

A Letter from Tashkent (1925)

Translated and annotated by Malcolm Archibald

In 1925 the anarchist Boris Klichevsky, exiled in Soviet Turkestan, wrote a letter to his old comrade Mark Mrachny in Berlin, reporting on the condition of repressed anarchists in the USSR. Klichevsky was a *starosta*, literally an “elder,” for the community of anarchist exiles in the city of Tashkent. This was an elected position which entitled Klichevsky to negotiate with the Soviet authorities on behalf of his fellow-exiles, and also gave him access to information about anarchist exiles and prisoners at other locations. Mrachny prepared a typescript of the letter which is now preserved in the International Institute for Social History (Senya Fléchine Papers: Folder 47, pp. 130-132). A heavily edited version was published in English translation in the *Bulletin of the Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia* (November-December 1925) as an anonymous letter.

One remarkable feature of Russian anarchism has always been its ability to regenerate itself under the most adverse conditions. As Klichevsky’s letters shows, there was a new wave of young people coming into the movement, people who were too young to take part in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Despite being indoctrinated in the Komsomol (Communist Youth) or even the Party itself, these people, from all walks of life, gravitated to anarchism.

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Dear friend Mark!

You are in the right, a thousand times in the right, when you scold us for not writing. We need to be beaten. Of course I mean that figuratively, although something like that has happened publicly twice already here in Tashkent between anarchists — the last time between comrades well known to you — their names are not important. I’ve been in the movement for a while now and I never heard of such a thing before. What’s the explanation? You figure it out.

I suppose that’s not a very nice way to start off, but I couldn’t help mentioning it because it’s upset me and others to the highest degree.

I won’t write any more about this.

Generally speaking, friend, I haven’t written to you for many reasons. Besides those that I will mention, there are others, more serious of course, that I’ll leave for another time.

We decided a few months ago to cut down on our correspondence: all letters are opened, some go astray — received at the wrong address — and we don’t want people writing who are

careless... . Why haven't they learned yet? There's a lot of unemployment in our circle, although somehow we keep going, but this saps our morale. Some of our friends have fallen sick again, and very seriously,¹ and the above mentioned shocking disclosure is why we haven't written to you about this, although I was even present when Izka Shkolnikov² wrote, but I didn't lift a finger to add anything.

In this letter I only want to give a brief summary.

Some of those mentioned below we have already been writing to for a long time, others we have only just started exchanging letters with, and a third group we haven't been in contact with yet; but all are vouched for:

Lela Pisarevskaia³ has been "transferred" from Kokand to Skobelev. The first time they tried this there was a row in the street, but the second time she was moved under condition of being assigned a job within seven days. She had served as a nurse, but now — who knows? This happened on August 4-5.

New arrivals in Turkestan are Iosif Bromberg, a student from Fona and Raya Shulman of the Institute of Art History.⁴ Sick people get dumped here. Both are from Peter.⁵ They arrived July 16 and are unemployed and urgently in need of treatment.

No more have arrived in Turkestan.

In Kirghizia new arrivals are: Alexander Petrovsky in Aulia-Ata, a student, it seems, from Peter or Moscow; also arriving there recently were Constantin Govar [*sic*, correct spelling is Govor] with his wife⁶ and Semyon Pastukhov,⁷ from Orenberg; travelling with them, but now in Chimkent, are Anton Bamokevich⁸ and Meyer Raisky,⁹ from Belorussia; and Alexander Bogdanov, a Left.¹⁰ In the city of Turkestan now is Nikolas Goncharov, a student of the Petrograd Polytechnical Institute; Sergei Byzov, a student from the Pedagogical Institute in the same city is now in Turtkul (Petro-Aleksandrovsk) — they were arrested on February 8 of this year. In Orsk there are Ivan Cheprunov and Aida, sent away in connection with the case of the All-Russian Federation of Anarchists (the Karelin group).¹¹ Schmidt and another comrade from Peter are in Urda. Benjamin Rakov and Alexandra Kvartchevskaia [*sic*, correct spelling is Kvachevskaia], students from Peter, along with Alexander Drugal,¹² a navy sailor, are exiled to Uralsk. Also in Urda are Alexei Maslov with his wife Xenia, syndicalists. Who among them are really anarchists, and who have ended up on our plate through a misunderstanding, I won't get into at this time. To some of them we have sent financial aid, since we could spare a little. In all we forwarded to them over 260 rubles, which includes part of the money we received from you. But it's a good thing we didn't need the money ourselves. Up to March there were 12 anarchists in Ust-Sysolsk, as you were informed at the time. And now the number has considerably increased by arrivals

from Peter, who seem to be turning up everywhere. We hear from the Narym region that many have arrived there. Lenya Lebedev¹³ is in Kolpashev, 65 versts from Parabel.

We've heard a very unpleasant story concerning Dmitry Alimov,¹⁴ who was arrested on July 24 and sent to Briansk. The State Prosecutor there, Chernogorov, laid charges under articles 105, 107-109 of the criminal code (work-related crimes). He added, "in order to discredit Anarchism in the eyes of the workers." Mitya mentioned when he was here that he had some kind of trouble with his boss when he worked in Narobraz [Department of People's Education]. We believe that he didn't receive your money.

Concerning a parcel we sent to Muksalma (Solovki), in early May, we have received an answer; concerning another sent to Sovatyev [*sic*, correct spelling is Savvatievo] we're still waiting for an answer.¹⁵

We've heard that the Peter comrades arrested on June 8 and sent to Solovki were held at Yaroslavl until July 1 and apparently will now be moved to Chelyabinsk. Some of the Solovetsky prisoners are now in Verkhne-Uralsk, but what monastery¹⁶ and who — we don't know, except that among them is Maria Weger.¹⁷

We haven't received any letters from Aron Baron in Biysk.

We have a letter from Liya Gutman¹⁸ from Yelizavetgrad. She got a minus-6 and they're chasing her out of there too.

We haven't received any letters from Boris Yelensky in Chicago.

Misha Axelrod,¹⁹ arrested in Kharkov in March, was taken to Akatuk in company with a comrade from Poltava, whose last name we don't know yet. We don't know any more at present.

I forgot: another exile has arrived here, a certain Istrin, a "Soviet anarchist," etc. He has, as he puts it, "five generations of gentry [*dvoriane*] blood." He's against any government and even an anarcho-communist society, but he supports the Soviet government and tries to make it stronger. He began his career as an anarchist in the Café of Poets with Shershenevich.²⁰ He has a minus 6, why?

Enough for this time.

Your Boris Klichevsky

Tashkent, August 5, 1925

Greetings to all: to Sasha [Berkman], Maximoff, Yarchuk, Vsevelod [Voline], etc. in the "outside world" from Yefim [Dolinsky],²¹ Rebbeka [Yaroshevskaya],²² etc.

Valya Charin²³ has been in the Butyrki hospital for two months already.

The case of [Misha] Axelrod and others in Kharkov was instigated, as they wrote to us, by Gordeyev-Teper.²⁴ Which is as one would expect.

1 Meaning renewed arrests, according to the editor of the English version published in the Bulletin of the Joint Committee.

2 Izka (Isaac, Tsezik, Ilya, Isya) Abramovich Shkolnikov (1893 – ?), an anarchist worker, emigrated to the United States where he was active in the radical labour movement before returning to Russia in 1917. Arrested in Moscow on August 16 1921, he was sentenced on January 14 1922 to three years in a “special purpose” camp, which he served at Solovki and Kemlag. In January 1924 he was released to exile in Central Asia for three years.

3 Yelena (“Lela”) Grigorevna Pisarevskaja was born in 1903 in Sevastopol. An anarchist, she was arrested in October 1923 in Moscow, where she was studying medicine at Moscow State University. In December 1923 she was sentenced to serve two years of exile in Tashkent, followed by a “minus-6” (forbidden to live in six major cities).

4 Fona is shorthand for the Faculty of Social Sciences, Leningrad State University; the Institute of Art History is also in Leningrad. Raya Shulman was arrested in February 1925 in Leningrad while attending a memorial meeting held on the anniversary of the death of Peter Kropotkin. In exile she married Yefim Dolinsky (see note 21).

5 Russian anarchists generally referred to St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad as “Peter.”

6 Konstantin Vladimirovich Govor (1900 – 1938) was born into a peasant family in the village of Kalinkovichi, Belorussia. He was trained as a teacher, and while serving in the Red Army from 1918 to 1922, he was engaged in running literacy programs. In 1922 he tried to resign from the Communist Party, having arrived at positions of anarcho-communism. The Party refused to let him leave quietly, and insisted on expelling him as an “adventurer and self-seeker.” From 1922 to 1924 he belonged to an anarchist group based in Kalinkovichi. This activity came to end on the night of October 15-16 1924, when members of the group were arrested. Konstantin was found to have a membership card of the All-Russian Federation of Anarchists (see note 11) and admitted that articles published under his name in the anarchist press (including *Amerikanskiye Izvestiya*) were actually written by him. From this point on his life consisted of alternating periods of prison and exile. His wife Lyubov (1906 – ?) was discovered to be hiding anarchist leaflets and was also arrested. She was born in Vilna, graduated from a Soviet vocational school, and worked as a clerk.

7 Semyon M. Pastukhov was arrested in the Belorussian city of Gomel in the autumn of 1924.

8 The editor of the translation published in the Bulletin of the Joint Committee has changed the name to Anton Balunkevich, apparently based on information from another source. Indeed there is no trace of an “Anton Bamokevich,” but there is a record of the worker Anton Balunkevich, who was arrested along with other Belorussian anarchists in the autumn of 1924.

9 The young Jewish anarchist Mikhail (Meyer) Gilevich Raisky (1905 – 1941?), arrested in the Belorussian city of Gomel in 1924, had no formal education.

10 Bogdanov is described as a “levak” [Left], which probably means he was a member of the Left Socialist-Revolutionary Party. A Left SR named Alexander Bogdanov is known to have belonged to an ispolkom (executive committee of a soviet) in Ufa in 1918. The editor would like to thank Ukrainian historian Yuriy Kravets for this information.

11 The All-Russian Federation of Anarchists, chaired by A. A. Karelin, was large enough in the early 1920s to be considered a mass organization (thousands of members, hundreds of groups). It was decimated by arrests in October 1924 and finally liquidated in May 1925.

12 Drugal and Kvachevskaya were actually a married couple. Alexandra Vladimirovna Kvachevskaya (1903 – after 1998) was an anarcho-communist, a student at the Institute of Art History in Leningrad. In January 1925 she was arrested and charged with anti-Soviet agitation. She was sentenced to two years of exile in Kazakhstan, a sentence that was subsequently extended by three years twice.

13 Leonid (Lenya) Yakovlevich Lebedev (1900 – ?), an anarchist workman, was arrested in Kharkov in November 1920 along with many other anarchists. In February 1923 he was sentenced to two years in the Solovki camps. In 1925 he was sent to Narym for two years of exile, to be followed by a “minus-6.” He was married to the anarchist Tamara Moiseyevna Weger, who was arrested in 1922 and sentenced to three years in the northern camps. In 1925 she accompanied her husband into exile. She was the sister of Maria Weger (see note 17).

14 Dmitry (Mitya) Vasilevich Alimov (1895 – ?) was an anarchist from Bryansk province.

15 Muksalma and Savvatievo were the names of former hermitages on the Solovetsky Islands used to house prisoners.

16 By “monastery” Klichevsky probably means “prison.”

17 Maria Moiseyevna Weger, an anarchist from 1914, had a high school education. She was arrested in 1921 and in January 1922 was sentenced to two years exile in Arkhangelsk for having a stash of anarchist literature. She fled from exile in the same year, but was captured and sentenced to three years in the Solovki camps. Upon completing her sentence in 1925, she was sent into exile in Narym.

18 Liya Isaakovna Gutman (or Gotman) was born in 1896 in Kovel. She was a prominent member of the Nabat Confederation of Anarchists of Ukraine, and also served in the cultural-educational section of the Makhnovist Insurgent Army. Frequently arrested, she spent her time in freedom working at an anarchist bookstore in Kharkov. In May 1923 she was sentenced to three years in Solovki. She was released from the camps in 1925 and sent into exile in Siberia. Her first husband, Iosif Gutman, a member of the secretariat of the Nabat Confederation, perished in 1920. Her second husband was the anarchist Ivan Charin (see note 23).

19 Mikhail (Misha) Borisovich Akselrod was born in Uman, Kievskaya province, in 1903. He had a higher education and worked as an accountant for the “Shakhtstroy” trust (mining conglomerate) in Kharkov in the early 1920s. When his anarchist sympathies became evident, he was expelled from the Communist Party and sent into exile in Siberia in 1925.

20 The poet and playwright Vadim Shershenevich was more of a bohemian than an anarchist.

21 Yefim O. Dolinsky (? – ?), an anarchist worker, was arrested in 1924 and exiled to Central Asia in the same year. He married Raya Shulman and the couple soon got into trouble with the authorities and were sent to the Verkhne-Uralsk political isolator (special prison for political dissidents).

22 Rebekka Yaroshevskaya (1887 – ?) was an anarchist from 1903. Her biography can be found here: <https://libcom.org/history/yaroshevskaya-rebekka-yakovlevna-1887-1937-or-after>.

23 Probably Ivan (Vanya) Charin, another activist of the Nabat Confederation, who suffered from mental illness after being subjected to solitary confinement for months in the Solovetsky camps.

24 Isaak Teper (real name: Gordeyev) (?–?) was a native of Yelizavetgrad (Ukraine). An anarchist from 1917, he worked in the cultural-educational section of the Makhnovist Insurgent Army, editing its newspaper The Road to Freedom. At some point he became an agent of the Cheka.