

Maria Botchkareva

Yashka

My Life as Peasant, Officer and Exile

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Yashka – My Life as Peasant, Officer and Exile

by Maria Botchkareva

Commander of the Russian Women’s Battalion of Death

as set down by Isaac Don Levine

author of “The Russian Revolution”

New York

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Maria Botchkareva

Introduction by Isaac Don Levine (1918)

In the early summer of 1917 the world was thrilled by a news item from Petrograd announcing the formation by one Maria Botchkareva of a women's fighting unit under the name of "The Battalion of Death." With this announcement an obscure Russian peasant girl made her debut in the international hall of fame. From the depths of dark Russia Maria Botchkareva suddenly emerged into the limelight of modern publicity. Foreign correspondents sought her, photographers followed her, distinguished visitors paid their respects to her. All tried to interpret this arresting personality. The result was a riot of misinformation and misunderstanding.

Of the numerous published tales about, and interviews with, Botchkareva that have come under my observation, there is hardly one which does not contain some false or misleading statement. This is partly due to the deplorable fact that the foreign journalists who interpreted Russian men and affairs to the world during the momentous year of 1917 were, with very few exceptions, ignorant of the Russian language; and partly to Botchkareva's reluctance to take every adventurous stranger into her confidence. It was her cherished dream to have a complete record of her life incorporated in a book some day. This work is the realization of that dream.

To a very considerable extent, therefore, the narrative here unfolded is of the nature of a confession. When in the United States in the summer of 1918, Botchkareva determined to prepare her autobiography. Had she been educated enough to be able to write a letter fluently, she would probably have written her own life-story in Russian and then had it translated into English. Being semi-illiterate, she found it necessary to secure the services of a writer commanding a knowledge of her native language, which is the only tongue she speaks. The procedure followed in the writing of this book was this:

Botchkareva recited to me in Russian the story of her life, and I recorded it in English in longhand, making every effort to set down her narrative verbatim. Not infrequently I would interrupt her with a question intended to draw out some forgotten experiences. However, one of Botchkareva's natural gifts is an extraordinary memory. It took nearly a hundred hours, distributed over a period of three weeks, for her to tell me every detail of her romantic life.

At our first session Botchkareva made it clear that what she was going to tell me would be very different from the yarns credited to her in the press. She would reveal her innermost self and break open for the first time the sealed book of her past. This she did, and in doing so ruined completely several widely circulated tales about her. Perhaps the chief of these is the statement that Botchkareva had enlisted as a soldier and gone to war to avenge her fallen husband. Whether this invention was the product of her own mind or was attributed to her originally by some prolific correspondent, I do not know. In any event it was a handy answer to the eternal question of the pestiferous journalists as to how she came to be a soldier. Unable to explain to the conventional world that profound impulse which really drove her to her remarkable destiny, she adopted this excuse until she had an opportunity to record the full story of her daring life.

This book will also remove that distrustful attitude based on misunderstanding that has been manifested toward Botchkareva in radical circles. When she arrived in the United States she was immediately hailed as a "counter-revolutionary," royalist and sinister intriguer by the extremists. That was a grave injustice to her. She is ignorant of politics, contemptuous of intrigue, and spiritually far and above party strife. Her mission in life was to free Russia from the German yoke.

Being placed virtually in the position of a father confessor, it was my privilege to commune with the spirit of this phenomenal rustic, a privilege I shall ever esteem as priceless. She not only laid bare before me every detail of her amazing life that memory could resurrect, but also allowed me to explore the nooks and corners of her heart to a degree that no friend of hers ever did. Maintaining a critical attitude from the beginning of our association, I was gradually overwhelmed by the largeness of her soul.

Wherein does the greatness of Botchkareva lie? Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst called her the greatest woman of the century. "The woman that saved France was Joan of Arc – a peasant girl," wrote a correspondent in July, 1917; "Maria Botchkareva is her modern parallel." Indeed, in the annals of history since the days of the Maid of Orleans we encounter no feminine figure equal to Botchkareva. Like Joan of Arc, this Russian peasant girl dedicated her life to her country's cause. If Botchkareva failed – and this is yet problematical, for who will dare forecast the future of Russia? – it would not lessen her greatness. Success in our materialistic age is no measure of true genius.

Like Joan of Arc, Botchkareva is the symbol of her country. Can there be a more striking incarnation of France than that conveyed by the image of Joan of Arc? Botchkareva is an astounding typification of peasant Russia, with all her virtues and vices. Educated to the extent of being able to scribble her own name with difficulty, she is endowed with the genius of logic. Ignorant of history and literature, the natural lucidity of her mind is such as to lead her directly to the very few fundamental truths of life. Religious with all the fervor of her primitive soul, she is tolerant in a fashion behooving a philosopher. Devoted to her country with every fiber of her being, she is free of impassioned partisanship and selfish patriotism. Overflowing with gentility and kindness, she is yet

capable of savage outbursts and brutal acts. Credulous and trustful as a child, she can be easily incited against people and things. Intrepid and rash as a fighter, her desire to live on occasions was indescribably pathetic. In a word, Botchkareva embodies all those paradoxical characteristics of Russian nature that have made Russia a puzzle to the world. These traits are illustrated almost in every page of this book. Take away from Russia the veneer of western civilization and you behold her incarnation in Botchkareva. Know Botchkareva and you shall know Russia, that inchoate, invincible, agonized, striving, rising colossus in all its depth and breadth.

It must be made unmistakably clear here that the motives responsible for this book were purely personal. In its origin this work is exclusively a human document, a record of an exuberant life. It was the purpose of Botchkareva and the writer to keep the narrative down to a strict recital of facts. It is really incidental that this record is valuable not only as a biography of a startling personality, but as a revelation of certain phases of a momentous period in human history; not only as a human document, but as a historical document as well. Because Botchkareva always has been and still is strictly non-partisan and because she does not pretend to pass judgment upon events and men, her revelations are of prime importance. The reader gets a picture of Kerensky in action that completely effaces all that has hitherto been said of this tragic but typical product of the Russian intelligentsia. Kornilov, Rodzianko, Lenine and Trotzky and some other outstanding personalities of the Russian revolution appear in these pages exactly as they are in reality.

Not a single book, as far as I know, has appeared yet giving an account of how the Russian army at the front reacted to the Revolution. What was the state of mind of the Russian soldier in the trenches, which was after all the decisive factor in the developments that followed, during the first eight months of

1917? No history of unshackled Russia will be complete without an answer to this vital question. This book is the first to disclose the reactions and emotions of the vast Russian army at the front to the tremendous issues of the revolution, and is of special value coming from a veteran peasant soldier of the rank and file.

Perhaps surpassing all else in interest is the horrible picture we get of Bolshevism in action. With the claims of theoretical Bolshevism to establish an order of social equality on earth Botchkareva has no quarrel. She said so to Lenine and Trotsky personally. But then come her experiences with Bolshevism in practice, and there follows a blood-freezing narrative of the rule of mobocracy that will live forever in the memory of the reader.

Botchkareva left the United States towards the end of July, 1918, after having attained the purpose of her visit – an interview with President Wilson. She went to England and thence to Archangel, where she arrived early in September. According to a newspaper despatch, she caused the following proclamation to be posted in village squares and country churches:

“I am a Russian peasant and soldier. At the request of the soldiers and peasants I went to America and Great Britain to ask these countries for military help for Russia.

“The Allies understand our own misfortunes and I return with the Allied armies, which came only for the purpose of helping to drive out our deadly enemies, the Germans, and not to interfere with our internal affairs. After the war is over the Allied troops will leave Russian soil.

“I, on my own part, request all loyal free sons of Russia, without reference to party, to come together, acting as one with the Allied forces, who, under the Russian flag, come to free Russia from the German yoke and in order to help the new free

Russian army with all forces, including Russia, to beat the enemy.

“Soldiers and peasants I Remember that only a full, clean sweep of the Germans from our soil can give you the free Russia you long for.”

Isaac Don Levine New York City,
November, 1918.

Part One – Youth

I – MY CHILDHOOD OF TOIL

My father, Leonti Semenovitch Frolkov, was born into serfdom at Nikolsko, a village in the province of Novgorod, some three hundred versts north of Moscow. He was fifteen when Alexander II emancipated the serfs in 1861, and remembers that historic event vividly, being fond even now of telling of the days of his boyhood. Impressed into the army in the early seventies, he served during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, and distinguished himself for bravery, receiving several medals. When a soldier he learned to read and write, and was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

(...)

Back cover

This book tells the extraordinary story of Maria Botchkareva “Yashka”, a peasant girl grown up in Siberia, who at the outbreak of First World War asked and obtained to enlist in the Russian army: not to be one of the many Red Cross nurses, but to be a soldier and fight.

Yashka fought and distinguished herself at the forefront, so that after the revolution of March 1917 the provisional government of Kerensky allowed her to organize a women combat unit that was talked about by the press around the whole world, and that was submitted to massacre on the battlefield of the last Russian offensive.

After the dismissal of the remains of her Women’s Battalion of Death and the dissolution of the whole Russian army, Yashka managed to reach the West with the utopia of gathering funds to restore a people’s army and to continue the war against Germany. In the United States, in 1918, her story was collected and published by a journalist of Russian origin, Isaac Don Levine.

It is controversial whether and how the figure of Yashka belongs to the women emancipation movement, as at the time was considered by the same Emmeline Pankhurst, who was a supporter and a friend of Yashka. Indeed Yashka acted instinctively following an unconditional and non-negotiable loyalty to her country, because in this loyalty she found at the same time self-respect and redemption by the deprivations of her experience.

By telling widely not only the facts, but also her own feelings and motivations, Yashka left us a testimony that rises far above the usual memoirs of war.

The story of Isaac Don Levine, fallen into oblivion for a long time, is now available again in this ebook, with an afterword by Alberto Palazzi that focuses on the definition of herself that

Yashka was looking for in commitment and sacrifice for her country.

Maria Botchkareva

Maria Botchkareva (1889-1920), a Russian peasant, fought on the front of the First World War with the *nom de guerre* of Yashka, and in 1917 was in command of a feminine combat unit talked of by all the press of the time. In 1918 in the U.S. she dictated her story to an immigrant Russian journalist, Isaac Don Levine (1892-1981). Back in Russia she organized a medical detachment by refusing to fight in the civil war, but arrested she was sentenced to death by a revolutionary court.