Screenplay for the film "1926 – Women and Terror (Maria Spiridonova). Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI

Screenplay Summary:

The text centres on the year 1926 and on Maria Spiridonova, using her life as a thread to show how the Soviet regime moves from revolutionary terror to state terror and, ultimately, to punitive psychiatry and a new ruling class.

It opens with the adoption of the 1926 Criminal Code of the RSFSR, which for the first time recognises medicine as a "measure of social protection". Under this Code, those who commit offences against the Soviet system while in a state of mental illness can no longer be shot or sent to camps; instead they may be subjected to medical or medico-pedagogical treatment. On the surface this looks humane and in line with international practice. In reality, it institutionalises the idea that opposition to Soviet power is itself a form of insanity, and creates a legal framework for confining political opponents in psychiatric institutions under the guise of treatment.

This legal innovation foreshadows future developments: within a decade, prison psychiatric hospitals run by the NKVD (like the one in Kazan) and secret departments at the Serbsky Institute in Moscow will test drugs designed to break prisoners' resistance. Later, in the 1960s–1980s, psychiatric repression will become the main instrument used against dissenters. Andropov, often called the "father" of punitive psychiatry, is presented here instead as the heir to mechanisms created under Lenin and Stalin.

The first emblematic victim of these mechanisms is Maria Alexandrovna Spiridonova. Once a legendary revolutionary, she becomes a "patient" of House No. 23 on Kropotkin Lane (the future Serbsky Institute) in 1921. Leader and symbol of the Left Socialist-Revolutionary (Left SR) Party, she had joined the revolutionary movement in 1905. In 1906 she shot dead Luzhenovsky, a provincial official responsible for bloody repression of peasant unrest. Brutally beaten by Cossacks, nearly raped, she became a national cause célèbre; liberal newspapers published her letters from prison, her mother's appeal "to Russian mothers", and her declaration that she would die calmly, having fulfilled her task. Her death sentence was commuted to life at hard labour, and leading terrorists like Gershuni and Sazonov wrote to her that she was "the symbol of Russia".

Her journey to the Nertchinsk penal system at Akatuy unfolded like a strange mixture of martyrdom and triumph: crowds greeted the convoy at stations, chanting her name; she was asked to appear and speak. In Akatuy and later at Maltsev women's prison, political prisoners lived in conditions that, though harsh, were incomparable to what Stalin's camps would later become: they wore civilian clothes, decorated cells with flowers, read books and foreign literature sent by post, went for day-long walks in the forest "on their word of honour", and only donned shackles and prison uniforms when inspectors appeared.

In 1926 Spiridonova publishes her memoirs of Nertchinsk penal servitude, with almost nostalgic descriptions of those times. The narrative contrasts these with later testimonies from the late 1930s, such as Galina Serebryakova's account of a woman giving birth in a Soviet prison cell with no doctor, the umbilical cord bitten through by another prisoner, the newborn taken away to an

orphanage and quickly reported dead. The difference underlines how the old tsarist "hard labour" and the early penal system were, in retrospect, almost human when set against Stalinist terror.

Politically, Spiridonova's trajectory is equally paradoxical. Freed in 1917, she returns to Petrograd as the most famous woman revolutionary in Russia, fresh from eleven years of penal servitude. She meets the hitherto unknown émigrée Alexandra Kollontai; both speak at soldiers' meetings, but Kollontai – with her theatrical oratory – wins stormy enthusiasm. The Left SRs ally with the Bolsheviks to disperse the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, then break with them over peasant policy, grain requisitions and the failure to give land truly to the peasants (the SRs' core slogan "Land to the peasants!"). Spiridonova supports the Brest-Litovsk peace against her party but cannot accept what she sees as Bolshevik betrayal of the countryside.

The July 1918 Left SR uprising – spearheaded by the assassination of the German ambassador von Mirbach by Chekists Blumkin and Andreyev – ends in fiasco. Spiridonova is arrested, tried, then amnestied, only to be arrested again a few months later. She is kept in a tiny damp room inside the Kremlin, spitting blood, constantly spied on by Red Army soldiers even in the lavatory – which she bitterly compares with the relative dignity afforded to female politicals under Tsarist penal servitude.

Running alongside Spiridonova's story is a contrasting portrait of the new Bolshevik elite, especially its women. While she sits in cells and then in exile, figures like Kollontai and Olga Kameneva live in former imperial palaces, wear luxurious gowns, host literary salons and travel abroad on generous state funds. Kollontai organises lavish embassy receptions, buys dozens of dresses in Berlin, sails in first-class cabins with marble baths, justifying it all as raising "the prestige of the Soviet state". In Oslo, barrels of caviar glow under special lamps, a nude dancer closes the ball for the October anniversary.

In the Kremlin, Olga Kameneva pours tea into porcelain cups with double-headed eagles, gives an old Bolshevik's tubercular son a handful of rice while her own boy, "Lyutik", attends high-level meetings and plays the role of intuitive class detector. Lyutik cruises the Volga on the former tsar's yacht with flotilla commander Raskolnikov and Larisa Reisner, who scratches her name in diamond next to the empress's on the cabin window. The text lingers over these scenes to show how quickly the new rulers adopt and amplify the lifestyle of the old nobility, while preaching equality and sacrifice.

By 1926, internal party struggles have moved from Trotsky versus Stalin to Stalin versus the "Left Opposition" of Zinoviev and Kamenev. After using them against Trotsky, Stalin brands them an opposition, crushes their bloc with Trotsky, and secures approval of his doctrine of "socialism in one country" at the Fifteenth Party Conference. NEP has reached its limits, industry is in crisis, the budget is empty, and private capital is needed. Instead of liberalising, Stalin opts to sacrifice economic rationality for political control, shifting toward a command economy based on coerced, quasi-slave labour: people will "work as much as the state orders, eat on ration cards, and live by permit".

Spiridonova's final turn is tragic: in the 1930s she publicly declares that she has "politically disarmed" and that Stalin's government, supported by the whole people, is the true Soviet power. She supports industrialisation and especially collectivisation – policies that will devastate the peasantry she once claimed to defend. Her loyalty earns her nothing. In 1937 she is accused of involvement in a plot to assassinate Voroshilov, arrested again, and in 1941 shot in Orel prison on

the same day as Olga Kameneva. Kameneva's son Lyutik, who once "saw through" the enemies of the revolution, grows up to be an airman and is also executed.

Thus the fate of Maria Spiridonova – from adored symbol of "tortured Russia" to an almost forgotten victim of Stalin's purges – frames the long arc from individual revolutionary terror to state terror and the cold, bureaucratic violence of Soviet punitive psychiatry.

Screenplay:

Maria Spiridonova

On 22 November 1926, at the 2nd session of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) of the 12th convocation, the Criminal Code of the RSFSR was adopted. In it, medicine was for the first time treated as one of the measures of social protection.
From then on, against persons who had committed acts directed against the Soviet system, the new Criminal Code allowed not only judicial-correctional measures, but also medical and medico-pedagogical measures.

The Code stated that judicial-correctional measures – that is, execution by shooting or the labour camp – could not be applied to persons who had committed crimes against the Soviet system while in a state of chronic mental illness or temporary mental disorder.
At first glance this looks humane and in line with international standards. At second glance, however, the article essentially affirms that anyone who opposes Soviet power is mentally abnormal. Therefore such people are to be subjected to compulsory treatment and placed in a medical institution combined with isolation.

Moreover, the introduction of medical measures in the Criminal Code specifically for political offenders was an excellent groundwork for the future, both near and far.
In the near future, less than ten years later, the first prison psychiatric hospital under NKVD control would be opened in Kazan. This was a purely Soviet achievement in psychiatry. At the Serbsky Institute in Moscow, a special secret department would work on particular medicamental methods of influencing those under investigation. True, in the 1930s medically loosened tongues and forced self-incrimination did not save anyone from being shot.

In the more distant future, in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, medical methods of pressure on political prisoners would become the main tool of repression – and would remain so right up until the beginning of perestroika. When people say that Andropov was the founder of punitive psychiatry, that is not historically accurate. Andropov was merely a direct continuer of the work of Lenin and Stalin.

In 1926, the magazine *Screen*, a supplement to *Rabochaya Gazeta* (*The Workers' Newspaper*), published an article entitled "House No. 23". It begins with the words: "The residents of this white house in Kropotkin Lane are constantly changing. They are brought in – and taken away." In house no. 23, Kropotkin Lane, was the Institute of Forensic Medical Examination, later named after Serbsky. It should be said that Vladimir Petrovich Serbsky himself had nothing to do with Soviet political psychiatry. He died before October 1917.

The first prisoner to be subjected to the mechanisms of Soviet punitive psychiatry was Maria Spiridonova. She became a patient of house no. 23 in Kropotkin Lane back in 1921. Maria Alexandrovna Spiridonova was the informal leader, symbol and banner of the Left Socialist-Revolutionary (Left SR) Party. She had been active in the revolutionary movement since 1905. Long before any asylum, Spiridonova had said: “I have a premonition that the Bolsheviks are preparing some special kind of filth. They’ll declare me insane, like Chaadayev, put me in a psychiatric clinic – something like that.”
At first this statement of hers seems senseless, since the Bolsheviks had at their disposal both shootings and exile abroad. The party to which Spiridonova belonged was banned. Yet they did indeed deal with her in a refined way, each time allowing her to remain alive.

In July 1921, Clara Zetkin wrote to Lenin: “Various foreign delegates have asked me to say a word in favour of Maria Spiridonova. I hope that your decision in her case will be as merciful as it is politically wise.”
In 1921 Lenin really did consider it politically wise not to kill Spiridonova. First, because Soviet power was shaky against the background of the Kronstadt mutiny and the peasant uprising in Tambov province. Second, because the 37-year-old Maria Spiridonova – tubercular, not yet recovered from typhus – was extraordinarily influential and dangerous. To kill her or to leave her at liberty were both equally bad for the authorities.

It was Dzerzhinsky who came up with the idea of hiding Spiridonova away in a psychiatric hospital. He wrote to the head of the Secret Department of the Cheka: “We must get in touch with Obukh and Semashko (that is, with the Moscow Health Committee and the People’s Commissariat of Health) in order to place Spiridonova in a psychiatric institution, on the condition that she cannot be abducted from there or escape.”

When she was brought to the psychiatric clinic, she refused food and drink. Fourteen days of dry hunger-strike. The doctors and the Cheka leadership began talking about artificial feeding. In this case, such violence against the body would have meant death for the patient. For the essence of her condition was horror of any violence – against herself or against others. In her nightmares, in delirium, she cried out: “Gendarmes, Cossacks, Chekists!”

The drama of the situation lay also in the fact that this mental illness had come down upon a woman who, at the age of twenty, had become the most famous Russian terrorist of the twentieth century.

In 1906, at the railway station of Borisoglebsk, Maria Spiridonova shot dead with a revolver the Tambov provincial councillor Luzhenovsky, responsible for suppressing peasant unrest. She made no attempt to flee; she shouted out that it was she who had fired. She wanted to shoot herself publicly, but did not have time. On the order of esaul (Cossack captain) Pyotr Avramov, the Cossacks began to beat her with whips and with their boots. This long, cruel, disgraceful scene took place in front of the station crowd. Then they began to beat the speechless onlookers as well.

A medical examination of Maria Spiridonova recorded: swelling of the face, bruises with red and blue stripes; the mouth would not open; the skin on the forehead had been flayed off; the left eye would not open; haemorrhage in the retina; the hands badly swollen, with skin stripped in places; lash-marks on the body with clearly outlined contours; haemorrhages and flayed skin on the legs; lungs completely battered; blood flowing from the throat; she could not move; periodic loss of consciousness; delirium, hallucinations. In addition, in the train from Borisoglebsk to Tambov, the same esaul Avramov tried to rape her.

Everything that happened to Spiridonova was widely discussed and reported in the press, both provincial and metropolitan. In Tambov, the correspondent of the Petersburg paper *Russ* (*Russia*), Vladimirov, conducted a "journalistic investigation". He soon published his newspaper pieces as a separate book. Before the trial, *Russ* printed a letter from Spiridonova in Tambov prison: "Yes, I wanted to kill Luzhenovsky. I will die calmly, with a good feeling in my soul." The newspaper *Molva* (*Rumour*) printed a letter from Maria's mother under the headline "Appeal to Russian Mothers".

The Provisional Military Court of Tambov sentenced her to death: "To be subjected to the death penalty by hanging."
Two weeks later, the same court petitioned for a mitigation of the sentence: "In view of an incurable disease, tuberculosis, replace the death penalty by hard labour for life."
The Minister of the Interior, Durnovo, replied: "In the case of Spiridonova, I believe it right to grant the petition of the military court." On 20 March 1906, Spiridonova wrote to her comrades in the SR Party: "My death seemed to me to have such great social value, I had waited for it so much, that the commutation of the sentence has affected me very badly – I feel ill."

Then came her farewell letter before being transferred from Tambov: "I am of those who laugh upon the cross."
In April, esaul Avramov was shot dead by a pretty young girl with a long braid.

In the summer of 1906, the Petersburg paper *Thought* printed a letter that Spiridonova herself had seen earlier in Tambov prison. Under it were the signatures of Russia's most famous terrorists – Gershuni and Sazonov.
Grigory Gershuni was the founder of the highly effective SR combat organisation which operated against the highest officials and members of the imperial family. Egor Sazonov was the man who killed Interior Minister Plehve in 1904.

These legendary terrorists wrote from the Schlüsselburg fortress to Spiridonova in Tambov prison: "They have already compared you with tortured Russia. And you, comrade, are indeed her symbol."

It was precisely as a symbol of Russia that the terrorist Spiridonova first found herself in the Pugachev Tower of Butyrka prison, and then was sent to penal servitude. In the train with her were five other female terrorists, aged between nineteen and twenty-six. None of those five had the kind of press coverage that Spiridonova did. At the stations along the way, huge crowds gathered. People chanted: "Spi-ri-do-no-va! Spi-ri-do-no-va! Long live Spiridonova! Greetings to Spiridonova!"

Spiridonova would come out and address them. Her fellow prisoner Alexandra Izmaylovich, who later spent her whole life at her side, recalled: "On the whole journey there were only two dark patches. In Syzran, some merchant's wife cried out: 'Some heroine! You'll go down in history, won't you!' And in Siberia, at a little station, an elderly worker said: 'What are you doing, madwoman?'"

They were going to Akatuy. After the train, they continued in tarantasses. Akatuy had been part of the Nertchinsk prison system for political prisoners since 1826, the time of the Decembrists.

The same Alexandra Izmaylovich continues: "On the way, around noon, we would settle in some nice spot by a little river and lie in the grass for three hours, bathe, drink tea. At first I walked a lot barefoot. But I soon had to give up: my feet were burning from the hot sand and full of thorns. I had to get into the carriage." They arrived in Akatuy.

M. Spiridonova (first on the left) in Akatuy with other political prisoners.
Izmaylovich continues: “Here we are in front of the prison gate. A noisy wave engulfs us, deafens us with the thunder of revolutionary songs, showers us with flowers. We look at what is happening as if in a dream. We find ourselves in a courtyard full of smiling men, women and children. The children are also singing and throwing flowers at us. Everywhere flags, garlands of flowers, slogans: ‘Long live socialism’, ‘Long live the Socialist-Revolutionary Party’. We stand there under the sound of the Marseillaise and the rain of flowers, completely bewildered. I could hardly pick out Gershuni and Sazonov with my eyes.

Some ladies, the wives of convicts, led us to the bathhouse, then gave us dinner and took photographs of us. Later, in the greenery of the yard, we drank tea.

When we arrived, the prison governor came to us. He bowed, shook hands and kept asking whether we would be comfortable in our little rooms.”

When you hear this for the first time, you instinctively feel like protesting: it must be a lie, a publicity clip ordered by the Akatuy prison governor. Yet it is true. These are the authentic memoirs of the terrorist Alexandra Izmaylovich, daughter of a general, who had tried to kill the governor of Minsk during a pogrom. Later she would pass through a Lenin-era prison and a Stalin-era camp, and would be able to feel the difference. In Stalin’s camps people were not photographed for girls’ albums. In Akatuy the inmates took many photos. The album was miraculously preserved abroad. In the USSR it would have been an anti-Soviet document.

After Akatuy came the women’s prison at Maltsev. The political prisoners there did not work. Their duties were to clean the cells, wash the laundry and stoke the stoves – in other words, self-service. The chief specialist in floor-washing was Irina Kakhovskaya, from the family of the Decembrist Kakhovsky, who had shot the war hero Miloradovich in the back on Senate Square in 1825.

According to the political prisoners, the hardest work was washing one’s own underwear. They wore their own underwear, not prison-issue, and there was a lot of it. The common criminals brought in firewood for the stoves. Unlike in Stalin’s camps, here the politicals had a privileged status compared with the common criminals. The criminals worked: they knitted mittens, sewed shirts. The politicals read. Books and money came regularly by post.

They read philosophy, political economy, fiction – in various languages. This was not forbidden. It was not equated with espionage.
The cells were usually not locked. There were flowers in them. The “lifers”, those sentenced to life, wore their own dresses, often brightly coloured.

The shackles lay around, ready “for special occasions”. As soon as a three-horse carriage with some official appeared beyond Mount Zarentuy, the prison raised the alarm. The wardress ran to lock the cells. Everyone hurried to change into prison dress. Bright dresses and flowers were hidden. Shackles were quickly fixed to ankles. In less than five minutes, everything turned grey. As Spiridonova recalled, the prison “assumed a tightly screwed-down appearance”.

In 1926, Maria Spiridonova published a book, *From Memories of Nertchinsk Penal Servitude*:
“We were allowed out to walk on our word of honour, far into the forest, sixty people at a time, for the whole day. By the time we arrived, the prisons looked more like clubs. But for a worker of little education it was hard to just sit, because he needed change of impressions. There was hardly any work at most penal camps, and that is why dozens of comrades became sick people. When some

managed to get sent to the gold mines of the penal system, they wrote happy letters from there and, above all, could earn something for themselves."

And now another fragment of recollections:
"Once in our cell a young Kazakh woman went into labour. We asked for a doctor. No one came. At the sacred moment when the baby's head appeared, a warder barged into the cell.
'Shut up! You demand a midwife! And who do you think you are? You are enemies of the people.'
The birth continued. One of us bit through the umbilical cord with her teeth and tied it with a rag. Only in the morning did the prison nurse, Sonya, appear. She took the newborn baby and ordered the mother to follow her. Three weeks later the mother returned to us. The baby had been sent to an orphanage. Soon we were told that the child had died."

This fragment comes from the memoirs of Galina Serebryakova, a writer and wife of two members of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Serebryakov and Sokolnikov. She is describing a Soviet prison in 1938.

In 1926, no one was interested any more in Spiridonova's memories of Nertchinsk penal servitude. And what would happen ten years later, no one could yet imagine.

A mass of people who had been nobodies before October 1917 had by 1926 acquired a taste for power and become a real ruling class. The overwhelming majority of them had wives.

At the beginning of 1926, Kamenev's wife, Olga Davydovna – who was also Trotsky's sister – went on a shopping trip in Paris with her friend Lyubov Vasilievna, the wife of the Soviet ambassador Krasin.
Kameneva often came to Paris; she was known for her outfits and her unlimited means. The French papers wrote about her.

A new news pretext was provided by Alexandra Kollontai, who found herself in Paris en route from Norway to Mexico. Naturally, she visited the places where she had lived before 1917, the modest boarding house of her emigration, the café near the Sorbonne where she had sat with the husband she had left in 1898. Then she set off to the jewellery shops of the Rue de la Paix. French journalists followed her. She sailed to Mexico on the liner *Lafayette*, in a cabin with a marble bathtub, where heated sea water continuously flowed.

In Norway, they still remembered the grand reception held there for the anniversary of the October coup. All the halls of the best hotel in Oslo had been rented. Everywhere stood two-kilogram barrels of caviar sent from Moscow. The ice around the barrels was lit by special lamps. The hostess of the ball danced tirelessly. The finale of the banquet in honour of October was a dance by a naked beauty holding two bunches of grapes.

In an unofficial letter, Kollontai wrote: "I conducted an extremely important piece of business. I'm dead tired."
In her official report: "The reception has further raised the authority of the Soviet Union. All the newspapers write that the embassy of Tsarist Russia never organised anything like it."

In 1926, when Kollontai briefly came to Moscow, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Chicherin, waved in front of her the report of an inspector, which showed that in Berlin alone she had bought fifty dresses.
She replied that this raised the prestige of the country.

My grandmother used to tell me: once she brought some letter to Kollontai at the Metropol Hotel, where the latter was staying. Kollontai received her in an incredible negligee. My grandmother at once had the feeling she had seen something like it before. Before the revolution, in Minsk, she made women's hats. The owner would send her to deliver a hatbox to wealthy clients. On the way back from the Metropol, my grandmother finally remembered where she had seen such a negligee: a long time before, in Minsk, she had taken a hat to a client who was wearing exactly the same sort of gown. That client was the madam, the owner of an expensive brothel.

Alexandra Kollontai had met Maria Spiridonova in the spring of 1917. In essence, their encounter marks the moment of change of the revolutionary elites. Maria Spiridonova was the most famous female revolutionary in Russia. She had just returned to Petrograd from the East, from the penal colonies, freed by a personal decree of Justice Minister Kerensky in the first days of the February Revolution.
Alexandra Kollontai had come from the West, from emigration. No one knew her. One woman had behind her eleven years of penal servitude; the other had not seen Russia since 1898, and had only been back a couple of times, briefly. Their ideas of the country were therefore both limited, but in 1917 this did not matter much.

At a meeting of soldiers, Spiridonova and Kollontai spoke in turn. Spiridonova was listened to respectfully. Kollontai was greeted with roaring enthusiasm. After her speech, the soldiers carried her in their arms to the car.
Konstantin Stanislavsky, who heard Kollontai at that meeting, praised the staging of her speech – i.e. her speech technique: "From her very first phrases she put just enough lift into her voice to capture the audience. She eased off in the middle of the speech, then at the end again reached full strength, without ever lapsing into shouting." About the content of her speech he said nothing. The male audience showered Kollontai with lilac bouquets.

In fact, in the spring of 1917, no one imagined that they were witnessing, in that form, a change of historical figures. Moreover, after the October coup, at the elections to the Constituent Assembly on 5 January 1918, these women and their men – i.e. their parties – again found themselves on the same side of the barricade.

The two most revolutionary parties, the Bolsheviks – who had just seized power – and the Left SRs, received a minority of seats in the All-Russian Constituent Assembly. The Left SRs then allied with the Bolsheviks and dispersed the Constituent Assembly. Maria Spiridonova had stood as a candidate for chair of the Assembly, but did not win enough votes. A few hours after her failure in the election she approved of the dispersal of the Assembly. In other words, after eleven years of penal servitude she came out in favour of dictatorship.

The Left SRs were the only and last political party the Bolsheviks tolerated – but only until the middle of 1918.

Spiridonova supported Lenin's position on the Brest peace. Against the opinion of her party she advocated peace with Germany at any price, with any territorial concessions. Incidentally, under the document on the complete demobilisation of the Russian army, alongside Trotsky's signature is that of Anastasia Bitsenko, an SR terrorist who had served penal time with Spiridonova.

When, at the end of March, the Fourth Congress of Soviets ratified the Brest treaty with the loss of huge territories, the Left SRs left the government. Spiridonova obeyed party discipline. In reality the true cause of the break with the Bolsheviks for SR Spiridonova was a single one: Bolshevik

policy toward the peasantry, the grain requisition detachments, the seizure of bread, famine. And above all, the Bolsheviks did not give the land to the peasants.

The slogan “Land to the peasants!” was the main SR slogan. The author of the SR Land Law, Ilya Mayorov, would be Spiridonova’s future husband. The Bolsheviks had stolen – or, if one prefers, borrowed – the slogan “Land to the peasants!” from the SRs in October. Once used, they discarded it. Spiridonova was incapable of such cynicism. That was how she differed from Lenin. Lenin said of her that she was a person “whose sincerity neither I nor anyone else doubts”.

To Spiridonova herself, Lenin had once said: “There is no morality in politics, there is only expediency.”

It is hard to say whether Lenin and Spiridonova spoke different political languages or the same one. One fact remains: individual SR terror gave way to state terror. In this hard game for power, the Bolsheviks admitted no one. Only their own.

In the season of the White Nights in 1918, Alexandra Kollontai lived in Tsarskoye Selo. She installed herself in the apartments of Catherine the Great. For her walks she chose the alleys the empress had favoured. Lunacharsky’s wife, Anna, chose the rooms of the children of the last tsar. At that time they were still alive. They would be killed a month later.

Anna Lunacharskaya oversaw Soviet children’s institutions. She received visitors sitting in the very armchair in which the empress had heard the news of Nicholas II’s abdication and of her own and her children’s arrest. In Anna’s rooms the evenings were especially merry. There was singing and dancing.

In the same circle was the wife of Politburo member and head of the Petrograd party organisation Zinoviev – Zlata Lilina. She headed the Petrograd Provincial Social Welfare Department and was also deputy head of the provincial education department, dealing with orphanages, children’s homes and schooling. She declared: “We must remove the children from the pernicious influence of the family. Let us say it frankly: nationalise them. And from the very first days of life they will be under the beneficial influence of communist kindergartens and schools. Forcing mothers to give their child to the Soviet state – that is our task.”

At that time nurseries were popularly called *morilki* – “death sheds” – in the sense that children died there. And until the process of re-educating children and parents was complete, the children of high-ranking party functionaries should not attend ordinary schools. It was much better to hire private tutors so that the child would not mix with riffraff. Such reasoning was not limited to the ladies of the capital’s party elite; it was found in the provinces too.

The example of the centre was extremely contagious for the regions. The “Archive of the SR Party” records: “Before Easter, the Tambov provincial grain requisition detachments received a telegram from the People’s Commissariat of Food in Moscow ordering them to send a wagon of geese to Moscow, addressed to the Central Committee of the RCP(b). The order was carried out. The Tambov provincial party committee did exactly the same. And the families of the party officials received thirty poods of geese for Easter.”

Apart from the geese, this document is striking in that it contains the word “Easter”. Judging by this instruction, the Bolsheviks easily sacrificed atheist principles for the sake of a good roast goose.

And the geese were nothing! On Zinoviev's orders – he was also chairman of the Comintern – the Soviet trade representative in Estonia, Lenin's youthful friend Georgy Solomon, had to arrange a rush transit shipment to Petrograd. The cargo amounted to 200,000 gold marks' worth of goods "for the needs of the Comintern".

The trade representative arranged the shipment, but asked what was being sent. The answer: "Pineapples, mandarins, various candied fruits, sardines, fine lingerie for Zinoviev's wife Lilina, perfumes, soap, manicure tools, all sorts of lace, God knows what else."

The shipment was escorted by one Slivkin, a courier of the Comintern, darling of the party ladies. They said to him one after another: "Comrade Slivkin, bring me Coty soap", "And me Atkinson perfume." And he always brought it. The bills were paid by the Comintern. The money was the people's. And there was nothing of Marx's equality in it.

These Bolsheviks had no intention, from the very beginning, of observing the principles in whose name they committed their crimes. They had an explanation: no revolution can succeed without a staff. The staff must not worry about daily bread. It consists of the people most devoted to the cause of revolution, the most conscious. They must be the best fed. Satiety, in a hungry country, cements their party loyalty. Satiety, in a hungry country, makes that loyalty indestructible. Party women merely adorn that loyalty with their charming needs.

The last SR attempt to get back into history was a feeble revolt in the fierce heat of July 1918.

The Peasant Section of the VTsIK for the Left SR Party was located on the ground floor of a building at the corner of Vozdvizhenka and Mokhovaya streets. In the last days of June 1918 a meeting of the Central Committee of the Left SR Party took place there. It was chaired by Spiridonova: "We need a whole series of terrorist acts. They will push the people to open struggle. The Bolsheviks, like blind men, are driving all Russia into a single pit from which we will not get out. Our task is to begin an uprising."

They began with a flourish. The Left SR Chekists Blumkin and Andreyev killed the German ambassador, von Mirbach, right in his residence. The idea of the terrorist act was to derail the Brest peace signed by the "traitor Bolsheviks". As for what came next, that was already unclear. There was a vague hope of support from the workers and peasants. They thought they could rely on the 600 soldiers and sailors of Popov's detachment, stationed in Trekhsvyatitelsky Lane.

At a rally that arose, Spiridonova spoke of the betrayal of the Bolsheviks in favour of Germany, and of how flour was being taken away in the countryside. Then she went to the ongoing Congress of Soviets to explain to all the working people the meaning of the terrorist act.

One of the SR detachments, about forty men, seized the telegraph office. After some confusion, through the Trade-Telegraph Union a telegram was sent ordering that telegrams signed by Lenin and Trotsky not be transmitted. In this telegram, the Left SR Party was called for the first and last time "the party currently in power". In Popov's HQ, boots and tins of food were being handed out.

After news came in of Spiridonova's arrest, an order was given to stop automobiles. Speeches in Moscow barracks produced no major results. Soviet troops began to shell Popov's HQ. The firefight lasted until the next morning. Popov announced a retreat. Everyone fled through windows and gaps in the fence. Two dead, twenty wounded. That was the end of the Left SR uprising.

Maria Spiridonova explained the motives of the uprising in a letter from prison to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party:
“Your policy has turned out to be a continuous swindle of the working people.
Your innumerable bureaucracy will devour more than a handful of bourgeois.
Soviet power is no longer Soviet, but exclusively Bolshevik power.”

Spiridonova was tried and sentenced, and two days later the Presidium of the VTsIK issued a decree amnestying her.
She immediately began speaking at rallies again. At one of them she crossed swords with Bukharin. Later he said: “All of Spiridonova’s speeches were striking for their logical inconsistency – hysterical cries attesting to her complete instability.” She talked about hunger in the countryside.

Bukharin clearly underestimated Spiridonova’s oratorical ability. We can best judge it from the fact that she was arrested again three months after the amnesty. Moreover, immediately after her arrest the VTsIK adopted the Decree on Socialist Land Use and the Measures for Transition to Socialist Agriculture. This was the beginning of the era of state farms (sovkhozes) and collective farms (kolkhozes). Land was declared state property. The SR slogan “Land to the peasants!”, with which the Bolsheviks had taken power, was finished.

The place chosen for Maria Spiridonova’s next imprisonment was the Kremlin. She was placed in a little room next to the Kremlin guardroom. Vaulted ceiling, stone floor, damp, she spat blood from her throat. Red Army soldiers constantly peeped at her through the little window in the door and the cracks in the partition. They spied on the famous Maria Spiridonova. Some simply barged into the room and stood there staring.

The sentry led her to the lavatory. Spiridonova described this lavatory: walls and door split with cracks from top to bottom. Next to it was the lavatory for the soldiers, with glass doors. The quality of the lavatory is always a convenient way of humiliating. The soldiers felt no discomfort about the glass doors. Spiridonova wrote: “At penal servitude they did not treat us like this.” The supreme Soviet authority was very close to her – right there, in the Kremlin.

Olga Davydovna Kameneva, wife of the chairman of the Moscow Soviet, Lev Borisovich Kamenev, poured tea in the dining room of her Kremlin apartment into tall flared faience cups. Tea is not served in such cups; they are for chocolate. But those cups came to the Kamenevs when they divided up other people’s property. The cups bore a thin gold rim and a double-headed eagle.

Olga Davydovna, in a black skirt and white batiste blouse, was head at that time of the Theatre Department of the Commissariat of Enlightenment. She said: “Poets, artists, musicians are not born; they are made. The idea of innate talent was invented by feudal lords. Any worker can be made into a poet, any woman worker into a dancer; the main thing is diligence.”

Yet Kameneva could have become a good dentist; she was trained as a stomatologist.

All this is recalled by the poet and writer Vladislav Khodasevich. She invited him to her home more than once, as well as Vyacheslav Ivanov and Baltrushaitis. She wanted to have her own literary salon, like those of the Silver Age. She wanted to be a patroness, but specifically of pre-revolutionary poets. She longed to merge literary bohemia with party bohemia.

But the literary community was no longer bohemian, it was starving. As for the party elite, it truly could not give up its bohemian ways. Their emigrant life for many years had in effect been that of provincial bohemians. Now they found themselves in the Kremlin.

While Khodasevich was there, an old Bolshevik, who had failed to make a career, came to see Kameneva on some matter. He had a son who was sick with tuberculosis. Kameneva asked: “How is your little boy?”
“Not well,” answered the old Bolshevik. “They told me he needs port or cognac with milk – but where can you get that? And with what money?”

It was common knowledge in Moscow that the Kamenevs had plenty of wine and choice cognac.
“Oh, poor boy, I’ll give him some rice,” said Olga Davydovna.

She went out and came back with a tiny bag, about a hundred grams.
“Here is some rice for your son,” she said. The boy’s father took the bag, thanked her, bowed low, backed out to the door and left.

Suddenly Kameneva said to Khodasevich: “You know, our son Lyutik sometimes attends the most important meetings, and one can only marvel at how well he understands people! He sits there silently, listening, and when everybody has gone, he suddenly says: ‘Daddy, mummy, don’t trust comrade So-and-so. In his soul he’s a bourgeois and a traitor to the working class.’ And twice already it has turned out that he was right about old communists, supposedly the most tried and tested. Now, about everyone we have to deal with, we ask Lyutik’s opinion.”

Lyutik was about thirteen at the time.
“And last year,” Kameneva continued, “we sent him to the Volga with Comrade Raskolnikov. Well, Raskolnikov dressed our Lyutik in a sailor’s blouse, a sailor’s cap – even the same shoes as the sailors. A real little sailor!”

Khodasevich writes that he felt a chill. Only recently another boy, his son’s contemporary, had run around in the same sailor outfit – Tsarevich Alexei Romanov, killed on Lenin and Sverdlov’s orders.

Olga Davydovna suddenly realised she had walked into a trap and did not know how to get out, and therefore said something utterly inappropriate: “If only Lyutik stays alive and well!”

Lyutik sailed then, in 1918, with flotilla commander Raskolnikov on the former imperial yacht *Mezhen*. On the same yacht was Raskolnikov’s wife, the beautiful poet and commissar Larisa Reisner. According to eyewitnesses, Larisa Mikhailovna was in high spirits, had settled in the empress’s cabin and, on learning that the empress had scratched her name on the windowpane with a diamond, she crossed it out and scratched her own name next to it – also with a diamond.

When Larisa Reisner sailed along the Volga with Raskolnikov on the tsar’s yacht in the height of the fighting against Kolchak, they did not pass by the country estates scattered along the banks – nor the peasants’ houses. Reisner would go into those houses, choose something suitable to wear and then appear at meetings either in splendid ladies’ gowns or in peasant girls’ clothes. She said: “It would be hypocrisy to deny ourselves what always falls to those who hold power.”

Her appearance at a masquerade ball in the House of Arts in Petrograd caused a sensation. Reisner had promised three poets that she would come in a costume designed by Bakst for the ballet *Carnival*. And she did – despite the fact that this priceless costume was guarded at the Mariinsky Theatre by a whole team of cloakroom attendants and seamstresses. In a velvet half-mask, her hair tied with a lilac ribbon, her shoulders beautifully chiselled, she glided about, and everyone stepped aside.

Larisa Reisner died of typhus in 1926. She is the only one among the women of the October coup who might claim the name of a muse. Gumilev and Pasternak both dedicated poems to her.

To Maria Spiridonova, Maximilian Voloshin had dedicated a poem after her act of terror, calling her a “seagull”. Anton Chekhov would not have been delighted. That was back in 1906. In 1926, she was forgotten. The SRs had been finished off. Spiridonova was kept in exile. After prison and the psychiatric ward, she was now in Tashkent. Once, in her Kremlin confinement, Spiridonova had written: “Never have I wanted so much to be free as now.” In exile in 1926, she wrote nothing of the kind.

The women who lived in the Kremlin in 1926, however, felt completely free and entirely safe. The ranks of women with pre-revolutionary “experience” had by then been expanded by new additions. These newcomers had arrived by different routes.

Some, like Bukharin’s young wife, came from families of first-generation Bolsheviks and felt themselves to be the new hereditary nobility. Others had already been married to SRs, but had left their former husbands, sometimes out of political instinct, sometimes simply because they fell in love, and their new husbands happened to be party officials – an excellent “catch”.

Then there was a third category: girls from “good” families, from what would later be called the “former people”. Their young men had been killed in the Civil War or had left Russia. The girls stayed behind. When a Red detachment marched into their town, one girl would run to another, breathless: “What are you doing sitting here! Their commanders are interesting, young, in uniform – just like White officers. Let’s run to the town garden, quickly!” And they ran. They wanted to find protection. It seemed to them that to marry a commander was to find protection.

Besides, before his death Lenin had said that this was now a breathing-space before the coming of world revolution. They relaxed. They relaxed so much that Olga Davydovna Kameneva, Trotsky’s sister, completely got carried away with playing the role of a grand duchess intriguing at court.

According to Kremlin gossip of the time, she played the leading role in aggravating relations between her husband and her brother, that is, between Kamenev and Trotsky. Trotsky was brought down.

After his victory over Trotsky, the advocate of world revolution, Stalin advanced the thesis of building socialism in one country. Kamenev and Zinoviev, who had helped Stalin pull Trotsky down, now rose against him. Stalin immediately pinned the label of “Left Opposition” on them.

They tried to make a bloc with Trotsky – or he with them. The bloc was short-lived. On 4 October 1926, Trotsky and Zinoviev sent a letter to the Politburo stating that polemics should cease. A week later, at a meeting of the Politburo, Stalin said: “There can be no doubt that the opposition has suffered a severe defeat. It is also clear that indignation against the opposition in the ranks of the party is growing.”

Two weeks after that, the Fifteenth Party Conference unanimously endorsed Stalin’s slogan of building socialism in one country as the official policy of the party. It was never again called into question.

Stalin’s economic – or rather political – instinct did not fail him. The NEP, a very peculiar economic freedom within very narrow limits, had by 1926 exhausted the possibilities that power had allowed it. The tax pressure on the population was at breaking point, yet the Soviet budget was unable to

cope with the crisis in industry. The Soviet bureaucratic system could extract nothing from the nationalisation it had carried out. Attempts to raise loans from the population failed in view of its poverty.

The economy required massive private investment and an escape from the command system. But that was a matter of politics, of power. The slogan of building socialism in one country was Stalin's choice in favour of power. That choice meant renouncing twentieth-century economics in favour of an economic model based on slave labour. In other words: working as much as the state orders, eating by ration card, living by permit.

Life "at liberty" and life "inside" would merge in a system of communicating vessels. The Leninist guard and their women ought not to have been surprised by Stalin's policy. Exploiting the population for free, destroying opponents, leaving no predecessors alive along with their children – that was Lenin's policy. It was just that now the steamroller was passing over their own bodies.

As for Maria Spiridonova, she fully supported Stalin's industrialisation and especially collectivisation. She said that she had completely disarmed politically and that Stalin's power was the genuine Soviet power, since it enjoyed the support of the entire people. And indeed it did enjoy nationwide support.

In 1937, Spiridonova was accused of organising an attempt on Voroshilov's life and was imprisoned again. In 1941 she was shot in Orel prison on the same day as Olga Kameneva. Kameneva's son Lyutik grew up, became a pilot – and he too was shot.