

# Introduction to The Partisan Poetry of Nikola Vaptsarov

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STRUGGLESESSIONS



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By an anonymous contributor

*Editor's Note: This text reproduces some poems and presents biographical information of the Bulgarian revolutionary and writer Nikola Vaptsarov. We hope that this will serve as an introduction to his life and work for our readers, demonstrating the connection between life in the class struggle and art operative for the revolutionary artist.*

### **The Intellectual Stoker's Song**

The drowsy rails are rattling  
Night gets late  
Our bones now ache  
with weariness.  
Somebody says "I don't expect a thing-"  
I say: I do!  
The world is expecting me!

I know where I belong in life  
and I  
won't easily surrender,  
just like that.  
I will die an honest worker's death  
if I shall die  
in our fight  
for freedom and for bread.

\*

Nikola Vaptsarov was born in Bulgaria in 1909. He spent his entire life as a worker, first as a sailor, then as a stoker in a paper factory and later as a

mechanic. He joined the Communist Party of Bulgaria in 1931, at the age of just 22. The son of a Macedonian revolutionary, Vaptsarov was remarkably class conscious from a young age. Bulgarian intellectual Lyudmil Stoyanov remembered him by saying “Events shook him like a young poplar but he had firm roots and indecision was alien to him. For he knew the power of evil, he knew the enemy who was not a ghost or a fiction but an oppressor of flesh and blood.” In particular he paid close attention to the struggles against fascism in Europe and extended deep internationalist sentiments to the Republican fighters in his poem entitled “Spain.”

\*

## Spain

What were you to me?

Nothing.

A land forgotten and remote,  
a land of knights and high plateaux.

What were you to me?

The hearth

Where blazed a strange and cruel love,

a wild intoxicant

of blood,

of glinting blades

and serenades,

of passion,

jealousy

and psalms.

Now you are my destiny,

now I live and share your fate.

In your struggle to be set free  
wholly I participate.

Now I'm stirred, now I rejoice  
at all your victories in the fight.  
In your youth and strength I trust  
and my own strength with yours unite.

Crouching in machine-gun nests,  
I fight on to victory,  
down among Toledo's streets,  
on the outskirts of Madrid.

A worker in a cotton shirt  
torn by bullets near me lies.  
Ceaselessly the warm blood streams  
from the cap pulled o'er his eyes.

It is my blood that I feel humming  
through my veins, as suddenly  
in him I recognize the friend  
I once knew in a factory

where we shoveled coal together,  
stoking the same furnace fire,  
and found there was no barrier  
to check our young and bold desire.

Sleep, my comrade, sleep in peace!  
Though now the blood-red flag be furled,  
your blood into mine will pass  
and stir the peoples of the world.

The blood you gave, already flows  
through village, factory, town and state,  
arouses, urges and inspires  
all working men to demonstrate.

That workers never will lose heart,  
but will advance relentlessly,  
determined both to work and fight  
and shed their blood that men be free.

Today your blood builds barricades,  
infuses courage in our hearts,  
and with a reckless joy proclaims,  
“Madrid is ours!  
Madrid is ours!”

The world is ours! Friend, have no fear!  
The whole expanding universe  
is ours!  
Beneath the southern sky  
sleep  
and have faith,  
have faith in us!

\*

Although today Vaptsarov is remembered primarily as a literary figure, he was a staunch revolutionary who was only able to write poetry by losing out on sleep in between his duties as a worker, labor organizer, agitator and Communist Party militant. This is a deliberate attempt to sanitize his legacy and to depoliticize his poetry. Lenin himself remarked on this phenomenon of sanitizing revolutionaries by saying “During the lifetime of great

revolutionaries, the oppression classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred, and the most unscrupulous lies and slander. After their deaths, attempts are made to convert them into icons, to canonize them, so to say, and to hallow their names to a certain extent for the 'consolation,' of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping the latter, while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its substance, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it." Yet what goes ignored by bourgeois literary scholars is that many of his poems correspond to real life political action he participated in personally. For example, in 1940 he was arrested for agitating for Bulgaria to leave its alliance with Nazi Germany and instead ally with the USSR which is described in his poem "Country Chronicle."

\*

## Country Chronicle

Someone is arguing loudly  
on the radio  
With whom?  
I don't know.  
Maybe with the people.  
But let the speaker speak.  
That's what he's paid for.

"There is a state,  
a government protecting  
your interests day and night.  
Throw down your slogans!  
Drop down your placards!  
The people are happy,  
full,  
and satisfied."

Someone blows his nose  
inside the coffeeshop  
slowly wiping his nose with his sleeve,  
then looks around and says softly:  
“They may well be cheating us  
these bastards.  
As it says in the Bible,  
‘The voice of the people is the word of God’.”

“You may well be right,”  
a young man in the corner chimes in,  
his voice stiff with starvation  
“they lied to you in the same way  
in 1915,  
didn’t they?”

“And if they send us  
to a certain death  
and if they push us  
to the bullets  
then even an idiot  
would see  
that we must  
speak up.

“So I am saying  
since cooking oil is scarce  
and our bread is  
harder  
than our pains are  
our slogan should be:  
Stop the terror!  
Alliance with the USSR!”

\*

Vaptsarov was not demoralized at all by the arrest; instead, it steeled him and his political activity only increased after he was released. He joined the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Bulgaria. He was already experienced in clandestine work and his experience as a machinist gave him technical knowledge that helped the Military Commission manufacture bombs. For the next two years he would help produce and smuggle arms to the anti-fascist Bulgarian resistance led by the Communist Party. In 1942 he and 11 of his comrades were arrested for smuggling arms. They were all jailed and severely tortured for several months before they were all tried and executed together on the same day, July 23 1942. Despite the months of torture and his impending execution, Vaptsarov remained resolute: he did not have his usual tools of a furnace or a machine gun with him but he had pen and paper and he used them to carry out his duty to the very end. On the same piece of paper he scrawled two final poems: one for his beloved wife and one for his beloved class. These are sometimes interpreted together as the same poem and they were never given names but they are commonly referred to as "On Parting," and "The Struggle" respectively.

\*

## **On Parting**

*For my wife*

Sometimes I'll come home in your dreams  
And sit and watch you as you sleep.  
Just leave the door upon the latch,  
Then in the darkness I will keep



My soft and silent bedside watch,  
An unexpected guest, and when  
My eyes have drunk their fill of you,  
I'll kiss you, then I'll go again.

## The Struggle

The fight is hard and pitiless  
The fight is epic, as they say.  
I fell. Another takes my place –  
Why single out a name?

After the firing squad – the worms.  
Thus does the simple logic go.  
But in the storm we'll be with you,  
My people, for we loved you so.

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