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# **HELEN KREBEL – VARLAM CHERKEZISHVILI'S ANONYMOUS WIFE**

In 1906, Marie Derval committed suicide at a hotel in London. Reports soon revealed that the woman was a victim of anarchists' revenge. She was charged with reporting the anarchists to the police, spying on by order of the Russian Empire. The case was placed in the centre of interest of British and American newspapers and was a sensation for some time. This case has attracted our attention, as there are some reports saying that the famous Georgian anarchist Varlam Cherkezishvili had a marital relationship with Marie Derval and that the latter played a leading role in leading the woman to death. In its turn, if the materials we have seen in the press tell a story close to reality, we are dealing with a completely new page in Cherkezishvili's personal life.

**KEYWORDS:** Varlam Cherkezishvili, Marie Derval, Helen Krebel, George Gapon, Anarchism, Nihilists, Frieda Rupertus, Rudolf Krebel, Fyodor Krebel, Herbert Fitch.

**W**e still have a very little information about the family life of one of the Georgian anarchists Varlam Cherkezishvili. Dimitri Shvelidze in his monograph - "Georgians! That is who Varlam Cherkezishvili was!" - indicates that Varlam Cherkezishvili had a wife named Frieda who actively helped him in various activities (Shvelidze 2001, 230-231). Frieda's date of birth was unknown. In addition, we did not know her real last name. However, owing to online archives we were able to learn that she was born in 1877 (Rupertus Freida), and her surname was Rupertus. We also found out that Frieda and Varlam got married in March 1906.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the Marriage certificate following the link: [https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/search.pl?start=1906&end=1906&sq=1&eq=1&type=Marriages&vol=1a&pgno=529&db=bmd\\_1603137739&jsexec=1&mono=0&v=MTYwNTAzODkyODphMDFkNzYxOWE4MzRmYzYxNTRmZDAxYmMyNTJjM2QxYmM5MGJiZGVl&searchdef=db%3Dbmd\\_1603137739%26type%3DMarriages%26sq%3D1%26eq%3D4%26surname%3Dtcherkesoff&action=Find&fbclid=IwAR2gAGCz6r3206](https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/search.pl?start=1906&end=1906&sq=1&eq=1&type=Marriages&vol=1a&pgno=529&db=bmd_1603137739&jsexec=1&mono=0&v=MTYwNTAzODkyODphMDFkNzYxOWE4MzRmYzYxNTRmZDAxYmMyNTJjM2QxYmM5MGJiZGVl&searchdef=db%3Dbmd_1603137739%26type%3DMarriages%26sq%3D1%26eq%3D4%26surname%3Dtcherkesoff&action=Find&fbclid=IwAR2gAGCz6r3206)

It is true that so far we neither have had a complete biography of Frieda nor have known the date and place of her death, although according to the data at our disposal she might be still alive by 1950 (Wedman 1993, 190). Recently, we have come across with an article written by Alan Sargent, a researcher, writing about the meetings of the Social-Democratic Party in London (Studies in British Bolshevism 2018, 11). In his work, Sargent refers to the memoirs of Herbert Fitch, a British Special Forces officer (Studies in British Bolshevism 2018, 4). The latter tracked immigrants from the Russian Empire to London at the beginning of the twentieth century. In these memoirs, we find a reference to Varlam Cherkezishvili's yet unknown wife. Since Alan Sargent wrote this paper for different purposes, he did not pursue the identity of the woman. We tried to gather the information disseminated in the world press and the archival materials to find out the truth. Unfortunately, many things are unclear, so at this point we have limited ourselves to raising the topic and making some assumptions in our study.

Let us move to London of the early 1900s. On the 14th of March 1906, a young woman, fluent in French, visited a hotel in the suburb of Pimlico, London. She rented a hotel room and checked in with the name of Marie Derval. The following day, hotel staff found this person dead. The British officer Fitch, mentioned above, recalls in his memoir published in 1933 that he went to the scene and saw that "a young woman lay crumpled on the floor, a bullet through her head and a revolver clutched in her hand" (Fitch 1933, 30). According to news reports, a vessel of poison possibly containing chloride was found in the woman's room (Inquest 1906, 14). It is still difficult to say which version is more precise. However, the newspapers unanimously replicate the version of the poison. According to the press, the woman had left a letter with the following contents: "No one claim me, as I am without relations, family or friends.... I want to be cremated and my ashes goattered anywhere. Let me disappear as quietly as can be... The name I registered is not my name. I am an American" (Inquest 1906, 14).

Obviously, the criminal case was initiated and the corpse dissected. According to Dr. Robert Salisbar Trevor, a pathanatomist of the Saint George Hospital, "the body was that of a well-nourished woman. She was about 40 years of age, 5ft. 5in. in length, and had fairly long, brown hair, fairly good but irregular teeth, hazel eyes, and 25in. waist. He was satisfied that death was due to poisoning by corrosive sublimate"<sup>1</sup> (Inquest 1906, 14).

The story of Marie Derval soon was talked about throughout the UK and for months a number of newspapers touched upon the story. The story was spread far beyond the UK as well. Murders and suicides were not just single cases in London at the time, however, for the reason we will discuss below, this case used to be a source of sensation for the British and non-British press for weeks.

The police said that the identification of the woman was the first step to make. As soon as the press release was published, letters from vari-

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<sup>1</sup> 1,67 metres.

ous people reached the London police office. They were looking for their missing family members and checking the similarities between the data of the woman and their relatives. Newspapers soon reported that the truth about the dead woman was revealed.

A woman living in the United States, whose surname was Wood, claimed that the dead woman might have been her sister - millionaire Cushing's wife, but this assumption was soon rejected, as Wood turned out to be alive.

Shortly afterwards, a reference came from the French police that the deceased was a Russian woman with the surname - Krebel (Evening Star 1906, 17). The newspapers also claimed that she was Helen Krebel - the daughter of a Russian nobleman. As it was determined that the woman was a victim of the "nihilists", soon the story turned into the main "news" of the press (Identified woman 1906, 7).

Before we continue any discussion about Helen Krebel, it would be necessary to make a small theoretical digression in the topic in order to clarify the reason that caused special attention to the issue at that time.

Researcher Anna Vaninskaya tells us that the spy genre was especially popular in English literature and the press. She writes:

"But spy fiction had another late Victorian parent, and it too spoke with an unmistakable Russian accent. Three dates are of particular relevance in this neglected history. In 1878, the revolutionary Vera Zasulich shot at and wounded the Governor of map icon St. Petersburg, initiating a wave of political violence. The following year, the terrorist organization People's Will, which was dedicated to the assassination of key government figures, was formed. In 1881, it successfully carried out its primary goal of killing Tsar Alexander II. Russian secret police activity went into overdrive as police spies infiltrated revolutionary groups, and leading figures were arrested and executed. The political developments in Russia were widely covered by the British press and provided an inexhaustible source of sensational material for interested British writers. By the early 1880s, love and adventure among the Russian Nihilists emerged as one of the most popular stands of "terrorist". The Russian Nihilist motive was instrumental in developing the institutional dimension of literally portrayals of spying, for the revolutionary Nihilist almost never appeared without his nemesis, the spy of the Tsarist secret police" (Vaninskaya 2016).

This passage is quoted just for the reason to show that the story on Helen Krebel described in the British press fits well in this scheme.

In the 10th of June 1906 issue of the Sunday Call, we read:

"The Paris correspondent of the Tribune states that a woman who committed suicide in a London hotel, and who had given the name of Marie Derval, was a daughter of the Russian Consul at Genoa, M. de Krebel. This gentleman had two daughters, of whom the elder

married a Russian named Krapotkine"<sup>1</sup> (End of the Romance... 1906, 13).

As for the other members of the family, they were prominent. In general, Krebel appears to be a noble name in the nineteenth-century in Russia. Helen's grandfather, Rudolf Krebel, was a Russian scientist, doctor of medicine, and naval physician (Krebel R.).

Helen's father, Fyodor, was born on the 18th of April 1841, in the city of St. Petersburg. He served as a state counsellor, Kammerherr. He was a Consul of Russia at Genoa (The White Movement members, see the link below).

During the Russian Revolution, Fyodor actively supported the White Guards, and as the Soviet rule came into power in Russia, he chose to stay in Italy and died there on the 29th of May 1926.

According to an American newspaper, Helen Krebel, with her appearance, origin and wit, became a weapon in the hands of Russian diplomacy from the very beginning. Information coming from foreign embassies fell into the hands of Helen Krebel. She was sent to the anarchists as a secret agent and even managed to gain their trust. Her activities took place abroad, mainly in France. As the American newspaper puts it, Krebel was telling the anarchists that she could transfer their funds abroad so as not to arouse undue suspicion (Why the Czar's Cleverest... 1906, 17).

In the newspaper Truth we read the information provided by a London Star correspondent. He states: "It is four years ago since I saw her [Helen Krebel] in Moscow. She was a splendid lecturer and a brilliant writer. Her pamphlets were written in splendid style. While her addresses electrified the audiences. Whenever it was known in the Moscow group that Helene was going to speak, the meeting was sure to be crowded" (A Female Anarchist 1906, 7). The correspondent notes that, according to the story, she married the anarchist Cherkesov, one of the leaders of the Moscow group. Cherkeshvili fled from the Russian Empire in 1876 and he was a fugitive from justice until the famous amnesty of 1905. We know that he went secretly to Georgia four times during that time (Startt 1987, 145). As for his stay in Russia, his letter to the Chicago Daily News shows that he indeed was in St. Petersburg in 1902 (Despotism in Russia 1902, 3), but we do not know the details of that visit yet. Nor do we know how the fugitive Cherkeshvili managed to legally write a newspaper letter from St. Petersburg, even to a foreign newspaper. In short, we consider their meeting in Russia to be quite acceptable. According to Officer Fitch, it was an anarchistic marriage.

With regard to family relationships, anarchists believe that civil marriage should be replaced by autonomous marriage, which means that the parties agree to live together as long as they like to be together. When one of the parties expresses a desire to end up the relationship, the partnership ends (Osgood 1889, 20). It seems that in this case, it was the Georgian anarchist who wanted to break up relations. According to William Fitch,

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<sup>1</sup> We are talking about Sergey Kropotkin.

angry Krebel took the documents exposing the crimes of the anarchists to the police. Cherkezov's friends were hanged in St. Petersburg.<sup>1</sup> Cherkezov managed to escape to America (Fitch 1933, 31). As for Cherkezishvili and America, he had had an interest in the United States since his youth. He writes in his small autobiography that he wanted to go to America and fight against the proponents of slavery (Startt 1987, 145). In addition, the famous anarchist Peter Kropotkin told Price Bell, an American journalist, that he and Cherkezishvili adored Abraham Lincoln (Chicago Daily News 1929, 16). We know that Cherkezishvili and his wife Frida cooperated with the American press for years, especially with the Chicago Daily News. However, it is still unknown whether Cherkezishvili had ever been in the United States or not.

According to the Belfast News-Letter, Krebel's espionage was not immediately revealed, and for some time she continued to transmit information to the gendarmerie. When the revolutionaries suspected her, they decided to test her for loyalty, so she was instructed to kill one of the officials (name not specified). After that, Helen Krebel fled from Russia (The Fate of a Spy 1906, 9).

Fitch provides the continuation of the story. Krebel tried to escape revenge from the anarchists by fleeing to America, France, and England. According to Fitch, Krebel decided to assassinate Cherkezov by her own efforts in Paris although she overshot the target. As she home and heard that three strangers had visited the house and left the message that they would come back, she fled to London. Fitch says that along with Krebel's body, he also saw the last love letter dedicated to Cherkezov (Fitch 1933, 31).

There is also a different version of Krebel's stay in Paris: Helen, who arrived in Paris, stopped in the suburb of Neville, where she had contact with only one peasant woman - Janet Grosjean. The interview of this woman was published in the Boston American:

One evening, when Krebel returned home from a regular walk and went to bed, a good-looking man appeared at the door, speaking French with a slight Russian or German accent. He handed a letter to Grosjean and told her that it was intended for his lady. He put five silver francs in the hostess's hands and disappeared. As soon as the man left, Krebel asked the hostess some questions:

- “- Whom did this man ask for, Jeanette?
- For no one, madame. He simply asked me to give my mistress this letter, because it was important.
- What was this man like?
- He was slender and dark, madame. He was well dressed. He spoke French very well.
- And he asked no questions?
- No, madame.

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1 So far, we have not found any information in the Russian press that a large group of anarchists were arrested by the police and executed during that period.

- Did he give you anything else besides the letter?  
 -Yes, madame – this five-franc piece” (Why the Czar’s Cleverest... 1906, 17).

Krebel was getting paler. Then she said to the hostess to leave her. Then she opened the letter. The letter had a great impact on her. After an emotional shock, an attack of fear and feelings, she decided to leave Paris and go to London, informing also the hostess of her decision.

“Jeannette, I have received bad news. I am leaving France this evening. I require your services no longer. Here is a month’s wages. If I return to Paris, I shall hope to employ you again. In the meantime I must charge you to say nothing about me to any one to answer no questions” (Why the Czar’s Cleverest... 1906, 17).

After that, Helen left for London where she committed suicide.

In a Paris correspondent’s version from the Daily Chronicle, the visit of an unknown man is confirmed, although with some differences:

“One day a stranger appeared and asked the concierge if the Russian lady was in. The concierge, ignorant then that Mme de Krebel was Russian, said there were no Russians in the house. The man, who was about thirty-five years of age, dark-complexioned, and spoke French with a slight accent, became angry, and accused the concierge of trying to deceive him. He then asked for Mme de Krebel by name, and was shown up”.

The last visit of that man was a week before Krebel’s escape to London. It seems that a flamboyant conflict arouse between Krebel and the man, leaving Krebel in constant fear. The situation reached its peak when she received a death-threatening letter. Krebel then wrote a letter to her sister in which she was saying that her decision was caused neither by fear nor by madness. She was making the decision based on a reasonable thought. She was going to a foreign country where no one would know her (Norfolk News, 1906).

It was especially difficult to get information from the Russian Embassies in Paris and London whether the dead woman - Marie Derval was Helen de Krebel. The keys were sent from Paris. They matched exactly Krebel’s suitcases in the London hotel warehouse. The Russian authorities demanded to immediately seal everything. Before everything was sealed, a letter appeared out of one of the suitcases that impressed the woman. The news about the execution of the priest Gapon was spread in the press of that time; the magazine contained the executed clergyman’s picture.

Apparently, these publications forced her to find the strength and courage (to commit suicide) (Why the Czar’s Cleverest... 1906, 17).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The article deals with the priest Georgy Gapon (1870-1906). He was the leader of so-called “Zubatovshchines.” Gapon’s activities sparked the start of the First Russian Revolu-

Finally, the main question arises, how relevant is the fact that it was Varlam Cherkezishvili who visited Helen Krebel several times? We exclude this. Cherkezishvili had been in the Russian Empire since January 1906 and had never returned to Europe until 1907. It is possible that the anti-police league formed by Cherkezishvili and his associates, which was a kind of anarchist “counterintelligence”, was really persecuting Krebel.

However, according to Officer Fitch’s narrative and the news from the contemporary press, we can conclude that Marie Derval was indeed Helen Krebel. It is conceivable that Officer Fitch is telling the truth when he emphasizes the relationship between Krebel and Cherkezishvili. The particular popularity of the story is explained by the fact that it fits well into the popular “terrorist fiction” scheme of the British press at the time. Due to the diversity and abundance of versions, it is still difficult to determine the exact circumstances of the case. It is also hindered by the shortage of resources and that we have not obtained British archival materials yet. In addition, at this stage, we have not found anything about the biography of the woman written in the Russian press. This should become the subject for further research.

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lution. On the 9th of January 1905, Gapon led a large wave of workers. The demonstration was violently dispersed by the monarch’s army, after which Gapon fled to England. He was suspected of being a provocateur and a spy. Finally, in March 1906, he was killed by one of the members of his own organization. We can find comparisons between Georgy Gapon and Helen Krebel in a number of articles.

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