

# To Be a Bright Torch for Others: On Felix Dzerzhinsky's Prison Diary and Letters

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STRUGGLESESSIONS

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**To Be a Bright Torch for Others:**  
On Felix Dzerzhinsky's Prison Diary and Letters

by S Hausner

To the young man  
pondering over  
his life,  
wondering whom  
to take as his model,  
I say—  
Don't ponder,  
model it  
on Comrade Dzerzhinsky.

*From a poem by Mayakovsky*

The proletarian youth, with their usual bravery and yearning to action, should indeed follow Mayakovsky's recommendation here and model their lives on Felix Dzerzhinsky—Iron Felix, the incorruptible. Dzerzhinsky's wife Zosia Dzerzhinska writes of him after his death: "disciple and comrade-in-arms to the great Lenin, valiant son of Poland... an ardent fighter for communism....he is spoken and written of as a knight of the Revolution—a knight without fear or reproach. His own liking was to be known as a solider of the Revolution."

Iron Felix is one of those special sons and daughters of the proletariat that we can study, remember, and cherish with fondness and pride. Hearing his name should bring a smile to our lips, stir our hearts, and firm up our spines for action. Look to his Prison Diary and Letters, and find sustenance there to continue the fight with proletarian resolution and without self-indulgent rest. Look to Comrade Dzerzhinsky, and find a bright burning flame reflected in your eyes.

Dzerzhinsky was among the most stalwart of revolutionaries to emerge in the storm of the Great October Socialist Revolution. At the young age of 17, he dedicated himself to the cause of the proletariat and joined the Lithuanian Social-Democratic Party. He rebelled against the artificial and harmful separation between the intellectuals and the workers there, and refused to only teach “general knowledge” to the workers as he was told to not “mix in their [the workers] affairs or go among the masses.” At 19, Dzerzhinsky left school to go among the masses and to learn from them: “I did this by attending social evenings, visiting the taverns and all the places where workers congregated.” From here he became an agitator and propagandist in Vilnius, Lithuania, and later in Warsaw. There was no Social-Democratic (i.e. Communist) organization in Warsaw when Dzerzhinsky arrived, as the organization had been recently smashed. What did Dzerzhinsky do, then?

In his own words, characteristic of his humility, his proletarian discipline, and his simple, yet lofty, thoughts:

“I made contact with the workers and managed to rebuild our organization. A desperate struggle with the PSP [Polish Socialist Party] ensued, which ultimately ended in our victory despite the fact that we had no money, no literature and no intellectuals in our ranks. The Warsaw workers nicknamed me the Astronomer and Frank.”

Obviously beloved by the workers, Dzerzhinsky put his shoulder to the wheel without complaint and generated Communists where before there were none, from the ranks of the workers themselves. And this when he was told as a

young revolutionary precisely not to “meddle in the affairs” of the workers! A true example of going against the current in defense of the left line.

The Czarist autocracy arrested him again and again—sentencing him to prison time, exile and hard labor. He escaped exile, was arrested, served prison time, returned to organizing, was arrested again, and so on. While in prison away from his comrades and from the class struggle, his heart burned for the class and for the shining future of humanity. The bourgeoisie of his time hated him for his incorrigibility, while the revolutionaries and the people loved him.

In his April 30, 1908 Prison Diary entry, he writes:

“Tomorrow is the First of May. In the office of the secret police one of the officers, smiling sweetly, said to me, ‘Do you know that we are rounding up lots of your people before your celebration?’ Today I was reproached by the gendarme, Colonel Ivanenko, who wanted to know if I was a confirmed Social-Democrat and if I would be willing to work for him. ‘Maybe you’ve become disappointed?’ he queried. I asked him if he had ever heard the voice of conscience, whether he had ever had the feeling that he was serving an evil cause...”

While in prison, he struggled against the incorrect methods of protest of the anarchist prisoners who went on hunger strike, filed written protests and tried to organize demonstrations over every petty, daily slight of prison life, wearing themselves thin and alienating their fellow prisoners—even going so far as to tell the guards that groups of prisoners were set to demonstrate or strike when those very prisoners had no knowledge of any planned demonstration.

Dzerzhinsky writes in contrast to the anarchist methods that “the tactics of the others [the Social-Democrats and the Polish Socialists, too, we can assume] is...to take care, above all, to conserve the strength of the prisoners, to avoid conflicts whenever possible but at the same time to uphold one’s rights and one’s dignity.” Thus we can read in Dzerzhinsky’s diaries a Maoist spirit and approach to combat—endeavoring to preserve one’s forces to

annihilate the enemy's forces, and a collectivist view and long-view of conflict, rather than the anarchist individualism which short-circuits rebellion.

Faced with weeks on end of solitary confinement and all the minor and major abuses of the prison guards of the Old State, Dzerzhinsky burned with class sentiment. He struggled against the bitterness and dejectedness of some of the other political prisoners on his block; he was motivated all along by the highest proletarian sentiments and out of care for the other prisoners, who he writes about and interacts with objectively, without any hint of bourgeois sentimentality or romanticism. He writes of his yearning to “break through” the ideological or superstructural veneer which separates the gendarmerie from the prisoners, knowing that many of the guards are conscripted poor peasants and workers, the same as their inmates, with crushed-down patriotic and progressive feelings, human feelings and class feelings.

Writing of the ruling class fear of incendiary ideas spreading among the army from sympathetic soldiers, Dzerzhinsky says: “The commander of the ‘squadron’ refuses to take these men, pleading with the general not to send them since he fears they will ‘corrupt’ the entire squadron, and those whom he will have to send to the prison in their stead will likewise be ‘corrupted’ by contact with us. One thing is clear, that the army, generally speaking, is ‘corrupted,’ that many of the conscripts are ‘corrupted’ and then in turn ‘corrupt’ the others, the fearful conditions of the service ‘corrupt’ them.”

So it is: the ruling class is caught, fearful, vengeful, while their own system of misery creates their gravediggers, “corrupts” the people into heroic fighters, into activity, rebellion, into becoming the sympathizers and aids of revolution.

He struggled against the isolation imposed by the Czarist prison, which went even to the point of eliminating human sound and speech through psychological pressure—for instance, that guards were not allowed to speak to each other in the presence of the prisoners, and prisoners were only allowed to be in the toilets one at a time, imposing a strict and brutal regime of isolation even when not placed into the “punishment cells.”

Dzerzhinsky describes losing his ability to speak after long periods of isolation, only to struggle back to speech, his will indomitable because his heart is with the proletariat and the shining future of humanity all the time. We see in Dzerzhinsky's prison diary early forms of the systematic methods of psychological torture—turned into a science by the CIA and the West German servants of US imperialism in the Stammheim Prison, with a wing specifically constructed to hold the prisoners of the Red Army Faction (RAF); there, solitary confinement, severe isolation, and psychological torture were perfected as part of the imperialist counter-insurgency arsenal, tools intended to turn insurgents themselves into counter-insurgents.

Dzerzhinsky shows how to combat this counter-insurgency. With profound class sentiments, he writes from within his miserable cell, where all is hushed except the constant and dreadful metallic rustling of the prisoners in shackles:

“What is the way out of the present hellish life with its wolfish exploitation, oppression and violence? The outlet lies in an idea of life based on harmony, a full life, embracing society as a whole, all humanity; in the idea of socialism, in the idea of the solidarity of the working people. This idea is now nearing realization, the people are ready to accept it with open hearts. The time is now ripe for this. The ranks of the advocates of this idea should be united, the banner unfurled, so that the people can see it and follow it. And in our times this is the task of tasks for the Social-Democrats, for the handful still at large.

“Socialism should cease to be merely a scientific preview of the future; it should be the torch kindling in the hearts of people indomitable faith and energy.

“A small but ideologically strong handful of people, uniting the masses around their banner, can give them that which they lack, that which would enliven them, give them renewed hope, disperse the fearful atmosphere of unbelief and the thirst for revenge which boomerangs against the people.

“No government of murderers can maintain order or divert life into the old channels. The blood of the guiltless people, the hunger and suffering of the masses, the tears of the children and the despair of the mothers—the sacrifices which the people must make in order to overcome the enemy and achieve victory—will not be in vain.

“It is late. Here in this place I intend to maintain a regime that will enable me to conserve my strength. And I feel that I have the strength which, I think, will enable me to hold out and return. But even if I should not return, this diary will, perhaps, reach my friends and they will have at least a particle of ‘me’ and they will know that I was calm and that I called to them in the moments of silence, in the moments of sad thoughts and gay and that I am as well as it is possible to be in this solitude, alone with thoughts of spring, nature and of friends—here where the silence is such that one can visualize the smiles of friends.”

And we do have this particle of him, invaluable particle, in his words and in his deeds forever inscribed into the heart of the class. From within prison, Dzerzhinsky lays out with poetry and grace the class morality filling his heart and the warm and tender sentiments of a revolutionary. He writes with tenderness about his fellow prisoners and with hatred about the snitches, traitors, and takes risks to warn others of these traitors: vigilant, warm, and level-headed in the worst circumstances.

As the head of the Cheka, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, he is remembered as a terror by the bourgeoisie and their academic servants. Good. While the vulture academics, Trotskyists, etc, attempt—with great energy but also totally vainly—to recast especially the founder Marx but also the great Lenin as respectable, bourgeois gentlemen reformers and intellectuals, they cannot even imagine trying to corrupt the image of Dzerzhinsky, the convicted and confessed revolutionary and conductor of Red Terror.

This incorrigibility, this iron Bolshevik spirit and great sentiment of class love for the workers and of hatred for the oppressor is shown clearly in

## Dzerzhinsky's Prison Diaries and Letters.

Felix Dzerzhinsky died of a heart attack at the young age of 49 just after delivering a speech denouncing the Trotsky–Zinoviev counter–revolutionary clique. To his dying day he defended the revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, the homeland of the international proletariat, his body ravaged by years in prison, by exile, by the hard life of a revolutionary fighting the autocracy and the counter–revolutionaries in the fiery years of the Civil War, and by the hard task of constructing socialism—for he engaged in both sides of the dialectic, destruction and creation, as the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the National Economy of the USSR from 1924 to his death in 1926.

Writing to his wife Zosia of their son, he says “He should cherish a broader and stronger feeling than the sacred feeling for his mother or for the loved ones near and dear to him. He should be able to cherish the idea—that which unites him with the masses, that which for him will be a torch throughout life...”

And summing up communist morality, Dzerzhinsky writes in his June 16, 1913 letter to his sister:

“To be a bright torch for others, to be able to shed light—that is the supreme happiness which man can achieve. He who achieves this fears neither suffering, pain, sorrow nor need. Death no longer holds terrors for him, although it is only then that he learns really to love life.”

A true and shining role model for the young rebels, more and more of whom spring up from the ranks of the people every day. Look to Iron Felix, knight of the Revolution!

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