Mary Heaton Vorse
Garrison, Dee

Published by Temple University Press

Garrison, Dee.
Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/59699

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2145896

This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
From her return home from Paris in June 1919, until her next trip abroad two years later, Vorse rarely remained in one spot as long as she did during the Amalgamated lockout. Aside from the summer she spent in Provincetown in 1920, she commuted almost biweekly between New York and Washington or Pittsburgh. During 1920 she published two books of light fiction and completed the manuscript of her well-received ninth book, *Men and Steel*, the story of the steel strike. Her literary production in this period included a string of short stories and articles. Her writing and labor work represent an astounding output of energy during the immediate postwar years.\(^1\)

She saw her children infrequently. Heath was away at school. Joel and Ellen lived with Joe O'Brien's sister in the Southwest. Although Vorse later claimed to regret her "neglect" of the children during this time, there is no trace of remorse in her journal. One senses that she was too busy and absorbed to think much of the two youngest children, who seemed content under the care of their aunt, Josie Ham, the childless wife of an army officer.

Vorse's movements from 1920 through 1922 are difficult to trace. The rich documentary record of her personal life that she normally maintained is missing; during these two years she apparently destroyed the material or never recorded her activities. Perhaps her frequent movement left her no time for correspondence, or to write her usual "Daily Notes" and "Yearly Summaries." It is possible, too, that she later found a record of this time—a period marked by her affair with Robert Minor and her absence from
her children—as either too painful or too guilt provoking to preserve.

Forty-five years later, Vorse instructed her sons upon her death to destroy her collection of Minor's letters, a request they dutifully honored.² It also seems likely that Vorse hid the evidence of her activity as a means of self-protection against sundry redbaiters and Department of Justice agents. Her reluctance to record her doings can be reasonably explained by this factor alone, in light of the political hysteria that then convulsed the nation.

Vorse's activities were closely monitored by labor spies, informers, and government agents. Distorted descriptions of her involvement were given in weekly and monthly reports to J. Edgar Hoover. In November 1919, the Thiel Detective Agency, an anti-union group for hire, informed the Department of Justice that Vorse—along with several anarchist, IWW, communist, and AFL leaders—had met in Chicago and formed a plan, under the leadership of John Reed, to overthrow the U.S. government and kill all high public officials. Prisoners taken in the Red Scare Palmer raids in Chicago were questioned about this supposed meeting.

In March 1920, Department of Justice agent Rodney from Chicago reported to Frank Burke, chief of the Washington office of the Bureau of Investigation, describing Vorse's trip from Chicago to New York in company with Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union. Rodney warned his boss that Mary Vorse and Roger Baldwin were plotting to arrange a meeting at Madison Square Garden where Bill Haywood would speak.

The Department of Justice record of Rodney's report is preserved at the National Archives in coded and decoded form. Apparently, the federal agents had a great deal of fun when they devised their code. Their mortal enemy, the American Civil Liberties Union, they hopefully dubbed CHECKMATED BASSOONS. Roger Baldwin's big-mouthed socialist rhetoric, they must have felt, made him deserving of the code name FABIAN HEMP-MOUTH. Vorse's reputation with the agents as a woman of quality was stained. She emerged as an old cow of easy sexual availability. Her code name was BISON QUIXWOO.³

A few months later, Vorse began her investigation of the historic Sacco and Vanzetti case. When Carlo Tresca and his group of anarchists decided to raise money for defense, Tresca and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn asked Vorse for help with publicity. Minor and Flynn produced the first Sacco and Vanzetti defense pamphlet. Vorse and Flynn traveled to the Dedham jail to see Sacco and also met with Sacco's wife in the late spring or early fall of 1920. The Sacco and Vanzetti case, Vorse reported, "is bound up with all the fight that is going on for the closed shop and the unalterable

Smashup 171
determination of the employers to smash the workers." Vorse's discussion of the interviews appeared in the New York Call in December and in Norman Thomas's magazine, the World Tomorrow, in January 1921. This and John Beffel's article in the New Republic on December 29, 1920, were the first published journal alerts to the significance of the case. It was also Vorse who first brought the plight of Sacco and Vanzetti to the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union. She appeared before the ACLU Executive Committee on November 22, 1920, to elicit the first funds and support from them for the defense effort. Aided by the ACLU, Felix Frankfurter, later a Supreme Court Justice, eventually took over the leadership of the Sacco and Vanzetti defense, enlisting the aid of prominent intellectuals and bringing the cause new respectability.4

In the two years after the war, Vorse enjoyed only one extended period of quiet. The summer of 1920 was a memorably happy one for her. She realized her hope to have Minor with her in Provincetown for a few weeks without interruption.5 She finished Men and Steel that summer. Minor, as he later described it, settled down in this "out-of-the-way place" to study Bolshevik theory. To assist him in his reeducation program, he was joined for a while in Provincetown by Leo Caplan, his frail mentor from St. Louis who had won him to socialism in 1907. Minor and Caplan, who was now a supporter of Lenin, debated the nature of the new Soviet state. Minor's 1919 trip to the Soviet Union had convinced him that Lenin and Trotsky had established "a complete monopoly of news, fact and opinion" in order to silence the "more radical revolutionaries . . . behind the dark cloak of secrecy."6

Vorse shared Minor's opinion of Bolshevik terror. She likened Lenin's true believers to religious fanatics. She wrote Minor in 1920:

The peculiar stern gloom of the Communist state . . . is not alone the result of blockade and war. It is part and parcel of these people who think that they and they alone have the truth, and who also think they have all the truth there is. . . . The Communists are the chosen people and they have all the unsufferable qualities which God's elect and anointed have always had. Leo [Caplan] resented my saying they were like the Puritans. . . .

Leo is a great wizard, he explains everything. He almost explains away the things I myself have seen and the things you say you have seen.7

Minor's and Vorse's rejection of Bolshevik dictatorship—their views simplistically stated, and based on little evidence, for they wrote this at a
time when westerners knew little of Soviet events—revealed their longtime revulsion at elite control. Yet, within a few months after his 1920 summer in Provincetown, Minor would become a fervent believer in Bolshevik theory and a pliant functionary in the service of Soviet state policy.

By January 1921, Minor's allegiance to Soviet-style communism was complete. He never turned back. Until his death in 1952, he followed every twist in the party line dictated to the American Communist leadership by the needs of Soviet foreign policy. So adept did Minor eventually become at Communist Party hopscotch that he has achieved some symbolic value as an example of the ultimate party hack for many students of American communism. One must not conclude, however, that he saw himself as an agent of a foreign power. On the contrary, he was a committed internationalist who could give himself freely to the control of the Comintern because, in theory, it was the world party, which would further economic equality for oppressed people in all countries. For Minor, the failure of the world revolution, apparent by 1920, made all the more splendid the success of the revolution in the Soviet "workers' state."

In light of Minor's domineering personality, it seems probable that his relationship with Vorse could not have continued had she firmly opposed his new political ideals. But neither could she accept them in the way he wished. He was able to accept an impatient compromise. Vorse promised to read and study the works of Lenin while Minor was away on a national speaking tour. "Minor always called me bourgeois," Vorse recalled in 1957 for the Oral History Project at Columbia University. "He never pressured me to become a Party member. I don't think he thought I was fit for it." Their political differences were placed in limbo for the time being.

Political disagreement was not the only conflict that shadowed their union. Even in the blissful summer of 1920, her love for him carried barbs of ambivalence. For one thing, she found herself unable to accept his literary criticism with what he felt to be the proper grace. She discovered that his overflowing self-esteem could be wearing, his verbosity stifling, his purity of soul impregnable. In the early months of their partnership, he chided her for sending him a book of poems: "Mary, child, don't you see that writings like that in which the meaning of words is warped, twisted, ravished, aimlessly to drag on in a perfectly mane sound recurrence is not beautiful?" So much for poetry. She confided to her diary that it required of her "something full of effort" to endure his single-minded concentration on revolutionary politics, to the exclusion of most all other enjoyment in living.

In the summer of 1920, her repressed scorn for Minor's puritanical
certainty was best expressed in the little game that she played with her teenage son, Heaton. Whenever Minor approached, she and Heaton were in the habit of humming—surreptitiously, to be sure—the opening strains of Richard Wagner’s *The Twilight of the Gods*, a paean to the Teutonic deities who were greater than life.  

But the most terrible blow to Vorse’s serenity during the 1920 summer in Provincetown came with the invasion of a specter from Minor’s past. In mid-August, Minor received a letter from Lydia Gibson, the beautiful young radical poet whom he had first met in San Francisco four years before when he worked on the Tom Mooney defense effort. Minor had fallen in love with Gibson then, but had been spurned by her. 

Gibson’s first letter to Minor in Provincetown, addressed to Vorse’s house, was direct. Why, she asked, had he not told her that his divorce from his first wife, Pearl Minor, was final? And why was he living with Mary Vorse? Did he love her more than he had once loved Lydia Gibson? 

Minor’s initial response was cool. He and Vorse had a perfect understanding, he wrote Gibson: “She is independent and so am I. We tell each other nearly everything because we want to and we can, and not because we have to . . . If ever it becomes otherwise we must part. But [loving] Mary and admiring her and being free, I have no intention of leaving her.” Yet, he hedged, if ever his feelings should change, he would not live with Vorse if he preferred another, “for [Mary] is not the kind of person I could treat in such ignominious fashion.” Within a week Gibson returned two special delivery letters and a telegram to Minor. Her lavish interest in him produced a sudden change of tone in his next letter to her. Minor promised to see her during his next lecture tour; “with unlimited joy I will see you.” Thus did he overcome his distaste for rhyme and elevate his lust for a young poet to an abstraction worthy of consummate union on his next trip west. 

When Minor left to begin his speaking tour, Vorse awaited his return in Provincetown and New York. At first, her letters to him were warmly adoring. But as the weeks grew to months with only an infrequent letter from him, the tone of her letters grew plaintive. “A sense of loss rises about me. . . . I love you so it hurts. I had not wanted again in my life to have my heart so in the keeping of someone else.” Next, Vorse voiced distrust, poorly disguised as bravado: “These long tests of endurance and patience to which you have of necessity put me place their inevitable wounds deep in my unconscious. It may take a while for my inner self not to flutter frayed on the wing of doubt. . . . There is another thing: I wrote Elizabeth [Gurley Flynn] giving her a humorous description of my state of mind.
She answered in a panic: "Mary, any woman can love him too abjectly and too indulgently."

Finally the letters from Minor stopped coming. Vorse hardened herself against the hurt. "I will not suffer," she wrote in her diary. "A stubborn pride makes me tear pain from my heart. . . Pain is a prison. I hate what limits or encloses me. . . I have felt the terror again. . . Intolerance, hate, meanness. Back of it, murder. . . I am proud. I would not tolerate unhappiness long. Life has imprisoned me now and then but I have always found my way out."

In the late spring of 1921, Vorse traveled to the Southwest to see her children. There she received an unexpected letter from Minor. He asked her to join him at the Moscow meeting of the Third Congress of the Comintern, where he was one of the American party's four delegates.

At this point, and for three more months to come, members of the capitalist press were forbidden entry into the USSR by the Soviets. In mid-June, when news of a terrible Soviet famine began to dribble into the West, correspondents from the capitalist countries began to pile up at Riga, awaiting entry into the Soviet Union. Western reporters would be required to wait until late August, when negotiations to bring food relief into the Soviet Union were concluded between Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration and the Soviet government.

As the "wife" of Robert Minor, and as a well-known left labor journalist herself, Vorse would be welcomed into the Soviet Union in 1921, several weeks before the majority of American reporters. She was offered a unique opportunity—to be one of the first, and few, Western reporters to observe the new socialist state whose creation had shaken the political structure of the world.

"In looking back," Vorse wrote in 1935, "I am always of two minds about that sudden Russian trip. It is as though the road of my life forked off there and I left the highway on a long detour. I had come to the place where I needed to do a long book to distill what I had learned about life and while I was in the Southwest that spring I began a book called Women's Lives." (Vorse never finished that central interpretive work, although she took it up several times more; her ideas were instead to become the core of the feminist satire "Men," which she completed in the 1950s.) "I needed to give out, not to take in," Vorse wrote of her monumental turn toward the Soviet Union in 1921. "Already I was at the point of saturation."

She had worked "with scarcely a Sunday off" for four years, reporting the upheaval in Europe and the uprising of labor in the United States. Most of her labor work paid nothing: "Always in odds and ends of time I
had to write stories and articles to earn [my and the children’s] living." She
had little money and she was tired. Despite her doubts, she decided to go.
To be one of the first American journalists to report the famine occurring
in the Soviet Union, to study the Soviet experience, to see Minor—all
this overruled her certain knowledge that being with him brought as much
misery as it did pleasure into her life. She left Stettin for Moscow on
June 25, four days after the opening session of the Comintern. Her 1921
passport identified her as Mary Heaton Vorse Minor and listed her as
thirty-nine years old, a curiously traditional subterfuge for a radical woman
who was actually forty-six.12

Vorse joined Minor in his large room on the second floor of Moscow’s
Lux Hotel. The prerevolutionary building, on one of the busiest streets in
the city, housed the foreign delegates to the Comintern. Everything was
free to the visitors in the hotel, just as the citizens of Moscow did not pay
for public services like streetcars and apartments after the revolution.13

"The summer of 1921 was zero hour for Russia," Vorse wrote. Although
the civil war and the Allied blockade ended in late 1920, there was a
staggering domestic crisis within the Soviet Union. The economy was
near collapse. War communism, dictated by military necessity, had been
marked by centralization of government controls over the army and the
proletariat, and forcible seizure of food and livestock from the peasants,
in order to feed the soldiers and workers in the cities. Soviet rule was
on the verge of being swept away by a swelling wave of peasant insurrec-
tions, labor strikes, and urban revolts. The climax of the anti-Bolshevik
disturbances came in March, when the sailors of the Baltic fleet at Kron-
stadt rose in protest, with a prime demand for a decentralized socialist
government.

The Kronstadters suffered bloody defeat, but their revolt marked a funda-
mental change in Soviet policy. In the summer of 1921 Lenin’s New
Economic Policy (NEP) replaced compulsory food collections from the
peasants with a 10 percent tax in kind. The government also gave the peas-
ant the right to lease land, hire labor, and trade food in a free market. Trade
unions were granted a small measure of autonomy. While the Bolshevik
state retained control of heavy industry, foreign trade, transportation, and
communications, it restored capitalist operation in small businesses and
in consumer production. Concurrent with the economic relaxation of the
NEP, centralized Bolshevik authority was fastened on the country more
thoroughly than ever.

When Vorse entered the imposing premises of the former German
embassy, where the Comintern met, she was mightily impressed by the
historical grandeur of the moment. Intensely conscious of the "magnificent dream" here afloat, she wrote: "Here the accumulation of individual wealth is to stop. Here one of the main preoccupations of mankind is meant to cease." The packed hall was filled with long tables on either side of the aisle. Her first impression was that every expanse was draped with heavy red material. She sat down, gaping, transfixed by her first look at the distant men who had shaken the world—Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev.

The Third Congress, meeting from June 22 to July 12, 1921, was the largest Comintern gathering yet, attended by delegates from forty-nine countries. Its meetings were dominated by recognition that the postwar ferment in the West had ended. With world revolution indefinitely postponed, the Soviet Bolsheviks pronounced a sudden policy shift. The new slogan was "To the Masses!" The American Communists were directed by Soviet leaders to "try by all means to get out of their illegalized condition into the open among the wide masses." After a brief skirmish among the American factions, the Workers' Party of America was born in late 1921, with Minor on its Central Executive Committee.14

Even before the Third Congress ended, stories abounded in Moscow of famine in the Volga basin. Agricultural production in the Soviet Union had plummeted because of war, civil war, and the partial crop failure of 1920. The drought of 1921 brought disaster in the great food-producing regions. By the end of July the full horror of the famine was apparent. Fifteen to twenty million persons were sure to die by winter if food was not provided. Thousands were already dead. The peasants near Samara were eating grass, acorns, and sawdust. Hundreds of thousands had left their villages to migrate to the banks of the Volga or to village railroad stations to escape the famine area.15

In early August, the Soviet government prepared a political propaganda train—"The October Revolution"—to travel through the famine district and bring hope to the stricken. Mikhail Kalinin, the president of the USSR, headed the mission. Vorse convinced Lunacharsky, the minister of propaganda, to allow foreign reporters to join the expedition. She had an assignment from International News Service to cover the famine for the Hearst papers. Izvestia reported that the train left Moscow on August 12 "with five Americans and the same number of non-party journalists" aboard.16 Among the American reporters, beside Vorse and Minor, was a sister Heterodite, Bessie Beatty, author of The Red Heart of Russia, an eyewitness account of the revolution.

In Penza, on the edge of the drought zone, Vorse first saw famine-stricken children. She visited a maternity home, where hungry mothers
gave birth to already starved babies. The building was filled with constant feeble wailing. In the cribs, Vorse saw “tiny, dying skeletons, jerking their heads from side to side, even in sleep searching with their blue mouths for food.” The newborn “were shrunken beyond recognition of anything human. Their parchment-like skins were drawn so tight across their faces that their noses looked like tiny beaks.”

Observing the wasted children, she felt outrage “that in Europe and America statesmen still debated whether it was politically expedient to send food to Russia.” In fact, the delay between July 30, when the Soviet government asked Maxim Gorky to appeal to the West for help, and August 20, when the agreement to bring food into Russia was reached between Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Administration and the Soviets, was due as much to Lenin’s suspicion of the motives behind Western relief as it was to the conditions of aid established by Hoover. Yet Vorse’s revulsion was fair, if judged from the standpoint of humane action and not from that of the political chieftains in both the Soviet Union and the West.

She reached Samara, the heart of the drought. In some places the earth was as hard as pavement, in other places the dry dust swirled like talcum powder. All day long, boxcars, each piled with sixty men, women, and children, crawled out of the station taking the haggard human freight to provinces that had food. But most of the ash-colored crowd she saw at Samara was doomed to die. The famished lay piled on sacks and bundles along the tracks, under the cars, filling every inch of the train station and marketplace beyond. A crowd of thousands made no noise. Creatures with yellow faces, bloated stomachs, fever-bright eyes, they stood mutely or lay down to die quietly. Hundreds of orphaned children sat dazed and solemn, blue-mouthed with scurvy, hunched in hunger and pain, too apathetic and weak to cry or speak. They looked like ghosts of children, a group that had once been children, barely recognizable as children now.

Vorse returned to Moscow after a thirteen-hundred-mile trip by rail and ship. “As I recall the days spent in the famine region,” she wrote in 1934, “it is the recollection of the children that still hurts the most.” In Moscow, the ARA had begun to feed Soviet youngsters. By December 1, ARA relief had reached beyond the Urals and southward to Astrakhan. More than a half-million children were fed daily. At the height of its effort, the ARA sustained over ten million people. It withdrew from the Soviet Union in 1923. Ironically, the new Soviet government was stabilized partly through the effort of that devoted anti-Communist, Herbert Hoover. But when the famine ended, hostility resumed between Soviet and American officials.
The possibility of a new pattern of Soviet-American relations was again lost.\(^\text{17}\)

Vorse remained in Moscow for five months after her return from the famine region. In the winter of 1921 each foreign newspaper was allowed only one correspondent in Moscow, ostensibly because of limited housing. Vorse was the representative of the Hearst papers and one of four American newspaperwomen in the city.\(^\text{18}\)

News gathering was difficult in the Soviet Union, complicated by the great size and complexity of the country, the physical problems of travel, the government's regulation of the reporters' movements, the sometimes secretive and suspicious officials. Getting about the city meant walking, for autos were few, taxis rare, and buses unreliable. Vorse spent the mornings hearing translations from the daily Soviet press. In the afternoons she worked on copy or sought interviews with Soviet officials. The government's scanty approved press releases were usually distributed after midnight. Each night Vorse would write her copy, have it passed by the censors, and then walk to the telegraph office a mile away to make the 2:00 A.M. deadline for New York publication. "At that time gathering news in Russia was like mining coal with a hatpin," she remembered.

In Moscow she heard Lenin speak many times, and twice spoke with him. She once asked him what was the main problem of the Communist Party in Russia. He answered: "The main problem with the Communist Party in Russia is that it is entirely composed of human beings." Vorse also heard Trotsky address the shop stewards of Moscow. "I sat not twelve feet from him during the long afternoon," she wrote with an uncharacteristic lack of sophistication, betraying her excitement at contact with these historic giants who had altered the fate of the world.

Her friend Melnuchansky, whom she had met in 1916 at an oilworkers' strike in Bayonne, New Jersey, was now a high official in the Moscow trade unions. At his request she traveled to Kazan to speak to the workers about conditions in the United States. In Moscow, Vorse frequently saw Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, and came to know Clara Zetkin well. Vorse and Mikhail Borodin, who was later to direct Communist work in China, also became friends and sometimes went to the opera together.

In those early days of the new Russia, Vorse wrote, people were telling their stories wherever they went: "At that time . . . the great romances of the Revolution were told many times as people gathered together in trains, in railway stations, in steamboats." What most clearly remained in her memory was an impression of great crowds of people moving over
the land, crowds so large the individual dwindled, and the sense of an
"immense stir among the people. . . Wherever you went people were
. . . talking, discussing, Old people learning to read, Young people feel­
ing responsible for building a new world. No one had anything. There
was want, there was famine, but a new life flowed warmly through the
innumerable conventions and meetings down to the small gatherings in
private rooms where discussions seemed so exciting. It was hard even to
go to bed," she wrote.19

Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman were in Moscow that winter,
both having been expelled from the United States during the Red Scare.
They saw the tightening Bolshevik dictatorship as a betrayal of their hope
for a socialist republic in Russia and were soon to leave the Soviet Union
and live in exile for the rest of their lives. Minor was angered by their
concern for the imprisoned anarchists in Moscow. According to Gold­
man, Minor told Berkman: "You people make me sick, you . . . forget
this is a revolutionary period. What do these thirteen [jailed anarchists]
matter, or thirteen hundred even, in view of the greatest revolution the
world has ever seen?" Goldman considered Minor's view "an outrage of
revolutionary ethics. Individual life is important and should not be cheap ­
ened and degraded into mere automation. That is my main quarrel with
the Communist state."

In her autobiography, Goldman blamed Vorse for not coming to visit
her in Moscow: "Mary Heaton Vorse, an intimate in my New York circle,
was a kind soul and a charming companion. Her political views came to
her by proxy. She had been an I.W.W. when vivid Joe O'Brien was her
husband, and no doubt she must be a Communist now that she was with
Minor. Reason enough why Mary should not have allowed her superficial
political leanings to obscure the friendship [with me] that she had formerly
so often proclaimed." Their friendship abruptly ended when Goldman
warned Vorse to stop her "irresponsible talk" about an American anarchist
then in Moscow; Goldman feared Vorse's indiscretion might send him to
jail.

Goldman's critique of Vorse's politics by proxy cut deep. In 1935, when
Vorse published her own autobiography, she returned Goldman's jab.
In Moscow, Vorse wrote, "there were individuals as far apart as Isadora
Duncan and Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, bitter and dis­
illusioned, exemplifying Lenin's analysis of anarchists who, he claimed,
would by their philosophy of necessity find themselves fighting the revo­
lation with the bourgeoisie."20

There remain only fragments of evidence to indicate the nature of
Vorse's relationship with Minor during her trip to the USSR. "I had perfect goodness with him in the beginning, but that was shot to pieces in Russia," she said in 1923. Her diary notation of 1921 noted with scorn how Minor "listened so unquestionedly" to the pronouncements of the Bolshevik leaders. Just before she left the Soviet Union, Minor made clear his expectation that she would join his support of Bolshevik policies. He also ordered her to change her literary style. The time had come, he said, for her to "write indecently." Their evident conflict was softened by her still eager desire to please, to enmesh her needs in his. In the Soviet Union they were married, perhaps at her insistence, but whatever the exact nature of the ceremony, it was not recognized as legal in the United States. In 1921, she wrote, she was certain "she was the mate of the most interesting man in America." Surely this belief could lead to the conclusion that she was thus the most interesting of all women.  

After six months in the USSR, she sailed for home in early 1922 with the "impression of having left a society being born for one that was dying." Her sudden shift from the austere political intensity of the Soviet Union to the world of the bourgeoisie was shocking. The contrast enabled her to see the bustling people aboard her ship from an entirely new perspective. Their lives seemed to center about material accumulation or the pursuit of "fun." Their morality seemed shaped by a religious dogma that primarily concerned itself with restrictions on sexual behavior. The suspension of norms during the passage led to debauchery by a wayward few, while the rest worried over the iniquity of the deviant. Here were paraded all the barbarities and hypocrisies of the capitalist world assembled in the iron confines of a ship, she wrote. The experience was absorbing enough for her to publish a book about it in 1928, entitled Second Cabin.  

When Vorse returned to New York, she joined the amnesty campaign to free American political prisoners. These were persons sentenced under the Espionage Act, not for criminal acts, but solely for their expression of political dissent in either speech or writing. When liberal and radical Americans united against this injustice in late 1921, the amnesty campaign gained political strength and fairly widespread support. President Warren Harding and Attorney General Harry Daugherty agreed to release their main prisoner, the socialist leader Eugene Debs, as a way to cool the growing demand for amnesty. Their policy paid off when the AFL thereupon ended its amnesty drive. But 113 political prisoners were still in jail in 1922. Some of the prisoners were pacifists, but most had been
sentenced for their real or suspected activity as labor organizers while associated with the IWW. As the historian William Preston has explained, "the amnesty of political prisoners depended on strikes, unrest and domestic radicalism rather than on the justice of the convictions or the adequacy of the punishment. The war was over, but the class war went on."\(^{23}\)

Vorse worked for amnesty under the direction of Kate Richards O'Hare, the "first lady" of American socialism. In 1917 O'Hare had been sentenced to five years in prison under the Espionage Act for uttering "seditious" words at a political rally. Released in May 1920, she organized the "Children's Crusade" as a publicity tactic for the amnesty movement.

Composed of thirty-five mothers, wives, and children of the political prisoners, the Children's Crusade for Amnesty left St. Louis in April 1922. The prisoners' families headed for Washington where they hoped to present their petition for amnesty to President Harding. They were greeted at Terre Haute, Indiana, by Debs himself and treated to a bounteous reception and dinner. But at Indianapolis, where the American Legion opposed their entry, the city officials refused to let the children march or distribute handbills. Jane Addams met the group in Chicago and arranged a meeting where university professors and society women donated money to the cause. At Dayton, Cincinnati, and Toledo, the crusaders were greeted, fed, and housed by organizations ranging from conservative women's clubs to Communist and anarchist groups. In Cleveland, a mass meeting was arranged; clergymen, businessmen, and trade unionists spoke to two thousand people demanding release of political prisoners.

But when this brilliantly conceived and publicized procession ended in Washington, the cheering stopped. Policemen barred the way into the White House. President Harding refused to see the petitioners. He was engaged in receiving Lord and Lady Astor that day, after which he was scheduled to play golf.\(^{24}\)

Vorse helped Elizabeth Gurley Flynn make the arrangements to greet the group in New York, where they were received at the Fifth Avenue home of the wealthy liberal Mrs. Willard Straight. The travel-worn women and children paraded from Grand Central Station up Madison Avenue, accompanied by reporters, photographers, and members of the New York bomb squad. At the Amalgamated Food Workers' headquarters, the group was fed. The waiters brought a gift for the children—a small bank in the shape of the Statue of Liberty.

In the *Nation*, Vorse told the story of some of the women. Mrs. George Bryant had saved enough money to travel to the prison to visit her husband. "Nickel by nickel, and dime by dime, with sacrifices that soft people
like us do not know about, she saved the price of a ticket to Leavenworth—one hundred dollars,” Vorse wrote. “The bank where she kept the money failed. She has not seen her husband.” Vorse wrote of Mrs. William Hicks, the wife of a Quaker preacher who had been convicted for a letter he wrote to a friend in England that foretold the war and decried the effects of capitalism on American workers. A month after he went to jail, his baby was born. “That made four babies under seven,” Vorse wrote. “Mrs. Hicks had to be cared for by the county. The judge took her next older baby, and when in the courtroom she wept and begged for it, he told her she could not have it because she was a county charge and the wife of a convict. So you see, Mrs. Hicks knows a good deal about the benefits of a democracy.”

The mother of the prisoner Clyde Hough stayed in Vorse’s New York apartment overnight. Mrs. Hough had two sons whom she had advised to follow their conscience. One son enlisted and went to France. Clyde, who belonged to an IWW woodworkers’ union, refused to register for the draft and went to jail. On the day he was released, he was arrested by federal agents for conspiracy under the Espionage Act, even though he had been in prison when the act was passed. He was sentenced to another five years. “I stood it all right for a long time,” Mrs. Hough told Vorse, “but then I got sick and took to thinking about Clyde in the night and I could not stand it and I took to crying. I cried and cried and could not stop crying for two days, thinking of my Clyde. It was too much. One boy in France and the other in jail.”

The day in New York was over. Vorse stood with the little group of crusaders waiting in Pennsylvania Station for the next train. Curious people crowded around. “It’s an interesting sight,” Vorse wrote, “brimming over with human interest. A wonderful spectacle for a fine, free country.”

It had been ten years since Vorse met the train carrying the workers’ children from Lawrence. Now she ended the decade meeting the children of the prisoners—again the children coming to New York to seek help and publicity from the urban liberals and intellectuals. But America had changed since 1912. The reform period was over. “The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts,” as Willa Cather summed up the reaction of many to postwar America.25

During the amnesty campaign of 1922, Vorse and Minor shared an apartment in New York. He was working at the Liberator office, alongside his old love, Lydia Gibson, who had come east to join the journal’s staff that spring. Vorse was uneasy about his daily contact with Gibson, but Minor assured her that he had no time for any interest less pressing than politics. Unknown to Vorse, her telephone was tapped by the Department
of Justice; the federal transcript of the conversations indicates that from
morning to night, Minor seemed to be in a political meeting or in transit
to one, or at least this was what he claimed to be doing. Through this
period, he was immersed in the struggle within the American Communist
movement against those who wished to retain the Communist under-
ground organization despite the Comintern's instructions to disband it.

In April, Vorse realized she was pregnant. She was forty-seven years
old, posing to Minor as forty.

In the early summer, she and her children moved to the resort town of
Highlands, New Jersey, across the bay from New York City. She planned
to stay in Highlands through the summer, to be near Minor and to escape
the heat of the city.

She walked daily to the beach from her apartment in Highlands, down
the high wooden staircase that led from the top of the high bluff to
the beach below. In mid-July, when she was four months pregnant, she
stumbled and fell down the long flight of steps. She immediately mis-
carried. A local female physician treated her with morphine, to provide
momentary relief for her physical and emotional distress.

Vorse was still confined to bed when less than a week after her fall,
Robert Minor and Lydia Gibson suddenly appeared at Highlands. Stand-
ing before her bed, they gave her the unwelcome news. They were in
love with each other, Minor told Vorse. He and Gibson were going to be
married. After this brief announcement, Minor and Gibson abruptly left.
Vorse's twenty-one-year-old son, Heaton, cared for her in Highlands until
she was well enough to return to Provincetown in September.

Despair was total. For she was about to suffer another tragedy more dev-
astating than the loss of her child or the rejection from Minor. As a result
of her medical treatment after the miscarriage, she became addicted to
morphine.

Although some medical authorities warned against the free use of mor-
phine as early as the 1870s, many doctors continued liberal use of the
drug, especially to their already addicted patients. Complicating matters
was the knowledge that morphine was easily available in dozens of patent
medicines before 1914. The doctor's desire to relieve pain, and inadequate
medical education, were the major causes of medically induced addiction.
A report released by the Bureau of Internal Revenue after World War I
estimated that the major cause of addiction was still the use of physicians' prescriptions.

184 1919-1928
Morphine addiction is rapid, usually occurring within ten to fourteen days of use. Unlike many drugs, morphine does not create a feeling of abnormality. One does not experience an altered state of consciousness, such as hallucinations or changed sensitivity to sight or sound. Rather, one feels normal, except for an unusually pleasant sense of freedom from pain and worry and a quickened flow of ideas.

The withdrawal from morphine, however, quickly leads to a feeling of abnormality, accompanied by intense anxiety, depression, and physical distress. Thus the function of morphine for the addict finally becomes not to induce euphoria, but to avoid the extreme discomfort of withdrawal. Withdrawal symptoms occur about forty-eight hours after the drug is stopped. Intense depression is followed by hot and cold flashes, chills, extreme nervousness, short jerky breath, and excessive nasal secretions. Painful abdominal cramps, a sense of suffocation, and violent spasms of diarrhea and vomiting occur. The horrors of morphine withdrawal drive the addict to maintain addiction, and larger doses are required to maintain a sense of normality. Within a few months, addicts require the drug approximately every four hours to prevent discomfort. The only known cures for morphine addiction are abstinence or gradual reduction of dosage; both demand the dreaded passage through withdrawal. Willpower seems ineffectual, as the addict bitterly learns from relapse after relapse. Addiction leads to a fundamental alteration of personality for the addict trapped in secretiveness and loss of self-direction.

In the 1920s, the distress of the addict was compounded by the popularization of new personality theories that sought the origins of drug addiction in personality defects. Whereas drug addiction had once been perceived as a tragic vice, or perhaps the result of heredity, it came to be seen as the hideous crime of a degenerate mind. Social rejection further turned the addict inward, to take refuge in self-pity, self-blame, or grandiose dreams of eventual freedom and accomplishment.  

Vorse's diary of the early 1920s is filled with the addict's typical sense of regret, despair at unfinished work, and an overriding miasma of loss and failure. Her personal relationships receded in importance. Separation from society and loss of self-esteem sapped her energy and thought.

In *The Big Money*, published in 1936, John Dos Passos described this time in Vorse's life: "She didn't seem to have any will left." Mary French, the character in *The Big Money* who is modeled on Mary Vorse, leaves the defeated steel strikers of 1919 and travels to New York to work as a publicist and organizer for a ladies' garment worker union, just as Mary Vorse left Pittsburgh to serve the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. In New
York, Mary French meets Don Stevens, who, like his counterpart, Robert Minor, is a self-centered, single-minded Communist. Mary French is betrayed by her selfless idealism. She is least unhappy when she is running small errands for Stevens, or providing small domestic comforts to him, all of which he never seems to notice. When Stevens abruptly leaves on a mysterious mission abroad, he never writes. She waits patiently, doing union work and fixing up the apartment for his return. When she learns he is landing, she scurries to the dock to greet him. He is evasive and cool. A few days later, she learns he has married a young redhead he met during his trip. Mary French, wrote Dos Passos, her spirit shattered, retreats into drink and drugs, “seeing faces, hearing voices” through a “blank, hateful haze.” If Dos Passos meant Mary Vorse (as Mary French) to serve as a radical heroine, he portrays her without glamor or toughness, quirkishly devoted to ideals, asking no questions, and making no struggle against her fate. He presents a fundamentally nineteenth-century Victorian view of women, wherein the standard historical pitfall for women’s illicit love is pregnancy and sordid defeat.29

In Provincetown, Mary Vorse was taken under the care of a local physician. “Mary was absolutely flat broke and very, very ill,” the doctor’s widow recalled. “For months, my husband used to visit her every day, sometimes several times a day. It was often necessary for him to take food to her house for her children.” Apparently Vorse’s doctor was attempting to restore her to health by a gradual lessening of the morphine dosage that she required.30

During the next year, Vorse suffered a great weight loss. Her eyes sunk into deep holes. A photograph taken in 1922 shows her with her wan and confused looking teenage daughter seated at her feet. Vorse appears untidy and bewildered. Her great, sad eyes dominate her face, with its peculiar pallor and shallowness of expression. “She was a skeleton,” a neighbor said, remembering Vorse in that time. “She looked so terrible.” After a long pause, her friend said softly, “We were all so sure that she was going to die.”31