

Sofia Perovskaya

Terrorist Princess

The Plot to Kill Tsar Alexander II
and the Woman Who Led It

Part of a Series
Profiles in Terrorism ©

by Robert R. Riggs



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Introduction

The Russian “revolutionist” group whose development culminated in the assassination of Russia’s Tsar Alexander II by Sofia Perovskaya and Narodnaya Volya in 1881 inaugurated the modern practice of terrorism.¹ Narodnaya Volya’s history, makeup and advocacy must be of extreme interest to any contemporary student of terrorism. The Narodnaya Volya explicitly called themselves “terrorists,” though they would also, at other times, deny that they were terrorists when such a denial suited their purposes. Narodnaya Volya’s theorists dwelt extensively on the philosophy of political terror as a method of struggle. They fabricated a rationale to justify its use. They devised a terrorist “constitution.” They demonstrated how terrorism can be used to whip up recruits to the cause. Narodnaya Volya lends powerful insight into the phenomenon of terrorism because it represents a formative ontogeny, a sort of instinctual, toddling, unaided development into a terrorist organization. And the reaction of the imperial government against the Russian “Sixties” activists is also a prime source of insight. As we shall see, that reaction lacked in insight. Its harsh overreaction was

short-sighted and largely counterproductive.

Sofia Perovskaya, in the end, emerged as Narodnaya Volya's most decisive leader. She resides on the thin razor's edge that divides a saintly heroine from a terrorist killer. Sonia, as she was called and as she called herself, has not yet been the subject of an English language biography. Prior authors have looked at Perovskaya in some depth as part of an examination of the feminist aspect of the Russian revolutionists of the "Generation of the Sixties," notably, Cathy Porter's *Fathers and Daughters* and Margaret Maxwell's *Narodniki Women*. Perovskaya has also been discussed in biographies of male members of Narodnaya Volya, particularly, in David Footman's *The Alexander Conspiracy: A Life of A. L. Zhelyabov*, and in Lee B. Croft's *Nikolai Ivanovich Kibalchich: Terrorist Rocket Pioneer*. Topical works on the Sixties era, such as Roland Seth's *The Russian Terrorists* and Walter Moss's *Russia in the Age of Alexander II, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky*, also feature her prominently. As well they should. It was Perovskaya's unyielding will which brought about Narodnaya Volya's most prominent terrorist exploit, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Inside Narodnaya Volya, as within the prior groups to which she had belonged, the others looked to Sonia for leadership due to her unstinting dedication to the cause, due to her energy, due to her zest for martyrdom, and due to her prominent asceticism. Her study is more difficult than is that of some others, because Perovskaya was mainly a doer, not a theorist; she was not a prolific writer, and she rarely spoke in public.

The ferment of a generation of Russians who matured in the 1860's and 1870's distilled out a small subset of people who had the requisite character traits to turn to the methods and mentality of terrorism. Perovskaya was a product of this distillation. Her passionate hatred, combined with her ability, drive, and determination, proved to be the key to fruition of the conspiracy to assassinate the closest 19th century Russian

analog of Lincoln, the liberator of the serfs, Tsar Alexander II. Perovskaya's antecedents in the highest levels of Russian aristocracy* make her an archetype of one of the many striking paradoxes demonstrated by terrorists. By no means poor and oppressed beings, they are generally children of wealth and privilege who go overboard in adopting the cause of others.

Napoleon once wrote, "It is through many experiments made with precision, in order to arrive at the truth . . . that we advance gradually and arrive at simple theories, useful to all states of life."² It is in that spirit that we approach one of the thorniest and most perplexing unsolved problems of our era, the origins and motivation of the terrorist. Terrorism has become virtually a daily intrusion into Western consciousness. Yet at bottom it remains a poorly understood phenomenon. Governments, commentators and mass media tend to be distracted by the optics of contemporary groups who claim "credit" for the terrorist act of self-immolation. The distance of history yields perspective on these matters.

What we observe, in looking at historical terrorists such as Perovskaya and her associates, is a striking pattern of personal characteristics. Our "simple theory" is that the methods of terrorism appeal to a peculiar kind of personality, one not yet

* With reference to the title of this work, the objection has been raised, with justice, that Sofia Perovskaya did not have a formal title of "princess." We use "princess" as per the Oxford online dictionary definition 1.4 of that term: "A woman or thing regarded as pre-eminent in a particular sphere or group: 'the princess of American politics.'" This well describes Perovskaya, as we shall see. Moreover, her contemporaries – adversaries within the government, colleagues within Narodnaya Volya, and the public who turned out in hordes to watch her mount the scaffold – were fascinated above all with the fact that Sonia was a product of the highest level of the Russian nobility.

fully recognized in its details. All terrorist “causes” – be they Islamism, anarchism, right wing extremism, opposition to legalized abortion, racism, etcetera – serve merely as the “flavor of the day” for the terrorist persona. This is an expansion of a hypothesis offered by a thoroughgoing student of terrorism, Walter Laqueur.³ There is an identifiable constellation of personality traits, what we call here a profile, that is strongly associated with persons who act out as terrorists, regardless of the particular cause or value structure that the terrorist happens to be supporting.

Like a particle, popping into existence at a fundamental quantum level, the terrorist persona appears to be an inherent fluctuation in the human personality. The terrorist materializes out of “nothingness” at any time, at any place, and in any social milieu. Terrorism has manifested itself in the United States, in Russia, in France, in Germany, in Japan, in India, and in the Middle East. There is no one political or religious structure that gives rise to terrorism, or that magically protects against it. Unfortunately, we see that under certain conditions terrorists can “grow” other terrorists by exploiting, cultivating and bringing out its inherent personality attributes, especially among young people. The terrorist emerges out of “nothingness” in the sense that terrorism is a sudden burst of passionate violent behavior which generally cannot be traced to compelling hardships, injustices or other social forces exerted on the terrorist personally. In the words of Laqueur,

[T]errorism is not merely a technique. Those practicing it have certain basic beliefs in common. They may belong to the left or the right, they may be nationalists or, less frequently, internationalists, but in some essential respects their mental makeup is similar. They are often closer to each other than they know or would like to admit to themselves or others.

One of Laqueur’s fundamental observations, which we

shall see verified in this work, is that terrorism is not carried on by “poor and desperate human beings.”⁴ Laqueur noted the following myths regarding terrorism:⁵

1. Terrorism is a response to injustice; if there were political and social justice, there would be no terrorism.
2. The only known means of reducing the likelihood of terrorism is a reduction of the grievances, stresses and frustration underlying it.
3. Terrorists are fanatical believers driven to despair by intolerable conditions.
4. They are poor and their inspiration is deeply ideological.

This biography will, in particular, add to the evidence which shows that the terrorist typically turns out to be a product of relatively affluent economic and social circumstances. Sofia Perovskaya started her life by being born into a wealthy, accomplished, family with royal status and with the highest social connections. Sonia ardently felt, and gave herself over to, the cause of others. We shall see that “adopting the cause” of others is generally a pivotal paradigm of the terrorist.

A strange paradox about terrorists is that despite their demonstrated capacity to engage in ruthless acts of murderous violence against unsuspecting, unarmed people, in their other life they generally are neither harsh nor cold blooded. Sofia Perovskaya, as we shall see, was lauded by her peers for being loyal to her friends, for being tender with the sick, for her sweet disposition, and for being devoted to her mother.

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Chapter 2: The New Tsar Liberator

The rise of the Generation of the Sixties happened soon after the accession to the throne of Alexander Nikolaevitch Romanov, who upon the death of his father in 1855 was titled Tsar Alexander II. The new Tsar was only 38 years old. He had a tendency to lean to the liberal side of autocratic Russian politics. A sensitive sort, young Alexander had always displayed much more fondness for the pomp of military parades and the polish of military uniforms than the brutish imperial business of fighting battles against heathens and pacifying hostile territory.¹¹² His father, Tsar Nicholas I, felt it necessary to prepare Alexander for eventual rule. In 1837 Nicholas sent the 19-year old heir apparent on a tour of discovery throughout the vast regions ruled from St. Petersburg. While touring in a remote area of northeast Russia, on the way to Siberia, Alexander attended an exhibition where he was guided by a well educated young noble, Alexander Herzen. Herzen had been sentenced to live there for having attended a festival in which subversive poetry was read. After meeting Herzen in this way, the Tsarevich personally interceded for Herzen and obtained from his father a

commutation of Herzen's banishment.¹¹³

Another place young Alexander Romanov sojourned on his voyage was Kurgan, Siberia. There, consigned to exile, resided a group of liberal nobles who had supported the so-called "Decembrist" revolt of 1825, opposing his father's accession to the throne, but who did not participate so overtly and directly in the rebellion to be hanged as ringleaders. Though the exiled Decembrists were not allowed to speak with the young Tsarevitch, Alexander had felt pity for these convicts. Immediately after his visit he had urged his father to show them clemency.¹¹⁴

Upon becoming Emperor, one of Alexander's first acts was to sign pardons and commutations for the remaining Decembrists exiled in Siberia.¹¹⁵ The new Tsar was awed by the magnitude of the powers now reposed in him as supreme ruler of the enormous Russian empire. He humbly asked for divine assistance in assuming to undertake the role of supreme judge.¹¹⁶ While vowing loyalty to his father's legacy, Alexander II promptly embarked on his own policies, which were in sympathy with the progressive elements of Russian thought, and thus stood in contrast to his father's conservatism. For instance, very soon after his accession, travel policies were loosened so that it became easy for Russians to obtain passports to travel abroad in Western Europe.¹¹⁷

More students were now allowed to pursue higher education. Entrance into the Russian university system, under Nicholas, had been basically restricted to privileged sons of the nobility. At the time of Alexander's accession, there were only 2,900 university students in a country of 70 million people.¹¹⁸ Alexander cracked open the doors of the universities. Between 1853 and 1860 student enrollment in the five Russian universities (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov and Kazan) climbed from 2,809 to 4,935.¹¹⁹

Though still very low in absolute numbers, the influx of new students and faculty would soon spray into Russian

society a stream of young intellectuals and activists. Many of these men and women felt a strong urge to dedicate their lives to ameliorating the ills of Russian society. They were particularly concerned with the poverty, disease and often brutal discipline of the Russian peasantry, which young people from middle and upper class backgrounds found appalling. Eventually, most of the starry eyed students embarked on family life and productive careers. They favored the granting of academic and personal freedoms, as well as the abolition of serfdom, but they did not choose to sacrifice their own lives to attain these goals.¹²⁰

However, a very small percentage of the students in the Generation of the Sixties would follow a different path. They would be drawn into a deepening fascination with the ideal of dramatic change through revolution, rather than gradual evolution. These “revolutionaries” would, themselves, evolve. They would organize. They would polarize, disdaining “liberals” and believers in constitutional reforms. They would theorize. They would rationalize. Ultimately, from the core of uncompromising “revolutionaries” would be distilled an even smaller circle, one composed exclusively of individuals who would refine and reinforce one another’s delusions. This group would ultimately reject all other forms of direct action in favor of a vision of effecting dramatic change through spectacular murderous exploits. According to their own terminology, they were committed “terrorists.” Their own deaths, and martyrdom in support of the cause, were integral to the vision. They created a virtual test tube laboratory for terrorism.

Early in his reign, Alexander delegated power to liberal ministers. He also gave much deference to the views of his younger brother Konstantin, always an outspoken reform advocate, and his aunt H el ene, a French-educated progressive. Konstantin and H el ene vehemently opposed the institution of serfdom. They bolstered Alexander in his resolve to make its abolition the key initiative of his reign.

The battle over Russian serfdom, a form of slavery, was fought out in parallel with the struggle to abolish slavery in the United States. In many respects, Russia's serfdom was even more challenging than America's problem with slavery. Out of an estimated 70 million total Russians, 50 million were in some form of bondage when Alexander became Emperor. Ending serfdom had been one of the principal "planks" of the Decembrists. Tsar Nicholas I, after crushing the Decembrists, sought to defuse the issue. He had, in fact, appointed his son Alexander to a secret committee to try to work out a solution.¹²¹ The major issue and obstacle was: How to free the serfs, without at the same time granting them land? To give the serfs land, it was felt, the government must take away valuable land from land owners. And as in the antebellum southern United States, large plantation owners (in Russia, more commonly called "estate owners") formed a powerful and entrenched constituency. They depended upon and perpetuated the institutions of serfdom.¹²²

Upon accession to the throne, Alexander rapidly appointed his own committee to find a path to emancipation.¹²³ However, in a pattern we will see repeated, a majority of the nobles and councilors whom Alexander placed on this committee were conservatives, basically hostile to the idea of a wholesale liberation. They were just as content to keep the system as it was or, at most, to enact slow and small changes. They expected to watch the new Emperor's anti-serfdom initiative die of its own weight, just like all the previous ones under Nicholas. In order to overcome this inertia, Alexander appointed his brother Konstantin to the emancipation committee. Alexander also took the bold



Alexander Nikolaevitch Romanov, Tsar Alexander II

step of publicly announcing his support for ending serfdom.¹²⁴ Alexander thus earned his enduring nickname, “The Tsar Liberator.”

Debate on how to end serfdom dragged on interminably during the first five years of Alexander's rule. Constant political battles raged over the issue. Alexander kept pushing for results. Finally, in January 1861, the Emperor personally intervened with the committee and insisted that a decree must be in place by mid February, well before the planting season

could start. On February 19, 1861, the historic imperial decree abolishing serfdom was signed.¹²⁵

Some highlights of the new emancipation law included:

- The serfs would receive the rights of citizens, and perpetual freedom.
- They also received the perpetual use of their homes.
- The serfs received an allotment of ground similar to what they had cultivated in the past; however, they were required to “purchase” this ground from the landowner.
- Only domestic serfs were emancipated without ground.
- A two year transitional period was decreed, in which the existing relationships would hold, prior to emancipation.
- During this two year transition period, the “purchase price” of the peasant plots was to be negotiated.
- Disputes over the land purchases would be resolved by “peace arbitrators” selected from the local nobility.
- To facilitate the transition, the government would make low interest loans, to enable the landowners to receive the money and to allow the peasants to pay off their land acquisition over a period of years.
- Much of the land, that was previously under collective cultivation, would remain under collective cultivation, in the form of the mir. The mir would also be responsible to pay the taxes.
- To figure out how much land each freed serf would receive, a complicated formula was used. In part, it was broken down geographically. Russia was

divided into the “fertile” zone, the “non fertile” zones, and the “steppes,” which were themselves subdivided into 16 categories.¹²⁶

A rough parallel could be drawn between Alexander’s emancipation decree and U.S. President Barack Obama’s “Affordable Health Care” act. Both initiatives produced a legislative package that was, in the end, a patched up package of compromises, with many flaws, injustices, and loopholes. It was easy to underestimate the vast economic, administrative, and social difficulties and complexities involved in working out the emancipation law. As a result, advocates on both sides of the issue were left unhappy. Many were highly critical of the final decree. Among the more immediate problems, landowners naturally sold to the serfs those of their lands that were the least desirable due to issues such as sand or marshy conditions. The two year period of continued servitude prescribed prior to emancipation seemed like an eternity. Also, there was a provision in the law that allowed freed serfs to elect to receive only one quarter of their land allotment, and pay nothing, instead of “purchasing” their entire allotment. Many peasants of course opted to pay nothing, and as a result, they received an allotment of land that was too small to make a sustainable living. Due to protests over these problems and other perceived “tricks” embedded in the emancipation decree, the popular adulation Alexander received upon its issuance was short lived.¹²⁷

In early 1861, just as the emancipation decree was in its final stages of preparation, major protests erupted in Poland against its rule by imperial Russia. Partly because of his German heritage (Alexander’s mother was Prussian, and he had spent much of his youth visiting Germanic areas), Alexander had a tendency to look upon the partition of Poland between Prussia and Russia as justified and inevitable.¹²⁸ On the Poland question, he found himself strongly torn between the hawkish advice of his father’s former aides, who urged a

policy of repression, and the doves associated with his brother Konstantin and the liberal ministers, who urged conciliation. On March 25, 1861, Alexander announced a series of major concessions to Polish autonomy, including a Polish council of state, educational reforms, and increased freedom for the Catholic church to operate in Poland. He also installed a Polish nobleman, Alexander Wielopolski, as a sort of virtual vice-tsar of the Polish territory.¹²⁹

Unfortunately, neither Alexander's autonomy concessions nor his appointment of Wielopolski were enough to pacify the nationalists dedicated to an independent Poland. Alexander's benevolent moves only led the militants to demand more. The Polish nobility, clergy, youth, and notable citizens all called for an end to Russian dominion over Polish territory. Polish partisans also agitated abroad, particularly in Paris.¹³⁰ Little by little, the "Polish cause" was widely accepted and championed throughout Europe. Wielopolski, despite being Polish, was viewed as an illegitimate imposition, resulting in hostility. Alexander was soon forced to recall him. Next, Alexander tried appointing his brother Konstantin to the post of vice-tsar for Poland. Despite Konstantin's strong credentials as an ardent liberal, his appointment again failed to quell the brewing nationalistic ferment within Poland.¹³¹ Polish partisans declared that they preferred Siberia or the gibbet to the ignominious insult of an "amnesty" offered as one of the Tsar's conciliatory gestures.

The balance of power within the government was tipped back toward the reactionaries by a series of terrorist attacks that occurred in Poland, including an assassination attempt against Konstantin himself. The perpetrators were caught, and hung. Their martyrdom provoked more bitterness and recriminations among the Polish patriots. Alexander found himself emotionally affected by the attempt on his brother. In response, he approved the dispatch of Russian troops into Poland. Konstantin was recalled to Russia and, under the

supervision of ruthless military governors who replaced him, a deadly purge commenced. Thousands of Poles were arrested, executed, and sent to forced labor in Siberia. Russian was made the obligatory official language in Poland. Even the church fell under strict scrutiny. Convents that were suspected of sheltering or helping Polish partisans were closed. Pope Pius IX protested in vain. Most of the surviving Polish partisan leaders fled to the West.¹³²

Alexander's Polish policy obliterated his remaining goodwill among Russian progressives.¹³³ Alexander Herzen, who by now had left Russia and who had become one of the most influential Russian expatriates, cancelled his planned toast to Alexander's liberation of the serfs. Instead, in his London periodical *The Bell* [*Kolokol*], he chastised: "You, Alexander Nikolaevitch, why did you rob us of our joyful occasion?" Now Herzen drank "for the full unconditional independence of Poland."¹³⁴ Yet Alexander's hard line policy on Poland was thoroughly supported by mainstream Russian public opinion. Most Russians favored territorial aggrandizement, and did not want lands of the empire stripped off.¹³⁵

By this time, some within the new generation of energized Russian youth had turned to writing as a means to push for social progress. At the center of the progressive Russian press was a radical periodical called *The Contemporary* [*Sovremennik*]. The writers who published in *The Contemporary*, including Chernyshevsky who was one of its principal contributors between 1858 and 1860, had nothing but contempt for liberals and their plans for peasant reform. Chernyshevsky was not an advocate of reform, but of revolution.¹³⁶ He privately criticized emigrés like Herzen and Mikhail Bakunin as being hopelessly behind the times, in terms of the "liberation movement."¹³⁷

Chernyshevsky was born in 1828 in Saratov, 840 kilometers southeast of Moscow. His father was a priest.

Young Nikolai himself grew up devout. He was groomed to follow in his father's profession. Thus he was sent to Russian Orthodox seminary, where he proved to be a precocious and gifted student. By the time he graduated, he had read most of the classics of contemporary world literature, including the works of George Sand, the alter ego and pen name used by the feminist French author Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin, as well as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Charles Dickens. He had acquired a working ability in eight modern and classic languages, including, French, Italian, German, and English, in addition to his native Russian. His parents, convinced that a brilliant future awaited their son, eagerly sent him to university at St. Petersburg, the capital of the Russian empire, in 1846. But upon his arrival in the capital, Nikolai was regarded as nothing special, just another boy from the provinces. He was awkward and very nearsighted, peering through thick glasses. He lacked social graces such as musical talent and dancing ability. His relative poverty was reflected in his wardrobe, which quickly made his origins obvious to his university peers, most of whom were children of the aristocracy.

Chernyshevsky's rather large and sensitive ego felt crushed. The experience altered him deeply. In his diary he spoke of a coldness that crept into his heart and produced a renunciation of emotion. He abandoned his former devout religious faith and, in its place, ardently embraced a philosophy of utilitarian materialism. This, essentially, is the utopian world view reflected in *What Is to Be Done?* As part of his transformation Chernyshevsky embraced with passion the political outlook of revolutionary socialism.¹³⁸ Thus, Nikolai finally succeeded in gaining acceptance by others who were following a similar path.

The year 1848 witnessed a wave of nationalistic and republican oriented uprisings against hereditary monarchies throughout Europe, including in France, Germany, Ireland, Denmark, Austria, Hungary and Italy. Russian students were

acutely aware of current world events. Stimulated by the hope for radical change, Russian utopian socialists, including some prominent intellectuals and writers, formed a group called the Petrashevsky circle, named after its original organizer Mikhail Petrashevsky. The very idea of such a group was highly illegal under the repressive regime of Nicholas I. The Tsar's secret police soon learned of the Petrashevsky circle. They arrested all of its members whom they could catch. Many were sentenced to death, only to have the sentences commuted at the very last second by a special "dispensation" of mercy from Nicholas himself. Among these was Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who at the time was 28, seven years older than Chernyshevsky. Dostoyevsky spent four years in prison as a result of his involvement in the Petrashevsky circle. Chernyshevsky, as a university student, also was active with Petrashevsky, but apparently his involvement escaped the attention of the secret police.

After graduating in March 1851, Chernyshevsky returned to Saratov and became a teacher. Two years later, he was married.¹³⁹ However, his relationship with his wife Olga was never happy. Once married, she all but abandoned Nikolai, whom she found tedious and pedantic, and whose ideas she never found remotely interesting.¹⁴⁰ Unencumbered by any semblance of a family life, Chernyshevsky returned to St. Petersburg where he immersed himself in radical journalism. This he did predominantly in the form of *The Contemporary*, which he took over editing during the mid-1850's.

By 1861 Chernyshevsky was ready to launch into revolutionary agitation. To counter goodwill generated by the Tsar's proclamation freeing the serfs, Chernyshevsky wrote demagogic pamphlets. He did not, however, call for an immediate uprising. Instead, he urged the "people" to stay quiet and gather their strength until such time as their "friends" and "well-wishers" called for them to rise. He convinced himself that the revolution would occur in 1863. In order to

build momentum in that direction, a group of St. Petersburg radicals inspired by Chernyshevsky formed a new secret organization, named Zemlya i Volya [Land and Freedom] to exploit the main frustration accompanying the Tsar's emancipation decree – the fact that land grants did not accompany the serfs' freedom. Zemlya i Volya would be the forebear of a series of underground groups organized by radicals who emerged from the Generation of the Sixties.¹⁴¹

Russian governments have long been very proficient in techniques of surveillance. In Alexander II's era, the Russian intelligence agency charged with spying on Russian subjects was called the Third Section of the Okhrana [meaning, Guard]. Chernyshevsky, rightly suspected of being an instigator of student protests, was a major object of its study. His janitor and cook provided the Third Section with the fascinating intelligence that he seemed to sleep only two or three hours per night, spending the rest writing behind the locked door to his study. He was observed being visited by army officers, by left wing dissidents, and by suspected Poles.¹⁴² In late April 1862, Prince Vasily Dolgorukov, chief of police, presented a report to Alexander in which he concluded that liberal policies had led to an organization that was trying to take power. He recommended the arrest of 50 subversive persons including Chernyshevsky.¹⁴³ Alexander, however, did not immediately follow this recommendation. He took it under advisement.

In May of 1862, a series of major urban fires struck St. Petersburg. The largest of these, on May 28, 1862,¹⁴⁴ struck the Apraxin Dvor, a huge outdoor public market filled with shops and stores. Arson was suspected. Although no proof was ever produced, in the public mind the fires were associated with left wing agitators typified by Chernyshevsky and the writings of *The Contemporary*. A popular sentiment of fear and distrust, fueled by the fires, bolstered the conservatives in their push for repressive measures. On July 7, 1862, Chernyshevsky was arrested.¹⁴⁵ His prison based authorship

of *What Is to Be Done?* would follow.

Alexander still moved forward with liberalizing. He continued with his opening of the universities, and he also supported initiatives to make the governance of the university system itself more enlightened. He took action to outlaw corporal punishment, in the form of control techniques such as beating and whipping, which were previously endorsed by codified law in Russia, and which were notoriously applied to the bodies of serfs. Alexander was aware that these punishments were regarded as medieval and barbaric by “modern” societies. On April 7, 1863, Alexander signed a decree banning the *bastonnade* (judicial beatings), as well as branding with a hot iron and all corporal punishment. However, an exception permitted whipping to remain an approved method of discipline within the military and in prisons.¹⁴⁶ This exception would prove fateful for Alexander.

Alexander also instituted sweeping reforms of the Russian justice system. On November 20, 1864, he signed a decree that thoroughly modernized and overhauled the Russian court system. It introduced such concepts as confrontation of witnesses, the right to defense attorneys, public trials, independent judges protected from removal from office, speedier trials, and equality before the law. Criminal trials were now to be decided by juries. This change, too, would be intertwined in an unexpected way with Alexander’s fate.

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Chapter 4: Birth of a Princess

Sofia Lvovna Perovskaya was born September 1, 1853 in St. Petersburg. She was the fifth and youngest of the five children born to the union of Lev Nikolaevitch Perovsky and Varvara Stepanovna Veselovskaya.¹⁷³ At her christening the future terrorist wore a brightly colored sundress. She was decorated by her paternal grandmother, who doubled as her godmother, with a gold cross hanging from a bright crimson ribbon.¹⁷⁴

The brilliant family into which baby Sonia was born was beyond noble. It was considered to be princely due to its royal connections. Hers was a family of immense wealth and prestige, situated at the highest level of the Russian aristocracy. And what is more, the family's members had reached the pinnacle of society not merely by virtue of high birth, but by dint of intelligence and hard work, combined with good looks and charm.

The newborn's great-great grandfather, on her father's side, was Kirill Grigorievitch Razumovsky.¹⁷⁵ Kirill Razum,

his original name, was the younger brother of Alexei Razum, a courtier who due to his personal charm became the morganatic husband and royal consort of Empress Elizabeth, tsaritsa of Russia. Tsaritsa Elizabeth reigned from 1741 until 1762. The Tsaritsa fell deeply in love with Alexei, a handsome and musically gifted Ukrainian Cossack, and married him in secret. The happy relations between Alexei and Elizabeth were a boon to the entire Razum family. They were summoned to St. Petersburg, and on all of them was conferred a title complete with a new, ennobled name: “Razumovsky.”

The Empress’s new brother-in-law Kirill Grigorievitch Razumovsky was blessed with a handsome face and an even better intellect. He was known for his kindness, openness, generosity, and good-natured sense of humor. Catherine the Great, the empress who followed Elizabeth, described Kirill Grigorievitch in these terms. “He was good-looking, he was very pleasant to deal with and his mind was incomparably superior to the mind of his brother, who was also handsome.” Kirill Grigorievitch, similar to Americans of the era such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, was a Renaissance man. The formerly illiterate Cossack stunned Russian society by teaching himself mathematics and science to such a degree that he became not only a member, but ultimately a director, of the Russian Academy of Sciences.¹⁷⁶

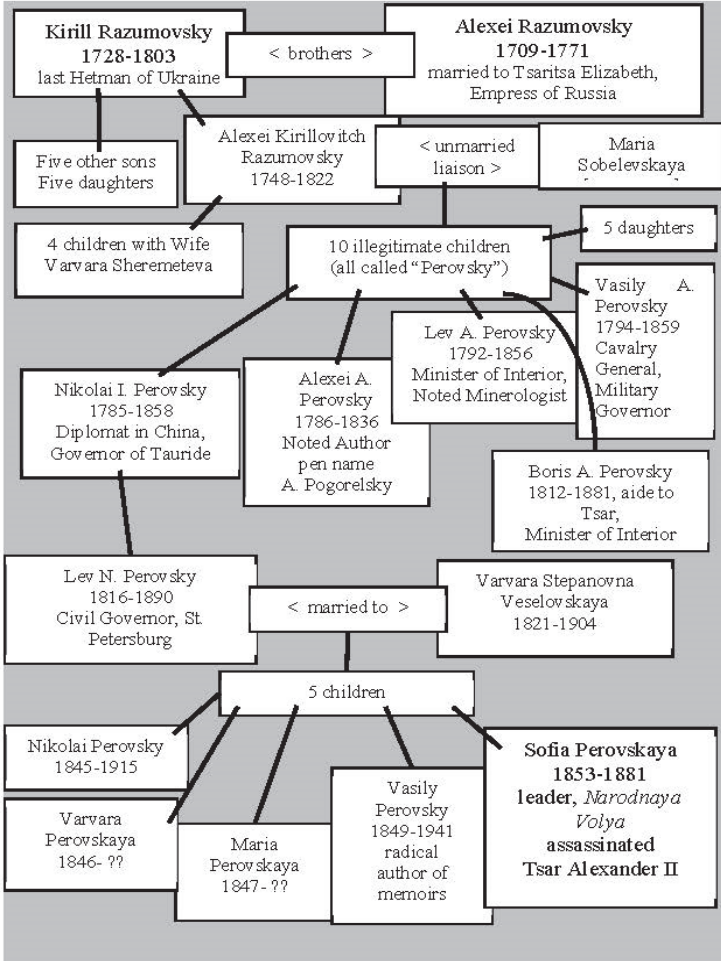
At the imperial court, all of the girls were crazy about the clever, handsome Kirill. To be his wife, Tsaritsa Elizabeth selected Kirill’s second cousin, Katarina Naryshkin. Katarina came from an enormously wealthy noble family. As his reward for taking her, Kirill was given a huge dowry which included, among other things, several villages in the territory of modern Moscow. The favored brother of the Empress’s consort suddenly became one of Russia’s richest people. The lavishness of Kirill’s lifestyle was legendary. In Razumovsky’s kitchen every day were slaughtered a whole ox, ten sheep, chickens and a hundred other beasts and fowl in an

appropriate amount. The cuisine was supervised by a famous imported French chef named Barid.

The Empress appointed Kirill to the post of Hetman, or supreme military commander, of the Ukraine. Although his performance in that position was tainted with accusations of corruption, ultimately leading to his dismissal, Kirill survived these political adventures to return to the estate in Moscow. He became even richer in 1771 when his older brother and imperial consort Alexei died childless, leaving him everything including an estimated “100,000 peasants.”

Kirill Razumovsky had eleven children, of whom one of the most prominent was Alexei Kirillovitch Razumovsky.¹⁷⁷ This nephew of the original Alexei Razumovsky, born during his aunt Elizabeth’s reign in 1748, grew to become a senator, minister of education and advisor to the throne. In 1774 his marriage was arranged to one of the wealthiest eligible brides in Russia. Alexei Kirillovitch was notably prolific. After having four children with his wife, he moved her into a home in town, and then produced a second family out of wedlock with a commoner on the suburban estate, Maria Sobelevskaia. Maria gave birth to eight illegitimate children by Alexei Kirillovitch between 1785 and 1798; eventually he had two more. Maria and her children were maintained in regal style on the Razumovsky family estate in Perovo, a suburb of Moscow. From this geographical point of reference, the out of wedlock children of Alexei Kirillovitch who were born on the

RAZUMOVSKY / PEROVSKY FAMILY TREE



estate were all given a newly invented surname, “Perovsky.”

Difficult as it is to imagine, the Perovsky children grew up to become even more accomplished than their “legitimate” Razumovsky forebears and cousins. Not only did they serve the sprawling Russian empire in a variety of military posts, and as cabinet ministers, they also distinguished themselves in

scientific and artistic pursuits. Alexei Alexeivitch Perovsky, who fought with distinction during the victorious war of 1812 that repelled Napoleon's invading French army, was a botanist and a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, besides being a noted writer as discussed below. Brother Lev Alexeivitch Perovsky was a noted geologist. He was the first to identify a mineral -- called "perovskite" -- that continues to be used today in making solar cells.

Lev Alexeivitch was also important in Russia's political life, and became minister

of the interior. We have small hints that Lev Alexeivitch was one of the more progressive members of the circle of advisors to the conservative Nicholas I. In 1846, after being appointed to head the Emperor's special committee to struggle with abolition, he took the lead in formulating a proposed measure to free the serfs.¹⁷⁸ He was trusted by the Emperor. In 1852, he was promoted to be the head of Nicholas's cabinet.

The Perovsky clan showed a talent for creative writing. Alexei A. Perovsky, the scientist and war veteran, also became a novelist. He wrote widely read children's stories under the pen name, Antony Pogorelsky. Alexei A. Perovsky / Antony



This portrait of Alexei Alexeivitch Perovsky, who went by the pen name Antony Pogorelsky, hangs in the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg

1835 painting by Karl Brullov.

Pogorelsky was a good friend of Alexander Pushkin, still considered by many to be the greatest Russian poet. He was also the mentor and close companion of his nephew Alexei Konstantinovich Tolstoy, another famed Russian poet. Alexei K. Tolstoy was in fact the son of Anna Alexeyevna Tolstoy (b. 1796), one of the “Perovsky pupils” (i.e., illegitimate offspring) of Alexei Kirillovitch Razumovsky. Anna’s sister and fellow “Perovsky pupil,” Elisaveta Alexeyevna (b. 1795), was the mother of three “Zhemchuzhnikov” brothers (Alexander, Alexei and Vladimir Mikhailovich). Collectively these brothers, together with their cousin Alexei K. Tolstoy, gained notoriety for publishing a series of satirical verses and aphorisms under another fictitious pen name – “Kozma Prutkov.” Kozma Prutkov published much of “his” material in *The Contemporary* – the same publication that would sow the intellectual seeds for the Generation of the Sixties -- during the last part of Nicholas’s reign, and continuing into the early years of Alexander’s.

As young people both Lev A. Perovsky and Vasily A. Perovsky distinguished themselves in the war of 1812. On Vasily Alexeivitch the war left its lasting mark. He was wounded, tearing off the index finger of his left hand.¹⁷⁹ For the rest of his life he wore instead of a finger, a silver tip. He also was captured by the French, escaped from captivity and, as a result, he became the dashing prototype of Pierre Kirillovitch Bezukhov in Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace*. Tolstoy in 1877-1878, after writing *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, conceived (but did not get around to writing) a new novel, the central figure of which would have been Vasily A. Perovsky.¹⁸⁰ In real life, Vasily Alexeivitch was promoted to be a prominent general, and the governor of Orenberg province at the southern end of the Urals. After some reverses, in the 1850’s he ultimately conquered for Russia several of the wild regions in Central Asia, and he constructed a fort to hold them, known as “Fort Perovsky.”

The oldest “Perovsky pupil” was Nikolai Ivanovitch, born in 1785. He too went on to a state career of importance. After serving for a time as a diplomat in China, he was appointed mayor of Feodosia, on the Black Sea in the Crimea. He then became governor of the Tauride, an administrative region in the southern part of the Russian empire that included most of the Crimea. Nikolai had three surviving children, the second of whom, born in 1816, was named Lev Nikolaevitch Perovsky.

This younger Lev attended the Tsarskoe Selo High School, which had been founded by Alexei Kirillovitch Razumovsky while he was minister of education and which gained repute as the leading Russian prep school. In 1831, he continued his “studies” by taking courses in railway engineering at university. He then gave every indication that he would follow in the footsteps of family glory by pursuing a career in military service. There being no suitable war in progress, as a junior military officer holding ranks such as ensign and lieutenant, Lev Nikolaevitch was engaged during the 1830’s in “practical activities” working on government railway and canal construction projects in the St. Petersburg area. Later he worked on highways.¹⁸¹

By 1839, Lev Nikolaevitch became an aide to Major General A. K. Ushakov. While on duty in Mogilev province in the town of Chechersk (in what is now Belarus) in 1844, he met a 22-year old girl from a local family that was landed, but modest in terms of its wealth. This girl was Varvara Stepanovna Veselovskaya. The two of them fell deeply in love. Very soon they were married. It was a whirlwind romance, and for Varvara, Lev was passionate. He took extended leave for most of 1844, and then resigned his military commission entirely, without returning to duty, in early 1845.¹⁸² Without doubt a baby was soon on the way, and indeed, Nikolai Lvovitch was born to Varvara on June 8, 1845. A marriage of this kind, based on an impulsive “love match,”

was a break from family precedent and was also contrary to Russian custom, particularly in the high aristocracy. The story of his marriage tells us that Lev Nikolaevitch Perovsky, despite the major conflicts he had later on with a rebellious son and daughter who were avid participants in the Sixties Generation, started out as a young man with something of a progressive, idealistic and “liberated” point of view on social issues.

Any doubt about the young Lev’s liberal leanings are put to rest by the identity of the woman with whom he fell in love, and whom he so eagerly married. Varvara Stepanovna was, according to her son, a person with a “loving soul and an affection for all things progressive.”¹⁸³ Varvara was highly intelligent, and she was raised in an intellectual family. Her father, Stepan Semenovich Veselovsky (born 1781) when 18 years old began to serve in the Guards of the Semyenovskiy regiment, whose chief was Tsar Alexander I himself. Stepan Semenovich distinguished himself in the Napoleonic Wars, taking part in several historic battles. According to Varvara Stepanovna’s brother, Konstantin Stepanovich Veselovsky, “for the Veselovskys it was a matter of honor to devote their noble youth to military service, and only then, after reaching a certain rank, to leave the village and live a country life.”¹⁸⁴ Stepan Semenovich followed in this family tradition. After the war ended, in July 1817 he married the 18-year old daughter of a Mogilev landowner and officer, and in 1820 he retired as a colonel. Varvara Stepanovna was born soon thereafter, in late 1821 or the beginning of 1822.¹⁸⁵

Stepan Semenovich, Varvara’s father, was openly liberal in his attitudes and his politics. He was “much loved” for his kindness and for improving the lives of the local peasants. The revenues derived from his Mogilev estate were marginal. Still, the Veselovsky children including Varvara were sent away to schools in St. Petersburg. Konstantin Veselovsky wrote later: “Our parents made the greatest possible effort to ensure to deliver the best education to their children, and for this they

made material sacrifices, ones that were disproportionate to their modest incomes.”¹⁸⁶ Varvara’s brother Konstantin graduated from Tsarskoe Selo High School and thereafter became an outstanding scientist, active member and secretary of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He was an economist whose statistical studies on the Russian economy were recognized internationally and were relied upon in the writings of Karl Marx.¹⁸⁷

It has been speculated that Lev Nikolaevitch Perovsky after falling in love with Varvara at first thought to follow in the Veselovsky tradition by retiring, with his new bride, to the life of a country gentleman.¹⁸⁸ However, Lev Nikolaevitch had no land of his own, he had not yet reached the age of 30, and most importantly, his “love match” did not come with a dowry. So in 1846, almost exactly one year after his discharge from the army, he took on a civil service job with the post office. From there he moved to a series of other civil service jobs in St. Petersburg.

Here we encounter an aspect critical to the understanding of Lev Nikolaevitch Perovsky. Within the perspective of the glorious Perovsky family, he was something of a disappointment, a bit of a “loser,” as it were. In early 1850, when Lev was seeking advancement within the customs service, he prepared a sort of curriculum vitae which covers the history of his professional life to date. The very existence of this resumé is a hint of trouble. A glorious Perovsky should not need to submit a humble resumé; he should move up the ladder with ease based on energy, charm and talent. And the contents of that resumé are of interest. In it, Lev Nikolaevitch Perovsky attempted to smooth over some of the problems with his military service record. His lengthy “leaves” – three months in 1837, four months in 1840-41, and then the entire time, except for one month, between March of 1844 and March of 1845, as well as his discharge itself – were explained as being due to an unidentified “illness.” Blame was also placed

on the discharge of General Ushakov in early 1844, which was said to have “affected his job” adversely.¹⁸⁹

Lev Nikolaeivitch Perovsky would eventually succeed in using his family connections to climb the ladder to a high position within the Russian civil service. However, he would continue to be plagued with job related difficulties, conflicts and heartbreak. Ultimately, his career would turn out to be a disappointment to him. Lev developed a persistent complex around his insecurity and anxiety about inability to live up to the family name. This complex grew over time and profoundly influenced his family, especially his daughter Sonia.

Chapter 5: He Called Her Gloomy Girl

Lev Nikolaevitch received his big career break in late 1856. While working in a mundane job as an associate director of expeditions with the State Bank in St. Petersburg, he was appointed by the newly crowned, liberal and reforming Tsar Alexander II to fill the office of vice-governor of Pskov, an ancient town located to the southwest of St. Petersburg, on the western edge of Russia next to Estonia. Undoubtedly, Lev Nikolaevitch owed this executive appointment to lobbying from relatives and friends in high places, including his uncle Lev Alexeivitch whom Alexander had inherited as a key member of Nicholas's cabinet. But Lex Alexeivitch died unexpectedly on November 10, 1856, shortly after the family had arrived in Pskov.¹⁹⁰ This triggered nervousness in Lev Nikolaevitch that he would now wind up being stuck in a long term provincial assignment.

In Pskov, the Lev Nikolaevitch Perovsky family moved into a large two-story home that was more comfortable than their St. Petersburg apartment. The Perovsky children were



The Perovsky Family, in 1856. L to R: Nikolai, Varvara Stepanovna, Sofia, Maria, Lev Nikolaevitch, Vasily.

Source: V. Perovsky Memoir, National Library of Russia

happy there. The vice-governor's home was situated next door to the home of the Pskov governor, at that time Valerian Nikolaevitch Muraviev, brother of the Nikolai Nikolaevitch Muraviev who was governing at the time in eastern Siberia and who helped Bakhunin, as we have reviewed. Valerian Muraviev was a widower, his wife having died in childbirth. The Perovsky kids regularly played with his son Nikolai. Together they enjoyed a variety of children's games. In the Perovsky garden in the summer they swung on swings, and in winter an ice mountain was constructed. In the governor's garden, where there were thick high plants, Vasya Perovsky and Kolya Muraviev made themselves wooden swords and then used them to "fight" in games such as "cops and robbers."

Sonia from the age of four to five years took an indispensable part in these “battles.” Decades later Vasily Perovsky would vividly remember a private ferry boat that the children could take to and from the Pskov governor’s house. While riding the ferry, the young children liked to imagine that they were sailing on an ocean ship and fighting with pirates.¹⁹¹

During the Pskov years, the Perovsky family was relatively harmonious. They all regularly gathered in the same formation at the dinner table, with Lev Nikolaevitch sitting to the left of Varvara Stepanovna, and with Sonia seated across from him, to the right of her mother. Lev Nikolaevitch frequently entertained everybody when he returned from his office in good spirits. He would recite to the family silly nonsense poems. He liked to amuse everyone by approaching the youngest, Sonia, with thought provoking questions. These elicited characteristically short dry responses from little Sonia that left the entire family rolling with laughter. They thought it was funny how Sonia maintained such a serious facial expression when answering her father’s questions.¹⁹²

On April 22, 1858, Lev’s father Nikolai Ivanovitch Perovsky died, leaving substantial estates in the Crimea to 42-year old Lev Nikolaevitch and his younger brother Peter Nikolaevitch. Lev visited St. Petersburg where, after prolonged efforts, he ultimately secured a transfer to the post of vice-governor of the Tauride. The family, after selling all of its furniture in Pskov, moved to the family country estate at Kilburun in the Crimea in the summer of 1859. They traveled by a newly rebuilt rail line to St. Petersburg, and continued from there to Moscow. From Moscow, they went on to the Crimea in their own private horse drawn carriage. Vasily Perovsky recalled that as they traveled along in the carriage the family looked with amazement upon the natural beauty of southern Russia with its dramatic mountain peaks and its verdant river valleys lined with orchards.¹⁹³

In the Crimea as in Pskov, the Perovsky family led a close-

to-idyllic existence. Nikolai entered the fourth grade, and Vasily the second grade, in Simferopol gymnasium. The family stayed on the estate in summer and occupied a town house in Simferopol during the winter. Maria Lvovna, the second oldest, went to a finishing school in Kerch. For six-year-old Sonia a home teacher was hired. There were dance lessons, there were music lessons, and there were dress-up parties for the children. But with every passing year Sonia engaged more and more in energetic, active type games. At the seaside in Yalta she was already competing successfully with her brothers in the arts of swimming and diving. She soon became a phenomenal swimmer, surprising and even frightening those in her age group (and adults!) with the distance of her swims.

In Kilburun at the tender age of eight years, Sonia also became a serviceable gunner. This is depicted in the memoirs of Vasily Perovsky. “At my grandfather’s estate there were up to a dozen different sizes of copper cannons, with French inscriptions on some of them. With Sonia we amused ourselves considerably by firing them in wide directions, being considerably benefitted by the cheap cost of gunpowder. I, as usual as I was the older, tried to play the role of commander, and Sonia regularly, on command, applied a match to the wick of the fuse. She was not frightened, and did not hesitate to fire off the gun, despite how the gun recoiled and bounced back when fired.”¹⁹⁴

Vasily could not recall an instance when he had ever seen Sonia act frightened of anything. To the contrary, she appeared fearless, even at a young age. He gave an example from life at Kilburun. “One time when Sonia left the house and went towards the stable, I saw one of the workers waving at me and telling me to be careful, saying there was a rabid dog on the loose. I then saw the dog with his tail tucked under its legs and foaming at the mouth. I dashed to my room, grabbed my gun,

and ran out looking for the dog. I saw that it ran around a long building, and went on a path that was made in the grass. At that time I saw Sonia walking towards the dog. Very scared, I yelled at her to get off the path and to stand still so as not to attract the rabid dog's attention. Sonia slowly walked four to five feet off the path and just calmly looked at the dog while it ran by. After that I was able to shoot the dog."¹⁹⁵ On another occasion several years later, when Sonia was ten years old and Vasily fourteen, the two stayed out until Russian summer midnight stalking a bear, whose lair they had detected in an oat field. Vasily was equipped on this expedition with a shotgun, Sonia with just a large hunting knife. Probably they were lucky that the bear did not make an appearance.¹⁹⁶

Varvara Stepanovna played the role of full time homemaker during her time in Pskov, followed by the Crimea and Simferopol. Her passionate devotion to her children throughout these formative years was a huge influence on them. The children were deeply impressed by her heartfelt pious sentiments, which were often expressed by crying along with them while reading and rereading the account of Christ's crucifixion in the Bible.¹⁹⁷ One of the family's friends in the Crimea described Varvara Stepanovna as "holy in the full sense of the word." Vasily said of the time when he was five years old, "Mother, who was then very religious, taught me every day before going to bed to say a prayer, kneeling before an icon, in the corner of the room. She did the same with Sonia in the first years of her childhood." However, father Lev Nikolaevitch was not an openly religious man. While careful to state on his resumé that he was "Orthodox," he avoided immersing his children in what is commonly called religious education.¹⁹⁸ What he did share with his wife, and even projected to their children during these early years, were progressive values. To the entire family, he read aloud from Hugo's *Les Misérables*, then as now a humanist classic.¹⁹⁹

Meanwhile, Lev Nikolaevitch began having trouble in his

government service. He came into conflict with his immediate superior, Lieutenant General Grigory Vasileivitch Zhukovsky, who was then the governor. Zhukovsky was just as ambitious as Lev Nikolaevitch, and he held a higher rank, which enabled him to undermine not only the quality of the work, but also the personal reputation of anyone on a lower level, including the vice-governor. Zhukovsky often absented himself from work, and Lev Nikolaevitch in such cases substituted for him. But upon his return from absence, Zhukovsky got his vice-governor in trouble by blaming him for problems and scandals that had happened while he was gone. In the end, after a series of accusations to the minister of internal affairs P. A. Valuev, Zhukovsky brought about the resignation of Lev Nikolaevitch as vice-governor and the removal of his protégés from the provincial government.

In the wake of this debacle, Lev Nikolaevitch was reassigned to St. Petersburg, and there, “thanks to an influential family,” was appointed to the same level position, vice-governor, but now in the capital. St. Petersburg was really where Lev Nikolaevitch wanted to be, anyway. At the time, of the immediate family of Lev Nikolaevitch there remained alive only his uncle, Alexei Kirillovitch Razumovsky’s youngest son Count Boris Alexeivitch, who was then serving as a teacher for the Tsar’s sons. Probably Boris advocated his nephew for the appointment. But, it appears Lev Nikolaevitch’s candidacy also was supported by the circle of liberal advisors to Alexander who were then in vogue, including the St. Petersburg Governor-General Alexander A. Suvorov and the head of the secret police, Vasily Dolgorukov.²⁰⁰ So, on July 7, 1861, State Councilor Lev Nikolaevitch Perovsky was appointed vice-governor of St. Petersburg. The family soon relocated from the Crimea to St. Petersburg.²⁰¹

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Chapter 7: A Select Harvest of Rebellious Seedlings

Shortly after the public hanging of Karakozov, Vera Zaslitch, a young woman of 17, arrived in St. Petersburg. Vera, of middling height, was strong and robust. She was not what would be considered a beauty, but she had very fine, well shaped gray eyes with long lashes that shone when she became enthusiastic. She was negligent about her appearance and disdained all makeup, jewelry or other feminine adornment.²²² Vera had been born to a noble family in the region of Smolensk. At age three, her father died. She was sent to the country to be raised with her cousins. She was very bright and taught herself readily. As a girl, she read and re-read the New Testament gospels. She felt a passionate love for Jesus. She was particularly obsessed with Jesus's execution on the cross, which she found very engrossing and stimulating. She felt a kind of excited dread about his fate.²²³ Inspired by the example of Jesus to a path of renunciation, the maturing Vera felt her

upbringing as a member of the upper classes was more a misfortune than it was a privilege.²²⁴ She bridled against the “future” available to her as a woman. A boy would have had far broader prospects. The idea of revolution appealed to her because it made her the equal of a boy. She could dream of action, of exploits, of waging the supreme battle and of making the supreme sacrifice. She seized avidly upon the idea of dying for a cause.²²⁵

In the 1860’s in Russia, there were no formal university programs for women. Women who came to universities, like Vera, did so purely out of their own energy and a sense of solidarity with the male students. Once in St. Petersburg, Vera soon gravitated toward circles composed of those of the Sixties Generation who were searching for an answer to the Chernyshevsky question, “What Is to Be Done?” Many students were frustrated, impatient and felt that the revolutionary movement was at a standstill.

After publication of *What Is to Be Done?*, many sewing cooperatives had been started, “like mushrooms” as Zaslitch says in her autobiography. Her account reveals the degree to which these utopians lacked contact with reality.

The associations were generally created by women who had the means to buy a sewing machine, to rent an apartment and to pay the wages of one or two other experimenters. Among the members, most of the time one found nihilists who knew nothing about sewing but who ardently desired to ‘work for the cause,’ while the rest were seamstresses who were hoping to earn a good salary. The first month, everybody wielded the needle with great conviction. But sewing eight to ten hours per day just to show the principle of the utopian association, especially when most of them were not used to manual labor, was something in which very few found the patience to persevere.

The workers started complaining and in fact, the

best ones left because they could make more money working for a regular boss. This was true even though the founding proprietor abandoned her own earnings to the collective. Eventually some of the workers took the sewing machines. At the trial that ensued, the workers said that the proprietor was not good for ‘anything except talking’ and that they had the right to take the machine in order to earn a livelihood. The court, however, required its return to the proprietor.²²⁶

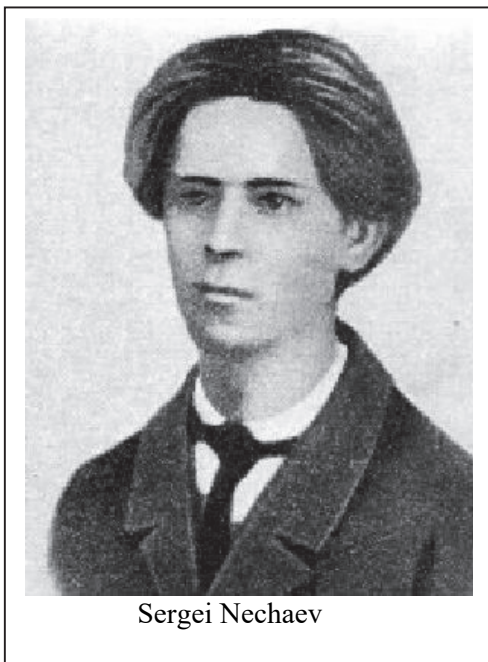
The children of the Sixties who were yearning for action were now largely silenced due to the White Terror. Young men and women who had come to St. Petersburg with high hopes for radical change found themselves demoralized and anguished. People in universities started saying, “there needs to be a student movement,” and that “something,” at least, needed to happen. This was the situation as school opened in the fall of 1868. Rebellious, progressive youthful energy coalesced around a campaign to protect scholarships for deserving students, which became, superficially, the focus of student protest.²²⁷

Organizers emerged, who started forming smaller circles out of the more committed students. By Christmas the first wave of student gatherings started. Some of these were held in homes of the wealthy that were made available for the purpose. Several hundreds would crowd into a room to hear speeches by student orators who, one after the other, stood on chairs to give their declamations. One of the organizers was 21-year old Sergei Nechaev (pronounced “Netch-A-yev”). Nechaev himself rarely spoke in the chair climbing rallies. Instead, he concentrated on observing and tracking who, among the militants, made the most willing and effective speakers.

Sergei Nechaev grew up the son of a sign painter in Ivanovo, a dreary textile mill town aptly dubbed “the Manchester of Russia.” He was almost entirely self-educated. Without ever being enrolled as a student in a formal school, he

progressed directly to being a teacher. He attached himself to a small group of intellectuals in blue collar Ivanovo. While only 13, he served as the librarian for a school which his older friends were running in Ivanovo. From librarian, he progressed into teaching. With the financial help of his father, at age 17 he escaped Ivanovo and traveled, first to Moscow, and then on to St. Petersburg where he first obtained a teaching certification and then secured a paid position as a bible school teacher.

Physically, there was nothing attractive about Sergei Nechaev. He was smallish, sickly looking, with thin lips, straight black hair half covering his ears, and he wore wrinkled clothes. He was constantly biting his nails.²²⁸ But his demeanor quickly betrayed a ferocious energy churning within him. He was in perpetual motion, always needing to be busy. He had a mania for surrounding himself with books, nervously jumping from one to the other. After his arrival in St. Petersburg, Nechaev became obsessed with the Karakozov assassination attempt. He avidly read all of the back issues of *The Bell* which dealt with the subject. He also studied, with fascination, the methods of The Organization and of Hell.²²⁹



Sergei Nechaev

From a young age Nechaev demonstrated an uncanny ability to manipulate people. Some of his extraordinary power

in this regard can be attributed to an unusual personal capacity he possessed for simultaneously terrifying and fascinating. Another vital element was his ability to convince others that he was fully resolved and prepared for the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom.²³⁰ Nechaev was obsessed with control techniques, which he used to dominate. One of his roommates described him as follows:

The first impression Nechaev makes is unpleasant yet actually seductive. He is psychologically touchy – and one feels this at first contact, although Nechaev tries to restrain himself. He reads a great deal . . . especially books of historical and sociological content, and thus knows a great deal, although when he cites various authors he is sometimes quite careless. In debate he will try to trick and humiliate his opponent – he is a talented dialectician and knows how to touch the most sensitive areas of a young conscience: truth, honesty, courage, etc. He won't tolerate people who are his equals, and with those stronger than he, maintains a strict silence and tries to cast a shadow of suspicion over them. He is extremely firm in his convictions, but out of self-esteem, to which he is prepared to sacrifice everybody. Thus, the main traits of his character are despotism and self-esteem. All of his declamations are full of passion, but very bilious. He stimulates interest in himself, and the more impressionable and naive simply worship him, the latter a necessary condition of any friendship with him.

Another who knew him in the early “student protest” period commented,

On the one hand, he was a good comrade, honest, truthful, willing to share all of his material possessions with his friends, but on the other, he was unbearable,

always asking questions and saying nothing about himself, taking everything the wrong way, extremely callous in his treatment of others . . . But his most repellent trait was his extreme despotism with respect to one's ideas. He couldn't reconcile himself to the fact that his acquaintances had ideas, convictions unlike his own, and looked at things and acted in a different way than he did. But he didn't scorn these people. No, on the contrary, he tried with incredible persistence to convert them.

The St. Petersburg student gatherings in the fall of 1868 were not clandestine. In fact, their times and locations were sometimes announced in the papers. Even the police did not hesitate to attend. From the first, there was a split between the "radicals" – whom Nechaev winnowed and cultivated – and the "mainstream," of whom a student named Stepan Ezersky was the spokesperson. The primary issue driving the split was the means to be used to achieve the goals of student grants-in-aid and securing the right to assembly. The radicals advocated submitting signed petitions, and publicly demonstrating. The mainstream, on the other hand, pointed out that this method would be foolhardy as well as counterproductive, because it would put the all the names of the dissident students directly into the hands of the government and the police. Nechaev and his faction did not directly dispute these arguments. They just kept criticizing and reproaching anyone who argued the moderate line, accusing them of being insincere cowards.

In more intimate discussions, Nechaev privately admitted that demonstrations and petitions had no chance of achieving the protest goals. In fact, he admitted the goals being advocated by his chair orators in the student gatherings were not even his real goals. Nechaev's real expectation was that the petitions and demonstrations would, indeed, get a large number of students expelled from university. These expulsions, he calculated, would then set off a wave of

discontent throughout the Generation of the Sixties. More students would be expelled. Then their brethren in seminaries would also take up the cause, with many of them also being expelled. The expelled students would return, discontented, to their home villages. Thus, according to Nechaev's vision, large numbers of the disgruntled, unemployed students would make their way en masse to the country, where they would rapidly foment rebellion among the peasants. The peasants were always assumed to be, if properly led, ready, willing and able to rise in revolt. It was an article of faith within the Sixties movement that the peasants were exploited, miserable and on the verge of rebellion. The smallest doubt on this subject was criticized and reproached as a politically incorrect insult to the character of "the People."

Nechaev called another activist gathering. This time, he personally spoke. He challenged all of those present who were not scared for their skins to prove it, simply by signing a paper that he had prepared for this purpose. Students in attendance agreed and started to sign. But after many had signed, others present started to ask, why? Some independent thinkers protested that it was stupid, in fact suicidal. They demanded that the paper be torn up. But it was too late. The signed paper was already in Nechaev's pocket. Next day, the rumor swirled and circulated that Nechaev and two other students had been summoned by the university chief of security, who threatened that if the meetings did not stop, all three of them would be arrested and put in prison.

Yet another activist gathering was hastily organized. This time there were only 40 to 50 persons in attendance. The mainstream student movement, fed up with Nechaev's signature ploy, basically did not show up. But then, to everyone's surprise, Nechaev did not show up either. Instead, his protégé and de facto aide de camp, a youngster named Evamply Ametisov, stepped up and announced the startling news that Nechaev had been arrested.

He informed the gathering that Vera Zaslitch had received in the mail a strange letter which read:

Today crossing Vassilevsky Island, I came across a jail carriage. From the carriage a hand was sticking out a window. The hand dropped a note. I heard a voice call out from the carriage, ‘if you are a student, take this to the address written on it.’ I am in fact a student, so I considered it my duty to obey his request. Make this letter disappear!

There was no signature. With this letter there enclosed was another, scratched in pencil in the handwriting of Nechaev. It read:

I am taken to prison, I don’t know which one. Send this message to the friends in the movement, that they will continue with the path of action. I hope to see you again.

The news of Nechaev’s arrest caused an immediate sensation among the students. The event became even more dramatic and attention grabbing because the authorities persisted in denying it.²³¹ Everyone assumed the authorities were lying. They speculated feverishly about the reasons for Nechaev’s arrest and why it was kept a secret.

It would be a matter of years before the students would finally learn that Nechaev’s sudden disappearance was not, in fact due to his arrest. Rather, it was a cover for a carefully planned departure from St. Petersburg, coupled with a completely false and concocted story of his arrest that was intended to, and did, generate a mystique with respect to Nechaev himself, while at the same time whipping up an angry reaction among the activists. After a preliminary stop in Moscow, where he borrowed someone else’s passport, Sergei’s ultimate destination was Geneva.²³² He arrived there in March of 1869. Very soon after his arrival, he sought out Mikhail Bakhtunin.²³³

[pages are omitted from this preview version]

Chapter 9: Going to the People

The liberalization of university admissions under Alexander II was limited to men. The extent of higher education for young women in Russia consisted of finishing schools for the daughters of the nobility, the most prominent of which was called the Smolny Institute.²⁵⁵ Women were on occasion permitted to attend university lectures, but only as outside auditors not allowed to take any of the qualifying examinations. There was little incentive for women to engage in a rigorous course of studies.²⁵⁶ At the beginning of the Sixties, however, a “Sunday School movement” arose, in which regular school teachers volunteered their time on the sabbath to try to provide access to learning for young women otherwise excluded from the educational establishment. The Sunday School embodied something of the spirit of the women’s self-help collective idealized in *What Is to Be Done?* The movement rapidly gained momentum. There were soon 2,500 volunteers teaching in the Sunday Schools throughout Russia.²⁵⁷ But this was short lived. The very wildfire nature

of the Sunday Schools, as well as the ministry of education's inability to supervise their curriculum, caused the government to entertain grave doubts about the wisdom of allowing them to exist. Those in power feared that the unregulated schools were spreading "liberal ideas," or worse. In 1862, most of the Sunday Schools were abruptly disbanded by government decree. The more radical teachers were arrested and the schools were closed down "pending their reorganization on a new basis."²⁵⁸

When Sofia Perovskaya returned to St. Petersburg at age 16 in 1869, the situation in women's university education was basically unchanged. That spring, another unofficial school for women, consisting of a series of evening classes, had been launched by university professors teaching on a volunteer basis. Because the classes were given in a school building near the Alarchina Bridge, they were called the "Alarchinsky" classes.²⁵⁹ Anna Vilberg, on the boat with Sonia, was headed to St. Petersburg to study in the Alarchinsky classes. Sonia rapidly made up her mind to enroll in Alarchinsky as well.

Sofia Perovskaya as a student in Alarchinsky was quiet and taciturn. Only a few of the other students learned much about her.²⁶⁰ A fellow woman student recalled the impression which Sonia made at this time:

[A] girl very young, almost a little girl, who stood out over the other women by the modesty of her attire: a very simple gray dress, that almost resembled a high school uniform, with a small white collar that did not fit her that well. One sensed a complete indifference to her exterior aspect. The first thing that stood out about her was her exceptionally high and large forehead which swallowed up the rest of her small round face.

Watching her closely, I noted, under the forehead, blue-gray eyes that looked around from beneath lowered lashes at everything around her with an air of

distrust. In that look, there was something inflexible. When she was not speaking, her childlike mouth was pressed shut, as if she was afraid of allowing any superfluous words to escape. Her face was profoundly serious and thoughtful. From her whole persona emanated something ascetic and monastic.²⁶¹

Perovskaya embodied an incongruous combination of feminine gentleness and masculine hardness. Although her appearance was juvenile and unprepossessing, something about Perovskaya made her attractive to men. One would later preface his biography of her with the comment, “[i]t was not the beauty which dazzles at first sight, but that which fascinates the more, the more it is regarded.”²⁶² Over the course of the next ten years, several men in the radical community developed real crushes on her.²⁶³ But Perovskaya cultivated a studied indifference to the opposite sex.

In terms of the Alarchinsky course program, Perovskaya’s main academic pursuit was mathematics. But her real interest was quickly drawn to the flaming women who attended the class sessions. With their lack of feminine adornment, short cropped hair, wide brimmed hats, and plain white blouses, their whole manner of dress exuded the distinctive nihilist attitude.²⁶⁴ The effect was topped off with the nihilist trademark, enormous blue spectacles. Sonia liked the aura and audacity of these women. She soon became close friends with several of them. The stocky, masculine looking Alexandra “Sasha” Kornilova became one of the closest. Like Sonia, Sasha had a passion for remaining independent of all forms of male control.²⁶⁵

Sonia as well as other girl students soon went outside the formal curriculum of Alarchinsky to become involved in organizing independent group meetings. Feminism and the oppression of women were always the issues at the center of the debate, even if political and social themes also were discussed. Perovskaya, although the youngest, already was the

de facto leader of a study circle. She was cautious about which girls she agreed to admit into the group. It was decided to delve in depth into review of an edition of John Stuart Mill that Chernyshevsky had annotated. She walked everybody through this text slowly, analyzing each new idea and argument presented. Sonia took these studies very seriously. With biting sarcasm she criticized the girls who did not show up for the study sessions, or who chronically arrived late.²⁶⁶

Sonia's father, with Varvara, left St. Petersburg for an extended period to visit Germany to seek relief in a sanitarium for his physical and mental ailments. By the time her parents returned, Sonia had become accustomed to hanging out in her new circle of nihilist women. One time Sonia's mother made some of Sonia's friends stay for dinner. Lev immediately detested these women due to their irreverent attitude, boisterous conversations and nihilist form of dress. He forbade Sonia from ever bringing them into his home again. He even threatened to forbid Sonia from continuing with the Alarchinsky courses if she continued to see them.²⁶⁷ This edict greatly upset Sonia. She rejected any thought of obeying Lev's orders. Sonia decided to move out and rent her own room. In order to do so, she had to possess an internal passport stating that she was allowed to reside in the town. Because Sonia was underage, the passport could only be provided by her father. This, he refused to do.

But Sasha Kornilova's father, a wealthy merchant and the father of four radical daughters, was far more tolerant. Before long, Sonia became a regular at the Kornilova household. There she engaged in long discussions with Sasha and her sisters, as well as a steady stream of other women who constantly dropped in to visit. One of the Kornilova sisters, Vera, worked out a fictitious marriage with a willing young man in order set up her own separate flat. One night Sonia failed to return home and instead stayed with Vera Kornilova. She intended to remain there, in hiding, until Lev relented and

granted her the papers necessary to live on her own. She stubbornly stuck to her resolve, even though her father instigated a major police investigation aimed at finding her and returning her home.²⁶⁸

Lev was appalled at his daughter's impertinence. He accused her brother Vasily of putting her up to it. Vasily at one point met with his father's doctor to discuss the situation with Sonia. This doctor scoffed at Sonia's demand for independence. Vasily pointed out to the doctor that Sonia, if denied the independence she sought, could very well commit suicide. This was taken as a serious threat. Vasily was summoned to the police station and

threatened with arrest if he did not disclose where Sonia was hiding. Fortunately for him, he really did not know where his sister was. Varvara intervened, trembling with emotion. She tearfully insisted to Lev that she would go along to the police station with Vasily, and that she would insist on being arrested herself if Vasily were to be arrested. In response to his wife's impassioned reproach, Lev softened his attitude.

The following day, Lev himself joined Vasily in the trip to the police department. He seemed bent on avoiding trouble.



Sofia Perovskaya (on floor wearing man's trousers), with companions (L to R) A. Vilberg, S. Lechern and A. Kornilova, 1870.

Source: V. Perovsky memoir,
National Library of Russia

After speaking alone in the office with the chief of police, he left in the carriage. When Vasily's turn came to be interviewed the chief did not arrest him, but merely gave a lecture about the foolishness of Sonia's behavior. He warned that hanging out with the wrong crowd could ruin her life. He added that he hoped the uproar caused by Sonia's evasion could be resolved peacefully and without police involvement. In the course of the interview, Vasily repeated to the police chief what he had told the doctor, that he knew his sister, and that if police become involved, she may take a "tragic step" (implying suicide). Faced with this threat, continued pressure from Varvara, and his doctor's medical advice against any further stress of confrontation, Lev finally relented and signed to allow Sonia an internal passport. When doing so, he lashed out to Vasily that he never wanted to see Sonia in his house again.²⁶⁹ The wish, made in anger, would be granted.

After getting her passport, Sofia Perovskaya moved into a communal dacha along with Sasha Kornilova, Anna Vilberg and Sofia Leshern, a woman a decade older than Perovskaya who had been involved with the Sunday School movement. The housemates spent much of their time focusing on a self-directed reading program. To avoid unwanted sexual attention, the four of them wore men's clothes when they went walking. Sonia's ascetic personality included a prominent rejection of any sexual experiments. Vasily recalled a conversation he had with Sonia during this period in which the topic turned to sexual relations. Sonia expressed a strong opinion that early marriages were against the normal development of the human body, and that a person was not ready for sex until around age 30. Earlier sexual urges, in her opinion, were caused by "living in the city" and "ballet." Perovskaya and her friend Vilberg shared the view that early marriages serve to halt a person's development in the activities of public life.²⁷⁰

With Sasha Kornilova, Sonia began to attend meetings of the Chaikovsky circle, so named after one of its early

organizers, Nikolai Chaikovsky. Their participation in this group, because it was organized by men, caused a bit of a stir at first among Sonia's women friends who were accustomed to her "keep males out" attitude that had prevailed to that point.²⁷¹ The Chaikovsky participants were basically the same St. Petersburg radicals who, just a year earlier in 1869, had declined to become involved with Nechaev and his phantom "Committee." They tried to build an organization on a higher level of moral development than the crude Nechaev model, one dedicated to mutual respect, trust, and equality of all members. Mark Natanson was an influential participant. The circle united around the point of view that the "people" – workers in the urban areas, peasants in the country -- needed to be "prepared" before the revolution would come. The Chaikovsky members themselves needed to be "prepared" as well. For this purpose they organized classes and study programs for themselves. Natanson frequently served as the "professor." The young men and women lived communally in dachas rented by Natanson and other wealthy adherents. In the mornings they worked out with gymnastics and also rowing, another physical activity at which Perovksaya excelled.²⁷²

At the time of Sonia's arrival, the Chaikovsky circle functioned much like a utopian collective from the pages of *What Is to Be Done?* Nikolai Chaikovsky himself was an idealist of the highest order, a true believer in the vision of Chernyshevsky. One of the participants later wrote:

There were no rules, for there was no need of any. All the decisions were always taken by unanimity. . . . Sincerity and frankness were the general rule. All were acquainted with each other, even more so, perhaps, than the members of the same family, and no one wished to conceal from the others even the least important act of his life. Thus every little weakness, every lack of devotion to the cause, every trace of egotism, was pointed out, underlined, sometimes

reciprocally reproved, not as would be the case by a pedantic mentor, but with affection and regret, as between brother and brother.²⁷³

Perovskaya rapidly immersed herself in Chaikovsky. She passed a year in its almost cloistered surroundings. During this time she became one of the group's more respected and influential members. Despite her small stature and youthful appearance, her air of stoic severity, her indefatigable energy, and her mental capacity brought her a moral authority over others. Her disciplined lifestyle was admired. She slept on bare boards. She insisted on personally carrying large buckets of water and performing other physically strenuous household chores.²⁷⁴ The anarchist theoretician Peter Kropotkin, who spent much time with Perovskaya during the Chaikovsky days, described his memory of her:²⁷⁵

Seeing this worker dressed in a wool dress, wearing ugly shoes, with her head very simply covered with a cotton scarf, nobody ever could have recognized in her the same girl who, just a few years earlier, had glittered in the most aristocratic halls of the capital. She was our favorite out of everyone. . . . Hard as steel, she displayed no fear at the thought of death, the vision of the scaffold. One day she said to me, 'We are undertaking something big. Two generations perhaps will die at the task, but it will be accomplished.'

Those in the Chaikovsky circle strongly embraced "Going to the People." This was a movement that swept over and through the "Sixties" activists during the early 1870's. The "spirit of *Narodnichestvo*" arose. This means, roughly, "a love and reverence for the working classes of one's country, coupled with an altruistic desire to serve them." It was inspired in large measure by the published advocacy of Herzen and Bakunin. Bakunin's writings, in particular, urged activist

students to leave the university in order to raise consciousness of the need for revolt.²⁷⁶ Hundreds if not several thousands of young people left the cities, left their families, left the universities and colleges and, hastily acquiring some semblance of a practical trade and peasant dress, headed for the villages. They felt an urge to mingle with the mujiks, to breathe their smell, to share in their suffering. The idea was to prepare and bring about the revolution by working directly among the vast Russian peasantry to enlighten them and to improve their lot. There was an almost religious feeling among these “populists,” as they called themselves, a sense that by serving the humble and blessed “people,” a child of wealth and privilege could somehow expiate the moral debt of original sin.²⁷⁷

In the spring of 1872 Sonia left the communal Chaikovsky dacha in St. Petersburg for Stavropol, a medium sized town nestled inside a meander of the Volga in the province of Samara.²⁷⁸ There she stayed for a time with a local doctor named Evgraf Alexeivitch Osipov. Osipov sympathized with the progressive point of view on Russian society. From what we can gather, Osipov and his family acted as generous benefactors to Perovskaya. Sonia, however, rapidly grew to feel disdain for the doctor and also for his wife, whom Sonia disparaged as being “infected with liberalism.” In contrast to her monastic singular commitment to the cause of radical change, Osipov was in her view bogged down with “family, aristocratic, petty life; all the attention he gives to community medical activities.”²⁷⁹

With help from Osipov, Perovskaya volunteered to start a program of smallpox vaccinations, an activity she could combine with proselytizing for revolution as she made her way from village to village, boarding each night with a different peasant family. She lived with spartan “Rakhmetov-ness,” according to a colleague’s anonymous memoir, meaning, she lived without comforts, slept on straw pillows, ate milk

porridge, etcetera. The peasants, in general, were friendly. They enjoyed 18-year old Sonia's energy, her robust health and rosy cheeks,²⁸⁰ but they proved very resistant when it came to selling them on social upheaval. The "people" were, in fact, far more firmly anchored in reality than were the idealists who came to them in droves from the Sixties Generation. Few "Going to the People" ventures ended well. The populists possessed little in the way of skills relevant to rural life. They failed to appreciate that the romanticized view of the peasantry reflected in Russian literature was not widely embraced by the peasants themselves. The prevailing mentality of peasants throughout Russia was to be stubborn, protective of old ways, and suspicious of strange people and doctrines. Peasants especially did not trust privileged, educated youth who were preaching revolution. They immediately suspected them of being spies, spirits, or worse. Most of the populist missions devolved into a series of disappointments.²⁸¹

We have a window into the inner gloom Perovskaya felt upon sensing the vast disconnect between her visions and the reality. She wrote a letter to a friend and Chaikovsky companion, Alexandra Yakovlevna Obodovskaya, shortly after her arrival in Samara in late April 1872.

6 May (1872).

Alexandra Yakovlev(na), Why you don't write to us. How do you live and how long do you intend to stay there. I'm here, in the Samara province for the second week already. I just moved to the village, before I lived in Stavropol with Dr. Osipov. This gentleman gave me a nasty impression. He married an empty lady who is infected with liberalism, and now he gradually begins to get bogged down completely with family, aristocratic, petty life; all the attention he gives to community medical activities. He has a brother, who also serves in zemstvo, he seems better. I have met two rural teachers, they seem

good, but don't seem developed. When I look around, I feel the smell of dead deep sleep, I don't see the thought of active work and life; and in the villages and cities, everywhere is the same. And the peasants are similarly working every day, like machines, no longer thinking, just dead machines that started once and now always move in a routine. This situation deeply affects the young teachers, they are just silent, sad, and it seems that they could start the activity, but there is only emptiness and death everywhere. I now understand why the persons traveling alone to the province start to feel down with time. First of all, the people's consciousness is not thoroughly enough developed. Then, when they find themselves in this state of torpor, they inevitably begin to converge with other personalities that have anything good, and therefore that way, they gradually start to get used to the vulgarity, and then later they become vulgar themselves. After all it's necessary for a human to have a rest, and if you don't have noble people around, you can stick with vulgar and immoral ones, with the exception of only the strong, energetic personalities.

I had such a strong yearning these days, it was impossible to study, and yet everything around me brings such a wistful melancholy, including even these teachers, because they are so sad, add to this also the fact that I feel that the only way out from this situation is to stir it up and to help these individuals to break out of their situation, and yet for this I have no knowledge, no skill. It is true that skill and knowledge can be gained, but now the situation is still despicable. I want to stir up this dead world, but all I can do now is to look at it.²⁸²

A month later, Sonia wrote Obodovskaya again. She claimed that her prior "apathetic despair" had passed, yet the written

evidence in the form of Perovskaya's own words persuades us otherwise. Sonia was already looking at moving on from Stavropol; much of the message was spent urging her friend to find her some kind of accounting job working at the Tver cheese factory where Obodovskaya was employed. "Please take care of it," she implored. "I don't want to live with my mother." By this time, Perovskaya had largely ceased her "work" in the villages. She was concentrating on indoctrinating student teachers. On June 13 she wrote:

Then I will say that I live now in the heart of Stavropol, helping one lady to work with teachers and four peasant boys. Mainly, I read now; now more than ever, I feel the need to study, because of the awful situation around. All around I see only torpor, and the other people fight, fight, but their efforts are wasted and accomplish almost nothing, and due to that fact, it seems to me that there is little knowledge as to existing conditions as well as theoretical, they cannot correctly and finally decide what to do next.

Recently, I received a letter from Mikhail Fedotich.²⁸³ He is in distress, — all the bread he planted, dried up, so he has only the debt left now and doesn't have money to pay it back, to move further, and to finish a course in University, otherwise he will be forced to become a Cossack. Maybe he will visit me while passing by my place. I really want to see him, to know what impression was made on him by the year of peasant life.

You ask me to write you more, but to write about my inner state disgusts me, also it is now very volatile; one thing I can say is that my apathetic despair state that I had due to the surrounding conditions in which I was when I wrote you the last letter has passed, and I hope, will never return. A general characteristic of

my condition both external and internal, both at present and in the future, is the uncertainty. It seems that only two girls out of those with whom I study and the lady who arranged these sessions are good people. The first two are beginners in becoming part of the new direction, and their moral qualities, in my opinion, are hopeful. But their outer situation is horrible -- first, because of the family, and secondly, because of poverty, so whether they can break out of this wilderness, is still unknown.²⁸⁴

Sonia's letter reveals much about an aspect of her mentality she shared in common with terrorists of more recent vintage. She drew a sharp distinction between "good people" – meaning persons she perceived as candidates for total dedication to the "cause" -- and everybody else.

Perovskaya sent a third letter to Obodovskaya about a month later. Again, the basic theme was a plea for help in finding work elsewhere. The authorities had by now identified Sonia as a subversive threat. They had banned both the "vaccinations" and the "studying sessions with the teachers." She talked as if the inertia of her situation was making her feel listless and almost physically ill.

Alexandra Y., you, probably, have not received my answer to your letter, where I begged you to learn from Vereshchagin²⁸⁵ whether there is any accountant clerk position or something like that. I wrote you this letter a long time ago, and still didn't get the answer. I am in a very nasty situation; here, in Stavropol, I do nothing, because of the terrible awfulness, I need to find a job somewhere to survive; due to lack of money and any prospects in this place I can't move anywhere. Anyway, please Alex. Yacob., even if you didn't find out about an accounting position, yet answer me as soon as possible, and it is better finally to know that the answer is no, than rely on a maybe. I absolutely

don't know what I am going to do in the future. I know one thing, that I need any activity, even in the most ordinary sense of the word. I can't be happy with only theory and books; it is my strong desire to do some work, even though it is purely physical, only that it is reasonable. And in inaction, a whole day alone in four walls with books mixed with talks to one or another, leads me, finally, into such a state of apathy and mental dullness that I cannot stand any book, and everything, starting with myself and ending with all people and everything around me, is getting me sick. Sometimes I so desperately want to do something, except reading books and making conversations, that I end up in an abnormal state -- running from one corner to another or prowling through the woods, then fall into another strongest apathy. I need five or six hours a day to work, even to some extent physically, and then my theory will go smoothly. At first, when I came here, it was a totally unfamiliar environment, the vaccination, acquaintance with the teachers gave me quite a bit of living material, and my theory went well, I read Buckle and some other books and I started to identify a number of issues for which I was trying to come to a practical final conclusion. But now the vaccination is stopped, and the studying sessions with teachers ended, due to the fact that the authorities banned it, and because I now have nothing to do and am waiting for a job and my lack of money doesn't allow me to move. I don't have anything to write about now and don't want to.²⁸⁶

Sonia's statement that she read Buckle near the start of her sojourn in Stavropol is of interest. The Englishman Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-1862), much like Perovskaya, was an "auto-didact" – meaning, he was self-educated. Being the son of a wealthy merchant who inherited a fortune while relatively

young, Buckle had time for leisure, and, by dint of his high intelligence, he developed into a brilliant chess player. He was a prolific writer as well. *The Miscellaneous and Posthumous Works of Henry Thomas Buckle* were published in 1872, at just about the same time when Perovskaya arrived in Stavropol. This volume included an essay with the tantalizing – for Perovskaya – title, “The Influence of Women on the Progress of Knowledge.”²⁸⁷ Sonia apparently felt enraptured by passages such as this:

On every side, in all social phenomena, in the education of children, in the tone and spirit of literature, in the forms and usages of life; nay, even in the proceedings of legislatures, in the history of statute-books; and in the decisions of magistrates, we find manifold proofs that women are gradually making their way, and slowly but surely winning for themselves a position superior to any they have hitherto attained. This is one of many peculiarities which distinguish modern civilization, and which show how essentially the most advanced countries are different from those that formerly flourished.²⁸⁸

Shortly after sending her third letter, Sonia abandoned Stavropol to join Obodovskaya in Tver, northwest of Moscow.²⁸⁹ There she earned a teaching credential and taught for a time in a rural school. But by the end of the school year, she felt isolated and out of touch with the main populist movement. So she returned to St. Petersburg, where in the summer of 1873 she once more became a prime mover in the Chaikovsky circle. By now Natanson and many other Chaikovsky adherents had been arrested for subversive activities. Along with one of the Kornilova sisters, Sonia began to specialize in visiting jailed comrades. Taking full advantage of her innocent girlish appearance, she brought them books, groceries, clothing, and letters from the outside.

The police had now learned much about the group.

Subterfuge was beginning to be required to avoid easy arrest, and Sonia played her part. She moved into a flat, posing as the wife of a member named Dmitri Rogachev.²⁹⁰ Fictitious marriage, so prominently featured in *What Is to Be Done?*, was considered by the anarchists to be a particularly virtuous form of subterfuge. With other Chaikovsky adherents, Perovskaya became involved in “educating” factory workers. This eventually brought her to the attention of the authorities. In January 1874, the police arrested Perovskaya.²⁹¹ She spent the next six months in jail, reading a series of books brought to her by her brother. Already thoroughly accustomed to a spartan lifestyle, Sonia found this incarceration relatively easy. By means of bribery, she received adequate supplies of both books and interesting visitors.²⁹²

Eventually, Sonia allowed her father to intercede. By now, Lev Nikolaevitch was permanently separated from Varvara Stepanovna. Chronically ill, he lived with a mistress in St. Petersburg.²⁹³ When Lev Nikolaevitch intervened, Sonia was released on bail. She was directed to remain in the Crimea with her mother, under strict police surveillance. While in the Crimea, Sonia worked on improving her healing skills, taking a formal medical training course at Simferopol. Ultimately she was certified as a *fel’dsher*, a Russian medical professional similar to a paramedic.²⁹⁴ While studying, she worked in a hospital in Simferopol. Due to her zeal and diligence, she managed to acquire such regard from the doctors that they often trusted her with patients, despite the fact that she had not yet finished the *fel’dsher* course. She was the darling of the sick. In addition to her coursework and her hospital rotations, Sonia volunteered to care for a helplessly ill cancer patient, going to her home every day to change her dressings. This dying woman was very impressed with Sonia.²⁹⁵

Perovskaya took a break from her medical internship to join her brother Vasily and others on a horse camping trip in the mountains. At some point, Sonia’s mount tripped and fell.

All her companions were very worried. However, Sonia got the horse back on its feet all by herself. One man in the party, named Peter Telalov, was very funny and charming. However, this did not attract Sonia to him in the slightest way. She kept deliberately sending her horse off into a gallop, so that Telalov's horse would take off after it. Telalov was terrified, although later he was able to laugh over the episode.

When the vacation was over, Sonia left the horse with her brother and returned to Simferopol where there was an urgent need to treat the many soldiers wounded in the Russo-Turkish war, a sort of pro-Christian, anti-Islamic crusade which Alexander had recently decided to undertake. This sad work made an impression on Sonia. However, after only a month, in the summer of 1877 she was finally summoned by the police to go to St. Petersburg to stand trial on nebulous charges related to her role in "Going to the People."²⁹⁶

The prosecution of Perovskaya and her fellow "Going to the People" populists was part of a get-tough policy by the Russian government focused on radicals from the Generation of the Sixties. From a political standpoint, the policy reflected a continuation of the White Terror of the late 1860's. It in many ways backfired. For example, the "Going to the People" wildfire was fueled by an imperial edict issued in 1873 which required all female Russian students then studying in Switzerland to return to Russia by the end of the year.²⁹⁷ This decree was intended to prevent young women from becoming contaminated with Western liberal notions, but in reality it had an opposite effect. Young students, and especially girls, were already attracted to progressive ideas. When required by the edict to return to Russia, large numbers of them returned as populists. The government decided to arrest anybody caught "Going to the People." Some four thousand were arrested by the end of 1874. Of these 770, including 158 women, were charged and held over for trial.²⁹⁸ A large number of the arrestees were held in custody pending trial at the newly built

St. Petersburg House of Detention. Another manifestation of imperial policy in the 1870s, this was a new facility built to lock up radicals.²⁹⁹

Chapter 10: The Tsar's Second Family

Alexander had, by now, pretty well abandoned the broad liberal vision he had brought to the throne. He was very preoccupied with his personal life. His wife Marie was sickly and had long ago stopped having sex with him. She had already suffered through eight pregnancies and doctors had advised her she could not survive any more. Alexander sought solace with other women, while Marie, weak with tuberculosis, turned a blind eye to his flirtations. Starting in 1865, Alexander focused his attentions on a young girl of illustrious ancestry whose parents had recently gone bankrupt. She was an indigent ward of the state, benefitting from the Tsar's financial aid to attend the Smolny Institute. Her name was Catherine "Katia" Dolgorukov. Katia was only 18, and Alexander 47, when she became the main object of his romantic intrigues. It was an attention she coyly encouraged with the full complicity of her mother. Alexander was already courting Katia, meeting her regularly on the Palace grounds for walks and the like, in April 1866 when the Karakozov assassination attempt occurred. The



Catherine Dolgorukov, c. 1866

two began a physical sexual relationship three months later.

Young Katia was not the most beautiful, nor the most intelligent, nor the most cultured of women. She was moody, intensely jealous, and possessive, as reflected in her extensive letters to and from Alexander which were written in French with only a few words of Russian thrown in here and there.³⁰⁰ Katia rapidly did what was

necessary to solidify her grip on the monarch. In Alexander's own words, they "clenched each other like cats."³⁰¹ But Katia's Italian sister-in-law Louise, working to keep the affair a secret while it was still possible to salvage the young woman's reputation, arranged to take Katia away to live with her in the home she shared with Katia's brother in Naples, Italy.³⁰²

Alexander had much German blood in his ancestry, and he had spent time in Germany with his relatives during his youth. He tended to chart a pro-German course in the balance of power politics that prevailed in nineteenth century Europe. He maintained "neutrality" when Prussia waged war on Denmark, ending with the annexation of Schleswig and

Holstein in 1864. Alexander was well aware of Bismarck's grand plan for unifying Germany. In 1866, Prussia took a giant step toward unification by defeating the Austrian army at the battle of Sadowa. Only then did some of Alexander's advisors urge a rapprochement between Russia and France to balance the expansion of the north German confederation. In an effort to improve Russia's image in France, Alexander declared a general amnesty for the Polish insurgents of 1863. This paved the way for a personal visit to Paris by Alexander in May 1867. His ulterior motive in making this trip was to arrange a rendezvous with Katia, whom he had not seen for six months. He put her up in a Parisian luxury hotel a short distance away from his guest quarters.³⁰³

Alexander received a cold reception from the French public, which kept chanting "*Vive la Pologne*" when he appeared in public. On May 25, Alexander joined fellow emperors Napoleon III of France and Wilhelm I of Prussia for his favorite military activity, a full dress parade at the Longchamp horse track. As the troops were streaming by, a man stepped forward brandishing a pistol and fired twice at Alexander. One of Napoleon III's guards spotted the assailant first and grabbed him, disturbing his aim just enough so that the shots missed, grazing a nearby horse and a bystander. The brazen attempt greatly perturbed the Tsar, although he maintained a facade of indifference. The assassin was a Polish refugee, Anton Berezowski.

After the shock of another assassination attempt, Alexander found comfort in the loving arms of young Katia. But he would long hold the Berezowski attack, as well as the hostile hecklings he had received, against the French people. He was even more insulted when France failed to put the assassin to death, finding "extenuating circumstances" which warranted sentencing him to life in prison instead. He would have been happier if the culprit would have been first sentenced to death, and then granted a Russian style reprieve on the

scaffold.

When Alexander returned from France to St. Petersburg, he brought Katia back with him. There she took up residence as the Tsar's concubine, thinly disguised as one of the Empress's maids of honor. Katia had the discretion to stay away from imperial functions, being content, for the time being, to remain largely in the Palace shadows. But Alexander began taking Katia with him on junkets, even when he traveled on important affairs of state. In June 1870, Alexander held meetings in Germany with Wilhelm I, his chancellor Bismarck, and Alexander's own foreign minister Gortchakov. Alexander favored Prussia in her disputes with France, giving vital encouragement that led to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Napoleon III would lose this war, after a disastrous defeat at Sedan, and he would also lose his throne. Alexander viewed this as a righteous punishment for France's attitude during his visit in 1867.

On April 30, 1872, Katia gave birth to her first child with Alexander. This occurred in secrecy at the Winter Palace. But of course the news leaked out to the imperial court. Some of Alexander's relatives, especially his brother Konstantin and his aunt Hélène, expressed consternation over Alexander's extramarital conduct with Catherine Dolgorukov. However, the Tsar's wife Marie seemed resigned to her fate. She projected a feeling of being used up, that she had almost lost her will to live. The next year, Katia bore Alexander another child, this time a daughter.

By this time, Alexander's extramarital relationship with Katia was common knowledge at court.³⁰⁴ Thus, it was almost certainly known to Perovskaya, who remained in touch with sympathetic nobles, including some in the highest echelons of government. Alexander's lifestyle was one of which Sofia Perovskaya strongly disapproved. Probably her hostility to it was heightened due to her own father's promiscuous behavior. Sonia reacted in an opposite direction. Not only was Sonia

herself sexually abstinent, she expected similar restraint from others within the communal society of the Chaikovsky circle. Traditional Russian vices, such as heavy alcohol consumption, she criticized sharply when engaged in by any of the Chaikovskists. And if there was one area where Sofia Perovskaya was particularly judgmental, it was the tendency of Russian men, especially those in the upper classes, to womanize. Within the Chaikovsky circle, Sonia was known for ostracizing young men bent on sex. She criticized them as philanderers even when the objects of their attention were unattached and available. When a Chaikovsky member found himself torn between a love affair and political commitment, she insisted that the member be ostracized and excluded from the group.³⁰⁵

The idealistic Chaikovsky circle died out, largely due to attrition from the mass arrests of 1874. Nikolai Chaikovsky emigrated to the United States, where he started a utopian commune near Wichita, Kansas. However, the Chaikovsky circle veterans formed a ready-made nucleus for further revolutionary organization. In the fall of 1876 Mark Natanson, having finished his period of administrative exile, returned to St. Petersburg. Along with Georgi Plekhanov, he became one of the leading spirits in the formation of a new organization of St. Petersburg radicals, many of whom were former Chaikovsky participants. The group's name, *Zemlya i Volya*, bespoke an intent to revive the Sixties group of the same name that Chernyshevsky had helped form. One of the revived organization's first major actions was a demonstration under a red banner proclaiming "*Zemlya i Volya*" in front of the Kazan cathedral in St. Petersburg. Although sparsely attended with only 250 participants, the public rally was regarded by the government as a serious affront. The police responded in force, greeting the activists with clubs and arrests.³⁰⁶

One of those arrested in front of the Kazan cathedral was a 24-year old student named Alexei Emelyanov. He gave

authorities the false name of Bogolyubov. Bogolyubov was swiftly sentenced to 15 years of hard labor. Awaiting deportation, he was placed temporarily in the St. Petersburg House of Detention, which was already full of young radical men and women being held pending trial in connection with “Going to the People.” An ambiguous attitude existed toward these prisoners on the part of the jailers. Although official government policy toward them was harsh, the prison guards recognized the reality that these were not ordinary criminals. The overwhelming majority were children of the nobility and upper and middle classes. The detention center accorded the “politicals” a certain amount of liberty within the prison walls. However, Fyodor Trepov, the former director of the 1863 Polish reprisals, had been promoted to the post of Governor of St. Petersburg. One day he came to the House of Detention for an inspection. He did not appreciate the relaxed attitude of the political prisoners. His anger seethed as he saw them walking about the yard in groups and chatting. Among them was Bogolyubov. Upon approaching Bogolyubov, Trepov became infuriated because Bogolyubov did not remove his cap. Trepov reached out and knocked off Bogolyubov’s cap. Trepov’s aggressive motion caused Bogolyubov to flinch and lose his balance. The enraged Trepov regarded this sudden movement as an assault and a further unacceptable affront.³⁰⁷

One cardinal feature of Alexander’s judicial reforms in 1864 had been the abolition of corporal punishment. But this reform left one exception – beatings remained legal inside prison walls. Trepov summarily ordered Bogolyubov to be lashed with one hundred strokes. The sound of the slow, steady strokes of the whip cracking against the naked body of Bogolyubov while he was held on the whipping block caused a near riot. The prisoners went into an immediate frenzy, making all kinds of noise and throwing just about anything that they could fit through the bars.³⁰⁸ Word of the vicious lashing, which resulted in lasting injury to Bogolyubov, soon spread

and, indeed, caused indignation in many levels of society, not just among the nihilists. Avenging Bogolyubov became a special rallying cry for the radicals.

Hundreds of versts away from St. Petersburg, news of the ugly Bogolyubov incident reached a new collection of radicals who had split with the “populist” philosophy of *Zemlya i Volya*. Various called “insurrectionists” or “the disorganizing group,” these anarchists were loosely based in what Russians called “the South” – primarily, the Ukrainian cities of Kharkov and Kiev, and the Crimean city of Odessa. No longer were these “Southerners” enthralled with the notion that it was good to work gradually to educate the peasantry in order to build support for revolution. They now theorized that the “people” were already miserable and in inchoate revolt against the existing system. So, the revolutionaries simply needed to engage in strokes bold enough to set off a spark to catalyze a lightning-quick chain reaction. They felt strongly that the government was an organized injustice, and that there was no form of resistance too dirty to use against it.³⁰⁹ They embraced dramatic, violent “disorganizing” tactics, which featured publicly proclaimed acts of assassination and banditry that were designed to intimidate ordinary citizens.

One of the key Southern leaders, Valerian Osinski, repeated a classic Nechaev stratagem by inventing a fictitious “Executive Committee of the Russian Social Revolutionary Party,” complete with its own seal, to take credit for acts of terrorism. Osinski, the son of a wealthy landowner, was personally debonair and charming. But he was chilling in his approach to perceived “spies,” as well as government leaders viewed as leading instruments of repression. These persons would be cut down on the street, killed without warning. As another legacy of Nechaev, spreading falsehoods was used as an instrument of fomenting fear and panic. Osinski had his



Seal of the “Russian Revolutionary Executive Committee,” used on communications in 1877 by Osinski’s group to evoke terror.

“Executive Committee” publicly take “credit” for terrorist assassinations of spies and local police officials.³¹⁰ In the spring of 1877, Osinski and some of his associates went out at night and plastered Kiev with false

communiqués of Russian disasters in the Russo-Turkish war. They developed skillful methods for forging passports, evading surveillance, and communicating through sophisticated signals and ciphers. They acquired revolvers, and they practiced shooting them.

The budding group of “Southern” insurrectionists now included Vera Zaslitch. The years since her association with Nechaev in St. Petersburg had been a long odyssey for Vera. Due to the government’s discovery of letters addressed to her from Nechaev, she had been arrested and held in a detention center for a year. Then she was confined for a second year in solitary confinement within Russia’s maximum security facility, the Peter and Paul Fortress. After that, she was released to a series of administrative exile postings in western Russia and the Ukraine. Eventually the authorities relaxed their supervision. Vera was able to slip into a clandestine life first in Kharkov, and then in Kiev. She tried “Going to the People” by posing as the married proprietress of a tea shop in the village of Tsibulevka, near Kiev. She utterly failed in convincing the “people” of the role, as all she did was read books. She refused to do any cooking or cleaning in the shop,

and was unable even to make a decent pot of tea. Her fictitious “husband” Mikhail Frolenko took up drinking with the peasants to try to allay their suspicions about Vera.

Shortly after the Bogolyubov episode, Zaslitch with an attractive red-haired female companion, Maria “Masha” Kolenkina, made their way from Kiev to St. Petersburg. They arrived just as the mass trial got under way of the activists arrested while “Going to the People.” Drawing attention to the sheer numbers on trial, this event was dubbed the “Trial of the 193.” The collective nature of the trial, with its huge number of defendants, was another serious miscalculation by the imperial authorities. The proceedings brought together and united the most radical and intransigent activists left over from the Generation of the Sixties. Those of the accused who were not already friends with each other, now became friends in the courtroom. No longer were these defendants starry eyed students. They were now veteran revolutionaries. They would react with harshness of their own to the government’s harsh policies.

Perovskaya herself became much more involved with underground radical activity after she was removed from Simferopol in the summer of 1877 and ordered to stand trial in St. Petersburg. She was not under true arrest, and spent most of her time being in charge of the “Prisoner Red Cross.” She pretended to be engaged to a Chaikovsky member, Lev Tikhomirov, in order to visit him in the House of Detention. In addition to Tikhomirov, she also visited other political prisoners. Typically she brought them supplies that they could use. Even more important, she could tell them much of what was happening outside the walls. In the trial, Perovskaya was brought up first, apparently in hopes that she would make statements implicating other defendants. However, acting in accordance with a prearranged plan, Sonia pointedly refused to say anything at all.

The Trial of the 193 accomplished little, except to provide

a pulpit for a few of the accused to voice very public criticisms of the government's repressive policies. The most vocal was Ippolit Myshkin, a printer by trade, who had been arrested in Siberia while plotting to rescue Chernyshevsky from exile. In his speech to the court, Myshkin branded the trial a farce. He accused the judges of being worse than girls in a brothel. Such impudence caused him to be dragged away by the bailiffs, and ultimately, to be sentenced to ten years at hard labor. But in general the defendants who declined to speak, including Perovskaya, were acquitted, or were released based on credit for time already served, when the trial ended on January 23, 1878. Much rejoicing ensued, and a great deal of energy was released among the revolutionaries. One who was not on trial would recall:³¹¹

It was an uninterrupted session of a revolutionary club, where 90 to 100 visitors attended in a day. Friends brought with them strangers who wished to shake hands with those whom they had looked upon as buried alive.

In the wake of the acquittals, Perovskaya hosted in her apartment a celebratory gathering welcoming the newly freed defendants from the Trial of the 193. The discussions digested and recapitulated much that had happened during the trial. The participants were stimulated by this event and, far from learning a lesson, felt themselves spurred on to further revolutionary commitment.³¹² Perovskaya, however, was not happy about the trial or its outcome. Her thoughts continued to dwell on Myshkin and the others who had been sentenced to hard labor in prison. She retained channels of communications with those close to the halls of power and, from them, she was informed that there had been sentiments to commute those sentences to mere exile, but the sentiments had been vetoed. It kindled a bitterness Sonia would never relinquish.³¹³

Despite the notoriety that was given to her disdain for men, Perovskaya was remembered by many for her tender

qualities toward male activists who were sick or imprisoned. One of her fellow feminists, Kovalskaya, left this portrait of her.

Among the defendants [in the Trial of the 193], there was a very young male student, A.L., who was put in prison in the flower of his adolescence. He left, under surveillance, four years later dying of tuberculosis. He had an attitude beyond reproach during the entire trial, rigorously honest, but he did not join the outspoken protestors because he felt that the presence of those who were unjustly accused and remained silent would have an even greater effect on public opinion. He was a very good friend and before leaving St. Petersburg I wanted to stop by to see him. Fearing to wake him, I very softly opened the door to his room and entered without making a sound. The long straight room was bathed in the afternoon sun. L. was lying on a metal bed. His fine handsome face displayed the flushed red cheeks and glowing eyes of a fever. Perovskaya was sitting next to the bed, on a chair in front of a small table. Out of the corner of her eye she kept glancing at the patient. In her regard, there was an enormous compassion, silent and delicate, such a tenderness and a desire to relieve the sadness. I did not even recognize in her at all the severe militant that I had met earlier. But when she saw me, a change came over her. Her face hardened, she seemed to return to her former self, fearing to betray her tender feelings.

At one time, Perovskaya had lived in a commune with L. L. sat up in bed, and with a voice punctuated with spasms of coughing, asked her avidly about the trial. Obviously trying to avoid the subject, Perovskaya kept giving one word answers. She kept trying to divert the conversation, bringing up happy or

funny episodes from when they had lived together in the commune. L., sensing her diplomatic efforts, seemed to worsen and fade. Seeing this bad reaction, and fearing to have acted maladroitly, Perovskaya quickly began telling him about the trial. She repeated with indignation the closing argument of a defense attorney named Borovinsky (later a poet and a senator), who did not hesitate to declare: 'Here, Honorable Judges, on the bench of the accused, you will see eagles and you will see chickens. My client is part of the second group.' But sensing that she had again caused trouble by telling something she would have rather not said, she fell silent. L. started laughing gently. He said, 'Come on, come on, please continue. I know very well that you take me for a chicken. It is always better to be taken for a peacock, or at least a crow.' The tension broke. Perovskaya's face changed and, smiling, she continued telling L. about the trial.³¹⁴

Chapter 11: Disorganizing

The day after the sentences were handed down in the Trial of the 193, Vera Zaslitch awoke early next to Masha Kolenkina. She rose and neatly laid out a set of nice clothes. They were much different from her usual unkempt attire, which was a shapeless gray linen cloak with holes crudely cut for her head and arms and whose corners doubled as handkerchiefs.³¹⁵ Vera carefully packed up a fake application she had prepared the night before, requesting a certificate supposedly necessary to obtain a diploma. It was critical that she arrive at Governor Trepov's office well before 9 a.m., the hour when Trepov regularly began to receive supplications from petitioners. After dressing, she kissed Masha goodbye and set out walking cold streets to catch the train. When she reached Trepov's office there were already around ten people waiting to present their petitions. "Will the Governor be receiving today?" she asked an officer. "Yes, and soon," came the response. Someone in front of her asked, "Will he be receiving in person?" The response again was affirmative.

While waiting, Zaslitch was asked by another waiting woman to read over her petition. Vera corrected an error in it.

She suggested that the woman show the paper to the officer who was looking over other similar papers. The woman did not want to show it by herself, so she asked Vera to talk to him for her. The officer, after speaking briefly with Vera, ushered both of them into an inner room and told them to wait in the corner. Other supplicants lined up behind her. From the other side of the room Trepov, surrounded by staff, entered. He approached Vera first and asked her what she wanted. “A certificate,” she replied. Trepov noted something in pencil and turned to her neighbor in the receiving line. Vera quietly withdrew a British Bulldog snub nosed revolver she had been concealing and, after a misfire, exploded a single shot that hit Trepov. As her aim was a bit negligent, the shot struck Trepov somewhere below the belt, inflicting a serious injury to his buttocks that proved not to be fatal.

Zasulitch immediately threw down the gun. She expected to be seized and beaten. And indeed, after a stunned moment of shock, guards grabbed her, threw her on the floor, gouged at her eyes and hit her a few times. She thought it strange that at the time she felt no sensation of pain, although she would later discover bruises. An officer present took command and ordered the guards to stop before they killed her. There needed to be an inquiry to find out who Vera was, and who had sent her.

Zasulitch was removed into another room, much larger, where there were few guards. One of them said to her, “We have to search you.” Vera replied, “For that, you need a woman.” A scene worthy of Kafka ensued.

The officer: “Where would we find a woman here?”

Vera: “On every staff, there is a midwife.”

Officer: “The time that it would take to find one . . . And you might have another weapon on you!”

Vera: “Nothing will happen. All you have to do is

tie me up if you are worried about it.”

Officer: “I am not worried about myself. I know very well you will not shoot me. But I just came back to duty from being sick. What would I have around here to tie you up with?”

Vera: “If you don’t have a rope, use a napkin.”

The officer looked in the desk and took out a napkin. He did not look very intent on using it. Timidly he looked up at Vera. “Why did you fire at him?”

Vera: “Because of Bogolyubov.”

Officer: “Ah.” He said it as if it was exactly the response he expected.³¹⁶

Zasulich’s shooting of Trepov marked a definite turning point on the path to terrorism. Typical of terrorist acts, Zasulich’s assassination attempt provoked the Russian government into an overreaction. The lenient decisions that had just been handed down in the Trial of the 193 were immediately quashed, and were replaced with new harsh sentences. Instead of Myshkin being the only defendant exiled to Siberia, now fourteen of the defendants were ordered exiled.³¹⁷ The government was sensitive about criticisms that had been leveled at its “show trial” style political handling of the Trial of the 193. As there seemed to be very little risk, given the undisputed and overwhelming nature of the evidence, a decision was made by Alexander himself to try Zasulich using the jury trial procedure introduced as part of Alexander’s great reforms. This procedure had never been used before for a political trial. Jury trials, being new to Russia, were poorly understood. Trouble soon ensued. The judge allowed the defense in effect to put Trepov on trial, by arguing and introducing evidence to highlight Zasulich’s “motive,” the unwonted brutality of the punishment of Bogolyubov. Given this latitude, Zasulich’s defense attorney Peter Alexandrov handled the case brilliantly. He presented the jury with a

sympathetic version of Zaslitch's entire life story, including her chance introduction to Nechaev, her subsequent imprisonment, and her (supposed) learning of Bogolyubov's beating from reading a small item in the newspaper. All of it was rosily embellished. Trepov, he argued, deserved to be punished, and Zaslitch was justice's angel of vengeance. The prosecutor reacted a bit sheepishly, and was totally unprepared to point out the inaccuracies in Alexandrov's version of Zaslitch's story. The gallery was even allowed to cheer Alexandrov's arguments.

The jury, in response to these tactics, did what juries do. It became inflamed. It rapidly handed down a verdict of "not guilty." Havoc broke loose. Alexander immediately tried to intervene and order Zaslitch re-arrested, but by that time, she had already been released and spirited into hiding. Ultimately she was smuggled out of Russia and into Switzerland.³¹⁸

Dramatic acts by "revolutionaries" now began in earnest. One of the more creative involved three imprisoned "Southerners" who had been caught plotting a violent revolt. The organization devised an ingenuous rescue plan. Mikhail Frolenko, the same who had previously pretended to be the husband of Zaslitch, now presented a fake passport under the name "Fomenko." He succeeded in getting himself hired as a warder at the Kiev prison where the three radicals were held. "Fomenko" showed himself to be an intelligent and reliable prison employee. After several months of diligent performance, he succeeded in getting himself promoted to be a head warder. Then through contrivance, warder "Fomenko" caught Yacob Stefanovich, one of the jailed extremists, red handed in the act of writing a forbidden note. The Governor of Kiev took no action against Stefanovich, but he did acquire great faith in the sleuthing ability and loyalty of "Fomenko." The extremists, on the other hand, pretended to be extremely upset and angry with "Fomenko" due to his successful spying against them.

“Fomenko” fell in line to be promoted to head warder of the “political” wing of the prison. However, the incumbent head warder, one Nikita, was a decent and competent man. No pretext could be found to trigger Nikita’s dismissal. The revolutionaries invented all kinds of fictitious offenses against Nikita, of which they complained to the Governor, but to no avail. Nikita maintained his composure and just kept repeating, “Jesus Christ suffered. I will also suffer.” Finally Osinski came up with a plan. He went to a tavern frequented by Nikita, found him there and bought him some drinks. Out of delight with the fine fellow, Osinski offered Nikita a very advantageous employment as the bookkeeper for a sugar refinery in the country. The bait was taken. Nikita agreed to accept traveling expenses and a month’s pay. He gave notice that he was leaving his position at the prison. In the wake of Nikita’s resignation, “Fomenko” was promoted to head warder in charge of the political wing.

By now it was late May, 1878. The terrorists were in a huge hurry to complete the escape. Some of the other political prisoners imprisoned in Kiev knew the real identity of “Fomenko,” presenting a serious risk of discovery. The plotters determined that “Fomenko” must free the prisoners right away, although he could find only two fake guard uniforms for them to wear. The third prisoner had to tag along wearing ordinary civilian clothes. To make matters even more difficult, one of the real warders came along just as Frolenko was preparing to unlock the escapees’ cells. Thinking quickly, Stefanovich threw an unbound book, really just a collection of loose pages, out the window. “Fomenko” asked the warder to go down to the ground to pick up these sheets. Then, as Frolenko and the escapees made their way out of the hallway, in the complete darkness one of them slipped. To catch himself, he grabbed a rope that turned out to be connected to a loud alarm bell. But once again, “Fomenko” smoothly talked his way out of the desperate situation. He assured the

responding guards that it was he who had accidentally tugged the alarm rope. The guards believed him. Obediently, they opened the gates of the prison so that he and his companions could leave. Osinski awaited, a short distance away with a getaway vehicle, to take the escapees down to the Dnieper River. They got away cleanly in a waiting boat. “Fomenko” disappeared. So complete was the belief in his deception, it was assumed by the authorities that the escaped prisoners must have killed him. They spent a great deal of time looking for the body.³¹⁹

In the aftermath of this escape, Perovskaya moved to Kharkov, where many radicals sentenced in the Trial of the 193 were now imprisoned. There she joined up with “Southern” radicals in a plot to free activists imprisoned following the Trial of the 193. She resumed her role as “prison nurse,” making friends with and perhaps bribing some guards. A group of nine, including Perovskaya, lived in three apartments in Kharkov while hatching rescue plans. Her first objective was to free Ippolit Myshkin. However, the government got wind that a plot was in the works, and increased the security on Myshkin to the point where no rescue was feasible. After a month and a half, Sonia learned that an older political convict named Porfirio Ivanovich Voinaralsky was about to be transferred to another prison. Prior to his arrest for the Trial of the 193, Voinaralsky had been a member of Chaikovsky and an important regional organizer of “Going to the People.” He had donated his entire fortune, some 40,000 rubles, to the cause.³²⁰ Perovskaya decided to rescue Voinaralsky.

The communal residents of the “movement” helped Sonia work out a detailed plan. Three of them, Frolenko, Alexander Barannikov and Alexander Mikhailov, dressed as military officers and staff. They intercepted the wagon transporting Voinaralsky and ordered the sergeant in charge of the transport to turn the prisoner over to them. Other bandits in the group followed separately behind. When the sergeant became

suspicious, the confrontation turned violent. Barannikov shot one of the guards driving the wagon, but Frolenko's shot missed the other. The officer riding inside the carriage with Voinaralsky alertly and courageously held his sword to the prisoner's neck to keep him from jumping out. While holding the carriage stopped at gunpoint, the terrorists should have unhitched the wagon's horses, but being inexperienced, they failed to do so. The surviving carriage driver was able to spur the horses to a gallop. The wagon's horses were faster, and better trained, than the terrorists' horses. The horse of Alexander Kviatkovski, one of the conspirators following behind, shied and refused to approach when it heard the gunshots. The transport wagon managed to escape and, ultimately, was able to summon help. As a result, the terrorists themselves were nearly captured, and one of the gang's members was caught shortly afterwards at a nearby train station. When she learned of the failure, Sonia was furious with her comrades. She blamed them for cowardice, masculine incompetence and too much "Russianness."³²¹

In the wake of their attack, it was too "hot" for the bandits to remain in Kharkov. Most of them filtered out of the city and went to St. Petersburg, where they soon became involved in planning another terrorist attack. The radical community was incensed because one Ivan Kovalsky had just been sentenced to be executed. Kovalsky, a nihilist, had helped run a clandestine printing press in Odessa for what he called the "social democratic party." When the government detected the printing operation, shortly after the Trepov assassination attempt, Kovalsky was arrested in a nasty violent shootout. His armed resistance to arrest was the reason for his death sentence. To protest Kovalsky's execution, radicals rallied in Odessa. Police fired into the crowd, killing one. On August 2, Kovalsky was shot by a firing squad. The terrorists decided to strike back with, in their words, "a death for a death."³²²

Rightly or wrongly, the radicals held Nikolai Mezentsov,

the imperial police chief, responsible for the new and harsher sentences which had been imposed on Trial of the 193 defendants after Zaslitch's attack on Trepov. They decided to "execute" Mezentsov in retaliation for the execution of Kovalsky. Lessons the terrorists had learned in the failed Voinaralsky rescue were put to use. Alexander Mikhailov masterminded the attack. This time, he made sure to have a good horse. He got hold of an animal named Varvar, a champion trotter. He studied Mezentsov's movements and learned that Mezentsov was in the habit of walking to work accompanied by a single adjutant when the summer weather was pleasant. The attack was, as a result, made boldly in the heart of St. Petersburg, near the corner of Mikhailovsky Square and Italienskaya Street, at around 9 a.m. on August 4, 1878. With Barannikov acting as his lookout, Serge Kravchinsky came up behind Mezentsov and plunged a dagger deep into his body. By firing a revolver, Barannikov delayed the adjutant from giving chase just long enough for the terrorists to reach the getaway vehicle hitched to Varvar. Mezentsov died almost immediately, while Kravchinsky and Barannikov escaped. Mezentsov's murder, boldly carried out in broad daylight on a major city street, was the terrorists' most high profile violent exploit to date.³²³

After the botched Voinaralsky rescue attempt, Perovskaya did not accompany the other radicals to St. Petersburg. Instead, she left Kharkov and traveled to the Crimea to visit her mother and brother Vasily. She was already wanted by the authorities, who (without even knowing anything about her role in the violent Kharkov rescue attempt) had decided to place her under administrative supervision. The morning after her arrival at her mother's home, the police came to place Perovskaya under arrest. She was immediately shipped to her designated place of exile, in far northern Russia in a small town called Povenets, 600 kilometers northeast of St. Petersburg. However, although her demeanor remained meek, Sonia had no intention of

accepting exile.³²⁴

For the first part of the two-day long rail journey, Perovskaya behaved quite well. She was all sugar and smiles with her two police escorts, and they in turn were considerate and respectful of her. When the first guards were replaced with another pair, she was already much more than half way to Povenets. Sonia finally saw her opening. While waiting late at night to change trains at a small station in Volkhov, a transfer point around two hours east of St. Petersburg, the escorting officers let her stretch out on a couch in a waiting room. The policemen stretched out also, one in front of the window, the other in front of the entrance to the room. Sonia, however, noticed that the door opened outward. She lay still, and was very patient. Every time a train was called, the officers jumped up. They kept looking nervously at Sonia, but she always appeared to them to be in a deep sleep. Eventually they too fell asleep. They did not even raise their heads when trains were called. Very softly, Sonia rose. She removed her shoes and very delicately tiptoed over the officer sleeping by the door. Without anyone seeing her, she made her way onto the platform. She crossed over the tracks and hid in some bushes on the other side.

In an hour, a train bound for St. Petersburg arrived. On board, the conductor made a fuss because she did not have a ticket. Perovskaya, with a scarf draped over her head, pretended to be an ignorant peasant who had never traveled by train before. The conductor was taken in. When the police escorts awakened, they were chagrined to find that Sonia had disappeared. Despite telegrams they sent ahead, she got off the train without detection upon its arrival in the capital. She quickly made her way to the house of a sympathizer.³²⁵ The princess would lead the rest of her life from this point on living as an “illegal,” meaning, underground with an assumed identity. This clandestine life in itself was a serious criminal offense.

Olga Lyubatovich, with Masha Kolenkina, met Perovskaya right at the time she escaped custody and went underground in St. Petersburg. She presented herself to these women as if they were old friends, even though Olga had never met her previously and knew of Perovskaya only by reputation. Sonia seemed emotional. The other women gathered around to hear her tell of how she had escaped from her police escort. Olga could see that this young girl – a child, almost, in her appearance, according to Lyubatovich – had a close rapport with Kravchinsky, who made haste to come to meet her. This was born of their days and weeks spent together in the Chaikovsky circle. Kravchinsky brought news of humiliations and sufferings being endured by radicals, including Myshkin, now imprisoned in Kharkov. Lyubatovich saw an immediate cloud come over Sonia’s demeanor. The vengeance Kravchinsky had inflicted by killing Mezentzov was no consolation to her. She resolved to leave immediately for Kharkov, even though all of her friends tried to convince her to stay longer in St. Petersburg. She wrote to Lev Tikhomirov, her pretend “fiancé,” who at that time following the Trial of the 193 was living away from the radicals with his parents at Stavropol. She successfully appealed to Tikhomirov to return to St. Petersburg to take over Kravchinsky’s place as the editor of the radical newspaper, *Land and Liberty*. Kravchinsky was preparing to depart Russia.

With difficulty, Sonia’s associates persuaded her to remain in St. Petersburg for just a few days. To “celebrate” her departure, Kravchinsky organized a night at the opera. The young activists were aghast at Kravchinsky’s bravado. He rented an entire loge, into which, in small groups, entered eleven men and women radicals, all “illegal.” In between acts they giggled and joked, everybody thinking how shocked the government would be to learn of such a nest of “wrong thinkers” in a box at the opera. But the government was not searching for them at the opera. The performance they

attended was *Le Prophète* by Giacomo Meyerbeer. The “plot” of this mid-19th century opera (which, itself, is set in the 16th century) includes an uprising by peasants against their feudal rulers. It ends with a gigantic palace explosion in which the hero, his mother, and the villains all are killed. It was an opera much adored in Sonia’s revolutionary circle.³²⁶

When Sonia arrived in Kharkov, she soon found that, as the St. Petersburg group had already predicted, she was not able to make any progress with jail break schemes. She kept very busy nonetheless. She organized a service to smuggle in food and clothing to the politicals in prison. She networked with other Zemlya i Volya adherents in the town. She conducted a midwife course so as to become even better qualified for work among “the people.” She was described by friends who knew her in Kharkov as looking very young and girlish for her 25 years, with a small face, prominent large forehead, blonde hair and a pink and white complexion. She was extremely serious and meticulous. She would go to every shop in town to try to get the best value for the money available to be spent on the prisoners. She had a strong will and a low opinion of male intelligence and reliability. But despite her personal effort, due to a lack of funds and help the rescue plans had to be abandoned.

The entire organization was of necessity becoming more hardened. The police were now more knowledgeable and more active. They had succeeded in identifying and arresting some of the important leaders. Radicals like Perovskaya who were living clandestine lives had to be on the alert every minute of every day.³²⁷ Reacting to the constant vigilance of the secret police, they began to excel at deception. One of the subterfuges was that two members of the “illegals,” a man and a woman, would be assigned to rent a safe house, posing as a married couple. In this way, less suspicion was generated. The house was then used for meetings, preparations, changes of disguise, and sometimes as a temporary hiding place. On conclusion of

the enterprise the residence would be abandoned.³²⁸

Chapter 12: Terrorists Split Off

In late 1878 and early 1879, philosophical differences began to emerge among Zemlya i Volya activists. In many ways the debate was a replay of what had happened ten years earlier when Nechaev insisted on public forms of protest. The moderates opposed assassinations and other acts of terror. They viewed violence as highly counterproductive because it made the radicals look bad in public opinion. Terrorism also inevitably would bring on waves of arrests and government surveillance. The moderates continued to advocate propaganda and education of workers and peasants as the methods most likely to bring about fundamental change.

The extremists within the revolutionary movement were, by now, veterans of this “populist” approach. They felt that it had proven to be frustrating and ineffective. Jail and prison had added to the hardening of their mindset. Vera Figner, who was one of these extremists, would later recall:

The hopes of many crumbled to dust; the program which had seemed so feasible did not lead to the

expected results; faith in the soundness of its theoretical construction, in one's own strength, wavered. The keener the enthusiasm of those who had gone out among the people to spread propaganda, the more bitter was their disillusionment.³²⁹

The sensational assassination of Mezentsov, coming as it did on the heels of the sensational shooting of Trepov by Zaslitch, exerted a magnetic force which attracted a select few men and women throughout Russia who had the proclivities to seek to join the cause of the pro-violence faction within the ranks of Zemlya i Volya. This built momentum which fairly soon led to a schism within Zemlya i Volya between the mainstream, who wanted to continue with the program of recruiting support for uprising among the workers and the peasants, and a small but insistent faction that began to argue openly for terrorism. They theorized that violent acts would catalyze deep latent forces of discontent. The most dramatic act of all, for which they increasingly argued, was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. The revolutionaries held Alexander at fault for the new and harsher sentences that were imposed on the defendants, following Zaslitch's shooting of Trepov, after they had already been given lenient case dispositions at the end of the Trial of the 193.

In the provincial region of Saratov, approximately 850 kilometers southeast of Moscow, Vera Figner was engaged in "Going to the People" as a medical practitioner. She was in most ways a typical female child of the Sixties. One year older than Perovskaya, she was born to a family of prosperous nobles. Her father, a forester, had liberal leanings. He once remarked, "If the serfs had not been freed, and had revolted, I should have led their rebellion." As a peace mediator he would devote much energy to helping resolve conflicts involving peasants that arose from the imperial decree freeing the serfs. However, like Lev Nikolaevitch Perovskiy, at home he was hot tempered and stern. Vera was much closer to her mother.

Vera Figner grew to be a student radical, as did several of her siblings. She was profoundly affected by the poetry of Nikolai Nekrasov, founder of *The Contemporary* and Chernyshevsky's mentor. After an arranged marriage, Vera secured permission to study medicine in Switzerland. Once there, she swiftly divorced her husband due to his non-radical political views. In spite of the 1873 decree requiring all female Russian students to return, she remained in the University of Berne working to complete her medical degree. However, in December of 1875, after much agonizing, she responded to a personal appeal from Mark Natanson for her to return to Russia to work among "the people." She quit the program and left the Swiss school even though she was only five to six months short of getting her diploma.

Because of the late timing of her return to Russia, Figner was not jailed in the 1874 arrests of the "populists." She went through a series of "Going to the People" postings. After the Trial of the 193, she relocated to Saratov where she worked alongside her sister Evgenia, also a radical, who had passed the exam to be an assistant surgeon. The two made a sensation with "wonder worker" efforts in a population that was hugely underserved in terms of attention to basic modern medicine. As usual, they soon attracted negative attention from the local authorities. Despite their efforts to avoid appearing as nihilists, everybody in power was well aware that the Figners were present among the villagers not just to provide medical care, but also to incite discontent and rebellion.

In the spring of 1879 the Figners received a visit from 33-year old Alexander Solovyev. Solovyev had been sent to university, and then to law school, at the expense of Alexander's liberal aunt Hélène. His father worked on Hélène's estates as a medical aide. Despite, or perhaps more accurately because of, this generous opportunity, Solovyev became a radical. He abandoned his studies to "go to the people." He then joined *Zemlya i Volya*.³³⁰ His purpose in

visiting the Figners at Saratov was to consult with them and seek their support for his project to kill Tsar Alexander. Solovyev offered Vera his opinion that going to the people was “mere self-gratification when one considered the existing order of things.” There was “no chance of success.” Therefore, terrorism was required and warranted. Solovyev reflected the growing trend of thought among the radicals. There was a sense that “Going to the People” had failed, that there was no new energy to sustain it, that the radical energy needed to be devoted to sensational acts of violence.

Solovyev extemporized to Figner:

The death of the Emperor may bring about a turn in social life; the atmosphere will become purified; the intelligentsia will no longer be diffident, but enter upon a broad and fruitful activity among the people.

When Figner wondered if the failure of the attempt might bring about still more serious reaction, Solovyev assured her failure was unthinkable. He was determined to die for the cause, and he would enter the undertaking with every chance for success. Figner later described Solovyev as a “man, who united the courage of a hero with the self-renunciation of an ascetic, and the kindness of a child.”³³¹ She felt it was not in her power to dissuade him, even had she wanted to do so.

Solovyev returned to St. Petersburg where, in March of 1879, he met with Alexander Mikhailov to discuss his mission. Mikhailov was by now one of the important proponents of terror within *Zemlya i Volya*. Being well organized and disciplined, he was rapidly assuming a role as a sort of “operations” leader. Solovyev actually had two competitors for the job of killing the Tsar. One was Grigory Goldenberg, a “Southerner” who, with help from Osinski, had just finished assassinating the governor-general of Kharkov, Prince Dmitri Kropotkin. Another was a Pole named Kobilianski. Mikhailov decided it was best to go with Solovyev. Assassination by Kobilianski would inevitably be interpreted as Polish

nationalism, not revolution. Assassination by Goldenberg, a Jew, would inevitably be interpreted in ethnic and religious terms, and would result in a bloody pogrom. Mikhailov convinced Goldenberg and Kobilianski to relinquish the “honors” to Solovyev. Solovyev was indignant that anyone else was even considered. “Only I satisfy all the conditions,” he declared. “I must do it. This is my work. Alexander II is mine and I will not give him up to anybody.”

It was decided that the assassination should appear to be an individual effort by Solovyev. Other group members would be on hand merely to have a horse and cart waiting to spirit him away. Solovyev would carry a poison capsule in his mouth to swallow if captured. A controversy arose as to whether the terrorist act should be done in the name of Zemlya i Volya. Mikhailov was in favor of an official group endorsement. But moderates within the organization, especially its founder Georgi Plekhanov, were adamantly opposed.³³² To them, all an assassination would accomplish would be to “add a numeral” (i.e., by replacing Alexander II with his son, Alexander III), and it would bring on a new wave of repression. The moderates threatened to inform authorities about the plot. It was a fundamental fracture within the group. Ultimately, there was no sanction on behalf of Zemlya i Volya. But there also was no betrayal of the attempt.³³³

On the morning of April 2, 1879, Alexander was returning to his Winter Palace from his daily walk. Captain Koch, the head of his personal guard, walked with him but at a respectful distance, in order not to disturb the sovereign’s thoughts. A little farther away, there was the usual gathering of curious onlookers. Alexander noticed a tall young man step forward from the crowd. Along with a black cape, he wore a uniform cap adorned with a cockade in the style of a government official. As he looked at the young man, he noticed that he was pointing a pistol at him. With all of his 60-year old reflexes, Alexander leaped to the side just as the trigger was pulled.

Miraculously, the shot missed.

What followed was dark comedy. In full view of his aides and the crowd of gawkers, Alexander took off fleeing at full speed, running away like a boy while Soloviev chased close behind him. The terrorist fired again and again, five shots in all. As he sprinted, Alexander used a technique of evasive action drilled into him decades earlier, in his military training. He kept changing direction, moving first left, then right, desperately zigging and zagging to throw off his pursuer's aim. One of the shots grazed the Tsar's cape. The last shot, fired just as Koch finally managed to tackle Solovyev, went between Alexander's legs. It was a frightful and humiliating experience for one of the world's most powerful rulers.³³⁴

Alexander carried on with grace before his mistress, the family members, noblemen and ladies who gathered in the palace to cheer his survival of a brush with death. He believed his escape was divinely ordained. While the bells of the city tolled, he dramatically emerged on a balcony. He received a thunderous ten minute ovation. But especially coming, as it did, on the heels of the assassinations of Trepov, Kropotkin, and Mezentsov, Solovyev's attack cast a pall over Alexander. No longer would the ruler feel himself at liberty to stroll. From now on, his travels about St. Petersburg would take place only in heavily guarded vehicles moving at a fast clip. Public perception was shaken. There was a general sense that the nihilists had much more in store for the administration.³³⁵

The administration, for its part, reacted to the attack in a manner that other governments, including that of the United States, have found tempting when confronted by terrorism. On April 5, 1879 it decreed a broad suspension of ordinary judicial and administrative procedures for any matters that were deemed to involve a threat of terrorism.³³⁶ It was an overreaction. The repression fell on ordinary citizens as well as revolutionaries, and created dissatisfaction among social strata loyal to the government.³³⁷

Solovyev, immediately after he was grabbed, swallowed potassium cyanide. However, the poison did not act rapidly enough. Perhaps it was too old. Koch heard him crack the capsule with his teeth, and ordered his stomach to be pumped right away. As a result, Solovyev vomited profusely. When he recovered himself, he looked around. His first and widely reported remark was, "Could it be that I did not kill the Tsar?" He then asked for and was given a cigarette, which he puffed nonchalantly. He proceeded to hold forth with an air of importance in a sort of impromptu "press conference." His every word and his every pronouncement were assiduously noted by a gathering of high government officials.

As the moderates within Zemlya i Volya had foreseen, the furor around Solovyev's assassination attempt provoked an immediate harsh government response. Osinski, inventor of the latest proclaimed "Executive Committee," had been arrested in January, and was already being held in custody. He was swiftly placed on trial and sentenced to death. The hanging of Osinski and two other "Southern" revolutionaries was carried out in the Kiev prison on May 14, 1879.³³⁸ Solovyev went to his own death two weeks afterwards, on May 28. He had refused all overtures to beg grace from the tsar. He was transported to the gallows riding backwards through the streets of St. Petersburg wearing a placard with huge letters, "State Criminal." Newspaper reporters were on hand to provide graphic accounts of his last, very public, moments. With firm footsteps he strode up the steps to the scaffold. An assembled crowd estimated at 4,000 looked on with approval as they witnessed Solovyev's death convulsions, the agonized face chastely obscured by a white hood.³³⁹

Nearby, the terrorists of Zemlya i Volya seethed. The day after the hanging, a broadside proclamation was found scattered about the city. "We are taking off the gloves, we do not fear either the battle or death. At the end of the accounting, we will smash this government to bits, such will be the number

of victims we will count.” A shivery breeze stirred the air of St. Petersburg.³⁴⁰

Believing that revolutionists in the provinces would generally favor their views, Plekhanov and other moderates pushed for a conference of party leaders to resolve the future course of the movement.³⁴¹ Mikhailov and the others who had supported Solovyev agreed to hold this conference in late June. It was arranged for the conference to occur in the province of Voronezh, well south of Moscow near the Ukraine border. Voronezh had been one of the more prominent venues for “Going to the People.”³⁴²

The terrorist faction, however, had no intention of relenting. Mikhailov, Frolenko, and others decided to steal a march on the “party congress” by having their own prior organizing meeting. The terrorists’ pre-meeting was arranged to occur in Lipetsk, a quiet spa resort town only about 125 kilometers north of Voronezh. No one who was thought to give credence to the “populist” views of Plekhanov was informed of the existence of this pre-meeting. Perovskaya in Kharkov, for example, was carefully screened from learning any news of Lipetsk. Frolenko was dispatched to the “South” to personally invite hand picked attendees. While in Odessa as part of this trip, Frolenko invited a new person to attend. Up until now, this new person had not been particularly noticed or active in the leadership of the revolutionary movement. This new man was Andrei Ivanovitch Zhelyabov (pronounced “JE-LYA-bov”).³⁴³

Zhelyabov was not cut from the usual cloth of a Russian “Sixties” nihilist. His immediate progenitors were serfs. His two grandfathers, Zhelyabov and Frolov, were house serfs who had migrated along with their master from the north of Russia to the Crimea shortly after the Napoleonic wars. His father, Ivan Zhelyabov, received training as a market gardener. Being industrious, he saved money and, with 500 rubles, purchased the right to marry Frolov’s daughter from her master. Andrei

Ivanovich was their first son, born in 1850.³⁴⁴ Like Perovskaya, he grew up in the Crimea.

Andrei's grandfather Frolov was highly influential with him as a boy. He was very tall, very gaunt and very solemn, with a long, grey beard. Zhelyabov afterwards believed he was slightly touched. He could read "the old church script" and possessed half a dozen holy books. He was devoted to Andrei, and the two became inseparable. Grandfather Frolov busied himself with young Andrei's education. He taught Andrei to read archaic church script and Andrei learned to recite the Book of Psalms by heart.³⁴⁵ Like his grandfather, Andrei grew up tall and thin. Frolov's daughter, Andrei's mother, was also a huge influence. She was scornful of landowners, whom she dismissed as "beasts and torturers." She was also disdainful of her frugal husband due to his penchant for taking the line of least resistance, and willingness to see good points in the landowners.

An important formative episode for Zhelyabov, according to his autobiographical account, occurred when he was only 7 or 8 years old. His aunt Lyuba, who was the most attractive young woman in the family, was dragged off for sex with the local landowner, Lorentsov. Grandfather Frolov cursed Lorentsov's servants who came to take her, but ultimately he was impotent to do anything to stop the ravishment. Zhelyabov says in his autobiography that he swore that he would kill Lorentsov.³⁴⁶ However, there is no independent confirmation of this incident, and no way to check on the details. Nor is there indication that Andrei, as an adult, ever did anything to take revenge on Lorentsov.³⁴⁷ What the reported episode foreshadows is a trait in Zhelyabov that is highly typical of a terrorist – a passion for going overboard in support of other people's causes and injustices.

Andrei's future benefitted greatly from the charity of a local landowner named Nelidov. After hearing that the young Zhelyabov was a prodigy of learning, Nelidov made a point of

sending for him. Andrei could, at that time, read only the arcane church script. Nelidov taught him to read regular print. Soon Andrei, aged ten, became an avid reader immersed in Russian literature. Nelidov arranged to send Andrei as a boarder to a junior school in Kerch. He was an above-average student and qualified to attend the faculty of law at Novorossisk University at Odessa. He was enabled to attend there by a grant of thirty rubles per month from a legacy bequeathed by a local merchant to assist needy students. The university accepted Zhelyabov as a student “whose exemption from the payment of university fees is justified by their poverty and their disposition towards study.”³⁴⁸

Andrei grew up to be tall, handsome, charming, and chivalrous. Not until he reached the age of 21 in 1871 is there any concrete evidence that he was involved in any activity that smacks of being radical. At that time, he became involved in a fairly typical “Sunday School,” volunteering to teach free secret classes in subjects that had been deleted from the university curriculum as part of the White Terror. An outstanding public speaker, Andrei became an instant heartthrob for progressive teenage girls who attended these classes. He was also popular with girls he tutored in private homes of the upper classes.

A crucial turning point for Andrei Zhelyabov was his expulsion from the Odessa university. This grew out of a trivial incident in which he was not at all personally concerned. The trouble began on October 16, 1871, in the classroom of Professor Bogishich, a Croat. Bogishich spotted a student, one Baer, lounging and possibly falling asleep in his seat during a lecture. He stopped in the middle of what he was saying and called out, “Do you think you are in a drink-shop? Do you need a pillow? If you can’t behave you can get out.” When Baer aroused himself and began to mumble an explanation, Bogishich completely lost his temper and physically hustled him out of the room. The lecture proceeded, but other students

on hand felt that Bogishich's treatment of Baer had been abusive, out of line, and even worse, un-Russian.

Upon Bogishich's next scheduled lecture four days later, no students appeared in the classroom. Instead, a crowd of them collected in the hallway and jeered as he went by. This impromptu student strike was reported to university authorities. The rector arranged to meet the following day with the students who had protested. He arrived to find a large crowd. He asked the students to appoint a spokesman and disburse, which they did. Zhelyabov was merely one of several delegates whom they appointed. He was not even in the Bogishich class.

After meeting with the rector, and with the rector's approval, the student delegates went to speak with Bogishich. He assured the delegates that the matter had been a misunderstanding. He said he had not realized that using the Russian word *kabak*, or drink shop, had undesirable associations. He assured them he had not intended to hurt anybody's feelings and he was prepared to say as much in his next lecture, on October 23. The students were satisfied. It seemed the incident was at an end.

Evidently, however, the professor was riddled with doubt. Come time for the lecture on October 23, Bogishich failed to appear in the crowded classroom. Instead he sent a message that he was sick. The result was an uproar. The student body quickly assembled and, when the vice-rector arrived, Zhelyabov was at the podium. He was haranguing the crowd and declaring, amid great applause, that it was a matter of principle that satisfaction be obtained from Bogishich. After the assembly disbursed, protest meetings continued to carry on in small groups and private homes. The authorities overreacted, perhaps in part because Tsar Alexander II was soon due to make a visit to Odessa. The university council, an innovation introduced under Alexander's educational reforms, was convened. It ordered a court to try the ringleaders, and

cancelled all lectures until the court proceedings were finished. It also made a formal expression of sympathy and regret to Professor Bogishich.

When these events were reported to Alexander's conservative minister of education, Count Dmitri Andreivich Tolstoy, he telegraphed back his approval of the council's actions. He requested "immediate and strictest measures." Specifically, "students expelled from university to be banished immediately from Odessa." The council trial proceeded from October 25 until November 5. At its conclusion, Zhelyabov was ordered expelled and banished from Odessa for one year. There was a great deal of opposition, among other university professors and even among local government officials, to the manifest harshness of this decree. On November 11, Zhelyabov was arrested, to be banished back to his hometown, the village of Sultanovka near Kerch. As he embarked on his forced departure, he was lauded and celebrated by a large crowd of sympathizers who came to see him off.³⁴⁹ The experience gave him a taste of the thrill of martyrdom. It would prove to be intoxicating.

Zhelyabov is a textbook case to illustrate how a strict government policy aimed at holding down militant elements can backfire. After returning home to his parents, Andrei applied for permission to live and work giving private lessons in nearby Feodosia. University officials helped him by supplying certificates of his progress in school. In August of 1872, he applied for readmission to the Odessa university. The application was granted by the university and forwarded to the ministry of education for approval. The administration, however, denied approval. It decreed that Zhelyabov's sentence of banishment had been for a full year, and a full year had not yet passed. In view of this, "and also of the necessity for preserving the student body from undesirable influences," his readmission could not be approved.

The university council next requested permission to

readmit Zhelyabov as of November 8, exactly one year after his sentence of expulsion. After a month passed, the ministry of education wrote back to pronounce a further ruling that, because the regulations governing universities provided only for the admission of students at the beginning of each scholastic year, no proposal to readmit a student in November could be entertained. This marked the end of Zhelyabov's academic career.³⁵⁰

During his time of expulsion, Zhelyabov secured a position as private tutor for a liberal sympathizer and wealthy industrialist named Yahrenko who owned a sugar factory near Kiev. He promptly became enamored of his employer's 20-year old daughter Olga. Olga was a lovely girl, pretty, affectionate, and musically gifted. She also fell deeply in love with Andrei. By the summer of 1873 they were married. That fall, Zhelyabov took a socially responsible post as a teacher at the Odessa Municipal Poor House.

His favorable marriage and consequent improved social standing did not diminish Zhelyabov's restless drive to sacrifice himself. He simply could not remain happy with a normal and faithful domestic life. A friend later wrote of him, "Anything he did or said was always bound up with some deep inner passion."³⁵¹ Feelings of discontent smoldered ever more warmly in him. He resumed "Sunday School" activity, holding secret evening classes for working men. He also joined a subversive group based in Odessa, one which was engaged in smuggling and distributing prohibited political literature. The police soon learned of the illegal organization and arrested its ringleaders. Zhelyabov was implicated due to an encoded letter he had sent to Anya Rosenstein Makarevich, the wife of the group's incarcerated leader. She was a nihilist on whom he had developed a crush. Zhelyabov was arrested.³⁵²

However, the local Odessa chief of police, who was well aware of the unjust treatment Andrei had previously received in the Bogishich affair, recommended that he not be

prosecuted. The chief also released him on bail of 2,000 rubles. He pointed out that Zhelyabov should not be regarded as a nihilist, in that he had recently married the daughter of a local luminary. However, the central government by now had made up its mind that Zhelyabov was a dangerous malcontent. A telegram came at once from St. Petersburg requiring that Zhelyabov be re-arrested. He spent four months in jail, lost his job, and, according to his later claim, in this incarceration “became a revolutionary.”³⁵³

In March of 1875, Zhelyabov was released on an increased bail of 3,000 rubles posted by his father-in-law. In a manner similar to Perovskaya, he lived quietly for two and a half years in the Crimea while awaiting his eventual trial, which came as part of the Trial of the 193. He was under constant supervision by the police. Though the two of them maintained a certain

degree of mutual loyalty, Yahnenko was beginning to realize that his relatives were right, that his daughter's marriage was a huge mistake, and that his son-in-law, however handsome, was an intractable problem. Andrei acted moody and depressed. He continually experienced



Anya Rosenstein Makarevich, photographed in Florence, Italy, 1908

photo credit: Mario Nunes Vais

fantasies about nihilists such as Anya Makarevich, and about his own death for the “cause.” He began to quarrel with his wife Olga. He forbade her to go out in the evenings to entertain friends of the Yahnenkos with her singing. He later wrote that he could not allow her to “delight the ears of plutocrats.” Olga tried long and hard to remain obedient to her husband. She bore them a baby son in 1876. But she had secret crying sessions over his behavior and attitude.³⁵⁴

In September of 1877, Zhelyabov was summoned to surrender to his bail in preparation for the Trial of the 193. He was incarcerated in the St. Petersburg House of Detention, shortly after the flogging incident involving Trepov and

Bogolyubov. In this “dissident academy,” as well as the ensuing trial itself, Andrei became acquainted with many leading lights of the revolutionary movement.³⁵⁵ Like Perovskaya, Zhelyabov took a low profile in the trial proceedings, and he attracted little notice. When the verdicts came out, he was acquitted. In the ensuing celebrations, Andrei and Sonia briefly met for the first time. Zhelyabov promptly returned to Odessa, where he went through the motions of resuming his family life.³⁵⁶

What could motivate an intelligent, gifted young man to turn his back on a home with a charming, attractive wife and a young son bearing his name? The persona of the terrorist is a pathology centered around an egocentric form of asceticism. No matter how hard Olga might try to tame him with love, no matter how much moral and financial support he might be offered by her wealthy, liberally minded father, Andrei Zhelyabov was determined to throw it all away, in favor of, in its fundamental attractive essence, a martyr’s death.

After spending just a short time in the Yahnenko family home with Olga and little Andrei, Zhelyabov left to work all spring and summer of 1878 growing melons in a field rented by a revolutionary named Mitya Zheltonovsky. Mitya’s wife, also named Olga, was only 25 years old, but she was dying of tuberculosis contracted while incarcerated for propagandizing in connection with “Going to the People.” Mitya and his wife Olga had been part of the Makarevich circle in Odessa, and thus, were very friendly with Andrei’s idolized Anya. The ordeal of Olga’s slow decline and death, during the course of a long hot summer that Andrei spent toiling 16 hours a day in the melon field, apparently preyed further on Zhelyabov’s tormented character. He finally returned to his own wife Olga in Odessa after the harvest. Once again, he did nothing more than go through the motions of family life. His real energies were spent on associating with the Odessa community of underground radicals.

At the end of November or in December, 1878, Zhelyabov “broke it off permanently” with Olga. He left the family home to live separately and apart. He also made sure to announce this “divorce” very publicly. Even one of Zhelyabov’s admirers, Pimen Semenyuta, admits “much sympathy was expressed for Olga Semyonovna, who had really loved him and hoped that he was not in earnest.”³⁵⁷ Zhelyabov’s sympathetic biographers have tried to spin this heartless desertion as a humane act done from a sense of duty that was intended to avoid enmeshing Olga and young Andrei in the infamy of his martyrdom.³⁵⁸ A more likely and frank assessment would be that Zhelyabov had no desire to be burdened with a caring wife and family who were not enthralled, as he was, with the vision of a glorious death on the cross for the sake of somebody else’s “cause.”

After the final separation from Olga, Andrei lived an extremely spartan life. Semenyuta found his dwelling “pitiful,” and he came across him on the street in a state of “actual hunger.” Zhelyabov was trying to live on a “pittance” earned giving lessons.

Semenyuta explicitly informs us about a key element of Zhelyabov’s personality, a recognizable star in the constellation of traits of the terrorist persona. Andrei could not stand to be a follower. During the fall and winter of 1878, Valerian Osinski was the undisputed leader of the revolutionary movement in Odessa. Far more debonair and cultured than Zhelyabov, Osinski was highly charismatic and attractive to women in his own right.³⁵⁹ Although they traveled in the same radical circles, Zhelyabov made all kinds of excuses, and declined to even meet Osinski. Semenyuta provides an interesting insight. “Andrei Ivanovich, between you and me, was noticeably ambitious and could not bear anybody to be superior to him.”³⁶⁰ Even when he was gaunt with hunger, Zhelyabov could not bring himself to ask for any financial support from Osinski’s ample war chest. Semenyuta

ultimately had to use a ruse to persuade Andrei to accept even a small amount of cash.

However, at the “very end of 1878, certainly not later than mid-January 1879,” Zhelyabov did accept an important piece of help from Osinski. Osinski got Zhelyabov a good false internal passport. It was made out in the name of “Vasily Andreivich Chernyavsky.” This was not merely a forgery, but a tested valid passport, something that was very difficult to obtain.³⁶¹ It would enable the newly “divorced” Andrei to tunnel permanently underground. By a stroke of luck, the government was able to arrest Osinski just afterwards, in late January of 1879. His departure from the scene left a large void in the organization of the “Southern” terrorists.

When Mikhail Frolenko, himself a “Southerner,” visited Odessa in the spring of 1879 in search of committed violent revolutionaries to attend the secret terrorist pre-congress in Lipetsk, Zhelyabov was a mature fruit ripe for the picking. Even though he had never before engaged in any terrorism, and even though he was a near total unknown in St. Petersburg, Frolenko, with his cunning and perceptiveness for people, sought out Zhelyabov and asked “if he was prepared to join us in continuing Solovyev’s cause.” He guessed right and hit the target. Frolenko later wrote of his star recruit: “From being a little known provincial rebel, or really just a dreamer, he was instantly transformed into an *ataman*, a terrorist leader.”³⁶² Olga Lyubatovich recalled that since the time she had known Zhelyabov several years earlier in Odessa, “He had really matured, physically and intellectually. He was a dark haired man, tall and rangy, with a pale face and a dark thick beard and expressive eyes. His speech was full of flame and passion, his voice pleasant and strong.”

Chapter 13: The Formation of Narodnaya Volya

Zhelyabov arrived at Lipetsk, along with Mikhailov, on June 13, 1879. Using their false names and passports, they took a room together. Gradually the other extremists began to filter into town. Eleven in all attended.³⁶³ Among them was Nikolai Morozov, son of a wealthy noble landowner, who was a gifted writer and one of the intellectuals of the movement. Morozov had just published an incendiary article in the newspaper of *Zemlya i Volya* that stoked the raging controversy between the party's moderates and its terrorists. Entitled "Political Killings," it espoused a sophisticated rationale and justification of terrorism. Morozov wrote:

Political killing is, above all, an act of vengeance. Only when it has avenged the comrades that have perished can a revolutionary organization look its enemies straight in the eye; only then can it rise to the moral heights that a champion of freedom must attain

to be able to lead the masses. Political killing is the only means of self-defense in the present conditions, and one of the best ways of agitating. By striking at the very center of the government organization it shakes the whole system with terrifying force. The blow radiates instantly throughout the state like an electric current and disrupts all its functions. When the advocates of freedom are few in number, they always shut themselves up in secret societies. This secrecy endows them with tremendous strength. It has given mere handfuls of daring men the ability to fight millions of organized but overt enemies . . . But when to this secrecy is added political killing as a systematic means of struggle, such people will become truly terrible to their enemies. The latter will live in constant fear of their lives, never knowing from one minute to the next when or whence vengeance will come. Political killing is the realization of revolution in the present.³⁶⁴

At Lipetsk, the budding terrorists pretended to be tourists walking in the woods. Their meetings gave the appearance of chance encounters, in meadows far from any habitations, where spies could be seen hundreds of yards away. In the course of these meetings, they went straight to the Nechaev playbook. They formed themselves into a real life version of the “Executive Committee” which Osinski, and before him Nechaev, had contrived as a terrorist strategem. Positions were assigned to the members according to their inclination and ability. The glib, charismatic Zhelyabov took the role of the fiery, moving speaker. His code name was “Boris.” He would rapidly become the group’s perceived leader.

Another key leadership role was assumed by the portly Alexander Mikhailov. He was the organizational wizard and chief of security. Due to his passion for keeping the Committee’s operations “clean,” his code name was “the

Janitor.”

Nikolai Morozov was placed in charge of published propaganda. Slender and willowy, and with a soft, childlike voice,³⁶⁵ he was nicknamed “Sparrow.” Before long, “Sparrow” would come into intellectual conflict over anarchist principles with Perovskaya’s erstwhile fictitious fiancé, Lev Tikhomirov. Tikhomirov seemed aged beyond his years. He was known as “Starik” or the “Ancestor.” The “Ancestor” was also a writer, and he was named party theoretician. Tikhomirov put a philosophy of terrorism into terms even more simplified than those of Morozov. “Terrorism is a very pernicious idea, absolutely chilling. It is capable of transforming weakness into force.”³⁶⁶ Frolenko, who was not a political philosopher, stated the prevailing argument more crassly. “We’re all going to be killed, aren’t we? There’s no other possibility. We shall die, and that’s a fact. But we can die for a mere nothing, or we can die doing something big. So the obvious thing is to do something big.”³⁶⁷

A test for entrance into the new group was unanimously agreed. The candidate was to be asked: “Are you ready at once to offer your life, your personal freedom and all that you have?” If he or she said “yes,” then they could be taken on. Membership of the committee was made irrevocable. Once accepted, a candidate was committed to never resign, to “admit of no ties of friendship, affection or relationship” and to “devote his or her whole self to the service of the party.” The conference concluded with an “indictment” of the Tsar for unforgivable sins. The “Janitor” recounted the grounds, from the terrorists’ point of view, which consisted mainly of the history of repression culminating in the beating of Bogolyubov, the retraction of lenient sentences after Vera Zaslitch’s shooting of Trepov, and the executions of terrorists that had occurred in Kiev and in St. Petersburg.³⁶⁸ Lipetsk broke up and its enthused participants filtered into Voronezh to carry out the Executive Committee agenda for the “party

congress” of Zemlya i Volya.

Voronezh began on a note of evident discord. Plekhanov opened by reading with unconcealed scorn Morozov’s essay on “Political Killings.” He expected to be joined in general criticism of the article. Instead, his mocking reading was greeted with a stony silence. Sensing that the tide had turned against him, Plekhanov promptly walked out of the conference to return to St. Petersburg, where he would try to muster support among moderates there. But his discomfiture did not end the Voronezh conference.³⁶⁹

Sofia Perovskaya, who was admired and respected by both sides for her degree of “moral elevation and boundless devotion,”³⁷⁰ stepped up into leadership after Plekhanov’s departure. She had arrived at Voronezh determined to work for unity within Zemlya i Volya. She felt strongly that the beleaguered party needed every possible ounce of strength. She spoke out in opposition to Zhelyabov’s advocacy of a top-down “central committee” structure. This “constitutional” model was not in keeping with Sonia’s personal political views, which were strongly influenced by Chernyshevsky’s vision of a post-apocalyptic society peopled by anarchist communes.³⁷¹ In her statements to the gathering at Voronezh, she criticized the Lipetsk faction for leaving the peasants in the background. With Vera Figner, Sonia was the main force in hammering out a note of accord on which the conference ended. Under this compromise, Zemlya i Volya would continue its propaganda role in rural villages, but would give one third of its total funds to the support of armed revolt.

Impressed with Sonia’s prominent, outspoken role in opposing him at Voronezh, Zhelyabov uncharacteristically shut up and stopped making speeches. Instead, he made vigorous efforts behind the scenes to cultivate Sonia, and to win her over to the Executive Committee’s side, that is, the path of terrorism. To assuage her concern that the “peasant cause” was being sacrificed and ignored, he constantly

reminded her of his own serf parentage, and the difference from her royal antecedents. For several months, Sonia carried on with her efforts at diplomacy and cultivation of the moderates. But the vision of abandoning her life to a final, desperate act of violence in support of an adopted cause struck a sweet spot in Sonia's personality. A more moderate Russian activist who opposed terrorism characterized her as "the most brilliant" of those embraced the path of violence, because she was filled with a sense of indignation and disdain against the "terrorism of the government itself."³⁷² Inside, Perovskaya was boiling with fury over the fate of those who had been hanged, and over the fate of those such as Myshkin who were rotting in prison.

By the end of summer, although she still claimed formally to be neutral with respect to the party split, Sonia's comments and actions were those of a woman who had thoroughly embraced the idea of terrorism. And, once she finally went over, she would prove to be the most terrible terrorist of them all.³⁷³ It was almost as if she had a dual personality. Kravchinsky wrote: "This woman, with such an innocent appearance and with such a sweet and affectionate disposition, was one of the most dreaded members of the Terrorist party."³⁷⁴

At the St. Petersburg suburb of Lesnoi, near the end of August, occurred the final dismantling of Zemlya i Volya. Lesnoi was, at the time, the main location of radical "safe houses" in which the illegals resided. As stated by Figner, the conference at Voronezh had not removed, but only stifled, the dissension within the party. The greatly outnumbered Plekhanov announced his intention of leaving both politics and Russia, to concentrate on Marxist studies. With him went most of the moderate faction, including Vera Zaslulich. Interestingly, upon returning to Russia she had established herself as one of the most prominent opponents of terror. It was agreed that the two factions would henceforth be totally

autonomous, and that neither of them would continue to use the old name. The moderates, who were awarded the old organization's printing press, reorganized themselves under the name *Cherny Peredel*, which roughly translates as "Black Partition." The terrorist faction adopted the name *Narodnaya Volya*, meaning the "Will of the People." As one of its first official acts, Narodnaya Volya proclaimed a "death sentence" against Alexander II on August 26, 1879. The Executive Committee decided to abandon attacks on all other military and political leaders and to use all of its energy to go after the Tsar himself.

Still hoping for a reconciliation, Sonia spent much of her time lobbying the moderates, even after Lesnoi. Her political beliefs still inclined to those of the "villagers," as their opponents called them. But her personality was all for fighting back against the administration. She was, according to one of the moderates, "the incarnation of the spirit of revolt. She was determined that official brutalities must not be left unanswered. In a small, almost childish voice she proclaimed the necessity of terror." Sonia was angered when Plekhanov suggested she leave the country in order to avoid arrest. She was determined to stay in Russia and die for the cause. The attraction of martyrdom was, for her, a sucking vortex. To one of her fellow feminists who was supporting Cherny Peredel, she commented, "there's nothing real about your people. We're alive."³⁷⁵ Sonia eagerly agreed to Mikhailov's request that she go to Moscow to pose as the wife of Lev Hartman in connection with Narodnaya Volya's latest plan to assassinate Alexander. Her actions indicate that she had made up her mind to die for the cause. She wound up her affairs in St. Petersburg, and she handed over "all her money and contacts" to representatives of Cherny Peredel.³⁷⁶

The Emperor was far bigger game for the terrorists than the unsuspecting government officials they had previously assassinated. Signs of the cunning Mikhailov are all over their

battle plan, which featured a new and dramatic weapon just added to the terrorist arsenal – dynamite.³⁷⁷ It was decided at Lesnoi to kill Alexander by blowing up his train when he returned to St. Peterburg after spending the fall in the Crimea.

The attack featured three almost wholly independent prongs. Vera Figner headed up the Odessa effort. Nikolai Kibalchich, Narodnaya Volya's home grown explosives expert, posed as her husband. Resort was made to the same stratagem that had worked in the past. Frolenko would take a job in a sensitive position, this time, as a railroad guard. Figner successfully posed as an aristocratic lady, approaching a local official in order to help him obtain the job. The plan worked well once again, with Frolenko handling his sub rosa employment with his usual aplomb. But ultimately, due to windy, rainy cold weather, the Emperor decided not to travel by boat to Odessa, but instead to take a train directly from the Crimea to St. Peterburg. Thus, his travel route would no longer take him through Odessa.³⁷⁸

The second attack was headed up by Zhelyabov. Anna Yakimova, a member of the Narodnaya Volya Executive Committee, posed as his wife. Aided by some of his recent recruits, Zhelyabov worked tirelessly for nights on end to dodge police patrols along the tracks and lay lengthy concealed wires leading to two explosive-laden brass cylinders positioned underneath the railroad tracks near Alexandrovsk, a small town outside Kharkov. The work was greatly hindered by cold, rainy weather as well as Zhelyabov's own illness and night blindness. With difficulty, Zhelyabov got the wires and cylinders placed in time. But when the moment of the Tsar's train transit arrived, the charges failed to detonate.³⁷⁹

The third, and most successful, attack was the one led by Perovskaya. With 1,000 rubles of "revolutionary" funds, Mikhailov had bought a house in a poor neighborhood near the tracks, approximately 14 kilometers from downtown Moscow. The area was mainly waste land, rubbish heaps, and little

market gardens, with here and there a ramshackle one storied cottage. Perovskaya and Lev Hartmann, a member of the Executive Committee, moved in posing as husband and wife under the name of “Sukhorukov.” Mikhailov took rooms in town from which to help direct the operation. Two other *narodniki*, Aronchik and Chernyavskaya, in the guise of another young married couple, established themselves in a flat which was to serve as conspiratorial quarters. Other collaborators took rooms, or put up at cheap hotels, and work began.

The plan was to drive a gallery from the cellar of the house to the railway embankment some fifty yards away and there lay a charge under the line. The first main preoccupation was not to arouse the suspicion of the neighbors. The locals in the neighborhood, market gardeners or else day laborers in factories in the town, were mostly Old Believers. They felt it was a sin for a man to shave his beard, thus defacing the image in which man had been created. The Old Believers tended to be suspicious of newcomers. However, the terrorists benefitted because they were equally aloof and suspicious of the police.³⁸⁰

Hartmann gave himself out to be a workman employed in the town. It was natural that he was not visible during the day. The main brunt of contact with the outside world thus fell on Perovskaya. In the middle of October, Goldenberg arrived from the South. Mikhailov took him to the house and set him to work. Goldenberg later said, “as I was new to it, I did the simple work. I cleared the earth from the gallery to the hatch and from the hatch to the store house. I used to help Perovskaya with the housework.”

None of the terrorists had expertise in tunneling. Although Hartmann had some knowledge of how to construct a mine shaft, there were no skilled manual workers among them. Their tools were primitive. They had a short pointed “English spade” to pick out the dirt at the gallery head, and two shovels to pull it back. They had a cheap compass for keeping the

tunnel straight, but as a matter of fact they did not keep it very straight. As the gallery advanced Hartmann fixed up wooden rails along the floor and a little truck on wheels, worked by a rope on a pulley, to get the earth back out of the tunnel.

The tunnel they dug was about one meter high by 78 centimeters across. Its mouth, in the wall of the cellar, was boarded up to prevent discovery in case of a stranger making his way down. There was a hatch in the boarding to let the workers in and out and for the earth to be removed. An iron pipe was installed for ventilation. One man worked at the head of the gallery; another shoveled the earth onto the truck. A third stood at the hatch to receive it. A great problem was the disposal of the earth removed from the tunnel. The capacity of the storehouse was limited. They piled it up in the cellar, they put it under the floor boards of the living room. Finally they had to spread it over the yard at night or dump it in nearby rubbish heaps. It was hard work. The frail "Sparrow" cracked up from the strain and had to return to St. Petersburg.

The terrorists understood that they faced the gallows the moment they were discovered. Almost with gaiety, their entire faith was placed in nitroglycerine. They were determined never to be taken alive. Sonia put out, to be ready for use on a moment's notice, a bottle of nitroglycerine that the terrorists felt sufficient to blow up the whole house. In case they were discovered, everyone knew and agreed that Sonia was the person entrusted to explode the fatal bottle with a pistol shot. Despite this explicit awareness of their own impending death, the "Sukhorukov" household remained in unflagging good spirits. At dinner time, they all talked and joked as if nothing were at stake. "Sonia was the one who most frequently delighted the company with her silvery laugh." Comic verses were composed to make light of the vicissitudes and incidents of the mining work.³⁸¹

Those lodging in town would arrive at the house just before daylight. They worked from six to eight, had tea, then

continued until two in the afternoon, which was dinner time. They had a short rest after dinner and then worked on until 10 o'clock at night. When things were going well the diggings progressed at the rate of 30 centimeters per hour of work. There were frequent alarms. They had been working a week when the former occupant came around looking for some jam which she said she had left in the storehouse. By this time the storehouse was full of earth and props for timbering the gallery. Perovskaya said she had lost the key. Later she took the jam to the woman herself.

A few days afterwards, the storehouse caught fire. Neighbors ran to help. It was fatal if they were to see the contents of the storehouse, jammed as it was with soil from the excavation. Thinking very fast, Sonia jumped in front and held out her arms to keep them away. She cried out that God had brought about the fire. If it was His will, he would put it out himself. The sentiment appealed to the Old Believers. With this bit of ingenuity, Sonia managed to keep them away. Time and again the venture was saved by Perovskaya's resourcefulness. She did the shopping. As the quantity of provisions was far more than what two young people could consume, at one point the volume of her purchases elicited the well-meaning interest of gossiping neighboring housewives. She then made use of a cat that had attached itself to the conspirators. She blamed the cat for the amount of food she had to buy, spinning an elaborate yarn around its appetite, ingenuity, and capacity for breaking crockery.³⁸²

There were other close calls. The laboring terrorists came to the base of a telegraph pole and had to divert the gallery around it. It rained long and hard, the same rain that was causing the Emperor to change his travel plans, and that was hindering Zhelyabov at Alexandrovsk. Water collected in the gallery and began to rise. The conspirators had no pump. Incessant bailing doubled the work and brought them nearer to complete exhaustion. Mikhailov would later describe the

situation as being “like working while buried alive, using the last superhuman efforts in the fight against death.”³⁸³ Finally, due to continuous rain and faulty timbering, the roof of the gallery fell in. The subsidence from this event formed a big crater on the surface. This crater was right next to a trail alongside the track where railway police patrols regularly passed. But no patrols came by on the afternoon of the collapse, nor did anybody else notice the crater. That night, the conspirators managed to fill the crater. One of the diggers from that point forward carried a dose of poison, so he could commit suicide in case he was buried by another sudden collapse.

When the terrorists reached the railway embankment, progress again became harder. Instead of soft soil, the conspirators now encountered large stones that had been laid within the bed of the tracks. Removing them would bring the risk of another collapse. They decided that they needed a drill to cut a hole in the stones. But there were no more funds on hand for buying one. The conspirators made a bold decision to mortgage the house. Hartmann went into town and found a wealthy widow who was willing to lend money.³⁸⁴ The lender sent out an official of the housing department and a policeman to inspect the property. This was a very anxious moment. Perovskaya, however, pulled it off smoothly. She also bargained hard. Six hundred rubles were successfully borrowed. The conspirators bought a drill and kept moving.

The use of the drill led to a modification of the plans for the actual mine itself. The terrorists began to fear that they did not have enough dynamite. The frenetic Goldenberg was dispatched to get more dynamite from the abandoned Odessa project. Goldenberg arrived in Odessa and picked up a suitcase full of explosive from Frolenko. Kibalchich, the explosives expert, was then in South Russia. Instead of just concentrating on transporting the dynamite to Moscow, Goldenberg decided to meet Kibalchich to discuss the situation. They exchanged telegrams, but the result was a mixup. On November 12,

Goldenberg wound up waiting at Odessa for Kibalchich, while Kibalchich was waiting at Kharkov for Goldenberg. The two managed to communicate, probably by telegraph, and arranged to meet in Elizavetgrad, closer to Odessa and approximately one fifth of the way to Moscow. Goldenberg's incongruous actions in pretending to be a wealthy traveler, while insisting on carrying his own baggage, generated suspicion. A porter notified the police.³⁸⁵ When Kibalchich arrived he found a stir at the station. Kibalchich made out that a young man had been arrested with a small but very heavy trunk. It was Goldenberg. He had been caught with the dynamite.

On November 14, the party at the Sukhorukov house heard about Goldenberg's arrest. Three days later, they received a telegram from Simferopol. In crude code, the message indicated that the Emperor was riding in the fourth coach of the second train. "Price of flour two rubles our price four." On that day the conspirators held a final conference. It was decided that Sonia would watch and give the signal for Hartmann to press the lever to trigger the explosion. All the 18th of November, the conspirators hung about waiting for news from Alexandrovsk. None came until evening, when they heard the Emperor had arrived at Kharkov. That meant Alexandrovsk had been a failure.³⁸⁶

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