Cover

LAND AND FREEDOM

THE ORIGINS OF RUSSIAN TERRORISM, 1876-1879

DEBORAH HARDY

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE
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NUMBER 7

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Land and Freedom

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PREFACE

This manuscript grew out of my fascination with puzzles and contradictions. In connection with some other research, I found it necessary to go through some early twentieth-century Russian radical journals almost page by page. In spite of myself, I was soon absorbed in the many romantic and ingenuous reminiscences published there by Russian revolutionaries of earlier decades.

One is struck at once by the strangest dichotomies. Women who told of teaching peasant children turned instead to the dynamiting of trains. Men who sought social utopias of wealth and honey stabbed other human beings until their hands as well as their daggers were red with blood. Young people whose original dreams had been to cure the ailing poor traveled in disguise from city to city distributing bombs that they carried in suitcases and paper bags. And fifty years later, they published tales of their heroism and martyrdom as if their methods had been vindicated, although actually the tsar's assassination had only resulted in the destruction of their comrades and their cause.

Who were these people? What did they seek, and why? Above all, why did they decide on violence, and what did they think to achieve by it? I had read much about them, but it seemed to me that the richness of the sources as measures of character, personality, and intent had not been thoroughly exploited. These puzzles and questions led me to write this manuscript. Whether they are really answered herein is something else altogether.

The research that led to this manuscript is so entangled with other projects and dates so far back in time that it is difficult accurately to acknowledge kindnesses and assistance. I am grateful to the American

Council of Learned Societies and to the American Philosophical Society for grants-in-aid many years ago. I have greatly benefited from my use of the University of Illinois library during the Summer Research Lab on Russia and Eastern Europe. The University of Wyoming has provided generous support on more than one occasion. I am grateful to excellent archivists and librarians in more places than I can mention: from the Lenin Library in Moscow to the University of Helsinki, the Hoover Institution at Stanford, the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, the British Library, the Library of Congress, and elsewhere. Family and colleagues have been consistently supportive, even to the point of reading and criticizing the manuscript. Without the patience of Diane Alexander, who cheerfully typed her way through several versions, I might still be editing rough drafts.

It should be noted that dates herein accord with those of the old Russian calendar, which ran thirteen days behind our own. In notes and citations, dates of course are either Russian or Western, depending on the source.

INTRODUCTION

Historians of the Russian revolutionary movement between the years 1860 and 1881 have painted a dreary landscape of failure and futility, and indeed a similarly gloomy picture haunted young radicals of the time as they struggled to remold Russian society. Determined to foment a massive social (or sometimes more strictly political) revolution, these youthful rebels were driven by successive failures from one method to another, from attempts at one type of revolution to another—at least according to traditional evaluations.

In the 1860s, after the first flood of hope that followed the Crimean war and the emancipation proclamation, the intelligentsia (and particularly the students) operated as conspirators, forming small underground groups, reading forbidden radical literature, and devising plots and plans for the future. Beyond the publication of occasional leaflets and the unsuccessful attempt of Dmitrii Karakazov to assassinate the tsar (1866), they could point to few accomplishments. Therefore in the early 1870s they charted a new course; discouraged by their lack of success, repelled by the ‘‘immoral’’ actions of Sergei Nechaev,[1] and inspired by a new light, they abandoned conspiracy for learning.

The following few years saw the major radical circles (particularly the group known as the Chaikovtsy, located in Russia’s major cities) concentrating on the pursuit of knowledge. Educating themselves first (they said), they soon moved to the education of others and developed an extraordinary system for distributing illegal literature to the intelligentsia in the provinces. No revolution resulted (if indeed revolution was intended), and the frustrated radicals turned in 1874

to a new device: a mass movement of the intelligentsia out to what they saw as the mute, oppressed, suffering Russian peasantry, which now became the focus of hopes, the core of revolutionary plans. If some of these educated young people sought out the peasant in order to draw close to him, to share his miseries, and thus to expunge the burden of guilt they had chosen to assume for Russia's centuries-long exploitation of the serfs, other youths went clearly to foment revolution, to persuade the peasant to rebellion against master and tsar. In this too they did not succeed.

The ebbs and flows of conspiracy, radical learning, and *buntizm** in great measure reflected the advices and admonitions of Russia's three contemporary revolutionary theorists: the conspirator Petr Tkachev, the scholar Petr Lavrov, and the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Caught up in one enthusiasm after another, the Russian students—for most of them were attached at least temporarily to one or another institution of higher learning—avidly read, adopted, and then just as avidly rejected the dicta of these radical emigrés, as pronounced in books and journals smuggled in from the free atmosphere of Switzerland. True, on occasion ideas merged and muddied each other, for *buntari* could become conspirators, and scholars could seek out the peasants. One Russian returning from abroad in 1878 was startled to find that the St. Petersburg Lavrists had little in common with the Lavrov he had come to know in Paris.[2] Still it would be a mistake not to grant these revolutionary mentors their due in terms of the influence they exerted on young and enthusiastic minds.

From the patterns of revolutionary activity, scholars have frequently concluded that the wave of terrorism and violence that caught up the young radicals between 1878 and 1881—a wave culminating in the successful assassination of Alexander II, but involving violence beforehand on many levels-was the result of the failure of the revolutionaries in the countryside. Having adopted a plan based on the ideas of Bakunin and Lavrov, the propagandists (it is said) found it to be inadequate and switched to a scheme more closely resembling the plans of Tkachev. Because they were unable to rouse the peasant to rebellion, the radicals took revolution into their own hands and, as Adam Ulam has put it, "in the name of the people"[3] went ahead with a program of individual violence and assassination.

* A *bunt* was a local, spontaneous, violent uprising, such as advocated by Bakunin's followers, who called themselves *buntari*.

Scholars have frequently pointed to failure in the countryside as a major reason for the switch to terrorism as a revolutionary method—or in other words, as the participants themselves tended to put it, the switch from social to political revolution as a first goal. In this regard, Soviet historians have consistently taken a strong and positive line. Thus B.P. Koz'min, great scholar of the Russian revolutionary movement, has written:

> The transfer [of the populists from agitation and propaganda among the peasants to terrorism] was the direct consequence of the failure of "going to the people" and the "fixed settlements" in the village. The propagandistic experience of the populists…led them to the conclusion that efforts to rouse the peasants to revolution were doomed to failure.[4]

His views were later echoed by P.S.Tkachenko, a historian of the group called Land and Freedom, the leading St. Petersburg revolutionary organization of the mid-1870s: "Disenchanted with the previous forms of work in the village, the Land and Freedom group transferred its hopes to the intelligentsia, to its potential for independent revolutionary action,"[5] and by another Soviet scholar, L. Berman:

> Bitter experience in the seventies of the last century, [experience] acquired at a dear price, demonstrated that under the existing political regime, propaganda of revolutionary ideas was impossible. This called forth the appearance of a new direction in the revolutionary movement.[6]

Franco Venturi, great scholar of Russian populism and socialism, writes in somewhat similar vein.

> As they began to defend the peasants, [the propagandists] at once felt ahead of them a huge wall, made up of all the dominating social forces from the kulak to the Tsar. And so the need to fight against the State itself became inevitable…. Returning from the colonies, individually and in groups, the Populists came to the towns, convinced that a change was necessary. It was they who developed the campaign of terrorism and who wrote the programme of *Narodnaya Volya* [the People's Will].[7]

American scholars, while less dogmatic in their analyses than their Soviet colleagues, have on the whole agreed that the failure of propaganda among the peasantry was at least a major factor in the coming

of terrorism. “The attempt to rouse the masses had obviously failed,” writes Avrahm Yarmolinsky, and he adds that therefore “the idea of an offensive against the monarchy…was coming to the fore.”[8] In his biography of G.V.Plekhanov, revolutionary leader and early Marxist, Samuel Baron writes that “terrorism was attractive to many revolutionists who were discouraged by the lack of success among the peasants.”[9] Philip Pomper, in his study of *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia,* on the whole agrees that “continuing frustration in the countryside during 1877 and 1878 forced more and more *narodniki* [populists] to search for new modes of revolutionary expression,”[10] and Ronald Seth believes the radicals of the seventies saw in terrorism “the only means of arousing the masses, of dispelling the inertia which was a much greater enemy even than the Third Division [the secret police].”[11] These thoughts appear also in other scholarly works.

Careful examination of the sequence of events in the years 1878 and 1879—the period of the origins of the People’s Will, the leading Russian terrorist organization—-indicates that the reactions and actions of propagandists and terrorists alike were emotional, intellectual, rational, irrational, complex, and unpredictable. This book should be seen as an effort to enlarge the picture painted by many historians because it adds shadows, mutes colors, and perhaps contributes complicated perspectives.

Without presuming to reduce broad spectra into simplistic schemes, this book will attempt to demonstrate that many “villagers” or propagandists, (those young revolutionaries who favored work directly among the peasantry) did not regard themselves as unsuccessful in the countryside. From the beginning, their plans had involved several stages of development before any revolutionary attempt was forthcoming, and according to their schedule they were moving forward toward their goal. Their personal experiences among the peasantry were often, although not always, less disheartening than heartwarming. Thus terrorism does not seem to have been inaugurated by discouraged “villagers.” With few exceptions, it was an urban phenomenon, designed by urban revolutionaries for protection against the urban police. Until the spring of 1879, no single terrorist action was perpetrated by a propagandist partial to the program of 1876. Indeed, violence was disliked by many “villagers” because police retaliation in the provinces made their work dangerous.

There is reason to believe that the leading revolutionary organization called Land and Freedom was deliberately destroyed by urban

proponents of violence who had only scorn for provincial propagandizing. Thereafter many one-time propagandists were persuaded into the terrorist camp primarily through a deliberate campaign on the part of their urban colleagues. A number of leading members of the terrorist core that assassinated the tsar were at first reluctant to turn to violence. Although thoughtful and intellectual arguments played their role in converting these skeptics, a major element in the terrorist effort lay in its appeal for action and heroism and in the promise of membership in a close-knit, dedicated group. Even so, the wouldbe terrorists found it difficult to convince the "villagers" that they had failed in the countryside and needed to change course.

But a reassessment of the roots of Russian terrorism must begin in the year 1876, when those of the revolutionaries not already behind bars for propagandizing among the peasantry began their efforts to reassess the situation for themselves.

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Land and Freedom

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1
THE NEW POPULIST PROGRAM

The renewed optimism and enthusiasm of the Russian *narodniki** in the years 1876 to 1879 emerged from their conviction that they had found a different, more mature, and sounder approach to winning support among the peasantry—an approach demanding more sacrifice and patience, but promising in the long run greater success. The new program for revolution was not easy to devise, for the radicals' experience in the Russian countryside in the summer of 1874 had proved so traumatic that it took the young propagandists years to recuperate and regroup. Once they had analyzed their difficulties, argued out their differences, and set their new plans, the reinspired *narodniki* went back to the villages filled with determination and hope. Their failures and successes, the weaknesses and the strengths of their convictions form the backdrop against which the turn toward terrorism must be viewed.

The program that these young revolutionaries formulated in 1876 was based upon a careful analysis of the lessons of the past. Indeed, the "crazy summer" of 1874 had devastated and demoralized revolutionary ranks. The almost spontaneous movement of *narodniki* "to the people" had notoriously failed to convince the Russian peasant of the benefits of revolutionary socialism.[1] Instead, the most telling response to the propagandists' efforts had come not from the peasants

* Much has been written about the definition of *"narodnik''* the exact translation of which is "populist." Without entering the debate, the author has chosen to use the term as it was generally used in 1876: as a designation for those who supported village work and propaganda, as distinct from those who preached terrorism or "disorganization."

but from the police. Hundreds of young radicals had been arrested, and throughout several years many of them languished in prison while tsarist officials prepared the lengthy, detailed accusation to be set against them at their trial, eventually held finally in the winter of 1877–78.[2] Some of the erstwhile propagandists escaped abroad. Those who remained at liberty were only somewhat better off than their imprisoned comrades, for their spirits were shattered. Russian circles were disorganized and contacts disrupted. Many young radicals-even those who had escaped arrest—were discouraged to the point of giving up the revolutionary cause.

Vera Figner found them so on her return to Russia in December 1875. At first optimistic and cheerful—so much so that she shocked some of her Moscow comrades[3]—she was soon so deeply drawn into their misery and depression that she too sank into a spiritual morass and even contemplated suicide.[4]

In her perceptive autobiography, Figner has described the situation. Government persecutions, she wrote, had effectively destroyed all major revolutionary circles. Citing statistics proffered by Count C.I.Palen, Minister of Justice, Figner averred that in Moscow

> about a hundred persons were investigated, and the number of people treated to short-term arrest and to searches was, of course, many times greater. The plague had struck in a certain stratum of society; everyone had lost a friend or a relative; a mass of families had experienced grief.[5]

But worse even than devastation by arrest, Figner found the pervasive discouragement and general inertia that traumatized the movement. Even the loss of comrades, she wrote, might be endured more easily than

> the moral shock that was incurred by the failure of the propagandist movement. All hopes were dashed; the program that had seemed so realistic did not lead to the anticipated results. [The propagandists'] faith in the correctness of their methods and in their own abilities was shaken. The stronger the enthusiasm of persons going to the people for propaganda, the more bitter their disenchantment. All previous convictions disintegrated into dust. Criticism, skepticism, and lack of faith were characteristic of these times. The old was destroyed, but new outlooks had not yet evolved. In the course of the seven years that I lived through with the [revolutionary] party, I never saw anything like it. This was a crisis in the full sense of the word.[6]

Unable to help as she had intended, Figner observed with increasing misery the hopelessness and lassitude of her companions.

Figner's situation is revealing, for not only does she give us the most detailed available report of the revolutionary centers in these times, but she observes and judges what was happening from the perspective of a new arrival, an outsider. She had not participated in the "crazy summer," for she was then in Switzerland, studying to become a doctor. Her decision to return to Russia just a few months before her course was completed was reached only with great difficulty and soul-searching.[7]

For Figner, leaving Bern and abandoning her studies meant giving up a dream in exchange for less happy reality. She had gone to Switzerland because medical education was not open to women in the Russia of her day, but she had always meant to return, for she had seen herself as a doctor among the peasants. To give up was not easy. She was influenced in her decision by the crisis in the revolutionary movement, as it was described to her by propagandists who had fled abroad, and by the pleadings of Mark Natanson, a revolutionary returned from exile, who sought her help in reviving the movement. Above all, she was upset by the plight of her dearest friends from the women students' circle in Zurich, called *Fritsche* after their Swiss landlady. These friends had gone home before her to propagandize among the Moscow textile workers and with their companions (a group of young male radicals mostly from the Caucasus) had suffered arrest and imprisonment.[8] Among them wasVera's sister Lidiia. Thus with no clear sense of what she might do to help but with a fervent desire to assist them, Vera Figner finally threw over her studies and came home.

Her lot was more difficult than she might have anticipated. First there was the meeting with her mother—dearly beloved by her and her sisters—who was greatly distressed by Vera's abandonment of her studies. Then there was the necessity of finalizing her separation from her husband, named Filippov, who had earlier moved from Switzerland and was living in Kazan.[9] Moreover, once arrived in Moscow, Figner despaired of aiding her imprisoned friends, for she feared that her very appearance as their visitor might have engendered police surveillance and endangered the comrades at liberty with whom she was in touch. She did not dare to communicate with her sister at all.

Denied contact with friends, acquainted with few individuals and caring for fewer, she settled unhappily in Moscow in the early spring of 1875, in a so-called "conspiratorial apartment," where she was assigned a task she hated: that of decoding messages, day after day. Little wonder she felt depressed.

> For a time, I lost myself. Not having had the slightest experience in the revolutionary cause and not knowing where within it was an appropriate place for me, I passively submitted to whatever they asked of me and did whatever they assigned. These were people hastily summoned from various areas, called partly from far away, and united in the task of continuing that which they had not begun and in which they had not previously taken part. And now, without previous common agreement between them, without having decided on a plan of action, these replacements for the arrested members of the circle each carried on his segment on his own without coordination between them—contacting one another more physically than spiritually. True, a strict cohesion of organizations was not generally characteristic of the revolutionary milieu at that time, but here it was completely nonexistent, in the sense that people did not identify with each other, did not merge together for the common cause, as was the case earlier with the Chaikovtsy [the famous radical circle of the 1870s] ,the Fritsche, the Caucasians, but [instead] met in one place, called by some outside force for a goal chosen, but not freely chosen.[10]

Indeed, efforts to reunite and revitalize the revolutionary movement had consistently failed, one after another. The great gathering to analyze the achievements of the "crazy summer," as enthusiastically scheduled for the autumn of 1874, had never materialized, owing to the arrests of many propagandists, the flight of others, and the demoralization of all.[11] In 1875 in St. Petersburg, some of the old members of the Chaikovskii circle attempted to build a united front with some followers of P.L.Lavrov, whom they too had once supported, but lack of enthusiasm and philosophical disagreement caused the entente to disintegrate within weeks.[12] Later that year conferees in Moscow found themselves unable to establish a united revolutionary front, and the effort was termed "unsuccessful" even by its sponsors.[13] In the same city in 1876, Figner was instrumental in organizing a meeting of radicals to hear out an unidentified St. Petersburg revolutionary leader, but she reports that he was only greeted with cynicism when he attempted to infuse the Moscow groups with a sense of unity and purpose; ‘‘pushers," such agitators were called, less with irritation than with sad humor and hopeless shrugs.[14] That same spring, sixteen *narodniki* from Moscow went to spread propa-

ganda in Nizhegorod province, but scarcely had they arrived when they turned back, blaming their defection on police restrictions, although Figner was wise enough to recognize what was really lack of cohesion, energy, and purpose.[15]

Figner was a woman of energy and spirit, lucky in that she had not shared in the previous defeats, but she might never have pulled herself free had it not been for a friend. He was Anton Taksis (real name: Aleksandr Sergeevich Buturlin), a follower of the philosophy of Lavrov and deeply committed to educative revolutionary propaganda among intelligentsia as well as peasantry. To Taksis, Figner turned for succor and advice. Where was her work with the people? she asked him. Where was her propaganda? Was this what she had studied medicine for?[16] Taksis understood her purposes and her mood. He urged her to set clear goals for herself. When she explained her ambitions, he insisted that she not set them aside in favor of mundane tasks she had been assigned. He advised her to find out for herself what propagandizing was like, to settle in a village, to "observe what kind of sphinx this 'people' is."[17] Without promising her a life of excitement or of heroism—and indeed she wrote later that his words were not designed to be comforting—he set her back on track.

Under Taksis's influence, Vera left Moscow in late spring 1876 for Iaroslavl, where she had an introduction to a medical doctor. After working for several months in a hospital under his supervision, she took and passed her exams for paramedic *(fel'dsher),* although she felt and feared the suspicions of the local examiner, for she knew medicine better than might be expected and Latin better than he.[18] In August she came to St. Petersburg, where a few months later she took additional exams in midwifery at the Medical-Surgical Academy. She was thus in the capital city in the autumn of 1876, when the revolutionaries there slowly began to pull themselves together and come back to life.

In the long run, credit for reorganizing the revolutionaries under a more or less common banner must go not to Figner but to Mark Andreevich Natanson, a Jew born in Lithuania, who was primarily responsible for the regathering of forces in the capital city in autumn 1876.[19] A one-time student at the Medical-Surgical Academy, Natanson had already won his credentials in the radical movement, for in 1871 he had assembled the original "commune" on which the important Chaikovskii circle was based and had then become a leading member of the latter group. Through his work with the Chaikovtsy

in the so-called "book affair"—the distribution of illegal volumes to student and intelligentsia groups throughout Russia—he had established contacts with many provincial radical circles. In 1873, he was exiled by administrative (that is, not judicial) order. He and his activist wife Ol'ga Shleisner, who followed him, spent three years away from the capital city, first in Siberia, then in Voronezh, and finally in Finland, the home of Ol'ga's relatives. Figner reports that Natanson devoted his exile to completing his education, even borrowbooks long-distance from his St. Petersburg friends.[20]

Released in 1875, Natanson returned at once to the capital to observe first-hand the demoralization among revolutionary ranks. Like Figner, he had not participated in the movement "to the people" and like her, he was able to reactivate his hopes and renew his energies more rapidly than could those who had been more directly devastated by a sense of personal failure.

And reactivate he did. Immediately upon his return from Finland, Natanson set to work to reestablish friendships and to call the revolutionaries back together. Making arrangements through unidentified sources, he slipped abroad: to Berlin, to Paris, and to Switzerland, contacting his old Chaikovskii circle comrades, many of whom had been able to flee from Russian arrest into West European safety after 1874. Figner gives him credit for convincing many individuals of energy and dedication that it was time to return home, and indeed he so persuaded such later important revolutionaries as Aleksandr Ivanovich Ivanchin-Pisarev, nobleman propagandist; Dmitrii Klements, writer and radical; and Mariia Pavlovna Leshern-fon-Gertsfel't, one of Figner's own circle of friends.[21] He was also instrumental in persuading Figner, whom he sought out in Bern; she could hardly refuse him when he told her that her Fritsche friends, imprisoned in Moscow, begged her to come, although she discovered later that Natanson had told a little white lie and her friends had not actually asked her aid at all.

It was Natanson who proposed to unite his friends and the Lavrists into one Union of Russian Revolutionary Groups, and he who negotiated such a united front with Figner's friend Taksis in the autumn of 1875.[22] When in the winter of that year Natanson journeyed to London, it was to meet Lavrov, in the hopes of subsuming the latter's emigré journal *Vpered!* (Forward) under the new revolutionary umbrella. But Lavrov was not impressed; Natanson's ‘‘conditions" would have deprived the old radical of all editorial decisions and left such judgments in the hands of the St. Petersburg revolutionaries.