Introduction

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The following will show what the women of our circle were. One night Kupreyanoff and I went to Varvara B., to whom we had to make an urgent communication. It was past midnight, but, seeing a light in her window, we went upstairs. She sat in her tiny room, at a table, copying the programme of our circle. We knew how resolute she was, and the idea came to us to make one of those stupid jokes which men think funny. "B," I said, "we came to fetch you: we are going to try a rather mad attempt to liberate our friends from the fortress." She asked not one question. She quietly laid down her pen, rose from the chair and said only, "Let us go." She spoke in so simple, so unaffected a voice that I felt at once how foolishly I had acted, and told her the truth. She dropped back into her chair, and with tears in her eyes and in a despairing voice, asked: "It was only a joke? Why do you make such jokes?" I fully realized then the cruelty of what I had one.

—Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*

In the course of the nineteenth century, violent movements opposed to the existing political order erupted all over Europe. Inspired, no doubt, by French revolutionary assertions of popular sovereignty, and the Jacobins' adoption of Terror as a means to shape an ideal society between 1793 and 1794, revolutionaries in many European states laid claim to the right to exercise violence against their rulers, and their rulers responded with violence in their turn. Nowhere was revolutionary political violence more visible and dramatic than in Russia. There, revolutionaries took the lives of dozens of people, most but not all of them high officials, and accepted the label

“terrorist” as a badge of honor. However, unlike most people who are usually labeled “terrorists” today, Russian revolutionaries selected their targets carefully, focusing on those whom they regarded as responsible for the oppressive political and social order and mourning unanticipated civilian casualties. They also insisted upon the morality and justice of their cause, and were fully prepared to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of it. The goal: the end of an unjust social and political order, and its replacement by one that would genuinely represent and serve the people.

The women who tell their stories in this book shared this goal and participated actively in efforts to realize it. Some became famous abroad as well as at home, thanks to newspapers pleased to supply accounts of revolutionary exploits to a public hungry for sensational stories. (Many of the illustrations in this book originally appeared in non-Russian newspapers within days of the events they portray.) Especially well known were Vera Zasulich, whose attempt in 1878 to assassinate General Trepov, the governor of St. Petersburg, signaled the intensification of terrorist struggle and, to her own dismay, made her a heroine to Western European leftists in addition to much of the Russian public; and Vera Figner, who presided over the remnants of the People’s Will after it assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Others played vital but less visible roles: Olga Liubatovich belonged to one of the first groups of revolutionary propagandists to take jobs as factory laborers; Praskovia Ivanovskaia became a typesetter for the printing press that presented the movement’s goals to a broader public; Elizaveta Kovalskaia, herself a peasant by birth, rejected *political* terror but not terrorist violence itself, envisioning terror as a way of struggling against economic oppression.

None of these women, or any of the other women and men who came to accept political violence as a method of struggle, began their oppositional activities with a commitment to it. Young, educated and idealistic, mostly from privileged backgrounds, they awakened—often under the influence of books that spoke of a different and better life—to glaring social injustices that they felt morally compelled to rectify, even at the

cost of their lives. Together with thousands of others, they joined a revolutionary populist movement that reached mass proportions during the 1870s.

Some fifteen percent of its members were women. Women participated in every phase of the movement—from propaganda work among the peasantry, which predominated in the early part of the decade, to the stage of political “terrorism,” which culminated in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II on March 1, 1881. Furthermore, women sometimes assumed positions of leadership, as did Vera Figner in the People’s Will and Elizaveta Kovalskaia in the South Russian Workers Union, which she founded with a comrade. The role played by these women was highly unusual by the standards of other nineteenth-century movements, and all the more so because of women’s legal status: wives remained subject to the absolute authority of husbands, as did daughters to fathers until the age of twenty-one. Most women joined the radical movement at a much earlier age.

It was by virtue of their oppression that women first became important to radical thinkers in the late 1850s. They were influenced by the impending emancipation of the serfs, which brought new attention to the issue of personal autonomy and individuals’ rights to develop themselves freely. Thus, radical writers denounced women’s enslavement to the patriarchal family and advocated marriages based on mutual love, rather than parental calculation, in which women could retain their independence. They also called for higher education for women—no education beyond secondary school was available to women in Russia at that time—and employment to enable women to achieve economic self-sufficiency. None was more influential than Nikolai Chernyshevskii, whose novel *What Is To Be Done?* (1862), which fictionalized social experiments already underway, explicitly connected personal with political liberation. Freed from an oppressive family situation by marriage to a medical student, a “new man,” the heroine, Vera Pavlovna, enjoys a room of her own and the freedom to love another, as well as meaningful, socially useful work. She organizes a sewing workshop that she transforms into a

cooperative; eventually, she becomes a physician, each stage of her development facilitated by her husband. By depicting the personal and productive relations that would constitute the socialist future, Chernyshevskii's novel linked women's liberation with the more sweeping goals of social transformation and revolution. The book became a key work in shaping the outlook of this and subsequent generations.

Women also took action in their own cause, with education as one of the prime objectives and lifestyle as one of the battlegrounds. A women's movement emerged in the late 1850s, led by Anna Filosofova, Nadezhda Stasova and Maria Trubnikova, well-educated women from elite backgrounds. Initially concerned with assisting needy gentlewomen, they subsequently launched a campaign to expand women's educational opportunities. In 1859 women began to audit university lectures, which, having been shut on account of student unrest, had just been reopened to the public. Within a year, women's presence during university lectures had become almost commonplace and remained so until 1863, when the women were once again barred from attendance. In 1861, several scientists at the St. Petersburg Medical Surgery Academy opened their laboratories to women. Among those who audited medical lectures was Nadezhda Suslova, the daughter of a serf. Suslova completed her medical studies in Zurich, where she earned the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1867, becoming the first woman to receive such a degree from a European university. Her success inspired hundreds of other women to follow her example, among them Vera Figner and Olga Liubatovich. In the cities of Russia, some young women openly flouted conventional gender expectations. They cropped their hair, dispensed with crinolines and simplified their dress; they smoked in public, went about the streets without an escort and wore blue-tinted glasses. A few even donned the clothing of men in order to enjoy greater freedom (see the photo on p. 215 of this book). These young rebels became known to their critics as nihilists (*nigilistki*) because of the rejection of "the stagnant past and all tradition" and demand for the right to choose their own path.

But it was, above all, the passion for education that motivated

the women of the sixties. During that period, many women's groups, like Elizaveta Kovalskaia's in Kharkov, unsuccessfully petitioned for access to the universities of Russia. In 1858, Tsar Alexander II had approved a proposal for secondary schools for girls of all social backgrounds, offering a six-year course of study; otherwise, only boarding schools, which offered at best a superficial education, and a few courses to train midwives were all that were available to women until 1869. Anything else women had to learn on their own. Because of this, self-education circles—study groups—proliferated in the sixties.

Women also took an active part in efforts to extend elementary and political education to factory workers. Vera Zasulich, for example, taught in the evening and Sunday schools established by radicals for workers in St. Petersburg. In Kharkov, Elizaveta Kovalskaia used her inheritance to set up an evening school for women laborers, where lectures were offered on women's issues—which contemporaries entitled "the woman question"—and socialism.

When opportunities to pursue higher education expanded at the end of the sixties, many women eagerly seized them. Crowning years of work by advocates of women's rights, advanced secondary courses for women opened in 1869 (the Alarchinskii courses in St. Petersburg), as did university-level lecture courses (the Liubianskii courses in Moscow). This marked a turning point in the development of the women's movement in Russia: at last, the government had come to terms with women's long-expressed desire for higher education to the extent of approving non-degree programs. From the beginning, the response was overwhelming, as hundreds of young women from all over Russia streamed into the cities. The Alarchinskii courses in St. Petersburg, in particular, provided an invaluable opportunity for women to further their knowledge of science and mathematics, and also to develop their social and political views and strengthen their personal networks. Elizaveta Kovalskaia described the unending succession of meetings at which women students—men were excluded—discussed their position in the family and their role in society. Before long, their topics had broadened to encompass

other social questions as well, such as the wretched situation of the working class and the peasantry, by comparison with whom these women felt themselves privileged. By 1871, social questions had eclipsed women's issues in the minds of some women; they had become convinced that Russia's most pressing need was a "social revolution"—one that would redistribute the land among the peasantry—and that women could best serve the cause by joining with men in mixed groups.

A similar evolution—from a focus on women's issues to revolutionary populism—took place in Zurich. The establishment of nondegree courses had not satisfied women's desire for professional education, and so during the early seventies, increasing numbers of Russian women went abroad. By 1873 there were over a hundred Russian women attending schools in Switzerland, most of them studying medicine. At this time, Switzerland was also a haven for Russian radical émigrés seeking freedom of expression. Political life was particularly intense in Zurich, and many women students became engrossed in it: they attended meetings of the local section of the International Workingmen's Association, devoured the important works of European socialism, including the works of Karl Marx, and helped set type for the radical émigré newspaper *Forward!* (*Vpered!*), all while pursuing their studies with a passion. In order to assimilate the new ideas encountered, thirteen of the Russian women students, few older than twenty, formed a study group that they called the Fritsche circle after the boardinghouse in which most lived. The group included Olga Liubatovich and her younger sister Vera, and the sisters Vera and Lidia Figner. By 1873, most of the circle had become convinced that the need to end social injustice trumped their desire for higher education, and they resolved to return to Russia and begin revolutionary activity. They entered into negotiations with a group of young male émigrés and in 1874 merged to form the Pan-Russian Social Revolutionary Organization.

When members of the Fritsche circle joined the revolutionary movement, they abandoned the struggle for their individual liberation and advancement as women, just as had the

members of the women's circles of St. Petersburg a few years earlier. In the eyes of women and men of the 1870s, such a struggle had no place in a radical movement devoted to the emancipation of Russia's oppressed peasantry and operating under the harshest political conditions, in which loyalty to the group necessarily took precedence over individual aspirations. Nonetheless, the women's movement played an important role in shaping the women revolutionaries of the 1870s. It gave them a sense of their own capacity for action and, for some, an invaluable experience of developing their political ideas independently of men; and through it, they developed ties of sisterhood that they maintained in later mixed-gender radical groups. Their own strengths enabled women to participate as equals in the populist movement. Once they joined it, women's fate became linked with the fate of the broader movement.

POPULISM IN ACTION

Russian populism was an ideology of agrarian revolution.¹ Populists aimed at social rather than political revolution, a revolution from the bottom up, rather than the top down. That revolution might be—indeed almost certainly would be—violent, but if violence was exercised, it would be by the revolutionary masses against targets of its own choosing, and as part of a process of far-reaching social transformation.

The engine of revolutionary transformation would be Russia's peasantry: the vast majority of Russia's population and the most oppressed. On February 19, 1861, Tsar Alexander II had freed the peasants after centuries of serfdom and instituted a series of other reforms that introduced into Russia a modern system of justice and limited local self-government. But he had not given peasants the land they had long cultivated, and which they felt to be rightfully theirs; they had been

¹The Russian word is *narodnichestvo*, derived from *narod*, "the people." The populists were known as *narodniki*.

obliged to redeem it at prices that sometimes exceeded its market value. The unsatisfactory nature of the emancipation had provoked sporadic acts of resistance from the peasants, but these soon subsided when confronted with government repression. Among educated members of society critical of the existing order (known as the intelligentsia), the emancipation led to the emergence of numerous small groups that believed in the necessity and imminence of a revolution to bring about the redistribution of land and an end to Russia's autocratic political order.

During the 1860s, a few were prepared to employ political violence to reach that goal. In 1866, a member of one such revolutionary group, Dmitrii Karakozov, unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate the tsar "for the sake of my beloved people," as he put it, and paid with his life. Karakozov's shot rendered political terror thinkable, although certainly not inevitable. His shot brought what some historians have labeled "White Terror"—a significant increase in repression and an end to the progressive initiatives that had followed the emancipation. It also prompted the birth of a revolutionary underground, aimed at eluding the repressive arm of the state.

One of its most prominent figures was Sergei Nechaev, a revolutionary and leading figure in the student movement of the late 1860s, whose hierarchical organization, conspiratorial methods and readiness to resort to violence against individuals would serve to discredit all three for a time. When one of the members of his organization, Ivan Ivanov, expressed certain doubts, Nechaev directed other members of the group to kill him notwithstanding the absence of proof, which they did on November 21, 1869. Over a period of months the police arrested scores of radicals in connection with the case, among them Vera Zasulich, although many had only the most tenuous relationship to Nechaev.

Nechaev himself managed to escape abroad and elude the tsarist police for nearly three years. But the revelations produced by his trial in 1871, widely reported in the press, greatly influenced the shape of the populist movement of the seventies: in radical circles, the aversion to his dictatorial, dishonest

methods was so strong that, for years to come, any attempt to create a centralized, hierarchical organization met with great suspicion. The populist groups that took shape in the early seventies were consciously egalitarian, basing themselves on the principles of honesty and mutual respect among comrades, women and men alike.

While they never developed a unified body of doctrine comparable to Marxism, populists shared—at least until the late 1870s—a number of fundamental tenets. They believed that Russia's peasantry was inherently socialist (as evidenced by their egalitarianism, communal self-government and ownership of land) and that an agrarian revolution would thus make it possible for Russia to avoid capitalism and pass directly into socialism. But it was imperative that a revolution be carried out soon and quickly, because capitalism, although still at an early stage in Russia, was already beginning to undermine the Russian commune (*obshchina*) by increasing economic stratification among the peasantry. A "political" revolution, aimed at replacing Russia's absolutist political order with a constitutional regime, would be of no benefit to the peasantry; only a "social" revolution, by and for the peasantry, would do.

But how were revolutionaries who sprang from the privileged classes to approach the peasantry, the people of whom most revolutionaries knew so little and whose way of life differed so profoundly from their own? On this question, Russian radicals tended to divide into partisans of Peter Lavrov and Michael Bakunin, the two figures most influential in making populism into a mass movement in the 1870s. Lavrov, in his *Historical Letters*, published in book form in 1870, argued that the culture of the educated classes had been bought with the sweat and blood of the toiling peasantry; that as a consequence, the privileged intelligentsia was morally indebted to the peasantry; and that the way to repay that debt was to put one's knowledge at the service of the people, enlightening them and preparing them for socialism. Bakunin, on the other hand, argued that the revolutionary's duty was not to *teach* but to *learn from* and *merge with* the peasant masses. He believed that the peasantry was always ready for revolution—

pointing to the massive peasant rebellions led by Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively—and needed only a spark to set it off. The role of a revolutionary was to supply that spark and help unify local rebellions into one nationwide uprising.

Heated debates erupted between the respective adherents of Lavrov and Bakunin. But when the first mass movement “to the people” materialized in 1874, it was basically spontaneous and uncoordinated, and it easily accommodated both orientations. That summer, thousands of young people—primarily students—poured into the Russian countryside singly and in small groups, to draw closer to the peasantry and spread socialist propaganda. Some worked in a semi-professional capacity, such as village teachers or medical assistants, and settled in one spot. Others dressed themselves as peasants and sometimes learned trades such as cobbling in the hope that this would enable them to find work and establish contacts among the people. Most of the latter engaged in “flying propaganda”—that is, they moved rapidly from village to village. The socialist ideas they preached were sometimes drawn from parables phrased in the language of the common people, but often the propagandists merely paraphrased their own reading of Western European socialist works. The peasants’ response varied: relatively few were sympathetic; the majority were bewildered, indifferent, or even hostile. In no case did populists from the cities succeed in sparking a revolutionary uprising. And in the absence of civil liberties in Russia, freedom of speech especially, they paid a steep price for trying. Usually acting openly, with little concern for their personal security, propagandists made easy targets for the police. By the end of the year, roughly four thousand people had been harassed, questioned, or imprisoned.

The members of the Pan-Russian Social Revolutionary Organization, which included Olga Liubatovich and Lidia Figner, Vera Figner’s sister, adopted a different approach when they returned from Zurich to Russia in 1875. Like all the populists of the early seventies, they believed that the peasantry had to be the main force of the revolution. But rather than organizing

among the peasants themselves, they decided to conduct propaganda among factory workers, who were for the most part seasonal: when these workers returned home periodically to their native villages to help with the farm work, they would be able to spread socialist ideas more effectively than could outsiders from the cities. The organization established contacts with workers in several cities, but within six months the entire membership had fallen into the hands of the police.

Thus, by the end of 1875 the populist movement had suffered severe setbacks. A large proportion of the activists of the early seventies were imprisoned or under police surveillance. Nevertheless, there were still individuals making free-lance journeys into the countryside (as Praskovia Ivanovskaia did in the summer of 1876), and various groups developing new strategies for approaching the peasantry.

Land and Liberty, which became the most significant of these groups, began to take shape in 1876. According to its analysis, the first wave "to the people" in 1874 had been too haphazard and reckless and its propaganda too abstract. Although Land and Liberty did not establish an elaborate hierarchy, it was definitely a centralized organization, with a coordinating group in St. Petersburg that adhered strictly to the conspiratorial practices populists had once rejected: apartments and addresses known only to specific individuals, false identity papers and care in the use of written communications. The organization's program was based on what were perceived to be the existing desires and demands of the people: expropriation of all the land, including that owned by the nobility and the state, and its redistribution among the peasantry; the break-up of the Russian empire in accordance with popular aspirations for local autonomy; and self-government through federations of peasant communes. These demands could be achieved only through revolution. But Land and Liberty adopted a cautious, long-range approach in spreading its ideas. Instead of "flying propaganda," more lasting bases—"colonies" or "settlements" as they were called—were established in the countryside; revolutionaries took jobs in these locations as paramedics (*feldshers*), nurses, schoolteachers, or clerks in the hopes of gradually

winning the trust of the local population. This became the dominant form of activity in the second phase of the movement "to the people" during 1877–78—not only for the members of Land and Liberty, but also for people like Vera Figner and Elizaveta Kovalskaia, who chose not to join the new party.

But propaganda and educational work among the peasantry was not the only form of activity: there was a growing acceptance of violence. Some radicals had already begun to engage in other forms of struggle, aimed at defending revolutionaries from the repressive agents of the state. The program of Land and Liberty, although still oriented towards peaceful propaganda, also allowed for such actions. These were a means to avenge fallen comrades, to strike fear into the hearts of government officials and deter them from further reprisals against revolutionaries and, by example, to stimulate popular resistance to the regime—"propaganda by the deed" as it was sometimes called. Such was the role of the "disorganization group," which operated more or less independently of the rest of the organization. Other revolutionaries, who did not belong to the organization, took matters into their own hands. In 1876 Lev Deich, a close comrade of Vera Zasulich and subsequently her lover, attempted to murder a man he believed to be a police spy, an act he came to regret. Political murders of people thought to have betrayed radical comrades escalated in 1877. Militants also began carrying arms and using them to defend themselves against the police. Even before it had become a weapon of struggle against government officials and the autocratic state, by the end of 1877 violence had begun to attract adherents within the populist movement. Primarily a response to the state's own violent treatment of movement activists, the growing attraction to violence also owed something to the lure of heroic action for those radicals who had grown tired of the difficulties and isolation of work among "the people."

Meanwhile, two mass trials helped to create widespread sympathy for the revolutionary cause. Widely reported in the press and eagerly followed by the educated public, the trials functioned as a kind of theater, featuring government and radicals engaged in a war of words. It was the radicals who proved

the more effective in getting their message across. The Trial of the Fifty, conducted in Moscow in 1877, included most of the membership of the Pan-Russian Social Revolutionary Organization. The government was confidently expecting to discredit the revolutionaries as a band of cynical, dangerous criminals. Instead, spectators and reporters took away from the courtroom a picture of idealistic young people who, motivated by a vision of social justice, had selflessly renounced their own privileged positions and shared the wretched lives of factory workers. The women defendants, in particular, made a strong impression: courtroom spectators repeatedly exclaimed, "They are saints!" One defendant, Sofia Bardina, concluded her statement to the court with a resounding claim to the higher moral ground: "Persecute us—you have material strength for a while, gentlemen, but we have moral strength, the strength of ideas, and ideas, alas, you cannot pierce with bayonets!"

The Trial of the Hundred and Ninety-three, which began in October of the same year, 1877, had much the same impact. It included a large number of activists who had gone "to the people" in 1874. For their crime of preaching socialism to the peasants, they had suffered more than three years of pre-trial imprisonment under the harshest conditions; dozens were lost to illness, death (sometimes by suicide) or madness. At the trial, many of the accused expressed their contempt for the tribunal by refusing to present any defense. When one man attempted to describe the conditions in prison and make a political statement, he was repeatedly silenced by the judges and finally dragged from the courtroom. The government failed to prove the existence of a conspiracy (many of the defendants had never so much as laid eyes on each other); it managed only to discredit its own methods. The defendants, meanwhile, utilized the months-long trial to make acquaintances and build solidarity. When it ended, the majority were acquitted outright or released in consideration of their pretrial imprisonment. Prison had hardened them, embittered them and strengthened their convictions. They resumed their political activity—many promptly joined Land and Liberty—with the determination to avoid the naïve errors that had made them

easy targets for government repression years before.

The trial ended on January 23, 1878. Twenty-four hours later, the populist movement entered its terrorist stage.

Populist terrorism consisted of attempts to assassinate government officials, including the tsar himself. Its proponents argued that it was a highly selective form of revolutionary violence: whereas the government habitually employed arbitrary and excessive force against its subjects, activists' various assassination attempts claimed only a handful of unintended victims other than bodyguards of the tsar. They viewed their decision to take up violence as a necessary but tragic choice, which the government had forced upon them. Prepared to sacrifice their own lives in the process, they fully believed in the moral rectitude of their cause. Historians have nevertheless proposed additional explanations for the adoption of terrorism: the desire to avenge fallen comrades; despair over the failure of peaceful propaganda to elicit a response from the peasantry; impatience for revolution in the near rather than distant future; even the internal dynamics of the movement itself. Among a tightly knit radical community whose members had severed most ties with the external world, violent tactics created their own momentum. Such explanations for the turn to terror are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It was in this phase of the revolutionary movement that the five women represented in this book played their historic roles.

On the morning of January 24, 1878, Vera Zasulich walked into the office of General Trepov in St. Petersburg and, in the presence of a roomful of witnesses, shot him to avenge his mistreatment of a political prisoner. Six days later, there was a gun battle when the police attempted to raid an underground press in Odessa; on February 23 there was an unsuccessful attempt on the life of an assistant prosecutor in Kiev; on May 25 a police official in Kiev was assassinated. Then, on August 4, 1878, Sergei Kravchinskii, one of the leading members of Land and Liberty, assassinated the head of the political police on the street in St. Petersburg and made a clean getaway. Bypassing the law, the government instituted special military tribunals to deal with such attacks and executed the participants when

and if it caught them. But the campaign continued: armed resistance to the police in St. Petersburg in October and Kharkov in November; the assassination of the governor of Kharkov in February 1879; an attempt on the life of the head of the police in St. Petersburg in March 1879.

The escalating use of violence exposed the latent divisions within Land and Liberty. Through 1878, the organization itself remained committed to its program of peaceful propaganda with the eventual goal of revolution among the peasantry. However, intensified government repression victimized propagandists as well as terrorists. By late 1878, harassment such as what Vera Figner describes had made it virtually impossible for revolutionaries to propagandize or even live among the peasantry, and almost all of Land and Liberty's colonies had been abandoned. Increasingly, the idea of terror—political violence—found support even among those committed to social revolution, that is, a revolution by and for the peasantry.

Revolutionaries who supported terror did so for different reasons. Some believed that terrorism itself would lead to social revolution—that once the tsar had been killed, the peasants would recognize the weakness of the government and rise up in rebellion. Still others, most notably Lev Tikhomirov and Maria Oshanina, adopted a “Jacobin” approach (the names derives from the Terrorist phase of the French Revolution), as Olga Liubatovich reports. They contended that terrorists should themselves seize power and use it to implement a socialist order. And others still, Nikolai Morozov most prominently in the pages of the movement's newsletter, espoused terror primarily as an heroic method of struggle, a way of keeping the revolutionary faith alive. However, most of those who came to support terror did so more pragmatically, in the hope that the assassination of high officials would compel the government to make concessions, such as a constitution and civil liberties, that would ease the work of organizing among the peasantry.

Nevertheless, some strongly resisted the new “political line” on the grounds that attacks on officials would further increase the repression and make organizing still more difficult, and

that, if a constitutional regime dedicated to protecting political rights was achieved, it would benefit only the propertied classes, that is, the bourgeoisie. This kind of political change would do nothing to improve the lot of the peasantry and would also intensify the economic stratification and disintegration of communalism that capitalism was introducing into peasant life, thereby eroding the basis for agrarian socialism.

The conflict came to a head in March 1879, when Alexander Soloviev approached Land and Liberty with a plan to assassinate the tsar. Advocates of terrorism were sympathetic; partisans of peasant organizing, still the majority of the organization, were vehemently opposed. The party refused to provide support, but individual members could and did aid Soloviev. He made his attempt on April 2 and failed. By then, however, the “politicals,” angered by the party’s refusal to support their efforts, had organized their own secret group within Land and Liberty—giving it the dramatic title of Liberty or Death—and they began to set up workshops to manufacture explosives.

Neither faction in Land and Liberty relished the prospect of a formal split in the party, which would mean breaking old and strong bonds with comrades and, most likely, weakening the revolutionary movement. But there was an urgent need to resolve the conflict, one way or another, so a party-wide conference was set for late June. Anticipating an open rupture and hoping to win over the majority of the conference attendees, the partisans of terror secretly scheduled a preliminary caucus in Lipetsk several days prior to the party’s meeting in order to plan their tactics and to round up potential supporters beforehand. They decided to focus on regicide for the first time and drew up statutes for a strictly centralized party that made no allowance for peaceful propagandists. When the entire party met at Voronezh, however, the expected split did not materialize. Another compromise was worked out, retaining the old program of Land and Liberty but sanctioning attacks on leading government officials who threatened the revolutionary movement, thus approving regicide in principle. But in the end, the divisions ran too deep. In August, after two months of fruitless intra-party negotiations (described by Liu-

batovich), the two factions agreed to go their separate ways. Two independent parties emerged. The advocates of regicide and political struggle called themselves the People's Will, thus claiming to embody a popular mandate; their opponents took the name Black Repartition, which referred to the demand for the redistribution of all land among the peasants.

Black Repartition, the smaller of the two, maintained Land and Liberty's traditional emphasis on agrarian revolution. The party was virtually stillborn; political conditions did not permit peaceful organizing among the peasantry. Black Repartition proved an important way station, however, for in 1883 its leaders established the first Russian Marxist Group: Emancipation of Labor.

Vera Zasulich was among those leaders. On the basis of her attack on Trepov, she might have been expected to join the People's Will, which was carrying on the assassination campaign. But Zasulich never envisioned her action becoming systematic policy; as Olga Liubatovich reports, Zasulich was extremely distressed by the series of assassination attempts inspired by her own. In the years to come, she repeatedly condemned the political tactic she herself had once appeared to embrace.

Black Repartition's program did provide for one form of terrorism, at least in theory: "economic terror," which consisted of attacks directed not at high government officials but at the enemies of the people at a local level—factory owners, landlords and police officials or administrators. This was the strategem that attracted Elizaveta Kovalskaia to the party. But in practice the party proved unwilling to implement it. When a member of the party's central body rejected outright Kovalskaia's proposal to initiate economic terror in the South of Russia, she left the party and, with comrade Nikolai Shchedrin, formed a new organization: the Union of Russian Workers of the South. Employing the threat of violence to achieve worker demands—such as higher pay, shorter working hours and the right to strike—within the space of six months the two succeeded in organizing several hundred workers into the Union.

The "political" faction of Land and Liberty, joined by veterans of other groups, formed the People's Will. The establishment of

this party amounted to a major transformation of the populist movement, because of the explicit abandonment of peasant organizing in favor of political revolution. Moreover, with its discipline and strict centralization, the People's Will became the first party of professional revolutionaries in Russia's history. Although the process had begun within its forerunner—Liberty or Death—this transformation took a while to consolidate; well over a year, Vera Figner estimated. Olga Liubatovich, a member of the party's Executive Committee from its formation, could not reconcile herself to the evolution she saw during this period. To her mind, the People's Will was moving toward Jacobinism—that is, a revolution by a small group, which would decree social transformation from above, rather than base itself on the will of the people. Furthermore, she felt that the party was endorsing a return to “Nechaevism”: decisions were being taken without the full, equal participation of all members. Early in 1880, she left the party.

Praskovia Ivanovskaia and Vera Figner remained. Ivanovskaia served as typesetter in the party's printing operation, and her memoirs provide a rare and valuable account of the daily routines and personal relationships of life underground. Figner became one of the leaders of the People's Will and took an active part in several assassination attempts, and her descriptions of such are in this book.

The history of the People's Will is inseparable from its campaign to assassinate Tsar Alexander II. That campaign, begun in the fall of 1879, lasted far longer and exacted a heavier toll than the party had anticipated: it took seven separate attempts over the space of a year and a half. They finally achieved their goal with a bomb-throwing attack on March 1, 1881. Nine days later, the party sent an open letter to the new ruler, Tsar Alexander III. Threatening further violence if its demands were not met, the letter called for a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of universal suffrage and full civil liberties. The new ruler not only ignored these demands, he revoked or curtailed many of his father's reforms, initiating a period of reaction that lasted for decades. The assassination was followed almost immediately by a wave of arrests. By

the middle of 1882, Vera Figner was the only member of the original leadership of the party still at liberty in Russia. With her capture in February 1883, the effective life of the People's Will came to an end.

The afterlife of the People's Will lasted longer. Glorifying the transformative power of individual, self-sacrificing and heroic action, its model of political terrorism proved immensely attractive. Other terrorist groups emerged in Russia after the collapse of the People's Will. On March 1, 1887—the date intentionally chosen to mimic the successful act of the People's Will—an abortive attempt was made on the life of Tsar Alexander III. The leaders—among them Alexander Ulianov, older brother of Vladimir Ulianov, better known as Vladimir Lenin—were hanged. In 1901, the populist-oriented Socialist Revolutionary party was formed. Echoing the program of the People's Will in its embrace of righteous violence on behalf of political change, the Socialist Revolutionary party attracted some of the earlier group's adherents, including Praskovia Ivanovskaia, who joined it after she escaped from exile in 1903.

The writings of movement participants contributed to the movement's mythic stature. In remembering their lives and their movement in print, revolutionaries sought not only to preserve their own history but also to honor their dead and to sanctify their own cause. The Bolsheviks, who came to power in the fall of 1917 pursuing very different politics, nevertheless embraced populist revolutionaries as their heroic predecessors, especially the members of the People's Will. Surviving members of the movement, including the women whose autobiographies appear in this book, were encouraged to write their recollections, which appeared in periodicals created for the purpose of preserving and celebrating the revolutionary past, as well as providing citizens of the new socialist society with models of self-sacrifice and revolutionary heroism. Their memoirs, including that of Olga Liubatovich, which was published earlier, in 1906, created a monument to their movement.

Even so, in its representation of revolutionary women, the monument came close to reality. If it omitted the darker aspects of the terrorist struggle—the right revolutionaries

claimed to take the lives of others, and the government reaction elicited by their actions, to cite the most obvious—it nevertheless captured the women's absolute commitment to ending suffering and injustice and their willingness to sacrifice their own well-being to that end. In that sense, revolutionary women embodied—and had no doubt been influenced by—the ideals of the Russian Orthodox faith, which venerated the capacity for suffering and self-sacrifice. It is not surprising that their contemporaries recognized them as saints. They possessed a passionate and lucid moral vision that exile, imprisonment or imminent death could not destroy. Sofia Perovskaia—both organizer of the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and the first woman in Russian history to be executed for a political crime—put it simply: “I have no regrets about my fate,” she wrote to her mother on the eve of her death. “I shall meet it calmly, since I’ve long lived with the knowledge that it would come, sooner or later. And really, Mamma dear, my fate isn’t all that dismal. I have lived according to my convictions; I could not have acted otherwise; and so I await the future with a clear conscience.”

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