Women's Political and Social Thought
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Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler

appear to a great extent unaware of the immense importance of this subject, even for the future peace and stability of our Empire, apart from higher interests. It will be "imposed upon them," I do not doubt, sooner or later, as it has been imposed upon certain missionaries and others who regard the Divine command as practical and sensible men should do: "Go ye and teach all nations." All cannot go to the ends of the earth; but all might cease to hinder by the dead weight of their indifference, and their contempt of all men of colour. Dr. Livingstone rebuked the Boers for contemptuously calling all coloured men Kaffirs, to whatever race they belonged. Englishmen deserve still more such a rebuke for their habit of including all the inhabitants of India, East and West, and of Africa, who have not European complexions, under the contemptuous title of "niggers." Race prejudice is a poison which will have to be cast out if the world is ever to be Christianized, and if Great Britain is to maintain the high and responsible place among the nations which has been given to her.

"It may be that the Kaffir is sometimes cruel," says one who has seen and known him,—"he certainly requires supervision. But he was bred in cruelty and reared in oppression—the child of injustice and hate. As the springbok is to the lion, as the locust is to the hen, so is the Kaffir to the Boer; a subject of plunder and leaven of greed. But the Kaffir is capable of courage and also of the most enduring affection. He has been known to risk his life for the welfare of his master's family. He has worked without hope of reward. He has laboured in the expectation of pain. He has toiled in the snare of the fowler. Yet shy a brickbat at him!—for he is only a Kaffir!" However much the Native may excel in certain qualities of the heart, still, until purged of the poison of racial contempt, that will be the expression of the practical conclusion of the white man regarding him; "Shy a brickbat at him. He is only a nigger."

A merely theoretical acknowledgment of the vital nature of this question,—of the future of the Native races and of Missionary work will not suffice. The Father of the great human family demands more than this.

"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that ye break every yoke?"
(Isaiah lviii.6.)
Vera Figner (1852–1942)

Vera Nikolaevna Figner, born on June 24, 1852, was one of those revolutionary women who were leaders of the Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will), the terrorist branch of the populist movement in Russia in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was her close associate, Sofia Perovskaya, who directed and carried out the assassination of Tsar Alexander II on March 1, 1881, for which Perovskaya and others were executed on April 3 of that year. Vera Figner, who had participated in the assassination plot and helped to prepare the bombs, escaped arrest for nearly two years. As the sole surviving member of the Executive Committee of the Narodnaya Volya, she became the party’s leader and succeeded in rallying and reorganizing its forces until betrayed to Alexander III’s police by one of her most trusted associates, Sergei Degaye. She was arrested on February 10, 1883, in a sweep which led to the destruction of the party through the imprisonment, exile, and executions of many of its remaining leaders and members.

At the Trial of the Fourteen in September 1884, Vera Figner was condemned to death, but the sentence was reduced to life imprisonment. In October 1884 she was sent to the Schlusselberg fortress, the most oppressive and hated of the Tzarist prisons, where many died of the physical and mental abuse and deprivations to which they were subjected. There was only one other woman, Ludmilla Wolkenstein, in the prison. Figner was kept for nearly twenty years in solitary confinement at Schlusselberg but was released in 1904 to live in exile, at first in Siberia, later in Europe. From 1906 until 1914 she lived in Switzerland, France, and England, but she returned to Russia at the outbreak of World War I. She was detained again in Nijni-Novgorod but was permitted to go to St. Petersburg in 1916, and she lived to see the Russian Revolution, its aftermath, and the fateful events leading to World War II. She died in Moscow on June 16, 1942, at ninety years of age.

During her imprisonment in the Peter Paul fortress in St. Petersburg while awaiting trial in 1883–84, Figner wrote pre-trial testimony preserved in police files, and at the trial, though weakened by the conditions of her imprisonment and fearful that her voice would fail because of the months of enforced silence she had endured, she was able to offer a sustained and powerful defense of the beliefs, motives, and resort to violence of the Narodnaya Volya. Her trial statement was kept from publication in Russia until after the Revolution of 1905; it was first published in 1906, while she was still living in Siberian exile. Her voice and her pen were silenced during the twenty years she spent at Schlusselberg, where she was not allowed books or paper for thirteen years, and by the time she was released she found herself wholly disoriented by the changes that had taken place. But in later years she became dedicated to writing her autobiography (beginning with Zapachatennyi Trud [The Unforgettable Effort], published in 1921–22) and to preserving the memoirs of other populist revolutionaries of the Tzarist era, through the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles and the Granat Encyclopaedia, for which she edited a collection of forty-four memoirs in 1926.

Figner grew up in an isolated country environment with little to direct her toward the political course she adopted as a young woman. Her mother was the source of her early education and her aspirations for higher education for herself and other women. Her first introduction to liberal social views came from an uncle, a liberal democrat, and later influences on her thought were the radical press and the women’s movement. But like thousands of young men and women of the middle and upper classes in late-nineteenth-century Russia, she was swept up, in revulsion against the brutality of Russian czarism, into the movement “to the people,” the mission of bringing education, medical care, and reform to the masses of Russian peasantry and factory workers. Her first steps in this direction were modest but plunged her rapidly into the maelstrom. To extricate herself from her limited opportunities at home, she married in 1870 an accommodating liberal lawyer, Alexei Filipov, and with him and one of her younger sisters, Lydia, went to study medicine at the University of Zurich in 1872, conscious that she and other women who pursued this opportunity in that period were, as she later expressed it, “pioneers in the struggle for women’s higher education.”

In Zurich, Figner encountered the clandestine study circles—at first of women only, later of men and women—in which she was introduced to a wide range of radical and socialist thought and debate. She came to Zurich with vague ideals of service to the poor and admiration for democratic governments but soon came into contact with more radical concepts and ideas such as class, capital, proletariat, and the social parasitism of the privileged classes. As she later recorded, it was in conversations with Sofia Bardina, a student she met in a mineralogy class, that she was shaken to the core by recognition of her own heretofore unwitting role, by virtue of her class position, as oppressor and exploiter of the poor. Filipov, alienated by the political direction Vera was pursuing, returned to Russia and they were
soon divorced. But it was her sister Lydia who first became deeply engaged in revolutionary activities and drew Vera into a solemn pact to commit her life to the movement. After Lydia returned to Russia and was arrested in 1875, convicted in one of the famous mass political trials of the period—the Trial of the 50—and sent into exile, Vera gave up her hopes of a medical degree and returned to Russia to engage herself fully in the revolutionary struggle.

Initially, Figner and her sister Eugénie worked with a new organization, Land and Liberty, founded in 1876. They undertook to work in country districts, teaching, providing health care, and seeking to raise political consciousness. But like many other young people with the same ideals, they were met with suspicion and hostility from the upper classes and discomfort from many of the poor, and as their efforts to work for change through such pacific means stumbled or were met by brutal police repression, they turned to the policy of selective violence that was adopted formally at the founding of the Narodnaya Volya in 1879.

In this they were inspired and followed the example—though not the program—of Vera Zasulich, who initiated the campaign of revolutionary terrorism by shooting Governor-General Trepov of St. Petersburg on January 25, 1878, in the reception room of the governor's offices in front of more than twenty witnesses. Although Zasulich had been briefly acquainted with the nihilist Sergei Nechaiev, she was not a nihilist and did not advocate terrorist violence as a policy. She shot Trepov in reaction to an especially sadistic and unjustified public whipping of a prisoner. She did not particularly try to kill him (and did not), and she testified at her trial that she shot him in order to make a public statement "that no one can be allowed to carry his contempt for human dignity to such lengths" (Maxwell, 11). Public sentiment was so hostile to Trepov and sympathy for Zasulich so great that she was acquitted, and though the police attempted to rearrest her, she managed to escape abroad. In later years she became, with George Plekhanov and P. B. Axelrod, a founder of the Russian Marxist group, Emancipation of Labor. Though Zasulich differed from Plekhanov in her theoretical approach to Marxism, she shared his opposition to the policy of revolutionary terrorism adopted by the Narodnaya Volya. Nevertheless the image of her decisive action and spectacular escape and the public enthusiasm her actions aroused went far to persuade Vera Figner and others struggling inside Russia to gain ground for the revolution that was the best option open to them was that of selective terrorism.

As the public response to Zasulich's action made clear, sentiment in favor of democratic political reform was widespread throughout the different classes of society, despite the success of the czarist police in driving the opposition underground. One significant aspect of this was the spread of democratic and socialist ideas even into the military forces and the officer corps. Vera Figner was remarkably successful in winning support and protection among the officers at Kronstadt, St. Petersburg, Odessa, and other locations, even after the assassination of the Tsar in 1881. Indeed, though the uprising that Narodnaya Volya had hoped would follow the assassination never materialized, the possibility was debated seriously amongst the revolutionary sympathizers in the military, and they welcomed Figner, the sole surviving member of the Executive Committee that had planned and executed the assassination, to stir their imaginations and challenge their ideas. This she did, exhorting them to question the nature of their obligations and see that duty, honor, and patriotism all called them to join the revolution. "You can stand with the liberators of our people or you can be their hangmen. And let him who wavers remember the foul path he must tread if he chooses to serve tyranny. He must deaden his conscience, spit on human dignity, blind himself to the shootings and beatings by the mercenary police, and be ready to order his troops to shoot innocent people. . . . Say 'No!' to this. . . . In the open war with tyranny which is at hand, the true officers will carry the flag of the people" (Maxwell, 90–91).

And many were won over or strengthened by her. As one admirer wrote: "Figner appeared to be a super-revolutionary. A lot was said about her beauty, elegance, education, intelligence and ability to conduct herself properly in all social circles, aristocratic included. For us she was an ideal revolutionary, a woman with an iron will. After the fall of Perovskia and Zheltayov, she was the only one everyone recognized as having unlimited revolutionary authority" (Engel and Rosenthal, 3). Perhaps this recognition was a reflection of the integrity of her commitment to the cause, and her conviction that there could be no separation between theory and action. "I made no distinctions between word and deed. . . . I believed in the power of words and the might of the human will," she wrote (Engel and Rosenthal, xiii).

The following selections are from the 1991 reprint of Figner's Memoirs of a Revolutionist (1927), the abridged English translation of Zapechatlennyi Trud. Her trial statement (1884) was reproduced by her in the Memoirs and is included among the excerpts given here, as are several statements by the Executive Committee of the Narodnaya Volya, which also reflect her views.

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Sources and Suggested Readings


Memoirs of a Revolutionist (1927) [1921-22]

Author’s foreword to the American edition

More than one hundred years ago the advanced portion of Russian society became imbued with the idea of the necessity of overthrowing the Autocracy, and replacing it by a representative government. But from the military conspiracy of the Decembrists (1825) to the seventies, only individual persons or small isolated groups figured as the opponents of absolutism, and they were swiftly crushed by the repressive measures of the government. Only with the liberation of the serfs (1861) and the inauguration of reforms during the early years of the reign of Alexander II (1818-1881) was Russian life rejuvenated, and social forces received a chance for a broader activity. However, the land and court reforms, and the introduction of county (zemstvo) and city self-government, could not satisfy the progressive men of Russia, as long as the obsolete political order remained. Despite the abolition of serfdom the economic condition of the people was quite unsatisfactory; the long-expected "freedom" failed to fulfill the hopes of the peasantry. On the other hand, the educated class, now increased in numbers, demanded a wider field of activity, and this was impossible in the absence of civil liberties.

These were the two causes of the incessant turmoil which reigned in the internal life of Russia and generated a revolutionary movement with the permanent slogan of Land and Freedom. At first the social-revolutionary movement was directed toward the organisation of the peasant masses for an uprising, with the aim of overthrowing the existing economic order. It was expected that this would inevitably result in the fall of the political order and its replacement by a new one. Such a formulation of the revolutionary programme implied no direct struggle against the government. But toward the end of the seventies, a new tendency ripened, owing to the lack of response on the part of the peasants, and to the persecutions and intolerable oppression of the unlimited Autocracy: the overthrow of absolutism was formulated as a definite task. In 1879 was formed the revolutionary socialist party, The Will of the People, headed by its Executive Committee. Planning the organisation of a military conspiracy backed by factory workers and by all the discontented, this party resolved to throw its own forces without delay into a ruthless battle with the Autocracy, directing its blows against the head of the state, who personally assumed the responsibility for the rule of the millions and millions of his people. This battle by means of violence against violence was waged for three years with unexampled energy and obstinacy. It culminated on March 1 (14), 1881, when Emperor Alexander II fell on the streets of St. Petersburg from the bombs hurled by two members of the party.

The first part of my book comprises the brief period of 1876-1884, describing the consecutive activity of the secret society, Land and Freedom, and later, of the party, The Will of the People. I took part in working out the programme of Land and Freedom, and was the last member of the Executive Committee of The Will of the People when arrested, in 1883. I describe the events as an eye-witness and participant.

The Executive Committee perished to the last person, the party was smashed, but its significance in the history of the revolutionary movement was extraordinary. After The Will of the People, political struggle became an essential part of the programmes of all the subsequent revolutionary generations. Seventy-two members of the party appeared before court within five years. Those who were not executed or exiled to Siberia, were incarcerated in the Fortress of Sts. Peter and Paul, and from 1884, in the Schlüsselfort. In the latter, I, too, was confined. The majority of us died, and I was freed in 1904, after twenty years of confinement, and sent into exile. Life in Schlüsselfort, mine and that of my comrades—this epilogue of our struggle against Autocracy—is described in the second part of my book.

Vera Figner.

Moscow, Spring, 1927.
P.S. For those who may be dismayed by the cruel methods employed by The Will of the People in its struggle against Autocracy, I should like to recall the declaration of the Executive Committee of our party, on the occasion of the assassination of President James A. Garfield in 1881:

"Expressing its profound sympathy for the American people, on the occasion of the death of President James Abram Garfield, the Executive Committee regards it as its duty to declare in the name of the Russian revolutionists its protest against such acts of violence as that of Cuiiteau. In a land where personal freedom gives an opportunity for an honest conflict of ideas, where the free will of the people determines not only the law but also the personality of the ruler, in such a land political murder as a means of struggle presents a manifestation of that despotic spirit which we aim to destroy in Russia. Personal despotism is as condemned as group despotism, and violence may be justified only when it is directed against violence."

(Signed) The Executive Committee. September 10 (23), 1881. V.F.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE

In conformity with the demands of intensive warfare against our mighty antagonist, the plan of organisation of The Will of the People was designed along lines of strict centralisation, and on an all-Russian scale. A net of secret societies, groups of party members, some of whom might busy themselves with tasks of a general revolutionary nature in a limited region, while others might pursue special aims, having chosen for themselves one branch or another of revolutionary work, was to have one common centre, the Executive Committee, through which a general solidarity and bond was established. The local groups were obliged to obey this centre, to surrender to it their members and resources upon demand. All general party functions and business of an all-Russian nature, came under the direction of this centre. At a time of uprising, it was to direct all the available forces of the party, and might call upon them for revolutionary purposes. But until such a time, its main attention was to be directed towards the planning of a conspiracy, that work of organisation which alone provided for the possibility of a revolution, through which the authority was to be transferred to the hands of the people. The forces of the party were generally applied in this direction. All the stranger was the title of terrorist organisation which it later acquired. The public gave it that name because of the external aspect of its activity, the one characteristic which caught their attention. Terror for its own sake was never the aim of the party. It was a weapon of protection, of self-defence, regarded as a powerful instrument for agitation, and employed only for the purpose of attaining the ends for which the organisation was working. The assassination of the Tsar came under this head as one detail. In the fall of 1879, it was a necessity, a question of the day, which caused some to accept this assassination and terrorist activity in general as the most essential point of our entire programme. The desire to check the further development of reaction which hampered our organising activity, and the wish to assume our work as soon as possible, were the only reasons which induced the Executive Committee immediately upon its formation as the centre of The Will of the People, to plan for an attempt on the life of Alexander II to be made simultaneously in four different places. And yet the members of the Committee at the same time carried on active propaganda both among the intelligentsia and the workingmen. Zhelyabov directed it in Kharkov, Rolodkevich and I in Odessa, Alexander Mikhailov in Moscow, and Kryakovsky, Rorba and others in St. Petersburg. The work of propaganda and organisation always went hand in hand with that of destruction; it was less evident, but was nevertheless destined to bear its fruits.

Uniting the dissatisfied elements into a general conspiracy against the government, the new party fully understood the meaning of the support which a peasant uprising would give them at the moment of the government's overthrow. Accordingly it assigned a requisite place for activity among the people, and always regarded the ones who wished to devote themselves to it, as its natural allies.

The by-laws of the Executive Committee, by which we bound ourselves, were also written by those who had called the congress at Lipetsk. These requirements of the constitution consisted: first, in the promise to devote all one's mental and spiritual strength to the revolutionary work, to forget for its sake all ties of kinship, and all personal sympathies, love and friendships; second, to give one's life also, if necessary, taking no thought of anything else, and sparing no one and nothing; third, to have no personal property, nothing of one's own, which was not shared in common by the organisation of which one was a member, fourth, to devote oneself entirely to the secret society, to renounce one's individual desires, subordinating them to the will of the majority as expressed in the ordinances of that society; fifth, to preserve complete secrecy with respect to all the affairs, personnel, plans and proposals of the organisation; sixth, never in dealings of private or social nature, or in official acts and declarations, to call ourselves members of the Executive.
tive Committee, but only its agents; and seventh, in case of withdrawal from the society, to preserve an unbroken silence as to the nature of its activity, and the business transacted before the eyes and with the participation of the one withdrawing.

These demands were great, but they were easily fulfilled by one fired with the revolutionary spirit, with that intense emotion which knows neither obstacles nor impediments, but goes forward, looking neither backward nor to the right nor the left. If these demands had been less exigent, if they had not stirred one's spirit so profoundly, they would not have satisfied us; but now, by their severe and lofty nature they exalted us and freed us from every petty or personal consideration. One felt more vividly that in him there lived, there must live, an ideal. . . .

**THE FIRST OF MARCH**

By the order of the Committee I was to remain at home until two o'clock on that first day of March, to receive the Kobozevs, for Bogdanovich was to leave the shop an hour before the Tsar's party should pass that way, and Yakimova was to leave directly after the signal that the Tsar had made his appearance on the Neva. A third person (Frolenko) was to switch on the electric current, and then leave the shop as a casual customer, in case he should escape perishing in the ruins from the explosion wrought by his own hand.

At ten o'clock Frolenko came to see me. With astonishment I saw him take from a package that he had brought with him, a bottle of red wine and a sausage, which he put on the table, preparing to have a little lunch. In my state of intense excitement, after our decision and the sleepless night spent in preparations, it seemed to me that to eat and drink was impossible.

"What are you doing?" I asked, almost with horror, as I beheld this matter-of-fact procedure on the part of a man who was destined to an almost certain death under the ruin caused by the explosion.

"I must be in full possession of my strength," calmly replied my comrade, and he imperturbably began to eat.

I could only bow in silent admiration before this disregard of the thought of possible death, this all-absorbing realisation that, in order to fulfil the mission which he had taken upon himself, he must be in full possession of his strength.

Neither Bogdanovich nor Yakimova came to the apartment. Isayev returned, and with him a few members of the party, with the news that the Tsar had not passed the shop, but had gone home from the Manège. Forgetfully entirely that they had not followed the return route of the Tsar, and also had not been informed of the last decision of the Committee, to act, whatever might occur, though it be only with bombs, I left the house thinking that for some unforeseen reasons the attempt had not taken place.

And indeed, the Tsar did not pass through the Sadovaya; but it was at this point that Sofia Perovskaya displayed all her self-possession. Quickly concluding that the Tsar would return by way of the quay along the Ekateriminskaya Canal, she changed the entire plan of action, deciding to employ only the bombs. She made the rounds of the bomb-throwers and instructed them to take new positions, after they had agreed that she was to give the signal by waving her handkerchief.

Shortly after two o'clock, two detonations that sounded like shots from a cannon, thundered out, one after another. Rysakov's bomb wrecked the Tsar's carriage, while Grinevitsky's struck the Tsar. Both the Tsar and Grinevitsky were mortally wounded, and died within a few hours.

When I left the house after Isayev's return, everything was quiet, but half an hour after I had made my appearance at Glyeb Upsensky's, Ivanchin-Pisarev came to him with the news that there had been some explosions and that a rumour was circulating to the effect that the Tsar had been killed, and that in the churches the people were already swearing allegiance to the heir.

I rushed home. The streets hummed with talk, and there was evident excitement. People were speaking of the Tsar, of his wounds, of blood and death. When I entered my own dwelling and saw my friends who as yet suspected nothing, I was so agitated that I could hardly utter the words announcing the death of the Tsar. I wept, and many of us wept; that heavy nightmare, which for ten years had strangled young Russia before our very eyes, had been brought to an end; the horrors of prison and exile, the violence, executions, and atrocities inflicted on hundreds and thousands of our adherents, the blood of our martyrs, all were atoned for by this blood of the Tsar, shed by our hands. A heavy burden was lifted from our shoulders; reaction must come to an end and give place to a new Russia. In this solemn moment, all our thoughts centred in the hope for a better future for our country.

Shortly afterwards Sukhanov joined us, joyful and excited, and embraced and congratulated us all in the name of that future. The letter to Alexander III [see Appendix], drawn up a few days later, is characteristic of the general state of mind of the members of the party in St. Petersburg, during the period that followed the first of March. The letter was composed with a moderation and tact that won the sympathetic approval of all Russian society. Upon its publication in the West, it

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produced a sensation throughout all the European press. The most moderate and conservative periodicals expressed their approval of the demands of the Russian Nihilists, finding them reasonable, just, and such as had in large measure been long ago realised in the daily life of Western Europe...

I must here say a few more words about the demoralisation brought about in society by the methods of the struggle between the government and the revolutionary party. This struggle was accompanied by violence, as is the case with any conflict waged by means of force rather than ideas. And violence, whether committed against a thought, an action, or a human life, never contributed to the refinement of morals. It arouses ferocity, develops brutal instincts, awakens evil impulses, and prompts acts of disloyalty. Humanity and magnanimity are incompatible with it. And from this point of view, the government and the revolutionary party, when they entered into what may be termed a hand-to-hand battle, vied with one another in corrupting everything and every one around them. On the one hand, the party declared that all methods were fair in the war with its antagonist, that here the end justified the means. At the same time, it created a cult of dynamite and the revolver, and crowned the terrorist with a halo; murder and the scaffold acquired a magnetic charm and attraction for the youth of the land, and the weaker their nervous system, and the more oppressive the life around them, the greater was their exaltation at the thought of revolutionary terror. Since the effects of ideas are hardly perceptible to a revolutionary during the brief span of his lifetime, he desires to see some concrete, palpable manifestation of his own will, his own strength, and at that time only a terrorist act with all its violence could be such a manifestation. Society saw no escape from the existing condition; one group sympathised with the violence practised by the party, while others regarded it only as a necessary evil—but even they applauded the valour and skill of the champion. And the repetition of such events made them a normal element of society's life.

But the gloomy side of revolutionary activity was heightened by the concord and brotherhood which existed among the revolutionists themselves; moreover, the party committed its deeds of violence under the banner of the people's welfare, in defence of the oppressed and insulted. Outsiders became reconciled to terrorism because of the disinterestedness of its motives; it redeemed itself through renunciation of material benefits, through the fact that the revolutionist was not satisfied with personal well-being, the possibility of which he rejected, once he had set out on his dangerous path; it redeemed itself by prison, exile, penal servitude and death. Thus, though society became somewhat callous by accustomed itself to the violence practised by the revolutionary party, yet it nevertheless beheld, if not in the party as a whole, at least in individual representatives of it, examples of self-sacrifice and heroism, persons of rare civic virtues.

Parallel with the violence practised by the revolutionary party, but on a larger scale, was the violence practised by the government. It enchanted thought, forbade free speech, and despoiled the people of life and freedom. Administrative exile was an ordinary occurrence, the prisons were filled to overflowing, executions were numbered by the dozen. In addition to this, prisoners were violently abused in the Siberian mines, and humiliating treatment was common in the central prisons. Throughout all the prisons harshness and violence were the daily order; in the House of Preliminary Detention, Bogolyubov was flogged and the modesty of women was insulted.

The officials who carried out the orders became callous, the sufferers and their relatives, friends and acquaintances became more and more incensed. Society became accustomed to this degradation of human dignity. The spectacle of public executions aroused mob bloodthirst; retaliation, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, became the watchword of all. Secret police were necessary in order to avert the government from impending danger; official gold created an army of spies. These were recruited from all ranks of society; among them were generals and baronesses, officers and advocates, journalists and doctors, college men and women; alas, there were even high-school students, little girls fourteen years old, while in Simferopol the department of the gendarmerie induced an eleven year-old high-school boy to become a paid spy. We know well that there is no stronger passion, or one leading to baser crimes than the passion for gold. Persian gold forced the Greek chieftains to sell their native land; thirty pieces of silver seduced Judas Iscariot. Our government took every advantage of the greed and covetousness of the human race, and utilised in every possible way the power of gold. Young women used the charms of their beauty and youth to seduce and betray; spies played the parts of initiators, organisers, and moving spirits in revolutionary work; secret accusations, treachery of the most perfidious kind, a clever trick at an examination, as a means of exacting a confession, or the inauguration of a great trial, under the most artificial pretences, and at the price of the well-being of dozens of people—such were the exploits that won the prize of gold, or advancement in office. In addition to all this, the government enticed the weak members of the party to become renegades. Remission of penalties, an agreement to forget the past, freedom and money— all served as a means for...
seduction. This was the greatest moral blow dealt to us revolutionists, a blow which shook our faith in mankind. It was not so hard to lose one’s freedom, as to see a former comrade for whose sake you had been ready to risk your life, whom you had trusted and protected, and for whom you had performed every possible brotherly service—to see him helping the gendarmes to arrest you, and to hear his cynical words, “So you didn’t expect it, did you?” Of course, all this was done in the name of “legal” justice, for the sake of saving the fatherland, or rather that state of society in which they wished to preserve the fatherland. But who, who will deny the base degradation of human character made manifest by these facts? . . .

There came at last the most memorable day of my life, the most profoundly moving moment in any trial, when the president turning to the accused, says in a peculiarly solemn voice, “Defendant, the last word is yours!”

The last word! How great, and how deep a significance is in that brief phrase! The accused is given an opportunity, unique in its tragic setting, and perhaps the last, the very last opportunity in his life, to express his spiritual individuality, to explain the moral justification of his acts and conduct, and to speak aloud, for all to hear, those things which he wishes to say, which he must say, and may say. A few minutes more, and this opportunity, this last possibility, drops into the past, retreats irrevocably and forever. If this moment is allowed to escape, the man whom they are trying, and whom they are ready to condemn, will never more lift his voice in speech: they will not listen to him, and his voice will either grow dumb in prison, or die with him on the scaffold.

How many torturing fears did I experience, in awaiting that day and hour in the loneliness of my cell!

Under the circumstances created by the investigation, I was the central figure of the trial, the person of most importance in the case under consideration. The previous trials (dating from 1879 to 1884), of Alexander Soloviev, Alexander Kryatkovsky, of the conspirators of the first of March, and the trials of the twenty, and of the seventeen members of The Will of the People, during which my name had been frequently mentioned, had created for me, the last of them all to be arrested, an exceptional position. This position demanded that, as the last member of the Executive Committee, and as a representative of The Will of the People, I should speak at the trial.

But I was in no mood for making speeches. I was crushed by the general situation in our native land. There was no doubt that the conflict and the protest were ended; a long, dark period of reaction had come upon us, all the more difficult to endure morally, because we had not expected it, but had hoped for an entirely new form of social life and government. The warfare had been waged by methods of unheard-of cruelty, but we had paid for such methods with our lives, and had believed and hoped. But the common people had remained silent, and had not understood. The advanced elements had remained silent, though they had understood. The wheel of history had been against us; we had anticipated by twenty-five years the course of events, the general political development of the city people and the peasantry—and we were left alone. The carefully selected and organised forces, small in number, but audacious in spirit, had been swept from life’s arena, suppressed and annihilated. My comrades on the Executive Committee had been arrested and condemned before me. Some of them had died on the scaffold, others had died slowly from exhaustion and ill-treatment behind the walls of the Alexey Ravelin. The entire organisation of The Will of the People party, insofar as it had not been destroyed, had been reduced to fragments, over the ruins of which played the demoralising activity of Sergey Degayev, who, after the founders of The Will of the People had met their fate, began his career of betrayal in prison, and, emerging therefrom by means of a pretended escape, continued his career of treachery and espionage outside.

So it came about that at the time of the trial in 1884, in which I was the central figure, the secret society which had striven to destroy autocracy, and which through its activities had not only shaken to the foundations our native land, but had aroused the whole civilised world, now lay prostrate. It lay prostrate, with no hope of soon arising from its ruin.

And at the very time when my body was shaken and weakened by the conditions of my preliminary imprisonment in the Fortress, when my spirit was broken and devastated by all that I had lived through, the moment arrived in which I was inexorably bound to fulfil my duty to my dead comrades and to our shattered party, to confess my faith, to declare before the court the spiritual impulses which had governed our activities, and to point out the social and political ideal to which we had aspired.

The presiding judge had spoken; my name was called. There was an unnatural silence, and the eyes of those present, strangers and comrades alike, turned to me, and they were all listening, though as yet I had not uttered a word.

I was nervous and timid: what if in the midst of my carefully thought-out speech that mental darkness should suddenly descend upon me, which in those
decisive days frequently overwhelmed me, without causing me to lose consciousness?

And in the midst of the stillness, vibrant with the general attention, I spoke my last words in a voice wherein sounded my repressed emotion.

"The court has been examining my revolutionary activities since the year 1879. The public prosecutor has expressed astonishment in his speech of indictment, both with respect to the character and to the extent of those activities. But these crimes, like all others, have their own history. They are logically and closely bound up with my whole previous life. During the period of my preliminary imprisonment, I have often debated whether my life could have followed a different course, or could have ended in any other spot than this Criminal Court. And every time I have replied to myself, No!

"I began my life under very happy surroundings. I had no lack of guides in the formation of my character; it was not necessary to keep me in leading strings. My family was intelligent and affectionate, so that I never experienced the disharmony which often exists between the older and younger generations. I had no knowledge of material want, and no anxiety concerning daily necessities or self-support. When, at the age of seventeen, I left the Institute, the thought was borne in upon me for the first time that not every one lived under such happy conditions as I. The vague idea that I belonged to the cultured minority, aroused in me the thought of the obligations which my position imposed upon me with respect to the remaining uneducated masses, who lived from day to day, submerged in manual toil, and deprived of all those things which are usually called the blessings of civilisation. This visualisation of the contrast between my position and the position of those who surrounded me, aroused in me the first thought of the necessity of creating for myself a purpose in life which should tend to benefit those others.

"Russian journalism of that period, and the feminist movement which was in full swing at the beginning of the seventies, gave a ready answer to the questions which arose in my mind, and indicated the medical profession as being a form of activity which would satisfy my philanthropic aspirations.

"The Women's Academy in St. Petersburg had already been opened, but from its very beginning it was characterised by the weakness for which it has been distinguished up to the present time, in its constant struggle between life and death; and since I had firmly made up my mind, and did not wish to be forced to abandon the course which I had undertaken, I decided to go abroad.

"And so, having considerably recast my life, I departed for Zurich, and entered the University. Life abroad presented a sharp contrast to Russian life. I saw there things which were entirely new to me. I had not been prepared for them by what I had previously seen and known; I had not been prepared to make a correct evaluation of everything which came into my life. I accepted the idea of socialism at first almost instinctively. It seemed to me that it was nothing more than a broader conception of that altruistic thought which had earlier awakened in my mind. The teaching which promised equality, fraternity, and universal happiness, could not help but dazzle me. My horizon became broader; in place of my native village and its inhabitants, there appeared before me a picture of the common people, of humanity. Moreover, I had gone abroad at the time when the events which had taken place in Paris, and the revolution which was progressing in Spain, were evoking a mighty echo from the entire labouring world of the west. At the same time I became acquainted with the doctrines and the organisation of the International. Not till later did I begin to realise that much of what I saw there was only the brighter side of the picture. Moreover, I did not regard the working-class movement with which I had become acquainted, as a product of western-European life, but I thought that the same doctrine applied to all times, and to every locality.

"Attracted by socialist ideas while abroad, I joined the first revolutionary circle in the work of which my sister Lydia was engaged. Its plan of organisation was very weak; each member might take up revolutionary work in any form he chose, and at any time suited to his convenience. This work consisted of spreading the ideas of socialism, in the optimistic hope that the common people of Russia, already socialists because of their poverty and their social position, could be converted to socialism by a mere word. What we termed at that time the social revolution was rather in the nature of a peaceful social reorganisation; that is, we thought that the minority who opposed socialism, on seeing the impossibility of carrying on the strife, would be forced to yield to the majority who had become conscious of their own interests; and so there was no mention of bloodshed.

"I remained abroad for almost four years. I had always been more or less conservative, in the sense that I did not make speedy decisions, but having once made them, I withdrew from them only with great difficulty. Even when in the spring of 1874, almost the entire circle left for Russia, I remained abroad to continue my medical studies.

"My sister and the other members of the circle ended their careers most miserably. Two or three months' work as labourers in factories, secured for them two-and three-year terms of preliminary detention, after which a trial condemned some of them to
penal servitude, others, to lifelong exile in Siberia. While they were in prison, the summons came to me: they asked me to return to Russia to support the cause of the circle. Inasmuch as I had already received a sufficiently thorough medical education, so that the conferring of the title of doctor of medicine and surgery upon me would satisfy only my vanity, I cut short my course and returned to Russia.

"There, from the very first, I found a critical and difficult situation. The movement 'To the People' had already suffered defeat. Nevertheless, I found a fairly large group of persons who seemed congenial, whom I trusted, and with whom I became intimate. Together with them I participated in the working out of that programme which is known as the Programme of the Populists [Narodniki]."

"I went to live in the country. The programme of the Populists, as the court knows, had aims which the law could not sanction, for its problem was to effect the transfer of all the land into the hands of the peasant communes. But before this could be accomplished, the rôle which the revolutionists living among the people must play, consisted in what is called in all countries, cultural activity. So it was that I too went to live in the country with designs of a purely revolutionary nature, and yet I do not think that my manner towards the peasants, or my actions in general, would have aroused persecution in any other country save Russia; elsewhere I might even have been considered a useful member of society.

"I became an assistant surgeon in the Zemstvo."

"A whole league was formed against me in a very short time, at the head of which stood the marshal of the nobility, and the district police captain, while in the rear were the village constable, the county clerk and others. Rumours of every kind were spread about me: that I had no passport, while I really had one, and was living under my own name; that my diploma was forged, and so forth. When the peasants did not wish to enter into an unprofitable agreement with the proprietor, it was said that I was to blame; when the county assembly reduced the clerk's salary, it was said that I was again to blame.

"Public and secret inquiries were made: the police captain came; several of the peasants were arrested; my name figured in the cross-questioning; two complaints were made to the governor, and it was only through the efforts made by the president of the executive board of the County Zemstvo that I was left in peace. Police espionage rose up around me; people began to be afraid of me. The peasants came to my house by stealthy and circuitous routes.

"These obstacles naturally led me to the question: what could I accomplish under such conditions?"

"I shall speak frankly. When I settled in the village, I was at an age when I could no longer make gross mistakes through any lack of tact, at an age when people become more tolerant, more attentive to the opinions of others. I wanted to study the ground, to learn what the peasant himself thought, what he wished. I saw that there were no acts of mine which could incriminate me, that I was being persecuted only for my spirit, for my private views. They did not think that it was possible for a person of some culture to settle in the village without some horrible purpose.

"And so I was deprived of the possibility of even physical contact with the people, and was unable not only to accomplish anything, but even to hold the most simple, everyday relations with them.

"Then I began to ponder: had I not made some mistake from which I could escape by moving to another locality and repeating my attempt? It was hard for me to give up my plans. I had studied medicine for four years and had grown accustomed to the thought that I was going to work among the peasants.

"On considering this question, and hearing the stories that others had to tell, I became convinced that it was not a question of my own personality, or the conditions of a given locality, but of conditions in general, namely, the absence of political freedom in Russia.

"I had already received more than one invitation from the organisation Land and Freedom, to become one of its members, and to work among the intelligentsia. But as I always clung fast to a decision once made, I did not accept these invitations, and stayed in the village as long as there was any possibility of my doing so. Thus, not vacillation but bitter necessity forced me to give up my original views and to set out on another course.

"At that time individual opinions had begun to arise to the effect that the political element was to play an important role in the problems of the revolutionary party. Two opposing divisions grew up in the society Land and Freedom, and pulled in opposite directions. When I had come to the end of my attempts in the country, I notified the organisation that I now considered myself free.

"At that time two courses were open to me: I could either take a step backwards, go abroad and become a physician — no longer for the peasants, to be sure, but for wealthy people — which I did not wish to do, or I could choose the other course, which I preferred: employ my energy and strength in breaking down that obstacle which had thwarted my desires. After entering Land and Freedom, I was invited to attend the conference at Voronezh, where there took place no immediate split in the party, but where the position of each member was more or less clearly defined. Some said that we must carry on our work on the old basis, that is, live in the village and organise a popular insur-

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rection in some definite locality; others believed that it was necessary to live in the city and direct our efforts against the imperial authority.

"From Voronezh I went to St. Petersburg, where shortly afterwards Land and Freedom broke up, and I received and accepted an invitation to become a member of the Executive Committee of The Will of the People. My previous experience had led me to the conviction that the only course by which the existing order of things might be changed was a course of violence. Peaceful methods had been forbidden me; we had of course no free press, so that it was impossible to think of propagating ideas by means of the printed word. If any organ of society had pointed out to me another course than violence, I might have chosen it, at least, I would have tried it. But I had seen no protest either from the Zemstvo, or from the courts, or from any institutions whatsoever; neither had literature exerted any influence to change the life which we were leading, and so I concluded that the only escape from the position in which we found ourselves, lay in militant resistance.

"Having once taken this position, I maintained my course to the end. I had always required logical and harmonious agreement of word and action from others, and so, of course, from myself; and it seemed to me that if I admitted theoretically that only through violence could we accomplish anything I was in duty bound to take active part in whatever programme of violence might be undertaken by the organisation which I had joined. Many things forced me to take this attitude. I could not with a quiet conscience urge others to take part in acts of violence if I myself did not do so; only personal participation could give me the right to approach other people with various proposals. The organisation really preferred to use me for other purposes, for propaganda among the intelligentsia, but I desired and demanded a different role. I knew that the court would always take cognisance of whether or not I had an immediate part in our work, and that the only public opinion which is permitted to express itself freely, always descends with especial rancour upon those who take immediate part in acts of violence. And so I considered it nothing short of baseness to thrust others into a course which I myself did not enter.

"This is the explanation of that 'bloodthirst,' which must seem so terrible and incomprehensible, and which is expressed in those acts, the very enumeration of which would seem cynical to the court, had they not proceeded from motives which at all events do not seem to be dishonourable.

"The most essential part of the programme in accordance with which I worked, and which had the greatest significance for me, was the annihilation of the autocratic form of government. I really ascribe no practical importance to the question whether our programme advocates a republic or a constitutional monarchy. We may dream of a republic, but only that form of government will be realised for which society proves itself ready—and so this question has no special meaning for me. I consider it most important, most essential, that such conditions should be established as will allow the individual to develop his abilities to the fullest extent, and to devote them wholeheartedly to the good of society. And it seems to me that under our present order, such conditions do not exist."

"When I had finished, the president asked gently, "Have you said all that you wish to say?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And no earthly power could have urged me to speak further, so great was my agitation and weariness."

The sympathetic glances, handshakes and congratulations of my comrades and defenders at the end of my speech, and in the following intermission, convinced me that my address had produced an impression... . . .

Appendices

I. The Letter of the Executive Committee of the Will of the People to Tsar Alexander III

Your Majesty:—

Fully comprehending the sorrow which you are experiencing during these present moments, the Executive Committee does not, however, feel it right to yield to the impulse of natural delicacy, which demands, perhaps, a certain interval of waiting before the following explanation should be made. There is something higher than the most legitimate emotions of a human being: that is one's duty to his native land, a duty for which every citizen is obliged to sacrifice himself and his own feelings, and even the feelings of others. In obedience to this primal duty, we have determined to address you at once, without any delay, since that historical process does not wait, which threatens us in the future with rivers of blood and the most violent convulsions.

The bloody tragedy which was played on the shores of the Ekaterininsky Canal, was not accidental, and surprised no one. After all that has passed in the course of the last decade, it was absolutely inevitable, and in this lies its profound meaning—a meaning which must be understood by the man whom fate has placed at the head of the state power. To interpret such facts as being the evil plots of separate individuals, or even of a band of criminals, would be possible only to a man who was quite incapable of analysing the life of nations. In the
course of ten years we have seen how, notwithstanding the most severe persecutions, notwithstanding the fact that the government of the late Emperor sacrificed everything, freedom, the interests of all classes, the interests of industry and even its own dignity, everything, unconditionally, in its attempt to suppress the revolutionary movement, that movement has nevertheless tenaciously grown and spread, attracting to itself the best elements of the nation, the most energetic and self-denying people of Russia, and for three years now has engaged in desperate, partisan warfare with the government. You know well, your Majesty, that it is impossible to accuse the government of the late Emperor of lack of energy. They have hanged our followers, both guilty and innocent; they have filled the prisons and distant provinces with exiles. Whole dozens of our leaders have been seized and hanged. They have died with the courage and calmness of martyrs, but the movement has not been suppressed, it has grown and gained strength. Yes, your Majesty, the revolutionary movement is not such as to depend on individual personalities. It is a function of the national organism, and the gallows, erected to hang the most energetic exponents of that function, is as powerless to save this outworn order of life, as was the death of the Saviour on the cross, to save the corrupt, ancient world from the triumph of reforming Christianity.

Of course, the government may continue to arrest and hang a great multitude of separate individuals. It may destroy many revolutionary groups. Let us grant that it will destroy even the most important of the existing revolutionary organisations. This will not change the state of affairs in the least. The conditions under which we are living, the general dissatisfaction of the people, Russia’s aspiration towards a new order of life, all these create revolutionists. You cannot exterminate the whole Russian people, you cannot therefore destroy its discontent by means of reprisals; on the contrary, discontent grows thereby. This is the reason that fresh individuals, still more incensed, still more energetic, are constantly arising from the ranks of the people in great numbers to take the place of those who are being destroyed. These individuals, in the interests of the conflict, will of course organise themselves, having at hand the ready experience of their predecessors, and therefore the revolutionary movement in the course of time must grow stronger, both in quality and quantity. This we have actually seen in the last ten years. What did the death of the adherents of Dolgushin, Tchai-kovsky, the agitators of the year 1784, avail the government? The far more determined populists arose to take their place. The terrible reprisals of the government called forth upon the stage the terrorists of ’78 and ’79. In vain did the government exterminate such men as the adherents Kovalsky, Dubrovin, Osinsky, and Lizogub; in vain did it destroy dozens of revolutionary circles. From those imperfect organisations, by the course of natural selection there developed still harder forms. There appeared at last the Executive Committee, with which the government has not yet been able to cope.

Casting a dispassionate glance over the depressing decade through which we have lived, we can accurately foretell the future progress of the movement if the political tactics of the government do not change. The movement must go on growing, gaining strength; terroristic acts will be repeated in ever more alarming and intensified forms. A more perfect, stronger revolutionary organisation will take the place of the groups that are wiped out. In the meantime, the number of malcontents in the land will increase, popular faith in the government will lapse, and the idea of revolution, of its possibility and inevitability, will take root and grow more and more rapidly in Russia. A terrible outburst, a bloody subversion, a violent revolutionary convulsion throughout all Russia, will complete the process of the overthrow of the old order.

What evokes this terrible perspective, what is responsible for it? Yes, your Majesty, a terrible and sad perspective. Do not take this for a mere phrase. We understand better than any one else, how sad is the perishing of so much talent, such energy, in a labour of destruction, in bloody conflicts, when, under different conditions, these forces might be directly applied to creative work, to the progress of the people, the development of their minds, and the well-being of their national life. Whence comes this sad necessity for bloody strife?

From the fact, your Majesty, that there exists among us now no actual government, in the true meaning of the word. A government, according to its fundamental principle, should express only the aspirations of the people, should accomplish only the Will of the People. While in Russia, pardon us for the expression, the government has degenerated into a veritable camarilla, and deserves to be called a band of usurpers far more than does the Executive Committee.

Whatever may have been the intentions of the Sovereign, the acts of the government have had nothing in common with the popular welfare and desires. The Imperial Government has subjugated the people to the state of bondage, it has delivered the masses into the power of the nobility; and now it is openly creating a pernicious class of speculators and profiteers. All its reforms lead to but one result, that the people have sunk into ever greater slavery, into a state of more complete exploitation. It has brought Russia to such a point that at the present time the popular masses find

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themselves in a state of utter beggary and ruin, not free even at their own domestic firesides from the most insulting surveillance, powerless even in their own communal village affairs. Only the spoiler, the exploiter, is favoured by the protection of the law and the government. The most revolting depredations remain unpunished. But what a terrible fate awaits the man who sincerely thinks and plans for the public welfare! You know well, your Majesty, that it is not only the socialists who are exiled and persecuted. What kind of a government is this, then, which protects such an “order”? Is it not rather a band of rascals, an absolute usurpation?

This is the reason why the Russian government has no moral influence, no support in the people; this is why Russia gives birth to so many revolutionists; this is why even such a fact as regicide awakens joy and sympathetic approval in an enormous part of the population. Yes, your Majesty, do not deceive yourself with the declarations of fawners and flatters. Regicide is very popular in Russia.

There are two possible escapes from this situation: either a revolution, quite inevitable, which cannot be averted by any number of executions, or a voluntary turning to the people on the part of the Supreme Authority. In the interests of our native land, in the desire to avoid those terrible calamities which always accompany a revolution, the Executive Committee turns to your Majesty with the advice to choose the second course. Believe us that as soon as the Supreme Authority ceases to be arbitrary, as soon as it firmly determines to accomplish only the demands of the nation’s consciousness and conscience, you may boldly drive out the spies who defile your government, send your convos into their barracks, and burn the gallowes which are depraving your people. The Executive Committee itself will cease its present activity, and the forces organised around it will disperse and consecrate themselves to cultural work for the benefit of their own people. A peaceful conflict of ideas will take the place of the violence which is more repugnant to us than to your servants, and which we practise only from sad necessity.

We turn to you, casting aside all prejudices, stifling that distrust, which the age-long activity of the government has created. We forget that you are the representative of that power which has so deceived the people, and done them so much harm. We address you as a citizen and an honourable man. We hope that the feeling of personal bitterness will not suppress in you the recognition of your duties, and the desire to know the truth. We too might be embittered. You have lost your father. We have lost not only our fathers, but also our brothers, our wives, our children, our best friends. But we are ready to suppress our personal feelings if the good of Russia demands it. And we expect the same from you also. We do not lay conditions upon you. Do not be shocked by our proposition. The conditions which are indispensable in order that the revolutionary movement shall be transformed into peaceful activity, have been created, not by us, but by history. We do not impose them, we only recall them to your mind.

In our opinion there are two such conditions:

1. A general amnesty for all political crimes committed in the past, inasmuch as these were not crimes, but the fulfilment of a civic duty.

2. The convocation of an assembly of representatives of all the Russian people, for the purpose of examining the existing forms of our state and society, and revising them in accord with the desires of the people.

We consider it necessary to mention, however, that in order that the legality of the Supreme Authority may be confirmed by popular representation, the process of selecting delegates must be absolutely unrestricted. Therefore the elections must be held under the following conditions:

1. The deputies must be sent from all ranks and classes alike, and in numbers proportionate to the population.

2. There must be no restrictions imposed upon either the electors or the deputies.

3. Electioneering, and the elections themselves, must be carried out in complete freedom, and therefore the government must grant as a temporary measure, prior to the decision of the popular assembly:

   a. Complete freedom of the press,
   b. Complete freedom of speech,
   c. Complete freedom of assembly,
   d. Complete freedom of electoral programmes.

This is the only way in which Russia can be restored to a course of normal and peaceful development. We solemnly declare before our native land and all the world, that our party will submit unconditionally to the decision of a Popular Assembly which shall have been chosen in accord with the above-mentioned conditions; and in the future we shall offer no armed resistance whatever to a government that has been sanctioned by the Popular Assembly.

And so, your Majesty, decide. Before you are two courses. On you depends the choice; we can only ask Fate that your reason and conscience dictate to you a decision which will conform only to the good of Russia, to your own dignity, and to your duty to your native land.

(Signed) The Executive Committee.
March 10 (23), 1881.