TERRORISM IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE: LESSONS OF HISTORY FOR TODAY’S WAR ON TERRORISM
Part II: The People’s Will and its role in the history of political terrorism in Russia

Introduction. This article examines the role and significance of the revolutionary populist socialist organization The People’s Will in the history of political terrorism in the Russian Empire.

Methods. Two waves of political terrorism took place in the Russian empire between 1878 and 1894 and 1894 and 1916. The first wave of terrorism was dominated by the People’s Will whose major accomplishment was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II on March 1, 1881. By contrast, many left-wing parties and movements participated in the massive second wave, particularly in the Revolution of 1905-1907. However, elements of continuity dominated the second wave of terrorism largely due to the work of the People’s Will in determining goals and tactics of terrorism.

Results. The People’s Will acquired such an aura of perfection and self-sacrifice that future terrorists could not change their goals and tactics out of fear of betraying the legacy of this organization. The legacy of the People’s Will shaped not only the goals and tactics of the terrorists of the second generation, but also the responses of liberals, conservatives, and the government in both waves of terrorism. Terrorism in both waves was often used by different groupings in the government and political classes to advance their political goals and justify their responses to the terrorist threat.

Conclusions. The People’s Will still holds a unique place in the history of terrorism in the modern world. However, objective study of the People’s Will is still difficult because the historiography of this organization for more than 140 years has included huge elements of myth-making and many blank spaces.

Key words: terrorism, terror, terrorism in Russia, terrorism in Russian Empire, political terrorism in Russia, terrorists in Russia, political violence in Russia, state security policy of Russia, state crimes in Russia, political crimes in Russia, People’s Will

ТЕРРОРИЗМ В РОССИЙСКОЙ ИМПЕРИИ: УРОКИ ИСТОРИИ ДЛЯ СЕГОДНЯШНЕЙ ВОЙНЫ ПРОТИВ ТЕРРОРИЗМА

Часть II: Организация «Народная Воля» и ее роль в истории политического терроризма в России

Введение. Данная статья исследует роль и значение революционной народнической социалистической организации «Народная воля» в истории политического терроризма в Российской империи.

Методы. Две волны политического террора имели место в Российской империи в 1878-1894 гг. и в 1894-1916 гг. «Народная воля» занимала доминирующее место в первой волне террора, и главным достижением народовольцев было цареубийство Александра II 1 марта 1881 года. Во второй волне террора, особенно в революции 1905-1907 гг., многие левые партии и движения принимали участие в террористической борьбе. Элементы преемственности преобладали во второй вспышке террора, главным образом благодаря наследию «Народной воли» по части определения целей и тактики террористической активности.

Результаты. Народовольцы приобретали большой идеалистический и романтический ареал, поэтому будущие террористы не могли изменить цели и тактику из-за боязни измены наследию этой организации. Традиция «Народной воли» предопределяла не только цели и тактики террористов второго поколения, но и ответы либералов, консерваторов и самодержавия в обеих волнах терроризма. Многие группировки в правительстве и политических классах использовали терроризм для достижения своих политических целей и оправдания своих ответов на террористическую угрозу.

Выводы. «Народная воля» продолжает занимать особое место в истории политического терроризма в современном мире. Однако объективное исследование «Народной воли» еще представляется достаточно затруднительной задачей, поэтому что на протяжении 140 лет историография этой революционной организации содержит большие элементы мифотворчества и множество белых пятен.

Ключевые слова: терроризм, террор, терроризм в России, политический терроризм в России, террористы в России, политическое насилие в России, политика государственной безопасности России, государственные преступления в России, политические преступления в России, «Народная воля»

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This article will examine the role and significance of the revolutionary populist socialist organization The People’s Will [Narodnaya Volya] in the history of political terrorism in the Russian Empire. Historians have generally focused on the major accomplishment of the members of the People’s Will [narodovol’cy] – the assassination of Tsar Alexander II on March 1, 1881 [1]. The People’s Will played a pivotal role in the establishment of goals and trends in terrorism in Russia over the course of decades and shaped the responses of the government and different factions of the political classes to this phenomenon. This article will also explore the challenges in studying the history of the People’s Will objectively. For more than 140 years, the historiography of the People’s Will has included many elements of myth-making disguised as history and many blank spaces.

The need for objective analysis of the People’s Will is extremely crucial in the light of the tendency by many academic and popular writers in Russia to rewrite history backwards to show how the revolutions of 1917 were a «Golgotha». Along with idealization of tsars and supporters of the autocracy goes demonization of revolutionary and opposition movements. Not surprisingly, the People’s Will is singled out for having killed the «Tsar Liberator» [Tsar osvoboditel’], a major step on the road to the horrors of the revolution and civil war, particularly the murder of Alexander II’s grandson Nicholas II in 1918.

Also necessary in studying the People’s Will is examination of the different factors in the history of the revolutionary populist movement that shaped the decisions of the People’s Will to opt for political struggle and terrorism as means of overthrowing the government. The ideology of the People’s Will [narodovol’chestvo] was an organic part of Russian populism [narodnichestvo], the dominant trend in Russian socialism from the late 1840s to the early 1890s. Furthermore, populism did not exist in a vacuum. It was shaped by the historical conditions that emerged in Russia after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the other great reforms of Alexander II. Revolutionary populism developed through its interaction with the government and the political classes.

The impact of the People’s Will on Russian history went far beyond the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. In many ways, the record of the People’s Will reinforced the relationship between the government and political classes as a self-perpetuating antagonistic relationship. A major contribution of the members of the People’s Will to Russian history was to give organized terrorism a certain useful appeal to many members of the political classes and government, even among those who opposed terrorism. Terrorism in both waves was often used by different groupings in the government and political classes to advance their political goals and justify their responses to terrorism. Deliberate use of terrorism as a tactic to shape the political development of the country contributed to a growing difference between Russia and European countries, ironically in a period when Russia was becoming a European state in many other respects. Terrorism became one more factor in a frequently antagonistic relationship between the autocracy and the political classes [2].

Political terrorism in the Russian empire over the course of 50 years passed through three distinct periods with large elements of continuity in tactics and aims of terrorists along with elements of continuity in the responses of the political classes and
the autocracy. A preliminary stage ran from 1866 to 1869 followed by virtually zero ter-
orrorist activity between 1870 and 1877. Two major waves of terrorism took place from 1878 to 1894 and from 1894 to 1916. The People’s Will and groups acting in its name dominated the first terrorism outbreak while many left-wing political parties and movements participated in the second outbreak, particularly during the Revolution of 1905-1907. A long period of inactivity between 1887 and 1901 was dominated by theo-
retical discussions by populist and Marxist socialists about the goals and aims of terror-
ism. Central to these discussions was an examination of the legacy of the People’s Will.

The history of the People’s Will can be summarized as follows [3]. The organization emerged in June, 1879 as the result of a split within Russia’s major populist revolution-
ary organization Land and Freedom [Zemlya i Volya]. Land and Freedom, organized in 1876 after the disastrous «Going to the People» [Hozhdenie v Narod] of 1874 when se-
veral thousand young propagandists went to the villages in hope of igniting a peasant revolution. Land and Freedom was officially committed to conducting socialist prop-
ganda among the peasants for a socialist revolution, but it also permitted terrorism as «disorganizing activities» directed against spies, cruel officials, and others who harmed revolutionary work. Terrorist attacks in 1878 and the first half of 1879 were conducted by members of Land and Freedom, individual revolutionaries, and a group of about 10 people calling themselves the Executive Committee of the Social Revolutionary Party [Ispol’nitel’nyj Komitet Social-Revolyucionnoj Partii]. The practice of terrorism did not cause the split within Land and Freedom, but rather its emphasis. Those forming the People’s Will opted for political terrorism – specifically through the assassination of the tsar. Narodovol’cy maintained that because power in Russia was concentrated in the person of the tsar, an act of regicide would lead to the collapse of the state. They differed on tactics and many goals although the goal of regicide was paramount. Many members of the People’s Will expected that terrorism would force the regime to grant a constitu-
tion that would permit socialist propaganda and eventually bring about a socialist rev-
olution. Other members expected that regicide and the resulting collapse of the state would allow the People’s Will to ignite a peasant revolution. Still others wanted a seizure of political power, with the help of their military supporters, but without popular sup-
port, and then enact socialist transformations from above. Members of the People’s Will differed on whether the political or social revolutions could be combined or would happen in stages. Their opponents who formed Black Repartition [Chernij Peredel] opted for conducting socialist propaganda and economic terrorism – terrorist acts against land-
owners and factory owners, also known as factory-agrarian terrorism.

Black Repartition was a failure from the start and the organization ceased its exist-
ence in early 1882. Many members joined the People’s Will while other members be-
longed to independent circles of “orthodox” populists. Still other members fled abroad and, by 1883, Georgii Plekhanov, Vera Zasulich, and several others broke with populism to form Liberation of Labour [Osvobozhdenie Truda], the first major Russian Marxist or-
ganization.

The founders of the People’s Will constituted themselves as the Executive Commit-
tee [Ispol’nitel’nyj Komitet]. The Executive Committee combined terrorist, ideological, and organizational duties. Choice of targets, implementation of terrorist acts, and deci-
sions to suspend, cease or renew terrorism were the monopoly of the committee. This meant that the People’s Will practiced centralized terrorism – a practice that was disput-
ed by other terrorists in both waves of terrorism who called for the right to practice dif-
fused/non-centralized/local terrorism – in other words, any other individuals and groups could pick their targets and assassinate them [4].
Committee members formed groups of local revolutionaries, workers, students, army and navy officers. They attempted to work with liberals by arguing that they had common interests in gaining a constitution. The People’s Will also devoted its attention to winning the support of socialists and liberals in Europe and North America by arguing that the narodovol’cy were freedom fighters forced to take up terrorism by a repressive government.

The assassination of Tsar Alexander II absorbed most of the energy and resources of the Executive Committee. From March 1, 1881 to 1883, most committee members were arrested. The collapse of the organization accelerated because arrested committee member S.P. Degaev agreed to cooperate with police colonel G.P. Sudejkin in giving names of Narodovol’cy to the police. In effect, the People’s Will, under the leadership of the Executive Committee, ended its existence by the end of 1883. Revolutionaries made repeated attempts to re-establish the People’s Will into the early 1890s. One group calling itself the Terrorist Faction of the People’s Will attempted to assassinate Tsar Alexander III on March 1, 1887. One group leader Aleksandr Ulyanov was the older brother of Vladimir Lenin. Despite assertions by Soviet historians that Marxism was gaining ground in Russia during the 1880s and early 1890s, most revolutionaries continued to identify themselves as members of the People’s Will. The linear successor to the People’s Will was the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries [Partiya socialistov-revol'yucionerov], formed in 1901 after several years of preparation. Among its first members were surviving members of the People’s Will, including members of the Executive Committee.

Determining the pivotal role of the People’s Will in the history of political terrorism in Russia poses several challenges. When determining elements of continuity and change in this half-century of terrorism one must do more than just study the goals, tactics, and activities of terrorist movements and parties. Understanding the origins, development, and consequences of terrorism in the Russian Empire requires studying the responses of the Imperial government, socialists, anarchists, liberals, conservatives, far rightists, religious leaders and believers, Russian nationalists, and ethnic minority nationalists to terrorism. Issues of morality and ethics often surfaced in discussions about terrorism because organized political violence involved breaking traditional religious, legal, moral, and ethical restraints against killing. These discussions, responses, behaviours, and other trends all had their origins during the terrorist wave dominated by the People’s Will. No organization practicing terrorism can exist in isolation from the political and social setting in a particularly country in a given historical time [5].

A major challenge in determining the significance of the People’s Will in the history of political terrorism in Russia is that, to the best of the author’s knowledge, there is no comprehensive monograph about terrorism in the Russian Empire in the fifty years between 1866 and 1916. Also lacking is a comprehensive study of the responses of socialists, liberals, conservatives, the government, and many social institutions to the waves of terrorism. Russian historian O.V. Budnickij has written a solid monograph about Russian terrorists from Russia-wide or empire-wide [obshcherossijskie/obshcheimperskie] parties and movements on issues of ideology, ethics and psychology. However, he chose not to write about terrorism practiced by ethnic minority parties in the second wave because he asserted that «terrorism on the basis of national-liberation struggle is a different case. This is terrorism of a different type; it has other ideological, political, and psychological roots; as a matter of fact, it is difficult to relate it to the Russian revolutionary movement» [6].

Actually, there was a much closer connection between Russia-wide and ethnic minority terrorist parties. The People’s Will attracted members of ethnic minorities and its Executive Committee had a multi-ethnic makeup. As well, the first Polish socialist party
Proletariat, operating alongside the People’s Will, practiced terrorism. Members of ethnic minorities participated in Russia-wide terrorist movements in the second wave of terrorism and had their own parties that often worked closely with populist and Marxist empire-wide parties [7]. In a peculiar way, the practice of terrorism by ethnic-minority parties and the participation of many non-Russians in empire-wide movements were a result of a conscious or unconscious Russification of minority opposition movements. This phenomenon highlights the need for a comprehensive narrative on the history of terrorism in the Russian Empire.

The lack of a common narrative for the history of terrorism in the Russian Empire has led certain historians to exaggerate the uniqueness of the People’s Will and to present its members as people of the highest moral character compared to the terrorists in the preliminary stage and second wave. For example, American historian Adam Ulam described terrorists of the 1860s such as D.V. Karakozov, N.A. Ishutin, I.A. Hudyakov, and S.G. Nechaev as psychopaths motivated by a sheer passion for violence. By contrast, members of the People’s Will were motivated by a sincere belief that terrorism was a legitimate form of struggle against a repressive government even though Ulam admitted that there were morally repugnant incidents in the history of the People’s Will. Ulam noted that the Narodovol’cy acknowledged Karakozov and Nechaev as their predecessors rather than distance themselves from the terrorists of the 1860s. However, he emphasized that this acceptance of the legacy of the past formed part of a broader acceptance by Russian socialists and liberals from the late 1870s to early 1900s of using terrorism as a legitimate means of political struggle [8].

American historian Anna Geifman, in her monograph on the second wave of terrorism, argued that the terrorists from 1900-1917, particularly anarchists and members of obscure extremist groups, can best be described as terrorists of a new type. Unlike their predecessors in the 19th century, the new terrorists were less ideologically-oriented, less scrupulous about means, and less restrained in their choice of targets [9]. The author of this article wrote a master’s thesis on political trials from 1866-1894 [10] and cannot agree with Geifman’s assertions about a new type of terrorist appearing in the 20th century. The terrorists of the 20th century had a long tradition preceding them just as the People’s Will had traditions set by the terrorists of the late 1860s. Despite Geifman’s assertions that the terrorists of the 20th century attracted many common criminals, psychologically unstable people, teenagers, and children, the fact remains that the terrorists of the 19th century included many morally reprehensible people, including those who were psychologically unstable, and there was an involvement by common criminals in revolutionary movements even in the 1870s and 1880s. The high-minded terrorists of the People’s Will not only practiced deceit and mystification in dealing with liberals and fellow socialists, but also crossed moral boundaries by killing Alexander II. Old Narodovol’cy would have been the first to notice a change in the next generation of terrorists and their practices, but they apparently did not detect any difference. Many veteran populists and members of the People’s Will joined the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries, especially its Combat Detachment. All that really differed between the two waves of terrorism was the sheer magnitude of the second wave and the large numbers of parties participating in it.

In effect, we are dealing with myth-making that has shaped the history of the People’s Will for almost 140 years. An aura of romanticism still surrounds the People’s Will for having engaged in single combat [edinoborstvo] with the autocracy. The love relationships of the men and women of the Executive Committee have enchanted many people. Most spectacular was the romance of the two leaders of the regicide of March 1, 1881 – Andrei Zhelyabov, a former serf, and Sofiya Perovskaya, daughter of a former
governor of St. Petersburg and great-granddaughter of Kirill Razumovskij, last Hetman of Ukraine in the late 1700s. Historians have praised the defiant and courageous behavior of the narodovol'ci at political trials, particularly at the trials of members of the Executive Committee – the trials of the 16 in 1880, 6 regicides in 1881, 20 in 1882, 17 in 1883, and 14 in 1884 [11].

Defendants and their liberal lawyers invariably argued that government repressions against peaceful propagandists had forced young idealists to become terrorists. Prosecutors generally demonized the defendants as the incarnation of evil. Historians have usually praised the heroic speeches of the defendants and the lawyers, while condemning the prosecution for persecuting the revolutionaries. However, the trial behavior of the narodovol'cy forms a large part of the myth-making about the People's Will. Their trial behaviour, although undeniably courageous, followed the pattern set by populists in trials beginning in 1871. What gets ignored by too many historians is the fact that prosecutors, defendants, and lawyers all brought political agendas to the trials and turned justice into a secondary issue. Furthermore, the courtroom behavior of all three parties undermined the judicial reform of 1864, a reform that could have done much for turning Russia into a state based upon the rule of law [12].

Further complicating objective study of the People's Will and contributing to myth making is the fact the organization has generally occupied a uniquely honourable place in the history of terrorism in the modern world. The People’s Will had many foreign admirers including many luminaries of world literature such as Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, Guy Maupassant, Jules Verne, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Mark Twain [13]. Novels have been written about the People’s Will and the assassination of Tsar Alexander II [14]. Few other terrorist organizations have achieved such recognition. Furthermore, historians have shown a high degree of reluctance to compare the People’s Will to terrorist organizations of the latter part of the 20th century. For example, Walter Laqueur, an American specialist on terrorism [15], suggested that it would be a waste of time to compare the People’s Will to West Germany’s Red Army Faction (also called the Baader-Meinhof group through its two main leaders Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof) as opposed to doing useful comparative analyses of Latin American urban guerillas or nationalist terrorists in the past and present [6. p. 11].

It is true that terrorist movements emerge in different countries under historical conditions. The Russian Empire from 1861 to 1917 certainly differed from Western Europe and Latin America, for example, during the 1960s and 1970s. However, one cannot ignore the fact that terrorist movements over decades can share common goals and tactics. A noticeable trait of both left-wing and right-wing terrorist movements has been an intense hostility to liberal parliamentary democracy and many movements have undertaken considerable efforts to undermine democratic governments by provoking governments into becoming more repressive. The People’s Will set a historical precedent for future examples of terrorists by provoking the autocracy into abandoning attempts to enact reforms.

American researcher Jeffrey M. Bale noted just how much «black» [right-wing] and «red» [left-wing] terrorists in the 1960s and 1970s shared common tactics with differing final goals: «Finally, both black and red terrorists aim to destroy the «pseudo-democratic» bourgeois state by provoking violent repression. In the left-wing variant, «armed struggle» is initiated to force the regime to abandon its democratic facade and expose its underlying «fascist» core, which will in turn supposedly catalyze public discontent and allow the «advanced» elements of the proletariat to lead a revolutionary transformation of society. In the right-wing version, terrorist acts are launched to create chaos and thereby pressure the public into clamoring for «law and order», which will
provide the necessary preconditions and pretext for an authoritarian response led by ultras within the state apparatus, particularly the army, the militarized police, and the secret services. Although Harmon [Christopher Harmon from the American Heritage Foundation, TR] seems to conflate or equate these two approaches, it is important to recognize that to the paramilitary left provoking state repression is only a means to an ostensibly different end, whereas to the paramilitary right it is viewed either as an end in itself or as the first step in the development of a strong national and "social" state purged of divisive and subversive elements» [16].

Both right and left terrorists in the later 20th century unconsciously applied a Russian revolutionary concept of «the worse it is, the better» [чём хуже, тем лучше – chem huzhe, tem luchshe] in speeding up a destruction of parliamentary governments by forcing governments to become more repressive. Terrorists forced governments in Western Europe to adopt extraordinary legislation that came close to threatening civil rights and provoked military takeovers in Turkey and Latin American countries. Both American and Soviet journalists and publicists acknowledged terrorism as a destabilizing force. However, in the context of the Cold War, this provoked a stream of Western and Soviet polemics about who was to blame for the upsurge of terrorism and the threat to stability and democracy. American publicists blamed the Soviet Union for supporting terrorism, while Soviet publicists blamed the United States [17].

What was ignored and still is ignored by many historians, political scientists, journalists, and others is the fact that the People’s Will had first shown that terrorism could provoke a government into becoming more repressive and to abandon any attempts at reforming itself. A few days before his assassination, Alexander II had agreed to allow representatives of local self-governments to participate in discussion of proposed legislation – basically bringing members of the public into the State Council that drafted and enacted legislation. This bold step could have eventually led to the granting of a constitution, but the assassination buried this chance. Alexander III rejected his father’s plans and announced that he would rule as an autocrat – a promise that he kept until his death in 1894. As former Hungarian communist Tibor Szamuely noted: «“Narodnaya Volya” destroyed itself by achieving its supreme triumph. Its history is usually referred to as a glorious failure. What had it gained for the Russian people? Nothing. It had merely frittered away its members’ lives in acts of individual terrorism that were inevitably doomed to failure. Such is the conventional view. It is wrong. In terms of its own purposes “Narodnaya Volya” was completely successful. It had sacrificed itself on the blood-stained altar of revolution, but in death it was triumphant. The revolution had won the race for time. The main aim had been accomplished: Russia’s constitutional bourgeois development had been stopped. It was only resumed twenty-five years later, and by then it was too late» [18]. Szamuely’s assessment of the political accomplishments of the People’s Will stands in marked contrast to most historians who argue that the organization’s work was a massive failure.

Although the myth-making about the People’s Will includes much idealization, the myth-making includes huge elements of denigration and demonization. Study of the People’s Will in the Soviet Union was banned for about 20 years. Soon after the assassination of Leningrad Communist Party Secretary Sergei M. Kirov on December 1, 1934, Joseph Stalin learned that Kirov’s assassin L.V. Nikolaev kept a portrait of Andrei Zhelyabov in his room. Stalin remarked to A.A. Zhdanov «if we raise our people on the People’s Will, then we will be bringing up terrorists». On June 14, 1935, a resolution «About current propaganda work», of the Communist Party’s Central Committee announced «It is especially necessary to explain that Marxism in our country grew up and strengthened itself in struggle with populism (the People’s Will ideology etc.) as the most evil enemy of
Marxism, and on the basis of the destruction of its ideological positions, means and methods of political struggle». Publication of materials about the populists and People's Will was banned, the Society of Former Political Hard Labour Prisoners and Exiles was suppressed, and many narodovol’ci were sent into exile [6 c. 241.]. Stalin's virtually canonical Short Course of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), published in 1938, described the populists as «heroes-failures imagining themselves to be "makers of history" and beginning to go head-on against the historical demands of society» [19]. Note that Stalin and his followers took the myth-making about the People's Will to eschatological levels with populism, instead of capitalism, being described as the most evil enemy of Marxism in Russia. Stalin's concept of populism as the most evil enemy of Marxism was in line with both religious and secular ideological concepts of the internal enemy being more dangerous than the external enemy. In other words, another type of socialism was more dangerous to Marxism than capitalism. The Short Course cursed the populists, especially the People's Will, for deliberately misleading the peasants and workers; for practicing terrorism that caused more sufferings to the people; for delaying the emergence of a Marxist party in Russia [20]. Just as «Jews walking in the ways of the Gentiles» had delayed the coming of the Messiah according to Jewish eschatology, so had the populists delayed the coming of socialism to Russia according to the grand eschatological narrative of Soviet history [21].

Only after the 20th Communist Party Congress in 1956 could Soviet historians study and write about populism, the People's Will, and non-Bolshevik political parties and movements. However, historians were still bound to show the logical inevitability [zakonomernost'] of the triumph of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and the defeat of their ideological opponents [22]. Ideological errors of non-Bolshevik parties could be projected back decades. Historians continued to rewrite history backwards to show how the Bolsheviks' populist opponents from the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries had a flawed history going back to the populists and People's Will. Historians could always apply to the People's Will a statement by Lenin in 1902 condemning the Socialists-Revolutionaries for practicing terrorism. Lenin noted: «Because the Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs), by including terrorism in their programme and advocating it in its present-day form as a means of political struggle, are thereby doing the most serious harm to the movement, destroying the indissoluble ties between socialist work and the mass of the revolutionary class. No verbal assurances and vows can disprove the unquestionable fact that present-day terrorism, as practiced and advocated by the Socialist-Revolutionaries, is not connected in any way with work among the masses, for the masses, or together with the masses; that the organization of terrorist acts by the Party distracts our very scanty organizational forces from their difficult and by no means completed task of organizing a revolutionary workers' party; that in practice the terrorism of the Socialist-Revolutionaries is nothing else than single combat, a method that has been wholly condemned by the experience of history» [23].

Part of the exercise in post-Stalin Soviet historiography involved presenting a new history of the People's Will. The People's Will could be presented as a major revolutionary organization but it had its limitations and fatal flaws due to the rigid Soviet periodization of the history of the revolutionary movement. Lenin had referred to three generations from three different social classes leading the liberation movement in Russia over the course of a century. These generations were: the nobility who included the Decembrists of 1825 and Aleksandr Herzen, the founder of Russian populism; the raznochiny, people of mixed social origins, who included the populists and the People's Will; the proletariat – in other words, the Liberation of Labour Group founded in 1883, the St. Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class, founded by
Lenin and others in 1895, the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party. [24]. While Lenin and Soviet historians could concede that the People’s Will had little choice but to use terrorism to force the government to grant a constitution and political freedom, they also argued that the organization doomed itself to failure by opting for a political conspiracy without the participation of the people in overthrowing the political-social order [25].

The debates by Soviet historians about the place of the People’s Will in the raznochincy stage, what the organization had contributed to the cause of liberation, whether the narodovol’ci were heirs of N.G. Chernyshevskij and the «revolutionary democrats» of the early 1860s took on the dimensions of theological debates with intense eschatological themes. This is hardly surprising because Soviet historiography of the revolutionary movements, the revolutions of 1917 and the Civil War was basically a Marxist-Leninist retelling of Christian eschatology about the salvation of humanity from the creation and the original fall of humanity to the coming of a Messiah. Soviet historians, in effect, turned history into a gigantic eschatological myth about how Lenin and the Bolsheviks had saved the peoples of the Soviet Union from the hell of capitalism and brought them into the socialist paradise. Furthermore, Soviet historians, even after Stalin, emphasized the role of internal enemies in the liberation movement to explain why the cause of liberation suffered so many setbacks and why so many false socialist ideologies delayed the coming of 1917. Finding the correct ideology was key to the triumph of the revolution.

The emphasis upon three stages of the liberation movement bears a strong resemblance to the Russian Orthodox concept that Moscow constituted the Third Rome and the true guardian of Orthodoxy that had succeeded the First and Second Romes of Rome and Constantinople that had fallen into error. However, one can also argue that Soviet historians about periodization was an unconscious reworking of the eschatological concepts of the Italian monk Joachim of Fiore (1145-1202). Joachim attempted to explain how history was heading toward the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Joachim divided history into three ages. The Age of the Father was the age of the Law, corresponding to the Old Testament period with the people of Israel constituting God’s people. The Age of the Son was the age of the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus with the Church constituting the people of God. But on the horizon was the Age of the Holy Spirit, an age of love when all would live in harmony and endless prayer and contemplation. This would be the age when God’s people constituted a gigantic monastic church. Joachim predicted that this new age would come around 1260 [26].

Because each age according to Joachim of Fiore had its own revelation and concept of who constituted God’s people, each stage of the liberation movement in Russia had its own ideology and its own class that would lead the liberation struggle. This goes a long way toward explaining why Soviet historians argued fiercely about who could be included in the second stage of the liberation movement and, consequently, who could be excluded from it. Once again, Marxist-Leninist eschatology influenced the debates.

Soviet historian N.A. Troickij, a leading Soviet historian on the People’s Will, was criticized for idealizing the organization by fellow historians, especially by M.V. Nechkina and others specializing in the history of the «first revolutionary situation» in the early 1860s before, during, and after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Nechkina and others drew a sharp distinction between the revolutionary democrats of the 1860s and populists of the 1870s and suggested that populism was a regression of the revolutionary spirit. They suggested that the raznochincy stage had three periods – the revolutionary democrats of the 1860s, the revolutionary populists of the 1870s, and the liberal populists of the 1880s. Note how the emphasis was upon the ideological degen-
eration of the second stage and the decline of revolutionary spirit. Other historians conceded that the two groupings of revolutionaries were connected, but maintained that the populists and People's Will acted more from weakness than their heroic predecessors because they were isolated from the masses, relied on terrorism, and underestimated the role of the proletariat in the liberation struggle. Troickij and other historians argued that the entire raznochincyn stage was populist from the 1860s to the 1880s. [27]. Thus, the People's Will was the subject of historical-eschatological debates from the death of Stalin to the end of the Soviet Union about who could be included in or excluded from the predecessors of the Bolsheviks.

Troickij's courage in fighting post-Stalinist attempts to distort history was commendable and his work especially on political trials of the populists and members of the People's Will are valuable contributions to our understanding of the revolutionary movement, liberal opposition, and government policies. However, Troickij created his own version of the history of the People's Will that contained huge elements of myth-making and blank spots. Although the regicide of March 1, 1881 was an undisputable fact, Troickij de-emphasized the role of terrorism and argued that the People's Will devoted considerable energy to conducting propaganda among all groupings of Russian society. To emphasize the threat that the organization posed to the government, Troickij wrote that police just from June, 1881 to the end of 1883 subjected to repression more than 8,000 people for membership in the People's Will [28]. Not surprisingly, Troickij wound up over-compensating for the decades of denigration of the People's Will by Stalinist and post-Stalinist historians. Although he emphasized how the autocracy undermined the court reform and enacted severe emergency legislation in 1881 in its fight against the People's Will, the fact remains that the government lacked both the resources and political will to become a police state [29].

Soviet historians offered a highly selective version with huge blank spots in the history of the People's Will. They generally ended accounts of the organization in 1882 when the majority of the members of the Executive Committee had been arrested. Few wrote detailed accounts of the many attempts to restore the People's Will right up to 1894. Certain topics were simply ignored such as the support of certain narodovol'cy for anti-Jewish pogroms in 1881 as the prelude to a peasant revolution and how, through intermediaries, members of the Executive Committee conducted negotiations with the Sacred Brotherhood [Svyashshennaya Druzhina], a secret aristocratic society, formed in 1881, to combat the People's Will. Soviet historians ignored other crucial topics in the post-1882 history of the People's Will. One topic was a trend called militarism. Militarists advocated organizing a military conspiracy to overthrow the government and, thus, bring about political and social changes. This trend was basically an update of the Decembrist movement of the early 1820s along with a certain tendency in the People's Will that emphasized a seizure of power. Militarists of the 1880s included both officer and civilian radicals. Officers organized their own circles while civilian militarists conducted propaganda among officers [30]. Also ignored was the attempt by many narodovol'cy to build an alliance with liberals. By the end of the reign of Alexander III, many supporters of the People's Will called for the formation of a united front of liberals and socialists to force the government to grant a constitution. Supporters of the united front advocated using terrorism, including regicide, to extract concessions from the regime. Many revolutionaries sincerely believed that liberals, who had been antagonized by the reactionary course of Alexander III's government, would support the use of terrorism [30 c. 224].

American historian Norman Naimark attempted to explain why revolutionaries during the reign of Alexander III could not and would not break with the legacy of the People's Will. «Orthodox» populists (those rejecting political struggle) and Marxists
could not really offer an alternative form of revolutionary action because the People’s Will, during its «heroic» phase from 1879-1881, was the only party that had come closest to toppling the government [30 c. 224].

Emphasizing the continuing appeal of the People’s Will to Russian revolutionaries after 1882 was unacceptable for Soviet historians. On the one hand, studying the history of the People’s Will throughout the reign of Tsar Alexander III would have meant examining the pre-history of the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries and the history of how Russian liberals continued to support terrorism right into the 20th century. Furthermore, recognizing the continuing appeal of the populist People’s Will and its dominance of the revolutionary movement in the 1880s and early 1890s contradicted the concept of periodization of the revolutionary movement.

Soviet historians generally conceded that populism dominated the raznochincy stage although many continued to emphasize a difference between the revolutionary democrats of the early 1860s and the revolutionary populists of the 1870s and early 1880s. The year 1882 became a terminal date for the history of the People’s Will probably because Liberation of Labour, Russia’s first Marxist group, was formed in Geneva, Switzerland in 1883. Not surprisingly, Soviet historians devoted much detail to the formation of the first Marxist circles in the Russian Empire [31]. Historians also devoted much attention to proving the close connections between Russian revolutionaries, including populists, with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels [32]. One can suggest that the emphasis upon close relations of Marx and Engels with Russian revolutionaries of all socialist tendencies was used to prove that the world centre of the revolutionary movement was shifting to Russia from Western Europe. However, the Soviet construction of the history of Marxism in Russia meant ignoring Marx’ and Engels’ prejudicial comments about Russians and Slavs and their enthusiasm for the People’s Will as a revolutionary force instead of commending the work of Black Repartition and Liberation of Labour in opposing the choices of the People’s Will. All that really mattered to Marx and Engels was that revolutionary action was finally happening somewhere in Europe after the destruction of the Paris Commune in 1871.

Minimizing the history of the People’s Will for the late 1880s and early 1890s and focusing on the emergence of Marxism allowed Soviet historians to ignore one crucial fact. Vladimir Lenin, like many other future Social Democrats, most likely began his political career as a member of a circle of narodovol’ci [6. c. 238-243, 345-348.].

The practice of dividing the raznochincy stage into three periods of declining revolutionary content continued right up to the end of the Soviet Union. As late as 1991, a dictionary of philosophy defined populism as «a system of views of petty-bourgeois peasant democracy in Russia» and described how the raznochincy stage degenerated from the revolutionary democrats of the early 1860s to the revolutionary populists of the 1870s and early 1880s to the liberal populists of the late 1880s and early 1890s. [33]. Liberal populists, like revolutionary populists, regarded the peasant commune as the embryo of a future society. However, they rejected revolutionary action and chose «small deeds» [«malye dela»], as opposed to «big deeds» [«bol’she delo»], revolutionary activity, in working legally to improve the condition of the peasantry.

Post-Soviet Russian historiography of the People’s Will varies in quality and comprehensiveness. An outstanding contribution to our understanding of the role of public opinion during the period is historian Yuliya Safronova’s monograph on how the government and the People’s Will conducted an information war to win the support of Russian society. Safronova used government decrees, church sermons, accounts of political trials, editorials and articles from the legal press, rumours, illegal publications of the People’s Will, diaries, letters, and other sources to show how society formed its opinions.
Her work is a valuable contribution to our understanding of how terrorism became one aspect of the increasingly antagonistic relationship between the government and the political classes [34]. A glance in the database Cyberleninka with keywords such as populists [narodniki], People’s Will [Narodnaya Volya], political terrorism [politicheskii terrorizm] will produce many results showing that Russian scholars are studying many questions ranging from the attitude of the People’s Will to the pogroms of 1881 to questions of morality and terrorism as perceived by the revolutionaries [35].

Not surprisingly, post-Soviet historiography on the People’s Will has generated controversies between historians of the Soviet period, such as N.A. Troickij, and newer historians such as G.S. Kan. Any new assessment of the People’s Will involves new evaluations of the autocracy, especially its policies toward political opponents, and of the relationship of Russian society to the government and revolutionaries [36].

As noted earlier, certain historians and publicists in Russia now are engaged in rewriting history backwards to show how the «Golgotha» of 1917 became possible. This exercise in rewriting history includes idealization of tsars and supporters of the autocracy along with demonization of revolutionary and opposition movements. Part of this exercise involves use of conspiracy theories blaming external and internal enemies. In the case of the People’s Will, the conspiracy involved a union of terrorists and bureaucrats and the involvement of Grand Duke Konstantin, the younger brother of Tsar Alexander II. These accusations surfaced soon after the assassination of the tsar along with blaming Jews and Poles for the regicide [37]. The point of these conspiracy theories is to «prove» that «true Russians» [«istinno-russkie»] could not have committed such a horrific crime.

Thus, the history of the People’s Will is the story of more than 140 years of myth-making accompanied by many blank spots that still require investigation. Although historians have generally described the People’s Will as a failure because the organization did not overthrow the government, the People’s Will scored some major victories. These victories included: winning the support of liberals and other opposition elements in the Russian Empire; launching an information war to convince European and North American liberals and socialists that terrorism was a legitimate form of struggle against a repressive government; convincing other Russian socialists of how terrorism could bring a socialist revolution closer; setting an example to ethnic minority nationalists to use terrorism; winning the support of the world’s greatest writers; influencing the formation of right-wing terrorist groups and the eventual formation of mass far-right political parties; provoking the government into taking a more repressive course; setting back the course of Russia’s constitutional development for decades.

Most significantly, the record of the People’s Will reinforced the relationship between the government and political classes as a self-perpetuating antagonistic relationship. A major contribution of the members of the People’s Will to Russian history was to give organized terrorism a certain useful appeal to many members of the political classes and government, even among those who opposed terrorism. Deliberate use of terrorism as a tactic to shape the political development of the country contributed to a growing difference between Russia and European countries in a period when, in many ways, Russia was becoming a European state.

To be continued

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БИБЛИОГРАФИЧЕСКИЕ ССЫЛКИ И ПРИМЕЧАНИЯ

1. Все даты даются согласно юлианскому календарю. В XIX веке различие между юлианским и григорианским календарем составляло 12 дней; в XX веке – 13 дней.


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