THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA

Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism 1860–1930

RICHARD STITES

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

Typical of those who went to the people, but much better known, was Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya (1844–1934), known to three generations of Western readers as "the little grandmother of the Russian Revolution." One could hardly conceive of a less democratic pedigree than hers: Her father was a West Russian landowner of Polish noble ancestry; her mother, an aristocratic Smolny graduate. Yet doubts about her status began stirring early, and she claimed to have always sided with the house serfs when they were punished. "From the age of eight," she recalled, "how to find justice was the question that troubled me"; and she sublimated her maternal-benevolent impulses by "feeding" a nearby shrub, which in her childish imagination, resembled a calf. Her strong feelings of otherness, which often nourishes a philanthropic personality, may have been heightened by a physical disability, a congenital crooked neck. But unlike most of her later colleagues, she gave vent to her humanitarian longings in a drawn-out phase of gentry liberalism—*zemstvo* work and peasant schools—bypassing nihilism and arriving at radicalism only at the end of her twenties.[6]

Harrassed by the authorities, she lost faith in liberal "small deeds" and asked her husband, a *zemstvo* liberal, to join her in propaganda. When he refused, she left him, cutting all family ties (except one: she was pregnant), and went off to Kiev to join the "cause." Possessing a highly volatile nature, Breshkovskaya was bored by Lavrovian abstrusities and was quickly drawn to the teachings of Bakunin, dubbing herself a "flame-seeker." In such a frame of mind, she had her baby, promptly handed it over to her brother, and began her trek along the Dnieper, sowing the ideas of equality and justice among the peasants. She and her companions were captured by the police and sent to the capital for trial.[7] Breshkovskaya's later career with the Socialist Revolutionary Party, her wide contacts in America, and her coming and goings in 1917 at a grand old age have helped contribute to the myth that she was somehow a key figure in the revolutionary movement. In fact, her activities as a female radical were entirely typical. The hard will, the resilience, and the confidence approaching arrogance all of which have made her a legend, were the standard personal equipment of most Russian revolutionary women. In prison she "dreamed dreams of freedom and of intense activity. My faith in my own capacity increased. I knew that I was ready to dare and bear everything." She became a living example of her belief that history is made by

[6] The two main sources for her early life are in English: *The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution*, ed. Alice Stone Blackwell (Boston, 1930), a translation of autobiographical notes and letters which first appeared in Yiddish; *Hidden Springs of the Russian Revolution*, ed. L. Hutchinson (Stanford, 1931). The former work covers her early years. The fact that its editor was an American feminist and the daughter of a more famous feminist (Lucy Stone), partly accounts for Breshkovskaya's fame in this country. When it appeared in 1917, its author was "a grandmother (*babushka*)"—the sense here is Grand Old Lady—of the Russian Revolution; but certainly not "the grandmother." The second work deals with her revolutionary career, but is badly edited. My remarks are drawn from *Grandmother*, 2–25 (quotation, 8) and *Hidden Springs*, 328.

"people of high mental and moral aspiration," and "persons of outstanding character."[8]

In 1874–1875, the women of the All Russian Social Revolutionary Organization—the erstwhile Fritschi from Zurich—began to disseminate propaganda in factories. "The Moscow Amazons," as they were called at their trial, literally moved into the Moscow factories "to share the sufferings of the people." Bardina worked fifteen hours a day and lived in lice-ridden quarters. Kaminskaya, posing as a soldier's wife, inhaled the dirt and paper dust of an unventilated room by day and squeezed into the cold and smelly female barracks at night. Transferring to a textile mill, she found she could make no headway with the women workers, who used what spare time they had to cavort with the men. And the men in turn tried to lure the young Kaminskaya into the tavern. In time she won the confidence and attention of the workers by the simple device of telling them clearly but eloquently about the contrast between their wretched poverty and the wealth of their masters. Such social pictures often held them spellbound even after the closing whistle. For Kaminskaya, these were the happiest days of her life. It all ended in the spring of 1875 when she and the others were arrested.[9]

Vera Figner was one of the last to confront "the people." After the breakup of her sister's Moscow organization, she was summoned to Russia by the survivors to take up the work. Conflict now raged within her; with great difficulty, she broke with her husband, abandoned her studies, and returned home bearing with her a memory of the Zurich years that had given her "learning, comrades, and a life's goal, a goal so exalted that all sacrifices paled before it." Unable to revive the shattered circle in Moscow, she finally went out to the wretched villages of Samara Province. Figner was stunned at the realization that contact with the peasants had played no role in her path to radicalism. Her consciousness had begun with a desire to avoid the "arid, dull and narrowly egoistic" life which would have enveloped her in the cramped surroundings of family and kitchen. She had chosen The People as her goal, and study as the means. Now at twenty-five, after years of escape from reality among her books, she stood before them—diseased, undernourished, dirty, and poor—and she felt like an inexperienced child.[10] After a year and a half of work among them, she was ready to return to the revolutionary centers. By this time their character and hers had undergone a decisive change.

START HERE:

The great political trials mounted by the tsarist government in 1877–1878 were part of an effort to demonstrate to the "moderate" intelligentsia that the revolutionaries were an extremist fringe of evil people. The effort was a dismal failure, and not least because of the women prisoners in the dock, who

[8] Quotations from *ibid.*, 177, 120.
[9] For the makeup and activities of the Moscow Organization, see: Lavrov, *Narodniki*, 257; Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I, 131: Venturi, *Roots*, 531–33; *Gos. prestup.*, II, 399–401: Dzhabadari, "Protsess," 169–73. On Kaminskaya: Deutsch, *Rol Evreev*, 90–93; Stepniak, *Russia*, 92.
[10] Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I, 132–36, 153–75 (quotation, 132).

gave impassioned speeches, bore themselves with dignity, and received gratuitously harsh sentences. The first was the Trial of the Fifty that dealt with the members of the All Russian Social Revolutionary Organization. Among the defendants were sixteen women, mostly from the Fritsch Circle, who were given various terms of hard labor or exile. Though charged with plotting to overthrow the government and inciting to revolution, the women made a favorable impression upon the public. Sofya Bardina, the twenty-three year old "aunt" gave a well-rehearsed speech that became a classic in the revolutionary literature. Stepniak, Figner, and others have testified to the vivid impression it made. One young school girl was steered toward revolution by the spectacle of privileged ladies who had "gone to the factories in order to bring light into the realm of darkness." The Serbian publishers of Turgenev's *Virgin Soil* (1877)—likening the author's heroine to Bardina—included a copy of her speech as an appendix to the novel.[11]

Bardina's address—aside from its value as an explanation of what the revolutionaries were about and of their moral justification of their behavior—is important on another count. It is one of the rare instances of a female "populist" publicly voicing her views on the woman question; and it provides illuminating testimony as to how deeply the simplistic economic interpretation of the problem had penetrated into the rank and file of the movement. To the prosecutor's accusation that she was trying to undermine the family (as well as property and religion), she answered as follows:

> As far as the family is concerned, isn't it really being undermined by that social system which forces woman to leave her family and go to work in a factory for a miserable pittance, a subsistance wage, there to be debauched along with her children? Isn't it being destroyed by a social system which forces an impoverished woman to abandon herself to prostitution, and which even sanctifies this prostitution as a legal and necessary element of every civilized state? Or is it we who are destroying the family? we who are trying to root out this poverty—the major cause of all society's ill, including the erosion of the family?

After warning her judges that "even our sleepy and lazy society" would some day rise up and avenge the wrongs done to it, Bardina was sentenced to exile in Siberia. She managed to escape; but, profoundly shaken by her experiences, she committed suicide in 1883.[12]

[11] For the trial: *Gos. prestup.*, II, 399–401. For the impact of Bardina's speech, see: Stepniak, *Russia*, 108–109; Figner, *Zapech. trud*, 1, 146. The schoolgirl's reminiscence, with quotation, is given in Fanina Halle, *Woman in Soviet Russia*, tr. M. Green (New York, 1933) 54–55. The speech was transcribed and read at student meetings that year (*Revol. narod.*, II, 128). The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam has at least three reprints of it (two in Russian, one in French) printed in Geneva between 1893 and 1903. The information on the Serbian edition of *Nov* is from Amfitreatrov, *Zhenshchina*, 37. Mariyanna, the heroine of the novel, has variously been taken as a copy of Bardina and an anticipation of Zasulich. In view of Turgenev's colorless portrayal of this character, it hardly seems worth arguing about.

[12] Burtsev, *Za sto let*, 124–27.

The Great Trial, or "Trial of the 193" (October 1877–January 1878), meted out justice to the propagandists who had been languishing in jail for three years or more. Their abode was the Petersburg House of Preliminary Detention, a harmless looking edifice which can still be seen sprawling along Chaikovsky Street in Leningrad. A special women's section had been constructed to house the growing number of radical women; it was staffed by a female warden and a handful of volunteer princesses and officers' widows. Breshkovskaya tells us that they treated her with open contempt until they learned that she was highborn and educated. She also recalls that the prison atmosphere, not very oppressive, was lightened by visits from the "political Red Cross," radical volunteers who eased the lot of the prisoners. But the narrow cells and the inactivity drove some of them to suicide or an early death and the rest of them to an intense hatred of the government. Of the 193, 37 were women; about half the total were acquitted. Of the convicted women, a few were released because of their court connections; others escaped from penal settlements and emerged as hardened revolutionaries.[13]

The most celebrated trial of the decade was that of Vera Zasulich, would-be assassin of the Governor of St. Petersburg, and unwitting initiator of an age of terror. Zasulich's personality was a study in contradictions. Retiring, passive, and introverted, she once dreamed of leading a partisan horse brigade to liberate the peasants. Abjuring personal violence throughout most of her life, she was the first woman to raise the weapon in the revolutionary struggle. She became one of the best known Russian women revolutionaries; yet compared with Perovskaya and Figner, her political work within the movement was of minor importance. Her fatal shot was a grim illustration of the truth of Mariya Vernadskaya's assertion that a woman with a revolver could kill a man with an axe.[14]

Zasulich endured a smoulderingly unhappy childhood as an orphan; her father, a retired captain of the poorer Smolensk gentry died when she was a baby, leaving her mother with five children. Little Vera was raised by her cousins, the Mikulins. She was painfully aware of her status as an outsider and would fly into a rage when anyone called her "Vera Zasulich," screaming "It's not true. Mikulich! Mikulich!"—a pitiful effort to transform herself into one of the family. Like many children in like situations, she sought a soulmate for her pain and found it in Christ. For weeks she would pore over the Passion story and wallow in the details of Jesus' torment and death. But by the time she was fifteen, her early sympathy for Christ was directed toward "humanity" through her reading of Schiller, Ryleev, Lermontov, and Nekrasov whose works sent her into transports of "social daydreaming" and urgent longings

[13] The trial: *Gos. prestup.*, II, 262–65. Breshkovskaya's prison and courtroom experiences are in *Hidden Springs*, 105–11; 135–36 and "Iz vospom.," 179. A personal testimony of the radicalizing effect of the trial is given by Popov in *Zapiski*, 119–23.

[14] See Vernadskaya's remark and its context on p. 36 of the present study. Zasulich's sketchy memoirs, *Vospom.*, may be supplemented by the even sketchier essay by R. A. Kovnator in Zasulich, *Stati o russkoi literature* (Moscow, 1960) 3–40.

"to struggle" and perform great social deeds. She was particularly captivated
by a line from Ryleev: "There are times, indeed whole epochs, when there
can be nothing as beautiful and desirable as a crown of thorns."[15]

All this, revealing as it may be, is not sufficient to explain Zasulich's con-
version to radicalism. At sixteen, she went to Moscow to attend one of those
private boarding schools run by German women where the discipline and
snobbishness surpassed those of the institutes they were trying to emulate.
"At the age of seventeen," Zasulich tells us, "I considered myself a
socialist." But this was hardly more than an emotional commitment, rein-
forced by her new reading habits and perhaps by the ideas of her two sisters
who had preceded her to Moscow and had joined the Ivanova Workshop.
Zasulich herself mentions no direct radical contacts until her journey to St.
Petersburg in 1868 where, as we have seen, she fell in with Nechaev's fol-
lowers. Four years of freedom (1869–1872) were thus snatched away from
her. Upon her release, she quickly acquired a "ticket to the people," a mid-
wifery licence, and made her way into one of the most desperate groups, "the
Kiev Rebels." Here in a two-room flat, Lev Deutsch recalled "Marfusha"
Zasulich, arrayed in the careless manner of the 1860's, always with her nose
in a book, shy and retiring, but healthy and happy and without a trace of mor-
bidity. Her closest friend was the rhapsodic and rather asexual Kolenkina, a
moody, nervous, and poorly educated young girl. It was she, according to
Deutsch, who conceived the idea of assassinating the governor and the chief
prosecutor of the Great Trial.[16]

Figner once said that educated revolutionaries looked on corporal punish-
ment as the greatest kind of shame.[17] When the governor had a young revolu-
tionary flogged for a minuscule offense, these two women resolved to kill.
The gesture was designed to show the world that Russian officials used "Turk-
ish bestiality" on their own people while pretending to rescue the Bulgars
from it. "It is a hard thing to lay a hand on another human being," Zasulich
said later, and she was plagued by nightmares and anxiety lest her comrades
disapprove her act. Kolenkina failed to meet her victim; Zasulich shot hers
point blank and almost killed him. But at her trial, which the authorities
foolishly mounted as a common criminal case in order to discredit her act, she
was received as a heroine since she had done the deed without any intention of
escaping. She was acquitted and spirited off to Western Europe where, to her
disgust, she became a momentary celebrity.[18] In later years she came to look
upon individual terror as an aberration and became a staunch pillar of the

[15] The early years: *Vospom.*, 1–16. The Ryleev line is from "Nalivaiko's Confession": see
M. G. Sedov, *Geroicheskii period revolyutsionnogo Narodnichestva* (Moscow, 1966) 69.

[16] The Zasulich quotation given by Kovnator in Zasulich, *Stati*, p. 5; *Vospom.*, 114, n. 13 and
115, n. 15; Deutsch, "Yuzhnye Buntari," 54–58.

[17] Figner, *Les prisons russes* (Lausanne, 1911) 10.

[18] Zasulich's motives and doubts: *Vospom.*, 65–70; Breshkovskaya, *Hidden Springs*, 155. Her ... given in one of Mikhailovsky's pamphlets (reproduced in ... called the great

non-terrorist groups, Black Repartition and Liberation of Labor. But her act
of violence, which electrified society, and her acquittal, which sickened the
conservatives, served to sharpen even further the brutal struggle waged be-
tween the government and the revolutionaries.

Most of the groups and individuals still at large in 1876–1878 gradually
combined to form the organization later known as Land and Liberty (*Zemlya i
Volya*), though its members were at first known simply as Narodniks. Bigger
and better organized than its predecessors, the new party stressed immediate
agitation for the peasants' needs and wants—"land and liberty"—in contrast
to the rather leisurely style of the older propagandists. But Land and Liberty
was weakened at the outset by a deep internal division over the question of
terror as a prime revolutionary device. Among the women who voiced bitter
complaints against the emphasis on "disorganization" and violence were
Zasulich, Kolenkina, and Mariya Krylova. The latter, whom we have met in
the Ivanova Workshop, was described by Breshkovskaya as "a typical person
of the 1860's" who had fled from her domestic realm of darkness. Krylova's
background and career closely paralleled those of Zasulich; but her ample
conspiratorial and technical skills as custodian of the party's press made her
one of the most crucial figures in Land and Liberty. She polemicized vigor-
ously with her colleagues and refused to allow them to transform the party
newspaper into the mouthpiece of the terrorist tendency. When the party fin-
ally split over the issue, she joined the non-terrorist wing which called itself
Black Repartition.[19]

The terrorists took shape as The People's Will (*Narodnaya Volya*), whose
twenty-eight member Executive Committee dedicated itself to assassinating
Alexander II and any of his officials who stood in their way. Ten of these, over
a third, were women: Vera Figner, Sofiya Ivanova (no relation to the Ivanovas
of the 1860's), Anna Korba, Tatyana Lebedeva, Olga Lyubatovich, Nataliya
Olennikova, Mariya Oshanina (sister of the preceding), Sofiya Perovskaya,
Elizaveta Sergeeva, and Anna Yakimova. They were all Russians, ranging in
age (as of 1879) from twenty-three to thirty. All but one, the priest's daughter
Yakimova, came of gentry-officer families, mostly provincial; all were well
educated. Most of them had begun their illegal activities in one of the circles
of the early seventies. In the Committee they were regarded as equals to the
men, but their abilities and performances varied widely. All but three ended
their revolutionary careers in captivity or on the scaffold.[20]

Figner's path to terrorism was characteristically slow and painful. After a

impact Zasulich's deed made upon her circle in "Stranitsy iz vospominanii o V.I. Zasulich," *Gruppa "Osvobozhdenie Truda": iz arkhivov G. V. Plekhanova, V. I. Zasulicha i L. G. Deicha*, 6 v. (Moscow, 1923–1928) III, 82–87 (86).

[19] Breshkovskaya, "Iz vospom.," 219–30; Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I, 192: *Deyateli*, II/2, 697–98. An example of her invective may be found in Valk, *Arkhiv*, 104–105.

[20] The list is given in Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I, 302. Thumbnail sketches may be found in Stites, "The Question of Woman in Nineteenth Century Russia" (Ph.D., Harvard, 1967) 393–406.

long spell in the provinces, she had returned to Petersburg disheartened and persuaded of the uselessness of propaganda. "Show me any way," she said to Lev Deutsch; "show me how, under the present circumstances, I can serve the peasants and I am ready to go back to the villages at once." She resisted the pull of the terrorists within Land and Liberty for some time and attempted to hold the two factions together. After the break she joined The People's Will. For the next five years she served the organization with great vigor and intelligence, helping to prepare several assassination attempts, maintaining conspiratorial apartments, and conducting propaganda among the legal elements of society. Her greatest moment came after the assassination of the Tsar when, for two years, she tried to hold the decimated party together almost singlehandedly against the depradations of the police and their informers. Her commitment to terror was still deep enough for her to order and coordinate one more assassination of a hated police official. When she was finally taken in 1883, the new Tsar, Alexander III is supposed to have said "Glory to God, that horrid woman has been arrested." Tsarist vengeance was achieved: She was sentenced to life imprisonment and served twenty-two years of solitary confinement in Schlüsselburg Fortress.[21]

But Figner's views on political murder did not survive her revolutionary career. On hearing the news of the assassination of Alexander II, she had wept profuse tears of relief, happy that "the dreadful nightmare which had suffocated young Russia before our very eyes for a whole decade was at last ended." But in later years, she looked back with regret upon certain aspects of the struggle which she and her comrades had chosen to pursue.

> The violence engendered by the struggle arouses ferocity, brings out the beast, awakens evil impulses, and leads to acts of disloyalty. Humanitarianism and greatness of soul are incompatible with it. And in this sense, both the government and the party, joining so to speak in hand-to-hand combat, competed with one another in the process of corrupting everything around them. On its side, the party proclaimed that all methods were permissible in the struggle against the enemy, and that the end justified the means. It also established a cult of the bomb and the revolver, and cannonized the terrorist. Murder and the gibbet captivated the imagination of our young people; and the weaker their nerves and the more oppressive their surroundings, the greater was their sense of exaltation at the thought of revolutionary terror.[22]

Sofiya Perovskaya's view of terror was more complex. Her fierce hatred of the government was a suitable obverse to her love of the common people. The

[21] Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I, 175–360. Her remark to Deutsch in his *Sixteen Years in Siberia*, tr. H. Chisolm (New York, 1905) 117. The Tsar's words are reported in A. M. Bikhter, ed., *Poety-demokraty 1870-1880-kh godov*, 3d ed. (Moscow, Leningrad, 1962) 468.

[22] Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I. 268, 285.

hatred deepened with the arrest of her comrades. Like Figner, she was long opposed to terror and tried to patch up the schism in Land and Liberty. But she eventually joined The People's Will and not only justified the use of terror but also practiced it with a vengeance. The word vengeance is not idly used here, though she herself once denied that it ever played a role in the motivation of her party:

> Vengeance [*mest*] is a personal affair, something that might, by stretching a point, explain those acts of terror carried out by the personal will and initiative of separate individuals—but not those of an organized party. But such acts, except those done in self-defense, are almost unknown in our revolutionary history. A political party cannot be formed around the banner of revenge, especially if it attracts the public sympathy that ours undoubtedly enjoys. The first shot—Zasulich's—was fired not in revenge, but as retribution for an insult to human dignity.

Even the notion of retribution (*vozmezdie*), she explained, was insufficient to account for the terror, for it served mainly to frighten and disorganize a government which left the revolutionaries no other means of expression. All this was said shortly before the assassination of the Tsar. Yet she told her brother before her execution that to her the terror "was simply a matter of revenge for the death of those near and dear to her."[23]

Perovskaya's personality is fascinating and cryptic. A hostile source pictured her as aloof, secretive, stubborn, rude, scornful of men, heartless, evil and cruel.[24] Figner, Stepniak, and others have contrasted her maternal tenderness for "the people" with her judgmental sternness toward her colleagues and her merciless and lethal enmity toward her political foes.[25] About the last there can be no doubt. Of all the leaders of her party still at large in late February 1881, she was the coolest and best fitted to oversee and carry to completion the long-sought murder of the Tsar. On March 1 she arranged her lookouts and bomb-throwers in their proper places and, from her post on the canal, gave the final signal for the fatal bombs to be hurled. But after the successful assassination, the narcotic of her hyper-active tension wore off; she wandered as in a dream—becoming, as her biographer put it, a "woman" once again.

Arrest followed quickly: To her first questioner, the famous Plehve, she

[23] Asheshov, *Perovskaya*, 88–89. "Iz vospominanii brata S. L. Perovskoi," *Na chuzhoi storone*, X (1925) 204–209 (207).

[24] *Khronika sotsialisticheskago dvizheniya v Rossii, 1878–1887: offitsialnyi otchët* (Moscow, 1906) 169–71. This is a vivid, detailed, officially inspired anti-revolutionary account of the movement, originally published in French (apparently for foreign consumption). It seems probable that the writer who describes Perovskaya either knew her or drew on persons who did; but any semblance of objectivity that he might have wished to convey is damaged by his crude remarks about her personal appearance and his anti-semitic description of Gesya Gelfman.

[25] Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I, 276–77; Stepniak, *Perovskaya, passim*. Like so many of her colleagues, Perovskaya, between revolutionary episodes, had studied to be a *feldsher* (Medic) and had performed medical work in the Crimea.

freely confessed her guilt; but at the trial of the six assassins—two women, four men—she challenged the interpretation of her crime offered by the prosecutor, N. V. Muraviev, a man who had been, ironically enough, her childhood playmate.

> Much, very much blame has been heaped upon us by the prosecutor. I have nothing more to say about the factual side of these [charges], for I have admitted to all of them in my deposition. But when it comes to charges against me and the others of immorality, brutality, and disregard for public opinion, I should like to object and to point to the fact that anyone familiar with our life and the conditions under which we had to work would not hurl charges of immorality and brutality at us.[26]

All were sentenced to death; but Perovskaya's female co-defendant, Gesya Gelfman was reprieved because she was pregnant. Thus Perovskaya became the first woman political to mount the scaffold. Pleas for mercy from prominent members of society were ignored. Perovskaya's last days were occupied with attempts to console her grieving mother. Her demeanor on the scaffold was cool and dignified. Displaying to the end her emotional discrimination, she refused to render farewell to the informer Rysakov who was about to share her fate, but embraced the others warmly. Her stoicism held sway over instinct almost to the last moment. Though she retained her haughty smile as the noose was fixed upon her neck, some force deep within her took over: she fastened her feet firmly to a protuberance on the platform and it took the violent exertions of two men to dislodge her feet and hang her.[27]

How many women were engaged in this appalling yet, in its way, elevating struggle? It is still difficult to say, both because of the paucity of statistical analyses and the relative lack of attention given to all but the most prominent women revolutionaries by the scholars who have the data at their disposal. At best we can offer only a few crude observations based on the figures available. Of the 5,664 revolutionaries of the 1870's listed in *Figures*, about one-eighth were women, an impressive increase over the 1860's where the female radical contingent accounted for only 3 percent of the total. These bare percentages tell us little, however, for the brief entries in that biographical compendium are often little more than catalogues of arrests, surveillances, and vital statistics. But we do have other samples which, when combined, exhibit a certain pattern. If we put them in a scale,[28]

[26] Burtsev, *Za sto let*, 191.
[27] Asheshov, *Perovskaya*, 137–40; L. Planson, "Kazn tsareubiits (iz lichnykh vospominanii)," *Ist. vest.*, XXXIV (Feb. 1913) 20–35.
[28] Sources for the samples in the table: (1) Itenberg, *Dvizhenie*, 375, n. 35; (2) *Literatura "Narodnoi Voli,"* 348; others referenced elsewhere. See the interesting remarks of Robert McNeal in "Women in the Russian Radical Movement," *Journal of Social History*, V, 2 (Winter 1971–1972) 143–61.

Sample	*Percentage of Women*
5,664 revolutionaries of the 1870's	c. 12.5
1,611 arrested 1873–1877	15
770 arrested and indicted 1874	20
193 tried in the Great Trial of 1877–1878	18
50 tried in the Trial of the Fifty 1877	32
28 members, Executive Committee of People's Will	33

they tend to show that, while the proportion of women in the movement is rather low, it increases in those samples that reveal greater involvement or extremism. Such limited and tiny samples can be taken as no more than tentative and suggestive; men always outnumbered the women at every level from the first propaganda circles to The People's Will, held the most responsible posts, and performed most of the rigorous, dangerous, and criminal work. But having said this, we must also accept the fact that, individual for individual, women were more deeply involved than the men: "better fewer, but better," as Lenin would have put it. This does not prove that women were on the whole "better" revolutionaries than men, but only that it was easier for the latter to come in and out of the movement in large numbers and have relatively little impact on it. Women found it harder to resume a normal life after a radical sojourn; and their initial impulse to commit themselves was probably much stronger than that of their brothers for whom radicalism was a more natural vocation.

Age level, class background, and education are easier to document. Like the men, the women in the movement were almost all between twenty and thirty. To a much greater extent than the men, they were of gentry origins—some 67 percent of those most deeply implicated in the years 1873 to 1877—and at least four of them were daughters of generals. All but a handful had been given good to excellent educations, many of them in European and, after 1876, Russian universities.[29] This is hardly cause for wonder: Russian radicalism, even in its simplest forms, was not likely to appeal to women of primitive education. On the other hand, a good education in and of itself was not the final determinant of Russian women's drift to revolution. Modern scholars have tentatively concluded that the only sure relationship between educational level and politics is that the former helps create a high political awareness. But higher learning "may reinforce or weaken prejudice; it may lead to either radicalism or conservatism, and it certainly does not ensure rationality in political orientation or behavior."[30] A superior academic experience and broad reading habits disclosed to many women the specter of social injustice, but it was not sufficient to draw them into the fight against it.

[29] The figure on class origin is from N. N. Sidorov, "Staticheskie svedeniya o propagandistakh 70-kh godov v obrabotke III Otdeleniya," *Katorga i ssylka* (No. 1, 1928) 30; Perovskaya, Löschern, Armfeldt, and Batyushkova were the generals' daughters. S. I. Strievskaya mentions eight *Bestuzhevki* in Valk, ed. *Kursy*, 32.
[30] James S. Coleman, ed., *Education and Political Development* (Princeton, 1965) 19–20.

Of all the non-Russian females in the movement, only the Jews enjoyed an impressive representation. The traditional Jewish family was, if anything, more despotic for girls than the Russian, practicing as it did the arranged marriage through a matchmaker and tying its daughters securely to the home. The new girls' high schools of the early 1860's afforded previously unheard of opportunities for the cloistered Jewish girl; by the end of the decade the Jewish *nigilistka* had made her appearance both in the Russian cities and in the *shtetls* of the Pale, complete with bobbed hair, a plain dress, a sincere manner, and a feverish desire for "goyish" learning. Once in the movement of the 1870's, these women quickly assimilated, inter-marrying with Russians at a higher rate than did Jewish men. Typical was Anna Epstein, daughter of a smuggler, who attached herself to a band of ex-rabbinical students who helped smuggle revolutionaries across the frontier. She was drawn to radicalism not through study or worship of the plain folk, but by her veneration of the hounded revolutionaries, one of whom, Dmitry Klements, she married. Gesya Gelfman was another woman of Jewish background. Though of wealthy Orthodox parents, she received no schooling and was mistreated by her stepmother. After many misadventures she joined The People's Will and shared a conspiratorial flat with Sablin, by whom she became pregnant. Her condition saved her from the gallows in 1881, though both she and her child died not long after the executions.[31]

The backgrounds and psychological types of radical women were so varied that it is impossible to generalize about their motivation in terms of emotional frustration, sex-need, father-hatred and the like. It is true that many had an unhappy childhood; but so did many non-radical women. Most of them, like Madame Roland, possessed "religious feelings without religious faith."[32] Sofiya Kovalevskaya managed to capture this spirit fictionally in her character Vera Vorontsova who as a young girl revelled in the Book of Martyrs and longed to go to China as a gesture of sacrifice in the struggle for the salvation of mankind. After reading Dobrolyubov, she replaced the heathen of China with the masses of Russia; but her secular dreams were still couched in a religious apostrophe: "O Lord! I know that there is much woe in the world, much injustice, and many who are needy. I want to serve the people. I am ready to give my life for them."[33] The classic pattern seems to have been a high degree of religious sensitivity, reinforced by literature and transformed into "social

[31] Deutsch, *Rol Evreev*, 18–28; Louis Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia*, 2 v. (New Haven, 1944–1951) I, 158. On Epstein: *ibid.*, I, 153 and Zasulich, *Vospom.*, 80–81. On Gelfman: Breshkovskaya, "Iz vospom.," 230–35 and Alphonse Thun, *Geschichte der revolutionären Bewegung in Russland* (Leipzig, 1883) 264–66. The law prohibiting the execution of a pregnant woman until forty days after childbirth is from the *Ulozhenie* of 1649: P. Mullov, "Zhenshchina po russkomu zakonodatelstvu," *Zhurnal Ministerstva Yustitsii*, VII (Mar. 1861) 540–86 (559).

[32] J. M. Thompson, *The French Revolution* (New York, 1966) 292.

[33] From her story "Nigilistka" (1889–1890) in *Vospominaniya detstva; Nigilistka* (Moscow, 1960) 177–78. This tale, though not of a high literary order, offers a strikingly faithful portrayal of a Russian female radical.

daydreaming"—fantasies in which observed injustices to self or others were obliterated by a future realm of Total Justice.

Altruism, whether radical or philanthropic, is much more the result of the consciousness of social injustice than it is of the "objective" conditions of exploitation, though one can hardly deny that such conditions abounded in nineteenth-century Russia. The heavy strain of altruism, so prominent in both sexes of the Russian intelligentsia, divided into the abstract and the concrete. Those who could satisfy themselves with direct, immediate, and "small" manifestations of such altruism could express it in teaching, medicine, or charity. Those who tended to make "humanity" the object of their unselfish love looked at medicine as a mere craft. Vera Figner was the clearest example of a female radical who tried desperately to hold to her view of medicine as an adequate means of serving mankind, but who drifted into abstraction and thus revolution. How and why Figner crossed this line into the realm of abstract altruism is a question whose answer would give us a key to the problem of revolutionary consciousness.

According to the bylaws of the Executive Committee of The People's Will, members were to donate all their spiritual power to the cause of revolution, and to renounce all family ties, friendship, sympathy, and love that interfered with that cause. Love within the movement was allowed if it did not distract the revolutionary's attention from the main business. Frivolous or loose sexual behavior was forbidden. But beyond these general rules, there was scope for some variety in sexual behavior: Figner had been married, Perovskaya had a lover, and Zasulich seems to have had neither. Some, like Alexander Mikhailov preferred celibacy for themselves. Zasulich's friend, Kolenkina, paraded her indifference to men. "I love the movement," she said. Olga Lyubatovich tried for a while to persuade her comrades that love interfered with revolutionary activity, and she and her beloved Morozov agreed to postpone sexual relations. But the flesh asserted itself and she bore his child and later married another revolutionary. For the most part, "nihilist" attitudes toward sex prevailed. Fictitious marriages were widely used to free the energies of domestically incarcerated daughters. If we can take Stepniak's novel, *Career of a Nihilist*, as an authentic picture of life in the movement, love-triangles were quietly resolved in the manner of *What Is To Be Done?* In general, marriages or free-unions, based on attraction and incubated in the intimacy of conspiratorial apartments, were the norm. The most celebrated of these was the revolutionary romance of Perovskaya and Zhelyabov. The governor's daughter, at first wooed by Tikhomirov, finally overcame her aversion to men and found brief happiness with the peasant-revolutionary, Andrei Zhelyabov. Their love, which ended on the gallows, is commemorated by the two adjoining Leningrad streets that bear their names.[34]

[34] Bylaws: *Revol. Narod.*, II, 200; Kolenkina: Deutsch, "Yuzhnye Buntari," 56–58; Lyubatovich: *Byloe* (May 1906), 208–48 and (June 1906) 108–54; N. Morozov, *Povesti moei*

The functions of women in the movement varied widely, ranging from clean-up duties performed by the illiterate Gryaznova[35] to leadership roles assumed by women like Figner and Perovskaya. There were no women theorists except Mariya Oshanina, called Madame Jacobson by some in droll reference to her Jacobin tendencies. But she was unable to impose her views upon the Executive Committee, and she was opposed by Perovskaya and others.[36] Fourier had once voiced the belief that "the cabalist passion is the favorite passion of women; they are excessively fond of intrigue, rivalries, and all of the greater and lesser flights of cabal."[37] This certainly did not apply within The People's Will; if anything, the women were less devious than the men, especially at the time of the schism. They performed their jobs quietly and efficiently, whether acting as "wives" in conspiratorial flats, masquerading as the fiancées of prisoners, or performing technical jobs with dynamite or printing presses. In the decision-making process, the women members of the Executive Committee spoke as equals. In the literature of the revolutionary movement which I have read, I have encountered only one minor instance of a radical opposing women's holding of responsible posts: this was an 1880 letter of the eighteen-year old I. G. Shiryaev complaining of the large number of women police spies recruited from among arrested women.[38]

Formally equals in the revolutionary movement, women were increasingly so treated by the police and the courts. They paid heavily for their actions during the 1870's and 1880's. Up to Perovskaya's conviction, death sentences for women had all been commuted. After that, many women revolutionaries marched to the gallows or fell before the firing squad. Particularly during the 1880's large numbers of women came to know the inner walls of The Crosses, the Peter-Paul Fortress, the Kharkov "house of terror," and Moscow's grim Lubyanka and Butyrki prisons; many more experienced hard labor at Kara and the desolate settlements of Siberia. Figner languished for twenty years in a Schlüsselburg cell which gave this writer claustrophobia after being in it for five minutes. The treatment of women prisoners, though generally mild, occasionally descended to brutality: Stories of rape, forcible stripping, physical violence, and verbal abuse have all found their way into the enormous prison literature. Nadezhda Segida, for example, a *narodovolka* of Greek extraction, was given 100 blows for having slapped the warden; she died two days later. Many of the women prisoners, lacking the stoicism of a Figner, went insane; others committed suicide—something like a third of the number of male suicides.[39]

zhizni, 3 v. (Leningrad, 1947) II, 417–19 and III, 281; Stepniak, *A Female Nihilist*, 3d ed. (Boston, 1886) 16–25. Fictitious marriages: Sinegub, *Zapiski*, 18–84; Popov, *Zapiski*, 249–50. Triangles: Stepniak, *The Career of a Nihilist: a Novel* (New York, n.d.), a fictitious but accurate gallery of revolutionary types.

[35] Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I, 192. It ought to be noted that even the major women figures, like Perovskaya, were not above running "to the market after some milk." Segal, *Perovskaya*, 286.

[36] The Jacobin clique got their ideas from Zaichnevsky who was exiled in their native province, Orël; later they became the admirers of Tkachëv. See: Kozmin, *Iz istorii*, 307–11, 327; Popov, *Zapiski*, 87–88; Figner, *Zapech. trud*, I, 200–201; Segal, *Perovskaya*, 219. Oshanina's political views may be inspected in *Byloe* (June 1907) 1–10; Perovskaya's in Asheshov, *Perovskaya*, 86–90.

[37] Fourier, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3d ed., 6 v. (Paris, 1846–1848) IV, 406.

[38] Shiryaev's opinions alluded to in a letter to him from V. A. Bronevsky (*Revol. Narod.*, II, 96). Bronevsky dismissed Shiryaev's suggestion that women be confined to giving "moral support" to the Party; he alluded to the large number of male police informers and to the doctrine of [illegible] which was lodged in the charter of the People's Will (of which Shiryaev's brother was a

In all of this, Russia distinguished itself from the rest of Europe in a grimly dramatic way. The women's struggle there was hardly a generation old, when numerous Russian women, bypassing it, were marching in the ranks of a violent, determined, and historically significant revolutionary movement. The last flame of French female radicalism, born in 1789, had flickered out in the Paris Commune. Britain saw no violent women until the present century and then only in the fight for specifically women's causes. Other countries knew even less of such a development. Perovskaya and her comrades represent a unique phenomenon in nineteenth-century European social history. More important, they set a precedent for the large numbers of women who joined the revolution in 1905 and in 1917. "From the experience of all liberation movements," wrote Lenin in 1918, "it can be noted that the success of revolution can be measured by the extent of the involvement of women in it."[40] The significance of this pronouncement is not its author, but the fact that it was shared by all Russian revolutionaries. Their faith was more than justified by events.

The relevance of female radicalism to the history of women's emancipation in Russia is enormous, in spite of the paradoxical fact that the women revolutionaries rejected any outright activity on its behalf. First, it was the rapid assimilation among the Russian intelligentsia of the idea of sexual equality that allowed women to enter the movement as equals, and it was the self-confidence that women silently absorbed from the literature on the woman question which acted as their psychological armament in the revolutionary struggle. In the 1870's, the vocation of revolutionary was the only one open to women which would greet her as an equal, allow her talents fully to unfold and permit her to rise to the top; there her energies, character, and skills were unlocked and put to use. At the very least, the revolutionaries proved tha[t] woman was capable of things undreamed of in the traditional view. An ironi[c] measure of this is the fact that in the very year of Perovskaya's birth, a Rus[...]

[39] On Sigida: Stepniak, *King Stork and King Log: a Study of Modern Russia*, 2 v. (London 1895) II, 88–93. Since the appearance of Linguet's memoirs of the Bastille and Silvio Pellico' *My Prisons* (1832), tales of incarceration have played an interesting role in the political literatur of Europe. The volume of such literature in Russia is enormous, but the two standard works are M. N. Gernet, *Istoriya tsarskoi tyurmy*, 3d ed. 5 v. (Moscow, 1960–1963) and George Kennan *Siberia and the Exile System*, 2 v. (New York, 1891). As a tiny sampling see: *Galleriya shlissel burgskykh uznikov* (SPB, 1907), 222–223; Stepniak, *Russia*, 63, 110, 147–58, 173–74; Kropot kin, *Memoirs*, 270–71; Deutsch, *Sixteen Years*, 193; and, most illuminating of all, Figner's ac count of her years in the fortress (*Zapech. trud*, II).

[40] V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 55 v. (Moscow, 1960–1965) XXXV[...]

sian physician had written that "naturally, modes of activity involving heroism or deeds of violence could not be open to women."[41] Like the Salvation Army, the Russian revolutionary movement discovered early that sexual equality was not incompatible with either discipline or ideological purity.[42] This notion, buttressed by a lengthy martyrology of fallen revolutionary women, constituted a legacy for twentieth-century Russian women of a broad spectrum of political views. To the female Left, it bequeathed two additional things: revolutionary anti-feminism—the idea that the common cause superseded and contradicted any special women's cause; and revolutionary sublimation, whose substance has never found clearer expression than in Alexandra Kollontai's tribute to Sofiya Perovskaya: "a daring 'man's mind' and an ability to subordinate her woman's 'ego' and her loving, passionate heart to the cause of the revolution."[43]

On the other hand, if the feminists can be faulted for ignoring the revolution and focusing on women, the radical women were guilty of the opposite sin. They repudiated feminism for themselves (though a few had passed into radicalism via a feminist stage of consciousness), and perceived themselves as revolutionaries equal to men. But they also ignored the enormous mass of peasant women who would one day have to be led into the light of civilization if the revolution were to have any meaning. Female propagandists who made contact with peasant women in the factories and in the villages apparently did not mount a "special effort" for peasant women or utilize any women-oriented arguments or messages in their propaganda work. The result was a virtually total absence of contact between educated women propagandists (except through medical activity) and the Russian peasant women—a crucial weakness that the successors of the populists, the Socialist Revolutionaries, would make little effort to correct. There would be no village equivalent of the Marxist "proletarian women's movement" in prerevolutionary times; and radical contact with women-as-women in the Russian countryside would have to wait until the 1920's.

[41] V. V. Deriker, *Fiziologiya zhenshchiny* (SPB, 1854) 120.
[42] Cf. Strachey, *Struggle*, 215.
[43] Kollontai, *Polozhenie zhenshchiny v evolyutsii khozyaistva* (Moscow, 1922) 126. An excellent collection of translations of the works of some of the women discussed in this chapter is *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar*, ed. and tr. Barbara Engel and Clifford Rosenthal (New York, 1975).

Voices of the 1860's

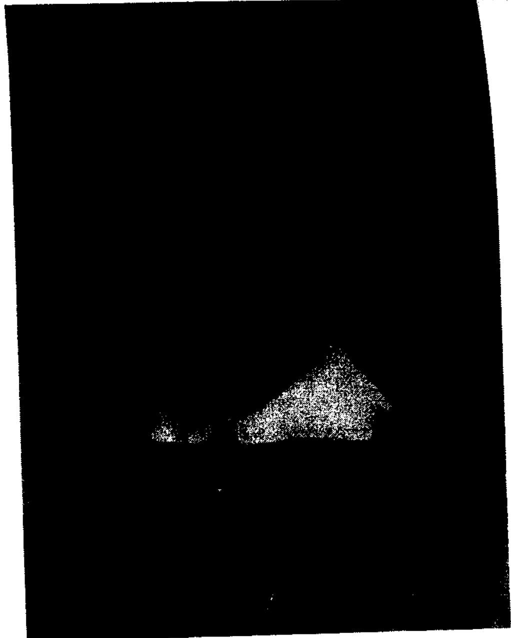
N.G. Chernyshevsky
E.N. Vodovozova, *Na zare Zhizni.*
3d ed, 2 v. Moscow, 1964.

E.N. Vodovozova
E.N. Vodovozova, *Na zare Zhizni.*
3d ed. 2 v. Moscow, 1964.

Heroines of Terror

Vera Zasulich
V.I. Zasulich. SPB, 1906.

Vera Figner
(Soviet Postcard)



Sofya Perovskaya
E. Segal, *Sofya Perovskaya*. Moscow, 1962.