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Women and Violence in Revolutionary Russia, 1860-1925

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WOMEN AND VIOLENCE IN REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA, 1860-1925

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

History

by

Jenny R. Findsen

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Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

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Russian women engaged in public violence during the late imperial and revolutionary periods in various ways and for a variety of reasons. This study examines traditional gender roles in Russia, and women's motivations for female terrorism as well as military and police service. It establishes that women broke through patriarchal social barriers through violence, even while still embracing traditionally feminine notions of self-sacrifice for the common good. Based on primary sources such as memoirs, official policies, and newspaper articles, I argue that Russian women committed both illegal and officially sanctioned violence to achieve diverse personal, ideological, political, material, and familial goals. Observers, both domestic and international, interpreted the women's motivations and characters using their own preconceived notions of femininity. A common theme linking the three groups of women and public observers was the age-old expectation of female self-sacrifice. This work encompasses elements of Russian women's history, class and gender history, institutional history, and the history of Russian terrorism.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Between the 1860s and the 1920s, Russian women engaged in violent actions to advance their political and social ideologies, to defend their nation, to protect a fledgling state, and to express themselves as independent actors. In a time of rapid social, political, and economic change, these women drew on and challenged deeply embedded patriarchal social norms by stepping out of the realm of domesticity and into the public world traditionally reserved for men. Women engaged in violence for various reasons, including a bid for political and social independence, a desire for vengeance, the expression of ardent patriotism and love for Russia, and personal adventure and expression. Many of their reasons overlapped with those of men who also pursued these aims. However, there was an added dimension to women's causes. Given the strict overlapping hierarchies of gender, class, and official status into Russia, women had a palpable need to prove their worth as valuable citizens in public and political spheres, whereas men already knew their value. The violent actions of women, even though few of their sisters hoped to emulate them directly, gave new generations of Russian women a sense of purpose and freedom. Yet such actions failed to dislodge, and in some ways augmented, the centuries-old tradition of feminine self-sacrifice.

Russian traditional culture stressed the importance of hierarchy according to class, rank, gender, and ethnicity. Each Russian subject was expected to know their place, to submit to others, and to subordinate individual interests to societal ones. Patriarchy was deeply embedded in this hierarchy. In peasant society, the

bol'shak or male head of household, exercised almost total control over all those living in his household.¹ The same extended to urban families. The father gave commands, and those in his household obeyed. The feminine world was bounded by domestic concerns, wifehood, and motherhood, along with labor considered appropriate for the female sex.² Efficient household management, wifely obedience, devoted and gentle motherhood, and moral leadership continued to be the principal ideals of womanhood.³ This ideal was especially true for women of the educated classes. Nineteenth-century noblewoman Natalie Grot encapsulated elite feminine virtues while describing her mother: "Her intellect was outstanding, remarkable for a woman, and her feelings were deep and strong. She was composed, usually quiet, and rarely expressed herself. Her thinking was exquisitely noble and elevated, and her devotion to my father and her family was immutable. A careful, energetic housekeeper with a great sense of practicality, she restrained my father's enthusiasms."⁴ Absolute obedience to her husband, management of the household, and the bearing of children was as much a part of a peasant woman's life as an aristocrat's, though the nature of peasant livelihood valued the *krest'ianka's* labor more than her family connections, intellect, sentimentality, or demeanor. Hard work around the house and in the fields, thrift, submissiveness, and sexual fidelity were the ideal virtues of a peasant woman.⁵

¹ Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia, 1700-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 53.

² Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 3.

³ Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 149.

⁴ Clements, *A History of Women*, 149.

⁵ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 49.

The Orthodox Church played a foundational role in shaping imperial Russian society. Church doctrine taught that hierarchy was the natural order of society on all levels, mandated by God. Thus, for example, the hierarchy in the home reflected the hierarchy of the cosmos and then the state. "The man is the head of his wife; the prince is the head of the man; and God is the head of the prince."⁶ Orthodoxy reinforced the separation of the genders and preached two opposing images of women to buttress strict patriarchy.⁷ The figure of the "good woman" versus the "evil woman" was prominent throughout Russian literature and Orthodox tales and sermons. The ideal woman was submissive, silent, chaste, industrious, self-sacrificing, and ready to serve her husband. An evil woman, by contrast, was self-indulgent, lazy, outspoken, ruled over her husband, and flouted authority.⁸ In essence, the Orthodox Church idealized the "good woman," associating her with women saints who endured martyrdom for their faith and devotion.⁹ Thus the qualities with which the Orthodox Church endowed the "good woman" fostered in Russian women the model of self-sacrifice and suffering as holy actions. According to historian Barbara Alpern Engels, "people who manifested such qualities could exercise considerable moral authority."¹⁰ This quote shows that Russian women could manipulate within the established social structure.

⁶ Natalia Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (Gloucestershire: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 36.

⁷ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 7.

⁸ Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History*, 36-37.

⁹ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 9.

¹⁰ Barbara Alpern Engel, *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 4.

The 19th century brought rapid changes to Russia, though it largely remained a traditional society with Orthodox values. However, in emphasizing self-sacrifice and suffering on behalf of others, these same traditional values "provided women with a rationale for rebellion" against "family despotism."¹¹ Instead of submission and service for the good of the family, these women devoted their energies to society. The higher purpose "legitimized and ennobled women's rebellion in the eyes of many contemporaries," making them outstanding revolutionaries and even warriors.¹²

There was a long history of a Russian women breaking free of the domestic sphere. Some of the most shocking transgressors were elite women who engaged in public violence. From vengeful medieval queens such as Grand Princess Olga of Kiev, who destroyed the Drevlians after they murdered her husband, to masquerading soldiers such as Nadezhda Durova during the Napoleonic Wars, Russian women had long challenged and manipulated feminine gender roles for personal, philosophical, and political reasons. Russian peasant women also held fierce reputations for violent public action; their motive was "their need to ensure the survival of their family under exceedingly difficult circumstances."¹³ There are many accounts of peasant women fighting their landlords and officials, whether brandishing farm tools as weapons or using their bodies as barriers and shields to protect their villages. Peasant women seldom fought for the betterment of their nation or overthrowing the tsarist government,

¹¹ Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, 5.

¹² Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, 5.

¹³ Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg, *Cultures in Flux: Lower-Class Values, Practices, and Resistance in Late Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 35.

as was the aim of elite radicals. Rather they acted as "members of their family and their community."¹⁴ For example, in 1885, villagers in Orel attempted to negotiate terms of their grain harvest. When the men's arguments were unsuccessful, "their wives would take their place and, using their scythes and knives, would cut anyone who tried to stop them."¹⁵ By the turn of the millennium, Russian women from all levels of society were increasingly visible as revolutionary terrorists, soldiers, and police enforcers.

In the late imperial period, socioeconomic change led to the disruption of traditional gender roles. A new technologically modern, urban, and literate world emerged, bringing new problems that challenged traditional views of women and altered the expectations of women themselves. For the first time, women in urban areas entered the paid workforce, which was traditionally the domain of men. As industrialization grew apace and the demand for more laborers rose, an increasing number of women left the countryside to fill the void in factories and domestic service. The cities offered expanded opportunities for literacy and public engagement to the new workers. During this time, elite women gained increased access to higher education.¹⁶ Elite young women left their homes to become doctors, nurses, and educators, and peasant women left theirs to work in urban factories and private homes. Urban women of all classes occupied increasingly democratized public spaces, which introduced them to new and sometimes radical ideas.

¹⁴ Frank and Steinberg, *Cultures in Flux*, 37.

¹⁵ Frank and Steinberg, *Cultures in Flux*, 41.

¹⁶ Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8.

Elite women both drew on and discarded traditional feminine roles to assert themselves and their ideologies. Some women advocated for political and social change, including liberation from the long-established patriarchy. Even conservative women saw the need for changes in women's education, property, and legal rights, though they may not have rejected the patriarchal structure itself.¹⁷ The forum for women's social participation varied widely. Many voiced their opinions through the pen in women's magazines, encouraging political activism. Other elite women worked with and on behalf of working-class women. They joined organizations that coordinated rallies, marches, and protests, demanding governmental reforms. In late imperial Russia, a few exceptional elite women rejected their comfortable, privileged lifestyles to embrace terrorism as a way to fight for their political ideologies.

Russian women of the working classes had different motivations for engaging in public violence than women from the elite class. After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Russia began to modernize rapidly, in social and economic terms if not political ones. Women who left the peasant village to work in urban areas directly experienced many of these changes. Working-class women were exposed to an expanding array of choices that represented both an opportunity to earn a living and to have a modicum of freedom from patriarchal control.¹⁸ An increasing number of working women started to be more concerned with their own individual well-being instead of the welfare of the family and community. This new independent mindset aroused "dissatisfaction with

¹⁷ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 3.

¹⁸ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 105.

traditional gender, social, and even political hierarchies."¹⁹ At the same time, like all women, working women did not wholly abandon traditional values. Most had the goal of marriage and a family. What led working women to join revolutionary causes organized by radical elite women were the grim circumstances they faced such as harsh working and living conditions. Female workers lived in factory dormitories with dozens of other women, and female domestics slept in hallways or kitchens. Their literacy rates were lower than men, as were their nearly subsistence level of wages. Working women were often targets of sexual abuse, and they were characterized in misogynistic ways. They were treated as backward usurpers who got in the way of male advancement. Nonetheless, working women increasingly insisted on their personal dignity. By the end of the nineteenth century, they were more likely to resist such abuses and to organize.²⁰

In an increasingly educated society, the “woman question” or how to improve Russian women’s legal and economic circumstances became a central topic in Russian reform.²¹ As historian Barbara Clements states, “It was primarily men—intellectuals and artists—who shaped the increasingly fashionable conception of woman as suffering servant, but it was primarily women who led the efforts to improve women’s situation.”²² However, not everyone agreed as to what the “woman question” encompassed. The solution to the problems facing Russian women ranged from improved labor conditions to more education to full

¹⁹ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 105.

²⁰ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 99.

²¹ Barbara Evans Clements, *Daughters of Revolution: A History of Women in the U.S.S.R.* (Arlington Heights: Harland Davidson, Inc., 1994), 10.

²² Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 10-11.

political and social equality.²³ The trials of early terrorists such as Vera Zasulich and Vera Figner brought revolutionary demands, and women's promotion of them, to national and international attention. Sympathizers painted such women as impassioned, seeking justice for those who suffered under the cruel hand of the tsarist government. Detractors saw them as gender-deviant monsters. For their part, women such as Zasulich and Figner saw themselves as feminine martyrs for the greater cause.²⁴ For later generations of female radicals, such women became role models.

The 1905 Revolution was a turning point in feminist and radical women's ambitions. Not only did they want political independence and social worth, but they also insisted on full citizenship and the right to participate in building a new government. The political temperature was heating up all over Russia. "The language of rights filled the air, and women expected to be included" in the debate.²⁵ Women's place in society was evolving rapidly. Political rights for all sorts of social groups seemed possible, and many educated women became "temporary revolutionaries."²⁶

Women of all classes participated in the burgeoning worker demonstrations and strikes that erupted throughout the country as 1905 approached and in the revolutionary year itself. "Female strikers showed that some poor women were far less docile than the government, the factory owners,

²³ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 10.

²⁴ Amy Knight, "Female Terrorists in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party," *The Russian Review* 38, no. 2 (1979), 151.

²⁵ Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 42.

²⁶ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 274.

and the revolutionaries had assumed."²⁷ Women from all classes rose up in revolution to make their voices heard. The working class joined and formed unions. They organized, demonstrated, and went on strikes. Peasant women joined in the revolution by demanding from landlords better terms on leases and attacking anyone who appeared to be an exploiter. Professional women and schoolgirls found any excuse to join the revolutionary movement. Many women banded together to organize the Union of Equal Rights. Their objective was "the attainment by all women of political and civil rights identical with the rights of Russian male citizens, with the goal of improving the legal and economic situation of women."²⁸ In other words, they wanted universal suffrage, equal educational opportunities, protective labor regulations, equal treatment of peasant women, and "an end to government regulation of prostitution."²⁹ The 1905 revolutions became a proving ground for reformist and radical women. They marched and orated, assassinated and rioted. Like their male comrades, they were arrested, brutalized, and banished to Siberia. In many cases, the harsh treatment did not dampen their revolutionary spirit; it only fueled the fire.³⁰

Women who engaged in violence served different symbolic functions for the organizations they served, as well as for their enemies. The tsarist state and its supporters hoped to use public trials, executions, and the demonization of revolutionary women as deterrents and negative examples. In many cases, it had the opposite effect. Revolutionaries used the involvement of women to promote

²⁷ Clements, *A History of Women*, 170.

²⁸ Clements, *A History of Women*, 170.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History*, 206.

their own political goals. They elevated such women to near sainthood for their self-sacrifice and devotion to the cause, hoping to garner more support. Perceived by those with revolutionary sympathies as the epitome of the highest feminine virtues of self-sacrifice, sentimentality, and motherhood, and by others as monstrous perversions of these same traits, women who engaged in public violence were understood differently than their male counterparts. The revolutionary activities of men were not considered counter to male gender norms.

In addition to stepping outside their gender domain, women had to be twice as committed and to work twice as hard to make a place for themselves in the public sphere. Women who engaged in violence, in other words, abruptly and noisily entered the realm of men. Many found it exciting, interesting, scary, and unfamiliar. Such women had to reinvent themselves physically and emotionally, unlike their male comrades, to prove themselves worthy of respect and full membership.

Women terrorists left home to gain independence and break away from the patriarchal structure that dominated their lives. However, they did not abandon what it meant to be Russian, or even Russian women. On the contrary, they transferred deeply embedded notions of self-sacrifice and discipline into their revolutionary work and relationships with their comrades. Likewise, women soldiers did not completely shuck off Russian societal norms. Many women who ran away from home to join the military had to do so by outwardly putting aside their femininity to disguise themselves as men. However, their motivations,

always multidimensional, at least in part were often decidedly feminine. Many of these female soldiers felt a deep desire to sacrifice themselves for the love of their country and to be with a loved one or avenge their families. Peasant woman Alexandra Braiko joined her brothers' regiment when they were conscripted during World War I. Another woman, Marfa Malko, joined her husband who was a junior officer on the battlefield until her husband was killed and she was captured by Germans.³¹

As the banner year of 1917 approached, political parties such as the Bolsheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries used the violence of women less in symbolic ways than in practical ones. Both revolutionary parties understood that without women's individual and mass support, there would be no hope for victory. Vladimir Lenin wrote, "The experience of all liberation movements demonstrates that the success of every revolution depends upon the extent to which women participate in it."³² The key to the success of revolutionary activity depended on the mobilization of women. Intellectual women answered the call, as did tens of thousands of other, less famous women.

Russia's terrible performance in World War I led to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, which brought the Provisional Government to power and the Provisional Government then introduced women into the armed forces. Women soldiers were used mainly as a propaganda tool, first to shame and then increase morale amongst war-weary male soldiers. The female soldiers, such as Maria

³¹ Laurie Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland: Russia's Women Soldiers in World War I and the Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006) 36.

³² Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History*, 208.

Bochkareva and Alexandra Kudasheva, had a different point of view. They saw this as their chance to protect their country and to earn the right to full citizenship. Even though their motivations and characters differed very little from men's, the experience of women engaged in public violence was fundamentally shaped by gender expectations.

After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Bolshevik women in the Cheka dared to display cold and calculated terror and violence. Russian social norms saw women as prone to emotional impulsivity and irrational thinking, in all ways subordinate to men. In the Bolshevik Party, however, women experienced far more egalitarian treatment than in traditional society. The Party believed women should work alongside men equally. This ideology allowed for some women to rise within the ranks of the Bolshevik party to positions of power. The freedoms and equality offered by the Bolsheviks were compelling to many. Educated socialist women flocked to join their ranks. After the revolutions of 1917, some of these women, including Rosalia Zemlacha and Varvara Iakovleva, were appointed to top positions within the Cheka.

The motivations for female terrorism, military, and police service were diverse: to safeguard the nation, to promote political and social change, to exact revenge, to prove their mettle as useful citizens, or even simply to find adventure. The tradition of self-sacrifice for the good of the family evolved into self-sacrifice for the people and nation of Russia itself, and for political and social aims. Women's familial devotion transformed into devotion to the revolutionary cause

and their fellow comrades. Finally, women sought to dismantle the old corporate hierarchies and achieve personal liberation and self-expression.

There are many resources detailing aspects of the Russian revolutionary period. In my search for understanding Russian women's connection with revolutionary, military, and government-sanctioned violence, several books proved helpful. Having a grasp of Russian utopian ideology in the late Imperial and early Soviet periods is critical to understanding the development of socialism in Russia. Richard Stites, in his book *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, provided valuable insight into the revolutionary mentality. He argued that "the Russian revolution took on its main spiritual, mental and expressive forms from the collision and collusion of the major utopian traditions in Russian history: those of the people, those of the state, and those of the radical intelligentsia."³³ Equally important to understanding utopian ideology often found at the core of revolutionary history is literacy and education, which played an integral part in radical movements. In *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917*, Jeffrey Brooks argued that the late imperial literature was characterized by movement and tension between tradition and modernity. Literature of the time reflected a gradually growing sense of individualism.³⁴ Bruce Lincoln, in his work *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War 1918-1921*, analyzed the reality of Bolshevik implementation of the revolutionary dream. He argued that the Russian

³³ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3.

³⁴ Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature 1861-1917* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), xviii-xix.

Civil War was brutal, pitting brother against brother. After the war ended, the despotic Party officials terrorized citizens. Terror permeated society, determining the structure by which the Soviet people both were governed and thought.³⁵

There are many books that comprise the historiography of women's history in Russia. Barbara Evans Clements chronologically explored women's ideologies and events in her book *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present*. Clements centered her book around two questions: What did women do, and how did they make a difference? Clements insisted her book was not about gender history, but about women's agency.³⁶ She argued that "bringing women to the forefront changes the established narrative of Russia's political, economic, and social history."³⁷ Focusing on fundamental changes in Russian history, Barbara Alpern Engel's book, *Women in Russia, 1700-2000*, captured some of the diversity and evolution of women's experiences and identity in response to economic, social, political, and cultural developments. She argued that gender shaped Russian women's lives. It defined who they were and how they interacted with others. Moreover, the social construction of the feminine and masculine contributed to and reflects a society's power structure.³⁸ Natalia Pushkareva's book *Women in Russian History from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* presented a comprehensive and multifaceted look at women's lives throughout the centuries. Pushkareva rejected the widely held notion that Russian

³⁵ W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 13.

³⁶ Clements, *A History of Women*, xiv.

³⁷ Clements, *A History of Women*, xiv.

³⁸ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 3.

women suffered from eternal subjugation and argued instead that women frequently played decisive roles in Russian history.³⁹ Richard Stites' *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* focused on elite women in traditional roles, "the woman question" and responses to it, women's movements, and finally, women's "liberation." He argued that while women's roles in revolutionary history were infinitely nuanced and complex, the book was ultimately a social history concerned with small groups, personal interactions, and personalities that were biographical in nature.⁴⁰ Personalities as much as political affiliation unified and splintered women's political activities.

Another important book to understanding revolutionary women is Barbara Evans Clements' *Bolshevik Women*. Her book covers the many roles Bolshevik women played during and after the revolution. She identified the reasons why women joined radical movements in general and the Bolsheviks in specific, and how they contributed to the revolutionary cause by organizing, teaching, and providing support for the cause. Clements argued that revolutionary women, mainly in low-level positions within the Communist Party, nonetheless played an essential role in the revolution, the Civil War, and the building of the Soviet Union.⁴¹ She detailed the lives and contributions of many prominent women, including women covered in this thesis, such as Rosalia Zemlacha, Elena Stasova, and Konkordia Samoilova.

³⁹ Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History*, 5.

⁴⁰ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, xix.

⁴¹ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 3.

There are few books on Russian female terrorists. However, *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in the Nineteenth Century* by Barbara Alpern Engel is a foundational work on the origins of this activity. Engels contended,

In the nineteenth century, the belief in women's moral superiority served to justify demands for greater rights for them in public life as well as private life. As educational opportunities expanded, fostering an individualism that challenged their traditional submission to family authority, women claimed the right to defy family despotism for the sake of their own self-development and to fulfill an ethical vision by devoting themselves to society as a whole. Their ethical vision and willingness to dispense with other attachments prompted women to an absolutism and intensity of dedication that most male radicals lacked.⁴²

Engel explored in detail the connection between the Russian female terrorist martyr mentality and the ideology of the Orthodox Church. What she doesn't show is the shifts in these aims and mentalities as Russia crossed the revolutionary and "modern" society divide.

Along with Engel's work there are memoirs and essential biographies that give a clear look at early radical women. Lynne Ann Hartnett detailed the revolutionary life of Vera Figner in *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner: Surviving the Russian Revolution*. Hartnett argued that Figner "became a living symbol whose perseverance, survival, and self-constructed life narrative of sacrifice defined revolutionary heroism and martyrdom for a generation and became a model of appropriate revolutionary behavior for the new Soviet woman."⁴³

Understanding the impact of Figner's revolutionary model is key in

⁴² Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, 5.

⁴³ Lynne Ann Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner: Surviving the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), xv.

comprehending the actions of subsequent generations of revolutionaries such as Varvara Iakovleva, Elena Stasova, Konkordia Samoiloa, and Maria Spiridonova. Another iconic terrorist figure was Sofia Perovskaia. Robert Riggs wrote *Sofia Perovskaya, Terrorist Princess: The Plot to Kill Tsar Alexander II and The Woman Who Led It*. His research described Perovskaia's background, her work with underground revolutionaries, and her role in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Riggs argued that the 1860s and 1870s gave rise to “a small subset of people who had the requisite character traits to turn to the methods and mentality of terrorism. Perovskaia was a product of this distillation. Her passionate hatred, combined with her ability, drive and determination, proved to be the key to assassinating the liberator of the serfs, Tsar Alexander II.”⁴⁴

Between memoir and biography, *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar*, edited by Barbara Alpern Engel and Clifford N. Rosenthal, provided commentary on the memoirs of five revolutionary women, including Vera Figner and Vera Zasulich. The editors argued that revolutionary women who engaged in and supported terrorism believed that it would instigate a social revolution and that violence would make the tsarist government open to constitutional and civil liberty concessions.⁴⁵ The women represented in the book “captured the women’s absolute commitment to ending suffering and injustice and their willingness to sacrifice their own well-being to that end.”⁴⁶ While many revolutionary women

⁴⁴ Robert Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya Terrorist Princess: The Plot to Kill Tsar Alexander II and the Woman Who Led It* (Berkeley: Global Harmony Press, 2018), ii-iii.

⁴⁵ Barbara Alpern Engel and Clifford N. Rosenthal, eds., *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), xxiii.

⁴⁶ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, xxviii.

abandoned the Orthodox faith, they were inspired by the Orthodoxy which formed the core of Russian society that idealized self-sacrifice and suffering.⁴⁷ While Another story of self-sacrifice can be found in Vera Figner's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, which detailed her family life and transition into a revolutionary radical. Figner discussed her many relationships with other revolutionaries, such as Sofia Perovskaia, while working in the underground movements. She recounts her transition from the "Going to the People" movement to plotting the assassination of Alexander II.

Scholarly articles include Jay Bergman's "The Political Thought of Vera Zasulich," which analyzed the political thinking behind Russian terrorism. Bergman argued that Russian socialism was a synthesis of Marxism and Utilitarianism that drove radicals to violence to achieve the ultimate state of harmony and bliss.⁴⁸ Anke Hilbrenner, in her article, "The Perovskaia Paradox, or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia," explored how both tsarist authorities and radicals were trying to quantify the ostensible paradox of violent women. The Perovskaia case showed that the authorities as well as radicals used identical gender ideology to either inculcate or venerate the female terrorist. Hilbrenner argued that in 19th-century Russia, "the idea that women could be violent contradicted gender expectations. Women were likely victims of violence, but not the doers of violent deeds."⁴⁹ However, the author pointed out that women were not only victims of brutality, but one must also keep in mind

⁴⁷ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, xxviii.

⁴⁸ Jay Bergman, "The Political Thought of Vera Zasulich," *Slavic Review* 38, no. 2 (1979): 243-58.

⁴⁹ Anke Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia," *Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 17, no. 17 (2016).

that violent crimes committed by bourgeois women were rare.⁵⁰ In her essay, "Female Terrorists in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party," Amy Knight explored the conditions that led to young women's radicalization. Such women felt compelled to show selfless devotion, intense commitment, and a high capacity for self-sacrifice and heroic martyrdom. Knight explained that female terrorists came from affluent families, were highly educated, and were looking for meaning in life. Women SRs often did not consider non-violent alternatives to political change, as they were not always actuated by logical political concerns. Their memoirs bring to light certain female ideals such as self-sacrifice and boundless devotion that lent themselves well to terrorism.⁵¹ Sally Boniece explored the public legend that developed around the Maria Spiridonova case. She argued that Spiridonova was elucidatory of the collaboration of political terrorism, which communicated with numerous groups through images, symbols, and actions. Boniece found four different layers to Spiridonova's myth: the Socialist Revolutionaries' and Spiridonova's public version, the liberal press version, the tsarist version, and a version Spiridonova wished to keep private.⁵²

There are only a handful of books that study women within the Russian military during World War I. In the book *They Fought for the Motherland: Russia's Women Soldiers in World War I and the Revolution*, Laurie Stoff argued,

The traditional conception of femininity centers on the creative, caring, and nurturing forces of humanity. Full of violence, destruction, and death, war presents itself as the absolute antithesis to these energies.... A woman

⁵⁰ Anke Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia," *Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 17, no. 17 (2016).

⁵¹ Knight, "Female Terrorists," 139-59.

⁵² Sally A. Boniece, "Mariia Spiridonova, 1884-1918: Feminine Martyrdom and Revolutionary Mythmaking," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Russian History* Vol 4, no. 3 (2003): 571-606.

in combat controverts socialized female roles and challenges a man's conception of war itself. Therefore, men have found it difficult to accept the inclusion of women in soldiering.⁵³

Stoff's book detailed the military exploits of Ekaterina Dadeshkeliani, Marina Iurlova, and Maria Bochkareva and explored their reasons for taking up arms, such as adventure, vengeance, and love of country. Another book that gives a personal look at women during World War I is *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*, by Margaret R. Higonnet. Higonnet traced the relationship between traditional accepted gender norms and reality. For example, politically, the front lines of war were a man's domain. Behind the lines was a woman's place, concealed and silent, tending the wounded and providing support to fighting men.⁵⁴ In "'My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness': Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia's Great War, 1914-1917," Melissa K. Stockdale argued that World War I presented an opportunity for women to claim full citizenship.⁵⁵ The memoirs of Maria Bochkareva, the impetus behind the formation of the Women's Death Battalion in 1917, provided a voice from the perspective of a lower-class woman who was not particularly political but wanted to be of service to her country during a time of war.⁵⁶

Books dedicated to women Chekists are virtually non-existent. It is a subject in need of extensive research. Works by Barbara Evans Clements and Richard Stites provide the foundational background on these women, and there

⁵³ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 6.

⁵⁴ Margaret R. Higonnet, *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), xxxii.

⁵⁵ Melissa K. Stockdale, "'My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness': Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia's Great War, 1914-1917," *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (2004): 78-116.

⁵⁶ Maria Bochkareva, *Yashka: My Life as a Peasant, Officer and Exile* (New York: Frederick A Stokes Company, 1919).

are other useful background sources that detail the history and role of Lenin's Cheka. These books explain the ideology and structure in which Chekist women lived and operated. Terror was seen as a powerful tool to be utilized in order to protect the state from counter revolution and those deemed enemies of the people. The books on Chekist history provide valuable insight into the mindset behind the secret police. One of the most detailed histories of the Cheka is Lennard D. Gerson's *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia*. He explained the evolution of ideology and philosophy behind Chekist policies and procedures as the organization grew, highlighting Lenin's theory of terror. Gerson argued that while the Cheka incorporated some aspects of the former Tsarist Okhrana, it was under Lenin's guidance and direction that the Cheka assumed its intricate system of societal control and power.⁵⁷ John J. Dziak's book *Chekisty: A History of the KGB* asked how and why the Cheka penetrated every aspect of Russian life, including the government and military. The Cheka placed spies and informants at every level of society to root out any possible enemy of the people. Dziak showed that the Cheka, and later the KGB, had incredible, almost unchecked power, led by the near-sainted Felix Dzerzhinskii.⁵⁸ Ronald Hingley, in his book *The Russian Secret Police: Muscovite, Imperial Russian and Soviet Political Security Operations, 1565-1970*, argued that as Russia's international influence, land accumulation, and population increased, there was a corresponding centralization of absolutist

⁵⁷ Lennard D. Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), xiv.

⁵⁸ John J. Dziak, *Chekisty: A History of the KGB* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1988), xvi.

autocracy and, along with it, an increase in the power of the secret police.⁵⁹ Another book that details the beginnings of the Cheka in late 1917 is Victor Sebestyen's book *Lenin: The Man, The Dictator, and the Master of Terror*. Sebestyen detailed the organization and ideology of the Cheka from Lenin's perspective, which held the organization as his personal strong arm of Soviet policy.⁶⁰

While there are no extensive studies of Chekist women, there are a few personal accounts, newspapers, and short mentions related to these women. For example, Tatiana Varsher's autobiographical "Things Seen and Suffered," detailed her friendship with Konkordia Samoiloova as a young student, and later her reaction of horror and confusion to Samoiloova's Chekist activities. Varsher detailed the transition of her schoolmate, once passionate about social justice, to a hardened instrument of terror.⁶¹ Spanish Journalist Manuel Chaves Nogales interviewed renowned flamenco dancer Juan Martinez about the dancer's time in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent Civil War. Martinez recounted his encounters with high-ranking Chekist Varvara Iakovleva.⁶²

This thesis studies women in late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia who embraced public violence in many forms. Until now, these three groups of Russian women—terrorists, soldiers, and secret police—have not been connected

⁵⁹ Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police: Muscovite, Imperial Russian and Soviet Political Security Operations, 1565-1970* (London: Hutchinson and CO, 1970), xii.

⁶⁰ Victor Sebestyen, *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror* (New York: Vintage Books, 2018).

⁶¹ Tatiana Varsher, "Things Seen and Suffered," in *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁶² Manuel Chaves Nogales, *El maestro Juan Martínez que estaba allí* (Barcelona: Publicado por Libros del Asteroide S.L.U., 2007.).

in any research. While each group had diverse experiences, political ideologies, and motivations, they all shared a common thread of public violence. Women's contributions during times of war and revolution are often marginalized. A woman taking up arms as a terrorist, a soldier, or law enforcement challenged Russian and European traditional gender norms of domesticity and nurturing. The purpose of this thesis is to uncover the shared motivations and experience of violent Russian women in the extraordinary transition period, and to compare the self-perceptions of feminine revolutionaries, soldiers, and Chekists with the perceptions of others. Last, it studies the changing circumstances that gave women the opportunity to break gender norms, and the impact of this groundbreaking activity.

Female Russian revolutionaries of the 1860s and 1870s provided the blueprint for subsequent feminine terrorists. Vera Figner, Sofia Perovskaia, and Vera Zasulich defied the rigid autocratic system, unable to modernize with the rest of Europe, that did not allow public activism of any kind, and certainly not from women who did not belong in the public sphere in the first place. In their defiance of the tsarist state, they confronted the deep-seated patriarchy that controlled every aspect of their social and political lives. In order to understand terrorism in contemporary history, one must understand these iconic women. The women who organized into all-female women battalions during World War I laid the groundwork for female integration into Soviet fighting forces during World War II and subsequent wars. Women in the Cheka were portrayed in the media and public opinion as hard-hearted and vicious. Their image nonetheless helped

shape the ideal of the new Soviet woman, iron-willed and unwaveringly devoted to the Soviet state.

The thesis is organized into three chronological sections detailing Russian women as terrorists, soldiers, and secret police, from 1870 to 1917. Through the exploration of the lives of female revolutionaries Vera Zasulich, Sofia Perovskaia, Vera Figner, and Maria Spiridonova, Chapter One argues that in the late nineteenth century many elite Russian women left their families to join radical terrorist groups, intending to affect positive change against the autocracy and for the people of Russia. Many of these women exchanged one family for another within the organization. They found a certain amount of freedom and purpose in their new family, even while embracing and reinforcing the centuries-old tradition of female self-sacrifice. These women embraced the necessity of violence, intending to eradicate a social and political order they saw as inequitable. Acts of terrorism played an essential part in these women's search for a heroic purpose in life and in martyrdom. However lofty their public reasons for defying the autocratic system in Russia, these revolutionary women also had more personal motivations, such as personal fulfillment, adventure, and freedom, unavailable to them in traditional society.

Chapter Two argues that women joined the frontline of World War I for a variety of reasons. Some went to fight alongside male loved ones. Others sought adventure to escape the dreariness of feminine daily life, to exact vengeance for the fallen, or to defend the motherland. For many women, a key motive for taking up arms was to prove their worthiness for full citizenship.

Chapter Three assesses women who joined the Cheka. Most women who worked in the secret police held low-level positions. However, a handful of women rose to prominence within the ranks of the Cheka, mainly Varvara Iakovleva, Konkordia Samoiloova, Rosalia Zemliachka, and Elena Stasova. The chapter argues that Chekist women used violence and terror as a tool to protect the fledgling Soviet government they worked so hard to bring about and to safeguard new political and social freedoms supported by the Bolshevik Party. There was also an element of revel and celebration in their newly obtained power within the Cheka, previously denied them by the tsarist state. The Cheka offered these women membership into an elite club at the top of the new Soviet society.

CHAPTER II

PROPAGANDA BY THE DEED

On 24 January 1878, Vera Zasulich shot and severely wounded Fiodor Trepov, military governor of St. Petersburg, in retribution for abuses against a political prisoner, a fellow revolutionary. Zasulich was arrested and put on trial in the newly reformed and public courts. However, the prosecutors, not wanting to create a martyr out of Zasulich, tried the woman as a common criminal. This approach backfired, as Zasulich's defense played on the heroism of her act. When asked why she did it, Zasulich replied that Trepov grossly overreacted by having a political prisoner flogged for refusing to remove his cap in his presence. She declared, "There was nothing to stop Trepov, or someone just as powerful as he, from repeating the same violence over and over. I resolved at that point, even if it cost my life, to prove that one who abused a human being that way could be sure of getting away with it."¹ Zasulich's trial enraptured and garnered the sympathy of many members of the public. In their eyes, Trepov was a horrible beast, and she was a heroine. Zasulich's crime was a prime example of feminine self-sacrifice in the face of injustice.²

In the forty years between 1870 and 1910, many Russian women left their families and cut ties with their past to flock to groups such as Land and Liberty, The People's Will and later the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs), intending to affect positive change within Russia for the people. In a sense, these women exchanged one family for another within the organization. They found a certain

¹ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 82.

² Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 144.

amount of freedom and purpose in their new families, while reinforcing the centuries-old tradition of female self-sacrifice. Many members of The People's Will and the SRs embraced the necessity of violence with the goal to eradicate a social and political order they saw as inequitable. The violence manifested in acts of terrorism and assassination. These acts played a dual role: a personal one, in which these women found a morally justifiable purpose in life, and a public one, in which their self-sacrifice was recognized as heroism and martyrdom. Women's personal searches for meaning were transformed as inspirational symbols of revolution by underground anti-tsarist groups such as The People's Will.

Born 8 August 1851, Vera Zasulich came from a poor Polish noble family. Zasulich's father died in 1854, leaving a widow and five children. Because her mother was unable to provide for her children, Vera was sent to live with prosperous cousins. Feeling like an orphan and very much an outsider, Zasulich grew up unhappy. For solace she turned to religion and the story of Christ.³ Vera immersed herself in the message and trials of Jesus. To her, Christ was the ultimate example of self-sacrifice for the greater good. At fifteen Zasulich began scrutinizing society. Her preoccupation with the trials of Jesus translated into sympathy for the struggles of the peasantry, who suffered and toiled every day to survive.⁴ She began daydreaming about social change, especially personal independence for women.

I was repelled by the fate that my social position held in store for me. They referred to it casually at Biakolovo: I was to become a governess...Even before I had revolutionary dreams, even before I was placed in boarding school, I made elaborate plans to escape becoming a

³ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

governess. It would have been far easier, of course, had I been a boy: then I could have done almost anything...And then, the specter of revolution appeared, making me equal to a boy; I, too, could dream of “action,” of “exploits,” and of the “great struggle.” ...I too could join “those who perished for the great cause of love.”⁵

The revolutionary era afforded Zasluch an outlet for her idealism. A year after entering a private boarding school in Moscow, Zasluch proclaimed herself a socialist and moved to St. Petersburg, where her revolutionary life began.

In the 1860s the radical movement in St. Petersburg was growing. St. Petersburg was the capital city and the seat of the state. Since the reign of Nicholas I, many members of the intelligentsia who criticized the tsarist autocracy lived and worked in St. Petersburg. During this period thousands of young, privileged nihilists living in the capital “declared that the first step toward progressive social change was self-transformation. The individual must reject the parasitical, indolent lifestyle of the nobility and become honest and socially responsible.”⁶ Zasluch, working as a clerk in St. Petersburg, quickly took this advice to heart and became involved. She came to accept the anti-tsarist dogma that it was the duty of the educated and privileged to “redistribute the material and intellectual” wealth among society.⁷ To this end, she taught literacy to workers and bound revolutionary propaganda materials for distribution.⁸ Zasluch also met many leaders of the student movements. One such individual was Sergei Gennadiievich Nechaev (1847-1882). He believed that “a revolutionary was a doomed man: there was no love, no friendship, no joy for him, only revolutionary

⁵ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, 69.

⁶ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 123.

⁷ Bergman, "The Political Thought of Vera Zasluch," 243-58.

⁸ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, 61.

passion. There was no morality for a revolutionary outside of service to the cause. Everything that aided the revolution was moral; everything that hindered it was immoral.”⁹ Zasluch was skeptical of Nechaev’s *Catechism*, but she did believe in his cause, which was to topple the tsarist government by any means necessary.¹⁰ However, through Nechaev’s carelessness Zasluch was arrested for revolutionary activities, and she spent two years in Litovskii fortress and another two years in exile in the north. Upon her release in 1873 she rejoined society as a committed revolutionary. Zasluch went to study midwifery in Kharkov with the purpose of providing access to peasant women.

Beginning in the 1860s many Russian women were drawn to study medicine. “Medicine and radicalism” were “elements of the liberation movement.”¹¹ Medicine was one of the few professions open to women. Young radicals became doctors, nurses, and midwives to help the common people while spreading socialist ideology. The women’s courses in Kharkov at “The Pink House” were one of many small schools focused on women’s education. Elizaveta Solntseva, the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy landowner and a serf, founded the school in Kharkov that Zasluch attended. Solntseva had received an excellent education and was freed by her father. The heiress had “advanced” ideas and strongly believed in women’s suffrage. Solntseva organized The Pink House as a place where young women could study a trade while learning about socialism and

⁹ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹¹ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 83.

women's rights.¹² As with many schools for women started during the time, The Pink House was closed down by the police in 1878.

Solntseva embraced socialism and feminism, as did other female intellectuals, although she was not necessarily a radical revolutionary. Russian feminists and revolutionaries shared some commonalities; both groups were made up of primarily well-educated aristocrats who advocated for political and economic change. However, there was a marked difference between Russian feminists and radical revolutionaries. Sophia Bardina, a friend of Vera Zasulich, best described the difference between the two groups. "We should direct all our resources not toward ameliorating the plight of isolated individuals, not toward doctoring individual cases, but rather toward the struggle to subvert the social institutions that are the source of all evil. We must struggle against man's exploitation of man, against private property, against inheritance rights. All of these must be abolished."¹³ Socialist revolutionaries like Bardina believed that focusing on feminist causes such as suffrage and self-independence would take away from the goal of liberating everyone. Radical women felt that women's rights would be obtained when all people's rights were. In other words, for radicals, "the woman question was clearly subsidiary to the over-riding question of the Revolution."¹⁴

Zasulich embraced this sentiment whole-heartedly. While she studied in the midwifery courses, which she saw as her "ticket to the people,"¹⁵ Zasulich

¹² Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 129-130.

¹³ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 124.

¹⁴ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 123.

¹⁵ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 144.

joined a known radical organization called the Kievan Insurgents, a militant group who embraced the philosophy of Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin, the founder of collective anarchism.¹⁶ Of everyone in the group, only Zaslulich had actual revolutionary experience. She had been imprisoned and exiled for anti-tsarist activities, and she had undertaken intensive study of revolutionary ideologies.

One friend recalled,

Because of her intellectual development, and particularly because she was so well read, Vera Zaslulich was more advanced than the other members of our circle...Anyone could see that she was a remarkable young woman. You were struck by her behavior, particularly by the extraordinary sincerity and unaffectedness of her relations with others.¹⁷

The Kievan Insurgents met, planned, and discussed new ideas in a small flat. Lev Deutsch remembered his fellow comrade Zaslulich, also known by her revolutionary name Marfusha, “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 morbidity.”¹⁸ Zaslulich, according to Deutsch, devised the plan to assassinate the governor and the chief prosecutor of the Great Trial.¹⁹

In 1874, students of both sexes left their studies at universities for the countryside, proclaiming, “We have no right to study at the expense of the people.”²⁰ The objective of the first “To the People” movement was to transform society from the ground up, starting with the peasants. “Hundreds and hundreds of these men, themselves the offspring of privilege, go ‘among the people,’ carrying

¹⁶ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, 78.

¹⁷ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, 62.

¹⁸ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 144.

¹⁹ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 144.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

with them the Gospel of Socialism, the very object of which is the destruction of privileges, the privileges of the classes from which they have sprung.”²¹ The populists (*narodniki*) believed revolution had to come from the peasantry, whose native communalism could form the basis of a non-capitalistic, anarchist society. The peasants’ unexpected hostility and indifference to the populists, however, caused massive frustration and within a year most of the idealistic students left the countryside and returned to their studies and revolutionary activities in the cities.²² Land and Liberty, an underground revolutionary group made up of former populists, began to re-coalesce in 1876.

Many revolutionaries in the newly formed Land and Liberty group remained firm in their philosophy “of peaceful propaganda with the eventual goal of revolution among the peasantry.”²³ However, under increasing oppression and scrutiny by the Third Section, the tsar’s secret police, members of Land and Liberty became better organized. They met with only known individuals, used forged identity papers, and communicated with extreme care. But increasing pressure from the government created fractures within the organization by 1878. Some revolutionaries clung to the philosophy of peaceful protest, but others were impatient to bring about social and political changes. They wanted to force the government to capitulate to their demands for freedom of speech, the right of assembly, and freedom of the press, through the use of violence.²⁴ These

²¹ S. Stepniak, *Underground Russia: Revolutionary Profiles and Sketches from Life* (England: Smith, Elder, 1883), xiii.

²² Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 26.

²³ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, xxiii.

²⁴ Engel, *Women in Russia*, 82.

extremist radicals believed that acts of terrorism would show the peasants how weak the tsarist government had become, thereby inducing them to revolt. Many who propagated the use of violence believed they should take power themselves in order to institute a new social order.²⁵

During these philosophical debates within Land and Liberty, Zaslulich learned of abuses done to political prisoners while they were imprisoned for minor offenses. Such was the case of Aleksei Bogoliubov, who in July 1877 was severely beaten for failing to remove his cap in Governor Trepov's presence.²⁶ After this atrocity, Zaslulich waited for a response by her fellow revolutionaries or by anyone else. The general public was outraged by the "assault on human dignity," but no action was taken in response.²⁷ Thus Zaslulich decided that she alone had to act against this terrible injustice. Zaslulich and her roommate Maria Kolenkina devised a plan to assassinate Governor Trepov. "I couldn't find another way of drawing attention to what happened," remembered Zaslulich. "I saw no other way...It's terrible to have to lift a hand against another person, but I felt that it had to be done."²⁸ Zaslulich's assassination attempt set a new tone for the Land and Liberty organization and reinvigorated the argument for terrorism. Her trial put a heroic sheen on acts of selfless violence for the good of Russia and its people.

Zaslulich's assassination attempt of Trepov was used as propaganda by revolutionaries. She became the poster girl for terrorism, an idea which she

²⁵ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, xxiii.

²⁶ Engel and Rosenthal, *Five Sisters*, 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

abhorred. She believed that terrorism was an individual, single act. Her goal was to bring to light the cruel abuse of political prisoners, not to use terrorism as a way to overthrow the entire government. She did not realize her act would bring harsher repression against and further separate revolutionaries from the people they meant to incite and help.²⁹ Zasluch was a firm believer in socialism. She was also a utilitarian. Zasluch maintained “that under socialism, man would finally realize the utilitarian ideal of the greatest good for the greatest number.”³⁰ This idea became central to her philosophy. According to historian Jay Bergman, “Given her sense of civic responsibility, Zasluch concluded that her obligation as a woman of gentry lineage was to help the lower classes achieve the material prosperity and cultural enlightenment without which the general sum of happiness in society could never reflect much more than the well-being of a few.”³¹ A hybrid of socialism and utilitarianism fit very comfortably into Russian traditional notions of self-sacrifice. Under Zasluch’s interpretation of utilitarianism, self-interest metamorphosed into self-sacrifice, and rational calculation turned into a natural obligation of the privileged. However, these ideas of civic duty were not unique to Zasluch. As Anke Hilbrenner put it, “Vera Zasluch pulled the trigger on Russian terrorism.”³² Meaning that Zasluch’s act inspired other women to join the underground movements and to participate in assassinations of tsarist officials.

²⁹ McDermid and Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917*, 28.

³⁰ Bergman, “The Political Thought of Vera Zasluch,” 244.

³¹ Bergman, “The Political Thought of Vera Zasluch,” 244.

³² Hilbrenner, “The Perovskaia Paradox or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia.”

Women deeply impacted the revolutionary movement from its late-nineteenth-century inception, beginning with individual examples of self-sacrifice and high moral standards. However, women who perpetrated terrorism ran counter to gender norms in the nineteenth century. Women were seen as emotional creatures who were moved to violence because of love, jealousy or even revenge. While violent acts carried out by emotional women were shocking, the public more often than not was entertained. Anke Hilbrenner wrote, "Violence spurred by emotion was less shocking than if it were coolly calculated, and emotionality was also a feminine trait. Therefore, women who committed a crime not out of emotion, but for allegedly rational reasons, such as politics, represented a much greater breach of the norm."³³ Zasluch's defense team understood the public's opinion of feminine violence and successfully played the emotional heroine card, which ultimately got her acquitted. "What was startling about the case was that Zasluch was lauded as a heroine in Russia, and the governor a cruel monster."³⁴ The fact that Zasluch had suffered through prison and confinement for being suspected of revolutionary activities only cast her in a sympathetic light. While her acquittal by jury was startling, her personal suffering and public outrage for Bogoliubov's beating provided at least a partial explanation and perhaps mitigation for her assassination attempt of Trepov.³⁵

Zasluch's contribution to the revolutionary cause characterizes women's presence in underground organizations. They encouraged higher levels of self-

³³ Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia."

³⁴ McDermid and Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution*, 28.

³⁵ McDermid and Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution*, 28.

denial and intellectual intensity that set them apart from their male counterparts. They were the very model of self-sacrifice. They refused to conform to traditional social roles. Many estranged themselves from their lives and families for the cause. This type of sacrifice lent credence and legitimacy to their movement. Sally Boniece wrote, "In general, the women of underground Russia appear to have had a more intense and absolute commitment to the cause than their male comrades, perhaps because women were less likely to practice a profession but more likely to have suffered a serious break with their families for joining the radical movement."³⁶ In traditional Russian society, a woman's life was restricted to the domestic sphere. For a woman to leave the protection of her home and family for an independent life in the public domain was to completely break from tradition.

Sofiia Perovskaia, the mastermind behind the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, became the first Russian woman to fully plan and execute a terrorist act. As Anke Hilbrenner noted, while Vera Zasulich may have planned to assassinate General Trepov in 1878, her actions were not considered by the courts as terrorist or political in nature.³⁷ The trial of Zasulich in 1878 was cast in a light by society that was acceptable (according to traditional values), politically and personally. Her actions were seen as a product of a female mind: deeply sympathetic and emotional, and not particularly political. On the other hand, Perovskaia presented a more uncomfortable figure. She was considered a troubling paradox of feminine emotion and cold-blooded calculation. To many,

³⁶ Boniece, "Mariia Spiridonova," 583.

³⁷ Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox."

she was an unnatural monster who plotted the assassination of Alexander II. This is in stark contrast to how the public viewed Zasluch, who was seen as an impassioned heroine moved to action in retribution for inhumane treatment of political prisoners. However, there were a few who painted Perovskaia in a more positive light, as a revolutionary priestess of the highest order.³⁸

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, the revolutionary populists and the “spirit of *narodnichestvo*” entered the revolutionary scene, and the members of groups like the Tchaikovsky Circle embraced their program. Journalist Robert Riggs translated *narodnichestvo* as “a love and reverence for the working classes of one’s country, coupled with the altruistic desire to serve them.”³⁹ The meaning of the Russian word *narod* evolved over time. During the 1870s the term referred to the peasantry and intelligentsia who were seen as the lifeblood of Russia. Later, the Bolsheviks used word to indicate the working class in urban areas. The Soviet Union used *narod* to include all the people of Soviet. This spirit of the “people” coupled with the Russian nihilist struggle against all forms of tyranny, hypocrisy, and artificiality in order to attain individual freedom for all, developed into a revolutionary movement. Influenced by the works of Alexander Herzen (1812-1870) and Nikolai Chernyshevskii (1828-1889), many university students left school with the desire to help and learn from the peasants in rural areas. They hoped to ensure the peasants were ready for the coming revolution, which envisioned a new Russia as a decentralized confederation of self-governing sectors, liberated from the affliction of serfdom, industrialism, capitalism, and the

³⁸ Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox."

³⁹ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 117.

violence of an imperial state. They believed that the revolution to overthrow the oppressive tsarist state had to come from “the voice of the people.”⁴⁰ The Tchaikovsky Circle was part of the populist network. Their main shared goals were self-education, spreading socialist and revolutionary ideas amongst the peasants, and the destruction of the autocracy.

Born on 1 September 1854 into an aristocratic family in St. Petersburg, Sofiia Perovskaia grew up under a domineering father who was governor-general in St. Petersburg, as Trepov had been. The dynamics between her tyrannical father and timid mother gave Perovskaia a life-long aversion to men that influenced her revolutionary activities. Her early education was in line with other girls of her class, consisting of tutors and a foreign governess. At fifteen, in 1869, she took the newly state-approved Alarchin Courses. Meant to be a “bridge” to women’s higher education, Alarchin courses provided preparatory evening classes for women’s higher education. “Perovskaia’s main academic pursuit was mathematics. But her real interest was quickly drawn to the flaming women who attended the class sessions.”⁴¹ Later the Alarchin Course became a well-known hotbed for famous revolutionary women. Along with basic education, revolutionary teachers led political discussion groups and introduced socialist ideology.⁴² Perovskaia made friends with some of the women in attendance and eventually joined book discussion groups. In these groups Perovskaia was

⁴⁰ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 138.

⁴¹ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 112.

⁴² Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 77.

exposed to new ideas about politics and women's issues.⁴³ She was introduced to nihilism, which she embraced whole-heartedly, as Zasluch did. She shared the Russian nihilists' protests against tyranny at every level, from the patriarchal family to the autocratic state. She, like them, abhorred artifice and convention and promoted individual freedom. Inevitably, such beliefs clashed with the traditionalism of the Orthodox Church, the Tsarist autocracy, and even the family patriarchy. Nihilist women like Perovskaia were easy to spot. They cut their hair short and wore wide-brimmed hats and simple clothes. Many wore large blue glasses.⁴⁴

Perovskaia's father disapproved of the discussion groups she was attending and forbade her to continue. Unwilling to concede, she decided to leave home and rent her own room in the city. However, Perovskaia was underage and needed papers or an internal passport stating she could live on her own. The problem was that only her father could grant her such papers, and he was disinclined to do so.⁴⁵ Perovskaia did not return home one evening while out visiting friends as usual. She hid at the apartment of Vera Kornilova, the older sister of Perovskaia's good friend Alexandra Kornilova (1853-1938). Both were radicals. Perovskaia's father reported her disappearance to the police. A vigorous investigation ensued to find the girl. After several days and much persuasion from

⁴³ Norma Corigliano Noonan and Carol Nechemias, eds., *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 51-52.

⁴⁴ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 112.

⁴⁵ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 112.

the family, Perovskaia's father relented and handed over her internal passport, on the condition that he never wished to see his daughter again.⁴⁶

Perovskaia promptly moved into a communal dacha with several women, including her friend Sasha Kornilova. In 1870 she started to attend Tchaikovskii Circle meetings. The group was named after Nikolai Vasilyevich Tchaikovskii (1851-1926), one of the founders. Tchaikovskii was a revolutionary socialist and an idealist. Tchaikovskii believed that major structural changes to society could only be achieved through social revolution. In other words, he believed that revolution was necessary to transition from a feudal or capitalist mode of production to a socialist one. Tchaikovskii embraced Nikolai Chernyshevskii's vision laid out in his widely read book *What is to be Done*, also used as a handbook for a model of a female radical. The Tchaikovskii Circle strived to actualize Chernyshevskii's utopia from his novel, which elevated small socialist, industrial cooperatives and glorified subordination of personal needs for the needs of the cause. Sergei Stepniak (1851-1895), who took part in the group, explained the extraordinary closeness he found there.

There were no rules, for there was no need of any. All the decisions were always taken by unanimity. Sincerity and frankness were the general rule. All were acquainted with each other, even more so, perhaps, than the members of the same family, and no one wished to conceal from the others even the least important act of his life.⁴⁷

For a time, the Tchaikovskii Circle lived their utopian ideal, uniting around the idea that it was their duty to prepare urban workers and peasants for the coming

⁴⁶ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 113-114.

⁴⁷ Stepniak, *Underground Russia*, 119-120.

revolution. To this end, they organized classes, studied various educational programs to expand their knowledge and skills, and kept fit physically.⁴⁸

Perovskaia embraced the lifestyle of the Tchaikovskii Circle. Even though she was one of the youngest members of the group, she was respected and considered one of the leadership core comrades. The disciplined lifestyle of sleeping on bare boards, performing strenuous household chores, and living aesthetically suited Perovskaia.⁴⁹ Even though she rebelled against discipline dictated to her by her father, she embraced a strict lifestyle of her own choosing. She had cut her hair short in the nihilist fashion, wore simple clothes, often trousers, enjoyed physical exertion every morning, and slept on bare boards at night. The anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), who spent a considerable time with Perovskaia in the Tchaikovskii Circle, remembered her:

[A] worker dressed in a wool dress, wearing ugly shoes, with her head very simply covered with a cotton scarf, nobody ever could have recognized in her the same girl who just a few years earlier, had glittered in the most aristocratic halls of the capital. She was our favorite out of everyone...Hard as steel, she displayed no fear at the thought of death, the vision of the scaffold.⁵⁰

What stands out about Kropotkin's description of Perovskaia is that she blatantly cast off any association with her former family and life, without regret and whole making it obvious she was going to do so. It was a performance. Many revolutionary women of the era, out of contempt for their social sphere and its conventions, broke all ties with their former lives to explore new ways of being. Perovskaia epitomized this action. In essence, she possessed all the qualities of an

⁴⁸ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 116.

⁴⁹ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 117.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

ideal Tchaikovsky Circle. She lived simply, embraced stoicism and asceticism, loved the oppressed, and demonstrated a deep loathing for the oppressive state.⁵¹ Perovskaia later wrote that she joined the group, “in order to make possible the development of the people.”⁵²

In the spring of 1872, Perovskaia left Saint Petersburg for the town of Stavropol, just north of the Caucasus mountains. She stayed and worked with a local doctor, Evgraf Alexeivitch Osipov, where she learned basic nursing. Determined to move among the people, Perovskaia, with the help of Osipov, started a local smallpox vaccination program. This allowed her to alleviate peasant suffering while propagating socialist revolutionary ideology.⁵³ While Perovskaia was idealistic and energetic with her mission, she was largely disappointed by the stout resistance of the peasants to ideas of revolution. Perovskaia’s experience was common among many of the populists, who were often teachers and health care workers in the “Going to the People” movement. Their romanticized view of the peasantry was replaced with a view that Russian peasants were “stubborn, protective of old ways, and suspicious of strange people and doctrines.”⁵⁴ In reality, peasants were xenophobic and suspicious of young elites who propagated revolution. Disenchanted, Perovskaia left Stavropol for Samara. She described her feelings of what she interpreted as peasant attitudes towards life in a letter to her friend Aleksandra Iakovlevna Obodovskaia, dated May 1872.

⁵¹ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 131.

⁵² Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 131.

⁵³ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 118.

⁵⁴ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 119.

When I look around, I feel the smell of dead deep sleep, I don't see the thought of active work and life; and in the villages and cities, everywhere is the same. And the peasants are similarly working every day, like machines, no longer thinking, just dead machines that started once and now always move in a routine. This situation deeply affects the young teachers, they are just silent, sad, and it seems that they could start the activity, but there is only emptiness and death everywhere. I now understand why the persons traveling alone to the province start to feel down with time. First of all, the people's consciousness is not thoroughly enough developed. I had such a strong yearning these days, it was impossible to study, and yet everything around me brings such a wistful melancholy, including even these teachers, because they are so sad, add to this also the fact that I feel that the only way out from this situation, and yet for this I have no knowledge, no skill. It is true that skill and knowledge can be gained, but now the situation is still despicable. I want to stir up this dead world, but all I can do now is to look at it.⁵⁵

A few months later, Perovskaia had mostly given up "working" with the people, meaning that she stopped giving lessons in socialist ideology to rural teachers and she stopped giving out smallpox vaccinations. In any case, the authorities now banned vaccinations, fully aware that they were used as a cover for the spreading of revolutionary propaganda. Stuck with no money and nothing to do, Perovskaia wrote:

Sometimes I so desperately want to do something, except reading books and making conversation, that I end up in an abnormal state—running from one corner to another or prowling through the woods, then fall into another strongest apathy....But now the vaccination is stopped, and the studying sessions with teachers ended, due to the fact that the authorities banned it, and because I now have nothing to do and am waiting for a job and my lack of money doesn't allow me to move. I don't have anything to write about now and don't want to.⁵⁶

By this time the local authorities had pegged Perovskaia as a subversive threat. She laid low until she gathered enough money to head to Moscow to live with her friend Obodovskaia.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 123.

In Moscow, Perovskaia obtained her teacher's certification. She taught in a rural school for a while, hoping to spread the revolutionary message. However, it did not take long for Perovskaia to feel isolated from her comrades and the movement. In the summer of 1873, she returned to Saint Petersburg and rejoined the Tchaikovskii Circle. Several members of the group had been arrested, and Perovskaia brought them books, food, and other items they needed. With the authorities focused on the group, going deep underground was necessary. Perovskaia moved from the compound into a small apartment with her husband Dmitri Rogachev. Theirs was a fictitious marriage along the lines posed by Chernyshevskii in *What Is to Be Done*, in which a young man offered to free a woman from the authority of her family by marrying her in name only, with no obligation, in order to avoid the authorities and the patriarchal power of her father.⁵⁷ The marriage did not work for long. In January 1874, Perovskaia was arrested for spreading revolutionary propaganda among factory workers. She spent six months in jail. This was the end of the original Tchaikovskii Circle, as all the members were either in jail or in exile.⁵⁸ Perovskaia's father eventually bailed her out, and she was sent to live under strict surveillance at her mother's home in Crimea. Perovskaia entered a formal medical training course in which she was certified as a medical professional equivalent to our modern-day paramedic. She was determined to be useful to the people, and to create purpose for herself. Soon after, she got a job working in a local hospital.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 123-125.

⁵⁸ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 131.

In April 1877 the Russo-Turkish War broke out and Perovskaia found herself treating wounded soldiers. Vera Figner, a fellow populist, described Perovskaia as “maternally tender in her treatment of the sick.”⁵⁹ Figner thought perhaps, “Perovskaia had inherited her mother’s tender heart, and this may explain her womanly gentleness and overflowing goodness toward the toiling masses...”⁶⁰ Figner’s assessment of her comrade indicates a continuing prevalence of traditional notions of Russian femininity, even amongst those who sought to rebuild society. The horror of war left a lasting impression on Perovskaia.

A few months later Perovskaia was summoned to Saint Petersburg by the police to stand trial for her role in the “Going to the People” movement. This was the “Trial of 193.” It was arguably one of the most important political trials in pre-revolutionary Russia. The trial was largely a show, “intended to expose revolutionary propagandists as members of an evil extremist fringe.”⁶¹ One hundred and ninety-three “revolutionaries” were charged with spreading populist propaganda and stirring up unrest against the tsarist government. The trial ended with all but a few acquitted. Those few who were convicted were sentenced to prison or hard labor. Perovskaia was acquitted. Nevertheless, she was promptly rearrested for trying to help political prisoners escape. She was sent into exile. However, she quickly escaped and went underground.⁶²

⁵⁹ Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 106.

⁶⁰ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 105.

⁶¹ Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women’s Movements*, 11.

⁶² Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women’s Movements*, 52.

At the end of 1878, Perovskaia returned to Saint Petersburg after Vera Zasulich was acquitted of shooting General-Governor Trepov. Zasulich's trial legitimized terrorism in the eyes of many revolutionaries, Perovskaia included. Figner stated in her autobiography, "Reason told us that we must follow the course chosen by our comrades, the political terrorists, who were drunk with the spirit of strife and animated by success."⁶³ In this way, Zasulich's success invigorated the revolutionary spirit.

The revolutionary political group The People's Will was organized in 1879. Their main objective was to assassinate Tsar Alexander II and thereby overthrow the autocracy. Perovskaia was a founding member of The People's Will, along with Vera Figner, and part of the Executive Committee at the center of the group.⁶⁴ The Executive Committee had twenty-eight members, ten of which were women. According to historian Richard Stites, women within the committee were considered equals to the men. However, their duties widely varied according to their abilities, such as conducting propaganda, maintaining the organization's underground apartments, or intelligence gathering.⁶⁵ Less than a year after its organization, the Executive Committee of The People's Will published its first journal, summarizing its goals and assassination targets. "Terror will be used against the most harmful members of the regime; it will be used to dispose of spies; it will be invoked in retaliation for the government's most heinous acts. Terrorist acts will show the government it is not invincible, raise morale, and

⁶³ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 106.

⁶⁴ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 106.

⁶⁵ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 145-146.

instill a revolutionary fervor.”⁶⁶ Over the course of 1880, several more pamphlets and journals were published justifying terrorism. “Terrorists, the defenders of the people, have the right to ignore the public conscience which ‘always denies’ the defense of the people.... Terrorism directs its blow against the real perpetrators of evil...the position of the representatives of autocracy is completely changed by the presence of terrorism as a system.”⁶⁷

Perovskaia’s perspective on terrorism was complex. She had a deep hatred for the tsarist state, which in her eyes was the source of the suffering and subjugation of the people. This hatred was balanced by an equal proportion of love for the common people. She had been opposed to the use of terrorism in the past. Like many revolutionaries, she had viewed acts of violence as counterproductive, and they made the revolutionaries look bad to the public. Also, terrorism garnered the attention of the police, which brought about more arrests and surveillance. Vera Zasulich’s trial for the assassination of Governor Trepov and subsequent acquittal had legitimized the use of terrorism in the eyes of many revolutionaries, as had the peasants’ indifference to the “to the People” movement. Again, like Perovskaia, arrests and time in prison had fortified their resolve to utilize terror to bring down the tsarist government.⁶⁸ When Perovskaia joined The People’s Will, she was ready to embrace terrorism with vengeance.

While setting up a terrorist organization, Perovskaia met the charismatic peasant Andrei Zheliabov (1851-1881). Perovskaia fell head over heels in love,

⁶⁶ Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin, *Chronologies of Modern Terrorism* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2008), 14.

⁶⁷ Rubin, *Chronologies of Modern Terrorism*, 14.

⁶⁸ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 152.

for the first time. Figner wrote, “Zheliabov awoke her warmest admiration and enthusiasm.”⁶⁹ Zheliabov was born into a serf family in Sultanovka, a village in Crimea. Zheliabov was intelligent and graduated from a gymnasium in Kerch near the top of his class. He studied law at Novorossiysk University in Odessa but was expelled for revolutionary activities. In need of an income, in 1872 Zheliabov began work as a private tutor for an industrialist and liberal sympathizer who owned a sugar factory. His employer’s daughter, Olga, caught Zheliabov’s attention, and they were quickly married. However, Zheliabov soon grew restless and joined a subversive group.⁷⁰ In 1874 he left his family and joined a Tchaikovsky Circle in Odessa. While there, he worked to spread revolutionary propaganda. He was arrested and was part of the Trial of 193 but was declared innocent due to lack of evidence. After being released he continued his revolutionary activities and then joined The People’s Will. He believed that violence was a necessity to enact change.

Zheliabov officially left his wife in late 1878. As a good-looking man he was not without admirers. However, he lived a spartan, solitary lifestyle. One admirer described, “He had really matured, physically and intellectually. He was a dark-haired man, tall and rangy, with a pale face and a dark thick beard and expressive eyes. His speech was full of flame and passion, his voice pleasant and strong.”⁷¹ On the other hand, Zheliabov was arrogant. As another stated, “Andrei Ivanovich, between you and me, was noticeably ambitious and could not bear

⁶⁹ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 108.

⁷⁰ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 164.

⁷¹ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 169.

anybody to be superior to him.”⁷² When The People’s Will was formed about a year later, he was an outspoken proponent of terror, while the Executive Committee was still hashing out their agenda. Zheliabov concluded, “History moves frighteningly slowly, one has to give it a push.”⁷³ Perovskaia, also part of the Executive Committee, was admired and respected for her feminine qualities of “moral elevation and boundless devotion.”⁷⁴ However, it was Perovskaia’s outspokenness instead of feminine meekness on policies she disagreed with that caught Zheliabov’s attention. He was so impressed with her that he stood down and became uncharacteristically silent at the meeting.⁷⁵ The two revolutionaries became best friends and lovers, living as husband and wife.

Perovskaia and Zheliabov worked together to plan the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Their assassination plans involved blowing up a bridge in Saint Petersburg. Ultimately, they failed in this first attempt, but immediately began planning another attack. As the date for the assassination neared, however, Zheliabov was arrested and imprisoned. Determined not to fail again, Perovskaia stepped up to take Zheliabov’s place as leader. Perovskaia had played an intimate part in the plan and had gathered much of the intelligence. Despite her significant contributions, it was unusual for a woman to assume full leadership, given traditional gender values that placed men in positions of power and women in positions of submission. Anke Hilbrenner argued that the plot to assassinate Alexander II may have failed had Perovskaia not assumed leadership of the

⁷² Ibid., 168.

⁷³ Rubin, *Chronologies of Modern Terrorism*, 15.

⁷⁴ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 173.

⁷⁵ Riggs, *Sofia Perovskaya*, 173.

terrorist attempt. It was her flexibility and improvisation that led to success.⁷⁶ On March 1, 1881, Alexander II was assassinated by two bombers.

Many terrorists in the following days were arrested. The Executive Committee members urged Perovskaia to leave town. She refused. She would not leave Zheliabov and hoped to help him escape. Perovskaia was arrested two days later and put on trial with five of her comrades, including Zheliabov. The tone of Perovskaia's trial was vastly different from that of Vera Zasulich. Zasulich was painted as a young lady overcome by emotion in reaction to injustice. This portrait of Zasulich was in line with how the public and media accounted for violence perpetrated by women. Violence done in the name of emotion was less shocking and understandable, as high emotion was attributed to the feminine. Russian women were believed to go through life emotionally in need of male guidance, as women left to their own devices became vengeful, jealous, and overly passionate. The planned, rational violence that Perovskaia committed was not seen as feminine at all. A woman who engaged in it could only be unnatural and monstrous. Vera Zasulich's assassination attempt was seen by herself and spun by her legal representation as a passionate act of vengeance. While Perovskaia plotted the assassination of the Tsar was for the revolutionary cause, it was not seen as an act of personal retribution.

Hilbrenner pointed out that "Perovskaia seemed to occupy both sides of this divide: on the one hand, she was an emotional, irrational woman who, for the sake of her love of Zheliabov, would not flee St. Petersburg; on the other hand,

⁷⁶ Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox."

she was the cold-blooded assassin who capped intense, politically motivated planning with cruelly swift thinking to assure the death of Alexander II.”⁷⁷ The prosecutor at the trial, Nikolai Murav’ev (Perovskaia’s childhood acquaintance), argued that the true mastermind of the assassination plot was Zheliabov and that Perovskaia was simply his girlfriend. Perovskaia, a woman, was too delicate and weak to successfully plan and execute such an act. Throughout his argument, Murav’ev depicted Perovskaia as both an ideal woman and a monster of terror. The combination was meant to be disgusting. To Murav’ev and even to the public, Perovskaia was an unnatural being.⁷⁸ Of course not everyone saw Perovskaia in such a light. In his memoirs, fellow revolutionary terrorist Sergei Stepniak described Perovskaia as an innocent girl with titanic strength, “for under her cuirass of polished steel a woman's heart was always beating.”⁷⁹ In other words, Stepniak likened Perovskaia to a priestess with a duality of an “almost girlish woman with a warmly beating heart and as an armoured priestess.” This transported her “from the ordinary into the sphere of the eternal.”⁸⁰ On April 3, 1881, Perovskaia was executed by hanging, alongside Zheliabov and their comrades.

One member of the Executive Committee of The People’s Will escaped the newly formed state secret police, the Okhrana: Vera Figner. After the assassination, Figner and many other members of the Executive Committee left Saint Petersburg. Figner first went to Moscow, stayed for about a month and then

⁷⁷ Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox."

⁷⁸ Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox."

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

left for Kharkov in Ukraine, where she stayed hidden. By spring of 1882 Figner was the last member of the Executive Committee responsible for Alexander II's assassination to elude capture. This fact made her the focal point of the ongoing Okhrana investigation.⁸¹

Vera Figner was the eldest child of six born July 7, 1852, into an aristocratic family in Kazan province. Her father, Nikolai Alexandrovich Figner, was a stern, strong-minded state forester, while her mother was pious and meek, a family dynamic that many revolutionary women seemed to have in common. After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, her father retired as a forester and worked as an arbitrator of peace.⁸² Figner, in her memoirs, described her parents as "very active and energetic people...of remarkably robust constitution and strong will." She deemed these characteristics as a "good heritage."⁸³

As a young child, Figner received special attention from visitors and family friends. Figner attributes this special attention from adults for her keen mind and rapid development.⁸⁴ Figner remembered that family friends encouraged her to study: "Natalya Grigorienvna Tselshert, knowing that my parents were thinking of sending me to the Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg, would seat me in an armchair beside her every time we met, and begin to talk about the Institute, and my future destinies. 'Mind you, you must study as hard as you can,' she would impress upon me, 'and don't fail to be the first in your class.'⁸⁵ Figner later

⁸¹ Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 126-127.

⁸² Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, 20.

⁸³ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 11.

⁸⁴ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 14

stated that these conversations only spurred her on to grander dreams, far beyond most women.

Figner received a traditional education for one of her social status. In her younger years she was raised by a peasant nanny who played an important role in shaping her later ideology. She was tutored at home before attending Rodionovskii Institute for Young Noble Ladies in Kazan. The Rodionovskii Institute was conservative in its curriculum and Figner widened her education through extensive reading. After six years at the Institute, Figner reflected on her time there.

What did six years at the Institute give me? A cultivated manner and a sense and need of comradeship developed in me by living with many others who were in a position identical with my own... the regular course of study, and the strict order of the day had accustomed me to a certain kind of discipline.... I acquired there in addition the habit of intellectual work. As for scientific knowledge, or still more intellectual training, these years at school not only gave me almost nothing, but even retarded my spiritual development, not to mention the harm caused by the unnatural isolation for life and people.⁸⁶

Scientific knowledge was important to young Figner as well as other like-minded women attending Institutes. Peter Lavrov (1823-1900), a prominent Russian theorist, philosopher and populist, stated in his well-read *Historical Letters* that “natural science is the very foundation of a rational life.”⁸⁷ He believed that without knowledge of natural sciences one could not be a modern educated person. He concluded that “knowledge is not to be an end in itself or a mere vocational training, but a form of self-preparation for the lofty and

⁸⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁷ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 127.

formidable task of liberating the people.”⁸⁸ Lavrov’s ideas directly influenced the foundation of the populist movement. He saw socialism as a natural progression of Western European history. He believed that the bourgeoisie were doomed to destroy themselves. Lavrov also asserted that personal interests were aligned with societal interests. Both Figner and Perovskaia agonized over Lavrov’s words before leaving their studies to “go out to the people.”⁸⁹ Lavrov’s ideas are important for understanding why many revolutionary women did not take up the feminist cause. They believed that the “woman question” would be solved when society as a whole gained social and political equality.

After finishing at the Rodionovskii Institute at seventeen, Figner begged her father to send her abroad to study medicine in Zurich. He refused. As a graduate and a daughter of the nobility, her family expected her to marry. However, this prospect did not appeal to Figner. Ideas of nihilism and a utilitarian duty to the common people were foremost in her mind. Nihilist ideology was highly appealing to young, educated women. It promised “social and intellectual equality, and the eventual chance of useful, meaningful work.”⁹⁰ Nihilism taught that science should be the foundation of society ruled by a new class of people who rejected sentimentality. Figner as a girl was encouraged by her relatives to read books on natural sciences. “Being followers of Pisarev, they attached great importance to natural science, and at their suggestion, I read the works of Darwin, Lyell, Lewes, Vogt, and the popular articles of Pisarev...”⁹¹ It gave meaning to

⁸⁸ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 127.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁹⁰ Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 28.

⁹¹ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 30.

Figner's life, beyond the stifling role she was expected to play in society, marriage, and motherhood. One of the consequences of women's higher education in general was growing dissatisfaction with the constraints of a highly patriarchal system. Figner was no exception. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge was not enough for her, as with many women. She believed that ideology without action meant nothing. Even before beginning her revolutionary activity, Figner adopted her lifelong motto: "Match your deeds to your words."⁹²

Figner married Aleksei Filippov in 1870. She quickly convinced him to give up his judicial career and move to Zurich so that she could start her medical training.⁹³ Her first motivation was not to be useful to the people. That came later. What placed the idea to study medicine in her mind was an article in the journal *The Cause* that detailed the success of Nadezhda Suslova, the first Russian woman to receive her medical degree in Zurich. Figner wrote,

Not the thought of my duty to the people, not the conscience of the "repentant nobleman" impelled me to study in preparation for the position as village physician.... My main moving influence was a mood. An excess of vital forces of which I was unconscious, but which permeated my entire being, excited me; and a joyous sensation of freedom after the four walls of the private school came to the surface. It was this superabundance of joy in my attitude towards life as I first entered it, that formed the real source of my altruistic aspirations....it seemed to me that I was more beloved than anyone else around me, touched me and awakened a tender, but indefinite feeling of gratitude...I wanted to give thanks to some one for the blessings of the world, the blessings of life. I wanted to do something good...so good that it would benefit myself and someone else.⁹⁴

Figner felt compelled to bring good to the world, but perhaps more importantly, to express and free herself. In 1872, Figner started her medical training in Zurich.

⁹² Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, 20.

⁹³ Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, 20.

⁹⁴ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 33.

While in Zurich, Figner joined the Frichi Circle, a women's discussion group that read about "social and labor problems, and the history of Socialism."⁹⁵ Figner embraced revolutionary ideology and the group organized itself into a propaganda machine. However, the Russian government became aware of their activities and promptly banned Russians from studying in Zurich. Figner made a decision to abandon her non-political husband in Switzerland and she moved to the university in Berne to continue her medical studies.⁹⁶ She stated, "My husband and I had been following gradually diverging paths. He was inclined to be conservative, while I became ever more strongly attracted to the radical group." She also realized the inadequacy of her medical training. "I came to see in the practice of medicine only a palliative for an evil which could be cured only by social and political means."⁹⁷ Figner stayed in Bern for more than a year before she gave up studying to be a doctor to pursue revolutionary activity in Russia full-time in 1875. Figner struggled over a question posed by another medical student, S.I. Chudnovskii: "Knowledge or work [among the people]?"⁹⁸ Figner decided to put her ideas into action. She rationalized that she could spread the message while working as a medical assistant. In the spring of 1877, she went to Samara to work. Like Perovskaia and so many other populists, Figner had never worked with the common people. "For the first time in my life I found myself face to face with village life... I must confess I felt lonely, weak, and helpless in this peasant sea."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 39.

⁹⁶ Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, 20.

⁹⁷ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 38.

⁹⁸ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 127.

⁹⁹ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 49.

Samara offered Figner's first experience of the reality of true poverty and ignorance.

Up until this point the whole of Figner's knowledge of the common people stemmed from books and discussions in socialist circles. As she said herself,

Heretofore I had not seen the wretched peasant environment at close range; I knew of the people's poverty and misery rather theoretically, from books, magazine articles, and statistical material. Now, at the age of twenty-five, I faced the people as a baby into whose hands they thrust some strange, extraordinary object."¹⁰⁰

It was not long until Figner questioned whether she could spread the revolutionary message to such wretched people. Like Perovskaia, who believed that the common people were not developed enough to fully grasp the message she taught, Figner wondered if the people had time or the energy to protest living under such harsh conditions. She wrote:

Despair would seize me. Was there an end to this truly terrifying poverty? Were not all those prescriptions a hypocrisy amidst the surrounding squalour? Could there be any thought of protest under such conditions? Would it not be irony to speak of resistance, of struggle, to people completely crushed by their physical privations? For three months, day after day, I saw the same picture. Only such close observation could give one a true conception of the condition of our people.... I had hardly a chance to look into their souls; my mouth could not open for propaganda.¹⁰¹

Figner was not in Samara for long. When an acquaintance was arrested for subversive activities, the police found mention of Figner in some letters. Figner hurriedly left for Saratov to be with her sister Evgeniia. There she helped organize a school for children and evening classes for adults.¹⁰² Her work in teaching lasted

¹⁰⁰ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 49-50.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹⁰² Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, 21.

only so long. She found herself a subject of interest to the police, and this placed a hold on her revolutionary work. Nevertheless, Figner began to warm privately to the idea of becoming a more active revolutionary.

Figner joined The People's Will in the summer of 1879 and accepted their political terror agenda. If the peasantry could not or would not act to free themselves from tsarist oppression, then The People's Will would have to do it for them. She became one of seven women of twenty-two members of the Executive Committee (the terrorist wing of The People's Will) fully committed to the objective of assassinating Alexander II.¹⁰³ After the bombs exploded and the emperor fell, Figner remembered,

I wept as did others that the heavy nightmare that had oppressed young Russia for ten years was over...Neither the bayonets of hundreds of thousands of troops, nor throngs of guards and spies, nor all the gold in his treasury could save the sovereign of eight million people as he fell at the hands of a revolutionary.¹⁰⁴

Shortly the hunt for the revolutionaries responsible for Alexander II's death picked up speed. Many of the Executive Committee were hunted down and arrested, including Perovskaia. Many others fled St. Petersburg. "In view of the danger of remaining in St. Petersburg, a few of us, at the suggestion of the Committee, were to leave the city. I was among this number."¹⁰⁵ However, Figner did not leave immediately. Her ultimate quest for martyrdom could not be fulfilled by fleeing to safety in exile. Instead, she laid low while she heard of her fellow Committee members' arrests. "Not more than a week passed, and we lost

¹⁰³ Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 96.

¹⁰⁴ Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 116-117.

¹⁰⁵ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 101.

Sofia Perovskaia who was treacherously seized on the street.”¹⁰⁶ A month later, on April 3, 1881, Figner described the atmosphere of St. Petersburg shortly after the execution of her comrades as she left the city.

That day, April 3rd, was the day of the execution of our regicides. The weather was marvelous...When I left the house the public spectacle was already over, but everywhere they were talking about the execution. At the time when my heart was aching over the thought of Perovskaia and Zheliabov, I happened to take a horse-car in which there were people returning from the Semenovskiy Square where the execution had taken place. Many faces were excited, but there was no sign of regret or sorrow. Just across from me there sat a good-looking burgher in a blue overcoat. He was black-haired and swarthy, with a bristling beard and glowing eyes. His handsome face was distorted with passion; a real *oprichnik* [bodyguard of the Tsar] he was, ready to hew off heads.¹⁰⁷

Figner made her way to Moscow and then on to Odessa.

As the last original member of the Executive Committee to avoid arrest, in 1882 Figner felt obligated to take up the leadership reins and train a new generation of revolutionaries. She described the new recruits as full of energy and high ideals but lacking in confidence or experience in “organizing and spreading propaganda.”¹⁰⁸ Once she was satisfied that the new recruits in Odessa were properly organized, she soon moved on to Kharkov. There she found a small local group of “worthy and energetic people.”¹⁰⁹ Working out of Kharkov was strategic. There were several larger cities nearby that had healthy revolutionary groups. She focused all her energy on uniting “the strongest forces available, and to create from them a group which should compensate as far as possible for the absence of the central organization, which has been utterly annihilated by the

¹⁰⁶ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 100.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

successful maneuvers of the police.”¹¹⁰ Determined to continue their terrorist work, Figner’s group began to plan their next assassination.

The new Tsar Alexander III, fearful of another physical attack by The People’s Will, surrounded himself with increased security. He did not know that the terrorist organization lacked the resources and the manpower to pull off another large-scale attack. Not deterred by resource limitations, Figner believed the group needed to refocus their efforts on the officials surrounding the tsar.¹¹¹ The new members of the organization agreed. Their next target was the military prosecutor in Odessa, General Vasilii Strelnikov. Figner returned to Odessa in late 1881 where she lived under an alias, Elena Ivanovna Kolosnova. She shadowed Strelnikov for weeks, learning his routine. By March 1882 the plan was set. As the last of the Executive Committee, Figner planned to leave Odessa for Moscow before the assassination was carried out. On the evening of March 18, Strelnikov was shot point blank while sitting on a park bench. The assassin and his accomplice were immediately arrested and hanged four days later. Figner was pleased that her plan worked. However, she was plagued by her failure to ensure the two assassins’ safe escape.¹¹²

Figner now became notorious, and the primary target of the Okhrana. Her organization began to suffer more failures than successes. Cracks started showing in Figner’s drive for revolution. She felt tired and demoralized, and the Okhrana

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹¹¹ Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 126.

¹¹² Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 127.

was closing in. Recounting when their underground printing press was seized by the authorities in Odessa, she wrote:

With a heavy heart do I recall that dark period into which I plunged after this news reached me. I saw that all my preparations had come to naught, that all my work had been fruitless. Whatever plans I devised were swept away to destruction bearing with them the ruin of those whom I had engaged to take part in them. I had persevered, but all in vain... Everything was perishing, going down to destruction around me, and I was left alone, like Eugene Sue's eternal wanderer, to travel my path of sorrows to which there seemed no end.¹¹³

Figner did not give up on the cause, however. Many around her recognized her sacrifice. She had given up everything to free the people from the oppression of the state. In time, Figner became a living legend for good or ill. By many who opposed revolution, she was a deviant, cold and bloodthirsty. Those who believed in the cause saw her as the ultimate martyr, a rallying point during the darkest days, the “icon of liberty.”¹¹⁴ Such acclaim also had a downside. Lynne Hartnett elaborated, “From this point in her revolutionary career until her death, she became as much of a symbol as she was a woman. Ever conscious of her position and responsibility as an icon of the radical movement, she suppressed many of her true emotions, aspirations, and fears so as not to compromise the revolutionary myth that was Vera Figner.”¹¹⁵

Being a living icon also made Figner a target. She was betrayed to the police in February 1883 by a former comrade. Figner spent two years in prison in the Petropavlovsk Fortress in St. Petersburg before her trial, known as the “Trial

¹¹³ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 138.

¹¹⁴ Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 129.

¹¹⁵ Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 129.

of the 14.” While waiting in prison she wrote her confessions, which she used during the trial.¹¹⁶ Figner stated before the court that before she embraced violence against the state, she had tried to enact social change by being useful, by helping and educating the common people. After being thoroughly frustrated, she came to believe violence was the only avenue open to her for making real changes. Figner revealed that the Executive Committee under her command had begged her to use peaceful methods of bringing about change, but she had flatly refused, sticking to her high ideals.¹¹⁷ Figner tried to present herself as a woman with a noble cause that led her down to a path of violence. Instead, she sounded like a revolutionary whose dreams were crushed by an oppressive state. She was found guilty and sentenced to be executed. However, the sentence was reduced to life in prison at Schlüsselburg Fortress near St. Petersburg. Figner was not relieved that her death sentence had been commuted. She was ready for a swift martyr’s death, rather than a slow dying of the spirit while rotting away in prison.

But had the sentence remained in force, I should have died with complete self-possession; my mind was prepared for death. I should hardly have been exalted and inspired thereby; I had outlived all my strength, and I should merely have preferred a speedy death on the scaffold to a slow process of dying, the inevitability of which I clearly recognized at the time.¹¹⁸

In the end, Figner spent twenty years in prison. The experience was both an important part of her revolutionary identity and of a narrative that influenced a new generation of feminine terrorists. She was unexpectedly released in 1904, but

¹¹⁶ Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women’s Movements*, 21.

¹¹⁷ Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 145.

¹¹⁸ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 171.

the authorities required her to live in the countryside. Her entire life work had been geared to bring freedom to the peasants. Ironically, in 1906 during a visit to Kazan province, peasants burned down her ancestral house. The incident shows how great a disconnect there was between the populists and the common people. While the *narodniki* were intensely dedicated to the liberation of the people, they did not understand what motivated the peasantry.¹¹⁹

In the later generation of pre-revolutionary female terrorists, no one was more well-known than Mariia Spiridonova. Her story, printed in newspapers, was widely familiar throughout Russia. Spiridonova differed from her famous predecessors in that she took control, within her capabilities, of her own narrative. While she was imprisoned, awaiting execution after being beaten, tortured, and raped by soldiers, she wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper *Rus* that promoted her version of her story.

Mariia Spiridonova was born in the city of Tambov in 1886. She was the eldest daughter of a minor noble family. Her father, fairly well-off, worked as a bank official.¹²⁰ She attended a local gymnasium until around 1902, when her father died. Shortly after, Spiridonova contracted tuberculosis. When she recovered, she joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party, or SRs. The SRs, founded in 1902, were in many ways the ideological heirs of the populists, who supported a democratic socialist Russian republic.¹²¹ To them it was much more than an ideology, it was a “moral goal, a life-work.”¹²² As historian Barbara Evans

¹¹⁹ Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, xvii.

¹²⁰ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 272.

¹²¹ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 203.

¹²² Knight, "Female Terrorists in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party," 151.

Clements added, “The Socialist Revolutionaries were socialists much influenced by Marxism but loyal as well to the populist mission of inspiring the peasants to revolt.”¹²³ They did not place great value on philosophical or theoretical views. The uniting factor of the SRs was their common state of mind and the spirit of their predecessors in the People’s Will. The terrorists of The People’s Will believed that action must follow words, as did the next generation of terrorists in the SR. Many women were attracted to the party’s political activism. It opened doors for them to play important roles alongside men. Self-sacrifice and utter devotion were crucial, especially in the terrorist brigade. The chance for self-sacrificial and heroic martyrdom as demonstrated by Zasluch, Perovskaia, and Figner was a major attraction to women.¹²⁴ “The fact that the SRs valued political activism at least as much as they did ideological sophistication meant that women, who rarely excelled as theoreticians, were able to play an important role within the party. This was especially true of the terrorist wing, where the most crucial quality was selfless devotion, a trait that had been instilled in women as a traditional female virtue.”¹²⁵ For many, revolution became their life as they endeavored to turn words into action. They kept alive the practice of targeting tsarist officials to enact social and political change.

In 1905, during the first Russian revolution, Spiridonova entered a nursing course. However, she soon left school to become a full-time revolutionary. In that same year, Police Inspector General Gavriil Nikolaevich Luzhenovskii subjected

¹²³ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 188.

¹²⁴ Knight, "Female Terrorists in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party," 143.

¹²⁵ Knight, "Female Terrorists in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party," 143.

the Tambov province to punitive raids and harsh repression of peasant unrest.¹²⁶

Luzhenovskii was the local leader of the Union of the Russian People, which included the Black Hundreds, a far-right paramilitary group whose main purpose was to fight socialists. Spiridonova and the SR group in Tambov believed the injustices he perpetrated on the people fighting for their freedom required a response. During her trial, Spiridonova justified her actions in a speech before the court:

Yes, I murdered Luzhenovskii, and I desire to explain my deed. I am a member of the Social Revolutionary party. The discontent of the people with the existing regime has turned into revolution, armed resistance to the authorities, attacks on officials and into open collisions with the troops in the streets. Instead of meeting the needs of the people the government used guns, bayonets and bullets, but they did not succeed.¹²⁷

After describing the crimes and abuses of the tsarist state, Spiridonova described the crimes of Luzhenovskii.

I won't speak about the 'pacification' of the peasants in many of the provinces. I won't even speak of the whole of the province of Tambov but will confine myself to the bloody work of Luzhenovskii. Villages which he visited he left looking like Bulgarian villages after Turkish raids. In the village of Pavlodar ten men were killed by his orders...He [Pavel Zeitseff] and his friend Ostrovitinoff, when Luzhenovskii arrived, went to him as the delegates of the peasants and Luzhenovskii replied to their requests with a volley from his Cossacks. For four days Zeitseff and Ostrovitinoff were tortured - tortured until they died. After his 'triumphal' trips Luzhenovskii was able to lay as 'trophies of victory' at the feet of the bureaucracy murdered peasants, ruined owners, assaulted women and bruised and crippled children. He was an oppressor of the people, and he merited death.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Judy Cox, *The Women's Revolution: Russia 1905-1917* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 31.

¹²⁷ "She Says She is Justified: Russian Girl Who Killed Lezhenoffski Tells Why She Did So--Horrors Practiced," *Perth Amboy Evening News*, April 30, 1906, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85035720/1906-04-30/ed-2/seq-3/>.

¹²⁸ "She Says She is Justified: Russian Girl Who Killed Lezhenoffski Tells Why She Did So--Horrors Practiced."

Spiridonova was clear about the mission of the Socialist Revolutionaries. “The Socialist Revolutionary party seeks to protect the interests of the masses even at the price of personal sacrifice. Its aim is to establish political and economic conditions which will permit the people to realize a socialistic regime in which ‘liberty, fraternity and equality’ will be a reality and not a dream.”¹²⁹ In her speech in front of the court, in which she invoked the motto of the French Revolution, Spiridonova encapsulated the spirit and aims of many Russian revolutionary groups.

Inspired by past populist heroines, Spiridonova volunteered to do the deed. She shadowed the Inspector General for days. Finally, at the Borisoglebsk railway station, an opportunity arose. To avenge the atrocities perpetrated against the people, Spiridonova, in broad daylight, shot Luzhenovskii in the face with a revolver.¹³⁰ Ready to claim her revolutionary martyrdom, she raised the gun to her temple, only to be thwarted by soldiers. She was thrown face down by the surrounding Cossack soldiers and severely beaten. The soldiers arrested Spiridonova, and subsequently interrogated, humiliated, tortured, and raped her.¹³¹

Recovering in the prison hospital and awaiting her trial, in February 1906 Spiridonova wrote a letter to the newspaper *Rus* describing her actions and her treatment after her arrest.

The letter says that after the shooting of Luzhenovskii, whose bodyguard of Cossacks did not save him from five well-aimed bullets, Mlle.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 272.

¹³¹ Alexander Rabinowitch and Maria Spiridonova, "Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament," *The Russian Review* (Stanford 54, no. 3, 1995), 425.

Spiridonova was knocked down and beaten with the whips of the Cossacks and rifle butts. She was dragged by her hair downstairs to a sleigh by the Cossacks, taken to the police station undressed and put into a damp, cold cell, where she was subjected to eleven hours of torment in order to force her to reveal the names of her accomplices. The girl says that two officers took brutal pleasure in kicking her back and forth across her cell, tearing her hair, burning her flesh with their cigarettes and threatening her with abandonment to the Cossacks unless she confessed.¹³²

Her letter created a public outcry of sympathy for the assassin, from all levels of Russian society.¹³³ Spiridonova embodied the perfect female revolutionary-martyr. She was a noblewoman, young, beautiful, and educated, who shot a brutish man in response to injustice and then willingly faced the consequences.¹³⁴ At her trial she was sentenced to death, which was exactly what Spiridonova wanted. She and the SR party wanted to use her martyrdom to advance the revolutionary cause. In her final statement at her trial, she made her motives clear. “In spite of all the horrors to which I have been subjected I am happy in the thought that I belong to the ranks of the protectors of the people and that I am to die for their cause.”¹³⁵ By stating that her crime and the actions of the SRs were purely for the protection of the people, she drew upon the Russian tradition of female self-sacrifice for the greater good.

As the Spiridonova legend arose in 1906, she sought to shape it into a propaganda tool.¹³⁶ Spiridonova crossed class borders, in that she was well liked by elites as well as peasants, especially in Tambov. To peasants and workers, she

¹³² “Girl Assassin’s Tale Stirs Russian Wrath,” *Danville Intelligencer*, March 2, 1906, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86053369/1906-03-02/ed-1/seq-2/>.

¹³³ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 272.

¹³⁴ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 188.

¹³⁵ “She Says She is Justified: Russian Girl Who Killed Lezhenoffski Tells Why She Did So--Horrors Practiced.”

¹³⁶ Boniece, “Mariia Spiridonova,” 574.

became a model of self-sacrifice. Her story was meaningful to many people, and she gained national attention. Due to such publicity, an investigation into the allegations against the Cossack soldiers was initiated. At the same time, an investigative journalist series painted Spiridonova as a courageous but delicate gentlewoman who bravely fought against the cruelty of the Russian state and was met with atrocities against her person. To subdue the public outcry over her case, Spiridonova's death sentence was commuted to eleven years in exile in Siberia. Nevertheless, her time spent in prison only increased her revolutionary martyr legend. When she was released after the February 1917 revolution, Spiridonova continued her revolutionary activities and became a leader of the Socialist Revolutionary party.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Boniece, "Mariia Spiridonova," 575.

CHAPTER III

FOR THE LOVE OF RUSSIA

Total war spread from the frontlines of combat and into civilian spheres, demolishing any type of barriers. The nation as a whole was mobilized toward victory, from agricultural supplies, mandatory drafts, and food rationing to armament production. The demands of total war set World War I apart from previous European conflicts and signaled an end of an era. Not only did the Great War end the “golden age” in England and throughout Western Europe, but it also marked the end of four great empires: the Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and German. European society was changing with frightening speed.

One of the demands of total war was the mobilization of women, particularly women’s labor. Combat, however, was considered solely the realm of men with few exceptions. In Russia, women nonetheless mobilized themselves in an effort to defend their motherland. Melissa K. Stockdale argued that as a result of war and revolution in Europe during the eighteenth century, conceptions of citizenship, gender, and military duty became closely intertwined.¹ A new male ideal emerged, heroic, disciplined, and self-sacrificial for a higher purpose, but so did a new female ideal emphasize the same qualities. Unlike the female revolutionaries of the previous generation, these women engaged in violence on behalf of official national goals.

Across Europe, only men at this time were considered full citizens. Modern citizenship meant the right to politically participate, and the guarantee of

¹ Stockdale, “My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness,” 78-116.

civil equality under the law.² The extension of rights eventually included more and more of the male population of Europe. Connected to this growing inclusion was a principle of universal male military service, which became a civic obligation. Military service was seen as transformative for the male population. It made “men into citizens and males into men.”³ Women were intentionally excluded from the double transformation of becoming a “man” and a citizen through military service.

The feminine ideal traditionally centered around ideas such as passivity, nurturance, creativity, caring, and, especially in Russia, self-sacrifice. These were seen as the natural attributes of women. In wartime, women were relegated to factory and farm labor, moral support from the safety of home, and the care of the wounded or ill.⁴ Active fighting on the frontlines of conflict belonged to the domain of men. Women in combat contradicted the natural order of gender and challenged “a man’s conception of war itself.”⁵

Contrarily, in Russia there was also a tradition of the female warrior in folktales, and a recurrent strong-woman motif. In Russian culture powerful women were admired, at least in a legendary sense. In folklore the *polianitsy* were female warrior heroines. These women were physically powerful, morally superior, and capable of decisive action when their male counterparts were

² Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness," 81.

³ Ibid., 82.

⁴ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 5.

⁵ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 5.

indecisive and impotent. Many Russian authors who wrote about such strong female figures believed they were “a vital source of national salvation.”⁶

Despite the prevalence of strong female characters in literature and folk tales, in late imperial Russia it was against the law for women to serve in the military. In the face of the rapid modernization taking place, many people still held the opinion that women should serve their country only in a support capacity, if at all. However, the unprecedented demands of World War I on all parts of Russian society blurred traditional conventions. Without strong central leadership or a robust economy, Russia floundered against the combined strength of Germany and Austria. Millions of soldiers died, and economic production plummeted. The dearth of labor and supplies opened some previously closed doors to women. Peasant women filled vacancies in factories and on farms. Women of the middle and noble classes raised funds for the war, organized committees to gather supplies for soldiers and refugees, and turned their homes into temporary hospitals. Many women served as army nurses, while others worked in army support positions, such as cooks, laundresses, drivers, and clerks.⁷

During World War I and the subsequent Russian Civil War some women, from all levels of society, felt the call to fight alongside their male counterparts, either openly or disguised as men. These dedicated women joined the frontline of the war for a variety of reasons. Some went to fight alongside a loved one, a husband, father, or brother, or to exact vengeance for the fallen. Others sought adventure to escape the dreariness of feminine daily life. A few fought to defend

⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 180.

their political ideals or the integrity of the nation. For many women, the inspiration for taking up arms was closely tied to traditional notions of citizenship and military service. By serving their country alongside men, women hoped to prove their worthiness for full and equal citizenship.

Princess Ekaterina Dadeshkeliani, daughter of Prince Alexander and Princess Eristavi, was born in Georgia in 1891. Belonging to the ruling family of Svanetia, Dadeshkeliani grew up in aristocratic comfort. In 1909, when Dadeshkeliani was eighteen years old, her father was assassinated. Soon after, Dadeshkeliani's younger sister committed suicide. The young princess fell into a depression.⁸ Wanting to break free of her grief she turned to a family friend for help. Under the protection of Colonel Edik Khogandokov, she joined the army as a man under the name Djamal Dadeshkeliani. Many male officers helped women. Often, they were family friends or the wives of fallen soldiers, who wanted to join the military. They helped women disguise themselves as male officers. Their motivations for helping these passing women ranged from protecting family friends to a shared understanding for the need of vengeance for fallen loved ones. In her memoirs, Dadeshkeliani stated that she left her privileged life for the frontlines in search of adventure and escape.

Khogandokov taught Dadeshkeliani enough military etiquette and basic soldiering for her to pass as a young male officer. She was assigned to Grand Duke Mikhail's newly formed Caucasian Native Cavalry "Savage Division," of the 4th Squadron of the Tartar Regiment. At first, she worked as a military

⁸ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 38.

courier, which bored her. She had joined the army for action and adventure. Determined to experience both, in 1915 she requested a transfer to the frontlines against the Austrian army. Colonel Khogandokov harbored many doubts about sending a woman into combat, but Dadeshkeliani would not relent. In the summer of 1915, however, Dadeshkeliani spent only a week in the trenches before succumbing to paralyzing fear. She wrote, "I never felt the same feeling of uselessness, of powerlessness, or failing of duty...."⁹ Clearly, Dadeshkeliani had built up a romantic vision of engaging in physical combat. When confronted with the realities of brutal warfare, she blamed her sex for her reaction. After leaving the frontlines, she was reassigned to an ambulance division where she felt more capable.

While Dadeshkeliani had difficulty dealing with violence on a larger scale in the trenches, she was not against the use of violence in general. Her memoirs included instances where she ended up in fist fights to resolve conflicts with other soldiers, while maintaining her male disguise. However, based on her own experience she was adamantly against women in combat. She decreed, "A woman is not in her place in the fighting ranks, even when she is disguised, there is an atmosphere of weakness about her and the men will be instinctively encouraged to spare her, to protect her, and their own action will thereby be impeded."¹⁰ She made it clear that in her opinion men and women belonged in separate spheres, at least in wartime. After the February Revolution in 1917, Dadeshkeliani left the army and returned to her family who lived in Petrograd at the time. As a staunch

⁹ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

tsarist, she was horrified by the revolution and refused to take the Provisional Government's oath of loyalty to the new government, required for all military units.¹¹

Not every woman fighting on the frontlines fell into the grips of uncontrollable fear. "Terror was my guide, and nothing more than terror. I could not have stopped talking then, even if I had been told to. I could not have stopped walking upstream, even if they had realized where I was leading them. But they didn't."¹² Marina Iurlova, a teenage girl, wrote about one of her wartime experiences leading the Kurdish enemy into a trap while suffering from a bullet wound in the leg. Only fourteen years old at the onset of World War I, Iurlova was the daughter of a colonel of the Kuban Cossack. After her father's regiment was called to war, Iurlova found herself swept up in the emotion of the moment. Not wanting to be left behind and with little forethought, she sought to join another Cossack regiment. Iurlova was fueled by stories of Cossack female warriors. She was inspired by the Cossack Nadezhda Durova, who ran away from home, disguised herself as a man, and had a successful career as an officer during and after the Napoleonic Wars.¹³ Unlike Durova, Iurlova did not attempt to disguise herself as a man. Instead, to prove her own worth she hid the fact that her father was an important Cossack colonel. Driven by a desire for adventure and a romanticized tradition of Cossack women fighting alongside their men in battle,

¹¹ Ibid., 39.

¹² Higonnet, *Lines of Fire*, 181.

¹³ Higonnet, *Lines of Fire*, 178.

she finally convinced a Cossack commander to let her stay on in a unit of a hundred men.

Among certain groups of Cossacks, such as the Kuban, Don and Zaporozhian, female soldiers were not uncommon. Cossack culture by tradition valued strength, horsemanship, and competency in combat. They lived a militaristic lifestyle that shaped men's as well as women's lives. Cossack women had greater degrees of freedom than other Russian women. They were not as restricted in the public sphere.¹⁴ This degree of freedom stemmed from the fact that Cossack men were often away on military duty. With the men gone, women were left to act independently in both the community and in the domestic sphere. The result was that Cossack women were particularly capable at soldiering.

Another major contributor to the greater number of Cossack female warriors was acceptance from men. Margarita Romanovna Kokovtseva, female soldier, when asked by a reporter in the summer of 1915 about her experience fighting with Cossack men, stated that she felt "equal among equals." She added, "Oh, don't you believe what people say about the frivolity of Cossacks, about their rudeness in relations with women—it's just a fairy tale—about the possibility of offending the weaker sex."¹⁵ Kokovtseva alluded to how the Cossacks were perceived and portrayed by Russians and the media abroad. Cossacks in the media were often described in conflicting ways. The mere mention of Cossacks often invoked fear and terror in both men and women. They were known for their hardened fierceness in battle and were even said to have an

¹⁴ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 47.

¹⁵ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 48.

“insensibility to pain,” both their own and others’.¹⁶ On the other hand, Cossacks were also painted as soldiers who were devout in their Orthodoxy or Buddhism, strict in their code of honor, and at the same time fun-loving and childlike. New York’s *The Sun* reported on the life of Cossack warriors, quoting Buddhist lamas’ instructions for conduct given to Buryat Cossacks:

Insult no one, calumniate no one, harm not the enemy who flees or the enemy who lies in his blood. Do not grieve your guardian angel (who fights with you) by doing useless harm. Do not touch the goods of others. What, soil your conscience by plunder and one minute afterward, perhaps, behold your dead body in the trench, where gold and valuables will not serve you?¹⁷

The same article argued that historically Cossacks soldiers wrought the least amount of havoc during war. The reporter noted that they were almost animalian in appearance, with an unpretentious and open demeanor. “In spite of their terrifying aspect, great fur hats and wild and windy beards, they proved to be overgrown children.”¹⁸ The article described several historical encounters with Cossack soldiers in times of war.

In a letter to a friend Alexandra Kudasheva also denied the barbarity of Cossack soldiers under her command, “Not one of my fire-eating Cossacks has been guilty of offering indignities to a woman of the enemy. Maybe my little ones do some burning and looting—if my back is turned—but to act in a beastly way to women and children, no!”¹⁹ Margarita Kokovtseva stated to the journalist

¹⁶ “Cossacks of the Russian Army and Their Work,” *Barbour County Index*, May 18, 1904, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015080/1904-05-18/ed-1/seq-6/>.

¹⁷ “The Terror Inspiring, Childlike Cossacks,” *The Sun*, November 22, 1914, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1914-11-22/ed-1/seq-39/>

¹⁸ “The Terror Inspiring, Childlike Cossacks.”

¹⁹ Francis Trevelyan Miller, *True Stories of the Great War, Volume VI* (New York: Reviews of Reviews Company, 1917), 351.

interviewing her that the men in her unit “treated her politely and straightforwardly.”²⁰ When asked about creating all-women units of Cossack fighters she replied, “Well no, I am against this...first of all they [women] quarrel too much among themselves. A woman lieutenant would never accept the authority of a woman colonel. Second, military formation was not like dancing a quadrille [a popular dance in Europe performed by four couples].”²¹ It is quite evident that Kokovtseva was not an advocate for women’s rights. The article continued, “She [Kokovtseva] was not one of those who believed that the redemption of women lay in equal rights, and she considered herself to be an accidental exception in the kingdom of women.”²² The sentiment of being unique or an exception in the world of women can also be inferred in the case of Ekaterina Dadeshkeliani, Marina Iurlova, Maria Bochkareva and other female soldiers.

The Cossack regiment that Marina Iurlova was eventually allowed to join saw and treated her as an odd type of mascot, due to her young age and sex.²³ She cut her hair and dressed in a uniform, not to disguise herself as a man, but to fit in the unit while training and drilling. Even if the men did not take her very seriously at first, she quickly proved her mettle in combat. In 1915, her unit was sent on a mission to the Araxes River near Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Their mission was to blow up bridges across the river. During their mission they faced resistance. The commander of their unit was killed, and Iurlova was shot in the

²⁰ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 48.

²¹ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 48.

²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 49.

leg. Over the course of the war Iurlova was awarded the Russian Cross of Saint George for bravery in battle three times. She was also wounded several times, including once from an explosion that landed her in a hospital in Moscow for almost a year between 1917 and 1918. After she was released, she was assigned to Kazan, where she appeared on a Red Army training list. As a loyalist, she refused to join their ranks. Immediately she was arrested and imprisoned. She did not spend long in prison, as she was freed by Czechoslovak soldiers fighting in the White Army during the Civil War. Ultimately Iurlova joined the fight against the Bolsheviks. She was shot in the shoulder and was sent to a hospital in Omsk.²⁴

Throughout the war, Iurlova demonstrated tenacity and bravery. She spent her formative years serving as a soldier, experiencing massive bloodshed, hardship, and horror. While many women witnessed World War I from the relative comfort of their home, Iurlova was burying the dead on the front lines and facing down the enemy. She did not categorize herself as particularly feminine nor did she see herself as particularly masculine. In her memoirs, Iurlova described her response to an officer's flirtation. "I was a soldier. Not a girl."²⁵ To Iurlova, until after the wars, her gender did not matter. What was important to her was being a soldier.

Marina Iurlova was not the only example of young girls running away from home to join the fight. A Russian journalist known as Ivanova, who regularly contributed to the women's political journal *Zhenskii Vestnik* told the following story in one of her articles:

²⁴Higonnet, *Lines of Fire*, 179.

²⁵ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 51.

Many girls from different social classes are running away from home, dressing up as men, and trying to get into the army. Some succeed with the help of officers with whom they are acquainted. Thus, one seventeen-year-old girl, the relative of an officer, asked his regiment to take her to war with them. They found her a uniform for a lower rank and enlisted her in the regiment. The girl demonstrated extraordinary courage during one skirmish, when a soldier by her side was seriously wounded. The Russians had to retreat, abandoning their wounded on the battlefield. At dusk the girl set off with an officer to search for her wounded comrade. They found him and took him up on the saddle, then set off toward their own forces. The enemy fired at them and gave chase, and when the girl's horse went lame, caught up with them; but the girl did not want to surrender and began to shoot. They were rescued by the arrival of a detachment of Cossacks. The girl received the medal of St. George for bravery; later on, during a reconnaissance mission, she was wounded.²⁶

There are many instances such as this when women ran away from their families or school to defend the nation. According to Historian Laurie Stoff, male Cossack soldiers seemed more ready to accept and even condone women in combat roles. There are several instances where Cossack women joined the army with the full backing of their communities. The Cossacks' military heritage ran deep through their culture, making women in war an easier transition.

Another example of a Cossack woman who was accepted in the military and made a successful career there was the "Queen of the Cossacks," Alexandra Kudasheva. Born in Khiva (modern-day Uzbekistan), she was raised, in a similar manner to Nadezhda Durova, by the Cossack soldiers in her father's unit after his death. She grew up to be an excellent horsewoman. She became a widow during the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, where her husband fought for the Sixth Ural Cossack Regiment. Shortly after the Great War started, she cut her hair and

²⁶ Higonnet, *Lines of Fire*, 111.

volunteered in her late husband's regiment as a man.²⁷ She fought in the light cavalry unit against the German Uhlans in Prussia. Kudasheva was wounded twice, and thus it came to the public's attention that she was a woman. She was decorated with the cross of Saint George for bravery in the face of danger. Kudasheva, instead of being made to quit the regiment upon discovery of her gender, was promoted to lieutenant and then later to colonel. The newspaper *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published an article that painted Kudasheva as a brave woman willing to sacrifice herself in war for the honor of her family.

Madame Kudasheva, the Colonel of the Sixth Ural Cossack regiment is perhaps the best known of Russia's women soldiers, and certainly the most beloved. She is the widow of a soldier, and in going to the front is carrying out his deathbed wish to have the name of Kudasheva continue in the service. She made several of the most gallant charges and recently had the cross of St. George conferred upon her for bravery under fire.²⁸

Another newspaper article described Kudasheva as being "the widow of a soldier" and "following her husband's wishes in continuing the Kokovtsev name in service."²⁹ Kudasheva's soldiers, including both women and men, adored her, and saw her as the ultimate in feminine strength.

Despite the fame of a few female Cossack warriors, Cossack family values were very traditional. The man was the head of the household and the provider. Women were caretakers of the household and were submissive to men. The question of gender and military service came up again in a letter written by

²⁷ "The Russian "Joan of Arc's" Own Story," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 15, 1915, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045389/1915-08-15/ed-1/seq-49/>.

²⁸ "Women's Work in Wartime," *The Daily Telegram*, October 13, 1915, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85059715/1915-10-13/ed-1/seq-11/>.

²⁹ Frederic J. Haskin, "Women Do Men's Work," *The Daily Telegram*, July 27, 1915, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85059715/1915-07-27/ed-1/seq-14/>

Kudasheva to a male friend while she was recovering in a hospital from being wounded in battle.

"Listen, Batjuschka," I had to say just now to the grimmest and fiercest of them—a grizzled giant who only yesterday captured six Austrians single-handed—"do you wish to see your Jessual [Colonel] shedding tears like a mere woman? For shame! About face—march!"

But the wretch had the audacity to try and kiss my hand—he left a tear on it, anyway. When I'm out I shall have to discipline him severely!

My splendid Cossacks! Who would have thought that they would consent to be commanded by a woman? Often have I told you of their superior attitude toward women. They expect their women to work for them, to serve them and be always submissive. Evidently my fierce little ones consider me as a sort of Superwoman. or, perhaps they do not consider me a woman at all—except now that I am wounded and in the hospital—and respect merely my colonel's uniform. Truly it has little in common with the Tartar shirt, half-coat and foot-gear and kerchief of their sisters and wives. At any rate they obey my slightest wish, perform the most reckless deeds, gayly court death, to win my approval.³⁰

Kudasheva acknowledged that Cossack men (as did other Russian men), expected submissiveness from their women. She seemed almost surprised that once a woman shed her casual clothing and donned a uniform, proving her mettle, she was no longer a woman but respected as an officer.

In Kudasheva's writings the interconnection between citizenship, masculinity and military service was evident. When a man donned a uniform, he took place in society as a person worthy of citizenship. According to George Mosse, during the late 18th-century wars and revolutions in Europe, a new model of ideal masculinity was created. The attributes of heroism, discipline, and self-sacrifice for a higher purpose became celebrated. Russia "co-opted the ideal of manliness as its own," and tied it closely to the idea of patriotism.³¹ When a

³⁰ Miller, *True Stories of the Great War, Volume VI*, 351.

³¹ Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness," 82.

Russian woman put on a uniform, an interesting transformation took place. She was no longer a woman, nor was she a man. She left her gender at the threshold and became a soldier. As historian Melissa Stockdale argued, frontline participation in the war offered an opportunity to claim citizenship for those who were otherwise denied it.³² “For women and other individuals denied membership in the community of citizens, or for whom citizenship was only partially realized in law, the heavy burdens of the war could also appear as an opportunity, by providing a new basis for winning citizenship claims.”³³ Some Russian women, including organized feminists, believed that women could earn their right to full citizenship “through patriotic self-sacrifice in support of the nation at war.”³⁴ That support could entail active military service.

“Don’t be cowards! Don’t be traitors! Remember that you volunteered to set an example to the laggards [meaning men] of the army. I know that you are of the stuff to win glory. The country is watching you set the stride for the entire front. Place your trust in God, and He will help us save the motherland.”³⁵ Maria Bochkareva, born Maria Leontievna Frolkova, was a semiliterate peasant who came from a poverty-stricken, abusive home in Nikolsko, located on the banks of the Yug River. Her father, a veteran of the Russo-Turkish War in 1877, was a drunkard and often beat her. In order to escape the abuse, Bochkareva married Afanasi Bochkarev at the age of fifteen. It was not long until she realized her new husband was also a heavy drinker who tended to be violent. Bochkareva ran away

³² Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness," 82.

³³ Ibid., 83.

³⁴ Ibid., 83.

³⁵ Bochkareva and Levine, *Yashka*, 162.

with Yakov Buk, who was later arrested as a petty criminal and sent to Siberia.³⁶ Bochkareva followed Buk, only to suffer yet more violent abuse at his hands. To flee, she attempted to enlist in the Tomsk Reserve Battalion in 1914. In her memoirs, she rewrote her escape attempt in idealistic terms: “The spirit of sacrifice took possession of me. My country called me.”³⁷ The commander of the regiment laughed at Bochkareva's request to join, telling her that if she wanted to fight, she would need to petition the Tsar for permission, since it was illegal for women to serve in the imperial army. Bochkareva persisted. “My heart yearned to be there in the boiling cauldron of war, to be baptized in its fire and scorched in its lava.”³⁸ Bochkareva sent her petition with a letter of recommendation from the commander. To everyone’s surprise, permission was granted by Tsar Nicholas II.

For two years Bochkareva fought on the southwestern frontlines with men who, after an adjustment period, accepted her as one of their own. She was a natural soldier and showed talent for warfare. Like other women, Bochkareva cut her hair short and abandoned women’s clothing for a uniform. She quickly and easily adopted a male posture and habits. As historian Laurie Stoff states, “She smoked, drank, spat, cursed, and even visited a brothel with some male soldiers.”³⁹ Bochkareva left the domain of the feminine to join the masculine, not to become a man, but to be something more than a woman. The *New York Tribune Review* on August 19, 1917, ran a long article detailing Bochkareva’s career as a soldier. They described her as a type of superwoman or Amazon, with

³⁶ Higonnet, *Lines of Fire*, 157.

³⁷ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 71.

³⁸ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 71.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

a “warlike spirit.” “Finely yet strongly built, with broad shoulders and healthy complexion, she can lift 200 pounds with the greatest of ease. She has never known what fear is.... For two years she has lived in the trenches and fought like a man.”⁴⁰ Generally, female warriors lived only in legends of a distant past. Now women combat soldiers, especially those who commanded their own units, were given the status of superheroes, creatures to admire but hardly the norm for women in society and hardly the norm for how male soldiers were seen, especially as the war dragged on.

Bochkareva was decorated three times for bravery and rose to the rank of corporal. Two hundred and fifty soldiers in Bochkareva’s company were caught, during battle, in barbed wire no-man’s-land between German machine gun fire and another company of advancing Russian troops. Over half of Bochkareva’s company was killed or wounded. The survivors were ordered back to the Russian trenches. That night, she could hear the cries of her wounded comrades. Unwilling to let fellow soldiers die alone on the battlefield, she crawled out onto the battlefield. Working alone she dragged wounded soldiers back to the trenches. By dawn the next morning she saved fifty men.⁴¹ During another battle, Bochkareva was severely wounded and nearly paralyzed by a piece of shrapnel lodged near her spine. After spending several months recovering, Bochkareva returned to the frontlines.⁴²

⁴⁰ “The Russian “Joan of Arc’s” Own Story,”

⁴¹ Michael P Kihntopf, “During World War I, Russia Lieutenant Maria Bochkareva Forged the Women’s Death Battalion,” *Military History* 20, no 2, (June 2003), 22.

⁴² Higonnet, *Lines of Fire*, 157.

Not particularly politically minded, Bochkareva nonetheless supported the February Revolution in 1917, because she believed the uprising would lead to freedom for everyone, including women and peasants.⁴³ Bochkareva, like many other women throughout the Russian Empire, assumed the revolution would grant full citizenship rights to women, including the right “to bear arms in their country’s defense.”⁴⁴

Finally, the joyous news arrived. The Commander gathered the entire Regiment to read to us the glorious words of the first manifesto, together with the famous Order No. 1. The miracle had happened! Tsarism, which enslaved us and thrived on the blood and marrow of the toiler, had fallen. Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood! How sweet were these words to our ears! We were transported. There were tears of joy, embraces, dancing. It all seemed a dream, a wonderful dream. Whoever believed that the hated regime would be destroyed so easily and in our own time?⁴⁵

Bochkareva’s regiment swore allegiance to the Provisional Government.

However, it was not long until conceptions of freedom and military duties became blurred. Bochkareva wrote, “One day in the first week of the revolution, I ordered a soldier to take up duty at the listening-post. He refused.” The man responded with a sneering voice that profoundly shocked Bochkareva. “I will take no orders from a *baba* [a woman]. I can do as I please. We have freedom now.”⁴⁶ Later Bochkareva called a meeting with the soldiers under her command. She argued that the revolution did not lessen their duties and responsibilities but increased them. Their duty was to protect the fledgling new government, their homeland, and their newly granted freedoms from outside aggressors. To this, most men

⁴³ Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness," 91.

⁴⁴ Pamela D. Toler, *Women Warriors: An Unexpected History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 190-191.

⁴⁵ Bochkareva, *Yashka*, 111.

⁴⁶ Bochkareva, *Yashka*, 112.

agreed. She noted, though, that “the men were in a high state of enthusiasm, but obedience was contrary to their ideas of liberty.”⁴⁷ Bochkareva was completely dismayed by the breakdown in command authority and the disintegration of the army’s fighting capacity.⁴⁸ She became so frustrated with the state of the army that she asked her commander Colonel Stubendorf to release her from duty. The commander acknowledged her complaints, but asked her to persevere, stating they were all in the same boat. Convinced to stick it out, she stayed with the regiment. “It was abhorrent to my feelings, but I remained. Little by little things improved.”⁴⁹

Commanders began to be replaced or to retire. Some disappeared, never to be heard from again. Bochkareva remarked on the changes in command when her own commanding officer disappeared. “Even Colonel Stubendorf, the Commander of the Regiment, was gone, retiring perhaps because of his German name.” Along with these changes were improvements, she believed. “Discipline was gradually reestablished. It was not the old discipline. Its basis was no longer dread of punishment. It was a discipline founded on the high sense of responsibility that was soon instilled into the gray mass of soldiery.”⁵⁰ But such high incentive to fight for freedom soon waned.

In May of 1917 a delegate of the Army Committee of the Provisional Government came to speak to the frontline regiments. He argued that the soldiers had bled and suffered for three years for the Tsar’s war. “Now the Tsar is no

⁴⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁸ Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness," 91.

⁴⁹ Bochkareva, *Yashka*, 113.

⁵⁰ Bochkareva, *Yashka*, 113.

more. Why, then, comrades, should we continue this war?"⁵¹ Thousands of soldiers cried out in response that they had had enough of war. The delegate continued that now the Russian people had two enemies, one was the pressing German army and the other was the "bourgeois bloodsuckers." One could not fight two wars and win. If they continued to fight the Germans, the enemy within would rob them of the freedom they were granted with the revolution. The soldiers responded with heated applause. Bochkareva, on the other hand, was alarmed and angered by the delegate's words. In a loud outburst she addressed the large crowd.

"You stupid asses!" I burst out. "You can be turned one minute one way, the other minute in an opposite direction. Didn't you cheer Krylov's truthful words when he said that the Kaiser was our enemy and that we must drive him out of Russia first before we can have peace? And now you have been incited to start a civil war so that the Kaiser can walk over Russia and take it all into his grip. This is war! War, you understand, war! And in war there can be no compromise with the enemy. Give him an inch and he will take a mile! Come, let's get down to work. Let's fulfill our duty."⁵²

Many of the soldiers around her did not take kindly to her admonishment. They called her a "silly baba" and began to beat her. She was saved by a few sympathetic comrades who quickly took her away from the mob. That was the last straw for Bochkareva, and she set out for newly- dubbed Petrograd.

The idea of an all-woman fighting unit had been floating around all spring since the February Revolution. Many women voiced interest in serving their country through combat. Several women's groups petitioned the newly formed government for permission to organize such units. Morale on the frontlines was

⁵¹ Ibid., 117.

⁵² Ibid., 118.

low. The combatants had suffered from heavy fighting and losses. There was a shortage of food and basic supplies. Desertion rates increased exponentially. Other than granting ethereal ideas of freedom to the soldiers, the Provisional Government was as ineffective at waging war as the previous government.⁵³ A large part of the inefficiency was ideological splits in the new government.⁵⁴ During the revolution many political parties worked together to overthrow the old regime. After the successful coup, the Bolsheviks were in a position of power among the other socialist groups. The Bolsheviks, among other demands, called for an end to Russia's involvement in the Great War.⁵⁵ However, there was pushback on brokering peace with the Germans.

Bochkareva arrived in Petrograd to an almost frenzied atmosphere. There she met with the President of the Duma, Mikhail Vladimirovich Rodzianko (1859-1924), to share her concerns on the state of the army. After several meetings, Rodzianko acknowledged Bochkareva's soldering experience and asked her for a solution. Surprised by the request, she asked to have a moment to formulate an answer. "The session continued, while I sank deep into thought. For a half an hour I raked my brain in vain. Then suddenly an idea dawned upon me. It was the idea of a Women's Battalion of Death."⁵⁶ Bochkareva's idea met with a mixed reception from the committee. Some voiced concerns over the loose behavior of women at the front, and the resulting unwanted pregnancies.

Bochkareva responded:

⁵³ Toler, *Women Warriors: An Unexpected History*, 191.

⁵⁴ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 295.

⁵⁵ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 183.

⁵⁶ Bochkareva, *Yashka*, 124.

If I take up the organization of a women's battalion, I will hold myself responsible for every member of it. I would introduce rigid discipline and would allow no speech-making and no loitering in the streets. When Mother-Russia is drowning it is not a time to run an army by committees. I am a common peasant myself. And I know that only discipline can save the Russian Army. In the proposed battalion I would exercise absolute authority and get obedience. Otherwise, there would be no use in organizing it.⁵⁷

In the end she was given permission to create a battalion of women fighters.

Bochkareva believed that an all-women battalion could serve as a high standard for the demoralized soldiers while protecting their nation from the enemy.⁵⁸ At least in part, the battalion was meant to shame male soldiers by example.

The Petrograd Women's Military Organization was formed under the Provisional Government to help assist in the formation of fifteen women's battalions. Bochkareva worked to spread the word for recruitment. Posters were distributed throughout the city displaying a picture of Bochkareva and the slogan, "The duty of every woman is to join the general effort for victory over the enemy."⁵⁹ Bochkareva sought women between eighteen and thirty-five years old, and an overwhelming two thousand women answered the call to enlist.

The military training and discipline, however, were harsh. Many women dropped out because they were unable to meet the demands. By the time the battalion was ready for battle, only three hundred soldiers were left.⁶⁰ The women came from various social backgrounds. About half of the recruits had secondary education, and roughly a third had completed a degree at university. Other women

⁵⁷ Bochkareva, *Yashka*, 124-125.

⁵⁸ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 55.

⁵⁹ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 77.

⁶⁰ Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, 55.

came from working in the factories or the fields. A few of the women had already seen combat alongside men. Many more had worked in hospitals caring for the wounded.⁶¹ The new recruits traded in their feminine clothes, closely cut their hair, and donned army uniforms. Old notions of the spiritual superiority of women again came to the fore. The battalion's creation called for women "whose hearts are crystal, whose souls are pure." The goal was to create an all-female fighting force that upheld feminine attributes of self-sacrifice and purity in order to save the Motherland.⁶² Of course Bochkareva, like many other women who joined the combat ranks, still thought of herself as a soldier first and a woman second.

All the new volunteers had to sign a document pledging absolute obedience to Bochkareva, and loyalty to the Provisional Government. In addition, unlike their male counterparts, the female recruits had to follow a strict set of rules of conduct. They included:

1. The honor, freedom, and well-being of the motherland is the first priority.
2. Iron discipline.
3. Steadfast and unwavering spirit and faith.
4. Courage and valor.
5. Accuracy, neatness, persistence, and quickness in execution of all duties.
6. Irreproachable honesty, and a serious attitude toward work.
7. Cheerfulness, happiness, kindness, hospitality, chastity, and fastidiousness.
8. Respect for the opinions of others and full faith in one another.
9. Quarrels and personal scores are intolerable, as is the degradation of human dignity.⁶³

⁶¹ Toler, *Women Warriors: An Unexpected History*, 193.

⁶² Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness," 92.

⁶³ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 78.

The standard of conduct for women was placed far above that of male soldiers and included gendered ideas and traits. Rule seven is directed specifically towards feminine ideals. Male fighting units were not directed to march through mud or fight in the trenches with a cheerful and happy countenance, and chastity among male soldiers was hardly considered a virtue. In the eyes of the Provisional Government, and, to some extent Bochkareva, the Women's Death Battalion was to serve as a standard and inspiration, or even as cheerleader, since it was meant to shame men into conduct befitting a Russian soldier for the whole of the army.

The 1st Women's Death Battalion was unique in two ways. First, it was the first all-female combat unit in Russia. Second, out of fifteen additional women's battalions, it was the only one to face combat. The 1st "Death Battalion" was fiercely determined to defend the country even "to the last drop of blood."⁶⁴ A death battalion had two goals: to deal death on the battlefield and to fight to the death. According to Laurie Stoff, the All-Military Union granted that any unit that embraced such a mentality could wear the "epithet of death."⁶⁵ The soldiers could sew black and red patches onto the sleeves of their uniforms and add a skull and crossbones on their regiment's flag. American journalist Bessie Beatty reported on the Women's Death Battalion, "Red for the Revolution that must not die and black for a death that is preferable to dishonor for Russia."⁶⁶ By October of 1917 only 106 Death Battalions existed.

⁶⁴ Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness," 92.

⁶⁵ Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness" 92.

⁶⁶ Bessie Beatty, "CLASSIC DISPATCHES: THE BATTALION OF DEATH," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 32, no. 2 (2020): 78-81.

In June of 1917, just before Bochkareva's battalion was sent to the Russian western front, British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst visited, along with British journalists and other representatives of women's movements. In her address to the battalion, Pankhurst highlighted the fight every woman faced: the fight for equal rights.

We all, millions of women, must fight for our rights in life, even for the right to defend one's own homeland and for the right to die for it. The creation of the Women's Battalion of Death is the greatest page written in the history of women since the time of Joan of Arc. I believe that at the front your example will carry the tired Russian soldier, demoralized by the enemy and by Bolshevik propaganda. Be brave. A million women's eyes filled with tears will follow you to victory, and a million women's hearts will be beating with hope, as one with yours. And our spoken prayers will help you to fulfill your difficult but honorable role.⁶⁷

Pankhurst's speech linked the idea of women in combat with the rights of all women. The idea was linked to the connection between soldiering and citizenship. Pankhurst, a feminist, stated that women must fight for their rights in life, meaning political participation and social independence. Understanding the links between patriotism, service, and citizenship, European as well as Russian feminists saw the war as an opportunity for women to prove their case for full citizenship. As World War I continued, the need for able-bodied men became a pressing concern. In Britain and in Germany, women were given uniforms and placed into newly created auxiliary corps working in support positions such as drivers and cooks, "thus freeing up men for combat."⁶⁸ In Russia women's auxiliary corps were also created to support the fighting troops. However, unlike

⁶⁷ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 88.

⁶⁸ Stockdale, "My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness," 83.

their European sisters, some Russian women opted to take up arms and fight on the frontlines as official combat soldiers.

At the end of June 1917, Bochkareva's battalion was sent to the western front for trial by fire. In July, Bochkareva's battalion captured two thousand prisoners, with seventy casualties. Bochkareva in her memoir described the scene:

Every officer was provided with a rifle. The line was so arranged that men and women alternated, a girl being flanked by two men. The officers, now numbering about a hundred, were stationed at equal distances throughout the line. We decided to advance in order to shame the men, having arrived at the conclusion that they would not let us perish in No Man's Land. We all felt the gravity of the decision. We had nothing to guide us in the belief that the boys would not abandon us to our fate, except a feeling that such a monstrosity could not happen.... At last the signal was given. We crossed ourselves and, hugging our rifles, leaped out of the trenches, every one of our lives dedicated to "the country and freedom." We moved forward against a withering fire of machine guns and artillery, my brave girls, encouraged by the presence of men on their sides, marching steadily against the hail of bullets... We swept forward and overwhelmed the first German line, and then the second. Our regiment alone captured two thousand prisoners.⁶⁹

According to Bochkareva's account, the troops on the western front were so demoralized that they had to intersperse women among the male soldiers to shame them into fighting.

After the victory over the Germans, the male soldiers found large amounts of alcohol and proceeded to get drunk. Bochkareva and her soldiers, taking on the role of moral police, destroyed as much of the alcohol as they could, garnering the resentment of the men. By the evening the Russian advance came to a standstill, despite Bochkareva's encouragement to keep driving the Germans back. Many of the soldiers retreated without orders, stating they had done enough and deserved

⁶⁹ Higonnet, *Lines of Fire*, 164-165.

rest. In the meantime, the Germans regrouped and attacked. Bochkareva and her battalion, along with a few other soldiers from neighboring units, tried to hold the line through the night. She requested relief several times, but no support came. Eventually, running out of ammunition, they had to retreat under heavy fire.⁷⁰ As Bochkareva remembered,

Our line was drawn in, and we were preparing for the final dash when terrifying shouts of “Hurrah!” suddenly rang out, almost in unison, on both flanks. We were half surrounded! Another quarter of an hour and the net would have been drawn tight around us. There was no time to lose. I ordered a free-for-all run. The German artillery increased in violence, and the enemy’s rifles played havoc with us from both sides. I ran for all I was worth several hundred feet, till knocked unconscious by the terrific concussion of a shell that landed near me. My adjutant, Lieutenant Filippov, saw me fall, picked my body up and dashed with it through the devastating fire, the German trench system, the open space that was No Man’s Land before the offensive, and into the Russian trenches.⁷¹

Back in the Russian trenches, the Army Ninth Corps was deliberating whether to send reinforcements to support the Women’s Death Battalion. The Germans regained all ground they had previously lost during the offensive. Nearly a hundred women were killed or wounded. Bochkareva and the Provisional Government had miscalculated. The Women’s Death Battalion had not inspired male soldiers to fight for their country, or to defend their female counterparts. With some exceptions, the women garnered open hostility among the men.⁷²

In October 1917 the Bolsheviks came to power. Bochkareva supported Kerenskii and the Provisional Government, who had given her permission to form a women's battalion. She offered to help defend the Winter Palace, alongside

⁷⁰ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 110.

⁷¹ Bochkareva, *Yashka*, 168-169.

⁷² Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, 55.

three thousand other soldiers.⁷³ They were famously defeated in their efforts. Bochkareva, along with her unit, was arrested by the Bolsheviks, but released due to pressure from the British government to ensure the safety of the female captives.⁷⁴ Obtaining an external passport with the help of some friends, Bochkareva made her way to Vladivostok, where she booked passage to the United States.

In July 1918 Bochkareva met with President Woodrow Wilson to talk about the situation in Russia and to ask for help fighting against the Bolsheviks.⁷⁵ A few days later she travelled to Great Britain with the same mission. In September, Bochkareva returned to Russia and joined the White movement. She tried to form another all-female unit but failed, denied command by White Army commanders. General Marushevskii “told her to remove her uniform and go home.”⁷⁶ Not willing to give up, Bochkareva went to Admiral Kol’chak. Unwilling to give her command of fighting forces, he suggested that she organize a women’s medical detachment.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, as she was organizing medical support she was arrested by the Red Army and charged as an enemy of the new state. After four months of interrogation, Bochkareva was shot by the Cheka on May 16, 1920.

World War I opened the door for Russian women to demonstrate their military mettle and their usefulness as citizens. Certainly not all women who

⁷³ Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, 98.

⁷⁴ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 158.

⁷⁵ “Mme Botchkareva See President,” *The Hays Free Press*, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84029690/1918-07-25/ed-1/seq-6/>.

⁷⁶ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 213.

⁷⁷ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*, 213.

joined the fighting ranks were feminists or intellectuals seeking to lay a foundation for citizenship claims. Many women came from the semi-literate peasantry and urban working class. They sought to escape from poverty and abuse, to find adventure or exact revenge for a fallen loved one, and to serve their country. No matter the level of society from which they came, taking up arms allowed women to exhibit patriotism on a whole new level. Engagement in violence set them apart from their European sisters.

After Russia left the fighting field of World War I, the Civil War began. Women fought on both sides of the conflict. Many women in the Red Army fought openly as women, whereas fewer women in the White Army fought, and those who did so were mostly disguised as men. Their participation in combat for the Whites was seen as an exception of war rather than a rule, and the female soldiers who fought as extraordinary. Women did not achieve full integration into the Russian military forces until World War II.

CHAPTER IV

THE SWORD AND SHIELD OF UTOPIA

The women of the Cheka fully embraced the value of terror in consolidating power for the new Soviet state. The idea that women could be cold, calculated, and ruthless was still shocking to those in Russia and the world who held traditional values which held that women were passionate creatures ruled by emotions. Old gender stereotypes still prevailed. Their place was in the home, or contributing to society in a nurturing, supportive way, called on for more active service only in extraordinary circumstances. Yet many women had already defied traditional gender norms by playing the roles of revolutionaries and soldiers. Further, the Cheka as an organization and a tool of the state was the antithesis of nurturing or supportive. Their role in calmly and rationally ordering torture and death on a mass scale could not be romanticized, as could that of the revolutionary terrorist impassioned to seek justice for the inhumane actions of an overbearing state or that of a woman seeking to serve her country by facing the enemy at the front lines. Nevertheless, like female terrorists and soldiers, women Chekists operated according to a new vision for the future and a new morality that sacrificed old traditions, which they were willing to go to great lengths to protect.

Before the 1917 revolutions, many women flocked to underground radical groups. Within these revolutionary organizations, women experienced far more egalitarianism than in traditional society. Women, it was believed, should work alongside men equally. In the Bolshevik Party it was “declared that the emancipation of women was but one of a host of necessary social changes that

must be achieved through revolution.”¹ This ideal come directly from the philosophy of Peter Lavrov studied in earnest by early revolutionaries. Nonetheless many Bolshevik women served in top positions as committee leaders. "Nowhere in law-abiding Russia could women find a life so emancipated from the constraints of their nation's patriarchal traditions."² The Bolsheviks and other Social Democrats dreamed of a socialist utopia that would create a "politically decentralized, democratic, and harmonious" society ultimately spreading across the globe. The ideal society would banish all races, religions, classes, and genders. All would live and work together in "perfect equality." While women in the Bolshevik party, in theory, were equal to men, the majority of females served in low-level positions. In keeping with the idealistic philosophies of equality and freedom that all revolutionaries devoutly shared, male revolutionaries attempted to treat their female counterparts as comrades.³ As a result, a few Bolshevik women rose in the ranks of the revolutionary underground into the commanding ranks and served in high positions in the new Soviet Union.⁴

Vladimir Lenin’s utopian goals included the withering away of the state, social class, and violence. The state “would be unnecessary because in a classless communist society there is nobody to be suppressed—nobody in the sense of a class, of a systematic struggle against a definite section of the population.”⁵

¹ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 108.

² Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 57-58.

³ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 26.

⁴ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 100.

⁵ Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin’s Russia*, 5.

Between the revolutions of 1917 and Stalin's rise to power in 1922 was a period of enticing possibilities in Russia. Lenin, called "the dreamer in the Kremlin" by H.G. Wells, was a colossal visionary. He and other Bolsheviks embraced a particular breed of communist utopia, including happiness, prosperity, and freedom. Like many in the Party, Lenin possessed "extravagant dreams, impossible to realize."⁶ Lenin was so engrossed in his vision that he turned Russia into "a vast laboratory," seemingly "emotionally immune to the human costs."⁷ However utopian his vision, Lenin had first to secure the future of his Party in the real world. The Cheka was an important institution in practical terms. The Cheka alone during the civil war were responsible for at least 250,000 executions, not including the number of deaths in battle.⁸ As historian Christopher Read stated, "The Cheka is one of the best illustrations of the gap between Lenin's dreams of 1917 and the realities of power."⁹

Lenin was a complex personality. On one hand, he was a utopian dreamer; on the other hand, he was a practical and ruthless ideologue who had to operate in the realm of practical policy without any sort of blueprint to follow. Lenin understood that between the collapse of capitalist autocracy and the perfect communist society stood a long period of transformation. The infrastructure of the old regime could not be immediately or completely torn down. The economy could not thrive, for example, until workers learned the art of self-administration.

⁶ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 41.

⁷ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 41.

⁸ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 28.

⁹ Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and Their Revolution, 1917-1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 208.

Lenin resisted turning control over to such untrained people. Instead, like the father figure he saw himself as, he promoted “discipline, organization, the use of specialists, division of labor, and inequality in privilege.”¹⁰

The revolution magnified many fears and anxieties of those who took control of power. How exactly were they to create order and efficiency in the face of chaos? The people were war-weary and hungry. How was the fledgling state going to distribute food and justice? Under the constant threat of counter-revolution, how could the new government trust the masses when faced with the state’s survival? In the fall of 1917, after the Bolshevik seizure of power, there was widespread social disorder spurred on by the increasingly unpopular war and famine. The Bolshevik hold on power was tenuous, and the threat of a counter-revolution was real. The Bolsheviks did not command vast amounts of support. Their party numbers were small, only 250,000 in a population over 140 million.¹¹ Most of their support was garnered from factory workers and soldiers garrisoned in Petrograd. Thus, the Bolsheviks temporarily allied themselves with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. For a time, the Left SRs shared power with the Bolsheviks and filled governmental offices. In March 1918, however, Lenin worked to oust the members of other socialist parties from leadership positions. They also shut the door, literally, to free elections by closing the Constituent Assembly.¹² One of the main contributing factors to the outbreak of the Civil War

¹⁰ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 44.

¹¹ Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police: Muscovite, Imperial Russian and Soviet Political Security Operations 1565-1970*, 118.

¹² Robert Butler, *Stalin’s Instruments of Terror* (London: Amber Books, 2006), 31.

was Bolshevik insistence on being the sole ruling power. They spurned other socialist parties that had worked together to overthrow the old regime.

The problem of internal and external threats was much larger than Lenin had anticipated. He concluded that a special force was needed to combat the new state's enemies.¹³ To secure the Bolshevik regime, Lenin created the Cheka, or the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, as a temporary solution to safeguard the revolution. The primary task of the Cheka was "to protect the Party and its leadership from any perceived threat of subversion, and to dispense revolutionary justice."¹⁴ Lenin called it "the sword and shield" of the Bolshevik Party.¹⁵ Men and women alike joined the new taskforce. The number of women working in the Cheka during the Civil War was considerable, although the exact number is not known.¹⁶ Many women worked in low-level positions, as spies or informers. Several held high positions as heads of divisions. Varvara Iakovleva, for example, was in the "circle of twenty" at the top of the Cheka and worked for a time as the head of the Petrograd division.

At the dawn of the new Soviet regime, Russian women joined the Cheka and, in doing so, propagated violence and terror. Women in positions of power within the Cheka seemed to agree with the Bolshevik leadership that bloodshed was an important tool for securing and defending the new communist state. The methods of Lenin's Cheka were a different type of terror than deployed in the

¹³ Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 40.

¹⁴ Sebestyen, *Lenin*, 367.

¹⁵ Sebestyen, *Lenin*, 367.

¹⁶ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 321.

1870s and 1880s where individual tsarist officials were targeted with the goal of effecting political change. The Cheka used terror to control the people and shape a new society. In fighting against the threat of counterrevolution, terror protected hard-won political and social freedoms for the people, including women. In adopting a cult of terror, women Chekists sacrificed old traditions of society for the vision of socialist utopia. However, female Chekist leaders were also driven by motives other than political. Some sought prestige in the government, or notoriety, in which the mere mention of their names invoked fear. Perhaps they reveled in new kinds of power previously denied to most Russian women. Low-ranking female Chekists enjoyed new freedoms and power, too, along with additional material benefits such as better housing, food, and recreation that came with belonging to the secret police. In times of war and deprivation these benefits proved alluring. Whatever their motivations, the actions of Chekist women bolstered the image of the new Soviet woman, resolute, strong-willed, and practical, equal to men.

The Extraordinary Commission needed a singular individual to lead it. Lenin took great care in choosing the right person to build and direct the Cheka. He needed a like-minded individual whom he could explicitly trust, “a staunch proletarian Jacobin.”¹⁷ He chose Feliks Dzerzhinskii, who like Lenin, thought that the revolution and the new Bolshevik state were in danger. At the Council of People’s Commissars on December 7, 1917 Dzerzhinskii argued:

Long conversations are not necessary here. Our revolution is in clear danger. We have been too complacent in looking at what is going on around us. The opposition is organizing its strength.

¹⁷ Sebestyen, *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror*, 368.

Counterrevolutionaries are active in the countryside, in some places winning over our own forces. Now the enemy is here, in Petrograd, at our very hearts. We have incontrovertible evidence of this. We must send to this front--the most dangerous and the most treacherous front of all--resolute, steadfast and devoted comrades for the defense of the conquests of the revolution. I propose, I demand the organization of revolutionary violence against the counterrevolutionaries. And we must not act tomorrow but today, immediately.¹⁸

Dzerzhinskii outlined the purpose of the Cheka he would soon head. "I do not seek forms of justice. We are not in need of justice. It is war now—face-to-face, a fight to the finish. Life or death."¹⁹ These words soon became the unspoken motto for the Cheka. From its inception, the Cheka worked outside of the law, creating an atmosphere of terror and violence. The Cheka's practices were well in step with Lenin's Theory of Terror, defined as "the use of violence by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, rule that is unrestricted by any laws."²⁰ Dzerzhinskii clarified the theory in his famous statement on terror, issued in response to the growing concern and criticism of the Cheka. "We represent in ourselves organized terror—this must be said very clearly—such terror is now very necessary in the conditions we are living through in a time of revolution."²¹ The bloodshed emanated from Dzerzhinskii's deep love of his adopted country and its people. According to Viktor Chebrikov, a chairman of the KGB:

Feliks Edmundovich whole-heartedly sought to eliminate injustice and crimes from the world and dreamed of the times when wars and national enmity would vanish forever from our life. His whole life was in keeping with the motto which he expressed in these words: "I would like to embrace all mankind with my love, to warm it and to cleanse it of the dirt of modern life."²²

¹⁸ Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia*, 21.

¹⁹ Sebestyen, *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror*, 369.

²⁰ Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia*, 5.

²¹ Dziak, *Chekisty*, 28.

²² Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 42.

Chebrikov referenced Dzerzhinskii's dream of achieving the Marxist utopia, even if the dream required violence in the short term. For Dzerzhinskii the "dirt of modern life" meant "social evils that condemned countless innocent people to a pitiful and inhuman existence."²³ For a staunch socialist, social evils included a mixture of the old system of autocracy and aristocracy and the rise of capitalism. Anyone who represented the tsarist regime, capitalists, merchants, or landowners were deemed enemies of the state. It was with this mindset that Chekist women set about their work securing the new Soviet Union. The image of the revolutionary woman was new, too, or at least altered. A woman in the Cheka was seen as "the tough-willed equal of men."²⁴ These women became the model for the "New Soviet Woman." They were independent, iron-willed, and deeply devoted to the Soviet regime.

The Cheka started with a task force of only forty people, but the commission quickly mushroomed into a vast network of agents and spies. Within two years each major city in Russia had a secret police headquarters. From the onset, the Cheka's concern was largely domestic. The Cheka operated as "an organ for the revolutionary settlement of accounts with counter-revolutionaries."²⁵ This meant that they were intended to be a terror organization rather than an instrument of justice. As Lenin said, they were to "investigate and liquidate all attempts or actions connected with counter-revolution or sabotage, no matter from

²³ Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia*, 14.

²⁴ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 322.

²⁵ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 24.

whom they come, throughout Russia.”²⁶ Lenin perceived the threat to the new regime as so great that he granted wide powers to his new secret police. They had almost absolute total autonomy, reporting only to Lenin himself. This autonomy can be seen in the work of Rosalia Samoilovna Zemliachka and Varvara Nikolaevna Iakovleva, who were notorious for signing hundreds of death warrants and their viciousness. Ostensibly the Cheka would work closely with another commission charged with justice.²⁷ However, Lenin “adamantly and successfully fought attempts to subordinate the Cheka to any governmental body, keeping it directly answerable to the party [The Bolshevik Party], because to them it was truly the party’s sword and shield.”²⁸ Lenin stonewalled any attempts to subordinate the Cheka.

Among the growing numbers of Chekists were women. It is hard to know the exact number of women who joined the ranks of the Cheka as “data on them is very scanty and unreliable.”²⁹ They became officers and spies to help unearth any opposition to the Bolsheviks. These women were often portrayed by the White Movement and foreign media as vicious and bloodthirsty. Perhaps they were. Historian Barbara Clements put forth that it is more likely that “their reputations grew from a horrified reaction to women being implicated in the atrocious cruelty of civil war.”³⁰ Tatiana Varsher added, “The Bolsheviks went much further along the road to women's equality: not only did they give women their ‘place in

²⁶ Sebestyen, *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror*, 368.

²⁷ Sebestyen, *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror*, 367.

²⁸ Dziak, *Chekisty*, 16.

²⁹ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 321.

³⁰ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 47.

Parliament,' as well as some of the highest positions in the republic—they also gave them the job of executioner."³¹

As the Cheka grew, the theory and implementation of state terror evolved. What distinguished the Cheka from previous secret police forces such as the Okhrana and the Third Section were the number of political arrests and executions. In five years, the Cheka outpaced in sheer volume all its predecessors combined, with the possible exception of the Oprichnina under the rule of Ivan the Terrible.³² Estimates of its victims widely vary, from 13,000 to 1.7 million. W.H. Chamberlin estimated that around fifty thousand people were executed by the Cheka.³³ This number did not include prisoners in Chekist concentration camps who died of disease, torture, or starvation.

Who was the enemy? Dzerzhinskii outlined those he considered enemies of the people, which became the benchmark for the entire Cheka.

1. Those who, having disguised themselves as friends of the people, have penetrated the ranks of the revolutionary organs for provocative or mercenary reasons and who...by their criminal deeds discredit Soviet power.
2. Those who forge and use counterfeit commissions, orders, and licenses, etc. of revolutionary organs.
3. Perpetrators and disseminators of deliberate and false slanders against Soviet power, and the authors and distributors of slanderous and anonymous leaflets and newspapers, etc.
4. Organizers of plots, pogroms, and drunken brawls, etc.
5. Marauders, speculators, merchants...³⁴

The commission focused first on printers, strikers, and those they considered saboteurs. At its inception, the Cheka was given only mild disciplinary powers,

³¹ Varsher. "Things Seen and Suffered," 113.

³² Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, 126.

³³ Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, 126.

³⁴ Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia*, 20-21.

such as confiscation of property, house arrest, deprivation of ration cards, and publication of lists of enemies of the people.³⁵ The Cheka was not hamstrung for long. Especially after the August 1918 assassination attempt on Lenin by SR Fanny Kaplan, Lenin encouraged violence for political reasons. The brutality was painted as revenge against the bourgeoisie for centuries of inequalities and domination.³⁶ The Red Terror had begun in earnest. Utopian dreams had turned into nightmares.

The threat of death and torture hung over every prisoner of the Cheka like a specter. The Cheka did not hold public executions, but only listed the names of the executed. “You [Russian citizens] can never find out about the fate of political prisoners in Soviet Russia.”³⁷ There were mass executions which resulted in burials in mass graves outside of towns. The most common method of execution was a bullet to the back of the head, although there were reports of hangings, drownings, and other forms of death.³⁸ Torture was less uniform. Sleep deprivation, starvation, beatings, and threats against relatives were hallmarks of everyday life for prisoners. Female prisoners routinely endured rapes by Cheka guards. Each regional Cheka headquarters was known for their particular brand of torture, ranging from rolling a prisoner around in a barrel embedded with nails to pouring molten sealing wax on faces, arms, and necks.³⁹ A female Chekist known as Comrade Dora was said to have “forced Red Guards to violate women and

³⁵ Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia*, 23.

³⁶ Sebestyen, *Lenin: The Man, the Dictator, and the Master of Terror*, 386.

³⁷ Nora Murray, *I Spied for Stalin: Freedom's Sacrifice* (London: GB Publishing, 2017), 152.

³⁸ Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, 126.

³⁹ Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War 1918-1921*, 383-384.

children before executing them.”⁴⁰ Another woman, known simply as Rosa, reportedly boiled the skin of the limbs of her victims. The veracity of these particular reports is hard to substantiate. However, they illustrate the coalescing view of the Soviet woman as cold and calculating, versus the passionate revolutionary of the 1870s.

The brutality of the Cheka knew no bounds and was in practice it was rarely checked. As Bruce Lincoln so aptly wrote, “As they violated the minds and bodies of their victims, the Cheka’s inquisitors abandoned every moral principle that guided the behavior of civilized men and women.”⁴¹ Dzerzhinskii once said about prisoners, especially those in camps, “The sooner we get rid of them, the sooner we will reach socialism.”⁴² The more tortures and executions the Cheka carried out, the closer the utopia was within reach. Chekists saw themselves as the builders of the new world promised by the Bolsheviks. In a newspaper article, the Ukrainian Cheka made clear their justification for extreme measures.

For us there do not, and cannot, exist the old systems of morality and humanity invented by the bourgeoisie for the purpose of oppressing and exploiting the lower classes. To us all is permitted, for we are the first in the world to raise the sword...in the name of freeing all from bondage.... Only the complete and final death of that [old] world will save us from the return of the old jackals.⁴³

This justification permeated even to low-ranking Chekists. Their actions were in service to the utopian dream. Part of their duty as revolutionaries was to kill the evil bourgeoisie.

⁴⁰ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 321.

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 383.

⁴² Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 389.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 389.

There are several women who became Chekists, notorious for their brutality throughout Russia. Yet these women were no more brutal than their male counterparts. Sometimes Chekist women tried to restrain dealing out terror and death, as was the case of Elena Stasova. Hearing reports of many deaths and horrendous terror tactics being used on civilians, Stasova asked to be assigned to the Petrograd Cheka in order to curb the onslaught. One cannot doubt these women were as devoted to the Bolshevik utopia as Lenin or Dzerzhinskii. Perhaps their dream included gender equality. Just as female soldiers fought alongside men, eager to prove they were worthy of full citizenship, Chekists women strove for equal treatment and status. Instead of fighting on the frontlines against outside forces, they worked as spies, agents, and leaders, fighting against an internal, less easily identifiable threat.

Unfortunately, information on Chekist women is scarce and often unreliable, so it is hard to determine exactly what the individual motives or goals for joining the secret police unique to women were. Safeguarding the Bolshevik regime from counterrevolutionaries was a primary goal of all leadership within the Cheka and thus was likely to have motivated women as well as men who joined the organization. Many Bolshevik women had fought and suffered along with revolutionary men. In the socialist fight for equality of all people, many women also fought for their own social and political independence. Safeguarding the revolution also meant protecting hard-won rights for women. Another possible motivation was that belonging to the Cheka (at least in the beginning) was like belonging to a family. Chekist families worked and played together. There were

many material advantages in being a Chekist. They had their own stores where the shelves were never empty, and they were assigned better living conditions.

During the civil war many Russians became destitute. Small wonder that people sought secure positions in the Cheka, which compensated them with money and goods. Nora Murray, daughter of a Chekist, remembered, "Father's main job, as deputy head of counter-espionage, was to obtain information of any unrest or plots being hatched against the new regime. To do this, he built up a spy network of all nationalities, working in all countries. Some of his chief informers were themselves White Russians ready to betray their comrades for a handful of Red rubles."⁴⁴ The Cheka had their own sports clubs and vacation resorts where all expenses were paid. Murray in her memoirs described Dynamo, the Cheka sports club in Leningrad. "It was a huge place with a swimming-pool, tennis courts, boats and sail-planes fitted with skis and a sail racing down the frozen river."⁴⁵ While it is virtually impossible to know the personal motivations of many women working throughout the Cheka, clearly being part of the "family" had its benefits during a chaotic time.

Varvara Nikolaevna Iakovleva was born into a bourgeois family in Moscow on January 1, 1884. Little is known about Iakovleva's childhood or her family. As she neared adulthood, she took advanced courses for women. Eventually, she became a student of science in Moscow.⁴⁶ While there, it is possible she came into contact with members of the Bolshevik Party. In 1904, at

⁴⁴ Murray, *I Spied for Stalin*, 38.

⁴⁵ Murray, *I Spied for Stalin*, 35.

⁴⁶ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 275.

the age of 20, Iakovleva joined the Bolshevik movement. She served the cause by distributing Social Democratic propaganda leaflets to workers in Moscow. A year later, Iakovleva participated in the 1905 Russian Revolution. Stites argues that "for some female Bolsheviks 1905 was a proving ground."⁴⁷ This statement held true for Iakovleva. Her mettle was tested at the May Day Parade, at which she was pulled out "by hefty armed men who jumped up and down on her breasts, causing an injury that led to tuberculosis."⁴⁸ Who the attackers were and why they attacked Iakovleva is unknown. Five years later, in 1910, Iakovleva was sent into exile in eastern Siberia. She soon escaped and made her way back to Moscow.⁴⁹

Iakovleva did not give up the Bolshevik cause after her attack and arrest. In 1912 she was made a member of the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, or the RSDLP, a group which included Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.⁵⁰ In January of that year, a party conference was held in Prague. Lenin planned to create a purely Bolshevik party, separate from other Social Democrats. Toward this goal he sent invitations to the conference to members of the other factions, but too late for attendance.⁵¹ It is not known if Iakovleva attended the conference in Prague.

In 1913 Iakovleva was once again arrested and sent into exile in eastern Siberia. Again, she escaped, only to be captured once more in the latter half of the same year. This time she was sent south to Astrakhan province, along the Volga

⁴⁷ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 275.

⁴⁸ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 275.

⁴⁹ A.M. Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

⁵⁰ Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.

⁵¹ Robert Service, "The Bolshevik Party," in *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution 1914-1921*, ed. Edward Action, Vladimir Iu. Cherniaev, William G. Rosenberg, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 233.

River.⁵² In 1917 Iakovleva played a significant part in the October Revolution. On October 10, Iakovleva sat in a small flat, taking notes next to Lenin at a Bolshevik Central Committee meeting, where only twelve members sat around a table to decide to trigger the revolution.⁵³ After the coup, on October 25, Iakovleva was elected to the Party Combat Center, which guided the work of the MRC, or the Military Revolutionary Committee.⁵⁴ The MRC was a body of workers and soldiers that led the armed uprising in Moscow as well as Petrograd. The following year, in March, Iakovleva joined the Cheka in the new capital city when the central government moved from Petrograd to Moscow. Proving her effectiveness in Moscow, she was moved back to Petrograd, where she was promoted to head chairman of the local Cheka.⁵⁵ In Petrograd, Iakovleva earned her infamous reputation and the nickname "Bloody Iakovleva."⁵⁶ Historian Richard Stites remarked on her reputation: "Although hard evidence of her brutality is lacking, there is no reason to disbelieve the fact that Iakovleva (a future purge victim also) was directly responsible for a large number of Cheka executions in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks did not deny the value of terror, whether administered by men or by women."⁵⁷ In any case, by early 1919 newspapers around the world painted Iakovleva as a cruel Jezebel and the real dictator of Petrograd. On January 9, 1919, *The Evening Telegraph* in Great Britain printed an article titled "Woman Dictator of Petrograd":

⁵² Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.

⁵³ Sebestyen, *Lenin*, 342.

⁵⁴ Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.

⁵⁵ Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.

⁵⁶ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*, 47.

⁵⁷ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 321.

Helsingfors, Wednesday. Members of the Danish Legation state that the real dictator of Petrograd is a woman, aged 22, named Jacobleva, chief of the anti-counter revolutionary committee. Her cruelty surpasses all existing legends.⁵⁸

The same day, the *Ballarat Star* in Victoria, Australia released:

PETROGRAD'S RULER. A WOMAN OF TWENTY-TWO. PAST CRUELTY OUTDONE. Helsingfors, Tuesday - Members of a Danish Legation arrived from Petrograd state that the British civil and military officials who are kept imprisoned at Moscow are being tyrannically treated. The real dictator at Petrograd is a woman aged 22, named Jacobleva, the chief of the Revolutionary Committee. Her cruelty surpasses all existing legends. Many people die of starvation in the streets daily. The population has sunk to 875,000. All the shops are closed, and the tramway services are suspended as there is no coal. Electric light may only be used two hours daily. The Red Guard in the Petrograd district number 50,000.⁵⁹

Curiously enough, about a month later, a bulletin from Petrograd falsely reported that Iakovleva had been tried and executed for crimes against the state. All these news articles seemed to draw on the same report from the Danish Legation. The exploits of Iakovleva were reaching remote areas around the globe. The *Geelong Advertiser* in Victoria, Australia on March 28, 1919, printed the following:

RUSSIA'S ANARCHY. THE CHAMPION SLAV MURDERESS HAS BEEN KILLED. A message from Petrograd states that the Soviet announces the execution of Madame Jacobleva, the notorious female Chief Justice, who has signed thousands of death warrants. [A Reuter cable message, published on January 8 last, stated: - the real dictator at Petrograd is a woman aged, 22, named Jacobleva, the chief of the Revolutionary Committee. Stories of her cruelty surpass all existing legends.]⁶⁰

Two months later in May, the South African newspaper *Daily Herald* reported:

WOMAN DICTATOR. SHOT FOR EXECUTING TOO MANY.

⁵⁸ "WOMAN DICTATOR OF PETROGRAD," *The Evening Telegraph*, January 9, 1919, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article214946684>.

⁵⁹ "PETROGRAD'S RULER," *The Ballarat Star*, January 9, 1919, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article213866115>.

⁶⁰ "RUSSIA'S ANARCHY," *Geelong Advertiser*, March 28, 1919, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article165253103>.

The following extraordinary story serves to illustrate the kind of "news" concerning Russia, which is being circulated in the British press: —Mme. Jacobleva, one of the butchers of the Bolshevist regime at Petrograd, has herself been tried and shot, according to information which has reached Zurich. Though only 22 years of age, she was appointed president of the special Commission for fighting the counter-revolution, and signed hundreds of death warrants. Some months ago she was dismissed from office, and is believed to have been tried for abuse of her powers and disobedience to the orders of the Commissioners of the People. It is marvellous that Lenin, Trotsky, and one or two women can control the one hundred and fifty million people of Russia, slaughter as many as they please, and continue in power for so long!⁶¹

There is no explanation for why the new Bolshevik government reported the death of one of their top officials. In 1919 Iakovleva was alive and well. She continued working for the Cheka for a while longer. However, she was reassigned to several different posts between 1919 and 1921. It is hard to say whether she was transferred out of Petrograd because of her growing reputation or if her skills were needed elsewhere. She ended up in Odessa during the summer of 1921.⁶²

While on tour in Odessa, Juan Martinez, a famous flamenco dancer, and his partner Sole, were caught by surprise by the Bolshevik Revolution. The new Soviet government denied the dancer and his partner the right to leave. They were virtually under arrest until the end of the civil war in 1922. After they were allowed to leave, Martinez met with the well-known Spanish journalist Manuel Chaves Nogales in Paris to tell his story. In his narrative, he told of his own survival, and his experiences with traveling artists, German spies, and Chekist assassins.⁶³ He also related an encounter with Iakovleva. Martínez described

⁶¹ "WOMAN DICTATOR," *Daily Herald*, May 30, 1919, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article106464787>.

⁶² Nogales, *El maestro Juan Martínez que estaba allí*.

⁶³ Nogales, *El maestro Juan Martínez que estaba allí*.

Iakovleva as a communist fanatic, famous for boldness and cruelty, and frightened by nothing. He related that on one occasion, she arrived at the Duma, the Soviet advisory and legislative body, wearing blood-red thigh-high boots. She easily took command of the proceedings. On another occasion, after being summoned to Cheka headquarters, Martinez and Sole walked into Iakovleva's office to find her talking animatedly to her secretary. Her countenance hardened as she talked with the artists, and she denied them a visa to exit the country. They had to deal with the situation like everyone else.⁶⁴

Iakovleva held various other posts throughout her career, including head of the Siberian Political Administration of Railroads. She also sat on the committee of the Siberian Regional Bureau of the Central Committee. In 1923 she was appointed Acting Minister for Education for the Russian Federation. However, also in 1923, she signed the "Letter of 46" in support of Trotsky's attempt to reform the Communist Party. This would later prove disastrous. Still in the good favor of Communist leaders, she was appointed Minister of Finance in 1929. It was not until 1937, during Stalin's Third Moscow Trial, that Iakovleva fell from grace. She was arrested on the charge of terrorism. Immediately she was sent to Oriol Central Prison, where she stayed until the end of World War II. After that, she was summarily shot.⁶⁵

Konkordia Nikolaevna Gromova was born in the Siberian city of Irkutsk in 1876.⁶⁶ The daughter of a priest, her family was impoverished. Before pursuing

⁶⁴ Nogales, *El maestro Juan Martínez que estaba allí*.

⁶⁵ Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.

⁶⁶ Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.

higher education, she spent a few years teaching at local peasant schools, saving money. At the age of twenty, she traveled to St. Petersburg to attend the Advanced Courses for Women at the Bestuzhev Institute. While there, she roomed with Tatiana Varsher, daughter of a Moscow professor. Gromova was not able to work as a tutor since her education was considered insufficient and she spoke a quaint Siberian dialect.⁶⁷

Varsher described Gromova as tall and awkward.⁶⁸ Other sources state that she was "of medium height, with a broad face graced by heavily lidded blue eyes and a kind, if somewhat severe, expression."⁶⁹ She was caring, industrious, and took great interest in social problems. She was always concerned for the sick and for prisoners, bringing them food or working in soup kitchens. In Varsher's eyes, there was no better nurse.

In early 1897 student riots began. Gromova participated along with many other students from the Bestuzhev Institute. Many students were expelled. Though later some of the students were readmitted, Gromova never returned to the institute.⁷⁰ She was considered politically undesirable and summarily and permanently expelled. In February 1901, she was arrested for protesting the imprisonment of university students in Kiev and spent three months in prison. After her release, she went home to Irkutsk to recover. A year later, she traveled to Paris, determined to study Marxism and to become a Social Democrat. She joined the staff of the Bolshevik newspaper *Iskra*. Barbara Clements believed the

⁶⁷ Varsher, "Things Seen and Suffered", 113-114.

⁶⁸ Varsher, "Things Seen and Suffered", 114.

⁶⁹ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 24.

⁷⁰ Varsher, "Things Seen and Suffered", 114.

expulsion from the Bestuzhevskii courses and the stay in jail decisively affected Gromova's outlook. These events persuaded her to throw in her lot with the revolutionaries, in their quest to topple the tsarist government that promulgated the suffering of the people.⁷¹

Sometime between 1903 and 1914, Gromova joined the RSDLP. She served on many of its committees. She worked as secretary of the newspaper *Pravda*'s editorial board and the women workers' journal *Rabotnitsa*.⁷² In 1913 Gromova married Arkadi A. Samoilov, her partner of six years and a propagandist in the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP. Apparently, it was an affectionate marriage, and the couple had two children.⁷³ Unlike many socialist revolutionaries, Konkordia Samoilova was concerned specifically with women's rights. This concern stemmed from her agitation work in Baku. In part because some women accused her of trying to steal their husbands, Samoilova became focused on helping working class women.⁷⁴ She also played a big part in organizing the first celebration of International Women's Day in Russia, even though she met with some resistance from her comrades. "They had been skeptical because they thought the project sounded feminist; and besides, they argued, working class women would not come."⁷⁵ Most socialists were not feminists, even though they believed in women's equality. They believed that social and political rights were a broader issue not limited to women. When all of

⁷¹ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 25-26.

⁷² Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.

⁷³ Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, 66.

⁷⁴ McDermid and Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution*, 68.

⁷⁵ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 55.

society gained their freedom, so too would women. However, Samoilova was given the go-ahead to organize the event. The celebration was successful in attracting female workers. She firmly believed in the political education of women and worked tirelessly to educate women in factories.⁷⁶ According to Ralph Carter Elwood, "He [Lenin] was far happier with Samoilova's systematic work as secretary of *Pravda's* educational board [in Ukraine] than he ever was with the activities of her male predecessors."⁷⁷ She returned to this type of work even after repeated arrests and exiles.

After the October Revolution, Samoilova actively participated in forming the new Bolshevik government. In spring 1918 starvation became a real threat to the people. Food reserves and grain shipments fell to dangerously low levels. Low grain shipments were not because of poor harvests. The Bolshevik's clumsy power grab, the loss of control over railroads, and lost territory to the White Movement all contributed to the "hungry spring." For the Bolsheviks the "battle for grain had to be viewed not merely as a struggle for bread, but as a conflict upon which the Revolution's very survival depended."⁷⁸ Thus in May 1918, Lenin announced that "those who have grain and fail to deliver it to properly designated rail stations and shipping points...are declared enemies of the people."⁷⁹ Grain was no longer to be bought and sold in a capitalist market. Instead, grain became a symbol of forced communal sharing. Lenin appointed Aleksandr Tsiurupa, a long-time Bolshevik, as the new People's Commissar for Food Supply, also

⁷⁶ McDermid and Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution*, 68.

⁷⁷ McDermid and Hillyar. *Midwives of the Revolution*, 84.

⁷⁸ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 65.

⁷⁹ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 65.

known as the “Dictatorship of Food Supply.”⁸⁰ Samoilova worked along with Tsiurupa and urged workers in Petrograd to support the Revolution by enlisting in Tsiurupa’s grain-requisitioning detachments. Slowly, workers joined the cause in the battle for bread. Within a month, over four thousand workers swelled the ranks of the food detachments.⁸¹

Samoilova worked ceaselessly for the Bolshevik cause, never faltering in her resolve to serve the new Soviet, even to the point of becoming an executioner. In 1920, Samoilova was sent to Ekaterinoslav to work in the Cheka headquarters. Varsher, in her memoirs, was shocked to learn that the kind-hearted young woman she knew so well at the Bestuzhev Institute had signed the death warrants of so many. She wrote:

Two of my former students came knocking at my door in the middle of the night. They had managed to escape from the Ekaterinoslav Cheka. Using fake IDs, they had spent a whole month traveling to Petersburg. They told me all about the horrors they had seen in the south. "It's hard to understand," I said. "How someone as good as Konkordia Gromova could get mixed up in all this filth." - "If you mean Konkordia Gromova or Comrade Natasha, you must be joking!" Talking both at once, they launched into a tale of how Konkordia Gromova had signed death sentences by the hundreds, organized punitive raids, and condemned whole villages to pillage and plunder.⁸²

Symbolic of her devotion to the Bolshevik cause and to her own newly acquired status as a woman in a position of power, the gentle nurse to the people became an efficient executioner. As historian Nina Nikolaevna Selivanova wrote, “These women were fanatic, they were ready to sacrifice their most sacred possessions on

⁸⁰ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 67.

⁸¹ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 68-69.

⁸² Varsher, “Things Seen and Suffered”, 114-115.

the altar of their ideals.”⁸³ In the late spring of 1921, while working on a "propaganda ship" moving down the Volga, Samoilova died of cholera in Astrakhan.

Rosalia Samoilovna Zemliachka was another notorious Chekist. She was born in Mogilev gubernia in Belarus on March 20, 1876. Zemliachka was the youngest child of a large, wealthy Jewish merchant family. Her father owned a large business in Kiev, where her brothers went to the university. Her liberal-minded mother taught Zemliachka democratic ideology. From early on, Zemliachka grew up around revolutionary ideas since her family was politically aware. At the age of five, she remembered the police searching their home for illegal pamphlets. At the age of six, she went to live with her father in Kiev. While there, she attended school, proving herself a competent student. Several years later, at fourteen, she convinced her brothers to let her read revolutionary literature. She devoured any material she could find and declared herself a populist. A year later, in 1891, she finished school at the age of fifteen. A short time afterward, she was arrested for revolutionary activities.⁸⁴

Soon Zemliachka started to read Marxism. She was convinced that Marx's theories were correct. Eager to spread her convictions, in 1897, Zemliachka spoke at a secret meeting for a workers' movement in Western Europe.⁸⁵ Wanting to spread the call for revolution, in 1902 she decided to work for the Bolshevik newspaper *Iskra*. While there, Zemliachka became friends with Leon Trotsky. He

⁸³ Nina Nikolaevna Selivanova, *Russia's Women* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1923), 200-201.

⁸⁴ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 23-24.

⁸⁵ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 24.

described her as "a very valuable person, steady, devoted to the cause" as well as a "forthright sort, though with a temper so prickly that she should not be assigned delicate tasks requiring diplomacy."⁸⁶ With the favorable report from Trotsky, Zemliachka was reassigned to Odessa in order to organize the local party leaders. She soon became the leader of the underground. Odessa was an important port for smuggling in newspapers and pamphlets. By 1903 "the Odessa party committee was firmly in the hands of the Iskrists."⁸⁷ Zemliachka kept busy with other revolutionary activities, too. She served on committees to coordinate elections to the Social Democratic Second Party Congress and played negotiator, though her friend Trotsky said she would not be good in the role, for numerous party factions. A year later, Zemliachka settled in St. Petersburg, but restlessly. She believed that the Bolsheviks' infighting was wasting time.⁸⁸

In May 1905 while abroad at the Third Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party held in London, she called on the delegates to return to Russia to strengthen and unify national leadership. Most of the delegates agreed with Zemliachka. However, she grew impatient with the continuing debates. She returned to her home in St. Petersburg as the organizational secretary of the city committee, whose purpose was to organize factory workers towards revolution. However, shortly afterward, she had to flee to avoid arrest. She went to Moscow, where she became a prominent figure in the underground once again.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 78.

In Moscow during the December 1905 uprising, the Social Democrats transformed the streets into a battlefield by declaring a strike and arming the workers with guns. Zemliachka was on the front lines. She “deployed armored streetcars” and helped set up barricades in the streets.⁹⁰ The following spring Zemliachka was arrested, but she escaped before her trial. She now had to settle herself with a low-ranking position, for security reasons. She was too well known by the government. Despite lying low, she was arrested once again in 1907. She spent 18 months in prison before being released for health reasons. She had developed a heart condition and suffered from tuberculosis. “When she came out of jail, Zemliachka was deep in the same sort of crisis of revolutionary faith that was plaguing Stasova.”⁹¹ She recalled that “the factional politics of people so far from the realities of their homeland disgusted and depressed her.”⁹² Disillusioned, Zemliachka went to the Caucasus to recover, then left Russia to live abroad for the better part of five years.⁹³

Coming out of the shadows for the October Revolution of 1917, Zemliachka resumed her political activities. As the Civil War broke out, she was assigned as a commissar, or political supervisory officer, in the Eighth and Thirteenth Red Armies. As commissar she developed a reputation for cruelty. As Lincoln described, “Zemliachka dressed in the stereotypical leather garb of a Bolshevik commissar and killed with vengeance.”⁹⁴ When asked by a reporter for

⁹⁰ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 385.

⁹¹ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 79.

⁹² Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 79.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 386.

the *Krasnyi Krym* about the brutality, she replied by echoing Dzerzhinskii's sentiments, "We need pitiless, unceasing struggle against the snakes who are hiding in secret. We must annihilate them, sweep them out with an iron broom from everywhere."⁹⁵ In 1920 she was tasked, along with her lover, the future leader of the Hungarian Republic Bela Kun (1886-1938), to bring Crimea under control. Together, Zemliachka and Kun spread terror across Crimea that garnered international attention. She promised to bring "peace to the whole world through a sea of precious blood."⁹⁶ Blood, once enough was spilt, would bring about a new world order, in which violence was obsolete. For now, on her orders, thousands of White military officers and members of the bourgeoisie were executed. She could not abide corruption, support for any other cause than the Bolshevik agenda, or any sexism directed at her.⁹⁷ As Stites described:

Now in her forties, the only vestige of her bourgeois origins was the pince-nez that she wore in grotesque contrast to her short hair, boots, pants, and leather coat. Merciless to her enemies, Zemlyachka would unblinkingly order the shooting of one of her female comrades caught at treason.⁹⁸

Word got out of Zemliachka's viciousness. Newspapers around the world reported what was happening in Crimea. The *West Australian* in Perth reported:

A BOLSHEVIK INQUISITION. Eighty Per Cent Defection. RIGA, April 20 The latest activity of Mme. Rosalie Zemlyachka, one of the most notorious women of the old guard of the Bolsheviks notable for their cruelty during the revolution, is the purging of the voluntary co-operative organization at Riga.... Mme Zemliachka has not completed the task but announces that out of the employees she examined she dismissed or arrested 80 per cent., censured 15 per cent, and found that only 5 per cent, were filled with Bolshevik ideals. She has 2,000 more to examine.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 386.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 321.

⁹⁸ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 321.

⁹⁹ "A BOLSHEVIK INQUISITION," *The West Australian*, April 22, 1930, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article31075588>.

As her infamy overseas grew, so did the leadership's concern over the international optics of such cruelty towards White soldiers and sympathizers, and she was removed from her position. Historian Barbara Clements stated, "Zemliachka was removed from her position as political officer in the Crimea in 1920 because of the brutal retributions she had ordered against White sympathizers."¹⁰⁰ Still in 1921, she received the Order of the Red Banner for her excellent, tireless, and selfless political work which led to Red Army victory.¹⁰¹ In 1924, Zemliachka became the only woman to sit on the Council of People's Commissars under Stalin.¹⁰² Zemliachka died in Moscow at the age of seventy. She was honored along with a few other Bolsheviks by having her ashes placed in the Kremlin Wall.¹⁰³

Stites described Elena Dmitrievna Stasova as the "archetypical professional radical."¹⁰⁴ Stasova was born in St. Petersburg in 1873 to a prominent family. Her father was a famous Russian lawyer and political activist. She was brought up to be an aristocratic lady, in a loving home. She received her education from her parents and tutors, and then attended gymnasium. At sixteen she graduated and joined the Bestuzhevskii courses, where she studied medicine and history. As a young woman she was determined to be more socially productive than a lady philanthropist like her mother and aunt. She dreamed of bettering society through her effort.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Clements, *Daughters of Revolution*., 47.

¹⁰¹ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 386.

¹⁰² McDermid and Hillyar, *Midwives of the Revolution*, 57.

¹⁰³ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 315.

¹⁰⁴ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 274.

¹⁰⁵ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 22.

In a world where only a few professions were open to women, namely teaching, medicine or social work, Stasova chose teaching. She taught elementary education to factory workers in the evening. There Stasova met other teachers who taught Marxist ideology. She was drawn to them almost immediately. By 1895 she was working with the revolutionaries, smuggling messages to and from revolutionary prisoners.¹⁰⁶ A few years later Stasova was asked to take over the finances of the Social Democrats' operations in St. Petersburg. She accepted the position, feeling she had truly become part of the revolutionary movement. She reflected years later, "From this moment I considered myself a member of the party, and all my previous work was only doing good deeds."¹⁰⁷ During the Menshevik and Bolshevik split in 1903, she chose to side with the Bolsheviks. In connection with her continued revolutionary activities, Stasova was arrested several times and spent three years between 1913 and 1916 in exile in Eniseiskaia Province in Siberia.¹⁰⁸ During the revolutions of 1917, she played a central part in the Bolshevik takeover in Petrograd, working closely with Lenin as his secretary. Her official position was secretary of the RSDLP/B Central Committee.

Stasova's memoirs of life as a revolutionary give valuable insight into the revolutionary underground and the life of a subversive. She was considered an "ideal agent," and later received the honorary title of Comrade Absolute. According to Stites, her memoirs "reveal Stasova's special revolutionary personality."¹⁰⁹ He described her as a cautious, precise person with average

¹⁰⁶ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 23.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰⁸ Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, 176.

¹⁰⁹ Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 274.

intellect. She was not prone to passionate delusions, and not one to entertain flights of utopian dreaming. Instead, she embraced the utilitarianism of socialist ideology. She was very observant, iron willed, and punctual.¹¹⁰ Another one of her assets was her physical appearance and poise. She was tall, blonde, and comported herself well. As she walked the streets, she looked like a schoolteacher, not a revolutionary. Many found her intimidating, which worked in her favor when dealing with Bolshevik soldiers and workers. Anyone “who met with her realized that Stasova had no trouble giving orders. She had become a skilled manager who could inspire hard work and dedication in her subordinates.”¹¹¹

In March 1918, Stasova worked as secretary of the Petrograd Bureau of the Communist Party’s Central Committee. She was a full member, tasked with setting up the Northern Oblast Bureau, a newly formed department that supervised a vast area. But by summer Stasova began to seriously doubt the changes taking place in the Bolshevik Party. She was concerned with corruption, incompetence, bad communication, and disorganization. Everywhere in Petrograd she could see evidence of the excesses of Bolshevik rule. Of particular concern to her were the mass arrests carried out by the Cheka. After the August 1918 assassination attempt on Lenin, the Cheka increased their activities in rooting out subversion and enemies of the state. On August 30, Stasova attended a meeting of the Petrograd Party Committee at which it was argued that “workers should be given *carte blanche* to settle scores with the intelligentsia after their own fashion,

¹¹⁰ Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, 274.

¹¹¹ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 195.

out on the streets--an open invitation to lynch law."¹¹² In fact, Lenin had sent a letter stating full support and encouragement for this kind of mass terror.

Determined to avert needless bloodshed and terror, Stasova assigned herself to the Cheka in Petrograd. In late October she wrote to a friend:

Now I am occupied there [at the Cheka] primarily in unloading the prison, for they are arresting harmless people in the raions who don't have the slightest involvement, like hostages. At the same time, they are filling up the prisons. Something dreadful in the sanitary conditions has been created and it thickens the atmosphere into an absolute hell. I want to leave the Cheka but there are so many undesirable tendencies there that I think for the time being I'll pull this load.¹¹³

Literary critic and army veteran Victor Shklovskii attested to Stasova's more merciful nature. In January 1919 he was arrested as a suspected SR terrorist. He recalled that "she let me go without insisting on my arrest and she advised me not to come back to her office but to telephone her. I walked out with sweat running down my back. I called her a day later and she told me my case was closed. All in a very satisfied voice."¹¹⁴

Not every Bolshevik assigned to the Cheka embraced mass terror and unchecked brutality. As a practical woman, Stasova had little propensity towards emotionalism and possessed a concrete moral compass. She opposed the terror tactics used by the Cheka. Stasova believed that these tactics were morally reprehensible and would tarnish the reputation of the Bolshevik party.¹¹⁵ It is impossible to know how many of the Bolsheviks shared Stasova's thoughts on the Red Terror promoted by Lenin and executed by Dzerzhinskii.

¹¹² George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 111.

¹¹³ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 194.

¹¹⁴ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 194.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

The ideal Chekist, according to Dzerzhinskii, must “always have a cool head, a warm heart, and clean hands.”¹¹⁶ The Chekist motto included decades later in KGB operation manuals meant each agent needed to be level-headed and quick thinking at all times. They were to show compassion when compassion was due. Dzerzhinskii himself had a soft spot for children, especially orphans living on the street, which seemed contrary to the violence and terror perpetrated under his command. In an article written in July 1926, Dzerzhinskii proclaimed, “I want to throw part of my own efforts and primarily the forces of the Vecheka to combat the problem of homeless children.... Firstly, this is a terrible calamity! For when you look at the children, you cannot fail to think—everything is for them!”¹¹⁷ A “warm heart” can also be seen in Nora Murray’s memoirs. She recounted a story about her Chekist father: “One day a woman dragged herself to father’s office with the heart-rending plea to save her child who was dying of hunger. Father obtained food for her and sent her away with tears of gratitude.”¹¹⁸ Not all individuals who embraced the Marxist utopian dream believed that the perfect communist society was worth any price.

Chekist women were multi-dimensional in their motivations for participating in official terror through the secret police. One unifying motivation for all Chekist women, however, was to defend the new regime from enemies of the people and counterrevolutionary movements. On the practical side, the Cheka offered material benefits to its members that appealed to many in a time of war

¹¹⁶ Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 382.

¹¹⁷ Felix Dzerzhinsky, *Communist Morality* (New York: Prism Key Press, 2011), 23.

¹¹⁸ Murray, *I Spied for Stalin*, 20.

and chaos. Women such as Zemliachka and Iakovleva seemingly enjoyed their newfound power over the lives of so many. Their ferociousness in dealing with perceived enemies earned them domestic and even global notoriety. Other women, such as Stasova, had different motivations for joining the Cheka. Horrified by the terror and cruelty wielded by many Chekists, Stasova requested to be assigned to the secret police as a moderating force.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, women engaged in violence during the late imperial and revolutionary eras for a variety of reasons. Some sought to advance socialist ideologies through which women could achieve social and political independence. During times of war, numerous women took up arms to defend their nation. Having achieved personal independence with the Bolshevik revolution, some women felt the need to preserve the new Soviet state that granted them freedom. Violence also provided opportunities for adventure and a way to express new powers and freedoms. Even though Russia was rapidly changing socially, politically, and economically, women, unlike men who knew their value, still felt the need to prove themselves worthy of citizenship. Engaging in violence gave new generations of women purpose and freedoms previously unknown. However, their actions failed to disentangle them from traditional notions of feminine self-sacrifice. More often than not, conceptions of femininity remained, even as the image of the New Soviet Woman was constructed in the post-revolutionary era.

The 1920s saw a synthesis of gender ideology for males and females. It was a blend of old Russian tradition, modern liberal notions, and socialist revolutionary conceptualization of gender norms. From the cauldron of a new society arose the “New Soviet Man” and the “New Soviet Woman.”¹¹⁹ The New Soviet Man “was a competent, diligent, responsible, and self-disciplined worker; a modest comrade who worked well with others; and a faithful husband who

¹¹⁹ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 221.

provided for his family and disciplined his children.”¹²⁰ The New Soviet Man closely resembled old notions of masculinity. Not much had changed in the imagining of the Russian male. The New Soviet Woman was a little trickier in design. The image of the Russian woman rising from the ashes of the Civil War was independent, iron-willed, and exceedingly devout in building a socialist nation. However, as the 1930s dawned the image of the New Soviet Woman needed adjustments to “serve the priorities of the 1930s.”¹²¹

While women were still encouraged to build socialism, the government felt the need to add elements of domesticity to the feminine Soviet image. A new cult of domesticity was formed. Guidance was given on how to create a comfortable home for the family, support and advise a husband, and how to raise children. A. M. Poliakova, a housewife, stated in 1936 while giving a speech “Now if a wife welcomes her husband home with love and tenderness, if she respects him and talks to him, then the husband will go back to work in a good mood and will think only about his work. It’s obvious that in this case his labor productivity will increase.”¹²² Not only was the New Soviet Woman supposed to be an “indefatigable worker and civilizing wife,”¹²³ she had to be a good mother, excellent homemaker, and untiring volunteer in the community. The idea of the New Soviet Woman was rooted in the archetypes of old Russian tradition. In

¹²⁰ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 221.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 222.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 222.

realizing their true nature, women had a duty to “serve her family and her society”¹²⁴ through self-sacrifice.

Russian women from all political viewpoints and classes played a significant role in transforming Russia from a tsarist autocracy to a communist state. In so doing these remarkable women broke down barriers of gender norms and patriarchal structures. Russian women were among the first in the world to achieve suffrage. World War I saw the first all-women combat battalions that fought alongside men on the front lines. Politically, women within the Bolshevik and Socialist Revolutionary Parties achieved high-ranking positions and helped build a new society on the ashes of the old regime. Women from all levels of Russian society, some more than others, organized, protested, and made their voices heard. As the revolutionary movement reached its pinnacle in 1917, women within the Bolshevik Party worked with male comrades in hopes of building a better state, one that guaranteed their hard-won liberties. What happened to women after the Bolsheviks won the Civil War and settled on the task of building a new state?

As historian Barbara Clements puts it, "After the Revolution, the pace of change in women's lives accelerated.... Female Bolsheviks then persuaded male party leaders to make good on those promises." Some of those promises turned into real programs and policies for women. Women advanced in education and took advantage of new social services designed to ease their domestic work.¹²⁵

¹²⁴Ibid., 221.

¹²⁵ Barbara Evans Clements, "Later Developments: Trends in Soviet Women's History, 1930 to the Present," in *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, eds. Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, Christine D. Worobec, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 267.

Even more significantly, many women working in factories or as farm labor moved from labor-intensive jobs into white-collar positions.¹²⁶

In the 1930s, after Stalin came to power, women in the Soviet Union continued to make advances. However, the Stalinist regime "reined in independent female activism."¹²⁷ Women who previously held high positions in the new Soviet government were slowly moved into minor positions. Elena Stasova, who had volunteered to work in the Cheka in St. Petersburg, was named after the 1917 October Revolution as secretary for the Central Committee. By spring 1920, she was dropped from the Central Committee and the party secretariat altogether. In 1921 Stasova went to work for the Comintern.¹²⁸

The male-dominated Stalinist regime took a commanding role in the lives of women. Historian Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild wrote that "Russian feminism was submerged in the USSR by a narrative that emphasized socialist style women's liberation, comradely relations between the sexes, and international class solidarity. The history of Russian feminist activism and victories were made invisible or inconsequential."¹²⁹ Of course there were other privations in the years under Stalin, which affected both men and women. There were food and housing shortages. In the countryside, there was forced collectivization that resulted in massive loss of life when peasants resisted. The social programs for women, such as day-care and communal dining rooms created under Lenin, were underfunded

¹²⁶ Clements, "Later Developments," 267.

¹²⁷ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 317.

¹²⁸ Noonan and Nechemias, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, 176.

¹²⁹ Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917*, 249.

and rare. Promises that once economic foundations were laid, the standard of living would rise were fruitless.¹³⁰

In the mid-1930s, a new standard for the Communist woman took shape. Women were urged to cultivate their femininity and to reassume the double burden of public and domestic work. "A wife should also be a happy mother and create a serene home atmosphere, without, however, abandoning work for the common welfare. She should know how to combine all these things while also matching her husband's performance on the job."¹³¹

In the 1920s, women workers in support of the regime were confident that Bolshevik policies would ensure their emancipation, and they continued to be deeply committed to building a new communist society. Through the sacrifice of their own happiness and comfort, they would ensure the better, brighter future the new regime pledged for their children.¹³² But as Pushkareva pointed out, "The building of a new society demanded an enormous effort, and women were forced to expend their strength, health and time toward that end."¹³³ With industrialization, collectivization, and increased production quotas in the 1930s, the lives of female workers began to markedly deteriorate, with long working hours, restricted freedom of movement, and shortened maternity leaves. There were some improvements in the lives of women. The education of women continued to grow, and more social services were put into place. Women entered many new areas of the workforce previously closed to them, such as heavy

¹³⁰ Clements, "Later Developments," 267.

¹³¹ Clements, "Later Developments," 268.

¹³² Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History*, 259.

¹³³ Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History*, 259.

industry, social services, and the bureaucracy. This expansion into the workforce enabled them to contribute to building a new society.¹³⁴

During World War II, women's regular participation in the military became officially legal. Russian women's enlistment far outstripped female military participation in any other nation. Well over a million women fought in the Soviet military.¹³⁵ Many more Russian women served in civil defense on the home front and in support positions in field hospitals, transportation, communications, and other services. While Russian women's contribution to the war effort surpassed that of any other combatant nation, they still had to deal with old gender traditions. Most men did not want women fighting by their side. It challenged male notions that men should protect women, not send them to war, and it disrupted male camaraderie on the battlefield. Once again, women found themselves having to prove their mettle in order to be accepted by male soldiers.¹³⁶

Violent resistance to the Stalinist system was difficult, and there are no documented instances of attempts on his life. Stalin took drastic steps to ensure his own security, to the point of paranoia. During the Great Purges of the late 1930s, many old Bolsheviks, male and female, did not make it out alive. Varvara Iakovleva did not survive Stalin's purges. After serving as the head of the Cheka in Moscow, she was demoted to a board member of the People's Commissariat of Food. In 1923, Iakovleva signed the "Letter of 46," which supported Leon

¹³⁴ Clements, *A History of Women in Russia*, 251-252.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

Trotsky's attempt to democratize and reform the Bolshevik Party. In 1937 after being accused of being a terrorist working against the state, she was sentenced to twenty years in prison. After World War II broke out, she was executed.¹³⁷

Maria Spiridonova, Socialist Revolutionary, was once considered a champion of the revolutionary cause. When she was released from prison after the October Revolution, she joined with the Left SRs, who supported the Bolsheviks. She strongly supported all-socialist unity in the government. After the Bolsheviks took power, she quickly became disillusioned with the new regime and its tactics. Spiridonova disapproved of the brutal grain-procurement policy and was increasingly aware of the deepening misery of people around the country. As Alexander Rabinowich noted, "By this time popular disenchantment with Bolshevik rule was already well advanced, not only in rural but also in urban Russia. The primary beneficiaries of this nationwide grass-roots shift of public opinion were the Left SRs."¹³⁸ In late 1918 Spiridonova was arrested by the Cheka and sentenced to a year in prison but was amnestied the next day. Quickly, she became the "voice of a radical faction of the Left SRs." She was arrested numerous times and released. In 1937 during Stalin's reign of terror, she was once again arrested. This time she was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. After the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, by order of Stalin, Spiridonova, along with over 150 other political prisoners, was executed.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Prokhorov, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.

¹³⁸ Rabinowitch and Spiridonova, "Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament," 424-46.

¹³⁹ Rabinowitch and Spiridonova, "Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament," 424-46.

Women in the military who fought for their country during World War I fared little better than old Bolsheviks. Maria Bochkareva, in the spring of 1919, was arrested and sent to Krasnoyarsk, where she was interrogated for four months before she was sentenced to death. In May of the following year, she was shot by the Cheka.¹⁴⁰ Marina Iurlova joined the White Army unit led by military leader Vladimir Kappel to fight against the Bolsheviks. Unfortunately, she was shot in the shoulder while on patrol by the Red Army. Ending up in Vladivostok, Iurlova escaped to Japan. In 1922 she immigrated to the United States, where she worked as a dancer. Shortly thereafter, she married filmmaker William C. Hyer.¹⁴¹

Vera Figner, Rosalia Zemliachka and Elena Stasova are a few examples of those who survived the madness. Vera Figner was one of the original revolutionary terrorists who played a significant part in bringing about the Bolshevik Revolution. In post-revolutionary politics, she proved herself adept at negotiating through the chaos. She witnessed dozens of those around her being arrested by the Cheka. Horrified by the imprisonment of innocent people, she worked within proper channels to pursue their release. As historian Lynn Anne Harnett observed, “While Vera Figner escaped arrest and persecution, she did so not solely because of her reputation and radical pedigree but also because she refrained from joining those who could be considered politically dangerous.”¹⁴² This was a major change in deportment for the once fearless revolutionary.

¹⁴⁰ Stoff, *They Fought for the Motherland*.

¹⁴¹ Elizabeth Shipton, *Female Tommies: The Frontline Women of the First World War* (Stroud: The History Press, 2017), 200.

¹⁴² Harnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner: Surviving the Russian Revolution*, 240.

Rosalia Zemliachka not only survived the purges, but she continued her rise to power. She served as vice-president of the Council of People's Commissars, one of the highest-ranking positions in the regime. In 1934, "she was also elected to the Commission of Soviet Control, a watch-dog organization that investigated infractions by government employees."¹⁴³ Without a doubt, Zemliachka worked closely with Stalin's NKVD, managing to protect herself from the purges that also swept through the secret police. By 1940 she stood alone as a woman in the higher ranks of Stalin's state.¹⁴⁴

Elena Stasova, after working for the Cheka, settled into a position as deputy head of the International Organization for Help to Revolutionaries. There she helped "imprison radicals throughout the world and publicized human rights abuses in capitalist countries and praised the achievements of the Soviet system at home and abroad."¹⁴⁵ She seemed to enjoy her work even though she was not being paid, since she was so devoted to the cause. In 1936 Stasova was accused of being a Trotskyite. Stalin was reported to have said that Stasova was "scum" and would "probably" be arrested. She was promptly dismissed from her post.¹⁴⁶ Stasova was able to avoid the charges leveled at her, and she continued her work helping victims. In the end, she outlived Stalin and escaped his wrath. Clements theorizes that Stasova "managed to ride out the storm because she was considered too harmless to arrest."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 286.

¹⁴⁴ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 287.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁴⁶ Lazitch Branko and Milorad M. Drachkovitch, *Biographical Dictionary of the Comintern* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), 444.

¹⁴⁷ Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 291.

The women who used violence as a means to an end broke Russian gender norms. Traditional society painted women as submissive, weak, and emotional creatures needing guidance and protection from men. However, female terrorists, soldiers, and secret police defied the patriarchal tradition. They were independent, fierce, and had bravely entered the traditional domains of men (war and violence). How did women's motivations and experience differ from that of their male counterparts? To join radical groups, frontline combat units, or the Cheka was to enter a masculine sphere. War and violence were the realms of men. As a result, women had to reinvent themselves and work harder than men to justify their presence and to succeed in their goals.

Women who engage in terrorism and violence continue today, using early Russian female terrorists, soldiers, and secret police as their models. The Chechen Black Widows, for example, is a group of female Islamist suicide terrorists. They have proved themselves willing to sacrifice their lives, reportedly motivated by despair and revenge for brothers and fathers lost during the Chechen Wars in 1994.¹⁴⁸ Another powerful justification, as with late imperial revolutionaries, is the fight for freedom from an oppressive regime.

The first known Black Widow was Khava Barayeva, the niece of a Chechen warlord killed in 1999. Determined to sacrifice herself, she walked into a Russian military base in Chechnya strapped with explosives in June 2000.¹⁴⁹ At first, the Chechen Black Widows chose military and political targets. Within two

¹⁴⁸ Rubin and Rubin, *Chronologies of Modern Terrorism*, 297.

¹⁴⁹ Bernard A. Cook, *Women and War: A Historical Encyclopedia from Antiquity to the Present* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 106.

years, civilians were placed within the blast radius. In 2002, the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow was hit by a twenty-six-year-old woman suffering from tuberculosis. Her suicide elevated her to the status of martyrdom, a loyal and selfless servant of the Chechen people who suffered under an unjust Russian occupation.¹⁵⁰ The Black Widows and other female terrorists continue the tradition of feminine self-sacrifice started by young Russian women in the 1870s, motivated by personal vengeance and the ideological cause they support.

¹⁵⁰ Rubin and Rubin, *Chronologies of Modern Terrorism*, 297.

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