

Populism in Russia

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ABSTRACT

The Populist movement resulted from Alexander II's Great Reforms. The purpose of the reforms was to take Russia into the future. However, the Russian people were not ready for the radical changes that were being implemented in their society. The people began questioning the foundation of Russian society. This culminated in the formation of Russia's first revolutionary movement which was called Populism. The Russian government's reaction to the Populist Movement was one that was true to its historic paternalistic despotic tradition. The Movement was effectively eliminated and Russia regressed once more to a country that would be controlled by the means of governmental oppression.

This free heart,
That lived through bondage,
The heart of the people,
Is a heart of gold!

The force of the people,
Is a force that is mighty,
A conscience that is tranquil,
A truth that is alive!

NEKRASOV,

Komu na Rusi zhit' khorosho

Populism climaxed in the 1870s and 1880s as a response to Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs, which was one of his Great Reforms. The unity of these decades was not one of ideology, but rather a psychological unity of the *intelligenty*. The youth who attended Russian universities made up the intelligenty. It was expressed as a common emotional bond among the populace which at times grew into a glorification of the peasant. Wortman said:

The absorption with the peasantry became apparent at the end of the fifties. It persisted into the sixties, and dominated the intelligentsia's psychology during the seventies. The populism of the late seventies represents not merely a particular political strategy, but the culmination of a psychological dynamic at work since the beginning of the reform era.¹

Programme and ideology would be used as instruments to strengthen and protect the bonds with the peasantry. These bonds grew into the Populist movement. The movement eventually discarded its peaceful roots

when the peasants did not respond to its efforts to instigate a revolution. The movement then resorted to terrorism in an attempt to eliminate the Russian autocracy which had become a symbol of all that was wrong within Russia.

This paper will show that Alexander II's Great Reforms shook the foundation of Russian society and explain how the intelligenty responded to the aftermath of those reforms by forming an ideological group which was true to the romantic belief in the peasant and communal life. The government responded by declaring war on the young radicals. The populist movement then evolved into a terrorist organization that mounted an all out attack on the Russian government. In the end, Alexander III reacted by launching the "White Terror," effectively shattering the revolutionary movement in Russia.

In the 1860s, the Great Reforms struck at the moral foundation of Russian state and society. Although the reforms did not fundamentally change the lives of many of the Russian people, they served to shake up people's thoughts. They began to question the foundation of Russian society. The young people of Russia's universities became disillusioned as they began to discover the great promises of change to be very different from the stark realities of life in Russia. The emancipation of the peasants, far from improving the peasants' lives, was in actuality turning them into paupers.² News of change in the West awakened their hopes for real change in Russia. This group of intelligenty would become the key figures in the populist movement.

Ideologically, the populist group called *Land and Liberty* was true to the romantic belief that "truth" lay

¹Wortman, R. *The Crisis of Russian Populism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967, page X.

²Stephenson, G. *Russia from 1812 to 1945: A History*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969, page 161.

in "the will of the people" and that Russia's future lay in the survival of the commune or the "collective life," not with the western ideals of capitalism and individualism. They held tight to this belief throughout the populist era, even after they had taken their truth to the people, attempted to instigate a revolution, and failed. Their original belief in the peasant remained. However, they revised their programme and changed the means of reaching their goals.

In the spring of 1874, the young radicals united in an attempt to guide the peasants to revolution. They felt that "taking it to the people" would bring about the changes that were so desperately needed in Russia to improve the lives of the people. They abandoned their academic pursuits, left the city, and lived among the peasants.

In such a situation, what can be done by our intellectual proletariat, our honorable, sincere Russian youth, devoted to socialism to the bitter end? They must, without doubt, go to the people, outside of the multi-million masses of the workers, there is neither life, nor a cause, nor a future.³

They were confident that the village commune or *artel'* farm was the key to curing the ills which plagued Russia. The commune was being undermined by the development of rural capitalism; the much vaunted egalitarianism of village life was being poisoned by the appearance of the *kulak*, or rich peasant.⁴ *Artel'* cultivation, work performed in common, with the product often shared equally by the participants, was vanishing from the countryside.⁵ The intelligenty went to the people to promote the communal life and to encourage the peasants to rise up to force social change. This was intended to lead the people towards a better future. Ultimately, this was supposed to remove the scourge of capitalism which had begun to permeate Russian society.

In 1878, Aleksandr Nikolaevich Engel'gardt founded an *artel'* farm called the "practical academy" at Batishchevo to train the youth in rural life. His goal was to transform them into not only true peasants but superior peasants, so that the peasants could then emulate the youth. Others attempted to form similar communes. However, these experiments turned out to be unmitigated failures. The intelligenty proved unable to overcome their shortcomings to create a model of harmonious life for the peasants to emulate. The intelligenty in the city felt Engel'gardt had gone against the populist goal, "choosing efficiency over justice, thus betraying the image of the peasant that underlay all their hopes."⁶

The young populist choice to "take it to the people"

turned out to be the wrong one. It was not successful. The high hopes of the youth were dashed rather quickly. The peasants did not welcome them with open arms, but with suspicion and distrust. The eager youth were quickly turned over to the police by the very people they were hoping to help. The populists were incarcerated by the hundreds over the next few years. Mass public trials would be conducted by the government in 1877 with the objective of enlisting educated opinion against the populist nuisance.

Mass trials of the 193 and of the 50 in 1877 marked the sad conclusion of the "going to the people" stage of populism. The peasants, to repeat, would not revolt, nor could satisfactory conditions be established to train them for later revolutionary action.⁷

The autocracy had declared war on the young radicals in an effort to eliminate any possible threat to the traditional autocratic power structure of Russia. However, this "war by public trial" only served to give the populists a public platform and a sympathetic audience.

Rejection by the peasants did not dissuade the radicals from their objectives, but instead served to strengthen their resolve. It increased their admiration and respect for the peasants' moral integrity. The young populists began to search for new and more successful methods of attaining their goals. If the peasants would not act, it remained to the revolutionaries themselves to fight and defeat the government. This marked the beginning of several years of revolutionary conspiracy, terrorism, and assassination attempts upon key political figures by the populist revolutionary society which was called *Land and Freedom*.

In early 1878, Vera Zasulich shot and wounded the military governor of St. Petersburg, General Theodore Trepov, who had ordered a political prisoner to be flogged. On the order of General Trepov, the punishment was duly meted out, the victim became insane in Kharkov Prison.⁸ Vera Zasulich was not convicted by her jury trial; apparently the sympathies of the people were with the populists and not the government. Vera Zasulich was spirited away by friends after the trial before the gendarmes could arrest her for a retrial. This incident served to fan the flames and raise the hopes of the populists. It also encouraged more violence. The government responded harshly by eliminating jury trials for political offenders. Afterwards, in order that the death punishment could be awarded, a criminal had to be tried by a military tribunal, not by a jury.⁹

⁷Riasanovsky, N. V. *A History of Russia*. 5th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, page 383.

⁸Hingley, R. *Nihilists: Russian Radicals and Revolutionaries in the Reign of Alexander II (1855-1881)*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1967, page 82.

⁹*London Times* 3 May 1881, 8 (D).

³Itenberg, B.S. page 16

⁴Stephenson, page 163.

⁵Wortman, page 46.

⁶*Ibid.*, page 60.

Opponents of the Russian autocracy constantly argued about the degree of violence desirable in assaulting the Russian State, and in 1879 *Land and Freedom* split into two camps over this issue.¹⁰ The "Black Partition" was anti-terrorist and emphasized gradualism and the use of propaganda to achieve populist goals. The "Will of the People" mounted an all out terrorist attack upon the government with the Czar as their primary target.

Members of the "Will of the People" believed that, because of the highly centralized nature of the Russian state, a few assassinations could do tremendous damage to the regime, as well as provide the requisite political instruction for the educated society and the masses. They selected the emperor, Alexander II, as their chief target and condemned him to death. What followed has been described as an "emperor hunt" and in certain ways defies imagination.¹¹

Three of these attempts on the life of the Czar have become famous. One was the attempt to blow up the Imperial train near Moscow on 19 November 1879. They succeeded in blowing up a train but not the train that the Czar was riding on. Another attempt was made on 5 February 1880, a bombing at the Winter Palace. Alexander escaped unharmed because he hadn't yet reached the dining room when the bomb went off. This explosion killed eleven people and injured over fifty, mostly soldiers. The sixteen people, men and women, considered responsible for these two attempts, along with other "high crimes and offenses," were court-martialed in St. Petersburg on 6 November 1880. Two of the 16 were purportedly hanged in the fortress of Saints Peter and Paul. The Nihilist Executive Committee (in support of the populists) responded:

They first explained that the reason of the execution of the prisoner Kviatoffshy; he was hanged to please the soldiers of the Guard, many of whose comrades were killed in the explosion at the Winter Palace. The secret execution (of prisoners Kviatoffshy and Presniakoff) in the fortress of Saints Peter and Paul was due, it is alleged, to the fact that the Government feared to carry out the sentence openly.¹²

The final attempt on the life of Alexander II was successful. On 1 March 1881, the Czar was returning by carriage to the Winter Palace. When he reached Catherine Quay, two bombs were thrown. The first bomb was unsuccessful, but the second bomb satisfied

the populists' objective. The Sovereign was removed to his palace where he died a short time later. The "Will of the People" had finally succeeded in killing the Czar who had freed the serfs. His son, Alexander III, became the new Czar of Russia.

Alexander III launched an attack of revenge on the revolutionary movement in Russia when he began his reign in the evening of 1 March 1881.

What one of the young women involved in the plot to kill Alexander II called the "White Terror" began that very day, shattering the revolutionary movement in Russia ... So long as he ruled Russia, revolutionaries would find it difficult to gain even an uncertain foothold among the empire's masses. Even those who dissented only modestly from the principles whose virtues he considered to be self-evident found little tolerance for their views.¹³

Alexander III, having a more conservative political outlook than his father, launched counter-reforms in the 1880s.¹⁴ Alexander III was convinced his father's Great Reforms had been a colossal mistake, and Russia returned to autocratic paternalistic despotism under his rule.

The conspirators of Alexander II's assassination were brought to trial. They were condemned to be hanged and the sentence was executed on 3 April 1881. These executions broke up the directing force of "The People's Will." The strong-arm tactics of the Czarist State had effectively eliminated the organized forces of revolution. The populists were persecuted by the police and isolated from the active support of both the peasantry and society at large. All of them feared the conservative hand of Alexander III. The unity of the movement disintegrated and its vision was lost. However, even though the group was fragmented, its ideas and its followers lived on. "The ideas of populism were revived in organized form at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Socialist Revolutionary party. Its adherents, however, tended to drift away from populism towards Marxism."¹⁵

What began as Alexander II's plan to take Russia into the future resulted in Russia's first revolutionary movement. The very foundation of Russian society was called into question. The government's reaction to this new revolutionary movement returned Russia to its autocratic, paternalistic, despotic tradition and effectively ended the populist movement.

¹³ *London Times* 26 November 1880, 5 (F).

¹⁴ Lincoln, W. B. *The Great Reforms: Autocracy, Bureaucracy, and the Politics of Change in Imperial Russia*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1990, page 176.

¹⁵ Stephenson, page 178.

¹⁰ Hingley, page 96.

¹¹ Riasanovsky, page 384.

¹² *London Times* 26 November 1880, 5 (F).

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