4. THE GROWTH OF A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT

A. Who were the revolutionaries?

Alexander's reforms failed to satisfy his critics among the liberal and socialist ranks. With the relaxation in press censorship, liberal students and a growing body of socialists openly discussed liberal and radical political ideas in the 1860s, the lead being taken by radical journalists. A number of manifestos were published which all contained the same grievance. "The sovereign has betrayed the hopes of the people, the freedom he has given them is not real and is not what the people dreamed of and need." They also agreed that their aim was that, 'we want all citizens of Russia to enjoy equal rights, we do not want privilege to exist, we want ability and education, rather than birth, to confer the right to high position, we want offices to follow the electors principle.' (G. Vernadsky et al. (eds), A Sourcebook for Russian History from Earliest Times to 1917, Yale University Press, 1972). In 1862 a group of student radicals published the manifesto 'Young Russia' in which they argued that revolution was the only solution.

The following is from this student revolutionary manifesto, Young Russia, 1862, quoted by G. Vernadsky et al. (eds), A Sourcebook for Russian History from Earliest Times to 1917, Yale University Press, 1972.

Society is at present divided into two groups that are hostile to one another because their interests are diametrically opposed. The party that is oppressed by all and humiliated by all is the party of the common people. Over it stands a small group of contented and happy men. They are the landowners...the merchants...the government officials...in short all those who possess property either inherited or acquired. At their heart stands the Tsar. They cannot exist without him or he without them. If either falls the other will be destroyed.

This is the imperial party. There is only one way out of this oppressive and terrible situation which is destroying contemporary man and that is revolution - bloody and ruthless revolution.

The most important of the student revolutionary groups was the Organisation, started in 1863 at Moscow University with the aim of moulding public opinion to accept a general rebellion. There was a high level of peasant and student unrest and disturbances during the 1860s including a failed attempt on Alexander's life in 1866. These revolutionary developments divided educated Russian society. Many liberals abandoned their liberalism and became either conservative nationalists or radicals. Alexander blamed the educational system for encouraging the spread of scandalous ideas. He replaced the liberal

reformers and progressives who had carried through the 'Great Reforms' with outspoken reactionaries. They recommended a strengthening of the police, tighter control of universities and the press and an extension of the policy of Russification of nationalities, policies that characterized the last 15 years of Alexander's reign.

B. The Populist movement

Despite its policy of repression revolutionary activity continued in the 1870s in the form of the Populist movement, the Narodniki (name derived from the word 'to the people') and the Narodnoye Volya (The People's Will). Both posed a real threat to the regime. The Populists aimed to achieve their ideal of a perfect society based on the peasant and the village commune. Between 1879 and 1874, 2000-3000 educated Populists from the nobility and intelligentsia decided to 'go to the People.' They visited peasant villages to share in the 'true' life of the peasant and to educate them to rise up in rebellion against the tsar and establish a Populist State. An account of the experiences of one Populist, Catherine Brshchovskaya, the daughter of a noble and later a founder of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, is given below. This extract is from her memoirs in which she describes her experiences as a Populist in the town of Smolensk, a centre of the sugar beet industry, quoted in T. Riba, Readings in Russian Civilization, University of Chicago Press, 1964.

To the request that he (an old man whose hut room he shared) help me in my revolutionary propaganda in Smolensk the old man answered: 'I have no strength left, I have been cruelly punished. One soldier stood on one arm, another on the other, and two on my legs. I was beaten, beaten until the earth was soaked with blood. That is how I was flogged. And that did not happen merely once or twice. I was exiled to Siberia, came back, and begin all over again but I can't do it any more.'

[Other peasants] made no protest against my proposal to prepare soil for a general revolt, but it was evident that the recent punishments (after the 1861-3 uprisings) had made a terrible impression on them. They said as one man: 'If everyone agreed to rise at the same time, if we went around and talked to all the people, then it could be done. We tried several times to rise. We demanded our rights to the land. It was useless. Soldiers were sent down and the people were punished and ruined.'

The peasants viewed the Populists with deep suspicion and either beat them up or reported them to the police. Populism had failed. Two major trials of 245 young revolutionaries were held in 1877-8 (see Section 6C below). Those who escaped arrest or who had escaped from their place of administrative exile kept the revolutionary movement alive.
C Divisions in the Populist ranks

Some decided that revolution would not come from the conservative and traditional peasants. They turned their attention to the ideas of Karl Marx and to revolution based on the industrial workers. Other groups retained faith in the peasants but tried a new approach. One such group was known as 'Land and Liberty', Zemlya i Volya that appeared in 1876. After their experiences in the early 1870s they recognised the need for a strong central organisation that enforced discipline through its ranks if they were to succeed against the state machine of repression. H. Seton-Watson has described what emerged as the 'first revolutionary party in Russia'. Its leaders developed a highly organised system of central and local command which included a section dealing with escapes from prison of arrested members, assassinations of government officials as revenge for ill treatment of revolutionaries and the discovery and punishment of traitors or police spies. Support for the revolutionaries grew as discontent increased with Russia's involvement in war against Turkey in 1877–8. They continued the idea of 'Going to the people' but learning from the failure of the mid-1870s, they adopted a different approach. This was based on revolutionaries, disguised as peasants, working in villages as doctors, teachers or skilled craftsmen, helping to organise them to resist tsarist officials and landlords. It was apparent however that the peasants would not stage a revolution from below and by 1879 the Land and Freedom movement had died away.

It was at this point that division appeared in the ranks of the revolutionaries over the future direction of the revolutionary movement and the methods to be pursued.

1 Black Narishkin, Cherny peredyel, led by Plekhanov, confined their activities on the condition of the peasantry whose interests they aimed to advance through political reform and mass agitation rather than violence.

2 People's Will, Narodnoye Volya believed in political terrorism and directed all their attention on the assassination of the tsar which was successfully achieved on 1 March 1881, when Alexander was fatally injured in the second of two bomb attacks.

This division brought Populism to an end.

D Significance of Populism

Its methods proved to be very expensive not only in money but also in membership, many of whom were arrested after each outrage. Its activities had alienated many members of the public who had accepted its arguments but not its methods. However, it should not be dismissed as a complete failure. It succeeded in promoting a political awareness in many people and its ideology and actions influenced later generations of revolutionaries particularly the Socialist Revolutionaries.