

## 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, liberals, radical 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 appointments to public office to follow the elective 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 merciless 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 seditious ideas. He replaced the liberal

#### KEY ISSUE

'Young Russia.'

Q  
Which social groups were identified as members of the imperial party?

#### KEY ISSUE

The organisation.

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 characterised 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 *Narodniks* (name derived from *v narod* 'To the people') and the *Narodnaya 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 1873 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 Breshkovskaya, 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 Smela, a centre of the sugar-beet industry, quoted in T. Riha, *Readings in Russian Civilisation*, University of Chicago Press, 1964.

To the request that he (an old man whose hut room she shared) help me in my revolutionary propaganda in Smela 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 began all over again; but I can't do it any more.'

[Other peasants] made no protest against my proposal to prepare the 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 you 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 243 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.

#### KEY ISSUE

*The People's Will.*

Q  
How useful is this source for accounting for failure of the Populists to rouse the peasants to rebel?

### 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 ideal of 'Going to the people' but learning from the failure of the mid-1870s, they adopted a different approach. This was based on revolutionaries, dressed in peasant clothes, going to work in villages as doctors, teachers or skilled workmen, 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 Partition*, *Chorny peredyel*, led by Plekhanov, centred 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*, *Narodnaya 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 had 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**.

#### KEY ISSUE

The growth of political terrorism.

**Socialist Revolutionaries** were committed to democratic socialism. They believed in the right of people to govern themselves. As heirs to the Populists they attached importance to peasant organisations, which accounts for the support they gained from sections of the peasantry. They played a role in encouraging peasant discontent.

## 5 THE REGIME TAKES A REACTIONARY TURN – 1865

It is generally acknowledged that 1865–6 was a watershed, not only in politics but also in the personal life of Alexander. His eldest son died while his wife, whose health was shattered by tuberculosis, retreated into a private life. Alexander alienated leading members of his family when he embarked on a relationship with a young princess, Catherine Dolgorouky, who 'alone could give him a new life'. She was given private apartments in the Winter Palace; four children were born to the relationship before they were eventually married a year before his assassination. Close liberal members of his family who had encouraged Alexander to pursue his programme of reform lost influence. Grand Duke Constantine and Grand Duchess Helen found it increasingly difficult to obtain an audience with the tsar.

In politics, the golden age of reform was coming to an end. Alexander found himself under pressure from the right and the left. He rejected reformist demands for a general assembly of elected representatives from throughout Russia to discuss the common needs of the entire state. Extreme conservatives wanted a break on further reform, a view supported by Alexander after the failed attempt on his life. His interest in, and commitment to, reform declined as he became increasingly exhausted by criticism from all sides.

#### KEY ISSUE

Significance of 1865–6.



PICTURE 3  
Tsar Alexander II, Princess Catherine Dolgorouky and their elder children, George and Olga, c. 1879