The origins of terrorism among the Russian *narodniki*

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THIS PAPER looks at the rise of terrorism in nineteenth-century Russia through the career of Vladimir Debogorij-Mokrievič. An attempt is made to understand how he became a revolutionary, then a terrorist, and to explore the inner logic of terrorism. Though the paper's purpose is not to analyze al-Quaida, it may be in order to cite the United States government's official definition of terrorism: '... the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives' (University Press of America 2000). The horrible acts of September **II,** 2001 epitomized the defining feature of the terrorism of our time—the willingness, even eagerness, to slaughter the innocent. Nor is this paper about the terror practiced by states, from the Committee of Public Safety to the **NKVD** and beyond. My nineteenth-century terrorists shrank from inflicting 'collateral damage'. The Russian terrorists' violence was directed against individual representatives of their own state, in hope of displacing their country's pernicious social system with another, more just one.

The generation of Russian youth who came to maturity in the 1870s pioneered the modern revolutionary style. By concentrating the children of the nation's social elite in a few large towns, the universities gave them an arena for collective activity. Scornful of an educational system that they thought was designed to mold them into servants of a despised social order, some of the students turned their schools into centers for the recruitment and indoctrination of radicals, created a 'counter-culture', experimented with 'alternative life-styles', and rebelled against authority by defying the educational establishment. They adopted socialism as their creed and 'the people' as their cause. After failing to persuade the people, that is the peasants, to join them in revolt, they fell inexorably into a life of political outlawry. Pursued by the authorities, they perfected their conspiratorial technique, became urban guerillas, and transformed their informal network of circles and communes into Russia's first

political party. The end of the decade found them resorting to the desperate weapon of frustrated revolutionary minorities: 'terror', that is, political assassination.[1]

Among the memoirs left us by participants in these social movements, those of Vladimir Karpovič Debogorij-Mokrievič were recognized almost sixty years ago by the British historian David Footman as 'the literary masterpiece of the revolutionary movement of his time'. Debogorij's work compares favorably with other revolutionaries' memoirs not only in literary quality but also —as S. N. Valk, his Soviet editor, pointed out—in its value as a historical source. By narrating only the events he witnessed, he achieved a high level of authenticity. One reason for the accuracy of his recollections was his writing them down fairly soon after the events. At the same time, his ideology changed in the brief period between his experiences and his recording of them. His consequently ironic view of his past provided a critical perspective. Rather than merely attributing the causes of events to individuals, he tried to delineate historical trends and even inquired into underlying causes.[2]

Debogorij-Mokrievič, who was born in 1848 in Cernigov (Ukraine), took part in each successive phase of *narodnicestvo* (that is, populism, or faith in the people) from 1871 to 1879.[3] Though he was a typical representative of his revolutionary generation, his career had certain individual qualities. He was one of the few disciples of Michail Bakunin's anarchism, and his activities were centered in Ukraine, where revolutionaries were most prone to violence. He was involved in the only concerted effort of the period to raise a peasant revolt, as well as in the origins of terrorism.

Why did Debogorij become a revolutionary? Several features of his background and experiences may have prepared him for radicalism and motivated him to activism. Among these influences were the serf emancipation, his father's economic situation, his southern environment, the Polish Question, school authorities, family atmosphere, and personal psychology.

Though he once cited the influence on his generation of the 1861 peasant reform, elsewhere he admitted how weak an impression the serf emancipation made on him. He himself discounted the role of

[1] Venturi i960; Itenberg & Volk 1964-5; Ulam 1977; vonBorcke 1982; Hardy 1987;Offord 1986; Budnickij 2000
[2] Footman 1945,245 ; Debogorij-Mokrievič 1930, 8-9.
[3] Debogorij-Mokrievič 1906; Dejč 1926; Breshkovsky 1931, 28.

ideas in shaping his revolutionary consciousness. He was doubtless not the only *narodnik* whose *revoljucionnost'* owed less to reasoned ideology than to moral assumptions and emotional attitudes.

Why did Debogorij feel so strongly that there was something irremediably awry with the society into which he was born? He offered the commonly advanced explanation that the economic insecurity of some of Russia's privileged elite sensitized them to the poverty of the peasants, 'the people'. There is some evidence of such a process in his case. His father, on retiring from service with a modest pension, had to remove his family to his father-in-law's little estate of 135 acres. He could not afford tutors for his five children. Vladimir lost a year at Kiev University because he could not pay the tuition. He often worked in the fields alongside the peasants. Still he more likely had learned about economic inequality and social injustice from better-read acquaintances (Debogorij-Mokrievič 1906, 34).

The ambiguity of Debogorij's national identity may have contributed to his feeling of being an outsider. With a Russian father and a Polish mother, he was victimized by his Polish classmates on one side and his Russian teachers on the other. The Polish Uprising of 1863-4 impressed him more deeply than the Peasant Emancipation of 1861.

Debogorij maintained that his experience with the abuse of power by school authorities taught him to hate all authority. The radicalizing experience of his youth was the expulsion of his refractory older brother Ivan from the gymnasium. Ivan, well versed in the literature of Russian radicalism, initiated Vladimir into the movement.

Debogorij did not start on a life of revolt by rebelling against parental authority. On the contrary, his parents' support fostered his self-confidence and optimism. To be a revolutionary requires more than the sensitivity to realize that the world is misarranged. Also helpful is the self-assurance to believe that it lies within one's power to set the world right.

Nor was Debogorij one of those youths for whom the revolutionary movement was a stage on which to enact their personal psychological dramas. He was a cocky young man with a vibrant personality. He reportedly 'enjoyed huge success with women', particularly Marija Kovalevskaja, who left her husband for Debogorij.

At some level of external influence, and at some stage of inner development, most of these circumstances contributed something to the making of Debogorij the revolutionary. Probably lowest on the scale belong the big political events of his youth. Neither the peasant reform nor the Polish Uprising, nor Dmitrij Karakozov's 1866 *attentat* against Emperor Alexander II, made much impression on him. Primacy ought to be given to salient characteristics of his family life: the household's marginal economic status; his partially Polish parentage; parental sympathy; and, above all, his closeness to his older brother. Ivan induced Vladimir to bristle at the injustice of established authority, schooled him in the radical tradition, discussed Sergej Nečaev's revolutionary conspiracy with him, involved him in efforts to turn the family estate into a model farm, and introduced him to anti-establishment activity. By the time Debogorij reached university, he was already a rebel if not yet a revolutionary.

The Debogorij brothers, like many other European utopians, imagined that the New World was better suited than the Old for putting their ideas into practice. They joined a circle of radicals who intended to emigrate to America. The inspiration for this 'American Circle' came from an older cousin, also named Ivan, who went to the United States to establish an agricultural commune. On his return he was implicated in the pseudo-revolutionary conspiracy led by the notorious Sergej Nečaev. He converted his namesake to Americanism, and he in turn recruited Vladimir. Though three of the circle went to Kansas, most of them decided like Debogorij that America was too far.[4]

Typically, Debogorij got his first taste of collective activity and prohibited books at Kiev University. Otherwise he found little of interest there and passed his time in drinking, billiards and chess. He dropped out of university and went to Switzerland, where other Russians, including some Americanists, had gone to study in relative freedom. One of the former Americanists introduced him to Bakunin's lieutenant, Armand Ross (M. P. Sažin), who brought him to Bakunin's home. There the revolutionary novice came to be on familiar terms with the head of the international anarchist movement (Meijer 1955, 136-7). Bakunin's influence on him was second only to his own brother's.

[4] Debogorij-Mokrievič 1906,66-71, 78-9; Yarmolinsky 1985,12-13, 26-9, 36-8, 4i-2;Hecht 1947,200-1;Mačtet 1911,185-239.

Debogorij's revolutionary philosophy was simple. At an early age he fell in love with revolutionary adventure and identified with the romanticized heroes of the Great French Revolution. Then he dreamed of abolishing social inequality by transferring the landowners' land to the peasants and requiring everyone to earn his daily bread by physical labor. These vague ideas constituted an intuitive *narodničestvo.* By teaching Debogorij the goal of anarchist federalism and the strategy of *buntarstvo,* Bakunin turned him from a rebel into a committed revolutionary. According to Bakunin the immediate duty of the young radical intelligentsia was to raise armed rural riots *(bunty).* The muzhik only needed a little prodding to bring about a social revolution, and the autocracy would collapse once faced with militant resistance. Since the power of revolution lay exclusively in the peasant masses, social revolution could not be achieved by political means.

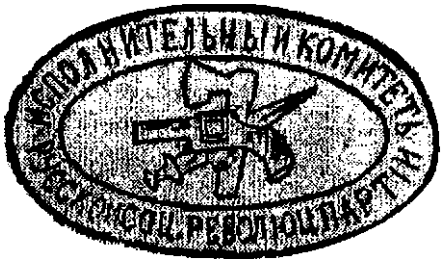
When Debogorij returned home, a police raid interrupted his experimenting with his creed on his family's peasants. From then on there was no turning back from the revolutionary road. Debogorij fled to Kiev, where a 'commune' of activists was planning, like their counterparts in other urban centers, to 'go to the people'. After eluding the consequent mass arrests of 1874, Debogorij took the initiative in organizing the Kiev 'circle of *buntari'.* The *buntari* constituted his main contribution to *narodničestvo.* Though shortlived, the circle nurtured two lively offspring: the Cigirin conspiracy and the Executive Committee. The Cigirin affair, based on the 'authority principle' of appealing to the peasantry's monarchist illusions, was the only revolutionary enterprise in which *narodniki* succeeded in involving an appreciable number of peasants. (There is no evidence that the conspirators were inspired by the attempt made during the Polish Uprising to incite the peasantry of Kazan' province by circulating forged imperial manifestos (Venturi i960, 309-13).) Ju. V. Stefanovič, the principle organizer, put the plan into action on learning of the invocation of the authority principle by a peasant of the Cigirin district of Kiev province. Debogorij, discouraged by Bakunin's repudiation of this strategy, drifted away from the conspiracy.[5] He related that his Cigirin involvement was limited to a call on the imprisoned conspirators, who were being held in Kiev. Dejč insinuated that the ostentatiously combative Debogorij was determined to avoid personal injury or death.

[5] Debogorij-Mokrievič 1906, 203-10; Dejč 1926,11-17; Field 1976,113-207.

In June 1876 two *buntari* tried to kill a third in Odessa because they suspected him of being a police spy. This affair, which revived a tactic of the Nečaev circle, put the police on the trail of the *buntari* and forced them to abandon their rural settlements. Soon afterward, the twenty-odd surviving members of the group met at Char'kov to discuss their cloudy future. With *buntarstvo* at an impasse, Debogorij was at a loss. Terrorism had deep roots in the revolutionaries' frustration and boredom, accompanied by strong feelings of solidarity among comrades and vengefulness towards their persecutors. Reportedly the *buntari* broke up because they could not agree on a plan, lacked the means to arm a peasant uprising, and had tired of the countryside. To be sure, the *narodniki* were finding the towns much more congenial than the country. The dynamics of terrorism led to the extinction of rural settlements. Not only was violence more psychologically satisfying than patient propaganda among largely indifferent or even hostile peasants, but also individual terror was the only kind of 'deed' within the revolutionaries' financial means. Terrorist acts, a response to police repression, brought official reprisals that inspired further terrorism at the same time that they made life in the villages too risky.

In January 1878, Vera Zasulič, a *buntar'* who had earlier been involved in the Nečaev affair, shot the St Petersburg governor. After an Odessa revolutionary put up armed resistance to arrest, the tempo of southern violence quickened. Valerian Osinskij, who had failed to persuade the St Petersburg revolutionaries to undertake a terrorist campaign, on returning to the south tried to assassinate the Kiev assistant procurator. Besides that attack, Debogorij was also party to the assassination of the Kiev police chief, and he was directly involved in rescuing the Cigirin conspirators from prison. Later another conspirator carried out Osinskij's death sentence against the governor of Char'kov.

Seal of the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE RUSSIAN SOCIAL REVOLUTIONARY PARTY (1878)



Debogorij began in March to help post around Kiev proclamations explaining the terrorists' motives to the public and representing themselves as agents of a secret revolutionary organization called the 'Executive Committee of the Russian Social Revolutionary Party'. The mock-awesome seal they affixed to their proclamations reveals the inspiration of Nečaev. To the symbolic axe of *Narodnaja rasprava* ('People's Retribution'), they simply added a gun and a dagger.[6]

The statutes of the second *Zemlja i volja* ('Land and Freedom'), the national revolutionary party that Osinskij helped found, specified that 'the end justifies the means'. When Osinskij's Executive Committee evolved into the directing group of one of *Zemlja i volja's* successors, *Narodnaja volja* ('People's Will'), its program reiterated that 'we consider any means necessary that leads to the goal'. Recognizing the inviolability of neutrals in the struggle, *Narodnaja volja* restricted the application of this principle to the government and those who sided with the government against the revolutionaries. The Executive Committee was the historical link between the *buntari* and *Narodnaja volja*, and the Cigirin conspiracy linked *buntarstvo* to terrorism.

In Kiev Osinskij made a discovery that transformed *narod-ničestvo* from an amorphous trend into a political force. A constitutionalist movement had arisen. And the liberals were sympathetic to revolutionary actions against the autocracy. Osinskij was converted to constitutionalism. Back in St Petersburg, he attended a grand council of *Zemlja i volja.* On the agenda he placed items relating to 'disorganizing activity' and 'political struggle', and tried to include political objectives in the party's program. The council refused to endorse his views, but sent him south to try them out.

Through terrorism the revolutionaries discovered that their true constituency was not after all the *narod,* but rather the intelligentsia from which they themselves had sprung. The peasants, who in *narodnik* theory were ripe for revolution, rejected the populists' overtures. At least part of the intelligentsia, though, countenanced revolutionary actions provided that their object was political reform and not social revolution. They longed to participate in a government that guaranteed them freedom to read, write, organize and travel. It

[6] Debogorij-Mokrievič 1906, 325-3$, 352-66; Prokof'ev 1960, unnumbered leaf between 96-7, as reproduced above.

has been observed (Budnickij 2000, 10-11) that the 'interests' that the terrorists 'expressed' were their own, that is, the interests of educated people striving to remove impediments to their self-realization.

Some liberals hoped that the revolutionaries might help obtain a constitution. In December 1878 liberal leaders of the Cernigov zemstvo met with Osinskij, Debogorij and other revolutionaries. The meeting produced no alliance because the liberals insisted on non-violent methods.[7] Nevertheless, within the revolutionary movement there grew a constitutionalist strain that appealed to the intelligentsia. Ultimately Osinskij's views were incorporated into the *Narodnaja volja* program, which coupled terrorist tactics with the demand for a constituent assembly.

Why did Debogorij become a terrorist, when he disapproved of Osinskij's ideas and actions? He was averse to bloodshed, and even his brother, now a constitutionalist, was unable to dissuade him from anarchism. Yet Debogorij was very close to Osinskij. They were planning to present to a congress of revolutionaries 'a grandiose program of revolutionary activity'.

The influence of Osinskij's strong personality helps account for Debogorij's actions. Among beleaguered revolutionaries, personal loyalty and group solidarity tend to become supreme values; the state's normal anti-subversive measures are perceived as affronts to revolutionary honor that demand retaliation, and comrades who have fallen in the struggle are viewed as innocent victims of tyranny whose martyrdom must be avenged. Debogorij candidly mentioned the childish pleasure he derived from frightening the authorities with the specter of a secret society of assassins. The exhilaration of dangerous adventure was preferable to the inactivity of the year 1877.

Debogorij described the period between the Char'kov meeting and Osinskij's arrival in Kiev as a 'time of troubles'.

> I recall this time with horror, as though I spent it lying stricken with some sort of grave illness, so chaotically do I picture it now.... The shameful fiasco that our undertaking had suffered gave rise to a very disgusting mental state, to which was added a complete material crisis…..Simple failure would have presupposed ... the possibility of success, but here was something deeper, significantly deeper than ordinary failure. It was something else, which I did not know how to formulate and which only now ... I can delineate in my mind …

[7] Debogorij-Mokrievič 1906, 373-4; Petrunkevič 1934, 100-2; Footman 1945, 84-5.

.. Problems suggested themselves and led my thinking into such a labyrinth that it, poor thing, did not know how to extricate itself. …I felt a lack of energy.[8]

A depressed Debogorij fell under the influence of Osinskij's fresh enthusiasm. As Debogorij began to lose his faith in *narodničestvo* and to realize that armed peasant revolt was a chimera, he drifted into condoning terrorism, and then its political rationale, without believing in either one.

Osinskij may have had a death wish, but not Debogorij. When he was finally arrested, he saved his life by offering no resistance. After escaping from Siberia, he had made his way back to European Russia in February 1881, just before *Narodnaja volja* assassinated Alexander II. A number of personal setbacks had exacerbated his ideological crisis. He had lost his lover, his brother, and his oldest friend. Meanwhile *narodničestvo* had evolved even further from his ideals. There were now two factions, neither of which could he consider truly revolutionary. He even composed a polemic against the Jacobinism of *Narodnaja volja.* The minority group, *Cernyjperedel* ('Black Repartition'), which included some of his old comrades, stood by the old *narodnik* program but could not put it into practice. Within a couple of years they gravitated to Marxism.

The police roundup that followed the regicide made it dangerous to remain in Russia. Debogorij emigrated in May 1881 and settled in Bulgaria in the 1890s. By the mid-i88os he was cured of anarchism and came around to a viewpoint not far from the radical zemstvo liberalism he had scorned. He chose the constitutional socialism of the Ukrainian radical M. P. Drahomaniv and the emigre revolutionary Vladimir Burcev. Debogorij advocated a united effort of liberals and socialists to win civil and political rights. All that remained to him of Bakunism was federalism and anti-Jacobinism. When he visited Russia in 1917, he opposed the Bolsheviks. He died in Bulgaria in 1926.

[8] «Об этом времени я вспоминаю с ужасом: словно я пролежал в какой-нибудь тяжкой болезни — до того хаотическим представляется оно мне те- перь. ... Постыдное фиаско, которое мы потерпели в нашем деле, вызывало самое отвратительное нравственное состояние; к этому еще присоединился полный матерьялный кризис…..; простая неудача преполагала бы ... возможность и удачи; но тут было что-то глубже, значительно глубже обыкно- венной неудачи; было что-то иное, чего я не сумел бы в ту минуту формули- ровать и что только теперь ... вычерчивается в моем представлении…..вопросы сами собою напрашивались, и заводили мысль в такие дебри, из которых она, бедная, не знала, как ей выпутаться…..Я чувствовал недо- статок энергии.» (Debogorij-Mokrievič 1906,288-91)

Debogorij's entire political career was plagued by miscalculations, setbacks, disappointments and disillusionment^. If he had not acted as the catalyst of terrorism, Osinskij or someone else would have. Still, Debogorij's life is instructive, because he was present at the creation of the theory and practice of systematic, tactical terrorism. Terrorism tends to arise where guilt-ridden, altruistic young idealists from privileged social strata perceive the established social and political order as oppressive. Their perception, coupled with their conviction that they can cure these ills, commits them to thoroughgoing social change. They develop a communal and ascetic subculture, with a strong ethical code of loyalty to comrades, hatred of the group's enemies, and love of 'the people'. Frustrated by their inability to influence either the government or the populace, they turn to terrorism in the hope of converting their political impotence into power, partly but not entirely by instilling fear. Terrorism is a weapon of those who are politically ambitious but weak. It is a sort of political judo whereby the weaker contestants try to turn their opponents' strengths against them. If revolutionaries perceive that the strength of the government rests solely on its bureaucracy, they may hope that the removal of a few key officials by a handful of dedicated conspirators can bring down the entire state structure.

Underlying such hopes is the faith that an individual's act can alter the course of history. To the Russian populists has been attributed (Offord 1986, 34) an allegedly unique faith in *the podvig* (exploit) of the lone, selfless hero. More generally, it is because terrorists identify their inner transformation into dedicated revolutionaries with the revolutionary remaking of society at large that they are willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to participate in a presumptively decisive moment of history.

The inherent conflict between their noble ends and their dubious means brings rationalization into play. The resort to violence is legitimized first by the exigencies of self-defense, then by the duty owed comrades, the purity of the cause, and the malevolence of their enemies. Finally some political function will be posited for terrorism. To the goal of inflicting reprisals on state officials may be added extorting concessions from the government, overturning the state, winning popular support, inciting mass revolt, saving Russia from capitalism... At one time or another, the terrorists of *Narod-naja volja* claimed all these contradictory purposes.

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The excesses and failures of the revolutionary *narodniki* raise disturbing questions about their means and ends. As we ponder these questions, we might keep in mind that they were first raised by the revolutionaries themselves, who paid heavily for their dreams of individual freedom and social justice.

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