

# ***NECHAYEV***



***CATECHISM OF  
A REVOLUTIONARY***

# The Revolutionary Catechism

By Sergey Nechayev, 1869

## The Duties of the Revolutionary toward Himself

1. The revolutionary is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property, and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution.
2. The revolutionary knows that in the very depths of his being, not only in words but also in deeds, he has broken all the bonds which tie him to the social order and the civilized world with all its laws, moralities, and customs, and with all its generally accepted conventions. He is their implacable enemy, and if he continues to live with them it is only in order to destroy them more speedily.
3. The revolutionary despises all doctrines and refuses to accept the mundane sciences, leaving them for future generations. He knows only one science: the science of destruction. For this reason, but only for this reason, he will study mechanics, physics, chemistry, and perhaps medicine. But all day and all night he studies the vital science of human beings, their characteristics and circumstances, and all the phenomena of the present social order. The object is perpetually the same: the surest and quickest way of destroying the whole filthy order.
4. The revolutionary despises public opinion. He despises and hates the existing social morality in all its manifestations. For him, morality is everything which contributes to the triumph of the revolution. Immoral and criminal is everything that stands in its way.
5. The revolutionary is a dedicated man, merciless toward the State and toward the educated classes; and he can expect no mercy from them. Between him and them there exists, declared or concealed, a relentless and irreconcilable war to the death. He must accustom himself to torture.

6. Tyrannical toward himself, he must be tyrannical toward others. All the gentle and enervating sentiments of kinship, love, friendship, gratitude, and even honor, must be suppressed in him and give place to the cold and single-minded passion for revolution. For him, there exists only one pleasure, one consolation, one reward, one satisfaction – the success of the revolution. Night and day he must have but one thought, one aim – merciless destruction. Striving cold-bloodedly and indefatigably toward this end, he must be prepared to destroy himself and to destroy with his own hands everything that stands in the path of the revolution.

7. The nature of the true revolutionary excludes all sentimentality, romanticism, infatuation, and exaltation. All private hatred and revenge must also be excluded. Revolutionary passion, practiced at every moment of the day until it becomes a habit, is to be employed with cold calculation. At all times, and in all places, the revolutionary must obey not his personal impulses, but only those which serve the cause of the revolution.

### The Relations of the Revolutionary toward his Comrades

8. The revolutionary can have no friendship or attachment, except for those who have proved by their actions that they, like him, are dedicated to revolution. The degree of friendship, devotion and obligation toward such a comrade is determined solely by the degree of his usefulness to the cause of total revolutionary destruction.

9. It is superfluous to speak of solidarity among revolutionaries. The whole strength of revolutionary work lies in this. Comrades who possess the same revolutionary passion and understanding should, as much as possible, deliberate all important matters together and come to unanimous conclusions. When the plan is finally decided upon, then the revolutionary must rely solely on himself. In carrying out acts of destruction, each one should act alone, never running to another for advice and assistance, except when these are necessary for the furtherance of the plan.

10. All revolutionaries should have under them second- or third-degree revolutionaries – i.e., comrades who are not completely initiated. These should be regarded as part of the common revolutionary capital placed at his disposal. This capital should, of course, be spent as economically as possible in order to derive from it the greatest possible profit. The real revolutionary should regard himself as capital consecrated to the triumph of the revolution; however, he may not personally and alone dispose of that capital without the unanimous consent of the fully initiated comrades.

11. When a comrade is in danger and the question arises whether he should be saved or not saved, the decision must not be arrived at on the basis of sentiment, but solely in the interests of the revolutionary cause. Therefore, it is necessary to weigh carefully the usefulness of the comrade against the expenditure of revolutionary forces necessary to save him, and the decision must be made accordingly.

#### The Relations of the Revolutionary toward Society

12. The new member, having given proof of his loyalty not by words but by deeds, can be received into the society only by the unanimous agreement of all the members.

13. The revolutionary enters the world of the State, of the privileged classes, of the so-called civilization, and he lives in this world only for the purpose of bringing about its speedy and total destruction. He is not a revolutionary if he has any sympathy for this world. He should not hesitate to destroy any position, any place, or any man in this world. He must hate everyone and everything in it with an equal hatred. All the worse for him if he has any relations with parents, friends, or lovers; he is no longer a revolutionary if he is swayed by these relationships.

14. Aiming at implacable revolution, the revolutionary may and frequently must live within society while pretending to be completely different from what he really is, for he must penetrate everywhere, into all the higher and middle-classes, into the houses of commerce, the churches, and the palaces of the aristocracy, and into the worlds of the bureaucracy and literature and the military, and also into the Third Division and the Winter Palace of the Czar.

15. This filthy social order can be split up into several categories. The first category comprises those who must be condemned to death without delay. Comrades should compile a list of those to be condemned according to the relative gravity of their crimes; and the executions should be carried out according to the prepared order.

16. When a list of those who are condemned is made, and the order of execution is prepared, no private sense of outrage should be considered, nor is it necessary to pay attention to the hatred provoked by these people among the comrades or the people. Hatred and the sense of outrage may even be useful insofar as they incite the masses to revolt. It is necessary to be guided only by the relative usefulness of these executions for the sake of revolution. Above all, those who are especially inimical to the revolutionary organization must be destroyed; their violent and sudden deaths will produce the utmost panic in the government, depriving it of its will to action by removing the cleverest and most energetic supporters.

17. The second group comprises those who will be spared for the time being in order that, by a series of monstrous acts, they may drive the people into inevitable revolt.

18. The third category consists of a great many brutes in high positions, distinguished neither by their cleverness nor their energy, while enjoying riches, influence, power, and high positions by virtue of their rank. These must be exploited in every possible way; they must be implicated and embroiled in our affairs, their dirty secrets must be ferreted out, and they must be transformed into slaves. Their power, influence, and connections, their wealth and their energy, will form an inexhaustible treasure and a precious help in all our undertakings.

19. The fourth category comprises ambitious office-holders and liberals of various shades of opinion. The revolutionary must pretend to collaborate with them, blindly following them, while at the same time, prying out their secrets until they are completely in his power. They must be so compromised that there is no way out for them, and then they can be used to create disorder in the State.

20. The fifth category consists of those doctrinaires, conspirators, and revolutionists who cut a great figure on paper or in their cliques. They must be constantly driven on to make compromising declarations: as a result, the majority of them will be destroyed, while a minority will become genuine revolutionaries.

21. The sixth category is especially important: women. They can be divided into three main groups. First, those frivolous, thoughtless, and vapid women, whom we shall use as we use the third and fourth category of men. Second, women who are ardent, capable, and devoted, but whom do not belong to us because they have not yet achieved a passionless and austere revolutionary understanding; these must be used like the men of the fifth category. Finally, there are the women who are completely on our side – i.e., those who are wholly dedicated and who have accepted our program in its entirety. We should regard these women as the most valuable of our treasures; without their help, we would never succeed.

### The Attitude of the Society toward the People

22. The Society has no aim other than the complete liberation and happiness of the masses – i.e., of the people who live by manual labor. Convinced that their emancipation and the achievement of this happiness can only come about as a result of an all-destroying popular revolt, the Society will use all its resources and energy toward increasing and intensifying the evils and miseries of the people until at last their patience is exhausted and they are driven to a general uprising.

23. By a revolution, the Society does not mean an orderly revolt according to the classic western model – a revolt which always stops short of attacking the rights of property and the traditional social systems of so-called civilization and morality. Until now, such a revolution has always limited itself to the overthrow of one political form in order to replace it by another, thereby attempting to bring about a so-called revolutionary state. The only form of revolution beneficial to the people is one which destroys the entire State to the roots and exterminated all the state traditions, institutions, and classes in Russia.

24. With this end in view, the Society therefore refuses to impose any new organization from above. Any future organization will doubtless work its way through the movement and life of the people; but this is a matter for future generations to decide. Our task is terrible, total, universal, and merciless destruction.

25. Therefore, in drawing closer to the people, we must above all make common cause with those elements of the masses which, since the foundation of the state of Muscovy, have never ceased to protest, not only in words but in deeds, against everything directly or indirectly connected with the state: against the nobility, the bureaucracy, the clergy, the traders, and the parasitic kulaks. We must unite with the adventurous tribes of brigands, who are the only genuine revolutionaries in Russia.

26. To weld the people into one single unconquerable and all-destructive force – this is our aim, our conspiracy, and our task.

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Sergey Genadievich Nechayev was a man so feared by the Czar and the aristocrat, ruling classes, he became the Czar's special prisoner. The Czar received weekly special reports on Nechayev's prison activities.

Nechayev was born September 20, 1847. He died at age 35 in prison, on December 3, 1882 – from dropsy complicated by scurvy.

He was convicted for the murder of a fellow student, but his real crimes were political. He frightened the state because he claimed to head a secret society four million strong. In truth, it was a small group, maybe a few hundred, mainly of St. Petersburg students. The trial sentenced him to 20 years in Siberia. The Czar intervened and ordered him to be retained for the rest of his life. He was kept in Cell #1 of the notorious Alexis Ravelin of the Peter and Paul Fortress.

As a human being, he left much to be desired – he lied, cheated, blackmailed, murdered. Of course, he would defend his actions based on the principles laid out in the following document. Regardless his personal attributes, he rejected the authority of the state to his dismal end and, for that, gained legendary status in Russia.

The Narodnaya Volya (People's Freedom) considered using its resources to free him rather than kill the Czar – an offer he rejected, saying the death of the Czar was more important. (And, indeed, on March 13, 1881, Czar Alexander II was assassinated whilst riding through the snowy streets of St. Petersburg.)

Dostoyevsky used Nechayev as the inspiration for his novel, *The Possessed*. Nechayev wrote quite a few pamphlets on revolutionary topics. Probably the most famous and lasting is *The Revolutionary Catechism*.



# Sergey Nechayev: The 20th century belonged to him, and so will the 21st century

*(Essay published April 2019 by the author of deathandvirginityin1876.blogspot.com)*

Sergey Nechayev (1847 – 1882) was a terrorist, an anarchist, an essayist and widely the single most reviled figure in all of anarchism. More than Max Stirner, more than Renzo Novatore, even more than the Bonnot gang. In the book Bakunin: The Creative Passion, Mark Leier writes:

*"Bakunin's careful thoughts on the nature of revolution and organization were, however, overshadowed by his relationship with one of the most repellent characters of the nineteenth-century revolutionary movements. His active work with Sergei Nechaev took up only a few months of Bakunin's life, yet it would have immediate repercussions and would taint Bakunin and anarchism for generations to come."*

Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism also has some comments on the infamous bizarre Bakunin-Nechayev relationship:

*"In his search for likely catalysts, Bakunin became involved at this time with a young revolutionary called Sergei Nechaev. It proved a disastrous relationship and did immense harm to the anarchist movement. Nechaev, who later inspired the character Peter Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's The Possessed, was an extraordinary character: despotic, power-hungry, egoistic, rude and yet strangely seductive. He exemplifies the unscrupulous terrorist who will stop at nothing to realize his aim."*

Sergei Gennadievich Nechaev sorely tested Bakunin's belief that society, not individuals, should be held responsible for crimes and transgressions. Nechaev stole money and reputation from the anarchist, inadvertently aided Marx in purging him from the International Working Men's Association, and provided ample, if indiscriminate and inaccurate, munitions to the enemies of anarchism that they are still firing off today."

Furthermore, the book comments on his most lasting pamphlet,

## Catechism Of A Revolutionary:

Whilst in Geneva with Bakunin, Nechaev wrote between April and August 1869 a Catechism of a Revolutionary which proved to be one of the most repulsive documents in the history of terrorism. The guiding principle of this work is that 'everything is moral that contributes to the triumph of the revolution; everything that hinders it is immoral and criminal.' It calls upon the would-be revolutionary to break all ties with past society, to feel a 'single cold passion' for the revolutionary cause and to adopt the single aim of 'pitiless destruction' in order to eradicate the State and its institutions and classes.

There also exists a biography which I have not read because it is no longer available, but I know it considers its subject a psychopath from quotes about it in other articles. So, clearly, anarchists do not think very highly of Nechayev. But let's back up: Who was Sergey Nechayev?

Nechayev was the son of a serf (somewhat unusual for a revolutionary, who mostly had noble backgrounds, such as Kropotkin or Bakunin) who, while by no means wealthy, were able to give him a decent education. In 1865, he moved to Moscow to study and take the examination to become an elementary school teacher. However, that failed, and he moved to St. Petersburg. There, he was radicalized by Karakozov's attempt to assassinate the Tsar. He found himself working with fellow revolutionaries and developed an highly ascetic theory of the revolutionary and terrorism (which we will touch on later). There, he manipulated students by telling them lies and exaggerations regarding his own background, convincing his comrades that he was arrested by the secret police, and had miraculously escaped the Peter and Paul fortress. Indeed, manipulation will prove to be a recurring theme in Nechayev's life.

In fact, he was just planning to flee Russia, but this way he had created himself a backstory that would grant him street cred among fellow revolutionaries. This story was very helpful when he met Bakunin in Geneva, in March 1869. Bakunin, the old anarchist, had fell out with "the people" of Russia, and saw in Nechayev a new, youthful revolutionary spirit, "one of those young fanatics who doubt nothing

and who fear nothing". The relationship proved extremely disastrous. But this is when Nechayev, with perhaps some help of Bakunin (how much Bakunin had an hand in Nechayev's essays is a source of bitter controversy), wrote several pamphlets. These essays are what got Bakunin an infamous reputation as an apostle of terrorism and nihilistic destruction. On Nechayev's merciless methods, Bakunin told him:

*"People's revolutions are born from the course of events, or from historical currents which, continuously and usually slowly, flow underground and unseen within the popular strata, increasingly embracing, penetrating, and undermining them until they emerge from the ground and their turbulent waters break all barriers and destroy everything that impedes their course. Such a revolution cannot be artificially induced. It is even impossible to hasten it, although I have no doubt that an efficient and intelligent organization can facilitate the explosion. There are historical periods when revolutions are simply impossible; there are other periods when they are inevitable."*

Nechayev as a young man

Among many other bizarre episodes in his life, he would murder a fellow comrade for questioning whether Nechayev was truly the head of a secret revolutionary society (he wasn't). Another tale comes when Bakunin was paid in advance for translating Marx's Das Kapital into Russian. When Bakunin took the money and lazied up on the translation job, Nechayev sent the man who had paid him threatening him, along with pictures of a revolver and a knife. People thought Bakunin had done this, putting Bakunin in further trouble.

Not only that, but he helped Marx into getting Bakunin out of the First International.

When he was arrested for the murder, so manipulative was he, that he succeeded in manipulating the very guards who guarded him. The Tsar himself seemed to be afraid of him, demanding that his twenty year sentence was turned into a life sentence. So dedicated was he to revolution, as he puts it in his Catechism, that when fellow radicals Narodnaya Volya offered to take him out of jail, he refused, saying that

they should use their resources to assassinate the Tsar. And indeed, the Tsar was eventually murdered.

So, why all this? What made Nechayev so memorable as a character in anarchist history. Well, it is almost entirely due to his essay, *Catechism Of A Revolutionary*. It is very short, so I would simply [show it above] rather than try and summarize it.

The essay would prove to be incredibly destructive to the anarchist cause, with people to this very day using it as an example of "proof" that anarchism is inherently nihilistic. While it did influence fellow Russian nihilists as well as some Narodniks, it influenced no important figures in the history of anarchism. Kropotkin, in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, criticizes Nechayev for his methods, in fact.

However, and this is a big however, it did influence one very important person: Lenin.

Several Lenin biographies record the following comment regarding Nechayev:

*"He [Lenin] once told Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич: 'People have completely forgotten that Nechayev possessed a special talent as an organizer, an ability to establish particular skills in illegal work...It's enough to recall his precise reply to the question, who should be killed in the royal family? He said "the whole ektenia" [the entire list of Romanovs read out in a traditional Orthodox service]. So who should be killed? The entire house of Romanov...That was pure genius."*

In other sources, he also had called Nechayev "a titan of the revolution", and said that everyone should read him and they should look for Nechayev's essays and have them published. So he was clearly familiar with Nechayev, but it is more fascinating still, to understand just how close Lenin's concept of a "professional revolutionary" that would fill the ranks in a vanguard party is to that of Nechayev's "doomed man".

Lenin argued, as a revolutionary tactician, for a vanguard party filled with professional revolutionaries. All these revolutionaries would have

had professional discipline, just like the ascetic conspirators described in The Revolutionary Catechism. The Catechism describes a secret society of revolutionaries that operates with total devotion to the revolution. Since Lenin was aware of Nechayev and his Catechism, it is not at all a stretch to suggest that his model of a "vanguard party" was heavily influenced by this. Likewise, Nechayev's notion that "morality is everything which contributes to the triumph of the revolution. Immoral and criminal is everything that stands in its way." echoes several of Lenin's speeches.

According to Robert Service's Lenin: A Biography:

*“They knew that he admired the notorious Pëtr Tkachëv’s journal Alarm and the proclamations of the still more notorious Sergei Nechaev (whose complicity in murder had caused the Swiss authorities to make a legal exception in 1872 and extradite him to St Petersburg). Lenin recommended his associates to read these materials and learn lessons from them.”*

Further, from Nechayev's essay The Fundamentals Of The Future Social System:

*“The ending of the existing social order and the renewal of life with the aid of the new principles can be accomplished only by concentrating all the means of social existence in the hands of our committee, and the proclamation of compulsory physical labour for everyone. The committee, as soon as the present institutions have been overthrown, proclaims that everything is common property, orders the setting up of workers' societies (artels) and at the same time publishes statistical tables compiled by experts and pointing out what branches of labour are most needed in a certain locality and what branches may run into difficulties there.*

*For a certain number of days assigned for the revolutionary upheaval and the disorders that are bound to follow, each person must join one or another of these artels according to his own choice... All those who remain isolated and unattached to workers' groups without sufficient reason will have no right of access either to the communal eating places or to the communal dormitories, or to any other buildings*

*assigned to meet the various needs of the brother-workers or that contain the goods and materials, the victuals or tools reserved for all members of the established workers' society; in a word, he who without sufficient reason has not joined an artel, will be left without means of subsistence. All the roads, all the means of communication will be closed to him; he will have no other alternative but work or death."*

This brutal view of anarchism (which I like to call "authoritarian anarchism"), called by Marx "Barracks Communism", bears an uncanny similarity to Lenin's War Communism, the Policies of the USSR before the NEP.

So, Nechayev's authoritarian anarchism bears a lot of similarities to Lenin's own ideology, and was almost certainly influenced by it. Seeing that the Red October was the single most important event of the 20th century, this would mean Nechayev had a massive influence on the history of the 20th century. Every Leninist revolutionary, specially the Vietcong who were ideologically trained to never give up, is a "doomed man", whose personal interests, business affairs, emotions, attachments, property and name are second to revolution. Furthermore, I wrote in a previous essay that the future will have a revolution, and it will be extremely brutal and costly. Nechayev has already had the 20th century, but he shall have the 21st century as well. Who else, if not the "doomed man", could carry out the atrocities, the terrorism, and specially the extermination (a word that Nechayev constantly used, saying at one point "Our task is one of extermination") of all the groups that oppose the revolution? Nechayev's Catechism was reprinted by the Black Panther Party and became a personal bible to some of its members, and in the future it will again become a personal bible to many revolutionaries.

Because of this, I argue, one should study the tactics, the story and the writings of Nechayev, if not just to understand history a little bit better, then to understand what is coming in the future. Likewise, there are several books written on Nechayev, including a biography, but none of these are available online and they are long since out of print. A reprint of these could help us. Perhaps too, it would help us to translate and reprint the essays of Nechayev. I am sure that they are in some

Russian archives, somewhere.

He [Nechaev] was, in short, a Bolshevik before the Bolsheviks -  
Orlando Figes

# Lenin's Brother: An Interview with Philip Pomper

by Aaron Leonard

Alexander Ulyanov, was V.I. Lenin's older brother. Like his brother he was a revolutionary committed to the overthrow of the Russian autocracy. Unlike his brother, who went on to head the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (later the Communist Party), "Sasha" became a part of the "The Terrorist Faction of the People's Will," a small group who conspired unsuccessfully to assassinate then Tsar Alexander the III. Named after the "People's Will" who had successfully assassinated the Tsar's father Alexander II on March 1, 1881. "The Second March 1" group (as they were known) were amateurish to such a degree that police surveillance preempted their efforts, the group was rounded up as they prepared to carry out the assassination. Five of the conspirators were later hanged for the attempt. Alexander Ulyanov, despite the imploring to the Tsar on the part of his mother, was one of those. I recently sat down with Professor Pomper in a cafe in Greenwich Village to talk about his new book.

## **Who was Alexander Ulyanov?**

He was the second child in the Ulyanov family, born in 1866. He had an older sister named Anna who was born in 1864. The three important figures in the story, the three important children, are the three eldest children. Vladimir Ilyich comes along in 1870, four years behind the older brother. Alexander [Sasha,] as the eldest male in the family is an important figure -- it's a patriarchal culture. Anna, who was an interesting person, was sort of shoved aside. Alexander was the dominant male in a way. Very quickly he was the family's hope for the future. He followed his father's path in science.

Sasha is part of a family history that's sort of the holy family of Russian Marxism. As Lenin's brother, as the link in the chain that lead Lenin to revolution, he's a very important figure.

## **How did you become interested in this?**

In 1990 my book on Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin came out. It was a study of the psycho-dynamics, the psychological triangle, of three really



important figures in the Party. I wanted to understand their interactions and psychologies. In order to do that I needed to understand their family histories. I was pretty satisfied when I finished the book that I had figured them out to my satisfaction. But very shortly after that the Soviet Union collapsed. Now all of the archives were open, including the Ulyanov family archives and I realized that at least the Lenin part of the story probably needed to be revisited.

Among other things I found myself studying the intellectual foundation of Alexander Ulyanov's terrorism. The history of the Russian revolutionary movement requires you to study terrorism. If you start back in the 1860s one of the most profound socialist thinkers was Peter Lavrov. He was an artillery officer and he taught in a military school; a middle age man a kind of a scholar of the cabinet as they used to say -- somebody who was ... very myopic, suffered from night blindness -- helpless outside of his study. But he got involved with the student movement and because of the autocratic system and fear of any kind of challenge he was arrested and sent into external exile. He escaped and went abroad and he became one of the emigre theoreticians of the movement.

Studying him I got involved with the study of terrorism because he evolved with the movement and accepted terrorism as a tactic. In his work he provided Sasha with a lot of the scientific thought behind his terrorist commitment.

It was clear to me, after reading Sasha's writing, that it was Lavrov's thinking at the foundation of his own. Certainly there were others who fed into it. There was also the Russian thinking about Darwin -- a form of Darwinism that is now accepted; this idea of group selection and altruism and the value of altruism for groups. So there was a Russian school of Darwinian thought that intersected with the Russian revolutionary movement.

**In Lenin's work, "What Is To Be Done?," he says, "The spontaneous striving of the workers to defend the students who are being assaulted by the police and the Cossacks surpasses the conscious activity of the Social-Democratic organization!" I thought of this when I read your description of the Tsar's police containing a demonstration that Sasha was part of. How much of an influence was Sasha experience on his younger brother?**

I think it was really very important.

I think the remark in “What Is To Be Done?” had something to do with Lenin’s experiences. He was in exile already when the news of the student demonstrations of 1901 when the workers joined them. There was a lot of violence at that moment, 1901. I don’t think he was going back to November 1886 and the demonstration in which Sasha (and Anna as well) participated. At that moment there was a fair amount of restraint. The only incident of the Cossacks being anybody that I encountered in the memoirs was the Raisa Shmidova story [a friend of Sasha’s] where a Cossack had hit her in the shoulder with his rifle butt. There wasn’t widespread violence in 1886.

**I’m trying to remember the scene of the demonstration at the graveyard to commemorate Nicholas Dobrolyubov’s [the Russian nihilist] death. It seemed it was a bit more contentious...**

It was contentious because the students were humiliated. They didn’t have to be beaten to be humiliated. Being beaten by the police, being flogged was such an extreme humiliation that it might lead to suicide.

It actually did in some Siberian exiles -- there were suicide protests.

These were kids from gentry families, for them to be beaten was a major humiliation. They responded to it in a way that you can only understand by understanding their culture.

There were other ways to humiliate them, making them stand in the rain for hours, surrounding them with Cossacks, making them feel penned in, denying them their freedom to move, that was enough to cause a lot of rage. So the demonstration at the graveyard was a psychological turning point for Sasha. There’s no question about it.

**One of the more striking actions during the Bolshevik revolution was the decision to execute the Tsar and his family. On one level this was in the midst of the Civil War and the justification was to deny the Whites a ‘flag to rally around.’ That said, do you think that what happened to Alexander Ulyanov 31 years earlier -- and Tsar Alexander III’s refusal to commute his sentence despite the imploring of Sasha’s mother -- impacted that decision?**

It could have fed into it very easily. I think when psychology is involved, when revenge is involved it is a very deep and complicated thing. A lot of rivulets feed this great torrent of revenge that people feel in 1917-18.

Lenin's writing during the summer of 1917 hold many references to the Jacobins. That meant summary executions. He was of a mind to do that. He and Yakov Sverdlov, his close associate at that time, were the people who decided [to execute the Tsar]. They were the ones who had the main control over it. Some people think it was the local Soviet, which was very radical in the Urals, but nobody would decide anything without Lenin. So it was Lenin and Sverdlov who decided it.

And I think that the motivation goes all the way back to what the Tsarist regime had done to his family, but also is fed by these other rivulets that I think reinforced his convictions about that. Or his feelings were reinforced with convictions is a better way to put it.

Lenin had also spoken approvingly of [Sergei] Nechaev's approach to the problem of what to do with the Tsar....

### **Who was Nechaev?**

He was a revolutionary who headed an organization called the People's Revenge. Nechaev, along with Bakunin, co-authored the *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, which is a famous document. For example, it is cited by Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*. It's a document that has carried on well into the 20th century.

Nechaev was a revolutionary of the late 1860s. He was the one who executed one of his own followers, in 1869. That was a terrible scandal in the revolutionary movement and it inspired Dostoevsky to write "The Possessed," which in English should really be translated "The Demons." The point is that Nechaev had become a negative lesson of the '70s but they still ended up terrorists.

### **Who were some of the characters in the plot to assassinate the Tsar who made the biggest impression on you?**

The story of Peter Shevyrev is interesting. He was the head of the conspiracy and had a kind of Nechaevist mentality; bloody-minded, kill as many as possible. The nature of the bomb [they planned to use against Alexander III] suggests how bloody minded a couple of the leaders were. That is the bombs with strychnine and shrapnel -- that would have been a lot of collateral damage.

In Nechaev's case, I could see [how he became who he was]. He was a gifted kid, growing up in a tough situation. In a city that was bit like Manchester, England -- Ivanovo-Voznesensk was called a Russian

Manchester -- his father was a bartender and caterer. He had taken his knocks as a kid. You could see him changing and getting angry. I could understand that. Even though what he turned into was an ugly character.

I don't know how Shevyrev got that way, but he was an ugly character too, bent on murder and if necessary mass murder. He was willing to kill members of his own organization, just like Nechaev. So Shevyrev was one of the important fascinating characters. He was the one who got the thing off the ground and got it past the point of no return. In organizations like that you need people like that. They all knew he was nasty, but they all more or less recognized his value.

Joeseef Luchashevich is another fascinating character. Even though he was one of the central organizers of the conspiracy and the real master bomb maker. He managed to get out of a death sentence. How he did it was fascinating. How they all conspired to get him off.

The three throwers, some were a little opaque to me. All you could be sure about was that they wanted to die for the cause. Vasilli Osipanov [one of the throwers who was hanged]. He was nicknamed "the Cat" [because of his solitary ways] who started it all, was probably the inspiration behind the poison lead cubes. The other two, Vasillii Generalov and Pakhomii Andreyushkin, seemed to have had blighted adolescence. I don't know enough about them to know why they were quite the way they were.

**You quote a Russian friend toward the end of your book, "In Soviet times Sasha was a revolutionary martyr; now he's just a fanatic and suicidal terrorist." On one level it points to the great shifts in Russia in the past 20 years -- on another it captures something about the flow of history -- things are not linear, they're also not tidy. I think of the current world order of capitalism, it took many hundreds of years to consolidate, with unlikely heroes who are constantly being reevaluated -- think of John Brown in this country. In that respect to what degree is the legacy of Lenin and Alexander still vital? Were there things they saw or attempted to see, in spite of the wrong turns, that remain relevant?**

There are something that are perennial, it's not just Russia, it's a universal sense that justice should be done. It is striking to me in

studying revolutionary history over decades and world history, ideas come around in different shapes.

One notices the resemblance of the revolutionary ideas of the twentieth century with religious formulations; the last shall be first, a rich man will not enter the kingdom of heaven. That's not a new idea. The question always is, is this a kind of cultural background to Marxism? Or was it just a parallel phenomenon at a different time? An idea that was evoked by similar circumstances. A response to social injustice and exploitation in a given historical context. This is a formulation that arises now and again in which it's recognized you are exploiting the many, and causing the misery of they many and there should be a way out. There should be justice. There should be a repair of the situation.

You find again and again in texts about justice, social justice, you find the victimizer/victim narrative. Marx put it in dialectical terms. He made it a story of history working its way through. The thing about Marxism that was very appealing -- and Narodism -- an earlier form of Russian socialism that was supplanted by Marxism. The thing that makes it all work in a way, and appealing, is we all can identify with victims. It's there in all of us. So the victims may change over time but that narrative has universal appeal and perennial appeal. So sure it's still relevant because its there imbedded in all of us. Most of us I think respond to it. Those that don't are....sort of mean.

You may not agree with any of the remedies that are put forward. You may not agree with the master narrative that is designed to explain who when where and why -- you don't have to agree with all that to appreciate the enduring quality of those narratives.

**One of the things I took away from this book, or at least something I started thinking about more is that once you set aside this whole master narrative, for example early Marxism had this whole tendency toward determinism -- things go through exact phases, etc. Once you set that aside, it's actually possible to appreciate some of the farsightedness of some of these characters, though even though they were so contradictory. That some even held ideas that were atrocious, or whatever adjective you want, doesn't negate that other ideas had a positive effect -- the effect of putting something into the historical realm of**

**possibility that wasn't there before. That's not to endorse every element of what they were about -- which is where I think a lot of people fall down, they feel they have to justify the whole package....**

To me the Russian thinkers of the 1870s were the most admirable in that sense. These were the thinkers that Sasha admired. They created something called subjective sociology. I wrote a book about Peter Lavrov, who was one of the founders along with Nicholas Mikhailovsky. Subjective sociology was frankly elitist. So was Sasha by the way -- his Darwinism said the elite have an obligation to sacrifice itself for its own position. Some people called it the mentality of the repentant gentry, that they had gotten to their position and looked back and said, "how did we get here, look at all the generations of serfs that have been exploited!" and so it's our job to repent and even sacrifice themselves. That was lurking behind their Darwinism.

Lavrov had said in effect in every generation there are the lucky people who have the opportunity for higher education and deep reflection about the human condition. Those privileged people are the ones who are obliged to come up with the formulations of progress. How do we get to the next step? How do we remedy social injustice? We are the ones who carry that burden. And not just to formulate the master narrative, because that's what he wanted -- he wanted them to be the formulators of theories of progress that are consonant with their historical context. He believed that they had to adapt to every new historical context. So he called them the critically thinking minority.

They had the burden of theorizing. They had the burden of carrying their theorizing forward into the future as their context changed.

Instead of the objective sociology of the sort Marx created, he had an ever-changing subjective sociology. When Marx came along Lavrov said, "Here's something new." So we have to accept a lot of his ideas.

But they didn't accept it altogether. What Lavrov said in a letter to one of his woman admirers in St. Petersburg -- he was already in exile -- he wrote her a letter in which he said, "someday, our socialism may be to thinkers of the 20th Century, what Aristotle's physics is to contemporary physics." And he said, someday the women question may be more important than the workers question. That's a farsighted thinker. And he was right.

**I suspect were Marx and Engels alive today they would be interesting as well, as opposed to the ossified thinkers they are made out to be ...**

They were animated by an instinct to rebel against injustice. They just had that, and they were going to find the ideas. I think it takes a certain kind of emotional core -- which is why I'm interested in psychology -- were not just thinking machines.

suggested further reading

atassa

the rebels dark laughter by bruno filippi

my iconoclastic individualism by renzo novatore

desert by anonymous ([readdesert.org](http://readdesert.org))

against the logic of submission by wolfi landstreicher

consensus submission making by jason rodgers (available at  
[feraldistro.noblogs.org](http://feraldistro.noblogs.org))

illegalism by paul z simons

the unique and its property by max stirner

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