

**Research Papers
in Russian and East European Studies**

**TERRORISM IN RUSSIAN POPULISM
AND EUROPEAN ANARCHISM IN THE 1870s:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

Graham Gamblin

Research Papers in Russian and East European Studies

ResPREES: No. REES98/1

November 1998

Research Papers in Russian and East European Studies is a series of working and discussion papers published by the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham. It is designed to disseminate papers in the disciplines of history and the social sciences, mainly by younger scholars in the field.

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The editors would like to thank the School of Social Sciences, University of Birmingham, for its generous financial assistance for the establishment of the series.

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ISBN 07044 19955

Printed by The University of Birmingham Central Printing Services

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank: Mrs Maureen Perrie for her thorough editing of the manuscript; Dr Linda Edmondson and Dr Arfon Rees for proof reading and helpful comments; and Mrs Marea Arries for preparation of the manuscript for publication.

Any errors in fact or interpretation remain the responsibility of the author.

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Terrorism in Russian Populism and European Anarchism in the 1870s: a Comparative Analysis

Introduction

Russian populism and European anarchism as they developed in the second half of the nineteenth century shared some common features, and some common ideological bases. Both hoped to bring about the destruction of the current political and economic order in their respective geographical areas by means of a violent revolution. Both looked to peasants and workers as the makers of the revolution and as the beneficiaries the social justice which would follow. There was a powerful mistrust within the populist movement of the state and government, which was one of the central tenets of anarchism. Neither movement, however, was monolithic, and within both there were debates over tactics, organisational forms, and constituencies. The arguments among the populists over centralist or federalist organisation, for example, was the same issue which divided Marxists and anarchists in the West. Tactical debates over written and spoken propaganda of socialism and revolution as against violent insurrectionism went on in both movements. However, in the late 1870s, within both populism and anarchism a strain came to the fore which advocated bringing about change by means of terrorism. By 1881, the Tsar of Russia had been killed by *Narodnaya volya* "People's Will", and the anarchist congress in London had adopted the study of "technical, chemical and military sciences" to aid the revolutionary case alongside the "less effective" methods of written and spoken propaganda. The aim of this paper is to discuss the roots of the terrorist policy in both movements, to clarify whether or not there were common reasons for the turn to terror, to explain what the two movements hoped to achieve by it, and to examine the debates which surrounded the policy in both movements. A comparison of the rise of terrorism within populism and anarchism will, I hope, help to place the former more firmly in the context of the European socialist movement as a whole.

1. Populism and Anarchism to the mid 1870s

Anarchism: the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government - harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilised being.¹

Thus reads Kropotkin's definition of the anarchist ideal, written for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1910. While anarchism embraces many different currents of thought and strategy, certain basic assumptions and themes are common to all anarchists. All reject the legitimacy of external government and the state, and condemn imposed political authority, hierarchy and domination. They seek to establish the condition of anarchy, that is to say, a decentralised and self-regulating society consisting of a federation of voluntary associations of free and equal individuals.²

Although anarchists like to trace their heritage back to ancient times, anarchism finds its first modern expression in William Godwin's "Enquiry Concerning Political Justice" of 1793 which accompanied the upsurge of radicalism surrounding the French Revolution, and called for the abolition of the "brute engine" of political government.³ Anarchism as a fully-fledged political and social movement emerged in the nineteenth century in the form of mutualist socialism as advocated by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon;⁴ direct exchange of products of labour based on "labour value" was the goal, bypassing capitalists, merchants and all who profited from the labour of others. Proudhon called on peasants and workers to avoid electoral politics, and to assert themselves directly by putting their ideas into practice themselves. Like many others, Proudhon's experience of the revolution of 1848 in France and the betrayal of workers' interests strengthened his mistrust of bourgeois radicals and his belief that politics and the state were incapable of offering real liberation to the masses. 1848 had convinced him that palliatives like suffrage were no solution to the problems

¹ P. Kropotkin [Anarchism and Anarchist Communism](#) London 1987 p.7

² P. Marshall [Demanding the Impossible](#) London 1993 p.3 This is the most comprehensive history of anarchism currently available in English. See also G. Woodcock [Anarchism](#) (n.p.) 1962; J. Joll [The Anarchists](#) London 1964; M. Nettleau [A Short History of Anarchism](#) London 1996 (this is a summary of his four-volume [Geschichte der Anarchie](#) Berlin 1927-1931 which has not been translated into English); D. Miller [Anarchism](#) London 1984.

³ Marshall [Demanding](#), p.5

⁴ On Proudhon see, e.g. E. Hyams [Pierre Joseph Proudhon](#) London 1956; K.S. Vincent [Pierre Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism](#) New York/Oxford 1984; G. Woodcock [Pierre](#)

faced by the exploited classes, for which the entire economic and social edifice would have to be radically changed. Governments, he claimed, always served an elite; he looked to a federation of independent producers and other groups for the new social organisation. His criticism of government and centralism applied equally to the socialist state and the dictatorship of the proletariat advocated by Marxists. Indeed, Proudhon claimed that peasants and workers had the same interests, as the have-nots in society, and assigned no leading role to the proletariat in social change. This represents an obvious difference with Marx, who discounted the peasantry as petty-bourgeois and reactionary and furthermore, destined to die out as a class as capitalism advanced.

With the advent of the first International Workingmen's Association in 1864, Proudhonist mutualists came to see important differences between their position and that of Marx's followers. While Marxists looked to the industrial proletariat as the vanguard of revolution, the mutualists included peasants, artisans and small traders in their constituency; where Marxists valued the conquest of political power for the benefit of workers, Proudhon's followers favoured its abolition; and while Marxists favoured a strong centralised organisation to accomplish revolution, mutualists advocated federalism. These differences created two wings within the International during the course of the 1860s and sowed the seeds of the split which was to come later.⁵

Proudhon's position was shared and developed in a more rigorous and revolutionary form by Mikhail Bakunin.⁶ Bakunin insisted that the new society had to be based on, and spring from, autonomous groups working freely together, a society organised from the bottom up. Bakunin opposed Marx's centralism, which was gathering power in the International at the expense of the autonomy of local sections. His opposition was based on his critique of political authority; for Bakunin, the very existence of powerful centralised institutions would encourage some group or other to use them for their own benefit. Basically, while for Marx the state was evil because it

Joseph Proudhon London 1956; A. Ritter The Political Thought of Pierre Joseph Proudhon Princeton 1969. Proudhon also occupies a chapter in most general works on anarchism and socialism.

⁵ For the First International see eg. G.M. Stekloff History of the First International London 1928; G.D.H. Cole A History of Socialist Thought v.II- *Marxism and Anarchism* London 1954; J. Braunthal History of the International v.I London 1966

⁶ For Bakunin, see eg. R. Saltman The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin Westport 1983; A. Mendel Michael Bakunin New York 1981; E. Pyziur The Doctrine of Anarchism of Michael

was run by and for the bourgeoisie, and could be used to positive advantage when in the hands of the workers' representatives, for Bakunin and the anarchists the state was evil *per se* and could only serve to institutionalise privilege; thus their refusal to engage in "politics". This critique applied to the International as much as to the state; a centralised and hierarchical International would create a new set of political leaders, in effect a ruling elite in waiting. The anti-authoritarian society could only be created through an anti-authoritarian revolutionary organisation.⁷

Like Proudhon, and unlike Marx, Bakunin and the anarchists included peasants, artisans and poorly-paid, unskilled workers in the revolutionary army, since they were in a more antagonistic position to the existing order than skilled, well-paid urban workers.⁸ In terms of tactics, as well as constituency, the anarchists were opposed to Marxists' ideas of participation in electoral struggles and in revolutionary seizure of state power. Instead, they began to advocate seizure of land and the means of production directly by the peasants and workers themselves; a network of revolutionaries was necessary only to provide organisation and to co-ordinate actions of various groups. As soon as the peasants and workers gave up the revolution into the hands of representatives or to a revolutionary government, they would find themselves in the hands of a new oppressor. Furthermore, since the anarchists ascribed no leading role in the revolution to the industrial proletariat, they denied the necessity of a bourgeois revolution and capitalist phase of development, believing that it was possible, or even desirable, for societies to pass directly to socialism. This position was shared by Russia's Populists, who saw socialist potential in the *mir* or peasant commune, which the advance of capitalism would destroy.

As disputes grew in the International between Marxists and Anarchists over differing policies of centralism/federalism, conquest of political power/destruction of power and nationalisation/workers' control, a split became inevitable, and with the increased powers granted to the General Council and the expulsion of Bakunin and James Guillaume, anarchists, trade unionists and others formed a breakaway "anti-authoritarian" International on a federalist basis in 1872. However, as this

A. Bakunin Milwaukee 1955; E.H. Carr Michael Bakunin London 1937. Again, Bakunin occupies a chapter in most general histories of anarchism.

⁷ Saltman op.cit. p.113

⁸ This distinction was also raised by the Russian Populists, who in their memoirs claim a preference for the semi-peasant workers of the *fabriki* over the skilled and more urbanised *zavodskie*. See for example

organisation went into decline from the mid-1870s, some anarchists sought new ways to bring about the revolution, as government repressions across Europe made it hard for the International to survive as a mass organisation. As the Russian terrorist movement grew in the late 1870s and achieved organised form in *Narodnaya volya*, terrorist attacks against heads of state were also on the rise in Western Europe. Governments and the press raised the spectre of the International and the anarchist menace to frighten populations into supporting programs of repression.⁹ But how far was terrorism a part of anarchist policy? The attempts on the lives of European royalty which took place in the late 1870s do not appear to have been connected with anarchist groups, although they were generally sympathetically received by anarchists. Nevertheless a strong current grew up within the anarchist movement during the late 1870s which favoured a policy of terrorism, with the aims of inspiring further acts of revolt, retaliating against repression and spreading confusion and fear among governments and ruling classes. This policy was associated with the idea of "propaganda by deed"; however it is not correct to conflate propaganda by deed and terrorism, nor indeed anarchism and terrorism. There were debates surrounding propaganda by deed and the growth of terrorism within the anarchist movement, and some parallels with the populist movement in Russia in this regard.

Until the 1870s, socialism in Russia remained largely confined to the universities and intellectuals, and insofar as it had revolutionary content, took the form of conspiratorial circles of students, and did not on the whole reach out to the masses. The Petrashevtsy in 1848-9 were one such group; this circle entertained ideas ranging from reform in collaboration with the Tsarist government to Jacobinism, their desire for change fanned by the revolutionary winds blowing from France and Germany, which also led to a fearful Russian government ruthlessly disbanding the group. However such circles grew in number as the student movement of the early sixties became more political. Hopes for liberal reform which had grown in the 1860s with the coronation of Alexander II and were fired by the Emancipation, faded as the regime became more repressive. The brutal suppression of the Polish uprising in 1863

P. Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, New York 1970, p.326; for an in-depth discussion, see R. Zelnik, *Populists and Workers*, in *Soviet Studies* no3 1971 pp.251-269.

further turned young radicals away from the government as the vehicle for change; increasingly radical intellectuals looked to the people, the *narod*; hence the tag *narodniki*, or Populists.¹⁰ In particular, the peasants, with their semi-collective communes, seemed to them to offer hope for a socialist future for Russia. Groups like *Zemlya i volya* in the early 1860s hoped to guide and speak for a peasant movement and called for freedom with land, local self-government and a national assembly. They tried to co-operate with the Polish rising of 1863, which brought about their suppression. Other radicals turned to Jacobinism; Zaichnevskii's Society of Communists for example aimed to lead a popular rising and implement change via a central government. Their ideal, common to most Russian socialists of the time, was an agrarian socialism based on the commune; the difference was their ruthless conspiratorial program to bring this about.

This Jacobin trend in populism, and the political conditions of Tsarism, led to an early turn to conspiracy and terrorism to bring about change. Nikolai Ishutin's *Organisatsiya* opposed all liberal reforms, which would only delay the revolution, believing that popular revolt could be sparked by an assassination of the Tsar. When Dmitrii Karakozov's attempt failed in 1866, the severe repressions that followed stamped out all meaningful socialist activity inside Russia for the next couple of years. When activity did re-emerge, it reflected the two main strands of Populism that had grown up in the 1860s: the creation of a strong elite organisation to head a revolt, and a propaganda movement to spread knowledge and socialist ideas to create a popular movement. From the first the Populist movement was divided between "actionism" and propagandism, a divide which was to persist through the 1870s. At the turn of the decade, the urge to action was embodied in Sergei Nechaev, who had some links with Polish revolutionaries and produced programs in conjunction with the Jacobin P. Tkachev and later the anarchist M. Bakunin, calling for "revolutionary prototypes", dedicated and ruthless professional revolutionaries, and a tight disciplined organisation. Both Tkachev and Nechaev called for a strong, centralised party of conspirators subject to strict discipline, which could seize power during a

⁹ In fact governments also took part in terrorism to provide pretexts for suppressing subversive groups. For example the leading advocate of terrorism in the anarchist movement, Serraux, editor of *La Révolution Sociale*, was in fact a police agent.

¹⁰ The most comprehensive history of Russian populism in English is Franco Venturi's Roots of Revolution Chicago 1983; see also J. Billington Mikhailovskii and Russian Populism Oxford 1958; A. Gleason Young Russia Chicago 1980; D. Hardy Land and Freedom New York 1987

popular rising and effectively administer the social revolution. Nechaev's Machiavellism, his willingness to deceive his comrades, regarding them as expendable revolutionary capital, and his "Jesuitical schemes" as Bakunin called them, aroused the disgust of most radicals when they came to light after the murder by Nechaev and a few comrades of one of his followers. This had the effect of strengthening for the next few years the propaganda and popular movement tendency of Populism. The largest and most effective organisation of this tendency was the Chaikovskii circle.

The Chaikovskii circle began as a student self-education group, which merged with a women's group in St. Petersburg in 1871 with the aim of spreading socialist ideas among the intelligentsia. Branches of this organisation quickly sprang up in Moscow and in the provinces. Their ideas at the beginning of the 1870s were roughly in line with those of the émigré P. Lavrov, who called for a long-term development of a socialist intelligentsia which could spread knowledge among the people. Within a few years however, with the influx of more radical members like Petr Kropotkin and Sergei Kravchinskii, and as contact was made with workers, they began to look for a more radical program and the building of a popular movement based on peasants and workers. By 1873, Lavrov's more moderate program of propaganda and intellectual and moral preparation among the intelligentsia was being left behind by events; when illegal literature from socialist circles abroad began to arrive, it was Bakunin's "Statism and Anarchy", with its radical program of peasant insurrection, which found favour over Lavrov's journal "Forward!" among the Chaikovtsy.¹¹ With the Jacobins out of favour for the time being, debate was between those who favoured a long, slow propaganda campaign, and those who believed that what the peasants needed was not theory but help to organise revolts. The Chaikovskists covered a broad spectrum of ideas between these extremes; they were not anarchists, having no clear-cut ideological position, but found themselves in a similar position to Bakunin and the anarchists in the West. Furthermore, more extreme and explicitly Bakuninist groups grew up, known as *buntari*, or "rebels" for their desire to organise and co-ordinate peasant *bunts*. The *buntari* were always stronger in the South of Russia and in Ukraine, particularly in Kiev and Odessa. There were certainly Bakuninist circles in

¹¹ P. Akselrod, Perezhitoe i peredumannoe, Berlin 1923 p.101; L. Shishko in P. Lavrov, Narodniki-propagandisty, St. Petersburg 1907, p.187

St. Petersburg and elsewhere; however it is not entirely clear how active these were, and in the early 1870s they were overshadowed by the Chaikovtsy.

Pressure to go to the peasants to spread socialism spilled over in 1874 during the so-called "mad Summer", when thousands of students left the towns to propagandise in the countryside. Some anarchists and Chaikovskists hoped to learn a trade and settle in the villages, others made "flying" visits. The more extreme Bakuninists, like V. Debagorii-Mokrievich and Ya. Stefanovich, denied the need to learn a trade in order to settle among the *narod*, or of teaching literacy or propagandising, so literally did they take Bakunin's idea that the people were instinctively revolutionary.¹² The buntari opted for immediate practical action. Studying was a waste of time; some even claimed it would be better to forget all they had learned in the past since their intellectualism only hindered them from joining the popular mass.¹³ However, the movement was on the whole the effort of uncoordinated individuals, and eluded organisation. No peasant movement resulted, many students were arrested and those Populists still at large returned to the towns to consider their next move.

In the debates within the Populist movement especially during the early 1870s, a number of issues were at stake regarding theory and tactics which were also points of dispute among Europe's anarchists, both within their movement and in the broader socialist movement and the First International. These debates were closely connected in both movements with the rise of political terrorism at the end of the decade. Firstly was the question of constituency; while the Populists in theory looked to the peasants to make the revolution, in practice their first sustained contact with the *narod* was with the workers of St. Petersburg and other large towns. Within this group they noted two sub-groups; the skilled and more or less urbanised *zavodskie* and the unskilled semi-peasant *fabrichnye*. Memoir accounts express a preference for the latter, but in fact extensive propaganda work went on in the zavody also. Europe's anarchists were in a similar position; they looked particularly to poor peasants and labourers,

¹² It is worth noting that this position was not held by Bakunin himself; in his Appendix A to *Statism and Anarchy*, which deals with Russia, the main task of Russian revolutionaries is co-ordination of a popular rising, but there is no denial of propaganda by word, and indeed the idea of a popular newspaper is entertained. See M. Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, Cambridge 1990. For Bakunin the "revolutionary instinct" was historically conditioned by the material position of the labouring classes and summed up their desire to wrest control of their lives from capital and the state. This instinct required education and organisation for a successful revolution however; some Russian Bakuninists seemed to ignore this. See Saltman, op.cit pp. 100-102

unskilled workers and the unemployed. While the strand of anarchism that would later become anarcho-syndicalism tried to build a labour and strike movement, others suspected that better-paid and skilled workers could be satisfied with making gains within the capitalist system.

Other issues affecting both movements included the question of social vs. political revolution, or whether to concentrate on the destruction of the prevailing order or to try to win political freedoms from it; federalist or centralist organisation of the revolutionary movement, which was a major bone of contention in the split in the First International, and became an issue in the Russian movement from the mid-1870s with the increasingly centralist character of *Zemlya i volya*; tactics of propaganda, agitation, insurrection (or *buntarstvo* in the Russian context), economic terror, propaganda by deed, and attacks on heads of state and officials as opposed to the economic system and institutions that allowed them to exercise power. All of these debates in the anarchist and Populist movements fed into the growth of political terror in both, and left its opponents fighting a rearguard action against an apparent obsession with violence and a growing distance between the revolutionaries and the masses.

The Rise of Terrorism in Russian Populism

1. The "Buntari" of the South

The failures of the movement to the people did not immediately result in a fundamental rethink of policy by Lavrovists or Bakuninists. The goal remained the *narod*; however the mass arrests indicated a need for stronger organisation and better conspiratorial techniques. Hence the Pan-Russian Social-Revolutionary group which grew up in 1875 adopted an organisational structure with a central "administration" to spread anarchist propaganda in the factories of Moscow. Meanwhile in the South the failure of the propaganda campaign encouraged in some the idea of a buntarist approach to fomenting a peasant revolution. Debagorii-Mokrievich and Stefanovich were joined by Lev Deich and a group of women including Mariya Kovalevskaya and Vera Zasluch. They had some links with Mark Natanson's embryonic *Zemlya i volya* group in St. Petersburg (see below), but the spirit of revolutionary violence which was growing in the South had yet to penetrate the more cautious North. It is difficult to

¹³ Debagorii-Mokrievich, op.cit. p.115

say exactly why this regional variation occurred, but a number of reasons may be speculatively put forward. Firstly is the simple fact that the police were much better organised in the capital than elsewhere and revolutionaries felt able to act more openly in the southern provinces. Secondly is the presence of the nationalistic element; not only did there grow up around this time a Ukrainophile movement in the south of the Empire which increased enmity to the Russian government to a certain degree among the educated, much of Ukrainian land was owned by Russian and Polish nobles, and an element of nationalism among the peasants perhaps meant that they were even more badly disposed towards the nobility than were their Russian counterparts, a fact which could have encouraged the southern rebels. Finally, as the *obshchina* landholding system was far less common here than in central and northern regions, the peasants were in a more precarious economic position. Thus the buntari could have expected a higher degree of rebelliousness from the peasants.

In 1875-6 the rebels were living in a kind of commune in Kiev and were always armed. The Governor of the town apparently knew of the group but kept away, fearing active resistance.¹⁴ They remained contemptuous of reading and theorising, and had only a vague program of trying to arouse peasant disturbances. However they were determined that they would resist arrest and where possible attack the most zealous representatives of the authorities. This last idea is one root of the terrorist campaigns of *Zemlya i volya* and *Narodnaya volya*, but for now it was not articulated in terms of a campaign of political violence; rather it was a means of defence and disorganisation of the enemy. The essential difference here is that the rebels did not expect political gains from their "defensive" violence, while later terrorists of *Narodnaya volya* did. The stated aim of the rebels remained social and economic revolution by and through the peasants and not political reform forced by terror.

Other currents were meanwhile raising the question of fighting for political freedoms. Among these was the Southern Russian Union of Workers which grew up in 1875. This group appears to have inherited the mantle of the Chaikovskist group in Odessa, which had been very strong. The Union advocated propaganda and organisation among the workers and peasants, and its program included the possibility of a political struggle for an immediate improvement in the lives of workers and peasants. Soviet authors have made much of this in trying to portray the group as a

¹⁴ F. Venturi, *op.cit.* p.571

proto-Marxist organisation.¹⁵ At the end of Summer 1875 a group of several dozen workers became disillusioned with the Union's careful policies and joined the buntari. The success of a strike in August probably encouraged the majority to stick with the Union however. When the Union was uncovered, the suspected traitor was murdered. To my knowledge this was the first case of its kind since the Nechaev affair five years earlier, and this time it was not received with the reaction of disgust that had greeted that episode. In fact it was to be the first of a series of similar acts against spies and provocateurs. Thus the Union left two important legacies to the movement in the South; the notion of a struggle for political freedoms, and the use of terror against immediate enemies. Both of these were to assume far greater significance in the last years of the decade.

The rebels remained determined to concentrate on the narod, and went to the people to see where they could spark peasant revolts. Revolt, as they saw it, was the only way to educate the people in revolution. Here they differed both from those "colonists" from who favoured a slow propaganda campaign among the peasants, and from those who were considering political action and a direct fight with the state. From 1875 Debagorii-Mokrievich and Stefanovich organised a new circle. They decided to target the South East part of Kiev province, where there had been a rising twenty years before, in the hope of organising the peasants for a redistribution of the land. A close circle of revolutionaries would disperse among the villages and try to agitate.¹⁶ However a change of attitude towards the peasants is noticeable even among the Bakuninists; whereas in 1874 they had tried to "become" peasants, dressing poorly and denying their noble ancestry and education, now they realised that a good suit and literacy and education raised their status in the eyes of the peasants.¹⁷ The rebels were no longer interested in becoming peasants but in the practical task of organising armed detachments for a *bunt*. The rebels had conceived a plan which, although inspired by Bakuninism, was rejected by Bakunin.¹⁸ They would concoct a false manifesto from the Tsar which encouraged the peasants to rise against the landowners and take the land for themselves. However the fear of discovery led the rebels to make little contact with the peasants. The need to conceal their intentions while

¹⁵ B. Itenberg *Yuzhnorossiiskii soyuz rabochikh* Moscow 1974 pp.70-72

¹⁶ Debagorii-Mokrievich, *op.cit.* p.203

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.219

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.206

Stefanovich was preparing the nucleus left the rest of the group doing little beyond making detailed studies of the area and practising marksmanship. Lack of activity and funds, and the need for secrecy led to low morale and a realisation that they were still alienated from the narod. Many of them shared the feeling of the majority of revolutionaries in the Southern towns by the end of 1877 that it was impossible under present conditions to work in the narod. However, Stefanovich's conspiracy to form an armed detachment of peasants provided a ray of hope.

Stefanovich's efforts had focused on the *uezd* of Chigirin, where there had been peasant unrest since the early 1870s on account of an assessment of redemption payments for land. Many of the poorer peasants were demanding a redistribution of land. There had as yet been no violence against the authorities, but a stubborn refusal to obey even after prosecutions, imprisonments, confiscations and troops had been used. The peasants justified their refusal to obey on the ground of their belief in the Tsar's benevolence; the Tsar was the embodiment of what was right in the peasant mind, and any official who contradicted the peasants' sense of justice must be distorting the Tsar's true will. The myth of the Tsar encouraged resistance against the authorities; but at the same time it taught passivity in expectation of the Tsar's true will.¹⁹

Stefanovich wanted to turn this passive resistance into insurrection.²⁰ Making contact with the peasants he offered to go to the Tsar himself with a petition. The offer was accepted and Stefanovich left in February 1876. He returned in November with two impressive looking documents, the Secret Imperial Charter, and the Code of the Secret *Druzhdina*. The first document purported to be an appeal from the Tsar and claimed that freedom with land had been granted in 1861, with no payments and an end to military service. But the nobles had prevented this and kept the best land for themselves, burdening the peasants with poor land and heavy taxes. The tsar had become convinced that he was not able to defeat the nobles alone, and called upon his loyal subjects to seize the land by armed force. He ordered them to unite in a secret society to prepare the rebellion, for which the Code provided an organisational form.²¹ Several thousand peasants in the area became involved in the conspiracy.

¹⁹ For a discussion of peasant monarchism and the myth of the Tsar, see D. Field, Rebels in the Name of the Tsar, Boston 1989

²⁰ Stefanovich's account of the affair is translated in Field, *op.cit.* pp.131-162

²¹ Field, *op.cit.* pp.172-174

When the Chigirin affair came to light it aroused a storm of debate among the revolutionaries. Sergei Sinegub, amongst others, objected to the venture on moral and practical grounds; it was wrong to deceive the narod, and it did not serve the revolutionary cause to reinforce faith in the Tsar.²² Stefanovich replied that the revolutionary had to accept the peasant as he was and exploit whatever revolutionary potential he could find. Kropotkin was dubious, pointing out that while rumours and false *ukazy* were common in the history of popular risings in Russia, they were not a conscious deception but rather could be invoked by peasants as a defence if the rising failed.²³ Kravchinskii wrote that the conspiracy was a shift by the socialists onto to entirely popular ground and demonstrated the possibility of a peasant organisation,²⁴ while others saw its collapse as yet another indication that political conditions had to be changed before work among the narod was possible.²⁵

By the end of 1877 the cause of the rebels seemed to be a lost one. Along with the "colonists" of *Zemlya i volya* (of whom more below), they began to drift back to the towns of Southern Russia, where a "political" movement was growing, encouraged by the politicisation of society in the South that accompanied Balkan war. Demand for political change grew in towns like Odessa, where the effects of the war were particularly visible. Liberalism underwent a revival, while some liberals joined the revolutionaries who were prepared to use radical tactics to force political change in Russia. Some of the rebels meanwhile volunteered to fight in the war, hoping to gain experience of battle, and take advantage of a volatile situation to spread their ideas. Most returned disillusioned by the nationalist nature of the war. The focus of the rebels and popular propagandists on social and economic revolution was overshadowed as the attentions of the majority of revolutionaries shifted to the formation of a party and a political rather than a social revolution as an immediate aim. In the Southern towns the propensity for "activism" and revolutionary violence associated with the Bakuninist tradition took new forms, as many gave up agitation among the narod and concentrated on freeing prisoners or killing spies.

2. Zemlya i volya

²² S. Sinegub, *Vospominaniya chaikovtza*, Byloe 1906 no.10, p.63

²³ Field, op.cit. p.168

²⁴ Ibid. p.165

²⁵ V. Bogucharskii, *Aktivnoe narodnichestvo 70kh godov*, M. 1912, p.257

At around this time the operations of the Zemlya i volya project were getting under way in the South of Russia. Like the rebels, Zemlya i volya continued to look mainly to the peasantry to carry out Russia's social revolution; in this sense they can be said to be continuing the trend of Bakuninist populism. However they believed that the narod was not ready for revolt, and Bakunin's assurances on this score had been mistaken. According to Aleksandr Mikhailov, their leading theorist, the rebels had idealised the people; what was necessary was to listen to their immediate demands and take concrete steps for their liberation.²⁶ He still proposed as an ultimate goal the ownership of the land by the peasants through the *obshchina*, and the substitution for the state of social organisation determined by popular will. Social and economic revolution remained the means, but the allowance in their first program, drawn up in 1876, for immediate improvements in the lot of the peasants and for the disorganisation of the state pointed to a political campaign.²⁷ Nonetheless the "colonies" sent out by Zemlya i volya from the provincial towns to the countryside employed a wide range of tactics. Some went as doctors or teachers, others looked for revolutionary potential in the religious sects, others still experimented with "agrarian terror", encouraging the peasants to use arson, crop/land seizure and attacks on the person and property of the landlords. This broad range of violent and non-violent tactics reflects the lack of central control in favour of federalism in the early Zemlya i volya. By the end of 1877 most of the colonies had conceded failure, however, and returned to the towns; Zemlya i volya's campaign became consciously more centralised in organisation and began to concentrate on freeing prisoners and killing spies, and work in the towns rather than the countryside, and the rift between those who wanted to work among the narod and those who favoured a campaign of political violence began to deepen. Terrorism began to take on an organised form in Ukraine in 1878, and the very nature of such tactics raised the issue of a direct "political" conflict with the state; and the state's reply with military tribunals and death sentences encouraged the trend. As assassination attempts against heads of state were being carried out in Europe by isolated individuals, the Russian terrorists were coalescing into an organisation within Zemlya i volya, and the seal of the so-called Executive Committee began to appear on their proclamations.

²⁶ Venturi, *op.cit.* p.571

²⁷ The program is reprinted in Arkhiv Zemli i voli i Narodnoi voli, Moscow 1932 p.53

Zemlya i volya had achieved organised form in St. Petersburg in 1876; members and contacts tended to come from the right of the movement, i.e. the propagandists, relations with the buntari remaining cold for the time being. However as the various attempts at peasant conspiracies, bunts and work among the narod came to a halt, some of the rebel activists returned to the Southern towns and linked up with Zemlya i volya. The organisation as a whole began to formulate political demands, at the same time as organising into a tighter and more disciplined body. They set their task as agitation by word and by deed, action being the best way to organise revolutionary forces.²⁸ This idea is close to the anarchists' concept of "propaganda by deed", of which more below. A new and more detailed program was drawn up in 1878 which placed greater emphasis on centralism and on the "disorganisation of the state", by which was obviously meant terrorism.²⁹ The activist and violent tradition of the Bakuninists thus began to take new forms within Zemlya i volya.

Bakuninists and some Zemlevol'tsy had experimented with agrarian terrorism in the mid-1870s on a small scale. By agrarian terrorism they meant encouraging the peasants to use tactics such as arson or attacks or threats of attacks on the person or property of landowners to force them to grant concessions, give up land to them or reduce dues. As work among the peasants failed however, some said that terror should be redirected against those who caused peasant misery and prevented the revolutionaries from alleviating it; i.e. the government and its officials. This is more important than it at first seems because the target of violence has changed from economic, in this case the landowners, to political. Attacks on police spies, including a particularly gruesome failed murder attempt, added to the atmosphere of terrorism in the South. Government repressions which increased as student unrest and strikes grew in the late 1870s served to encourage the idea of an immediate war with the government. A turning point was reached when the governor of St. Petersburg had an imprisoned revolutionary flogged with such violence that he went mad and died. Early in 1878, Vera Zasulich shot the governor in revenge, but failed to kill him. Zasulich had been one of the rebels of South Russia; it was from the South that terrorism came, it took organised form there, and was adopted by many revolutionaries as a tactic of war, to eliminate those considered dangerous and to

²⁸ Venturi op.cit. p.574.

²⁹ This second program is also reprinted in [Arkhiv "Zemli i voli" i "Narodnoi voli"](#) op.cit.pp.54-58

defend the interests of the party. This marked it out from the numerous assassination attempts which took place in Europe in the same year, which were the work of individuals and not co-ordinated by any group. However it should be noted that Zasulich's act was not intended to be primarily political, although of course it had political consequences; she saw it as an act of revenge and neither a means of forcing concessions from the government nor an act of "propaganda by deed".

Armed battles and assassinations grew in frequency in South Russia. A raid on a secret press was greeted with gunfire by Ivan Kovalskii, whose trial was marked by an armed demonstration resulting in two deaths. A police spy was killed in Rostov; an attempt was made on the life of the vice-prosecutor of Kiev, and in May the adjutant of police Baron Geiking was killed in the street. Each "sentence" was announced and justified with posters bearing the seal of the Executive Committee. Events were on the move in the capital also, where revolutionaries were beginning to look for political change and turn away from the idea of a popular movement. This current was joined by the activism and terrorism of some of the southern rebels, the determination to take political action by a new generation of revolutionaries, and from abroad by Sergei Kravchinskii, who assassinated the head of the secret police in broad daylight on Nevskii Prospekt and escaped without a trace. As these currents met, and in the wake of a series of arrests, *Zemlya i volya* was reorganised, with greater centralisation and discipline. While still claiming sympathy with the anarchists in Western Europe, their principles, it was claimed, could not yet be realised in Russia;³⁰ so a tight organisation of revolutionaries would attack the state directly, whilst forging links with other groups (workers, peasants and students) engaged in struggle with the authorities. To a certain extent this marks a return within populism of the Jacobin trend embodied by Nechaev, Tkachev and Zaichnevskii. In 1879 the governor of Kharkov was killed and an attempt made on the new head of the police. Meanwhile, the editor of *Zemlya i volya*'s clandestine periodical, who had tried to keep it to a more classically Populist line of working among the *narod*, was arrested, and his replacement favoured a campaign of political terror, which could open the way for mass movements in the future. This line of thinking was behind Aleksandr Solovev's attempt on the Tsar in 1879, and showed that *Zemlya i volya* had moved from defence of the organisation to direct attacks on the government.

³⁰ Ibid p.54

3. Political Terror, Economic Terror and Propaganda

Nevertheless, other tendencies continued to operate. Some colonists, or *derevenshchiki*, led by Georgii Plekhanov, insisted on continuing the slow campaign of infiltrating the peasantry. Others, like Lev Deich, Stefanovich and Vera Zasulich joined them- but they remained buntari, insisting on economic terrorism by the people against their immediate enemies, the landlords and the bosses. Their quarrel with the new trend was not whether to use arms and action but who should use them and against whom. Both they and the *derevenshchiki* pitted their federalism and hopes for a mass movement and social revolution against the Executive Committee's centralism and political action. Thus a three-way debate on tactics and organisation was taking place within Russian populism; some favoured federalist organisation and propagandist tactics; others federalism and tactics of popular violence; and still others centralist organisation and political violence. A split was inevitable; those around the Executive Committee, who favoured a campaign of political change through terrorism became *Narodnaya volya*, while Plekhanov's followers formed *Chernyi peredel*, "Black repartition", reflecting their continuing concentration on the peasants.

Chernyi peredel reflected the views of "orthodox" Populism, envisaging a long, slow campaign of propaganda among workers and peasants to build a mass movement. They claimed the isolation from the masses implied by a political terrorist campaign could only lead to revolutionaries replacing the state rather than destroying it. They emphasised federalism rather than centralism in their organisation, agrarian revolution and a redistribution of the land. "If the popular forces are not organised, then even the most heroic fight put up by the revolutionaries will prove advantageous only to the upper classes; the liberation of the people must be the work of the people themselves" wrote Plekhanov.³¹

However, the debate was not merely one of propaganda by deed and political revolution (*Narodnaya volya*) against propaganda by word and social revolution (*Chernyi peredel*). Like *Chernyi peredel*, the aim of the South Russian Union of Workers in 1880-81 was to increase the political conscience and organised activity of workers and peasants, and thus prepare a social and economic revolution carried out by, not in the name of, the exploited classes. E. Koval'skaya and N. Shchedrin shared

³¹ Venturi op.cit. p.661

the idea that the basis of revolutionary activity should be among the masses, but they approved of terror as a means. When Zemlya i volya split, they joined Chernyi peredel which they saw as being closer to the narod. However they split with them over tactics; they felt that working in the countryside was impossible, because by the time one had gained the trust of the peasants the police were on your trail; furthermore, tactics of economic terror were more easily understood than written propaganda, it protected the immediate interests of workers and raised their revolutionary spirits, and produced popular propagandists who could go to the countryside and be more readily accepted than intelligentsia revolutionaries.³² In Kiev they worked out an anarchist program with tactics of economic terrorism, and began to build relations with the rail and arsenal workers, where the idea of economic terror found favour.³³ A *kruzhok* formed which became the South Russian Workers' Union.

Since the group had no money and its program evinced no support from wealthy liberals, Koval'skaya and Shchedrin did not expect to build a large organisation. Negotiations with Narodnaya volya came to naught for the very reason that the narodovol'tsy feared that the Union's activities would scare off the liberals.³⁴ They were forced to work in the town because new faces in villages were so much more conspicuous, and both Shchedrin and Koval'skaya were wanted by the police. However, links with peasants were formed by workers.³⁵ Their first proclamation was uncompromising, and illustrative of what is meant by economic terrorism. Addressed to the boss of the Kiev arsenal, it gave him three weeks to meet workers' demands for shorter hours and more pay, or face a death sentence. After four days, most of the demands were met. A second proclamation insisted on the rest.³⁶ These too were duly fulfilled, and hundreds of workers immediately joined the Union. Meetings had to be held out of town, and eventually the workers had to be divided into groups of about a hundred, so that Shchedrin and Koval'skaya had to address meetings every night of the week. In June 1880 a press was set up and leaflets were printed about trials, executions, the conditions of local peasants, the meaning of economic terrorism, as well as threats and demands against local land- and factory owners. These were

³² A. Levandovskii *Elizaveta Nikolaevna Koval'skaya* Moscow 1928 p.23

³³ The program is reprinted in V.V. Maksakov/V.I. Nevskii (eds) *Yuzhno-russkie rabochie soyuzy* Moscow 1924 pp.260-264

³⁴ E. Koval'skaya, *Yuzhniy rabochii soyuz v 1880-81gg.*, Byloe 1904 no.6 (Houghton Collection 949) p.37

³⁵ *Ibid.* p.38

distributed in Kiev, Rostov, Kremenchug, Ekatorinoslav, Odessa and Nikolaev, in Russian and Ukrainian, and transport of illegal literature from abroad was also arranged.

Shchedrin and Koval'skaya were arrested at the end of 1880, but the Union continued to operate without them for a further four months. However, it was eventually given away by a spy, and further arrests brought it to an end. With the downfall of the Southern Union, the activities of the rebels was effectively over, and the enforced emigration of Plekhanov and other leading figures of Chernyi peredel left the field more or less clear for Narodnaya volya's campaign of political change. However as we have seen, their activities broadened the debate from one of merely propaganda vs. terrorism at the end of the 1870s; the Union recognised that political terror could disorganise government forces, but their aim was to encourage workers and peasants themselves to hit back against their exploiters. They were in agreement with the federal and economic policies of Chernyi peredel' but wanted to offer workers a tactic which would place them in a sharply antagonistic position with their exploiters and thus the state. Therefore they called on peasants to seize land, burn crops and buildings and attack the *pomeshchiki*, and on workers to attack factory directors, to smash machinery and to commit arson.

Narodnaya volya meanwhile pointed to mute public opinion and silence in the countryside as justification for its taking on the direct fight with the government, which by its policies of repression and the virtual martial law which had been declared to deal with the revolutionaries, was equally isolated from the population. Furthermore, Narodnaya volya saw in the Russian government the greatest force for capitalism in the country, which had to be stopped before it destroyed the collectivist patterns of Russian rural life and allowed the growth of a strong bourgeoisie. So it was necessary to cripple the government; Narodnaya volya decided that the best way to do this was to aim at its head. They envisioned replacing the autocracy with a constituent assembly, which they assumed would be almost entirely socialist, since the vast majority, the peasants, were socialistically inclined, and would support the revolutionaries who were acting on the people's behalf. Alexander II was sentenced to death by the Executive Committee of Narodnaya volya in August 1879, and the organisation threw all its energies into accomplishing the task it had set itself.

³⁶ These proclamations are reprinted in Yuzhno-russkie rabochie soyuzy op.cit. pp.270-274

Dynamite attacks were made on the Tsar's train and on the Winter Palace. Finally the regicide succeeded on 1st March 1881 when the Tsar was killed by a bomb thrown from a few feet away. No popular reaction ensued from the regicide, and the revolutionaries knew that they did not have the forces to provoke one. Their demands for a constitution from the new Tsar were rejected. Arrests and executions brought Narodnaya volya to an end as an effective revolutionary organisation, although it continued to exist for a few more years.

What we have seen then over the course of the 1870s in Russian Populism is the growth and predominance of a tendency which favoured political change as a precursor to social revolution, which favoured as tactics conspiracy and terrorism, and a hierarchical, disciplined, and centralised organisation. Ironically, this was encouraged by some who had formerly been buntari, who had wanted a mass-based peasant movement but were now prepared to turn their activism to other uses. Against this were pitted the ideas of a social movement organised on a federalist basis, coordinated but without a centralist leadership which could lead to dictatorship, within which were a minority which continued the buntarist tradition through a campaign of economic terror carried out by workers and peasants themselves against their immediate enemies, the bosses and the landlords, rather than heads of government. Both of these groups rejected the idea of political revolution advocated by Narodnaya volya, which they claimed could not alleviate significantly the situation of peasants and workers, which was economically based and could only be changed by a thoroughgoing social and economic revolution. Thus Narodnaya volya's terrorism was aimed at political change, to a change in the system of governance of Russia; to achieve this they chose a centralised conspiratorial form of organisation. Both the propagandism of Chernyi peredel and the economic terror of the South Russian Union were linked to federalist socialism and economic and social revolution and the desire to build a broad popular organisation. The centralist/federalist, political/social debate reflected that in the socialist movement in Europe in the early 1870s, as Bakunin and the anarchists took on Marx's attempts to turn the General Council of the International into a centralised governing body, and attacked the Marxists' desire to conquer the state with their program of destroying political authority altogether. The debates on terrorism as a tactic, and of political vs. economic terror were also reflected in Europe, this time within the anarchist movement, to which we shall now turn.

"Propaganda by Deed" and Terrorism in the European Anarchist Movement of the 1870s

1. Insurrectionism

In rejecting participation in conventional politics and collaboration with bourgeois radicals, anarchists advocated a policy of action by workers and peasants themselves, without mediation or representation. This was embodied in the preamble to the statutes of the International; the emancipation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves. The mutualists, following Proudhon, interpreted this as setting up their own mutual aid, direct exchange and credit institutions to escape the control of capital; as the influence of Bakunin grew in the IWA however, the focus shifted to acts of revolt and insurrection. Assisted by revolutionaries, the workers and peasants should, according to Bakunin, seize by force the land and means of production and put them into common ownership, working them for their own benefit. Such actions, even if defeated, would serve as an example and inspiration to other workers' organisations, by demonstrating *in fact* what was meant by socialism. Bakunin noted in his 1870 *Letters to a Frenchman* that "deeds are the most popular, powerful and irresistible form of propaganda."³⁷ However effective written and spoken propaganda may be, putting ideas into practice was the best way for anarchists to win popular support. Speaking to the Russian populist V. Debagorii-Mokrievich in 1874, Bakunin said that the anarchists did not expect an immediate successful revolution, but "we must make unceasing revolutionary attempts, even if we are beaten...one, two, ten, even twenty times; but if on the twenty-first time the people support us by taking part in our revolution, we shall have been paid for all the sacrifices."³⁸ This idea was the basis of what later became known as propaganda by deed.

Insurrection as a revolutionary tactic had strongest support in Spain and Italy during the 1870s. The Spanish FRE (Federación Regional Espanola, the Spanish section of the International) had relied mainly on strikes in the early 1870s, and its Federal Commission hoped to use information gathering to determine the best moment to call strikes, although in practice this rarely took place.³⁹ The Spanish

³⁷ Quoted in C. Cahm Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism Cambridge 1989 p.76

³⁸ N. Pernicone, Italian Anarchism 1864-1892, Princeton 1993, p.84

³⁹ G.R. Esenwein, Anarchist Ideology and the Working Class Movement in Spain 1868-1898, Berkeley 1989, p.52

anarchists embraced an early form of revolutionary syndicalism, which based itself in labour organisations using strikes to attack the capitalist system, with the ultimate aim of a general strike to bring it down. The mood of insurrectionism grew in the atmosphere of repression which followed the cantonalist risings of 1873. Strikes of course required a strong union or syndicate organisation, which was not possible when repressions set in. A legal requirement to submit membership lists of unions led many workers to keep their organisations secret. Also, taking advantage of the turmoil of 1873, anarchists in the South led rural workers in an insurrection in the town of Sanlucar de Barramuda, imprisoning the police and destroying property and tax records. The FRE remained in control of the town for a month, and even after its defeat by government troops, the insurrection, and other similar actions involving the anarchists, stood as a beacon ensuring popular support in the region, to the detriment of republicans, and encouraging the insurrectionist tactic for its inspirational and propaganda value.⁴⁰

The International was proscribed in Spain in 1874 and in conditions of repression the Federal Commission opted for insurrectionary tactics over strikes, advising anarchist locals to organise action groups, to obtain arms and to carry out reprisals against capitalists and oppressors. However some areas held to their earlier unions and continued to strike despite the illegality of their organisations.⁴¹ The anarchist and FRE council member G. Vinas advised workers to seize the granaries as bread riots, food seizures and arson spread. Insurrection provided a means of direct action which did not rely on unions, and seemed the only means of pursuing revolutionary aims.

In Italy social unrest in the early 1870s encouraged anarchists to give a practical example to the people of what they wanted; as Andrea Costa put it, to propagate their ideas with deeds.⁴² To this end, Costa, Carlo Cafiero, Errico Malatesta and other leading militants tried to organise, with the assistance of Bakunin, an insurrection in Bologna in the Summer of 1874. Weak organisation and lack of support from the International, which continued to call for strikes in Italy, prevented even the hoped-for propaganda effect of the rising.⁴³ The movement had regrouped by

⁴⁰ T. Kaplan, *Anarchists of Andalusia*, Princeton 1977, p.110

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.119

⁴² Pernicone, *op.cit.* p.85

⁴³ *Ibid.* p.95

1876; as in Spain there were regional tensions in Italy between syndicalists in the Marches and Umbria who preferred the strike as a revolutionary tactic, and the insurrectionists who drew their support from the Romagnole-Emilian Federation of the Italian International. For the time being however, the debates on syndicalism/insurrectionism were overshadowed in the International by the debate on propaganda by deed.

It was the Italian Federation which introduced the concept of propaganda by deed to the International at the Bern Congress of 1876. What Malatesta and his comrades understood by the phrase at this time was insurrection by workers and peasants to seize land and means of production. In a public statement Malatesta and Cafiero pronounced that:

"The insurrectionary deed, destined to affirm socialist principles by means of action, is the most effective means of propaganda, and the only one which...can penetrate into the deepest social strata and draw the living forces of humanity into the struggle sustained by the International."⁴⁴

The Italians were drawing on Bakunin's ideas and the native Italian traditions of insurrection and guerrilla warfare (Mazzini and Garibaldi) to arrive at their concept of propaganda by deed. Moreover they knew that a few poorly armed peasants could not win any immediate struggles but they hoped to make acts of propaganda and provocation which would find echoes in the population.

Despite the predominance of workers and artisans in the Italian Federation of the International,⁴⁵ its leaders shared Bakunin's belief that the peasants' active support was necessary to carry through the revolution. Moreover not only were some sections of the urban workforce subject to the debilitating effects of bourgeois culture, some had enough security and good enough wages to make them think twice about risking revolutionary action. Only the very poorest with the least to lose could be relied upon to take such risks, and in many countries this meant the peasants. Thus the next site they chose for an insurrectionary attempt was in the Matese mountains, in Benevento province. Once again the attempt, made in April 1877, was thwarted by swift government action. Nevertheless, in capturing national attention for several weeks, the insurrectionists drew notice to the International and to socialism, and according to

⁴⁴ Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne, Dec. 3 1876, quoted in Pernicone, op.cit. p.115

⁴⁵ Pernicone, op.cit. p.78

N. Pernicone, enhanced anarchism rather than diminishing it for some workers. At any rate the Italian Federation acquired many new members over the next year and a half in spite of repression, and the anarchists became certain that in order to retain their credibility before the workers and peasants, another action was necessary, indicating that radical tactics had widespread support.⁴⁶

Coterminous with the Italians' formal adoption of propaganda by deed was their declaration in favour of anarchist communism. Until the mid-1870s, the majority of anti-state socialists had been adherents of collectivism, that is, the ownership of land and the means of production by autonomous, federated producers' associations, as advocated by Bakunin. However, during the mid- to late 1870s support grew within the movement for anarchist communism. The essential difference between the two ideas concerns the distribution of the products of labour, which communists claimed should also be socialised in order to prevent accumulations of wealth; that is to say, the product of labour would not be the property of producers' associations but of the commune or community as a whole, with each member free to take what s/he needs from the common pot. Caroline Cahm sums up the difference thus: collectivism represents "from each according to ability, to each according to work", while communism means "from each according to ability, to each according to need".⁴⁷ This was seen as a complement to collectivism rather than a denial of it, and did not at first cause much of a stir in the anarchist movement. There would appear to be nothing inherent in this theoretical position to connect it with tactical policies of propaganda by deed, or the later current of terrorism; nevertheless in Spain for example, there was a clear split between collectivist-sindicalist and communist-terrorist wings of anarchism by the 1880s.⁴⁸ Marie Fleming links the rise of anarchist communism to that of terrorism.⁴⁹ However for the time being the Italians had adopted anarchist communism as a principle yet still retained insurrectionism as their main tactic, so the link is not direct. However the new theory offered "a new style of thinking which did not rely on formal labour organisations".⁵⁰ Perhaps this shift of focus away from producers' organisations as the vehicle for revolution helped open the way for tactics

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.141

⁴⁷ Cahm, op.cit. p.39

⁴⁸ W. Bernecker, *Strategies of Direct Action and Violence in Spanish Anarchism* p.101, in W. Mommsen/G. Hirschfeld (eds) *Social Protest, Violence and Terror*, London 1982.

⁴⁹ M. Fleming *Propaganda by the Deed: Terrorism and Anarchist Theory in Late Nineteenth Century Europe* in Y. Alexander/K. Myers (eds) *Terrorism in Europe* London/Canberra 1982 p.25

of insurrection and eventually, when this failed to produce results, terrorism? The fact of weakening the link with formal labour organisations could allow some minds to look either to broader organisations (insurrection), or small-group and individual acts (terrorism) as potentially revolutionary. Furthermore, as a more radical development in anarchism, there may simply have been an attraction to those who favoured more radical tactics.

2. The Growth of Terrorism

Despite the failure of the Benevento rising, it served to give impetus to the acceptance of propaganda by deed. Particularly enthusiastic was Paul Brousse, editor of *L'Avant-garde*. Brousse's interpretation of propaganda by deed however was broader than that of the Italians, and included such actions as demonstrations, and later even the destructivist vote (the election of illegal candidates) as propaganda methods.⁵¹ The importance of this broader interpretation should be noted; insurrection involved the *acting out of socialist aims* by seizing the means of production and driving out the authorities, while other tactics served only to *attract attention* to the movement. Accepting this interpretation of propaganda by deed could feasibly (although not necessarily) open the way to small-group and individual acts, i.e. terrorism.

Given the unlikelihood of fomenting an insurrection in Switzerland, and inspired by a demonstration in St. Petersburg in December 1876, Brousse proposed a workers' demonstration at Bern. He was joined in this by Kropotkin, who saw the need for some inspiring act to get the masses on the move.⁵² However, differences soon became apparent between the two men. Brousse later declared that the purpose of the demonstration was to show the workers that they had no right to demonstrate in "free" Switzerland, where the display of the red flag was forbidden. Kropotkin on the other hand had wanted to show that "at least here and there the workers would not have their rights trampled underfoot and would offer resistance." Kropotkin clearly hoped for a serious confrontation with authority, and in fact tried to procure guns for the event. A few months later he took part in a smaller demonstration to which he

⁵⁰ Esenwein, op.cit. introduction p.8

⁵¹ *La propagande par le fait* in Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne 5 aout 1877 pp.1-2

⁵² Cahm, op.cit. p.99

came armed and ready to fire on the police had violence broken out.⁵³ The important point to note is not the desire for violence however, but the desire for a genuine act of revolt. For Kropotkin the idea of a dramatic gesture with the aim merely of making propaganda, which Brousse seemed to support, was pointless. Revolutionary action had by its very nature a propaganda effect, but actions should be carried out, he claimed, with the primary aim of attacking the current oppressive social, political and economic system. An act of social revolt was by its nature inspiring to the oppressed and exploited and this was what Kropotkin meant by propaganda by deed. While Kropotkin hoped for a skirmish in the social revolution from the demonstration, essentially maintaining the insurrectionist position put forward by the Italians, Brousse, it would seem, was advocating a political act; these differing interpretations reflect the social/political revolution debate, and a political interpretation of propaganda by deed could obviously include terrorism and assassination. Therefore while Kropotkin's line in this particular case favours a greater degree of violence, in fact it is Brousse's more political interpretation of propaganda by deed that feeds into the later terrorist wave in anarchism. Kropotkin advocated a policy of action as well as spoken and written propaganda; for the time being however this meant collective action and insurrection, although subsequent events were to focus the attention of Kropotkin and other anarchists on small-group and individual acts of revolt.

From 1878 a series of terrorist acts in Europe and Russia, including a number of regicide attempts, helped to turn the anarchists' attention to such deeds. Although not organised by the anarchist movement, the regicide attempts were greeted with approval by anarchists; however the anarchist journals did not classify them as "propaganda by deed".⁵⁴ Nevertheless the sensation caused by Hoedal's and Nobiling's attempts on the life of the German emperor, Passanante's knife attack on the king of Italy, and Moncasi's attempt on the king of Spain, as well as the fear they generated among the ruling classes of Europe, were among the factors influencing anarchists to look to terrorist tactics.⁵⁵ The reaction to Vera Zasulich's attempt on the life of Governor Trepov was enthusiastic and she was invited by anarchists to Paris to a heroine's welcome, to write against the social democrats. She refused; she herself

⁵³ Ibid p.102

⁵⁴ Esenwein, op.cit. p.63

⁵⁵ Brousse regarded the assassination attempts as acts of Republican, but not socialist propaganda. *Hoedal, Nobiling et la Propagande par le Fait* in *L'Avant-garde* 17 juin 1878 pp.1-2

had not expected her act to have any popular impact, it was not intended as "propaganda by deed". Kropotkin agreed, seeing it as merely answering violence with violence.⁵⁶ He continued to espouse a primarily collective view of action, although he now began to attach importance to the individual act of revolt as a precursor to revolution.

In Italy, demonstrations celebrating king Umberto's survival of Passanante's attack were disrupted by bomb attacks. Needless to say the authorities blamed the International, and arrests, detentions and exile brought the Italian Federation to a halt as a widespread organisation.⁵⁷ Across Europe, repressions helped to cut the anarchists off from the masses. Carlo Cafiero now urged anarchists to organise in secret for immediate violent action; the notion that a public organisation led to persecution became widespread. In Spain meanwhile, growing militancy of local sections left the FRE unable to control them. The inability of the FRE to resist the repressions or to organise actions led many workers to abandon it, leaving anarchist militants with a greater say in the affairs of the organisation. With the policy of insurrection becoming harder to sustain, organisation became secret, and cells in Andalusia, Catalonia and Madrid took it upon themselves to combat the enemy "by whatever means possible".⁵⁸ By 1880 Kropotkin too was paying attention to individual and small group acts. He was impressed by the panic induced by the Russian terrorists, but seems to have hoped they were preparing a popular revolt as well.⁵⁹ He continued to look for acts which were economically based and more spontaneous, such as the burning of plantations and factories in Spain, riots and arson in Italy and the "economic terror" practised by some of the Russian *Zemlevol'tsy*. However Johann Most, recently converted from social democracy, advocated a policy of terrorism in his journal *Die Freiheit*, while Jean Grave, speaking of elections, said that the money spent on electing deputies would be better spent on dynamite to blow them up.

Among the causes of the growing support for terrorism within anarchism were the impossibility of organising mass actions in the face of what was by now severe

⁵⁶ Cahm, op.cit. p.109

⁵⁷ Paola Feri has argued that the bombs were in fact the work of the police to excite fear and support for repression among the middle classes "Il movimento anarchico in Italia", *Il Trimestre* 11, nos. 1-3, 1978; quoted in Pernicone, op.cit. p.149

⁵⁸ Esenwein, op.cit. p.71

⁵⁹ Cahm, op.cit. p.133

repression, increasing isolation from the masses, angry reprisals against persecution, and, connected with the above, a growing "anti-organisation" trend, which Max Nettlau calls "amorphousness".⁶⁰ Believing that mass organisations like the International were unfeasible, growing numbers of anarchists were calling for completely autonomous cells of revolutionaries taking whatever form of action they deemed necessary. This of course only compounded the anarchists' isolation from the masses. The Spaniard Morago saw the idea of propaganda by deed as a battle such as the Russian terrorists were waging; if a general revolution were not possible, it was necessary to combat the enemy by whatever means possible. Cafiero called for "permanent revolt by the word, in writing, by the dagger, the rifle, dynamite, sometimes even the ballot [meaning illegal candidatures]...everything is good for us that is not legal."⁶¹ Johann Most called for the destruction of communications, dynamiting of homes, offices, churches, stores and factories.⁶² As the International declined in the late 1870s, autonomous groups espousing guerrilla warfare and terror became widespread. By 1880-81, terrorism as a revolutionary strategy, rather than a retaliatory measure, had become common in the anarchist movement, although by no means advocated by all anarchists. Furthermore, it had now taken over as the dominant interpretation of propaganda by deed, especially in the minds of governments and the public.

The other major factor in influencing the anarchists' turn to terror was the dramatic actions of Russia's Narodnaya volya. The assassination of Alexander II exhilarated the anarchists and encouraged the view that the revolution could be stimulated by terrorism. In fact however this view was based on what certain anarchists wanted to see, rather than what was actually happening in Russia. It was reported that the cry of "Down with the exploiters!" was reverberating throughout Russia. Carlo Cafiero thought that the success of the act proved the efficacy of small, autonomous cells with no central organisation or leadership, because that was how he thought Narodnaya volya was organised.⁶³ "No more centres, no more general plans. Let each man in his own locality seek to form a group...and pledge action without

⁶⁰ M. Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism*, op.cit. p.151

⁶¹ Pernicone, op.cit. p.187

⁶² A. Carlson, *Anarchism and Individual Terror in the German Empire 1870-90* p.188 in Mommsen/Hirschfeld (eds), *Social Protest...* op.cit.

⁶³ Pernicone, op.cit. p.189

fail" he wrote.⁶⁴ Kropotkin took a more sober view; while he saw the assassination as a blow against autocracy and greeted it with enthusiasm, he was disturbed by the political nature of Russian terrorism, and his writings on the subject stress the populist inclinations of Perovskaya et al.⁶⁵ Meanwhile articles by others appeared in *Le Révolté* trying to identify the anarchist movement with Narodnaya volya and to give an anarchist interpretation to their efforts.

It was in the atmosphere of disintegration, violence and isolation that a conference was organised in Summer 1881 in London to try to revive the anti-authoritarian International. It turned out to be a burial rather than a resurrection however. In preliminary meetings of the "Intimité" (former members of Bakunin's secret alliance Malatesta, Cafiero, A. Schwitzguébel, L. Pindy plus Kropotkin) only Kropotkin and Malatesta were in favour of a mass organisation.⁶⁶ Cafiero said that the only thing for the conference to decide was how to organise violence. When the conference took place, the majority took the anti-organisation and pro-terrorist view, which the police agent Serraux helped to foster. Kropotkin called for a dual organisation of a Strikers' International with a mass membership to co-ordinate economic actions by workers, and within it a clandestine body to organise economic terror. Malatesta agreed, but added the idea of an organisation to fight states directly; political struggle was necessary, he claimed, since private property cannot be destroyed without also destroying the authority that upholds it.⁶⁷ Kropotkin rejected this, fearing the formation of a hierarchical party of conspirators. Others however rejected the idea of a mass organisation altogether, calling for autonomy of groups and individuals, with no program or statutes other than an agreement of solidarity with revolutionary acts.⁶⁸ Even the idea of a correspondence bureau was rejected by some, who feared the potential authority of any central body.

Kropotkin also had to struggle against the obsession with violence of some delegates. A proposal that every section should study chemistry and military science was attacked by him; the Russians, he said, had people with prior knowledge of the

⁶⁴ Ibid. p.190

⁶⁵ Cahm, op.cit. p.143

⁶⁶ U. Linse in her *Propaganda by Deed and Direct Action*, Mommsen/Hirschfeld, *Social Protest...* op.cit. connects Kropotkin with anarchism's abandonment of formal organisation in favour of independent groups cut off from the masses, as does Marie Fleming in *Propaganda by the Deed...* op.cit. p.22 In fact Kropotkin fought hard against this tendency.

⁶⁷ M. Nettelau, *Anarchisten und Sozialrevolutionäre*, Berlin 1931, p.207

⁶⁸ Ibid. p.211

subject, but the skills and knowledge involved could not be acquired in a section; the sections should not be turned into military schools. He continued to call for other forms of propaganda; dynamite was not a panacea, it was but one form of action among many, which, he regretted, were being neglected. If a group found it necessary to use dynamite, it would do so, but this should not be elevated to the only form of propaganda.⁶⁹ Louise Michel supported this, calling for a broad range of propaganda and action.⁷⁰

There was a debate on morality, a word which Serraux proposed should be struck from the statutes of the International. Kropotkin opposed this strongly and won a compromise which attempted to clarify the meaning of the morality of the anarchists as opposed to that of the bourgeoisie. It was ambiguous however: since the present world is based on immorality, its destruction by whatever means would lead to morality.⁷¹ The influence of the terrorists is obvious here. The final report of the Congress called for the addition of propaganda by deed to the "less effective" means of oral and written propaganda; for the abandonment of all legal methods; and for the study of technical, chemical and military sciences as means of struggle and attack.⁷² While some anarchists, including Malatesta and Kropotkin, had wanted to unite forces, with Malatesta prepared to countenance working with political revolutionaries, and Kropotkin calling for mass expansion of the International, the main trend was in the opposite direction. Far from reawakening the International, the Congress gave the movement a secret and exclusive appearance, and staked everything on the potential of terrorism to spark a popular revolt. This position isolated the movement and was open to exploitation by its enemies.

Conclusion

Some of the parallels between the anarchist movement in Europe and the Russian populists should now be clear. Both movements tried in the early 1870s to raise a mass movement among the poor and oppressed, regarding the peasants as particularly hopeful revolutionary material. Both faced severe repression from governments. Both moved from a concentration on organising and propagandising

⁶⁹ *Le Révolté* 20 août 1881 p.3

⁷⁰ Nettlau, *op.cit.* p.219

⁷¹ *Ibid.* p.213

⁷² *Ibid.* p.221

workers to an acceptance of violence, and with a lack of popular support, to policies of terrorism, with a view to exacting revenge against their enemies, attracting attention to their ideas, and sparking a popular revolt. The debates of the Congress of 1881 and those which split *Zemlya i volya* in Russia in 1879 are also remarkably similar; while some of the anarchists, such as Kropotkin and Malatesta, wanted to rebuild a mass, federated movement of workers and peasants, using strikes, insurrections and economic terrorism, the majority of militants seemed bent on using small, secret cells of professional revolutionaries using dynamite to attack the state and the ruling class. Indeed, the focus seemed to have shifted from direct action by workers and peasants, without mediation or representation, to direct action by the anarchists, without any interference from their supposed constituencies. Nevertheless I would have to question Fleming's claim that anarchist theory, due to its espousal of individual autonomy, meant that anarchists had to accept terrorism.⁷³ This ignores the debates going on in anarchism at the time, and the fact that anarchist theory contained competing tendencies. Kropotkin's non-condemnation of the attentats was based on a refusal to condemn the desperate acts of the impoverished and oppressed, which were a mere precursor to a broader revolutionary movement; a sign of the times so to speak. This did not mean that terror should be elevated into a conscious tactic by the revolutionaries themselves. However the link between terrorism and those anarchists who denied the use of any broad organisation and espoused complete individual autonomy ("amorphousness") is correct.

In Russia, the majority of the *Zemlevol'tsy*, recognising their failure to build a mass movement and desiring to attack the government directly, proposed an adoption of terrorism and regicide, cutting themselves off from the mass of the peasantry and taking the revolutionary struggle entirely onto their own shoulders. In both cases, a minority defended the more traditional methods of propaganda and organisation among the people, with little success. These minorities did not deny violence; all recognised that at some point a violent revolution would have to be undertaken. The point of debate in both movements was not over the use of violence per se, but rather over the aims of violence (political vs. socio-economic change) and the related issue of who was to carry out that violence, a mass popular organisation or a clandestine revolutionary group, and the targets- economic exploiters or political and state

⁷³ Fleming, *op.cit.* p.25

representatives. Thus the issue of revolutionary violence has to be divided between social violence, connected to a broad popular social-revolutionary movement, and political violence, or terrorism, connected to a clandestine movement of professional revolutionaries seeking political change.

Other comparisons can also be made; for example the similarities between the call of the Spanish FRE in 1874 for reprisals against capitalists and oppressors and the policy of economic terror advocated by some of the populists of Southern Russia. Both advocated violence, but the violence was to be carried out by the workers and peasants, not by professional revolutionaries, and against economic rather than political targets, and looked to traditional popular methods such as arson, riot, food seizures and so on. Kropotkin was enthusiastic about this policy in Russia, of which the leading exponents were M. Shchedrin and E. Koval'skaya of the South Russian Workers' Union. This sprang from his interpretation of propaganda by deed; genuine acts of revolt by peasants or workers could inspire others in equally desperate situations to do the same. A more political interpretation of the term led others to believe that assassinations and bomb attacks by individuals and small groups against political figures, heads of state and others could inspire the populace to revolution.

Important differences also stand out. In terms of organisation, while the trend in anarchism was from federalism to "amorphousness", the populist movement was becoming ever more centralised and hierarchical. In both cases this was born of, and resulted in, isolation from the masses in whose name they claimed to act. However, for the purposes of comparison, this actual difference may be less important than the fact that, as we have seen, many anarchists saw themselves reflected in Narodnaya volya, mistakenly thinking that it was an agglomeration of autonomous cells. Anarchists on the whole also seem to have been unaware (or deliberately ignored) the Russians' focus on using violence to achieve political change, as opposed to social and economic change which was the *raison d'être* of anarchism. Those anarchists who took up terrorism hoped to inspire popular revolt, while Narodnaya volya hoped for more modest, political results from their campaign. Moreover it was perceived that the Narodovol'tsy were the most active and successful revolutionary group of the time, and their tactics were to be emulated. The growing isolation and persecution faced by the anarchist movement at the end of the 1870s had diverse effects; some defected to legal socialism (Costa, Brousse); others stubbornly persisted in trying to

build mass organisations (Kropotkin, Malatesta). Still others, seeing no possibility for popular organisations which were so easily infiltrated and brought down by governments, made a virtue out of their isolated positions and like the Russians, who were in the same situation vis-à-vis the masses, took up conspiracy and terrorism. But while Narodnaya volya were perceived in Europe as social revolutionaries, in fact their use of terrorism was aimed at forcing the government to grant political change; meanwhile the anarchist terrorists hoped to inspire popular revolt, perhaps not realising that they were in fact placing themselves in the same position as Narodnaya volya, that of an isolated duel with the forces of the state.