

AN OLD WEAPON REASSESSED

D. J. GOODSPEED

SINCE Hungary's bid for freedom was so bloodily suppressed, there have been many critics in the West who have argued that all such valiant attempts are predestined for failure. Fortunately for the cause of liberty, such cowardly counsels are not likely to be permanently accepted by the oppressed. Yet there is nevertheless a danger that this argument will be given wide credence by the free world and that it will come to be accepted as a commonplace that a successful revolt against a modern totalitarian state is impossible. It will be claimed that the slavery will inevitably be perpetuated in two ways—by violence against the body and by persuasion of the mind. A victorious rebellion will be considered out of the question whenever a single monolithic party controls not only the army and the police, but also the means of employment, the media of mass propaganda, the schools and universities, national churches, publishing houses, and the world of entertainment.

Now the truth or falsity of this theory is a matter of very great importance to all of us. In the long historical perspective, indeed, it may prove to be the most vital of all the problems that confront us. If the hypothesis is correct, it necessarily follows that the grip of a totalitarian party upon a nation can be pried loose only in one of two ways: either by the party dividing against itself and falling into internecine warfare, or by the exertion of external force, which in practice would generally mean the defeat of the totalitarian state in war.

The first of these alternatives would not appear to be a very hopeful one. Inter-party quarrels, though often murderous enough, have in fact seldom led to the toppling of the régime. The split between Trotsky and Stalin in the 1920's never came even close to endangering the Communist system of government, nor did Hitler's blood purge of Captain Roehm and the SA in June, 1934, seriously jeopardize the Nazi dictatorship. This is because such internal quarrels are always over the exercise of power and because disagreements are naturally not allowed to develop into a crisis until the power has been sufficiently consolidated to be a worth-while prize.

The second possibility, that a tyranny may be overthrown by being defeated in a foreign war, has certainly been the constant hope of oppressed peoples in the past. Poland was said to tremble whenever Russia and Germany agreed, but conversely, in the days of the partitions, the Poles always began to hope

when there was a falling out among the great powers. In former times most totalitarian regimes have indeed come to their end by military defeat. However, now that thermonuclear weapons have so greatly increased the destructiveness of modern war, there is an understandable reluctance on the part of the West to pay so high a price. Prudence—or what passes for prudence—will be able plausibly to plead that freedom is only meaningful if there is someone alive to enjoy it and that the liberty which is achieved as the result of a thermonuclear war might be too absolute to have any practical appeal.

These are very serious considerations. If they are true, it means that modern techniques of propaganda and coercion combined with the political and administrative apparatus of totalitarian states have initiated an altogether new historical trend. Furthermore, it means that the trend is virtually irreversible and that every totalitarian gain becomes to all intents and purposes permanent. Those states that become the protectorates or satellites of a great totalitarian power must abandon all hope of regaining their independence, while the oppressed peoples of the dictatorships themselves must accept an indefinite perpetuation of their servitude.

Still, if a tyranny cannot be overthrown from within, and if thermonuclear war is too dreadful an alternative, perhaps an oppressed people may comfort itself with the hope that the régime will grow progressively less authoritarian, that more liberal ideals will act as leaven within society, and that the totalitarian state will gradually transform itself into a more acceptable system of government. Certainly this is not an impossible course of events, although there is pathetically little in the way of historical precedent to support such a hope. Only the most credulous, for instance, can see any "withering away" of the state after forty years of Communist rule in the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the Communist bureaucracy has extended its influence throughout every section of private life, and the tragic ruins of Budapest are a mute rebuke to those who place their hope in so unlikely a course of events. In any case, there can be no effective pressure from below in a modern totalitarian state, and the great objection which must be advanced against the advocate of gradual reform is Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts and that absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. No individual man or political party, having once achieved a position of absolute authority, is at all likely to relinquish any of that authority unless forced to do so. The hope of progressive amelioration would therefore appear almost certain to be a vain one.

Yet the theory that all revolt against modern oppression is doomed to failure is seen to produce such a monstrous brood of evils that we must continue to attack it. If we can find no historical example of a modern totalitarian power that has been overthrown from within (and thereby disprove the hypothesis by the easy means of demonstration), perhaps we can do the next best thing and find some relevant example of an unsuccessful revolt which, if things had only turned out differently, might have achieved its object. History, after all, only tells us what actually happened, and there is no reason why we should not learn as much from the mistakes of revolutionaries as from the successes of tyrants.

Our quest, however, is not an easy one. No example from the twentieth century appears to suit our purpose. The divisions of the Western Allies, and their reluctance to face the ultimate consequences of World War III, tragically meant that there was from the outset no real hope for the patriots of Hungary. Neither the "bread and freedom" riots in Poznan earlier this year nor the heroic demonstration of the East Germans on June 17, 1953, were serious attempts at revolt, while the bomb plot of July, 1944, in which some members of the German officer corps at last turned against their Führer, ended in a bloody fiasco. The conspiracies of Italian liberals and the activities of the Italian Communist party under Mussolini never came within measurable distance of success. In October, 1917, the Bolsheviks under Lenin and Trotsky did indeed seize power in Russia, but this example is of no use to us since the major factor in the success of the Red Revolution was the defeat of the Tsarist armies in war. Yet if we ask ourselves who the Bolsheviks were and how they came to be revolutionaries, we are perhaps at last on the track of an historical analogy that will be useful.

By the end of the fifth decade of the nineteenth century Holy Russia still seemed far sunk in Oriental barbarism and superstition. Among the upper classes and the intelligentsia there were some advocates of liberal reform, but the middle class, which in the countries of Western Europe had led the struggle against absolutism, was in Russia small and weak. It is true that most of the peasants were sullen and discontented with their lot, but they had neither leaders, nor organization, nor articulation. Strangely enough, the liberation of the serfs in 1861 did little to overcome this popular dissatisfaction. To most of the emancipated serfs freedom as such meant very little. All that they were able to understand was that they were now expected to pay, over a period of twenty-nine years, for the land which they had always regarded as their own.

Russia, however, was very far from revolt at this time. The power of government was highly centralized, and the Autocracy, which had successfully broken the spirit of 1848 and which had ridden out the popular protests against the Crimean War, seemed in an unassailable position. The administration was loyally supported by the Army and was well served by a powerful and numerous secret police. The bureaucracy, although corrupt and inefficient, remained faithful to its own interests and staunchly supported the régime. There was no independent judiciary. The control of education was in the hands of Church and State, while a strict censorship was largely successful in protecting the masses from the disturbing influence of new ideas. Technology, it is true, had not yet placed in the hands of the government the radio, the mass circulation newspaper, or the television set as means of persuading the popular mind. But this disadvantage was to a large extent offset by the influence of a state-dominated religion that reached out to every diocese and parish of the Empire and whose arguments in favour of the *status quo* were listened to with a respect which modern propagandists can rarely inspire. All in all, Imperial Russia at this time would seem to conform in almost every respect to the definition of a modern totalitarian state. The outlook for the opponents of tyranny could scarcely have been less promising.

Yet in April, 1866, a student at the University of St. Petersburg, one Karakozov, fired his old-fashioned revolver at the Tzar. Considering the age and inefficiency of the weapon used, it is not surprising that Karakozov missed, but this bold attempt at tyrannicide did not go unnoticed, and there were others in Russia who took his example to heart. Indeed, it is not too much to say that Karakozov began with his pistol shot what was to end so tragically with the murder of the Romanoff dynasty by the bayonet thrusts of Yurovsky's Latvian soliders in the cellars at Ekaterinburg half a century later.

The courage and self-sacrifice of the would-be assassin served as an inspiration to a small group of intellectuals who formed revolutionary study circles in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, and throughout the southern provinces. The most famous of these was probably the Chaikovsky Circle, which was led by M. A. Natanson, a medical student in St. Petersburg. These idealists gathered together in students' rooms and in cheaply furnished flats where they sat around the samovar until the small hours of the morning, drinking endless glasses of tea and endlessly discussing the rights of man, the society of the future, and what was to be done. In the meanwhile Vera

Zasulich shot General Trepov, the St. Petersburg police commandant, and a revolutionary by the name of Kravchinski assassinated General Mezentsev, the head of the secret police.

These, however, were relatively isolated incidents, the mere flotsam and jetsam on the main current of revolutionary feeling in Russia. The great majority of those who favoured a new order were still preoccupied with their samovars and their discussions. But suddenly, towards the end of 1873, the revolutionary intellectuals felt that they had talked long enough and began the great spontaneous movement of the *Norodniki*, or "going to the people," the aim of which was to inspire the Russian masses by teaching and example with a desire for better things.

Within two years it was obvious that this movement had been a dismal failure. Not only did the peasants have no real interest in the freedom that the *Norodniks* promised them, but they also regarded the intellectuals from the cities with a very lively suspicion. Not infrequently they betrayed their would-be benefactors to the authorities. Between 1875 and 1877 the disillusioned *Norodniks* returned to their study circles in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev. By now many of them had had their first taste of Tsarist prisons. Some of their comrades had died in the cells of the Schlüsselberg Fortress or of the great Peter-Paul Prison in the capital. Some of those who met again had escaped from exile in Siberia. Yet, although the *Norodniks* no longer believed that the people were ripe for revolt, they had by no means resigned themselves to the existing state of affairs.

A new political party, *Zemlya i Volya* (Land and Liberty), was formed but was almost entirely ineffective. There is almost always some considerable measure of truth in popular conceptions, and the general public at this time tended to regard the extreme Russian revolutionaries as wild-eyed, bearded men, not too clean and scarcely sane, who wandered about with dynamite in their pockets and with impossibly Utopian dreams in their heads. In 1877 there was much to support this view. The major weakness of "Land and Liberty" was that it was essentially based on an emotional protest rather than on any reasoned tactical aim or on any definite objective of political or social reform. This emotionalism accounts ultimately for the disproportionate influence of personalities in the organization, for the aimless and uncoordinated effect of the party's activities, and for the disruptive and opposing influences within the party itself.

Naturally enough, none of the revolutionaries were satisfied with things as they were. The result was that "Land and Liberty" split in the summer of 1879. A conference of the most extreme elements, which was held at the watering resort of Lipetsk in June of that year, resolved to organize terrorism on an efficient basis. By ones and twos the delegates made their ways to a meeting in the woods outside the town. There, under the trees, they resolved upon the murder of Tsar Alexander II and determined to force their opinion upon the main body of the party, which was due to meet in a few days' time at Voronezh. At Voronezh the split in "Land and Liberty" was made formal, the Social Democrat, G. V. Plekhanov, leading the moderate elements away to form the party known as the *Cherni Peredyel*, or "Black Partition," and two extremists, Mihailov and Zelyabov, forming a new party known as *Narodnaya Volya*, or the "People's Will," which was dedicated to terrorism.

The formation of the *Narodnaya Volya* let loose the real spirit of the Russian revolutionary movement. The active members of the "People's Will" were always pathetically few in numbers, while the party itself had an effective life-span of rather less than two years. Those who actually participated in the attempts against the Tsar numbered twenty-one men and eleven girls, while the Party as such can only be said to have existed between the beginning of July, 1879, and March 1, 1881. Yet in that time there were at least six distinct attempts to assassinate the Emperor, and there may have been more of which we know nothing. Almost from the beginning this small group of men and women made the Tsar of All the Russias virtually a fugitive in his own palace. They hounded him in the streets, they exploded bombs beneath his private dining-room, they blew up coaches of his imperial train, they wrung from him the concession of calling a General Commission with representatives of the *Zemstva* and the large towns sitting upon it, and finally they killed him in full view of the populace of St. Petersburg, while he was surrounded by his imperial suite and his Cossack guards.

Among the revolutionaries three personalities were primarily responsible for the spirit and the activities of the party. A. I. Zelyabov, the son of a Crimean serf, was the real leader of the group, while Alexander Mihailov was Zelyabov's right-hand man. Mihailov, who knew every alley and side-street in St. Petersburg like the palm of his hand, made himself responsible for the internal security of the party. His arrest in

November, 1880, was a calamity from which the "People's Will" never fully recovered. The third member of this strange triumvirate was Sophia Perovskaya, the daughter of a Tsarist general who had been military governor of St. Petersburg. Sophia Perovskaya, like Mary Queen of Scots, is inevitably regarded as a heroine of romantic tragedy, although like Mary Queen of Scots, we can see her only through the eyes of those who were in some degree hostile to her. We see her first—small, blonde, extremely pretty, and with the daintiness of a doll—conducting study groups in St. Petersburg during the 1870's. We hear her speaking in her small, almost childish voice at the conferences at Lipetsk and Voronezh, urging always that now was the time to strike, that the Tsar must be killed, that there was no place in the party for second thoughts, or qualms, or pity. We see her on the morning of March 1, standing in the snow on the banks of the Catherine Canal blowing her dainty nose with a white handkerchief as the signal for the bomb throwers to take up their positions. We see her at last with her arms strapped behind her on the scaffold high above Semenovki Square. We see her kiss the cross that the bearded Orthodox priest presents to her, and we see her turn to kiss Zelyabov, her lover, good-bye. Then the executioner's assistant places the white cowl over her head, and Sophia Perovskaya passes into legend. What the *Narodnaya Volya* achieved was almost entirely the work of these three, and it is a fitting comment on the party that at the time of their capture Zelyabov was thirty-one years of age, Alexander Mihailov was twenty-four, and Sophia Perovskaya was twenty-seven. Zelyabov had been apprehended by the police prior to the final successful attempt on the life of the Tsar, and within the next few days practically all of the surviving members of the "People's Will" were under arrest. The six people who had been most directly concerned in the assassination were tried together and were condemned to death. To all intents and purposes the "People's Will" ceased to exist.

Yet the achievement of this small handful of terrorists must, in the judgment of history, be regarded as decisive. They became the martyrs of the forces of reform, and although the Communists who reaped the fruits of their sacrifice have been characteristically grudging in their praise, there is no doubt that the terrorists influenced the course of subsequent events as much by the feeling of shame that they inspired in weaker spirits as they did by any veneration. Above all, they had conclusively demonstrated that the people could hit back

and that even the Autocracy was vulnerable. The faith of officialdom in the fixed order of things was badly shaken, while there was a corresponding resurgence of confidence on the part of those who opposed the Tsar. Nor is it without significance that one of the last members of the *Narodnaya Volya* to be executed (1887) was Alexander Ulianov, Lenin's elder brother.

If we have an interest in these old terrorists today it is because there is once again in Russia and in Eastern Europe a repressive totalitarian power that brave men and women are struggling and dying to overthrow. They will continue to struggle and to die, and the free world, if it has any concern for its own safety or salvation, must help them in their struggle. In such a fight, with the odds so heavily on the side of tyranny, it is more than ever necessary to profit from the lessons of the past.

When all is said and done, the small handful of Russian revolutionaries made just about every mistake that it was possible to make. They were above all else romanticists and idealists rather than practical men and women. The aim of the terrorist technique must always be to make government impossible. It must not be revenge, or protest, or any lesser thing. Terrorism can bring about the breakdown of government in one or two ways: by the progressive intimidation of officials so that they no longer can be trusted to perform their duties, and by the direct removal of those persons who are the bulwarks of the existing order. Thus, although the members of the "People's Will" were tactically correct in their attack upon the Tsar, they failed to push this attack to its logical conclusion. It was not Alexander II who was their enemy, but rather it was any man who wore the Imperial Crown of Russia. The terrorist attack, to be efficient, should therefore have been against the position rather than against the man. In practice this would have meant that the murder of Alexander II was but the beginning and that his successor should likewise have been killed and his successor after him. Almost certainly Zelyabov, Mihailov, and Perovskaya recognized this necessity. Where they failed was in their ability to make a sustained effort. Terrorists indeed must always expect heavy casualties, but the business of the terrorist, like the business of the military leader, is to trade casualties for a better bargain. He buys and sells, and if he is worsted he is a poor business man. The price to be asked for blood is not indeed always the same—it may be public inspiration, or it may merely be more blood—but at the end it must always be that weakening of the spirit which alone

gives victory. It has been estimated that, between the years 1866 and 1892, the victims of the terrorist revolution totalled thirty thousand. By far the majority of these casualties were suffered by the revolutionaries themselves or by their possible sympathizers. This was a senseless and profligate squandering of resources.

The next time the Communist power in the satellites is challenged it is to be hoped that this will not be done by an heroic people throwing themselves on Russian tanks with pitiful home-made grenades. This is magnificent, but it must be said with all respect that it is not war. The tanks are not even the real targets. Those targets are rather the men who oppress, the political leaders. When you fight with a giant you must strike at his heart or his brain and not throw away your strength by hacking unsuccessfully at his armoured extremities. To be successful in such an endeavour it is necessary to conserve your own forces. It was in this matter that the People's Will were so woefully inadequate—they had no effective organization, no functioning security system, virtually no counter-intelligence system, and above all they did not impose that discipline which insists on a rational choice of objectives. The murder of minor officials, although it may be emotionally satisfying, is a waste of time. Most of the thirty thousand casualties could have been avoided if the rebels had been willing to disguise their feelings, to dissimulate, to take orders rather than to strike independently.

Moreover, the members of the "People's Will" never seem to have taken the technical problems of their profession with sufficient seriousness. There was literally no attempt at training. One or two days before the final attempt on the life of the Tsar, the grenade throwers were indeed taken to the deserted grounds of the Smolni monastery and given some practice in tossing rocks of approximately the equivalent weight, but grenade throwing is not an art that can be learned in an afternoon, and effective pistol shooting certainly takes even more time. The revolutionaries' choice of weapons also did much to limit the results they achieved. In almost every respect the bomb is an inferior weapon for a personal assault as compared with the pistol or the rifle. No one, indeed, seems to have considered using the rifle at all, although this weapon can kill effectively at a range of four hundred yards. It is no valid answer to this criticism to say that the revolutionaries were able to lay their hands on dynamite but other weapons were denied them. Rifles or pistols could at that time have been

purchased at any hardware shop in the capital, and even if this were not so, the determined revolutionary always has an unflinching supply of arms if he is willing to take them from the bodies of sentries or policemen.

The revolutionaries did not by any means make the best use of the Tsar's mistakes. In any clandestine fight against tyranny, the oppressing power can almost always be led to commit atrocities that will isolate it from the great mass of public opinion. Alexander II did indeed commit this error, and his son and grandson continually made the same type of mistake. It should be the business of the revolutionary to provoke official reaction and then to present that reaction to the general public in the worst possible light. Normally this should not be too difficult a business. If you take the cat of tyranny by the tail, you may safely leave it to the cat to do the pulling.

Yet it would be both ungenerous and unhistorical to end this critique on an entirely adverse note. The faults of the Russian social revolutionaries in the 1870's and the 1880's were the faults of youth, of inexperience, and of enthusiasm. These people did indeed lack judgement, knowledge, and common prudence, but they possessed on the credit side idealism, faith, and flawless courage. They fought for a cause which now has no more than academic interest for us. Their political ideals are outdated, their social objectives are no longer applicable, their dreams of the future have been erased by subsequent events. They failed to organize themselves properly before they struck their blow. They neglected the most elementary precepts of the art of war by loose security, dispersion of effort, failure to sustain their attack, and by substituting emotionalism for rational behaviour. We can learn from these mistakes, and we can help our friends in the oppressed nations to learn from them too. We now know for certain what we have always suspected—that the Communist empire in Eastern Europe has no real popular support, that it is hated by its subject peoples, that someday those peoples will fight again. Next time, if the staff work is good, that fight can be won. And these old Russian revolutionaries have, perhaps, other than purely technical lessons to teach us in the twentieth century.

In the time that has elapsed since their death, the tempo of the struggle between freedom and tyranny has greatly increased. The centralized totalitarian state has in many ways increased its power as it has certainly increased its brutality. The cells of the Schusselberg or of Peter-Paul were pleasant places as compared to the cells of the Lubyanka or to the huts

of Belsen or of Büchenwald. There is more need now than in previous times for a tightly-knit, compartmented, secure organization before the striking of the first blow. The problems of recruiting and of counter-espionage are more complicated and delicate than they were in the last century.

Yet the years have not brought advantage only to the totalitarian state. The very centralization which is the oppressing state's strength may also in some ways be its weakness. Power that is highly concentrated is undoubtedly swifter and more efficient, but it also presents a more attractive target. The Russian terrorists proved that oppressive governments were still vulnerable. The hypothesis that was our original point of departure would thus seem to be not even technically correct. There are weapons left with which even the smallest minority may hope to oppose even the vastest machine.

In another sense, of course, the technical side of the matter is the least important. The real mistake of those who argue that modern totalitarian states are too strong to be effectively opposed is not that they overestimate the coercive and propaganda power of the state, but that they underestimate the spirit of man. Perhaps, after all, the last word on this subject was said by one of the social revolutionaries. Shortly before his arrest and execution Alexander Mihailov told his friends, "We can do anything if we are not afraid of death."