

[Review Article]

Philosophy, Psychology and History: The Making of a Suicidal Terrorist

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Abstract *Philip Pomper is a leading scholar of 19th and 20th century Russia. His latest work is a study of Alexander ('Sasha') Ulyanov, who was executed for his role as one of the leaders of a failed assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander III in 1887. His motivation in becoming a terrorist is examined in the light of the evidence presented by Pomper and account is also taken of previous studies such as those by Thomas Masaryk. It is contended that the culture of nihilism and the concomitant worship of science were more important than anything in Ulyanov's family background in explaining his radicalization. The transition from theory to practice is explained by focusing on the psychological impact of the concept of the nihilist 'new man' on the young student Alexander. Attention is also given to the significance of what has often been dismissed as a minor episode in the history of terrorism, one which would have faded from view but for the later fame of Ulyanov's younger brother, Vladimir Ilyich, who entered the mainstream of history as Lenin.*

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'Since the [eighteen-] sixties, nihilism has been the question of questions for thoughtful Russians—and for thoughtful Europeans.' This, in the judgment of Thomas Masaryk nearly a century ago (1919: 81), because for Europeans nihilism was the primary symptom of the general crisis of belief ravaging the continent. But for Russians it was more serious yet. The nihilists they had to confront no longer confined themselves to verbal assaults on the established order; they had moved on from the philosophy of 'positivism' and the aesthetics of 'realism' to the provoking of revolution through acts of terror. It was a step that was to determine much of the course of the history of their country (and the world) for the next century

and more, but fathoming the process by which it took place is far from easy. What forces, what experiences could have driven such people to choose not just to kill, but to do so indiscriminately, using the most advanced weapon created by the science they venerated, the dynamite grenade (laced for good measure, on occasion, with strychnine)?

In explaining how, in some cases but by no means all, nihilists took the rutted path from study and debate to political violence, Thomas Masaryk sketched a compelling composite portrait of the Russian terrorist of the 1870's and '80's; young, aristocratic, 'frank and straightforward,' 'strongly individualistic,' one who 'had something of the ascetic about him' and so 'delighted in self-sacrifice' with 'no taste for bodily pleasures,' who 'aspired to distinguish himself by deeds of personal heroism,' whose 'enmity was concentrated upon individuals' and for whom his task was 'a point of honour' because it was 'an aristocratic struggle for freedom waged against tsarist autocracy' (1919: 107-108). And here, in Philip Pomper's biographical study of Alexander ('Sasha') Ulyanov, one of the leaders of a failed conspiracy to assassinate Tsar Alexander III in early 1887, we have a living specimen of the type. Here we might learn from a detailed case study the essentials about what drove young people like him, reluctantly but inexorably, to attempted carnage and the scaffold. More importantly still, we are forced to confront the significance of his actions for those who take thought today, not just in Europe but throughout the world.

Pomper, emeritus professor of history at Wesleyan University, has spent much of his academic career trying to fathom the character and motivation of the Russian nihilists; as well as producing studies of the theoreticians and practitioners of terror like Lavrov and Nechaev (1972, 1979), he is the author of a widely read survey of the topic (1992). In Sasha Ulyanov's case, he believes, conversion to terrorism 'followed a familiar pattern: first anger at the regime and despair at its policies, then deep and careful study of the possibilities, and finally (often after an emotional experience) submission to a sometimes amoral entrepreneur of terrorism' (p. 113). This generalization apart, though, he also tries to navigate the more complex 'psychological undercurrents' of the Ulyanov family (p. xxiii) for insights into why it produced not just Sasha but a second, vastly more destructive revolutionary, Vladimir Ilyich, better known to history as Lenin. Can psychology, sensitively applied to the family and to individuals, act as a bridge to explain how philosophy was transmuted into history?

As far as the Ulyanov family background goes, there is little to suggest that it was of itself a fertile breeding ground for extremism. Ilya Nikolaevich, the father, was a conscientious government official, orthodox in religion, who if anything seems to have acted as a brake on the radicaliz-

ing of his sons. Although Pomper does not make the point, it is worth noting that his father's death in January 1886 may have removed the key barrier that had hitherto prevented Sasha from finding his path into revolution. He was clearly prepared to sacrifice his mother's feelings for him when committing himself to a self-destructive assault on the regime, but whether he could have defied his father in similar fashion is an open, if unanswerable, question. However that be, it remains a fact that after January 1886 Sasha was himself head of the family, beholden to no-one else's authority, free to act entirely on his own responsibility.

In politics Ilya Nikolaevich may have been no begetter of a radical, but he did make two contributions to that cause, however unwittingly. His own example, as well as his teachings, clearly inspired in Sasha a devotion to the service of others and an ambition for academic distinction that were, in perverted form, to manifest themselves in his brief career as a terrorist. Sasha's belief that he and his fellow conspirators alone understood the path to their country's salvation, which they had an unshakeable duty to realize, greased the downward slope to murder. Professor Pomper is particularly helpful in expounding the nature and significance of the concept of *rodina* or 'homeland' with which Sasha made such effective play at his trial (pp. 185-6), and the moral self-belief that this embodied doubtless owed much to the way in which Sasha patterned himself on his father. Ilya Nikolaevich also emphasized the supreme importance of education, and Sasha took this to heart, pushing himself single-mindedly to achieve success in his chosen field, science. Some of the knowledge he acquired along the way was later put to the service of making grenades, but even more significant was the way in which a belief in the methods of science prepared him for entry into the radical milieu of the university world.

Professor Pomper is right to point out that when Sasha entered St. Petersburg University in 1883, he was far behind many of his fellow students in terms of radicalization (pp. 80-81). But, in what is perhaps the most valuable remark in the book, he also notes that Sasha's experience thereafter 'shows dramatically that suicide terrorism emerges from "scientific" ideas as easily as from fervent religious beliefs' (p. xxv). This was in part because of the self-confidence, amounting to self-blindness that imbued those who felt they had mastered scientific ideas. As Pomper notes, 'The idea of science as the source of all truth and a panacea for human ills had been introduced by the nihilist critics thirty years earlier and remained strong in this period' (p. 72). Such overweening claims did much to undermine the voice of conscience, and here Professor Pomper's expertise in the genesis and development of Russian nihilism comes into its own. He is particularly insightful into the manner in which Lavrov's views of 1884 opened the door

to revolutionary terror (p. 53), but of even greater significance for Sasha Ulyanov was the portrait that Pisarev sketched in 1865 of the character Bazarov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. For Bazarov, in Pisarev's interpretation, became a type, a model for Sasha. As Pomper notes, 'Pisarev admonished young people to calculate everything...' (p. 37) and in so doing he created a model which Sasha strove to incorporate into himself.

Central to this self-image was a mathematizing approach to life that came to dominate Sasha's relationships with people and the world. The notion that one should 'calculate everything' he took to heart. Once again, Pomper is an excellent guide to the implications of this, arguing that 'Pisarev's image of the nihilist hero...showed young men of Sasha's type the lineaments of a new kind of human being ascetically dedicated to science and work for the good of humanity' (p. 33). He goes on to quote a key passage from that 1865 essay in which Pisarev states confidently that 'New men don't sin and don't repent; they always reflect, and thus they only make mistakes in calculation, and then correct their errors and avoid repeating them for the future...The new people's intellect is in total harmony with their feeling...' (pp. 33-34).

The dangers of this for Sasha became apparent all too quickly. The analogy between solving an equation and coming to a proper understanding of himself and others was far too superficial. It failed to safeguard him from 'errors' that could not be 'corrected' with the aid of an eraser and a pencil, robbing him of the self-understanding that might have led him to question his own capabilities, if not his motives. Masaryk, though in principle sympathetic towards those like Sasha who were in youthful rebellion against the established regime, was not blind to their faults in this regard.

'The Russian terrorist was young...The papers were full of news items about revolts among schoolboys and girls...

The youthful terrorist had a fine enthusiasm, but he was green in judgment, he lacked knowledge of men and things, he knew little of political and administrative institutions. For these reasons, his enmity was concentrated upon individuals, and was frequently directed against the tsar alone. Owing to this political anthropomorphism (it might even be called fetichism), the young terrorists were in social and political matters utopian, unpractical, and negative.

The boyish nihilist, in his inexperience and simplicity, was naïve also in ethical and political fields; he was frank and straightforward, devoid of understanding for compromise, and with no fears concerning the consequences of his logic' [1919: 107].

It was here that the 'scientific' approach of nihilism did its greatest

harm, since it convinced Sasha that his understanding of what needed to be done for the homeland that he genuinely wished to serve was complete, and that he was therefore at liberty, indeed compelled, to act at once. The true complexity of Russia's problems passed unseen, and with it went any hope of grasping the actual consequences of the course on which he was to embark. He passed through the first two stages of Professor Pomper's schema, 'anger at the regime' and 'study of the possibilities' far too hastily; his image of himself as a scientific adept denied him the protection that a more sensitive awareness of reality would have brought.

His complacent, self-approving innocence was also evident in the third stage of his radicalization, the 'submission to a sometimes amoral entrepreneur of terrorism,' in this instance, Peter Shevyrev, the organizer of the plot to kill Tsar Alexander III on the anniversary of his father's assassination in 1881 (the conspiracy thus being styled the 'Second March First'). Sasha had his reservations, telling a close friend, 'A strange mechanism this fellow Shevyrev—I just don't understand him' (p. 121). This was scarcely surprising, for one could not 'calculate' an individual like Shevyrev who, suffering from chronic tuberculosis, seemed intent on taking as many down with him into death as he could, and in the most spectacular way possible. A failure to attend properly to his own feelings was instrumental in explaining why Sasha threw in his lot with what Pomper accurately characterizes as a small group of 'reckless and suicidal youths, whose behavior violated conspiratorial rules and played into the hands of the police' (p. 127).

But, for all the vaunted 'intellect' that was supposed to inform Sasha's 'scientific' approach to life, there was still lacking the 'emotional experience' that Professor Pomper argues, quite correctly, was necessary to make Sasha's commitment to terrorism irrevocable. It came on November 17, 1886 [misdated to 1887 on p. 113], during a student demonstration at the Volkovo Cemetery to commemorate the anniversary of the death of the nihilist writer, Nicholas Dobrolyubov. The behavior of the police on that occasion, preventing the students from entering the cemetery to pay their respects and then detaining them for hours in the rain, triggered an enormous explosion of anger in Sasha. Professor Pomper tries to link the humiliation that Sasha felt on this occasion with similar incidents dating back to his childhood, but can only come to the rather vague conclusion that 'For whatever deep reasons, this became the moment of Sasha's transformation into a terrorist' (p. 115). Perhaps more helpful than such psychological speculations here, though, is the analysis of the general climate of reaction in the Russia of that time that Masaryk provides.

'The tyranny exercised over literature and over academic freedoms was all the more intolerable in Russia, because in these

respects liberty had already for the most part been secured elsewhere in Europe, and because such liberty could not be kept out of Russia, unless the tsarist censorship should attempt to gag the whole of Europe. None the less the impossible was attempted. Forcibly and brutally Russian absolutism stamped on every possible movement towards freedom. Each revolutionary outrage had to be atoned for by the sacrifice of countless victims on the scaffold, in fortresses, and in Siberia. The revolutionists fell sick and died by hundreds in the fetid jails. Many of them, unquestionably, were perfectly innocent. Numbers became insane. Many terminated their protracted martyrdom by suicide, often in some unprecedented manner, as by the hunger strike. Even more inhuman than the cruelty was the depravity of the bureaucracy, the arbitrary infliction of corporal punishment upon political prisoners, and all the brutality to which the official tyrants were prone' (1919: 111).

The significance of what happened on November 17, 1886, was that Sasha came into immediate physical contact with the forces of reaction for the first time. What triggered his outrage, whether the actual presence of the St. Petersburg chief of police in front of his eyes, or having to watch a female companion being clubbed with a rifle butt, is uncertain, as Professor Pomper notes (pp. 114-115). But it was the tipping point, the moment when things became real for him.

The story of the failure of the conspiracy itself is well told by Professor Pomper and need not detain us long here. It was almost certainly doomed from the outset, given the carelessness of the Shevyrev and his recruits, the relative apathy of the student body following the collapse of the People's Will movement in the wake of the 1883 Degaev affair, and increasingly effective police counter-terrorism surveillance. Although Sasha was drawn in to act as a grenade maker, publicist and eventually leader for the group, rather than as an actual bomb thrower, at heart he seems to have guessed his fate; he had become at least a suicidal, if not actually a suicide terrorist, one of those who, in the words of his fellow practitioner of terror, Serge Stepniak-Kravchinski, were 'consecrated to death' (Laqueur, 2004: 89). This was the atmosphere that Dostoevsky knew intimately and could describe better than anyone. Once arrested along with the rest of the group, Sasha chose to turn his trial into an occasion to expound rather than renounce his beliefs and to play up his role in the conspiracy, both of which ensured him a death sentence. It was duly carried out on May 8, 1887.

Sasha Ulyanov deliberately chose the manner of his death. As Professor Pomper notes, by keeping his interrogators in ignorance of his role in instigating the plot, he might have escaped hanging (p. 158); instead

he tried to treat the court to a full account of his convictions, including his belief that, in the words of the group's proclamation that he himself had penned, 'In Russia there will always be small groups of people, so dedicated to their ideas and so passionately feeling the misery of their homeland, that they will not think it a sacrifice to die for their cause' (p. 184). Such words implied a confident expectation that his martyrdom would not be in vain, that it must be of service to his *rodina*. What has been the judgment of history on that expectation?

Thomas Masaryk was, to his core, a democrat, an advocate of freedom and indeed a Christian, but we have already seen that his attitude to young nihilistic Russian terrorists like Sasha Ulyanov was not without a measure of regard—as he wrote, 'We have to remember that certain theologians have defended tyrannicide... (1919: 105). Masaryk, who himself fought the absolutism and theocracy of the Habsburg Empire in defense of his nation, had little sympathy to spare for the Romanovs, a family he regarded as the most potent symbol of reaction in his era. His feelings were rather with their opponents, as is clear from his description of the autocracy quoted above, one that he viewed as choking the breath out of Russian society and provoking the violence of the response of the country's youth by its own violence. Autocracy, allied to theocracy, was Masaryk's chief obstacle in the creation of modern Czechoslovakia, so his opinions, rendered in the early years of the 20th century when autocracy still survived and totalitarianism was a matter for the future, have the flavor of those times.

'Whatever the faults of the Russian revolutionists and terrorists, it is impossible, in a final survey, to judge them unfavourably. Their ardent devotion to intellectual and political freedom, their self-sacrificing enthusiasm for their folk, their reckless disregard of their personal interests and of their own lives, their fidelity towards their comrades—these are brilliant characteristics, are qualities of the utmost value, which cannot fail to arouse respect and sympathy for individual revolutionists and for the Russian people from which they sprang' (1919: 113).

But they did so fail. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, surveying the unfolding legacy of terrorism from the vantage point of the 1960's, was far from respectful or sympathetic; the millions of dead in the Soviet gulag and the Ukrainian famine, the 'second serfdom' of Stalin, political repression far, far worse than anything under the Tsars, all of this he saw as the true bequest of revolutionaries like Alexander Ulyanov, the historical results by which they should be judged.

'A hundred years after the birth of the revolutionary movement, we can say without hesitation that the terrorist idea and the

terrorist actions were a hideous mistake on the part of the revolutionaries and a disaster for Russia, bringing her nothing but confusion, grief and inordinate human losses.

...Here is one of the earliest [terrorist] proclamations, which started it all.

“What is it that we want? The good, the happiness of Russia. Achieving a new life, a better life, without casualties is impossible, because we cannot afford delay—we need speedy, immediate reform!”

What a false path! They, the zealots, could not afford to wait, and so they sanctioned human sacrifice (of others, not themselves) to bring universal happiness nearer! They could not afford to wait, and so we, their great-grandsons, are not at the same point they were (when the peasants were freed [in 1861]), but much farther behind’ (1978: 90-91).

And indeed Sasha Ulyanov was in haste, though it is also true that he did sacrifice himself, and Russia a century after his birth was without much question a good deal farther from universal happiness than it had been during his lifetime. But another fifty years have passed since Solzhenitsyn wrote, so perhaps there are fresh insights to be gained today into the meaning of this young life cut short. To some, the amateurishness of the 1887 plot may still seem ‘like the death rattle of terrorist groups’ (Burleigh: 56), an insignificant episode briefly punctuating a period of ‘downtime between the revolutionary terrorism of the People’s Will and its most notable successor, the Party of Socialist-Revolutionaries’ (Law: 85). But in the light of the collapse of the Ulyanov created Soviet Union, is there anything new to be said about the ‘Second March First’ and its theoretician?

In terms of enhancing our understanding of the family and cultural milieu from which Sasha Ulyanov came, there is much of value in Professor Pomper’s new study. We come away with a richer appreciation of the atmosphere of the times, and of the seeming inevitability of the unfolding drama. In terms of the wider significance of the topic, though, the attempt to link that drama with the life story of Sasha’s much younger brother, the future Lenin, is problematical. In his much earlier work on Lavrov, Professor Pomper had stated that Lenin ‘almost certainly entered the revolutionary movement because of the execution of his brother, Alexander’ (1972: xiv), a claim that is echoed in the rather sweeping subtitle of the present book. But while it is obvious that the origins of the Bolshevik Revolution lay in the life of Lenin, to ascribe his radicalism to the manner of his brother’s death smacks of overstatement. Sasha himself did not become a revolutionary because of the death of a relative, and there was enough in

the climate of the times to radicalize almost an entire generation of educated young people. The assertion that Lenin would have escaped such influences but for Sasha's execution is hard to justify, and not just because it is counterfactual.

Professor Pomper is certainly on much firmer ground when he argues that Lenin learned from his brother's mistakes as a conspirator. Caution, amounting to a complete lack of trust in others, did indeed become the hallmark of the future Bolshevik leader, and so it might be argued that Sasha's chief significance lay in providing an example of carelessness for his brother to avoid. But this not only presupposes that Lenin's secretive behavior was a matter of nurture rather than nature, it also assumes that revolutionary conspiracy, whether overtly terroristic or not, can be judged appropriately in terms of success or failure. It is clear from the perspective of the early 21st century that Bolshevism had a hollow core from the very outset, and that its 'success' in 1917 brought unmeasured havoc to the Russia for which Sasha Ulyanov believed he was laying down his life. Nor is it in any way clear that if the grenades that he manufactured had done their job on February 26, February 28 or March 1, 1887, Russia would stepped forward to a brighter future. Nihilist idealism coupled with youthful self-ignorance were certainly no guarantees of the approach of paradise. Perhaps the true lesson of the 'Second March First', then, is that not all failures are what they seem. Sasha Ulyanov, for all his misapplied virtues and his efforts to the contrary, escaped this life without actually having blood on his hands. The same cannot be said of his far more 'successful' younger brother. To which of them was fate actually kinder?

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