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WHEN RUSSIAN TERRORISTS WERE MORAL

BY VLADIMIR ALEXANDROV

In the fall of 1904, leaders of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party gathered in Paris to plan their next steps. Emboldened by the successful assassination of Minister of the Interior Vyacheslav von Plehve in Saint Petersburg on July 15 by the Combat Organization, the party's terrorist branch, and convinced that Russia was on the verge of a revolution and that more assassinations would help fuel the fire, they sentenced to death the governors general of the three most important cities – Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev. The Socialist Revolutionaries (or “SRs”) were the largest radical party in Russia and pursued a populist agrarian agenda that focused on the peasantry, who made up eighty percent of the population and whose labor was the backbone of the empire's predominantly agricultural economy. That the peasants lived largely in archaic poverty and ignorance was just one of the crimes against the Russian people for which the SRs blamed the imperial regime.

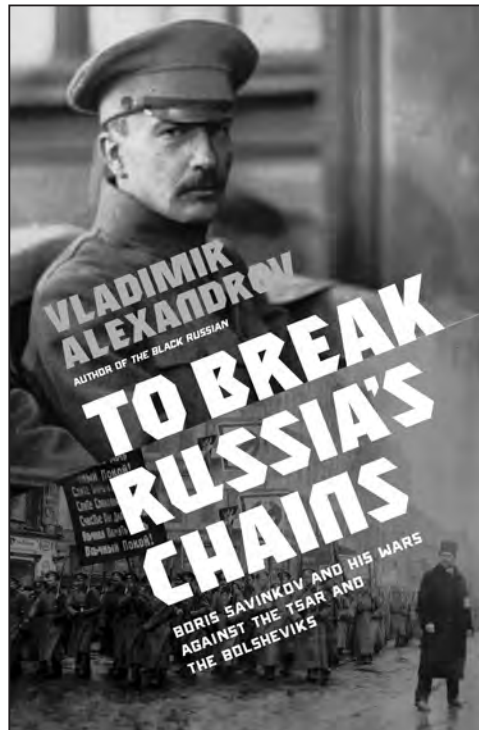
Boris Savinkov, second-in-command of the Combat Organization and the leader of the team that assassinated Plehve, eagerly took on the target in Moscow – Grand Duke Sergey Alexandrovich, who, in addition to being the city's governor general, was the tsar's uncle and his brother-in-law (they had married sisters). Sergey was one of the most influential members of the entire reactionary Romanov clan, and thus, in the eyes of the SRs, an embodiment of injustice. When he was appointed to his post in Moscow in 1891 by his brother, Alexander III, he began his duties by brutally expelling the city's 20,000 Jews; moreover, he did so on Passover. He showed heartless indifference during the

notorious Khodynka Tragedy in 1896, when several thousand peasants and working-class Muscovites were trampled to death during the bungled coronation celebrations for Nicholas II. He let police and Cossacks use bloody force to suppress dissent and to break up demonstrations in Moscow by protesting students and others. At the end of 1904, with the country in turmoil and many groups demanding reform, Sergey urged his nephew Nicholas II to stand firm against change, leading the tsar to announce to

his chief minister: “I shall never, under any circumstances, agree to a representative form of government because I consider it harmful to the people whom God has entrusted to my care.” Not only revolutionaries, but liberals seethed at the mere mention of Sergey's name.

In early November 1904, Savinkov and the three other members of his team made it safely to Moscow, smuggling in several dozen pounds of dynamite and with an ample supply of money. Using the Combat Organization's previous experience with Plehve, two members, Boris Moiseyenko and Ivan Kalyaev bought horses, *droshkys*, and disguised themselves as cabbies so they could follow the grand duke's comings and goings freely in the streets. The third member of the team, Dora Brilliant, was the chemist and bomb technician

and stayed out of sight in a hotel a few streets from the Kremlin, waiting patiently for the call to arm the bombs she had fashioned. However, Savinkov took the opposite approach and hid in plain view. Using papers that identified him as a rich Englishman, he assumed an aloof mien befitting an Anglo-Saxon (even though he did not speak any



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English), and moved freely around the city in an expensive fur coat with a magnificent beaver collar and matching hat.

The winter of 1904-1905 was a restive time in the Russian Empire and the team's stalking was interrupted several times when Sergey changed his routines in response. The war with Japan over Manchuria that began in February and that the Russians had expected to win hands down was going from bad to worse and causing political and labor disturbances in Moscow and other cities. On January 9/22, 1905, a day that would go down in history as "Bloody Sunday," troops in Saint Petersburg shot hundreds of peaceful demonstrators who were approaching the Winter Palace in an attempt to petition the tsar to improve labor conditions and end the unpopular war. The carnage triggered outrage throughout the Empire and around the world. Protest meetings took place in many cities and within days 400,000 workers went on strike in the largest action of its kind in Russian history. Sergey decided to seek increased safety for himself and his family and retreated from an imperial residence on the city's outskirts to the Nicholas Palace inside the Kremlin itself.

Finally, in late January, after the team had picked up Sergey's trail again, Savinkov saw his chance. He read in Moscow's newspapers that a benefit concert for a military charity would take place on February 2 in the Bolshoy Theater. And since the patroness of the charity was Sergey's wife, Grand Duchess Elizaveta (sister of Alexandra, the Empress of Russia, and known in the family as "Ella"), Savinkov concluded that the grand duke could not fail to attend the benefit and set the assassination for that day.

On Wednesday afternoon, February 2, Dora Brilliant assembled



Boris Savinkov, c. 1899.

two bombs in her hotel room weighing several kilograms each. Savinkov met her in an alley nearby at 7PM. Handling the soldered tin boxes very carefully, he transferred them to a briefcase.

The team's surveillance had determined that there were only two routes Sergey's carriage could take from the Kremlin to the Bolshoy Theater half a mile away: it would have to go either to the left or the right of the Imperial Russian Historical Museum, a large red brick building in an ornate Russian style that sits on the edge of Red Square.

By 7:30PM Savinkov finished delivering the bombs to the two throwers. He gave the first to Kalyaev, with whom he had been close friends since childhood, and who would wait for the grand duke on his likeliest route, to the right of the museum. They said their farewells and then embraced. Kalyaev expected to die during the attack, and Savinkov had never heard him speak of his love for the team and its mission with such ardor.

At 8PM Kalyaev took up his position in front of the red-brick Moscow City Hall building on the northern edge of Red Square near the museum. The second thrower

was a hundred yards away, by the tall iron gates to Alexander Garden. Both men dressed inconspicuously as peasants and each carried a cotton bundle that sagged under the weight of the bomb inside. Savinkov went into the depths of the garden to wait for the explosion.

A blizzard was beginning and the cold was intense. The few streetlights in the area did little to lift the gloom of the heavy northern night, which seemed even darker because of the clouds hanging over the Kremlin's sharp towers. There was hardly any traffic on the nearby streets and squares. Passersby were few and difficult to make out through the layered shadows.

A few minutes after 8PM, Kalyaev saw the white acetylene lamps of the grand duke's carriage emerge from the passageway near the Historical Museum one hundred yards away from where he was standing. He had anticipated this moment for months and did not hesitate. Raising his right hand with the bomb, he began to run over the snow-covered ground, intending to cut the carriage off as it crossed the square in front of him.

In seconds, he was close enough to see inside.

But what he glimpsed stunned him. Silhouetted against the padded, white silk interior was Sergey, but on the seat next to him was a woman – the grand duchess, and in the seat opposite – two children.

Kalyaev stopped as abruptly as if he had run into a wall. He then let his arm drop and stood watching as the carriage rolled away toward the lights of Theatrical Square. There was no one around – no mounted guards, no escorting police vehicles – and neither the coachman nor anyone inside the carriage had noticed him.

To Savinkov waiting in Alexander Garden, time had dragged so slowly that it seemed as if entire years had passed. He had seen the lights of the grand duke's carriage flash by and turn toward Kalyaev; but no explosion followed. Then, as he peered into the freezing mist and gloom, he saw Kalyaev approaching.

His expression was anxious, his eyes searching.

Savinkov stared at Kalyaev with bewilderment.

But Kalyaev was so shaken that he had difficulty stringing words together: "I'm afraid. Wouldn't it have been a crime against us all? . . . But I couldn't do otherwise, you have to understand, I couldn't . . . My arm dropped by itself . . . There was a woman, children . . . Children . . ."

Only then did Savinkov understand what had happened.

"Tell me, was it the right thing to do?" Kalyaev continued. "It was right, wasn't it? Let them live. Are they guilty? Or do you think that I'm afraid? No, you don't think that . . . I ran right up to the carriage."

The children Kalyaev had glimpsed were Sergey's and Ella's nephew and niece, ages twelve and thirteen, whom they had

formally adopted two years earlier. By staying his hand against them, Kalyaev had risked arrest and death for himself and the entire team. But the moral imperative not to spill innocent blood, which was a cardinal tenet of the SRs and the Combat Organization, eclipsed revolutionary justice.

Savinkov replied to Kalyaev that not only did he not condemn him – he fully approved what he did. So did the other members of the team. They decided to try again two days later.

In the morning on Friday, February 4, Brilliant again went through the risky procedure of arming the two bombs by inserting the impact fuses into them. But just as Savinkov was leaving to distribute them, he discovered to his shock that one of the throwers had dropped out of the attack at the last minute. It seemed as though it would be necessary to suspend the entire operation. However, Kalyaev insisted that he could make the attack alone, and after vacillating for a few moments, Savinkov agreed.

They said goodbye again, Kalyaev kissed Savinkov on the lips, and headed off toward the Kremlin. In those distant and more innocent days, entry into it was unrestricted.

Savinkov's plan had been to meet Brilliant in a confectioner's shop a short walk away and then return with her to the Kremlin to witness the bomb's explosion. They were still walking back when he suddenly heard a curiously muted, "distant, hollow, sound."

According to eyewitnesses, the bomb went off at 2:45PM. Kalyaev had run right up to the grand duke's carriage in Senate Square, sixty-five paces inside the Kremlin's walls, and hurled the bomb from a distance of only a few feet. There were no guards close enough to intervene.

The explosion was devastating. Kalyaev felt himself sucked into its vortex and for a split second glimpsed the carriage disintegrating; then a blast of hot smoke and splinters hit him in the face and tore his hat off. A narrow column of dirty yellow and black smoke shot into the sky. But miraculously, Kalyaev remained on his feet.

When the smoke cleared, some five paces away he saw a low, shapeless mass consisting of fragments of wood from the carriage, shreds of the grand duke's clothing, and what was left of his body. The sight was horrific: the head was missing and most of the torso was completely destroyed; the snow all around was splattered with blood. One of Sergey's fingers and other small bits of flesh were found on surrounding rooftops weeks later.

Kalyaev was surprised to be alive. He knew that he could not escape but started walking away anyway; then he heard cries from behind and felt people seize him. A panicked detective prattled with relief that it was a miracle he hadn't been hurt himself. Kalyaev was bundled off in a cab to a local police station and from there to prison.

When Sergey's wife Ella heard the explosion from inside the palace, she realized immediately that something appalling had happened to her husband and dashed outside wearing only a loose cloak over her shoulders.

Some people had begun to gather around the gruesome mass in Senate Square. One or two tried to stop the grand duchess from approaching; she pushed past them. In shock, but showing exceptional self-control, Ella knelt in the snow and started to gather what she could of her husband's bleeding remains. She pressed her face to what was left of his right hand and pulled off the rings.

The residents of the Kremlin entered deep mourning, and the first prayers for the dead were chanted over the grand duke's remains at 4PM in the church of Saint Alexey. When members of the imperial family in Saint Petersburg got the news, they were shocked and horrified, even if many had no personal affection for Sergey. They were also so terrified about their own safety, just as the SRs had planned, that neither the tsar, nor several other senior members of the family risked coming to Moscow for the funeral several days later. Because of the danger of appearing in public, they were even advised not to attend requiem services in Saint Petersburg's major cathedrals.

Beyond these inner circles, however, the reaction was mostly indifference. The British Consul in Moscow reported to his embassy

in Saint Petersburg that there was much sympathy for the grand duchess because of the affection she had won through her efforts to help sick and wounded soldiers; but although newspapers condemned the assassination, he added, they said little "in favour of the late Grand Duke." By contrast, in a central Moscow prison, when political prisoners heard the news, they began to sing the "*Marseillaise*," France's national anthem, which had also become the international hymn of revolution.

Despite her shock and grief in the aftermath of Sergey's death, Ella showed striking stoicism as well as her characteristic charity. On the day of the assassination itself, she visited the coachman who had been driving the grand duke's carriage and had been seriously injured. To spare his feelings she did not reveal the truth about her husband.

However, the greatest proof – and test – of Ella's fortitude and faith was her astonishing visit to Kalyaev in his prison cell just three days after the assassination.

Kalyaev was so shocked that he could only watch in amazement as she dropped helplessly into a chair next to his, then took his hand firmly in hers, and began to weep.

It was an amazing, surreal encounter of two people from irreconcilable worlds who managed briefly to share a common humanity in the face of one death and a second that was imminent. Their meeting lasted about twenty-five minutes. Kalyaev later described it in letters to Savinkov, to other comrades, and in a moving poem.

At first, an overwhelming feeling of pity for the grand duchess washed over him, and, incredibly, he even tried to console her. Equally incredibly, she responded to him with compassion, saying



A brilliant examination of Boris Savinkov, the enigmatic Russian revolutionary about whom Winston Churchill said, "few men tried more, gave more, dared more and suffered more for the Russian people," and who remains a legendary and controversial figure in his homeland today.

"Fascinating."
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

"Excellent. Will awaken interest in this extraordinary life."
—Anthony Beevor

"A formidable achievement."
—Kai Bird,
Pulitzer Prize-winner



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that he “must have suffered a great deal” to decide to do what he did.

But upon hearing this, Kalyaev jumped up and interrupted her, crying that his suffering was nothing compared to the suffering of millions of others who have no way of “protesting against the cruelties of the government, and against this most horrible war.” When Ella tried to explain her and her husband’s position, and despite his pity for her, Kalyaev did not yield his revolutionary convictions and insisted that he would give his life “a thousand times, not just once” for Russia to be free.

Before leaving, Ella told Kalyaev that she would pray for him and that “the grand duke forgives you.” She also asked him to accept a small icon from her “as a memento.”

Kalyaev took the icon, but could not resist telling her: “My conscience is clear.”

When Ella got up to leave, Kalyaev rose too. He then bowed his head, took her right hand in his, raised it to his lips, and kissed it.

On April 5, 1905, Kalyaev was tried by a Special Commission of the Imperial Governing Senate and sentenced to death. He was hanged at dawn on May 10, 1905, in Shlisselburg Fortress, an old political prison twenty miles east of Saint Petersburg, and retained his composure until the end.

After Grand Duke Sergey’s funeral, Ella withdrew from the world and dedicated the rest of her life to her faith and good works. In 1908, after selling her jewels to buy land in Moscow, she founded the Martha and Mary Convent of Mercy that was dedicated to tending to the city’s poor and sick. In 1910, she took the veil herself and became the Convent’s abbess.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in November of 1917, they arrested Ella and her followers, as well as many other members

of the imperial family. Unlike the SRs, the Bolsheviks had no compunctions about killing innocents. On July 17 of the following year, their political police, the “Cheka,” executed Nicholas II, his wife, their five children – aged thirteen to twenty-two, and four retainers. Later the same day, a detachment of the Cheka took Ella and a number of her followers to an abandoned, water-filled mine shaft in the Urals and pushed them in alive. When the guards heard splashes and voices singing prayers, they threw in two hand grenades; when this did not stop the singing the Cheka filled the shaft with brush and set it on fire. In 1984 the late grand duchess was canonized a martyr saint by the Russian Orthodox émigré church in New York City. Eight years later, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ella’s canonization was recognized by the Moscow Patriarchate.

Savinkov left Moscow shortly after the assassination, and after checking on the Combat Organization’s plots in Saint Petersburg and Kiev traveled to SR headquarters in Geneva. The assassination of Sergey was a spectacular success and the Combat Organization’s prestige was at an all-time high among different strata of Russian society. The next logical targets for the terrorists would be other imperial grandees, and even Tsar Nicholas II himself.

However, when Savinkov left Russia, he had no idea how lucky he was to get out unscathed. Neither he, nor the other leaders of the SR Party knew that there was a traitor in their midst, no less a figure than the revered head of the Combat Organization itself, Evno Fischelevich Azef. He had been on the payroll of the Okhrana, the secret police force charged with protecting the imperial regime, for a decade, and rose to his se-

nior position in the SR Party while simultaneously betraying its members and their plans.

But Azef was also something other than the double agent the imperial police believed him to be because although he revealed some terrorist plots to them, he allowed others to succeed, such as the ones against Plehve and Sergey. To this day it is not clear what motivated him in his complex game other than cupidity and conceit (because of his skill in deceiving dangerous opponents on both sides).

Even against the background of Russia’s often tragic history, which is filled with outsize individuals, Azef is an unbelievable figure. Like the religious mountebank Rasputin with his malignant influence on Nicholas II and Alexandra and through them on the entire country, Azef was both a symptom and an agent of the forces that were tearing Russia apart and preparing for the unprecedented human disasters that defined the twentieth century.

For his own mysterious reasons, after Sergey’s assassination Azef decided to give Savinkov up to the Okhrana, and informed them where he would be crossing the Polish-German frontier. However, Savinkov unexpectedly changed his plans and took the northern route through East Prussia, as a result of which he escaped.

Savinkov’s and the SR party’s day of reckoning with Azef would not come for another four years.

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VLADIMIR ALEXANDROV is
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