

TERRORISM IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA: NEW RESEARCH AND SOURCES IN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES

Workshop at Tulane University, November 14, 2007. Co-organized by the GHI and the Murphy Institute of Political Economy at Tulane University. Conveners: Anke Hilbrenner (University of Bonn), Frithjof Benjamin Schenk (University of Munich), Carola Dietze (GHI). Participants: Sally Boniece (Frostburg State University), Oleg Budnickij (Institute for Russian History, Moscow), Anna Geifman (Harvard University), Samuel C. Ramer (Tulane University), Claudia Verhoeven (George Mason University/EUI Florence).

This workshop brought scholars to Tulane University to share information concerning current trends in the study of pre-revolutionary Russian terrorism, archival holdings of particular importance to students of such terrorism, and ideas about the most fruitful directions in which study of such pre-revolutionary Russian terrorism might proceed.

The workshop opened with Oleg Budnickij's paper on the archival and published sources on the history of Russian terrorism. Budnickij pointed out that the most important documentary sources for the "first wave" of Russian terrorism in the 1870s and 1880s are accessible in published form. But there is a significant body of materials for the "second wave" of such terrorism (the first decade of the twentieth century) that must still be sought in archives. Budnickij provided a detailed review of the Moscow archival holdings that he has found most useful, together with sage advice on locating terror-related materials, whose archival descriptions rarely include the term "terror." Anke Hilbrenner concluded this opening session with an overview of the materials on the Russian terrorist movement contained in the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. Her paper, which placed particular emphasis on holdings indispensable when writing the history of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, included a brief but fascinating history of how these materials had been assembled and preserved during the first half of the twentieth century.

The second morning session turned to recent research on pre-revolutionary Russian terrorism. Drawing upon the work she has done on Dmitry Karakozov's failed attempt to assassinate Alexander II in 1866, Claudia Verhoeven illustrated some of the ways in which she had chosen to focus upon a "material history" of terrorism. Her exploration of popular and commercial responses to Karakozov's assassination attempt

suggested how such responses to terror can be an important lens through which to examine popular attitudes and beliefs.

In her paper "Maria Spiridonova: The Terrorist, Terrorized," Sally Boniece drew attention to the pitfalls inherent in the very use of the word "terror," so frequently called upon to describe political movements that differ in significant ways. The subject of her study, the Socialist Revolutionary Maria Spiridonova, provides an example of the varied contexts of "terror." Spiridonova was active in the pre-revolutionary terrorist movement, murdering police inspector G. N. Luzhenovsky in 1906. During the Russian Revolution of 1917, as a leader of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, she engaged in the plot to assassinate Count Mirbach, the German ambassador to Soviet Russia, as a protest against the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Eventually, like many other political opponents of the Bolsheviks, she herself became a victim of state terror.

Afternoon sessions offered further examples of current research. Drawing upon her published studies of terror in Russia, Anna Geifman emphasized the enormous scope that Russian terror assumed during the first decade of the twentieth century. She cites a figure of 17,000 victims of terror in the course of the decade. Tsarist statistics on victims do not distinguish between killed and wounded, but regardless of the distribution, this figure suggests a degree of political violence that is stunning by any measure (and insufficiently appreciated in most studies of Russian revolutionary politics). In its techniques and its goal of political intimidation, Geifman argued, this Russian terrorist movement constitutes the birthplace of modern terrorism worldwide.

In a second paper, Carola Dietze presented the broad outlines of her book project on political assassination and public discourse in Europe and the United States. Dietze's work places central emphasis upon the relationship between modern terrorist movements and the media through which they hope to communicate their message. The emergence of a mass public and popular press in the late nineteenth century provided terrorists with the possibility of influencing public opinion in a fashion previously unprecedented.

Papers in the workshop's concluding session explored the importance that terrorists attached to the places they chose for attacks. Anke Hilbrenner's paper focused on terrorism as a "language of the streets." She pointed out that much of the literature on Russian terrorism emphasizes the huge boulevards of the capitals. What remains to be explored, she argued, are the narrow streets of towns on Russia's periphery, where there was also significant terrorist activity. (Her own paper focused on the importance of political terror in the south of Russia). Frithjof Benjamin Schenk's paper on railroads and terrorism focused on the various attractions that railroads presented to terrorists, whether as sites for attack or

means of communication. The railroad, he argued, was obviously a vital tool in the tsarist regime's efforts to knit the empire together and promote economic development. But it was also an arena in which terrorists chose to confront the tsarist regime, and for which the regime had to devise some means of defense.

At the workshop's conclusion, participants reflected upon the most promising directions in which the study of pre-revolutionary Russian terrorism might develop. The relationship between terror and "modernity" struck all participants as a particularly fruitful avenue of inquiry. Many of the developments of the late nineteenth century—the railroad, the telegraph, increased literacy, and a burgeoning popular press—greatly enhanced terrorists' capacity to communicate their message to a broader public and to conduct a political war with the tsarist regime. Popular consciousness of a growing disparity between Russian institutions and practices, on the one hand, and the emergence of a modernity more attuned to the rights and dignity of individual citizens, on the other, created an environment in which terrorists could count upon a certain degree of popular (if passive) sympathy.

While participants were wary of exaggerating the similarities between pre-revolutionary Russian terrorism and the events of our own day, there was nevertheless a sense within the workshop that the very dilemmas of our own time might also serve scholars well, making them sensitive to aspects of terrorism that earlier scholars have either overlooked or dismissed as marginal. Conversely, participants shared a modest sense that the study of terrorism in pre-revolutionary Russia might yield useful insights into the broader roots of terrorism as well as the ways in which it might be effectively combated, including ways of opposing terrorism that have been proven ineffective.

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