

Victor Serge: The Russian Heritage

Part One: The Kibalchich Legend

by Richard Greeman

*“There is some one myth for every man,
which, if we but know it, would make us understand
all he did and thought.” --W.B. Yeats*

1. The Children of March 1

On the first page his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, Victor Serge gives a curious account of his origins. It begins on March 1, 1881, the date of the assassination of Czar Alexander II at the hands of *Narodnaya Volya*, the Party of the Peoples' Will.¹ Serge describes the event in dramatic detail, and the reader learns that one of the regicides, the chemist Nikolai Ivanovitch Kibalchich, was a distant relative of his father, Leon Ivanovitch Kibalchich. Leon is described as “a non-commissioned officer in cavalry of the Czar's Imperial Guard serving in St. Petersburg at the time and a sympathizer of this tiny illegal party which was demanding land and freedom for the Russian people.” (Victor's son Vladimir Kibalchich, believed his grandfather Leon Kibalchich was an actual member of the *Narodnaya Volya* and a participant in the March 1 conspiracy whose assigned role was to have finished off the Czar if he returned to the palace wounded or unharmed.²) Serge's *Memoirs* go on to describe the heroism and dignity with which Nikolai Kibalchich and his fellow regicides - martyrs to the cause of land and freedom - faced their judges and executioners. We then learn that Victor's father moved south and “joined the combat as part of a [*Narodnaya Volya*] military organization” in the Ukraine. When it was destroyed, Leon Kibalchich “hid out in the gardens of St. Lavra's in Kiev, one of the oldest monasteries in Russia, escaped over the Austrian border by swimming” while “gendarmes' bullets” whistled over his head, and sought asylum in Geneva.

Only after this stirring account of the legend of March 1, 1881 does Serge get around to introducing himself, modestly, almost as an afterthought: “I was born by chance in Brussels, on the highroads of the world, for my parents travelled between London, Paris, Switzerland and Belgium in search of daily bread and good libraries.” Of his mother, Serge notes only this: “of Polish petty nobility, she had fled the bourgeois life of Petersburg to come to study in Geneva as well [...] On the walls of the tiny lodgings our fortunes brought us” he recalled, “there were always the portraits of the hanged.” So although Victor was born in Europe, the ikons that presided over his cradle were Russian: the revered March 1 martyrs Mikhailov, Rysakov, Zheliabov, Sophia Perovskaya and his father's kinsman Nikolai Kibalchich. Moreover, the ethos of the *Narodnaya Volya* and the Kibalchich legend infused the atmosphere in which he took his first breaths: “Adult conversations were concerned with trials, with executions, with escapes [like his father's ‘under a hail of bullets’], with Siberian highways, with big ideas, constantly re-evaluated, with the latest books about those ideas.”³

The events of March 1, 1881 so dominate the opening pages of Serge's *Memoirs* that careless readers have the impression that he was born in their immediate aftermath. They are not altogether mistaken, although the archives of the Town Hall of Brussels record that Victor Lvovitch Kibalchich, the future “Victor Serge,” was born there nearly nine years later on December 30, 1890. Unconsciously, perhaps, Serge invites the reader to inscribe his birth in the

legend of the *Narodnaya Volya* and to consider him a spiritual “child” of March 1, 1881. So that is where his spiritual biography must begin.

W.B. Yeats writes: “There is some one myth for every man, which, if we but know it, would make us understand all he did and thought.” I do not know if *every* man can be explained by such a myth, but in the case of Serge, Yeat’s aphorism comes close to the mark. To understand who Victor Serge was and why he acted and wrote the way he did, we must begin by exploring the myths he grew up with: the myth of the *Pervomartovtsi* (as ‘those of March 1’ were remembered by Russians) incarnated in the name Kibalchich, as a strand of the broader myth, or rather ethos, of the Russian revolutionary *intelligentsia*, of which Victor’s mother, Vera Nikolayenka Podrevskaya, was a typical representative.

This exploration is all the more necessary at the dawn of the Twenty-First Century when individual terrorism is almost universally anathematized. Indeed, in our market-oriented world, even idealism itself is considered somewhat suspect. Our purpose here is not to glorify idealistic revolutionary assassins so much as to understand why, particularly in Russia at the end of the Nineteenth Century when Serge was born, intelligent and well-meaning people did. This is all the more problematic in our post-Communist era, when Alexander II, the ‘liberal’ Czar who emancipated the serfs, and even the feckless Nicholas II are worshiped as ‘martyrs’. Yet it is an accepted fact among historians that in the years around 1881 much of educated public opinion in Russia and abroad sympathised with the assassins of March 1 and considered the *Pervomartovtsi* to be the martyrs of the day. Our exploration into the revolutionary past is therefore one of cultural archeology, sifting through the ruins of a defeated *race* and an extinct *milieu*. By reconstructing the lives and ideals of these men and women, by breathing the atmosphere that surrounded them, we can attempt to understand Serge’s *ethos* and the source of his creativity - his need to bear witness. For whatever the realities behind the Kibalchich legend he imbibed as a child, this atmosphere was decisive in the formation of his moral-intellectual character.

Moreover, in reconstructing this atmosphere we will be following in the footsteps of Serge himself, both as a writer of biographies (*Lénine 1917, Portrait de Staline, Vie et Mort de Trotsky*) and of novels - those imaginary compendia of vicarious lives. Atmosphere is in any case a key concept for Serge. Not only did he strive to recreate in his novels, he saw it as a political-historical category as well, the key to understanding the generation of Russian revolutionaries whose actions “shook the world” in 1917: “That generation [...] had been prepared by its origins, by its struggles, by the complex and multiple efforts of the entire elite of a country concentrated for over fifty years in a single direction. To produce these revolutionaries, it took the intellectual and moral questings of Dostoyevsky, of Chernychevsky, of Turgenev, of the Nihilists; the epic terrorism of the *Narodnaya Volya*, the apostelate of the youth who went ‘to the people’: *for they were born into that atmosphere* [emphasis added].”⁴ We will be tracing a similar filiation as we explore the atmosphere, the myths, the ethos of Serge’s own childhood.

Serge also conceived of literature partly as a testament to the fallen and an extension of their revolutionary ethos into the future. “The forming and the character of such men are full of lessons. And their example must remain - and it is the duty of those who live after them not to allow either their lessons, their example, or - simply and piously - their memory to be lost.” [*La formation et le caractère de tels hommes sont pleins d’enseignements. Et leur exemple doit rester, - et c’est un devoir chez ceux qui leur survivent de ne laisser perdre ni l’enseignement, ni l’exemple, ni simplement et pieusement, le souvenir.*] Serge wrote these lines in a 1921 obituary article dedicated to the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ossipovitch Lichtenstadt (Mazin), a comrade and mentor killed in the Civil War. Serge’s friend « Mazin » had adopted that *nom de*

guerre to honor the memory of a fellow-prisoner, and Serge fully appreciated the significance of the gesture: “Behind the memory of Vladimir Ossipovich Mazin lies the tall shadow of a predecessor” [*Il y a donc derrière la mémoire de Vladimir Ossipovitch Mazine la grand silhouette d’un prédécesseur*] expressing “the continuity of dedication and will among men who belong to the same spiritual race.” [*la continuité du dévouement et de la volonté chez des hommes appartenant à la même race spirituelle*].

In like fashion did the Kibalchich name and legend loom like a « tall shadow » over the childhood of Victor Lvovich Kibalchich to the point where it became the ‘central myth’ of his life. This was the ‘spiritual race’** into which he was born and whose continuity he proudly and humbly assumed during a lifetime of pure-hearted dedication as a revolutionary and of his commitment, as a writer, to another old-fashioned religious notion, ‘testimony.’ Moreover, Serge’s formula ‘spiritual race’ evokes Hypolite Taine’s jejeune formula for biography - ‘*la race, le milieu, le moment*’ - which may for once prove helpful in the case of Serge, who born into the *race* of Russian revolutionary *intelligenti* (now nearly extinct), rooted in the *milieu* of pre-WWI Franco-Belgian anarchism, and permanently transformed by the *moment* of the Russian revolution and Civil War. In any case, with what other kind of « race » than a spiritual one could this child of Russian exiles, born stateless in Belgium (where citizenship is hereditary) identify ? And are we not then all the more justified in attempting to recreate the Kibalchich legend (even if some of its factual elements fail to stand up to historical criticism) and exploring the *ethos* of the Russian revolutionary *intelligentzia* in which it was rooted ?

2. Origins

All that Victor remembered of his paternal grandfather, Ivan Kibalchich, was an old photograph, “a yellowed daguerreotype of a thin, bearded cleric with a high forehead and a kindly expression, in a garden full of bonny, bare-footed children.”⁵ He had also been told that grandfather Ivan was an Orthodox priest in a little village in the Chernigov District of South Russia (today’s Ukraine) and that he was of Montenegrin origin. In fact, the Kibalchich family constituted a veritable dynasty of Orthodox priests who had been established in Chernigov Province since the early 18th Century.⁶ Back in Montenegro, the Kibalchich clan had had a long tradition of fighting the Turks, who overthrew the Serbian Empire in 1389 but never succeeded in conquering the rugged mountaineers of Montenegro. Indeed, Victor Kibalchich’s ancestry can be traced back to a famous Montenegrin rebel, Fyodor Nikitovich Kibalchich, and the Yugoslav historian Vladimir Dedijer, himself an exiled ex-partisan of World War Two vintage and a dissident who was expelled from the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party for defending Milovan Djilas, made much of the “Montenegrin” aspect of Victor Serge’s character.⁷

The story goes that the Turks had placed a price on Fyodor Kibalchich’s head. When Fyodor’s partisan unit was surrounded, his comrades urged him to flee to Sosnetzy monastery in Chernigov Province. He later attended the seminary in nearby Kiev and became a priest. Generations later another Kibalchich rebel, Victor’s father Leon, would find sanctuary in another Kievan monastery, St. Lavra’s.⁸

It is difficult to establish the precise relationship between the regicide Nikolai Ivanovich Kibalchich, and Victor’s father Leon Ivanovich Kibalchich, due to the paucity of precise information. Victor described them as a “distant relatives” [*lointain parent*], while the family tree established by the Kibalchich House Museum in Korop, Nikolai’s birthplace, shows two branches with ‘Ivans’ on both sides.⁹ Whatever the degree of blood kinship between the two men, two things are clear. The first is that both Nikolai and Leon, eight years younger, grew up in the

midst of a veritable dynasty of Kibalchich priests which had been established in the same province for generations and constituted a kind of clan. The second is that, “spiritually” speaking, they were brothers. It follows that, insofar as the cultural influences and emotional atmosphere that nourished the young Victor are concerned, the rather rich material available about the notorious Nikolai is relevant enough to supplant our meagre knowledge of Leon, who apparently cast himself in the same mold as his older kinsman.

What is certain is that Victor Kibalchich grew up in the shadow of his famous relative and that the *Pervomartovts* N.I. Kibalchich was a name to be conjured with among Russians and remains so to this day, not only a revolutionary, but also as a scientist. For at the very moment he was building the bombs that killed Alexander II, he was also developing a solid-fuel rocket ‘flying machine’ believed to be the ancestor of today’s space vehicles. As a result, during the Soviet period he was held up as a role-model for the youth. “*N. I. Kibalchich: Scientist and Revolutionary*” is the title of a popular pamphlet, and a crater on the moon has been named for him. As we shall see, Victor’s father was also consumed by a passion for science, which he in turn passed on to his son.

3. Parallel Lives

Listening to his parents’ conversations about “trials, executions, escapes ... and great ideas,” young Victor would have been struck by the many parallels between what he knew of his father’s life in Russia and that of his illustrious relative. Both were the sons of priests named Ivan in the Chernigov district near Kiev. Both rebelled against their Orthodox upbringing and refused to follow their fathers into the priesthood. Both managed to get a secular secondary education at a gymnasium. Both were caught and punished for possessing revolutionary literature. Both rejected religion and embraced scientific positivism. Both became passionately interested in chemistry and physics. Both also studied medicine. Both became absorbed with revolutionary ideas. Further, according to the legend both migrated to St. Petersburg, became involved with The Peoples’ Will and eventually joined its duel to the death with the autocracy. So in retelling the story of Nikolai’s destiny and ideas, which young Victor must have heard, piecemeal, along his father’s, we can get some sense of the emotional atmosphere and paternal influences he grew up with.

Nikolai Kibalchich was born on October 19, 1853, in the town of Korop in what is now the Ukrainian Republic.¹⁰ Leon was born in Kiev eight years later in on June 19, 1861. The Kiev birthplace suggests his family connect with St. Lavra’s monastery. Leon also listed “Stehasnawka” as his place of origin, perhaps the village where his father was priest and taught those barefoot children.¹¹ They were born in a historically significant moment. In 1855, two years after Nikolai’s birth, Czar Nicolas I died after a long and stiflingly oppressive reign, and Alexander II, who was to meet his death under Nikolai Kibalchich’s bombs, began his reign as a reformer, opening the universities to the poor, modernizing the judiciary, and emancipating the serfs - this in the year 1861, the year of Leon’s birth. Alexander’s liberalization had a paradoxical effect. His university reform did broaden the *intelligentsia* to include low-born sons of the clergy like the Kibalchich boys, but in the absence of freedom of speech and the press, education often bred new enemies for the autocracy. Moreover, Alexander’s emancipation left the newly freed serfs without sufficient land, yet indebted to their previous owners. By 1863 both students and peasants were rioting under the slogan “Land and Liberty.” The ‘60s were also the decade in which literary works like Chernyshevsky’s *What Is To Be Done?* and Turgenev’s far more

readable *Fathers and Sons* proposed the role-models of the “new man” and the “Nihilist” to Russian youth.

That these two scions of a priestly family from the provinces should have been attracted to the revolutionary movement is thus less unusual than may first appear. Moreover, the Ukrainian province of Chernigov where the Kibalchichs grew up had its own revolutionary traditions. Situated on the left bank of the Dnieper in the Desna River basin, this ancient principality was part of old the Kievan *Rus*, which also included Novgorod to the north. Like Kiev and Novgorod (where Serge’s mother grew up) Chernigov was adorned with magnificent churches and monasteries like St. Lavra’s dating from before the Mongol invasions, when Kievan Russia was one of the most civilized states in Europe. As early as December 1825, the Province was the scene of the famous Chernigov Regiment uprising. One thousand soldiers and 17 officers, in league with the famous Petersburg ‘Decembrist’ rebels, swore an oath to take up arms against the autocracy, serfdom, and compulsory military service. They held out until they were reduced by government troops while trying to join forces with rebellious troops from Kiev.¹² And in the 1870’s, when Victor’s father was coming of age, Southern Russia (Ukraine) was noted for agitation among both the students and the peasants; it was also the “first arena of violence” in the wave of terrorism that led to March 1, 1881.¹³

4. Radical Influences

At the age of six, Nikolai Kibalchich came under the radical influence of his maternal grandfather, Ivanitsky, who raised him. A graduate of the Chernigov Seminary, Ivanitsky had scandalized the priesthood by giving up a lucrative position as a priest to follow the theater. Grandfather Ivanitsky was also said to have been a member of an atheistic revolutionary brotherhood. After two years at the Chernigov seminary, Nikolai too rebelled against religion, defied his father, and entered the Novgorod gymnasium in 1869, at the age of sixteen, where he amazed his friends and teachers with his talent for mathematics and chemistry.¹⁴ Among Nikolai Kibalchich’s Novgorod schoolmates was Mikhailov, later one of the most formidable of the Peoples’ Will terrorists. Nikolai is known to have risked expulsion for publicly denouncing a venal teacher. He also participated in the organization of an illegal library and discussion group, where he first encountered the writings of Herzen and Chernyshevsky.¹⁵

Nikolai Govrilovich Chernyshevsky is a key figure in the filiation of Victor’s ‘central myth.’ Like Nikolai and Leon Kibalchich, Chernyshevsky was the scion of an ecclesiastical family who had replaced his religious faith with faith in reason. His writings were among the first in Russia to develop economic doctrines of class interest similar to Marx’s (Marx is said to have learned Russian in order to read him); he preached the idea that the masses had only themselves to depend on for social change, and inculcated scorn for liberals as “born compromisers.”¹⁶ His novel, *What Is To Be Done?*, written in prison in 1863, remains his most influential work. That the novel - or tract in novel form - appeared at all was a hazard of bureaucratic incompetence, and it was soon banned. Nonetheless, and despite its questionable literary merit, it continued to inspire large numbers of youth for generations. Lenin is said to have undergone a radical transformation after reading it at the age of eighteen, and borrowed its title for his most famous pamphlet. In *What Is To Be Done?* Chernyshevsky dealt with the question of women’s liberation through its heroine Vera,* sketched a future Utopian society, and went on to answer the provocative question of his title. Speaking through various characters, he suggested that the advent of the new order could be hastened by the dedication of a band of selfless souls. In the “new people” of the novel, he presented the first portrait of that peculiar Russian type, the

professional revolutionary dedicated to changing history, of which the men and women of March 1, 1881 and later on Lenin and Victor Serge, were to become the living examples.**

When Chernyshevsky was condemned, on the basis of falsified testimony, to fourteen years of hard labor and lifelong exile in Siberia, the example of his martyrdom added to the lustre of his work and drew free-thinking youth like Nikolai and Leon Kibalchich to him like a beacon. A half-century later the figure of Chernyshevsky continued to inspire Victor Serge, who evoked him in a significant passage of his 1930 novel *Birth of Our Power* (*Naissance de notre force*). Like Chernyshevsky, the narrator of Serge's semi-autobiographical novel has been imprisoned as a revolutionary. The year is 1917, and when he hears the news of the revolution in Russia his thoughts turn to Chernyshevsky, whose struggles and sufferings have borne fruit generations after his death in impotent exile. From his own prison, he imagines the scene of Chernyshevsky's "civil execution," the official degradation that preceded his deportation:

... From the height of a pillory he contemplated the world. They put the chains on him; he crossed his chained arms over his chest. The executioner made him kneel. He wiped his damp glasses with his finger. The executioner broke his useless sword over his head and dropped the two pieces into the mud on either side of the scaffold [...] He was at once powerful and impotent, like the mind itself. Under this interminable rain, attached to that pillory, he was ending his career as a thinker for whom the world was not only to be understood but also to be transformed. His book, written in a cell, would survive [...] Every event is the result of an endless chain of causes. And this too, at a distance of a half-century, appears to me as a cause. Chernyshevsky in chains, wiping off his glasses in order to go on seeing the faces of life, listening to the dull rumblings of the crowd under the rain, explains for me the victory of millions [...] They say that seeds discovered in the tombs of the Pharaohs germinated. Nothing is ever lost. How many were we, how many of us are there even now, in all the prisons of the world, lulling ourselves to sleep with this certainty? And this force too will not be lost...

Yes, but the man on the pillory was lost... Chernyshevsky had only his life.

Wouldn't he have lost it even more had he ended up as an Academician?¹⁷

The gesture of the philosopher wiping his glasses on the scaffold the better to understand the historical moment that is crushing him - a gesture both heroic and pathetic - epitomizes the ironical nature of Serge's historical sense. This historical irony is what gives force to Serge's final paradox - the successful academician seen as the loser - while it consoles the imprisoned narrator (an earlier version of Serge himself) celebrating the revolution's distant victory behind barbed wire.

Such ironic thoughts may have consoled the author as well, for by 1930, little more than a decade after the victory of the revolution, Serge had become a persecuted dissident unpublishable in the Soviet Union, albeit somewhat sheltered by his literary reputation abroad. So when he wrote of Chernyshevsky, "his book would survive," Serge was uncertain whether his own books would survive, a circumstance that gives ironic depth to the novel's leitmotif, "*Nothing is Ever Lost*." (Sadly, unlike Chernyshevsky's, the manuscripts of two novels Serge wrote after his 1933 arrest and deportation, illegally confiscated by Stalin's secret police, were lost.) Serge's sense of history - derived from the tradition of Chernyshevsky and incarnated in the Kibalchich myth - as the key intellectual quality that shaped his life and work. It gave him the courage to continue resisting and writing when the revolution turned against itself, returning him to the world of prisons and exile to which he was born. Moreover, unlike other prominent ex-Communists, he didn't "end up as an academician." But we are getting ahead of our story...

Returning to the Kibalchiches, in 1871 we find Nikolai in St. Petersburg, at the Institute for Communication (Railroad) Engineers, pursuing his passion for science. However he left after two years, under the influence of Populist ideas, in order to enroll in the Medical-Surgical Academy and work among “the people” as a country doctor like Bazarov, the Nihilist hero of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*. This Academy seems to have been a hotbed of radicalism, and Nikolai Kibalchich participated in student disturbances.¹⁸ The younger Kibalchich, Leon, also rebelled against his religious upbringing, turning to the study of medicine and other scientific pursuits. Under the influence of the writings of Herzen, Belinski, and Chernychevsky, Leon became an agnostic, a disciple of the scientific positivism of Herbert Spencer, whom he later heard lecture in London.¹⁹ “It was a time of scientific revival, and the current which carried minds toward natural sciences was irresistible,” wrote Prince Kropotkin about his own studies at the School of the Imperial Guard.²⁰ The question of ‘what to believe’ profoundly troubled the Russian intelligentsia, and a veneration for science often replaced religious faith. This veneration was all the more profound for men like the Kibalchich’s who had broken with the traditions of an ecclesiastical family.

5. From Science to Revolution

Although sympathizing with the movement of students who went “to the people” to work and propagandize, Nikolai Kibalchich did not participate in the famous “mad summer” of 1874, when hundreds fanned out into the countryside. No doubt he was preoccupied by his studies and scientific pursuits, a preoccupation Victor noted as “consuming” in the case of his father. Indeed, there is some uncertainty about when Nikolai first became involved in revolutionary activities. In the memoir by Breshkovskaia, the “little grandmother” of the Russian Revolution, he is presented mainly as a scholar and scientist whose sympathies led him to making explosives for the Peoples’ Will.²¹ His fellow-terrorist, the writer Sergey Kravchinsky (Stepniak) recalled that Kibalchich did not meddle in politics as a student, but was arrested when the police found some revolutionary propaganda which a friend had left in his room. He then became converted to socialism in jail during the two years of his pre-trial detention.²²

However, more recent historians see him as an active propagandist before he became involved in terror.²³ Kibalchich is believed to have distributed seditious literature among the peasants during the summer of 1875.²⁴ This would make perfect sense, given his origins in Southern Russia (Ukraine). For if the idealistic Populist students who went “to the people” in other regions in the summer of 1874 were greeted by peasants who were largely uncomprehending, suspicious, frightened or even hostile to these wild-talking intruders from another world, this was not the case in Southern Russia in 1875. Already in the early ‘70s peasant revolts had broken out - without any help from student agitators - in the Chigirin area on the River Dnieper near Kiev. In 1875 these disturbances were brutally quelled, but even then the peasants refused to submit to floggings or to having soldiers quartered in their villages. Revolutionaries soon moved in, and by autumn 1877 they had about 1,000 peasants under arms.²⁵ Victor’s father, Leon Kibalchich, was already a teenager during these years of agitation in his province. If he did not actually take part, he would certainly have been influenced by the radical spirit of the students and peasants in his province..

As for his older kinsman Nikolai, it was not for agitating among the South Russian peasants that he was first arrested, but for a large quantity of radical pamphlets discovered in his room during a search in October 1875 - presumably back in St. Petersburg. Among these papers was a new translation of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, in manuscript, which Kibalchich himself may have

authored.²⁶ Nikolai spent two and a half years in prison, awaiting trial, and “suffered agonies” during “prolonged solitary confinement.”²⁷ He also mixed with the “rabble” of common criminals and somehow managed to perfect his revolutionary education, reading such works as Marx’s *Capital*. On May 1, 1878, he was tried and sentenced to one month. About the impact of prison he wrote:

Prison can have one of two effects on a person. If he is weak, it will cause him to renounce any kind of activity; but on other people prison experience has the effect of strengthening their will and of giving them a much more serious outlook on life in which they take part in the most important problems of the day.²⁸

Victor Serge’s own prison experiences (the subject of his first novel) led him to a similar conclusion:

Out of a little over fifty years, I have spent ten in various forms of captivity, which have usually been harsh. These confinements have taught me the truth of Nietzsche’s paradoxical dictum: ‘Whatever does not kill me, strengthens me.’²⁹

During the years Nikolai Kibalchich spent in prison, the political climate outside had turned harsher. The idealistic liberal youth who had gone to the people to propagandize for a constitution, civil liberties, and land for the peasants had met with arbitrary arrests, unjust verdicts, and brutal repression. Frustrated, they fought back. Terrorism fed on repression and *vice versa*. The level of violence increased in what was more and more perceived as a duel between the revolutionists and the Autocracy. Meanwhile, prison had had a radicalizing effect on Nikolai Kibalchich. His friend Popov noted the change in him: “I can see two Kibalchiches in front of me, one before and the other after prison...”³⁰ And Praskovia Ivanovskaya, a fellow underground worker, noted: “Prison had drained him of all color. At rare moments, the bitterness seemed more than he could contain; he remarked to us that sometimes he was seized by the desire to throw a lit match into a powder keg.”³¹ Before long he would have his chance.

In June 1879 Nikolai Kibalchich joined the Freedom or Death group that developed within the Populist Land and Liberty (*Zemlya y Volya*) Party. A few months later, the Populists split over the issue of terrorism, and the redoubtable *Narodnaya Volya* or Peoples’ Will (or “Peoples’ Freedom”) Party was formed. (In Russian *Volya* can mean both “will” and “freedom,” while *Narod* has the sense of “people” or “the nation,” like *Volk* in German.)³² Although the total membership of the *Narodnaya Volya* throughout its existence probably never exceeded sixty members and five or six hundred sympathizers,³³ its strength was due to the quality of dedication of its members - to their faith, heroism, and capacity for sacrifice - rather than to their numbers. Kibalchich joined the Peoples’ Will in August 1879, and on August 26 at a clandestine meeting in a forest, its Executive Committee formally condemned the Czar to death. After numerous attempts, the sentence was carried out just over eighteen months later, thanks to Kibalchich’s bombs. It would be easy to see him simply as a fanatical dynamiter, as did the Czarist policeman who wrote: “Kibalchich can be characterized as a typical anarchist following an evil obsession, uniquely from the viewpoint of applying technology to infernal machines: a monstrous criminal fanatic, a new personality-type but clearly demonstrated by the evidence of the investigation.”³⁴ Be that as it may, Kibalchich’s personality and activities were much more rich and complex than this stereotype.

6. N. I. Kibalchich’s Original Ideas

First of all, Kibalchich did not abandon his literary activities when he turned to dynamite. He wrote, under various pseudonyms, for liberal publications and contributed a long study, “The

Political Revolution and the Economic Problem,” to the organ of his own party, *Narodnaya Volya*, which appeared on February 5, 1881, just a month before the Czar’s assassination. Venturi, the historian of Populism, calls this “the most important theoretical article that the review published, the only one to draw the ideological consequences of the political position assumed by the Executive Committee.”³⁵

In this article, Kibalchich attempts to deal directly with the anti-statist, anti-political trend in his own movement in relation to the economic and political doctrines he had learned from Marx, and to arrive at a “synthesis.” It is prophetic in a number of ways. First, by taking the position that in backward Russia a socialist party would have to accomplish the task which “has already long been done everywhere else in Europe, not by Socialist parties, but by the bourgeoisie,” that is to say to “destroy despotism,” Kibalchich anticipated aspects of Lenin’s and Trotsky’s theories by a generation. Further, by attacking certain Marxists who, like Plekhanov, “went far beyond their master” and wished to limit the struggle to the economic sphere, Kibalchich anticipated Lenin’s 1903 critique of “economism.” Finally, Kibalchich anticipated the Social Democrats by recognizing the role of the factory workers and declaring that “the first signal for a revolution will come from the town and not from the village” - as was to be shown in the revolutionary events of 1905 and 1917.

Nikolai Kibalchich was thus a leading theoretician of Populism as well as one of its outstanding martyrs - one of the first to face, in thought, the problems that later confronted Victor Serge and his contemporaries in life. We cannot know if Leon Kibalchich was familiar with Nikolai’s articles in the Populists’ journal nor if his original ideas were among those ‘constantly argued over’ [*grandes idées sans cesse remises en question*] in Victor’s childhood lodgings. On the other hand, it is a curious coincidence that N.I. Kibalchich’s attempts to reconcile the anarchistic anti-statism of his native Populism with Marxism anticipated what was to be a central preoccupation in the life and work of Victor Serge, who sought to balance the libertarian ethic of the anarchists with the theoretical rigor of the Marxists.

Despite his prophetic speculations, on the practical level Kibalchich was still operating within the classic populist program, which was designed to save Russia from the dehumanization of capitalist development by sparking a pre-emptive revolution and moving directly to an organic socialism based on the traditional peasant commune, the *mir*. Populism projected an essentially Slavophile vision of an idealized peasantry and of Russia’s exceptional destiny among the nations. Nonetheless, Karl Marx, who was in correspondence with the *Narodniki*, found this vision compelling enough to consider that Russia might be an exception to his own model of stages, according to which socialism arises only after capitalism’s full development.³⁶ For the Populists, on the other hand, pre-capitalist Russia presented a momentary window of opportunity, a chance to save a society from the ravages of a soul-destroying capitalism: a society in which remnants of primitive communism might blossom directly into socialism. A dream? Perhaps. But even Tzar Nikolas II’s most practical and cynical First Minister, Stolypin, feared such a development and took practical steps to prevent it by decrees aimed at weakening the *mir* and encouraging *kulak* capitalist farming.³⁷ And in October 1917, the eminently practical Lenin won over the peasantry and made a successful revolution by ‘stealing’ the populist program from the Social Revolutionary Party, successor to the Peoples’ Will, which had failed to apply it when they held power during the 1917 Provisional Government.

Thus for N.I. Kibalchich and his tiny band of underground activists, by 1881 time seemed of the essence. As his fellow-regicide, Zheliabov put it: “History is too slow. It needs to be pushed. Otherwise the nation will have degenerated before the liberals pull themselves together and get to

work.”³⁸ Moreover there was a more immediate urgency. In pronouncing a death sentence on Alexander II, the Executive Committee had pronounced a death sentence on itself, unleashing a intensified manhunt by the Czarist police. It was only a matter of time as to which sentence would be executed first. But before recounting the climax of Kibalchich’s participation role in that dramatic duel to the death described on the first page of Victor Serge’s *Memoirs*, let us pause to examine the *ethos* of his terrorist ‘role models’ and place the tragedy of March 1, 1881 in its historical context.

7. The Problem of Terrorism

Liberal historiography makes much of the irony that in assassinating Alexander II, the Executive Committee killed the most liberal of Czars, the reformer who liberated the serfs in 1861. It is further argued, not without justice, that the assassination of Alexander II, far from ushering in a revolution, provoked a period of dark reaction under the vengeful Alexander III, who abrogated many of his predecessor’s reforms and stepped up state repression. From this retrospective point of view, Alexander II may well pass for a martyr. All the more so in this post-Communist 21st Century, when, as we have remarked, even Rasputin’s Czar, Nicholas II, with much less to recommend him, passes for a martyr whose icon today’s ‘new Russians’ display, much as Victor’s parents hung “portraits of the hanged” *Pervomartotsi*.

So it behooves us to recall that throughout most of the 19th Century and up to 1917 such pro-Romanov sympathies were relatively rare outside of official Russian circles. On the contrary, Czarist autocracy was generally considered anathema among liberal, educated people both in Russia and in Europe and America, especially among Jews. For continental democrats, the Russian Czar was considered ‘the gendarme of Europe,’ whose vast peasant armies could be counted on to weigh in on the side of reaction in any international conflict. Constitutional governments throughout Europe welcomed Russian revolutionary exiles, offered them asylum, and made little attempt to curb their anti-Czarist activities. In the United States, land of immigrants, the image of Czarism - with its oppression of Jews, Poles and other minorities, its rigid caste distinctions, mass poverty, internal passports, long years of obligatory military service, stifling repression, and generalized brutality - incarnated every form of hateful oppression that had driven its citizens or their parents to uproot their lives and flee to America.

Mark Twain spoke for millions of Americans when he wrote, “My sympathies are with the Russian revolution, of course...Government by false promises, by lies, by treachery, and by the butcher-knife, for the aggrandizement of a single family of drones and its idle and vicious kin, has been born quite long enough in Russia.”³⁹ The knout, that distinctively Russian instrument of torture, was everywhere recognized as the symbol of Czarism, for example in political cartoons. Far from condemning the authors of attempts on the lives of Czarist officials, public opinion sympathized with them as freedom fighters. It is only the recent memory of the unthinkable horrors of the Communist tyranny of Stalin - who applied the industrial methods of 20th Century totalitarianism to the authoritarian heritage of Czarism - that permits moderns to view his Imperial predecessors through the nostalgic veil of retrospective martyrdom.

Beginning with Ivan the Terrible, the violence, cruelty and madness of the Czars was legendary, and in a semi-feudal hierarchy, this cruelty descended through the ranks, brutalizing every level of society. Husbands had a total patriarchal authority over their wives and daughters, as did landlords and employers over their dependants. Brutal beatings were routine, often enough resulting in death. Masters commonly forced their serfs into arranged marriages without regard to personal choice, provoking suicides and domestic tragedies. A landlord could send a peasant off

to the army on a whim or for some minor offense, and military service was essentially for life, snatching a man from home and family forever. Soldiers were brutally flogged for the most minor offenses. The punishment for a court martial offence was running a gauntlet of a thousand men, lined up in facing ranks who beat him with finger-thick rods; the man could be dragged through the ranks three, four and five times spitting blood. Death often ensued.

Historically, a monstrous medieval cruelty was characteristic of the even the most enlightened Czars. Peter the Great - who travelled Europe disguised as a commoner and introduced modern industries, hospitals and academies to Russia - cut off twelve thousand heads on a single occasion (the revolt of the *streltsy*) and tortured his own son to death. As for Catherine the Great, friend to Diderot and the Encyclopedists, her punishments went even farther in refinement and cruelty. "I have taken precautions to avoid witnessing these cruel proceedings, but they occur so often that it is impossible to avoid hearing the cries of unfortunately victims of human caprice," wrote a Frenchman, Passenans, visiting her court. "Their cries followed me in my dreams."⁴⁰ One recalls the cruel joke played on Doestoyevsky by Nicholas I, who condemned the writer to death for the 'crime' of discussing liberal books with a circle of intellectuals, had him dragged before the firing squad and then reprieved him at very last instant, sending him instead to hard labor in Siberia.

The trade of Autocrat - ruling a vast empire personally like a father his family or a landlord his estate - was an exhausting and dangerous twenty-four-hour-a-day job, which in the long run could only harden a man's soul and destroy his mental equilibrium. Indeed, the very nature of Czarist Autocracy - absolute, arbitrary, personal rule - demanded a brutal nature; caught in vicious cycle, the more arbitrary acts a Czar committed, the more isolated he became, the more he feared conspiracies, and the more insane cruelties he inflicted. As a result, no Czar was ever willing to relinquish absolute power, accepting a constitution, responsible ministers, and the rule of law. Indeed, the paradoxical career of Alexander II, who began as a sincere reformer, is a tragic case in point. Not only did Alexander II free the serfs in 1861 (two years ahead of President Lincoln's partial emancipation of the slaves), he granted them rights to the land, whereas the landless American Blacks never got their "forty acres and a mule." Yielding to liberal public opinion, Alexander also issued decrees expanding education, instituting elected *Zemstvo* councils, trial by jury and shorter military service.

"It has often been said that Alexander II committed a great fault, and brought about his own ruin, by raising so many hopes which later on he did not satisfy,"⁴¹ wrote Prince Peter Kropotkin, that gentle dreamer, gentleman scientist and anarchist philosopher who grew up at the Imperial Court. For after such fair beginnings, Alexander became frightened at the pace of reforms which would inevitably have led to some form of constitutional government, turned away from the liberals, embraced reactionary advisors, and did everything to prevent the actual implementation of the very reforms he had initiated. The turning point was the 1863 Polish insurrection against Russian rule, with which Russian public opinion sympathised and which Alexander crushed with exemplary brutality. He also put off spelling out the terms on which the former serfs would get the land, and when these decrees were finally published it turned out the peasants would get only part of the common lands and would have to pay for them on onerous terms over long years, so that many landlords got even richer than under serfdom. Similarly, Alexander did everything possible to undermine the work of the *Zemstovs*, the councils of the gentry which, following the broad outlines of his earlier reforms, were taking initiatives to set up local schools, hospitals, agricultural stations and the like.⁴²

To understand the motives of Kibalchich and his fellow *Narodnaya Volya* conspirators, we must remember that they and their fellow reformers had exhausted every possible legal and peaceful means of redress. By 1879 the reformers in official circles, whether at Court, in the *Zemstovs*, the Army or the administrations had been isolated, silenced, disgraced or exiled. The pacific reading circles of liberal and radical students and intellectuals had been subjected to police raids and their members arrested or administratively exiled. The idealistic flower children who had streamed out to the countryside as literacy teachers, medical workers, and propagandists during the “to the people” movement of the early 70’s were in prison, exiled or underground. Meanwhile new reactionary decrees and repressive measures were making Russian society even more brutal than before. Finally, matters came to a head when a young woman, Vera Zasulich,^{*} impulsively drew a revolver and wounded Count Trepov, the Petersburg Police Chief, after he had personally beaten a political prisoner who had failed to take off his hat to him during an inspection, thus unwittingly ushering in the age of terrorism.

Terrorism. A word to be conjured with. What are we to make of Serge’s exaltation of his *Narodnaya Volya* heritage today, when terrorism has degenerated from what might once have been considered heroic tyrannicide into random violence against innocent civilians carried out by political thugs under the orders of self-styled nationalist or religious “revolutionaries” who are themselves oppressors or would-be oppressors? Are we justified in running the film of history backwards and condemning the men and women of March 1 as the ancestors of Osama bin Laden? The question is arguably one of context rather than of abstract morality. Theft is wrong, but we don’t judge a poor woman who steals food for her hungry children the same way we judge a professional gangster. Nor do we condemn the French Resistance (designated as ‘the terrorists’ by the collaborationist Vichy government) much less the German generals who attempted to assassinate Hitler.^{***} In any case, the *Narodnaya Volya* believed assassination was only justifiable when all peaceful roads were closed by government terror. In a letter dated September 1881, the Party sent its condolences to the American people on the assassination of President Garfield and protested against the use of political murder “in a country in which the freedom of the individual allows an honest contest of ideas.” Such assassinations are “an expression of the same despotic spirit which we feel it is our duty to combat in Russia.” “Violence,” the letter concluded, “is justifiable only when it is directed against violence.”⁴³

8. The Road to March 1

Returning to N.I. Kibalchich, we see him becoming more and more a central figure in the activities of the Executive Committee as March 1, 1881 approaches. In September 1879 Kibalchich and Vera Figner set up a clandestine apartment in Odessa and prepared dynamite and fuses to mine the railroad tracks on which the Czar’s train was expected to pass, but this operation was cancelled and Kibalchich left the city in December.⁴⁴ Early in 1880 Kibalchich set up another clandestine apartment with Praskovia Ivanovskaya, whose first impression of him was ambivalent: “Kibalchich seemed quite proper, much older than his years (he was 26), and this inspired our respect. But his exaggerated palor and utterly unchanging expression made him appear unpleasantly lifeless, dull-witted, slightly indifferent to everything - an impression that was heightened by the locks of dark hair that fell, straight as icicles, over his high forehead. Every now and then, however, his beautiful blue eyes would flash, brightening up his face and relieving the languor habitually exhibited there.”

Only the presence of Vera Figner, whose beauty, grace, and indomitable personality were many years later to cast their spell on Victor^{**}, seemed to relieve his melancholy. When she visited the

apartment, “Nikolai suddenly became so gay and talkative that he was unrecognizable.” With time, Ivanovskaya learned to appreciate and grow closer to “this peculiar man, this lethargic philosopher... [whose] learning rendered him alien to all pettiness, all philistinism and conceit.[...] Kibalchich didn’t share the illusions harbored by most of the young people of the time, but he wasn’t a pessimist in the ordinary sense: his words radiated hope.”

Altogether absorbed by his scientific pursuits, Nikolai took no part in the clandestine printing operation for which he and Ivanovskaya, who passed themselves off as man and wife, had established the safe house they shared. “He was engrossed in devising a new type of air engine [or rocket-ship in modern parlance], and he spent hours on end working in his room. Now and then, he dropped into the room where we worked - not to help, but rather to relieve the tensions of intellectual activity and straighten out his back, which was eternally bent over his books.” This brilliant scientist was so impractical that he understood nothing of what he called “woman’s work.” On one occasion when Ivanovskaya, occupied with her printing press, laughingly ordered him to make his own tea, Nikolai emerged from the kitchen “sad, embarrassed, and covered with coal dust,” having blown up the samovar!⁴⁵ His kinsman and fellow-scientist, Leon, was apparently cast in the same mold. Thus Victor was to recall his father: “I never knew him as anything but a man possessed with an insatiable thirst for knowledge and understanding which was to handicap him continuously where practical matters were concerned.⁴⁶

In September 1880, Mikhailov, the leader of the terrorist Executive Committee, gave his former Novgorod schoolmate a new assignment. According to the police, Nikolai Kibalchich took “more or less part” [*plus ou moins part*]⁴⁷ in another failed attack on the Czar. When arrests thinned the party’s ranks after several more unsuccessful attempts, it became obvious that there was little time left. During the winter of 1880-81 N.I. Kibalchich moved to St. Petersburg, where Serge’s *Memoirs* also place Leon, serving as a non-commissioned officer in the Petersburg Imperial Guard. In Petersburg Nikolai Kibalchich worked diligently on his explosives in makeshift clandestine laboratories where, according to Vera Figner, he and his helpers were “liable to be killed at any moment.” [*la mort pouvait les surprendre d’un moment à l’autre.*]⁴⁸ Given Nikolai’s dexterity with the samovar, this is obviously no exaggeration, especially when one recalls that these amateurs were hastily manufacturing hundreds of pounds of unstable nitroglycerine (recently invented by Alfred Nobel and still experimental), and creating billows of fumes and stench in rented rooms under the eyes (but fortunately not the noses) of the police. The original plan had been to blow up the Czar’s sled as it passed over a huge mine buried under the street, but when one of the leading terrorists, Zhelyabov, was arrested on February 27, the assassination was moved up to the coming Sunday. According to family legend, Leon Kibalchich was assigned to play a crucial role in this last desperate attempt. Serge’s son, Vladimir Kibalchich states:

My father told me that Leon Ivanovich was the one who was actually picked to shoot Alexander if the other attempts failed. That day there were three [planned] attempts on the Czar’s life. One of them was supposed to blow up the bridge over the Nevsky with dynamite as the Czar crossed. If he turned to the right he would be killed. But Ryssakov missed him, he didn’t throw the bomb. Grinevsky threw the bomb between the Tsar and himself, and if this wouldn’t have happened, then Leon had to shoot the Tsar. Leon’s would be the third attempt. At this time Leon was a student in Medical school.⁴⁹

On another occasion, Vladimir told me the same story, adding the detail that Leon Kibalchich, as a Guards Officer on duty at the Imperial Palace, would have fired on the Czar if he returned home wounded or unhurt. However, on both occasions Vladimir insisted that Victor had expressed his reticence about committing this story to paper, declaring: “*What can’t be proved can’t be written*

without appearing as a lie.” [ce qui ne peut être prouvé ne peut s’écrire sans paraître un mensonge.]⁵⁰ Was Victor voicing his general scrupulousness about historical matters or did he perhaps harbor some doubts about the verifiability of an account he had heard only from his father Leon?

Returning to the established historical record of that fateful weekend, we know that Vera Figner took charge of operations, and that Nikolai Kibalchich spent Saturday night in her apartment hastily improvising special new bombs - four clumbrous hand-grenades weighing five pounds each.⁵¹ Kibalchich was described as “professorial” as he delivered lectures to his comrades on the correct use of the new bombs and as “phlegmatic and absent-minded” on the eve of the assassination.⁵² This absent-mindedness points to another aspect of the Russian revolutionary character as exemplified by Kibalchich. During the terrible drama of March 1 as well as during his imprisonment and trial, Kibalchich’s mind was “not on the subject” because he was preoccupied with his design for a rocket-powered “flying machine.”⁵³ His scientific passion asserted itself, in typical *intelligentsia* fashion, without any regard to his personal circumstances.

On Sunday, March 1, 1881, the Autocrat of all the Russias was reported in high spirits. On the previous day he had received word of the arrest of Zhelyabov, considered the leader of the Executive Committee whose assassination attempts had practically reduced Alexander II to the position of a prisoner in his own Empire. This was great news. With their leader gone, the rest of the terrorists would soon be rounded up. Furthermore, he had just agreed to sign a decree on reforms designed to win back the *intelligentsia* to the Czarist cause and undercut public sympathy for the rebels.⁵⁴ The Emperor would be secure in his realm. Count Valuyev, who had an audience with Alexander that morning, noted in his diary that he “hadn’t seen the sovereign looking so well in a long time.”⁵⁵

With the fear of assassination lifted, the Emperor decided to go ahead with his plan to review his troops in Manège Square. At one o’clock he left the Palace in a two-seater sled, resplendent in a dark blue cloak and a helmet with a white plume, surrounded by his Cossack body-guard in scarlet Circassian coats and followed by his chief of police.⁵⁶ However, bowing before his wife’s apprehensions, he agreed to change his planned route. After reviewing his Guards with obvious pleasure, he decided to pay a surprise visit on his cousin, the Grand Duchess Catherine. At about two-fifteen p.m., the Imperial party emerged from the Duchess’s palace and turned onto the quay along the Catherine Canal.

As Serge tells the tale at the opening of his *Memoirs* “a fair-haired young woman, her face calm and determined, who was waiting near a St. Petersburg canal for the passing of a sledge escorted by Cossacks, suddenly waived a handkerchief. There was an echo of muffled, soft, explosions, the sledge came to a sudden halt, and there on the snow, huddled against the canal wall, lay a man with graying side-whiskers, whose legs and belly had been blown to shreds...” Serge’s account compresses what were in fact two successive bomb attacks. After the first (described by Serge) two men were mortally wounded, but the Czar was miraculously unhurt. Colonel Dvorzhitzky, the chief of police, urged him to return to the palace with him immediately. But the sovereign insisted on looking at his assailant and examine the spot where the explosion had taken place. “He assuredly was not a coward,” remembered Prince Kropotkin. “He would meet a bear face to face [...] Yet he was haunted all his life by the fears of his own imagination and of an uneasy conscience.”⁵⁷ Five to six minutes passed under the pale winter sun. “Thank God, all is well,” exclaimed the Emperor, according to Vera Figner. His curiosity satisfied, the Czar was about to return home when another young man came toward him and made a sudden gesture.

“We’ll see if all is well,” replied the bomb-thrower.⁵⁸ There was a second explosion. This time there was no miraculous escape.

“In court,” continues Serge, “four of the five [*Pervomartovtsi*] condemned to death defended their libertarian demands with dignity and courage; on the scaffold, they embraced each other and died calmly.” Indeed, Nikolai Kibalchich’s conduct after his arrest again shows the richness of his personality. At first he took sole responsibility for the assassination, wishing to shield his comrades. Then, when he was aware that they had confessed, he stressed the collective nature of the enterprise, avoiding the limelight, and even waived his legal right to seven days’ delay in order to be tried with those who had been arrested earlier.⁵⁹ Like his comrades, he made no effort to withhold damaging evidence at the trial, taking full responsibility for his acts, defending his political motives, and explaining that their terrorism was not motivated by “bloodthirstiness.” With all peaceful avenues of redress cut off by Czarist police terror, what alternative was there?

However, when the technical aspects of the crime were discussed, Kibalchich’s scientific passion again came to the fore, and he engaged the prosecution experts in heated technical discussions about the making of explosives. A comic note was struck when he implied that the expert Fedorov lacked competence and cited, from memory, the August 1878 *Journal of Artillery* to prove his point.⁶⁰ To one observer it seemed “like a discussion between chemists, rather than a trial.”⁶¹ At this time, moreover, he was deeply concerned over the fate of his “flying machine,” - one of the first attempts to apply the principle of rocket power to the problem of manned flight.⁶² His only regret was not being able to finish his project before being hanged,⁶³ and he repeatedly spoke of it at the trial, appealing to the authorities to publish his design. It was in fact first published in 1918, after the Revolution,⁶⁴ and apparently provided for the construction of a powder engine, control of flight by changing the engine’s angle of inclination, an automatically controlled rate of combustion, and means of ensuring the stability of the aircraft. The Soviets considered it a forerunner of the *sputnik*, and named a crater on the far side of the moon for Kibalchich.⁶⁵ Breshkovskaya compared him to Archimedes, who was killed by a Roman soldier while concentrating on a geometry problem he was working out in the sand: “[Kibalchich] had great conviction in the rightness of what he was doing, and could look calmly in the eyes of death. On the eve of his death he was concerned only with the fate of his project, as Archimedes was for the fate of his circles.”⁶⁶

Kibalchich is reported to have gone to his death calmly, after arguing with the priest about religion and embracing his friends on the scaffold.⁶⁷ He was fortunate to be the first hanged, as the execution was a gruesome affair even for Russia, where the use of the fall-trap to break the victim’s neck was unknown, and death came after long minutes of agonizing strangulation. Although the imperial authorities had organized elaborate preparations and lavish panoply for the benefit of a huge audience including the international press and diplomatic corps, the hangman showed up drunk, the rings on the scaffold failed to hold, and one man had to be hanged three times. In the end the government lost face as the crowd murmured: “We Russians can’t even hang a man properly.”⁶⁸

9. The Aftermath

The March 1 victory of the Peoples’ Will was a Pyrrhic one. True, the Czarist autocracy had been decapitated. It’s prestige was permanently damaged. But, in the absence of a mass uprising timed to coincide with the assassination, Czarism was able to gather the forces of reaction under its banner and live on until 1917; whereas, on the revolutionary side, the Peoples’ Will party was truly decapitated with the arrest and death of its outstanding leaders. Yet the spirit of Populism

had lived on among Russians both in exile and at home and continued to play an important role in forming the unique character of the members of Russia's revolutionary *intelligentsia*, including Victor Kibalchich. For example, of the six editors of *Iskra*, the Marxist journal that was to make the name of "Lenin" famous, three were pioneers of Populism: Axelrod, Plekhanov (who had broken with the Executive Committee on the eve of the assassination over the issue of terror) and Vera Zasulich (who inadvertently opened the era of Populist terrorism when she shot General Trepov in 1878).⁶⁹ Populism had a crucial, although indirect, influence on Lenin himself. When Lenin was 17, his older brother, Alexander Ilyich Ulyanov, was hanged for taking part in a conspiracy to assassinate the reactionary Czar Alexander III. The attack had been planned for March 1, 1887 (to coincide with the anniversary of the assassination of Alexander II), and was to be carried out in the name of the "Terrorist Section" of the *Narodnaya Volya*, a party which no longer existed but which lived on in the imagination of Alexander Ilyich and his six youthful companions and have gone down in revolutionary history as the 'new *Pervomartovtsi*.'⁷⁰ The younger Ulyanov became an intransigent revolutionary. Like the future "Serge," the future "Lenin" grew up under the shadow of a Populist gallows.

Although in the long run March 1 spelled the doom of the Peoples Will, Vera Figner, the young woman who had coolly directed the March 1 operation and thereafter headed the Executive Committee for nearly two more years until she herself was arrested, emphasized the great enthusiasm that reigned in and around the Party following its successful decapitation of the Empire. "Sympathisers, recently passive or indifferent, asked us for direction; groups offered us their services. Those who did not live through the aftermath of March 1 with us will never be able to understand the meaning of that event for our revolutionary party."⁷¹ No where was this enthusiasm greater and more sustained, than in Ukraine, where the Serge's *Memoirs* place his father. These military groups were among the few sections of the organization to survive the police roundup that followed March 1.⁷² According to a contemporary police report, "The vitality of the circles of the South, which functioned much more actively than those of the North during the entire duration of the terrorist movement is a fact worth remarking. It is among them that the idea of creating a revolutionary organization with a central core and discipline in special forms triumphs... Energetic and capable leaders were never lacking in the South; those who fell into the hands of the police were rapidly replaced by others, which explains the fact that while the anarchists of the North and even their "center," the Executive Committee [of the People's Will] went through a violent crisis, the circles of Kiev continued at peak activity."⁷³

Eventually, however, the Southern Fighting Organizations were destroyed by the authorities, like the Petersburg group before it. As Serge recounts in his *Memoirs*: "*Mon père s'engageait dans le combat avec une organisation militaire du sud de la Russie qui fut détruite toute entière en peu de temps; il se cacha dans les jardins de la Sainte-Lavra de Kiev; il franchit la frontière autrichienne à la nage sous les balles des gendarmes; il alla recommencer sa vie à Genève, en terre d'asile.* It was in Geneva that he joined forces with another anti-Czarist Russian student, Vera Poderevskaya, who became his lover and eventually Victor's mother."⁷⁴

Part Two: Vera Poderevskaya and the Feminist Legacy of the Russian intelligentsia

1. What Serge tells us about his mother

Vera Mikhailovna Poderevskaya-Frolova was born in Nijni-Novgorod in 1856. At the time she met Leon Kibalchich, she was the thirty-two year-old wife of a Petersburg state bank official

named Vladimir Frolov, and the mother of two little girls, one of whom, Helena, had accompanied her to Switzerland. But we would not know this from Serge's *Memoirs*. For if they tell us precious little about his father, they are even more laconic about his mother, whose name is not even recorded there. Whatever the psychological significance of this omission, we must remember that Serge's book was not intended as a personal autobiography, but rather as political and historical testimony. It was the publisher, not Serge, who imposed the inevitable title *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (following both Prince Kropotkin and Vera Figner quoted above) on Serge's posthumous manuscript. Serge's own working titles were more impersonal: 'From the Revolution to Totalitarianism,' 'The Russian Revolution and the Comintern: An Eyewitness Account,' 'Souvenirs of Forgotten Worlds.' The opening chapter on his childhood was added as an afterthought, and the one intimate passage where Victor describes a touching boyhood scene with his mother was crossed out in black pencil and marked "hold back" (*reserver*) on the manuscript.⁷⁵ As for information about his mother, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* tell us only that she came "from the Polish petty nobility" and "had fled the bourgeois life of Petersburg to come to study in Geneva."

Serge's KGB file provides us with two more details about his mother. In a 1925 "Concise Autobiography" submitted to the Communist Party, he identified her as "a teacher of noble origin who 'went to the people.'" ⁷⁶ The phrase - evoking the idealism of the Russian student crusade of the "mad summer of 1874" - clearly links her with the revolutionary *intelligentsia*. Moreover, as we shall see, teachers, particularly female teachers, played a special role in that movement. Serge mentioned her in another concise autobiography, written under dramatic circumstances three years later in 1928. Having been expelled from the Communist Party as a Left Oppositionist and expecting to be arrested at any moment, Serge managed to smuggle this document to his sympathizers in France, so as to provide them with accurate biographical information to be used in an eventual press campaign protesting his extra-legal incarceration. (The tactic proved successful). He writes: "Mother: Vera Mikhailovna Poderevskaya, from Nizhni-Novogrod, lesser nobility, daughter of an officer, wife in her first marriage to a Petersburg official, leaves her family surroundings to study abroad [in Geneva]. Socialist. Switzerland, France, England, Belgium. Poverty, exhaustion, tuberculosis."⁷⁷

The starkness of those final three words prefigures the tragic end of Vera's life. She may have already contracted tuberculosis before leaving Russia. The Swiss climate was highly recommended by Russian doctors, and the hope of improved health may have added to the attraction of the University of Geneva. But when Vera chose to abandon the comforts of marriage to a successful official and threw in her lot with a 'perpetual student' and political exile like Leon Kibalchich, she condemned herself to poverty and exhaustion in the damp slums of London and Brussels - an existence that led to her death (in Tiflis in Russian Georgia) at age fifty.

Although Vera was a noble and Leon a commoner, the son of a priest, they were united by that thirst for knowledge and passion for living out the full consequences of their ideas - whatever the consequences - that characterized Russia's unique *intelligentsia*. Among those ideas was the emancipation of women, and Vera never bothered to marry Kibalchich. So we may assume that it was as equals that they began their trek across Europe "in search of bread and good libraries" the two basic necessities for Russian *intelligenti*. Although Victor's emancipated mother gave up her wealth when she joined Kibalchich, she brought her son a spiritual heritage equally as rich, culturally and intellectually speaking, as that of his father. For if the Kibalchich legend incarnated the heroism of Russia's revolutionary past, the Poderevsky connection put him in touch with its revolutionary future. It was through his mother that Victor was connected with the writer who

dominated the literary scene in Russia during the decades preceding and following the 1917 Revolution: Maxim Gorky, who, according to Serge's *Memoirs*, "had become friends with my maternal family... during the days of his famished youth in Nijni Novgorod."⁷⁸

Gorky, whose real name was Alexei Peshkov and who experienced the "Lower Depths" before writing about them, was born in Nijni-Novgorod in 1868, twelve years after Vera. Whatever the nature of this family connection, it proved durable. In 1919, after the Revolution, when Vera's son Victor sailed for Russia for the first time, he left the address of Gorky's newspaper, *Novaya Zhizn*, as a forwarding address for his friends in France.⁷⁹ And when Victor arrived, Gorky greeted him "affectionately" in his Petrograd apartment, and later offered him work in his publishing house. And although Victor did not take the job,⁸⁰ Gorky, whom he dubbed the "implacable witness of the revolution," [*le témoin implacable de la révolution*] remained an important connection as well as a role model for him. The Podrevskys were also connected with the group of Georgian social-democrats that produced such important Soviet leaders as Aveli Enukidze, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, and Iossif Vissionovich Dzhugashvili, later known as "Stalin." (It was to Georgia that Vera went to die in 1903.) In 1919, these Podrevskaya connections helped Vera's 29-year-old son to find his bearings and integrate himself when he crossed the border into the turbulent world of revolutionary Russia.

2. The Podrevskys of Nizhni-Novgorod

Geneological records show that the Podrevskys, although relatively poor, came not from the "petty nobility" as Serge assumed, but from the Polish "grand nobility," part of which was absorbed into the nobility of Russia during the period when much of Poland was being taken over by Russian expansion.⁸¹ Thus the ancestor of the Podrevskys, Stepan Ivanovitch, came to Russia sometime after the fall of Smolensk in 1643 and remained there, serving in the Polish noble cavalry of Smolensk, as did his descendants all through the Eighteenth Century. In 1755 the Order of the Senate confirmed, at the behest of some of these Podrevsky descendants, that Stepan Ivanovitch had been a 'grand noble' and had been granted an estate in the little village of Ostinski in the Smolensk Region as a reward for his service. Vera's paternal grandfather, Nikolai Mikhailovitch Podrevsky, was born there in 1778. He was a Major and Chevalier and inherited the Ostinski estate. However, Nikolai married a woman named Maria Ivanovna Ienlakova, the daughter of a minor official from Nizhni-Novgorod and settled there. He became the owner of an estate of 90 "souls" (serfs) in the Nizhni-Novgorod Region, presumably his wife's dowery. Ninety "souls" was not considered a very big estate, and Vera's father, Mikhail Nikolayovich, born at Nizhni-Novgorod in 1819, was the second son, one of four children.

Mikhail's career, although altogether honorable, did little to improve his fortunes. In 1837 at the age of seventeen he was enrolled as a trooper in a regiment of hussars, and rose through the ranks - non-com, cornet, lieutenant - to second captain after ten years of service. In 1847 Captain Podrevsky was noted "worthy and capable" and granted a discharge from the King of Hanover's hussars at age 27 "for family reasons" following the birth of his son, Nikolay. Over the next ten years four more children were to follow, all girls: Alexandra, Varvara, Maria and finally Vera Mikhailovna, born September 19, 1856.

In the 1853 elections among the nobility of the Regional Government of Nizhni-Novgorod Captain Podrevsky was elected *Ispravnik* (a kind of High Sheriff) of the Gorbatovsky District, where his estate was located, and in 1858 he was re-elected. *Ispravnik* was a difficult, demanding job and brought with it some respect, the equivalent of rank nine in the bureaucratic hierarchy. However, Mikhail's salary - average for an *Ispravnik* - was worth a mere 280 rubles and 20

kopeks a year. Even teachers, whose pay was considered low, received 390 rubles. Of course Mikhail Podrevsky was also the landlord of an estate in the Nizhni Region as well as the owner of 89 souls, (this wealth may have diminished after Emancipation in 1861). However, given the low productivity of Russian agriculture, his income would have placed him in genteel poverty, especially with four daughters to marry off.⁸² On the other hand, the noble serf-owning Podrevskys were well off enough to have been surrounded by servants and to have passed on a sense of *noblesse oblige* if not “aristocratic guilt” to their children.

In terms of culture, Mikhail Poderevsky was quite well educated for the time and place. He had been tutored at home, as was common in noble families. His military records state that he “knows how to read and write in Russian and also knows arithmetic, grammar, algebra, geometry, physics, geography, history, French and German.” So we can assume that Vera grew up in a house where books and learning were respected, that she and her brother and sisters were encouraged to study (Vera was educated enough to become a teacher), and that they participated in the cultural life of the provincial *intelligentsia* of Nizhni. It is also likely that the household of this officer was liberal, as was much of the *intelligentsia* during the liberal first part of Alexander’s reign during the euphoria around Emancipation. In any case liberal ideas were not uncommon among officers, and particularly among Poles. Alexander II’s brutal repression of the Polish uprising of 1863, when Vera was six, turned much of educated opinion against him, and the Poderevskys, as Russified Poles, would have been particularly outraged. Indeed subversion among subjects of Polish origin had been endemic in Russia to the point where a Polish name was almost as likely to trigger Police suspicions as a Jewish one.

Nizhni-Novgorod, at the time Vera was growing up there, was a fast-growing provincial town of some forty thousand inhabitants (its population was to double in the next decades with ship-building, manufacturing and trade). Located at the confluence of the Volka and Oka rivers, Nizhni-Novgorod already had a glorious past as a center for Russian culture and learning when it was incorporated into Moscovy at the end of the Fourteenth Century. It boasted an Opera House (1798), an international fair (from 1817) and was connected to Moscow by a railroad line (1862). However, for the majority of its inhabitants Nizhni-Novgorod was “a squalid swamp of poverty and ignorance.” The administration was poor and city amenities were primitive. The daily newspaper often reported brutal beating of wives, the deserting of children, and the excess of cheap and wild entertainment. Rapid industrialization added unemployment, social dislocation, and the smugness of the new-rich *bourgeois* to the endemic torpor and brutality of Russian provincial life..⁸³

The contrast between this brutality and the humanitarian sensibilities of liberal, educated people like the Poderevskys was dramatic. One sees this in the autobiographical writings of Maxim Gorky (“Bitter” in Russian), which overflow with indignation over the degradation of the poor and the hypocrisy of the rich. Gorky began life as a downtrodden, oft-beaten, book-loving Nizhni apprentice and began criticising society in the local Nizhni press in 1889. When he died in 1936 Stalin ordered the city to be renamed “Gorky.” However, during the period when Vera was growing up in Nizhni-Novgorod, society was being criticised by another radical writer, the social realist Vladimir Korolenko, who was Gorky’s mentor and another role model for the future “Victor Serge.”⁸⁴ Indeed, Nizhni-Novgorod was said to live “under the sign” of Korolenko, whose profound social criticism, published in the local press, affected not only the *intelligentsia* but merchants and officialdom itself. We can easily imagine Vera’s father reading Korolenko’s indignant articles aloud surrounded by his cultured daughters, and we know that her son Victor was inspired by him.

Of Korolenko Serge writes: “In the society of the old regime, he was a dangerous ‘stranger’, fallen from another planet [...] Every time some new shameful deed revealed the perversion of the old regime, every time an injustice or vile action was committed, Vladimir Korolenko raised his protest, firmly, gently, persuasively. In his articles, full of withering condemnation, there is never any sort of violent language.” Serge places Korolenko in the line of Russian writers who “formed the consciousness” of revolutionaries like himself. “They taught whole generations to hope for, to will, to believe in the possibility of social transformation. They maintained a holy indignation against the old world and set an example.”⁸⁵ We can assume that Vera Poderevskaya was not indifferent to that example.

On the other hand, we may also assume that a cultivated girl like Vera would also be dreaming of getting away from provincial Nizhni-Novgorod and of breathing the finer atmosphere of St. Petersburg. She got her chance when she was twenty in the form of an eligible suitor, one Vladimir Frolov, a rising young Petersburg bank official who was in Nizhni-Novgorod on business.⁸⁶ Frolov was the son of a Petersburg magistrate, and he was twenty-five when he met and married Vera. He had graduated from business school and begun his career at the State Bank at twenty, working his way from Accountant Fourth Class to Accountant First Class when he was sent to the Nizhni-Novgorod branch during the annual Fair. The young man from St. Petersburg was thus a fair catch for a young noble woman with little dowry, especially one whose father had recently passed away. We know this because in October 1876 a passport was issued to Vera’s mother as “the Widow Poderevskaya.” Its purpose was to travel to Petersburg, accompanied by her next youngest daughter Maria, for Vera’s wedding that November. In 1878 the couple give birth to a daughter, Elena, whom we have already met as a ten year old in Geneva, and in 1880 to another girl, Vera Jr. Meanwhile, Frolov continued his slow but steady ascension through the fourteen ranks of the vast Russian state bureaucracy, eventually ensuring his own nobility, for by the Nineteenth Century nobility had become so rooted in bureaucratic service that “it was automatically attained by a plebeian who had put in a definite number of years in possession of a government inkpot.”⁸⁷

Normally, Vera’s story should end happily here, for as Tolstoy says, happy families have no histories. “Normally,” if we were dealing with a genteel Victorian woman raised in Britain, France or the United States. But this was Russia, the land that routinely produced formidable women like the three other Veras we have already met in our story: Vera Figner, who took over the leadership of the *Narodnaya Volya* when her comrades were hanged, Vera Zasulich, who opened the era of assassinations by firing on Count Tropov and ended up in Geneva editing *Iskra* with Plekhanov and Lenin, and finally “Vera,” the feminist heroine of Chernyshevsky’s *What Is To Be Done?* So to understand Vera Poderevskaya and breathe the maternal atmosphere in which Victor was raised, we need to look a little closer at these phenomena. For in contrast to educated European society, the pre-revolutionary Russian *intelligentsia* represented a unique social group, formed out of both noble and plebeian origins, in which women assumed their freedom to a degree astonishing even by Twenty-first Century standards.

3. The Russian Intelligentsia, Feminism and *Noblesse oblige*

The *intelligentsia* is a specific Russian formation, not to be confused with the educated and professional classes of the West. Indeed, the very word comes to us from the Russian, despite its obvious Latin roots.⁸⁸ It enters the English language around 1920,⁸⁹ and as late as 1956 it was not yet to be found in a common French dictionary.⁹⁰ It first appears in print in the Russian novels of Boborykin and Turgenev around 1870,⁹¹ and it immediately becomes popular,

indicating that this group was more than half-way conscious of its unique identity in Russia even earlier.⁹² Perhaps the very crudity and stratification of Russian society united educated people from differing social origins into an ideal class to which the only “entrance requirement” was the love of ideas. This idealism distinguished members of the *intelligentsia* from the merely literate: bored matrons who devoured love-novels and merchants or officials who read newspapers - like the bourgeois philistines of Nizhni-Novgorod excoriated by Gorky. It was the tension between brutality of Russian reality and the beauty of ideas (mostly imported during successive waves of Westernization) that alienated the *intelligentsia* from established society and eventually imbued it with a revolutionary mission.

Unlike social groupings in the West, the *intelligentsia*'s members were held together not by common social origins nor by common economic interests, but by a common alienation from society and a common belief in the power of ideas to criticise and to transform it. Its members lived as it were suspended in the atmosphere - above them an all-powerful, suspicious autocracy, below them a vast uncomprehending, suspicious peasantry. Beginning as gentle dreamers, they were driven almost in spite of themselves into rebellion by a regime which forbade them to dream, arrested them for discussing “subversive” books, and exiled them for proposing reforms. It reached the point where the very word “student” became synonymous with “revolutionary.”⁹³ Rejecting the present and rejected by it, they lived in and for the future, in the hope of transforming it through their ideas and the sacrifices they were prepared to make in the name of this historical mission.

Victor Serge, although born to exile in glittering *fin de siècle* Europe, inherited this historical consciousness and remained true to it throughout his life: “Early on,” he wrote, “I learnt from the Russian *intelligentsia* that the only meaning of life lies in conscious participation in the making of history. The more I think of that, the more deeply true it seems to be. It follows that one must range oneself actively against everything that diminishes man, and involve oneself in all struggles which tend to liberate and enlarge him.”⁹⁴ This sense of commitment, this serious and permanent *engagement*, distinguishes members of the Russian *intelligentsia* from most Western intellectuals, for whom being “progressive” entails little more than reading the correct newspaper, making “politically correct” remarks, signing petitions, turning up at demonstrations and, in France, going to the correct café.

Whole books have been written on the origins of the *intelligentsia*. On the one hand, the philosopher Berdiaev believed the *intelligenti* were sons of Orthodox priests, like the Kibalchiches, whose religious faith had been “perverted into faith in reason.”⁹⁵ On the other, the Populist, Mikhailovsky, derived the *intelligentsia* from the “conscience-stricken nobility” - people like the Poderevskys. Basically, a self-selected social grouping, this caste recruited its members from all classes: from the nobility above and from the plebeian classes below - literate workers, artisans, occasional peasants, educated clergy - below. Indeed, the five hanged *Pervomartovtsi* whose portraits stared down at young Victor illustrated all these origins. Their leader Sophie Perevskaya was a noble like Victor's mother. “The four other revolutionaries of March 1,” (noted Vera Figner) “were “the peasant Zheliabov, the chemist Kibalchich, a priest's son, the worker Timothy Mikhailov, and the petty-bourgeois Ryssakov, symbolically representing all the castes of the Empire of Russia.”⁹⁶ Be this as it may, the sense of *noblesse oblige* and aristocratic guilt certainly motivated the strand of the revolutionary Russian *intelligentsia* from which Victor's mother emerged, and it helps to understand how she made the difficult choice to throw over a life of privilege for the hard life of a wandering scholar and political exile.

Another of our four Veras, Vera Figner, faced a similar choice under similar conditions. Like Poderevskaya, Figner had travelled to Switzerland to study and eventually to become a doctor for the poor. There, her Russian women classmates introduced her to socialist ideas, which provoked in her a moral crisis. "My ideas and feelings were at odds," she recalled. "I had a desire, a powerful instinct, to own property, even if only in the future; I certainly didn't want to stay poor." But Figner was aware of how her noble father had gotten rich buying up land cheaply at the time of the Emancipation and awakened to aristocratic guilt. "Logic led me inexorably to the conclusion that the money my father had once spent for land had been blood money. There was no avoiding it; still, I would need a great deal of time before I could rid myself of the desire to hold on to what I considered mine, or reconcile it with the new idea that labor - physical labor - is the basis of everything, that it creates all material wealth."

The same inexorable logic drove Vera Poderevskaya to socialism. Although it is doubtful poor Captain Poderevsky made much money out of Emancipation, the exploitation of peasant labor, whether free or servile, was the obvious source of the family's modest rent income. Moreover, Vera's husband Frolov, although he exploited no one personally, represented that quintessential capitalist institution, the bank. The young Vera Figner had also faced this issue. "But a person who puts money in the bank and gets interest on it - he certainly can't be living at another's expense, you can't call him an exploiter?" she protested. Her socialist woman classmate "demonstrated calmly and methodically that even the bank, that peaceful refuge, was a device to wring sweat from the workers, and that interest was also criminal income." Figner found it "difficult to digest such a notion - and still more difficult to accept it. All the more so because there was only one way out: if it was all true, then I would have to renounce my position, for it would be unthinkable to recognize that you are the cause of others' suffering and still retain your privileges and enjoy your advantages." Like Vera Poderevskaya, Vera Figner had to face the frightening personal consequences: "But that would mean that I would have to descend into that very poverty, filth and degradation that was the lot of the oppressed majority. It was terrible to draw such a conclusion, terrible to have to make up my mind!"

Make up their minds, both Vera's did, and Poderevskaya's son Victor summarized the consequences in those three stark words: "Poverty, exhaustion, tuberculosis." However, in shedding her noble privileges, Poderevskaya did not shed her aristocratic manners and attitudes, some of which she passed on to her children, Victor Kibalchich and his Frolova half-sisters. As for Victor, although he was raised in poverty, worked long hours as a half-starved young apprentice, and spent nine years in harsh captivity, and during much of his adult life earned his living in newspaper printshops, he invariably maintained a certain elegance of speech, dress, and manner which stood out against the roughness of his physical surroundings as aristocratic. (And since his father had taught him the military arts of fencing and boxing, he never was made to suffer for it.) His son Vladimir remarks: "Kibalchich left us his name. But his character came from his mother - peacefulness, good manners, well-manicured finger-nails, well brought-up, social ease. This in the middle of prison - filth, brutality, globs of spit, homosexuals. He was incapable of saying a dirty word."⁹⁷ Vladimir also told me that his father had once confided to him that the Poderevskys were hereditary "Counts," a title which as a revolutionary Victor repudiated and certainly would not have advertized. Nonetheless, according to Vladimir, Victor wore a family signet-ring and managed to preserve it through his many imprisonments. However, the nobiliary crest had been filed off in order to efface any symbol of unjust privilege from the cherished object, presumably a gift from his mother. Moreover, Victor, although an active militant, seems to have scorned revolutionary careerism and the desire to dominate others - in

contrast to those plebeian revolutionaries who, having grown up with feelings of inferiority and humiliation, brutally grasped at power and its perquisites.⁹⁸ *Noblesse oblige?*

In any case, the sense of obligation toward the people was common among educated Russians. For example, Lavrov the liberal essayist maintained that the culture of the educated classes had been bought with the sweat and blood of the toiling masses; that as a consequence, the privileged *intelligentsia* was morally indebted to the peasantry; and that the way to repay that debt was to put one's knowledge at the service of the people.⁹⁹ Women like Vera Poderevskaya were particularly influenced by this argument, and it is not surprising that she became teacher and eventually a socialist. What is truly remarkable is that she and thousands of other Russian women were able to educate themselves and to play an independent, active social role - often surpassing the men - in such a backward, authoritarian, patriarchal society. Paradoxically, these emancipated Russian women were far in advance of the European and American women of the day. The idealism of the *intelligentsia* with its radical belief in the equality of all classes and sexes placed them above the inherited social prejudices that inhibited Victorian women in the West, while the very enormity of the obstacles to be overcome may have steeled their souls to accept no limits for their sex. In the words of Prince Kropotkin, "they *conquered* their rights in the true sense of the word."¹⁰⁰

Beginning in the 1860's Russian women succeeded in opening a series of educational institutions "in the teeth of the government, [...] in spite of the open hatred of Alexander II for educated women; in spite of the bitter opposition of the state police, who represented every woman student as a revolutionist." Kropotkin recalled that the Czar, "when he met in his walks a girl wearing spectacles and a round Garibaldian cap [symbol of the democratic revolution], began to tremble, thinking that she must be a nihilist bent on shooting at him." (A signed photograph of Garibaldi was among the souvenirs Vera Poderevskaya left with her son Victor.)¹⁰¹ When women gymnasium graduates were considered "unqualified" for university entrance, they petitioned for intermediate courses. When these were denied, they created their own teacher-training pedagogical courses staffed by volunteer university professors who agreed to teach them the "pedagogical method" of presenting every subject including anatomy, thus circumventing the ban on such subjects and preparing them willy nilly for university study abroad. Drove of Russian women soon enrolled in the courses of any Zurich or Geneva professor who would admit them, and they soon excelled to the point where one brilliant young girl, a mathematician, became the first woman to be appointed as a professor in a European men's university. The Czarist government then recalled the Russian women students from Zurich "to prevent their intercourse with the revolutionist refugees" (as in the case of Vera and Leon Kibalchich). Whereupon the women "forced the government to let them open in Russia four universities of their own, which soon had nearly a thousand pupils." Eventually women were 45% of Russian university students, and between 1860 and 1914 their number rose from 5,000 to 69,000.¹⁰²

The center of all this frenetic activity was St. Petersburg, where Vera Poderevskaya, now Vera Frolova, moved in 1876 as a young wife. At that time, women's pedagogical courses were organized as private classes and drawing-room lectures in all parts of Petersburg, where Vera may have prepared for her role as a teacher. As Kropotkin recalled: "Every afternoon the young wife of my brother, on her return from the women's pedagogical courses which she followed, had something new to tell us about the animation that prevailed there [...] Debates upon schools or upon different methods of education were organized in connection with the courses, and hundreds of women took a passionate interest in these questions, discussing them over and over again in private.[...] A vigorous, exuberant life reigned in those feminine centers, in striking

contrast to what I met elsewhere.” Solidarity was an essential feature of these circles, and efforts were made to include women of the lower classes and to provide work for them in cooperatives while they educated themselves. Here again, the Russian women were well in advance of their Western contemporaries, and perhaps of the women’s movement today. Again Kropotkin: “None of the women who were the soul of that movement were mere “feminists,” desirous to get their share of the privileged positions in society and the state. Far from that. The sympathies of most of them went with the masses.”

From such “sympathies” to revolutionary ideas was only a short step, and Alexander II was not entirely paranoid when he associated girls with glasses and potential assassins. Even at the secondary level and despite strict surveillance, girls’ academies were as likely to harbor radical study circles as the *gymnasia* where boys like Nikolai and Leon Kibalchich were infected with revolutionary ideas. Nikolai’s female co-conspirator Praskovia Ivanovskaya stated: “Boarding school resembled a monastery. Still the wave of new ideas of the sixties found their way to us, penetrating the stone walls of our cloister.” While Vera Zazulich described her schooldays as “filled with the most feverish activity,” adding: “The specter of revolution appeared, *making me equal to a boy*” (emphasis added). Could one even imagine anything like Vera’s or Praskovia’s radical initiation occurring in a French girls’ *pensionnat* or an Anglo-Saxon boarding school of the Victorian period? One would have to wait a century, precisely until 1968, for revolutionary “new ideas” to penetrate those walls and find a reception within.

If Vera Poderevskaya-Frolova was active as a “teacher,” as Victor reported, it was probably in St. Petersburg, probably in the context of the literacy classes that women from the pedagogical centers created for workers of both sexes. These were often transmission belts for radical ideas, as was the case a decade later when Krupskaya’s Petersburg literacy classes were turned into Marxist propaganda circles by her husband, Vladimir Lenin. We must assume that Vera’s husband, Vladimir Frolov, indulgently tolerated these activities, following the fashion of the liberal Petersburg *intelligentsia*. However, four years after Vera’s arrival in Petersburg, these fashions altered radically following the events of March 1, 1881.

We recall that the initial reaction to the assassination had been sympathetic to the regicides, at least in Petersburg liberal circles, to the point where Alexander III had apparently even considered calling a National Assembly.¹⁰³ So when Vera Frolova first heard the name “Kibalchich,” it was as a hero and martyr. Later, opinion turned against the *Narodniki* under Alexander III’s increasingly severe repression and reactionary policies. Compared to his successor, Alexander II looked more and more liberal in retrospect, and his assassins were held responsible as the Petersburg atmosphere grew darker and darker from year to year. The literacy classes and womens’ education circles, subject to strict surveillance, were curtailed. In any case, after 1881 Vera Frolova’s participation in such subversive activities would seriously have compromised her husband’s comfortable status in government service. In this atmosphere Frolov himself would have become less indulgent of his wife’s revolutionary sympathies, and relations would have become strained. The names Jeliabov, Perovskaya and Kibalchich had become anathema in Frolov’s official milieu, and one imagines Vera, forced to hide her views, becoming more and more passionately attached to their forbidden names and legends. Indeed, Vera may already have been half-way in love with “Kibalchich” when she met him in Geneva in the form of his handsome, brooding younger double.

In any case, Vera was stifling in Petersburg, and a trip to Geneva, where she could study and breathe a freer atmosphere was the obvious solution for the Frolovs. Vera was probably already touched by tuberculosis, and the air of Switzerland was known to be an antidote to the miserable

damp of Peter's city, built over a swamp. Frolov continued to play the indulgent husband in the liberal tradition, procured Vera a passport, and sent her abroad to study accompanied by their older daughter, Helena. The younger daughter, Vera Junior, remained with her father. (No wife or daughter could travel, either within Russia or abroad, without a police document or "passport" bearing her husband's or father's permission.) Such an arrangement, nearly unthinkable in the Victorian West, was hardly unusual among the Russian *intelligentsia*, where women's personal liberation flowed with inevitable logic from their intellectual liberation.

The sexual freedom of educated Russian women was all the more remarkable in the context of an authoritarian, patriarchal society where the power of the husband and the father over the wife and daughter was as absolute and as brutal as that of the Czar over his subjects. For example, Maxim Gorky's memories of growing up in Nizhni-Novgorod at the same time as Vera Poderevskaya are rife with blood-chilling accounts of the brutal wife-beatings he was forced to witness: his grandfather smashing the head of his saintly grandmother, his uncle beating his pregnant wife every night until he finally killed her, his aristocratic step-father rhythmically kicking Gorky's suppliant mother in the breast with his pointed boot while dressing for an adulterous rendez-vous. Yet this was the Russia that produced Vera Poderevskaya and the other remarkable Veras we have encountered here - precisely because of the *intelligentsia*'s tendency to counter the brutality of daily life with an abstract assertion of an opposite ideal, in this case the duty of men to encourage women's total emancipation.

The role models for this radically new relationship between man and women were provided by another Vera - the heroine of Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What Is To Be Done?* - and her compliant husband. Chernyshevsky believed that women had so long been subjugated by men that mere equality of the sexes was not enough. Anticipating the concept of "affirmative action," he held that the scales must be tipped in the other direction. Husbands, for example, should not just tolerate but actually encourage their wives to exercise their freedom by taking lovers. If the wives chose to leave with a new partner, the husband should remain loyal and raise the children. Moreover, Chernyshevsky practiced what he preached, encouraging his own somewhat frivolous wife in her affairs.

Although Chernyshevsky's feminist ideas were derived from Western writers like John Stewart Mill, Georges Sand and Jenny D'Héricourt, his heroine was modeled on a live Russian woman, Mary Obruchev, one of the first Russian girls to study medicine. To get permission to study, Vera's model contrived a "fictitious marriage," which was real enough for a time, and then negotiated an amicable change of partners.¹⁰⁴ Thus, while Chernyshevsky's novel popularized this advanced pattern of woman's emancipation, it was based on ideas and examples already in vogue among the *intelligentsia*, at least in Petersburg. And by the time Vera Poderevskaya was growing up, Chernyshevsky's Vera was already available as a role-model even in provincial Nizhni-Novgorod. It's hard to imagine that she was unaware of this didactic novel, whose plot prefigured in an uncanny way her own destiny. In it, the fictional Vera escapes from the stifling world of middle-class St. Petersburg and runs off with a Nihilist medical student. Did Vera Frolova think of this when she took up with Kibalchich? Such cases of 'life imitating art' were not really so remarkable in the *intelligentsia* milieu, and the few facts we possess about Vera Frolova can hardly be woven into a coherent pattern without reference to Chernyshevsky's Vera. In any case, no Victorian scruples would have prevented a Vera Frolova, whose morality was based on science, from living out her own novel when she found herself fatally attracted to this young, intensely intellectual medical student whose persona glowed with the dark aura of a legendary past. Leon Kibalchich was about twenty-six years old when Vera met him in Geneva.

She was about thirty-two with a ten-year-old daughter to look after. It was nearly inevitable that they would meet. The Russian emigre students in Switzerland were organized in mutual aid societies, naturally of a radical complexion, which provided lending libraries, lectures and discussions, and a little financial help in emergencies. These societies were of course under police surveillance, and Leon Kibalchich's name figures on one such list.¹⁰⁵ His name and legend would have surrounded him with a certain prestige in these Russian student circles, and Vera Frolova, as we have seen, was predisposed to succumb to it.

There was only one problem: Leon Kibalchich was a confabulator if not an impostor, and the Kibalchich legend, in so far as Leon's personal role in it was concerned, was a tissue of half-truths and lies.

Part Three: Deceit and Denial

1. Irina Gogua's Testimony

The truth about Leon Kibalchich first began to emerge in 1989. In that year, thanks to Gorbachov and *glasnost*, Serge's son Vladimir Kibalchich - born in Petrograd in 1910 and exiled along with his parents and baby sister in 1936 - was invited to return to the Soviet Union for the first time in 53 years. In Leningrad he met his Poderevsky cousin, Irina Gogua, the grand-daughter of Vera Poderevskaya's older sister Julia. Irina had survived twenty-one years in the camps, including Vorkuta and Ukhtarka under the notorious sadist Kashketin, and had last seen Vladimir as a boy of six in Leningrad. After explaining how they were related, Irina told him the Poderevsky version of the family legend:

“[The name] Poderevsky is the line of Polish aristocracy. But they lived in Nizhni-Novgorod. They were nobility, but they lost their money. They were poor.[...] Vera Poderevskaya was 17 years old when they wanted to get her married. They married her to Frolov who was 50 years old [*sic*], and a widower. He lived in a beautiful apartment with a beautiful art gallery in the apartment. He was rich, old Russian nobility [*sic*] and a high official in Tsarist times. Very soon after that Vera got tuberculosis. Frolov put her in Davos [an Alpine cure-center] in Switzerland and there she met Lev Kibalchich. Frolov with all his beautiful pictures went to Hell and Vera stayed with Kibalchich. She never came back to Frolov. And there Victor was born. Kibalchich, when they write about him they say he was part of Narodnaya Volya, but it was not true. All he was, was a real gambler. There were periods of winning, and then they stayed in big hotels. Then there were periods of losing, and then they lived in empty, broken old garages in utter poverty. Victor escaped this family when he was twelve and never came back to the house. This is what I know. What do you know?”¹⁰⁶

Vladimir was flabbergasted by this account: “What you tell me about Lev Kibalchich as a gambler is new to me.” He then recounted to Irina the Kibalchich legend as he remembered hearing it from his father, but somewhat defensively: “My father was not a gambler, he was a serious man. Papa was very careful talking about his family. He was very reserved... But at the end of his life he told me something. He never wrote this, so if anybody is lying it is me. You can believe me or not. I am almost 70 and I'm not going to lie. But maybe it would make sense to help my biography. Papa told me that Lev Kibalchich was a member of the group of March first who tried to assassinate the Czar...”

However, by the time Vladimir had finished his account, he had more or less convinced himself that Irina's testimony didn't really contradict it: “What I am going to say, maybe it is a lie and he

was not only a gambler, but a member of the Party.” (Such contradictions were part of the Russian character, he later explained to me: look at Doestoyevsky.) In the throes of that defense mechanism psychologists call denial, Vladimir attempted to persuade Irina that they were both right: “Everything looks like it is coming into place, so it looks like it is true from what we know.” Vladimir had also convinced himself that “in the history of the *Narodnaya Volya* in two volumes there is a list of all the names of all the *Noradnya Volysets* ...There were not more than 60 people. Among them was Lev Ivanovich,” he told the sceptical Irina. But Lev was not on that list. The only Kibalchich on it is Nikolai, the chemist, and in March 1989, the publication in Moscow of an interview (which prefaced the publication of some excerpts from Serge’s *Memoirs*) in which Vladimir made the same claims, immediately provoked an indignant letter to the editor from a Kibalchich descendant - attributing responsibility for the falsification to Victor, rather than to Vlady or or Lev Kibalchich.¹⁰⁷

Oral history is unreliable enough even when we have the testimony of actual eyewitnesses, and in this case we are dealing with stories handed down through generations in families that had strong reasons to shape them in a certain way. (Of course, this distortion only adds weight to their significance when regarded as myths and legends). For example, in Irina’s tale Vladimir Frolov, in reality a modest bank official of twenty-five when he married twenty-year-old Vera, is transformed into a fabulously wealthy fifty-year-old widower and aristocratic art collector to whom Vera’s impoverished parents had sacrificed their seventeen-year-old daughter. One understands how Poderevsky family pride may have shaped this version. The Kibalchich legend presents us with the additional problem of a story already mythologized at its source, the *mythomane* confabulator Leonide Ivanovich, who apparently traded on his famous name by elaborating a self-legend around it. Yet this myth remained so vital to the interests of family identity that Victor began his autobiography with the historical date March 1, 1881 rather than his own birth date, so vital that even a century later, his son Vladimir persisted in denial in the face of contradictory evidence.

In psychological terms, ‘denial’ is a syndrome typically affecting families, the classic for example being the wives and children of alcoholics). Vladimir had great difficulty accepting evidence which threatened his psychological investment in his his father’s veracity (which were apparently exemplary in all other respects). His need was to “protect” his father, whom he deeply loved and admired. One suspects he “inherited” this denial pattern from his own father, Victor, who may similarly have “protected” ‘Leon’ Kibalchich, a father whom he too loved and admire by avoiding (one supposes unconsciously) every opportunity to prove him a fraud.

I must confess that would-be biographers are not entirely immune to the denial syndrome, especially when (as in my not altogether unusual case) the biographer has been more or less adopted by the subject’s family. By 1989 Vlady Kibalchich and I had been friends for twenty-five years and addressed each other as “Brother;” he and his Mexican wife Isabel had, on frequent and prolonged visits, made me welcome in their (childless) home, where Serge’s archives and library were kept. To be sure, as a conscientious scholar, I was aware of the the temptations of ‘hagiography,’ and I systematically hunted for documents that might provide independently corroborate (or contradict) Serge’s *Memoirs*. I also sought out the testimony of Serge’s detractors, such as Boris Souvarine, Jean Malaquais and Marcel Body. I dutifully searched (in vain) various Western libraries for that famous two-volume Russian work on the *Narodnaya Volya* in which, Vlady insisted, he had read the name ‘Leon Kibalchich.’ By then I had begun to take Vlady’s elaboration of the Kibalchich legend with a grain of salt, but not Victor’s account in the *Memoirs*.

Be this as it may, Freud might well have been discussing my own situation when he wrote of biographers who “have chosen their hero as the subject of their studies because - for reasons of their personal emotional life - they have felt a special affection for him from the very first. They then devote their energies to a task of idealization, aimed at enrolling the great man among the class of their infant models - at reviving in him, perhaps, the child’s idea of the father.”* Thus it transpired that only long after the fact (and after years of psychoanalysis) did I realize why - in Paris in 1963 at the age of 22, when I first met Vlady and committed myself to translating and studying Serge - I committed a classic ‘Freudian slip’ or ‘*acte manqué*’. I failed to interview the key surviving witness to Serge’s youth: his mistress Rirette Maîtrejean, who died a few years later leaving a trove of Serge’s letters to her daughters, who apparently burned them.

What *rational* force could possibly have inhibited a budding scholar from taking possession of what can only be described as a biographer’s treasure? All I remember a half-century later is a painful feeling of embarrassment, a shameful inhibition which made me put off from week to week the necessary steps to seek her out and ask for a meeting until it was too late and I sailed home to New York. I associate this apparently powerful inhibition with an ambiguous, sexually oriented remark by Vlady (then aged 43, an idealized father-figure), who, while giving me ‘permission’ to go see Rirette, referred to her in sarcastic, denigrating, sexist terms. (I repressed the actual expression, but it had something to do with cats. I was not yet aware that her ‘promiscuity’ was legendary). Why this shocking remark? Vlady, usually respectful of women and no Puritan, must have had some psychological stake, perhaps unconsciously protecting his mother’s honor. . Whatever cultural taboos and inner conflicts Vlady’s remark may have awakened in my *psyche*, the apparent result was an inhibition as compelling as it was irrational. Sobering evidence for a biographer of the power of the denial mechanism in the face of psychologically threatening information transmitted through the dynamics of families (real or imagined).

2. The Documentary Evidence

What were the probable effects of Leonid Kibalchich’s duplicity (and of the family pattern of denial around it) on the developing identity of the future ‘Victor Serge’? How might it have shaped his stance as a revolutionary and a writer? Before attempting to explore this psychological dynamic, it behooved us first to establish the facts - to the extent that they can be discovered. Fortunately the same *Glaznost* that allowed Irina Gogua’s testimony to come to light, also pried open the Russian police archives. As a result, and thanks to the collaboration of Julia Guseva¹⁰⁸ and her colleagues, we now have enough evidence about *Leonid* Kibalchich (not ‘Leon’ as he styled himself in exile much less ‘Lev’) to permit us to reconstruct significant parts of his story, separating fact from legend.

There is no doubt that Leonid Kibalchich was a confabulator, if not an outright imposter. Extensive research in St. Petersburg archives reveals no trace of his presence in the capital around 1881 nor of his participation in the *Narodnaya Volya*.¹⁰⁹ Nor could any evidence be found for his participation in its Southern (Ukrainian) combat organizations in the archives of the Kiev Police Department for the years 1881-1887; nor was there any such evidence in the records of important local political cases, in the lists of suspects, or in the files for other revolutionary organizations around Kiev.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, the archives at Kiev do permit us to reconstruct certain key episodes of his life on the basis of which Leonid Kibalchich constructed his legend, for he was at least in the periphery of the *Narodnaya Volya*, and St. Lavra’s Monastery in Kiev

did play a role in his actual escape from the police, whether or not it was “*à la nage sous les balles des gendarmes.*”

The paper trail begins in 1881, where we find 20-year-old Leonid Kibalchich not in St. Petersburg much less in its prestigious Imperial Guard, but near Kiev in the Konstantinovkoye Second Military School from which he was soon expelled for “possession of forbidden literature.”¹¹¹ (In this respect, as in others, Leonid Kibalchich did follow in the footsteps of his heroic namesake Nikolai, around whose legend he later embroidered his own). As punishment, Leonid was transferred to 131st Regiment of Tiraspol Infantry and presumably demoted from officer candidate to simple trooper. During this period, which coincided with the assassination of Alexander II and its aftermath, Leonid Kibalchich was in contact with a radical circle of young men in Kiev who were on the periphery of the *Narodnaya Volya* and among whom he would have absorbed its *ethos*.¹¹² These Narodnik sympathisers met at the home of Petr Petrovitch Koss, an unemployed alcoholic nobleman and ‘ex-volunteer’ (soldier) who lived off his parents. According to the anonymous police agent in his circle, the people who got together at Koss’s almost always drank, but sometimes discussed politics. Most were in favor of terrorism. Koss himself had had contact with more serious ‘suspects,’ but the active revolutionaries didn’t trust him because of his drunkenness. On the other hand, according to the police, ‘when drunk’ he was ‘capable of all kinds of political crimes.’

Kibalchich did not last long as volunteer trooper (enlisted man). On June 1, 1882 he ran away, deserting from Tiraspol Regiment at a camp near Kiev and - much more serious - taking a revolver with him. This last detail suggests an impulsive action, and it is not impossible that he had discovered he was under suspicion for subversive activities. However, his motives may just as well have been personal: impatience with military discipline or a drunken quarrel over cards. “He was a very frenetic man, loved to gamble with cards. Gambling debts may have been the reason he fled to Belgium [*sic*]” surmised the geologist Oleg Kibalchich in his 1989 letter debunking Vladimir’s claims about his grandfather’s membership in the *Narodnaya Volya*.¹¹³

Gambler or no, Leonid Kibalchich did not hesitate to ask his radical friends in Kiev to help him in his escape, and they did not refuse, which seems to confirm Serge description of his father as a Narodnik “sympathizer.”

Leonid’s most desperate need was money, and he sent a friend named Vankevitch to the monastery of St. Lavra’s to get him some (presumably from a priestly Kibalchich relative who was officiating there) and bring it to the house of another comrade named Lozinsky. Vankevitch was a 22-year-old unemployed nobleman who wanted to become a teacher. He was very poor and so lived with Koss, who introduced him to all kinds of suspicious persons including Leonid Kibalchich. According to the police, Vankevitch was a peaceful soul, hardly a partisan of terrorism, and he was tolerated above all for his good humor and his willingness to run small errands. This one got him in bad trouble, for the police were waiting to arrest him at St. Lavra’s where Victor’s exile father later claimed to have hidden out. Koss himself was arrested a week after Kibalchich’s desertion, on the night of June 8, 1882, officially for drunkenness. The police searched his lodgings, perhaps looking for Kibalchich, and there they found several copies of the *Narodnaya Volya* journal and the address of the nobleman Lozinsky, to whose house Yankevitch was supposed to bring the escape money and whose relations with Kibalchich were noted in the report. So despite the authentic connection between St Lavra’s and Leonid’s escape, it is probably more likely that he was hiding out at Lozinsky’s.

This Lozinsky was considered a ‘very suspicious person’ and maintained political relations with people in Russia and abroad, so he would have been in a position to help Kibalchich emigrate

after his escape. Lozinsky himself had emigrated illegally in 1878, but was given permission to return. He and his friend Mozurmovitch “were respected by the youth and enjoyed the confidence of the [*Narodnaya Volya*] Party.” But, since they were under Police surveillance, they had removed themselves from political activity. Clearly Lozinsky was a much more serious revolutionary than the drunkard Koss, whom he did not frequent, and his willingness to help Kibalchich suggests that the latter’s political credentials had impressed him. With or without Lozinsky’s help, on June 15, 1882, a week after Koss’s arrest, Kibalchich apparently fled abroad - to Geneva where, five or six years later, he became the lover of the wife of a Petersburg banking official and apparently gambled away all her money.¹¹⁴

Three months after Leonid’s escape, a letter to Lozinsky from Geneva was intercepted by the police. Dated September 6, 1882 and signed ‘Ivanov,’ it asked Lozinsky to locate and send off some “papers” (perhaps fake travel documents) that were in the hands of Isaak Levinski, a mutual friend of Kibalchich and Lozinsky. Levinski happened to be in jail at the time, but ‘Ivanov’ thought his friends might have possession of those “papers.” Col. Novitsky, the Chief of the Kiev gendarmes, suspected that the ‘Ivanov’ in question is none other than Leonid Kibalchich, who may have needed false papers to return to Russia undetected, as his name figured on a list of those to be arrested at the border. Was ‘Ivanov’ really Kibalchich? Another policeman suspected that the author of the Geneva letter was a notorious revolutionary activist named Vassily Ivanov. However, Col. Novitsky argued persuasively that Vassily Ivanov was too careful a professional revolutionary to be involved with a drunkard like Koss and that far from emigrating, he was having success in propagandising the workers in the Kiev region, where he had been living as late as September 12, 1882. Col. Novitsky may even have known Kibalchich, and he gives us the only description we have of him: ‘thick-set, light-chestnut hair, blond beard and mustache, handsome, rather bold, intrepid.’¹¹⁵

One can well imagine Vera Frolova being seduced by a young man of that description bearing a famous name, and Leonid, whatever his actual involvement, was familiar enough with the *Narodnaya Volya* milieu to embroider on his own adventures so as to create a charismatic persona. (And clever enough to cover his tracks by claiming that his Narodnik ‘combat organization’ had been totally destroyed (*détruite toute entière*) so that no embarrassing witnesses could turn up to contradict his tale). According to the documentary evidence, their meeting in Geneva could not have taken place until five or six years after his flight from Kiev in the aftermath of March 1. These years present a curious and frustrating five-year gap in the paper trail, and Serge’ *Memoirs* are oblivious to the hiatus between his father’s 1882 escape to Geneva and his parents’ meeting there. The gap in the paper trail is curious because on June 3, 1883, the file of the fugitive Kibalchich was closed without explanation, and his “Biography and Description” were apparently removed from the files. Between 1883 and 1888 no record of his surveillance or arrest could be discovered in either the National Archives or those in Kiev; to be sure, these files do contain gaps. Victor’s father’s name next appears in Geneva, in a report from the local branch of the Czarist secret police, the Okhrana: “Lev Kibalchich was sent from Kiev in 1887, as political exile. He lived in Kiev until that time. After arriving in Geneva, he lived there until 1889. From there he moved to Belgium.” Another report in the same file specifies that he “has been living in Kiev at 22 Alexandrov Street, which he left in 1887 to come to Geneva as a self-described (*soi-disant*) political refugee.”¹¹⁶

Had Leonid been living peacefully in Kiev (or elsewhere in Russia) between 1883 and 1887? Or did he supply false information to the Geneva authorities - the presumed source of the Okhrana information - when he arrived there “from Kiev” in 1887 describing himself as a “political

refugee”? Unfortunately, no confirmation of his presence of Kiev could be found due to unavailability of address records there prior to 1890. In any case, assuming he did return to Kiev after his original escape to Geneva, he may well have used an assumed name and false papers, perhaps procured with the help of *Narodnaya Volya* sympathisers like Lozinsky. On the other hand, if he returned after June 1883, when his file was closed, his presence may not have come to the attention of the authorities, even if he had used his own name. But this would imply that he kept out of trouble, avoiding subversives and fights over cards, perhaps returning to the Kibalchich priestly fold. But then why was his file closed twelve months after his desertion? Curiously, the authorities in Kiev didn't bother to learn the description of the fugitive and sent off an 'orientation' to the Department of Police without it. Negligence by an overburdened and not very professionalized police staff is the most likely explanation. In any case, the files of fugitives, if inactive, were routinely closed at some point, although a year seems short.

There is, of course, another explanation which we are obliged to consider: that Leonid made some kind of a deal with the police, perhaps after being captured at the border attempting to return to Russia. The punishment for desertion with a revolver would have been draconian if the police had turned him over to the Army for court martial : at the very least, running the bloody gauntlet described above. The police would have had a strong hold over this wild young man who, as a *Narodnaya Volya* sympathiser, was in a position to give them valuable information about the enemies of the Empire they were sworn to protect. The deployment of agents-provocateurs was one of the main weapons forged by the Okhrana (the “Defensive”), the new Tsarist secret police created after the debacle of March 1, 1881, and these informants were systematically recruited - using a sophisticated combination of pressure and psychology - among captured fugitives and people with “weaknesses” like gambling. These methods were so effective that the Okhrana's network of double agents eventually developed to the point where they were able to place agents at the head of the two most dangerous revolutionary groups in Russia. The underground terrorist section of the Social Revolutionary Party (heir to the *Narodnaya Volya*) was run by the Okhrana *agent-provocateur* Azev, while the double agent Malinovsky became Lenin's Bolshevik mouthpiece in the Duma.

If the Okhrana had managed to get Leonid Kibalchich to compromise himself, the first thing they would have done would have been to close his file and remove his description. The Okhrana jealously protected the identity of an informant. His or her actual name was replaced a nickname like “Blondie” or “the Gambler,” while his original identity was known only to the Chief and the policeman who was “running” him. Agents files were kept in a secret locked room, accessible only to the Chief and his archivist. This secret spy system had the additional advantage (for the police) of spreading suspicion and mistrust provoking infighting and bitter accusations among the revolutionaries. However, in that *milieu* a revolutionary accused of being an informer had the right to defend his reputation before a “jury of honor.” Without conclusive evidence, he would be considered innocent until proven guilty, and this must be *a fortiori* our judgement on the honor of Leonid Kibalchich, against whom there are no specific grounds for suspicion - only that curious closed file and our ignorance of his whereabouts and activities between 1882 and 1887. However, by an irony of fate the one person who did have access to the Okhrana files and who could have verified Leonid Kibalchich's record as an heroic member of the *Narodnaya Volya* (or his disgrace as an informer) was Victor Serge himself: and thereby hangs a tale.

3. Victor Avoids the Evidence

In January 1919 Victor Serge-Kibalchich was ‘repatriated’ to Russia from the European emigration into which he had been born twenty-nine years earlier. He soon became a member of the Communist Party and was entrusted with serious responsibilities by the Bolshevik leaders, who were literally overwhelmed by the problems of the Civil War. One such problem was the preservation and investigation of the central Okhrana archives in Petrograd (the once and future St. Petersburg). These voluminous and dangerous files had fallen into the hands of the revolution, and Victor Serge was delegated to deal with this delicate mission under the most dramatic circumstances. In October 1919, Petrograd was heavily besieged by the White army of General Yudenich, and the despairing local Bolsheviks planned to evacuate. Serge’s responsibility was to pack up the most interesting files and to evacuate them to Moscow at the last moment or, that failing, to burn or dynamite them. This was urgent, for if the Reds were overwhelmed and the Okhrana archives fell into the hands of the victorious Whites, they could be used to track down and exterminate the defeated revolutionaries whose descriptions and histories were recorded there.¹¹⁷ In the event, Petrograd was saved at the last minute by Trotsky and his legendary armored train, and Serge had time to investigate the files at leisure. Based on these studies, he published a little book in 1925 called *The Okhrana: Behind the Scenes of a Modern Political Police* (or *What Every Activist Should Know About State Repression*) which became a classic, translated into several languages and reprinted by radical groups and police agencies for more than half a century.¹¹⁸

Serge was highly impressed by the extensiveness, thoroughness and professionalism of the Okhrana. It even had a branch in Paris to keep tabs on revolutionaries exiled in Europe. He was amazed to find “a whole series of entries” under his name (*toute une série de fiches à mon nom*) even though he had never even been to Russia. I think I can explain those entries. As we know, in 1912, a Russian national named Victor Kibalchich - the future ‘Victor Serge’ - was one of the principle accused in a sensational Paris bank-robbery trial, at which he appeared wearing a Russian blouse (The ‘Tragic Bandits’ of French anarchy known as the Bonnot Gang had terrorised Paris for months). So the Paris Okhrana naturally did a background check on the name “Kibalchich,” and their Geneva correspondent forwarded the files of two Kibalchiches living there: Basil, the leader of a Christian choir, probably another distant Kievan cousin, and a handwritten letter dated April 8 1913 in bad French from Geneva stating: I believe I can affirm that the Kibalchich who was convicted in Paris is probably the son of Léon Kibalchich and of *soi-disant* Podrewski or Poderevsky, Marie-Hélène (who was actually Victor’s half-sister). Incidentally, these Paris files also confirm that Leonid Kibalchich had been a student in Geneva back in 1887-1889.¹¹⁹

The story of how these top secret Paris Okhrana files came to light in the U.S. a century later offers an ironic parallel to the story of Serge and the Petrograd Okhrana files. In 1917 the Paris files became the official property of the new revolutionary government in Russia, and the last Czarist ambassador to Paris faced the same dilemma as Victor in Petrograd: how to preserve the archives while preventing them from falling into the hands of an implacable adversary - the Reds - who would hunt down every last enemy named there. The lame duck Czarist Ambassador packed them in sealed crates and eventually shipped them secretly to the Hoover Institute of War, Peace and Revolution in Stanford, California under a solemn agreement that their existence be kept secret until after his death. The Geneva “Kibalchich” files were among them when they were finally opened. I assume that the Paris Okhrana had duly forwarded another set of duplicates to

central headquarters in Petersburg back in 1912, where Victor came upon them after the revolution in the course of his Okhrana research.

We don't know if Victor had the curiosity to search the Petrograd Okhrana files for more information about "Leon" Kibalchich. However, the (inevitable) absence of any document confirming his father's imaginary 1881 revolutionary activities in Petersburg and in the South Russian fighting organization would not necessarily have shaken Victor's faith in Leonid's legend. On the other hand, he obviously found nothing in the files under 'Kibalchich' that might have suggested his father had been a double agent either, as he likely would have, since the Bolshevik Commissar Krasin's main purpose in assigning Serge to study thousands of double-agent files was to expose any who may still be active in revolutionary work. After recounting a number of the "sordid tales of treachery and baseness" that oozed out of the "mud-colour pages" of the Okhrana's double-agent files - some 35,000 of them - including, as we have seen, a number of respected revolutionaries, Serge's text provides the reader with 'a moment of moral relief' in an historical aside where speaks warmly of the "idealism" of the March 1 regicides and cites at length a moving letter from Jeliabov, discovered in his file, begging the new Tzar to consider him guilty and hang him with "the chemist Kibalchich" the others.

Serge's 1921 study goes into the psychology as well as the political significance of these double agents, many of whom felt they were sincerely devoted to the revolutionary cause. A surprising number of them, true Doestoyevskyan doubles, actually chose to return to Red Russia from the safety of exile and surrender to the revolutionary authorities for trial and - in most cases - execution. One such case was Malinovsky, Lenin's mouthpiece in the *Duma* during the brief period after the 1905 when the Russian Social Democrats were a legal parliamentary party. Serge calls them *revenants*, ghosts compelled to return. Another celebrated *revenant* was the brilliant and daring Social-revolutionary and terrorist, Boris Savinkov, who fascinated Serge.¹²⁰

In his 1931 novel *Birth of Our Power*, Serge brought to fictional life a revenant in the endearing character of the old Jewish exile "Uncle Sam" who is arrested as he steps off the train bringing him home to the dreamed-of revolution. Politically, Serge concluded that the double agent, whether cynical or sincere, is also a revolutionary in that he serves the cause, if only to preserve his "cover." What difference did it make if Lenin's words were delivered to the Russian people through the mouth of the traitor, Malinovsky, speaking for the Bolsheviks in the Duma? "The revolutionary word needs only to be heard. It matters little who transmits it." This statement may also be applied to Serge's Russian heritage. Whether or not his double of a father was also a double agent, it was certainly through the lips of an imposter that young Victor heard "the revolutionary word" of the *Narodnaya Volya* ethos. Yet it became and remained his "central myth."

In 1931 Serge had another unique opportunity to verify (or disprove!) his father's legend when he was chosen to collaborate with the last surviving heroine of the *Narodnaya Volya*, his mother's namesake, Vera Figner. "I was translating her memoirs," Serge recalled, "and she would harrass me with suggestions framed in uncompromising tones. She was, at 77 years of age, a tiny old woman, wrapped in a shawl against the cold, her features still regular and preserving the impression of a classical beauty, a perfect intellectual clarity and a flawless nobility of soul. Certainly she looked upon herself proudly as the living symbol of the revolutionary generations of the past, generations of purity and sacrifice."

Not only had Figner personally directed the conspiracy of March 1, 1881 in which Leonid Kibalchich claimed a part. In its aftermath she had also made a clandestine trip to Kiev to work with the South Russia underground in whose "fighting organizations" Victor's father had claimed

to be enrolled. These military groups were among the few sections of the organization to survive the police roundup that followed March 1, and Vera considered the Kiev organization to be “the best after Moscow.” [*le meilleur après celui de Moscou*]. As she wrote in her Memoirs, “Its members made an excellent impression on me.” [*ses membres me firent une excellente impression*] As Serge translated those lines, was he not curious to learn if his father had been among those members who had impressed her? Was he not tempted to ask Vera, an intimate of the chemist Nikolai Kibalchich, if she had not also known his distant cousin Leon?

Obviously Figner would have had no recollection of Leonid Kibalchich who, as we have seen, was never in Petersburg and remained on the periphery of the Kiev organizations at the very time they were flourishing. At most she might have heard mention of this sympathizer’s name - a name which obviously would have retained her attention. If questioned by Victor, she might have made some such acknowledgement, but apparently he failed to press her for details to verify Leonid’s tales. He may have felt intimidated by her imperious personality, as his sketch of her above suggests. He may also have felt modestly ashamed to indulge himself in such a non-revolutionary, bourgeois emotion as family pride. But these motives would have been merely conscious “rationalisations.”

As we saw in Part One, Victor’s identification with his father as the incarnation of the *Narodnaya Volya* spirit was essential to his self-identity and moral outlook. To have recognised his father’s shameful imposture would have been shattering to his basically healthy ego as it developed and matured. Everything suggests that even as an adult Victor unconsciously protected himself through the defensive mechanism of “denial,” avoiding troubling evidence about Leonid that might have shaken the foundations of his identity. The logical alternative, that Serge himself consciously manufactured an heroic legend around his father, has little to recommend it. To begin with, if Serge had wanted to brag about his family name, he could more easily have exaggerated his relationship to the famous Nikolai Kibalchich, whom he modestly sets aside as “a distant relation” in his *Memoirs*. More to the point, such a conscious imposture is inconsistent with everything else we know about Victor Serge, whose modesty, probity and respect for the truth are widely recognized as his essential characteristics. Leonid Kibalchich, on the contrary, was a duplicitous man who committed impostures in other areas, as we shall soon see. So it is safe to assume that Victor heard his father’s imaginary heroic exploits as a child from Leonid’s own lips and internalized them along with the *Narodnaya Volya* ethos around which he constructed his identity. He thus successfully incorporated the positive aspect of the father, crucial to healthy ego-development, but at the cost of buying into the family’s defensive system of denial.

Psychologists and social workers typically encounter denial systems in families with an abusive father whose systematic denial of his violence, alcoholism or sex abuse is supported by his victims. Denial is so powerful that spouses and children commonly “protect” their abuser by lying to the police and even to themselves. This is the psychological price many wives children pay to protect the nuclear families on whom their material and emotional lives depend. Serge’s nuclear family did, in fact, break up when he was only thirteen, and from then on the boy lived on his own. His ailing mother returned to Russia, and Victor never saw her again. We must assume that Vera had “protected” his father by not exposing his imposture in front of the boy, if indeed she was not in denial herself. Victor had no desire to move in with his father’s second family and felt mature enough at the precocious age of thirteen to live on his own in a rented room. His relations with Leon remained cordial, but they met for the last time when Victor was nineteen and left Brussels for Paris. Victor’s precocious independence indicates that his nuclear family had provided him with a solid enough identity by the time it broke up that he was able to successfully

negotiate adolescence alone, educating himself and cutting a dashing figure in the Belgian socialist youth movement with his Russian blouse and ultra-radical ideas. Victor had thus already permanently internalized the Kibalchich myth at a young and uncritical age, and he had no occasion or reason to challenge it during his adolescence when to have done so might have been fatal to his fragile, precocious identity.

However, by the end of his life Serge was apparently ambivalent about some of his father's tales. To be sure, he felt confident enough about the details concerning his father's participation in the Southern fighting organizations and his dramatic escape from Kiev to include them in his *Memoirs*, completed around 1943. Yet when he cautiously confided to his son Vladimir the account of Leon's direct participation in the March 1 events, he hedged, pointedly remarking that 'what could not be proven should not be written.' However despite Victor's conscious ambivalence, his unconscious childish need to deny his father's duplicity remained overpowering, for as we have seen he neglected a number of opportunities to seek the truth as an adult. Yet Serge's whole career is a demonstration of his dedication to seeking and writing the truth, the uncomfortable truth, at whatever personal sacrifice. His favorite adage was the ironical: "The problem, when you search for the truth, is that you find it." His avoidance of the truth about his father, his denial of his father's imposture, is thus more than a paradox. It is the key to his inner dynamic.

4. From Denial to Overcompensation

As we have seen, Victor received the *Narodnaya Volya* heritage of idealism and sacrifice through an imperfect vessel in his confabulator father who, like the agent provocateur Malinovsky, Lenin's spokesman in the Duma, told the truth through lying lips. Although Leonid, like Malinovsky, was doubtless sincere in his devotion to the cause, he felt compelled to create an heroic self-fantasy, a legend, perhaps to defend against an inner sense of worthlessness (was he an agent? or merely a failure and a gambler?) As for Victor, despite his complicity in the family pattern of denial, he must also have experienced unconscious or semi-conscious doubts about his father's tall tales even as a boy. The need to suppress these doubts and protect himself against threatening feelings of shame and humiliation set up an inner conflict which played itself out in a variety of ways, pushing him to contradictory extremes. These extremes are best understood as reaction formations based on an inner need to "over-compensate" for the shaky foundations on which his identity rested. In other words, Victor would vindicate his father by striving to surpass him, by becoming the actual hero his father only pretended to be: a revolutionary of such purity, such courage and, above all, of such probity as to silence any inner doubts. Our understanding of this dynamic of denial and over-compensation may help illuminate our understanding of the major crises in Victor's life: crises that marked the transitions from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to manhood and maturity.

During his adolescence Victor will assert his independence by isolating himself from the Russian emigré intelligentsia and adopting the narrow credo and sectarian mores of French anarchist individualism. During this period he will apparently forget much of his Russian, yet paradoxically he will be known in Brussels and Paris for his trademark Russian blouse. At age fifteen he will create an aggressive new identity as "The Maverick" (*Le Retif*). He will bond entirely with his Belgian peer group of teenage anarchist desperadoes, and follow them to the very foot of the gallows. Following this crisis, Victor's assumption of maturity will be marked by his "return" to his Russian motherland, now the revolutionary promised land of his parents' dreams, and by the creation of another new identity: "Victor Serge." As Serge, he will return to

the values of the *Narodnaya Volya*, reincarnated in the lucidity, determination and capacity for self-sacrifice of the Bolsheviks, with whom he will bond at the moment of the greatest danger during the height of a terrible civil war. However, with the rise of Stalinism these same values will lead him to join the opposition and pay the price of expulsion, persecution, arrest, and the loss of his identity as a professional revolutionary. He will overcome this crisis of political “un-personhood” by reincarnating himself as a novelist, returning to the intelligentsia tradition of the Russian writers, bearing witness to his tragic times by creating “truthful fictions” in the face of Stalinist impostures.

It goes without saying that these successive crises and transitions must also be understood as part of a process of intellectual and spiritual growth and as creative reactions to the historical and intellectual crises of the early Twentieth Century, for it is as an historical actor, as an engaged yet critical witness, ultimately as a novelist that Serge interests us. Our analysis of his subconscious motivations should not tempt the reader to interpret his commitments and choices reductively as mere psychological symptoms determined by a childhood complex. On the contrary, psycho-dynamic analysis should enrich our understanding of an historical individual by illuminating the conflicting inner forces, the unconscious drives that powered but did not determine his successive personal, intellectual, political and artistic commitments as he faced life’s challenges. The clinical instruments bequeathed to us by psychoanalysis, admittedly crude, are as yet the only telescopes that enable us to chart those vast, cloudy, turbulent nebulae known as souls. They help us to comprehend a somewhat austere subject like Victor Serge no longer just as a cultural icon, the sum of his achievements, the static representative of certain values, but, to quote Freud, as “a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related.”

Victor’s unconscious need to live down his inner doubts about his father’s authenticity by sacrificing his own personal comfort and security to their shared ideals may well have pushed him to extreme solutions at each of the critical junctures that punctuate his development. Consistently he courted poverty, persecution, prison, even the risk of death, when alternatives, sometimes quite honorable ones, were available. Although it would be inaccurate and misleading to speak of a “martyr complex” (Serge had little of the masochist), the notion of “martyr” is suggestive when we recall that it is the equivalent of “witness” (*témoin*), a key concept for Serge. In ancient Greek *martus* designated a witness to facts, as in a court of law, but also carried a broader connotation of a witness to truth and ideals (the exemplary lives of the Stoic and Epicurian philosophers) and even of prophesy. For the early Christians a *martus* was simply one who testified to the truth of the Gospel, but with the persecutions of the Second Century “martyr” took on its popular meaning of persecuted victim. During the Nineteenth Century, romantics cloaked themselves in the mantle of the suffering prophet-martyr handing down testimony to an uncomprehending Humanity, while in the Twentieth Century, the notion of “bearing witness” inspired Christians to join the struggle for social justice and human rights.

Serge was a martyr-witness in several of these senses. He is widely quoted by historians and political scientists as a witness to facts, and his account of post-revolutionary Russia is considered among the most lucid and reliable. His need to participate, to bear witness to his ideals drove him to the storm-center of revolutionary movements in half a dozen different countries, while his frequent and long-term imprisonments testify to his acceptance of sacrifice. Did he court martyrdom? When the Russian Revolution turned sour, instead of criticising it from the safety of Europe where he was employed as a Comintern publicist, he actually demanded to return to the Soviet Union in order to bear witness to the truth in the face of a well-organized, mendacious Communist propaganda machine; he considered this a political decision based on a

rational risk. Deprived of political rights, Serge turned to literature, and the words “witness” (*témoin*) and “testimony” (*témoignage*) occur whenever he attempted to define his stance as a writer. He originally conceived of his fiction cycle as “a series of witness-novels about my unforgettable times.”

For Serge the witness-writer, “he who speaks, he who writes is above all one who speaks on behalf of all those who have no voice.” As a witness to fact, Serge penned exposés, political reportages, and books of history (*Year One of the Russian Revolution* 1930). Their common thread is the need to bear witness for the fallen, the persecuted, to preserve their memory and thus confer upon them a certain immortality in the face of historical tragedy. But historical work did not entirely satisfy him. “It does not allow one to show living men enough, to take apart their inner workings, to penetrate into their souls. I am convinced that only free, disinterested literary creation can cast a certain light on history itself.” Hence Serge’s oxymoronic concept of “truthful fictions.”

Eventually, the creation of fiction became a powerful means of self-liberation for him. He defined the need to write as a need “first of all to capture, to fix, to understand, to interpret, to re-create life; to liberate, through exteriorization, the confused forces one feels fermenting within oneself and by means of which the individual plunges into the collective unconscious...” One is tempted to view the creation of fiction as the ultimate resolution of Victor’s inner conflict, his way of laying the ghost of his imposter father who pathetically had attempted to testify to his ideals by inventing a false *persona* and getting others to believe in it. Serge, unlike his father, knew the difference between fact and fiction. And if powerful unconscious forces prevented Victor from ever facing the evidence of his father’s self-fictions, they may also have been sublimated into Serge’s power to create literary fictions, to invent other selves and allow them to live out their lives in his imagination. “Writing,” noted Serge, “thus becomes a search for polypersonality, a means of living several destinies, of penetration into others, of communicating with them. All the characters in a novel and even the trees in the forest, even the skies are integrated into the author’s life because they spring from it. The writer becomes conscious of the world he brings to life, he is its consciousness, and he thus escapes from the ordinary limits of the self, something which is at once intoxicating and enriching with lucidity.”

This statement is an eloquent expression of the joy and power Serge experienced as a writer giving life to his characters and creating their truthfully fictional worlds. His creativity thus transcended the dark forces that drove his father, that proud, tormented double, to fictionalize his pathetic life and graft it onto the Kibalchich legend. So despite this tainted source, the ethos of the *Narodnaya Volya* and the revolutionary intelligentsia remained Serge’s ‘central myth’ as he plunged into the turmoil of Twentieth Century revolution and emerged as its witness par excellence.

¹ Victor Serge, *Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire et autres écrits politiques: 1908-1941*, Paris, Laffont (Bouquins), 2001, p. 501. Original edition, Paris, Les Editions du Seuil, 1951, p.8. FR original: *mon père s'engageait dans le combat avec une organisation militaire du sud de la Russie qui fut détruit tout entière en peu de temps; il se cacha dans les jardins de la Sainte-Lavra de Kiev, le plus vieux des monastères de Russie; il franchit la frontière autrichienne à la nage sous les balles des gendarmes; et il alla recommencer sa vie à Genève, en terre d'asile.... Je naquis par hasard à Bruxelles, sur les routes du monde, car mes parents, à la recherche du pain quotidien et des bonnes bibliothèques, voyageait entre Londres, Paris, la Suisse et la Belgique... Ma mère, de petite noblesse polonaise, avait fui la vie bourgeoise de Pétersbourg pour venir, elle aussi, étudier à Genève.*

² Conversation with the author, Mexico City, Dec. 1966.

³ Il y avait sur les murs, dans nos petits logements de fortune, des portraits de pendus. Les conversations des grandes personnes se rapportaient à des procès, à des exécutions, à des évasions, aux chemins de la Sibérie, à de grandes idées sans cesse remises en question, aux derniers livres sur ces idées...

⁴ “Mazine:” *Bulletin communiste*, Vol. 1921, No. 42, p.719. FR original: Cette génération [...] avait été préparée par ses origines, par ses luttes, par l’effort multiple et complexe de l’élite entière d’un pays, concentré depuis plus de cinquante ans dans une direction unique. Pour produire ces révolutionnaires, il a fallu les recherches intellectuelles et morales de Dostoïevsky, de Tchernichevsky, de Tourguineff, des Nihilistes, le terrorisme épique de la Narodnaia Volia, l’apolstolat du mouvement de la jeunesse “vers le peuple”: car ils sont nés dans cette atmosphère.

** The words ‘spiritual’ and ‘race’ in an article by a Communist writing in *Le Bulletin communiste*, albeit an obituary published under the heading ‘Heros and Martyrs of the Revolution,’ may sound oddly to politically correct modern ears. Serge was a thoroughgoing scientific and historical materialist (although not a positivist like his Spencerian father) ; his « materialist spirituality » (the phrase is his son Vladimir’s) connects him with Bergson’s *élan*, the vitalists, and Verdnatsky’s *noosphere*. *On pourra supprimer cette note*.

⁵ Ibid. FR [un daguerréotype jauni montrant un pope maigre et barbu, au grand front, au visage bienveillant, entouré dans un jardin de beaux enfants nu-pieds]

⁶ Information supplied by the Kibalchich House Museum, Korop, Chernigov Province, Ukraine.

⁷ Vladimir Dedijer, “Victor Serge, the Persistent Rebel,” (review of Serge’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, published 1963?)

⁸ St. Lavra’s is mentioned in an 1882 Kiev police bulletin concerning L. I. Kibalchich’s escape. See below p. XXX.

⁹ Victor’s kind-looking grandfather might have been Ivan Fedorovich, the priest of Mglin, or the latter’s son, Ivan Ivanovich, the priest of Oster.

¹⁰ Greater Soviet Encyclopedia, 1974 Edition.

¹¹ Michel Hainaut, “Sur les traces de Victor Serge a Bruxelles,” *Socialisme* No. 226-227, Juillet-Octobre 1991, Bruxelles. Leon’s 1888 Geneva *Carte de séjour* also corroborates.

¹² Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 1974 Edition.

¹³ Hingley, p. 84.

¹⁴ Information supplied by Kibalchich House Museum, Korop.

¹⁵ Aron Ia. Cherniak *Nikolai Kibalchich: revoliutsioner i uchenvi* (Moscow, 1960), p. 7. Thanks to Prof. Richard Robbins of the University of New Mexico, for his invaluable assistance in reading and translating.

¹⁶ Yarmolinsky, pp. 93-98.

* Of whom more later.

** This example of « life imitating art » (Wilde) strikes me as characteristic of Serge’s « spiritual race », the Russian revolutionary *intelligentsia*. So does Serge’s express hope that his books might help ‘form the character’ of future revolutionary generations , as they certainly did when reprinted in the 60’s and 70’s.

¹⁷ Serge, *Naissance de notre force* (Paris, 1931), pp. 177-178, also in *Les Révolutionnaires: Cinq romans de Victor Serge* (Le Seuil, Paris, 1967) p.276; *Birth of Our Power*, translated by Richard Greeman, Doubleday, N.Y.,1967, Writers & Readers, New York and London, 1977, p. 181. [... *On fit monter sur cet échafaud un homme de trente-cinq ans, maigre et pale, blond, la barbiche pointue, le regard concentré derrière des lunettes en argent... Il contemplant le monde du haut d’un pilori. -- On lui mit des chaînes; il croisa ses bras enchaînés sur sa poitrine. Le bourreau le fit s’agenouiller. Il essuyait du doigt ses lunettes mouillées. Le bourreau brisa au-dessus de sa tête son épée inutile et en laissa tomber les tronçons dans la boue, des deux côtés de l’échafaud. ... Il était à la fois puissant et impuissant comme l’esprit. ... Son livre, écrit en cellule, allait survivre...*

[Tout évènement résulte d’un enchaînement de causes innombrables. Et ceci aussi, à un demi-siècle de distance, m’apparaît comme une cause. Tchernichevski enchaîné, essuyant ses lunettes pour voir encore les visages de la vie, écoutant la sourde rumeur de la foule dans la pluie, m’explique la victoire de millions d’hommes en marche, ...On dit que des graines trouvée dans les tombes des pharaons germèrent... Rien ne se perd. Combien avons-nous été, combien sommes-nous dans toutes les prisons du monde, à nous endormir sur cette confiance? Et cette force aussi ne sera pas perdue...

Oui, mais l’homme au pilori s’est perdu, lui... Tchernichevski n’avait que sa vie.

Ne l’aurait-il pas perdue davantage s’il avait fini académicien?

¹⁸ Cherniak, pp. 18-20.

¹⁹ Serge, *Memoires*, p. 8.

²⁰ Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, Doubleday, Garden City, 1962. p.90.

²¹ E. Breshko-Breshkovskaia, *Russkie revoliutsionery II: Nikolai Ivanovich Kibalchich* (Tipografiia Partii Sotsialistov-Revoliutsionerov, n.d., 1903.

²² Sergey Kravchinsky (Stepniak), *Nikolay Ivanovich Kibalchich*, Geneva 1899 as quoted by Vera Broido, *Apostles into Terrorists*, Viking, N.Y. 1977.

²³ Cf Cherniak and Venturi, *op cit*.

²⁴ Cherniak, pp. 28-30.

²⁵ Cf. Hingley p. 77.

²⁶ *Cherniak.*, pp. 28-32.

²⁷ According to his fellow-revolutionary, Praskovia Ivanovskaya, quoted in *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar*, an anthology of autobiographical writings by women members of the Peoples Will edited and translated from the Russian by Barbara Alpern Engel and Clifford N. Rosenthal, New York, 1975, p 116.

²⁸ Cherniak, p. 40.

²⁹ Memoirs, p. 371) J'ai passé dix années sur un peu plus de cinquante, en diverses captivités, généralement dures. Elles m'ont enseigné ce qu'il y a de vérité dans l'aphorisme paradoxal de Nietzsche: "Tout ce qui ne me tue pas me rend plus fort..." (Mém. p. 395.)

³⁰ Quoted by Venturi, p. 642.

³¹ Praskovia Ivanovskaya, *loc. cit*.

³² Cf. Venturi, p. 183.

³³ Serge, *L'An I de la Révolution russe*, Maspero, Paris, 1971.

³⁴ Ministère de L'Intérieur (Russia), *Chronique du mouvement socialiste en Russie: 1878-1887* (St. Petersburg, 1890), p. 350. This curious volume bears the following on its title-page: "tiré à 100 exemplaires" and "Confidentiel et exclusivement personnel." It was written, in French, "sous la direction de l'Adjoint du Ministre de l'Intérieur le lieutenant-général Schébéko. Original French: *Kibaltschitsch fut caractérisé comme le type d'un anarchiste poursuivant l'idée fixe du mal, uniquement au point de vue de la technique appliquée aux engins meurtriers: un fanatique monstrueux et criminel, type nouveau, mais clairement dessiné par les données de l'enquête.*

³⁵ This article is quoted at length and analysed in detail by Venturi, pp. 679-681, as well as by Cherniak on p. 55-60.

³⁶ See Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 2010.

³⁷ Cf. Bertram D. Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution*, pp. 359ff.

³⁸ Quoted by Victor Serge, *L'An I de la révolution russe*, p. 21. French original: L'histoire est trop lente; il faut la boucscluler: ou la nation aura dégénéré avant que les libéraux ne se soient ressaisis et mis à l'oeuvre.

³⁹ Quoted in Kaum, p. 592.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Wolfe, p. 31.

⁴¹ Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, Anchor Books, NY 1962, p.144.

⁴² Kropotkin, *op. cit.*, p 206

* About whom more later.

*** Need I add that we are dealing her only with the morality of individual terrorism directed against the state, perceived as oppressive? There is no possible moral justification for state terrorism -- whether Czarist, Stalinist, Nazi or imperialist -- with its vast anonymous apparatus of surveillance, torture, mass murder, and assassination of civilian populations by bombers, V-2's or pilotless drones.

⁴³ Quoted in Broido, p. 205.

⁴⁴ Vera Figner's testimony at her 1884 trial, quoted in *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar*, Barbara Alpern Engel and Clifford N. Rosenthal, Ed., New York, 1975, pp.45-47.

** Who met her a half-century later in Leningrad in 1930 in the course of translating her *Memoirs* into French

⁴⁵ Praskovia Ivanovskaya, *loc. cit*. pp. 116-118.

⁴⁶ Serge, *Mémoires*, p. 8.. "Je ne l'ai connu que possédé d'une inextinguible soif de connaître et de comprendre qui devait l'handicaper sans cesse dans l'activité pratique."

⁴⁷ Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Chronique*, p. 112.

⁴⁸ Figner, *Mémoires*, Serge translation, p. 111.

⁴⁹ Tape-recorded conversation in Russian between Vladimir Kibalchich and his cousin Irina Gogua, Moscow, March 10, 1989. Translation and transcription courtesy of Suzi Weissman.

⁵⁰ Letter of Vladimir Kibalchich to the author, 12 June 1991.

⁵¹ Hingley, p. 114.

⁵² Yarmolinsky, pp.274-275.

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- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- ⁵⁴ Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*, trans. Francis Haskell (New York, 1960), p. 718.
- ⁵⁵ Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *Road to Revolution: A Century of Russian Radicalism* (New York, 1959), p. 277.
- ⁵⁶ Ronald Hingly, *Nihilists*, Delacorte Press, 1967, p. 114.
- ⁵⁷ Kropotkin, *op. cit.* p.160.
- ⁵⁸ Vera Figner, *Mémoires d'une révolutionnaire*, traduit du russe par Victor Serge, NRF, "Les Contemporains vus de près," Paris, Gallimard, 1930, p. 186. [*Nous allons voir si tout va bien*]
- ⁵⁹ Cherniak, p. 72.
- ⁶⁰ Breshko-Breshkovskaia, pp. 30-31.
- ⁶¹ Cherniak, p. 75.
- ⁶² According to a 1958 issue of *Pravda*. Quoted by Cherniak, p. 78.
- ⁶³ Venturi, p. 720.
- ⁶⁴ *Byloe*, Nos. 4-5.
- ⁶⁵ Greater Soviet Encyclopedia, Vol. 12, p. 210.
- ⁶⁶ Breshko-Breshkovskaia, p. 7.
- ⁶⁷ Yarmolinsky, pp. 288-289.
- ⁶⁸ Hingly, p. 116.
- ⁶⁹ Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921* (New York, 1965), pp. 59-61.
- ⁷⁰ Bertram D. Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution: A Biographical History* (Boston, 1948), pp. 62-65.
- ⁷¹ [Des sympathisants, naguère passifs ou indifférents, nous demandaient des indications du travail; des cercles nous offraient leurs services. Ceux qui n'ont pas vécu avec nous ce lendemain du 1er mars ne se feront jamais une idée de la signification de cet événement pour notre parti révolutionnaire.]
- ⁷² Yarmolinsky, pp. 314-315.
- ⁷³ Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Chronique du mouvement socialiste en Russie, 1878-1887* [St. Petesrburg, 1890] pp. 429-30.
- ⁷⁴ *Mémoires*, p. 8; English, p. 2.
- ⁷⁵ See Jean Riere's *Avertissement* to the 1977 Seuil edition.
- ⁷⁶ KGB Files, Moscow. Victor Serge, Oct. 18, 1925 "Concise Autobiography" appended to his Oct. 15, 1925 request to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for transfer from the French Communist Party.
- ⁷⁷ Reproduced in Pierre Pascal, *En Communisme: Mon Journal de Russie (1918-1921)*, Lauzanne 1977, p. 104. Mère: Véra Mikhailovna Poderevskaia, de Nijni-Novgorod, petite noblesse, fille d'officier, épouse en premières noces d'un fonctionnaire de Petersbourg, quitte son milieu familial pour faire des études à l'étranger [Genève]. Socialiste. Suisse, France, Angleterre, Belgique. Misère, épuisement, tuberculose
- ⁷⁸ *Mémoires*, p. 80. FR orig: s'était lié à ma famille maternelle...au temps de sa jeunesse crève-la-faim à Nijni-Novgorod
- ⁷⁹ Letter to Fuchs, Jan. 8, 1919.
- ⁸⁰ According to his *Memoirs*. On the other hand, Tova Yedlin in his *Gorky: A Political Biography*, states that Serge found employment there along with Zamyatin and other literary figures (p.125).
- ⁸¹ 2. RCIA, Russian State Historical Archives. Mikhail's Poderevsky's Service records F 587 l 20 n 434; the file on his nobility F 1434 l 2742 d 4037; the File on the Poderevsky nobility f 1434 l 2742 d 4037. Thanks to Boris Tamarkine for archival research and to Julia Guseva for translation.
- ⁸² Thanks to Richard Robbins, Prof. of Russian History, at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque for these evaluations and for acting as my guide through 19th Century Russian history over a lifetime of friendship.
- ⁸³ Cf. Tova Yedlin, *Maxim Gorky: A Political Biography* Praeger, Westport CT 1999, p.1.
- ⁸⁴ See Alexander Kaun, *Maxim Gorky and his Russia*, Benjamin Blom Inc., N.Y. 1931 and 1968, p. 226.
- ⁸⁵ Dans la société de l'ancien régime c'était un "étranger" dangereux, tombe d'une autre planète [...]chaque fois qu'une honte nouvelle révélait au monde la tare de l'ancien régime, chaque fois qu'une injustice ou qu'une infamie était commise, Vladimir

Korolenko, élevait sa protestation sobre d'expression, ferme et douce, et persuasive. Dans ses articles qui flétrissent et condamnent pourtant sans rémission, on ne trouvera jamais de violence de langage, d'aucune sorte [...]. Ils ont formé les consciences révolutionnaires. Ils ont appris à des générations entières à espérer, à vouloir, à croire possible la transformation sociale. Ils ont entretenu l'indignation sacrée contre le vieux monde et donne un exemple. Victor Serge, "Korolenko," *Bulletin communiste* No 4, 3 Jan. 1922.

⁸⁶ Russian State Historical Archives St. Petersburg [RGIA] f 1347 l 2742 d 4036 Vladimir Konstantinovich Frolov's service record. Thanks to Boris Tamarkine and Julia Guseva.

⁸⁷ Bertram Wolfe, *op. cit.* p.21.

⁸⁸ "Adopted from the Russian, although ultimately derived from the Latin *intellegere* by way of the Italian *intelligenza*." Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York, 1958), p. 346.

⁸⁹ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Third Edition Revised with Addenda (Oxford, 1955).

⁹⁰ The Quillet-Flammarion *Dictionnaire usuel* 1956 Edition, not averse to foreign words, gives the British locution "*Intelligence Service*" in the alphabetical place where "*intelligentsia*" should be found.

⁹¹ Richard Pipes, "The Historical Evolution of the Russian Intelligentsia," in *The Russian Intelligentsia*, p. 48.

⁹² Cf. Malia, p. 1.

⁹³ Cf. Bertram Wolfe, *op. cit.* p. 33.

⁹⁴ *Mémoires*, p. 368; English *Memoirs*, p. 374. French original: L'*intelligentsia* russe m'avait de bonne heure inculqué que le sens même de la vie consiste à participer consciemment à l'accomplissement de l'histoire. Plus j'y pense et plus cela me paraît profondément vrai. Cela veut dire se prononcer activement contre tout ce qui diminue les hommes et participer à toutes les luttes que tendent à les libérer et à les grandir.

⁹⁵ Cf. Martin Malia, "What is the Intelligentsia?" in *The Russian Intelligentsia*, ed. Richard Pipes (New York, 1961), p. 18, footnote.

⁹⁶ Figner, *op. cit.* p. 184 French original: "les quatre autres révolutionnaires du 1er mars, le paysan Jéliabov, le chimiste Kibaltchitch, files d'un pope, l'ouvrier Timothée Mihailov, et le petit bourgeois Ryssakov, représentant symboliquement toutes les castes de l'Empire de Russie."

⁹⁷ Vlady Kibalchich, letter to the author, 12 June 1991. French original: Kibalchich nous a laissé son nom. Mais le caractère vient de la mère -- la paix, les bonnes manières, les ongles signés: le bien élevé, l'aisance. Cela dans les prisons, la vacherie, la méchanceté, les crachats, les homosexuels -- il n'a pas pu dire un gros mot.

⁹⁸ After the Russian Revolution, Serge considered such "inferiority feelings" on the part of many newly empowered Bolsheviks a significant cause of the brutality of the Cheka and ultimately of the degeneration of the Soviet regime.

⁹⁹ Cf. Lavrov's *Historical Letters* of 1870, quoted in Engel and Rosenthal, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ Kropotkin, *Op. cit.*, p. 174. Also quotes below.

¹⁰¹ According to Vladimir Kibalchich.

¹⁰² Figs, p. 163.

¹⁰³ Kropotkin, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

¹⁰⁴ Hingley, pp. 35-7.

¹⁰⁵ GARF. F102 1889 D127 P 156 mentions him in the 'Référence sur les personnes recherchées et mêlées à l'affaire de Zurich' (cercles sociaux des émigrés, fonds détournés).

¹⁰⁶ Tape recorded interview in Russian (March 10, 1989). Translated by Susan Weissman.

¹⁰⁷ Oleg Kibaltchich, Candidate in Geographical Science. Letter to V. Loukianine, Editor of *Moscow*, March 29, 1989.

* Of course Freud lived in the era of Victorian biographies written to 'praise famous men.' Today's "Freudian" biographers, on the contrary, are preoccupied with their subjects' vices and perversions. One imagines them unconsciously motivated to "murder," rather than immortalize, their "fathers" by explaining away their subjects' admirable achievements as "side-effects" of their morbid compulsions.

¹⁰⁸ Julia Guseva, the Russian translator of Serge's *Memoirs* and novels, is librarian of the Victor Serge Library at the Praxis Research and Education Center in Moscow www.praxiscenter.ru

¹⁰⁹ Petersburg documents consulted include police files, reference works and memoirs on the topic Narodnaya Volya. Archives consulted include the Institute of Mines, the Military Academy of medicine and the State Archives of Russian History (RGIA). Thanks to Boris Markovich Tamarkine for his research.

¹¹⁰ Files consulted include F442 (Chancellery of the Governor General of Kiev, Polod and Volvre); F317 (Prosecutor of the Kiev Chamber of Judgements); F316 (Court of the Kiev Military Region); F318 (Prosecutor of the Court of the Kiev Military Region). Thanks to Anna Dobovik for her research.

¹¹¹ “Revue des enquetes les plus importantes faites aux Directions de la gendarmerie de la Russie de mai à septembre 1882” (Dossier 222, F 274 L 1D 242, p.57 Direction de la Gendarmerie de Kiev). Unfortunately, there are no files on the Konstantinovkoye Second Military School in the Kiev archives.

¹¹² GARF Archives F102 1882 D 718 “D’Ivanov habitant Geneve et de ses connaissances a Kiev’ beginning Oct. 6 1882 and ending April 25 1885. Thanks to Julia Guseva for research and translation.

¹¹³ Loc. cit.

¹¹⁴ GARF File 116 part 4 [F102, 1889 (???)] confirms that Leonid Kibalchich was already in Switzerland in the Fall of 1882. On page 205 of this file there is a list of persons to be detained and arrested at the border if they returned to Russia. Kibalchich is cited thus: ‘On June 15 he fled abroad. After having lived in Geneva, where he is at this time (1889) he entered the Medical Faculty of the University. His description is unknown.’

¹¹⁵ FR: les cheveux châtains clairs, gros, ayant la barbe et les moustaches blonds, beau, assez audacieux, intrepide.

¹¹⁶ Hoover Institution Archive, Paris Okhrana Files [Russia. Dep. Politsii. Box 123, Folder 1B, XIIIb (1), 1913]. Thanks to Mr. Ronald Bulatoff, archivist. French original: Avait avant habité Kieff 22 r. Alexandroff d’ou il etait passé en 1887 pour venir a Genève comme soi-disant réfugié politique.

¹¹⁷ *Memoires*, p. . N.B. Most of these archives were later closed by Stalin, that other creator of revolutionary legends designed to denigrate his rivals and to hide his own mediocrity (and possible role as an Okhrana double agent).

¹¹⁸ Victor Serge, *Ce que tout révolutionnaire doit savoir sur la répression* suivi de *L’Okhrana ou les coulisses d’une Sûreté générale*, Zones, Paris, 2010. Original edition, Librairie du Travail, Paris 1925. The book was based on articles originally published in Paris in the *Bulletin communiste* in November 1921. In the wake of the revolutionary events of May 1968, the French police brought out a private edition for internal education, while the Leftist publisher François Maspero reissued it in 1970 under the title *Ce que tout révolutionnaire doit savoir sur la répression*.

¹¹⁹ Hoover Institution, Stanford, Russian Collection; Dep. Politsii; Box #148, Folder XIII c (1), 1912, folder 1 B]. Thanks to Ronald M. Bulatoff, Archival Specialist and Elena Danielson for locating and sending me copies. Original French: Je crois pouvoir vous dire que Kibalctchich qui a été condamné à Paris, doit être le fils de Léon Kibalchich. et de soi-disant Podrewki or Podrerevsky, Marie Hélène.

¹²⁰ As witness a copy of Savinkov’s memoirs, translated into Spanish by Andrés Nin (Serge’s close friend in Russia in the 20’s and later leader of the POUM) and inscribed by Serge, found in a US book auction.