"To a Dog, a Dog's Death!": Naïve Monarchism and Regicide in Imperial Russia, 1878–1884

Daniel Beer

On March 13, 1881, less than two weeks after the assassination of Alexander II by the revolutionary organization, the People's Will, Eremei Ovchinnikov, a fifty-seven-year-old Orthodox peasant from Kirsanovskii district in Tambov province reportedly declared: "The Imperial family has grown in number; it has all kinds of servants and gets huge funds which make Russia poorer. That's why we need to elect our rulers every three years and there's nothing to regret in the killing of the tsar!" Ovchinnikov had been denounced to the authorities by two fellow peasants, but a further three, who had also been present, affirmed that the accused had made no such statement. Having considered the police report on the matter, the procurator in Saratov dropped the case.[1] A year later Ovchinnikov's alleged sentiments were shared (allegedly) by Semen Artem′ev Novikov, a literate Orthodox peasant who was working as a contractor on the Tiflis-Baku railway line. In conversation with a fellow employee, Novikov declared:

> The dead tsar was good for nothing and the peasants would anyway have been freed without him. And there's also no need for the new tsar; the ruler sends money abroad, which makes Russia poorer. Soon we'll have a revolution and a republic; we'll elect a president from clever people of all ranks, and the tsars will live on their farms like generals.

Novikov proclaimed his innocence and explained that his accuser had denounced him out of malice. The procurator of the Tiflis court ordered Novikov be detained for one month and issued a reprimand (внушение).[2]

Both Ovchinnikov and Novikov were peasants; neither had any recorded history of involvement in the revolutionary movement nor had either been, in the language of the arrest protocols, "noted for political unreliability."[3] Yet both men expressed a lack of sympathy for the slain Alexander II and the view that the assassination was a welcome development that offered the people recompense for their ruthless exploitation by the crown or augured a new era of popular sovereignty. These two arrest protocols are broadly representative of nearly 20,000 cases contained within the Ministry of Justice archives of individuals arrested between the mid 1870s and the mid 1890s for allegedly making remarks hostile to the Russian monarchy.[4] This article draws on a

1. Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGIA), fond (f.) 1405, opis (op.) 540, delo (d.) 37 (1880), list (l.) 288–288ob (Spravochnye listki ob obviniaemykh v gosudarstvennykh prestupleniiakh).

2. Ibid., l. 152–152ob.

3. Ibid., l. 288.

4. The 62 archival files, entitled, "Spravochnye listki ob obviniaemykh v gosudarstvennykh prestupleniiakh," each contain approximately 300 individual arrest

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sample of some 330 cases from the late 1870s to the mid 1880s. These laconic arrest protocols were drawn up by local policemen, usually on the basis of denunciations they received from members of the public, and then sent to district courts for decisions.

The individuals concerned were charged with lèse-majesté, a crime identified in article 268 of the 1845 penal code as follows: "whosoever shall express, even if indirectly, insolent and offensive words against the Sovereign Emperor, or whosoever deliberately damages, defaces or destroys portraits, statues, busts and other images of Him displayed in government offices or in public spaces." The penal code stipulated punishments ranging from the loss of all rights of rank and exile to penal labor for terms of between six and eight years to, in cases of drunkenness, imprisonment for between six and twelve months.[5] In most cases, having considered the reports, local prosecutors decided on an appropriate punishment, usually a brief custodial sentence, or simply threw the case out for lack of credible evidence. The protocols concern tsarist subjects from all classes across the Empire but they do feature a significant majority of men and women drawn from the common people: peasants, workers, tradesmen, merchants, miners, scribes, clerks, soldiers, and brothel-keepers. They deal with statements allegedly made by Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Germans, and Lithuanians. Some were illiterate; others literate, but there is no compelling evidence in the sources to suggest a correlation between literacy and anti-tsarist sentiment. The approach here is to examine reports grouped around a set of different (but inevitably overlapping) themes that allow us to reconstruct something of the political imaginary of lower-class contemporaries. The arrest protocols provide a valuable window onto the attitudes of the common people towards the monarchy in the years immediately before and after the assassination of Alexander II. Valuable because historians have long wrestled with uncertainty and speculation in assessing the political consciousness of uneducated subjects of the tsar in the decades before 1917 and with what Daniel Field, in his canonical study *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, termed "naïve monarchism."[6]

Naïve monarchism holds that the Russian lower orders, especially the peasantry, revered the tsar as a ruler sympathetic to the plight of his people. The tsar's benevolent intentions to distribute land and wealth among his subjects were repeatedly frustrated by the nefarious machinations of the boyars and, later, the gentry.[7] The tsar might sometimes have been impulsive and cruel, but he was fundamentally a just benefactor, who sought to redress

protocols on separate pages, yielding around 800 cases annually, or two to three per day. See RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, dd. 1–62.

5. *Ulozhenie o nakazaniiakh ugolovnykh i ispravitel'nykh* (St. Petersburg, 1845), part 3, article 268, 100. Peter the Great first introduced the crime of lèse majesté in Russia in his Military Statutes. See, *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, vol. 5, chapter 1, article 20. Available (p. 325 of vol. 5) at https://runivers.ru/bookreader/book9813/#page/321/mode/1up (accessed March 30, 2021).

6. Daniel Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston, 1989).

7. On the history of naïve monarchism in early modern Russia, see Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* (New Haven, 1961); Valerie Kivelson, "The Devil Stole His Mind: The Tsar and the 1648 Moscow Uprising," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (June 1993), 733–56; Maureen Perrie, *Pretenders and Popular Monarchism in Early*

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the suffering and exploitation of the common people and would one day usher in a world of "liberty and tranquility."[8] This view of the ruler straddled the secular and the sacral realms. As Leonid Heretz has observed, "folk tsarism consisted of a simple and cohesive set of ideas, based on the analogy between the Tsar and God, and, secondarily, between the Tsar and the father as the head of the family." As the popular saying went, "without God the world cannot exist; without the tsar the earth cannot be ruled." Bolstered by popular religion, naïve monarchism was also rooted in the lived experience of lower-class Russians, for whom the existence of the tsar was a "fact of life, like the sun rising in the east."[9] Field has argued that "the peasants *externalized* their sense of justice and fastened it to the person of the tsar, who 'orders' them to do what they want." The underpinnings of naïve monarchism can be found, therefore, in "folklore and religion, in the social structure and the nature of the tsar's authority, and in experience."[10]

The concept of naïve monarchism, or "folk tsarism" as it is sometimes called, has held sway in accounts of the political worldview of lower-class Russians since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, a commonplace in the writings of educated Russians from across the political spectrum.[11] In 1851, Alexander Herzen lamented that "the idea of the Tsar still enjoys some considerable prestige in the mind of the peasant. But it is not the actual Tsar Nicholas whom he adores, it is rather an abstract idea, a myth, a kind of Providence, an Avenger of evils, an embodiment of justice in the popular imagination."[12] Naïve monarchism confronted successive waves of radical propagandists, who invested considerable efforts in agitational work among the lower orders in the 1870s and 1880s, as a *political problem*.[13] Beyond addressing the real material distress of the lower orders, they also sought to challenge faith in the tsar as a benevolent figure sympathetic to the plight of his people. They believed that the dismantling of this naïve monarchism was

Modern Russia: The False Tsars of the Time of Troubles (Cambridge, 1995) and P.V. Lukin, *Narodnye predstavleniia o gosudarstvennoi vlasti v Rossii XVII veka* (Moscow, 2000).

8. Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, 6.

9. Vladimir Dal', ed., *Poslovitsy russkogo naroda: Sbornik poslovits, pogovorok, rechenii, prislovii, chistogovorok, pribautok, zagadok, povierii i proch* (Moscow, 1862), 244; and Leonid Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars* (Cambridge, Eng., 2008), 123–24.

10. Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, 12–13, 17. On the figure of the tsar in folklore, see Maureen Perrie, "Folklore as Evidence of Peasant *Mentalité*: Social Attitudes and Values in Russian Popular Culture," *Russian Review* 48, no. 2 (April 1989): 119–43.

11. Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, 1–2.

12. Alexander Herzen, "The Russian People and Socialism: A Letter to Jules Michelet," in his *From the Other Shore and the Russian People and Socialism*, trans. Richard Wollheim (Oxford, 1979), 180–81.

13. Reginald E. Zelnik, "Populists and Workers: The First Encounter between Populists and Industrial Workers in St. Petersburg, 1871–74," *Soviet Studies* 24, no. 2 (1972), 251–69; Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: a History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, trans. Francis Haskell (London, 1960), ch. 19; Ben Eklof and Tatiana Saburova, *A Generation of Revolutionaries: Nikolai Charushin and Russian Populism from the Great Reforms to Perestroika* (Bloomington, 2017), 63–67; and Christopher Ely, *Underground Petersburg: Radical Populism, Urban Space, and the Tactics of Subversion in Reform-Era Russia* (DeKalb, 2016), ch. 4.

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a necessary step towards liberating the population from a passive acceptance of its own suffering. Their ventures apparently bore only modest fruit. Populist memoirs and testimony tend to record the encounter with peasants and workers in terms that register disappointment with the common people's receptivity to wider discussions of religion and the sanctity of the autocracy.[14]

To give a few examples: in the "mad summer" of 1874, when thousands of students fanned out from their university lecture theatres along the roads of the empire to live among the peasantry in the Going-to-the-People movement, Populist Vladimir Karpovich Degaborii-Mokrievich undertook his own pilgrimage to the countryside in Kiev *guberniia*. He later described how his fellow propagandists were "instantly confronted with tsarism that had put down deep roots in the worldview of the peasants." He noted how "the peasants projected their own desires and understandings of justice onto the tsar, as if they were his desires and his understandings. The redistribution of land was to occur because the tsar wished it."[15] Countless other testimonies and memoirs register frustration and disappointment at the peasants' stubborn conviction that the "tsar little father" had his subjects' best interests at heart, and that attacks on his rule, whether verbal or physical, were unacceptable.[16] Occasionally, radicals noted that the peasant's faith in the tsar was "fragile," but such encouraging assessments of popular consciousness are few and far between in the accounts the Populists subsequently penned.[17]

Radical memoirs similarly document the persistence of naïve monarchism among the empire's expanding working classes. In Kiev in the early 1880s, Elizaveta Koval′skaia and Nikolai Shchedrin encountered workers who believed that "the Tsar, having destroyed serfdom, was now struggling with the nobles to take land from them and give it to the *narod*."[18] Reginald E. Zelnik and Deborah L. Pearl have described how propagandists in the 1870s and

14. Daniel Field has cautioned against setting too much store by these retrospective accounts of the hopelessness of the propaganda effort, faced with the intransigence of, among other things, peasant faith in the tsar. Memoirs were often written long after their authors had abandoned agitational work in favor either of political terror or small-deeds legal activity and now had a vested interest in showing that their earlier "efforts had indeed been ridiculous." It remains the case, however, that much of the contemporary testimony given by radicals arrested during the Going-to-the-People movement tends to confirm this perception of peasant resistance to the proselyting efforts of the students. See Field, "Peasants and Propagandists in the Russian Movement to the People of 1874," *Journal of Modern History* 59, no. 3 (September 1987): 420; Boris Itenberg, ed., *Revoliutsionnoe narodnichestvo 70-kh godov XIX veka*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1964), 1:266–67, 1:292–96.

15. Vladimir Debagorii-Mokrievich, *Ot buntarstva k terrorizmu*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1930), 1:174.

16. V. Ia. Bogucharskii, *Aktivnoe narodnichestvo semidesiatykh godov* (Moscow, 1912), 194–96; Field, "Peasants and Propagandists," 419. Spurred by their conviction that the peasants could not be readily disabused of their naïve monarchism, one group of radicals cynically sought to exploit it by summoning one particularly gullible group of peasants to rebellion in the name of the "real tsar," in what became known as the "Chigrin Affair." Ely, *Underground Petersburg*, 130–40; Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, ch. 3.

17. Itenberg, ed., *Revoliutsionnoe narodnichestvo*, 1:241, 1:419.

18. Elizaveta Koval′skaia, *Iuzhno-russkii rabochii soiuz 1880–1881* (Moscow, 1926), 28–29 (cited in Deborah Pearl, "Tsar and Religion in Russian Revolutionary Propaganda," *"Festschrift" for Nicholas Valentine Riasanovsky*, special issue of *Russian History* 20, no. 1–4 [1993], 84).

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1880s "encountered popular faith in the tsar from rank-and-file workers who, before or during a strike, sometimes proposed petitioning the tsar directly to redress their grievances." Revolutionaries' attacks on God, the priesthood, or the tsar were, in the words of one activist, "ineffective methods of propaganda" and often earned them a beating at the hands of irate "comrades."[19] Workers apparently resisted the idea that the tsar was the figure who presided over their oppression rather than the figure who wished to end it.

The views of these disappointed revolutionaries have subsequently informed the work of historians who have argued that pro-monarchist sentiment was firmly entrenched among the lower orders and survived into the twentieth century. Field has acknowledged that it makes sense to assume a "pattern of gradual erosion" in popular faith in the tsar in the decades prior to 1905 but maintains that "it is almost impossible, however, to find evidence in support of this pattern."[20] Pearl, meanwhile, notes that the tragic events of Bloody Sunday—the massacre of unarmed workers petitioning the assistance of the tsar before the Winter Palace on January 9, 1905—cemented popular disillusionment with the regime among the common people rather than causing a rapid collapse in their "naïve monarchism."[21] Other historians have argued that naïve monarchism continued to feature prominently in appeals authored by peasants, even after Bloody Sunday.[22] Both Boris Kolonitskii and Vladislav Aksenov have amassed a large body of evidence that testifies to the rapid collapse of popular support for the monarchy during the patriotic mobilization of the First World War, when many "who had been his sincere supporters ceased to believe in the tsar."[23] So, historians differ in their assessments of the speed of the erosion of naïve monarchism, but most argue that it began to decline around the turn of the twentieth century and had entered a state of rapid disintegration by 1917.[24]

How might one account for this apparent persistence of naïve monarchism among the lower orders into the twentieth century? In still the most sophisticated reading of the phenomenon to date, Field has argued that

19. Pearl, "Tsar and Religion," 89; Pearl, "Educating Workers for Revolution: Populist Propaganda in St. Petersburg, 1879–1882," *Russian History* 15, no. 2–4 (Summer–Fall–Winter 1988): 282; and Reginald E. Zelnik, "'To the Unaccustomed Eye': Religion and Irreligion in the Experience of St. Petersburg Workers in the 1870s," *Festschrift for Leopold H. Haimson*, special issue of *Russian History* 16, no. 2–4 (1989): 321–22.

20. Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, 21.

21. Pearl, "Tsar and Religion," 93.

22. François-Xavier Coquin, "Un aspect méconnu de la revolution de 1905: les 'motions paysannes,'" in François-Xavier Coquin and Céline Gervais-Francelle, eds., *1905: la première revolution russe* (Paris, 1986), 202; L.T. Senchakova, "Prigovory i nakazy—zerkalo krest′ianskogo mentaliteta 1905–1907 gg.," in V.P. Danilov and L.V. Milov, eds., *Mentalitet i agrarnoe razvitie Rossii (XIX–XX vv.)*, (Moscow, 1996), 181; Andrew Verner, "Discursive Strategies in the 1905 Revolution: Peasant Petitions from Vladimir Province," *Russian Review* 54 (January 1995): 65–90; and Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity*, 160–61.

23. B.I. Kolonitskii, *"Tragicheskaia erotika": Obrazy imperatorskoi sem′i v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow, 2010), 568; and Vladislav Aksenov, "Ubit′ ikonu: Vizual′noe myshlenie krest′ian i funktsii tsarskogo portreta v period krizisa karnaval′noi kul′tury 1914–1917 gg.," *Eidos: Almanakh teorii ta istorii istorychnoi nauky* 6 (2011/2012): 386–409.

24. Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven, 1999), ch. 1.

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peasants deliberately manipulated the myth of the good tsar in order to press their claims on officialdom and to evade punishment for their own misdeeds (but points out that there is "no necessary contradiction between sincere belief and manipulation"). He cites, for example, from a magistrate's report in 1902 that "the great mass of the peasants is still faithful to its sovereign" but concedes that "our knowledge of naïve monarchism in the nineteenth or seventeenth century rests upon much the same kind of evidence as this magistrate's report." He continues:

> peasants professed their faith in the tsar and acted in conformity to these professions, and. . . these professions were useful to them, and. . . nonpeasants accepted them. We may wonder about the sincerity of these professions, but we cannot appraise it. The sincerity of peasants is out of our reach. A hypothetical peasant hypocrite, or community of peasant hypocrites, would leave no trace in the written records on which we depend. We must rely on what educated Russians conveyed to us. And in any encounter between peasants and members of educated society, the peasants had an overwhelming impulse to dissemble.[25]

These pitfalls in the sources lead Field to conclude that, "if the peasants' faith in the tsar was in decay by 1900, the process passed undetected."[26]

Except that it did not, at least not entirely. Lower-class hostility towards the tsar was detected in the police reports that are the subject of this article. The arrest protocols, which recorded often verbatim the alleged expletive-laden statements of the accused, convey sentiments unmediated by the peasants' possible suspicion or manipulation of educated Russians. They document hostility towards the tsar as the figure who presided over an unjust and exploitative social order.[27]

The protocols are themselves a problematic source that, of course, need to be tapped with a good deal of caution. The representativeness of the offences they document is impossible to determine. Anti-monarchist statements clearly drew the attention of the authorities—although one must wonder how many similar remarks passed unreported—but the relatively mild sentences handed down suggest that the courts saw the problem as endemic and difficult to root out. Denunciations are, moreover, notoriously ambiguous. Their veracity is virtually impossible to reconstruct; the motives of their authors inevitably questionable. Many of the allegations detailed in the arrest protocols were disputed by other witnesses and emphatically denied by the accused themselves.

The Ministry of Justice arrest protocols contain only the barest smattering of contextual information and so compound these interpretative challenges. Large numbers of those accused of seditious remarks were illiterate and it is

25. Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, 211–12.

26. Ibid., 21.

27. On the basis of the anti-tsarist invective he has discovered in political investigations, Evgenii Anisimov has argued that faith in the legitimacy and authority of the tsars suffered during the Time of Troubles and continued to decline over the course of the eighteenth century. *Dyba i knut: Politicheskii sysk i russkoe obshchestvo v XVIII veke* (Moscow, 1999), 66–70.

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reasonable to assume that many of those who denounced them also were. The protocols detail alleged utterances communicated to local policemen who wrote them down. The police were themselves hardly paragons of bureaucratic efficiency and reliability. Even in the wake of the judicial reforms of the 1860s they remained, in the words of one scholar, "overburdened, undermanned, incompetent, corrupt, and inexperienced."[28] The language and sentiments contained in the arrest protocols thus drew on the expressive efforts of multiple unreliable authors—the accused, the denouncer(s), and the policeman—perhaps only the last of whom was able to fix language in written form.

Denunciations can be read, however, not in a bid to fathom their veracity but rather for what they reveal to us about the worldview and priorities of their authors. Describing a "culture of denunciation" among the peasantry of late Imperial Russia, Jeffrey Burds has examined how peasants would accuse their neighbors who migrated to the towns of religious deviation, a charge which often masked other, less spiritually-defined concerns about defending established hierarchies of authority and control within the village.[29] Pursuing a similar line of argument, the language and the sentiments expressed within the protocols may be understood to reflect, if not necessarily what tsarist subjects actually said, or some variant thereof, then at least what contemporaries could imagine they *might have* said. Mikhail Bogoslovskii has argued that denunciations "reflect the mindset and attitude of the society from which they emerged. The points of view they contained were thus possible and likely to be found within that milieu, even if they were not uttered by the particular persons to whom they were attributed by the denouncers."[30] Whether actually uttered or merely imputed, these statements offer a startling insight—one not mediated by the documentary efforts of educated contemporaries—into the political views of lower-class Russians in the reigns of Alexander II and Alexander III.

In his study of popular monarchism in the reign of Peter the Great, Evgenii Trefilov has cautioned against reading "a lack of or decline in esteem for the monarchy per se" into criticisms of the individual tsar. In the early eighteenth century, with his claims to the throne a matter of dispute and conflict and his rule one of cultural and political disruption and forced change, Peter the Great's subjects criticized him for "not acting as previous tsars had or denied his royal heritage."[31] In the reigns of Peter's nineteenth-century successors, however, there is little evidence that popular hostility focused on the

28. Robert J. Abbott, "Police Reform in the Russian Province of Iaroslavl, 1856–1876," *Slavic Review* 32, no. 2 (June 1973): 302. See also, Neil Weissman, "Regular Police in Tsarist Russia, 1900–1914," *Russian Review* 44, no. 1 (January 1985): 45–68; and Stephen P. Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict and Justice in Rural Russia, 1856–1914* (Berkeley, 1999), 30–36.

29. Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861–1905* (Pittsburgh, 1998), ch. 7.

30. M.M. Bogoslovskii, *Petr I: Materialy dlia biografii*, 5 vols. (Moscow, 1940–1948), 3:178–78, 3:192. (Cited in Evgenii Trefilov and Julia Leikin, "Proof of Sincere Love for the Tsar: Popular Monarchism in the Age of Peter the Great," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no.3 (Summer 2017): 465).

31. Trefilov, "Proof of Sincere Love for the Tsar," 465–66.

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individual tsar as opposed to the institution of the monarchy. His claims to the throne unimpeachable, Alexander II was assailed not for failing to live up to the lofty standards set by his predecessors but rather for manifesting the same callous indifference to his subjects.

The ensuing discussion proceeds in two stages: it first argues that the arrest protocols constitute grounds for a revisionist challenge to the existing historiography which charts enduring, if gradually declining, popular support for the monarchy in the final decades of tsarism. It then goes on to argue for a reappraisal of the efforts by revolutionaries in the reign of Alexander II to undermine the sanctity of the autocracy through the use of "propaganda by the deed."[32] The revolutionaries conceived of the terrorist campaign that culminated in regicide as series of dramatic acts that would both paralyze the government and rouse the people from their political apathy by demystifying the aura of the tsar's supposedly immutable power. In this context, Carole Dietze has defined terrorism as "a politically motivated strategy for applying spectacular violence with the aim of producing a strong psychological effect on a society—fear on the one hand and sympathy on the other—in order to force political change." It is, she argues, "primarily a communications strategy."[33] The campaign to assassinate Alexander II has been long dismissed as an ill-conceived attempt to foment revolution among a general population still devoted to the tsar. It emerges in the arrest protocols, however, as a partially effective form of political messaging. It might have failed to win over the majority lower-class subjects of the tsar to the revolutionaries' cause, but it did encourage some of them to articulate their own local grievances in terms of popular sovereignty, natural justice, and political accountability.[34]

Their criticisms of the sovereign are evidence of fissures opening up in the edifice of popular support for the monarchy at a time when historians have generally agreed that such support remained robust and unchallenged. Most uneducated tsarist subjects might have remained broadly loyal to the regime, but the arrest protocols suggest that they were at a minimum confronted in their everyday lives with the opinions of dissenters who challenged the very premise of a legitimate and benevolent ruler.

32. The term "propaganda by the deed" is attributed to the Italian anarchist, Carlo Pisacane, who used the term in his 1857 "Political Testament" to call for deeds rather than words in galvanizing Italians to revolt: "Propaganda of the idea is a chimera, the education of the people is an absurdity. Ideas result from deeds, not the latter from the former.. . .The only work a citizen can do for the good of the country is that of cooperating with the material revolution: therefore, conspiracies, plots, attempts, etc. are that series of deeds through which Italy proceeds towards her goal." Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism, 1864–1892* (Princeton, 1993), 13. Mikhail Bakunin took up the refrain in his "Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis" of 1870 in which he declared, "we must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda." *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, trans. and ed. Sam Dolgoff (New York, 1971), 195–96.

33. Carola Dietze, *Die Erfindung des Terrorismus in Europa, Russland und den USA 1858–1866* (Hamburg, 2016), 57, 76.

34. Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (July 1981): 379.

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A Figure of Contempt

A generalized irreverence, even hostility, towards the person of Alexander II, often expressed when individuals had been drinking heavily, pervades the statements documented in the arrest protocols. Having become involved in a drunken argument with the head of his village, Petr Timofeev Novogradskii, a fifty-year-old peasant from Orlov guberniia declared in July 1880 that he would like to "send the Tsar to Siberia."[35] Others were less delicate. In January 1880, Martyn Ivanov Iankevich, a forty-year-old illiterate purveyor of dairy products from Tverskaia guberniia allegedly declared of the tsar while drunk, "he's a thief and I'd like to shit on him! (Он вор, насрать я на него хочу)."[36] Ivan Mikhailov Shumilov, a literate tradesman from Rostov on Don was reportedly overheard in April 1879 saying (while sober), "The Tsar is an idiot, fuck his mother! (Царь дурак, ёб Его мать!)"[37]

As these examples demonstrate, expletives peppered the language of the arrest protocols. Russian has, of course, an impressively fertile vocabulary of profanity, and both before and after the revolution educated Russians associated the use of *mat* with the uncultured world of the "dark masses."[38] The protocols sometimes used euphemistic references to "uncensored language" but increasingly offered a frank transcription of the earthier formulations that leavened criticisms of the tsar. *Mat* was a form of proprietorial language that expressed lower-class identity in opposition to educated society (общество). It was freighted with subversive power when used by the common people to refer to their social superiors and especially of course to the tsar, a figure conventionally swathed in reverential language. As a linguistic register, mat was profoundly transgressive, the very language of desacralization.

Lower-class Russians frequently gave vent to their hostility towards the tsar when confronted with his image. On May 4, 1883, a sixty-eight-year-old illiterate peasant, Nastʹia Danilova Shulʹgina, came across an acquaintance carrying a portrait of the tsar and allegedly declared: "How I'm sick of these tsars! To the devil with them!"[39] A year later, a drunken Vasilii Kosʹmin Veprintsev, an illiterate peasant from Moscow guberniia, addressed an icon of the tsar in the hut of a neighboring villager with the following words: "Fuck him (Вот ему хуй), I'm not afraid of him. . .."[40] During the pogroms that erupted in Kherson guberniia in June 1881, Vasilii Lazerevich Vorona, a twenty-six-year-old illiterate peasant reportedly smashed a portrait of the Emperor and Empress with the words, "that's what they deserve!"[41]

35. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 168.

36. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 62 (1881), l. 152. See also ibid., l. 124.

37. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 223.

38. S.A. Smith, "The Social Meanings of Swearing: Workers and Bad Language in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia," *Past and Present* 160 (August 1998): 182–92.

39. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 204.

40. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 8 (1881), l. 279. For similar sentiments expressed in similarly colorful terms, see RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 173.

41. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 10 (1881), l. 85. Aksenov has argued that physical damage to the representations of the ruling family were prosecuted far more aggressively than instances in which the accused merely swore at an image. Aksenov, "Ubitʹ ikonu," 404.

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Sometimes these minor acts of iconoclasm appeared deliberately calculated to offend public taste. Egor Stepanov Kurnakov, the seventeen-year-old son of a soldier who worked at a hotel in Saratov allegedly remarked of one of the portraits of Tsar Alexander II that festooned the streets of the city in the wake of his assassination, "that picture is only any good for tearing down and wiping your ass with!"[42] Aleksandra Ignatova Kulakova was a twenty-six-year-old Orthodox peasant in Moscow who kept prostitutes. When very drunk on August 30, 1883, she ran out of her apartment into the courtyard carrying a portrait of the tsar. She smashed the glass with her fist and then, having hitched up her skirt, "placed the portrait against her bare flesh, swearing as she did so." Kulakova later explained that she broke the portrait having accidently stumbled over her doorstep.[43] Other peasants were rather more inventive in their subsequent explanations to the authorities. Ivan Ivanovich Novikov, a thirty-year-old illiterate peasant from Moscow guberniia, was reported by three witnesses who were singing a song that ended with the line, "Our Tsar little father is glad (Рад наш Батюшка Царь)" to have interjected "up a cunt! (в пизде!)." Novikov explained that the witnesses had misheard and that he had in fact pronounced, "out in front! (везде!)."[44]

Such outbursts might be discounted as impulsive off-color jokes or provocations that reflected momentary frustration rather than considered hostility to the tsar. Indeed, these examples of the ways in which the figure of the tsar served as a conductor for apparently spontaneous abuse might be said to demonstrate the enduring symbolic power of the monarchy. Yet the expressions of hostility towards the tsar become more difficult to dismiss as mere outbursts of momentary irritation or anger when they were coupled with specific allegations of the monarchy's direct responsibility for injustice and oppression.[45]

Autocratic Paternalism and Its Discontents

One of the key assumptions of naïve monarchism made first by educated contemporaries and subsequently by historians is that the common people directed their criticisms at local officials, landowners, and factory bosses but spared the tsar himself. Intermediate authorities functioned as scapegoats that helped to shield autocratic paternalism from popular discontent.[46] Yet

42. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 28 (1881), l. 146. For similar remarks see also RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 192.

43. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 28 (1881), l. 5. For the canonical discussion of the carnivalesque, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984).

44. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 146.

45. In their studies of lower-class attitudes to the monarchy during the First World War, Kolonitskii and Aksenov have drawn similar distinctions between inchoate expressions of anger or exasperation at the tsar one the one hand and more considered criticisms of his policies on the other. See Kolonitskii, "*Tragicheskaia erotika*," 207 and Aksenov, "Ubit' ikonu," 405–6.

46. As in many contemporary European monarchies, this paternalist exercise of power in the Empire embodied a compact between the ruler and the ruled: service, obedience, and deference were to be rendered by the tsar's subjects in return for his protection and

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many of the arrest protocols report individuals who heaped blame on the tsar personally for their own misfortunes in a manner that suggests the officially-endorsed role of officials and nobles as a lightning rod for popular discontent had, by the 1870s, begun to lose some of its conductivity. A good portion of this discontent spoke to the peasants' disappointments with the terms of the Emancipation decree and their mounting economic distress in the decades that followed. In October 1879, an illiterate Orthodox peasant, Artemii Andreev Iakushev, who had learned of a government communication that quashed rumors of a redistribution of land, was reported to have said, "if we don't get land, we don't need to serve the tsar."[47] In September 1880, an illiterate peasant from Kovno guberniia, incensed at the forced sale of his property by a bailiff, blurted out, "if the tsar himself was here now I would smash his head in!"[48] In July 1880, when the drunken thirty-one year-old Ivan Nikitin Nikitin from Skopinsk district in Riazan′ guberniia was thrown out of an inn, he allegedly declared, "why didn't the Tsar (expletives) give any land to the house serfs (доворовые люди) so now I have nowhere to go?"[49] In August 1881 a twenty-five-year-old literate Ukrainian peasant from Odessa commented on the forthcoming commemorations of the coronation of Alexander II, "what do I care about the festival? I couldn't give a rat's ass about it (міні царске свято коло задніцы)." When challenged, he continued "the Tsar doesn't mean anything to me. He doesn't feed me with bread, doesn't spare me taxes. I don't give a shit about the festival (насрать мне на это)."[50] Such views protested what lower-class Russians saw as the tsar's failure to take care of his subjects in exchange for their service and obedience.

Others complained about the costs of maintaining the royal family. In May 1881, Kirill Ivanov Kunitsyn, a literate peasant who ran a tavern in Moscow guberniia, was alleged while drunk to have said of the slain Alexander II: "Why do you feel sorry for him? If we didn't have a royal family at all, we'd live much better and wouldn't be squeezed. If another louse is born in the royal family, millions are spent on him, which is why they're wrung from the peasants."[51] On the eve of the anniversary of the assassination of Alexander II in 1882, Grigorii Iakovlev Iaremenko, a forty-nine-year-old illiterate Orthodox peasant in the region of Odessa allegedly explained his refusal to make a donation to a collection for a commemorative service in the following terms: "I have no money myself and nothing to feed my family with. Does the tsar really need my money? Did he ever really do anything for us? I wouldn't want my enemies to live as we do!"[52] These examples suggest the emergence of a

care. Pavla Miller, *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500–1900* (Bloomington, 1998); Susan K. Morrissey, *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia* (Cambridge, 2006), 11–12; and Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1995), vol. 1, ch. 9.

47. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 62 (1881), l. 130.
48. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 170.
49. Ibid., l. 1.
50. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 141–141ob.
51. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 28 (1881), l. 80.
52. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 62 (1881), l. 194–194ob.

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kind of ledger in the popular imagination whereby the costs and failings of the tsars were now weighed—often unfavorably—against their achievements.

A related recurrent theme in the arrest protocols is condemnation of the tsar's military (mis-)adventures abroad and the government's treatment of its soldiers. On January 22, 1881, Spiridon Ivanov Shpakovskii, an Orthodox scribe aged forty-three, allegedly declared to a friend in tea shop in Akkerman, a small town in Kherson guberniia, "'we pray for the tsar but he wasted more than three hundred thousand souls in Turkey and went off there with his spy glass like he was going hunting'—uttering these words with lots of foul language."[53] On March 4, 1881, former non-commissioned officer and farmer, Ivan Ivanov Kulinich, allegedly responded to the assassination by declaring, "that's what the bastard deserved! When he sent us to Sevastopol, he promised us a pension of a hundred rubles but as soon as we retired, we had our new great coats taken away."[54] In stark contrast to the claims of naïve monarchism, common to all these statements was the assumption of the tsar's direct responsibility for the plight of his subjects.

"Propaganda by the Deed"

Historical accounts of the campaign of the People's Will to assassinate Alexander II have concurred that the regicide was a political failure. On the eve of the assassination the group's leaders, like Nikolai Morozov, were convinced that "striking at the very center of the government causes the whole system to tremble with dreadful force. Like an electric shock, in a moment it spreads the charge throughout the state and disrupts all its functions."[55] It did nothing of the sort. The state quickly rallied; the Okhrana had become brutally efficient in penetrating and disrupting the revolutionary underground. The People's Will quickly succumbed to a barrage of denunciations and arrests, its safe houses discovered, its networks rolled up.[56]

More importantly, neither did the regicide succeed as a form of "propaganda by the deed"; it failed to trigger the revolutionary upheavals of which the People's Will had dreamed.[57] In January 1880, the Executive Committee of the People's Will had clarified the role of terrorism in its political program: "it

53. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 119.

54. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 28 (1881), l. 37. See similar protests in RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 13 and RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 62 (1881), l. 75.

55. Nikolai Morozov, "Znachenie politicheskikh ubiistv" (1879), in E. L. Rudnitskaia and O.V. Budnitskii, eds., *Revoliutsionnyi radikalizm v Rossii: Vek deviatnadtsatyi* (Moscow, 1997), 414.

56. Jonathan W. Daly, *Autocracy Under Siege: Security Police and Opposition in Russia, 1866–1905* (DeKalb, 1998), ch. 3.

57. On anarchist sympathy for the Russian radicals, see Marie Fleming, "Propaganda by the Deed: Terrorism and Anarchist Theory in Late Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Terrorism* 4, no. 1–4 (1980): 8–10. On the wider context in which "propaganda by the deed" was attempted and understood, see Jean Maitron, *Le mouvement anarchiste en France*, vol. 1, *De origins à 1914* (Paris, 1975); John Merriman, *The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror* (New Haven, 2009); and Richard Bach Jensen, *The Battle Against Anarchist Terrorism: An International History, 1878–1934* (Cambridge, 2014), chs. 1–2.

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seeks to break the spell of government power and provide constant proof of the possibility of waging a struggle against the government."[58] But far from rousing the people from their political apathy and disseminating revolutionary ideals throughout imperial society, the regicide provoked a pro-monarchist backlash. The popular press, which quickly spread news of the regicide throughout the Empire, condemned the assassination as an "unimaginable act of evil" perpetrated by fanatics who had staged an attack "on the people themselves."[59] Bewildered and outraged at the killing, the lower classes turned their ire on hapless Jewish communities in a wave of brutal pogroms that swept through the southwest of the country.[60] In a particularly robust dismissal of the Populists' political naivety, Christopher Ely has commented that "it is not often enough pointed out just how nonsensical it was to hope to ignite a peasant rebellion by assassinating the tsar."[61]

Tried and hanged a month after the regicide, the *Narodovoltsy* had failed in their stated aim of inciting revolution. They might have got their man on the banks of St. Petersburg's Ekaterinskii canal but in so doing they discovered that the king had two bodies and, while they succeeded in murdering the mortal Alexander II, they had failed to land a blow on the institution of the monarchy itself.[62] Bolstered by the Church, the tsarist regime even enjoyed some success in crafting a narrative of the martyred "tsar-liberator," cruelly slain by fanatics who enjoyed no popular support in the Empire.[63] In the established historical narrative, it was not until the first decade of the twentieth century that "propaganda by the deed" enjoyed any real resonance in the plebeian imagination.[64]

The picture is, however, rather more ambiguous than this established account would suggest. The radicals themselves were, perhaps understandably, less ready to acknowledge the complete political failure of the campaign to assassinate the tsar. Vera Figner, one of the leading lights of the People's Will, noted that its terrorist campaign elicited confusion and consternation

58. "Programma Ispolnitel′nogo Komiteta," *Narodnaia Volia* 2, no. 3 (1 January 1880), in *Literatura partii "Narodnoi voli,"* 2 vols. (Moscow, 1907), 85.

59. *Peterburgskaia gazeta*, March 4, 1881 (no. 54), 1; *Rus′*, March 4, 1881, 1; and Louise McReynolds, *The News under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton, 1991), 94–95. Iuliia Safronova has argued that "there is little evidence that the representatives of [educated] society responded 'sympathetically' or even joyfully to the regicide." Safronova, *Russkoe obshchestvo v zerkale revoliutsionnogo terrora, 1879–1881 gody* (Moscow, 2014), 293.

60. John D. Klier, *Russians, Jews, and the Pogroms of 1881–1882* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011).

61. Ely, *Underground Petersburg*, 263.

62. For the canonical treatment of the theological underpinnings of the idea, see Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957).

63. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 2:196–210, 2:244–48 and Safronova, *Russkoe obshchestvo*, 72–84.

64. Anna Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917* (Princeton, 1993); Oleg Budnitskii, *Terrorizm v rossiiskom osvoboditel′nom dvizhenii: Ideologiia, etika, psikhologiia (vtoraia polovina XIX-nachalo XX v.)* (Moscow, 2000); and Sally A. Boniece, "The Spiridonova Case, 1906: Terror, Myth, and Martyrdom," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 3 (Summer, 2003): 571–606.

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among the people and that the assassination had an electrifying effect on their political consciousness: it "agitated the entire peasant world; it led it out of the realm of its quotidian concerns and rural interests and concentrated its attention on the question: who killed the tsar and why was he killed?"[65] Historians have argued that the lower orders themselves answered that very question in ways that tended to reflect the assumptions of naïve monarchism. Rumors and interpretations of the assassination among the peasantry manifest the belief that the tsar had been killed either for freeing the serfs from bondage or in order to prevent him from carrying out a thoroughgoing land redistribution.[66]

Yet the arrest protocols document another and far less sympathetic response, one which undercuts the presumed naïve monarchism of the lower orders. Many individuals denounced to the authorities expressed approval at successive attempts on the life of the tsar. In July 1879, forty-six-year-old peasant Pavel Ivanov Kal′chenko, while complaining about the taxes he had to pay, referred to the recent failed attempt on Alexander II by Aleksandr Solov′ev and was allegedly overheard muttering to himself, "Solov′ev shot at the tsar but didn't kill him. If it had been me, I'd have shot his eyes out."[67] In the wake of the Stepan Khalturin's bombing of the Winter Palace on February 5, 1880, Zakhar Egorov Shubeikin, a fifty-eight-year-old retired illiterate solider from Simbirsk guberniia who had been distinguished by fifteen years of "impeccable" military service, allegedly declared, "good riddance! His head should have been torn off a long time ago! (давно бы ему следовало голову-то оторвать!)"[68]

The campaign to assassinate Alexander II emerges as an important reference point in dozens of the arrest protocols, cited as evidence of both the crimes of the autocracy and the possibility of seeking redress. An illiterate peasant in Kovno guberniia, Avgust Ivanov Novaitis, was denounced by fellow peasants for declaring, while at work in the fields in May 1883, that Alexander III's coronation decree "was really good for the landowners and others but it did nothing for us poor people and that's why such a mean-spirited (подлый) tsar should be shot."[69] That same month, Maksim Ivanov Shliakhov, an illiterate peasant who worked on the railways similarly held the tsar personally responsible for the "disorderly state of Russia" and declared that he deserved to be killed.[70]

In many of the alleged statements recorded in the reports, the assassination of the tsar implied the possibility, even the desirability, of

65. Vera Figner, *Zapechatlennyi trud: Vospominaniia v dvukh tomakh*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1964), 1:282.

66. See, for example, M.M. Gromyko, *Mir russkoi derevni* (Moscow, 1991), 214; Heretz, *Russia on the Eve*, 128; and Pearl, "Tsar and Religion," 89–90.

67. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 21 (1881), l. 301.

68. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 180. For very similar sentiments, see ibid., ll. 209, 252 and RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 30 (1881), l. 200.

69. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 122. The manifesto, "On the Inviolability of the Autocracy," was a vigorous affirmation of autocratic prerogatives and a declaration of war on sedition. *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, ser. III, vol. 3, no. 1583 (May 12, 1883).

70. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 44.

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killing his successors as well. One peasant, a forty-five-year-old semi-literate gardener named Aleksei Nikolaev Kulev, was reported in October 1881 to the Kharkov prosecutor for arguing with a local noblewoman: "you have 700 *desiatinas* of land and I don't have anything. They take recruits from us but give nothing in return. Things are very different for you. They've already killed one tsar and if we don't have equality, they'll kill another one."[71] A retired non-commissioned officer working as a scribe, sixty-year-old Grigorii Alferov Shkurdenko was married with seven children and had been awarded medals for his valiant conduct in the campaign to quash the Hungarian Revolution in 1848, the Crimean War, and the suppression of the Polish Rebellion in 1863. At the funeral of his peasant father-in-law in June 1882, Shkurdenko was reported as saying, "I served tsars Nikolai and Alexander, and returned home but I have no land and am forced to work for sheaves of wheat, and my children complain about it. They killed the last tsar and, if they kill this one too, I won't be sorry."[72] For some, the tsar's personal responsibility for their woes assumed almost comic levels of pettiness: Iuppe Petrov Kal′nin, a fifty-five year-old Orthodox peasant in Livonia, reportedly declared in March 1883 that "the tsar should be shot or hanged for the fact that tobacco is expensive and that he, Kal′nin, cannot afford to buy it and that the tsar is to blame for that."[73] These examples indicate that regicide had become a tangible political possibility in the minds of lower-class Russians, a new form of potential redress for injustices and indignities suffered. The tsar was no longer a lofty and inviolable figure beyond the reach of his disgruntled subjects; even if lower-class Russians did not understand or approve of the revolutionary aims of the People's Will, they grasped the basic fact that March 1, 1881 exposed the sovereign's vulnerability.

Besides, the arrest protocols further suggest that the regicide was understood not as singular act directed at the person of Alexander II but rather as a new political instrument that could now hold his successors to account. In a discussion with fellow peasants about the murdered tsar in March 1881, Foma Ivanovich Kupstas, a Lithuanian village elder declared, "the devil took one of them, and there'll be another devil in his place."[74] A few months later, a retired non-commissioned officer, Dmitrii Matveevich Novitskii, dismissed the public mourning for Alexander II: "Idiots, they have something to pray about! The idiot is the one who killed only one of them; it would have been better if he'd killed them all. To a dog a dog's death!"[75] Anna Aleksandrovna Shuina, a thirty-five-year-old peasant from Moscow guberniia, declared on the eve of Alexander III's coronation in 1883 that "we have to pray that they kill the new tsar like the old one."[76] Others cast the assassination as retribution for the tsar's persistent failure to act in the interests of his people. An illiterate Ukrainian Cossack and reservist, Ivan Petrov Iarov, allegedly said to a fellow

71. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 28 (1881), l. 11–11ob
72. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 7–7ob.
73. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 21 (1881), l. 271.
74. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 28 (1881), l. 99.
75. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), 1. 160. See similar examples in RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 62 (1881), l. 42 and ibid., l. 254.
76. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 190.

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soldier in April 1881, "the dead Tsar never really did anything good for the people. That's why he was killed; if this [new] one is killed then things might be even better."[77] Alexander II's assassination had made regicide conceivable as a form of political action. If one tsar could be killed, then why not his heir? Such sentiments echoed the strategic goal of the revolutionaries themselves, who sought not to replace one tsar with another but to discredit the entire edifice of the autocracy.[78]

The arrest protocols suggest, therefore, that the assassination served to undermine the sanctity of the monarchy itself by emphasizing the mortality of the tsars and the impermanence of their rule. The physical fragility of the sovereign featured prominently in press reports that dwelt on the tsar's wounds in graphic detail. On March 3, 1881, *Peterburgskaia gazeta* described how, "as he approached the Winter Palace the tsar began to lose consciousness from loss of blood which poured out from the torn-off muscles of his knees. These muscles were the only link between his feet and both his knees because the shin bones had been blown apart and pulverized (раздроблены) by the explosion."[79] Such reports, as Louise McReynolds has argued, "demystified the man who had ruled by divine right by accentuating his mortality in vivid descriptions of shreds of bloody flesh and bones."[80] Indeed, the bomb that mangled the tsar's body on March 1, 1881, also appears to have inflicted considerable damage on the supposedly timeless, immutable body of the monarchy. The assassination seemed to prove for many, whose statements found their way into the Ministry of Justice archives, that the tsar had been exposed as mere flesh and blood, a placeholder for his successor. In June 1881, a witness alleged that Vasilii Spiridonovich Valov, a thirty-three-year-old literate peasant from Petersburg guberniya, attributed diminishing value to the lives of successive tsars: "They tried to kill the old ruler for a million and they'll kill this one for a thousand." Another witness reported him as saying "soon we'll have a republic."[81]

Indeed, this view of the sovereign as mortally dependent on the consent of the governed drew repeated endorsements of democratic forms of government. In May 1883, Ivan Sergeev Iarovoi, a twenty-year-old illiterate peasant from Kharkov guberniia, allegedly made the following contribution to a conversation about the regicide: "Let them kill the tsars! They killed one; they'll kill another; there'll be a third; they'll kill them all, and then we'll have

77. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 62 (1881), l. 8.

78. Claudia Verhoeven has argued that Dmitrii Karakozov conceived of his own attempt on the life of Alexander II in 1866 as a full-frontal assault on the very mythic foundation of the state order. Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity and the Birth of Terrorism* (Ithaca, 2009), 179.

79. *Peterburgskaia gazeta*, 3 March 1881 (no. 52), 1. For further examples, see the coverage in *Peterburgskii listok, Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti, Moskovskie vedomosti* in the days after the assassination.

80. McReynolds, *The News Under Russia's Old Regime*, 94. Richard Wortman has observed that "with the assassination, the sense of the tsar's inviolability died… much as it had in France with the execution of Louis XVI." See Wortman, "Moscow and Petersburg: The Problem of Political Center in Tsarist Russia, 1881–1914," in Sean Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics Since the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1985), 248.

81. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 8 (1881), l. 46.

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a tsar from among our brothers or the soldiers."[82] Fedor Ivanov Obnisskii, a retired medical orderly was accused in May 1881 of saying, "it's good that the tsar was killed and it would be good if the entire royal family was killed because then we'd start to elect the tsar from the peasants or from the traders and it would be better for everyone."[83] Some invoked the electoral principles that governed rural life. Ivan Evdokimov Iakhimovich, a fifty-three-year-old literate carpenter expressed the opinion in March 1884 that, "it would be better if we elected the tsar, just like we elect the *volost* elders."[84] Others expressed a preference for rulers elected from the aristocracy. In September 1883, Petr Platonov Iakubovskii, a parish clerk in a village in Kharkov guberniia became drawn into a conversation on the merits of Russia's war with Turkey. Iakubovskii averred that "the current ruler hasn't done anything good for his state and his people, and other states these days are governed by elected rulers and do things much better than we have them. In a couple of years, we'll be electing our ruler from among the lords, and many of them are much better and more deserving than the royal family."[85] Rule by consent runs like a thread throughout many of the arrest protocols, even if lower-class Russians were divided over their preferred political arrangements.

Some cases in the arrest protocols draw comparisons (usually from individuals with some education) with democratic systems of government in other European states, notably the French republic. Mikhail Vasil′ev Nikol′skii, a twenty-four year-old village school teacher in Tambov district, declared in a tavern in 1880: "people live better in France than in Russia, because they don't have a tsar and the president is elected for three years, which is why France is rich but in Russia everything is spent on the Tsar and the royal family."[86] In July 1882, Vladimir Ivanov Nikol′skii, a twenty-eight year-old clerk in the small town of Yelabuga in Viatka guberniia, ventured the following opinion in a conversation in a tavern: "it is true that students killed the tsar . . . .We will wipe out the entire Romanov family and then we will be like France and have elections." According to the report, Nikol′skii "was drunk, but not very."[87] In February 1883, a twenty-three-year-old literate peasant named Aleksei Nikifonov Shustrov who worked as a blacksmith in Smolensk guberniia allegedly declared that "after the death of this current ruling sovereign, there won't be any more sovereigns but elected people will govern and then everyone will live better." He also insisted that, "life is much better in France because we spend far too much money on maintaining the court."[88] Common to all of these invocations of republican France was the conviction that autocracy was a contingent form of rule, subject to change, and that sovereignty lay ultimately not with the ruler but with the people.

82. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 62 (1881), l. 206. For similar sentiments, see RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 228–228ob and RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 8.
83. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 227–227ob.
84. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 62 (1881), l. 250–250ob.
85. Ibid., l. 126.
86. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 37 (1880), l. 99–99ob.
87. Ibid., l. 86.
88. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 243–243ob.

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Conclusion: Violence and the Mutability of Power

In post-reform Russia, naïve monarchism was never the impregnable wall of demotic blind faith that the memoirs of disillusioned radicals suggest. The "Two Russias" of which Aleksandr Herzen wrote in 1851 were still clearly discernible a quarter of a century later, but the frontier between them was becoming more and more porous.[89] Schoolteachers and officials, peasants and workers, artisans and merchants all mingled in the streets, taverns, and marketplaces and increasingly came into contact with educated Russians in the expanding towns and cities. The emerging working classes retained strong links with the countryside and rural migrants to the towns became conduits of metropolitan culture to the rural hinterland.[90] Many of the individuals whose statements appear in the arrest protocols were peasants with some experience of urban or military culture; they worked in towns and cities, on the railways, or served in the army, and so had one foot, even both feet, beyond the isolated rural worlds of their birth. Enough cases here document anti-monarchist sentiment among the rural peasantry to make it difficult to distinguish between the world of the village and the world of the towns.

More broadly, the gap between educated and uneducated Russia was beginning to narrow. Louise McReynolds and Jeffrey Brooks have both shown how, even in conditions of censorship, the expansion of the popular press in the post-reform era disseminated new political horizons and vocabularies across the Empire.[91] Alongside sanctioned publications, radical propagandists also produced a steady stream of illegal political pamphlets, newspapers and popular fiction that sought explicitly to challenge the naïve monarchism of the lower orders.[92] "The Story of an Experienced Soldier" (1874–1875) was one such "agitational story" that featured a conversation between a veteran and a fresh conscript. The older soldier gently dismantles his younger comrade's faith in the tsar: "I'll just say that there isn't a single state in which tsars have ever been just or done anything good for their people. Instead, they've only taken whatever was biggest and whatever was best for themselves and their kind."[93] Anatolii Bulanov's "Whose Side Is the Tsar On?" (1881) followed a similar model of didactic dialogue between an older and established industrial worker, Vasilii Ivanych, and Egor, his much younger countryman who has recently arrived in St. Petersburg and found work in Vasilii's factory. Over a series of conversations serialized in the radical newspaper *Zerno*, Vasilii disabuses Egor of his naïve faith in the benevolence of the tsar. He does so by

89. A.I. Gertsen, "Le peuple russe et le socialisme," in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Moscow, 1954–65), 7:271–306.

90. Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics*; Reginald E. Zelnik, *Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia: The Factory Workers of St. Petersburg 1855–1870* (Stanford, 1971); Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861–1914* (Cambridge, 1994); Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 1997), ch. 4; and Mark D. Steinberg, *Moral Communities: The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry, 1867–1907* (Berkeley, 1992).

91. McReynolds, *The News Under Russia's Old Regime* and Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture, 1861–1917* (Princeton, 1985).

92. See, for example, *Literatura partii "Narodnoi voli."*

93. Itenberg, ed., *Revoliutsionnoe narodnichestvo*, 1:153.

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pointing out that "the tsar is like the landowners and the merchants: he works together with them and he doesn't give a damn about the working man."[94]

While the specific role of revolutionary agitators cannot be discovered in the protocols, there is a considerable degree of overlap between the revolutionary message of the radicals and the criticisms of the autocracy articulated by workers, peasants, and soldiers.[95] Pearl identifies "self-government and popular ownership of the land and the factories" as the "basic components of the programs of [the] revolutionary parties."[96] Twenty-seven-year-old illiterate peasant Erofei Dmitriev Shugailenko in Kiev guberniia protested in April 1881: "why shouldn't I be allowed to complain about the ruler? What has he ever done for me? I don't have any land and I have to pay taxes; if he were good, he'd give me land, but I don't even have a place or a yard to call my own (я не имею ни кола ни двора)." He then "dared to use foul language in relation to the sovereign emperor."[97] So, while the arrest protocols do not identify the origin of the anti-tsarist sentiments uttered by peasants such as Shugailenko, they raise the possibility that radical attempts to demystify the tsar were more effective in the reign of Alexander II than either historians or indeed the revolutionaries themselves noticed.

There is no adequate way to assess the representativeness of the language and attitudes contained within the arrest protocols. For each one reported, how many passed undetected, ignored, indulged, or were dismissed as drunken ravings? And for every person daring enough or foolish enough to speak out in this way, how many held similar views but also kept their counsel, wary of attracting the unwanted attentions of the authorities? Any one of the statements recorded in the arrest protocols might have been invented by accusers determined to heap trouble on entirely blameless men and women. But even where they were baseless or exaggerated, the accusations map out what contemporaries *might plausibly have said*, especially when their tongues were loosened by alcohol. While the material presented above cannot disprove enduring and widespread support for the monarch among lower-class subjects of the tsar, then, it does suggest that such support cannot be simply assumed. Instead, pro-monarchist sentiment was shot through with dissenting voices that challenged the image of the benevolent ruler, argued that he was indifferent to the plight of his subjects, and claimed that he deserved the bombs and bullets of the revolutionaries. The protocols testify, therefore, to the opening of fissures within the pro-monarchist worldview of the lower orders. By 1917, these fissures had proliferated and widened until

94. "Za kogo tsar'?," *Zerno*, June 1883, no. 3, in V.I. Nevskii, ed., *Istoriko-revoliutsionnyi sbornik*, 3 vols. (Leningrad, 1924–26), 2:364.

95. Ekaterina Zav′ialova has shown how in Smolensk in the 1870s, gendarmes themselves noticed increasing expressions of "revolutionary propaganda" in the "foul language" directed by peasants at Alexander II. "Osobennosti otnosheniia krest′ian k tsarskoi vlasti vo vtoroi polovine XIX veka (na materialakh Smolenskoi gubernii)," *Istoricheskie, filosofskie, politicheskie i iuridicheskie nauki, kulturologiia i iskusstvovedenie. Voprosy teorii i praktiki*, 2011, no. 7, part 2:85.

96. Pearl, "Educating Workers for Revolution," 276–77. See also the appeals penned by Nikolai Dolgushin in Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 496–99.

97. RGIA, f. 1405, op. 540, d. 60 (1881), l. 186–186ob.

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the entire symbolic edifice of the monarchy came crashing down. Loss of faith in the tsar formed, *pace* Kolonitskii, one of the essential dynamics of the revolution.[98]

The arrest protocols illuminate how the political imaginary of uneducated Russians in the reigns of Alexander II and Alexander III was increasingly shaped by the possibilities of violence. The bloody fantasies of retribution and political change contained within the arrest protocols reveal a new horizon of wrongs righted and justice served. The iconoclasm of the violent invective directed at the tsar by some of his subjects reflected this new political reality in which the tsar's vulnerability to popular vengeance was a fact of life and terrorist violence might itself be justified as an instrument of enacting this vengeance. The regicide also undercut the purported stability and permanence of dynastic rule in Russia, throwing open a future fraught with turbulence and new possibilities.

Uneducated Russians did not need to agree with the revolutionary program of the Populists in order to approve the assassination of the tsar. Different explanations of the regicide abounded, and those denounced in the arrest protocols allegedly cast Alexander's murder as legitimate punishment for a whole host of sometimes decidedly petty indignities and injustices that filled their own lives. March 1, 1881 was rather a totemic event, invoked by lower-class subjects of the tsar, who wielded little control over their own lives, in defense of their dignity and as a tangible demonstration of (future) justice and power. This rush to fill the enigma of the regicide with meanings that legitimized private grievances and aspirations sheds light more widely on the means by which terrorist acts can acquire popular approval.[99]

By implication, the files suggest that we need to recalibrate our understanding of the impact of "propaganda by the deed" on uneducated Russians. In the aftermath of the assassination, Petr Tkachev insisted from Swiss emigration that terrorism was "the only effective method of achieving the political and social regeneration of Russia" because it served to "liberate loyal subjects (*верноподданные*) from the oppressive fear of the powers that be."[100] Against the backdrop of a *presumed* enduring naïve monarchism, historians have usually invoked such claims as evidence of the self-delusional hubris that propelled the revolutionaries in their ill-conceived campaign to assassinate the tsar. Yet in the context of the hostility to the tsar and the approval of his killing documented in the arrest protocols, the campaign to assassinate Alexander II does emerge as a partially successful form of "propaganda by the deed." It might have elicited confusion, consternation, even outrage among

98. Kolonitskii, *"Tragicheskaia erotika,"* ch. 3.

99. In her recent study of terrorism at the turn of the twentieth century, Susan K. Morrissey has argued that "alongside their evocation of memory and grievance, narratives of vengeance projected a vista on to the future, elaborating a modern and forward-looking language of popular sovereignty, universalism, agency, justice and human dignity." See: "Terrorism and *Ressentiment* in Revolutionary Russia," *Past and Present* 246, no. 1 (February 2020): 198.

100. Grakkh (P.N. Tkachev), "Terrorizm kak edinstvennoe sredstvo nravstvennogo i obshchestvennogo vozrozhdeniia Rossii" (September 1, 1881), in Rudnitskaia and Budnitskii, eds., *Revoliutsionnyi radikalizm*, 438.

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many lower-class subjects of the tsar. But in the eyes of others, it threw into sharp relief fundamental questions of political organization. The statements detailed in the arrest protocols took the campaign by the People's Will to assassinate Alexander II as their central reference point. In this sense, the terrorism of the Populists pioneered a new form of political communication which thrust questions of sovereignty, consent and authority into the consciousness of lower-class subjects of the tsar.[101] In itself, the assassination did not "liberate loyal subjects" from their naïve monarchism but, for some lower-class Russians, it "denaturalized" the existing political system and challenged the political consensus upon which it relied.

Contemporary anarchists certainly hailed the terrorism of the People's Will as a new communicative strategy that blazed a trail for others to follow. Marie Fleming has noted that, "in the dark post-Paris Commune days, there was at last a revolutionary spark, and it seemed all the stronger because in glowed in Russia, the darkest corner of the civilized world."[102] In May 1880, the French anarchist leader Louise Michel pointed to "what is happening in Russia" and saluted the achievements of the "great nihilist party."[103] In a widely read article published in the anarchist *Le Révolté* in Geneva in May 1881, that champion of "propaganda by deed," Petr Kropotkin, hailed violent acts that seek "to propagate and find expression for dissatisfaction, to excite hatred against exploiters, to ridicule the government and expose its weakness." As a result of "actions which compel general attention," he claimed, "the new idea seeps into people's minds and wins converts. One such act may, in a few days, make more propaganda than thousands of pamphlets."[104] A month and half later, to the echoes of the explosion on the banks of the Ekaterinskii canal, an international congress of anarchists met in London and officially adopted the policy of "propaganda of the deed."[105]

Plebeian hostility to the autocracy predated, of course, the terrorist campaign of the People's Will. Longstanding grievances surrounding land, poverty, and the inescapable injustices of feudalism had festered among the common people for generations. But the political violence of the People's Will recast these resentments in a new language of political accountability and political action as individuals interpreted the regicide as just desserts for the misdeeds of the autocracy. As a spectacular form of political message, March 1, 1881 highlighted the mortality of the tsar and his dependence on the consent of his subjects. More fundamentally, it exposed the mutability of power and authority in the Russian Empire. The regicide amounted, therefore, to a revolutionary framing of new possibilities in a culture which had hitherto suppressed the very idea that political power might ever be subject to change.

101. The Populists also sought to challenge the dynastic sovereignty of the tsar and assert the inviolability of individual rights in their confrontations with the state on the scaffold. See Daniel Beer, "Civil Death, Radical Protest and the Theatre of the Punishment in the Reign of Alexander II", *Past and Present*, 250 (February 2021): 171–202.

102. Fleming, "Propaganda by the Deed," 10.

103. Louis Andrieux, *Souvenirs d'un préfet de police* (Paris, 1885), 347.

104. Peter Kropotkin, "The Spirit of Revolt," in Emile Capouya and Keitha Thompkins, eds., *The Essential Kropotkin* (New York, 1975), 5–6.

105. Jensen, *The Battle Against Anarchist Terrorism*, 17.

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