

Perovskaya, Sofya (1853–1881) and the Narodnaya Volya (“Will of the People”)

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Sofya Perovskaya was a terrorist and organizer of the movement called *Narodnaya Volya* (Will of the People). Born into an aristocratic family (her father, General Lev Perovsky, was at one time the governor of St. Petersburg), at the age of 12 she went to Geneva, where her uncle lived. Most of the Russian émigré writers worked there, and Perovskaya may have known about

1860s nihilism when, in 1866, the nihilist student Karakozov attempted to assassinate Tsar Alexander II. In 1869 she attended the recently opened Alarchinsky courses for young women instigated by the tsar, where she learned physics, mathematics, geometry, Russian, and pedagogy. In 1870 she rebelled against her strict father and ran away from home, deciding not to return.

In 1871 she joined the Chaikovsky Circle (1869–74), one of the revolutionary movements in St. Petersburg with the project to go among people in the country to teach the peasantry their moral imperative to revolt, without positive results. In the same year she was arrested for the crime of collaborating with Nikolai Goncharov, the son of a general, who printed 40 copies of a revolutionary sheet in his own home, but she was soon freed. In 1872 Perovskaya went to a village not far from Kazan’ and assisted the local *zemstvo* doctor (the *zemstvo* was the electoral district council in pre-revolutionary Russia). In 1873 she came back to St. Petersburg and began conspiratorial activity in a house, where then was found the document “The preparatory work of the party,” which declared the need to create a new social and state order, destroying the actual government system. In January 1874 she was arrested together with Peter Kropotkin and accused of preaching new revolutionary ideas. Thanks to her father’s influence, she spent only a few weeks in Peter Paul Fortress Prison.

Understanding that the masses should be the protagonists of the fight against the tsar, she became one of the leaders of the secret association *Zemlya i Volya* (Land and Freedom), but soon realized that the masses still trusted the tsar and they had proven incapable of solidarity. On March 1, 1881, having planned the assassination of Tsar Alexander II for months, Perovskaya and her comrades murdered him by a bomb attack in St. Petersburg. She was arrested on March 10 and on April 15 was hanged together with her lover Andrei Zhelyabov and comrades Timofei Mikhailov, Nikolai Kibalchich, and Nikolai Rysakov.

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SEE ALSO: Anarchism, Russia; Bakunin, Mikhail Alexandrovich (1814–1876); Kropotkin, Peter (1842–1921); Plekhanov, Georgi (1856–1918); Zasluch, Vera (1849–1919)

References and Suggested Readings

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