

The First Wave of Modern Terrorism

Anarchism

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The ‘Anarchist wave’ of terrorism is known as the “Golden Age of Assassinations” and grew out of anarchists’ dissatisfaction with capitalist oppression and the power of the Bolshevik Party. In this period, terrorists targeted high-ranking officials to achieve a disproportional response from governments, because they were planning to polarize societies through the excessive force by governments. According to David Rapoport, the first wave of modern terrorism began when Vera Zasulich shot Fyodor Trepov, the governor of St Petersburg in January 1878.¹ As Jay Bergman states Zasulich was Marx’s disciple before she espoused his ideology.² Through her anarchist attack and political thoughts, Zasulich entered history as a revolutionary martyr and a real female role model for some anarchist women like: Vera Figner and Gesia Gelfman.

The Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will) was the first modern organization in history dedicated to systematic political terrorism.³ The organization was found by Russian university students and targeted political leaders. Vera Figner and Gesia Gelfman were female members of Narodnaya Volya played a key role during the assassination of the Russian Emperor Alexander II in St. Petersburg on March 13, 1881. After his assassination, Figner was condemned to 25 years in prison and Gelfman was sentenced to death.⁴ These two women anarchists were treated as heroic revolutionary icons in the twentieth century.⁵

Another Russian revolutionist Fanya Kaplan, was the member of Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) considered Vladimir Lenin a traitor to the revolution and tried to assassinate him on the evening of the August 30th, 1918. Kaplan succeeded in shooting Lenin, but she fell short of her goal because he stayed alive. Although Lenin’s injuries were grave, Bolshevik media played down the situation because his state of health might engender public panic and cause a coup against the regime. In the end, Lenin narrowly escaped death and Fanya Kaplan was arrested by the CHEKA (early secret police agency). During her interrogation, she made the following statement: “My

¹ David Rapoport, “The Four Waves Of Modern Terrorism,” *Attacking Terrorism*, Audrey Cronin & James M. Ludes (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004) 46–73.

² Jay Bergman, *Vera Zasulich: A Biography*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1983).

³ Richard Pipes, *The Degaev Affair: Terror and Treason in Tsarist Russia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴ Elena Gapova, “Gender Equality vs. Difference and What Post-socialism Can Teach Us,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 59, (2016).

⁵ Anna Hillyar, and Jane McDermid. *Revolutionary Women in Russia, 1870–1917*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

name is Fanya Kaplan. Today I shot at Lenin. I did it on my own. I will not say whom I obtained my revolver. I will give no details. I had resolved to kill Lenin long ago. I consider him a traitor to the Revolution.”⁶ On September 3, 1918, the Kremlin commandant Pavel Malkov who killed Fanya Kaplan told that he had no hesitation in dispatching a ‘traitor’ such as Kaplan.⁷ Through this assassination attempt, Kaplan remained one of the most famous female assassins in world history.

Emma Goldman (1869–1940), who was a Russian immigrant, made a name for herself as a leading political anarchist and writer in American history. She had revolutionary ideas like anarchism, atheism, sexual freedom, and birth control. Although Goldman did not attempt or involve herself in a terror attack, her political thoughts were considered as a threat to national security. In 1892, Alexander Berkman who was her lover attempted to assassinate industrialist Henry Clay Frick and was condemned to 22 years in prison.⁸ In 1917, Goldman was jailed for almost 2 years for arguing against conscription in World War I. After two years, the United States government deported Goldman and Berkman along with 246 left-wing figures to Russia due to committing acts of violence. For the rest of her life, Goldman spent her remaining days as a self-described “woman without a country” and she died in Canada in 1940. Goldman who was the founder of the anarchist journal *Mother Earth*, was against to all forms of totalitarianism and her thoughts inspired new Leftists and feminists.

In brief, the first wave of modern terrorism was based on anarchism and a series of assassinations attempts on political leaders, ended with World War I. Vera Zasulich, Narodnaya Volya, Fanya Kaplan and Emma Goldman were one of the most influential women of the wave, also inspired other women to resist political authority.

⁶ Tony Brenton, *Was Revolution Inevitable? Turning Points of the Russian Revolution*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 185.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Vivian Gornick, *Emma Goldman*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

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