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The Formation of the Social Base of Revolutionary Terrorism in the Russian Empire in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Abstract

This article examines the process by which the social base of revolutionary terrorism in the Russian Empire expanded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The author argues that one of the principal factors behind the growth of revolutionary terrorism was not only the development of terrorist organizations themselves, but also the gradual expansion of their social base to include young people, segments of the student body, the radical intelligentsia, socially unstable urban strata, women, and other groups experiencing political alienation and social frustration. Particular attention is devoted to several interrelated issues: the current state of scholarship on the subject; the profile of the typical terrorist bomber; the mechanisms by which terrorist attacks were carried out; the role of the social environment and the press in disseminating a culture of terrorism; the ethics of bomb terrorism as

a system of moral justifications for violence; the ideological infrastructure of terrorism, represented by the *Narodnaya Volya* movement and related organizations, as well as their programmatic texts; the image of the female terrorist and its significance for the expansion of the terrorist milieu; and, finally, the social and political groups that opposed the ideology and practice of bomb terrorism. The article concludes that revolutionary terrorism should be understood not merely as a form of political practice or a collection of underground organizations, but also as a distinct social process possessing its own environment of formation, expansion, ideological self-reproduction, and public resonance.

Keywords:

Revolutionary terrorism; Social base of terrorism; Russian Empire; Political violence; Terrorist bomber; Public attitudes; Youth radicalization; Female terrorist; *Narodnaya Volya*; *Catechism of a Revolutionary*; Late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

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evolutionary terrorism in the Russian Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains one of the most dramatic and methodologically challenging subjects in Russian history. It cannot be reduced either to the history of individual assassination attempts, to the biographies of the best-known terrorists, or to the activities of underground political parties as such. The terrorism of this period was not merely a form of political violence, but also a distinctive social process that encompassed the ideological justification of assassination, the creation of a sympathetic and imitative milieu, the glorification of violent action, and the establishment of a stable mechanism for reproducing the revolutionary underground.

The history of Russian terrorism is often narrated through its most striking episodes: Dmitry Karakozov's attempt on the life of the Tsar, the activities of *Narodnaya Volya*, the assassination of Alexander II, the Socialist Revolutionary Party's Combat Organization, assassination attempts against ministers and governors-general, and the wave of mass terrorism that accompanied the Revolution of 1905–1907. Such an approach inevitably highlights the dramatic character of political violence, yet at the same time obscures a more fundamental question: why did terrorism come to be regarded by a segment of Russian society not merely as an intelligible, but as an attractive method of political action?

Without answering this question, it is impossible to understand either the scale of revolutionary terrorism or the reasons for its persistence. Revolutionary terrorism expanded not simply because underground organizations and militant groups existed, but because late imperial Russian society produced a social environment in which violence could be perceived as an expression of historical duty, righteous retribution, sacrificial heroism, and even personal self-realization. This environment was not identical with the terrorist organizations themselves. It was considerably broader, encompassing sympathizers, apologists, admirers, imitators, supporters, those who provided shelter, and those who disseminated terrorist mythology, thereby expanding the social base of political violence.

It is for this reason that the present study aims to analyze not only revolutionary terrorism as a form of political practice, but also the process by which its social base was formed. To achieve this objective, several tasks are undertaken: to reconstruct the profile of the average



Assassination of Emperor Alexander II. 1 March 1881. Postcard.
From open sources

terrorist bomber; to demonstrate the role of the social environment, the press, and the concept of “propaganda by the deed” in the expansion of terrorism; to trace the emergence of the ethical framework of bombing terrorism; to examine the significance of ideological texts and *Narodnaya Volya* organizations in cultivating a terrorist milieu; to analyze the role of the female terrorist as a distinctive symbolic figure; and, finally, to characterize the social and political circles that opposed terrorist ideology and practice.

Methodologically, the article proceeds from the premise that terrorism should be understood as a socio-communicative system encompassing organization, ideology, moral justification, the symbolic image of the heroic martyr, the dissemination of terrorist acts through information channels, and an environment conducive to imitation. Only within such a framework is it possible to understand why revolutionary terrorism in Russia outgrew the confines of a narrow underground movement and became a major factor in the destabilization of society.

Revolutionary terrorism in the Russian Empire of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is among those subjects that, despite their apparent historiographical maturity, continue to contain significant internal gaps. Historians have produced a substantial body of scholarship devoted to individual terrorist attacks, the biographies of



Alexander II's uniform, torn apart by the bomb explosion.
Collection of the State Hermitage Museum

prominent militants, the programs and practices of revolutionary parties, and the government's efforts to combat political violence. Yet, as T. Rocchi rightly observes, there is still no comprehensive study covering the entire period from Dmitry Karakozov's assassination attempt in 1866 to 1911 while simultaneously analyzing the ideology and tactics of the various parties and movements, government policy, public attitudes towards terrorism, and the distinctions between terrorism proper and other forms of mass violence¹.

This historiographical incompleteness is of fundamental importance for the subject of the present article. When scholarly attention is focused primarily on *Narodnaya Volya* and the Socialist Revolutionary Party's Combat Organization, the impression is created that terrorism consisted merely of a succession of spectacular attacks carried out by a relatively small circle of conspirators. Such a perspective, however, leads to an underestimation of the true scale of terrorism, particularly during the First Russian Revolution, when terrorist activity involved representatives of a wide variety of parties, political currents, and peripheral groups².

¹ Рокки Т. Политический терроризм в Российской империи в 1901–1911 гг. и его место в исторической памяти России // Известия АлтГУ. Исторические науки и археология. 2020. № 6 (116). С. 51–52.

² Ibid. С. 52–53.

Anna Geifman has specifically emphasized that, although both Soviet and Western scholarship addressed nineteenth-century Russian terrorism – especially the “heroic period” of 1878–1881 – the massive wave of revolutionary violence that unfolded in the early twentieth century long failed to receive adequate monographic treatment. Her own study was conceived precisely as an attempt to move beyond the established historiographical canon, in which *Narodnaya Volya* had been examined in considerable detail, whereas the outbreak of terrorism between 1894 and 1917 remained much less thoroughly investigated³.

Another characteristic of the existing historiography is its fragmentation. Some studies focus primarily on terrorist organizations, others on political ethics, still others on government countermeasures, and yet others on the place of terrorism in public memory and ideological debate. The question of terrorism’s social base, however, generally remains peripheral. Even when scholars discuss the radicalization of the intelligentsia, young people, women, or ethno-confessional minorities, these issues are usually treated as secondary rather than as central to understanding the mechanisms by which the terrorist milieu expanded.

Particular attention should also be paid to the evolution of interpretations of terrorism within Russian historiography. Soviet scholarship was largely subordinated to the overarching conception of the Revolution of 1905–1907 as the “dress rehearsal” for 1917. Within this framework, Socialist Revolutionary and anarchist terrorism was typically portrayed as politically misguided, petty-bourgeois, or objectively harmful, whereas Bolshevik violence was justified through a different vocabulary, often employing euphemisms such as “guerrilla actions”. As a result, the issue of terrorism’s social appeal and the extent of its public support was effectively relegated to the background⁴.

Although post-Soviet historiography has benefited from greater intellectual freedom and thematic diversity, it has not fully remedied this deficiency. On the one hand, a growing number of substantial studies have appeared on pre-revolutionary terrorism; on the other, there remains either a tendency to concentrate on individual assassination

³ Гейфман А. Революционный террор в России, 1894–1917. С. 5–8.

⁴ Рокки Т. Опр. cit. С. 53–55.

attempts or an inclination to situate terrorism exclusively within broader discussions of political turmoil, the crisis of statehood, or revolutionary catastrophe. Consequently, the social mechanisms underlying the expansion of the terrorist milieu remain insufficiently reconstructed.

In this regard, the historiographically most significant works are those that examine terrorism as a phenomenon possessing its own moral and social logic. Foremost among these are the studies of B.N. Kashnikov and O.V. Budnitsky. In Kashnikov's interpretation, terrorism is inseparable from the concept of justice and, consequently, from the social environment prepared to regard violent acts as morally permissible. From this perspective, terrorism cannot be reduced to the mere technique of assassination; rather, it depends upon the moral consent of at least part of society. For the purposes of the present study, it is therefore particularly important to shift the focus from the history of individual terrorist attacks to the history of the social milieu capable of justifying, disseminating, and reproducing such acts⁵.

Accordingly, the principal historiographical task today is to examine terrorism as a distinctive form of political culture encompassing ideological justification, organizational structures, moral legitimization, public resonance, and the self-reproduction of its human resources.

The average terrorist bomber

The most emblematic figure of revolutionary terrorism in the early twentieth century was the terrorist bomber. He embodied the convergence of individual political violence, public spectacle, and the symbolism of self-sacrifice. In public perception, the bomber appeared not merely as a member of an underground organization but as an individual of direct action, capable of challenging the state single-handedly. Reconstructing his social and psychological profile is therefore of fundamental importance for understanding the mechanisms through which the social base of terrorism expanded⁶.

⁵ *Кашников Б.Н. Идея справедливости в теории и практике русского терроризма конца XIX — начала XX века // Российский научный журнал. 2008. № 4. С. 12–15.*

⁶ *Гейфман А. Опр. cit. С. 167–169.*

The historiography, together with evidence drawn from archival sources, makes it possible to identify several recurring characteristics of this type. Above all, the terrorist bomber was typically young and occupied a transitional social position. He was most often a former student, a current student, or a first-generation industrial worker, originating from the *meshchanstvo* (petty bourgeoisie), the *raznochintsy* (educated commoner), or the lower intelligentsia. Such individuals had not yet become firmly integrated into the existing social order but had already entered a state of political and moral radicalization. It was precisely this condition of social incompleteness that made them especially receptive to terrorist propaganda⁷.

An equally important characteristic was a pronounced tendency towards self-dramatization. The bomber perceived his actions not as ordinary criminal offences but as historical gestures, acts of righteous retribution, and expressions of personal heroism. Particularly significant in this respect is B.N. Kashnikov's conclusion that Russian terrorism constituted not only a political but also an ethical practice: its participants sought to interpret violence as morally justified. This ethical framework made it possible to combine a willingness to kill with an unshakable conviction of one's own moral righteousness⁸.

The demonstrative function of bomb attacks was no less significant. A terrorist act was intended not only to eliminate a particular representative of the authorities but also to generate a powerful public effect. Consequently, figures such as Karpovich, Balmashov, Sazonov, and Kalyaev became not merely participants in individual assassination attempts but revolutionary symbols. Their historical significance derived not solely from the acts of violence themselves but also from the powerful impression these acts produced upon the wider radical milieu⁹.

Particularly revealing is the image of Ivan Kalyaev, whose place in revolutionary mythology became associated with the motif of moral selectivity. His refusal to throw a bomb when he saw children in the Grand Duke's carriage was subsequently transformed into a symbol

⁷ Ibid. C. 5–8, 167–169.

⁸ Ibid. C. 167–169.

⁹ Кафтан В.В., Путятин В.Д. Исторические корни и эволюция терроризма. Новосибирск, 2015. С. 27–34.

suggesting that terrorist violence supposedly retained certain moral limits. Regardless of the extent to which this episode was later mythologized, the essential point remains that the bomber came to be portrayed as an individual who combined unwavering determination with an appearance of moral purity. This image proved especially attractive to a segment of the younger generation¹⁰.

Archival materials from the political police, widely employed in the historiography, demonstrate that by the beginning of the twentieth century the terrorist milieu could no longer be reduced to a narrow circle of ideological conspirators. Official documents reveal much broader networks, transitional groups, and peripheral forms of radical activity in which the terrorist bomber appeared not as an isolated exception but as a product of an expanding environment of political agitation and revolutionary mobilization¹¹.

Thus, the average terrorist bomber of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may be characterised as a young man occupying a transitional social position, most commonly originating from the *raznochintsy*, the petty bourgeoisie, the working class, or the lower intelligentsia, experiencing social insecurity, political radicalization, and moral maximalism, and inclined to perceive violence as both a form of historical action and a personal heroic mission. It was precisely the combination of these characteristics that made the terrorist bomber one of the central figures in the expansion of the social base of revolutionary terrorism.

The social environment and the expansion of the social base of terrorism

The expansion of the social base of revolutionary terrorism occurred not only through the direct recruitment of new members into militant organizations but also through the formation of a broader social environment in which terrorist violence gradually ceased to be perceived as entirely alien or unequivocally criminal. Terrorism became sustainable

¹⁰ Кашиников Б.Н. Оп. cit. С. 23–24.

¹¹ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 00.242. Д. 113. Л. 1; Д. 25. Ч. 101. Л. 6; Оп. 246. Д. 122. Л. 55.

when it was surrounded by a circle of sympathizers, apologists, admirers, or those who regarded it as historically explicable¹².

One of the principal preconditions for this development was the combination of social discontent, the political exclusiveness of the autocratic regime, and a growing crisis of confidence in legal forms of political participation. Under such circumstances, terrorism came to be viewed by part of society as an effective response to governmental arbitrariness. Anna Geifman convincingly demonstrates that revolutionary violence extended far beyond the confines of clandestine circles and acquired the character of a socially significant mass phenomenon. This development cannot be explained without taking into account the broader social environment that provided terrorism with public resonance¹³.

The youth milieu was of particular importance. For many young people, the terrorist act was perceived not merely as an isolated episode of political struggle but as an example of decisive historical action. Youthful idealism, the uncertainty of social status, and disillusionment with legal methods of political struggle made the figure of the terrorist bomber especially attractive. In this sense, a terrorist attack was directed not only against the authorities but also towards potential recruits, serving simultaneously as a political signal and a mechanism of emotional contagion¹⁴.

This is precisely how the historical practice of “propaganda by the deed” should be understood. A terrorist act derived its significance not only from the elimination of its intended target but also from its demonstrative character, designed to produce a powerful public impression: to reveal the vulnerability of the state, inspire sympathizers, and establish a behavioral model for others to emulate. The terrorist bomber thus functioned not only as an operative but also as an exemplar¹⁵.

The public sphere likewise played a significant role in this process. Through the periodical press, terrorism moved beyond the confines of

¹² Рокки Т. *Op. cit.* С. 54–55.

¹³ Гейфман А. Революционный террор в России, 1894–1917. С. 32–34, 167–169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* С. 167–169.

¹⁵ Будницкий О.В. Терроризм в российском освободительном движении: идеология, этика, психология (вторая половина XIX — начало XX в.). С. 145–178; Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 12–15.



The carriage destroyed by the bomb explosion in which Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich was traveling. Moscow Kremlin, February 1905.
State Archive of the Russian Federation. Ф. 124. Оп. 67. Д. 591а. Л. 30

the underground into the realm of public discussion. Newspapers and journals communicated not only fear and condemnation but also moral ambiguity, latent sympathy, and elements of admiration for “decisive action”. In doing so, they fostered not legal acceptance but a form of cultural tolerance towards terrorism¹⁶.

Archival materials produced by the Russian political police confirm that the authorities confronted not only individual terrorists but also a much broader radical milieu comprising transitional associations, peripheral groups, circles of sympathizers, and other forms of unstable revolutionary activity. The central problem therefore lay not simply in the existence of terrorists but in the existence of an environment that made their emergence and continual reproduction possible¹⁷.

Thus, the social environment of revolutionary terrorism emerged at the intersection of social discontent, political dissatisfaction, youthful idealism, and the moral legitimization of violence. It was this environment that transformed terrorism from the practice of relatively small underground circles into a socially reproducible phenomenon.

¹⁶ Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 15–18.

¹⁷ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 242. Д. 88. Л. 1, 7–7 об.; Оп. 244. Д. 9. ч 55 лит. В. Л. 7–7 об., 14; Д. 340. Л. 22 об. – 23; Оп. 246. Д. 122. Л. 55.

The mechanism of terrorist acts and the expansion of the social base of bombing terrorism

A historical analysis of revolutionary terrorism in the Russian Empire demonstrates that a terrorist act was not a spontaneous outburst of violence but rather a relatively stable technology of political action. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, terrorist practice had developed its own established pattern: the selection of a symbolically significant target, preliminary surveillance, clandestine preparation, the acquisition of weapons and explosives, the allocation of responsibilities within the group, and, finally, the public exploitation of the completed act as an instrument of political and psychological influence. A terrorist attack should therefore be regarded not merely as an isolated criminal offence but also as an element of a broader social and communicative strategy¹⁸.

It is revealing that Dmitry Karakozov's assassination attempt of 4 April 1866 already embodied this logic. In his proclamation, he declared that even if he failed to kill the Emperor, others would nevertheless "follow his path", and that his own death would serve as "an example" to them. This formulation already contained one of the central ideas of subsequent revolutionary terrorism: the terrorist act was conceived not only as the elimination of a target but also as an example intended to inspire future imitation. From the very outset, terrorist violence was planned as an act possessing not only immediate physical consequences but also a broader social afterlife¹⁹.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, this logic had become much more explicit. The early acts of Socialist Revolutionary terrorism – Pyotr Karpovich's shooting of Nikolai Bogolepov in 1901, Stepan Balmashov's assassination of Dmitry Sipyagin in 1902, Egor Sazonov's killing of Vyacheslav Plehve, and Ivan Kalyaev's assassination attempt on Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich – demonstrate an already established model of revolutionary action. The victim was expected to possess political symbolic value; the attack itself had to be

¹⁸ Гейфман А. *Революционный террор в России, 1894–1917* / Пер. с англ. Е. Дорман. М.: КРОН-ПРЕСС, 1997. С. 5–10.

¹⁹ Кафтан В.В., Путятин В.Д. *Ор. cit.* С. 12–13 (о Д.В. Каракозове, ишутинской «Организации» и прокламации «Друзьям-рабочим!»).

bold, spectacular, and easily recounted; and the perpetrator had to be perceived as a person of exceptional determination. In this sense, the terrorist act constituted a form of political drama in which not only the outcome but also the manner of its execution was of crucial importance²⁰.

B.N. Kashnikov rightly emphasizes that the early activities of the Socialist Revolutionary Combat Organization made such a profound impression precisely because of the “scope and precision” of its terrorist operations. The first attacks were perceived as highly selective, creating the impression that each “Tsarist satrap” was being punished specifically for his own actions. This moral and political framework made it possible to present assassination not as random violence but as a form of revolutionary justice. In this way, public sympathy – and, consequently, the expansion of terrorism’s social base – became possible²¹.

The mechanism of a terrorist attack itself consisted of several recurring stages. The first was ideological justification and the selection of a target. The intended victim had to personify state authority, repression, or “reaction”, thereby lending himself to political symbolization. The second stage involved organizational and clandestine preparation: surveillance of the target, selection of the route, preparation of safe houses, establishment of communications, and acquisition of weapons and explosives. The third stage was the technical execution itself, including the manufacture of bombs, the allocation of operational roles, and the calculation of the optimal moment for the attack. The fourth and final stage was public dissemination, when the attack began to assume a new existence as a political message and a signal to society²².

It is particularly at this fourth stage that the connection between the terrorist act and the expansion of terrorism’s social base becomes most apparent. Geifman demonstrates that with the emergence of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR), terrorism acquired not only an ideological foundation but also an organizational infrastructure. The party possessed an extensive organizational network, financial resources,

²⁰ Кафтан В.В., Пуятин В.Д. *Op. cit.* С. 34–42; Возникновение терроризма. С. 18–27.

²¹ Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 20–22.

²² Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 57–63.



Assassination of Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich.
 Cover of *Le Petit Journal*, No. 746, 5 March 1905. *Bibliothèque nationale de France*

and a technical base that facilitated the production of bombs and the maintenance of militant operatives. Even more importantly, however, the first successful bombing was conceived as a means of attracting “thousands of supporters”. Thus, from the outset, the terrorist act was regarded as an instrument for expanding the movement through shock, emotional impact, sympathy, and imitation²³.

In this respect, the press played an especially significant role. As Geifman observes, newspapers throughout the Empire reported almost daily on assassination attempts, bombings, political expropriations, armed attacks, kidnappings, and acts of extortion. The very regularity of this reporting transformed terrorism into a permanent feature of public life. It ceased to be perceived as an exceptional occurrence and instead became integrated into everyday political consciousness²⁴.

The press amplified the social impact of terrorist attacks in several ways. First, through the serial nature of its reporting: society was

²³ Ibid. C. 60–63.

²⁴ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* C. 32–34, 95–101.

constantly confronted with new accounts of political violence and gradually came to perceive terrorism as an established method of political action. Second, through personalization: readers became familiar with the names of terrorists and their victims and followed the details of assassination attempts, trials, executions, and escapes. Third, through unintended romanticization: even while condemning terrorism, newspapers were compelled to describe the boldness, precision, self-sacrifice, and dramatic character of the attacks. Finally, through the effect of imitation: terrorist acts became easily retold public narratives suitable for discussion in political circles and for incorporation into the mythology of radical youth²⁵.

It is particularly significant that Geifman's empirical research drew, in part, upon the SR's archive of newspaper clippings, which contained extensive reports on terrorist attacks and the government's efforts to suppress them. Among the materials she cites are clippings from *Russkie Vedomosti*. This demonstrates that the periodical press was not merely a passive backdrop but an essential component in the functioning of terrorism as a social phenomenon. It transformed terrorist attacks from clandestine events into publicly visible occurrences and thereby unintentionally contributed to the expansion of their social resonance²⁶.

It is at this point that a direct connection emerges with the previously outlined portrait of the terrorist bomber²⁷. His appeal was determined not only by his personal characteristics – youth, moral absolutism, and transitional social status – but also by the fact that society witnessed his actions through the press. Newspapers transformed an underground militant into a public figure. Even where formal condemnation was expressed, the detailed descriptions of courage, precision, and dramatic execution elevated the bomber into a recognizable type of political hero.

Biographical narratives further reinforced this effect. Pyotr Karpovich was presented as a former student who shot the Minister of

²⁵ Ibid. C. 95–101.

²⁶ Ibid. C. 27–28.

²⁷ Русские ведомости. 1908. 16 марта. Архив Партии социалистов-революционеров.

Education; Stepan Balmashov as a young Socialist Revolutionary who appeared before the Minister of the Interior disguised in an officer's uniform; Egor Sazonov as the bomber who assassinated Vyacheslav Plehve; and Ivan Kalyaev as a figure surrounded by an aura of moral selectivity. Each of these cases conformed to the same social pattern: a young man carrying out a decisive and historically significant act against the state. Consequently, the terrorist attack became not merely an event but a model of possible life for future radicals²⁸.

Equally revealing was the response of the revolutionary milieu itself to the first attacks of this new wave of terrorism. Geifman notes that following Karpovich's assassination attempt and Balmashov's killing of Sipyagin, many independent socialists and revolutionaries associated with the traditions of *Narodnaya Volya* celebrated the heroic deeds of both men. This indicates that the expansion of terrorism's social base occurred not only at the level of the general public but also within the intellectual and political opposition itself. The terrorist act came to symbolize a new style of revolutionary struggle that could be glorified and presented as a model for emulation²⁹.

The opposing reactions are equally instructive. Precisely because terrorist methods possessed genuine social appeal, Social Democrats – including Georgy Plekhanov, Vera Zasulich, and others – considered it necessary to wage a sustained polemic against them. Plekhanov argued that under contemporary conditions terrorism was “not expedient and therefore harmful”, while Zasulich opposed entrusting the cause of liberation to a “handful of heroes”, thereby reducing the masses to the role of passive spectators. The very necessity of such polemics demonstrates that the attraction of individual terrorism was not merely theoretical but represented a tangible social force³⁰.

The process by which terrorism's social base expanded is even more clearly illustrated by the records of the political police. Documents preserved in the State Archive of the Russian Federation reveal not only individual terrorists but also a much broader radical environment

²⁸ Кафтан В.В., Пуятин В.Д. *Op. cit.* С. 34–42; Возникновение терроризма. С. 18–27.

²⁹ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 49–53.

³⁰ *Ibid.* С. 53–55.

comprising transitional associations, peripheral groups, unstable terrorist alliances, and circles of sympathizers extending well beyond the core membership of political parties. These records provide documentary evidence that terrorism spread not simply through the activities of several organizations but as an environment of progressive involvement, in which the path to participation might begin with curiosity, develop into sympathy, and ultimately culminate in logistical assistance or direct participation in terrorist operations³¹.

Particularly striking is the episode recorded by Geifman in which adolescents, “following the example of adults”, attempted to disarm policemen, while one boy even fashioned a Browning pistol replica out of soap and succeeded in confiscating several genuine revolvers from police officers. The importance of this incident lies not in its anecdotal character but in what it reveals. It demonstrates that the behavioral model of terrorism penetrated youth culture – and even childhood – not primarily through profound ideological conviction but through imitation, play, and fascination with exemplary conduct. The expansion of terrorism’s social base therefore occurred not only within the organized underground but also within the broader culture of violent political action³².

Thus, the mechanism of terrorist action in the Russian Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encompassed not only preparation, clandestine organization, technical execution, and the attack itself, but also its subsequent social existence. A terrorist act became a political event, a media phenomenon, a subject of moral controversy, an object of imitation, and an instrument for recruiting new adherents to the radical movement. This constituted one of the principal mechanisms through which the social base of bombing terrorism expanded. The terrorist bomber was not merely a product of his social environment but also one of its principal creators: his biography, his actions, his visibility in the press, and his subsequent mythologization all served to produce new generations of potential bombers.

³¹ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 242. Д. 88. Л. 1, 7–7 об.; Оп. 244. Д. 340. Л. 22 об. – 23; Д. 9. Ч. 55. Лит. В. Л. 7–7 об., 14; Оп. 246. Д. 122. Л. 55.

³² Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 121–123.

The ethics of bombing terrorism and the expansion of its social base

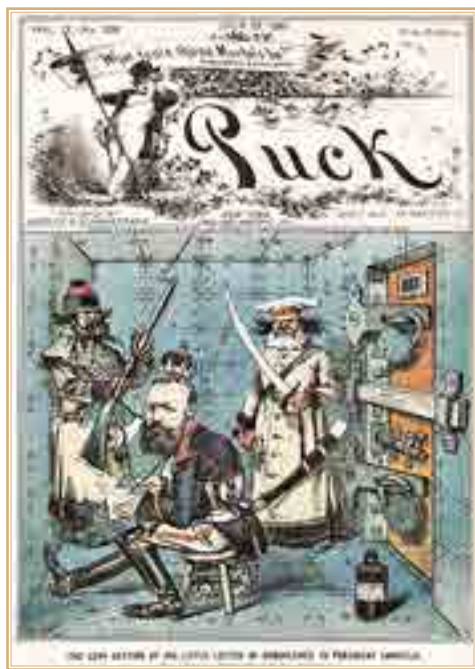
To understand the mechanisms underlying the expansion of the social base of revolutionary terrorism, it is insufficient to describe only the organizational structures of the underground movement, the techniques of assassination, or the social composition of militant groups. Equally important is an examination of the ethics of bombing terrorism that gradually emerged within revolutionary circles and rendered violent action not only internally justifiable but, in many cases, attractive to young people. This ethical framework consisted of a distinctive set of ideas in which the terrorist act was understood as morally permissible, politically meaningful, and personally ennobling. It was precisely this ethical system that transformed terrorism from an isolated criminal offence into a mechanism for expanding its social base³³. As Kashnikov demonstrates, Russian terrorism possessed not only a political but also a distinctly ethical dimension. Its participants sought to portray violence not as mere murder but as historical retribution, a sacrifice undertaken for the people, and a means of restoring justice. In other words, bombing terrorism rested upon a particular moral logic in which the terrorist appeared not as a criminal but as a person fulfilling a moral duty³⁴.

This ethical system consisted of several interrelated elements. First was the idea of the terrorist's moral superiority over a "passive" society: the militant was portrayed as someone who acted rather than merely spoke. Second was the concept of selective retribution: violence was directed not indiscriminately but against representatives of state authority, political reaction, or police repression. Third was the ideal of self-sacrifice: the terrorist consciously accepted arrest, execution, penal servitude, or death as integral components of a heroic mission. Fourth was the principle of exemplary action – the belief that a single decisive act could morally and politically inspire others.

It is this final element that is especially significant. Karakozov's proclamation already contains a clear formulation of this principle:

³³ Гейфман А. О.р. cit. С. 49–55; Кашиников Б.Н. О.р. cit. С. 12–15.

³⁴ Кашиников Б.Н. О.р. cit. С. 15–18.



Alexander III receives condolences from U.S. President James A. Garfield.
Cover of Puck, 27 July 1881. From open sources

even if his attempt failed, “there will be others who will follow my path”, and his own death “will serve as an example and inspire them”. Here we encounter an early and highly revealing expression of terrorist ethics: the terrorist act is conceived as a moral example intended to encourage imitation. Thus, even during the earliest phase of Russian revolutionary terrorism, violent action was understood not merely as an act of violence but as a means of educating future revolutionaries³⁵.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, this ethical framework assumed a more explicit and widespread form. The first prominent figures of the new wave of terrorism – Pyotr Karpovich and Stepan Balmashov – rapidly acquired significance not merely as perpetrators of individual attacks but as moral and political symbols. Contemporary sources explicitly note that, following their actions, many independent socialists and revolutionaries associated with the traditions of *Narodnaya Volya* celebrated the heroic deeds of Karpovich and Balmashov.

³⁵ Шушунов А.С. Возникновение и развитие терроризма в истории России на разных этапах ее становления. Отличие терроризма и террористического акта // Вестник науки. 2025. № 1 (82). С. 402–407; Кафтан В.В., Путятин В.Д. *Op. cit.* С. 12–13.

This demonstrates that the terrorist act functioned not only as an event but also as a model of behaviour that could be admired, glorified, and presented as a norm for a new generation³⁶.

The appeal of the ethics of bombing terrorism to young people derived from several factors. It offered a simple moral framework that divided the world into oppressors and fighters, the guilty and the vengeful, the passive and the active. It transformed violence into the language of heroism. It resolved the moral contradiction between killing and conscience by proposing that violence became ethically permissible if committed “in the name of the people”, “in the name of justice”, or “against executioners”. Finally, it was closely connected with the principle of “propaganda by the deed”: the terrorist act was understood as an action intended to inspire others. Every “heroic” deed thus became an instrument of moral contagion within the revolutionary milieu³⁷.

The press played an exceptionally important role in disseminating this ethical framework. Newspapers throughout the Empire reported almost daily on assassination attempts, bombings, “expropriations” (*exes*), armed attacks, and other forms of revolutionary violence. As a consequence, terrorism ceased to appear as an exceptional underground phenomenon and became a familiar element of the public information space³⁸. At the same time, newspapers communicated not only the fact of the terrorist act but also its ethical framing: courage, audacity, self-sacrifice, refusal to repent, and willingness to face execution.

Thus, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Russian Empire had developed not merely a practice of bombing terrorism but also an ethics of terrorism — a system of moral norms, values, and behavioral models that rendered violent action internally legitimate and socially contagious. This ethical framework became one of the principal factors in the formation and expansion of terrorism’s social base.

³⁶ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 49–53.

³⁷ *Ibid*; Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 18–24.

³⁸ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 27–28; Кашиников Б.Н. *Идея справедливости в теории и практике русского терроризма конца XIX — начала XX века*; Geifman A. *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. P. 5–12; Budnitskii O.V. *Op. cit.* P. 145–178.

Narodnaya Volya organizations and ideological texts as factors in the formation of terrorism's social base

The formation of the social base of revolutionary terrorism proceeded not only through individual assassination attempts, militant organizations, and the practice of “propaganda by the deed”, but also through the creation of a stable ideological environment in which violence received a comprehensive worldview-based justification. This environment was shaped by revolutionary circles, secret societies, populist organizations, and programmatic texts that interpreted terrorism as a morally permissible, historically necessary, and politically effective method of struggle. In this sense, the social base of terrorism was not only socially constituted but also doctrinally constructed³⁹.

Historically, the most important precursors of developed revolutionary terrorism were the organizations and circles of the 1860s and 1870s, within which a gradual transition occurred from propaganda, conspiratorial activity, and revolutionary romanticism to the acceptance of political violence as an independent method of struggle. Already within the early Ishutin circles and the associated “Organization”, to which Dmitry Karakozov belonged, the propaganda of utopian socialism was combined with terrorist tactics. This is of particular importance, for terrorism emerged here not as an external addition to ideology but as one of its practical means of implementation⁴⁰.

A special place in the early genealogy of Russian terrorism belongs to Sergei Nechaev's organization *Narodnaya Rasprava* (“People's Retribution”). Unlike the later *Narodnaya Volya*, it never developed into a mass movement, yet it played an exceptional role in formulating the radical ethics of the revolutionary underground. Its historical significance lay less in its practical achievements than in its creation of an extreme model of the revolutionary, for whom neither private morality,

³⁹ Покку Т. *Op. cit.* C. 51–55; Geifman A. *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. P. 27–35; Daly J.W. “Political Crime in Late Imperial Russia”. *The Journal of Modern History*. 2002. Vol. 74. No. 1. P. 74–103; Stockdale M.K. “Politics, Morality and Violence: Kadet Liberals and the Question of Terror, 1902–1911”. *Russian History*. 1995. Vol. 22. No. 4. P. 455–504.

⁴⁰ Шушунюв А.С. *Op. cit.* C. 402–407; Geifman A. *Op. cit.* P. 5–12.

nor social obligations, nor personal attachments possessed any value outside the cause of destruction. It was here that the idea first emerged with particular force that the revolutionary must become completely alienated from ordinary society and recognize as morally legitimate everything that served the cause of revolution⁴¹.

The next stage was associated with the organization *Zemlya i Volya* (*Land and Liberty*), which became the principal organizational center of revolutionary populism. Its importance lies in the fact that within its ranks emerged the fundamental division from which two radically different models of revolutionary practice subsequently developed. The split of 1879 into *Narodnaya Volya* and *Cherny Peredel* (*Black Repartition/Distribution*) represented not merely a tactical disagreement but a fundamental choice between two distinct conceptions of revolutionary action⁴².

Cherny Peredel remained committed to political agitation, land redistribution, and long-term work among the peasantry, thereby representing an anti-terrorist alternative within the populist movement. Its significance for the present study lies precisely in this contrast: it demonstrates that the revolutionary movement contained an alternative path that did not revolve around the cult of individual political violence.

The path chosen by *Narodnaya Volya*, however, was fundamentally different. This organization was the first to provide terrorism with a relatively coherent political and moral framework. *Narodnaya Volya* became one of the earliest mass organizations to regard terrorism as the shortest path to equality and justice. Its historical uniqueness lies precisely in the fact that it transformed terrorism from an occasional tactic into a normative element of revolutionary strategy, integrated into its conception of revolutionary morality⁴³.

Narodnaya Volya is significant not merely because of its assassination of Alexander II. The organization's historical importance lay in the fact that it developed a model in which the terrorist act became a means not only of combating the state but also of consolidating its own ranks, demonstrating in practice that resistance to the government

⁴¹ Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.*; Budnitskii O.V. *Op. cit.* P. 145–178.

⁴² Шушунюв А.С. *Op. cit.* С. 403–404; Кафтан В.В., Путятин В.Д. *Op. cit.* С. 14–18; Geifman A. *Op. cit.* P. 13–20.

⁴³ Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 49–50; Budnitskii O.V. *Op. cit.* P. 156–161.

was possible, sustaining revolutionary morale, and cultivating “forces fit for and accustomed to struggle”. Terrorism was thus conceived not simply as a blow against the enemy but also as an instrument for educating and strengthening the revolutionary milieu itself⁴⁴.

In this context, Nechaev’s *Catechism of a Revolutionary* assumes particular significance. For the purposes of the present study, it is one of the key texts because it did more than merely justify violence: it established a normative code of revolutionary conduct. Studies of Russian terrorism have therefore described it, not without reason, as a kind of “Bible” of revolutionary terrorists and a “code of honor” defining the aims, principles, and way of life of the revolutionary engaged in the struggle against the existing social order⁴⁵.

The historical significance of the *Catechism* may be summarized in several fundamental respects. First, it formulates the ideal of the revolutionary as an individual who has completely renounced conventional morality. Personal life, family ties, civic obligations, compassion, friendship, and even one’s own identity are all sacrificed to the cause of destruction. Such a personality type is especially dangerous not merely because it is prepared to employ violence but because it transforms violence into an internal moral norm.

Second, the *Catechism* presents the revolutionary as a person of absolute duty. This conception proved particularly attractive to young people undergoing periods of social and psychological transition. Where ordinary life appeared meaningless or degrading, Nechaev offered a complete moral framework: renounce everything, become a person of action, acquire a clear purpose, and attain historical significance.

Third, the text abolishes the boundary between political struggle and moral crime. As Kashnikov observes, Nechaev’s principle effectively reduces morality to a single proposition: “everything that contributes to the triumph of the revolution is morally justified”. For this reason, the *Catechism* should be understood not merely as a revolutionary manifesto but as a mechanism for producing the ethics of terrorism⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ Шушунов А.С. *Op. cit.* С. 403–404; ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 242. Д. 88. Л. 1, 7–7 об.

⁴⁵ Geifman A. *Op. cit.* P. 21–24.

⁴⁶ Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 50–51; Budnitskii O.V. *Op. cit.* P. 162–166.

Fourth, the *Catechism* places particular emphasis on establishing connections with the most destructive elements of popular life. Nechaev urged revolutionaries to align themselves not with the moderate “people” understood as a moral community but with those forces that opposed the state “not merely in words but in deeds”. This is a crucial point. The social base of terrorism is conceived here not as an enlightened political nation but as a radicalized milieu prepared for destruction. Thus, the *Catechism* not only justified violence but also proposed a social strategy for expanding the revolutionary movement by forging alliances with the most extreme elements of society⁴⁷.

Organizations associated with the populist and *Narodnaya Volya* traditions, together with ideological texts such as the *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, contributed to the expansion of terrorism’s social base in several ways. They created a language through which violence could be justified; established a normative model of the revolutionary; provided an organizational framework for recruitment and participation; and ensured historical continuity, allowing terrorist norms to survive the destruction of individual organizations and to be transmitted to subsequent generations of radicals. In this sense, *Narodnaya Volya* organizations and revolutionary ideological texts should be regarded as part of the infrastructure through which terrorism’s social base expanded.

The image of the female terrorist and its influence on the expansion of the social base of bombing terrorism

The participation of women in revolutionary terrorism within the Russian Empire was neither accidental nor peripheral. On the contrary, the female terrorist became one of the most powerful and socially influential figures in the revolutionary culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her historical significance lay not only in her direct involvement in assassination attempts, clandestine activities, and militant organizations but also in the symbolic impact her image exerted upon society. The appearance of women within the sphere of political violence challenged established gender norms, intensified the

⁴⁷ Кашиников Б.Н. Оп. cit. С. 51–52; ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 1914. Д. 340. Л. 22 об. – 23.



Caricature of a Socialist Revolutionary woman terrorist.
Early twentieth-century postcard. Artist: E. Sokolov. From open sources

public impact of terrorist acts, and made terrorism itself more visible and attractive to new groups of sympathizers and potential recruits⁴⁸.

A number of scholars have noted that by the beginning of the twentieth century women constituted nearly one-third of the SR Combat Organization and approximately one-quarter of all terrorists. This development has been linked to rising female literacy, restricted access to higher education, the crisis of traditional gender roles, and women's desire for self-assertion beyond conventional social boundaries. Within the revolutionary movement, women found opportunities that ordinary society largely denied them: respect, responsibility, danger, a sense of mission, and the feeling of participating in a historically significant cause. It was precisely these opportunities that made the terrorist milieu especially attractive to many young women⁴⁹.

A special place in the history of female political violence belongs to Vera Zasulich. Although she later became a critic of individual

⁴⁸ Hilbrenner A. The Perovskaia Paradox, or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth-Century Russia // *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*. 2012. Vol. 32. No. 2. P. 195–210.

⁴⁹ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 167–169, 211–214; Geifman A. *Op. cit.* P. 152–160.



"The Terrorist." Painting by N.A. Yaroshenko. 1881.
The heroine was modeled on V.I. Zasulich. N.A.
Yaroshenko Memorial Museum-Estate, Kislovodsk

terrorism, her shooting of Fyodor Trepov in 1878 established a crucial precedent that made the female terrorist a publicly recognized figure. Scholarship demonstrates that Zasulich became the principal point of reference for subsequent Russian women terrorists: through her example, society learned to perceive female political violence either as scandal, heroism, or a form of political martyrdom⁵⁰.

No less significant was Sofia Perovskaya. She shattered two deeply rooted stereotypes simultaneously: that women were passive by nature and that they occupied only secondary positions in politics. Her participation in the conspiracy of 1 March 1881 and her role in organizing the assassination of Alexander II transformed the female terrorist from an exceptional participant into a leader within the revolutionary movement. In the public imagination, Perovskaya inspired both horror and admiration, making her an exceptionally powerful symbolic figure⁵¹.

Maria Spiridonova represents a later stage in the evolution of revolutionary terrorism, one in which political violence became fused with

⁵⁰ Hilbrenner A. Op. cit. P. 195–210.

⁵¹ Ibid. P. 200–206.

the image of the suffering heroine. Her assassination of G.N. Luzhevsky and the subsequent story of her arrest, mistreatment, trial, and exile transformed her from a militant operative into a symbol of martyrdom and moral superiority over the authorities. This considerably strengthened the emotional appeal of the terrorist myth. Young people were offered not merely the image of a determined assassin but that of a woman who simultaneously avenged injustice, sacrificed herself, and suffered for the “people’s cause”⁵².

The participation of women produced a particularly powerful shock within traditional society. The female terrorist broadened prevailing conceptions of who could become a revolutionary. She endowed terrorism with additional associations of sacrifice, purity, and moral exceptionalism while intensifying the public resonance of terrorist acts through the violation of established gender expectations. The female terrorist also made the revolutionary movement more attractive to young women, who increasingly perceived it as a sphere of self-realization and historically meaningful action⁵³.

Whereas the “typical” terrorist bomber appealed to young people through his combination of determination, risk, clandestine elitism, and symbolic entry into history, the female terrorist intensified this appeal by adding the themes of moral purity, martyrdom, and cultural defiance. She represented not merely another participant in political violence but a figure whose very participation challenged the existing social order, thereby rendering revolutionary action even more significant. It follows that women’s participation cannot be regarded as a peripheral aspect of revolutionary terrorism. On the contrary, the image of the female terrorist became one of the most powerful channels through which the social base of bombing terrorism expanded.

⁵² McDermid J. Mariya Spiridonova: Russian Martyr and British Heroine? // *Women and Revolution in Russia, 1905–1917: A Documentary History* / Ed. by M. Buckley. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. P. 51–68.

⁵³ Broido V. *Apostles into Terrorists: Women and the Revolutionary Movement in the Russia of Alexander II*. London, 1977. P. 145–176; Findsen J.R. *Women and Violence in Revolutionary Russia, 1860–1925*. M.A. Thesis. Central Washington University, 2011. P. 34–57.

The social milieu and social type opposed to bombing terrorism

The terrorist bomber was opposed by a different social milieu, one for which revolutionary terrorism represented not a form of righteous retribution but a symptom of the disintegration of the state, the rule of law, and public morality. This milieu was far from homogeneous. It included representatives of the civil administration, the judiciary, the police, the armed forces, moderate liberal opinion, sections of the intelligentsia, and political groups which, while advocating reform, rejected individual terrorism as a legitimate method of political struggle⁵⁴.

Whereas the terrorist bomber embodied social transition, moral absolutism, and uncompromising action, his opponent was typically an older, socially established individual integrated into existing institutions and committed to legal order, political continuity, and gradual reform. For such people, terrorism represented not a path towards freedom but a route to chaos and the destruction of the historical fabric of society⁵⁵.

This social type is most clearly illustrated by several prominent individuals. Pyotr Stolypin exemplifies the model of the conservative reformer who combined a program of governmental reform with an uncompromising struggle against revolutionary violence. For him, terrorism constituted a threat not merely to individual officials but to the very existence of the state⁵⁶. Vyacheslav Plehve represented the type of the resolute administrator who regarded terrorism as a direct challenge to governmental authority and the integrity of the Empire⁵⁷. Alexander Guchkov embodied the moderate liberal parliamentary opponent of terrorism: in his view, terrorism did not advance the cause of liberty but instead delayed reform and strengthened political reaction⁵⁸. Georgy

⁵⁴ Рокки Т. *Op. cit.* С. 51–55; Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 95–99; Stockdale M.K. Politics, Morality and Violence: Kadet Liberals and the Question of Terror, 1902–1911 // *Russian History*. 1995. Vol. 22. No. 4. P. 455–504.

⁵⁵ Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 54–55; Stockdale M.K. *Op. cit.* P. 460–468.

⁵⁶ Шушунов А.С. *Op. cit.* С. 404–405; Кафтан В.В., Путятин В.Д. *Op. cit.* С. 28–31; ГА РФ. Ф. 102. ДПОО. Оп. 1916. Д. 122. Л. 55.

⁵⁷ Кафтан В.В., Путятин В.Д. *Op. cit.* С. 31–33; Geifman A. *Op. cit.* P. 102–110.

⁵⁸ Гучков А.И. Речь по поводу убийства П.А. Столыпина // *Государственная дума Российской империи: стенографические отчеты*. СПб., 1911. С. 45–47; Stockdale M.K. *Op. cit.* P. 480–486.

Plekhanov stands as the principal ideological critic of individual terrorism, rejecting it as politically harmful and strategically ineffective⁵⁹. Vera Zasulich is significant because, although she emerged from the revolutionary tradition of the nineteenth century, she ultimately came to criticize terrorism as a substitution of heroic individualism for genuine mass political struggle⁶⁰.

Opposition to terrorism in the late Russian Empire was therefore not merely a matter of police repression or governmental policy but also an intellectual, political, and social phenomenon. The average opponent of the ideology and practice of bombing terrorism may be characterized as a socially established, mature, institutionally integrated individual associated with the state, lawful public activity, or the moral and religious traditions of society, for whom terrorism represented not a path to liberation but a threat to the state, the rule of law, and the social order.

The foregoing analysis leads to the conclusion that the social base of revolutionary terrorism in the Russian Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerged neither spontaneously nor instantaneously. Rather, it developed as the result of the prolonged interaction of ideological, organizational, socio-psychological, and communicative factors. Terrorism evolved not merely as the practice of individual underground circles or militant organizations but as a distinctive form of political culture capable of reproducing its own environment of support, imitation, and recruitment⁶¹.

First, ideological preparation played a decisive role in the formation of the terrorist milieu. From Nechaev's circle to the traditions of *Narodnaya Volya*, early revolutionary organizations and texts developed a language in which violence ceased to be understood simply as criminality and instead came to be interpreted as duty, retribution, sacrifice, and the shortest path to justice. Organizations such as *Narodnaya Rasprava*, *Narodnaya Volya*, and the broader radical populist movement thus created not only organizational forms of struggle but also a normative

⁵⁹ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* C. 67–70; Geifman A. *Op. cit.* P. 57–63.

⁶⁰ Ibid. C. 70–72.

⁶¹ Рокки Т. *Op. cit.* C. 51–55; Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* C. 32–34; Daly J.W. Political Crime in Late Imperial Russia // *The Journal of Modern History*. 2002. Vol. 74. No. 1. P. 74–103.

model of revolutionary behavior that provided terrorism with a coherent ideological justification⁶².

Second, the turn of the twentieth century witnessed a qualitative expansion of terrorism's social base. Whereas earlier revolutionary circles had been largely confined to relatively narrow educated milieus, by the beginning of the twentieth century the terrorist movement increasingly attracted young people occupying transitional social positions: school pupils, university students, first-generation industrial workers, members of the *raznochintsy*, the petty bourgeoisie, the lower intelligentsia, women, and representatives of other groups experiencing social insecurity and political frustration. It was this new constituency that became the principal reservoir from which revolutionary terrorism expanded⁶³.

Third, the figure of the terrorist bomber acquired particular significance. He ceased to be merely the perpetrator of isolated assassination attempts and instead became one of the defining political heroes of the age. His youth, incomplete social integration, determination, willingness to sacrifice himself, and tendency towards moral self-dramatization made him especially attractive to a generation undergoing political radicalization. Through the biographies of Karpovich, Balmashov, Sazonov, Kalyayev, and others, terrorism offered a model of accelerated entry into history through a violent yet symbolically elevated act⁶⁴.

Fourth, the ethics of bombing terrorism played an essential role. This ethical framework reconciled murder with conscience by transforming violence into a form of "higher duty". Within its moral universe, the terrorist appeared simultaneously as avenger, martyr, judge, and exemplar. It was precisely this ethical framework that rendered terrorism internally legitimate and socially contagious. Particularly significant was the principle of exemplary action: the terrorist act was conceived as an event capable of inspiring future participants. From Karakozov's proclamation to the practices of the Socialist

⁶² Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 47–57; Шушунюв А.С. *Op. cit.* С. 403–404; Буднитский О.В. *Op. cit.* Р. 145–178.

⁶³ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 167–169, 211–214; Geifman A. *Op. cit.* Р. 152–160.

⁶⁴ Кафтан В.В., Путятин В.Д. *Op. cit.* С. 12–18; Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 50–52; ГА РФ. Ф. 109. ДПОО. Оп. 1912. Д. 113. Л. 1.

Revolutionaries in the early twentieth century, this logic is clearly discernible⁶⁵.

Fifth, the broader social environment – and especially the press – played an enormous role in expanding terrorism's social base. Newspaper coverage transformed terrorism into a recurring feature of public life. Through the press, terrorist attacks moved from the secrecy of the underground into the sphere of public discussion, while the terrorist himself entered the realm of the public imagination. Even when condemning violence, newspapers inevitably conveyed its audacity, danger, self-sacrifice, and dramatic character, thereby reinforcing the appeal of the revolutionary militant as a political type. In this way, each terrorist act acquired a continuing existence as rumor, public narrative, object of imitation, and instrument for the moral recruitment of new adherents⁶⁶.

Sixth, the participation of women terrorists constituted a distinct channel through which terrorism's social base expanded. Figures such as Vera Zasulich, Sofia Perovskaya, Maria Spiridonova, and others intensified the emotional and symbolic impact of revolutionary violence. The female terrorist challenged established social and gender norms, rendered terrorism even more visible, and, in the eyes of part of society, invested it with an aura of martyrdom, moral exceptionalism, and self-sacrifice. Consequently, the social base of terrorism expanded in a distinctly gendered dimension as well⁶⁷.

Finally, the present analysis demonstrates that the expansion of terrorism's social base followed a discernible sequence. An ideological and ethical framework was first established, followed by a demonstrative terrorist act. This generated public attention and media resonance, which in turn produced sympathy, imitation, organizational recruitment, and the replenishment of militant groups. In other words, terrorism's social base was formed not only "from below", through socially discontented

⁶⁵ Шушунов А.С. *Op. cit.* С. 402–403; Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 47–49; Geifman A. *Op. cit.* P. 5–12.

⁶⁶ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 27–28, 32–34; Русские ведомости. 1908. 16 марта; Daly J.W. Political Crime in Late Imperial Russia // *The Journal of Modern History*. 2002. Vol. 74. No. 1. P. 74–103.

⁶⁷ Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 167–169; Hilbrenner A. *Op. cit.* P. 195–210; McDermid J. *Op. cit.* P. 51–68.

and politically frustrated groups, but also “from above”, through ideological texts, revolutionary organizations, the cultural glorification of terrorism, and the continual dissemination of violence through public communication⁶⁸.

Revolutionary terrorism therefore developed as a socio-communicative system in which underground organizations, ideology, ethics, terrorist acts, the press, heroisation, and imitation functioned together as mutually reinforcing elements. This explains why a strategy confined solely to police suppression of individual conspiracies and militant groups could never produce lasting results. The state confronted not only terrorists themselves but also a much broader social environment in which terrorism had already become politically intelligible, morally justified, and socially reproducible. This constituted the principal historical reason why revolutionary terrorism evolved from the practice of relatively small clandestine circles into a major factor in the destabilization of late imperial Russian society.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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⁶⁸ Шушуннов А.С. *Op. cit.* С. 404—405; Гейфман А. *Op. cit.* С. 27—34; Кашиников Б.Н. *Op. cit.* С. 47—52; ГА РФ. Ф. 102. ДП. Оп. 242. Д. 25. Ч. 101. Л. 6.

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