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Revolutionary Counter-Terror: The Kovalevich Outrage [The Leontiev Lane Attack]

The Bolsheviks' crackdown on their political adversaries triggered more than protests made just by word of mouth or in print. Some revolutionaries reverted to their old fighting methods that they had so often deployed against the tsarist autocracy and which had now come back into their own, they reckoned, where Bolshevik absolutism was concerned. The Social Revolutionaries were the first to retaliate with individual attacks. Thus, on 25 June 1918, Moshe Volodarsky, a Petrograd Bolshevik leader who had earned a reputation for the ferocity towards his political adversaries, was gunned down on a Petrograd street corner. For the very same reasons, Moshe Uritsky, the head of the Petrograd Cheka was gunned down by Leonid Kannegisser [Kannegisser] on 30 August 1918. On the very same day, Fanny Kaplan, an erstwhile SR terrorist who had served eleven years as a convict prior to the revolution, opened fire on Lenin, leaving him badly wounded. After her arrest, Fanya Kaplan declared that she had long been mulling over an assassination of Lenin, as he had betrayed the revolution.

In Moscow in 1920, the All-Russian Cheka published the first volume of the *Red Book of the All-Russian Cheka*. Published under the aegis of Makintsian, the book was swiftly withdrawn from circulation for readily understandable reasons. That first volume described – complete with lots of unpublished documentation – three important anti-Bolshevik movements: the uprising in Yaroslavl in July 1918, sparked by Boris Savinkov's Union for the Defence of the Homeland and Freedom; the Left Social Revolutionaries' revolt in Moscow on 5 and 6 July 1918; and the so-called Kovalevitch [Kovalevich] outrage targeting the Communist Party headquarters in Moscow on 25 September 1919.

Let us take a closer look at the last of these.

Here are the facts. The 26 September 1919 edition of *Izvestia* announced: *"Representatives from the Moscow Region Communist Party as well as leading militants from Moscow gathered last evening in Leontiev Lane for a meeting of the Russian Communist Party's Moscow Committee. At around nine o'clock, two bombs were thrown into the meeting room through the window that looks out on to the courtyard."* The outrage was initially attributed to some unknown counter-revolutionary, and then, the following day to some White Guard terrorists.

The building hosting the meeting of the Bolshevik leaders was the former residence of the Countess Uvarova and was formerly the headquarters of the Left Social Revolutionaries. Of the 150 people attending the meeting, 12 were killed and 58 injured. The most significant figures among the dead were Zagursky, the secretary of the Moscow Party Committee (he was chairing the meeting) and Kropotov, a member of the Moscow Soviet. The wounded included a number of Party bigwigs: Bukharin, Steklov, Olminsky, Pokrovsky, Yaroslavsky, A F Miasnikov (the Armenian), Sloutsky and Ya. Shliapnikov.

Shortly after that, the outrage was claimed by an "All-Russian Insurrectional Committee", a statement from which we reprint below;

*"Citizens, brothers*

*On the evening of 25 September 1919, at a gathering of the Moscow party, the approach to the struggle against the risen people was under scrutiny. The Bolshevik masters had expressed their*

*unanimous support for the most extreme steps to be taken against the risen workers, peasants and Red soldiery, the anarchists and Left Social Revolutionaries, to the extent of their seeking to enforce extraordinary power in Moscow, with mass shootings."*

The situation was very serious and no mistake: Denikin was marching on Moscow, Yudenitch [Yudenich] was threatening Petrograd and Koltchak [Kolchak] had overrun Siberia. Moreover, the Bolsheviks had managed to unite every other revolutionary faction against them, as well as the vast majority of workers and peasants, due to their authoritarian and brutal methods.

So the Bolshevik leadership was considering pulling out of Moscow and fleeing to the safety of Finland. But the insurgent movements of the revolutionary partisans restored things to an even keel by crushing the White generals.

The statement went on to spell out its aims:

*"Our task is to erase the order of the commissar-ocracy and Chekas from the face of the earth and to establish an all-Russian Free Federation of Unions of the workers and oppressed masses. We have to establish it straight away by our own efforts, without waiting for the gains of the October revolution to be lost once and for all.*

*The third revolution draws near.*

*On 17 June the Cheka and the Revolutionary Military Court had the following insurgents shot in Kharkov – Mikhalev-Pavlenkov, Burbyga, Kostin, Polunin, Dobrolyubov, Olezchnik, Korobko and Ozerov. On 25 September, the insurgent revolutionaries avenged them by blowing up the Bolsheviks' Moscow Committee.*

*The All-Russian Insurgent Revolutionary Committee of Partisans."*

In fact, as it subsequently transpired, this Committee was an offshoot of the "Underground Anarchists", an umbrella group with around thirty members in Moscow, one that stood apart from other anarchist groups in terms of its attitude towards the Bolshevik authorities. They looked upon themselves as "follow-through anarchists" and shunned any compromise with the State, no matter how soviet and revolutionary it might claim to be. Over the four months of unfettered existence they enjoyed, they mounted fairly intense propaganda, publishing, among other things and in addition to that statement, the following handbills: *No Need to Wait*, *The Truth about the Makhnovshchina*, *Where does the Solution Lie?*, plus two issues of a newspaper: *Anarchy*.

In a final handbill addressed to the Bolsheviks, its essential stance was articulated fairly well:

*"You are in power in Russia, but what has changed? The factories and the land are still not in the hands of toilers, but rather of the Boss-State. Wage slavery, the fundamental ailment of the bourgeois order, still exists: making hunger, cold and unemployment inevitable. On account of the "need to put up with it all" in hope of a brighter future and "defending gains already made", a vast bureaucratic machine has been created, the right to strike been abolished, freedoms of speech, assembly and the press crushed.*

*You foster a Red military chauvinism, but what is there for the working class to defend? You say that the bourgeoisie has been sidelined and that the working class is in power. Our response to that is that there are only a few workers in power, and those are only former workers, divorced from their class.*

*By definition, the oppressed cannot be in power: even should the authorities profess to be "proletarian", which is only the grossest falsehood. You will protest to us that you too want anarchy, but first the enemy has to be broken, after which the authorities will fall asunder by themselves.*

*It is our belief that, personally, subjectively, you may have the best intentions: but objectively, by your very nature, you are the representatives of the bureaucrat-civil servant class, a bunch of unproductive intellectuals. We pay heed, not to your red flag but to the facts and we can see that your policy leads to a veritable backlash inside the country. There is still nothing done and dusted and there is nothing for us to defend.*

*We are calling for an immediate uprising for the sake of bread and freedom and we will defend our freedom with the weaponry of freedom rather than that of slavery.*

*That is the only position anarchists can espouse vis a vis any "revolutionary" authority. It is the key difference between socialism and anarchism: as long as authority endures, as far as we are concerned, nothing changes. The Bolsheviks have grasped this very well. Thus, in his pamphlet Anarchism and Communism, Preobrazhensky write that only the anarchists conduct themselves so uncompromisingly towards the soviet authorities just as they do every other authority, and that they have remained true to their teaching, even though Preobrazhensky regards it as bookish and "counter-revolutionary".*

This stance clashed with the views of lots of "law-abiding" anarchists or anarchists who had quite simply gone over to and were working hand in glove with the new regime.

It was a stance more easily understood if we take into account the fact that Casimir Kovalevitch [Kovalevich], a worker on the Moscow region railways, had spent several weeks in Ukraine in 1919 and had taken part in the Makhnovist insurgent movement and seen the Bolshevik repression for himself. He had returned from Ukraine together with some twenty anarchists, twelve of them Latvians, who had also taken part in the Makhnovist movement. In Moscow, they had set up a solid network comprising: 1. A propaganda team publishing handbills and Anarchy; 2. A combat team; 3. A press; 4. A bomb-making workshop.

The combat team also handled "expropriations" to raise the funds required for its activities. Thus, in Moscow, they had expropriated three "people's" banks: the Dimitrovka, the Tagananka Square bank and Serpukhova Square bank. Part of the group had also travelled out to Tula, a pretty important town nearly 200 kilometers outside of Moscow and had expropriated a bank there. This latter operation had been openly conducted in concert with the local Maximalist organization. Indeed, like the Makhnovist movement, there was coordinated action with certain Maximalists and Left Social Revolutionaries. The most radical personnel stood shoulder to shoulder in the new revolutionary combat group.

That twelve-man Latvian group took off for Latvia with some of the proceeds raised, intending to organize "underground anarchist" groups there. The rest of the membership decided to prepare something significant to mark the anniversary of the October revolution. Their operation was brought forwards, in light of how serious the situation was and of a timely suggestion coming from a Left Social Revolutionary, Cherepanov, that they blow up the headquarters of the Moscow Communist Party, especially as all of the bigwigs, Lenin included, were due to take part in the regional meeting on 25 September.

Two months later, towards the end of November, the two leading members of the “underground anarchists” – Kovalevitch [Kovalevich] and Sobolev – were caught on the hop by Chekists: they tried to shoot and bomb their way out of trouble, before blowing themselves up. Another six members of the organization, cornered in a house, also blew themselves up. Eight other members were rounded up by the Cheka. The transcript of their interrogations and confessions were reproduced in *The Red Book of the All-Russian Cheka* and it is on foot of that evidence that we have been able to reconstruct the history of their movement.

The grounds on which the *Red Book of the All-Russian Cheka* was withdrawn from circulation are now plainer. Makintsian, the naïve editor of the book, had not realized that the reprinting of lengthy quotations from their handbills and the reprinting of the transcripts from their interrogations, in short, that that whole gamut of documentation, provided plain evidence of how and why revolutionary organizations to combat the new autocratic authorities could be set up and was, so to speak, laying down the model to be followed. Such contagion had to be averted at all costs.

Besides, the Cheka’s methods looked as police-like as those used by the Okhrana. The resurrection of the old revolutionary means of struggle and the ambiguousness in which they wrapped the nature of the Bolshevik authorities might befuddle any readers.

The penny dropped and the *Red Book of the All-Russian Cheka* was swiftly withdrawn from sale and a follow-up volume never did appear. As for Makintsian, he dropped out of sight.

In order to round off this description of one aspect of the revolutionary counter-terror, we publish below a translation of the last transcript as it appeared in *The Red Book*.

It is a statement made by Donato Andreyevitch [Andreyevich] Cherepanov, a Left Social Revolutionary, who devised the attack. Cherepanov was arrested on 17 February 1920 and interrogated that same day in the presence of Dzerzhinski, the president of the Cheka, of Latsis, its vice-president and of the Cheka’s ideologue, Ksenofontov, Romanovsky and other high-ranking Chekists:

*1. Together with Casimir Kovalevitch [Kovalevich], I organised the All-Russian high command of the Revolutionary Partisans, which had been essentially tasked with carrying out a whole series of terrorist acts. This was the organization that carried out the Leontiev Lane attack. The preparations, the elaboration of the plan and the oversight of the operation had been entrusted to me right up until the last moment.*

*I was not involved in the throwing of the bomb, on the orders of the high command; otherwise I would gladly have done it.*

*Initially, the matter of this terrorist act had been debated at length among us. Several viewpoints about the matter were expressed.*

*Initially the issue had been throwing a bomb into Cheka headquarters, but that proposal was turned down on the following grounds: the Cheka and comrade Dzerzhinski are mere tools, servants of the Party; consequently, the real responsibility belongs to the Party and not to the Cheka.*

*The 25 September meeting, bringing together the main office holders and leaders of the party’s Moscow Committee, was an opportunity to target the real culprits, especially as Lenin was due to be in attendance.*

*Obviously, it is to be regretted that the victims of the explosion were not the most important Party leaders and that the latter suffered no serious harm. As we saw it, that act was supposed to revolutionize the masses and indicate the course to be followed by real revolutionaries; the terrorist path, the path of blows directly targeting the head of the enemy.*

*As for the objection to the effect that a lot of those hurt by the explosion were ordinary militants, my answer would be that your Cheka has done much worse.*

*2. By my reckoning, power should be handed over to the trades unions, which might strive as comrades to boost production levels and meet needs.*

*In time of civil war and times of famine, that strikes me as the only solution. There are forces aplenty and it is just a matter of holding them to account. All the trade unions would become agencies of power and the All-Russian Union of those trades unions would act as the supreme organ of authority.*

*That some of those trade unions might at present be displaying harmful tendencies is of no importance, as class consciousness and mutual aid rather than Bolshevik violence will still be able to revolutionize those masses.*

*3. As I did during the July 1918 uprising by the Left Social Revolutionaries, I abide by my assertion that the Left SRs had no desire to seize power, as we have always been against any party dictatorship.*

*The sole aim of that uprising was to break the counter-revolutionary Brest-Litovsk Treaty and to wrench their dictatorial powers from the hands of the Bolsheviks, in order to replace it with the power of the soviets! Speaking for myself, I have never thought about seizing power. Even though the Central Committee of the left SRs threw me out, as it did the entire Moscow organization, it is still my view that it did not have the power so to do, by virtue of the fact that at the most recent Party conference there was a clear tendency of the provincial and mass organizations taking shape that was in our favour. Since that conference was interrupted by the Cheka, that Central Committee cannot be representative. Which is why we regard ourselves as authentic Left SRs in spite of all of the disavowals coming our way [...]*

*I have but one regret that I have been arrested for treason and was unable to take out your agents.*

*What is currently going on is nothing but out-and-out Robespierism!*

*Needless to say, Cherepanov was not spared.*

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