

Attacking the Empire's Achilles Heels: Railroads and Terrorism in Tsarist Russia*

On November 27, 2009 the Russian public was shocked by a bomb attack on a high speed passenger train on its way from Moscow to Saint Petersburg. The incident occurred near the town Bologoe, about 320 kilometres north of Moscow. Extremists had planted an explosive device underneath the railway embankment leaving a crater one meter in diameter and damaging one kilometre of track. Four carriages of the "Nevskiy-Express", which had been targeted already in August 2007 by terrorists, came off the rails. Eyewitnesses reportedly heard a loud bang before the train derailed at high speed. The accident killed 27 passengers and left more than 90 injured.¹ This attack was just one example of a long line of terrorist assaults targeting systems of civil infrastructure in various countries at the beginning of the 21st century.² In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, modern societies became increasingly aware of the vulnerability of their arteries of communication and transportation. The aeroplanes crashing into the towers of the World Trade Centre in 2001, the commuter trains exploding in Madrid in March 2004 and in Mumbai in July 2006, and the carriages of the London Underground being attacked by the so-called "backpack-bombers" in July 2005 became symbols of the fragility of modern societies in an era of increasing human mobility.

The vulnerability of infrastructure systems and the dependence of modern societies on their networks of communication and transportation have drawn considerable attention both among political scientists and historians.³ Whereas scholars once perceived the construction of national and trans-national systems of civil infrastructure primarily as an indicator of the integration of political, cultural and economic spaces – think of Friedrich List's famous vision of German unification with the help of a national network of railroads – historians today pay more attention to the fact that the building of railways, telegraph-lines, power grids and the expansion of civil aviation networks also made modern

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1 Derailment of express train rekindles Russian fears; *BIDDER* Anschlag auf Newski-Express. Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) later accused Alexander Tikhomirov, an Islamist rebel from Chechnya, who was killed during a raid in Ingushetiya at the beginning of March 2010, of bearing responsibility for this terrorist act. Cf. Ingushetia rebel killed in raid by Russian troops.

2 According to "Jane's Intelligence Review" between 1998 and July 2006 there were at least 74 separate terrorist attacks on railways worldwide. *HINDS* Mumbai bombings signal sustained rail terrorism trend.

3 *LITVINOV/ROZHKOV* Bor'ba s terrorizmom; *LIEBERMAN / BUCHT* Rail Transport Security; *MERKI* Die Verwundbarkeit des modernen Verkehrs.

societies more vulnerable to external assaults.⁴ Whereas in 1933 the author of the entry on terrorism in the “Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences” optimistically predicted the decline of politically motivated violence (since “modern technology has made our world so complex that we have become increasingly invulnerable to determined actions by individuals or small groups”⁵), the terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid, Mumbai, London and Bologoe illustrated the contrary. They unveiled the technical skills of today’s militant political activists who make use of the ‘blessings’ of technological development – like cell-phones, internet and aviation traffic, and they demonstrated that arteries of modern communication (as well as other sensitive networks like the internet and power grids) have become highly vulnerable Achilles’ heels of 21st century societies.

In this article I argue that the identification of networks of modern infrastructure as targets of terrorist plots is not an ‘achievement’ of today’s militant political activists at all. In fact the first modern terrorist groups, which started their underground warfare in Tsarist Russia in the late 1870s, already recognised the terrorizing effects of attacks targeting networks of modern communication like railroads.⁶ Analyzing the development of terrorist strategies that focussed on sites of modern infrastructure both in Imperial Russia and in other countries at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, I will show that the construction of railroads not only enabled a significant increase of geographical mobility and economic development in the 19th and 20th centuries, thereby contributing to the integration of national and trans-national spaces. This new means of transportation must also be regarded as one of the prerequisites for the development and spread of modern terrorism.⁷ This article understands ‘modern terrorism’ to be a strategy of violent political warfare applied by non-state actors working conspiratorially to attack individuals, institutions, vital national resources or symbolic sites of a political and social order and using the dissemination of information about their deeds and goals in media of modern mass communication to advance their cause. The emergence of modern terrorism, therefore, is a phenomenon of the era of ‘high modernity,’ i.e. a product of social and political developments dating back to the second half of the 19th century.⁸

During the “Golden Age of Assassination” (RAPOPORT) modern terrorists tried to achieve their political goals by attacking individuals, especially high ranking political officials representing the opposed system. Attacks on symbolic sites in public space occupied by large numbers of randomly gathered people were subsequently included into the catalogue of terrorist strategies. Both in Russia and in other countries that had entered the railway age, railway tracks, stations and train carriages repeatedly became sites of terrorist activities, targeting either selected individuals or random groups of men and women. Both forms of modern railway terrorism significantly altered modes of perception of public space in general and of sites of modern infrastructure like trains and railway stations in

4 VAN DER VLEUTEN *Infrastructures and Societal Change; On the vulnerability of today’s “network societies”*; cf. special issue of the journal *History and Technology* 20 (2004) no. 3 and VAN DER VLEUTEN *Introduction*.

5 RAPOPORT *Fear and Trembling*, p. 3.

6 The literature on the history of railway terrorism is scarce: Cf. VON RÖLL *Enzyklopädie des Eisenbahnwesens*, pp. 183–184, s.v. „Anschläge (Attentate) auf Eisenbahnen“; PREUSS *Eisenbahn-Attentate*.

7 On the conceptual history of the terms “terror” and “terrorism”: WALTER *Terror*.

8 RAPOPORT *Four Waves*, pp. 3–9.

particular. The experience of modern terrorism at these public spaces in the era of technological progress was part of the ‘modern experience’ and led to the emergence of a new sense of personal and social insecurity at these “places of modernity”.⁹

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Russia was not among the avant-garde of railroad-building countries in Europe. Except for the short railway link between Saint Petersburg and the Tsarist residences of Pavlovsk and Tsarskoe Selo, inaugurated in 1837, the Tsarist Empire did not possess any railway line of national importance until 1851, when the railway link between Moscow and Petersburg was put into operation. Soon after the defeat in the Crimean War and later in the 1890s, however, Russia experienced two major booms of railway building, providing the world’s largest continental empire with the second largest national network of railroads.¹⁰ When Alexander II gave the green light in 1857 to the construction of a railway system in European Russia, he primarily regarded this modern means of transportation as a tool to strengthen the country’s economic and military might. Throughout the second half of the 19th century, the discourse on railway construction was dominated in Russia by voices stressing the importance of steam engines and railway tracks for the consolidation of Russia’s territorial integrity. As Mikhail Katkov, an admirer of German railway policy, wrote in the newspaper “Moskovskie vedomosti” in 1883, “after the bayonet, it is the railways that consummate national cohesion.”¹¹

Already in the early phase of railroad building, Russian authorities realised that the new means of transportation could also be used by opponents of the autocratic and imperial order. The intentional and militant disruption of railway lines first became a political issue during the Polish uprising of January 1863. Recognizing the strategic importance of railroads in the western borderlands, the organisers of the national revolt took advantage of the regime’s new dependence on this modern means of transportation. Right after the outbreak of the rebellion, insurgents burnt wooden railway bridges of the strategically important Saint Petersburg–Warsaw line and cut down poles of the railway telegraph. In this way they significantly constrained the processes of communication between Tsarist authorities in the Polish Kingdom and in the headquarters in the Russian capital. The Polish rebels were also supported by like-minded employees of the privately run railway company, as Polish railwaymen helped to obstruct the relocation of loyal Tsarist troops from Russia to the provinces in turmoil.¹²

9 On the term “places/sites of modernity” (Orte der Moderne): GEISTHÖVEL/KNOCH (eds.) *Orte der Moderne*. – The sense of insecurity of human beings making use of systems of modern mass transportation was likewise fuelled by the “modern experiences” of the train accident and criminal acts in trains. Cf. HARRINGTON *Railway Accident*; KILLEN *Railway Accidents*; BEAUMONT *Railway Mania*.

10 On the history of the railways in Tsarist Russia: SOLOV’EVA *Zheleznodorozhnyy transport Rossii*; KRASKOVSKIY/UZDIN (eds.) *Istoriya zheleznodorozhnogo transporta Rossii*; HAYWOOD *Russia Enters the Railway Age*.

11 *Moskovskie vedomosti* (4.8.1883), cit.: TVARDOVSKAYA *Ideologiya poreformennogo samoderezhaviya*, p. 79. English Translation: WORTMAN *Scenarios of Power*, p. 300.

12 *Obshchiy Ustav Rossiyskikh Zheleznykh Dorog*, p. 525.

Yet the attempts of Polish insurgents trying to interrupt rail and telegraph communication between Tsarist Russia and the Polish Kingdom in 1863 do not fully comply with the definition of modern terrorism given above. The events of January 1863 at the Saint Petersburg–Warsaw railroad are more reminiscent of new strategies of modern warfare in the railway age that aim at the destruction of the enemy’s strategic means of communication and that had been systematically applied for the first time between 1861 and 1865 during the American Civil War.¹³ Nevertheless the struggle between Polish rebels and Russian authorities over the control of the railroads in the western borderlands confronted the Tsarist regime for the first time with the new strategies of political opponents targeting the highly sensitive arteries of imperial communication and transportation.

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Two years after the suppression of the January uprising the Tsarist administration was alarmed by confidential reports from the western borderlands about a planned assault on the Emperor’s train on its way from Warsaw to Moscow. In May 1865 the “Third Section of his Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancery” reported on a meeting of Polish subjects in the house of a railway guard named Malik where the plan to damage the railway tracks before the journey of Alexander II to Moscow had been discussed.¹⁴ A few years later an anonymous letter alerted the Police of Elizavetgrad to a group of militant political activists planning to attack the Emperor’s train on its passage through the city. In late summer 1869, the nameless informant wrote,

“two young persons settled in [the] [...] city with the extremely evil goal of undermining the railway and causing an explosion during the passage of the Tsar’s train, but the Tsar changed his route, so the efforts of these men were in vain. Yesterday evening someone from Odessa came to see them, advising them to create an explosion during the passage of the mail train, which act he said might bring in a nice sum of money.”¹⁵

13 BLANK *Der Einfluss der Eisenbahn auf die militärische Beweglichkeit*; FÖRSTER *Wie modern war der amerikanische Bürgerkrieg?*, p. 177.

14 GARF, f. 109, op. 2a, ed. chr. 788, l. 1–3ob.

15 POMPER *Nechaev and Tsaricide*, p. 125. – Armed train robberies, as they were mentioned in the anonymous letter, became popular among militant political activists in Russia at the turn of the century. Probably the best known action of this kind was committed on September 26, 1908 by the “Revolutionary Faction of the Polish Socialist Party” under the leadership of Józef Piłsudski at the railway station of Bezdany (Lithuanian: Bezdony) 25 kilometers away from Wilna. On that day 19 activists “confiscated” more than 200,000 rubles transported in a post train from Wilna to Saint Petersburg. The train raid left one Russian soldier killed and five seriously injured. The stolen money was used to equip the militant and newly founded “Union of Active Struggle” (*Związek Walki Czynnej*). Cf. JĘDRZEJEWICZ Piłsudski, pp. 41–43; GARLICKI Józef Piłsudski, pp. 128–130; HEIN Piłsudski-Kult, p. 38; POBÓG-MALINOWSKI *Akcja bojowa pod Bezdany*; ZAVARZIN *Rabota taynoy politsii*, pp. 459–462. – After 1905, politically motivated robberies on trains, banks, and other public institutions became “a source of constant concern for the [Tsarist] authorities”. GEIFMAN *Thou Shalt Kill*, p. 21. On the increasing number of armed train raids in Russia (in particular in the Caucasus): *Zheleznodorozhnoe delo* 18 (1899), no. 25–26, p. 228; 21 (1902), no. 2–3, pp. 31–32; no. 7, p. 80; no. 30–31, p. 300; no. 38–39, p. 380; 22 (1903), no. 2–3, pp. 30–32; no. 15–16, p. 171; no. 19–20, p. 220; no. 13–14, p. 155; no. 24, p. 259; no. 25, p. 268; no. 39–41, p. 431; no. 45, p. 494; no. 46–47, p. 512 etc.

Shortly thereafter the police detained three male suspects – F. A. Borisov, M. P. Troitskiy and V. I. Kuntushev – who claimed to have only pursued a plan to smuggle illegal literature from Geneva to Russia. But none of the suspects could explain why a sledgehammer was found by the authorities in their possession.

Historians have speculated about the goals of this group of militant political activists and the so-called “Elizavetgrad affair” in 1869. According to PHILIP POMPER the suspects had been planning “something other than a plot to smuggle contraband literature.”¹⁶ Feofan Borisov had been a member of Nicholas A. Ishutin’s socialist circle “Organisation.” Within the secret cell of this group (called “Hell”), the method for assassinating the Tsar described in the anonymous letter had been discussed.¹⁷ The other detainee, Mikhail Troitskiy, subsequently joined the terrorist organisation “Narodnaya volya” (People’s Will). Later the police found out that Sergei Nechaev, the author of the “Catechism of a Revolutionary” and founder of the underground organisation “Narodnaya Rasprava” (“People’s Reprisal”), had also been in the area where the three suspects were arrested. Nechaev had been seeking work on the railroad and had introduced himself in Odessa as a Serbian machinist. We also know that he had contacted the group of Borisov, Troitskii and Kuntushev in September 1869. All these facts taken together suggest that Tsar Alexander II luckily escaped a sophisticated bomb attempt on his train in the autumn of 1869 that had been planned by a group of revolutionary socialists.

Railroads appeared as an ideal target for attempts on the life of such high-ranking officials as the Russian Emperor for three reasons: First, terrorists understood that the network of railway-lines was difficult for the authorities to control effectively and therefore offered an almost ideal site for attempts that needed long and complicated preparations. The fact that the Emperor’s train was also operated by night facilitated the work of the terrorists under the cover of darkness. Second, the activists counted on the operation of trains according to schedules, allowing them to foresee the time of arrival of a train and to plan the destructive explosion a few minutes in advance. Finally, the terrorists expected the train’s momentum to cause its derailment (if stopped at full speed) with the crash of the carriages, ‘hopefully’ injuring or killing the train’s passengers. Therefore, alongside dynamite, invented by Alfred Nobel in 1866, railroads seemed to be a new and useful item in the strategic arsenal of modern political terrorists.

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Considerations of this kind likely inspired members of the executive committee of “Narodnaya volya” when masterminding the abortive attempt of November 18–19 1879 on the life of Alexander II during his return from his summer residence in Livadia in the Crimea to Moscow. Three different spots of the railway lines were targeted.¹⁸ Indeed, when the Executive Committee imposed its “death sentence” on Tsar Alexander II in August 1879,

16 POMPER Sergey Nechaev, p. 98; POMPER Nechaev and Tsaricide.

17 VILENSKAYA Revolyutsionnoe podpol’ye v Rossii, p. 413. On the foundation of the organization “Hell”: VENTURI Roots of Revolution, pp. 336f.

18 On the plots of November 18/19, 1879: Delo 1-go marta 1881 g., pp. 57–86, 97–99, 273–285, 367–372; VENTURI Roots of Revolution, pp. 681–684; FIGNER Memoirs of a Revolutionist, p. 77. ULAM In the Name of the People, pp. 336ff.; VOLK Narodnaya volya, pp. 100–102.

the conspirators decided that the best opportunity to attack the Emperor was precisely the time when he was moving by rail from one location to another.¹⁹ Whether the activists of “*Narodnaya volya*” were acquainted with the idea to attack the Emperor’s train developed by Polish national rebels and socialist revolutionaries of the 1860s remains unknown. In fact, by 1879, the implementation of such an attempt was still unprecedented in international railway history.

Months before the expected journey of Alexander II from his summer residence in the Crimea to Saint Petersburg, the “*People’s Will*” had managed to install one of its members as a ‘railway-guard’ near Odessa and to rent houses located in proximity of railway-lines near the village Aleksandrovsk in Ekaterinoslav guberniya and near Moscow.²⁰ Without raising any suspicion, the terrorists dug tunnels from their shelters to the railway tracks, laid cables and installed galvanic batteries and explosive devices. Despite these sophisticated preparations, none of the bombs hit the designated target. At the first spot near Odessa, the terrorists left their hideout before the estimated train journey due to changes of the Emperor’s travel route. At Aleksandrovsk, a small town on the railway line between the Crimea and Khar’kov, Andrey Zhelyabov incorrectly joined the electrodes when the Emperor’s train passed above the hidden explosives on November 18. The mechanism produced no spark, the bomb did not detonate and the Emperor’s train passed by without incident.²¹ At the third location on the Moscow–Kursk Railroad, Stepan Shiri-aeu connected the electrodes correctly but only after the first of two illuminated trains had passed by.²² The assassins assumed that Alexander II would travel in the following train. In fact, the Emperor’s train and the train of his entourage had changed positions on their way to Moscow and the bomb consequently hit ‘only’ the servants’ train causing its derailment but without seriously injuring its passengers. At this moment the Tsar had already safely reached Moscow.

Although Alexander had once again survived an attempt on his life, the perpetrators were proud of their sophisticated action. Despite their failure to kill the tsar, they had managed to derail one of his trains – a prominent symbol of the government’s project to modernize Russia in the era of the Great Reforms. Vera Figner, one of the members of the “*People’s Will*” who was involved in the preparations of the plot near Odessa, recalled in her memoirs: “With the help of chemistry and electricity the revolutionaries blew up the Emperor’s train.” Although the attempt was a ‘mishap,’ it nevertheless “produced an immense impression in Russia, and found an echo throughout all Europe”.²³ In their under-

19 Apparently the decision to attack Alexander II’s train on its way from the Crimea to Saint Petersburg was taken on the clandestine meeting of “*Narodnaya volya*” in summer 1879 in Lipetsk. *Iz spravki*, pp. 90f. Cf. also: *Delo 1-go marta 1881 g.*, pp. 246, 285, 342, 367; VENTURI *Roots of Revolution*, p. 681.

20 Vera Figner, who had joined the terrorist cell at Odessa, used her contacts to the city’s political establishment to get a position as railroad guard for her fellow combatant Mikhail Frolenko alias Semen Aleksandrov. FIGNER *Memoirs*, p. 79; VENTURI *Roots of Revolution*, p. 682.

21 *Delo 1-go marta 1881 g.*, p. 99, p. 367; FIGNER *Memoirs*, p. 80; VENTURI *Roots of Revolution*, p. 682.

22 FIGNER *Memoirs*, p. 80.

23 FIGNER *Memoirs*, p. 80. In March 1881, Nikolay Kibal’chich, “*Narodnaya volya*’s” ‘technician’ and specialist for the construction of explosive devices, explained at court that due to the “intensification of the government’s struggle with the party and regarding the fact, that [“*Narod-*

ground newspaper the organization highlighted the *modern* character of the attempt of November 19: In contrast to this attempt on the Emperor's train, earlier assaults had been rather primitive. "A man with a revolver has always been confronting the ruler [...] face to face. [The assassin] didn't have a chance to escape and [his deed] was not likely to be successful." How different were the circumstances of the attempt on the Emperor's train in 1879: "The assault was thoroughly planned and prepared – a significant amount of money, workforce and technical knowledge were applied."²⁴ Full of self-confidence the organisation boasted:

"The increasing level of proficiency is for us a source of great satisfaction. [...] The 'self-educated persons' adopted the best weapon systems and applied the latest and newest scientific and technological achievements. In all phases of their fight, the revolutionaries unintentionally recall the highest cultural race, pitting their strength against the numerous, wild hordes of the government. Knowledge and ingenuity are without any doubt on the side of the 'half-educated'."²⁵

By contrast, 'official' (and censored) Russian newspapers were shocked by the new tactics of the invisible revolutionary foe. Two days after the attempt *Russkie vedomosti* commented:

"Regarding the fighting methods applied, [the subversive elements] [...] went a bold but horrible step further. The weapons they traditionally used for their actions seem not to be sufficient any more. Daggers and pistols, which need a fanatic hand for one moment, have been thrown away because they have not produced the expected results. They were replaced by slow actions which demand both persistent tension and malevolent activities. From the surface of the earth [the subversive elements] have disappeared to the underground and from there they pursue their destructive activities."²⁶

When the news of the detonation near Moscow reached the Tsarist authorities, none of the officials bearing responsibility for the security of the Emperor wanted to believe that somebody might have dared to commit a terrorist act against the train of Alexander II.²⁷ When Prince Dmitriy D. Obolenskiy, who had survived the plot of November 19 as one of the passengers in the train of the Emperor's servants, rushed to Moscow immediately after the accident and delivered his report to the Minister of the Imperial Court, Count Adlerberg, to the Chief of the "Third Section," Adjutant General Drentel'n and to the General-Governor of Moscow, Prince Dolgorukov, the high ranking officials refused to believe

naya volya"] would have to make use of devices it had not used before, I decided to collect the respective manuals on technical and chemical issues I needed for accomplishing this task." Delo 1-go marta 1881 g., p. 88.

24 Narodnaya volya. Sotsial'no-revolutsionnoe obozrenie, vol. 2, Nr. 3, 1.1.1880, p. 4.

25 Narodnaya volya. Sotsial'no-revolutsionnoe obozrenie, vol. 2, Nr. 3, 1.1.1880, p. 5. – In 1882 Sergey Stepanyak-Kravchinskiy, who had murdered the St Petersburg Chief of Police, N. V. Mezentsev; in 1878 and became one of "Narodnaya volya's" prominent 'spokesmen' in Western Europe after his escape from Russia, lauded the "Egyptian labours" of the Moscow mine ("raboty byli poistine egipetskie") and stated that engineers later praised the tunnel near Moscow as "extremely well made" (*sdelan ochen' khorosho*). STEPANYAK-KRAVCHINSKIY 'Podpol'naya Rossiya, p. 115, p. 117; English translation: Underground Russia, pp. 156–157.

26 Russkie vedomosti, no. 294, 20.11.1879, p. 1. State attorney Nikolay V. Murav'ev argued similarly in his bill of indictment on March 28 1881. Delo 1-go marta 1881 g., p. 285, p. 288.

27 Nabroski vospominaniy, pp. 272–273.

that the train accident might have been caused by a terrorist plot.²⁸ Count Adlerberg reportedly replied to Prince Obolenskiy's account: "You know, human nerves are often stressed after a [train] accident. Lie down and relax. After a good night's rest everything will look differently."²⁹ But shortly after this conversation the officials had to acknowledge that Obolenskiy had not made up the story of the bomb attempt on the Emperor's train. (At this time they still did not know that the attempt on the Emperor's train near Moscow was the third in a series of similar ambushes.) The events of November 18/19 confronted the Tsarist regime with the fact that the *kramola*, the invisible terrorist enemy, had opened up a new chapter of political warfare, targeting the Emperor when he was travelling around the country and making use of the 'blessings of modernity', like nitro-glycerine and the railroads. Over the subsequent years, the security measures applied during the Emperor's journeys on the Russian railroads were increasingly tightened. As we know, Alexander II only reluctantly accepted the new restrictions on his personal mobility – a fact which undoubtedly helped the assassins of the "People's Will" to kill the emperor while he rode in his carriage on March 1, 1881.³⁰

The fortunate rescue of Tsar Alexander in November 1879 was interpreted and propagated by court officials and conservative publicists as a sign of the grace of god who "again had saved the precious life of the Emperor" (*vnov' spas dragotsennuyu zhizn' Gosudarya*).³¹ The authorities deliberately made use of the fact that Alexander II, after having reached Moscow in the first train, was praying in front of a miracle-working icon of the Mother of God at the moment when the bomb hit the servant's train.³² This coincidence was presented to the public as a divine "miracle" (*chudo*) – proof of Alexander's protection by Providence.³³ When, one day later, the Emperor appeared in front of high-ranking officials in the Kremlin of Moscow, he stressed that "God once again saved Me and all people accompanying Myself."³⁴ After November 19, a painting was distributed in Saint Petersburg depicting the "miraculous" rescue of Alexander II: "You see a criminal hiding behind a wall in a lonesome house, watching attentively the first train approaching. Up in the sky there is an angel sheltering the carriage in the middle of train with his hands. The whole episode is shown in evening light. The bright signal lamps of the steam engine illuminate the angel in dazzling light."³⁵ Whereas the perpetrators of "Narodnaya volya" stressed in their 'reading' of the event of November 19 the 'modern' character of their tac-

28 Nabroski vospominaniy, pp. 272f.

29 Nabroski vospominaniy, pp. 272.

30 On the notion of security and its impact on the behavior of European heads of state in the 19th century: DIETZE/SCHENK *Traditionelle Herrscher*.

31 Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti, no. 321 (22.11.1879), p. 1; Rasskaz ochevidtza, p. 377. Cf. also: MESHCHERSKIY *Moi vospominaniya*, p. 438; *Denkwürdigkeiten des Botschafters*, p. 83.

32 Moskovskie vedomosti, no. 297 (21.11.1879), p. 2; Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti, no. 321 (22.11.1879), p. 1; VON PFEIL UND KLEIN-ELLGUTH *Das Ende Kaisers*, p. 54.

33 Moskovskie vedomosti, Nr. 297 (21.11.1879), p. 2; *Vestnik Evropy* 14 (1879), no. 12, p. 857. The Minister of War, Dmitriy Milyutin, described the rescue in his diary as a "miracle", too. *Dnevnik D. A. Milyutina*, vol. 3, p. 180.

34 Moskovskie vedomosti, no. 297 (21.11.1879), p. 2; Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti, no. 321 (22.11.1879), p. 1; *Vestnik Evropy* 14 (1879) no. 12, p. 858.

35 VON PFEIL UND KLEIN-ELLGUTH *Das Ende Kaisers*, p. 54.

tics, the authorities, on the contrary, highlighted the Tsar's protection by God and thereby referred to traditional and pre-modern interpretative patterns.

Rumours abounded that the Tsar had originally planned to travel in the second train that fell victim to the terrorist's assault. According to this story, the Tsar had arrived earlier than scheduled at the place of departure in Simferopol, thereby requiring the change in timetables of the imperial and the servants' trains.³⁶ This narration was well compatible with the story of Alexander's rescue by Providence: God made his pious servant change the prearranged order, he intervened in the laws of modern life and the rhythm of timetables and thereby offset the modernist visions and technology-driven plans of the terrorists. From the memoirs of Vera Figner and testimonies of other contemporaries, we know that the 'miraculous' rescue of the Emperor's life had rather profane reasons. In fact Alexander II had left Simferopol according to the timetable of the second train. Informants of "Narodnaya volya" sent the following message to Moscow by telegraph: "We accompanied grandmother this morning to the train. Please come and meet her. The price of wheat is 2 roubles, we charge 4 roubles [i.e. the Tsar is travelling in the fourth carriage of the second train.]"³⁷ But on their way to Moscow both trains changed position, a fact the terrorists could not anticipate.

After the assault of November 19 the authorities and the conservative press made a strong effort to show, that the extremists bearing responsibility for the plot must not be regarded as representatives of the "ordinary" Russian people. Whereas the activists of "Narodnaya volya" claimed to act in the name of the "People's Will," official propaganda stressed the deep divide between them and the pious and loyal Russian *narod*. On November 22, for example, "Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti" stated:

"Such criminal acts [like the plot of November 19] go beyond the possibilities of imagination for the incorrupt, virgin fantasies of ordinary people [...] [Such acts] would not have occurred if the idea of such a deed had come to the mind of the population. If someone told the inhabitants of Moscow that somebody might have dug a tunnel underneath a railway track in order to explode a bomb when the Emperor's train was passing by, every Russian would have gone to examine all houses and huts near the railway embankment and would have checked personally that nothing threatens the tranquillity of the monarch."³⁸

Right after the abortive attempt on the life of Alexander II, the Russian press reported in detail about the background of the terrorist plot. Conservative journalists highlighted that the extremists had cowardly lied in ambush and thereby violated the rules of an 'honest' trial of strength with the authorities. When the house where Shiryayev and Sofiya Perovskaya had waited for the arrival of the Emperor's train was searched by the security forces, they found out that every item connected to the destructive mechanism had been properly camouflaged.³⁹ Similarly, the methods applied seemingly evidenced the cold-blooded attitude of the radicals who had dug a 40-meter-long trench from the house to the

36 Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti, no. 322 (23.11.1879), p. 1; Rasskaz ochevidtstva; Nabroski vospominaniy, p. 270; Dnevnik D. A. Milyutina. 1878–1880, vol. 3, p. 179.

37 Nabroski vospominaniy, p. 271.

38 Sankt Peterburgskie vedomosti, no. 321 (22.11.1879), p. 1. "Narodnaya volya", in contrast, claimed that the news of the attempt on Alexander's life was absorbed by the public in Moscow with apathy and coldness. Cf. VENTURI *Roots of Revolution*, p. 683.

39 Moskovskie vedomosti, no. 300 (25.11.1879), p. 3; Podrobnosti pokusheniya 19-go noyabrya; Rasskaz ochevidtstva, p. 378.

railway track and installed a wire from their shelter to the mine underneath the embankment of the railroad.⁴⁰ Indeed, the journalist of “Novoe vremya” highlighted in his report that Shiryayev and Perovskaya had disguised their nocturnal activities by pretending to live a religious life during the daytime.⁴¹ By decorating their ‘home’ with holy icons they had pretended to be part of the pious neighbourhood where they took residence. Consequently, according to the officials’ reading, they violated the unwritten laws of the Russian community and alienated themselves from the ‘ordinary people.’ With some satisfaction the press thus reported that, once the police had finished their investigations at the site of the crime, an enraged mob of around 4,000 people gathered at the small house where the terrorists had hidden and destroyed all windows and furniture shouting “hurray” as if they wanted to take personal revenge on those traitors who had pursued their deed from this “hated house” (*nenavistnyy dom*).⁴²

* * *

Apart from being regarded by terrorists as a practically suitable and highly symbolic target for their militant activities, railroads served political activists working in conspiracy as an indispensable network for communication and transportation. The new means of transportation had opened up new possibilities for radicals to move quickly around the empire and to leave the country in order to escape detention. Railroads also facilitated the foundation of networks of clandestine terrorist cells in various cities and communications within these networks.⁴³ Memoirs of activists from terrorist organisations like “Narodnaya volya” or the “Combat Organization” (*Boevaya Organizatsiya*) of the Socialist Revolutionary Party give ample evidence of the importance of trains for the flow of information and the transport of weapons, propaganda, dynamite, money, instructions, etc.⁴⁴ The authorities realised that this modern mode of transportation was used by the regime’s opponents and, therefore, they steadily intensified the control of suspicious passengers and their baggage at railway stations.⁴⁵ When Grigoriy Gol’denberg, who was involved in the preparation of the abandoned plot against the Emperor’s train near Odessa, left the city in order to return some nitro-glycerine to Moscow, he was checked by security guards on November 14, 1879 at the railway station of Elizavetgrad because his heavy suitcase had raised the suspicions of a porter.⁴⁶ Though he tried to escape and defended himself with a revolver, Gol’denberg was arrested and later provided the police with detailed information about

40 On the preparations of the plot: VENTURI *Roots of Revolution*, p. 683; PRIBYLEVA-KORBA/FIGNER *Narodovolets Aleksandr Dmitrievich Michaylov*, p. 142.

41 *Podrobnosti pokusheniya 19-go noyabrya*, p. 2; *Moskovskie vedomosti*, no. 300 (25.11.1879).

42 *Moskovskie vedomosti*, no. 300 (25.11.1879), p. 3.

43 On the impact of the image of Russia’s network of railroads on Dostoevskiy’s novel “Demons”: LOUNSBERY *Dostoevskii’s Geography*.

44 Cf. for example: SAVINKOV *Vospominaniya terrorista*.

45 KANTOR *Ispoved’ Grigoriya Gol’denberga*, p. 121; PIPES *Degaev Affair*, p. 43; *Politicheskaya politsiya i politicheskii terrorizm v Rossii*, p. 84.

46 *Politicheskaya politsiya i politicheskii terrorizm v Rossii*, pp. 48–53, 84–93; CROFT *Nikolay Ivanovich Kibalchich*, p. 67; VENTURI *Roots of Revolution*, p. 681; FIGNER *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, p. 187; MESHCHERSKIY *Vospominaniya*, p. 440; RUTKOWSKI *Die revolutionäre Bewegung*, p. 395.

the underground activities of “Narodnaya volya” and the persons involved in the plot of November 18/19.⁴⁷

When the Chief of the “Third Section” was informed by officials in Elizavetgrad about the detention of a certain Stepan Efremov (alias Grigoriy Gol’denberg) and the confiscation of more than 16 kilograms of explosives found in his baggage, Adjutant General Drentel’n (who five days later pretended to be surprised by Obolenskiy’s report) left the following remark on the telegram: “Didn’t he prepare anything for the journey of the Emperor’s train?” (*Ne k proezdu li imperatorskogo poezda on gotovil?*)⁴⁸ The director of the “Third Section,” Shmidt, even sent urgent telegrams to Simferopol, Ekaterinoslav, Khar’kov, Orel, Tula, Kaluga, Moscow, Tver’ and Novgorod warning the authorities on the spot of “a possible attempt on the Emperor’s train on its way from Livadia to Petersburg or on the train of the Tsarevich on its way from Petersburg to Moscow”.⁴⁹ As we know, the alarming message did not mobilize the responsible agencies in a sufficient manner. Apparently the idea that terrorists might try to blow up the Emperor’s train on its journey through “Holy Russia” still sounded to the ears of many Russian officials as too fantastic to be treated seriously. It took only a few days until these men had to recognize that Shmidt’s terrible vision had become reality.⁵⁰

* * *

Railway stations could become a ‘mouse trap’ both for terrorists like Grigoriy Gol’denberg and for high-ranking Tsarist officials falling victim to new strategies of militant political warfare in the Tsarist Empire. Railroads were discovered by terrorists in Russia both as a target for attempts on the Emperor’s life and as an almost ideal site for assaults on the life of high ranking Tsarist officials. In 1904, during the “second wave of terrorism” in Russian history, members of the SR “Combat Organization” identified the square in front of the station of the Saint Petersburg-Warsaw railroad in the Russian capital as an appropriate site for their attempt on the life of the unpopular Minister of the Interior, Vyacheslav von Plehve. On 15 July 1904 von Plehve drove in his armoured carriage from his dacha on Aptekarskiy ostrov to the Baltic Station where he planned to embark on a train taking him to a meeting with Tsar Nicholas II at his summer palace in Peterhof. Plehve, who had already survived a number of attempts on his life, was killed when Egor Sazonov threw a bomb underneath the wheels of his carriage in front of the Warsaw railway station.⁵¹ The square in front of the building proved to be an almost ideal site for a terrorist

47 TROITSKIY *Narodnaya volya pered tsarskim sudom*, pp. 89–91.

48 KANTOR *Ispoved’ Grigoriya Gol’denberga*, p. 123.

49 KANTOR *Ispoved’ Grigoriya Gol’denberga*, p. 124.

50 Stepnyak-Kravchinskiy claimed that rumours about the attempt on the Emperor’s train had “quickly spread throughout all Russia” (“bukval’no po vsey Rossii”) already before November 19: “Every student, every barrister, every writer not in the pay of the police, knew that the ‘Imperial train would be blown up during the journey from the Crimea to St. Petersburg’. It was talked about ‘everywhere’, as the phrase runs. [...] Yet the police knew nothing.” STEPNYAK-KRAVCHINSKIY *Podpol’naya Rossiya*, pp. 182–183, English translation: *Underground Russia*, p. 276. – This story was clearly part of the revolutionary’s wishful thinking that the “narod” and the “intelligentsiya” unanimously supported the terrorists’ mission.

assault of this kind for several reasons. As Boris Savinkov, one of the conspirators involved in the plot, recalled in his memoirs,

“the plan was as follows: it was known that Plehve lived in the building of the Police Department (Fontanka 16) and that every week he rode to the Winter Palace, Tsarskoe Selo, and Peterhof – depending on the time of year and the Tsar’s residence – to report to the Tsar. Because it was obviously more difficult to kill Plehve at his home it was decided to put him under constant surveillance. The goal of this surveillance was to determine the exact day and hour, the route, and all of the apparent details of his trips to the Tsar. Based on this, we proposed to blow up his carriage with a bomb.”⁵²

After long and thorough observations of the minister’s itineraries in Saint Petersburg the perpetrators decided to make their attempt on a Thursday when von Plehve usually took the morning train to Tsarkoe Selo for his regular appointment with the Emperor.⁵³

In the morning of July 15 the Minister left his dacha, his coach was – as always – accompanied by agents of the *okhrannoe otделение*. Von Plehve planned to take the 10 o’clock train to Peterhof at the Baltic Station and the terrorists anticipated that he “never came late to a meeting with the Tsar.”⁵⁴ The fact that von Plehve had to reach his destination in time in order to reach his scheduled train helped the perpetrators plan their deed meticulously. They anticipated several locations and the exact time when the respective assassin could best hit his target. Savinkov’s memoirs illustrate impressively how and to what extent the terrorists had already anticipated a modern understanding of time⁵⁵: “the transfer of the bombs was calculated by minutes (*rasschitana po minutam*). The lateness of one conspirator hampered the whole process and could even frustrate the chance of a successful attempt.”⁵⁶ On July 8 when an attempt to kill von Plehve failed because one of the perpetrators came late, Savinkov “nervously went forwards and backwards on the Peterhof avenue, but Sazonov was late. I looked at my watch, we mustn’t lose a minute. At this moment Shveytser appeared punctually at the arranged time [...] I told him that we had no time to wait for Sazonov.”⁵⁷

One week later, between eight and nine o’clock in the morning of July 15, two members of the SR conspiracy arrived by train at the Nikolay Station and two at the Warsaw Station where they were met by Savinkov. Egor Sazonov and Ivan Kalyaev had been at a clandestine meeting in Vilna; David Boroshanskiy and Shimel’ Sikorskiy arrived from the city of Dvinsk. In Saint Petersburg each of the four terrorists was provided with a bomb and instructions when and where he was supposed to attack von Plehve on his way from his dacha to the Baltic Station. Egor Sazonov was expected to detonate the first bomb in front on the Warsaw Station, i.e. the neighbouring building of the Baltic Station (Fig. 1). Sazonov dis-

51 On von Plehve’s assassination: Niva. Illyustrirovanny zhurnal literatury i sovremennoy zhizni, 1904, no. 30, p. 600; SAVINKOV Vospominaniya terrorista, pp. 21–72; GEIFMAN Thou Shalt Kill, pp. 54–55, p. 279, n. 52; JUDGE Plehve, pp. 234–237. The event of July 15, 1904 inspired Andrey Belyy when writing his famous novel “Peterburg”. Cf. PERI/EVANS Visions of Terror.

52 SAVINKOV Vospominaniya terrorista, p. 23. English translation quoted from: PERI/EVANS Visions of Terror.

53 SAVINKOV Vospominaniya terrorista, p. 51.

54 SAVINKOV Vospominaniya terrorista, p. 59.

55 On the notion of temporality and the history of modern terrorism cf. the article of Claudia Verhoeven in this issue.

56 SAVINKOV Vospominaniya terrorista, p. 59.

57 SAVINKOV Vospominaniya terrorista, p. 59.



Fig. 1: The facade of the Warsaw railway station in St. Petersburg with broken windows after the assault on Vyacheslav von Plehve on July 15, 1904. The picture was taken by a professional photographer of the studio "K. Bulla" and published in the illustrated magazine "Niva" on July 24, 1904.

guised himself as a railway employee in order to blend in to the surroundings of the railway stations, and Kalyaev was dressed as a porter: "The uniform of a railwayman minimized the risk of being accidentally arrested."⁵⁸ Busy traffic and crowds of people coming from and rushing to their trains gave Sazonov perfect shelter to approach von Plehve and to toss the explosive device underneath his carriage. The explosion immediately killed the Minister. Sazonov survived the attempt seriously injured. The proximity of the railways allowed the other conspirators to escape quickly from the scene of the crime. After assuring himself that the plot had been 'successful,' Kalyaev threw his bomb into a pond and left the city with the 12 o'clock train to Kiev. Boroshanskiy likewise got rid of his explosive device and left Saint Petersburg by train. Savinkov, who read about von Plehve's death in a special edition of a daily newspaper, boarded a train in the evening in order to report in Warsaw to Evno Azef, the head of the SR "Combat Organization," about the group's achievement.⁵⁹

Railroads allowed the conspirators of the plot against von Plehve "to step on and off the staging ground for the murder and to retreat into the wings when necessary" and thereby to lessen the risk of capture.⁶⁰ The regularity of the minister's itinerary, which was synchronized with the timetables of trains commuting between the capital and the Tsarist

58 SAVINKOV *Vospominaniya terrorista*, p. 59. In a letter to his comrades written in custody Sazonov explained that "in this costume (*v étom kostyume*) nobody took notice of me in between the masses of railwaymen passing by". SAZONOV *Materyaly dlya biografii*, p. 9.

59 SAVINKOV *Vospominaniya terrorista*, p. 67, p. 73.

60 PERI/EVANS *Visions of Terror*.

residences in Peterhof and Tsarskoe Selo, helped the terrorists to plan in detail and ‘on schedule.’ The gathering of passengers and railway employees in front of the station enabled Sazonov, disguised as a railwayman, to “disappear in the masses” (*Sazonov izchez v tolpe*)⁶¹ and to throw his bomb from this ‘shelter’ at the minister’s coach. “Without this modern technology, as Peri and Evans convincingly argue, Azef’s plot against Plehve would not have been feasible.”⁶²

The attempt on Vyacheslav von Plehve in July 1904 also illustrates a significant shift in tactics of underground warfare from the first wave of Russian political terrorism in the 1870s to its second phase at the beginning of the 20th century. Whereas the activists of “*Narodnaya volya*” focussed their attention on the Tsar and identified his imperial train as a potential target of their assaults, attacks on low- and mid-level officials proliferated in the later period. In this context, moreover, crowded sites of public space like railway stations became ever more frequent arenas in which Socialist Revolutionaries and other extremists challenged the Tsarist regime. – Another terrorist operation that fits into this picture was Mariya Spiridonova’s failed attempt on the life of the provincial counsellor Gavriila Luzhenovskiy at the station of Borisoglebovsk in Tambov province on 16 January 1906.⁶³ This “most famous terrorist act committed by a woman in the era of the first revolution”⁶⁴ allows us to shed light on another dimension of how the railroads could be used by extremists as an instrument of terror.

As this article has emphasized, railroads were an important means of transportation and communication both for terrorists and for members of the Russian administration. Trains enabled officials to move quickly from one place to another and thereby to enhance control over the country’s vast territorial expanses.⁶⁵ As the assassination of von Plehve illustrates, trains and railroad stations also turned out to be dangerous places for representatives of the Tsarist elite. By definition “public spaces” (*publichnye mesta*), trains and railway stations were accessible to everybody, populated and used by members of all social classes and consequently difficult to control.⁶⁶ At the same time, trains and railroad platforms can also be characterized as *enclosed* public spaces, segregated by walls and fences from the exterior and thereby both offering shelter and enclosing people inside. This double nature of ‘openness’ and ‘closedness’ of railway-space played a pivotal role in the terrorist act of Mariya Spiridonova.

In her letter from the prison of Tambov, published in part by the liberal newspaper “*Rus*” on 12 February 1906, the 21-year-old member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party described in detail how she had prepared and ultimately committed the attempt on Luzhenkovskiy who was notorious for his suppression of peasant unrest during the revolution of 1905/06 in Tambov province.⁶⁷ Luzhenovskiy, security chief of Borisoglebsk, one

61 SAVINKOV *Vospominaniya terrorista*, p. 65.

62 PERI / EVANS *Visions of Terror*.

63 BONIECE *The Spiridonova Case*.

64 BONIECE *Spiridonova Case*, p. 605. – On Spiridonova and her biography cf. also the article of Sally Boniece in this issue.

65 SCHENK *Mastering Imperial Space?*

66 “Public space encompasses: streets, squares, railroads and other roads, stations, rivers, embarcaderos, canals, steamboats, trains, coaches, sites of public amusement, hotels, bars and other public institutions.” *Prakticheskoe rukovodstvo*, p. 49.

67 Pis'mo M. A. Spiridonovoy, in: BUDNITSKIY (ed.): *Istoriya terrorizma v Rossii*, p. 224–228.

of the most unruly districts in these years, was moving around the area via railroad in his efforts to pacify the population. Spiridonova stalked her victim for several days as he travelled around the Borisoglebsk district by train in order to identify the train in which he was travelling. Crowded railway stations offered a perfect surrounding for stakes-outs of this kind because the presence of an ordinary young woman did not attract the suspicion of the local security forces. One day she determined from the presence of Cossacks meeting a train that Luzhenkovskiy was among its passengers. Spiridonova bought a second-class ticket for the coach next to his. Dressed as a gymnasium student, she did not attract any suspicion.⁶⁸ Once she had successfully entered Luzhenkovskiy's train, Spiridonova seized the chance that her victim could not escape the enclosed space of his railway carriage. When the train approached the station of Borisoglebovsk, she saw Cossacks and police driving people off the platform and deduced that this was done to prepare for Luzhenkovskiy's arrival. She left her second-class carriage, entered the neighbouring coach and fired at her victim as he was stepping down from the train.⁶⁹ In her letter from prison Spiridonova proudly announced that „Luzhenkovskiy was riding on that railroad for the last time.“⁷⁰ The regional counsellor received a total of five wounds but survived the attempt seriously injured. Notwithstanding the fact that Luzhenkovskiy was met on his point of destination by Cossacks and police, it had turned out to be impossible to protect him sufficiently on his trips on the railroads. In his case the railroad turned out to be a cage-like site of modern public space, sheltering an assassin and imprisoning his victim at the same time.

Spiridonova's attempt on Luzhenovskiy is probably the best known but by far not the only terrorist assault at a high ranking official which took place inside the building of a Russian railway station. On 13 August 1906 the 27-year-old SR-activist Zinaida V. Konoplyannikova shot and killed General I. Min, the head of the renowned Semenovskiy regiment, on the platform of the railway station of Peterhof.⁷¹ Konoplyannikova rented a room in a house neighbouring General Min's dacha from where she thoroughly observed her victim's rhythm of life. In the evening of August 13, the General and his wife left their cottage for the railway station where they wanted to take the train to Saint Petersburg. Both were followed by Konoplyannikova who was equipped with a timetable of the Baltic Railways, a revolver and some books.⁷² When the General and his wife sat down on a bench on the platform, unprotected by any guard, the young terrorist approached them and shot several times in Min's back. The General was seriously injured and died soon afterwards. A large number of people were walking up and down the platform of the station when Konoplyannikova committed her deed. Like Spiridonova six months earlier at the station of Borisoglebsk, the young woman had not aroused any suspicion among the public. Again the railway station was used by the perpetrator to act from the shelter of the

68 On the relationship of modern terrorism and dress cf. article of Lynn Patyk in this issue.

69 BONIECE Spiridonova Case, p. 586.

70 Rus', no. 27 (12.2.1906), quoted from BONIECE Spiridonova Case, p. 586.

71 On Zinaida Konoplyannikova: KNIGHT Female terrorists, pp. 145–146; K delu Z. Konoplyannikovoy; Delo Zinaidy Konoplyannikovoy, pp. 258–275.

72 Delo Zinaidy Konoplyannikovoy, p. 265.

masses and to meet her victim at a place from which he could not escape. In August of that same year Konoplyannikova was sentenced to death and executed.⁷³

* * *

Newspapers in Western Europe reported at length about the spread of terrorism in the Tsarist Empire in general and the first occurrence of railway terrorism in this country in particular.⁷⁴ In light of the extensive publicity, it is likely that the targeting of arteries of communication and transportation in a modern society spread from Russia to Western Europe as early as the 1880s. In fact we find the first evidence of bomb attempts at railway facilities in Great Britain already in September 1880 when a deposit of explosives was found by a plate-layer underneath the track of the London and North Western Railway about sixteen miles from London. Despite the fact that the bomb was discovered before it could cause any harm, the railway company received instructions in November 1880 from the Home Office and the Royal Household regarding special arrangements to be employed for Queen Victoria's journey by the Royal Train at the end of the month.⁷⁵ Between 1883 and 1885 the population of London was shocked by a number of explosions in trains of the city's underground railway. The attacks were part of a campaign – known as the “Dynamite War” – by a group of Irish-American republicans called *Fenians* against the British government and high profile targets, particularly in London. “Clan na Gael,” a group of extreme Irish Republicans, deposited three bombs in or close to London Underground railway carriages full of passengers and left four more in the luggage offices of the London mainline railway terminal.⁷⁶ Though nobody was killed during these bombings the number of indiscriminately insured passengers was significant. The strategy of

73 Konoplyannikova was the first woman executed for a terrorist act since Perovskaya in 1881. I would like to thank Sally Boniece for bringing this fact to my attention.

74 On the coverage of the attempt of November 19, 1879 in the Western press cf. for example Illustrated London News, no. 2112, vol. LXXV (6.12.1879), p. 522; Illustrierte Zeitung (Leipzig), Nr. 1902 (13.12.1879), S. 494.

75 The London & North Western Railway Society Journal 4 (2003–06), no. 3, pp. 94–95, no. 4, p. 131. – On July 2, 1881 (N.S.) US President James Garfield was shot in a Washington railroad station by Charles Guiteau, an American lawyer who committed his crime without belonging to a terrorist organization. Garfield who was on his way to a summer's retreat on the New Jersey seashore was seriously injured and died from his wounds on September 19, 1881 (N.S.) Guiteau was sentenced to death and hanged in June 1882. – On the reaction in the Russian press on Garfield's assassination cf. for example Vsemirnaya illyustratsiya, no. 653 (1881), pp. 47–50; no. 656, pp. 113. Guiteau's deed which was not in the strict sense an act of modern political terrorism was harshly criticized by the Executive Committee of “Narodnaya volya.” In an open letter to the American people the Russian terrorists declared on 10 September 1881 that in the US, “a country where citizens are free to express their ideas [...] political assassination is a manifestation of the spirit of despotism that we attempted to destroy in Russia”. Quoted in: NAIMARK Terrorism, p. 189; STEPNIAK Terrorism in Russia, p. 340. In a similar manner Russian SR activists at the beginning of the 20th century criticized anarchist terrorism “in the free countries” (*v svobodnykh stranakh*) of Western Europe. SAVINKOV Vospominaniya terrorista, p. 83.

76 GRAY Irish Terrorism; QUINAULT Underground Attacks; JACKSON London's Metropolitan Railway, p. 123; SHORT The Dynamite War, pp. 160–163, 205, 210; CLUTTERBUCK The Progenitors of Terrorism, p. 307.

railway terrorism was also repeatedly applied in the early 20th century by revolutionary ‘extremists’ in the Indian province of Bengal.⁷⁷

To what extent these examples of railway terrorism outside Russia were related to the development of political violence in the Tsarist Empire needs further investigation. There is some evidence, however, that Russian terrorists were perceived by Western authorities as archetypes of internal political enemies and by militant political activists in the West as a source of inspiration. The British Home Secretary, Vernon Harcourt, who was in office during the “Dynamite War” of 1883–85 and who introduced an “Explosive Bill,” banning the unlicensed possession of combustible substances, denounced the perpetrators of the London Underground explosions as “enemies of the human race” and compared them to Russian nihilists.⁷⁸ Whether the Irish-American revolutionaries in the 1880s were copying the battle strategies of the “People’s Will” applied in November 1879 cannot be determined. In contrast, we do know that French anarchists collected press clippings reporting on the train-crash of the Russian Emperor Alexander III in October 1888 near Khar’kov which, incidentally, was not the result of a terrorist attempt.⁷⁹ One scholar recently stated that “techniques imported from Russia [...] did have some influence on Indian terrorists involved in the freedom movement [after 1907].”⁸⁰ But we do not have any evidence documenting that Indian revolutionaries of the early 20th century deliberately copied the Russian example when they identified railways as a target of their terrorist activities.

Apart from a number of similarities between the strategies applied by railway terrorists both inside and outside Russia at the end of the 19th and the beginning of 20th century, one must also admit a significant difference between the methods of “Narodnaya volya” and the SR “Combat Organisation” analysed above and those of Western terrorist movements at the end of the 19th century. Unlike Western anarchists and activists of militant movements of national liberation like the *Fenians*, both “Narodnaya volya” and the Socialist Revolutionaries – in contrast as well to Russian anarchists – rejected terrorism targeting randomly gathered people at public places like cafés or train stations.⁸¹ Though Russian terrorists from these organizations did tolerate the deaths of servants, guards and family members incidentally accompanying high ranking officials who had been “sentenced to death,” activists of both “Narodnaya volya” and the SR Party regarded railway terrorism as a tool of assassination of distinctive individuals and not as a method of mass

77 VON RÖLL *Enzyklopädie des Eisenbahnwesens*, p. 183–184. One of the first actions of this kind in Bengal was the attempt to blow up the train carrying the Lieutenant-Governor of the province, Sir Andrew Fraser, on December 6th 1907. HEEHS *Foreign Influences*, p. 550; HEEHS *The Bomb in Bengal*, p. 121; CAMPBELL KER *Political Trouble in India*.

78 QUINAULT *Underground Attacks*, p. 19; CLUTTERBUCK *Progenitors of Terrorism*, p. 303. – On the impact of Russian terrorism of the 1870s–1880s on the development of terrorism in other countries: RAPOPORT *Four Waves*, p. 8.

79 KONI *Krushenie tsarskogo poezda*, p. 492.

80 HEEHS *Foreign Influences*, p. 553.

81 On the program of “Narodnaya volya” cf. for example: MOROZOV *Terroristic Struggle*, p. 149; *The Basic Principles of the Program of the Union of Revolutionary Socialists* (1900), in: MOROZOV *Terroristic Struggle*, pp. 135–136, here p. 136; On the debates among SR activists about the legitimacy of killing innocents: SAVINKOV *Vospominaniya terrorista*, p. 83. On terrorist strategies of Russian anarchists at the beginning of the 20th century cf. the article of Anke Hilbrenner in this volume.

killing of innocent bystanders. From this perspective the examples of the terrorist acts of Bologoe, Madrid, London, and Mumbai at the beginning of the 21st century bear more resemblance to the militant activities of extreme Irish Republicans in London during the 1880s than to the deeds of their Russian predecessors.⁸²

Nevertheless, the history of railway terrorism, which has not come to an end today, has its historical roots in the 1860s and 1870s in Imperial Russia. WALTER LAQUEUR and other experts on the history of political violence repeatedly label Tsarist Russia the “cradle of modern terrorism.”⁸³ STEVEN MARKS recently portrayed “Narodnaya volya” as the “prototype of virtually all subsequent terrorist groups in the world.”⁸⁴ In fact the “People’s Will” was the first organization to use dynamite systematically as a destructive tool for their political warfare and to count on the resonance of their “Propaganda by Deed” in the national and international press.⁸⁵ As it is demonstrated here, “Narodnaya volya” was also the first violent group using railroads as a target for attempts on the life of prominent representatives of the political and social order they sought to destroy. They thereby laid the foundation for the tactics of modern railway terrorism.

* * *

In May 1883 the dynasty of the Romanovs lavishly celebrated the coronation of Tsar Alexander III in Moscow’s Kremlin. Among the high-ranking guests was the German ambassador to Saint Petersburg, General Hans Lothar von Schweinitz. In his memoirs the Prussian diplomat recalls the festivities of Alexander’s coronation as follows:

“The celebrations of Moscow recollect in their scope similar events in the era of the Roman and the Byzantine Empires. We can’t find anything similar in history and hopefully we won’t have to encounter rituals like this again in the future. Imperial celebrations, like those staged [in the Middle Ages] by Friedrich Barbarossa in the lowlands of the Rhine, were wonderful when the monarch was surrounded by [an assembly of] knights – but they are just monstrous in the era of railroads and nihilists.”⁸⁶

82 Lindsay Clutterbuck convincingly argues in his *Progenitors of Terrorism* that Irish “perpetrators were reckless or careless to the potential loss of innocent life or at worst, they considered it of little or no consequence to their objective. For all these reasons there is a strong case to declare that the form of terrorism that came to dominate the latter half of the twentieth century originated with the campaign of terrorism launched by the extreme Irish nationalists.” In their acceptance of the loss of innocent lives they “differ markedly from [...] the Russian revolutionaries”. CLUTTERBUCK *Progenitors of Terrorism*, p. 305–307.

83 LAQUEUR *Terrorism*, p. 11; CHALIAND/BLIN *The Invention of Modern Terror*, p. 111; VERHOEVEN *The Odd Man Karakozov*, pp. 4–5, 176. David Rapoport claims that “modern terror began in Russia in the 1880s and within a decade appeared in Western Europe, the Balkans, and Asia.” RAPOPORT *Four Waves*, p. 3. Clutterbuck in contrast argues that it was the movement of extreme Irish Republicans in the late 19th century, not the Russian revolutionary movement, “that so many of the concepts, strategy, tactics and techniques of terrorism as it manifested itself in the twentieth century originated.” CLUTTERBUCK *Progenitors of Terrorism*, p. 314.

84 MARKS *How Russia Shaped the Modern World*, p. 16; Cf. also: PIPES *Degaev Affair*, p. 10; GEIFMAN *Terrorism*.

85 On terrorism and modern mass communication: RAPOPORT *Four Waves*, p. 5.

86 *Denkwürdigkeiten des Botschafters*, p. 230.

The German ambassador was obviously struck by the preservation of medieval rituals at the Russian court which – from his point of view – contradicted the rapid process of modernisation the country was undergoing. Schweinitz did not, of course, use the term “modernity” to describe the new era he and his contemporaries were experiencing. Yet he did refer to two outstanding signifiers of the new epoch: the railroads and “nihilism” – a term used by him and others as a synonym for contemporary political terrorism. The railways and terrorism were conceptualized by the diplomat as two sides of the same coin, as signifiers of what we call today the ambivalence of ‘modernity.’

Abbreviation

GARF *Gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (State Archive of the Russian Federation)
 SR *Sotsialisty-revolutsionery* (Socialist Revolutionaries)

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Summary

Attacking the Empire's Achilles Heels: Railroads and Terrorism in Tsarist Russia

This article analyzes the development of terrorist strategies that focused on sites of modern infrastructure both in Imperial Russia and in other countries at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. It argues that the construction of railroads not only enabled a significant increase of geographical mobility and economic development in the 19th and 20th centuries, thereby contributing to the integration of national and trans-national spaces. This new means of transportation must also be regarded as one of the prerequisites for the development and spread of modern terrorism. The article reveals that the history of railway terrorism, which has not come to an end today, has its historical roots in the 1860s and 1870s in Imperial Russia.