In 1873, at the close of the spring semester, the Russian newspaper Government Herald published a directive concerning the women students in Zurich. Hypocritically bemoaning the passion of young people for revolutionary and communist ideas (it was no accident that a reference to our debate on Stenka Razin and the Paris Commune was inserted), the Russian government forbade women students to remain in Zurich any longer. If they proved obstinate, the government threatened to bar them from licensing examinations in Russia. This directive depressed us all. After our great efforts, it deprived us of the goal that had brought us to Zurich. We had wasted our energy—our knowledge would never be applied in practice. Our plans to work for the good of society had been destroyed. And, as if that were not enough, the government had even resorted to filthy slander: the directive declared, for all the world to hear, that under the guise of studying science, the women students were practicing free love and using their medical knowledge to destroy the fruits of that love. That accusation we found the most offensive of all. We were hurt and angry at being driven from Zurich, forced to scatter and to abandon our university studies, but that, at least, did not impugn our honor.

After we had considered the practical side of the matter and had read the text of the government decree more carefully, we found an easy way of circumventing the threat: the circular referred only to Zurich, saying nothing about other universities abroad. In the future, only those who remained in Zurich would lose their rights. In fact, those who wanted to continue studying abroad took the obvious solution, moving to other cities.

But we, the younger, more radical women, could not remain silent about the accusation of immorality; we wanted to protest that slander, and protest publicly, in the newspapers. Once again a meeting was called solely for women. This time we were not meeting to learn to speak logically, but to cry out: "Don't slander us!"

The meeting in the Russian House was crowded. Everyone came, even women who usually stayed away out of prudence, or because they were too busy. Disagreements and conflicts of interest were immediately apparent: we first- and second-year students energetically defended the idea of a protest, while the party of "complacent bourgeois liberals"—women who were closer to finishing their program—tried to prove how inadvisable, dangerous, and futile such a step would be. After passionate debates they finally declared that if we printed a protest, they would sign and publish a counterprotest. We were outraged, both by their moral stance and by the fact that our public statement would not be effective unless everyone signed it.

The meeting broke up late that night, after stormy, bitter debates. Not only would we have to endure public insult without a murmur, we had been beaten down by our own comrades.

The government's directive destroyed the student community in Zurich, thwarting our plans and scattering us all in different directions. But before we left Zurich, the Fritsche group drew up a modest program with a set of regulations to formalize our little association, which hitherto had rested solely on unspoken agreement. In a general way, this document formulated the socialist goals of the organization and the means to be used to bring them about. As I recall, these few paragraphs were an exact copy of the organizational principles of the Swiss section of the International: pallid and undescr ipt, they totally ignored Russia's political and economic conditions.

But could anyone really have expected us to understand our native land? We were all young, fresh from boarding school, when we went abroad and settled in a free country—an environment totally alien to Russia—as if it were our natural element. Everything we saw, heard, or learned about Western European conditions and attitudes we interpreted as being totally applicable to Russian life—to the Russian village, to the Russian factory, to the Volga peasant and the
worker of Ivanov-Voznesensk. The initial program, naïve and unsophisticated, which the Fritsche group drew up and adopted in Zurich, inevitably reflected our total estrangement from everything native, everything Russian.

Once we had a charter, the next step was necessarily practical activity. The most pressing question thus became the form of activity the Fritsche group should adopt when they returned to Russia.

Our circle in Zurich had arrived at the conviction that it was necessary to assume a position identical to that of the people in order to earn their trust and conduct propaganda among them successfully. You had to "take to plain living"—to engage in physical labor to drink, eat, and dress as the people did, renouncing all the habits and needs of the cultured classes. This was the only way to become close to the people and get a response to propaganda; furthermore, only manual labor was pure and holy, only by surrendering yourself to it completely could you avoid being an exploiter. Consequently, from both the ideological and practical perspectives, you had to leave the university, which led to a doctor's diploma, renounce your privileged position, and go to work in a factory or mill in Russia.

Most of the Fritsche resolved to do precisely that. Student concerns became extraneous to them, and by 1874—within a year after they left Zurich—they had set off for Russia. I was a renegade on this issue of manual labor. But before I could make up my mind and tell my comrades that I wouldn't join them in Russia, I already lived in Russia, that I would stay at the university; I went through a period of emotional turmoil.

Was it really necessary, I asked myself, to become a factory worker, no matter what? Did I really have to renounce the position, the tastes and habits of a member of the intelligentsia? But on the other hand, could I in all honesty refuse to simplify my life completely, to don peasant dress and felt boots like a peasant, to cover my head with a kerchief and pick through foul-smelling rags in a paper factory? Would it be honest of me to hold a position as a doctor, even if I were also conducting socialist propaganda? Finally, would it be honest of me to continue studying medicine while the women around me—also of the educated class—were abandoning their scientific studies and descending to the depths of our society for the sake of a great ideal?

I could see clearly all the beauty of my friends' consistency and sincerity, and I knew they would be doing the very best sort of work. It tormented me that I couldn't bring myself to do it, too, that I didn't want to become a worker. For so many years I had longed to go to the university; I had been studying so long, and the idea of being a doctor had become so much a part of me. Now, even after my plans for engaging in cultural activity in the zemstvo had been replaced by the goals of a socialist propagandist, I still wanted the trappings of a doctor's life. A worker's life was horrible, inconceivable to me! The very idea made my blood run cold. But I lacked the courage to declare outright, "I don't want to." I was ashamed to admit it, and so I said, "I can't."

I found reasons, of course: "I'm not strong enough," I said. "Why, I asked, "must everyone enter the factories? Socialists can do other things, too, even in less 'democratic' positions. A zemstvo doctor might seem like just another master, remote from the people—but what about a paramedic [feldsher]! I'm studying and I'll continue to study in order to acquire knowledge, not a diploma. Once I know enough, I won't have to become a doctor, I can serve as a paramedic in a zemstvo—it will still be necessary for me to bring as much knowledge as possible to the village."

The Fritsche circle was tolerant of the individual opinions of its members. It is true that many of them held the most extreme views and—as if showing off for each other—we all chose as our heroes the most irrevocable leaders of the great French Revolution. Some were enthralled by Robespierre, while others would settle for no less than Marat, the "friend of the people" who demanded millions of heads. Nevertheless, the original decree neither compelled us to pursue a particular kind of activity nor told us when to begin, and after
the rest of the Frische group resolved to return to Russia and begin practical work. Aptekman and I, remaining behind to complete our studies, never heard a word of reproach or saw any sign of disapproval. However, as soon as the others left Switzerland, we two were completely cut off. We heard nothing about their talks and subsequent merger with a men's circle from the Caucasus, nothing about their contact with the editors of the Worker.

I found out about all this only after I had left for Russia myself.

The inclusion of the masculine element proved very beneficial to the Frische: the organization's plans for action became more practical. The men were also partly responsible for the fact that the regulations of the combined organization, after being reworked in Russia, became the first ones to be based on the principles of discipline and solidarity.

The revised plan of the 'Moscow Organization,' as it came to be called, was this: two or three members would take turns staying in the city, to act as an administrative center for the general affairs of the organization. Everyone else was to go off to the various industrial centers—Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, Tula, Ivanovo-Voznesensk, and Orekhovo-Zuevo—where, along with some workers from Moscow who had been propagated by earlier activists, they would enter factories and mills.

There were no plans to go to the villages: it was difficult for women to get positions as workers there. Besides, the circle's primary goal was clearly defined as conducting propaganda among industrial workers. When they abandoned the factories twice or three times a year for field work or to return home to their families in the villages for the holidays, they would in turn influence the people— "the peasantry—

through oral and written propaganda. After propaganda had prepared the soil, there were to be local uprisings, which would then merge into a nationwide insurrection.

However, nothing went as planned. Everything fell apart in the very first stage.

In Moscow, Prince Tisitsianov and Vera Liubatovitch served as the administration, while Bardina, Kaminskaia, and, for a while, my sister Lydia, took up factory work. Olga Liubatovitch went to Tula and Alexandra Khorzhevskia to Odessa; Anna Toporkova, Varvara Alexandrova, my sister Lydia, and two male workers were sent to Ivanovo-Voznesensk. But all these beginnings were quickly aborted. Lydia Figner and later Bardina and Kaminskaia had to slip away from the factories. It proved impossible for elegant young "ladies" dressed up as peasant girls not to attract attention in the miserable surroundings of a factory. Everything they did set them apart: their small, tender hands were unaccustomed to working, and ten or twelve hours of labor in an unsanitary workshop—Kaminskaia, for example, had to work with dirty rags in a paper factory—exhausted them beyond endurance. They couldn't even conduct propaganda, because the consciousness of their female co-workers was too low, and so, disguised in their worker's clothing, defying custom as well as the outright prohibition of the factory administration, they went to the barracks of the male workers to try to get them interested in books. They offered the material to everyone, but since very few workers were literate, they eventually resorted to reading aloud. The sight of a solitary young woman, reading in the filthy, ill-lit, stinking barracks to a circle of those workers who hadn't yet tumbled into bed, was extraordinary to behold.

Since the women would permit no "fooling around," the workers couldn't figure out why they were there.

Factory routine frequently got them into trouble. For instance, when they left the factory on holidays, the "ladies" had to carry their revolutionary publications along in their knapsacks. They couldn't leave them in trunks in the barracks, where they might be found during a search or even by some accident; but on the other hand, workers' knapsacks had to be

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14 The Worker was published by a group of Bakunists in Geneva; it was the first attempt to found a working-class organ in the Russian language. It lasted a year, ceasing publication when the Pan-Russian Social Revolutionary Organization collapsed in Russia.
15 Or the Pan-Russian Social Revolutionary Organization, as it called itself.
16 Except for the men who were already workers before they were recruited, only the women in the organization actually undertook factory work.
17 Factory workers in Russia were usually seasonal.
were concocted on the desk, in which stamps, ink, and an extensive correspondence were stored. Many people visited this place for one reason or another, the organization’s sizable funds were kept there to be distributed according to need. The Subbotina sisters, who were members, had generously contributed this money, placing the whole of their large fortune at the disposal of the organization. When the police raided the apartment, Prince Tatischev engaged in armed resistance—the first such action in the history of the revolutionary movement of the seventies.

At almost exactly the same time, Khorfizhenskay and Zhidnovsky were arrested in the south, at a railway station where they were waiting to pick up a consignment of literature. They were caught with a complete text of the organization’s program and statutes, and later it was all produced as evidence against them in court.

Of course, the members of the organization had established ties with various people, and the police zealously pursued all leads. Occasionally, they stumbled on the trail of people who actually had been involved in the Moscow Organization’s work; in other instances, however, they contradicted to tie in people who were not implicated at all. That’s how the “Trial of the Fifty” came about. It included eleven of the women who had studied in Zurich; a twelfth, Kaminskaia, was not brought to trial, ostensibly because she became mentally disturbed during her preliminary detention. There was a rumor that the quiet melancholia from which she suffered would not have saved her from trial if her father hadn’t given the police 5,000 rubles. After her comrades were sentenced, Kaminskaia’s thwarted desire to share their fate led her to poison herself by swallowing matches.

By the fall of 1875 I was in my seventh semester of medical school in Bern. Since there were only nine semesters

\footnote{When he was arrested in Tatischev’s apartment, Kusinov was caught with 10,000 rubles, which he had been given for one assignment—an indication of how much money the organization possessed.—Pigher.}
in the program, I was to start work on my dissertation within a year. But my life had reached a critical juncture.

Mark Natanson came to Europe that November, seeking to bring back to Russia the revolutionaries who had migrated west. He spent time in London and Paris, and when he got to Switzerland, he sought out Apteckman and me to tell us about the wretched state of the socialist cause in Russia. The Moscow Organization, including the original Frizche group, had been destroyed, he told us; all of its members had been arrested and no one was left to continue their work. Nevertheless, wherever they had been active, they had established connections, and these had to be maintained. And so, in the name of the revolutionary cause and for the sake of comradely solidarity, he was inviting us to leave the university and come to the aid of our perishing comrades. These comrades, behind prison walls, were calling out to us, he said, to become their reinforcements in the empty ranks of propagandists and agitators.

Natanson’s proposal took me totally by surprise. I had received no letters from my friends since they had left; it had never even occurred to me that I might in general be needed in Russia, or that they in particular might need me. I had been moving toward my goal calmly and confidently, intending to begin my practical activity only after I’d finished my studies. Natanson’s invitation came as a real catastrophe.

Once again I was forced to ask: What should I do with my life?

For the third time since I’d left the provinces and forsakes the peaceful country fields, I was plunged into painful introspection, faced with the sort of choices that decide the direction of one’s life.

I had first been tormented by hesitation and doubt when I was passing from the secure camp of liberalism and complacent philanthropy to the uneasy sphere of revolution and

socialism. I suffered torments for a second time when my sister and our friends were leaving for Russia. And now, after all that had finally passed and I had regained sufficient confidence to devote myself to what I was doing, now, for a third time, I was confronted with those disturbing moral questions, questions that demanded immediate answers. My soul was divided, my feelings were at war.

The Frizche group had themselves demonstrated all the difficulties facing a woman of the intelligentsia who tried to become a laborer. Their experience showed how brief such unaccustomed activity would be—activity that put you in an illegal position from the very start, since you had to use false identity papers. The results of their noble attempt to become ordinary laborers did not encourage others to choose that method of approaching the people; henceforth, moderately “democratic” positions, such as I had chosen—that of a para-medic—were seen as providing opportunities for enduring work.

But if I was going to serve as a paramedic in a zemstvo, why did I need a doctor’s diploma? If I had no intention of becoming a doctor, why did I have to finish school? All I needed was enough knowledge to carry out my duties and help the people—and I had that much already: surely three and one-half years of study were sufficient for that. If I wasn’t seeking the piece of paper that would publicly attest to my knowledge, why shouldn’t I leave the university at once and rush to the aid of the revolution and my friends who were serving it?

And... suddenly I realized that the diploma, that piece of paper of which I’d been so scornful, was in fact precious to me: it enticed me and bound me. It would signify official recognition of my knowledge, evidence that I’d finished what I’d started, achieved the single, absolutely fixed goal I had pursued for so many years with such energy, constancy, and self-discipline. How could I retreat now, how could I abandon the program without finishing? I was ashamed to abandon it—ashamed in my own eyes and in relation to others. What
would be the reaction of all the people who knew about my efforts, which had no precedent in our provincial backwoods? What about the friends and relatives who had sympathized with me, encouraged me, and sent me off to Zurich with their best wishes for my success in a pursuit that was still so new to women?

Yet, on the other hand, there was the revolutionary cause, which, I was told, also needed my energies! Locked in cells, bound hand and foot, my friends were calling out to me for help! Now that they had communicated their needs to me, could I ignore them and give preference to my pride, my vanity, and—alas!—my ambition? I had never admired these qualities in others and had tried never to let them rule me either, but now I realized how strong my vanity and ambition really were! Would I actually succumb to them? My self-esteem, my faith in myself demanded that I answer "No!" Nevertheless, it was painful; I regretted having to leave the university, regretted that I, Vera Figner, would never have the right to sign my name "Doctor of Medicine and Surgery."

I asked myself, did they really need me in Russia—for the revolutionary cause in general, and to maintain the contacts of the Moscow Organization in particular? This was the first time I'd met Natanson; I had never heard anything about him before, and he brought no letters of introduction—all he told me was that Varvara Shatilova, a relative of the Subbotina sisters, was the only one left in Moscow after the arrest of my friends, and despite her best efforts, she couldn't cope with all the problems facing her. The people she had managed to enlist to do some work had also been quickly arrested, and there was no one to replace them. Normally, I knew that either Aptekman or I ought to check things out personally to make sure that we were really needed in Moscow. Only one of us would have to leave Bern to do this, and if temperament counted for anything, Aptekman ought to be the one: she was calm and judicious, and would make a thorough examination of the existing conditions. If she found that the two of us weren't really needed, she would return and keep me from going. On the other hand,

if I left the university to go to Russia, it could safely be predicted that I would never return.

But Aptekman remained silent; I could see that she didn't want to go.

Why couldn't I say to her: "There's no need for both of us to leave right now. You're cautious and level-headed—you go first and then write me to come, if it's necessary. If I go first myself, I'll never come back"?

But I couldn't say it. I was incapable of asking another person to do something I wouldn't do myself.

And so, with these feelings, I approached Aptekman and said: "You stay! I'll go alone and write whether it's worthwhile for you to come, too." That's how I made the decision that determined the course of my life.

The spiritual crisis I underwent in order to make this decision was my last. My personality had been formed and tempered during these years of struggle with myself. After the decision was made, my mind was finally at rest, and I vacillated no longer; I set to work without a backward glance. Social concerns had gained ascendance over personal ones for good. It was the victory of a principle that had been imprinted long ago on my thirteen-year-old mind, when I read in the Bible "Leave thy father and thy mother and follow me..."

I left the university without earning my diploma; I abandoned Switzerland, where I had found a new world of generous, all-embracing ideas, and, still feeling the effects of my recent emotional turmoil, set off for Russia. I was twenty-three years old.

On my way to my homeland, I stopped off at Geneva. There was a little café there, the Café Gressot, that was famous among the Russian colony, and whenever I was in Geneva, I visited this refuge for émigrés. During this final trip, I met three strangers among the usual guests there: Ivan Debagor-Mokrievich, Gabal, and a young man whom everyone called the "Landlord." We were introduced, and they must have taken a fancy to me, because they invited me over to their place. We made our way to a squad little garret. The place
was a mess. They were evidently very poor: two cots served as beds for Gabel and Mokrievich, while the Landlord, who was younger, lined up three or four chairs to sleep on, using a few newspapers for his mattress and blanket; some sort of bundle—probably illegal literature—served as his pillow.

After we'd managed to make ourselves comfortable in this garret, my new friends began to propagate me. All they knew about me was that I was a student, and so, to pull their leg, I pretended to be a total ignoramus. They talked to me about Russia and about revolutionary activity there—about how the people needed us to install revolutionary passion, not theoretical propaganda; about how the people were on the verge of a general explosion, and how the intelligentsia had to be the spark that set it off. Ivan Mokrievich did most of the talking, and he spoke beautifully—with energy and enthusiasm. With his words he painted for me an inspiring scene on the immense canvas of Russia—a scene like the ones that had excited me in books I had read describing revolutions.

There would be a national uprising; the din of the tocsin would fill the villages and resound through the fields. Led by a mighty chieftain—a modern-day Emilio Pugaevic or Stanke Razin—a horde of peasants armed with scythes would abandon their homes, families, and fields and go into battle, to conquer or to die. I could see banners streaming, hear the people's army tramping. The people still trusted the tsar and regarded him as their benefactor, but this faith would become a powerful weapon in the hands of a popular revolutionary leader from the ranks of the intelligentsia; he would proclaim that he belonged to the tsar's family. And beside this glorious leader there would stand a beautiful woman, her hair flowing loose, a banner in her hand. . . . The people would capture arsenals and arm themselves, and the guns of revolution would begin to roar. The troops—who were the sons of peasants—would join the insurgents; the regular army would be smashed, the government overthrown. The landlords' country estates would be in flames, while the peasants took possession of the land. Smoking ruins would cover the earth that for so many centuries had been irrigated with the blood and sweat of the people, and a new, just social order would be born from the ruins, as the phoenix rises from the ashes.

All night long I listened to my hosts develop this theme. The beauty of their words, their revolutionary ardor and enthusiasm appealed to me. They all tried to persuade me to leave the university and, along with them, devote myself to the revolutionary cause in Russia. They mustered all possible arguments against my university education and any further stay abroad, fervently summoning me to return home with them. I listened.

Gabel began to expound the basic principles for a revolutionary organization: its members should be united by the strongest bonds of friendship and devotion, should share all joys and sorrows—particularly sorrows! In their attempt to demonstrate the indissoluble bonds of comradeship uniting the three of them, they told me about a recent incident.

In December, Geneva celebrates a three-day holiday called Escalade. During this time, any man can go up and kiss any woman he meets on the street. The young Russian émigrés were overjoyed at this opportunity and started kissing all the attractive women who crossed their path. The cause of the incident was this: Ivan Mokrievich rushed to kiss a beautiful Englishwoman who was walking beside a healthy young Englishman. Seeing his companion in the embrace of a stranger, the Englishman began to beat Mokrievich over the head with his walking stick. Mokrievich's companions saw their comrade in distress and rushed to demonstrate their solidarity by attacking the Englishman. The police intervened and took Mokrievich off to the police station. But hadn't Gabel and the Landlord vowed to share with their comrade sorrow as well as joy—and for as long as they lived? This was a golden opportunity to demonstrate their fidelity to their oath. Gabel and the Landlord demanded that they, too, be brought to the station and put in the lockup—which was, in fact, done. The
misfortunes and torments of prison confinement were not, however, prolonged: all three were released the following morning.

Gabel related this episode in utter seriousness. I was appropriately attentive.

The conversation continued through the night; my hosts kept talking, trying to win me over, while I maintained the role of a politically naive student. There was no time for sleep—it was already growing light. At that point, I took out my gold watch to check the time. The Landlord extended his hand, and, playing with the gold chain, said, “Give me your watch!”—probably to measure my attachment to material objects.

Both the watch and its chain were family heirlooms, the only ones I had taken with me when I left for Zurich. At the time, I had thought, I’ll sell them only when I’m in dire need. Now, as the Landlord said “Give it to me,” I was struck again by the poverty surrounding us; these émigrés hadn’t even a centime. I took off my watch at once, and placed it in the Landlord’s hand. The following day they sold it for next to nothing—a pitiful forty francs.

Now it was completely light, and the cafés were open. The four of us decided to go to the Gessot to have our morning coffee. But before we left the room I revealed my innocent hoax, laughing a little to myself because my new acquaintances had taken me for a novice, and had spent an entire night trying to convert me to their faith. With some ardoir, I announced that I belonged to an organization whose members had been arrested in Moscow, and that I had already left the university, packed my things, and would be leaving for Russia in a few days.

I then asked when they themselves planned to return to Russia.

“We can’t leave,” Mokievich said. “We’d really like to, but we have no money.” He told me that he had originally left Russia for Herzegovina with his comrades to take part in the rebellion against the Turks. As it turned out, they made virtually no contribution to the rebellion: they were only a burden to the mountain-dwelling Herzegovinians in their difficult military maneuvers. It reached such a point that the mountainers had to carry the Landlord around on their backs, since the Russian volunteers weren’t used to local conditions.

“And now,” Mokievich continued, “we’re stuck here, and we’ve almost lost hope. Since we’ve had no money, we’ve been living on Gressot’s credit and are terribly indebted to him; and then there’s the money we’d need for the three of us to get back to Russia.”

“How much would you need to pay off your debts and get to Russia?” I inquired.

“Not less than six hundred rubles,” Mokievich replied. “Well then, I’ll get it!” I exclaimed. “And I’ll send it as soon as I get to Russia.” I found it unbearable to think that such outstanding revolutionaries, eloquent and bold, were vegetating idly abroad on account of a mere six hundred rubles. They were needed in Russia; there they would move mountains to carry out their plans.

I never ceased worrying about getting them home. When I arrived in Petersburg, I immediately began seeking the required money. I appealed to one wealthy acquaintance, enthusiastically relaying the story of my meeting with the three socialists who were uselessly stuck in Geneva, and the story made no less of an impression on her than the meeting itself had on me. I received the necessary sum at once.

My mother was just about to go abroad with two of my sisters—Evgenia, who had just finished school, and Olga, who was still a little girl. I gave the money for Mokievich to my mother, but I was afraid that she’d be searched at the border, and I didn’t want to make her anxious, so I entrusted Olga with the letter to Mokievich, after impressing on her the tremendous importance of the little note I had rolled up like a scroll. Gripping it tightly in her hands, the eleven-year-old girl jumped for joy at having been entrusted with such important business. Then, hitching up her shoulders in a way that made me laugh, she yelled: “If they try to question me, I’ll say: ‘Leave me alone! I’m a minor!’”
The note, meanwhile, contained only a few affectionate words.

The meeting with the three émigrés had really affected me: the night I spent in their company has stayed with me, partly because our encounter was so brief. Everything I had read about revolution in action—all the beauty and the pathos—I heard that night in animated and impassioned speeches. I found Mokritchev particularly interesting: he seemed remarkable, an implacable rebel. He had dressed Russian reality, that slovenly Cinderella, in the gold-brocaded finery of Cinderella the princess. . . . I was in ecstasy: his words took possession of my mind. Actually, at the time I made no distinctions between word and deed: I believed that whoever spoke with such energy and force would also have the strength to translate their words into action. I believed in the power of words and the might of the human will.

I was no prophet, however; I couldn’t foresee that although Gabel would wind up in Siberia, in administrative exile, Mokritchev would start giving music lessons in Kiev, and eventually become a peaceful constitutionalist. And the Landlord, that proprietor of imaginary Spanish courts and castles, became an actual landlord after his lengthy stay abroad.

When Figner arrived in Russia, she found that there was nothing she could do to help her comrades of the Moscow Organization. She got her license as a paramedic (concealing her studies in Zurich, which were politically suspect), obtained a divorce from her husband, and set out to establish herself among the peasantry. Henceforward, her life was totally bound up with the revolutionary movement.

In the following pages, drawn from Figner’s statement at her trial in 1884, she describes the stages in her political development.

When I returned to Russia and found that the movement had already suffered defeat, I underwent an initial crisis, but before long I was able to find a good number of people whose ideas were similar to my own, and whom I liked and trusted; together, we worked to develop what came to be known as the populist program. I then left for the countryside.

As the court knows, the goal defined by the populist program was the transfer of all lands to the peasant collective—a goal that was, of course, against the law. However, the revolutionaries who went to live among the people were to begin by playing a different kind of role: we were to engage in what is known in all other countries as “cultural activity.” I, for example, became a paramedic worker in a zemstvo. Thus, although I went to the countryside as a committed revolutionary, my behavior would never have been subject to persecution anywhere but in Russia—indeed, elsewhere I would have been considered a rather useful member of society.

In short order, I found that a whole league had formed against me. It was headed by the marshal of the gentry and the district police officer, and included, among others, the village policeman and the clerk. They spread all sorts of false rumors: that I had no identity card, that my diploma was false, and so forth. When peasants were unwilling to make an unprofitable deal with the landlord, it was said that Figner was to blame; when the district assembly lowered the clerk’s salary, it was alleged that the paramedic was responsible. Inquiries about me were made in public and in private; the district police officer came by to see me; some peasants were arrested and my name was raised when they were questioned; there were two denunciations to the governor, and only the fact that the chairman of the zemstvo administration interceded on my behalf spared me further trouble. I lived in an atmosphere of suspicion. People began to be afraid of me: peasants made detours through back yards when they visited my house. Finally, I was forced to ask myself: What can I do under these circumstances?

I’ll tell you frankly: when I settled in the countryside, I was
old enough to avoid making crude mistakes with people simply out of tactlessness, old enough to be more tolerant of the views of others. My goal was to explore the terrain, to learn what the peasant himself was thinking and what it was he wanted. The authorities had no evidence against me: they were just incapable of imagining that a person with some education would settle in the countryside unless she had the most dreadful aims. What I was actually being persecuted for was my spirit, my attitudes.

Thus, even physical proximity to the people had become an impossibility for me; not only was I unable to accomplish anything, I couldn't even have the most ordinary kind of contact with them. I began to wonder: Perhaps I'm making mistakes that could be avoided if I move to another place and try again? But as I reflected upon my own experience and gathered information about that of other people, I became completely convinced that the problem wasn't my personality, or the conditions of my particular village—the problem was the absence of political freedom in Russia. Hitherto, I had been concerned strictly for the peasantry and its economic oppression; but now, for the first time, I was experiencing for myself the drawbacks of Russia's form of government.

I had two options at this time: I could either take a step backward—go abroad and become a doctor, but a doctor for rich people, and not for peasants; or—and this was my preference—I could use my strength and energy to break through the obstacle that had dashed my hopes. Somewhat earlier, Land and Liberty had invited me to join up and work among the intelligentsia. I hadn't accepted at that time, because I'd already decided to work among the peasantry, and when I made decisions, I stuck to them. Now, out of bitter necessity and not through any lack of serious consideration, I was finally relinquishing my original views and embarking on another path. When I was ready to leave the countryside, I announced to Land and Liberty that I considered myself free of any obligations and wanted to join the party. I was invited to the Voronezh Congress [June 1879].

As this time various people were beginning to suggest that

the element of political struggle had to play a role in the tasks of the revolutionary movement. Two factions, drawn in different directions, had emerged in Land and Liberty. Although the party didn't split at the Voronezh Congress, everyone's position became more or less clear: some people said that we had to continue working as before—i.e., that we must live in the countryside and organize peasant uprisings in particular localities; others asserted that we should live in the cities and direct our activities against the central government itself.

Shortly thereafter, when the party finally broke up, I was invited to become an agent of the Executive Committee of the People's Will. I agreed. My past experience had convinced me that the only way to change the existing order was by force. If any group in our society had shown me a path other than violence, perhaps I would have followed it; at the very least, I would have tried it out. But, as you know, we don't have a free press in our country, and so ideas cannot be spread by the written word. I saw no signs of protest—neither in the zemstvos, nor in the courts, nor in any of the other organized groups of our society; nor was literature producing changes in our social life. And so I concluded that violence was the only solution. I could not follow the peaceful path.

Once I had accepted this proposition, I remained committed to it until the end. I had always demanded that a person—myself as well others—be consistent, that she harmonize word and deed. Thus, once I had accepted violence in theory, I felt a moral obligation to participate directly in the violent actions undertaken by the organization I had joined. In fact, the organization preferred to use me for other purposes, for propaganda among the intelligentsia, but I desired and demanded another role for myself. I knew I would be judged, both in court and by public opinion, according to whether I had participated directly in acts of violence. That is why I did the things I did. My deeds—deeds that some people might call "bloodthirsty" and might regard as terrible and incomprehensible, deeds that, if they were simply enumerated, might seem callous to the court—were prompted by
motives that, to me in any event, have an honorable basis. The destruction of the absolutist form of government was the most vital aspect of our program, the part that had the greatest importance to me. I really didn’t care whether the regime was replaced by a republic or a constitutional monarchy: the crucial thing was that conditions be created under which people could develop their capacities and apply them to the benefit of society. It seems to me that under our present system, such conditions do not exist.

After the congress in Voronezh, I went underground, going through all the metamorphoses involved in that process, such as adopting a pseudonym. I settled in Kvitakovskii’s apartment in Leningrad for a while. But after the division in the party was finalized, we moved to the city. Under the name of Likhareva, I lived with Kvitakovskii in the apartment where he was arrested that November.

After completing its theoretical and organizational work, the Committee announced to the members its decision to organize attempts on the tsar’s life at three different points as he was en route to the capital from the Crimea. Designated individuals were instructed to go to Moscow, Kharkov, and Odessa, respectively. Although all the attempts were to involve blowing up railroad track with dynamite prepared in advance, each team of agents was left free to determine precisely where and how it would act. The various plans they devised were to go to the Committee for confirmation. Agents could choose assistants from among the local people. Each agent was to be kept in the dark about the personnel and methods used at the other points.

In addition to all these operations, the Committee was preparing an explosion at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. None of us agents were privy to this secret.

I was not among those assigned to carry out the assassination. However, the prospect of bearing only moral responsibility for an act that I had endorsed, of having no material role in a crime that threatened my confederates with the gravest punishment, was intolerable to me, and so I made every effort to get the organization to give me a role in implementing the plan. After being reprimanded for seeking personal satisfaction instead of placing my resources at the disposal of the organization, to use as it thought best, I was sent to Odessa, where a woman was needed.

In early September I left for Odessa with the supply of dynamite needed for the operation there. Nikolai Kibalchich and I found a suitable apartment within a few days, and moved in as the Ivanitskiis. Soon Kolodkevich and Frolenko arrived; Tatiana Lebedeva followed. All meetings and conferences were held in our apartment; the dynamite was stored there, the gun cotton dried there, the fuses prepared. Induction apparatus tested—short, all our work was carried out there, under the direction of Kibalchich, but with the aid—sometimes the very vital aid—of others, myself included.

We decided that the best plan would be for one of our people to get a job as a railroad watchman and lay the mine from out of his cabin. I volunteered my services in obtaining the job. I went as an anonymous petitioner to see Baron Uvarov Sternberg, an influential person in the administration of the Southwestern Railroad, and asked him to place a man I knew, representing this request as an act of philanthropy. Sternberg couldn’t help me, but he wrote a note to the engineer who was actually in charge of the post. I noticed that the reception given me by the baron was not the sort usually accorded to society people, and so I hastened to correct the mistakes I had made in my outfit before my next interview. I appeared in velvet, dressed as befit a lady petitioner. This time, my reception was courteous in the extreme, and they asked me to send “my man” over the very next day. I went home and made up a passport for Frolenko in the name of Semyon Alexandrov, the name I had given to his future superiors. The next day, he went to the admin-

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22 Members of the Executive Committee referred to themselves as agents in order to conceal their importance from the police.

23 See the selection by Praskovia Ivanovskia, p. 114.

24 This was a common practice at the time.
istrator of the railroad division and was assigned to a place eleven to thirteen kilometers from Odessa, near Gniliakov.

Frolenko was given his own cabin, and he brought Tatiana Lebedeva there as his "wife." We transferred the dynamite to him so that he could plant it under the tracks, but then Grigorii Goldenberg arrived unexpectedly and demanded that we send some of the explosives back to Moscow, since they didn't have enough there and the Moscow-Kursk railroad was the line that the tsar was most likely to use. We had to submit.25

A second operation was established in the vicinity of Kharkov. Here a group of seven spent weeks channeling under the tracks. By the time the two trains carrying the imperial party approached, the dynamite was in place, but it failed to explode when the detonating circuit was closed—apparently there had been a technical error. A day later, as the trains approached Moscow, a third attempt was carried out. The People's Will had purchased a small house adjacent to the railroad and had dug a tunnel from its cellar. The tsar's trains reached the ambush at about 10 p.m. on November 19. Sof'ya Perovskaya, who lay waiting in the bushes alongside the railroad tracks, allowed the first train to go by, assuming that it was the way; she gave the signal as the second train passed, and the resulting explosion derailed and destroyed it. As it turned out, the tsar had been traveling on the first train after all, and so he escaped unharmed.

A fourth attempt took place in the tsar's residence itself. In September 1879, Stepan Khalturin, a skilled carpenter and member of the People's Will, had gotten a job on a renovation project in the Winter Palace. Along with the other workmen, he started living in the basement of the Palace. Despite the tight security surrounding the tsar, over a period of months Khalturin gradually smuggled in a substantial quantity of dynamite, which he stored among his personal belongings. He was able to determine the tsar's routine, and at dinnertime on the evening of February 5, when none of the other workmen were around, Khalturin lit a slow fuse and left the Palace. Moments later, the explosion resounded. A first-floor room was destroyed, and a number of soldiers were killed or wounded, but the royal dining room on the second floor was only slightly damaged.

Figner remained in Odessa after the operation there was abandoned.

Frolenko and Lebedeva soon gave up the cabin near Gniliakov, then left Odessa altogether. Kibal'chich left the city in mid-December, Kolodkevich in January. The remainder of the more influential people went with them, and the party's work was turned over to me and a few little-known local people who proved so unsuitable that I had to get rid of them later on. But in any case, after Kibal'chich's departure I rapidly established an extensive circle of acquaintances among all classes of society—professors and generals, landlords and students, doctors, civil servants, workers, and seamstresses. I advanced revolutionary ideas and defended the methods of the People's Will wherever possible, but my favorite sphere was the youth, among whom feeling was so strong and enthusiasm so sincere. Unfortunately, I knew few students personally, and those I did know were generally pessimistic about the rest, resolutely refusing to believe that there were good people among them.

In March or April 1880, Nikolai Sabinin and Sof'ya Perovskaya arrived in Odessa. They announced to me that they'd been sent by the Executive Committee to prepare mines in Odessa, in the event that the tsar passed through the city on route to the Crimea. Meanwhile, I had been busy preparing another terrorist action—the assassination of Panutin, right-hand man of the governor-general. Everything was practically ready, but Perovskaya's arrival with the Committee's instructions forced me to abandon this project.

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25 Goldenberg left Odessa for Moscow, but at Elisavetgrad he was arrested and proceeded to betray the party. Nevertheless, the party carried out the bombing on November 19 as planned.—Figner.
Sabin and Perovskaya had come with a plan for the attempt: they were to choose the street most likely to be used by the sovereign in getting from the station to the steamship pier; to rent a store on this street and carry on a business as man and wife; and from this store, lay a mine under the pavement of the street.

We found a shop on Italianskaia Street and began work immediately. We had to hurry; the sovereign was expected in May, and it was already April. Moreover, we could work only at night, since the shaft had to be laid from the store itself, rather than the attached living quarters, and of course customers were around during the day. Instead of digging, we proposed to use a drill. The work turned out to be very difficult: the ground was clay, and it choked the drill, which required enormous physical effort and even then advanced exceedingly slowly. At long last, we found ourselves beneath the paving stones; the drill bit moved upward and emerged into the light of day.

Shortly thereafter, Grigorii Isaev lost three fingers in an explosion caused by careless handling of mercury fulminate. He bore it like a stoic, but we were terribly upset—he should have stayed in the hospital. After this incident, everything that we had been keeping at Isaev's—the dynamite, mercury fulminate, wire, and so forth—was brought over to my house, since we were afraid that the roar of the explosion in his apartment might have aroused the curiosity of all his neighbors.

So we had one less worker. I offered to bring some local people I knew into the operation, but everyone was opposed to this. We decided to stop using the drill temporarily, make a tunnel a few yards long, and then resume drilling. It was imperative to remove all the dirt as soon as possible, in the event that the houses along the tsar's route were checked. We got rid of some of it, and the rest was brought over to my apartment in baskets, packages, and bundles. After sending the maid off on errands, I would empty them in a place I'd found there.

But meanwhile, rumors of the tsar's trip died down, and the Committee instructed us to stop our preparations. We proposed taking advantage of the work we had done to blow up Count Totsleben: at the time, we envisioned destroying the entire institution of governors-general by systematically exterminating its individual representatives, but the Committee turned us down. It did give us permission, however, to make an attempt on the tsar's life by some other method, and so Sabin, I, and a few people I enlisted began following the governor-general around. We intended to use some kind of projectile, and if we had had the devices Isaev and Kibalchich invented somewhat later, the count certainly would have lost his life. But all we had was dynamite and some imperfect fuses: any projectile we made would have been of awkward size and might not have been accurate. Even so, we would have carried out our plans if Count Totsleben hadn't been transferred out of Odessa. After he left, all our preparations had to be liquidated. First we covered the tunnel with the earth we had extracted. I help was with this work, which wasn't very difficult: at night I would drag sacks of dirt from the living quarters and lower them into the basement, where the men trampled down the loose earth. We closed up the shop on Italianskaia Street. When everything was in order, Sabin and Perovskaya left. Isaev and Iakimova followed.

Through them I transmitted a request to the Committee, asking that they recall me from Odessa and designate a person to whom I could transfer local party business and contacts. However, I left for St. Petersburg—it was July, I think—

26 In the spring of 1879, the government attempted to subdue the revolutionary movement by establishing six special regional commands, each headed by a governor-general who was given far-reaching powers over civilian life.

27 These bombs were used for the first time on March 1, 1881.
without a successor’s having arrived. I was greeted with a reprimand for my absence without leave, which had destroyed the possibility of effecting a personal transfer of contacts to the new agent.

In February 1880, in response to the bombing of the Winter Palace, Alexander II had created the Supreme Administrative Commission, headed by General Loris-Melikov. Until then, repression had been relatively indiscriminate; the most timid criticism of the regime could bring harsh penalties, and as a result much of liberal society had become sympathetic to the revolutionaries. Melikov’s regime—the “dictatorship of the heart,” as it became known—made repression more selective and rational, focusing its full force on known revolutionaries and on them alone, while offering limited concessions to the liberals: a greater voice in public life at the local level, less stringent censorship, and certain positive measures in the area of education.

The People’s Will did not accept Loris-Melikov’s policies as evidence of the regime’s commitment to fundamental reform. However, as indiscriminate police repression was curtailed, the possibilities for propaganda and organizing increased significantly, and the party moved to take advantage of them.

The period from the fall of 1880 through the beginning of 1881 was one of intensified propaganda and organizational work for the People’s Will. The absence of police harassment and gendarmerie searches during this period made work among the students and factory workers a lot easier. In St. Petersburg itself, propaganda, agitation, and organizing were being conducted on a massive scale. Everyone was animated and hopeful. The depression that had appeared as a result of the failures of the early 1870s and the ensuing reaction was gone without a trace. The demand for retribution still resounded loudly, because the policies of Count Loris-Melikov deceived no one: the essence of the government’s attitude toward society, the people, and the party hadn’t changed a bit—the count had merely substituted milder forms of repression for crude, harsh ones. And so the Executive Committee devised another assassination: a shop would be rented on one of the streets in St. Petersburg most frequently used by the tsar, and from there, a mine would be laid for an explosion. I proposed to the Committee that my friend and comrade Iurii Bogdanovich serve as the store’s proprietor, and he was accepted for this role [Anna Iakimova posed as his wife]. Meanwhile, the Committee’s technicians were working to perfect explosive projectiles: these were to play an auxiliary role in landmining operations, which had hitherto proved inadequate.

As for me, I didn’t know the location of the shop, or Bogdanovich’s alias—“Kochozov”—until the end of February, when I had to make up duplicate identity papers for him. My role during this period was propaganda and organizing. I participated as an agent of the Committee in two organizational groups that operated in two different spheres; I also went with Zheliabov from time to time to speak to military men—his special area of involvement. In addition, the Committee designated me secretary for foreign communications in the fall of 1880. The bombings of 1879 and 1880 had stimulated tremendous interest among all strata of Western European society, and in view of the importance that European public opinion could have for the party, the Committee decided to publicize our goals and aspirations abroad and acquaint Europe with the Russian government’s domestic policy. I sent party reports, biographies and photographs of revolutionaries who’d been executed or imprisoned, revolutionary publications, and Russian journals and newspapers to Lev Hartman, later, after March 1, I sent him a copy of the Executive Committee’s letter to Alexander III and a drawing showing the inside of the Kochozov store, done by Kochozov—that is, Bogdanovich—himself.

In January 1881 the Executive Committee suggested that

4 Hartman, a participant in the November 19 train bombing in Moscow, was forced to flee abroad because the police were on his trail.

5 In mid-March 1881, the Executive Committee set forth its political demands in a letter to Alexander III, son and successor of Alexander II.
Izayev and I established an apartment exclusively for its members. We found a place, and lived there together as the Khozhanovskis. During February, a series of important meetings were held on alternate days at this apartment. The Executive Committee had called together its agents in the provinces, Moscow, and St. Petersburg and asked them for detailed accounts of the state of party affairs in all localities and spheres of activity. These, in turn, were summarized in one general account and presented by the Committee to the assembly of agents, who were invited to express their opinions on certain internal organizational questions, as well as on the party's over-all policy. In particular, the Committee wanted to know whether the agents considered the party organization sufficiently strong and extensive, and whether the public mood sufficiently favorable, for the question of insurrection to be placed on the agenda immediately—that is, should all subsequent party work be aimed at fomenting an insurrection in the immediate future, and should the central group devote itself to elaborating a serious, detailed plan for that insurrection? By a huge majority, the agents responded that a practical formulation of the question of insurrection was indeed warranted. At the conclusion of the meetings, the agents were dispersed by the Committee to begin work pending new, detailed instructions.

Several months earlier, in November 1889, Alexander Mikhailov had been arrested. This was an irreparable loss, one we remembered whenever misfortune struck us. Mikhailov had guarded party security from within: he was the organization's all-seeing eye, the guardian of the discipline so essential to the revolutionary cause. Now, around the time of the February meetings, we lost the one remaining person most valuable to the organization, the external guardian of its security: Alexander Kletchnikov, who had made his way into the government's Third Section, and, for the past two years, had helped to ward off the government's attacks against the party by warning us in advance.

By this time, the tunnel in the Kobozev store had been completed. One Sunday in mid-February, the tsar passed by the Kobozev shop on Malaya Sadovaya on one of his weekly visits to the riding hall. There was general dismay in the party that we had missed this opportunity because the mine wasn't ready yet: we might have to wait a whole month before he passed by again. The Committee ordered that all work both on the mine and on the projectiles be completed by March 1. By that date our agents had been familiarized with the plans: there would be an underground explosion as the ruler was passing, and in case the explosion didn't coincide with the tsar's passage, or proved too weak to achieve its intended goal, people stationed on opposite sides of the street would throw explosive shells. We also knew that the personnel involved in the attack had already been chosen. Beginning March 1, we were to expect the attempt on each and every Sunday.

I don't remember the twenty-seventh of February at all, but the twenty-eighth is clear in my memory—I think because Andrei Zhelabov was arrested on the evening of the twenty-seventh, and on the morning of the twenty-eighth, Sukhanov brought us the news at our apartment.

On the twenty-eighth, the Committee sent Izayev to the Kobozev store in order to lay the mine. That same day, we learned that not one of the projectiles was ready yet; furthermore, the people responsible for the apartment where all the technical operations were to be carried out had announced the evening before that they thought their apartment was being watched. At the same time, a rumor was spreading through the city that the police believed they were on the trail of an extraordinary discovery in the very precinct where the Kobozev store was located. Some young people had conveyed to us a conversation overheard between the concierge of the Kobozev apartment house and the police concerning a search in the building; then Bogdanovich-Kobozev himself stopped by our place to tell us that the shop had been inspected by an alleged health commission that was obviously acting under instructions from the police. Although Kobozev told us the inspectors had turned up nothing—indeed, they had fully legalized him...
—his story left us thunderstruck. It was clear that our mission—conceived long ago and brought nearly to conclusion through all the difficulties and dangers, the mission that was to climax the struggle that had bound our hands for two years—was hanging by a thread and might be thwarted on the eve of its execution.

We could have borne anything but that! It wasn’t that we were worried about the personal safety of individual members of our organization—the party’s entire past, our whole future, was at stake on the eve of March 1. There was no nervous system that could have tolerated such intense strain for long. Thus, when Sofia Perovskaia asked the Executive Committee how to proceed if the tsar did not come down Malaya Sadova on March 1, whether in that situation we should act with only the shells, the Committee responded, “Act in any case,” and drew up a contingency plan. Sukhanov alone expressed some reservations, because the shells had never been used in action.

The Committee’s decision was made on February 28. I was informed that three people would arrive at our apartment at 5 p.m.—Sukhanov, Kibalchich, and Grachevskii—and work on the shells all night.

During the early evening, agents stopped in at the apartment continually, some with news, others with routine requests, but this hindered the work, and so around eight o’clock they all dispersed. Five people were left in the apartment, including Perovskaia and myself. I persuaded the exhausted Perovskaia to lie down in order to marshal her strength for the following day; then I began helping the workers wherever an inexperienced hand could be of use—pouring metal with Kibalchich or, along with Sukhanov, trimming the tin kerosene cans I’d bought to serve as molds for the shells. I left them at 2 a.m., when my services were no longer needed. When Perovskaia and I got up five hours later, the men were still working. Two shells were all finished, and Perovskaia took them away; Sukhanov left shortly thereafter. I helped Kibalchich and Grachevskii fill the other two cans with detonating jelly, and Kibalchich took those away. And so, at 8 a.m. on the morning of March 1, four shells were ready, after fifteen hours of work by three people.

The Committee had instructed me to remain at my apartment until 2 a.m. on March 1, in order to receive the Kobozevs, who were supposed to abandon the store—he an hour before the sovereign passed, she after a signal that the sovereign had appeared on Nevskii Prospect. A third person was to activate the electric current; should he survive the explosion produced by his own hand, he was to leave the store, pretending to be an outsider. But the Kobozevs never showed up at my place. Instead, I appeared, with the news that His Majesty hadn’t passed by the store, and that he had proceeded home after finishing at the riding hall. I left the apartment, thinking that, for some unforeseen reason, the attempt hadn’t been carried out. I totally forgot that the Kobozevs hadn’t been notified of the Committee’s final decision: to use bombs at a particular point on his return trip.

Everything was peaceful as I walked through the streets. But half an hour after I reached the apartment of some friends, a man appeared with the news that two crashes like

The assassination of Tsar Alexander II
cannon shots had rung out, that people were saying the sovereign had been killed, and that the oath was already being administered to the heir. I rushed outside. The streets were in turmoil; people were talking about the sovereign, about wounds, death, blood.

On March 3, Kibalchich came to our apartment with the news that Cesia Gelfman’s apartment had been discovered, that she’d been arrested and Sabin had shot himself. Within two weeks, we lost Perovskaia, who was arrested on the street. Kibalchich and Frolenko were the next to go. Because of these heavy losses, the Committee proposed that most of us leave St. Petersburg, myself included. I wanted to remain, however, and so I argued with the Committee until it gave me permission. Unfortunately, my stay turned out to be a brief one.

On April 1, Isaev failed to come home. He was arrested on the street, like several other agents who’d been caught during March. To avoid worry and misunderstandings, we had previously agreed that the people responsible for the party’s apartments were not to spend the night away from home without prior arrangement; consequently, by 12 midnight of April 1 I was certain that Isaev had been arrested.

For various reasons, our apartment had gradually become a warehouse for all sort of things: type and other printing equipment, all the utensils and a large supply of dynamite from the chemistry lab, half of our passport department, party literature, and so forth. Such resources could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the police: I decided to save everything and leave the apartment absolutely empty. During the afternoon of April 4, Sukhanov appeared, and with his usual efficiency, removed everything of value from the apartment in the space of two hours. He insisted that I leave the house immediately, but I saw no need to go before morning; I was sure Isaev wouldn’t give the police our address. I stayed till morning, then, finding a suitable pretext to get rid of the woman who came to clean, I left, locking up the ravaged apartment. I’ve heard that the authorities arrived before the samovar I used to make tea that morning had cooled.

In the period after March 1, 1881, Vera Figner became the acting leader of the People’s Will. She tried to restore the party to its former strength, securing funds, recruiting new members, and working to expand its organization among military units. But most of the other experienced leaders were in jail, and the party had been infiltrated by the police; on February 19, 1883, Figner was arrested.

In September 1884, at the Trial of the “Fourteen”—members of the People’s Will who continued to be active after the assassination of the tsar—“Vera Figner alone succeeded in getting herself heard out. Both the judges and the public listened with uncommon attention, and the chairman of the tribunal did not stop her once,” recalled a co-defendant, A. A. Spandoni.83 She received the death penalty, but her sentence was subsequently commi
Vera Figner after her release from prison, 1906

muted to life imprisonment. She spent the next two decades in the Shlisselburg fortress.

After the revolution of 1917 Vera Figner wrote extensively of her experiences as a revolutionary. She died in the Soviet Union in 1943.