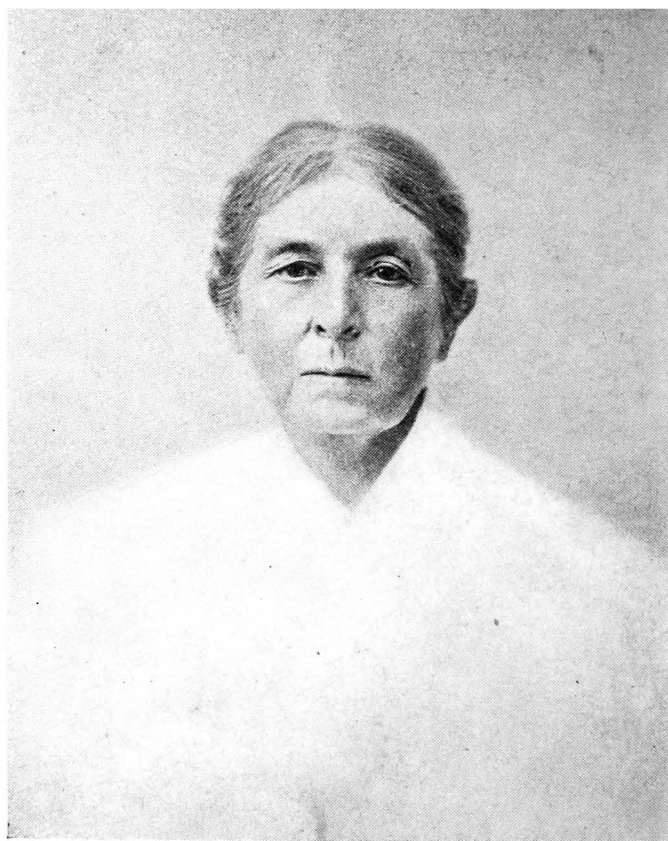


MEMOIRS
of a
REVOLUTIONIST



Veraigner.

Moscow, 1925

VERA FIGNER

MEMOIRS OF A
REVOLUTIONIST

Authorised Translation from the Russian



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INTRODUCTION

At the age of seventy-five, the author of these Memoirs displays the same nobility of spirit, the same fortitude of character and convictions, the same personal magnetism that have distinguished her revolutionary leadership half a century ago. Neither the strenuous experiences of terroristic activity, nor the deadening years—twenty years of confinement in the Schlüsselburg Fortress—have dimmed the flaming faith of Vera Figner in humanity, in the worth of heroic efforts for the betterment of life. Indeed, the one manifest effect of the prison term was to soften somewhat the austerity of her outlook, to instill more charity into her intransigency. The Memoirs present a rare document of human loveliness, force and grandeur, rising above sordid reality, and proclaim the possibility of a heroic life even at this unromantic age of ours.

At the completion of the second part of her Memoirs, "When the Clock of Life Stopped," Vera Figner wrote somewhat apologetically:

"'Sufficient unto the day the evil thereof.' New times require new songs, whereas my book is a song of what is past, finished, and will never come back.

"Yet though my book speaks of the past and contributes nothing to the practical life of the present moment, a time will come when it will be of use. The dead do not rise, but there is resurrection in books. Silvio Pellico's *My Prisons*, or De Coster's *Eulenspiegel*, are alive for us, even though the one was written a hundred years ago, and the other describes events of the sixteenth century.

"'Write!' admonished me the great tragedian, Eleanora Duse, when we met abroad. 'Write: you *must* write; your experience *must not* be lost.'

“Let then my experience of the time ‘When the Clock of Life Stopped’ not be lost for those who are going to live under conditions of ceaseless movement on the part of the clock’s hand, a movement in the ever forward direction toward genuine equality and freedom, for the happiness of Russia and all humanity.”

Vera Figner has authorised this abridged translation, and has written a special foreword for the American edition. The bulk of the translation has been done by Miss Camilla Chapin Daniels; Mrs. G. A. Davidson translated the latter portion of Book Two. Professor George R. Noyes, of the Department of Slavic Languages at the University of California, has revised the manuscript, jointly with his colleague, Alexander Kaun, who is responsible for the general editing of the text. The editor acknowledges his gratitude to his collaborators.

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

MORE than one hundred years ago the advanced portion of Russian society became imbued with the idea of the necessity of overthrowing the Autocracy, and replacing it by a representative government. But from the military conspiracy of the Decembrists (1825) to the seventies, only individual persons or small isolated groups figured as the opponents of absolutism, and they were swiftly crushed by the repressive measures of the government. Only with the liberation of the serfs (1861) and the inauguration of reforms during the early years of the reign of Alexander II (1818-1881), was Russian life rejuvenated, and social forces received a chance for a broader activity. However, the land and court reforms, and the introduction of county (*zemstvo*) and city self-government, could not satisfy the progressive men of Russia, as long as the obsolete political order remained. Despite the abolition of serfdom the economic condition of the people was quite unsatisfactory; the long-expected "freedom" failed to fulfil the hopes of the peasantry. On the other hand, the educated class, now increased in numbers, demanded a wider field of activity, and this was impossible in the absence of civil liberties.

These were the two causes of the incessant turmoil which reigned in the internal life of Russia and generated a revolutionary movement with the permanent slogan of *Land and Freedom*. At first the social-revolutionary movement was directed toward the organisation of the peasant masses for an uprising, with the aim of overthrowing the existing economic order. It was expected that this would inevitably result in

the fall of the political order and its replacement by a new one. Such a formulation of the revolutionary programme implied no direct struggle against the government. But toward the end of the seventies, a new tendency ripened, owing to the lack of response on the part of the peasants, and to the persecutions and intolerable oppression of the unlimited Autocracy: the overthrow of absolutism was formulated as a definite task. In 1879 was formed the revolutionary socialist party, The Will of the People, headed by its Executive Committee. Planning the organisation of a military conspiracy backed by factory workers and by all the discontented, this party resolved to throw its own forces without delay into a ruthless battle with the Autocracy, directing its blows against the head of the state, who personally assumed the responsibility for the rule of the millions and millions of his people. This battle by means of violence against violence was waged for three years with unexampled energy and obstinacy. It culminated on March 1 (14), 1881, when Emperor Alexander II fell on the streets of St. Petersburg from the bombs hurled by two members of the party.

The first part of my book comprises the brief period of 1876-1884, describing the consecutive activity of the secret society, Land and Freedom, and later, of the party, The Will of the People. I took part in working out the programme of Land and Freedom, and was the last member of the Executive Committee of The Will of the People when arrested, in 1883. I describe the events as an eye-witness and participant.

The Executive Committee perished to the last person, the party was smashed, but its significance in the history of the revolutionary movement was extraordinary. After The Will of the People, political struggle became an essential part of the programmes of all the subsequent revolutionary generations. Seventy-two members of the party appeared before court within five years. Those who were not executed or exiled to Siberia, were incarcerated in the Fortress of Sts. Peter and Paul, and from 1884, in the Schlüsselburg Fortress. In the latter, I, too, was confined. The majority of us died, and I

was freed in 1904, after twenty years of confinement, and sent into exile. Life in Schüsselburg, mine and that of my comrades—this epilogue of our struggle against Autocracy—is described in the second part of my book.

VERA FIGNER.

Moscow, Spring, 1927.

P.S. For those who may be dismayed by the cruel methods employed by The Will of the People in its struggle against Autocracy, I should like to recall the declaration of the Executive Committee of our party, on the occasion of the assassination of President James A. Garfield in 1881:

“Expressing its profound sympathy for the American people, on the occasion of the death of President James Abram Garfield, the Executive Committee regards it as its duty to declare in the name of the Russian revolutionists its protest against such acts of violence as that of Guiteau. In a land where personal freedom gives an opportunity for an honest conflict of ideas, where the free will of the people determines not only the law but also the personality of the ruler, in such a land political murder as a means of struggle presents a manifestation of that despotic spirit which we aim to destroy in Russia. Personal despotism is as condemnable as group despotism, and violence may be justified only when it is directed against violence.

(Signed) “THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.”

September 10 (23), 1881.

V. F.

APPENDICES

I

THE LETTER OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE TO TSAR ALEXANDER III

YOUR MAJESTY:—

Fully comprehending the sorrow which you are experiencing during these present moments, the Executive Committee does not, however, feel it right to yield to the impulse of natural delicacy, which demands, perhaps, a certain interval of waiting before the following explanation should be made. There is something higher than the most legitimate emotions of a human being: that is one's duty to his native land, a duty for which every citizen is obliged to sacrifice himself and his own feelings, and even the feelings of others. In obedience to this primal duty, we have determined to address you at once, without any delay, since that historical process does not wait, which threatens us in the future with rivers of blood and the most violent convulsions.

The bloody tragedy which was played on the shores of the Ekaterininsky Canal, was not accidental, and surprised no one. After all that has passed in the course of the last decade, it was absolutely inevitable, and in this lies its profound meaning—a meaning which must be understood by the man whom fate has placed at the head of the state power. To interpret such facts as being the evil plots of separate individuals, or even of a band of criminals, would be possible only to a man who was quite incapable of analysing the life of nations. In the course of ten years we have seen how, notwithstanding the most severe persecutions, notwithstanding the fact that the government of the late Emperor sacrificed everything, freedom, the interests of all classes, the interests of industry and even its own dignity, everything, unconditionally, in its attempt to suppress the revolutionary movement, that movement has nevertheless tenaciously grown and spread, attracting to itself the best elements of the nation, the most energetic and self-denying people of Russia, and for three years now has engaged in desperate, par-

tisan warfare with the government. You know well, your Majesty, that it is impossible to accuse the government of the late Emperor of lack of energy. They have hanged our followers, both guilty and innocent; they have filled the prisons and distant provinces with exiles. Whole dozens of our leaders have been seized and hanged. They have died with the courage and calmness of martyrs, but the movement has not been suppressed, it has grown and gained strength. Yes, your Majesty, the revolutionary movement is not such as to depend on individual personalities. It is a function of the national organism, and the gallows, erected to hang the most energetic exponents of that function, is as powerless to save this outworn order of life, as was the death of the Saviour on the cross, to save the corrupt, ancient world from the triumph of reforming Christianity.

Of course, the government may continue to arrest and hang a great multitude of separate individuals. It may destroy many revolutionary groups. Let us grant that it will destroy even the most important of the existing revolutionary organisations. This will not change the state of affairs in the least. The conditions under which we are living, the general dissatisfaction of the people, Russia's aspiration towards a new order of life, all these create revolutionists. You cannot exterminate the whole Russian people, you cannot therefore destroy its discontent by means of reprisals; on the contrary, discontent grows thereby. This is the reason that fresh individuals, still more incensed, still more energetic, are constantly arising from the ranks of the people in great numbers to take the place of those who are being destroyed. These individuals, in the interests of the conflict, will of course organise themselves, having at hand the ready experience of their predecessors, and therefore the revolutionary movement in the course of time must grow stronger, both in quality and quantity. This we have actually seen in the last ten years. What did the death of the adherents of Dolgushin, Tchaikovsky, the agitators of the year 1784, avail the government? The far more determined populists arose to take their place. The terrible reprisals of the government called forth upon the stage the terrorists of '78 and '79. In vain did the government exterminate such men as the adherents Kovalsky, Dubrovin, Osinsky, and Lizogub; in vain did it destroy dozens of revolutionary circles. From those imperfect organisations, by the course of natural selection there developed still harder forms. There

appeared at last the Executive Committee, with which the government has not yet been able to cope.

Casting a dispassionate glance over the depressing decade through which we have lived, we can accurately foretell the future progress of the movement if the political tactics of the government do not change. The movement must go on growing, gaining strength; terroristic acts will be repeated in ever more alarming and intensified forms. A more perfect, stronger revolutionary organisation will take the place of the groups that are wiped out. In the meantime, the number of malcontents in the land will increase, popular faith in the government will lapse, and the idea of revolution, of its possibility and inevitability, will take root and grow more and more rapidly in Russia. A terrible outburst, a bloody subversion, a violent revolutionary convulsion throughout all Russia, will complete the process of the overthrow of the old order.

What evokes this terrible perspective, what is responsible for it? Yes, your Majesty, a terrible and sad perspective. Do not take this for a mere phrase. We understand better than any one else, how sad is the perishing of so much talent, such energy, in a labour of destruction, in bloody conflicts, when, under different conditions, these forces might be directly applied to creative work, to the progress of the people, the development of their minds, and the well-being of their national life. Whence comes this sad necessity for bloody strife?

From the fact, your Majesty, that there exists among us now no actual government, in the true meaning of the word. A government, according to its fundamental principle, should express only the aspirations of the people, should accomplish only the Will of the People. While in Russia, pardon us for the expression, the government has degenerated into a veritable camarilla, and deserves to be called a band of usurpers far more than does the Executive Committee.

Whatever may have been the intentions of the Sovereign, the acts of the government have had nothing in common with the popular welfare and desires. The Imperial Government has subjugated the people to the state of bondage, it has delivered the masses into the power of the nobility; and now it is openly creating a pernicious class of speculators and profiteers. All its reforms lead to but one result, that the people have sunk into ever greater slavery, into a state of more complete exploitation. It has brought Russia to such a point that at the present time the popular masses find themselves

in a state of utter beggary and ruin, not free even at their own domestic firesides from the most insulting surveillance, powerless even in their own communal village affairs. Only the spoiler, the exploiter, is favoured by the protection of the law and the government. The most revolting depredations remain unpunished. But what a terrible fate awaits the man who sincerely thinks and plans for the public welfare! You know well, your Majesty, that it is not only the socialists who are exiled and persecuted. What kind of a government is this, then, which protects such an "order"? Is it not rather a band of rascals, an absolute usurpation?

This is the reason why the Russian government has no moral influence, no support in the people; this is why Russia gives birth to so many revolutionists; this is why even such a fact as regicide awakens joy and sympathetic approval in an enormous part of the population. Yes, your Majesty, do not deceive yourself with the declarations of fawners and flatterers. Regicide is very popular in Russia.

There are two possible escapes from this situation: either a revolution, quite inevitable, which cannot be averted by any number of executions, or a voluntary turning to the people on the part of the Supreme Authority. In the interests of our native land, in the desire to avoid those terrible calamities which always accompany a revolution, the Executive Committee turns to your Majesty with the advice to choose the second course. Believe us that as soon as the Supreme Authority ceases to be arbitrary, as soon as it firmly determines to accomplish only the demands of the nation's consciousness and conscience, you may boldly drive out the spies who defile your government, send your convoys into their barracks, and burn the gallows which are depraving your people. The Executive Committee itself will cease its present activity, and the forces organised around it will disperse and consecrate themselves to cultural work for the benefit of their own people. A peaceful conflict of ideas will take the place of the violence which is more repugnant to us than to your servants, and which we practise only from sad necessity.

We turn to you, casting aside all prejudices, stifling that distrust, which the age-long activity of the government has created. We forget that you are the representative of that power which has so deceived the people, and done them so much harm. We address you as a citizen and an honourable man. We hope that the feeling of personal bitterness will not suppress in you the recognition of

your duties, and the desire to know the truth. We too might be embittered. You have lost your father. We have lost not only our fathers, but also our brothers, our wives, our children, our best friends. But we are ready to suppress our personal feelings if the good of Russia demands it. And we expect the same from you also.

We do not lay conditions upon you. Do not be shocked by our proposition. The conditions which are indispensable in order that the revolutionary movement shall be transformed into peaceful activity, have been created, not by us, but by history. We do not impose them, we only recall them to your mind.

In our opinion there are two such conditions:

1. A general amnesty for all political crimes committed in the past, inasmuch as these were not crimes, but the fulfilment of a civic duty.
2. The convocation of an assembly of representatives of all the Russian people, for the purpose of examining the existing forms of our state and society, and revising them in accord with the desires of the people.

We consider it necessary to mention, however, that in order that the legality of the Supreme Authority may be confirmed by popular representation, the process of selecting delegates must be absolutely unrestricted. Therefore the elections must be held under the following conditions:

1. The deputies must be sent from all ranks and classes alike, and in numbers proportionate to the population.
2. There must be no restrictions imposed upon either the electors or the deputies.
3. Electioneering, and the elections themselves, must be carried out in complete freedom, and therefore the government must grant as a temporary measure, prior to the decision of the popular assembly:
 - a. Complete freedom of the press,
 - b. Complete freedom of speech,
 - c. Complete freedom of assembly,
 - d. Complete freedom of electoral programmes.

This is the only way in which Russia can be restored to a course of normal and peaceful development. We solemnly declare before our native land and all the world, that our party will submit unconditionally to the decision of a Popular Assembly which shall have been chosen in accord with the above-mentioned conditions;

and in the future we shall offer no armed resistance whatever to a government that has been sanctioned by the Popular Assembly.

And so, your Majesty, decide. Before you are two courses. On you depends the choice; we can only ask Fate that your reason and conscience dictate to you a decision which will conform only to the good of Russia, to your own dignity, and to your duty to your native land.

(Signed) THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

March 10 (23), 1881.

TO MY MOTHER

O comrade, if you see the light again,
The free, bright sun, if you embrace your own,
Remember then my mother in her pain—
My mother, waiting through the years alone.
And for the sake of all things dear to us,
Sacred, and pure, and tender, near to us,
I charge you, give her word of me, and say
That I am well, and live, and greet each day
With no repining, no regret, but true
To my ideals and to my country, too.
At first the days were stern and hard for me;
The burden of my longing grievously
Crushed to the earth my spirit and its song—
Ah, joy is short, but life is very long—
My face no longer pales, although I know
That weary, endless years shall come, and go,
And that I cannot ever hope to see
My mother, nor embrace her tenderly.
I ask not that she love me, for my heart
Feels that she loves me warmly, though apart
From me for many a long year.
I feel that in her breast she still holds dear
My memory. But oh, let her not weep;
Remembering me—my griefs are all asleep—
And I am happy, brave. She shall not grieve!
One little charge alone with her I leave.

VERA FIGNER

Ask her to bless me in her prayers at night,
To seal my spirit with a cross of light,
So that with stouter heart her daughter may
Travel the long and rough and dreary way.