13 Illusion and Reality: Into the Abyss, 1915–1917

The First World War placed the political police system of Russia on alert. The forces of order like so many other institutions in Russia believed that the outbreak of war had merely granted Russia a reprieve from revolution, that its conclusion (with the inevitable victory of course) would bring on the long expected second revolution in the new century, challenging the last bits of authority the Romanov dynasty possessed over its people. In the face of this bleak prospect, the forces of order assigned Fontanka’s political police essential roles in the defence of the monarchy.

During the war the political police had access to vast resources allowing it to spread its tentacles more widely and deeply into Russian life than it ever had before. Tasks assigned to it beyond its standard brief to contain and control Russia’s opposition and revolutionary forces included: uncovering profiteers; vigilance over the masonic movement; stirring up loyalty for the dynasty by supporting the patriotic right-wing press and making payments to reactionary members of the State Council; supplying skilled political police officers to the army for counter-intelligence purposes and training military and particularly naval officers in the art of counter-espionage; unmasking pro-German sympathisers and defeatists; maintaining surveillance over foreign diplomatic staff including those of Russia’s own allies and the establishment of surveillance over an entire range of civilians and officers it considered unreliable.

Despite this effort the political police system was remarkably ineffective in sustaining even the traditional role it perceived for itself: as the bulwark of the dynasty. Why was this so? In part, as we shall discover, Fontanka was itself victimised by the Byzantine politics that came to dominate the milieu of the MVD during the First World War and in part the political police succumbed to its own traditions and mind set.

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The dismissal of V.F. Dzhunkovskii in September 1915 removed the last voice advocating reform at 16 Fontanka Quai to the end of the regime. With Dzhunkovskii’s departure to the regular army, Fontanka restored the Special Section to its former independence and re-established the Internal Agency to its former pre-eminent position. Meanwhile the MVD re-instated most normal pre-Dzhunkovskii practices including the policy of placing undercover agents within the high schools and generally releasing its sotrudniki from the restrictions
imposed upon them by Dzhunkovskii and Director of Fontanka Briun-de-Sent-Ippolit (who was dismissed a few days after his mentor).6

The man behind the revitalisation (at least as Fontanka saw it) of the political police was none other than S.P. Beletskii who returned to 16 Fontanka Quai in late September 1915 as assistant minister of internal affairs managing the police. Almost immediately Beletskii acquired control over every aspect of Fontanka’s affairs. This task was made easy by the inexperience of his immediate subordinates, successive interim directors of Fontanka R.G. Mollov and K.D. Kafafov, and the indecisiveness and prevarication of Minister of Internal Affairs A.N. Khvostov.7 Beletskii restaffed the Department of Police with experienced men upon whom he could rely and placed within the Special Section itself experts knowledgeable about the opposition and revolutionary movements. Beletskii worked long hours, rarely seeing his family. His wife repeatedly asked him to resign, without success. Notwithstanding the public excuses he made later for staying on, he remained in office to fulfil his consuming ambition to build a ministry of police.8

Although available evidence does not incontrovertibly link Beletskii to proposals for creating a modern police state, it is clear from Beletskii’s memoirs that he was in all probability involved with the development of such a plan, ostensibly proposed by B.V. Shturmer, Khvostov’s successor as minister of internal affairs. Shturmer suggested the creation of a super police: a completely conspiratorial organisation hidden from even the most powerful sanovniki. This new force would employ a huge network of secret agents programmed to penetrate into every aspect of Russian life. The information they collected would be reported directly to Shturmer. Beletskii’s claim that this proposal was Shturmer’s idea and failed to be implemented only because Shturmer fell from his post is not convincing.9 Much of this programme was in fact already part of Fontanka’s modus operandi devised under Beletskii’s own auspices before Shturmer became minister of internal affairs. None the less, if these functions had been located within a truly independent, highly secret police institution and then combined with General Alekseev’s proposal of a dictatorship under what he called a Supreme Minister of Defence, the foundations of a modern police state would have been laid.

Indeed, there is little doubt that there had arisen an awareness in right-wing circles that an alternative form of government to the traditional monarchy – a modern dictatorial police state – could better dispose of the constitutional and revolutionary forces assailing the government.10 Beletskii, however, lived and worked in a milieu where the establishment of such a state was no longer (if it had ever been) possible. Shturmer, although given ‘dictatorial powers’ by Nicholas II, was incompetent and just bumbled along without encouragement from either the court or the bureaucracy both of which felt, in any case, exceptionally uncomfortable with these proposals.11

In reality, the incompetence, professional insecurity and corruption which permeated the tsarist government during the First World War condemned the politi-