6 Spinning the Web: Plehve and the Expansion of the Political Police Network

By the end of the nineteenth century the dissident elements within Russian society were coalescing into political groups which ranged from moderate monarchist reformers to ardent, committed agrarian and marxist revolutionaries. The most prominent group became known as the Liberation Movement, under whose banner marched the entire political spectrum of the legal opposition. The Liberation Movement through its speeches, publications and actions gave respectability to the opinion that the behaviour and outlook of the regime was inappropriate for a modernising state entering the twentieth century. These men from the ranks of the professions, from the zemstva and from the landed gentry, in growing numbers, believed that the transformation of the autocracy by peaceful means into a constitutional regime ruled by law, not by men – a true Rechtsstaat – would be Russia’s only salvation. For the members of this movement the remaining conceivable alternatives to a Rechtsstaat were a bloody left-wing revolution or a steadily increasing reaction. The persistent intransigence of the regime, however, drove the Liberation Movement steadily to the Left. The founding of the Beseda circle – a group of prestigious zemstva men who met several times a year between 1902 and 1905 – and its increasing domination by the constitutionalists and the subsequent publication of the constitutionalist emigré journal, Osvobozhenie (Liberation), infuriated and worried the MVD.

Whereas the Liberation Movement signalled the birth of non-revolutionary political parties within the tsarist political spectrum, the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party born in Minsk in 1898 and the Socialist-Revolutionary Party formed in late 1901 dominated the radical shades of this spectrum. Both of these parties had arisen out of the growing activism of the revolutionary emigration and were fed by the seething discontent on the land and in the factories.

In the very early years of the twentieth century, Russia’s political opposition although divided by ideological differences did not express the mutual hostility that became so entrenched after the 1905 Revolution. Rather, in these formative years of Russia’s political parties the ideological groupings expressed similar views on the immediate changes they wished to impose on the tsarist system of government. Of course, for the revolutionaries among them, the establishment of a constitutional government served only as a step in a lengthy revolutionary process; while for the legal opposition this form of government was a desired
end in itself. This divergence in outlook was, however, of minor significance for the Russian government. It preferred to concentrate on the terrifying image of a united opposition with sufficient strength to bring an end to almost three hundred years of absolute Romanov rule.

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The MVD was responsible for protecting the integrity of absolute monarchical rule but unfortunately for the regime, the forces of order laboured under the guidance of men of modest ability. Between 1895 and 1899, despite growing discontent, I.L. Goremykin and I.N. Durnovo unimaginatively continued to support the policies of counter-reform established during the reigns of Alexander II and his son. In 1899, D.S. Sipiagin took charge of the MVD, exacerbating social tensions still further with his strong belief in police rule, strict censorship and his loudly proclaimed desire to restore political power to the hands of the nobility.\(^5\) He also launched a series of measures that curtailed the activities of the zemstva and he suppressed the student movement with unnecessary harshness.\(^6\) None of the measures implemented by these three ministers of internal affairs silenced dissent, although they did serve to make the ministers the focal point of popular dissatisfaction.

What better target could there be for assassination? Sipiagin became the first target of a new socialist-revolutionary terrorist campaign, but while the SRs plotted, an expelled student stole their dénouement by murdering one of Sipiagin’s colleagues. On 14 February 1901, Peter Karpovich mortally wounded N.P. Bogolepov, the reactionary minister of education, triggering mass demonstrations protesting at the government’s stultifying education policies. Sipiagin attempted to limit the disturbances by quashing news about the assassination in the press.\(^7\) When he did not succeed, further demonstrations erupted in Kharkov, Kiev, Moscow and other university towns. On 4 March the elite of St Petersburg’s radical intelligentsia along with hundreds of students participated in a huge demonstration in Kazan Square. The police and cossacks used the broad latitude given them by the authorities to inflict severe beatings on many of the demonstrators and to make over 1500 arrests.

The behaviour of the cossacks and police during the Kazan Square demonstration shocked society at large and aggravated its disapproval of Sipiagin’s conduct of affairs. It became clear to Russia’s terrorists that the elimination of the tsar’s most despised advisers by whatsoever means would have the acquiescence and perhaps approval of society. Indeed, only four days after the Bogolepov’s assassination an attempt was made on the life of K.P. Pobedonostsev, the man most closely identified with Nicholas II’s reactionary policies,\(^8\) forcing Fontanka to redouble its efforts at protecting Tsardom’s most senior officials, its sanovniki. In a report of major significance, P.I. Rachkovskii, chief of the Foreign Agentura, claimed that the revolutionary movements (in which he included the Liberation