Childhood and Education

Anna, the eldest Ul’ianov sibling, was born to Il’ia Nikolaevich Ul’ianov and Mariia Aleksandrovna Blank in August 1864. Il’ia and Mariia had married the year before and had established a household that displayed features of the traditional and the liberal-progressive. While Il’ia pursued a very successful career as a schools inspector, which often involved long absences from home, Mariia took on the management of the household. Their marriage seems to have been a love match and was certainly a companionate marriage.  

Anna was the first child of eight (though two died at birth). Aleksandr followed in 1866, then Vladimir in 1870, Ol’ga a year later, then Dmitrii in 1874 and Mariia four years after that. The Ul’ianovs were loving parents, and while Il’ia’s patriarchal authority in the family was recognised, this being symbolised, for example, by the fact that to punish the children in Il’ia’s absence, Mariia would send them to sit in their father’s chair, both parents seem to have worked together in raising their children and had an equal share of influence over the type of upbringing they received. Their youngest daughter, Mariia Il’inchna, remembered that the two never fought in front of the children and always presented a ‘united front’ to them.

This description contrasts with Tumarkin’s interpretation of the solar system myth. She argues that in the Ul’ianov family, the senior male received star status and that this status was transferred when that male
died. After Il’ia’s death in 1886, it was passed on to Aleksandr, who had always been a favourite in the family, and from him, after his execution in 1887, it was transferred to Vladimir. Each star received the love, care and devotion of the rest of the family and became the centre of attention.

Anna and Mariia’s memoirs offer a more nuanced description of their relationships with male members of the family. Anna’s relationship with her father was loving, but not without problems. She did not like her father’s regular absences and she often argued with him over her schooling. However, she remembered fondly spending time with him during the holidays and the help he gave her and her siblings with their studies. In the first example of the Ul’ianovs protecting the memory of a loved one, Anna would not accept criticism of her father’s parenting after his death. In 1894, Anna wrote to the Simbirsk guberniia gazette to refute an article that had argued that Il’ia ‘did not know what the family was doing, nor what his children were working on’.

Despite her love for her father, it is clear from Anna’s memoirs that she was devoted above all to her brother Aleksandr. She felt a strong love for him and looked up to him as a model of maturity, thoughtfulness and confidence. However, beyond that, her memoirs have to be treated with caution, as it is apparent that the feelings Anna describes in them are complicated and intensified by her grief at his death (he was executed for plotting to assassinate the Tsar) and even guilt felt retrospectively about her own behaviour around him. For example, she expresses regret for once turning down her father’s offer to take her and her brother to Moscow, since Aleksandr’s life turned out to be ‘so short and so lacking in joy!’.

In general, her memoirs show an understandable tendency to portray Aleksandr in a very positive light, which is compounded by Anna’s habit of comparing herself unfavourably to her brother. Anna confesses that when her parents employed a young and inexperienced tutor to teach her and her brother, ‘capricious’ as she was, she took advantage of this to misbehave. When she noted that the tutor did not refer to this behaviour in his reminiscences, but only to the exceptional diligence of the children, Anna concluded that ‘it is possible of course that he mainly had Sasha [Aleksandr] in mind, who from childhood was very conscientious and serious about his duties’. Even when she describes disagreements between them, showing that she was not totally over-awed by Aleksandr in life, she tends to take the blame for them.

In portraying Aleksandr as a model young man, Anna also points out that as a boy Vladimir adored his elder brother and ‘usually did