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Nihilist Girl

by Charlie Ulch

(History 2225)

The book, *Nihilist Girl*, was originally written by Sofya Kovalevskaya who lived from 1850 to 1891. This also coincided with the with the Reign of Alexander the II who brought some of the greatest change to Russia. At this time Russia was undergoing some of the biggest change it has seen in its history at the hands of Alexander II who took the throne just five years after Kovalevskaya's birth. Also during this Kovalevskaya's time some of the most notorious acts of terrorism took place which she was certainly not oblivious too. By studying the key events in the lives of Vera Barantsova and two main characters lives we can see that this book is not just any fictional short story. It can actually be used as a profile for the lives of revolutionary nihilists of the time.

When we look at the time period in which they were living which shows how the path to revolution started. The character of Vera Barantsova was growing up in a time known as "The Era of Great Reforms" during which we see a series of events that allow for the development of a revolutionary population.

The first examples of this in the book can be found when the serfs were freed in 1861. Barantsova's family started to lose money and had to fire their servants, one of which was her tutor leaving her without a whole lot of education and a lot of free time. In *Nihilist Girl* it says that "Vera was left entirely to her own devices... Vera spent entire days in the park on the estate... Or she ran around the neighboring fields and forests."¹

This can be viewed as an allegory for the freedom that came along with Nicholas the II's reforms. These reforms gave the Russian press leeway that they had never had before which they used to write essays critical of the monarchy. With this newfound voice the left was able to lay the groundwork for dissent. To demonstrate just how much reach that these papers had, by the 1870s and 80s they became the most widely read pieces of writing amongst the Russian elite; who were the only ones literate at the time"²

And just like the educated at the time Vera began to become drawn to the revolutionary mentality as a result of her new found freedom. It started slowly though with her becoming obsessed with religion and the idea of the idea of martyrdom.

Those around Vera seemed unable to cope with the freedom and were left with nothing to do. According to Vera "It seemed as if people were only living to torment and nag one another. In order to escape the boredom and hostility she turned to the bible."³ From there she soon began reading many religious textbooks. The most influential one was called *The Lives of Forty Martyred Men And Thirty Martyred Women*. After that she read a book about missionaries being burned at the stake in China "and from that day forward fate was decided in her own eyes. All her dreams acquired a specific shape and direction."⁴ She became focused on the idea of dying for a greater good.

¹ Sofya Kovalevskaya, *Nihilist Girl* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2001), 35.

² Randall D. Law, *Terrorism: A History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 75.

³ Kovalevskaya, *Nihilist Girl*, 36-37.

⁴ Kovalevskaya, *Nihilist Girl*, 38-39.

This obsession with religion and the idea of martyrdom that Vera has draws a striking resemblance to the life of an actual Nihilist radical of the time named Vera Zasulich. In 1878 she attempted to assassinate the governor of St. Petersburg.⁵ In the proceeding trial, Zasulich “Recounted her early conversion experience as a young girl” where Christ’s “martyrdom became entwined with her own.” This mindset was not unique to Zasulich. Most radicals at the time shared a similar idea rooted in their orthodox upbringing.⁶ However this is just one of many building blocks for revolutionaries.

The second element that helped shape these revolutionaries is exemplified in Vasilisev’s background as a liberal professor who challenged the system of aristocracy. As a result, he was banished by the government to his estate.⁷ He was now out of step with typical Russian nobility that wealthy individuals like him would have traditionally associated with. He was also unable to gain any intellectual stimulation from the population around his estate. This is reflected by the fact that at this time ninety percent of the peasants at this time were “uneducated and burdened.”⁸ leaving him with a profound sense of disenfranchisement which is a key component in the birth of any radical.

The third element is illustrated by Vasilisev teaching Barantsova about English philosophers Herbert Spencer who was considered “controversial” by Russian intellectuals at the time.⁹ This shows that the Russian elite were starting looking at the rest of Victorian Europe only to see that they were far behind in terms of common social belief and technology.

Vasilisev also represents Russian thinkers of the time such as Mikhail Bakunin who laid the ideological groundwork for younger radicals who would adopt those principles and use them as a way to validate their more violent acts. This is observed in a letter from Vasilisev that Barantsova receives after his death that says the following, “And now, as I lay dying, I think only that you will be a continuation of me... I know, I feel that you will be called to do something fine and exalted. What I only dreamed of, you will carry out; what I only had a vague presentiment of you will accomplish.”¹⁰

Barantsova then takes these words to heart. In the final chapters of the book a group of political prisoners is put on trial. Fortunately, this gives them the opportunity to publicly state their case and in *Nihilist Girl* the narrator says “Political trials were a fine instrument for propaganda.”¹¹ This again mirrors the trial of Vera Zasulich which had been used as an opportunity to further a political cause. Both Barantsova and Zasulich demonstrate that they were willing to become martyrs for a cause based on their childhood background.¹² Barantsova becomes one in the sense that she gives up her life by marrying one of the one of the convicts thus saving him from one of the worst prisons in Russia, Alekseev Revlin.¹³ While Zasulich did not receive the same fate and was instead found innocent during her trial she went in fully expecting to die.

⁵ Ana Siljak, “The Trial of Vera Zasulich,” in *Russian and Soviet History: From the Time of Troubles to the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, eds., Steven A. Usitalo and William Benton Whisenhunt (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 147.

⁶ Ana Siljak, “The Trial of Vera Zasulich,” 152.

⁷ Kovalevskaya, *Nihilist Girl*, 41-42.

⁸ John M. Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union: A Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present*, 7th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 157.

⁹ Kovalevskaya, *Nihilist Girl*, 78.

¹⁰ Kovalevskaya, *Nihilist Girl*, 92.

¹¹ Kovalevskaya, *Nihilist Girl*, 103.

¹² Ana Siljak, “The Trial of Vera Zasulich,” 149.

¹³ Kovalevskaya, *Nihilist Girl*, 120.

Because Barantsova chose to marry this man his punishment is lightened to being banished to Siberia and Barantsova travels with him to Siberia thus taking the journey to radical nihilism to the very end and essentially ending her life as she knows it. In doing so she fulfills the requirements laid out by radical philosopher Sergey Nechaev in his work titled *The Catechism Of The Revolutionist* which stated that says “He is a doomed man” and “Must be prepared both to die himself and to destroy...”¹⁴

These writings were published when Kovalevskaya was nineteen years old. Which means she was old enough to obtain and understand them. It is quite possible that she could have used the guide on how to become a revolutionary as a guide for the character Vera while writing this book.

Through our examination of these subjects we observe that both Barantsova and Vasilisev follow a path toward nihilism that in fact reflects the road that many real life, well-educated Russians of this time took to become leftist radicals. We come to this conclusion based on the fact that key plot points in the book are mirrored by the actual occurrences in late nineteenth century Russia. Barantsova’s freedom is representative of the freedom granted to the people which in turn allowed them to discover new ideas and question the czar. This is illustrated through her tutor Vasiletsev who is symbolic of thinkers such as Nacheav, Bakunin, and others who provided the ideological groundwork and directive for the younger generation. This is demonstrated because both the character and the actual thinkers were well educated and spread their message the youth and urged that action be taken in order to change the system. We can see that this directive is followed because Vera Barantsova gets involved with the nihilists and becomes willing to give up her life as she knows it for the purpose of the revolution in the same way that real life revolutionary Vera Zasulich did.

Now that we see how closely this book parallels real life events we see that it is much more than a short story. It is a piece of social commentary and the world that is created within it can actually be seen as a microcosm for Russia at this time. It allows those not directly involved in the nihilist movement to understand how individuals become involved. It helps humanize radicals which allows the reader to step inside their shoes and see what led them down this path allowing the reader to make the journey with them.

¹⁴ Laqueur, Walter. *Voices of terror: manifestos, writings, and manuals of Al Qaeda, Hamas and other terrorists from around the world and throughout the ages*. New York, NY: Reed Press, 2004, 71-72