Prologue—
‘I’ll Make Them Pay’

Vladimir Ulyanov was puzzled when a class-mate called him aside to show him a letter she had just received from a friend in St Petersburg, the Russian capital. Soon he was reading the terrible news that his brother, Alexander, had been arrested and charged with plotting to assassinate the Emperor. He rushed home to tell his mother. His father, Count Ulyanov, had died the year before and so she had to make the long journey to St Petersburg alone. No one in Simbirsk would go with her; it was not wise to be friendly with the mother of a political prisoner.

In St Petersburg, she learned that Alexander, a brilliant science student, had joined a group of revolutionaries, the People’s Will, which had been set up to assassinate the Emperor and leading figures in the government. He had been arrested after waiting with a group of comrades, armed with home-made bombs, for the Emperor’s carriage to pass by. The police had warned Alexander III to stay in the Winter Palace and had turned up themselves to arrest the conspirators.

At the trial, Alexander told the judge, ‘My purpose was to aid in the liberation of the unhappy Russian people.’ He refused to show any regret, and asked why he had not tried to escape, said, ‘I did not want to escape. I wished to die for my country.’ In the early morning of 8 May 1887, Alexander and four others from People’s Will were hanged.

Back in Simbirsk, Vladimir read the news. He flung aside the paper and cried out: ‘I’ll make them pay for this! I swear it.’

Thirty years later, Vladimir Ulyanov was known throughout the world as Lenin, the man who on 8 November 1917 became the head of the first Communist state, the Soviet Union.
1 Russia and the Tsars

Vladimir Ulyanov

A month after the execution of Alexander, Vladimir left the high school at Simbirsk, with a gold medal for being the best student 'in ability, development and conduct'. His headmaster recommended him to Kazan University as a model student: 'Neither in or out of school has a single instance been observed when Ulyanov by word or deed caused dissatisfaction to his teachers or the school authorities.'

But it was only a few weeks before he was in trouble. In December 1887 the students at Kazan presented a petition to the head of the University demanding that they should have the freedom to hold political meetings. In the front row of the demonstrators stood Vladimir. That night he, and forty others, were arrested and expelled from the town. A police officer tried to give him advice: 'Why did you engage in this revolt, young man? Don't you realize you're up against a wall?'

'Yes, a wall, but a rotten one; one kick and it will crumble,' replied Vladimir.

What made Vladimir risk his own safety so soon after his own brother had given up his life?

The Tsars

They were both protesting against the system of government under the emperors, or Tsars, of Russia. Since the seventeenth century Russia had been ruled by the Romanov family. Their rule was the perfect example of autocracy—government by one man. There was no parliament or council from which the Tsar had to take advice. There was not even a committee, or cabinet, of ministers. Each of the ministers was the Tsar's personal servant and only the Tsar, and sometimes his wife or a favourite adviser, had a complete picture of the country's problems.

Autocracy had been necessary in the time of the early Tsars,
Modern Russia

Russia and the Tsars

not by me but by my forty thousand clerks.' The civil servants were graded into fourteen different ranks, from the humblest clerks at the bottom to the governors of the provinces and the ministers at St Petersburg at the top. Each rank carried with it a special uniform and title. Great honours poured on the few who reached the fourth grade, who were made noblemen and given the title of 'Excellency'. Only those with influential friends and relatives ever reached so high.

Many Russians sought after posts in the civil service because they meant a life of ease. At the very least, there was a chance of spending the long cruel winters in a warm office and there were plenty of opportunities for forcing bribes out of the people. Two common Russian proverbs were: 'Any stick will do to beat a thief but only a rouble will help you with an official', and 'The law is like an axe—you can turn it whichever way you please if you give it plenty of grease.'

The officials were given little freedom to make their own decisions. Even minor repairs to a government office required approval from a chain of higher officials which ended at the ministries in St Petersburg. In the reign of Nicholas I, the reports on one case filled 15,000 sheets of paper. The Russians accused the civil service of standing in the way of efforts to develop trade and industry and improve their towns and villages. Men and women were not even allowed to move from one district to another without passports and a pile of documents signed by officials.

The task of the civil service was to keep the autocracy in being and this could not be done if the Russian people were allowed any freedom to govern themselves.

The Okhrana

The job of making sure that the country remained loyal to the Tsar was given to the Minister of the Interior, who kept control by a confusing system of organizations. Russia was divided into fifty provinces, each of which had a governor. Below him were the governors of districts and the commandants of the towns. These men had wide powers and ruled with the help of their own police forces. But apart from these, the Minister of the Interior headed the Secret Police, known in the middle of the...
century as the Third Section and later as the Okhrana. It was the task of these men to seek out persons suspected of opposition to the Tsar. Their powers were very wide. There was no need to prove that a prisoner was plotting against the emperor; any suspect could be exiled to Siberia without any form of trial whatsoever. The Okhrana worked through secret agents who joined suspected organizations, or enrolled as students at a university, to seek out the tiniest breath of criticism. Many of its arrests were quite unjust and thousands of innocent Russians were exiled because the Okhrana was unwilling to admit a mistake. The Okhrana headquarters contained the ‘black room’ where mail was opened and read before being sent on its way. It had the power to censor all printed books and papers and order the removal of anything of which it disapproved.

The Land
The autocratic Tsars ruled over a country which, by comparison with western Europe, was backward in almost every respect. An English traveller, Mackenzie Wallace, toured the country in the 1860s and wrote a very full account of all he saw. Travel was boring and uncomfortable. There were very few railways because Russia was not the busy industrial nation that England, France and Germany had become at this time. The few trains ran across the unchanging plains at between fifteen and thirty miles an hour carrying passengers who sat surrounded by furs, blankets, pillows and food for a journey that might last for many days.

Most journeys were made by coach, usually a heavy wooden affair rather like a cradle on wheels, with no springs and nothing more than an armful of hay for a seat. Horses were changed at post-stations where passengers rested by stretching out on wooden benches. Very often they were annoyed to find themselves held up by post-station keepers or police chiefs who found some fault with their great bundle of documents. The roads were surfaced tracks of great width, due to the efforts of coach drivers to steer to the right or left of the deep ruts made by earlier coaches.

Peasants
In such coaches, Mackenzie Wallace passed along the broad muddy streets which ran through the centre of countless villages. The peasants who lived in them made up more than three-quarters of the Russian population. They lived in roughly-made timber houses whose roofs sloped down from the top of the single room and carried on over the stables and cowsheds. Inside, the only furniture was a rough wooden table, a bench and several stools. The most important object was a large brick stove. From the stove and along one wall ran a wide wooden shelf which served as a bed for the whole family. In the coldest weather peasants often slept on top of the stove itself.

Until 1861 the Russian peasants were serfs, the property of a landowner for whom they had to work three days in the week as well as paying a great number of different fees and rents. The owner controlled the private life of the serf. He chose his wife for him, prevented him from leaving the village or, on the other hand, punished a troublesome serf by forcing him into the army. The landowner had the right to beat his serfs and to sell them.

After 1861 when they were freed, the peasants found that life became harder. Most of them were granted less land than they had farmed as serfs and even this had to be bought from their old masters. As very few peasants had any savings, the government paid the landlords and collected the money by
instalments which, in most cases, were to go on until 1932.

Each family had to belong to the Mir or village assembly which was responsible to the government for the behaviour of the peasants. The Mir had to issue passports for those who wished to leave the village and was forced to collect heavy taxes to hand over to the government. It was also responsible for re-dividing the village land every few years. The peasants still farmed strips, no more than eight feet wide, in the three huge fields. Farming was extremely primitive. Very few peasants owned more than a crude wooden plough.

As the nineteenth century wore on, the share of land that fell to each peasant became smaller. Russia’s population grew from about sixty million to more than a hundred million in the second half of the century, and more people meant smaller farms and less food. Many peasants fell into debt and were forced to borrow from money-lenders at more than twenty per cent interest. Hundreds of thousands left the villages to seek work in city factories, but tens of millions stayed behind to face hardship and hunger. Their difficulties increased as the factories began to mass-produce articles made from leather, cane and wrought iron which previously peasants had made in their own homes and sold.

**Landlords**

Every few years hunger and misery led to peasant risings. Usually these took the form of attacks on neighbouring landowners who were rich in land and very often had fields which
they did not even bother to cultivate. Their houses were damaged and their hay-ricks and stables burned. On such occasions the government sent troops, usually the dreaded Cossacks, cavalry fighters from south Russia, who put down the peasants with great savagery and executed large numbers. Not surprisingly, the landowners feared any change in the system of government which might lead to plans for transferring some of their land to the peasants. They were the firmest supporters of the system of autocracy. Yet most of them did very little to serve their country in any useful way. Mackenzie Wallace described a typical day in the life of a landlord, Ivan Ivanovitch:

'Ivan Ivanovitch gets up about seven o'clock and puts on, with the assistance of his valet de chambre, a simple costume consisting chiefly of a faded, plentifully stained dressing gown. Having nothing in particular to do, he sits down at the open window and looks into the yard. . . . Towards nine o'clock tea is announced and he goes into the dining room. . . . As this morning meal consists merely of bread and tea, it does not last long; and all disperse to their several occupations. The head of the house begins the labours of the day by resuming his seat at the open window. When he has smoked some cigarettes he goes out with the intention of visiting the stables and farmyard, but generally before he has crossed the court he finds the heat unbearable, and returns to his former position by the open window. Here he sits tranquilly till the sun has so far moved round that the verandah at the back of the house is completely in the shade, when he has his arm-chair removed thither, and sits there till dinner-time.

'Dinner is the great event of the day. The food is abundant and of good quality, but mushrooms, onions and fat play a rather too important part.

'No sooner has the last dish been removed than a deathlike stillness falls upon the house; it is the time of the afternoon siesta.

'In about two hours the house gradually re-awakes . . . soon a man-servant issues from the kitchen bearing an enormous tea urn which puffs like a little steam engine.

'In the evening it often happens that a little group of peasants come into the court and ask to see the "master" . . .
expected to teach respect for the autocracy through its bishops and priests, and in its schools. It provided nearly all Russia's very few schools, where religion and ancient literature were taught to the wealthy. The Tsar and the Church did not want education for the masses who might demand changes in society.

The Bishops watched carefully over the parish priests, even censoring their sermons. Very few parish priests tried to change the ignorance and superstition of the peasants. The peasants despised them for their idleness, and the payments they took for holy days and marriage or burial services. One priest complained to Mackenzie Wallace: 'I can see that the peasants grudge every handful of rye and every egg that they give me. I can hear their sneers as I go away and I know that they have many sayings such as "The priest takes from the living and from the dead."

The Opposition
The backwardness of Russia, the cruelty of the government and the miserable living conditions of the peasants led to attacks on the autocracy. The earliest criticisms came from the liberals, men and women who compared the state of Russia with conditions in the countries of western Europe, where rapid changes were taking place. Cities were growing into bustling centres of industry. France, Britain and Germany were building a network of railways; new scientific discoveries and inventions were made every year.

These countries, the liberals thought, were thriving because of their more democratic systems of government. In England and France, power had passed from the kings and the landowning classes into the hands of the middle classes, ruling through parliaments. This had led to many improvements. There was no secret police and judges were not expected to give the verdict the government wanted. Education was encouraged. In Germany one in every eight of the population was in school while the figure for Russia was only one in 376. Life was hard for the poor but there were none of the cruelties still practised in Russia—flogging, for example, or the passport system which prevented people moving about the country and, above all, serfdom were no longer known.
Liberalism was a strong force among educated Russians. Many were from noble families and had grown up deeply ashamed of the idle and purposeless lives led by their friends and relatives. From the great Russian novelists, playwrights and poets of the time they learned to mock the inefficiency and ignorance of civil servants and to hate the cruelty of the secret police. ‘God, what sad country Russia is,’ said the poet, Pushkin, after reading Dead Souls, a tragicomic novel by Gogol. Tolstoy attacked the stupidity and cruelty of the police and law courts in Resurrection and he expressed his deep sympathy with the peasants in Anna Karenina.

There was a brief time at the beginning of the reign of Alexander II (1858–1881) when the liberals had some success. The Crimean War had exposed Russia’s backwardness. The nation had been unable to provide good transportation to southern Russia for her armies who were fighting French and British troops, who had travelled two or three thousand miles to the battlefield. The defeat of Russia was blamed on the inefficient government and led to widespread demands for change. Alexander feared that his empire was on the edge of revolution and tried to weaken the opposition, first by freeing the serfs in 1861 and then by granting some of the reforms called for by the liberals. In 1864 he allowed each district to set up a zemstvo or local council with powers to provide roads, schools and medical services. This was a concession to the liberals, not to the masses of the people, for the right to elect zemstvo members was restricted to the wealthy.

In many zemstvos liberals won a majority and set out to use their powers to the fullest. Schools, clinics and doctors’ surgeries were opened; some roads and bridges were built. But the zemstvo experiment only sharpened the divisions in Russia. The civil service did everything it could to obstruct the work of the zemstvos. Landowners of the old school resented the zemstvos’ attempts to improve the lives of peasants who only a few years before had been their serfs.

Alexander’s hopes of winning support for the autocracy were shattered by the continued demands of liberals for more reforms. He began to rely more and more on the civil service, the secret police, the old nobility and the church. Yet his ministers and his police could not crush the new opposition which grew up in the universities.

The Narodniki
One of Alexander’s reforms had been to relax police control over university education. For the first time many students heard of socialism, which was a growing movement in the cities of western Europe. Most of the Russian poor were peasants so ignorant that they accepted their way of life because they knew of nothing better. To many young educated Russians it seemed that here was the force which could sweep away the autocracy. If only the tens of millions of peasants could be brought to demand more freedom, more education and more land, they would create a force which no government could stop.

In 1874 the idea was put into practice. Two thousand young men and women put on peasant dress and went into the countryside. This movement ‘to the people’ (in Russian, y narodu) earned them the name ‘narodniki’. Living with the peasants they helped them by teaching, nursing and giving medical help. At the same time they tried to explain how they hoped the peasants would take part in their campaign for a democratic government. They were disappointed and discovered what one writer meant when he said that the people cared more for potatoes than a constitution.

Although the movement was a failure the government took it seriously. The secret police arrested 1,500 narodniki. The narodniki tried again the following year with the same result; the peasants were not interested, and the police were active.

What then were the narodniki to do? This was the moment when the supporters of terrorism had their chance—for some believed that any form of government was bad and assassination of political leaders was a means of setting the people free. The narodniki set up a special terror organization, People’s Will, which was to organize attacks on the Tsar and his leading ministers. ‘History is terribly slow, it must be pushed forward,’ said one of the organizers.

In 1879 they condemned the Tsar to death. There were seven failures before, in March 1881, a bomb was thrown at
the Tsar's carriage, killing one of his guard. Alexander stepped down to look at the bomb thrower who had been seized by the crowd. As he returned to his carriage, a second bomb was thrown. Alexander died an hour later.

Pobedonostsev and the Reaction
The new Tsar, Alexander III, 'mounted the throne as a soldier mounts the breach', determined to crush all opposition. The years which followed 1881 are known as the reaction, the time when the government, and its supporters in the Church and among the landowners, did all they could to undo the advances made under Alexander II.

To organize the reaction Alexander called upon Pobedonostsev, the procurator of the Holy Synod. Pobedonostsev was a firm believer in autocracy. 'Parliamentarianism', he once said, 'is the great lie of our time.' He immediately strengthened the powers of the secret police and made the censorship of books and newspapers even stricter. He then stopped the spread of new schools, which he believed turned the children of the poor into dangerous revolutionaries. The fees for secondary schools were increased so that 'children of coachmen, servants, laundresses, small shop-keepers and the like' would not be able to attend. He clamped down on the universities. Professors were in future to be chosen by the government; students were forbidden to join clubs. Police spies were enrolled as students to see that lectures contained no criticism of the government and to seek out secret organizations among the students.

An even more evil side of the reaction was the persecution of the non-Russian people in the Empire.

The Russian Empire had grown from the tiny state of Muscovy, the area around the city of Moscow. As it expanded the Muscovites, or Great Russians, had conquered people of many different races and religions. Together these 'minority people' made up nearly half the total population of the Empire. In the south they were mostly Asiatic people, many of them Muslims, who had been over-run by the Cossack bands of free Russian fighters. In the west the minority people were the people of Lithuania, the Ukraine and Poland, all of whom
which taught minority languages were closed. Opponents of Russian rule were arrested and exiled by the Okhrana. Worst were the pogroms. Mobs of Russians were encouraged by the government to attack Jews or other minority people and to destroy their homes and businesses while the police made no effort to interfere.

THE RUSSIAN POPULATION FROM THE CENSUS OF 1897

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<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Percentage of Population of Empire</th>
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<tr>
<td>Great Russians</td>
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<td>Ukrainians</td>
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had been conquered by Russia in the eighteenth century. The kingdom of Poland had been divided among three European countries but Russia took the largest share, including the capital, Warsaw. Many of the people of the western lands were Roman Catholics, but there were also a large number of Jews, who had always been persecuted by the Great Russians and forced to live within the 'pale', a narrow strip of western Russia.

In the nineteenth century nationalist movements grew up among the minority peoples, who demanded greater freedom and the right to practise their own religions and use their own languages. Pobedonostsev's answer was Russification, or enforcing the ways of life of the Great Russians on the minorities. Special privileges were given to those who followed the Russian Orthodox faith and those who spoke Russian. Schools