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## The Political Thought of Vera Zasulich

Compared to Lenin or Plekhanov or Martov, Vera Zasulich is a relatively minor figure in the Russian Revolutionary pantheon. She is remembered more for shooting Trepov in 1878 than for anything else she accomplished in her lifetime. Vera Zasulich created no party, conceived no doctrine, established no personal following. Her political thought is not without originality or interest, however, and an examination of her ideas reveals how radical dogma equating poverty and virtue was able to fascinate Russian *intelligenty* possessed by an altruism which demanded that the affluent and educated help redistribute the material and intellectual resources of society. Teaching illiterate workers the rudiments of education in the 1860s, preaching revolution among the peasants of southern Russia in the 1870s, and disseminating Marxist theory in the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s helped assuage the guilt Zasulich had accumulated as a woman of education and refinement. Viewed as a whole, these activities exhibit a dominant theme of her life, which transcends her conversion from Populism to Marxism in the 1880s.

Zasulich never lost the unconventional personal habits she had acquired during her adolescence, and thus, to many of her acquaintances, she appeared to be the embodiment of the epic history of revolutionary struggle. Her attire, reminiscent of that of Russian nihilists, generally reflected what one friendly observer termed "an absolute and complete indifference to her appearance."<sup>1</sup> In the words of Rosaliia Plekhanova:

She wore a shapeless dress . . . it was a piece of linen from the center of which had been cut a hole for her head and from the sides of which had been cut a hole for her arms. This piece of linen, thrown on our new friend, was held by a narrow belt, and its edges hung down, fluttering on all sides. On her head was something resembling not a hat, but rather a pie, made of crumpled gray material.<sup>2</sup>

With considerable nostalgia, in 1924, Leon Trotsky expressed his affection for Zasulich, and rendered a description of her manner:

She wrote very slowly, suffering truly all the torments of creation; she put down one sentence at a time, pacing up and down her room, shuffling in her slippers, chain-smoking cigarettes she had rolled herself, throwing butts in all corners of the room, on the window sills, on the tables, scattering ash over her blouse, her arms, her manuscripts, her cup of tea, and incidentally also over her interlocutor.<sup>3</sup>

1. L. I. Aksel'rod, *Etiudy i vospominaniia* (Leningrad, 1925), p. 37.

2. R. M. Plekhanova, "Stranitsa iz vospominanii o V. I. Zasulich," *Gruppa "Osvo-bozhdienie Truda": Iz arkhivov G. V. Plekhanova, V. I. Zasulich i L. G. Deicha*, vol. 3 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1925), pp. 84-85.

3. Leon Trotsky, *Lenin: Notes for a Biographer* (New York, 1971), p. 41.

Observers also spoke of an introspection so extreme that to some it seemed symptomatic of psychological impairment.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, even as they admired her, Zaslulich's colleagues in the organizations to which she belonged often underestimated her capacity for serious thought. By and large, she was valued as an inspirational figure whose reputation as Trepov's assassin helped give these groups the revolutionary pedigree they needed in order to legitimize their existence. Indeed, after 1900, as the ravages of tuberculosis made her more inclined to defer to her colleagues on matters of substance, it was only natural that they should have esteemed her past heroics and treated less seriously the ideas that she could, on occasion, still articulate in print. But her reticence should not be confused with intellectual vacuity. Although she lacked Plekhanov's theoretical brilliance, Aksel'rod's predilection for organizational questions, and Lenin's gift for polemical invective, Zaslulich added to Russian socialism a sensitivity to moral subtleties which made particularly unfortunate her later silence at large gatherings, where her prestige alone might have swayed minds and altered policies she opposed.

Central to Zaslulich's thinking was the notion that, under socialism, man would finally realize the utilitarian ideal of the greatest good for the greatest number. Having read in her adolescence the works of Mill, Lavrov, and Chernyshevskii, Zaslulich felt certain that mankind would ultimately evolve to a state of harmony and bliss in which individual and collective happiness coincided. It seems that no one else in the history of Russian Marxism described the socialist utopia in terms based so fundamentally upon utilitarian calculations; everything else in Zaslulich's thinking is derived from the synthesis of utilitarianism and Marxism, most notably her view of the relationship between the proletariat and the revolutionary party which purports to act on its behalf.

At first glance it would appear that Zaslulich's altruism and her utilitarianism could not possibly be reconciled, since a political philosophy based on utility would presumably contradict a personal ethos based on idealism and self-sacrifice. But in Zaslulich's mind, utilitarianism meant something quite different from what it meant to those in Russia who proclaimed themselves to be utilitarians. For Chernyshevskii, writing in *What is to be Done?*, utilitarianism was akin to rational egoism, according to which society would benefit if its members calculated their self-interest rationally. For Pisarev, utilitarianism meant simply the practice of evaluating everything in terms of its social utility, which, in the context of an impoverished and predominantly illiterate society, caused Pisarev to deduce that a pair of boots had more value than the entire corpus of Pushkin's writings. But for Zaslulich, utilitarianism implied the effort through words and deeds to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number, a formulation which became the principal criterion by which she determined that a socialist order was preferable to any other. Given her sense of civic responsibility, Zaslulich concluded that her obligation as a woman of gentry lineage was to help the lower classes achieve the material prosperity and cultural enlightenment without which the general sum of happiness in society could never reflect much more than the well-being of a few.

For Zaslulich, therefore, utilitarianism was transformed into its opposite: self-interest became self-sacrifice and rational calculation became noblesse oblige.

4. For example, Sergei Kravchinskii, *Underground Russia* (London, 1883), pp. 108-9.

By extracting from utilitarianism the part that appealed more than any other to her emotions, Zasulich may have been playing with fashionable terminology without truly understanding it. But if her utilitarianism was uniquely her own, the altruistic impulses behind it were not. Indeed, the varieties of ideology which appeared in Russia in the late nineteenth century reveal how individuals with the same sense of civic obligation sought different intellectual superstructures under which their more elemental impulses could be explained, justified, and, in some cases, defended against theoretical attack. Provided one recognizes Zasulich's utilitarianism as really more ethos than ideology, as well as a call for the individual to work for the general welfare, it is possible to trace her objections to Leninism, which, in contrast to her philosophical reflections, have had lasting significance. For this reason, Zasulich's thought deserves thorough exploration.

Perhaps the clearest exposition of Zasulich's "utilitarianism" is her critique of philosophical idealism (entitled "Elements of Idealism in Socialism") published in *Zaria* in 1902.<sup>5</sup> Written while Zasulich was one of six coeditors of *Iskra*, the essay attacked the philosophy and social ethics of Nicholas Berdiaev, a recent convert from Marxism to an idealism *au courant* in intellectual circles which, in the words of Peter Struve, attempted "to inject a valuable moral content into the sociopolitical ideal of the proletariat."<sup>6</sup> Berdiaev ultimately embraced Russian Orthodoxy as most congenial to his idiosyncratic concept of "creative freedom," but there was a period in his intellectual development when his idealism was still entirely secular. Berdiaev had once adopted but later repudiated a materialism which he considered to be the principal flaw in Marxist theory: in its emphasis on the material origin of all ideas, Marxism lacked ethical content, causing its proponents to determine the moral value of an action solely by its momentary utility in the struggle for a socialist revolution. In Berdiaev's view, Marxists such as Zasulich and Plekhanov were actually engaged in disseminating an ethic of hedonistic self-enrichment which, he claimed, was identical to the "*burzhuaznost*" that socialists were ostensibly determined to eradicate. According to Berdiaev, the fulfillment of man's creative potential, the establishment of man's supremacy over nature, the elimination of all barriers between intellectual and manual labor, and all the other goals of Marxism would be rendered unattainable by the vulgar and philosophical materialism that Russian socialists espoused while attempting to achieve these ends.<sup>7</sup> Berdiaev proposed instead that socialists redirect their energies to what he termed "the perfection of the individual personality." According to Berdiaev, man was an end in himself, and the political system in Russia blunted, but could not completely eradicate, his moral and creative potential. Thus, it seemed only logical that, given the difficulty of reforming social and political institutions, revolutionaries could best serve their altruistic impulses by espousing the virtues of inner moral transformation; only after spiritual regeneration was complete would it be possible—and morally permissible

5. The essay is reprinted in Vera Zasulich, *Sbornik statei*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1907), 2:313–71.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

7. Works by Berdiaev that Zasulich found especially infuriating were his *Sub'ektivizm i individualizm v obshchestvennoi filosofii* (St. Petersburg, 1901) and "Bor'ba za idealizm," *Mir bozhii*, 10, no. 6 (June 1901), from both of which she quoted extensively in her essay.

—to attempt to transform society. If, in Marx's scheme, changes in human nature could only be the result of changes in man's environment, in Berdiaev's system, this sequence was reversed: man's environment could be altered legitimately only after he had rediscovered his spirituality.

What makes Zaslulich's rebuttal so distinctive, when compared with her *Iskra* colleagues' responses, is the utilitarian phraseology she employed to embellish it. To Berdiaev's claim that Marxists have no genuine system of ethics, Zaslulich replied that whether they do or not is irrelevant, because the only moral principle Marxists require is what she referred to as *solidarnost'*, the notion that, if necessary, one must sacrifice one's personal fortunes for the greater good of society. Fortunately, serving society is almost always in one's personal interest, but in cases where one can distinguish between "individual" and "collective" happiness, there is no doubt that the Marxist should prefer one to the other. In a lengthy footnote, Zaslulich explicitly acknowledged this utilitarian morality in her ideology:

As far as I know, Marxism has no official system of morality. But it is clear that Social Democrats and all those who struggle on behalf of the proletariat have one all-embracing moral demand: solidarity. Not doing anything contrary to the general good is the minimal demand of solidarity; doing everything one can for the general good, not sparing anything personal for it, if necessary, even dying for it, is the maximum. This is undoubtedly a utilitarian morality. What defines this demand is the general welfare, to which the fate of the individual is inextricably joined.<sup>8</sup>

Zaslulich found Berdiaev's social ethics—or more precisely his lack of them—appalling not because she considered man's moral perfection ignoble or wrong, but because such a goal seemed to bear no relation to the more important task of increasing the general sum of happiness in society. With considerable emotion she accepted Berdiaev's contention that Russia was intellectually backward, but maintained that the cause of this was something other than the vulgar materialism that Berdiaev had condemned:

It is true that now there is just as little concern for beauty as there is for truth, for social interest, for friendship or life in the purely human meaning of this word. The market struggle, which absorbs all spiritual forces, pushes aside and perverts all the higher human needs. It perverts even the means of their satisfaction, overcrowding the market with substitutes for truth and beauty and all that which by their very essence the market struggles and valuations do not nurture—and which can develop freely only above an economic level of existence which satisfies the lowest and most basic needs.<sup>9</sup>

Dismissing Berdiaev's idealism as an excuse for doing nothing to aid the cause of social justice, she affirmed instead what she termed a "practical"—as opposed to a purely metaphysical—idealism, which she said was possible "only when the individual merges his own personality with the general good, the common revolutionary cause."<sup>10</sup>

8. Zaslulich, *Sbornik statei*, 2:332–33.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 352.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

If nothing else, "Elements of Idealism in Socialism" demonstrates that Zasulich had become a Marxist in the 1880s primarily because she found in socialism the best expression of the utilitarian ideal. Whereas capitalism encouraged self-enrichment, socialism would allow man to work for the general welfare without regarding his labor as a sacrifice of his personal interest; indeed, in Marx's system, the distinction between individual and collective happiness would disappear as economic forces creating conflict were eliminated. With his interests finally identical to his neighbors', man would live in a state of perpetual peace, secure in the knowledge that the elimination of private property and the profit motive made possible the fulfillment of all material and spiritual needs. With the awkward eloquence she displayed when writing about subjects she considered especially significant, Zasulich described the socialist utopia:

The sociopsychological and ethical significance of the replacement of the contemporary order by the socialist consists in the emancipation of people from personal, individual anxieties over their personal or family welfare, in the abolition of the degrading struggle among people for bread and for contentment, in the emancipation of the soul from the fear of tomorrow's hunger, and in the destruction, consequently, not only of the necessity but even of the very possibility of transforming the securing of their personal satisfaction into the object of a cult, into the supreme aim and highest value of life.<sup>11</sup>

Although manual labor would remain obligatory under socialism, the time spent performing such labor would be minimized sufficiently so that no one would lack the opportunity to realize his creative potential. Freed from the need to secure the material necessities of life, man could finally experience the satisfaction of intellectual accomplishment, cognizant that his efforts would benefit not only himself but society as well. To Zasulich the creation of a socialist society meant that after years of economic exploitation, when the perpetual struggle for survival made intellectual endeavor impossible, "man at last could now make his own history."<sup>12</sup>

Having said this, in the same essay Zasulich felt compelled to explain why some people more than others could develop the civic consciousness that she considered both a prerequisite of and a concomitant to socialism; for a Marxist, this meant explaining why only the proletariat was qualified to achieve a socialist revolution. According to Zasulich, the proletariat was different from other classes, past and present, in that it had no reason to develop an ethic of self-aggrandizement. Because the fruits of the worker's labor were returned to him only after a significant portion had been extracted in the form of "surplus value," his contemplation of personal enrichment was, in her words, "comparable to participating in a lottery without a ticket."<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the bourgeoisie and the peasantry, who devoted their energies to protecting their own interests, the worker quickly lost all incentive to advance his interests at the expense of his neighbors'. In other words, only workers could advance what Rousseau had

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 349–50.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 344.

termed "the general will" a century earlier.<sup>14</sup> And yet, while industrial labor tied the body of the worker to his employer, "his mind and emotions remained free . . . to concentrate on wider, more general concerns than all the complicated needs of independent producers."<sup>15</sup> Because his labor precluded the accumulation of wealth, the worker had the capacity to develop an ethos of collective solidarity and a consciousness of the general welfare without which no group of individuals could ever coalesce into a political party or movement committed to the transformation of society. Accordingly, as an ideology of revolution, socialism "can be a goal only of the party of the proletariat, and can be realized only by the proletariat itself."<sup>16</sup>

In practical terms, this meant that Zasluch's preference for a workers' revolution rather than a coup d'état by socialist *intelligentsy* was not based on any special reverence for majority rule; that the class which brought about the revolution would also constitute the majority was, in her mind, incidental to the fact that, among the classes of society, the proletariat alone possessed the solidarity that was necessary to conduct a revolution and to create a socialist order in the aftermath. To be sure, Zasluch's critique of the October Revolution included a strongly worded admonition that democracy of some sort was required to prevent the immediate degeneration of socialism into tyranny. Undoubtedly, the rule of a self-appointed elite in Petrograd troubled her greatly, and perhaps it was fortunate for her that she passed away in 1919, before the authoritarianism in the Bolshevik Party attained its most grotesque expression in Stalinism. But in 1902 Zasluch was concerned with other matters. One suspects that Marx's failure to predict the continued rise of real wages impelled her to dwell instead on the psychological effects of industrial capitalism and to point out the positive role of workers' "alienation" in creating proletarian solidarity. In many ways the most cogent of Zasluch's works, "Elements of Idealism in Socialism" possibly reflected the belief that new and different arguments were required for Marxism to withstand the attacks of those, such as Eduard Bernstein, who effectively refuted Marx's prediction of proletarian immiseration. If, in her rebuttal, Zasluch so diluted Marxism with utilitarian phraseology that the product which emerged bore scant resemblance to the original theory, this was a risk she was willing to take. In her own way, she was just as ideologically flexible as Lenin, and she composed a polemic no less audacious than Lenin's *What is to be Done?*, which rephrased, in different terminology, the tenets of a doctrine its creator had felt would require no revision.

It is clear from Zasluch's writings that solidarity brings with it not only political consciousness but certain psychological benefits as well. As a member for many years of Plekhanov's tiny Emancipation of Labor group, living in Switzerland hundreds of miles from her homeland, Zasluch concluded from her own isolation that the individual derives psychological comfort, above all, from

14. It is noteworthy that, in 1896, Zasluch composed a biography of Rousseau in which she tried to demonstrate that Rousseau had been a proto-Menshevik among the monarchs and aristocrats of his day in his view that only the lower classes acting in concert could eliminate disparities of wealth and opportunity (see V. I. Zasluch, *Zhan-Zhak Russo*, reprinted in Zasluch, *Sbornik statei*, 1:1-144).

15. Zasluch, *Sbornik statei*, 2:344.

16. *Ibid.*

collective endeavor. For example, in her essay, "Outline History" of the First International, Zasulich argued that strikes in Western Europe were successful after 1864 primarily because the International had lent to them its financial resources and prestige.<sup>17</sup> As an institution dedicated to the welfare of workers everywhere, the International gave striking workers the confidence, assertiveness, and esprit de corps that emerge only when one enlists in collective entities such as trade unions, student circles, and political parties:

Although the Norman weaver and Belgian coal miner joined the International without reading its statutes, the mere act of joining forced him at once to understand and to experience staggering things: the individual worker who, from his very childhood, perhaps, had not received help from anyone else, was only vaguely conscious of his solidarity with millions of fellow workers throughout the world. He could not help but feel that with the workers of a faraway distant city, the very name of which he had previously never known, workers who in the most difficult moments of his strike had sent him a few pennies of their own, he had a greater kinship than he did with all those in his own country who exploited him. The International enabled the working class to feel . . . that collective power which is the result of a unified organization.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of the International, then, was that it fostered allegiances, traditions, and alliances which alleviated feelings of isolation and powerlessness. In contrast to classical liberalism, in which the individual and his autonomy were considered the objects of all political endeavor, Zasulich maintained that a person could find happiness and protection only in the camaraderie of collective action; unless he joined his fate to others in an organization whose bonds transcended the limits of his experience, man was powerless to effect beneficial changes in his life. Apparently oblivious to the danger to personal freedom contained in the ethos of collective action, Zasulich passionately and consistently espoused it, quite possibly because it seemed the best alternative in an age when the individual remained essentially helpless in his struggle for survival. Both to the workers in Russia and to Zasulich alone in exile in Western Europe, the only possibility of self-improvement seemed to lie in association with mass movements of one sort or another.

Three years later, in a review of Sergei Kravchinskii's novel, *The Career of a Nihilist*, Zasulich returned to this theme.<sup>19</sup> After describing the novel and pointing out what she considered its inadequacies, she evoked Turgenev's Rudin as a fictional character who possessed the complexity lacking in Kravchinskii's characters. To Zasulich, Rudin was particularly appealing because he personified a commitment to improving the public welfare at a time when most men of his class were preoccupied with concerns of a purely egoistic nature:

17. Written in 1889 to coincide with the convocation of the Second International, the essay is reprinted in *ibid.*, 1:245–318.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 317.

19. Originally published in *Sotsial-demokrat*, 1892, no. 4; the essay has been reprinted in Zasulich, *Sbornik statei*, 2:111–47.

His task—the task of that time—consisted solely in developing in people a striving for the general and the great, to make people realize for the first time that there could be in the world concerns and issues other than the personal, that everything great is perfected through people, not through tsars and generals.<sup>20</sup>

However, as Zasluch noted, Rudin was too far ahead of his time. Because the opportunities for practical action were virtually nonexistent, he never developed the humility and self-effacement essential to a successful revolutionary. Indeed, the best corrective for Rudin's egoism and vanity would have been for him to join a revolutionary organization which demanded of its members a sincere commitment to the general welfare. According to Zasluch,

in a revolutionary organization all the weak and seamy aspects of Rudin's character would recede and only the more splendid ones would remain. Conscious of his own superiority in certain aspects of revolutionary action, he would be forced to recognize his inadequacies in many others. . . . The investment of all resources of an organization to the general good, and the intimate camaraderie which makes possible the kinds of sacrifices even the closest of friends cannot make for one another, eliminates from this world even the faintest trace of a personal struggle for individual survival.<sup>21</sup>

For Zasluch, then, a socialist party was something more than an association of like-minded individuals engaged in the pursuit of common goals. A socialist party, as her analysis of Turgenev's Rudin so clearly reveals, had the power to effect a moral transformation in those willing to subordinate their personal concerns and petty vanities to the greater good of revolutionary action. Not only a means by which to achieve political objectives, a revolutionary party was also an instrument of spiritual purification, the vehicle through which those in power after a socialist revolution would acquire the humility, self-effacement, and concern for the general good which was essential if the socialist utopia was to be as virtuous as she claimed.

Few others in the revolutionary movement, it seems, viewed the party in quite the same fashion as Zasluch. To Plekhanov and Aksel'rod, the party was the political expression of the urban proletariat and a means by which the workers would gain a consciousness of their role within society.<sup>22</sup> To Lenin, it was an elite of hardened revolutionaries acting in what they thought to be the best interests of the proletariat.<sup>23</sup> However, one finds in Zasluch's articles published in the 1890s and 1900s the idiosyncratic notion that a revolutionary party elevates the moral caliber of virtually everyone who participates in it, transforming intelligent but self-centered individuals like Turgenev's Rudin into men who have such compassion for what she calls "the general and the

20. Ibid., p. 119.

21. Ibid., pp. 120–21.

22. For Aksel'rod's views in this regard, the reader should refer to his "Ob'edinenie rossiiskoi sotsial-demokratii i eia zadachi," *Iskra*, no. 55 (December 15, 1903), and *ibid.*, no. 57 (January 15, 1904).

23. V. I. Lenin, *Chto delat'?*, reprinted in V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., vol. 6 (Moscow, 1959), pp. 30–31, 124–27.



great" that they become, in effect, living proof of the superiority of socialism. In Zasulich's conception of a socialist party, one also sees her vision of a socialist society, the self-sacrifice and dedication of party members being a harbinger of what will exist on a larger scale when these virtues have pervaded the proletariat as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the moral purification that results when one commits oneself to a collective enterprise like a revolutionary party was Zasulich's most vivid illustration that a socialist society was preferable to a capitalist one. No doubt, Marxists everywhere agreed that workers' parties of one kind or another were essential in the struggle against industrial capitalism, but none believed more passionately than Zasulich in the capacity of these parties to bring about a moral transformation among its members *before* significant progress had been made in improving the objective conditions of society. By the camaraderie, élan, and ethic of self-sacrifice it engendered, a revolutionary party "socialized" its members the way the proletariat, by virtue of its solidarity, would socialize all means of production once political power had passed into its hands. For Zasulich, a revolutionary party was actually a socialist society in microcosm, its virtues evident to everyone. Thus, in Zasulich's view, the party was an integral aspect of any socialist movement. Indeed, one of the reasons she tried so assiduously (and, for the most part, unsuccessfully) to preserve the unity of the RSDLP was that, because she saw the party as the temporary repository of revolutionary virtue, party infighting called into question the entire revolutionary enterprise; if the intelligentsia could not achieve this spiritual transformation, it could hardly help the proletariat to do the same.

But an aspect of Zasulich's thinking no less important than those already mentioned was her belief that, in the end, "the emancipation of the workers must be a matter for the workers themselves"—a phrase which appears countless times in her writings.<sup>25</sup> No matter how diligently intellectuals such as herself exerted themselves on behalf of the workers, or how much workers initially depended on bourgeois revolutionaries for tactical and ideological support,

it must be made clear to the Russian people that without the working masses a revolution is unthinkable; it is necessary that bourgeois revolutionaries be convinced once and for all that any revolutionary movement which does not direct all its energies in the direction of acquiring mass support among the people is "abnormal" and condemned to failure.<sup>26</sup>

24. There is reason to believe that Zasulich argued this point strenuously because she had seen in her dealings with Nechaev in the late 1860s how one man's duplicity ultimately robbed his circle of all moral rectitude; in her mind, a judgment of Nechaev was also a judgment of the society he promised to create. Like Zasulich, both an accomplice and a victim of Nechaev's intrigues, Mikhail Bakunin drew from this experience the same conclusion (which he sometimes ignored)—that a revolutionary party is not simply an instrument of liberation but an embryonic model of that liberation as well (Arthur Lehning, ed., *Michel Bakounine et ses relations avec Sergej Nečaev, 1870–1872: Ecrits et matériaux* [Leiden, 1971], pp. 117 and 126). I am indebted to Professor Marshall Shatz for calling Bakunin's views to my attention.

25. V. I. Zasulich, "Revoliutsionery iz burzhuaaznoi sredy," *Sotsial-demokrat*, 1890, no. 1, cited in Zasulich, *Sbornik statei*, 2:29.

26. V. I. Zasulich, "Kar'era nigilista," *Sotsial-demokrat*, 1892, no. 4; reprinted in Zasulich, *Sbornik statei*, 2:146.

In her article, "Revolutionaries of Bourgeois Background," Zasluch described how the proletariat of Western Europe had been betrayed in 1848 when it placed its fate in the hands of the bourgeoisie, which at that time was at a stage in its development roughly equivalent to that of the Russian intelligentsia in the 1890s. The workers realized too late that the bourgeoisie had turned against them when the revolutions it had started began to threaten its vital economic interests.<sup>27</sup> The treachery of the bourgeoisie had taught the workers to be self-reliant, a lesson she hoped they would not forget in future struggles. Still, as she judiciously pointed out, there was a tiny fraction of bourgeois revolutionaries who had performed admirably on behalf of the proletariat in 1848. Notwithstanding the contradiction between their convictions and their economic interests,

when republicans in 1848 were revolutionaries, when, risking their freedom and their lives, they turned to the workers and participated with them in conversations, and lined up with them in the courts and on the barricades, they honestly thought of the workers as their comrades, and sincerely called them to a struggle that would benefit them both. At the same time, these bourgeois revolutionaries performed a service for the workers, stimulating in them an interest in things intellectual, forcing them to become aware of those ideas and those interests that the two classes held in common.<sup>28</sup>

According to Zasluch, bourgeois intellectuals capable of acting against the interests of their class could be found both in Western Europe and in Russia. She undoubtedly included herself and her *Iskra* colleagues among them.

In her view, the historical task of "revolutionaries of bourgeois background" was to mediate what she described as "the interaction between revolutionary thought and a revolutionary class"—which, in practical terms, meant simply that the revolutionaries should serve as teachers of the workers, instructing them in the doctrines of socialism on the assumption that a revolution could not take place without them.<sup>29</sup> In a letter to Engels in 1890, she defined her view of the pedagogical obligation of intellectuals like herself:

Our task is to occupy ourselves unconditionally with the propagandizing of revolutionary socialism, of the principles of Marxism, and to bring greater clarity to the ideological confusion that now exists, which is very harmful to the movement. . . . This is our goal, and we will do everything we can to achieve it.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, one of her objections to the terrorism of *Narodnaia volia* had been that it turned inward the attention of nearly everyone engaged in it, thereby separating the intelligentsia even more from the workers and peasants who required its assistance. In "Elements of Idealism in Socialism," she defined further the relationship between workers and revolutionary *intelligenty*:

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–14.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

30. Zasluch letter to Engels, April 10, 1890, in *Perepiska Marksa i Engel'sa s russkimi politicheskimi deiateliami* (Moscow, 1947), p. 260.

Whether it wants to or not, the intelligentsia will influence the proletariat in the evolution of its views. For the workers to answer their own questions without the whispers of the “bacillus” of the intelligentsia; for their *Weltanschauung* to be formed exclusively under the influence of their factory work and material existence—this is just as impossible to achieve as it would be to isolate the factory proletariat from the *raznochintsy* . . . who represent in their social position and education the natural ties which exist between the lowest strata of the urban poor and the world of the intelligentsia and of the book. . . . At the present juncture in history the intelligentsia cannot help but shape the views of the proletariat.<sup>31</sup>

Zasulich’s conception of the evolution of Russian Social Democracy—even if, in contrast to Plekhanov, she never discussed the topic systematically—can now be determined. In her view, the roles of the intelligentsia and the proletariat would at some point undergo a radical transformation, with the two groups essentially reversing the existing relationship between them. Although, at the outset, the intelligentsia would lead and the proletariat would follow, by the time conditions were ripe for revolution, the proletariat would dominate the revolutionary movement. In spite of the fact that the proletariat initially lacked the consciousness of Marxist doctrine to lead a socialist or even a bourgeois revolution, the efforts of the intelligentsia would have given it sufficient knowledge of its role and obligations to allow the intelligentsia simply to fade into the background, no longer required as the teacher of the workers. By a peculiar working of the dialectic, the intelligentsia would create the conditions which would render it irrelevant: having educated the workers it would withdraw, handing over the party apparatus it had nurtured for so long. Zasulich did not indicate the precise point at which this transfer of political power would occur, but her critical comments about the October Revolution suggest that she died without having seen the moment arrive.

Unlike Plekhanov and Lenin, Zasulich had no “Jacobin” strain in her thinking. She considered coups d’état to be a violation of the basic premises of Marxism; a centralized, elitist party was a regrettable, and only temporary, expedient made necessary by a repressive autocracy. Plekhanov seemed to vacillate on this point at various times in his career, on one occasion (at the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903) espousing the virtues of elitism, only to revert a few months later (as he did in 1903) to the notion of a revolution by the masses. Zasulich, on the other hand, was consistent in her hostility to any plan for revolution which did not proclaim a priori the *ultimate* preeminence of the proletariat. She can therefore be included—along with Aksel’rod, Akimov, and Riazanov—among those Russian Marxists who were most obdurate in their emphasis on a true workers’ revolution.

Lenin and Zasulich were virtually poles apart on the issue of who would really make the revolution. On any spectrum measuring the elitism of various Russian Social Democrats, the two would have to be placed at opposite ends, each adhering to the piece of Plekhanov’s ambiguous intellectual legacy that was most congenial to his/her particular point of view. When Lenin argued in *What is to be Done?* that the proletariat required intellectuals’ assistance in

31. Zasulich, *Sbornik statei*, 2: 359–60.

order to understand its revolutionary obligations, he was merely repeating what Zaslulich, Plekhanov, and Aksel'rod had first stated nearly twenty years before, when they formulated the first draft program of the Emancipation of Labor. Lenin's formulation implied, however, that the dominance of the intellectuals would be *permanent*, that the workers' lack of revolutionary consciousness was an affliction so profound and firm that any political party Russian socialists might create would have to reflect this condition in its structure and organization. Unlike the revolutionary pedagogues in Zaslulich's party, the *intelligenty* in Lenin's would never fade into oblivion, but would retain control over every aspect of the revolutionary struggle. It was precisely this authoritarian emphasis in Lenin's argument that prompted Zaslulich to link implicitly Lenin to Louis XIV of France when she publicly objected to Leninism in the summer of 1904.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, her objections boiled down to a single difference: if, to paraphrase Clemenceau, Lenin considered socialism to be "too important to be left to the workers," Zaslulich felt that, when the moment for revolution arrived, it was "too important to be left to the intelligentsia." This simple substitution of words demonstrates the principal difference between bolshevism and menshevism and also expresses the dilemma confronting revolutionary movements in which the circumstances of economic development force revolutionaries of bourgeois origin to define their relationship to a working class too weak or politically quiescent to foment revolution on its own. The debate between Zaslulich and Lenin exhibits a conflict no less real today in various areas of the world than it was in Russia at the turn of the century.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Zaslulich offered no discernible objections to *What is to be Done?* when it first appeared in 1902. Zaslulich had voluntarily assumed the role of mediator between Plekhanov and Lenin when the two men, so different in age, temperament, and sensibility, vied with each other for control of *Iskra*. Whatever her misgivings about Lenin's pamphlet, Zaslulich's commitment to *Iskra* was so overriding that she deliberately refrained from expressing her doubts, lest her disclosure create further conflict. Zaslulich felt that it was a terrible waste of human potential for Russian socialists to be consumed by internecine conflict when the opportunities for revolutionary agitation had never been greater. Thus, in the early 1900s, she employed all the prestige, diplomacy, and tact she could muster in order to ensure that the *Iskra* enterprise would not collapse amidst a welter of acrimonious polemics.<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, however, Zaslulich felt compelled to express publicly her objections to Lenin's politics after Lenin had convinced the Second Party Congress in 1903 to remove her (along with Aksel'rod and Potresov) from the editorial board of *Iskra*; but, as it happened, her demotion was only temporary. Nonetheless, her attack on Lenin marked the first time she had criticized a fellow socialist in print. That the object of her polemic was a man whom she had previously held in high esteem indicates how radically her opinion of Lenin

32. Cited in John S. Reshetar, Jr., *A Concise History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (New York, 1964), p. 3.

33. Jay Bergman, "Vera Zaslulich and the Politics of Revolutionary Unity" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1977), pp. 225–28, 246–49, 266–78.

had changed since the halcyon days of their relationship in 1900, when the two seemed so captivated by each other's abilities.<sup>34</sup> In her article, Zasulich took great pains to distinguish the concept of "party" from that of "organization": whereas a party is defined by the individuals who belong to it, an organization is defined by the particular functions it performs. In Zasulich's view, an "organization" invariably necessitates a strict hierarchy of control with authority running unidimensionally from top to bottom. In vivid contrast, "a real-life party is born—even without any organization—when people who think and feel in the same way become opposed to people who think and feel differently." A rigid hierarchy is unnecessary because disagreements are few and, for the most part, insignificant.<sup>35</sup> Zasulich argued that Lenin had led Russian socialists astray by confusing the two concepts and substituting a socialist organization for a socialist party. Whereas a socialist party, by Zasulich's definition, should include "that section of the population which Social Democracy had drawn to participate in its theoretical and practical struggle," Lenin had created, instead, an "organization" whose structure and function, as Zasulich defined them, limited its membership to those whose actions he could directly control.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Lenin had excluded from the party most of those who, by virtue of their views, deserved to belong to it. The result, although she did not say so explicitly, would be a dictatorship of the elite over the masses.

It is unclear why Zasulich chose such a highly theoretical context in which to express her objections to Leninism; Plekhanov, Martov, Aksel'rod, Rosa Luxemburg, and Trotsky had all reached similar conclusions without engaging in such convoluted semantic disquisitions. Equally significant—and, in retrospect, more easily understood—is the fact that nearly two years elapsed before Zasulich seemed to become aware of the dictatorial implications in Lenin's politics. Thus, the question arises: If Zasulich attacked Lenin's elitism in 1904, what had prevented her from doing so in 1902, following the publication of *What is to be Done?* Why was such an extended period of time required for the message of Lenin's celebrated pamphlet to leave its mark on her consciousness? A possible answer is that Zasulich, like virtually everyone else in the Russian socialist movement, saw the democracy of the movement threatened more by Plekhanov than by Lenin. During the years between the establishment of *Iskra* and the Second Congress of the RSDLP, she had expended so much time and energy restraining Plekhanov's authoritarian impulses that she failed to recognize the same impulses when they manifested themselves in Lenin to a much greater degree. Preoccupied with the "Jacobinism" of one man, she could not see its same expression in the words, temperament, and actions of another.

Given her conception of the party, it was perhaps inevitable that a decade later Zasulich would defend what was pejoratively referred to as "liquidationism": the view that the RSDLP should "liquidate" its underground apparatus

34. B. I. Nikolaevskii and A. N. Potresov, *Sotsial-demokraticheskoe dvizhenie v Rossii: Materialy* (Moscow, 1928), p. 11; Nadezhda Krupskaja, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, trans. E. Verney (New York, 1970), p. 55.

35. V. I. Zasulich, "Organizatsiia, partiia, dvizhenie," *Iskra*, no. 70 (July 25, 1904), p. 5.

36. *Ibid.*

(or as much of it as was politically prudent) and concentrate most, if not all, of its energies on mass agitation and activity. Some liquidators, as Lenin dubbed them, advocated participation in elections to the Duma, others did not. But all agreed that, for the party to survive when its popularity had diminished so precipitately, it had to attract as many new members as possible. Hence, Lenin and, to a lesser extent, Plekhanov argued strenuously against the liquidationist position.

At first, Zasulich had little inclination to embroil herself in yet another conflict which could only further widen the deep fissures in Russian socialism that already existed. However, when Plekhanov coupled an especially vitriolic attack upon the liquidationists with the caveat that he did not include Zasulich within their ranks, Zasulich could no longer remain silent: Potresov and others whom Plekhanov had impugned were among her closest collaborators. Consequently, barely eight days after Plekhanov's polemic, Zasulich replied in the pages of *Luch*, a journal published by the "August Bloc" of Russian Social Democrats, a group that attempted to secure a reconciliation between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.<sup>37</sup> In her article, Zasulich stated that, if Plekhanov chose to censure Potresov and his friends, he should understand that in doing so he was assailing her as well, since she herself was no less a liquidationist than the others. Were it not for the wretched state of her health, she declared, she would be actively involved in the struggle to rid the party of its clandestine apparatus.<sup>38</sup> If, to Plekhanov and Lenin, liquidationism was a term of opprobrium, to Zasulich it suggested the first step Russian socialists should take toward achieving a party whose leadership would be truly working-class in composition. Characteristically, she concluded her defense of liquidationism by pointing out that nothing good could emanate from such intraparty recriminations, and that their only outcome would be to show the workers how ill equipped to assist them Russian socialists were.

The debate about liquidationism continued. Plekhanov responded to Zasulich in *Pravda*, Zasulich replied to Plekhanov this time in *Zhivaia zhizn'*, and Lenin composed a critique of Zasulich's position ironically entitled "How Vera Zasulich Demolishes Liquidationism."<sup>39</sup> As polemics these articles tell little about Russian social democracy that is not already known. They show that the omnipresent specter of failure, especially after 1905, made Social Democrats more prone to squabbling than they might have been had their efforts to foment revolution been effective. As a substantive issue, however, the debate about liquidationism is extremely significant, because it indicates that, Adam Ulam and other historians notwithstanding, basic issues separated Lenin and his critics.<sup>40</sup> Beneath

37. G. V. Plekhanov, "Pis'mo k odinnadtsati 'perevodym' rabochim," *Pravda*, no. 83 (April 10, 1913).

38. V. I. Zasulich, "G. V. Plekhanov i likvidatory," *Luch*, no. 88 (April 18, 1913), p. 1.

39. G. V. Plekhanov, "V. I. Zasulich, likvidatory i raskol'nichii fanatizm," *Pravda*, nos. 129 and 130 (June 7 and June 8, 1913); V. I. Zasulich, "Po povodu odnogo voprosa," *Zhivaia zhizn'*, no. 8 (July 19, 1913), pp. 2-3; V. I. Lenin, "Kak V. Zasulich ubivaet likvidatorstvo," *Prosveshchenie*, 1913, no. 9.

40. For example, in his otherwise excellent biography of Stalin, Adam Ulam maintains (incorrectly, in my opinion) that "as one looks at the two branches of Russian Marxism until the fateful days of 1917, one finds a striking similarity of views and, for the most part, of tactics" (Adam Ulam, *Stalin* [New York, 1973], p. 51).

the personal conflicts and polemics that obscured them lay two basic tendencies in Russian Social Democracy: one attempting to perpetuate an elitist, clandestine party, the other condemning this party as a harbinger of revolutionary dictatorship. To Lenin, an elitist party was not only a necessity but a virtue as well. By contrast, Zasulich's 1913 articles on liquidationism indicate not only that she considered an elitist party harmful to intraparty democracy, but that she felt the time had finally come for the party to shed its underground apparatus and assume the character of a mass movement:

We have now a broad section of workers who would have every right to join any socialist party in the West. All our forces should be in this rapidly growing sector of the workers, who lack only the opportunity of formally joining a party to found one, and no matter what we call this section we shall both think of it and speak of it as the party. . . . A formally disorganized party of workers, strongly tied to the entire working class, is preferable to an organized, underground party distinct from it.<sup>41</sup>

It would be difficult to find a substantive issue over which two people could disagree more than Zasulich and Lenin did over the structure, function, and evolution of a socialist party. In retrospect, it seems that their debate ended in a stalemate: if the liquidationists were naïve in believing that a mass party could function effectively in what Richard Pipes has described as “a monarchical police state,”<sup>42</sup> they were quick to perceive the authoritarian potential in Lenin's alternative, a potential whose limits would be explored by Lenin's successor. If, in 1913, the idea of an elitist party committing crimes of genocidal proportions twenty years later was inconceivable, Zasulich and others sensed danger in Lenin's elitism and did what they could to alert the revolutionary left to its implications.

Given her belief that socialism could emanate only from a workers' revolution, Zasulich could not help being troubled by the Bolshevik regime. Writing in *Nasha zhizn'* in February 1918, not long after the Bolsheviks had forcibly disbanded the Constituent Assembly, she made clear her belief that the October Revolution was nothing less than a perversion of Marxist theory,<sup>43</sup> because Lenin's coup d'état did not allow for a decent interval between the bourgeois and the socialist revolutions—an interval during which the proletariat would acquire the necessary education and political consciousness to create a true socialist order. To attempt to accelerate the Marxist stages of history, to merge the bourgeois and socialist revolutions into one, would lead only to the collapse of the working-class movement and to a resurgence of militarism and imperialism throughout the world. In this, the last article she would complete before her death, Zasulich maintained that a premature revolution was actually worse than no revolution at all:

From the point of view of socialists who remain faithful to the legacy of socialism, who formerly nurtured Russian Social Democracy, there are at

41. Zasulich, “Po povodu odnogo voprosa,” pp. 2–3.

42. Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York, 1974), pp. 281–318.

43. V. I. Zasulich, “Sotsializm Smol'nogo,” *Nachalo*, 1918, no. 2; reprinted in *Zaria*, 1922, no. 9–10, pp. 285–86.

the present time no greater enemies of socialism than the men of Smolnyi. They will not transform capitalist means of production into socialist ones, but annihilate capital and destroy heavy industry. . . . The hand of Smolnyi will ruin everything it touches.<sup>44</sup>

After a lifetime of struggle for the principles and ideas that she believed in, Zaslulich could not look kindly upon a government which she thought had made a mockery of them. To the pain, disappointments, and personal misfortunes of the past was now added, in the last year of her life, the humiliation of watching helplessly as the Bolsheviks tarnished the socialist legacy for which she had sacrificed so much of her happiness.

Thus, Zaslulich's conception of a socialist party reflects the same ethos of social altruism and philanthropy that had originally attracted her to revolutionary politics. Inasmuch as the revolutionaries helped the lower classes to acquire the political consciousness necessary to overthrow autocracy, they performed a function not too dissimilar from that which Zaslulich had performed as an adolescent in the late 1860s, when she had worked for a justice of the peace and taught illiterate workers to read and write. The only alteration this ethos had undergone in nearly thirty-five years of revolutionary activity was that the principal object of Zaslulich's altruism was no longer the *narod* of Russian Populism but rather the proletariat of Russian Marxism. Because she considered the workers to be the repository of virtue in a socialist society, they were worthy of the intellectuals' solicitude before the socialist revolution, when they still lacked the political consciousness to determine their own interests and those of society.

In sum, Zaslulich regarded the relationship between workers and revolutionary *intelligenty* as mutually supportive; the ennobling experience of the party would, over time, imbue both with the requisite solidarity and civic consciousness to make a social order superior in every way to those that had preceded it. But the history of Russian radicalism, in both its Populist and Marxist phases, seemed to favor individuals like Zheliabov and Lenin, whose instincts told them it would be politically suicidal and psychologically debilitating to endure weakly the many years it might take to inculcate revolutionary ideas among the masses. Zaslulich's politics of gradualism promised, by the links it would forge between workers and intellectuals, a society more truly egalitarian than that actually created by her rivals, but her skepticism about quick (and elitist) solutions made her view distinctly unpalatable to those impatient for radical change within their lifetimes. However prescient Zaslulich's contention that Russian socialism could not be born without an adequate period of gestation, it was perhaps too much to ask of revolutionaries that, in the name of creating solidarity, they deliberately defer to some future epoch a socialist revolution whose fruits they might otherwise enjoy themselves. As it happened, the temptation in 1917 to fill a power vacuum was so irresistible that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were willing, despite their fears, to bring about a revolution and to take the risk that its fruits might not be ripe. Although Lenin was by far the better politician, in retrospect Zaslulich was the better prophet.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 286.