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Friend and Foe: The Agent Provocateur in Late Imperial Russia

Matthew Landis
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The Russian secret police apparatus has been shrouded in anonymity since birth. Long the stuff of legend, agents and operations have attracted the attention of both academic and popular readers of history. From Ivan the Terrible’s ruthless Oprichniki to the current Federal Security Service (FSB), the organization has undergone significant changes that mirror the discontinuity of the rulers themselves. Charged to protect the political status quo and fight subversion, the secret police have been referred to by various names which further the confusion surrounding their activities – Okhrana, Fontanka, The Special Section, The Cheka, The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), The Ministry for State Security, (MGB), and countless others, including the well-known Committee for State Security, or KGB. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent opening of clandestine records have furthered this curiosity and amplified historical scholarship on the subject.

Specifically, the Late Imperial secret police have received special attention in light of the 1905 and 1917 revolutions that rocked the country. Richard Deacon and Ronald Hingley broadly narrate the entirety of Russian secret police activity from 1565 founding to the early 1970’s and give attention to late twentieth century developments.¹ More recently, Frederic S. Zuckerman narrows the field in The Tsarist Secret Police in Russian Society, 1880-1917 (1996) and places the organization within a wider European framework of nations struggling to hold

¹ Hingley’s The Russian Secret Police (1970) takes a wide-angle approach to the security apparatus, beginning with Ivan the Terrible in 1565 and ending in 1970—fitting, considering the book’s publication date and highpoint of KGB operations. He focuses on the operations of the secret police and argues that those actions directly influenced Russian society. More to the point, he contends that they were one of the most dominant forces that shaped the nation, an argument supported by this current essay. Deacon similarly chronicles the Russian secret police in A History of the Russian Secret Service (1972), although his methodology varies. Instead of an administrative approach he frames the narrative around the primary actors and their major influences. Perhaps the largest difference is his incorporation of foreign infiltration, a topic that both Hingley and I omit.
onto their autocratic past. Similarly, Jonathan Daly chronicles the creation and progression of the police administration in *Autocracy Under Siege: Security Police and Opposition in Russia 1866-1905* (1998), and its equally thorough sequel, *The Watchful State: 1905-1917* (2004). Anna Geifman has also done extensive research on the topic, including a provocative biography that redefines Russia’s most notorious informant, though most of her works focus on the terrorists rather than the secret police. These scholars and a host of others have addressed the primary component of the police apparatus – the secret or “double” agent – but leave in their wake some questions worth positing. How was provocation, whereby undercover police agents helped to plot and carry out revolutionary activities to only turn in their revolutionary brethren later, used to fight terrorism? What motivated these provocateurs and the superiors who controlled them? And most importantly, was this tactic successful?

2 Zuckerman finds that Late Imperial Russia was compelled to create such a security police force in order to deal with a citizen backlash fueled by the Great Reforms and a growing hatred for the Tsar’s culture. He is concerned chiefly with what constitutes a political crime and how political repression in Europe influenced Russia’s response to the same threat. This essay relies heavily on his analysis of the lives of undercover agents and their superiors, but avoids his wider focus.

3 These two works combine to form the preeminent English modern study on the secret police apparatus in Late Imperial Russia. In *Autocracy Under Siege* (1998) Daly examines how the security police adapted to changes in the political and social arena of a monarchy in turmoil. He concludes that while the secret police managed to thwart various revolutionary plots, the administrative power that was required to do so alienated much of the society at large, and thus increased those dedicated to the Tsar’s demise. I concur with Daly on this point; however, the current essay focuses more on internal damage done by traitorous agents rather than society at large.

*The Watchful State* (2004) picks up after the near collapse of the 1905 Revolution and chronicles the overhaul of the security police. Attempting to learn from their mistakes, Daly argues that the apparatus developed into an efficient, effective force that successfully battled terrorism. The blame for their ultimate failure, seen in the Revolution of 1917, rests on the ineptitude and corruption of upper level officials rather than the agents. On this last notion Daly and I depart. I find an inherent naivety in the amount of power given to both agents and the officials who controlled them, and hold both responsible for the fallout.

4 Using updated material from the archives of the Russian Federation (GARF), Geifman paints a less menacing but equally gutless portrait of Evno Azef in *Entangled in Terror: The Azef Affair and the Russian Revolution* (2000). Neither traitor nor master spy, Azef was simply an insecure, greedy informant. While interesting, this notion reverses decades of research and is therefore used in conjunction with previous scholarship on Azef to provide a more comprehensive picture.

5 *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894-1917* (1993) is her landmark work and argues that the 17,000 plus killed by revolutionaries influenced the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. In a different vain, *Death Orders: The Vanguard of Modern Terrorism in Revolutionary Russia* (2010) positions Russian terrorism in modernity, no doubt influenced by events in the US and Middle East. Geifman finds that Late Imperial terrorists were part of a global, transcultural phenomena reaching to today, a growing topic not addressed in this essay.
Early 20th century author A.T. Vassilyev once stated that, “the gravest reproach made against the Okhrana is that it employed the objectionable means of provocation – i.e., direct incitement – first to drive countless numbers into political crime, and thereafter to send them to Siberia or even bring them to the gallows.”

While Vassilyev’s criticism of the injustices of provocation are notable, they are incomplete; the gravest reproach of provocation is not that it was unethical or immoral (though it could be argued so), but that it was counterproductive to the fight against political subversion. The essay to follow examines the actions, motivations, and eventual fallout of secret agents and police officials who practiced provocation. In it I will argue that agent provocateurs were inherently dangerous yet irresistible to a fledgling administration who had run out of options to combat terrorism. In an ironic and fateful twist, police superiors trusted those they shouldn’t have and foolishly believed they could control a country in turmoil. These mistakes would do irreparable harm to the fight against subversion and lend a hand in bringing down the Tsar.

The modern relevance of provocation should not be understated. Though rooted in France and made famous in Russia authorities across the globe continue the practice today. In the United States specifically, The Federal Bureau of Investigation for decades has placed agents inside criminal and radical groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Black Panthers. More publicly, the New York Police Department used agent provocateurs to infiltrate protest groups during the Republican National Convention of 2004. In this case, the NYPD’s “R.N.C.

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8 Paul Chevigny’s *Cops and Rebels: A Study of Provocation* (1972) which focuses on a Blank Panther cell in New York City is a prime example.

Intelligence Squad” went as far as to send agents abroad (Canada and Europe) to spy on potential protest groups.\textsuperscript{10} At the Democratic National Convention four years later, undercover Denver Police detectives were pepper-sprayed by their own while staging a fight to escape a heated crowd. Ironically, their actions may have increased the level of tension among the protestors, a fact that prompted the American Civil Liberties Union to issue a call for further investigation.\textsuperscript{11} Though this essay is not concerned with modern police tactics, it is quite fitting that many of their historical counterparts bare similar qualities. Therefore, an understanding of provocation in Late Imperial Russia, a nation that saw the stunning success and brutal failure of the policy, is indispensable.

The Russian “secret collaborator”, or sotrudniki, as I will refer to herein, is a concept older than the country itself. The Russian proverb “scratch the Russian and you will find the Tartar” holds true in the practice of espionage, for it was Genghis Kahn who first used the practice of informers to seek out his enemy’s weakness when sweeping west across Asia. Mongol soldiers posing as defectors went to outlying villages and gave false information about the invading army to the inhabitants as they surveyed the terrain. After a few weeks’ time they returned to their army camps with detailed geographical knowledge and an invasion soon followed. It was from these origins that the Russian secret police learned the skill of infiltration.\textsuperscript{12}

It is doubtful, though, that the Genghis Kahn could envision an empire in such tumultuous state as Russia in 1904. Revolution, long in the hearts of the people and now on their tongues, was close at hand. Centuries of repression had led liberals, radicals, proletariat, and

peasants to clamor in unison for broader civil liberties and changes in the political, social, and economic structure. The militant tone, exacerbated by strikes, was heading towards an armed uprising against the tsarist regime.\textsuperscript{13} Political assassinations had become standard procedure, and although the security police made mass arrests and shut down illegal presses they were unable to strike at the heart of the revolutionary ranks. In order to successfully combat their enemy the tsarist police needed to infiltrate their ranks and gain access to the inner workings of the organizations.\textsuperscript{14}

The \textit{sotrudniki} fell into two categories: those who acted as informers on the fringes of groups and never participated directly in revolutionary activities (\textit{osvedomitel}) and those who put their lives in harm’s way by penetrating hardcore revolutionary groups. While our focus will be the latter, the former were important as well. Placed in prison cells, universities, salons, and even the bureaucracy, the \textit{osvedomitel} collected data and gave detailed reports on their specific area.\textsuperscript{15} But it is the \textit{agent provocateur} that is the focus of this discussion, and among the them there are four that clearly display the counterproductive nature of provocation: Dmitry Borgrov, Evno Azef, M. Ia. Tsikhotskaia, and A. A. Petrov. Additionally, Father Gapon and Roman Malinovskii will be addressed in conjunction with the superiors that controlled them - P.I. Ratchkovsky and S.P. Beletskii respectively.

Dmitry Borgrov, or agent “Alensky” as he was known to the Secret Police, provides a straightforward explanation of the devastating nature of the \textit{sotrudniki}. An ardent reader of revolutionaries Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, Borgrov aligned himself during his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 40.
\end{itemize}
studies at the University of Kiev with a covert cell of anarchists.\(^\text{16}\) He disapproved, however, of their implementation of anarchism and overtime became disillusioned; soon after in February of 1906 he first offered his services to the Kiev \textit{Ochranka} and began to inform on his revolutionary friends.\(^\text{17}\)

The double life of the \textit{sotrudniki} forced them deep into their roles as enemies of the tsar and put them in a volatile position of power with little to no accountability. While they might be monitored early on, it was nearly impossible to keep tabs on them at all time and they were for the most part left alone by their superiors while undercover.\(^\text{18}\) Borgrov, rising higher in the ranks of the anarchists, was given more information (and thus more power), which he often withheld from the police; other times he reported fully and had his friends arrested.\(^\text{19}\) This process, called the “false pose” made the \textit{sotrudniki} feel as if he was independent of both police and revolutionaries and able to control the outcome of events. Bogrov, like many secret agents, became lost in this provocation. By 1909 he was already planning the assassination of former Prime Minister Stolypin, creating false terrorists and suspects to divert his police superiors.\(^\text{20}\) Two years later on the night of September 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1911 Borgrov fatally shot the man during intermission at the Kiev Opera House. Historian Charles Ruud and Sergei Stepanov dismiss the idea that Borgrov, a Jew, was retaliating for Stolypin’s apparent anti-Semitic Russian nationalism; instead, he was a “frightened \textit{provocateur} who was unable to extricate himself from his dual roles as police agent and a Socialist Revolutionary terrorist and finally lashed out at his

\(^{17}\) Ibid.,. 174.
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
main tormentor, the government.” There is no evidence to the contrary that proves Borgrov’s motives were rooted in revenge. His life, caught between lines of blurring loyalty, was shared by many sotrudniki; but retribution would prove a crucial drive for Russia’s most infamous double agent, Evno Azef, a man who must be mentioned in any discussion on provocation.

Born the son of a poor Jewish tailor in 1869, Azef was a master at adaption and survival, skills essential to a sotrudniki. At the prompting of his father he obtained an education and served as a tutor, traveling salesman, reporter, and clerk. After meeting some young revolutionaries in 1892, he was accused of having distributed illegal literature, and, rather than be arrested, fled to Germany leaving his wife behind. While abroad he again crossed paths with disgruntled Russians activists and the idea came to him: why not turn treason into profit? Soon after he wrote his famous letter to the Police Department informing them of the actions of the Karlsruhe Group and a month later he became a salaried member of the Okranka.

In hindsight it is clear that Azef’s motives were dangerous. By the early 1900’s he was receiving over five hundred rubles a month, an unheard of sum for a sotrudniki. “Azef’s was a purely mercenary nature,” Police Chief Zubatov would later lament following the unmasking of his former pupil, “looking at everything from the point of view of profit, working for the Revolution for the sake of personal gain, and for the Government out of no conviction but also

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22 Three agents featured in this paper hail from minority groups; Borgov and Azef were Jewish, and M. Ia. Tsikhotskaia was a woman. This certainly begs the question whether the security police specifically targeted minority groups to be informants, perhaps taking into account their perceived positions in society. The topic is certainly interesting, and while not be discussed here due to a limitation of sources, it warrants further scholarship that is hopefully forthcoming.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 104.
26 Ibid., 107.
for the sake of personal profit."\textsuperscript{27} But at the time his intelligence on the Socialist Revolutionaries abroad was so detailed and constant that this was overlooked. Like Borgorv, the nature of the relationship between Azef and his superiors “allowed disloyal agents to mesmerize their case officers into a lull of confidence.”\textsuperscript{28} Several incidents, however, were about to occur that would cause the police to look with more scrutiny on their \textit{provocateur extraordinaire}.

From Berlin, Azef made contact with G. A. Gershuni, a chief organizer of revolutionary activities in Russia who specialized in assassination plots on high-level officials. Following Azef’s suggestions, however, the security police did not arrest Gershuni when they had the chance; a few months later Gershuni orchestrated the assassination of Sipyagin, the Interior Minister.\textsuperscript{29} Yet still the security police trusted Azef, not aware that his friendship with Gershuni was keeping him from arresting the man. When Azef \textit{did} reveal the plot to kill Vyacheslav Plehve, Sipyagin’s replacement, police superiors had no idea he was concealing a separate attempt on the life of the Governor of Kharkov, Obolensky.\textsuperscript{30} Azef, like Borgrov began withholding vital information while relaying some. In 1903, Azef and Gershuni discussed plans to kill Bodganovitch, Governor of Ufa, which was carried out several months later. It was only by his own hands – an accidental telegram sent to a friend – that Gershuni was caught by the police, leaving Azef in total control of the revolutionaries abroad.\textsuperscript{31} By sheer cunning and luck the Russian secret police had one of their own in control of the Battle Organization of the Socialist Revolutionaries; unfortunately they were completely unaware that their super-agent was

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 110.
playing both sides for personal gain, which made his unmasking all the more destructive to their
fight against terrorism.

Some historians, notably Richard Deacon, have speculated that Azef had another motive
for carrying out his most notorious act of provocation: revenge. Unlike Borgrov, there is a good
deal of evidence that supports this claim. Deacon argues that the planned assassination of
Interior Minister Phelve was a score settler based on Azef’s Jewish heritage. Following an anti-
Jewish pogrom in Kishenev, Azef was reported by both his revolutionary friends and Zubatov to
have “shook with fury and hate in speaking of Plehve.”32 Clearly Azef blamed Plehve for the
murder of several hundred of his kinsmen, and used his role as a sotrudniki to carry out his plan.
This notion is quite plausible but irrelevant, for Azef’s motive of profit should have been enough
to convince any observer of his unreliability. Instead, desperate to have eyes and ears inside the
enemy camp, the Interior Ministry and the Police Department put their own officials at risk and
in turn got many of them killed. To sum up what Russian historian Jonathan Daly calls
“unwarranted trust”, Police Chief Gerasimov quoted in hindsight, “I had total confidence in
Azef, and gave him freedom of action.”33

Women also entered the ranks of the sotrudniki and their fate differed little from their
male counterparts. M. Ia. Tsikhotskaia, or T. M. Tsetlin as her Socialist Revolutionary friends
knew her, became an informant for the police in 1907. After several years Tsikhotskaia proved
to be a cunning provocateur, infiltrating the combat organization and helping to plot the
assassination of several police officials including Gerasimov (her superior), Kurlov, and other
police officials. Her downfall, though, was not her questionable loyalty as was the case for

Press, 1997), 111.
33 Daly, Jonathan. The Watchful State: Security Police and Opposition in Russia, 1906-1917 (DeKalb: Northern
Borgrov and Azef. After being unmasked by Vladimir Burstev, the self-appointed revolutionary detective who denounced Azef, Tsetlin was caught by her revolutionary comrades and sentenced to death. Rather than face the gallows, she agreed to give up information about the police in exchange for her life. Unlike Borgrov and Azef, Tsetlin did not harbor an ulterior motive; rather, she valued life more than loyalty and divulged sensitive intelligence that wreaked havoc on the department. More importantly, Tsetlin’s case brings to light another glaring liability of provocation: self-preservation. Perhaps more understandable, this motive proved as destructive as greed and would compromise the operations of other agents.

Desperate for information and apparently willing to stomach the risk, the secret police continued to put their trust in treacherous men and women; indeed, the immediate aftermath of the Azef affair is a prime example. Rather than learn from the betrayal of Azef, the police chose A. A. Petrov as their new undercover agent. A notorious terrorist, Petrov had thrown bombs and robbed banks for the Socialist-Revolutionaries, but his career was cut short after being turned in by Tsetlin. Predictably, he agreed to inform on his counterparts rather than go to prison, and his escape was facilitated by the police soon after. On the surface it appears that he, like Tsetlin, valued life above loyalty; but Petrov’s treachery was of a more dangerous, ideological strand. Rather than fleeing the country to reassert himself into the Socialist-Revolutionaries, he instead confessed to the party leadership and swore to redeem his cowardice by killing Gerasimov. On 17 December 1909 Security Chief Karpov, Petrov’s naïve handler, paid his double agent a visit in a St. Petersbourg apartment. Suspicious of the unannounced guest, Petrov detonated a bomb

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35 Ibid., 105.
36 Ibid., 106.
hidden under the kitchen table, which blew Karpov to pieces. But what makes this case so
damning is that upon his arrest, Petrov confessed that his covert goal had always been to inflict
damage upon the security police. Driven by a conviction that trumped personal safety, he was
the prototype of everything the secret police were trying to stop. So frantic were they to destroy
the revolutionaries that police chiefs like Karpov put their trust where it did not belong, and like
Borgrov, Azef, and Tsetlin, A.A. Petrov made them pay.

The examples above clearly illustrate the volatile nature of the double agent and the use
of provocation as a tactic to fight political subversion. Whether lost in the “false pose”, desiring
money, control, revenge, eager to save one’s neck or defeat an ideological enemy, the sotrudniki
were given an unwarranted trust by the security police administration that proved fatal. But what
about the superiors who chose to employ such tactics? If anything, the incidents above (A. A.
Petrov most of all) bring to light the issue of accountability. Why did the secret police resort to
provocation? How did their own motivations dictate the actions of the sotrudniki who carried
them out?

Provocation was at one time strictly forbidden by Russian authorities, though eventually
the practice was encouraged and funded by the security police in the early 1900’s. When laying
out the foundational principals for political police training, General A.I. Spiridovich was quite
clear on the topic:

It must be explained to him [the double agent], that the means he employs, no
matter how tempting the result...are impermissible once they run contrary to
law. With his initiation into criminal activities or incitement to them, that is,
‘provocation’, the undercover agent not only ceases to be of assistance to the

37 Ibid.
38 Daly, Jonathan. The Watchful State: Security Police and Opposition in Russia, 1906-1917 (DeKalb: Northern
government in the struggle against the revolutionaries but becomes a State Criminal himself.39

But even Spridovich could not deny the success of undercover agents used during the 1880’s to bring down revolutionary groups. While privately he admitted that the philosophy of provocation was fundamentally wrong, he acknowledged that the sotrudniki who often employed it were vital.40 Those who followed him, however, were not nearly as bashful in their acceptance of this tactic, and their fate will consume the remainder of this essay.

P.I. Ratchkovsky, Chief of the Okranka during the 1880’s, was the developer, if not the author, of agent provocateur schemes employed during the early 1900’s in Russia. During this earlier period his techniques had successfully penetrated and rendered useless The People’s Will41, and in 1905 he was called upon again to uproot terrorism.42 Though successful in the past, his role in this era reveals an insidious, political motivation that resulted in the murder of an agent he personally recruited. Donned “Ratchkovsky the Manipulator” by historian Richard Deacon, the Security Chief was notorious for radical procedures that others wouldn’t consider.43 For example, he encouraged bomb throwing (and even funded it himself), yet made sure the blame fell on the Socialist-Revolutionaries in hopes of turning public opinion against them.44 His most notorious exploitation was of Father Gapon, a misguided priest who led the peaceful

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41 The People’s Will (Narodnaya Volya) was the left-wing terrorist group that orchestrated and carried out the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in March of 1881. In an ironic turn of events, Alexander’s successor (Alexander III) refused to entertain liberal reforms and instead waged war a successful war on The People’s Will, aided by Ratchkovsky.
43 Ibid., 119.
44 Ibid.
march that culminated in Bloody Sunday\textsuperscript{45}. Previously in the service of Police Chief Zubatov in 1903 as a labor organizer, Gapon had become a pitiable figure in the revolutionary movement.\textsuperscript{46} Ratchkovsky, a shrewd psychologist, knew exactly what to say to arouse the man’s passions. He flattered Gapon, inflated his pride, and even offered him his job as Security Chief if he would inform on the revolutionaries.\textsuperscript{47} Gapon eventually agreed and divulged a contact named Rutenberg in hopes of regaining his preeminence. Rutenberg, a hardened revolutionary, immediately smelled Gapon’s treachery and lured the man to a secluded villa outside St. Petersberg where he hung him from the rafters.\textsuperscript{48} In contrast to the previous cases, the manipulation here was done by the superior who knowingly put his agent in harm’s way, revealing another dark side of provocation.

If a discussion on the sotrudniki must include Evno Azef, then any examination of the police superiors must equally feature Sergei Zubatov. By no accident are the two names intertwined, for it was Zubatov who groomed Azef and received credit for the victories (and crushing defeats) the agent extraordinaire achieved. Like Azef, Zubatov dabbled in revolutionary activities in his younger days before becoming an informant with the Okhranka in 1884.\textsuperscript{49} In many ways he saw Azef as a younger version of himself, but the loyalty of his protégé could not have been more drastic. Zubatov, for example, was an avid reader of Dmitry Pisarev, a radical who believed that education and cultural development would lead to social

\textsuperscript{45}Bloody Sunday was the massacre of hundreds (possibly thousands) of peaceful protestors who carried out a coordinated march on St. Petersburg in January of 1905 to present a petition to Tsar Nicholas II. Historians have cited it as a pivotal moment leading to the pseudo revolution of 1905 as well as the monarchy’s capitulation in 1917.


\textsuperscript{49}Ronald Hingley, \textit{The Russian Secret Police} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 87.
improvement; conversely, Azef had more base motivations. Only the agent’s unmasking and subsequent investigation would truly show how blind Zubatov had been.\(^{50}\)

Zubatov often used double agents to penetrate revolutionary groups, but he is best known for inventing a more subtle form of provocation known as Police Socialism, or Zubatovshchina (Zubatovism). Though innovative, this creation highlights an illusion of control that many in the secret police administration fell prey to. Perhaps rooted in his studies of Pisarev, Zubatov wanted to address the worker’s economic needs to assuage them from violent agitation.\(^{51}\) To this end he launched the Moscow Production Worker’s Aid Society in 1901, a police-controlled trade union that championed better wages and shorter workdays.\(^{52}\) Police Socialism appeared successful and even had the blessing of Moscow’s Governor and D. F. Trepov, the chief of police. By making concessions to the workers Zubatov was killing two birds with one stone; for if the proletariat had their needs met they would not be drawn into revolutionary ranks, which in turn would shrink.\(^{53}\)

As Zubatovism spread to southern Russia, its architect was promoted to head of the Special Section, the nerve center for all political investigation in the Russian Empire.\(^{54}\) On the surface all seemed well, but at the core level a storm was brewing. Police Socialism relied primarily on the ability to observe and direct the whims of the trade unions, a task easily accomplished early on. But in 1903 a strike in Odessa spilled out of control; Zubatov’s representative in the city, Dr. Shayevich, failed to regulate the movement and factories across southern Russia were shut down.\(^{55}\) Once the Empire’s leading security official, Zubatov was


\(^{52}\) Ibid., 89.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
discredited and fell under suspicion of “crypto-revolutionary exploiting police techniques to further the cause of subversion.”

In short, the Zubatovism experiment had failed.

Zubatov was no traitor, but his use of provocation (in this liberal sense) was misguided. Believing that he could channel the worker’s unrest to police-monitored trade unions may have been admirable, but ultimately fatal. Rather than transform the agitation into economic progression he transferred it to a new venue, arguably creating an additional enemy of the government and a host of subversives for the security police to monitor. A desire for control and the belief that it was actually attainable had proven to be a disastrous mirage, but Zubatov would not be the last or most infamous to be fooled by such a delusion.

S.P. Beletskii, appointed the Director of Police in 1912, did not learn from his predecessor’s mistake. Like Zubatov, Beletskii believed that pro-government trade unions controlled by the police were a workable alternative to channel revolutionary aggression away from terrorism. But his strategies were far more radical; after assuming power he aimed to penetrate and control not only the union movement but the Duma and radical press as well.

Following the treacherous assassination of Stolypin by Borgrov, widespread reform altered many policies and strategies of the Special Section and Secret Police. Beletskii, however, increased rather than eradicated the number of sotrudniki, ordering more agents than ever before to be placed among the revolutionaries, specifically the Bolsheviks. To employ this stratagem he chose the well-known Leninist Roman Malinovskii who was already steeped in revolutionary

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56 Ibid., 90.
57 In Late Imperial Russia, the Duma was the state assembly body made up of popularly elected representatives. Following the 1905 Revolution, Tsar Nicholas II promised legislative power to the group, something he quickly clarified in a restrictive code called The Fundamental Laws. Unable to elect Ministers or hold the executive authority responsible, the Duma continued to be a defunct advisory group that was subject to the Tsar’s repeated dismissal.
59 Ibid.
rhetoric. (In an interesting note, Beletskii even went as far as to write the speeches his agent would read in the Duma). This approach of containment was rooted in a belief that by controlling the grass roots organizations and placing spies at all levels one could dictate the actions of the revolutionaries. Beletskii high-risk high-reward-tactics, however, were about to explode in his face.

The fiery orations delivered by Malinovskii in the Duma rallied the labor movements to massive unrest, ironically achieving their overt objective. By the summer of 1913 it was clear that Beletskii strategy had failed; by infiltrating the Bolsheviks more than ever before the sotrudniki had been too good of actors and incited their countrymen to labor strikes on a scale unseen in Russia. Naturally, the police department officially terminated the policy of containment, and returned to mass arrests and liquidation of revolutionary groups. In short, Beletskii’s plans had gone the way of Zubatov’s, his schemes having “evolved beyond his comprehension and his control.”

Why, then, did the security police engage in provocation at all? If loyalty and control were always in question, why not pursue other means of counterinsurgency? The answer lies in the success of numerous double agents. In the decades prior to the revolution of 1905, The People’s Will had been devastated by Sergei Degaev, a spy for the St. Petersburg Okhrana. Likewise, S. K. Belov, a double agent buried deep within the Moscow cell of the Black Repartition was instrumental in bringing down that terrorist group in 1884. The early 1900’s also had a handful of strikingly successful sotrudniki, including Zinaida Zhuchenko, Aleksandr

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60 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 220.
Mass, and Lakov Zhitomirskii whose actions did not compromise the state’s fight against terrorism.\textsuperscript{65} One double agent in particular—Anna Egoronv Serebreiakove—shows why the security police continually used provocation. Through her work with the Red Cross, Serebreiakove managed to weave her way into the Socialist-Revolutionaries. Her home became a meeting place for various revolutionaries that passed through the city, meetings she eavesdropped on and reported to the Moscow police.\textsuperscript{66} She was never unmasked and enjoyed a long, successful career as an informant; but her experience was not the norm, primarily because her involvement in provocation was minimal. Though Serebreiakove was able to report on the many revolutionary groups that met in her home, she was not a pivotal member who directed policy or drummed up regicide. Rather, she was merely a listener who had spectacular luck. Her acts of provocation in this sense were minimal, thus allowing her remarkable success. To many police administrators, though, Serebreiakove was worth the risk, even if she turned out to be an Azef.

Zubatov once told his junior political police officers that they “must look at the sotrudniki as a beautiful woman with whom you are maintaining a secret liaison. Be careful with her [as she] is the apple of your eye. One careless step and you disgrace her.”\textsuperscript{67} While he was referring to the secrecy that case officers must have with their agents, a striking parallel can be noted from this eloquent analogy that is vital to the modern understanding of provocation in Late Imperial Russia. The relationship of the double agent and their supervisors was one reminiscent of a knowingly immoral but tempting pleasure, one yielding momentary gratification with little to no thought of future consequences. Widely thought to be unethical, a secret agent in the enemy’s

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 47.
camp was extremely seductive to the upper level police administrators. Foiled assassination plots and mass arrests made possible by the *sotrudniki* were the forbidden fruit that some superiors could not resist. Though they can hardly be blamed for being drawn to such endeavors, the proponents of provocation are nonetheless responsible for the devastating outcomes that their choices had on the fight against subversion. As most salacious affairs, the participant was often caught in the present, robbed of foresight to navigate the damage their seductress could inflict on them, or their actions could inflict on themselves.

Such was the case of the *sotrudniki* in Late Imperial Russia and the volatile tactic of provocation. Though often effective in the short term, double agents were fundamentally dangerous and often sought control, power, money, and revenge. Desperate for information, the security police knowingly put their faith in these men and women who often became disillusioned or changed loyalties to suit their own desires. The superiors who enlisted them suffered a similar fate. A desire to control the avenues of unrest led many police chiefs to increase provocation to levels unseen in Russia and knowingly put their agents and the stability of the Empire at risk. Others naively assumed that they could contain the revolutionaries, directing their steps through provocation. This too proved fatal, and not only deteriorated public opinion of the security police, but also pushed many to the radical ranks and hastened the coming revolution.
Bibliography


