

NECHAYEV



SERGEI NECHAYEV'S

THE CATECHISM OF THE REVOLUTIONIST

With a preface by
Nicholas Walter

Published by
Jim Hugget's

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THE CATECHISM OF THE REVOLUTIONIST

by

Sergei Nechayev

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ENQUIRIES WELCOMED

Commentary Note on Nechayev's 'Catechism of the Revolutionist'

Nicholas Walter

This revolting rather than revolutionary document was written in 1869 by one of the most remarkable figures in the Russian Populist movement, Sergei Gennadievich Nechayev. He was born on 20th Sept 1847 of working-class parents in the industrial town of Ivanovo. He left home in 1865 to become a student teacher, first in Moscow and then in St. Petersburg. In 1868 he became a university student in St. Petersburg, and also a political activist. He was interested in the French Revolution, admiring the Jacobins and especially the 1796 'Conspiracy of Equals' led by Babeuf and described by Buonarroti. Early in 1869 he joined Tkachov, the leading Russian Jacobin, in writing A Programme of Revolutionary Action, which called for student groups to cause disturbances first among workers and then among peasants, leading to a general insurrection on 19 February 1870 (the ninth anniversary of the emancipation of the serfs).

Nechayev surrounded himself with an aura of mystery and deception, falsely claiming to have escaped from custody in both St. Petersburg and Moscow. In March 1869 he left Russia to contact the international movement, and joined the Russian exiles around Bakunin in Switzerland. He and Bakunin were mutually impressed and recruited each other into their respective semi-imaginary organisations. During the summer of 1869 they collaborated in producing a series of pamphlets, and it was during this period that The Catechism of the Revolutionist was written.

In August, having raised a large amount of money, Nechayev returned to Russia. He formed an organisation called Narodnaya Rasprava (The People's Retribution) in Moscow, basing it on the classic cell-system of 19th century conspirators and claiming to rule it on behalf of an international committee, and he produced a paper with the same name. The organisation is chiefly known because on 21 Nov 1869 Nechayev led the murder of a dissident student member called Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov (Dostoyevski used this incident for the plot of his novel The Devils); Narodnaya Rasprava collapsed and Nechayev fled abroad.

He resumed his association with Bakunin in Switzerland, producing a further series of pamphlets, and also six issues of a revived edition of Herzen's old paper Kolokol (The Bell). But in summer 1870 Nechayev and Bakunin quarrelled, and Nechayev moved to London, producing two issues of a paper called Obshchina (The Commune). He later moved to France, and then back to Switzerland, still producing revolutionary literature - now influenced not so much by Bakunin as by Babeuf and Blanqui, and also by Marx (especially The Communist Manifesto, of which he published a Russian translation).

In July 1871 eighty of Nechayev's followers were tried in St. Petersburg. The four involved in Ivanov's murder were sentenced to hard labour for from seven to fifteen years, and many others received short sentences. At the same time the true story of Nechayev's behaviour became generally known, and his reputation was destroyed. He struggled on in Switzerland, but on 14 August 1872 he was arrested in Zurich, and in October he was extradited to Russia. He was tried in Moscow on 8 Jan 1873, and sentenced to hard labour for twenty years and exile for life; but the Tsar ordered him to be imprisoned in St. Petersburg, and he was held in solitary confinement in the Peter-Paul fortress until his death.

Yet he continued his revolutionary activity. He gradually managed to win over his guards, communicating through them with the Executive Committee of Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will) while it was planning the assassination of the Tsar - and successfully infiltrating the Third Department and the Winter Palace as recommended in The Catechism of the Revolutionist - and after that he tried to plan his own escape. But this final conspiracy was exposed, and in December 1881 seventy of his guards were arrested. Nechayev was never heard from again and he died of scurvy on 21 November 1882.

The Catechism of the Revolutionist was not intended for publication, and Nechayev took it back to Russia in 1869 in coded manuscript form. It was seized during a police raid in Moscow on 29 November 1869, decoded, and used for the trial of the Nechayevists. It was first printed in the Pravitelstvenny Vestnik (Official Gazette) on 11 July 1871; the Marxists published a French translation in 1873 as part of their campaign against Bakunin, and the Bolsheviks published a definitive Russian edition in 1924. From the beginning there was argument about its authorship. Bakunin was suspected of being involved, despite his denials; a copy in his handwriting was said to have existed, echoes of his style may certainly be detected, and he had written another work with a similar title a few years earlier. In the absence of conclusive evidence, scholars hostile to anarchism attribute it to Bakunin and those sympathetic to anarchism attribute it to Nechayev alone.

The most direct evidence was recently brought to light by Michael Confino in the French academic paper Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique (7:4, October-December 1966). This is a previously unpublished letter from Bakunin to Nechayev dated 2 June 1870 (now in the Bibliothèque Nationale), in which Bakunin explained at great length his reasons for breaking off relations, and said in passing; "You remember how angry you were with me when I called you a brigand, and your catechism a catechism of brigands" This unequivocal reference should settle the question once and for all. The most famous - or infamous - expression of pure, total, fanatical, destructive, nihilistic, self-defeating revolutionism must be seen as the work of Nechayev himself. And he was probably the only person who ever fully accepted it - though it certainly impressed Zhelyabov, the leader of the Tsar's assassins in 1881, and also Lenin, and it has recently been printed in the United States by the Black Panther Party, with an introduction by Eldridge Cleaver.

But judge for yourself; is this what you mean by revolution?

The Catechism of the Revolutionist

Sergei Nechayev
(1847-1882)

The Revolutionist's Attitude Toward Himself

1. The revolutionist is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no affairs, sentiments, attachments, property, not even a name of his own. Everything in him is absorbed by one exclusive interest, one thought, one passion - the revolution.

2. In the very depth of his being, not merely in word but in deed, he has broken every connection with the social order and with the whole educated world, with all the laws, appearances and generally accepted conventions and moralities of that world which he considers his ruthless foe. Should he continue to live in it, it will be solely for the purpose of destroying it the more surely.

3. The revolutionist despises every sort of doctrinairism and has renounced the peaceful scientific pursuits, leaving them to future generations. He knows only one science, the science of destruction. For this and only for this purpose he makes a study of mechanics, physics, chemistry, and possibly medicine. For this purpose he studies day and night the living science of human beings, their characters, situations, and all the conditions of the present social system in its various strata. The object is but one - the quickest possible destruction of that ignoble system.

4. He despises public opinion. He despises and hates the present day code of morals with all its motivations and manifestations. To him whatever aids the triumph of the revolution is ethical; all that which hinders it is unethical and criminal.

5. The revolutionist is a doomed man. He is merciless toward the State and toward the entire system of privileged educated classes; he need in turn expect no mercy from them. Between him and them there is a continuous and irreconcilable war to the bitter end - whether it be waged openly or secretly. He must be ready to die at any moment. He must train himself to stand torture.

6. Rigorous towards himself, he must also be severe towards others. All tender, softening sentiments of kinship, friendship, love, gratitude, and even honor itself must be snuffed out in him by the one cold passion of the revolutionary cause. For him there is only one satisfaction, consolation and delight - the success of the revolution. Day and night he must have one thought, one aim - inexorable destruction. Striving coldly and unfalteringly towards this aim, he must be ready to perish himself and to destroy with his own hands everything that hinders its realization.

7. The nature of a real revolutionist precludes every bit of sentimentality, romanticism, of infatuation and exaltation. It precludes even personal hatred and revenge. Revolutionary passion having become a normal phenomenon, it must be combined with cold

calculation. At all times and places the revolutionist must be not that towards which he is impelled by personal impulses, but that which the general interests of the revolution dictate.

The Relations of the Revolutionist Toward His Comrades in the Cause

8. A revolutionist may feel friendship or attachment only for those who have proven themselves by their actions to be revolutionists like himself. The measure of friendship, devotion, and other obligations towards such a comrade is determined solely by the degree of his usefulness to the cause of the all-destructive revolution.

9. Solidarity of the revolutionists goes without saying. The whole strength of the revolutionary cause is based on it. The fellow revolutionists who stand on the same plane of revolutionary understanding and ardor must, as far as possible, discuss all important matters jointly and decide them unanimously. In the execution of a plan thus decided upon, however, everyone must, as far as possible, count upon himself. In carrying out acts of destruction each one must act alone and resort to the counsel and aid of comrades only when this is necessary for success.

10. Each comrade must have at hand several revolutionists of the second and third degree, i.e. such as are not entirely initiated. He must consider them as part of the common revolutionary capital placed at his disposal. He must spend his portion of the capital economically, always striving to extract the greatest possible use from it. He is to consider himself as capital, fated to be spent for the triumph of the revolutionary cause; however, he has no right personally and alone to dispose of that capital without the consent of the aggregate of the fully initiated.

11. When a comrade comes to grief, in deciding the question whether or not to save him, the revolutionist must take into consideration not his personal feelings, but solely the interests of the revolutionary cause. Therefore, he must weigh on the one hand the useful work contributed by the comrade, and, on the other, the expenditure of revolutionary forces necessary to rescue him, and he is to decide according to which side outweighs the other.

The Revolutionist's Relation with Society

12. The admission into the organization of a new member, who has proven himself not in words but in deeds, can be effected only by unanimous agreement.

13. The revolutionist enters the world of the State and of the educated privileged classes and lives in it only for the purpose of its fullest and quickest destruction. He is not a revolutionist if he is attached to anything in this world, if he can stop before the annihilation of any situation, relation or person belonging to this world - everybody and everything must be equally hateful to him. All the worse for him if he has any relations of kinship, friendship or love; he is not a revolutionist if they can stop his hand.

14. For the purpose of ruthless destruction, the revolutionist may and frequently must live in society, pretending to be something

entirely different from what he is. The revolutionist must penetrate everywhere, into all of the higher and middle classes, the merchant's store, the church, the nobleman's home, the bureaucratic world and military circles, into literature, into the Third Department (Secret Police), and even into the Tsar's Winter Palace.

15. The whole ignoble social system must be divided into several categories. In the first category are those who are condemned to death without delay. The association should draw up a list of persons thus condemned in the order of their relative harmfulness to the success of the cause so that the preceding numbers may be removed before the subsequent ones.

16. In making up such lists and for the purpose of establishing the above-mentioned order, one should by no means be guided by the personal villainy of the individual, nor even by the hatred which he calls forth in the association or among the people. This villainy and this hatred may even be partly useful by helping to arouse the masses to revolt. It is necessary to be guided by the measure of usefulness which would result, from his death, to the revolutionary cause. Thus, first of all, those men must be destroyed who are particularly harmful to the revolutionary organization and also those whose sudden and violent death may fill the government with the greatest fear and shake its power by depriving it of its clever and energetic men.

17. The second category must consist of persons whose lives would be spared only temporarily so that, by a series of brutal acts, they may bring the people to the point of inevitable revolt.

18. To the third category belong a great many brutes in high positions not distinguished either by any particular intellect or energy, but - due to their position - enjoying riches, connections, influence and power. It is necessary to exploit them in every possible way, trap them, confound them, and, getting hold of their dirty secrets as far as possible, turn them into one's slaves. Their power, influence, connections, riches, and strength will thus become the inexhaustible treasury and support of various revolutionary enterprises.

19. The fourth category consists of ambitious office-holders and liberals of various shades. One may conspire with them in accordance with their programs, making them believe that one follows them blindly and at the same time one should take hold of them, get possession of all their secrets, compromise them to the utmost, so that no avenue of escape may be left to them, and use them as instruments for stirring up disturbances in the State.

20. The fifth category - doctrinaires*, conspirators, revolutionists talking idly in groups and on paper. They must be continually pushed and pulled forward, towards practical neck-breaking statements, the result of which would be the complete destruction of the majority and the real revolutionary training of a few.

21. The sixth and very important category includes women who should be classified under three main divisions: some - empty-headed,

* Refers to Bakunin's opponents within the revolutionary camp

stupid, soulless, who may be used like the third and fourth categories of men; others - ardent, devoted, capable, but not with us because they have not yet worked themselves up to the real phraseless and genuine revolutionary understanding; they are to be made use of like the men of the fifth category; finally, women, entirely ours, i.e. fully initiated and having completely accepted our program. They are our comrades. We must look upon them as our most precious treasure, without the aid of which we cannot get along.

The Attitude of the Association Toward the People

22. The Association has no aim other than the complete liberation and happiness of the masses, i.e. of the people who live by manual labor. But, convinced that this liberation and achievement of this happiness is possible only through an all-destroying popular revolution, the Association will by all its means and all its power further the development and extension of those evils and those calamities which must at last exhaust the patience of the people and drive them to a general uprising.

23. By Revolution the Association does not understand a regulated movement after the classical western model - a movement which, always bowing to the property rights and the traditions of the social systems of so-called civilization and morality, has until now limited itself everywhere to the overthrow of one political form in order to replace it by another and striven to create a so-called revolutionary state. Only that revolution will be beneficial to the people which will destroy at the very root every vestige of statehood and will annihilate all of Russia's state traditions, institutions and classes.

24. The Association therefore does not intend to foist on the people any organization from above. The future organization will no doubt evolve out of the popular movement and out of life itself. But this is the business of future generations. Our business is destruction, terrible, complete, universal, and merciless.

25. Therefore, in getting closer to the people, we must first of all join those elements of the masses which, since the foundation of the Moscow State power, have never ceased to protest, not in words alone but in deed as well, against everything which is directly or indirectly connected with the State: against the nobility, the bureaucracy, the clergy, the guilds (meaning the merchants and capitalists in general) and against the parasitic kulak. Let us join hands with the bold world of bandits - the only genuine revolutionists in Russia.

26. To consolidate this world into one invincible, all-destroying force is the sole object of our organization; this is our conspiracy, our task.

RUSSIA AND REVOLUTION

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