

Luke Palmer
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HIST 2100

Vera Figner

Vera Figner's reasons for becoming a revolutionary and a terrorist are tied to the intellectual and emotional influences she met in Zurich, and the contrast she felt when she returned to Russia.

Vera traveled to Zurich in order to attend the university and study medicine, which she intended to use to treat the peasants. There she attended a short-lived women's club, which led her to join a student club called the Fritsche. This club would heavily influence Vera's future political choices.

In Zurich, Vera was exposed to ideas that had never even occurred to her during her upper-class Russian upbringing. She developed a moral conflict between her growing belief in the the ideas that "a small group of people at the top [are] responsible for ... the sufferings of the laborers in industry and in workshops everywhere" (14) and the realization that she was one of those people on top.

I never asked myself how such a system could be established in Russia—the question never even occurred to me. My uncle had once told me ... "Every nation gets the government it deserves."
(12)

As her intellectual development continued in Zurich, she began to see that a doctor who helps a few hundred people would do nothing to help the poor

compared to a change in social structure—a change in government. This was the way to create equal well-being for all people.

Vera was subject to several emotional influences in Zurich. She was captivated by the heroic contrast between her own sad fate and the people's bright future. Her social circles were certain of the inevitability of social revolution, while this idea was under harsh persecution in Russia. "If these ideas had not been subject to persecution in Russia, then it might have been possible to examine disagreements or doubts about them on their merits." (18)

Vera Figner became a revolutionary because of the discomfort she felt in her old beliefs and the freedom and acceptance she enjoyed in her revolutionarily-minded social group.

The Fritsche eventually formed the nucleus of the All-Russian Social Revolutionary Organization, which ventured to Russia to work among the peasants and spread the idea of revolution (which was a miserable failure). Vera stayed back for a year, but eventually abandoned her diploma and returned to Russia as well.

She settled in the countryside to become a paramedic in a *zemstvo*. There she was subject to unending persecution. "I lived in an atmosphere of suspicion." (41) She became convinced that her struggles there were due to the absence of political freedom in Russia.

Vera felt first-hand the lack of freedom—the oppression—in Russia, and decided that becoming a terrorist was the only way to achieve her revolutionary goal. "My past experiences had convinced me that the only way

to change the existing order was by force.” (43) The government and the culture would simply smother any other way.