

*Boris Savinkov (center) meeting with then Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky, in September 1917.*

## Russian Terrorists with Febrile Dreams of Flight

BY VLADIMIR ALEXANDROV

*The following is excerpted from To Break Russia's Chains: Boris Savinkov and his Wars Against the Tsar and the Bolsheviks, published by Pegasus Books in September.*

It's hard not to think of the 9/11 attacks as defining an entirely new and horrific chapter in the history of terrorism and in the fight against it. But, in fact, the attacks themselves and their consequences were all prefigured ninety-four years earlier, when a handful of vengeful Russians began to dream of transforming the airplane – a mechanical marvel that had just been invented to help liberate humankind from the tyranny of time and space – into a tool of death and destruction in the service of revolution.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tsar Nicholas II and his grandees trembled at the name of Boris Savinkov, who was the most famous and notorious terrorist in the Russian Empire. A leading member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, and second-in-command of its Combat Organization, he organized the assassinations of Minister of the Interior Vyacheslav von

Plehve in 1904 and Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, the tsar's uncle, in 1905. The Party had sentenced them to death for their numerous crimes against the Russian people, and both were blown to bits with bombs – the first on a street in St. Petersburg, the second inside Moscow's Kremlin walls. The assassins managed to get past the cordons of guards, and close enough to throw their heavy bombs from only several feet away, by disguising themselves as street peddlers, cabbies, and workmen. Both deaths were resounding thunderclaps in the revolutionary storm growing in Russia and, as the terrorists had intended, shook the foundations of the autocratic imperial regime.

But by 1906 the Socialist Revolutionary Party's terrorist campaign had begun to falter badly. The Okhrana, the secret police force charged with protecting the imperial regime, suddenly got much better at

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arresting members of the Combat Organization and disrupting its plots. Savinkov decided that the old methods and disguises were no longer working (he was wrong – there was actually a traitor in the Combat Organization who was pursuing his own enigmatic agenda; but that’s another story). And because science and industry were transforming the world, he concluded that the only way to resurrect terrorism was by embracing technological innovation.

Savinkov presented his ideas to his closest comrade, Evno Azef, the head of the Combat Organization, and a man admired by all the leading Socialist Revolutionaries for his technical prowess and tactical brilliance (he was also the secret traitor in question, as Savinkov would learn only several years later). Azef listened with interest and spent some time mulling over possibilities. Then, in January 1907, he came to visit Savinkov in Beaulieu-sur-Mer on the French Riviera, where Savinkov was living in exile. To Savinkov’s shock and delight, Azef announced that the Combat Organization was going to build its own airplane.

AZEF’S PLAN WAS VERY FAR AHEAD OF ITS TIME. Flying machines were a dazzling new development in the first decade of the twentieth century, and although every new achievement made news around the world and galvanized the public’s imagination, in 1907 the new technology was still in its infancy. The Wright brothers had first flown in 1903, covering 852 feet in 59 seconds. In 1906, Alberto Santos-Dumont set the first world speed record of twenty-five miles an hour when he flew 700 feet in 22 seconds. The first one-kilometer-long flight was made by Henri Farman, in 1908. It would take until 1909 for Louis Blériot to make the first substantial flight – crossing the 22 miles of the English Channel in 36 minutes.

Azef told Savinkov that he had found an expatriate Russian engineer, Sergei Bukhalo, who lived near Munich and had drawn up plans for a powerful new machine

with capabilities that exceeded anything anyone had built before. He claimed it could reach any altitude, descend as readily as rise (in 1907 there was as yet no consensus among experimenters about the best way to control airplanes in flight), carry a heavy weight, and reach a speed of eighty-five miles per hour, which seemed incredible because Santos-Dumont’s 25 mph speed record from 1906 still stood. By conviction Bukhalo was an anarchist, but he was prepared to place his invention in the service of the Combat Organization to assassinate Nicholas II.

Azef was an engineer by training. He assured Savinkov that he had personally checked Bukhalo’s design and calculations and concluded that they were sound. It would take Bukhalo only nine or ten months to build his machine. However, there was one obstacle: Bukhalo did not have the money for a workshop or the equipment and supplies he would need.

Savinkov listened to Azef with astonishment. Everything he said sounded like a fantasy come true. The speed of Bukhalo’s machine would make it possible to start an attack on St. Petersburg from several hundred miles away, in Sweden, Norway, even England; its lifting power was such that it could carry a bomb big enough to destroy an entire imperial palace; and its ability to fly at any altitude would ensure the attackers’ invulnerability.

Savinkov knew nothing about machines or engineering and took Azef’s word that the project was feasible. He also agreed that it was worth risking the large sum required – 20,000 rubles, or around \$300,000 in today’s money. Three rich Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party sympathizers were found who quickly donated the sum. Bukhalo set up his workshop outside Munich, hired assistants, and set to work.

Savinkov was elated. “I will fly on this airplane,” he told a friend, his voice ringing with pride and conviction. The Combat Organization would become invincible and he would be at its center again.

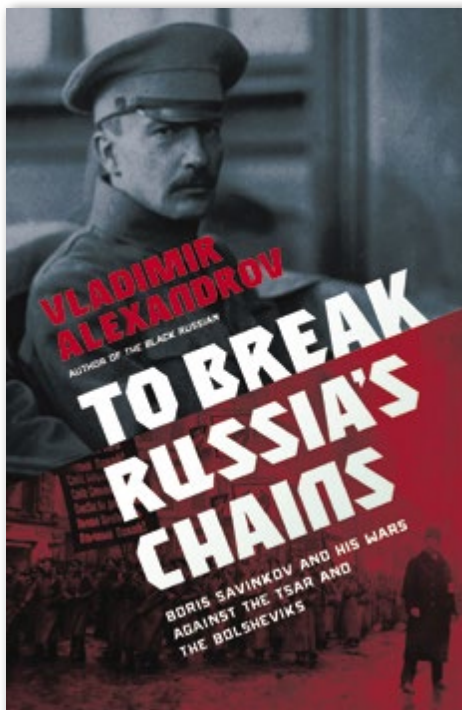
## Nearly a century before 9/11, and before practical flying machines even existed, the idea of an attack by air was already filling the febrile dreams of terrorists.

AND SO, IT TURNS OUT THAT NEARLY A CENTURY before 9/11, and before practical flying machines even existed, the idea of an attack by air was already filling the febrile dreams of terrorists.

Savinkov knew there were logistical issues that would have to be solved even after the Bukhalo Bomber was built. A remarkable hallmark of the Combat Organization's plots was that the assassins made every effort to avoid hurting innocent bystanders. (The first attempt on Grand Duke Sergei was actually suspended because his wife and adopted children were in the way.) One wonders what precautions Savinkov believed he could take to spare the lives of the numerous servants, guards, and retainers as his spindly craft with its giant bomb droned toward the sprawling imperial palaces at Tsarskoye Selo or Peterhof on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. And what sort of accuracy did he imagine he could achieve? Even when airplanes began to be used widely in 1914 during the Great War, aerial bombardment was highly inaccurate and remained a technological challenge. Of course, there was always the Combat Organization's openness to suicide attacks – all of the bomb throwers were prepared to die during their attempts – and perhaps a pilot would be moved to anticipate the kamikazes of World War II or the Al-Qaeda pilots of 2001.

However, Savinkov's exultation that he had found a way to defeat the imperial regime's vigilance was also overly optimistic. As soon as the first successful flights of airplanes were reported in the world's press, the Okhrana started to pay attention, realizing perfectly well the potential danger the new technology represented. In 1909, when airplanes finally emerged from inventors' workshops and went into serial

production, the police were ordered to monitor all flights in the Russian Empire, as well as aviators, students learning to fly, and members of "aero-clubs," all of whom were required to register with the government. But it remains an open



question if the Okhrana's safeguards would have worked. In 2001, despite all the advances in the scope and technology of intelligence gathering, the FBI and CIA failed to act on the information they had that could have disrupted the 9/11 plots.

Savinkov waited impatiently for Bukhalo's airplane throughout the winter and into the spring of 1907. To see it for himself and start his training as an "aviator," he traveled in August to the outskirts of Munich. To his surprise and disappointment, however, he discovered

that nothing was finished. Still believing in the project, Savinkov decided that he would settle near the workshop and take charge of it himself.

This didn't help. New problems with Bukhalo's project kept accumulating, and in the end, he wasn't able to complete building his machine. Pouring more money into it also didn't seem worthwhile, and Savinkov reluctantly abandoned the project.

NEVERTHELESS, IF BUKHALO HAD BUILT HIS airplane, or if Savinkov had been emboldened to find a different one and succeeded in destroying a palace together with its imperial inhabitant, the consequences for Russia might have been as enormous as 9/11 was for the United States, and ultimately, the world.

Al-Qaeda murdered thousands of innocent Americans in an act of vengeance, and the American response was to kill not only scores of the perpetrators' comrades but tens if not hundreds of thousands of innocent people in a series of invasions and wars that are not yet over, even after the debacle of Afghanistan.

In Russia, an event of the magnitude contemplated by Savinkov could have unleashed the revolutionary storm that was already gathering and brought down the imperial regime a decade sooner than it actually fell. But if there is a lesson in the history of 1917 and what the Bolsheviks did in November of that year when they seized power, it is that revolutions can lead to new tyranny and countless hecatombs of deaths even more readily than to freedom and rebirth.

The ancient tragedians would have understood all such unintended consequences well. "This is the law," wrote Aeschylus, "blood spilled upon the ground calls out for more."