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Flags and bayonets

The doomed struggles of a colourful revolutionary

By [Daniel Beer](#)



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Caricature of Boris Savinkov by N. Rodlov, 1917 | © Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

IN THIS REVIEW

TO BREAK RUSSIA'S CHAINS

Boris Savinkov and his wars against the tsar and the Bolsheviks
576pp. Pegasus. £22.

Vladimir Alexandrov



In a warm May evening in 1925, Boris Savinkov returned to the secret police headquarters at the

Lubyanka in central Moscow from a stroll with his jailers. Ascending to the fourth floor, he availed himself of an open window and the inattention of his guards to leap to his death on the asphalt below. Savinkov left behind a few personal effects, an oeuvre of reasonably accomplished belles-lettres and a biography that, as Vladimir Alexandrov shows in this compelling study, wove its way through Russia's decades of revolutionary upheaval.

 Savinkov was born in 1879, the son of a judge in Warsaw. Like many of his generation, he became radicalized in secondary school, and entered the ranks of the Socialist Revolutionary Party while studying in St Petersburg. Never one for the details of ideology, he manifested an early enthusiasm for terrorism and, after a few false starts, rose to be the mastermind of the party's Combat Organization, responsible for the murders of key tsarist officials and dignitaries, including the Minister of the Interior and the tsar's first cousin. Then, much to the dismay of his fellow radicals, whose preferred genre in matters of self-representation was the hagiography, Savinkov spent a period of exile in France publishing raw but timely novellas about disillusioned, anguished and bored terrorists.

The collapse of the tsarist empire in 1917 catapulted Savinkov back into the thick of the action in wartime Petrograd. There he became a leader in the Provisional Government just as its support was evaporating and the Bolsheviks were preparing to pounce. After October, Savinkov joined the White movement in its doomed struggle against the Reds, before fleeing Russia once again for the safety of western Europe. As an émigré, he orchestrated a series of desperate and ineffectual campaigns against the Bolsheviks, which culminated in a secret mission in 1924 to lead a new terrorist organization in the Soviet capital. In fact, Soviet spy chiefs had fabricated the entire organization with the express intention of luring Savinkov back to Russia. He was arrested on his arrival in Minsk, prosecuted in one of the show trials that would become a grim hallmark of Soviet propaganda, and sentenced to the indeterminate prison term from which the fourth-floor window of the Lubyanka offered an escape of sorts. (The book makes clear that Savinkov jumped, and was not, as some have surmised, pushed.)

Alexandrov distils a great deal of research into a fast-paced narrative about Savinkov's personal and political fortunes, the assassinations, the betrayals, the marriages, the escapes, the struggles over money, the friendships with leading lights in Russia's Silver Age. But he also takes in the political turmoil of Russia as the old world was consumed in the flames of war and revolution and a new order forged with flags and bayonets. *To Break Russia's Chains* reads like a political thriller, and it is a story Alexandrov tells with aplomb.

In that telling, Savinkov's story is also Russia's: it supplies evidence that "the paths Russia took during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries - the tyranny of the Soviet period, the authoritarianism of Putin's regime - were not the only ones written in her historical destiny". This leads Alexandrov to ruminate frequently on the possible implications of success for any of Savinkov's plots. One of the book's refrains is "what if?", as Alexandrov seeks to elevate Savinkov from a thorn in the side of the Soviet regime to its potential nemesis.

If Savinkov's attempt to stage an uprising in Yaroslavl in 1918 had worked, or if his invasion of Belorussia with

a rag-tag band of antisemites had raised a peasant rebellion against the usurpers in the Kremlin, things might have turned out differently. Perhaps if, on his final return to Moscow, Savinkov had succeeded in assassinating Bolshevik leaders and in triggering an uprising (“What if his target had been Stalin?” Alexandrov muses), he might now be acclaimed as one of the most influential political figures of the twentieth century and Lenin might be remembered as the Russian Béla Kun. But none of these plots enjoyed a snowball’s chance of success. The counterfactuals lay bare not so much the contingencies of the Bolsheviks’ seizure of an empire as the desperate and deluded adventurism of their enemies.

In admittedly turbulent times, Savinkov managed a dizzying series of ideological contortions, by turns throwing in his lot with Socialist Revolutionaries, moderate socialists, nationalists, Mussolini’s fascists and then eventually, after a presumed apostasy in Moscow, with the Bolsheviks themselves. Vladimir Alexandrov generously interprets Savinkov’s repeated shedding of his political skins as improvisations that stemmed from his “absolute commitment to personal and political freedom”, but a no less plausible explanation is surely that each fresh skin allowed Savinkov to play – at least in his own mind – a key role in determining Russia’s future. When the Bolsheviks made clear to what one of them called “the sportsman of revolution” that the game was up, and that he would live out the rest of his days in the obscurity of the Soviet penal system, Boris Savinkov was left with one final dramatic move.

Daniel Beer’s most recent book is *The House of the Dead: Siberian exile under the tsars, 2016*

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