

Anna Geifman. *Entangled in Terror: The Azef Affair and the Russian Revolution.* Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000. ix + 247 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2650-5.



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'Not a friend, a disciple or a believer'

The role of Evno Azef has taken on massive symbolic significance in study of the late years of tsarism, and of the revolutionary parties. He has become an icon of the tsarist government's ineptitude and corruptness, the man paid by the police to inform on the revolutionary terrorists who at the same time played a leading role in the assassination of some of Russia's best known statesmen.[1] Azef himself was described in the international press as the devil incarnate, a synonym for shame and duplicity. Geifman successfully re-evaluates his role, and argues convincingly that despite his efficacy as an icon of corruption, Azef was in fact never a double agent. This revelation is woven into a readable and well structured book which sets itself three key points; to assess Azef's alleged role a double agent, to look at Azef's personality, and to demystify the circumstances of Azef's exposure. Geifman acquits her first and her third points admirably, but the book's attempts to unravel Azef's psychological state and motivations using contemporary psychological writing are tenuous and unconvincing.

Chapter 1, "A Frightened child," describes Azef's childhood, and establishes the basis for Geifman's thesis that Azef was a personality 'driven by fear'. This part of the book is largely speculative, and forms the weakest part of her work. Geifman portrays Azef's child-

hood as poverty stricken. Born to a poor Jewish family from Grodno, who moved to Rostov-na-Donu in 1874, Azef's traits of acquisitiveness, doubt and fear are linked to envy, lack of parental support and fear of pogroms in this period.

The source material for this section is sketchy at best, and many of Geifman's assertions appear to be self-fulfilling. Azef received education up to secondary level, "a rare luxury for Jewish boys of his background" (p. 16); Geifman does not consider the possibility that this was evidence that his background was not as impoverished as she had surmised. Azef the teenager was a gauche, ugly, socially inadequate young man with a squeaky voice, not unlike many teenagers, who sought to compensate for his failings by development of mental abilities. His lonely existence at school was broken down by involvement in revolutionary circles, which offered comradeship and a "lofty outlet." Again, Geifman is in danger of determinism when stating that Azef sought to compensate for lack of personal warmth by "feigning personal involvement" (p. 26). Azef decided to emigrate to Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1892, and stole money to do so. Geifman suggests that this decision was driven by his driving force, fear, in this case, fear of arrest, but concedes that it was "not entirely panic based or new" (p. 28). The cynic has to ask if it was panic based at all; there is no direct source material

dealing with Azef's state of mind in this period.

Chapter 2, "Yet another way to sell your soul," describes Azef's early career as police spy, and investigates his motives for deciding to inform; he was driven by fear of poverty and a self-seeking mentality. He impressed revolutionaries as a potential leader, and moved his political affiliation to fervent terrorism in accordance with police wishes. Azef returned to Russia in 1898 and continued to inform; by this time, he risked exposure if he stopped. Azef emigrated once more in 1902, again at police instigation, because he was the police's only hope of tracking the western based revolutionary organisations. Geifman's treatment of Azef's wife and his feelings towards her in this chapter are difficult to accept. His wife, Liubov' Grigor'evna, is portrayed as stupid and plain, and Azef "clearly did not love her" (p. 41). Azef's own proclamation of deep and brooding love for his wife is relegated to a footnote. Geifman includes a lively description and searing indictment of his "low, base" cultural life, and his coarse tastes; he avoided intellectual involvement, and was a womaniser and adulterer who used expensive brothels.

Chapter 3, "Terrorist-Neophyte 1902-1905," details Azef's connections with terrorism, and explains his failure to thwart entirely the activities of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR). The *boevaia organizatsiia* (fighting organisation) of the party, headed by Gershuni, enjoyed a degree of independence from the central committee, and Azef did not have a close relationship with Gershuni. Geifman here draws some worthwhile comparisons between Azef and the handsome, confident, ego-centric Boris Savinkov, "the true taskmaster and architect behind all central terrorist ventures from mid-1903" (p. 55) and, in personality, Azef's antithesis. Azef built on his notoriety within the PSR terrorist organisation by claiming credit for terrorist action he was not involved in, most notably the assassinations of Alexandrov and Von Plehve. The successful assassination of Plehve was, according to Geifman, due to police incompetence; Azef had provided enough information to foil the attempt. A grey area exists in terms of Azef's involvement in explosives manufacture. Geifman comments that he impressed the party leadership with jargon, and pretended to co-ordinate bomb-making, but never definitively states that he played no useful part in bomb manufacture.

Chapter 4, "Terrorist-Virtuoso 1905-8," looks at the most successful part of Azef's career as informer. Despite a certain breakdown of relations between Azef and the police, information did get through, and police tactics of

shadowing and sabotage ensured that most PSR terrorist activity was frustrated. Azef's role in thwarting terrorist attempts were "too numerous to list" (p. 87), and he sowed discord between the central committee and fighting organisation. The terrorist activities of regionally based "flying detachments" (*letuchie boevie otriadi*) and "combat units" (*boevie druzhiny*) which had some success were entirely divorced from the activities of the fighting organisation.[2] The party's central fighting organisation was almost entirely unsuccessful from 1906 onwards. The exception to these failures was the assassination of Admiral Dubasov in 1906; even Geifman admits here that Azef's role was "shadowy." Though Azef was not fully informed of the details of the attempt, which was run by Savinkov, he was undoubtedly involved.

Chapter 5, "The Exposure," provides a fascinating account of Azef's exposure, which captures the absolute credulity of the PSR leaders. Burtsev, a Menshevik who was later to try to build a career on 'spy hunting', made some public claims about Azef's police connections. The PSR central committee were so outraged that they had Burtsev tried for slander. Burtsev, however, by uncertain means succeeded in obtaining an oral confession from the retired police chief Lopukhin, which assured Burtsev's acquittal and Azef's exposure. Azef, on being confronted by a group of PSR leaders lied unconvincingly then, true to form, ran away.

Chapter 6, "The Public Scandal," considers the repercussions of Azef's disrobing, for the PSR and for the tsarist government. In January 1909 the PSR central committee made a public declaration over the Azef affair, asserting that the police had confirmed details of terrorist attacks, and that the affair had not discredited the use of terror, which would continue. Police sources consistently stated that Azef had always been an informer, never a provocateur. Though the left sought to utilise the affair as discrediting the tsarist government, Geifman asserts that repercussions of the affair were more serious for the PSR itself than for the tsarist government. Bewilderment and acrimony among active party members reigned; the central committee resigned, and regional groups were thrown into disarray by Azef's exposure. Savinkov's attempts to rebuild the fighting organisation failed, and in 1911 the fighting organisation was formally disengaged. Azef had succeeded in leaving the party's central terror organisation in utter disarray.

Chapter 7, "Fugitive Incognito," concludes the story of Azef. He ran to Friedrshchsdorf, where he met his lover, a singer, whom Geifman curtly describes as

tawdry, crass, and provincial. Azef proceeded to live very comfortably indeed on his ill-gotten police gains. His comfortable life came to an abrupt halt when he was arrested in 1915 by the German Imperial police as a subversive. He was finally released in December 1917, but died the following year from a range of ailments. It was 1925 before the SR's discovered that he had died. Press interest in Azef continued for some years after his exposure, and the earlier attempts of his revolutionary comrades to humanise him reversed when he was exposed, producing a huge range of negative accounts of him.

Geifman returns in this chapter to her problematic assessment of Azef's emotional state. She says that Azef gave the impression of well-concealed tenderness to his children, wrote long and pleading letters to his wife from exile, and although "not heartbroke" by her demands for divorce, "he insisted on his right to take part in their children's upbringing" (p. 149). He did not express any fears of being tracked down by the SR's once in Germany, which was "quite out of character" (p. 160). Such unconcern on Azef's part was certainly anomalous with the picture presented by Geifman of a man whose life was driven overwhelmingly by fear.

Geifman concludes that Azef was an efficient police spy who made significant contributions to the foiling of terrorist attempts. He was never a 'Judas'; on the contrary, he always sought to sabotage the activities of the fighting organisation. Azef was, however, no idealist; he was motivated in his actions by fear and avarice. This conclusion confirms the book's strong and clear refutation of the commonly held assertion that Azef was an agent provocateur. The evidence presented on this is so clear that Geifman could comfortably have allowed for more acceptance of 'grey areas' of Azef's terrorist activities, when he may actually have been complicit in successful terrorist attacks. The psychological profiling of Azef as a man governed by fear, and Geifman's judgemental attacks on Azef's wife, mistress and bourgeois values ring hollow, and distract from the sound historical analysis Geifman offers elsewhere.

Geifman marshals an impressive array of archival material and secondary sources. One conspicuous absence in her bibliography is any mention of K.N. Morozov's monograph, *Partiia Sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov v 1907-1914gg* (Rosspen, Moscow, 1998). Chapters three and four of part one (pp. 164-248) deal with the Azef affair, quoting extensively from the sources that Geifman

uses, and presenting a more detailed picture of the impact of the affair on PSR organisation. Like Geifman, Morozov attempts to present a picture of Azef, and of the moral-psychological atmosphere of the PSR in this period, but unlike Geifman does not indulge in value judgements. Instead he presents the testimonies of senior PSR figures, as found in the judicial commission of the PSR central committee into the affair, and allows the readers to come to their own conclusions. Although Geifman uses these sources extensively, their presentation in Morozov's work is illuminating, and enables the reader to see that the positions taken by Geifman are sometimes tenuous; the material she herself uses often contradicts her position. For instance, Zil'berberg, who joined the PSR's fighting organisation in 1906, commented, in direct opposition to Geifman's thesis, that Azef was absolutely fearless.[3] Azef's knowledge and understanding of theory, which Geifman asserts was nominal, is given a fuller treatment in Morozov's work, and the dissonance among senior PSR members on Azef's engagement with theory is drawn out.[4]

These criticisms notwithstanding, Geifman's book provides a useful addition to scholarship on the pre-revolutionary period. Its readability will ensure that it is a popular addition to undergraduate and postgraduate reading lists, and will provide specialists in the field a further insight into the complex affair of Azef. Its problematic moral tone, occasionally verging on histrionics, and rigidity of approach, can be countered by a comparison with Morozov's less analytical, source based approach.

Notes

[1]. The best known of Azef's alleged victims was of course Viacheslav von Plehve, killed by a bomb thrown by the SR terrorist Egor Sazonov on 15th July 1904.

[2]. On the autonomy of the regional fighting organisations and their activities up till 1917, see A. Geifman, *Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894-1917* (Princeton, 1993), p. 58ff.

[3]. K.N. Morozov, *Partiia sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov v 1907-1914gg*. (Rosspen, Moscow, 1998), p. 169.

[4]. Morozov, op. cit., pp. 166-7.

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