

JASPER KENT

THE PEOPLE'S WILL

Russia, 1881.

The blood of two great families flows in the veins of one man.
And blood must be spilled if either is to survive . . .

ИВАНСКИЯ ВОРОТА 1787

From the author of the bestselling *Twelve*

ABOUT THE BOOK

The next moment he was upon him, his eyes blazing, his mouth open to reveal his fangs. Osokin began to pray, not that he would live but that he would truly die...

Turkmenistan 1881: the fortress city of Geok Tepe has fallen to the Russians.

Beneath its citadel sits a prisoner. He hasn't moved from his chair for two years. Neither has he felt the sun on his face for more than fifty... although for that he is grateful.

Into this subterranean gaol marches a Russian officer. He has come for the captive. Not to release him, but to return him to St Petersburg - to deliver him into the hands of an old, old enemy who would visit damnation upon the ruling family of Russia: the great vampire Zmyeevich...

But there is another who has escaped Geok Tepe and followed the prisoner. He is not concerned with the fate of the tsar, or Zmyeevich or the officer. All he desires is revenge.

And other forces have a part to play. A group of revolutionaries has vowed to bring the dictatorship of Tsar Aleksandr to an end, and with it the entire Romanov dynasty. They call themselves The People's Will...

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Also by Jasper Kent

Copyright

THE PEOPLE'S WILL

Jasper Kent

For M.B.K. and E.B.K.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Measurements

Much of the Russian Imperial measurement system was based by Tsar Peter the Great on the British system. Thus a *diuym* is exactly equal to an inch (the English word is used in the text) and a foot is both the same word and measurement in English and Russian. A *funt* is translated as a pound, though weighs only about nine-tenths of a British pound. A *verst* is a unit of distance slightly greater than a kilometre.

Dates

During the nineteenth century, Russians based their dates on the old Julian Calendar, which in the 1880s was twelve days behind the Gregorian Calendar used in West Europe.

In the text dates are given in the Russian form and so, for example, the death of Dostoyevsky is placed on 28 January 1881, where Western history books have it on 9 February.

With thanks to John Dunne for his knowledge of Saint George's Church in Esher, Stéphane Marsan for help with the French language and Seçkin Selvi for advice on Ottoman Istanbul.

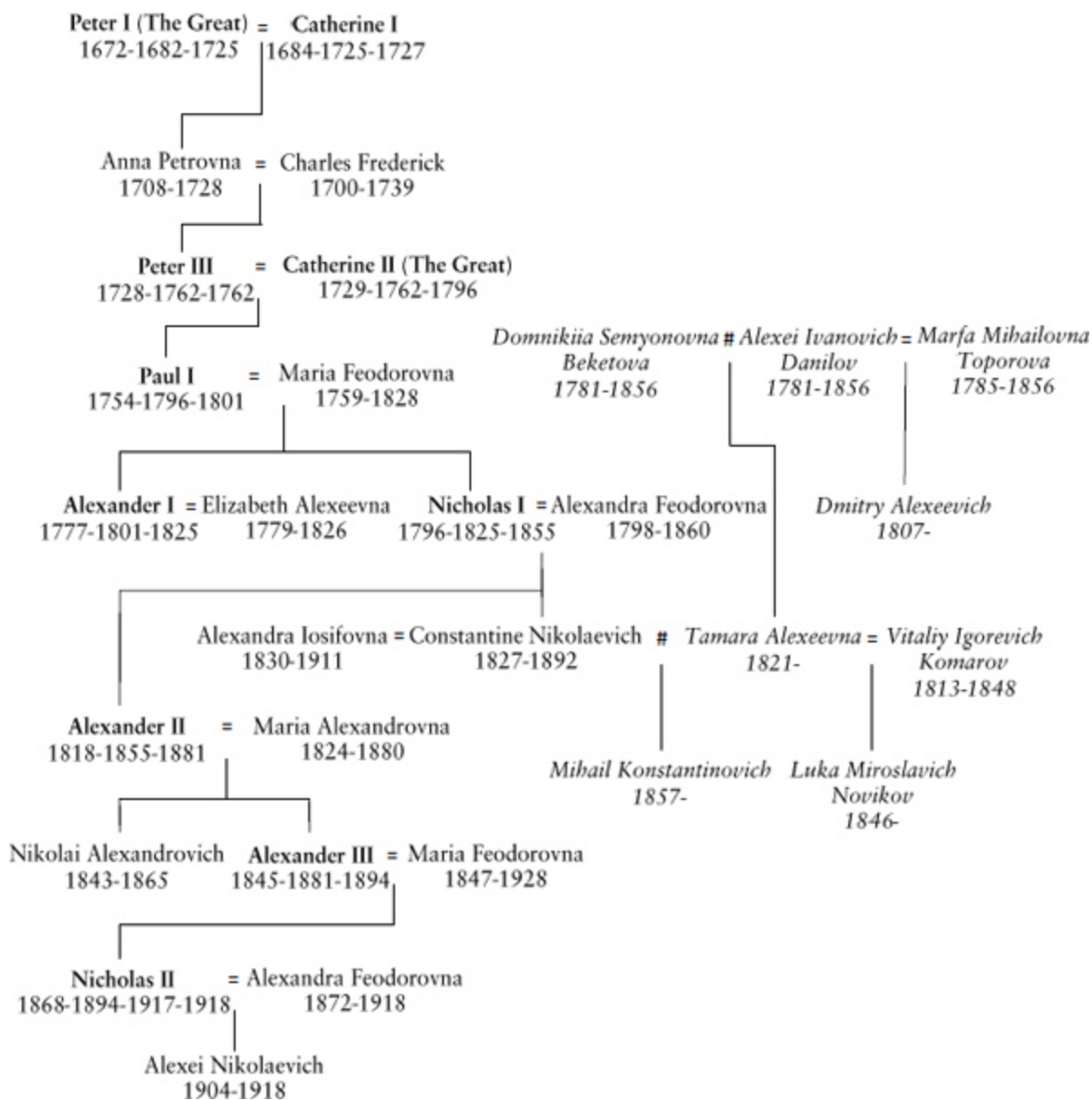
Selected Romanov and Danilov Family Tree

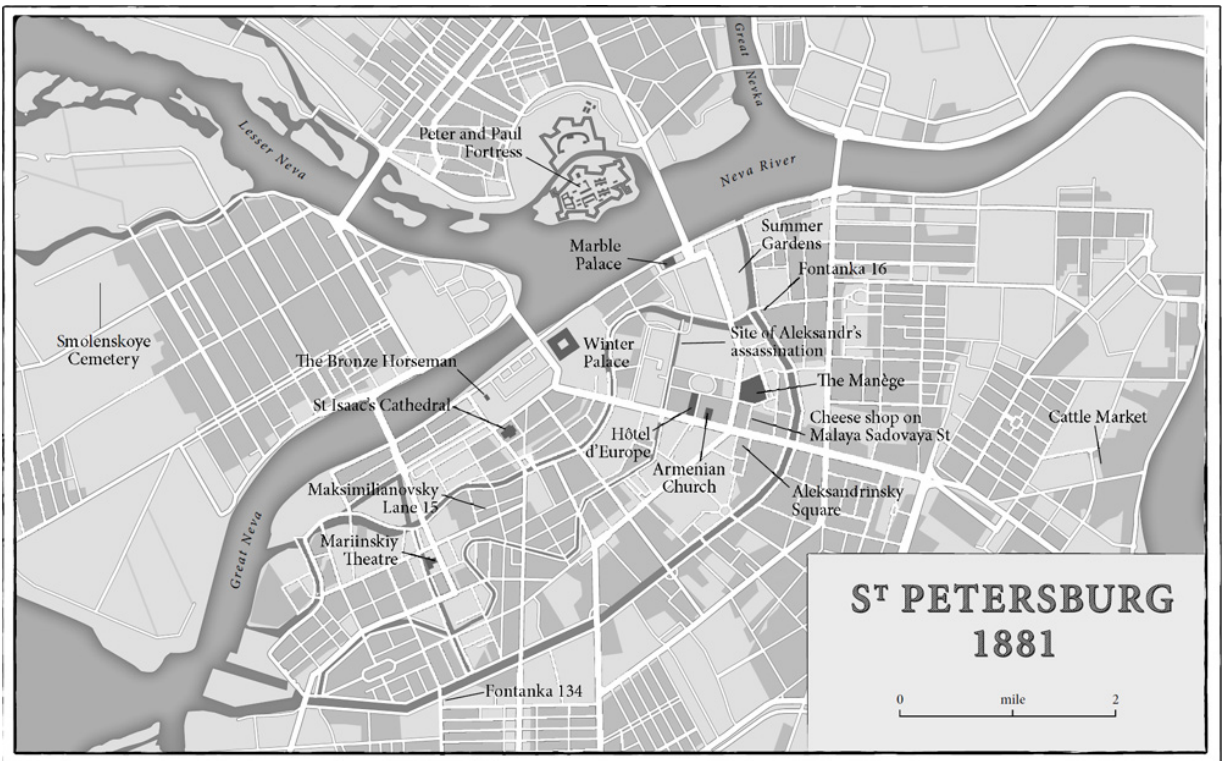
Reigning tsars and tsaritsas shown in **bold**.

Fictional characters shown in *italic*

'#' indicates unmarried parentage.

Dates are *birth-[start of reign]-[end of reign]-death*





Smolenskoye Cemetery

The Bronze Horseman

St Isaac's Cathedral

Maksimilianovsky Lane 15

Mariinsky Theatre

Fontanka 134

Peter and Paul Fortress

Marble Palace

Winter Palace

Hôtel d'Europe

Armenian Church

Great Neva

Neva River

Summer Gardens

Fontanka 16

Site of Aleksandr's assassination

The Manège

Cheese shop on Malaya Sadovaya St

Aleksandrinsky Square

Cattle Market

ST PETERSBURG 1881

0 mile 2

Only the scoundrels have forgotten that strength is with those whose blood flows, not with those who cause blood to be shed. There it is - the law of blood on earth.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, writing shortly before his death in 1881

PROLOGUE

The verdict was unanimous. The sentence was death.

In the summer of 1879 the Executive Committee of *Zemlya ee Volya* - Land and Liberty - held a congress in the central Russian town of Lipetsk. There were eleven of them. It required twelve to constitute a jury, but they would be enough. The very idea of a jury was an innovation in Russia - one that had been instigated by the accused himself, a particularly august Russian. They came from all parts of the motherland - from Petersburg and Moscow, of course, but also from the south; from Gelendzhik and Odessa and Kiev. It was those from the south who argued most keenly for a death sentence. They knew poverty better, or had at least witnessed it more closely. None of the Executive Committee was truly poor, though some had parents who had been serfs - until emancipation, eighteen years before. Some might catch a hint of irony that the condemned man was also the emancipator, but sentimentality was a weakness. *He* would not be sentimental when it came to dealing with *them*.

Lipetsk was a spa town and the eleven of them - ten men and one woman - arrived in ones and twos, under the guise of patients. They drank the waters, bathed in the mud and rowed on the lake, gazing into its clear, fishless waters. Shiryaev suggested that the minerals which made the waters so healthy for men meant also that fish could not live in them. Shiryaev was a scientist. That would prove useful.

The lake was known to locals as the Antichrist Pond. It was Frolenko who asked how the name arose. The

antichrist in question, so they were told, was none other than Tsar Pyotr I - Peter the Great. The Executive Committee hid their smiles. Pyotr was the great-great-great-grandfather of the man they had come here to judge. When he had begun to reform Russian society at the beginning of the eighteenth century, many believed him to be the false prophet that the Bible foretold. Today the members of Land and Liberty held Aleksandr II in similar regard, though they cared little for Christian mythology.

On 15 June the Executive Committee made their way to a forest outside the town; though a popular spot for picnics, they managed to find a secluded glade. It was not their main purpose, but they too had brought food, wine and vodka. They were in a merry mood. On the way there Zhelyabov showed off his enormous strength, lifting a passing droshky by its rear axle and stopping the horse in its tracks. They did not mind drawing attention to themselves; no one would guess their true purpose.

After they had eaten, Aleksandr Dmitrievich Mihailov read out the charges against his namesake, Aleksandr Nikolayevich Romanov. The tsar, though not present to face his accusers, had but one defence. Mihailov dismissed it. 'The emperor has destroyed in the second half of his reign almost all the good he permitted to be done by the progressive figures of the sixties,' he explained to the others. Each of them was asked in turn whether the reforms of Aleksandr's earlier reign could win him a pardon for the evils of the present and for those he would yet inflict upon the country if allowed to live. From each came the same answer: 'No.'

The sentence was passed.

Then they went on to discuss how the execution was to take place and how, once the tsar was dead, the whole edifice of monarchy would be brought down. The second matter seemed simple, almost dull. Revolution would be brought about by the people. On Aleksandr's death the

masses would sense their freedom. It would be more a question of how to guide the transformation of government than how to instigate it. Matters would be helped though if the tsar was not the only one to die. It would be easier if there was no obvious successor. The tsarevich, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich, should not become Aleksandr III. His son, though just eleven, should not become Nikolai II. There were those who would rally even to a child emperor if he bore the Romanov name.

But the tsar himself must be the prime target. As to how he would die, it was Shiryaev, the scientist, who made the suggestion - a new invention to bring about a new age: dynamite. It provided everything they needed. It would give the executioner the opportunity of escape; it stood the chance of dealing with those around the tsar as well as the tyrant himself; and it would be noticed. Land and Liberty had learned from their French predecessors that terror itself was a political statement.

And so the Congress of Lipetsk closed with much decided. The Executive Committee knew what had to be done. They knew how it was to be done. All that remained was to choose when.

But the decisions of the Executive Committee were not entirely popular among the wider membership of Land and Liberty. A further congress took place in Voronezh and within two months Land and Liberty was no more. Those who disagreed with the conclusions reached in Lipetsk formed their own party, Black Repartition, dedicated to a fairer distribution of land for the peasants, brought about by political means.

The Executive Committee, and many others, remained faithful to what they had decided; remained dedicated to carrying out the sentence which they had passed upon the tsar. They too chose a new name for their group, a name which described in simple terms that which they believed themselves ... which they *knew* themselves to embody.

They called themselves *Narodnaya Volya* - the People's Will.

The verdict was unanimous. The sentence was death.

This trial had been a simpler affair, though it had preceded the events of Lipetsk by over a decade. It had taken place in Saratov in 1865. The accused was not a member of the imperial family, or the nobility, or even a citizen of Russia, though it was in Russia that his offences had been committed. With him there was no need to balance the good of his earlier years with the evils of his later life. There was no mitigation for his crimes.

Where the trial in Lipetsk would be forced to function with only eleven jurors, in Saratov there were just two. Even so, they followed the procedures of a trial, taking on all the necessary roles between them. For one of the two it was a game, for the other an obsession. It was the older of them, the woman, who spoke most. She was counsel for the prosecution and the chief witness. Other witnesses could not be present, so she represented them, retelling their experiences as best she knew them. She even acted as counsel for the defence. When the judge called on her to present her case she stood up, took a deep breath and then returned to her seat without a word. The judge giggled.

Then the jury - so recently acting as judge and counsel - retired. Unanimity between two was easier than between eleven, but there had never been any doubt as to the verdict. It fell to the judge to announce what they had decided. Some might see it as pointless that the only person he had to announce it to had moments before sat with him on the jury, but he understood the concept of play-acting.

Having discovered the verdict it was the judge's duty to pass sentence. The counsel for the prosecution made a strong case for death, against which the defence could find no arguments. The judge did not deliberate for long. He

spoke the single word 'Death' in a whisper. It was an onerous decision for any judge to make, more so because it meant that one day he would have to take on another role - that of executioner.

More onerous still because the judge was a little boy - a little boy just eight years old.

CHAPTER I

OSOKIN GLANCED AT his watch. One minute before noon.

'Steady,' he said, his voice edged with suppressed excitement that he hoped wouldn't be read as fear.

Colonel Otrepyev didn't respond. He stood, or half stood, in the mouth of the side tunnel, too tall to fully straighten his back in the enclosed space. Ahead of him were the handful of troops that he'd brought with him on his mysterious late-night arrival, six days before, with orders from on high that his every whim was to be catered for. That side tunnel, the result of six days' labour, was more than a whim.

The main attack force was some way behind, at the mouth of the larger tunnel. Osokin had no plans to join them when they finally surged forward. His duty had been to undermine the city, not to invade it. Originally he'd intended to follow up with the rearguard, taking a little less glory for a little less risk, but since Otrepyev's arrival his ideas had changed. He wanted to see what lay at the end of that other tunnel.

'All set, Lieutenant?' he asked.

Lieutenant Lukin glanced up. He licked his dry lips and nodded curtly. He was the real genius behind all of this. He was scarcely more than twenty; only a few years out of the Imperial Technical School in Moscow. It was an odd route into the army, but an effective one. Science was the future of war; every officer knew that, all except a few geriatrics who'd have done better to die at Sevastopol in place of their men. But their time was past and a different breed of officer was eager to make its mark. Lukin knew his

business – and his business was tunnelling and explosives. It was as though he'd been born for this job.

Osokin would never have guessed that they would get so far in so short a time. They'd started just two weeks ago, as 1880 had turned into 1881, and now they were ready. Above them, the massive citadel of Geok Tepe stood, ignorant of how it had been subverted, unprepared for the devastation to come. Each day it withstood a barrage of sixty Russian guns raining shell and shot down on the mud-brick walls. But today, at noon, the danger would come from a quite different direction.

It was quiet now. The beginning of the salvo was to be the signal. Ahead of them, down the tunnel – a safe, long distance ahead of them – lay five thousand pounds of nitroglycerin. Two thin copper wires led all the way back to where Lukin was crouched. In front of him sat a small wooden box with a little handle at the side and two metal pins sticking out of the top. Lukin had tried to explain, and though Osokin had no real idea how it worked, he understood enough. Lukin had simply to wind the handle, generating an electric current and then – boom – the walls of Geok Tepe would crumble. Joshua himself could not have done better, even with ten thousand ram's horns.

But Otrepyev's arrival had added further complications. Osokin had despised him on sight, and had to bite his lip to keep from muttering the word '*oprichnik*' whenever the colonel walked past. The more correct term these days was '*ohranik*', but whatever the name, Colonel Otrepyev reeked of the Third Section. Or he might have done if the Third Section had still existed. Its disbandment five months before had been a universal joy. But its work continued, and its stench lingered.

But the colonel's orders had to be obeyed. The extra tunnel had been dug and now another pair of wires emerged from it, at the far end of which lay more explosives; not as much as had been used for the main

tunnel, but enough. Otrepyev and Lukin had discussed it all very carefully. Otrepyev knew where he wanted the tunnel to lead and Lukin knew how to get it dug. Lukin had been happy to assist. Perhaps he was too young to understand what Otrepyev was. Perhaps he was too smart to reveal his revulsion for a man who would spy on his own people. Perhaps he was just too fascinated by the work itself. Only minutes earlier he had twisted his detonation wires with Otrepyev's, and when the time came the larger explosion would mask the smaller.

When the time came.

Osokin looked at his watch again. It was a minute past. The sound of the guns would be muffled down here, but they'd be heard. Every day of digging they'd been audible, and that was above the crunch of shovels scraping unceasingly against the soil. Now all was silent. The loudest sound was Osokin's own breathing. In the dimly lit tunnel it was impossible to see the men waiting behind, or the bend in the passage ahead which would protect them from the blast. The tallow candles spaced out along the walls flickered, making the shadows jump back and forth. Lukin had suggested using electric light, but the resources were simply not available out here, closer to Afghanistan than to Russia.

When it came, it was more of a sensation than a noise, reaching Osokin not through his ears but his feet. He waited a few moments more, wanting to be certain. It was a different sound from that of the days before, when they had been digging. Now he could hear nothing of the guns themselves; the blasts of expanding gas forcing the shells from their muzzles. All that could be perceived was the shaking ground as the onslaught pummelled the city above. He glanced at Lukin, who had noticed it too.

'The men, sir,' said Lukin, jerking his head in the direction of the tunnel behind them. 'All those bodies - must be blocking the sound.'

Osokin nodded. He looked over at Otrepyev, who finally returned his gaze.

'Well?' demanded the colonel.

Much as Osokin would have liked to toy with Otrepyev's impatience, he knew his duty. The guns had begun firing; the rest must follow. He pressed his fingers against his ears.

'Do it!' he hissed at Lukin.

The lieutenant turned the handle rapidly, like a little boy playing with a *diable-en-boîte*. Just as with the toy, the exact moment at which his effort would bear fruit was unpredictable. Thus the blast, even though expected, was a surprise when it came.

It was testament to the glorious power of technology that so slight an action could have so devastating an effect. The sound from the side tunnel, the shorter of the two, came first, but only by a moment. Even with his ears covered it was possible to distinguish the scale and direction of the two blasts, until the one from the tunnel ahead became so loud as to drive out every other sound - every other thought. It was still growing in volume when Osokin felt its effects - first a wind rushing through the passageway towards him, and then a more solid impact, as though he had run into a wall, which threw him back on to the ground. For a moment his hands moved from the sides of his head in an attempt to break his fall and he experienced the full intensity of the sound hammering against his eardrums. He quickly covered his ears again, preferring to be bruised than deafened.

He lay still for a few moments. Clouds of dust and debris began to billow along the tunnel towards them. To his right he noticed that Lukin had removed his hands from his ears and was using them to cover his mouth and nose. Osokin did likewise, and squeezed his eyes shut too as the first flecks of pulverized rock began to pepper them. The noise was still loud, but now more of a slow rumble, as column by

column the city's southern wall started to collapse into the pit that the explosion had created.

He waited a few seconds before opening his eyes again. The air was still thick with dust, making it impossible to see more than a short distance. Even so, Osokin could just detect the presence of daylight - something of which he had known little in the past two weeks. As they'd planned, the tunnel roof had caved in ahead. Here it was still intact, but at the end of the passageway the crater would be so large that no amount of rubble could fill it and block out the midday winter sun.

From behind him he heard a noise. It might have been a shout, but his ears still rang too much to make out what was said. A new sound assailed him, a rapid thump, thump, thump this time, again from behind. He turned, but the route back to the surface was veiled in dust, worse now in that direction than ahead. Shadows advanced, emerging from the thick smog. The shout he had heard was the command to attack. Whether the citadel would be taken by these men, streaming in through the tunnel, or by those on the surface charging across the detritus of the breached wall, no one could predict. So enormous a detonation could not be precisely calculated. It would come down to the relative sizes of the breach and the crater, and where the Turcomans chose to concentrate their defence.

Colonel Otrepyev had vanished. It was easy to guess where to. If Osokin stayed here, he would get caught up in the onslaught; either trampled underfoot or carried along by the crowd and into the sights of the defensive guns. He desired neither fate, and was still keen to discover what it was that Otrepyev had expended so much effort to get hold of before the marauding Russian army could fall upon it. He pulled himself to his feet and darted across to the side tunnel, into which Otrepyev had so recently disappeared.

Osokin had not ventured into this section of the mine before. Otrepyev said nothing explicit about its secrecy, but

Osokin, like any Russian, understood without being told what was for him to know and what was not. Aside from the sappers doing the digging, only Otrepyev and Lukin had been down here - and Lukin pretty rarely. Even Otrepyev's select squad of men were walking into the unknown. Osokin knew he was taking a risk. Whatever lay ahead was Otrepyev's business. He might choose to have Osokin shot, but in the chaos that surrounded them it should be easy enough for Osokin to make an excuse for his presence.

The tunnel, as could be guessed from the time spent on it, was not long. It ended in an underground wall, constructed of large, heavy sandstone blocks - or at least it had done until the explosion. Now there was simply a jagged hole. Beyond was a corridor, constructed of the same stone. A greater amount of explosive might have brought the whole thing down instead of just one wall. The precise result was testament to Lukin's skill.

Osokin stepped over the rubble and into the corridor. It was brighter here - lit by oil lamps rather than candles. The breach had been made just as the passageway turned a sharp corner. One path led, as far as Osokin could tell, to the north-east, the other north-west, though both twisted and he could not see far along either. The sound of feet marching away came from the latter route, and Osokin took it.

He soon caught up with Otrepyev's men. They were moving swiftly, and it was clear that the colonel knew where he was heading, though it was hard to imagine he had ever been here before. In recent evenings, Osokin had seen him poring over maps that the other officers were not allowed to inspect. The route would not have been difficult to memorize.

From behind him, Osokin heard shouts. They were not Russian voices, but local Turcomans. Then footsteps - a single set - racing towards him. In a moment his pistol was drawn. He pressed himself into a corner of the wall and

cocked the gun, raising it in front of him. He saw the shadow first, flickering against the stonework, and tried to guess where the figure would emerge. He squeezed the trigger.

His guess was wrong, fortunately for Lukin. The bullet ricocheted off the wall as the lieutenant raced along the corridor. His pace slowed momentarily in reaction to the shot, but as his eyes fell upon Osokin he seemed to comprehend the major's error. He flung himself against the hard stone wall just behind where his commanding officer was crouched and drew his own pistol.

'How many?' asked Osokin.

'Five,' replied Lukin. 'Maybe six.'

Even as he spoke, the first two appeared. Osokin had seen Turcomans from a distance, manning the city walls, but never this close. Their uniforms seemed almost medieval. They were dressed in some kind of mail, and carried small shields. They had rifles - supplied by the British, at a guess - but these were clumsy weapons to aim in an enclosed space. Osokin and Lukin's revolvers spoke moments apart, and the two men fell - their chainmail no protection against a modern bullet. But behind them, two of their comrades had managed to take aim.

Osokin felt a burning pain in his right arm. His hand fell to his side and he tried to reach over to take hold of the gun with his left. At the same time he felt Lukin grab his collar and drag him round the corner to temporary safety. But it would not take long for the Turcomans to advance, and Lukin alone would not be able to hold them off. Osokin tried to raise his pistol, but his arm would not obey. A body threw itself forward, lying stretched out on the ground in front of them, rifle aimed. Lukin fired, but the Turcoman's tactic had been clever - the shot went above his head. The man on the ground returned fire, but missed, and then two more figures appeared behind him, standing, the barrels of their guns raised.

Osokin heard a volley of gunshots - perhaps four detonations timed to the precise same moment. In the enclosed space, it was impossible to tell the direction that the sound came from, but the two standing Turcomans crumpled; the one already on the ground twitched and lay still, with nowhere further to fall.

Osokin turned to see four of Otrepyev's squad standing, rifles raised, wisps of smoke idling from the muzzles and twisting around the bayonets. Two of the men charged forward round the bend in the passageway. Osokin heard a scream, quickly strangled to nothing. He watched the soldiers' shadows as they thrust their bayonets forward. Then they reappeared, rushing past Osokin and Lukin as if they were not there.

'Can you walk?' Lukin asked.

Osokin glanced at his arm and put his hand across to feel the wound. It had numbed him, but the bullet had gone through and not broken the bone. He nodded and got to his feet. The two of them ran on in the direction the soldiers had gone.

Soon they reached the end of the corridor - or at least as close to it as they could. Otrepyev's elite squad blocked the way, and their way was in turn blocked by a heavy wooden door, with iron bands across it. One of the soldiers was bending down close to the lock, while Otrepyev leaned over him intently.

Lukin pushed forward through the men. 'Let me!' he shouted.

Otrepyev looked up, and then beckoned to Lukin. 'Move!' he snapped at the man beside him. The others parted to allow Lukin through, and Osokin took the opportunity to follow in his wake.

'This has to be quick,' growled Otrepyev.

Lukin nodded. 'Get them back,' he said.

Otrepyev ordered his men away and soon they were hidden behind a bend. Otrepyev stayed to watch Lukin, and

Osokin did likewise. The lieutenant took the short stick of dynamite that his predecessor had been attempting to attach to the lock, and moved it to the other side of the door.

'The hinges will be weaker,' he explained. 'At least you've brought the right kit.'

He delved into the bag that the soldier had been using and brought out a handful of wet clay, with which he easily fixed the explosive where he wanted it. He struck a match and the fuse was alight.

'We've got about eight seconds,' he said, already on the move.

Soon they were with the others. Osokin held his breath. Otrepyev glanced at him and then at Lukin. The words 'Stay back and let *us* deal with this' emerged from his lips an instant before the blast. Even as sound came, Otrepyev's troops ran forward, and Osokin and Lukin had no choice, for the moment, but to obey.

It was Lukin who moved first, his curiosity evidently as great as Osokin's. Within seconds they were back at what remained of the door, the top hinge blasted by dynamite, the bottom smashed by a soldier's boot. The two officers gazed at what lay within.

It was like the inside of one of the cone-shaped chimneys used to manufacture glass; easily fifty paces across and twice as tall, with the curved walls converging almost to a point where one might expect to see a circle of daylight, though none was visible. By Osokin's estimation, they were still below ground level, but the peak of this strange cellar was surely above it.

The squad had scattered across the room, brutally dealing with the Turcoman warriors they discovered inside. The defenders outnumbered the Russians by at least two to one but seemed no match for Otrepyev's men, who happily slaughtered them with sword, bayonet and pistol. If the place had merely been some kind of barracks, then the

effort of blasting their way in here would have been superfluous. But Osokin could see that the Turcomans were not here for their own comfort. They were here to guard something.

And what they were guarding stood at the very centre of the room.

It was a chair; a wooden chair - sturdy but surely not comfortable. The word 'throne' might have been more apposite, given its slightly raised, central position and the evident fact that this room - this throne room - existed solely to house it. But the man sitting in it was no king, those surrounding him no loyal courtiers. He did not move. At first Osokin suspected he might be dead, but looking closer he saw the man's eyes constantly flickering, taking in what was happening around him.

Osokin walked forward, oblivious of the melee that was taking place. With his injured arm, there was little he would have been able to do to defend himself, but he found he was strangely removed from what was going on all around. The Turcomans' objective did not seem to be the repulsion of the invading soldiers, but was more like a retreat; a retreat which the Russians were intent on hindering. But how they might escape was unclear. There was only one door to the chamber - the one which Lukin had so effectively blown from its hinges - but the Turcomans did not head for it. Instead they were making for two muster points, towards the back of the room on either side of the chair, marked by pieces of machinery whose detail Osokin could not make out. None tried to defend the chair itself, though no one save Osokin was attempting to approach.

As he got closer, he could see more clearly why the occupant did not move: he was bound where he sat. On his forearms and shins, thick leather straps fastened him to its arms and legs and, as if this might not be enough to fetter him, chains added a further layer of constraint. A strap

stretched across his shoulders, and his head was kept still by yet another across his forehead, pressing his unkempt blond hair tight against his skull and binding him to some extension of the chairback that Osokin could not see. The prisoner - there could be no doubt as to what he was - strained every sinew against his bonds, but could do nothing to free himself, or even to move.

It had become lighter. Osokin looked around, realizing that it had been no gradual process but a sudden increase in illumination beyond what was provided by the oil lamps. He looked up and saw that the dark circle at the apex of the chamber's coned ceiling was now partially lit, almost like a waxing moon. Sunlight was spilling through and illuminating the wall, the line between dark and shadow gradually moving, soon to reach the floor as the gap above opened further.

A shot rang out. Osokin looked and saw Otrepyev holding his pistol, his arm outstretched. Following its line, he saw a Turcoman slump to the ground. Beside him was one of the machines that Osokin had observed. It was fastened to the wall; a large wheel with a crank handle, which two of the dead man's comrades continued to operate.

Otrepyev did not expend any more bullets, but strode over towards them, sabre in hand - the height that had so restricted him in the tunnels now giving him impressive speed without his having to break into a run. One of the men let go of the wheel and drew his sword in an attempt to defend his post, but Otrepyev quickly dispatched him with a backhand blow to the neck. The remaining guard desperately tried to turn the handle more quickly. Osokin could see now that from the wheel a long rope ran up the wall to a pulley, after which its path could not be seen, but it was clear enough that it was this which was gradually drawing aside the shutter that had been blocking out the sun, and allowing its light to spill into the room.

Why this action should be of such vital importance to the Turcoman was unclear, but it most certainly cost him his life. Otrepyev brought his sword down on the man's hands. The Turcoman snatched them away from the wheel and held them up in front of him, as if hiding his face in fear. But one hand, lolling from his wrist by the fragment of skin and sinew that had been left by Otrepyev's blow, provided no cover. Otrepyev quickly put him out of his misery, his pistol firing at close range into the middle of the face the Turcoman had seemed so eager to protect.

Next Otrepyev grabbed the rope that stretched out above him with one hand and hacked at it with his sword. It was soon cut through and the colonel let it swing freely across the chamber. Almost instantly another Turcoman broke free of the swordfight that had been engaging him and leapt high into the air, grabbing the dangling rope and pulling it down so that the panel above opened a little further and the line of sunlight progressed another step across the room. The Turcoman tugged and jiggled on the end of the rope, swinging back and forth as he did so, but his weight was insufficient to encourage any additional movement. As this human pendulum came past him, Otrepyev took a short run and flung himself into the air - an impressive feat for a man of his years. At the apex of his flight he hacked at the rope again with his sword, cutting it in a single stroke. The Turcoman fell to the ground, still clutching his end of the rope like a valued treasure. Otrepyev landed comfortably on his feet and turned, but he had no need to deal with his adversary. A swarm of Russian soldiers rallied to the prone figure and finished him with their bayonets.

That so many of them were free to do so showed that the fight had turned in the Russians' favour. There now remained only a small group huddled against the wall, furiously working on the other device that Osokin still could not see. Otrepyev shouted an order and pointed towards the Turcomans. A number of his men moved towards them.

At the same moment one of the Turcomans gave a cry which Osokin guessed to be an exhortation to his god. There was a sudden movement among the group, two of them falling to the ground, and Osokin could at last see what they were working on: a great iron lever set into the wall which they had finally managed to pull down from the vertical to the horizontal.

Osokin heard a sound above him, as did Otrepyev, who looked to its source and then broke into a run towards the chair at the centre of the chamber. He quite deliberately barged one of his own troops out of the way, pushing him across the room so that he blocked Osokin's view of the chair and the prisoner. As the soldier's head turned towards Osokin, a look of horror appeared on the man's face and he attempted to throw himself backwards. But he was already off balance and could do nothing. Behind him Otrepyev could be seen, still dashing towards the chair.

Osokin felt a whoosh of air above his head and a dark shape appeared in front of his eyes, as though some great black raven had swooped down from its nesting place high in the wall. But as it moved away Osokin saw that it was no bird. Two long, straight poles stretched up from it to a pivot in the ceiling by which it swung, released by the lever he had watched the Turcomans operate. At the end of the poles was a thin horizontal sheet of metal, which was travelling at huge speed now that it approached the bottom of its arc.

The Russian soldier in front of him had had no time to move. The horizontal blade hit him with gruesome precision just a little way above the middle of his Adam's apple. The man's body fell to the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut; as though the head had been holding up the body instead of the other way round. The head itself remained momentarily *in situ*, given a slight upward momentum by the impact and spinning frantically in the air, repeatedly showing and hiding the gaping red

cross-section of its hewn neck. Osokin felt a splatter of blood across his face, and then another.

But the impact had done little to slow the blade's progress. As the soldier's head continued to turn in the air, behind it Otrepyev had launched himself off the ground, his feet out in front of him, as if aiming a drop kick at the prisoner. But instead the impact was just to one side of the captive's head, to the wood of the chair itself.

The blade was level with Otrepyev's own head as his feet made contact with the wood. It was a race between the two of them. If the blade were to be the victor it would fulfil its design - there could be no doubt that all of this was planned - and sever the prisoner's head. The chair back received the full force of Otrepyev's lunge. The room was filled with a screeching, tearing sound as the chair's legs ripped away from the nails and bolts that fixed it to the platform beneath.

The prisoner gazed at the blade, now only inches from him, and then seemed to look upwards as the chair finally began to tip back under the force of Otrepyev's assault. For a few moments, the blade continued to make ground, closing faster on the prisoner's neck than the falling chair could move him away. But then he began to fall quicker, down as well as back, and the blade finally skimmed over him, just missing, or perhaps just catching, the ball of his chin.

The chair and the prisoner and Otrepyev and the spinning, severed head all continued to fall, each matching the others' speed in response to the same gravitational force. There was a loud crash - nothing compared with the blasts that Osokin had heard earlier in the day - as the two men and the chair hit the ground. At the same instant the head landed and, still revolving, began to roll eagerly towards Osokin's feet, coming finally to rest just in front of them, its dead eyes gazing upwards. It had been only seconds since the blade's release.

Over by the lever, Otrepyev's men had dealt with the last remaining Turcomans and were already wiping their bayonets clean. Otrepyev himself was pressed against the floor, aware that the swinging blade was still loose. Osokin could see it returning already, level with his eyes and hurtling towards him. He stood his ground. It had missed him before, and would follow the same path back. He felt his hair ripple as the blade flew over his head and relished his bravery, or at least the power of his intellect to overcome his native fear. It swung past again, on its way down.

'Deal with it!' shouted Otrepyev from his position on the floor.

Two soldiers approached warily, knowing full well what the blade had done to their comrade. They kept to the side of its path, jabbing at it with their rifles and each time taking a little of its momentum. When it had slowed enough, one of them felt sufficiently brave to grab at it, but he couldn't keep hold. The other man was knocked to the floor, but the blade had lost its power to kill. Soon they had it under control and let it come to rest at its natural position, just above where the chair had been, at the height of the prisoner's neck.

Otrepyev pulled himself to his feet and dusted down his greatcoat.

'Get him up,' he snapped.

Two more of his men ran forward and grabbed the chair, dragging it across the chamber, away from the dangling blade. Then they began to tip it back upright, the prisoner still bound to it as tightly as ever.

Osokin stepped closer, keen to see the man who had been the focus of so much effort, both on the part of Otrepyev to get at him and, it seemed evident, on the part of the Turcomans to ensure that he was not taken alive. The others gathered around too. Osokin noticed that Lukin was among them. Whether he had taken part in the battle or,