

Kayley DeLong

Undergraduate Research Awards Submission Essay

*Feminism in Revolution: Women of the 19th Century Anti-Tsarist Movement*

My assignment for Dr. Nunez's course was to choose a topic relevant to the topics we learned in class and to conduct individual research in order to put together a final paper that was well rounded in its sources, both primary and secondary. For me, I knew I wanted to focus on eastern Europe because the time frame which we were studying--the 18th-20th centuries, mainly--was a very intriguing time for Russia's political and internal health. I initially went in with the purpose of studying women of the Russian intelligentsia, and discussing the ways in which women became involved in the circulation of contemporary philosophical, social, and political ideas.

The more I scratched at the surface, the more stories I found of individual women and their stories of being not just intellectuals, but anti-Tsarist revolutionaries. They were dynamic, complex, and their motivations for their activism revealed so much about what it meant to be a Russian woman in the 19th century. The critical pillar of my research was Vera Figner's "Memoirs of a Revolutionist," which were her personal stories of being a member of the Narodnaya Volya, or "People's Will" movement during the mid-to-late 19th century. Although it was challenging to find a copy in that was translated from her native Russian writing, the Hollins library's interlibrary loan system allowed me to track it down. I used the interlibrary loan system as well as the books already here at the library in order to put together context for the lives these women led: the environments they grew up in, the reasons they deviated from their society's wishes, and what set them apart from other female activists of their time.

Ultimately, my decision to dive into the lives of women in the Narodnaya Volya proved crucial to creating a paper worth writing. A common theme in my study of Russian history was how much the infrastructure had to grow out of obscurity in order to be comparable to their industrializing and commercializing western counterparts. In my research I found that even though some histories and heritages might seem draped in mystery and humbleness, there are fascinating and compelling stories to be told within their shadows. In this case, it was the women who put their lives and security on the line for the political and social causes they believed to be vital to the survival of their country. These women were educated, thoughtful, and rebellious; I am only grateful that through the bravery of Figner's decision to tell her story and the stories of her counterparts, that I was able to learn that for myself.