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It was in the period from the 1880s to 1905 that Russian Marxism emerged and developed its particular character and reputation. Its reputation in the international socialist movement for undiluted propriety in matters of Marxist theory and uncompromising militance in matters of practice was a product of its struggles and pronouncements of these years — its heroism in the battle with the Russian autocracy for political freedom and a better deal for the workers, its emphatic rejection of revisionism of all hues and its militant role in leading the revolution of 1905. It had also acquired a reputation that was the obverse side of its devotion to Marxist principle — it was thought to be hopelessly schismatic. By 1905–6 deep internal divisions had rent Russian Marxism and the broad lines of affiliation and opposition which were to characterise the movement in 1917 had already emerged. A large part of the explanation for the uniquely uncompromising character of Russian Marxism lies in the relationship of the Russian Marxists to their native labour movement. Almost everywhere else in Europe Marxism had to be grafted on to existing, and often powerful, labour movements. These movements had developed their own traditions of thought and organisation long before Marxism began to have an appreciable impact upon the European labour movement in the 1880s.

The most spectacular instance of this general phenomenon was of course the British labour movement where the Marxist proselytes of the eighties and nineties found powerful and self-confident associations of unionists and cooperators suspicious of their intentions and anxious to preserve their own organisations and the structure of beliefs bound up both with these organisations and with their shared memories of past battles.

In France the Proudhonists had long propagandised and organised quite a large proportion of the artisans and urban workers in pursuit of the mutualist dream of re-establishing their economic independence. In Spain and Italy Bakuninist propaganda had struck strong roots and established a heroic tradition of struggle which continued to be more potent than Marxism throughout this period. Even in Germany, though Marxism was notionally triumphant by the early 1890s, the resilience of the older Lassallean traditions was clearly apparent by the end of that decade. Certainly in its attitude towards the revisionist followers of Bernstein none could accuse the German Marxists of want of compromise on basic issues.
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Only in Russia was there an emergent working class that was quite devoid of strong traditions of thought and organisation, which had, moreover, no corporate memory to bind its identity. It was kept in its atomised state by the autocratic government which saw every attempt at working class organisation as a threat to its own prerogatives that had to be ruthlessly stamped upon. The attempts, therefore, of such groups as the North Russian Workers’ Union \(^1\) and the projects of groups associated with individuals like Blagoev, \(^2\) Brusnev \(^3\) and Fedoseev \(^4\) attained momentary and generally very localised success but certainly did not beget a continuous or broadly shared tradition. There was another factor, apart from ruthless government suppression, which, no doubt, partly accounts for these failures. This was the obvious fact that it was not until the early 1890s that a settled urban proletariat began to emerge in Russia to any significant degree. In almost all the other countries of Europe Marxism had, as we have seen, only begun to make a significant impact in the 1880s, i.e. after the urban proletariat had established itself. In Russia, however, the Marxist intelligentsia, if it did not actually pre-date the class emergence of the proletariat, at least emerged contemporaneously with it. Consequently the Russian Marxist intelligentsia (and it is crucially important to remember that, at least until 1905, the Marxist movement was almost exclusively recruited from the intelligentsia) began their activities with far more of a tabula rasa than had been the case elsewhere. They had before them an almost clean sheet of infinite possibility and they were determined that what they wrote upon it would be word-perfect according to the textbooks of Marxism.

The effective absence of prior organisation and systems of thought was at once advantage and drawback: advantage in the sense alluded to above, that the Russian intelligentsia Marxists would not have to temporise or conciliate in adapting their Marxism to native traditions, and drawback in that there were no ready-made organisations which might be utilised to propagate the message, to use as a lever to convert the class.

The selection of documents presented here demonstrates quite clearly the twin preoccupations of Russian Marxists which derived from their rather unique situation as an intelligentsia movement dealing with a disorganised, emergent working class. Throughout the documents there is an almost obsessive and very self-conscious discussion of how to characterise the proletariat. What were its defining attributes, its immediate and ultimate objectives? To answer these problems the Russian acolytes looked to the Master and they were more faithful to Marx’s specification than most other Marxists. It was precisely the earnestness with which Plekhanov, Akselrod, Lenin and Martov clung to Marx’s account of the essential role of the proletariat that accounts for the vehemence with which they rounded on all varieties of Economism and revisionism; for what were these but attempts to renge upon the obligations Marx had laid upon the proletariat and its party?

Inextricably bound to their characterisation of the proletariat and its mission in history was the enormous practical problem of how to make the Russian proletariat conscious of its class objectives and organised and enthused to fulfil them. This organisational ‘practical’ problem could not, in the view of the Russian Marxists, be
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separated from the ‘theoretical’ specification of the proletariat’s mission. The examples of other countries provided object lessons enough of how attachment to inappropriate organisational forms had perverted the proletariat’s awareness of its objectives. The organisation had to be consonant with the objective in hand and, therefore, as the objectives changed from lower to higher ones, as the proletariat increasingly approximated its essential role, so its organisational forms would have to change. That at least was what the practical experience of the 1890s taught the Russian Marxists.

The ‘practical’ activity of the Russian Marxists in building bridges to the workers and attempting to develop the class consciousness of the proletariat cannot, according to this analysis, be separated from their ‘theoretical’ views on the process of history and the role of the proletariat within it. Those views were, of course, explicitly derived from Marx.

Marx: the class characteristics of the proletariat

Marx’s specification of what constituted the proper class activity of the proletariat is crucial for any understanding of what Russian Social Democrats were attempting to do in this period. It was, after all, this specification that defined the proletariat for the Social Democrats. The workers only began to emerge as a class properly so-called when they began to exhibit the characteristics Marx had long previously set out. The task of the Social Democrats, as the Russians were very self-consciously aware, was not simply to act as the passive instrument of the working class but to raise the class to accept and prosecute the role allotted to it. Theory, Marx maintained, must not only strive towards reality but reality must strive towards thought. The working class must strive to realise those universal elements which philosophy had allotted to it. Thus, in Marx’s early conception, the proletariat was characteristically viewed as the vehicle to resolve the problems of German philosophy that, in Hegel’s system, had finally arrived at an impasse. Marx and some other radical Young Hegelians came to the conclusion that speculative philosophy could go no further: it had exposed the rottenness of German reality and revealed religion as an aspect of man’s self-alienation. The critical problem which now emerged was how could German political and social life, which had fallen so lamentably behind that of Europe generally, be raised to the level of European history? How could the huge discrepancy between what German thinkers had attained and German reality displayed be overcome? How could man re-appropriate all those parts of himself he had so prodigally alienated to the state, to religion and to the pursuit of Mammon? Where was the force that would regenerate a decrepit civilisation?

Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation? Answer: In the formation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong but wrong generally is perpetrated against it; which can no longer invoke a historical but only a human title; which does not stand in any one-sided
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antithesis to the consequences but in an all-round antithesis to the promises of the German state; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete rewinning of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat.⁵

Like Moses Hess, Marx came to the conclusion that speculation had run its course and ended eventually in a blind alley. The philosophical questions had been solved, the outstanding problems were practical ones. Reality had to be changed to make it conform to the goals of philosophy. Man had now not so much to think as to act upon reality to change his world, and, from the French, Hess groped towards a philosophy of practice.⁶ He came to the very French conclusion that the main vehicle in the practical transformation of existing society could only be the proletariat. The essential germs of the way out of the impasse had been discovered and were seized on and developed by Marx.

The proletariat is a force at once inside civil society yet not of civil society. All its features are drawn by Marx long before he had any practical involvement with the proletariat quite explicitly in order to complete the philosophical picture he was creating. To be the agent of universal regeneration it was essential that the proletariat be shown to be the victim not of any particular or partial wrong but of universal and complete maltreatment. To be not simply the agency for resolving peculiarly German problems the proletariat must, moreover, be shown to be the vehicle of a world-historical rebirth, a global regeneration of mankind to properly human existence. ‘The proletariat’, Marx insisted, ‘can thus only exist world-historically, just as communism, its activity, can only have a “world-historical” existence’.⁷ Its object in history was not merely to end exploitation but to overcome alienation in all its aspects for all classes of the population. Its revolution was to secure the triumph of humanism not merely for the oppressed, exploited and debased, but also for the exploiters who had been wont to see in their wealth and power a semblance of their self-realisation and affirmation.⁸

The proletariat, for Marx, existed as such only insofar as it fulfilled the universal characteristics theory allotted to it. Its mission in history was to realise (or negate) philosophy and in so doing realise itself as human.

The imperative to achieve this realisation proceeded, according to Marx, from a two-pronged spur. In the first place the development of the division of labour which modern industry inexorably produced resulted in a progressive whittling down of the skills of the worker, and his aggregation into a vast anonymous mass made it impossible to take any personal satisfaction in the article produced.

Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage to the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him.⁹

The worker was not only alienated from his skills and his product, which should have encapsulated his innate drive to act on nature to produce things in accordance
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with the norms of beauty, he was also alienated from his fellow man. Each worker set in competition with every other made flagrant mockery of the natural instinct to produce cooperatively. Man the worker was in this way, according to Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts and the first part of the German Ideology, robbed of his humanity yet still preserved a presentiment of what he might be if his self-activity were allowed to flourish.

Apart from the urge to recover a lost humanity there was, of course, the ever-present imperative to escape from physical, material need. The experience of the workers would, however, reveal to them that the capitalist structure was inherently unable to provide even the bare necessities of a tolerable existence. Marx’s later economic studies confirmed that:

Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolise all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this grows the revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.10

The capitalist system therefore stands condemned not only because it consigns the majority of the population to pauperism, not only because ‘it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within its slavery’,11 but also because it is endemically anti-human. Together these provide a sufficient and compelling rationale, or rather imperative, to overthrow it.

Since in the full-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the semblance of humanity, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguised, absolutely imperative need – the practical expression of necessity – is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. But it cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation.12

The tasks of the proletariat are truly of epic proportions, they are to recast the world in its entire economic, social, political and general cultural relations. These essential goals of the proletariat are given by the role it must play in Marx’s philosophical schema and it is hardly accidental that Marx, having specified them in the passage given above, immediately proceeds to make this clear. The workers themselves, Marx argues, may well be lamentably unaware of their great goal but that does not invalidate it. One does not, Marx seems to be arguing, discover the goal of the proletarian movement by opinion sampling of the proletariat, for the proletariat itself is only gradually forged and made conscious (i.e. aware of its mission) in a long progress of historical struggles. Only those blessed with a prescient awareness of its future development can properly define its aim, the proletariat itself is for a long while fated to have only a very inadequate grasp of it.
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It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organisation of bourgeois society today.13

Marx’s whole analysis is clearly dependent upon the presence of at least some individuals who have the inclination, education and leisure to stand back and appraise the historical evolution of the proletariat, what it is and what it must become. The essential being of the proletariat must be known to some of its observers if not to itself. These people clearly have a prescient awareness of what the ultimate goals of the proletariat amount to. They are those who ‘have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement’.14 The crucial role of the intellectuals in the movement begins to emerge but is little developed by Marx — his Russian disciples were to be more forthright and in many ways more cogent and honest in their accounts. All that Marx will say (as clearly, from the above account, he has to say, since the whole system is predicated upon some individuals with prescient awareness providing the initial impetus and steering the movement in its nascent phase of ill-developed consciousness) is that ‘a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and, in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole’.15

The actual way in which the proletariat itself is brought to consciousness and acquires the organisation necessary to implement its grand objectives is rarely directly dealt with by Marx. Perhaps the closest Marx comes to an account of these processes is in his historical essays on the experience of the French working class in the period 1848–51. The Class Struggles in France and The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte both contain the same essential message. The proletariat began its revolutionary activity with all sorts of illusions, under the direction of all sorts of charlatans, crackpots and naive idealists. It imagined variously that its goals were quite compatible with those of the bourgeois democrats and could be accommodated within the bourgeois democratic republic; it convinced itself that the guarantee of the right to work, or the promotion of cooperatives or phalanstères, would be the social revolution accomplished. Only the experience of the revolution itself, only the polarities which emerged in the actual historical struggle when the bourgeoisie moved to counter-revolution and bloody suppression of the workers’ most modest demands, only when the schemes of utopian crackpots for partial amelioration were shown in practice to be utterly useless, only then did the proletariat purge itself of illusions in the hard school of historical experience.

In a word: the revolution made progress, forged ahead, not by its immediate tragi-comic achievements, but on the contrary by the creation of a powerful, united counter-revolution, by the creation of an opponent in combat with whom alone the party of overthrow ripened into a really revolutionary party.16

The process of political polarisation was, according to Marx’s account, the pro-
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cess wherein all who aspired to any change in the existing structure of society were obliged to assume a position of unqualified antagonism to its bourgeois defenders and obliged also to acknowledge the dominance of the proletariat in the opposition camp.

Little by little we have seen peasants, petty bourgeois, the middle classes in general, stepping alongside the proletariat, driven into open antagonism to the official republic and treated by it as antagonists. Revolt against bourgeois dictatorship, need of a change of society, adherence to democratic-republican institutions as organs of their movement, grouping round the proletariat as the decisive revolutionary power — these are the common characteristics of the so-called party of social democracy, the party of the Red republic. This party of Anarchy, as its opponents christened it, is no less a coalition of different interests than the party of Order. From the smallest reform of the old social disorder to the overthrow of the old social order, from bourgeois liberalism to revolutionary terrorism — as far apart as this lie the extremes that form the starting-point and the finishing-point of the party of ‘Anarchy’.17

All the strata which are marginal to modern society (i.e. all those apart from the proletariat and the bourgeoisie) are forced to choose and align themselves whenever great political issues are fought out. Having no possibility of an autonomous political, and therefore class, existence of their own, they must side with one or the other of the great social and political powers. Revolutions act in this way as the locomotives of history by enormously accelerating the process of class development: ‘in this vortex of movement, in this torment of historical unrest, in this dramatic ebb and flow of revolutionary passions, hopes and disappointments, the different classes of French society had to count their epochs of development in weeks where they had previously counted them in half centuries’.18

The process of political polarisation did not, however, end here; it was not just a matter of oblitering peripheral or marginal groups to choose sides, it also entailed, in Marx’s account, a process of ideological and organisational consolidation within the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie became ever more monolithically committed to the maintenance of all its privileges quite intact, and to the defence of its economic prerogatives. To guarantee their defence it had little compunction in transferring its political power into the hands of the military and revealing itself as an overtly anti-democratic force. For its part the proletariat, chastened by its recent experiences and rid of its utopianism:

increasingly organises itself around revolutionary Socialism, around Communism, for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name of Blanqui. This socialism is the declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of all the ideas that result from these social relations.19

Marx has in this way resolved the difficulty which was inherent in his earlier account of consciousness. The essential being of the proletariat or the proper location of its aim was, as we have seen, for some time unattainable by the pro-

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letariat itself. It could only be theoretically apprehended by some few renegade bourgeois ideologists who undertook the initial leadership of the Communist movement. The proletariat was not, then, nor arguably is it ever, in a position to apprehend its situation and its goal theoretically. Its mode of learning, Marx appears to argue in The Class Struggles in France and The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, is practical and sensuous. Its practical experience of struggle is the process of its class development and the maturation of its consciousness. The process of realisation of proletarian consciousness is shown to be an historical and practical process which vindicates the theoretical prescience of the intellectual pioneers.

An essential part of the process of class formation of the proletariat is its organisational cohesion and especially its ability to organise to articulate its interests on a nation-wide basis. Until it is able to achieve this it cannot lay claim to a properly class existence. It was of course on these grounds that Marx, in his famous passage in The Eighteenth Brumaire, found the peasants incapable of constituting a class:

Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class . . . They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.20

Clearly the sharing of a common relationship to the ownership of the means of production is a necessary but by no means a sufficient definition of class in Marx’s account. Earlier, in The Poverty of Philosophy, in a tantalisingly brief comment, Marx had distinguished between the ‘economic’ and ‘political’ attributes and had implied that these were ascending phases of class existence. A recognition of a community of interest on the purely economic plane would seem, in this account, to be no more than rudimentary class consciousness:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have pointed out only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.21

The conclusion that Marx arrives at here was elevated by his Russian disciples into the single most important and influential precept of Marxism. The text from which it was taken was directed against the apoliticism of Proudhon’s scheme of social regeneration and it long served the Russian Marxists as a valuable quarry of materials to use against their native apolitical Populists. Given the dominance of the Russian anarchist tradition on social thought in the 1870s it was hardly surprising that Plekhanov, when making his first translation of Marxism to Russian conditions, should take as his prefatory text Marx’s epigram ‘Every class struggle is a political
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struggle', and that he should entitle his first work as a thorough-going Marxist *Socialism and the Political Struggle*.

For Marx the form of organisation best able to articulate the ultimate aims of the proletariat on a national scale was the political party. Given that the conquest of the state machine and the establishment of a transitional political regime, to be known as the dictatorship of the proletariat, were held to be necessary in pursuit of these aims, it followed that the proletariat had to be organised into a political party. The 'immediate aim of the Communists', as announced in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, was the 'formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat'. A little earlier in the same text the connection is even more precisely made, 'This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party'. It was hardly surprising that Marx's Russian followers regarded the degree to which the proletariat was politically organised as the acid test of its class development. Only in proportion as it was organised in a political party and conscious of its great political tasks could the proletariat emerge as a class.

It will be convenient at this point to summarise Marx's account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for proletarian class existence.

i. The aggregation of large numbers of non-owners of the means of production in one place consequent upon the extensive use of machinery.

ii. The adhesion to the proletarian cause of some renegade bourgeois intellectuals able to generalise about the workers' conditions of life and, from their theoretical understanding of the historical line of march, able to formulate the ultimate aims of the movement.

iii. The pursuit of economic objectives in the course of which the workers became aware that they share certain interests.

iv. The struggle for political rights led by a revolutionary political party, in the course of which many of the illusions of the proletariat are purged and adequate consciousness and organisation begin to emerge.

We shall not begin to understand the controversies that consumed the social democratic and labour movements in Russia in this period unless we bear these criteria for defining the proletariat as firmly in mind as the Russian Marxists did.

**Plekhanov's translation of the problem to Russian conditions**

There is a striking and important similarity between Marx's and Plekhanov's motives for discovering the proletariat and attributing to it the goals they did. Both were expressly and self-consciously searching for a force which would lift their country out of an intolerably backward and anachronistic social and political reality and raise it to the advanced European level.

In Russia of course this search had, ever since Chaadaev, constituted a sort of full-time occupation for the intelligentsia who followed the trail of every West European innovation remorselessly to its terminus in the hope that it might afford a solution to Russia's appalling social and political plight. With all the seriousness
and commitment which ever characterised this preoccupation the Russian intelligentsia wholeheartedly embraced liberalism, Utilitarianism, Fourierism, Owenism and every latest product of the West European forcing-house — only to see each in turn wilt and die in the inhospitable Russian environment. Then, after the failure of the 1848 revolutions and the renegacy of the ‘liberal’ middle classes of the West, a reaction set in. Herzen, taking over some of the Slavophiles’ ideas, backing them with Haxthausen’s sociological findings on the continued vitality of the peasant commune, and blending both with French socialist ideas, began to distil a native brand of Russian socialism which in various guises was to dominate the social and political thought of Russia for the next forty odd years. In this distillation the peasant was to be the agent of Russia’s regeneration. The muzhik — the authentic man of the Russian narod (people) — preserved within himself a dislike of state or any other kind of centralisation and disparaged all politics which had to do with the domination of one group of men by another. Politics was not the vocation of the Russian people. Their destiny was to show the world the way to a humane, decentralised, non-political society of equals where the governance, and therefore dominance, of men by men would no longer hold sway. ‘The Slavic peoples’, Herzen declared, ‘like neither the state nor centralisation. They prefer to live in scattered communes, as far as possible from all interference on the part of the government. They hate military organisation, they hate the police. A federation would be the most authentically national form of organisation for the Slavic peoples’.  

In achieving her destiny Russia was uniquely aided by the continued strength of the ancient communal landholding system where the peasant communes continued to hold land and to distribute it according to need. The federation of free communes, the libertarian socialist ideal, was shown to be, in the Russian environment, no idle utopia but a project rooted in the consciousness and institutions of the Russian people.

Plekhanov himself had been a prominent Russian Socialist in his younger days and had enthusiastically endorsed the militantly libertarian version of Populism inspired by Bakunin’s writings and example. Plekhanov’s faith survived until the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties but by that time three factors intruded themselves which were, cumulatively, to cause him to reject the Populist resolution of Russia’s problems. In the first place there was the inescapable evidence of the failure of Populist strategy. The great hopes of Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) to inaugurate the social revolution by sending its socialist missionaries among the naturally revolutionary Russian peasants, had issued in lamentable failure. The idealistic ‘Going to the People’ exposed the naïve hopes and extravagant expectations of the young revolutionaries: nowhere did they succeed in rousing the peasants to revolutionary activity. On the contrary they were met with incomprehension, suspicion and, frequently, animosity which did not stop short at turning the youthful revolutionaries over to the authorities. The gap between the revolutionary intelligentsia and the ‘people’ had been shown to be as wide as ever and the pretensions of the youngest to articulate the ‘real’ interests of the peasants had been rudely shattered.