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Introduction

The most striking feature of the revolutions of the twentieth century which describe themselves as socialist is that they have taken place, not in the advanced industrial societies of Western Europe and North America as the predictions advanced by Marx in the mid-nineteenth century had assumed, but in predominantly peasant countries, such as Russia and China, whose industrialisation was only in its infancy. Any modern sociology of revolution must account for the fact that it is the land-hungry peasantry – numerically if not organisationally stronger than its ally, the industrial proletariat – which has guaranteed success for socialist parties in many areas of the world.

Although ultimate victory in 1917 went to the Bolshevik party, Lenin was not the first Russian socialist to appreciate the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. Many of the Populists of the 1870s had considered that the transition to socialism could be made on the basis of the institution of the peasant commune, avoiding the stage of capitalist development. The failure of their 'movement to the people', however, and the apparent indifference of the peasantry to revolutionary ideas, discredited Populism in the subsequent decades, and industrialisation lent greater credibility to the Marxism of the rival Social-Democratic groups. A reassessment of the rôle of the small agricultural producer came only at the turn of the century with the formation of the Agrarian-Socialist League, and the later formation of the Socialist-Revolutionary (SR) party. It was in the course of polemics with his SR rivals concerning the nature of the peasant movement which developed at the beginning of the twentieth century that Lenin's attitude towards the peasantry was formed.

This study is concerned with the agrarian policy of the SR party in the early years of the twentieth century: its political sociology of the peasantry, its programme for the 'socialisation' of the land, and its attempts to organise the peasantry as a revolutionary force. According to SR theory – which Chernov, the party leader, claimed to have a more valid Marxist basis than that of the Social-Demo-

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crats (SDs) – the small, peasant producers formed part of the working class with a similar interest in socialism to that of the proletariat. In addition to this purely objective criterion of class position, there were also subjective factors which made the peasants receptive to socialist ideas: the egalitarian views fostered by the institution of the repartitional commune, and the traditional peasant belief that only personal labour gave rights to the use of land. The SR proposals for the socialisation of the land were designed to correspond to the peasants' own concepts of social justice and to prepare the way for socialist agriculture.

In the period from the formation of the party in 1901 to the outbreak of war in 1914, the SRs had no real opportunity of putting these ideas into practice. Their campaign for the peasantry was launched only in 1902, and the revolution of 1905 had overtaken them before they could establish their influence in the countryside. At the same time, the SRs were probably closer to the peasantry than any other revolutionary group in Russia, and more aware of the problems presented by the socialist transformation of the countryside. They had few illusions about the individualist streak in the peasantry but were optimistic that this could be overcome by patient propaganda and education.

The events of 1917 mean that the SR agrarian programme has been consigned to the political limbo of unsuccessful revolutionaries. After 1917, it was the agrarian policy of the Bolsheviks, and the Leninist analysis of the class structure of the countryside, which guided Russian peasant agriculture towards socialism. Recent studies of Soviet agrarian policy in the 1920s, however, have suggested that the failures of this policy, culminating in the forced collectivisation drive of 1929–30, were derived from the inadequacy of the Bolsheviks' theoretical understanding of the dynamics of peasant society.[1] In this context, a re-examination of the views of the Bolsheviks' chief ideological opponents may not be without interest.

[1] M. Lewin, *Russian peasants and Soviet power; a study of collectivisation*, (London, 1968); D. J. Male, *Russian peasant organisation before collectivisation; a study of commune and gathering, 1925–1930* (Cambridge, 1971); T. Shanin, *The awkward class; political sociology of peasantry in a developing society: Russia 1910–1925* (Oxford, 1972).

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Part I

FROM POPULISM TO THE SR PARTY
(1881–1901)

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1
The Populist legacy

Historically, the origins of Socialist-Revolutionary activity among the peasantry can be traced to the 'movements to the people' of the 1870s. After the failure of these attempts by the Populist intelligentsia to convert the peasantry to the cause of revolutionary socialism, their secret organisation, *Zemlya i volya* ('Land and liberty'), split into two groups, *Chernyi peredel* ('Black repartition') and *Narodnaya volya* ('People's will'). These two parties represented the two major trends which had developed within the Populist movement after the failure of the 'movements to the people'. *Chernyi peredel*, while retaining the essential programme of *Zemlya i volya*, with its faith in a peasant revolution, in practice concentrated its efforts on the urban workers. Its leaders, Plekhanov and Aksel'rod, soon left Russia for Switzerland, where they later created the first émigré Marxist group. In view of the prevailing disillusionment among the revolutionaries concerning the possibilities of a mass socialist movement, the organisation in Russia soon petered out. *Narodnaya volya*, on the other hand, rejected the policy of propaganda among the masses in favour of a campaign of systematic terrorism aimed at the political overthrow of the autocracy, which overthrow they considered to be a necessary prerequisite of socialist revolution in Russia. The organisation had a brief but spectacular career which culminated in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. This act, however, brought down upon the terrorists the forces of reaction and repression, and the organisation of *Narodnaya volya* was virtually destroyed.[1]

The decade which followed saw the complete stagnation of the Populist movement in Russia. The events of the preceding few years had shown that neither of the courses of action which the Populists had proposed was practicable under existing conditions. The peasants' lack of receptivity towards socialist propaganda suggested that the prospects of a mass revolutionary movement were poor;

[1] The standard account of Populism to 1881 is F. Venturi, *Roots of revolution* (London, 1960).

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and the ease with which the government had suppressed *Narodnaya volya* meant that the alternative course of political terrorism was equally doomed to failure. In the eighties the widespread disillusionment of the intelligentsia with the revolutionary potential of the peasantry and with political terrorism created a favourable intellectual climate for the popularity of the rival Marxist view of Russia's path to socialism; and it was in the eighties that the first Social-Democratic groups were formed in several Russian cities. The rapid industrialisation of Russia in the latter part of the nineteenth century also served as a justification of the Marxist thesis that the bearers of socialism in Russia would be not the peasantry but the urban proletariat. Although scattered groups of *narodovol'tsy* who had survived the destruction of the central party organisation still existed in various places, the eighties and much of the nineties saw Populism gradually replaced by Marxism as the fashionable ideology of the revolutionary intelligentsia.[2] It was not until the formation of the Socialist-Revolutionary party at the beginning of the twentieth century that the twin pillars of Populism – peasant socialism and élite terrorism – were restored to the forefront of the revolutionary movement, albeit with a Marxist facelift applied by Chernov.

However, if the eighties were the decade of the decay of the old Populism, they were also marked by developments of considerable significance for the emergence of the new. The educational reforms of Alexander II had brought increasing opportunities for upward social mobility through the professions for members of the lower strata of society.[3] This new generation of *raznochintsy* inherited the intellectual atmosphere of the aftermath of the Populist débâcle

[2] The term 'Populism' is used here in the accepted broad, if anachronistic sense, to describe that school of revolutionary thought which believed that Russia could avoid the capitalist stage of development and make a direct transition to socialism on the basis of her existing institutions, such as the peasant commune. See R. Pipes, '*Narodnichestvo*; a semantic inquiry', *American Slavic and East European Review*, vol 23 (1964), pp 441–58. Although many Populists were influenced by Marx, the orthodox Marxists considered themselves, and may be considered by historians, to represent a distinct new school of thought, which stressed the inevitability of Russian capitalism. Populism and Marxism co-existed as rival ideologies in the 1880s and 90s, and were eventually to crystallise in the Socialist-Revolutionary and Social-Democratic parties respectively. Valuable studies in English of aspects of Populist and Marxist thought in the 1880s and 90s are: J. H. Billington, *Mikhailovsky and Russian Populism* (Oxford, 1958); A. P. Mendel, *Dilemmas of progress in Tsarist Russia; Legal Marxism and Legal Populism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961); and A. Walicki, *The controversy over capitalism; studies in the social philosophy of the Russian Populists* (London, 1969).

[3] See V. R. Leykina-Svirskaya, *Intelligentsiya v Rossii vo vtoroy polovine 19 veka* (Moscow, 1971).

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with its indifference towards political activism. Theories of 'small deeds' gradualism, the belief that the perfection of the individual must precede that of the social order, and new religious teaching (such as that of Tolstoy) dominated the intellectual horizon of the eighties.

Among a considerable section of the intelligentsia, however, these ideas found their expression in 'service to the people', and the decade saw a great influx of *raznochintsy* into the *zemstva* – the local government institutions established in 1864 with broad responsibilities for education and welfare – where they comprised a group which later came to be known as the 'third element'.[4] The intelligentsia of the seventies had made a 'movement to the people'; their successors in the following decade accomplished a 'settlement among the people'.[5] The new rural intelligentsia were dedicated to serving the people, not as revolutionary leaders but in their professional capacity as doctors, teachers, nurses, veterinary surgeons, lawyers and agronomists. Insofar as they saw their rôle in any light other than that of the ideal of public service, it was as the bearers of cultural, rather than political, enlightenment to the peasantry among whom they lived and worked. What political aspirations they had were channelled not to socialist propaganda among the peasantry, but to demands for greater autonomy and wider powers for the *zemstvo* itself, which was under attack in the eighties from the government of Alexander III through a series of acts of restrictive legislation. In this conflict between *zemstvo* and government, the third element found allies in the more progressive gentry landowners, and the rapprochement of these two groups created the social base for the '*zemstvo* liberalism' of the next decade.[6]

Historians of the Socialist-Revolutionary movement see the famine year of 1891 as a crucial date for the revival of revolutionary Populism.[7] In that year, famine throughout the Central Black Earth

[4] The 'third element' comprised the hired professional employees of the *zemstva*, as opposed to the appointed officials (the 'first element') and the elected councillors (the 'second element'). See N. Potresov, 'Evolyutsiya obshchestvenno-politicheskoy mysli v predrevolyutsionnuyu epokhu', in *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie v Rossii v nachale 20 veka* (4 vols, St Petersburg, 1909–14), vol 1, pp 538–9; N. Cherevanin, 'Dvizhenie intelligentsii', in *ibid*, vol 1, p 268.

[5] I owe this phrase to an early publication of the Agrarian-Socialist League: *Ocherednoy vopros revolyutsionnago dela* (London, 1900), p 3.

[6] Potresov, *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie . . .*, vol 1, pp 539–40.

[7] S. N. Sletov, *K istorii vozniknoveniya Partii Sotsialistov-Revolyutsionerov* (Petrograd, 1917), p 23; A. Spiridovitch, *Histoire du terrorisme russe, 1886–1917* (Paris, 1930), p 35. Sletov's book is a posthumous reissue of his 'Ocherki po istorii Partii Sotsialis-

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agricultural region was accompanied by a widespread outbreak of cholera and by sporadic peasant disturbances. For the first time since the seventies the attention of the urban intelligentsia was focused on the plight of the peasantry, and a large corps of volunteers, mainly students, went to the countryside to join in the famine-relief work which was being organised there by the *zemstvo* third element.[8]

The survivors of the Populist movement of the seventies sought to take advantage of the famine situation to reach revolutionary ends. A group of émigrés in Geneva issued proclamations appealing to revolutionary circles in Russia to exploit popular discontent in the famine-stricken areas in order to reactivate the revolutionary movement. In Paris at the end of 1891, Lavrov founded a 'Society to combat the famine', which issued appeals laying the blame for the famine on government policy towards the peasantry and calling for the concentration of all revolutionary forces against the government.[9] Within Russia in 1892, a 'Group of *narodovol'tsy*', based in St Petersburg, published a 'Letter to the starving peasants' by the Populist writer Astyrev, in which he explained the connection between the famine and government policy as a whole and why the authorities were persecuting members of the intelligentsia who had tried to help the peasants.[10]

These appeals, however, were largely unheeded by the majority of the *intelligenty* and students who 'went to the people' in 1891. Their motives were humanitarian rather than political,[11] and to this extent the government's grave misgivings failed to take into account the change in mood of the intelligentsia since the seventies. Insofar, however, as any increased contact between the peasantry and the intelligentsia could not fail to have undesirable consequences for the conservative policies of Alexander III's government, official concern was indeed well-founded. The intelligentsia's work in the field of famine relief and medical aid to the cholera victims was

tov-Revolyutsionerov', published under his party nickname of 'S. Nechetnyi' in *Sotsialist-Revolyutsioner*, no. 4 (1912), pp 1–101. Spiridovich's history is a translation and revised edition of his *Partiya Sotsialistov-Revolyutsionerov i ee predshestvenniki, 1886–1916*, the first two editions of which appeared in Petrograd in 1916 and 1918. Sletov, who was killed on active service in France in 1915, was a prominent member of the SR Central Committee, and the brother-in-law of Viktor Chernov; Spiridovich was head of Nicholas II's personal security police.

[8] Cherevanin, *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie* . . ., vol 1, pp 268–9.

[9] Spiridovitch, p 36 (footnote).

[10] A. Egorov, 'Zarozhdenie politicheskikh partii i ikh deyatel'nost'', in *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie* . . ., vol 1, p 373; Sletov, p 34.

[11] Cherevanin, *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie* . . ., vol 1, p 269.

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soon extended to cultural and educational activity, such as the organisation of public lectures, the opening of libraries and reading rooms, and the free distribution of books and pamphlets on scientific, moral and literary themes. Other activities, which received a great impetus at this period and evoked considerable concern on the part of Durnovo, the Minister of the Interior, included the establishment of various 'Sunday schools' for adult education and 'Committees for the elimination of illiteracy' in many provincial towns.[12]

This cultural and educational activity, which was intensively conducted in many guberniyas, undoubtedly played a considerable rôle in achieving the rapprochement between the peasantry and the intelligentsia which was a prerequisite for successful revolutionary work in the countryside. By the end of the nineties, the humbler strata of the rural intelligentsia, especially teachers, were being recruited in increasing numbers from the peasantry[13] and could, therefore, share in and sympathise with their problems on the basis of personal experience. The heterogeneity of the rural intelligentsia in terms of social composition was reflected in the range of political allegiances which they were to manifest in 1905. The doctor or lawyer with a higher education and professional training, who hobnobbed with the local gentry on the *zemstvo* board, was more likely to favour plans for liberal reform; whereas the village teacher or medical assistant, whose education had frequently reached little more than primary level and whose way of life was often little different from that of the peasants among whom he lived, represented the backbone of the Socialist-Revolutionary organisation in the countryside.[14]

The political fruits of the 'settlement among the people', however, were not to be gathered until the end of the decade. Various groups and circles of students and intellectuals with more or less Populist sympathies existed in the nineties, calling themselves either *narodovol'cheskie* or 'Socialist-Revolutionary', but they remained largely divorced from the cultural movement. Indirectly, however, the general upsurge of 'Populist' feeling among the intelligentsia, which had been evoked by the famine of 1891, contributed to a revival of the urban revolutionary movement. The young people, returning

[12] Sletov, p. 24; Spiridovitch, pp 35–6. For an account of this 'enlightenment' activity by the intelligentsia, see Leykina-Svirskaya, pp 255–76.

[13] *ibid*, pp 163–4; L. K. Erman, *Intelligentsiya v pervoy russkoy revolyutsii* (Moscow, 1966), p 29.

[14] On the social composition of the intelligentsia, see Erman, pp 18–33.

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to their studies in the towns and cities after participating in the relief work in the villages, sought some alternative outlet for their idealistic aspirations to serve the people, and this mood was utilised by both Social-Democratic and Socialist-Revolutionary groups, who set up circles of 'self-instruction' among the students. These were primarily discussion groups, but the members also undertook to distribute revolutionary literature to the workers and the intelligentsia.[15]

The main difference between the groups calling themselves Social-Democratic and Socialist-Revolutionary, at this time, was that the latter revealed a greater ideological eclecticism and laid more emphasis on purely political forms of action, including political terrorism, than did the Social-Democrats, whose prevailing trend was 'economist'.[16] In addition, the Socialist-Revolutionary groups were united, in spite of various differences on points of ideology, by a feeling that they were continuing the native Russian revolutionary tradition of *Zemlya i volya* and *Narodnaya volya*.[17] This awareness of a common heritage was strengthened in the middle and later nineties when the exiled and imprisoned Populists of the seventies began to return to the provincial towns of European Russia, thus constituting a living revolutionary link with the past. These 'elders' of the movement exerted a strong influence on the younger generation and formed the centre of many new Socialist-Revolutionary groups.[18]

In general, the groups of the nineties showed little interest in the peasantry.[19] Both ideological and practical considerations contributed to this situation. The influence of Russian Marxism on Socialist-Revolutionary thought at this period was considerable, and the Social-Democratic view – that the commune, which the Populists had seen as the potential basis of agrarian socialism in Russia, was disintegrating under the influence of capitalist development and that the peasantry was being differentiated into a bourgeois element of prosperous kulak farmers, on the one hand, and a landless or near-landless agricultural proletariat, on the other – was widely

[15] Spiridovitch, pp 42–3; Sletov, pp 40, 45ff.
[16] Sletov, pp 41, 46.
[17] *ibid*, p 41.
[18] *ibid*, pp 42–5.
[19] For details of these groups, their programmes and activity, see Sletov, p 32ff; Spiridovitch, p 12ff; Egorov, *Obshchestvennoe dvizhenie* . . . , vol 1, pp 372–5; V. Meshcheryakov, *Partiya Sotsialistov-Revolyutsionerov* (2 pts, Moscow, 1922), pt 1, pp 7–52.

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shared by the Socialist-Revolutionaries.[20] The hopes of the Russian revolutionaries were placed now on the emergence of the rural proletariat, which, it was assumed, would soon display the same revolutionary socialist zeal as the Marxists attributed to its industrial counterpart. It followed, however, that since the process of social differentiation among the peasantry was only in its initial stages, propaganda and organisational work in the country by a socialist party were still premature.

Even those groups and individuals who rejected this analysis[21] and retained their Populist faith in the socialist potential of the mass of the communal peasantry were reluctant to institute a new 'movement to the people', for purely practical reasons. It was felt that, in view of the numerical weakness of the movement and the shortage of revolutionaries even for urban work, it would be a foolish over-extension of their forces to attempt to include the countryside in their sphere of activity.[22] Most groups, however, recognised the value of the work conducted among the peasantry by individuals who lived and worked in the countryside – such as members of the rural intelligentsia, industrial workers who moved to factories in rural localities, and urban workers on regular visits to their relatives in the villages – since such activity could have no detrimental effect on the movement's efforts in the towns.[23] On the contrary, the utilisation of such forces would increase the potential number of cadres at the movement's disposal, by defining a rôle for the young people of provincial areas that had no industry, no proletariat, and, consequently – in terms of Social-Democratic theory, at least – no opportunities for revolutionary action. Allegiance to the Social-Democrats would logically have condemned them to political impotence; the Socialist-Revolutionaries, on the other hand, could make use of their energy in the countryside. But the influence of Marxism was strong, and throughout the nineties the younger generation of revolutionaries continued to think of work among the peasantry as the eccentric delusion of an older generation out of touch with contemporary Russian reality.[24]

[20] As noted with approval by Meshcheryakov, pp 15–25. The author is critical of the SRs from a Bolshevik standpoint.
[21] The most eminent of the anti-Marxists were the old Populists Lavrov and Breshkovskaya; Sletov, pp 52–3.
[22] *ibid*, pp 51–2, 77, 91.
[23] *ibid*, pp 60–61.
[24] As Breshkovskaya discovered when she returned from Siberian exile in 1896; see E. Breshkovskaya, 'Vospominaniya i dumy', *Sotsialist-Revolyutsioner*, no. 4 (1912), pp 122–3.

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