

CHAPTER ONE



*RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY
 POPULISM BEFORE 1 MARCH 1881*

THE THEORY AND SPIRIT OF REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM

The history of the Russian revolutionaries of the 1880s is in a sense a history of their struggle with the heritage of the Populists of the 1870s as well as with the régime they despised, for while they remained for the most part deeply affected by the same beliefs as their predecessors and strove hard to preserve those beliefs, nevertheless they were forced increasingly to admit that the bitter campaign of the previous decade had brought the dream of socialist utopia no nearer to realisation and they had consequently to carry out modifications to revolutionary strategy and tactics in the light of their practical experience in a harsh reality. As for those among them who decided at an early stage to explore new channels, even they had first to reckon with the established Populist canon before they could effectively strike out on their own. It is important at the outset, therefore, briefly to re-examine the basic premisses of the Populism of the 1870s, for they provided a powerful source of inspiration for the activists of the 1880s and gave resilience to the revolutionary movement in that difficult decade, and yet at the same time their survival posed problems with which the activists had to grapple.¹

Implicit in the Populist credo which had finally evolved around 1870 were perhaps as many as six fundamental and inter-related assumptions. Firstly, the Russian peasant commune was an egalitarian and democratic institution and would serve as a basis for socialism in Russia. Secondly, the Russian peasant was instinctively socialistic, or at least he had qualities

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2 RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM BEFORE 1 MARCH 1881

which made him amenable to socialist collectivism. Thirdly, given these advantages, Russia could bypass the capitalist stage of economic development currently afflicting the advanced nations of Western Europe and thus pass directly from a semi-feudal condition to socialism. Fourthly, the educated man had a compelling moral responsibility to devote himself to the task of transforming his society in the name of the socialist ideal. Fifthly, the individual – or at least the individual who belonged to the ranks of the intelligentsia – possessed, as did his nation as a whole, the freedom and the capacity to exercise a significant degree of control over his own destiny. And, sixthly, the forthcoming revolution would not only promote the interests of the popular masses but would also give expression to their wishes and even be carried out mainly by them. The classical exponents of Populism thus defined were Lavrov, Mikhaylovsky and Bervi-Flerovsky, though Bakunin, broadly speaking, shared most of the assumptions enumerated above and even Tkachov, for all his isolation among the revolutionaries of the 1870s, subscribed to some of them.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that by the 1880s these assumptions had acquired in revolutionary circles an apparently self-evident plausibility that made attempts to dislodge them seem hazardous, if not indeed sacrilegious. They had about them an incontestability that came partly of the fact that they had been incessantly repeated over a long period by thinkers of various persuasions (some of whom did not even have any connection with the revolutionary camp). The closely inter-related views held by the Populists on the peasant commune, the nature of the Russian peasant and the historical path being followed by their nation, for example, were not novel in the 1870s, but dated back to the 1840s and originally owed something to the politically conservative German aristocrat, Baron von Haxthausen, who had depicted the commune as a bulwark against the ‘pauperism and proletarianism’ of the modern West,² and to the Slavophiles, who fondly believed that the Russian masses still preserved the familial spirit and brotherly love supposedly characteristic of pre-Petrine Muscovy. In the same decade Bakunin, already embarked on his career of revolutionary agitator, had also begun to eulogise the masses, in whom, he claimed, the ‘energy and future life of Russia’ lay, and to predict that these masses would soon reveal themselves in all their ‘virginal beauty’ through a ‘great’ and ‘salvatory’ ‘tempest’.³ Herzen, in a series of essays written between 1847 and 1854 and aimed in the first instance at a public in Western Europe, had put forward a brand of ‘Russian socialism’ that was essentially similar to Bakunin’s, though more moderate in tone. Anxious to

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demonstrate that 'Europe', such as it was, had 'completed its role' and that the time had now come for the Slavs to make their contribution to history, Herzen extolled the supposedly instinctive socialism which he thought found expression in the peasant commune, a miniature republic which had existed since time immemorial, democratically governing the internal affairs of the rural community and ensuring equitable use of the common resources. Russia's 'youth' as a nation, moreover, made it conceivable to Herzen that this inherent 'socialist element' might mature, for Russia had thus far remained immune from the capitalist development that would have undermined the commune. Russia might therefore arrive at socialism without passing through all the phases of Western European historical development; or at least she would pass through such phases only 'in the same way that the foetus passes through the inferior stages of zoological existence'.⁴ Chernyshevsky, the main tribune of the young *raznochintsy*, took a more restrained view of the commune, which he saw as a feature of the existence of all peoples at a primitive stage of their development rather than as 'any mysterious characteristic' exclusive to the Slavs. And yet he, too, believed that the commune might serve as an 'antidote' to the Western ill of proletarian misery and in the late 1850s argued, as Herzen had done, that Russia might proceed directly from a semi-feudal condition to a form of socialism based on the existing peasant commune without undergoing a protracted intervening phase of capitalist development.⁵ In the same period Dobrolyubov endorsed the belief that the peasant masses were the 'real Russian people' and described them as serious-minded, practical, endowed with a moral purity lacking in the idle aristocracy and fit for the role of free citizen after the abolition of serfdom.⁶ Publicists such as Bervi-Flerovsky and Mikhaylovsky – whose writings exercised a very great influence on Populist revolutionaries⁷ – therefore had numerous and venerated predecessors when at the end of the 1860s and the beginning of the 1870s they argued that the Russian people, in preserving the communal system of land-tenure, had shown 'incomparably more tact and common sense' than their Western European counterparts and that Russia might undertake an 'unprecedented experiment' and evolve on her own 'some combination of social forces more or less distinct from those which prevail in the West'.⁸

It was not only the wide currency given to these notions about the Russian people and the commune and Russia's historical path by Russian *thinkers*, however, that accounted for the vitality and tenacity of Populism and made it still credible to revolutionaries in the 1880s, for by the 1870s these notions were on one level merely expressions of a mood that extended

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4 RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM BEFORE 1 MARCH 1881

far beyond the confines of socialist publicism. Intellectual and artistic endeavours in different fields were to an unusual degree interdependent in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The radical intelligentsia was small, concentrated in St Petersburg and sustained in a state of excited anticipation by its sense of beleaguement. The work of its representatives often had a strong utilitarian bias and reflected a shared determination to introduce civilised values into a benighted society. It is therefore understandable, though the point is often overlooked, that disciplinary distinctions – the borders between publicism, philosophy, sociology and political economy, historical and ethnographic scholarship, and imaginative literature – were more than usually blurred, and even painting and music reflected current social and political preoccupations. The osmosis of ideas on the common people between publicism and imaginative literature, for instance, proceeded steadily from the late 1850s on. There emerged a substantial school of young writers – Golitsynsky, N. I. Uspensky, Levitov, V. A. Sleptsov, Reshetnikov, Nefyodov, Naumov, Zasodimsky and others – who, together with the poet Nekrasov, described conditions in the countryside and on the factory floor in unembellished and often heart-rending terms. Painters such as Perov, Repin, Myasoyedov and Kramskoy also began to treat the masses in their work with compassion and respect, pointing up the continuing social inequality of post-reform Russia or hinting at the supposed strength of the common man. Even some composers (notably Musorgsky) attempted, under the guidance of the critic Stasov, to express the elusive spirit of the people, freely introducing folk songs and motifs into their works and treating the peasant mass as a mighty historical force. There was great interest in the ethnographer Maksimov's sketches of peasant life and in Mordovtsev's surveys of peasant rebellions in Russian history. Finally, numerous writers, following the example of Shchapov, made studies of the schism in the Russian Church and of the resultant communities of Old Believers, whose sobriety, industriousness and civic spirit seemed to give grounds for believing that the Russian people were capable of governing themselves democratically if freed from the interference of the state.⁹ It would be wrong, of course, to see all these writers and artists as precursors of the Populist revolutionary movement in any strict theoretical sense. But their images, particularly those of Nekrasov,¹⁰ did imprint themselves indelibly on the minds of subsequent revolutionaries, for whom their works for long remained almost textbooks on the life of the masses. More important, they evoked sympathy for the masses and fostered the impression that the key to Russia's destiny was to be

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found there, among the common people. In their way, then, artists, ethnographers and historians, no less than the socialist thinkers and publicists, helped first to generate the revolutionary movement in its Populist phase and then to sustain it.

There is a further factor which helps to explain both the emergence of Populism as a revolutionary doctrine at a fairly precise date, in the late 1860s and early 1870s, and its resilience even after practical experience would have seemed to militate against a continuing defence of Populist views on the peasantry and the commune, namely fear of the development of capitalism in Russia. It is no coincidence that the assertion by Bervi, Mikhaylovsky and other publicists of the possibility of an autochthonous historical development for Russia was accompanied by condemnations of the capitalist mode of production which operated in the West. Admittedly, deep-seated hostility to capitalism had long since been widespread in Russia, even among conservative thinkers, who often harboured the aristocrat's disdain for the bourgeois or the country squire's distaste for the industrial townscape. But among the socialist intelligentsia of the 1860s and 1870s tirades against the capitalist West, and against England in particular, became commonplace and acquired a new vehemence. These condemnations, moreover, derived vigour and authority from the knowledge which Russian publicists were now beginning to gain of the study made of Western capitalist society by Marx and Engels. The title chosen by Bervi for his major work, *The Condition of the Working Class in Russia* (1869), suggested an indebtedness to Engels' work on the English proletariat. A young political economist, Ziber, wrote a scholarly dissertation on the theories of Ricardo which relied on Marx's analysis and was discussed by Mikhaylovsky, who himself reviewed Marx's *Capital* in 1872.¹¹ And, more clearly than any other work, the first Russian translation of the first volume of *Capital*, begun by Lopatin, completed by Danielson and published in 1872, allowed Russians to glimpse the fate that might befall their own country if capitalism established itself there. The matter had great topicality for them, too, for economic processes threatening the survival of the commune were becoming more apparent in the Russian countryside, where the richer peasant, appearing to offer a helping hand to the needy, was in fact subjecting them to a new, economic form of dependence and voraciously accumulating property and capital. Russia was in the condition of an embryo, it seemed; indeed the whole country, one 'huge embryo' of the modern industrialised capitalist West, was pregnant with capitalism, as the publicist Yeliseyev put it, borrowing an image from Marx.¹² Thus

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6 RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM BEFORE 1 MARCH 1881

Populism – an assertion of Russia’s independence from Western European historical development – began to flourish at precisely the moment when Russians became more fully acquainted than ever before with the operation and effects of Western European capitalism and when, too, they detected clear signs that the seeds of a similar order were also sprouting in Russian soil. And the hope that Russia might still avoid capitalism – a hope deftly translated by publicists into an assumption that such avoidance was indeed historically possible – was not abandoned as the feared economic and social changes proceeded. On the contrary, Russian radical publicists and their revolutionary disciples clung even more tenaciously to it – and to the related faith in the Russian peasant – as the only guarantee of socialism in Russia in their time.

If we turn now to those premisses of Populism which concern not so much the peasant as the revolutionary intelligentsia – that is to say the moral responsibility of the *intelligent* and his freedom of action – then we again find that crucial statements were made at the end of the 1860s, but that the power and authority of these statements were greatly increased by their compatibility with the mood of the times and with a longer-established and rich cultural tradition.

It was important to the theoreticians of classical Populism to free ethical and sociological speculation from the jurisdiction of the supposedly infallible scientific method invoked by the radicals of the early 1860s, especially Chernyshevsky. Those radicals, by their attempt to explain man’s behaviour as a product of environment or physiological factors over which he had no control, had tended, albeit unintentionally, to deprive man of the freedom to change his society, and consequently of the moral responsibility to do so. Such determinism, however, was deeply disturbing to thinkers of a slightly later period, who were alarmed by the advance of capitalism and impatient to transform society in accordance with their own ideals. They wished to assert that man did have the freedom to make moral choices and to change his society; indeed, they demanded that he do so. Thus Mikhaylovsky, in his long essay ‘What is Progress’ (1869), argued that the objective point of view obligatory in the natural sciences was ‘quite unsuitable’ in sociology, in which man was himself the subject of study as well as the student. Perhaps the sociologist could only arrive at the truth, Mikhaylovsky suggested, if he put himself in the position of the sentient beings he was examining, if he tried to think their thoughts, suffer their sufferings and shed their tears. At any rate he could not help but make moral judgements. While not wishing altogether to abolish the objective method,

Mikhaylovsky did therefore demand that the subjective method serve as a 'higher control'.¹³ Even more important for the Populists than Mikhaylovsky's essay were Lavrov's *Historical Letters* (published in serial form in 1868–9 and in a separate edition in 1870), which acquired, to judge by the accounts of memoirists of the period, an almost evangelical significance in revolutionary circles.¹⁴ Having attempted, in the same spirit as Mikhaylovsky, to establish that history is a field of human enquiry at least as important as the natural sciences and that a subjective method, unacceptable in the latter, is inevitable and legitimate in it, Lavrov proceeds in his fourth 'letter', entitled the 'price of progress', to frame a vigorous appeal to the intelligentsia to pursue the ideal of social justice. An enormous price had been paid by the toiling majority of mankind, Lavrov argued, for the conditions which had made possible the development of the privileged 'critically thinking minority' who cherished that ideal. A member of the educated minority might absolve himself from a share of the blame for the sufferings of the masses only if he began at once to repay his debt to those masses by attempting to translate his ideals into practice. No excuses for inaction, no self-doubt, no scholarly work divorced from society's real and immediate needs, no fears about the possible futility of heroic deeds by solitary individuals could relieve the *intelligent* of this obligation.¹⁵

These pleas for social concern and a resolute crusade on behalf of the masses had an intrinsic power, to be sure; but they could hardly have enjoyed such widespread popularity and lasting influence had they, too, not given expression, in sociological terms, to a mood that had broader cultural sources. They echoed the sentiments of literary heroes with whom Populist revolutionaries, as we know from their own testimony, were no less familiar. The conception offered by Mikhaylovsky, Lavrov (and Bervi, too) of the *intelligent* moved by conscience to dedicate himself to a social cause corresponded to the portrait of the 'positive hero' (or heroine) of imaginative literature, who from the beginning of the 1860s had supplanted the ineffectual 'superfluous man' so prominent in the fiction of the Nicolaevan period. This 'positive hero' invariably embodied some permutation of three qualities which were to be deemed indispensable to the revolutionary: an ability to rise above the philistinism of his environment; a morality which was altruistic, at least in practice if not in theory;¹⁶ and the practicality and resoluteness needed to translate convictions into action.¹⁷ The most celebrated early incarnations of the 'positive hero' or 'heroine' are Turgenev's Insarov and Bazarov, in *On the Eve* (1860) and *Fathers and Children* (1862) respectively, and the 'new people', Lopukhov, Kirsanov,

8 RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM BEFORE 1 MARCH 1881

Vera Pavlovna and Rakhmetov, in Chernyshevsky's novel *What is to be done?* (1863). The type also finds embodiment in a sense in Sokolov's popular work *Renegades*, first published in 1866 and republished in 1872, in which the stoics, early Christians, sectarians, utopians and socialists are all presented as beings of superior moral calibre who chose to live outside the imperfect societies into which they happened to have been born. And he, or she, reappears, often as a pilgrim to, or propagandist among, the people, in a further spate of works (for instance, Bazhin's *History of an Association* (1869), Mordovtsev's *Signs of the Times* (1869), Omulevsky's *Step by Step* (1870), and Kushchevsky's *Nikolay Negorev, or a Successful Russian* (1871)) that were produced in precisely those years when interest in the peasantry was also reaching a new height. Nor was inspiration for prospective revolutionaries to be found exclusively in prose. It could be drawn, too, from the poetry of Nekrasov, who exhorted his readers to contemplate chivalrous exploit and seemed to invite heroic self-sacrifice. Even the painter Kramskoy, in his canvas *Christ in the Wilderness* (1872), captured the pervasive sense of yearning for suffering in some noble cause.

Thus the revolutionary Populism which took shape in the period 1868–72 was much more than a set of bare sociological, economic and philosophical propositions and the strategic and tactical deductions that might be made from them. It was made up not only (perhaps not so much) of certain specific ideas for which objective validity might be claimed, but also of a strong emotional component and an expansive quixotic spirit. Its objective appears in retrospect to have been not merely a revolution in the material condition of the impoverished Russian peasant, for whom the Populists expressed an unconditional love and compassion, but also a revolution in the moral condition of the relatively affluent *intelligent*, with his almost religious thirst for some grand redemptive feat, *podvig*, through which he might sacrifice himself for the larger good. Populism was, then, a consummate expression of fears and hopes, guilt and aspirations that ran deep in the Russian intelligentsia, and as such it had an intensity and a vitality that sustained it long after its theoretical premisses had first been called in question.

REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGIES: LAVROV, BAKUNIN AND
 TRACHOV

The Populist credo that has been outlined gave rise in the early 1870s to certain strategies which underpinned the activity of revolutionaries in that

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RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM BEFORE 1 MARCH 1881 9

decade, and since these strategies, taken in conjunction with the revolutionaries' practical experience, continued to serve as the main starting-point for discussion in revolutionary organisations throughout the 1880s as well, they, too, need to be briefly examined here. By far the most influential strategies were those of Lavrov and Bakunin, but it is important also to take account of the views of Tkachov, for we shall have to consider in due course the extent to which some of his challenging assumptions affected the thinking of revolutionaries after 1879.

Like many of his contemporaries Lavrov believed that it might soon become impossible to implement socialism in Russia in the foreseeable future if capitalism were allowed to develop freely there. Under a limited constitutional monarchy the Russian bourgeoisie, which at present had no traditions or unity, would become strong, while the masses would be further debilitated by 'all the vampires of the new civilised Russian capitalism' which sucked their blood.¹⁸ The revolutionary was therefore urged to turn his attention immediately to the Russian countryside – for it was 'not from the towns but from the villages' that the Russian revolution would come¹⁹ – and to inculcate in the peasant the socialist consciousness that would enable him to transform Russian society before the march of capitalism and its attendant class struggle had become irresistible. This the revolutionary would do by means of propaganda, not agitation. That was to say he would promote an understanding of socialism by exploring present conditions in their broadest perspective rather than by dwelling on specific or local grievances. He would appeal to the few rather than the many, since only the actions of a minority were governed by the rational precepts which it was the purpose of the propagandist to expound.²⁰ Having won staunch adherents among the masses in this way, the revolutionary would retire into the background (though he would of course still share the fortunes of the masses in the ensuing struggle),²¹ for the revolution itself – and this was a point of cardinal importance to Lavrov – would have to be carried out from below, by its prospective beneficiaries, the masses themselves. Russian society should be reconstructed, Lavrov insisted, 'not only with the people's welfare *in view*, not only *for* the people, but also *through the agency* of the people'.²² Socialist ideals should not be imposed on the masses from above by a small minority claiming to represent the people's interests. Revolutionaries should not plan to take the reins of central government themselves and to issue decrees, attempting to mould a better society as a potter shapes soft clay. In all instances where 'consciousness' had been imposed on the masses by a minority alien to them a new breed of exploiters

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10 RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM BEFORE 1 MARCH 1881

had come to power over the bodies of those who had built the barricades.²³ It was consistent with this distaste for authoritarian socialism that Lavrov should argue for the gradual elimination of the state (although he did concede in his book, *The State Element in the Future Society*, a weighty utopian treatise published in 1876, that the state might for some time remain a necessary evil).²⁴ The revolution that Lavrov envisaged was, therefore, in the terminology of the time, an ‘economic’ rather than a ‘political’ one. Lavrov was concerned primarily to promote a new social structure by transferring ownership of the means of production from the privileged minority to the masses rather than by handing over the administrative apparatus to a new government. Like early Western European socialists, such as Fourier and Robert Owen, he was sceptical of the value of political machinations and, like many of his own compatriots, such as Kropotkin and Tolstoy, was inclined also to view political power as a corruptive influence on those who exercised it.

Both the Populist’s traditional faith in the Russian peasant and his chivalrous morality were implicit in Lavrov’s revolutionary strategy. Advocacy of revolution from below rested after all on the assumption that there could be found in the ranks of the masses in general administrators quite as able as those from the educated class²⁵ and that the Russian masses in particular had ‘strength’, ‘energy’ and ‘freshness’, as their uprisings and the withdrawal of the sectarians among them into communities of their own seemed to demonstrate. Lavrov affirmed, too, that the practice of communal land-tenure was the ‘special ground’ on which socialism might be built in Russia, and that the *mir* might become the ‘basic political element’ of the future society.²⁶ And in an article of 1875, published in a revolutionary journal, he urged on the revolutionary the same moral purity and integrity with which the ‘positive hero’ of imaginative literature and the ‘critically thinking’ *intelligent* of the *Historical Letters* had been endowed. ‘Social-revolutionary’ morality, he argued here, demanded the renunciation of self-indulgent pleasure, the strict limitation of one’s material needs, and the cultivation of the capacity to derive enjoyment from contributing to the common well-being.²⁷ Nor were these moral considerations without their practical implications for revolutionary tactics. The revolutionary was warned not to jeopardise the ‘moral purity of the socialist struggle’. He did not have the right in his struggle for social justice to stain his banner with a single drop of blood needlessly shed or to attempt to hasten the revolution with dishonest propaganda,²⁸ for justice and truth could not be promoted by gratuitous violence or deception, an end could not be attained by the