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# Vera Zasulich's Critique of Neo-Populism

## *Party Organisation and Individual Terrorism in the Russian Revolutionary Movement (1878–1902)*

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### Abstract

Vera Zasulich's shooting of Trepov, a governor of St Petersburg who had ordered the flogging of a political prisoner, in January 1878, catapulted her to international fame as a revolutionary heroine, a reputation that she put to good use by becoming one of the five 'founding parents' of Russian Marxism that created the 'Group for the Emancipation of Labour' in 1883. But her act of self-sacrifice also triggered, to her dismay, the institutionalisation of individual-terrorist tactics in the Russian Populist movement with the creation of the 'People's Will' (*Narodnaya Volya*) Party in 1879. The organisation went into decline after the killing of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, and Populism itself was increasingly superseded by Marxism as the hegemonic force on the left with the rise of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). But individual-terrorist tactics reappeared with the creation of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1902, prompting Zasulich to write an article for *Die neue Zeit*, the theoretical organ of German Social Democracy, in which she both condemned the Neo-Populist tendency as deleterious to the rising labour movement and supported the organisational plans for the RSDLP sponsored by the *Iskra* group, developed at length by Lenin in his book *What Is to Be Done?*, published in March 1902. This article provides the background to Vera Zasulich's article 'The Terrorist Tendency in Russia' (December 1902), setting it against the history of the Russian revolutionary movement from 1878 to 1902.

## Keywords

Russian Social Democratic Labour Party – Socialist Revolutionary Party – Vera Zasulich – *Die neue Zeit* – individual terrorism – Marxism – Lenin – *What Is to Be Done?*

### Vera Zasulich and the Shooting of Trepov in 1878

On 24 January 1878 Vera Zasulich (then a 27-year-old woman who had already spent two years in prison and four-and-a-half years in exile) came into the office of the Governor of St Petersburg, General Fyodor Trepov, and fired at him at point-blank range. She offered no resistance to those who seized her, believing that she had killed him and expecting to be killed on the spot. Instead, she had only wounded him. She was detained and sent to trial. Zasulich's action had been prompted by the flogging, on Trepov's orders, of a political prisoner, Arkhip Bogolyubov, who would become insane and die a few years later.

Trepov had acquired a reputation for brutality even before that. As chief of police in Warsaw in 1861, he had ordered his men to shoot at demonstrations of protesting students, and in 1869 he had ordered the arrest of student protesters in St Petersburg. When Trepov visited the prison yard of the House of Preliminary Detention, Bogolyubov refused to tip his cap. Trepov began to beat him, setting off mayhem in the prison. Trepov then ordered the flogging of Bogolyubov with 25 strokes, and the displaying of the birch rods before the other inmates in the prison. Zasulich decided to shoot Trepov in protest.

Vera Ivanovna Zasulich was born on 27 July (8 August, according to the Gregorian calendar) 1849 at Mikhaylovka, in Smolensk province. The impoverished daughter of a nobleman, she was raised to be a governess. Zasulich became a revolutionary in 1868 and joined the circle of Sergey Nechaev, the author, together with Bakunin, of the notorious *Catechism of a Revolutionary*. Apparently never more than a letter-carrier, Zasulich was arrested at the end of April 1869 and sent to Litovsk prison. In early 1870 she was transferred to the Peter and Paul fortress, where she was confined for another year. Then in March 1871, after appearing as a witness in the trial of the Nechaevists, she was ordered to proceed to Kresttsy in the province of Novgorod, and report there regularly to the police. She was then exiled to the more distant town of Soligalich in Kostroma province, but in December 1873 she was transferred to the city of Kharkov. She spent 21 months in Kharkov, and was not permitted to leave the city until September 1875. Thus she missed the 'Going to the People' movement of 1874 – the first mass attempt by the Russian intelligentsia to make contact with the peasants, which ended in failure. Zasulich then

spent 14 months in and around Kiev, where she became the companion of a fellow revolutionary, Lev Deich (Leo Deutsch). Zasluch lived for a short time in Kharkov, and in December 1876 she moved north to St Petersburg to join the recently established *Zemlia i Volya* ('Land and Liberty') organisation, where she worked as a typesetter.

When news of the flogging of Bogolyubov spread, the Kiev section of *Zemlia i Volya* authorised a 'committee' of five people to move to St Petersburg for the specific purpose of assassinating Trepov. Independently of this committee, Zasluch also decided that she had to respond to the Bogolyubov incident. They both waited, however, until sentences had been meted out to those convicted in the 'Trial of the 193' – the largest political trial in tsarist Russia, resulting from the arrests following the 'Going to the People' movement of 1874 and the student protests of 1876. Zasluch and her roommate, Maria Kolenkina, agreed that, once the Trial of the 193 was over, Kolenkina would shoot Zhelikovskii, the prosecutor, at precisely the same moment at which Zasluch would shoot Trepov. On 23 January 1878, sentences were announced in the Trial of the 193, removing the last obstacle to Zasluch's plans to avenge Bogolyubov. In the end she acted alone: Kolenkina was unable to execute her part of the plan, because Zhelikovskii's servant refused to admit her into the prosecutor's residence.<sup>1</sup>

Since a rumour began to spread in official circles that Vera Zasluch had been Bogolyubov's mistress and that the reasons for her action were only personal, the Ministry of Justice handed over the trial to an ordinary tribunal, rather than to one of the Senatorial Committees which had always previously been concerned with political cases. Zasluch was thus tried by a jury. To everybody's surprise, including her own, she was acquitted on March 31, 1878, thus testifying to the extent of public opposition to autocracy, as well as to Trepov's well-deserved reputation as a murderer. The police then tried to hold her in prison without judicial authority, but were prevented from doing so by a violent demonstration that took place when she was freed. There were clashes with the authorities and one student was killed, allowing Zasluch to get away. Despite frantic searches, the police were never able to catch her, and she managed to flee abroad. In May 1878, Zasluch finally escaped to Western Europe, where (with the exception of brief, clandestine trips to Russia in 1879 and 1899) she remained until the general amnesty of 1905 made it possible for her to return to Russia.<sup>2</sup>

Zasluch's spectacular deed, trial and subsequent escape from the claws of the tsarist police turned her into an internationally famous figure, and indeed

1 Bergman 1983, pp. 33–9.

2 Venturi 1960, p. 605.

into a correspondent of Marx, whom she consulted about the fate of the Russian peasant commune, the *obshchina*.<sup>3</sup> Even more importantly, she would become, together with her companion Lev Deich, Georgii Plekhanov, Paul Axelrod and Vasily Ignatov, one of the five original founders of the Group for the Emancipation of Labour, the first Russian Marxist organisation, established in exile in Geneva in 1883. In order to explain its origins, we must make a short excursus into the history of Populism.

### From 'Land and Freedom' to the 'People's Will' and 'Black Repartition'

According to the main historian of the movement, Franco Venturi, Russian Populism originated with the launching in 1857 of the periodical *Kolokol* ('The Bell') by Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Ogaryov from their London exile. Simultaneously, Populist ideas were advanced in Russia by Nikolay Chernyshevsky in the periodical *Sovremennik* ('Contemporary'). Their agitation originally centred on the abolition of serfdom in such a way that the peasants would retain their land and their communal village organisation (the *obshchina* or *mir*), which they regarded as the basis for a future direct transition of Russia to socialism, without having to go through the purgatory of capitalism. After the abolition of serfdom in 1861, their demands focused on the abolition of redemption payments and the granting of democratic liberties. In 1862, Chernyshevsky was arrested and confined in the fortress of St Peter and Paul, where he wrote his famous novel *What Is to Be Done?*, whose title Lenin would borrow forty years later for his homonymous book. Chernyshevsky's legacy was continued and developed by a variety of individuals and organisations, including the first 'Land and Freedom' (*Zemlya i Volya*) secret society (1861–4). The movement came of age with the 'Going to the People' movement of 1874, and, after its failure, with the creation of the second 'Land and Freedom' organisation in 1876.

Populists regarded peasants as the subject of the social revolution and settled in 'colonies' in order to conduct mostly unsuccessful agitation in rural areas. The unexpected success of their work among urban workers would later turn some of their members, like Zasulich, Plekhanov, Axelrod and Deich, to Marxism. The party also had 'disorganising' sections, which became the basis of the terrorist groups that eventually took over the organisation.

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3 See the letters in Shanin (ed.) 1983, pp. 97–126.

Zasulich's action had immediate consequences. The first example of armed resistance to the police occurred a week later, at Odessa, where the local members of *Zemlya i Volya* first put into practice the principle of 'not allowing themselves to be taken like sheep'. Then, on 1 February 1878, an *agent provocateur* was executed at Rostov. Posters were stuck up in the streets with the warning: 'Such is the fate that awaits every Judas'. The poster, which was circulated in half a dozen other Russian towns, had at the bottom a stamp on which were shown a crossed axe, revolver and dagger surrounded by the words 'Executive Committee of the Social Revolutionary Party'. The appearance of the 'Executive Committee' was a sign that terrorism would from now on turn into a systematic policy. Blows were no longer struck by isolated figures, but by an organ set up for that purpose by the party. Then, on 4 August 1878, General Nikolay Mezentsov, head of the Third Section (the tsarist secret police) was assassinated. A manifesto was published explaining that Mezentsov had been killed to avenge those who had been ill-treated in prison. The government reacted to the assassination of Mezentsov by imposing the death sentence for terrorism on 9 August 1878. Two months later, in October 1878, the police struck at the very centre of *Zemlya i Volya*, arresting some of its most prominent leaders. Alexander Mikhailov reconstructed the centre, giving it a resolutely terrorist orientation with the help of Lev Tikhomirov and Nikolai Morozov, who became the most important editors of the magazine *Zemlya i Volya* and of the leaflet series *Listok Zemli i Voli*, which began to read more and more like war communiqués.

On 25 March 1879, Alexander Drenteln, the new chief of the Third Section, was the victim of a failed assassination attempt. A manifesto was published by the 'Executive Committee', and the *Listok* described 'a political assassination' as 'an act of revenge, the only means of defence in the existing situation, and at the same time one of the best weapons of agitation'.<sup>4</sup> Then, on 2 April 1879, an attempt was made on the life of Tsar Alexander II by Alexander Solovev, a former student acting on his own, who was subsequently hanged. The government's reply to Solovev's attempt on the life of the Tsar was to impose a state of siege, handing over the administration of those regions where the revolutionary movement had been strongest to six 'governor-generals', with the authority to hand over any suspect to a military tribunal, to arrest and banish whoever they wanted, and to suppress any newspaper. This policy of state terrorism only strengthened the terrorist tendency within *Zemlya i Volya*.

In St Petersburg, the opponents of political terrorism grouped themselves around Georgii Plekhanov and Mikhail Popov, who turned for support to

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4 Venturi 1960, p. 630.

the activists who were still in the 'colonies' – the so-called *derevenshchiki* or 'country folk'. In June 1879, at the Lipetsk and Voronezh Congresses, the terrorist tendency was victorious with the institutionalisation of the 'Executive Committee', which was assigned the role of ruling body of the party. Plekhanov was the only delegate who openly opposed the new terrorist orientation at Voronezh. Since no-one supported him, he got up and left the meeting. On 26 August 1879 the Executive Committee formally condemned Tsar Alexander II to death, and on 12 September it proclaimed itself 'a secret society entirely autonomous in its activities'. This marked the end of the organisation 'Land and Freedom'.

It was agreed that neither of the two sections should use the old name *Zemlya i Volya*. The group led by Plekhanov, supported by Zasluch, remained committed to agitation among the peasantry and adopted as its symbol the peasants' demand that all the land should be divided up equally and partitioned among the labourers who had been serfs. This group, therefore, called the party's organ *Chernyi Peredel* ('Black Repartition'). *Chernyi Peredel* was infiltrated by an *agent provocateur* who prevented the publication of its organ in Russia and forced Plekhanov, Zasluch and Deich to emigrate, but it did play an important historical role by insisting on the need to resume work among the people whatever the circumstances, arguing that 'the liberation of the people must be the work of the people itself'. Although still holding on to the Populist belief that the agrarian problem was the central element of the Russian revolution, Plekhanov began to note in the pages of the journal *Chernyi Peredel* (of which only five numbers were published) that 'the centre of gravity of the economic problem is shifting towards industry' – a realisation that would lead him and his comrades to Marxism four years later.<sup>5</sup>

The group bent on carrying the terrorist tactics to their ultimate consequences wanted to emphasise its determination to fight for the realisation of the will of the Russian people, which they understood to be the destruction of absolutism, and therefore called the political organ of their Executive Committee *Narodnaya Volya* ('The People's Will'). The first number of their journal *Narodnaya Volya* appeared in October 1879. The fifth number appeared shortly before they managed to achieve the assassination of Tsar Alexander II on 1 March 1881. The last issue, numbered 11–12, was published in October 1885, but the organisation was actually crushed shortly after the execution of the tsar and the hanging of Rysakov, Zhelyabov, Mikhailov, Kibalchich and Sofya Perovskaya on 3 April 1881. *Narodnaya Volya's* hopes that the elimination of the tsar would spark a peasant uprising were dashed: most peasants regarded his

5 Venturi 1960, p. 661.

assassination as a conspiracy of the nobility in retaliation for their liberation from serfdom. Moreover, the helm of the state passed into the hands of Tsar Alexander III and his ultra-reactionary counsellor Konstantin Pobedonostsev, who in a manifesto dated 29 April 1881 proclaimed 'the Sovereign's firm determination to maintain and defend the autocracy'.<sup>6</sup>

Terrorist tendencies continued to reverberate during the 1880s. One assassination attempt in particular had a major impact on Lenin's life: on 1 March 1887, the day of the sixth anniversary of Alexander II's murder, his elder brother, the twenty-one-year-old Aleksandr Ulyanov, took part in a conspiracy to eliminate Alexander III. He was hanged, together with four of his comrades, on 8 May 1887. Lenin, who was seventeen years old at that time, would later state that 'the trail has been blazed for me by my older brother'.<sup>7</sup>

### Georgi Plekhanov and the 'Group for the Emancipation of Labour'

On 12 September 1883 the Group for the Emancipation of Labour, the first Russian Marxist organisation, was created in Geneva. Its members included Plekhanov, Zasulich, Deich, Pavel Axelrod and Vasily Ignatov. Within two years of its establishment its numerical strength dwindled from five to three. Ignatov died shortly afterwards, while in February 1884 Lev Deich, Zasulich's companion, was arrested in Germany for smuggling literature from Switzerland into Russia. He was subsequently turned over to the *Okhrana* and eventually exiled to Western Siberia, where he remained until the spring of 1901.<sup>8</sup>

The 'Group for the Emancipation of Labour' began to publish a 'Library of Contemporary Socialism' and to smuggle it into Russia. It included translations of Marx and Engels as well as works by Plekhanov, Axelrod, and Zasulich. The first essay Zasulich produced was an 'Outline History' of the First International, timing its publication to coincide with the convocation of the Second International in 1889. In 1890 she published a brochure called *Revolutionaries of Bourgeois Background* and a critique of populism (*narodnichestvo*). She would go on to publish biographies of Voltaire in 1893 and of Rousseau in 1898.

Although Zasulich was by far the most well-known figure of the group, its ideologist was the young Plekhanov, a scion of a noble family who was twenty-six years old in 1883. He had made his political debut in December 1875 by addressing a small crowd, consisting mainly of intellectuals, before the

6 Venturi 1960, p. 719.

7 Pomper 2010, p. 210.

8 His memoirs of Siberian exile have been translated into English; see Deutsch 1903.



Kazan Cathedral in St Petersburg – an unheard-of event in autocratic Russia. Subsequently, Plekhanov was active as a propagandist among industrial workers in the capital and opposed the terrorist tendency, believing that only mass action would be able to bring down autocracy and secure democratic rights. Early in 1880, harassed by the police, he emigrated: he was not to return to Russia until 1917.

Plekhanov's first major theoretical work was *Socialism and the Political Struggle*,<sup>9</sup> quickly followed by *Our Differences*,<sup>10</sup> which subjected Populist theories to exhaustive criticism. Plekhanov's epoch-making contribution to the Russian revolutionary cause was to shift the subject of the revolution from the peasantry to the working class. He argued that 'Holy Russia' would be subject to the development of capitalism just like any other secular nation, creating a growing class of wage slaves whose political organisation should be the task of the revolutionaries, now no longer Populists but Marxists or, in the language of the time, Social Democrats. In his polemic with Nikolai Mikhailovsky, the theorist of *Narodnaya Volya* who advocated a 'subjective sociology', Plekhanov insisted that history was not a series of random events to be bent at will by some arbitrary ideal, however noble, but a law-governed process.<sup>11</sup> The individual could only hope to realise his subjective ideals by aligning himself with a progressive social class, and those who exalted the role of individual 'heroes' above that of the 'crowd' were condemning themselves to futility. Freedom consisted in the conscious acceptance of historical necessity, which imposed upon Russian revolutionaries a series of political tasks first codified in the Programme of the Emancipation of Labour Group. The first programme, drafted in 1884, still showed strong terroristic influences. It reads:

The Emancipation of Labour Group sets itself the aim of spreading modern socialism in Russia and preparing the working class for a conscious social and political movement; to this aim it devotes all its energies, calling upon our revolutionary youth for help and collaboration. Pursuing this aim by all means in its power, the Emancipation of Labour group at the same time recognises the necessity for terrorist struggle against the absolute government and differs from the *Narodnaya Volya* party only on the question of the so-called seizure of power by the revolutionary

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9 Plekhanov 1974a.

10 Plekhanov 1974c.

11 Plekhanov 1974f.

party and of the *tasks of the immediate activity of the socialists among the working class*.<sup>12</sup>

Even the second draft-programme, written three years later, stated that the Russian Social Democrats 'will not stop even at so-called acts of terrorism if that proves to be necessary in the interests of the struggle'.<sup>13</sup> It would be a gradual process until the development of a mass movement turned Russian Marxists into opponents of individual terrorist tactics. Nevertheless, the fundamental step had been taken: Plekhanov declared in his address to the inaugural congress of the Second International in 1889 that 'the revolutionary movement in Russia will triumph only as a *working-class movement* or else it will never triumph!'<sup>14</sup>

In 1889, when the Swiss government forced Plekhanov to leave the country because Russian terrorists in Zurich had caused an explosion, Zasulich followed him to the French village of Mornex, just across the border, where she lived for the next five years. In 1894, after anarchist demonstrations in Paris prompted the French government to expel foreign nationals suspected of revolutionary activity, Zasulich and Plekhanov moved to London. Plekhanov was subsequently permitted to return to his family in Geneva, but the resources of the British Museum so delighted Zasulich that she remained in England, where she made the acquaintance of Engels, until the spring of 1897.

Plekhanov and Zasulich's chief associate and lifelong friend was Pavel B. Axelrod (1850–1928). Born into a poor Jewish family, he entered Kiev University and was active in the Populist movement both as an organiser and a propagandist. Like Plekhanov and Zasulich, Axelrod was at first a follower of Bakunin, but more linked to German Social Democracy than Plekhanov. In exile he worked as an artisan, selling Caucasian yogurt. As late as 1898, Axelrod felt compelled to write an article for *Die neue Zeit* about 'The Historical Justification of Russian Social Democracy' in the face of what he called 'a certain scepticism [*eine gewisse Skepsis*] about the practical aspirations of Russian Social Democracy even in the ranks of the West European workers' parties'.<sup>15</sup>

Plekhanov and Axelrod's views on Russia's historical development and the political tasks following from it were statistically substantiated in Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia: The Process of the Formation of*

12 Plekhanov 1974b, p. 357.

13 Plekhanov 1974d, p. 360.

14 Plekhanov 1974e, p. 400; emphasis in the original.

15 Axelrod 1898, p. 100.

*a Home Market for Large-Scale Industry*, published in 1899. The subtitle reveals the political intention behind Lenin's massive work. Populist theoreticians had argued that capitalism could not develop in Russia because its late arrival barred Russian industry from access to the world market, while the poverty of the peasant masses did not provide an adequate internal market for its development. Lenin showed that social differentiation among the peasants had already given rise to a substantial class of wage workers which would only grow in the future. That should be the target of the revolutionaries' work, because only through the urban workers would they be able to reach the peasant masses in the villages.

The size of this new class, which first became nationally prominent with the strike wave of the textiles workers of St Petersburg in 1896, was still tiny. According to official statistics, 2.2 million workers were employed in mining and manufacturing industries in 1900. If one includes those not subject to the factory inspectorate, a figure of approximately two and a half million is obtained. To this one may add another half a million employed in transport and approximately 300,000 building operatives in urban areas, making 3.3 million in all. This amounted to just 2.5 per cent of the total population of 129 million in 1897.<sup>16</sup> It was this overwhelming predominance of the rural population which provided the basis for the later appearance of Neo-Populism. But the industrial workers were concentrated in key centres from which, if they acted in an organised manner, they could exercise an influence out of all proportion to their numerical strength.

### **The St Petersburg 'League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class'**

In 1895 the various propagandist circles in the capital united to form an organisation called 'The St Petersburg League of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class'. In December 1895, before the new body could make its existence felt, six of its most prominent leaders, including Lenin, were arrested. It was Martov who, one week later, gave the League its name and arranged the issue of its first leaflets; but he barely had time to rally the organisation before he was himself seized by the police, along with several other leaders. Other arrests followed, and by August 1896 only one man belonging to the original nucleus of seventeen, Stepan Radchenko, was still at liberty. The League was

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16 Keep 1963, p. 6.

thus in no position to direct the textile workers in their famous strike. By the autumn of 1896 Radchenko was too busy trying to avoid his own arrest to provide the League with effective leadership. Although he retained control of its official seal, authority passed to a new team headed by Vladimir Makhnovets (Akimov), Vladimir Ivanshin and Konstantin Takhtarev. The new leaders of the League emphasised the satisfaction of the workers' immediate economic needs, to the detriment of the political struggle against the autocratic regime: this was the origin of 'Economism'.<sup>17</sup>

'Leagues of Struggle' emerged in other Russian cities in the period 1895–1900, forming the first Social-Democratic city organisations. During the winter of 1895 a 'Moscow Workers' Union' came into being, keyed to industrial rather than political action. At Ivanovo-Voznesensk a 'Workers' Union' was formed in 1895, which survived for two years and won certain mass support. At Nikolayev a 'South Russian Workers' Union' was formed, whose leading figure was Lev Davidovich Bronstein, the future Leon Trotsky. At Yekaterinoslav there were at first two organisations, which in December 1897 joined to form a 'League of Struggle' on the St Petersburg model. Finally, at Kiev a 'League of Struggle' managed to publish two issues of a journal called *Rabochaya Gazeta* in 1897.<sup>18</sup>

### The 'Legal Marxists': Pyotr Struve and Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky

Editors of journals critical of the regime found space for articles by Marxist writers, and a few periodicals appeared that openly propagated their ideas. In the winter of 1896–7 a group of Marxists at Samara led by Pyotr Maslov obtained control of a local newspaper, *Samarskiy Vestnik* ('The Samara Courier'), which published contributions by Pyotr Struve and several of his colleagues. Shortly afterwards a successful monthly review, *Novoye Slovo* ('New Word'), appeared in St Petersburg under Struve's editorship. A number of individuals in influential positions, particularly in the cultural field, developed Marxist sympathies. Among the 'Legal Marxists' in St Petersburg, the best-known figures were the economist Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky and the publicist Pyotr Struve.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Keep 1963, pp. 47–9.

18 Keep 1963, pp. 50–2.

19 Mendel 1961.

### The First Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP)

In October 1897 a Jewish socialist organisation had been established, called 'The General Union of Jewish Workers in Russia and Poland' (*Allgemeinen jüdischen Arbeiterbund*) or, more simply, 'the *Bund*', from whose ranks came one of the main leaders of Russian Social Democracy, Yuliy Osipovich Tserderbaum, better known as Julius Martov. It was the *Bund* that made the practical arrangements for the first congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), held at Minsk on 1–3 March 1898. The congress appointed the 'Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad' as the party's foreign agency and the Kiev *Rabochaya Gazeta* as its official organ. Shortly afterwards the police clamped down on the RSDLP. Some 500 arrests were made, including 175 in Kiev and over 50 in Moscow. By January 1899 the police claimed to have seized eight of the nine delegates to the congress. *Rabochaya Gazeta* ceased publication and the Central Committee was paralysed. Its most important legacy was a Manifesto written by Pyotr Struve (soon to become one of the main spokesmen of Russian Liberalism), whose main passages read:

The farther east one goes in Europe, the more the bourgeoisie becomes in the political respect weaker, more cowardly, and meaner, and the larger are the cultural and political tasks which fall to the share of the proletariat. On its broad shoulders the Russian working class must bear and will bear the cause of the fight for political freedom. This is essential, but it is only the first step toward the realization of the great historical mission of the proletariat – towards the creation of that social order in which the exploitation of man by man will have no place. [...] Taking as the principal immediate task of the party the goal of conquering political freedom, Social Democracy moves toward the goal which has already been marked out by the glorious activists of the old 'People's Will.' But the means and the path which Social Democracy chooses are different. The choice of them is determined by its conscious desire to be and remain a class movement of the organized working masses. It is firmly convinced that 'the liberation of the working class can only be its own business,' and it will undeviatingly make all its action conform to this fundamental basis of international Social Democracy.<sup>20</sup>

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20 Daniels (ed.) 1993, pp. 5–6.

The repression that followed the Minsk Congress of 1898 strengthened the trend towards decentralisation and local autonomy, and contributed to the spread of the tendency known as 'Economism'. With the collapse of the Minsk venture the centre of gravity of the RSDLP reverted to the émigré groups in Western Europe.

### The Revisionist Controversy in Germany and 'Economism' in Russia

Back in 1888 Plekhanov had been obliged to agree to the formation of an organisation known as the 'Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad', which the Emancipation of Labour Group joined as a corporate entity, with the right to edit its publications. In practice the new body scarcely existed. But in 1894 Plekhanov and his friends, desperately short of funds, were forced to make further concessions, and to merge their group with the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad. It was agreed that they would continue to exercise their editorial duties, which included publication of a journal entitled *Rabotnik* ('The Worker'), as well as a series of leaflets on current topics. By the autumn of 1898 the veterans were politically isolated. When the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad held its first congress in 1898, their opponents, who were in a majority, carried a motion admitting to membership two individuals, Boris Krichevsky and Pavel Teplov ('Sibiriak'), to whom Plekhanov and Axelrod objected. They demonstrated their disapproval by renouncing their rights as editors of the publications of the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad. The congress decided to launch a new journal in place of the now defunct *Rabotnik*, called *Rabocheye Delo* ('The Workers' Cause'), the first issue of which came out in April 1899. The *Rabocheye Delo* editorial team consisted at different times of Krichevsky, Teplov, Vladimir Ivanshin, Vladimir Akimov and Alexander Martynov.

Two of the leading 'Economist' spokesmen were Sergei Prokopovich, an economist who emigrated to Switzerland in 1896, and his wife Yekaterina Kuskova. The couple moved to Belgium, where they were impressed by the mass support enjoyed by the Belgian labour organisations and the emphasis they laid on constitutional methods of struggle. In a letter to Axelrod in the spring of 1898, Prokopovich drew an unflattering comparison between Belgian and Russian socialism, stating that neither he nor Kuskova would continue to accept the official programme of the Emancipation of Labour Group, as members of the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad were obliged to do.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Keep 1963, pp. 55–6.

In 1899 Kuskova wrote the most famous ‘Economist’ document, the so-called *Credo*, first published by opponents of ‘Economism’ together with a ‘Protest of Russian Social Democrats’ drafted by Lenin and signed by seventeen political exiles in Siberia.<sup>22</sup> Proceeding from the assumption that ‘the talk about an independent workers’ political party merely results from the transplantation of alien aims and alien achievements to our soil’, the *Credo* reached the conclusion that ‘for the Russian Marxist there is only one course: participation in, i.e., assistance to, the economic struggle of the proletariat, and participation in liberal opposition activity’.<sup>23</sup> Lenin pointed out the implications: Social Democrats should merge in a common political front led by the liberals, leaving the workers to fight for purely economic objectives, and placing the labour movement under the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie. In *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin wrote that ‘the notoriety deservedly acquired by the *Credo*’ was due to the frankness with which it ‘blurted out the fundamental political tendency of Economism – let the workers carry on the economic struggle (it would be more correct to say the trade-unionist struggle, because the latter also embraces specifically working-class politics) and let the Marxist intelligentsia merge with the liberals for the political “struggle”’.<sup>24</sup>

The development of ‘Economism’ coincided with the outbreak of the Revisionist Controversy in the German Social Democratic Party. Faced with Eduard Bernstein’s move to turn Social Democracy into a party of reforms within the framework of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, Plekhanov set out to defend Marxist revolutionary principles. He was one of the first Marxist writers with an international reputation – other so-called ‘orthodox’ were Alexander Helphand (Parvus) and Rosa Luxemburg, both of whom had ‘Russian’ backgrounds – to open fire on Bernstein and his fellow revisionists.<sup>25</sup> It was them, together with the British maverick Belfort Bax, who prompted Karl Kautsky to confront the reformist challenge, and to become the main spokesman of the ‘orthodox’ camp against Bernstein’s revisionism.<sup>26</sup> The ultimate consequence of Bernstein’s theories was Millerand’s ministerialism, an early version of Stalin’s Popular Front theory. In June 1899 Alexandre Millerand, a leader of the *Parti Socialiste de France*, joined as Minister of Commerce the bourgeois ‘government of republican defence’ headed by René

22 Lenin 1964a, where the full text of the *Credo* is reproduced.

23 Lenin 1964a, p. 174.

24 Lenin 1961, pp. 363–4.

25 Plekhanov 1898, 1899a, 1899b; see also the documents in Tudor and Tudor (eds.) 1988.

26 Kautsky 1899; Bernstein 1993.

Waldeck-Rousseau (together with the butcher of the 1871 Paris Commune, General Gallifet) using as an excuse the Dreyfus trial.

According to Lenin, the 'most outspoken and honest advocate of Economism' was the journal *Rabochaya Mysl'*.<sup>27</sup> *Rabochaya Mysl'* ('Workers' Thought') was launched in October 1897 by the St Petersburg League of Struggle. After the second issue came out in December of the same year, a series of arrests destroyed the original group. The venture was taken over by a group of intellectuals, the most prominent of which was Karl August Kok, a Bernstein sympathiser then living in Berlin, which continued to publish the newspaper abroad. Starting with the fourth issue, which appeared in October 1898, the émigré editorial group was joined by Konstantin Takhtarev, who had been introduced to Kok by Kuskova.

*Rabochaya Mysl'* claimed to be the voice of the St Petersburg workers, yet was published by an émigré editorial board of intellectuals who cultivated a lofty disdain for theoretical controversies. The *intelligenty*, the editors warned, were unreliable champions of the people's cause, and the party established at Minsk was an artificial creation, which ought to be replaced by a broad-based working-men's union. Their rejection of intellectuals, however, was selective, for the 'Separate Supplement' to *Rabochaya Mysl'* No. 7, published in July 1899, included an article by the revisionist Eduard Bernstein as well as a sympathetic analysis of revisionism.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting the illusions created in some workers' circles by government toleration of illegal strikes in the late 1890s (Sergei Zubatov, the head of the Moscow *Okhrana*, would go on to create yellow unions), *Rabochaya Mysl'* proclaimed the object of the workers' movement to be the satisfaction of their immediate economic and political demands. Politics was understood as a projection of this trade-unionist struggle rather than as the ideological and organisational preparation for a revolution. The editorial of the first number of *Rabochaya Mysl'* proclaimed that economic struggle, 'the struggle with capital on the field of everyday essential needs and strikes as the means of this struggle', was 'the watchword of the worker movement'. Workers should group themselves around strike funds, which would 'provide means not for study courses, not for books, but for bread on the table when the struggle is at its most heated – during a strike.' In that way they would know 'that they are not fighting for some kind of future generation but for themselves and their children.'<sup>29</sup>

27 Lenin 1961, p. 364.

28 Lih 2006, pp. 240–78.

29 Quoted in Lih 2006, p. 278.



As Boris Savinkov (then a Social-Democratic activist in St Petersburg and later a prominent member of the Socialist Revolutionaries' 'Combat Organisation') put it in an article published in April 1900:

To the extent that the active organisation gives itself the aim of reflecting the demands, views, and mood of the less developed part of the factory proletariat, while leaving without attention the political maturity of its advanced strata – to that extent its practical activity unwittingly must for the most part take on the character of agitation on the basis of immediate economic interests, while the centre of gravity of this activity must come to rest on the publication of proclamations that exploit each individual fact and each local abuse in a factory.<sup>30</sup>

Thus the 'Economist' tendency reflected the most immediate demands of the least developed section of the proletariat, while Social Democracy, Plekhanov and Lenin argued, should aspire to organise first of all its advanced strata.

### *Rabocheye Delo and Iskra*

Though *Rabocheye Delo* was outwardly opposed to 'Economism' (it published Lenin's protest against the *Credo* when it arrived in Geneva), it equivocated and stated that the *Credo* was the mistaken opinion of a few isolated individuals rather than part of a broader trend which included *Rabochaya Mysl'*. One of the members of *Rabocheye Delo*'s editorial board, Boris Krichevsky, provided support for the 'Economists' by advancing a 'stages theory', according to which the workers arrived at class consciousness first of all through economic agitation. Against this, Plekhanov argued that *Rabocheye Delo* was cutting down the scope of the movement to suit the more backward workers.<sup>31</sup>

In 1899 Krichevsky wrote a series of dispatches on French affairs for the organ of German Social Democracy, *Vorwärts*, where he praised Millerand's ministerialism, giving rise to an acrimonious dispute with Martov and Parvus. When Plekhanov discovered that revisionism had infected the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad, he broke with the 'youngsters'. In March 1900 the Emancipation of Labour Group brought out a sharply polemical pamphlet

30 B-v [Boris Savinkov], 'Peterburgskoe dvizhenie i prakticheskie zadachi sotsial' demokratii [The Petersburg Movement and the Practical Tasks of Social Democracy]', *Rabocheye Delo*, No. 6, April 1900, pp. 28–42, quoted in Lih 2006, p. 357.

31 Keep 1963, p. 63.

by Plekhanov, called *A Vade Mecum for the Editors of Rabocheye Delo*. In April of the same year, at the second congress of the Union, Plekhanov, Zasulich and Axelrod left, and together with some followers formed the 'Revolutionary Organisation "Social-Democrat"'<sup>32</sup>

Crucially, the old guard received the support of a new cohort of activists recently returned from Siberian exile, including Martov, Alexander Potresov and Lenin, who left Russia for Europe in July 1900. This enabled the Emancipation of Labour Group to belie *Rabocheye Delo's* accusation that their 'dogmatism' stemmed from its isolation from Russian reality, and to launch together a new journal, *Iskra* ('The Spark') – a name taken from the words of one of the Decembrists to Pushkin: 'From the spark shall grow the flame' – in December 1900. The 'Declaration of the Editorial Board of *Iskra*' stated clearly: 'Before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first of all draw firm and definite lines of demarcation.'<sup>33</sup> Simultaneously, Plekhanov edited a theoretical organ called *Zarya* ('Dawn'), where he engaged in polemics with the now increasingly liberal 'Legal Marxists'.

*Rabocheye Delo's* opportunist lack of firm principles led them to make a U-turn during the 'spring events' of February–March 1901, when workers came out on the streets in support of student protests. After the shooting of the Minister of Education Nikolay Bogolepov by Pyotr Karpovich, a supporter of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, on 15 March 1901, they became not only advocates of political action but even supporters of individual terrorism, stating that 'the *white terror* of the tsarist government will again, with the unstoppable force of a law of nature, create the soil for a *red terror* of the revolutionaries.'<sup>34</sup> This sudden infatuation with individual terror was shared by other Social Democrats such as the editor of the short-lived newspaper *Svoboda* ('Freedom'), Yevgeny Zelensky ('L. Nadezhdin'), who in 1901 wrote: 'Long live terror as the vanguard of a wide political movement in the masses!'<sup>35</sup> He went on to support terrorism in his brochure *Rebirth of Revolutionism in Russia*, in the following words:

Terror cannot help but to intensify the movement if only because it initiates political struggle. It is the clear symptom of the beginning of the end. The reason for its existence is to throw a spark into that inflammable material that has already been collected. The availability of such material

<sup>32</sup> Dan 1970, p. 218.

<sup>33</sup> Lenin 1964b, p. 354.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Lih 2006, p. 301.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Lih 2006, p. 371.

is known to any observer of Russian life, and if that is the case, then terror is an essential, necessary step forward in revolutionary struggle.<sup>36</sup>

Nadezhdin's brochure drew forth a sharp reply from Lenin, who dismissed 'the "excitative" terror of a Tkachov the Little' (a reference to the Russian Blanquist Pyotr Tkachev, who also supported individual terror) as 'simply ludicrous'.<sup>37</sup> More significantly for the purposes of our article, it was also sharply criticised by Vera Zasulich.<sup>38</sup>

When their hopes for an immediate revolution were dashed, the editors of *Rabocheye Delo* decided to join a common organisation with *Iskra*, signing for that purpose a joint declaration of principles in June 1901 renouncing their previous support for revisionism, and then decided to pull out of it, bringing about a final break. The conflict between *Iskra* and *Rabocheye Delo* finally came to a head in October 1901, with the celebration of the third congress of the Union of the Russian Social Democrats Abroad. After the split, the *Iskra* group set up its own émigré organisation, called the 'Foreign Union of Revolutionary Social Democracy'. During the course of 1901 *Rabocheye Delo* steadily lost influence, and in February 1902 it ceased publication altogether.<sup>39</sup>

### Lenin's *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (March 1902)

In his book *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*, published in March 1902, Lenin emphasised the connection between Russian 'Economism' and German Revisionism, and criticised revisionist 'freedom of criticism', arguing that 'without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement'.<sup>40</sup> He also stressed the role of the conscious as against the spontaneous element in the development of a *socialist* workers' movement. In his article 'The Revision of the Programme of Social Democracy in Austria', Karl Kautsky had written that 'socialist consciousness is something introduced into the class struggle of the proletariat from without, not

36 Nadezhdin, *Vozrozhdenie revoliutsionizma v Rossii*, quoted in Lih 2006, p. 375.

37 Lenin 1964b, p. 511.

38 Vera Zasulich, 'Review of Nadezhdin's *Vozrozhdenie revoliutsionizma v Rossii*', in V.I. Zasulich, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, Moscow: Mysl', 1983, first published in *Zarya*, No. 2–3, December 1901.

39 Keep 1963, pp. 86–7.

40 Lenin 1961, p. 369.

something spontaneously arising from it'.<sup>41</sup> The history of all countries showed that spontaneously, by its own unaided efforts, the working class was capable of developing only a 'trade-unionist' consciousness:

There is much talk of spontaneity. But the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology, *to its development along the lines of the Credo programme*; for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism, is *Nur-Gewerkschaftlerei*, and trade-unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is *to combat spontaneity, to divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.<sup>42</sup>

An anonymous review of Lenin's book published in Struve's liberal journal *Osvobozhdenie* ('Liberation') summed up the issues in dispute as follows:

The programme [of the 'Economists' outlined in the *Credo*] maintained that the dream of creating a political party based on the workers could not be carried out and, just for that reason, was harmful. The Russian proletariat – said the advocates of this programme – had not yet matured enough to understand specific political demands; all that it was capable of now was the struggle for its economic needs. The Russian worker did not yet feel any need for political freedom, he was unable to lift himself up to a struggle with the autocracy, he was attracted only by the struggle for high wages and a short working day.

But such a programme, given the whole nature of present-day Russian life, did not have and could not have any success. In a country that has a despotic regime such as our Russian one, in a country where such elementary democratic rights as the right of free speech, assembly and so on, do not exist, where each worker strike is accounted a political crime and workers are forced by bullets and whips to return to work – in such a country, no party can restrict itself to the narrow framework of an exclusively economic struggle. And Mr. Lenin justly protests against such a programme. Basing himself on the fact that a definite section of

41 'Das sozialistische Bewußtsein ist also etwas in den Klassenkampf des Proletariats von außen Hineingetragenes, nicht etwas aus ihm urwüchsig Entstandenes', Kautsky 1902, p. 80.

42 Lenin 1961, p. 384.

the Russian proletariat has now already matured to an understanding of the necessity of the struggle with autocracy, he finds it possible and necessary to conduct a struggle not only for the immediate economic demands of the proletariat, but also for the transformation of the existing form of government.<sup>43</sup>

The review then went on to quote the following passages from *What Is to Be Done?*, which shows that Lenin wanted to transform not just ‘the existing form of government’:

The Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for *all* and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.<sup>44</sup>

Lenin argued that the root cause of the crisis besetting the RSDLP was the lack of unity resulting from its ‘handicraft methods’ (*kustarnichestvo*) of organisation, as he called them, by reference to the Russian handicraft worker, the *kustar*. The immediate task was to build up a centralised organisation of professional revolutionaries, consisting of men who had no occupation other than clandestine political activity, and were capable of carrying out organisational work in the strictest secrecy under the autocratic tsarist state. The link holding together this network of professional activists would be the production and distribution of an all-Russian political newspaper, *Iskra*, edited abroad to secure continuity in the face of political persecution and smuggled into Russia. Zasluch fully endorsed this perspective in her article, published nine months later and translated for the first time into English in this edition of *Historical Materialism*.<sup>45</sup>

43 *Osvobozhdenie*, Kn. 1, 1903, p. 62, quoted in Lih 2006, pp. 212–13.

44 Lenin 1961, p. 423.

45 Sassulitsch 1902.

### The Development of a Mass Movement in Russia

The developing mass movement in Russia had been foreshadowed by the disturbances that broke out at St Petersburg University in February 1899, which were repressed by the police. The punishment meted out the following year to the students that had taken part in the protests gave rise to a new wave of disturbances. More than two hundred students were forcibly drafted into the army in autumn 1901. Student demonstrations in St Petersburg and Moscow were joined by workers and dispersed by Cossack troops during the 'spring events' of February–March 1901. These events culminated in the assassination of the Minister of Education Bogolepov by Karpovich, an expelled student, on 14 March 1901, and in a mass demonstration in Kazan Square in St Petersburg on 4 March 1901.

Meanwhile, in May 1900, several thousand men had marched in procession through the streets of Kharkov. The slogans on their banners included demands for civil rights as well as an eight-hour workday. In August 1900 there was a two-week strike by the railwaymen of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, and on May Day 1901 demonstrations were held in several cities. At the Obukhov armaments factory near St Petersburg, a pitched battle took place shortly afterwards between strikers and police, reinforced by troops; there were many arrests, and 37 men were sent for trial. There was bloodshed at Batumi, Georgia, in March 1902, when troops clashed with oil-workers who protested against the receipt of dismissal notices. At least 14 men were killed and about 80 were injured. May Day was celebrated in 1902 on a more extensive scale than ever before, with meetings and demonstrations in 36 towns. Serious peasant riots occurred in the spring of 1902 in the provinces of Poltava and Kharkov. The rioters were brutally repressed and required to compensate the landowners for damage done to their property.<sup>46</sup>

### Struve and the Liberal Newspaper *Osvobozhdenie* ('Liberation')

As early as 1895, Lenin had called Struve's criticism of the economic content of Populism a 'reflection of Marxism in bourgeois literature', although Struve still belonged to 'Legal Marxists' circles.<sup>47</sup> Lenin's warning was prescient: by 1901 Struve had become a centre of attention in Liberal *zemstvo* circles. When the Liberal leaders decided, in the spring of 1902, to launch a clandestine

46 Keep 1963, pp. 70–1.

47 Lenin 1972a.

newspaper, Struve was selected as its editor. *Osvobozhdenie* ('Liberation'), as the paper was called, began to appear in July 1902. Like *Iskra*, it was published abroad and distributed in Russia by groups of sympathisers. Although Struve did not issue a straightforward call for constitutional government, preferring to speak of the need for 'rights and an omnipotent all-Russian *zemstvo*', after a few months he began to demand the convocation of a constituent assembly based on universal suffrage. In the tactical sphere, *Osvobozhdenie* advocated collaboration with Social Democrats. In mid-1903, after the founding of the liberal *Soyuz Osvobozhdeniya* ('Union of Liberation'), the magazine became the Union's official organ. In 1905 Struve would become one of the founders of the liberal Constitutional Democratic Party (*Kadets*).

### The Emergence of Neo-Populism: The Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR)

By the end of the 1890s, a group of prominent *Narodniki* convicted in the famous 'Trial of the 193' in 1878 had served out their sentences and returned from Siberian banishment. The young Populist generation gathered around these figures, which included Yekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, Porfirii Voinaral'skii, Petr Nikolaev, and Valerian Balmashev.

The Populist movement had always been strong in the South, among other things due to the combination of class and national oppression in Ukraine. A circle in Kiev, founded in 1896 and led by the surveyor I.A. D'iakov, established circles of instruction, set up a printing press, disseminated proclamations and maintained contact with comrades elsewhere in Russia, before being dissolved by the *Okhrana* in 1898.

In August 1897 a conference was held in Voronezh with the aim of organising the merger of groups in south Russia, the Ukraine, and elsewhere. Representatives from Kiev, St Petersburg and Kharkov tried to work out a common programme as a basis for the merger, but the first attempts proved unsuccessful due to arrests or political disagreements. Finally, the draft programme of the group from Voronezh was accepted at the fourth conference of the Southern groups, and published in November 1900 as the 'Manifesto of the Socialist Revolutionary Party'. It advocated agitation among the workers and peasants, and made no mention of terror, which led to its authors being accused of 'Social Democratism' by former members of *Narodnaya Volya*. Indeed Social Democrats reacted with applause, and *Iskra* even invited the authors of the Manifesto to become members of the RSDLP.<sup>48</sup>

48 Hildermeier 2000, pp. 33–5.

A 'Group of Old Narodovol'tsy' (*Gruppa starykh narodovol'tsev*) – i.e. former adherents of *Narodnaya Volya* – had come together in Paris in 1893, led by the best-known representative of Populist philosophy in exile, Pyotr Lavrov, who, in Isaiah Berlin's words, 'represented the central stream of Populism and reflected all its vacillations and confusions'.<sup>49</sup> The funeral ceremonies for Lavrov, held in Paris in February 1900, gathered the entire Populist leadership in Western Europe. The decision was made to found an organisation for the production of agitational literature directed at the Russian peasantry, called the 'Agrarian-Socialist League' or ASL (*Agrarno-sotsialisticheskaia Liga*).

The 'Agrarian-Socialist League' soon became the most significant exile group. The main Populist '*stariki*' ('elders' or 'patriarchs') became members, including Feliks Volkhovskiy, Nikolai Chaikovskii, Ilya Rubanovich, Egor Lazarev, Chaim Zhitlowsky, Leonid Shishko, Dmitry Khilkov, Dmitrii Klements, Samuil Kliachko, Solomon Rappoport ('An-skii'), and Esper Serebriakov. For the first time the representatives of a younger Populist generation – future leaders of the PSR such as Viktor Chernov, Mikhail Gots and Stepan Sletov – played a visible role alongside these older leaders. By unifying in this way old *Narodniki* and young 'Socialist Revolutionaries', the ASL initiated the cooperation that gave rise to the PSR.

The programmatic positions of the ASL were presented in the brochure *The Next Question of the Revolutionary Cause (Ocherednoi vopros revoliutsionnogo dela)*, written by Chernov and published in 1900. Chernov reached back to the traditions of Populism, stressing that revolutionary theory should focus back on the majority of the population – the peasantry. Although the ASL's programme did not mention political terror, it would soon become one of the central tenets of its successor, the Socialist Revolutionary Party or PSR (*Partiia Sotsialistov-Revoliutsionerov*). The Agrarian-Socialist League finally merged with the newly-formed party in 1902.

It is not possible to give an exact date for the foundation of the PSR because neither a formal founding assembly nor a party convention with the participation of all socialist revolutionary groups was organised. The merger was thus completed in steps. The first number of the party journal, edited by Chernov and Gots, *Revoliutsionnaia Rossiia* ('Revolutionary Russia') appeared in January 1901. The party's theoretical paper, edited by Nikolay Rusanov and Ilya Rubanovich, was *Vestnik russkoi revoliutsii* ('Messenger of the Russian Revolution'). The new party, due to its ideological heterogeneity, was not ready to draft even a provisional programme, and indeed one was not adopted

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49 Preface to Venturi 1960, p. XIII; on Lavrov see further Chapter 17: 'Bakunin and Lavrov'.



until the first party conference, held from 29 December 1905 to 4 January 1906.<sup>50</sup>

The peasant revolts in Kharkov and Poltava provinces in March–April 1902 provided the final impetus for the rebirth of the ‘Neo-Populist’ Party, as its historian, Manfred Hildermeier, aptly calls it. The main leaders of the PSR were Grigory Gershuni, head of the ‘Battle Organisation of the PSR’ (*Boevaia organizatsiia Partii Sotsialistov-Revoliutsionerov*), replaced after his imprisonment by the famous *agent provocateur* Yevno Azef; Yekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, the ‘Grandmother of the Revolution’, two decades older than Gershuni, who had taken part in the ‘Going to the People’ movement of 1874 and had been a defendant at the Trial of the 193; Mikhail R. Gots, the son of a Moscow tea millionaire and former member of *Narodnaya Volya*, who after returning from Siberian exile financed a large part of the party’s activities; and Viktor Chernov, the eclectic theoretician of the Neo-Populist movement, who would write the programme of the PSR. The two other members of the first central committee were Mark Natanson and Nikolay Rusanov.

The distinguishing trait of Chernov’s theoretical efforts was his attempt to prove the existence of a basic identity in the economic situation and political interests of workers and peasants. He claimed that there was ‘no qualitative, principled difference between the historical role of the peasantry and the proletariat’.<sup>51</sup> Chernov exposed the ‘theoretical’ basis of this claim in his 1900 brochure *The Next Question of the Revolutionary Cause*. His main argument was that for both workers and peasants the only source of income was their own labour. Surplus value was extracted from the peasant in a ‘hidden, masked form’, as rent, interest, falling prices, or taxes. Exploited work marked the position of both oppressed classes in the economic reproduction process of society. The compulsion to work or freedom from that compulsion, rather than the relationship to the means of production, was declared by Chernov to be the criterion for membership in a social class.<sup>52</sup>

Chernov proudly asserted that the PSR held to Mikhailovsky’s ‘tried and true’ formula and wanted to represent the interests of the ‘totality of those working classes which are for us the people, inasmuch as they embody and represent the principle of work’.<sup>53</sup> ‘Socialisation of the land’ (*sotsializatsiia*

50 Hildermeier 2000, pp. 37–48.

51 Chernov, *Marksizm i agrarnyi vopros. Istoriko-kriticheskiĭ ocherk*, St Petersburg, 1906, p. 166, quoted in Hildermeier 2000, p. 65.

52 Hildermeier 2000, p. 63.

53 Chernov, *Krest’ianin i rabochii kak ekonomicheskie kategorii*, Moscow, 1906, p. 44, quoted in Hildermeier 2000, p. 67.

*zemli*), first proclaimed in the summer of 1902 after the peasant revolts in Poltava and Kharkov, became the essence of the SR programme and its main claim to 'socialism'. The programme approved in January 1906, however, did not include the demand for the socialisation of the factories: it merely called for legislation for the protection of the workers, preserving wage slavery.

### The Question of Terror in the 'People's Will' and the Socialist Revolutionary Party

For the old *Narodnaya Volya*, the basic purpose of 'political terror', which was understood to be the assassination of senior tsarist civil servants as representatives of autocracy or even the tsar himself, was to function as a *substitute* for the revolutionary activity of the oppressed masses. Terror was a *legitimate* and *essential* weapon so long as a revolutionary *mass* movement had not developed. The terrorist method resulted from the *isolation* of the revolutionary forces from the people, and ended up in a duel between the government and the *intelligentsia*. Only because the autocracy suppressed all other propaganda means did the 'People's Will' see itself compelled to resort to terrorist means.

Although at first sight it might seem that the Socialist Revolutionary Party simply took over the theoretical justification for political terror from *Narodnaya Volya*, in actual fact it stood the ideas of the 'People's Will' on their head. Political terror was no longer justified as a substitute for the missing revolt of the masses, but as a universally valid tactic, useful even in a period of increasing social unrest.

According to Gershuni and Chernov's theoretical substantiation of individual terrorism, terrorist attacks had three functions. The first was 'self-defence', an effect to be achieved when the state learned to fear the revolutionaries and so refrained from further injustice, for each individual representative of the state would live in the certainty that his measures would be repaid in kind. Second, terror was to have an 'agitatory effect' because it 'evokes wide attention, and so will awaken the most indifferent, narrow-minded citizen . . . and force the people, against their will, to think politically.' Finally, the killing of leading representatives of the tsarist state would have a 'disorganising effect'. Revolvers and bombs would force the state to look for support in society and make concessions. To this was added an element of emotional blackmail absent in *Narodnaya Volya*. Self-sacrifice was held up as an ideal and the 'hero of revenge' became the exemplary revolutionary figure. Terrorist activity was 'a matter of honour' for every true revolutionary. This shaft was especially directed against

Marxists. Terror was justified by the 'duty' to defend one's own 'dignity' against the abuses of the autocratic government.<sup>54</sup>

Chernov and Gershuni argued that only 'bookworms' would fight a 'war of ink' over the appropriateness of terror as a tactic, for 'life itself' had already decided this question – a reference to the assassination of the Minister of Education Nikolay P. Bogolepov by Pyotr V. Karpovich on 14 March 1901 and of the Minister of the Interior Dmitry S. Sipyagin by Stepan Balmashev on 2 April 1902. The party had, however, given 'life' a good deal of help, because Balmashev's attack was the first assassination carried out by Gershuni's special unit for political terror, the 'Battle Organisation of the PSR'. And indeed in the PSR's first years everything that had to do with terror had an absolute priority. This immediately had national and international repercussions, both positive and negative: Rosa Luxemburg wrote an article condemning their terrorist tactics for the German Social-Democratic press as early as August 1902.<sup>55</sup>

### Lenin's Criticism of the Tactics and Strategy of Neo-Populism

In his first, unpublished article on the Socialist Revolutionaries, written in June–July 1902, Lenin accused them of rejecting Marxism, resurrecting *Narodnik* illusions about peasant socialism and trying to prevent that fusion of socialism with the working-class movement which the RSDLP was attempting to achieve, and which he regarded as the sole guarantee of a strong and truly revolutionary movement. In Lenin's opinion, the PSR had no real social basis in mid-1902; it was just 'a group of unstable intellectuals who qualify their vagueness and lack of principle as "broadness"', and who were 'seeking to rely simultaneously and in an equal degree upon the intelligentsia, the proletariat, and the peasantry.' This could only result in 'the political and ideological enslavement of the Russian proletariat by Russian bourgeois democracy'. By identifying socialism with the socialisation of the land, they 'compromise the teaching of scientific socialism concerning the socialisation of *all* means of production as our ultimate aim.' Lenin concluded with a criticism of the PSR's tactics of individual terrorism, which in his opinion weakened the contact of the revolutionaries with the mass movement:

54 G.A. Gershuni and V.M. Chernov, 'Terroristicheskii element v nashei programme', *Revoliutsionnaia Rossiia*, No. 7, June 1902, pp. 2–5, quoted in Hildermeier 2000, p. 56.

55 Luxemburg 1972.

The Socialist-Revolutionaries, by including terrorism in their programme and advocating it in its present-day form as a means of political struggle, are thereby doing the most serious harm to the movement, destroying the indissoluble ties between socialist work and the mass of the revolutionary class. No verbal assurances and vows can disprove the unquestionable fact that present-day terrorism, as practised and advocated by the Socialist-Revolutionaries, is *not connected in any way* with work among the masses, for the masses, or together with the masses; that the organisation of terroristic acts by the Party distracts our very scanty organisational forces from their difficult and by no means completed task of organising a revolutionary *workers' party*.<sup>56</sup>

Lenin's first published article against the Socialist Revolutionaries, which appeared in *Iskra* in August–September 1902, bore the eloquent title 'Revolutionary Adventurism', and began by criticising the PSR's attitude towards the Revisionist controversy. We will quote from it at length because it refers to the editorial article of the second number of *Viestnik russkoi revoliutsii* ('Messenger of the Russian Revolution') cited by Vera Zasulich, entitled 'The World-Wide Growth and the Crisis of Socialism':

It was only in No. 2 of *Vestnik Russkoi Revoliutsii* that the Socialist-Revolutionaries finally decided to come out with a theoretical statement of principle, in an unsigned editorial headed 'The World Progress and Crisis of Socialism.' We strongly recommend this article to all who want to get a clear idea of utter unprincipledness and vacillation in matters of theory (as well as of the art of concealing this behind a spate of rhetoric). The entire content of this highly noteworthy article may be expressed in a few words. Socialism has grown into a world force, socialism (= Marxism) is now splitting as a result of the war of the revolutionaries (the 'orthodox') against the opportunists (the 'critics'). We, Socialist-Revolutionaries, 'of course' have never sympathised with opportunism, but we are over-joyed because of the 'criticism' which has freed us from a dogma; we too are working for a revision of this dogma – and although we have as yet nothing at all to show by way of criticism (except bourgeois-opportunist criticism), although we have as yet revised absolutely nothing, it is nevertheless that freedom from theory which redounds to our credit. That redounds to our credit all the more because, as people free of theory, we stand firmly for general unity and vehemently

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56 Lenin 1964c, p. 173.

condemn all theoretical disputes over principles. 'A serious revolutionary organisation,' *Vestnik Russkoi Revolutsii* (No. 2, p. 127) assures us in all seriousness, 'would give up trying to settle disputed questions of social theory, which always lead to disunity, although this of course should not hinder theoreticians from seeking their solution' – or, more outspokenly: let the writers do the writing and the readers do the reading [a quote from the satirist Saltykov-Shchedrin's *Miscellaneous Letters*] and in the meantime, while they are busying themselves, we will rejoice at the blank left behind.<sup>57</sup>

Developing the idea advanced in *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin argued that 'the absence of theory deprives a revolutionary trend of the right to existence and inevitably condemns it, sooner or later, to political bankruptcy. In the opinion of the Socialist-Revolutionaries, however, the absence of theory is a most excellent thing, most favourable "for unity"'.<sup>58</sup>

As for the PSR's assurances (in a leaflet issued by the Party of the Socialist-Revolutionaries on 3 April 1902) that they advocated terrorism 'not in place of work among the masses, but precisely for and simultaneously with that work', and that therefore the arguments used by Marxists to refute the efficacy of that method of struggle did not apply to them, Lenin argued that this merely revealed 'an utter failure to understand the mass movement and a lack of faith in it', since '*without* the working people all bombs are powerless'.<sup>59</sup> Attempts on the lives of ministers could only have a disorganising effect on mass-organisational work. But for the Socialist Revolutionaries 'the demand to adhere steadfastly to the class standpoint and to maintain the mass nature of the movement' was mere 'theorising' about a 'vague and distant future' in which mass mobilisations would break out. Their 'political adventurism' stemmed, in Lenin's opinion, from 'their lack of principle'. Marxists, by contrast, 'without in the least denying violence and terrorism in principle', worked for 'the preparation of such forms of violence as were calculated to bring about the direct participation of the masses' in the struggle against the state.<sup>60</sup>

As for the Socialist Revolutionaries' class analysis, Lenin accused them of unconsciously subsuming the socialist movement of the wage workers against the bourgeoisie into the democratic movement of the peasants against the remnants of serf-ownership, by advancing the trinity formula of 'the

57 Lenin 1964d, pp. 185–6.

58 Lenin 1964d, p. 186.

59 Lenin 1964d, p. 189.

60 Lenin 1964d, pp. 192–3.

intelligentsia, the proletariat, and the peasantry'. This ideology took account neither of developing capitalism nor of the class struggle, and their allegedly socialist programme (equalitarian tenure of land held as social property) actually did not go beyond the limits of a bourgeois programme, 'since the preservation of commodity production and toleration of private farming, even if it is conducted on common land, in no way eliminates capitalist relationships in agriculture'.<sup>61</sup> The Socialist Revolutionaries simply obscured the ultimate aim of socialism by confusing the primitive peasant idea about small-scale equalitarian land tenure with the doctrine of modern socialism about 'the conversion of all means of production into public property and the organisation of socialist production'.<sup>62</sup> The PSR programme was nothing but a 'laboured attempt to sit between two stools', and to occupy 'an altogether indefinite position *between* revolutionary Social-Democracy and the opportunist trend on the one hand, and *between* Russian Marxism and Russian liberal Narodism on the other'.<sup>63</sup>

To the PSR claim that '*labour*, as a definite category of political economy, is the basis of the existence of both groups' (peasants and wage workers) – a quotation taken from the article 'Questions of Programme' in *Revoliutsionnaia Rossiia* No. 11 – Lenin countered: 'It is not labour that is a definite category of political economy, but only the social form of labour, the social organisation of labour, or, in other words, the mutual relations of people arising out of the part they play in social labour'.<sup>64</sup> 'To look for the fundamental distinguishing feature of the various classes of society in their sources of income', like the Socialist Revolutionaries did, was 'to give precedence to relations of distribution, which in reality are only a consequence of relations of production'. Actually, 'the fundamental criterion by which classes are distinguished is the place they occupy in social production and, consequently, the relation in which they stand to the means of production'.<sup>65</sup> The PSR's theoretical confusion stemmed from the need to hide 'the *petty-bourgeois character* of peasant economy'.<sup>66</sup>

The revival of the mass struggle showed, in Lenin's opinion, 'the utter stupidity and harmfulness of the Socialist Revolutionaries' attempt to restore the *Narodnaya Volya* movement with all its theoretical and tactical mistakes'.<sup>67</sup>

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61 Lenin 1964d, p. 200.

62 Lenin 1964d, pp. 204–5.

63 Lenin 1964e, p. 262.

64 *Ibid.*

65 Lenin 1964e, p. 263.

66 Lenin 1964e, p. 265.

67 Lenin 1964f, p. 277.

They could not ‘find enough praise of the great “agitational” effect of political assassinations.’ Since they were ‘free of all narrow dogmas on anything even approximating a definite socialist theory’, they believed that ‘stimulating’ acts of individual terror could serve as a substitute for the political education of the proletariat. Marxists, on the other hand, believed that the political education of the masses could only come from ‘events in which the masses themselves are the actors, events which are born of the sentiments of the masses and not staged “for a special purpose” by one organisation or another.’ Even ‘a hundred regicides’ could never produce ‘so stimulating and educational an effect as this participation of tens of thousands of working people in meetings where their vital interests and the links between politics and these interests are discussed.’ Participation in mass struggles ‘really *rouses* ever new and “untapped” sections of the proletariat to greater political consciousness, to a broader revolutionary struggle.’ To the PSR’s talk about the ‘disorganisation of the government’ by terrorist attacks, Lenin countered that ‘to *sacrifice* one revolutionary, even in exchange for ten scoundrels, means only disorganising our own ranks, which are thin as it is, so thin that they cannot keep up with all that is “demanded” of them by the workers.’ He concluded:

We believe that the government is truly disorganised when, and only when, the broad masses, genuinely organised by the struggle itself, plunge the government into a state of confusion; when the legitimacy of the demands of the progressive elements of the working class becomes apparent to the crowd in the street and begins to be clear even to part of the troops called out for the purpose of ‘pacification’; when military action against tens of thousands of the people is preceded by wavering among the authorities, who have no way of really knowing what this military action will lead to; when the crowd see and feel that those who have fallen on the field of civil war are their comrades, a part of themselves, and are filled with new wrath and a desire to grapple more decisively with the enemy. Here it is no longer some scoundrel, but the existing system as a whole that comes out as the enemy of the people.<sup>68</sup>

This rejection of the tactics and strategy of Neo-Populism was in no way the result of personal animosity, as could be expected from someone who had lost a brother in the terrorist struggle. On the contrary, it was accompanied by the greatest regard for the revolutionary qualities of the Socialist Revolutionaries as individuals.<sup>69</sup> But, regardless of the individual qualities of

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68 Lenin 1964f, pp. 278–9.

69 Lenin 1964g, pp. 271–2.

the Socialist-Revolutionary militants, the PSR's political line could only lead to the 'escamotage of the working-class movement by the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia'.<sup>70</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this short overview of the history of the Russian revolutionary movement from 1878 to 1902 and from Zaslulich's article is that there is a striking coincidence between the arguments advanced by Zaslulich in the first part of her article and those put forward by Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?*. This suggests that the views advanced in Lenin's book reflected those of the entire *Iskra* group, rather than representing a blueprint for some different kind of party organisation. There is also no contradiction to be found between Lenin's articles against the Socialist Revolutionaries and the second part of Zaslulich's article criticising the PRS's tactics of individual terrorism, although here she was able to draw on her own personal experience to make a more compelling political argument than Lenin's. In general terms, Zaslulich's document is a warning against anachronistic readings of Lenin's book projecting the controversy between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (which broke out the following year at the second congress of the RSDLP) back in time to some mythical birthday of 'Leninism', understood as a special kind of party organisation. This myth originated in Zinoviev's 'Bolshevisation' (actually bureaucratisation) policy, launched in 1924 to weed out Trotsky's supporters from the Communist parties all over the world, in the framework of his alliance with Kamenev and Stalin known as the 'troika'.<sup>71</sup>

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70 Lenin 1964g, p. 274. We have confined ourselves to summarising Lenin's writings against the Socialist Revolutionaries from 1902, in order to contextualise Vera Zaslulich's article, written in December of that year. For Lenin's later articles on this subject, see Lenin 1965, 1972b and 1973.

71 Broué 1997, pp. 267–385.



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