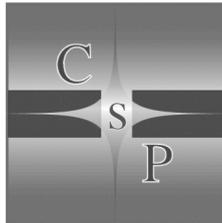


V.M. Chernov

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Theorist, Leader, Politician

By

Alexander Trapeznik



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>A Note on Transliteration and Dating</i>	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One	
Youthful Enthusiasm	9
Chapter Two	
The Formation of Social Revolutionism	18
Chapter Three	
The 1905 Revolution	34
Chapter Four	
The Party Ideologue	55
Chapter Five	
Crises, Repression, and Treachery	66
Chapter Six	
Internationalism	82
Chapter Seven	
Descent to Bolshevism	99
Chapter Eight	
Aftermath and Exile	126
Conclusion	150
<i>Bibliographical Note</i>	154
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	157
<i>Chronology</i>	158
<i>Index</i>	164

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND DATING

The system of transliteration adopted in this book is that of the Library of Congress, with a few modifications. Diacritical marks are omitted, and spellings of the better-known proper names follow a more familiar usage; thus, for example, Trotsky is used and not Trotskii, Aksentiev and not Aksent'ev. This is also the case with some names of non-Russian origin; for example, Kronstadt is preferred to Kronshtadt.

Events occurring in Russia before 1 February 1918 have been dated according to the Julian or Old Style (OS) calendar then observed in Russia. In the nineteenth century, the OS calendar ran twelve days, and in the twentieth century thirteen days, behind the Gregorian or New Style (NS) calendar in use in Western Europe. The Russian change-over to the Western calendar occurred on the day following 31 January 1918 (OS), which was declared to be 14 February 1918 (NS).

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War has led Russian scholars to reinterpret not only the history of the Russian Revolution, but also the entire history of the twentieth century. The decline of Imperial Russia, the success of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the creation of the Soviet Union, and the impotence of other revolutionary groups in challenging the tsarist autocracy and later Bolshevik dictatorship take on added importance and significance. Historians now posit new questions focusing on the failures rather than successes or survival of the Soviet system in seeking to understand Soviet history and the momentous events of 1991. In so doing, questions of causation and periodisation arise, the answers to which lie in the events, issues, personalities, and ideas that competed for public acceptance in the years leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Russian revolutionary movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and, indeed, up until 1917, faced an unprecedented task in the history of the socialist movement: the task of deciding the best socialist tactical policy in a country that was essentially economically backward and peasant-based. The question was not solely centred on the most suitable organisational form for socialist transformation, but also on the ideological discourse taking place between populists and Marxists regarding the future development of Russia.

This book will focus on the problem of a socialist revolution in a backward agricultural land as seen through the eyes of one of its leading participants, Viktor Mikhailovich Chernov. Furthermore, an examination of Chernov's theoretical writings will, I believe, enlarge our understanding of "modern populism", a movement within the Russian revolutionary tradition which, from 1901 to 1917, was the major rival of Russian Marxism. Although Chernov's name has long been associated with a theoretical tendency and a strategy of Russian revolutionary populism, he himself has never been fully presented as a thinker and actor in the movement. In this respect, he is possibly the most neglected of all the major figures in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement. This neglect is perhaps due to a critical defect in an approach to history which seems to regard only the successful as meriting close examination.

Moreover, from the early 1900s to 1917, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that Lenin would emerge as the major figure in the Russian revolutionary movement, let alone as the ruler of Russia. Chernov, Martov and Trotsky could equally have been heirs apparent to the throne. Indeed, there were

occasions when it appeared that Chernov's Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Party would succeed in dominating the Russian revolutionary movement and, for much of 1917, they exercised far more influence over the working class and in the country at large than did the Bolsheviks or Mensheviks. In fact, it can be argued that SR policies and blunders in 1917 contributed as much to the Bolshevik triumph as the actions of the Leninists themselves.

No one played a more central role than Chernov in shaping the political perceptions and tactics which came to be the hallmark of modern populism. On all the questions which separated the SRs from the Social Democratic parties—the organisation and structure of the Party, the nature of the revolution against the autocracy, the relationship between the working class and peasantry—Chernov's views proved prophetic. He was the spokesman for the SR Party, and the Party's chief ideologist, and he established the theoretical underpinnings of many of its most important political positions. He contributed more than any other Party member towards developing modern populism into a distinct ideological and political force.

Because Chernov was concerned with the overthrow of autocracy and socialist revolution, an examination of his ideas and proposals brings into sharp relief the practical problems which arose from an attempt to introduce populist ideals into a country undergoing industrialisation and the encroachment of a capitalist system in the countryside. Virtually all that Chernov wrote between 1899 and 1917 during his long stay in Europe, only returning briefly in 1905, was designed to adapt Western political strategy, which he had mastered, to the peculiarities of the Russian situation. Though thoroughly inventive and sophisticated, the endeavour suffered from obvious defects and weaknesses. The very effort to create a mass-based party in an autocratic police state was bound to be painful and problematical. It is not surprising that a number of individuals within the SR Party challenged Chernov's conceptions and so provoked some of the most dramatic and momentous splits in the movement. In the attendant debates both Chernov and his opponents were forced to clarify their positions, and analyses of these discussions illuminate the issues which were at stake and provide clues as to why the SR Party developed as it did.

Chernov was acutely aware of the direct connection between tactics and ideology. This awareness led him to conclude, sooner than most SRs, that terrorist tactics were unproductive and detrimental to the political programme for advancing socialism.

An examination of Chernov's political and intellectual career also illuminates several other radical currents in Russia. As a student revolutionary in the 1890s, an émigré revolutionary in the West up until 1917, and a revolutionary in power in 1917, Chernov's experiences of those years yield further insight into the political restlessness of the radical intelligentsia.

The radicals of the 1870s were confronted with several important questions, but the issue which most troubled Chernov was to haunt the revolutionary

intelligentsia for decades to come. Given Russia's general economic backwardness compared to Western Europe, the lack of a strong and politically-assertive middle class and a numerically-strong and politically-conscious working class, the absence of civil liberties and political freedom, and the extension of capitalistic large-scale methods to the countryside, how could a revolutionary party hope to be effective? Should it devote itself to mobilising mass support and, if so, how? Or should it concentrate on training a radical elite who would somehow deal a death-blow to the archaic autocracy? The choice of one or the other alternative could not, as Chernov realised, be made simply on the basis of the pragmatic criterion of effectiveness. The choice bore long-term implications: it would determine not only the nature of the revolutionary movement, but also the form of Russian society on the morrow of the Revolution.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century populism was for Russia the dominant revolutionary ideology. Imbued by a romantic, naive and mystical vision of Russia and the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, the populists martyred themselves to their noble cause. The populism of the nineteenth century was not, however, a coherent body of philosophical, political, and social doctrine. It was heterogeneous in nature, comprising a broad collection of ideas and attitudes—a matrix from which emerged various specific, and often contradictory, ideologies and movements. Russian populism, similarly, was never a unified political ideology; it was a loose, non-hierarchical movement, which permitted varying interpretations by the remarkable array of strong-minded individuals who placed themselves under its banner. The attempt to realise often-disparate objectives as part of a vaster programme of social change led to a number of controversial debates among the populist intelligentsia—particularly concerning the nature of the organisational framework best able to support the movement in its struggle against the autocracy. The appeal of secret, conspiratorial, ruthless, and hierarchical revolutionary organisations, such as those espoused by Peter Tkachev and practised by Serge Nechaev, was always quite limited. It was, instead, the written word which the intelligentsia used as its primary weapon, and it did so superbly. Chernov exemplified this tradition, which links the populism of old and Chernov's modern populism or neo-populism.

The philosophical foundations of neo-populism drew upon populist ideals, but did not rest exclusively on them. The neo-populism of Chernov was a fundamentally-radical departure from the utopian socialist ideology of Alexander Herzen, Nicholas Chernyshevsky, Peter Lavrov, and Nicholas Mikhailovsky. Neo-populism was far more than a reaction to a demographic phenomenon or a consequence of capitalism. Instead, it reacted against the forms of governance, social relations, economic organisation, and culture which came to prevail in major urban cities. To ignore this relationship is to misunderstand the nature of neo-populism. Chernov's neo-populism was urban

in Russia because it was a reaction against the development of capitalism, which had undergone a rapid expansion in organisational and productive capacity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Capitalism was enormously efficient, but it depended on, among other things, concentrating capital and decision-making in urban centres. Chernov provided a distinctive and original socialist revolutionary theory—neo-populism of the twentieth century—which fulfilled the requirements of revolution-making in a predominantly agriculturally-based economy undergoing rapid capitalist expansion.

This book will, in part, examine how Chernov (1873–1952) attempted the implementation of theory into practice, ideology into reality. An intellectual, Chernov was the son of a tsarist official, ennobled for his services to the state, and an active socialist from his student days and, unlike most of the other SR leaders, he was a keen student of Marxism and well acquainted with the socialist movements of the West. Before the Revolution of 1917, he had long been in exile, mainly in Switzerland and Italy. Whilst in exile he had edited the chief SR organ *Revoliutsionnaia Rossiia* (*Revolutionary Russia*) before the Revolution of 1905. In exile he had learnt to regard as obsolete the old *Narodnik* doctrine, which looked to the building of a peasant socialism on the basis of the ancient communes. He had also shed his opposition to industrial development while retaining a strong objection to the application of large-scale, capitalistic methods to the countryside. Chernov even saw a role for the industrial proletariat as the vanguard in the coming revolution, which would, in his view, supply most of the direction, with the peasants forming the main body of the army of progress. A proletariat-peasant alliance was conceived by Chernov before Lenin's theoretical pronouncements on the matter. Chernov also learnt to reject the *Narodnik* way of viewing the entire peasantry as a single revolutionary class. In the revolution, he said, the poorer peasants would contend with the rural bourgeoisie, while the urban proletariat dealt with the bourgeoisie of the towns. He was critical of Marxist class analysis, which categorised the peasantry as petty bourgeois. By emphasising the distribution relationship rather than the relationship to the means of production, Chernov argued small producers were not petty capitalists and, hence, not petty bourgeois. As for the bourgeois revolution to which the Social Democrats looked forward as a future event, Chernov placed it in the past. He considered it had taken place when the serfs were emancipated and supplies of workers for industry were thus made available from the country districts. Accordingly, there could be no further bourgeois revolution. Nevertheless, Chernov believed that the coming revolution would be in two stages. The first or “minimum programme” would end tsarism, establish a bourgeois democracy, and preserve the peasantry from capitalist contamination, and the second or “maximum programme” would build voluntary, socialist cooperatives of an advanced type throughout the countryside, and then set up a loose socialist government in the capitals, eventually turning the cities, too, into a network of voluntary cooperatives.

Chernov believed that his “constructive socialism” combined that which was good in Marxism with that which was good in utopian socialism.

The advent of World War I further added to the problems of an already disunited and disorientated party. The SR Party developed an insidious and, as it turned out, permanent split on the question of supporting the Russian war effort. Many Party members, especially at home, became the “defensists”. Chernov did not. Instead, he became the leading light among the Russian delegations to the socialist conventions held in Switzerland, at Zimmerwald in 1915 and Kienthal in 1916. The Paris office of the *Okhrana* reported in 1915 that, in his anti-tarism and anti-militarism, Chernov went so far as to merit the label of “Germanophile”. Supported by Martov, he advocated the defeat of Russia and preached alliance with the German socialists.

Chernov spent most of the period between 1911 and 1917 residing in Spocia-Alassio, Italy. He returned to Russia after the February Revolution of 1917, arriving in Petrograd on 8 April, five days after Lenin. In May, he joined Kerensky’s Provisional Government as Minister of Agriculture. As Minister, however, he appears to have made no effective impression on his colleagues, and his position in government was fatal regarding his prospects of gaining popular support. Wishing for peace, he found himself committed to the continuation of war. Similarly, he was eager to get land for the peasants but, as Minister, he had to try to prevent them from taking it for themselves without waiting for the Constituent Assembly to give it to them. He found himself under attack from the right because of his Zimmerwaldian record, and from the left as a supporter of the bourgeoisie and an opponent of Soviet influence. He was evidently at a loss as to what to do, and unable to give his party any effective leadership. His declining hold over the masses was shown in July 1917, when he was saved by Trotsky from the hands of an angry crowd. As the leader of the largest socialist party, his position should have been one of commanding strength, but it was, in fact, one of increasing weakness.

Chernov resigned from the Provisional Government in September 1917. He was powerless to prevent the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. The SR Party once again was chiefly concerned with, and distracted by, factional infighting and the elections to the Constituent Assembly. The Assembly duly convened in Petrograd on 5 January 1918. It met for only one day during which it elected Chernov as Chairman. Chernov was called on by some of his colleagues to summon his supporters to its aid. He refused, saying that he would not be party to the shedding of blood in internecine socialist conflict.

Civil war broke out in the course of 1918. Chernov made his way to Samara on the Volga where many leading SRs had come together with a few Mensheviks, and were attempting to set up a new Provisional Government made up of members of the dispersed Constituent Assembly. In November 1918, Admiral Kolchak staged his own *putsch*, seized power, and arrested the democratic and socialist leaders. Chernov managed to escape and declared his

intention to continue an unarmed struggle against the Bolsheviks on the one hand, and the right-wing counter-revolutionaries on the other.

Chernov's last appearance in Russia seems to have been in May 1920, when he arrived in Moscow in disguise, and made a speech at a meeting organised by the mainly Menshevik Printers' Union with the British Labour Delegation then visiting Russia. From there he began a long and melancholy exile: in Reval (now Tallin), Prague, Paris, and finally New York. During thirty-two years of frustration, recriminations, and feelings of guilt, Chernov spent his time defending himself, splitting from most of his colleagues, denouncing the Bolsheviks, and writing histories and memoirs. However, all was in vain: the Bolsheviks maintained power in Russia. The prospect of the society and life for which Chernov strived had faded. In 1952, Chernov died in a tiny, gloomy apartment in New York.

The end of the SR Party came in 1922, when its remaining leaders in Russia were tried for treason and condemned to death. The SR Party, always an amalgam of many groups and tendencies, owed whatever theoretical coherence it had had almost entirely to Chernov. Chernov had been virtually the sole architect of its programme in 1906, and had retained his leadership—despite evident practical incapacity—as there was no one to take his place. There were, of course, other leaders, such as Gots and Gershuni, but none of them ever formulated a coherent policy and they were, instead, primarily concerned with tactical and organisational matters.

This book, in essence, examines the programme Chernov devised and, more importantly, how he attempted its implementation. It examines Chernov as a revolutionary figure from his student days to his departure from Russia in 1920. It is also, by necessity, a study of Russian social, economic, and political life during this period.

Chernov's revolutionary career is set out chronologically and the narrative is interwoven with analysis. Material is arranged according to a conventional periodisation: birth to death. However, the focus of the study is the period from the 1890s to 1920. Whilst a chronological approach makes logical sense it also makes intellectual sense. The major controversies of Russian history - the impact of industrialisation, the tasks of a revolutionary party, the best socialist tactical policy to implement and adapt in a country with an essentially backward and peasant-based economy, the origins of Bolshevism, and the attempts at continuity after 1917 - acquire extra meaning when viewed through Chernov's prism.

The first chapter, "Youthful Enthusiasm", places Chernov in historical context. Through his memoir accounts I trace his early life, the influence of writers and poets on his early intellectual development, his schooling and university years, his arrest and "administrative exile", and his departure from Russia for Switzerland in 1899.

The second chapter, “The Formation of Social Revolutionism”, examines Chernov’s period of European exile, the individuals and groups with whom he came into contact, and his early writings about socialism and the revolutionary process, noting especially his seminal contribution: the argument for an alliance between the toiling peasantry and the industrial working class. The emphasis on the proletariat demonstrates the Marxian influence on Chernov’s thought. The formation in 1901 of the SR Party is also examined.

Chapter 3, “The 1905 Revolution”, examines this Revolution—often portrayed as the dress rehearsal for 1917—from the point of view of Chernov and the SRs. The events of 1905 reinforced Chernov’s early views on a peasant–proletariat and town–country alliance. I also look at Chernov’s brief return to Russia in October 1905.

In Chapter 4, “The Party Ideologue”, I return to look at Chernov’s revolutionary career, the organisation of the First Party Congress of the SRs in 1905–6, and the Party’s subsequent two-fold split. Chernov was undeniably the Party’s chief theoretician.

Chapter 5, “Crises, Repression, and Treachery”, includes an examination of the post-1905 period until World War I. This period saw Chernov back in exile and the Party in crisis, as it felt the impact of Stolypin’s attempts at fundamental agrarian reform, coinciding with a programme of “pacification”. Moreover, the revelation that Azef, head of the SR Party’s terrorist wing from 1902–8, was also chief informer on its activities, completed the process of demoralisation which had begun after the Stolypin repression. The Party, under Chernov, had foundered and no amount of effort by him could save it.

The sixth chapter, “Internationalism”, analyses the war years. Chernov not only opposed World War I, favoured revolution, and expressed an intention to continue working toward this end, but he also rejected the idea of a Russian victory and raised—even lauded—the prospect of Russia’s defeat as a necessary precursor to revolution. This position, erroneously attributed exclusively to Lenin and some Bolsheviks, came to be known as “defeatism” and represented the most extreme position on the war.

Chapter 7, “Descent to Bolshevism”, outlines how, in 1917, Chernov presided over a divided party. While in power as Minister of Agriculture in Kerensky’s Provisional Government, Chernov should have seized the opportunity to put theory into practice but, when confronted with the responsibility of authority, he was to prove impotent.

Chapter 8, “Aftermath and Exile”, discusses the SR Party’s preoccupation with intra-Party strife and how this strife blinded it to outside developments and, more importantly, diverted its attention from the task at hand: the transformation of Russia into a socialist society. Chernov and the SRs placed their faith in the primacy of the Constituent Assembly to which Chernov was elected President on 5 January 1918. Harassed by the Cheka, he left Russia in May 1920, using a false passport, destined once again for a long and melancholy exile in the West.

As a political figure in Russia, Chernov cannot be judged a success. He realised few of his aims and was unable to prevent his worst fears from becoming a reality. None the less, in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement he occupies a special place. He took up the cause of the working class as he saw it, and fully identified with this cause throughout his political life. Although he proved inconsistent at times, his commitment to a new social order, a free and socialist society, and a democratic republic on a federative basis for the benefit of the separate nationalities remained the dominant preoccupations of his political life.

CHAPTER ONE

YOUTHFUL ENTHUSIASM

The *Narodniki* or Russian populists took their name from the Russian word “*narod*” meaning “people”. The name is an apt one. Although the populist movement included many diverse elements, its most typical concern was that of mobilising the Russian population against tsarism. The movement was orientated towards the people. The term “movement” is used deliberately as the *Narodnik* influence was much wider than that of the political parties it spawned. It was a literary influence and a general cultural trend as well as a specifically-political movement, and few Russian intellectuals who reached maturity between the years of 1861 and 1905 escaped its influence.

Because of the universality of its influence Russian populism is difficult to define precisely. The political attitudes of the populists, as distinct from their political programmes, included a distrust of liberalism and parliamentary democracy, a belief in the possibility of the autonomous development of socialism in Russia through the preservation of the village community (the *obshchina*), and the avoidance of capitalism. The object of “going to the people” was primarily to broaden popular resistance to tsarist autocracy. It was not necessarily based on any veneration of the Russian peasant, although this was often present. Since nine-tenths of the Russian population were rural dwellers, and since the majority of them were peasants, it was natural that any political movement seeking to secure a popular base should be concerned with inciting the peasantry. At times, as with the Chaikovskists in 1872–73, Russian populists concentrated on organising the urban workers. Yet even here the focus was sometimes on urban workers not as a developing industrial proletariat, but as peasants temporarily employed in the cities—who were better educated than their fellow villagers, and therefore more easily influenced. It was expected that they would return to their villages taking the message of populism with them.

Populism, like earlier movements based essentially on intellectuals, favoured the “study group” form of organisation. Clandestine groups of populists including students, writers, and teachers formed to organise libraries of prohibited books, the compilation of books of political extracts, the publication of popular pamphlets, and political education. These groups soon expanded to include workers and peasants. In the early years of the movement the groups were locally organised and only loosely linked. This was even true of the first

Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom) groups, organised during the early 1860s. Although these groups were soon shattered by arrests, they were replaced with new exile groups, which had new leaders and a similar orientation and purpose. In 1876, a new *Zemlya i Volya* organisation was formed. Unlike the earlier organisation of the same name, it was more disciplined and more centralised and was, in fact, a political party in the modern sense. The influence of this second *Zemlya i Volya* was wider than the first. In addition to a central group of about twenty-five, there were fixed centres in several provincial towns. From these centres teachers, students, doctors, and *zemstvo* officials and other intellectuals moved out to the surrounding countryside to influence the peasantry. The organisation reached a new stage in October 1878 with the appearance of the journal *Zemlya i Volya*. This was printed abroad but was widely distributed inside Russia. However, even at the time when this journal was launched, the organisation was showing signs of internal strain. In response to increased police persecution, and the failure of the policy of inciting the peasants, a large section of its membership increasingly favoured terrorism as a political method. In 1879, this group organised, within the *Zemlya i Volya*, a tightly-disciplined terrorist group called the “*Narodnaya Volya*” (“People’s Will”). The non-terrorists, including the future socialist Plekhanov, separated themselves from the *Narodnaya Volya* and formed the “*Cherny Peredel*” (“Black Redistribution”).¹ Whereas the former group increasingly concentrated its activities on planning the assassination of the Tsar, the latter group continued to emphasise the influencing of workers and peasants and popularisation of its programme of immediate reforms. The division between the terrorist and non-terrorist wings of the populist movement was largely confined to differences over political strategy. Both groups favoured the same sort of political programme. This involved demanding the election of a Constituent Assembly based on universal suffrage, regional self-administration based on the autonomy of the *mir* (commune), land nationalisation and the distribution of the landed estates to the peasantry, workers’ control of factories, and freedom of conscience, speech, press, meeting, association, and electoral agitation.²

The assassination of Alexander II on 1 March 1881 led to a quick and savage retaliation. Hundreds of *Narodniks* were arrested, several were executed, and the remainder were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment and exile. Police control was strengthened, especially in the larger towns. Populist political organisation did not recover from this attack, although remnants of the *Narodnik* influence survived in the later SR Party. Many of the early Russian Marxists, including Plekhanov and Lenin, were influenced by populism, and the early Marxist groups, despite their repudiation of it, absorbed much of its tradition and some of its programme. The fact that Marxist writers such as Plekhanov, Martov, and Lenin were forced to devote a good deal of their time and energy, as late as 1900, to exposing the “errors” of populism, is a tribute to the strength of the populist tradition in Russia.³ They were later to devote as much attention

to the neo-populism of Chernov.

It is within this historical tradition that Chernov must be placed. Although the continuity of thought was by no means a direct one, the philosophical foundations of neo-populism drew upon populist ideals. However, they did not rest exclusively on these ideals, as the subsequent chapters shall demonstrate.

Chernov was born in the town of Novouzensk, in the Samara Province, on 19 November 1873, and was brought up in the nearby town of Kamyshin situated on the Volga. Chernov's father was born into a peasant serf family. His grandfather, on gaining his freedom, resolved to spare his son from the rigours of *muzhik* exploitation. Chernov's father became a rural schoolteacher and later entered tsarist service, initially as a young clerical assistant in the District Treasury. Slowly and methodically he progressed up the hierarchy and, in the end, after some forty years of service, he reached the top of the treasury administration, and became District Treasurer. With this position came the Order of Saint Vladimir and personal nobility, together with the title Councillor of State.⁴ Viktor was the youngest child of his father's first marriage.

In his memoirs, Chernov relates how, in his early years, he suffered under the daily oppression of his stepmother, whom he rejected, and how he consequently sought solace in the society of street children, absorbing their experiences like a sponge absorbs water.⁵ Chernov's mother, from a modest noble family, died when the boy was barely out of infancy, although he speaks of her as "fine and deep". His stepmother was kind to her husband's children until she bore her own. Then the house divided, the old family lived downstairs, and the new family lived in the second storey. They met only for meals, which was a "strained and boring ritual" for the members of the lower house. The children referred to their home as "bicameral". Chernov's attraction to, and empathy with, the downtrodden was linked to his perception of his stepmother: "I myself grew up under constant 'humiliation and insult'; and for me it was so natural an urge to be attracted to all who were 'humiliated and insulted'."⁶ While Chernov's stepmother alienated him, his father influenced his view of the world: "I inherited from him a plebeian outlook on life."⁷

In his adolescent years, Chernov turned to literature, and was inspired by the poet Nekrasov—so much so that he memorised much of his work. In Chernov's estimation he breathed life into the "people". Nekrasov was just one of the many authors Chernov read—in no systematic order.⁸ The influence of writers and poets in the Russian revolutionary movement was characteristic of the nineteenth century as a whole, but it was especially characteristic of the period from 1820 onwards. Pushkin and some of his contemporaries were involved in the Decembrist movement and later writers developed under the stimulus of its heroic failure. Herzen, Belinsky, Turgenev, Goncharov, Chernyshevsky, and many others were actively involved in revolutionary agitation. Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shedrin, and Chernyshevsky were all directly influenced in the 1840s by the revolutionary, Petrashevsky. Nekrasov was actively associated for a time

with the populist movement. His best poems are those in which he expressed either his love for his Polish-born mother or his compassion for the long-suffering Russian peasant. Nekrasov did not succeed in creating a school of his own: no “peasant” poets came in his wake. But he, more than any other Russian poet, made his contemporaries aware of the existence of peasants and their problems. Few knew as much as he about the Russian peasant; fewer still could express the truth as artistically and as powerfully.

Immersed in the world of literature, Chernov continued to live a secluded intellectual life. He described his adolescent years as uneventful, “an unusually dull, lacklustre time ... In a revolutionary sense, society was absolutely lifeless.”⁹ It was not until the latter half of the 1880s that Chernov started to live a politically-conscious life.¹⁰ His introduction to politics was at the instigation of his elder brother, Vladimir. It was he who introduced Chernov to his political circle, which was organised by a Tolstoian army officer. From this initial encounter Chernov went on to participate in other political circles. His involvement in such political activity did not go unnoticed. In 1890, Sazonov was arrested, and Chernov was also taken into custody; he was searched, questioned, and released.¹¹

Towards the end of his schooling in Saratov, Chernov met the veteran populist, Mark Natanson,¹² describing him as “no writer, no orator, nor an adventurer, whose affairs vividly speak for themselves. He was an organiser.”¹³ In order to avoid further police prosecution, Chernov travelled to Derpt¹⁴ in Estonia to continue his studies in the autumn of 1891. While there, he made the acquaintance of like-minded students and this led to the formation of an organisational circle in which Chernov continued his propaganda work. It was here that he met and became a close friend of Karl Parts, a member of the Estonian Constitutional Democratic Party. Chernov completed his school-leaving certificate and returned to Saratov.

In 1892, Chernov continued his formal education at Moscow University, where he enrolled in the Faculty of Law. It was during this period at university that Chernov first encountered Marx’s writings. Chernov’s study of Marx was espoused in these terms:

We are not Marxists, we studied Marx to know him better, rather than to be converted. This at times turned into for us a sort of sport. We had to know all the main authors who may be utilised in an argument... We appeared to the young Marxists as utopians and petit bourgeois; “moss-grown troglodytes” we were called by one of their prominent Marxist publications in the mid-1890s.¹⁵

Chernov’s activities in his early university life were confined to ideological debates and discussion. While at university he became involved in a student organisation called the “Union of Soviets”, a populist circle which irregularly published a journal entitled *The Struggle for Public Power in Russia*.¹⁶

Narodnoe Pravo (People’s Right Party) emerged in 1893 under the headship

of Natanson. It was through Natanson that Chernov's friend, Iakovlev, who at one time had been a disciple of Natanson in Saratov, joined People's Right; through him, Chernov's brother Vladimir also joined. The Party's goal was to unite revolutionary and liberal elements in order to overthrow despotism. In the party programme, printed in Smolensk, one can find such populist demands as representative government based on universal suffrage; freedom of religion, press and assembly; inviolability of the person; and political self-determination of nations.¹⁷

The Party quickly crumbled after the arrests of its leading members in April 1894. Among those arrested were Chernov's brother Vladimir, his sister Nadejda, and Iakovlev. Chernov himself was arrested at this time; he was only twenty years old. The police accused him of playing a prominent role in the party organisation and having numerous illegal publications in his possession. While in police custody, Chernov wrote an autobiographical account for his interrogators outlining his life up until his arrest. It makes for interesting reading, although its accuracy must obviously be called into question in view of his particular circumstances and the audience for whom it was intended.¹⁸ Chernov states that up until the completion of his schooling in Derpt, he did not participate in any circles, and his interest at that time centred, instead, on questions of morality and philosophy. Upon his arrival in Moscow, his interests changed from exploring philosophical questions to studying economics and politics, reading Marx's *Das Kapital* and other selected works, and mastering the theoretical components of socialism. This, in turn, generated an interest in applying this theoretical knowledge to Russian society. For Chernov, Russia was a land of agriculture—poor, and dominated by small landowners. The Russian peasant lived a more primitive—and, hence, more well-rounded—life, and a more communal, fraternal—and, therefore, more moral—life, than other Russians or Europeans. Chernov believed that the peasant commune and joint workshop, and the peasants' cooperative habits, were priceless moral survivors of primitive socialism, which should not be destroyed by competitive, divisive capitalism from Western Europe. "Capitalism for Russia played and will play a destructive role, more so than a creative one."¹⁹ Chernov held that the tsarist state machine, and all other Leviathan states, should be dismantled after the revolution to make way for small-scale, local, cooperative, and largely non-coercive community governments.

After initial questioning by police, Chernov was transferred to Petropavlovsk Prison in St Petersburg.²⁰ From there he was moved to a less stringent detention centre before his trial. This transfer provided him with the opportunity to write and access to reading material.²¹ "With a quill pen in my hands I felt in myself immediately a sense of mental strength."²² While still under detention, Chernov resolved to write an article in which he would look at the critique of philosophy, on-going questions in methods of sociology, the theory of struggle for individuality, individual freedom, the fate and destiny of capitalism in Russia,

the proletariat and the peasantry, and agrarian revolution. After three months this article was completed. The title was long and awkward, just like its contents: “Philosophical Flaws in the Doctrine of Economic Materialism”.

In January 1895, under the petition of his father and uncle, Chernov was released and exiled to his native province Saratov, and his hometown of Kamyshin. Thus came to an end Chernov’s first period of imprisonment. He was later to refer to this period as his abridged nine-month university course.²³ Life in Kamyshin proved difficult: he was subjected to verbal abuse and harassment for his revolutionary activities. Chernov left Kamyshin and, after a brief stay in the city of Saratov where he engaged in political debates in the Argunov circle, he arrived in Tambov.²⁴ Tambov at this time was the scene of more agrarian unrest than any other Russian province. Undaunted by the past experiences of the “going to the people” movement, in 1896–97 Chernov, and a group which included Anastasia Nikolaevna Sletova (later to become Chernov’s first wife), her brother Sletov, Dobronrarov, and the brothers Volskii, initiated the first revolutionary peasants’ organisation in Russia in the village of Pavlodar, Borisoglebsk *uzed* (district). From here the movement gradually spread to the surrounding districts of Tambov province until the multiplicity of “brotherhoods”, as these revolutionary units were called, culminated in the large-scale insurrections of 1905.²⁵ It was a neo-populist “going to the people” movement revitalised, though with a different orientation.

Chernov envisaged the movement as a mass people’s movement, based upon a close organisational union between the proletariat in the cities and the labouring peasants in the country villages. It was a town–country alliance, which was to later become the cornerstone of his revolutionary strategy for the transformation of Russian society.

However, such activity was not enough to placate Chernov, who had an irrepressible urge to travel abroad, submerge himself entirely in the revolutionary struggle in the West, and absorb and re-shape the “most recent words” in world socialist thought. His intention was to stay for a two- or three-year period; long enough, he thought, to assimilate the various philosophical and political trends. After nine months’ imprisonment and three years of “administrative exile” under police supervision (1895–99), in 1899 Chernov obtained a passport to go abroad. He intended to go via St Petersburg so as to be able to meet Mikhailovsky and the other revolutionaries, Annenskii, Korolenko, Miakotin, and Peshekanov. In the end, Chernov was only able to meet with Mikhailovsky, to whom he would later refer as “friend, collaborator, teacher, my second father.”²⁶ In the course of his life, Chernov wrote a number of articles on Mikhailovsky, including personal memoirs and defences of his thought.²⁷ Chernov loved to argue in print by using a series of quotations from others’ works, and it is characteristic that his final quotations, presented to close a given argument, usually came from Mikhailovsky. Chernov felt that it was patriotic to praise Mikhailovsky before the world; to assert that Mikhailovsky, a

true Russian, had anticipated Western thought in many ways, and had phrased certain strands of Western thought more cogently than any Westerner.²⁸

Mikhailovsky enjoyed great popularity among democratic and revolutionary circles in Russia in the late-nineteenth century. In his various writings he called on the Russian intelligentsia to serve the people, sought to arouse a sense of personal responsibility for the country's future, defended democratic traditions, and opposed reactionary ideology.

Mikhailovsky considered himself the preserver and continuator of Chernyshevsky's tradition. In sociology, Mikhailovsky, along with Lavrov, elaborated on the idea of free choice of an "ideal", which provided the philosophical foundation for the view that social development could be re-directed by the progressive intelligentsia. This idea underlies the "subjective" method in sociology, proclaiming the individual, the "irreducible" element, to be the starting point for historical research and the supreme measure of social progress. Mikhailovsky rejected Marxism without qualification. His political views were influenced by the *Narodnik* movements of the 1870s.

Mikhailovsky divided history into three stages in which technology became more complex while society, fragmented by an increasing division of labour, became more oppressed by gigantic systems such as Christianity, the tsarist state, and European capitalism. Only the Russian peasant, he asserted, retained in many ways the older, well-rounded way of life. Only the Russian village commune could serve as a model for future, small-scale, democratic, socialist communities after the passing of tsarism and capitalism. Although a radical, Mikhailovsky usually opposed terrorist activity to overthrow the regime. In his last decade, he spent much time controverting Russian Marxists.²⁹

At their St Petersburg meeting Mikhailovsky gave his blessing to Chernov to study European socialism at its source. "You of course, are right, seclusion in some sort of Russian national provincialism is unnatural and harmful."³⁰

In 1899, Chernov left Russia for Switzerland.

Notes

¹ They took their name from their central objective: to divide the landed estates among the peasantry.

² Venturi, Franco. *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960, 677–78.

³ For example, see Plekhanov's works *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, 1883; *Our Differences*, 1885; *On the Development of the Monistic View of History*, 1895; *On the Materialist Conception of History*, 1897; and *On the Role of the Individual in History*, 1898; and Lenin's *What the "Friends of the People" Are*, 1894; and *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, 1899.

⁴ Chernov, Viktor. *Pered Burei: Vospominaniia (Before the Storm: Memoirs)*. New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1953, 27.

⁵ Chernov, Viktor. *Zapiski Sotsialista-Revoliutsionera (Notes of a Socialist Revolutionary)*. Berlin: Z. I. Grzhebin, 1922, 13–14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Chernov, *Pered Burei*, 50–51.

¹² Mark Andreevich Natanson (1850–1919) was one of the founders of the Chaikovsky circle and of *Zemlya i Volya* (Land and Freedom); after the split in the latter organisation, he affiliated himself with *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will). Natanson founded the People's Right Party in 1893 and was leader until 1894, when he was arrested. In 1905, Natanson joined the SR Party, associating himself with its left wing, and became a member of the Party's central committee. Natanson joined the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in 1917.

¹³ Chernov, *Pered Burei*, 46.

¹⁴ Renamed Iurev.

¹⁵ Chernov, *Pered Burei*, 55–56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56–57, 71.

¹⁷ Kuklin, G.A., ed. *Itogi Revoliutsionnago Dvizheniia v Rossii za Sorok Liet 1862–1902 (Compilations of the Revolutionary Movement in Russia for Forty Years 1862–1902)*. Geneva, 1903, 283. See also Chernov, *Pered Burei*, 73–79, and *Zapiski*, 182ff. The programme of the party can be consulted in Burtsev, Vladimir, ed. *Za Sto Liet 1800–1896 (After a Hundred Years 1800–1896)*. London, 1897, 250; and also in Kuklin, *ibid.*, 76–77. For a Russian history refer to Shirokova, Varvara Vasilevna. *Partiia "Narodnogo" Prava (People's Right Party)*. Saratov: Izd-vo Saratovskogo universiteta, 1972.

¹⁸ For an account of Chernov's experiences in People's Right refer to Chernov, Viktor. 'K istorii Partii Narodnoe Pravo' ('Toward a history of the Party of People's Right'). *Krasnyi Arkiv (Red Archive)*, 1 (1922): 282–88. As mentioned in the text, this is a

peculiar document. Chernov tried to convince his interrogators (1894) that he was a Marxist, and he also denied belonging to the People's Right.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁰ Chernov's cell neighbours were Tiutchev and Iakovlev with whom he communicated by tapping on the cell wall.

²¹ Chernov provides us with a list of his reading material: I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*; F.A. Lange, *Historical Materialism*; K. Marx, *Das Kapital*; P.S. Struve, *Critical Notes on the Question of the Development of Capitalism in Russia*; and Beltova, *On the Question of the Monistic Interpretation of History* (Chernov, *Zapiski*, 232–33).

²² Chernov, *Pered Burei*, 89.

²³ Chernov, *Zapiski*, 236.

²⁴ For an account of this period refer to Argunov, A.A. "Iz Proshlago Partii Sotsialistov-Revolutsionerov" ("From the Past of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party"). *Byloe (The Past)*, no. 10/22 (October, 1907): 94–112.

²⁵ Radkey, Oliver H. *The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism: Promise and Default of the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries February to October 1917*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958, 56.

²⁶ Chernov, *Pered Burei*, 55.

²⁷ For example, see "N.K. Mikhailovskii, k 20 Letiu do Dnia Smerti" ("N.K. Mikhailovsky on the 20th Anniversary of his Death"), *Volia Rossii (Russia's Will)*, no. 3, Prague (1924): 44–54; *Pamiati N.K. Mikhailovskago (In Memory of N.K. Mikhailovsky)*, Geneva, 1904; "N.K. Mikhailovskii kak Eticheskoi Myslitel" ("N.K. Mikhailovsky as Ethical Thinker"), *Zaviety (Legacies)*, no. 1 (January, 1914): 1–46; "Gdie Klivch k Ponimaniuu N.K. Mikhailovskago" ("Where is the Key to Understanding Mikhailovsky?"), *Zaviety (Legacies)*, no. 3 (March, 1913): 88–131; and "Filosofskii Osnovy Ucheniia N.K. Mikhailovskago" ("Philosophical Basic Studies of Mikhailovsky"), in *Filosofskie i Sotsiologicheskie Etiudy (Philosophical and Sociological Studies)*, Moscow: Sotrudnichestvo, (1907): 5–29.

²⁸ Chernov, *Zapiski*, 249.

²⁹ See Billington, James H. *Mikhailovsky and Russian Populism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958.

³⁰ Chernov, *Zapiski*, 358.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL REVOLUTIONISM

In 1899 Chernov made the first of a number of trips abroad, not only for further education, but also in order to have a freer hand at revolutionary agitation. After leaving Russia, Chernov arrived in Zurich. The Russian émigré community at this time was primarily composed of young social-democrats involved in the Emancipation of Labour Group, a Russian revolutionary organisation, organised on Marxist principles. Chernov met Plekhanov, its chief ideologist, through Akselrod, and was later to recount in his autobiography that the relationship between the two failed to develop and blossom.¹ In such an atmosphere Chernov's espousal of populist sentiments and peasant revolution found few political adherents or sympathisers. However, one populist group, the Union of Russian Social-Revolutionaries Abroad, did attract Chernov's attention. Under Zhitlovskii's leadership it functioned as the Northern Union's branch abroad.² While in Zurich, Chernov and Zhitlovskii were inseparable. Zhitlovskii advised Chernov to leave Zurich and travel to Berne, where Zhitlovskii himself was based, in order to enrol as a student at Berne University. The idea was for Chernov to extend his philosophical research, an ambition he had held while in Russia. The ultimate goal for Chernov was the gaining of a doctor's diploma, a matter to which Zhitlovskii attached great importance. Zhitlovskii, at this time, also promised to publish the Constitution, a document that Chernov had drafted for the Pavlodar Brotherhood, in the next issue of *Russkii Rabochii* (*Russian Worker*), a small journal that he edited. In addition, he undertook to open a campaign to re-direct the attention of Russian socialists towards the next question on the political agenda: the transfer of the vanguard of a mass organisation from the proletariat in the cities to the peasantry in the countryside.³

Chernov did not hesitate too long as there was nothing in Zurich to detain him. In the first year which Chernov spent in Berne, barely a day went by when he did not meet with Zhitlovskii. There was not a single question which they had not discussed.⁴ But the harmonious relationship was soon to falter. Chernov states that he soon became aware of ideological differences between the two, although he does not elaborate on this point.⁵ He does, however, allude to the fact that the failure of Zhitlovskii's *Russkii Rabochii* to publish the Constitution he had drafted greatly disillusioned and disappointed him.⁶

The Constitution had originally been drafted by Shcherbinin, but Chernov had altered it, as he had altered the name of the organisation, to better fit his plans for wider propaganda among the peasantry. In Shcherbinin's Constitution, according to Chernov, the aims of the society were mentioned very briefly and diffusely. The main content of the Constitution indicated the obligations of each member towards the whole, and defined what would happen upon failure of duty to fulfil these obligations. In this respect the Constitution was more than strict: Chernov noted the recurrent phrase, "is liable to be deprived of his life."⁷

Dobronavor delivered the Constitution to Chernov bearing Shcherbinin's title, "Society of Brotherly Love". Chernov was to alter it to "Brotherhood for the Defence of the People's Rights".⁸ The original Constitution contained the aim of the society, which was to struggle "against the *pomeshchiki* and other oppressors of the people who stand between the people and the Tsar."⁹ This merely reinforced the standard mythology that the Tsar was shielded from the peasants' plight by the gentry and the bureaucracy. The myth was included by Shcherbinin, ostensibly, as Chernov stated, to divert suspicion away from the society should the Constitution fall into the hands of the tsarist police. This contrivance to fool the authorities was abandoned on Chernov's advice, "so that we should not confuse the people, instead of the authorities (who would not have been fooled in any case)."¹⁰ The published Constitution of the Brotherhood¹¹ contained no explicit mention of the Tsar, but the accompanying "Letter to the Entire Russian Peasantry" contained a direct attack on the peasant view that the Tsar himself was innocent of the oppression which was practised in his name.¹² Perhaps, indeed, the most valuable of all the lessons they learned during this period (1896–97) was

that the old bugaboo of the revolutionists, the peasants' loyalty to the throne, could be overcome by skilful propaganda which taught the peasants to look upon the Tsar, not as a compassionate father deceived by wicked squires, but as the first of the squires and the greatest landowner in all Russia. That was the wedge devised by Chernov to split the people from the throne, and it must be admitted that it was an efficacious one. The only trouble was that Chernov did not harvest the fruits of his labour; they were gathered in by the Bolshevik foe.¹³

Chernov's vision was to unite the Russian Brotherhoods, which would be served by a journal published abroad. Semen Akimovich An-Skii (Solomon Rappoport)¹⁴ travelled to Berne in order to meet with Chernov and to unfold, on Lavrov's behalf, a plan for an autonomous émigré group, divorced from the existing émigré circles, which would organise the peasant agrarian movement from abroad. This concept was, in effect, similar to Chernov's own aspirations and, since Lavrov was a most respected, if not venerated, old populist, Chernov was convinced. When, in January 1900, Chernov arrived in Paris from Berne to meet with Lavrov's group, he was hailed by it as "the first swallow of Russia's coming revolutionary spring."¹⁵ Lavrov was a magnet for peasant

revolutionaries in exile.¹⁶

Unfortunately, Lavrov died on 6 February 1900, shortly after Chernov's arrival. His funeral attracted Russian populist émigrés from throughout Europe. Far from stifling the concept of a new populist organisation, however, his death in fact enhanced its realisation. The Agrarian Socialist League was founded by Chernov in collaboration with An-skii, Leonid Emmanuilovich Shishko, Feliks Vadimovich Volkhovskoi, and Egor Egorovich Lazarev. The latter three had all been involved in London earlier with the "Fund of the Free Russian Press".¹⁷ "Lavrov's funeral became the christening party of our Agrarian Socialist League: the dear departed was its invisible godfather, and Semen Akimovich An-skii was, as it were the executor of his will concerning the league."¹⁸ By the end of 1901 the League had released its first publication. At the beginning of 1902, 25,000 copies had already been published under the title, *Partiia Sotsialistov-Revoliutsionerov Abroad*.¹⁹ The Agrarian Socialist League had, indeed, become a major source of radical tracts for smuggling into Russia.

While he was with the Agrarian Socialist League, Chernov wrote about socialism and the revolutionary process. The policy of the League is set out in an essay entitled "*Ocherednoi Vopros revoliutsionnogo Dela*" ("The Immediate Task of the Revolutionary Cause"), which the League published in London in 1900. Although the essay was published anonymously, it undoubtedly bears the imprint of Chernov.

There is no historical law that says that the socialist organisation of any branch of production may be possible only as a product of preceding capitalist development. There is no historical law that requires that in all branches of production the direct producers first have to pass through a kind of purgatory—the proletarian state—before entering the socialist paradise. For a certain part of the direct producers, for certain branches of production, a more direct transition to socialism is possible through the evolution of various types of communal ownership, including the village commune, to the nationalisation of the land, and through cooperative associations.

We are deeply convinced that in Russia the future can belong only to the party that manages to find a fulcrum for its struggle not only in the city but also in the village, a party that can construct a harmonious programme which would enable it to represent and defend simultaneously the interests of the industrial working class and those of the toiling peasantry. Without some support among the peasantry—and still less *against its will*—no revolutionary party in Russia will be able to strike a serious, decisive blow to the bourgeois-capitalist regime, which in our country knows how to live in peaceful harmony with the relics of an age of self-owning gentry under the wing of Russian absolutism.

Only an alliance between the intelligentsia and the people can transform the spontaneous popular movements of our time into conscious action and direct them along sensible paths. And only an alliance between urban and rural workers will represent a vital force strong enough to break the power of the existing order and prepare the triumph of the ideals of socialism and revolution.²⁰

While confirming the old populist belief—that Russia's future lay in bypassing Western market capitalism—this essay was none the less an important and radical departure from the traditional interpretation of Russian populism. It recognised the fact that capitalism had, indeed, already emerged in Russia; that Russia had already experienced a substantial amount of industrialisation; and that there had, in fact, emerged a new class, the industrial proletariat, whose interests were not to be ignored, but rather represented and defended. Chernov went one step further and argued for an alliance between the toiling peasantry and the industrial working class. The peasant revolution was no longer to be an exclusively peasant affair.

The traditional view of the later SR Party, which Chernov was to lead, portrays it as primarily peasant-orientated; this is clearly a misapprehension. The SRs, even from their earliest days, took a great interest in the urban proletariat and, in return, received strong support from workers. In essence, Chernov was advocating a programmatic formulation of a proletarian vanguard to lead the peasant masses. One of the tasks which the Agrarian Socialist League defined as its mission in 1900 was “the publication and distribution of popular revolutionary literature suitable both for the peasantry, as well as for the urban factory- and craft-worker, especially those having ties with the village.”²¹ While still fundamentally peasant-orientated, the League under Chernov's influence was concerned with both workers and peasants. It did not aim for a complete upheaval of the movement's orientation. However it should be recalled that Chernov was the chief theoriser of the concept of the “proletarian vanguard”: the proletariat was given the role of vanguard, the peasantry that of mass strike-force.²²

The emphasis on the proletariat demonstrated the Marxian influence on Chernov's thought. But the key point regarding the idea of the proletarian vanguard, in its particular Russian context, is that it was of populist rather than Marxist provenance. Until Lenin began his theoretical and programmatic adjustments regarding the peasantry in 1902 and 1903, Russian Marxists continued to view the proletariat as the revolutionary class *par excellence* and expected little of the petty bourgeois peasantry.²³ While Chernov borrowed much from Marx, he attacked the Marxist view that the peasantry was a reactionary force, together with the view that, in order to achieve socialism, proletarianisation of the peasantry was necessary. While conceding the advent of capitalism in Russia, Chernov argued there was no historical law requiring a compulsory proletarian purgatory in order to achieve the socialist ideal. The emergence of capitalism, and specifically capitalist agriculture, had not led to the eradication of the small landholding peasant producer who should have been swept away by competition. Indeed, the peasantry had proved much more resilient in the face of agricultural capitalism because it had not been incorporated into large-scale production units, as was the case with urban

industry.

The assumption by classical Marxists that the working peasantry²⁴ was “petty bourgeois” was dispelled in the second edition of the pamphlet, *Ocherednoi Vopros Revoliutsionnogo Dela*, published in 1901, as “both theoretically and practically incorrect.” The term petty bourgeois gave the appearance that the small peasant producer was on the same plane as the large bourgeois. Chernov and his associates in the Agrarian Socialist League argued that there was a qualitative—and not just a quantitative—distinction between the economy of the working peasantry and that of the bourgeois capitalist:

The latter [bourgeois capitalism] is a means of extracting surplus value; the former [peasant economy] is simply a mode of production. The latter guarantees its owner an unearned income; the former does not guarantee its owner against becoming a tributary of capitalism. The great majority of peasants comprise a particular class of independent agricultural producers, the source of whose income is labour—but only labour which is still not alienated from the means of production ... In essence, therefore, the working peasantry is an economic category sharply distinct from the bourgeoisie and more closely approximating the proletariat.²⁵

This is not to say that similarities did not exist between the working peasantry on the one hand and the rural bourgeoisie and agricultural proletariat on the other. Members of the working peasantry, like the bourgeoisie, owned their means of production. However, unlike the bourgeoisie they did not exploit the labour of others. The peasantry, like the proletariat, supported itself exclusively by the personal labour of its members. This labour could be exploited by the privileged classes in the form of taxes and rents. Hence, Chernov, among others, rationalised that the working peasantry was on the same plane as the proletariat and not that of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, as Western experience had shown, the peasantry invariably produced popular movements by joining with the proletariat rather than the bourgeoisie.²⁶ The interests of the working peasantry were thus considered by Chernov to be identical to the interests of the proletariat and he was later to expound on these nebulous and uncoordinated ideas in a much more coherent and cogent fashion in *Revoliutsionnaia Rossiia*.

The overthrow of the autocratic state was not to be accomplished by the use of terror, a feature peculiar to the old populist movement. Rather, as Chernov stated in an early manifesto of the SR Party, it could be achieved, instead, by a passive, peaceful withdrawal of labour and money by the peasants.

What can the intelligentsia and proletariat do *together with the peasantry*? Everything. The peasantry gives autocracy an enormous portion of its material strength in the form of money and soldiers; tsarist power rests upon peasant ignorance as a hitherto unshakeable foundation. Therefore, it is not absolutely

necessary for the entire peasantry to attack autocracy using armed force in order to destroy it. At the critical moment, for example, merely a mass refusal to pay taxes and furnish recruits may prove sufficient for the chief props of autocracy to totter—and for it to crash down with the first strong push.²⁷

Of course, one had to believe in the potential of peasant revolutionary consciousness. Its genesis came from the populists of the 1870s and was taken up by the neo-populists of the 1890s and early 1900s. However, as stated earlier, the theory of a worker and peasant revolution was essentially a neo-populist concept.²⁸ Neo-populism, with Chernov at the helm, recognised and admitted the inevitability of industrialisation and the onset of a capitalist money economy in Russia.²⁹ The SRs, as neo-populists, also recognised the deleterious long-term effects of this process on the commune; a point which signified that SRs had eschewed, once and for all, any naive notions of peasant socialism *per se*. They now felt that the existing communal modes of the peasant economy would smooth the transition to a collectivist economy by providing a basis for their land socialisation programme—which itself was merely a step, albeit an important one, towards socialism. Consequently, Chernov and the SRs were protective of the commune, but did not idealise it; nor were their plans for the achievement of the socialist order based directly upon it.³⁰ Rather, SR theory saw the proletariat, a class born of industrialisation, as the leading force in the revolutionary socialist army. As for the peasantry, the SRs, as neo-populists, had neglected them—not for theoretical reasons, since SR theory believed peasants capable of revolutionary consciousness, but because of their decades' long acquiescence. Traditional historiography of the SR Party implies there was a direct link between early populist theories calling for complete reliance on the peasantry and the rejection of industrialisation for Russia. Riasanovsky states, “the Socialist Revolutionaries of the twentieth century, led by Victor Chernov ... remained essentially faithful to populism staking the future of Russia on the peasants and on a ‘socialization of land’”³¹

This is a misinterpretation. While drawing on early populist ideals, the neo-populism of the 1890s and that of the SR Party in the first years of the twentieth century was based firmly on the theoretical pronouncements of Chernov, who devised an original and distinctive Russian theory for peasant revolution.

Meanwhile, the Agrarian Socialist League continued to fulfil its primary function: the publication and distribution of propaganda literature, especially designed for the peasantry. By January 1902 it had produced a thousand copies of *The Immediate Question of the Revolutionary Cause* and a further thousand copies of the second edition. In addition to this, the League had also published five propaganda pamphlets: *How the Minister Takes Care of the Peasants* and *How the Hungarian Peasants are Fighting for their Rights* (one thousand copies of each); and *Peasant Unions in Sicily, Sketches from Russian History*, and *Conversations about the Land* (two thousand copies of each).³² Unfortunately,

these products of the League's labour were circumvented by an *agent provocateur* within its ranks. The smuggling of illegal literature into Russia had always been a haphazard affair. In this case Pauli, who had been assigned the task of overseeing the transportation of the League's publications into Russia, was in the pay of the tsarist secret police, and most of the literature was confiscated at the frontier.³³

Late in the autumn of 1901, Chernov returned to Berne. Many of the neo-populist groups felt that the time was right to form a national political organisation. The impetus for unification came from the Southern Union or, more particularly, from two groups within it, in Kiev and Voronezh.³⁴ The Party of the Socialist Revolutionaries, as the Southern Union was known, was formed in Voronezh in 1897. The merging of the Southern Union and the only other major grouping, the "Union of Socialist-Revolutionaries", or Northern Union—originally centred in Saratov by Argunov in 1896, and transferred to Moscow in 1897—saw the birth of the SR Party. Other smaller socialist-revolutionary groupings in Russia, such as Gershuni's predominantly Jewish Worker's Party for the political liberation of Russia, and the independent Saratov circles, also adhered to the new Party at this time.³⁵ While unification was achieved within Russia, the émigré community in Western Europe was still in disarray. Gots³⁶ and Chernov were enthusiastic prime movers in the bid to unite the various quarrelling factions.³⁷ After some deliberations with Azef and Gershuni, who had travelled abroad as representatives of the embryonic Party of the Socialist Revolutionaries, agreement was reached. The result of long and protracted negotiations was the SR Party, formally founded in that year; although it only gained cohesion and importance with the relative freedom within Russia in 1905–6.

The newspaper *Revoliutsionnaia Rossiia*, originally published by the Northern Union, was to be transferred abroad to Switzerland under the editorship of Chernov and Gots.³⁸ The newspaper was to become the official organ of the new, united party.³⁹ A central committee was established to head the Party. Among its principal members were Natanson, Breshko-Breshkovskaia, Rusanov, Chernov, Gots, and Gershuni. Zhitlovskii's "Union of Russian Socialist-Revolutionaries" was to be transformed into the "PSR Organisation Abroad", which was also to include the editorial boards of the two Party organs, *Revoliutsionnaia Rossiia* and *Vestnik Russkoi Revoliutsii*.⁴⁰ The Party also at this time acquired its slogan: "*V borbe obretesh ty pravo svoe*" ("In struggle thou shalt win thy rights!").⁴¹

The Agrarian Socialist League finally merged with the newly-formed party in 1902, although not without some trepidation. Several older populists were reluctant to place their faith in a new party, fearing the League's autonomy would be threatened. Some felt the League should remain a non-party organisation open to both socialist-revolutionaries and social-democrats. One social-democrat, Soskis, did, in fact, join. But Volkovskoi, in particular, felt that