

as a martyr for justice by the democratic intelligentsia, and was acquitted by a liberal court. This was the signal for a wave of terror, whose aim was to undermine the autocracy and to force it to make political concessions. Two provincial governors were killed. Six failed attempts were made on the Tsar, including a bomb on the imperial train and a huge explosion in the Winter Palace. Finally on 1 March 1881, as Alexander was driving in his carriage through St Petersburg, he was killed by a bomb.

The widespread revulsion felt even amongst the revolutionaries to this wave of terrorism led to a split in Land and Liberty. One branch, calling itself the People's Will (*Narodnaya Vólia*), espoused the ideals of Tkachev and stayed loyal to the tactics of terrorism leading to the violent seizure of power. Formed in 1879, this faction carried out the murder of the Tsar. Many of its leaders were later arrested — several of them executed — in the repressions that followed the assassination. But the campaign of terror which it had started was carried on by several other smaller groups in the 1880s. One of them included Lenin's elder brother, Alexander Uliianov, who was executed after a failed plot to assassinate Alexander III on the sixth anniversary of his father's death. The supposed aim of the campaign was to destabilize the state and provide a spark for a popular rebellion. But it soon degenerated — as all terror does — into violence for violence's sake. It has been estimated that over 17,000 people were killed or wounded by terrorists during the last twenty years of the tsarist regime — more than five times the number of people killed in Northern Ireland during the twenty-five years of 'the troubles'.<sup>20</sup> Some of the terror was little more than criminal violence for personal gain. All the revolutionary parties financed themselves at least partly by robberies (which they euphemistically termed 'expropriations'), mainly of banks and trains, and there was little to stop those who did the stealing from pocketing the proceeds. This was bad enough for the moral climate of the revolutionary parties. But it was not nearly as damaging as the cumulative effect of years of killing, which resulted in a cynicism, an indifference and callousness, to the victims of their cause.

The rival branch of Land and Liberty called itself the Black Partition (*Chernyi Peredel*) — a peasant term for the revolution on the land. It was formed in 1880 by three future leading lights of the Social Democratic Party — Plekhanov, Axelrod and Zasulich — who would all convert to Marxism during the early 1880s. They rejected the use of terror, claiming it was bound to end in failure and renewed repression. They argued that only a social revolution, coming from the people themselves, could be both successful and democratic. The failure after Alexander's assassination to extract political concessions seemed to prove the correctness of their first claim; while the growth of the urban working class gave them new grounds for hope on the second. This was the real beginning of the Marxist movement in Russia.

## ii Marx Comes to Russia

In March 1872 a heavy tome of political economy, written in German, landed on the desk of the tsarist censor. Its author was well known for his socialist theories and all his previous books had been banned. The publishers had no right to expect a different fate for this new work. It was an uncompromising critique of the modern factory system and, although the censorship laws had been liberalized in 1865, there was still a clear ban on any work expounding 'the harmful doctrines of socialism and communism', or rousing 'enmity between one class and another'. The new laws were strict enough to ban such dangerous books as Spinoza's *Ethics*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Voltaire's *Philosophy of History* and Lecky's *History of European Morals*. And yet this German *magnum opus* — 674 pages of dense statistical analysis — was deemed much too difficult and abstruse to be seditious. 'It is possible to state with certainty', concluded the first of the two censors, 'that very few people in Russia will read it, and even fewer will understand it'. Moreover, added the second, since the author attacked the British factory system, his critique was not applicable to Russia, where the 'capitalist exploitation' of which he spoke had never been experienced. Neither censor thought it necessary to prevent the publication of this 'strictly scientific work'.<sup>21</sup>

Thus Marx's *Capital* was launched in Russia. It was the book's first foreign publication, just five years after the original Hamburg edition and fifteen before its first English publication. Contrary to everyone's expectations, the author's as well as the censors', it led to revolution earlier in Russia than in any of the Western societies to which it had been addressed.

The tsarist censors soon realized their mistake. Ten months later they took their revenge on Nikolai Poliakov, Marx's first Russian publisher, by putting him on trial for his next 'subversive' publication, a collection of Diderot's stories, which were confiscated and burned by the police, forcing Poliakov out of business. But it was too late. *Capital* was an instant hit. Its first print run of 3,000 copies was sold out within the year (the first German edition of 1,000 copies, by comparison, took over five years to sell). Marx himself acknowledged that in Russia his masterpiece was 'read and valued more than anywhere'. Slavophiles and Populists both welcomed the book as an exposé of the horrors of the Western capitalist system, which they wanted Russia to avoid. Marx's sociology and view of history, if not yet his politics, spread like a wild craze during the later 1870s. Among students it was 'almost improper' not to be a Marxist. 'Nobody dares to raise a voice against Karl Marx these days', complained one liberal, 'without bringing down the wrath of his youthful admirers'.<sup>22</sup>

After the collapse of the 'To the People' movement, with its false idealization of the Russian peasant, the Marxist message seemed like salvation to the radical intelligentsia. All their hopes for a social revolution could now be

switched to the industrial working class. There was clearly no more mileage in the idea of a peasant revolutionary movement; and from the 1880s work among the peasants was condescendingly described by the Marxists as 'small deeds' (i.e. the sort of charity work favoured by the gentry and zemstvo types). The famine crisis of 1891 seemed to underline the backwardness of the peasantry. It showed that they were doomed to die out, both as individuals and as a class, under the wheels of economic development. The peasants were a relic of Russia's savage past — its *Aziatchina* or Asiatic way of life — which would inevitably be swept away by the progress of industry. Their cultural backwardness was symbolized by stories that during the cholera epidemic after the famine peasants had attacked the very doctors who were trying to inoculate them because they thought that their medicines were some strange poison. During the 1890s social science publications boomed — whole libraries were filled by the volumes of statistics published in these years; their aim was to find the causes of the famine crisis in the Marxist laws of economic development.

The 'scientific' nature of Marxist theory intoxicated the Russian radical mind, already steeped in the rationalism and materialism of the 1860s. Marx's historical dialectic seemed to do for society what Darwin had done for humanity: provide a logical theory of evolutionary development. It was 'serious' and 'objective', a comprehensive system that would explain the social world. It was in this sense an answer to that quintessential Russian quest for a knowledge that was absolute. Marxism, moreover, was optimistic. It showed that progress lay in industry, that there was meaning in the chaos of history, and that through the working class, through the conscious striving of humanity, socialism would become the end of history. This message had a special appeal to the Russian intelligentsia, painfully aware as they were of their country's backwardness, since it implied that Russia would inevitably become more like the advanced countries of the West — Germany, in particular, whose Social Democratic Party was a model for the rest of the Marxist movement in Europe. The Populist belief in Russia's 'separate path', which had seemed to consign her to perpetual peasanthood, could thus be dismissed as romantic and devoid of scientific content.

The idea that Marxism could bring Russia closer to the West was perhaps its principal appeal. Marxism was seen as a 'path of reason', in the words of Lydia Dan, lighting up the way to modernity, enlightenment and civilization. As Valentinov, another veteran of the Marxist movement, recalled in the 1950s:

We seized on Marxism because we were attracted by its sociological and economic *optimism*, its strong belief, buttressed by facts and figures, that the development of the economy, the development of capitalism, by demoralizing and eroding the foundations of the old society, was creating new

social forces (including us) which would certainly sweep away the autocratic regime together with its abominations. With the optimism of youth we had been searching for a formula that offered hope, and we found it in Marxism. We were also attracted by its *European* nature. Marxism came from Europe. It did not smell and taste of home-grown mould and provincialism, but was new, fresh, and exciting. Marxism held out a promise that we would not stay a semi-Asiatic country, but would become part of the West with its culture, institutions and attributes of a free political system. The West was our guiding light.

Petr Struve, one of the leading Marxist theorists, said he had subscribed to the doctrine because it offered a 'scientific solution' to Russia's twin problems of liberation from autocracy and the misery of backwardness. His famous words of 1894 — 'No, let us admit our lack of culture and enroll in the school of capitalism' — became one of the mottoes of the movement. Lenin echoed it in 1921. Here perhaps, as Leo Haimson has suggested, was the intellectual root of the movement's attraction to the Jews.\* Whereas Populism offered an archaic vision of peasant Russia — a land of pogroms and discrimination against the Jews — Marxism offered a modern and Western vision. It promised to assimilate the Jews into a movement of universal human liberation — not just the liberation of the peasantry — based on the principles of internationalism.<sup>23</sup>

Until the middle of the 1890s it was hard to distinguish between the Populists and Marxists in Russia. Even the police (normally well informed in such matters) often confused them. The Populists adopted Marx's sociology, translated and distributed his works, and, in the final years of his life, even gained the support of Marx himself. The Marxists equally borrowed from the Populists' rhetoric and tactics and, at least inside Russia, if not in exile, were forced to work alongside them. The revolutionary underground was not large enough for the two factions to fall out: they were forced to share their printing presses and work together in the factories and clubs. There was great fluidity and co-operation between the various workers' groups — Plekhanov's Emancipation of Labour, the Workers' Section of the People's Will, the student-organized Workers' Circles, the Polish Marxist Party and the first groupings of Social Democrats — which all combined elements from Marx and the Populists in their propaganda.

This was the context in which the young Lenin, or Ulianov, as he was

\* Jews played a prominent role in the Social Democratic movement, providing many of its most important leaders (Axelrod, Deich, Martov, Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev, just to name a few). In 1905 the Social Democratic Party in Russia had 8,400 members. The Bund, by contrast, the Jewish workers' party of the Pale, had 35,000 members.

then known,\* entered revolutionary politics. Contrary to the Soviet myth, which had Lenin a fully fledged Marxist theorist in his nappies, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution came to politics quite late. At the age of sixteen he was still religious and showed no interest in politics at all. Classics and literature were his main studies at the gymnasium in Simbirsk. There, by one of those curious historical ironies, Lenin's headmaster was Fedor Kerensky, the father of his arch-rival in 1917. During Lenin's final year at the gymnasium (1887) Kerensky wrote a report on the future Bolshevik describing him as a model student, never giving 'cause for dissatisfaction, by word or by deed, to the school authorities'. This he put down to the 'moral' nature of his upbringing. 'Religion and discipline', wrote the headmaster, 'were the basis of this upbringing, the fruits of which are apparent in Ul'ianov's behaviour.' So far there was nothing to suggest that Lenin was set to become a revolutionary; on the contrary, all the indications were that he would follow in his father's footsteps and make a distinguished career in the tsarist bureaucracy.

Ilya Ul'ianov, Lenin's father, was a typical gentleman-liberal of the type that his son would come to despise. There is no basis to the myth, advanced by Nadezhda Krupskaya in 1938, that he exerted a revolutionary influence on his children. Anna Ul'ianova, Lenin's sister, recalls that he was a religious man, that he greatly admired Alexander II's reforms of the 1860s, and that he saw it as his job to protect the young from radicalism. He was the Inspector of Schools for Simbirsk Province, an important office which entitled him to be addressed as 'Your Excellency'. This noble background was a source of embarrassment to Lenin's Soviet hagiographers. They chose to dwell instead on the humble origins of his paternal grandfather, Nikolai Ul'ianov, the son of a serf who had worked as a tailor in the lower Volga town of Astrakhan. But here too there was a problem: Nikolai was partly Kalmyk, and his wife Anna wholly so (Lenin's face had obvious Mongol features), and this was inconvenient to a Stalinist regime peddling its own brand of Great Russian chauvinism. Lenin's ancestry on his mother's side was even more embarrassing. Maria Alexandrovna, Lenin's mother, was the daughter of Alexander Blank, a baptized Jew who rose to become a wealthy doctor and landowner in Kazan. He was the son of Moishe Blank, a Jewish merchant from Volhynia who had married a Swedish woman by the name of Anna Ostedt. Lenin's Jewish ancestry was always hidden by the Soviet authorities, despite an appeal by Anna Ul'ianova, in a letter to Stalin in 1932, suggesting that 'this fact could be used to combat anti-Semitism'. 'Absolutely not one word about this letter!' was Stalin's categorical imperative. Alexander Blank married Anna Groschopf, the daughter of a well-to-do Lutheran family from

\* The alias and pseudonym 'Lenin' was probably derived from the River Lena in Siberia. Lenin first used it in 1901.

Germany and with this newly acquired wealth launched his distinguished medical career, rising to become a police doctor and medical inspector in one of the largest state arms factories. In 1847, having attained the rank of State Councillor, he retired to his estate at Kokushkino and registered himself as a nobleman.<sup>24</sup>

Lenin's non-Russian ethnic antecedents — Mongol, Jewish, Swedish and German — may partly explain his often expressed contempt for Russia and the Russians, although to conclude, as the late Dmitry Volkogonov did, that Lenin's 'cruel policies' towards the Russian people were derived from his 'foreign' origins is quite unjustified (one might say the same of the equally 'foreign' Romanovs). He often used the phrase 'Russian idiots'. He complained that the Russians were 'too soft' for the tasks of the revolution. And indeed many of its most important tasks were to be entrusted to the non-Russians (Latvians and Jews in particular) in the party. Yet paradoxically — and Lenin's character was full of such paradoxes — he was in many ways a typical Russian nobleman. He was fond of the Blank estate, where he spent a long time in his youth. When young he was proud to describe himself as 'a squire's son'. He once even signed himself before the police as 'Hereditary Nobleman Vladimir Ul'ianov'. In his private life Lenin was the epitome of the heartless squire whom his government would one day destroy. In 1891, at the height of the famine, he sued his peasant neighbours for causing damage to the family estate. And while he condemned in his early writings the practices of 'gentry capitalism', he himself was living handsomely on its profits, drawing nearly all his income from the rents and interest derived from the sale of his mother's estate.<sup>25</sup>

Lenin's noble background was one key to his domineering personality. This is something that has often been ignored by his biographers. Valentinov, who lived with Lenin in Geneva during 1904, recalls how he found a rare and deeply hidden source of sentiment in the Bolshevik leader. Having read Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*, a work that frequently waxes lyrical on the subject of the Russian countryside, Valentinov had become homesick for his long-abandoned family estate in Tambov province. He told Lenin of these feelings and found him clearly sympathetic. Lenin began asking him about the arrangement of the flower-beds, but their conversation was soon interrupted by a fellow Bolshevik, Olminsky, who, having heard the last part of Valentinov's confession, attacked him for his 'schoolgirl' sentiments: 'Listen to the landowner's son giving himself away!' According to Valentinov, Lenin rounded on Olminsky:

Well, what about me, if it comes to that? I too used to live on a country estate which belonged to my grandfather. In a sense, I too am a scion of the landed gentry. This is all many years ago, but I still haven't forgotten the pleasant aspects of life on our estate. I have forgotten neither its lime trees nor its flowers. So go on, put me to death. I remember with pleasure how

I used to loll about in haystacks, although I had not made them, how I used to eat strawberries and raspberries, although I had not planted them, and how I used to drink fresh milk, although I had not milked the cows. So am I . . . unworthy to be called a revolutionary?

It was not just Lenin's emotions which were rooted in his noble past. So too were many of his political attitudes: his dogmatic outlook and domineering manner; his intolerance of any form of criticism from subordinates; and his tendency to look upon the masses as no more than the human material needed for his own revolutionary plans. As Gorky put it in 1917, 'Lenin is a "leader" and a Russian nobleman, not without certain psychological traits of this extinct class, and therefore he considers himself justified in performing with the Russian people a cruel experiment which is doomed to failure.'<sup>26</sup>

While, of course, it is all too easy to impose the Lenin of 1917 on that of the early 1890s, it is clear that many of the characteristics which he would display in power were already visible at this early stage. Witness, for example, Lenin's callous attitude to the suffering of the peasants during the famine of 1891 — his idea that aid should be denied to them to hasten the revolutionary crisis. Thirty years later he would show the same indifference to their suffering — which he was now in a position to exploit politically — during the famine of 1921.

The charmed life of the Ul'ianovs came to an abrupt halt in 1887, when Lenin's elder brother Alexander was executed for his involvement in the abortive plot to kill the Tsar. Alexander was generally thought to be the most gifted of the Ul'ianov children, the one most likely to leave his mark on the world. Whereas the young Vladimir had a cruel and angry streak — he often told lies and cheated at games — Alexander was honest and kind, serious and hard-working. In 1883 he entered St Petersburg University to read science and seemed set on becoming a biologist. But after his father's sudden death, in 1886, Alexander fell in with a group of student terrorists who modelled themselves on the People's Will. All of them were squire's sons, and many of them Poles, including ironically Joseph Pilsudski, who would later become the ruler of Poland and an arch-enemy of Lenin's regime. They conspired to blow up the Tsar's carriage on 1 March 1887, the sixth anniversary of Alexander II's assassination, when there would be a procession from the Winter Palace to a special memorial service at St Isaac's Cathedral. Alexander put his scientific education into practice by designing and making the bombs. But the plot was discovered by the police and the conspirators were arrested (one of them launched one of Alexander's bombs whilst they were inside the police station but the home-made device failed to go off). The seventy-two conspirators were imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress — fifteen of them were later brought to trial.

Alexander, as one of the ring-leaders, realized that his fate was already sealed, and from the dock made a brave speech justifying the use of terrorism. He and four others were executed.

There is a legend that on hearing of his brother's death Lenin remarked to his sister Maria: 'No, we shall not take that road, our road must be different.' The implication is that Lenin was already committed to the Marxist cause — the 'we' of the quotation — with its rejection of terror. But this is absurd. Maria at the time was only nine and thus hardly likely to recall the words accurately when she made this claim in 1924. And while it is true that Alexander's execution was a catalyst to Lenin's involvement in the revolutionary movement, his first inclination was, like his brother's, towards the tradition of the People's Will. Lenin's Marxism, which developed slowly after 1889, remained infused with the Jacobin spirit of the terrorists and their belief in the overwhelming importance of the seizure of power.

In 1887 Lenin enrolled as a law student at Kazan University. There, as the brother of a revolutionary martyr, he was drawn into yet another clandestine group modelling itself on the People's Will. Most of the group was arrested that December during student demonstrations. Lenin was singled out for punishment, no doubt partly because of his name, and, along with thirty-nine others, was expelled from the university. This effectively ended Lenin's chance of making a successful career for himself within the existing social order, and it is reasonable to suppose that much of his hatred for that order stemmed from this experience of rejection. Lenin was nothing if not ambitious. Having failed to make a name for himself as a lawyer, he now set about trying to make one for himself as a revolutionary opponent of the law. Until 1890, when he was readmitted to take his law exams, he lived the life of an idle squire on his mother's estate at Kokushkino. He read law, tried unsuccessfully to run his own farm (which his mother had bought for him in the hope that he would make good), and immersed himself in radical books.

Chernyshevsky was his first and greatest love. It was through reading him that Lenin was converted into a revolutionary — long before he read any Marx. Indeed, by the time he came to Marxism, Lenin was already forearmed with the ideas not just of Chernyshevsky but also of Tkachev and the People's Will, and it was these that made for the distinctive features of his 'Leninist' approach to Marx. All the main components of Lenin's doctrine — the stress on the need for a disciplined revolutionary vanguard; the belief that action (the 'subjective factor') could alter the objective course of history (and in particular that seizure of the state apparatus could bring about a social revolution); his defence of Jacobin methods of dictatorship; his contempt for liberals and democrats (and indeed for socialists who compromised with them) — all these stemmed not so much from Marx as from the Russian revolutionary tradition.