INTRODUCTION

My aim is to provide a brief account of the Russian Revolution in the *longue durée*, to chart one hundred years of history as a single revolutionary cycle. In this telling the revolution starts in the nineteenth century (and more specifically in 1891, when the public's reaction to the famine crisis set it for the first time on a collision course with the autocracy) and ends with the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991.

It might seem odd to plot the revolution in one hundred years of history. Most short books on the subject focus on the years immediately before and after 1917. But to understand the revolution's origins, its violent character and tragic course from freedom to dictatorship, one must look more closely at the tsarist past; and to perceive its lasting outcomes, one must see it in the broader context of Soviet history. Many of the themes of the first chapters, on the tsarist period – the absence of a political counter-balance to the power of the state; the isolation of the educated classes from the common people; the rural backwardness and poverty that drove so many peasants to seek a better life in the industrial towns; the coercive basis of authority in Russia; and the extremism of the socialist intelligentsia – will reappear in the later chapters, on 1917 and the Soviet regime.

When did the Russian Revolution end? Historians have chosen various dates, depending on the stories which they wish to tell, and these of course can all be justified. Some have ended their accounts in 1921 with the ending of the Civil War, when armed opposition to the Bolsheviks was finally defeated, and the consolidation of the Soviet dictatorship. Others have concluded with the death of Lenin in 1924, as I did in *A People's Tragedy*, a work on which I draw in these pages, on the grounds that by this time the basic institutions, if not the practices, of the Stalinist regime were in place. One or two have ended in 1927, with the defeat of Trotsky and the Left Opposition; or in 1929, with the onset of a new revolutionary upheaval, the forced industrialization and collectivization of the first Five Year Plan, implying that the Stalinist economy was the significant outcome of 1917.

One of the most influential historians of the Soviet period, Sheila Fitzpatrick, concluded her short history of the revolution in the mid-1930s, a period of 'retreat' from its utopian objectives when the structural economic changes of Stalin's revolution were consolidated as a permanent system. By her own later admission, this was to suggest that the Great Terror of 1937–8 was a 'monstrous postscript' to the revolution, an aberration explained by the regime's fear of war, when in fact it was a part of it – the biggest in a series of waves of terror whose origins can only be explained by the insecurities of the Soviet regime going back to 1917. To omit the Great Terror from a history of the Russian Revolution, Fitzpatrick acknowledged, would be the equivalent of writing an account of the French Revolution of 1789 without the Reign of Terror (1793–4) for which it was chiefly known.[1]

The Great Terror was not the final wave of violence by the Soviet state. The population of the Gulag labour camps, which Solzhenitsyn placed at the very core of the Bolshevik experiment, reached its peak, not in 1938, but in 1952. So it does not make much sense to end a history of the revolution with the halting of the Great Terror. But then it doesn't make much sense either to break it off in 1939 or 1941. The Second World War did not interrupt the revolution. It intensified and broadened it. Bolshevism came into its own during the war – with its military discipline and cult of sacrifice, its willingness to expend human life to meet its goals, and its capacity to militarize the masses through its planned economy, it was made to fight. The revolution was reforged and toughened by the war. Through the Red Army and its NKVD units, the Soviet empire tightened its control of its borderlands in West Ukraine and the Baltic, purging towns and villages and sending to the Gulag, in their hundreds of thousands, nationalist insurgents, repatriated Soviet servicemen and 'collaborators' with the Germans. By force of arms, the Bolsheviks exported the Russian Revolution into Eastern Europe – first in 1939–40 and again in 1945.

The Cold War, in this sense, has to be seen as a continuation of the international civil war started by the Bolsheviks in 1917. The global ambitions of the revolution's leaders remained essentially unchanged, from their first attempts to extend Soviet power into Europe through the invasion of Poland in 1920 to their final foreign adventure in Afghanistan after 1979. Lenin's power seizure had been based on the idea that the revolution could not survive on its own in a backward peasant country such as Russia, that it needed the

support of revolutions in the more advanced industrial states or in countries that could give it the resources it needed to industrialize: a life-or-death conflict between socialism and the capitalist powers was unavoidable as long as capitalism existed. Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Andropov, if not Gorbachev, were all Leninists in this belief.

Until the end of their regime, the Soviet leaders all believed they were continuing the revolution Lenin had begun. Their means of rule altered over time, of course, particularly after Stalin's death, when they gave up on the use of mass terror, but they always saw themselves as Lenin's heirs, working to achieve the same utopian goals envisaged by the founders of the Soviet state: a Communist society of material abundance for the proletariat and a new collective type of human being. That is why I think a good case can be made for the revolution being treated as a single cycle of one hundred years, ending with the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991.

Within this longer cycle I aim to explain the revolution's rise and fall in three generational phases. The first corresponds to the lifetime of the Old Bolsheviks, mostly born in the 1870s or 1880s and, if not already dead, eliminated in the Great Terror. Their utopian ideals and austere Party culture of military unity and discipline had been shaped by years of struggle in the conspiratorial underground. But they obtained their revolutionary power from the cataclysm of the First World War – which seemed at once to undermine the value of a human life and to open up the possibility of altering the nature of humanity out of the destruction it had caused – and reached the height of their destructive fury in

the Civil War, from which the Bolsheviks emerged victorious and strengthened in their conviction that any fortress could be stormed. From these killing fields they set about the building of a new society. But they could not overcome the problem of the peasantry – the smallholding family farmers who made up three quarters of the country's population and dominated its economy – with their individualistic attitudes, patriarchal customs and attachment to the old Russian world of the village and the church. To so many of the Party's new supporters – peasant sons and daughters who had fled the 'backward' village for a better life – the revolution could not banish peasant Russia fast enough.

Here were the roots of Stalin's 'revolution from above', the second phase of the cycle charted here, beginning with the Five Year Plan of 1928–32. Stalinism's vision of modernity gave fresh energy to the utopian hopes of the Bolsheviks. It mobilized a whole new generation of enthusiasts – young ambitious workers, officials and technicians born around the turn of the century and schooled in Soviet values – who forced through Stalin's policies of crash collectivization and industrialization and who, through the purges of the 1930s, took the places of the old élites. Collectivization was the real revolution of Soviet history – the complete overturning of a peasant way of life that had developed over many centuries – and a catastrophe from which the country never recovered. It was a social holocaust – a war against the peasants – uprooting millions of hardworking families from their homes and dispersing them across the Soviet Union. This nomadic population became the labour force of the Soviet industrial revolution,

filling the great cities, the building-sites and labour camps of the Gulag.

The industrial infrastructure built by Stalin in the 1930s remained in place until the end of the Soviet system. His Five Year Plans became the model for Communist development throughout the world. They were said to be the cause of the Soviet military victory in 1945 – the justifying rationale for everything accomplished by the October Revolution according to Soviet propaganda. But these achievements came at an enormous human cost – far bigger than we had imagined before the archives opened after 1991 – so big that they challenge us to think about the moral nature of the Stalinist regime in ways reserved previously for historians of Nazism.

Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin's crimes marks the start of the revolution's third and final phase. The Soviet system never recovered from the crisis of belief caused by Khrushchev's revelations at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956. For the next thirty years the leadership was split about how far they could build on Stalin's legacies, or even recognize his influence, except as a war leader. The country was divided between Stalin's victims and those who revered his memory or took pride in Soviet achievements under Stalin's leadership. But the speech was the defining moment for a younger generation that identified itself by the years of Khrushchev's 'thaw' (the *shestidesiatniki* or 'people of the sixties'), among them a 1955 law graduate from Moscow University called Mikhail Gorbachev, whose ideas of socialist renewal were first sown by Khrushchev's programme of de-Stalinization.

The challenge facing all the later Soviet leaders was to sustain popular belief in the revolution as it became a remote historical event. The problem was particularly acute for the generation born since 1945: they were too young even to relate to the 'Great Patriotic War', the other main legitimizing Soviet myth after the 'Great October Socialist Revolution'. Better educated and more sophisticated than the Stalin-era generation, the post-war Soviet baby boomers were less engaged in the revolution's history or ideas than in Western music, films and clothes. Did this make the demise of the Soviet system unavoidable? Is any revolution destined to run out of energy, to die from old age, if it lives as long as the Soviet Union did? The Chinese endgame (liberalizing the economy within the one-party state) could briefly have been an alternative for the Soviet leadership under Andropov and Gorbachev, although it is doubtful whether economic modernization could have saved the system in the longer term (the Soviet population had forgotten how to work). But in the end it was Gorbachev's commitment to political reform – a belief rooted in his Leninist ideals – that brought the system down.

In 2017 the world's media will reflect on the revolution during its centenary. It is a good time to look back at 1917. A generation after the collapse of the Soviet regime, we can see it more clearly, not as part of Cold War politics or Sovietology, but as history, a series of events with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Retrospective distance enables us to see the revolution from a fresh perspective and to ask again the big questions:

why Russia? why Lenin? why Stalin? why did it fail? and what did it all mean? Questions as worth engaging with at the start of the next hundred years as they were during the last.

Seen from today's perspective the revolution appears very differently from the way it looked in 1991. Communism now seems, more than ever, like something from a stage of history that has been passed. Capitalism may have its crises, but outside North Korea no one sees the Soviet model of the planned economy as a viable alternative, not even China or Cuba any more. Russia has become very much weaker as a power in the world. Its loss of empire and foreign influence has been so dramatic that it makes one wonder how it held the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for so long. Despite its recent intervention in Ukraine, Russia is no longer the aggressive threat it once was. It does not start foreign wars. Economically it is a pale shadow of the powerhouse it was on the eve of the First World War. Seventy years of Communism ruined it. Yet the authoritarian state tradition has revived in Russia in a manner unexpected twenty years ago. This resurgence, based on Putin's reclamation of the Soviet past, demands that we look again at Bolshevism – its antecedents and its legacies – in the long arc of history.

CHAPTER 1

The Start

After a year of meteorological catastrophes the peasants of south-east Russia faced starvation in the summer of 1891. The seeds planted the previous autumn had barely time to germinate before the frosts arrived. There had been little snow to protect the young plants during the severe winter. Spring brought with it dusty winds that blew away the topsoil and then, as early as April, the long dry summer began. There was no rain for one hundred days. Wells and ponds dried up, the scorched earth cracked, forests turned brown, and cattle died by the roadsides.

By the autumn the famine area spread from the Ural mountains to Ukraine, an area double the size of France with a population of 36 million people. The peasants weakened and took to their huts. They lived on 'hunger bread' made from rye husks mixed with goosefoot, moss and tree bark, which made the loaves turn yellow and bitter. Those who had the strength packed up their meagre belongings and fled wherever they could, jamming the roads with their carts. And then cholera and typhus struck, killing half a million people by the end of 1892.

The government reacted to the crisis clumsily. At first it buried its head in the sand, speaking euphemistically of a

'poor harvest', and warned newspapers not to print reports on the 'famine', although many did in all but name. This was enough to convince the public, shocked and concerned by the rumours of starvation, that there was a government conspiracy to conceal the truth. There were stories of the obstinate bureaucracy withholding food relief until it had 'statistical proof' that the population for which it was intended had no other means of feeding itself. But the greatest public outrage was caused by the government's postponement of a ban on cereal exports until the middle of August, several weeks into the crisis, so that merchants rushed to fulfil their foreign contracts, and foodstuffs which could have been used for the starving peasants vanished abroad. Even then the ban had been opposed by the Ministry of Finance, whose economic policies (raising taxes on consumer goods so that the peasants would be forced to sell more grain) were seen by the public as the main cause of the famine. As the unfortunately worded official slogan went: 'We may not eat enough, but we will export.'[1]

Unable to cope with the situation, the government called on the public to help. It was to prove a historic moment, for it opened the door to a powerful new wave of public activity and debate which the government could not control and which quickly turned from the philanthropic to the political.

The public response was tremendous. Hundreds of committees were formed by 'public men' to raise money for the starving peasants. Thousands of well-meaning citizens joined the relief teams organized by the zemstvos – district councils dominated by the liberal gentry which had done

'good works' for the rural population (building schools and hospitals, providing agronomic help and credit, gathering statistics about peasant life) since their establishment in 1864. Famous writers such as Tolstoy and Chekhov (who was also a doctor) put aside their writing to join the relief campaign. Tolstoy blamed the famine on the social order, the Orthodox Church and the government: 'Everything has happened because of our own sin. We have cut ourselves off from our own brothers, and there is only one remedy – to repent, change our lives, and destroy the walls between us and the people.'[2] His message struck a deep chord in the moral conscience of the liberal public, plagued as it was both by feelings of alienation from the peasantry and by guilt on account of its privileges.

Russian society was politicized by the famine, and from 1891 it became more organized in opposition to the government. The zemstvos expanded their activities to revive the rural economy. Doctors, teachers and engineers formed professional bodies and began to demand more influence over public policy. In the press and periodicals, in universities and learned societies, there were heated debates on the causes of the crisis in which Marx's ideas of capitalist development were generally accepted as the most convincing explanation of the peasantry's impoverishment. The global market system was dividing peasants into rich and poor; manufacturing was undermining rural crafts, and a landless proletariat was being formed. The socialist movement, which had been largely dormant in the 1880s, sprang back into life as a result of these debates. In the words of Lydia Dan, a teenager in 1891 but later to become one of the founders of the main Russian

Marxist party, the Social Democrats (SDs), the famine was to prove a vital landmark in the history of the revolution because it had shown to the youth of her generation 'that the Russian system was completely bankrupt. It felt as though Russia was on the brink of something.'[3]

When does a 'revolutionary crisis' start? Trotsky answered this by distinguishing between the objective factors (human misery) that make a revolution possible and the subjective factors (human agency) that bring one about. In the Russian case the famine by itself was not enough. There were no peasant uprisings as a consequence of it, and even if there had been, by themselves they would not have been a major threat to the tsarist state. It was the expectations of the upper classes – and the Tsar's refusal to compromise with them – that made the famine crisis revolutionary.

In 1894, the country's most progressive zemstvo leaders presented a list of political demands to Nicholas II on his accession to the throne, following the premature death of his father, Alexander III. They wanted to convene a national assembly to involve the zemstvos in the work of government. In a speech that infuriated public opinion Nicholas denounced such 'senseless dreams' and emphasized his 'firm and unflinching' adherence to the 'principle of autocracy' which he had sworn to uphold in his coronation oath. The Tsar's sovereignty was absolute, unlimited by laws or parliaments, by bureaucrats or public opinion, and his personal rule was guided only by his conscience before God.

Nicholas believed it was his sacred mission to emulate his father's autocratic rule, but he lacked his domineering

personality and the wherewithal to provide effective government. He was only twenty-six when he came to the throne. 'What is going to happen to me and to all of Russia?' he had wept on his father's death. 'I am not prepared to be a Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to the ministers.'[4]

Had circumstances and his own inclinations been different, Nicholas might have saved the monarchy by moving it towards a constitutional order during the first decade of his reign, when there was still hope of satisfying liberal hopes and isolating the revolutionaries. In England, where being a 'good man' was the sole requirement of a good king, he would have made an admirable sovereign. He was certainly not inferior to his look-alike cousin, George V, who was a model of the constitutional king. He was mild-mannered and had an excellent memory and a perfect sense of decorum, which made him ideal for the ceremonial tasks of a constitutional monarch. But Nicholas had not been born into that world: he was the Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias; Tsar of Moscow, Kiev, Vladimir, Novgorod, Kazan, Astrakhan, Poland, Siberia, the Tauric Chersonese and Georgia, et cetera, et cetera. Family tradition and pressure from the crown's conservative allies obliged him to rule with force and resolution and, in the face of opposition, to assert his 'divine authority'.

Here, then, were the roots of the monarchy's collapse, not in peasant discontent or the labour movement, so long the preoccupation of Marxist and social historians, nor in the breakaway of nationalist movements on the empire's periphery, but in the growing conflict between a dynamic public

culture and a fossilized autocracy that would not concede or even understand its political demands.

Russia had been a relatively stable society until the final decades of the nineteenth century. It was untroubled by the revolutions that shook Europe's other monarchies in 1848–9, when Marx called it 'the last hope of the despots'. Its huge army crushed the Polish uprisings of 1830 and 1863, the main nationalist challenge to the Tsar's Imperial rule, while its police hampered the activities of the tiny close-knit circles of radicals and revolutionaries, who were mostly driven underground.

The power of the Tsar was only weakly counter-balanced by a landed aristocracy. The Russian nobility was heavily dependent on military and civil service to the state for its landed wealth and position in society. Nor were there real public bodies to challenge the autocracy: most institutions (organs of self-government, professional, scientific and artistic societies) were in fact creations of the state. Even the senior leaders of the Orthodox Church were appointed by the Tsar.

The Church retained a powerful hold over rural Russia, in particular. In many villages the priest was one of the few people who could read and write. Through parish schools the Orthodox clergy taught children to show loyalty, deference and obedience, not just to their elders and betters but also to the Tsar and his officials.

For all its pretensions to autocracy, however, the tsarist state was hardly present in the countryside and could not get

a grip on many basic aspects of peasant life, as the famine had underlined. Contrary to the revolutionaries' mythic image of an all-powerful tsarist regime, the *under-government* of the localities was in fact the system's main weakness. For every 1,000 inhabitants of the Russian Empire there were only four state officials at the end of the nineteenth century, compared with 7.3 in England and Wales, 12.6 in Germany and 17.6 in France. The regular police, as opposed to the political branch, was extremely small by European standards. For a rural population of 100 million people, Russia in 1900 had no more than 1,852 police sergeants and 6,874 police constables. For most intents and purposes, once the peasants had been liberated from the direct rule of their landowners, with the abolition of serfdom in 1861, they were left to look after themselves.

Despite the abolition of serfdom, its legacies continued to oppress the peasants in the following decades. Most of the arable land remained the private property of the gentry landowners, who rented it out to the land-hungry peasants at rates that increased steeply in the later nineteenth century as the population rose. Legally the peasants remained excluded from the sphere of written law. Their affairs were regulated by the customary law of the village commune (*mir* or *obshchina*), which in most of Russia upheld the old peasant moral concept that the land belonged to nobody but God and that every family had the right to feed itself by cultivating it with its own labour. On this principle – that the land should be in the hands of those who tilled it – the squires did not hold their land rightfully and the hungry peasants were

justified in their struggle to take it from them. A constant battle was fought between the state's written law, framed to defend the property rights of the landowners, and the customary law of the peasants, used by them to defend their own transgressions of those rights – poaching and grazing cattle on the squire's land, taking wood from his forest, fishing in his ponds, and so on.

Gentry magistrates were responsible for the judicial administration of the countryside. As late as 1904, they retained the power to have peasants flogged for rowdy drunkenness or trespassing on the landowner's land. It is difficult to overestimate the psychological impact of this corporal punishment – forty-three years after the serfs had been 'freed'. One peasant, who had been flogged for failing to remove his hat and bow before the magistrate, was later heard to ask: 'What's a poor peasant to a gentleman? Why he's worse than a dog . . . At least a dog can bite, but the peasant is meek and humble and tolerates everything.'[5]

The coercive basis of authority was replicated everywhere – in relations between officers and men in the armed services, between employers and workers, between peasant elders and wives and children. According to Russian proverbs, a woman was improved by regular beatings, while: 'For a man that has been beaten you have to offer two unbeaten ones.' At Christmas, Epiphany and Shrovetide there were huge and often fatal fights between different sections of the village, sometimes even between villages, accompanied by heavy bouts of drinking. However one explains this violence – by the culture of the peasants, the harsh environment in which

they lived, or the weakness of the legal order – it was to play a major part in the overturning of authority during 1917.

The tsarist system could not cope with the challenges of urbanization and the development of a modern market-based economy which brought so many democratic changes in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The 1890s were a watershed in this respect. From this decade we can date the emergence of a civil society, a public sphere and ethic, all in opposition to the state.

Profound social changes were taking place. The old hierarchy of estates (*sosloviia*), which the autocracy had created to organize society around its needs, was breaking down as a new and more dynamic system – too complicated to be described in terms of 'class' – began to take shape. Men born as peasants, even serfs, rose to establish themselves as merchants, engineers and landowners (like the character Lopakhin who buys the cherry orchard in Chekhov's play). Merchants became noblemen. The sons and daughters of noblemen entered the liberal professions. Social mobility was accelerated by the spread of higher education. Between 1860 and 1914 the number of university students in Russia grew from 5,000 to 69,000 (45 per cent of them women). Public opinion and activity found a widening range of outlets in these years: the number of daily newspapers rose from thirteen to 856; and the number of public institutions from 250 to over 16,000.

These changes also helped the rise of nationalist movements on the periphery of the empire. Until the development of rural schools and networks of communication, nationalism

remained an élite urban movement for native language rights in schools and universities, literary publications and official life. Outside the towns its influence was limited. The peasants were barely conscious of their nationality. 'I myself did not know that I was a Pole till I began to read books and papers,' recalled a farmer after 1917.[6] In many areas, such as Ukraine, Belorussia and the Caucasus, there was so much ethnic intermingling that it was difficult for anything more than a localized form of identity to take root in the popular consciousness. 'Were one to ask the average peasant in the Ukraine his nationality,' observed a British diplomat, 'he would answer that he is Greek Orthodox; if pressed to say whether he is a Great Russian, a Pole, or an Ukrainian, he would probably reply that he is a peasant; and if one insisted on knowing what language he spoke, he would say that he talked "the local tongue".'[7]

The growth of mass-based nationalist movements was contingent on the spread of rural schools and institutions, such as peasant unions and cooperatives, as well as on the opening up of remote country areas by roads and railways, postal services and telegraphs – all of which was happening very rapidly in the decades before 1917. The most successful movements combined the peasants' struggle for the land (where it was owned by foreign landlords, officials and merchants) with the demand for native language rights, enabling the peasants to gain full access to schools, the courts and government.

This combination was the key to the success of the Ukrainian nationalist movement. In the Constituent Assembly elections of November 1917, the first democratic elections

in the country's history, 71 per cent of the Ukrainian peasants would vote for the nationalists – an astonishing shift in political awareness in only a generation. The movement organized the peasants in their struggle against foreign (mainly Russian and Polish) landowners and against the 'foreign influence' of the towns (dominated by the Russians, Jews and Poles). It is no coincidence that peasant uprisings erupted first, in 1902, in those regions around Poltava province where the Ukrainian nationalist movement was also most advanced.

Throughout Russia the impact of modernization – of towns and mass communications, the money economy and above all rural schools – gave rise to a generation of younger and more literate peasants who sought to overturn the patriarchal village world. Literacy rose from 21 per cent of the empire's population in 1897 to 40 per cent on the eve of the First World War. The highest rural rates were among young men in those regions closest to the towns (nine out of ten peasant recruits into the Imperial army from the two provinces of Petersburg and Moscow were considered literate even by 1904). The link between literacy and revolution is a well-known historical phenomenon. The three great revolutions of modern European history – the English, the French and the Russian – all took place in societies where the rate of literacy was approaching 50 per cent. Literacy promotes the spread of new ideas and enables the peasant to master new technologies and bureaucratic skills. The local activists of the Russian Revolution were drawn mainly from this newly literate generation – the beneficiaries of the boom in rural schooling during the last decades of the old regime, now

in large enough numbers to pass on the new ideas to those still illiterate. In its belated efforts to educate the common people, the tsarist regime was helping to dig its own grave.

A study of rural schoolchildren in the 1900s found that almost half of them wanted to pursue an 'educated profession' in the city, whereas less than 2 per cent wanted to follow in the footsteps of their peasant parents. 'I want to be a shop assistant,' said one schoolboy, 'because I do not like to walk in the mud. I want to be like those people who are cleanly dressed and work as shop assistants.'[8] For these youths the desire for social betterment was often synonymous with employment in the town. Virtually any urban job seemed desirable compared with the hardships and dull routines of peasant life. They saw the village as a 'dark' and 'backward' place of superstition and crippling poverty – a world Trotsky would describe as the Russia of 'icons and cockroaches' – and looked towards the city and its modern values as a route to independence and self-worth. Here was the basis of the cultural revolution on which Bolshevism would be based. The Party rank and file was recruited in the main from peasant boys like these; its modernizing ideology was based on their rejection of the peasant world. The revolution would sweep that village world all away.

Forced off the land by poverty, over-population and the growing cost of renting land, millions of peasants came into the towns, or worked in rural factories and mines. In the last half-century of the old regime the empire's urban population grew from 7 million to 28 million people. The 1890s saw the sharpest growth as the effects of the famine crisis coincided

with the accelerated programme of industrialization and railway construction pushed through by Count Witte, the Minister of Finance from 1892.

There was a pattern in the peasant in-migration to the towns: first came the young men, then the married men, then unmarried girls, then married women and children. It suggests that the peasants tried to keep their failing farms alive for as long as possible. Young peasant men were sending money earned in mines and factories to their villages, where they themselves returned at harvest time ('raiding the cash economy' as is common in developing societies). There was a constant to-and-fro between the city and the countryside. We can talk as much about the 'peasantization' of Russia's towns as we can about the disappearance of the farming peasantry.

Factory conditions were terrible. According to Witte, the worker 'raised on the frugal habits of rural life' was 'much more easily satisfied' than his counterpart in Europe or North America, so that 'low wages appeared as a fortunate gift to Russian enterprise'.[9] There was little factory legislation to protect labour. The gains made by British workers in the 1840s, and by the Germans in the 1880s, remained out of reach of Russian workers at the turn of the century. The two most important factory laws – one in 1885 prohibiting the night-time employment of women and children, and the other in 1897 restricting the working day to eleven and a half hours – had to be wrenched from the government. Small workshops were excluded from the legislation, although they probably employed the majority of the country's workforce, and certainly most of its female contingent. By 1914,

women represented 33 per cent of the industrial labour force, and in sectors like textiles and food processing they were a clear majority. The inspectorates, charged with ensuring that the factories complied with the regulations, lacked effective powers, so employers ignored them. Unventilated working areas were filled with noxious fumes. Shopfloors were crammed with dangerous machinery: there were frequent accidents. Yet most workers were denied a legal right to insurance and, if they lost an eye or a limb, could expect no more than a few roubles' compensation. Workers' strikes were illegal. There were no legal trade unions until 1905.

Many factory owners treated workers like serfs. They had them searched for stolen goods when they left the factory gates, and fined or even flogged for minor breaches of the rules. This degrading 'serf regime' was bitterly resented by workers as an affront to their dignity, and 'respectful treatment' was a prominent demand in strikes and labour protests that broke out after 1905.

Russian workers were the most strike-prone in Europe. Three quarters of the factory workforce went on strike during 1905. Historians have spent a lot of time trying to explain the origins of this labour militancy. Factory size, levels of skill and literacy, the number of years spent living in the city, and the influence of the revolutionary intelligentsia – all these factors have been scrutinized in microscopic detail in countless monographs, each hoping to discover the crucial mix that explained the rise of the 'workers' revolution' in Russia. The main disagreement concerns the effects of urbanization.

Some have argued that it was the most urbanized workers, those with the highest levels of skill and literacy, who

became the foot soldiers of the revolution. But others have maintained that the recent immigrants – those who had been 'snatched from the plough and hurled straight into the factory furnace', as Trotsky once put it[10] – tended to be the most volatile and violent, often adapting the spontaneous forms of rebellion associated with the countryside to the new and hostile industrial environment in which they found themselves.

There is no doubt that the peasant immigrants added a combustible element to the urban working class. Labour unrest often took the form of riots, pogroms, looting and machine-breaking, or the 'carting out' of bosses from the factory and dumping them in a cesspool or canal – all actions one might associate with an uprooted but disorganized peasant mass struggling to adapt to the new world of the city and the discipline of the factory. Nevertheless, it is going too far to suggest that such 'primitive' actions, or the raw recruits behind them, were the crucial factor in the rise of labour militancy. During the 1890s strikes became the main form of industrial protest and they required the sort of disciplined organization that only the most skilled and literate workers could provide.

Here Russia stood in stark contrast to Europe, where these worker types tended to be the least revolutionary and labour parties representing them were entering parliaments. There were few signs of such a 'labour aristocracy' emerging in Russia and certainly no parliament to which it could aspire. The print workers were the most likely candidates for such a role. Yet even they stood firmly behind the Marxist and other revolutionary socialist parties. Had they been able to develop their own legal trade unions, the workers might

have gone down the path of moderate reform taken by the European labour movements. But the Russian political situation pushed them to extremes. They were forced to rely upon the leadership of the revolutionary underground. To a large extent, then, the workers' revolutionary movement was created by the tsarist government.

The famine crisis gave new life to the revolutionary parties, bringing them supporters, not just from the working class, but from a widening range of liberal professionals, students, writers and other members of the intelligentsia – a caste defined by its sense of debt to and commitment to 'the people'. The key to that commitment was moral: a stance of uncompromising opposition to the autocracy and a willingness to take part in the democratic struggle against it.

There was a revival of the Populist movement, culminating in 1901 with the establishment of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR). Populism had its roots in the intelligentsia's mission to improve the peasants' lot and to involve them in a democratic movement against the autocracy following the serf emancipation in 1861. The Populists idealized the peasant way of life. From the 1870s, they had gone into the countryside to educate and organize the peasantry, some of them (they called themselves the People's Will) increasingly resorting to violence and terror as they became frustrated by the failure of the peasants to respond to their revolutionary call. The Populists believed that the village commune could become the basis of a socialist society, thus enabling Russia to take a separate path to socialism from that of the West, where capitalist development was

destroying the peasantry and Marxist hopes of revolution rested on the industrial working class. In contrast to the Marxists, the Populists believed that peasant Russia could advance directly to a socialist society without passing first through the capitalist stage of history.

The famine crisis undermined that view. Partly caused by the tax squeeze on the peasants to pay for industrialization, the crisis suggested that the peasantry was literally dying out, both as a class and a way of life, under the pressures of capitalist development. Marxism alone seemed able to explain the causes of the famine by showing how a capitalist economy created rural poverty. In the 1890s it fast became a national intelligentsia creed. Socialists who had previously wavered in their Marxism were converted to it by the crisis, as they realized that there was no more hope in the Populist faith in the peasantry. Even liberal thinkers such as Petr Struve found their Marxist passions stirred by the famine: it 'made much more of a Marxist out of me than the reading of Marx's *Capital*'.[11]

The SRs were swept along by this intellectual drift. Led by Viktor Chernov, a law graduate from Moscow University, the party accepted the Marxist view of capitalist development in sociological terms while still adhering politically to the Populist belief that workers and peasants alike – what it called the 'labouring people' – were united by their poverty and their opposition to the government.

Marx's *Capital* had been published in Russia as early as 1872. It was the book's first foreign publication, just five years after the original German edition and fifteen years before its appearance in English. The tsarist censors had passed it

by mistake, assuming that 'very few people in Russia' would read the heavy tome of political economy, and 'even fewer understand it'.[12] Contrary to expectations, Marx's critique of the capitalist system would lead to revolution earlier in Russia than in any of the Western societies to which it had been addressed.

The intelligentsia were drawn to Marxism by its 'scientific' nature – it was seen as a 'path of reason', in the words of Lydia Dan, offering 'objective solutions' to the misery of poverty and backwardness – and by its promise that Russia would become more like the capitalist West. 'We were attracted by its *European* nature,' recalled a veteran of the movement in Russia. '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.'[13]

Here perhaps was the root of Marxism's attraction to the Jews, who played such a conspicuous role in the Social Democratic movement, providing many of its leaders (Trotsky, Martov, Axelrod, Kamenev and Zinoviev, to name just a few). Where Populism had proposed to build on peasant Russia – a land of pogroms and discrimination against the Jews – Marxism offered a modern Western vision of Russia. It promised to assimilate the Jews into a movement of universal human liberation – not just the liberation of the peasantry – based on principles of internationalism.

Even the young Lenin only became fully converted to the Marxist mainstream in the wake of the famine crisis.

Contrary to the Soviet myth, in which Lenin appeared as a fully fledged Marxist theorist in his infancy, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution came late to politics. In his last school year he was commended by his headmaster (by an irony of fate the father of Kerensky, his arch-rival in 1917) as a model student, 'moral and religious in his upbringing', and never giving 'cause for dissatisfaction, by word or deed, to the school authorities'.[14]

Lenin's father was a typical gentleman-liberal of the type his son would come to despise. His noble background was a source of embarrassment to Lenin's Soviet hagiographers. But it was a key to his domineering personality. It can be seen in his intolerance of criticism from subordinates, and his tendency to look upon the masses as no more than human material needed for his revolutionary plans (during the famine he argued that the peasants should be denied aid because it would make a revolution more likely). As Maxim Gorky wrote 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 beforehand.'[15]

Lenin came to Marx already armed with the ideas of the People's Will, the terrorist wing of the Populist movement which had carried out the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Lenin's elder brother, who had belonged to the People's Will, was executed for his participation in the abortive plot to kill Alexander III in 1887. There is a Soviet legend that on hearing of his brother's death Lenin said 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 theoretical rejection of terror in favour of the organization of the working class. But this is nonsensical (Maria at the time was only nine). And while it may be true that his brother's execution was a catalyst to Lenin's involvement in the revolutionary movement, his first inclination was, like his brother's, towards 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.

Lenin was particularly influenced by the 'Jacobinism' of the revolutionary theorist Petr Tkachev (1844–86), who in the 1870s had argued for a seizure of power and the establishment of a dictatorship by a disciplined and highly centralized vanguard on the grounds that a social revolution was impossible to achieve by democratic means: the laws of capitalist development meant that the richer peasants would support the status quo. Tkachev insisted that a coup d'état should be carried out as soon as possible, because as yet there was no real social force prepared to side with the government, and to wait would only let one develop.

All the main components of Lenin's ideology – his stress on the need for a disciplined 'vanguard'; his belief that action (the 'subjective factor') could alter the objective course of history (and in particular that the seizure of the state apparatus could bring about a social revolution); his defence of terror and dictatorship; his contempt for liberals and democrats (and indeed for socialists who compromised with them) – stemmed not just from Marx but from Tkachev and

the People's Will. He injected a distinctly Russian dose of conspiratorial politics into a Marxist dialectic that would otherwise have remained passive – tied down by a willingness to wait for the revolution to mature through the development of objective conditions rather than bringing it about through political action. It was not Marxism that made Lenin a revolutionary but Lenin who made Marxism revolutionary.

Lenin was made for a fight. He gave himself entirely to the revolutionary struggle. 'That is my life!' he confessed to the French socialist (and his lover) Inessa Armand in 1916. 'One fighting campaign after another.'[16] There was no 'private Lenin' behind the professional revolutionary. The odd affair apart, he lived like a middle-aged provincial clerk, with precisely fixed hours for meals, sleep and work. There was a strong puritanical streak in Lenin's character which later manifested itself in the political culture of his dictatorship. He suppressed his emotions to strengthen his resolve and cultivate the 'hardness' he believed was required by the successful revolutionary: the capacity to spill blood for the revolution's ends. There was no place for sentiment in Lenin's life. 'I can't listen to music too often,' he once admitted after a performance of Beethoven's Appassionata Sonata. 'It makes me want to say kind, stupid things, and pat the heads of people. But now you have to beat them on the head, beat them without mercy.'[17]

After his arrival in the capital, St Petersburg, in 1893, Lenin moved much closer to the standard Marxist view – that Russia was only at the start of its capitalist stage and that a democratic movement by the workers in alliance with the bourgeoisie was needed to defeat autocracy before a socialist

revolution could commence. No more talk of a coup d'état or terror. It was only after the establishment of a 'bourgeois democracy', granting freedoms of speech and association to the workers, that the second and socialist phase of the revolution could begin.

The influence of the exiled Marxist theorist Georgi Plekhanov was vital here. It was he who first mapped out the two-stage revolutionary strategy. With it the Russian Marxists at last had an answer to the problem of how to bring about a post-capitalist society in one only now entering the capitalist phase. It gave them grounds for their belief that in forsaking the seizure of power – which, as Plekhanov put it, could only lead to a 'despotism in Communist form' – they could still advance towards socialism.

Marxist groups set about the education of the workers for the coming revolution through propaganda. Some of the skilled and educated workers were more inclined to improve their lot within the capitalist system than to overthrow it. They were supported by a group of Marxists, the Economists, who sought to channel the workers' movement away from revolutionary goals. Lenin led the attack on Economism with the sort of violence that would become the trademark of his rhetoric. Its tactics, he argued, would destroy socialism and the revolution, which could only succeed under the centralized political leadership of a disciplined vanguard party in the mould of the People's Will. If the police regime was to be defeated, the Party had to be equally centralized and disciplined. It had to match the tsarist state.

In his polemics against the Economists Lenin came out with a pamphlet that would become the primer for the

Bolsheviks through the revolution of 1917 and the founding text of international Communism. The implications of *What is to be Done?* – that the Party's rank and file should be forced to obey, in military fashion, the leadership's commands – were not fully realized when it first appeared in 1902. 'None of us could imagine,' recalled one of the SDs, 'that there could be a party that might arrest its own members.'[18]

That only began to emerge at the Second Party Congress, which met in London (at the Communist Club at 107 Charlotte Street*) from August 1903. The result was a split in the Party and the formation of two distinct SD factions. The cause of the split was seemingly trivial: the definition of Party membership. Lenin wanted all members to be activists in the Party's organization, whereas Martov thought that anyone who agreed with the Party's manifesto should be admitted as a member. Beneath the surface of this dispute lay two opposing views of what the Party ought to be: a military-revolutionary vanguard (tightly controlled by a leader such as Lenin) or a broad-based party in the Western parliamentary style (with a looser style of leadership). Lenin won a slender majority in the vote on this issue, enabling his faction to call themselves the 'Bolsheviks' ('Majoritarians') and their opponents the 'Mensheviks' ('Minoritarians'). With hindsight it was foolish of the Mensheviks to allow the adoption of these names. It saddled them with the permanent image of a minority party, which was to be an important disadvantage in their rivalry with the Bolsheviks.

* Today, ironically, the headquarters of the global advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi.