Feliks Volkhovskii
A Revolutionary Life

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1. Introduction

The Russian political exile Feliks Volkhovskii died in London at the start of August 1914, at the age of sixty-eight, as Europe slid into the maelstrom of war. The outbreak of hostilities represented a defeat for a liberal peace movement that held military conflict to be morally unconscionable and economically destructive.[1] It also revealed the impotence of a socialist internationalism that believed war was the consequence of imperial rivalry for markets in which the workers had no stake.[2] There is no record of how Volkhovskii reacted to the chaos of the July Crisis. His health was poor, and he probably knew little of events taking place beyond the cloistered world of his flat in West London, but if he had known then he would surely have been distraught. Volkhovskii had for many years been one of the most prominent voices in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party warning about the threat posed by 'militarism' both to European peace and the cause of revolution in the Russian Empire.

Volkhovskii first arrived in London in 1890, following a dramatic flight from Siberia, where he spent more than a decade in administrative exile for involvement in a society that planned 'at a more or less remote time in the future, to overthrow the existing form of government'.[3] Over

1 Among the large literature on the peace movement both in Britain and abroad before the First World War see, for example, Sandi E. Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism. Waging War on War in Europe, 1815–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Paul Laity, *The British Peace Movement, 1870–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

2 For a useful overview of the genealogy of socialist internationalism before 1914, see Patrizia Dogliani, 'The Fate of Socialist Internationalism', in Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (eds), *Internationalisms: A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 38–60. James Joll, *The Second International, 1889–1914* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955) remains a lively if dated account of the Second International.

3 George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System*, 2 vols (New York: Century Company, 1891), I, 333.

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the next few years, he became a public figure in Britain, writing and lecturing at length about the harsh treatment meted out to those in Russia who opposed the tsarist government. Along with several other Russian émigrés in London, including Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii and Nikolai Chaikovskii, he worked closely with members of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom producing the newspaper *Free Russia*. Volkhovskii also established friendships with several Britons who played an important role in fostering interest in Russian literature among their compatriots, most notably Edward Garnett and his wife Constance, whose translations of novelists including Leo Tolstoi and Fedor Dostoevskii helped to fuel the Russia craze in Britain during the decades before the First World War.[4]

Volkhovskii made a powerful impression on many of those he met in Britain during the 1890s. Although he never became such a well-known figure as Sergei Stepniak or Petr Kropotkin, he contributed regularly to British newspapers and journals, while his colourful lectures about his time in Russia attracted large audiences up and down the country. His name had already become familiar to many of those interested in Russian affairs when he was still in Siberian exile, thanks to the work of the American writer George Kennan, who first met Volkhovskii when he travelled through the region in the mid-1880s collecting material for a series of articles in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. Kennan told his readers in 1888 that

> To me perhaps the most attractive and sympathetic of the Tomsk exiles was the Russian author Felix Volkhofski ... He was about thirty-eight years of age at the time I made his acquaintance, and was a man of cultivated mind, warm heart, and high aspirations ... His health had been shattered by long imprisonment in the fortress of Petropavlovsk; his hair was prematurely gray, and when his face was in repose there seemed to be an expression of profound melancholy in his dark brown eyes.[5]

4 For an excellent account that examines how networks of Russian émigrés and British writers helped to fuel the Russia 'craze', see Rebecca Beasley, *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Beasley's monograph only appeared when the first draft of this book was completed but has proved invaluable in helping to contextualise Volkhovskii's literary activities.

5 George Kennan, 'Political Exiles and Common Criminals at Tomsk', *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (henceforth *Century Magazine*), 37, 1 (November 1888), 32–33.

Following his flight from Siberia to London, via North America, Volkhovskii worked closely with Kennan in the campaign to promote Western sympathy for the opposition movement in Russia, and while the two men often disagreed on questions of tactics, the American never lost his affection for his old friend. A few months after Volkhovskii's death, Kennan wrote that he had throughout his life shown 'a fortitude in suffering and indomitable courage in adversity [that] put to shame the weakness of the faint-hearted ... and compel even the cynic and the pessimist to admit that man, at his best, is bigger perhaps than anything that can happen to him'.[6]

Kennan's hagiographic description was echoed by many others who knew Volkhovskii during his years in emigration. The journalist and writer G. H. Perris, who worked closely with Volkhovskii in London, described him as 'the poet and the statesman of revolutionary propaganda' whose 'fiery spirit' never flagged despite years of imprisonment and exile.[7] Sympathetic obituaries in the British press following his death told readers how Volkhovskii had lived 'a life truly great' that illustrated 'the grandeur of fraternity among the toilers of the earth'.[8] J. F. Green, who for a time co-edited *Free Russia* with Volkhovskii, recalled his old friend as 'a charming companion' of 'wide culture'.[9] The Executive Committee of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom praised the 'sacrifices' he had made for his country.[10]

Kennan's original articles in *Century Magazine* used an almost martyrological language to represent Volkhovskii as a heroic figure who embodied the suffering of critics who dared to oppose the Russian autocratic government. Many of those who subsequently wrote about Volkhovskii echoed this trope by making much of the personal tragedies he had faced while still living in Russia. His first wife died in Italy when he was in prison in St Petersburg awaiting trial. His second wife killed herself after struggling with the hardships of Siberian exile. He lost two children in infancy. Volkhovskii himself seldom referred to these personal tragedies after his flight from Russia, but he was adept during

6 George Kennan, *A Russian Comedy of Errors with Other Stories and Sketches of Russian Life* (New York: The Century Company, 1915), 139.
7 G. H. Perris, *Russia in Revolution* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1905), 226.
8 *Daily Herald* (6 August 1914).
9 *Justice* (13 August 1914).
10 *Manchester Guardian* (14 August 1914).

his first ten years in Britain at fashioning a *persona* that dramatised and embodied the anguish endured by many critics of the tsarist regime. He sometimes imitated Kennan by lecturing to audiences dressed in the clothes and chains of a Russian convict (Volkhovskii himself had in fact worn neither while in Siberia). He was also skilled at behaving in ways that dovetailed with the expectations of the social and literary circles in which he moved, presenting himself as an exotic representative of an intriguingly alien country, yet one who could easily accommodate himself within the orbit of Western culture and values. And, in his articles and lectures, he discussed Russian affairs in general—and the Russian revolutionary movement in particular—in ways that were designed to reassure his audience that the values espoused by Russian revolutionaries like himself were consonant with those held by respectable liberals and moderate socialists in countries such as Britain.

There was nevertheless something paradoxical about the efforts made by Volkhovskii and some other political émigrés in Britain to defend a Russian revolutionary movement whose members were often committed to tactics and values profoundly at odds with the political and cultural *mores* of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Volkhovskii himself was for the most part ready to endorse the use of terrorism in Russia, both as a natural response to the brutality of the tsarist state and as an ethical means of bringing about political change. He was also a socialist who believed that, in Russia at least, the main value of such liberal appurtenances as universal suffrage and freedom of speech lay in their role in facilitating the struggle for a new social and economic order. Many Britons who sympathised with the struggle against tsarism by contrast viewed the Russian revolutionary movement through a prism shaped by a fusion of the Nonconformist Conscience and hazy memories of a previous generation of European revolutionaries like Lajos Kossuth and Giuseppe Mazzini. It was at best a partial understanding of a complex reality.

There is in fact a real danger of reducing Volkhovskii's career to his role as an intermediary between the Russian revolutionary movement and its British supporters in the years after 1890 (a theme that dominates the way he is discussed in much of the existing literature). The leader of the Socialist Revolutionaries, Viktor Chernov, wrote in his memoirs that 'the life of Feliks Volkhovskii is a history of the Russian revolutionary movement, of which he remained a true and faithful servant his *whole*

life' [italics added].[11] Vera Figner, who played a leading role in the Narodnaia volia (People's Will) organisation that assassinated Tsar Aleksandr II in 1881, agreed that 'the whole of his [Volkhovskii's] ... life was devoted to the revolutionary cause'.[12] The focus on Volkhovskii's long and varied revolutionary career was echoed in the obituaries that appeared in Russia following his death. Nikolai Chaikovskii recalled that when he first met Volkhovskii in the early 1870s, his new acquaintance was already a veteran of the revolutionary movement, who had endured two terms of imprisonment.[13] An obituary published a few months later in *Mysl'* focused by contrast on Volkhovskii's work in the final decade of his life, when he played an important role in the Socialist Revolutionary Party, editing many of its publications, and serving on the Foreign Committee that provided material support to revolutionaries organising uprisings across Russia.[14] Both obituaries said much less than the British press about Volkhovskii's role editing *Free Russia* and his work with members of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom.[15]

One of the main aims of this book is indeed to gently 'shrink' the Volkhovskii familiar to many of his British friends and allies, and instead give more attention to placing him within the development of the Russian revolutionary movement. A good deal of valuable work has been published in recent years discussing Russian revolutionary communities abroad and the integration of Russian revolutionaries within broader transnational revolutionary networks.[16] The limited scholarly attention given to Volkhovskii has similarly focused on his role in shaping American and European attitudes towards Russia in the 1890s and early 1900s, although he has too often been seen primarily as a sidekick to Stepniak, lacking the glamour and brilliance

11 V. M. Chernov, *Pered burei* (Moscow: Direct Media, 2016), 203.
12 V. I. Figner, *Posle Shlissel'burga* (Moscow: Direct Media, 2016), 345.
13 N. V. Chaikovskii, Obituary of Volkhovskii, *Golos minuvshago*, 10 (1914), 231–35.
14 Ritina [I. I. Rakitnikova], Obituary of Volkhovskii, *Mysl'*, 40 (January 1915).
15 The same was true of the obituary by N. E. Kudrin that appeared in *Russkoe bogatstvo*, 9 (1914), 364–65, which focused overwhelmingly on Volkhovskii's life before 1890 when he fled Russia.
16 The most important recent work taking this approach is without doubt Faith Hillis's magisterial *Utopia's Discontents: Russian Émigrés and the Quest for Freedom, 1830s–1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), which examines how Russian colonies abroad formed part of the broader Russian revolutionary movement, while also shaping and being shaped by their host communities.

of his better-known friend.[17] Much less has been written—particularly in English—about the other parts of his life.[18] Volkhovskii was, as Figner and Chernov recognised, a living embodiment of the development of the Russian revolutionary movement. He came of age in the 1860s under the influence of the revolutionary scientism of 'nihilists' like Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Dmitrii Pisarev. He was imprisoned in 1869 on suspicion of being involved in the network of groups that surrounded Sergei Nechaev, the self-fantasising *enfant terrible* of the Russian revolutionary movement, whose murder of one of his followers was immortalised by Dostoevskii in his novel *Besy* (The *Devils*). Volkhovskii subsequently became a prominent figure in the Chaikovskii milieu that coalesced in the early 1870s, paving the way for the 'Going to the People' movement of 1874, when thousands of young Russians fanned out into the Russian countryside in an effort to draw closer to the people, although he was himself always sceptical of those populists (*narodniki*) who believed that some elusive quasi-mystical wisdom was to be found among the ordinary Russian peasants. Following his exile to Siberia, Volkhovskii largely reinvented himself, playing a significant role in the cultural life of Tomsk, writing numerous short stories and poems, as well as becoming the most prolific contributor to the newly established paper *Sibirskaia gazeta* (*Siberian Gazette*).

17 Among the few publications in English devoted to Volkhovskii, see Donald Senese, 'Felix Volkhovsky in London, 1890-1914', in John Slatter (ed.), *From the Other Shore: Russian Political Emigrants in Britain, 1870–1917* (London: Frank Cass, 1984), 67–78; Donald Senese, 'Felix Volkhovskii in Ontario: Rallying Canada to the Revolution', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 24, 3 (1990), 295–310. A good deal of material can also be found in Donald Senese, *S. M. Stepniak-Kravchinskii: The London Years* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1987). Volkhovskii's name has also started to occur more frequently in some recent work in English on the Russian revolutionary movement, not least because his papers often include valuable material about other better-known figures. See, for example, Lara Green, 'Russian Revolutionary Terrorism, British Liberals, and the Problem of Empire (1884–1914)', *History of European Ideas*, 46, 5 (2020), 633–48; Lynne Hartnett, 'Relief and Revolution: Russian Émigrés' Political Remittances and the Building of Political Transnationalism', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46, 6 (2020), 1040–56. Other literature touching on Volkhovskii's time in emigration is discussed in later chapters.

18 For two recent exceptions, see the relevant sections of Ben Phillips, *Siberian Exile and the Invention of Revolutionary Russia, 1825–1917: Exiles, Émigrés and the International Reception of Russian Radicalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Lara Green, 'Russian Revolutionary Terrorism in Transnational Perspective: Representations and Networks, 1881–1926' (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2019).

Following his flight from Siberia and arrival in London in the summer of 1890, where he became a central figure in the international campaign against tsarist Russia, Volkhovskii continued to play a significant role supporting the development of the Russian revolutionary movement. He was a key figure in the Russian Free Press Fund, which printed radical literature for distribution in Russia, and joined his old friend Stepniak in efforts to overcome the divisions that characterised the Russian revolutionary movement. The two men also sought to build closer links with Russian liberals, a tactic viewed with scepticism by revolutionary luminaries like Petr Lavrov and Georgii Plekhanov, who feared that such cooperation would weaken rather than strengthen the opposition to tsarism. In the chaotic aftermath of the 1905 Revolution, Volkhovskii returned for a time to Russia, where he played a role producing propaganda designed to encourage mutiny in the Russian army and navy, before fleeing the country once again to avoid arrest. In the final years of his life, he served as a regular delegate for the Socialist Revolutionaries at conferences of the Second International. He was, to put it flippantly, something of a revolutionary 'Forrest Gump' whose life can provide a segue into the development of the Russian revolutionary movement.[19]

Vera Figner once suggested that there was 'almost no material' on Volkhovskii in the literature describing the history of the Russian revolutionary movement.[20] Volkhovskii's name in fact appears quite regularly in the memoirs published in such journals as *Byloe* (*The Past*) and *Katorga i ssylka* (*Penal Servitude and Exile*), for he was a familiar figure to several generations of revolutionaries, ranging from the 'new people' of the 1860s through to the neo-*narodniki* of the early twentieth century. He was himself a prolific writer of poetry, short stories, literary criticism and polemical journalism. Yet the archival trail is surprisingly thin on material casting light on his ideas and activities. Volkhovskii was a keen correspondent, but while he kept many of the letters he received, only a small number of those he wrote have been preserved. His diaries are episodic and contain little of substance. The records

19 The reference is of course to the 1994 film directed by Robert Zemeckis, whose eponymous hero lives a life that intersects with some of the most dramatic events of the history of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

20 Figner, *Posle Shlissel'burga*, 346.

of the *Okhrana* and its predecessors contain some material relating to surveillance and interrogation, but they seldom reveal much substance about Volkhovskii's networks and activities.[21] Some useful documents can be found in the archives of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, but even there he remains an elusive figure. Volkhovskii wrote several autobiographical pieces towards the end of his life, both for Russian and Western audiences, but while such accounts are valuable, they need to be read with caution given his penchant for turning his experiences into propaganda. His biography must instead be assembled from sources scattered around the world in archives and long-forgotten publications.

The problem in reconstructing the 'life and times' of Volkhovskii is not, though, simply one of source material. It is also the challenge of locating him within a fast-moving and complex landscape, in which he was sometimes a significant figure, but seldom a pivotal one. Volkhovskii was a highly intelligent man, who had little interest in dogma, and was throughout his life impatient with the ideological squabbles that so often characterised the revolutionary movement. His own outlook was characterised above all by his loathing of the tsarist social and political order and his commitment to ending the exploitation of the Russian *narod*, the 'ordinary' Russian people, idealised and mythologised by generations of educated Russians in ways that were often fantastic and naïve.[22] These two instincts—and they were instincts rather than highly articulated principles—underpinned his ideas and actions for half a century. Yet it was precisely Volkhovskii's impatience with ideology that makes it difficult to delineate his long career in terms of the vocabulary typically used to explore patterns of opposition to tsarism: nihilist, radical, revolutionary, populist, liberal and the like.

This should not come as any surprise. The literature on the Russian revolutionary movement that has appeared over the past twenty-five

21 The *Okhrana*, or Department for the Preservation of Public Safety and Order, is often referred to as the tsarist secret police and regularly seen as the predecessor of the better-known secret agencies of the Soviet period. For a useful general history of the *Okhrana*, see Charles A. Ruud and Sergei A. Stepanov, *Fontanka 16: The Tsar's Secret Police* (Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press, 1999).

22 The word *narod* was used by many members of the Russian intelligentsia to describe the 'ordinary' Russian people, typically the peasantry, although from the 1870s onwards it was increasingly used to describe urban workers as well. The character of the Russian *narod*—whether conservative or revolutionary—was at the heart of much social and political debate throughout the nineteenth century.

years or so has taken seriously the lived experience of its participants. The opening up of archives has combined with new ways of thinking about history to allow a richer exploration than one that focuses simply on ideas and organisations. Biography has once again become recognised as a valuable way of understanding the past, not so much for restoring agency to the individual, but because it shows the uncertain and contradictory motives that influence the actions of both the celebrated and the obscure.[23] Detailed discussion about the ideology espoused by members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, for example, seems less compelling when research into the situation on the ground shows patterns of complexity and diversity that do not fit easily into neat categories.[24] Even such seminal developments as the split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks now appear more fluid and uncertain than they once did. The history of opposition to tsarism was characterised by an ever-changing kaleidoscope of individuals and organisations with more-or-less clearly held objectives and ideologies. Too close a focus on ideas and plans runs the risk of assuming that members of the radical opposition thought and acted in line with well-defined ideological principles and a clear sense of tactics. Yet ignoring such things altogether runs the risk of missing how the language and practice of opponents of the tsarist regime were saturated by a conviction that any successful effort to bring about change had to be rooted in a coherent analysis of the possibilities and limitations imposed by Russia's historical situation.

It is in the light of such things, to return to a previous point, that the value of a biography of Feliks Volkhovskii partly rests. It is not only that it can provide a fuller picture of his role within the revolutionary milieu, although that is certainly one of the benefits, given that he has been largely overlooked by historians. Nor is it simply that his career can serve as a prism through which to view wider patterns in the development

23 For a useful discussion of the scholarly nature of this development, see Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma (eds), *The Biographical Turn. Lives in History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017). Many of the biographies cited in the chapters that follow have perhaps (and quite laudably) been inspired less by strong theoretical views and more by a recognition that studying the lives of individuals can help to understand the times they lived in.

24 The best general discussion in English of the Socialist Revolutionary Party before 1914, which captures its complexity and changing character, remains Manfred Hildermeier, *The Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party Before the First World War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).

of opposition to tsarism. A study of Volkhovskii's biography can also illuminate the many ways that the Russian revolutionary movement can be explored: socially, culturally, intellectually and organisationally. As the following chapters will show, Volkhovskii was in many ways a 'typical' representative of the Russian *intelligentsia*, who came to maturity in the 1860s, and dedicated the rest of his life to undermining the tsarist state and the social and economic order it symbolised and protected. At the same time, though, his life—like all lives—was governed by unpredictable contingencies and the need to respond to the countless changes that took place in Russia during the fifty years before the First World War.

It is this that makes Volkhovskii's career so difficult to describe in terms of a vocabulary that is itself often inadequate or confused. It is hardly a concession to the wilder epistemological shores of postmodernism to recognise that social and political labels have uncertain and shifting meanings. The only practical response is to engage in the kind of linguistic pragmatism that is the staple of most historians (even if they are sometimes reluctant to admit it). The situation can perhaps be best illustrated by looking at a few examples. While the literature on the Russian *intelligentsia* is immense, and perhaps still pervaded by a sense that the holy grail of a precise meaning remains elusive, there is something close to a consensus that it constituted a distinctive social-cultural-psychological milieu, characterised both by its alienation from the dominant *mores* of tsarist Russia and by a moral commitment to promoting the well-being of the victims of the social and political *status quo*.[25] The most astute work on the subject has often focused less on the challenge of defining the *intelligentsia* in terms of its supposedly enduring abstract features and more on exploring the factors that shaped its evolution in a specific historical situation, often through the

25 Among the massive and often contradictory literature on the Russian intelligentsia in English see, for example, Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin, 1994); Martin Malia, 'What Is the Intelligentsia?', *Daedalus*, 89, 3 (1960), 441–58; Laurie Manchester, *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia and the Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008); Vladimir C. Nahirny, *The Russian Intelligentsia: From Torment to Silence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1983); Philip Pomper, *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia* (Wheeling, IL: H. Davidson, 1993); Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia. The Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966); Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801–1855* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

prism of particular individuals. The character of the *intelligentsia* was not fixed over the course of half a century. Nor was its development uniform. By examining individual lives, it becomes easier to understand the Russian *intelligentsia* in all its heterogeneity, recognising that any attempt to reduce it to a specific set of features is doomed to fail. Volkhovskii himself was, by any understanding of the term, an *intelligent* whose efforts to bring about revolution shifted over time in response to changing circumstances.

A similar point can be made when addressing the question of whether Volkhovskii was a *narodnik* (or 'populist' to use the English word most often used as a translation). The term itself has long proved elusive, generating extensive academic discussion among scholars about its meaning and relationship to broader European understandings of populism.[26] While Volkhovskii had little interest in ideological questions, he was not really a *narodnik* in the sense suggested by Richard Pipes, who argued in a celebrated article that the term should be limited to a small number of radicals who believed that they should seek to learn from the *narod* rather than lead them 'in the name of abstract, bookish, imported ideas'.[27] Nor was he much interested in the extensive debates that took place about how the tsarist regime needed to be overthrown to forestall the disintegration of the peasant commune in the face of the development of capitalism (fears that have for some historians come to define *narodnichestvo*, at least before the 1880s, as a form of anti-capitalist radicalism).[28] And, more than twenty years later, Volkhovskii contributed little to the earnest discussions within the Socialist Revolutionary Party about questions of post-revolutionary land tenure that so preoccupied Viktor Chernov and many other Party leaders.

Volkhovskii, indeed, wrote almost nothing about the peasant commune and surprisingly little about the Russian peasantry. And yet, in his personal foundation myth, he described how it was the

26 See, for example, the important collection edited by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969). The character of Russian populism and its treatment in the scholarly literature is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

27 Richard Pipes, '*Narodnichestvo*: A Semantic Inquiry', *Slavic Review*, 23, 3 (1964), 441–58 (445).

28 For an interpretation of Russian populism along these lines, see Andrzej Walicki, *The Controversy over Capitalism: Studies in the Social Philosophy of the Russian Populists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

harsh treatment of Russian serfs which he witnessed as a child that led him to question the legitimacy of the existing order. His first major 'revolutionary' activity was planning the clandestine circulation of literature in the Russian countryside, as a means of fostering popular enlightenment through building closer links between the peasantry and sympathetic members of the *intelligentsia*. In many of his writings about literature and theatre in the 1880s, Volkhovskii called for the publication of books and plays crafted to illuminate the culture of the Russian *narod*, while many of the short stories he wrote throughout his life echoed motifs from traditional Russian folktales (more often than not with a distinct radical twist). There is, in short, no neat answer as to whether Volkhovskii was or was not a *narodnik* given that it is a yardstick that lacks precise meaning or definition. What remains important is that his attitude towards social and political questions was shaped by the sense, so characteristic of the Russian *intelligentsia* of the second half of the nineteenth century, that there was a moral imperative on all those who recognised the wretched condition of the Russian *narod* to do everything in their power to ameliorate it. His ideas and instincts—not to mention his actions—clearly place him within the network of individuals and groups that are conventionally assumed to fall within the broad framework of *narodnichestvo*. And, equally clearly, they distance him from the tradition of Marxism–Leninism that triumphed in October 1917, three years after Volkhovskii's death.

A rather different issue is whether Volkhovskii was a revolutionary as opposed to a radical or even a liberal. Much of the ambiguity about Volkhovskii's status as a revolutionary stemmed from his ideological flexibility and readiness to work with all those seeking to bring about change in Russia. It was noted earlier that some leading figures in the Russian revolutionary movement, like Lavrov, thought that he was too focused on building bridges with Russian and Western liberals, yet the tsarist authorities always recognised Volkhovskii as someone who could pose a serious threat both before he left Russia and later in emigration. Nor did he himself shrink from the label revolutionary, even if when writing for a Western audience he typically emphasised how revolution represented a natural choice in the face of repression, rather than a commitment to radical social and economic change. Volkhovskii never had much interest in Russian liberalism as a distinct intellectual

tradition, but he was throughout his career willing to work with those who sat more easily within the confines of (semi-)permitted dissent, whether in Odessa (Ukr. Odesa) in the 1870s or London in the 1890s. While some of his critics saw such a position as evidence of a lack of ideological rigour and revolutionary zeal, it was in large part a reflection of Volkhovskii's pragmatism, and his determination to find the most effective way of undermining the tsarist regime.

All this, in a sense, simply underscores a truth familiar to any biographer: that it is possible in most lives to discern distinct patterns that nevertheless ebb and flow in response to changes and circumstances that disrupt even the most definite narrative arc. Karl Marx was prescient when he observed that 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please'. So, too, is there much truth in the quotation, often attributed to Churchill, that 'when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?' The development of the Russian revolutionary movement was for fifty years or more characterised by a struggle between what some nineteenth-century thinkers called necessity and freedom. Or, to put it rather differently, the challenge facing many of its leading representatives lay in reconciling a view of the world influenced by clear ideological preconceptions with the need to respond to ever-changing but nevertheless still constraining circumstances.

Even the most determined of revolutionaries could not avoid altogether the need to adopt new tactics and ideas in response to events. Vladimir Lenin was once seen by many scholars as an ideologue who bent the course of Russian history by his titanic will. Yet, more recent biographies have rightly recognised how he often responded to events in a pragmatic way to advance his long-term objectives.[29] The most interesting questions focus on the extent to which his short-term manoeuvrings became the substance of his revolutionary work. In other words, was Lenin's use of Marxist language simply a cloak for his all-consuming emphasis on making revolution, or was it rather the framework that shaped his activities, while leaving sufficient room to use his agency to respond to circumstances? Common sense suggests there was an element of both. And common sense suggests, too, that

29 For a lively biography of Lenin that firmly eschews a teleological approach in favour of one that captures his uncertainties and contradictions, see Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2010).

the same was true of many other revolutionaries who had to reconcile their intellectual convictions with the stubborn material of history. Volkhovskii's commitment to revolution was the product, above all, of a visceral loathing of the tsarist state and a determination to promote the welfare of the Russian people. His focus was less on doctrine and more on action—weakening the tsarist state at specific moments in time—in order to expand the potential for developing practical ways of improving the material and cultural position of the *narod*.

It is this insight that frames the argument in the pages that follow. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 examine Volkhovskii's life in Russia before his flight to the west, tracing the genesis of his radical views, and setting them against the wider revolutionary drama, with its progression from the 'nihilism' of the 1860s, through the populism of the 1870s, and on to the bleak years of repression that followed the murder of Aleksandr II in 1881. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 then explore Volkhovskii's time in Britain in the 1890s, arguing that while he played an important role in mobilising international support for the victims of tsarist oppression, he also remained a significant figure in the broader revolutionary emigration through his role in the production and distribution of propaganda. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 discuss the last fifteen years of Volkhovskii's life, when he once again firmly established himself within the ambit of the Russian revolutionary movement, as opposed to being a political exile whose career was characterised primarily by his relations with foreign liberals and radicals. There is a sense in which Volkhovskii became increasingly 'revolutionary' during his last years, expressing more openly than before his support for the use of force to destroy the autocratic regime, and questioning the value of working with moderate opposition groups to bring about change. Whether this represented a definite change in his position, or rather the more forceful articulation of views long held, is perhaps a moot point.

Many of the themes that emerge in these chapters are touched on above: Volkhovskii's general lack of interest in the details of ideological discussion; his focus on the *narod*, not as a repository of communal virtue, but rather as the victim of a harsh social and political order; his sometimes ambiguous attitude towards terrorism and political violence; his growing concern over the threat posed to peace by the forces of 'militarism'; and, perhaps above all, his readiness to respond

to circumstances in ways that could make him seem inconsistent but were often simply a reaction to the situation in which he found himself. Any biography of Volkhovskii also needs to capture other aspects of his life, not least his work as a poet and short story writer, along with his activities as a critic and translator. Nor were these simply ephemeral interests. Literary activity was central to the nineteenth-century Russian *intelligentsia*, in part because it provided a vehicle for expressing views and sentiments likely to face censorship if articulated in more purely political terms, and partly because culture itself was often seen as a kind of handmaiden to the revolutionary cause. Many of Volkhovskii's short stories and poems were propagandistic in character, but he undoubtedly had real literary ability, as well as very significant talent as a critic. His work was the hallmark of a man who was for all his revolutionary passion something more than a revolutionary. And, as will be seen in the chapters that follow, while some of those who met Volkhovskii could find him domineering and impatient, many others considered him to be, in the words of 'the grandmother of the revolution', Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, one of the 'noblest hearts' of the Russian revolutionary movement.[30] What follows is above all a biography of Volkhovskii's public life, but it tries too to capture at least a little of the elusive timbre of a man whose personality impressed so many of those he met as a model of integrity, and who faced the harsh vicissitudes of life with enormous courage and strength.

30 Alice Stone Blackwell (ed.), *The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution. Reminiscences and Letters of Catherine Breshkovsky* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1918), 282.