



FELIKS VOLKHOVSKII  
A REVOLUTIONARY LIFE

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Michael Hughes, *Feliks Volkhovskii: A Revolutionary Life*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0385>

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-194-8

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-195-5

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-196-2

ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-197-9

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-199-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0385

Cover image: Portrait originally published in an obituary of Volkhovskii by Nikolai Chaikovskii in *Golos minuushago*, 10 (2014), 231–35.

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

## 8. Conclusion

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There was something ironic about the date of Volkhovskii's death, given that he had devoted so much of his time and energy over the previous few years to the struggle against 'militarism', for he died the day after Berlin declared war on Russia and two days before Britain declared war on Germany.<sup>1</sup> The armed forces of the main European states remained loyal to their governments. So, for the most part, did the people. Although there were protests in Britain and France in the days following the declaration of war, they were insignificant compared with the patriotic demonstrations that took place on the streets of London and Paris, while thousands of young men flocked to join the fight against their country's enemies.<sup>2</sup> Middle-class support for the war was strong in Germany, and although working-class opinion was more divided, protests soon faded as recognition grew that the conflict had become inevitable.<sup>3</sup> Even Russia was not immune to the wave of patriotic sentiment, despite recent outbreaks of disorder in several cities, which had raised hopes among some revolutionary groups that a new phase in the fight against tsarism was about to begin.<sup>4</sup> The fervent hope repeatedly expressed at conferences of the Second International—that

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- 1 Volkhovskii died on 2 August, although a few sources give the following day as the date of death.
  - 2 Among the large literature on this subject, see Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United. Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jean-Jacques Becker, *L'année 1914* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004).
  - 3 Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'The Topos of Inevitable War in Germany in the Decade Before 1914', in Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen (eds), *Germany in the Age of Total War. Essays in Honour of Francis Carsten* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 23–45.
  - 4 For a useful discussion of the reaction to war in Russia, see Joshua Sanborn, 'The Mobilization of 1914 and the Question of the Russian Nation. A Reexamination', *Slavic Review*, 59, 2 (2000), 267–89.

the spirit of proletarian internationalism would outweigh the siren call of nationalism—appeared at least for a time to be nothing more than the quixotic fantasy of radicals loathe to acknowledge the stubborn realities of the world they hoped to transform.

It is impossible to know how Volkhovskii would have reacted to a war that eventually cost millions of lives and transformed the continent forever. The SR Party quickly split over the conflict. Most of the populist veterans Volkhovskii had known for many years—including Lazarev, Chaikovskii and Breshko-Breshkovskaia—supported Russia's war effort on the grounds that a German victory would set back the cause of revolution. Other prominent SRs like Chernov and Natanson took a different view, arguing for a revolutionary internationalism designed to mobilise popular opposition to war in all the combatant nations, even if they never endorsed the outright 'defeatism' of Lenin and the Bolsheviks.<sup>5</sup> It seems likely that if Volkhovskii had lived then he would have remained committed to the cause of revolutionary internationalism, even at the cost of a break with old friends, although such a judgement must remain tentative given the sheer number of imponderables. It is by contrast almost certain that if he had survived to witness the events that followed the October Revolution of 1917, then he would have joined other SRs, including Chernov and Chaikovskii, as an active participant in the fight against the Bolshevik government.<sup>6</sup> The brutal suppression of dissent that became a hallmark of the new regime would have appalled Volkhovskii as a betrayal of the principles he had espoused for half a century. He was perhaps fortunate in being spared the disillusion and danger that became the lot of so many of his old comrades.

The suppression of the Socialist Revolutionaries in the months following the October Revolution has been seen by some scholars as a key moment in the disintegration of the revolutionary promise of 1917,

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- 5 Michael Melancon, *The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Russian Anti-War Movement 1914–1917* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 20–56.
  - 6 Among the large literature on the SRs in the wake of the October Revolution, see Oliver Radkey, *The Sickle under the Hammer: The Russian Socialist Revolutionaries in the Early Months of Soviet Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); Scott B. Smith, *Captives of Revolution: The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolshevik Dictatorship, 1918–1923* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011). For a lively discussion of the SRs in emigration between the world wars, see Elizabeth White, *The Socialist Alternative to Bolshevik Russia: The Socialist Revolutionary Party, 1921–1939* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

signifying the Bolsheviks' determination to defend their position, even at the cost of eliminating other radical voices and movements.<sup>7</sup> There was, though, even before 1917, a recognition in some quarters that the seeds of authoritarianism were deep-rooted in the culture of the Russian revolutionary *intelligentsia*. The contributors to the celebrated *Vekhi* (*Landmarks*) Symposium of 1909, including Petr Struve and Nikolai Berdiaev, argued that a quasi-millenarian instinct had fostered a deep-seated intolerance and opposition to compromise among many Russian radicals.<sup>8</sup> It was an insight that subsequently found an echo in much of the scholarly literature produced in Western Europe and North America, both on the pre-revolutionary Russian *intelligentsia* and the post-revolutionary Soviet state,<sup>9</sup> as well as the vast literature on totalitarianism as a form of political religion that came to prominence after the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> Although seldom spelt out in detail, much of this work assumed that Bolshevik authoritarianism was simply one expression of a broader revolutionary tradition, characterised by an oppositional mentality that focused above all on the need to destroy the

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- 7 See, for example, Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War* (London: Longman, 1995). For a superbly detailed examination of the establishment of Bolshevik power, and the marginalisation of other left-wing groups, see Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power. The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).
- 8 Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (eds), *Vekhi / Landmarks* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994).
- 9 Among the numerous examples of such works see, for example, Alain Besançon, *The Intellectual Origins of Leninism*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981); Tibor Szamuely, *The Russian Tradition* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974); Adam Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Prerevolutionary Russia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998).
- 10 The classic early text on this theme, which exerted enormous influence on later writers, was Eric Voeglin's 1938 book *Die politischen Religionen* available in translation by T. J. DiNapoli and E. S. Easterly III, *Political Religions* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 1986). See, too, the chapter by Arthur Versluis, 'Eric Voeglin, Anti-Gnostics, and the Totalitarian Emphasis on Order', in Arthur Versluis, *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-Hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 69–84. The potential affinities between totalitarian political ideologies and religious belief systems became a standard motif in many works that sought to compare Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia as political systems with ruling ideologies and civic rituals informed by distinct religious memes. For a lively if rather simplistic article on this theme, see Marcin Kula, 'Communism as Religion', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religion*, 6, 3 (2005), 371–81. For a more critical approach see Hans Maier, 'Political Religion. A Concept and its Limitations', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religion*, 8, 1 (2007), 5–16.

tsarist regime, rather than confront the practical challenges of building a new socialist society. The obvious conclusion that flows from such a perspective is that other revolutionary parties might have followed the Bolshevik path if they had found themselves in power.

Such broad interpretations tend to fall apart when subjected to detailed historical investigation, even if they sometimes contain insights that remain of value, providing a broader context in which to view specific moments in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement. It was noted in the Introduction that Viktor Chernov characterised the life of Feliks Volkhovskii as 'a history of the Russian revolutionary movement'.<sup>11</sup> It is certainly true that his biography provides a way into the complex ideological and organisational mosaic that was the hallmark of the Russian opposition to tsarism over half a century. What the life of Volkhovskii shows above all, though, is precisely the danger of making neat generalisations about ideologies and organisations. This is partly because he was a revolutionary pragmatist, deeply committed to promoting popular welfare and destroying the autocratic state, while remaining open-minded in the face of the fervent debates about ideology and tactics that enthralled so many leading figures in the revolutionary movement. And, inevitably, his views about how best to promote revolution changed over fifty years as the world around him changed. Volkhovskii's life and thought was shaped as much by contingencies as by forethought and planning. It is, despite these caveats, possible to identify four broad periods in his revolutionary career, even if the chronological and thematic divisions between them were not always precise.

Whether or not the seeds of Volkhovskii's revolutionary instincts were sown in early childhood, when he witnessed the flogging of one of his grandfather's serfs, he was by his teenage years familiar with the radical ideas expressed in journals such as *Sovremennik*. He was just eighteen when in his first year at university he witnessed the civic execution of Nikolai Chernyshevskii. The youthful Volkhovskii was in all respects a typical *shestidesiatnik*—a person of the sixties—an *intelligent* whose outlook was shaped by a blend of opposition to the social and political *status quo* and a passionate if vague commitment to a utilitarian

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11 V. M. Chernov, *Pered burei* (Moscow: Direct Media, 2016), 203.

scientism that rejected the idealism of the older generation of 'fathers'. He was part of a milieu that defined itself as much in terms of lifestyle and outlook as it did in more formal intellectual commitment. And, while he was not as a young man directly involved in any of the plots to assassinate the Tsar and foment violent revolution, whether the Ishutin-Karakazov conspiracy of 1865–66 or the Nechaevskoe delo of 1869–70, he was in contact with some who were. Volkhovskii was among the first of the young *intelligenty* of the 1860s to think seriously about how to build bridges to the Russian *narod*, whose welfare formed the focus of much radical talk, even as it remained, in German Lopatin's words, something of a 'sphinx' to those who spent their lives in the city. The short-lived Ruble Society, co-founded by Volkhovskii and Lopatin to foster closer ties between the peasantry and the *intelligentsia*, represented an early moment in the shift from the nihilism of the 1860s to the populism of the following decade. Even so, Volkhovskii himself never came to share the romanticised view of the *narod* held by many of those who subsequently flocked to the Russian countryside during the mad summer of 1874.

Volkhovskii's writings of the late 1860s—whether in the form of diary jottings or draft articles—suggest that he was for a short time open to a Jacobinism which held that the destruction of the tsarist state could only be brought about by a determined group ready to seize power in the name of the *narod*. By the time he was released from his second spell of imprisonment in 1871, though, he had once again come to believe that an effective revolution could only take place with the active involvement of the people. As leader of the Chaikovskii circle in Odessa, he was convinced that the cause of revolution was best advanced by developing a leadership cadre of young workers and members of the *intelligentsia*. It was a view shared by some (but not all) members of the wider Chaikovskii movement, although Volkhovskii's emphasis on organisation and discipline was unusually strong, as was the vigour and determination with which he built his organisation. Equally striking was his sense that urban workers rather than the peasantry represented the most natural focus for agitation and organisation (he seldom took much interest in the intense ideological debates that preoccupied many leading *narodniki* about the threat posed by the development of capitalism to the peasant commune). Volkhovskii was, by the 1870s, a pragmatist who was ready to work with liberals in Odessa if it could help to advance

the cause of revolution. This did not necessarily make him a 'moderate', although he was throughout his life adept at reassuring those who were appalled by the brutality of the Russian state, even as they feared the chaos of revolution that was bound to result from its destruction. It was rather that Volkhovskii focused on practical questions of advancing the revolutionary cause rather than constantly interrogating its ideological foundations.

Volkhovskii was already established as a significant revolutionary leader by the time of his third arrest in 1874. His poetry was well known in radical circles. And, three years later, he was one of the most prominent defendants at the Trial of the 193, where his impassioned denunciation of the 'Court' became an important staging-post in reducing the process to a judicial farce. It is still not clear why Volkhovskii was not sentenced to hard labour, given his track record, but exile to Siberia in 1878 inevitably marked an important stage in his revolutionary career. The realities of exile, first in Tiukalinsk and then Tomsk, placed constraints on his freedom of action at a time when the reactionary government of Aleksandr III was hollowing out the heart of the revolutionary wave that had culminated in the assassination of his father in 1881. Whether Volkhovskii would have become a member of Narodnaia volia in the late 1870s, if he had still been at liberty, remains uncertain, but it is striking that many of those he worked with earlier in the decade subsequently committed themselves to a 'political' strategy of terrorism, in the hope that it would lead either to the destruction of the tsarist state or at least to reforms that could further the struggle for radical social and economic change.

Volkhovskii's outlook during his time in Siberia during the 1880s seems at first glance to have changed sharply, marking the development of a second phase in his revolutionary life, in which he became more convinced of the virtues of participating in legal forms of opposition, contributing extensively to *Sibirskaiia gazeta* as well as publishing numerous short stories and poems. Distinctive radical and *narodnik* themes nevertheless still ran through many of Volkhovskii's writings. His theatre columns were informed by a literary aesthetic that emphasised the need for dramatic performances to engage with the outlook and needs of the people. Many of his short stories criticised the philistine values of the merchant class and the corruption that was commonplace



among *chinovniki* in provincial towns. Such work was consistent with the broader development in the 1880s of a cultural populism that focused on accurately depicting the Russian *narod* in literature and art, in order to foster greater understanding of its character and needs, rather than articulating the more revolutionary social and political motifs of the previous decade. ‘Legal populism’—to (mis)use a term that has its own uncertainties and ambiguities—was both a reaction to a political environment that limited the scope for truly revolutionary action as well as a search for new ways to promote a deeper understanding of the Russian *narod*.<sup>12</sup> Volkhovskii’s emphasis on ‘Siberianism’, which was the hallmark of many of the articles published in *Sibirskaiia gazeta*, was shaped by a desire to identify and defend patterns of popular identity in the face of a government bureaucracy that believed such ‘regionalism’ could threaten social and political order. The same was true of the ‘Ukrainophilism’ that had characterised his outlook since his time as a student in the 1860s. The constraints of censorship meant that such ideas and criticisms could only be expressed in veiled and elusive terms, but even the most cursory reading of Volkhovskii’s writings of the 1880s often reveals a critical intent designed to shape the views of the audience, while remaining sufficiently Aesopian in character to pass the censor.

There was nevertheless another dimension to Volkhovskii’s literary output during his time in Siberian exile. While much of his poetry of the 1870s had been thoroughly ‘revolutionary’ in character, designed to celebrate and inspire those who were committed to the fight against tsarism, some of his best work also captured the sadness and pathos that ran through his own life. The same was even more true of his poetry of the 1880s, which was less ‘programmatically’ than his earlier work, and more inclined to celebrate the beauty of the Siberian landscape and the heartache of his own tragic losses. Nor was there anything ‘revolutionary’ about many of the *feuilletons* he contributed to *Sibirskaiia gazeta*, for while he sometimes used fantasy as a way of denouncing bureaucratic incompetence and corruption, much of his work was

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12 For a discussion of legal populism, see G. N. Mokshin, *Evolutsiia ideologii legal'nogo narodnichestva v poslednei treti XIX–nachale XX vv.* (Voronezh: Nauchnaia Kniga, 2010). See, too, B. P. Baluev, *Liberal'noe narodnichestvo na rubezhe XIX–XX vekov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1995).

simply whimsical and light-hearted. Volkhovskii was—throughout his life—not immune to the leaden demands of revolutionary aesthetic. He nevertheless possessed a real literary talent and imagination that meant his best work displayed a vivid quality that reflected his own suspicion of dogma in all its various forms.

Volkhovskii's literary talent was to become a significant factor in giving him an entrée to British society following his arrival in London in the summer of 1890. So too was his *persona*—part crafted and part genuine—that seemed to embody the suffering of those who dared to fight against the tsarist autocratic state. The seeds of Volkhovskii's future reputation (and reception) in Britain were planted by George Kennan, who was immensely impressed by Volkhovskii during their meetings in Tomsk in 1885-86, although the picture he painted for his Western audience in *Century Magazine* was distinctly one-sided. While not denying that many Siberian exiles like Volkhovskii were ready to support the use of violence to overthrow tsarism, Kennan presented such a strategy as the only one available to men and women confronted by a brutal autocratic state that snuffed out any demands for change. In doing so, he helped to shape Volkhovskii's image as a man whose moral and political *credo* placed him firmly within the boundaries of Anglo-American liberalism. Volkhovskii's meetings with Kennan in Siberia led him to recognise for his part that the cause of revolution could be advanced by winning over supporters in the West, and while his flight from Siberia in 1889 was partly the result of his desperate personal circumstances, he had already come to believe that he would be more effective at helping the revolutionary cause in exile abroad rather than by remaining in Russia.

The third phase in Volkhovskii's revolutionary career, roughly the years between 1890 and the early 1900s, was marked by a certain tension. Much of the support for the 'cause' of Russian freedom in Britain and North America came from liberals and nonconformists who viewed the country through a prism of moral universalism which encouraged a critical focus on the tsarist government's treatment of religious minorities and political opponents. Many members of this distinctive coalition were, though, firmly opposed to the use of terror and, more generally, quizzical about any ideology that challenged the supremacy of liberal constitutional values and the rights of private property. A large

number of those active in the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom were curiously ready to believe that the Russian exiles in London were at heart political moderates rather than revolutionaries. Volkhovskii and Stepniak came to personify for many of their British sympathisers a beguiling mixture of strangeness and familiarity, representatives of an alien and intriguing culture, who were nevertheless inspired by the same values as fair-minded men and women in Western Europe and North America.

Nor was this simply the result of an elaborate self-fashioning on the part of political émigrés like Volkhovskii, designed to reassure Britons that in subscribing to *Free Russia*, or attending a lecture sponsored by the SFRF, they were not supporting violent revolution. The relations between the Russian émigrés and their English sympathisers were often genuinely warm and constructive. The vast appetite for all things Russian at the height of the 'Russia craze' helped open hearts and minds to Volkhovskii and other members of the London emigration. There was, though, always something unreal about the image of the Russian revolutionary movement presented in the pages of *Free Russia*. Individual revolutionaries were presented as heroic victims of the harsh rule of the tsarist state. Very little was said about their ideological views. While many readers of *Free Russia* thought of revolution in terms of individual freedom and rights, the same was seldom true of members of the more radical wing of the Russian opposition, whether *narodnik* or Marxist. Or, to put it more precisely, revolutionaries like Volkhovskii saw the struggle for freedom and constitutional reform as a struggle for changes that would in time make it easier to bring about a more far-reaching social and economic revolution. Some radical Fabians among the early supporters of *Free Russia* and the SFRF might have sympathised with such a position. Most by contrast believed that establishing constitutional government in Russia was something of supreme value in its own right. They thought that the revolutionaries were fighting for changes that would make Russia more like Britain.

The limits to the liberalism of Volkhovskii and Stepniak were, perhaps paradoxically, highlighted by their commitment in the first half of the 1890s to building a broad opposition movement of Russian revolutionaries and liberals alike. It was a strategy founded on a recognition that both 'parties' had a common interest in securing

constitutional reform, whether as a fundamental political *desideratum*, or as a mechanism for facilitating the fight for revolutionary change. Neither Volkhovskii nor Stepniak ever saw themselves, though, as belonging to the ranks of the Russian liberals: quite the reverse. Nor did they believe that the existence of certain common ground eliminated the distance between the two groups (although Petr Lavrov in Paris was suspicious that they did). What is perhaps less clear is what kind of society Volkhovskii (and, indeed, Stepniak) hoped to see emerge in Russia beyond a vaguely articulated socialism. Nor were they alone in this. The social and economic changes that took place in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rendered archaic the earlier *narodnik* focus on defending the peasant *mir* (commune). It was only in the first decade of the twentieth century that serious thought was given by members of the newly formed Socialist Revolutionary Party to such questions as what forms of land tenure would be most effective in advancing the welfare of the Russian peasantry. Volkhovskii, as has been seen throughout this book, preferred to focus his attention on identifying ways of undermining the tsarist state rather than pondering what kind of social and political order might emerge out of its destruction.

Volkhovskii's time in London helped to build further the journalistic and propagandistic skills he had developed when still living in Siberia. He was more or less from the moment he arrived in London the *de facto* editor of *Free Russia*, working closely with Stepniak to ensure that the tone of its coverage appealed to its British readers, through a sustained focus on the harshness of the Russian prison system and the iniquities of exile. He was also a leading figure in the Russian Free Press Fund, as well as the editor and main contributor to *Letuchie listki*, fostering a 'non-factional' approach designed to appeal to all strands of the opposition movement. Volkhovskii's role in these enterprises has often been eclipsed by his friendship with Stepniak, widely seen at the time and since as the main architect of both *Free Russia* and the Fund, as well as the principal author of the strategy of building a broad anti-tsarist opposition both in Russia and abroad. Yet while Stepniak possessed a charisma and authority that his old friend lacked, Volkhovskii played a more significant role in the practical side of propaganda work: obtaining Cyrillic typefaces, dealing with financial questions, building networks to smuggle material into Russia. Stepniak's death at the end of 1895 was

without doubt a major blow to the fundists. It exposed tensions within the group and reduced their influence both with the *narodniki* grouped around Petr Lavrov in Paris and the Emancipation of Labour Group in Geneva. It also weakened links with revolutionaries from other European countries. The practical business of producing *Free Russia* and *Letuchie listki* nevertheless continued unabated. So, too, did the work of the Free Press Fund. Volkhovskii was the central figure in ensuring that Stepniak's death did not mark the end of such activities.

The campaign orchestrated by the *Okhrana* in the 1890s to discredit Stepniak and Volkhovskii, by equating them with the violent anarchists responsible for terrorist outrages across Europe, undoubtedly met with some success. It increased concern among more moderate British proponents of the 'cause' that their financial support might be used to promote violent revolution. Nor is there much doubt that some of the money collected by the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom was diverted to such ends. Volkhovskii was, though, throughout the 1890s concerned not to alienate potential supporters of the revolutionary movement in Britain. This began to change in the years after 1900, as he focused less on mobilising international support, and more on working with other Russian émigré groups across Europe to support the revolutionary cause, a development that marked the start of the fourth and final period of his revolutionary life. While Volkhovskii's work with Konni Zilliacus to build a broad-based opposition to tsarism was consistent with the strategy that he pursued with Stepniak in the 1890s, his support for smuggling weapons into Russia, to foment armed uprisings at a time when Russian forces were focused on war with Japan, represented a more direct entry (or perhaps return) to 'hands-on' revolutionary activity. So did his support for the assassination of senior tsarist officials in the years before the 1905 Revolution. It was not that Volkhovskii had ever opposed the use of force as a matter of principle. It was rather that he thought during the 1890s that Russian émigrés in Britain and elsewhere needed to be circumspect in expressing views that might make their position more difficult. He was by the opening years of the twentieth century increasingly ready to acknowledge that a successful revolution was unlikely to be bloodless.

The creation of the Agrarian-Socialist League, and its subsequent merger with the Socialist Revolutionary Party, shaped Volkhovskii's

activities throughout the last fourteen years of his life. While he continued to edit *Free Russia*, support for the 'cause' in Britain increasingly came from radical socialists, who were sympathetic to demands for sweeping social and economic change as well as constitutional reform. It is striking that when Volkhovskii died, most of the Britons who attended his cremation service were drawn from left-wing socialist parties, rather than the distinctive liberal-nonconformist nexus that formed a large part of the audience for *Free Russia* in the 1890s. In the years following the 1905 Revolution, Volkhovskii also finally abandoned his earlier hopes of building a broad coalition of opposition between Russian revolutionaries and Russian liberals, in part because of his frustration at the latter's timidity, and even more because he believed that the situation on the ground had fundamentally changed. Like many SRs, Volkhovskii continued to believe that political reform could expedite far reaching social and economic change, but he was less inclined than before to think that it represented a critical stage on the road to revolution. Nor was he any clearer than before about what kind of society he hoped to see emerge in the wake of a successful revolution. While Volkhovskii remained committed to the development of socialism both in the city and the countryside, he was still remarkably silent on what he understood by such a term, and showed little interest in the agonised debates that took place in SR publications and at SR conferences about such things as the socialisation of the land and the nationalisation of the means of production in industry. He was by contrast intensely interested in identifying ways of weakening the tsarist state's capacity to prevent revolution and maintain the social and political *status quo*.

Volkhovskii's main contribution to the SRs was as ever in the sphere of propaganda. It is not entirely clear why he became involved in the production of material aimed at Russian soldiers and sailors during his months in Finland, at the end of 1906 and start of 1907, but it certainly became his main focus of activity down until his death in 1914. Volkhovskii's long experience in producing newspapers and flysheets meant that he was well-suited to take a leading role in the production of *Za narod* from its first publication in 1907, helping to develop a paper that blended analysis and reportage, while articulating an editorial position that assumed all the revolutionary parties were united in their desire to overthrow tsarism. He was also a significant figure within the

SR leadership in emigration, where his status as one of the veterans of the revolutionary movement gave him considerable prestige, although he never commanded such loyalty as figures like Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, in part because he was seen by some younger Party members as increasingly out of touch with developments in Russia. While Volkhovskii played a significant role in the SR Foreign Committee during the 1905 Revolution, he never fully grasped that Party leaders abroad would always find it difficult to determine questions of strategy and tactics, not least given the chaotic character of the Party's administration and the instinctive suspicion of hierarchy that characterised many of its members. Nor was he ever really a dominant voice within the SR hierarchy. Although he participated in many of the key Party congresses and conferences in the years after the 1905 Revolution, his interventions were seldom decisive, even on such questions as the use of terror and the development of effective agitation within the military. And, while Volkhovskii could be adept at winning the respect and affection of some Party members, many more found him abrasive and out of touch. Yet his skills as a publicist were always in demand. When he sought to pull back from his commitments in the wake of the Azef affair, he was persuaded to continue his work, at a time when the SR Party was facing a deep-seated crisis of confidence and internal strife.

Volkhovskii's focus on producing propaganda to foment unrest in the military was a logical response to the widespread disorder that erupted in both the army and navy in 1905–07. So too was his involvement in meetings of the Second International that focused on how best to mobilise workers to counter the threat of war. It is hard, though, to see such activities as having any positive result. When war came in 1914, the Russian army for the most part remained loyal to the government, and it was only when massive failures of military supply resulted in defeat on the battlefield that spiralling levels of discontent and desertion led to the army and navy becoming important sites of revolutionary activity. The Bolsheviks were far more successful than the Socialist Revolutionaries after 1914 at building up support within the military rank and file, in part because of their uncompromising opposition to the war, which in turn ensured that the Party's leaders could rely on significant support in the army and navy during the chaos of 1917. The efforts made by Volkhovskii and other SRs before 1914 to foster revolutionary sentiment

in the military seem to have had little long-term effect, at least in creating a deep well of support for the Party among soldiers and sailors, perhaps (ironically) because the insistence on a non-party approach masked the important role the SRs played in propaganda and agitation in the military in the years after 1905.

The success of the Bolsheviks in overthrowing the Provisional Government in October 1917, along with the subsequent repression of other revolutionary groups, has often prompted a teleological reading of history in which the triumph of Lenin is seen as the almost inevitable outcome of factors ranging from the superior organisation of the Bolsheviks through to the vacillation and division of other radical groups. More recent scholarship has questioned such a narrative, showing how Lenin's control of the Bolsheviks was far less complete than sometimes imagined, while the Bolshevik Party was itself often deeply fractious and impervious to the wishes of its leaders. The limited historiography on the Socialist Revolutionaries before 1914 has by contrast *always* tended to focus on its divisions and lack of clear leadership. There is a good deal of truth in this image of the Party, which reflected differences over important issues such as the use of terror and participation in the Duma, as well as the tension between SR leaders in emigration and those in Russia itself. While the Party periodically lost activists on both the left and the right, it was never ideologically cohesive nor united on questions of tactics. A moment's pause suggests that such divisions and disagreements should hardly be a cause for surprise, given that the SR Party contained tens of thousands of activists with a range of backgrounds and experiences, each with their own perspectives on how to bring about revolutionary change. Chaos and confusion are more often the stuff of human experience than order and certainty. The absence of so dominant a figure as Lenin was probably a factor in condemning the SRs to disagreement and division when the Party needed to coalesce more fully round a clear set of tactics and beliefs. But even Lenin followed events as much as he shaped them.

This is not to say there were no individuals who played a definite 'leading role' in the SRs. Viktor Chernov did more than anyone to shape the ideological character of the Party's programmes and statements. Mikhail Gots, Evno Azef and Boris Sazonov played an important role in shaping the Party's terrorist strategy. Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia



established a kind of effortless influence that gave her voice real authority in the Party's counsels. Volkhovskii was never among these figures—but even influential figures like Chernov were seldom able to determine developments 'on the ground' in Russia, where local SR groups enjoyed considerable autonomy, rejecting instructions that did not fit with their own priorities and view of the immediate situation. It is once again unwise to assess individuals in the Russian revolutionary movement simply in terms of their agency or importance. The interest in studying any revolutionary life, perhaps any life, instead lies in seeing how it fitted into a wider pattern that was itself often uncertain and contradictory.

It has been seen throughout the previous chapters that the language traditionally used to discuss the development of the revolutionary movement in Russia before 1917 is as much a source of obfuscation as illumination. Terms such as 'populist', 'liberal', 'radical' and 'revolutionary' all have fluid meanings that reflect both historical and contemporary usage as well as a semantic tension between what might be termed their *a priori* and positional resonance. Or, to put it more simply, while such terms have their uses, they have their limitations too. Although it is possible to identify certain broad patterns of ideological development and disagreement in the Russian revolutionary movement in the half century before 1917, as well as shifting views about revolutionary tactics and organisation, the experience of being a revolutionary was more complex and fragmented than sometimes assumed. Many revolutionary careers were shaped not so much by well-defined ideological principles as by a powerful emotional commitment to bringing about the downfall of the economic and political *status quo*. This is not to argue that ideological conflicts within the revolutionary movement were not deep-seated and fierce. Nor is it to question whether 'ideology' helped to provide a framework for understanding the complex brew of social and political tensions that eventually destroyed the tsarist state. It clearly did. It is instead to suggest that a revolutionary 'instinct' was, for many members of the Russian revolutionary movement, more important than the nuances of ideological debate.

Feliks Volkhovskii was no exception to this pattern. His own published autobiographical writings (both Russian and English) were designed to convince his readers of the brutality of the tsarist state and

by implication justify the actions of those who sought to overthrow it. They seldom touched on questions of ideology or revolutionary tactics narrowly understood. Opposition to the tsarist state and sympathy for the economic plight of the Russian people, whether in the countryside or the city, was the constant *leitmotif* of Volkhovskii's revolutionary life. He was instinctively flexible in addressing how change might be brought about. And, while his pragmatism appeared to some as lack of principle, it was informed above all by a deep fount of human sympathy that had little time for the kind of intolerance and factionalism that was so often a feature of the Russian revolutionary movement before 1917.