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THE «UNITED OPPOSITION» OF THE 1890-s: ATTEMPTS TO UNITE RUSSIAN POLITICAL EMIGRATION

In the early 1930s, during the preparation of an edition of the papers of G. V. Plekhanov, his widow Rozalia Markovna wrote to the Russian emigre David Vladimirovich Soskis asking him for copies of Plekhanov's letters to him together with annotations regarding their content. These documents, the extant letters from Plekhanov and notes on them compiled by Soskis together with an autobiographical note from the letter on his experiences in Russia and abroad as a Russian Social Democrat, are held in the Records Office of the House of Lords in London. Only a part of these documents and notes were published in the Plekhanov edition. They illuminate a pivotal moment in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement: the attempts, during the mid-1890s, to publish a united opposition newspaper which would print news and opinion acceptable to all the groups within the movement.

Relations between the various groups of Russian political emigres, and between the emigres and their «front-line troops» in Russia itself, were frequently complicated, even quarrelsome. As P. L. Lavrov, for long the doyen of the emigration, put it, schism and dispute were «a natural pathological phenomenon in every emigration torn away from its homeland» (1). By the early 1890s, the opposition to Tsarism had split into three major emigre centres. Paris, where P. L. Lavrov himself lived and where broadly the emigration was **народники** or **народовольцы**, Switzerland/French Alps, where Plekhanov and the Marxists were dominant; and London, where a mixed or eclectic group, the FVRP (**Фонд Вольной Русской Прессы** or **фондовцы**, as they were most often called) held sway. Connected with the FVRP was an organisation aimed at recruiting among British sympathisers with the anti-Tsarist cause, the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom (SFRF).

Nonetheless, at various times attempts had been made to unify the opposition to Tsarism into a single «party». For instance, in the autumn of 1881 there was a rapprochement between the **Черный передел**, the nascent Marxist movement, and **Народная воля** over the issue of the role of terrorism in the revolutionary movement. These negotiations were intended to result in a joint publication, **«Вестник народной воли»**, and the setting-up of a

united anti-Tsarist political party (2). The next attempt at unification came after the regnancy of Lev Tikhomirov, who had, in 1887, from being a **народоволец**, turned tsar's evidence (3), — and also came to nothing.

A further attempt to form from the revolutionary movement a united front, came in the wake of the 1890-s famine in Russia. The Swiss exiles (mainly «the Liberation of Labour» group at the instigation of P.B. Aksel'rod) formed a Society to Fight the Famine' (Общество борьбы с голодом), whose aims were expounded in Plekhanov's article «The All-Russian Devastation» («Всероссийское разорение»). In it, he urged «all honest Russian people» to «immediately begin agitation for the convocation of a land assembly» земский собор, «without regard to party differences»: «Let each party and each fraction do whatever deed is suggested to it by its programme» (4). Lavrov replied refusing to collaborate with the **Фондовцы** on the grounds that they had opportunistically tailored their policies to suit British bourgeois public opinion (5). Aksel'rod wrote to Stepniak in February 1892 that collaboration with the Lavrovists was impossible since «they put minor personal accounts in the foreground and political considerations in the background» (6). Stepniak also refused the invitation to collaborate on the grounds that «I am definitely and unconditionally against organisations abroad which take it into their heads to lead affairs in Russia. Abroad is for one thing only literature, the theoretical working out of general and particular (practical) issues. Anything more than that is on the cunning side» (7).

The famine gave impetus to attempts by the opposition inside Russia to unify against Tsarism. M.A. Natanson, formerly a leading figure in the Chaikovskii circle of the early 1870s, formed an intellectual **кружок** in Saratov between 1890 and 1892. With his extensive network of acquaintances in the revolutionary movement, Natanson managed to establish links with N.K. Mikhailovskii, the leading **народник** theorist — soon to become the editor of «Русское богатство», the prominent legal **народнический** journal. Links were also established with the Союз groups (so known from the title of a review which it launched in January 1893, which called for «a union of revolutionaries in Russia» since in Russia «there is not yet a basis for party organisations on the European pattern» (8) ; and with the writer V. G. Korolenko in Nizhnii Novgorod. A «club, joined by both **народовольцы**... and marxists» (9) was formed in Kazan' in 1892. As David Soskice's autobiographical fragment shows (10), such non-party groups had existed on the Volga in the 1880s, too. In 1894 the Kasan' group united with similar groups in Orel, Samara and elsewhere to form the People's Right Party — Партия народного права. This party was in existence for just over a year in all-it was shattered by arrests in mid-1894-but included among its members Korolenko, Natanson, A. I. Bogdanovich,

P. N. Miliukov and V. M. Chernov. The members managed for some time thereafter to reconstitute the organisation in a looser form, the People's Right Society — Общество народного права.

The народоправцы had many contacts abroad, among them D.V. Soskice, who had escaped abroad in the summer of 1893 and forged links with the фондовцы. By 1894, the Фонд had published the Society's brochure «The Vital Question» — «Насущный вопрос» — and its manifesto in Russian in London (11). Another link was formed by V. G. Korolenko, who travelled in 1893 to the Chicago World's Fair as the correspondent of «Русские ведомости». On the way, he stopped off in London and met the фондовцы, who greatly admired his work, which the Фонд had published in Russian uncensored. Stepniak gave him a letter of introduction to L.B. Gol'denberg who introduced Korolenko to the Chicago representative of the Фонд, Egor Egorovich Lazarev. All of this became known to the Охрана, which had recruited Gol'denberg's associate, the US-resident Russian bookseller A.M. Evalenko, as an informer. Evalenko and Gol'denberg put to Korolenko the idea of publishing an all-party revolutionary newspaper. Lazarev then wrote to the principal emigrant colonies to L.I. Sishko in Paris, to the фондовцы in London and to Plekhanov in Geneva (12). In March 1894, Lazarev left for Paris and London to recruit a Central Committee for Russia. According to the Охрана's Paris bureau chief, V. L. Burtsev and Soskice were ready to return to Russia to act in this role. In the event, other emigres did return to Russia acting on behalf of the organisation but were arrested in a mass police intervention against народоправцы all over Russia on 21 April 1894. However, the ФВРП continued to have close links with народоправцы, publishing in 1897 and 1898 two Сборники the People's Right Society under the title «Наше Время». The PRS ceased to exist in 1898.

The next chapter of the «Russian opposition newspaper», a plan which had clearly not been abandoned by the emigrants, occurred at the end of 1895. A lawyer from Odessa, Lev Abramovich Kupernik, a former **народоправец**, came to London with an offer of financial help for a «united opposition» newspaper, to be called «Земский собор» — «The Land Assembly» — and to be edited by Stepniak. Negotiations were progressing well when Stepniak was killed in an accident at an unprotected railway crossing in Shepherd's Bush, West London on December 23, 1895. Feliks Vadimovich Volkhovskii was the candidate editor to replace Stepniak, but he was not as acceptable to all parties as his predecessor had been, and Plekhanov refused to enter into any publishing venture headed by him (13).

In 1896, following the debacle of the «Земский собор», P. A. Dementiev (also known — in the USA — as Demens, and — in literary circles — as

P. A. Tverskoi), made a similar proposal to the Фондовцы: to publish an all-party journal, concentrating on the «political» issues of representative government, the rule of law and civil and human rights, on which it was thought that the entire emigration could agree. Whilst in America in 1893, V. G. Korolenko had met Dement'ev, who however produced an unsympathetic impression on him (14). The ФВРП in 1896 published Dement'ev's short story «По ошибке» and the following year brought out three issues of a journal «Современник» edited by him. The journal proved to be a failure in terms of its ideas, which fell short of the revolutionary content desired, and therefore in terms of its ability to unite the opposition (15).

By end of the 1890s, then, the aim of uniting the whole Russian anti-Tsarist movement under one harness had failed to be realised. In this respect only, Nikolai II was right to characterise his opponents' ambitions as «бессмысленные мечтания». The future of the movement lay not in unity and eclecticism, but in differentiation and purity of vision.

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3. Там же. P. 34—42 (Correspondence between Aksel'rod and the editorial)
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5. Письма П. Б. Аксельрода и Ю. О. Мартова. Berlin. 1924. P. 117—119.
6. Там же. P. 128.
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10. See my contribution to: *Исторический архив*. 1995. № 5—6.
11. John Slatter, *The Russian Emigre Press in London, 1850—1917* // *Slavonic and East European Review*. October 1995. P. 716—747.
12. See his letter to Plekhanov, dated 10 November 1893, in which he insists that the source of the American money remain secret, // *Литературное наследие Г. В. Плеханова*. Т. 1 М., 1934. С. 227.
13. See Plekhanov's first letter to Soskis dated 1 September 1896 // *Литературное наследие Г. В. Плеханова*. М., 1937. Т. 4. С. 305—6.
14. В. Г. Короленко, *Избранные письма*. М., 1932. Т. 1, С. 127.
15. See Soskis' note (VII) to his letter to Plekhanov // *ИА* 1995. № 5—6.