

A PEOPLE'S TRAGEDY

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
1891-1924

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revolution. That was the tragedy of 1917.

iii Looting the Looters

For the first time in many years General Denikin found himself among ordinary Russians as he sat in a third-class railway carriage, disguised as a Polish nobleman, on his way to the Don:

Now I was simply a *boorzhui*, who was shoved and cursed, sometimes with malice, sometimes just in passing, but fortunately no one paid any attention to me. Now I saw real life more clearly and was terrified. I saw a boundless hatred of ideas and of people, of everything that was socially or intellectually higher than the crowd, of everything which bore the slightest trace of abundance, even of inanimate objects, which were the signs of some culture strange or inaccessible to the crowd. This feeling expressed hatred accumulated over the centuries, the bitterness of three years of war, and the hysteria generated by the revolutionary leaders.

The future White army leader was not the only refugee from Bolshevik Russia to feel the wrath of the crowd during that terrible winter of 1917-18. The memoir literature is full of similar accounts by princes, countesses, artists, writers and businessmen of the traumatic journeys they had to make through revolutionary Russia in order to flee the Bolshevik regime. They all express the same sense of shock at the rudeness and hostility which they now encountered from the ordinary people: weren't these the brothers and sisters of their nannies and their maids, their cooks and their butlers, who only yesterday had seemed so kind and respectful? It was as if the servant class had all along been wearing a mask of good will which had been blown away by the revolution to reveal the real face of hatred below.

For the vast majority of the Russian people the ending of all social privilege was the basic principle of the revolution. The Russians had a long tradition of social levelling stretching back to the peasant commune. It was expressed in the popular notions of social justice which lay at the heart of the 1917 Revolution. The common belief of the Russian people that surplus wealth was immoral, that property was theft and that manual labour was the only real source of value owed much less to the doctrines of Marx than it did to the egalitarian customs of the village commune. These ideals of social justice had also become a part of that peculiar brand of Christianity which the Russian peasants had made their own. In the Russian peasant mind there was Christian virtue in poverty.* 'The meek shall inherit the earth!' It was this which gave the revolution its quasi-religious status in the popular consciousness: the war on wealth was seen as a purgatory on the way to the gates of a heaven on earth.

If the Bolsheviks had popular appeal in 1917, it was in their promise to end all privilege and replace the unjust social order with a republic of equals. The utopian vision of a universal socialist state was fundamental to the popular idealism of the revolution. One peasant-worker, for example, wrote to the All-Russian Peasant Soviet in May 1917: 'All the people, whether rich or poor, should be provided for; every person should receive his fair and equal ration from a committee so that there is enough for everyone. Not only food but work and living space should be equally divided by committees; everything should be declared public property.' The rejection of all superordinate forms of authority (judges, officers, priests, squires, employers, and so on) was the main driving force of the social revolution. By giving institutional form to this war on privilege, the Bolsheviks were able to draw on the revolutionary energies of those numerous

* To the Western mind, it may seem strange that the Bolsheviks should have chosen to call their main peasant newspaper *The Peasant Poor* (*Krest'ianskaia Bednota*). But in fact it was a brilliant example of their propaganda. The Russian peasant saw himself as poor, and, unlike the peasants of the Protestant West, saw nothing shameful in being poor.

elements from the poor who derived pleasure from seeing the rich and mighty destroyed, regardless of whether it brought about any improvement in their own lot. If Soviet power could do little to relieve the misery of the poor, it could at least make the lives of the rich still more miserable than their own — and this was a cause of considerable psychological satisfaction. After 1918, as the revolution's ideals became tarnished and the people became more and more impoverished, the Bolshevik regime was increasingly inclined to base its appeal almost exclusively on these vulgar pleasures of revenge. In an editorial to mark the start of 1919, *Pravda* proudly proclaimed:

Where are the wealthy, the fashionable ladies, the expensive restaurants and private mansions, the beautiful entrances, the lying newspapers, all the corrupted 'golden life'? All swept away. You can no longer see on the street a rich *barin* [gentleman] in a fur coat reading the *Russkie vedomosti* [a liberal newspaper closed down after October 1917]. There is no *Russkie vedomosti*, no fur coat for the *barin*; he is living in the Ukraine or the Kuban, or else he is exhausted and grown thin from living on a third-class ration; he no longer even has the appearance of a *barin*.⁶³

This plebeian war on privilege was in part an extension of the violence and destruction which Gorky had condemned in the wake of the February Revolution. There was the same hatred and mistrust of the propertied classes, the same cruel desire for retribution, and the same urge to destroy the old civilization. To the propertied classes, it all seemed part of the same revolutionary storm. They compared the violence of 1917 to the *Pugachevshchina*, the anarchic wave of peasant destruction — 'senseless and merciless', as Pushkin had described it — which had haunted Russia since the eighteenth century. They talked of the 'dark' and 'savage' instincts of the people, which the Bolsheviks had inflamed, just as their predecessors had talked in the nineteenth century of Pugachev's followers. Yet such crude and value-laden stereotypes probably tell us more about those who used them than they do about those they were meant to describe. It was, in other words, only the social pretensions of those who saw themselves as 'civilized' and 'respectable' which defined the violence of the crowd as 'anarchic', 'dark' and 'savage.' If one looks at the violence in its own terms, there are important distinctions between the war against privilege after October and earlier forms of violence against the propertied classes.

For one thing, the violence after October was articulated and legitimized by a new language of class, and class conflict, which had been developed by the socialist parties during 1917. The old and deferential forms of address for the members of the propertied classes (*gospodin* and *barin*) were phased out of use. They soon became a form of abuse, or of sarcastic mocking, for those who

had lost their title and wealth. These were the 'former people' (*byvschie ljudi*), as the Bolsheviks came to call them. The proliferation of egalitarian forms of address — 'comrade' (for party members and workers) and 'citizen' (for all others) — seemed to signify a new republican equality, although of course, in reality, the comrades, to adapt George Orwell's phrase, were rather more equal than the others. The word 'comrade' (*tovarishch*) had long had connotations of brotherhood and solidarity among the most class-conscious industrial workers. It became a badge of proletarian pride, a sign to distinguish and unite the avenging army of the poor in the class war against the rich. This new language of class awakened a sense of dignity and power in the once downtrodden. It was soon reflected in a greater assertiveness in the dress and body-language of the lower classes. Servicemen and workers tilted back their caps and unbuttoned their tunics in a show of cocky defiance. They went around with a pistol sticking out visibly from their belts and behaved in a generally aggressive manner. They spoke rudely to their 'social betters', refused to give up their tram-seats to women, and sat in the theatre, smoking and drinking, with their feet up on the chairs in front of them.

In the minds of the ordinary people, who had never read their Marx, class divisions were based much more on emotion than objective social criteria. The popular term *burzhooi*, for example, had no set class connotations, despite its obvious derivation from the word 'bourgeois'. It was used as a general form of abuse against employers, officers, landowners, priests, merchants, Jews, students, professionals or anyone else well dressed, foreign looking or seemingly well-to-do. Hungry workers condemned the peasants as *burzhoois* because they were thought to be hoarding foodstuffs; while peasants — who often confused the word with *barzhui* (the owners of a barge) and *birzbye* (from the word for the Stock Exchange, *birzh*) — likewise condemned the workers, and all townsmen in general, because they were thought to be hoarding manufactured goods. The *burzhoois*, in other words, were not so much a class as a set of popular scapegoats, or internal enemies, who could be redefined almost at will to account for the breakdown of the market, the hardships of the war and the general inequalities of society. Villagers often described the *burzhooi* as a 'hidden' and 'crafty' enemy of the peasants who was to blame for all their problems: he could be a townsman, a trader or an official. In urban food queues, where endless theories of sabotage were spun to explain the shortage of bread, the words *burzhooi*, 'speculator', 'German' and 'Jew' were virtually synonymous. This was a society at war with itself — only everyone thought they were fighting the *burzhooi*.⁶⁴

The socialist press encouraged such popular attitudes by depicting the *burzhoois* as 'enemies of the people'. The best-selling pamphlet of 1917 — which did more than any other publication to shape the political and class consciousness of the mass of the ordinary people — was *Spiders and Flies* by Wilhelm (not to

be confused with Karl) Liebknecht. Several million copies of it were sold in more than twenty different editions sponsored by all the major socialist parties. *Spiders and Flies* divided Russia into two warring species:

The spiders are the masters, the money-grubbers, the exploiters, the gentry, the wealthy, and the priests, pimps and parasites of all types! . . . The flies are the unhappy workers, who must obey all those laws the capitalist happens to think up — must obey, for the poor man has not even a crumb of bread.*

The rich and educated, by being labelled *burzhooi*, were automatically vilified as antisocial. 'The *burzhooi*', wrote one socialist pamphleteer, 'is someone who thinks only of himself, of his belly. It is someone who is aloof, who is ready to grab anyone by the throat if it involves his money or food.' As the social crisis deepened, the *burzhoois* were increasingly condemned as 'parasites' and 'blood-suckers', and violent calls for their downfall were heard with growing regularity, not just from the extreme left-wing parties but also from the streets, the factories and the barracks. 'We should exterminate all the *burzhooi*', proclaimed one factory worker in January 1918, 'so that the honest Russian people will be able to live more easily.'⁶⁵

The Bolsheviks encouraged this war on privilege — and even made it their own popular *raison d'être*. Lenin had always been an advocate of using mass terror against the enemies of his revolution. In 'How to Organize Competition?', written in December 1917, he called for a 'war to the death against the rich, the idlers and the parasites'. Each village and town should be left to develop its own means of:

cleansing the Russian land of all vermin, of scoundrel fleas, the bedbug rich and so on. In one place they will put into prison a dozen rich men, a dozen scoundrels, half a dozen workers who shirk on the job . . . In another place they will be put to cleaning latrines. In a third they will be given yellow tickets [such as prostitutes were given] after a term in prison, so that everyone knows they are harmful and can keep an eye on them. In a fourth one out of every ten idlers will be shot. The more variety the better . . . for only practice can devise the best methods of struggle.⁶⁶

On many occasions he stressed that the 'proletarian state' was 'a system of

* Right-wing pamphleteers before the war used the image of the spider to depict the Jew 'sucking the blood of the harmless flies (the Russian people) it has caught in its web' (Engelstein, *Keys*, 322–3).

organized violence' against the bourgeoisie: this was what he had always understood by the term 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat'. Licensing popular acts of plunder and retribution was an integral element of this system, a means of 'terrorizing the bourgeoisie' into submission to the Proletarian State. Here were the origins of the Red Terror.

Historians have tended to neglect the connections between this plebeian war on privilege and the origins of the Red Terror. Most of them have seen the Terror as exclusively political. They have shown how it was imposed by the Bolsheviks — either deliberately to build up their power, so that terror became the fundamental basis of their regime (the view of the Right), or as a largely pragmatic response to the threats and problems of the civil war (the view of the Left). Neither is a satisfactory explanation. The Terror erupted from below. It was an integral element of the social revolution from the start. The Bolsheviks encouraged but did not create this mass terror. The main institutions of the Terror were all shaped, at least in part, in response to these pressures from below. The anarchic plunder of bourgeois, Church and noble property was legitimized and institutionalized by the Bolshevik decrees of revolutionary confiscation and taxation, which the local Chekas then enforced through the arrest of 'bourgeois' and 'counter-revolutionary' hostages. The mob trials of bourgeois employers, officers, speculators and other 'enemies of the people' were institutionalized through the People's Courts and the crude system of 'revolutionary justice' which they administered — which in turn became a part of the Cheka Terror.

The Cheka system, as centrally organized political terror, did not really take off until the late summer of 1918 (see pages 627-49). During the early months of the Bolshevik regime, the Cheka system was, like the rest of the state apparatus, extremely decentralized; and this often meant that social pressures, such as the desire of the local population to despoil the rich and powerful, or even the desire of one community to pursue a vendetta against another, could determine whom the local Cheka bosses chose to arrest or execute. This 'mass terror' is analysed here, the aim being to understand the social roots of the Cheka's Terror. For, however much one may condemn it, and however hard it may be to admit, there is no doubt that the Terror struck a deep chord in the Russian civil war mentality, and that it had a strange mass appeal. The slogan 'Death to the Bourgeoisie!', which was written on the walls of the Cheka interrogation rooms, was also the slogan of the street. People even called their daughters *Terrora*.

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In January 1918, at a meeting of party agitators on their way to the provinces, Lenin explained that the plunder of bourgeois property was to be encouraged as a form of social justice by revenge. It was a question of 'looting the looters'.

Under this slogan, which the Bolsheviks soon made their own, there was an orgy of robbery and violence in the next few months. Gorky described it as a mass pogrom. Armed gangs robbed the propertied — and then robbed each other. Swindlers, thieves and bandits grew rich, as law and order finally vanished. 'They rob artistically,' Gorky wrote in a bitter editorial on 16 March:

no doubt history will tell of this process of Russia's self-robbery with the greatest inspiration. They rob and sell churches and museums, they sell cannons and rifles, they pilfer army warehouses, they rob the palaces of former grand dukes; everything which can be plundered is plundered, everything which can be sold is sold; in Theodossia the soldiers even traffic in people — they bring Turkish, Armenian and Kurdish women from the Caucasus and sell them for twenty-five roubles apiece. This is very 'original', and we can be proud — there was nothing like it even in the era of the Great French Revolution.⁶⁷

In the provinces the establishment of Soviet power was often accompanied by such acts of looting and violence. Most of it was perpetrated by unruly elements in the crowd, though the local party leaders were often involved, or else urged the crowd on from the sidelines. In Ekaterinoslav the local Bolshevik leader told his followers to 'wrest from the bourgeoisie the millions taken from the masses and cunningly turned into silken undergarments, furs, carpets, gold, furniture, paintings, china. We have to take it and give it to the proletariat and then force the bourgeoisie to work for their rations for the Soviet regime.' In Stavropol the Bolshevized soldiers systematically plundered shops and houses, and arrested hostages from the bourgeoisie; the local Soviet, which shared power with the leaders of the Duma and the zemstvos, was too weak to stop this terror and chose instead to license it as the first step towards the seizure of outright power. The violence soon spread to the surrounding countryside, as the Russian peasant soldiers vented their old class and ethnic hatred of the land-rich Kalmyk pastoralists by setting fire to their houses and killing their families with quite unspeakable brutality (pregnant women had their babies cut out of their wombs). The Kalmyks then retaliated by attacking the Russian peasant farms. It was common for the terror to spiral in this way as long-suppressed ethnic and social conflicts suddenly exploded and there was no neutral power to stop them. In the Don industrial town of Taganrog the Red Guards reaped a savage revenge on the military cadets, mostly bourgeois sons, whom they had defeated in the seizure of power. Fifty cadets, who had surrendered on the promise of an amnesty, were marched off to a metal factory, tied by their hands and feet, and thrown, one by one, into the blast furnace. In Evpatoria, a Crimean coastal town, the Bolshevized sailors were allowed by the

Soviet leaders to go on the rampage: in three days they massacred 800 officers and bourgeois residents. Most of them were killed in a tortuous fashion, with broken arms and legs tied around their head before their bodies were thrown into the sea. Similar massacres took place in Yalta, Theodosia and Sevastopol.⁶⁸

This war against the bourgeoisie was paralleled by a number of Bolshevik decrees sanctioning the 'looting of the looters'. Soviet officials, bearing flimsy warrants, would go round bourgeois houses confiscating typewriters, furniture, clothes and valuables 'for the revolution'. Factories were taken out of private ownership, shares and bonds were annulled, and the law of private inheritance was later abolished. Banks were nationalized and the holders of accounts were restricted to withdrawals of no more than 1,000 roubles per month (a sum that was soon made worthless by hyperinflation). The owners of bank safe deposits were ordered to appear with their keys so that the boxes could be inspected: foreign money, gold and silver, and all other precious items were subject to confiscation. During the first six months of 1918 more than 35,000 deposit boxes were inspected. Countess Meshcherskaia gives a vivid description of the sailor placed in charge of this operation at her local bank:

Around his chest was wrapped a belt of machine-gun cartridges and from his holster, at his side, one could just make out the handle of his revolver. Young and broad-shouldered, with his eyes wide open from the consciousness that he was performing an important task, he tried to make his large and friendly face look menacing by frowning at us. He didn't have the slightest notion about precious jewels but knew only one thing: the state needed gold.

From their opened safe, he took several handfuls of items — jewels, diamond monograms, silver crucifixes and even a Fabergé egg — and piled them up on a table. Several times he paused 'to gaze admiringly at this mountain of booty'.⁶⁹

The Soviets levied their own punitive taxes on the bourgeoisie. This was often the start of the Bolshevik Terror, since the local Chekas were inclined to enforce the payment of these levies by arresting hostages. In Nizhnyi Novgorod, for example, the Soviet imposed a revolutionary levy of twenty-two million roubles, while the Cheka arrested 105 bourgeois citizens and held them hostage until the levy was paid.⁷⁰ Many of these taxes were imposed on people quite unable to pay: emigration and inflation had drastically reduced the size and wealth of the Russian bourgeoisie and many of those persecuted as 'the rich' were no more than petty traders or half-impoverished teachers, doctors and clerks. Convinced by their own propaganda that this phantom bourgeoisie must be hiding its wealth, the local Chekas made even more arrests and began to shoot their hostages.

The same happened with the confiscation of Church property. It began with a clumsy attempt by Kollontai, the People's Commissar of Social Welfare, to turn the Alexander Nevsky Monastery into a sanctuary for war invalids. On 19 January she sent a detachment of sailors to occupy this famous holy shrine in the centre of Petrograd. They were met by an angry crowd of worshippers and, in the scuffles that followed, a priest was shot dead. Lenin was furious: the last thing he needed now was open confrontation with the Church, which so far had been careful to keep out of politics. But since Kollontai had already enraged the priesthood, he saw no reason for holding back from the conflict which, as he saw it, would have to come sooner or later. The Decree on the Separation of Church and State was published the next day, 20 January, much earlier than planned. It declared all Church property to be the property of the state. Sanctioned by this licence, Bolshevik squads went round the country's churches and monasteries looting their silver, drinking their wine and terrorizing the priesthood. Patriarch Tikhon, the head of the Church, called on the clergy to resist 'these monsters of the human race' in a pastoral letter anathematizing the Bolshevik regime. Not all the priesthood chose the path of open opposition. Some of the minor clergy, who had welcomed the revolution as a chance to build closer ties with their parish, sought to conciliate the Bolsheviks. The Preobrazhensky Monastery in Viatka, for example, turned itself into a labouring commune with a nursery for workers' children and a workshop where the nuns made clothes and shoes for orphans. But most of the clergy and their congregations followed Tikhon's call, which enabled the Bolsheviks to brand them as 'counter-revolutionaries' and to step up their campaign of looting and terror. The monks of the Alexander Svirsky Monastery in Olonetsk, for example, after trying to resist the Bolshevik squads, were imprisoned — and later executed — by the local Cheka.⁷¹

One of the most traumatic humiliations suffered by the wealthy classes in these early months of the Soviet regime was the compulsory sharing of all or part of their living space. The Bolsheviks were proud — and stressed it in their propaganda — that they were forcing the wealthy to share their spacious houses with the urban poor. To many people this seemed only fair: the fact that some people had lived in palaces, while others languished in damp and dirty cellars, had become a symbol of the unjust social order of the old regime. Wealthy families often tried their best to find a clean and modest couple to move in with them whom they might be able to persuade to make do with one or two of the smallest rooms in the house. But the vigilance of the buildings committees, which were placed in charge of this process, made it very hard. These committees were usually formed by the old house porters and domestic servants, among whom the desire for revenge could often be very strong. Joining the buildings committee, and even more the party, gave them a licence to turn

the tables on their former superiors. They occupied the best rooms in the house and filled them with the finest furniture, while their previous employers were moved into the servants' quarters. Here was a whole world of hidden revolutions in domestic life where the servants and the masters literally changed places. It was a microcosm of the social transformation in the country at large.

'I've spent all my life in the stables,' complained an ex-servant at a political rally in the Cirque Moderne, 'while they live in their beautiful flats and lie on soft couches playing with their poodles. No more of that, I say! It's my turn to play with poodles now: and, as for them, it is their turn to go and work in the stables.' The idea of putting the leisured classes to work was an integral element of the war on social privilege — and the Bolsheviks were quick to institutionalize it. Lenin had promised that the fundamental rule of the Soviet order would be 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat.' The universal conscription of labour was part of the Declaration of Rights of the Working People (which was in effect a Declaration of the Obligations of the Non-Working People) which the Bolsheviks had presented to the Constituent Assembly. Trotsky pioneered the mass conscription of bourgeois labour in the early days of the Red Army, where it was used for non-combatant tasks in the rear, such as digging trenches and cleaning out the barracks. But it soon became a general practice of the city Soviets. Aristocrats, former factory directors, stockbrokers, lawyers, artists, priests and former officials would all be rounded up and forced to do jobs such as clearing the rubbish or snow from the streets. Meanwhile, commissars and groups of idle workers would stand around smoking and watching with obvious pleasure as the well-dressed ladies and gentlemen, none of whom had ever done a single day of manual labour in their lives before, struggled to master their shovels and picks. There was no real economic benefit in these conscriptions of bourgeois labour; their sole purpose was to degrade and physically destroy the genteel classes. As Trotsky put it in a speech that perfectly expressed the mob psychology: 'For centuries our fathers and grandfathers have been cleaning up the dirt and the filth of the ruling classes, but now we will make them clean up our dirt. We must make life so uncomfortable for them that they will lose the desire to remain bourgeois.'⁷²

Dispossessed and degraded, the life of these 'former people' soon became an arduous daily struggle. Hours were spent queuing for bread and fuel along with the rest of the urban poor. As inflation rocketed, they were forced to sell their last precious possessions just to feed themselves. Baroness Meyendorff sold a diamond brooch for 5,000 roubles — enough to buy a bag of flour. Mighty scions of the aristocracy were reduced to petty street vendors: Princess Golitsyn sold home-made pies, Baroness Wrangel knitwear, Countess Witte cakes and sweets, while Brusilov's wife sold matches, just like hundreds of wounded veterans from the army her husband had once commanded. A former

Gentleman of the Chamber to the Tsar became the concierge of a museum, where strange creatures were kept in jars of alcoholic spirit; he exchanged this for water and sold the gruesome alcohol on the streets. The flea-markets of Petrograd and Moscow were filled with the former belongings of fallen plutocrats: icons, paintings, carpets, pianos, gramophones, samovars, morning coats and ball dresses — all could be picked up for the price of a meal or two. The more precious items were snapped up by the *nouveaux riches* of the Soviet regime — commissars and officials, looting soldiers and sailors, petty traders and bandits — as they sought to acquire the status symbols of a ruling class. The new masters of Russia were easily distinguishable by the way they wore their long and dirty hair greased back, by their gold-toothed smiles and their eau-de-cologne smells, and by the way they went around the shops and hotels with dolled-up girls of easy virtue on their arm.

Baron Wrangel recalls one of these *arrivistes rouges*, a Bolshevik soldier 'straight from the plough', purchasing a pearl necklace for his mistress in one of the top jewellers on Nevsky Prospekt. His mistress was a former kitchen-maid, now dressed in sumptuous furs and diamonds, though her face was covered with the scars of smallpox. The country boy was obviously proud to be seen with such a 'fine lady' and demanded to be shown 'the most expensive pearls, shining ones like the *baryni** wear'. He was not satisfied with those the jeweller brought out because, at 75,000 roubles, they were still not expensive enough. He and his mistress were due that evening at a reception in the Winter Palace and had to have the best. The kitchen-maid announced that they would go to the Gostiny Dvor, where 'we are sure to find what I want'. This produced a fit of contemptuous laughter from the other customers, a group of former society ladies who had come to sell their diamonds, because the shops there were known to sell cheap imitation jewellery. Realizing that she had made a blunder, the poor girl blushed and tried to recover herself by saying that they would take 'the wretched pearls' after all and come back when the jeweller had found something better.⁷³

Many of Russia's fallen rich and mighty sold up everything and either went abroad, though this was very hard, or fled south to the Ukraine and Kuban, or else east to Siberia, where the White Guards had their main bases of power. Others sought refuge on their landed estates in the countryside, hoping that the peasants, whom they had always seen as humble and respectful, would be kinder to them than the Bolshevized workers in the towns. But here too the war against the rich was in full swing, as the peasants, sanctioned by the October Decree on Land, carried out their own seizures of the gentry's land and property.

The equal distribution of all the means of production, the land, the tools and the livestock, had long been the basic ideal of the peasant revolution.

* The ladies of the nobility.

They looked upon this 'Black Repartition' as the Will of God, and believed that the rest of the revolution had also been organized on the same general principles. The All-Russian Soviet was conceived of by the peasants as a kind of giant village commune redistributing all the property in the country. Many peasants were convinced, in the words of one of their more literate representatives, that socialism, of which they had only vaguely heard, 'was some sort of mystical means — mystical because we could not imagine how this would be done — of dividing all the property and the money of the rich; according to our village tailor, this would mean that every peasant household would be given 200,000 roubles. This, it seems, was the biggest number he could think of.'⁷⁴

The peasants themselves had no mystical means of dividing up the land. They did not even have the basic technical means, such as maps and rulers. The land was divided as it always had been, by pacing out the width of the strips, or judging the overall size of the plots by eye, and then allocating them to the peasant households according to the local egalitarian norm. This usually meant the number of eaters, or more rarely the number of adult workers, in each household. Without accurate land-surveying methods, these divisions were inevitably accompanied by arguments, sometimes ending in fist-fights, over who should get what piece of land. But in general terms, given its crucial importance for a peasant community, the land repartition was remarkable for its peacefulness — a tribute to the self-organization of the village communes which carried it through.

The confiscated lands of the gentry and the Church were usually divided separately because it was feared that if the revolution was reversed the peasants would be forced to return this land to its former owners. Many communes stipulated that all their household members had to receive a strip of this land in order to share the burden of risk. The gentry themselves, including those who returned to their estates from the cities, were usually left a generous portion of land and tools, enough to turn their estates into a sizeable family farm on a par with the rest of the peasant households. While the peasants were in no doubt that the gentry had to be destroyed as a superordinate class, they also believed that the squires should be allowed to turn themselves into 'peasants' and farm a share of 'God's land', as they put it, with their own family labour. The rights of land and labour, which lay at the heart of the peasant commune, were understood as basic human rights. Indeed, in so far as the 'peasantization' of the squires was in line with the basic peasant ideal of creating a society made up entirely of smallholding family farmers, it was even something to be welcomed. Many landowners, especially the smaller ones, remained on the land after 1917; and they were joined by those, normally resident in the cities, who now sought refuge from the Bolshevik Terror on their estates. As late as the mid-1920s there were still some 10,000 former landlords living on their manors alongside

the peasants, a figure equivalent to 10 per cent of the total number of landowners in Russia before 1917.

The Rudnevs, a medium-sized landowning family in Simbirsk province, were a typical example. They had decided to stay on their family estate because, as Semen Rudnev put it, they thought that 'the disturbances of the revolution would be less harsh in the countryside than in the towns [and because] the economic conditions of the village, with its almost natural economy, would also be better'. The turmoil of 1917 largely passed their village by. The Rudnevs spent the summer and autumn in the leisurely manner to which they were accustomed: 'The men went drinking and hunting, guests from Simbirsk came to stay, and we went off to Nazhim and the milk-farm for picnics and mushroom picking.' During the following winter they agreed to the demand of the neighbouring village commune to turn their land and property over to the peasants. They kept a small farm of 20 *desyatiny* (54 acres) near the manor house, where they continued to live. The livestock and tools were auctioned off at bargain prices, though most of the peasants could not afford to feed their new pedigree horses, which kept running back to their former owners for hay. The peasants came to work in the Rudnevs' fields during the spring and were paid in vodka and fruit liqueurs. The harvest was bigger than the peasants' and so the commune ordered the Rudnevs to sell their surplus grain at fixed prices to the village poor. But well before the harvest could be gathered the manor house was ransacked, and the Rudnevs forced to flee, by a local detachment of the Red Guards.⁷⁵

This was a common pattern. Though peasant acts of violence, pillage and arson were not uncommon, it was usually the young demobilized soldiers who took the lead in instigating them. The slogan 'Loot the Looters!' was brought home to the villages by those who returned from the Front and the garrisons, where they had developed a strong sense of militant brotherhood and where they had been exposed to the propaganda of the Bolsheviks. They often formed a paramilitary faction inside the village, not unlike the *fascisti* in rural Italy at this time. They had their own regional organizations, such as the Union of Front-Line Soldiers, or the Union of Wounded Veterans, as well as their own Red Guard detachments, attached to the local Soviet, which could exert a powerful influence on the village and steer it towards more violent forms of action against the gentry. In one particular village of the Kerensky district in Penza province, for example, peasant attacks on the local squires suddenly increased: it was connected to the return of several soldiers, who were then elected to the head of the village Soviet. The war had obviously had a brutalizing effect upon them, for they soon became notorious for their heavy bouts of drinking and sadistic violence. One poor noble widow, who had hitherto lived quite peacefully with the peasants, having already given to them most of her land and livestock, was driven to suicide when the drunken bullies shot her last

horse and cow and left her 'pet dog dead on her doorstep: it had been an act of pure spite.⁷⁶

* * *

The Russians, it might seem, were particularly prone to such cruel and savage acts of revenge. 'I am', wrote Gorky, 'especially distrustful of a Russian when he gets power into his hands. Not long ago a slave, he becomes the most unbridled despot as soon as he has the chance to become his neighbour's master.'⁷⁷ Mob trials and lynchings were the most common expression of this popular vengeance, both in the countryside and in the towns. They had taken off as a mass phenomenon in response to the catastrophic rise in crime and the breakdown of law and order during 1917 (when Gorky claimed to have counted over 10,000 cases of mob justice). Since the police and the old criminal courts had virtually disappeared, there was a common feeling that the only way to deal with the problem of crime was by mob trials in the street. Some poor thief would be seized by the crowd, given summary justice and executed on the spot. Gorky witnessed one such instance in the centre of Petrograd, in which even children had taken part in the brutal execution of a thief (see pages 400-1). As the socio-economic crisis deepened, and the popular belief developed that the *burzhois* were responsible for it, so these mob trials began to assume an overtly class nature. They became a weapon in the war against privilege, focusing less on petty thieves from the urban poor and much more on merchants and shopkeepers, factory owners and employers, army officers, former tsarist officials and other figures of superordinate authority.

The Bolsheviks gave institutional form to the mob trials through the new People's Courts, where 'revolutionary justice' was summarily administered in all criminal cases. The old criminal justice system, with its formal rules of law, was abolished as a relic of the 'bourgeois order'. The twelve elected judges who made up the People's Courts did not have to have any formal legal training — they were to be guided by their 'revolutionary conscience' — and were mainly drawn from the workers, the peasants and the petty officials of the old law courts. Half of them had not been educated beyond primary level, and one in five belonged to the Bolshevik Party. The sessions of the People's Courts were little more than formalized mob trials. There were no set legal procedures or rules of evidence, which in any case hardly featured. Convictions were usually secured on the basis of denunciations, often arising from private vendettas, and sentences tailored to fit the mood of the crowd, which freely voiced its opinions from the public gallery.

The system of revolutionary justice administered by the People's Courts was similar in many ways to the old peasant customary law, with its rough and ready system of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Here is the Penal

Code introduced by the People's Court in the village of Lubny, in Tambov province, in May 1918:

If one strikes another fellow, the sufferer shall strike the offender ten times. If one strikes another fellow causing thereby a wound or a broken bone, the offender shall be deprived of life. If one commits theft or receives stolen articles he shall be deprived of life. If one commits arson and is caught, he shall be deprived of life.

It had long been a basic tenet of peasant legal consciousness that a rich man stealing from the poor was many times more guilty than a poor one stealing from the rich — and this same principle of 'class justice' was applied in the People's Courts. Judgements were reached according to the social status of the accused and their victims. In one People's Court the jurors made it a practice to inspect the hands of the defendant and, if they were clean and soft, to find him guilty. Speculative traders were heavily punished and sometimes even sentenced to death, whereas robbers — and sometimes even murderers — of the rich were often given only a very light sentence, or even acquitted altogether, if they pleaded poverty as the cause of their crime.⁷⁸ The looting of the looters had been legalized and, in the process, law as such abolished: there was only lawlessness.

Lenin had always been insistent that the legal system should be used as a weapon of mass terror against the bourgeoisie. The system of mob law which evolved through the People's Courts gave him that weapon of terror. So too did the Revolutionary Tribunals, modelled on their Jacobin namesakes, which dealt with a whole new range of 'crimes against the state'. In February 1918, at the time of the German invasion of Russia, Lenin issued a decree — 'The Socialist Fatherland in Danger!' — ordering the Revolutionary Tribunals to shoot 'on the spot' all 'enemy agents, profiteers, marauders, hooligans and counter-revolutionary agitators'.⁷⁹ To his disappointment, the Revolutionary Tribunals turned out to be highly inefficient instruments of the Bolshevik Terror: too many of its judges could be easily bribed, which is hardly surprising given the fact that most of them came directly from the factory floor. But this was only the start of a new state machinery of mass terror, and the work of the tribunals was gradually taken over by the local Chekas, which were not wanting in revolutionary zeal. Latsis, one of the Cheka's leaders, instructed his officials:

not to look for evidence as proof that the accused has acted or spoken against the Soviets. First you must ask him to what class he belongs, what his social origin is, his education and profession. These are the questions

that must determine the fate of the accused. That is the meaning of the Red Terror.⁸⁰

During its early stages of development the Cheka system was extremely decentralized: each local Cheka organization was a law unto itself. This made the Cheka Terror both random and susceptible to pressures from below. Virtually anyone could be arrested, and almost anything could be construed as 'counter-revolutionary' behaviour. The Cheka's own instructions listed private trading, drunkenness, and even being late for work as 'counter-revolutionary' conduct. But on this basis the whole of the population would have been in jail. Many of the early victims of the Red Terror had been arrested on the basis of no more than a single denunciation by some personal enemy. The Cheka in Omsk complained in April that of the 1,000 cases of 'counter-revolution' so far brought before it, more than 200 had had to be thrown out because the only evidence against the accused had been the hearsay of some person or group of people who, it later turned out, had a private grudge. Some of the less scrupulous Chekas did not let this stop them from securing a conviction. The Penza Department of Justice complained in April, for example, that its prisons were 'full of innocent people arrested by the Cheka on the basis of some false accusation by one person against another'. It was particularly common for someone in debt to denounce his creditor as a 'kulak usurer', and thus a 'counter-revolutionary'.⁸¹ It was one way to cancel your debts.

This is what was happening, then, in the early stages of the Terror, before the Centre took control and redirected it against its own politically defined enemies: sections of society were driving the Terror from below as a means of retribution against those whom they perceived as their own enemies, which in their eyes meant the same thing as 'the enemies of the revolution'. Their ability to do this was of course dependent upon their place in the local Bolshevik power structure. But this hardly means that the Terror was constructed from above. Rather it suggests that there was a close but complicated link between the political and the mass terror. As Dzerzhinsky himself wrote in 1922, all the Cheka did was to 'give a wise direction' to the 'centuries-old hatred of the proletariat for its oppressors', a hatred which might otherwise 'express itself in senseless and bloody episodes'.⁸²

Many people foresaw that this mass terror would result in a social holocaust in which not only the bourgeoisie but also many of the common people would be destroyed. Citing the words of the Anarchist sailor Zhelezniakov, that 'for the welfare of the Russian people even a million people could be killed', Gorky warned the readers of *Novaya zhizn'* on 17 January:

a million 'free citizens' could indeed be killed in our country. Even more

could be killed. Why shouldn't they be killed? There are many people in Russia and plenty of murderers, but when it comes to prosecuting them, the regime of the People's Commissars encounters certain mysterious obstacles, as it apparently did in the investigation of the foul murder of Shingarev and Kokoshkin.* A wholesale extermination of those who think differently is an old and tested method of Russian governments, from Ivan the Terrible to Nicholas II . . . so why should Vladimir Lenin renounce such a simple method?

Steinberg, the Left SR Commissar for Justice, was another early critic of the Terror, although all his efforts to subordinate the Chekas to the courts proved to be in vain. When, in February, Steinberg first saw the Decree on 'The Socialist Fatherland in Danger!', with its order to shoot 'on the spot' all 'profiteers, hooligans and counter-revolutionaries', he immediately went to Lenin and protested: 'Then why do we bother with a Commissariat of Justice at all? Let's call it frankly the "Commissariat for Social Extermination" and be done with it!' Lenin's face lit up and he replied: 'Well put, that's exactly what it should be; but we can't say that.'⁸³