

Jeff R. Meadowcroft
University of Glasgow, UK

The History and Historiography of the Russian Worker-Revolutionaries of the 1870s. PhD Dissertation Summary*

In the socialist movements of 19th and early 20th century Europe, the worker-revolutionaries had a special place. In Russia, as in Western Europe, the emergence of a group of consciously committed worker-revolutionaries was taken as proof that a social revolution for and by the working class was, indeed, a possibility; their very existence lent the ideas and the activities of social-revolutionary groups a certain authority. Around the 1890s, significant numbers of worker-revolutionaries – often referred to as “developed” or “conscious” workers – began to appear in Tsarist Russia; earlier waves of revolutionary activity had, however, brought radical working men and their circles of education and agitation to the notice of the government and of educated society. In the 1870s the “going to the people” movement, dominated by a radicalised and alienated section of the intelligentsia, went into the workers’ quarters in St. Petersburg, Moscow and a number of provincial capitals in an effort to give to “the people” (*narod*) a consciousness of their own interests. One success of this movement was the formation of circles of working people devoted to the achievement of a workers’ revolution against the autocracy. These small groups of workers created a culture of working-class radicalism that would underpin and give continuity to the work of the revolutionary parties so often in emigration, with their leaders embroiled in internal disputes.

There was, then, a symbolic value in the existence of worker-revolutionaries that transcended the practical activities of particular circles and groups. If workers were eventually to liberate themselves from political oppression and economic exploitation, they would also have to learn to represent themselves and to speak for themselves as working people. While the notion of a workers’ voice had a direct, political dimension (the example of the German social-democratic movement and their worker delegates was well-known to Russian revolutionaries) in Russian socio-political conditions, the strictly symbolic aspect often took precedence. The speech of the worker Pëtr Alekseev at the “Trial of the Fifty” in 1877 and the foundation of the Northern Union of Workers by Viktor Obnorskii and Stepan Khalturin were, from the perspective of the autocracy, mere aberrations, easily repressed, but for the revolutionaries they were symptoms of the self-destructive nature of Tsarism and symbols of the coming self-liberation of the Russian working classes. The active construction of a “revolutionary historiography” from the end of the 1870s opened up another space for worker’s voices to be heard, in the form of documentation, and the accounts of workers’ own activities written by workers themselves. Where the “voices” of workers had previously been valued as symbolic of the potential for radicalism among the working classes, now worker-revolutionaries were to represent the working-class struggle *historically*. They would speak not only for themselves – a special, politically active group of working people – but also for the Russian working class (including the urban workers and the peasants) as a whole. The

* Supervisors: Prof. Geoffrey Swain and Prof. Evan Mawdsley. Thesis defended in December 2011. Fulltext available online at Glasgow University Thesis Repository: <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/3079/>

voices of particular workers would be read as the “workers’ voice”, the documents of individual working people made testimony to working-class life and experience in general.

After the revolution of October 1917, the Bolshevik Party set up a series of institutions whose purpose was to collect, preserve, and create a documentary base from which a history of the Communist Party and of the Revolutions could be constructed. The Commission for the History of the Communist Party and the October Revolution (better known as “Istpart”), the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, the Society of Old Bolsheviks, the Society for Former Political Exiles, and other, parallel organisations were deeply involved in this project. The creation of a working-class historiography was one aspect of their work, and they threw themselves into it with great energy. The result was the most extensive collection of workers’ writings then known to history. Many of the earliest “developed workers” from the 1870s were able to contribute memoirs, autobiographies and questionnaire responses to this new “workers’ history”. It was intended that this entry into historiography would be part of working-class self-emancipation; it was apparently hoped that it would be experienced by individual workers as some sort of liberation, a crowning achievement for the working people who had already educated themselves, become conscious of themselves, and made a revolution. But was this really a liberation?

Historians have previously explored working-class experiences of writing, and have at least broached the problem of the entry of working people into documented history before.¹ In fact, within every historical study of the Russian working class, there is also another, second-order account of how the lives, experiences, and activities of Russian working people came to be documented and made “historical”. The complexity of the relationships between those who documented working-class conditions and working class experience and the cultural, political and economic forces and interests that shaped their efforts is very great. The individuals, groups and institutions involved in the documentation of the Russian working-class during the nineteenth and early twentieth century were extremely numerous: political parties; workers’ circles; the regular police and gendarmes; factory inspectors; doctors and other experts in disease and sanitation; independent researchers and activists; trade unions; libraries and book-sellers... Historians of the Russian working-class and of the workers’ role in the Russian revolutionary movement, drawing upon this rich collection of historical documents, must make judgements regarding the origins, authenticity, purposes, and value of these materials with the possible political determinants of such material in mind. Historical writing on the Russian revolutions has never been innocent of political concerns, and much documentation of the revolutionary and early Soviet periods was shaped directly by immediate political interests and intentions.² With regard to Soviet system, the question of the direct political manipulation, falsification, and the principles behind the composition, selection, preservation and publication of documentary materials has imposed itself with

¹ Reginald Zelnik: Russian Bebels. An Introduction to the Memoirs of the Russian Workers Semen Kanatchikov and Matvei Fisher, Part I. In: *Russian Review* 35 (1976), 3, pp. 249-289; Id.: Russian Bebels. An Introduction to the Memoirs of the Russian Workers Semen Kanatchikov and Matvei Fisher, Part II. In: *Russian Review* 35 (1976), 4, pp. 417-447; Daniel Field: *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1976; David Moon: *The Russian Peasantry. The World the Peasants Made, 1600-1930*, London-New York, Longman, 1999; Jacques Rancière: *The Nights of Labor. The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth Century France*, Philadelphia, Temple UP, 1989; Id.: *The Philosopher and His Poor*, Durham-London, Duke UP, 2004.

² James D. White: *Lenin. The Theory and Practice of Revolution*, Basingstoke, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2001, pp. 178-202; Id.: Trotsky’s ‘History of the Russian Revolution’. In: *Journal of Trotsky Studies* 1 (1993), pp. 1-14; Ian D. Thatcher: *The First Histories of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, 1904-6*. In: *Slavic and East European Review* 85 (2007), 4, pp. 724-752, here: pp. 724-5; Mark D. Steinberg: Introduction. *The Language of Popular Revolution*. In: M. D. Steinberg, Z. Peregodova, and L. Tiutiunnik (eds): *Voices of Revolution, 1917*, New Haven/London, Yale UP, 2001, pp. 1-36.

particular force. An increasing interest over the last thirty years in discourse and in the everyday aspects of power (identity; mentalité; representation) widens the notion of “politicisation” considerably.³ The terms, concepts and frames of reference through which the lives and thoughts of “historical actors” (and the very notions of what is “historical”) are documented are in part constitutive of systems of power; the direct manipulation of history is only one dimension of this.⁴ Yet, traditionally, the work of judgement and evaluation has been considered technical in nature, and has been relegated to the footnotes or to passing discussions aimed at professional historians. The social identity paradigm and the growth in discursive and textual analyses *have* made social historians take the “representation” of working people as a primary focus.⁵ Still, the stories of the documentation of Russian working-class life, of the evolution of a “working-class historiography”, or of the entry of individual working people into documented history, have rarely become the direct objects of historical investigation.

Yet there are several interesting stories to be told here. These stories shed light on the bigger problems of historical knowledge and of historical writing as social practices; on the place of historiography in the revolutionary and workers’ movements; on the nature of individuality and class in Imperial and Soviet Russia. The story of the construction of historiography of the Russian working class also feeds back into the history proper of autocratic society, of the practices of a class system, on the cultural formation of a working class in Russia, and on the relations between workers and the social-revolutionary parties between the 1870s and the 1930s. This dissertation is a first attempt at a “social historiography” of Russian working people across the Imperial and Soviet periods. It takes a small group of worker-revolutionaries of the 1870s as its fixed point of reference, and examines the different ways in which their lives, experiences, thoughts and actions came to be documented, explaining how they became a part of different (often conflicting) historical narratives and analyses, and how they came to document their own lives in speeches, memoirs, autobiographies, and in other forms of writing. The emphasis throughout is on the relation between particular working people – Pëtr Alekseev, Dmitrii Smirnov, Diomid Aleksandrov, Semën Volkov, Vasilii Gerasimov, Viktor Obnorskii, Stepan Khalturin – and the systems of historiographical and political power that gave their individual lives an existence *for us*, as historians. In that way, the problems identified by historians with regard to our historical knowledge of workers can be seen as part of the total development of this historical

³ Leopold Haimson: The Problem of Social Identities in Early Twentieth Century Russia. In: *Slavic Review* 47 (1988), 1, pp. 1-20; Reginald Zelnik (ed.): *Workers and Intelligentsia in Late Imperial Russia. Realities and Representations*, Berkeley, Berkeley University Press, 1999; Michael Melancon, Alice Pate (eds.): *New Labor History. Worker Identity and Experience in Russia. 1840-1918*, Bloomington, Columbia State UP, 2002; Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg: *Strikes and Revolution in Russia 1917*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1989; Lenard R. Berlanstein (ed.): *Rethinking Labour History. Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis*, Urbana, Illinois UP, 1993.

⁴ Stephen Kotkin: *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley, Berkeley UP, 1995; Igal Halfin: *From Darkness to Light. Class, Consciousness and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia*, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh UP, 2000; Id.: *Terror in My Soul. Communist Autobiographies on Trial*, Cambridge (MA.), Harvard UP, 2003; Id.: *Between Instinct and Mind. The Bolshevik View of the Proletarian Self*. In: *Slavic Review* 62 (2003), 1, pp. 34-40; Jochen Hellbeck: *Working, Struggling, Becoming. Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts*. In: Igal Halfin (ed.): *Language and Revolution. Making Modern Political Identities*, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 114-135.

⁵ See: Reginald Zelnik: *On the Eve. Life Histories and Identities of Some Revolutionary Workers, 1870-1905*. In: Lewis Siegelbaum, Ronald Suny (eds.): *Making Workers Soviet. Power, Class and Identity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994, pp. 2765; Stephen A. Smith: *The Social Meanings of Swearing. Workers and Bad Language in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia*. In: *Past and Present* (1998), 160, pp. 167-202; Id.: *Revolution and the People in Russia and China. A Comparative History*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2008; Mark D. Steinberg: *Workers on the Cross. Religious Imagination in the Writings of Russian Workers, 1910-1924*. In: *Russian Review* 53 (1994), 2, pp. 213-239; Robert L. Hernandez: *The Confessions of Semen Kanatchikov. A Bolshevik Memoir as Spiritual Autobiography*. In: *Russian Review* 60 (2001), pp. 13-35.

knowledge since the appearance of the worker-revolutionaries in the early 1870s. Contemporary judgements of the historiographical value of “worker’s voices” can be understood in the context of the development of a (highly politicised) “workers’ voice” in Tsarist Russia. To that end, the dissertation begins with a question taken from the contemporary study of workers’ writings, *viz*: Do the writings of the Russian worker-revolutionaries truthfully represent working-class experience, as they were intended to do?⁶ From there, it moves to an examination of the notion of ‘representation’ in both its political and historiographical forms, showing how the ‘workers’ voice’ was interpreted by the autocratic government and valorised by the revolutionary movement.

My argument is that worker-revolutionaries did indeed *experience* speaking and writing for themselves as a liberation - as the realisation of a desire for self-mastery and concrete, collective freedom - but that the social categories through which their voices became *politically* meaningful tended to emphasise exactly the class condition they were trying to escape. While their aim was to be recognised as *individuals*, with the ability to act freely *against* the system of class, both the social-revolutionary movement and the autocratic regime reverted to social class – understood as a shared condition, quality or essence – as a means to explain the actions of working people. Workers themselves often accepted the task of representing working-class experience and conditions, and in so far as they went out to describe it in their writings, they ended up documenting themselves and their actions not as individual and free, but as socially determined and necessary; in describing their “politically active” lives, however, the individual and concretely collective moments of their pasts were brought to the fore. Written into these “documents”, then, is a tension between their particular, “historical” lives as revolutionaries and their “unhistorical” lives as workers, as exemplars of the class. This tension is not, however, ubiquitous to all the writings of working people. The category “worker’s writings”, often used by historians, arose historically from the social-revolutionary notion of a “workers’ voice”, and the underlying belief that only “the worker” could authentically represent the working class or be a witness for it historically. In so far as being a witness to working-class life was *written into* the writings of those categorised as “workers”, then it is correct to talk of “workers’ writings”. It is found that the ascription of this role was a strong feature of Soviet attempts to construct a “workers’ historiography”. The result was the reproduction of the essentialist class categories of the old regime.

Since the aim is to understand “workers’ writings” through an examination of socialist, autocratic and working-class ideologies and practices (including the historiographical ones), the potential source-base for this work is both extensive and varied. In the first place, the dissertation draws upon workers’ memoirs and autobiographies published in the Imperial and Soviet periods,⁷ as well as other records of ‘workers’ voices’ in the form of speeches, letters,

⁶ Daniel Kaiser: Review Essay. Worker Voices, Elite Representations. Rewriting the Labor History of Late Imperial Russia. In: *Journal of Social History* 34 (2001), 3, p. 699-301; Franco Venturi: *Roots of Revolution. A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*. Translated by F. Haskell, London, Phoenix Press, 1960, p. 539; Reginald Zelnik: *Law and Disorder on the Narova River. The Kreenholm Strike of 1872*, Berkeley, UCP, 1995, pp. 223-227; Alfred Kelly: Introduction. In: Alfred Kelly (ed.): *The German Worker. Working-Class Autobiographies from the Age of Industrialisation*, Berkeley, UCP, 1987, pp. 1-47, here: pp. 2-4.

⁷ For instance: *Iz rabocheho dvizheniia za Nevskoi zastavoi*. *Iz vospominaniia starogo rabocheho*, Geneva, Izdanie Souza Russkikh Sotsial-demokratov, 1900; Mikhail Olminskii (ed.): *Ot gruppy Blagoeva k soizu bor'by (1886-1894)*. *Stat'i i vospominaniia*, Rostov-na-Donu, Ispart, 1921; Alexei Peterson: *Iz pros'by grazhdanina Sovetskoi Respubliki Aleksei Nikolaevich Peterson v Sotsial'noe Obespechenie o pensii*. In: *Katorga i ssylka* (1924), 3; *Rabochee dvizhenie v Rossii v opisaniii samikh rabochikh*, Moskva, Molodaia gvardiia, 1933; E. A. Koroľchuk (ed.): *V nachale puti. Vospominaniia peterburgskikh rabochikh 1872-1897*, Leningrad, Lenizdat, 1975; Semën I. Kanatchikov: *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia. The Autobiography of Semen Ivanovich Kanatchikov*. Translated by Reginald Zelnik, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1986.

strike demands, petitions, and leaflets.⁸ An important (and previously untapped) source of workers' "biography" is used to show the origins of the worker's memoir: the interrogations and testimonies (*pokazaniie*) collected by the Corp of Gendarmes and the Third Section through the 1860s and 1870s.⁹ In order to understand the wider historiographical and literary precedents and contexts of workers' writings, an analysis is made of memoir materials¹⁰ and historical narratives written by revolutionaries,¹¹ by Tsarist officials,¹² and by Soviet historians from the 1860s through to the 1930s. Extensive use has been made of published sources – mostly written by autocratic agencies (the Third Section, the regular police, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Education) – that document day-by-day developments in the workers', peasants', students' and revolutionary movements through the 1860s and 1870s.¹³ Finally, the origins and developments of the concepts and categories of revolutionary and autocratic thinking are explored through a wide range of philosophical, polemical and programmatic texts written between the late 18th and the early 20th centuries.

The basic method of this study is the textual analysis of workers' writings and of the historiographies they entered. It begins as a discursive study, treating all the categories analysed not as referential to an extra-textual reality (to "history", as such), but as elements in various systems of language. With this approach it is possible to treat "class", "individuality", "workers' writings", and the associated concepts of authenticity, authority and representation, with requisite critical distance. Yet, there is a certain point at which incredulity towards the 'extra-textual' reality of class, individuality, etc. begins to rub against the evidence it itself produces through the analysis of texts. The study of the autocratic system of documentation – its "economy of history", so to speak – reveals a structure of description, of perception, and (ultimately) of political power in which an individual's recognised, historical existence depended to a great degree on their social categorisation, and in which "historicity", once recognised (or withheld), reproduced those categories in descriptions and in documentation of their actions. What happened to the worker-revolutionaries of the 1870s – arrest, interrogation, exile, and symbolic exclusion – in fact shows how it was that the

⁸ For instance: Boris Bazilevskii (ed.): *Gosudarstvennyia prestupleniia v Rossii v XIX veke*. Vol. 2: 1877, [pub.], Rostov-na-Donu, [1906] and *Gosudarstvennyia Prestupleniia v Rossii v XIX veke*. Vol. 3: Protssess 193-kh, [pub.] St. Petersburg, [1906]; N. S. Karzhanskii: *Moskovskii tkach Pëtr Alekseev*, Moskva, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo kul'turno-prosvetitel'noi literatury, 1954, pp. 151-155.

⁹ Many workers' testimonies from the early 1870s are included in: Anna Pankratova (ed.): *Rabochee dvizhenie v Rossii v XIX veke*. *Sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, vol 2: 1861-1884, part 1: 1861-1874, Moskva, Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1950; the testimonies and confessions of students, professional revolutionaries and others from the same period can be found in: Boris S. Itenburg (ed.): *Revoliutsionnoe narodnichestvo 70-kh godov XIX veka*. Tom I: 1870-1875 gg., Moskva, Nauka, 1964.

¹⁰ For instance: Pëtr Kropotkin: *Propaganda sredi Peterburgskikh rabochikh v nachale semidesiatikh godov*. In: *Byloe* (1900), 1, pp. 31-36; Sergei Sinegub: *Vospominaniia Chaikovtza*. I. In: *Byloe* (1906), August, pp. 39-80; Nikolai Charushin: *O dalekom proshlom*. *Iz vospominaniia o revoliutsionnom dvizhenii 70-kh godov XIX veke*, Moskva, Mysl', 1973; Vera Figner: *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois UP, 1991.

¹¹ See, for instance, Nikolai Morozov: *Ocherk po istorii kruzha 'chaikovtsev' (1869-1872 gg.)*. In: Itenburg, *Revoliutsionnoe narodnichestvo*, pp. 202-240; Georgi Plekhanov: *Russkii rabochii v revoliutsionnom dvizhenii*. In: D. Riazanov (ed.): *Sochineniia (24 vols.)*. Vol. 3, Petrograd-Moskva, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1923, pp. 121-213; Petr Lavrov: *Narodniki-propagandisty (1873-78)*, Sankt-Peterburg, Tipografiia "T-va Andersona i Loitsianskago", 1907; Nikolai Rubanovich: *Inostrannaia pressa i russkoe dvizhenie*. *Materialy dlia istorii russkago sotsial'no-revolitusionnogo dvizhenie (XVI)*, Geneva, Gruppya Starykh Narodovol'tsev, 1893.

¹² For instance: Graf. S.S. Pahlen: *Iz zapiski ministra iustitsii gr. Palena*. In: Vladimir Burtsev, Sergei Kravchinskii (eds.): *Za sto let, 1800-1896*. *Sbornik po istorii politicheskikh i obshchestvennykh dvizhenii v Rossii*, London, Russian Free Press Fund, 1897, p. 113-123; Bazilevskii, *Gosudarstvennye prestupleniia*, v. 3, pp. 128-175.

¹³ For instance: E. A. Korol'chuk (ed.): *Rabochee Dvizhenie v semidesiatykh godov*. *Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov s vvodnoi stat'ei i dopolneniiami po literature*, Leningrad, 1924; Pankratova, *Rabochee dvizhenie*, vol. 2.1, and Id. (ed.): *Rabochee Dvizhenie*, vol 2.2: 1875-1884), Moskva, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1950; Itenburg, *Revoliutsionnoe narodnichestvo*.

autocratic government dealt with the people of one social category (in this case, the “peasant-workers”, the mass) behaving like people from another (the educated and individuated upper and middle classes). This gives us a better understanding of what happened within the Russian socialist movement from the 1870s to the 1930s. I argue that the valorisation of class categories by social-revolutionary thought and practice was *not* determined by its “discourse”, but rather that this discourse was shaped and bounded by the sort of socio-political system they were living in, the activities they were able to devise within that system, and the concrete perceptions of working people they then had. The social fact of class under the autocracy was not entirely “inescapable”: the actions of worker-revolutionaries and of the radical intelligentsia are evidence of a limited freedom to resist violently imposed social categories. But these categories *were* extremely powerful, were concretely experienced, and “held” objectively no matter the attitude of workers or the intelligenty to them. For that reason they ended up hypnotising the socialist movement: instead of seeing *categorised people*, they saw exemplars of categories. And that is a part, at least, of the story of the Communist Party, of the Soviet Union, and of the development of the Russian “workers’ state”.

Contact: jeffmeadowcroft@yahoo.co.uk