

Behind the Scenes of the Russian Revolution: The Russian Free Press Fund in London at the End of the Nineteenth Century

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Charles Tilly famously defined revolution as a “forcible transfer of power” and, for a long time, the Russian Revolution was interpreted within such a framework.¹ The events of October 1917, the storming of the Winter Palace, the arrest of the Provisional Government who had been in power only a few short months, and the declaration of Bolshevik rule seemed to fit the bill. But defining revolution in this way is not so simple. The famous scene from Sergei Eisenstein’s 1928 film *October* has often been presented as contemporary footage, as has video of the 1920 commemorations of the Revolution which involved a restaging on the palace steps. These moments have become iconic because the term ‘revolution’ is loaded with connotations of legitimacy in the modern period.² In Soviet political culture, mass commemorations sought to reinforce the narrative of popular revolution, whereas those critical of the Soviet Union have often presented it as a coup.

At the same time, study of the revolution was often limited to Petrograd (now known by its former name, St Petersburg) or Moscow, Russia’s two largest cities. Accounts of foreign observers of the events in these cities in the latter months of 1917

provided an important source of information with which to study revolution.³ More recently, however, historians have begun to reassess the chronology, temporality, and geography of the Russian Revolution. One important area of development has been in studies of the events of February 1917, which marked the end of centuries-old tsarist rule in the Russian Empire. Change did not happen overnight in politics, society, culture. Instead, we can see the revolution as part of a long-running process. The Study Group for the Russian Revolution, its annual conference, and its journal *Revolutionary Russia*, date the revolutionary era as between the years 1880 and 1932.⁴ The ongoing multi-volume project ‘Russia’s Great War and Revolution’, published by Slavica, forms one key strand of scholarly efforts to reassess many of the aspects of revolution in a longer term and geographically broader perspective. Other collections have similarly brought together scholars seeking to challenge the idea of October 1917 as a moment of decisive change.⁵

There are other ways in which reconsidering the Russian Revolution can have a significant impact on our understanding of the processes of revolution. Violent insurrection does not happen

¹ Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1482-1992* (Oxford, 1993), p. 8.

² For a brief introduction to some theories of revolution, see: Allen Buchanan, ‘Revolutions’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/revolution/>

³ One of the most famous of these was the American journalist John Reed’s *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919), which was later the source material for the popular 1981 film *Reds*, starring Warren Beatty and Diane Keaton. You can read Reed’s book here: <https://archive.org/details/tendaysthatshoo00reedgoog>.

⁴ <http://basees.org/study-group-of-the-russian-revolution>. See also: John Smele, ‘The Study Group on the Russian Revolution: The First Thirty Years’, *Revolutionary Russia*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2005), p. 210. This date range was extended from the group’s early years, when the period between 1900 and 1921 was the focus.

⁵ Matthias Neumann and Andy Willimott (eds), *Rethinking the Russian Revolution as Historical Divide* (London, 2017).

overnight. While it is certainly true the spontaneous nature of some revolutionary activity must not be overlooked, revolutions are often the products of long-running preparations, theoretical debates, and popular agitation. In the Russian case, revolution was also made in the dingy rooms of rented lodgings where revolutionaries languished in exile. It was made in the British Library's Reading Room, a favourite haunt of the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, but also of émigrés such as the terrorist propagandist Sergei Stepniak.⁶ Revolution is made by real people, living real lives. While they may be preoccupied with defining and planning revolutionary activism, they still have to budget, buy food, care for children, and look after their health.⁷

Stepniak and his colleagues in the Russian Free Press Fund are a great example of how the archives can be read in such a way as to understand the lived experience of revolutionary activism. The Fund was a loose publishing collective with five official members. Stepniak, the most famous, is the subject of numerous biographical works and scholarship. He arrived in London in 1884. The next most famous, Feliks Volkhovskii arrived in London in 1890, having escaped from exile in Siberia. He too is the subject of a number of articles and an ongoing biographical project. Stepniak and Volkhovskii were famous representatives of the Fund, writing and lecturing in Britain and the US, and, as such, have received much of the attention. On the other hand, the Fund's other members Nikolai Chaikovskii, Lazar Goldenberg, and Leonid Shishko are relatively overlooked. Chaikovskii is usually recognised as the leader of the eponymous circle of revolutionary activists in St Petersburg in the 1870s, but his contributions to the Fund are often downplayed. Goldenberg and Shishko are only minor characters in many histories. But should this be the case? And are these five individuals really then

only ones who contributed to the Fund's work? Where should we look for evidence of this revolutionary activism? The short answer is in the archives, in the folders more often overlooked by historians perhaps more interested in the correspondence between famous figures, on scribbled scraps of paper, and in notebooks and diaries.

There is a rich field of work on Russian revolutionary history of the late nineteenth century which provides a detailed insight into the minutiae of revolutionary activity. Although now fairly old, a classic among these works and an important source of biographical information for revolutionary activism is Franco Venturi's *Roots of Revolution*, a study of the revolutionary movement in Russia to the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Venturi's extensive study amounts to over 900 pages and through his close attention to detail and his approach to writing about Russia, as in his other work, reflects a decentered and holistic approach.⁸ As we moved to home working during the recent lockdown, my own copy of this weighty book spent several weeks propping up my computer monitor. Venturi has proved invaluable to my research in establishing a range of biographical details, but in my efforts to write a fuller history of the Fund, I have often found myself frustrated with the lack of biographical detail of women's lives and activism, when even minor male figures receive much more attention. So, under my computer monitor the book remained, as I delved once again into my notes from the archives.

Once we start looking deeper into the correspondence of the Fund, it soon becomes clear that looking beyond personality and celebrity are essential in understanding the day-to-day aspects of revolutionary activism. For example, when Stepniak toured the US in the winter of 1890-1, he probably would not have got far

⁶ See: Robert Henderson, 'Lenin and the British Museum Library', *Solanus*, vol. 4 (1990), pp. 3-15 and 'Russian Political Émigrés and the British Museum Library', *Library History*, vol. 9, nos. 1-2 (1991), pp. 59-68.

⁷ The archives of the revolutionary activist Felix Volkhovskii are particularly useful in this regard, full of his everyday diaries and shopping lists, letters about his medical conditions, arrangements for the care and education of his daughter Vera, and even his eyeglasses prescriptions. The main parts of Volkhovskii's personal archive are held by the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University and the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

⁸ Michael Confino, 'Franco Venturi's Russia', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2010), pp. 77-105.

without his wife Fanni who certainly organised the supply of publications for distribution at his lectures, and probably much more of the arrangements too.⁹ At the same time, Goldenberg, who was at the time working for the Fund in New York, organised much of the distribution of print materials and subscriptions to the Society of American Friends of Russian Freedom.¹⁰

Despite ground-breaking studies which have reassessed the roles of women such as the Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai in the Russian Revolution, works reassessing the revolution in broad chronological and thematic perspective still often fail to meet the criteria set out by Katy Turton in 2011 for writing “integrated histories”.¹¹ Recent reassessments of 1917 in the context of long-term change such as Stephen Smith’s 2017 book show a much greater sensitivity to gender and the lived experiences of structural and social change in the late-imperial and early-Soviet periods.¹² However, there is still more work to be done. Women less frequently left behind significant archival collections and were rarely the authors of famous political works, Kollontai being one important exception.¹³

Reconstructing the everyday life of political activism recovers the work of women associated with the Russian Free Press Fund obscured in prior scholarship. Sergei Stepniak’s archive held at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow, for example, also contains his wife Fanni’s papers and correspondence. That Fanni’s archive even survived at all is surprising, but is likely a result of how it was subsumed into her husband’s. The the post-war period, a time in which they sought to purchase the archival remnants of historical

Russian political and cultural figures. However, the letters between Fanni and Sergei are primarily held in the Bakhmeteff Archive at Columbia University New York. Without the privileged ability to consult both collections, with travel budgets, visas, the ability to take photographs in the archives, and time, it is more difficult to build up a complete picture of Fanni’s role. So it is easy to see why, in the past, historians overlooked certain files and collections in favour of others.

From letters in Stepniak’s archives, we see Fanni also played an important role in her husband’s literary translation work. As one letter suggests, she was probably better at translation than her husband. The letter notes that she was correct in writing “shawl for which you substitute ‘head’”. Now I am not very conversant with the manners and customs of Russian society and it may be presumptuous on my part to offer an opinion but I was disposed to think Russian ladies are not in the habit of taking off their heads when they make a call.¹⁴ Her work was also an essential part of preparing her husband’s 1890 novel, copying out the manuscript several times.¹⁵ Fanni Stepniak’s contributions were rendered invisible because of the commercial value of her husband’s name in marketing their translations. Such work was characteristic of women’s roles: publicly invisible but essential to the writing and publishing process.

Seeing the individual within the context of their networks has important benefits for understanding the workings of the revolutionary movement, especially over time. By seeing Stepniak in the context of his family and close colleagues, we can better understand the realities of political activism.

⁹ Fanni Stepniak to Lazar Goldenberg, 3 January 1891. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. 5799, op. 1, d. 100, l. 1

¹⁰ Notes made by Goldenberg on letters received from his American collaborator Francis Jackson Garrison (the youngest son of the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison) record the subscriptions. This is just one example of where the physicality of the letters themselves is important for their use as historical sources. Francis J. Garrison to Lazar Goldenberg, 3 October 1891. GARF, f. 5799, op. 1, d. 133, l. 22.

¹¹ Katy Turton, ‘Men, Women and an Integrated History of the Russian Revolutionary Movement’, *History Compass*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2011), pp. 119–33. Turton is the author of several ground-breaking books on networks, family, and gender in Russian revolutionary activism.

¹² S.A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890 to 1928* (Oxford, 2017).

¹³ Turton, ‘Men, Women and an Integrated History’, p. 120.

¹⁴ William Westall to Stepniak, 9 March 1893. Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 1158, op. 1, d. 462, ll. 67–67ob. Westall was Stepniak’s collaborator on several literary translations in the early 1890s.

¹⁵ Edward R. Pease to Stepniak, 1 June [1889]. RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, d. 385, l. 63 ob. Pease was a British socialist who was a close friend of the Stepniaks and who helped Sergei Stepniak revise his novel for publication.

A network-based approach also has the effect of highlighting previously overlooked individuals, often women, who connected others. While it is significant certain famous individuals forged transnational connections between activists, networks transcend and outlast the activism of an individual and are shaped by other external forces.¹⁶ Centring the activism of a network as a collective enterprise has the effect of approaching political activism in a more holistic way.

In a time when social and political activists are uniting to build a more just and equitable world, just as Russian Revolutionaries of the late nineteenth century sought to achieve, we must examine the narratives we tell of current events. If we seek to understand the world as it is, we must look to tell the full and varied stories of activism. From the local and the small-scale, to the disenfranchised and silenced, we must place these within the narrative. As historians we can use the tools and understanding of our profession to amplify activists' voices, but we should not seek to minimise their agency or to incorporate them into grand, sweeping arcs where some voices are more privileged than others. The history of revolution tells us that is not the whole story.

¹⁶ For a discussion of how the Fund's networks were repurposed, see: Lara Green, '15 Augustus Road, Hammersmith: Transnational Russian Revolutionary Networks', *Peripheral Histories*, 2019. <https://www.peripheralhistories.co.uk/post/15-augustus-road-hammersmith-transnational-russian-revolutionary-networks>