

The tragedy of the Russian Revolution : Promise and default of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in 1918*

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Cinnella Ettore. The tragedy of the Russian Revolution : Promise and default of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in 1918*. In: Cahiers du monde russe : Russie, Empire russe, Union soviétique, États indépendants, vol. 38, n°1-2, Janvier-juin 1997. Guerre, guerres civiles et conflits nationaux dans l'Empire russe et en Russie soviétique, 1914 - 1922. pp. 45-82;

doi : 10.3406/cmr.1997.2483

http://www.persee.fr/doc/cmr_1252-6576_1997_num_38_1_2483

Document généré le 03/06/2016

Résumé

Ettore Cinnella, La tragédie de la révolution russe. Promesse et faillite des socialistes-révolutionnaires de gauche en 1918. Cet article s'appuie principalement sur les minutes inédites des trois Congrès qu'ont tenus les socialistes-révolutionnaires de gauche en 1918. Il part de la crise du parti socialiste-révolutionnaire à l'automne 1917 et de l'émergence des SR de gauche. Bien que ces derniers soient en accord avec les bolcheviks sur les questions cruciales de la terre et de la paix, ils regardaient avec méfiance la façon dont gouvernait le Sovnarkom. Entre novembre 1917 et les premiers mois de 1918, la campagne fut le théâtre d'une bataille décisive pour la survie et la consolidation du nouveau pouvoir. Le parti des SR de gauche fournit alors les outils institutionnels pour réorganiser la propriété de la terre (socialisation de la terre) et joua ainsi un rôle d'importance. Son activité, pendant cette période, porta ses fruits car elle répondait aux aspirations les plus profondes du monde rural. Mais les SR de gauche étaient des internationalistes enthousiastes et intraasigeants et ce rêve les aveugla au point qu'ils perdirent de vue des tâches plus urgentes. Comment sinon expliquer l'effondrement d'un parti si profondément implanté dans les campagnes ? Il fut provoqué par le meurtre de Mirbach et la quête chimérique de l'internationalisme. Mais il existe une autre raison importante : le comportement changeant et contradictoire de la gauche populiste face à la création des kombedy (comités des paysans pauvres).

Abstract

Ettore Cinnella, The tragedy of the Russian Revolution. Promise and default of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in 1918. The unpublished minutes of the three congresses held by the Left Socialist Revolutionaries (PLSR) in 1918 are the main source of this article. Its starting point is the crisis the old Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR) suffered during the fall of 1917 and the rise of the Left SRs. Though the Left SRs actually agreed with the Bolsheviks on the crucial questions of land and peace, they were mistrustful of the way in which the Council of People's Commissars governed. Between November 1917 and the first months of 1918, the countryside was the scene of the crucial battle for the survival and consolidation of the new power. The PLSR played a very important role in making available the institutional tools for reorganizing land ownership (land socialization). Their activity during this period was fruitful because it answered the deepest aspirations of the rural world. But the Left SRs were enthusiastic and intransigent internationalists and indeed this dream so blinded them that they lost sight of more urgent tasks. How can we explain the collapse of a party so strongly rooted in the countryside as was the PLSR? It can be ascribed to the murder of Mirbach and the party's quixotic quest for internationalism. However, there is another important reason: the erratic and contradictory response of the Populist left to the introduction of the kombedy (committees of village poors).

ETTORE CINNELLA

THE TRAGEDY OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
PROMISE AND DEFAULT OF THE LEFT SOCIALIST
REVOLUTIONARIES IN 1918*

Oliver Henry Radkey's two volumes on the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1917 and the beginning of 1918 can be considered classics of modern historiography, noteworthy both for their keen judgment and for the importance of their subject matter.¹ Because of the prevailing pro-Bolshevik current of opinions in the English-speaking world over the course of the past few decades, neither book has received the acclaim it deserves. Indeed, very few Sovietologists have read them. This is a pity since they deserve admiration if for no other reason than for their limpid, elegant prose, so different from the mediocre English in vogue nowadays amongst so many influential historians.

It is difficult to understand why the historians of the Revolution of 1917 and of the rise of Soviet society have so thoroughly ignored the Populist parties. The rise and consolidation of the Bolshevik regime can hardly be understood without a clear grasp of the underlying reasons behind the defeat of the Socialist Revolutionaries (i.e., the party of the Russian peasantry) and without a clear appreciation of the actions of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries after October 1917. Radkey is still well worth reading for the light he can shed on these two fundamental questions and for the intelligent issues he raises though, sadly, his research goes no further than January 1918. Certainly, Soviet historiography is of little or no help in solving the historical problem pertaining to the rise and fall of organized Populism in 1917-1918 in that, up to the collapse of the USSR, the heavy hand of ideology stifled historical studies of this difficult and thorny issue and Soviet researchers were unable to carry out their research freely. Of course, quite serious and minutely detailed studies — some based on archival sources — are available and are of great use, though their analyses appear to be quite unconvincing and very much in line with the judgments expressed at the time by Lenin and by Bolshevik propaganda.²

It is truly astonishing to what extent Western historiography has ignored the Populist left during 1917-1918.³ Not even the opening of the archives has served to promote an interest in the study of the field or to flesh out the rather sparse bibliography. It is as if the victorious Bolsheviks — together with the mountains of documents Lenin's party has left posterity — had cast a spell over historians who have not yet come to grips with the fundamental importance of a political and social

movement which was of such monumental consequence to the founding of Soviet society. What follows is an attempt to fill this void as I follow Radkey's footsteps in reconstructing the main events in the activities of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in 1918.

From the old PSR to the Left Socialist Revolutionaries

The fundamental point of departure must of necessity be the crisis the old and glorious Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR) underwent in the autumn of 1917 and the rise of the Left Socialist Revolutionary Party (PLSR). How did the organized Populists react to the Bolsheviks' takeover of power? What was the position of the Right and Left SRs during negotiations for the creation of an homogeneous socialist government, which had been promoted by the All-Russian Executive Committee of the Railwaymen's Union (*Vikzhel*) immediately after the Bolshevik revolution? Let us see if we can answer the latter question before embarking upon the more general topic of the split in Russian Populism.

It is a well-known fact that the all-powerful *Vikzhel* forced the Bolsheviks to open negotiations with their adversaries. *Vikzhel* sent a telegram on October 26, 1917, threatening with a total breakdown in railway traffic.⁴ He condemned the "fratricidal war" and wanted the creation of a "homogeneous socialist and revolutionary government," since the Kerenskii ministry had proved itself "incapable of maintaining power" and the Council of People's Commissars, which was the expression of a single party, "will not encounter recognition and acceptance throughout the land." *Vikzhel* declared that it would maintain a scrupulously neutral stance while the political conflict unfolded and solidly backed the founding of an executive comprising "all the Socialist parties, from the Bolsheviks to the Popular Socialists" as the only way out of the crisis.

Radkey's description of the attitude taken by the Socialist Revolutionaries in the weeks following the October uprising, though penned more than thirty years ago, is still well worth reading. He gave a very cogent and wise analysis of where the responsibility lay for the failure of negotiations carried out by *Vikzhel*: in his view, the Bolsheviks were not the only ones who showed insincerity and ambiguity during the course of negotiations; the SRs were equally guilty. The left-centrist wing of the PSR and the Bolshevik minority could, arguably, have come to an agreement, but the hard-liners in both camps were not willing to strike any kind of compromise.⁵ Abram R. Gots, who was the organizational mastermind of the PSR, opted for armed resistance against the Bolsheviks. Indeed, he organized the failed insurrection of the cadet officers at Petrograd on October 29. Conversely, Viktor M. Chernov, the famous and prestigious internationalist head of the party, was "more like a prize bird, exhibited on occasion because of the brilliance of its left-centrist plumage and the attraction this had for soldiers and peasants, but caged again as soon as it gave indications of independent flight."⁶

After the October uprising, both the right and center-right wings of the PSR continued to hold considerable sway in the party — the same voices which several months previously had accepted governmental collaboration with the Kadets and the pursuit of war. One typical exponent of this moderate school of thought was the mayor of Moscow, Vadim V. Rudnev, who advocated opposing the Bolsheviks with

armed might and who was a dyed-in-the-wool patriot and strong supporter of an alliance with the liberals.⁷ Even the social composition of the rank and file of the party had changed, as could be seen during the events of Moscow, minutely reconstructed by Radkey. There was only a tepid response in the former capital to the call of the Socialist Revolutionary committee to mobilize the people against a Bolshevik dictatorship, in that “the loss of its proletarian and military following had reduced the party in Moscow to an organization of intellectuals and radical-democratic elements that were not minded to fight in the streets, aside from an undetermined number of students who joined their classmates of other persuasions in a volunteer movement said to have been initiated by Constitutional Democrats.”⁸

In the autumn of 1917, the PSR was at deadlock. By this time, its supporters in the cities comprised mainly intellectuals and white-collar workers, who could of course be counted on to favor political and social reforms but who were also capable of being blinded by patriotism and nationalism. Radkey was quite right in concluding that “the war was the nemesis of the PSR as it was of the whole Russian Revolution.”⁹ In truth, the Socialist Revolutionaries proved incapable of formulating a clear-cut and consistent solution to the terrifying problem of the war and ended up — to a greater extent even than the Mensheviks — destroying themselves by internal conflicts until the final split came in November 1917, when the Left Socialist Revolutionary Party (PLRS) was officially founded.

Another, no less fatal, blow was dealt by the split between the leadership and the rank and file as a result of the war. The masses had become increasingly radicalized and embittered during the wartime years, most particularly in the countryside and at the front, whilst the democratic intelligentsia increasingly tended to side with the liberal and nationalistic stance of the professional and clerical classes. There had been a fragile union between intellectuals and the people which had flowered at the end of the nineteenth century with the rise of the “third element” and which had prospered during the final stages of the 1905 Revolution; this alliance foundered and expired on the battlefields and trenches of the First World War, together with millions of human lives. In no country on earth did national cohesion, imbued with the venom of chauvinism which festered amongst the propertied and the subordinate classes, survive intact unto the bitter end, as proved by the social and political upheavals of the immediate post-war period. Nonetheless, in the country where the tsar ruled, and where the gap between the high degree of culture achieved by the Westernized middle classes and the backwardness of the plebeian masses was greatest, the long drawn-out war had dug an insurmountable trench between the two Russias. Though the clerical workers and the professionals a decade earlier had opposed the war with Japan, in 1914 they fell subject to the lure of nationalism which was winning over their Western European colleagues. Of course, this whole process of ideological homogeneity had consequences. Only a small minority of the democratic intelligentsia which was in close contact with the lower classes and was aware of their needs and mind-set was able to withstand the temptation of giving in to nationalism and found refuge in extremism and radicalism. Most of them felt that — however brightly the flame of the old dream of reform might burn — the more immediate and urgent task facing the homeland was German imperialism. The democratic bourgeoisie was both pugnacious and revolutionary as long as the tsar held the reins of power. Indeed, the democratic bourgeoisie played a not inconsiderable role in bringing about the fall of the autocratic regime and in the establishment of freedom

in Russia. However, once tsarism fell, they were truly on the horns of a dilemma — should peace negotiations with all the belligerents begin at once or should the democratic Russian homeland be defended against the Austro-German invaders? The democratic bourgeoisie opted for the latter choice, in that there was the added advantage of couching the powerful feelings of patriotism in idealistic terms. Since quite a few Socialist Revolutionary intellectuals remained true to their pacifist ideals, the professional and clerical classes who by now comprised the heart and soul of the party hurled accusations of treason at those who spoke in concrete terms of peace negotiations.

Inside the PSR, the conflicts had reached fever pitch by the end of the summer subsequent to the mass resumption of peasant uprisings. The truth is that in the Socialist Revolutionary Party there were at least three distinct and quite dissimilar political groupings coexisting side by side, all of them, however, originating from the same Populist roots. The origins of the crisis of the Socialist Revolutionary movement harkened back to the defeat of 1905 and to the land reform promoted by Stolypin; it was with the outbreak of the war and during the course of the war itself that the various political positions inside the Populist movement hardened to the point that they became ultimately irreconcilable. It bears repeating that the main reason for the split lay in the political and ideological metamorphosis of broad swathes of the Russian democratic intelligentsia, whose sudden conversion to liberal nationalism blinded them to the fact that the country was facing very real and very urgent social problems. Thus, in 1917, thanks to the unusually persuasive and convincing Populist message, the SRs managed to create a party with a very large following and to perform the miracle of peacefully mobilizing the rural masses. Then, however, instead of convening the Constituent Assembly and introducing land reform, the leadership of the PSR made several mistakes. Firstly, the leadership assumed that the peasantry, who had long lusted after the gentry's lands, and the soldiery, who were eager to abandon the trenches and share in the spoils of the division of the large landed estates, could be kept down. The Populist left, both in the capitals and in the hinterland, pled in vain for the leaders to acknowledge the true feelings running rife amongst the masses and the fire smouldering amid the ashes of what on the surface looked peaceful. The ties the Socialist Revolutionary intelligentsia had had with the Russian plebs had been either lost or weakened to the point that the intelligentsia no longer understood that paying lip service to the old and glorious party program no longer sufficed to resolve the social conflicts and to placate the masses. The plebeian hard core of the Socialist Revolutionary movement did not disperse but rather passed intact into the new political movement which arose out of the split in the PSR after the Bolshevik victory. Radkey was quite right when he noted that the "plebeian character" and the youth of its leaders were the hallmarks of the new Populist party. At the time of the split, the allegiance of most of the intellectuals and the clerical workers remained with the old PSR, whilst almost all of the sailors and a goodly number of workers and soldiers followed the Left Socialist Revolutionaries.¹⁰

The start of cooperation between the Left SRs and the Bolsheviks

Once Lenin had rejected out of hand any possibility of working together with the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries, he tried to establish a special relationship with the extreme left wing of the Populists, which was in the process of splitting from the PSR and setting up as an independent party. The truth was that negotiations between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs, which had begun immediately after the Petrograd insurrection and had continued through to the end of November, were anything but easy; though the PLSR actually agreed with Lenin and his program as far as the crucial questions of land and peace were concerned, it continued to disagree with the coup of October 25 and was extremely mistrustful of the way in which the Council of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) governed.¹¹ The Left SRs, moreover, by no means presented a united and coherent front. Among their ranks there was a radical and hard-line wing which coexisted with a more moderate wing, which was aware of the democratic rules of the game and which abhorred the Bolsheviks' methods.

It would be well to bear in mind precisely what distinguished the PLSR from the Leninist Bolsheviks. First of all, the PLSR rejected terror as a means of speeding up the coming of socialism and sponsored the protection of the rights of freedom. These were the most hotly-contested topics between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs during the meetings of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK). On November 2, 1917, B.F. Malkin vehemently protested against the single-party dictatorship, which had taken repressive measures which risked affecting not only the property-owners but also the masses.¹² Then, two days later, there was a debate rife with tension on the freedom of the press after the *Sovnarkom* decree which closed down the bourgeois newspapers. Prosh P. Prosh'ian was quite clear in his condemnation of the crude theories of Lenin and Trotskii when he observed that "the struggle for freedom of the press has always been closely bound up with the struggle for socialism."¹³ Malkin countered the attempts of the two top Bolshevik leaders to come up with an ideological justification for the dictatorship in the following way:

"We firmly repudiate the notion that socialism can be introduced by armed force. [...] The revolution's appeal lies in the fact that we are striving not just to fill our hungry bellies but for a higher truth, the liberation of the individual. We shall win not by closing down bourgeois newspapers but because our programme and tactics express the interests of the broad toiling masses, because we can build up a solid coalition of soldiers, workers and peasants. [...]"

Lenin has told us about slanders put out by the bourgeois press. [...] We revolutionaries and socialists reply to these lies by telling the truth. The lies of the bourgeois press do not represent an authentic danger to the socialist movement. [...]"

We Socialist-Revolutionaries were once prisoners of tsarism but we were never its slaves, and we don't want to establish slavery for anyone now."¹⁴

Another cause of friction between Lenin's party and the Left SRs was the omnipotence of the executive, which was not subject to any control. Karelin protested at the abuse of the term "bourgeois":

“It is not only bourgeois governments which need to give account of themselves or to maintain good order in their affairs, even in matters of detail. [...] A proletarian government must also submit to popular control. [...]

Our demand for responsible government is being rejected on the simple grounds that this was characteristic of earlier parliamentary regimes. The logical corollary would be to abandon financial accountability as well, another ‘bourgeois’ prejudice. [...]

These decrees and draft ordinances which are being cooked up like *bliny* are extraordinarily illiterate, although as yet, thank heavens, literacy has not been declared a bourgeois prejudice.”¹⁵

The PLSR had no intention whatsoever of striking a compromise over the division of powers between *Sovnarkom* and VTsIK during the negotiations which had begun with the Bolsheviks for the formation of a two-party government. Once the PLSR abandoned its original idea of a coalition of all the Socialist parties after the breakdown of the negotiations promoted by *Vikzhel*, it decided to join the Council of People’s Commissars. However, it did so only after it had achieved the enlargement of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets (VTsIK) by including representatives of the extraordinary peasants’ congress (which was sitting at that time in Petrograd) and after the adoption of a document which regulated the relationship between the government and the “parliament.” In his address to the first congress of the PLSR, Boris D. Kamkov defined as an “immense victory” for his party the separation of the legislative branch (in the guise of the VTsIK) from the executive (the *Sovnarkom*).¹⁶ Indeed, the rules adopted on November 17 governing the relationship between the VTsIK and the *Sovnarkom*¹⁷ established that the Council of People’s Commissars was to be “entirely responsible before the Central Executive Committee” and that “all legislative acts, and any and all ordinances of major political import” were to be submitted to, and ratified by, the Soviet “parliament.” Only emergency measures in the struggle against the enemies of the Revolution could be enacted immediately, and only if the government then answered to the VTsIK. Lastly, the regulations obliged each member of the *Sovnarkom* to answer for his or her actions once a week before the VTsIK, and obliged the government to respond “immediately” to any requests put forward by the Central Executive Committee. Once this admittedly rough and ready form of division of powers between *Sovnarkom* and VTsIK had been achieved, the Left SRs entered the government and accepted, for the time being, the Ministry of Agriculture (they were later to hold other offices, as well).

Nonetheless, there were still enormous differences between the Left SRs and the Bolsheviks, as shown by the speech delivered by Mariia A. Spiridonova, on behalf of the PLSR, welcoming the newly-elected peasant deputies to the headquarters of the VTsIK.¹⁸ The Populist revolutionary spoke of the basic concepts underlying international socialism and repeated that the Russian peasantry would finally be emancipated only by means of an alliance with the Russian workers and with the workers of the world. Her speech also contained religious overtones which were alien to Bolshevik doctrine and which harkened back to the traditional ideals of Russian Populism:

“We shall attain our ideals not just through hatred but also through feelings of pity for all who suffer and love, for all who are oppressed. For our ideals we shall give everything, our lives and even perhaps our honor. We must cast off the last traces of slavery in our psychological outlook. We must eliminate hatred among ourselves and direct our enmity solely against our enemies. We must develop mutual respect and tolerance towards our comrades in the struggle that awaits us. We must become better, purer, more sincere, so that no one should dare say that our insurrection is bringing forth hatred and evil. Upon the ruins of the old society there is being born, hidden from our eyes, a new society of justice and love.”

Furthermore, the Bolsheviks and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries disagreed on what stance to take regarding the Constituent Assembly, which had been elected in November 1917. At first, the PLSR seemed to lean in favor of recognizing the right of the Constituent Assembly to convene and to announce to the country at large the basic guidelines of its policy. Indeed, it was this very question which sparked off a lively debate within the VTsIK. The Left Socialist Revolutionary Shteinberg protested against the *Sovnarkom* decree adopted on November 28 whereby the leaders of the Kadet Party were to be arrested on the accusation of being “enemies of the people.”¹⁹ Shteinberg said that “there is no place in the class struggle for arbitrary repressive measures” and added: “The decree suggests a willingness to disrupt the Constituent Assembly, and we announce that we are categorically opposed to such a step.”²⁰ Trotskii answered disdainfully:

“Russia is completely split into two irreconcilable camps, that of the bourgeoisie and that of the proletariat. Between them are the Left SRs, who have yet to find their feet and are vacillating in a petty-bourgeois funk which leads them to obstruct the CPC’s class struggle. [...] You wax indignant at the naked terror which we are applying against our class enemies, but let me tell you that in one month’s time at the most it will assume more frightful (*groznye*) forms, modelled on the terror of the great French revolutionaries. Not the fortress but the guillotine will await our enemies.”²¹

In his speech, Mstislavskii alluded to Trotskii’s reference to the French Revolution to show how the Bolsheviks, in their zeal to attribute a petit-bourgeois outlook to the PLSR, themselves were overly eager to copy the political forms of a revolution which had itself been bourgeois and petit-bourgeois. The kind of terror Lenin and Trotskii were advocating ran the risk of perverting the social nature of the Russian Revolution, turning it into civil war. Mstislavskii felt that the task before the Left Socialist Revolutionaries was to stop the Bolsheviks from harming the cause of the Revolution with their blind repressive measures, such as the persecution of the Kadets and of the Constituent Assembly.²²

Why did the PLSR change its tack and ally itself with the Bolsheviks on the question of the Constituent Assembly? Prosh’ian gave an explanation at the meeting of the VTsIK on December 22, stating clearly that “we were not being hypocritical, we were not lying, when we defended the assembly.” But “real life is more intransigent than political dogma. Its logic is more merciless, and saner, than that of any political program.” Since the Constituent Assembly was asking for full powers, it clashed headlong with the Soviets, “the sole organs of revolutionary authority,” and blocked the social revolution then well under way in the country.²³

The peasants and Soviet power

Between November 1917 and the first few months of 1918, the crucial battle for the survival and consolidation of the new power took place in the countryside. In the autumn of 1917, there was a spontaneous peasant *jacquerie*, which was, in essence, the final stage of the Russian social revolution. It spread so far and so violently that it quickly spun out of control, unchecked by any political force or party. Lenin, in a brilliant move, quickly understood its importance and this was his political masterpiece in 1917.

Most, if not all, informed observers would agree that the famous Land Decree made a major contribution in effecting a turnabout in the peasant uprisings, gradually banking the fires of the raging *jacquerie* and winning the peasantry over to the Bolshevik regime. Yet that is not quite the full picture. In a very important study, the Bolshevik historian, A.V. Shestakov, boldly maintained that the date of the October uprising should not be considered “a milestone in the peasants’ struggle against the *pomeshchiki*” and that the *jacquerie* raged on until November and December.²⁴ Shestakov’s study, unfortunately unknown to Western scholars, is based upon solid documentary evidence.

The truth is that the rise of a new popular government in Petrograd hardly made any impact whatsoever on the behavior of the rural masses. As a rule, the peasants were apprised of the Land Decree only some time after the event: the Bolshevik press and even the position papers of the government were available and in circulation only in the major urban centers, beyond the ken of the boundless Russian provinces. Even when news of the agrarian policy of Lenin’s government reached the hinterland (usually spread by soldiers returning home from the front, informing their fellow countrymen about the proclamations of the new government), the Land Decree was interpreted as a call to seize the lands and the goods of the gentry. It is important to bear in mind the extremely primitive degree of political awareness of the very first “Bolshevik” propagandists, whose actions served only to increase the chaos and violence that already reigned in the countryside.

Though Lenin’s decree had, to all intents and purposes, no practical effect, it was nonetheless quite a far-sighted and resourceful political act, aimed at paving the way towards a global and radical restructuring of land ownership in Russia. For restructuring of land ownership to occur, however, first the anarchical peasant masses had to be won over politically. This was not a task for a political party like the Bolshevik party which had no rural roots and which was remote from the cares and thoughts of the country-dwellers. Only a political movement which had a long Populist tradition could hope to put an end to the chaos and establish a new order in the villages. It was clear to Lenin from the beginning that only the political platform of the Socialist Revolutionaries was capable of satisfying the basic claims of the Russian peasantry and thus he co-opted it, to the astonishment and rage of his Bolshevik friends and of his enemies. Nonetheless, for a few weeks, his political sectarianism stopped him from reaching an agreement with the Populist left which — whilst agreeing with the main guidelines of the Land Decree — disagreed with the methods used by the Bolsheviks in power. When he realized that the Populist platform could never be implemented by his party, for both political and cultural reasons, Lenin opened the *Sovnarkom* to the Left SRs and gave them the Agriculture Commissariat. This governmental coalition with the PLSR was of great help to the

Bolshevik party at a very crucial moment, during the convening of the Constituent Assembly. Even more important, in terms of safeguarding and strengthening the Soviet regime, was the proselytism carried out amongst the peasantry by the Populist left in the center and above all in the hinterlands. One could safely say that without these new allies, the Bolsheviks would have quickly lost power.

The Second All-Russian Soviet Congress, which ratified the Bolshevik takeover of power and elected a new executive committee was not at all representative of the countryside. Indeed, the executive committee of the All-Russian Soviet of Peasant Deputies was firmly in the hands of the Socialist Revolutionaries and was openly and proudly hostile to the Bolsheviks. There was a fierce battle in the capital for control of the main organ of political representation of the rural masses between November and December 1917. Radkey has given a detailed description of the "fight for the peasantry," describing the complicated political events and the social composition of the congresses which were hurriedly held one after the other in Petrograd during those weeks.²⁵ One conference of the representatives of the countryside, which opened at Petrograd on November 10, declared itself an extraordinary peasant congress and elected a Presidium of Left Socialist Revolutionaries. A few days later, the assembly was split into two opposing camps: the extraordinary congress, which was dominated by the Populist left and by the Bolsheviks, and the conference of the supporters of the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Peasants' Soviet. The extraordinary congress was held more or less at the same time as the founding congress of the PLSR, and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries decided to recognize the *Sovnarkom* and to send their own representatives, thus legitimizing the Bolshevik regime and drawing it out of its isolation. Radkey described these events thus:

"The Extraordinary Congress (November 10/25) had provided Lenin's regime with a fig leaf to conceal its proletarian nakedness. The mere fact that an assembly of peasants had joined its voice to that of the workers and soldiers helped to stabilize the regime, for in the general confusion few bothered to examine the title of the congress or the validity of its members' credentials."²⁶

The final split between the "right" and the "left" occurred during the Second All-Russian Peasants' Congress, held in Petrograd from November 26 to December 10, 1917. Both of the opposing executive committees elected by the congress tried to strengthen their position by convening a new general congress. The pro-Bolshevik Peasants' Congress, held on January 13, 1918, decided to merge with the Third All-Russian Soviet Congress, which was being held concurrently. At the same time, the "right" Peasants' Congress was being held; it harkened back to the values of the Constituent Assembly and, like the Constituent Assembly, was forcibly disbanded. Thus, thanks to the conclusive contribution of the Left SRs, the Bolsheviks managed to overcome the resistance of the old PSR and to consolidate the central organs of Soviet power.

The above-described events, important though they are, are of no use whatsoever in understanding the political turnabout which occurred in Russia between the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918. The "fight for the peasantry" raged not only in Petrograd, but throughout the boundless land; this struggle was to determine the fate of Soviet power. Though the Bolsheviks had the active support of many workers and soldiers in the capitals and in the main industrial centers, in the provinces the new

regime had either not even managed to become established or was hanging by a thread. In the final analysis, everything depended upon the position that the Soviet district congresses were to take. In a rural nation like Russia, the Soviet district congresses were mainly made up of peasant delegates.

We have only the most rudimentary knowledge of the composition and activities of the local peasant congresses, even though they did play a most important role in the establishment of Soviet power in the hinterland. Very few historians have been bold enough to attempt to gather information on the political struggles in the countryside in the months following the October Revolution.²⁷ Shestakov's book, once again, comes to the rescue; based on local sources, it describes the changing political mood of the district peasant soviets during the last few months of 1917 in the black-soil provinces. For example, on October 29, the Temnikov Soviet (province of Tambov) had decided to back the Provisional Government and fight Bolshevism; on January 23, 1918, it announced to the *Sovnarkom* that a new power with popular backing was being organized in the district.²⁸ Similar events, at different times, were occurring throughout the land. The political conquest of the district and *volost'* soviets allowed the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs to get rid of the *volostnye zemstva* (i.e., the administrative bodies of the rural areas) and the other organs of local self-government which had arisen after the February Revolution and which had up until then refused to recognize the new government. Clearly, the split in the PSR and the rise of the PLSR were responsible for the new mix of politics in the rural *volosti*. The old PSR, which up until then had had the local administrations in hand, was now in the minority and deprived of power. Chernov's party first saw an abrupt drop in its clout in the countryside at the end of the summer, and now it was losing political control over the peasant organizations. On their own, the Bolsheviks would have had neither the strength nor the capacity to disrupt the authority in the rural districts of the party which had won the elections for the Constituent Assembly. Suffice it to say that, at the beginning of 1918, 207 Bolshevik organizations (covering only 3-4% of the rural *volosti*) were operational in the agricultural areas for a total of 4,122 peasant militants.²⁹

From the first few months of 1918 onwards, the *volost'* soviets became the most important political and administrative organ in the rural areas and, thus, the backbone of the new regime in the countryside. Their duties were manifold and essentially concerned all aspects of daily life in the rural hamlets, from the division of land to procuring supplies, from the running of schools and hospitals to helping the needy (orphans, the elderly, invalids, etc.), from enforcing law and order to armed defense of the territory. Though we do not know much about how these local soviets actually worked (documentary sources are scattered and as yet unstudied), one thing is certain — the Bolshevik regime was able to establish itself and take root thanks in large part to the rise of the local soviets.

The land socialization

We have already seen how, though the Land Decree was of enormous political value, it did not have any immediate practical effects. There were, however, a number of other pieces of legislation which had an impact on the economic and social life of the countryside, amongst which was the law adopted on December 13/26, 1917 on

the land committees, which established the ways in which these operational bodies were to be elected and what their jurisdiction was to be, both locally and nationally.³⁰ The land committees had been created in April 1917 by the Provisional Government; now they were to be vested with the power to carry out a land survey and to manage all the confiscated lands. The actions of the *volost'* land committees were very important; in January of 1918, an All-Russian congress of the *volost'* land committees was held and it helped in drawing up the law on the socialization of the land and elected a Main Land Council (*glavnyi zemel'nyi sovet*) which was dominated by the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. The Left SRs were given the task of supervising the enormous land reform then underway. The PLSR not only headed the People's Commissariat for Agriculture, it also asked for — and obtained — the leadership of the peasant section of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, which (like the other departments of the VTsIK) acted as a parliamentary committee with far-reaching operational tasks. During the period in which they collaborated with the Bolsheviks, the Left SRs were adamant that the soviet "parliament's" independence be maintained with respect to the *Sovnarkom* and the individual People's Commissariats. They were not always successful in defending the privileges of the VTsIK. If anything, the opposite. However, in the case of the peasant section, they did manage it, thus becoming one of the main instruments the PLSR used in shaping the new agrarian world to their liking. The VTsIK's peasant section, headed by Mariia Spiridonova, not only sent agitators and political pamphlets to the countryside, but it also received numerous peasant emissaries sent with petition (the so-called *khodoki*).³¹

The PLSR's activities in those months were fruitful, in that they were in line with the deepest aspirations of the rural world. It is well worth bearing in mind that the main protagonists of the profound changes in the agrarian world were the peasants themselves and that the parties in power (first and foremost, the Left SRs) were the ones to make available the institutional tools for the reordering of land ownership which the village dwellers desired. Equality of ownership of the land, achieved within the first six months of 1918, was the culmination of centuries of longing by the peasants and had from the start been the byword of the Populist movement. By helping it to come about, the PLSR miraculously managed to combine its political and idealistic traditions with the claims of the peasantry. Early in 1918, the Soviet regime managed to overcome both the political parties and the opposing social classes by establishing deep roots in the villages and by endorsing the main demand of Russian Populism. Russian Populism — considered more as a faith than as a rational belief — was certainly alive in the hearts and minds of millions of men and women. In order to gain an understanding of the prevailing mood of the countryside, it would suffice to read the spare yet moving minutes of the local peasant congresses of the time. Choosing one of the many, the minutes of the congress held in Bezhetsk (in the province of Tver') in March, 1918, and a speech of one of the delegates, we read that he was not a member of any political party, but was "merely a Populist (*narodnik*) who loved the callous hands of his fellow laborers." The Populist delegate's name was Voronin, and he demanded the equal redistribution of land, harking back to the language of the muzhiks: "God created land and only laborers may use it."³²

The *narodniki* also advocated the revival of the *obshchina* (land commune), an idea which the Russian Marxists abhorred. Though land communes had been

declared dead many times, the revival of the *obshchina* was finally achieved in 1917. After the fall of tsarism and the abolition of the suffocating police state, the *obshchestvo* or the *mir* (as the peasants called their village commune) became the center of political and organizational life for the peasants. In the main, the most important decisions (from the “sentences” and the “instructions” to the occupation of the lands of the gentry) were taken collectively by the rural assemblies.³³ We are fairly unfamiliar with what happened to the *obshchina* during the months in which the *jacquerie* raged; by the same token there are many other aspects of village life in that turbulent time which remain obscure. One thing is certain, however: from the beginning of 1918, rural communes were once more in the forefront of events and however hostile the Bolshevik authorities might be to them, their power increased during the years of civil war.

Once the operational terrain for reform was set via the land committees, the Soviet government set down guidelines for reform by means of the fundamental law of land socialization, which was ratified on January 27 (February 9), 1918. It was published a few days later, to coincide with the anniversary of the emancipation of the peasants in 1861.³⁴ The text was clearly inspired by the land reform program of the Socialist Revolutionaries, even though it was contrary to the holy doctrine of Russian Marxism.

In truth, the Bolsheviks were anything but jubilant over the law advocated by their partners in the government. Yet, once again, Lenin convinced them that the “black repartition” (which is what the Russian muzhiks called equal distribution of land), was inevitable and limited himself to making a few amendments to the draft under discussion.

The law solemnly proclaimed that henceforth all forms of private ownership of the land would be abolished without reimbursement and that its use would be granted solely to those who actually worked the land. Thus, only farm laborers could legitimately claim use of farmland. These were Populist principles permeating the entire legislative text. It was further stated that the reforms, among other things, were meant “to encourage the collective system of agriculture at the expense of individual farming, the former being more economical and leading to a socialistic economy.” Another article stated that precedence must be given to collective use of the land as opposed to individual use. These were of course mere statements of principle, in that the actual provisions of the law regulated in minute detail the equal redistribution of the land. The agrarian sections of the local soviets were the bodies responsible for overseeing the reform. After the January All-Russian Congress, the land committees were disbanded and their members formed part of the new operational instruments established by the socialization law. The agrarian sections were supposed to base the assignment of land on one basic criterion, the consumption-labor norm (*potrebitel'no-trudovaia norma*), which was a typically Populist concept, taking into account both the working capacity of each peasant family and the number of mouths to be fed. That is why the law listed the categories of individuals who were exempt from work for reasons of age or gender (girls and boys up until the age of 12, women after the age of 50 and men after the age of 60) and also established, in quantitative terms, the working capacity of individuals, assessed on the basis of gender and age cohort (out of a score of full working ability of men aged 18 to 60, women from 18 to 50 years of age were given a score of 0.8, down to adolescents of both sexes between the ages of 12 and 16, who were attributed a score of half a unit).

The law endeavored to create both the legal and institutional premises for allocating the land to the peasants in as egalitarian a way as possible. And in the spring of 1918, throughout Russia, there was a colossal redistribution of the ownership of land. Yet, however strange it might appear, Soviet historiography has often been quite hesitant, almost embarrassed in dealing with an event of such huge economic and social importance. Most particularly, there were very few historians during the Stalinist period who dared tell the truth about the true nature of the 1918 land reform, contradicting the official version, whereby the kulaks (the rich peasants) benefited the most from the breakup of the property of the gentry. This gross distortion of the truth can only be explained by the Bolshevik doctrine that the peasantry was divided into classes at odds with each other. Given the social and economic levelling process which occurred in the countryside after the October Revolution, it is difficult to understand the reason why the party persecuted the kulaks — sometimes ferociously, sometimes less so — from the summer of 1918 up until Stalin's collectivization.

In 1949, in the depths of the period of obscurantism, Evgenii A. Lutskii wrote a very brave article, which is useful to this day, revealing the levelling consequences of the law on the socialization of the land.³⁵ The law's egalitarian ideals were clearly evinced by the fact that most of the lots of farmland were allotted "by eaters" (*po edokam*), i.e. according to the overall number of people comprising a peasant family. This was the unquestioned and uncontested criterion adopted, especially in the black-soil provinces, where the communal traditions were most deeply rooted and where the thirst for land was most acutely felt. As Shestakov wrote, "the decision to use the land in an egalitarian manner and to distribute it by eaters underpinned any and all resolutions governing redistribution."³⁶ Here, in fact, often even the lots of land which the peasants had owned before the reform were included in the general redistribution of the land according to the new laws. It would appear (though detailed studies of individual farm areas of the immense tracts of land in Russia are lacking) that the land elsewhere was redistributed in a less egalitarian way; in other areas, the working capacity of each family was taken into account and the wealthier peasants were able to keep their land. As Keep has suggested,³⁷ a clear grasp of the ways in which the reform was implemented would require an understanding of the nature of agrarian relations and the peasant traditions of each region, instead of Soviet historiography's ritual explanation — the "pressure of the kulaks." At any rate, redistribution, with rare exceptions, was carried out in a peaceful and organized fashion, though of course there were, inevitably, conflicts with the neighboring *volosti*. One eyewitness, who spent a number of months a year in the central-Russian countryside and therefore knew it well, spoke of the "miraculous transformation" which occurred in April: "When left to themselves the peasants partitioned the land [...] peacefully [...] and without the aid of land surveyors, relying solely on the experience gained from communal land ownership."³⁸ True enough, not everything transpired so easily and so smoothly. Nonetheless, the contrast between the apocalyptic *jacquerie* in the autumn of 1917 and the calm, industrious "black repartition" in the spring of 1918 was striking.

The net result of the egalitarian reform is that though the Russian muzhiks were granted to all intents and purposes the use of the land expropriated from the *pomeshchiki* and from the Church, it did not enlarge by any appreciable extent the farmland they cultivated. The reasons are quite clear: many have noted that, from the

second half of the nineteenth century onwards, the large aristocratic landholdings progressively diminished while the peasant holdings increased. This does not in any way detract from the extraordinary importance of the land redistribution of 1918. Once the aristocracy had been driven out and their land expropriated, the muzhiks had fully achieved what they and their ancestors had dreamed of — the age-old class war between the *pomeshchiki* and the peasants had finally ended with the triumph of the latter. Imagine the deep satisfaction of the villagers in the months following the October Revolution. Not only had they finally wrought their revenge against the hated aristocrats, terrorizing them and pillaging their property, but also doing so without the draconian reprisals which usually followed each *jacquerie*. Not only did the agrarian terror in the autumn of 1917 go unpunished, it was also legitimized by the new power, which had abolished private property for all time.

The peasants also felt that they were masters of their own fate and of their future for another reason: they had finally partitioned the land on the basis of criteria which had been freely chosen and deeply felt, without any great hindrance. No matter that the overall surface area allotted to each village was still insufficient, given the agricultural techniques of the day. The important thing was that now the muzhiks could make use of (almost) all of the arable land and that the land could be partitioned according to the age-old rules of the *obshchina*. Therefore, in every sense the peasants were the true victors of the Russian Revolution.

The followers of Populism were also deeply satisfied at their alliance with the Bolsheviks, since they had managed to achieve the land revolution generations of Russian revolutionaries had dreamed of. The Left Socialist Revolutionaries had prepared the groundwork and managed the great land reform; they were the heirs to the political and idealistic heritage left by the *narodniki* and were expressing the desires of the muzhiks. As Aleksei M. Ustinov said before the peasants' congress of the Saratov province, illustrating the principles underlying the socialization law: "this is one of the few laws not scientifically drawn up, it is not an abstract invention (*ne vvsasyvalsia iz pal'tsa*), but rather it arose from life itself, from the toiling peasants. Radishchev, the Decembrists and Chernyshevskii were the first to talk of adopting such a law, though it took shape only during the first Revolution." Ustinov further observed, harking back to the main milestones of the land reform, starting from the bills presented to the Duma down to the recent socialization law: "This law, more than any other, corresponds to the fundamental relationship the working peasant has with the land. Each word of the law is as if it comes from the mouths of the peasants."³⁹

Surprising though it may seem, the Bolshevik party's main source of popularity at the beginning of 1918 was the fact that, whether it wished to be or not, it was the heir of Russian Populism. After the early difficulties, the regime's political strength lay in its alliance with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and its social strength in its roots in the countryside. Though by this time Soviet power was well-established in the cities, there was still a great deal of resistance from the middle classes, and the workers were starting to be restless due to the worsening food supply. In the rural areas, however, the establishment of the *volost'* soviets and above all the implementation of the land socialization law served to broaden the new regime's appeal. It has already been mentioned that Lenin was the main advocate of the Bolsheviks' bold land policy after the October Revolution; but that is not all — Lenin

was also mainly responsible for the breakdown of the recent miraculous political and social alliance.

Populism and internationalism

The Left Socialist Revolutionaries were always attentive to their relations with the Bolsheviks, and this aspect, which we have only fleetingly analyzed, is quite worthy of interest. Prosh Perchevich Prosh'ian, in the political report of the central committee delivered before the second party congress (held in Moscow from April 17 to April 25, 1918), described the various stages of the sometimes difficult relations between the PLSR and the Bolsheviks after October 1917.⁴⁰ Prosh'ian's speech described the prospect of the two political forces working together in hopeful terms, though he did point out that originally there had been a "psychological abyss" between them which was "gradually disappearing." He showed how the PLSR's stance on the difficult question of repression had become similar to that of the Bolsheviks ("we are convinced that the power of the people must often be wielded with strength and determination, with recourse to political terror, arrests, gags on the bourgeois press, etc.") and how, once the initial difficulties had been overcome, the two parties had cooperated on a wide range of political and social problems, from relations with the Constituent Assembly to the question of the socialization of the land. Then, after ratification of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, relations between the two parties suddenly deteriorated, when the Left SRs protested by withdrawing their representatives from the *Sovnarkom*. Though the two parties had acted in unison during negotiations with Austria and Germany, when the Bolsheviks yielded to German imperialism, an internationalist party such as the PLSR could not go along. Thus, the difficult decision to withdraw from the *Sovnarkom* was taken; however, this did not mean — as Prosh'ian was quick to point out — that they had definitively broken with Lenin's party.

Though Prosh'ian belonged to the pro-Bolshevik wing of the PLSR, his opinion was largely shared by the party. However, that "psychological abyss" he had mentioned between the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks had not vanished even though the two parties had worked closely together in the government; it still represented the greatest stumbling-block to an agreement between them. The speeches of PLSR members had ethical and religious overtones, which was anything but a sham; the party had deep roots in the idealism and the long tradition of sacrifice and abnegation of the nineteenth-century Populist intelligentsia. Mariia Aleksandrovna once again reminded delegates of their tradition at the first PLSR congress, speaking of the party's "glorious forerunners," those "militants of the 1860's, the 1870's, the 1880's and the 1890's."⁴¹ Spiridonova not only harkened back to the roots of her movement, she also honored the Socialist Revolutionary terrorists who had fought against tsarism and had gone to the scaffolds with their heads high shortly before 1905 and during the first Revolution.

Over the course of the next few months, the official organ of the PLSR, *Znamia truda* repeatedly stressed the party's Populist origins and its terrorist past. Two events stand out in this connection. At the end of January 1918, on the fourteenth anniversary of the death of Nikolai Konstantinovich Mikhailovskii, the newspaper dedicated two full pages to "the populist who united the peasants and the workers

under the banner of the toiling people,” the uncompromising critic of capitalism and the “bard of the liberation of human individuality,” who “began from the theory of the person” to end up “with the theory of society based on labor, and a republic founded upon labor and socialism.”⁴² One week later, the newspaper dedicated another full page to the writings of Ivan P. Kaliaev, including some poems, his speech before the court, his *Letter to my comrades*; Kaliaev was the Socialist Revolutionary terrorist who on February 4, 1905, threw a deadly bomb at the Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich. Kaliaev was then sentenced to death by the tsar’s court.⁴³

Though the PLSR did boast of Russian Socialism’s terrorist past, it also condemned the crude and brutal methods of the Bolsheviks in power. As we have seen, the coup in October 1917 had been condemned by the Socialist Revolutionary Left, which had advocated a broad-based agreement amongst the popular parties; the Socialist Revolutionary Left had been appalled at the idea of a fratricidal war within “revolutionary democracy.” On November 22, Boris Davidovich Kamkov delivered a long speech before the congress participants, outlining what the Left SRs had done within the VTsIK,⁴⁴ in the course of that speech, he gave a clear account of the proud history of the conflicts between the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks — who “were punch-drunk from a too-easy victory” — and the way in which the Left SRs, who were “immune from the exaltation of victory, the exaltation of the easy taking of the Winter Palace,” had managed to keep united “the fronts of Russian democracy.” Since the PLSR had not managed to bridge the gap between the two Socialist fronts, it was now in danger, “between the devil and the deep blue sea,” and had decided to side with the Bolshevik government, but only after obtaining specific guarantees from the Bolsheviks. The main guarantee obtained was that the executive branch (the *Sovnarkom*) would be subordinate to the legislative branch (the VTsIK). However, Kamkov certainly did not think that all their problems were resolved and that all the differences were papered over; he was perfectly aware of the dangers involved in the mind-set and actions of the Bolsheviks. Certainly, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries’ concept of political struggle and of democracy was completely different from that of the Bolsheviks:

“Terror is inherently weak. Only very weak political organizations, without deep social roots and without the strong backing of broad-based social support feel that they must gag their opponents, and have recourse to mass arrests and even mass executions. A strong power, a power based on the working classes — particularly in Russia, where the overwhelming majority is of the working class — does not need these methods, which could only serve to weaken. That is why we are pursuing a policy of reinstating civil liberties, to use a term which Trotskii would call bourgeois.”

By April of 1918, during the PLSR’s second congress, a great deal of water had already flowed under the Neva’s bridges from the day in which Kamkov had solemnly committed himself to defending political liberties. The Left Socialist Revolutionaries had initially promised to give free rein to the Constituent Assembly, only to subsequently decree its dissolution; they had furthermore consented, whether wholeheartedly or unwillingly, to the Bolshevik government’s series of repressions. A perusal of the PLSR’s official organ, the *Znamia truda*, over January and February of 1918 shows no notable changes in tone in the comments on the political events of the day from the comments made by the Bolshevik *Pravda* in that same time frame. During that period, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries felt that the iron fist of the

Soviet regime was legitimate, or at least inevitable. Nonetheless, even then the SRs continued to pursue their own quite specific political line in an attempt to maintain at least the appearance of constitutional legality. As before, the Populist left was consumed with the problem of the relationship between the VTsIK and the *Sovnarkom* and was intent on ensuring that legislative power prevail.⁴⁵

A number of voices extremely critical of the governmental alliance with the Bolsheviks were raised during the congress held in April of 1918. The harshest critic of all was the former People's Commissar for Justice, Shteinberg, who told his comrades that he had never held "real power" and that they should return "to the people" if they were to have any hope of implementing the party's platform. Shteinberg was a PLSR moderate and a "liberal"; he denounced the Soviet regime's despotism and illegal acts as "coming not from the popular masses but rather from men who have been appointed and who therefore become 'professional power wielders'"; he concluded that "we have a democratic bureaucracy which is worse than the old bureaucracy — at least the old one was God-fearing and fearful of the powers that be, whereas they consider themselves to be God, tsar and the supreme authority."⁴⁶

One aspect of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries which is worthy of note is that they were enthusiastic and intransigent internationalists. At the first congress in November of 1917, the venerable Mark Andreevich Natanson (born in 1850 and one of the great heroes of Russian Populism), spoke of prevailing philosophies in European Socialism both before and after 1914; he showed how what truly distinguished reformists from revolutionaries was the fact that revolutionaries were internationalists and diametrically opposed to the narrow, nationalistic vision of reformists. Of course, Natanson placed the new Russian left-wing party in the mainstream of the movement launched via Zimmerwald (1915) and Kienthal (1916) pacifist conferences.⁴⁷ As a matter of fact, during the course of 1917, while the Left Social Revolutionaries were still militants within the old PSR, they had criticized the cautious or even ambiguous position taken by the party leaders on the war. The PLSR had called for immediate social revolution in the cities and in the countryside, while waving the flag of proletarian internationalism and anxiously following the struggles of workers in the West. This is something which Soviet historians have too often forgotten; they have misrepresented the Left SRs as the political representatives of certain segments of the Russian peasantry (i.e., the kulaks, according to the most widespread interpretation, or the "middle peasants" according to some). Whereas the truth is that the PLSR was, at one and the same time, both a party rooted in the plebeian reality of the Russian countryside and a party sworn to achieving its goal of world revolution — and this created a serious structural weakness.

Indeed, after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, it was the internationalist dream which ruined the relationship between the PLSR and the Bolsheviks. At first, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries had hoped that the fact that Trotskii and the Russian delegation to the peace negotiations tried to procrastinate meant that they were trying to block a new Austro-German offensive and that, by the same token, the political and social crisis in the West would be accelerated. The party's newspaper was "deeply pleased" that the Russian delegation had rejected the proposal of signing a peace treaty with the imperial powers; it was convinced that the time was ripe for "the peace negotiations which had begun with Kühlmann and Hoffman to be concluded by negotiating with the representatives of the revolutionary proletariat of

Germany and of Austro-Hungary.”⁴⁸ Of course, we now know that the opposite occurred: the German military offensive launched after the break of the negotiations crushed the young Soviet republic, and the Western proletariat didn’t lift a finger in defense of the Russian Revolution. Still, the PLSR did not lose heart. On February 24, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries held a conference in Petrograd and rejected the peace conditions imposed by the “German imperialist plunderers” and called the “workers, soldiers and peasants to armed resistance against the aggression of foreign capital.”⁴⁹ A few days later, the central committee launched a heated appeal to all party organizations, calling upon them to organize “combat squads” (*druzhiny*) and to keep in touch with the “committee of insurrection” in Petrograd. In this document, stress is placed on the vital importance of the struggle against foreign imperialism: “by strangling Soviet power, the German bourgeoisie hopes that it can survive the revolution of its own working class and that the West can be spared from the victorious offensive of Soviet ideas.”⁵⁰

It was inevitable that such an unyielding position taken with regard to peace with Germany would lead to open conflict with the party which had signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. It is common knowledge that the Left Socialist Revolutionaries protested against the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and withdrew their delegation from the Council of People’s Commissars.

Indeed, it was this topic and, more generally, the prospect of cooperation with the Bolsheviks which dominated the debate during the April 1918 congress. The archives of the minutes show that the decision to stand down from the *Sovnarkom* was not an easy one to take and that there was a broad spectrum of opinions with regard to such a far-reaching decision. Natanson pled in favor of cooperation in government with the Bolsheviks, and his speech was very well-received.⁵¹ Spiridonova felt that withdrawing from “the power structure,” i.e., from the “Ministry of Agriculture” at a moment in which the law on the socialization of the land was being implemented was nothing less than a “most grievous crime.”⁵² In her self-criticism, Mariia Aleksandrovna went so far as to touch upon the problem of the party’s attitude to the war and to the Bolsheviks. It was unfair to call the Bolsheviks the “traitors of the social revolution” and to reproach them because they had signed the Treaty of Brest, when “we, the internationalists, have done our very best to break down the old discipline” without creating a “new, revolutionary” one. If truth be told, the Peace Treaty had been signed by “a routed army, by hunger, by distress, by our confusion, by the fact that we tried to build a Socialist order and in five months didn’t succeed, by the fact that the entire population was tired of fighting.”⁵³ Opposing Bolsheviks meant playing into the hands of the bourgeoisie and the moderate Socialist parties; on the other hand, the Bolsheviks were not in a position to fulfill the promises of the Russian Revolution. That was the “tragic situation” in which the Left Socialist Revolutionaries found themselves:

“The great tragedy of our Russian Revolution derives from the fact that by the very nature of their platform and due to their mind-set, Social Democrats are incapable of implementing our national Russian Revolution as it should be. They don’t know how to make use of every single opportunity afforded by daily life, how to use the psychology of peasants and workers, how to tap into our national identity, our national peculiarities and our people; and this is at least part of the reason why the Russian Revolution might fail.”⁵⁴

Mariia Spiridonova's clear-eyed and bitter analysis touched upon the very heart of the problem of the relationship between social movements and political forces in the Russian plebeian revolution. There is no doubt that — even taking into account an understandable partisanship — Mariia Spiridonova had hit the nail on the head and had perfectly understood that Bolshevism was a movement which, however alienated it may have been from genuine popular traditions, had become the main protagonist in the entire revolutionary process. No other delegate had so clearly articulated the internal contradictions of the Russian Revolution. All the delegates, however, had an opinion on the very topical question of relations with the Bolsheviks before and after Brest-Litovsk. The speeches delivered by the representatives of the local committees are of particular interest and depict the mood of the party's rank and file in the provinces where the Soviet regime had become established.

The Olonets delegate stated that, in the Olonets provincial committee, there had been "major differences of opinion" on the question of whether the Left Socialist Revolutionaries should quit the government, and that the majority opinion supported the official party line. At any rate, a clear-cut majority in the organs of local power were against a break with the Bolsheviks.⁵⁵ Baranov, the representative of the province of Viatka, stated that the majority in his organization was against having the Socialist Revolutionary commissars resign from the *Sovnarkom*.⁵⁶ Andreev, the delegate from the province of Smolensk, stated that the masses were behind the Bolsheviks on the question of the Brest Peace Treaty; resigning from the government, it was felt, had been an incomprehensible move and seriously damaged the PLSR.⁵⁷ Other speakers, as well, expressed grave doubts about whether or not to renounce high government posts. The motion adopted by the congress⁵⁸ obviously took into account the prevailing mood of the party in that, though it approved the withdrawal of the Socialist Revolutionary delegation from the *Sovnarkom*, it did not rule out future participation by the PLSR in the central government "if the political situation changed." At any rate, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries were to remain in the collegial organs of the commissariats and in the other institutions so as not to weaken Soviet power at the center and in the hinterland.

Summing up in brief the state of play of the relationship between the Bolsheviks and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries as evinced from the many speeches given by local cadres of the PLSR, we could safely say that, though there was a great deal of tension and even bitter differences of opinion, the two parties managed to continue cooperating in a fruitful manner. Sometimes the Bolsheviks, though they were in the majority, were so keen on maintaining an alliance with the Populist left that they gave in and accepted joint representation in the soviets and in the other organs of local power. The main bone of contention — what approach to take with regard to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk — appeared insurmountable in both capitals, yet diminished in importance the further one traveled from Petrograd and from Moscow. The yearning for peace was so keenly felt by the masses — particularly the peasants — that the local PLSR committees felt unable to attack the Bolsheviks because they had signed the humiliating treaty with Germany.⁵⁹ As a matter of fact, a perusal of the proceedings of the local peasant congresses would suffice to realize the impact in the countryside of the news that the war had ended. That is probably why Spiridova felt she could pose the question in such brutal terms to the congress: "Can our party, the party of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, dare violate the peace and assume the leadership of waging war with German imperialism?"⁶⁰ The question already

contained the answer: the PLSR must of necessity avoid taking any isolated action against the peace treaty because it would be a risky, dangerous business.

The party debated matters of war and peace once again during the proceedings of the third congress, from June 28 to July 1, 1918. A number of delegates who took part in the proceedings observed that the PLSR was notably more united and in agreement than before. Reading the minutes of the congress allows one to experience first-hand the feeling of enthusiasm reigning amongst the delegates; they felt that the Left Socialist Revolutionaries had gained in popularity in the eyes of the peasants and the people. Prosh'ian felt that the heady rise of the party over the course of the past months was due to "our clear-cut position with regard to the question of the ratification of the peace treaty."⁶¹ Many speakers at the congress stressed the importance of combating German imperialism. Mariia Spiridonova herself — though she had been most cautious and moderate at the previous congress — now spoke clearly of how the political situation had changed and how the first signs of collapse of the German army required a new strategy. Since the irreversible crisis of German imperialism had begun, the truce must be ended. "There had of course been many reasons why a peace treaty could be considered justified and why breathing space was necessary; now, the international situation does not by any means justify a truce of this type." It followed that the policy of the Bolshevik government was wrong-headed and criminal, and that the Bolsheviks were dupes of the German ambassador, Mirbach, and even more enslaved to the charms of diplomacy than the Kerenskii government had been. In Spiridonova's final appeal to her comrades, she did not rule out the fact that even bitter conflict with the Bolsheviks could ensue, including the use of German bayonets against the PLSR. What, therefore, would be the best tactic? It would be necessary to disregard the conditions imposed by the Peace Treaty without, however, a reopening of hostilities and a call to arms. "The only response is that we would be subject to repression and the German imperialists would carry out punitive expeditions. This would be our saving grace — punitive expeditions in Ukraine gave rise to a movement and engendered an insurrection." There was nothing to fear from an invasion of Russia by German troops, not even if they conquered Moscow and Petrograd.⁶²

Spiridonova's naive hope that the masses would rise in response to a German invasion of Russia was fomented by the example of Ukraine, where there had been a number of peasant uprisings against the German-backed puppet government. One of the main topics debated during the congress was the Ukrainian revolt; the Left Socialist Revolutionaries learned from the revolt that it was possible to resist German imperialism and that the countryside was still seething. However, not all the delegates felt that resistance to German militarism was imminent. Even during the third congress, a number of delegates voiced the opinion that the attitude of the workers to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk could not be taken for granted. Though the delegate from the provinces of Arkhangel'sk and Vologda did admit that the humiliating treaty was "disastrous for the people and for the Revolution," he also added that he didn't think the masses would reject it nor would they rise against it.⁶³ Murav'ev, from the province of Voronezh, stated that, however much the workers might disapprove of the unjust peace, they would not heed the PLSR's call, with the exception of the provinces of the southern frontier, which had been frequently occupied by German troops.⁶⁴ Roslavets, a delegate from the district of Elets (in the province of Orel) was even more vocal in her criticism of the prevailing attitude in the party: she said that

“if Kamkov and not Lenin were the head of government, we wouldn’t be here today, we’d all be in Turukhan” (i.e. in Siberia). As far as Mariia Spiridonova’s prediction that the truce with Germany would be soon broken, Roslavets stated that this would happen only “if all the peasants and all the workers were ready to mobilize voluntarily. But they are not.”⁶⁵

Even relations with the Bolshevik party were worse than they had been in the spring of 1918, as a number of delegates pointed out. Impatience with the Communists was expressed time and again in the speeches of delegates, culminating in the unanimous adoption of a motion proposed by Mariia Spiridonova condemning capital punishment.⁶⁶ Still, not all the bridges between the PLSR and Bolshevism had been burnt. Many could still remember episodes of close cooperation between the local Socialist Revolutionary committees and the Bolsheviks, particularly the left-wing Bolsheviks who were against the Peace Treaty with Germany. One of the leaders of the party, Vladimir A. Algasov, called upon the party to avoid any clashes with the Bolsheviks, because they had “taken the initiative and had had the great honor of liberating Russia from the bourgeoisie”; anyway, many of them were against the Treaty of Brest. If anything, it was incumbent upon the Left Socialist Revolutionaries to imitate the Bolsheviks, so that they, too, could “take the initiative and have the honor of liberating Russia from the imperialistic bourgeoisie.”⁶⁷ Markar’iants, a representative of the Saratov organization, reopened the question of the PLSR’s resignation from the government, stating that it had been a serious mistake and stressing the need to have a solid working relationship with the Bolsheviks.⁶⁸

As a matter of fact, even Mariia Spiridonova stated that “the main, characteristic feature of our activity is not the struggle against Bolshevism and the Bolsheviks: the main, characteristic feature of our activity must be the struggle against capitalism, against German imperialism, against the conciliators (*soglashateli*ami), and against the Bolsheviks’ harmful policy when it begins to be a conciliatory one (*soglashatel’skoi*).” It is important to bear in mind that the Bolsheviks were “the party at whose side we fought after the October Revolution, the party which shoulders the burden of the leadership of the government”; a party which had of course committed a number of errors, which “was no longer what it had once been,” but which still harbored “deadly hatred towards the bourgeoisie.”⁶⁹

What clearly emerged from the debate during the party congress was that an overwhelming majority of delegates, still reeling from the recent successes of the party, thought that the time had come to wash away the shame of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The speakers who took the floor did not clarify exactly in which way the party should protest against the iniquitous treaty, though on June 24, 1918, the PLSR central committee had felt that it would be both “possible and opportune to organize a series of terrorist acts against the most eminent representatives of German imperialism.”⁷⁰ The party leadership, encouraged by the anti-German sentiment running rife in the congress, decided that action was necessary. On July 6, two Socialist Revolutionary militants, Iakov G. Bliumkin and Nikolai A. Andreev, assassinated the German ambassador, Wilhelm von Mirbach, in Moscow, while the party newspaper (*Znania truda*) proclaimed in screaming headlines: “Down with the noose of Brest which is strangling the Russian revolution!”⁷¹ The attack was easy and successful; there were a number of aspects to the attack which have led a few historians to suspect that it might have been a provocation caused by (or facilitated

by) the Bolsheviks in order to eliminate a dangerous rival, the PLSR. The Russian scholar, Iurii G. Fel'shtinskii, who emigrated to the United States in the late 1970's, is one such historian.⁷² There is, however, no good reason to suspect that the Bolshevik political police (the notorious Cheka) were involved in the planning and execution of the attack on Mirbach. All contemporary documents point to the fact that the Socialist Revolutionaries were intent on breaking the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and resuming the struggle against German imperialism. At any rate, the unpublished minutes of the fourth (and last) PLSR congress, which was held in Moscow from October 2 to October 7, 1918, do unequivocally prove that the Bolsheviks were not involved in Mirbach's assassination. That fateful decision — with all its dreadful consequences for Mariia Spiridonova's party — had been decided upon unanimously by the leadership of the Socialist Revolutionary party. Karelin had spoken on behalf of the central committee in his address to the congress that, since the previous congress had voted in favor of violating the Brest Peace Treaty, the PLSR's decision-making organ had consequently decided to arrange the attack on the German ambassador. Karelin supplied details regarding the meeting of the central committee which had voted to carry out the terrorist act, revealing that only one comrade had voted against the assassination and that even the pro-Bolshevik wing of the PLSR had consented. As if wanting to justify such a disastrous choice, Karelin confessed that no one in the party before July 6 had even imagined that the Bolsheviks would have turned out to be such pawns of German imperialism: "Our assessment of them was based upon our memories of the October Revolution and, mindful of the part they played then in the Revolution, we certainly didn't expect them to behave so differently; it was our fault that we ignored to what extent they would end up defending German imperialism."⁷³

In plotting the assassination of ambassador Mirbach, the PLSR was hoping to force the Bolshevik government's hand and to shake it out of its deep lethargy and infuse it with new revolutionary fervor. Thus, contrary to what Soviet historiography has often maintained, the aim was not to fight Lenin's party, since the Left Socialist Revolutionaries hoped to be fellow travelers of the Bolsheviks for a long time to come. By this time, the PLSR was so blinded by internationalist fervor that it started tilting at windmills, fighting battles which had been lost before they began, whilst losing sight of more urgent tasks before them in the political and social struggle. Peasant protests against the Bolsheviks' land policy were exploding throughout the country; Lenin's party had lost the support of the urban masses and was in a blind alley, and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries managed to fritter away in only a few weeks the great popular support they had amassed in the previous months by embarking upon pointless quests and conjuring up specters which had no relation to the urban and rural masses. That is the reason behind the party's resounding failure and why it quickly and irremediably foundered at the moment of its greatest glory.

The collapse of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries

Once the German authorities had been pacified and once war with Germany had been avoided, the Bolshevik government managed to deal with the aftermath of the revolt of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries without too many difficulties. The leadership of the PLSR was imprisoned, the local committees were persecuted by the

Bolshevik peripheral organizations and the entire party was to all intents and purposes forced into hiding. In only a few months, the still fragile organizational framework of the party of the Populist left was reduced to rubble due to a double blow — by the Bolshevik repression and by internal breakdown.

A perusal of the reports delivered by the local committees before the October congress — which was the very last congress the Left Socialist Revolutionaries ever managed to organize — gives a very clear indication of the PLSR's untenable situation. Generally speaking, the speeches delivered at the congress were sad and disconsolate in tone and quite the opposite of the joyful and celebratory atmosphere which reigned during the PLSR's third congress only three months before. Almost all of the representatives of the local organizations described a party in a state of acute crisis, weakened by persecutions and torn apart by internal splits. The delegate from Vologda said that in his province "the party organization split into a thousand pieces after July 6" and asked for clarification, asked why Mirbach was assassinated and asked what line should be followed in the present difficult moment.⁷⁴ Balakhin complained that in the area of Novgorod, "all the organizations have been completely destroyed."⁷⁵ The representative of the province of Tver' described a somewhat less bleak situation: "After July 6, here as elsewhere, our party has been persecuted by the Communists; nonetheless, the Tver' organization has not given up yet on all the work which has yet to be accomplished."⁷⁶ Matters were much worse in Vladimir, as Loktev reported: "The events of July have had enormously cruel consequences for the Vladimir committee. Some have been imprisoned, others removed from office. Only those who worked in the provincial soviet are still at their jobs: at any rate, the Communists have stated that they would put up with them for the moment, and then later would get rid of them."⁷⁷

The PLSR was only less than a year old and did not have a solid organizational structure, as the Bolsheviks did. Unlike the Bolsheviks, who were quite capable of keeping alive a rudimentary apparatus even during very difficult periods or even after a serious defeat, the PLSR was capable of achieving broad-based support and of growing enormously in a very short span of time; it was not, however, capable of translating the growth achieved by working with the people into a solid organizational basis. As a matter of fact, Mariia Spiridonova and her comrades were well aware of the party's organizational limitations, which they felt were due to the lack of "intellectual forces." Many of the leaders mentioned time and again that the Socialist Revolutionary militants had a very low level of schooling, and this was considered to be a considerable obstacle to future growth of the party. Indeed, as has been noted, during the November 1917 split, almost all of the intellectuals and white collar workers sided with Chernov's party, whereas the new PLSR comprised mainly soldiers and workers, most of whom had only elementary schooling or were semi-literate. Not only was the Populist left quite plebeian in make-up, it was notable as well for the fact that its leaders and militants were very young (Natanson was a notable exception, in that he was a famous representative of the revolutionary generation of the second half of the nineteenth century).⁷⁸ Even Bolshevism in 1918 was a political movement comprising young, unruly plebeians but, unlike in the PLSR, there was a more numerous and capable leadership which had a long tradition of political plotting and had great organizational capabilities. Furthermore, the Bolshevik leaders were more politically homogeneous; even though there might have been internal political dissent concerning a number of questions, they were

nonetheless prepared to close ranks with regard to adversaries and enemies. Lenin's party responded to the increased isolation after the power takeover by presenting a united front; conversely, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries' response to the brief period of governance was the creation of profound rifts and conflicts, so that they ended up more divided than they had been when they split from the PSR. As we shall soon see, even with regard to the crucial question of the peasants, the left Populists began to be irresolute and divided, thus losing touch with the rank and file, with its broad-based, secure support.

When the Left Socialist Revolutionaries carried out their crazy terroristic attack on Mirbach, they were at the height of popularity and had a majority in a number of district and rural soviets. Indeed, all the data available seem to point to the extraordinary rise in popularity of the PLSR between the spring and the summer of 1918 in the countryside and, to a lesser extent, in the cities. The Bolsheviks had always had their strongholds in the cities and so they managed to gain the majority at the fifth All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, which opened on July 4 at the Bol'shoi Theater in Moscow. At the time, however, the PLSR felt that the tallying of the votes was suspect; one historian has recently expressed serious doubts about the legitimacy of the Bolshevik victory.⁷⁹

When the Left Socialist Revolutionaries decided that their battle-cry would be the question of the Brest Peace Treaty and relations with imperialist Germany, they paved the way for the Bolsheviks to defeat them politically and to exclude them from the soviets. Certainly, the factory workers and the peasants had other things to worry about! Throughout Russia that July there was an enormous purge of the local soviets (provincial, district and rural soviets), and by the end of the purge, the Left SRs had been expelled from all the organs of power. Where the left Populists had the majority, the Bolsheviks used sheer force in disbanding the Socialist Revolutionary soviets, electing new and more trustworthy councils. Of course, matters were much simpler when the PLSR deputies were in the minority — in that case they were simply dismissed. Furthermore, at times the Bolsheviks forced their adversaries to deliver a formal declaration (sometimes in writing) condemning the botched Moscow uprising. Thanks to such declarations of fealty to the Bolshevik government, some of the Socialist Revolutionary deputies managed to remain in power in the local soviets.⁸⁰ However, the Bolsheviks were certainly unsparing of the party and its leaders. Mariia Spiridonova and the other leaders of the PLSR were imprisoned.⁸¹ The reports of the delegates to the fourth congress in October 1918, which have already been mentioned, give an idea of what happened to the local organizations.

Notwithstanding the persecutions, the Left SRs tried to continue their campaign of dissent against the deterioration of the Soviet regime, which they felt was guilty of betraying the Russian and the international revolution. By early autumn, however, the PLSR was on its last legs. The final battle between the Bolshevik government and its adversaries had been fought in the summer of 1918. During those momentous days, the Populist left not only pursued its quixotic battle against phantom enemies, but it also refrained from allying itself with the moderate Socialist parties (the Mensheviks and the PSR), which were trying to throw off the Bolshevik yoke. Mariia Spiridonova's party ended up being politically and socially isolated and quickly disappeared without a trace. Many militants and leaders of the party formally joined Bolshevism, a movement they had felt close to since October 1917.

The Bolsheviks proved quite adept at taming the opposition made up of the left-wing SRs, wielding both carrot and stick. The PLSR's unstoppable decline, the upshot of paralyzing internal conflicts subsequent to the events of July 6, 1918, precipitated once the Bolsheviks chose a flexible response, which was intended to repress any insurrections and to checkmate the Socialist Revolutionary leaders, but which also tried to win over, wherever possible, the more pliant members of the rival party.

All things considered, even the way the Bolsheviks treated the leaders of the party was more lenient than the way they treated other adversaries of the regime. The fact is that the Bolsheviks simply could not forget how immensely useful the PLSR had been during the very delicate stage of establishing and consolidating Soviet power. Lenin himself clearly stated this in Prosh'ian's obituary, which was published in *Pravda* on December 20, 1918.⁸² It is true that Prosh'ian, who died young, belonged to the pro-Bolshevik wing of the PLSR and that therefore Lenin found it easier to praise him and his sincere dedication to the Socialist cause, even if he did come from a Populist background. However, it is also true that Prosh'ian, like his comrades, had willingly taken part in the anti-Bolshevik revolt in July. At any rate, Lenin's final assessment was quite clear-cut: "Still, up until July of 1918, Prosh'ian contributed more to the consolidation of the Soviet regime than he did to its downfall after July 1918."

The Left SRs and the question of the peasantry

The defeat of the PLSR was not only due to the rash decision to join battle over an issue — the war with imperial Germany — of which the masses knew nothing and cared less about. The truth was that Mariia Spiridonova's party was easily bested by the Bolsheviks because at a very crucial moment it completely lost sight of its traditions and ideals, thereby losing the active support of the very class which had up until that moment backed and sustained it. The underlying reasons for the collapse of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, which was to have such profound repercussions on Soviet society, can be found both in the senseless attack on Mirbach and in the weakened bond with the peasants. When the peasants rose against the Bolshevik government's agrarian policy, both the leaders and the militants of the PLSR seemed hesitant and uncertain. For that reason, Mariia Spiridonova and her comrades wasted a great historic opportunity, just as the year before Chernov's party reneged on its solemn promise to resolve the land reform question and had been soundly defeated.⁸³ In the summer of 1918, the requisitioning of farm products and the creation of the committees of village poor (*kombedy*) set off a furious reaction, almost as violent as the class war against the *pomeshchiki* which had raged in the autumn of 1917. What was the reaction of the Left SRs to the Bolsheviks' food supply policy? How did they react to the introduction of the *kombedy* in the villages, which upset the traditional equilibrium in the countryside? Before answering these questions, a few more points must be made with regard to the PLSR's peasant policy.

It has been repeated over and over again that the Left Socialist Revolutionaries were both the expression of and the guardians of the interests of the Russian peasantry, and to a great extent this is true; nonetheless, this is not the whole picture. Further study is required, but not to establish whether the PLSR represented the

“middle peasants” or the kulaks; Soviet historians have studied this aspect for years, though it is a completely false and superficial controversy — as false as Lenin’s and the Bolsheviks’ classification of the rural world. No, the true problem is that Maria Spiridonova’s party was the spiritual heir of the old PSR, carrying on and renewing the Socialist commitment of Russian revolutionary Populism.

The slogan put forward by the Russian revolutionary Socialists, the “socialization of the land,” was both original and contradictory, in that it was considered a minimal party claim, to be implemented within the context of the bourgeois economic system, and at the same time an initial step towards the introduction of socialism.⁸⁴ The heirs of the *narodniki*, who at the beginning of the century had renewed the Populist tradition while adapting it to the changed political and social reality, considered themselves Socialists — and indeed they were; their appreciation of the importance of the growing factory proletariat testifies to that. However, given their political background, they could hardly ignore the aspirations of millions of peasants for whom the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries had fought. The *obshchina* seemed to justify their faith that the agrarian movement could act as a powerful catalyst in the Socialist transformation of Russia. The socialization of the land seemed to reconcile the peasantry’s pressing desire to share out the *pomeshchiki*’s lands with the overarching plan to collectivize society. The October Revolution and the land decree abruptly overturned the entire scenario. Their adversaries, the Bolsheviks, had made a solemn proclamation, promising to implement the central plank of the Socialist Revolutionary platform. The PSR was taken by surprise and reacted by casting aspersions upon Lenin’s oversimplification of the problem in passing decree after decree in the hopes that this would solve the highly complex land reform problem. The secessionists in the PLSR, on the other hand, took Lenin’s new agrarian policy quite seriously and participated in the Bolshevik government with the firm intention of implementing the socialization which had traditionally been the main goal of revolutionary Populism.

The Left SRs embarked upon such an ambitious undertaking in the firm conviction that the political bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie and the rise to power of a workers’ party would be followed by agrarian transformations the nature and extent of which would be much greater than contemplated in the minimal program. Furthermore, the PLSR felt that the bourgeois and capitalist elements which arose from Stolypin’s land reform served only to complicate the play of economic forces in the countryside and to force events in a specific direction. In brief, the law on the socialization of the land, which had been discussed in January of 1918, was imbued with socialist overtones. When Il’ia Andreevich Maiorov, the official rapporteur on the agrarian question, addressed the party’s second congress (from April 17 to April 25, 1918), he reported that the party felt that the measures were of such scope and economic import that the party felt compelled to organize courses on the socialization of the land throughout the countryside for the edification of the peasantry.⁸⁵ The party congress adopted a motion reiterating that “the socialization of the land is not to be considered a measure unto itself, but rather a means by which the ultimate goal of socialism is to be achieved,” stressing the fact that the collective tilling of the land would bring both material and moral advantages.⁸⁶

Clearly, though, the party platform of the Left SRs was different from that of the Bolsheviks. After they had seized power, the Bolsheviks to an increasing degree tended towards a centralized management of the economy by the state; the Left

Socialist Revolutionaries, on the other hand, whilst disapproving of anarchic syndicalism, were much more in favor of an economy based on cooperativism and initiatives coming from below. The difference between the two parties was most evident in each party's approach to the introduction of land reform by means of the law on socialization. Mariia Spiridonova addressed the PLSR's second congress and spoke on behalf of the peasant section of the VTsIK, which she headed, mentioning the "interminable disputes with the Bolsheviks over how to get this point or that point of our program across, while they introduced amendment after amendment aimed at voiding the socialization of the land of its meaning and its spirit." For example, the insistence on basing the right to the land upon both "labor" and "Soviet power" was basically trying to achieve nationalization "through the back door," whereas "for us, it is labor which confers the right to the land."

Spiridonova's report on the activities of the peasant section, part of which has been quoted above, is interesting not only because of the information it gives on the ongoing differences in ideals between the two Socialist parties, but also because it shows how the PLSR changed its stance towards the rural world.⁸⁷ This is an issue of great importance and which requires close study, in that it can help explain the PLSR's defeat in the summer of 1918. A few months after the October Revolution, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries shunned any idealized vision of Russia's masses, and in particular of the peasantry. Spiridonova quite unequivocally spoke of "the people's general disheartenment," which was growing to alarming proportions in the peasant section, where some members "were absolutely not up to the situation." It was not just a question of the very low level of education of the muzhiks, which was so damaging and such a hindrance to the section as it tried to achieve its outsize goals; at first, Mariia had been tireless — "the only intellectual" to work in the section, where even the secretaries were "almost completely illiterate." This lack of "intellectual militants" (*rabotnikov intelligentykh*) had not stopped the PLSR — which was used to difficulties of this nature — from achieving the miracle of establishing contacts, by means of the soviets, with the peasant masses. Rather, the major difficulties arose from the fact that, in the section, someone had been caught red-handed stealing, or was suspected of being a thief. Furthermore, many did not work at all: "We had to throw a number of peasant comrades out of the section because they weren't doing anything at all: all they did was take the money, went to all the spots and then just lounged about." Spiridonova's overall assessment of the peasants was bitter — they were not to be particularly trusted, given the general discontent in the countryside over the government's food supply policy. Were a peasant congress to be convened, "all would not be well for Soviet power." Therefore, the attempts at agitation in the countryside had had among its aims that of "dividing the peasantry into two camps — those who stood for the old and those who were fighting for the new." To this end, more Bolsheviks had been sent to the countryside than Left SRs, since the former were "more ideologically sure" (*bolee ideiny*) than the latter.

Spiridonova's analysis was in many respects similar to the Bolshevik analysis, but quite surprising, with the hindsight of our knowledge of the deep divisions between the Russian Populists and the Marxists. It is true that ever since Stolypin's land reform, the Socialist Revolutionaries had abandoned their old, dearly-held image of a compact and homogeneous world of the peasantry, because they had recognized the early signs of economic divisions in the villages.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, the

Bolshevik idea of countryside being split into antagonistic classes was still quite alien to them. This concept began to gain a foothold amongst the left-wing Populists after October 1917, whilst coexisting with the traditional faith in the revolutionary role and Socialist aspirations of the peasants. This is the most important novelty to be perceived in the doctrine of the newly-founded PLSR; together with the very strong internationalist commitment, this new approach to the question of the peasants brought the Left Socialist Revolutionaries closer to Lenin's party. A few months after the takeover of power by the Bolsheviks, the PLSR stated that it appreciated Leninism's resolute leadership during the October Revolution and its ability to distinguish all the diverse social strata in Russian villages. When Mariia Spiridonova addressed her party's third congress (from June 28 to July 1, 1918), she praised Lenin's concept of "the struggle against the small landowners (*khoziaichiki*)" which in her opinion merely confirmed the fact that the "president of the *Sovnarkom* was a genius." Indeed, it was easier to prevail against the big capitalists than to conquer "those counterrevolutionaries, the petit bourgeois kulaks, who are scattered throughout Russia." Even throughout Western Europe, the small peasants had always posed a serious threat to the revolution. In Russia, "we are facing the kulaks, who are our greatest economic and political enemies; they must be crushed, they must be disarmed, they must be eliminated."⁸⁹ With regard to the food supply question, Karelin as well established a clear-cut line of demarcation, dividing the rural world "into toiling peasants and kulak peasants, into small toiling peasants and parasitic kulaks."⁹⁰ Roslavets went even further, calling upon the party to "retire the expression 'laboring peasants,' which is old-fashioned and obsolete." "There were laboring peasants, when the distinction between the kulaks and poor peasants didn't exist. The Elets organization favors the use of the term 'poor peasants' over the traditional one."⁹¹

It would be over-hasty to conclude from the above that the Left Socialist Revolutionaries had cut their Populist ties on the very fundamental issue of how to deal with the peasants. First of all, thoroughly Bolshevik opinions, such as those expressed by the Elets delegate, were in the minority within the PLSR. Secondly, the Left SRs had openly and completely split with the Bolsheviks over the question of the food supply. In her address to the third party congress mentioned above, Spiridonova condemned Lenin's agrarian policy, which aimed at ensuring the total victory of the small class of poor peasants and landless farm laborers, because this policy would "keep the peasants away from Soviet power. If we falter in our farm policy, if we do not understand the psychology of the peasants, they will not be grateful for the revolution and will rise against us — and this would be due to Lenin's policy."⁹²

Early in the summer of 1918, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, fired with enthusiasm by the example of the Ukraine, believed once again in the revolutionary and progressive role of the peasants. This is the line Mariia Spiridonova espoused before the third party congress, when she said that "today, if Soviet Russia is to be saved, it will be saved solely by the peasants, who are working to build their new Soviet Russia and their new Soviet countryside."⁹³ In the wake of the party's great successes at the time, the leadership of the Populist left did not discern the contradictions inherent in their analysis of the rural world (which in many respects was similar to the Bolshevik analysis) and the PLSR's stated objections to the Bolsheviks' agrarian and food supply policies. The central committee published a plea in the *Znamia truda* on June 9, 1918, forbidding all party militants from

participating in the actions of the requisitioning squads who operated outside the guidelines laid down by the local soviets, since the requisitions were “forcing the countryside into an artificial solidarity (*iskusstvenno splachivaiut vsiu derevniu*) in the struggle against the cities, making the country’s situation worse and, in the final analysis, weakening Soviet power.” The PLSR leadership perceived the Bolshevik agrarian policy as a serious threat not only to the food supply of the cities but to the very survival of the Soviet regime. Therefore, stress was laid more on the certainty that the requisitions carried out by the armed Bolshevik divisions would have a negative impact than on trying to refute the political and social premises (the struggle against the kulaks) upon which Lenin’s government had based its food supply policy. The atmosphere was quite different during the district peasant congresses, where the speakers all shouted for the requisitions to cease immediately, and the general tenor of the reports of the representatives of the PLSR local committees at the third congress was quite different as well, in that there was great insistence upon the pressing need to defend the peasants from the incursions of the food squads. A perusal of the local documents gives the clear impression that, as had been the case for the Peace of Brest-Litovsk, the agrarian question as well was one which the rank and file understood better than did the party leaders in Moscow; the rank and file militants had grasped what the masses felt and needed and their attitude was much less doctrinaire than that of the members of the Central Committee. It would be an oversimplification to explain away the complex splits within the party as merely divisions between the center and the periphery and between the main party organs and the local organizations. Nonetheless, one could safely say that the local PLSR committees often had difficulties in following the instructions which came from the leadership and applying them to local realities. At any rate, there is no doubt that, wherever the Left SRs firmly opposed the requisitions, they were enthusiastically backed by the village inhabitants and easily managed to best the Bolsheviks. What follows is the report of a delegate from Voronezh (a province in the black-soil region). The delegate took the floor during the third national PLSR congress, stating that “the food supply question has been the greatest bone of contention between the Bolsheviks and us.” He added that:

“Now the peasantry is against the Bolsheviks because of their recent food supply policy; yet they are still favorable to Soviet power. Though the peasants of Voronezh province are not better supplied with food than the peasants of any other province, they nonetheless feel closer to the Revolution now thanks to the implementation of the law on the socialization of the land. The peasants of the province of Voronezh have quite enough land, for which they have the Revolution to thank and for which they are duly grateful. That is why they are in favor of Soviet power; still, they do not trust the Bolsheviks.”

Prospects for the Left Socialist Revolutionaries looked good. If only the local organizations had been patient enough in working with the masses and had made certain that they were distinct from the Right Socialist Revolutionaries and from the Bolsheviks and had “explained to the masses how disastrous the peace of Brest was for the Revolution and above all if they had explained the Bolshevik’s agrarian policy,” then the PLSR would have politically conquered the countryside in two or three months.⁹⁴ Indeed, though there were thousands of organizational difficulties, the PLSR local committees did try to penetrate down to the local village level throughout the vast country.

Why did a party which was so strongly rooted in the countryside as was the PLSR during the summer of 1918 fall prey so quickly to the Bolsheviks, who were so unpopular with the peasants? One reason has already been adduced: the murder of Mirbach and the PLSR's quixotic quest for internationalism. The more bitter the warfare between the peasants and the Bolsheviks became, the more the Left Socialist Revolutionaries wasted their strength on unpopular battles destined to fail. However, there is another, not insignificant reason: the erratic and contradictory response of the Populist left to the introduction of the *kombedy* (the committees of village poor). Indeed, wherever the Socialist Revolutionary committees managed to organize and lead the peasant protests against the Bolsheviks, they were able to overcome without major damage even the July crisis. During the October 1918 congress, Murav'ev, who represented the Voronezh committee, as he had during the third congress, reported that in his province the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs were at loggerheads because of the requisitions and that the events of July had not taken the party by surprise; the peasants there were fed up with the violence and injustice of the food supply squads and were fully behind the party which was fighting for them.⁹⁵

The example of Voronezh proves that, even after the political and organizational upsets due to the July events, the PLSR still managed to keep the Bolsheviks in line whenever they offered their unswerving support to the peasants. However, as can be seen by the tenor of the debates during the fourth congress, by the end of the summer the party no longer had a united platform with regard to the fundamental question of the *kombedy*. Some were clearly against the committees which had recently been founded in the countryside, while others were less hostile or even in favor of them. When the question was put to the vote, many delegates (30) felt that participation in the *kombedy*, under certain conditions, could not be ruled out and many others (24) saw no obstacles at all to Socialist Revolutionary militants joining the committees of village poor. Only 12 delegates were categorical in their rejection of any type of cooperation with the *kombedy*.⁹⁶ As one could imagine, such great indecision over an issue of such crucial importance only served to cast an already split and disorganized party into even greater confusion and to hasten its end. One speaker spoke in simple terms of what many from the rank and file were feeling: "We of the province of Chernigov have protested against these committees: How, then, can we go back home from our party's congress and start spreading propaganda in favor of them?"⁹⁷

The issue of the *kombedy* was the decisive test which the Left Socialist Revolutionaries had to face in the summer and in the autumn of 1918. This was the issue — i.e., whether or not the party could meet the challenge of the Bolsheviks in the countryside — which would determine the survival or final collapse of organized Populism in Russia.

The Left Socialist Revolutionaries and the kombedy

The committees of village poor were set up, according to the letter of the decree dated June 11, 1918,⁹⁸ as auxiliary instruments of the local food supply organs; soon, they were invested with wide-ranging powers and a great deal of discretionary power over the management of the political and economic life of the villages. The law's first two paragraphs had been drafted in intentionally vague terms; they laid down the

procedure for the establishment and the election of the *kombedy* in the villages and in the *volosti*. The Bolshevik leaders had planned for the *kombedy* to be used as a tool in upsetting social relations in the countryside, sparking off a veritable class war between the rich peasants and the quasi-proletarian elements. Bolshevik ideology was based upon the conviction that the village classes were antagonists; this was a misperception of what life was really like in the Russian countryside where, after all, the great division of the spring of 1918 had produced a greater degree of levelling than had existed before and had seen the rebirth of the village commune (*obshchina*). This is not to say that there were no rivalries or tension or conflicts amongst the peasantry, but rather that what conflicts there were could not be comprehended or explained away by means of the rigid categories established by Lenin and by Russian Marxists. From the very beginning, the implementation of the *kombedy* decree had been met with the open hostility of both the village inhabitants and the rural soviets, which were led by the Left SRs. Thus, the attempt to set up the committees of village poor immediately sparked off a fierce battle between the Bolsheviks and the Populist left over the question of who would have hegemony over the village and *volost'* soviets. At first, the PLSR did not hesitate in opposing the Bolshevik forays into their own political and social strongholds.

As a rule, the Bolsheviks were forced to adopt all kinds of subterfuges and use violence in order to set up the committees of village poor. Wherever a communist cell already existed, it disbanded and then reelected the village soviet ruled by peasants — who were called kulaks by the Bolsheviks — who opposed the government's agrarian policy. Even in these rare cases, however, force was necessary in order to overcome the fierce resistance of the "kulaks."

Generally speaking, the Bolsheviks could not count on their own militants or on villagers sympathetic to their cause; thus, the Bolsheviks were forced to send an envoy or an instructor (usually a worker who was also a party member); the envoy or instructor would then try to upset the political and social equilibrium in the countryside, with the help of the armed forces. What often transpired was that the first *kombedy* were mainly composed of people who were outsiders. This is what is revealed by Bolshevik sources. Indeed, the very fact that the "committees of village poor" usually drafted the minutes of their founding deed and of each meeting clearly shows that the Bolsheviks were behind the creation and the activities of the *kombedy*. From their inception, the *kombedy* were anything but spontaneous; clearly, they were managed and controlled by the local committees of Lenin's party. At first, the Bolsheviks were certain of the doctrine that there was a great deal of class antagonism boiling in the villages and that the *kulaks* would soon be easily isolated and then defeated; after all, the *kulaks* had starved the proletariat and the Bolsheviks were confident that they had the support of the poorest classes of the peasantry. However, many unexpected difficulties arose, the Bolsheviks neither wavered nor faltered — as far as they were concerned, the problem could only be solved by a more rigid organization and by a more fierce struggle against the all-powerful kulaks. The following is taken from an article published on August 18, 1918 in a Bolshevik newspaper in the province of Vitebsk:

"At present in our district (Polotsk), we are suffering from an acute shortage of propagandists. [...] Throughout the district, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries are conducting a propaganda campaign against the Bolsheviks. Under these conditions,

wherever committees of the village poor have been set up, they cannot fulfill their tasks. [...] A continuous struggle between the poor peasants and the kulaks is raging throughout the district. The former shall undoubtedly emerge the victors if help is sent in time — propagandists and armed men.”⁹⁹

Bolshevik propaganda usually blamed the kulaks and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries for the failure of the *kombedy*. The Leninist militants turned a blind eye to reality and convinced themselves that only the “excessive power” (*zasil'e*, a term much in vogue at the time) of the kulaks, who were supported or at the very least tolerated by the Populist left, stood in the way of the victory of the Socialist revolution in the countryside.

Until August, the Populist left had been fairly united in its desire to defeat the *Sovnarkom*'s food supply measures and to block the rise of the *kombedy*. (Though Bolshevik documents often triumphantly brandished incredible figures concerning the *kombedy*, they actually existed only on paper or else were of little or no influence). Why did the Left SRs change their stance vis-à-vis the decree of June 11? Why did the delegates to the PLSR's fourth congress seem to be so uncertain with regard to an issue of such great importance? The answer lies in Karelin's address to the October congress of his party:

“I would merely like to remind you of a document of major importance — the appeal of Lenin and of Tsiuriupa (*sic*). Allow me to read it out to you. (*He reads the document.*) This document, and most particularly its conclusion, which I have just read out to you, contains not one word with which we disagree.”¹⁰⁰

The document so lavishly praised by Karelin (and by other congress participants) was the telegram sent to all provincial soviets on August 18, 1918 and signed by Lenin and by Tsiurupa, People's Commissar for Food Supply.¹⁰¹ The telegram stated that Soviet power had never intended to conduct a battle against the “middle peasants” and that the many reported incidents of violations of the rights of the middle peasants were due to a misinterpretation of the spirit and of the letter of the *kombedy* decree. “The committees of the village poor must be the revolutionary organs of all the peasants against the former *pomeshchiki*, the kulaks, the merchants and the popes, not the organs of the farm proletariat standing alone against the rest of the rural population.” The provincial soviets and the provincial food supply committees were supposed to take this into account and to ensure that their activities were in line with the political guidelines established by the central government.

The telegram sent by Lenin and by Tsiurupa remained a dead letter in the countryside, but it did have the effect of disarming the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. If the *kombedy* were not trying to create a split amongst the peasants, but rather were endeavoring to isolate and defeat a handful of exploiters, then it was perfectly pointless to oppose the rise of organs which represented the overwhelming majority of the rural population. As a PLSR delegate to the fourth congress put it:

“The committees which had been set up earlier and which only the poorest Bolsheviks were allowed to join were absolutely unacceptable. But ever since Lenin's decree made it quite clear that the committees of the village poor can include the middle strata of the laboring peasant population, from that moment on we, the party of revolutionary socialism, can harbor no further objections to these committees.”¹⁰²

Of course, not everybody in the party went along with this sudden about-face with regard to the *kombedy* and Lenin's policy. That autumn, as can be gleaned from Bolshevik sources, a few local committees were still against the food squads and opposed the committees of the village poor; indeed, the committees had not really changed all that much after August 1918. However, once the party — which was already in a state of crisis after having failed in July — adopted that ambiguous motion during its October congress, it also lost its last stronghold in the villages and began its rapid and inglorious decline.

The president of the assembly launched a heartfelt plea for unity during the closing speech of the fourth PLSR congress, but in vain. Unity was the party's last hope for survival. The president's hope that the next congress would be held under happier circumstances, "against a backdrop of world revolution, when the world will be lit by the fire of the world revolution and our party will occupy the most important spot in that fire,"¹⁰³ was merely pathetic wishful thinking and a smokescreen to avoid facing much more pressing matters and to avoid gazing into the coffin in which the PLSR, which had forgotten its Populist origins, was soon to be laid to rest.

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* I became acquainted with the important book on the Left SRs by Lutz Häfner (*Die Partei der linken Sozialrevolutionäre in der russischen Revolution von 1917-18* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994)) only after my article was ready for print and therefore I was unable to take it into account. It is my intention to write a detailed review of this book at the first opportunity.

1. O.H. Radkey, *The agrarian foes of Bolshevism. Promise and default of the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries. February to October 1917* (New York—London, 1958); id., *The sickle under the hammer. The Russian Socialist Revolutionaries in the early months of Soviet rule* (New York—London, 1963).

2. Here I would like to recall two interesting and well-documented works: K. Gusev, *Krakh partii levykh eserov* (Moscow, 1963); and L.M. Spirin, *Klassy i partii v grazhdanskoj voine v Rossii (1917-1920 gg.)* (Moscow, 1968).

3. Outside the USSR, the only extensive work about the Left SRs is the superficial book by the Russian Iurii G. Fel'shtinskii, which appeared in the history series edited by Solzhenitsyn: *Bol'sheviki i levye esery. Oktiabr' 1917-iiul' 1918. Na puti k odnopartiinoi diktature* (Paris, 1985).

4. See *Delo naroda*, Oct. 31, 1917 and other Socialist newspapers of that period.

5. O.H. Radkey, *The sickle under the hammer*, *op.cit.*: 72-73.

6. *Ibid.*: 83. For more about Chernov's complex political stances after the October Revolution which, from certain points of view, resemble those of the left-wing Menshevik Martov, I recommend J. Burbank's article "Waiting for the People's Revolution. Martov and Chernov in revolutionary Russia 1917-1923," *CMRS*, XXVI, 3-4 (1985): 375-394.

7. Further information about Rudnev can be found in P.V. Volobuev, ed., *Politicheskie deiateli Rossii. 1917. Biograficheskii slovar'* (Moscow, 1993): 279-280.

8. O.H. Radkey, *The sickle under the hammer*, *op. cit.*: 52.

9. In the preceding volume *The agrarian foes of Bolshevism*, *op. cit.*, Radkey reconstructed the political history of the PSR from February to October of 1917, giving special attention to the debates about peace and war.

10. O.H. Radkey, *The sickle under the hammer*, *op.cit.*: 157-158. With the exception of the venerable Mark A. Natanson (born in 1850), one of the greatest heroes of the revolutionary Populism, the average age of PLSR leaders was about 30. At the outset the Socialist Revolutionary Left acquired followers above all among factory workers and garrison soldiers and else in the

regiments stationed at the front. It is more difficult to establish the size of its following in the countryside. During the months of the *jacquerie* the situation in the villages was too volatile to permit us to attribute influences to one party or another. However, it is beyond doubt — and we will see this further on — that once the rage of the muzhiks had been placated — the PLSR emerged as the only political force to carry any weight in the villages.

11. It is general knowledge that the Left SRs refused to enter the *Sovnarkom* immediately after the October Revolution. Speaking on behalf of his group at the second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, Vladimir A. Karelin — as we can read in the minutes — “explained the refusal of his party to enter the government on the ground that it could thus act more effectively in mediating between the Bolsheviks and the other groups” (J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1918. Documents and materials* (Stanford, Calif., 1934): 135). A few days later Karelin declared that the second All-Russian Congress of Soviets should not be considered the only source of government authority (*The debate on Soviet power. Minutes of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets. Second convocation, October 1917-January 1918*, transl. and ed. by John L.H. Keep (Oxford, 1979): 54).

12. *Ibid.*: 60-61.

13. *Ibid.*: 77. The Bolsheviks Larin and Riazanov also declared themselves to be contrary to any form of censorship whatever (*ibid.*: 68-69, 76).

14. *Ibid.*: 75-76.

15. *Ibid.*: 82-83.

16. *Protokoly pervogo s"ezda partii levykh sotsialistov-revoliutsionerov (internatsionalistov)* (Moscow, 1918): 46. A Soviet historian, author of a detailed account of the works of the VTsIK from the October Revolution to the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, wanted to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the victory flaunted by the PLSR: cf. A.I. Razgon, *VTsIK Sovetov v pervye mesiatsy diktatury proletariata* (Moscow, 1977): 189-190. The fact remains that the Left SRs witnessed the acceptance, at least on paper, of a principle close to their hearts, i.e., the subordination of executive to legislative power.

17. *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti* (Moscow, 1957), I:102.

18. *The debate on Soviet power, op. cit.*: 131-132.

19. See *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti, op. cit.*: 162.

20. *The debate on Soviet power, op. cit.*: 173-174.

21. *Ibid.*: 177-178.

22. *Ibid.*: 178-179.

23. *Ibid.*: 246-248.

24. A.V. Shestakov, *Klassovaia bor'ba v derevne TsChO* [Tsentral'no-chernozemnaia oblast'] v *epokhu voennogo kommunizma* (Voronezh, 1930), I: 16.

25. “The fight for the peasantry” is the title of the 5th chapter of his book I have already mentioned, *The sickle under the hammer*. See also chapter 32 (“Taming the peasants organizations: the summit”) of J.L.H. Keep, *The Russian Revolution. A study in mass mobilization* (London, 1976).

26. O.H. Radkey, *The sickle under the hammer, op. cit.*: 223-224. Radkey also makes some perspicacious remarks concerning the prevalence of soldiers among the delegates who backed the Populist left and the Bolsheviks. It is quite true that “the soldiers were the backbone of radicalism in rural Russia” (*ibid.*: 266-267). However, the general conclusions which the American historian draws from his reconstruction are less convincing: the soldier-peasant, once he arrived home “established his authority in the village and wrenched it out of the age-old ruts, imparting to it a leftward twist which served the Soviet power well for years to come. Probably he became the backbone of the Red Army and of the Communist Party in rural Russia” (*ibid.*: 278). In actual fact, the Bolshevik penetration into the countryside proved to be far more ephemeral than Radkey suggests.

27. John L.H. Keep devoted a chapter of his book on the social history of the Revolution to this subject (*The Russian Revolution, op. cit.*: 449-463).

28. A.V. Shestakov, *op. cit.*: 43-44.

29. V.M. Selunskaiia, *Rabochii klass i Oktiabr' v derevne (Rabochii klass vo glave Oktiabr'skoi sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii v derevne. Oktiabr' 1917-1918 g.)* (Moscow, 1968): 80.

30. See the text in *Agrarnaia politika Sovetskoi vlasti (1917-1918 gg.). Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 1954): 129-134.

31. Some information about the work carried out by the section (which broke up in the autumn of 1918 to merge with the People's Commissariat for Agriculture) can be gleaned in E.N. Gorodetskii, *Rozhdenie Sovetskogo gosudarstva. 1917-1918* (Moscow, 1987): 108-110.

32. M. Dubrovskii, ed., *Piatyi chrezvychainyi s"ezd krest'ianskikh deputatov Bezhetskogo uezda. 22-30 marta 1918 g.* (Bezhetsk, 1918): 8.

33. For the role of the *obshchina* on the eve and after the October Revolution, cf. V.V. Kabanov, "Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia i krest'ianskaia obshchina," *Istoricheskie zapiski*, 111 (1984): 100-150. As a historian of the land commune put it: "in the course of the *chernyi peredel* that swept the countryside in 1917 and 1918, the commune was revived and extended beyond any of its previous historical frontiers. [...] The old, traditional village organization proved to be the indispensable executor of the peasants' revolutionary testament" (D. Atkinson, *The end of the Russian land commune, 1905-1930* (Stanford, Calif., 1983): 174).

34. The text is reproduced in *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti, op. cit.*, I: 407-419; for an English translation, see J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, *op. cit.*: 673-678.

35. E.A. Lutskii, "Peredel zemli vesnoi 1918 goda," *Izvestiia Akademii nauk SSSR. Seriia istorii i filosofii*, VI, 3 (1949): 227-245.

36. A.V. Shestakov, *op. cit.*: 56.

37. J.L.H. Keep, *The Russian Revolution, op. cit.*: 403, 405.

38. J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, *op. cit.*: 681-682.

39. See his speech in *Protokoly Saratovskogo gubernskogo s"ezda sovetov krest'ianskikh deputatov, proiskhodivshego v g. Saratove s 25-go maia po 2-e iunია n/st. 1918 g.* (Saratov, 1918): 140-147.

40. The typewritten stenographic minutes of the three congresses held by the PLSR in 1918 can be found in the ex-Central Archive of the Party in Moscow. As it is well-known, after the fall of the USSR it was renamed Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Contemporary History (*Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei istorii*). In future this archive will be mentioned with the acronym RTsKhIDNI, followed by the indication of the collection (*fond*), inventory (*opis'*), document (*edinitsa khraneniia* or *delo*) and page (*list*). All the documents from these archives quoted hereafter belong to the same collection (f. 564). Prosh'ian report survives in the form of the text which appeared in the newspapers of the time: see RTsKhIDNI, f. 564, op. 1, d. 1, l. 19.

41. See the speech of M. Spiridonova in *Protokoly pervogo s"ezda...*, *op. cit.*: 33-37.

42. *Znamia truda*, Jan. 28/Febr. 10 (1918). The excerpts quoted can be found in V. Trutovskii's article "Pamiati N.K. Mikhailovskogo." No less significant is the piece about "N. K. Mikhailovskii v russkom revoliutsionnom dvizhenii," written by M. Braginskii.

43. *Znamia truda*, Febr. 4/Febr. 17 (1918). Besides paying honor to Kaliaev in the party newspaper, the PLSR organized a series of meetings in order to commemorate the "historical significance of the terrorist deed" carried out by "this great martyr and fighter," whose activity could become the symbol of the "readjustment process under way in society at the present moment": cf. the story of the day in honor of Kaliaev in *Znamia truda*, Febr. 6/Febr. 19 (1918): 7.

44. *Protokoly pervogo s"ezda...*, *op. cit.*: 38-46.

45. See, in *Znamia truda*, Febr. 6/Febr. 19 (1918), the motion discussed by the Left Socialist Revolutionary group proposing the creation, inside the Soviet "parliament," of sections parallel to the People's Commissariats, to act as "legislative commissions responsible for the preliminary examination of all bills brought before the VTsIK and for overseeing the activity of the relative Commissariats." Furthermore, the document asked for the Commissariats to be reorganized on a collegial basis, with extensive participation by members of the VTsIK. Finally, the need was reiterated for a constitutional charter of the Russian Republic — which was both "Soviet" and "federal" — where the "rules and procedure for the election of the supreme legislative body" were to be laid down.

46. RTsKhIDNI, f. 564, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 181-186. During his exile Shteinberg wrote his memoirs to tell of his brief and frustrating experience as People's Commissar for Justice in the government

presided over by Lenin: cf. I. Steinberg, *Als ich Volkskommissar war. Episoden aus der russischen Oktoberrevolution* (Munich, 1929).

47. *Protokoly pervogo s"ezda...*, *op. cit.*: 20-23.
48. *Znamia truda*, Jan. 25/Febr. 7 (1918).
49. *Ibid.*, Febr. 13/Febr. 26 (1918).
50. *Ibid.*, Febr. 15/Febr. 28 (1918).
51. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 75-83.
52. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 1, l. 166.
53. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 166-167.
54. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 174-175.
55. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 1, l. 73.
56. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 1, l. 74.
57. "It was a terrible shock for us local party executives, when our party left the Council of People's Commissars" (RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 62-63).
58. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 3, l. 149.
59. For the reactions of local PLSR organizations to the negative attitude assumed by the party leaders towards the Brest Treaty, see also K.V. Gusev, *Partiia eserov ot melko-burzhuaznogo revoliutsionarizma k kontrrevoliutsii* (Moscow, 1975): 248-249.
60. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 2, l. 93.
61. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, l. 244.
62. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 182-184, 197-203.
63. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, l. 66.
64. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 69-70.
65. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 270-271.
66. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, l. 321. Capital punishment which had been abolished immediately after the October Revolution, was reintroduced by the Bolsheviks in June 1918.
67. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 278-280.
68. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 290-292.
69. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 332-333.
70. "Miatezh levykh eserov 6 iiulia 1918 g.," *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 5 (1989): 162.
71. "Doloi Bretskuii petliu, udushaiushchuiu russkuiu revoliutsiiu," *Znamia truda*, July 6 (1918). The most extensive reconstruction of the well-known events of July was written by a Soviet historian: cf. L. M. Spirin, *Krakh odnoi avantiury (Miatezh levykh eserov v Moskve 6-7 iiulia 1918 g.)* (Moscow, 1971). In K.V. Gusev (*Rytsari terrora* (Moscow, 1992): 114-115) we can find a biographical sketch of Bliumkin, who was soon to become a devoted follower of Trotskii; indeed, loyalty to the exiled revolutionary was to cost him his life in 1929.
72. Fel'shtinskii reaffirmed his thesis according which the Bolsheviks were somehow behind the Mirbach attack in a recent article as well as in the above-mentioned book *Bol'sheviki i levye esery*. The article — which appeared in *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 3 (1992): 30-61 — is followed by Lev M. Ovrutskii's and Anatolii I. Razgon's objections. Fel'shtinskii's thesis has now also been accepted by V.N. Brovkin, *Behind the front lines of the Civil War: Political parties and social movements in Russia, 1918-1922* (Princeton, N.J., 1994): 19.
73. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, ll. 76-77.
74. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 3.
75. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 21.
76. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 24.
77. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 27.
78. It is practically impossible to have precise information about the size and social composition of a party like the PLSR. Everybody in the party complained about the fact that it was difficult to carry out the simplest of tasks for lack of "intellectual forces." As for the exact number of party members, even official Socialist Revolutionary sources provide imprecise and discordant indications: for example, at the third congress Karelin said that the 214 delegates represented 58,000 militants according to the questionnaires they filled in, whereas according information gathered orally there were 75,000 members (RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, l. 325). Another serious obstacle for the PLSR was the lack of money. It has been calculated that in the course of 1918 the overall number

of newspapers of the Socialist Revolutionary Left in 26 Russian provinces amounted to 19, whilst the Bolsheviks had 74 dailies in that year and the PSR managed to print 42 newspapers despite the fact that it was in opposition (cf. P.N. Sobolev, *Uprochenie soiuza rabochikh i krest'ian v pervyi god proletarskoi diktatury* (Moscow, 1977): 207, 318).

79. Cf. A. Rabinowitch, "Maria Spiridonova's 'Last Testament'," *The Russian Review*, 54, 3 (1995): 426, note 11. It is significant that the very Alexander Rabinowitch, who in the past has never concealed his pro-Bolshevik sympathies, should write today: "An exact breakdown of properly elected delegates may be impossible to ascertain; however, based on substantial but incomplete archival evidence, it is quite clear that the Bolshevik congress majority was artificially inflated and highly suspect" (*ibid.*).

80. See L.M. Spirin, *Klassy i partii...*, *op. cit.*: 218-222, for a description of the various methods adopted by the Bolsheviks in order to annul the PLSR's hegemony or influence in the local soviets.

81. For more about the calvary of the "blessed Mariia" in Russia under Lenin and Stalin, see Rabinowitch's above-mentioned article "Maria Spiridonova's 'Last Testament'", which contains in its appendix extensive passages from an interesting inedited document of 1937. The horrendous death of the socialist heroine — killed together with other eminent revolutionaries by Stalin's regime soon after the Nazi attack on the USSR — was revealed a few years ago: cf. "Tragediia v Medvedevskom lesu," *Izvestija TsK KPSS*, 11 (1990): 124-131.

82. V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1969) 37: 384-385.

83. In the summer of 1917 the PSR lost its hegemony over the muzhiks, immediately after achieving the miracle of directing the agrarian movement into peaceful and democratic channels. I have dealt at length with this problem (which I consider essential if 1917 is to be fully understood) in an essay on the revolution in the province of Samara: see E. Cinnella, "La provincia di Samara nel 1917," *Rivista storica italiana*, 2 (1987): 321-434.

84. A perspicacious and fascinating analysis of the Socialist Revolutionary agrarian program can be found in O.H. Radkey, "Chernov and agrarian socialism before 1918," in *Continuity and change in Russian and Soviet thought*, ed. with an introd. by Ernest J. Simmons (Cambridge, Mass., 1955): 63-80. For an intelligent Marxist interpretation, see E.A. Morokhovets, *Agrarnye programmy rossiiskikh politicheskikh partii v 1917 g.* (Leningrad, 1929): 76-90.

85. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 3, l. 14.

86. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 3, l. 157 (newspaper cutting).

87. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 31-40.

88. For the upheaval caused in the PSR program by Stolypin's agrarian reform, see M. Hildermeier, *Die Sozialrevolutionäre Partei Russlands: Agrarsozialismus und Modernisierung im Zarenreich (1900-1914)* (Cologne—Vienna, 1978): 348-354.

89. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, l. 191.

90. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, l. 222.

91. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, l. 272. It is worthwhile remembering that the Left SRs from Elets (in the province of Orel) engaged from the beginning in creating the *kombedy* and that Roslavets sided with the Bolsheviks, distancing herself publicly from the position adopted by the Central Committee of her party: cf. S.L. Ronin, ed., *Kombedy Voronezhskoi i Kurskoi oblasti. Materialy po istorii komitetov bednoty* (Voronezh, 1935): 28-29, 63.

92. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 192-193. During the fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets, in July 1918, Mariia Spiridonova challenged the Bolsheviks publicly announcing: "We will fight in every single district (*na mestakh*) and there will be no room for the committees of village poor" (quoted in *Kombedy RSFSR. Sbornik dekretov i dokumentov o komitetakh bednoty*, pod red. i i s predisloviem prof. A.V. Shestakova (Moscow, 1933): 15).

93. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, l. 25.

94. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 68-70.

95. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, ll. 66-72.

96. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 316.

97. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 310.

98. Cf. *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti* (Moscow, 1959) II: 416-419.

99. *Komitety bednoty Belorussii. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Minsk, 1958): 358.

100. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 314.

101. The text of the telegram, together with the preliminary draft written by Lenin, can be found in *Leninskii sbornik* (Moscow—Leningrad, 1931) 18: 142-144.
102. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 305.
103. RTsKhIDNI, op. 1, d. 5, l. 387.