

INTRODUCTION

In March 1938, at the last of the great Moscow show trials organized by the triumphant Stalinist leadership of the Soviet state, Joseph Stalin's disgraced rival Nikolai Bukharin confessed: "I admit I am guilty of treason to the socialist fatherland, the most heinous of possible crimes, of the organization of kulak uprisings, of preparations for terrorist acts, and of belonging to an underground anti-Soviet organization."¹ To historically minded listeners, Bukharin's confession might have recalled the first major Soviet show trial, the trial of more than twenty leading Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) in 1922. The crimes to which Bukharin confessed—maintaining treasonous relations with foreign interventionists, organizing peasant rebellions, and conspiring to carry out terrorist attacks on Bolshevik leaders—were the same charges that had been levied against the SRs in 1922. For much of that year the Soviet press had lavished enormous attention on charges that the SRs had been tied to Anglo-French imperialism throughout the civil war, were complicit in peasant rebellions against the Soviet state, and stood behind the 1918 terrorist attack that nearly took Lenin's life. At the conclusion of the trial in August 1922, the court condemned a dozen of the SR leaders to death, although the Soviet government suspended the execution of the sentences. For the rest of their lives Abram Gots, Evgenii Timofeev, and the other principal defendants at the trial were effectively captives of the Soviet state. Most of them perished in the paroxysm of political violence that took Bukharin's life and that of countless other revolutionaries who faced charges of terrorism and treasonous links with foreign intelligence services and kulak conspirators in the 1930s.

In a deeper sense, Bukharin's 1938 trial neatly articulated the master plot that structured the SR trial and other major Soviet show trials. Soviet show trials combined a dread vision of the overthrow of Soviet power by "renegades of socialism" and a heroic account of vigilant, Bolshevik triumph over these unmasked enemies.² This narrative loomed large in the Bolshevik imagination. It shaped the struggle against the Bolshevik opposition in the 1920s, and it

structured not only show trials but also the rituals of self-criticism and apology that Communist Party members who had deviated from the general line were expected to perform throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Soviet mass meetings and agitation trials often enacted a similar story, and the discovery and trial of hidden enemies was a staple of early Soviet literature and film. By exploring the many contexts in which Bolsheviks staged rituals of unmasking, recent scholarship has enormously enriched our understanding of the political culture of the Bolshevik elite and uncovered some of the meanings these performances held for their organizers, participants, and audiences in the 1920s and 1930s.³ This book explores the history and peculiar power of the narrative that underpinned the show trials and apology rituals by grounding it in a formative Bolshevik experience: the struggle against socialist and radical resistance to the Soviet state in the first years after the October Revolution.

At the epicenter of that struggle stood the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (PSR), heir to the tradition of Russian revolutionary populism and the largest political party in Russia in 1917. From the time it coalesced in 1902, the PSR distinguished itself from Social Democracy and other currents of the Russian revolutionary movement by its commitment to a model of development that emphasized the possibility of a noncapitalist transformation of the Russian countryside and by its use of terror in the struggle against the imperial government. Each line of thinking and practice derived from SRs' conscious embrace of the heritage of the People's Will and the other Russian radical groups of the 1870s and 1880s. Each aspect of that heritage, however, had undergone substantial changes since the nineteenth century. Although Alexander Herzen and the populists of the nineteenth century may fairly be described as agrarian socialists, the PSR had long since made its peace with industrialization and sought to adapt its view of the socialist future to the unfolding processes of Russian economic and social modernization.⁴ Throughout its existence the PSR cultivated support among industrial workers.⁵ Like the other parties of the Second International, to which it belonged, the PSR tended to link socialism and industrial modernity.

Sympathetic readings of Marx were also widespread among SRs, but they insisted, against Social Democratic orthodoxy, that peasants formed part of a larger toiling class that included industrial workers. They likewise stressed peasants' revolutionary potential in the struggle against the Old Regime. Before 1917, Viktor Chernov, the principal theoretician of the PSR, argued that peasants' hunger for land and their hope to remake the countryside in accordance with values that had been shaped by centuries of communal farming would inevitably radicalize Russian politics after the overthrow of the monarchy. The revolution, he and many other Socialist Revolutionaries believed, would overflow the conventional political boundaries of a bourgeois revolution and smash

the first breaches in Russian capitalism.⁶ The most important such breach would be the socialization of land—the abolition of private property in agricultural land, which would be distributed to anyone willing to till it by his or her own labor. This revolutionary breakthrough would open the way to a lengthy process of socialist transition, in which Russia would be characterized by a democratic state, a socialized countryside, and a capitalist industrial sector.⁷

The PSR was also distinctive in its attachment to terrorism as a method of struggle against the Old Regime. Between 1902 and 1911, SRs carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks, killing two ministers of the imperial government and the uncle of the tsar, among many others.⁸ Ivan Kaliaev, one of the best-known SR terrorists, is famous for having remarked that a Socialist Revolutionary without a bomb was not an SR.⁹ Kaliaev's disdain for methods of political action other than terrorism would have endeared him to his predecessors in the People's Will, but SR leaders in fact saw terrorism simply as one of several methods the party ought to pursue in its fight against the Old Regime. Many were indeed skeptical of the terrorists' inclination to substitute their own efforts for mass revolutionary action. In the last years of the Old Regime, when the imperial security police had become skilled at penetrating SR terrorist detachments and foiling their plans, some leading voices in the party even recommended abandoning terrorism. The party majority demurred, however.¹⁰ Although few would have gone as far as Kaliaev in identifying the party and the terrorist struggle, most leading SRs shared his emotional attachment to terrorism, which made manifest the party's revolutionary genealogy, affirmed its commitment to the violent destruction of the Old Regime, and stood alongside the socialization of the land as the key point distinguishing it from Social Democracy, in either its Menshevik or Bolshevik variant.

These commitments to terrorism and the socialization of the land did much to define the SR profile before 1917, but the PSR was always remarkable for the range of diverse opinion that it contained. In part this stemmed from the aspiration of the party's founders to absorb all of the populist groups that dotted the political landscape in Russia and the emigration after the turn of the century. It stemmed as well from the absence of a single dominant figure in the leadership, and from the organizational weakness that plagued the party throughout its existence. Multiple centers of authority always coexisted and competed within the party, and leading SRs often voiced widely divergent, even contradictory, views. In seeking to do justice to this range of opinion and action, but also to write a coherent narrative of the party's history after October, I have taken inspiration from comments by the historian Gareth Stedman Jones about the British Labor Party. The Labor Party, he has argued, should not be understood as the outgrowth of a coherent, systematic ideology, and still less as the expression of a particular set of social interests. It should be seen rather as a

“vacant center—as a space traversed or tenanted by groups possessing different and sometimes incompatible political languages of widely varying provenance, a changing balance of forces and their discursive self-definitions.” The task of the party’s historian, he suggests, is to map these languages and their conflicts, and to explore how “groups and discourses of very different points of origin enter at particular moments into relationships of stable coexistence or even mutual reinforcement.”¹¹

The PSR is a particularly fruitful site for the study of political languages in revolutionary Russia and for an exploration of the categories, narratives, and practices of civil war politics, because it spread across the space on the political spectrum at which the two great languages of collective action in the modern world—the language of class and the language of nationhood—collided, co-existed, and interpenetrated. Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were by no means immune to the pull of nationhood, but they were certainly far more comfortable speaking the language of class. To the SRs’ right, Kadets were deeply suspicious of that idiom and tried, with little success, to identify themselves with a supra-class set of national and state interests.¹² Most SRs, by contrast, sought to make sense of the upheavals of revolution and civil war in terms of both class and nation. Their efforts to do so—and the reciprocal interplay between political languages, social structures, and political practices—form one of the principal themes of this book.

The SRs stand at the end of an important, and distinctively Russian, political and social tradition. They should be recovered in their own right from the dustbin of history to which Trotsky famously, and erroneously, consigned them in 1917. My chief aim, however, is not to restore a neglected political party to scholarly attention, but to explicate the politics of the Russian civil war. Following the late French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, I see politics as a struggle to impose an authoritative vision of the social world. This struggle plays out in, and is constrained by, particular social contexts, but it turns crucially on the establishment and control of the vocabulary that constitutes and defines social reality. As Bourdieu has put it: “The categories of perception, the systems of classification, that is, essentially the words, the names that construct social reality as much as they express it, are the crucial stakes of political struggle, which is a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division.”¹³

In the Russian civil war the stark binary of Red and White, widely understood as rooted in class antagonisms, became that legitimate principle of vision and division. By the end of 1918 it defined the political alternatives facing the country, the social identity of the combatants, and the larger meaning of the violence that had enveloped Russia. The mobilizing power of this vision of the civil war contributed immensely to the victory of the Red Army and Soviet state. Its power reflected the fact that the Bolsheviks had effectively monopo-

lized revolutionary political discourse, thereby securing control of the key site of political power and severely impinging the ability of SRs, Mensheviks, Left SRs, and other radicals to define a revolutionary alternative to Bolshevik dictatorship. From this perspective the central political question of the civil war is how the polarities of Red and White were in fact produced and established over the course of 1918, and that year becomes the decisive year of the civil war.

Bolshevik success in framing the civil war as a war between Red and White dictatorships has shaped its historiography. Historians have taken over the categories of Red and White with little awareness that this way of thinking about the civil war is a product of the Bolsheviks' own ideological labor and in fact played an important role in their victory.¹⁴ For decades it rendered SRs, Mensheviks, Left SRs, and other radical opponents of the Soviet state nearly invisible after October, and its simple picture of class relationships has obscured a more nuanced social topology of the civil war.¹⁵ It has also fostered a historiographical tendency to hurry from the revolutionary polarizations of 1917 to the battles of the Red Army against the Whites in 1919, which paradoxically emerge as the decisive turning points of the civil war and yet mere codas to 1917. Study of the civil war has thus languished until recently, despite the historian Sheila Fitzpatrick's suggestion twenty-five years ago that it was the formative experience of the Bolshevik party and Soviet state.¹⁶ My final ambition is to develop that insight conceptually and empirically. Key features of the Bolsheviks' outlook and important practices of their dictatorship—the dictatorship itself, in fact—took shape amid struggle with radical and popular opposition in 1918. The events of that year established the Socialist Revolutionaries in particular as the archetypal “renegades of socialism” and offered a scenario of catastrophe that haunted the Bolshevik imagination for many years, as Bukharin's plea suggests.

A few words should be said about various boundaries that delimit this project. The book analyzes the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries during the civil war, with an emphasis on the party's national leadership and its efforts to find its place in the civil war. Developments are sketched at the local level, but the focus of the book and the paucity of source materials on local SR organizations after 1918 make it difficult to go into great detail on some basic organizational questions (such as party membership) or to write a genuine social history of the PSR in the first years of the Soviet period. In addition, factions and individual SRs who had split from the party before 1918 appear occasionally, but they are not the objects of study here. This category includes notably the Party of Left Socialist Revolutionaries, but it also comprises the SR-Maximalists and a handful of important individuals, such as Boris Savinkov. I do give attention, however, to groups and individuals who separated from the main body of the party over the course of the civil war, including Vladimir Vol'skii's Narod group, the

SRs who worked in the Union for the Regeneration of Russia, and the Siberian Union of Socialist Revolutionaries.

On a terminological note, I avoid the label “right SR” throughout the book. This Sovietism, which SRs themselves did not use, formed part of the Bolshevik effort to reshape the public image of the PSR, undermine its socialist and revolutionary credentials, and ultimately destroy it. Indeed the disappearance in Soviet usage of the term “Socialist Revolutionary” and its replacement by “right SR” (*pravyi eser*) testifies to the Bolsheviks’ success in monopolizing revolutionary political discourse.¹⁷ That process is a principal concern of this book, but not one that I should reproduce in its pages. I refer to persons on the right wing of the PSR without using the term “right SR,” and I reserve “Left SR” for members of the PLSR. Members of the PSR in fact invariably referred to themselves as “Socialist Revolutionaries,” not “SRs” (*esery*). For reasons of space and style, however, I have chosen to use the shortened form throughout the book.

In another terminological matter, the historians Vladimir Brovkin and Peter Holquist have each proposed the term “civil wars” as an alternative to the conventional “civil war.”¹⁸ I agree that “civil wars” is in some ways analytically richer, but I have nevertheless adopted the usual term, on the grounds that a book that deals substantially with representations ought to stick close to the usage of contemporaries. Russians understood themselves to be living through a “civil war,” not “civil wars.” The SRs and Bolsheviks who are the subjects of this book discussed it as a unitary, though complex, phenomenon, and their vocabulary was freighted with historical associations that had important effects on their perception of events. It has therefore seemed to me important to preserve.

Chronologically, the book addresses the period from the onset of civil war in early 1918 through the demise of the PSR in Russia in the early 1920s. It begins in the aftermath of the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, when the SR leadership first began seriously to think through a way beyond Soviet power.¹⁹ Geographically, the book concentrates on European Russia and Siberia, the main staging grounds of the PSR during the civil war.

Before proceeding further, it may be helpful to sketch a brief account of the PSR in 1917.²⁰ The fall of the monarchy transformed the PSR overnight into the largest political party in Russia. On the eve of the revolution, the party had been little more than a congeries of small, atomized groups. These groups were poorly connected with each other and with the party leadership in emigration.²¹ The party’s reputation for radicalism and its association with the socialization of land, however, drove a heady growth in the several months after the revolution. By the summer of 1917, the influx of new recruits, the so-called “March SRs,” swelled the party membership to approximately seven hundred thousand. Little is known about the social background and political outlook of the new party members, but it seems safe to say that the PSR had the

widest appeal across class and estate boundaries of any political party in Russia. SRs dominated the nascent network of peasants' soviets and had an enormous presence in the army, where soldiers comprised almost half of the PSR's 1917 membership.²² By summer SRs also served as the mayors of Petrograd, Moscow, Kiev, and many other cities. Mensheviks generally played the leading role in the workers' soviets and in the central Soviet institutions, but the SR presence was impressive there as well and belies the stereotype of the PSR as a party of agrarian socialism.

For several reasons, however, this picture of strength was misleading. Even at the peak of its popularity in the summer of 1917, the PSR suffered from difficulties that undercut its ability to withstand the Bolshevik surge in the fall. Two weaknesses in particular should be highlighted, because their effects extended past October and into the civil war. First, the PSR was split by internal disputes that left different sections of the party often working at cross purposes. The two most contentious issues were Russia's participation in the World War and SR participation in the coalition with the Kadets in the Provisional Government. The far right wing of the party, grouped around the Petrograd newspaper *Volia naroda*, fiercely defended both the continuation of the war effort and coalition government. This group, which included such longtime party luminaries as Andrei Argunov and Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, had no mass following, but it did have a strong voice in the party leadership and some influence on the Provisional Government. On the other side of the party, much of the internationalist wing of the PSR gravitated left over the course of the year and came out in support of Soviet power by late summer. Unlike the right, it had a significant mass following. The final separation of the left wing and the formation of the Party of Left Socialist Revolutionaries took place only after October, but well before the Bolshevik seizure of power, much of the SR left had effectively seceded from the party, taking with it large parts of the party organizations in Petrograd, Khar'kov, and elsewhere.²³

Between these two warring wings, the SR Central Committee also suffered from the contentious disputes over the war and the coalition. The bloc of centrist SRs that dominated the Central Committee was itself divided into two wings, the so-called right-center and left-center. The right-center controlled the majority in the Central Committee until the Fourth Party Congress in December 1917. It comprised a group of veteran SRs, mainly from Moscow, who were bound together not only by their support of the war effort and their belief in the necessity of coalition, but also by ties of kinship, marriage, and long-standing friendship. The most important men in this group were Nikolai Avksent'ev, Abram Gots, and Vladimir Zenzinov. All had studied together in Germany before 1905, where they absorbed the neo-Kantian idealism that provided the philosophical underpinnings of their moderate and reformist views.

Their studies also set them apart from the other groups in the party leadership, which for the most part held fast to nineteenth-century orthodoxies. Chernov in particular dismissively referred to the former students as “knowledge rats” (*gryzuni nauki*).²⁴

Chernov was himself the dominant figure in the left-center minority of the Central Committee. Before 1905 he had been almost single-handedly responsible for the elaboration of the party program, and for many years he had figured as the party’s principal theoretician. SR positions on the peasant commune, the terrorist struggle, and Russia’s road to socialism were almost entirely the products of his thinking and writing. Part of Chernov’s skill, however, lay in finding compromise formulations that papered over the disagreements in the party, a mixed blessing in light of the party’s divisions in 1917 and during the civil war.²⁵ He was also not in any meaningful sense the charismatic or organizational leader of the party. In 1917 there is no doubt that the mass of the party rank and file stood closest to Chernov’s internationalist views on the war and shared his mounting skepticism about coalition government, but for a variety of reasons, the Central Committee elected at the Third Party Congress in May was dominated by the right-center.²⁶ As the party’s predicament deepened over the course of 1917 and the mass of the party moved left, Chernov proved powerless to push the Central Committee beyond its commitments to the coalition and the Kerensky government.

This state of affairs persisted through the catastrophes of the fall. After the Bolshevik seizure of power, Gots organized the Central Committee’s frantic efforts to find forces with which to restore the Provisional Government, efforts that resulted in the ill-fated “Junker rebellion” of October 29. With less enthusiasm, the right-center leadership of the party also participated in the negotiations to form a coalition socialist government that were organized by the Executive Committee of the Railway Workers’ Union (*Vikzhel*).²⁷ In December the acrimonious Fourth Party Congress finally bore witness to the prevailing leftist sentiment in the party, despite the withdrawal of the Left SRs. It elected a new Central Committee with a left-center majority led by Chernov and Nikolai Rakitnikov. Avksent’ev and several stalwarts of the right-center were dropped, although Gots and Zenzinov did manage to gain reelection.²⁸

Any hope that this might open the way to a more disciplined leftist line proved illusory, however, because the right-center and right wing of the party gained a new institutional base in the bureau of the SR fraction of the Constituent Assembly. It was elected by the fraction on December 23 to serve as its leading organ, and its two-dozen members included only one representative of the party’s left wing (Chernov). Most of the other members of the bureau, including the Central Committee members Zenzinov, Mikhail Gendel’man, and Evgenii Timofeev, as well as Argunov, Vadim Rudnev, and Il’ia Fondaminskii,

were prominent leaders of the right-center or right wing of the party.²⁹ This institutionalized division between left and right would plague the PSR for the rest of its history.

A second problem for the PSR, deeper and more intractable, was one that it shared with all the political parties in revolutionary Russia. Imperial Russian politics had long been characterized by the state's determination to contain the growth of organized political activity independent of bureaucratic authority. Political parties consequently entered the upheavals of the revolution, and civil war weakly developed, with shallow roots in the population. Moreover, the burgeoning impulse to define and defend collective interests that was so characteristic of popular political activity in 1917 was not primarily realized through the political parties.³⁰ More important in constructing and mobilizing social groups, and therefore of greater political importance in 1917 and beyond, were class-based institutions such as the soviets, factory committees, trade unions, and soldiers' committees. These institutions were the chief loci of popular politics. They expressed an understanding of democratization as the dismantling of social hierarchies, not the realization of popular sovereignty through the political parties and representative government.³¹ To be sure, this is more readily apparent in retrospect than it was at the time, when SRs, Mensheviks, and Bolsheviks saw the political labels affixed to the participants in such institutions as evidence of identification with the particular projects of their parties and with their larger understandings of the revolution. This was illusory in important ways, which posed profound challenges for SRs, Bolsheviks, and others after 1917.