

# A Russian Bebel Revisited: The Individuality of Heinrich Matthäus Fischer (1871–1935)

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At a meeting in the Newcastle Socialist Institute on Saturday 4 May 1907,

Comrade Fischer delivered an address upon the revolutionary movement in Russia. He said that at the start of the movement it was almost wholly in the hands of the nobles, and it was only since 1901 that the working classes had taken a leading part. He gave an account of the Duma, pointing out that the Social Democrats were a dominating force, and it was to that party only that the Russian people could look for any amelioration of the present social condition of the country. He referred at some length to the torture of political prisoners, more particularly to what was known as the 'Riga Museum', and said that these ought to be made known in order that the true state of affairs might be put before the world. A resolution was passed to the effect that the meeting expressed its heartiest sympathy with the Russian people in their struggle for freedom, applauds those local residents who have been assisting in the transference of arms and ammunition to the revolutionaries, and emphatically protests against the confiscation of the cartridges seized by the Newcastle police. It therefore calls upon the authorities to return the cartridges to their rightful owners.<sup>1</sup>

A speaker who held that the working classes did not start taking 'a leading part' in the Russian revolutionary movement until 1901 and that fifty or sixty Social Democrats were dominating the Second Duma seemed to be overlooking the St Petersburg textile strikes of 1896–97 and about 450 other elected Russian parliamentarians. Perhaps, then, 'Comrade Fischer' was ill informed. Perhaps, indeed, it is unreasonable to expect accuracy about Russia from a man with a German name in a speech to people in north-east England who were presumably no better informed than he was and who, as fellow socialists, probably sympathized with him anyway.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Meeting of Socialists', *Evening Chronicle* (Newcastle), 6 May 1907, p. 6.

It is more likely, however, that Fischer chose his words with care, for in fact he knew his subject well. Although his parents were German, he had been born and brought up in Russia and belonged to the very Russian 'working classes' whose aspirations he was trying to promote. As a metalworker, he probably considered 1901 more important than 1896–97 because of the so-called 'Obukhov Defence' of that year, an event which sparked off 'the first major wave of metalworker protest in Imperial Russian history'.<sup>2</sup> When he called the Social Democrats a 'dominating force' in the Second Duma he probably had in mind the dramatic part that one of them had been playing in the recent and continuing Duma debates about the torture of political prisoners at Riga,<sup>3</sup> for until shortly before his address in Newcastle he had been collaborating with Latvian subjects of the tsar in that 'transference of arms and ammunition' from the north-east of England to the Russian Empire which the British police had just exposed. He was actively involved, therefore, in the cause to which his address was devoted, and for that reason may be worth looking at more closely.

He has not escaped the attention of historians. Indeed, he and Semen Kanatchikov were the two 'Russian Bebels' whom Reginald Zelnik discussed in a celebrated article of 1976.<sup>4</sup> Zelnik looked at Kanatchikov first, however, returned to him but not to Fischer in subsequent publications,<sup>5</sup> and concentrated on Fischer's life in St Petersburg in the first half of the 1890s (whereas the present article considers his life as a whole). Other students of early Russian social

<sup>2</sup> Heather Hogan, *Forging Revolution: Metalworkers, Managers, and the State in St. Petersburg, 1890–1914*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 1993, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> Fierce denunciations of the government by I. P. Ozol', a Menshevik deputy from Riga, were among the highlights of the extensive debates in the Second Duma on the torture of political prisoners at Riga. See Gosudarstvennaia дума, *Stenograficheskie otchety, 1907 god*, 2 vols, St Petersburg, 1907, 1, 1906–13; 2, 700–16.

<sup>4</sup> Reginald E. Zelnik, 'Russian Bebels: An Introduction to the Memoirs of the Russian Workers Semen Kanatchikov and Matvei Fisher', *Russian Review*, 35, 1976, 3, pp. 249–89; 4, pp. 417–47 (hereafter, Zelnik, 'Russian Bebels').

<sup>5</sup> See *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia: The Autobiography of Semën Ivanovich Kanatchikov*, ed. and trans. Reginald E. Zelnik, Stanford, CA, 1986 (hereafter, Zelnik, *A Radical Worker*); and Reginald E. Zelnik, 'The Fate of a Russian Bebel: Semen Ivanovich Kanatchikov, 1905–1940', *The Carl Beck Papers*, no. 1105, Pittsburgh, PA, 1995. On Kanatchikov see also Richard L. Hernandez, 'The Confessions of Semen Kanatchikov: A Bolshevik Memoir as Spiritual Autobiography', *Russian Review*, 60, 2001, 1, pp. 13–35.

democracy mention Fischer only in passing.<sup>6</sup> Although he now also attracts attention in work on the celebrated Soviet spy Rudolf Abel' (his younger son), studies of Abel' tend to devote much more space to the identities that the spy acquired by training and practice than they do to the dual identity he possessed naturally by virtue of having been born and brought up in a non-British family in England.<sup>7</sup> I have underplayed Fischer myself, in an essay on Russian revolutionaries in the north-east of England which touched on him only briefly after dwelling on Kropotkin, Stepniak and Volkhovskii.<sup>8</sup> Putting him centre-stage will serve to highlight activities and characteristics which, inevitably, stand out less well in work whose focus lies elsewhere.

Fischer left two versions of his memoirs, both of them problematic.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have tended to prefer the first on the grounds that it shows fewer signs of editorial intervention,<sup>10</sup> but it is by no means devoid of such intervention<sup>11</sup> and it suffers anyway from having been written in haste (some of the events to which it refers having taken place only a

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Iu. Z. Polevoi, *Zarozhdenie marksizma v Rossii 1883–1894gg.*, Moscow, 1959, p. 380; Richard Pipes, *Social Democracy and the St. Petersburg Labor Movement, 1885–1897*, Cambridge, MA, 1963 (hereafter, Pipes, *Social Democracy*), pp. 42, 45, 50, 52–53, 136; A. M. Orekhov, *Perve marksisty v Rossii: Peterburgskii 'Rabochii soiuз' 1887–1893gg.*, Moscow, 1979, pp. 124, 129, 137–38; A. S. Trofimov, *Proletariat Rossii i ego bor'ba protiv tsarizma 1861–1904 gg.*, Moscow, 1979, pp. 94–95, 191, 194; F. M. Suslova, *Nachalo organizovannoi bor'by: Istoricheskoe znachenie leninskogo 'Soiuza bor'by za osvobozhdenie rabocheho klassa'*, Moscow, 1986, pp. 13, 15–18, 53–55, 225; and Leopold H. Haimson, 'Russian Workers' Political and Social Identities: The Role of Social Representations in the Interaction between Members of the Labor Movement and the Social Democratic Intelligentsia', in Reginald E. Zelnik (ed.), *Workers and Intelligentsia in Late Imperial Russia: Realities, Representations, Reflections*, Berkeley, CA, 1999, pp. 145–71 (p. 155).

<sup>7</sup> On Abel' see especially Kirill Khenkin, *Okhotnik vverkh nogami (O Rudol'fe Abele i Villi Fishere s vvodnoi stat'ei A. Zinov'eva)*, Frankfurt am Main, n.d. (hereafter, Khenkin, *Okhotnik*); Nikolai Dolgoplov, *Pravda polkovnika Abelia*, Moscow, 1995; Dmitrii Tarasov, *Zharkoe leto polkovnika Abelia*, Moscow, 1997 (hereafter, Tarasov, *Zharkoe leto*); Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West*, London, 1999, esp. pp. 192–95; the CD-ROM *Vil'iam Fisher / Rudol'f Abel': Legenda nelegal'noi razvedki*, Moscow, 2000 (RDCD 00669); and E. M. Primakov et al. (eds), *Ocherki istorii rossiiskoi vnesheii razvedki*, 6 vols, Moscow, 1996–, 5, pp. 160–76. A forthcoming book about Abel' by Mr Vincent Arthey of the University of Teesside will be the first to give his English birth and upbringing due weight. I am deeply indebted to Mr Arthey for giving me a copy of London, The National Archives of the UK: Public Record Office (hereafter, TNA: PRO), HO 144/1010/145334 (the file on Fischer's applications for naturalization as a British subject) and the transcript of an interview he conducted with Abel's daughter Evelina in Moscow on 2 September 2000 (hereafter, Arthey, 'Transcript').

<sup>8</sup> David Saunders, 'Tyneside and the Making of the Russian Revolution', *Northern History*, 21, 1985, pp. 259–84 (pp. 280–84).

<sup>9</sup> A. Fisher, *V Rossii i v Anglii: Nabludeniia i vospominaniia peterburgskogo rabocheho (1890–1921 g.g.)*, Moscow, 1922 (hereafter, *V Rossii*); G. Fisher, *Podpol'e, ssylka, emigratsiia: Vospominaniia bol'shevika*, Moscow, 1935 (hereafter, *Podpol'e*). Why Fischer's initial is different on the title-pages of these works will become apparent below.

<sup>10</sup> Pipes, *Social Democracy*, p. 145; Zelnik, 'Russian Bebels', p. 249, n. 1.

<sup>11</sup> A paragraph on 'the part that Vl. Il. Ul'ianov played in my final development as a committed advocate of revolutionary Marxism' (*V Rossii*, p. 53) does not appear at the relevant point in the manuscript: Moscow, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii (hereafter, RGASPI), f. 70, op. 3, ed. khr. 857, l. 47.

year before it was published). Although the second version undoubtedly appeared at a time of greater political correctness, it nonetheless contains many details not in its predecessor whose inclusion can hardly have been dictated by ideological considerations. What follows will make cautious use of both versions, correlating and supplementing them where possible with unpublished material and with information from printed sources which have not been consulted with Fischer in mind. Empirically speaking, the effect will be to add a little to the story of Fischer's St Petersburg period and rather more to the narrative of his childhood, the twenty years he spent in England, and the last part of his life when he was in Russia again.

Conceptually speaking, the purpose of the essay is to invite further reflection on Reginald Zelnik's notion that Fischer may be thought of as a 'Russian Bebel'. August Bebel (1840–1913), a cabinet-maker who rose to prominence in the late-nineteenth-century German Social Democratic Party, is usually taken to exemplify the fact that socialist political movements could occasionally allow genuine workers to occupy significant positions in their ranks. In the sense that Fischer was a socialist from an unprivileged background, comparing him with Bebel is obviously fair. But Fischer did not admire his German precursor. Whereas, he wrote, the majority of socialist intellectuals were 'deserters from the camp of the enemy' (the bourgeoisie), Bebel was a sort of deserter from the camp of the workers: 'Even if one thinks of Bebel, then even he is just proof of the general rule: he gained a reputation as a writer and orator only after he gave up the bench and the factory, i.e. after he was freed from the yoke of the plant.'<sup>12</sup> These words give the impression that Fischer doubted whether it was possible for a worker to become an intellectual whilst remaining true to his working-class origins. Since, as Zelnik made clear in 1976, he was profoundly mistrustful of the social group into which Bebel moved (the intelligentsia), the passage hints that he would have preferred Bebel to remain a cabinet-maker. Fischer accepted that workers sometimes had to take advice from intellectuals, but he remained wary of them and did not want to become one. In the last part of his life, when he was a published author, he continued to call himself a 'worker' (*rabochii*).<sup>13</sup> By that time Zelnik's principal 'Russian Bebel', Semen Kanatchikov, was calling himself an *intelligent*.<sup>14</sup> Since Fischer does not appear to have been discontented in his later years (except, perhaps, in the very last months of his life), it looks as if he was consciously trying not to go the way of Bebel. His goal may have been to pursue socialism without

<sup>12</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 43 (cf. *Podpol'e*, p. 117).

<sup>13</sup> RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, d. 2011, l. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 816, l. 3.

leaving the ranks of the working class. If it was, he was sufficiently unusual to be worth thinking about as an individual rather than a type.

Fischer's early life certainly predisposed him to individuality, for not only by ethnic origin but also by upbringing and education he differed from many of the other people who left the Russian provinces for St Petersburg in the later years of the nineteenth century. He was born on 9 April 1871 (old style) on an estate called Andreevskoe in the Mar'ino volost' of the Mologa district of the province of Iaroslavl'.<sup>15</sup> His father, Heinrich August Fischer (later Alexander August Fischer), came from the tiny duchy of Sachsen-Altenburg in the north-eastern part of Thuringia.<sup>16</sup> His mother, *née* Emilie Winkler (later Mariia Krüger), came from Berlin.<sup>17</sup> They and his godparents, Heinrich Freischtatsky and Mathilde Fleischer (*née* Keyser), were Lutherans.<sup>18</sup> People like these were thin on the ground in Iaroslavl'. In the year of Fischer's birth the province contained only 446 'Protestants and Lutherans' in a total population of just over 988,000.<sup>19</sup> German-speaking native inhabitants of the later Russian Empire were usually to be found in urban areas of the heartland or in the Baltic provinces, the Polish provinces, right-bank and southern Ukraine and along the Volga.<sup>20</sup> Because, furthermore, Fischer's parents were among the 'less than 5 per cent of the Germans in the Baltic provinces and in central and northern Russia' who worked on the land at the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>21</sup> they stood out occupationally as well as ethnically.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 2011, l. 3. Mar'ino and Andreevskoe are close to one another, not far from the left bank of the Volga some 40km west of Rybinsk (c. 58°N, 38°14'E).

<sup>16</sup> 'O prisoedinenii k Pravoslaviiu', *Iaroslavskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti: Chast' ofitsial'naiia*, 1881, 32 (8 August), pp. 249–50. For this reference and the one at the beginning of the next footnote, as well as for other kindnesses, I am indebted to N. M. Alekseev of the Mologa Museum in Rybinsk.

<sup>17</sup> 'O prisoedinenii k Pravoslaviiu', *ibid.*, 1881, 5 (31 January), pp. 24–25 (maiden name and change of first name); TNA: PRO, HO 144/1010/145334, sub. 2 (Berlin origin and the surname Krüger). How Fischer's mother acquired the surname Krüger is unknown, but since her husband predeceased her (*Podpol'e*, p. 79), she presumably remarried.

<sup>18</sup> Iaroslavl', Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Iaroslavskoi Oblasti (hereafter, GAIaO), f. 230, op. 11, d. 577, ll. 35ob.–36 (Fischer's record of baptism, from which I also take the spelling of his name in the title of this essay; I am particularly grateful to Dr Tim Kirk and Dr Thomas Rütten for helping me to decipher this document).

<sup>19</sup> P. F. Besedkin, *Obzor iaroslavskoi gubernii*, 2 vols, Iaroslavl', 1892–96, 1, 27. Of the c. 1.3 million native speakers of German recorded by the census of 1897 in the European part of the Russian Empire, only 874 lived in the province of Iaroslavl' and only 206 in rural parts thereof. See N. A. Troinitskii (ed.), *Obshchii svod po imperii rezul'tatov razrabotki dannykh pervoi vseobshchei perepisi naseleniia, proizvedennoi 28 ianvaria 1897 goda*, 2 vols, St Petersburg, 1905 (hereafter, Troinitskii, *Obshchii svod*), 2, pp. 22, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, Harlow, 2001, pp. 285–86.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 306–07.

They belonged nonetheless to a recognizable category, that of the German estate employee.<sup>22</sup> Heinrich August Fischer worked as a herdsman, vet, miller and forester; Emilie Winkler as an expert on poultry.<sup>23</sup> Fischer believed that they had been ‘ordered’ (*vybisannye*) from Germany by a Prince Kurakin before the abolition of serfdom,<sup>24</sup> but it is likelier that his father, at least, came to Russia at the behest of Prince Mikhail Dmitrievich Volkonskii, who owned Andreevskoe from 1835 until at least 1863.<sup>25</sup> Volkonskii was an improving landlord: he sent two peasants from Andreevskoe to the Baltic provinces in the 1830s to learn why the scythe was preferable to the sickle; he had a German steward in the 1840s and moved at that time in the circle of E. S. Karnovich (August von Haxthausen’s guide in the province of Iaroslavl’); and to judge by the fact that in 1863 he was running the only distillery in the Mologa district, he had commercial inclinations.<sup>26</sup> He was just the sort of person, therefore, to have been on the look-out for someone like the elder Fischer. He also had connections in the right part of Germany, for his third cousin and exact contemporary Aleksandr Nikitich Volkonskii, the owner of an estate of about the same

<sup>22</sup> Compare Vronskii’s German steward at Vozdvizhenskoe in Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, London, 2000, pp. 620, 630–31, 644 (part 6, chapters 19, 22, 25).

<sup>23</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 5; *Podpol’e*, p. 7; Fischer described his father as just a *skotovod* in RGASPI, f. 495, op. 65a, d. 12746, l. 10b.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> For a list of the owners of Andreevskoe in the nineteenth century see N. M. Alekseev, ‘Musiny-Pushkiny na mologskoi zemle’ (hereafter, Alekseev, ‘Musiny-Pushkiny’), in S. O. Shmidt et al. (eds), *Musiny-Pushkiny v istorii Rossii*, Rybinsk, 1998, pp. 172–80 (p. 173). M. D. Volkonskii inherited the estate from his father, who died in 1835 (see A. G. Tartakovskii [ed.], *1812 god: Voennye dnevniki*, Moscow, 1990, pp. 114–84 [the father’s diaries for 1812–14, with references to Andreevskoe at pp. 150–51 and an introductory essay by the editor]). He was still the owner in 1863 (P. Semenov, *Geograficheskostatisticheskii slovar’ Rossiiskoi imperii*, 5 vols, St Petersburg, 1863–85 [hereafter, Semenov, *Geograficheskostatisticheskii slovar’*], 3, 299). Although he lived until 1875 (M. V. Maiorov, *Russkaia rodoslovnaia mozaika: Vek XVI–Vek XXI*, Moscow, 2002 [hereafter, Maiorov, *Russkaia rodoslovnaia mozaika*], p. 112), he almost certainly gave the estate to his daughter Ekaterina on the occasion of her marriage to Prince Anatolii Aleksandrovich Kurakin in April 1864, for Kurakin owned land in Iaroslavl’ only in the name of his wife and was elected Marshal of Nobility in the Mologa district in 1867 (see St Petersburg, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv, f. 1162, op. 6, ed. khr. 272 [Kurakin’s service record, for the contents of which I am indebted to Professor Dominic Lieven] and, for the date of the marriage, Jacques Ferrand, *Les familles princières de l’ancien empire de Russie (en émigration en 1978)*, Montreuil, n.d., 1 [all published], p. 141).

<sup>26</sup> Kniaz’ Mikhail Volkonskii, ‘O koshenii khleba’, *Zemledel’cheskii zhurnal*, 1837, 4, pp. 65–70; S. A. Kozlov, *Agrarnye traditsii i novatsii v doreformnoi Rossii (tsentral’no-nechernozemnye gubernii)*, Moscow, 2002, pp. 122, 158, 432 n. 344; Semenov, *Geograficheskostatisticheskii slovar’*, 3, 299 (the distillery).

size as Andreevskoe in the same district of Iaroslavl' province, served as Russian Ambassador to Sachsen-Altenburg between 1858 and 1860.<sup>27</sup>

In view of the fact that Emilie Winkler, Fischer's mother, was from Berlin rather than Sachsen-Altenburg, she may not have come to Russia at the same time as her husband. If a modern newspaper article is right to say that she was the daughter of the steward at Andreevskoe,<sup>28</sup> she may have been there when the elder Fischer arrived. Perhaps she married her father's successor, for on his son's record of baptism Heinrich August is described as a *Gutsverwalter*.<sup>29</sup>

The couple had many children. Heinrich Matthäus mentions five brothers and two sisters, and his grand-daughter (the daughter of Rudolf Abel) claims that he was one of sixteen or seventeen.<sup>30</sup> Fischer said that the size of his family was the reason why, when he was six or seven, his parents gave him away to his childless godfather.<sup>31</sup> Since, however, he remained in touch with his natural parents (returning to live with his mother in 1895 and visiting her in 1899),<sup>32</sup> the transfer may also have had something to do with improving his chances in life. Six or seven was roughly the age at which children in the countryside began helping out with the family's work. Perhaps Fischer's parents parted with him because they felt that his godfather could give him skills they could not instil themselves. The transfer certainly altered the course of the child's upbringing, for it made him a migrant at a very young age, permitted him to receive a better education than he could have received at Andreevskoe, and introduced him to metalwork.

Fischer described his godfather as 'restless' or 'flighty' (*neusidchivyi*).<sup>33</sup> He had come to Russia to work on the construction of the Rybinsk-Bologoe railway and met Fischer's father during the erection of the bridge at the point where that railway crosses the Volga.<sup>34</sup> When he took Fischer off his parents' hands, he was working as depot chief at the

<sup>27</sup> Maiorov, *Russkaia rodoslovnaia mozaika*, pp. 111–12 (the third-cousin relationship); *Prilozheniia k trudam redaktsionnykh kommissii, dlia sostavleniia polozenii o krest'ianakh, vykhodiashchikh iz krepostnoi zavisimosti: Svedeniia o pomeshchich'ikh imeniakh*, 6 vols, St Petersburg, 1860, 4, pp. 18–19 (adjacent entries on the cousins' Mologa estates); Erik Amburger, *Geschichte der Behördenorganisation Russlands von Peter dem Grossen bis 1917*, Leiden, 1966, p. 452 (the ambassadorship). Sachsen-Altenburg was important to the rulers of the Russian Empire in the mid-nineteenth century because the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna was a scion of its dynasty on her mother's side and the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich and his son both married princesses from there.

<sup>28</sup> V. Andrianov, 'Po imeni Genrikh . . .', *Severnyi rabochii*, 12–24 August 1993.

<sup>29</sup> GAIaO, f. 230, op. 11, d. 577, l. 35ob.

<sup>30</sup> Arthey, 'Transcript', p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 5; *Podpol'e*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 28–29; *Podpol'e*, pp. 78–79, 118.

<sup>33</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; *Podpol'e*, p. 8. This point is about fifteen kilometres south-east of Andreevskoe, though the bridge to be found there today is a modern replacement. The line opened in 1870. See V. P. Semenov (ed.), *Rossia: Polnoe geograficheskoe opisaniie nashogo otechestva*, 11 vols, St Petersburg, 1899–1914 (hereafter, V. P. Semenov, *Rossia*), 1, p. 201.

railway station of Medvedevo, six kilometres to the east of Bologoe (some 200 kilometres to the west of Andreevskoe).<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, he bought and sold a farm before returning to work on the railways at Rybinsk (280 kilometres to the east of Bologoe).<sup>36</sup> Thus the young Fischer became peripatetic. A migrant life did not in itself make him unusual, for migration on the part of the male inhabitants of imperial Iaroslavl' was commonplace. Well established before the abolition of serfdom,<sup>37</sup> it gave the province a higher woman-to-man ratio at the time of the census of 1897 than was to be found in any other part of the Russian Empire.<sup>38</sup> Migration did not usually begin as early, however, as it began for Fischer, and it was not usually so local (relatively speaking) or so voluntary. Inhabitants of the Iaroslavl' countryside who were unable to make a living by farming the poor soil of the province and could not afford to take up distilling, logging, or butter production usually found themselves obliged to move to Moscow or St Petersburg.<sup>39</sup> Fischer, on the other hand, could apparently have found gainful employment on the estate on which he was born,<sup>40</sup> and did not move to one of the imperial capitals. Thus even in his early peregrinations he differed from the people around him.

Arrival in Rybinsk gave him the chance of an education. Although M. D. Volkonskii had founded what is now one of Russia's oldest village schools on the road between Andreevskoe and Mar'ino,<sup>41</sup> it would not have been able to offer Fischer the educational opportunities that came his way through his godfather's mobility. Rybinsk, indeed, left more than an educational mark on Fischer. In his second application for naturalization in England (in 1914), as well as in questionnaires he completed on returning to Russia in 1921, he claimed

<sup>35</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 5; *Podpol'e*, p. 8. For the location of Medvedevo see V. P. Semenov, *Rossiiia*, 3, p. 364.

<sup>36</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, V. A. Fedorov, *Pomeshchich'i krest'iane tsentral'no-promyshlennogo raiona Rossii kontsa XVIII–pervoi poloviny XIX v.*, Moscow, 1974, pp. 298–99, a tabulation by district of the number of travel documents issued in the province of Iaroslavl' in 1856.

<sup>38</sup> P. Bechasnov, 'Kratkii obzor tsifrovikh dannikh', in Troinitskii, *Obshchii svod*, 1, p. iv.

<sup>39</sup> For modern editions of some of the popular literature to which their presence in the capitals gave rise, see Iaroslav Smirnov, *Zhizn' i priklucheniia iaroslavtsev v obeikh stolitsakh Rossiiskoi imperii*, Iaroslavl', 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Some of his brothers were employed there when he returned in 1895. See *V Rossii*, p. 31, *Podpol'e*, p. 79. According to N. A. Sakharov, *Byloe (Kniga dlia chteniia i razdumii o proshlom rodnogo kraia)*, Rybinsk, 2000, p. 42, Andreevskoe adjusted well to the abolition of serfdom. Some of the local peasants prospered too, for one of them was sufficiently well off to donate 500 rubles to the church at Mar'ino for the regilding of the iconostasis in 1881. See *Iaroslavskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti: Chast' neofitsial'naia*, 1881, 51 (19 December), p. 418. A modern scholar says that the Mologa district of Iaroslavl' was one of only three among the ten districts of the province that could be said to have been 'economically developed' in the last years of the Russian Empire. See T. I. Volkova, *Iaroslavskoe zemstvo i razvitie narodnogo zdoravookhraneniia i obrazovaniia v gubernii (1865–1918gg.)*, Iaroslavl', 1998, p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> Alekseev, 'Musiny-Pushkiny', p. 178.



it as his place of origin.<sup>42</sup> In the first version of his memoirs he called it ‘pretty much my native town’;<sup>43</sup> in the second he devoted a number of new pages to the time he spent there.<sup>44</sup> Contemporary descriptions make his enthusiasm easy to understand. A volume published in 1873 said that ‘In respect of trade Rybinsk occupies one of the first places in Russia, thanks to its position on the Volga at the beginning of the water systems which connect the Volga with the Baltic Sea’.<sup>45</sup> These water systems — the Tikhvinskii and the Mariinskii — engendered a ten-fold increase in the permanent population of the town in the course of the nineteenth century and an additional quadrupling of its size in the navigation season.<sup>46</sup> Although railway lines eventually reduced Rybinsk’s importance as a trading centre, they did not do so immediately and even then affected only the trade in goods from far away, not that in goods like timber from the banks of nearby rivers. Movement of goods by river and rail into and out of Rybinsk was much larger by weight in 1880 than it was into and out of any other town in the province of Iaroslavl’ including the provincial capital.<sup>47</sup> A work of 1899 said that ‘Nowadays Rybinsk gives the impression of a large and flourishing industrial town’.<sup>48</sup> This was precisely the impression it made on the young Fischer.

Education, however, was the town’s greatest gift to him. After completing primary school there ‘in a single year’<sup>49</sup> (almost certainly 1884–85), he took the exam for the local three-class ‘municipal school’ (‘gorodskoe uchilishche’) in August 1885 and was placed in the ‘fourth division’ (i.e. the upper year of the second class).<sup>50</sup> The significance of ‘gorodskie uchilishcha’ in the late Russian Empire may not be fully understood. Christine Ruane does not speak very highly of the people who taught at them,<sup>51</sup> but to judge by the way in which Fischer refers to his teachers at Rybinsk they did some good work. Set up by a statute of 1872, schools of this type began opening their doors in 1874. They were supposed to replace the 402 existing ‘district schools’ (‘uezdnye uchilishcha’). They had up to four classes (five or six if local money

<sup>42</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/1010/145334, sub. 8; RGASPI, f. 495, op. 65a, d. 12746, l. 1, and op. 198, d. 812, l. 2.

<sup>43</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> *Podpol’e*, pp. 8–14 (and see also *ibid.*, p. 67, for the fact that Fischer kept up with people from Rybinsk when he was in St Petersburg).

<sup>45</sup> P. Semenov, *Geograficheskoi-statisticheskii slovar’*, 4, p. 355.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, p. 989.

<sup>48</sup> V. P. Semenov, *Rossia*, 1, p. 353.

<sup>49</sup> RGASPI, f. 70, op. 3, ed. khr. 857, l. 28 (a phrase from *V Rossii* which does not appear in the printed version).

<sup>50</sup> Rybinsk, Rybinskii Filial Gosudarstvennogo Arkhiva Iaroslavskoi Oblasti (hereafter, RF GAIaO), f. 77, op. 2, d. 35, l. 4ob.

<sup>51</sup> Christine Ruane, *Gender, Class, and the Professionalization of Russian City Teachers, 1860–1914*, Pittsburgh, PA, 1994, pp. 35–39, 111–12.

topped up funding from the state). The number of classes referred not to the length of the course of study but to the number of teachers; the course of study was six years (in a three-class school like Fischer's, pupils spent two years in each class). Children had to be at least seven years old at the point of entry and, if older, had to be able to read and write. Pupils between the ages of ten and fourteen who completed four years in a municipal school could enter the first class of gymnasia and *Realschule*. Those who completed the entire course of study could be appointed to the first rank in state service without doing the test laid down for appointment. The schools were fee-paying, though the poor could be absolved from payment. They operated throughout the academic year rather than just in the winter and were allowed to establish their own boarding facilities.<sup>52</sup>

Fischer made the most of his time at the Rybinsk municipal school. He took books by Fenimore Cooper, Walter Scott and Jules Verne out of the school library and learned about the principle of the conservation of energy from Pavel Ivanovich Bogoiavlenskii's physics lessons and Darwinism from another teacher. A slang word in his final Russian-language test prevented him from finishing at the top of his class, but he scored '5' for almost everything else in the three years he was a pupil.<sup>53</sup> When he graduated at the age of seventeen in 1888,<sup>54</sup> he became part of a small minority. Although municipal schools attracted larger numbers of pupils than the district schools they were supposed to replace,<sup>55</sup> they were not intended to cater for everyone. In 1884 the eight three-class municipal schools of the province of Iaroslav' contained only 1,177 pupils, which was roughly 3 per cent of the total number of children in the province's schools at that time.<sup>56</sup> So when Fischer completed his education, he would have been within his rights to feel that he was going to be equal to the occupational challenges that lay ahead. Perhaps it was for this reason, or more generally because his godparents had succeeded in their ambition to instil in him 'a determination to be independent' ('stremlenie k samostoitel'nosti'),<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, series 2, 55 vols, St Petersburg, 1830–84, 47, 1st pagination, pp. 727–36 (no. 50909, 31 May 1872); Allen Sinel, *The Classroom and the Chancellery: State Educational Reform in Russia under Count Dmitry Tolstoi*, Cambridge, MA, 1973 (hereafter, Sinel, *The Classroom*), pp. 215–25. For a photograph of the municipal school at Rybinsk see E. Sergeev et al., *Rybinsk: Fotoal'bom*, Rybinsk, n.d., p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> For the marks Fischer received at school see RF GAIaO, f. 77, op. 2, d. 15, ll. 86ob.–87 (1885–86); d. 41, ll. 9ob.–10 (1886–87); and d. 41, ll. 20ob.–21 (1887–88). See also *V Rossii*, pp. 7–8, and *Podpol'e*, pp. 8, 12, 14.

<sup>54</sup> Fischer's memoirs give the impression that his schooldays ended in 1886, but his school-leaving certificate is dated 3 June 1888 (RF GAIaO, f. 77, op. 2, d. 50, l. 22).

<sup>55</sup> '99 municipal schools enrolled more students than 337 county [i.e. district] schools in 1877–78' (Sinel, *The Classroom*, p. 225).

<sup>56</sup> P. Semenov, *Geograficheskoe-statisticheskii slovar'*, 5, p. 991.

<sup>57</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 6.

that he decided at this point in his life to take up a St Petersburg apprenticeship in metalwork which his godfather found for him from an advertisement in a German-language newspaper. Or perhaps a life in metalwork was enough on its own to make him move, for his godfather's craft obviously fascinated him. 'I learned from him how to tin samovars, knock out copper dishes, forge axes and instruments [. . .] Having learnt the craft of working metal, I liked it so much that when the book-keeping teacher suggested, at the end of my time at the municipal school, that I go to work as an office-boy [. . .] I said no and went to Gol'dberg's factory in Petrograd as an apprentice.'<sup>58</sup>

Fischer's two sets of parents, early geographical mobility, relatively high degree of education and early introduction to metalwork had given his childhood an individual favour. He was never a peasant. Even his natural father was a stockman rather than an agriculturalist (Fischer changed an adjective describing him from *zemeldel' cheskii* to *sel' skokhozi-aistvennyi* in the 1920s<sup>59</sup>). Although he learned how to milk a cow and to plough in the period when his godfather was flirting with farming,<sup>60</sup> at the beginning and in the later years of his time with his godfather he lived in suburban or urban environments (near Bologoe and in Rybinsk). The riverine and commercial Rybinsk of which he spoke so highly had less in common with the countryside which surrounded it than it did with the cities in which he was to spend his most active years (St Petersburg, Archangel, Saratov, Newcastle).

Finally, Fischer remained German. Only a few early Russian social democrats had parents who came from Germany.<sup>61</sup> Fischer's godfather, moreover, may have been more German by culture than his natural parents were, for although Heinrich August Fischer and his wife converted from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy in 1880–81,<sup>62</sup> Heinrich Freishtatsky and his wife were still going to the Lutheran Church in Rybinsk during Fischer's schooldays (Fischer says that there were 'a good many' German Lutherans in the town when he was there).<sup>63</sup> Admittedly, the fact that Fischer appears not to have made much use of the first of his given names gives rise to the suspicion that he regretted it did not Russianize very well (Heinrich/Genrikh). When he needed a patronymic, however, he always gave 'Avgustovich', which implies that his father (Heinrich August) did not make much use of the first of his

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, d. 2011, l. 5.

<sup>60</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Another was Ludwig Martens, the Bolsheviks' representative in the USA in 1919–20 (on whom see David W. McFadden, *Alternative Paths: Soviets and Americans, 1917–1920*, New York, 1993, esp. pp. 267–335). Martens was born 'of German parents in Russia' in 1875; his father owned a small engineering works in Kursk (RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, d. 1210, l. 4).

<sup>62</sup> For the evidence of their conversions see notes 16–17, above.

<sup>63</sup> *Podpol'e*, p. 13.

given names either. Nor did Fischer always use his second given name, despite the fact that it Russianized naturally (Matthäus/Matvei). As a young man he often used a third name. He explained matters as follows to the St Petersburg police in July 1894:

My name is Matvei Avgustov Fisher. Apart from the name Matvei I also bear the name Genrikh. My mother always called me Andrei. Workers at the factories and plants where I worked also called me Andrei, and none of them knew that I am called Matvei and Genrikh. When workers asked me my name I always replied that I am called Andrei, because in childhood I got used to being called by this name.<sup>64</sup>

This explanation does not support the notion that when Fischer employed non-German first names he was denying his roots. When he used the name Matvei, he was following his father's practice of using the second of two given names. When he used the name Andrei he was using his mother's name for him. In his school records of the 1880s he remained 'Genrikh'.<sup>65</sup> Cultural affinity seems to have been part of the reason why he lodged with Germans in St Petersburg for much of the early 1890s.<sup>66</sup> A contemporary remembered his 'German accuracy and cleanliness' at that time.<sup>67</sup> He read German socialist literature in the original and tried to use his knowledge of German to make something of a text in Swedish; in prison in 1894–95 he understood Heine's 'poisonous satire' only when he read him in German; in exile he read the Webbs on British trade unionism in a German translation; shortly after his arrival in Newcastle he translated for a German speaker at a political meeting there.<sup>68</sup> He registered his sons under English first names which could easily be Germanized but much less easily Russianized (Henry and William August), and on their birth certificates he gave his own first names as 'Henry' and 'Henry Matthew'.<sup>69</sup> When writing to Lenin in 1905 (in Russian), he invariably called himself 'G.'

<sup>64</sup> Moscow, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter GARF), f. 102, 7<sup>00</sup> deloproizvodstvo, 1894g., op. 191, d. 86, ch. 3, l.191. For another Russian baptized as a Lutheran whose first names complicated her life, see the memoirs of Martov's niece E. V. Gutnova: *Perezhitoe*, Moscow, 2001, p. 28. At an 'Evening of Recollections' in Leningrad in March 1930, Fischer ascribed his acquisition of the name Andrei not to his mother but to peasants at Andreevskoe who were unable to pronounce the name Genrikh. See E. A. Korol'chuk (ed.), *V nachale puti: Vospominaniia peterburgskikh rabochikh 1872–1897gg.*, Leningrad, 1975 (hereafter, Korol'chuk, *V nachale puti*), p. 422n.

<sup>65</sup> See the RF GAIaO references in notes 50 and 53–54 above.

<sup>66</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 12, 14, 28; *Podpol'e*, p. 78; I. I. Iakovlev, 'Vospominaniia o V. I. Lenine i peterburgskom "Soiuze bor'by"' (hereafter, Iakovlev, 'Vospominaniia'), *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1959, 6, pp. 96–107 (p. 99); K. M. Norinskii, *Pod nadzorom politsii: Vospominaniia*, Moscow, 1974 (hereafter, Norinskii, *Pod nadzorom*), p. 25; GARF, f. 102, 5<sup>00</sup> deloproizvodstvo, 1896g., op. 132, d. 36, ch. 1, l. 36.

<sup>67</sup> Norinskii, *Pod nadzorom*, p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 8, 20, 34, 73–74; *Podpol'e*, pp. 22, 73, 176, 193–94.

<sup>69</sup> Birth certificates of Henry and William August Fisher, Westgate sub-district, Newcastle upon Tyne, 18 April 1902 and 11 July 1903.

or Genrikh Fisher.<sup>70</sup> He was naturalized in England in 1914 under the name 'Heinrich Mattheus Fischer'.<sup>71</sup> He was always H. or H. M. Fisher in English street directories.<sup>72</sup> He described himself as a 'Russian German' when applying for membership of the Russian Communist Party in 1921.<sup>73</sup> He signed each part of the manuscript of the first version of his memoirs 'G. M. Fisher'<sup>74</sup> (the book was presumably published as the work of 'A. Fisher' because the author was still likely to be known to his prospective readers as 'Andrei'). He referred to his younger son as 'Vel'gel'm' (*sic*, presumably 'Wilhelm') when asking the Society of Old Bolsheviks to grant him a place at a rest-home in 1923.<sup>75</sup> The second version of his memoirs must have come out under the Germanic name G. (for Genrikh) Fisher because he had finally succeeded in making clear how he wanted to be known. His obituary in the bulletin of the Society of Old Bolsheviks and the article about him in the first edition of the *Bolshaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* very nearly got his first names right when they called him 'Genrikh Matveev' and 'Genrikh Matveevich'.<sup>76</sup> Although it is unclear what Rudolf Abel meant when, on his deathbed in Brezhnev's Moscow in 1971, he told his daughter not to forget that the family was German,<sup>77</sup> the remark sounds as if it had been passed down from fathers to children among the Fischers ever since the first of them left Sachsen-Altenburg. It is obviously impossible to quantify the extent to which Fischer thought his German origins marked him out from his peers, but it does not look as if he wanted to put them behind him.

At first sight, however, his ethnicity and the other relatively unusual features of his upbringing do not seem to have had as big an effect on the pattern of his early maturity as one might expect, for many of his experiences between the point when he left Rybinsk for St Petersburg and his emigration from Russia to England in 1901 resembled those of other contemporary political activists. He developed his skills as a metalworker, he read widely, he took part in discussion circles and the distribution of propaganda, and in due course he fell into the hands of

<sup>70</sup> D. I. Antoniuk et al. (eds), *Perepiska V. I. Lenina i rukovodimyykh im uchrezhdenii RSDRP s partiinymi organizatsiiami 1905–1907gg.: Sbornik dokumentov v piati tomakh*, Moscow, 1979–91 (hereafter, Antoniuk, *Perepiska V. I. Lenina*), 1/1, pp. 108–09, 161–62, 203–05; 2/2, p. 253; 3/1, pp. 56, 101, 296–97; 4/1, pp. 57–58; and RGASPI, f. 351, op. 1, ed. khr. 22, l. 3 (an unpublished autobiographical note of 29 March 1905 from the same correspondence).

<sup>71</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/1010/145334.

<sup>72</sup> *Ward's Directory of Newcastle-on-Tyne, 1907–08*, 2nd pagination, p. 781, 1915–16, 2nd pagination, p. 36 (and many other comparable references).

<sup>73</sup> RGASPI, f. 495, op. 198, d. 812, l. 2, and op. 65a, d. 12746, l. 10b.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 70, op. 3, ed. khr. 857, ll. 37, 47, 68ob.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 124, op. 1, d. 2011, l. 14.

<sup>76</sup> *Informatsionnyi listok Vsesoiuznogo obshchestva Starykh Bol'shevikov*, 1935, 1(9), p. 71; *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 1st edn., 65 vols, Moscow, 1926–47, 57, col. 675.

<sup>77</sup> Khenkin, *Okhotnik*, p. 85.

the police (in June 1894). After eight months under interrogation in the 'House of Preliminary Detention' on Shpalernaia in St Petersburg, he was despatched to the provinces to await sentence. There (in a village some five kilometres from Andreevskoe), he received notification early in 1896 that he had been exiled for three years to the province of Archangel. He served his time in the north and then spent most of the years 1899 to 1901 in Saratov before being expelled from the Russian Empire on the grounds that he was still a citizen of Sachsen-Altenburg. These stages are not unlike those in the life of (for example) the young Lenin, who arrived in St Petersburg at the end of August 1893, was arrested at the end of 1895, suffered three years' internal exile between 1897 and 1900 and then went abroad. Fischer was perhaps a little unusual in being formally expelled from the empire rather than leaving voluntarily, but Ludwig Martens, another early Russian socialist with German parents, had also been expelled on the grounds of foreign citizenship in 1899.<sup>78</sup>

These unexceptional outward events are belied, however, by some of the evocations of Fischer in the memoirs of his contemporaries. Vladimir Fomin, a metalworker at the Baltic Shipbuilding and Engineering Works, said that Fischer employed irony so effectively as a tool of argument that even those who disagreed with him saw the absurdity of what they were saying and joined him in laughter.<sup>79</sup> Ivan Iakovlev, a protégé of Fomin, recalled the liveliness of the workers' circle that Fischer established on the Petersburg Side in 1892, drew attention to the links that it forged with a circle of women servants led by Vera Karelina, and applauded the refusal of its members (Fischer in the vanguard) to accept unjust treatment from the management of the Iakovlev Kerosine Engine Works where the men were working. Like Fomin, Iakovlev commented on Fischer's style, noting his preference for canvassing other workers individually rather than at the communal

<sup>78</sup> Fischer's earliest and plainest account of his political career between leaving Rybinsk and leaving Russia is the autobiographical note he sent to Lenin in March 1905: RGASPI, f. 351, op. 1, d. 22, l. 3. His published accounts are in *V Rossii*, pp. 6–53, and *Podpol'e*, pp. 14–140. His St Petersburg years are covered in Zelnik, 'Russian Bebels', pp. 417–47. On the evidence he gave to the police in 1894, see below. On his circumstances and friends in Archangel see S. Ia. Kosukhkin and V. V. Malinovskii, 'Arkhangel'skaia sotsial-demokraticeskaja sylvka kontsa XIX–nachala XX vv.', in G. G. Frumenkov (ed.), *Iz istorii politicheskoi sylvki na evropeiskii sever (XVIII–nachalo XX vv.)*, Vologda, 1978, pp. 53–105, and M. N. Suprun and S. Ia. Kosukhkin, *Politicheskaja sylvka na Evropeiskom Severe v kontse XIX–nachale XXv.: Kratkii biobibliograficheskii slovar'*, 1: 1895–1905gg., Vologda, 1989 (hereafter, Suprun and Kosukhkin, *Politicheskaja sylvka*). He seems to have been in Tiflis in June 1899 (GARF, f. 102, Osobyi otdel, 1900g., op. 228, d. 1029, l. 1). The Governor of Saratov issued his passport on 12 September 1901 (ibid., l. 2). On Martens's expulsion from Russia in 1899 see RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, d. 1210, ll. 6, 8. Anna Geifman says that at the end of the nineteenth century expelling malcontents from the empire was a tsarist policy: *Entangled in Terror: The Azef Affair and the Russian Revolution*, Wilmington, DE, 2000, p. 48.

<sup>79</sup> Korol'chuk, *V nachale puti*, pp. 213–14.

breakfast.<sup>80</sup> Konstantin Norinskii claimed that Fischer's outward respectability lengthened the period when he could convene gatherings without exciting suspicion. He also believed that, in reaching out to women, Fischer and his associates were ahead of other such circles. Above all, Norinskii said, 'Fischer was one of the first in Petersburg to take the initiative of teaching in circles from his own resources ('svoimi silami'). At that time this was only beginning. Usually the teaching was entrusted to the intelligentsia'.<sup>81</sup> Aleksandr Petrov, who knew Fischer in Archangel in 1898, reported his establishment there of another workers' circle and thought of him as a 'man of steel' whom others perceived as 'very severe'.<sup>82</sup> Semen Kanatchikov recalled that, in Saratov in 1901, Fischer reproached him for spending nearly a month in the company of intellectuals before getting round to asking for his help in finding factory work: 'Could those light-minded triflers have mixed you up that much?'<sup>83</sup>

These recollections tend to support Reginald Zelnik's view that in the 1890s Fischer thought in terms of a revolutionary movement led by workers rather than the intelligentsia.<sup>84</sup> Although he studied the first nine chapters of the first volume of Marx's *Das Kapital* with V. V. Starkov and N. F. Daniel'son's account of the post-1861 Russian countryside with Lenin,<sup>85</sup> he did so in one-to-one study sessions, not in seminars. The only time he attended somebody else's educational group encounter in Russia seems to have been at the very beginning of his political career when he went for a short while to Petr Kaizo's circle on Vasil'evskii Island in St Petersburg to hear an intellectual expound Engels's *Origins of the Family*.<sup>86</sup> Otherwise, he appears to have insisted on retaining and developing his intellectual independence. In an autobiographical note of 1905 he wrote of his Saratov period: 'We were all held to be "worker-thinkers", because our organization insisted all the time on equality with the intellectuals' organization.'<sup>87</sup>

A determination to go his own way may even explain Fischer's curious behaviour under police questioning in 1894. His closest associates, Ivan Keizer and Konstantin Norinskii, denied everything.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Iakovlev, 'Vospominaniia', pp. 99–101.

<sup>81</sup> Norinskii, *Pod nadzorom politsii*, pp. 25–28.

<sup>82</sup> A. K. Petrov, *Rabochii bol'shevik v podpol'e*, Moscow, 1969, pp. 59, 64–67, 72–73.

<sup>83</sup> Zelnik, *A Radical Worker*, p. 198.

<sup>84</sup> Zelnik, 'Russian Bebels', pp. 417–47, passim.

<sup>85</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 19–21; *Podpol'e*, pp. 52–53, 56.

<sup>86</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 12; *Podpol'e*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>87</sup> RGASPI, f. 351, op. 1, d. 22, l. 3.

<sup>88</sup> GARF, f. 102, 7<sup>oc</sup> deloproizvodstvo, 1894, op. 191, d. 86, ch. 3, ll. 197–98; f. 102, 5<sup>oc</sup> deloproizvodstvo, 1896, op. 132, d. 36, ch. 1, l. 36. The future Socialist Revolutionary leader Viktor Chernov was equally unforthcoming. See V. M. Chernov, *Pered burei: Vospominaniia*, New York, 1953, pp. 80–86.

So, initially, did Fischer.<sup>89</sup> One set of government officials rather despairingly asked another what physical evidence there was to prove the guilt of the accused.<sup>90</sup> Luckily, from the point of view of the authorities, the balance sheet of a mutual-aid fund for politically active workers came into their possession just as the interrogation of Fischer and others was beginning to look fruitless. Having deduced that it was in Fischer's handwriting, they confronted him with it, whereupon he suddenly expressed 'a wish to explain with complete frankness everything that relates to my dealings with people from the People's Will party'.<sup>91</sup> It looks as if his nerve had failed him (perhaps as a result of torture). It is just possible, however, that he was trying to extract some advantage from the new development. Although he had certainly had dealings with the three populist members of the intelligentsia whom he proceeded to incriminate, he was not in sympathy with their opinions. On the contrary, he rejected their belief in immediate and violent action and was on the proto-socialist rather than the populist side of the ideological fence. It is highly probable that he had just been reading and circulating the manuscript of part of Lenin's anti-populist tract, *What Are the 'Friends of the People'?*.<sup>92</sup> When, therefore, he admitted that the accounts of the mutual-aid fund were in his handwriting but claimed that this was the case only because Mikhail Sushchinskii (a leading populist) had asked him to copy them out, it is possible that he was trying to damage fellow political activists with whom he disagreed. The attempt, if it was an attempt, was unsuccessful, for the police continued to question him until he not only admitted that the accounts were his own work but also divulged information about his socialist colleagues as well as the populists.<sup>93</sup> It may indicate, however, that Fischer felt he was sufficiently different from the people around him not to have to observe their principle of caution in all dealings with authority. Having had an unusual upbringing, he remained unusual in early maturity.

He was unusual in various further ways in the twenty years he spent in north-east England. Russian political émigrés had been coming to England since at least the 1820s,<sup>94</sup> but most of them were nobles or

<sup>89</sup> GARF, f. 102, 70e deloproizvodstvo, 1894, op. 191, d. 86, ch. 2, ll. 282–83.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., ch. 3, l. 38.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., ch. 3, ll. 191–96 (quotation from l. 191).

<sup>92</sup> *Podpol'e*, p. 56; GARF, f. 102, 70e deloproizvodstvo, 1894, op. 191, d. 86, ch. 4, l. 169, where Fischer is said in an official memorandum to have given Login Zhelabin 'a manuscript exercise book with a critical exposition of an article by Mikhailovskii about Marx'; and Korol'chuk, *V nachale puti*, p. 99, n. 2, where the editor argues for the identification of the 'critical exposition' with *What Are the 'Friends of the People'?*.

<sup>93</sup> For Fischer's later evidence see GARF, f. 102, 70e deloproizvodstvo, 1894, op. 191, d. 86, ch. 4, ll. 182–86, 409.

<sup>94</sup> Martin A. Miller, *The Russian Revolutionary Émigrés 1825–1870*, Baltimore, MD, 1986, esp. p. 37 (Nikolai Turgenev).



intellectuals rather than metalworkers and most of them lived in southern parts of the country rather than on the banks of the River Tyne. Although Fischer was not the only member of the Russian working classes to come to England in the years prior to the revolutions of 1917<sup>95</sup> — nor, indeed, the only one to live on Tyneside<sup>96</sup> — in social and geographical respects he differed from most of his fellow exiles. He also differed from most of the workers among them in the extent of his political activism. Nikolai Alekseev, Lenin's agent in early-twentieth-century London, said of the predominantly working-class Russians in his circle that they had 'very little leisure for systematic undertakings. Workers' circles show great enthusiasm at the start, but then it cools. Their composition changes all the time: some go to America, others simply fall away'.<sup>97</sup> Fischer did not fall away. Although his job in England sometimes placed heavy demands on him,<sup>98</sup> it never stopped him from pursuing his political concerns.

He explained his arrival on Tyneside very simply. When, in August 1901, the police informed him that he would be marched in irons ('vyslan etapom') to the German frontier if he did not leave the Russian Empire voluntarily within a month, he was determined not to go to Germany because he faced military recruitment there (or even imprisonment for not having turned up at the draft already). His friend Aleksandr Khozetskii, a metalworker from Kozel'sk and Moscow whom he had met in exile in Archangel, had been to Newcastle upon Tyne already and 'had connections with English socialists'. Moving to the principal city of north-east England was 'a big advantage because it enabled us to escape the merciless exploitation of the small Jewish workshops in London'. Thus he and the wife whom he had married in Saratov travelled to Warsaw, waited for Khozetskii to join them from Novorossiisk, and proceeded via Berlin, Hamburg and Grimsby to Newcastle, where Khozetskii's friends helped them find accommodation and work.<sup>99</sup>

Some further considerations may have played their part in the move. Reading the Webbs on British trade unionism when he was in

<sup>95</sup> Some others appear in Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900–21: The Origins of British Communism*, London, 1969, pp. 77–83, and John Slatter (ed.), *From the Other Shore: Russian Political Emigrants in Britain, 1880–1917*, London, 1984.

<sup>96</sup> For Ernest Kozlovskii, see below.

<sup>97</sup> A. Mil'shtein (ed.), 'K istorii zagranichnykh organizatsii RSDRP(b) (1905 g.)', *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, 1931, 6 (113), pp. 114–53 (p. 132).

<sup>98</sup> Antoniuk, *Perepiska V. I. Lenina*, 3/1, p. 101.

<sup>99</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 47–48, 52 (from which the quotations in this paragraph are taken); *Podpol'e*, pp. 139–40. Ludwig Martens had been obliged to do military service in Germany after his expulsion from the Russian Empire in 1899. Khozetskii went to England for the first time after his period of exile in Archangel came to an end in February 1900 (Suprun and Kosukhkin, *Politicheskaia ssylka*, p. 163); he had been a leading light in the 'Moscow Workers' Union' of the mid-1890s (V. F. Kut'ev, *Moskovskii 'Rabochii soiuз'*, Moscow, 1985, p. 118).

Archangel seems to have turned Fischer into an admirer of the English working class.<sup>100</sup> He may already have been learning the English language.<sup>101</sup> He was no doubt aware that, as his future associate the Latvian Iakov Kovalevskii was to put it, Britain was a country in which ‘political emigrants were defended by the government and in no way limited in their rights’.<sup>102</sup> If, as seems possible, his wife was Jewish,<sup>103</sup> it may have been particularly important to him to avoid ‘Jewish workshops in London’. Newcastle offered precisely the sort of heavy industrial environment to which he had become accustomed as a young man in St Petersburg.<sup>104</sup>

If, however, it is relatively easy to explain the Fischers’ arrival on Tyneside, explaining why they stayed is rather harder. When Iakov Kovalevskii was writing his autobiography for the Society of Old Bolsheviks in Moscow at the end of the 1920s, he took trouble to explain why he did not return to Russia until a year after the revolution of October 1917.<sup>105</sup> In view of the fact that the Fischers did not go back until May 1921, they may have had particularly strong reasons for staying in England. Friendship with Aleksandr Khozetskii was not among them, for he died of appendicitis in Newcastle at the end of 1902.<sup>106</sup> To judge by the unflattering picture that Fischer painted of the English working classes after he had experienced them at first hand, affection for his co-workers was not one of his reasons for staying either. He describes pining for home at the end of 1905 and discussing ways of getting back there in 1907.<sup>107</sup> Whether or not he had been studying English prior to his departure from Russia, he did not find mastering the language easy: ‘Getting to know an alien tongue,’ he wrote, ‘is not a pound of raisins.’<sup>108</sup>

Perhaps he stayed because it took him until 1914 to acquire the protection of naturalization as a British subject. Perhaps he was reluctant to disturb his children’s lives in the way his own life had been disturbed in childhood. Or perhaps he lived for twenty years on Tyneside because the region offered him the two things he appears to

<sup>100</sup> *V Rossiï*, p. 43; *Podpol'e*, pp. 176–77.

<sup>101</sup> Zelnik, *A Radical Worker*, p. 365.

<sup>102</sup> RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, d. 887, l. 10.

<sup>103</sup> She gave her name as ‘Jidova’ and ‘Gidova’ on the birth certificates of their children.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Oliver Lendrum, ‘An Integrated Elite: Newcastle’s Economic Development 1840–1914’, in Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster (eds), *Newcastle upon Tyne: A Modern History*, Chichester, 2001, pp. 27–46 (esp. pp. 39–42).

<sup>105</sup> RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, ed. khr. 887, l. 10.

<sup>106</sup> Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne & Wear Archives Service, T344/1/14, double-page opening no. 120, entry 36580, record of burial of ‘Alexander Khozetsky’ (*sic*), 28 years old, at St John’s Westgate / Elswick Cemetery on 22 December 1902; *V Rossiï*, p. 54; *Podpol'e*, p. 143.

<sup>107</sup> *V Rossiï*, pp. 89, 91; *Podpol'e*, pp. 153–54.

<sup>108</sup> *Podpol'e*, p. 180.

have been most enthusiastic about throughout his life: employment as a metalworker and opportunities for involvement in radical politics. This is not an argument which it is easy to base on a reading of his memoirs, for, as we shall see, they treat many aspects of life in England with asperity. But the tenor of the memoirs may be particularly misleading in respect of Fischer's English period because, at the time of their publication, he was unlikely to have been able to depict English workers in glowing colours. Both versions came out after the English working class had failed to rise in support of the Russian Revolution. Both, therefore, were likely to dwell on the reasons for England's lack of militancy. The case for the view that Fischer found a certain satisfaction in his life in England has to be based on reading between the lines of the memoirs rather than on their predominant flavour.

The most striking thing about his English years is that he stayed in one region. He had been peripatetic since his childhood. Why, in England, did he become sedentary? He did not even move much within his north-eastern locality. He changed his address relatively frequently, but only within the district of Benwell in Newcastle and, after the failure of his first application for naturalization in 1907, in the area of Whitley Bay and Cullercoats near the mouth of the Tyne (some ten miles away).<sup>109</sup> His relative immobility may indicate that north-east England appealed to him.

Part of the appeal surely lay in the job opportunities that the region offered. Fischer said of his time in Shenkursk in the province of Archangel that he felt compelled to move to the provincial capital because he did not like 'twiddling his thumbs' (*baklushnichan'e*).<sup>110</sup> His memory for wage-rates went back even to the work he had done in the holidays when he was a schoolboy in Rybinsk.<sup>111</sup> To these indications that being occupied and well paid was important to him may be added his poverty at the point he arrived in England and the fact that his wife was almost certainly pregnant.<sup>112</sup> When he found work more or less immediately on Tyneside, first as a navvy (hod-carrier, cement-mixer, scaffolder) and then, within three months, as a fitter at Armstrong's celebrated shipbuilding and ordnance works in Elswick, it seems reasonable to suppose that he was pleased. By Christmas 1901 his

<sup>109</sup> On the two occasions he applied for naturalization (November 1906 and March 1914), Fischer had to give his addresses for the previous five years (TNA: PRO, HO 144/1010/145334, *ibid.*, sub. 2 and sub. 8). On both occasions he listed places that were within a few hundred yards of each other. In 1915–16, 1917, and 1920, *Ward's Directory of Newcastle-on-Tyne* (2nd pagination, pp. 36, 35, 35) recorded him in the same road from which he submitted the second application (Lish Avenue, Whitley Bay).

<sup>110</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 35 (cf. *Podpol'e*, p. 105).

<sup>111</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 6; *Podpol'e*, p. 11.

<sup>112</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 53; *Podpol'e*, p. 142 (money). Fischer's wife was probably pregnant when they left Russia in September 1901 because their elder son was born in April 1902.

income was quite large.<sup>113</sup> In the middle of 1902 he paid off a debt of 25 rubles (about £2.50, more than a week's wages) to the family of N. M. Flerov in Poltava.<sup>114</sup> Whereas, in St Petersburg in the early 1890s, he had worked in at least seven factories (in one of them on two separate occasions), in north-east England the pattern of movement did not recur. Armstrong's appears to have been precisely the sort of large and vibrant industrial enterprise that Fischer liked. It was one of 'only four "heavy industrial" firms employing more than 10,000 people' in Edwardian England.<sup>115</sup> Fischer spent nearly thirteen years there and left only because anti-German sentiment militated against him at the beginning of the First World War. Although he says that after his dismissal he had to be removed from a second factory by the police and was left alone only after procuring a document from the Russian Consulate in Newcastle which stated that he had been born in Russia, had lived there until 1901, and had never been in Germany, he cannot have been out of work for long because he was at Swan Hunter's Neptune Engine Works at Walker (nearer the mouth of the Tyne) when hostility to Germans reached a peak after the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915. This time he managed to escape the sack because his new employers were building a ship for Murmansk and his workmates realized that he was getting on well with its Russian rather than German crew. Apart from a somewhat mysterious period of employment after October 1917 at a mine in Seaton Delaval (just to the north of Whitley Bay), he appears to have stayed at Swan's until his return to Russia in 1921.<sup>116</sup>

Employment, however, was probably not Fischer's main reason for finding his time in north-east England congenial. He also found that he could remain in touch with Russian politics and develop new interests in British politics. He went to London to see his fellow émigrés K. M.

<sup>113</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 53–54; *Podpol'e*, pp. 142–43, 180.

<sup>114</sup> M. S. Volin et al. (eds), *Perepiska V. I. Lenina i redaktsii gazety 'Iskra' s sotsial-demokraticeskimi organizatsiiami v Rossii 1900–1903gg.*, 3 vols, Moscow, 1969–70, 2, p. 20. On Flerov (a friend from Fischer's Archangel period) see *V Rossii*, pp. 32, 53; *Podpol'e*, pp. 96, 142; and Suprun and Kosukhkin, *Politicheskaya sylka*, p. 160.

<sup>115</sup> Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', *English Historical Review*, 99, 1984, 391, pp. 297–331 (p. 301). See also Kenneth Warren, *Armstrongs of Elswick: Growth in Engineering and Armaments to the Merger with Vickers*, Basingstoke and London, 1989.

<sup>116</sup> RGASPI, f. 495, op. 65a, d. 12746, l. 8ob (Fischer's employment history); *V Rossii*, pp. 93–94; *Podpol'e*, pp. 168–69. The records of the imperial consulate in Newcastle are not in the tsarist foreign policy archive in Moscow (despite the fact that it holds the records of six other imperial consulates in England). On the dismissal of Germans at Swan's after the sinking of the *Lusitania* see *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 10 May 1915, p. 9.

Takhtarev and N. A. Alekseev shortly after his arrival in Newcastle.<sup>117</sup> In the years before the revolution of 1905 he assisted in the despatch of *Iskra* to Russia and corresponded with Kanatchikov in Archangel on the Bolshevik-Menshevik split.<sup>118</sup> Although he did not attend the Second Congress of the RSDRP in London in 1903 and was unable to arrange for one of the congress delegates to return to Russia via Newcastle after the congress ended,<sup>119</sup> even in these early days he was doing a little for the Russian socialist movement. In 1905 he did more. In the immediate aftermath of Bloody Sunday in St Petersburg, he spoke for the first time in English at a protest meeting of Elswick shipyard workers.<sup>120</sup> Two months later, he established a Newcastle branch of the RSDRP and affiliated it to Lenin's 'Foreign Organization'.<sup>121</sup> In July, in Geneva, Lenin's newspaper duly recorded the establishment of the new branch.<sup>122</sup> At the end of August a 'meeting was held under the auspices of the Newcastle group of the Social Democratic Labour Party of Russia' at the Newcastle Socialist Institute. From the chair, Fischer 'referred to the Jewish massacres in Russia instigated by the Government, and said that when the Government was overthrown the workers in every country would be relieved. Until recently, the Russian Government was the greatest reactionary power in the world. Now, however, the Japanese had broken that power and the internal revolution in Russia would result in the disintegration of the Government altogether'. Nikolai Alekseev, who had come from London to address the meeting, said that 'after the massacres which had taken place in many towns during the present year [in Russia] it had become not the struggle of a few intellectuals against the Government, but the struggle of the masses of the people'. Although he denied that anyone in Russia 'thought it possible to introduce a Socialist regime as yet', he insisted that 'Everywhere in Russia there was a great strike movement of the working classes against the

<sup>117</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 55; *Podpol'e*, pp. 143–44. Richard Pipes asserted that the memoirs of K. M. Takhtarev (1871–1925) are one of the two key sources for the study of social democracy in late nineteenth-century St Petersburg: *Social Democracy*, p. 143. Alekseev (1873–1972) wrote partial memoirs of his 'London period'. See 'V. I. Lenin v Londone (Otryvki vospominanii)', *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, 1924, 3 (26), pp. 148–54. He mentioned Fischer and Newcastle on several occasions in his 'Pis'ma k V. I. Leninu i N. K. Krupskoi (Iz Londona, 1904–1905 gg)', *Staryi bol'shevik*, 1933, 1 (4), pp. 91–103. Fischer proposed him for membership of the Society of Old Bolsheviks in 1927: RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, d. 34, l. 22. He introduced the second version of Fischer's memoirs. (*Podpol'e*, pp. 3–5.)

<sup>118</sup> RGASPI, f. 351, op. 1, d. 22, l. 3; Zelnik, *A Radical Worker*, p. 365.

<sup>119</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 74; *Podpol'e*, p. 145.

<sup>120</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 71–72; *Podpol'e*, pp. 148–49; *Evening Chronicle* (Newcastle), 26 January 1905, p. 8.

<sup>121</sup> RGASPI f. 351, op. 1, ed. khr. 22, ll. 1–10, is Fischer's side of his correspondence with the Committee of the Foreign Organization, the second half of which (ll. 6–10) has been published in Antoniuk, *Perepiska V. I. Lenina*.

<sup>122</sup> *Proletarii*, 4/17 July 1905, p. 8.

capitalists' and that 'All sections were united in their determination to overthrow this abominable autocracy'. 'A collection on behalf of the revolutionary fund was taken.'<sup>123</sup> In view of the fact that the collection appears to have found its way to *Iskra*,<sup>124</sup> it looks as if Fischer was uncertain in the summer of 1905 whether he was a Bolshevik or a Menshevik (for the Geneva newspaper which had reported the foundation of his organization was indubitably Bolshevik, but *Iskra* had been Menshevik since 1903). Perhaps this is the reason why he played down the Newcastle branch of the RSDRP in his memoirs.<sup>125</sup> Otherwise, it is difficult to see why he did not highlight the fact that in all probability he had set up the one fully accredited affiliate of the RSDRP ever to be established in provincial England.

Even this, however, was not Fischer's most exciting contribution to the destabilization of the Russian Empire. That accolade belongs to his gun-running phase.<sup>126</sup> In 1906 he was marking time, waiting to complete five years in England so that he could apply for naturalization and return to Russia without fear of being expelled again. In November he duly submitted his application, but by then Alfred Nagel', a Latvian social democrat, had found his address in the newspaper of the Social Democratic Federation and asked for his help in the despatch of arms and ammunition from the north-east coast of England to Russia's ports on the Baltic. Dissident subjects of the tsar had been trying to infiltrate weapons into the Russian Empire from various parts of Western Europe since at least 1904.<sup>127</sup> The RSDRP held a conference on the question of armed struggle at Tampere in Finland in the month of Fischer's first application for naturalization.<sup>128</sup> Latvian social democrats, however, were probably more determined than most to pursue

<sup>123</sup> *Evening Chronicle* (Newcastle), 28 August 1905, p. 5; cf. *V Rossii*, p. 74, and *Podpol'e*, p. 152.

<sup>124</sup> *Iskra*, 24 September 1905, p. 8 (reporting the receipt of money from a body called the 'North Eastern Socialiste Fedaration Cateshead' [*sic*]).

<sup>125</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 72; *Podpol'e*, pp. 146–47 (where Fischer says his branch was indeed uncertain in its orientation).

<sup>126</sup> Except where otherwise stated, the following account of Fischer's gun-running is based on his own narratives (*V Rossii*, pp. 89–90, *Podpol'e*, pp. 153–58); TNA: PRO, HO 144/1010/145334, sub. 3 and sub. 5 (parts of his first application for naturalization); *ibid.*, FO 371/322, ff. 386–408 (police records of 1907 which the Home Office passed to the Foreign Office); and various unspecified contemporary reports in Sunderland, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Glasgow newspapers.

<sup>127</sup> S. G. Hobson, *Pilgrim to the Left*, London, 1938, pp. 126–29; Michael Futrell, *Northern Underground*, London, 1963, esp. p. 78 (for the view that the attempt of the *John Grafton* to convey weapons to Finland in September 1905 was 'The boldest and most nearly successful gun-running expedition in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement'); M. N. Liadov and S. M. Pozner, *Leonid Borisovich Krasin ('Nikitich'): Gody podpol'ia*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1928; and S. M. Pozner, *Pervaia boevaia organizatsiia bol'shevikov 1905–1907 gg.*, Moscow, 1934.

<sup>128</sup> For its minutes see E. Iaroslavskii (ed.), *Pervaia konferentsiia voennykh i boevykh organizatsii RSDRP: noiabr' 1906 god*, Moscow, 1932.

their objectives by force. The revolution of 1905–07 took even more savage forms in their homeland than it did in most other parts of the tsar's domains. They were anxious to defend themselves and they wanted revenge.<sup>129</sup> In Fischer, they found an ideal collaborator. Conveniently located, ever anxious to demonstrate his radicalism, probably not too troubled by the perennial disagreements among social democrats about the legitimacy of the use of force, he got help from his friends in the Social Democratic Federation, established stores of guns and ammunition in Newcastle and Sunderland and arranged for the goods to be delivered to the docks in small packages so that Latvian sailors who travelled to and fro between Newcastle and the Baltic could hide them in their ships and offload them at their destinations. All went well until April 1907, when the suspicious father of a Sunderland member of the circle informed the police that he had found some cartridges and a letter from Nagel'. The letter gave away the address of Fischer's house in Newcastle. Various British social democrats in Sunderland, Newcastle, Edinburgh, and Glasgow were arrested, tried, and fined for the illegal storage of explosive material. Nagel' escaped and Fischer escaped prosecution because no cartridges were found at his house, but the Latvians lost their stock (which was dumped at sea) and in the heat of the moment Fischer forgot to send off the postal order which would have completed his naturalization as a British subject. Although he remedied the omission quickly, by the time the Home Office received his money it had also received a damaging supplementary report on him from the police. His application was turned down and seven years were to elapse before he felt able to apply again.

The prosecutions of 1907 did not, however, put an end to Fischer's work for the Russian revolutionary cause. Indeed, he must have travelled to London to attend the Fifth Congress of the RSDRP as soon as the Newcastle gun-running trials were over.<sup>130</sup> Thereafter, he played host in Newcastle to many Balts and cooperated with the attempts of Latvian social democrats (in the person of a certain comrade Schmidt) to stamp out 'liquidationism' in Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Hartlepool and elsewhere. In short, 'I did not lose my links with the RSDRP and did all I could for the "condemned men" (*smertniki*) and other Russian

<sup>129</sup> On the revolution of 1905–07 in Latvia see, for example, Ia. P. Krastyn', 'Revoliutsiia 1905–1907 gg. v Latvii', in L. M. Ivanov et al. (eds), *Revoliutsiia 1905–1907 gg. v natsional'nykh raionakh Rossii*, Moscow, 1955, pp. 240–309, and Anna Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917*, Princeton, NJ, 1993, pp. 28–31.

<sup>130</sup> The last of the Newcastle trials took place on 9 May 1907; the congress opened four days later. Fischer attended as a 'guest' (*V Rossii*, p. 91; *Podpol'e*, p. 162).

party members who came to us with a party passport'.<sup>131</sup> During the First World War he enjoyed some success when proselytizing among the Russian crews of icebreakers which were being constructed on the Tyne for the Imperial government.<sup>132</sup> The Civil War offered him further opportunities of this kind, for steamships, semi-icebreakers and icebreakers continued to come to the Tyne from Russia for repair.<sup>133</sup> 'The last steamer-icebreakers loaded with military supplies for the interveners left the Tyne in December 1919.'<sup>134</sup> At that point, presumably, Fischer realized that Western intervention in Russia was over and that Bolshevism was going to survive. Perhaps he felt that the usefulness of north-east England as a vantage-point for the promotion of socialism in Russia had also come to an end and that therefore it was time to return home.<sup>135</sup>

In the sense that 1920 was the year of the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Fischer's 'British' political life may be said to have reached a turning-point at about the same time as his pursuit of change in Russia. The fact that he involved himself in British politics is superficially surprising. If he idealized English workers when he was in exile in Archangel, he did not do so after he got to know them. He felt sure, in this instance, that they needed help from socialist intellectuals; he was sarcastic about the difficulty of finding English people to help him when he was trying to arrange the return home through Newcastle of the Russian who had been at the Second Congress of the RSDRP; and he regretted the way in which the Northumberland miner Thomas Burt moved to the right in the course of his long career as an MP.<sup>136</sup> He spoke ill of virtually all the principal Labour politicians of his day (Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson, George Lansbury, Jimmy Larkin, Ramsay Macdonald, Philip Snowden, Tom Richardson); he was particularly hostile to the supposedly socialist thinker Robert Blatchford; he deplored the 'defencism' of people who claimed to be on the left but supported the British government in the First World War; and he excoriated the trade union leader Robert

<sup>131</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 93–94 (quotation from p. 94); *Podpol'e*, pp. 165–66. By *smertniki* Fischer meant Balts who had broken out of tsarist gaols and would have been executed if they had fallen into the hands of the Russian authorities. They included Ernest Kozlovskii, on whom see below (*Podpol'e*, pp. 174–75, 272–73; RGASPI, f. 124, op. 2, d. 303).

<sup>132</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 94–95; *Podpol'e*, pp. 170–73. These were the icebreakers which brought Evgenii Zamiatin to Newcastle (see Alan Myers, 'Evgenii Zamiatin in Newcastle', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 68, 1990, 1, pp. 91–99 [p. 92]).

<sup>133</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 101; *Podpol'e*, pp. 173–74.

<sup>134</sup> *Podpol'e*, p. 174.

<sup>135</sup> In view of the fact that his younger son's passport was issued on 21 July 1920 (Khenkin, *Okhotnik*, pp. 97–98), Fischer seems to have been contemplating taking his family back to Russia nearly a year before he actually set off.

<sup>136</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 43, 57–58, 74; *Podpol'e*, pp. 117, 145, 161–62, 207–08.



Williams for selling out the working class in the post-war strike wave.<sup>137</sup> He thought that, as a whole, English workers allowed themselves to remain at the mercy of ‘capitalist’ political parties. Even if the wages he made at Armstrong’s pleased him, he felt that good money could be energy-sapping: ‘England, as the first industrial country, was in a position to pay its hands more, relatively speaking, than other countries, which facilitated the development of false patriotism and self-satisfaction among the working class.’<sup>138</sup> He lamented the fact that some of the workers who were anxious to improve their lot wanted no more than to turn themselves into commercial travellers; he conceded that the courts’ attack on trade union funds in the Taff Vale decision of 1901 had made the labour movement more determined, but nevertheless believed that the movement continued to suffer from fragmentation, and a trade-union rather than a socialist consciousness; and although he admired the workers’ dedication to union objectives such as higher wages and a shorter working day, he felt that it would be a long time before their resolution would manifest itself in a full-scale confrontation with capitalism.<sup>139</sup>

Thus the general impression one gets from Fischer’s memoirs is that the working-class milieu in which he found himself in England depressed him. Yet he did not distance himself from British politics. He was more than a nominal member, for example, of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. Apart from obeying its calls to take strike action (on one occasion for eight months<sup>140</sup>), he served at various times as a branch committee member, branch chairman, ‘auditor’ of other branches and delegate at union congresses.<sup>141</sup> In the later version of his memoirs he recounted at length the violent overthrow of virtually the entire leadership of the ASE at the turn of 1912–13.<sup>142</sup> It is true that, broadly speaking, his memoirs express grave reservations about trade unions (they recall, for example, that his English friends wondered why he wanted to belong to one if he was opposed to them on principle);<sup>143</sup> but he may have been anxious, in the 1920s and 1930s, not to give the impression that he had ever leant in the direction of ‘economism’.

Nor was the ASE Fischer’s only British political outlet. We have seen already that he organized a meeting on behalf of Russian Jews in 1905

<sup>137</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 73, 100–01; *Podpol’e*, pp. 182–83, 208, 252–53, 256–58, 260, 268–69, 277–78.

<sup>138</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 59.

<sup>139</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 60–61, 64, 86–88; *Podpol’e*, pp. 179, 185.

<sup>140</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 99; *Podpol’e*, p. 232. On this strike see Richard Croucher, ‘The North East Engineers’ Strike of 1908’, *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, 9, 1975, pp. 43–56.

<sup>141</sup> RGASPI, f. 495, op. 65a, d. 12746, l. 8 (‘auditor’ in English in the original).

<sup>142</sup> *Podpol’e*, pp. 243–45.

<sup>143</sup> *V Rossii*, p. 66; *Podpol’e*, p. 184.

at the Newcastle Socialist Institute, recruited friends from the Newcastle branch of the Social Democratic Federation when he needed help in his gun-running activities of 1906–07, and spoke again at the Socialist Institute when the court cases to which his gun-running gave rise came to a head in May 1907. These bodies, the Socialist Institute and the SDF (and its successor bodies, the British Socialist Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain) were probably his main outlets in British politics.<sup>144</sup> The boundary between them is unclear. In 1905–06 Fischer appears to have run a branch of the SDF from his private address in Newcastle,<sup>145</sup> but in the second decade of the century the address of the Socialist Institute and of the SDF's successor, the British Socialist Party, were the same. Thus the Institute seems to have been an eclectic association of socialists which sometimes took the view that it could identify itself with a particular socialist party. In Fischer's eyes, it bore comparison with worker-run clubs he had valued in St Petersburg in the 1890s.<sup>146</sup> At first, he got into trouble at the Institute. He and Khozetskii had been trying to improve their English by reading the socialist writings of Robert Blatchford.<sup>147</sup> They found them deplorable, but succeeded in persuading other people at the Institute to forswear them only after nearly coming to blows on the matter. The effect of the quarrel was to oblige Fischer to give up all hope of political activism among English people 'for about a year and a half'.<sup>148</sup> But he had certainly returned to the Institute by 1905, and to judge by the fact that he speculated in the second version of his memoirs about whether it was still in existence,<sup>149</sup> he remembered it with affection.

Fischer records campaigning in the name of the Socialist Institute and/or the SDF and its successor bodies in the General Election of December 1905 (when Walter Hudson of the Railwaymen's Union stood in the Labour interest at Newcastle), in the Newcastle by-election of September 1908 (when Edward Hartley of the SDF split the left-wing vote and let in a Tory), and in local elections in the borough of South Shields (where a candidate representing the British Socialist

<sup>144</sup> For Fischer's party-political memberships see RGASPI, f. 495, op. 65a, d. 12746, l. 1, and f. 124, op. 1, ed. khr. 2011, l. 3; for the importance of the Institute to him one has to rely on his memoirs and the newspaper references from 1905 and 1907 above.

<sup>145</sup> See the list of affiliated bodies in every issue of the SDF's weekly publication *Justice* from 25 March 1905 to 28 July 1906 (where the Newcastle representative is said to be 'W. H. Fisher', but the Clara Street address is the same as that in Fischer's first application for naturalization).

<sup>146</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 10–11; *Podpol'e*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>147</sup> Fischer names *Britain for the British*, London, 1902. See *V Rossii*, p. 73; *Podpol'e*, pp. 182–83.

<sup>148</sup> *Podpol'e*, p. 194.

<sup>149</sup> *Podpol'e*, p. 262. (It was.)

Party gained election repeatedly for Tyne Dock).<sup>150</sup> Just as his memoirs expressed doubts about trade unions, so they decried the expense of parliamentary elections and held that both Tories and Liberals sold titles to raise money.<sup>151</sup> But just as he was nevertheless a committed member of the ASE, so he does not seem to have been averse to conventional electoral politics. Perhaps it was a belief in the value of elections which kept him in the camp of the SDF and its successor bodies. He criticized the SDF's founder and long-time leader H. M. Hyndman (though he spoke respectfully of his coadjutor Harry Quelch), and he took the 'internationalist' rather than the 'defencist' line as a member of the British Socialist Party during the First World War and consequently welcomed the defeat of the Hyndmanites and the foundation of *The Call* in 1916. He did not take the opportunity, however, which was available to him on the Tyne, of becoming a member of the ostensibly more radical (and certainly less electorally-inclined) Socialist Labour Party. In this he differed from Ernest Kozlovskii, the other worker from the Russian Empire who lived for years on Tyneside in the period immediately prior to the revolutions of 1917. Kozlovskii left the SDF in 1908 and joined the rival Socialist Labour Party because he welcomed its emphasis on the need to replace craft unions with 'industrial' unions and its relative lack of interest in electoral politics. It is a measure of the extent to which Fischer devoted time to thinking out where he stood on the British left that he clearly disagreed with Kozlovskii. He gave only lukewarm support to his unsuccessful application for membership of the Society of Old Bolsheviks in 1930, and he devoted several new pages of the 1935 version of his memoirs to explaining what was wrong with his fellow Tynesider's politics and with the SLP in general. These indicators give the clear impression that, in the last years of his life, he was still reflecting not only on what he had been able to contribute to Russian affairs when he was in England, but also on what British politics had meant to him at that time.<sup>152</sup>

Despite having found England politically stimulating, however, Fischer nonetheless clearly thought in 1921 that Soviet Russia was where he ought to be. To judge by most of the things that happened to

<sup>150</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 62–63; *Podpol'e*, pp. 201–03, 260, 262–65, 267–68. Articles on Hudson and Hartley appear in John Savile et al. (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (Basingstoke and London, 1972–), vols 2–3. The Newcastle by-election of 1908 is dealt with in Carol Ann Devlin, 'Congenial Ally or Threatening Rival: The Newcastle-upon-Tyne Labor movement, 1900–1914', unpublished PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1991, pp. 140–202.

<sup>151</sup> *V Rossii*, pp. 62–63; *Podpol'e*, pp. 187–88, 198–204.

<sup>152</sup> *Podpol'e*, pp. 208, 260, 268–69 (SDF); 270–72 (SLP). Ernest Kozlovskii's views are apparent in his unsuccessful bid to join the Society of Old Bolsheviks: RGASPI, f. 124, op. 2, d. 303 (a file which includes Fischer's lukewarm letter of recommendation at l. 6). His wife was put on trial in Newcastle in July 1918 for distributing pacifist literature in Wallsend: *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 26 July 1918, p. 3.

him in the Soviet part of his life, he was right. He went home at the time of the Third Congress of Comintern, effecting the transfer of his membership of the CPGB to that of the Russian Communist Party through the good offices of Tom Bell, the head of the British delegation to the congress.<sup>153</sup> After working as a craftsman for a few months, in February 1922 he moved to a white-collar job in the archives of the Comintern. The same month, he became one of the first members of the newly founded Society of Old Bolsheviks. By the end of 1922 he had published the first version of his memoirs and was serving on the executive bureau of the Society. His wife joined the Society in September 1922 and worked as the manager of its social club, a post which conferred entitlement to accommodation in the Kremlin (where the club was located). In 1924 he gave up his job at the Comintern to become manager of a paper mill in Sokol (a town to the north of Vologda); in 1928 he returned to Moscow as head of the mechanization or 'experimental construction' section of the Peat Institute; in 1931 he was granted a pension and retired.<sup>154</sup> In a small way, his literary career had continued. In 1926 a few pages from the first version of his memoirs received the honour of re-publication in *Staraia gvardiia*, a volume designed to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Lenin's Union of Struggle for the Liberation of the Working Class.<sup>155</sup> The Society of Old Bolsheviks invited him to contribute an article about Lenin to the first issue of its journal *Staryi bol'shevik* in 1930.<sup>156</sup> At his death on 22 March 1935 his public standing was high. The information bulletin of the Society of Old Bolsheviks contained a respectful obituary of him; the Society published the second version of his memoirs later in the year; and a brief article appeared about him in the *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* in 1936.<sup>157</sup> In view of the fact that in 1935 and 1936 Old

<sup>153</sup> Bell counter-signed Fischer's application: RGASPI, f. 495, op. 198, d. 812, l. 20b.

<sup>154</sup> RGASPI, f. 495, op. 65a, d. 12746, l. 2 (Fischer's jobs between May 1921 and February 1922); op. 198, d. 812, ll. 3-4 (his appointment to Comintern); f. 124, op. 3, d. 12, l. 1 (his membership of the Society of Old Bolsheviks); op. 3, d. 3, ll. 22, 59, and d. 12, l. 10 (his service on the bureau of the Society of Old Bolsheviks, 19 July 1922-23 October 1923); op. 3, d. 12, l. 24, and op. 1, d. 2012, l. 3-4 (his wife's membership of and work for the Society); d. 2011, l. 5, 62-64 (Sokol, the Peat Institute, and his pension).

<sup>155</sup> A. Fisher, 'Nabliudeniia i vospominaniia peterburgskogo rabochego', in B. Strumillo (ed.), *Staraia Gvardiia: K 30ti letiiu soiuzna bor'by za osvobodzhenie rabochego klassa 1895-1925gg.*: *Sbornik vospominanii i materialov o podpol'noi rabote russkikh marksistov 90-kh gg.*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1926, pp. 14-28 (reprinting *V Rossii*, pp. 11-28).

<sup>156</sup> RGASPI, f. 124, op. 3, d. 39, l. 19 (invitation, 25 December 1929); G. M. Fisher, 'Ob Il'iche', *Staryi bol'shevik*, 1930, 1, pp. 124-25 (reprinted in Korol'chuk, *V nachale puti*, pp. 362-65).

<sup>157</sup> *Informatsionnyi listok Vsesoiuznogo obshchestva Starykh Bol'shevikov*, 1935, 1(9), p. 71; *Podpol'e, Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 1st edn., 65 vols, Moscow, 1926-47, 57, col. 675.

Bolsheviks were falling into official disfavour,<sup>158</sup> Fischer seems to have been fortunate even in the time of his death.

Only a few things clouded his Soviet years. His elder son drowned in a swimming accident outside Moscow in 1921.<sup>159</sup> He was controversial in his period of service on the bureau of the Society of Old Bolsheviks because he committed more money than the Society could easily afford to the provision of accommodation for some of its members in a grand building at 54 Herzen Street (now the Brazilian Embassy).<sup>160</sup> It is hard to believe that there was no connection between his departure from the Comintern on 16 September 1924 and the arrest for spying, three days earlier, of his former gun-running partner Al'fred Nagel'.<sup>161</sup> Did he move to the relatively remote northern town of Sokol in order to diminish the possibility of a charge of guilt by association? Or was his new job, on the contrary, the reward for an act of denunciation? He may never have forgiven Nagel' for inadvertently divulging his address in Newcastle in 1907, a slip which indirectly prevented him from returning to Russia for fourteen years. Finally, Fischer's behaviour under police interrogation in 1894 returned to haunt him at the very end of his life. Some of his colleagues in the Society of Old Bolsheviks had worked out from the records of the tsarist police that he had incriminated fellow revolutionaries. A commission was appointed to investigate. The party historian Iaroslavskii adjudicated. Although Fischer was allowed to retain his membership of the Society on the grounds that he had revealed only part of what he knew, the affair can hardly have eased his passing.<sup>162</sup> In the 1970s the son of one of those who sat on the commission of investigation still found his behaviour in 1894 incomprehensible.<sup>163</sup>

In the main, however, Fischer had prospered in Soviet society. Indeed, he had been doubly successful, for he had continued to display his attachment to industrial forms of employment at the paper factory in Sokol and the Peat Institute in Moscow whilst at the same time becoming a writer. Thus he remained unusual even in this concluding phase of his career. The distinguishing features of his provincial childhood — Germanness, mobility, education, an early introduction to metalwork — had marked him out from his peers even in St Petersburg in the early 1890s. In Newcastle, he had demonstrated that

<sup>158</sup> See, for example, Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above 1928–1941*, New York and London, 1990, pp. 213–15, 306, 308–09.

<sup>159</sup> Tarasov, *Zharkoe leto*, p. 51.

<sup>160</sup> RGASPI, f. 124, op. 3, d. 3, ll. 92–94 (minutes of a general meeting of the Society of Old Bolsheviks held on 28 October 1923).

<sup>161</sup> RGASPI, f. 495, op. 65a, d. 12746, l. 4 (departure); David King, *Ordinary Citizens: The Victims of Stalin*, London, 2003, p. 26 (arrest).

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 124, op. 1, d. 2011, ll. 74–78.

<sup>163</sup> Norinskii, *Pod nadzorom*, p. 131.

it was not necessary for a politically engaged Russian émigré to live in France, Germany, or Switzerland, to take up residence in a capital city, to be geographically mobile, or to become an intellectual. In Soviet times he had come close to achieving something which August Bebel had barely attempted, becoming a writer without leaving the ranks of the working class. Thus at the end of his life, no less than at the beginning, he was an individual rather than a type.