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Nechaevshchina: An Unknown Chapter

On the afternoon of August 14, 1872, Sergei Nechaev, for nearly three years the object of an intensive police search in several countries, went to a café on the outskirts of Zurich. The author of the famous "Catechism of a Revolutionary" had already broken one of his personal rules by spending several consecutive nights under the same roof; in showing himself in public during daylight hours he violated another. Beyond that, Nechaev (along with other Russian and Polish émigrés) displayed a surprising naïveté and lack of caution: his host for the past few days, and one of his two companions on the outing, was Adolf Stępkowski. In March 1868 a "jury of honor" composed of Polish émigrés in Zurich had declared Stępkowski guilty of spying for the Russian government. Another "jury" convened in Paris a few months later overturned this "verdict"—but the events of August 14, 1872, were to prove the original Zurich judgment wholly accurate.[1]

While Nechaev and his two companions were sitting in the Café Müller, agents of the Zurich police entered and arrested the notorious Russian fugitive. Stępkowski and the other (unidentified) man made no attempt to intervene. Two other patrons of the café, Herman Greulich, leader of the local pro-General Council (that is, pro-Marx) Internationalists, and Theodore Remy, the secretary of Johann Philipp Becker (a leading figure in the Geneva International), also ignored Nechaev's cries for help.[2]

1. On the Zurich "trial" see *Kolokol* (Geneva), Apr. 1, 1868, p. 86. On the investigation conducted by Parisian émigrés (among them Jarosław Dąbrowski, future general of the Paris Commune) see "Wyrok sądu bratniego w Paryżu w sprawie Adolfa Stępkowskiego," in Staatsarchiv (Zurich), P 190 fasz. 1. The Poles in Paris argued that Stępkowski, though personally obnoxious, was no spy and indeed could not be one because of his perverse personality. In reality, he served both the Russian government and the Zurich police (who secured a Swiss passport for him in 1870). Ibid., P 190b, Fremdenpolizei, "Flüchtlinge aus Polen, Einvernehmen 1865–1871" (questionnaire on Józef Horodynski), and Bundesarchiv (Bern), Geschäfts-Controlle und Register des schweizerischen Justiz- und Polizeidepartements, 1870, Jan. 3, 15, 1870.

2. The only eyewitness account is Greulich's. See his *Die Tagwacht* (Zurich), Aug. 17, 1872, and his recollections in *Das grüne Hüsli* (Zurich, 1942), pp. 64–65. See also International Institute for Social History (IISH), Smirnov, afz. stk. IV, Valerian Smirnov to A. S. Buturlin, Aug. 14, 1872. Though he supported Marx and the General Council, Greulich was a Fourierist.

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In Switzerland, as elsewhere, one did not casually interfere with the police. And Greulich and Remy later claimed that they did not know Nechaev. But the presence of these two men in the Café Müller that August afternoon inspired ugly stories. The arrest of Nechaev came shortly after the savage beating (apparently by friends of Nechaev) of Nikolai Utin, leader of the pro-Marx Russian section of the International in Geneva. The rumors of Marxist complicity in the Nechaev arrest, however, were probably false; it would seem that someone planted them in an attempt to cover the tracks of the real Judas, Stępkowski.[3]

The sequel of this story is reasonably well known. Displaying a human —if decidedly unrevolutionary—inability to shed his identity completely, Nechaev had long been using his actual initials (Sergei Gennadievich) for his *nom de guerre* "Stepan Grazdanov" (the spelling varied), and in Swiss custody he continued to employ that name, claiming to be a Serb. He produced a passport to substantiate his story. Few people in Switzerland, however, had any doubts about his true identity. The new Russian ambassador, Mikhail Gorchakov (son of the foreign minister), overjoyed at this unexpected—though fervently desired—coup so early in his assignment, brought great pressure on both cantonal and federal authorities to grant extradition. Gorchakov found a sympathetic reception in the office of the Zurich chief of police, J. J. Pfenninger, who, like Stępkowski, expected and apparently received a substantial reward from the Russian government for the capture of Nechaev.[4]

Some members of the cantonal council agreed with the contention of the Slav students and émigrés that Nechaev, who on October 9 admitted his identity and asked for asylum, was a political refugee. This argument did not prevail. Pfenninger and Gorchakov carried the day with their insistence that Nechaev was a common murderer, or rather that he was accused only of the crime of murder. The Zurich council voted to extradite, and on October 27,

3. On February 5, 1873, the *Journal de Genève* reprinted a charge in *Die Zürcher-Presse* that Greulich had accepted a 2,000-franc "denier de Judas" from the Russians, but this story had no foundation, and indeed Greulich had earlier quarreled with *Die Zürcher-Presse* over another matter. See *Die Tagwacht*, June 15, 1872, and also IISH, Smirnov, map 59, Smirnov to Buturlin, Mar. 4 [1873].

4. See Gorchakov's October 6, 1872, letter to the Swiss president (Welti) in Staatsarchiv, Fremdenpolizei, "Auslieferung des Sergius Netschajeff," no. 63. For Pfenninger's position see *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, no. 560, Nov. 3, 1872. Stępkowski told the Third Section prior to the arrest of Nechaev that he believed Pfenninger would cooperate if promised a reward. See Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Oktiabrskoi revoliutsii (TsGAOR), fond III otd., 3 eksp., ed. khr. no. 80/1872, "Ob obrazovavshemsia v Tsiurikhe revoliutsionnom Slavianskom sotsial'no-demokraticheskom obshchestve," nos. 89–90, Third Section note of July 4 (16), 1872, and nos. 143–44, Nov. 6, 1872 (Oct. 25, 1872, in Russia) report of Bern agent or agents to Third Section.

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1872, cantonal police conducted the heavily bound prisoner to the German frontier and handed him over to a waiting Russian police detachment.[5]

Switzerland had no extradition treaty with Russia at that time (one came a year later, as a direct result of the Nechaev affair), and therefore each case was decided on its merits by cantonal authorities. In this instance Zurich insisted as a condition of extradition that the Russian government try Nechaev only for murder and that, if convicted, he suffer only the penalty prescribed in Russian law—deprivation of civil rights and confinement at hard labor. How much comfort Nechaev derived from these pious cautions can be imagined.[6]

Only now, a century later, does an interesting by-product of Nechaev's arrest come to light. Since that arrest, a four-page manuscript entitled "Fundamental Theses" ("Osnovnyia polozheniia") has reposed in the Zurich archives, in a dossier that many scholars have consulted.[7] Written in Nechaev's unmistakable (and difficult to decipher) hand, this document, his last political tract, had an uncertain provenance. Apparently, however, he intended it as a bridge between his tiny Zurich cell (himself, Valerian Smirnov, Vladimir Golshtein, Alexander Elsnits, and a few Serbs) and the local Polish Social Democratic Association. In May 1872, that Association, in the recent organization of which Adolf Stępkowski had—astonishingly—participated, approved a program and statutes.[8] According to a tsarist police agent

5. On the extradition see R. M. Kantor, *V pogone za Nechaevym* (Leningrad, 1925), pp. 128–35; *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, nos. 555, 556, 558–61, Oct. 31–Nov. 3, 1872; Great Britain, Foreign Office, 65 (Russia), 836, Loftus in St. Petersburg to Foreign Office, Nov. 11, 1872 (N.S.); IISH, Smirnov, afz. stk. IV, Smirnov to Buturlin, Oct. 27, 1872; *Die Tagwacht*, Nov. 2, 1872 (quoting a German opponent of capital punishment to the effect that a *Kulturstaat* should never extradite anyone to a *Barbarenstaat*); *Le Nord* (the Brussels newspaper subsidized by the Russian government), Nov. 1, 7, 10, 12, 19, 1872. See in general on Nechaev in Switzerland Leonhard Haas, "Njetschajew und die schweizer Behörden," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, 17 (1967): 309–63.

6. See Bundesarchiv, Protokoll des schw. Justiz- und Polizeidepartements, dr. "Netchaieff, Serge." See also *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, nos. 59, 63, 65, 94, Feb. 2–21, 1873. A copy of the 1873 Russo-Swiss extradition treaty is in Great Britain, Foreign Office, 100 (Switzerland), no. 67, Nov. 30, 1873.

7. The "Osnovnyia polozheniia" is in Staatsarchiv, "Auslieferung des Sergius Netschajeff," nos. 56–5, 56–6. For assistance in deciphering the manuscript the author wishes to thank Professors Stephen Lukashevich, Andrew MacAndrew, and Walter Sablinsky; full responsibility, of course, rests with the author. Among the scholars who have consulted the Nechaev dossier in Zurich are Haas, "Njetschajew und die schweizer Behörden"; J. M. Meijer, *Knowledge and Revolution* (Assen, 1955); Arthur Lehning, ed., *Michel Bakounine et ses relations avec Sergej Nečaev, 1870–1872: Écrits et matériaux*, vol. 4 of *Archives Bakounine* (Leiden, 1971).

8. The documents of the Towarzystwo Polskie Socialno-Rewolucyjne w Zurychu are in Staatsarchiv, "Auslieferung des Sergius Netschajeff," no. 56-11. Stępkowski sent copies to the Third Section; see Maria Wawrykowa, "Polacy a sprawa Nieczajewa," *Przegląd Historyczny*, 55, no. 4 (1964): 666. Boris Nikolaevsky, citing no proof, claimed that

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(very likely Stępkowski himself), the Communard Kasper M. Turski drew up these documents.[9] Like many of the young Slavs then in Zurich, Turski—later an associate of Peter Tkachev and through him of Blanqui—had succumbed to the influence of Bakunin. The program that he (or someone else in the Association) wrote reflected that influence.

The program commenced with some bombast that was the common property of the European radical left, speaking of the "political and economic despotism of the privileged minority over the working masses." Then came the unadulterated Bakuninism. A "free union of workers' associations" figured prominently in the program's vision of the future society, a society that a "general uprising" in the form of a "social revolution" would bring into existence. Land in that society would be the property of "agricultural communes," and factories and the means of production would belong to "worker associations." The program rejected Polish nationalism but hinted strongly at a kind of revolutionary Pan-Slavism: "We cordially greet and enter into close and solidary union with the rest of our brothers of the great Slavic fraternity who, also being under the yoke of governments we all hate . . . , have the absolute right to independence and national development." An "internationalist" paragraph greeted and offered unspecified aid to "other nations aspiring to freedom." The program concluded with exhortations: "Long live the social revolution! Long live the free commune! Long live free and social-democratic Poland!"

We can assume that Stępkowski gave Nechaev a copy (the one that the police found among Nechaev's effects) of this program. Having left his mistress in Paris,[10] Nechaev came to Zurich early in the autumn of 1871. He stayed underground, but he could not resist the temptation to infiltrate the Polish Social Democratic Association. This weakness soon proved fatal. He eventually found himself under the roof of Stępkowski—a man who, along with scores of Russian, German, and Swiss police agents, had long sought him. Nechaev himself was no Social Democrat, but he would have recognized at once that the program of the Association had, apart from a couple of slogans, nothing in common with social democracy. The program was (as Nechaev had briefly been) thoroughly Bakuninist.

Nechaev and Turski shared an apartment in Zurich: "Pamiati poslednego 'iakobintsa'-semidesiatnika (Gaspar-Mikhail Turskii)," *Katorga i ssylka,* 1926, no. 2 (23), p. 216.

9. TsGAOR, "Ob obrazovavshemsia v Tsiurikhe . . . obshchestve," nos. 22–25, Zurich agent (probably Stępkowski) report of May 10, 1872; nos. 26–27 (the documents).

10. The mistress was a Frenchwoman named Albertine Hottin, who was apparently the only love of Nechaev's life (Vera Zasulich having rebuffed his advances). Mlle Hottin's letters to Nechaev, and drafts of his to her (he wrote them in his notebook, practicing his French), are in Staatsarchiv, "Auslieferung des Sergius Netschajeff," nos. 56, 56-25, 56-42, 56-49.

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Nechaev sought to offer the Zurich Poles a profounder, more sweeping revolutionary program, and to draw them into his existing Russian-Serbian organization. That such was his intention we gather from the similarity of some of his phraseology to that found in the Association's program, from the fact that he discussed many of the same problems, from his use of the Polish *gmina* for "commune," and from the circumstantial evidence of Stępkowski's reports to the Third Section.

The "Fundamental Theses" and other works Nechaev wrote during his last couple of years of freedom (for example, the program of the London *Obshchina*[11]) indicate that although he had not wholly divested himself of Bakunin's influence, he had become an elitist revolutionary whose thinking now derived essentially from Blanquism. He wanted to organize a small, tightly knit, revolutionary party to carry out a social revolution and establish a socialist (like everyone else in this period he wrote "social-democratic") republic. Though continuing to recognize the role of the masses in the revolution as indispensable, Nechaev reiterated his belief that an elite party had to play a leading, directing, and tutorial role.

To bring about the revolution, the party would propagandize the masses and revolutionize them, in part through acts of violence against the state and its agents. These acts were certain to generate reprisals, which in turn would still further alienate the masses from the state. This cumulative violence, Nechaev argued, would shatter the myth of the state's invincibility. The revolution would be violent; the revolutionary new society would consolidate its victory through still more violence directed against enemies internal and external. Nechaev maintained that the new society could only arise on the graves of those who had controlled the old. The existing order maintained itself by violence; only violence would overthrow it.

In Nechaev's view, reason, parliaments, and good intentions could not overturn despotisms. The history of revolutions in the West—he did not mention unsuccessful Russian *jacqueries*—demonstrated, however, that violence alone produces no solutions, no utopias. Therefore, "competent and experienced men" from the "honest fraction of the intellectual minority" (i.e., the revolutionary elite) must direct the revolution. This elite would ensure that the goals of the "insurgent people," once realized, did not collapse, for it would destroy the enemies of the revolution.

Nechaev anticipated objections. Who would control the revolutionary elite? What were the limitations on the elite's powers? In the *Obshchina* pro-

11. Only one issue of this periodical, the full title of which was *Obshchina (La Commune. Die Commune)*, appeared in September 1870. The Paris newspaper *Le Monde* published the program from the French-language supplement on July 14, 1871. Arthur Lehning has reproduced the Russian version in *Archives Bakounine*, vol. 4, pp. 435–42.

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gram and in the "Fundamental Theses" the answer was straightforward and emanated directly from Blanquist teachings: the elite controlled itself, made its own rules, recognized only such limitations as it chose to impose on itself. The elite party would not hold elections, after the victory, until it had secured the goals of the revolution, and it alone would determine when that time came. When elections became feasible, only those citizens who had supported the revolution would be able to vote and to stand as candidates. Candidates would be required to pledge allegiance to the republic; accept state regulation of labor; approve nationalization of land, factories, and means of production; and affirm state responsibility for the rearing and educating of children. The revolutionary new society would take the form—here was an element of purest Bakuninism—of a "federated union of communes."

Another dash of Bakunin's thinking (and further indication of Nechaev's appeal to the Zurich Poles) came in the closing exhortations. Nechaev urged the Slavs to take concerted revolutionary action and spoke of their "great historical mission" and of their "union." Like Bakunin and the Poles, he often spoke of "social democracy" and claimed to stand squarely in that camp; but even the hint—let alone the open proclamation—of revolutionary Pan-Slavism alienated and outraged the mass of European Social Democrats as much as rampant and oppressive capitalism did.

The "Fundamental Theses," and his other last works, show Nechaev as an interesting but unoriginal and unsystematic thinker. Elements of old-fashioned Jacobinism and anarchism nipped at the heels of the Blanquism that was now dominant in his revolutionary view; the confusion this created leaves open to doubt the question whether Nechaev really formulated anything that we can accurately call a "theory." Indeed, his views and opinions added up to an unstable amalgam we might describe as democratic despotism. Like his successor (and fellow Blanquist) on the extreme left of the Russian revolutionary movement, Peter Tkachev, Nechaev agreed with the bard that everything resolves itself in power. Power in the hands of king, gentry, or middle class was tyranny. Power in the hands of a revolutionary elite acting on behalf of the downtrodden masses was freedom.

Now this of course was less theory than opinion, or perhaps crude world view, and its validity depended on one's view of history. Clearly, an enormous burden of proof rested on Nechaev's elite party. Seeking security as well as freedom, the masses would perforce surrender considerable freedom to that party. If the party took that freedom, but did not guarantee anything but the security of chains . . . But Nechaev ruled out any possibility that the revolution would take this course. Revolutionaries might fail; the revolution would not.

At this point Stępkowski and Pfenninger collected their thirty pieces of

https://doi.org/10.2307/2495409 Published online by Cambridge University Press

silver. The ruthless, rootless Nechaev, a maniacal type who had on several occasions proved himself an unscrupulous swindler, became a martyr. Many revolutionary émigrés who detested him and his works pleaded with the Zurich and Bern authorities not to extradite him. It seems certain that if these people, rather than the police, had found the "Fundamental Theses," that document would have become, for reasons not necessarily connected with its intrinsic value, an important piece of Russian revolutionary literature. We reproduce it below.

FUNDAMENTAL THESES

Sergei Nechaev

1. We, ———, convinced that, in the present circumstances in our country, an explosion of the discontented masses is near and inevitable, are forming a society for the formation of a party with the goal of changing the present order politically and economically, that is, for the founding of a s[ocial] democratic rep[ublic] to replace the despotism and exploitation that reign today.

2. Political developments in the history of the West[ern] nations offer us many sad examples of revol[utionary] movements that have remained without pos[itive] results; and all the torrents of the people's blood spilled thus far by and large have not led to the desired goals because the insurgent people did not have in their midst competent and experienced men whose interests coincided with theirs, and because most of the uprisings caught the honest fraction of the intellectual minority by surprise. On this basis we are entering upon the organization of a new party that, under favorable circumstances, would not only stimulate and direct a popular uprising but would also be able to consolidate successfully the results obtained by the revolution.

3. Having in view the life-and-death struggle with the huge, undisciplined machinery of despotism, we, although we have as a definite goal a system of a federated union of *gminas* of our country, nevertheless consider the concentration of the strength of the masses necessary, and, in time of revolution, the only thing that will save us;—and therefore, raising again our rev[olutionary] banner from which the blood of our fallen brothers has not yet been rubbed off, we leave on it the motto: [blank in the original], until the gains achieved by the revolution are fully secured both against the threat of internal reaction and against the intrigues of external enemies.

4. When there strikes the long wi[shed for] hour of nat[ional] lib[eration], when the revolutionary banner is triumphantly unfurled in our country, the founding members of the society consider themselves unquestionably bound to offer all necessary guarantees against both the intrigues of private individuals and against the retrograde aspirations of various local groupings. All attempts of the reaction to turn back to the old order must be paralyzed and the population must be directed by all possible means along the path of revolution.

5. On the strength of this, one of the main tasks of the rev[olutionary] party will be the organization of revolutionary propaganda in the first period of the revolution and the complete elimination of all influence of the supporters of the overthrown order in the *election of the representatives of the nation.*

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6. The revol[utionary] party must lay all the foundations for the new social system and only then, when a return to the old is definitely impossible, will this party organize elections—with complete freedom of revolutionary propaganda allowed—of the repre[sentatives] *of the nation* for the form[ation] of the constitutional gov[ernment] of the country.

7. Convinced by the experience of the last century what a powerful weapon the reaction fashioned for itself out of the universal electoral law, the party, on the basis of revol[utionary] govern[mental] unity, real and incontrovertible, rejects as candidates for the constitu[tional] assembly those who are against the following soc[ial] principles: (*a*) a republ[ican] form of government must be accepted without discussion because, under any other form of government, freedom of discussion itself is impossible; (*b*) after the fin[al] victory of the soc[ial] revol[ution] over its internal and external enemies, a function of state activity will be the organiz[ation] and regularization of labor. The state will decide the question of productive and unproductive labor; (*c*) the land must belong to those who work it, that is, to millions of people, to the whole people, and not to private owners, and therefore is the prop[erty] of the state, which will distribute it among the *gminas*; (*d*) factories, together with the tools of production, must belong to the urban lab[oring] population, that is, they also constitute a part of the nat[ional] property, and therefore will be distributed by the state among the lab[or] associations; (*e*) the obliga[tion] of rear[ing] and educa[ting] children devolves upon the state.

8. We accept these propositions as the basis of our program; deeply convinced of their justice and commonweal, we summon democrats of other Slavic peoples to a union with us.

9. Acknowledging all the importance of the Slavic race in the fut[ure] history of the continent, we are convinced that, solving the soc[ial] problem in a country that is under the yoke of a terrifying despotism, we shall thereby contribute to the solving of the social problem of Europe as a whole.

10. If we take the initiative in the cause of the rev[olutionary] Slavic race . . . [*sic*], the definitive organization of the soc[ial] democr[atic] republic can naturally be the only result of the uprising of all the fraternal peoples united in a mighty Sl[avic] union.

May the day soon come when the gr[eat] Slavic race, illumined by the sun of freedom, equal[ity] and solidar[ity], will take its rightful place among the peoples of Europe and will fulfill its great histor[ical] mission.

Long live the soc[ial]-democr[atic] insur[rectionary] rep[ublic]!

Long live the union of soc[ial]-dem[ocratic] Slavic states!

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