

Russian and Indian Revolutionaries Abroad

Exile, Internationalism and Terrorism in Paris, 1907–1912

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February 7, 2017

While there is no shortage of scholarly studies coming out and events happening to mark the centenary of the Russian Revolution of 1917, there has been an overwhelming focus on Vladimir Lenin and the victory of the Bolsheviks. The return of Lenin from Switzerland through Sweden in a sealed railway car, too, has often assumed almost mythical status (see, for instance, the republication of Alfred Rosmer's *Lenin's Moscow* (2016), Catherine Merridale's *Lenin on the Train* (2016) and Tariq Ali's *The Dilemmas of Lenin* (2017)). What such lines of historicism tend to mask is the diversity of Russian revolutionaries in exile across Europe in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century.

Before his return in April 1917, Lenin, of course, spent a decade in exile in Britain, France, Italy and Switzerland, where he engaged in these exilic Russian revolutionary networks comprised of Social Democrats, Marxists, Bundists, anarchists, Socialist Revolutionaries and various veterans of the *Narodnaya Volya* ('People's Will') group, who had assassinated Tsar Alexander II in March 1881, as well as revolutionaries from across Europe and the colonial world.

A recent trip to the Archives Nationales in Paris allowed a closer look at the files on the Russians (F/7/12894 – 'Revolutionnaires Russes'), while the Okhrana Files held at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, too, open a window onto their activities in Paris. In France, the *Sûreté Nationale* estimated that, out of 25,000 Russians in Paris, 1,500 were terrorists, of which 550 were anarchists and the rest were Socialist Revolutionaries, mostly Maximalists.

Despite political differences, the Russians in exile in Paris lived in close proximity of each other. Taking a geographical approach reveals clusters in the 14th arrondissement, just southeast of the Cimetière du Montparnasse, and in the 5th arrondissement, most of them within a 30 minutes walking distance of each other.

The Russians also engaged in wider international networks, especially with the Indian nationalists in Paris. The Socialist Revolutionary Ilya Rubanovich, a *Narodnaya Volya* veteran, edited the paper *La Tribune Russe* and, with Charles Rappoport, often associated with French socialists such as Jean Jaurès and Jules Guesde. Alongside Jaurès, Rubanovich attended the International Socialist Conference in Stuttgart in August 1907, where he met the Indian nationalists S. R. Rana and Bhikaiji 'Madame' Cama.

Inspired by Rubanovich's paper, Cama later made sure that her own paper the *Bande Mataram* was printed in Geneva to avoid prosecution for publishing sedition – 'the Russians are getting

everything printed in Switzerland’, wrote Cama – and Rubanovich even contributed a piece to the *Bande Mataram* (February 1911). Through Rubanovich, Cama also became friends with the Russian Social Democrat Mikhail Pavlovich and, through him, the writer Maxim Gorky. In their correspondence from September 1912, Cama reveals her great admiration for Gorky’s writing.

Reflecting on his Paris years, the Indian nationalist-cum-Bolshevik Virendranath Chattopadhyaya later noted that, ‘Bhikaji Cama used to tell us about Lenin and the Russian social-democrats and of their attitude towards the question of war and the right of self-determination of nations. But none of us understood at that time the enormous significance of the split in the Social-Democratic Party and the role of Lenin. We moved in the circles around *L’Humanite* (Jaurès, Longuet, etc.). It appears to me now very strange that Comrades Mikhail Pavlovich and Charles Rappoport with whom we often met never said a word to us about Lenin’.

However, it was another Russian revolutionary, Nicolas Safranski, who had a more profound impact on the Indians. Having arrived in Paris in early 1907, Safranski belonged to the Maximalist faction of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, which advocated terrorism and expropriation (for instance, bank robberies to finance revolutionary activities), and he was involved in a failed bomb plot in the spring of 1907. In November that year, the Indian nationalists P. M. Bapat and Hemchandra Kanungo Das approached Safranski with a request to learn bomb-making, and Safranski supplied them with a bomb manual, which was subsequently cyclostyled and smuggled to London and India, where it was used in several attacks throughout 1908 and 1909. The full extent of Safranski’s involvement with the Indians in Paris is still unknown, but he seems to have abandoned these alliances and instead assisted Vladimir Burtsev in his hunt for double agents among the Russians.

The Russian Maximalists, according to Richard Parry, also influenced the French anarchist circles, where the so-called Bonnot Gang adopted the programme of expropriation and carried out a number of bank robberies in 1911–12. Informants within the Indian revolutionary movement alleged that Virendranath Chattopadhyaya associated with the Bonnot Gang as well as other French anarchists, but there is no further evidence to support this claim.

It is clear that, as we return to mark the Russian Revolution a hundred years on, we are only beginning to understand the revolutionary infrastructures and networks in place in Europe in the early twentieth century. These networks, of course, included Indian anti-colonial nationalists in exile as well. I write more about the Russian revolutionaries and Indian nationalists in Paris in my forthcoming book *The Indian Revolutionary Movement in Europe, 1905–1918* (Liverpool University Press).

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