CHAPTER 1

From the Old Belief to Socialism

In 1935, accused of political crimes, Alexander Shlyapnikov sat in a remote prison in the Urals, separated from his wife and three young children in Moscow. His thoughts returned to childhood, when he and his siblings grew up in hardship, without a father. He began to write a memoir of childhood, as did some other victims of Stalin. Already a practised writer, he had composed lengthy historical memoirs of the revolutionary movement for a broad audience, but he wrote his prison memoir for his son Yuri to read, in a style accessible to an intelligent, well-educated nine-year-old boy and with age-appropriate content. His handwritten manuscript was preserved in secret police files and only released to the family after the collapse of the USSR. Because of the intended audience, it differs from worker-Bolsheviks’ published recollections. Although he surely meant to transfer his memories to his children by means of this document, it also reflected his revised understanding of the environment that shaped him into a revolutionary, making it somewhat of a departure from the standard worker autobiographies published in the 1920s and a valuable source for this chapter. In simple language, Shlyapnikov unfolded an interpretation of his upbringing as profoundly shaped by religious dissent. Detailing escapades, fears and dreams, he offered his son a model for masculinity and moral lessons emphasising education, sobriety and loyalty to family and friends. The source also reflects the changes Russia was undergoing in the 1890s, as large-scale industrialisation unfolded, facilitated by the policies of Finance Minister Sergei Witte; Russian commerce grew and its economy attracted capital for investment in industry. The rapid growth of a modern-industrial workforce encouraged Russian socialists to propagandise Marxist ideas among workers. The memoir culminated in a pivotal moment, Shlyapnikov’s first visit to Sormovo, a centre of advanced metalworking industry in Russia, in 1896, when he was 11 years old. His decision to become a metalworker exposed him to revolutionary socialism, which only intensified when he participated in the 1905 Revolution and suffered from subsequent harsh repressions. These experiences transformed his life’s direction.1

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1 Shliapnikov 1935; Bukharin 1998 and 2007; Kanatchikov 1986; Gambarov et al. (eds.) 1989; Wcislo 2011.
Early Childhood in Murom

Located on the Oka River, about three hundred kilometres east of Moscow, Shlyapnikov's birthplace of Murom was accessible by train from Moscow and St. Petersburg and by steamship from the trading centre of Nizhny Novgorod. An ancient city, with a rich heritage derived both from its original Finnic inhabitants and the Slavs who assimilated them around 1000 CE, the town's past was steeped in both legend and history. Not only was it renowned as the origin of the fabled Russian warrior, Ilya Muromets, but records attest that Tsar Ivan the Terrible built a cathedral in the town to celebrate his victory over the Kazan Tatars. In the late nineteenth century, Murom belonged to Russia's central industrial region; local industries included metalworking, textiles and a match factory. Its population of over fifteen thousand comprised gentry, clergy, townsmen and peasants, which were the four hereditary social estates into which Russia had been divided before the Great Reforms of the 1860s–70s. Boundaries between social estates became more fluid in the late nineteenth century, as Russia modernised, but along with emerging categories of class, they still limited an individual's social trajectory. The population was mostly Russian, with few national minorities, so local people had little opportunity to envision Russia as a multi-ethnic empire, unless they travelled to large cities or to the periphery. Well-educated elites and Russians in borderland areas were more aware of the empire's diversity.

Childhood in a small town set Shlyapnikov apart from Bolshevik workers such as Yezhov and Tomsky, who grew up in St. Petersburg or its environs, and Kanatchikov, who spent his early years in the countryside and first saw a factory when he went to work at one in Moscow at the age of 16.

Since Russia was overwhelmingly peasant, townsmen like Shlyapnikov were a minority in the country as a whole, but in many ways, his childhood was typical. He was of Russian nationality, attended three years of primary school and went to work early. High intelligence and intense ambition distinguished him from many other poor boys. Factory Street, where he grew up, was a neighbourhood of mostly poor people, many of whom worked at local factories (hence the street name), but even so, his family and others lived in their own houses (not apartments), with kitchen gardens and fruit trees, which meant he was

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3 Clowes et al. (eds.) 1991.
4 Tolz 2011; Sunderland and Norris (eds.) 2012.
5 Wynn 2012, pp. 120–1; Kanatchikov 1986, pp. 7–8.