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THE SOVIET SWINDLING TWENTIES: CORRUPTION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION*

"The evidence of vice and virtue is not confined to famous accomplishments. Often some trivial event, a word, a joke, will serve better than great campaigns as a revelation of character."

Plutarch

"What can be said of the Communist Party today," complained the author of a Komsomol propaganda pamphlet in 1929, "when it attracts . . . tens of thousands who have obtained a party card because of their personal, mercenary aims?"1 Echoing these complaints, the Communist Party fraction leaders of the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles of the Soviet Union (1921-1935), an organization of former revolutionaries of the pre-1917 era, candidly reflected on the issue of corruption as a social malaise of the period: "It is very interesting how sometimes the honorable mark of the Society of Former Political Prisoners is debased by a variety of scoundrels accidentally finding themselves in the court bench of a political trial in the past, and how these corrupt people manage to blindfold many organizations at present."2 But who were these "mercenaries" and "scoundrels?" How had they secured access to status, benefits, and privilege in revolutionary society? Most important still, how had they managed to thrive under the apparently zealous vigilance of military commissars, local party bosses, or the secret police?

Despite the much-heralded availability of archival sources in post-Soviet Rus-

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* I wish to thank Richard Stites, David Goldfrank, Harley Balzer, Rex Wade and Katya Vladimirov for their support, comments, and suggestions concerning my work on the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles; and to the American Council for Teachers of Russian (ACTR) for the financial support that made my research possible. I would also like to express my gratitude to the archivists at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in Moscow, to Dmitrii Vasilievich Chernyshiov, Director of the Glagol’ Publishing House in St. Petersburg; and to Mikhail Vital’evich Shkarovskii, archivist at the Central State Archive of St. Petersburg (TsGASP), for their invaluable information and help.

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sia, the issue of corruption in the Russian Revolution and its social and political implications has not received considerable attention. Scholars studying the social dynamics of the early Soviet period mention the existence of networks between the Communist administration and groups outside the political realm, and the influence of such networks in the creation of the social fabric of Civil War and NEP society. They also point out the emergence of an elite and its accompanying cultural system of privileges during the period. But they generally disregard the connection between these developments and a popular concept of revolutionary social mobility, in which the demarcation line between “having” and “having it all” was blurred. For the most, the personal motivations of those for whom the revolution was a profitable venture are explained as a “survival” technique given the dire conditions, a vestige of tsarist bureaucratic despotism, or a favorite playground for historians who loathe revolutionaries in general and Bolsheviks in particular.
