

# Bertrand Russell and the Volkhovsky letters, 1920–26<sup>1</sup>

by John Slatter

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THE BERTRAND RUSSELL Archives contain much material reflecting Russell's interest in Russia and things Russian. Of Russell's published output,<sup>2</sup> his best-known book on the subject is *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920). When Russell was writing this book in the summer of 1920, he met a thirty-nine-year-old Anglo-Russian woman, Vera Volkhovsky. Their correspondence, of which twenty-two letters survive in the Russell Archives,<sup>3</sup> is interesting for the several lights it throws on Russell: it gives us an expert opinion of Russell's writings on Russia free of blatant pro- or anti-Soviet bias; it provides what Russell called an "extraordinarily good" estimate of his knowledge of the country after his 1920 visit as a member of the Labour Party delegation; and finally it shows us Russell in the unfamiliar role of the spurner of woman's love.

<sup>1</sup> This research was completed with the help of a grant from the University of Durham.

<sup>2</sup> See Antony Flew, "Russell's Judgment on Bolshevism", in G. W. Roberts, ed., *Bertrand Russell Memorial Volume* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), pp. 428–55. However, Flew's article is not based on material in the Russell Archives.

<sup>3</sup> The details of the extant letters are as follows. The first column is the letter number, and the third shows the number of pages (or sides) on which the letter is written. "(R)" letters contain a reference to the previous letter from Russell.

Vera Volkhovsky (1881–1966) was the second of the three daughters of Feliks Vadimovich Volkhovskoi (1846–1914), a Russian revolutionary who was exiled to Siberia. He escaped from there in 1899 via Japan and Vancouver, arriving in London in 1890. There he joined a large Russian emigrant colony which included Peter Kropotkin and Sergius Stepniak. He simplified his name to Volkhovsky. Vera mentions this group of Russians in her correspondence with Russell:

... a very wonderful set of people those old revolutionists of my father's generation—unpractical judged by modern commercialised standards, some of them writing villain "literature"—but such very real idealists, always going right through from belief to action—men of tremendous courage and yet so fine in the grain.... [T]hey were all St.

1	10 August 1920	4
2	25	10
3	22 October	6(R)
4	1 November	10
5	12	18
6	18	20
7	12 December	12
8	16	12
9	18	14
10	24	8
11	30	6
12	1–2 January 1921	12
13	15	4
14	15 February	10
15	27	12
16	2 March	14
17	15	6
18	17	6(R)
19	"Easter Saturday"	8(R)
20	7 December 1925	3
21	23 January 1926	4
22	7 December	13

Letter 20 includes a note dictated by Russell: "This letter is from a woman I saw something of for a brief time. The letter sounds as if I had an affair with her. But I had not."

Georges. (Letter 17, sheet 2)

They were quite different from the contemporary revolutionary generation, more tolerant for example: "My Father was an Atheist but was much too fairminded to do anything but leave me free to any beliefs" (letter 18, sheet 3). His achievements for Anglo-Russian relations included the editing of the English-language anti-Tsarist magazine, *Free Russia*, from the death of Stepniak (its founder) in 1895, until Volkhovsky's own death; and convincing Constance Garnett to learn Russian in order to translate the great Russian classics into English.<sup>4</sup> Vera noted in one of her letters that "Constance Garnett and Brailsford<sup>5</sup> both said to me that they can never repay what they owe to my Father" (letter 17, sheet 2). F. V. Volkhovsky, who was widowed and lost his youngest daughter during his Siberian exile, was naturally most anxious for his younger surviving daughter to join him. In 1890, he learnt that the father of the child prodigy Max Hamburg (famous in adult life as the concert pianist Mark Hambourg) was returning to Russia to bring out his remaining five children. Mr. Hamburg was prevailed upon by Volkhovsky to bring back Vera disguised as the boy Max and occupying the sixth place on Mr. Hamburg's passport.<sup>6</sup>

Vera had been born in Siberia, where her father was in exile, her mother was a suicide, her younger sister died at age three, and her father was deaf from solitary confinement and prematurely grey from the rigours of prison and banishment. Yet she was "so original and affectionate, and she has had so much tragedy in her short life, which she speaks of now and then as if horrors were a natural part of existence to her", according to the British family with whom she at first stayed. This description also recounted a

<sup>4</sup> For a short account of F. V. Volkhovsky's career, see Donald Senese, "S. M. Kravchinskii and the National Front against Autocracy", *Slavic Review*, 34 (1975): 507. For the connection with Constance Garnett, see Carolyn Heilbrun, *The Garnett Family* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Noel Brailsford (1873–1958) was a distinguished radical and anti-war journalist (*The Manchester Guardian*, *The Nation*, *The New Leader*). In the 1920s, he became a supporter of the Soviet system of government: see his books *The Russian Workers' Republic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1921) and *How The Soviets Work* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1927).

<sup>6</sup> Mark Hambourg, *From Piano to Forte* (London: Cassell and Co., 1931), p. 28.

recurrent nightmare of Vera's in which her father's severed head appeared to her.<sup>7</sup>

Vera was educated in England, and went to Somerville College, Oxford, between 1901 and 1903. She went on to train as a teacher in dancing.<sup>8</sup> She aspired to a literary career,<sup>9</sup> but never became well known and instead made a living on the borderline of medicine and education. The information from her letters to Russell shows that she worked in the Women's Land Army during the First World War (letter 1, sheet 1 verso). We also know her to have been involved in Russian émigré politics during the war years: she was the representative of the Social-Revolutionary Party (of which her father had been a member) on the Committee of Delegates of Russian Socialist Groups in London. This Committee was formed in 1916 by the Social Democrat Georgii Chicherin in order to fight the British Government's plan to conscript or deport Russians then in Britain.<sup>10</sup>

After the war, she became a teacher (letter 12, sheet 1) and met Russell in July 1920, shortly after his return from Russia (letter 7, sheet 5 verso). This fact, and the unsettled emotional state Russell was in before his visit to China with Dora Black, led him to see in Vera a woman worthy of his attention: he reassured her that their mutual misery was not the only cause of their mutual attraction (letter 9, sheet 5). Vera, by her own admission a woman of great emotional capacity, fell deeply in love with Russell. Russell left for China in mid-August of 1920 with Dora Black. Vera then sent letter after unanswered letter to Russell in China. Eventually Russell replied (in January or February 1921). The correspondence between them came to an emotional peak in mid-March. A

<sup>7</sup> George Kennan, *Siberia and the Exile System* (London: J. R. Osgood, McIvaine, 1891), p. 344.

<sup>8</sup> According to personal communication from the Principal of Somerville College, Oxford, to the present author, Vera left the college through illness before her final examinations.

<sup>9</sup> In 1931, she published a translation of the tales of the nineteenth-century satirist Saltykov-Shchedrin, her only work in the *British Library Catalogue*.

<sup>10</sup> Special Branch report in Public Record Office file H045 10820/318095/198. For a brief account of the Committee's work, see Richard Kent Debo, "The Making of a Bolshevik: Georgii Chicherin in England, 1914–1918", *Slavic Review*, 25 (1966): 651–62.

few days later, Russell fell gravely ill and a Japanese news agency spread the rumour around the world that he had died. Vera then had a nervous crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Her life now once again diverges considerably from that of Russell. Another man she had known previously, Montague Fordham, began to ply his suit very insistently. They married on the condition, imposed by Vera, that she might leave him at any time. The marriage was unhappy, and they separated before long. In 1923 Vera finally got permission to go to Russia, and stayed there a year, in what she always regarded as her spiritual home. She adopted whilst there two Russian Civil War orphans, a boy and a girl—"They let me have them because I was my father's daughter!"—and then returned. About a year later, after seeing Russell by chance, she wrote to him again, the correspondence ending (letter 22) on an amicable note with the letter containing the above information about her life between 1921 and 1925. There is little information about Vera's subsequent life. She dropped out of the Russian émigré circles which she had formerly been proud to frequent,<sup>12</sup> and died in 1966.

The correspondence between Vera and Russell was probably sparked off by her knowledge of his writing on Bolshevism, the volume *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* coming out in November 1920. She first wrote to Russell in August 1920, just before his departure to China. When Russell fell ill in China, Miss Volkhovsky was at her nineteenth extant letter. At the end of 1925, she wrote to Russell again asking him not to snub her if they should meet in public. Two more letters were sent.

The correspondence as it survives is not complete. In letter 1, sheet 2, Vera refers to the fact that she "didn't stamp the last one enough". We do not have Russell's replies: three of these were almost certainly destroyed after Vera's death. The first, written en route to China, arrived before 22 October 1920. From internal

<sup>11</sup> Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), pp. 488–9, which tells us that Russell's longer-standing love, Lady Constance Malleon, reacted similarly to the "news".

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, numerous letters dated in the 1930s addressed to David Soskice by emigrants in the Soskice's papers (House of Lords Record Office, Stow Hill Papers, SH/DS/Box 22).

evidence, Vera received Russell's second reply enclosing photographs of himself and Dora Black in China, between 15 January and 15 February 1921. The third, containing a more explicit rejection of Vera's love, arrived between 15 and 17 March 1921. Vera wrote of this letter that she "destroyed it—not in spite, but because I too was ashamed of it for you. As for me, though it crumpled me up at the time, it was a good thing in the end" (letter 22, sheet 7). Vera then wired him, probably to say that she was coming out to China to join them. Russell cabled back putting her off and mentioning his and Dora's happiness together (letter 19, sheet 1 and verso). This reply arrived some time between the 17th and the 22nd March 1921. Vera replied to it with a more reproving letter than her preceding ones (letter 19, postmarked 21 March 1921).

As well as the biographical and emotional content of these letters, there are political overtones which centre on Russia and Bolshevism. The revolutions of 1917 had polarized Russian émigré communities, none more than the London one. For example, David Vladimirovich Soskice,<sup>13</sup> who had been Kerensky's political secretary, and Nikolai Vasil'evich Chaikovskii,<sup>14</sup> who was placed at the head of the Anglo-American puppet regime in the Archangel region in 1918, were both committed anti-Bolsheviks, whereas Kropotkin, though equally ideologically remote from Bolshevism, returned to Russia in 1917 and remained there until his death in 1921. On the other hand, waves of new Russian emigrants were coming to Britain, refugees from the collapse of the White regimes precariously planted on Russian soil by the allied powers in their Civil War intervention. These refugees tended to be of a pro-Tsarist political complexion, unlike

<sup>13</sup> D. V. Soskis (1867–1943) arrived in Britain in the 1890s. Having passed through Marxist and Populist phases, and practised both in Britain and in Russia as a lawyer, he returned to Russia in 1917 and was appointed political secretary to Kerensky, then head of the Russian Provisional Government. See Barry Hollingsworth, "David Soskice in Russia in 1917", *European Studies Review*, 6 (1976): 73–97.

<sup>14</sup> N. V. Chaikovskii (1850–1926) was since the 1860s a part of the Russian revolutionary movement. He stayed in Britain from 1880 to 1908. After 1910, he moved rightwards and, after his presidency of Archangel, returned to Britain, where he died.

those of the pre-revolutionary emigration.

Although Vera was politically on the left, her beliefs did not preclude friendships on both sides of the barricades. Letter 1 opens with her return "from a week in a Russian family ... whom I've been setting up in a household, they knowing no English" (sheet 1)—clearly a reference to a family of the new emigration—while a few months later she is extending the same help to the Soviet plenipotentiary, Leonid Krasin, and his family, and translating pamphlets for the Soviet Delegation (letter 12, sheet 3 verso and sheet 5). Indeed, Vera considered herself to be an interpreter between Britain and Russia on a national level, too, "able to see Russia and England from the inside and the outside, both, and the same with Bolshevism" (letter 4, sheet 1 verso). This was a position for which her upbringing had uniquely equipped her, a girl brought up entirely bilingual yet within a politically aware, consciously Russian background of family and friends. As she later put it,

I am rather oddly placed between the Russian political camps and also feel a double responsibility. The English part of me obliges me to help the Bolshevik folk (Delegation people) because the laws of hospitality are outraged every minute and people are extraordinarily cruel and dishonest to them—and in my Russian capacity I am always rushing to save some émigré with whom I have equally little sympathy from disgracing the name of Russian in English eyes—Oh these Russians—very attractive, wholly uncontrolled, tremendously gifted and utterly impossible—bless their hearts! (Letter 12, sheet 3 and verso)

Yet a little later she could write,

[T]he English are aware of the spiritual bignesses. It's very odd. I feel Russians and English are nearer each other, for all their unlikeness just because of that—only the English keep it well in hand.... [T]hey well know its intensity may destroy them. Russians know it too but cast themselves in inevitably. (Letter 16, sheet 5 verso)

An implied preference for the Russian side is confirmed in a story about Stepniak, a great favourite, when he "once lifted me

up to the ceiling and said 'Do you know, Verotchka, why I love you so much? It's because you are so very Russian!'—and I nearly burst with pride" (letter 17, sheet 1 verso).<sup>15</sup>

It is because of this "inside knowledge" of things Russian and of Bolshevism, that Vera's contact with Russell, at a time in his life when we know he was particularly concerned with both, holds a special interest, and that her opinions of his early writings on Bolshevism carry considerable weight, even though she met him too late to have had much influence on *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*: "I wish I could have talked to you more before you wrote it", she responded to Russell's sending her the book (letter 4, sheet 1 verso).

However, we must not assume that carrying the disparate intellectual and emotional baggage inherited from her background was easy for Vera. Indeed, one's first impression on reading the intimate, highly emotional outpourings contained in these letters is that they exhibit a considerable psychological stress, composed of reacting in a "Russian" way to things British, and being articulately conscious of being stranded in a partially alien and therefore hostile milieu.

The first page of the first letter shows this clearly: Vera had returned to English everyday life from arranging a household for her Russian family, feeling that "the warm simplicity of them has put the jangling bits of me together for the time", whereas "You English don't play straight—You will twist your minds to believe something which is obviously not true just because it's convenient" (*ibid.*, verso). This attitude recurs, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout the letters. Therefore, although Vera's opinions carry some weight in the context of Russian affairs, we must bear in mind that they are the emotional opinions of a person under considerable mental strain who feels herself to belong to neither side. Her extraordinary childhood experiences inside Russia must also be taken into account.

This intertwining of intellect and not very balanced emotion is reflected in her agreement with Russell's views, where her assent

<sup>15</sup> Vera told this story over forty years later in a letter to the Soviet Stepniak expert, E. A. Taratuta, who quotes it in her *S. M. Stepniak-Kravchinskii: revolyutsioner i pisatel* (Moscow, 1973), p. 524.

on an intellectual level is inseparable from her feelings for the man. In letter 2 (sheet 1 verso), she has just received some writings of Russell's and immediately reacts: "Those are very beautiful things of yours about Russia you sent me, Bertie. Thank you for them—You have a marvellous power of using words. It makes me instantly rejoice." She admired not just Russell's way of expressing himself, but his "almost uncanny ... way ... of saying the very things one wants to have said. It's like hearing someone else speaking one's thoughts only more clearly and beautifully" (letter 3, sheet 3 verso). Perhaps a feeling may have contributed to this, that "the real Russia ... is ... extraordinarily near your spirit—or rather you near its" (letter 4, sheet 2): perhaps, "that sense of uncanniness—of magic—that I have had with you from the beginning" (letter 8, sheet 3): perhaps too she had "such a tremendous feeling that you love Truth as other people don't" (letter 19, sheet 4 verso)—that Russell lacked the hypocrisy often said to be common among Englishmen of his class and generation. She certainly condemns this in her fourth letter, contrasting Russians, in material subordination, with English people, independent

in *outward* things and in material things—but they positively like to abase their *spirits* before persons of rank or wealth. Never shall I forget the King's visit to my Training College, they were *abject* in their delight! But the Russian peasants worshipped the God in their Tsar. (*Ibid.*, sheets 2 verso and 3)

As the above will no doubt already have suggested, Vera's attitude to Bolshevism was as ambivalent as her attitude to so many other things Russian. In her second letter (sheet 5 verso), she admits that Bolshevism was "difficult to feel certainty about ... from the beginning". On the one hand, its methods exhibited "crudity": on the other, it seemed to be the only way to achieve "a minimum of decency in material conditions" (sheet 2 verso). A little later, she calls Bolshevism "inevitable for the moment" (letter 4, sheet 3 verso)—presumably for Russia only, since in Britain "Communism has rather taken a back seat ... lately" (letter 1, sheet 2 verso). Russell argued his unfitness, by virtue of his aristocratic upbringing, to express an opinion about Bolshevism: "You say ... you have not spent half your life in hunger

and want—but do these necessarily bring wisdom?”, Vera replied (letter 2, sheet 2). She claimed for herself, as we have seen, the ability to understand Bolshevism “from the inside and the outside both”, and voices the mild criticism that “... some things you ascribe to Bolshevism are simply Russia and some that you call Russia is [*sic*] the accident of War and Bolshevism” (letter 4, sheet 2). What is “Russian” for her? For one thing, not “the fatal acquiescence to despotic power—That is heritage from the Tartar domination” (*ibid.*). Oriental fatalism, then, is a graft on to the pure stock of Russianness. “[Y]ou should not think of Russia as *Asiatic*—It *isn't*. It's *Slav*—that's the spirit, essence and meaning of it.” This Slavic Russianness has several components. There is “Slav fatalism and instinct for self-sacrifice” (*ibid.*, sheet 2 verso) for one thing: yet, under the submission

to all sorts of oppression ... degradation as it seems to an English person ... their spirits will be free ... [and] never worship something low. And from this comes the Russian's firm belief in the essential equality of humans. (*Ibid.*)

Thus she recounts an anecdote of a Russian servant-girl, who would even wash her, the lady, in the sauna-bath, yet in spite of the outward difference in status between them, was capable of feeling for Vera, who had no surviving family, “extreme and tender pity for a small destitute human, and of the sense of our standing naked and unashamed very close together” (*ibid.*, sheet 3 verso).

Russianness is, then, a very positive value for Vera in all the ways just detailed; Bolshevism, however, is a different matter. For one thing, Bolshevik politicians now saw themselves as entitled to privileges and acts of repression, to which other politicians were not. This was a change from the pre-war period:

My father was an S.R. [Social Revolutionary], but in those days Bolsheviks were merely S.Ds. [Social Democrats] and we knew many of them very intimately and instead of shooting each other they had meals quietly together in London lodgings or Geneva restaurants and

attended long and fruitless Socialist congresses and were peacefully photographed afterwards. (*Ibid.*, sheet 1 verso)

Perhaps this is a rather naive picture of the political émigrés' life in Western Europe, which was also marked by bitter political disputes. But it does make the point clearly that many émigrés felt some revulsion for Bolshevik methods without necessarily supporting the restoration of Tsarism. It is from this very point of view, in fact, that Vera writes about Bolshevism. Bolshevism is certainly not Russian: “nothing Russian would be of use just now.... It's a monstrous war product of German dogmatism and Russian wholeness—a ghastly combination” (*ibid.*, sheet 3 verso). This statement requires some comment. “War product” is clearly a reference to the paradoxical idea that the October revolution would not have triumphed without the disintegration of Tsarism and the Russian state brought about by war and defeat, yet that same disintegration caused extraordinary men and measures to be necessary. “German dogmatism” may be a reference to Marxism, although this is not certain. The S.R. Party, with which Vera sympathizes, was a broad alliance: on the one hand, there were those within it who claimed to be the only true Marxists, in contrast to the Social Democrats; on the other, there were former Narodniks (the peasant-oriented, home-grown revolutionaries), who had joined the S.R. Party at its foundation, as Vera's father had, and who might well feel that the foreign origins and relative theoretical strictness of Bolshevism had earned it the insult of “German dogmatism”. “Russian wholeness” (the Russian for this term would be *tselostnost'* or integralness) is a term derived from the ideas of the Russian sociologist and influential Narodnik theorist, N. K. Mikhailovskii, who used it to describe the many-sided development of man under socialism, the unity of a personality overcoming social, occupational and other divisions by reunifying them all in himself; here, it may perhaps be paraphrased as the aspiration to embrace all phenomena in a single theory or outlook.

However, although Russell had apparently not grasped the intricacies of the point, Vera thought his views “very accurately ...

got the feel of Russia—more than anyone else I know of” (letter 4, sheet 2)—much more accurately, evidently, than H. G. Wells, who at this time had gathered his newspaper articles on Soviet Russia into a volume<sup>16</sup> which Vera described as “*shoddy* ... [h]is mind is like a draper’s sale” (letter 16, sheet 1), while R. Page Arnot,<sup>17</sup> who wrote an early unfavourable review of Russell’s book from a Communist position, was “impishly spiteful” (letter 10, sheet 2 verso). Russell’s book was badly received by the left: many socialists felt an obligatory fellowship with the Soviet experiment at this early stage, and Russell’s frankness about the repugnance which he felt for it was seen by many as siding with the forces of reaction, in spite of his impeccable record as a libertarian during World War I.

In view of the pronounced, if not always unambiguous, views Vera expounded in these letters in regard to the native country she had not seen since childhood, her reaction to the place when she visited it in 1923 is interesting. It was, of course, still a remote, unknown country—“like jumping off the edge of the world” (letter 22, sheet 4), as Vera put it. By this time, her life had taken a tragic turn and she felt there was little to keep her in Britain. Russia was a tremendous tonic: “[I]t gave me a new life—For one thing, the satisfaction of being among my own people was amazing—quite unexpected” (*ibid.*, sheet 4 verso) for Vera, but less so for the reader of her letters to Russell. “It was as if some want that I had felt painfully all my life was now satisfied” (*ibid.*). Russia itself was indestructible, like “the immortality of the soul” (*ibid.*, sheet 5 and verso). “If I had been 20—even 10 years younger, I would certainly have stopped out there and worked”, but material conditions were just too hard (*ibid.*, sheet 5 verso).

The value of the Volkhovsky letters is, therefore, considerable, both in forming an estimate of Russell’s views on Russia and in throwing light on an unfamiliar part of the recipient’s biography

<sup>16</sup> H. G. Wells, *Russia under the Shadows* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920).

<sup>17</sup> Associate editor of *Labour Monthly*, author of, among other works, *The Impact of the Russian Revolution in Britain* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1967). Vera worked under him for a time in 1921 in the Labour Research Department (letter 10).

and personality. Some of their interest lies also in what they reveal to us of the sender, a character who stands in the wings of Russell’s life, but is centre stage in these letters, and who under different circumstances might have played a much more central role for Russell, too.

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