STEPNIAK ON TYNESIDE: NIHILISM, FICTION, AND PUBLISHING IN NORTH-EAST ENGLAND

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Advertised at the point of its publication on 15 November 1889 as 'the first novel written in English by a Russian',[2] *The Career of a Nihilist* by 'Stepniak' ('Steppe-dweller') was actually one of the first novels written in English by any non-native speaker of the language. Why Stepniak wrote it in English is only one of the questions it raises. Others include why he wrote a novel at all, and, especially, why he published it under the imprint of a firm on Tyneside in north-east England when he had already published four non-fiction books with three different publishers in London.[3] In focussing on these questions, the present essay pays particular attention to the last of them. its principal concern is to bring out the significance of a late nineteenth-century English publishing house whose activities centred on a place that was three hundred miles away from those of its main competitors.

[1] The authors are grateful to Northumbria University and the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies for funding research in Moscow, and to Professor Charlotte Alston, Dr Chris Baggs, Dr David Stoker, Professor Mark Turner, and especially the journal's anonymous reviewers for corrections, help, and advice..

[2] For the impending date of publication see Moscow, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI), *fond* 1158, *opis´* 1, *edinitsa khraneniia* 251, *list* 21, David Gordon of the Walter Scott Publishing Company to Stepniak, 30 October 1889; for the publisher's advertisement, see 'List of Walter Scott's Publications: October 1889', at the end of Stepniak, *The Career of a Nihilist: A Novel* (London [*sic*], 1889), unnumbered p. [59]. For evidence challenging the novel's place of publication, see below.

[3] Stepniak, *Underground Russia: Revolutionary Profiles and Sketches from Life* (London, 1883); S. Stepniak, *Russia under the Tzars* (London, 1885); Stepniak, *The Russian Storm-Cloud*; *or, Russia in her Relations to Neighbouring Countries* (London, 1886); idem, *The Russian Peasantry: Their Agrarian Condition, Social Life, and Religion* (London, 1888).

'Stepniak' was the pseudonym of Sergei Mikhailovich Kravchinskii, a leading figure in the left-wing Russian populist movement of the later nineteenth century. Born in 1851, he became politically active at the beginning of the 1870s. At first he wandered from village to village in the guise of a woodsman, felling trees whilst attempting to incite disgruntled peasants. Later, he turned to violence. In August 1878, in one of the most notorious of Russian terrorist outrages, he assassinated the head of the tsarist secret police on a square in St Petersburg. He then fled abroad, taking up residence first in Italy and subsequently, in 1884, in London. In the last decade of his life – he was hit by a train in London when walking across a railway line at the end of 1895 – he was at least as well known among Russian revolutionaries outside Russia as Prince Kropotkin, Georgii Plekhanov, and Pyotr Lavrov. Although it is sometimes said that, in England, he modified his views, becoming, if anything, a constitutionalist or a liberal (whereas Plekhanov, in Switzerland, became a Marxist and a younger generation of Russian revolutionaries started thinking about a return to the terrorist methods that Stepniak had supposedly given up), to what extent he had really disavowed violence is another of the issues that *The Career of a Nihilist* raises.

Stepniak has attracted a large literature. Twentieth-century work on him included Charles A. Moser's publication and contextualization of his long response to Edward Pease's critique of his novel; a Soviet volume which translated into Russian many of the English-language documents among his personal papers at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow; a biographical PhD about him by John Elliot Bachmann; a chapter in James Hulse's larger study of socialists in late nineteenth-century London; John Slatter's detailed account of his earliest days in England; and Thomas C. Moser's explanation of the way in which Joseph Conrad's

Under Western Eyes can be read as a sort of re-imagining of his London circle.[4] More recently, David Saunders summarized his life in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; Anat Vernitski spoke of *The Career of a Nihilist* in the course of detailing his interactions with Olive Garnett; Michael Hughes explained his appeal to the liberally inclined parts of Britain's educated public; Eric M. Johnson contextualized his views on women; Anna Vaninskaya pointed out that his attitude towards the tsarist regime differed radically from that of the contemporary journalist W. T. Stead; Dmitrii Nechiporuk spelt out his part in the foundation of an 'American Society of Friends of Russian Freedom'; and Lara Green set his terrorism in a transnational context.[5] Because, however, the two most important studies of him remain those by Evgeniia Taratuta and Donald Senese,[6] both of which came out some time ago, there is still a good deal to be said about his activities. To add to the literature on his English-language novel, the present essay works from manuscript

[4] Charles A. Moser, 'A Nihilist's Career: S. M. Stepniak-Kravchinskij', *American Slavic and East European Review*, 20:1 (1961), 55-71; S. M. Stepniak-Kravchinskii, *V londonskoi emigratsii*, ed. and tr. M. E. Ermasheva and V. F. Zakharina (Moscow, 1968); John Elliot Bachman, 'Sergei Mikhailovich Stepniak-Kravchinskii: a biography from the Russian revolutionary movement on native and foreign soil', unpublished PhD dissertation, American University, 1971; James W. Hulse, *Revolutionists in London: A Study of Five Unorthodox Socialists* (Oxford, 1970), 29-52; John Slatter, 'Stepniak and the Friends of Russia', *Immigrants & Minorities* 2:1 (1983), 33-49; Thomas C. Moser, 'An English Context for Conrad's Russian Characters: Sergey Stepniak and the Diary of Olive Garnett', *Journal of Modern Literature* 11:1 (1984), 3-44.

[5] David Saunders 'Kravchinsky, Sergey Mikhailovich [*pseud*. Stepniak])', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/62226 (last accessed 20 May 2020); Anat Vernitski, 'Russian revolutionaries and English sympathizers in 1890s London: The case of Olive Garnett and Sergei Stepniak', *Journal of European Studies*, 35:3 (2005), 299-314; Michael Hughes, 'British Opinion and Russian Terrorism in the 1880s', *European History Quarterly* 41:2 (2011), 255-77; Eric M. Johnson, 'Revolutionary Romance: Love and Marriage for Russian Radicals in the 1870s', *Russian History* 43:3-4 (2016), 311-37; Anna Vaninskaya, '"Truth about Russia": Russia in Britain at the Fin de Siècle,' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Fin de Siècle Literature, Culture and the Arts*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Edinburgh, 2018), 244-262; D. M. Nechiporuk, *Vo imia nigilizma: Amerikanskoe obshchestvo druzei russkoi svobody i russkaia revoliutsionnaia emigratsiia (1890-1930 gg.)* (St Petersburg, 2018), esp. 40-61; Lara Green, 'Russian Revolutionary Terrorism in Transnational Perspective: Representations and Networks, 1881-1926', unpublished PhD dissertation, Northumbria University, 2019, esp. 185-207, and 'Russian revolutionary terrorism, British liberals, and the problem of empire (1884-1914)', *History of European Ideas* (published online on 7 April 2020, https://doi-org.libproxy.ncl.ac.uk/10.1080/01916599.2020.1746083, last accessed 28 April 2020).

[6] Evgeniia Taratuta, *S. M. Stepniak-Kravchinskii – revoliutsioner i pisatel´* (Moscow, 1973); Donald Senese, *S. M. Stepniak-Kravchinskii: The London Years* (Newtonville, MA, 1987).

documents in English in his personal archive in Moscow (whilst also citing some of the documents in that archive which appeared in Russian translation in 1968);[7] gives public-domain references for his letters to the Newcastle solicitor Robert Spence Watson, which were not easy to cite until recently;[8] points out that memoir literature and newspapers, especially newspapers in the part of England where *Career* was published, provide more information than has been widely noticed so far; draws on John R. Turner's various studies of the company that published the novel; and refers to an early twentieth-century description of that company which seems to have been overlooked.[9]

The Career of a Nihilist is in three parts: ‘The Enthusiasts’, ‘Under Fire’, and ‘All for the Cause’. ‘Enthusiasts’ opens with the hero, Andrey Kojukhov (a fictionalized version of the author), in frustrated emigration in Geneva. He goes back to St Petersburg with a view to picking up the thread of revolution after certain big trials of revolutionaries have taken place there, falls in love with the daughter of a socially well-placed defence lawyer, and then leaves for a fictional city called Dubravnik. Part Two, ‘Under Fire’, centres on an attempt to free revolutionary associates from prison in Dubravnik. At first, the associates are digging a tunnel, but the authorities discover it. Then the revolutionaries who are still at liberty try to free the ones who are in prison by attacking a convoy in the street. They botch the attempt. Andrey escapes,

[7] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 251, 269, 299, 385, 462, and 471-2, letters to Stepniak from, respectively, David Gordon, W. H. Dircks, George Kennan, Edward Pease, William Westall, and Robert Spence Watson (some of which were translated into Russian in Stepniak-Kravchinskii, *V londonskoi emigratsii* [n. 3, above]).
[8] Special Collections, Robinson Library, Newcastle University, UK, Spence Watson / Weiss papers, SW/1/17/81-95, letters from Stepniak to Robert Spence Watson.
[9] For Dr Turner's work and the previously unnoticed description of the company that published *Career*, see below.

though he is wounded. Two prisoners also get away, but not the main one. Andrey goes back to St Petersburg. The woman he had fallen in love with, Tania, is now a member of his group. He conducts propaganda with her in various districts of the capital. Tania was scheduled to go to Moscow with a different revolutionary, but acknowledges that she is in love with Andrey and they get married (without ceremony). By this time, the imprisoned colleagues in Dubravnik are due to be tried and no doubt executed. Someone comes from Dubravnik to St Petersburg to ask Andrey to organize another attempt to free them. Part Three, ‘All for the Cause’, opens with Andrey going back to Dubravnik. Various fellow revolutionaries are sentenced to death there at the end of their trial. Andrey plots their violent release, but his group's bombs blow up by accident so the plot fails. Andrey returns to St Petersburg. His friends in Dubravnik are executed. He decides to assassinate the tsar, but his revolver is faulty and none of his bullets hits the target. He is captured, tried, and executed. The novel closes with the words: ‘He had perished. But the work for which he died did not perish. It goes forward from defeat to defeat towards the final victory, which in this sad world of ours cannot be obtained save by the sufferings and the sacrifice of the chosen few’.[10]

In a collective review of 'Novels of the Week' at the end of November 1889, *The Athenaeum* acknowledged that *The Career of a Nihilist* had some attractive features. It 'tells the reader just what is most interesting and valuable about the Russian middle classes at home, or at any rate about such of them as are in more or less open revolt against police barbarities'; 'No one,' the magazine concluded, 'can read this story of Russian middle-class life without deep interest, and without gaining a serviceable

[10] Stepniak, *Career*, 320.

insight into the facts of the situation'.[11] In particular, the reviewer thought *The Career of a Nihilist* showed that 'Stepniak has manifestly a high appreciation of the qualities of the women who take part in the Nihilistic movement, and he has drawn some very attractive and companionable creatures, who not only take part in the propaganda and the self-devotion, but also play no unimportant part in leading and stimulating the men'.[12] The novel was indeed important from the point of view of the way in which it conveyed the significance of women. Contemporaries had been struck by the part women played in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Sof´ia Perovskaia had attracted particular attention.[13] Writing shortly after the tsar's death, a radical Irish American had recommended the use of ‘the real Sophie Peroffsky dynamite, made for Russia’s Czar’.[14] Stepniak himself had eulogized Perovskaia in the first of his non-fiction books. She 'knew how to preserve the sacred spark [of revolutionary conviction]', he said, a characteristic with which 'Women, it must be confessed, are much more richly endowed ... than men'.[15] But whether Stepniak was quite as well disposed towards women as this evidence implies or as the *Athenaeum* 's reviewer observed has been a bone of contention among scholars. Eric M. Johnson pointed out recently that 'The centrality of romance in [*The Career of a Nihilist*]' may be best seen as 'an attempt to come to terms with a problem which he [Stepniak] grappled with in his own life'.[16] Quoting a letter of 1879 from one female populist to another about Stepniak's 'habit of stealing women's hearts', Johnson contended that the revolutionary may in fact have been in thrall to 'a traditional concept of masculine

[11] *The Athenaeum*, № 3240, 30 November 1889, 739-40.
[12] Loc. cit.
[13] Green, 'Russian Revolutionary Terrorism', 103-4.
[14] P.M. McGill, *The Irish Avenger, or Dynamite Evangelist* (Washington, DC, 1881), 16.
[15] Stepniak, *Underground Russia*, 139.
[16] Johnson, 'Revolutionary Romance', 335.

sexual prowess' which he merely 'dressed up in ideologically correct guise'.[17] As well as praising Perovskaia in *Underground Russia*, Stepniak also spoke somewhat condescendingly of her as an excellent schoolmistress and an even better nurse.[18] In roughly the same way, the fictional Tania is prominent in *The Career of a Nihilist* , but it is still she who does the cooking.[19] After reading *Career* in manuscript, Edward Pease pointed out to Stepniak that although Tania was 'devoted to the cause', she was still 'only part of the scenery amongst which Andrey moves.'[20] It may be that Stepniak was not as enlightened in his attitude to women as the *Athenaeum*'s reviewer suggested.

As a whole, *The Career of a Nihilist* is not really successful. Its plot is exciting, but readers are not told anything about the background of the vast majority of the protagonists, what social class the hero belongs to, how well educated he is, what he reads, who his parents are, whether he has brothers and sisters, what part of the Russian Empire he comes from, or how he acquired what little money he has. Although they are informed that he 'was very religious when a boy' and that he is unusual among revolutionaries in managing to escape arrest so long,[21] *Career* does not contain enough information of this kind to bring Andrey to life. Readers learn a few things about divisions within the ranks of the Russian revolutionary movement (notably between those who thought that violence was the best way to achieve the movement's goals and those who thought that circulating propaganda among the peasantry was likely to prove more effective in the long run), but information of this kind is more likely to appeal to a political scientist than to a lover of fiction. The

[17] Ibid., 335-6.
[18] Stepniak, *Underground Russia*., 127.
[19] Stepniak, *Career*, 207.
[20] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, d. 385, ll. 51 and 53, Pease to Stepniak, 10 March 1889..
[21] Stepniak, *Career*, 209, 281.

littérateur Ernest Rhys, who knew Stepniak, captured some of the pluses and minuses of the novel when he said that its author 'had the narrative art, as his story "The Nihilist" showed, but his characterization had not the subtlety of tale-writers like Turgenev'.[22]

Yet Stepniak attached great importance to *The Career of a Nihilist.* Since he was (or had been) a practical rather than a desk-bound revolutionary, why he set great store by his novel seems to need an answer. Although many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, Russian and non-Russian, wrote novels with a view to promoting change, they were usually writers first and reformers or revolutionaries second. Reformers and revolutionaries may have been a little more literary in Russia than they were in other places (one thinks of Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevskii), but even in Russia not many practical (as opposed to armchair) revolutionaries wrote novels. The other main exiled Russian revolutionaries in Stepniak's day, Georgii Plekhanov and Petr Lavrov, did not write novels. They wrote ideological tracts. Why then did Stepniak write *Career*?

Three answers come to mind: first, despite appearances to the contrary, Stepniak had always thought of writing for the general public as his true *métier* and had decided, in exile in England, to devote himself to it full-time; second, that the novel he published in 1889 was a way of expressing admiration for his younger self whilst at the same time acknowledging, indirectly, that the methods he had employed at that time were superannuated and had to be replaced; and third, that a novel of any kind might enable him to reach a different and perhaps larger body of potential

[22] Ernest Rhys, *Everyman Remembers* (New York, 1931), 155.

sympathizers than direct action could. Each of these by no means mutually exclusive possibilities requires elucidation.

The first of them may be supported by drawing attention to the fact that Stepniak did not suddenly start writing for the general public in the second half of the 1880s. On the contrary, he started before then and continued into the 1890s. As early as the first half of the 1870s, when he was attempting to incite unrest in the Russian countryside, he wrote stories for peasants (two of which he allowed to be published in English translation in the year of his death[23]). Although, after he left Russia, a good deal of his literary output took the form of non-fiction, even *Underground Russia*, his account of the heroic days of violent populism, reads more like a set of adventures than an impartial record, and the four volumes he published in the 1880s and 1890s on various aspects of Russian current affairs were left-of-centre reportage rather than political tracts.[24] Although his writings reflect his ideas, only a few of them were devoted to theory *per se.*[25] In August 1886 he said he was pleased that George Kennan was about to publish an exposé of Russia's Siberian exile system because it meant he no longer had to devote himself to politically orientated writing and could concentrate on fiction.[26] The translator and novelist Ethel Lilian Voynich started learning Russian under his aegis in 1886 and drew much of her early inspiration from him.[27] He signed a contract to write a biography of

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[23] E. L. Voynich (tr.), *The Humour of Russia*, with an introduction by Stepniak (London and New York, 1895), 254-72, 273-275.
[24] For the first three of these volumes, see n. 3, above; the fourth, *King Stork and King Log: A Study of Modern Russia* (London, 1896), came out just after Stepniak's untimely death.
[25] His most important theoretical statements were the pamphlet he published anonymously in St Petersburg in 1878 after murdering the tsarist secret police chief (*Ubiistvo shefa-zhandarmov general-ad"iutanta Mezentseva*, better known by its sub-title, *Smert´ za smert´* [*A Death for a Death*]) and 'What is Wanted?', in Stepniak and Felix Volkhovsky, *Nihilism As It Is* (London, n.d. [1895]), 13-51.
[26] Stepniak-Kravchinskii, *V londonskoi emigratsii*, 201.
[27] Shoshana Milgram Knapp, 'E. L. Voynich (11 May 1864 – 27 July 1960)', in George M. Johnson (ed.), *Late-Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists: Second Series* (Detroit: Gale, 1999), 293.

Turgenev in 1889, made a great impression on Constance Garnett (probably still Britain's best-known translator of Russian literature), lectured on Russian literature in London in early 1894, and continued to write fiction (in Russian) after the publication of *The Career of a Nihilist*.[28] Although he never ceased to be politically active, it is probably true to say that in the last years of his life his literary concerns were growing rather than diminishing.

In these ways, it can be argued that Stepniak wrote fiction simply because he saw himself as a writer as well as a political activist. But why did he write a novel with the particular contents of *The Career of a Nihilist*? Contemporary reviewers took it to be propaganda in support of terrorism. The reviewer in *The Athenaeum* had some good things to say about it, but also took the view that 'of broad and constructive revolution there is barely a trace. Not one of these men has a constitution in his pocket – all are limited to the thirst for revenge.'[29] The principal daily newspaper in Newcastle upon Tyne (where, as we shall see, the novel was published) felt that it was 'questionable ... whether Stepniak will add much to his reputation as the author of "Underground Russia" by his new book', because although 'all the conspiracy and Nihilistic business is well done, the story, as a story, is not agreeable.'[30]

At first sight, *The Career of a Nihilist* does indeed look as if it is a manifesto in support of terrorism. The novel ends, however, with the hero failing to kill the tsar (not

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[28] For the Turgenev contract, see *Newcastle Courant*, 23 March 1889, p. 4. Although the volume never appeared (see John R. Turner, *The Walter Scott Publishing Company: A Bibliography* [Pittsburgh, Pa., 1997, hereafter Turner, *Bibliography*], 595), Stepniak wrote about Turgenev in, for example, the introduction he contributed to Ivan Turgenev, *Rudin: A Novel*, tr. Constance Garnett (London, 1894), v-xxix. For the effect Stepniak had on Constance Garnett, see Helen Smith, *The Uncommon Reader: A Life of Edward Garnett* (London, 2017), esp. 34-5. For his literary lectures of early 1894 see Barry C. Johnson (ed.), *Olive & Stepniak: The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett 1893-1895* (Birmingham, 1993), 44-5 and 50 n. 75. His later fiction included a short story, 'The Little House on the Volga', and a novel about a religious sectarian (*Shtundist Pavel Rudenko*).

[29] *Athenaeum*, no. 3240, 30 November 1889, 739.

[30] *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 18 November 1889, 4.

much of an advertisement), and, in a preface he wrote for the second impression, Stepniak reproached reviewers for assuming that his book advocated violent revolutionary methods. Most of his early readers, the new preface said, 'have persisted in viewing my novel as a sort of political pamphlet in the guise of fiction. They assumed it to be the summing up of the Nihilists' programme, both theoretical and practical, and very naturally reproached it for being exclusively negative in theory, and narrowly violent in practice'.[31] But his goal, he said, had not been to advocate a particular course of action. Rather, he had been trying to portray individuals of a certain type, 'humanitarian enthusiasts, with whom devotion to a cause has attained to the fervour of a religion, without being a religion'.[32] He had centred his novel on 'the extreme or terrorist section of Russian revolutionists' because people of this kind 'exhibit[ed] to the full what was most peculiar to them', but he could have centred it on other groups of people, for particular creeds were not his concern: 'I was as little tempted to extol terrorism as to decry it.'[33]

In the light of this preface to the second impression, the last words of *Career* may imply recognition on Stepniak's part that, far from being laudable, his hero's methods had to be abandoned. The logical conclusion to be drawn from the fact that *The Career of a Nihilist* ends with the death of its central figure was that other people would have to express their commitment to the cause of revolution in new ways. Only then would the revolutionary movement go 'forward from defeat to defeat towards the final victory'.[34] In other words, Stepniak probably meant his readers to draw a conclusion from his novel that differed markedly from the one that most of them did

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[31] *The Career of a Nihilist*, 2nd "edition" (*sic*) (London [*sic*] and New York: 1890), ix.
[32] Loc. cit.
[33] Ibid., x.
[34] Stepniak, *Career* (1st edition), 320.

draw. His friend, the communitarian anarchist Prince Kropotkin, seems to have understood what he was really trying to say. Although Kropotkin by no means rejected the use of violence for revolutionary purposes, he was not as keen on it as Stepniak was in the 1870s. It is unlikely that he would have approved of *The Career of a Nihilist* if he had thought that its sole purpose was the blatant advocacy of terror.[35] He still complimented Stepniak, however, for saying, 'in his "Career of a Nihilist," that every revolutionist has had a moment in his life when some circumstance, maybe unimportant in itself, has brought him to pronounce his oath of giving himself to the cause of revolution'.[36] For Kropotkin, in other words, no less than for Stepniak himself, the key feature of the novel was its protagonists' commitment to the revolutionary cause rather than the particular revolutionary tactics they adopted. By the time Stepniak published *Career*, more than a decade had elapsed since his assassination of General Mezentsev. Although he wanted to impress upon his readers the enthusiasm with which he had taken up the cause of radical change, he did not necessarily want to convert them to violent methods.

This irenic interpretation of *The Career of a Nihilist* receives a degree of support from a recent study of Nikolai Charushin (1851-1937), a near-contemporary of Stepniak and fellow 1870s revolutionary.[37] The authors of the study believe that populists such as Charushin went on thinking of the 1870s as the high point of their careers even after they had spent long periods in exile and settled down to different lives. They wrote memoirs of their youth because they still thought well of the people they used to be. Although they had changed with the times, the inspiration behind

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[35] For Kropotkin's complicated views on the value of terror as a revolutionary tactic, see O. V. Budnitskii, *Terrorizm v rossiiskom osvoboditel´nom dvizhenii* (Moscow, 2000), 225-42.
[36] Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: 1971 [first published 1899]), 278.
[37] Tat´iana Saburova and Ben Eklof, *Druzhba, sem'ia, revoliutsiia: Nikolai Charushin i pokolenie narodnikov 1870-kh godov* (Moscow, 2016).

their undertakings was the same; it was merely expressing itself differently.[38] In the same way, it can be argued that Stepniak wrote *The Career of a Nihilist* by way of expressing admiration for his younger self, whilst accepting that the methods he had employed in those days were no longer appropriate. Although he continued to think well of his assassination of the head of the Third Department in St Petersburg in 1878, in exile in the United Kingdom he had turned to collaboration with non-violent socialists and even liberals. Although *The Career of a Nihilist* portrays the drive that motivated him in everything he did, it does not advocate – indeed, rejects – the particular forms of action in which its author had engaged a decade earlier.

Whether or not Stepniak intended his novel to express approval of terrorism, and whatever the extent of his preference for literature as opposed to political activism, in 1889 he was certainly still trying to promote the cause of change in Russia. This had been the object of everything he had been doing in Britain, and he had not given up; but a novel offered the possbility of reaching people that non-fiction studies could not.

It also offered the possbility of assisting in the foundation of a public movement accompanied by a lecture campaign. At the start of his time in Britain, Stepniak had ruled out public performances as a means of promoting his cause. Despite being taken up by British socialists almost as soon as he arrived in the country (having been introduced to them by Nikolai Chaikovskii, a contemporary populist who was already resident in Britain), in late 1885 he had refused to be the central figure in a

[38] At the end of their book they state explicitly that 'Charushin continued to think of himself as a revolutionary' even in the 1920s and 1930s (*Druzhba*, p. 407). When Victoria Frede took a less generous view of Charushin in her review of the book (*Kritika* 19:3 [2018], 630), the authors protested (*ibid.*, 20:2 [2019], 433-4).

'Russian liberation' society that his British friends were contemplating.[39] Although he had a reading knowledge of English before he arrived in Britain (in the early 1870s he and Kropotkin had translated sixteen pages of H M Stanley's *How I Found Livingstone*[40]), he was well aware, when he reached London, that his spoken command of the language was not yet good enough for sustained public campaigning. The first of his books to be conceived in English, *Russia under the Tzars*, named a translator on the title page (although the person in question, a journalist called William Westall, was really a copy editor rather than a translator).[41] Language apart, at the point of his arrival Stepniak had few potentially like-minded Russian collaborators (apart from Chaikovskii). Kropotkin had made a significant visit to Britain in 1881, but did not take up permanent residence there until 1886; and even Kropotkin was only a good friend rather than an ideological sympathizer. Finally, although, even in the first half of the 1880s, some British liberals (not just the small number of British socialists) were coming round to a more openly anti-tsarist position, British intellectuals in general were no more ready than Stepniak himself – in the first half of the 1880s – for a broad campaign against Russia. For most of the 1880s, therefore, Stepniak felt that his best way of promoting change in Russia was to write and publish the non-fiction books which took up most of those years.

In various ways, however, finishing *The Career of a Nihilist* put Stepniak in a position to undertake oral campaigning: it improved his linguistic confidence, and so increased his enthusiasm for speaking on public platforms; it marked the end of the first phase of his literary agenda (four non-fiction books and the novel); and it showed

[39] For a detailed account of Stepniak's first two years in England, see Slatter, 'Stepniak and the Friends of Russia' (above, n. 3).
[40] Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, p. 320.
[41] *Underground Russia* appeared in 1883, but it had been published in Italian the previous year.

he could write books with a wider potential appeal than *Underground Russia*, *Russia under the Tzars*, *The Russian Storm-Cloud*, and *The Russian Peasantry*.

From a linguistic point of view, finishing the novel was a major achievement, for novels in second languages are uncommon. Indeed, Stepniak may have been the first person to write a novel in English who had not lived in an English-speaking country in his youth. Mathilde Blind published *Tarantella* in 1885 and Maarten Maartens *The Black Box Murder* and *The Sin of Joost Avelingh* in the same year as *The Career of a Nihilist*, but Blind had been living in England since she was a child and Maartens had lived in England for several years in his teens.[42] Joseph Conrad did not publish his first novel until 1894 and most other 'second-language' novelists in English (Ayn Rand, Vladimir Nabokov, Arthur Koestler) belong to the twentieth rather than the nineteenth century. Thus, in view of the unusual nature of the task, it seems probable that Stepniak had good reasons for embarking on a novel in English. Certainly writing it imposed demands on him which his earlier non-fiction works had not. As George Kennan pointed out to him when *Career* was still in progress, 'in a work of art like a novel the smoothness[,] precision and idiomatic graces of style count for a great deal – for much more than in a work of mere statement and argument like "The Russian Peasantry". Style is much more important in character studies than in statements of fact'.[43] Stepniak's determination to overcome the difficulty of writing fiction in English supports the argument that he thought an English-language novel would enable him to attract sympathizers whom he could not reach by continuing to publish works of analytical reportage.

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[42] Patricia Srebrnik, 'Blind [*née* Cohen], Mathilde', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2652 (last accessed 8 May 2020); Maarten Maartens, *Letters* (London, 1930), 358.
[43] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 299, l. 15, George Kennan to Stepniak, 2 February 1889.

If, however, Stepniak's reason for writing *Career* in English was to appeal to a larger audience than he had reached so far, he had to find a firm to publish it. In view of the fact that he had already published four books in England, he may have thought that this would be easy, but events proved otherwise.

Studies of *The Career of a Nihilist* give the impression that it was published in London. Charles A. Moser said so explicitly.[44] So, much more recently, did Anat Vernitski.[45] Evgeniia Taratuta gave no indication to the contrary at the points in her major biography of Stepniak where it would have been appropriate to discuss the matter.[46] At first sight, these authorities appear to be correct, for the title page of the first edition of *The Career of a Nihilist* gives its publishing details as 'London / Walter Scott / 24 Warwick Lane, Paternoster Row'. Although the last page of the first edition of the novel is at odds with the title page when it says that *Career* was 'Printed by Walter Scott, Felling, Newcastle-on-Tyne',[47] this difference can be easily explained away, for publishers often (indeed, usually) commission, appraise, and edit manuscripts in one place, but print them in another. If one had only the first edition of *Career* to go on, one would imagine that the head office of the firm that published the book was in London but that it conducted the purely mechanical part of its operation on Tyneside.

In fact, the reverse was the case. Scott's London office was an offshoot. In its obituary of Sir Walter Scott (1826-1910), the eponymous founder of the company, *The Times* stated that his 'books were published at Felling and distributed from Paternoster-square, London, and from New York and Melbourne, where Sir Walter

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[44] Moser, 'A Nihilist's Career', p. 60.
[45] Vernitski, 'Russian revolutionaries and English sympathizers', 305.
[46] Taratuta, *S. M. Stepniak-Kravchinskii*, e.g. 347-8, 392-3.
[47] Stepniak, *Career*, p. 320.

had branch houses'.[48] A lengthy anonymous essay of 1904 about the company opened with a graphic description of its primary location at Felling in north-east England:

> Felling is some two-and-a-half miles out of Newcastle-on-Tyne, on the way south to Sunderland. Industrially it partakes of the general character of Tyneside, which is known the world over for coal, iron, ship-building, and subsidiary industries ...
>
> There is one striking interruption to Felling's uniformity. It is the centre of a publishing enterprise – the Walter Scott Publishing Company, Limited – that, in the volume of its turn-out as regards books, ranks with the best-known houses in London ... Though this enterprise enjoys several distinctions, it certainly enjoys none in the external appearance of the edifice wherein its products are manufactured. That edifice does not arrest the eyes of wayfarers, as edifices that house industries that are written about usually do. It is in keeping with the rest of Felling, differing only in that it lies on the steepest part, whence it looks easily over the N.E.R. [North-Eastern Railway], down upon the busy Tyne. Behind it the rough ground rises abruptly and is decorated at the summit by a derrick weirdly gibbeted against the sky. Yet from this unpretentious building, with its harsh and rugged surroundings, 11,000 bound books, selected works of standard authors, and a mass of printed matter are supplied weekly to the English reading world in styles and at prices that the ever-growing demand for them shows to be appreciated.[49]

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[48] *The Times*, 9 April 1910, 13.
[49] Anon, 'A Great Book Publishing House (illustrated)', *Sell's Dictionary of the World's Press and Advertisers' Reference Book 1904* (London, 1904), 109. For photographs of the former Scott's building in November 2008, just before it was pulled down, see Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne & Wear Archive Services (TWAS), JA.SCT/1/50/2.

The essay went on to make clear that the company's 'general managership and editorship' were both at Felling rather than in London, and that Scott's prided itself on the fact. 'In this combination of functions,' the essay said, 'there is gained the advantage of rapid decision; the general manager does not need to consult the editor, nor the editor the general manager, and there is no danger of each seeking to develop diverging lines of policy'.[50] The company's London office, meanwhile, employed only 'carefully chosen clerical staff ... controlled by and held responsible to the Felling headquarters'.[51] Not even John R. Turner, the expert on Scott's,[52] spotted this early twentieth-century account of the company's operations, and others have not yet appreciated the fact that, on occasion, the non-metropolitan location of the Walter Scott Publishing Company sometimes played a significant part in its selection of books for publication. One such occasion was the publication of *The Career of a Nihilist*.

Stepniak submitted the manuscript of his novel to at least two of the London publishers who had published his earlier books, but both of them turned it down. Smith Elder, publishers of *Underground Russia*, informed Stepniak on 18 October 1888 that 'the story [of *The Career of a Nihilist*] seems to us to lack the dramatic interest which might have been expected from such a subject, and we fear would have little attraction for English readers'.[53] Less than three weeks later, on 5

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[50] Anon, 'A Great Book Publishing House', 111-12.
[51] Ibid., 121.
[52] See John R. Turner, 'Walter Scott Publishing Company Limited (London: 1882-1931)', in *British Literary Publishing Houses 1881-1965*, ed. Jonathan Rose and Patricia J. Anderson (Detroit and London, 1991), 285-7; idem, 'The Camelot Series, Everyman's Library, and Ernest Rhys', *Publishing History*, 31 (1992), 27-46; idem, 'Sir Walter Scott (1826-1910), Civil Engineering Contractor', *Transactions of the Newcomen Society*, 64:1 (1992-3), 1-19; idem, 'A History of the Walter Scott Publishing House', unpublished PhD dissertation, 2 vols, University of Wales at Aberystwyth, 1995; idem, *Bibliography*; and Turner's article on Scott in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47446 (last accessed 21 May 2019).
[53] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 433, l. 1.

November 1888, Swan Sonnenschein, publishers of *The Russian Storm Cloud* and of *The Russian Peasantry*, wrote to say: 'We have grave fears that the book [*The Career of a Nihilist*] would have only a small success, and we would rather be associated with you in books that promise, according to our views, to give mutual satisfaction. I think you would do better in offering it to some other publisher, who might be prepared to speculate more in the copyright than we can see our way to'.[54] Whether Stepniak also offered his novel to Ward Downey, publisher of *Russia under the Tzars*, is not known, but, if he did, they too must have responded negatively, for in early 1889 he still did not have a publisher for the book.

The publishers with whom he had already had dealings were among the most significant in Britain. 'Smith Elder, under the leadership of George Smith, were renowned for recognizing the worth of *Jane Eyre* in 1847 and going on to publish Charlotte Brontë's novels. They also published Thackeray, Thomas Hardy and Arthur Conan Doyle'.[55] Although Swan Sonnenschein were probably best known for scholarly works (they published the first English translation of Volume One of Marx's *Das Kapital* the year before they turned down *Career*), they were not in principle opposed to novels and, in time, their list came to include works by Henry James, George Meredith and George Moore. In view of the facts that both Smith Elder and Swan Sonnenschein published fiction and that both of them had already published Stepniak's non-fiction, it is not surprising that he asked them to consider *The Career*

[54] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 292, ll. 7-8. Swan Sonnenschein may have regretted rejecting *The Career of a Nihilist*, for the firm remained in touch with Stepniak and wrote to him in October 1895 expressing surprise that he was about to publish *King Stork and King Log* with Downey & Co. (*The Archives of Swan Sonnenschein & Company, 1878-1911*, ed. Brian Maidment [25 reels of microfilm, Bishop's Stortford, 1973], reel 14, vol. 2, 882).

[55] Tricia Ayrton, 'John Murray', letter to *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 September 2018, 8 (on John Murray's takeover of Smith Elder in May 1917).

of a Nihilist. When they rejected it, he may well have thought that his chances of finding a publisher were not very good.

Where then was he to turn? Stepniak wrote to Scott's for the first time on 9 November 1888, four days after the second of the two rejections of his novel in London. Although his letter does not survive, its date and content are evident from the reply that the company's manager sent him on the following day:

> I am interested in receiving yours of yesterday and shall be glad if we can come to some arrangement as regards translations from the Russian. Probably the novelist you mention (Goncharov?) would be the best to begin upon, but it is a matter for consideration. Meanwhile, will you kindly inform me what you think your remuneration should be?[56]

In view of the fact that *The Career of a Nihilist* had just been rejected twice, it may seem odd that this first exchange between Stepniak and Scott's referred only to translations, not to the novel, but an analysis of the company's interests may serve to explain why, initially, Stepniak did not think of it as a potential outlet.

Scott's eponymous owner was mainly a building contractor. In Newcastle upon Tyne, where his office was located, he was continuing the work of Richard Grainger (who had reconstructed the heart of the town in the first half of the nineteenth century). Outside north-east England, his achievements included building 'the first electric "tube" underground railway" in London.[57] According to W. D. Rubinstein, he was one of only fifteen people who became millionaires in Victorian England without having inherited anything.[58] Although John Turner has explained in detail how he

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[56] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, d. 251, l. 1, David Gordon to Stepniak, 10 November 1888.
[57] W. H. D. (William Henry Dircks), 'Cities and Towns of England: Newcastle-on-Tyne – No. III', *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 15 June 1889, 44; Turner, 'A History', i. 15.
[58] W. D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain since the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1981), 125-6 and 140 n. 25.

became a publisher,[59] one or two details can be added to his account. On 18 March 1880, Tyne Publishing of Gateshead bought a printworks in Felling.[60] After commissioning Scott to put up a new building, it went bankrupt. In lieu of payment, Scott took the company over. His main interest in it may have been the quarry that came with the site on which he was building,[61] but his lifelong entrepreneurialism seems to have given him the idea that he could make something out of the publishing company too. Instead of dissolving it, he changed its name to his own and put in David Gordon as manager.

In conversation with Havelock Ellis, Will Dircks (who became 'publisher's reader' at Scott's) described David Gordon as a 'Napoleon of business'.[62] At first, his chances of turning the Felling company into a national and international success did not look very good. When, for example, Ernest Rhys, the first editor of the company's 'Camelot' series of prose reprints, asked the well-known London-based man of letters Edmund Gosse to write an introduction to the series, Gosse refused on the grounds that he 'was skeptical about "your Tyneside publishers, of whom nobody has heard" '; when, furthermore, the first volume in the series came out, Gosse looked as if he might have been right to have nothing to do with it, for, as Rhys remembered, 'the London critics were, naturally, contemptuous of a series of books produced by a Tyneside house and edited by an unknown scribe'.[63] But then the series 'captured the public chock-block' and Gosse, 'doubtful at first, came round'.[64]

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[59] Turner, 'A History', i. 26-44.
[60] For the contract of sale, see TWAS DT.SC/4/6.
[61] It is clearly marked on the site map which forms part of the contract of sale.
[62] Havelock Ellis, *My Life* (London and Toronto, 1940), p. 164.
[63] Rhys, *Everyman Remembers*, 79-80.
[64] Ibid., 90. Some twenty years later, Rhys was to employ the experience he had gained at Scott's to found a much more famous series of prose reprints, J. M. Dent's Everyman Library (Turner, 'The Camelot Series, Everyman's Library, and Ernest Rhys', *passim*).

The Camelot series was only one of Scott's early successes. Ernest Rhys's first involvement with the company had been as an editor of individual volumes in 'The Canterbury Poets', the firm's parallel series of verse reprints. Reprints were a common way for publishers to make money in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Literacy was increasing in the wake of Forster's Education Act of 1870, but some better-off people were worried that the newly literate were devoting their reading time to penny dreadfuls rather than to established works of literature.[65] Because of a change in UK copyright law in 1842, the number of works that could be freely reproduced increased from 1884. For these two reasons, publishing cheap copies of established works looked like a good idea. 'It has been estimated that by the turn of the century, at least eighty publishers were producing series of cheap reprints of the English classics'.[66] Scott's was one of the first.

As the firm's confidence grew, it moved on from series of reprints to series of original works, notably 'Great Lives' (newly commissioned biographies of literary figures) and 'Contemporary Science' (under the general editorship of Havelock Ellis). With four main series, a number of lesser series (on, for example, the culture of north-east England) and various free-standing publications, by the end of the 1880s Scott's was becoming highly profitable. A building contractor's gamble was turning out to be worthwhile.[67]

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[65] Patrick A. Dunae, 'Penny Dreadfuls: Late Nineteenth-Century Boys' Literature and Crime,' *Victorian Studies* 22:2 (1978-79), 133-50.

[66] Simon Levene, 'The Oxford University Press World's Classics Series: The Most Successful Series of Pocket Editions Ever Published in Britain', *Book and Magazine Collector*, № 30 (September 1986), 50 (which also provides the information about the change in British copyright law).

[67] Scott's 64-page October 1889 list of publications (appended to the first edition of Stepniak's *Career*) advertised among other things all four of the firm's main series, the last of which, Havelock Ellis's 'Contemporary Science', was just getting under way.

It is unlikely, however, that the youth and ambition of the Walter Scott Publishing Company were enough on their own to attract Stepniak to the firm or the firm to Stepniak. Stepniak did not, after all, offer Scott's *The Career of a Nihilist* in his first letter to them, despite the fact that it had just been rejected by Smith Elder and Swan Sonnenschein. Perhaps he still had hopes of Ward Downey, the third of his London publishers. Perhaps he thought Scott's did not publish original fiction (since, at the time of his first letter to the firm, its list consisted mainly of reprints). The reason why he confined his first letter to the possibility of translating Russian novels was surely that Scott's had just started publishing translations of the works of Tolstoy. The company had advertised Tolstoy's *A Russian Proprietor and Other Stories* in *The Publishers' Circular* on 15 October 1888 and *The Cossacks* in *The Bookseller* on 7 November 1888.[68] Having come across these advertisements, Stepniak no doubt thought that his linguistic skills might facilitate an arrangement with the company quite distinct from his work on *The Career of a Nihilist*.

To explain why Stepniak's novel came out with Scott's, additional considerations need to be taken into account. First, by the end of the 1880s Scott's was paying increasing attention to non-British works of literature. The two volumes of Tolstoy which it was advertising at the time of Stepniak's first exchange of letters with David Gordon heralded a substantial series which rendered Tolstoy well-known in Britain for the first time.[69] Matthew Arnold had had to rely on French translations when writing the essay of 1887 which more or less marks the beginning of the critical appreciation of Tolstoy in English;[70] a few years later, he would not have had to do

[68] Turner, *Bibliography*, 152-3 (№№ 266 and 267.a).
[69] For the relevant titles of these Tolstoy volumes, see Turner, *Bibliography*, 191-6 (№№ 327-41).
[70] Matthew Arnold, 'Count Leo Tolstoi', *Fortnightly Review*, vol 42, № 252 (December 1887), 785.

so. To judge by the fact that, when he was working as a British agent In Petrograd in 1917, Somerset Maugham wrote of reading *Anna Karenina* as a boy 'in a blue-bound translation published by Walter Scott',[71] the 'Scott Tolstoy' became memorable. And Russian literature was by no means the firm's only non-British interest in the late 1880s, for it was also introducing the plays of Henrik Ibsen to an Anglophone readership.[72] When, therefore, Stepniak first made contact with David Gordon, it was likely that the company was going to be interested not only in translations of Russian authors, but also in an English-language novel on a Russian subject.

A second reason why Scott's might have been predisposed in Stepniak's favour was that, even if terrorism repelled some people in Britain in the 1880s (because of the murder of Tsar Alexander II in Russia, the trial and conviction of the German terrorist Johann Most in London in 1881, and the Phoenix Park murders in Dublin in 1882),[73] interest in Russia in general was growing. The first edition of Donald Mackenzie Wallace's classic, *Russia*, had been published in 1877. Stepniak's own four non-fiction books (and the many magazine articles on which they had been based) had been keeping Russia in the public eye since 1883. Edmund Noble's *Russian Revolt* of 1885 and W. T. Stead's *Truth about Russia* of 1888 served the same purpose. In the context created by such volumes, Scott's was even more likely to believe that *The Career of a Nihilist* would bring credit to its list.[74]

Scott's may not even have been put off by the apparent radicalism of Stepniak's novel, for a third consideration that ought to be be taken into account in the

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[71] W. Somerset Maugham, *A Writer's Notebook* (London, 2001), 130.
[72] Turner, *Bibliography*, 140-1 (№№ 240.a and 240.b).
[73] Haia Shpayer-Makov, 'The Reception of Peter Kropotkin in Britain, 1886-1917', *Albion* 19 (1987), 373; but see also Hughes, 'British opinion and Russian terrorism', which argues that the British public looked more kindly on Russian terrorists in the 1880s than on terrrorists from other countries.
[74] For a detailed exploration of the Russian theme in late nineteenth-century British publications, see Vaninskaya, ' "Truth abour Russia" '.

explanation of its publication of *Career* is the probability that, at the peak of its activity in the late 1880s and the first half of the 1890s, the people in charge of the company's day-to-day business were radical themselves. Although the owner of the company was a Justice of the Peace and a Conservative member of Newcastle city council, some of the books that came out under his imprint give the impression that he gave his staff considerable leeway. Apart from introducing Ibsen to the British public in 1887, between 1885 and 1894 Scott's published Mathilde Blind's long verse indictment of the Highland clearances; a shilling paperback reprint and then a cheap hardback reprint of George Bernard Shaw's *Fabian Essays in Socialism*; Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England*; and George Moore's proto-feminist novel *Esther Waters*.[75] In different ways, all of these works challenged contemporary orthodoxies. Even if Walter Scott himself was interested only in profit (and he may not have been disappointed in this regard, for by 1896 the company had issued some 875,000 copies of Blatchford's *Merrie England*[76]), publications such as these support John Turner's view that, in its early days, the firm's politics were left of centre.[77] Perhaps, therefore, Scott's published Stepniak's *Career of a Nihilist* for the very reason that some other publishers may have turned it down – because it seemed to approve of revolutionary violence.

Two other considerations that help to explain why Scott's published *The Career of a Nihilist* have to do with, first, a strategic development on which the company seems to have been embarking in 1889, and, second, a general change in the economics of publishing that was under way at that time.

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[75] Turner, *Bibliography*, 102 (№ 102), 206 (№№ 356a-b), 309-10 (№№ 533a-c), 327-8 (№№ 560a-c).
[76] Turner, 'History', i. 232.
[77] Ibid., i. 112-54 (ch. 5, 'Progressive Ideas').

The strategic development was that in 1889, the year Stepniak's novel came out, Scott's began to make a serious commitment to the publication of original works as well as reprints. The firm's 'Great Lives' and 'Contemporary Science' series, both of which consisted of newly commissioned volumes, both began that year. What could have been more natural, at that time, to make *The Career of a Nihilist* the firm's first original novel? Scott's does not appear to have published any original novels prior to 1889.[78]

The general change in the economics of publishing was that, by the end of the 1880s, novels could no longer be issued at ten shillings and sixpence for each of three volumes. The 'three-decker' was dying. When Fisher Unwin published Mathilde Blind's *Tarantella* in 1885, it did so as a three-decker in two volumes (Part Two occupying the second half of Volume One and the first half of Volume Two). Shortly afterwards, it moved to single-volume novels at six shillings each. Stepniak's *Career* was in three parts, but Scott's published it in a single volume at five shillings. In short, the company no longer had to put as much capital into publishing a novel as it would have had to do only a few years previously.[79]

In these ways, it is possible to explain Scott's interest in *Career*. Two individuals, meanwhile, help to explain why Stepniak became interested in Scott's as an outlet for his novel as well as for translations.

The first of the two was the prominent Newcastle solicitor and social activist Robert Spence Watson. A few days after Stepniak exchanged letters with David Gordon of Scott's about the possibility of selling the company translations from

[78] To judge by the chronological listing in Turner, *Bibliography*.
[79] For a brief summary of the economics of publishing in the 1880s, see Smith, *Uncommon Reader*, 18.

Russian, he received an invitation from Spence Watson to stay with him in February 1889 when he was due to speak to the Tyneside Sunday Lecture Society.[80] Spence Watson had been trying to persuade Stepniak to speak to the society since 1886. Stepniak had refused then,[81] and refused again in 1887 on the grounds that he was 'quite unable to move from London this season having two publications to complete this winter'.[82] Having published *The Russian Peasantry*, however, and having all but finished *The Career of a Nihilist*, he had signed up with a 'Lecture and Entertainment Bureau' in Fleet Street,[83] so duly made the journey from London to north-east England and stayed with Spence Watson.

His host was a significant figure both locally and nationally. Although, as a Quaker, he felt unable to stand for election as an MP, he was to serve as President of the National Liberal Federation between 1890 and 1902 and accepted appointment to the Privy Council after the Liberal landslide of December 1906.[84] When Stepniak's only personal friend in Newcastle, Edward Pease, heard where he was to stay at the time of his lecture to the Tyneside Sunday Lecture Society, he wrote to Stepniak as follows:

> Spence Watson is such a very charming man, and his house and family are so typical of the very best middle-class English life, that I am most glad you are going there. He is a Quaker, a lawyer, and perhaps the most influential man out of Parliament in the north of England. He could get a seat anytime and

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[80] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 471, l. 1, Spence Watson to Stepniak, 19 November 1888.
[81] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 385, l. 20, Edward Pease to Stepniak, Newcastle, 17 Oct 1886 (asking 'Why didn't you accept?').
[82] Spence Watson/Weiss papers, SW1/17/81, Stepniak to Spence Watson, 15 May 1887.
[83] Stepniak-Kravchinskii, *V londonskoi emigratsii*, 236 (a reproduction of the advertisement which the lecture agency put out on Stepniak's behalf).
[84] For general information about Spence Watson see David Saunders, 'Challenge, Decline and Revival: The Fortunes of Pacifism in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Newcastle', *Northern History* 54:2 (2017), 235-6.

> anywhere that he chose. He is a very strong Radical, but not a Socialist. He is a man of great culture, a traveller and Alpine climber, has written books on Anglo-Saxon poetry etc etc etc and is still a young man of 45, more or less.[85]

A month after the lecture, Spence Watson wrote to Stepniak with great enthusiasm:

> I have been reading and re-reading your books since you were here, and I want to do what little I can to help you. I am a working man with many claims, but my wish to do however little is strong ... I shall be grateful if you will tell me at any time when and how I can be of service ... Your work is truly noble. I can't, of course, hold some of your views. To some I am intensely opposed, but when the vessel holds good measure of good stuff, why should we quarrel with the shape or pattern?[86]

Stepniak and Spence Watson were to remain close for the rest of Stepniak's life. In early 1890 they established the 'Society of Friends of Russian Freedom', which became Britain's principal anti-tsarist organisation between then and the outbreak of the First World War.[87] Did the first flush of their friendship also explain why Stepniak's twice-rejected novel came out under the imprint of a Tyneside publishing company?

Probably not, for although Spence Watson certainly knew the owner of the Walter Scott Publishing Company,[88] his political opinions were much more radical than Scott's and there is no evidence in his many surviving letters to Stepniak that he played a part in bringing *The Career of a Nihilist* into print. Indeed, there is evidence

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[85] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 385, ll. 43-4, Edward Pease to Stepniak, 11 February 1889.
[86] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 471, ll. 4-5, Spence Watson to Stepniak, 22 March 1889.
[87] See Barry Hollingsworth, 'The Society of Friends of Russian Freedom: English Liberals and Russian Socialists, 1890-1917', *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, new series, 3 (1970), 45-64.
[88] See Spence Watson / Weiss papers, SW1/2/37, John Bright to Spence Watson, 22 April 1880, expressing the wish to 'have another evening at Bentinck House [Walter Scott's home in Newcastle] to talk over the contest [i.e. the recent parliamentary elections]'.

to the contrary, for a day after the novel came out Spence Watson wrote to Stepniak to say, 'I am deep in your novel, but like all your writings, I find it so exciting that I am obliged often to lay it down.'[89] These words do not give the impression that Spence Watson knew much about the novel before its appearance in print. When, furthermore, he wrote a 'Bibliography of the Russian Question' in 1890 (for the first issue of the journal of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom), Stepniak gently reproved him for not making more of the novel.[90]

A second feature of the visit Stepniak paid to Newcastle in early 1889 seems almost certainly to have been the principal reason for the publication of his novel in north-east England. Although, in the long run, establishing a relationship with Robert Spence Watson was to benefit him hugely, the chance of renewing face-to-face contact with his old friend Edward Pease benefited him to a much greater extent in the short term.

Politics had brought Pease and Stepniak together in 1884, when Pease was one of the founders of Britain's early socialist Fabian Society and Stepniak was on the point of moving to London.[91] Between 1886 and 1889, when Pease was training as a carpenter in Newcastle, the two men had stayed in touch by letter. The progress of *The Career of a Nihilist* played a large part in their correspondence. In September 1886 Pease asked: ‘How jogs your novel? You must write something that will eclipse old Tolstoi, if you want to take by storm English opinion'; the following month he wrote, ‘I am most glad that your novel goes so well’; in January 1888 he observed

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[89] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 471, l. 6, Spence Watson to Stepniak, 16 November 1889.
[90] R.S.W. (Robert Spence Watson), 'The Bibliography of the Russian Question', *Free Russia* 1:1 (1890), 19-20; Spence Watson/Weiss papers, SW1/17/91, Stepniak to Spence Watson, 14 April 1890. Spence Watson surely played down *The Career of a Nihilist* because of the violence its characters employed, for, although he deplored tsarist autocracy, he was unequivocal in his pacifism: Saunders, 'Challenge, Decline and Revival', 236-43.
[91] Slatter, 'Stepniak and the Friends of Russia', esp. 34-6.

that ‘You go on as usual I suppose, always grinding away at your novel’; in May 1888 he wondered 'what you are doing about the novel’; and just before Stepniak's arrival in Newcastle in February 1889 he made clear that he expected 'to hear all about the novel’.[92] In view of these frequent references, it was only to be expected that, when the two men met in person in Newcastle at the end of February 1889, they would discuss what to do about finding a publisher for *The Career of a Nihilist* in the light of its rejection by Smith Elder and Swan Sonnenschein.

Pease was in a position to help. Having persuaded Stepniak to send him the completed manuscript, he wrote a long appraisal of it for Will Dircks, a fellow socialist who worked for the Walter Scott Publishing Company as 'publisher's reader'. The two of them saw *Career* through the press, Pease correcting Stepniak's English, Dircks dealing with the manuscript at Scott's. The role of David Gordon, Scott's manager, seems to have been confined to accepting Dircks's recommendation that the firm take the novel and negotiating with Stepniak about technicalities such as the price of the book and its publication in the United States.[93]

And so, eventually, *The Career of a Nihilist* found its way into print. Writing a novel had been a relatively unusual thing for a practical Russian revolutionary to do, and writing one in a language other than Russian had been unusual indeed. Finding a publisher had not been easy. Had the process been worthwhile? Did completing

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[92] RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 385, ll. 15-16, Pease to Stepniak, 19 September (1886); l. 18, 17 October 1886; l. 34, 25 January 1888; l. 40, 20 May (1888); ll. 43-5, 11 February 1889.

[93] For the letters that Pease wrote to Stepniak between 3 March and 23 June 1889 about the correction and publication of *The Career of a Nihilist*, see RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 385, ll. 46-67. Pease's long appraisal of the novel is at ibid., ll. 50-3. Charles Moser published Stepniak's response to the appraisal in 'A Nihilist's Career', pp. 60-3. By the time of the response, Pease had passed the manuscript to Dircks (RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 385, l. 49). Dircks's first letter to Stepniak about the novel is undated, but correlation of it with Pease's letters to Stepniak suggests that he wrote it on 16 April (RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, d. 269, l. 1). David Gordon's letters to Stepniak about the process of publishing the novel are at RGALI, f. 1158, op. 1, ed. khr. 251, ll. 6-22 (11 May to 4 November 1889).

The Career of a Nihilist and securing its publication provide Stepniak with more than personal satisfaction?

Contemporary reviews were not numerous. Although *The Times* noticed that the novel was on the point of publication,[94] it seems not to have reviewed it. As we have seen, *The Athenaeum* admired certain features of the book, but regretted its failure to advance solutions to Russia's problems.[95] On Tyneside, a recently established liberal daily newspaper thought the book 'very promising' and found Stepniak's style 'vivid and palpitating',[96] but, as we have seen, the principal Newcastle daily did not find *The Career of a Nihilist* 'agreeable'.[97] Nevertheless, sales were sufficient to warrant a second impression (to which Stepniak added the preface in which he took on his critics); *Career* excited Robert Spence Watson at the time when he and Stepniak were establishing the long-lived Society of Friends of Russian Freedom; the novel confirmed Stepniak's standing as a writer in the eyes of his two significant literary converts (the novelist Ethel Lilian Voynich and the translator Constance Garnett); whatever its success or failure, it did not put Stepniak off continuing to write fiction (albeit in Russian rather than English); it appeared in Russian after Stepniak's death (in a translation made by his wife); and, after the death of Stalin, the Russian version came out in large editions in the Soviet Union.

Thus, despite an initial reception which could at best be called 'mixed', *The Career of a Nihilist* did something to assist Stepniak in the promotion of his interests. On the other hand, the political stance of the novel's protagonists soon disqualified it from enthusing Russian revolutionaries. Although violent tactics had by no means

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[94] *The Times*, 20 September 1889, 5.
[95] *Athenaeum*, 30 November 1889, 739-40.
[96] *Newcastle Daily* Leader, 16 November 1889, 4.
[97] *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 18 November 1889, 4.

disappeared from the revolutionary armoury when Stepniak was writing and publishing *The Career of a Nihilist*, they were at a low ebb. Liberalism (in the sense of the quest for a solution to Russia's difficulties through the medium of representative institutions) had not gone away, and Marxism (in the sense of mass worker activism rather than individual heroism) was beginning to make inroads. When, therefore, Stepniak argued (in the preface to the second impression of the novel) that the key thing about his protagonists was their enthusiasm rather than the violent individual escapaded in which they engaged, the argument seemed, at that time, contrived. Terrorism re-surfaced as a revolutionary tactic in Russia in the first years of the twentieth century, but Boris Savinkov, another Russian political activist who wrote fiction (and himself a one-time man of violence), was to undermine 'the myth of the noble terrorist' in novels of 1909 and 1912.[98] By then, ideologically speaking, *The Career of a Nihilist* was beginning to look like a dead-end.

For several reasons, however, *The Career of a Nihilist* deserves to be restored to view. First, it reminds us that Stepniak was much more than an assassin. Although his literary career has attracted less attention than his non-literary activities (and his fiction less than his non-fiction), he was a literary figure as well as a man of violence. Second, his decision to write a novel in English shows that he was capable of devising new revolutionary methods. His general practice of working with the inhabitants of the country in which he found himself (rather than merely with fellow Russian and continental European exiles) differentiated him markedly from the majority of contemporary revolutionaries. The idea of writing a novel for English

[98] Daniel Beer, 'The Morality of Terror: Contemporary Responses to Political Violence in Boris Savinkov's *The Pale Horse* (1909) and *What Never Happened* (1912)', *Slavonic and East European Review* 85 (2007), 25-46.

rather than Russian readers was unique to him. Rightly or wrongly, he thought *Career* would 'do more to win adherents to our cause than serious and more scientific works'.[99] Finally, it is important to note the way in which *The Career of a Nihilist* found its way into print. The process which culminated in its publication on Tyneside highlights a company whose openness to left-of-centre ideas differentiated it from some of its metropolitan competitors, and says something about two late nineteenth-century British radicals, Robert Spence Watson and Edward Pease, whose activities and achievements are not always estimated at their true worth.

[99] Spence Watson/Weiss papers, SW1/17/91, Stepniak to Spence Watson, 14 April 1890.