PART II

THE FATE OF THE OPPOSITION PARTIES

CHAPTER VII

THE LEFT SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARIES

At the time of the bolshevik revolution the left wing of the Socialist Revolutionaries offered its support to the Bolsheviks and soon after set itself up as a separate political party. In December 1917 its members formed a coalition with the new ruling party; on 6 July of the following year they were fighting the Bolsheviks in the streets of Moscow and Petrograd. These Socialist Revolutionaries had been won over to the Bolsheviks by their resolute policies on peace and on the land question. The gulf between the non-marxist Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks was in reality far greater than that between the marxist internationalist Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. Yet, carried away by enthusiasm in which emotion pre-dominated over reason, the more extreme Socialist Revolutionaries attempted a union which the greater foresight of Martov's left menshevik group realized was impossible.

The Left Socialist Revolutionaries originated during the war when a small number of Socialist Revolutionaries revolted against the support of national defence which the majority of their party advocated. The veteran Natanson and Victor Chernov had been very close to the Zimmerwald Left. Soon after the February Revolution dissatisfaction with the policy of their party leaders led to the growth of a vocal, and ever increasing, socialist revolutionary left wing, which at times spoke the same language as the Bolsheviks. Natanson, the peasant leader with the face of a rabbi, headed this left wing and became one of the founders of the new party.¹ Chernov,

¹ Natanson had been for years on the left wing of his party, and was one of the oldest, as well as the most outstanding, socialist revolutionary figures. Wolfe (p. 389) suggests that the way for a coalition between the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks may already have been paved by co-operation.
however, disappointed the expectations of the left by taking office in the Provisional Goverment on his return from exile to Petrograd, and by vainly endeavouring to maintain within his party a rapidly diminishing centre. Another left leader was Maria Spiridonova, who had captured popular imagination in 1906 when as a young girl she had assassinated a provincial governor responsible for the suppression of peasant revolts. Her popularity among the peasants was almost legendary. Among the younger left leaders were Boris Kamkov (Katz) and V. A. Karelin.

At the Third Congress of the Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow, on 18 May 1917, the left wing, including Spiridinova, Natanson, Kamkov, Proshyan, and Steinberg, demanded a programme of no coalition with the bourgeois parties, an all-socialist government, an immediate peace, and socialization of land. Early in July they published a declaration that the official policy of their party was calculated to alienate the masses, and would tend to 'transfer the centre of party support to that part of the population which, by reason of its class composition, cannot stimulate a policy of real, revolutionary socialism'. When the Provisional Government after July reintroduced the death penalty at the front, the left wing of the Socialist Revolutionaries drew even closer to the Bolsheviks, who at that time in common with all Russian socialist parties were still opposed to the death penalty. By August the socialist revolutionary left wing could command well over a third of the votes at a party conference, and the Petrograd organization of Socialist Revolutionaries went over in its entirety to the left. The first open revolt of the socialist revolutionary left wing took place on 28 October, in the Council of the Republic (Pre-Parliament). Its members declared that

between the more extreme members of the socialist revolutionary party and the fighting groups for expropriation and hold-ups which Lenin secretly maintained. Natanson spent some years after 1905 in Baku, the centre of this activity, and may therefore have had the opportunity of co-operating in these exploits with the Bolshevik Krasin, who was the brain behind them.

See a manuscript essay by Miss A. Steinberg, 'The Left Socialist Revolutionaries', in the British Library of Political and Economic Science, at p. 36.

They opposed it throughout up to the seizure of power, and one of the first acts of the Second Soviet Congress was to repeal Kerensky's reimposition of it. If Trotsky is right, Lenin regarded the repeal as madness, and only yielded to the persuasion of Kamenev and Trotsky in view of public feeling, and on the understanding that shooting would nevertheless be resorted to 'when there is no other way'. See his Lenin, pp. 133-4.