Ten days before 'Bloody Sunday' in St Petersburg, Dr Robert Spence Watson drew up an appeal in his capacity as President of Britain’s Society of Friends of Russian Freedom. Writing at his home in Bensham, a district of Gateshead on the south side of the River Tyne in north-east England, he declared that ‘There has never been a time …when it was more necessary, in the direct interests of our work, that we should be furnished with funds sufficient to carry it on with the greatest vigour’.¹ Four days after ‘Bloody Sunday’, on the opposite side of the River Tyne in a western district of the city of Newcastle, ‘A meeting of Elswick workmen was held during the dinner hour at the Water Street entrance to the works … to protest against the massacre in St Petersburg. There was only one speaker, Mr Flynn, who, in vigorous language, denounced the sham Russian Government which had committed those unspeakable atrocities upon workmen and peaceable citizens’.² Thus both sides of the Tyne, and representatives of both the privileged and the unprivileged parts of the Tyneside population, seemed to agree on the need to further the Russian revolution of 1905.

North-east England looked as if it was about to provide one more instance of that enthusiasm for foreign liberation movements which the British had evinced during the Greeks’ struggle for independence in the 1820s, the Hungarians’ battles with Vienna in 1848-9, the Italians’ quest for unity in the 1850s and 1860s, and the Serb and Bulgarian conflict with the Turks in the mid-1870s.

Appearances, however, can be deceptive. It is misleading to say of British people in general and Tynesiders in particular that they were unanimous in their attitude towards Russia at the time of the Revolution of 1905. Robert Spence Watson was a lifelong Liberal, Charles Flynn an adherent of the Independent Labour Party. Both men sought the collapse of the tsarist regime, but they disagreed about what should replace it. To the left of Flynn, furthermore, a German-Russian revolutionary called Heinrich Matthäus Fischer who had been living in the Benwell district of Newcastle since 1901 was willing, in the pursuit of change in Russia, to countenance more forthright methods than almost all the people around him. He would
demonstrate, in 1906 and 1907, that a commitment to socialism did not preclude a ‘direct action’ approach to the maintenance of the Russian Empire’s revolutionary momentum. Discussing the differences among these people may illustrate the notion that if there had been a ‘mid-Victorian consensus’ in British politics, it was breaking down, and may support the idea that one of the reasons why the Russian Revolution of 1905 enjoyed only partial success was that the people who were trying to further it did not agree on their objectives or how they should go about achieving them.

In the nineteenth century, British antipathy to the tsarist regime ran very deep. Not many books on Russian matters were as judicious as Mackenzie Wallace’s *Russia of 1877*. Two considerations underpinned Britain’s hostility: her material rivalry with the Russian Empire and the ideological incompatibility of the British and Russian political systems. The material rivalry dated back at least as far as Catherine the Great’s ‘Armed Neutrality’ of 1780. Although Britain and Russia fought on the same side in the Napoleonic Wars, they did so only in the earlier and later stages. After 1815, the two states were almost always at loggerheads. Their rivalry showed up especially in the Balkans and Central Asia. Although, after Germany and Austria went into alliance in 1879, it was always likely that they were going to resolve their differences over the Balkans in order to stand in the way of future Germanic advances in that direction, differences in Central Asia remained. New differences, meanwhile, arose over China; Britain went into alliance with Japan in 1902 partly in order to give herself a bulwark against Russian encroachment on her eastern interests. When war broke out between Russia and Japan at the beginning of 1904, Anglo-Russian relations deteriorated. When the Russian fleet fired on British trawlers off the Dogger Bank in the North Sea on 21 October 1904, they plummeted.

Geopolitical friction between the two countries exacerbated their ideological antipathy. Nineteenth-century British commentators made much of the fundamental irreconcilability of the Russian and British political systems, holding the former to be interventionist but the latter permissive and facultative. Escapees from the lands of the tsar tended to confirm their analysis. British officials held that the right of the inhabitants of the British Isles to freedom of speech extended even to non-Britons. More than one foreign country sought clarification of this aspect of British policy. Uruguay, for example, enquired of the British Foreign Office in January 1897 what view it took of ‘anarchist’ activity within the frontiers of Britain; a clerk in the Home Office replied that ‘to be an Anarchist is not in itself any offence against English law, any more than it is to hold any other theory with regard to social or political questions.’

At a time when revolutionary movements seemed to be gaining ground not only within the Russian Empire but in many parts of Europe, the tsarist regime found the British attitude to the rights of foreigners on British soil difficult to accept. Along with various other continental European countries, Russia tried in the years before 1905 to put in place international agreements on the control of revolutionaries. When it sought British adhesion to them, however, the British would not play ball. Lord Salisbury, Britain’s Prime Minister between 1895 and 1902, expressed his country’s position on revolutionary movements at the time of the Rome Anti-Anarchist conference of 1898. ‘In this country,’ he wrote, ‘and possibly in others, great objection would be felt to any attempt to meet the dangers of the anarchist conspiracy by restraining or encroaching upon the liberty of the rest of the community.’ Two years later, after the assassination
of King Umberto of Italy, a clerk in the British Foreign Office noted that the Russian government was trying to persuade other governments to ‘make it penal to advocate anarchist doctrines even where no crime is directly recommended’. ‘Such legislation,’ he went on, ‘would in Lord Salisbury’s opinion be quite impossible in England’. When Britain was invited by Germany and Russia in May 1904 to sign up to an international ‘Secret Protocol’ on Anarchist Crimes, her Commissioner of Police raised multiple objections. Britain's police systems, he said, were too decentralized to allow the establishment of the sort of Central Bureau envisaged by the Protocol; Britain was unable to engage in the sort of political surveillance which was to be found on the continent because it lacked an internal passport system; the British police had no power to make ‘domiciliary visits’; and they could find out about revolutionaries only by making use of informers, who would not help them if they thought that the information they supplied was to be communicated to foreigners. The Foreign Secretary pointed all this out to the Russian Ambassador. In November 1906 Britain turned down a request from the St Petersburg Department of Police to be allowed to communicate with its London equivalent directly (rather than through the Russian Embassy in London); ‘An imprudent policeman might land us in a most awkward political situation’. Tynesiders reflected the general British hostility towards Russia from at least the 1840s. The Russia-related activities of local opinion-formers such as Joseph Cowen and Robert Spence Watson reached the wider community, for when Heinrich Fischer took up residence in the Newcastle area in 1901 he found that, ‘one way or another’, his fellow workers ‘were not badly informed about the condition of things in Russia’; they gave him to understand that the source of their knowledge was ‘the agitation which in his own day Peter Kropotkin conducted throughout England’, agitation in which the ‘anarchist prince’ had been assisted by a wealthy Newcastle radical and newspaper owner called ‘Robert Cowen’. By prefacing Cowen’s surname with Spence Watson’s first name, Fischer inadvertently recognized that between them these leaders of Tyneside society had arranged at least five speeches by Kropotkin in Newcastle in the 1880s and 1890s.

On the face of it, then, the readiness of all sorts of British people to express opposition to tsarist despotism seemed to be unqualified at the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, however, the coin was two-sided. British concern about the extent of immigration from the Russian Empire had been growing since the 1880s. Although Britain’s political police (the ‘Special Branch’) had come into being in the late nineteenth century in order to monitor subversion on the part of the Irish, it soon began to take an interest in other sorts of political activist. In 1897-8 it played a key part in the incrimination and trial in London of Vladimir Burtsev. Although, officially, Britain continued to maintain that people could not be prosecuted in British courts merely for the opinions they held, behind the scenes some people in responsible positions were prepared to enunciate modified versions of the country’s libertarian position. In 1898, a month after Lord Salisbury said that it was impossible to curtail the liberty of British people in order to ‘meet the dangers of the anarchist conspiracy’, a clerk in the Home Office referred to the recent prosecution of Burtsev in terms which made it clear that he did not think the trial had been a unique event: ‘might it not be well to remind FO [the Foreign Office],’ the clerk noted, ‘that English law allows of the punishment of prisoners who conspire or incite to murder abroad.
whether their motives are political or not, that there is no hesitation about putting this law into force and that a Russian extremist has recently been convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for a breach of it in respect of a newspaper intended for circulation abroad.\textsuperscript{15} Despite the fact that in 1904 Britain’s Commissioner of Police objected to the idea of British adhesion to the international 'Secret Protocol' on Anarchist Crimes, ‘At the same time H. M. Govt intimated that they would assist as far as possible in the proposed arrangements and that the Metropolitan Police undertook to notify known departures abroad of dangerous anarchists, and would do all possible to get credible information as to plots to commit crimes abroad and would communicate such information to the foreign authorities concerned’.\textsuperscript{16} Clearly, ‘official’ Britain was by no means wholehearted in its opposition to the Russian Empire. London rather than St Petersburg appears to have been the prime mover in the long series of exchanges which eventually gave rise to the Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907.\textsuperscript{17}

Signs of British sympathy for the tsarist regime at more or less the time of the 1905 Revolution were not confined to the ranks of British officialdom. Although most British journalists who specialized on Russia - Harold Williams, Bernard Pares, Robert Wilton - tended to back the reform movement, Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, who was more distinguished than any of them, ‘considered that throughout the revolutionary period of 1905-1907, the tsarist regime’s actions had been justified’.\textsuperscript{18} A second British journalist, W. T. Stead (a Tynesider, though he had moved to London in the 1880s), made an extended visit to Russia between late August and late October 1905 whose purpose was principally to reconcile the emergent political parties with the forces of order. It came to nothing, but Stead did not draw the conclusion that ‘official’ Russia had to give more ground. On the contrary, he was still supportive of the tsar in November 1907, when he wrote to Robert Spence Watson to complain about the latter’s objection to Russia’s chairmanship of the second Hague peace conference. ‘The Russians,’ he wrote, ‘have used their influence at the Conference uniformly as that of moderators with a strong bias in favour of progressive proposals’.\textsuperscript{19}

Robert Spence Watson, however, continued to seek fundamental change in Russia. After Burtsev’s arrest in London in 1897, he wrote to the Tory Home Secretary to point out what might happen ‘if papers which have been taken possession of by the English police should be communicated by them to the Russian police’.\textsuperscript{20} In 1898 he asked the Liberal grandee Earl Grey to use his good offices with the Tory Home Secretary to ameliorate Burtsev’s prison conditions.\textsuperscript{21} Six years later he still found it remarkable that the British authorities had ‘actually prosecuted [Burtsev] upon the charge of inciting Russians to kill the Tzar’.\textsuperscript{22} By then, his attention had turned to ‘the extraordinary Aliens Bill which had been introduced in the House of Commons’, which ‘gave almost an absolute power to the Secretary of State over the liberties, and practically the lives, of political refugees’. ‘No man,’ he believed, ‘should be entrusted with such a power’.\textsuperscript{23} By this time – 1904 – Spence Watson was angry. A ‘great causes’ politician,\textsuperscript{24} he had found in Russian affairs, not for the first time, an issue which he considered to be worthy of his full attention. The pericarditis from which he suffered in the last part of his life made concentration on one issue at a time even more natural for him than it had been formerly; and in the young David Soskice he had just acquired a new and vigorous editor of Free Russia, the journal of the ‘Society of Friends of Russian Freedom’ of which he was President.\textsuperscript{25}
Immediately after ‘Bloody Sunday’, Spence Watson permitted Soskice to use his name ‘for a Fund to assist the strikers’. ‘I can and will do anything in my power,’ he said, ‘to relieve the necessities of those who are being so shockingly treated and whose needs must be very great.’ Later in the revolutionary year he cast doubt on the Russian regime’s hesitant moves in the direction of political change: ‘As for the so-called constitution,’ he wrote, ‘from the first it seemed to me to be simply a dodge’. In September 1905 he did not doubt that ‘The autocracy must give way very much further than it has done if it is to avoid the fate which ultimately awaits all one-man governments founded upon the woes of the people who are misgoverned’. In late October he wrote Soskice a long letter about the massacres at Baku. In early November he described himself as ‘thankful that the Tzar and Witte are not trusted’, and lamented ‘What a mockery of good intentions are the massacres of the Jews!’ ‘[T]he one crumb of solid comfort’ he perceived at that time was ‘that the old rogue Pobiedonostseff is gone - if indeed that be true’. When, in the middle of November, he learned that Soskice intended to take advantage of Nicholas II’s recent amnesty and go back to Russia, he confessed that ‘although I am sure that these matters are much better left to the people of the country, I have had a most intolerable craving for the last 3 months to go over and see and hear for myself’. In mid-December, when Soskice was on the point of actually leaving, Spence Watson wished him good luck, felt that he ‘may be of signal service there’, and was ‘only afraid of matters getting prolonged and of some autocrat coming forward who has ability to work himself into a position of power’. After Soskice had gone, he returned to the hostility he felt towards Britain’s Aliens Act, a measure which he was certain made it harder for political refugees to base themselves in England.

Although Spence Watson was probably Tyneside’s most vocal liberal on Russian matters in 1905, he was by no means the only one. The principal Newcastle daily newspaper, the Chronicle, maintained a very public commitment to the idea of liberal change in Russia throughout the year. The highpoint of the liberal Tyneside response to the Russian Revolution of 1905 was perhaps a public meeting on behalf of Russia’s Jews which took place at the Lovaine Hall in central Newcastle on 22 November. The Jewish population of Newcastle was well established. The synagogue on Leazes Park Road in the town centre celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1905. Many local Jews were of east European provenance. The Newcastle Jewish Board of Guardians received 344 applications for financial support in 1904 on behalf of 158 people, ‘of whom 120 were Russians’. One of the Newcastle daily newspapers pointed out in a long leader of 2 May 1905 that the political changes which had been taking place in Russia did not yet include relief for Jews. Shortly afterwards it reported the murder of Jews in Zhitomir and a gathering of ‘Newcastle Zionists’. A new young rabbi, B. N. Michaelson or Michelson, was inducted at the Leazes Park Road synagogue on 9 September. Preaching on 11 November, he announced the forthcoming public protest meeting and pointed out that ‘As yet those who denounced the Bulgarian atrocities [of 1876] so vigorously have had little to say about the barbarities committed by those who, at the time of the Russo-Turkish war were looked to as the interpreters of the will of Holy Russia, the saviour of mankind’. The meeting itself was a major event. There was a ‘large attendance’.

Although Spence Watson was too ill to attend, the rabbi read out a letter from him in which he wrote amongst other things that ‘It has been carefully computed in late years
that, in the reign of Terror of the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, from 1,400 to 2,000 persons perished. I see that it is stated in Kischineff alone and in Odessa many more of your co-religionists have been shamefully put to death. It is appalling that in this twentieth century such atrocities can be perpetrated in Europe'. From the chair, Thomas Burt, MP for Morpeth, went so far as to say that ‘there could not be a shadow of a doubt ... that the authorities of the [Russian] Government ... had connived at these atrocities’. A local councillor pointed out that ‘a more orderly set of people, a more sober, law-abiding people [than Newcastle’s Jews] could not be found anywhere’. Seconding one of the meeting’s protest motions, a certain John Havelock argued that if the British ‘should close their doors to these poor refugees from Russian despotism, then they would go a long way to deserve that charge that they had done something to shut the gates of mercy’. Rabbi Michelson claimed at the end of the meeting that ‘the atrocities had been so fiendish that they could find no parallel even in the most barbarous annals of the most barbarous peoples’. The speaker who seconded the vote of thanks for Burt’s chairmanship recalled the days when Joseph Cowen had led Newcastle in its championship of oppressed continental Europeans. The liberal tradition of the city appeared to be in fine shape.

Public meetings of this kind were not unusual in England in 1905, but the one in Newcastle differed from the others in that a politically active German-Russian émigré, Heinrich Matthäus Fischer, took exception to it. Fischer thought that Thomas Burt ‘said nothing but liberal pap (razmaznia)’; he urged the assembled company ‘to address yourself not to the Russian government but to the Jews themselves, whom you should call upon to fight the Russian government and summon to organized and armed resistance, whilst placing all the blame for these pogroms on the money-bag owners, the Lords Rothschild’. In Fischer’s opinion, liberal disquiet was an inadequate response to the events of 1905 in Russia.

Up to a point, Fischer was right to say that the response of ‘liberal’ Newcastle to the pogroms in Russia left something to be desired. Spence Watson, for example, took the view that ‘men holding authority’ had ‘clearly ... instigated’ the pogroms in Russia, but he specifically exempted Witte and his circle from these strictures. Thomas Burt not only held that the Conservative British Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne, ‘had acted with great promptness in making representations to the Russian Government’, but also doubted whether it was time for Russian Jews to emigrate en masse ‘to some colony by themselves’ and believed that ‘The principle of brotherhood would solve this matter’. Another MP at the Lovaine Hall meeting claimed that ‘the Tsar must have had good thoughts towards his people when the [October] manifesto was issued’. In view of these bland sentiments it was perhaps not surprising that at least one person in the audience wanted to take a stronger line.

Greater outspokenness would not have been enough, however, to render the politics of Newcastle’s liberals acceptable to Heinrich Fischer, for his objectives were socialist rather than liberal and the methods he was prepared to employ included ‘organized and armed resistance’. Socialism was beginning to make a mark on Tyneside. ‘The first socialist candidate to fight a parliamentary election in Newcastle was Fred Hammill in 1895.’ The city returned its first Labour MP at the General Election of 1906. Edward Hartley sought unavailingly to capture Newcastle’s other parliamentary seat for socialism in an exciting by-election of 1908. Although the north-east of England did not become a Labour stronghold until after the First World
War, the wind of change was blowing. Indeed, there were already enough socialists in the region for differences to have appeared among them. Fischer was to the left, for example, of Charles Flynn, the speaker at the meeting of Elswick shipyard workers who appeared at the beginning of this essay. He gives the impression in his memoirs that he attended Flynn’s meeting. Whether or not he did, the two men were certainly acquainted. Early in February 1905 Fischer expressed an intention to write to a body called the North-East Coast Federation of Socialist Societies to ask whether it would organize meetings about the Russian movement at which he could be the speaker. On 9 May 1905 Flynn wrote to Fischer in his capacity as Honorary Secretary of this Federation. It is probable, therefore, that Fischer and Flynn were in touch throughout 1905, and it is clear from what Fischer did with the letter that he received from Flynn that he thought of him as a man whose socialism differed from his own. Flynn was writing to enquire about the best place to send funds collected on Tyneside for the Russian revolutionary movement. Fischer copied the letter to Lenin in Geneva, adding that its author had nothing to do with Britain’s Social Democratic Federation but was an adherent of the more moderate Independent Labour Party. Fischer, therefore, was already in the business not just of socialism, but socialism of a particular kind. He was probably about as left-wing as it was possible to be in the England of 1905.

I have attempted a full account of Fischer’s life elsewhere. Here, it need only be said that ‘Bloody Sunday’ in St Petersburg appears to have galvanized him. Apart from speaking at Flynn’s Elswick meeting (if he did), he collected money for Russian strikers with the help of a Newcastle councillor for Benwell and the members of a free-standing club called the Newcastle Socialist Institute. He bought envelopes and stamps in order to post Lenin’s journals Vpered and Proletarii to Russia. In connection with his money-raising endeavours, he spoke frequently at branch meetings of his trade union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. He hosted other Russian émigrés who came to Newcastle. He spoke at a branch meeting of the Social Democratic Federation in South Shields. He was delighted to learn that the Bolsheviks were to hold a congress in London. With a handful of like-minded fellow Russians in Newcastle, he founded an official cell of the Bolshevik fraction of the RSDLP. He organized his own meeting on behalf of Russian Jews at the Newcastle Socialist Institute and arranged for Lenin’s London lieutenant, Nikolai Alekseev, to come up from the capital to speak to it. He canvassed among the Russian crews of the Ermak and the Smolensk when they were in dock on the Tyne for repair, enjoying more success, by his own account, with the latter than the former.

Although some of these activities sound like those of Spence Watson, Fischer was prepared to countenance a wider range of methods. He did not devote himself solely to speech-making, meetings, collecting money and disseminating literature. In mid-1906 he became personally involved in the transportation of weapons and ammunition to the Russian Empire.

Spence Watson, a Quaker, rejected military methods on principle. When writing to David Soskice immediately after ‘Bloody Sunday’, he pointed out: ‘I am President of the Peace Society and I cannot subscribe to buy ammunition and the like’. Three days later he wrote: ‘It may be that you ... mean to start a fund for the purpose of supplying what I might call “war material”.’ I very much doubt if a fund of that kind would receive any considerable support. It may be that there are rich men who would
support it, taking quite a different view from that which I entertain on the matter, but they would have to be found out individually, and I do not know any such'.

To judge by the way Fischer behaved in 1906 and 1907, he disagreed strongly with this sort of quietism. He was not, of course, the only person in Britain in 1905 who thought that it was time to use force against the tsarist regime. Nor were like-minded people to be found only among the ranks of Russian exiles, for in ‘the late winter of 1904’ a businessman called S. G. Hobson began sending revolvers to Riga in barrels of lard on behalf of the Socialist Revolutionary Nikolai Chaikovskii. When the contact man in Riga fell silent, Hobson even travelled to the Baltic provinces on Chaikovskii’s behalf to find out what had gone wrong. On his return, he was warned by ‘a detective from Scotland Yard’ that Lord Lansdowne, the British Foreign Secretary, had received a letter about him from the Russian Consul-General. ‘Obviously,’ he related, ‘my wild and whirling career as a hardware merchant and lard exporter had reached an inglorious end’.

Gun-running as a whole, however, did not come to an end. Much ink has been spilt on the voyage of the John Grafton from Britain’s Channel Islands via Hull or Newcastle or Edinburgh to the coast of Finland in the late summer of 1905. Even after the very public fiasco in which that voyage ended, Britain remained a suitable place from which to despatch weapons, for, ultimately, the British authorities set greater store by the profits of British arms dealers than they did by the internal security of the Russian Empire. They seem to have warned off Hobson, but they did not accede to requests from Russian diplomats for more systematic intervention in Russia-related aspects of the British arms trade. In late January 1906 Sergei Sazonov wrote from Russia’s London Embassy to Sir Edward Grey, Britain’s new Liberal Foreign Secretary, to point out that Denmark was collaborating with St Petersburg in the latter’s attempt to enforce a ban on the importation of firearms into the Polish, Baltic and Finnish parts of the tsar’s domains. Grey was less cooperative than the Danes had been. He would do no more than place a note about the Russian ban in the London Gazette. In his opinion, ‘the circumstances of the case would not warrant His Majesty’s government in prohibiting the export of arms and munitions of war from this country’. When Sazonov wrote a second time, the British authorities went to greater lengths to justify their attitude. The Foreign Office wrote to the Home Office, the Home Office to the Customs. Customs pointed out that British exporters who were banned from consigning arms to Russia would simply send their goods to intermediate ports. A civil servant in the Home Office recorded Britain’s economic grounds for objecting to the Russian request. ‘It is difficult,’ he wrote, ‘to forecast the influence on the explosives trade of a measure of this kind [the ban sought by St Petersburg]. I can however if called on quote a somewhat analogous case in which a very considerable trade in explosives was entirely sacrificed in deference to the representations of a foreign government, - such trade being at once absorbed and retained by another European Power which had declined to be influenced by such representations’. Later in 1906 a clerk in the Foreign Office pointed out in response to yet another Russian request for action on the arms trade that ‘HMG refrained from interfering a few years ago with the trade in arms etc clandestinely introduced from Trinidad into Venezuela to assist in the Revolution there’. Adding insult to injury, at the end of 1906 and in 1907 Britain further refused to comply with Russian requests that misuse of explosives be made an extraditable offence under the Anglo-Russian Extradition Treaty of
Thus Britain never went beyond the note about the Russian ban on the importation of weapons that it had placed in the *London Gazette* after Sazonov wrote for the first time.

To judge by a querulous response to that note from a member of the ‘North of England Protecting and Indemnity Association’ (whose office was in central Newcastle), Tyneside was likely to have been a particularly good part of the United Kingdom from which to attempt the covert despatch of weapons to the Russian Empire. The region certainly had a strong interest in the arms trade, for its most famous nineteenth-century manufacturer, Lord Armstrong (founder of the Elswick Works where Charles Flynn had spoken), was a sort of ‘English Krupp’. Ordinary people in the region were used to explosives, for they were employed extensively in the local coalmines. To these reasons why Tyneside was a good place for a Russian revolutionary to contemplate gun-running, two more may be added. The natural orientation of much of the region’s trade meant that ships sailed constantly from its many ports to places on the Baltic. Local surveillance by the police, finally, was minimal. Although one of the reasons why the British government chose not to monitor the activities of ‘anarchists’ outside London had to do with its commitment to the principle of civil liberty, another was that it thought that most of the people at issue ‘reside[d] within the Metropolitan area’; ‘with few exceptions,’ a British official said, ‘they are aliens, and they find in the Metropolis facilities as regards their native language and communication with friends and countrymen which are not available elsewhere’.

For all these reasons Heinrich Fischer was well-placed, on Tyneside, to turn his attention to gun-running. In a letter to Spence Watson at the beginning of 1906, Feliks Volkhovskii asserted ‘that the centre of gravity of all Russian political activity has been fully and entirely transferred to Russia. There is nothing to be done here [ie. in western Europe] to help the movement, new possibilities having sprung up within the rebellious Empire’. The gun-running in which Fischer engaged in 1906 and 1907 was to cast doubt on this declaration.

Fischer’s two accounts of his gun-running may be summarized, roughly, as follows. At the request of a Latvian by the name of Alfred Nagel, who had located him through the newspaper of Britain’s Social Democratic Federation, he agreed to receive, store and despatch weapons and ammunition to the Russian Empire. British socialists helped him. Latvian stokers on ships between north-east England and the Baltic undertook the delivery of the material. The conspiracy worked well for some months, but fell apart when the British police lit upon a cache of weapons in Sunderland and then a letter from Nagel which led them to Fischer in Newcastle. Trials ensued in Sunderland, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Glasgow, though Fischer himself was not prosecuted because no weapons were found at his home and Nagel disappeared from view.

Many of these details can be verified. The key book on the ‘first Bolshevik fighting organization’ points out that it was reinforced in 1906 by Latvians who left their homeland in the wake of the tsarist regime’s ‘punitive expeditions’ of that year. It was not surprising that there were people whom Fischer calls ‘Latvian comrades’ on ‘Russian steamers’, for the Latvian maritime tradition dates back at least to the seventeenth century. To judge by the fact that a mid-nineteenth-century Latvian intellectual ‘suggested that Russian Imperial power and the interest of the Latvian
peasantry coincided in the area of seapower and maritime trade’, Latvians in the late
Russian Empire may have been actively encouraged to go to sea. In 1905 and 1906
Fischer’s name appeared as that of the secretary of the Newcastle branch of Britain’s
Social Democratic Federation in the latter’s weekly newspaper. The ‘English
comrade’ whom Fischer refers to as the manager of his store of arms in Newcastle
turns out to have been a certain Thomas Dugger Keast, whom the investigating
authorities at first thought to be a Russian or Polish Jew but later decided was a
Cornishman from Launceston. The ‘space in the business part of town’ which
Fischer says that he hired in Newcastle was a room at 42 Leazes Park Road in central
Newcastle, a terraced house about fifty yards up the hill from the synagogue where
Michelson had announced his concern for Russian Jews in November 1905. Fischer’s
statement that ‘steamers came from Hamburg’ to Newcastle with weapons is implied
by a letter in Latvian from Newcastle to Hamburg which fell into the hands of the
Russian Consul in Newcastle in early September 1906; for, apart from giving clear
indication that the illegible author was moving between Newcastle and Edinburgh, and
apart from asking ‘how do you like the bomb explosion in St Petersburg?’ (a reference
to the attack on Stolypin at his dacha on Aptekarskii Island in St Petersburg on 12/25
August 1906), this document employed conspiratorial language to tell the prospective
recipient to ‘forward to Newcastle another parcel like the last one’. The ‘English
comrade in Sunderland’ whose arms dump the British police lit upon was called
Daniel Currie; the ‘bachelor lad’ to whom Fischer says that Currie entrusted part of his
stock was a certain Robert Hutchinson; Al’fred Nagel seems to have worked for the
Second International in Brussels; Fischer’s address in Newcastle which Nagel
inadvertently gave away when he wrote to Currie in Sunderland was 113 Hampstead
Road, Benwell; the trials which took place in Sunderland, Newcastle, Edinburgh and
Glasgow between April and July 1907 fined various people (but no east Europeans)
for storing explosives illegally under the Explosives Act of 1875; and, luckily for the
gun-runners, the English authorities decided not to prosecute and the Scottish
authorities failed to achieve convictions under the more severe Explosive Substances
Act of 1883, which threatened custodial sentences rather than fines for the more
serious offence of possessing explosives for illicit purposes.

Above all, the contemporary British archival and newspaper sources make
clearer than Fischer’s memoirs that by 1906-7 he had associates in north-east England
and Scotland with whom he could take much more vigorous steps to modify the tsarist
regime than those contemplated by Robert Spence Watson. Clearly, the gamut of
opinion about Russia in north-east England (and Scotland) was very far from being
confined to the politically correct liberal centre. It may be the case, indeed, that the
British people who were involved in the Tyneside gun-running of 1906-7 provide
additional support for Graham Johnson’s recent attempt to rehabilitate the idea that
Britain’s Social Democratic Federation was a genuinely revolutionary organization.
Since, furthermore, the Englishmen who went to trial in Sunderland and Newcastle as
a result of Fischer’s gun-running were represented by a lawyer called Edward Clark
who was obviously acting for them because he shared their belief in the value of what
they were doing, and since a second Newcastle lawyer gave evidence at the Glasgow
trial to the effect that, as the official British agent for the Hamburg armaments
manufacturer who supplied the circle’s goods, he saw nothing reprehensible in the
circle’s activities, it looks as if support for the notion of direct action against Russia
was to be found in more than one layer of Tyneside society. Thus the left-hand end of the spectrum of Tyneside opinions about Russia in 1906-7 appears not to have been wholly confined to the unprivileged elements of the local community.

Aspects of Fischer’s gun-running about which one would like to know more include the means employed by the authorities to unravel the affair after their initial strokes of luck in Sunderland; the true identities of some of the people in the case; the question whether north-east England or Scotland was the British heart of the operation; and the particular sub-section of the Russian revolutionary movement to which Fischer’s activities related. When the police raided Fischer’s home, did he tell them about the arms store at 42 Leazes Park Road? If he did not, it is hard to see what put them on to it. Although it is certain that Al’fred Nagel’ employed the pseudonym ‘Stronmer’ and variants (because that was the name contemporary sources gave for the person who wrote from Fischer’s flat in Benwell to Donald Currie in Sunderland), it is possible that he also employed the name ‘Thomas Denvers’ and variants, under which name an article about the gun-running appeared in ‘the organ of Tyneside socialism’ at the time the Newcastle trials were going on. It is imaginable, furthermore, that Thomas Dugger Keast, keeper of the arms store in Leazes Park Road, was the pseudonym of a person whose real name has never been identified, for a previous investigator of the ‘north British’ gun-running of 1906-7 failed in extensive attempts to locate a person with this name in any other appropriate context.

Answers to these questions of identity would permit fuller definition of the ramifications of the gun-runners’ circle. Perhaps they would help in resolving whether the epicentre of the 1906-7 gun-running was in Scotland rather than on the Tyne. One of the earliest printed accounts in English of the gun-running of 1906-7 (whose authors had some personal knowledge) is almost entirely Scottish in its coverage (and incidentally puts a certain ‘Alf’ at the heart of the matter, thus confirming the importance of Nagel’). Since, in the early twentieth century, Glaswegians often took their holidays at Whitley Bay near the mouth of the Tyne, and since Tyneside was in a position to raise a brigade of 4000 Scottish infantry in the early days of World War I, it is not difficult to imagine that Scottish gun-runners got in touch with comrades on Tyneside rather than the other way round. The Scottish socialist John Leslie wrote in 1918 that he had twice been ‘actively engaged in the smuggling of arms and ammunition into Russia’, on the first occasion ‘immediately prior to the outbreak of 1905-7’, on the second ‘immediately subsequent to and during the height of the reactionary terror’. Since he then made the second rather than the first occasion sound like the operation in which Fischer was engaged, his account strengthens the notion that Scots were sending arms to Russia before people started doing so in north-east England.

The most important unresolved question to do with Fischer’s gun-running, however, is whether it was a Latvian operation, an aspect of the Bolshevik gun-running operations of Maksim Litvinov (and Leonid Krasin), or the work of some other sub-division of the Russian revolutionary movement. Fischer himself wondered in his memoirs whether, at a remove, the Socialist Revolutionary and police agent Evno Azef had been behind it all. Since Litvinov was a member of the Riga Bolshevik Committee in 1904-5 and represented it at the Third Congress of the RSDRP in London in 1905, it may not be sensible to try drawing distinctions between the gun-running operations he set up and others run by Latvians. After the
‘Unification’ Congress of the RSDRP in the spring of 1906, Latvian and Russian social democrats were closer than ever. The German-Russian Bolshevik Ludwig Martens (later famous as the Bolshevik representative in the USA in 1919 and 1920) was certainly shipping weapons from Hamburg to the Russian Empire in 1906, so he may have been shipping them via north-east England in the hope of avoiding surveillance on the part of the Russian secret police. Yet Litvinov’s own account of his gun-running activities in the year 1906 makes no mention of England or Scotland and speaks only of his efforts to convey weapons from western Europe to the Black Sea coast of the Russian Empire via Bulgaria. Some evidence, furthermore, gives the impression that Latvians really were despatching weapons entirely on their own account in 1906 and 1907. A Bulgarian who acted as a weapons purchaser for the Bolsheviks in Liège in 1906 refers to buying on the part of “the representative of the Latvian social-democratic party” as if it were a separate operation. The senior Latvian social democrat Iakov Kovalevskii (Jēkabs Kovaļevskis) describes a more or less wholly Latvian gun-running operation centred on Belgium and Hamburg which fell apart in 1906. Thus Al’fred Nagel may have been, in his work with Fischer, to revivify Latvian work which had been under way for some time.

Fischer did not lose interest in the Russian revolutionary movement after the exposure of his gun-running in the middle of 1907. Indeed, he must have left for the Fifth Congress of the RSDLP in London the minute the trials of his associates in Newcastle came to an end. There, he talked to Lenin about British politics and discussed ways of getting back to Russia with a friend he had made in Archangel in the late 1890s. Some of the cartridges which he had been transporting in 1906-7 seem to have come to light on the beach at Blyth in north-east England in August 1914, when, naturally, they were thought to be a cache for incoming Germans. As to the other protagonists in this essay, Robert Spence Watson remained hostile to the tsar until his death in 1911, accusing him of ruling by ‘brute force’ in June 1907, writing to the British authorities at Kropotkin’s instigation when Nikolai Chaikovskii was arrested in Russia in December 1907, and protesting when the tsar came to Cowes in 1909. Charles Flynn recedes into the shadows. The Russian Embassy in London made another unavailing attempt, in the wake of Fischer’s gun-running, to get Britain to stop armaments reaching Russian revolutionaries from British ports. Latvians continued to operate in Britain, impelling the Russian ambassador in London to write to the Foreign Office about them in 1907 and 1908 and perpetrating a wages heist in Tottenham in 1909 and the Houndsditch jewel raid of December 1910 (the latter culminating in the notorious ‘Siege of Sidney Street’ of January 1911). Fischer’s Latvian contact, Al’fred Nagel’, may have subsequently offered his services to British counter-intelligence, for a Latvian with this name was arrested in Moscow for spying in 1924 and executed there the following year.

More important than these details is the political positions which Spence Watson and Fischer exemplified. They stood for different views of the way forward in Russia. Spence Watson’s outlook was more or less that of the Russian Kadets. Fischer was a Bolshevik with a dash of the Socialist Revolutionary. Studying the reactions of these people and their associates to the Russian Revolution of 1905 serves to show that political ideologies were diverse in Britain in the early twentieth century, that they were diverse in ways which matched the diversity in Russia, and perhaps that political consensus was coming to an end in western Europe just as it was in the east.
2 Evening Chronicle (Newcastle), 26 January 1905.
3 D. Mackenzie Wallace, Russia (London, 1877).
6 London, National Archives (Public Record Office), HO144/545/A55176.
7 HO45/10254/X36450, sub-file 31, Salisbury to F. R. St John, 12 October 1898 (copy).
8 Ibid., sub. 116.
9 HO144/757/118516, sub. 1, 3, 15.
10 Ibid., sub. 47, 51.
15 HO45/10254/X36450, sub. 58 (23 November 1898).
16 HO144/757/118516.
17 Neilson, Britain and the Last Tsar, pp. 237, 267.

20 HO144/272/A59222B, sub. 2, Spence Watson to Sir Matthew White Ridley, Bensham, 17 December 1897.

21 Ibid., sub. 12, Spence Watson to Earl Grey, Bensham, 17 April 1898.

22 Robert Spence Watson, ‘England as the Refuge of the Oppressed’, _Free Russia_, Vol. 15 (1904), No. 7–9, p. 70.

23 Ibid.


25 Soskice replaced Feliks Volkovskii as editor of _Free Russia_ on 2 June 1904 (_Free Russia_, Vol. 15 [1904], No. 6, p. 68). On Spence Watson’s pericarditis see his letter to Soskice of 7 August 1905 (‘In the past 5 months I have six times come to the very gates of death’): London, House of Lords Record Office (HLRO), SH/DS/1/Box 10/Wat/item 12.

26 Ibid., items 6 and 7, telegram and letter from Spence Watson to Soskice, Newcastle, 24 January 1905.

27 Ibid., item 13, Spence Watson to Soskice, Newcastle, 24 August 1905.


29 HLRO, SH/DS/1/Box 10/Wat, item 18, Spence Watson to Soskice, Bensham, 24 October 1905 (published in _Free Russia_, Vol. 16 [1905], no. 11, pp. 110–11).

30 HLRO, SH/DS/1/Box 10/Wat, item 21, Spence Watson to Soskice, Bensham, 3 November 1905.

31 Ibid., item 22, Spence Watson to Soskice, Newcastle, 16 November 1905.

32 Ibid., item 23, Spence Watson to Soskice, Newcastle, 12 December 1905.


34 Its leaders on Russia in 1905 included ‘The Russian People’ (2 May), ‘The Baku Horrors’ (8 September), ‘The Tsar and Peace’ (20 September), ‘The Russian Revolution’ (30 October and 31 October), ‘A Free Russia’ (1 November), ‘The Russian Atrocities’ (22 November), and ‘The State of Russia’ (21 December and 29 December).


36 _Evening Chronicle_ (Newcastle), 4 February 1905.

37 _Newcastle Daily Chronicle_, 2 May 1905.

38 Ibid., 9 May and 5 June 1905.

39 Ibid., 11 September 1905.

40 Ibid., 13 November 1905.

41 _The Evening Chronicle_ (Newcastle), 23 November 1905, a long report of the meeting from which all subsequent quotations in this paragraph are taken.

42 Eliyahu Feldman, ‘British Diplomats and British Diplomacy and the 1905 Pogroms in Russia,’ _Slavonic and East European Review_, Vol. 65 (1987), No. 4, p. 600.

who was born in Russia in 1853 and spent the whole of his working life there, ‘The Rothschilds, as is well known, have never participated in any loan to the Russian Government’: Maxwell S. Leigh (ed.), Memoirs of James Whishaw (London, 1935), p. 127.

44 Evening Chronicle (Newcastle), 23 November 1905 (from which all subsequent quotations in this paragraph are taken).


48 Fisher, V Rossii, p.72.


50 Moscow, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial´no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 351, op. 1, ed. khr. 22, l. 6.


52 Fisher, V Rossii, pp. 72, 89.


54 HLRO, SH/DS/1/Box 10/Wat/items 7 and 8, Spence Watson to Soskice, Newcastle, 24 and 27 January 1905.


57 FO371/122, ff. 521–38, 544–7 and HO45/10333/137609, files which include Grey to Sazonov, 3 February 1906; the Customs to the Home Office, 9 March 1906; a Home Office minute of 13 March 1906; and a Foreign Office minute of 18 September 1906.

58 HO45/10349/147444.

59 See FO371/122, ff. 539–44.


61 HO144/757/118516, sub. 3.

62 University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Special Collections, Spence Watson Papers, Feliks Volkovskii to Robert Spence Watson, Lausanne, 2 January 1906.


64 Pozner, *Pervaia boevaia organizatsiia*, p. 22.


68 FO371/322, f. 388, Chief Constable of Newcastle to the Home Office, 10 April 1907, and ibid., f. 423, Home Office to the Foreign Office, 11 May 1907. See also *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 10 April 1907, in which Keast was said to be ‘a man about 30 years of age, of medium height, stoutly built, and with Jewish features’, but in which a draper called James H. Jackson is reported as saying: ‘It had been suggested to him that Keast was a Polish Jew, but if that was the case he must have been in the country for a long time, for he speaks excellent English’.

69 The Russian Consulate’s translation of this letter into English is to be found in FO371/122, f. 550, and FO371/322, f. 390.

70 The information in this paragraph comes from FO371/322, ff. 386–428; HO144/1010/145334, sub. 3, 5; *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 2–16 April 1907; *The Newcastle Daily Journal*, 4 April – 10 May 1907; *The Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 4, 10, 18 April, 2 and 10 May 1907; *The Evening Chronicle* (Newcastle), 10 April – 9 May 1907; *The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 20 April 1907; *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), 16–19 April 1907; *Glasgow Herald*, 10 July 1907; *Forward* (Glasgow), 8 June and 6 July 1907; *Daily Mail* (London), 3 and 5 April 1907; *The Times* (London), 10 April 1907; *Justice* (London), 11 May 1907 (reprint of an article called ‘The Cartridge Mystery’ by Thomas Denvers from the May 1907 issue of *The Keel* ['the organ of Tyneside Socialism']); and *Justice*, 22 June 1907 (address by Denvers to ‘a fairly good audience’ at Methil in Scotland). For an Al’fred Nagel’ who worked for the Second International in Brussels see Pozner, *Pervaia boevaia organizatsiia*, p. 207.


72 *Evening Chronicle* (Newcastle), 1 May 1907; *Glasgow Herald*, 10 July 1907.

73 Denvers, ‘The Cartridge Mystery’.


Fisher, V Rossi, p. 90.


RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, d. 1210, l. 6 (from an autobiographical note by Martens).


B. Stomoniakov, ‘Zagranichnaia organizatsiia po dostavke oruzhiia v Rossiiu v 1905 godu’, ibid., p. 94.

RGASPI, f. 124, op. 1, d. 887, l. 11 (from an autobiographical note by Kovalevskii).


Robert Spence Watson, ‘Government by Brute Force’, Free Russia, June 1907 (no volume or part number), pp. 1–2; University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Special Collections, Spence Watson Papers, SW 1/10/22, Kropotkin to Spence Watson, London, 14 December 1907 (about Chaikovskii); FO371/327, f. 291, Spence Watson to Sir Edward Grey, no date (but stamped 20 December 1907); Free Russia, July 1909 (no volume or part number), p. 11.

