

Contents

List of Illustrations	x
Series Editors' Introduction	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	xv
1. The Early Years	1
2. Sakhalin	25
3. Beginning a Professional Career in the Capital	112
4. Scholarship and Activism during the 1905 Revolution	144
5. The Last Decade before the Storm	161
6. The Years of Turmoil, 1914–17	224
7. Building a New Anthropology in the “City of the Living Dead”	267
8. The NEP Era and the Last Years of Shternberg’s Life	293
9. All Humanity Is One	392
Conclusion	439
Notes	447
References	489
Index	521

Illustrations

Photographs

1. Lev Shternberg and his family, ca. 1872–73 2
2. Shternberg as a gymnasium student, mid-1870s 4
3. Moisei Krol' during his exile, ca. 1890 34
4. Sakhalin Island prisoners
chained to wheelbarrows, ca. 1890s–1900s 37
5. Shternberg upon arrival on Sakhalin Island, 1889 38
6. Shternberg among Sakhalin exiles 39
7. Shternberg with the staff of Vladivostok, ca. 1895 80
8. Shternberg with family and friends
at a summer resort, early 1900s 162
9. Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg 163
10. Shternberg with MAE staff, 1914 164
11. Lev Shternberg and Sarra Ratner-Shternberg 191
12. Shternberg and a student assistant
with a group of Amur River natives, 1910 196
13. The Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society, St. Petersburg 213
14. Shternberg with participants in the
International Congress of Americanists, The Hague 325
15. Shternberg with participants
in the 1926 Scientific Pacific Congress, Tokyo 333
16. Ethnology students of Leningrad State University, 1926 363
17. Shternberg and Bogoraz with ethnology students, mid-1920s 368
18. Shternberg's official photograph
as member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR 378
19. Shternberg's Nivkh informant and guide, Churka,
with his son, Zagan 379
20. Shternberg's son, Arkadii, 1925 383
21. Shternberg's funeral 394
22. Shternberg's grave 396

Map

1. Sakhalin Island, 1900 26

I. The Early Years

Born Khaim Leib Shternberg on April 21 (May 4, new style), 1861, Lev Iakovlevich grew up in Zhitomir, the capital of the Volyn' Province (*guberniia*) in central Ukraine.¹ One of the oldest towns in the region, Zhitomir was first part of the Kingdom of Lithuania and later Poland. By the time it was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1778, its Jewish population was quite large, and it was well known as a major center of the Hassidic movement. In 1861 it had over 13,000 Jews out of a total population of 40,500, while thirty years later Jews accounted for 24,000 of its 70,000 inhabitants. The Russian government regarded the city as the central point of Jewish life and learning in southwestern Russia. In the mid-nineteenth century only Zhitomir and Vilno (Vilnius)—another major center of Jewish life and learning—were allowed to have a Hebrew printing press. Zhitomir also had one of the few rabbinical schools in the country. Despite its relatively large population, Zhitomir of the 1860s–1970s remained a very provincial town: the nearest railroad station was fifty-five kilometers away.

Khaim-Lev, as Shternberg was called, was the oldest son of Iankel Moishe (Iakov Moiseevich) Shternberg (1831–circa 1910), a local businessman whose fortunes rose and fell over the years. Iakov Shternberg was not a typical mid-nineteenth-century provincial Russian Jew. During the reign of Tsar Nicholas I, when the government attempted to speed up Jewish assimilation by encouraging the Jews to practice agriculture, he was among the first to try farming. Although he did not remain a farmer for long, he did retain a strong affection toward nature and animals, which he tried to impress upon his children. Because of these sentiments Iakov Shternberg eventually moved from Zhitomir's



1. Lev Shternberg and his family, ca. 1872–73: (top row left to right) Lev, Lev's father with brother Aron, Lev's sister, Shprintsa, Lev's mother; (front) Lev's brothers Savelii and David. Shternberg Collection, SPFA RAN, 280/1/194:21.

Jewish ghetto to a better neighborhood, one where he could build a nice small house and have a vegetable garden and an orchard (on a plot of land he would lease from the Jewish community). Every summer he rented a cottage outside the city where his children could enjoy swimming, boating, and hiking. His son Lev, who was always fond of swimming and long walks, shared his father's love of the outdoors with a passion.

Other characteristics distinguished Iakov Shternberg from most of the local Jews. He appears to have had a better command of Russian than many of his neighbors, even though his first language was definitely Yiddish. He was also more open-minded than many of them when it came to educating his children; once his sons had finished their traditional Jewish education in the religious school (*kheder*), he enrolled them in the local Russian gymnasium. At

the same time, he was a respected member of the local Jewish community who not only attended synagogue services but also offered financial support to it and other charitable organizations, such as the local hospital (where he also served as a trustee). At Sabbath and holiday meals there were usually several people at the Shternbergs' dining table whom Lev's father had brought home from the street. His children inherited his compassion for the less fortunate and concern for helping the poor. One time when Lev was only six, his mother saw him in tears and asked him why he was crying. The boy replied that he felt sorry for the family's servant for having to carry a heavy burden on her back (Shternberg Collection, SPFA RAN, 282/1/140:301).

Lev's mother (?–1905) was much more pious and traditional in her outlook. The only existing picture of the Shternberg family shows Yenta Vol'fovna wearing a wig prescribed for observant Jewish women. Unlike her husband, she could only speak Yiddish; in fact she learned to write only in her later years so she could communicate with her imprisoned oldest son. Impressed with how good a *kheder* student he was, she dreamed of his becoming a rabbi and religious scholar. If Iakov Shternberg had shared her views, Lev could have fulfilled her dreams. Having started his classes at the age of five, he spent long hours in the *kheder*, where he excelled in Hebrew, Bible, Talmud, and other subjects. Many years later he drew on this treasure house of knowledge while working on his lectures and essays dealing with the history of religion.

Besides acquiring a solid education in Judaism, the young boy was deeply affected by the stories he heard from his teachers about the suffering endured over the centuries by the Jews as a whole and those of Zhitomir in particular. He was especially moved by the accounts of the slaughter of innocent local Jews by eighteenth-century Ukrainian peasant rebels. The victims' mass grave, located next door to Lev's school and synagogue, fascinated and moved him (see Shternberg 1913a). According to his best friend, Moisei Krol' (1863–1943) (1929:215), the young Shternberg imagined himself a heroic savior of the Jewish people, a new Bar Kokhba or Judah the Maccabee. Shternberg's special sensitivity to all forms of injustice and senseless violence was also greatly influenced by the biblical prophets who forever remained his heroes. According to his own reminiscences (cited in his wife's memoir), when one of his teachers told him about the number of French soldiers killed by Prussian troops in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the nine-year-old boy exclaimed indignantly,



2. Lev as a gymnasium student, mid-1870s. Shternberg Collection, SPFA RAN, 280/1/194:1.

“I don’t understand these Germans! Haven’t they read the Bible and haven’t they thought about the need to beat swords into plowshares!” The teacher’s reply—that this famous pronouncement by Isaiah would not be fulfilled until the coming of the Messiah—did not satisfy him: the boy became convinced it was his duty to do something about such cruelties (Shternberg Collection, SPFA RAN, 282/4/9:105–106). Krol remembered Lev as a shy teenager with soft brown eyes and an energetic gait who was very fond of adventure books by Jules Verne, James Fenimore Cooper, and Thomas Mayne Reid (Shternberg Collection, SPFA RAN, 282/4/9:105–106).

The Shternberg house was located on Starovinnitskaia Street, which happened to be a place where a number of prominent future progressive leaders and writers grew up. With the exception of the great Russian novelist, progressive journalist, and public figure Vladimir Korolenko (1853–1921), they were all Jews.² As Shternberg reminisced years later,

All the residents and frequent visitors to this street knew each other, spent a good deal of time together, and influenced each other. All

of them were drawn, on the one hand, to revolutionary ideas, and on the other, to Jewish emotions. Their gatherings became especially lively during the summer months, when university students came back for vacation and when all the young people, regardless of age, organized their outings in the scenic environs of Zhitomir on the banks of the Teterev River. There they noisily discussed the burning questions of the day. (Shternberg Collection, SPFA RAN, 282/4/9:105–106)

In 1872 Lev's father enrolled him in the local rabbinical school. One of only two such schools in the Russian Empire, it combined instruction in Judaica with secular subjects taught in Russian (see Melamed 2001). A year later, after the school was closed, Lev was transferred to a local gymnasium. All four of his brothers followed in his footsteps.³ In the gymnasium he discovered a whole new world of secular learning, including current western European as well as Russian literature, with its heavy emphasis on social justice and the intelligentsia's duty to serve the masses.⁴ For a time Shternberg was absorbed by the work of Heinrich Heine. He was especially fond of the great poet's articles and poems on Jewish subjects. In the upper grades he began reading Western philosophers and social scientists like Darwin as well as left-leaning Russian literary critics such as Vissarion Belinsky, Dmitrii Pisarev, and Nikolai Dobroliubov, who first introduced him to progressive ideas and encouraged him to view Russia's political and socioeconomic system critically. In the late 1870s forbidden works by foreign and domestic radicals, including Marx, occupied his attention.

During this period, young Russian revolutionaries known as the Populists (Narodniks) began "going to the people"—settling among and trying to educate and radicalize peasants. Even such a provincial town as Zhitomir had its share of such propagandists, including several students in the upper grades of Shternberg's own gymnasium who were eventually expelled or even arrested (Krol' 1929:221–222). By the time Lev Shternberg finished high school, he had already become a committed Narodnik.

Populism (*Narodnichestvo*) was a uniquely Russian version of mid-to late-nineteenth-century utopian socialism. The Populists believed that social transformation in Russia did not have to follow the western European model of a rapid development of industrial capitalism and democratic bourgeois revolutions

but would depend on the peasantry (*narod*, or the people), and that a modern socialist society could be constructed on the basis of the peasants' traditional communal social institution, the *mir*. The Narodniks hoped that Russia could make a transition directly from "feudalism" to socialism, skipping over capitalism and all of its socioeconomic problems and injustices. The movement was composed mainly of professional people, students, and intellectuals from nongentry classes (*raznochintsy*). In the 1870s most populists moved from theorizing to political action. When their campaign of trying to incite rebellion among the peasants by mingling with them failed, many of the Populists turned to terrorism as a more immediate and effective way to undermine the regime and stimulate radical social change. Inspired by several leading Populist intellectuals, the young revolutionaries became convinced that it was the intelligentsia's duty to repay its "debt" to the "people" by overthrowing the tsarist government and establishing a democratic republic "of the people." By the late 1870s the differences between the minority of the Populists who still believed in using propaganda among the working people in order to create a broad-based revolutionary movement and the majority who advocated using terror as the main method of undermining and eventually bringing down the regime became so sharp that the main populist group, Land and Freedom (*Zemlia i Volia*), split into two. The more radical faction, People's Will (*Narodnaia Volia*), became a centralized conspiratorial organization that produced underground publications and carried out several successful assassinations of top government officials. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in St. Petersburg on March 1, 1881, was the most famous terrorist act of the People's Will, yet it also marked the beginning of the group's demise, leading to massive arrests of its leaders and rank-and-file members.

Lev Shternberg and his friend Moisei Krol' were not the only Jewish high school students in Zhitomir who became attracted to Populism. Between the 1870s and 1880s a significant number of young Russian Jews not only became fascinated with secular learning and non-Jewish "high" culture but also were drawn into various underground revolutionary activities. In fact, as a number of this movement's participants as well as historians have argued, their own formative influences, which included messianism and a peculiar "Jewish socialism" of the biblical prophets, created fertile soil for both socialist theorizing and revolutionary action (Haberer 1995).

For Shternberg this action began with becoming a teacher, a vocation he remained deeply committed to for the rest of his life. In the late 1870s a significant number of poor Jews from the outlying villages and small towns began arriving in Zhitomir in search of secular education and “new ideas.” Most of them, however, could not get into the local Russian high schools because of a lack of money and the Jewish quota system. Shternberg and several of his friends found cheap housing for these young people and began instructing them in the Russian language, mathematics, and various other secular subjects. The next step in his revolutionary career was the procurement and distribution of illegal Populist literature among these students and other local young people, most of them Jews. It is worth noting that despite their revolutionary zeal, Shternberg and Krol’ refused to get involved in an armed robbery plot (euphemistically called “revolutionary expropriation”) concocted by visiting Populists from the nearby city of Kiev (Krol’ 1929:222–223). The ethical standards of the two radicals remained forever very high. By the summer of 1881, when he graduated from the gymnasium, Shternberg had not only read many of the key works by the Western and Russian liberal and socialist thinkers (from Adam Smith and Ferdinand Lassalle to Karl Marx and Nikolai Chernyshevskii) but had fully embraced the platform of the People’s Will, including its use of terrorism.

University Studies and Revolutionary Activities

A very bright student, Shternberg chose to attend St. Petersburg University, the leading institution of higher education in the country. Despite being particularly interested in the social sciences, he opted for the Physical-Mathematical Faculty to strengthen his knowledge of the natural sciences. His professors included many of the country’s leading mathematicians, physicists, chemists, and biologists. Their lectures and the books they assigned emphasized materialism, positivism, and Darwinian evolution. At the same time Shternberg continued his independent studies in philosophy, history, and political economy.

Despite long hours spent on his studies, Shternberg devoted even more time to various clandestine revolutionary activities (see Shternberg 1925a, 1925b; Krol’ 1929, 1944:22–46). His friend Krol’, who had enrolled in the same faculty a year earlier, quickly introduced him to the main radical student organization, the Central Circle of the People’s Will. For several years this group had maintained

close contact with the Executive Committee of the People's Will and carried out its assignments aimed at radicalizing the students and recruiting them for revolutionary struggle. Among the party's assignments for its student affiliates was an open opposition to the new "university rules," introduced in 1879 in order to curtail many of the privileges granted to the universities in 1863. Another one was revolutionary propaganda among the city's industrial workers. While Krol' had had a chance to interact with some of the famous top leaders of the People's Will, by the fall of 1881, when Shternberg arrived in the capital, the Populist Party was in disarray following the assassination of the tsar and the arrest of most of the members in its central committee.

One of the biggest challenges for the radical student leaders like Krol' and Shternberg was to save their circle from destruction during this period of intensified police surveillance and entrapment by *agents provocateurs*. To accomplish this, Shternberg, who within a year became well known among the revolutionary students for his enormous energy and organizational skills, tried to discourage circle members from taking part in student demonstrations. One such demonstration occurred in November 1882, when radical and conservative students clashed angrily over the issue of whether to accept financial assistance from one of the city's millionaires. During a rally held on November 9, Shternberg managed to convince the radicals to cancel a planned large-scale demonstration, arguing that such an action would lead to wide-spread arrests and expulsions and thereby undermine the already weakened revolutionary movement. When the students tried to leave the university building, however, the police prevented them from doing so unless they gave the officers their names and addresses. Angered by this apparently illegal demand, Shternberg changed his mind and was one of the first to encourage the students to resist it. After hours of waiting in a standoff, some of the weaker students began to capitulate, but about two hundred of them remained defiant. Shternberg not only stayed with his comrades; he even tried to cheer them up with his jokes and words of encouragement. Krol', who participated in the rally, later recalled how amazingly composed and upbeat his friend was (Shternberg Collection, SPFA RAN, 282/4/9:114). By nightfall the defiant students were arrested, and after a ten-day incarceration they were expelled from the university. Shternberg and Krol', along with the other student leaders, were prohibited from ever resuming their higher education again and found themselves back in Zhitomir.

However, in the summer of 1883 the minister of education softened this verdict by allowing the blacklisted students to apply to any Russian university except the St. Petersburg one. The two friends took advantage of the ruling and enrolled in Novorossiisk University in Odessa, a young but highly respected institution. This time they chose the Law Faculty. The change in the focus of their studies suggests that their strong interest in the social sciences, typical for young Populists of the day, prevailed. In the course of their studies, the two future ethnologists became well versed not only in the history of western European and Russian law but in “primitive” or “early” (*pervobytnyi*) law and social organization as well.

Shternberg’s life in Odessa was not easy. His family’s fortunes had suffered a blow, forcing him to spend a good deal of time giving private lessons. While excelling in all his studies, he devoted even more time than before to underground activities. Within just a few weeks of his arrival in Odessa, he managed to bring together a group of radical students, most of them former students, like himself, of St. Petersburg University. This new Populist circle was determined to resume the work of the People’s Will, which had been further devastated by large-scale arrests. While many circle members were demoralized by the party’s decline, Shternberg maintained his optimism. As Krol’ recalled, the favorite rallying cry of this Jewish radical was “The God of Israel is alive!” (1929:226). By the spring of 1884 he had succeeded in establishing a southern branch of the People’s Will. Iosif Gessen (1865–1943), a younger member of this group and a future leader of the liberal Constitutional-Democratic (Russian КД) Party, recalled many years later that Lev was a very influential and highly respected leader of the southern Populists. As Gessen described him, Shternberg was tall and very thin, with a thick black beard and head of hair and a tired-looking face. He spoke with a heavy Jewish accent and said little, but his orders were obeyed without questioning (Gessen 1937:49). Another fellow Populist, Anastasia Shekhter-Minor, remembered Shternberg as “a very erudite man in the sphere of the social sciences” (1928:132).

In 1884 Shternberg wrote an important brochure entitled “Political Terror in Russia” to inspire and give direction to his comrades (Lavrov 1974, 2:572–594). In typical Populist fashion, Shternberg argued that “the only solution at the moment was for the intelligentsia to use all the means available to it to overthrow the tsarist government, to seize power, and then turn it over to the

elected representatives of the people” (Lavrov 1974, 2:579). At the same time, as this brochure and the memoirs of Krol’ indicate, Shternberg was well aware of the limitations of terrorism as a method of bringing about social change (Krol’ 1929:226–227). He pointed out that in western Europe, where socialists and workers had already gained important political rights and helped establish essential democratic institutions, terrorism was no longer necessary (Lavrov 1974, 2:583). Even in Russia, it was only a temporary means to an end. In Shternberg’s words, “On the very next day after the victory of the revolution, not a single revolutionary would soil his hand with the blood of a harmless scoundrel” (Lavrov 1974, 2:589). Despite an occasional convoluted passage, the brochure was well written and demonstrated its young author’s good grasp of European and Russian history. Lacking a printing press, Shternberg and his comrades printed the brochure using a simple hectograph and distributed it mainly among other young revolutionaries. In the words of Krol’, “With the freshness of its thoughts and its optimistic revolutionary tone, it created quite a stir” (1929:227).

In the wake of the arrest of one of its leaders whose notebook contained the names and addresses of many People’s Will’s members, the Populist movement continued to be devastated by one arrest after another. Determined to keep the movement alive by linking his southern, Ukraine-based group with party members located in Russia proper, Shternberg embarked on a trip to several major southern cities as well as Moscow and St. Petersburg. In the course of this journey he conversed with a number of energetic young Populists, including Al’bert Gausman, Lev Kogan-Bernshtein, Boris Orzhikh, Anastasiia Shekhter-Minor, and his future colleague and fellow ethnographer Vladimir (Nathan) Bogoraz. While Shternberg remained committed to terrorist activities as the quickest and the most efficient method of bringing down the tsarist regime, he was already well aware of the need to prepare for a long-term struggle and produce large-scale propaganda among the masses (Shternberg 1925b:102).⁵

During Shternberg’s important trip, the other two leaders of the southern Populists, Orzhikh and Bogoraz, were busy establishing printing presses and storage facilities for explosives in two southern cities. The next major Populist gathering took place at the southern town of Ekaterinoslav, the site of the Orzhikh-Bogoraz group’s best functioning local Populist organization. In mid-September, with the preparations for the “congress” completed, delegates arrived

from Odessa, Kharkov, Taganrog, and several other southern cities and towns.⁶ Although thirteen participants had been expected, only eight were able to attend. Shternberg came as a representative of Odessa. His presentation at the meeting was an important one: it informed the participants that he had been able to establish contact with several leading St. Petersburg and Moscow Populists. The representatives also discussed the resumption of the publication of the People's Will's newsletter and its content. Shternberg wrote a lead article for issues 11 and 12 of the newsletter that generated a heated debate (Denisenko 1929:138–139).⁷ In his letter to Denisenko, written forty years after the Ekaterinoslav meeting, Shternberg summarized its essence in this fashion:

In my article I very clearly emphasized that the goal of the present moment was the struggle against the monarchy and for political freedom, and that gaining that freedom was an absolutely necessary step on the road to socialism. During this period among many of the revolutionaries, including some of the meeting's participants, there existed a kind of old-populist fear of political freedom and that led to a lack of focus in the revolutionary thinking and a decline of revolutionary energy. Only after a long argument with my comrades and a compromise passage I had to add to my article, was it finally accepted. (Denisenko 1929:139)

Despite Shternberg's attempts to the contrary, it was decided to eliminate the passage about the seizure of power from the old program of the People's Will and place more emphasis on long-term agitation and propaganda among the masses.⁸ The issue of the use of systematic terrorism also generated debate. A few of the participants expressed opposition to it and proposed eliminating its discussion from the party's new program. However, Shternberg's majority, which was strongly in favor of continuing the use of terrorism, prevailed (Krol' 1944:55–56). The group agreed that a large amount of money was needed to carry out systematic terrorist activities (the only kind that appeared to have an effect) but rejected the use of armed robbery to secure such funds (Shekhter-Minor 1928:135). It should be mentioned here that Shternberg, unlike some of the other Populists (and their successors, the Socialist-Revolutionaries), always maintained a high moral standard in his revolutionary activities. As his wife pointed out, he never viewed ordinary party workers as "cannon fodder and