

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11441-7 - Vladimir Akimov on the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism 1895-1903

Edited by Jonathan Frankel

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INTRODUCTION

THE POLARIZATION OF
RUSSIAN MARXISM (1883-1903)

PLEKHANOV, LENIN AND AKIMOV

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INTRODUCTION

Leninism: Marxist or Populist?

In the years 1902–5 Vladimir Akimov and Vladimir Lenin stood at the opposite poles of Russian revolutionary Marxism. Lenin, as the leader of the Bolshevik faction, had opted for a ‘maximalist’ interpretation of Marxist thought—a full-blooded socialist régime in Russia as an immediate goal. For Akimov (the major spokesman of the so-called ‘Economist’ faction), Marxism demanded before all else the belief that the workers must master their own fate. The ‘kingdom of freedom’ could only be built on the broad foundations of popular initiative. A socialist revolution, as distinct from a revolutionary coup or an anarchic jacquerie, could be carried through only by a working-class confident in its own self-made and democratically-run organizations, in its own knowledge and ambitions. And to lay such foundations required time, patience. Both men were revolutionaries because both saw in the Tsarist autocracy an insuperable barrier thrown across the road of historical advance. But profound disagreement about the post-revolutionary future led to their diametrically opposed interpretations of party history, of Marxist doctrine and of the principles of party organization.

The full implications of this dispute only became apparent after the February Revolution of 1917 when Lenin’s call for the immediate establishment of a proletarian dictatorship clashed with the caution of the Mensheviks who, together with the right-wing Bolsheviks led by Kamenev, urged that a longer period of parliamentary government was required to enable the proletariat to prepare itself for power. But Lenin successfully asserted the primacy of political initiative over the dictates of socio-economic ‘realities’. It was against his voluntaristic interpretation of Marxism that Bukharin, too, was twice to argue a ‘deterministic’ alternative. In 1918 Bukharin fought tooth and nail against a separate peace—Brest-Litovsk—and in favour of revolutionary war, because how could the Bolsheviks hope to build socialism in a peasant country without the direct aid of the European proletariat and the advanced industry of the West? And in 1928–9 he resisted the collectivization of agriculture because how could the

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[More information](#)*POLARIZATION OF RUSSIAN MARXISM*

massive intervention of political power taken by itself make up for the crippling shortage of capital required for the frenetic tempos of Stalin's industrialization plans? Bukharin was defeated no less surely than Kamenev and the Mensheviks in 1917. The 'great leap forward' on a national scale prevailed over the right-wing Marxist faith in steady growth and over the left-wing Marxist faith in the indivisible revolution of the European proletariat. Politics triumphed over economics.

The Mensheviks saw the Leninist revolution of October 1917, with its contempt for the long-term laws of socio-economic development and its deliberate exploitation of the blind passions of the masses, as alien to Marxism. They argued that Lenin had reverted to Russia's pre-Marxist Populist (Narodnik) tradition—revolutionary, egalitarian, nationalist, incipiently dictatorial but clearly foreign to scientific and proletarian socialism. After all, it was Bakunin (Populist and anarchist) writing in the 1860s who had argued that a few magic slogans used by the revolutionaries could work Russia's peasant masses into a holy rage of destruction and so bring the old social order toppling into ruins. And it was Tkachev (Populist and Jacobin) writing in the 1870s who insisted that the Tsarist state—lacking solid support in society and so wholly dependent on bureaucracy, landowners and army—could be snatched from the hands of the Romanovs by an ever-vigilant band of revolutionaries.

Many Soviet historians looking back over Russian revolutionary history also came to see the October Revolution as the triumphant justification of Tkachev and of his followers in the revolutionary and terrorist party, the *Narodnaia Volia*. Historians such as Mitskevich and Teodorovich gained a growing notoriety by arguing that Tkachev and the *Narodovol'tsy*, like Lenin after them, had analysed the realities of Russian life—a top-heavy state, a population predominantly peasant and downtrodden, a miserably weak urban bourgeoisie—and had come up with 'Bolshevik' conclusions decades in advance of Lenin. Or as Mitskevich put it: 'The Bolsheviks acted according to the testament of the [Russian] Jacobin-Blanquists and we were not deterred when our opponents abused us—for them these were terms of abuse—as Blanquists and Jacobins.'¹ Such a community of views, argued these historians,

¹ S. Mitskevich, 'Russkie iakobintsy', *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, nos. 6–7 (18–19) (1923), p. 26.

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[More information](#)***LENINISM: MARXIST OR POPULIST***

showed that Lenin had known how to apply Marxist doctrine to Russian realities thus triumphantly vindicating both Marx and Tkachev.

Nevertheless, Mitskevich, Teodorovich and their historiographical school could be interpreted to mean that, while the October Revolution without Lenin was unthinkable, there could well have been a Lenin without Marx and Marxism. It is hardly surprising that by 1933 this entire school of Party historians had been silenced by the Stalin régime. The official orthodoxy, as developed in Stalin's history of 1938 (*The Short Course*), now became that the Bolsheviks owed all their ideas to Marxism as applied to Russia initially by Plekhanov but above all by Lenin, while Populism in all its forms was essentially reactionary and exerted a purely negative influence.

The truth of the matter is that while the revolutionary Populists as organized, for instance, in the *Narodnaia Volia*, did make plans for revolution remarkably similar to those eventually adopted by the Bolsheviks, they based these plans on radically different doctrinal premises. From the first, the structure of Bolshevism was reinforced by very specific ideological struts which had not been inherited from Populism. The Left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries, who saw themselves as the direct heirs of the *Narodnaia Volia*, supported the October Revolution and the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly, but they drew the line at Brest-Litovsk—they did not see the preservation of the 'proletarian' state as justifying the huge losses of Russian soil—and they would certainly never have acquiesced in collectivization, the enforced recruitment of Russia's peasantry to build up industrial socialism. And, of course, in recent years the developing countries have given us ample opportunity to see that not every one-party, egalitarian, socialist dictatorship is necessarily Leninist. The Bolshevik credo, their overall strategy as distinct from their specific choice of tactics at a given moment, was recognizably alien to Populism.

The doctrines which distinguished Leninism from the philosophy of Tkachev and the *Narodnaia Volia* were sufficiently clear-cut. Firstly, the Bolsheviks believed that in Marxism they had a scientific key which, if properly understood and interpreted, would enable them to understand the laws of nature and of man in nature, of history and society, of past and future. According to this law, the industrial proletariat was the instrument of historical progress at this stage of world development and upon it was laid

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[More information](#)*POLARIZATION OF RUSSIAN MARXISM*

the duty of overturning the bourgeois order and establishing a truly communist society, of carrying mankind from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. It was the function of the Marxist party to act as the *avant-garde* of the industrial proletariat leading it along its predestined path. In this capacity, the party had to seize power wherever it could in order to advance the interests of the world-wide proletariat. The success of the party was dependent on its ability to analyse correctly the historical forces in play at a given time and place, on its ability to apply the Marxist master-key to reality. A misinterpretation would lead to inevitable disaster—a failure to seize power when the time was ripe; a premature coup, inability to hold power once gained. Thus, the leaders of the party had to ensure that only orthodox Marxists be allowed to join its ranks and that any sign of deviation be rapidly stamped out. To maintain this degree of inner purity, the party clearly had to be highly centralized. False prophets would never be able to lead the people to the promised land.

These doctrines, then, were clearly not of Populist origin, but had they come from Marx? This was frequently denied by the Mensheviks. Of course, the basic propositions—that Marxism was an all-embracing and proven science, that the proletariat had a key rôle to play in building a radically new world—were accepted by all Marxists. But the sanctification of an élite and highly centralized party, the fear of deviation, the relegation of the masses to a passive rôle, the demand that the party seize power at the first opportunity—these were all beliefs which were repudiated over the years by most Mensheviks, as earlier by Akimov and the Economist faction.

Was, then, the Bolshevik credo essentially new, sprung fully armed from the head of Lenin? Many Mensheviks have tended to argue that it was (or at least that Leninism was) a new synthesis of Tkachev's Jacobinism and Bakunin's anarchism in superficial Marxist disguise. The study of Akimov's political career as of his writings suggests that this thesis is fallacious. The essentials of Leninism were finally forged in the years 1902–8 during the clash with the 'Economists'. But in this, the first, Party schism, Lenin was not only in the same camp as Aksel'rod, Martov and Potresov, the future leaders of the Menshevik faction, but was inspired and urged on by Plekhanov, 'the father of Russian Marxism' and from 1904–8 a major Menshevik spokesman. Until Lenin broke away from the other editors of their joint journal, *Iskra*, his central

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ideas were barely questioned and Akimov was therefore right to see Leninism as a logical stage in the unfolding of Russian Marxism as it had developed under Plekhanov's theoretical guidance. He opposed it and hoped that it would pass, but he never believed that it could be dismissed as a freakish imitation, a throw-back to Populism.

In his history of the Party, Akimov did not dwell at length on the early writings of Plekhanov, believing (quite erroneously as it proved) that the future of the movement lay with the working-class in Russia—as distinct from the émigré ideologists—and that the time had therefore come to trace the indigenous roots of Social Democratic action within the Empire. But an assessment of the clash between Akimov and the Economists, on the one hand, and Plekhanov and Lenin, on the other, must start with an analysis of Plekhanov's theories. He was the pioneer. The ideological roots of both 'Economism' and Leninism are to be found in Plekhanov's dialectical attempt to apply Marxism to Russia.

Plekhanov's Marxism

Plekhanov wrote his first clearly Marxist work in 1882. But even before this it had become apparent that anybody hoping to convert the Russian revolutionary movement to Marxism would have to overcome a crucial dilemma. If he emphasized that Russia had to go through the same prolonged stages of capitalist development as the West, he would be accused of weakening the faith of the revolutionaries who were fighting for equality, for socialism, not for political liberty. The revolutionary could hardly be expected to martyr himself in the attempt to overthrow the dictatorship of the Tsar if the only result would be to entrench emergent capitalism. If Marxism meant to postpone all hope of socialism for many decades or even for centuries, then such a doctrine spelt suicide for the revolutionary movement.

Yet, as against this, if it was said that Russia could avoid the capitalist stage and so pass directly to socialism, then what was the relevance of Marxism to the Russian revolutionary movement? Nearly all the Populist leaders—Lavrov, Tkachev, even Bakunin—admired Marx's socio-economic analysis of capitalist society, but they all argued that Russia as a feudal and agrarian country could learn from the West only how to avoid its errors and so find a direct road to socialism. Marxism was irrelevant.

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[More information](#)**POLARIZATION OF RUSSIAN MARXISM**

This problem had bedevilled Marx and Engels before Plekhanov. In his famous open letter of 1874 to Tkachev (who was erroneously taken by Marx and Engels to be a Bakuninist), Engels had argued that it was absurd to dream that Russia's peasants could create a socialist society. Socialism was the product of a highly advanced, industrial society and could be made a reality only by the proletariat moulded and prepared by such a society. Even if, as was to be hoped, a peasant rebellion tumbled the Tsarist régime, the result would not be socialism but the consolidation of a bourgeois order of society based on peasant, or petty bourgeois, private enterprise. The much lauded peasant commune (*mir* or *obshchina*) would disintegrate under the new order even faster than hitherto.

Yet this argument, however valuable in the anti-Bakuninist feud, lost its appeal to Marx and Engels when a few years later the revolutionaries in Russia finally organized themselves into an effective and dangerous revolutionary party, the *Zemlia i Volia* (which later developed into the *Narodnaia Volia*). Both parties worked for the violent overthrow of the Tsarist régime and its replacement by a socialist order. Marx, seeing in the Romanov régime the bulwark of European reaction, followed their successive assassinations and would-be assassinations with a mounting enthusiasm. When in 1881, Vera Zasulich (who had herself attempted a major political assassination three years before and who was still a Populist) turned to Marx with an impassioned plea to give the Russian revolutionary socialists a glimmer of hope, he decided to modify the water-tight determinism used by Engels against Tkachev. True, he replied, an agrarian society could not hope to attain socialism under its own steam. But if a revolutionary victory in Russia coincided with a proletarian revolution in the West, then with the aid of the industrial countries the Russians could by-pass the later stages of capitalism, thus advancing directly to a socialist system—the *obshchina* could then be saved and act as the 'main pivot for the social rebirth of Russia'.¹ Similarly in a letter of 1885 from Engels we read that 'if ever the Blanquist fantasy—to shake a whole society by means of a small conspiracy—had any foundations then of course it is in St Petersburg'.²

This dualism in the Marxist attitude towards Russia was

¹ *Perepiska K. Marksa i F. Engel'sa s russkimi politicheskimi deiateliami* (Moscow, 1947), p. 242.

² *Ibid.* p. 251.

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[More information](#)*PLEKHANOV'S MARXISM*

inevitable and, as we have seen, persistent. But Plekhanov came to believe that he could bridge the gap. He rejected the wholehearted support which Marx and Engels gave in the late 1870s and 1880s to the Populist revolutionaries seeing in their uncritical attitude a form of intellectual deception or self-deception. But, equally, he could not see in the West European Social Democratic Parties a model directly relevant to Russia. Germany, the Marxist motherland, was too far ahead—a major industrial power with an entrenched trade union movement, universal suffrage, and a Social Democratic Party with millions of followers.

It was in the writings and doctrines of Marx and Engels from the late 1840s that he believed he had found a solution. The Russia of the 1880s and the Germany of the 1840s could be seen as fundamentally similar: politically backward, semi-feudal, agrarian countries just entering the stage of capitalist industrialization. For both countries, at this stage, political democracy was a thing of the future and in both there could be discovered an industrial proletariat in embryo. The Russians could, therefore, hope for no better guide than the *Communist Manifesto* and other political works of the years 1847–50. It was no coincidence that Plekhanov's introduction to a translation of the *Manifesto* was his first clearly Marxist work.

Plekhanov now developed the argument put forward in 1874 by Engels. The plans of the *Narodovol'tsy* to save Russia from capitalism were utopian. Like Tkachev, they had seen the absence of an entrenched bourgeoisie as the great tactical advantage enjoyed by revolutionaries in Russia over those in the West. 'Does it follow from this', Plekhanov ironically asked, 'that the Persians, Egyptians and Chinese will go over equally easily to the idea of "peuple souverain"?' If so, then the further east we go, the nearer we come to the government of the people.¹ As this idea seemed patently absurd, he concluded: 'Thus, it follows that the extent to which a particular country is ready for true rather than fraudulent democracy is defined by the level of its economic development.'² However egalitarian its intentions, a would-be socialist coup by a few Populist revolutionaries would only accelerate the disintegration of the *obshchina*. Land distribution would inevitably strengthen the acquisitive and petty bourgeois instincts of the peasant, and the *Narodovol'tsy*, having seized the

¹ G. V. Plekhanov, *Nashi raznoglasiia* (Geneva, 1885), p. 230.

² *Ibid.* p. 232.

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[More information](#)**POLARIZATION OF RUSSIAN MARXISM**

state machine, would emerge not as socialists but as latter-day Robespierres, not socialist but radical and bourgeois, not liberators but dictators.

Yet there was hope. The Russian proletariat, however embryonic, had to be organized. Once even the skeleton of a workers party was in existence, it could play a decisive rôle in the anti-feudal and anti-Tsarist bourgeois revolution which was bound to break out in the foreseeable future. Marx and Engels had believed that, under these circumstances, the proletariat could ally with the bourgeoisie—democrats and radicals—against the feudal order. Taking up its stand on the extreme left wing of the democratic movement it could drive it forward to ever greater revolutionary violence. As the bourgeois revolution unfolded, the proletariat would eventually be able to seize power. This scheme, sketched out in the *Communist Manifesto*, had been further clarified by Marx and Engels in their *Address to the Communist League* of 1850. They had concluded that in Germany the struggle would be more difficult than in neighbouring and more industrialized France, but that power would nonetheless be won after a lengthy revolutionary development.

For Plekhanov this viewpoint was admirably suited to Russian conditions. In fact, in many ways it was even more applicable to the Russia of the 1880s than to the Germany of the 1840s. In Russia, the revolutionary movement had much deeper roots. 'We must not overlook the vitally important fact that with us the socialist movement began when capitalism was still in its embryo stage.'¹ It was therefore in a position to organize the industrial proletariat from its earliest years. Moreover, Russian capitalism had made a very late entry on to the stage of history and was doomed to live out its timid life caught between the Tsarist hammer and the proletarian anvil. When the anti-Tsarist revolution came, not the urban bourgeoisie but the proletariat would take the lead. Thus, the proletariat would enter the stage of bourgeois parliamentarianism well organized, tempered by victory in one revolution and ready for the next—the socialist—revolution. 'Our capitalism', he wrote, 'will fade without having fully flowered.' Just as 'in Germany the development of capitalism placed the working-class on a higher level of development than in England or in France and [just as] the resistance to capitalist exploitation was there more rapid and decisive,'² so now the Rus-

¹ G. V. Plekhanov, *Nashi raznoglasii*, p. 212.² *Ibid.* p. 299.

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[More information](#)*PLEKHANOV'S MARXISM*

sian proletariat could be expected to catch up with or even to pass the German. He quoted approvingly that section of the *Communist Manifesto* which looked forward to the 'German bourgeois revolution' as the 'immediate prologue to the workers' revolution' and he explained that the Russian Marxists of 1883 had 'the right to hope that the social liberation of the Russian working-class will follow very quickly after the fall of absolutism. If the German bourgeoisie "came too late", then the Russian bourgeoisie came later still and its rule cannot last long.'¹

By this use of Marxist dialectics, Plekhanov believed that he had overcome the dichotomy between economic determinism and socialist impatience. There was a satisfying completeness about his solution. It replaced the fundamental pessimism of much Populist thought ('If not *now*, then not for a very long time—perhaps *never*'²) with the confident certainty of Marxist laws—with every year the advance of capitalism brought the socialist revolution nearer. But equally it avoided the passivity so easily engendered by faith in historical inexorability and promised socialism 'in our time'. With its insistence that only the proletariat could undertake a socialist revolution it retained the first law of Populist belief—'the liberation of the people is the task of the people itself'. And it was from this standpoint that Plekhanov attacked the plans of the *Narodnaia Volia* as fundamentally utopian and dictatorial (seeking 'to replace the initiative of a *class* by that of a *committee*, to make the task of the entire working population of the country that of an exclusive organization'³). But as against this, Plekhanov also reaffirmed those narrowly conspiratorial methods of organization which had characterized the Populist parties since 1876 and which had encouraged the *Narodnaia Volia* to abandon their early faith in a truly popular revolution—for the time being the most that he hoped for was 'the organization of workers' socialist circles'.⁴

His blue-print envisaged the establishment of a parliamentary bourgeois democracy, so making feasible an anti-Tsarist alliance with all the liberal forces at work in the upper levels of Russian society; but at the same time it assured the out-and-out socialists

¹ 'Sotsializm i politicheskai bor'ba' (1883), in *Sochineniia*, ed. D. Riazanov (Moscow, 1923–), II, 86.

² P. Tkachev, *Izbrannye sochineniia na sotsial'no-politicheskie temy*, ed. B. P. Koz'min (Moscow, 1922–3), III, 70.

³ G. V. Plekhanov, *Nashi raznoglasiia*, p. 222.

⁴ 'Sotsializm i politicheskai bor'ba', in *Sochineniia*, II, 84.