

# Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856–1918): His Place in the History of Marxism

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On December 11, the international socialist movement marks the 160th anniversary of the birth of the “father of Russian Marxism,” Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov. “The good men do is oft interred with their bones. The evil lives after them.” This has been, to a great extent, the case with Plekhanov. This is not the result merely of the subjective caprice of historians, but arises from the contradictory character of his long revolutionary career.

Plekhanov’s political legacy has been profoundly colored by the fact that, during the last years of his life, his capitulation to national chauvinism shattered his reputation within the revolutionary left. He responded to the outbreak of the world war in 1914 by calling for the defense of Russia against Germany. In 1917, Plekhanov bitterly opposed the October Revolution. These two betrayals were not the products of episodic miscalculations. Without going so far as to assert that Plekhanov’s individual destiny was predetermined—people always make choices—his political downfall nevertheless reflected the fate of an entire generation of revolutionaries who were, in an objective sense, politically overwhelmed by the world crisis that erupted in August 1914.

It is understandable that historians and biographers should seek to discover the “roots” of the disastrous end of figures such as Plekhanov in their earlier errors and missteps. However, such necessary exercises in political autopsy can also lead to one-sided appraisals. The life under investigation is interpreted as a conflict between its “good” and “bad” sides. This approach fails to recognize that a political leader’s evolution cannot be properly understood as a conflict between positive and negative features, with each side struggling for dominance. Rather, within the context of objective circumstances, the deeper significance of the multi-faceted and interconnected elements of a political personality—and, we must add, of a political and intellectual tendency—are gradually revealed. Goethe’s Mephistopheles warned: “Vernunft wird Unsinn. Wohltat Plage.” (“Wisdom becomes nonsense. Kindness, oppression.”) What appears, with good reason, as both true and a source of strength in one period of historical development is revealed as false and a fatal weakness in another.

The challenge posed by the study of Plekhanov’s life is to preserve the necessary historical objectivity. There is no question that signs of his political decline were already evident in 1905. This is to be explained by neither the sudden weakening of his intellectual powers nor the strengthening of the “negative” sides of his personality. The dominant factor in the decline of Plekhanov was the outbreak and impact of the first Russian Revolution.

Plekhanov had been the first Marxist theoretician to anticipate the emergence of the working class in Russia as a revolutionary social force. The outbreak of revolution in 1905 confirmed his assessment of the decisive role of the working class in the democratic revolution. But it also raised critical political questions about the relationship between the struggle for political democracy, the overthrow of the capitalist class, and the establishment of socialism—questions that contradicted key elements

of the perspective that Plekhanov had developed over the previous quarter century. His adherence to a political perspective that had been overtaken by events set into motion a long process of decline, culminating in outright betrayal.

But Plekhanov’s end does not cancel out his achievements. Nor does the ultimate refutation of significant elements of his perspective mean that there is little to gain today from a study of his political writings. As is often the case with geniuses—whether they labor in the realm of politics, science or the arts—they leave behind many hidden jewels for later generations to discover. This is certainly the case with Plekhanov. His weaknesses and failures are well known, and their study has served as a cautionary tale for several generations of revolutionaries. But in searching through his work today, Marxists will find much in his theoretical and political legacy that is of great value for the revival of a revolutionary movement of the international working class.

It is impossible to adequately summarize within one article the extent of Plekhanov’s contribution to the early development and defense of Marxism, specifically during the three decades that preceded the 1905 Revolution. His writings exercised exceptional influence on the theoretical and political education of Lenin, Trotsky and the generation of Russian socialists who led the October Revolution and established the first workers’ state in history.

Plekhanov’s stature as a major historical figure rightly rests on his substantial body of theoretical writings, in which he explained and developed the conceptions of Marx and Engels. The most well-known are: *On the Development of the Monist View of History*, *The Role of the Individual in History*, *On the Materialist Understanding of History*, and *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*. Plekhanov’s critique of the limitations of 18th century French materialism, and its relationship to the elaboration by Marx and Engels of the theory of dialectical and historical materialism, remains authoritative. His knowledge of the history of philosophy was encyclopedic. The contemporary reader cannot help but wonder whether there existed any major philosophical text that Plekhanov had not mastered. In answering one or another petty-bourgeois professor’s self-deluding claims that his own confused and eclectic philosophical speculations were profoundly original, Plekhanov took great delight in showing that the arrogant philistine’s “discoveries” had already been presented, and expressed in a far more graceful literary style, in a book published a century or two earlier.

Plekhanov’s writings are rich in content, and those who take the time to read them carefully will be astonished by the enduring relevance of his insights. Writing in 1896, Plekhanov took the French historian Taine to task for employing the false concept of *race* to explain historical processes. “Nothing is easier, in shrugging off all difficulties,” Plekhanov wrote, “than to ascribe phenomena just a little more complex to the operation of such inborn and inherited dispositions. However historical aesthetics can only suffer great detriment therefrom.” [1]

In another comment on the same subject, Plekhanov noted with wry

humor: “It is common knowledge that any race, especially in the early stages of its social development, considers itself the most handsome and places a high value on those features that distinguish it from other races.”[2] Plekhanov rejected race as a valid category of historical analysis. “In going over to historical peoples, we should like to point out, first and foremost, that the word *race* cannot and should not be used in respect to them in general. We do not know a single historical people that can be called a people of pure race; each of them is the outcome of the very lengthy and intensive interbreeding and crossing of various ethnic elements.”[3] Using words that should be thrown in the faces of the innumerable pseudo-left and university-based proponents of identity politics, Plekhanov wrote:

Social science stands to gain very, very much if we finally shed the bad habit of ascribing to race whatever seems to us incomprehensible in the spiritual history of any particular people. Racial characteristics may have had some influence on that history, but such hypothetical influence has probably been so minute that the interests of research call for it to be considered equal to naught, and for features noted in the development of any people to be regarded as the outcome of the specific historical conditions in which that development has taken place, and not as the result of the influence of race.[4]

As the foremost defender of philosophical materialism, Plekhanov crossed swords with innumerable advocates of various schools of subjective idealism. His opponents, who included such European intellectual luminaries as Benedetto Croce, Wilhelm Wundt and Thomas Masaryk, generally emerged from these encounters with deep and bloody gashes. Plekhanov’s intransigent defense of materialism has made him a target of attack to this day. His views are routinely portrayed as a “vulgarization” of Marxism and the dialectic—a widely circulated opinion in the milieu of pseudo-left tendencies under the predominant influence of irrationalist and idealist currents, from neo-Kantian structuralism and positivism to the Frankfurt School and postmodernism.

It is often claimed that Plekhanov did not understand Hegel and was indifferent to the dialectical method. This reproach is particularly common among followers of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism, whose criticisms prove only that they have not bothered to read Plekhanov and that they have a very poor understanding of Hegel, not to mention Marx. Plekhanov’s 1891 essay, “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death,” is among the finest expositions of the significance of the great idealist’s dialectical method in the development of Marxism. Plekhanov explained:

Hegel’s importance in the social sciences is determined first and foremost by the fact that he considered all their phenomena from the standpoint of the process *des Werdens* (of coming into being), i.e., from the standpoint of their appearance and their disappearance.[5]

Despite the monumental scale of his intellectual achievements in the comprehension of the totality of phenomena in nature, history and mind as *process*, Hegel’s work developed on the basis of idealism. The philosopher chafed against this limitation. Hegel, Plekhanov observed, “seemed dissatisfied with the results he had achieved and he was often obliged to come down from the misty heights of idealism to the concrete ground of economic relationships.”[6] Hegel’s own efforts to find a path beyond idealism pointed toward a discovery—the significance of economic development—that initiated a new epoch in the study and comprehension

of history.

The transition to materialism which took place after Hegel’s death could not be a simple return to the naïve metaphysical materialism of the eighteenth century. In the sphere which interests us here, i.e., in the explanation of history, materialism had to turn first and foremost to *economics*. To act otherwise would have meant not progress, but retrogression compared with Hegel’s philosophy of history.[7]

It was Karl Marx who placed the study of history on a materialist foundation.

Like Hegel, he saw human history as a process conforming to laws and independent of man’s arbitrariness; like Hegel, he considered all phenomena in the process of their appearance and disappearance; like Hegel, he was not satisfied with barren metaphysical explanation of historical phenomena, and lastly, like Hegel, he endeavored to trace to a universal and single *source* all the acting and interacting forces of social life. But he found that source not in the absolute spirit, but in the same economic development to which, as we saw above, Hegel too was forced to have recourse when idealism, even in his powerful and skilled hands, was a powerless and useless instrument. But what in Hegel is accidental, a guess of greater or lesser genius, becomes in Marx a rigorous, scientific investigation.[8]

Plekhanov’s detractors claim that he displayed in his own writings a vulgar positivistic indifference to the significance of philosophical method. This is best answered by calling attention to the words of the master himself:

It was not for nothing that Hegel gave such an important place in his philosophy to the question of method or that those Western European socialists who are proud to “trace their descent,” incidentally, “to Hegel and Kant,” attach far more importance to the *method* of studying social phenomena than to the data resulting from that study. A mistake in results will *inevitably* be noticed and corrected by further application of the correct method, whereas an erroneous method can only in rare and *individual* cases give results not contrary to this or that *individual* truth. But there can be a serious attitude to questions of method only in a society which has had a serious philosophical education.[9]

In the course of his relentless assault on Eduard Bernstein, Plekhanov emphasized the revisionist’s ignorance of the methodological foundations of Marxism:

Herr Bernstein has remarked “the most important element of the basis of Marxism, i.e., its fundamental law, one that runs through its entire system, is its specific historical theory, which bears the name historical materialism.” This is wrong. Indeed, the materialist explanation of history is one of the main distinctive features of Marxism, but that explanation comprises merely a *part of the materialist world-outlook of Marx and Engels*. That is why critical research into their system should begin with a critique of the general

philosophical foundations of that world-outlook. And method is indubitably the soul of any philosophical system, any critique of the *dialectical method* of Marx and Engels should naturally precede a “revision” of their historical theory.[10]

The writings of Plekhanov on art and aesthetics revealed a depth of understanding and sensitivity that rested on immense knowledge. He was both Hegel’s pupil and Trotsky’s teacher in this field. Aesthetic judgment, he insisted, requires historical knowledge and social insight. He quoted, with approval, the words of Chernyshevsky: “The history of art serves as the basis of the theory of art...”[11] Great art was not merely the expression of subjective emotion, but gave expression to profound thought. “To analyze an artistic work is to *understand its idea and assess its form*. The critic should judge both *content* and *form*; he should be both an *aesthete* and a *thinker*.”[12] In his essay *Art and Social Life*, Plekhanov provided one of the finest expositions of the relationship between artistic form and content. Criticizing the views of the French Romantic poet Théophile Gautier, who insisted that the quality of a work of art is determined by its form, Plekhanov wrote:

Gautier not only maintained that poetry does not try to prove anything, but that it even does not try to say anything, and that the beauty of a poem is determined by its music, its rhythm. But this is a profound error. On the contrary, poetic and literary works generally always *say* something, because they always *express* something. Of course, they have their own way of “saying” things. The artist expresses his ideas in images; the publicist demonstrates his thought with the help of *logical conclusions*. And if a writer operates with logical conclusions instead of images, or if he invents images in order to demonstrate a definite theme, then he is not an artist but a publicist, even if he does not write essays or articles, but novels, stories or plays. All this is true. But it does not follow that ideas are of no importance in literary works. I go further and say that there is no such thing as a literary work which is devoid of idea. Even works whose authors lay store only on form and are not concerned for their content nevertheless express some idea in one way or another.[13]

The extent of Plekhanov’s influence on Marxist aesthetics is clearly apparent in the great essay of Trotsky’s co-thinker and comrade-in-arms, Aleksandr Voronsky, who wrote many years later:

To evaluate a work aesthetically means to determine the extent to which the content corresponds to the form; in other words, the extent to which the content corresponds to objective artistic truth. For the artist thinks in images: the image must be artistically true, i.e., it must correspond to the nature of what is portrayed. In this lies perfection and beauty in the work of an artist. *A false idea, a false content cannot find a perfected form*, i.e., cannot aesthetically move us in a profound manner, or “infect” us. And if we say: the idea is incorrect, but it has found a beautiful form—then this must be understood in a very narrow sense.[14]

Prior to the Revolution of 1905, which exposed serious limitations in his appraisal of the social dynamic and political outcome of the class struggle in Russia, Plekhanov’s position as the dominant theoretician in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party was beyond question. In his important memoir *Encounters with Lenin*, Nikolay Valentinov recalled:

Plekhanov impressed him [Lenin] as no one else did: more than Kautsky and Bebel. Everything that Plekhanov said, did, or wrote interested him very much. He became all ears whenever Plekhanov was mentioned. ‘Here is a man of colossal stature; it is right that one should make oneself small in his presence,’ he told Lepeshinsky.”[15]

Plekhanov’s influence was not confined to Russia. He was among the first in the late 1890s to initiate the struggle against the anti-Marxist revisionism of Bernstein. His devastating exposure of the Kantian foundations of Bernstein’s opportunism compelled the German Social Democracy to confront the growth of revisionism within its leadership. His critique of Bernstein—expressed in such texts as “Bernstein and Materialism, What Should We Thank Him For?,” “Cant Against Kant or Herr Bernstein’s Will and Testament,” and “Materialism or Kantianism”—are masterpieces of Marxist polemics, which demand careful study.

Plekhanov’s historical role as the “Father of Russian Marxism” is not based only on his literary-theoretical output. He was the founder of the revolutionary political movement of the Russian working class. The establishment of the Emancipation of Labor Group in 1883, under Plekhanov’s leadership, set into motion a political process that culminated 34 years later in the seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party in October 1917. Of course, the movement from 1883 to 1917 was characterized by convulsive political conflicts, which arose from deep-rooted contradictions in the development of Russian and world capitalism. Within this process, Plekhanov’s role was both profoundly important and profoundly tragic. It is an undeniable historical fact that the man who laid the theoretical and political foundations of the revolutionary workers’ movement in Russia ended his life as a bitter opponent of the 1917 Revolution.

The study of Plekhanov’s tragic fate is of immense importance for an understanding of the development of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which provided the strategic orientation for the Bolshevik seizure of power. The critical questions are: What is the relationship between the political theory that Plekhanov elaborated on his way from populism (*narodnichestvo*) to Marxism in the early 1880s and the perspective of the October Revolution? Is there any connection between the theory of permanent revolution and the conceptions elaborated by Plekhanov in the 1880s? Did not the triumph of the Bolsheviks in 1917, based on the theory of permanent revolution, more or less imply a complete repudiation of the entire political legacy of Plekhanov? After all, isn’t it well known that he did not accept the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, condemning it as a premature adventure?

Such a purely negative assessment of Plekhanov’s legacy would be profoundly mistaken, and would contradict the appraisal made by Trotsky in 1918, when he declared, in his funeral oration following Plekhanov’s death:

It was he who 34 years before October proved that the Russian Revolution would only triumph in the form of a revolutionary movement of workers. He strove to place the fact of the class movement of the proletariat at the root of the revolutionary struggle of the first circles of intellectuals. It is this that we learnt from him *and in this lies the foundation, not only of Plekhanov’s activity, but also of the whole of our revolutionary struggle*. [Emphasis added][16]

The coming to power of the Bolsheviks in October 1917 became possible only because of a specific socio-political orientation—the theory of permanent revolution, first elaborated by Leon Trotsky in the years of the First Russian Revolution, 1905–1907, and its immediate aftermath.

According to this theory, the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution (abolition of the remnants of feudalism, declaration of equal constitutional rights and freedoms for all citizens, and so on) could not be solved in the epoch of imperialism except through the seizure of power by the working class, the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship and the introduction of measures of a directly socialist character.

While initially formulated in relation to a relatively backward country such as Russia, Trotsky's theory provided the strategic orientation for the perspective of world socialist revolution. It was precisely Trotsky's recognition of the international dynamic of the class struggle that enabled him to predict that the democratic revolution in Russia would assume, under the pressure of world economy and imperialism, a socialistic character. The answer that Trotsky provided to the problem of Russian social development, in the epoch of world imperialism, represented an immense advance beyond the conceptions of Plekhanov.

However, the recognition of Trotsky's immense contribution to the victory of the Russian working class in October 1917 does not contradict the fact that his work was, in a historically significant sense, rooted in the pioneer efforts of Plekhanov.

Plekhanov's outstanding value as a political thinker lay in the fact that he foresaw the decisive role of the working class long before it emerged as a mass social group occupying a specific place in economic and political life, and under conditions in which capitalism in Russia had taken only its first steps.

The Father of Russian Marxism did not foresee the objective possibility that Russia, in the event that Tsarism should fall, could immediately begin the transition to socialism. But this does not diminish the significance of a central element of his historical perspective—that is, his idea of *the hegemony of the proletariat in the bourgeois revolution*.

Plekhanov's "discovery" of the Russian working class and the emphasis he placed on its leading role in the democratic revolution contained the seeds of future conflicts that could not be foreseen in the 1880s. The practical political implications of his insights were to emerge in the course of the 1905 Revolution, which necessitated a more precise and strikingly different assessment of the relationship between the democratic and socialist "stages" of the revolution from that which he initially presented. However, without covering over the extent of the fundamental difference between Plekhanov's separation of the democratic and socialist revolution into two distinct and separate stages of political development, on the one hand, and the perspective being developed by Trotsky, on the other, one should avoid the conclusion that Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution owed nothing at all to Plekhanov's pioneering theoretical and political work.

### From Populism to Marxism

The process of Plekhanov's development from populism to Marxism, and the genuine character of his early political conceptions, had already been reconstructed in exhausting completeness by the remarkable Soviet Marxist author and Left Oppositionist V. Ter-Vaganian (1893–1936) in the early 1920s. In 1924, he published a comprehensive biography, comprising almost 700 pages, specifically devoted to the development of Plekhanov's socio-political views.[17]

In 1920, Ter-Vaganian started to work at the Institute of Marx and Engels, which was headed by one of the most authoritative scholars of the history of international social democracy and Marxism of his time—D. B. Ryazanov. Ryazanov served as editor of the theoretical journal, *Under the Banner of Marxism*. Acknowledging the interest that Ter-Vaganian had shown for the works of Plekhanov, Ryazanov created a Plekhanov Department at the institute and employed Ter-Vaganian to prepare the 24-volume collected works of the founder of Russian Marxism. One intermediary result of the studies Ter-Vaganian undertook was his work *An Attempt at a Bibliography of G. V. Plekhanov*, which appeared in

1923. A new, expanded edition of this book was prepared in the early 1930s, but it was not published because, by that time, Stalin had adopted a hostile attitude toward Plekhanov. In 1936 Ter-Vaganian was among the defendants in the first Moscow Trial and was sentenced to death along with Zinoviev and Kamenev.

In the following, we will base ourselves on important material presented in Ter-Vaganian's biography. We will limit ourselves to the question of Plekhanov's transition from populism to Marxism and to how he formulated his political theory in his first Marxist pamphlet, *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, in 1883.

The main peculiarity of Russian populism (*narodism*) was its idealization of the peasantry and its conception that the Russian peasant *obshchina* (commune) would form a natural basis for a classless society. This theory directly contradicted Marxism, which was then strengthening its influence in Europe. And although the populists treated Marx's teachings with respect and sympathy, they considered them inapplicable to the conditions prevailing in Russia.

A similar view took form under the strong influence of the ideas of Aleksandr Herzen (1812–1870), the outstanding Russian thinker and writer. A disciple, in his youth, of Saint-Simonism, one of the currents of Western European utopian socialism, Herzen emerged in the 1840s as a leading publicist of the so-called "Westerners," regarding the history of Western Europe as a model for the historical path along which Russia would pass. However, after the defeat of the European bourgeois-democratic revolutions of 1848–1850, he underwent a crisis, coming to the pessimistic conclusion that bourgeois civilization had reached a dead end and the proletariat had undergone a philistine degeneration. Ultimately, Herzen, as a propagandist of pan-Slavism and a fierce polemicist against supporters of Marx's teachings, developed a reactionary theory about the unique role of the Russian peasantry as a force capable of renewing European civilization.

In the 1870s, a significant layer of the young generation of Russian *raznochintsy*-intelligentsia underwent a period of radicalization, becoming attracted to the idea of provoking a peasant uprising against Tsarism, which they regarded as the prologue to the liberation of the *obshchina* from the yoke of serfdom and absolutism and the construction of a society of equal and free toilers.

The fact that after the abolition of serfdom in 1861 the Russian peasantry's predicament had hardly improved encouraged these moods. The land remained in the hands of the large landowners, and despite being freed, the peasants could purchase their holdings only at extortionate prices and under onerous conditions that created virtually unbearable burdens. Moreover, the peasant reform intensified the internal differentiation within the *obshchina*, undermining the basis of this dominant form of peasant organization.

Unsurprisingly, the peasants increasingly felt deceived. They wanted to own their land, regarding it as a "gift of god," which the landowners had seized by force and deceit. At the same time, however, rebellious moods among the Russian peasantry, which, after several decades became one of the main driving forces of the Russian Revolution, were combined with a deeply rooted belief in the "good" tsar-emancipator.

For this reason, the populists' perspective and campaigns of "going to the people" resulted in complete failure. The attempts of the revolutionary intelligentsia to propagate, in the mid-1870s, the idea of rebellion among the peasants not only failed to win mass support, but even, in some cases, ended with peasants handing over the propagandists to the Tsarist police.

An internal crisis developed within the populists' organization, "Land and Liberty" (*Zemlya i Volya*), which soon led to a split, which took place at the congress in Voronezh in the summer of 1879. The bulk of the organization concluded that the only way to overcome Tsarism was to start a systematic campaign of terror against the leading figures of the state. Nikolai Morozov and Lev Tikhomirov, two of the four editors of the

literary organ of the populists, *Land and Liberty*, actively followed and particularly attracted the literary activities of Nikolai Ziber [Sieber] (1844–1888). Ziber had popularized the teachings of Marx in Russia, although he did so “as a true guardian of the sciences, not as a revolutionary.”[23]

At the congress in Voronezh they openly advocated the adoption of this new tactic. Morozov regarded the “method of Tell”[18] as a means for achieving freedom of speech and assembly. In the middle of the debate, A.D. Mikhailov unexpectedly exclaimed: “We will get a constitution, we will disorganize the government and force it to do it [adopt a constitution].” According to the memoirs of Aptekman, Zheliabov declared that it was necessary to entirely abandon the class struggle, thus advancing the political element to the forefront of the controversy.[19]

It is important to note that a characteristic of the populist worldview was to juxtapose the class struggle to politics and the social revolution. The populists were anarchists, regarding in an ahistorical manner any form of state as an evil that needed to be immediately destroyed. At the time, three main intellectual leaders emerged among them.

One of these was Pyotr Lavrov (1823–1900), who developed the conception of the special role of the educated intelligentsia in the revolution and was famous for his inclination to regard the “subjective” factor in history as decisive. He maintained friendly relations with Marx and Engels and strove to unite the various groups, believing that it was, above all, important to unify against the common enemy, the autocratic Russian regime, regardless of other differences.

Pyotr Tkachev (1844–1886) led another tendency. He emphasized the need for the immediate seizure of power by a revolutionary group, promoted the idea of conspiracy, and represented a type of Russian Blanquist. (Tkachev’s belief in the decisive role of a small group of conspirators and his refusal to consider the working class as a revolutionary force influenced Che Guevara, who repeatedly referred to the Russian *narodniks* as an inspiring heroic image for modernity.)

Finally, the third, and most influential, ideologist of Russian populism was Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), who competed with Marx and Engels for influence within the First International. Bakunin’s conception of the peasant *obshchina* as the natural basis for socialism, of federalism as a specific non-statist form of a “free society,” and his negative attitude toward German Social Democracy as the bearer of a “statist,” “authoritarian,” “dictatorial” element, constituted significant aspects of the populist world view.

Georgi Plekhanov had been a Bakunist in his early revolutionary period, later describing Bakuninism as a “special kind of Anarchist Slavophilism.”

As the differences within “Land and Liberty” began to intensify, Plekhanov emerged as one of the main opponents of the populists’ embrace of terrorism and of their rejection of the class struggle. The result was the emergence of the group *Chernyi peredel* (Black Repartition), which tried to preserve the old populist program.

However, in his efforts to substantiate his rejection of the tactics of terror and provide an explanation of the failure of the “going to the people” perspective, Plekhanov began to make a gradual review of the anarcho-Bakunist conceptions, initiating his turn toward Marxism.

Spending the winter of 1878–79 in St. Petersburg, Plekhanov witnessed the levels of discontent within the emerging urban working class.

An article he wrote in this period, “The Law of Society’s Economic Development and the Tasks of Socialism in Russia,” testifies to how he had started to include the proletariat, alongside the peasantry, in his developing conception of the revolution.[20] Meanwhile, as Ter-Vaganian observed, “he still thought that the workers’ revolution in the major cities would be in support of the peasant revolution. He thought that the social revolution would be completed by the peasants, and that the workers would only be their allies.”[21]

In his articles for the second issue of *Chernyi peredel*, which was published in August 1880, Plekhanov continued to repeat the slogans of the old populism.[22] But his respect for Marxism was developing as he

followed and particularly attracted the literary activities of Nikolai Ziber [Sieber] (1844–1888). Ziber had popularized the teachings of Marx in Russia, although he did so “as a true guardian of the sciences, not as a revolutionary.”[23]

The next important advance in Plekhanov’s development was his stay in Paris during the winter of 1880–1881. There, he met Lavrov, witnessed workers’ demonstrations, and participated in major meetings devoted to honoring the amnestied émigré leaders of the Paris Commune. He also worked in the National Library and regularly attended meetings of the Paris socialists, making his acquaintance with the leading French supporters of Marx, Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue, whose help with and influence on the development of his critical thought “were exceptional.”[24]

It is in this period that the decisive breakthrough in Plekhanov’s evolution from populism to Marxism occurred. In January 1881, he replied to a question about the character of socialism in a letter to the editorial board of *Chernyi peredel* in the following way:

Socialism is the theoretical expression, from the standpoint of the interests of the toiling masses, of the antagonism and the struggle of classes in existing society.[25]

In this letter, the peasantry ceased to be the social basis for socialism. From then on, Plekhanov was to regard socialism as the result of the “antagonism and the struggle of classes in existing (i.e., bourgeois) society.” Further, Plekhanov wrote:

The practical task following from this [the class struggle] for the revolutionary activity consists in the organization of the layer of workers [*rabocheyo soslovie*], in pointing out to it the ways and means for its emancipation ... Outside the organization of forces, outside the awakening of consciousness and the self-activity of the people, even the most heroic revolutionary struggle can only benefit the higher classes, i.e., precisely those layers of contemporary society, against whom we must arm the toiling, disadvantaged masses. The emancipation of the people must be the work of the people themselves.[26]

Plekhanov also decisively changed his attitude to federalism, now regarding state centralization as an important prerequisite for restructuring society on the basis of social equality.

The next milestone in his movement toward Marxism was his article “The Economic Theory of Karl Rodbertus-Jagetzow,” which was published in several issues of the legal Russian journal *Notes of the Fatherland* (*Otechestvennye Zapiski*) in 1882–1883.

In this article, Plekhanov argued that in the eyes of bourgeois authors all people were divided into those who acknowledged the right of the working class to struggle for its emancipation and those who did not acknowledge this right. He wrote:

The practical strivings of the authors of these theories, and above all, of course, the question of the political self-activity of the working classes, are of decisive importance in their eyes. The writer who is against the organization of the workers in a special political party will probably gain the sympathy of bourgeois economists, regardless of what theoretical conceptions he is meanwhile guided by.[27]

Here, Plekhanov, in early 1882, was formulating, in an absolutely clear manner, the necessity of organizing the working class in a special, class-based political party.

Parallel to the theoretical advances of the exiled Plekhanov, the terroristic efforts of the “People’s Will” (*Narodnaya Volya*) reached their apex. In March 1881, yet another attempt on the life of Tsar Alexander II ended with his murder. In the eyes of all democratic Europe, the revolutionary authority of the populists had reached its high point. However, the very “success” of the terrorist tactic simultaneously became the beginning of the end of the “People’s Will.” The ensuing cruel repressions removed the best cadres from its ranks. The “disorganization” of the government, if it took place at all, was short-lived and failed to shake the foundations of Russian absolutism.

After a temporary shock, the new Tsar Alexander III and his entourage began another “cold period” in Russia, and for the next 15 years they maintained a regime of fierce nationalist reaction in the country. An atmosphere of social decline was accompanied by the growth of pessimism and disappointment among broad layers of the radically oriented intelligentsia, which encouraged moods among them inclined towards adopting a theory of achieving “small things” and insignificant land reforms.

In the aftermath of the assassination of Alexander II, Plekhanov’s main efforts were focused on clarifying questions of decisive importance for the future Russian revolutionary movement. In carrying through his theoretical condemnation of the populists, Plekhanov displayed immense physical and intellectual courage.

The final result of Plekhanov’s theoretical labors was the founding of the “Emancipation of Labor” group in Switzerland in September 1883. The group existed until the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in 1903. Plekhanov had wanted the organization to adopt a name that underlined its social-democratic character. But he met with opposition from the other members of the group and, as a result, reached a compromise solution.

### **The pamphlet *Socialism and the Political Struggle***

The founding of the “Emancipation of Labor” group was preceded by the publication of Plekhanov’s pamphlet *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, in which, for the first time, he formulated in distinctly Marxist terms the basic points of his political program.

This work proved to be critical in the development of Russian socialism and attracted the attention of socialists throughout Europe. While in London, Plekhanov met Frederick Engels, who acknowledged him as an expert in philosophy. Plekhanov recalled that Engels agreed with the proposition that modern materialism was, in essence, Spinozism, cleansed of its inadequacies and carried to its logical completion—a thesis that lay at the foundation of all Plekhanov’s further struggles in defense of materialism against all sorts of idealist distortions and attacks.

Unable to entirely disregard the social significance of the emerging urban proletariat, the populists reluctantly acknowledged that the workers were important “for the revolution.” Turning this phrase against the populists, Plekhanov replied in “Our Differences”: “This is by no means the way the Social Democrat speaks; he is convinced that it is not a case of the workers being necessary *for the revolution*, but of the revolution being necessary *for the workers*.”[28] This sentence concisely summed up the results of Plekhanov’s struggle against the populists’ conception of a supra-class peoples’ revolution. In the coming revolution against the autocracy, the working class would occupy a distinct, independent and decisive role, and would act independently, with a consciousness of its own class interests and objectives.

In this same work, Plekhanov also declared:

To Marx’s teaching is attributed the absurd conclusion that Russia must go through exactly the same phases of historical and economic development as the West.[29]

This statement alone refutes the claims of Plekhanov’s critics, according to whom he supposedly “mechanically” applied Marx’s theory to Russia. Plekhanov insisted that,

...the history of West European relations was used by Marx only as the basis of the *history of capitalist production*, which emerged and developed precisely in that part of the world. ... Neither the author of *Capital* nor his famous friend and colleague lost sight of the economic peculiarities of any particular country; only in those peculiarities do they seek the explanation of all a country’s social, political and intellectual movements.[30]

In particular, Plekhanov explained that Marx’s teaching did not ignore the significance of the Russian land *obshchina*. He quoted from the foreword, written by Marx and Engels, to the Russian translation of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, which was written in January 1882. In it, they said that the Russian *obshchina* might, under certain conditions, “pass directly to the higher, communist form of land ownership.”

Plekhanov continued:

These circumstances are, in their opinion, closely connected with the course of the revolutionary movement in the west of Europe and in Russia. “If the Russian revolution,” they say, “becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting-point for a communist development.” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, VIII.) ... hardly anyone who understands the significance of international relations in the economic life of modern civilized societies can deny that the development of the Russian village commune “into a higher form of communist common ownership” is closely linked with the destiny of the working-class movement in the West.[31]

In other words, Plekhanov insisted that the analysis of the internal socio-political development of Russia was possible only within the framework of a general *international* perspective of the proletarian revolution.

Another claim of Plekhanov’s critics is that he “uncritically” based his conception of the Russian Revolution on the experience of the Western European bourgeois-democratic revolutions of the 19th century.

But Plekhanov never employed such a sterile approach. He wrote:

West European history tells us most convincingly that whenever the “red spectre” took at all threatening forms, the “liberals” were ready to seek protection in the embraces of the most unceremonious military dictatorship.[32]

From these words it is evident that Plekhanov was very aware that the threat of anti-capitalist political action by the proletariat in Russia would push the liberal bourgeoisie into the embrace of absolutist reaction. He sought to avoid this outcome, while at the same time strengthening the

position of the working class within the framework of the struggle for democracy. Seeking to find an appropriate response to an inherently contradictory situation, Plekhanov argued:

...our socialist intelligentsia must concern itself with *changing the factual relations of Russian social forces in favor of the working class even in the pre-constitutional period*. Otherwise the fall of absolutism will by no means justify the hopes placed in it by the Russian socialists or even democrats... *The socialist party itself, having won for the liberal bourgeoisie freedom of speech and action, may find itself in an "exceptional" position similar to that of German Social-Democracy today... the Russian socialists ... can and must place their hopes first and foremost in the working class*. The strength of the working class—as of any other class—depends, among other things, on the clarity of its political consciousness, its cohesion and its degree of organization. It is these elements of its strength that must be influenced by our socialist intelligentsia. The latter must become the leader of the working class in the impending emancipation movement, explain to it its political and economic interests and also the interdependence of those interests and must prepare it to play an independent role in the social life of Russia. They must exert all their energy so that in the very opening period of the constitutional life of Russia our working class will be able to come forward as a separate party with a definite social and political program. [Emphasis added][33]

Writing that “the Russian socialists ... can and must place their hopes first and foremost in the working class,” and that the “socialist party will win for the liberal bourgeoisie freedom of speech and action,” Plekhanov formulated his theory of the hegemony of the proletariat (and its party) in the struggle against Tsarism.

Without detracting from Plekhanov’s theoretical achievement, it is also necessary to acknowledge that his formulation advanced a two-stage theory of revolution. The first stage would fight for the establishment of a bourgeois democracy. A second stage, at an unspecified future point of development, would carry forward the fight for workers’ rule and socialism.

Plekhanov saw no possibility for the proletariat to immediately go over to the building of a socialist society under the conditions of socio-economic backwardness of Tsarist Russia in the early 1880s. However, he sought an answer to the question of how the workers’ party had to conduct itself in the event that the development of the Russian Revolution put on the order of the day the necessity of overthrowing absolutism while the dominant bourgeois rule was still maintained in Europe.

Plekhanov provided a deeply *dialectical* answer to this question, from a historical point of view, in accordance with the objective social reality of Russia at that time. But for this very reason, this answer was not a final one and it contained entirely discernible traits of *contradiction*.

The Russian proletariat, Plekhanov insisted, had to be the political leader of all other social layers, including the bourgeoisie, in the struggle against despotism. But it could not begin to realize its own class program immediately after the victory over Tsarism. The question, which objectively remained open, was reduced, therefore, to the following: Is it possible to hand over power to the bourgeoisie if and when the proletarian party is victorious in the democratic revolution, and what should the concrete mechanism of this process be?

Moreover, if the proletariat handed over power to the liberal bourgeoisie, what guarantee would there be that the latter would not become frightened of the threat of the “red rooster” and attempt to

suppress it with the methods of “the most unceremonious military dictatorship,” or even try to restore the monarchy?

Given the conditions of his time, Plekhanov was not able to provide a final answer to these questions. While insisting upon the decisive role of the proletariat in the revolutionary process, he did not believe that the revolution could advance, without a fairly lengthy interval, beyond its bourgeois democratic stage. The transition from a bourgeois democratic to a socialist revolution would, in all probability, span decades. The sources of the future Menshevism can, no doubt, be discerned here.

Trotsky, in his 1939 essay, “Three Conceptions of the Russian Revolution,” called attention to the limitations inherent in Plekhanov’s perspective:

Plekhanov not only separated the bourgeois revolution as a task from the socialist revolution—which he postponed to the indefinite future—but he depicted for each of these entirely different combinations of forces. Political freedom was to be achieved by the proletariat in alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie; after many decades and on a higher level of capitalist development, the proletariat would then carry out the socialist revolution in direct struggle against the bourgeoisie.[34]

Plekhanov did not see the possibility of directly combining the struggle for political freedom with the struggle for socialism. In fairness to Plekhanov, this possibility did not exist in the 1880s and 1890s. But even as he rejected a direct and immediate link between the democratic and socialist revolutions, Plekhanov indicated that the conscious action of the proletariat would strive to facilitate the transition—albeit over an extended period of time—from the democratic to the socialist stage. In *Socialism and the Political Struggle*, Plekhanov stated:

Thus, the struggle for political freedom, on the one hand, and the preparation of the working class for its future independent and offensive role, on the other—such, in our opinion, is the only possible “setting of party tasks” at present. To bind together into one two so fundamentally different matters as the overthrow of absolutism and the socialist revolution, to wage revolutionary struggle in the belief that these elements of social development will *coincide* in the history of our country, *means to put off the advent of both*. But it depends on us to *bring* these two elements *closer together*.[35]

It is important to note that Plekhanov, although dividing the course of the Russian Revolution into two stages, passionately wanted to “bring” them “closer together” as much as possible. Plekhanov’s American biographer, Professor Samuel Baron, called attention to the contradiction inherent in his position. Plekhanov, according to Baron,

was prepared to countenance the shortening if not the elimination of the capitalist stage of development. And this would be achieved by a modification of the historical process through the political activity of the revolutionary party. Of course, Plekhanov sharply delimited his outlook and strategy from that of the Narodniks, on the ground that the voluntaristic activity of his revolutionary party must always be kept within the confines determined by the prevailing level of economic development. In his estimation, recognition of those limits set Marxism off from the assorted utopianisms. It subordinated revolutionary will to the historical process and its laws,

thus guaranteeing the rationality of Marxian revolutionary policy. For all that, it is apparent that Plekhanov's system embraced elements both of voluntarism and determinism, which he did not succeed in reconciling.[36]

Plekhanov continually stressed the significance of the Social Democratic movement in developing the class consciousness of the working class and preparing it for revolutionary action. The claim that Plekhanov's insistence on history as a law-governed process led him to underestimate revolutionary practice is fundamentally false. "*The earliest possible formation of a workers' party,*" Plekhanov argued, "*is the only means of solving all the economic and political contradictions of present-day Russia.*" [Emphasis in the original] [37] Thus, he acknowledged that the practice of the party could, under certain conditions, influence and shorten the passage from the bourgeois democratic to the socialist stage of the revolution.

But he was unable to say how, and under what conditions, this was to be accomplished. The objective conditions of Russian socio-economic development, as understood by Plekhanov, appeared to impose insurmountable limitations on the party's striving for socialism. But the very posing of the contradiction left open the possibility of another solution to the historical problem identified by Plekhanov. This solution was discovered by Trotsky on the basis of an analysis of the changed objective conditions revealed by the 1905 Revolution. The theory of permanent revolution advances a strategy that not only "brings together" the democratic and socialist stages of the revolution, but also insists that the first stage is impossible without adopting the methods of the second.

There is no question that Trotsky's theory represented an immense advance beyond the perspective of Plekhanov (and, it must be stressed as well, beyond Lenin's own pre-1917 program of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.) Nevertheless—and herein lies both the greatness and tragedy of Plekhanov's life—his own identification of the central role of the Russian proletariat in the democratic revolution laid the foundations for all subsequent advances initiated by both Lenin and Trotsky in the sphere of revolutionary strategy and tactics. These advances were anticipated in Plekhanov's speech at the founding congress of the Second International in 1889. He electrified the delegates when he declared: "The revolutionary movement in Russia will triumph only as a workers' movement or it will never triumph at all." [38] No other European socialist had previously recognized the decisive revolutionary role of the proletariat in backward Russia.

It is precisely on the basis of *this* great insight that all subsequent struggles over the strategy of the socialist revolution in Russia developed, culminating in Trotsky's elaboration of the theory of permanent revolution. This is why Trotsky insisted, in the 1918 funeral oration, that Plekhanov's political and theoretical work laid the foundation "of the *whole* of our revolutionary struggle." [Emphasis added]

Several years later, in 1922, Trotsky was compelled to answer an assault by the historian Mikhail Pokrovskii on Plekhanov's conception of certain unique features of Russia's historical development. It was well known that Trotsky's own understanding of Russian historical development had been greatly influenced by Plekhanov's earlier theoretical work. In attacking Plekhanov, Pokrovskii, who was emerging as an ardent supporter of Stalin's faction, was seeking to undermine the historical foundations of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. In support of his assault, Pokrovskii recalled Plekhanov's political weaknesses and ultimate betrayal of the socialist revolution. Defending Plekhanov's historical theories against Pokrovskii's attack, Trotsky replied:

The weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie and the illusory nature of

Russia's bourgeois democracy undoubtedly represent very important features in Russia's historical development. But it is precisely from this, given all other existing conditions, that the possibility and the historical necessity of the proletariat's seizure of power arises. True, Plekhanov never arrived at this conclusion. But then neither did he draw any conclusion from another of his undoubtedly correct propositions, namely: "The Russian revolutionary movement will triumph as a working class movement or it will not triumph at all." If we mix up everything Plekhanov said against the Narodniks and the vulgar Marxists with his Kadetophilia [39] and his patriotism, there will be nothing left of Plekhanov. Yet in reality a good deal is left of Plekhanov, and it does no harm to learn from him now and again.[40]

Our defense of the theory of permanent revolution and insistence on Trotsky's historic role in the preparation and victory of the October Revolution is not in the least compromised by paying tribute to Plekhanov. We agree with Trotsky that it "does no harm" to both study and learn from this great Marxist theoretician. Particularly in this day and age, when intellectual life has been degraded by the foulest forms of anti-materialism and philosophical irrationalism, the writings of Plekhanov serve as essential weapons in the struggle for a scientific understanding of the development of the historical process, and, on this basis, the revival of revolutionary socialist consciousness in the working class. Moreover, at a time when the innumerable representatives of reactionary petty-bourgeois pseudo-leftism do everything in their power to slander the working class and deny its decisive revolutionary role, the struggle waged by Plekhanov to establish the revolutionary hegemony of the working class acquires immense contemporary relevance.

Plekhanov remains, 160 years after his birth and almost a century after his death, a major figure in the history of socialist and Marxist thought. Lenin's final tribute to Plekhanov, in 1922, was entirely justified:

Let me add in parenthesis for the benefit of young Party members that you *cannot* hope to become a *real* intelligent Communist without making a study—and I mean *study*—of all of Plekhanov's philosophical writings, because nothing better has been written on Marxism anywhere in the world.[41]

*Fundamental Problems of Marxism* by G. Plekhanov is available (paperback) from Mehring Books for \$7.65

*The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left* by David North is available from Mehring Books in hardcover, paperback, Kindle and ePub formats—on sale!

**Notes:**

1. "Essays on the History of Materialism," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 158.
2. "On the Materialist Conception of History," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 235.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 235–236.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
5. *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 402 [italics added].
6. *Ibid.*, p. 416.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 416–17.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 422.
9. "Our Differences," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 1, p. 164.
10. "Cant Against Kant, or Herr Bernstein's Will and Testament," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 2, p. 352.



11. "N.G. Chernyshevsky's Aesthetic Theory," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1981), p. 223.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 648.
14. Aleksandr K. Voronsky, *Art as the Cognition of Life: Selected Writings 1911–1936*, translated and edited by Frederick Choate (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 1998), p. 120.
15. Nikolay Valentinov, *Encounters with Lenin* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 180–81.
16. "In Memory of Plekhanov," reproduced in *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left*, by David North (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2015), pp. 281–82.
17. Ter-Vaganian: *G. V. Plekhanov: An Attempt at a Characterization of his Socio-Political Views*, (Moscow 1924).
18. Wilhelm Tell—the legendary popular hero of Switzerland, who supposedly lived from the end of the 13th to the beginning of the 14th centuries, a skilled marksman and fighter for the independence of his country from Austria and the Holy Roman Empire.
19. Ter-Vaganian, pp. 42, 43.
20. G.V. Plekhanov, *Sochinenia*, edited by D. Ryazanov, Vol. 1 (Moscow, 1922), p. 70.
21. Ter-Vaganian, p. 30.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
25. *Sochinenia*, Vol. 1, p. 134.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
28. *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 1, p. 339.
29. ??????? ??. ????????? ????????????? ? ????????????? ?????. ??? 1. (?, 1956), ?. 72. [G.V. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 1, pp. 68–69].
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, p. 99 [*Ibid.*, p. 94].
33. *Ibid.*, p. 108 [*Ibid.*, p. 102].
34. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), p. 56.
35. ??????? ??. ????????? ????????????? ????????????? ? ????????????? ? 1., ?. 110. [*Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 1, p. 104].
36. Samuel Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), p. 114.
37. "Our Differences," *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 1, p. 346.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 419 [*Ibid.*, p. 400]. We are using here the text of Plekhanov's speech as it was published in his collected works in the 1920s. (See Vol. 24, Moscow 1927, pp. 319–320). In the five-volume edition of Plekhanov's *Selected Philosophical Works*, which came out in the 1950s, this text appears as the "second version" of his speech. Along with this the "first" variant is cited, which is identical in terms of its content.
39. Trotsky is referring here to Plekhanov's increasingly opportunist advocacy of an alliance with the bourgeois Cadet Party after 1905.
40. Leon Trotsky, *1905*, translated by Anya Bostock (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 332.
41. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 32 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 94.

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