

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

Plekhanov: The Father of Authoritarian Russian Socialism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2q60c3s9>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 19(0)

Author

Kellogg, Michael

Publication Date

2000

Copyright Information

Copyright 2000 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Plekhanov: The Father of Authoritarian Russian Socialism

By Michael Kellogg

Writing of whom he terms “the father of Russian Marxism,”¹ Samuel Baron maintains: “Under attack ever since the Bolshevik revolution, relegated to virtual oblivion in the Stalin era, and only marginally rehabilitated following the Twentieth Party Congress, G. V. Plekhanov has now truly been resurrected in Russia.”² This assertion may be a slight exaggeration, but with the fall of Communism and the pressing search for a just socio-political order in Russia, Plekhanov’s ideas are more relevant now than they have been in decades. Russian Social Democracy has suffered from what Theodore Dan terms the “immemorial, fundamental problem” of the “fusion of democracy and Socialism,”³ and Plekhanovite thought currently enjoys the reputation of a more inclusive and democratic alternative to Vladimir Lenin’s authoritarian Bolshevism.

Western historians have lauded Plekhanov as a principled opponent of arch-centralization. Baron credits him with presciently decrying the perils of authoritarianism years before Stalin rose to power,⁴ and Philip Pomper argues that he sought to hinder the “establishment of a new authoritarianism” and to “prepare the way for a proper revolution by the gradual transformation of the spontaneous workers’ movement into a broad, conscious revolutionary party.”⁵ Isaiah Berlin casts the struggle between Plekhanov and Lenin as part of the ongoing battle between “every libertarian and federalist against Jacobins and centralizers,”⁶ Edward Carr juxtaposes the “milder and more cautious Plekhanov” with the “bolder and more uncompromising Lenin,”⁷ and Nicholas Riasanovsky posits the “fundamental division in modern Russian history” engendered by the break “between the older Marxist who never lost humanistic standards and culture and

¹ Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).

² Baron, *Plekhanov in Russian History and Soviet Historiography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), ix.

³ Theodore Dan, *The Origins of Bolshevism*, trans. Joel Carmichael (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964), 411.

⁴ Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, 359, 360.

⁵ Philip Pomper, *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1970), 173.

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 222.

⁷ Edward Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1950), 7.

the young fanatic confident that the ends justified the means.”⁸

Many Western scholars consider Plekhanov to have championed what may be termed a “democratic” program of working class initiative and political pluralism, yet a careful analysis of Plekhanov’s writings and actions does not support this judgment. While the historical record indicates that Plekhanov differed with Lenin on some key issues, most notably regarding the necessity for Socialist revolution only after a full-fledged bourgeois one, he fundamentally agreed with Lenin’s centralist, anti-democratic views on Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party organization when he held a secure position of power, only belatedly, tentatively, and contradictorily pleading for greater freedom for debate when his once-mighty influence in the Party was waning.

In retrospect, it may well have been better for the Russian people in the long run if, as the then-Muscovite mayor, Gavril Popov, asserted in 1990, the Bolsheviks had not “outr[u]n the development of productive forces, violated basic ideas of Marxism, and failed to take into consideration the views of leading Marxists like Plekhanov.”⁹ One must not turn a blind eye on Plekhanov’s authoritarian legacy in seeking to salvage a beneficent form of Russian Socialism from the ruins of Lenin and Stalin’s Bolshevism, however. Rather than representing the corruption of Plekhanov’s ideas, authoritarian Russian Socialism developed as a logical outgrowth of Plekhanovite thought.

Georgii Plekhanov, the 21-year-old son of a strict army officer, had to flee Russia for Switzerland after denouncing the Tsarist regime in a fiery oration in 1876, but he wielded considerable influence upon revolutionary Russian Populist politics from abroad. He soon converted from Populism to Marxism, however, founding the first Russian Marxist organization, the Emancipation of Labor Group, in 1883. In that same year, he laid the theoretical foundations of Russian Marxism in his work, *Socialism and Political Struggle*, which, according to Lenin, influenced Russia as much as *The Communist*

⁸ Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia, Third Edition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 527.

⁹ Baron, *Plekhanov in Russian History*, ix.

Manifesto had affected the West.¹⁰ Plekhanov's abandonment of his erstwhile Populist comrades is significant since Populism, in Pomper's words, sought the "resolution of the problem of the role of the intelligentsia and the role of the masses in favor of the masses."¹¹ In rejecting Populism Plekhanov embraced elitism.

In making the case for Plekhanov as upholder of decentralized and pluralistic organizational values, however, historians have made much of his assertion in *Socialism and Political Struggle* that if the People's Will, a clandestine revolutionary movement that used terrorist methods, decided to form a permanent government, then it would either

have to remain an indifferent spectator of the slow decay of the "economic equality" it has established, or it will be obliged to organize national production. It will have to fulfill this difficult task either in the spirit of modern socialism, in which it will be hindered by its own impracticality as well as by the present stage of development of national labor and the workers' own habits; or it will have to seek salvation in the ideals of "patriarchal and authoritarian communism," only modifying those ideals so that national production is managed not by the Peruvian "sons of the sun" and their officials, but by a socialist caste.¹²

Andrzej Walicki has stressed that Plekhanov "never abandoned" the beliefs he expressed here,¹³ and Baron refers to this passage at the end of his seminal work, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, in order to bolster his case for Plekhanov's inclusive ideals and remarkable prescience.¹⁴ It is worth noting, however, that Lenin also repudiated The People's Will's tactics upon grounds of expediency,¹⁵ but this has not led scholars to view him as an advocate of genuine democracy. Moreover, Plekhanov's primary concern at the time he wrote this was that The People's Will, with whom he had broken in 1879 over the use of terrorism, would try to force socialism upon a backward country that was not yet ready for it. He did not argue for the necessity of a broad and

¹⁰ Baron, *Plekhanov*, op cite, pp. 4, 18, 19, 78, 143.

¹¹ Pomper, *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia*, 100.

¹² Plekhanov, "Socialism and Political Struggle," in *G. Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1947), p. 114.

¹³ Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism*, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p. 415.

¹⁴ Baron, p. 360.

¹⁵ Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (New York: Farrow, Strass, and Giroux, 1940), p. 463.

democratic Russian Socialist movement per se.

In fact, in "Socialism and Political Struggle," Plekhanov stressed,

We do not belong to the opponents in principle of such an act as the seizure of power by a revolutionary party. In our opinion that is the last, and what is more, the absolutely inevitable conclusion to be drawn from the political struggle which every class striving for emancipation must undertake at a definite stage in social development.¹⁶

John Keep thus overstates his case when he asserts of Plekhanov, "In earlier years there had been no lack of warnings as to the perils involved in the seizure of power by a revolutionary minority."¹⁷ Plekhanov's early essay demonstrates that the Marxist theoretician did not oppose a minority seizure of power as such, but merely attacked the notion of a seizure of power carried out immediately under the aegis of his old enemies in The People's Will out of expedience, rather than moral considerations.

Moreover, Plekhanov demonstrated his belief in the necessity of a highly-centralized Russian Socialist Party and not a more democratically organized mass movement in the very preface to "Socialism and Political Struggle," arguing:

The desire to work *among the people* and for the people, the certitude that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves" -- this practical tendency of our *narodism* is just as dear to me as it used to be. But its *theoretical* propositions seem to me, indeed, erroneous in many respects. Years of life abroad and attentive study of the social question have convinced me that the triumph of a spontaneous popular movement similar to Stepan Razin's revolt or the Peasant Wars in Germany cannot satisfy the social and political needs of modern Russia, that the old forms of our national life carried within them many germs of their disintegration and that they cannot "develop into a higher communist form" except under the immediate influence of a strong and well-organized *workers'* socialist party.¹⁸

Plekhanov thus paid lip service to the attractiveness of a "spontaneous" socialist movement, but he argued that such an entity would be incapable of carrying out a successful socialist revolution, while a more highly-centralized one would.

¹⁶ Plekhanov, "Socialism and Political Struggle," *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 109.

¹⁷ John Keep, *The Rise of Social Democracy in Russia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 297.

¹⁸ Plekhanov, "Socialism and Political Struggle," *Selected Philosophical Works*, p. 57. Emphasis mine.

In another passage from *Socialism and Political Struggle*, Plekhanov stressed the need for the Russian Socialist intelligentsia to impart consciousness to the masses, thereby contradicting the basic Marxist principle that, as he worded it in a later work, "It is not the consciousness of men which determines their being, but...their social being that determines their consciousness."¹⁹ He argued that the

socialist intelligentsia....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 them 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.²⁰

Plekhanov feared that without strong Russian Socialist intelligentsia leadership, the working masses would be able to understand neither their political and economic interests nor the interdependence between them and would only be in the position to play a subsidiary role in Russian society. Thus, even in the early stages of his career, Plekhanov clearly favored a tightly-organized and "conscious" workers' party under the control of the socialist intelligentsia. Plekhanov predicted dire consequences if the People's Will were to seize power, but he was more concerned with hindering this particular group with whom he had an acrimonious running dispute from taking power than with arguing for democratic methods per se. Quite the contrary, he believed that Russian conditions necessitated a tightly-run and highly-centralized Socialist Party.

Never an amiable person, with the rise of Eduard Bernstein's Revisionism in the late 1890's, a movement that favored evolutionary instead of revolutionary tactics to achieve material gains for the workers within the framework of capitalism, Plekhanov became increasingly imperious and unwilling to compromise with those in the recently-founded Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party who did not unquestioningly accept

¹⁹ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History*, trans. Andrew Rothstein (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1947), p. 330.

²⁰ Plekhanov, "Socialism and Political Struggle," *Selected Philosophical Works*, pp. 57-58.

his will. In April 1899, he wrote Pavel Akselrod and Vera Zasulich regarding Revisionism: "If you want to participate in the upcoming struggle, well and good. If not, I alone will follow the path which my duty as a revolutionary requires me to follow."²¹ Plekhanov took it upon himself to define what constituted deviation from orthodox Marxism, and his brusque tone with his ideological comrades demonstrates his unwillingness to consider alternative vantage points.

Plekhanov further manifested his intransigence at the August 1900 organizational meeting for two new Social-Democratic newspapers, *Iskra* (*The Spark*), and *Zaria* (*The Dawn*), stressing the need to eliminate ideological nonconformity within the Party. Though Lenin later became famed for his hard-line stance towards Party organization, his proposal for *Iskra*'s Opening Editorial Statement envisioned the newspaper as an instrument of "general democracy." Lenin stressed:

We do not claim that our views in their entirety are the views of all Russian Social Democrats, we do not deny that differences exist, nor shall we attempt to gloss over or obliterate these differences. On the contrary, we desire our publications to become organs of discussion of all questions by all Russian Social Democrats of the most diverse shades of opinion.²²

In his effort to assert his complete dominance over *Iskra*, the political organ through which he intended to impose his will on Russian Social Democratic politics from exile in Switzerland, however, Plekhanov impatiently brushed aside Lenin's proposals aside. He so severely upbraided Lenin for his mildness towards advocates of Revisionism that Lenin later seethed at what he regarded as the "degrading" manner in which Plekhanov had handled him.²³ Plekhanov then threatened to withdraw from *Iskra*'s Editorial Board in order to frighten Lenin and the others into acquiescing to his demands, and they granted him two votes on the Editorial Staff of six. Lenin greatly resented what he came to see as a "trick" and a "calculated chess move aimed at naive pigeons."²⁴ Lenin also wrote that

²¹ Leopold Haimson, *The Russian Marxists & The Origins of Bolshevism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 88.

²² Baron, 211.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 214.

²⁴ Haimson, pp. 139, 140.

Plekhanov had revealed himself as a “bad man, inspired by petty motives of personal vanity and conceit - an insincere man.”²⁵

At Plekhanov’s insistence, *Iskra*’s Editorial Board asserted that in order to “establish and consolidate Party unity...it is necessary first of all to bring about unity of ideas which will remove differences of opinion.” *Iskra*’s Opening Editorial Statement stressed: “Before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first of all firmly and definitely draw the lines of demarcation between the various [anti-Tsarist] groups.”²⁶ Plekhanov imperiously relegated for himself the role of chief Party ideologue who would determine what represented true Marxist ideology and what deviated unacceptably from it.

Writing of the discord between Plekhanov and Lenin over *Iskra*’s editorial policy, Baron posits: “As Lenin describes the clash, one sees an obstinate, egotistical, and power-hungry man outrageously humiliating and exploiting a younger comrade who came to him in a spirit of reverence and devotion.” Baron concedes, “When he resolved to be disagreeable, Plekhanov had few equals,” but he then asserts that “differences of principle and not Plekhanov’s ‘repellent’ qualities must still be seen as the chief source of the conflict.” Baron further insists that “the quarrel was not so much a personal one as an early instance of disagreement on the nature of the Party - on the limits of diversity admissible within its bounds, and on how it should stand with reference to other parties.”²⁷

Given that Plekhanov severely berated Lenin for *excessively* tolerating divergent points of view, it seems odd that Baron nevertheless counts Plekhanov among the ranks of those who fundamentally opposed authoritarian Russian Social Democracy. Moreover, by downplaying the personal differences between Plekhanov and Lenin, Baron weakens his argument that Plekhanov was at heart much more democratic than Lenin. One could attempt to bolster the case for Plekhanov as anti-authoritarian by attributing his early dispute with Lenin primarily to psychological differences, but Baron downplays this

²⁵ Baron, 212.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 214, 215.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 209, 210, 213.

aspect, thereby rendering his case for Plekhanov as anti-authoritarian that much more tenuous.

After this meeting, Lenin, largely due to Plekhanov's influence, became convinced of the necessity for a highly-centralized Party and grew contemptuous of democratic safeguards altogether. Lenin published his famous brochure, "What Is to Be Done? [*Chto delat'?*]" in February of 1902. In this work he came down decidedly on the side of the "consciousness" of the revolutionary intelligentsia against the "spontaneity" of the workers, denouncing the "slavish cringing before spontaneity" prevalent in the Party. He quoted from Plekhanov himself in making his arguments, noting that the latter had observed that too many Russian Social Democrats mistakenly gazed "in awe" upon the "posterior" of the Russian proletariat. Lenin disparaged the capabilities of the working class in general, asserting that "the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only trade-union consciousness" since "class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without."²⁸

Lenin called for a tightly-organized and secret organization made up of "professional revolutionaries" to avoid the Tsarist police, and he ridiculed the idea of making any attempts at "playing at democracy." He argued that "freedom of criticism means freedom for an opportunist trend in social-democracy, freedom to convert social-democracy into a democratic party of reform, freedom to introduce bourgeois ideas and elements into socialism." He stressed the need for a small and conspiratorial cadre of committed revolutionaries, positing: "This organization must perform not be very extensive and must be as secret as possible."²⁹ He further maintained:

If we begin with the solid foundation of a strong organization of revolutionaries, we can ensure the stability of the movement as a whole and carry out the aims both of social-democracy and of trade unions proper. If, however, we begin with a broad workers' organization, which is supposedly most "accessible" to the masses (but which is actually most accessible to the gendarmes and makes revolutionaries

²⁸ Vladimir Lenin, *What Is to Be Done*, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 98, 101, 143, 169.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 172, 174, 200.

most accessible to the police), we shall achieve neither the one aim nor the other.³⁰

As well as specifically supporting Lenin's conclusions in "What Is to Be Done?" after the pamphlet was published in 1902, in the period between the turn of the century and the Second Party Congress in the summer of 1903, Plekhanov stressed the critical importance of the "conscious" Social-Democratic intelligentsia and lamented the workers' lack of consciousness, calling for a highly-centralized Party structure. Indeed, during this time, Plekhanov made numerous assertions that appear as if they could have come directly from the pages of "What Is to Be Done?" In early 1900, for instance, two years before Lenin's publication, Plekhanov disparaged the intellectual capacities of the workers in an argument that influenced Lenin's own views, arguing:

Only two things are known to the workers: 1) their own, clearly recognized, concrete interests, and 2) their position...among other classes. Hence the role of the superstructure, educated Social Democracy, is to understand the interests of the given moment, that is, the active psychological basis that is the motivating force of the masses, and, secondly, to understand the possible broader and truer position of the masses in the middle of all other entities at the given moment.³¹

In an article of February 1900 Plekhanov further maintained that once the Russian Social-Democratic intelligentsia had understood the political, social, and economic situation of the country, it had to begin "explaining [these interests] to the working class immediately" and to "speak both of social revolution and the seizure of power by the working class." He even stressed that the intelligentsia had to do no less than to "awaken the consciousness of the working class."³² In other words, Plekhanov advocated the very "Leninesque" argument that, left to themselves, the Russian workers would not be able to draw the necessary historical conclusions to carry out socialist revolution.

Not only did Plekhanov assert that the Russian Social-Democratic intelligentsia had to instill consciousness in the workers from without, he deplored what he regarded as the chaos resulting from internal debate. He lamented the "mess that prevails among us now,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³¹ Plekhanov, "Sbornik materialov, izdannyi gruppoi 'osvobozhdenie truda,'" in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, ed. D. Riazanov (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo, 1926), p. 490.

³² Plekhanov, "Predislovie k vademecum," in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, pp. 15, 37.

thanks to which it may soon truthfully be said that where two Russian Social Democrats meet, three Social-Democratic Parties will most likely spring up.” He melodramatically asserted, “I confess that I never thought that it would be my lot to suffer such shame! We must get out of this chaotic and disgraceful situation at all costs. Woe to the party that patiently endures such confusion!”³³ Far from advocating lively internal debate, Plekhanov emphasized the need for a streamlined and centralized Social-Democratic Party that clung to Marxist dogma as interpreted by himself.

While Baron stresses Plekhanov’s supposed commitment to cooperate with Russian liberals as evidenced by the older man’s 1895 comment to the young Lenin, “You turn your back to the liberals and we our face,”³⁴ Plekhanov demonstrated his elitist philosophy and basic distrust of left liberal elements in Russian society in his April 1901 article, “Once Again Socialism and Political Struggle.” [“Esche raz sotsializm i politicheskaia borba”] He expressed his apprehension at being subsumed into the “mass of other anti-governmental elements,” stressing that “precisely the transformation of Social Democrats into ordinary democrats would signify the abandonment of the class struggle and the rapprochement of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie.”³⁵ Plekhanov thus favored a highly elitist and intractable stance vis-à-vis other groups in Russian society that were striving to overthrow Tsarism.

The very idea of constructing a decentralized Party organization repelled Plekhanov. In his June 1901 article, “New Wine in Old Wine-Skins,” [“Novoe vino v starykh mekhakh”] Plekhanov demonstrated that his earlier critique of The People’s Will put forth in *Socialism and Political Struggle* had been primarily based on expedient and not moral considerations. Plekhanov rebuked his critics who argued that a “secret and strictly-centralized” Social Democratic Party organization would represent a throwback to the time of the People’s Will, maintaining that the idea of a highly-centralized

³³ Plekhanov, “Predislovie k vademecum,” *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, pp. 41-42.

³⁴ Baron, p. 155.

³⁵ Plekhanov, “Eshche raz sotsializm i politicheskaia borba,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, p. 101.

revolutionary body predated this organization. He concluded that a “secret, strictly-clandestine and centralized organization is essential for any revolutionary party that is vigorously fighting under contemporary Russian conditions.”³⁶ Thus, Plekhanov reached the same conclusion that Lenin later advocated in “What Is to Be Done?”

In his “Commentary on the R[ussian] S[ocial]-D[emocratic] W[orkers’] P[arty] Program,” published in *Zaria* a few months after the appearance of “What Is to be Done?,” Plekhanov reiterated his fundamentally anti-democratic views. Using a military metaphor, as he was wont to do, he stressed that the Social-Democratic intelligentsia represented the “vanguard” of the “workers’ army.” He quoted from Lenin himself in emphasizing the critical importance of the “revolutionary bacillus.” Referring to an article in which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had gladly renounced “cheap democratic popularity,” he boasted that Social Democrats now constituted “the vast majority in our revolutionary milieu,” but he emphasized that they would “have to dismiss [democratic popularity] if it became necessary for the interests of our cause.”³⁷ In asserting this, Plekhanov demonstrated that he would gladly defy his comrades’ wishes if he deemed it necessary to further what he regarded as the needs of “orthodox” Marxism.

Moreover, in “Commentary” Plekhanov argued that the Social-Democratic intelligentsia could not even consider surrendering its leadership role to the workers. Refuting an argument that a critic had leveled against Lenin’s emphasis on the importance of the “revolutionary bacillus,” Plekhanov stressed: “Social Democracy can never agree with this ludicrous and disgraceful role as the fifth wheel of the wagon without committing suicide.”³⁸ The forceful language Plekhanov employed here conveys how strongly he believed in the necessity for a committed cadre of revolutionary leaders to rule over what he viewed as the vacillating working class.

The organizational views of Plekhanov and Lenin in the time directly before the

³⁶ Plekhanov, “Novoe vino v starykh mekhakh,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, p. 121.

³⁷ Plekhanov, “Kommentarii k proektu programmy R.S.-D.R.P.,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, p. 213.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

Second Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party thus closely resembled each other. In fact, Lenin received much of the impetus for his arguments in favor of strict centralization from Plekhanov himself. It is thus not clear why Baron remarks of the Congress that "most incredibly of all, it aligned *together*, Plekhanov and Lenin."³⁹ As we have seen, their ideological positions before the Congress regarding Party organization were nearly identical, and the affinity between Plekhanov's and Lenin's theories manifested itself even more clearly at the Congress, over which Plekhanov presided.

At the Second Party Congress that met in Brussels and London for three weeks in July and August of 1903, Lenin's draft for the Party rules unleashed a controversy over Party organization that brought about the Bolshevik-Menshevik split. Lenin's draft stipulated, "Anyone is considered a Party member who accepts the program and supports the Party both materially and by participation in one of the Party organizations." Iurii Martov offered a counter-proposal arguing that members should only have to work under the guidance of a Party organization. Martov's proposal won the day, but Plekhanov voted for Lenin's draft, the only member of *Iskra's* six member editorial staff other than Lenin to do so.⁴⁰ While Sheila Fitzpatrick has counted Plekhanov as an opponent of Lenin at the crucial Second Party Congress,⁴¹ in fact, Plekhanov voted with Lenin on *every single issue* at the Congress, thus demonstrating that his actions, when they mattered most, supported Lenin's authoritarian views.

Baron has tried to cast Plekhanov's actions in a more favorable light. "Plekhanov's conduct at the Congress," he argues, "is partly to be explained by his failure to grasp the full indications of Lenin's organizational scheme."⁴² Ignorance is not a very flattering defense in any case, and Plekhanov was nothing if not perceptive. Plekhanov's speeches at the Congress demonstrated that he fully understood and accepted Lenin's doctrines of

³⁹ Baron, p. 234.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 237, 240.

⁴¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 30.

⁴² Baron, p. 244.

working-class torpor and the need for highly-centralized leadership from the Social-Democratic intelligentsia. Plekhanov defended Lenin against his critics to the full and praised him for understanding that “if you eliminate the [revolutionary] ‘bacillus,’ then you will only be left with the unconscious masses, whose consciousness must be brought in from without.”⁴³

In addition to postulating in Leninesque fashion that the workers could not become “conscious” without the guidance of the intelligentsia, Plekhanov admonished the Congress delegates, “We must not imitate the anarchy of the 70’s, but avoid it. Supporters of Martov’s draft claim that the right to name oneself a member of the Party has great moral significance. I cannot agree with this, however.” He attacked V. P. Akimov for criticizing Lenin, arguing that Akimov had understood “neither Lenin’s phrases, nor our draft.” Comparing Akimov with Napoleon, who had wanted his marshals to divorce their wives, Plekhanov stressed, “I will not become divorced from Lenin, and I hope that he likewise does not intend to divorce himself from me,” to which Lenin laughed and shook his head negatively.⁴⁴ Plekhanov’s use of familial language with regard to Lenin further demonstrated the ideological affinity that the two men shared.

At the Congress, Plekhanov exhibited his scorn for democratic safeguards within the Party. He asserted that “he who wishes to remain a member of the Party must stay rooted within the Program even in his criticism,” thereby implicitly threatening to expel those who did not toe the Party line as interpreted by himself. He stressed the importance of maintaining strict ideological unity with regard to outside elements and those lower in the Social-Democratic hierarchy, insisting that “the discipline of every collegium is obligatory with regard to outsiders and the lower levels of authority, but not with regard to the highest.”⁴⁵ In other words, the higher Party echelons, while possessing a strictly-limited right to internal debate as long as they remained within certain narrow ideological

⁴³ Plekhanov, “Rechi na vtorom ocherednom sezde R.S.-D.R.P.,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, p. 416.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 418, 427.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 412, 426.

parameters, had to present a determined front to outsiders and to expect complete obedience from below.

Plekhanov further dismissed democratic safeguards by asserting:

Every given democratic principle must be considered not by itself in abstraction, but in relation to the principle that may be called the fundamental principle of democracy, namely the principle that *salus populi suprema lex*. In translation to the language of the revolutionary, this means that the success of the revolution is the highest law. And if it were necessary to restrict this or that democratic principle for the sake of the success of the revolution, then it would be criminal to balk at such a restriction....The suitability of such a measure could only be judged on the basis of the rule: *salus revolutiae suprema lex*.⁴⁶

While Riasanovsky has emphasized the “fundamental division in modern Russian history between the older Marxist who never lost humanistic standards and culture and the young fanatic confident that the ends justified the means”⁴⁷ at this crucial meeting, Plekhanov unequivocally advocated precisely that for which Riasanovsky reproaches Lenin. Baron views Plekhanov’s speech as an aberration made in the heat of the battle without due consideration. Without presenting any evidence to back his assertion, Baron argues that Plekhanov “lived to regret this speech with every sinew of his being.”⁴⁸ Plekhanov made his oration in full consciousness of what he was positing, however, and as we shall clearly see, he upheld the validity of his notion “*salus revolutiae suprema lex*” years after the Congress, even after he had begun his vicious war against Lenin.

Rather than deciding hastily, Plekhanov carefully deliberated on the debate between Martov and Lenin and came down clearly and unambiguously on Lenin’s side. At one point during the Congress, Plekhanov forcefully expressed his beliefs regarding the Party rules: “The more that was said on this subject, and the more thoughtfully that I pondered the speeches of the orators, the more firmly has the conviction grown up in me that the truth is on Lenin’s side.” The last words Plekhanov spoke at the Congress, after hearing all of the pros and cons of Lenin’s position and carefully considering its merits and

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 418, 419.

⁴⁷ Riasanovsky, p. 527.

⁴⁸ Baron, p. 242.

faults, were: "Lenin's draft may serve as a bulwark against [bourgeois individualists'] intrusion into the Party, and for this reason alone opponents of opportunism should vote for it."⁴⁹ A close examination of the records of the Second Party Congress thus demonstrates that Plekhanov unreservedly backed Lenin's pleas for rigid centralization to the end.

Within a few months of the Second Party Congress, however, Plekhanov performed what Baron rightly describes as a "stunning volte-face" in "turning his cudgels" upon Lenin. Baron refuses to consider that something other than principled disagreement lay at the heart of the dispute between the two Social-Democratic leaders, however. Rather than regarding Plekhanov's assault upon Lenin as a tactical move to attempt to weaken a dangerous rival for Party leadership, Baron asserts of Plekhanov:

His reversal constitutes decisive evidence that his Bolshevism at the Congress was not nearly so resolute and unequivocal as it appeared to many. Though overshadowed by their evident unity, in retrospect the differences between Lenin and Plekhanov at the Congress are significant. They help to account for what otherwise defies rational explanation.⁵⁰

Baron's assertion notwithstanding, the evidence appears far from decisive that Plekhanov's Bolshevistic, i.e., authoritarian, tendencies were only superficial, and in fact supports exactly the opposite conclusion. Baron does not specify what "differences" at the Congress he has in mind, and, indeed, the record does not indicate any significant ones. On the contrary, Plekhanov's supposed Menshevistic or inclusive and not his Bolshevistic or exclusive tendencies were not resolute and unequivocal. Plekhanov moved against Lenin after the Congress primarily for power political reasons that had little to do with what Baron regards as "rational" philosophical differences.

Baron vaguely suggests that "freedom of criticism" posed a "possibility of discord" between Plekhanov and Lenin at the Second Party Congress and afterwards, without specifying precisely what he means by this.⁵¹ Baron's argument is hard to reconcile with Plekhanov's assertion at the Congress that "he who wishes to remain a member of the

⁴⁹ Plekhanov, "Rech'i na vtorom ocherednom sezde R.S.-D.R.P.," pp. 426, 427.

⁵⁰ Baron, p. 244.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Party must stay rooted within the Program even in his criticism,⁵² however. Moreover, months after the Congress, Plekhanov made the following decidedly unequivocal assertion against freedom of expression within the Party's ranks:

A party is a union freely composed of like-minded peers. As soon as like-mindedness disappears, divergence becomes inevitable. To foist on a party such members who do not share its views in the name of freedom of opinion is to constrain its freedom of choice and to hamper the success of its activities.⁵³

Plekhanov wished to brush aside views in the Party that differed from his own to the greatest extent possible.

In October 1903, Plekhanov attempted to outmaneuver Lenin by campaigning to reinstate the four members of *Iskra's* Editorial Board who had been forced out at the Second Party Congress. Plekhanov knew that Lenin would not countenance this, so he used his old tactic of threatening to resign from *Iskra's* Editorial Staff to win concessions. Lenin, fearing that he would be blamed if Plekhanov left *Iskra*, stepped down himself.⁵⁴ As soon as Lenin left, Plekhanov launched a major broadside against his erstwhile ally in an article in *Iskra*, "What Is Not to Be Done." ["Chego ne delat'"] The very title of his essay belies Baron's mild assertion that Plekhanov merely "put some distance between Lenin and himself."⁵⁵

In "What is Not to Be Done," Plekhanov cast aspersions on Lenin's character and intellectual abilities, arguing that the Party needed leaders who were distinguished not only by "boldness, persistence, and determination, but also by great circumspection." He warned against people who displayed "ordinary stubbornness," stressed that Party leaders needed to be "wise like the Serpent," and insinuated that Lenin was simply "stupid." Plekhanov went so far as to suggest that Lenin should withdraw from politics, noting that the first sign of political wisdom lay in being able to take the current state of affairs into account, and that he who did not have this ability "was not destined for political activity

⁵² Plekhanov, "Rech'i na vtorom ocherednom sezde R.S.-D.R.P.," p. 426.

⁵³ Plekhanov, "Krasnyi sez'd v krasnoi strane," in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, p. 455.

⁵⁴ Baron, p. 246.

⁵⁵ Baron, p. 412.

and would act more sensibly if he were to decline every sort of political role.”⁵⁶

Alluding to Lenin, Plekhanov somewhat vaguely asserted, “Consistent Marxists cannot be and, of course, will not be utopians of centralism.” Whatever he meant by “utopians of centralism,” as we have seen, Plekhanov had earlier repeatedly stressed the virtues of a highly-centralized Party. Based on his record, Plekhanov could not logically exclude himself from the ranks of “utopians of centralism.” Suddenly abandoning the arguments in favor of strict Party centralization that he had been advancing for years, Plekhanov warned that if the Party were to be organized in a rigidly-centralized manner, then “every mistake made by the center would inevitably spread out to the periphery.”⁵⁷ Since Plekhanov had long championed such a strong Party center, however, his primary concern with a centralized Party seems to have been his fear of a powerful central organization that Lenin, and not he, would dominate. Plekhanov thus attacked Lenin out of tactical expediency rather than moral conviction.

Conveniently neglecting the fact that at the Second Party Congress he had sanctioned removing Party members for breaches of Party doctrine, Plekhanov asked his readers to imagine a Party center filled with “determined and unflagging enemies of ‘Revisionism,’ along the lines Lenin put forward in “What Is To Be Done?” He asserted that if this center were to “expel” them, that would “certainly be easy and as ‘direct’ as possible. But would that...be beneficial for the unity of our Party and for the struggle with ‘Revisionism?’ We think not.”⁵⁸ This was a strange position indeed for a man to take who had devoted his previous career to delineating “orthodox” Marxism and ostracizing those who, in his eyes, deviated from it.

The same man who recently had stressed that freedom of criticism had to be kept within the narrowest of bounds when he had been the undisputed leader of Russian Social

⁵⁶ Plekhanov, “Chego ne delat’,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, ed. D. Riazanov (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo, 1926), pp. 3, 4, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp., 3, 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Democracy now suddenly claimed, "Earlier we fought with each other. Now we may engage in the exchange of ideas"⁵⁹ when faced with Lenin's serious challenge to his leading position in the Party. Plekhanov had helped to inspire Lenin's elitist, consciousness-oriented, centralist, and anti-democratic views, and he had supported the young Marxist theoretician as long as it seemed that he remained within his orbit; but when Lenin's growing power and ambition became evident at the Congress and afterwards, Plekhanov, ironically enough, suddenly began to posit the need for greater debate in an attempt to silence his principle opponent for Party leadership.

Even in "What Is Not to Be Done," Plekhanov seemed most concerned not with the need to decentralize the Party but with the necessity of "guarding unity with all of our strength," however. He stressed the value of strong Party discipline, arguing that even in a liberal state and certainly in the Russian system where the Party did not have the ability to operate openly, the most important task for Russian Social Democrats was that of their "self-education in the spirit of Party discipline." Moreover, he warned against any tendencies towards "anarchical individualism, which greatly hampers harmonious concerted work." He further emphasized, "Our center is obliged to concern itself extremely strictly with breaches of discipline in our ranks."⁶⁰ Plekhanov sensed that his position of power was becoming increasingly insecure, and he took strong countermeasures in an unsuccessful attempt to halt this process.

Plekhanov argued in his January 1904 article, "A Sad Misunderstanding," that centralization as such did not represent the problem, but that the lack thereof did. While admitting that he had belonged to the majority, or Bolsheviki, at the Second Party Congress, he wrote that the Congress had brought about an "abnormal" situation in which "people elected by one half [of the delegates] were to lead everyone." He wished the Central Committee to serve as the "expression of our Party as a whole, and not only one of

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

its parts.” He claimed that the Central Committee had become “eccentric,” when in fact it had to be “central.”⁶¹ Despite his anti-Leninist polemics, Plekhanov still wrote of the virtues of a tightly-run, united organization that did not allow a plurality of viewpoints.

Thus, what increasingly emerged in Plekhanov’s writings was not his conscientious objection to the dangers of extreme centralization and the lack of democratic safeguards in the Party, but his growing fear of the disintegration of the Party into two warring halves that did not accept his leadership. His halting and half-hearted advocacy of freedom of opinion sprang not from principled opposition to Lenin’s organizational plans in theory, but from fear that in practice Lenin threatened to sweep him from the nexus of power. Plekhanov’s comments about “brotherly *Schadenfreude*” and “comradely sniggers”⁶² prevalent in the Party demonstrate the stinging perception he had that he was losing the power and respect that he had once possessed.

Lenin, justifiably angered at his former mentor’s attacks upon him, responded to Plekhanov in his pamphlet of May 1904, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back.” Lenin noted that his critics had “accepted without a murmur” Point 18 of the Organizing Committee’s Regulations for the Second Party Congress, which stipulated that “all decisions of the Congress and all the elections it carries out are decisions of the Party and binding on all Party organizations” and “cannot be challenged by anyone on any pretext whatever and can be rescinded or amended only by the next Party Congress.” Lenin pointedly asked, “Has anyone ever seen a *party* organ whose editorial board said after a congress the very opposite of what they had said at the congress?”⁶³ It is easy to understand why Lenin felt that Plekhanov had betrayed him.

Almost simultaneously with Lenin’s brochure, Plekhanov published a pamphlet in May of 1904 entitled, “Centralism or Bonapartism?” [“Tsentralizm ili Bonapartizm?”] in

⁶¹ Plekhanov, “Grustnoe nedorazumenie,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 54-55.

⁶² Plekhanov, “Zabavnoe nedorazumenie,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 40.

⁶³ Lenin, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back,” *V. I. Lenin, Collected Works*, vol. 7, trans. Abraham Fineberg and Naomi Jochel (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 208.

which he intensified his attacks upon Lenin. In a celebrated section of this work, Plekhanov argued,

Imagine that we all agreed that the Central Committee should possess the still-debated right of “liquidation.” Here is what would happen. Since a Congress is approaching, the C.C. “liquidates” all the elements with which it is dissatisfied, plants its own creatures everywhere, and, filling all the committees with these creatures, easily guarantees itself a fully submissive majority at the Congress. The Congress constituted of the creatures of the C.C. yells “Hurrah!” in unison, approves all of its successful and unsuccessful actions, and applauds all of its plans and initiatives. Then, in reality, there would be neither a majority nor a minority in the Party, for we would have realized the ideal of the Persian Shah.”⁶⁴

Baron quotes this passage at the end of his Plekhanov biography, arguing: “As for the character of Party life as it developed under the aegis of Stalin, what could be a better description than Plekhanov’s critique of the implications of Lenin’s organizational plans, written in 1904?”⁶⁵ Plekhanov did indeed make a powerful statement against a Central Committee with sweeping powers, but one must remember that his own political fortunes were on the wane when he wrote this and that he essentially argued against the very position that he had openly supported only a brief time before. Moreover, Plekhanov stressed that his differences with Lenin were essentially ones of degree and not of kind when he asserted, “I am a centralist, but not a Bonapartist.”⁶⁶

The precise connotations that Plekhanov attached to his epithet “Bonapartist” are unclear, but the editors of a recent edition of *The Communist Manifesto* write:

Bonapartism originates in a period of social crisis and strives to concentrate executive power in the hands of a “strong man.” The Bonapartist leader presents himself as standing above contending class forces with the aim of maintaining the power of the dominant social class or layer. The term refers to the regime of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in France 1852-70.⁶⁷

Based on his record, the label of “Bonapartist” could just as easily apply to Plekhanov as to Lenin. Deciphering Plekhanov’s language, it seems that a “centralist” supported a highly-

⁶⁴ Plekhanov, “Tsentralizm ili Bonapartizm?,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 92.

⁶⁵ Baron, p. 360.

⁶⁶ Plekhanov, “Tsentralizm ili Bonapartizm?,” p. 92.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Pathfinder, 1987), p. 58.

centralized Party organization in which Plekhanov was the dominant figure, whereas a “Bonapartist” supported a highly centralized Party organization in which Lenin held sway.

Even in “Centralism or Bonapartism?,” moreover, which Baron has interpreted as an all-out assault against Lenin’s principles of strict central control of Party operations, Plekhanov affirmed the basic validity of Lenin’s organizational plans as put forward at the Second Party Congress. He admitted that he believed that Martov’s proposal at the Congress “would have opened the door” for “various opportunistic elements,” and that “in order to eliminate this danger, I said that it would be necessary to accept the formula that Comrade Lenin insisted upon. Even now I continue to think that Lenin’s formula was more felicitous.”⁶⁸ Here Plekhanov admitted that even a year after the Congress, he still fundamentally agreed with the views of the man whom he had been castigating mercilessly, thereby demonstrating tactical rather than philosophical differences.

Later in May 1904, presumably after familiarizing himself with Lenin’s critique of him in “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back,” Plekhanov sought to sweep his opponent aside with calls for Party unity, casting himself as the savior-unifier of the Party in his article, “Silence Is Not Possible Now.” [“Teper’ molchanie nevozmozhno”] Plekhanov accused Lenin of “most conspicuously and consistently” ascribing to the politics of “Bonapartism,” and he asked for support in ostracizing him. He stressed that for Social-Democratic unity it was necessary to “eliminate the misunderstandings that stand in its way. Let Lenin engender them, for this is in his interests. We ought to act in the opposite manner for the interests of our cause, however.”⁶⁹ In June of that month, Plekhanov even suggested that it would be best for the Central Committee to deprive Lenin of his powers.⁷⁰

Plekhanov issued his most stinging criticism of Lenin to date in his July 1904 work, “The Working Class and the Social-Democratic Intelligentsia.” [“Rabochii klass i sotsial-

⁶⁸ Plekhanov, “Tsentralizm ili Bonapartizm?,” p. 85.

⁶⁹ Plekhanov, “Teper’ molchanie nevozmozhno,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 110.

⁷⁰ Plekhanov, “Otvet tov. Liadovu,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 112.

demokraticeskaja intelligentsia”] Plekhanov reached new heights of vindictiveness, arguing that “had Lenin even bothered to think,” he would not have come up with such “unexpected nonsense.” He referred to Lenin’s “strange doctrine,” and argued that the Bolshevik leader had “shamefully missed the mark.”⁷¹ Plekhanov then poured salt into the wound, anticipating his later assertion that Lenin had always been “utterly careless” philosophically,⁷² by positing: “I have never considered Lenin to be any sort of outstanding theorist, and I have always considered him to be biologically incapable of dialectical thought.”⁷³

Plekhanov clearly dissembled when he made this last assertion, for if he had always been convinced that Lenin was intellectually lacking, he never would have supported him as strongly as he had both at the Second Party Congress and before. Moreover, a piece of his personal correspondence also clearly contradicts his assertion that he never thought very highly of Lenin. He wrote Akselrod in 1901: “That Petrov [Lenin] is a good fellow I never doubted, and after the journey to Munich [for a conference of editors], even less so.”⁷⁴ Plekhanov profoundly changed his views of Lenin precisely because of the intense psychological conflict between the two men that Baron is loathe to acknowledge. In defending his turnaround with regard to Lenin by attacking his intellect, Plekhanov overcompensated for what was a weak case to begin with, stressing his supposed long-standing disparagement of Lenin’s intellectual capabilities in order to draw attention from the fact that he had earlier openly espoused Lenin’s organizational schemes.

Plekhanov further claimed that in “One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back,” Lenin, in “logically developing his thoughts,” had taken “many steps backwards even in comparison with his brochure ‘What Is To Be Done?’” He argued that in order to take a “genuine and not a sham ‘step forward,’” it was necessary to understand the relationship between

⁷¹ Plekhanov, “Rabochii klass i sotsial-demokraticeskaja intelligentsiia,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 118-120, 128.

⁷² Plekhanov, “Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s družiami,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 274.

⁷³ Plekhanov, “Rabochii klass i sotsial-demokraticeskaja intelligentsiia,” p. 135.

⁷⁴ Baron, p. 215.

societal thought and existence as Lenin had failed to do. The elder Marxist asked if “scientific socialism” could have developed “completely independently of the spontaneous growth of the workers’ movement,” and he answered, “Of course not!” Plekhanov also took issue with Lenin’s assertion about trade-union consciousness. He noted that according to theories of “historical materialism,” which posited that “being determines consciousness,” and scientific socialism, which held that socialist revolution would inevitably follow from capitalism’s inner contradictions, it was “clear” that the workers of sufficiently developed capitalist states would inaugurate socialism “even if left to ‘their own devices.’”⁷⁵

Again, one must remark upon the fact that Plekhanov had not criticized Lenin’s brochure when it was under intense discussion much earlier, but had argued along the same lines both before and after it was published. It seems rather suspicious, indeed, that Plekhanov only remarked about the flaws he had allegedly always discerned in the intensely controversial writing over two years after its initial publication. Moreover, it is necessary to keep in mind that Plekhanov had earlier repeatedly stressed that the working masses on their own were incapable of developing their own class consciousness and instead needed to have consciousness brought to them from without. As we have seen, Plekhanov had earlier helped to engender Lenin’s fixation on the virtues of centralization, even equating leaving the workers to themselves with “suicide.”⁷⁶

In “The Working Class and the Social-Democratic Intelligentsia,” Plekhanov addressed the obvious question of why he had not critiqued Lenin’s allegedly grave errors earlier. He claimed that he had not become aware of Lenin’s theoretical flaws only recently, but had recognized the incorrectness of Lenin’s views right from the time when he had first met the young Marxist. He asserted, “Only after the Congress did I see that my extreme aversion to fighting with Lenin and firm intention ‘not to divorce’ from him

⁷⁵ Plekhanov, “Rabochii klass i sotsial-demokraticheskaia intelligentsiia,” pp. 117, 121, 135.

⁷⁶ Plekhanov, “Kommentarii k proektu programmy R.S.-D.R.P.,” p. 228.

were harmful for our Party,” and that when he realized that Lenin was inclining towards dictatorship, he “decided to fight and to argue [with him], following the only rule that applies in this situation: better late than never.”⁷⁷

Keep believes that Plekhanov’s excuses testify to the theoretician’s “intellectual honesty,”⁷⁸ but they would be more accurately regarded as a form of subterfuge. Plekhanov’s arguments that he had always disagreed with Lenin and recognized his reputedly grievous theoretical flaws with regard to strict Party organization and the crucial role of the intelligentsia from the very outset are patently false, as is his claim that he refrained from disputing with Lenin due to his peaceful nature. Throughout his career, Plekhanov had never hesitated to attack those with whom he disagreed, for instance walking out on the Land and Liberty movement, the precursor to The People’s Will, in 1879,⁷⁹ storming out of the League of Russian Social Democrats Abroad in April of 1900,⁸⁰ and threatening to resign from *Iskra* in order to gain sweeping powers of control.⁸¹

In his struggle with the Bolshevik leader, Plekhanov blasted Lenin for believing that “the grass is always greener on [his] side of the fence.”⁸² This charge could apply to Plekhanov as well, for he continually stressed that he was right whereas his opponents, primarily Lenin, were wrong. Plekhanov also rebuked Lenin by arguing that attempts to force the Party in line made by one “alpha wolf” (*vozhakom*) were doomed to failure. Yet Plekhanov himself was never afraid to act as an “alpha wolf” or military commander, as when he made statements to the effect that “all the members of our working class army must hold their positions, and woe to those who voluntarily desert them at this critical moment!”⁸³ Plekhanov, the son of an army officer, wished to assert his unquestioned dominance in the Party, and his conflict with Lenin must be understood much more in the

⁷⁷ Plekhanov, “Rabochii klass i sotsial-demokraticheskaja intelligentsiia,” pp. 135, 139, 140.

⁷⁸ Keep, *The Rise of Social Democracy in Russia*, p. 147.

⁷⁹ Baron, p. 42.

⁸⁰ Keep, p. 58.

⁸¹ Haimson, p. 139.

⁸² Plekhanov, “O nashei taktike po otnosheniiu k borbe liberalnoi burzhuazii c tsarismom,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 170.

⁸³ Plekhanov, “V ozhidanii pervogo maia,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 218.

sense of a power struggle between two obstinate combatants than a true ideological dispute over the degree of centralization necessary for the good of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party.

In his later writings, Plekhanov offered contradictory explanations as to why he had not criticized Lenin earlier. While, in the summer of 1904, he had argued that he had always recognized the grave errors inherent in Lenin's thought, in his article of March 1905, "On Some of Our 'Inadequacies,'" he offered another excuse for his failure to indict Lenin earlier, that of negligence. He argued, "If we had not neglected theory, then the weak points of Lenin's brochure, "What Is to Be Done?," would all have arrested our attention immediately upon its appearance, and then there would not be this disturbance among us that is tearing us up now."⁸⁴ Plekhanov's statements that he: 1) had always recognized the severely flawed nature of Lenin's thought and 2) had remained largely ignorant of Lenin's views, of course, nullify each other. In reality, Plekhanov neither had the wool pulled over his eyes nor combated what he later claimed were Lenin's grievous theoretical errors before, during, or immediately after the Second Party Congress for the simple reason that Plekhanov fundamentally agreed with Lenin's organizational views.

Plekhanov seems to have envisioned himself as the man who could impose order upon the Party through the sheer force of his will. True to form, in June of 1905, with Russia experiencing large-scale revolution, he fell back upon his old tactic of threatening to withdraw from leadership in the hope of winning greater concessions. As well as renouncing the presidency of the Party Council, he resigned from *Iskra's* Editorial Staff, stressing: "I can remain a representative of the Russian Social-Democratic Party *only* in the event that *both fractions* desire this."⁸⁵ Plekhanov stressed in August of that same year, "Someone must save the honor of Russian Social Democracy!,"⁸⁶ and it is not difficult to imagine whom he had in mind. This time, however, other Russian Social-Democratic

⁸⁴ Plekhanov, "O nekotorykh nashikh 'nekhvatakh,'" in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 259.

⁸⁵ Plekhanov, "Vykhod iz redaktsii *Iskry*," in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 226.

⁸⁶ Plekhanov, "Vrazhduishchie mezhdu soboi bratia," in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 319.

leaders did not rush to offer Plekhanov more power. He had overplayed his hand and, far from being thrust back into the decisive leadership role that he so craved, he faded into increasing obscurity and irrelevance.⁸⁷

Even in August 1905, over two years after the Second Party Congress, Plekhanov reiterated his basic views that the masses were relatively inert and aimless on their own and that democratic measures had to be circumscribed without hesitation if necessary, further demonstrating the degree to which his dispute with Lenin was much more of a power-political than a philosophical one. Even at this late date, he criticized the Mensheviks for their “decentralized position that is characteristic of the amorphous masses.”⁸⁸ In other words, he made the same basic argument that Lenin had made in “What is to be Done?” over three years after the brochure’s appearance and after he had supposedly recognized the pernicious nature of Lenin’s theories.

Moreover, in his November 1905 article, “Our Situation,” Plekhanov reaffirmed his commitment to the philosophy which he had advanced at the Second Party Congress that the ends justify the means. He reminded his readers, “At the Second Party Congress, I said, ‘*salus revolutiae suprema lex.*’ I repeat, in view of what is now taking place in Russia, *salus revolutiae suprema lex.*”⁸⁹ Thus, Baron’s assertion that Plekhanov came to regret his famous formulation at the Second Party Congress “with every sinew of his being”⁹⁰ is unjustified. On the contrary, Plekhanov stressed the continued validity of his assertion *over two years* after he had initially made it.

To maintain that Plekhanov was imperious, inflexible, and opposed to a broadly-based democratic organization of the Party is neither to deny his formidable intellectual gifts nor his immense contributions to the genesis and development of Russian Social Democracy. Lenin once rightly noted that Plekhanov had “reared a whole generation of

⁸⁷ Baron, p. 277.

⁸⁸ Plekhanov, “Vrazhduishchie mezhdou soboi bratia,” p. 318.

⁸⁹ Plekhanov, “Nashe polozhenie,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 336.

⁹⁰ Baron, p. 242.

Russian Marxists,⁹¹ and while the “father of Russian Marxism” deserves respect for his talents, one must acknowledge his fundamentally authoritarian and anti-democratic legacy. Plekhanov agreed almost to the letter with Lenin’s centralizing theories when he had a commanding position in the Party, even helping to engender Lenin’s belief in the virtues of strict Party centralization to control the “unconscious” working masses, and he only began half-hearted, inconsistent, and contradictory attacks upon Lenin as a tactical maneuver designed to reassert his primacy in the Party.

While Plekhanov fundamentally agreed with Lenin’s emphasis on the need for strict Party centralization, when a golden opportunity for mass revolution arose in Russia in 1917, Plekhanov did stress the need to carry out a two-stage revolution instead of “telescoping” the bourgeois and Socialist revolutions into one upheaval as Lenin advocated. Plekhanov had insisted on the necessity of a two-stage revolution in Russia as early as *Socialism and Political Struggle*, and Baron may be right in asserting that “Plekhanov’s warnings against a premature seizure of power subsequently came back to mock the ‘outlaws’ who had triumphed over him in 1917.”⁹²

In insisting on an “orthodox” Marxist revolutionary scheme in Russia, however, Plekhanov disregarded Marx’s later assessment of Russia’s role in overthrowing capitalism. Marx wrote in the introduction of Plekhanov’s 1882 translation of *The Communist Manifesto* that a peasant revolution in Russia could set off a proletarian revolution in Western Europe, and that the prevailing type of communal ownership in Russia might form the basis for a communist course of development.⁹³ Plekhanov thus took it upon himself to be more Marxist than Marx himself, and while his two-staged revolutionary scheme may have been more felicitous for the Russian people, as Baron and Gavril Popov believe, this should not obscure the fact that the logical outcome of Plekhanovite thought was some sort authoritarian Russian Socialist order.

⁹¹ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History*, 6.

⁹² Baron, p. 361.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Baron, Plekhanov's most ardent Western supporter, has recently acknowledged that he had earlier downplayed the repellent qualities of Plekhanov's character in his biography, suggesting that he may have minimized attention to "acrimonious affairs" in Russian Social Democracy "because they often showed Plekhanov in a most unfavorable light -- petty, arrogant, overbearing, and unscrupulous." Baron has further noted, "I may have wished to divert my attention from his repellent qualities in order to make possible continuing empathy." Moreover, Baron has asserted that when he began his project on Plekhanov, he "harbored friendly if not uncritical feelings toward our erstwhile Soviet ally, and my aspirations found an immediate outlet in political activity of a leftish sort."⁹⁴ Empathy and respect for Plekhanov and esteem for Marxism turned Baron away from Plekhanov's contentious nature, and perhaps they diverted Baron's attention from Plekhanov's basic authoritarian beliefs as well.

Other key historians of Russian Social Democracy, notably Keep and Wildman, who generally did their work in the 1960's, regard Plekhanov as much more anti-authoritarian than he was since he periodically aligned himself with the Mensheviks beginning with the Stockholm Congress of 1906.⁹⁵ After it lost out to Bolshevism in the 1917 Revolution, Western historians have regarded Menshevism as the superior variant of Russian Social Democracy. Alan Wildman, for instance, has contrasted Bolshevism, which carried "Lenin's banner of elitism," with Menshevism that allegedly acted as the "champion of worker initiative and democracy," providing a "refuge for all those who could not reconcile themselves to all of the ruthless implications which elitism incorporated."⁹⁶ Though Plekhanov remained too independent ever to align himself closely with the Mensheviks, he has benefited from respect by association in Western historiography.

⁹⁴ Baron, *Plekhanov in Russian History*, pp. 194, 197, 198.

⁹⁵ Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, pp. 269, 270.

⁹⁶ Allan Wildman, *The Making of a Workers' Revolution: Russian Social Democracy, 1891-1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 101, 190.

Plekhanov has also enjoyed a more savory reputation than his record merits since the vanquished often arouse greater admiration than the victors. Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, for instance, both failures in the immediate political sense, have elicited considerable sympathy in the West, largely since they both met grisly and untimely deaths at the hands of their enemies. Regarding Luxemburg, Western historians, moved by her tragic demise to evaluate her more favorably than would otherwise have been the case, have considered the gifted polemicist to have been a proponent of democracy within Communism largely due to her assertion in her 1918 essay, "On the Russian Revolution," that "freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently."⁹⁷

When evaluating Luxemburg's democratic credentials, however, it is worth noting that the perpetual outsider primarily had herself in mind with this assertion. Moreover, Luxemburg had earlier insisted that "Social Democracy is fundamentally an outspoken opponent of every particularism and national federalism."⁹⁸ She staunchly refused to cooperate with the Mensheviks, considering Lenin's Bolsheviks to be the much superior Russian Social-Democratic alternative.⁹⁹ Moreover, she argued in "On the Russian Revolution" that the "right of suffrage" represented an "anachronism...in the transition period of the proletarian dictatorship," and she concluded her essay by asserting that, given the chaotic conditions in Russia, Bolshevik political terror was understandable.¹⁰⁰

Regarding Trotsky, who likewise died a premature and gruesome death, historians have selectively quoted him, like Plekhanov, to demonstrate his supposed democratic inclinations. Isaac Deutscher, for instance, makes much of Trotsky's April 1904 argument in which he stressed the need for an "active and self-reliant proletariat" and warned that in Lenin's system, "The Party organization at first substitutes itself for the Party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organization; and finally a single

⁹⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, "Zur Russische Revolution," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, ed. G. Radczun (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1970), p. 364.

⁹⁸ Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Dick Howard (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 287, 288.

⁹⁹ J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 357.

¹⁰⁰ Luxemburg, "Zur Russische Revolution," pp. 362-364.

'dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee." It is worth noting, however, that before the Second Party Congress, Trotsky argued for a powerful Central Committee with the right to eject all wavering elements from the Party along the lines of Lenin's "What Is to Be Done?" and was even known as "Lenin's cudgel" at the Congress.¹⁰¹

Having died a natural death as an old man, Plekhanov cannot elicit claims to martyrdom in the vein of Luxemburg and Trotsky, and he is less celebrated than them largely for this reason. The very fact of his defeat at the hands of Lenin, however, has helped to inspire hagiographic Western literature on him. Baron even invokes Biblical imagery in titling the last chapter of his biography "The Prophet Rejected."¹⁰² The fact remains, however, that while Lenin originally stressed the need for pluralism within the Party only to jettison such pleas in favor of strict centralization along the lines of Plekhanovite thought as his influence increased, Plekhanov advocated ruthless centralization when he held unchallenged leadership in the Party and only initiated tentative and contradictory steps towards advocating greater debate when he sensed that his position was deteriorating.

A politician's desire to assert his dominance when in the position to do so is understandable enough, but while acknowledging human frailty, one must not accord Plekhanov greater democratic sentiments than he possessed. One could argue that a democratic socio-political order is not the best form of societal organization in all cases and that Russian conditions in the early 20th century necessitated authoritarian Socialist leadership of one type or another. If one views a broadly-based Social-Democratic Party with firmly-established democratic safeguards as a societal good, however, then one must acknowledge that Plekhanov, to virtually the same degree as Lenin, deviated greatly from this ideal. Authoritarian Russian Socialism does not represent a bastardization of Plekhanovite thought, is but its legitimate offspring.

¹⁰¹ Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky: 1879-1921* (London: Oxford University Press), pp. 45, 76, 90.

¹⁰² Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, p. 337.

Michael E. Kellogg,

University of California, Los Angeles