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In Memory of G. V. Plekhanov

25 November 1856–30 May 1918

Thirty years ago, before representatives of the international proletarian movement at an international congress in Paris in 1889, the Russian proletariat was represented for the first time as a special class organization.

Its representative, the bearer of the idea of the emancipation of labor, was Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov, who declared to the international congress with brilliant foresight:

“The revolutionary movement in Russia will triumph only as a revolutionary movement of workers. We have no other alternative, and there can be no other.”

G. V. Plekhanov’s name is linked with the early years of the social-democratic workers’ movement, with the brilliant theoretical and philosophical reworking of the problems of Marxism, with the passionate polemics against populism and N. K. Mikhailovsky, and with the analysis of the social formula of anarchism.

Comrade Riazanov, one of the oldest and most prominent members of the RKP(b), evaluated G. V. Plekhanov’s role in the history of the workers’ movement as that of the founder of Russian Social-Democracy, of its fiery and profound theoretician during the struggle against the economists. In making his assessment, he writes:

“Without the decisive support which Plekhanov and the group ‘Eman-

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icipation of Labor' gave to the 'Iskrovites' (headed by Comrade Lenin), the tendency which became known in the Russian Social-Democracy as 'Leninism' or 'Bolshevism' never would have been able to win the authority which it enjoyed and continues to enjoy among the working masses."

G. V. Plekhanov was born on 25 November 1856. When he was twenty, and a student at the mining institute, he belonged to the populist group of "rebels," and on 6 December 1876, during a student demonstration in Petersburg on Kazan Square, he delivered an impassioned speech in which he denounced the Russian government for crushing all that was alive. Soon, due to police persecution, he ended up in illegality and left Russia. In 1877 he returned once again, assumed a leading position in the society Land and Liberty as one of its best propagandists, and participated in developing the party's program. In 1878 and 1879 he was active in agitating among the Petersburg proletariat, helping the workers on strike to formulate their demands during the strikes at the New Cotton Spinning Mill and at the Konitz Spinning Mill in 1878. At the beginning of 1880 he was forced to leave Russia for an extended period. But before leaving, at the Voronezh Congress of Land and Liberty he had already separated from the populists. His close contact with the proletariat and familiarity with the writings of Marx produced a shift in his views in the direction of revolutionary Marxism. He tried to publish his work, *Black Repartition*, in Russia, but the print shop folded. In 1883, along with L. Deutsch, V. Zasulich, P. Akselrod and V. Ignatov, he laid the foundations for a new group, *Emancipation of Labor*, out of which Russian Social-Democracy would later develop. In 1884 Plekhanov published the major work, *Our Differences*, in which he gives a devastating scientific criticism of populism, and sums up the debate which outlined the basic differences between populists and Marxists.

In summation he noted that:

- 1) the communist revolution of the working class could by no means grow out of the peasant and petty-bourgeois socialism which was expounded by the socialist-revolutionaries;
- 2) the initiative in the communist movement could be taken only by the working class, the liberation of which could be achieved only through its own efforts.

Even before publishing *Our Differences*, *Emancipation of Labor* printed Plekhanov's pamphlet which is devoted to solving the problem of socialism

and political struggle, a question which had enormous significance.

Armed with the theory of modern scientific socialism, which teaches that "every class struggle is a political struggle," Plekhanov historically explained and demonstrated how the populist conviction that socialism is incompatible with political struggle is based on nothing but Proudhon's and Bakunin's teachings, i.e., on anarchist doctrines about the state. If the Russian workers were to follow the advice of the populist-rebels, instead of organized class struggle they would have to conduct a disjointed war against individual exploiters on whose side would always stand the organized forces of the state.

Plekhanov drew the final balance sheet with populism in his famous book, *On the Monist Understanding of History*, published under the pseudonym of Beltov in 1895. A year later Plekhanov headed the first Russian Social-Democratic delegation at the London international congress. In 1900 at the Paris international congress Plekhanov fought against Bernsteinism, which had found fertile soil in Russia among the followers of legal Marxism. During the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, at the international congress in Amsterdam, he spoke as a resolute "defeatist" and expressed the will of the workers to end the war and establish international peace.

The fact that Plekhanov had to spend the greater part of his life in the quiet of his study—and that his ties with the working masses and with the immediate workers' movement, which had been so close and vital in his youth, became ever more remote—inevitably had to lead to his estrangement from those who drew practical conclusions from his writings. After 1905 Plekhanov immersed himself in theoretical and literary activity. He devoted the period from 1907 to 1910 to a study of the trade union movement and to a struggle against anarcho-syndicalism. But already from his speeches at the international congresses of 1907 in Stuttgart and of 1910 in Copenhagen one could conclude that the questions of current issues interested him more from the standpoint of their philosophical underpinnings.

Plekhanov devoted a significant portion of his time to the writing of his major work, *The History of Russian Social Thought*, from the standpoint of the materialist understanding of history.

The war of 1914 led to a break between the founder of Russian Marxism and the majority of his disciples.

Plekhanov's fondness for Romance culture, his intimate friendship with old leaders of the French workers' movement such as Guesde and Vaillant, and, finally, the resurgence of old feelings for the traditions of the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia—of the same intelligentsia that emerged from the school of Belinsky, Dobroliubov, Chernyshevsky and Pisarev—compelled Plekhanov to become convinced of the illusory "justice" of the imperialist war. He acknowledged that the position of the allies was correct. This false position, which he began to defend with his inherent logical consistency and passion, made him unacceptable even for the part of Russian Social-Democracy which had itself fallen into the trap of defensism.

On 30 May 1918, Plekhanov passed away. He died in political isolation. But his glorious name, despite the errors of recent years, will remain forever in the annals of both the Russian and international workers' movement. It is the name of a man who for decades was the leader of the Russian proletariat and who was the first to place the banner of revolutionary Marxism into its hands.

V. G.¹

1. Voronsky signed a few articles in *Rabochii krai* with the initials "V. G."