

G. V. Plekhanov¹
(1918-1920)

Plekhanov died in tragic circumstances. Before his death he parted not only from the most advanced detachments of the Russian working class; but even the majority of his recent co-thinkers abandoned him. War and the Russian Revolution hurled Plekhanov into the camp of his enemies of yesterday – opportunists, against whom he had waged a merciless and brilliant struggle.

Plekhanov died an intellectual outcast, despite his enormous and unfading contributions to the Russian and Western European workers' movement.

The revolution is ruthless. Like Saturn it devours its children, without slowing its furious pace for even a second. It overthrows yesterday's leaders and authorities, and tomorrow hurls them into the depths of political nonexistence. Our time is a cruel time, merciless and ungrateful. In the whirlwind of events, the human individual disappears like a grain of dust, and the grandiose appears petty and commonplace.

Sometime in the tragic distance, various events which we have passed by indifferently, and various individuals who are forgotten, having been erased by today's hurricane, will arise with all their titanic might out from under the dust of decades and appear before future generations; and the future will give the past its due and restore the proper historical perspective.

And I think that Plekhanov's star will once again radiate with all its brilliance.

It is difficult for us, communist Bolsheviks, to speak about G. V. Plekhanov in the even and dispassionate tone of a researcher, even though Plekhanov is no longer alive, and even though Plekhanov belongs to the past. The events are still too fresh, and the recent struggle of life and death is too easy to remember...

... July 1917. The Provisional Government, along with Mister Aleksinsky, a member of Plekhanov's "Unity", creates an absurd provocation, the shameful and vile legend about Lenin and Trotsky, presenting them as agents of the German general staff. A trial is held, and an investigation is launched. Plekhanov knew that this was a foul lie. He was too intelligent, and knew both Lenin and Trotsky too well to believe

¹ From "Rabochii krai," 30 May 1920.

the slander. But Plekhanov remained silent in his “Unity.” No one heard his weighty and authoritative words, he didn’t drive Aleksinsky out of “Unity.” This silence was a great sin, Plekhanov’s sin before the Russian and Western European workers; and it was greater and more bitter than all the other mistakes and errors Plekhanov committed. Could we really be expected to forget this, to strike it from our memories?...

But we Bolsheviks know yet another Plekhanov...

Plekhanov is the father of Russian revolutionary Marxism. He was the first prophet and seer of the workers’ movement in Russia and of the Russian proletarian revolution. He was the first to discover the Russian worker as the basis, the foundation and the support of the struggle for socialism in Russia. Now, for us, this is a truism, a well-worn, clichéd truth, but forty years ago one needed to have an enormous intellect and sensitivity in order to say what Plekhanov said then: “The revolutionary movement in Russia will triumph only as a revolutionary movement of workers.” At that time, this statement was by no means obvious. The better part of the revolutionary intelligentsia at that time saw in the worker only the negative, they saw only the scum of capitalism. The Russian “obshchina” (peasant commune), the spontaneous Pugachev rebellions were the basis, the alpha and omega, of revolutionary tactics. Plekhanov discovered the Russian worker and for the first time in Russia the doctrine of the class struggle was proclaimed, a doctrine which said that every class struggle is a political struggle.

Plekhanov fought for socialism as a product of the workers’ movement throughout almost the entire forty years of his literary and revolutionary activity. His polemic with N. K. Mikhailovsky and other populists was one of the most instructive and interesting pages in the history of our Russian society. Plekhanov never tired of confirming that all hopes of leaping over this stage of historical development were empty illusions which would be shattered ruthlessly by reality. On this question Plekhanov left us the richest literary heritage, which has by no means lost its value even today, when the struggle is already under way to liquidate capitalist relations.

Plekhanov is not only the father of Russian Marxism, but of Marxism in general. He is a disciple of Marx and Engels, he is their loyal and orthodox follower, but he belongs to the ranks of those disciples who go further than their teacher, dressing theory in the flesh and blood of new phenomena, events and facts – working over, perfecting and deepening the constructs of their teacher. Plekhanov completely mastered both the spirit and method of Marx’s teaching. Under his pen the revolutionary doctrine became animated with all its flexibility, profundity and merciless severity.

Not all pupils are able to accomplish this. We know of examples where disciples have turned the doctrine of their teacher into a dogma, into something ossified and cold. This did not happen with Plekhanov precisely because he first of all mastered the method itself superbly. Plekhanov was not a scholastic, he was not a dry and lifeless dogmatic. From Plekhanov we all must learn how to approach various complex theoretical problems from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism.

Plekhanov did not remain within the confines of ground already covered. He tirelessly repeated what had been learned, he had favorite propositions and favorite thoughts which he tirelessly repeated in almost every article: – it is being which determines consciousness, and not consciousness which determines being, – and so forth. But see how this “old” material appeared in a new way, how it turned into, not a cliché, but a fresh thought which found reinforcement and further development from an entirely new point of view. See how before your very eyes a familiar proposition has become bathed in a new light and taken on the living garb of “life itself.”

None of his contemporaries knew as well as Plekhanov the French materialists of the eighteenth century, or the German philosophers Hegel, Fichte, and Feuerbach. In this realm, Plekhanov knew no equals. Among us Marxists there are few people with a broad philosophical education. With us, philosophical questions are generally kept off to the side; they take a back seat. Marx and Engels made many brilliant and extraordinary statements, but it was Plekhanov who brought everything together into a system. Whoever wants to make a thorough study of the philosophical foundations of Marxism has no other choice, and no other books to read, than the books by Plekhanov. Western European socialist literature is even more wanting than ours in this regard.

In questions of philosophy Plekhanov was a dialectical materialist. Plekhanov’s scientific struggle for materialism took on a specific character in the twentieth century. The bourgeoisie had long ago started to decline. It had long ago begun to outlive itself not only in the realm of productive relations, and not only in the realm of politics, but also in the sphere of science and art. In recent years the political reaction and impoverishment of the bourgeoisie has been accompanied by a retrogressive movement in the realm of scientific thought as well. In particular, the past materialism of the eighteenth century and Darwinism have begun to be replaced with attempts to reconcile religion with science, and with ever greater frequency the reactionary side of Kantianism is advanced. We have begun to see tight-rope walkers and sophists of philosophical thought. At first there was Avenarius, then the brilliant and intelligent Bergson, then the obliging

James with his pragmatism and so on. Materialism was declared to be an outmoded, naive doctrine. Bourgeois reaction in the realm of philosophical thought found its adherents in the socialist milieu as well. Plekhanov's struggle for materialism was a struggle against demoralizing bourgeois ideology, a struggle against the dominant tendency among scholars. Plekhanov was merciless and entered into this battle fully armed with the knowledge of the history of philosophy. With what annihilating criticism Plekhanov spoke out against our empirio-monists, Bogdanov, Bazarov and Lunacharsky! It is a fact that after Plekhanov's articles the philosophical exercises of Bogdanov, Bazarov and Lunacharsky began to fade and soon they began to attract ever smaller amounts of attention.

There is one area where Plekhanov's colossal role has not been sufficiently appreciated by those of us who are Marxists. This is the realm of literary criticism. Plekhanov left us many articles and books on the history of Russian social and artistic thought: his book on Chernyshevsky, his articles on Belinsky, Herzen, Uspensky, and Nekrasov. And this is far from a complete list of what Plekhanov wrote. Here Plekhanov appears before us as the sole and incomparable interpreter of the history of our social thought from the standpoint of Marxism. Plekhanov's articles on Belinsky and Uspensky are masterpieces in the area of Marxist interpretation of the history of our literature, and to this day no one has surpassed them. Such solid and "neutral" scholars as Ovsianikov-Kulikovskiy have paid homage in their time to this side of Plekhanov's activity. It is sufficient to note that Plekhanov was the first to interpret and explain Uspensky to the Russian reading public. Here we must say the same thing that we said about Plekhanov's philosophical works: for anyone who wants to become acquainted with the history of our social thought and with our literature – from the Marxist point of view – Plekhanov is a treasure house. With refined artistic sensibility Plekhanov combined the most thorough knowledge of the subject matter and profound mastery of analytical abilities. In this field Plekhanov clearly demonstrated how the Marxist method must be applied.

Plekhanov and the opportunists....

Few people know that Plekhanov was the first to speak out against the Western European revisionists of Marxism who had begun to revise the doctrine of Marx in the 1890s. Kautsky and other orthodox Marxists added their voices only later. In this struggle Plekhanov demonstrated all his indefatigability and the full measure of his brilliant polemical talent. Now there is hardly anyone who doubts that the revision of Marx's doctrine by Bernstein and his friends in Russia – Struve and Tugan-Baranovskiy – was anything but the vulgarization of Marxism, and the desire to remove from

Marxism all its revolutionary content, to adapt and lower Marxism to the level of bourgeois gradualism. But this became evident to a large degree thanks to Plekhanov...

Plekhanov's style is filled with brilliance and the refined simplicity which is given only by full clarity of thought and by a sharp, flexible mind. Plekhanov mastered the beautiful Russian language as few are able to do. As a polemicist, Plekhanov was a most dangerous opponent. His polemical thrusts were often truly fatal and always well-placed. Plekhanov's caustic and merciless irony, as well as his polemical passion were always and immutably supplemented by consciousness of his superiority. He spoke and wrote "like one who reigns." This grated upon many. But Plekhanov was entitled to act in such a way. His erudition was colossal, and when it comes to Plekhanov's polemical force, it could be said that his arrows were arrows of fire.

Plekhanov knew no golden mean. Once he had become convinced of the correctness of a proposition, Plekhanov proceeded to the logical end. He swept aside yesterday's friends and cast them into the camp of his decisive enemies. He broke his alliance with yesterday's allies and went his own way, certain that he was right. Every slip, therefore, every deviation with Plekhanov turned into a major error. This by no means excludes the flexibility of his mind, since Plekhanov's intellect was not only supple, but extremely consistent.

As a tactician, Plekhanov made a number of the crudest tactical mistakes. He ended his life surrounded by the most right-wing defensists. Plekhanov's mind was immersed in theory. In the realm of tactics he was weak. This often happens with great people. Tolstoy was a brilliant artist, but a very weak philosopher, although he himself had the opposite opinion of his abilities. Gorky, too, is a superb artist, but a very mediocre polemicist, and so forth. Tactics, in general, was Plekhanov's Achilles' heel. The fact that Plekhanov was with the Mensheviks, and then with the defensists, shows not only his tactical weakness, but indicates that Plekhanov belonged heart and soul to the period and epoch of the workers' movement which took shape, developed and became stronger after the defeat of the Paris Commune. This was a period of legalism, parliamentarianism, and the growth of trade unions within the framework of "peaceful struggle." We know that it was not only Plekhanov who "went astray," but Kautsky, Guesde and a number of other leading lights of the past epoch. It is true that Plekhanov had ties to the Russian revolutionary underground, but he nevertheless had even stronger ties to the West.

Here we must note that Plekhanov loved our revolutionary underground; he loved it as it developed since Herzen's times. In this

sense, Plekhanov was a Bolshevik. As a Menshevik, Plekhanov waged a ruthless struggle against the Bolsheviks in 1905-1906, but when a bit later the majority of the Mensheviks got bogged down in liquidators' mud, when the Mensheviks declared that the underground had degenerated and had outlived its time, Plekhanov broke with the Mensheviks, began to support the Bolsheviks energetically, and became a collaborator with "Pravda." "Mole, how well you burrow," Plekhanov said to the revolutionary Marxist underground during the years of desperate reaction, renegacy and betrayals. We all remember his articles in "Pravda" against Potresov. "Under a Volley of Bullets,"² was the title Plekhanov gave to one in this series of articles at that time.

During the war even the Mensheviks abandoned Plekhanov. Plekhanov blamed Germany exclusively; he claimed that the allies and tsarist Russia were waging a just war. He attacked the German Social-Democrats and found the position of the French and English social-chauvinists to be correct. Plekhanov's assessments of the February Revolution and the Provisional Government are well known. But not everyone knows that during the October days Plekhanov decisively spoke out against Kerensky's attempts to take Petrograd with the help of Krasnov's cossacks. When Kerensky was drawing close to Petrograd, and already controlled Krasnoye Selo, a well-known revolutionary and friend of Plekhanov's was sent as an intermediary – or, perhaps, went on his own initiative – and proposed that Plekhanov assume the task of forming a ministry as soon as the Cossacks entered Petrograd. Plekhanov replied: "I have served the proletariat for forty years and I will not begin shooting at the workers even when they are following the wrong course."

From this reply it is evident that, despite all his latest mistakes and deviation, the spirit of the old revolutionary was still alive in Plekhanov, and it revealed itself even at the moment of his most serious errors.

Plekhanov's name should be placed next to the names of Belinsky, Herzen, and Chernyshevsky. Plekhanov must be studied; every class-conscious worker must know Plekhanov's best writings. It would be the greatest crime if, because of Plekhanov's errors, we began to overlook a whole number of his brilliant works, which to this day remain unsurpassed.

A. Voronsky

² A secondary meaning of the phrase is: "A torrent of lies." -*trans.*