

# FORGOTTEN PHILOSOPHER

## *The Work of Abram Deborin*

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ABRAM MOISEYEVICH DEBORIN, born in Kovno in Lithuania, the child of poor Jewish parents, belongs unjustly to the forgotten philosophers. He became known in the twenties as the exponent of an individual brand of Marxism, orientated in method towards Hegel, and his own work is intimately bound up with the development of Soviet philosophy. Until the condemnation of his dialectical philosophy in 1931 he was considered the leading Soviet philosopher and was often mentioned in the same breath as Lenin. And Lenin himself included Deborin's first book, *Introduction to the philosophy of dialectical materialism* (written in 1908 and published in 1916 by Plekhanov), among those works which he considered worth thorough study. His *Philosophical Remains* (published by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow in 1932) contains extracts and marginalia—not always friendly—which reveal his interest in this first Russian exposition of Marxist philosophy.

Today Deborin and his philosophical work are almost completely forgotten. Although he was elected to the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in 1935—that is, after his philosophy had been condemned—and remained there as secretary of the Department for History and Philosophy, the traces of his own activities have been almost completely eliminated from all Soviet philosophical publications. The new Soviet Encyclopedia devotes only a few unkind lines to this philosopher, who is today living in retirement in Moscow.

The sources for his biography are therefore very scanty and dry up completely after his condemnation. His life until 1931 is documented in works of reference; his life since then can only be inferred from occasional references to his membership of scientific institutions and from the very few of his writings published. As there is no accurate information about his life any account must depend on what is said in a

few reference books and on unconfirmed remarks in the literature on the subject.

Deborin left a government Jewish school in Kovno in 1897 and learnt the trade of locksmith. It was in Kovno, too, probably, that he first came into contact with a revolutionary movement. It is probable that at the end of 1899, because of revolutionary activities, he moved to the more remote Kherson in order to escape the attentions of the police. There is evidence of his revolutionary activity there. Like most of the young intellectuals who were later to become prominent in the revolution, he joined an illegal revolutionary circle and in this group of eagerly debating revolutionaries he laid the foundations of his political and philosophical convictions. But he was soon expelled from Kherson also and returned to his native town.

In Kovno he was overtaken by the fate of all Russian revolutionaries. He was arrested for treasonable activities and, after a conditional release, placed under police supervision. A year later he escaped from this by fleeing to Switzerland. In Berne, where he spent several years, he joined the Lenin wing of the Russian social democrats. At the same time he completed his education at the University in Berne, where he studied history and philosophy. His contributions to the Stuttgart social-democratic periodical *Die Neue Zeit*, which fall into this period, in style and content already show all the characteristic features of his later thought.

In his first articles—which incidentally were written in German—the influence of the Hegelian dialectic is unmistakable. The effect of the encounter with Hegel was so profound that at times he falls victim to the mania of many young Hegel enthusiasts and seems determined to force all political events into the Hegelian categories.

His astonishingly wide reading, apparent even in his first writings, later also gave direction to his philosophy. His extensive knowledge of

pre-Marxist philosophy led him to attempt on the one hand to place Marxism in the historical development of philosophical ideas since Spinoza and, on the other hand—in accordance with the Hegelian triad—to interpret it as the great synthesis of the materialist philosophy of the 18th century with the dialectical elements of German idealism. Marx's achievement in doing this he regarded as the fusion, accomplished for the first time, of the concepts of 'matter' and 'dialectic' into a unified dynamic philosophy.

A far-ranging preoccupation with the history of philosophy very soon led Deborin to the conviction that Marxism could become an historical force only if—again completely in the Hegelian manner—it absorbed all the progressive elements of pre-marxist philosophy. According to this interpretation the essence of Marxism could only fulfil itself by preserving all the lasting cognitions of the human spirit. Full of this idea, Deborin did not tire of exploring French, English, and especially German philosophy for materialist and dialectical elements.

IT is therefore not surprising that the central theme of his first work, written in exile, is the dialectic. He began to prepare a history of the dialectic, tracing it from Spinoza through Kant, Fichte and Hegel to Marx, which is as characteristic of his work as his later attempt at systematisation in the realm of the natural sciences.

Given this interpretation of Marxism, it was only logical that Deborin, in spite of all his respect for Lenin's political and organising genius, should not attribute any special importance to his philosophy. The bolshevik version of a 'Leninist *stage*' of philosophy found no place in his far-ranging speculations. Among Russian Marxists he felt a bond only with that kindred spirit G. V. Plekhanov. To support his ideas he always refers to Plekhanov alone and makes him his chief witness. Lenin, on the other hand, appears in Deborin's work only as the great theoretician of the Revolution.

This philosophical development—in addition to political differences—helps to explain why Deborin parted company with the Bolsheviks in 1907 and joined the Mensheviks. The sug-

gestion that his break with the Lenin wing arose as a result of far-reaching differences of opinion is supported by the fact that after the October Revolution he continued to remain in the ranks of the Menshevik Party and joined the Bolshevik Party only very much later—in 1928.

In 1908 Deborin returned to Russia. In the years that followed he led the restless, roving life of all Russian professional revolutionaries, which took him to, among other places, Warsaw, St. Petersburg, and Poltava. The accounts of the influence of the October Revolution on his political convictions contradict one another. Some sources claim that he made a complete break with Menshevism—Deborin himself also put it this way—while others maintain that he continued to be a member of the Menshevik Party. The only undisputed fact is that, after a short political interlude as chairman of the Poltava city Soviet in 1917, he retired from active political life and devoted himself to teaching.

He taught at the Sverdlov University in Moscow and among the many honours bestowed on him were membership of the Institute of Red Professors, the Marx-Engels Institute, and the Communist Academy. In addition to his teaching activities he devoted himself to publishing the most important works of materialist philosophy. He edited for the 'Library of Materialists' and the 'Library of Atheism' the works of Holbach, Helvetius, Lamettrie, Toland, Diderot, and Hobbes. The complete edition of Hegel that he had planned—suspended in 1930—was intended, together with the works of Feuerbach, which he had already edited, to make the two most important forerunners of Marxist philosophy accessible to the Russian reader.

Deborin was torn from these teaching and editing activities in the mid-twenties by a philosophical discussion which resulted from his interpretation of Marxism and drew him again into political controversy.

IN the first half of the twenties the principles of Marxist philosophy had by no means been fully elaborated. After the liberating experience of the Revolution the most dissimilar materialist currents had formed an essentially emotional alliance. All these philosophical movements were drawn towards one another by the feeling

that they were called upon to provide spiritual guidance for the revolutionary materialist society. Each of the sects worked more or less in the conviction that the new world which had to be built would correspond to its ideals; and none took too seriously the contradictory utterances of the others. Before the great practical task theoretical differences faded into insignificance.

This apparent unanimity in the early phase of the Revolution was shaken for the first time in 1922 by the appearance of a programmatic article by O. Minin, a fairly primitive materialist who demanded the liquidation of philosophy in the Soviet Union. He started by saying that Soviet philosophy was a bourgeois survival and must be replaced by the positive sciences. This article was followed in quick succession by a number of articles and pamphlets, written by materialist-minded natural scientists, who were unanimous in their demand that the remnants of philosophy should be replaced by the positive sciences.

These vociferous demands naturally brought opponents onto the scene. 'Vulgar' Materialism, as this crude version was called, was spreading so fast and gaining so much influence, particularly among students, that even Bukharin, then the Party's chief ideologist, was forced to deal with this phenomenon. In 1923 he intervened in the controversy and sharply condemned Vulgar Materialism.

At Bukharin's side there was Deborin, who contributed a series of brilliant articles attacking Vulgar Materialism. His opposition, however, was expressed less in criticism of its theoretical premises than in the elaboration of a philosophically orientated programme, which by its scope alone made Vulgar Materialism appear intellectually provincial.

The theoretical resources of the Vulgar Materialists were insufficient for a serious controversy. The movement—which apart from O. Minin, centred particularly on the biologist Emmanuel S. Enchmen, who preached a peculiar form of philosophy, which he tried to reduce to biology—was soon replaced by a number of persons who had to be taken seriously. Among them—to name only the most influential—were Ivan Ivanovich Skvortsov-Stepanov (1870-1928), Arkadi Klement Timiria-

zev (1880-1955), the son of the famous Russian physiologist, and Liubov Isaakovna Akselrod (1868-1946). The new movement differed both from its Vulgar Materialist precursors and from the mechanical materialism of the 18th century. To distinguish themselves from their predecessors, its members called themselves *mechanistic* materialists.

The mechanistic group carried on the traditions of Vulgar Materialism in a very different form. It disputed the right of philosophy to exist in a socialist society with the following argument: just as, after the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Russian society had conquered all the irrational and blind forces whose victim it had been during the bourgeois capitalist phase of its history, and had established a rational, controlled, and planned social order, so it must free itself from all 'philosophical rubbish' in the realms of science and culture to make way for the positive sciences. Only by abandoning all philosophical fictions, the Mechanists believed, would the transition from the old bourgeois society to a new scientific epoch of history be completed.

They were thus trying to establish a scientific *Weltanschauung*, which was to be derived from summarising and elucidating the findings of the positive sciences. In explaining all material and spiritual phenomena they adopted a strict determinism and strongly denied the right to existence of a philosophy distinct from the individual sciences. Analysis was the method by which they hoped to penetrate to the ultimate mysteries of being, and since, for them, the laws of the microcosm applied also to the macrocosm, they believed that by penetrating into the smallest particles they would be able to solve general problems of nature and society. A universalist method, such as the dialectic, seemed to them to be simply scholasticism.

**I**N the summer of 1925 the Mechanists began openly attacking 'bourgeois survivals' in the Soviet Union. The occasion was furnished by Ryazanov's edition of Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*, which was published in 1925. Stepanov published a commentary on this book in which he maintained that Engels had proved that in socialist society only exact science remained.

The dialectic of which Engels spoke was nothing but a familiar theory of evolution.

But Deborin, against whom Stepanov's article was directed, could with good reason cite Engels in his defence; after all, it was precisely in this book that Engels had tried to make the dialectic the necessary methodological foundation of the natural sciences. The controversy between Deborin and Stepanov therefore began over the question of the place Engels attributed to the dialectic in the natural sciences and to philosophy in a socialist society.

Engels' unfinished work, which exists only as a fragment, grotesquely enough provided both parties with a justification of their position. The contradictions and numerous intellectual ambiguous passages produced a situation in which both sides fought for years on end over the meaning of individual sentences and phrases. When Deborin appeared to be getting the upper hand the Mechanists began to divide Engels' intellectual development into two phases. They asserted that a part of the notes dated from a period when Engels was still caught up in bourgeois philosophical prejudices: Deborin could be referring only to these immature and pre-scientific passages. In the second stage of his development Engels had understood his mistakes and had tried to eliminate philosophy and dialectics from the natural sciences.

From this point of view the quarrel between Deborin and the Mechanists can be regarded as a controversy over the views of Engels. Marx was allowed almost no say at all. His ideas were unambiguously expressed and hardly referred to the question under dispute. But Engels, in whose work materialist and idealist traditions were only very loosely interwoven, and who had died while trying to expand the historical materialism of his friend Marx into a comprehensive dialectical materialism, had left behind a great quarry from which Deborinists and Mechanists could help themselves to powerful arguments. The fact that Deborin and his views finally prevailed did not remove the stumbling-block. The ambivalence of this work of Engels later provided the natural scientists of the Soviet Union with effective quotations to defend themselves against the attempt to fetter research by dogmatic philosophy.

To the mechanistic interpretation of Engels, which in its extreme form was tantamount to the abolition of philosophy and dialectics as subjects to be studied and taught in the Soviet Union, Deborin opposed his idea of the inseparable link between the philosophy of dialectical materialism and a socialist order of society. According to this the guarantee for a scientifically planned society lay entirely in a scientifically worked out philosophy, whose function it was to prepare rules and norms by which society, state, and politics could be directed. The denial of Marxist philosophy as the supreme court of appeal would inevitably emasculate Soviet society.

Deborin emphasised that, historically, philosophy had always been one of the most important elements of state and society, and that therefore socialist society too must, for good or ill, remain bound up with Marxist philosophy. Without a clear theoretical concept of the future ordering of society there could be no purposeful quest for it in practical politics. Without responsible and scientific control of social and political development by philosophy, everything remained at the mercy of arbitrary, spontaneous impulses. With similar arguments he attacked the demand for the absolute autonomy of the positive sciences. The call for a self-sufficient science was to him synonymous with the renunciation of Marxist philosophy. For he was convinced that the natural sciences too were irrevocably bound by certain philosophical assumptions. They revealed their hidden workings only when the results were interpreted. As philosophy and science were inescapably coupled, the connection would have to be admitted, explicitly recognised, and utilised to control the results; and as the sciences could not free themselves completely from philosophical implications it was the task of the scientific philosophy of Marxism to act as incorruptible conscience and to fight unscientific undercurrents in the sciences.

He opposed particularly violently the attempt to eliminate the dialectic as methodological basis in the natural sciences. Closely following Hegel, he considered the dialectical method to be logic, ontology, and theory of cognition in one. To suppress it in the individual sciences

meant for him to give up a uniform and complete order of being. And since, for him, the dialectic represented an ontological principle governing all realms of life, its elimination from the natural sciences would lead to methodological confusion in which the results of research in the individual sciences would inevitably be frittered away and could no longer be integrated into a self-contained whole.

FOR five years (1925-29) the controversy between the Deborinists and the Mechanists revolved around these questions. Much ink was spilt on both sides, but neither party retreated. The Deborinists, who included Y. E. Sten, N. A. Karev, B. N. Gessen, V. F. Asmus, I. K. Luppol, I. I. Agol, M. L. Levin, I. F. Podvolotski, S. Levit, F. Telezhnikov, S. Novikov and many others, during these years became widely known as the 'dialectical school'. They agreed among themselves on the things they published, quoted each other, and for the rest followed their leader without question.

Their main organisational support, apart from scientific institutes and universities—where according to contemporary reports they held almost all the key positions—came from the Society of Militant Materialists, founded in 1924. In 1928 this society amalgamated with a splinter group under the name of Society of Militant Materialists and Dialecticians. In 1929 the Society, directed by Deborin, already had an organisational network which covered almost the whole of Russia. Its object, as Deborin put it, was 'to organise the systematic investigation of the Hegelian dialectic from the standpoint of Marxism'. With this aim in view the Society initiated a Hegelian renaissance in the Soviet Union, which very soon degenerated into a Hegel cult.

The publicity organ of the Deborinists was the periodical *Under the Banner of Marxism* (1922-44), which was translated into several languages and whose chief editor from 1926 to 1930 was Deborin. It had a direct influence on the course of the controversy as almost all disputed questions were discussed in it. Although until 1930 the journal followed the Deborinist line, it did not close its columns to its philosophical opponents. It was run in such

a way that the most divergent points of view could find relatively free expression in it.

Although Deborin was appointed editor-in-chief only in 1926, his influence is apparent in all leading articles of the preceding years. With a few exceptions, all his writings after the Revolution appeared in this journal and they alone gave it the unmistakable stamp which soon made it into a concept in the intellectual life of the Soviet Union. Deborin wrote that, in spite of the enormous load of work on his shoulders, Lenin, during the brief space of life left to him, concerned himself untiringly with all the questions connected with the journal and was able, by suggestions and proposals, to fill the editorial board with his spirit, so that fundamentally the periodical was his creation.

AN examination of Deborin's philosophical attitude, as outlined above, shows that it contains ideas which, in the twenties, must have been extremely welcome to the Bolshevik Party. In the realm of politics his theory of the dialectical leaps in development has a close affinity to the ideas of the Party, which found in it the philosophical confirmation of its hopes for international revolution. The mechanistic theory of evolution could hardly have met with approval during the twenties.

Moreover, one only had to pursue Deborin's theory of the inevitable connection between philosophy, society and science through to its logical conclusion, with the Party's tasks in mind, to find in it a cleverly disguised device for using philosophy to control society and science unobtrusively and effectively. The theoretical leadership of society and science which he demanded for the philosophers encouraged the idea of the Party's practical leadership in those fields. Not only did he draw up the ideal blueprint of control; but he also took the first practical steps in that direction. In opposing all spontaneous impulses, for which he demanded prior philosophical sanction, he initiated their practical control. Unintentionally he thus prepared the method of social and political control from above which the Party was later to make clever use of.

Moreover, the primacy of the dialectical method, which he finally succeeded in establishing against the opposition of the natural

scientists, offered the opportunity, which could not be ignored, of suppressing all undesirable developments in the individual sciences. Here too he paved the way for the Party's later social and political practices.

It is not surprising therefore that the Deborinists were given effective support in their fight against the Mechanists. Later on this philosophical struggle provided an opportunity to link the Mechanists with the right-wing deviators of those years (Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsy) and thus to seal the philosophical verdict by a political one.

When the second All-Union Conference of Marxist-Leninist research institutes opened in the Communist Academy in Moscow on 8 April 1929, the Mechanists found themselves at a disadvantage. As the majority of the 229 delegates belonged in any case to the Deborinist faction, the support of the Party was not needed to damn mechanistic materialism as an 'obvious deviation from the position of Marxist-Leninist philosophy'.

In his report to the conference Deborin once again summarised the points at issue. The crux of the controversy he continued to see in the Mechanists' refusal to recognise the use of the dialectic as compulsory in the natural sciences. With undiminished violence he accused Timiriazev and his followers of still not understanding that the crisis in modern natural science was caused by a crisis in fundamental methodological principles: 'We maintained', he said to the conference, 'that the law of the unity of opposites must be made the basis of theoretical physics. Our opponents thereupon accused us of idealism, scholasticism, and every other deadly sin. Comrade Timiriazev has called me the "liquidator of the natural sciences". Who, if not Comrade Timiriazev, should guard the natural sciences against our plots?'

As before he attacked the Mechanist charge that he had forced the dialectical method on the natural sciences and had therefore dictated laws to nature instead of inducing them from it. 'Comrade Timiriazev's ideas about Marxism are as confused as his ideas about Hegel's dialectic', he said to the Mechanists, 'Like all Mechanists, he completely fails to understand the reciprocal connection between theory and practice. He believes in empiricism, proceeding

at a snail's pace, and "Khvostism",\* and denies the role of the dialectic as a tool of research. . . .'

With the condemnation of the Mechanists, who included, in addition to Timiriazev and Akselrod, A. Varyash, V. L. Sarabyanov, Perov, Geylikman, Z. A. Tseitlin and others, Deborin reached the peak of his influence on Soviet philosophy. In his journal he noted with satisfaction that communist society had pronounced the final verdict. This verdict, passed by the most distinguished scientists in the country, must satisfy everybody.

His philosophical victory and his personal triumph over the Mechanists were effectively complemented by an increase in institutional power. His position as editor-in-chief of *Under the Banner of Marxism*, in those years the only philosophical journal, was confirmed by the conference. In addition he directed the Institute of Philosophy of the Communist Academy, was a member of the Presidium of that Academy, deputy director of the Marx-Engels Institute, and, after 1929, also an ordinary member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Furthermore, he was responsible for the philosophical section of the first Soviet Encyclopedia, which had started appearing in 1926 under the overall editorship of his friend O. Y. Shmidt; this enabled him to exercise a direct influence on the shape of the Encyclopedia, which played an extremely important part in forming political opinion in the Soviet Union. Until 1930 all the philosophical articles appearing in the Encyclopedia bear the stamp of his editorship. The Deborinists also controlled the philosophical department of the State Publishing House, which enabled them to examine all important theoretical publications. Another advantageous result of the second All-Union conference was the reform of Timiriazev's Scientific Research Institute in Moscow, until then under the control of the Mechanists, the directorship of which was given to the Deborinist I. I. Agol.

THE greater philosophical self-confidence of the Deborinists, which had been the result of the second All-Union Conference, and the claim to leadership, which they made soon afterwards, soon spoiled their relations with the

\* Lenin's term to denote lagging in the 'tail' of events.

Party. In 1929, however, the Party was still busy with other tasks. In the year of 'the great turn on all fronts of socialist construction' it was first of all necessary to break the opposition inside the Party to the policy of forced industrialisation and collectivisation. N. I. Bukharin, a member of the Politbureau, Rykov, then Soviet Prime Minister, and Tomsky, at the head of the trade unions, had come out against Stalin's policy of intensifying the class struggle. What could be more obvious in such a situation than to establish a connection between the 'rightist deviation' in politics and the 'rightest deviation' in philosophy? The spectacle of five years of controversy must have drawn the attention of even the least interested observer to the differences of opinion on the 'philosophical front'. After all, the Mechanists had been condemned as an evolutionary and positivist movement, which in political terminology meant 'rightest deviation'. The arguments used in the philosophical controversy offered themselves as a political weapon in the fight against all opposition to Stalin's general line of 1929.

It was no coincidence that the elimination of the Mechanists took place at the same time as the elimination of the Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky group. Bukharin was accused of Mechanism in philosophy and in April 1929 lost his position as president of the Communist International. In November 1929 he was expelled from the Politbureau.

This being the state of affairs, it was clear that the alliance between the party ideologists and the Deborinists could only be of short duration. In 1930 the 'philosophical front' presented a completely different picture.

The controversy between the Deborinists and the Mechanists concerned the philosophical foundations of Marxism, in which a subtler way of presenting arguments could only have a disturbing and hampering effect. So long as the foundations of Soviet philosophy were not clearly defined, a third ideological position could hardly be established without impeding or even preventing the process of clarification which was just beginning.

After Deborin's success at the conference things changed. There was now only one philosophical line, of which the Party could expect that, after winning a brilliant philosophical vic-

tory, it would show the same intellectual brilliance in the execution of real tasks. But the hopes which the Party had put in Deborin remained unfulfilled. In the new situation it became clear that Deborin's dialectical philosophy had rather aristocratic characteristics and that its representatives were not prepared to give immediate sanction to the Party's practical measures. They continued to look upon Soviet philosophy, which they represented and wanted to purge of all non-Marxist elements and preserve in complete purity, as the highest and ultimate criterion of truth of social and political development. They continued to regard all concrete phenomena of Soviet society—in so far as they paid any attention to them at all—only from the point of view of Marxist theory and the Hegelian dialectic.

After the condemnation of the Mechanists the truce in Soviet philosophy lasted just a year, or more accurately until the joint session of the Institute of Philosophy of the Communist Academy and the Moscow Organisation of the Society of Militant Materialists and Dialecticians held from 20 to 24 April 1930. Deborin gave the main speech and presided over the discussion which followed.

At the beginning of the conference Deborin still had good reason to believe that his philosophical ideas, which he had successfully defended against the Mechanists, would continue to have the approval of the Party; but by the end of the conference this had become more than doubtful. During the discussion it emerged that an anti-Deborin regrouping was taking place among Soviet philosophers. Deborin's report on 'Results and tasks on the philosophical front' was attacked and criticised with surprising violence by a small group.

Characteristically, the new group did not criticise any concrete point of the analysis given in the report, but made a general attack on the Deborinists' claim to be the leaders of philosophy. This was a completely new attitude; it was not directed against this or that point of dialectical philosophy, it did not seize on any theoretical problem, but, while accepting Deborin's theoretical arguments, nevertheless aimed at the removal of the Deborinists. Immediately after the discussion Deborin commented that it was less a question of theoretical

opposition to his philosophy than of the appearance of a new group, which defied exact definition, which apparently wanted to obtain control of the philosophical field, a group which, as he put it, was 'thirsting for power'.

In his final speech to the conference Deborin dealt with the arguments of his new opponents and announced that he would resist any attempt to discredit the philosophical leadership and to wrest it from his followers. 'Some comrades have said: your general line is correct, we don't want to break up the philosophical leadership; but on the other hand they have pursued a line which was aimed precisely at suppressing and discrediting the philosophical leadership. We shall fight against this. Why shall we fight? Naturally not because we cling to the leadership in philosophy, but because what the splinter group has said shows evidence of unhealthy symptoms.' Thus began the struggle between the Deborinists and the party ideologists for the control of Soviet philosophy.

**I**N April 1930 the new group was not yet able to get its way against the Deborinists. Although Deborin had met a new and incomparably more dangerous opponent, the resolution 'concerning the results and new tasks on the philosophical front', which he introduced, was adopted by an overwhelming majority of the conference (there was only one vote against it).

The decisive turning point occurred some months later, the occasion being a semi-official article, published in *Pravda* on 7 June 1930, written by three, then still unknown, party ideologists: Mark Borisovich Mitin (born 1901), Pavel Fedorovich Yudin (born 1899), and Vasili Nikiforovich Raltsevich (?). They came from the Institute of Red Professors and therefore had an influential institution behind them. Mitin and Yudin were the heads of the Institute party organisation. They thus represented a new type in the philosophical controversy, which until then had been waged by scholars.

The party ideologists justified their criticism of Soviet philosophy by reference to the approach of the Sixteenth Party Congress and the great practical tasks which it would present to the theoreticians. 'Reality is confronting theory with tremendous problems', they wrote. 'It is necessary to start at once with the prepara-

tion and theoretical generalisation of these problems on the basis of Marxist-Leninist methodology. Instead we notice that theory is lagging considerably behind.' This accusation was obviously directed at Deborin and his school.

They heaped reproach after reproach on official Soviet philosophy, accusing it of a lack of party-mindedness and of political neutrality, and imputing to it extreme formalism and the malicious separation of philosophy from the practical problems of the country. Their attack culminated in the demand that new tasks be formulated for philosophy, envisaging a fight on two fronts.

The philosophical equivalent of 'rightist deviation' in politics had been found in mechanistic materialism. Now—under the banner of a fight on two philosophical fronts—the party ideologists tried to establish the philosophical equivalent of 'leftist deviation', that is, of Trotskyism. Only if it could be proved that the leftist deviation represented a whole system which had penetrated into the official philosophy and of which there must therefore necessarily be a social equivalent, could the Party claim that its ruthless procedure against the Trotskyists was fully justified.

What was more obvious for this purpose, after the equation of Mechanism with 'rightist deviation' had proved so successful, than to say that Deborinism was the philosophical basis of Trotskyism? If Deborinism could be identified with Trotskyism, Deborin and his 'dialectical school' would be unmasked as forming an anti-state and anti-party movement and the philosophical foundations of Trotskyism would be laid bare.

Though cautiously phrased, the article did indeed accuse Deborin of Trotskyism. 'Fully aware of the great importance which the fight against Mechanism has played in strengthening Marxist-Leninist theory, we cannot, as some comrades are trying to do, pass over the shortcomings and mistakes which have occurred in communist philosophy in the past period of development. One of the major inadequacies has proved to be that in its development Marxist-Leninist philosophy has failed to unmask the theoretical foundations of Trotskyism.'

As the development of 'Marxist-Leninist philosophy' had until then been in Deborin's hands, the implication was obvious.

Retrospectively, it can be seen that after the publication of the semi-official article of 7 June 1930 the Deborinists were pushed on the defensive. Subjectively, however, they did not feel themselves to be on the defensive at all. On the contrary, they published a strong criticism of the new ideas. The May number of their periodical *Under the Banner of Marxism* contained a counter-declaration, signed by the most prominent representatives of dialectical philosophy. Their answer to the criticism in *Pravda* was produced with surprising self-confidence and was still written completely in the tone of 'philosophical leaders'.

In the introduction they said: '*Pravda* of 7 June of this year contained an article by Comrades M. Mitin, V. Raltsevich and P. Yudin, entitled "Concerning the new tasks of Marxist-Leninist philosophy". But this article presents a correct appreciation neither of the present situation in the realm of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, nor of the tasks which confront us. As the article touches upon extremely important topical questions we believe it necessary to examine these in greater detail.' The Deborinists pointed out that everything which was correct in the article of the three party ideologists was simply a restatement of their own philosophical views. 'But', they continued, 'where the authors of the article express their own views they depart from the correct Marxist-Leninist position.'

While the party ideologists had defined Mechanism and Trotskyism as the two fronts on which Soviet philosophy must fight, the Deborinists now added 'formalism and eclecticism' as a new front, putting the article of the party ideologists into this category.

It is surprising that in their defence the Deborinists said nothing about the Trotskyism of which they had been obliquely accused. This is the more surprising as they examined all the other accusations in detail and pulled them to pieces with the skill they had already demonstrated many times before.

Either they were so involved in their traditional ways of putting problems that, conscious of their services in the fight against Mechanism,

they dismissed as unimportant the accusation of not having done their duty of political supervision in one instance, or they were aware of an unfortunate omission in this question which they tried to pass over in silence. Another explanation might be that there was really an unadmitted elective affinity between Deborin's philosophy and Trotsky's political theories. The far-ranging learning, the delight in rhetorical glitter and stylistic form, the internationalist orientation and receptivity, even if critical, for the ideas for Western Europe, which characterised both Deborinists and Trotskyists, make it possible to compare them on the basis of an intellectual, psychological elective affinity. But beyond this there is no proof of the existence of any close political or philosophical connection, as claimed by the Party.

Whatever the truth, the fact that the Party very soon gave official support to the article of 7 June decided the outcome of the controversy. Moreover, making the attitude of the article its own provided the Party with a specific point of view on all philosophical questions. It could now fall back on a philosophy whose creed was the unconditional support of the Party's practical measures with philosophical arguments.

However strongly the Deborinists defended themselves, and however good and convincing their arguments, they lost influence steadily. In the September 1930 issue of their journal they were made to publish a resolution directed against themselves. It appeared on the last page without comment, and marks the end of the phase during which the journal was directed in the spirit of Deborin's dialectical philosophy. The September number was the last to be produced by the old editors. The next number appeared, but only after Deborin's dismissal in January 1931, under the new direction of V. V. Adoratski, M. B. Mitin, and P. F. Yudin.

THE elimination of Deborin's dialectical philosophy from Soviet intellectual life was accomplished in two resolutions which followed each other in quick succession: first, the resolution of the party cell of the Institute of Red Professors, of 29 December 1930, taken as a result of Stalin's personal initiative, which subjected Deborin's views to devastating criticism;

and second, the decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU of 25 January 1931, which condemned the philosophical line of *Under the Banner of Marxism* and ordered a change of editorial board.

At the height of the conflict between Deborin and the three party ideologists, Stalin intervened in the controversy. On 9 December 1930 he appeared in the office of the party cell of the Institute of Red Professors and, during the meeting, coined the expression 'menshevizing idealism' to describe Deborin's views.

Stalin's phrase about 'menshevizing idealism' was in fact meaningless. But as it linked Deborin's views with two movements which Soviet terminology branded as counter-revolutionary and reactionary, it could be used against an opponent who could not be accused of any concrete misdemeanours. In this capacity the concept 'menshevizing idealism' has continued to exist in Soviet terminology up to the present day.

It only remains to be said that the resolution of 25 January 1931 liquidated one of the most interesting phenomena in Soviet philosophy. Pilloried by the Party, Deborin and his school were submerged by a flood of suspicions and insults. Under pressure from the Party, and debarred from all active occupations, the Deborinists either took to self-criticism and turned into fierce critics of their former convictions—like I. K. Luppol (who vanished in the thirties) or V. F. Asmus (who is still writing today)—or else they remained firm in spite of the drive against them; in that case they had to endure trial for 'counter-revolutionary activities'—like B. N. Gessen and Y. E. Sten. Or else they retired completely from public life—voluntarily or under pressure—and became silent for ever.

Deborin had a twofold fate. It was noticeable that during the last months of the controversy he kept back and after the May declaration published nothing in his own defence. It is said that on 1 January 1931 he made a complete confession of his guilt before the Society of Militant Materialists and Dialecticians. It may be that when his followers were censured this early self-criticism saved him from anything worse than losing control of *Under the Banner of Marxism*. He was allowed to keep all his

other public positions. Some years later he was even elected to the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences and remained there until the end of the second world war.

As he admitted later (1933) in a long, self-critical speech at the Institute of Philosophy, Deborin had not finally abandoned his philosophical convictions in 1931. 'Our fundamental mistake', he said, 'lay in separating theory and practice. I must admit that for a long time I did not understand that accusation, because, after all, I was constantly speaking of practice as the criterion of truth. I was speaking about it and writing about it. Only later did I understand that this was not all that was at stake. The essence of the matter was that we failed to establish a connection between our theoretical and methodological investigations and the concrete tasks of socialist construction, that we separated theory from life. This led to a state where some of the menshevizing idealists developed to a certain degree into "inner emigrants" and later into political opportunists.'

Turning to his former followers, he demanded from them 'complete and unconditional surrender'. This, he thought, was the only possible decision for an honest communist.

Even though he bought his personal security and part of his public position with his 'unconditional surrender', the few of his articles which appeared after 1933 are devoid of any independent thought. They do not differ in any way from dozens of similarly nondescript productions. After disowning his philosophy he had really nothing else to say. He appears uncertain and indulges in false radicalism. His articles 'Karl Marx and the Present' (1933), and 'Lenin and the Present' (1934), are pedestrian treatises in party jargon. After 1934 he turned almost completely away from philosophical subjects—for example in the articles 'N. A. Dobroliubov' (1936), 'I. P. Pavlov and Materialism' (1936), and 'Bourgeois or socialist humanism' (1937)—or he repeated the Party's political slogans—for example in the articles 'The warmongers' campaign against national sovereignty' (1951), and 'The Agency of American Imperialism' (1953). Whenever during the last years he ventured into the realm of philosophy he wrote

about such out of the way subjects as 'Materialism and the dialectic in ancient Indian philosophy' (1956). His latest article 'Leibnitz as a Social Thinker' appeared in *Voprosy Filosofii* (No. 3, 1961).

The dialectical philosophy which Deborin and his disciples developed during the twenties has remained unique in the Soviet Union on account of its philosophical originality and intel-

lectual range. Since then no worthwhile attempt has been made to work out an *independent Soviet philosophy*, unaffected by the political interests of the Communist Party, or to revive the traditions of the early days. After 1931 dialectical materialism became canonised and was turned into rigid dogma. Since then all work on philosophical questions has remained within the narrow limits of a general line which even lays down the choice of words.

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## Aussenpolitik

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Philosophic thinking in the USSR has unquestionably entered a new epoch, inaugurated largely by the collapse of party ideology confronted by relativity. A new attitude has already emerged among the philosophers.

Among scientists it is rarely permitted to make prophecies. But in this case we have grounds on which to base the hope that Russian science will experience a resurrection of the spirit in the not too distant future.

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