

From My Memories of G. V. Plekhanov¹

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In 1889, when I arrived in Zurich, the overall political moods in the Russian revolutionary milieu were Populist in character. The ranks of the émigrés living there and of the Russian revolutionary youth who sympathized with them were dominated by bits and scraps of the Populist views of the 1870s and of the People’s Will of the 1880s. There were endless debates about program and tactics. The debates were all the more explosive and impassioned since the Russian revolutionary movement was then experiencing, as, unfortunately happens all too often with us, a transitional, critical period. On the agenda was the accursed Russian question: “What is to be done?”

The “Emancipation of Labor” group, which had arisen in 1883 and had managed during the six years of its energetic existence to accomplish an extraordinary amount in developing and explaining its ideas, did not, however, enjoy popularity. On the contrary, the general attitude toward this new revolutionary organization, and to its program and tactics, was negative to the highest degree. I remember how, a little while after I had arrived in Zurich, one of my acquaintances who was walking me home late at night pointed with his hand toward a lighted window and said with great meaning: “Do you see the light in the window on the second floor of this building?” “I see it, so what?” “In this house there lives a Russian Social-Democrat-emancipator, and, imagine, a passionate admirer of Plekhanov.” With great and avid curiosity I looked at the “strange, secretive” house in which an “emancipator”² lived.

A Russian Social-Democrat was at that time a rather rare phenomenon, and to recognize Plekhanov as the founder of a new, serious revolutionary tendency, let alone to be his admirer, meant for the majority of revolutionary Populists to be standing on the wrong side of good and evil.

I therefore understood my acquaintance very well when he pointed to the house where the Social-Democrat lived as if he were pointing at the cage of a rare animal. And what I understood particularly well was the condescending and slightly scornful tone in which he pronounced the words: “admirer of Plekhanov.”

Since I shared the generally dominant moods and prejudices of the revolutionary milieu, I imagined that the Social-Democratic doctrine was a naked and almost criminal violation of revolutionary traditions and a diabolical obstacle on the way to the further

¹ This article was published in the Tambov “Labor Association.” In view of the extremely small circulation of this special publication, this interesting article by comrade L. I. Akselrod is unknown to the broad reading public. We are reprinting it with changes and a few additions and corrections by the author. The editors.

² In a review of the first Social-Democratic pamphlet written by Plekhanov, “Socialism and Political Struggle,” P. L. Lavrov ironically called the members of the “Emancipation of Labor Group”... “Emancipators.”

development of revolutionary thought and the revolutionary cause. What therefore had logically followed was an extremely negative opinion of the personality and talents of the founder of Russian Marxism.

In the eclectic world outlook of the Populists, a subjective and moral element played, as is well known, the dominant role. Moral condemnation of the existing social and political order, sympathy for the oppressed and exploited, and the moral duty of the thinking intelligentsia toward the people comprised the main spiritual foundations of the general world outlook of the Populist. In other words, a moral evaluation of historical and social being replaced an account of objective social forces and their real interrelations. The ideals of the future were seen to be a spontaneous element determined by the free will of the individual.

The scientific-objective component in the construction of Populism, — without which, by the way, not a single utopia gets by — appeared to be an accidental element, despite the heated theoretical debates about the fate of Russian capitalism, the socialist potential of the land commune, and the possibility of "jumping over" the capitalist order immediately into socialism, and so forth. In short, Populist currents of all shades were dominated by the subjective method and by a devotion to the moral "formula of progress." But it would be profoundly unjust, nevertheless, to claim that the adherents of Populist romanticism were alien to scientific thought or enlightenment. By no means. On the contrary, the reading of serious books in several and rather varied branches of human knowledge was considered to be almost obligatory for revolutionaries of the Populist persuasion. And there is no doubt that revolutionaries of the 1880s read incomparably more than modern-day Social-Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries, who, to the great detriment of the socialist cause are nourished intellectually by almost exclusively newspaper literature. The Populists had great respect for science. Nevertheless, they saw science and revolution as opposing categories. The main reason for such a view of the relationship of scientific thought to revolutionary practice was, it seems to me, a utopian striving to surpass Western-European civilization with the help of the morally-subjective efforts of heroic individuals. An objective and serious assessment of Russian reality, a scientific grounding of program and tactics, could easily destroy the comforting and seductive illusions in the rapid achievement of socialist construction. Hence we can fully understand the psychological irritation with which the majority of revolutionaries greeted the first works written by G. V. Plekhanov.

A new revolutionary world outlook, based on strictly scientific thinking, which demanded an impartial, all-sided analysis of social relations, — a world outlook which juxtaposed the objective method of Marx and Engels to the popular moral "formula of progress" advanced by Mikhailovsky — meant a complete and decisive break with the old habits of revolutionary thought. This was a break which had to drive the overwhelming majority of revolutionaries away from the bold innovator. The Marxist method, which, according to the Communist Manifesto, should rise to an understanding of the course of historical movement, and, according to which capitalism and the powerful development of the industrial bourgeoisie were the necessary historical

preconditions for socialism, appeared to the utopian Populists to be a reactionary method, and the advocate of this method was in their eyes a traitor to the revolutionary cause.

Georgii Valentinovich used to recount how, when his father brought him to military school, the students at the school, his future comrades, greeted the newcomer with their fists. "I didn't know this custom," G. V. recalled, "since I was sure that in the cathedrals of science only learning would have any place. But I immediately concluded that if they were fighting, you had to give as well as you got, and so I did. It seemed to me that my attackers remained satisfied with my quick-wittedness, and we subsequently became comrades." The breakthrough in history which Georgii Valentinovich made was greeted by revolutionary circles in exactly the same way. Every new and powerful word that he uttered provoked most of all a terrible desire to do battle. And just as he had done in the military school, G. V. gave as well as he got.

"Our Differences," the classical reply to P. L. Lavrov and L. Tikhomirov, aroused a storm of indignation in the Populist milieu. As people who are entirely trustworthy have since recounted, in some revolutionary circles this historical work was burned. These fanatics and sectarians, raised on the methods of struggle known to Asiatic despotism, evidently imagined that in the nineteenth century thought and intellectual activity could also be exterminated by means of fire.

The entire surrounding atmosphere in which Plekhanov was forced to fight for his new ideas was filled with malice, hatred and sometimes poorly concealed envy toward the young, powerful and brilliant combatant. Like the gods, people created slander out of nothing. But strangely enough, despite such savage persecution, each presentation made by Georgii Valentinovich in one or another Swiss colony was for everyone, without exception, a true holiday event. I managed to hear Plekhanov for the first time in 1891. A month before his arrival in Zurich to give a lecture, or, as people said then, "an abstract" [referat], young people who were definitely opposed to the Social-Democratic doctrine in general, and who had expressed a clear hostility to Georgii Valentinovich in particular, awaited his arrival with great impatience. And so, I don't remember now exactly what month it was in the first half of the winter, one of my friends flew into my room and without managing to say hello, announced with excitement in her voice: "Plekhanov has arrived." "Why are you so happy?" I asked, "For, as far as I know, you are hardly an admirer of the ideas of the Emancipation of Labor Group, and as for Plekhanov's personality, do you remember how you have characterized it on more than one occasion?" She grew a bit embarrassed, and then, gathered her thoughts and replied: "I love to listen to him; he is a talent and speaks awfully well."

On the next day, in the evening, all Russian who were in Zurich, literally everyone except children and the ill, rushed off to attend Plekhanov's lecture.

The theme of the lecture was the famine which was troubling Russia at that time. Besides being a burning question of general interest, this theme also was of special, more partial, so to speak, party interest. As already noted, the Social-Democracy was quantitatively insignificant, but as for quality, the first followers of the "Emancipation of Labor Group"

were, for very understandable reasons, the most politically conscious people. They thought more and read more than today's Social-Democrats. Nevertheless, the traditional thinking of their recent past hung above even their heads. Separation from complex and varied reality; a sectarianism which had taken root very deeply; being in the habit of setting themselves in everything against absolutely the rest of the entire world – all this narrowed their horizons and hindered the assimilation of Plekhanov's new materialist scientific world outlook which was alien to sectarianism and utopianism.

This spiritual heritage of the sectarian past was sharply evident on the issue of the attitude of Social-Democracy to the famine. First of all, participation in organizing aid for the starving appeared to the young Social-Democrats to be a philanthropic matter which cut across revolutionary methods of action; secondly, the thought of fighting against famine in conditions of an autocratic regime seemed to be a tacit recognition of the latter; thirdly, the famine was, from their point of view, a factor of progress, since this popular misfortune should lead to the supposedly "beneficial" and more rapid proletarianization of the countryside.

G. V. Plekhanov held another view on this issue. From his standpoint, lively and active participation in the organization of aid for the starving opened favorable ground for revolutionary agitation against the very same autocracy. Humanitarian sympathy for the famished and a striving to provide as much aid as possible to the unfortunate peasants coincided in Plekhanov's overall outlook with political expediency; moral duty was in harmony with social-political tasks. Thus a conflict arose between the master and his young pupils, for, if I am not mistaken, the first time.

It was clear that people were awaiting the lecture with particularly strained interest. By eight o'clock in the evening the large hall was overflowing.

Plekhanov appeared on the stage. At that time, Russians did not have the custom of greeting a speaker with applause. On the contrary, when Plekhanov appeared, such a hush immediately dominated that you truly could have heard the buzzing of a fly if one had decided to intrude. I saw Plekhanov for the first time. I will not describe in detail his outward appearance. From a purely superficial view, it is well known through photographs. I say, "from a superficial view" since one does not immediately grasp the outward appearance of a man, and particularly of a great man; to do so requires careful and subtle observation over a significantly prolonged period of time and in differing conditions of life. At first glance, what was immediately striking about Georgii Valentinovich was how sharply he differed from other prominent émigrés. On almost all the émigrés whom I had managed to see previously there was a strong imprint of nihilism, an air of apostasy, and a sense of alienation from the reality surrounding them. At first sight it was clear that these were people of a circle, adepts of a sect. In G. V. Plekhanov's outward appearance, on the contrary, one could not detect even a semblance of sectarianism. On the stage there stood a brilliant man or, as the French say, a *belle homme*, who was a bit more than thirty, with refined and noble manners, restrained movements, and who was carefully dressed without, of course, any signs of dandyism,

but with good taste which revealed an artistic nature and a man who wore his clothes well.

G. V. began his speech with a slight but hardly noticeable excitement in his voice, which was characteristic of true artistic talent and which put his listeners in a certain mood. The enchanting timbre of his voice, marvelous pronunciation, clear and precise diction, strictly literary speech, in short, the classical form of the art of oratory captured the aesthetic attention of his listeners. But Plekhanov's power over his audience could not be explained by form alone. What was mainly at work, as in everything and at all times, was content.

Enormous erudition, full command of his subject, a broad world outlook, iron-like, clear and at the same time supple and original thought, plus tempestuous, revolutionary passion, plus a refined and imaginative wit, — all these components, concentrated in one of nature's chosen, led his listeners, all of them without exception, into a state of ecstasy. People felt spiritually uplifted and engaged in an increased level of mental activity.

In the first part of his lecture, Georgii Valentinovich sketched a full and horrifying picture of the famine, explaining that the causes of the people's catastrophe lay in the historical conditions of Russian life and particularly in the governmental system of autocracy. And here the "cold" Marxist Plekhanov, who, according to the Populists, recommended that "peasants stew in the factory cauldron", led several of the audience to tears. It seemed that the entire crowd was fused into one whole and that the heart of this unified being shuddered when the orator finished one turn of speech with the words of the poet:

Не беда, что потерпит мужик,
Так ведущее нас провидение
Указало, да он же привык.

So what that the muzhik will suffer a bit,
Thus has the Providence who guides us
Decreed, and the peasant has learned how to live with it.

The second half of the lecture was devoted to outlining the tasks of Social-Democrats in the struggle against the famine.

The mood of the listeners rose higher and higher, and naturally was felt by the orator who lived at one with the audience and at the same time stood absolutely apart from them on a high pedestal, striving with the classical lucidity of his brilliant exposition to raise them to an ever greater intellectual and moral height. Here what clearly emerged was G. V. Plekhanov's inherent socialist cultural democratism, i.e., *true democratism*. The history of ancient Greece tells us that when Pericles prepared to speak before the Athenian people, he prayed to the gods that no dissonant word unbecoming the subject would escape from his lips. Plekhanov was, as we know, a materialist philosopher. He did not believe in the help of the gods since he did not acknowledge their existence, but to speak publicly was for him, like it was for the valiant Athenian citizen, a responsible and sacred matter.

One felt that the lecture, despite its astounding freedom of exposition, was thought through and worked out with the greatest care both in content and in form.

A discussion followed the two-hour lecture. There were statements made by "official" opponents, Populists who felt it was their party duty to challenge Plekhanov. And to tell the truth, this was definitely an onerous, ascetic duty, for to speak after Plekhanov and the impression made by his speech meant to doom oneself to complete failure. The audience listened to the opponents distractedly, awaiting with great and obvious impatience the concluding remarks of the orator, in which the latter replied to his opponents and also to the questions asked by several other listeners. My neighbor and acquaintance, who was not yet a Social-Democrat, turned to me after the lecture and noted: "You will still hear his concluding remarks. He polemicizes remarkably well." The concluding remarks were indeed a beautiful work of art. And here, too, in this improvisation, there was not a single dissonant word unbefitting the subject. But most evident of all was the nature of a heroic fighter and a strong polemist in the style of Lessing. The opponents were routed and it seemed they were happy that their harsh ordeal had ended.

On the next day a discussion took place in the evening in which committed Social-Democrats and sympathizers participated. I didn't manage to attend this limited and intimate gathering. But people have told me that Plekhanov was "in good form" and that he responded to all questions with astounding and exhaustive detail.

In general, Plekhanov's visit had enormous significance. Vacillators joined the new current of revolutionary thought. Long after G. V.'s departure, people in the colony spoke and debated about the "abstract" he had delivered; the orator's witticisms were enthusiastically repeated. In short, as I stated above, G. V.'s visit was a great event in the life of the Russian colony.

Later, beginning in 1894, when my late sister Ida Isaakovna and I lived in Bern, I was assigned on behalf of the Bern Social-Democratic group to conduct a correspondence with Georgii Valentinovich regarding his trip to give one of his lectures. Knowing that this pleasant duty had fallen on me, the colony literally never gave me any peace. I can say without any exaggeration that anyone who simply happened to meet me or my sister at the university or on the street would start with the same question: "When is Plekhanov arriving?"

All the lectures given by Georgii Valentinovich in Bern from 1894 to 1903, and all his heated polemical battles with his opponents, live vividly in my memory. But unfortunately, the length assigned to this sketch robs me of the opportunity to share my reminiscences with the reader fully. I am comforted by the hope that, if the Fury of death, who now so mercilessly is destroying masses of human lives, does not carry me away to another shore as well, then I will return to this engaging theme. For now I cannot help but mention one more lecture given by G. V. Plekhanov. It was, if I am not mistaken, in 1898. Georgii Valentinovich was reading a lecture, or to be more precise, speaking about the general tasks of Russian Social-Democracy. As always, the hall was packed; as always, the audience was listening to the speaker with strained attention, interrupting here

and there the reigning silence in the hall with thunderous applause; as always the finale prompted a real, prolonged, friendly and stormy ovation; and, finally, as always, the Populist opponents spoke out. Zh. And R. made their objections. Both opponents pointed to what they considered to be the fundamental contradiction in the Russian Social-Democratic program. This contradiction was the following: on the one hand, the mass movement was only possible given the existence of political freedom, but on the other hand, political freedom could only be the result of a mass workers' movement. The Russian Social-Democratic program therefore was caught in a vicious circle. In continuing this thought, R. drew the conclusion that a Russian national program was altogether absent from the "Emancipation of Labor Group."

In his final words, G. V. gave a brilliant and thorough reply to his opponents. In dealing with the supposed contradiction, the orator unfolded with amazing mastery the dialectic in the movement of human history. Aided by many vivid facts of the social struggle of classes, he showed in what way contradictions of this type find their synthetic, reconciliatory resolution in the forward movement of historical reality. The movement of the working class, which is determined by class contradictions, develops and cannot be stopped by a repressive autocracy. In the struggle for political emancipation the working class will play the main deciding role, and on the other hand, the conquest of political freedom will be a mighty factor on the path of the continued forward movement of the popular working masses. It turned out that what had seemed to the opponents to be a logically formal contradiction and vicious circle was indeed a historical contradiction rooted in the depths of social reality and finding its resolution in the course of social development.

Then, arriving at the reproach that the Russian Social-Democrats had no program, Georgii Valentinovich picked up the program of the "Emancipation of Labor Group" which lay before him, placed it against his chest, and holding it with both hands, turned to the audience with the words: "Here is our program! Here it is! You just have to learn to read it carefully." The audience froze for an instant and then broke into stormy applause which lasted, I think, for about five minutes. The audience sensed that the program on Plekhanov's chest was part of his soul, and that the author was prepared to go to Golgotha in defense of this program. The audience felt this and gave their feeling strong and vivid expression. G. V. stood on the stage, slightly agitated and pale. R., irritated by his defeat, shouted to the entire hall: "Where are my boots?" To the accompaniment of friendly laughter he evidently had decided to flee from the field of battle. But Zh., the other opponent, was obviously captivated by the beauty and majesty of the moment and looked admiringly at the speaker. The inspired features of his face and the exalted gaze that he directed at Plekhanov spoke clearly about this.

Thus, what I am sure was a memorable gathering for all ended in genuine triumph.

While listening to Georgii Valentinovich in such a setting, it sometimes seemed strange and shameful that the cunning fates of Russian history had allotted to such a great man and classical orator such a limited arena for oral propaganda and agitation as the Russian colony in Switzerland.

The Swiss poet, Spitteler, has a powerful and beautiful poem in which the poet depicts an eagle which has accidentally fallen into a chicken coop. Finding himself in the chicken coop, the eagle tries to get used to his new surroundings but can't stand it. The tsar of feathered creatures bides his time, flaps his powerful wings and flies aloft into the heavenly sphere where, in the words of our poet, besides the eagle, only the wind soars.

That is how spiritual aristocrats and individualists solve the problem of the life of a great personality.

The founder of Russian Social-Democracy looked at this problem in another way. At our³ last meeting with Georgii Valentinovich on the 7th of January (Old Style) of last year, the late G. V. said, among other things, in a discussion with us about philosophy and religion, that as a child of about six or seven, he came to the conclusion that it must be extraordinarily boring for God. After all God was one being, and completely alone, while every muzhik was happy, since there are many people in the village, many more than even on a great estate.

It was then, and in that original manner, that the beginnings of democratic thought were born in the mind of the thinker and revolutionary.

An eagle when it comes to his rich endowment, but a democrat to the marrow of his bones, Georgii Valentinovich completely failed to notice the sharp contrast between the caliber of his personality and the narrow arena of his oral activity as an agitator.

And it is good that he did not notice.

For his work as an agitator in the Russian colonies abroad had a great historical significance that does not yield to precise evaluation.

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³ The conversation took place in the French hospital on Vasiliev Island, in the ward of my late sister, I. I. There were three of us, Georgii Valentinovich, Ida Isaakovna and myself.