



Plekhanov's Marxism

Review of G. V. Plekhanov, *In Defence of Materialism*

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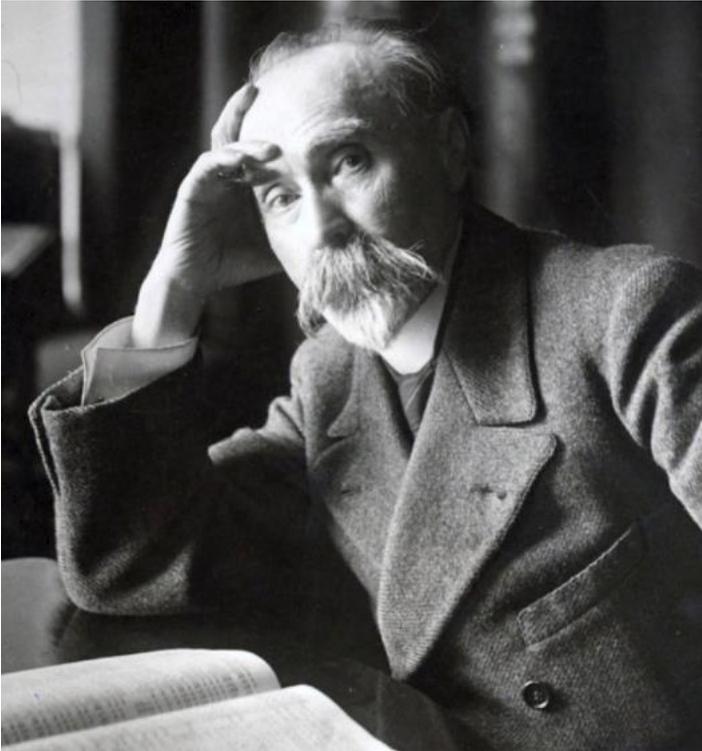
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Review of G. V. Plekhanov, *In Defence of Materialism: The Development of the Monist View of History* (London, 1947: Lawrence & Wishart), trans. Andrew Rothstein, *Slavonic Review* 28 (1949–50), no. 70 (November 1949), 257–62; letters, no. 71 (April 1950), 604–5, 607–10



G. V. Plekhanov, 1917

GEORGY VALENTINOVICH PLEKHANOV was the founder of the Russian Social Democratic Party, and the most influential figure in its history. He found his true faith relatively early in life, when he was converted from populism to Marxism; and thereafter

developed a capacity for applying it to both theory and practice in a manner which set him off from other European socialists (not to speak of the Russians) as a bold, independent and exact-minded thinker.

He was a man of acute, fastidious and fearless intellect, and uncompromising and often violent moral feeling; he was remarkably well read, even for a Russian doctrinaire, and possessed a disciplined mind and great talent as a writer. Both in the quality of his temperament and in the position which he [258] occupied, whether vis-à-vis his countrymen or vis-à-vis left-wing movements in Western Europe, he was the only true heir of Alexander Herzen.

These unique gifts Plekhanov combined with sanity, a clear head, a sense of proportion, and an exceptional capacity for organisation. It is to him, more than to his friends Axelrod and Vera Zasulich, that Russian Marxism as an organised movement owes its existence. His works, and his influence (as his disciple Lenin in effect acknowledged), became, to a degree scarcely smaller than those of Marx and Engels themselves, the foundations upon which Russian socialism was built. At all the Party Congresses he was the unquestioned intellectual authority, the formidable, remorseless, venerated 'professor', whose mordant tongue and air of disdainful superiority his associates, even the indomitable Trotsky (whom he disliked), seemed to find somewhat disconcerting, and even a little frightening.

Plekhanov made his choice when he was in his twenties, and his intellectual output, which was considerable, remained (until almost the end, when he composed a noble monument of historical scholarship) directed to one single, central, all-absorbing purpose: the inculcation of the Marxist method of theory and action, equally of understanding and making history, among the growing body of Russian socialist intellectuals and industrial workers who composed that revolutionary force which, Plekhanov was convinced, was the revolutionary instrument specially chosen by history for the overthrow of the Old World and the building of the New.

A thesis endlessly repeated is apt to produce tedium in the audience, however true, profound and important its message may be; and indeed the readers of Lenin's collected works – not to speak of those of his successors – may be excused if they sometimes nod to the dull ticking of the monotonously rehearsed doctrine. Plekhanov, schoolmaster as he was, never bored his audience, because of the variety and brilliance in style, the endless forms which his ironical imagination took, the ease and elegance of his luminous prose, but above all because of the breadth of his interests and the arresting quality of his ideas. His historical treatises, polemical as their purpose for the most part was (intended as they were to act at once as primers, pamphlets and revolutionary manifestos), are striking examples of these very rare and attractive qualities. His metier was the relating of the growth of social institutions to the development of ideas; this interplay he analysed by using the Marxist canons of the 'historical dialectic' in a very fresh and comparatively untried fashion, achieving thereby the beginnings of that new method of historical analysis which Marx and in particular Engels had promised but not fully possessed.

The volume under review is the earliest and one of the most spirited examples of the new invention in action. Like all Plekhanov's studies of his favourite thinkers, it is animated by the thesis that, whatever their errors, they were men who had fought in a cause dear to the author; [259] and his accounts of their lives and opinions are held together and given direction by a unifying pattern of thought and feeling which more scholarly, detached, carefully balanced studies sometimes conspicuously lack. To Plekhanov, such writers as Helvétius and Holbach, Saint-Simon and Fourier, Thierry and Mignet were not merely sociologists or historians of genius, but also heroes and martyrs in the war for truth and freedom – the war of whose final outcome he had, until the very end of his life, not the slightest doubt. These great and noble pioneers were doubtless excessively one-sided, often profoundly mistaken, sometimes blind to issues of primary importance, and above all without the benefit of either Hegel

(whom Plekhanov worshipped, for all his regrettable spiritualism) or – what was worse – of Marx, and were thus ‘pre-scientific’ and naive. Yet they were spreaders of light, at times flickering and intermittent, but nevertheless light, in the far greater darkness of their times: without them the great final revelation might have been far longer delayed.

Plekhanov's chapters on them possess a sharp and discriminating intellectual enthusiasm, and a triumphant sense of the unconquerable powers of reason, once it is unleashed, which is itself reminiscent of the heroes celebrated in them – the youthful Herzen, and beyond him the Encyclopedists themselves. Because, for all its learning and reverence for German scholarship, Plekhanov's writing possessed the first-hand, non-derivative quality of an innovator of the first order, it had a profoundly liberating influence on two generations of Russian intellectuals: to them it offered a new historical vista – the familiar facts boldly re-interpreted and thereby transformed – and so came close to giving them a new awareness of the revolution in which they were involved, as Hegel had once done for the Germans, and Michelet or the positivists for the French; and thereby opened a window into what seemed a new moral and intellectual universe.

Belinsky and Chernyshevsky had of course done something of this, far less systematically, for an earlier generation of Russians: by violently stirring the moral emotions they had moved young men to reform or revolution in the name of freshly discovered truths, of the new, movingly but often very haphazardly and crudely formulated, ‘materialistic’ sociological principles. The generous enthusiasm of the 1860s and 1870s had since that day been crushed effectively by the police; the *révolté* young men had been broken, scattered, and above all dispirited by the lack of response, and indeed by suspicion and open hostility, on the part of the ‘uncorrupt’ peasant masses – the ‘elemental forces’ to which they had gone to draw inspiration and power with which to build the new life. Plekhanov himself had obtained his training as a revolutionary among these passionate radicals, whose extreme wing consisted of those idealistic anarchists and terrorists whose

blindness to the 'objective' social and economic factors had finally forced him to search for the light in a new direction. His conversion came at a moment of acute depression in the left-wing camp, and many of its survivors found [260] unexpected support in the structure of his all-embracing, systematic, heavily fortified Marxist fortress, which offered them the double advantage of being at once a more formidable bulwark than the ramshackle defences of earlier radicalism, and of exposing its adherents to less immediate peril. In addition to a heavily theoretical, thoroughly academic air, it also advocated the education of the masses as the foundation for all further construction – almost gradualist 'penetration' in preference to individual terrorism – pointing out (to the satisfaction of respectable persons) the futility and waste brought about by the bomb and the dagger of the old-fashioned romantic, utopian, un-class-conscious, 'idealistic' assassin.

The clumsy title under which the treatise translated by Mr Rothstein was published was given it deliberately in order to avoid the attentions of the Russian censorship; as the translator relates in his preface, this ruse succeeded, and it duly became one of the basic texts of revolutionary Marxism in Russia. The work is divided into several sections. It begins with a cursory but vivid sketch of the early French materialists, followed by their successors, the utopian socialists and Saint-Simonian social historians; after this it gets into its stride and begins to wield the powerful weapons forged by Marx and Engels to destroy the 'populist delusions' of such contemporary publicists as Mikhailovsky and 'V.V.' (Vorontsov). The argument is not always either conspicuously fair or logically flawless, but it advances with immense verve and is a splendid piece of derisive pamphleteering. Mikhailovsky clearly had some ground for just indignation, since the validity of some of his criticisms of Marxism and historical materialism cannot be wholly concealed even in the brilliant caricatures of Plekhanov.

Nevertheless, despite these intrinsic merits, some kind of historical introduction is needed to throw light for the English-speaking public upon the context, the historical atmosphere, the opponents against whom it was directed and the subsequent

history of its influence. Mr Rothstein has unfortunately provided something rather different from this. His introduction is a faithful reproduction of the present Soviet party line: and according to this line there are two Plekhanovs – the good Plekhanov who rescued the left-wing Russian intelligentsia from the morass of populist and Bakuninist sentimentality and error, and was its wise and intrepid leader until the rise of Lenin, of whom he was the forerunner and Baptist; and the ‘other’ Plekhanov, who, after Lenin’s appearance abroad, rapidly loses his virtue. The fatal year 1903 proves his undoing; thenceforth he deviates and errs and turns into a false prophet in direct proportion as he fails to see the light to which Lenin points. From time to time what Mr Rothstein likes to call the ‘old’ Plekhanov – Dr Jekyll – reasserts himself: this, however, occurs only on those rare occasions when he and Lenin find themselves cooperating against some common foe; more often he turns out to be a sorry travesty of his former brave and brilliant self.

[261] Only on the assumption that Lenin was never wrong, and that nothing he did or wished to do was ever bad or even short-sighted, does this theory of the two Plekhanovs become intelligible. Unless the rigid yardstick of pure Bolshevik orthodoxy, as provided by the *Shorter History of the Communist Party*,¹ is applied to Plekhanov’s highly individual and, for all its doctrinaire quality, essentially humane and civilised thought, the lapses from grace, which Mr Rothstein records with a certain sadness, are not perceptible. There is no noticeable inconsistency in Plekhanov’s position between 1903 and 1910, or, for that matter, in 1917. Mr Rothstein, following his masters, implies that the principal difference between Plekhanov and Lenin was that the former believed in cooperation with liberals, whereas the latter stressed the necessity of alliance with the peasants.

Plekhanov did, of course, believe in a greater degree of collaboration with the radical liberals of the left, whom he

¹ [*History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (1938).]

fundamentally liked no more than did Lenin, than did the Leninites, but in 1903–4 that was not the central issue. Mr Rothstein need only look at the documents of the party, or at the very fair and detailed, if sometimes almost too self-consciously pro-Bolshevik, summary of them provided by the late Theodore Dan, to see that the issue was in the first place strategic, organisational, and to a large degree a matter of differing temperaments – an issue between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ methods of party tactics and party organisation – and not, at least consciously, a disagreement either on ideology or on the analysis of and prediction of events; nor did it turn mainly upon the peasant question, however great the political insight which Lenin, as compared to his rivals, in fact displayed on that occasion.

The differences which divided Plekhanov from Lenin and other Bolsheviks were indeed deeply irreconcilable, and sometimes doctrinal, but there was at least one further reason, not altogether surprisingly omitted by Mr Rothstein. Plekhanov's moral values, his code of personal behaviour, as opposed to his political and social and economic beliefs, were those of the great nineteenth-century champions of human freedom – Michelet, Mazzini, Herzen, Chernyshevsky – and Lenin's were not. For all his sharp phrases at the Congress of 1903, and his, at times, harsh or sardonic moods, Plekhanov detested brutality and cynicism, however disinterested, ‘realistic’ or fearless.

Two luminaries can evidently not shine long together in one firmament, particularly if the quality and source of their light is so profoundly dissimilar: Plekhanov derived from Belinsky, Herzen and the humane and civilised European radicals, Lenin from Marx, Zhelyabov, Chernyshevsky – and, perhaps, Boris Godunov. Lenin, who was, above all, not a jealous or mean-minded man, always, even at the height of their bitter quarrels, gave Plekhanov (just as he gave Martov) something like his due. Nevertheless, Lenin's victory made a just assessment of his master, particularly of his last phase, something politically impossible in his native country, and for historical reasons the validity of which Mr Rothstein appears to accept.

[262] So much for Mr Rothstein's own commentary. As for his translation, it is a valuable contribution to the dissemination of knowledge. It is very competent, though somewhat flat in style, which is more devastating to a sensitive and brilliant writer like Plekhanov with an acute sense of language than, for example, to the sledgehammer prose of Lenin. We get at fairly frequent intervals such typical translator's English as 'What a change, with God's help!' (p. 70); 'Amusing people!' (p. 71); '[no one], as they say, pricked up an ear' (p. 75). The English for 'proklyatyte voprosy' is scarcely 'damned questions', nor is 'theoretical property' the equivalent of 'property rights in the field of theory'.

There is little attempt at scholarship. A misquotation from Goethe is left uncorrected and unattributed; Chernyshevsky is described in a footnote as guilty of the charges brought against him by the tsarist police without mention of the almost conclusive evidence gathered by Soviet and pre-Soviet scholars to show that the police had forged their 'documentation'; so that the police are whitewashed because Chernyshevsky must be made to appear more 'activist' than he was. There are other and similar ironies of the changing party line. But these blemishes are not fatal to a work whose importance is in the first place that of a historical document. Cautiously, therefore, as the translator's comments should be treated by a reader still attracted to the ideal of 'objective' truth and scholarship, his translation does something to remedy that accident of language which has concealed much of the most arresting work of Russian thinkers from Western eyes.

Lenin won, and Plekhanov lost and knew that he had lost. One of his friends has recently told the story of how in the autumn of 1917, when Plekhanov was in Moscow after forty years' exile, he one day asked his old friend and comrade Vera Zasulich to accompany him on a walk on the Sparrow Hills. Presently they reached the very place from which they imagined that Herzen and Ogarev had once, on a famous occasion not long after the Decembrist rebellion, looked at Moscow stretched below them, and sworn their famous 'Hannibalic oath', dedicating their lives to the liberation of their countrymen. There the two old revolutionar-

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ies stood for a while, looked at Moscow, and wondered whether this was the freedom for which they had lived their own hard and single-minded lives. As Hegelians and Marxists, they were, no doubt, obliged to accept the verdict of history, however barbarous it might seem to them to be, not merely with stoicism, but with understanding, and consequently rational approval. They had not themselves been too kind to the failures and disillusion, the victims and casualties of earlier revolutionary movements; but this revolution – the *coup d'état* of 25 October – they could not bring themselves to bless. With their passing, the period during which revolutionary Marxism belonged to the tradition of European enlightenment came to an end.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

From Andrew Rothstein: no. 71 (April 1950), 604–5

G. V. Plekhanov evidently possesses for Mr Berlin all that power of romantic inspiration which Marxists who desert the revolutionary camp usually present to those who, in their wishes at least, have buried the Marxist cause; and I have no inclination to interfere in his dithyrambs or disturb his illusions. Moreover, I accept in all humility his strictures on my translation of *In Defence of Materialism*; although it is not very clear what the 'almost conclusive evidence' of police forgeries has to do with the historically established fact that Chernyshevsky was building an illegal revolutionary organisation.

I am even ready to forgive his assertion that Plekhanov was 'the founder of the Russian Social Democratic Party' – although not even the Menshevik writers he quotes (e.g. Dan, *Proiskhozhdenie bol'shevizma*, or Martov's chapters in the *Granat Istoria Rossii v XIX veke*), for all their tributes to Plekhanov's pioneering work in popularising Marxism, hint at such a defiance of historical facts.

But Mr Berlin complains of my introduction. He talks of my 'masters' and my 'faithful reproduction of the present Soviet party line' on Plekhanov's differences with Lenin. He airily advises me to 'look at the documents of the Party'. I change masters for the time being, and follow his advice. What do I find?

First and in general, that my account of Plekhanov's 'lapses from grace', i.e. of his siding in 1904–8 with the Menshevik policy of support for the liberal bourgeoisie, and of his ridiculing the alternative policy of fighting for the 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry', coincides not merely with the *History of the Communist [605] Party*, but also with Plekhanov's own writings of the period (volumes XIII and XV of his *Collected Works*).

Secondly and particularly, that while at the moment of Plekhanov's break with Lenin (November 1903) the issue *seemed* to be one of organisation, and of what Mr. Berlin calls 'differing temperaments' – just as the break between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks had seemed at the party congress a few months before – in a very short time it turned out that behind questions of organisation (as always in politics) lay profound theoretical differences. These differences were already hinted at by Plekhanov himself in January 1904 (*A Sad Misunderstanding*) and May 1904 (*Centralism or Bonapartism*); and a full admission of this, 'not altogether surprisingly omitted' by Mr Berlin, was made by Plekhanov as early as July–August 1904 (*The Working Class and the Social-Democratic Intelligentsia*).

Thirdly, that by November 1905 it was quite clear – again on the evidence of Plekhanov himself (e.g. no. 3 of *The Diary of a Social-Democrat*) – that, while formally acknowledging the revolutionary possibilities of the Russian peasantry, Plekhanov insisted that for immediate practical politics the working class must support the bourgeoisie (*not* the 'radical Liberals of the left' as Mr Berlin asserts). He made clear that in his view the revolutionary role of the Russian peasantry would only begin *after* the revolutionary function of the bourgeoisie – still to come in the form of a revolutionary democratic government of the capitalists – was over.

Fourthly, the alternative to which Lenin was pointing – alliance with the peasantry for a rising against tsardom and against the bourgeoisie, to establish the 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship' of the common people – Plekhanov was already calling 'betrayal of the proletariat' (April 1905), 'bourgeois-proletarian dictatorship' and 'Blanquism' (August 1905), 'irresponsible chatter about insurrection' (November 1905).

That was all I said myself of Plekhanov at this time, in my introduction. And his own former Menshevik associates have admitted no less – that behind 'differing temperaments' were differing politics (e.g. Volfson, *Plekhanov*, 1924, pp. 110–13, or Gorev, *The First Russian Marxist*, G. V. *Plekhanov*, 1923, pp. 41–5).

It seems unfortunate that Mr Berlin, who is so concerned for scholarship, does not appear to have looked up these elementary facts before instructing me in the differences between Plekhanov and Lenin.

From IB: no. 71 (April 1950), 607–10

Mr Rothstein clings to his misstatements with a most regrettable persistence, and it seems best to try to dispose of them in his own order, here and now.

1. The Chernyshevsky case. On p. 67 of his book Mr Rothstein observes that the eminent publicist was arrested 'while actively engaged in forming a secret organisation aimed at armed insurrection', and this, he adds in his letter, is a 'historically established fact'. While there is some evidence to suggest that Chernyshevsky was in touch with, and sympathetic to, individual members of underground organisations, I know of no evidence for holding that he was himself engaged in 'building a revolutionary organisation'. This was precisely the charge of the tsarist police supported by forgeries and later exposed by Lemke and other socialist scholars. I can only conclude that Mr Rothstein must **[608]** have access to unpublished data for the opposite conclusion. Not even the *Shorter History of the Communist Party* goes as far as he.

2. The causes of Plekhanov's break with Lenin. On this Mr Rothstein is quite explicit and certainly wrong. In his introduction (p. 23) he writes 'Plekhanov's errors of 1903–5 [...] centred round his refusal to accept Lenin's conception of the Russian proletariat as ally of the peasantry and leader of the people in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, and round his own counter-conception that only the bourgeoisie could play that part'. And he makes this point again elsewhere (p. 13, lines 18–24, and p. 13, *sub fin.*), in which he correctly ascribes to Plekhanov the social democratic view whereby 'the coming Russian revolution was bourgeois in character [...] led by the bourgeoisie'.

The unwary reader would assume from Mr Rothstein's account that Lenin believed the opposite of this, and that his somewhat obscure formula of 'bourgeois-democratic revolution' was

opposed to alliance with the bourgeoisie, or at any rate left the bourgeoisie out. But it was Lenin who wrote on 18/31 January 1905 (*Vpered* no. 4), 'We Social Democrats can and must march independently from the revolutionaries of bourgeois democracy [...]. *But we must go arm in arm with them* when the rising occurs [...], when we attack the Bastille of the accursed enemy of the entire Russian people' (my italics), and in *Two Tactics* (1905) he observes, 'only the most complete ignoramuses can disregard the bourgeois character of the democratic upheaval which is occurring; only the most naive optimists can fail to remember how little the mass of the workers still know about the purposes of socialism and the methods of its realisation [...]; whoever wishes to move towards socialism along a road other than that of political democracy must inevitably arrive at absurd and reactionary conclusions both economic and political'.

Of course there were profound differences in general outlook and of tactics between Lenin and Plekhanov, of which the split over the organisational question in 1903 was merely the climax. There is a strong strain of 'direct action' Blanquism in *Who the 'Friends of the People' Are*, which Plekhanov condemned as early as 1901 in a letter to Axelrod (cf. Plekhanov's letter to Vera Zasulich in the correspondence of Plekhanov and Axelrod, vol. 2. p. 167, Russian text). Of course I should not deny that Plekhanov distrusted the peasantry more than Lenin, despite the pro-peasant Menshevik resolution at the Geneva Congress, 1905 (*Iskra* no. 100, supplement), which advocated forcible seizure of the land and demanded that the 'anti-revolutionary and anti-proletarian character of bourgeois democracy of all shades' be fully explained to the workers; nor is Menshevik support at this Congress of the control by local committees of peasants, as against the Bolshevik demand for nationalisation of the land, a move against, or away from, the peasant masses.

But the crucial point is that the notion of the inevitable bourgeois stage before the final seizure of power by the proletariat (or the proletariat in combination with the poorer peasants) is a

social democratic [609] dogma, defended by Plekhanov against Marx himself and shared alike by Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

Two Tactics is quite unequivocal about this: 'the democratic revolution in Russia will not weaken, but will strengthen, the domination of the bourgeoisie'. No doubt Lenin said many things inconsistent with the above at this and other times; but then the consistent Lenin is a figment of the 1930s and 1940s. There is no evidence that Lenin abandoned this particular position or its corollary – that the first revolution must be bourgeois in character and establish a democratic republic – before his sudden volte-face in 1917 (vide Lenin's sharp attacks on his own Bolshevik left in 1915–16). Mr Rothstein maintains in his letter that Lenin differed from Plekhanov in wanting a proletarian–peasant rising against the bourgeoisie in 1903–5, which is not compatible with Lenin's disbelief in an anti-bourgeois dictatorship until 1917, and his attacks on Trotsky and Parvus, who preached it, precisely for this glaring heresy against Marxist orthodoxy. While it is true that Plekhanov sided with Lenin on the organisational question at the 1903 Congress, the alliance did not last long, because, left face to face with Lenin, Plekhanov became more and more nervous of Lenin's obviously authoritarian leanings towards dictatorship by the party, which derived from Babeuf and Tkachev rather than Marx. The conflict was one between two conceptions of Russian Marxism, the democratic – 'soft' – theory held by Martov and Rosa Luxemburg, and Lenin's Jacobin (or Communard) belief in the suppression of dissidents by the nucleus of professional revolutionaries, which had little in common with Western social democracy. Mr Rothstein deplors Plekhanov's condemnation of the Moscow rising in 1905, although its benefits from the point of view of Russian socialism are not clear; but even if Plekhanov was wrong in this, it was a difference about strategy and not about the peasants versus the bourgeoisie.

Mr Rothstein's thesis, which has no application to his chosen date of 1903–5, is perhaps more plausible after 1907 when Plekhanov certainly quarrelled with Lenin and wanted his followers to vote for the Kadet list; and thereafter the differences between

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the two men did include – although not very prominently – a difference of attitude to the peasants, only thinly disguised by the manifestos of the two factions of the Russian Social Democratic Party. After this date Lenin's stress on an alliance with the peasants does crop up, but it is incomparably less important than the fundamental difference of conception of the duties and purposes of socialists and revolutionaries which emerged so dramatically in 1917. Plekhanov's Menshevik biographers, cited by Mr Rothstein, reasonably say that behind 'differing temperaments there were differing politics', and this somewhat obvious point, triumphantly advanced by Mr Rothstein, is one on which in my review I laid if anything too much importance. But what has this to do with the point under discussion? Radical differences, of course, there were, but to reduce them to a difference of [610] attitude, in 1903–5, (*a*) towards the peasants and (*b*) towards the part to be played by the bourgeoisie, when (*a*) was at most one among many points of difference, and that only at a later date, and (*b*) did not, after Lenin's early pre-Marxist writings, emerge explicitly until 1917 – that really does seem to me to be an extraordinary declaration in an uncensored publication in 1950. I may have misjudged Mr Rothstein's motives; but not, I fear, the reliability of his conclusions.

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