CHAPTER 3

THE SHIFT EASTWARD:
Russian Marxism and the Prerevolutionary Debates

Prerevolutionary Russia

It is one of history's ironies that the world's first proletarian revolution took place in a country in which 80 percent of the population were peasants. Tsarist Russia was extremely backward. The vast geographical expanse, the harsh climate, the poor distribution of mineral resources, the low level of development of science and technology, the slow pace of urbanization, the degree of control by foreign capital would seem to favor neither the development of advanced forms of production and social relations, nor the development of advanced ideas. What development did take place was extremely uneven, resulting in the simultaneous existence of tribal, feudal, capitalist and socialist elements side by side. It was a land of sharp contrasts in which could be found the extremes of the most radical ideas and the most primitive superstitions. There was the enlightened intelligentsia, under the influence of western ideas and reasonably affluent, and there was the dark mass of the Russian peasantry, plunged in grinding poverty and dark illiteracy. Above it all was the autocracy, its repressive apparatus so severe and far-reaching as to bring, not only violent uprisings among the peasantry, but the massive alienation of the intelligentsia. Its rule was such as to leave no middle ground between servility and rebellion.

The character of the Russian intelligentsia was markedly different from its western counterparts. Russia had been untouched by scholasticism, by the
Renaissance, by the Reformation. Its Enlightenment came late and took its own distinctive form. It had never been rent by the dualisms that came with the decline of the medieval synthesis and the ascendency of capitalism, protestantism and modern science. It has not been torn by the wave of scepticism and relativism that had so tempered Western European intellectual life. The Russians were inclined to passionate monism, but they were not notorious for logical rigor.

Throughout the nineteenth century, all intellectual debate centered around the question: for or against the west. As the twentieth century approached, there emerged a new question, one of class. The question became: for the old aristocracy and the new bourgeoisie, or for the old peasantry and the new proletariat. The clash over the new question reopened and intensified debate over the older question in a new setting. This debate brought some of the narodniks, the more radical Slavophils, advocates of a kind of peasant anarchism, to reconsider their position. Leading the way, the young narodnik Georgi Plekhanov became a Marxist. As the first Russian to have embraced Marxism as an integral and all-embracing world view, Plekhanov is called the father of Russian Marxism. Those who came after all acknowledged themselves to be pupils of Plekhanov.

The Character of Russian Marxism

Russian Marxism merged within itself the radicalism of the Russian revolutionary tradition with the respect for reason and science characteristic of the westernizing intelligentsia. In so doing, it did have impressive predecessors—Belinsky, Herzen, and Chernyshevsky were among the great nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary thinkers charting such a path.

In 1883, Plekhanov and others formed the Society for the Emancipation of Labour, devoted to bringing Marxist ideas to bear on the Russian situation. Among those who came to join it was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, who became known to the world as Lenin. For the most part, their activity was confined to writing and to the organization of study circles. Lenin's group, however, was involved in some degree of active work among the working class. The society's members were faced with isolation, subterranean existence, harrowing poverty, arrest, and exile, but they did introduce Marxism to Russia.

In the 1890s, Marxism began to achieve a considerable degree of influence among the working class and intelligentsia. It became, in fact, as Plekhanov later said, "the vogue at every St. Petersburg chancery." Because tsarist Russia was a society of such extremes, Marxism came to take the place of liberalism for the bourgeois intelligentsia. In this, as both Plekhanov and Lenin saw the situation, there were both advantages and dangers for the working class. On the one hand, they were valuable allies and in fact the bearers of socialist ideology to the ranks of the proletariat, which could only generate of itself a trade unionist and economist consciousness at this time. Lenin pointed out that Marxism was brought to the proletariat from the outside by the most progressive elements of the bourgeois intelligentsia, including such people as Marx and Engels and, of course, Lenin himself. On the other hand, because of the absence of liberalism, Marxism appealed to people who, in terms of social status, mentality, or moral qualities, did not in fact identify with the proletariat and its liberation and who were inclined to adapt Marxism to the tastes and requirements of the bourgeoisie. According to this analysis, these were only "temporary Marxists" and were seeking the liberal alternative within Marxism itself. This was the social basis of the Russian variants of German revisionism.

Because leading theoreticians of Russian Marxism were in exile in Western and Central Europe and because the Russian intelligentsia always turned an acute ear to western trends anyway, Russian Marxists were very much involved in the wide-ranging debate that was spreading through the International. It was, however, not only foreign trends to which Russian Marxists were addressing themselves, but trends within their own ranks. The Russians were extremely serious about philosophy, and coming from a tradition not shaped by protestantism and Kantianism, they were inclined to believe it could be set apart in a separate sphere of its own or to think it was not politically important. Even those who came forward with epistemological or ontological alternatives to dialectical materialism were not so prone to argue that Marxism was philosophically neutral or that its politics could be combined with numerous alternative epistemologies. Some, directly under the influence of German neo-Kantianism and revisionism, did so, but the dominant tendency was to claim that a different philosophical standpoint was more in harmony with Marxist political strategy.

At any rate, Russian Marxism, from the very moment of its inception, became thickly embroiled in philosophical debate. The dominant stream, the dialectical materialists, as they began to call themselves, had various opponents to be taken on.  

There is some dispute over whether it was Plekhanov or Dietzgen who was first to introduce the term "dialectical materialism." It has been customary to credit Plekhanov with it, though Adam Buick (Realisc/Philosophy, 10, Spring 1975) has claimed that it was Dietzgen. Jonathan Ree, in an unpublished manuscript entitled Proletarian Philosophers seems to have established that it was Plekhanov after all. Whatever the facts are, it is certainly true that it was Plekhanov who brought the term into general use in the movement as the designation of the Marxist position in philosophy.
The “Legal Marxists”

The first round of the battle was against the critics: P.B. Struve, N.A. Berdyaev, M.I. Tugan-Baranovsky, S.N. Bulgakov, and S.I. Frank. They are most often referred to as “legal Marxists,” as they lived and wrote under their own names and did not participate in underground activity, unlike those who lived hunted lives under pseudonyms or were sent into exile. The “legal Marxists” in some respects anticipated Bernsteinian revisionism and in others reflected it. Politically, they were in favor of evolutionary socialism, the gradual achievement of reform within the existing institutions. They went so far in their insistence on the necessity of the capitalist stage of development as to regard it as an end in itself, with the socialist movement as the means to achieve it, rather than the other way round. Struve, like Bernstein, influenced by the Fabians, enjoined Russian social democrats not to concern themselves with unrealistic projects of “heaven-storming” but instead to “learn in the school of capitalism.”

Like their foreign counterparts, the “legal Marxists” sought to disengage Marxist social theory (such as remained of it after their revisions in that sphere) from its philosophical foundations. They too argued that historical materialism could be reconciled with neo-Kantianism or positivism or other possible alternatives as well. For themselves, they tended to neo-Kantianism, believing that Marxism as a scientific determinist account of history did not encompass the sphere of ethical principles and that these must be derived from other sources. Both Struve and Berdyaev put heavy emphasis on the need for the sort of ontological foundation for values that led them eventually to the reality of the Absolute as a grounding for absolute values. Even during their period of active involvement in the social democratic movement, they were Marxists with so many reservations as to make their self-identification as Marxists highly questionable. They soon followed their line of thinking to its logical conclusion and abandoned the field, ceasing to consider themselves Marxists at all.

This coincided with the rise of a genuine liberal movement in Russia and the falling away of this group from Marxism reflected the emergence of a liberal alternative to Marxism within the bourgeois intelligentsia. Years later, Lenin summed up their place in the movement’s history: “They were bourgeois democrats for whom the breach with narodism meant a transition from petty bourgeois (or peasant) socialism, not to proletarian socialism, as in our case, but to bourgeois liberalism.”

As they were essentially liberals and liberals everywhere were abandoning materialism, this group too believed that scientific optimism, faith in progress, and all forms of naturalism, had had their day and that idealism was on the march everywhere. Being Russian, they took the process to a more extreme stage than their opposite numbers in the west. Struve, Berdyaev, Bulgakov, and Frank all found their way back to Christianity. This transition was marked in 1903 by the publication of Problems of Idealism, in which these authors and others explained the reasoning behind their evolution from Marxism to idealism. It was a concerted attack on atheism, materialism, determinism, evolutionism, rationalism, and collectivism, in short, on all the hitherto accepted liberal values, as symptoms of intellectual impoverishment. They condemned Marxism for moral nihilism and contempt of personality, for sacrifice of the individual to the collective, for sacrifice of the present to the future. All the essays were pervaded by an intense personalism and longing for transcendence. The intrinsic value of human personality and the absolute validity of moral norms required, for them, the postulation of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. They insisted that materialism was incompatible with morality, that laws of nature and history were incompatible with the freedom of the individual. They even invoked Nietzsche in associating socialism with mediocrity and the values of the herd. Berdyaev, who became the best known in later years, continued for many years to engage in criticism of Marxism, both of its philosophy and of its politics and constantly reiterated the contention that dialectical materialism was an inherently contradictory philosophy based on absolutely irreconcilable elements: “Dialectics, which stands for complexity, and materialism, which results in a narrow one-sidedness of view, are as mutually repellant as water and oil.” Berdyaev was a powerful and brilliant writer and his later works often were remarkable for powerful insights into the Russian context of Soviet Marxism.

Marxists criticized this group for having turned their back on the oppressed in their glorification of egozentrum and in their adherence to religion, which they saw as an instrument of oppression. The foremost critic against this group was Lyubov Axelrod, who wrote under the pseudonym “Orthodox.” A pupil of Plekhanov’s while in exile, she held a Swiss doctorate in philosophy, was an active social democrat, and returned to Russia in 1906. She stressed the continuity between the natural sciences and human history and defended materialism against this reversion to idealism on the part of those who had previously stood with them. She defended determinism, both natural and historical, against the neo-Kantians, particularly Stammel who had objected that it was inconsistent to believe in both historical inevitability and revolutionary will. For Axelrod, this contention only reflected the fear of the future characteristic of a class that history had doomed to destruction.

The Economists

Another trend the Marxists needed to take on was economism, which began gaining ground with the spread of a labor movement in Russia. This was the
belief that the working class should confine itself to economic struggle and leave political (and of course scientific and philosophical) matters to the liberals. The economists believed that revolution would come spontaneously and inevitably (though in an ever more receding future) and they disputed the need for the formation of an independent working-class party.

The Bolshevik-Menshevik Split

Despite the controversy, an independent working-class party was formed. In 1899, a congress was held in Minsk for the purpose of launching a Russian Social Democratic Party, but it was unsuccessful and the small number of delegates were arrested soon after. However, in 1900, the weekly Iskra began publication, along with the theoretical journal Zarya, under Plekhanov, Lenin, and others. These organs were used to lay the foundations for a proletarian party. The first years of the century saw a massive strike wave, led mostly by Marxists, but there was as yet no organized party to provide overall coordination of this militancy. In 1903, a party congress began in a rat-infested flour mill in Brussels surrounded by Russian and Belgian detectives. After moving the congress to London, a bitter debate broke out over the nature of the party, with Martov advocating a loose mass organization and Lenin fighting for a tightly knit, disciplined, centralist party. When it came to the vote for the central committee and editorial board of Iskra, Lenin and his supporters were in the majority, becoming known as bolsheviks. The minority were called mensheviks. The mensheviks foresaw a long period of capitalist development and a bourgeois democratic revolution led by the bourgeoisie; their immediate goal was to form a legal party sharing power in a liberal government. The bolsheviks, however, believed that it would be possible to proceed directly from a bourgeoisie to a proletarian revolution and that even the democratic stage must be led by the working class in alliance with the peasantry. Their goal was revolutionary insurrection and to achieve it, both legal and illegal forms of work were deemed necessary. The bolsheviks were unable to maintain the edge they had secured at the congress, as the mensheviks succeeded in winning over Plekhanov and a few others and gained control of the central committee and Iskra. The bolsheviks split away and formed their own party, with its own central committee and paper. The mensheviks were supported by most parties of the Second International. Even Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg came out against Lenin. This was the situation on the eve of the revolution of 1905; in effect, two distinct social democratic parties with two distinct policies, each claiming to be the leadership of the working class.

The Revolution of 1905

Nobody planned the revolution of 1905. Out of the massive discontent following the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, in a period of severe economic depression, and coinciding with a new wave of strikes, came the spontaneous revolt. On "Blood Sunday" a vast procession of workers, who had marched to the Winter Palace to present a petition to the tsar, was fired on by the troops. The massacre was followed by riots, street fighting and further strikes in city after city, town after town. The peasants also arose burning the houses and seizing the lands of their masters. The sailors of the battleship Potemkin mutinied. During the October general strike in St. Petersburg, the soviets sprang up and these councils of workers' representatives acted as the effective authorities in those towns where they became the focus of revolutionary activity. Most members of the soviets were arrested, but certain concessions were won from the tsar. The October Manifesto provided for the convening of a constituent assembly, the Duma. In December, there was a final armed uprising from Finland to the Ukraine. The Moscow Soviet controlled the city for nine days, but the tsarist government was still strong enough to crush these revolts and it did. Thousands upon thousands were killed in fighting, executed, imprisoned, or exiled. Punitive expeditions scourged the country. Troops burned workers' quarters wholesale, watched babies go up in flames, dragged the wounded from the ambulances. The tide had turned. The autocracy survived.

The years following were years of reaction. It was a time of the most severe repression, a veritable reign of terror. Even members of the Duma were arrested and imprisoned. It was a period of extreme depression, despair, and intellectual confusion, even within the ranks of social democracy. Plekhanov commented: "We are passing through a period of unprecedentened intellectual decline." Lenin remarked on how the disintegration, the disunity, and the vacillation reflecting the abrupt change in the conditions of social life had brought about a serious and profound internal crisis in Marxism, bringing those who previously had assimilated Marxism in "an extremely one-sided and mutilated fashion to revise the very theoretical foundations of Marxism." The bolsheviks and mensheviks held conflicting interpretations of the 1905 revolution and of the political strategy flowing from it as a consequence.

Russian Marxism and the Philosophy of Science

But this was not the only area of debate. There emerged at this time a full-scale controversy in the area of philosophy of science, crossing the bolshevik-menshevik divide. There were a number of factors at work in bringing conflicting philosophical tendencies into play. One was the fact that the trend sweeping through the European intelligentsia early in the century was one of the antimaterialist reaction. The mood was against scientific rationalism and
historical optimism. There was a resurgence of idealism and many varieties of mysticism. This had already touched the Russian intelligentsia, as was demonstrated in the defection of the legal Marxists from the ranks of Marxism and their conversion to out-and-out idealism, which struck an intensely anti-scientific and anticolonvictivist note. The disillusionment following the defeat of the 1905 revolution did much to strengthen this mood and bring it to bear in sectors that had heretofore not felt the force of it. It is undoubtedly a pattern running through the history of ideas that periods of historical optimism give the upper hand to materialist currents of thought, whereas periods of historical pessimism give the edge to idealism. It was this mood that began to penetrate more pervasively into Russian social democracy reeling under defeat.

The Crisis in Physics

Another major factor coinciding with this to bring about a major debate in philosophy of science was the effect of new developments within the natural sciences themselves. The turn of the century saw a crisis in physics in which the fundamental concepts of classical physics were being subjected to the most searching reexamination. The new discoveries of radioactivity, of the electron, of the structural complexity of the atom, of the electromagnetic field, of transformations in mass effected by transformations in velocity, called into question established notions of time, space, motion, matter and energy.

As scientists penetrated ever more deeply into the level of the microcosm and discovered there new properties of matter, some were inclined to believe the very concept of matter discredited and to interpret the new revelations as a refutation of materialism. Such scientists as the French physicist Louis Houllevique declared “The atom dematerialises, matter disappears.” 48 Ostwald’s energeticism regarded pure energy, motion without matter, as the basis of all change. Far-reaching epistemological conclusions were being drawn. For some, it was not simply the concepts of classical physics that were thrown into doubt, but the very cognitive validity of the scientific enterprise. Scientific concepts began to be seen as merely subjective means of systematizing and coordinating experience, from which no conclusions could be drawn regarding nature itself. In fact, for some, the very notion of nature itself was held to be meaningless. Necessity and causality were denied and it was being declared that there was no logical connection between facts and events, but only simple succession. The old confidence of scientists that they were unveiling the truth about the world was shattered. The old certainty that modern science was bringing to mankind reliable knowledge of nature was gone. Now, an all-pervasive perplexity prevailed among those who discussed such questions.

There was a great flurry in writing in the field of philosophy of science. Various schools of thought emerged that reflected both the antimaterialist/anti-

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48Positivism was a trend within the empiricist tradition, characterized by the assertion that science represented the only valid claim to knowledge. Its view of science was inductive, progressivist, and reductionist. It represented a combative secularism, hostile to theology and idealist philosophy. Where the earlier positivists—Nyg, Comte, and others—had argued on a materialist and realist basis, the later positivists shifted to a phenomenalist basis.
were being undermined. Indeed, some Marxists, proceeding on the basis of the structural heterogeneity and inexhaustibility of matter, did argue this way. They believed that the antireductionist philosopher developed by Marx and Engels had within it ample resources to develop further and to come to terms with the new forms of matter and new principles of motion being brought to light. Engels had said that with every new development in the natural sciences, materialism had to change its form. This was its chance to do so. Marxists at this time were faced with a very different situation from the one in which the founders had first enunciated the new philosophy of science. For Marx and Engels, materialism was in the air. Their task was to develop it to a higher stage and to stress what they called its dialectical character. But in the new situation, certain aspects of dialectics, such as the relativity of knowledge, had become accepted, but materialism was under attack.

This was the new situation in which Marxist philosophy found itself early in the century. Russian Marxists responded to it quite differently and so found themselves engaged in philosophical polemics dealing with very complex issues and calling for considerable sophistication. It was not simply a matter of contrasting a Marxist interpretation of the new discoveries with a Machist one. In one group within Russian social democracy, Marxism merged with Machism and so there was a Machist-Marxist interpretation to contend with as well. Nevertheless, it is to the great credit of the Russians on both sides that, of all the Marxists of this period, it was they who faced the new situation most forthrightly and most explicitly. Ironically, it was the Russians who were on the cutting edge of the most advanced philosophical debate of the time and not the Germans, who, although from a far more advanced intellectual culture, were half-heartedly engaged in a struggle with a neo-Kantianism already superseded by Mach.

**Machism**

Ernst Mach was an experimental physicist, who sought to explore the epistemological roots of science in order to distinguish true knowledge from false or illusory claims to the title. In so doing, he came to the conclusion that it was necessary to purge physics of metaphysics. His philosophical starting point was Kant, but as time went on he began to realize “what a superficial role was played by the thing-in-itself,” and he returned to views like those of Berkeley and Hume “as far more consistent thinkers than Kant.” He told how, on strolling in the open air on a fine summer day, the whole world all at once seemed to be “one complex of interconnected sensations.”

In outlining the role of science in the light of this paradigmatic intuition, he took the view that science was an attempt to organize sensations in the most concise possible way, without any ontological significance. Its purpose was to select, classify, and record the results of experience in order to facilitate manipulation and prediction, not to discover the truth about the world. Explanation was a matter of condensed description and there could be no meaningful way of raising questions of causality or ontological status. A developed science simply expressed itself in terms of functional relationships of sensations to one another, according to the principle of economy of thought.

In pursuing the ideal of the unity of science, Mach’s unifying concept was experience rather than matter. Experience in and through sensations was the only meaningful epistemological category, excluding any notion of source, cause, or reference. Physical objects were only relatively constant groupings of sensations. It was out of order to raise the question of the relation of experience to a world above and beyond itself. He rejected the charge of solipsism or subjectivism, maintaining that he was not treating material qualities as mental states but simply declaring meaningless the question of the relation of mind and matter. A resolute monist, Mach declared that, in the notion of experience, the dualism of subject and object was vanished. A further argument against the charge of solipsism or subjectivism lay in the public character of science, in which evidence was a matter of shared sense data.  

Mach had pushed a phenomenalism account of science as far as it would go. It was a philosophy that obviously left a lot out of account, as its critics were quick to point out, but it was a serious philosophy that had its roots in the desire to give a new account of science that would meet the very real epistemological problems that were arising within science at this time. The characterization of Machism as a reactionary and fideist tend on the part of its Marxist critics was wide of the mark. Mach was himself a socialist and an atheist and his inspiration in formulating his philosophy of science was a thoroughly progressive and rationalist one. He wished to protect science from all forces that would intrude on it or threaten it. As one commentator has so deftly put it: Mach wished to keep “the door between laboratory and church firmly shut” and so he “barred the door of the laboratory from within.”  

Mach himself knew that he had left much out, but chose to endure an incomplete world view rather than find satisfaction in a seemingly complete, but inadequate, system.  

Similar conclusions had been arrived at by others, such as Richard Avenarius, who also wished to free philosophy from the dualism of mind and matter by reducing all being to experience. Any question of the existence of a world outside human perception was wrongly framed, according to Avenarius, as even any notion of a universe with no one perceiving it inevitably posited an imaginary observer. Science, as the experience upon which it was based, was ontologically neutral. Phenomenalists did not consider themselves idealists, but claimed to have transcended the distinction between materialism and idealism.
The Russian Machists and Their Critics

Among Russian Marxists who saw in empirio-criticism the basis for a monistic philosophy embracing the whole of experience in accord with both modern science and their revolutionary aspirations were Bogdanov, Bazarov, Lunacharsky, Gorky, Yushkevich, and Valentinov. These thinkers varied somewhat in their approach to the fusion of Marxism and Machism, some such as Valentinov being strict Machists, whereas others devised their own philosophical variants of empirio-criticism. Thus, there was Bogdanov's empirio-monism and Yushkevich's empirio-symbolism, not to mention the more exotic offshoot of this movement called "God building" associated with Lunacharsky and Gorky.

The principal critics of this group, Plekhanov, Axelrod and Lenin, refused to be sidetracked by the various differences within what they called empirio-criticism. It didn't matter so much, they insisted, about how the Machists differed with each other or with Mach, and they concentrated on what united them: their rejection of the realist theory of knowledge, that, in their eyes, was essential to both modern science and to the revolutionary movement. The Russian Machists believed, on the contrary, that both science and revolution demanded an abandonment of epistemological realism, which they regarded as naive and precritical. Their critics responded that the opposite was the case. It was necessary, they said, to choose between Marx and Mach, for Machism undermined confidence in the cognitive power of science and sapped the will to act.

Bogdanov

The most important of the Russian Machists in terms of philosophical output was Alexander Alexandrovich Malinovsky, who wrote under the name of Bogdanov. A doctor by profession and an active bolshevik, he had very early on been influenced by Ostwald's energeticism. In Machism, however, he found a scientific monism that would overcome all dualism and fetishism and provide the foundation for the unification of all of his efforts both in the intellectual sphere and in the political sphere. He saw Machism as a form of social adaptation, aiming at the purest description of experience within the maximum economy of thought. In his three-volume work, Empirio-monism,

published from 1904 to 1906, Bogdanov put forward a full-blown philosophy of science shaped under the influence of Mach. He took as his starting point the Machist derivation of all knowledge from experience and interpretation of scientific concepts as the forms of coordination of perceptions. The main task, as he saw it, was to eliminate the chasm between mind and matter: "to find the way by which it would be possible to reduce all interruptions in our experience to the principle of continuity." Empirio-monism was the solution to the problem of the dualism of the physical and the psychic. Experience was the unifying factor. Both the physical and the psychic were to be regarded as differently organized elements in one and the same experience: the psychic was individually organized experience, while the physical was socially organized experience. The criterion of truth was collectivism: what was true was what came to be socially accepted. This did not mean majority rule. In his time, Copernicus alone embraced the accumulated astronomical experience of the species. Others possessed only fragments of it and so it remained unorganized in its fullness before Copernicus. Knowledge was founded upon the collective labor process. The question of the conformity of experience to anything outside itself was meaningless, as experience encompassed all there was, there being nothing outside it. Bogdanov rejected the "thing-in-itself" as a useless multiplication of entities. He regarded it as an attempt to explain the known by the unknown, to explain what was accessible and experienced by what is inaccessible and unexperienceable.

Philosophy, as Bogdanov saw it, was never neutral; it always served a given class. The stress on the active, even constitutive, power of the human mind, as well as the emphasis on collectivity, were seen as appropriate, even necessary, to the revolutionary temperament. An understanding of causality as grounded in social labor constituted the truly proletarian perspective, according to Bogdanov. His interpretation of causality broke from the deterministic model. Human labor, involving forethought, decision, and skill, introduced a new factor into the process. This equation of instrumentalism with activism and of realism with passivity and quiescence was an influential factor in bringing Bogdanov's ideas a significant following among Marxists.

As to the relation of his collectivist subjectivism to the philosophy of Marx and Engels, Bogdanov argued that there should be less attention paid to the latter than to the spirit. He explicitly located himself within the Marxist tradition, especially as, "in the teaching of Marx, philosophy for the first time found itself, its place within nature and society, instead of above and beyond them." On the issue of materialism, he asserted that materialism was an inappropriate term for describing Marx's views, because "although Marx called his doctrine 'materialism,' its central concept is not 'matter,' but practical activity, live labour." By his own complex logic, Bogdanov described his own system as, "although not materialist in the narrow sense," belonging "to the same

*Bogdanov's empirio-monism took as its point of departure Mach's empirio-criticism. Bogdanov felt, however, that Mach's theory had not completely overcome the dualism of mind and matter. He put forward a monism that considered the psychic and physical as two different modes of organizing the same experience. Yushkevich's empirio-symbolism was in the tradition of Berkeley's substitution of the notion of mark or sign for that of corporeal causality.
category as materialist systems." Materialism was a more progressive philosophy than idealism, which failed to grasp the fundamental role of human labor. On the question of dialectics, he was a bit clearer about the area of disagreement. He criticized the tendency to leave the limits of dialectics undetermined. Defining dialectics as "an organizing process going on by way of struggle between opposite tendencies," he admitted that dialectical processes existed, but denied that they were universal. He took Engels to task for attempting to apply laws governing ideal processes to real phenomena. For Bogdanov, the emphasis was on equilibrium, as a more fundamental state than struggle. The concept of organization was the keynote of his whole system. Empirio-monism in philosophy laid the foundations for the harmonization of all intellectual experience. Socialist revolution in the sphere of political activity would lead to the harmonization of all social experience.

If Mach was not to be treated kindly by his Russian critics, even less so was Bogdanov.

Plekhanov

The first to take up the challenge of the empirio-critics on behalf of a more orthodox interpretation of Marxism was Georgi Plekhanov, who had been directly attacked by them. He brought to his criticism of the Russian Machists the same passion and outrage that he had brought to bear on his criticism of the German revisionists. Again he responded bitterly to pressures to tone himself down, asking, "Have you ever seen a cat with a mouse in its mouth? Try advising it to shorten or postpone its prey... The same with me... Bogdanov must die now." Again, too, he saw the matter not only in terms of truth and error, but in terms of loyalty and treachery. He answered Bogdanov's complaint that he had been insulted at Plekhanov's addressing him as "Mr."

rather than "Comrade" by sharply asserting "You are no comrade of mine... because you and I represent two directly opposed world-outlooks... I call comrades only those who hold the same views as myself and serve the same cause."

Numerous personal insults were interspersed throughout his philosophical polemic.

Materialismus Militans, published in 1908, was an extended reply to Bogdanov, though Plekhanov dealt with the trend represented by Bogdanov in various other works as well. Disputing Bogdanov's claim that Machism was "the philosophy of twentieth century natural science," he appealed to the evidence of the natural sciences as providing the decisive refutation of Machism. The empirio-critical reduction of the external world to sensations coincided with the traditional idealist thesis "there is no object without subject," a thesis that could not be sustained in light of the fact that the growing knowledge of the history of the earth showed that the object existed long before the subject appeared. It could not be that reason dictated its laws to nature, as the discovery of evolution had made it clear that reason appeared in the organic world only at a very high rung in the ladder of development.

Machism, in Plekhanov's view, despite its pose of being the last word in modern natural science, was really a backward step, a return to the views of Berkeley and Hume. As Plekhanov described it: "Machism is only Berkleyism refashioned a little and repainted in the colours of twentieth century natural science." He grounded his argument regarding the regressive character of Machism in his overall interpretation of the history of modern philosophy. Following Marx and Engels, he extolled both the eighteenth-century materialists and Hegel and regretted the tendency, which came with the neo-Kantian revival, to distort materialism and to pass over Hegel in silence. He thought that Kant should be given his due, but believed that the revival of his thought was called forth not by his strong side but by his weak one. It was his dualism that was most attractive to the ideologists of the bourgeoisie. Dualism, however, was the Achilles heel of Kantianism, and, as it could not be maintained, with consistency, one had to declare for one or the other of the two irreconcilable elements in Kantianism. Criticism of Kant could proceed either from the right or from the left. It could develop either towards idealism or towards materialism. Mach and Bogdanov had chosen the former, whereas Marxists chose the latter. The touchstone was one's attitude to the unknowable thing-in-itself. Both trends rejected it, the one in the direction of subjectivism, the other in the direction of objectivism. The choice was either solipsism and "the blind alley of the absurd" or the recognition of the objective existence of the external world, the decisive step of thought that cut the Gordian knot of Human scepticism.

Plekhanov believed the epistemology of empirio-criticism was riddled with contradictions and absurdities. No matter what contortions of logic Mach and Avenarius might resort to in order to safeguard their system against solipsism, he insisted that it couldn't be done. But even the occasional gestures towards materialism that emerged from time to time in Mach were absent in Bogdanov.

According to Plekhanov, Bogdanov had made this philosophy "idealism from A to Z." He sarcastically pointed out that Bogdanov's "higher criterion of objectivity," i.e., intersubjectivity, implied a time when the hobgoblin had objective existence.

In the same tradition as Marx and Engels and his contemporary, Lenin, Plekhanov was impatient with epistemological agnosticism and identified it with sophistry and cowardice. He agreed that it was merely "shamefaced materialism," a cowardly materialism that tries to preserve an air of decency. The English, he contended, were particularly prone to hold back and be afraid to go through to the end. He repeatedly referred to Engels's assertion that the best refutation of Kantian agnosticism was provided by experiment, by
industry, by daily practical activity: "The proof of the pudding's in the eating." He believed that agnosticism contradicted the facts accomplished in time and space.

The fact remains that he did at times veer towards Locke in his own epistemological orientation. His theory of knowledge was a representational one, based on the notion of hieroglyphics: "representations of the forms and relations of things are no more than hieroglyphics—enough for us to be able to study how these things-in-themselves affect us, and in our turn, to exert an influence on them." Lenin took exception to this as an unwarranted concession to agnosticism.

Lenin also criticized Plekhanov's critique of empirio-criticism as failing to set this new philosophical trend in relation to the new situation existing in science. While he had much to say that was of value regarding the relationship of science to philosophy and its relevance in the development of Marxism, he failed to come to terms fully with the significance of the newer discoveries and the challenge they entailed for the further development of materialism. Even as regards older discoveries, he addressed them only in a very general way. When he discussed the relationship between Marxism and Darwinism, he stressed the continuity between the study of nature and the study of history and the significance of natural necessity and dialectical development, revealed by Darwin in the sphere of biology and by Marx in the sphere of history. In reply to the charge of the Czech philosopher Tomáš Masaryk that Darwinism was not consonant with Marxism, Plekhanov took Darwin to task for not sufficiently separating biological categories from social ones and proceeded to assert that Marx and Engels adhered to the viewpoint of Darwinism in the sphere of biology, but that in sociology their viewpoint was that of historical materialism.

Plekhanov fought hard for his conception of the integrity of Marxism. Its organic unity was to be defended at all costs. The materialist explanation of nature was the foundation upon which the materialist theory of history rested. These could not be torn asunder without doing the most severe damage to the revolutionary potential of Marxism. The Machists were a threat to this. Although they did not hold that the Marxist theory of history was philosophically neutral, they did propose to substitute a different philosophical position, which they claimed was more consistent with it. But for Plekhanov, this was impossible. It would undermine the foundation upon which the whole edifice had been constructed and which could not be replaced without the whole structure falling to the ground.

Plekhanov was implacably hostile to the sort of eclectic materialism that he believed formed the basis of hasty syntheses of Marx with any and every thinker who came into fashion. He wondered how long it would take for someone to come along and supplement Marx with the thinkers of the Middle Ages. Speaking of the insoluble connection between the socioeconomic and philosophical aspects of Marxism, he complained:

And since these two aspects cannot but hang in mid air when arbitrarily they are torn out of the general context of cognate views constituting their theoretical foundation, those who perform the tearing out operation naturally feel an urge to "substantiate Marxism" anew by joining it again quite arbitrarily and most frequently under the influence of philosophical moods prevalent at the same time among ideologists of the bourgeoisie—with some philosopher or other; with Kant, Mach, Avenarius or Ostwald, and of late with Joseph Dietzgen. . . . No attempts have yet been made to "supplement Marx" with Thomas Aquinas.

When Plekhanov spoke in such terms in relation to Russian Machism, he tended to ignore Bogdanov's monism, to forget that Bogdanov too maintained an indissoluble connection between the socioeconomic and philosophical aspects of his interpretation of Marxism. Whatever else about it, Bogdanov's synthesis of Marxism and Machism was anything but eclectic and arbitrary.

Plekhanov paid a great deal of attention to the role of philosophical tradition in the formation of Marxism. He agreed with Engels that the great basic question in the history of philosophy was between materialism and idealism and he was intolerant of all who tried to steer a path midway between the two. The Russian Machists, according to him, were in this category. His deeply felt monism made him far more sympathetic to consistent idealism than to what he believed to be a philistine dualism that smugly stood halfway in between. As he saw the history of philosophy, the great philosophical systems had always been monist, that is, they had regarded spirit and matter merely as two categories of phenomena whose cause was inseparably one and the same. Profound minds were always inclined to monism, unable to feel satisfaction with many-sidedness. The great merit of Hegelianism was that it contained not a trace of eclectic materialism. Whoever went through this trial school learned consistency of thought and acquired forever a salutary repugnance for "ecclesiastic mish mash." This was perhaps fair enough as regards certain varieties of neo-Kantianism, but hardly fair in relation to Machism, which so much stressed consistency of thought and so ardently pursued the unity of science.

Nevertheless, for Plekhanov, the monism of the twentieth century needed to be one "thoroughly imbued with materialism." In insisting that the material was the basis of the psychic, his monism was to be distinguished from that of the Machists. Materialism, he contended, was the philosophy most in accord with modern science; since a time was coming when what had happened in the natural sciences would be repeated in the social sciences, all phenomena would be given a materialist explanation. Materialism Plekhanov defined as "a doctrine that wishes to explain nature by its own forces." It took nature as
its point of departure and asserted the primacy of matter to spirit. Matter was “nothing but the totality of things-in-themselves, in as much as the latter are the sources of our sensations,” a far from satisfactory definition that actually conceded far more ground to sensationalism than he seemed to have realized. In any case, Plekhanov believed that materialism was confirmed by the natural sciences and was the necessary theoretical basis of socialism. As such, he defended it against the prevailing antimatlistic “isms” and against all the popular misconception of it as drab, gloomy, and deadening, as immoral, as reducing man to “merely as a wavelet in the ocean of the eternal movement of matter.” He made the point that, after Feuerbach and Marx, materialism coincided with humanism.

Essential to this new stage of materialist philosophy, as Plekhanov saw it, was its convergence with dialectics: “The dialectical method is the most characteristic feature of present day materialism.” Darwinism had shed once and for all the notion of immutability of species and in all fields dynamic theories were replacing static ones. The idea of evolution had transformed everything, moving things beyond the stage at which earlier materialists could only resort to what they called reason. Dialectics, of course, was not identical with evolution; it implied leaps and abrupt transformations. It was a veritable “algebra of revolution,” which to Plekhanov explained the psychological substratum of all the attacks on Hegelian dialectics: it directly confronted the philistine fear of revolutionary upheaval. In Hegel, however, there was a contradiction between method and system that only came to a resolution with the materialist transformation of dialectics. He conceived the relation between method and system differently in different contexts. However, the conception most in harmony with Plekhanov’s monist inclinations was his assertion that method was the soul of any system. He regarded dialectics as the soul of Marxism. In his exposition of the laws of dialectics, he often left logical gaps between the illustrative instances and the principles they were supposed to illustrate, bringing criticism from Lenin, who accused him of reducing dialectics to an aggregate of examples.

Plekhanov’s most explicit discussion of the dialectics of nature came in his critique of Masaryk, who had contended that dialectics and materialism were incompatible and there could therefore be no question of dialectics in nature. According to Masaryk, materialists were a contradiction in terms. Hegel’s dialectics was “simple hocus pocus” and a “metaphysical cobweb.”

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*Despite Lenin’s criticism, this was a mode of presentation to be taken up by subsequent generations of Marxists. It was a mode from which Lenin was not himself totally immune.

**Thomas Masaryk—a Czech philosopher and politician who had written an extended critique of Marxism. He was later, from 1918 to 1935, President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia. He was a serious thinker, who deserved better than the flippantry exposition and critique of his views that he got from Plekhanov.

Marx and Engels were eclectic; they did not understand that dialectics was not for them, if they wanted to be materialists. The many contradictions in the details of Marxism sprang from the contradiction in the theoretical foundation of the entire system. Masaryk asserted that objective dialectics simply did not exist. In nature itself, there was no dialectical contradiction; there were no leaps. The examples cited by Engels as evidence of dialectics of nature were, according to Masaryk, only examples of nondialectical development, as they didn’t conform to the Hegelian triad. Plekhanov came to the defence of Engels’s conception and pressed the point that dialectics could be no means be reduced to the Hegelian triad. Masaryk, Plekhanov insisted, was incapable of grasping the distinction between a materialist and an idealist interpretation of the dialectic. It was one of many such debates on the nature and status of the dialectic that left the issues far from clear and quite unresolved.

So Plekhanov was determined to stand by the philosophy of science sketched out by Marx and Engels and to set himself against all comers. As far as he was concerned, the theory must remain intact, “an impregnable fortress against which all hostile forces hurl themselves in vain.”

Axelrod

Another who immediately came to the defence of orthodoxy against the empirio-critics, Lyubov Axelrod, was “Orthodox” herself. She contended that a subjective idealism that treated objects as collections of sensations, thus making consciousness the creator of the world, could in no way be reconciled with Marxism. On the contrary, such an orientation was logically linked to social conservatism. Moreover, it made science impossible. Science both presupposed and substantiated the existence of the external world. Echoing Plekhanov, she held it was impossible to maintain that there could be no object without subject, as science had demonstrated that the earth existed long before man. Therefore, mind was the product of nature and not a condition of it. Human knowledge had its source in matter. Axelrod was not, however, so facile as Plekhanov in defining matter. She held, on the contrary, that matter could not be defined, for it was the primal fact, the original substance, the beginning, the essence and cause of all things. Even here she fell into the trap she warned against, for the history of science was developing towards the disclosure of forms of matter that could not be considered as substance. In epistemology, Axelrod was of the same mind as Plekhanov and held to a representational theory of knowledge. Human sensations were in a relation of correspondence to the external world. Against the Machists, she argued that this must be the case, otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish between true and false perceptions. There would be no point in it, if reality and sensation were one and the same. Against Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov, she
argued that sensations were not reflections of the world in the sense of copies or mirror images, but in the sense of their content depending on the objects producing them. She accused Lenin of holding, not to philosophical materialism, but to naive realism.*

**Lenin**

Axelrod's assessment of Lenin was not altogether fair. It was true that he sometimes went on for pages and pages seeming to reduce materialism to realism, and a very naive realism at that. But if his philosophical works were looked at as a whole, it would be clear that there was more to the picture. There were indeed passages lacking in philosophical sophistication, in which he skinned lightly over matters to which professional philosophers gave much attention, or in which he was unnecessarily abusive of opponents.* But anyone put off completely by these things would be badly mistaken. For in terms of Lenin's grasp of certain philosophical issues at this historical turn, he left many in the shade. Although he was not a professional philosopher and although he turned his mind to many things besides philosophy, Lenin took philosophy extremely seriously and he displayed an interesting insight into the state of philosophy at this time and into the political and scientific context for its development at this historical juncture. In 1908, in response to the writings of the Russian Machists, and because he was not entirely satisfied with the efforts of Plekhanov and Axelrod, Lenin threw himself into an intensive study of philosophy and current scientific theory that culminated in the publication, in 1909, of a major full-scale philosophical work, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

The difference between Lenin and others was in his orientation to science. In his critique of the Russian Machists, he echoed many of the arguments already put over by Plekhanov and Axelrod, but, unlike them, he placed Machism within the context of the newest developments in the natural sciences and the whole complex of new philosophical trends sparked off by them. He addressed himself, not only to the empirico-critical revision of Marxism within Russian social democracy, but to the whole range of philosophical speculation on the new science. His analysis embraced all of the current trends, not only Machism, but conventionalism, instrumentalism, immanentism, energeticism, and the rest. He looked at the theories of Mach, Avemarius, and their Russian counterparts, along with those of Duhamel, Poincaré, Le Roy, Pearson, Ostwald, and a host of others. Lenin realized, in a way that the others did not, the full meaning of the radical change in philosophical mood and the really far-reaching character of the epistemological crisis in the natural sciences. He knew that a crucial turning point had come. Science had erupted into a sharp and formative controversy, a controversy that was profoundly philosophical in character, and philosophy could not be allowed to develop in disconnection with it, Marxist philosophy least of all. For attempting to do so, he openly criticized, not only such compatriots as Plekhanov and Deborin, but also others, such as Joseph Diner-Denes, who wrote an article in *Neue Zeit* entitled "Machism and the Recent Revolution in the Natural Sciences," making the point that new discoveries, such as X-rays and radium, confirmed various conclusions of Engels, but ignoring the epistemological conclusions being drawn from the new physics. To criticize Machism while ignoring its connection with the new physics, Lenin said, was to fall short of what was demanded of Marxists in this new period.

Lenin was acutely aware of the fact that the new period demanded of him something very different from what the previous period had demanded of Marx and Engels.* They had entered the philosophical arena at a time when materialism reigned and they therefore had devoted their attention to the theoretical development of materialism, to bringing it to a higher stage. They had not been so much concerned with the defence of materialism as with the vulgarization of it. They had warned against inconsistent, badly thought-out materialism, "materialism below, idealism above," and also against forgetfulness of the valuable fruits of idealist systems. They had not concerned themselves much with epistemology, as the objectivity of science was for the most part taken for granted. As Lenin explained it:

This is why Marx and Engels laid the emphasis in their works rather on dialectical materialism than on dialectical materialism, and insisted on

*Lenin saw Marx and Engels as of one mind in philosophical matters and challenged the assertions of the Russian Machist Viktor Chernov to the contrary. Chernov was one of the earliest to counterpose Marx to Engels and to accuse Engels of a crude, naive, and dogmatic materialism, while exonerating Marx.
historical materialism rather than on historical materialism. Our would-be Marxist Machists approached Marxism in an entirely different historical period, at a time when bourgeois philosophy was particularly specializing in epistemology, and, having assimilated in a one-sided and mutilated form certain of the component parts of dialectics (relativism, for instance), was directing its attention chiefly to a defense or restoration of idealism below and not of idealism above.53

Lenin, therefore, concentrated on the defense of materialism and epistemological realism, against the most challenging criticisms that had yet been made on this philosophy. The main thrust of his argument was that the crisis in physics was a crisis of growth. It was engendered by the very progress of science, though, to those in the middle of it, it mightn't seem so. The breakdown of old principles had brought a breakdown of confidence in the whole scientific enterprise and a rash of theories to the effect that science was not a matter of description, but simply convenient fiction, pure artifice, utilitarian technique, a method of notation, a process of symbolization. These ideas reflected real and serious problems in formulating for a new era the epistemological foundations of science. Lenin felt that the new physics was to be welcomed and due regard taken of the new level of complexity that had been introduced into the sphere of the philosophy of science. Nevertheless, as Lenin saw it, the essential point was to make a distinction between the new and progressive scientific discoveries and the reactionary philosophical implications that were being drawn from them. The new physics most emphatically did not necessitate the abandonment of materialism, as he saw it, but furthered the movement within science itself from a mechanistic stage to a dialectical one, even if scientists were not able to rise directly and at once from the old mechanistic materialism to the new dialectical materialism. Lenin felt that the logic of the new physics made this transition inevitable, however difficult and complex the process would be:

This step is being made, and will be made, by modern physics; but it is advancing towards the only true method and the only true philosophy of natural science, not directly, but by zigzags, not consciously, but instinctively, not clearly perceiving the “final goal,” but drawing closer to it gropingly, unsteadily, and sometimes even with its back turned to it. Modern physics is in travail; it is giving birth to dialectical materialism. The process of childbirth is painful.56

Within this context, Lenin made his defense of materialism. Against such as Valentinov who contended “the statement that the scientific explanation of the world can find firm foundation only in materialism is nothing but a fiction, and what is more so, an absurd fiction,”57 he stated that the exact opposite was the case. More than ever did science require the solid grounding that only materialism could give it, but it needed to be a far more sophisticated and flexible materialism than heretofore. The concept of matter was as essential to physics as ever it was, but it needed to be extended beyond its previous boundaries. To Lenin, the idea that matter was disappearing was an indication of the fact that the limits within which matter had hitherto been known were disappearing, that certain properties of matter which were once thought to be absolute, immutable, and primary—such as impenetrability, mass, inertia—were revealed to be relative, mutable, and characteristic only of certain specific states of matter. What was happening was that human knowledge was penetrating more deeply into the structure of matter and discovering new forms of matter in the process, and would continue to do so. The electron would prove as inexhaustible as the atom. Older definitions of matter were becoming obsolete, but the concept of matter was not; it was simply expanding. Older forms of materialism had been superseded, but materialism had not; it was developing to a higher stage. It was pointless to throw out the baby with the bath water. According to Lenin, the sole property of matter with which philosophical materialism was bound up was its objectivity. Although he claimed that matter could not be defined, as a definition entailed bringing a concept within a more comprehensive concept, and this could not be done in the case of the ultimate and most comprehensive concepts, he nevertheless stated: “Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to man by his sensations.”58

The new materialism, incomparably richer than the old, recognized the temporary, approximate, and relative character of every scientific theory of the structure and properties of matter. This was where dialectics came into it for Lenin.

Dialectics highlighted the inadequacy of all polar opposites. It brought to bear a healthy relativism, scepticism, and negation, without being reducible to these, always moving on to higher affirmations. It was the failure of scientists to grasp the dialectical nature of development that accounted for the tendency

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53 It must be said that this is a far from satisfactory formulation, but it does highlight the problem of giving a definition of the primary category in a monistic philosophy, as well as the necessity of openness to new research in the natural sciences. Nevertheless, it should be possible to acknowledge the comprehensiveness and flexibility of the concept, while still accounting for its specificity at least vis-à-vis other possible primary categories giving rise to alternative monistic philosophies. For instance, materiality, as the basis of philosophical materialism, is historically bound up with spatiality, temporality, motion, etc., in contrast to spirituality in so far as it forms the basis of philosophical idealism. In practice, however, Lenin did operate with a more complex and specific concept of matter than that expressed in his stated definition. This is clearest in passages where he contrasted materialism with idealism and in his arguments against Ostwald’s energeticism. Lenin, in contrast to Ostwald, who held that there could be motion without matter, and in contrast to eighteenth-century materialists, who believed there could be matter without motion, held that there could be no motion without matter and no matter without motion. Engels had earlier put forward this thesis that it was in the essence of matter to be in motion and hence in Engels’s thought, too, there was a more complex implicit definition of matter than the one explicitly stated. Another problem with Lenin’s definition of matter, as given, was that it was exclusively epistemological and left no way of distinguishing ontological materialism and epistemological realism. These do need to be distinguished.
of a minority of scientists, who previously held mechanist views, to slip by way of relativism into idealism. The new physics, as Lenin saw it, was wavering between dialectical materialism and phenomenology.

The majority of scientists, however, still adhered to a spontaneous materialism, though it needed to be philosophically developed. Lenin analyzed the thinking of such scientists of the day as Huxley, Hertz, Helmholtz, Volkmann, Boltzmann, and Rey, who could not suppress their instinctive materialism, but were unable to carry it through to an integral and consistent philosophy of science. It was the natural way of things that, even at this time of crisis, most scientists would persist in learning more in the direction of materialism than idealism. For every scientist who had not been led astray by professorial philosophy, or indeed for any healthy person who had not been an inmate of a lunatic asylum or the pupil of an idealist philosopher, Lenin insisted, sensation was the direct connection between consciousness and the external world. For the idealist philosopher, on the contrary, sensation was a wall separating consciousness from the external world.* Materialism, based on epistemological realism, took the objectivity of science as the starting point, whereas idealism, including the new varieties of it represented by empiricism, conventionalism, and the like, had to construct elaborate detours to deduce the objectivity of science from the collectivity of consciousness.

The difference between materialism and idealism for Lenin lay in their respective answers to the question of the source of knowledge and its relation to the physical world. Materialism, in accord with the evidence of the natural sciences that had decisively established the existence of the earth prior to man, asserted the primacy of matter and regarded sensation, consciousness, and thought as secondary, as products of a long evolution, as the historical outcome of a very high stage in the development of matter. Its fundamental premise was the existence of the external world, outside the human mind, of objects independent of sensations. Idealism, on the contrary, rested on the primacy of consciousness over matter, of mind over the external world, of sensations over objects. Materialism also adhered to the objectivity of causality, time, and space. Against all the various idealist interpretations of these concepts as a priori forms of sensibility or as organizing categories of human experience, they were real properties of the physical world. They did not exist in themselves, apart from matter, but they were real qualities of

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*Lenin made much of the fact that the "naïve realism" of everyday life formed the basis of the materialist theory of knowledge. There is a point in this line of argument, but it is dangerous to carry it too far. An exaggerated emphasis on common sense can become reactionary in a period when science is leading further and further away from the world of common sense. Engels warned against this even before science had begun to move so dramatically in this direction. Lenin was aware of this danger as well, although there are passages where it certainly did not show.
The position of the Russian Machists, Lenin concluded, was a logically untenable one: hostility to dialectical materialism, and, at the same time, the claim to be Marxists in philosophy. It was, he contended, impossible to maintain. The very distinctiveness of Marxism in philosophical terms lay in the refusal to recognize such hybrid projects for reconciling materialism and idealism as Machism, and the determination to move forward along a sharply defined philosophical road. Marxism was an integral philosophy, "cast from a single piece of steel," from which not one basic premise or one essential part could be taken away without its being transformed into something quite different. This did not mean that it could never change or develop. Lenin distinguished here between revision, which was an essential requirement of Marxism, and revisionism, which entailed betraying the essence under the guise of criticizing the form. So highly did he value integrity that he quoted with favor Dietzgen's expression of preference for the honesty and consistency of religious believers to the halfheartedness of agnostics, dualists, and all the halfway elements like the Machists, for "there a system prevails, there we find integral people, people who do not separate theory from practice." 40 There was a point worth making in standing on the side of integrity and wholeheartedness, but it was not fair to categorize the Russian Machists as among the halfway elements. 41 In Bogdanov, too, a system prevailed. Nor was he one to separate theory and practice.

As time went on, Lenin became more discerning in relation to philosophical positions with which he disagreed. This showed itself in his Philosophical Notebooks, writings dating from 1914–1915, published posthumously in 1929–1930. In this period, when he was concentrating on coming to grips with Hegel, as well as continuing his studies of the history of philosophy and current scientific theory, the emphasis was somewhat different than in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. In the earlier work, he had directed all his fire against attacks on materialism, whereas in the later notes he turned his attention to the positive aspects of idealism and the danger to materialism in neglecting such insights. This attitude was summed up in his exceedingly wise statement: "Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism." 42 There was a new level of philosophical sophistication in that he no longer tended to depict philosophical idealism in terms of stupidity or trickery on the part of fools and charlatans, but instead saw it as a one-sided, myopic development of human knowledge. Philosophical idealism was not groundless. It was a "sterile flower" growing on the living tree of human knowledge. Its roots were both social and epistemological. It was not so much a matter of blindness or deceit, but of myopia:

Philosophical idealism is only nonsense from the standpoint of crude, simple, metaphysical materialism. From the standpoint of dialectical materialism, on the other hand, philosophical idealism is a one-sided, exaggerated . . . development . . . of one of the features, aspects, facets of knowledge into an absolute, divorced from matter, from nature, apotheosized. Idealism is clerical obscurantism.

Human knowledge is not (or does not follow) a straight line, but a curve, which endlessly approaches a series of circles, a spiral. Any fragment, segment, section of this curve can be transformed (transformed one-sidedly) into an independent, complete straight line, which then (if one does not see the wood for the trees) leads into the quagmire, into clerical obscurantism (where it is anchored by the class interests of the ruling classes). Rectilinearity and one-sidedness, woodenness and petrification . . . voilà the epistemological roots of idealism. 43

Most of what Lenin had to say about dialectics dates from this period, although he also discussed dialectics in the earliest of his philosophical works "What the Friends of the People Are and How They Fight the Social Democrats," written in 1894. Here he differentiated the Hegelian dialectic from the Marxist one and tried to dispel the popular notion that Marxists tried to prove things by trials. He claimed that the dialectical method coincided with the scientific method in sociology, regarding society "as a living organism in a state of constant development and not as something mechanically concatenated and therefore permitting all sorts of arbitrary combinations of separate social elements." 44 In "The Three Sources and the Three Component Parts of Marxism" written in 1913, Lenin defined dialectics as "the doctrine of development in its fullest, deepest and most comprehensive form, the doctrine of the relativity of human knowledge that provides us with a reflection of eternally developing matter." 45 In "Karl Marx," written in the same year, he saw dialectics as:

a development that proceeds in spirals, not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes and revolutions; breaks in continuity; the transition of quantity into quality; inner impulses towards development, imparted by contradiction and conflict of the various forces and tendencies acting on a given body . . . ; the interdependence and the closest and indissoluble connection between all aspects, a connection that provides a uniform and universal process of motion, one that follows definite laws." 46

But Lenin's most elaborate unfolding of the dialectical method was in the Philosophical Notebooks where his attitude to Hegel changed somewhat from the time in which he wrote "What the Friends of the People Are" and he became more inclined to emphasize continuity with the Hegelian dialectic,
though he was still at pains to point out the differences. Here he saw the essence of dialectics to be the “all-sided flexibility of concepts,” “living, many-sided knowledge with an infinite number of shades,” “the internal source of all activity.” The dialectical concept of development was far richer than the simple notion of evolution. What distinguished it was the leap, the contradictoriness, the interruption of gradualness. He put great emphasis on unity of opposites as the kernel of the whole process. He went into very great detail about the characteristics of the dialectical process, at one point listing sixteen elements of dialectics, although these could be summed up in three: (1) the thing itself considered in the totality of its relations and in its development, (2) the internally contradictory tendencies in every phenomenon, and (3) the union of analysis and synthesis.44 Lenin’s thought during this period was far more subtle than his earlier work, though it was unfortunate that he did not explore the “living many-sidedness of things” in a way less tied to the texts of Hegel.

Another of the features of his new concentration on dialectics was his announcement of the identity of logic, dialectics, and the theory of knowledge. Despite the possible obscurity of this formulation, epistemology was an area in which Lenin’s thought underwent an obvious development, tied to this new attention to the living many-sidedness of knowledge. There is a noticeable difference in emphasis and degree of sophistication in Lenin’s treatment of the theory of reflection in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism and Philosophical Notebooks. In the earlier work, he spoke of sensations as “copies, photographs, images, mirror-reflections of things.”45 However, in the later work, he dealt with epistemology more subtly, moving beyond his earlier, essentially passivist formulations, to a new emphasis on the active side of the cognitive process. He put it quite sharply: “Man’s consciousness not only reflects the world but creates it.”44 He also saw the path of knowledge as less of a straight line but more full of twists and turns. Traversing it was a complex, halting, indirect process. The rhythm of the process of knowing was the rhythm of the dialectic, moving through the power of internal contradictions, each resolution always approximate and incomplete, with ever-new aspects yet to be discovered. Science was inextricably bound up with fantasy. Induction was connected with analogy and surmise.

Lenin, however, continued to believe that human ideas were not simply created by thought out of itself, but reflected the reality of the external world in however complex and indirect a way. He still held to a realist theory of knowledge, though certainly to a more subtle and highly developed one. Commentators who see some kind of radical “epistemological break” here are quite wrong, whether their preference is for the later Lenin interpreted in the radically voluntarist manner of such as Petrovic or Avineri, or for the earlier Lenin as interpreted by anti-Hegelian authors like Colletti. It is equally wrong, however, to gloss over the differences in different stages of Lenin’s thought as Hoffman does. In doing so, he engages in an extremely strained line of argument to defend Lenin’s earlier formulations and imply that his later insights were already there in his earlier thinking though unexpressed. He does state the problem quite pointedly: “Does not the imagery of the ‘photograph’ or the ‘copy’ imply a measure of passivity in the process of thought and sensation, so that the later statement in the Notebooks plays an important role in correcting an earlier contemplative bias?” He thinks not, because Lenin’s polemical target in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism was subjective idealism and he did in any case mention the criterion of practice in cognition. Hoffman then goes on to deal with the question of whether the formulations of Materialism and Empirio-Criticism are misleading, whether the imagery of photographing and copying are liable to passivist misconstruction. His answer is: “Unless we follow Plekhanov’s position and question the very premise that ideas do resemble reality in some intelligible way, how can we possibly avoid imagery which is liable to be misconstrued by those who cannot understand the practical nature of the reflection process?”46 Aside from this serious misrepresentation of Plekhanov’s position, this is a thoroughly untenable line of reasoning. Not only is it possible to find a more activist imagery for the knowing process, but many have and Lenin himself did.

As far as the secondary literature giving an overall evaluation of Lenin as a philosopher goes, there are great extremes of opinion. Not surprisingly, most of the authors hostile to Engels are equally hostile to Lenin and speak of him in the very same terms. In the same way, those who take an idolatrous attitude to Marx and Engels do so to Lenin also, only even more so. There have, however, been some distinctive features in the history of commentary on Lenin’s philosophical work.

Lenin’s critics

The earliest to attack Lenin’s philosophical work were his immediate opponents. The Russian Machists, against whom so much of his philosophical argument was directed, did not hesitate to answer back. Bazarov, Bogdanov, and Yushkevich published their reply in 1910 in Pillars of Philosophical Orthodoxy. Yushkevich was particularly abusive, claiming that Plekhanov and Lenin exemplified the decadence and dogmatism of Russian Marxism and accusing Lenin of “bringing the habits of the Black Hundred into Marxism.”47

47The Black Hundreds were monarchist gangs formed by the tsarist police to combat the revolutionary movement. They murdered revolutionaries, assaulted progressive intellectuals and organized pogroms against the Jews.
By the next generation of Russian Marxists, of course, Lenin’s philosophical works were highly esteemed, and in fact elevated to the position of classics of Marxism, as they were by the overwhelming majority of Comintern activists. Notable exceptions, however, were Anton Pannekoek and Karl Korsch. Pannekoek, under the pseudonym of J. Harper, first published Lenin als Philosoph in Amsterdam in 1938, the period during which Lenin’s philosophical works were being published abroad in foreign language translations. Pannekoek, who had been one of the Dutch leftists attacked by Lenin in Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder, called Materialism and Empirio-Criticism a “confused tirade,” in which Lenin distorted the views of Mach and Avenarius and failed to criticize them from a genuinely Marxist point of view. Lenin, according to Pannekoek, based his criticism of Machism on “middle class materialism,” which was the philosophical counterpart to the half-bourgeois, half-proletarian nature of bolshevism. It was true that Lenin was unfair to Mach and Avenarius, but it was not true that his was not a legitimately Marxist point of view. Just what Pannekoek’s genuinely proletarian alternative was to Lenin’s supposedly bourgeois or half-bourgeois position remained altogether unclear.

Even harsher was Korsch’s assessment of Lenin as philosopher. He approved Pannekoek’s criticism and carried it further. Also a leftist, Korsch too accused Lenin of failing to transcend the boundaries of bourgeois materialism. According to Korsch: “Lenin attacked the later attempts of bourgeois naturalistic materialism, not from the viewpoint of the historical materialism of the fully developed proletarian class, but from a preceding and scientifically less developed phase of bourgeois materialism.” He also asserted in an altogether unsubstantiated way that Lenin was completely unaware of the real achievements made by science in the days since Marx and Engels. Another charge against Lenin was that he preferred immediate practical utility to theoretical truth. That was altogether unfair, for Lenin was far closer to science than Korsch ever was and was far from indifferent to considerations of theoretical truth.

This has been the tone of many commentaries since, most recently echoed by Kolakowski, who has characterized Lenin’s philosophy as “crude and amateurish,” based on vulgar commonsense arguments and unbridled abuse of his opponents and adding nothing new to Engels and Plekhanov. Lenin, according to Kolakowski, failed to answer satisfactorily the philosophical questions with which he dealt, because of his “indolent and superficial approach and his contempt for all problems that could not be put to direct use in the struggle for power.” Moreover, it “had a deplorable effect in furnishing pretexts for the stifling of all independent philosophical thought and in establishing the party’s dictatorship over science.” Kolakowski is wide of the mark, for Lenin was far more serious about philosophy and had far more worth saying about it than he is willing to concede. However, certain texts of Lenin and the use to which they have been put by Leninists do lend a certain support to his criticisms.

**Lenin’s defenders**

Predictably, this type of commentary has been answered by others. Timpanaro, himself a leftist,* has specifically answered Pannekoek, Korsch, and more contemporary leftists as well, by pointing out that voluntarism, subjectivism, and the refusal of science may constitute a momentary revolutionary stimulus, but cannot in the long run provide the basis of a solid revolutionary doctrine. Timpanaro argues that Lenin’s defence of materialism was far more revolutionary than the semiidealism of Korsch and Pannekoek. Convinced that he was far in advance of Lenin, Korsch was actually very far behind him in thinking that the dominant orientation in bourgeois philosophy was materialism colored by the natural sciences and in waging an anachronistic battle against it in the name of his own idealism represented as authentic Marxism. Lenin had already discerned the reactionary character of the idealist renaissance that was under way, even when it presented itself as a revival of revolutionary activism against social Darwinist quietism. Lenin foresaw that empirico-criticism was only the first phase in an involution towards forms of fideist spiritualism that would lead from a methodological critique within science to a negation of science itself or to a falsification of it in a teleological or providential direction. This Korsch did not see, as his basic background had been alien and hostile to the natural sciences, unlike Lenin who was acutely aware of the most recent developments in the sciences and their philosophical significance. There was not, on Lenin’s part, the slightest repudiation of the new physics, which he understood well, despite a number of inaccuracies with regard to particular physical theories. He was basically right in his belief that the philosophy of Mach and Avenarius led logically to idealism, although they were not prone to the open idealism of their successors. In distinguishing between the new science and the antimaterialist use to which it was being put, Lenin managed to redeem the historicity of science as well as its objective truth. This concern for objective truth, Timpanaro insists, was the animating force of Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, despite Korsch’s extremely prejudicial reading of it, which led him to assert otherwise. Lenin believed idealism reactionary because it was untrue and not vice versa.18

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18 This term is being used in the historical descriptive sense for those who have defined themselves as being to the left of the communist parties.
Timpanaro is not himself uncritical of Lenin’s philosophy, but his criticisms are of a far more constructive nature. He believes that there was in Lenin’s work a certain wavering between the need for an integral materialism and a tendency to fall back on objectivism or realism. On the other hand, he does note that it is clear that Lenin was aware of the fact that materialism was much more than an epistemology. Timpanaro also thinks that Lenin’s enthusiasm for certain Hegelian propositions in Philosophical Notebooks was excessive. He does not believe that the profound transformations in the traditional concept of matter can be so easily accommodated through the framework of the Hegelian dialectic. He prefers the formulations in “Karl Marx” where Lenin dealt with contradictions more in terms of conflicts between forces than in terms of identity of opposites. Also, he holds that in “What the Friends of the People Are,” Lenin displayed a more perceptive awareness of the intrinsically idealist nature of the Hegelian dialectic, that put it beyond any redemption through any “standing on its head” or “breaking its shell.”

Another striking contrast to Kolakowski’s assessment of Lenin is that by the Irish scientist, J.D. Bernal. To him, what distinguished Lenin was his sense of perspective, the range of vision that brought understanding of the grand movements of nature and history. Lenin saw that the early twentieth century was a great period of transition in the scientific and philosophical world and that the old controversy between materialism and idealism was reappearing in new guises in the form of disputes between atomism and anergism, between evolutionism and vitalism. Lenin entered into all these disputes and advanced materialism to the level of the science of his day. He also saw that the tendencies common to Mach, Ostwald, Poincaré, and Bogdanov marked a drift towards a recurrence of fideism, which had its political counterpart in a tendency to blur more and more the definiteness of class struggle as part of the general trend of political compromise after the defeat of the 1905 revolution. The political aspect of Lenin’s own philosophy was shown in the tone he set for the development of a new kind of science that developed after the revolution, when he was able to see the historical effects in a completely different way from Kolakowski. While Bernal’s analysis is perhaps overly eulogistic and does not venture into the problem areas, it is nevertheless significant that one who has known science so well has regarded Lenin’s philosophy of science so highly.

Praise for Lenin’s philosophical work has sometimes come from surprising quarters. The Sociologist and priest, J.M. Bocheński, has commented that Lenin worked out an epistemology that was original in many respects, combining realism with rationalism and paying due regard to the difficulties for realism engendered by the latest results of research in physics. Another remarkable comment has been made by Feyerabend: “There are not many writers in the field today who are as well acquainted with contemporary science as was Lenin with the science of his time, and no one can match the philosophical intuitions of that astounding author.”

But others can damn by their praise. Such is the case with the supposedly pro-Lenin essay by Althusser entitled “Lenin and Philosophy.” By Althusser’s eccentric logic, it is not possible to raise the question of whether or not Marxist philosophy has a history. Here a “symptomatic difficulty” exists, Althusser declares, because “philosophy has no history”; it is “that strange theoretical site where nothing really happens, nothing but this repetition of nothing . . . philosophy leads nowhere because it is going nowhere.” According to Althusser, Lenin simply explained that Mach merely repeated Berkeley and counterposed to this his own repetition of Diderot. Nothing happened but a repetition of nothingness. Althusser explains that what is called Marxist philosophy presents a rather curious spectacle. After Marx’s “epistemological break” there was a long interval of philosophical emptiness. In this philosophical silence, only the “new science” spoke. After thirty years, it was broken only by an "unforeseen accident," Engels's "precipitate intervention" in which he replied to Dühring for political reasons and was unfortunately constrained to follow Dühring onto his own territory. The ultimate reason for this philosophical silence is that “the times were not ripe, that dusk had not yet fallen, and that neither Marx himself, nor Engels, nor Lenin could yet write the great work of philosophy which Marxism-Leninism lacks.” Althusser announces that Lenin’s philosophical work must be perfected, that is, completed and corrected, because Lenin was “unfortunate enough to be born too early for philosophy.” But by the bottom of the same page, he reverses this verdict and says that Lenin was not born too soon for philosophy because: “If philosophy lags behind, if this lag is what makes it philosophy, how is it ever possible to lag behind a lag which has no history?” As Althusser interprets the situation in which Lenin found himself, Lenin responded to the “scientific pseudo-crisis of physics” by drawing the crucial distinction between science and philosophy. Lenin supposedly proclaimed that philosophy was not a science, that philosophical categories were distinct from scientific concepts, that the meaning of the philosophical category of matter did not change for it did not apply to any object of science, but was absolute.

Nothing could be further from the spirit of Lenin, nor from the letter for that matter. Lenin explicitly affirmed the historicity and scientificity of philosophy, the relativity of the concept of matter, its basis in concrete experience and its development in response to new scientific research. Althusser’s analysis of Lenin is sheer nonsense and it is discredifying nonsense at that. The spectacle of the professional philosopher denigrating philosophy presents a very unworthy

*An assessment of the subsequent development of Soviet science, under the impact of Lenin’s philosophy of science, is, however, a matter for later chapters.
picture, as does such flagrant violation of logic and such overt distortion of another philosopher's position.

Another aspect of Althusser's interpretation concerns Lenin's attitude to philosophy in the political situation that existed in 1908. He suggests that Lenin's reticence to engage in philosophical debate with the bolsheviks who were also Machists in order to safeguard the political unity among bolsheviks was more than a tactical attitude, that it was a new "practice of philosophy," for dialectical materialism was "not a new philosophy, but a new practice of philosophy." Such was not the case. Lenin's attitude was a tactical one and his pursuit was a philosophical one, as a closer look at historical events will show.

The Politics of Philosophy: Bolsheviks/Mensheviks/Machists/Materialists

The philosophical debate among Russian social democrats cut across different lines than the political debate. Among the dialectical materialists in philosophy, Plekhanov, Axelrod, and Deborin were mensheviks, whereas Lenin was a bolshevik. Among the empirio-critics, Yushkevich and Valentinov were mensheviks, while Bogdanov, Bazarov, Lunacharsky, and Gorky were bolsheviks. Philosophical discord was always on the verge of breaking the fragile political unity of the bolsheviks. Several times it actually did. These tensions forced them into certain tactical concessions regarding publications. Three of the seven editors of the bolshevik paper were Machists, and there was an agreement in 1904 that publications be considered philosophically neutral. In 1908, the arrangement was spelled out more specifically. In The Proletarian, the illegal official newspaper, no philosophical articles were to be published. In the legal publications, however, philosophical articles could be published on the condition that both sides be given equal space.

Lenin was at first reticent about participating in the philosophical debate, but only for fear of contributing to a political split. Lenin was of an intensely philosophical frame of mind and believed philosophical matters to be of crucial importance. As time went on, the tension mounted, and, by 1908, Lenin had been provoked to boiling point and he could no longer refrain from intervening. Various developments had convinced him that it had become necessary.

One was the fact that mensheviks such as Plekhanov, Axelrod, and Deborin insisted on drawing attention to the fact that they saw a logical correlation between Machism and bolshevism. They claimed that the bolsheviks were deviating towards Blanquism in politics and philosophical subjectivism was naturally linked to political voluntarism. They did everything to instigate philosophical polemics among the bolsheviks. Finally, in a bolshevik publication, Bogdanov began to reply to Plekhanov. Lenin worried all the more about the image being projected of the mensheviks as orthodox and the bolsheviks as revisionist in the philosophical domain and when he wrote Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, he accused Plekhanov of being less concerned with refuting Mach than with dealing a factional blow at bolshevism. For this exploitation of such differences, Lenin remarked, Plekhanov was deservedly punished by the subsequent publication of two books by mensheviks advocating Machism.

Another development that convinced Lenin to enter the debate was the publication by the Machists of their most audacious works to date. Their collective work Essays in the Philosophy of Marxism caused him to "rage with indignation"; it was, he felt, becoming intolerable to have as allies people who believed such things. Neue Zeit, the most important theoretical organ of Marxism, had just published Bogdanov's article "Ernst Mach and Revolution." To add fuel to the fire, Gorky had written an article in which he seemed to be confirming, from the other side, the correlation the mensheviks were making between the philosophical and political aspects, and depicting the debate as a clash between a philistine materialism linked to historical fatalism and a philosophy of activism. When the article arrived at the bolshevik editorial office, Lenin vigorously protested against its publication at a meeting of the editorial board.

Meanwhile, there were new political debates among both the bolsheviks and the mensheviks that had in any case destroyed the tactical political unity. The bolsheviks were divided on the question of ottovism, a leftist move to recall delegates from the Duma, opposed by Lenin and supported by Bogdanov and Lunacharsky, who formed a faction known as the vperedists. The mensheviks, at the same time, were split on the question of liquidationism, an exaggerated parliamentarism that called for the abolition of the structure of illegal party work and that was challenged by the "party mensheviks," such as Plekhanov. Plekhanov withdrew from the menshevik paper and established one of his own. For a time, Lenin thought there might be a possibility of an alliance with the party mensheviks who were dialectical materialists and no longer worried as much about a split with the vperedists-Machists; the latter were busy propagandizing their views at a school they organized on the island of Capri. In 1909, Lenin violated the 1908 agreement and, overriding Bogdanov's protest, published in the illegal press a severe critique of Lunacharsky. At a 1909 meeting, the bolsheviks ended the arrangement giving equal space to opposing philosophical persuasions and passed a resolution declaring the commitment of their editorial board to dialectical materialism without however mentioning Machism or publishing the resolution. A split ensued. In 1912, however, the bolsheviks readmitted the vperedists with the stipulation that, although they could continue to publish Machist views, they could not do so in the bolshevik press. This arrangement broke down again in 1914.
Throughout all of this, Lenin never attempted to demonstrate any necessary connection between Machism and menshevism, but he did very firmly insist that the defence of dialectical materialism in philosophy was integrally bound up with the defence of Marxist theory in every other sphere. Marxism was “cast from a single piece of steel” and was the essential weapon of the proletariat in the revolutionary struggle.

The Turn of the Tide

Meanwhile other events were under way that would be decisive in determining the fortunes of the contending philosophies.

In 1912, the tide in Russia began to turn again. In the Lena goldfields of Siberia, in a land of a six-month night in winter and plagues of mosquitoes in summer, where workers labored for long hours in degrading conditions for hopelessly low wages, and their wives were obliged to wait on and sleep with the owners, wages were cut by 25 percent and horses’ genitals were found in the food. When they went on strike, five hundred were shot. This touched off a new wave of strikes and demonstrations. All over Russia, there was renewed unrest among workers, soldiers, and peasants. In the same year, at a congress in Prague, the bolsheviks broke finally and irrevocably with the mensheviks and declared themselves to be the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

In 1914 came the war and, as one year passed into another, military defeat followed upon military defeat. Discontent was rampant among the troops and the country was thoroughly exhausted. People were hungry, disillusioned, and angry. By 1917, the tsarist régime was unable to suppress discontent. Troops called in to put down a mass strike in Petrograd refused to obey orders and within two days the struggle was over in Petrograd. It then spread throughout the country and to the armies at the front. In February, the tsar abdicated and a Provisional Government was formed. The members of the government did not make the revolution. They merely stepped into empty positions of power. The government, dominated by business interests, continued the war and at home alternated between reform and repression. However, real power shifted to the soviets. A Central Congress of Soviets was formed. At first, mensheviks and social revolutionaries were in the majority, but the more other parties supported the government’s war efforts, the more did the bolsheviks isolate them from the hungry and war-weary people with their simple call for land, bread, and peace. Meanwhile, revolutionaries were returning from exile. In April, Lenin arrived at the Finland Station, startling even his own supporters with his militancy against the Provisional Government.

By October, the bolsheviks were very strong indeed. They were still vastly outnumbered by other parties, but they were the clearest, the best organized and the most disciplined. It was Lenin who had the most accurate reading of the pulse of the times.

Soon the political debate about party organization and methods of achieving power was over. It was settled on the streets of Petrograd. The philosophical debate, however, was far from resolved, but the setting in which it would be pursued was changed forever.

NOTES

4. Lenin, “Preface to the Collection Twelve Years,” in Against Revisionism (Moscow, 1966), p. 94.
5. Problemy idealizma, (St. Petersburg, 1903).
7. Lyubov Axelrod, O problemakh idealizma (Odessa, 1910; Filosofskie ocherki (St. Petersburg, 1906).
20. Ibid., p. 8.
21. Ibid., p. 72.
23. Plekhanov, Materialismus Militans, p. 113.
26. Ibid., p. 81.
27. Plekhanov, Fundamental Problems of Marxism, p. 27.
29. Plekhanov, Materialism Yet Again, p. 418.
30. Plekhanov, Fundamental Problems of Marxism, p. 27.
33. L. I. Axelrod, Filosofskie ocherki.
34. Lenin, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism (Moscow, 1920), p. 238.
35. Ibid., p. 319.
CHAPTER 4

THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION:
Marxism in Power

The Early Days of the Revolution

In October 1917 the revolution came, transforming utterly the whole context for every debate and giving birth to unanticipated new ones.

Under the leadership of the bolsheviks, the Soviets took state power, nearly without opposition; resistance came only from a handful of cadets and a women’s death battalion. The Provisional Government was dissolved and a new government was formed with Lenin as chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars at its head. The new Soviet government immediately issued a flurry of decrees, giving land to the peasants, nationalizing key industries, proclaiming the equality of women, and announcing an imminent end to the war. The bolsheviks went from town to town and from village to village, proclaiming the Soviet government and calling on peasants to confiscate land, on soldiers to arrest counterrevolutionary generals, and on workers to assume state functions. And so they did.

It was an extraordinary time. There had never been a time like it before, nor could there ever be a time like it again. It was the world’s first socialist revolution and as such it had no precedents. They were doing something that had never been done before, opening up a new line of historical development. There seemed to be unlimited scope for human creativity in this monumental enterprise of building from scratch a whole new social order. The air was alive with possibilities and everything was up for grabs. It was challenging and exhilarating. Lenin exhorted: