

HIS 242 Unit 4

Marxism

Remarks by Professor Blois



Lenin in wax replica with Professor Blois. Photo courtesy Bev Blois

In the early history of Russian Marxism, there are ironies and inconsistencies. For instance, the first Russians to read Marx were populists who, rejecting Marx' revolutionary prognosis, propagated his censure of

capitalism, which they felt was totally inappropriate in Russia. The first Russian to fully understand and accept Marx's socialism was Georgii Plekhanov, who lived abroad from 1880 to 1917 and who never led any of the important Marxist groups within Russia. Finally, it is significant that the revolutionary leader who established the world's first Marxist state, Vladimir Ulianov (Lenin), espoused a philosophy that drew on both populism and Marxism. Nevertheless, Lenin, the great innovator, was more concerned to appear the embodiment of orthodoxy than any other Russian Marxist except perhaps for Plekhanov.

In 1871, Nikolai Danielson, a Russian populist, translated into Russian volume one of **Das Kapital**, the work's first translation into any language since its publication in German in 1867. Danielson and other populists felt that Marx's study, so vivid in its description of the ills of capitalism, constituted the best proof available why Russia should not embark on the path of capitalist development. The motives of the Russian censors, who allowed the book's publication at a time when many wholly innocuous books were being routinely denied imprimatur, are also interesting. They apparently felt that **Das Kapital** was so dense and so utterly inapplicable to Russian conditions that it would fail to find an audience. Indeed, a decade passed before a Russian grasped and began to propagandize the revolutionary content of Marx's writings.

One of the few precepts that had bound together Russian populists had been their refusal to accept capitalism as appropriate for Russia. In the 1880s, when it became clear that Russia was undergoing capitalist development, populism was rendered bankrupt and the dream of a separate economic path for Russia was dashed. Marxism afforded an opportunity for many ex-populists, such as Plekhanov, to champion what was expected to be an

inevitable passage to socialism through capitalism. For Plekhanov, acceptance of an ideology placing its hopes on the industrial proletariat rather than the peasantry was easy since, according to his biographer, Samuel Baron, Plekhanov had always distrusted the peasant-based socialism of the populists.

In 1883, the year of Marx's death, Plekhanov founded the first circle of Russian Marxists, the Emancipation of Labor group. By the mid-1880s, he had laid the foundation for applying Marxism to Russian conditions in two pamphlets, **Our Differences** (directed at the populists) and **Socialism and the World Struggle**. In these pamphlets Plekhanov asserted that socialism must be erected by and for the proletariat rather than the peasantry, that only through their own conscious efforts could the workers be liberated, that it was inevitable for capitalism to lead to socialism in Russia, and that terrorism might be necessary to ensure success. Later, the battle lines between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks would be largely drawn over the emphasis given to these seminal premises.

In the 1880s, several Marxist study groups became active in St. Petersburg and other industrializing Russian cities, but most were created by radical students who were unable to win the respect of the workers. Worker distrust of the intelligentsia stemmed largely from a desire for self-education as a means to economic advancement. The student groups saw education of the workers as a means to the end of political radicalization. By the 1890s, worker-led Marxist circles were attracting many adherents precisely because they were far less agitational than the populists had been.

As the number and intensity of industrial strikes began to escalate, Russian Marxists often took part openly in the workers' struggles. Whether economic

or political goals were uppermost in these strikes is hard to discern, but in general workers were more interested in economic goals and Marxists in political ones. In the 1960s and 1970s, the American historian Richard Pipes challenged Soviet scholars over their claim that this divergence of interest was more apparent than real. Whether because of disenchantment with the workers or because of campaigns by tsarist police to arrest their leaders, many Marxist groups extricated themselves from open struggle and went underground. Among those that tended increasingly toward secrecy and elitism was the Radchenko circle which, in 1893, had recruited a new resident of St. Petersburg, Lenin.

In 1895, the Lenin-Radchenko circle joined with a group of Jewish socialists led by Iulii Martov, forming the nucleus of what became, in 1898, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP). The founding of this party, on the heels of a massive wave of strikes in 1896-97, indicated the Marxists' assurance that the revolutionary potential of the Russian proletariat had now been proved.

From its inception, the party was at odds over whether to remain secretive or to emerge as a mass organization. The repressive policies of the tsarist police caused Lenin, who had been imprisoned and exiled from 1895 to 1900, to decide in favor of secrecy. He set down his concept of the party's elite role in the pamphlet **What Is to Be Done?**, written in 1902. The revolution of the workers would be led by a small, secretive group of non-workers. Without this organizational precaution, the workers themselves would be unable to sustain militancy and would lapse into "trade union consciousness." At the time the workers were becoming disenchanted with the Marxists, as they had earlier with the populists, and were enlisting in large numbers in the trade union-like, police-sponsored organizations of

Zubatov. These organizations offered some economic concessions to the workers.

A showdown over tactics came at the party's second congress, held in London in 1903. All of Lenin's ideas, with the exception of his organizational plan, received approval by the delegates. Because of Lenin's majority at the congress, after which the party split into factions, his followers became known as Bolsheviks, meaning "majority-ites." Those who favored a mass party incongruously accepted the designation Mensheviks, or "minority-ites." Lenin henceforth elaborated his ideas in virtual isolation, and held his faction together on the principle of strict obedience to his positions. The group of Leninists was often small, but it was dedicated, obedient, and disciplined, virtues considered paramount by Lenin himself.

Lenin's childhood **[insert something here drawn from Deutscher article in Ramparts and Pipes' intellectual evolution of the young Lenin" from Rev Russia]**

[also insert a "Lenins n Things" photo essay somewhere... maybe here, maybe where discussing the late '80s/early '90s]