

# Theoretical Views and Social Democratic Activities of G.V. Plekhanov

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**Abstract**—Theoretical views of G.V. Plekhanov on the future of mankind still evokes undoubted interest. As an encyclopedic personality himself, he brought up a large pleiad of brilliant minds who successfully represented Russia in various fields of knowledge - economics, philosophy, literature and art. And now, in the modern world, his ideas do not age. In this regard, the purpose of the study is to analyze the life of the great man, his views, doubts, throwing, position. The main methods of research are the method of scientific abstraction, system analysis, deduction, the method of information structuring, the analysis of archival materials. The pedigree of the Plekhanov family is represented, the three stages of the Plekhanov's path as a political figure are traced, Plekhanov's views on the development of social and political thought are examined. Plekhanov's articles, as well as his actions, have always been vigorously discussed. He was fond of the ideas of Narodism, but there was a split among the Narodniks. After reading the Manifesto of the Communist Party, he was carried away by Marxism and abandoned the ideas of populism. He began to cooperate with Lenin, but the disagreements between them led Plekhanov to the side of the Mensheviks. In Plekhanov's works, undoubtedly, there is something that is considered valuable and durable, and views on the future of a wise, highly educated and just man can be traced.

**Keywords**—*theorist, thinker, populism, Marxism, ideology*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The modern level of education makes special demands on the development of creative activities of students who should grow into highly qualified specialists. This requires the use of all world scientific thought, a significant contribution to which

is the achievement of the Russian thought. In this regard, it is fair to recall the contribution of G.V. Plekhanov in the world treasury of ideas. Acquaintance with his works shows the exceptional depth and seriousness of thinking, the breadth of encyclopedic knowledge of the outstanding Russian thinker.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main research methods are: scientific abstraction, system analysis, deduction, structuring information, analysis of archival materials. Historical-genetic and historical-typological methods are also used.

## III. ANALYSIS OF THE SOURCES USED

The study uses the Plekhanov's correspondence with friends (V.I. Zasluchich, L.G. Deych, P.B. Akselrod), relatives (N.A. Semashko, Claude Bato), colleagues (Paul Lafargue, V.I. Lenin), and the works of the modern scholars (L.I. Abalkin, Sh.M. Munchaev, G.Kh. Popov, G.P. Zhuravleva and others).

## IV. FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

A great number of scientific works focus on the analysis of the revolutionary thought of G.V. Plekhanov, but his personal life is little known. This aspect of his development is important for understanding why some people disliked, while others respected Plekhanov for the same thoughts, sayings, works and deeds. Plekhanov himself asserted that “the life course of a person, his activity are determined by the main goals, innate as well as acquired qualities” [1]. And judging by the life of Plekhanov, his main goal was “the successful development of

Russia for the benefit of the people, and the first means of achieving this goal is building socialism by overthrowing autocracy” [2].

The basic personality traits of Georgi Plekhanov were formed in his family. He was born on December 11, 1885 (New Style) in the village of Gudalovka, Lipetsk district, Tambov region. His father, Captain Valentin Petrovich Plekhanov (1810–1873) was a petty nobleman. From him, Georgi inherited decency, honesty, hard work and self-confidence. “The family had a great influence on the formation of the personality of Georgi Valentinovich. It is precisely because of the complexity and inconsistency of the character that he often showed sharpness in controversy. Acknowledging this, Plekhanov, nevertheless, always treated the enemy with respect, did not go beyond the literary framework, did not stoop to vulgar abuse, making fun of not a person, but their point of view. That is why he hoped that he would be forgiven for his harsh criticism” [2]. The family of Valentin Petrovich was large. In the first marriage with Vera Ivanovna Pozdnyakova, who died in 1855, seven children were born, and Georgi had four stepbrothers and three stepsisters. His mother, Maria Fedorovna Belynskaya (1832–1881), the grand-niece of V.G. Belinsky, was an orphan. After graduating from the Tambov Institute of Noble Maidens, she worked as a governess in the families of local landowners. Seven children were also born in this marriage. From mother Plekhanov inherited sensitivity, magnanimity, patience, intelligence, modesty. Little information was preserved about Georgi’s family, probably because he had been in an illegal situation since 1876, and in exile since 1880.

G.V. Plekhanov himself was also married twice. His first wife, Natalya Nikanorovna Smirnova, was one of the first female doctors in Russia. She met Plekhanov when she studied at the women courses in St. Petersburg and helped revolutionaries. In this marriage a daughter Nadezhda (1877) and a son Nikolay (1878), who died in infancy, were born. But this marriage was short-lived and unhappy. Subsequently, Smirnova worked as a doctor at the Minyar city hospital in the Ufa province [3]. Plekhanov found family happiness in the marriage with Rosalia Markovna Bograd (1856-1949) who became his assistant and companion for life. She was also a doctor and was actively involved in the populist movement. Four daughters were born in this family: Vera and Maria died in childhood; Lydia (1881-1978) and Eugenia (1883-1964) remained to live in France, where the great-grandson, great-great-grandson and great-great-granddaughter of Plekhanov live today [4]. Practically nothing is known about other relatives.

The formation of G.V. Plekhanov as a thinker was difficult, including a variety of ideas and contradictions, sometimes mistakes, but the constant affirmation of the values of humanism in human development. In this development, the following steps are traced:

I - 1873-1883; II - 1883-1903; III - 1903-1918. The first stage was marked by the break with the nobility environment. Georgi abandoned his military career, then, in the fall of 1874, he entered the St. Petersburg Mining Institute, familiarizing himself with the leaders of the populist movement. Having embarked on the path of active

revolutionary struggle, Plekhanov “went to the people”, participated in demonstrations, strikes. During the first legal demonstration of the populists, the Kazan Demonstration on December 6, 1876, Plekhanov delivered a speech in defense of Nikolai Chernyshevsky, exiled to Siberia, defeated the autocracy. The speech brought Plekhanov the glory of the “orator” among his associates, and the police put him on the wanted list. From that day, Plekhanov went into hiding and became a professional revolutionary. He later emigrated twice: in 1877 to Berlin, then to Paris, in 1880 to Geneva [2]. At the beginning of his revolutionary activities, Plekhanov was fascinated for a while by the ideas of the leader of anarchism, M.A. Bakunin, who called on young people to immediately protest against the three-headed monster: private property, the state and the church. But there was no unity among the populists. Their main theorists, P.L. Lavrov and N.K. Mikhailovsky, considered the intelligentsia, as the bearer of moral consciousness and a critical attitude to the existing system, to be the driving force of historical progress and enlightenment.

In 1879, the Narodnik organization “Zemlya i Volia” (“Land and Liberty”), which emerged in 1862 under the influence of the ideas of A.I. Gertsen and N.G. Chernyshevsky, split into two separate ones. These were “Narodnaya Volya”, under the leadership of A. Zhelyabov, who chose the methods of terror in the struggle against autocracy, and “Cherniy Peredel” (“Black repartition”), led by Plekhanov who categorically objected to terror, believing that killing the king would not destroy the autocracy, and another monarch would come to the throne. But the revolutionary movement would seriously suffer as a result of arrests, exiles and executions of the best revolutionaries. V. I. Lenin assessed populism as an enormous strip of social thought, a kind of ideology based on a non-capitalist path of development.

In emigration, Plekhanov began his serious passion for Marxism. Independently, in a short time having learned German, he translated the Communist Manifesto into Russian.

The second stage of G.V. Plekhanov’s life is a break with populism and a transition to the position of Marxism. Admiring Karl Marx, Plekhanov declared that he was more Marxist than Marx himself, and that he would think a hundred times before he disagreed. The views of Plekhanov changed due to the accelerated development of capitalism in Russia, in-depth reading of the works of Karl Marx and F. Engels, their experience, the strengthening of the labor movement in Europe [2].

Geneva was the main city to meet with friends - members of the “Emancipation of Labor” group. They declared that their main goal was the spread of Marxism in Russia and the theoretical criticism of the ideology of populism. Plekhanov became a propagandist, theorist and a brilliant popularizer of Marxism in Russia [5]. He did a lot of translation of articles, brochures, books. Powerfully hitting his works on the ideology of the Narodniks, Plekhanov acquired strong critics and enemies among former like-minded people. He wrote: “Russia is uncontrollably following the path of capitalism, and the task of the Social

Democrats is to use the processes generated by capitalism in the interests of the revolution.” [1] Plekhanov was convinced that “the emerging proletariat, the hegemon of the liberation movement”, who is called to fight for the creation of a socialist workers’ party, becomes the main revolutionary force in the struggle against autocracy and capitalism [5]. A significant influence on the development of the Marxist world view of Plekhanov was exerted by his work in the congresses of the Second International, his communication with Engels and other major figures of the revolutionary movement [3, 7]. In 1895, Plekhanov teamed up with V.I. Lenin to collaborate on the organization of the first all-Russian Marxist newspaper *Iskra*, the magazine *Zarya*, and the development of the Program of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP). In adopting the Program and Charter at the Second Congress of the RSDLP (1903), Plekhanov supported Lenin, having left the congress together with the Bolsheviks. This led to the split of the party into factions of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks [6].

The last stage III is the most difficult and tragic, full of forecasts and thoughts of G.V. Plekhanov which are extremely relevant for understanding the present and future of modern Russia.

During this period, the frequent rushing of Plekhanov from the Mensheviks to the Bolsheviks and back again, the disagreements between him and Lenin constantly increased, which was reflected in his work and personal relations. Plekhanov completely mastered, according to the Bolsheviks, the obsessive and impracticable idea of the “unity of the party” by all means. Lenin was also in favor of unity, but exclusively under his command, with his goals and slogans, with which Plekhanov could not agree. Soon after the Second Congress, Plekhanov moved to the Menshevik camp and became one of their leaders. A significant contradiction appeared in his worldview: on the one hand, as a Menshevik, he politically opposed V. Lenin, especially on issues of the party strategy and tactics, against the Leninist concept of “forced seizure of power”; on the other hand, in philosophy, Plekhanov remained a militant materialist fighting against bourgeois idealistic philosophy” [2].

During the revolution of 1905-1907, Plekhanov condemned the course of the armed uprising, arguing that there was no need to take up arms. But in 1908-1912, Plekhanov acted as an opponent of liquidationism, God-seeking, Machism, and successfully exposed the opponents of the underground revolutionary struggle. During the First World War (1914-1918), Plekhanov took the position of the need to continue the war with Germany “to the bitter end” [13]. He fiercely defended his point of view, believing that the defeated Russian people could become slaves to the victors. The conclusion of peace with Germany would eventually make it stronger and unleash a war with Russia again. This was the manifestation of the Plekhanov’s foresight of the birth of fascism in Germany, World War II (1939–1945).

G.V. Plekhanov possessed the exceptional performance. In Russia and abroad, he was recognized as a bright and deep Russian scientist, philosopher, leader of the Russian Social Democratic movement. His return to Russia from a 37-year

emigration after the February Revolution was met at the Finland Station of St. Petersburg by a crowd of thousands of people, with an orchestra and welcoming speeches. But he was not invited to participate in the Petrograd Soviet. Although the head of the first composition of the Provisional Government, Prince G. Lvov, offered Plekhanov the post of the Minister of Labor, the Mensheviks voted for another candidate. Later, A. Kerensky again invited Plekhanov to the post of the Minister of Industry and Trade of the Provisional Government, but Plekhanov again refused, recommending that he talk with the Mensheviks. Social Revolutionary B. Savinkov even suggested that Plekhanov, after the possible overthrow of the Bolsheviks, would head the new government. Plekhanov refused this again, stating that “he will not shoot the workers even if they take the wrong path” [2].

In this situation, Plekhanov was left only to work in the newspaper *Yedinstvo* where he published his articles, persistently expressing his disagreement with Lenin and the Bolsheviks. So, Plekhanov’s comments on the April theses by V. I. Lenin were published under the title “About the theses by Lenin and why nonsense is sometimes interesting.” Plekhanov’s constant criticism of the course of the Bolsheviks led to an open confrontation between Plekhanov and Lenin, which reached its highest point in July 1917. Plekhanov openly advocated the arrest of Lenin, admitting the possibility of his political cooperation with Germany. Lenin, in the correspondence with friends, not waiting for Plekhanov to respond to an invitation to speak at the meeting of Bolsheviks dedicated to the 15th anniversary of the RSDLP, mockingly called Plekhanov “Zhulyabia”, Ignatii Loyola, “a general from influence”. In a letter to Plekhanov, Lenin declared that as regards “personal relations, their restoration is impossible.”

Before the October Revolution, Plekhanov warned that “early and premature socialist experiments are dangerous adventurism which can discredit the very idea of socialism and lead to the establishment of the barracks-communist order, the replacement of the power of the people by the power of the new bureaucratic elite” and even the degradation of the nation. According to Plekhanov, “the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks will lead not to the dictatorship of the proletariat, but to the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party alone, the dictatorship of one person, stagnation and the death of the country.” “He called this system “political ugliness”, a renewed royal despotism on a communist lining” [1, 2]. Therefore, Plekhanov did not consider the October Revolution of the Bolsheviks a socialist revolution, and boldly stated this. In the “Open Letter to the Petrograd Workers,” he wrote with the hope of being understood: “Dear comrades, I am not pleased, but saddened by the recent events in Petrograd .... They grieve me not because I do not want the triumph of the working class, but on the contrary, because I call upon it with all the forces of the soul and at the same time see how far their named events push it aside. They will be incomparably sadder if the conscious elements of the working class do not speak out firmly and resolutely against the policy of seizing power by one class, or – even worse, by one party. The government must rely on a coalition of all the living forces of the country” [7].

Rejected by the new authorities, Plekhanov was out of work. During his life, he did not see the unity of the living healthy

forces for which he had so advocated. The diseases accumulated during the years of wandering and excessive labor progressed and on May 30, 1918, Plekhanov passed away.

The coffin of Plekhanov was carried on the hands of Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, workers along Nevsky Prospect up to the Volkov cemetery. Petrograd Bolsheviks, headed by G. Zinoviev, pointedly refused to participate in the mourning ceremony. Plekhanov's closest friend Lev Deitch, saying goodbye to him at the grave, said that Christ had only one Judas, and there were many of them among Plekhanov's students, and the history would show who was right. Lenin was not at the funeral, but despite all the disagreements with Plekhanov, in 1921, Lenin admitted that "everything written by Plekhanov in philosophy is the best in all international literature of Marxism." In 1922, he said to N. Bukharin: "I am now rereading Plekhanov's articles again which he wrote during the war. Interesting! They are not as stupid as we thought they were then."

## V. RESULTS

The activities of Plekhanov, his personal behavior, the content of his works must be considered in the political context of Russia and Europe of that period. The period in the nineteenth century from Belinsky to Plekhanov was the century of the thinking intelligentsia who worked for the good of the Russian people, but different decisions were made for this, different tactics and methods of activity were chosen. These names are compared because, at the request of G.V. Plekhanov himself, his ashes were buried next to the ashes of V.G. Belinsky, symbolizing the continuity of revolutionary ideas.

Plekhanov "was a man with deep democratic convictions" [6], an implacable enemy of the political regime of autocracy and tsarism, showed firmness in his positions, in the choice of tactics and strategy. Often he went on a break even in respect of personal friendship, defended his principles, starting with the policy of terror which he did not recognize, and ending with attempts at compromises and accords. Many who have written about him view this as an "element of betrayal" [8]. But maybe he just looked on? Taking into account all that is happening in the world, the search for agreement, compromise, harmonization of interests is wisdom, foresight, which we, unfortunately, do not always hear in the words of Plekhanov.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Turning to the creative heritage of Plekhanov, it should be remembered that it is not quotations that can be found in his works on many issues, but aspirations for the benefit of Russia, its people, and its methodological approach to analyzing social, economic, political and other problems. The analysis of the works of Plekhanov shows their relevance and modernity. How much wisdom, for example, is only in his warning that "the socialist revolution is premature in an agrarian country, that it is necessary to prepare for it, to form, to create another level of development of productive forces, for which we must go the way of capitalist development." The question arises: is perestroika an objectively necessary way for the capitalist development of Russia, which we (erroneously or prematurely?) refused at the beginning of the last century and

return to it 70 years later? How to characterize the "restructuring"? As a reform of socialism, a coup (change of power while maintaining the economic system)? As a revolution (a sharp leap in social development)? A change from one mode of production to another (for example, capitalism to socialism in 1917) or counter-revolution (change of socialism to capitalism)? These issues are again being discussed.

Modern Russia is far from an agrarian country, but its raw material orientation does not allow raising the productive forces to the necessary level. For what? Not for socialism, this is not being said now, but perhaps in vain? The system built in the USSR is not socialism, but, according to Plekhanov, "political ugliness". The answer is necessary for the future, which has not yet found a generally accepted definition. So far we are talking about a new model of socio-economic development, about the need to reform the model of capitalism and not only in Russia. These questions need to be solved by the modern society, recalling the lessons of Plekhanov. Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov was and remains for us a real scholar, a deeply intelligent person, a bright personality, worthy of respect. In his works, we will always find what humanity considers valuable and eternal, because the ideals of enlightenment, humanism, freedom and justice, which Plekhanov served all his uneasy life, do not lose their value and attractiveness.

The materials of the article are of practical value for economists, philosophers, academic and pedagogical staff, graduate students and students. They can be used in lecture courses in economics, history, philosophy, aesthetics and psychology.

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