

Comrade Hegel: Absolute Spirit Goes East

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Abstract:

When the Soviet state finally won the Civil War against its multiple external and internal enemies, it found itself in a difficult (almost impossible) economic and political situation. Theoretically unified around Plekhanov's interpretation of Marxism, Soviet leaders struggled to fit the new existing reality of the success of their revolution and the old philosophical debates about its ultimate theoretical justification. The role of Hegel (and his understanding of the philosophy of history and dialectics) and his connection to Marx and Lenin emerged as one of the most important theoretical aspects of the emerging Soviet school of philosophy. Initially engaged as part of the so-called "mechanists versus dialecticians" debate, Hegel's dialectical heritage slowly but surely came to mean the inevitability of history's movement away from capitalism toward socialism. By the time Stalin and his supporters succeeded in their struggle for power, this notion of history and its dialectics became prevalent and was finally codified in the peculiarly un-dialectical presentation in the infamous theoretical insertion in the Party's official history published in 1938. This section – "On dialectical and historical materialism" – written by Stalin himself, represented the final word in the long and still considerably understudied history of Hegel's adventures in the early Russian and Soviet Marxist tradition.

Keywords:

Hegel, dialectical method, dialectical materialism, early Soviet philosophical debates, Stalinism.

A volume published in the Soviet Union in 1970 and dedicated to the two-hundredth anniversary of Hegel's birth opens with an editorial introduction by Academician Fyodor Konstantinov, one of the official reigning philosophers of the time. In his introduction Konstantinov discusses the role of Hegel's philosophy and writes, perhaps without realising the full meaning of this combination of clichés, something intriguing: "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin brilliantly observed that whoever did not read Hegel's *Logic*, did not understand Marx's *Capital*. This insight may be and must be applied to other works of the founders of Marxism, including the works of Lenin himself."¹ Lenin famously turned to Hegel at the time that others would have considered inappropriate for such abstract theoretical preoccupation. According to Konstantinov, Lenin's decision to spend time with Hegel indicated not only that he valued Hegel's philosophy but also that this philosophy was crucial for what was to follow – Lenin's leadership that resulted in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

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1 Suvorov 1973, 5-6.

Konstantinov's hyperbolic narrative continues. He asserts that Lenin's reliance on Hegel's *Logic* "and other works" in his book on imperialism, this "*Capital* of the twentieth century," meant that this revolutionary leader saw great value in the "most abstract philosophical works of the idealist Hegel."² And, therefore, so should we, the readers. Lenin, the argument goes, could not have created his theory of the socialist revolution without dialectics, i.e. without Hegel. That *Marx* could not be understood without Hegel, according to Lenin's aphorism, was an old cliché of Soviet philosophy. But that *Lenin* himself could not be understood without Hegel's *Logic*, that theory of socialist revolution would never have been formulated without Hegel, that was a rather novel observation. Hegel, although neither Konstantinov nor other official philosophers stated it quite like this, was connected not only to Marx and Marxism but also to Lenin and, ultimately, to Russian Revolution – no Hegel, no dialectics, no revolution, no socialism (in one country).

An attentive and informed reader will object that by the time the volume in question appeared the formulaic pronouncements concerning Hegel's importance reached a high level of idiosyncratic incomprehensibility, so the logical connection that was clearly proposed (Hegel – Marx – Lenin – USSR) was not to be understood *literally* but hyperbolically. That is most certainly true. However, the role of Hegel's philosophy, or rather, the role of Hegel's *role* in the history of Marxist tradition, was one of the most contentious and essential elements of Soviet philosophy. In one sense, one might say that the history of Soviet philosophy was the history of this struggle with, for and against, Hegel's legacy.

The above-mentioned volume's opening chapter was written by another coryphaeus of Soviet philosophy, Mark Mitin (sarcastically renamed by those around him into *Mrak* [Obscure] Mitin). This particular philosophical functionary came into view in the early 1930s when he, together with other young Stalinists, "exposed" the alleged theoretical deviations of Abram Deborin, a recognised Soviet Hegelian expert of the time. The charge was Deborin's alleged lack of recognition of the new "Leninist stage" of Marxist philosophy, denigration of Lenin as a mere "practitioner," as well as Deborin's alleged "Menshevizing idealism" and "Hegelian revision of Marxism."³ Then Soviet philosophers were accused of getting lost in the abstractions of Hegelian logic, *now*, forty years later, Mitin was telling his readers that Hegel "is near and dear to us."⁴

2 Suvorov 1973, 7.

3 Mitin 1934, pp. 83-84.

4 Suvorov 1973, p. 13.

Any revision of the principal positions of Marxism, Mitin noted, is always related to the revision of the relationship between Marx and Hegel.⁵

Why did the crusty "notarised Marxists" (in Mikhail Lifschitz's apt idiom) feel the need to link Hegel to Marx and then to Lenin and their socialist society? The main narrative of the entire history of Soviet philosophy is yet to be written. The present essay attempts to illuminate the initial stages of Hegel's travels in the Soviet philosophical space starting with the role of Plekhanov's interest in Hegel, continuing on to the most interesting philosophical debate in Soviet philosophy and ending with a symbolic death of Hegel's dialectical thought in Stalin's expressly *undialectical* philosophical chapter of the *Short Course*.

Plekhanov and the Birth of Dialectical Materialism

Many descriptions of "dialectical materialism" open with an inaccurate statement that the phrase was coined by Georgi Plekhanov, the first significantly influential Russian exponent of Marxism.⁶ The term was in fact coined by Joseph Dietzgen in 1887:

Because the idealist perversity in its last representatives, namely Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, was thoroughly German, its issue, *dialectical materialism*, is also a pre-eminently German product.⁷

Plekhanov *did* use the phrase a lot, sufficiently so that Lenin, while working on his attack against "Machism" and various "deviations" from true Marxism, attributed its origins to the "classics of Marxism": "Does the lecturer acknowledge that the philosophy of Marxism is *dialectical materialism*? If he does not, why has he not ever analysed Engels' countless statements on this subject?"⁸ If we take this question literally, then the answer is simple – Engels actually says nothing about "dialectical materialism" and neither does Marx, as he never used this particular phrase to describe his ideas.

In the preface to *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* Lenin goes further and claims that both Marx and Engels "scores of times termed

5 Suvorov 1973, p. 21.

6 See Anderson 1995, p. 15: "It is in this essay [Plekhanov's 1891 essay on the sixtieth anniversary of Hegel's death] that Plekhanov coins the term 'dialectical materialism'. Marx never employs the phrase; it is Plekhanov's own construct."

7 Dietzgen 1906, p. 293.

8 Lenin 1962, p. 15.

their philosophical views dialectical materialism.”⁹ And then again: “Marx frequently called his world outlook dialectical materialism.”¹⁰ Lenin identifies “Marxism” with “dialectical materialism” throughout the book and he does so not in imitation of Marx and Engels, but in following Plekhanov. Despite political and certain philosophical differences with Plekhanov, it is clear that Lenin learned about “dialectical materialism” from him and the connection between “dialectical materialism” and “philosophy of Marxism” was made based on that particular theoretical context.

Plekhanov’s contribution to the idea of “philosophy of Marxism” is essential, and any discussion of Russian and Soviet Marxism without him would be impossible. It is important to identify him as a genuine creator of the idea that such thing as “philosophy of Marxism” exists and goes back to Marx and Engels themselves. Plekhanov’s notion has roots in some of the writings by Engels, especially his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), the book that Plekhanov translated (and supplemented with comments) into Russian. However, while Engels emphasised the connection between Marx and Hegel in a way that did not suggest the necessity to thoroughly study the latter to fully understand the former, Plekhanov insisted that without reading Hegel *directly* it was impossible to understand Marx and Marxism.¹¹

In his first Marxist pamphlet – “Socialism and Political Struggle” (1883) – that was to introduce an entire generation of Russian revolutionaries to Marx and Engels, Plekhanov writes: “But what is scientific socialism? Under that name we understand the communist teaching which began to take shape at the beginning of the forties out of utopian socialism under *the strong influence of Hegelian philosophy* on the one side, and of classical economics on the other...”¹² Further in the same pamphlet Plekhanov mentions what will become a rather paradoxical but accepted position in the future Russian and Soviet Marxism: “... although scientific socialism traces its genealogy ‘from Kant and Hegel’, it is nevertheless the most deadly and resolute opponent of idealism.”¹³ Marxist philosophy comes out of idealism of Kant and Hegel, yet turns out

9 Lenin 1962, p. 19.

10 Lenin 1962, p. 246.

11 Kevin Anderson brings up this point in his discussion of Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach and Plekhanov’s* 1891 essay on Hegel: “Although Engels takes Hegel seriously, the preceding statement [regarding the distinction between Hegel’s conservative system and progressive method] could be (and was) read to imply that Marxists need not study Hegel directly...” Anderson 1995, p. 13.

12 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 66. Emphasis added.

13 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 67.

to be the most anti-idealist philosophy in existence.

In the next twenty or so years – Soviet historians, following Lenin, generally allowed for twenty years of Plekhanov’s influence (1883 – 1903) – Plekhanov ruled the world of self-proclaimed Marxist orthodoxy: “The services he rendered in the past were immense. During the twenty years between 1883 and 1903 he wrote a large number of splendid essays, especially those against the opportunists, Machists and Narodniks.”¹⁴ Philosophically speaking, Plekhanov’s defence of “dialectical materialism” had unquestioned authority among his future Soviet readers. So what is this “dialectical materialism” that Plekhanov argued coincided with “philosophy of Marxism”? And, more importantly, what was *Hegel’s* role in its conceptual organisation?

In a famous essay written for *Die Neue Zeit* in 1891 – “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death” – Plekhanov explained that “Hegel’s idealist philosophy itself contains the very best, the most irrefutable proof of the inconsistency of idealism.”¹⁵ Hegel’s philosophy demonstrates its own inconsistency thus taking idealism down once and for all. In other words, it takes idealism to its ultimate articulation and, once there, reveals its essential philosophical sterility. Hegel “puts us on the way to the materialist conception of history,” and his philosophy of history demonstrates that “*materialism is the truth of idealism.*”¹⁶ It is not entirely clear from Plekhanov’s essay *how* Hegel’s idealism demonstrates its own limitations and leads to materialism. But it is clear that Marx was Hegel’s greatest student and that Marx was a materialist who was able to take Hegel’s idealism to its breaking point. The unspoken assumption here is that idealism taken to its limit turns into materialism.

In his 1895 study – *The Development of the Monist View of History* – Plekhanov (writing under the pseudonym of “N. Beltov”) provides a kind of historical survey of materialist views from the eighteenth century French materialism to “dialectical materialism.” The collection, however, is not a systematic study of materialism as it was originally designed

14 Lenin 1964, p. 358. Lenin then continues: “But since 1903 Plekhanov has been vacillating in the most ludicrous manner on questions of tactics and organisation: 1) 1903, August – a Bolshevik; 2) 1903, November (Iskra No. 52) – in favour of peace with the “opportunist” Mensheviks; 3) 1903, December – a Menshevik, and an ardent one; 4) 1905, spring – after the victory of the Bolsheviks – in favour of “unity” between “brothers at strife”; 5) the end of 1905 till mid-1906 – a Menshevik; 6) mid-1906 – started, on and off, to move away from the Mensheviks, and in London, in 1907, censured them (Cherevanin’s admission) for their “organisational anarchism”; 7) 1908 – a break with the liquidators; 8) 1914—a new turn towards the liquidators.”

15 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 414.

16 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 418. “This greatest of *idealists*,” adds Plekhanov, “seems to have set himself the task of clearing the road for materialism.”

to contain Plekhanov's polemical essays directed against various theoretical enemies (as many of his books ultimately were). The book's largest essay is dedicated to "modern materialism." This materialism emerged "enriches by all the acquisitions of idealism."¹⁷ Idealism here stands largely for Hegel. Plekhanov engages various critics of Marx and counters their accusations regarding the latter's use of Hegel's idiom, the theme that will be for a very long time a matter of intense discussion in Marxist circles.

The use of Hegel, whatever that use actually was, by Marx was and continues to be a controversial subject matter. The essential controversy is around the question of whether Marx could do what he did without any reference to Hegel or whether his true Marxist ideas were in fact free of any connection to Hegel so the latter could be mentioned only as an early influence that is not necessary to take seriously if one were to grasp the ultimate nature of Marxist philosophy. The options are not as clear as "pro-Hegel" and "anti-Hegel" – were it possible, it would have been a very easy solution as two parties could easily align along these two poles. The options are "Hegel's philosophy was essential to Marx's discoveries and the latter could not have taken place without it" and "Hegel's philosophy was an early influence but Marx's discoveries are based on his analyses of facts (science) and are not connected to Hegel's obscure and outdated theoretical framework." Plekhanov belonged to the first group:

[Modern] materialism rose again enriched by all the acquisitions of idealism. The most important of these acquisitions was the *dialectical method*, the examination of phenomena in their development, in their origin and destruction. The genius who represented this new direction of thought was Karl Marx.¹⁸

Marx uses dialectical method in his analysis of *history* – it is only as a philosophy of history that Marx's use of Hegel is important to Plekhanov. On the one hand, he endlessly defends Marx from all and any opponents who suggest that the latter's philosophy of history was only a version of Hegelianism. On the other hand, Plekhanov's ultimate point is that, although Marx would not be possible without Hegel, Hegelian philosophy accomplished something no other idealist philosophy was able to accomplish – it took idealism to its end and thus made transition to "modern" (dialectical) materialism possible. In Plekhanov's chronology, idealism in general becomes "metaphysical idealism" in its most complex pre-Hegelian form; it is juxtaposed with "metaphysical

17 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 580.

18 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 574. Original emphasis.

materialism" of Holbach and Helvetius; as a result of the struggle between "metaphysical idealism" and "metaphysical materialism" a new form of idealism emerged – "dialectical idealism" of which Hegel is the highest point. This form of idealism was overcome by "dialectical materialism" of Marx and Engels.¹⁹

Hegel's dialectical method, argues Plekhanov, was discovered when Hegel realised that "Der Widerspruch ist das Fortleitenden" ("Contradiction leads the way forward").²⁰ According to Plekhanov, contradiction is a formative principle in Marxist philosophy of history and therefore anyone who aspires to understand how such philosophy of history "works" must first understand and accept this main principle of the dialectical method. The principle of contradiction allows Marx to discover the true nature of capitalism and to understand how capitalism will be overcome and defeated. For Plekhanov and his supporters (Lenin being the main among them) there is no Marx without Hegel, but also there is no genuine (dialectical) Hegel without Marx. Hegel announces the coming of future true dialectician who will take his "idealist" efforts to the next (final) stage of the Spirit which, Plekhanov argues, is not a return to previous forms of vulgar materialism but an overcoming of Hegel in the system of "dialectical materialism." If the final stage was indeed final, does it mean that Marxism is the end of philosophy, the end of history and science? "Of course not, gentlemen!" – exclaims Plekhanov and quickly adds, "[human thought] will make new discoveries, which will *supplement and confirm* this theory of Marx, just as new discoveries in astronomy have supplemented and confirmed the discovery of Copernicus."²¹

Dialectical materialism as philosophy of Marxism, insists Plekhanov, is the only system that discovers the iron law of history. However, Plekhanov denies that Marxism is a form of "economic determinism": "once we have *discovered* that iron law, it depends on us to overthrow its yoke, it depends on us to make *necessity* the obedient slave of *reason*."²² Dialectical materialism directly influences all that Marx has to say about the economic aspects of reality and therefore it is impossible, as Plekhanov's opponents suggested, for the "Hegelian formula" to be removed from Marx "as a glove from the hand or a hat from the head."²³

19 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 660. All these terms and descriptions will enter Soviet philosophy and be used in their various forms by Stalin in his 1938 discussion of "dialectical and historical materialism."

20 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 636.

21 Plekhanov 1977a, 639. Emphasis added.

22 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 660. Original emphases.

23 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 665.

Hegel's role was not preparatory in the sense that he laid the way for Marxist philosophy by providing it with some theoretical notions (contradiction) and methodology (dialectical method); his role was preparatory in the sense that he revealed the true workings of human thought and thus forever exposed the delusion of metaphysics (idealist or materialist). Plekhanov did not see any other use for Hegel and, judging by his works, have not expressed any particular interest in the inner workings of Hegelian logic, preferring to reference his discussion of the history of philosophy. Lenin's turn to Hegel's logic rather than philosophy of history will thus continue a major break from the use of Hegel popularised by Plekhanov.²⁴

Plekhanov's legacy vis-à-vis Hegel's influence in Marxism is ambiguous because many (if not most) Soviet philosophers (following the lead of Abram Deborin) considered Hegel's philosophy to be a theoretically important source of Marxism for the most part *because Plekhanov said so*. And Plekhanov said so because Marx and Engels testified to this influence. Despite all the essays and books on the subject neither Plekhanov nor his disciples ever produced a solid enough *demonstration* of the absolute necessity of Hegel's philosophy for understanding Marxism as a philosophical doctrine. And once the unchallenged philosophical influence of Plekhanov disappeared, the connection between Hegel and Marx, i.e. the connection between Marxism and its (alleged) Hegelian roots, came under direct attack. The ensuing debate had at first moved in the direction favorable for the position defended by Plekhanov, now in the figure of Deborin, but this favour ended quickly and the tide turned against those who allegedly valued Hegel too high.

The "Dialecticians" vs. the "Mechanists"

As most students of the period know, the political struggles of the Civil War (1917-1920) did not, for the most part, affect the academic life of philosophers and other "workers of the ideological front." Kosichev, the dean of the department of philosophy at Moscow State University in the 1970s and 1980s, researched the history of that university and reported in his memoirs that the situation in humanities did not change very much immediately after the October Revolution. In 1918 one could still take

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 24 Plekhanov does reference one particular section from *The Science of Logic* but it is the one that has to do with the same theme of the philosophy of history (leaps) rather than logical categories and other such matters: "When people want to understand the rise or disappearance of anything, they usually imagine that they achieve comprehension through the medium of a conception of the gradual character of that rise or disappearance. However, changes in being take place, not only by a transition of one quantity into another, but also by a transition of qualitative differences into quantitative, and, on the contrary, by a transition that interrupts gradualness, and substitutes one phenomenon for another." *Wissenschaft der Logik*, Volume 1 (Nürnberg, 1812), pp 313-14 – cited in Plekhanov 1977b, p. XXX (section V).

a course in theology or church law. Such former opponents of Lenin as Sergei Prokopovich (economist) and Petr Struve (philosopher and economist) continued to lecture and explain their positions. Lunacharski, Kosichev notes, preferred the slow *evolutionary* path of the development of higher education. Thus in the early 1920s one could still find both "non-Marxist" (for example, Semyon Frank) and non-orthodox Marxist thinkers (for example, Alexander Bogdanov) presenting and defending their views.²⁵

By the mid-1920s the situation began to change but the most important intellectual event of the late 1920s, event that resonated not only in the academic community of Marxist philosophers but in general public as well, was without any doubt the debate between the "mechanists" and the "dialecticians." The discussion, or rather a series of debates, publications, attacks and counter-attacks in the press and during public disputations, was, to put it simply, about the relationship between "Marxist philosophy" (if such existed, and in this case both parties seemed to have agreed that it was called "dialectical materialism") and natural sciences. In one sense it was a debate between two students of Plekhanov – Lubov Akselrod (representing the "mechanists") and Abram Deborin (representing the "dialecticians"). In another sense it was a debate regarding the status of Marxism as an overall theoretical framework for all scientific activity in the newly established Soviet (and therefore presumably Marxist) state. In yet another sense it was the first philosophical crisis that defined, in one way or another, the entire history of Soviet philosophical crises to come.

The main problem was the applicability of dialectical materialism, understood as a scientific theory of everything (with its own peculiar dialectical method, borrowed from Hegel and corrected by Marx), to the general pursuit of theoretical and practical knowledge. Now that the Soviet state defended its right to exist, now that the conversations regarding the "construction of socialism" proposed various (often competing) scenarios for moving forward, now that the Party and the people who trusted it and who were suspicious of it were "in it together," the question of the overall Soviet philosophical "world outlook" became very urgent. *That* this world outlook was Marxism was clear, but what exactly did this mean for, say, biology or geometry, aesthetics or even political economy was a matter of much debate.

The main outlines and themes of the debate have been presented and analysed elsewhere.²⁶ It is however important to note that Deborin,

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 25 Kosichev 2007, pp. 7-9.

26 For a detailed account of the events see Yakhot 2012.

the main “dialectician,” was one of the period’s most authoritative interpreters of Hegel and insisted, being true to Plekhanov’s legacy, that Hegel’s role in Soviet philosophy was extremely important (and not only as a representative of an idealist philosophy that happened to be one of the sources for Marxism). The debates and the ultimate “victory” of Deborin’s camp brought a lot of attention to Hegel’s works and resulted in the decision to translate (or retranslate) and publish a fourteen-volume edition of Hegel’s works.²⁷

In 1929 the existing translation of Hegel’s *Logic of Science* (originally published in 1916) was reissued with an explanation that the demand for Hegel’s books resulted in most of the existing texts going out of print.²⁸ The editors of the Institute of Red Professors, prefacing the republication, cite Plekhanov and his 1891 prediction that the success of labour movement will have the educated public wondering about the theoretical foundation for this movement. This short introduction is especially interesting because it summarises the debate between the “dialecticians” and the “mechanists” and presents its main stakes from the perspectives of the winners.

The interest in Hegel’s philosophy is explained by the popularity and wide dissemination of Marxism, the “need to further develop Marxist methodology and those gigantic tasks that Marxism has to take on in the realm of concrete sciences, especially natural sciences.”²⁹ The masses want to study Hegel, at least according to the editors, because they need Marxist theory to guide them in their practical task of building communism. While Marxism is the culmination of the “entire preceding history of the development of practice, concrete sciences and philosophy,” contemporary science still finds itself largely under the influence of bourgeois philosophy and ideology.³⁰ The overcoming of idealism in natural sciences is the challenge that both scientists and philosophers must face together – scientists need to apply dialectical method in their pursuit of scientific discoveries (or just in generalisation of their scientific observations), philosophers need to develop a correct dialectical materialist methodology:

27 The first volume (edited by Deborin and David Ryazanov, published by the Marx-Engels Institute) came out in 1929 with a hundred-page introduction essay by Deborin called “Hegel and Dialectical Materialism”; the last volumes came out in 1950s.

28 The new translation of *Science of Logic* will appear in 1937. This translation was “edited” by Mark Mitin, the reigning philosopher of the time who, by all available information, had no knowledge of German (or any foreign languages). Unlike the 1929 version (only 1,500 copies were published), the 1937 translation came out in a very large run of 20,000 copies. The updated version, published in three volumes in 1970, 1971 and 1972, has an impressive run of 42,000 copies.

29 Hegel 1929, p. VIII.

30 Hegel 1929, p. VIII.

Marxist philosophy ‘sublates’ Hegel’s philosophy. It is its negation, but at the same time it is its continuation as it takes the positive content of Hegel’s dialectics to the new higher level. Therefore the elaboration of materialist dialectics and the deep study of Marxism are impossible without the study of the history of philosophy, and especially philosophy of Hegel... The study of Hegel is also necessary because Marx and Engels did not provide us with a systematic presentation of materialist logic. Such a systematic presentation of dialectics we find only in Hegel.³¹

After a long quote from Lenin’s letter to the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism* where he calls for the development of materialist dialectics, the editors conclude by taking one last strike at the “mechanists” who are already defeated. These comrades, we read, reject the tasks posed by Lenin, do not want to develop the theory of dialectics, do not understand the need for the philosophical justification of the natural sciences and do not see the need in the materialist reworking of Hegel’s dialectics. The “mechanists” were defeated by the very fact that more and more people turned to philosophy in general and Hegel in particular, more and more people saw the need for theory to orient them in practice. So with Hegel (corrected by Marx) and his theory we can finally understand how to build communism!

The victorious tone of the introduction, however, will quickly change as Deborin’s followers (including the master himself) will suffer great public humiliations as they fight against the sharp accusations that it is *they* who ignore Lenin’s role in philosophy. Let us quickly rehearse the main events of the debate in order to trace the role of Hegel’s philosophy during this period and better understand its subsequent fate during Stalinist time (which we can provisionally date as “officially” inaugurated by the publication of the *Short Course* in 1938 with its famous chapter on dialectical and historical materialism).

The debate started without any indication that the issues in question had any potential to blow up into a full-on war between two clearly defined groups of theoreticians. Although the groups came to be known as the “mechanists” (due to their alleged mechanical, read *non*-dialectical, materialism) and the “dialecticians” (due to their claim to represent a more progressive version of materialism traced back to Marx and Hegel), the names are not to be trusted completely since both groups pled allegiance to Marxism as dialectical materialism and maintained the need for theory (Marxism) to lead practice (in this case, science).³² The original ac-

31 Hegel 1929, p. IX. All translations from Russian are mine.

32 Since the majority of original publications are only available in Russian, we will follow the account and provide the necessary references to the discussions based on Yakhot 2012.

cusation of “regression” to “mechanical materialism” goes back to 1924 and makes sense only in the context of (Plekhanovite) orthodox interpretation of the history of ideas: mechanical (or metaphysical) materialism is the materialism of seventeenth and eighteenth century scientists who were not yet able to understand materialism *dialectically*, primarily because they were unlucky enough to be born before Hegel’s time, but also because the economic conditions have not yet developed to allow for the idea of dialectical materialism to emerge. The accusation of “belittling the role of the dialectical method” went hand in hand with the accusation of regression to mechanical materialism.³³

The primary focus of early exchanges was on the relationship between new developments in science (for example, the use of new physical and mathematical methods): one side argued that science must be left to its own devices and produce results based on its own methodology (“mechanists”) while the other side argued that dialectics either applied to all knowledge (including scientific pursuits) or it was not a valid philosophical model at all (“dialecticians”). After several articles and books appeared in 1925, including a major collection of essays published by a reputable scientific institution (State Timiryazev Scientific Research Institute), the conversation seemed to have arrived at an impasse. Both parties claimed to be representing the latest developments in science and Marxist philosophy. On the surface (in public discussions and in print), parties pursued the matters under discussion in an open debate, using only arguments. Behind the scenes, however, the struggle was between those who stood on the side of “science” (conceived as a general human pursuit of knowledge) and those who stood on the side of “philosophy” (understood here as meta-scientific methodology of dialectical materialism). As one of the original “mechanists” put it, “science is being threatened by the re-emergence of philosophical *systems*.”³⁴ If science was to survive, it needed to fight against the threat of metaphysics, now dressing itself up as “philosophy of Marxism.”

The discussion between the “mechanists” and the “dialecticians” took another interesting turn in 1925 when Marx- Engels Archive (edited by David Ryazanov) published Engels’ notes under the title *Dialectics of Nature*. At this point Abram Deborin emerged as the main proponent of dialectical materialism and the main “dialectician.” In a programmatic essay in the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism* he presented the matter as a struggle between mechanical and dialectical materialisms,

33 Yakhot 2012, p. 23.

34 Yakhot 2012, p. 27.

a struggle between the old and the new, between a bourgeois philosophy and a proletarian philosophy.³⁵ Those who defended “mechanicism” were not only wrong, they were anti-Marxist in their reactionary views. If the publication of *Dialectics of Nature* showed anything, Deborin and his circle argued, it was that they had Engels on their side. The essay attacked “mechanists” and their misunderstanding of Marxism. The piece was a direct response to an essay in the same journal by the main proponent of the “mechanist” position, Ivan Stepanov.³⁶

The 1925 was a good year for Abram Deborin; he was unchallenged in his status as a successor to the philosophical legacy of Plekhanov and now deceased Lenin (who by 1925 was growing in his status as a major theoretician of Marxism, soon to be known as Marxism-Leninism). Deborin was the editor of the main theoretical journal of the time and his opinions carried weight. The year’s first issue of *Under the Banner of Marxism* opened with a short commentary by Deborin on the publication of Lenin’s philosophical notes on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*.

Deborin sets the stage for Lenin’s notes on Hegel with a characteristic militancy (which he will maintain all the way until his own demise and public philosophical humiliation): “The watershed between revolutionary Marxists on one side and revisionists-opportunists on the other have always been dialectical materialism and materialist dialectics. Revisionism always ‘oriented itself’ on philosophy of Kant. While revolutionary Marxism from the very beginning sided with the materialistically reworked dialectics of Hegel.”³⁷ Deborin’s notes proved influential in the way Lenin’s notes were interpreted by future Soviet readers. Although never intended for publication, the notes will become an important source for Soviet philosophy and the way they are read goes back to Deborin and his interpretation: if Lenin copied a passage from Hegel, he considered that particular passage to be “important and correct.”³⁸ How important and what aspects of the passage was correct was up to the reader and the interpret to discern.

The next issue of *Under the Banner of Marxism* carried a small essay by Ivan Stepanov that addressed the on-going debates between the “mechanists” and the “dialecticians” is placed in the back of issue in a

35 Deborin 1925b.

36 Stepanov’s essay was published in Nos. 8-9 issue under the title “Engels and the Mechanistic Understanding of Nature,” while Deborin’s essay was called “Engels and the Dialectical Understanding of Nature.”

37 Deborin 1925a, p. 3.

38 Deborin 1925b, p. 4.

discussion section called 'The Tribune'. Stepanov sets the record straight and presents the debate from his point of view in a piece called "The dialectical understanding of nature – the mechanistic understanding."³⁹ Here is the crux of the matter according to the "mechanists": Many comrades are interested in the natural sciences and there is an enormous gap in Marxist literature related to analysis of natural sciences (despite some discussion already present in Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin), so it is essential to provide a general overview of the *Marxist interpretation* of the natural sciences and their role in our society.

Stepanov's critics, he claims, reject his views simply because he never directly mentions the term "dialectics" and does not refer to "dialectical materialism." The greater debate, however, was about the general character of Stepanov's argument and whether it is an example of Marxist methodology or not. The ensuing debate exposed the presence of two opposing views in Marxism: one view was supported by the majority of natural scientists (according to Stepanov's count), the other view – supported by comrades who specialise in philosophy (Hegel's philosophy at that). The first view holds that dialectics must be applied as a method in our study of nature and society, the second view, again, according to Stepanov, simply argues that the dialectical philosophy of Hegel already provides us with basic principles of how the real world works.⁴⁰ In other words, we have either a method to be used if it is useful or an ontology, a Marxist metaphysics, a philosophical *system*.⁴¹ The problem with a *philosophical system* is that it distinguishes itself from scientific knowledge and claims some privileged position in relation to science. Stepanov cites Engels in support of his notion that philosophy is to be *overcome and replaced* with science (or, rather, science comes to the point of its history where it includes all previous forms of pursuit of knowledge, including philosophy).⁴²

The crux of the matter then is whether philosophy attempts to play a role of the "science of sciences," a role it claimed to play in the Middle Ages before it was thoroughly embarrassed and dismissed by the rise of modern scientific method. Such philosophy wants to dictate its will to natural science; it wants to prescribe the results at which science (if it is ideologically disciplined) must arrive. Stepanov cites Engels and his assertion that dialectics of nature is the "results of natural science from

39 Stepanov 1925a.

40 Stepanov 1925a, p. 212.

41 Stepanov 1925a, p. 213.

42 In a footnote to his citation from *Anti-Dühring*, Stepanov suggests, in passing, that universities should consider replacing history of philosophy with history of science in their curriculum. See Stepanov 1925a, p. 214.

the point of view of their own connections."⁴³ In the words of Stepanov's opponents, this means that if Marxist philosophy coincides with the natural sciences (at this stage of development of science), then there is no longer such thing as Marxist philosophy.⁴⁴ Stepanov presses his point that for Engels there is no such thing as "philosophy of nature" that exists as an independent discipline with its own special philosophical methods of research. "To put it shortly, dialectics is not the science of sciences, it does not stand above [natural] sciences, but it must be found in these sciences themselves."⁴⁵

Deborin did not wait long to rebut Stepanov's arguments. Unlike Stepanov, Deborin did not just respond to his critics or attacked his opponents, he wrote a narrative of the entire debate, he presented two camps as two opposing views of the subject matter at hand: one view (his) was Marxist and the other one was anti-Marxist reactionary confusion that needed to be exposed and defeated by all means available.

Some comrades, Deborin writes, came to the conclusion that with the progress of natural science there was no longer need for philosophy of Marxism, which is dialectical materialism. But Marxism *is* dialectical materialism and its soul is materialist dialectics.⁴⁶ Rejection of dialectical materialism as philosophy of Marxism is rejection of Marxism as understood by "Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin."⁴⁷ The situation is desperate because any identification of dialectical materialism with "contemporary natural sciences" means nothing short of complete liquidation of dialectical materialism (and therefore of revolutionary Marxism as such).

"Dialectics is the science of universal laws and forms of motion in nature, society and thinking."⁴⁸ Dialectical method is the universal method that must be applied to all engagement with nature and society. And here Deborin has strong allies in both Plekhanov and Lenin. Deborin's opponents are opponents of Marxism as presented in the writings of Plekhanov and Lenin, that is to say, true Marxism. "Mechanist" materialism knows only of quantity and uninterrupted evolutionary development while "dialectical" materialism understand the transformation of quantity into quality (and back) and supports the view

43 Stepanov 1925a, p. 216.

44 Sten 1924, p. 124.

45 Stepanov 1925a, p. 217.

46 Deborin 1925b, p. 5.

47 Deborin 1925b, p. 5.

48 Deborin 1925b, p. 8.

of revolutionary development by *leaps*, breaks and interruptions. And that is an essentially anti-Marxist position that goes against what classics of dialectical materialism have been saying for a long time. QED.

During the two years that followed the struggle between two camps became more heated partially because it now entered an administrative rather than theoretical realm. Since Deborin's supporters were in charge of various official journals, it soon became clear that they had no intention of presenting the views of their opponents, whom they considered to be dangerous revisionists, with any degree of fairness. On several occasions in 1927 and 1928 the reports about public debates appeared various publications in a more or less the same manner – the views of “mechanists” were summarised, the speeches of Deborin and Co. were published in full. The explanation was simple – a Marxist publication had no obligation to publish dangerous revisionist nonsense.⁴⁹

The official end of the debate came in 1929. Theoretically speaking no new arguments were produced in the previous years of debates so the end of the controversy came as a result of administrative suppression. In April of 1929 Deborin and his supporters managed to secure an important resolution against the “mechanists” during the meeting of the Second All-Union Conference of Marxist-Leninist Scientific Institutions. The resolution regarding the “contemporary problems of the philosophy of Marxism-Leninism” was based on the presentation by Deborin and published in the fifth issue of *Under the Banner of Marxism* from 1929. It was prefaced by a triumphant announcement of the end of the debate: the editorial preface emphasised that the conference *unanimously* voted to declare the mechanist position to be a *deviation* from Marxist-Leninist positions.

The victory for the “dialecticians” meant, more or less, the victory for Hegel and Hegelian interpretations of Marxism that was to be associated with the term “dialectical materialism,” the term that before this victory was used in a variety of wider meanings by all parties involved in the discussions since it was the accepted designation that went back to Plekhanov.⁵⁰ The terms “dialectics” and “materialism” were now combined into a very peculiar conceptual combination that eliminated any and all un-orthodox interpretations of the role of Hegelian dialectical method in the development of Marxism.

49 Cf. Yakhot 2012, p. 36.

50 Liubov Alexrod, a closer collaborator of Plekhanov and Deborin, who in 1920s was criticized as belonging to the “mechanicist” group published her version of the debate in a 1928 book called *In Defense of Dialectical Materialism* [V zashchitu dialekticheskogo materializma].

Deborin and his group did not get a chance to enjoy their dominances in the realm of philosophy for too long. While their ascend to the position of theoretical power was gradual, their downfall came quickly and surprised many, including Deborin himself. It could not have been completely unexpected in light of the political struggles of the late 1920s and early 1930s. With Trotsky in exile and with Kamenev and Zinoviev removed from any influential position of power the Stalinist machine was turning against Bukharin and the “rightist deviation” by the time this particular philosophical debate was declared over. But Deborin belonged to the old generation that did not yet understand the new situation so it was the youngsters with a special scent for the changes in political situation that took on their former professor, two recent graduates from the Institute of Red Professors, Mark Mitin and Pavel Yudin. Both Mitin and Yudin subsequently made spectacular academic careers as a result of their move against Deborin and their undying support for all things Stalinist. Academician Pavel Yudin died in 1968 having held high positions of power in Soviet academic circles. Academician Mark Mitin, the ultimate survivor, lived to see Gobrachev's *perestroika* and died in 1987.

The young “red professors” quickly understood the political situation and were eager to assist Stalin and his circle with fighting various “deviations” not only in political but also in theoretical-academic realms (or “fronts”). There appeared a number of publications on the situation on the “philosophical front” as well as an infamous letter to Stalin in which the young inquisitors informed the leader that Deborin and his disciples were teaching their students Hegel and not Marxism. Stalin read the letter and invited the group to see him. It is during this meeting, the story goes, that Stalin coined the designation for Deborin's group that was to stick for a very long time – they were “Menshevizing idealists.”⁵¹

Although Deborin's initial reaction was to stand his ground and defend his position, his days were numbered. One might be tempted to explain Deborin's naïveté by pointing out his essential professorial attitude to the crisis – he tried to argue his way out of various ridiculous criticisms of his position. However, considering the circumstances of what just took place over the few previous years – the circumstances of more or less institutional repression of various alternative interpretations of Marxism as well as the circumstances of the inter-Party struggle in the 1920s – it is impossible to believe that he would not understand the implications of attacks on his views.⁵²

51 Mark Mitin took notes during the meeting with Stalin and that is the purported source of the designation. For more details see Yakhot 2012, pp. 55-64.

52 While Yakhot's account of the philosophical debates in the 1920s is a good place to start the

The end of Deborin's philosophical reign in 1930 did not however mean that a new radically different philosophical view came to power. The irony of Deborin's defeat and the victory of Stalinist "philosophers" like Mitin and Yudin, the irony that Deborin himself pointed out during the discussion and later in his recollections (in 1960s), was that philosophically speaking very little changed in the official formulations of Soviet Marxism. Hegel was still important predecessor of Marxism and dialectical materialism, Engels was still the most important interpreter of science, Lenin was the founder of Leninism. The only real new addition was that now Stalin was the next in line of major Marxist theoreticians – Marxism-Leninism was to become Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism.

Although the official rhetoric celebrated various victories on the "philosophical front," after 1931 the new philosophers, allegedly freed from all deviations and insidious idealist tendencies, did not produce a large number of works dedicated to the *correct* interpretation of Marxism. Even such authors as Marx, Lenin and Stalin did not receive any special theoretical treatment. In 1933, in celebration of fifty-year anniversary of Marx's death, only one theoretical volume dedicated to Marx was published – *Marx and Bourgeois Historicism* by Valentin Asmus. As Deborin already predicted when he attempted to defend his position as an official Soviet interpreter of Marx (and Hegel), the new generation was interested not in theory but in power. In an unpublished text from 1961, originally intended as an introduction to a collection of essays, Deborin reflects on the thirty-year old conflict and concludes that all the calls for orthodox Marxism and the study of Lenin (the new "Leninist stage" of Marxism) were simply covers for promoting the new philosophical leader, Stalin. All the genuine studies of Lenin, writes Deborin, were done by him and his disciples (Nikolai Karev, Yan Sten, Israel Vainshtein and others).⁵³ All the subsequent works were aimed at the glorification of Stalin alone.

A dialectical materialism textbook under Mark Mitin's editorship was published in 1934. While the first part was dedicated to by then traditional discussions of the nature of dialectical materialism (sources, struggle against idealism, and the "laws" etc etc), the second part was dedicated to the official history of the entire period. Marxism-Leninism, the narrative goes, develops in the struggle against various anti-Marxist

research of the subject matter, it lacks in one particular realm – it does not place the philosophical discussions of the 1920s in the context of larger political struggles of the time. The Stalinists of the 1930s do not simply reject the "mechanists" and the "dialecticians" but align their positions with the previously identified "leftist" and "rightist" deviations.

53 Deborin 2009, p. 131.

deviations, the "struggle on two fronts."⁵⁴ True Marxism philosophy, dialectical materialism or materialist dialectics (these two are used interchangeably at this point), "is the methodological foundation of the revolutionary proletariat's practice, of the general line of this proletariat's party."⁵⁵ Any deviation from this methodological foundation is not simply a theoretical error but an indication that practical (political) deviation preceded it: "The perversions of dialectical materialism are always closely linked with deviations from the general line of the Party, with the non-proletarian political movements, with the reflection of the hostile class ideology in the midst of the proletariat and its Party."⁵⁶ And because materialist dialectics is so potent and full of revolutionary vigour, it is constantly enraging its opponents and therefore constantly under attack by them.

The textbook recounts all the deviations and revisions that the true proletarian philosophy had to confront and annihilate; the narrative takes up a considerable amount of space but is reduced to a very simple notion – those who deviate from materialist dialectics, do so because of the "social roots" or the "social position" (class). No theoretical position can be fully and completely divorced from the social background of those who support and develop it. Bourgeois philosophy is produced by bourgeois "elements" that hide in the midst of the proletariat ("bourgeois agents") and must be found out and exposed. Among the somewhat confusing attempts to align various philosophical trends along the lines of leftist and rightist deviations we find many accusations related to the use of *Hegelian* philosophy by the Deborin group: instead of critically reworking Hegelian philosophy from the positions of materialism, they uncritically reproduce it without understanding its connection to the concrete Party practical tasks.⁵⁷ This peculiar blindness to the developing nature of materialist dialectics resulted in Deborin's group rejection of Lenin and Leninism as the new (higher) stage in the development of Marxism. All of this resulted in "Hegelian revision of materialist dialectics."⁵⁸

Stalin's contribution to the discussion of Marxist philosophy (i.e. dialectical materialism) came later but it defined the entire conversation about Soviet philosophy for decades to come (and, one might argue, continues to do so).

54 Mitin 1934, p. 228.

55 Mitin 1934, p. 233.

56 Mitin 1934, p. 234.

57 Mitin 1934, p. 280.

58 Mitin 1934, p. 286-294.

On Dialectical and Historical Materialism: Stalin.

It is well-known that Stalin was always attentive to the historical narratives, if only to make sure that his role was illustrated in a way that supported his proposed role in the said narrative. Already in 1931 he addressed a letter to the editors of *The Proletarian Revolution* journal which initiated the official process of rewriting the history, or, as was and is clear to all students of history, of fabricating the history of the Party. In a long and rambling denunciation of a publication in the journal of an essay regarding Lenin and German Social-Democrats Stalin rehearses all the slogans regarding “Trotskyism” and so on. The essential detail of Stalin’s criticism of all previous attempts to write Party history was his insistence that this history must be seen as a long history of struggle against various forms of opposition. The task of Bolshevik historians, argued Stalin, was to develop a new Bolshevik history of the Party in order to once and for all reject all the falsifications by those who do not understand the principles of the Bolshevik historiography. The clear conclusion was that only Party official with official Party authorisation could write the official Party history.

1934 brought about the official change in the conception of history when the Party ordered the all hitherto existing history books and educational approaches be revised (or scrapped) and a new official theory (and four year later a new official narrative) be developed and endorsed.⁵⁹ The general intention was to strengthen the propagandist impact of historical narrative, to educate the Party bureaucrats who, at the time, were in their majority at a very low educational level – a large majority of regional secretaries in 1937 did not have secondary education.⁶⁰

The text of the new “verified” history of the Party was published in ten issues of *Pravda* in September of 1938. It was then republished in the *Bolshevik* journal and, again, as a separate book at the end of 1938. It was republished 301 times between 1938 and 1953 (around 43 million copies in 67 languages).⁶¹ Although Stalin’s name did not appear on the cover of the book, it is now a well-established (and well-researched) fact that Stalin in fact paid very close attention to the book’s production and made several rounds of thorough reviews and edits.⁶² Stalin’s contribution was significant both on the level of inclusion/exclusion of particular historical facts and events, and on the level of general theoretical framework – the history of the Party was the history of its struggle against its many (internal and external) enemies.

59 Daniels 1993, p. 193.

60 Zelenov 2002, p. 4.

61 Maslov 1996, p. 240.

62 Cf. Maslov 1996, Zelenov 2002.

The statement by the Central Committee regarding the publication of the Short Course was unequivocal in its description of the new history as a necessary and powerful ideological weapon: “the history of VKP(b) is Marxism-Leninism in action.”⁶³ Theory is not deduced from history, but history (or “historical facts”) illustrates theory; it does not demonstrate the truth of theoretical propositions, but becomes a realm where these propositions (“Marxism-Leninism”) emerge as “generalizations of the practical experience of the proletariat’s revolutionary struggle.”⁶⁴ Thus the famous opening of the textbook: “The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) has traversed a *long and glorious road*, leading from the first tiny Marxist circles and groups that appeared in Russia in the eighties of the past century to the great Party of the Bolsheviks, which now directs the first Socialist State of Workers and Peasants in the world.”⁶⁵ The Party that reads its own history, reads it backwards, from the present final state of victory to the earliest manifestations of its essence, having followed the laws of nature and history (dialectical and historical materialism), arrived at the present state of triumph of good over evil, revolution over counter-revolution, truth (Stalin) over conniving evil (Trotsky).

Understood not so much as a comprehensive history of the Party but as a theoretical framework for any future history of the Party, the short course is less a work of actual history (some might argue that it contains no actual history at all since its methodology is perverted by various ideological prejudices) and more a work of Stalinist propaganda. This, however, is not a reason to reject the effort completely. It might be a reason to reject it as an example of *Marxist* history. Perhaps fearing that anyone who read their Marx (and Lenin) would fail to see any resemblance between Marxist works of historical analysis and this new “official” Party history, Stalin inserted a rather ill-fitting (in terms of narrative location and style) section on dialectical and historical materialism. This section was later republished bearing his name.⁶⁶ We must note that it is not the only “theoretical” section in the book. In fact, it is best to begin this discussion with a few other theoretical passages found in the book that help understand the need for an explicitly philosophical insert.

Already in the short introduction the authors clearly define the overall theoretical perspective of the book – to see the entire history of the Bolshevik party as the “history of the struggle of our Party against all enemies of Marxism-Leninism, against all enemies of the working

63 TsK VKP(b) 1938, p. 2

64 TsK VKP(b) 1938, p. 2.

65 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 1. Emphasis added.

66 Stalin 1975.

class...”⁶⁷ Each of the twelve chapters ends with a “brief summary” (clearly designed to be memorised and recited as the only approved short interpretation of the chapter’s particular period in question) and uses similar language of the “struggle” to understand the history of the Party. The Party was formed in a struggle against Populism; it shattered and destroyed the views of its opponents; it landed some decisive blows and completed its initial ideological defeat of its early enemies.⁶⁸ Each chapter ends with a summary of the Party’s victories and the presentation of the next stage of its development, the next set of ideological enemies to confront and defeat. The Party is engaged in the “stubborn struggle over principles,” dispensing with its enemies and their “ideological confusion.”⁶⁹ Despite the setbacks of the 1903 split and the 1905 revolution, the Party continued on its fight in accordance with its changeless (Marxist) principles: “In the fight against the enemies of the working class and their agents within the working-class movement, the Party consolidated its ranks and extended its connections with the working class.”⁷⁰ The Party was never short of enemies, fighting both capitalists and internal enemies. The former wanted to crush the Party as a representative of the working class and peasants, the latter were saboteurs and conspirators within the Party who did not believe in the possibility of socialism. Once the external enemies were destroyed as a result of the Civil War, internal enemies were identified, exposed and destroyed in the 1920s and 1930s: “The Party rallied under the banner of Lenin around its Leninist Central Committee, around Comrade Stalin, and inflicted defeat both on the Trotskyites and on their new friends in Leningrad, the Zinoviev-Kamenev New Opposition.”⁷¹

The internal enemies struggled against the Party and, therefore, against its goal of achieving socialism. But the Party persevered and kulaks were crushed, capitulators were exposed, opportunists and their allies were expelled.⁷² With the advance of fascism, the external capitalist enemies used the unprincipled internal enemies in order to attempt to sabotage the miraculous transformation of the Soviet Union. “The Soviet Government punished these degenerates with an iron hand, dealing ruthlessly with these enemies of the people and traitors to the country.”⁷³

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 67 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 2.
 68 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 25.
 69 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 52.
 70 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 159.
 71 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 279.
 72 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 299.
 73 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 330.

The final, twelfth chapter, of the book does not contain a brief summary and instead is followed by a general conclusion for the entire history structured around a question: “What are the chief conclusions to be drawn from the historical path traversed by the Bolshevik Party?”⁷⁴

There are six main “chief conclusions”: 1) “the victory of the proletarian revolution... is impossible without a revolutionary party of the proletariat”⁷⁵ – the leadership principle; 2) the party of the proletariat cannot be the leader of the working class “unless it has mastered the *advanced theory* of the working-class movement, the Marxist-Leninist theory”⁷⁶ – this theory is discussed in a separate section of the book discussed in detail below; 3) the victory of the proletarian revolution is impossible unless all anti-proletarian parties are smashed; 4) the Party cannot perform its role as a leader unless all the internal enemies (opportunists, capitulators and others of their ilk) are smashed as well; 5) the Party cannot grow complacent and must practice self-criticism; and, finally, 6) the Party must continuously work on strengthening its connection with the masses.⁷⁷

We see the entire theoretical framework on the book presented in a series of fundamental principles. The leadership principle of the Party is based on the theory that allows the Party to lead *correctly* and, therefore, smash its enemies in an *ideologically* correct manner. The Party then needs to continuously seek to improve its understanding of the theory (i.e. practice self-criticism) and maintain a close connection with the masses that it teaches and that it learns from. It is easy to understand now why the book needed a purely theoretical section, even if the placement of this section was rather arbitrary (and seemed to have happened at the last moment when the book was already finalized and ready for release).

The section on dialectical and historical materialism was inserted in the fourth chapter that was dedicated to 1908-1912 period in the history of the Bolshevik Party, understood in Stalinist hagiography as the period when the Bolsheviks constituted themselves as an independent Marxist party. The immediate context is Lenin’s disputes with “revisionists” and his philosophical treatise *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. Lenin’s book appeared in 1909 but had very little influence in Russian Marxist circles until its revival in 1920 when it appeared in its second edition without any changes but with a new introduction by Vladimir Nevsky provocatively called “Dialectical Materialism and Philosophy of Dead Reaction.” The

.....
 74 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 353.
 75 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 353.
 76 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 355. Emphasis added.
 77 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 361, 362.

republication of the book outside of its theoretical and political context produced a peculiar effect and, especially after Lenin's death in 1924, it acquired an almost sacred status of the foundational texts of Marxism-Leninism.

The section in question contains very general discussion of what it purports to call Marxist world outlook (or, rather, the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party). The simple step-by-step and point-by-point presentation of the subject matter, again, allows for easy memorisation and recitation, and many suggested a certain catechetical nature of the essay. Before Stalin's summary appeared the debates regarding the exact nature of dialectics and materialism, as we saw above, could not be settled by means of philosophical arguments and had to come to a close by an administrative (bureaucratic) order. After Stalin's contribution, any discussion of the nature of *diamat* (dialectical materialism) and *istmat* (historical materialism) were only directed at clarification or application of the new philosophical principles. How new and how philosophical were those principles? Not very, but their incredible influence impacted Soviet philosophy for decades to come. In some sense, it continues to impact Marxist philosophy in general with its terminological distinction between dialectical and historical materialisms (distinction that was not invented by Stalin by any means but that was most certainly reinforced by his text).

Although intended as a purely theoretical insertion, the section contains no actual philosophical arguments. It contains a series of statements that are to be taken as true without any demonstration. These statements are supported by extensive citations from the "classics." But the basic premise is simple: there is a method (dialectics) and there is an overall conception of nature (materialism) – their combination into dialectical materialism constitutes the "world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party."⁷⁸

The first few pages of this section are among perhaps the most cited and well-known passages in Soviet philosophical tradition. These were the basic features of *diamat*, this peculiar Soviet Marxist orthodoxy. The most interesting feature of the opening lines of the *diamat* catechism is the already familiar reference to Hegel and his role in Marxism: "When describing their dialectical method, Marx and Engels usually refer to Hegel as the philosopher who formulated the main features of dialectics. This, however, does not mean that the dialectics of Marx and Engels is identical with the dialectics of Hegel."⁷⁹ So Marx and Engels refer to Hegel but then state that their dialectical method is not only different from Hegel's but is in fact its direct opposite. Marx and Engels took

78 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 105.

79 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 105.

only the "rational kernel" from Hegel's method. It is interesting that the classical presentations of the subject matter in question, i.e. the nature of dialectical materialism, usually stick to the historical development model – starting from ancient Greek philosophers (both "idealists" and "materialists"), skipping over Middle Ages to French materialists, then to rationalists, German philosophy with emphasis on Kant and Hegel, then Marx and contemporary philosophy. This is generally an example set in Plekhanov's presentation of the subject matter as early as his 1895 book on the monist view of history but it was also followed by other Social Democrats, including ones that were not aligned with Plekhanov-Lenin school of Marxism.⁸⁰

Once the relationship between Hegel and Marx-Engels is discussed, perhaps to make sure the readers are informed about the official stance on the discussions regarding the place of Hegel in the official iconography, Hegel as the originator of dialectics is replaced with general description of dialectical method as going back to the Greeks. "Dialectics," we quickly learn, "comes from the Greek *dialego*, to discourse, to debate. In ancient times dialectics was the art of arriving at the truth by disclosing the contradictions in the argument of an opponent and overcoming these contradictions."⁸¹ The section's continuous references to vague "ancient times" and its "philosophers" insists that dialectics is then a particular "method of arriving at the truth."⁸² This method facilitates our arrival at the truth by looking at opposite opinions and by disclosing and overcoming contradictions. Hegel's dialectics is not-so-subtly replaced with the method of "ancient times" that has little to nothing to do with the complex Hegelian conception but that serves the purposes of Stalinist *diamat* perfectly well. Hegel appears only once more in this theoretical section when it deals with two quotations. This does not mean that Hegel disappears completely, only that his dialectics is now folded into Marxist dialectics (whatever that might be) folded into "dialectical method" of "dialectical materialism."

Having informed the reader that dialectics is the best method of arriving at the truth, Stalin proceeds with a series of well-known theses. The method here is a good demonstration of what the author understands by "dialectics" – pointing out that X is the opposite of Y. There is no discussion of "constant movement" and "constant change" that are necessary for dialectical apprehension of the nature of truths in thought and in nature. What we have are simple statements of truth without any

80 Cf. Bogdanov 2016, pp. 163-200.

81 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 106.

82 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 106.

elaboration, dialectical or otherwise. What follows are four principal features of dialectical method and three principal features of dialectical materialism.

Dialectics regards nature as a “connected and integral whole, in which things, phenomena, are organically connected with, dependent on, and determined by, each other.”⁸³ Everything is connected to everything else. And this is, we are told, “contrary to metaphysics.” In addition to interconnectedness, dialectics holds that “nature is not a state of rest and immobility, stagnation and immutability, but a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development, where *something is always arising and developing, and something always disintegrating and dying away.*”⁸⁴ Again, this is “contrary to metaphysics,” that, we can only assume, alleges that everything is stable, unchanging, immoveable and eternal.

Everything is interconnected and mobile, and this interconnected mobility, this *matter in motion*, continuously changes and develops – but in what manner and in what direction? Everything develops in leaps as a “development which passes from insignificant and imperceptible quantitative changes to open, fundamental changes, to qualitative changes.”⁸⁵ And these leaps are not random changes of quantity into quality, they are leaps into the future, into the new and emerging and away from the old and disintegrating: “dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature, for they all have their negative and positive sides, a past and a future, something dying away and something developing.”⁸⁶ The question of direction is addressed implicitly – development is from old to new, from negative to positive, from past to future. On the surface of these statements we have a rather banal vision of “everything flows” philosophy; however, in the context of Marxist (Hegelian) view of historical process, something that the readers of the section would recognise and affirm, the *diamat* picture of reality is rather subtle. History moves in a particular defined direction, so change is never just change but always development – for Stalin “change” and “development” are the same here because nothing changes in a purposeless, irregular manner.

In a similar manner contradiction is never just a conflict between two or more parties, it is a struggle between the negative and the positive

83 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 106.

84 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 106-107. Emphasis added.

85 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 107.

86 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 109.

(evil and good, if you will), between what is passing and disintegrating (old) and what is emerging and forming (new). “New” and “old” here are categories determined in relation to the historical truth of reality, the necessary progression of humanity away from capitalism toward socialism. New is not positive because it is new, but because it is progressive and progress here is an objective evaluation vis-à-vis humanity’s approach toward its objective goal (socialism): “...if the world is in a state of constant movement and development, if the dying away of the old and the upgrowth of the new is a law of development, then it is clear that there can be no ‘immutable’ social systems, no ‘eternal principles’ of private property and exploitation...”⁸⁷

This last statement – there is no immutable social system – is again a surprising observation since it clearly implies that even the present system in existence (Stalinist socialism) is not eternal and will be replaced with something else. Does that mean that even the final stage of historical development – communism – also cannot be considered immutable and eternal? Does it suggest infinite progressive movement toward a better human situation? Does the history never end? Stalin’s argument goes only to the point of socialism necessarily replacing capitalism. But if “development proceeds by way of the disclosure of internal contradictions, by way of collisions between opposite forces,” then progressive movement indeed halts as soon as all contradictions are resolved and opposite forces are eliminated.⁸⁸ Stalin’s essay ends its discussion of dialectical materialism and proceeds to discuss “Marxist philosophical materialism.” But this discussion still continues to puzzle the reader – if “matter in motion” is in perpetual motion, if matter moves in accordance with objective laws of movement of matter, then the social systems never cease to change and develop – communism is not the end, it is the means to an end that never arrives. Stalin here cites Lenin’s remark regarding Heraclitus and his view that the world is a “living flame, systematically flaring up and systematically dying down.”⁸⁹ This reference to Heraclitus, perhaps entirely unintentionally, further drives a view that reality is inherently unstable and infinitely mutable. But if Hegel’s discussion of Heraclitus appreciates the latter’s dialectical approach to reality, Stalin’s reference to reality’s quality of systematically flaring up and dying down is confusing since it stops as this particular impression of finitude of everything that exists (Hegel’s famous description of finitude as “the hour of their [finite things] birth is the hour of their death”) but refuses to explain what happens next, suggesting only a kind of infinite progression of the

87 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 110.

88 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 111.

89 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 112.

same (“bad infinitude”).⁹⁰

The next two features of philosophical materialism stems from some discussions among the Russian (and other European) Marxists and are related to neo-Kantian motifs. Here Stalin quickly dispenses with “idealist” errors: matter is primary, mind is derivative, but mind can and does know matter (“world”). The implication is clear, the mind can perceive and grasp the objective world and history of society is perceived as objective and regular: there exist “laws of development of society,” and the study of these laws constitute a science.⁹¹ This science, “despite all the complexity of the phenomena of social life, can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology...”⁹² If historical materialism is not a science, if objective reality does not fully and completely present itself to mind, there is a possibility of error or (what is worse) a possibility of different views on the nature of basic elements of reality – all this leading to confusion and deviations in political practice. If there are two or more views on any subject matter (especially a political-practical subject matter), one simple way of discovering the true view in this simple realist position is to compare the view and the objective reality.

The old criticism of Hegel’s philosophy, repeated many times in Soviet Marxist textbooks (and based on references to Engels), was that it had a good (progressive) element and a bad (reactionary) element: one was Hegel’s dialectics (method), the other was his system (ontology). This particular distinction is not made by Stalin who clearly prefers to have both, a dialectical method that proceeds by identifying contradictions and pointing out a way they come into conflict and help the development, and an ontology (materialism) that paints a scientific picture of the world that is regular and therefore predictable. The role of ideas is the subject matter of historical materialism. Again, ideas (“social ideas and theories”) can be either old and serve the interests of the “moribund forces of society” or new and serve the “interests of the advanced forces of society.”⁹³ Progressive ideas interact with material conditions of society and “accelerate their development and their improvement.”⁹⁴ The remainder of the section rehearses a familiar Marxist history of ideas and material conditions of society (primitive community, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism).

90 For discussion of Heraclitus, Hegel and Marx, see Williams 1989.

91 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 114.

92 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 114.

93 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 116.

94 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 117.

With materialist dialectics as its method and materialism as its ontology, Stalin’s theoretical insertion summarised previous discussions and laid the cornerstone of the future edifice of Soviet Marxism as *diamat*. *Diamat* is a metaphysical system, an ontological construct that, as “mechanists” justly accused “dialecticians” of doing, creates a philosophy of everything. As Z. A. Jordan aptly put it in his presentation of Stalin’s philosophical contribution to Marxism:

While Marx tried to show that the laws of social development makes the fall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the proletariat equally inevitable, Stalin set out to prove that these events are indeed inevitable because the laws of social development are derivable from and determined by the evolutionary laws of the universe. *Stalin turned into a philosopher to give the Party a cosmic pat on the back.*⁹⁵

Diamat dictates its basic method and its basic principles to all other sciences. It is the return of philosophy as the “queen of sciences.” Yet this “queen of sciences” is unable to articulate its contemporary role as the debates between “mechanists” and “dialecticians” clearly showed. *Diamat* was supposed to be the philosophy of those in power, and yet those in power rarely required that their actions were in any way theoretically grounded in any form of dialectical materialism. Stalin’s exercise in theory failed as philosophy but succeeded as ideology. Philosophy (as science or *diamat*) did not speak truth to power; power spoke truth to philosophy – it did so from 1938 to 1953, and it continued to do so after Stalin’s death until the demise of the Soviet experiment.

Conclusion

Soviet Marxism, for the great majority of its history, was, without a doubt, a form of dogmatism. However, it was not, so to speak, a *doctrinal* dogmatism in its traditional sense. A doctrinal dogmatism aligns itself with a set of doctrines or a set of authoritative figures that express these doctrines. Soviet Marxism, although always explicitly devoted to Marx, Lenin and, during some twenty years of its existence, Stalin and their texts, as a dogmatism had to be rather *flexible* vis-à-vis these figures and their texts. Simple references to Marx or Lenin (situation was slightly different with Stalin) were by no means sufficient for one’s argument. It was *correct* references, allowed references, to the “classics of Marxism-Leninism” that counted. And since the criteria of correctness changed depending on the circumstances, the set of correct doctrines changed as well. Thus it was not a form of a *doctrinal* dogmatism with a demand to adhere to a number of theoretical propositions (unless one counts

95 Jordan 1967, p. 252. Emphasis added.

among such “theoretical” propositions a number of extremely vague and shallow slogans that, however, also required interpretation). It was primarily driven by the changes in the historical circumstances of the Party’s directives. Soviet Marxism, at least in its official representations (in print and in textbooks), was form of *opportunist* dogmatism: a basic set of doctrines changed (at times drastically as, for example, during collectivization) but the required theoretical dedication to the *placeholder* of doctrines was to remain as unconditional and unequivocal as ever.⁹⁶

The main danger to this form of dogmatism came not from its ideological foes, but from its own naïve adherents who were either unable or unwilling to play the double game of dedicated loyalty to a theoretical placeholder that others filled with appropriate ideological content. Marx and Lenin (and, during his lifetime, Stalin) read as living authors and not as the “classics of Marxism-Leninism,” were the potential source of many ideological troubles for the supporters of opportunist dogmatism. Those who lacked the “scent” for new doctrinal changes, lacked the ability or willingness to stay attuned to the constant fluctuations of the market of Party directives, were in danger of exposing the existing instability of the system.

The study of the “classics” often did create genuinely interesting philosophical views – the history of Soviet philosophy outside (and alongside) *diamat* is yet to be written. Hegel’s role in these strands of Soviet Marxism is essential – either for those who read and took him seriously or for those who insisted that Hegel’s role must be re-evaluated. Hegel’s role in Marxism became a subject matter of heated debates in 1920s in the Soviet Union precisely because theoretical discussion about the nature of Marxism were opened up not only to a small circle of “orthodox” adherents of Plekhanov’s dialectical materialism but also to a great number of other intellectuals and scientists. The resulting debate between “mechanists” and “dialecticians” was perhaps the most lively and open debate about the nature of Soviet Marxism during the entire Soviet experience. A thorough study of the theoretical positions taken and defended during that debate still awaits its researcher.⁹⁷ While “dialecticians” defends a more “orthodox” version that relied heavily on important of German tradition (Kant – Hegel – Marx), “mechanists” were trying to break away from that heavy theoretical position and

96 In a recent book Teodor Oizerman (himself a direct witness of the major part of Soviet philosophical history) describes the circumstances in which “citationism” was produced: “Citations on which the exposition of Marxism-Leninism was based were selected in such a way as to avoid any contradictions in the cited works, as well as any contradictions between the doctrines of Marxism and the Soviet reality, Party directives and so on.” Oizerman 2005, p. 94.

97 As mentioned above, Yakhot 2012 is a great place to start.

infuse Soviet Marxism with elements of scientific program and method, to convert stuffy Hegelian vocabulary into something more exciting and accessible to the masses (or so they thought). The summary of Soviet Marxist theory in the form of *diamat* put an end to all the genuine philosophical conversations and established one infallible ontology of “matter in motion.

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