

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Lenin, *What Is To Be Done*

FIGHTING FOR DIALECTICS AGAINST REVISIONISM

In the last dialectics column we described the sharp division in the working class movement between communists and revisionists that came into the open in the early 1900s, especially in Germany. The revisionists denied most of Marxism but rejected dialectics in particular. This was because they recognized that the growth of contradictions within capitalism would make revolution necessary, a conclusion they rejected. The revisionist rejection of materialism was equally important, since they wanted to substitute Kant’s idealist, non-class morality for the revolutionary tasks that the laws of motion of capitalism set out for the working class.

Although their numbers were small, communists in many European countries fought the ideological battle for communist ideas against the revisionists and their support of imperialist war. The most determined struggle specifically for dialectics and materialism, however, came from Russian communists G. Plekhanov and V. I. Lenin. The next few columns will describe their efforts, which proved to be fundamental for the further development of communist philosophy.

Plekhanov was one of the founders of the communist movement in Russia. His role would eventually prove to be enormously contradictory, involving major contributions, but also errors and betrayals. From the beginning, Plekhanov sharply

attacked the idealism of the revisionists, fighting for space in German Socialist Party newspapers to do this. In books, articles and speeches he explained and defended dialectics and attacked efforts to distort it.

Plekhanov Against “Legal Marxism”

In his work “Criticism of our Critics”, Plekhanov exposed the bogus reasoning of Russian revisionist P. Struve. Struve had watered down Marxism to make it “legal,” that is, acceptable to the tsarist censorship. He had argued that the contradictions of capitalism could be “blunted” so they would not lead to revolution. Plekhanov combined philosophical analysis and economic data in his refutation of Struve’s “blunting.” He showed that contradictions in the history of the communist movement had not only not been resolved by “blunting,” but by becoming more intense, which is the way contradictions are resolved in general. Plekhanov argued that the content of growing social production was constantly straining against the capitalist form that restricts it, a prime example, he said, of the “revolutionary significance of Marxist dialectics.”

Lenin Against the Narodniks

Lenin’s first major work, which was directed against the Narodnik movement, devoted sections to materialism and to dialectics. The Narodniks opposed the tsarist system in Russia with

terrorist actions like assassinating the Tsar, although a large section of the Narodniks did not oppose capitalism. They saw the small peasants as the revolutionary class. Lenin directed his fire particularly against Narodnik N. K. Mikhailovsky, who rejected dialectics and tried to refute the materialist idea that class relations and class struggle determine the development of class society.

Lenin noted that Mikhailovsky was using a common strategy for attacking dialectics. He attacked Hegel’s specific form of dialectics, trying to conclude that communist dialectics makes the same errors. In particular Mikhailovsky claimed that the “triad” pattern of “thesis—antithesis—synthesis” was the basis of dialectical development. Lenin pointed out that Engels had long ago written that “triad” patterns are not a necessary part of communist dialectics and nothing could be “proved” with them. Combatting Mikhailovsky’s distortions, Lenin outlined core ideas of dialectics, which he called “the scientific method in sociology.” Lenin’s emphasis on the importance of dialectics in this early work would be carried forward into his later writings, both those on communist theory and on practical political work.

In our next column we will discuss some major errors of Plekhanov’s dialectics.