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# Reception of Marxism in 20th Century Russia

Aleksandr Grabovskiy  
*Claremont McKenna College*

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CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE

RECEPTION OF MARXISM IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RUSSIA

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR KONSTANTINE KLIOUTCHKINE

AND

PROFESSOR JAMES KREINES

AND

DEAN GREGORY HESS

BY

ALEKSANDR GRABOVSKIY

FOR

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## Table of Contents

I. Introduction	5
II. Marxism	10
II.1 Historical Materialism	11
II.2 Society	14
II.3 Class and Class Struggle	18
III Marxism in Practice	25
III.4 Reception of Marxism in 20 <sup>th</sup> Century Russia	26
III.5 Divisive Questions	28
IV. Conclusion	38
Works Cited	

Abstract: In my thesis I will study how the revolutionary philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels was received and interpreted by early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian intellectuals in an attempt to reconcile orthodoxy with the real conditions present in Russia. Through analysis of documents spanning several decades of debate, I will trace the evolution of this discussion to unlock the logic that led to philosophy put to action in the form of revolution. Finally, I will evaluate how this logic fits into the historic trajectory described by Marxism.

## I. Introduction

The writing of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels has influenced revolutions, started wars and changed the landscape of thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. The school of thought known as Marxism made contributions to philosophy that has caused an upheaval of thinking about the place of individuals in society, while the work on politics and economics created a new paradigm for studying how the interactions of such individuals are dictated; this structure of human interaction was used to suggest an inevitable processes in history that culminated in a society free from social ills.

Fighting a great deal of social problems in their country, Russian intellectuals and revolutionaries adopted a great deal of Marx's theories as a guideline for establishing an order that would benefit their society as a whole. This process would involve raising consciousness among the uneducated in order to galvanize them into action against the status quo and following Marx's theoretical framework of class struggle to achieve a state free from worker exploitation and capitalist greed gone awry.

However, Marx's work was not simply adopted and implemented by the revolutionaries of Russia in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a country in turmoil, at the cusp of social change, Russia presented a unique opportunity for the Marxist movement unrivaled by any European nation. The political climate was that of a transition period marked by unpopular monarchical government at the brink of overthrow coupled with large swaths of population facing class exploitation and alienation. As such, Marx's theory of history would predict a revolution that would be responsible for the restructuring of politics, economics and ideology into a new order of either capitalism or socialism. The opportunity was one of an entirely blank slate that could be filled by the right group as necessary.

The concept of a *carte blanche* is important to understanding the importance of the reception of Marx by the early intellectuals of Russia. They viewed the *ancien régime* as hopelessly irreconcilable with the demands of modernity and the majority of the population yet still unconsolidated firmly into a historical epoch. This created an opportunity to implement change without contending with the preexisting conditions of government and capital that bogged down Marxist revolution in other countries. While most of Europe had long standing, highly developed industries at the time, Russia was as of yet developing and had not entirely transitioned to a heavily industrialized nation. Additionally, it was unique in that its autocratic government suppressed mobilization of workers and masses to make labor and social unification impossibility, creating "an emergent working class that was quite devoid of strong traditions of thought and organization...with no corporate memory to bind its identity." <sup>1</sup>The Marxist intelligentsia, thus, was born with the working class and given a chance to begin its work

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<sup>1</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 2

with a clean slate. As a result, both the intellectuals who critiqued Marxism and the revolutionaries who practiced it could recreate Marx's theory word for word or mold the ideology to favorably fit the circumstances.

The solution would seem simple to implement. A country with no preexisting impediments could simply be fitted with Marxist ideals through the education of the workers and the restructuring of the way labor was used and treated within the productive sector. Orthodox Marxism prescribed the basic ideas and guidelines for social, political and economic revolution. However, there was just one complication: just like any text, Marx's work is open to multiple readings and lively debate on the proper interpretation. Once received in Russia, scholars quickly splintered into groups and found themselves at odds on agreeing what Marxism actually required and how the real conditions could be adapted to fit the orthodox models of revolution and change.

According to Marxist theory, there is a teleological inevitability to historical processes which lead to the final outcome of communism and victory of the working class through the vehicle of revolution. However, the processes are not perfectly prescribed nor do they account for a possible corruption of the principles of social revolution by self interested parties. No matter how noble the ends of a process may be such as promoting the general interests of society the specific interests of class will always be at play. "Class members, or at least their ideological representatives, always think that the general interest can best be realized by measures that also happen to promote their special interests."<sup>2</sup>

Following this logic, we can trace the subtle forces of interpretation and argument that gently steer large ideas to fit small aspirations. The problem that Marxism

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<sup>2</sup> Elster, J. *Introduction to Karl Marx*. 173



encountered with its reception in the Russia of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was that there were very strong opinions of how the inevitable course of history must be set. In the *German Ideology*, Marx argues that the ideas of an epoch or historical period are dictated by the ruling class which has a monopoly over the creation and dissemination of ideology. This ideology becomes an unquestionable “eternal law” used to justify the power of the very class that creates it.<sup>3</sup> A key point of the success of this ideology is the failure of the class in question to realize they are propagating it. As such the ruling class becomes caught in its own ideology and comes to believe that it is simply part of the natural order of things.

In a similar vein, we will see how the scholars of Marx received, interpreted and viewed themselves as part of the historical process of political evolution. The approach will lay out the fundamental principles of Marxist orthodoxy for interpreting class struggle, prerequisites for revolution and its execution. This framework will be compared with the constructions of influential intellectuals who caused splintering within the community of Russian Marxists into separate and apparently irreconcilable schools of thought such as Georgi Plekhanov, Pavel Akselrod and Vladimir Lenin. Although working with the same texts, and determined not to fall into the ‘revisionism’ that other European Marxists had stumbled, the Russian school, while clinging to the veil of strict orthodoxy, nonetheless found itself fragmented and unable to agree on key points of revolutionary theory and process.

Finally, this analysis will attempt to reconcile the thesis of Marx with the antithesis of the differing accounts provided by his Russian followers. A synthesis will follow to attempt to evaluate how the Russian Marxists played their role in the historical process described by Marxist literature.

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<sup>3</sup> Marx, K. “The German Ideology.” Trans. Ryazanskaya, S. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 173

The key analysis of Marxist philosophy will be of its place in action that it itself describes. As an evolutionary process, once conscious of it, human hands can use it as a tool that has the potential to derail the progression that is expected. The scientific concept of evolution by natural selection rests on the premise that genetic mutations occur at random to produce certain *natural* outcomes; this can be altered with artificial selection to produce desired genetic variations which are not random as they would occur without interference. So too can political evolution be molded, interpreted and manipulated to delay or alter the course of this development away from theory which did not anticipate such exogenous influences. While Marxism describes the process of evolution to an end state of true global communism, it does not provide for forces outside of the theoretical construction nor does it contain measures of evaluation aside from internal benchmarks. As a conclusion, we shall see whether the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian Marxists were endemic in the historical progress to communism or outside of the prescribed framework because of excessive theoretical awareness.

## II. Marxism

In order to analyze the Russian reception of Marxist thought, it is first necessary to establish the basic tenets of the philosophy. The principles of society, class struggle, historical progress and revolution as described by Marx are associated with the concept of orthodoxy. Close adherence to these principles was considered desirable by the Russian intellectuals but was not possible or even claimed outside of Russia. In order to evaluate the claims of the Russian writers, in the coming chapters, that each is strictly following Marx's original intent, we must understand the fundamentals of what this intent was.

## 1. *Historical Materialism*

One of Marxism's most important and unique contributions is a lens for considering an alternative version of the movement of historical change. Marx and Engels's version of the driving force of history known as historical materialism places means of production as the most important aspect of human existence. From these means all other aspects of human life arise. The means of production are the primary characteristic that defines real individuals whose lives are first and foremost dictated by fulfilling needs:

“Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They distinguish...themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life...This mode of production is a definite form of activity of individuals, a definite form of expressing their life. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production”<sup>4</sup>

The historical significance of this viewpoint is that it essentially inverts previously held conceptions of how the social structure of human societies is determined. For example, Marx argues against popularly held ideas of the time such as those of Ludwig Feuerbach: “with him materialism and history diverge completely.”<sup>5</sup> These notions presupposed that individuals held ideas, morals and norms and applied them to create the sort of life that they believed they ought to live in spite of their material needs. Such a

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<sup>4</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 150

<sup>5</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 172

viewpoint makes cause and effect appear “upside-down as in a *camera obscura*.”<sup>6</sup> Just as the brain develops the ability to flip the inverted images produced by the retina of the eye to their correct orientation seeing the interaction of productive forces and ideology as they are is a more developed form of theoretical understanding.

The materialist view of history, which literally overturned its predecessors, is the correct version, Marx and Engels argue, because of the necessity that means of production precede anything else. As Jean Paul Sartre would later argue: “Existence precedes essence,” the causal chain of events must be viewed correctly. The development of consciousness – an individual’s understanding of the self and place in society – must follow and not lead material realities. Consciousness is not divinely bestowed upon individuals but rather is formed by them. “Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.- real active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces...Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process... life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life”<sup>7</sup> It is only after securing the needs of existence that individuals can go on to formulate ideas that create meaning and sense of their lives.

The consciousness that individuals develop through their material reality is responsible for dictating the higher realms of thought not concerned with immediate survival. An example of such a phenomenon is language, “language is practical consciousness...like consciousness it only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men.” The evolution of the individual from merely a creature of

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<sup>6</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 154

<sup>7</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 154

survival can be traced to the formation of society as an inevitable step directed by real necessities.

## 2. Society

It is apparent from the previous discussion and the text of the *German Ideology* that humans are defined by their modes of production which in turn determine their interactions with others. The lens of materialism now allows us to study the structure of society based on the organization of production. “There exists a materialistic connection of men with one another, which is determined by their needs and their mode of production” Forming societal relations allow greater ease with which production can be carried out. This is the moment of the development of society, or congregation of individuals around a certain productive necessity.

The materialist conception of society recognizes two main components: the forces of production and social relations or forms of intercourse of production.<sup>8</sup> The forces of production are process and technologies which are involved in creating material goods. The intercourse of production defines the social relations of managing production. Recall, the one of the most important conditions of materialism is that it influences humans to interact not just with their forces of production but also with each other. Thus, the second component is largely concerned with the way in which the consciousness of individuals can transcend to the macro-scale of a society.

The forces of production are the inputs required to sustain production. The concept, borrowed from Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, includes the tools necessary to carry out work, the raw materials involved and the technologies available at the time. These forces can be “everything that promotes the mastery of man over nature, for the purpose of want satisfaction.”<sup>9</sup> However, the true heart of the concept of production lies in

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<sup>8</sup> Gasper, P. *The Communist Manifesto: A Roadmap*. 14

<sup>9</sup> Elster, J. *Introduction to Karl Marx*. 106

the “productive powers of labor.”<sup>10</sup> Even the most advanced technologies and inputs would be useless without the necessary involvement of individuals participating in the process of production. To note, this first subcategory defines a relationship - between the individual and the material object. It is also worth noting that progress in this category of modes of production is measured by the use of less man power or labor to achieve the same goals of production.

The social relations of production define how the productive forces previously described are allocated. Indirectly involved with production, this aspect of society is largely concerned with the allocation of productive forces rather than actual material concerns. Here we enter the next step of understanding the relationships of individuals to their means of production. While the forces of production investigate direct interaction of man and material, the social relations of production study the indirect form of this intercourse, namely of individuals with other individuals in relation to production. These relations can be best understood in the non-Marxist terms of property rights.<sup>11</sup> The term rights may be misleading because they are not necessarily derived from states or laws but can rather exist de facto to ensure that certain individuals can have claims to particular assets.

The modes of production are of paramount importance to understanding societies. The question of what there is to own and who owns it determines the kind of society that individuals create. Relevant questions to determining the society type are: “Do immediate producers own their labor power, in part or in whole? Do they own their nonlabor means

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, A. *The Wealth of Nations*. I.8.3

<sup>11</sup> Elster, J. *Introduction to Karl Marx*. 173



of production?”<sup>12</sup>For example, a society where an individual reaps all of the benefits of the work he puts in to production is different from one in which a third party collects utility from the work of another. This can occur because of questions of ownership of means of production. If, for example, individuals claim ownership of forces of production not including labor, then they are able to receive the spoils of the labor of others, while the non-owning group does not fully gain from the work it does.

The answers to such questions establish the fundamental building blocks of fragmentation in society; they are the precursors to divisions based on class, which will be defined later, and the indicators of historical progress. Combined, these categories characterize the modes or “conditions of production”<sup>13</sup> of a society. Just as the “thinking and products of [] thinking,” of individuals is defined by their “material production and their material intercourse,”<sup>14</sup> so too does a particular society become defined by its modes of production.

Historical epochs are benchmarked by progress that creates differences in how production is carried out and organized. “History is nothing but the succession of the separate The four main epochs of historical development are defined in these terms. The earliest societies marked by the Asiatic modes of production involving a small ruling class which commands a state which owns all methods and yields of production. This is followed by slavery, in which individuals rather than a state own the products of others’ labor. Serfdom is the next step and can be understood in terms of a system such as feudalism in which an aristocracy forms a reciprocated contract with the forces of labor

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<sup>12</sup> Elster, J. *Introduction to Karl Marx*. 107

<sup>13</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 153

<sup>14</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 159

in which it gains rents for permitting the use of land. Finally, the last epoch is that of capitalism in which objects and services are exchanged on a supposedly free market.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Elster, J. *Introduction to Karl Marx*. 104

### 3. *Class and Class Struggle*

Understanding the development of any society in history depends on how classes interrelate and form from the social relations of production. The standard conception of class, according to the theory, is the existence of separate groups within a cohesive societal unit. “Most frequently, class membership is defined by the ownership or lack of ownership of the means of production.”<sup>16</sup> Individuals who do not own means or forces of production have to provide for their needs through other methods such as by selling their labor, while those that do control these means are able to benefit from the virtue of owning them.

By definition class divisions do not mean simple distinctions between groups. The concept implies and is confirmed by the historical epochs that individuals at different levels will face unequal conditions. “In the earliest epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank...in almost all these classes, again, subordinate gradations.”<sup>17</sup> Although there are many divisions of class, the coarsest view provides two macro-categories: a ruling class and a lower class. The epoch of capitalism, as an example, is divided into “two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat.”<sup>18</sup> Each class has a particular role in production and consumption of both material and immaterial goods such as ideology, which will be subsequently addressed.

As the lower class-the proletariat-is engaged in a disproportionately larger share of the production, the ruling class-the bourgeoisie- consumes more than it is responsible for directly producing through exploitation. “A person is exploited, in Marx’s sense, if he

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<sup>16</sup> Elster, J. *Introduction to Karl Marx*. 126

<sup>17</sup> Marx, K. *The Communist Manifesto*. I.3

<sup>18</sup> Marx, K. *The Communist Manifesto*. I.4

performs more labor than is necessary to produce the goods that he consumes. If he actually produces his own consumption goods, the criterion for exploitation is simply whether he also produces goods to be consumed by others.”<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, as the empowered class controls the relations of production in the form of owning property, it holds “the power of disposing of the labor-power of others.”<sup>20</sup>

This system of inequality is sustained by the ruling class using an ideological framework. This establishment essentially allows the ruling class to control the relations of production and maintain their favored position. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it,” since these ideas are “nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships...hence of the relationship which makes the one class the ruling one, [they are] therefore, the ideas of its dominance.”<sup>21</sup> In earlier social orders such as the Asiatic and slave based, physical coercion played a large part in keeping control; nonetheless, the most important output of the exploiting class is the mental production of ideology that justifies its rule.

It is a useful clarification that the ruling class ideology is not simply a construct. While the forces that create and uphold ideology are based on the interests of the ruling class, they cannot be viewed cynically as the products of intentional manipulation.

“Successful indoctrination requires that the rulers believe in what they are preaching;

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<sup>19</sup> Elster, J. *Introduction to Karl Marx*, p. 80

<sup>20</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 160

<sup>21</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 172

they must not have a purely instrumental attitude toward their doctrines...the mere fact that a ruling class benefits from the illusions of their subjects does not mean it is causally responsible for them.”<sup>22</sup>

It is the function of ideology to uphold the status quo for the ruling class which seems more precarious once it is established that there is no actual reason for its existence outside of the one it perpetuates. Studying the movement of history, it is clear that such rule cannot be maintained indefinitely and collapses at defining moments. The failure of ideology is above all an internal phenomenon that results from the paradoxes that necessarily arise in societies with class divisions as previously described.

Societal relations inevitably form and reach critical to produce alienation among the laboring classes. For a class structure to become an “intolerable power, i.e., a power against which men make a revolution, it must have necessarily rendered the great mass of humanity ‘propertyless,’ and produced at the same time, the contradiction of an existing world of wealth and culture, both of which conditions presuppose a great increase in productive power, a high degree of its development.”<sup>23</sup> Internal contradictions of society develop into illogical conditions that can no longer be ignored or explained away. For example, in feudal societies where great achievements and opulence were enjoyed by a small section of society as a result of high levels of output, the labor forces of production did not see themselves partaking in these benefits but only working so that they could be attained by others.

Once the exploited classes develop understand their real interests, they develop consciousness. This, in turn, creates an awareness of long experienced alienation- an

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<sup>22</sup> Elster, J. *Introduction to Karl Marx*. 169

<sup>23</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 161

understanding that their interests are not aligned or represented within the society as a whole. It becomes apparent that the ‘communal’ interest for which the laboring classes believe they have worked is actually “alien to them and independent of them...as a force existing outside of them, the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they thus cannot control.”<sup>24</sup> This point of class consciousness marks the beginning of the end of an established structure. As ideology can no longer justify or compromise to make acceptable the modes of production. In a feudal society, for example, this may have been attempted with lower rents on land or in capitalist society such methods would involve negotiations over wages and working hours. However, Marxism predicts that even such measures will eventually fail to reconcile conscious workers to their material conditions. The development of consciousness is the determining factor in the emergence of class struggle.

The ultimate expression of class struggle is revolution. As history can only be defined by changes in epochs, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”<sup>25</sup> As each historical period is defined by the specific structures of class and modes of production, so is its downfall defined by an upheaval and restructuring of those facets. The chief element of this historical development is first and foremost the struggling class. “The class making a revolution appears from the very start if only because it is opposed to a *class*, not as a class but as a representative of the whole society; it appears as the whole mass of society confronting the one ruling class...its interest is more connected with the interest of all other non ruling classes.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Marx, K. *The Communist Manifesto*. I.1

<sup>26</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 174

Revolution should not be viewed optimistically as the end of exploitation. *The German Ideology* argues that historical revolutions have been no more than a way to provide opportunities for a new class to establish “hegemony, only on a broader basis than that of the class ruling previously.”<sup>27</sup> Revolution is so encompassing because it essentially creates a vacuum to be occupied by new dictators of the intercourse of production -for those previously in an exploited class to, themselves, become exploiters. An instance of this is provided by the French revolution: “when the French bourgeoisie overthrew the power of the aristocracy, it thereby made it possible for many proletarians to raise themselves above the proletariat, but only insofar as they became bourgeoisie.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, we are confronted with the apparent futility of historic revolutions. “In all revolutions up till now the mode of activity always remained unscathed and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity.”<sup>29</sup> In essence, the rule of a certain set of ideas is terminated and replaced with new ones. However, the basic structure of the separation of production into two main groups, as well as exploitative interactions remains the same. The only truly revolutionary change, Marxism suggests, will be the communist revolution which will usher in the complete upheaval of previous notions of class, labor and property distribution.

The ultimate end of revolutions in history is the communist revolution. The only way in which this can be achieved is if individuals move beyond a myopic understanding of the drawbacks of their epoch. Whereas previously in history, individuals only recognized the shortcomings of an oppressive class and sought to

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

overthrow it, communist revolution demands that individuals understand the fundamental flaws in the very structure of society.

The communist revolution is against structures which antagonize individuals, create tensions and form the basis of previous revolutionary movements. It is aimed at eliminating class struggle by destroying the notions of class, preventing alienation by abolishing the previous order of labor and relations of production and creating a society free from built in contradiction. Rather than a change of ideology in terms of how the modes of production are justified, “the communist revolution is directed against the preceding *mode* of activity.”<sup>30</sup> Namely, it demands that instead of certain individuals owning the means of production for others to work on, there must be a union of the forces of labor with the relations of production in the form of communal ownership.

It is interesting to note that socialism as it was understood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Marx and Engels, too, intends to alleviate the ills experienced by exploited classes. However, Engels found that it lacks the key element which makes it unacceptable in comparison to a communist revolution. Described by Hal Draper, an American Marxist, the flaw with the concept was that it represented “‘socialism from above,’ in which an elite imposes change on a passive working class.”<sup>31</sup> This will most definitely contain elements that benefit the elite class and will be no more than a necessary compromise to maintain the given class structure. In the words of Friedrich Engels, “the emancipation of the working class must be an act of the working class itself.”<sup>32</sup>

The historical epochs discussed previously end at the most recent, capitalism, of which Marx and Engels were contemporaries. From this epoch, the next foreseeable step

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<sup>30</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 193

<sup>31</sup> Gasper, P. *The Communist Manifesto: A Roadmap*. 23

<sup>32</sup> Marx K., Engels, F. *The Communist Manifesto*. Preface



the Marxism predicts must be a movement to the ideal of communism transitioning through socialism. “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, [nor] an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.”<sup>33</sup> Marx cautions us that communism is not to be viewed as the implementation of certain theoretical ideas to mold reality. Instead, he concludes that the change of real conditions is inevitable given the premises of the trajectory of history and the needs of rational individuals.

Although discussing a system that does not yet exist, communism as a conception of a society free from the root causes of societal discontent is not utopian in nature. Instead, as a movement to “abolish[] the present state of things,” the Marxist account uses the principle of communism as a contrast and impetus to reject prior and current social organizations as unsuitable to the majority of individuals affected by them. Given the reigning historical epoch, the key task of Marxist theory was creating a revolution to bring down capitalism, freeing the workers from imposed ideology to organize a society free from exploitation.

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<sup>33</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Tucker, R. 162

### III. Marxism in Practice

With the establishment of the basic Marxist theories we can follow its application to real circumstances through the lens of Russia. Theory presents general ideas regarding concepts which are vaguely defined and not always present. For example, Marx and Engels clearly indicate specific epochs defined by modes of production which are either present or have been done away with through revolution. Unfortunately, these derived from historical observations mostly in Europe or antiquity. However, thinkers using Marxist texts after his death were faced with the conundrum of scenarios which were not originally provided for. When do circumstances define the presence of bourgeoisie society? Can revolutionary workers be a class of their own without imposing on their efforts the self interest inherent to the very notion? If so, how can this class dissolve at the advent of a classless society? Such questions were a part of the details which had to be created from interpretation of relatively open ended texts and put to the test of real conditions.

#### Chapter 4. *Reception of Marxism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia*<sup>34</sup>

Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a unique case for the contemporary Russian intellectuals. They were armed with consciousness produced by the writings of Marx and Engels as well as practical observations of the shortcomings of capitalism in European case studies. The period from the 1880s to the first and second decade of the 1900s was one of rudimentary industrialization in Russia. Although it was much debated whether or not Russia could be described as having a true bourgeoisie society, it was indisputably behind its European counterparts in terms of the development of capitalism. As such, Russian Marxists were poised to participate in the uncertain future of their nation.

The experiences of Marxist movements in Europe taught the Russian communists valuable lessons about their own position. With the development of this consciousness, they viewed it as entirely plausible that Russia could be diverted from descending further into capitalism and instead routed to the track of revolution to communism. The Russians attributed the failure of their peers to initiate a communist revolution to the long history of industrialization in those countries. Long before Marx's commentary on the failures of capitalist society, capitalism had existed in Europe, Germany and France where workers had been organizing and active. As such, European Marxism had to be grafted on to existing, and often, powerful labor movements." These movements had developed their own traditions of thought and organization long before Marxism began to have an

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<sup>34</sup> In the following chapters, numerous figures of Russian Marxism will be introduced. Although the writing analyzed will be limited to the period of the 1880s to 1910s, the title of the chapter and this work focuses on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is not to imply that the 19<sup>th</sup> century pieces are out of place; but rather, to highlight the relevance of these contributions to the ongoing debates in the period preceding the Russian Revolution (1917). Figures from more historical periods, pre-1880, will be discussed for referential purposes of or points of contrast.

appreciable impact,” conversely, “in Russia, the Marxist intelligentsia, if it did not actually pre-date the class emergence of the proletariat, at least emerged contemporaneously with it.”<sup>35</sup> Marxism had had a lackluster effect on English labor movements of the 1880s and suffered deep revisionism in its birthplace of Germany. Russian Marxists reasoned that this was an indictment against application, not theory; the original intent of Marx and Engels was hopelessly perverted in the process of reinterpretation or the conditions too great a challenge.

From the study of contemporary failures, the Russian Marxists believed that the key to successful revolution lay in as faithful adherence as possible to the prescriptions of the texts they studied. However, by 1905, more than two decades after Marx’s death, “deep internal divisions had rent Russian Marxism and the broad lines of affiliation and opposition which were to characterize the movement in 1917 had already emerged.”<sup>36</sup> The extremely divisive and stubborn nature of the opposing camps is almost paradoxical as Russian communists were considered to be the most orthodox by their peers. If everyone was trying to follow the same ideology to the letter how can it be that there was so much disagreement? Such inflexibility can be likened to the fundamentalism endemic of holy texts. Once a particular group considered itself to have teased out the correct interpretation, it believed itself to be the one true practitioner.

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<sup>35</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 1

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 5. *Divisive Questions*

### *Is Russia a Suitable Environment for Revolution?*

Communism is the application of Marxist philosophy in action. Those who considered themselves communists could come together on a point of accord based in the theoretical necessity of a revolutionary movement. However, the similarities quickly end there. Orthodox Marxism predicts that communism will follow capitalism with an interim revolutionary transition period. Although historical epochs end in evolutions, it is *capitalism* specifically that leads to the *communist* revolution and by nature digs its own grave. *The Communist Manifesto* explains that the bourgeoisie class in capitalism “finds itself involved in a constant battle.”<sup>37</sup> First, it must battle the aristocracy of a previous epoch to ensure its position. Second, because capitalism is a global phenomenon, it pits the bourgeoisie in competition with its counterparts in other nations. “In all these battles [the bourgeoisie] sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for its help, and thus drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with the weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie.”<sup>38</sup>

One would consider the self defeating account of capitalism to be a source of optimism for any Marxist. Russian communists, however, had little to be cheerful about: one of the earliest and most contentious issues was pinpointing the country’s position in the trajectory of historical epochs. The most direct method of gauging this location is through the lens of the two main forces that will battle in the time of revolution. *The Communist Manifesto* minced no words on this subject: “of all the classes that stand face

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<sup>37</sup> Marx K., Engels, F. *The Communist Manifesto*. I.41

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a genuinely revolutionary class.”<sup>39</sup> It is appropriate, therefore, that the debate of this question focuses on the state of these elements.

The earliest considerations of this question arose prior to the period we are studying with Mikhail Bakunin. Later ridiculed as the ‘cult of Bakunin’, his school of thought gained traction in the early 1880s and inspired the initial revolutionary attempts of the newly developing Russian communists. His interpretation was founded in the idea that there was no proletarian class to speak of and, thus, but an anarchic socialist movement could be mounted instead by a small enclave of dedicated revolutionaries. Although once considered a Marxist, Bakunin’s brand of social democracy was ridiculed as absurd and entirely unfounded in Marxism by the later communists. He is introduced into this discussion as a representation of unacceptable thought which traditional Marxists such as Giorgi Plekhanov vehemently reacted against.

Giorgi Plekhanov, also known as the father of Russian Marxism, addressed the issue of the Russian revolutionary environment in the 1891 *Report by the Editorial Board of the Journal Sotsial-Demokrat* to the International Congress of Social Democracy. In response to Bakunin’s arguments, he widely criticized the thoughts of individuals who failed to conduct a careful reading of Marxist texts and denounced such efforts as “terrorism.”<sup>40</sup> In this address, he notes that Russia was witnessing the synthetic expansion of a capitalist class by non-revolutionary means. The bourgeoisie are seen as the self destructive creation of the autocratic government which needed such a class to form industry and begin competing with other countries. “The rural petty bourgeoisie

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<sup>39</sup> Marx K., Engels, F. *The Communist Manifesto*. I.44

<sup>40</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 93

completely dominates the peasantry while the upper bourgeoisie is buying up the estates of the nobility, which more and more is approaching ruin.”<sup>41</sup>

There was no doubt that Plekhanov believed in the existence of capitalism in Russia. For him, one of the strictest Marxists in terms of adherence to doctrine, participation in the revolutionary movement at all depended on the premise of existing capitalism which, in turn, demand a proletariat: “where there is no proletariat, there is no basis for socialism.”<sup>42</sup> Yet he equivocated, “The mainstream of capitalism is as yet small...there are still few places where the relation of employee to worker would completely correspond to the generally held conception of the relation of capital to labor in a capitalist society.”<sup>43</sup> As a strict Marxist, his arguments were centered on the fact that Russia was moving in the right direction and the advent of full capitalism ought to be eagerly awaited. “The economic and social preconditions, in Plekhanov’s scheme of things, was nothing else than a highly developed industrial, capitalistic system.”<sup>44</sup> Plekhanov’s interpretation of the rudimentary state of capitalism in Russia dictated his belief that there could be no revolution until the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, with it, grew significantly.

Following Plekhanov’s analysis, Pavel Akselrod expressed even more optimistic views on the issue of preconditions in an 1898 letter. While he allows that the development of bourgeoisie society and capitalism is far from complete in Russia as compared to the rest of Europe, “the basic living conditions of the proletariat in them are,

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<sup>41</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 97

<sup>42</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 93

<sup>43</sup> Baron, S. *Plekhanov: Father of Russian Marxism*. 96

<sup>44</sup> Baron, S. *Plekhanov: Father of Russian Marxism*. 101

if not identical, then similar.”<sup>45</sup>The conditions external to the proletariat should theoretically, but may not necessarily, imbue it with the proper alienation and discontent to allow it to begin preparing for revolution. Akselrod explains that the Russian proletariat had taken the fast track to its prepared state through the mechanism of rapid development of the burdens of capitalism if not the development of capitalism itself. “The epoch of industrial capitalism is...living in its initial stages...and the Russian people has simultaneously to endure the sufferings caused by the progress of large scale industry and the yoke of economic and political barbarism that corresponds to the periods of capitalist evolution that the advanced peoples of the West passed through long ago.”<sup>46</sup> Akselrod focused on the status of the proletariat which he believed properly displayed the characteristics Marxism required and was, thus, set for revolutionary preparation.

We can notice in the transition from the earliest thinkers such as Bakunin to the latest thoughts on the subject of Russia’s revolutionary environment a curious evolution. The Bakuninists comfortably eschew the precepts of Marxism, assuming that the conditions of Russia are entirely irreconcilable with texts they found inapplicable. By the 1890s, with Plekhanov, the material conditions of Russia had changed enough to alter the ideology back to a close reading of Marx and the belief that the foundations of orthodox Marxism which required an extensive proletariat class had to be put in place before further action could be taken. The final thoughts on this subject, provided by Akselrod, stepped back into reinterpretation but on a much deeper level. His form of argument became the most accepted and would color the debate after the turn of the century;

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<sup>45</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 228

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



namely, that the spirit of Marxism could be followed with the slight alteration of concept defining details.

### *The Revolutionary Process*

Despite the disagreements and revisions, the growing number of members in debates and engaged in the action of spreading communism attests to the fact that the endogenous factors required for communist revolution were considered sufficiently present to make it possible. However, turning possibility into reality required the preparation of these necessary elements to play their historical role. This point of debate focused around the steps required to galvanize the existing conditions in Russia into action.

We have already established that whether or not the preconditions for communism existed, enough communists believed that they did to work on its actualization. As previous discussion established, Russia presented a case different, yet in some instances advantageous, from its European counterparts; namely the novelty of the labor movement. Even though “the Russian intelligentsia Marxists would not have to temperate or conciliate in adapting their Marxism to native traditions,” they faced a drawback in that “there were no ready-made organizations which might be utilized to propagate the message, to use as a lever to convert the class.”<sup>47</sup> This message was to be an account of the primary issues of the problems the proletariat faced as a class- struggle, alienation and bourgeoisie exploitation. Only through this step of educating the masses and imbuing them with consciousness could the communist revolution truly begin.

Again, we begin with the early writings that preceded the predominant considerations of practical Marxism. Mikhail Bakunin’s writings, deviate from Marx in

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<sup>47</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 2

suggesting that there is no proletariat class, but the peasant class can serve just as well in the making of revolution. Although he did not believe that the Marxist format of revolution could be successful, he nonetheless believed in the necessity and possibility of social revolution. His primary qualm was with the very central tenet of Marxism which provided that the proletariat had a leading and hegemonic role in initiating and maintaining class struggle. He believed that an inherent contradiction of Marxism was the necessity of implementing socialism by authoritarian means with the expectation that this group would be immune to the forces plaguing previous revolutionary struggles. “If you took the most ardent revolutionary, vested in him absolute power, within a year he would be worse than the tsar himself.”<sup>48</sup>

Narodnaya Volya, the party influenced by Bakunin disregarded the absolute necessity of a proletariat mass and spent the early 1890s attempting to form revolution with a small enclave of intellectuals from middle class and noble backgrounds. Known as *Praktiki*, they believed that the prominent peasant class of the, then, heavily agricultural Russia could be imbued with the ideals of communism. Their efforts were marked by failure. As they “recruited members almost exclusively from the intelligentsia, the Narodnaya Volya could not be very numerous.”<sup>49</sup> Additionally, their practice failed to address the necessary audience that would be responsible for revolution. Methods employed by communists in this school of thought focused on small classes to educate workers; this failed, as these workers desired study and greater theoretical training to join the intelligentsia rather than work on actively spreading revolution. Direct visits to

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<sup>48</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 69

<sup>49</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 94

peasants were met with suspicion and often violent altercations as they could not relate to that particular audience and could not imbue it with consciousness.

With the benefit of hindsight later members of the communist movement identified specific reasons for the failure of Narodnaya Volya. They found that “the intelligentsia,” that made up the party “was simply using the labor movement, foisting onto it political goals which might have been appropriate to them but which were alien to the proletariat.”<sup>50</sup>

The failings of previous theory could be attributed to the misapplication of Marxist theory or possibly a misunderstanding of the real conditions of Russia. Plekhanov is credited with some of the most influential attempts to marry Russian reality to Marxist ideology. Marx wrote that the crucial moment of the proletariat assuming its role in the revolutionary movement was embedded in the development of its consciousness. According to Marx “Theory also becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses,”<sup>51</sup> true to this orthodoxy, Plekhanov looked to the prescribed structure of historical materialism for instruction on the execution of revolution. He recognized that the “entire future evolution of Russia depends on the intellectual development of the Russian proletariat.”<sup>52</sup>

This development can be achieved with the spread of information from conscious individual to “worker who has not yet understood that he can only improve his difficult, oppressed and impoverished condition by constant struggle with the owners...his enemies solely because they are in possession of capital.”<sup>53</sup> In *Manifesto*, the conscious

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<sup>50</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 15

<sup>51</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 12

<sup>52</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 92

<sup>53</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 109

group is referred to as the communists defined as “the most advanced and resolute section of the working class party.”<sup>54</sup> The underdeveloped conditions of the Russian proletariat, however, ensured that the ranks of the conscious were not filled with members of the working class but rather intellectuals dedicated to spreading awareness. Plekhanov credited the intelligentsia with a much more active role in establishing proletarian consciousness than the account of orthodoxy. As such, he was criticized for the apparent resulting contradiction with “the central thesis of Marxism: being determines consciousness. That thesis could hardly be sustained, however, if proletarian consciousness had to be aroused by the socialist intelligentsia...[whose] circumstances of life were utterly different from those of the proletariat under capitalism.”<sup>55</sup>

The theoretical criticisms and questions of the proper application of Marxism were heavily restructured following the failed attempt at revolution in 1905. After the murders of innocent workers at the Winter Palace at the hands of the army, it was immediately made obvious to Russian communists and proletariat masses that the revolutionary process was necessary in the face of such state brutality. For Vladimir Lenin, a protégé of Plekhanov, the experience was eye opening and necessitated a change in his revolutionary theory, which was previously similar to that of his older counterpart.

The period from 1905 was marked by the most decisive split of Marxist debate into the main parties of Bolshevism and Menshevism. The Mensheviks, like Plekhanov adopted a new theory based on the reversal of prior conceptions of activity. They no longer saw the proletariat as an immediate requirement of the necessary historical progression. They believed in a two step approach that would allow a bourgeoisie led

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<sup>54</sup> Marx K., Engels, F. *The Communist Manifesto*.

<sup>55</sup> Baron, S. *Plekhanov: Father of Russian Marxism*. 101

revolution to proper capitalism and be followed by a proletarian revolt to the communist revolution. Lenin, as a believer in the Bolshevik movement criticized the ideas of the opposition as being too passive and, in waiting, for the further development of a bourgeoisie was guilty of allowing further atrocities.

The Bolshevik ideal sought to speed up the progress of history in an immediate transition from a half feudal-half bourgeoisie society directly to a socialist revolution, without necessarily having to develop, fully, the bourgeoisie stage. Although, orthodox Marxism dictates that the bourgeoisie must create its own downfall, Lenin believed that the creation of a leading revolutionary sect could ensure the proper preparation and activation of the proletariat class. “Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat which is capable of assuming power and of leading the whole people to socialism.”<sup>56</sup>This construct attempts to reconcile with the orthodoxy of Manifesto by suggesting that achieving the necessary element for communist revolution, a willing working class, is not necessarily dependant on a tipping point of antagonism suffered at the hands of the bourgeoisie. The cruelties of capitalism could be explained by an enlightened class to the proletariats without forcing them to experience it.

According to Lenin, the end goal of communist revolution could be attained through leadership, agitation and enlightenment of a class of intellectuals concerned with the welfare of the proletariat. In contrast to a bourgeoisie revolution which would claim to wage revolution in the name of all of society as it establishes its own hegemony, the revolutionary class would respect the dictatorship of the proletariat and its role in establishing communism. Lenin was faced with criticism that “it was heretical for

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<sup>56</sup> Lenin, V. *State and Revolution*. 9

socialists to assume the leadership of the democratic revolution.”<sup>57</sup> However, he responded by arguing that while not adhering to the letter of Marxism, the vanguard-led revolution retained its spirit. Because the purpose of the communist revolution was eliminating the discontents of the proletariat, there was no need to go through prescribed steps as long as the goals of the movement, although derived from theory rather than material reality, were proper in the Marxist sense.

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<sup>57</sup> Harding, N. *Marxism in Russia*. 33

#### IV. Conclusion

What can be learned from the previous textual analysis? It is obvious that each interpretation of Russian Marxism was always defended as based on orthodoxy despite the existence of numerous contending and contradicting interpretations in any given time. Additionally, we can see that in the practice of Marxism, the Russian communists actually fell neatly into the concepts and framework that the theory demanded. The forces affecting society and driving history as described by Marx and Engels could be observed in the writings of the Russian thinkers. The applications of theory to practice were also observed to follow the expected outcomes the Marxism predicted.

The development and transformation of the writings through the decades can be interpreted to follow, distinctly, the concept of historical materialism. Although numerous ideologies were always present we can see a coherent logic to the transition of various ideologies based on present day realities. In each case that was studied, of the viewpoint of any particular Russian Marxist, we can see that a shift in perceptions of reality caused a shift in ideology. The complete reversal of Giorgi Plekhanov's and Vladimir Lenin's theoretical frameworks following the 1905 revolution is a prime example of this phenomenon. Based on the adherence to this central Marxist thesis, we can see that the development of consciousness of the progress of history did not place the Russian Marxists outside of its momentum. Although these thinkers understood their role in the formation of revolution, they were not exempt from the weaknesses of their position that Marxism predicted. The failure of the revolutions prior to 1917 highlighted the fact that extensive theoretical debate was not necessarily the proper application of a philosophy of action. Namely, as members of a class that did not actually feel the burdens

of serfdom or capitalism but merely observers of its effects the Russian Marxists could not be expected to effectively lead a revolution intended for a class that became painfully aware of its position through experience.

The analysis of the interactions and emerging patterns of the documents allows us to see that real material conditions are not easily observable, and thus, make forming a correct ideology extremely difficult. The documents show us that each thinker created a philosophy based on his perceptions of reality rather than reality itself. How else can one explain the radically differing accounts of the state of the proletarian class as describe by Akselrod and Plekhanov considering that they were looking at the same country.

The question of whether or not Marxism is practically applicable is irrelevant to this study. The Russian communists believed it was and attempted to conduct their affairs accordingly. However, the answer to the question of whether or not the revolutionary theory was properly applied has been answered: it was not. Had it been, the logical conclusion would have necessitated the formation of communism in Russia. The constant revisions and disagreements in attempts to define real conditions in terms of Marxist ideology proved that it is impossible to tailor reality to fit theory.

Finally, these patterns can be used to evaluate an instance in which the Marxist idea of philosophy in action was actually conducted to the ends of a communist revolution which its practitioners considered a success. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was considered to have been a successful marriage of real conditions in Russia to Marxist philosophy. Lenin's account of the use of a class of revolutionaries to form revolution was defended as a necessary reinterpretation of Marxism to form an ideology that could be put into practice to cause communist revolution. However, such a defense is illogical



within the framework that Lenin was operating because Marxism states that any separation of class within a revolution will result in the maintenance of the historical status quo. If a class is leading a revolution, regardless of the ideological foundations it maintains such as action for the benefit of all of society, it can never be divorced from self interest and cannot be expected to dissolve itself upon the formation of the revolutionary society. The Bolsheviks may have viewed themselves as exempt from this clause of the *Manifesto*, but as Marxists who believed in the premises of communist revolution such a view was nothing short of incoherent.

Tracing further development of history we can see that the Bolsheviks succeeded in a revolution that was different from the bourgeoisie revolution they sought to bypass in name only. A class led the struggle for change and following this overthrow of the previous relations of production, installed itself as the ruling, class of a new society producing the ideology of continuous growth toward communism. Because the revolution of 1917 could, thus, be said to have been an incorrect practical application of Marxism, perhaps the world is still developing the necessary prerequisites for a communist revolution that has hitherto never had the chance to faithfully be carried out.

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