Chapter Six

Alexander Bogdanov, *Vpered*, and the Role of the Intellectual in the Workers’ Movement

The defeat of the Revolution of 1905 and the ensuing reflux of the revolutionary workers’ movement set the stage for a crisis in the Bolshevik leadership of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour-Party about what to do politically in order to move forward again. In 1909, Alexander Bogdanov emerged as the chief spokesperson of a dissident-group of Bolsheviks. He and his partisans launched a campaign to shift the axis of the RSDLP’s political activity.

For Bogdanov, the old tasks of building the Party, of agitation and propaganda in the mass-movement, seemed more and more irrelevant with the decline and eventual disappearance of that movement. The new conditions moved Bogdanov to attempt to deploy a strategy to prepare workers to seize power by creating ‘an all-embracing proletarian culture, *hic et nunc*, within the framework of the existing society’ by means of educating the working class in ‘proletarian universities’ run by socialist intellectuals.¹ Bogdanov recognised no national limitations to his strategy. In his view, the politics of creating ‘proletarian culture’ were valid not only for Russia but for all countries where the modern working-class movement had come into existence, in Europe and America.

In June 1909, a majority of Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, opposed Bogdanov’s general cultural-paedagogical

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¹ Bogdanov 1910, pp. 4–5.
orientation, and disclaimed all responsibility for any future political action that Bogdanov and his associates might undertake. Bogdanov left the Bolsheviks and launched a new organisation, *Vpered* (Forward), in December 1909, to push his political views. Along with a number of Bolsheviks, notably A.V. Lunacharsky, M.N. Pokrovsky, G.A. Alexinsky, Stanislav Volsky and M.N. Liadov, Bogdanov used *Vpered* to try to win the rest of the Bolsheviks and the RSDLP to the politics of ‘proletarian culture’.

I shall argue that the failure of the 1905 Revolution led Bogdanov to reaffirm his established view that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, would not be able to develop an integral Social-Democratic worldview and would need the assistance of revolutionary intellectuals. Bogdanov designed the political programme of the Vperedists to mobilise party-intellectuals to render such assistance to the workers. Vperedism, then, was premised on a strict interpretation of *What Is to Be Done?* regarding the tutelary role of the party-intelligentsia vis-à-vis the working class.

Lenin, however, interpreted the experience of the 1905 Revolution in a different way. He sharply revised his understanding of the relationship between the spontaneous workers’ movement and the party. As Lenin now saw it, the working class could formulate an independent ideology, as well as engage in revolutionary practice, in the process of its self-movement.

The split revealed that Bogdanov could not remain Lenin’s political ally if he wished actually to try to implement the Vperedist programme of ‘proletarian culture’. The two men could no longer collaborate politically because Lenin and Bogdanov now conceptualised in politically exclusive ways the manner in which the working class would achieve revolutionary, Social-Democratic consciousness.

**Contemporary historiography on Bogdanov and Vpered: a critique**

Broadly speaking, the validity of an interpretation rests at a very minimum on an accurate rendering of the facts. Despite the growth of an enormous literature on ‘non-Leninist’ Bolsheviks – Alexander Bogdanov most prominently – there continues to exist widely different interpretations of the reasons for

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2. According to Robert Williams, Bogdanov ‘recognised the need to impose consciousness upon the workers from the outside’. Williams 1986, p. 45. Robert V. Daniels agrees. Bogdanov was a prophet ‘in his own right’ of Social-Democratic doctrine on this issue. Daniels 1960, p. 14.