Chapter 8

Resolution of an Émigré RSDLP Conference, June 1901, Geneva

According to the commonly-agreed plan, representatives from the Union of Russian Social Democrats Abroad (Akimov), Rabochee Delo (Krichevksii), the ‘Struggle’ group (Steklov & Gurevich), the Revolutionary Organisation ‘Social Democrat’ (Koltsov), Zaria (Plekhanov) and Iskra (Martov) met in Geneva in June 1901 to discuss the reunification of the Social-Democratic emigration. Three Bundist émigrés also attended, but probably did not vote or take part in decision making, owing to the organisation’s established preference for a greater degree of independence from the RSDLP than was granted in the arrangement approved by the Party’s First Congress. At the meeting, a resolution was taken that supposedly expressed a common ideological position on the basis of which all the émigré circles could be united into one organisation, provisionally entitled the ‘Foreign Committee of the RSDLP’. The identity of the resolution’s author remains unclear, and it first appeared in a 1901 pamphlet by Rabochee Delo editor Martynov, entitled Two Conferences.

1 These were the followers of the ‘Emancipation of Labour’ group, who left the Union Abroad at its Second Congress in April 1900

2 Zaria was a theoretical journal that was nominally edited by the three members of the ‘Emancipation of Labour’ group: Georgii Plekhanov, Vera Zasulich and Pavel Axelrod and which was intended to serve as a venue for debates around the programme of the RSDLP. However, unlike Iskra, it sought to abide by German law, which was often hostile to Russian revolutionaries, and was put together by a sufficiently well-known publisher of Social-Democratic literature, Dietz of Stuttgart. Consequently it did not openly state its adherence to the RSDLP, presenting itself instead as a journal of the Social-Democratic émigré intelligentsia, somewhat in contrast to Iskra, which sought to project the image of a publication closely connected to the Russian underground and the RSDLP, with the effect that some émigrés believed that it actually was published in Russia. In reality, editorial work on Zaria was carried out mainly by the same group who organised Iskra – the ‘Emancipation of Labour’ group plus Lenin, Martov and Potresov, with Lenin and Martov probably doing the lion’s share of the work. Three issues appeared between March 1901 and August 1902, the second of which was a ‘double issue’, leaving four volumes in total.

3 Lenin later observed that the resolution was read out at the meeting by ‘Comrade Kruglov’, (Lenin 1960–79, Vol. 5, p. 226). This was Mikhail Grigorievich Kogan (1874–1942), better known by the pseudonym Viktor Grinevich, an ‘Economist’-minded student in Berlin who attended the meeting on behalf of the Bund.
In reality, this resolution was a blunt and detailed Plekhanovite manifesto stating the principles, tactics and immediate tasks of Russian Social Democracy from what its author terms a ‘revolutionary Marxist’ perspective. It stressed the importance of overthrowing the autocracy and rejected the possibility of its meaningful reform. It conceded absolutely no ground to the distinct views expressed in Rabochee Delo during the previous period: the notion that the ‘principles of scientific socialism’ needed to be combined with a consideration of ‘concrete conditions and workers’ demands’, as stated in the programme of Rabochee Delo; the denial of the existence of ‘Economism’ in the review of Lenin’s Tasks; the desire to examine the revisionist debate from all sides as stated in the ‘Announcement’ in Rabochee Delo No. 5; and the ‘stagist’ approach to agitation advocated by Krichevskii in Rabochee Delo No. 7.

Curiously, it seems that both Krichevskii and Akimov, the two main representatives of the Rabochee Delo trend at the conference, actually voted through this partisan statement of ‘common ground’. The reasons for this are not immediately obvious: they could have felt intimidated in the presence of opponents more versed in theory or have been persuaded that, being in a minority position, resistance was futile. Alternatively, a genuine radicalisation in their views owing to the February–March events, or a misguided attempt to make peace with their factional opponents by agreeing to demands which, because they were merely theoretical, would not have any impact on reality, could have taken place. One further possibility is that they were once again anticipating an attempt at an

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5 It seems that the Plekhanovites packed the Geneva meeting to a certain degree, as representatives from several numerically small organisations and publications with an overlapping membership (the ‘Emancipation of Labour’ group, ‘Social Democrat’, Iskra and Zaria) attended. Against these, the delegates from Rabochee Delo and the Union Abroad represented ‘Economism’. The fact that four pro-Plekhanov organisations were represented seems significant in so far as Lenin, at this stage, was evidently prepared to advocate a ‘federal’ form of organisation to a reunited Social-Democratic emigration, one which would on the one hand give each organisation a significant degree of independence, but which would at the same time grant each an equivalent weight in any decision-making process, regardless of the actual size of its membership. Thus, possessing four ‘organisations’, the pro-Plekhanov group would dominate the ‘Economists’, who possessed just two, assuming the Bund representatives did not consider themselves to be a separate party in the conflict dividing the ‘Russian’ émigrés and did not get involved (which appears to have been the case – their three delegates only observed the meeting), and assuming ‘Struggle’, in keeping with its reconciling role, remained neutral. See Lenin 1960–79, Vol. 5, pp. 241–2; Vol. 36, pp. 67–9 for evidence of Lenin’s thinking in this manner.