Chapter 19

Georgii Plekhanov, ‘What is Not to Be Done’, Iskra No. 52

Shortly after Lenin’s resignation from the Editorial Board of Iskra,¹ Plekhanov composed a rather curious article, ‘What is Not to Be Done’, in which he outlined a new attitude towards certain unnamed ‘former members’ of the revisionist trend who had remained in the RSDLP following the Party’s Second Congress.² Prior to Lenin’s departure, he had at times argued in favour of splitting the Social-Democratic movement into rival revolutionary and opportunist organisations, demanding on other occasions the expulsion of figures such as Bernstein from the Social-Democracy, owing to their revisionist views.³ His new attitude was sharply at odds with this earlier approach: he now recommended a ‘yielding’ attitude to

¹ 1 November 1903 N.S.
² The revisionists he had in mind appear to have included a group of students, former members of the Union Abroad who had apparently defected to the pro-Iskra League Abroad in 1902–3 (Smidovich 1904, p. 30), along with a couple of more prominent individuals such as Konstantin Mikhailovich Takhtarev (1872–1925) and Vladimir Ivanshin, former editors of Rabochaia Mys’ and Rabochee Delo respectively.
³ Plekhanov’s earlier irreconcilable attitude to revisionism is best illustrated in his discussion of Bernstein and the German Party. See Plekhanov 1961, Vol. 2, pp. 316–25 (‘On the Alleged Crisis in Marxism’) pp. 340–51 (‘What Should We Thank Him For?’). As is subsequently pointed out by the authors of the ‘Letter from Representatives of the Ufa, Mid-Urals and Perm Committees’ included in Chapter 21 of the present collection, this irreconcilable attitude continued to be expressed by Plekhanov right up until the departure of Lenin from the Editorial Board of Iskra, in articles such as ‘Krasnyi s’ezd v krasnoi strane’ (‘A Red Congress in a Red State’), Iskra No. 49 pp. 1–2, in which the author expresses support for the expulsion of Bernstein from the German Social-Democratic Party.
the ‘former followers’ of these trends where they continued to differ from the ‘orthodox’ on secondary or minor matters, and opposed further persecution of them.

The purpose behind this change of heart is not immediately obvious, as there is no evidence of a campaign against former revisionists taking place in the RSDLP during the autumn of 1903. At first glance, Plekhanov appears to be defending a grouping that was, by this stage, insignificant in the Party, from a non-existent attack, and such an article does not seem to deserve the front-page position it was given in the Iskra newspaper. However, a degree of clarity as to its real significance is obtained if we refer to the circumstances in which it was written and accept that, whilst nominally being directed towards a non-existent or nearly non-existent problem, it in fact represents an indirect attack on Lenin, particularly his conduct in the ongoing negotiations between the Leninists and the Martovites over the admittance of the latter to the leading bodies of the Party.

This veiled criticism can be more easily understood if we pay attention to the way these negotiations between the Leninists and the Martovites developed during the autumn of 1903. Prior to Lenin’s resignation, Plekhanov had evidently been showing a somewhat more yielding attitude than Lenin towards the Martovites for some time. Though both he and Lenin had initially been sympathetic towards the idea of co-opting the ‘rejected editors’ in the period immediately following the RSDLP Congress, Lenin’s attitude had started to become noticeably less conciliatory than Plekhanov’s with the discovery that the Martovites were planning to take the dispute to the committees in Russia and to partially boycott Iskra. Following the meeting of the Martovites in the middle of September, Lenin appears to have gradually moved towards a position in which he opposed co-options of any kind, whereas Plekhanov, though he too had begun to lose patience with the ‘opposition’ by the beginning of October, was still prepared to co-opt two new editors from the Martovite group in an attempt to make peace. The chaotic scenes at the League Congress evidently did not strengthen Plekhanov’s resolve in relation to the ongoing conflict, and he claims to have told Lenin of his decision to resign the day after the Congress finished. Lenin apparently opposed this step and an alternative arrangement was made in which he, Lenin, would resign. This was probably decided because, as an experienced practical activist, Lenin could be usefully co-opted onto the Central Committee, whereas Plekhanov’s increasingly compromising stance as an editor could prove useful if the Martovites were co-opted onto the

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4 Iskra No. 52, p. 1.
5 See Chapter 17, footnote 1.
6 See Chapter 17.
8 See above, Martov 1904, Appendix 11.