

What were the major theoretical and practical issues separating the mensheviks an...



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When Karl Marx was developing and publishing his ideas in the 1800s, he probably was not thinking that his beliefs would actually change a future of a country that was looking for a transformation. Karl Marx died in 1883 in London. However, his ideas prevailed, brought people together in a mass movement of major proportions and caused sufficient conflict. Who knew that Russia would make Marx's "ideology a principle of action"? 1 That same year, a first Russian Marxist group called the Group for the Emancipation of Labour, or just GEL, developed.

It consisted of four people: Rosalii Markovna Plekhanov, the 'father' of the Russian Marxist movement, Vera Zasulich, an assassin whose plan fell through, Pavel Axelrod, who became the leader of the Mensheviks, and Lev Deich, a leader of a group called Chorniy Peredel. This group had set its aims clearly, not only for themselves but whoever else wanted to be involved. They were to study political and social economic conditions of Russia, to spread their ideas through propaganda and most importantly, to form a Marxist revolutionary party in Russia.

With such a profound plan in their mind, they did not realize some things about Marx and his brilliant ideas. Because Marx based his studies on industrialized countries in the 19th century, mainly from Europe, it was difficult to apply those same ideas to yet somewhat developing Russia. Secondly, his theories came from dialectical materialism, meaning that it was a philosophically based work. Karl Marx was using economic analysis and that was not the agenda that the Group for the Emancipation of Labour had in mind in the first place. Because of these problems, the GEL did not

become popular in Russia during the 1880s. In 1883 and 1884 the GEL could not claim a single active supporter in St. Petersburg”.

Although this was a disappointing showing among Russian revolutionaries, the GEL’s later intention was to convert the Narodnaya Volia following from populism to Marxism. A decade or so later, an important figure appeared on the horizon of the Marxist movement. It was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov or better known as Lenin. He was a vigorous young man who received his degree in labour law with the highest honours from a university in Petrograd. Lenin was a younger brother of Alex Ulyanov, who was hanged for an attempted murder of the tsar.

Revolutionary ideas were in his blood and mind. Lenin became a member of a Marxist group in 1897, but was arrested and sent to Siberia for four years. Although Lenin was not present for a long time in the revolutionary scene, he still led people with his ideas and beliefs, even all the way from Europe. One of his major themes was organization. He preached it over and over. “ The programme of Iskra must become the programme and course of the party, the organizational plans of Iskra must be founded in the organizational statutes of the party”, said Vladimir Ilyich.

The party needed an organizational weapon, something that would keep it from deviating. For Lenin, it came to be a newspaper, called Iskra. The newspaper was printed in Germany and smuggled to Russia by an underground network, which disseminated it throughout Petrograd and the rest of the country. In 1902, Lenin settled down in London and published his

famous work, 'What Is To Be Done?' This work covered the relationship between the party and the proletariat class. It contained two main concepts.

First was stihiiinosty, the idea that the working class lacked education and could not, by their personal levels, develop their own political conscience and activism. This leads to the second concept of khvotism, which basically states that the proletariat class cannot lead the revolution by itself and that the Marxist movement should be 'at the head' of the way and not at the 'tail'. 4 What started as a group of people with a common interest to revolutionize Russia and demolish the autocratic government, became a group of idealists, who could not collaborate. The views kept changing and the party members were dropping in and out of the scene.

On July 30 of 1903, the second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was set in motion in Brussels with over sixty revolutionaries. The purpose of the Congress was to unite "at least twenty-six groups into a firmly consolidated political party. The Congress was to adopt a program, elect party committees, and decide a series of tactical and organizational questions". 5 The Congress members wanted to form a stabilized workers' party in Russia, since it only existed as "loose study groups and circles, often isolated, harassed by the secret police and therefore lacking cohesion and continuity".

However, no one knew that a split would take place that would become a "historic division between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks". 7 These two factions of the Social Democratic party, although both developed from the same school of thought, Marxism, could not agree on many aspects of <https://assignbuster.com/what-were-the-major-theoretical-and-practical-issues-separating-the-mensheviks-and-the-bolshheviks-between-1903-and-1914-essay-sample/>

membership within the party as well as other details. One thing that they could agree on was that Populism was a “ petty bourgeois” and “ utopian” philosophy. 8 They were both against it and it led to some arguments in the Congress later on.

The struggle between Lenin’s ideas on centralization and organization of the party and some of the original members of the GEL, such as Pavel Axelrod and Vera Zasulich, continued for over 10 years. Lenin chiefly cultivated the Bolshevik theory, while Axelrod took off with the Mensheviks. 9 What caused such a dramatic split? Were the personal differences too much to bear for the six editors of Iskra, a journal founded in 1900 by the orthodox? Was it just a power struggle? Maybe they were motivated in their manoeuvres and debates at the Congress by concern with vital ideological matters, but what were they? This major rivalry was no joke.

The momentous cause of the feud at the 22nd session of the second Congress was about the qualifications for party membership. This was a debate between Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Iulii Martov, where they both “ introduced rival drafts of the first paragraph of the Organizational Statutes”. 11 Lenin stated that “ membership entailed recognition of the party program and support ‘ by material mean and personal participation in one of the party organizations’” 12 He also proposed that a person, who wants to be a member, should be completely committed within the organization throughout his life at the party.

He said that a person should be able to sacrifice his or her own family and life to help the party. A member has to be a permanent party activist, <https://assignbuster.com/what-were-the-major-theoretical-and-practical-issues-separating-the-mensheviks-and-the-bolshheviks-between-1903-and-1914-essay-sample/>

without a question. The narrowing down of these requirements forms a very specific role for the member of the party. Martov, however, had a different idea in mind. He suggested that instead of working within the party, a member would have to work under the direction of one of the party's organizations. This seemingly trivial difference was actually splitting the membership qualifications matter into two conflicting concepts.

Martov's idea only enlarges the responsibility of a party member because of his or her subordinate nature of the work. After some debates, Lenin pointed out that he only intended to stimulate the drive to organize a party and not to suggest that only professional revolutionaries, who have spent a lifetime practicing their ideas, could join the party. 13 When the time came for the votes, Lenin did not see it coming. Twenty-eight voters chose Martov's proposal, the same people who voted against Iskra, while twenty-three voters picked his.

With such a disappointing defeat, Lenin lost in front of the Congress.

However at the unity Congress of the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in 1906, the decision was reversed in the favour of Lenin. In order to keep the party together and develop it, Iskra was launched. The paper involved all of the famous democratic leaders' debates, arguments and basic workers' news, from people like Trotsky and Plekhanov. It was an educational tool for the workers of Russia. Iskra published many articles that included ideas on how to develop the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

Many of these were written by Lenin but they were thoroughly discussed

with the rest of the Editorial Board. Some of the most famous ones are ' The <https://assignbuster.com/what-were-the-major-theoretical-and-practical-issues-separating-the-mensheviks-and-the-bolshheviks-between-1903-and-1914-essay-sample/>

urgent tasks of our movement' and 'Where to begin?'. In some of his articles, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin challenged the Economists, whose emphasis was on the struggle of the workers instead of the autocratic Tsarist regime that needed to end. However, this led to some arguments once again.

Because Iskra is meant to be the core of the party, other newspapers and journals could not coexist in the same 'universe' of the Social Democrats.

This indicated that Zaria, a theoretical journal, had to be scrapped. The proposal Iskra becoming the central organ of the party was not the only issue; the Editorial Board members had to be picked too. Lenin suggested that Gregory Plekhanov, Martov, and himself would be the editors because of their experience so far. This, of course, meant that the old editors had to retire. These were Axelrod, Zasulich and Potresov. This did not go well with the resistance that Lenin met. By the time it came to voting, seven anti-Iskra delegates had left.

Incidentally, since these people were all against Lenin's ideas, he received voting advantage. With 19 votes against 17, Lenin said that the Bolsheviks won and the Mensheviks lost. This was a win for Lenin and for Bolsheviks as a whole that signified the split within the party, the official words that separated the group. Bolsheviks became the authoritarian part, while Mensheviks were the left-wing compromisers. After the Congress has moved to London for security purposes, Lenin realized that the debates were not as serious as they seemed.

They were not on political principles but on methods in party building", said

Lenin. 14 This was argued by Leon Trotsky himself. It would seem strange
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that back in 1903, he would say something against Lenin's views although he joined him in the revolution of 1917. Nevertheless, Trotsky did not realize the importance of party organization. Lenin wondered for a while what has happened at that second Congress and in his book, called, ' One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: The Crises in Our Party', described his thoughts about the split just a year after what took place.

He said that the Mensheviks disputed about the Congress's ability to make decisions about the party, " for a broad workers party against what they portrayed as Lenin's conspiring group".¹⁵ However, more people do not necessarily mean more support. Some individuals could come only for a single time and act as if they were social democrats, but that would not trigger anyone to go ahead and lead an uprising. Organization and planned decision making needed to be explored in order to guide the country in the right direction, the way to socialism. Just like the title of Lenin's book, things seemed to be going backwards.

Martov and the Mensheviks allied themselves with the right wing party. This caused contradictions and then political concerns. Lenin kept his position fixed saying that the Congress debates did not justify the split of the party. A resolution was reached between Lenin and Plekhanov to let the other ' retired' members of the Editorial Board to come back to Iskra, which they refused to do. However, everything was switched around. Plekhanov could not handle Lenin's criticism of Mensheviks anymore and switched sides. That is when Lenin left the Editorial Board, letting the others come back to their old positions.

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After this, Iskra became politically different. The debates were ridiculed in Plekhanov's article 'What Should Not Be Done?' The new issues covered politics rather than organizational matters and party building. However, to Lenin this was a silly observation and replied with saying that the party leaders needed to be understood better and that "broad accounting of their activities and actions, the possibility to protest through resolutions and, 'in the worst case, to overthrow totally incapable people in power' were all methods for upholding democracy in the party".

It is much better to be distinguished as a party that will not turn away at the slight discomfort of a confrontation or debate, like Martov did when he turned down the position back in the Editorial Board after election. The debates during the 1903 Congress were very controversial and hostile, but the disagreements did not stop there. In the 1905 revolution, the Mensheviks "were totally taken up with the idea that the capitalist class should be involved, because the next phase of Russia's development would be a democratic capitalist society.

The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, stressed the independence of the working class - not to trust or subordinate itself to the capitalist class, even if the Bolsheviks also emphasized capitalist-democratic tasks of the revolution: the overthrow of the Tsar, solving the land question, national liberation". 17 During that year, the middle class joined together, workers went on strikes all over the country, and the social and economic moments of unrest became more bloody and intense with every time. From the Bloody Sunday to the

Moscow uprising - the rehearsal for a future revolution as predicted by Lenin himself.

These violent events led to an end of the revolution for a while. Although, according to Marx revolution requires an abstraction of the tsarist regime, this was just for practice. One of the biggest political changes after 1905 was the recognition and legalization of all political parties by the state. This meant that all the groups could operate openly, without risking their political agenda. However, it brought problems such as when the Second Duma was about to be assembled, the tsar had to dismiss it because he claimed that the Mensheviks were trying to plot an assassination against him.

With most of the Bolsheviks being arrested and sent to Siberia, or like Lenin, over to Europe, not many feuds were going on. But this was only because they had so much on their mind. On one hand, the disastrous Russo-Japanese War was at its peak, which produced an idea that the factions should unite so that the precious energy would not be wasted on useless arguments. On the other hand, there were enough things to fight about. With the war going on, the Congress in Europe decided that all international governments would not financially support the imperialist bourgeoisie war.

However, then they broke the rules and changed their minds. Only more disputes occurred, one of them about the funds for the party. The expropriation, which is a Marxist term for illegal economic activity, was suggested by the Bolsheviks, saying that because capitalists are wealthy, with a capability to channel money and the belief that the Romanov family were the anti-Christ, could support the Bolsheviks in overthrowing the

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regime. However, the Mensheviks were completely against the illegal part of this idea. Because robberies, hold-ups, and other attacks could be happening, the Mensheviks were against the violence.

They were also against the Germans funding the Bolshevik party, because it seemed as if they were funding and therefore provoking a revolutionary situation in the country in order to weaken the war, or practice revolutionary politics. Lenin thought that it was just fine to take money from anyone who gives, unlike the Mensheviks who thought that it was truly immoral. After that, many meetings have taken place in order to compromise and maybe even to unite. However, "as the philosophical Mensheviks had predicted, the Bolsheviks could not be moved by arguments" said Ascher.

In the period of the middle of the first decade of the 1900s, the distinctions between Bolshevism and Menshevism were refined to a far greater extent than before. It seemed that the clashes would not only result in opposition to any suggestion or plan, but also would lead to development of new schemes that had nothing to do with the first idea. Even though Menshevism and Bolshevism were variations of the ideas of revolutionary Marxism, by the end of the first decade of 1900s, "each represented a self-contained set of attitudes toward Russia's future development". 19