



# David Riazanov and the Leninist stage of Soviet Marxism

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Accepted: 25 February 2023  
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## Abstract

Focusing on David B. Riazanov career and his pioneering efforts in producing a complete edition of the works of Marx and Engels, the article explains why Riazanov's variety of Marxism was unacceptable to the Soviet regime, and why from 1924 Lenin was credited with being an outstanding Marxist theoretician, whereas previously he had been regarded only as a skilled political activist. The concept of Leninism as a new stage of Marxism was put forward by Bukharin and elaborated on by Stalin and Zinoviev. Georg Lukács attempted to show that Lenin's thought had the internal coherence that Bukharin postulated. In support of Lenin's theoretical credentials, his 'Philosophical Notebooks' began to be published from 1925. However, neither Riazanov nor his associate Abram M. Deborin subscribed to the official doctrine that Leninism was a new and higher stage of Marxism. For this stance they fell victim to Stalin's repression.

**Keywords** Riazanov · Lenin · Stalin · Bukharin · Deborin · Lukács

## Riazanov and Stalin

A memorable and much-quoted passage in Isaac Deutscher's biography of Stalin is that which reproduces David B. Riazanov's injunction to Stalin at a party meeting: 'Stop it, Koba, don't make a fool of yourself. Everybody knows that theory is not exactly your field' (Deutscher 1966, p. 290). Deutscher does not give the source for this story or provide details of when and where the incident took place, so that one must suspect that it is hearsay or that it never actually occurred. The story, however, has a certain artistic truth, in that it is emblematic of the gulf that existed in the 1920s between Marxist scholarship and the practical needs of the Soviet regime for a stable ruling ideology. As head of the Marx-Engels Institute (IME) in Moscow Riazanov rescued many key Marxist texts from oblivion and worked to create a scholarly edition of the complete works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. However, the need

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of the avowedly Marxist regime to have a usable doctrine for political guidance in everyday situations led to the promulgation of ‘Leninism’ as an allegedly updated version of Marxist theory. Stalin embraced ‘Leninism’ with enthusiasm, as it suited his political purpose, but Riazanov never accepted Marxism’s ‘Leninist stage.’ It was on this issue that the conflict between Stalin and Riazanov took place. The present article examines the process by which ‘Leninism’ emerged, and its implications both for Soviet ideology and for present-day conceptions of Lenin’s place in Russian intellectual history.

## Riazanov’s background

Riazanov, whose real name was Goldendakh, was born in Odessa in 1870 into a large well-to-do Jewish merchant family. Between 1881 and 1886 he attended the Odessa *gimnaziia*, from which he was expelled for his lack of progress in learning Greek. By diligent self-study, however, he was later to acquire a wide knowledge of history, philosophy, political economy, law, the history of the workers’ movement and socialism. From 1886, Riazanov began to conduct propaganda on behalf of the People’s Will group in workers’ circles in Odessa. In the autumn of the following year he came to the notice of the police for this activity and, threatened with arrest, left the country.

Riazanov spent the years 1889–1890 abroad. In Paris, he attended lectures at the Sorbonne and studied in the Bibliothèque Nationale. He visited groups of Russian political émigrés, and attended the founding congress of the II International, which was held in Paris in July 1889. In Switzerland, Riazanov met the veteran revolutionary Petr L. Lavrov, and the members of the Marxist Emancipation of Labour group Georgii V. Plekhanov and Vera I. Zasluch. As a result of these meetings, Riazanov abandoned the ideology of People’s Will and embraced Marxism, or, to be more precise, the ‘dialectical materialism’ of Plekhanov.

After returning to Odessa in April 1890 Riazanov engaged in educational and propaganda activities among the local students and workers, but because of the danger of being arrested he went abroad again and lived in Switzerland and France. On his return to Russia in October 1891 he was arrested at the border, and served terms of imprisonment in Odessa, St. Petersburg and Moscow. After spending six years in prison Riazanov was sent into exile in the province of Bessarabia, near the town of Kishinev. There, despite being under police supervision, he succeeded in setting up a social-democratic circle. When his term of exile ended in December 1899, Riazanov, now married, left Russia with his wife and settled in Paris (Riazanov 2018, pp. 11–17).

In exile, Riazanov headed the small group of social democrats *Bor’ba* (Struggle), which aimed at forming a united Russian social-democratic party on the model of the German Social-Democratic Party. The vision of such a party was mainly one that he shared with Vladimir I. Lenin and Iulii O. Martov. He believed it should be a centralised organisation of revolutionaries, but also that it should cater for the ‘all-round organisation of the widest possible mass of the proletariat’ (Riazanov 1903b, p. 2).

In pamphlets analysing the programmes of the two Russian social-democratic currents represented by the journals *Rabochee delo* and *Iskra* (Riazanov 1902, 1903a), Riazanov found both fell short of his ideal. He expected his *Bor'ba* group to be invited to the Second Congress of the RSDRP in 1903, but this was refused on the grounds that *Bor'ba* did not represent a distinct current in social democracy, and that it had very little influence among Russian social-democratic organisations. The Congress proposed that *Bor'ba* disband as a separate entity and that its members join one or another of the party organisations (Institut marksizma-leninizma pri TsK KPSS 1959, pp. 436, 438).

Riazanov believed that *Bor'ba* had been excluded from the Congress, not for the reasons given, but because the *Iskra* group had been unwilling to confront differences of opinion. He deplored the fact that both Lenin and Martov favoured a party organisation in which the leadership was not elected by and answerable to the membership. Without the democratic principle, without the elimination of all traces of personality cult, he considered, one could have at best a sect, but not a party (Riazanov 1904, p. 113). In subsequent years, Riazanov did not join either the Bolshevik or Menshevik fractions, but remained an unaligned member of the RSDRP, which he still hoped would re-unite.

On the outbreak of the 1905 revolution Riazanov returned to Russia, first to Odessa and then to St. Petersburg, where he became involved in the trade-union movement whose emergence had been made possible by the new freedoms granted by the October Manifesto. It was as a representative of the trade unions that Riazanov took part in the activities of the Social-Democrat fraction of the II Duma in 1907. It was at a meeting of the fraction that in May 1907 he was arrested, and was only released in October of that year. For a short time, he worked with the Social-Democrat fraction in the III Duma, but was forced again to go abroad. Riazanov remained in emigration from the end of November 1907 until his return to Russia in May 1917. It was in this decade of emigration that he began the collection of Marx and Engels' writings that would occupy him for the rest of his working life.

In 1909 Riazanov received a proposal from the Anton-Menger-Bibliothek in Vienna to publish documents on the history of the First International. In the course of his research for this project he discovered some hundreds of articles by Marx and Engels, among which there were several outstanding works. These were articles by Marx and Engels from the period 1852 to 1862. Riazanov intended to publish them in 4 volumes, but his work was interrupted by the revolution of 1917, and in the event only two volumes appeared.<sup>1</sup>

## The Marx–Engels correspondence

An important project in which Riazanov was involved was the publication in 1913 of a four-volume collection of correspondence between Marx and Engels entitled *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Friedrich Engels und Karl Marx 1844 bis 1883*. Ostensibly,

<sup>1</sup> *Gesammelte Schriften von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels 1852 bis-1862*. Zwei Bände Verlag von I. H. W. Dietz. Stuttgart, 1917 (Riazanov 1928, p. XVIII).

the collection was edited by the Engels' literary executors, the German Social Democrats August Bebel and Eduard Bernstein, with the participation of Marx's daughter Laura Lafargue, the historian Franz Mehring and Riazanov. However, as Riazanov explained, the actual editing work was carried out by Bernstein and Mehring, Riazanov's function being to correct the proofs and decipher some individual passages in the manuscripts. He was, however, well placed to observe how Bernstein and Mehring went about editing the Marx–Engels correspondence, and he disapproved of it strongly. Parts of the letters would be omitted and the wording changed if it seemed to the editors that the original text might cause offence to some living person. Riazanov believed that the published version of documents should be faithful to the original, and this was a principle that he adhered to in the projects for which he was later responsible, in particular publishing the works of Marx and Engels (Riazanov 1928, p. XIX).

Although somewhat distorted by the editors, the Marx–Engels correspondence was of great theoretical significance. It provided a unique insight into the thinking of the two men, their attitudes to events, movements, personalities, doctrines and books. Of especial value was the way it revealed the process by which *Das Kapital* had been written, and the philosophical dimensions it contained. From Marx's letters it emerged that Hegel was an important influence on Marx's thinking.

Lenin was one avid reader of the *Briefwechsel*, and in his opinion:

Its scientific and political value is enormous. Not only do Marx and Engels stand out before the reader in clear relief in all their greatness, but the extremely rich theoretical content of Marxism is graphically revealed, because in their letters Marx and Engels return again and again to the most diverse aspects of their doctrine, emphasising and explaining—at times discussing and debating—what is newest (in relation to earlier views), most important and most difficult. (Lenin 1963, p. 553)

On acquiring a copy of the *Briefwechsel* Lenin got down to reading and annotating the volumes, copying extracts from the letters into a notebook. Grigorii E. Zinoviev, who was with him at the time, recalled:

In 1913 there came out in four volumes the Marx–Engels correspondence, covering almost the whole 40 years. This correspondence of the founders of communism allowed Lenin especially to observe closely the intellectual laboratory of Marxism. I vividly remember with what 'enthusiasm' Lenin threw himself into a very detailed study of the four volumes of the correspondence, which were devoted to the most varied questions of the theory and practice of Marxism. Lenin not only studied every line of these four volumes himself, but encouraged all the comrades who were living with him at the time in Krakow to do the same. (Zinov'ev 1925, p. 378)

Among the items in the *Briefwechsel* that drew Lenin's attention were the comments made by Marx and Engels on books they had read.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Lenin noted Marx's

<sup>2</sup>In 1959, the Institute of Marxism–Leninism published Lenin's annotations and notes on the correspondence under the title: *V. I. Lenin. Konspekt 'Perepiski K. Marksa i F. Engel'sa 1844–1883 gg.'* In 1968, a second edition of the work was issued as a supplementary volume to Lenin's *Complete Works*.

admiration for Leibniz, Engels' high opinion of Carl von Clausewitz, and Marx's critical analysis of Ferdinand Lassalle's book on Heraclitus the Obscure. He paid special attention to what Marx said about Hegel, and copied out the passage in the letter of 14 January 1858 in which Marx alluded to the connection between Hegel's *Science of Logic*, and the methodology of *Das Kapital*. Marx wrote:

What was of great use to me as regards method of treatment was Hegel's *Logic* which I had leafed through once again by mere accident, Freiligrath having found and made me a present of several volumes of Hegel, originally the property of Bakunin. If ever the time comes when such work is again possible, I should very much like to write 2 or 3 printer's sheets making accessible to the common reader the rational aspect of the method which Hegel discovered but at the same time mystified. (Lenin 1968, p. 35)

Here Lenin noted: 'The rational in Hegel's *Logic*, in his method. Marx in 1858: once again leafed through Hegel's *Logic* and would have liked in 2–3 printer's sheets to have expounded what was rational in it. Minus his, Hegel's, "mystification"' (Lenin 1968, p. 35).

When Lenin moved from Krakow to Berne in August/September of 1914 he made use of the library there to read the books by the authors mentioned by Marx and Engels in their letters. Clearly, Lenin's purpose was to enter into the intellectual world that the founders of communism had inhabited. The notes on his reading would later be published as part of his 'Philosophical Notebooks.' In keeping with the purpose of viewing things from the perspective of Marx and Engels, not only the choice of the works to read, but also the evaluation of these were determined by what Lenin had discovered from the volumes of correspondence. In his notes Lenin follows the judgement of Marx and Engels, and does not venture an opinion of his own.

Thus, in his letter of 1 February 1858 Marx gave a lengthy critical analysis of Lassalle's book on Heraclitus The Obscure, commencing with the observation, copied out by Lenin, that:

Heraclitus, The Dark Philosopher by Lassalle the Luminous One is, *au fond* a very silly concoction. Every time Heraclitus uses an image to demonstrate the unity of affirmation and negation—and this is often—in steps Lassalle and makes the most of the occasion by treating us to some passage from Hegel's *Logic* which is hardly improved in the process; always at great length too, like a schoolboy who must show in his essay that he has thoroughly understood his 'essence' and 'appearance' as well as the 'dialectical process.' (Lenin 1968, p. 35)

Lenin remarked in his notes on Lassalle's book:

One can understand why Marx called this work of Lassalle's 'school-boyish' (see the letter to Engels of ...): Lassalle simply *repeats* Hegel, *copies* from him, *re-echoing* him a million times with regard to isolated passages from Heraclitus, furnishing his opus with an incredible heap of learned ultra-pedantic ballast. (Lenin 1930, p. 294)

Lenin also noted Engels' high opinion of Clausewitz in his letter to Marx of 7 January 1858, where Engels remarked that:

I am reading, *inter alia*, Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*. An odd way of philosophising, but *per se* very good. On the question as to whether one should speak of the art or the science of war, he says that, more than anything else, war resembles commerce. Combat is to war what cash payment is to commerce; however seldom it need happen in reality, everything is directed towards it and ultimately it is bound to occur and proves decisive. (Lenin 1968, pp. 34–35)

Lenin annotated this passage as: 'War=commerce=cash payment' (Lenin 1968, p. 35). When in Berne he read Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* and made extensive notes on the work, paying attention to the passage in which the author had compared war to trade (Lenin 1930, p. 402).

With regard to Hegel's *Logic*, Lenin focuses on finding the 'dialectics' that Marx referred to, and tries to understand the part played by dialectics in Marx's system. Marx himself did not provide any detailed guidance on this point, so Lenin had to resort to other authorities, in particular to Engels and Plekhanov. Lenin says, for example, that he is trying to read Hegel 'materialistically,' and refers to Engels' essay *Ludwig Feuerbach* where the author states that 'Hegel is materialism that has been stood on its head' (Lenin 1928, p. 58). Lenin copied out at length the section in *Logic* where Hegel speaks of the transition from Quantity to Quality. This was the section that Plekhanov had deployed in his polemic against Lev Tikhomirov, who had argued that social change comes gradually. Plekhanov had countered this idea by citing the authority of Hegel, who, Plekhanov alleged, maintained that radical transformations occurred suddenly (Plekhanov 1977, p. 372). It was these 'leaps' that Plekhanov considered to be the essence of dialectics. In the margins of this section of the *Logic* Lenin signalled his agreement with Plekhanov's interpretation by writing 'Leaps!, leaps!, leaps!' (Lenin 1961, p. 123).

In the second half of 1914 Lenin drew heavily on the Marx–Engels correspondence to write the entry on 'Marx' for the *Granat Encyclopedia*. In the section of the article dealing with the tactics of the proletarian class struggle Lenin made explicit reference to the *Briefwechsel*. He said: 'An immense amount of material on this is contained in all the works of Marx, particularly in the four volumes of his correspondence with Engels, published in 1913.' Reflecting Lenin's views on the cause of the collapse of the II International, the same section of the *Granat* article contains several references taken from the volumes of the *Briefwechsel* on the embourgeoisement of the British workers (Lenin 1964, pp. 74–75). As Zinoviev suggests, the Marx–Engels correspondence had a major influence on Lenin's understanding of Marxism.

## The Marx-Engels Institute

Riazanov returned to Russia in May 1917, and at once became an organiser in the trade-union movement. He joined the Bolsheviks in August, but soon found that their policies clashed with his democratic principles. He opposed Lenin's plan for an armed uprising, on the grounds that socialism in Russia was only possible with the support of an international revolution. He believed that the new Soviet government should not consist of Bolsheviks only, and urged the inclusion in it of representatives

of all the socialist parties. He argued against the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and the ending of press freedom. His opposition to the Treaty of Brest–Litovsk caused him for a time to leave the Bolshevik party, returning to it only after the November 1918 revolution in Germany (Rokitianskii and Müller 1996, pp. 44–47).

Riazanov was a founding member of the Socialist Academy (renamed in 1924 the Communist Academy) that was established in 1918 as the highest research institution of Marxist thought, the ‘official ideology of the victorious proletariat’ (Preobrazhenskii 1922, p. 7). On Riazanov’s suggestion the Academy was organised into several departments or ‘cabinets,’ some of which in 1920 separated out to form the Marx–Engels Institute (IME), which Riazanov headed (Udal’tsov 1922, p. 35). Like its parent body, IME was organised in cabinets, of which there were 12 in all. Through Riazanov’s efforts, IME acquired an extensive library of publications on the history of socialism.

Riazanov also invested a great deal of effort in collecting unpublished manuscript works by Marx and Engels. The enterprise was not easy and involved complex negotiations with Engels’ surviving literary executor Eduard Bernstein,<sup>3</sup> as well as prolonged study in the archives of the German Social-Democratic Party in Berlin. However, the rewards were substantial and included Marx and Engels’ ‘The German Ideology,’ Marx’s ‘The Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,’ the ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,’ and Engels’ ‘The Dialectics of Nature.’ Some of these works appeared for the first time in IME’s journals *Arkhiv K. Marksa i F. Engel’sa* and *Letopisi marksizma*. The Institute had extensive foreign contacts and attracted scholars from many parts of the world, so that it soon became the leading international centre for Marx studies (Burkhard 1985, p. 42; Leckey 1995, p. 145).

In order to cater for the need of Soviet students to familiarise themselves with Marxist ideas, IME published the collected works of G. V. Plekhanov in 24 volumes. In Riazanov’s view, Plekhanov was a talented populariser of Marxist ideas, and someone who had developed them creatively. Plekhanov was also one of the earliest commentators on Marx’s ideas, his writings on the subject appearing even before those of Karl Kautsky, the eminent German theoretician (Riazanov 1923, pp. 5–15). Between 1918 and 1924 Plekhanov’s writings were regarded as the chief guide to Marxist theory. The textbook on historical materialism by Isaak P. Razumovskii, for example, based on lectures given in 1922–23 and published in 1924, cites Plekhanov’s works considerably more often than it does Lenin’s (Razumovskii 1924).

## Riazanov’s report

In November 1923 Riazanov gave a presentation to the Socialist Academy on his progress in unearthing unpublished manuscripts by Marx and Engels. The presentation is remarkable for the way it reveals Riazanov’s role in rescuing from oblivion what would later be regarded as fundamental Marx texts. An important category of documents that Riazanov had found were the draft versions of the three volumes of *Das Kapital*, volumes II and III of which had been edited by Engels.

<sup>3</sup>Bebel, the other literary executor, died in 1913.

Riazanov thought Engels' editorship inadequate and proposed to publish the original manuscripts as Marx had left them, together with the version that Engels had produced.<sup>4</sup>

Riazanov informed his audience that he had been able to assemble the complete correspondence between Marx and Engels, and intended to publish it in an unexpurgated form, and in this way to improve on the four-volume collection that had been published in 1913 with his own participation.

In the categories of Marx and Engels' works mentioned by Riazanov in his presentation—the early writings, the drafts and versions of *Das Kapital*, the correspondence, the notebooks and annotations—one can discern in embryo the structure of what would later be the complete collected works of Marx and Engels.<sup>5</sup> As emerged from Riazanov's presentation, his work of collecting was far from complete, and further research in the Berlin archives was planned.

A source of irritation to Riazanov was that the students of the graduate school, the Institute of Red Professors (IKP), had written to *Pravda* complaining of IME's tardiness in producing a complete edition of the works of Marx and Engels. In view of the labour that such a publication would involve, Riazanov thought the students' demands were unrealistic, particularly as the assistance they offered never materialised.

One can understand the students' frustration. They were expected to approach their chosen subjects from a Marxist point of view. But what was the Marxist point of view? Who knew what the Marxism that emerged from Riazanov's discoveries would look like? Seemingly, one could not even trust Engels to have presented Marx's economic doctrines as Marx would have wished.

While one might admire Riazanov's assiduity and rejoice in the fact that the Soviet state led the world in Marx scholarship, practicalities meant that one could not have the official ruling ideology as a work in progress. It had to be something definite and complete, something that could be referred to for guidance. As matters stood, what Marxism was would only emerge in the course of time; what would be discovered in documents still to be unearthed might be inconvenient to the regime; and the content of the ruling ideology would be in the hands of Riazanov, a man of independent mind, who would have no qualms about making life difficult for the Soviet leadership.

## Lenin as a Marxist

An opportunity to remedy the situation came with Lenin's death in January 1924. Soon after this event, on 17 February, Bukharin gave a talk on 'Lenin as a Marxist' to the recently renamed Communist Academy.<sup>6</sup> Nikolai I. Bukharin began his talk by conceding that while it was widely accepted that Lenin had been an incomparable

<sup>4</sup>This is done in *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), Section II, Vol. 4, parts 1–3.

<sup>5</sup>For a detailed account of the evolution of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) see Zhao (2013a,b, 2014).

<sup>6</sup>In his biography of Bukharin Stephen Cohen contends that 'Lenin as Marxist' was written only 'ostensibly' to correct the insufficient appreciation of Lenin as a theoretician. He argues that its real purpose was to promote Bukharin's own ideas on Soviet economic development. However, the content of the speech and its later repercussions do not bear out Cohen's interpretation. See Cohen (1974, pp. 158–59).



activist of the workers' movement, his standing as a theoretician was much lower. An indication of this was the maxim, current at IKP, which stated 'Marxism in science, Leninism in tactics—this is our motto' (Bukharin 1924, p. 32).

This attitude, Bukharin argued, was quite mistaken. The impression that Lenin was not a theoretician was created by the fact that his theoretical pronouncements were scattered throughout his writings, and not concentrated in any one place. Lenin still awaited his systematiser. In time, however, Lenin would be recognised for the great theoretician he was, and Leninism would be regarded as the culmination and the further development of Marxism.

According to Bukharin, Marxism had undergone an evolution through three distinct phases. The first phase was the one in which the doctrine was first formulated by Marx and Engels, the founders of scientific communism. The times in which this Marxism came into being were turbulent, culminating in the revolutions of 1848. The character of the period put its stamp on the Marxist doctrine. It brought together the abstraction of theoretical generalisations with revolutionary practice, summed up in Marx's famous thesis on Feuerbach: 'Philosophers have hitherto explained the world; the point is to change it.'

The second phase of Marxism was the Marxism of the II International. In the period after 1848, when the capitalist system had achieved a relative state of stability, and, due to colonial expansion, the living standards of the working classes in Europe had risen. In this age of peace and some prosperity Marxist doctrine had degenerated and become revisionist. The culmination of the process had been the capitulation of the II International on the outbreak of war in 1914.

Leninism, in Bukharin's view, was the third phase of Marxism, a Marxism more relevant to the modern era than the Marxism of Marx. This was because in recent times new phenomena had appeared in the development of capitalism that were impossible for Marx to have known about because they had emerged only after his death.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, Bukharin emphasised that it was not a matter of opposing one doctrine to another; Leninism was the logical and historical development of Marxism. There were, in Bukharin's view, important areas that lay beyond the purview of Marx's analysis and that Lenin had illuminated, albeit in a fragmented way. There were four such areas. The first of these was the appearance of the monopoly stage of capitalism characterised by the development of syndicates and trusts and by the phenomenon of imperialism, the foreign policy of finance capital. The second area was the world war and with it the collapse of capitalist relations. The third area was the series of phenomena connected with the workers' revolts in the period of the collapse of capitalist relations. The fourth was the beginning of the era of the working class in power, the dictatorship of the proletariat. All these were new areas for theoretical investigation that were unknown to Marx and the generation in which he lived (Bukharin 1924, pp. 32–37).

There was another important respect in which, Bukharin argued, that Lenin had the advantage over Marx. It was that Marx's analysis was highly abstract; it required several intermediate logical steps for its application. In this respect Marx's teaching was the algebra of capitalist development. Lenin also had this algebra of phenomena, but in addition he had their arithmetic, the application of the algebraic formulae to

concrete and practical situations. Lenin's approach was a synthesis of theory and practice. In Bukharin's view, it was because practice dominated Lenin's activities that his theoretical positions were formulated in a fragmented way, reflecting the turbulent era in which he lived.

From the viewpoint of the Soviet regime, the advantage of using Lenin rather than Marx as an authority was that Lenin's writings were readily available. Most of the 20 volumes of the first edition of Lenin's works had been published by 1924, the series being completed in 1927. By contrast, the first volume of the Marx and Engels collected works only appeared in 1928. Moreover, unlike the writings of Marx and Engels, Lenin's writings related directly to Russia and contained pronouncements on numerous episodes in the country's recent history. They were a known quantity with no unpleasant surprises in store. Also, they were comprehensible, with little or none of the abstruseness that permeated the works of the founders of scientific socialism.

Esfir B. Genkina, a student at IKP, for example, recalls that while studying at the Sverdlov Communist University during 1920–23, she and her fellow students had spent whole days and even sleepless nights trying to get to grips with the writings of Marx and Engels. However, when she entered IKP in 1925, it was Lenin's works that were studied, and these she found infinitely easier to comprehend. They became, she said, the guiding thread in all her historical studies (Genkina 1984, p. 265).

## Stalin and Zinoviev

An important aspect of substituting Leninism for Marxism was that the arbiter of the ruling ideology was no longer Riazanov and his IKP, but Stalin and his party apparatus. It can be observed that in promoting Lenin as a theoretician Bukharin co-ordinated his efforts with Stalin, who was his ally at that time. Stalin's lectures delivered at the Sverdlov Communist University in April 1924 on 'The Foundations of Leninism' echoed Bukharin's arguments, defining Leninism as 'Marxism of the era of imperialism and of the proletarian revolution.' Stalin added that, to be more exact, Leninism was 'the theory and tactics of the proletarian revolution in general, the theory and tactics of the dictatorship of the proletariat in particular.' Echoing Bukharin, he went on to explain in what respects Leninism had an advantage over the Marxism of Marx and Engels.

Marx and Engels pursued their activities in the pre-revolutionary period (we have the proletarian revolution in mind), when developed imperialism did not yet exist, in the period of the proletarians' preparation for revolution, in the period when the proletarian revolution was not yet an immediate practical inevitability. Lenin, however, the disciple of Marx and Engels, pursued his activities in the period of developed imperialism, in the period of the unfolding proletarian revolution, when the proletarian revolution had already triumphed in one country, had smashed bourgeois democracy and had ushered in the era of proletarian democracy, the era of the Soviets. (Stalin 1925, p. 25)

In this work, Stalin went on to explain how it could be that a proletarian revolution had occurred in an economically backward country like Russia. The 'Leninist theory

of revolution' was, Stalin stated, that: 'the front of capital will be pierced where the chain of imperialism is weakest, for the proletarian revolution is the result of the breaking of the chain of the world imperialist front at its weakest link' (Stalin 1925, p. 55).

In fact, the theory of the chain of imperialism's breaking at the weakest link was not Lenin's, but one that Bukharin had put forward in 1920 in his book *Economics of the Transition Period* (Bukharin 1971, p. 165). Lenin's notes on Bukharin's book show that he did not agree with Bukharin's idea, remarking: 'Untrue: with the moderately weak link. Without a certain level of capitalism nothing would have happened here in Russia' (Lenin 1929, p. 397; White 2019, pp. 298–299). Nevertheless, Stalin appropriated the theory, probably with Bukharin's consent, and presented it, falsely, as an idea of Lenin's. Thus, Stalin's theoretical innovations, his theory of socialism in one country, and the 'weakest link' were invested with the authority of Lenin. Stalin made no claims to originality in Marxist theory; as a faithful follower of the deceased leader, he professed simply to be adopting Lenin's ideas.

Bukharin's conception of Lenin as a theoretician was also taken up by Zinoviev, another member of the then ruling group. Zinoviev's book *Leninism*, published in 1925, was based on lectures he had given to the Communist Academy and IKP at the end of 1924. Zinoviev too gave the definition of Leninism as 'Marxism of monopoly capitalism (imperialism), imperialist wars, national liberation movements and proletarian revolutions.' Like Bukharin, he cautioned his readers against thinking that 'Marxism was only theory and that Leninism was only practice.' The correct understanding was that Leninism was the 'theory and practice of Marxism for the period of imperialism and imperialist wars, which opened the way to the dictatorship of the proletariat' (Zinov'ev 1925, pp. 5–6).

As proof of Lenin's claim to be a Marxist theoretician, in the chapter entitled 'Lenin on Dialectics,' Zinoviev quoted from two issues of the theoretical journal *Pod znamenem marksizma* that had published the first part of Lenin's notes on Hegel's *Science of Logic* and his short essay 'On Dialectics.' Both of these items would later form part of Lenin's 'Philosophical Notebooks' (Zinov'ev 1925, pp. 378–96; Lenin 1925b, pp. 7–33; Lenin 1925a, pp. 14–18).

As an example of the erroneous way to regard the relationship between Marxism and Leninism, Zinoviev cited the remark made by Riazanov at the session of the Communist Academy held on 17 April 1924. In the course of the discussion on the change of name of the Socialist Academy to the Communist Academy Riazanov had declared: 'The proposal to change the name was made by me, I think, at the beginning of 1919. But I had other considerations in mind, which I now repeat. I am not a Bolshevik, I am not a Menshevik, and not a Leninist. I am only a Marxist, and as a Marxist—a communist.' It was deplorable, Zinoviev thought, that Riazanov should refuse to consider himself a 'Leninist' (Zinov'ev 1925, p. 10; Protokol 1924, p. 392).

The publication in *Pod znamenem marksizma* of Lenin's notes on Hegel's *Logic* and the fragment 'On Dialectics' were clearly part of the effort to present Lenin as an accomplished Marxist thinker. The notes were accompanied by a short Introduction, written by the leading philosopher of the day, Abram M. Deborin, a follower of Plekhanov and a deputy director of IME. Deborin was not sure what to make of Lenin's notes. Did the fact that Lenin copied out extracts from Hegel indicate agree-

ment with what he said? Sometimes the answer was clear, at other times not. Nevertheless, Deborin believed, Lenin's notes would be a stimulus to the further study of dialectical materialism, something much to be desired in the present situation, where there was so much confusion about what Marxism was. Deborin was alluding to the current debate between the rival 'mechanist' and 'dialectical' interpretations of Marxism, Deborin being the leading representative of the 'dialectical' current (Deborin 1925b, pp. 3–5; Ahlberg 1962, pp. 129–41).

Deborin had more to say on the fragment 'On Dialectics,' which was unambiguously Lenin's composition. He stated that it showed Lenin's profound understanding of the philosophical bases of Marxism in general and the essence of dialectics in particular. It demonstrated Lenin's ability to combine the most abstract ideas with revolutionary practice. Clearly, Deborin was trying to make the most of the jottings of a person who had been attempting to make sense of a difficult text. As in the notes on the 'Objective Logic,' in the fragment 'On Dialectics,' Lenin was influenced by Plekhanov's idea that dialectics consisted in the rapid change from Quantity to Quality, the alleged 'leaps.' Seemingly, he had not noticed that for Hegel dialectics was the movement of the Concept (*Begriff*) through the phases of Universality, Particularity and Individuality (White 1996, pp. 69–77). In 'On Dialectics,' Lenin has this the wrong way round, and imagines that there is a progression from Individuality through Particularity to Universality, which makes nonsense of Hegel's system. Deborin, who had to know better, reproduces Lenin's musings without demur (Deborin 1925a, pp. 5–13).

Lenin's notes were followed by an article by Razumovskii, the author of a textbook on historical materialism. Although Razumovskii's book still gave prominence to Plekhanov as a thinker, its later editions included a section explaining that Leninism was a higher stage of Marxism than Plekhanov's, enriched with the experience of the class struggles of the working class in the era of imperialism (Razumovskii 1928, p. 22). The article that accompanied Lenin's notes on Hegel was more in keeping with the campaign to boost Lenin's reputation as a Marxist theoretician. It emphasised that the current practice of contrasting Marx the theoretician with Lenin the activist was based on the misconception that there could be revolutionary practice without theoretical analysis. In this connection, Razumovskii took up Bukharin's contention that whereas Marx's work was highly abstract, Lenin's approach was a synthesis of theory and practice. Drawing on a number of Lenin's writings, Razumovskii examined the part played by abstraction in Lenin's concrete analyses of given situations (Razumovskii 1925, p. 35).

## Lukács as systematiser

One can see in Razumovskii's article an attempt to draw together themes in Lenin's writings, and to systematise them in the way that Bukharin had called for. A more celebrated attempt to bring system to Lenin's scattered pronouncements was that of the young Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács in his essay *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of his Thought* (Lukács 1997).

Lukács, a regular contributor to *Vestnik kommunisticheskoi akademii* at this time, had the methodology to hand for the task. It was to apply his doctrine of 'Totality,'

which he professed to derive from Hegel. This was the idea that in certain details the whole picture could be revealed. The argument was that Lenin's genius was in his broad historical vision. Lukács had already put forward this interpretation of Lenin in a volume of tributes to the deceased Soviet leader published in 1924.

Just as Marx from the analysis of the English factory developed genuine laws of capitalism in general, so Lenin not only discovered the prerequisites and possibilities of the Russian revolution (the role of the proletariat, the attitude to the peasantry etc.), but at the same time found in them also the basic problems of the world revolution. Neither Marx nor Lenin 'generalised' what had only a local significance. Both in the microcosm of a single country, with the perspicacity of real genius, found the macrocosm of universal development. (Lukács 1997, p. 378)

In the essay on Lenin, Lukács does not use the term 'Totality' to describe Lenin's ability to see the universal in particulars. Probably the reason for this is that Lukács had already used the term widely and would continue to do so in his later works, applying it to individuals as diverse as Rosa Luxemburg and Sir Walter Scott. In order to imply that Lenin's talent was peculiar to him, instead of 'Totality' Lukács speaks of the 'actuality of revolution,'<sup>7</sup> but the argument is the same. Although Lukács made a sophisticated case to show that Lenin was a theoretician as well as an activist, and that 'Leninism' was 'a new phase in the development of the materialist dialectic' (Lukács 1997, pp. 81–85), he was unable to achieve the kind of systematisation of Lenin's ideas that Bukharin had in mind. The task was in any case formidable, if not impossible. Most of Lenin's literary output was journalistic articles, reacting to events as they occurred, with occasional theoretical excursions such as *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, *Imperialism*, and *State and Revolution*. It was an output that defied systematization, so that 'Leninism' never got beyond being a collection of quotations.

## The Philosophical Notebooks

The entirety of Lenin's notes on Hegel's *Science of Logic* was published in the ninth issue of the journal of the Lenin Institute *Leninskii sbornik* in 1929. The section on 'The Subjective Logic' included Lenin's 'Aphorism' that:

It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Das Kapital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, after half a century none of the Marxists understood Marx! (Lenin 1961, p. 180)

No great insight was needed to come to this conclusion if one had read, as Lenin had done, Marx's letter to Engels of 14 January 1858.

The notes were accompanied by a Foreword by Deborin, who had obviously given the 'Philosophical Notebooks' more thought since the time he made his introductory

<sup>7</sup>The term may have been suggested by Bukharin's lecture 'Lenin as a Marxist,' where the word 'actuality' appears three times.

remarks in *Pod znamenem marksizma*. He could now say with some certainty what in Hegel's *Logic* Lenin agreed with, and what he did not. He was sure that Lenin had no objection to the way Hegel had structured his *Logic*, and that he agreed with much that Hegel said. Deborin made no mention of the Marx–Engels correspondence as Lenin's stimulus to read Hegel and other authors mentioned there. His explanation for the existence of the 'Philosophical Notebooks' was Lenin's intention to write a book on materialist dialectics, but he had been prevented from doing this by the onset of the war. Lenin had got as far as making notes from the main works of Hegel, the 'Metaphysics' of Aristotle, the two-volume work on Heraclitus the Obscure by Lassalle, and a number of books on natural science. Deborin did not mention Lenin's notes on Clausewitz, presumably because these did not accord with Lenin's alleged purpose of writing a book on materialist dialectics.

In Deborin's view, there was no doubt that if Lenin had succeeded in finishing his book, it would have given a considerable stimulus to the development of dialectical materialism, raising it to a higher level. For Deborin, Lenin had only potentially raised dialectical materialism to a higher level, but had not actually done so. Rather than say that Lenin's Marxism was an advance on Marx's, Deborin argued that Lenin's Marxism was an advance on Plekhanov's, since it incorporated the rich experience of the class struggle in the era of imperialism.

Most of Deborin's Foreword was devoted to presenting the notes on Hegel in a way that implied a high degree of theoretical sophistication on the part of Lenin, and in this Deborin showed considerable ingenuity. He picked up on the passage in the notes in which Lenin had observed: 'Marx, consequently, clearly sides with Hegel in introducing the criterion of practice into the theory of knowledge: see the Theses on Feuerbach' (Deborin 1929, p. 16). Deborin explains that what Lenin was referring to here was Marx's conception of Praxis as a criterion of truth. In his first thesis on Feuerbach, Marx indicates that the old materialism regards reality only in terms of the object, not as the subject, subjectively, not in the terms of Praxis. Moreover, in Marx's view, in contrast to materialism, the active side of perception was developed by idealism, but only abstractly, because idealism does not recognise concrete reality as such. Deborin goes on to argue that the correct way to conceive of the relation between subject and object is in terms of theory and practice. The possibility to change the world comes from the actual existence of the world and our practical action upon it. The world is not something alien to the subject: on the contrary, the subject dominates the object, or, as Hegel puts it, 'assimilates' objectivity to itself (Deborin 1929, pp. 16–17).

This exegesis on Lenin's notes went far beyond what Lenin had actually written. However, it was highly relevant to the task in hand: to establish the point that Lenin was not just an activist, but also a theoretician. To imply that Lenin was the embodiment of Praxis, of the unity of theory and practice, was exactly what was required in the situation. It also had the advantage of tying Lenin to the intellectual tradition of Marx and Hegel. It is in this political context that the interpretation of Marxism as a doctrine of Praxis had its beginnings.

The issue of *Leninskii sbornik* containing Lenin's notes on Hegel's *Logic* was edited by Bukharin, whose name appeared prominently on the title page. In the course of the campaign against the Rightists, the issue was withdrawn, and a new

one was produced in 1930. The new issue contained only a few introductory remarks by Vladimir V. Adoratskii, the new editor. The Foreword by Deborin, who was now under attack, had been removed.

The second part of the 'Philosophical Notebooks' appeared in the 12th issue of *Leninskii sbornik* for 1930. This contained notes on the books other than Hegel's *Logic* that Lenin had been inspired to read by the Marx–Engels correspondence: Lassalle's study of Heraclitus the Obscure and Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*.

Unlike Deborin, Adoratskii did not attempt to show the depth of Lenin's philosophical understanding. Adoratskii's tactic was to present an intellectual biography of Lenin, showing that he had always been interested in philosophy, hence the extended collection of philosophical notes. He argued that although in a letter to Alexander Bogdanov in 1906 Lenin had described himself as a 'rank-and-file' Marxist in philosophy, this should not be taken literally. Throughout his career Lenin had a profound and abiding interest in philosophical questions. In Adoratskii's judgement, after Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* was the greatest work in Marxism. The publication of this book had marked the beginning of a new stage in Marxist theory (Adoratskii 1930, p. 12).

Although Adoratskii concurred with Deborin in the presumption that Lenin's 'Philosophical Notebooks' had been compiled with a view to writing a book on Marxist dialectics, he also believed that the stimulus to study dialectics was to counter the distortions of Marxism perpetrated by the leaders of the II International. According to Adoratskii, Lenin's enormous achievement was to rescue dialectics 'from the simplification, the vulgarisation, the transformation into sophism, of the renegades of the II International,' and to reconstruct it in the form that it had with Marx (Adoratskii 1930, p. 19).

Adoratskii's survey of Lenin's publications and preparatory materials that had some bearing on philosophical questions has every appearance of being comprehensive, but the notes on the Marx–Lenin correspondence are not included in the collection, or mentioned in the introduction. What is included is a note containing an exchange between Lenin and Bukharin on the subject of Bogdanov's *Tectology*: Lenin condemning it, and Bukharin supporting it. The inclusion of the note was obviously to discredit Bukharin, by showing that he took Bogdanov's side against Lenin. The note had such a devastating effect on Bukharin's standing because of the elevated status that had been attributed to Lenin. With a fearful symmetry the monster of Leninism that Bukharin had created now returned to destroy him.

When the 'Philosophical Notebooks' first appeared as a separate publication in 1934 they omitted the notes on Clausewitz, but retained the original introduction by Adoratskii and the exchange on Bogdanov between Lenin and Bukharin (Lenin 1934). However, by the time the same work was published in 1947, both the Adoratskii introduction and the Lenin–Bukharin exchange had been discarded. The preface to this version maintains that Lenin's motive for taking up the study of Hegel was the need to combat various currents in contemporary bourgeois idealist philosophy (Lenin 1947, p. 14). The version of 'Philosophical Notebooks' that appeared in volume 38 of the fourth edition of Lenin's *Collected Works* published in 1958 stated that Lenin's objective was the desire to 'expose the opportunism and social chauvinism of the leaders of the Second International' (Lenin 1961, p. 14). This latter interpretation is the one that gained wide currency in Western scholarship.

## The end of the Institute of Marx and Engels

The lukewarm attitude of Deborin and other members of the ‘dialectical’ school to Lenin’s ‘Philosophical Notebooks’ came under attack in an article in *Pravda* in January 1931. In it, Deborin, Riazanov and their colleagues at IME were reproached with harbouring the Menshevik conception that refused to recognise Leninism as a new and higher stage of Marxism, and of maintaining that Lenin had contributed nothing to Marxist doctrine. As part of the offensive against IME Stalin sent supporters from IKP, headed by the philosophers Pavel F. Iudin and Mark B. Mitin, to demand that the institution be reorganised on ‘Leninist principles’ (Rokitianskii and Müller 1996, p. 103).

Riazanov replied at once to the *Pravda* article, and, with regard to the criticisms made of his Institute by Stalin’s emissaries, pointed out that the stimulus for Lenin’s Hegelian studies had been the reading of the Marx–Engels correspondence, and that consequently there could be no suggestion of Leninism as a new, higher stage of Marxism. Riazanov recalled:

I replied with a critique in the form of a lecture in which I showed that Lenin’s views on the dialectical method between 1894 and 1914 had undergone significant changes, that only after he became acquainted with the correspondence of Marx and Engels did he apply himself to a more profound study of materialist dialectics, that he arrived at results that allowed him, as distinct from Plekhanov, to make more precise and to perfect his understanding of Marxist dialectics, that these results were used by him in his fine article on Marx,<sup>8</sup> and that therefore there could be no talk of Leninism as a new, higher, method of scientific investigation as compared with the method of Marxism, that one could only speak of the dialectical method of Marx, Engels and Lenin. (Rokitianskii and Müller 1996, p. 312)

Riazanov’s arguments were rejected by the *Pravda* editorial board, who contended—as Adoratskii had in his essay—that Lenin had completely mastered the dialectical method even before 1914. They maintained, moreover, that Riazanov’s attitude to Lenin was no different from that of Deborin, who had denied that Lenin had so much as ‘given a considerable stimulus to the development of dialectical materialism.’ For their refusal to regard Leninism as a higher stage of Marxism both Riazanov and Deborin were accused of ‘Menshevising idealism’ by the *Pravda* editorial board (Rokitianskii and Müller 1996, pp. 313–16).

Riazanov was arrested on 16 February 1931, expelled from the party, stripped of all his posts and his membership of the Academy of Sciences, and exiled to Saratov in April. In his six years in Saratov Riazanov worked as a consultant for the university library, but on 21 January 1938 he was re-arrested, accused of belonging to a mythical Rightist-opportunist Trotskyist organisation. He was condemned to death and shot on the same day.

<sup>8</sup>That is, the article in the Granat *Encyclopedia* mentioned above.



## Conclusion

The changed attitude towards Lenin that followed the Soviet leader's death in January 1924 has been treated by historians mainly in terms of a 'Lenin cult.' Here, one thinks of Stalin's quasi-religious speech at Lenin's funeral, the placing of Lenin's preserved body in the mausoleum on Red Square, the naming of places and institutions in his honour and the many other manifestations of veneration. Besides encouraging the 'Lenin cult,' the Soviet regime had a serious purpose in extolling Lenin as a Marxist thinker. It was impractical to adopt Marxism as the ideology of the regime, particularly in the form it was taking in the hands of Riazanov. It was still in the process of formation—uncertain and unreliable. It was also impractical to renounce it, because of the prestige and loyalty it commanded both nationally and internationally. The solution was to declare Lenin the authentic theoriser and practitioner of Marxism, a Marxism suited to the present day, since it belonged to the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution. Increasingly, from 1924, conformity with Lenin's writings was held to be the criterion of truth. Whereas, before this date Lenin was seldom cited as an authority on any issue, after 1924 reference to Lenin had become practically essential. By the end of the 1920s the term 'Marxism–Leninism' had come into use.<sup>9</sup>

The promulgation of 'Leninism' had far-reaching political implications. This became the battleground on which the debates of the 1920s and 1930s were fought. Arguments were decided on who was the best Leninist. In this respect Stalin showed excellent judgement in adopting the role of curator of the Leninist heritage, although, as was indicated above, the heritage was not always authentic. In marshalling quotations from Lenin, Stalin was in his element. It was an exercise that required perseverance and application rather than expertise in Marxist theory. If Riazanov had indeed made a remark about Stalin's lack of talent for theorising, it was misplaced. By the time the question of socialism in one country arose, the ground of debate had shifted to territory on which Stalin could dominate. Stalin never expounded a theory of socialism in one country on his own behalf, as Deutscher implies. Stalin would never leave himself open to criticism in that way. What he did do was argue that the theory of socialism in one country was one that Lenin, in his time, had advocated.

It is remarkable that Leon Trotsky did not question the authority Bukharin, Stalin and their associates claimed for Lenin. On the contrary: his challenge to the Soviet leadership after 1924 was that he, not they, was the best Leninist, and that he was Lenin's rightful heir. This is the theme of Trotsky's writings from 'Lessons of October' in 1924 to *My Life* and *History of the Russian Revolution* in 1930–31. However, it was ground on which Trotsky was vulnerable. He had criticised Lenin in the past, and the veneration for Lenin made these criticisms powerful ammunition in the anti-Trotsky campaign.

It fell to Riazanov to point out the artificiality of the Leninist stage of Marxism. He was in a position to do this because, better than any of his predecessors, he knew the writings of Marx and Engels. He also knew Lenin and his intellectual evolution at first hand, and in particular, how Lenin had come to study Hegelian philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> According to Erik van Ree, Stalin began to use the term in November 1928. See (van Ree 2002, p. 256).

But it required exceptional courage and integrity to speak out against the doctrine of Leninism, which had become the official ideology of the Soviet regime. Riazanov paid with his life for his adherence to principle. In an ironic act of human vandalism, a regime ostensibly dedicated to Marxism destroyed its—and the world’s—leading Marxist scholar.

It is also ironic that present-day Western scholars of Marxism should take the part, not of Riazanov, but of the Soviet regime. One encounters the argument that the ‘Philosophical Notebooks’ place Lenin closer to ‘Hegelian or “Western” Marxists than to orthodox Marxists, including official Soviet Marxist–Leninists’ (Anderson 1995, p. ix; Levine 1978, p. 29). That Leninism was on a higher level than existing Marxist doctrines was the impression that the publication of the ‘Philosophical Notebooks’ was intended to create. The ‘Philosophical Notebooks’ did not contradict official Soviet ‘Marxism–Leninism;’ they were its crowning glory.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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