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The Resurrection of Plekhanovism in Soviet Historiography

By SAMUEL H. BARON

The Soviet writer Iu. Polevoi recently remarked that in the Stalin era Plekhanov's literary heritage was "relegated to oblivion, and his role in the development of historical science was belittled and ignored."¹ This judgment is beyond dispute, and its public acknowledgement testifies to the renewal of interest in Plekhanov's work since Stalin's death—or, to be more precise, since the Twentieth Party Congress and Khrushchev's sensational denunciation of Stalin in 1956. To illustrate, a bibliography of Soviet writings published between 1931 and 1961 on Plekhanov's thought lists 128 items; but of that number, only 31 appeared between 1931 and 1953, an average of about 1½ per year. The frequency of such publications continued at the same level between 1953 and 1956, but in the next five years the number multiplied more than tenfold to better than 15 per year.² The conjunction in 1956 of the anti-Stalin campaign and the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Plekhanov's birth resulted that year in a

¹ Iu. Polevoi, "G. V. Plekhanov o vostochnom despotizme," *Narody Azii i Afriki*, 1967, no. 2, p. 73.

² See B. A. Chagin, *G. V. Plekhanov i ego rol' v razvitii marksistkoi filosofii* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1963), pp. 298–303. This bibliography is more comprehensive than it purports to be; though described as a bibliography of Plekhanov's philosophical, sociological, and esthetic views, it also includes works on his economic and historical views. The publication between 1934 and 1940 of the eight-volume collection, *Literaturnoe nasledie G. V. Plekhanova*, may appear to contradict the point we are making, but it actually constitutes a special case. The collection was a product of Dom Plekhanova, an institution that the Soviet government created in Leningrad to house Plekhanov's library and papers. Plekhanov's wife had agreed in 1928 to transfer these materials from Western Europe to the Soviet Union, on condition that they be specially housed and she placed in charge. She very likely had also insisted as part of the bargain that portions of Plekhanov's literary remains be published.

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bumper crop of 42 publications.³ One could hardly have expected that extraordinary level to be maintained, but in subsequent years, down to 1972, the annual number of publications devoted to Plekhanov has averaged 7–10.

While other areas of Plekhanov's thought suffered relative neglect in Stalin's time, his historical views—the subject of this paper—were indeed “relegated to oblivion.” Apart from the critical chapter devoted to Plekhanov in N. L. Rubinshtein's *Russian Historiography*, I have found only one other item worth mention for the entire period from 1931 to 1953, and the years between 1953 and 1956 brought only one more.⁴ Polevoi's statement, and the statistical support we have cited, might lead one to believe that the eclipse of Plekhanov's thought was contrived by Stalin. As we shall see, however, Stalin played a secondary role. The ban on Plekhanov had been pronounced years before Stalin rose to supremacy, and its author was none other than M. N. Pokrovsky. It was Pokrovsky who in 1922 wrote: “We must fight [Plekhanov's historical] theory in the most decisive way, in fact no less energetically than we are now fighting against religious prejudice.”⁵ The next year he followed his own advice with an unbridled attack, whose purpose was to destroy Plekhanov's authority as a Marxist historian of Russia. After he had metaphorically buried his adversary, however, Pokrovsky unexpectedly assumed the role of seer and produced an uncanny prophecy: “In his understanding of Russian history,” Pokrovsky observed, “Plekhanov is not a teacher

³ The high point of the celebration was a December 11 meeting at the Bol'shoi Theater. The next day *Pravda's* front page carried a photograph of the Bol'shoi stage that featured a huge portrait of Plekhanov overlooking and dwarfing N. S. Khrushchev and the entire party leadership seated at the dais. The inner pages devoted nine full columns to a speech by Academician M. B. Mitin, a member of the Party Central Committee, entitled “Istoricheskaia rol' G. V. Plekhanova v russkom i mezhdunarodnom rabochem dvizhenii.” The speech was also published as a separate pamphlet in 1957.

⁴ N. L. Rubinshtein, *Russkaia istoriografia* (Moscow, 1941), ch. 32; M. I. Sidorov, “Kritika Leninym men'shevistskikh vzgliadov Plekhanova na istoriiu russkoi obshchestvennoi mysli,” *Uchenye zapiski Akademii obshchestvennykh nauk pri TsK VKB (B)* 15 (1952); Iu. Polevoi, “Ob istoricheskikh vzgliadakh Plekhanova,” *Voprosy istorii*, 1954, no. 8.

⁵ M. N. Pokrovsky, *Istoricheskaia nauka i bor'ba klassov*, 2 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1933), 1:135. This work is a collection of Pokrovsky's writings on historiography. The quoted statement was made in a polemical article directed against Trotsky's historical views, which, Pokrovsky argued, were a replica of Plekhanov's.

of the past but perhaps a teacher of the future"; and he then went on to forecast the possibility of a "resurrection of Plekhanovism."⁶

I suggest that Pokrovsky's prophecy is on the way to fulfillment, but before we examine the evidence it will be necessary to review the key aspects of the Plekhanov-Pokrovsky relationship.⁷ Because Pokrovsky so clearly dominated the field in the pre-Stalin period of Soviet historiography's development, Western students are apt to reach for his *History of Russia from the Earliest Times* when they wish to consult the Marxian interpretation of Russian history. Nevertheless, we must insist that at the time the 1917 revolution erupted Pokrovsky had produced not *the* but *a* Marxist interpretation of Russia's past. The most considerable Marxist treatise other than Pokrovsky's *History* (1913-1914), and its most serious competitor, was Plekhanov's *History of Russian Social Thought* (1914-17).⁸

Pokrovsky's interpretation became supreme in Soviet Russia more as a result of chance than of considered choice. After 1903, Plekhanov was for the most part aligned with the Mensheviks against the Bolsheviks, and in 1917 he vehemently opposed Lenin's seizure of power. By contrast, Pokrovsky had joined the Bolsheviks in 1905, and in 1917 he ardently supported Lenin. The only historian of any note among the Bolsheviks, Pokrovsky was catapulted into a commanding position in the historical profession as a consequence of the Bolshevik takeover.⁹ The offensive he thereafter launched against his rival was well calculated to put Plekhanov's historical views beyond the pale. The most damning element in the indictment charged that by the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:100. Pokrovsky's attack on Plekhanov came in the course of a series of lectures he gave on Russian historiography in 1923. They are reprinted in *ibid* under the title "Bor'ba klassov i russkaia istoricheskaia literatura." The material relating to Plekhanov appears in pp. 78-93, 99-100. Pokrovsky presented substantially the same ideas on Plekhanov in an article entitled "Plekhanov kak istorik Rossii," *Pod znamenem marksizma*, 1923, nos. 6-7.

⁷ I have dealt more fully with this matter in a paper called "Plekhanov, Trotsky, and the Development of Soviet Historiography," which is to be published in the July 1974 issue of *Soviet Studies*.

⁸ Plekhanov's historical magnum opus is reprinted in his *Sochineniia*, 24 vols. (Moscow, 1923-27), 20-22.

⁹ Biographical information on Pokrovsky may be found in Rubinshtein, *Russkaia istoriografiia*, ch. 34; and in O. D. Sokolov, *M. N. Pokrovskii i sovetskaia istoricheskaia nauka* (Moscow, 1970).

time Plekhanov composed his *History*, he had abandoned the proletarian cause and become a spokesman of the bourgeoisie; his work, permeated with bourgeois ideology, was therefore not a Marxist history at all.¹⁰

In so arguing, Pokrovsky was rather careless of distinctions. Though of course aware that Plekhanov had been affiliated with the Mensheviks, he chose to see little or no difference between that group and the Kadets: hence the claim that Plekhanov had become a spokesman for the bourgeoisie. Moreover, Pokrovsky found it convenient to ignore the fact—or was he unaware of it?—that Plekhanov had devised the main elements of his interpretation of Russia's past long before he became a Menshevik.¹¹ In envisaging Plekhanov's *History* as a case of "politics projected back into the past," Pokrovsky was mistaken, but his critique did not rest on such extrinsic considerations alone. The decisive question, and of course Pokrovsky implicitly answered it in his own favor, was this: which interpretation of Russia's past was best supported by the evidence and at the same time most consistent with the principles of Marxian historical thought?

The contrast between the Plekhanov and Pokrovsky interpretations could hardly be more striking. At the most general level it may be stated as follows: in Pokrovsky's scheme the Russian historical process from the sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth was basically similar to the West European, and the differences of secondary significance; in Plekhanov's view, the Russian and West European processes were fundamentally dissimilar, though not absolutely so. Pokrovsky evidently leaned in the indicated direction even before he became a Marxist,¹² but this way of apprehending the Russian his-

¹⁰ Pokrovsky, *Istoricheskaia nauka i bor'ba klassov*, 1:88, 91-93. Pokrovsky also contemptuously dismissed Rozhkov and Trotsky, two other Marxist historians, and thus his own interpretation was left to enjoy uncontested dominance of the field. As I have shown in my paper cited in note 7, Trotsky entered the lists against Pokrovsky in Plekhanov's and his own behalf, but the tides of political fortune soon carried him away.

¹¹ For the development of Plekhanov's ideas on this theme prior to the publication of his *History*, see my article: "Plekhanov's Russia: The Impact of the West upon an 'Oriental' Society," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19, no. 3 (June 1958).

¹² See Rubinshtein, *Russkaia istoriografia*, p. 578; for a fuller discussion of Pokrovsky's historical outlook before he became a Marxist, see Roman Szporluk, "M. N. Pokrovsky's Interpretation of Russian History," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1965).

torical process dovetailed neatly with the Marxian conception as he appears to have understood it. In this view, history is a unitary process regulated by law, and all peoples of necessity pass through a definite sequence of stages—e.g., from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to socialism. In Pokrovsky's *History* one is actually hard put to find a clear-cut system of periodization keyed to Marx's series of socio-economic stages. Unmistakable, however, is his stress on the likeness of Russian and West European historical development, the primacy of economic factors in historical causation, and the perception of the state organization as an instrument of the ruling class.

These guiding ideas are all blended in the most characteristic aspect of Pokrovsky's outlook. He envisaged the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the age when commercial capitalism rose to pre-dominance in Russia: hence Russia's development paralleled the commercial revolution and the rise of capitalism in Western Europe. He explained the rise of Russian commercial capitalism in economic terms: it was a response to foreign commercial capital's intrusion into Muscovy's economic life. Concomitant to the rise of commercial capitalism, he saw the emergence of a significant merchant class that, as a matter of course, assumed political power. The influence of commercial capitalism became all-pervasive: among other things, it was the force that drove Ivan the Terrible to war for the Baltic coast; and the development of the grain trade—a feature of the rise of commercial capitalism—spurred the landed elements to convert their peasant laborers into serfs. In all this the state exercised no independent authority but instead, as Pokrovsky crisply put it, "Muscovite autocracy was the embodiment of commercial capitalism's dictatorship."¹³

Plekhanov sounded the keynote of *his* interpretation near the beginning of the first volume of his *History*. "Peculiarities of the [Russian] historical process," he wrote, "very noticeably set it apart from the historical process of all the countries of the European West and recall [instead] the developmental process of the great oriental despo-

¹³ Pokrovsky, *Istoricheskaia nauka i bor'ba klassov*, 1: 142. Although Pokrovsky made this statement in 1925, the idea it expresses, as well as the other points I have made in this paragraph, are all to be found in the second volume of his *History*.

tisms.”¹⁴ He understood the term “oriental despotism” to mean a system in which the state—the despot and his governing apparatus—through control of the means of production, reduced all classes of the population to utter dependence. He intended this characterization especially but not exclusively for the Muscovite era. In his conception, the decisive factor in the shaping of the Russian state and society was the massive disproportion between the country’s backward, natural-economy base and the military needs generated by protracted external threats from several quarters. The emergent Muscovite state responded with a draconian policy of social mobilization designed to ensure its survival. It assumed control of landed property, created a new nobility dependent upon service to the state, and reduced the peasants to dependence upon the noble servitors. The resulting order, with its stagnant agriculture and weakly developed commercial-industrial sector, its overwhelmingly peasant composition and its numerically weak and politically impotent urban population, possessed a high degree of stability. Unlike feudalism, moreover, it was relatively impervious to capitalistic inroads. Therefore, it had required the challenge of the West to rouse Russia from her prolonged slumber and spur her into the European path of development.

In contrast to Pokrovsky’s, Plekhanov’s depiction stressed the peculiarities of Russia’s development; the *interaction* of economic and political factors in the historical process to produce an uncommonly powerful state; and the state’s extraordinary role in the determination of the country’s social and economic evolution. This representation appears to me to be distinctly more congruent with the evidence than Pokrovsky’s, but it might seem to be disqualified on another score. Plekhanov’s conception no doubt has a familiar ring, and it does so because it has a good deal in common with the interpretation worked out by a number of pre-revolutionary Russian historians, of whom the best known to Western students is V. O. Kliuchevsky. In his 1923 lectures Pokrovsky sought to impale Plekhanov on that very point: he accused his opponent of having fallen captive to the “statist” school of Russian historians that had its beginnings with B. N. Chicherin, whose ideas, he contended, remained influential in the writ-

¹⁴ Plekhanov, *Sochineniia*, 20: 12.

ings of Kliuchevsky and P. N. Miliukov.¹⁵ On that score, he declared, the substance of Plekhanov's interpretation was demonstrably contrary to Marxian precepts.

Plekhanov was in fact influenced no little by pre-revolutionary non-Marxist historians, but that does not necessarily prove that *his* interpretation was non-Marxist. If his representation resembled that of the others, his extraordinary emphasis on Russia's natural economy basis, the discreteness of its village community organizations, the weakness of the urban sector, the state control of economic resources, and the barring of capitalistic development by these circumstances added a by no means inconsequential Marxist dimension. It may be objected that his interpretation seems to ignore the well-known sequence of stages that are widely believed to be at the heart of Marxian historical thought. However, in his book *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1908), Plekhanov discriminated in the Marxian canon *two* alternative lines of social development from a universal beginning in the primitive communism of the clan. In the West the first stage had been succeeded by the classical system (slavery) and then feudalism; elsewhere, owing to differing circumstances, primitive communism gave way to a distinctive social system called "oriental." While capitalistic relations gradually evolved within the feudal societies of the West, moreover, the oriental societies provided virtually no scope for such development. Plekhanov's perception that the Marxian legacy allowed for multilinear social development and not just one exclusive way for all peoples was correct.¹⁶ His interpre-

¹⁵ Pokrovsky, *Istoricheskaia nauka i bor'ba klassov*, 1: 85, 89.

¹⁶ Plekhanov, *Sochineniia*, 18: 216-17. In a recent essay, based on a thorough familiarity with the writings of Marx and Engels, the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm asserts: 1. "Marx's view of historical development was never simply unilinear"; 2. Marx discriminated a distinct Asiatic mode of production—one of several alternatives to feudalism—that featured despotic rule over a multitude of economically self-sufficient agricultural communes; and, unlike feudalism, this system was incapable of giving rise to a capitalistic order until exposed to a major shock from the outside; 3. There was never an inclination on Marx's part "to abandon the Asiatic mode" and there was "certainly a deliberate refusal to reclassify it as feudal"; 4. Marx also wrote now and then of a "Slavonic" socio-economic formation that evidently arose in Russia and had affinities with the Asiatic. See Hobsbawm's introduction to K. Marx, *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations* (New York, 1964), pp. 32-38, 42-43, 58, 70. On the last point, see the appended drafts of Marx's 1881 letter to Vera Zasulich (pp. 142-45). See also George Lichtheim's 1963 essay on oriental despotism republished in his *The Concept of Ideology* (New York, 1967).

tation of Russia's history, though not without faults, is consistent with this perception.

As I suggested earlier, the relative merit of the different approaches did not determine which should prevail. Pokrovsky's political affiliation, the commanding position he enjoyed in the Soviet historical field, and the verdict he pronounced on Plekhanov's work decided the issue. Accordingly, Pokrovsky's views established the framework for Soviet historical research, while Plekhanov's historical conception—to repeat—was relegated to oblivion. To be sure, Pokrovsky's anathema did not prevent the republication of Plekhanov's *History of Russian Social Thought* in 1925, as part of his *Collected Works*. But we may not unfairly suppose that it was in response to its republication that Pokrovsky printed in the journal *Istorik marksist*, which he edited, the lengthiest and most circumstantial critique of Plekhanov's historical views that has ever appeared in the Soviet press. Indeed, it would not be surprising to learn that Pokrovsky had commissioned the piece.

The author, one E. Gazganov, accepted without question Pokrovsky's depiction of the Russian historical process, and he also followed the master's lead in his criticism of Plekhanov. However, he succeeded better than Pokrovsky in disclosing some of the weak points in Plekhanov's conception. For example, he justifiably took Plekhanov to task for his tendency to lump the societies of the West and those of the East into two more or less uniform categories. As against Pokrovsky's blunderbuss approach, Gazganov more sensitively, though still not entirely accurately, described Plekhanov's work as "an attempt to set the traditional views of liberal-bourgeois historiography on a Marxist base." He evidently regarded Plekhanov as a Menshevik *avant le mot*; for, though plainly aware that his subject conceived the view of Russia as an oriental despotism in the 1890s, he characterized this historical construction as "the authentic Menshevik interpretation of [Russian] history."¹⁷ Whatever one may think of this characterization, it became the standard Soviet view; and, of course, it made Plekhanov's outlook no more acceptable than before.

¹⁷ E. Gazganov, "Istoricheskie vzgliady G. V. Plekhanova," *Istorik marksist*, no. 7 (1928), pp. 75-77, 83-85, 109-16.

The denunciation of Pokrovsky and his "school" following his death in 1932 would seem to have provided an opening for the resurgence of the alternative Marxian historical conception that Plekhanov had devised. In 1937 the exile Miliukov was obviously thinking along these lines when he remarked that if Pokrovsky's principal errors were really condemned, that "would be tantamount to a return to Plekhanov and Trotsky" and the non-Marxist historians by whom they had been influenced. Because that was unlikely to occur, he judged, Soviet history would necessarily continue to be history "in the Pokrovsky manner."¹⁸

Miliukov proved right in large part. The condemnation of Pokrovsky did not, as has been widely assumed, signify the total repudiation of his ideas. Certain features of his historical outlook considered objectionable, among them his anti-heroic and anti-national inclinations, were "corrected." But a 1965 statement by a prominent group of Soviet historians noted that in the Stalin era "almost the only task confronting historians was taken to be the demonstration of the universality (*obshchikh zakonomernostei*) of the development of social formations in all countries . . . [while] the concrete-historical manifestations . . . their national expressions were obscured, and sometimes completely ignored." The exaggeration of the importance of economic factors and a corresponding underestimation of the significance of the reverse effects of the superstructure, especially the state, on the base reportedly also continued.¹⁹ Why this should have been so is puzzling, and it deserves further investigation, because the role of the state in Russia's history was never greater than in the Stalin era, and the dominating role it assumed was plainly reflected in a whole range of other disciplines and institutions. Plekhanov's view of the Russian past would seem to have provided a more appropriate background than Pokrovsky's for the totalist social mobilization that Stalin carried out.

Stalin certainly had the power to rehabilitate Plekhanov's historical interpretation, but he evidently preferred to secure historical

¹⁸ P. N. Miliukov, "Velichie i padenie M. N. Pokrovskogo," *Sovremennye zapiski* 65 (1937): 387.

¹⁹ *Perekhod ot feodalizma k kapitalizmu v Rossii* (Moscow, 1969), pp. 6, 7.

support for his activities by other means. To establish suitable precedents for the dictator, his historians represented Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great—nonentities in Pokrovsky's history—as men of towering stature who had contributed mightily to Russian national development. In Plekhanov's work, the first figured as the quintessential oriental despot, the second as the possessor of an oriental despot's power, which, paradoxically, he used to advance his policy of Westernization. As Stalin was evidently less than eager to be portrayed as an oriental despot, his minions celebrated Grozny and Peter as far-sighted, progressive statesmen, and their brutalities were either muted or justified.²⁰

Our assumption that Stalin did not relish being cast as an oriental despot depends in part on the outcome of a controversy about oriental despotism that extended over a decade or so in the Soviet Union and ended late in the 1930s, when Stalin was at the pinnacle of power. Although the controversy has been treated by a number of writers, much remains obscure.²¹ This much is clear, however: by the late 1930s the very concepts "oriental society" and "the Asiatic mode of production" were officially barred from Soviet socio-historical discourse. This step does not seem to have been motivated primarily by anti-Plekhanov bias, although early in the controversy Plekhanov (and Trotsky) were pilloried for identifying tsarist autocracy with oriental despotism. Nevertheless, the decision obviously committed Soviet historiography to the unilinear interpretation of the Marxian canon, for the Asiatic mode of production was declared to be not a distinct socio-economic formation but a type of feudalism. By the same token, Plekhanov's outlook was destined to continued banishment. As corroborating evidence, we have the chapter on Plekhanov

²⁰ It would be interesting to know, but we probably never shall, if Stalin was aware of Plekhanov's warning (1883) that any attempt to create a nationalized economy in the absence of the preconditions would necessarily result in an "authoritarian communism" managed by a "socialist caste." See Plekhanov, *Sochineniia*, 2: 81.

²¹ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, 1957), pp. 401–412; Konstantin Shteppa, *Russian Historians and the Soviet State* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1962), pp. 67–88. An unpublished manuscript by George Enteen of Pennsylvania State University spells out some of the issues especially clearly.

in Rubinshtein's *Russian Historiography* (1941), which faithfully echoes Pokrovsky's 1923 critique.²²

So the situation remained until after the Second World War, when Pokrovsky's concept of commercial capitalism, roundly denounced in the 1930s, was revived in somewhat amended form in Soviet historiography and given wide support. I have in mind, of course, the highlighting of Lenin's remark of 1894 affirming the development of an "all-Russian market" in seventeenth-century Russia, and the guidance this statement provided for an immense amount of Soviet research in the next decade or so.²³ To be sure, Lenin had not, like Pokrovsky, envisaged "Muscovite autocracy as the embodiment of commercial capitalism's dictatorship." But not long before his death Pokrovsky had cited Lenin's remark in defense of his own historical interpretation,²⁴ and many a Soviet historian from the late 1940s on occupied himself with demonstrating the rise of capitalism in the seventeenth, or even the sixteenth, century. Pokrovsky himself remained in ill-repute, but, as if to ward off any possibility of favorable attention to Plekhanov's *History*, in 1952 M. I. Sidorov published a long article devoted to Lenin's criticism of Plekhanov's "Menshevik" historical views.²⁵

²² Rubinshtein, *Russkaia istoriografiia*, ch. 32. The only source Rubinshtein cited other than the Stalinist *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks). Short Course* (Moscow, 1939) was Pokrovsky's critique of Plekhanov. It is important to note that Stalin's well-known exposition of dialectical and historical materialism in the *Short Course* deliberately excluded the Asiatic mode of production. Stalin cited at length (pp. 130-31) Marx's much quoted statement on historical dynamics from the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, but ended the quotation at the point where Marx proceeded to list the various socio-economic formations, including the Asiatic. Elsewhere in the chapter (p. 123), Stalin himself listed "the five main types of relations of productions," but the Asiatic is conspicuously missing.

²³ On this, see my article "The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism in Russia; A Major Soviet Historical Controversy," *American Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (June 1972.)

²⁴ Pokrovsky, *Istoricheskaia nauka i bor'ba klassov*, 2: 274-76; see also M. N. Pokrovsky, Preface to the tenth edition of *Brief History of Russia* (New York, 1933), pp. 11-13, and p. 292 of the appendix.

²⁵ M. I. Sidorov, "Kritika Leninyim men'shevistskikh vzgliadov Plekhanova," pp. 279-321. This article, which focuses chiefly on Plekhanov's thought concerning the "revolutionary democrats," is misnamed, for it is more a critique of Plekhanov's views by the author than a consideration of Lenin's criticism. As for Sidorov's critical comments on Plekhanov's historical interpretation, interestingly enough they are often identical with Pokrovsky's, although the latter is never mentioned.

The period between Stalin's death and the Twentieth Party Congress brought little change. In 1954 the same Polevoi whose words we quoted at the beginning of this paper, published a short article, "On Plekhanov's Historical Views," that plainly "belittled" them.²⁶ To be sure Polevoi credited Plekhanov with having successfully expounded and developed the concepts of historical materialism, with being "the first . . . to approach the study of Russian history from the standpoint of historical materialism [in his critique of the populists]," and with some other positive achievements. However, much of this was merely a reprise of the judgments Stalin passed on Plekhanov in his *Brief History of the CPSU*;²⁷ and, for the rest, Polevoi's evaluations were keyed to citations from Lenin. He ventured into controversial territory only once, with a brief for the proposition that Plekhanov's views in the 1890s were not in fact Menshevik but genuinely Marxist. The few pages of the article he devoted to *The History of Russian Social Thought* repeated the usual critical points. Although Pokrovsky's name went unmentioned, his spirit was manifest in Polevoi's ultimate verdict: "Plekhanov's scheme of Russian history in this and other works," he pronounced, "is a variant of the reactionary gentry-bourgeois historical conceptions."²⁸

In 1956 F. Ia. Poliansky contributed a consideration of Plekhanov's historical conception much more ambitious and extended than Polevoi's.²⁹ Unfortunately, even by contrast with Polevoi's piece, Poliansky's appears crude and insensitive. He misrepresented or misinterpreted Plekhanov all too frequently, and one sometimes gets the impression that his familiarity with Plekhanov's *History* was less than adequate. Equally serious, and rather astonishing, he completely ignored other Russian historical literature; besides Plekhanov he cited not a single source other than Marx-Engels or Lenin. Not surprisingly, then, in forty pages of closely printed text, Poliansky offered nothing new or arresting. His article was no doubt written before 1956,

²⁶ Iu. Polevoi, "Ob istoricheskikh vzgliadakh Plekhanova," *Voprosy istorii*, 1954, no. 8, pp. 48-64.

²⁷ *History of the CPSU(B). Short Course*, pp. 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 19.

²⁸ Polevoi, "Ob istoricheskikh vzgliadakh Plekhanova," p. 60.

²⁹ F. Ia. Poliansky, "Istoricheskaia kontsepsiia G. V. Plekhanova," *Uchenye zapiski MGU*, no. 179 (1956), pp. 147-184.

the year it was published; but, for him, as for some others, 1956 apparently did not figure as a watershed. When nine years later he addressed himself to a closely related subject—Plekhanov as historian of Russian economic thought—his handling of it was no more satisfactory and gave evidence of little or no movement.³⁰

As opposed to Poliansky, some historians began to depart from Stalinist orthodoxy even before the Twentieth Party Congress. Especially noteworthy was N. M. Druzhinin's paper delivered to the International Historical Conference in Rome in 1955.³¹ It was noteworthy for its unflinching recognition that Russian historical evolution, as evidenced in the course of capitalist development there, differed remarkably from the Western pattern. Moreover, it encouraged many another historian to publish findings consistent with that perception and to criticize the contrary and dominant view. This "new current" scored an impressive victory ten years later at the 1965 conference in Moscow on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Russia.³² Following Druzhinin's lead, the insurgents emphasized the great hindrances presented by a tenacious and adaptable feudal order to the development of capitalism in Russia. They advanced the beginning of the transition from feudalism to capitalism to the last third of the eighteenth century, and some were plainly skeptical of the view that Russian feudalism had exhausted its potentialities by the time serfdom was abolished.

The "new current's" insistence upon the peculiarities of Russian historical development went together with admonitions to give due weight to the role of the state. To cite an admirably apposite example, one participant observed: "Perhaps for fear that they might be suspected of sympathy for the 'statist theory,' [our] historians have underestimated the central government's fiscal exploitation."³³ The insurgents underscored the indispensability of comparative-historical

³⁰ F. Ia. Poliansky, *Plekhanov i russkaia ekonomicheskaia mysl'* (Moscow, 1965), ch. 11.

³¹ N. M. Druzhinin, *Genezis kapitalizma v Rossii* (Moscow, 1955).

³² For a discussion of the conference proceedings, see my article cited in note 23. I. F. Gindin labeled the views of the insurgents "the new current" in *Dokumenty Sovietsko-Ital'ianskoi konferentsii istorikov* (Moscow, 1970), pp. 225-29.

³³ *Perekhod ot feodalizma k kapitalizmu v Rossii*, p. 187.

study, and one commentator urged—as had Plekhanov—the necessity of comparing Russia's evolution not only with Western Europe's but also with the oriental societies. The "new current" also contended that the Russian state differed markedly from Western absolutist polities, and two conferees tentatively argued that it might indeed have been more like an oriental despotism.³⁴

These last points were central to the debates among Soviet historians about "Russian absolutism" at the Soviet-Italian historical conference in 1968, and in the pages of *Istoriia SSSR* between 1968 and 1972.³⁵ This time the insurgents aggressively advanced the view that the Russian state differed in kind from Western absolutism as a consequence of Russia's different socio-economic development. The contributor whose delineation of the character of the Russian state secured the greatest approbation was the West Europeanist A. N. Chistoznov. In an incisive article that drew parallels between early modern Spain and Russia, he emphasized that Marx had distinguished the Spanish from other West European states and had likened it to the Asian political model. Leaving no doubt as to his meaning, Chistozvonov repeatedly referred to the Russian polity as a despotism.³⁶

The forceful advocacy of such ideas—and for want of space we have been compelled to treat this in the most abbreviated manner—points to the resurrection of Plekhanovism. This is not to say that Plekhanov's historical conception has been revived and embraced *in toto*, or that the advocates of contrary views have abandoned the struggle. But even after such disclaimers, the attentive reader may still properly ask if we have reason to assert that Soviet historians consciously associate the ideas we have indicated with Plekhanov.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 139–40, 399.

³⁵ For discussions of these debates, see Alexander Gerschenkron, "Soviet Marxism and Absolutism," *Slavic Review* 30, no. 4 (December 1971); Thomas Esper, "Recent Soviet Views of Russian Absolutism," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1972); John Keep, "The Current Scene in Soviet Historiography," *Survey* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1973); Hans-Joachim Torke, "Die neuere Sowjethistographie zum Problem des russischen Absolutismus," *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 20 (1973).

³⁶ Chistozvonov's initial contribution, "Nekotorye aspekty problemy genezisa absoliutizma v Rossii," appeared not in *Istoriia SSSR* but in *Voprosy istorii*, 1968, no. 5. A second contribution was printed in *Istoriia SSSR*, 1971, no. 3.

No one pronounced his name at either the 1965 or 1968 historical conferences, it is true; nevertheless, Plekhanov's name has been surfacing now and again in historical discourse, and various of his ideas formerly ignored or attacked have been appreciatively discussed. As early as 1956, M. I. Sidorov defended Plekhanov against "unfair criticism" of his view of the relationship between the economic base and superstructure, and against allegations that he omitted class struggle from his account of Marxian historical theory.³⁷ In 1960 our weathervane, Polevoi, remarked that Plekhanov "laid the basis of Russian Marxist historiography" in the 1880s and early 1890s, though he carefully avoided reference to the major contours of the pioneer's historical outlook.³⁸

By contrast, the same year, in a brief discussion of Plekhanov's *History of Russian Social Thought*, L. V. Cherepnin discerned "great theoretical interest" in Plekhanov's "general understanding of the Russian historical process." Cherepnin found faults in Plekhanov's *History*, but he presented his subject's ideas fairly and accurately; he recognized Plekhanov's emphasis on the role of productive forces as the primary base of social development; and he found suggestive and valuable the parallels Plekhanov drew between the formation of the Russian centralized state and oriental despotism. Two years later, in a work on Russian historiography, A. L. Shapiro took notice of Cherepnin's appraisal in the considerable chapter that he devoted to Plekhanov. He himself found definite merit in certain of Plekhanov's views, although he believed that Plekhanov's "analogy between feudal [sic] Russia and the slaveowning [sic] despotisms lacked a sufficient basis." Shapiro either failed to recognize or to acknowledge that Plekhanov's views on oriental society derived from Marx and Engels. Nevertheless, he was more concerned to understand Plekhanov's outlook than to condemn it, his criticism was measured, and his essay on Plekhanov's historical work is the best informed and

³⁷ M. I. Sidorov, "Razrabotka G. V. Plekhanovym istoricheskogo materializma," *Voprosy filosofii*, 1956, no. 6, pp. 17-18.

³⁸ Iu. Polevoi, "Nachalo marksistkoi istoriografii v Rossii," in *Ocherki istorii istoricheskoi nauki v SSSR*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1955-66), 2: 272. Plekhanov's *History of Russian Social Thought* was published subsequent to the time span Polevoi was assigned to cover, it is true; but, as we have observed earlier, in the 1890s Plekhanov adumbrated what was to become the main theme of his *History*.

the most sensitive that has ever appeared in the Soviet press.³⁹

As Soviet historians have again confronted the task of defining the role of the state, the most important superstructural element in the historical process, some prominent figures have publicly turned to Plekhanov for guidance. Thus Corresponding Academician M. I. Iovchuk in 1964 called attention to Plekhanov's view on the reverse effects of the superstructure on the base; and, in 1966 Academician E. M. Zhukov endorsed Plekhanov's idea that state policy might either impede or abet economic development.⁴⁰

In 1967 the thaw had proceeded sufficiently to encourage Polevoi to advance claims for sympathetic reconsideration of Plekhanov. He now implicitly disassociated Plekhanov's outlook from the "reactionary gentry-bourgeois historical conceptions" with which he himself had affiliated it thirteen years earlier, and emphasized instead that Plekhanov's conception of oriental despotism was derived "above all" from the works of Marx and Engels. No less interesting, he now discovered that Plekhanov had deduced the possibility of two lines of historical development from the same authors. As a final token of Plekhanov's readmission to the community of the faithful, Polevoi implied that Plekhanov was merely being a good Marxist when he criticized "bourgeois historians" for comparing Russian forms of development only with those of Western Europe and not with those of the Orient.⁴¹

Even as they shift to a more favorable appraisal, Soviet writers who have publicly endorsed certain of Plekhanov's ideas have generally been careful to couple their endorsement with critical comments. The only exception I know of is M. V. Pavlova-Sil'vanskaia, a contributor to the debate on Russian absolutism. Other participants agreed to label the Russian state a despotism, and some were ready to describe it as an oriental despotism, or at least a state that exhib-

³⁹ L. V. Cherepnin, *Obrazovanie russkogo tsentralizovannogo gosudarstva v XIV-XV vekakh* (Moscow, 1960), pp. 95-98; A. L. Shapiro, *Russkaia istoriografiia v period imperializma* (Leningrad, 1962), ch. 12.

⁴⁰ *Voprosy istorii*, 1964, no. 3, p. 58; E. M. Zhukov, "Vstupitel'noe slovo," in *Teoreticheskie i istoriograficheskie problemy genezisa kapitalizma*, ed. S. D. Skazkin (Moscow, 1969), p. 6. This work presents the proceedings of a conference held in 1966.

⁴¹ Iu. Polevoi, "G. V. Plekhanov o vostochnom despotizme," pp. 74-75.

ited oriental-despotic traits. She alone gave due consideration to the case Plekhanov made for designating Russia an oriental despotism, however, and she declared it both genuinely Marxist and correct.⁴²

It should be pointed out that resurrection of Plekhanovism has certainly been abetted, directly or indirectly, by the recent revival of the earlier-banned concept of a distinct Asiatic mode of production. The revival, which deserves more attention than can be given here, was stimulated in part by the publication of Marx's *Grundrisse*, particularly his notes on pre-capitalist economic formations. This material, which emphasizes the importance Marx attached to the Asiatic mode of production, provoked a lively discussion among Marxists outside the USSR, beginning in the early 1960s. Soviet scholars first entered the arena in 1964, with the lead taken, interestingly enough, by the famous economist E. Varga. Many Soviet students of primitive, precapitalist, and non-European societies now consider the Asiatic mode of production a distinct socio-economic formation rather than a variety of feudalism, and they accordingly support the case for multilinearity in the historical process.⁴³ By contrast, Soviet scholars concerned with Russian history have been cautious about affirming the relevance of the Asiatic mode of production to their area, Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov notwithstanding. Nevertheless,

⁴² M. P. Pavlova-Sil'vanskaia, "K voprosu ob osobennostiakh absoliutizma v Rossii," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1968, no. 4, pp. 71-72, 77-83. She also pointed out that Lenin more or less shared the idea that the Russian state had been an oriental despotism.

⁴³ For the first round of contributions to the renewed discussion of the Asiatic mode of production, see *La Pensée*, no. 114 (1964). The discussion among French Marxists was set in motion by the Hungarian sinologist, F. Tökei, who visited Paris in 1962. For the many pieces *La Pensée* has since printed on the Asiatic mode of production, see nos. 117, 122, 127, 129, 132, 138, 143, 144, 151, 159. For contributions in the Czech press, see *Eirene* 3 (1964), 5 (1966), 6 (1967). Varga condemned the suppression of this historical concept in the Soviet Union and called upon Soviet scholars to examine it anew in the last chapter of his book *Ocherki po problemam politekonomii kapitalizma* (Moscow, 1964). Later specimens of Soviet writings on the Asiatic mode of production that include numerous references to the literature are: L. S. Vasil'ev and I. A. Stuchevsky, "Tri modeli vozniknoveniia i evoliutsii dokapitalisticheskikh obshchestv (k probleme aziatskogo sposoba proizvodstva)," *Voprosy istorii*, 1966, no. 5; L. V. Danilova, "Diskussionnye problemy teorii dokapitalisticheskikh obshchestv," in *Problemy dokapitalisticheskikh obshchestv* (Moscow, 1968). Marx's notes on pre-capitalist economic formations were first published in the USSR in 1939-41 but evidently evoked no significant discussion until the 1960s. They were published in German in 1953, in Italian in 1956, and in English, with a long introductory essay by Eric Hobsbawm, under the title *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations* (New York, 1964).

considerable movement has obviously occurred in the last decade or so, and there may be more in the years ahead.

We are left with one perplexing problem. Earlier in this paper I suggested that Plekhanov's and Pokrovsky's interpretations were polar alternatives. Perceiving that to be the case, Pokrovsky took steps to discredit and suppress Plekhanov's conception. When Pokrovsky himself was later denounced, the retention of important elements of his system combined with certain of Stalin's predilections to block effectively the revival of Plekhanov's interpretation. Few of us have been aware of the recent revival of Plekhanovism, but it is widely known that Pokrovsky has been rehabilitated since 1956.⁴⁴ The more-or-less simultaneous resurrection of Plekhanov and rehabilitation of Pokrovsky may appear to upset the premise of my paper, but I suggest that it really does not. To be sure, Pokrovsky's *History* has been republished and the vicious charges leveled against him in the 1930s have been exposed as groundless slander. But it is Pokrovsky the man who has been vindicated, and the contemporaneous rise to ascendancy of historians who emphasize the peculiarities of Russian historical development indicates that at long last Pokrovsky's influence is really dissipating. By way of corroboration, we may cite the judgment made in 1966 by a leading—and rather conservative—historian: "Pokrovsky belongs to history. We are speaking not of restoring Pokrovsky's conclusions nor of idealizing his works and conceptions but of determining in an objective, scientific way his role in the establishment and development of [our historical] science."⁴⁵

As a measure of the distance Soviet historiography has traveled, we may conclude with this rhetorical question: When in 1923 Pokrovsky allowed that Plekhanov was perhaps a historian of the future, could he have imagined that the time would come, as it has, when

⁴⁴ On the rehabilitation of Pokrovsky, see D. Dorotich, "Disgrace and Rehabilitation of M. N. Pokrovsky," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 8 (1966); George Enteen, "Soviet Historians Review Their Own Past: The Rehabilitation of M. N. Pokrovsky," *Soviet Studies* 20, no. 3 (January 1969); John Keep, "The Rehabilitation of M. N. Pokrovsky," in *Revolution and Politics in Russia. Essays in Memory of B. I. Nicolaevsky*, ed. A. Rabinowitch et al. (Bloomington, Ind., 1972).

⁴⁵ L. V. Cherepnin, "M. N. Pokrovsky i ego rol' v razviti sovetskoi istoricheskoi nauki," in *Ocherki istorii istoricheskoi nauki v SSSR*, 4: 198.

some Soviet historians would compare his own work with his adversary's and award the laurels to Plekhanov?⁴⁶

Postscript

The need for caution in treating problems of Soviet historiography is underscored by the contents of a recent article that came to my attention after this paper had been completed. As we have seen, L. V. Cherepnin in 1960 not only treated Plekhanov's *History* appreciatively but plainly rated it superior to Pokrovsky's, and, in the 1966 statement quoted above, he seemed to dispose of the latter's views conclusively. Yet recently, he joined with two other Academicians, I. I. Mints and M. V. Nechkina, to attack "the new current" with Pokrovsky-like argument. They wrote:

Specialists on feudalism have the task of continuing to criticize the views of several historians who underestimate the determining role of basic [economic] phenomena in the early feudal period. We find objectionable also the assertion that the development of the centralized state in Russia stemmed not from economic processes but primarily from the state's military and foreign policy needs. Such a formulation of the matter could take us back to the views of B. N. Chicherin and the 'historical-juridical school', that treated the state as the demiurge of society, that bound and then liberated the classes.

To get the matter right, the article continued, it is essential to rely on "Lenin's conception concerning the all-Russian market."⁴⁷

The opponents of the "new current" are discovering that Pokrovsky still has his uses; and, on that score, he should not be counted out prematurely.

⁴⁶ Cherepnin (*Obrazovanie russkogo tsentralizovannogo gosudarstva*, pp. 95-98) plainly rated Plekhanov over Pokrovsky as did later Pavlova-Sil'vanskaia ("K voprosu ob osobennostiakh absoliutizma v Rossii," pp. 71-72, 77-83) and A. L. Shapiro, "Ob absoliutizme v Rossii," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1968, no. 5, p. 75.

⁴⁷ I. I. Mints, M. V. Nechkina, L. V. Cherepnin, "Zadachi sovetskoï istoriografii na sovremennom etape ee razvitiï," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1973, no. 5 p. 9.