

Isaac Deutscher 1948

## Marx and Russia

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The attitudes of Marx and Engels towards Russia and their views on the prospects of Russian revolution form a curious topic in the history of socialism. Did the founders of scientific socialism have any premonition of the great upheaval in Russia that was to be carried out under the sign of Marxism? What results did they expect from the social developments inside the Tsarist Empire? How did they view the relationship between revolutionary Russia and the West? One can answer these questions more fully now on the basis of the correspondence between Marx, Engels and their Russian contemporaries, published by the Marx – Engels – Lenin Institute in Moscow last year. This correspondence covers nearly half a century. It opens with Marx's well-known letters to Annenkov [1] of 1846. It closes with the correspondence between Engels and his Russian friends in 1895. The volume also contains nearly fifty letters published for the first time.

Among the Russians who kept in touch with Marx and Engels there were men and women belonging to three generations of revolutionaries. In the 1840s the revolutionary movement in Russia had an almost exclusively intellectual and liberal character. It was based on no social class or popular force. To that epoch belonged Marx's early correspondents, Annenkov, Sazonov [2] and a few others. Marx explained to them his philosophy and his economic ideas, but engaged in no discussion on revolution in Russia. For this it was too early. Broadly speaking, in those years Russia was to Marx still identical with Tsardom, and Tsardom was the hated 'gendarme of European reaction'. His and Engels' main preoccupation was to arouse Europe against that gendarme, for they believed that a European war against Russia would hasten the progress of the West towards socialism.

In the 1860s another generation of Russian revolutionaries came to the fore. They were the Narodniks or Populists or Agrarian socialists. It was, curiously enough, with the Russian intellectuals of that school advocating a pure peasant socialism that the two founders of the Western, strictly proletarian, socialism established ties of the closest friendship. Russia possessed no industry yet, no modern working class, almost no bourgeoisie. The intelligentsia and the peasantry were the only forces inside Russia to whom the two sworn enemies of Tsardom could look. There was, of course, also Bakunin's anarchism. Marx first cooperated with Bakunin and then quarrelled with him. But I shall not discuss that controversy, to which only casual references occur in the correspondence under review. Incidentally, vis-à-vis Marx, Bakunin acted more as the spokesman of Italian, Swiss and Spanish anarchists than as a Russian revolutionary.

The Narodniks in Russia and in exile eagerly responded to the theories of Marx and Engels. Russian was the first language into which *Das Kapital* was translated from the original. Based on English classical economy and German philosophy and on a thorough study of Western industrial capitalism, this great work seemed to bear no direct relation to the social conditions then prevailing in Russia. And yet right from the beginning when it was making no impression on the Western European public, Marx's opus exercised an enormous influence upon the Russian intelligentsia. Danielson, [3] the translator of *Das Kapital*, himself a prominent Narodnik and economist, wrote to Marx that the Russian censor passed the book, believing it to be too strictly scientific to be suppressed. The book, so the censor thought, made in any case too heavy reading to have any subversive influence. He was more afraid of the frontispiece of the Russian edition with Marx's portrait, and, allowing Marx's ideas to reach

the Russian public, he confiscated his picture. Some years later the Russian censor passed the second volume of *Das Kapital* too, even though he had shortly before confiscated a Russian edition of the works of good old Adam Smith. Nine hundred copies of *Das Kapital* were sold out in St Petersburg within a few weeks after its publication in 1872, a very large number considering the character of the book, the time and the place. But even before that Marx received striking proof of strange Russian enthusiasm for his ideas, when on 12 March 1870 a group of Russian revolutionaries asked him to represent Russia on the General Council of the First International.

Marx was slightly puzzled by this unexpected Russian enthusiasm. 'A funny position for me', he wrote to Engels, 'to be functioning as the representative of young Russia! A man never knows what he may come to, or what strange fellowship he may have to submit to.' [4] But ironical amusement was only one part, perhaps the least essential, of Marx's reaction to Russian admiration. His mind was agitated by Russia as a social phenomenon. At the age of fifty he and Engels began to learn Russian. They watched the development of Russian literature and swallowed volume after volume of Russian statistics and sociology. Marx even intended to rewrite a portion of *Das Kapital* so as to base it on his Russian findings, an intention he was never able to carry out. Although amusement at some Russian eccentricities never left them, both Marx and Engels acquired a profound respect for the Russian intellectual achievement. Chernyshevsky, [5] then serving his term of slave labour in Siberia, impressed Marx as the most original contemporary thinker and economist. He planned to arouse protests in Western Europe against the victimisation of Chernyshevsky, but Chernyshevsky's friends feared that foreign protest and intervention might do more harm than good to the great convict. Dobrolyubov, [6] who had died at the age of twenty-five, was another Russian thinker highly valued by Marx as 'a writer of the stature of a Lessing or a Diderot'. [7] Finally, in 1884, Engels wrote to Madame Papritz, a Russian singer, and translator of Engels:

We both, Marx and myself, cannot complain about your countrymen. If in some groups there was more revolutionary muddle than scientific research, there was also, on the other hand, critical thought and disinterested investigation in the field of pure theory, worthy of the nation of Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky... I have in mind not only the active revolutionary socialists, but also the historical and critical school in Russian literature, which is infinitely superior to anything achieved by respectable historians in Germany and France. [8]

But the main issue of the correspondence was Russia's road to socialism. In the West, capitalist industrialisation was, according to Marx and Engels, paving the way for socialism. The industrial working class was the main force interested in socialism. But what about Russia, where capitalist industry had not even begun to strike roots? The Narodniks argued that Russian socialism would be based on the primeval rural commune or the *obshchina*, which had existed alongside of feudalism. Even after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, the peasant land was still owned by the rural commune, in some respects the forerunner of the present Russian *kolkhoz*. Russia, said the Narodniks, need not go through the trials and tribulations of capitalist industrialism to attain socialism. She finds socialism in her native rural tradition, which she only needs to cleanse of feudal remnants. This then was to be Russia's road to socialism, very different from that by which Western Europe was expected to travel.

Most, though not all, Narodniks were Slavophiles and believed in Russia's peculiar socialist mission. Marx, as we know, rejected Slavophilism; and nothing made him more furious than the talk about Russia's socialist mission. He did not believe, he once said, that old Europe needed to be rejuvenated by Russian blood. But he did, nevertheless, share some of the hopes that the Narodniks placed on the Russian rural commune. Here, he said, in a famous letter to a Russian periodical in 1877, here was 'the finest chance ever offered by history to any nation' the chance to escape capitalism and to pass from feudalism straight into socialism. [9] True, Marx added important qualifications: the rural commune had begun to disintegrate, and if that process were to continue Russia would miss her 'finest chance'. Moreover, a stimulus from outside, the socialist transformation of Western

Europe, was needed to enable Russia to build socialism on the rural commune. In his eyes Western Europe had the birthright of socialist revolution, while Russia's role could be secondary only. Nevertheless, Russia might have her own short cut to socialism.

He and Engels also sympathised with the terrorism of the Narodniks, with their attempts on the life of the Tsar and his satraps. When, in 1881, revolutionaries assassinated Tsar Alexander II, Marx and Engels applauded the deed. In a message to a Russian meeting commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Paris commune, they expressed the hope that the assassination of the Tsar foreshadowed 'the formation of a Russian commune'. [10] Here we reach the most dramatic point in the whole correspondence. By the time of the assassination of Alexander II a new generation of revolutionaries, the first real Russian Marxists, had entered politics. Their chief spokesmen were George Plekhanov, Vera Zasulich and Paul Axelrod, the future founders of Russian social democracy. These first Russian Marxists were bitterly opposed to the Narodniks precisely on those points in which Marx and Engels had supported them. The young Marxists opposed terrorism. Plekhanov in particular had regarded the planned assassination of the Tsar as a senseless adventure. He believed that the task of Russian revolutionaries was to abolish the autocratic system, not to kill an autocrat. The Russian Marxists further believed that like Western Europe Russia had to go through capitalist industrialisation and the experience of democratic self-government before she could even begin to evolve in the direction of socialism. They held that the rural commune was irretrievably disintegrating and was of no use to socialism. They placed their hopes not on the peasants but on the industrial working class now beginning to grow, not on agrarian but on proletarian socialism.

Both Narodniks and Marxists quoted *Das Kapital* as their authority. The Marxists had reason to expect that the two great Western socialists would agree with them that Russia was destined to go through the same evolution that Western Europe had gone through. One can therefore imagine their disappointment when Marx himself cold-shouldered them. In a letter to Vera Zasulich of 1881 Marx told them that it was no use to quote *Das Kapital* against the Narodniks and the rural commune, for in *Das Kapital* he had analysed the social structure of Western Europe only – Russia might well evolve towards socialism in her own way. Marx admitted that the rural commune had begun to decay, but on balance he still subscribed to the Narodnik view that the commune had a great future. [11] Nor was Marx impressed by indignant arguments against Narodnik terrorism, although he regarded it as a 'specifically Russian and historically inevitable method about which there is no reason... to moralise for or against'. [12] He would, of course, have none of that terrorism in Western Europe.

In 1883 Marx died and Engels took over the correspondence. The Russian Marxists tried to convert the surviving founding father of the Marxist school to their view. At first they were unsuccessful. Engels persisted in the hope that the Narodnik terrorist attempts would lead to the overthrow of Tsardom. In 1884 and 1885 he expected dramatic political changes inside Russia. Russia, he wrote, was approaching her 1789. Recalling the assassination of the Tsar four years after the event, he said that this was 'one of the exceptional cases in which a handful of men could make a revolution', a view that the young Russian Marxists, hoping for revolution by a social class and not by a 'handful of men', had already derided as a dangerous illusion.

Every month now [Engels wrote to Vera Zasulich in 1884], ought to aggravate Russia's domestic difficulties. If some constitutionally minded and courageous Grand Duke were to appear now, even the Russian upper classes would find that a palace revolution was the best way out of the impasse. [13]

One can imagine the ironical smile with which Plekhanov and Zasulich tried to disillusion him but in vain. We now know that in this controversy it was the Russian Marxists and not Marx and Engels whom events proved to be right. The assassination of Alexander II in fact entailed the disintegration and demoralisation of the

Narodnik movement and a prolonged period of reaction. This cool attitude of Marx and Engels towards their Russian followers was marked by intellectual inconsistency. But it was understandable and very human. The Narodniks had been Marx's close and admired friends, the first to raise the banner of popular revolution, the first to respond, in their own Slavonic manner, to Marxism. The Narodnik views had now become outdated. But an old loyalty and, no doubt, remoteness from the Russian scene, prevented Marx and Engels from grasping this as quickly as their young Russian pupils had done it.

Only in the early 1890s, towards the end of his life, Engels at last realised that Plekhanov and Zasulich had been right, that the rural commune was doomed, that capitalism was invading Russia and that the agrarian brand of socialism had to give way to the industrial one. He tried to impress his new view upon the old Narodniks, especially upon Danielson, the translator of *Das Kapital*. The letters that now passed between Danielson and Engels make melancholy reading. Danielson vented his disappointment with Engels' new attitude. He described very eloquently the evils of capitalism in Russia, suggesting that by its insistence on the need for Russia to go through the capitalist phase Marxism acted as *advocatus diaboli*. [14] He reminded Engels what great store Marx had set by the Russian rural commune. In reply Engels argued seriously, patiently and gently, very gently indeed, that new social processes had taken place, that in the meantime the rural commune had become part of a 'dead past', and that though the evils of capitalism were so great, Russia could unfortunately not escape them. 'History', said Engels, 'is the most cruel of all goddesses. She drives her triumphal chariot over heaps of corpses, not only during war, but even in times of "peaceful" economic development.'

This was a reference to the disastrous Russian drought and famine of 1891, which Danielson had blamed on incipient capitalist disorganisation in agriculture. The rural commune, Engels went on, would have become the basis for Russian socialism, if in the industrial West socialism had won 'some ten or twenty years ago. Unfortunately, we [that is the West] have been too slow.' Which were the symptoms? The loss by England of her industrial monopoly, the industrial competition between France, Germany and England:

America [Engels wrote in 1893] bids fair to drive them all out of the world's markets... The introduction of an, at least relative, free-trade policy in America is sure to complete the ruin of England's industrial position and to destroy, at the same time, the industrial export trade of Germany and France; then the crisis must come...

Meanwhile capitalism still dominated the West, and Russia, too, must come within its orbit. This delay in the march of socialism was deplorable. But, said Engels, 'we... are unfortunately so stupid that we never can pluck up courage for a real progress unless urged to it by sufferings that seem almost out of proportion' to the goal to be achieved. [15]

It is now easy to see that in this controversy both sides were right and wrong at the same time. Engels, converted to the view of his young Russian disciples, was of course right when he said that Russia could not avoid becoming capitalist. But the old Narodnik Danielson was also right in his insistence that Russian capitalism would have little scope for development because the terrifying poverty of the Russian peasants would limit to a minimum its home market and because Russia was too weak to compete with other nations in foreign markets. It was precisely this weakness in Russian capitalism, a weakness not clearly seen either by Engels or by the early Russian Marxists, that led in the last instance to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. It was this weakness that was to make of Russia, in Lenin's words, the 'weakest link in the chain of capitalism'.

Nevertheless, Engels had a strong premonition of the coming Russian revolution. Repeatedly he stated that ‘Russia was the France of the new age’. On his dying bed almost, in 1895, he watched the first moves of the new, and the last, Russian Tsar Nicolas II, and in a letter to Plekhanov he prophesied: ‘If the devil of revolution has taken anybody by the scruff of the neck then it is Tsar Nicolas II.’ But what Engels apparently expected to occur in Russia was ‘another 1789’, another anti-feudal, bourgeois revolution, not a socialist one.

Even towards the end of his life, after he had intellectually detached himself from the Narodniks, Engels still refused to criticise them in public. Plekhanov and Zasulich repeatedly urged him to do so and thus to further the cause of Russian Marxism. Engels then somewhat apologetically explained to Plekhanov his extremely delicate attitude towards the old Narodniks:

It is quite impossible to argue with Russians of that generation... who still believe in the spontaneously communistic mission, which allegedly distinguishes Russia, the true holy Russia, from all other infidel countries... Incidentally, in a country like yours... surrounded by a more or less solid intellectual Chinese Wall, erected by despotism, one should not be surprised by the appearance of the most incredible and queer combinations of ideas.

With this note of an almost sorrowful understanding for the limitations of his old Narodnik friends, Engels’ correspondence came to an end.

#### Notes

1. Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov (1812-1887) – liberal landlord and litterateur, personally acquainted with Marx in the 1840s – MIA.
2. Nikolai Ivanovich Sazonov (1815-1862) – member of Herzen’s student circle, publicist, subsequently in exile – MIA.
3. Nikolai Frantsevich Danielson (1844-1918) – economist and writer, ideologist of Narodism – MIA.
4. Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 24 March 1870, available at < [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/letters/70\\_03\\_24.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/letters/70_03_24.htm) > – MIA.
5. Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) – revolutionary democrat and utopian socialist, scientist, novelist, literary critic, one of outstanding forerunners of Russian Social-Democracy – MIA.
6. Nikolai Alexandrovich Dobrolyubov (1836-1861) – revolutionary democrat, prominent literary critic, materialist philosopher, one of outstanding forerunners of Russian Social-Democracy – MIA.
7. Karl Marx To Nikolai Danielson, 9 November 1871, available at < [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71\\_11\\_09.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_09.htm) > – MIA.
8. Friedrich Engels to Eugénie Papritz, 26 June 1884, available at < [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84\\_06\\_26.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84_06_26.htm) >. Yevgenia Edvardovna Papritz (1853-1919) – Russian singer, carried on research in Russian folk music, was connected with illegal Moscow Translators and Publishers Society (1882-84), which published Marx and Engels’ works in Russian – MIA.
9. Karl Marx to the Editor of the Otechestvenniye Zapisky, November 1877, available at < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/11/russia.htm> > – MIA.
10. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to the Chairman of the Slavonic Meeting, 21 March 1881, available at < [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/letters/81\\_03\\_21.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/letters/81_03_21.htm) > – MIA.
11. Karl Marx to Vera Zasulich, 8 March 1881, available at < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/03/zasulich1.htm> > – MIA.
12. Karl Marx to Jenny Longuet, 11 April 1881, available at < [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/letters/81\\_04\\_11.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/letters/81_04_11.htm) > – MIA.
13. Friedrich Engels to Vera Zasulich, 6 March 1884, available at < [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84\\_03\\_06.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84_03_06.htm) > – MIA.
14. Advocatus diaboli – devil’s advocate – MIA.
15. Friedrich Engels to Nikolai Danielson, 24 February 1893, available at < [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93\\_02\\_24.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_02_24.htm) > – MIA.
16. Friedrich Engels to Georgi Plekhanov, 26 February 1895, Marx – Engels Collected Works, Volume 50 (New York, 2004), pp 449-51.