CONFERENCE OF YOUNG NIGERIAN DEMOCRATS

DEMOCRACY DIGEST

Compilation of E-Books on Democracy

Compiled by:
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Georgy Plekhanov

Georgy Plekhanov (1856-1918), Russian revolutionary and political theorist, often called the “father of Russian Marxism.” Georgy Valentinovich Plekhanov was born into a family of the minor nobility in Gudalovka, in west central Russia. Attracted to revolutionary activities as a student, he abandoned his studies at the Saint Petersburg Mining Institute to become a full-time revolutionary. By 1877 he was prominent in Land and Liberty, a peasant-oriented revolutionary movement. To avoid arrest by the imperial authorities he fled abroad in 1880, where he stayed, mostly in Geneva, until 1917.

While in exile Plekhanov struggled to reconcile the theories of German philosopher Karl Marx with Russian conditions. In *Socialism and Political Struggle* (1893), *Our Differences* (1895), and other writings, Plekhanov noted the industrial revolution beginning in Russia and argued that the Marxist analysis of a socialist revolution now applied there. He theorized a two-stage revolution for Russia that became the ideological basis for all Russian revolutionary movements. In the first stage the industrial proletariat (the working class) in alliance with the bourgeoisie (the capitalists) would overthrow the monarchy and usher in Marx's bourgeois stage of society. During this period Marxists would labor to educate and organize the working masses to carry out the second stage, the socialist revolution.

He and others formed the first Russian Marxist revolutionary group, League for the Emancipation of Labor, in 1883. In 1900 Plekhanov joined with Yuly Martov, Vladimir Lenin, and others to publish the newspaper *Iskra* (The Spark) and define the ideology of the Russian Marxist movement. The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), originally founded in 1898, was revived through their efforts. The party split into the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions at its Second Congress in 1903, however, and Plekhanov sided with the Mensheviks in criticizing Lenin’s plans for a highly centralized party of professional revolutionaries, acting on behalf of the proletariat. From 1905 Plekhanov became engaged in two sets of activities. In the political arena he fought to maintain a close adherence to Marxist orthodoxy as he defined it, gradually alienating himself from both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. He also produced a large body of writings that increasingly used Marxist philosophy to analyze literary, cultural, intellectual, and social trends.
During World War I (1914-1918), Plekhanov surprised everyone when he assumed a “defensist” position by supporting the Russian and Allied war effort against Germany rather than the “internationalist” position, which opposed supporting national war efforts. Paradoxically, given his prominence as the “father of Russian Marxism,” he played only an insignificant role in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power in the October (or November, in the Western calendar) phase of the revolution. Already ill, he died in Finland shortly thereafter. Despite his criticism of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Plekhanov was honored in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) for his early work in formulating Russian Marxism and his Marxist philosophical writings.

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