

Martov: a Russian Social-Democrat

In the Socialist Party of Gt. Britain Martov is mainly remembered for his pamphlet *The State and the Socialist Revolution*, in which he does a brilliant demolition job on Lenin's *State and Revolution*. Israel Getzler's study (*Martov: a political biography of a Russian social democrat*, Cambridge University Press, 70s) is the first biography of this leader of the Russian Mensheviks to be published. Although it has a number of defects – not least the author's irritating Jewish nationalism – it is nonetheless better than nothing.

When measuring up Martov's contribution to the working class movement it is convenient to compare him with Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik fraction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. The Menshevik-Bolshevik split of 1903 was largely centred on different conceptions of how a social-democratic party should be organised. Lenin, with his Jacobin turn of mind, wanted (as Rosa Luxemburg put it) "*the blind subordination of all party organisations and their activity, down to the least detail, to a central authority which alone thinks, acts and decides for all*". Martov, on the other hand, favoured an organisation roughly modelled on the German SPD. This then was not a controversy between Socialists – since both sides accepted the need for leaders and both were opportunists, prepared to ally themselves with, and support, anti-socialists if it seemed politically expedient.

Although Lenin and Martov opposed the first world war, their position on militarism was not a consistent Socialist one. Thus Lenin, in a letter to the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks, September 26-27, 1917: "*Only our party, having won a victory in an uprising, can save Petrograd, for if our offer of peace is rejected, and we obtain not even a truce, then we shall become 'defensists', then we shall place ourselves **at the head of the war parties**, we shall be the most 'warring' party, and we shall carry on a war in a truly revolutionary manner.*" (Lenin's emphasis). In a similar style Martov denounced the Brest-Litovsk peace, calling for "*a nation-wide call-up*", and in a speech to the combined session of the Executive Committee of Soviets, the Moscow Soviet and trade unions on May 5, 1920 he pledged his party's support to the war effort against Poland – although he wanted a 'defensive war'.

Martov, however, came into his own after the Bolsheviks seized control of the state. Since the Mensheviks were then excluded from any share in political power he no longer had much opportunity to squander his talents on reformist issues. Instead he was able to use his Marxist knowledge to hammer away at the efforts of the Bolsheviks to convince the working class that they were constructing a Socialist system in the Russian empire. When Lenin suggested 'Socialism in one country':

"If for the construction of socialism a certain level of culture is required . . . why should it not be permissible for us to begin by seizing by revolutionary means the preconditions for that certain level, and then *afterwards*, on the basis of the workers' and peasants' state-power and the Soviet order, advance further and catch up on the other (Western) nations."

Martov was able to answer by flinging back at Lenin his own words, written in 1905:

"We declare he is an *agent provocateur* who strives to use state power for the realisation of socialism in backward Russia."

Similarly, when they enforced the death penalty, he reminded the Bolsheviks of their former stand – how they had voted for a resolution against execution at the Copenhagen Congress of the International in 1910 and had protested against the reintroduction of the death penalty in Russia in July, 1917. He singled out Lunacharsky:

“You, A. V. Lunacharsky, you who loved to come to the workers and depict them in resounding words the greatness of the socialist teaching; you, who casting your eyes up to heaven, extolled the brotherhood of men in socialist construction; you who denounced the hypocrisy of a Christian religion which sanctioned homicide, you who preached the religion of proletarian socialism – you are three times a liar, three times a Pharisee when, in a pause in your self-intoxication with cheap phrases, you become an accomplice of Lenin and Trotsky, in the organisation of murder, with or without trial!”

But, unlike the vast majority of the critics of the Soviet Union, Martov went much further than just sniping at the unpleasant features of the Bolshevik regime – at the smashing of democracy and the use of terror. While he acknowledged the Russian revolution as being historically progressive he also recognised its capitalist nature, despite the idealism of Lenin and his associates. He realised that the Bolsheviks’ wild shrieks for world revolution would soon give way to an even more fervent passion for normalising their relations with the rest of the capitalist world as they set about the task which confronts any young capitalist state – the twin process of industrialisation and beating down the peasantry into a mass of propertyless wage-earners. Nor did he fall into the trap of criticising the lack of democracy in Russia simply on ethical or moral grounds. Instead he contrasted the clumsy and arbitrary repression in the Soviet Union with the Bolsheviks’ claim that they were advancing to Socialism. He pointed out that this was a primitive concept which had been popular among many of the utopian Socialists of the nineteenth century. Babeuf, Weitling, Cabet, Blanqui – all had their elitism summed up for them by Charles Naine:

“The minority possessing the knowledge of the truth of scientific socialism has the right to impose it on the mass . . . Later, that is, after the social order will have been totally transformed by the socialist dictators, liberty and democracy will be reconstituted.”

Martov put forward the Marxist argument against this. Socialism, he argued, could only be achieved by a politically conscious working class. It is the experience of workers under capitalism which drives them to understand the need for Socialism and this process is enhanced by the degree of democracy which they have won for themselves. Dictatorial power wielded by a vanguard minority, no matter how sincere its intentions, can never act as a substitute. That way the workers remain a subject class and the dictators, having acquired a taste for power, consolidate their own rule.

This then is Martov’s value to Socialist theory. Even however when bitterly criticising the Bolsheviks, he still had no real alternative to offer – not, at any rate, in uncompromising, revolutionary terms such as those of the Socialist Party. But like other social democrats – Plekhanov, Kautsky, Luxemburg – despite all his errors, he made a contribution to the general body of Marxist theory. Lenin is a pale shadow at the side of him.

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