

# Stalin Era Intellectuals

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Culture and Stalinism

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## Chapter 4

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### **‘Menshevising Idealism’ and Stalinisation of Philosophy**

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## 4 ‘Menshevising Idealism’ and Stalinisation of Philosophy

*Vesa Oittinen*

The concept of ‘Menshevising Idealism’ (*men’shevistvuyushchiy idealizm*) was a central idea in a philosophical debate that began in 1930 as part of an abrupt policy shift undertaken when the Communist Party decided to abandon the NEP and begin a forced industrialisation of the country. The debate was one aspect in the overall ‘Bolshevisation’ of Soviet intellectual life, which aimed at elimination of the Second International Marxism, hence the reference to the Mensheviks who adhered to this tradition. ‘Menshevising Idealism’ was, however, a relatively short-lived term and apparently disappeared from the vocabulary of Soviet philosophical and ideological discourses already towards the end of the 1930s, save for entries in dictionaries of philosophy. Later, the notion of ‘Menshevising Idealism’ has mostly been interpreted as a political stamp only, used to discredit Stalin’s adversaries and rivals. Seen from today’s perspective, it is clear that ‘Menshevising Idealism’ was employed as a politically stigmatising label. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is worth analysing more accurately precisely because, political aspirations of the Stalinists notwithstanding, the concept may be revealing of a certain political reality at the time.

Not much research literature exists on Menshevising Idealism, especially not in relation to philosophical discussions of the early 1930s. Most scholars of Soviet intellectual history have viewed the dispute as uninteresting from a philosophical viewpoint.<sup>1</sup> The main study to date remains Yehoshua Yakhot’s *Podavlenie filosofii v SSSR (20-30 gody)*, 1981. Other works worth mentioning besides René Zapata (1983) include a dissertation by Nikolai Korshunov from the year 2003.<sup>2</sup>

### Background

The philosophical culture of the young Soviet Union in the 1920s was characterised by two traits that differed considerably from later Soviet philosophy. The first of these, easily noted by present-day researchers, was a certain pluralism, or rather the tendency of the discourses to become polarised around two interpretations of Marxism: the Deborin school, on the one hand, with its proponents being called ‘Dialecticians’, and the ‘Mechanists’, on the other. These currents were not strictly defined, and the ‘Mechanists’, especially, were actually a rather motley crew. In the tug of war between the two currents of thought, the Dialecticians had the

advantage insofar as Abram Deborin occupied the position of chief editor of the important philosophico-theoretical Bolshevik journal *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* (Under the Banner of Marxism). This journal was founded in 1922 under the auspices of Lenin himself, and in its third issue in the same year it had published Lenin's article 'On the Significance of Militant Materialism', wherein Lenin laid out the central goals and tasks of the journal.

However, a second important trait of Soviet philosophy of this era has often escaped the attention of researchers. The percentage of ex-Mensheviks among ideology workers, teachers of Marxism and philosophers was quite high. This reflected a problem that the Bolsheviks encountered after the revolution: although they had been politically successful and had managed to squeeze the Mensheviks out from the political arena, they suffered from an acute shortage of theoretical practitioners. Partially this may have been due of the fact that in the pre-revolutionary period, a substantial number of Bolsheviks had been supporters of Aleksandr Bogdanov's (1873–1928) 'empiriomonism', a current of thought that could be called Marxist only with strong reservations. Bogdanov challenged many central doctrines of Marxism, including its materialist world outlook. Lenin had succeeded at great effort to turn the tide and ward off the influence of Bogdanovism in the ranks of the Bolsheviks. But Lenin's more orthodox view of Marxism seems nevertheless not to have entirely replaced the influence of Bogdanov and become so deeply rooted among the Bolsheviks themselves as is commonly assumed.

In the years when the struggle against Bogdanovism was quite real, Lenin had made a 'philosophical pact' with Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918), one of the early founders of Russian Marxism. He held Plekhanov in high esteem as a Marxist scholar, despite the fact that Plekhanov was one of the main theoreticians of Menshevism. So, in the period when Lenin was working on his book against Bogdanov, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (published in 1909), a strange configuration was already evident: Lenin, as head of the Bolshevik faction, needed to strongly rely on the head of his opponents, the Menshevik leader, in his fight against undesirable currents within his own faction. After the October Revolution, the configuration gained renewed importance on a much larger scale. The Bolsheviks, in need of sufficiently qualified cadres to take care of the teaching and study of Marxism, had again to resort to the Menshevik intellectuals for help. In 1921, Lenin stressed the importance of the theoretical heritage of Menshevism, when he, in an article on the role of trade unions, in parenthesis suddenly made the following claim: 'you *cannot* hope to become a *real*, intelligent Communist without making a study – and I mean a *study* – of all of Plekhanov's philosophical writings, because nothing better has been written on Marxism anywhere in the world' (V. I. Lenin, 'Once Again on the Trade Unions ...' in Lenin, 1973, p. 94). At about the same time, however, Lenin insisted on marginalising the Mensheviks politically, which he viewed as dangerous enemies of the new proletarian state. Clearly, an inherent contradiction in the aspirations of the Bolsheviks needed to be resolved at this point. When the secretary of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik party, Yemelyan Yaroslavsky, in 1921 asked Lenin whether it might be advisable to let Deborin and Lyubov' Aksel'rod, both well-known Mensheviks,

lecture on philosophy and historical materialism, Lenin gave Salomonic advice: 'I think we *must* have both. It will be useful because they will be propounding Marxism (if they start agitating for Menshevism, we shall catch them out: *we must keep an eye on them*)' (Lenin's letter to Yaroslavskiy, end of April 1921, in Lenin 1973 b, p. 129). He based the model for such advice on the old pre-revolutionary 'philosophical pact' with Plekhanov: in politics, yes, we are adversaries, but in philosophy, we are allies.

## The Great Turn of 1929 and Its Demands

We can date the beginning of the 'Great Turn' in Soviet philosophy from Stalin's speech at the Conference of Marxist Workers in Agrarian Economy, December 1929. Stalin noticed that although a new era had just begun when the Soviet Union had started to build socialism, the development of Marxist theory had been lagging behind the practical needs of the Communists. Stalin's speech did not yet contain any concrete instructions as regards to philosophy. They were first formulated in the ill-famed 'Article of the Three', which was published in *Pravda* on 7 June 1930 under the title '*O novykh zadachakh markistsko-leninskoy filosofii*' (On the New Tasks of the Marxist-Leninist Philosophy). The article received its popular name from the three co-signatories: Mark Mitin, Pavel Yudin and Vasiliy Ral'tsevich. The last of the three, Ral'tsevich, soon disappeared from the political stage; the last news about him was received from a concentration camp in Vorkuta around the year 1936. All three were so-called *i-ka-pi* people, or 'Ikapists': the expression comes from the abbreviation IKP, *Institut krasnoy professury*, often translated into English in the somewhat misleading form Institute of Red Professors (see David-Fox, 1997, especially Ch. 3, p. 133). The IKP was founded in 1921 with the goal of furnishing cadres of scholars and teachers for Marxist studies, of which there was a significant deficit in the young Soviet state. It consisted of a three-years course (later a fourth year was added), and the students came mostly from the uneducated peasantry and working class. To speak of 'Red Professors' is insofar an exaggeration, as the cultural level and sophistication of the Ikapists cannot hardly be compared with the old academic intelligentsia, which they, however, were intended to gradually replace.

Yet, the publication of the 'Article of the Three' had been preceded by several months by an Ikapist critique of the established philosophers. The main targets of the critique were the Deborinists of the journal *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*. They were accused of letting the philosophy lag behind the practice of socialist construction, of being insufficiently alert to the dangers of Trotskyism and of laxity towards attempts to smuggle idealist propaganda into Marxism. The authors of the article formulated the demand for a 'struggle on two fronts': against the Mechanists and against the 'Dialecticians' of the Deborin group, but it soon proved that the main target were the latter.

The Deborinists soon issued a response. Already in the next issue of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*, Deborin and nine of his colleagues (including Ivan Luppel, Yan Sten and Boris Gessen) rejected all the accusations made against them in the

*Pravda* article, taking particular offense at its vulgar tone and ‘gross errors’. With an ironic tone, they hinted at the fact that Lenin, too, had engaged every now and then in abstract theoretical studies, for example in 1915 when he began to read Hegel’s *Logic*. Consequently, when applying the criteria suggested by the critics of the ‘Article of the Three’, even Lenin was thus guilty of undermining the divisions between theory and practice (Deborin et al., 1930, p. 141). Besides rejecting the critique offered by the Ikapists, the Deborin group tried to reformulate the tasks of the struggle to their benefit. Yes, a struggle ‘on two fronts’ is necessary, but the fronts are against the Mechanists, on the one hand, and the ‘formalists and eclecticians’ on the other, with the Ikapists belonging to the latter group (p. 147).

The discussion continued at the Presidium of the Communist Academy on 18 October 1930. Its minutes reveal a similar list of accusations against the Deborin group, but Deborin and his pupils were still able to resist. Taking the floor, one of the critics, V. P. Milyutin, noted that ‘the relation between theoretical work and practice is the *central problem* we are encountering’, because ‘colossal class shifts’, like ‘the liquidation of the kulaks as a class’, are at the moment taking place in the Soviet Union (‘O raznoglasiyakh na filosofskom fronte’ 1930, p. 12). Deborin’s shortcoming was that he failed to understand the requirements of the time and underestimated the significance of Lenin’s legacy. Deborin had depicted Lenin as essentially concurring with Hegel’s philosophical position. That was a mistake, according to Milyutin, because ‘Lenin does only offer a materialist interpretation of Hegel, but also modifies his ideas in a critical way (*kriticheskoe ego prerabatyvaet*)’, meaning that ‘we can see in Deborin’s definition of dialectics a tendency to retreat from Lenin’ (‘O raznoglasiyakh...’, 1930, pp. 14–15). On 20 October, the session continued. Mark Mitin began by launching a new broadside against Deborin, accusing him of ‘a complete lack of understanding of the essence and nature of and tasks faced by’ the current Great Turn in the nation’s political landscape. Deborin wanted to continue along the ‘old line’ and did not understand that the new situation had put forth new theoretical tasks:

It is unquestionable that the main task of the entire great epoch in which we are living is the necessity to develop a theory of materialist dialectics. However, at every stage of our revolution different aspects of this work come to the fore .... Who does not understand that in the ‘restoration’ period [i.e. the NEP era – V.O.] the centre of gravity was the general defense of a theory of dialectics, developing its categories in the most general form, and that with the transition to the construction period ... the centre of gravity had shifted to the concretisation of these categories, towards working on the problems of the transition period – he has not understood anything.

(‘O raznoglasiyakh...’, 1930, p. 42)

Towards the end of the discussion at the Communist Academy, Yan Sten noted that the critique offered by the Ikapists and their followers against the Deborin school was misleading in that it muddled the different forms of proletarian struggle: the theoretical, political and economic forms of struggle. The Ikapists in essence

sought to reduce the philosophy of Marxism to a 'specific form of politics'. They sought, according to Sten, to reduce politics to a series of 'considerations that will necessarily lead to the liquidation of theory'. Moreover, Sten continued, while 'it is possible to speak of politics in the field of philosophy, one is not allowed to look upon philosophy as a special form of politics' ('O raznoglasiyakh...', 1930, p. 110). Sten's position caused a commotion in the meeting hall. He essentially labelled the critiques offered by Mitin and other Ikapists as ultra-leftist, although he did not use the term.

But if the Deborinists had hoped to divert the attack against them, they did not succeed. An anti-Deborinist campaign gained increasing momentum. The October discussion at the Communist Academy was the turning point. Between December 1930 and January 1931, a group of leading Ikapists met with Stalin, where the formulation 'Menshevising Idealism' was coined for the first time, obviously by Stalin himself.<sup>3</sup>

According to Korshunov, the 'philosophical campaign' can thus be periodised as follows: the first phase began with the aforementioned speech of Stalin at the conference of Marxist agrarians in December 1929; the discussions at the Communist Academy inaugurated the second phase, which ended with the meeting of the Ikapists with the General Secretary of the Party (Korshunov, 2003, p. 20 sqq.). It is possible to identify yet a third phase – with the proviso, however, that discussions were no longer in fact taking place, only a direct persecution of the Deborinists. As Korshunov (p. 22) notes, 'one characteristic trait of the third phase of discussion was excessive praise of Stalin and an exaggeration of his role in the development of Marxist philosophy', as well as an inappropriate way of staging debates, as the Ikapists did not hesitate to use consciously falsified quotations often taken out of context. When reading the texts published in these years, it is easy to concur with Korshunov's assessment of the situation: 'The theoretical level of public presentations of the Mitin – Yudin group in the period between 1929 to 1933 was exceedingly low' (p. 23).

### **Of Which Did the Menshevising Idealism Actually Consist?**

On what principles, then, was the alleged 'Menshevising Idealism' (MI) based? The accusations made by Ikapists against both the mechanists and the 'Menshevising Idealists', i.e. the Deborin school, consisted of two main claims: first, the Mechanists as well as the Deborinists had disconnected their theoretical work from the actual practice of building socialism in the Soviet Union. Second, they had not understood that Lenin had elevated Marxism to a new level: Leninism was Marxism in the era of imperialism and socialist revolution. They repeated such accusations tens of times in different variations. MI differed from Mechanism in that it overestimated the role of Hegel's heritage in Marxism.

In 1933, Mark Mitin gave a speech at a scientific session of the Communist Academy's Institute of Philosophy marking the 50th anniversary since the death of Marx. The speech was published in the journal *Pod Znamenem Marksizma* under the title 'Materialisticheskaya dialektika – filosofiya proletariata' (The

materialist dialectic is the philosophy of the proletariat). Here, Mitin attempted to summarise some additional points of the discussion. After lengthy passages extolling Stalin's accomplishments, he came to his old foe Deborin. According to Mitin, Deborin had not, despite two and a half years of his views being criticised, sufficiently atoned for his stated philosophical position. True, he 'had taken certain steps towards confessing his mistakes', but he had nevertheless again 'been diverted into assuming the positions of MI'. Here, the case against Deborin had proved that 'Comrade Stalin' had been quite right in noting that

the representants of MI will shout and make a racket towards supporting the idealism [of Marxism] in an upfront manner, but we shall not shut our eyes to the fact that they instead will continue to secretly support idealist views. (Mitin, 1933, p. 40)

In closely scrutinising Deborin's beliefs, Mitin discovered a passage from his discussion with the academician Vladimir Vernansky. Deborin had explained to Vernansky the difference between materialism and idealism as follows: 'Materialism differs from idealism in that it does not confine itself to only a logical analysis of its concepts but submits them to correction and change via experience and observation'. Here, Mitin notes, Deborin had equated materialism with empiricism, and his definition of materialism was such that 'any Kantian' would have been satisfied with it. It may be that Deborin had not managed to formulate the difference between materialism and idealism in the best possible way. But what makes Mitin's remark especially sinister is his hint that Deborin had deliberately avoided mentioning the fundamental difference between the two – in other words, that Deborin's act of repentance had been lip service only, while secretly he had continued to ascribe to idealism (p. 41).

According to Mitin, a further 'sin' committed by Deborin had been that 'he continues his old line with respect to Hegel'. Mitin identified a particularly damning passage by Deborin: 'Interestingly, no one other than Hegel has presented correct and, in principle, good scientific ideas as regards the relations of space and time with matter and its movement'. Here, too, Deborin had 'forgotten' (quotation marks in original) that Hegel's philosophy of nature was based on idealist presuppositions, claimed Mitin. Deborin had not wanted to mention that Lenin had already in his work *Philosophical Notebooks* paid attention to the fact that Hegel's idealism is especially visible in the way he interprets space and time. Mitin then proceeded to quote Lenin on Hegel's *Logic*: 'It is [...] here that Hegel has, as it were, allowed the ass's ears of idealism to show themselves – by referring to time and space (in connection with sensuous representation) as something *lower* compared with *thought*' (Lenin, 1976, p. 227). The quotation seems to support Mitin's point that Deborin had misrepresented Hegel in relation to Lenin's own stated position. But when we examine the context of Lenin's discussion of Hegel more thoroughly, it soon becomes clear that Lenin's above words are part of a more extensive and detailed assessment of the significance of Hegel's dialectical ideas. Elsewhere, Lenin wrote approvingly from Hegel's doctrine of



space and time, especially the passages where Hegel warns of the need to think of space and time as abstract principles only and to disconnect them from concrete physical processes. Lenin added a marginal note: 'Cf. Engels idem in *Ludwig Feuerbach*' (Lenin, 1976, p. 70). It is quite probable that Deborin was referring to these passages when he spoke of the positive contribution of Hegel to the physics of space and time.

So, we have here an example of a distorted quotation from an opponent, which is precisely the accusation levelled by Korshunov against Mitin. Be that as it may, Mitin's verdict is that Deborin, as the main proponent of MI, 'adopts Hegel entirely, without any materialist reworking'. According to Mitin, this error is especially clear in the domain of gnoseology, where Deborin defended a Hegelian subject-object-identity perspective instead of a materialist theory of reflexion (Mitin, 1933, pp. 42–43).

However, despite the fact that Mitin stressed that the question was not one of 'individual mistakes, but of his *conception* of a Menshevising Idealism' (p. 42), the precise contours of the philosophy against which Mitin is combatting remain strangely vague and unspecific. It may be – indeed, it soon becomes rather clear even for present-day readers – that Deborin had a 'Hegelian' inclination and that he was not critical enough of idealism. But even accepting Mitin's demand for a new, Leninist stage in Marxist philosophy, it is difficult to see in Deborin's thoughts – and MI in general – a deliberate attempt to create an alternative perspective to that of Leninism. Instead, we could characterise Deborin as a not overly consequent and deep thinker; he had only followed, as an apprentice, quite closely in the footsteps of his master, Plekhanov. To construct MI as a clear-cut current of philosophical thought was not an easy task for Mitin.

Much later, in the Khrushchev period, Mitin tried to summarise once more the content of the term he had so actively used in the early 1930s. In the article *sub verbo*, published in *Filosofskaya entsiklopediya*, he described 'Menshevising Idealism' as follows:

a designation that was used in Soviet philosophical literature to characterise the views of a group of Soviet philosophers (Deborin, N. Karev, Ya. Sten, etc.), who in their works of the 1920s and 30s offered several formalist and idealist distortions of Marxist philosophy and deviated from Dialectical Materialism. These deviations found their expression in the downplaying of the principle of partiality [*partiynost'*], in a break between theory and practice, between philosophy and politics, in a 'Hegelianisation' of the materialist dialectics, in not understanding and ignoring the Leninist phase of development of Marxist philosophy.

(Mitin, 1964, pp. 388–389)

According to Mitin, Deborin and his pupils 'in several cases unjustifiably brought Hegel's idealistic dialectics and Marx's materialistic dialectics closer together; they incorrectly claimed that Marxism is a synthesis of a materialistic reworking of Hegelian dialectics and Feuerbach's materialism'.<sup>4</sup> Despite some 'excesses'



(*peregiby*), which had led to the repression of innocent persons, the philosophical discussion around the year 1930 ‘played a great positive role in the struggle of ideas that the Party waged for Leninism’, since it ‘resulted in the victory of the Party line in philosophy’ (p. 389). This last point is, despite all its intellectual fuzziness, a rather exhaustive description of what Mitin and the other Ikapists believed and why they felt threatened by Deborin and MI.

### **A Stalinist Figure of Thought Only?**

How should we evaluate the phenomenon of Menshevising Idealism? Some scholars, such as Yakhot, assert that there actually existed nothing like Menshevising Idealism and that the whole term was created only to support a cult of Stalin.<sup>5</sup> I would suggest that Yakhot of course is right in that MI did not exist as a clearly definable philosophical doctrine, but the term nevertheless hinted at a deficiency in the Soviet Marxist philosophy inherited from the 1920s. Which deficiency? The key can be found in the last sentence of the above quotation from the late Mitin’s encyclopaedia entry: the so-called Menshevising Idealists ignored or did not grasp the importance of the ‘Leninist phase of development of Marxist philosophy’. The philosophical campaign around 1930 is quite obviously related to the Great Break – the *velikiy perelom* – of 1929, as the Bolshevik Party decided to abandon the NEP and steer a course towards the forced industrialisation of the country, imposing the first five-year plan and starting the collectivisation of agriculture. It should be stressed that this was not in any way Stalin’s personal decision, but the result of long and often bitter inter-party discussions from the mid-1920s onwards. The Bolsheviks already made the principal decision to leave the NEP at the 15th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party in 1927, although not in so drastic a form as occurred a couple of years later. Stalin himself hesitated for a long time as to which side to join, but once he had chosen to back the adherents of an accelerated industrialisation plan, he soon became the leading advocate of this policy.

It is important from a methodological standpoint to keep in mind this background to the ‘philosophical debate’, since it can be related to analogous phenomena in modern history. If we see the philosophical campaign of the early 1930s in the USSR in this context, it loses much of its initial enigmatic character. The closest analogy is the philosophical campaign in Maoist China, during the so-called Cultural Revolution of 1966, when Chairman Mao urged his young Red Guardians to fight the ‘bourgeois elements’ that had allegedly infiltrated the Chinese Communist Party. The ‘revisionists’ had to be eliminated by consciously aggravating the class struggle (remember here the Stalinist doctrine, according to which class struggle will intensify in the transitional period to socialism). The student-led paramilitary social movement by the Maoist Red Guards (*Hóng Wēibīng*) involved studying Mao’s ‘Little Red Book’, from which the peoples could allegedly draw dialectical wisdom. Actually, Mao’s philosophical ideas, supposedly representing the highpoint of Marxist thought, consisted of nothing

but commonplace constataions, like 'everything has different sides' or 'one divides into two'.

What is interesting both to the Soviet philosophical discussions of the 1930s and the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966 is not so much the philosophical weight of the arguments as the underlying socio-political processes. The Soviet/Russian historians Gennadiy Bodriugov and Vladimir Kozlov highlight in their fascinating retrospective take on the period the role of 'mass enthusiasm', the spontaneous outbursts on the subjective level. As they note, this revolutionary enthusiasm was not only a positive feature, but also led to negative socio-political processes such as the 'critique' campaigns. The Party decision to enforce industrialisation onto backward Russia filled people with a verve rarely seen before, an energy seemingly disconnected from their immediate material interests. Bodriugov and Kozlov describe the energy as follows:

The grandiosity of the plans had an immensely stimulating effect on the workers, even on those who in the beginning did not support the acceleration of the tempo. The grandiose plan attracted them with the idea of socialist construction, and at the same time led to a voluntarist take on economy, to the idea that 'everything is possible'. (Bodriugov and Kozlov, 1992, pp. 72–73)

The atmosphere in those years has been described quite well in many contemporary novels, for example in the works of Andrei Platonov. We encounter the same phenomenon of sudden mass enthusiasm during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, despite the fact that the latter was not so clearly tied to the new horizons promised by industrialisation; rather, it took place more on a political and cultural level.

The psychological effect of a historical leap forward called for taking effective action against ideas and beliefs from the previous NEP period. This step seemed justifiable, especially as, according to Bodriugov and Kozlov, 'the theoretical elaborations of the 20s, as useful and interesting as they may have been in themselves, essentially did not take into account the notion of evolutionary leaps in the progress of a socialist society' (p. 82). It seems to me that just such a perspective lay behind the claim directed against the 'Menshevising Idealists': their thoughts had been formed in the era of the NEP, in circumstances where the idea of a sudden and dramatic leap forward in the life of society had not been properly discussed. On the contrary, they had taken for granted Lenin's words that the New Economic Policy introduced after the bitter experiences of the so-called War Communism system should last for a long period into the future. Therefore, it is no wonder that Deborin and his disciples, hitherto respected as good Marxists, suddenly presented themselves to the young and enthusiastic Ikapists as retrograde types representing an era that now needed to be overcome. They were indeed determined to overcome it, even if Lenin's old 'theoretical pact' with Menshevik intellectuals was now being broken. Stalin, for his part, did not delay in making use of the enthusiasm of the people.

What was truly tragic during this process was, as Bodriugov and Kozlov write, the fact that Soviet philosophers and social scientists had during the 1920s not developed ‘any clear conception of inner-formational leaps and transitions in the process of building socialism’. ‘As a result’, they continue,

‘a sequence of hasty pragmatic decisions followed. Theory was sharply dissociated from practice and could not offer any recommendations in practice. [...] That theory lagged behind practice was one of the main reasons why a historically necessary and progressive turn of events, the abandonment of the old NEP, was carried out with too a high prize, via a trial-and-error method’. (p. 82)

We may interpret these remarks in the following manner, applying them to an assessment of the philosophical discussions of the early 1930s: the young Ikapists, the critics of the Menshevising Idealists, were right insofar as previous philosophical developments in the Soviet Union during the 1920s had not prepared the Marxists to cope with such a policy as the five-year plans after abandoning the NEP. It would indeed have demanded a new interpretation of Marxism, an interpretation that would differ radically from the evolutionary Marxism of the Second International as well as from Karl Kautsky, not to mention such thinkers as Eduard Bernstein. While in Lenin’s writings the seeds of such a new and desired interpretation might have been found, the philosophy of the 1920s had not nurtured them sufficiently. If we are to believe Yakhot, the whole idea of ascending into a ‘Leninist stage’ in Marxist philosophy was nothing but a camouflage for a cult of Stalin.<sup>6</sup> I think that we should analyse the situation a bit more in depth. It is of course true that Stalin (and the Stalinists in the Party) utilised for their own purposes the need to develop Marxist theory further, but this does not invalidate the fact that the heritage from the thought of the Second International was in need of a reassessment.

However, this being said, it is equally obvious that the Mitin-Yudin group, backed by the General Secretary of the Communist Party, did not have the intellectual and cultural foundation to accomplish such a delicate task. The task was instead realised in a ‘Stalinist’ manner, by a rude and forced attack. As Yan Sten had noted in the discussion held at the Communist Academy in October 1930, philosophy was not understood – or not considered – as a kind of argumentation in its own right which should not be submitted to politics *sans phrase*. The legend says that Stalin had answered as follows when someone had complained to him that Mitin was an illiterate: *Konechno, Mitin i Yudin zvezd s neba ne khvatayut, a tekhniku dela znayut khorosho* (‘Of course, Mitin and Yudin do not touch the stars in the sky, but they understand very well the technical side of the matter’).<sup>7</sup> In the early 1930s, the ‘tekhnika dela’ was yet such that the accused Menshevising Idealists could keep their lives, albeit while occupying lower institutional positions than before. During the Great Terror of 1936–1937, however, their theoretical sins were remembered and most of Deborin’s students were executed. The repressions were motivated by connecting in an arbitrary manner the philosophical

views with certain political currents – in the case of the Mechanists, with the ‘rightist deviation’ of Nikolai Bukharin and others, in the Deborinist case mostly with Trotskyism (Yakhot, 2012, p. 51). Deborin himself was allowed to keep his position as an academician, but he remained silent for 30 years.<sup>8</sup>

### **Lukács and Lifshits against Deborin, Too**

The result of the discussion of 1929–1933 is commonly described as the ‘Stalinization’ of Soviet philosophy (Yakhot, 2012, p. viii). This perspective is certainly correct, but the dynamics behind the process requires further attention. Even if we attribute to Stalin ‘a diabolical ability to deceive, to cover his tracks, and to say one thing while doing another’ (Yakhot, 2012, p. viii), we should not neglect an analysis of the objective processes and trends at work at the time. To attribute the philosophical campaigns to Stalin’s initiative only means forgetting the fact that Bodriugov and Kozlov, to my mind, rightly emphasise: ‘One should bear clearly in mind that Stalin’s regime was able to parasitise objective socio-economic processes, but not determine them’ (Bodriugov and Kozlov, p. 148). Stalin followed the processes, which often started and developed spontaneously, intervening first when an appropriate moment came. This thesis regarding the ‘parasitic’ character of Stalinism contains an important methodological clue that has not yet sufficiently been applied in analyses of the politics and culture of the Stalinist era.

Could the Deborin school have been dealt with in other possible ways? Georg Lukács seems to give us a hint. In his memoir *Gelebtes Denken*, published in 1981, he quite surprisingly approves of the campaign against the Deborinists, although he does not use the term ‘Menshevising Idealism’. Referring to his work at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow in the early 1930s, he had the following to say:

On the other side, it is a prejudice that Stalin has expressed only incorrect and anti-Marxist ideas. I mention this in context with the fact that in 1930, during my first longer sojourn in the Soviet Union, the so-called philosopher’s debate took place, which Stalin had started against Deborin and his school. Of course, many later Stalinist traits were already recognisable in this discussion. Nevertheless, Stalin put forth one extremely important point of view, which has played a very positive role in my development. Namely, Stalin attacked the Plekhanov orthodoxy, which in those times was so important in Russia. He denounced the idea that one should regard Plekhanov as a great theoretician ... Stalin’s claim was that in Marxism, it is rather the Marx–Lenin position – and behind it, the Stalin position – which is relevant in Marxism.

(Lukács, 1981, p. 140)

Lukács continues by noting that ‘Stalin’s critique of Plekhanov inspired even me to criticise Mehring’.<sup>9</sup> Lukács’s comment on the philosophical debate of the early

1930s is most interesting, although it shows some indecisive formulations concerning the ‘real’ role of Stalin. With reference to Bodriugov and Kozlov’s thesis above, we might rather say that even in this case, Stalin had only ‘parasitised’ on the objective need to take a step further from the philosophy of the Plekhanovites and Deborin. It is improbable that Stalin was interested in questions of philosophy as such, even Marxist philosophy, but still he saw here an opportunity to strengthen his own position in the Bolshevik Party.

Lukács’s cautiously positive assessment of the anti-Deborin campaign received support from Mikhail Lifshits, who worked with Lukács at the same time at the Marx-Engels Institute. In a lengthy interview with the Hungarian Marxist László Sziklai, given in 1974 (this text is not translated into English), Lifshits talked about the critique levelled against the Deborin school:

[M]y attitude towards the then dominant Deborin school was quite negative, as well as towards other ideological monopolies of those years (the school of Fritsche, the school of Perevertsev). I had no sympathies towards a Marxism of the Deborinian type, and therefore, I quite eagerly supported the critique of him in 1931.

(Lifshits, 2012, p. 46)

Lifshits considered Deborin a mediocre thinker only, who clung to an old Second International interpretation of Marxism and did not understand the new perspectives opened by the October Revolution and Lenin. On the other hand, some pages later Lifshits grows a bit more reserved and admits that ‘this discussion became possible only thanks to the intervention of Stalin’:

Be that as it may, a younger generation of people who had studied philosophy, or rather who had studied at the Institute of Red Professors, actively supported the critique of the Deborin school. It may be that not everything in this critique was logically or morally grounded, there was much ignorance and ballyhoo.

However,

I and Lukács, we stood on the position that the ‘Leninist stage’, as it was called in those days, was a gigantic revolution in Marxist philosophical thought, and since then, I have not to any extent changed my opinion.

(Lifshits, 2012, pp. 51, 52)

It is worth noting that both Lukács and Lifshits do not accept the term ‘Menshevising Idealism’ itself, although they do not condemn the anti-Deborin campaign. We need not take the assessments offered by Lukács and Lifshits as the last word regarding the tricky problem of understanding the fate of the Deborinist school of thought and ‘Menshevising Idealism’, but they clearly indicate that further research on this dramatic phase of Soviet philosophy may give new insights

into what 'really' happened. Both Lukács and Lifshits have the reputation of being 'Hegelian Marxists', but they clearly were not Hegelians in the same manner as Deborin. In their eyes, the Plekhanovian tradition had absorbed Hegel's dialectics in a superficial and scholastic manner, as a prescription which one only needed to 'apply' in Marxism.

But where does the shoe pinche? To answer the question, we need to make acquaintance with a sequel in the 1950s, a couple of years after Stalin's death.

### **A Sequel of 1954–1955**

The stage is again set in Moscow, in the Moscow State University (MGU), but the *dramatis personae* have changed: the young philosophers Eva'ld Ilyenkov and Valentin Korovikov presented during 1954 and 1955 their 'Theses on Philosophy', which aroused a lively discussion. When one reads the protocols today, from a distance of over 60 years, one cannot but get struck by the intensity, even a 'waspish' character of the interventions.

Ilyenkov and his buddy Korovikov were accused of attempts to smuggle 'gnoseology' into Marxist philosophy (Il'enkov and Korovikov, 2016, p. 25). In the Party cell meeting of the faculty, Teodor Oizerman reminded that the viewpoint of Ilyenkov and Korovikov had been characterised – rightly or wrongly, Oizerman did not say – 'as a remnant of Menshevising Idealism' (Il'enkov and Korovikov, 2016, p. 69). According to the protocol, Oizerman further seemed to be unsatisfied with the fact that no disciplinary actions against the young philosophers – called as 'philosophical hooligans' (*filosofskie stilyagi*) by another speaker at the same meeting<sup>10</sup> – had been undertaken. This is a bit puzzling, since it was otherwise rumoured that Ilyenkov was a protégé of Oizerman and had to thank his mentor for being accepted to the Institute of Philosophy in 1953.

The attempt to connect Ilyenkov with Deborin and Menshevising Idealism is interesting, but clearly unsubstantiated. Actually, it turns the real state of affairs upside down. Ilyenkov was in fact rather critical of Deborin. True, in his works he has only sparsely commented Deborin, although he must have known his writings of the 1920s. (I do not know whether they met personally, too; in every case, Deborin was broken down morally by the rude Stalinist critique of his views, and remained silent, withdrawn from public life.) However, in one of his philosophical notebooks, which can be dated in the years 1954–1955, thus just in the period when the dispute around the 'Theses on Philosophy' was actual, Ilyenkov clearly takes distance from Deborin. In one passage, Ilyenkov writes that one should avoid to return to a Deborinian concept of philosophy as a purely and abstractly sophisticated methodology. This is possible, if one only understands the importance of the organic unity of Marxist philosophy with revolutionary practical activity (Il'enkov and Korovikov, 2016, p. 184). This comment is quite in resonance with the critique directed against Menshevising Idealism in the 1929–1933 campaign: Ilyenkov thinks of Deborin as an abstract theoretician, disconnected from the practical demands of the day.

In another passage of the notebook, Ilyenkov gives a more detailed assessment of the Deborin school:

The Deborin school absolutised the moment of relative normativity of the general laws of dialectics, and attempted to build a system on unchangeable procedures for theoretical thinking; it remained in the sphere of their purely speculative inspection, detached from all contacts with the research of the living theoretical knowledge of the objects, detached from the new level reached by the practice. Thus it dogmatised the general principles of dialectical method and actually attempted to retain theoretical thought at the level of development which generally was characteristic for the epoch of Hegel ... This, of course, is not only a conservative, but even a reactionary tendency. (Ilyenkov and Korovikov, 2016, p. 189)

Here, too, Ilyenkov concurs in a remarkable manner with the critique against the Deborin school during the philosophical campaign of 1929–1933!

Another point where Ilyenkov differs from Deborin is the question of ontology vs. gnoseology. When the dogmatic Party philosophers in the discussion around the ‘Theses on Philosophy’ accused Ilyenkov of ‘gnoseologism’, this accusation was inconsistent with the claim that Ilyenkov should have been an adherent of Menshevizing Idealism. Actually, Deborin and his school had an *ontologistic* interpretation of Marxism, not a gnoseologistic one, as Ilyenkov (allegedly) had. I think it suffices here to quote here a contemporary Russian philosopher and follower of Ilyenkov, Sergei Mareev:

The doctrinaire idea of dialectics, which has put down roots into the Soviet philosophy and from which the present-day ‘ontology’ hatched out, stems from Plekhanov and Deborin, not from Lenin ... For them [Plekhanov and Deborin – V.O.], the dialectics was a science of ‘the world in its totality’, a kind of metaphysics, like the doctrine of Christian Wolff, with the exception that in this dialectics it was continuously stressed that ‘everything is developing’. ... In ontology, the reality is examined without paying any notice to the consciousness.

(Marejev, 2006, pp. 125–126)

Hard words, but I believe most of us would agree. Mareev refers to the 18th-century German rationalist philosopher Christian Wolff, for whom ‘ontology’ was nothing else but *philosophia prima*, metaphysics, whose task was to analyse and to describe the most general traits of Being. According to Wolff, ontology (i.e. metaphysics) did not in principle differ from other sciences, it was only more (actually, most) general. Physics studied the interaction and movement of bodies, mathematics was a bit more abstract, studying the quantities as such, and ontology was the most abstract science, musing on ‘Being’ in general.

It is ironic that although Deborin himself fell already in 1930 as a result of the ‘philosophical campaign’, the young Stalinist philosophers who dethroned the erstwhile



'Pope' of the Soviet philosophy were not able to make any substantial changes to the Deborinian interpretation in this respect. For them, too, as the Russian scholar Sergei Mareev remarks, 'the philosophy remained a "Diamat", that is, a doctrine of the world matter [*mirovaya materiya*] in its "eternity, infinity and development"' (Mareev, 2008, p. 38). The Soviet philosophy followed in Deborin's footsteps and 'ontologised' the dialectics, while Ilyenkov followed Hegel and attempted to sublimate in a dialectical manner the dualism of ontology and gnoseology.

Hegel did not try to save the old ontology from Kant's devastating critique, but he offered a more subtle, dialectical solution. His stance to the question of the ontology vs. gnoseology opposition was dictated by his general ambition to bring about a 'conciliation', *Versöhnung* of these oppositions. In his philosophy, ontology and gnoseology are reduced to mere subordinated viewpoints in the grand totality of the evolving Spirit. Ilyenkov of course rejected Hegel's objective idealism, but his 'Hegelian' standpoint led, however, by its inner logic, to a similar solution.<sup>11</sup> For Ilyenkov, too, the ontology vs. gnoseology divide should become sublated – not in the totality of the Spirit, as in Hegel, but in human culture, which is a product of the activity of Man. Ilyenkov's concept of the Ideal states that the ideality does not exist only 'in the head', in the cognising subject, but especially and predominantly in the forms of material culture, and that human consciousness arises as a result of the interiorisation of the culture. Thus, the Hegelian identity of Thought and Being is realised in the process of material activity (*deyatel'nost'*), or praxis.

This concept of human culture and ideality is the main factor which distinguishes Ilyenkov's (and, we might add with some reservations, Lukács's, too) Hegelianism as well from Deborin's Hegelianism, as from Diamat. One might say that it represents one of the possible alternatives, which the critics of Deborin pursued in the philosophical discussion around 1930 but could not realise, thanks to the circumstances created by Stalinism.

## Notes

- 1 For example, Viktor Koloskov, whose book (Koloskov 1978) belongs to the very few later Soviet studies of the philosophy in the 1930s, mentions the 'Menshevising Idealism' only *en passant* (pp. 33–34), without reflection on it at all.
- 2 Of Korshunov's dissertation, I have had an access to the 'avtoreferat' only. In addition to these works, two English-language sources might be mentioned, as they are contemporary with the events analysed here. In *Communist*, the organ of the Communist Party of USA, D. S. Mirskiy published an article on the philosophical discussion around 1930 (see Mirskiy 1933). He did not mention the term 'Menshevising Idealism', but otherwise his article is well-written and gives a clear picture of the main events of the discussion. It is obvious that Mirskiy, who had previously lived for a long time in England and mastered the language excellently, had been commissioned by Soviet authorities to inform American and other Anglophone Communists about the aims and results of the philosophical discussion. Mirsky (originally Svyatopolk-Mirskiy, from an old noble family of princes) had moved to the Soviet Union in 1932 after he had become a Marxist. He published articles on Russian and Western literature, but was arrested in 1937 accused of espionage and died in a labour camp in Magadan, Siberian Far East in 1939. Another contemporary English-language source of the discussions around 1930 is Julius (or Julian) F. Hecker's *Moscow Dialogues* (1933). Hecker was a Russian-American Christian minister who continued to live in Moscow after the October revolution. The book consists

- of 20 dialogues by fictive persons, of which the Soviet participant, ‘Socratov’, however, is very well-versed in questions of Marxist theory and explains at length to others the subject matter of the philosophical campaign around 1930.
- 3 Before this point, the political currents to be criticised had been described as, for example, ‘tendencies that conceal leftist phraseology as half-Menshevik (*polumenshevistskoe*) rightist content’ (editorial by *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*, 5/1930; PZM Editorial 1930, 3). Another earlier label had been ‘Formalism’, which, however, was so unspecific that it practically did not have any point.
  - 4 Here, Mitin is referring to one article published in *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*, vol. 2—3 (1927), p. 21.
  - 5 ‘The tendency which was called “Menshevizing idealism” in actual fact never existed. An analysis of the events of those years has led us to one more conclusion: philosophy had begun to play an exclusive role in the period of the Stalin cult’ (Yakhot 2012, p. 195).
  - 6 ‘The “Leninist stage” was a means, whereas the creation of a Stalin cult was the goal’ (Yakhot, 2012, p. 157).
  - 7 I have encountered the anecdote several times in the literature but have not yet been able to verify it.
  - 8 Deborin was later rehabilitated; cf. Plimak (2002), Korsakov and Deborin, (2014).
  - 9 In his extensive essay on Franz Mehring, published for the first time in 1933, Lukács writes that Mehring’s scholarly works contain ‘moments and methods [...], which have not transgressed the horizon of the II International’ and which one thus ‘must overcome’ (Lukács, 1954, p. 320). This approach is analogous to the critique of the MI presented in the philosophical discussions around the year 1930: since Deborin was not able to see further than the Menshevik horizon allowed him, so too Mehring was restricted by the traditions of the Second International. As proof of his claim, Lukács quotes a passage from Mehring wherein the latter says that Marx and Engels ‘always remained of the same philosophical viewpoint as Feuerbach’ (Lukács, 1954, p. 354). This is the same accusation that Mitin directed at the Deborinists in his 1964 article for *Filosofskaia Entsiklopedia*, as cited above. Moreover, the Lukácsian critique of Mehring is anticipated in an editorial in issue 9–10/1931 of *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*: ‘It must be noted, that even the Left Social-Democrats – Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, Pannekoek – did not in their philosophical views rise above the general level of the II International [...] Mehring, who in his historical and literature historical works gave some examples of materialist dialectics, stays in principle true to the positions of natural-historical materialism’ (PZM Editorial, 1931, p. 7). Lukács does not, however, refer to the Soviet philosophical discussions at all, and it goes without saying that he presents his critique of Mehring in a much more sophisticated manner than the Soviet Ikapists treated the representatives of the MI position. ‘Mehring’s great historical merit [...] will remain stable’, Lukács wrote (1954, p. 320).
  - 10 So Orest Trakhtenberg, a professor on history of philosophy; Il’enkov and Korovikov, 2016, p. 71.
  - 11 Lenin in fact seems to accept this Hegelian idea, when he commented in his conspectus of Hegel’s *Logic*: ‘In *Capital*, Marx applied to a single science logic, dialectics and the theory of knowledge of materialism [three words are not needed: it is one and the same thing] which has taken everything valuable in Hegel and developed it further’ (Lenin 1976, p. 317). Although the basic idea of an unity behind the divisions in philosophy is same, Ilyenkov differs from Lenin in that his concept sees *human culture* as the basis of the unity between ontology and theory of cognition.

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