

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Andre Liebich. *From the Other Shore: Russian Social Democracy After 1921.* Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1997. xii + 476 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-32517-3.

Reviewed by Robert W. Thurston (Miami University)
Published on H-Russia (December, 1998)



They Dreamed and Divided to the Very End

These intense figures who stare at the camera or into space in one photograph: could they, with their sharp faces and utterly bourgeois costumes, down to the remains of a bird on one woman's hat, ever have been capable of leading Russia? Are there any conceivable circumstances in which they could have brought the country to both socialism and democracy? If they had been out in Russia walking in a group between October 1917 and late 1920, wouldn't they have been the targets of abuse from workers, Cossacks, peasants, White officers, and more, if only because of the way they looked?

To be sure, various photographs of Bolsheviks convey the same impression of the intelligentsia about to implement its own peculiar vision of politics, but Lenin and his followers at least occasionally bridged the gap between themselves and the *narod*. After the spring of 1917 the Mensheviks never could. Nor could they close the numerous chasms in their own ranks: the party's story often involves division and rancor. "Ugly fractional behavior," in the words of member Peter Garvi (p. 39), appeared after the Second Party Congress of 1903; sharp words characterized the splits of 1917, disagreements about Stalin or whether the Vlasovites should be "amnestied," churlish obituaries of Fedor Dan, and finally Boris Nicolaevsky's successful effort to block a publication by Boris Sapir in the 1950s. Menshevik stalwarts summered, far from the proletariat, in the French town of Arcachon in 1910 and in Tannersville, New York after World War II, despite the poverty of other Mensheviks nearby. In both places, some of the relaxing radicals

would have nothing to do with the others. Except for the brief period when they wielded *vlast'*, though no power, the Mensheviks' bickering and constant divisions make them seem the ultimate emigres.

Andre Liebich's capable and remarkably even-handed study of this ill-fated group, intended for those already generally familiar with Soviet history, is well worth reading for the collective and individual history of the Mensheviks, the perspectives on the Bolsheviks provided by his discussion of personalities and tactics, and his treatment of the split between the two sides of Russian Social Democracy. It is useful when considering the course of Russian Marxism to bear in mind that Fedor Dan "subverted" earlier party initiatives before the Second Congress met and that Iulii Martov's behavior at the meeting up to the moment of the split was "brutal," as he himself admitted (p. 38). In thinking about Lenin it is helpful to have Liebich's remark that "if one can describe Dan's character as a milder version of Lenin's, then Lenin's character may be called a milder version of [Georgii] Plekhanov's" (p. 36).

From the Other Shore does a fine job of describing the famous split during and after the Second Congress, emphasizing personality differences and the fact that "invective was a staple" on all sides (p. 22). Liebich carefully critiques the view that "juxtaposes Menshevik virtue and good faith in 1917 to Bolshevik conspiracy and betrayal of promise and principle (p. 68)." He points out, though perhaps with insufficient emphasis, that the Mensheviks

really cared little for the outcome of the elections to the Constituent Assembly and that their objections to “terror” during the Civil War largely related to the use of coercion against socialists. The party was quite willing to see the rights of “bourgeois” groups eliminated or even to say that democracy might be limited to the working class, all the while claiming to be the voice of democracy in general.

Nicolaevsky’s adventures as he alternately lost and rescued his archive make fascinating reading, as does the story of connections between Mensheviks and American scholars of Russia. New light is shed on the *upolnomochennyye* movement, the “workers’ representatives” of early 1918; Liebich shows that it was essentially a creation of the Menshevik Right. Therefore other Mensheviks backed away from the movement, so that, although the author does not say so, it was probably doomed even without Bolshevik suppression. The background to the Menshevik Party trial of 1931 is carefully explored; Liebich finds that several leading Mensheviks, for example Eva Broido, slipped into the USSR in the late 1920s. The GPU believed that Raphael Abramowitch had also entered the country, although he had not. Nicolaevsky in 1956 denied that “wrecking conversations” [took place between Mensheviks abroad and present or former party members in the Soviet Union], but there were conversations” (p. 208). Thus in the 1931 case, as in the later Moscow show trials, some fire was burning underneath all the smoke.

Liebich sets high standards of evidence and analysis which in some places he then fails to meet. In his discussion of “The Letter of an Old Bolshevik,” he does not indicate that in 1964 Nicolaevsky, who originally published it, said that he had rewritten “an account of my conversations with Bukharin” and had also “relied on information from other sources, above all Charles Rappoport, a well-known French-Russian Communist.” [1] Therefore it is impossible to be sure what came from Bukharin, what from Nicolaevsky, and what from Rappoport and “other sources.” Liebich is also too anxious to establish the credibility of the Menshevik journal *Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik*, valuable as it was. Thus he stresses its accuracy but qualifies this judgment by saying that it applies not so much to “stark facts but trends and attitudes,” which are not black and white in their correctness (p. 7). That is a slippery standard indeed for veracity.

Liebich does not do justice to the Mensheviks’ behavior after the Bolsheviks seized power, when the former denounced the takeover—then turned around and hypo-

critically offered to join a coalition, soviet government, but only on their own terms, without Lenin and Trotsky in office. Menshevik “peasantophobia” is mentioned only once, while the leadership’s disdain for workers as immature and prone to elemental urges is not highlighted sufficiently. In short, the Menshevik condescension to the vast majority of the Russian people, which contributed so mightily to the party’s undoing in 1917 and after, gets short shrift.

The book is really not so much a study of Menshevism in general after 1921 as it is an investigation of the party’s Russian-Jewish segment, which of course dominated the group. But it is a bit unsettling to find only two references to the Mensheviks in the Caucasus, whence came fully half of the (admittedly paltry) votes for the party in the 1918 elections to the Constituent Assembly.

Liebich argues that phenomena should not be examined “only in light of their future success” (p. 2), and for the most part he avoids that trap in regard to both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. On the other hand, one major problem with *From the Other Shore* is that it follows the common line on Stalinism, mentioning it only in connection with the Gulag, its “staggering toll” (p. 3, pointing to the “Soviet experience” as a whole), and with the words “barbaric” and “barbarism” (p. 4). Stalinism is invoked as a label, as something already known; Liebich here discards his own keen analytical skills and adopts a stance he himself criticizes: “other deformities of mind and character flow easily from the negative image of the opponent (p. 30).” In other words, a certain a priori picture of Stalinism helps produce an analysis of other phenomena, reversing the way we ought to work. As in other interpretations, this view is facilitated by dehumanizing practically everyone on the scene, until “in Kafka’s words, the Revolution evaporated, leaving behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy (p. 121).”

Nonetheless, Liebich’s study is invaluable in emphasizing the contradictions of Menshevism, perhaps captured nowhere better than in Martov’s remark about the “sickness” of the Russian Revolution, while he simultaneously maintained that no attempt should be made to overthrow the Bolsheviks. The “choice lay between bolshevism and counterrevolution” (pp. 82-83), leaving the Mensheviks in effect nowhere. It took one of their own, the “extraparty right wing Menshevik Stepan Ivanovich,” to sum up the party’s position as one of the “politics of isolation and... ’aristocratic-Marxist disdain for the whole world, except for the proletariat, which is presently not in the party’ (p. 103).”

Liebich makes clear that the Menshevik leaders—and there were never very many followers—wanted a family at least as much as they wanted a party, in order to assuage their profound alienation from Russian and virtually every other society. They certainly got a family, not exactly one that could serve as a model of solidarity and support, but one which will continue to involve and challenge all of us who still feel drawn to Russian studies.

Notes:

[1]. Boris A. Nicolaevsky, *Power and the Soviet Elite*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965, p. 9.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Robert W. Thurston. Review of Liebich, Andre, *From the Other Shore: Russian Social Democracy After 1921*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2613>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.