

Distinguish between Menshevism and Bolshevism

Marxism contains within it a political ideology that will form socialism by changing and improving society and following this the formation of communism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels first developed Marxism early in the 19th century. The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was the predominant party who upheld Marxist values and ideals in Russia. This Party held within its ranks such famous figures as Vladimir Lenin, Iulli Martov and Leon Trotsky. The Party came to prominence in the early 20th century following the demise of the Russian Tsar. Under the Tsar many of the party found themselves in exile or self-exile for demonstrating opposition to Tsarist rule. For this reason the second party congress was held not in Russia but in Brussels, Belgium. The Belgian authorities however did not allow the congress to take place in their country and so it was broken up. Therefore the 'true' second party congress took place in London in 1903.

This congress brought together the leaders and party members. It was here that disputes took place over the direction and methods of the Party. The party leadership could not agree over what they wanted from the Party and this led to a division of the Party into Bolsheviks – 'partisans of the majority' and Mensheviks – 'partisans of the minority' (*Acton, E. 1995: 109*). The divisions between the two sides of the Party were numerous and varied in nature. This work will explore these differences, the reasons behind them and the effects that they had on both sides of the Party.

At this congress in London, which began in August 1903 an irrevocable, split developed between the two factions of the party. The split at the time of the congress was largely due to the conflict in opinions over party organisation. Lenin had written his work 'What is to be done?' and it was published in 1902, this work had addressed some of these organisational issues. The faction that would in due course become the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin wanted a tight knit Party that admitted only "dedicated and disciplined activists" (*Acton, E. 1995: 109*). In contrast those who would become known as the Mensheviks, led by Martov wanted to provide a much broader based Party that would contain large sections of the proletariat. At the congress Lenin lost a vote on Party membership however he later won a vote on Party leadership and organisation, it was following this victory by a small minority that Lenin dubbed his supporters the Bolsheviks (*Chubarov, A. 2007*). The Mensheviks feared an alienation of the class that the Party was supposed to serve the interests of, the workers, they believed that "the fundamental question facing the Social Democrats [was] that of the relationship between the Party and the rank and file of the proletariat, the class for whom it was designed." (*Acton, E 1995: 109*). In this the Mensheviks feared that the Bolsheviks were betraying the 'rank and file of the proletariat' and socialism itself. Trotsky, at the time a Menshevik, is known to have said to Lenin "That's dictatorship you're advocating" to which Lenin replied "There is no other way" (*Cavendish, R. 2003*). The Mensheviks saw this theory of a dictatorship as a betrayal of Socialism and the ideas laid down by Marx and Engels.

Despite having been branded the 'partisans of the minority' the Mensheviks were in fact larger than the more radical Bolsheviks. This is understandable considering the two factions approach to party membership, but in terms of support by people who were not themselves party activists their were no such restrictions. Mensheviks found following the congress in 1903 that they were at this point the stronger side of the Party. There were "few cities where the Bolsheviks were

stronger than their Menshevik rivals" (Cohen, S. 1973: 10). It was thus unsurprising that at this time Lenin found some Bolsheviks debating with him the merits of reunification with the Mensheviks in order to strengthen the party. Lenin however held an intransigent hatred of Menshevism (Cavendish, R. 2003) after 1903 and so any form of reconciliation was out of the question. Thus at this stage shortly after the Party split it was the Mensheviks who held the most support out of the two sides of the Party.

The thoughts of the two factions differed not simply over the organisation of the Party; there were also divisions over the ideas of Marx and Engels. For instance the latter two had suggested that Communism would follow Socialism and this in turn would have followed an extended period of Capitalism. Russia at the beginning of the 20th century was arguably the most backward country in Europe and certainly more so than the Great Powers of Europe. The Mensheviks believed that before a Socialist revolt could take place the Bourgeoisie must revolt and that state power must move to the Bourgeois political parties. After this had happened and a capitalist society had been established the socialist revolution could then take place. The Mensheviks claimed that it was incorrect to speak of an imminent socialist revolution in such a backward country (Brovkin, V. 1987: 2). They saw the February revolution of 1917 as the Bourgeois revolution stage of the process. In contrast Lenin believed that Socialism could be established in 1917, he believed in the revolutionary potential of the peasantry that formed a large proportion of Russia's population. Lenin surmised that the need to wait for the establishment of a Bourgeois Capitalist state was unnecessary and that the Bourgeois and proletariat revolutions could be merged. (Evans, D & Jenkins, J. 2001: 111). Both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks interpreted the events of February 1917 as the 'Bourgeois Democratic revolution' but they both held differing views of what was to come next (Acton, E. 1995: 112). In this respect it can be considered that compared with the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks held a more cautionary and slower approach to the revolution.

This more moderate and less radical approach of the Mensheviks is further shown by their willingness to work with the less radical political organisations in Russia at the time. Firstly the Mensheviks wished to secure the cooperation of the bourgeoisie in order to maintain industrial production and civil peace (Brovkin, V. 1987: 5). This was necessary in order to put in place the conditions that were needed for the revolution of the proletariat that would in turn lead to the set up of socialism in Russia. Secondly they threw themselves into heavy involvement with the working class trade unions that sprung up in 1905. In contrast the normally radical Bolsheviks for once urged caution and claimed the need for the Party to have control over these trade unions rather than simple involvement (Acton, E. 199: 112). Thirdly, the Mensheviks were willing to work with liberals in Russia to achieve their aims as demonstrated by their participation in the Dumas between 1905 and 1917, however in contrast the Bolsheviks took a much more 'backseat' position in these governments. Finally, the Mensheviks did not see violence as an effective medium for achieving their aims. The Bolsheviks being more radical were willing to use violence (Cavendish, R. 2003). The Bolsheviks were different from the Mensheviks in that they had a policy that was much more isolationist and involved less cooperation with other political parties. It could be argued that in the same way that Lenin wanted a tight knit, dedicated party his view towards other political organisations was much the same, that is he was reliant on his own party and those he knew well, more than he was willing to rely on others.

Like all socialist parties across the globe as well as many other political organisations both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks wished to see an end to the First World War and called for an end to the fighting. However the two

factions had differing opinions over the way in which the war should be ended. The Mensheviks drove their efforts to pressure the rival nations to agree to peace and prevent the bloodshed of thousands of workers. In contrast to this Lenin welcomed Russia's defeat, if it was what was needed to allow for the conditions of a proletarian revolution. Martov disagreed with Lenin's view, he believed that the defeat of one country by another would only weaken the internationalism of workers and create agitation between the working classes of the victors and the defeated (*Brovkin, V. 1987: 3*). It is also worth mentioning that the Mensheviks were not all in agreement over the desire for peace and the ending of the war against Germany. A small proportion of Mensheviks led by Plekhanov were in favour of continuing the war believing that Germany were the aggressors and so should be met with resistance.

A major difference between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks is the composition of their ranks and the areas of society that they received their support from. For example the heavy emphasis on discipline and even more so the emphasis on centralised control advocated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks was particularly unattractive to activists from Russia's many minority nationalities. So much so that eighty percent of the Bolsheviks activists were Great Russians, in contrast to this the Mensheviks were only made up of approximately a third of Great Russians, the rest came from minority nationalities.

Another pattern found was the age of the supporters of each faction. The Bolsheviks were predominantly made up of younger men. Older generations tended to support the more moderate Mensheviks (*Trotsky, L. 1972: 306*). The Bolsheviks more radical nature appealed more to younger men as Cohen says "The Bolshevik appeal to a schoolboy may have been as simple as Ehrenburg suggests: he 'understood that the Mensheviks were moderates, more like my father.'" (*Cohen, S. 1973: 10*). The Mensheviks did not worry about this youthful support too much; between 1912 and 1914 they believed that Bolshevism's popularity was simply due to the expansion of the working class to include more youths and peasants. They believed that "Given time, they would recognise the greater realism of Menshevik moderation" (*Acton, E. 1995: 138*). Unfortunately for the Mensheviks this time was not allowed due to the events of 1917 and the Bolshevik seizure of power.

The Bolsheviks and Mensheviks may have originated from the same political Party but the two were both very different. Broadly speaking the Bolsheviks were the radical side of the Social Democratic Labour Party and the Mensheviks the more moderate side. The Bolsheviks were determined to effect dramatic change rapidly. To do this they were willing to use any means such as violence, force or even defeat in the war. Bolshevism wanted to turn the backwards Tsarist Russia into a Socialist state as quickly as possible. The Mensheviks were much more cautionary in their approach. They were willing to cooperate with other political organisations and did not feel the need for rapid transformation of the Russian system believing they could effect change over time. It is this cautionary approach that may have cost Menshevism its existence. In the backwards Russian system the Bolshevik force and radicalism was evidently more effective and enabled them to gain leadership in Russia.

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