



## NOTAS Y DEBATES DE ACTUALIDAD

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### The Activity of the Social-Democratic Group 'Yedinstvo' in 1918-1919

*La actividad del grupo socialdemócrata 'Yedinstvo' en 1918-1919*

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#### ABSTRACT

G.V. Plekhanov was a cut above like-minded people of the "Yedinstvo" by his authority, the last stage of its existence remained practically unreported in the historical literature. It was established in the process of research that at that time activity of the group was crowned with an extremely curious historical paradox. As the supporters of Plekhanov, who was the founder of the National Social Democracy at his time, the "Reds" during the Civil War and stood on the other side of the barricades and supported Denikin, the "white" general and the worst enemy of their former party members, in 1919.

**Keywords:** Bolshevism; civil war; Menshevik party; political opposition.

#### RESUMEN

A diferencia de G.V. Plekhanov fue un corte por encima de la gente de ideas afines del "Yedinstvo" por su autoridad, la última etapa de su existencia permaneció prácticamente sin ser reportada en la literatura histórica. Se estableció en el proceso de investigación que en ese momento la actividad del grupo se coronaba con una extremadamente curiosa paradoja histórica. Como partidarios de Plekhanov, quien fue el fundador de la Democracia Nacional Social en su tiempo, los "Rojos" durante la Guerra Civil se mantuvieron al otro lado de las barricadas y apoyaron a Denikin, el general "blanco" y el peor enemigo de sus antiguos miembros del partido, en 1919.

**Palabras Clave:** Bolchevismo; guerra civil; partido menchevique; oposición política.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is no special work, which covers the activity of the All-Russian Social Democratic organization "Yedinstvo" in 1918-1919, in historiography, and the purpose of this article is to fill this gap. Probably, the inattention to the last period of existence of the "Yedinstvo" is connected with the fact that firstly, G.V. Plekhanov, the group leader and "father of the Russian Revolutionary Social-Democracy", had to leave Russia in January 1918, and in May of the same year, he died in Finland. It would seem that if the charismatic leader of the "Yedinstvo", overshadowing the scale of his personality and the intellect of his associates, left this life, and publication of the newspaper "Nashe Yedinstvo (Our Unity)", which was the central organ of the group, was discontinued on January 20, 1918, due to the lack of money and Plekhanov's illness, there is nothing to right about. As a result, the main biographers of G.V. Plekhanov finished his works with his death, not paying attention to the fate of the organization, directed by him, after departure from life (Baron, 1963; Tyutyukin, 1997).

Secondly, inadequate attention on the part of researchers can also be attributed to the fact that the group "Yedinstvo" had a very insignificant influence on the minds of representatives of the Russian revolutionary democracy. In the elections to the Constituent Assembly, candidates won less than 2 thousand votes from the "Yedinstvo" in Petrograd. The number of votes was 0.2% of the total number of election participants (throughout Russia – 20 thousand votes and 0.04%) (Tyutyukin, 1994). And arguing about the general course of the revolution in August or in September 1917 at the conference of the "Yedinstvo" in Tsarskoe Selo, G.V. Plekhanov remarked himself: "The masses are not following us, and this is our grief, but this is Woe from Wit". And thirdly, in editions devoted to the political parties of Russia in the first quarter of the XX century, attention was given to the "Yedinstvo" few or wasn't given at all, because the group had an independent status and stood without the organizational framework of the Menshevik Party (Spirin, 1984; Zevelev, 1994; Zevelev *et al.*, 2000).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAIN STAGES OF THE ACTIVITY OF THE SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC GROUP "YEDINSTVO" IN MOSCOW

However, despite the loss of the leader and the repression of the Bolsheviks, the "Yedinstvo" continued its activity to defend its views. The majority of the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets was awarded unflattering characteristics in the "Nashe Yedinstvo" from January 17, 1918. It was named "the mute clique of Lenin's indulgers": "Having shouted a loud "hurray", to the separate peace and civil war, the Bolshevik Congress of Soviets goes to long rest", the article "Opposition of His Majesty" said. "The delegates depart to places to carry the news about the betrayal of Russia for flow and plunder to the German imperialism and occupational troops of other neighbours (Galili *et al.*, 1999).

The application for termination of publication of the "Nashe Yedinstvo" was published in No. 22 of the newspaper from January 20. Characterizing causes of her death, R. Plekhanova wrote: "The small funds of the newspaper were taken by the authorities under the register and were difficult to obtain from the bank, and it was often difficult to satisfy the workers' demands for the money owed to them. From time to time, the Red Army soldiers honoured the typography... with a personal visit and scattered the font... In a word, the newspaper died of starvation shortly before the death of its editor-in-chief... "The "Yedinstvo"", Rosalia Markovna summed up the activity of the newspaper, "was a torch that indicated the right way to salvation, and a bell that sounded the alarm at the slightest danger" (Plekhanova, 1991).

After returning the status of the capital of the state to Moscow, the centre of activity of the "Yedinstvo" also moved to Belokamennaya (Moscow). It was functioned by the Moscow Committee and 6 district committees there. In spring 1918, it was planned to convene a conference of the group and to develop the publishing activity. However, the enemy didn't doze – the Bolsheviks were keeping wary eyes on the activity

of their opponents. So, the weekly newspaper "Yedinstvo", which began to issue on May 1, quickly ceased to exist under the hail of repressions (Dalin, 1988).

In early 1918, G.A. Aleksinskiy, one of the leaders of the group, moved to Moscow from Vologda to wage a fight with the Bolsheviks. He was sent by the Central Committee of the "Yedinstvo" to carry out the election campaign for the Constituent Assembly. On April 27, he was arrested and put to the Taganska Prison "alone" for characterizing the Brest Peace as "shameful" one at the meeting in the Great Hall of the Nobility Assembly. On January 1919, in connection with the typhoid fever, Aleksinskiy was released on bail, after which he worked in the Office of Information of the Central Council of Trade Unions and in the Main Archive Directorate. In spring of the same year, M.I. Kalinin, the chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), offered him a job in the Soviet government, but Grigoriy Alekseyevich refused. In May 1919, Aleksinskiy moved to Petrograd and fled to Paris through Estonia and Denmark together with his family (Aleksinskaya, 1968).

### **FEATURES OF RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE "YEDINSTVO"**

The meeting of the "Yedinstvo", where several important resolutions were adopted, was held on August 23-27, 1918. The lion's share of attention in the resolution "On overall policy" was given to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. It was noted that withdrawal of Russia from the coalition of countries fighting against Germany, significantly increased the chances of the latter to win in the war, which would be the triumph of imperialism. It was emphasized in the resolution that the Brest peace and the events following it have actually turned Russia into a German colony, whereas not only the working masses in Russia are interested in restoration of its independence and state unity, but the international democracy is also interested: "The success of this case is prevented by the policy of the current authority, contributing to implementation of the predatory plans of the German imperialism under the flag of neutrality", the document said. "On the other hand, the refusal of the Allies to recognize the Brest Peace and their unceasing war with the Germans create objective conditions, conducive to revival and liberation of our homeland. In the name of this great goal, the Russian socialists... are obliged to fight for destruction of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and for renewal of the close alliance with the Western democracies". However, considering that this fight will be extremely hampered by inertia of the population, its political passivity and lack of knowledge, the "Yedinstvo" put propaganda activities among the working masses, one of its main tasks – explaining to them the perniciousness of the victory of the German imperialism for Russia, discovery of the role played by the Bolshevik government in successes of this imperialism and in the all-Russian collapse, and also awakening among the masses of sympathy for the Entente. Even necessity of "using external forces" wasn't denied for the cause of revival of Russia. Whilst, Germany was excluded from the number of possible options: "Malice and hatred causes among them the desire to get rid of it in any way, not excluding the German orientation", the resolution said. "The organization "Yedinstvo"... is expressed against any actions in the spirit of this orientation..." (Galili *et al.*, 1999).

D.B. Pavlov confirms that the "Yedinstvo" ceased to exist under the hail of repressions in autumn 1918. The group wasn't saved also in the fact that G.V. Plekhanov was included in the list of "great people", to whom the Council of People's Commissars intended to raise monuments (Pavlov, 1999). However, this confirmation requires clarification that the organization completed its activity not in general, but in the territory of Soviet Russia. Because it's known that in autumn 1919, the Kyiv Committee of the "Yedinstvo" adopted the declaration with explanation of views as to current political moment. On August, 1919, Kyiv was taken by Denikin and, of course, this fact affected the content of the document.

### **DISAPPEARANCE OF THE “YEDINSTVO” FROM THE POLITICAL ARENA**

It was started from an indication of proximity of the 2-year anniversary of Soviet power, the anniversary of those days when “...the Bolshevik Communist Party took... the power, dispersed... the Constituent Assembly... and concluded an ignoble peace with Germany in order to prolong its reign. Being in contradiction with reality, we read further in the declaration, “initially, communism was doomed to powerlessness and could give the people... only such “equality in poverty” that set aside Russia to the times of rushlight, impassability and barter economy. ... The great country lay in the ruins as easy prey for strangers. ... Bolshevism betrayed Russia headlong to all predators of international capital for two years of its reign. Therefore, the Kyiv Committee of the “Yedinstvo” encouraged the workers “to give support to the state formations in the territory of Russia with the whole strength of their assistance. The state formations put overthrow of the Soviet power, restoration of the state unity and free organization of the state through the National Constituent Assembly with their objective”, and it also encouraged in their declaration “to recognize Kolchak, the admiral, as a temporary carrier of the supreme power, and to see the mighty lever for the re-establishment of the Russian state and ensuring its external independence in the armies under its supreme command”.

Soon the episodic speeches of the “Plekhanovites” were also ceased. The “Yedinstvo”, as an organization, finally disappeared from the political scene towards the end of the Civil War (Dalín, 1988). The group, living by personal influence of the leader, was doomed to die slowly after his death.

But not only G.V. Plekhanov’s departure from life and repressions of the Bolsheviks were the reasons for such a rapid movement of it into oblivion. The equally important reason was inopportunity of advancement to the foreground by “some persons” in the “military” platform of 1917-1918 of slogan of the need to bring the war to the victorious end over the German imperialism. By 1917, people were tired of participating in the protracted war, the purpose of continuation of which weren’t realized and accepted by them, and the achievement of which didn’t seem to them to be a matter of primary importance. In 1917-1918, the basic needs of the soldiers were the immediate cessation of the war and the return to home fires, in order not to delay the redistribution of land by the new revolutionary authorities. All the political slogans that contradicted these aspirations were doomed to failure, and their authors – to the very political loneliness, in which G.V. Plekhanov found himself “old, sick, not accepted by the events, and didn’t accept the events” after his arrival to his homeland in 1917 (Sukhanov, 1992).

The thing that even more aggravated sad situation for the “defensively” inclined politicians was the constant advancement, even to the sphere of theoretical policy, by the leaders of both the revolutionary authorities – the capital’s Council of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, the Provisional Government, and the Bolsheviks – the slogan of necessity, in the short or long term, the conclusion of peace. This discouraged the Russian soldier, convincing him that there was no need to continue the war. In the conditions of frequent use of pacifist slogans by power-ridden politicians, the protracted war seemed to the Russian soldier incomprehensible and senseless. No one agreed to go on the offensive and to die when the statesmen talked about the need for peace, interrupting each other. The soil, richly sprinkled with blood spilled in 1914-1917 in order to achieve the goals soldier-peasant, couldn’t produce harrowing crops in 1917-1918.

As a whole, all these reasons determined the small number of the organization “Yedinstvo” and its weak influence among the masses. In summer 1917, there were no more than 800 persons in it, and the meetings of the Moscow group “Yedinstvo” gathered only up to 30 participants, who were arranged by G.V. Plekhanov three times in August (Tyutyukin, 1994; Valentinov, 1991). If in May 1917, the group held 5 representatives into the Petrograd Duma, in July – only 2 ones. All these figures help to understand why Nikolai Sukhanov (Himmer), who became the Menshevik at this time, called the “Yedinstvo” not otherwise than a circle, a microscopic, insignificant and worthless group, and David Anin, a historian, wrote that this group “remained only a voice crying in the wilderness” in 1917 (Sukhanov, 1992; Anin, 1971). R. Plekhanova also didn’t deny

the obvious things. She testified that "except for the small, although active group "Yedinstvo", unfortunately, there were few supporters of Plekhanov's views around him" (Plekhanova, 1991).

### CONCLUSION

There is a certainty that G.V. Plekhanov perfectly understood futility of the propaganda of such views in the realities of revolutionary Russia of 1917-1918. Otherwise, he wouldn't be Plekhanov. However, being alien to such concepts as populism, demagoguery, political mercantilism, and also believing that the role of the leader consists not in adaptation to prejudice of the majority, but in the struggle against them for the sake of the triumph of their convictions, neither he nor his adherents of the group "Yedinstvo" still could make a deal with their conscience and sacrifice their patriotism for the sake of momentary confession on the part of people misguided on the topic of the war and the revolutions of masses. Fidelity to the assimilated principles, in the correctness of which Plekhanovites had no right to doubt if it was more important for them than anything else either in 1917-1918 or earlier. An example, quite worthy of all imitation.

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