

Ron Suny

“A Tempest in a Glass of Water”

Stalin the Underground Revolutionary and the Conflicts within Bolshevism

ABSTRACT

In the years after the 1905–1907 revolution, Social Democrats operated in the political shadows and turned much of their energy to internal differences of strategy and philosophy. Lenin took the issues of Marxist philosophical orthodoxy on questions of materialist ontology so seriously that he was willing to break off his relationship with one of his most talented comrades, Bogdanov, and create a schism in the diminished Bolshevik ranks. Stalin, then a minor figure in the party leadership, was a moderate in this debate and pushed for reconciliation and unity in the Bolshevik faction.

Keywords: *Stalin, Lenin, Bogdanov, Bolshevism, Menshevism, otsovizm (recallism).*

I never really considered him a revolutionary, and I have told him this more than once to his face. Koba doesn't love the people; he despises them. His ambition may cost the party dear.

*Aleksandr Svanidze*¹

Father loved Russia very strongly and deeply for his whole life. I do not know any other Georgian who forgot his own national characteristics as much and who so strongly loved everything Russian. Already in Siberia father loved Russia in a way that counts: the people, the language, and the nature. He always remembered the years of exile as if this were just fishing, hunting, and walks in the taiga. He preserved this love his whole life.

*Svetlana Allilueva*²

1 Aleksandr Svanidze to Galina Serebriakova: *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 8 December 1967, p. 4, translated by Robert C. Tucker, in: *Slavic Review* 27:2 (1968), p. 304.

2 Svetlana Allilueva: *Dvadtsat' Pisem K Drugu*, New York 1968, p. 114.

Prison and exile were a formative experience for Koba. All in all he would be arrested six times, the first time in 1902, the last in 1913. He was exiled in 1903–1904, 1908–1909, 1910–1911, 1911–1912, a second time in 1912, and finally for his longest term, in 1913–1917. He escaped from exile five times: on 5 January 1904, 24 June 1909, for a few days in early September 1911, then again on 29 February 1912, and on 1 September 1912. The tsarist exile system was porous and inefficient, relatively mild when compared to the Gulag of Stalin's years in power. In contrast to the Soviet system political prisoners were treated much more leniently than ordinary criminals, and though sickness and neglect led to the death of many committed revolutionaries, others managed to return to fight another day. Koba's exile during his Baku years (1907–1909) proved to be one of his shortest. But the trip to Vologda was his longest *etap*, the journey from beginning to end taking 110 days. He was in a group with other prisoners from Baku, some of them Georgians, and together they were taken through Rostov-on-Don to Kursk, Tula, and Moscow, where they were held in the notorious Butyrka prison. Koba was dressed in a loose, long belted shirt called a *tolstovka*, pants over his boots, and a cap. After two months of police-escorted transport, he reached the provincial capital, Vologda, in north-central Russia sometime in January 1909.³ He was locked up with about 20 political prisoners in a cold, damp cell. Every day a few prisoners died from typhus.⁴ From there Koba was taken on to his designated place of exile, but weakened by the journey he came down with *typhus recurens* and was taken from the Viatka prison to the local *zemstvo* hospital. Once he recovered he was sent on by train to Kotlas and then by sled for the last 27 kilometers on the frozen Vychegda River. Two weeks after his illness he arrived, on 27 February 1909, in the town of Solvychevodsk, where on the high banks above the Vychegda, as the town's name indicated (*sol'* in Russian means salt), Russians had mined salt since the Middle Ages.

As far from his past life as Solvychevodsk was, Koba found company in like-minded rebels. The long-time Bolshevik Iosif Dubrovinskii had arrived a week earlier but fled the town two days after Koba reached it.⁵ Still, in June about 15 people gathered around a bonfire by the river, among them Iakov Sverdlov, who would share yet another exile with Koba and rise to become the official head of the first Soviet state, the chairman of

3 A. V. Ostrovskii: *Kto stoial za spinoi Stalina?*, St Petersburg 2003, pp. 300–302; memoirs of Tar'iana Sukhovaia, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 4, d. 647, l. 267; memoirs of Akima Semenov, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 4, d. 658, ll. 339–340.

4 A. V. Ostrovskii: *Kto stoial za spinoi Stalina?*, pp. 300–302; memoirs of F. V. Blinov, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 4, d. 647, ll. 33–39.

5 Iosif Dubrovinskii (“Innokentii”) (1877–1913) was a Bolshevik who at various times was considered by Lenin to be too conciliatory toward the Mensheviks. A member of the Central Committee, he was exiled to Turukhansk just before Stalin and, suffering from tuberculosis, he drowned himself in the Enisei River.

the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets in 1917.⁶ Koba met a 23-year-old noblewoman, Stefaniia Petrovskaiia, who had been sentenced to two years exile in Vologda. She was living with another exile, Pavl Tribulev, when Koba and she became more than friends. When her term of exile ended, she went to Baku where, by that time, Koba had fled.⁷ He also befriended a teacher, Tatiana Sukhova, another exile, who remembered years later how Comrade Osip Koba shivered in poverty in Solvychevodsk. He slept, indeed spent much of his time, on an improvised bed: “In the window was a wooden crate covered with planks and a bag of straw. On top of it were a flannel blanket and a pink pillowcase. Comrade Osip Koba would spend the night on that bed”. Sometimes Sukhova found him lying there during the day as well. He suffered from the cold, lying wrapped in his overcoat, surrounded with books: “In his spare time Comrade Koba joined us in our walks more and more often. We even went rowing. He would joke a lot, and we would laugh at some of the others. Comrade Koba liked to laugh at our weaknesses”.⁸

From his first days in Solvychevodsk Koba plotted his escape. He wrote to his friend Sergei Alliluev, who was then living in St. Petersburg, to send him the address of his apartment and some money. He contacted a certain Vladik in Tiflis (Vladimir Ter-Mirkurov), who sent a letter to Stepan Takuev, a Dashnak in Kiev, informing him that “Soso (Koba) has been writing from exile and requests that you send money for a return journey”. But his Armenian contact was arrested, and Koba had to collect money from among the exiles, he confided in Sukhova. “Before his departure”, she writes, “it turned out Comrade Osip Koba had no money. Sergei and Anton got hold of some money for him, and I gave him a few handkerchiefs for the trip. Comrade Osip Koba took them, and smiling remarked: ‘One day I will give you a silk handkerchief in return’.”⁹ On the evening before his escape, a fake card game was organised, and Koba won the pot of seventy rubles. His friends dressed him in a *sarafan*, a Russian peasant woman’s tunic, and three friends – Sukhova, Sergei Shkarpetkin, and Anton Bondarev – rowed him down the river to Kotlas. They cut through a forest and crossed the Vychevda moving southwest on the Northern Dvina River, hiding in the bushes whenever another boat

6 A. V. Ostrovskii: *Kto stoial za spinoi Stalina?*, p. 308. Iakov Sverdlov (1885–1919) was a leading Bolshevik who shared the Turukhansk exile with Stalin. More a party operative than a theorist, Sverdlov served as chairman of the All-Russian Executive Committee of the Soviets (VTsIK), the *de facto* head of the Russian Soviet Republic, until his untimely death in an influenza epidemic.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 308–309

8 Miklos Kun: *Stalin: An Unknown Portrait*, Budapest 2003, p. 98; RGASPI, f. 558, op. 4, d. 647.

9 *Ibid.*

appeared. At a small train station his friends left him just before the one train per day for Viatka was about to depart.¹⁰

Saint Petersburg, the imperial capital, starkly reflected both the grandeur of empire and the squalor of most of its subjects, exposing the profound chasm between Russia's privileged upper classes and its peasants and workers. The centre of the city stretched along the arrow-straight Nevskii Prospekt with its pastel palaces and ornate bridges. Across the Neva River and removed from the glitter of aristocratic life were the workers' quarters. Bridges, which were raised at night, further segregated the poor from the rich. Built on swampy ground by its namesake, Peter the Great, subject to the winds and cold rain from the Baltic, Petersburg was harsh and inhospitable to a visitor from the south. For half the year the days were short, cold, and damp, and the nights extended interminably. Police and their spies were ubiquitous, and for an illegal itinerant the city memorialised by Gogol and Dostoevsky offered, not opportunity, but obscurity and danger.

Koba reached the capital around 26 June 1909, in the season when daylight in the far northern city extended far into the night. He searched for his friend Sergei Alliluev, who was not at his workplace when he arrived. Alliluev remembered that he was walking near Liteinyi Boulevard, not noticing where he was going, when suddenly someone blocked his path. Annoyed, he raised his head and saw Koba standing before him. They walked on together, and Koba told him that he had twice gone to the address that Alliluev had sent him but found no one at home. Koba was pale and weary.¹¹ Alliluev found him a place to stay, with a certain Melnikov, a relative of the concierge of his building. Years later Melnikov recalled "a young man who had black hair, a swarthy complexion, and a mustache" who dressed badly: "I gave him some underwear and a shirt to put on." Not a party member but willing to help out, Melnikov was told to watch out for police spies.¹² Alliluev also housed him with Kuzma Savchenko, who served with a cavalry regiment and was the brother of the apartment's owner, Kanon, who was arranging false papers for the fugitive. There in the wing of a building, close to the barracks at the Tauride Palace, Koba lived, right next to the comings and goings of the court officers' carriages.¹³ Koba also visited his friend from Georgia, Silibistro Todria. His wife, Sofia Simakova, recalled that her husband came home during the work day and asked that lunch be prepared for his old friend Soso. Todria ran off to buy wine and fetch Soso. After potatoes, herring, and pickles, Soso asked to rest. "Stalin refused to lie down on our bed", Simakova writes.

10 Ibid.; A.V. Ostrovskii: *Kto stoial za spinoi Stalina?*, pp. 309–310; S.Ia. Alliluev: *Vstrechi s tovarishchem Stalinym: otryvki iz vospominanii*, in: *Pravda*, 22 December 1939.

11 A.S. Allilueva: *Vospominaniia*, p. 110–111.

12 Miklos Kun: *Stalin: An Unknown Portrait*, p. 98; RGASPI, f. 558, op. 4, d. 647.

13 A.S. Allilueva: *Vospominaniia*, pp. 111–112.

He said that that was our place, and he would rather lie on the ground. I objected, but he insisted that I should make a bed for him on the floor. I swept the floor, of course, and then put down a blanket and gave Soso a pillow. He lay down, lit a cigarette, and began asking us about our life in Finland [...]

where Todria worked on a secret printing press in Vyborg.¹⁴ Koba spent only a few days in St. Petersburg, but he used his time in the capital to have his comrades Vera Shveitser and Todria arrange a meeting with the Bolshevik *duma* deputy, Nikolai Poletaev, to discuss the publication of a newspaper. By early July he was back in Baku. Now entering his thirties, Koba returned to party work, engaging in the debates and divisions that were paralysing the Social Democrats. The police had him under surveillance almost as soon as he came to town, but they were confused as to who this Koba was. Somehow they were unable for months to identify him as Jughashvili, the escapee from Solvychevodsk. He moved about with a false passport under the name Oganés (Hovhanes) Vartanovich Totomiantz until he was again arrested eight months later on 23 March 1910.

The so-called years of reaction bled the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDRP). Intellectuals abandoned the party, and workers deserted the unions. In Russia as well as Europe Social Democrats argued over the corpse of 1905. The Menshevik and Bolshevik postmortems pulled in opposite directions. Lenin wrote:

Wait, we will have another 1905. That is how the workers look at it. To the workers that year of struggle provided an example of *what is to be done*. To the intelligentsia and the renegade petty bourgeois it was a “mad year”, an example of *what not to do*. To the proletariat, the study and critical assimilation of the experience of the revolution means learning to apply the methods of struggle *of that time more effectually*, learning to convert that October strike movement and December armed struggle into something broader, more concentrated and more class-conscious.¹⁵

Suspicious of the liberal bourgeoisie, the Bolsheviks had banked on the revolutionary action of the workers, and, Lenin claimed, their faith in the workers had been vindicated in 1905 when they proved to be the major mass force in the revolutionary struggles. Mensheviks, on the other hand, had placed their confidence in the liberal bourgeoisie and eventually reverted to their usual position of restraining the workers so as not to frighten the propertied classes who were slated to replace the autocracy.

While Koba moved from exile back to Baku, the *émigré* leaders in Geneva, Paris, and other European cities turned on each other. Personality, politics, and philosophy not only further separated Mensheviks from Bolsheviks but tore apart both the Bolshevik

14 Miklos Kun: Stalin: An Unknown Portrait, p. 98; RGASPI, f. 558, op. 4, d. 647.

15 V. I. Lenin: K otsenke russkoi revoliutsii, in: Proletarii, May 10 [23] 1908; PSS, XVI, pp. 40–41.

and Menshevik factions as well. From the left the conflict stemmed from a challenge to Marxist materialism and an unwillingness to work within the possibilities of parliamentary politics. From the right disgust with the old practices of the party underground convinced some, like Aleksandr Potresov and the editors of the newspaper *Nasha zaria* (Our Dawn) (those whom the Bolsheviks labeled liquidationists), that the future of the labour movement lay with trade unions and an emphasis on legal approaches.¹⁶ Less convinced than the Leninists that the next revolutionary upsurge was on the horizon, Mensheviks worked most energetically in the legal institutions, unions and the *duma*. Others, like Martov, Dan, and those around their newspaper *Golos Sotsial-Demokrata* (Voice of the Social Democrat), defended both the work of the trade unionists and the old underground party.

Lenin's position also fell in between those who favored legal work and the *komitet-chiki* enamored of the underground. He had fled to Geneva in January 1908, fearing arrest if he remained in Finland, which though somewhat autonomous was still part of the Russian Empire. After the heady exhilaration of the revolutionary years, this second European exile was more difficult than his first: it was "a flight from failure".¹⁷ Doubting whether he would ever see Russia or revolution again, he confided, "I have the feeling that we have come to lie in a coffin."¹⁸ Most concerned about preserving the underground party organisations, even while not abandoning legal work with workers' organisations and in the *duma*, he had fought at a party conference in Kotka, Finland (21 July 1907) to isolate those Bolsheviks who wanted to boycott the Third State Duma elections and to defeat those Mensheviks who proposed a parliamentary alliance with the liberal Kadets. As far as he was concerned, new heresies were appearing in the Bolshevik faction: *otzovizm* (the call for recalling the Bolshevik deputies from the *duma*); *ul'timatizm* (having the *duma* deputies read an ultimatum and then walk out); and *bogostroitel'stvo* (the view that Marxism was like an inspirational religion for workers, but built on science rather than the supernatural).

Although Bolsheviks had constituted a majority at the last (London) congress of the RSDRP and its members participated in the Central Committee, they maintained their own Bolshevik Centre as a coordinating committee for their faction. But former

16 Aleksandr Potresov (1869–1934) was one of the original editors of *Iskra* and after the Second Party Congress sided with the Mensheviks, he edited *Nasha zaria* and was an advocate of what Lenin condemned as "liquidationism", concentrating exclusively on the legal labor movement. In 1914 along with Plekhanov he defended Russia's war effort. He left Russia in 1925 and died in Paris.

17 Bertram D. Wolfe: *Three Who Made a Revolution: A Biographical History*, Boston 1948, p. 475.

18 N. K. Krupskaja: *Vospominaniia o Lenine*, Moscow 1931; the English translation: "I have a feeling as if I've come here to be buried." (*Reminiscences of Lenin*, Moscow 1959, p. 162)

activists were leaving party work, and several of Lenin's closest friends and comrades, most notably Aleksandr Bogdanov, Anatolii Lunacharskii, and Maxim Gorky, began to write vigorously about new philosophical thinking that to Lenin seemed to question the fundamentals of Marxist materialism. Some saw Lenin as too moderate, too willing to work with legal institutions. Lenin's friend, Gorky, wrote to the dissident Bolshevik Bogdanov, "Lunacharskii is right when he says Lenin does not understand Bolshevism."¹⁹ Marooned in Geneva, sad, angry, but as pugnacious as ever, Lenin put aside some of his journalistic work and immersed himself in a deep study of philosophy. While his mentor became obsessively concerned with these disputes about materialist ontology and epistemology, Koba would later dismiss them as divisive diversions from political necessities.²⁰

Both radicalised young intellectuals and embittered workers had gravitated to the Bolsheviks in the revolutionary years 1905–1907 and would again when the labour movement revived in 1912. They did so largely because the Leninists were perceived to be the more militant and aggressive of the two Social Democratic factions. There was a romantic, even millenarian impulse that propelled many into the perilous pursuit of revolutionary change, and when in the years after 1907 Lenin edged pragmatically toward combining underground revolutionary activity with exploitation of the new legal institutions, the left Bolsheviks resisted what looked like accommodation with the existing order. This pattern would repeat itself in the future – in 1918 in the crisis over Russia's surrender to imperial Germany at Brest-Litovsk, and again in 1921 in the transition from the radical programme of War Communism to the moderation of the New Economic Policy. On several occasions Lenin would tear into what he called left-wing infantilism, even as he zealously fought against those on his right, like the Menshevik liquidators, whom he feared were abandoning the revolutionary struggle. But in his war on two fronts, Lenin was particularly strident and uncompromising and unusual in his readiness to use the most offensive language to caricature his opponents. This was a trait that his disciple Koba shared. Because of Lenin's great influence among his comrades, he encouraged a rhetoric and culture within the faction of bitter, exaggerated accusation and condemnation that in post-revolutionary years would have fatal effects on those who had employed it so loosely in less consequential circumstances.

Menshevik polemics were as vitriolic as Bolshevik ones. Martov in particular pushed political language to the extreme. By the eve of the war the enmity between the leaders in the emigration was unbridgeable. Torn away from real politics for so long, distant from the everyday life of their constituents, the *émigrés* expressed their differences and petty personal annoyances in polemics that became the substitution for engagement in

19 Georges Haupt and Jutta Scherrer: Gor'kij, Bogdanov, Lenin: Neue Quellen zur ideologischen Krise in der bolschewistischen Fraktion (1908–1910), in: Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique 19:3 (1978), p. 323.

20 See the appendix for an account of the philosophical divisions within Bolshevism.

meaningful political conflict, compromises, and coalition building. Lenin confessed as much in a letter to Gorky (11 April 1910): “*Émigré* life [*emigrantschchina*] is now a hundred times more oppressive than it was before the revolution. *Émigré* life and squabbling are inseparable.” Then he reiterated his consistent confidence in the future: “But the squabbling will fall away [...] And the development of the party, the development of the Social Democratic movement, will go on and on through all the devilish difficulties of the present situation.”²¹

Koba and his comrades in the Caucasus were troubled by the factional fracturing that they observed from afar. Bolsheviks inside Russia – even Koba in prison and exile – watched from the sidelines while the *émigrés* battered each other in polemical articles. These philosophical issues seemed far less weighty to them than to Lenin and Bogdanov. The energy seeping out of the movement within Russia was escaping even more rapidly because their theorists in Europe were preoccupied with questions of ontology and epistemology. In June 1909, Lenin called a conference “of the extended editorial board of *Proletarii*” in Paris to deal with Bogdanov and other rival Bolshevik approaches. The conference, which included Bolshevik members of the Central Committee, turned into a bitter debate over what constituted Bolshevism and what views would be tolerated in the faction. Lenin had effectively packed the meeting with his supporters, and Bogdanov was isolated, backed only by one or two others. Many of the Leninist core of the future Bolshevik party emerged here: Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov, Tomskii, and Skrypnik. Kamenev, who had earlier favored boycott of the *duma* elections, recanted his leftism and came around to Lenin’s position. Lenin pushed back against those who wanted to call for a Bolshevik congress to reconstitute the faction. Instead he spoke in the name of “partyiness” (*partiinosť*) against any further schism in the RSDRP and urged joining with those “party Mensheviks” who repudiated the “liquidators”. When the conference backed Lenin, condemning *otzovizm*, *ul’timatizm*, and *bogostroitel’stvo*, Bogdanov walked out. Irritated and intransigent, Lenin had weakened his own faction, and veteran Bolsheviks refused to go along with narrow definition of what constituted Bolshevism.

The left Bolsheviks – among them Lunacharskii, the historian Mikhail Pokrovskii, and the Baku veteran Martyn Liadov (M. N. Mandelshtam) – formed their own group and began publishing their own newspaper, *Vpered* (December 1909), appropriating the name of Lenin’s earlier journal. Bogdanov accused Lenin of abandoning “the entire political line of Bolshevism” and defended the heightened pedagogical role of Social Democrats in bringing revolutionary consciousness to workers that he took from the Lenin of *What Is To Be Done?* But Lenin had been so impressed by the actions of workers in the revolution of 1905 that he now championed their ability to develop revolutionary views through revolutionary experience. To Bogdanov’s educational approach, Lenin retorted, “Experience in the struggle enlightens more rapidly and profoundly than years of propa-

21 V.I. Lenin, PSS, XLVII, p. 251.

ganda.”²² In one sense the conflict between Bogdanov and Lenin was a conflict between two Lenins – the Lenin of 1902 and the Lenin of 1905.²³ In another it was a struggle over the breadth or the narrowness of those who could be called Social Democrats. “Throughout 1909”, writes Lenin biographer Robert Service, “he had behaved as if only his group inside Bolshevism and Plekhanov’s inside Menshevism were legitimate constituent elements of the party.”²⁴

On tactics Bogdanov went along, unenthusiastically, with Lenin on the question of participating in the *duma*, but far more important to him was the pedagogical task of teaching workers. To this end he and his adherents organised a party school at Gorky’s villa on Capri in 1909 and in Bologna in 1910–1911. Lenin was extremely reluctant to bring up his philosophical disputes with Bogdanov in public, which would have precipitated the breakup of their tenuous alliance. But Plekhanov and various Mensheviks repeatedly claimed that Bolshevism was a political practice that flowed naturally from Ernst Mach’s philosophy, so beloved by Bogdanov. The Menshevik *Golos sotsial-demokrata* crowed, Machism was “a worldview without a world”.²⁵ As important Bolsheviks gravitated to Bogdanov, took up God-building, or came out against the Social Democrats participating in the *duma*, Lenin decided to confront the dissidents within the faction. The “schism with Bogdanov,” he wrote, was worse than that between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. He threatened, “I will leave the faction as soon as the ‘left’ line and real ‘boycottism’ take over.”²⁶

The elder statesman of Caucasian Bolshevism, Mikho Tskhakaia, was sympathetic to the Bogdanovites and *otzovizm*. He wrote from Paris to Baku, asking for Baku’s mandate for the upcoming fifth conference of the RSDRP. Without Tskhakaia’s express agreement, Shahumian circulated Tskhakaia’s letter to comrades in Baku, including to those, like Koba, in prison. They answered with a letter signed by seven who agreed with the views of Koba. Shahumian then sent Koba’s letter to Tskhakaia. In his own carefully crafted letter Shahumian replied that the Baku Bolsheviks were leaning toward giving the mandate to Lenin (which they later did):

22 V.I. Lenin: Politicheskaia stachka i ulichnaia bor’ba v Moskve, in: Proletarii 21:4, 17 October (1905); PSS, XI, p. 350.

23 This is the argument of John Eric Marot: Alexander Bogdanov, Vpered, and the Role of the Intellectual in the Workers’ Movement, in: Russian Review 49:3 (1990), pp. 241–264, who sees Bogdanov as a continuation of the Lenin of *What Is To Be Done?* but distinct from his views after 1905. Critical comments on Marot’s article can be found in the Walicki and Sochor articles in the same special issue of *Russian Review*.

24 Robert Service: *Lenin: A Biography*, London 2000, p. 189.

25 *Golos sotsial-demokrata* 4–5 (April 1908); cited in Robert C. Williams: *The Other Bolsheviks: Lenin and His Critics: 1904–1914*, Indiana 1986, p. 132

26 Letter to V.V. Vorovskii, 1 July 1908, V.I. Lenin PSS, XLVII, p. 160.

In this matter, of course, you will not interpret anything insulting for you, knowing full well that this is dictated by principled motives. Perhaps we have incorrectly evaluated your projected tendencies, but we are firmly convinced that Ilich's position is correct and are, if not completely negative, than in any case greatly mistrustful of empiriomonism, etc. It is necessary to say, that here we have become extremely interested in philosophy, we read and reread Dietzgen, Plekhanov, Bogdanov, and others.²⁷

Shahumian then reported that “Koba calls our intrafactional fight ‘a tempest in a glass of water’”, and that Koba agreed that these philosophical disputes would not lead to a schism in the faction. He went on to cite Koba's letter:

No schism will come out of this. Curse each other a bit and this matter will end, but the positive result will be: improved acquaintance with the philosophical bases of Marxism and, it seems, a cleansing of new ‘isms’ that wish to be added to Marxism. To us it seems the more incomprehensible occurrence in the party is the so-called ‘*otzovizm*’. It seems absolutely unbelievable and extremely shameful that such views, such thinking can have a place in the ranks of a serious Social Democratic party.²⁸

Koba's letter from prison was addressed to an “old friend” but one who had strayed. He confirmed that those in prison shared the view of those outside [*na vole*]:

OK, let's get down to business. Where is the source of this ‘storm in a glass of water’, which might turn into a real tempest? In ‘philosophical’ disagreements? In tactical [questions]? In questions of organisation, politics (relations to the ‘Left Menshies’ and so forth)? In the self-regard of various egos? *Let's begin with philosophy* [...] Should we separate all these tendencies one from the other and form around ourselves special factions? I think that if our party is not a sect – and it has not been a sect for a long time – it cannot break up into groups *according to philosophical* (gnoseological) tendencies. Of course, ‘philosophical’ discussion is necessary and useful; we can only be happy about the well-known ‘philosophical’ revitalisation in our party ‘intrigues’

27 Shaumian's letter to Mikha Tskhakaia, July 27, 1909, in: Stephan G. Shaumian: *Izbrannye proizvedeniia: 1902–1916*, vol. 1, Moscow 1956–1958, pp. 267–269; Stephan. G. Shaumian: *Pis'ma: 1896–1918*, Yerevan 1959 pp. 151–153. The writings of Joseph Dietzgen (1828–1888), a friend of Marx, became influential in Russia at the turn of the century. As the author of *The Nature of Human Brain Work* (1869), he believed that socialism was the future religion of science. He argued that socialists needed to recognise that humans are motivated by emotion and a need for faith. His work was praised by Marx.

28 Ibid.

[*afery*][...]. But [...] discussion is one thing; abandoning the editorial board is something completely different.

Koba considered Bogdanov's leaving *Proletarii* a desertion from his post. He was opposed to publishing the philosophical discussion in the newspaper, which would only result in fracturing the "party proletariat" into "various philosophical 'ists'". This was a bitter affair, he wrote, and would be even bitterer if "we, Russia's *praktiki*, were not able to call our nervous *literatory* to order."²⁹

As for the substance of the (philosophical) differences, I personally think that your evaluation is completely correct. Of course, it is necessary to discard Plekhanov's 'thing in itself', his peculiar understanding of materialism, his scornful attitude to Dietzgens, Mach, Avenarius, and others, as having nothing in common with the spirit of Marxism. But in just the same way it is necessary to discard Bogdanov's 'pan-physicism', his spiritualistic 'universal substitution', and so forth. Empirocriticism, despite its good sides, is on the whole also unacceptable in view of its parallelism that only confuses things. We must stand on dialectical materialism (not Plekhanov's, but Marx-Engels'), developing and concretising it in the spirit of J[oseph] Dietzgens, acquiring along the way the good sides of '*Machism*'. Plekhanov's brushing aside of all 'bourgeois philosophy' seems to me laughable and contradictory: were not Hegel and Holbach bourgeois philosophers, and is it not so that despite this Marx-Engels' treated them and many others like people of science?

Like Shahumian, Koba worked through the philosophical distinctions among Marxists and came to his own conclusions. But his paramount concern was that these disputes over materialism and perceptions not lead to further factional fractures. Bogdanov and Lenin had made it imperative that any party activist with serious pretensions to leadership would have to master the consequences of Machism and other philosophical interventions on Marxism. Koba made a serious effort to understand what was at stake in these debates, and while he was unwilling to take the nuances of the rival opinions as seriously as Lenin he retained an interest in such questions. At key moments in his years at the head of the Soviet state Stalin would re-engage in ongoing controversies within Marxist philosophy. But then he was not simply a minor participant but the ultimate arbiter of what was permitted to be true.

Not surprisingly, Koba's first excursion into the philosophical forest was not published in the Soviet Union in his lifetime – and then only after Nikita Khrushchev's expo-

29 Koba used the word *praktik* with positive connotation even though it was used in contrast to *komitetchik* and *teoretik*. *Praktik* was also employed for those who worked directly with workers, particularly trade unionists.

sure in 1956 of Stalin's crimes. When ammunition was needed in the 1960s to discredit Stalin's Leninist credentials, this letter was resurrected to demonstrate his deviation. In fact, he was very close to Lenin and repeatedly emphasised that Lenin's position was the most sound. He shared Lenin's views on the necessity to use the possibilities offered by trade unions, and other legal institutions, and he had come around to oppose boycott of the *duma* elections or recall of Social Democratic deputies. The boycott issue was a thing of the past now that Social Democrats had in fact been elected to the parliament. As for recall, "even Bogdanov himself (together with Ilich) said that *otzovizm* is poorly understood Bolshevism!" Yet in this letter Koba's views were far more accommodating to Mach and Bogdanov than were Lenin's, less intransigent about compromise, and more open to working something out with Bogdanov.

Here Koba showed a supreme confidence about his understanding of the most sensitive issues facing party members. There was no hesitation to take on the giants of Social Democracy, even his revered Lenin. Discussing the party's attitude toward legal institutions, Koba pulled few punches:

It is not worth speaking, for, if one takes into consideration the circumstances, that Ilich *overestimates* the significance of such organisations, but that other comrades (for example, the Muscovites) *underestimate* it a little, the party has already decided the question. Of course, deviations from strict Bolshevism happen *accidentally* in one part of our faction headed by Ilich (the question about the boycott of the Third Duma), but first of all, we are all guilty of this, for not once did we try (*seriously try*) in such cases to *establish the correctness of our position*.

Koba ridiculed Kamenev's defense of the *duma* boycott as well as the *otzovisti*. But, he concluded, "Should we 'drive to the end' these chance deviations and make an elephant out of a fly?" He opposed turning these disputes into major, divisive issues, even as he held that Bogdanov should have observed party discipline and not walked out of the editorial board: "Is it really possible that there will never be an end to these anarchic exits from our faction?" Bogdanov's action was shameful: "I knew him as one of the few, serious, bright heads in the party and cannot stand such a frivolous walkout by him."

As for organisational policy, Koba favored unity of the Bolshevik faction as well as unity of the whole party:

I think that Lenin's policy of rationally *putting Bolshevism into practice* (not simply *defending* but putting it into practice), demands sometimes some smoothing of the sharp corners of Bolshevism, [and] is the *only possible policy in the frame of a united party*. The unity of Social Democracy is no less essential than the unity of the faction – without such unity it is difficult to hold high enough the banner; Social Democracy will lose its influence among the proletariat. And I contend that if we want the unity of Social Democracy, then we must adopt the policy of Ilich.

Koba was willing to “let Bolshevism suffer a bit” by allowing various tendencies to continue. What was important was putting Bolshevik policy into practice. But, he continued, this has “nothing in common with conciliationism, for conciliationism is opportunism, that is, forgetting the basic interests of the faction.” Instead he proposed

[...] forgetting the transitory, non-essential interests of the faction for the good of its basic interests, and, this means, for the good of the unity of the party. That is why I think that the organisational policy of Ilich (the relationship with the *duma* caucus, toward the left Mensheviks, etc.), as far as I am acquainted with it, seems at this moment to be the only sensible one.³⁰

Still, as Leninist as he fashioned himself, a year later, after he had read Lenin’s major work on materialism, Koba wrote critically about the older man’s softness toward Plekhanov:

We precisely and correctly point to some more slips [*promakhi*] of Ilich. It is right to point out that while Ilich’s materialism differs greatly from that of Plekhanov, despite the demands of logic (in the service of diplomacy), Ilich tries to conceal [this]. In general I remain convinced that Ilich’s book is the only one of its kind that surveys the situation in Marxist philosophy.³¹

Apparently not amused by Koba’s irreverent phrase, Lenin noted to Orjonikidze, “Nihilistic jokes about a storm in a glass of water show the immaturity of Koba as a Marxist.” Soviet journalist Iliia Dubinskii-Mukhadze reconstructed Lenin’s conversation with Orjonikidze. Walking arm in arm one evening in Paris, Lenin turned to his young comrade: “Sergo, are you familiar with the phrase ‘a foreign storm in a glass of water?’” Orjonikidze understood that Lenin was referring to Koba. He had himself wanted to ask Lenin about Koba’s views but has hesitated to bring up the subject, what with his Caucasian comrade “then languishing in exile”. “Look here [*Ish’ ty*], ‘a foreign storm in a glass of water,’” repeated Lenin. “What nonsense! [*Ekaia akhineia!*]” “Vladimir Ilich, don’t!”, Sergo pleaded, “Koba is our comrade! I am tied to him in many ways.” “Of course, I know,” Lenin willingly agreed.

I have the fondest memories of Stalin. I praised his ‘Notes of a Delegate’ on the London Congress of the party and especially ‘Letters from the Caucasus’. But the revolution has not yet been victorious and has not given us the right to place personal

30 Letter of Koba to Mikha Tskhakaia, 1908, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 5262, ll. 1–6.

31 Letter signed K. Stefin from Baku to Stefik in Geneva, December 26, 1909, GARF, f. 102, op. 1910, d. 5, ch. 61.B, l. 5–70b.

sympathies and any pleasant memories above the interests of the cause [...]. You Caucasians value comradeship too highly [...].

Lenin again frowned.

You say, 'Koba is our comrade,' you say, a Bolshevik, he will not betray [us]. [*deskat', bol'shevik, ne peremakhnet*] But are you shutting your eyes on what is inconsistent? Nihilistic jokes 'about a storm in a glass' show the immaturity of Koba as a Marxist. We won't delude ourselves. The disintegration and vacillation is extraordinarily great.³²

Russian Social Democratic political culture involved a sometimes-corrosive intensity of argument. Koba was able to give as well as take in the fierce disputes and debates that both invigorated and exhausted party members and workers. But at the same time he worried constantly that differences would lead to unnecessary divisions. Deeply disturbed by the fissiparous tendencies in the party, Koba sent a letter to the editors of *Proletarii*, the Bolshevik newspaper abroad, in mid-November 1909, just before he left prison for exile. At about that time Lenin found himself at odds with Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Dubrovinskii on internal party organisational matters.³³ Koba began by apologising for not writing earlier in answer to the editors' letters because he and his comrades had been dealing with the problem of *provokatsii* [police spies]. Speaking in the name of the Baku Bolsheviks, he expressed "our even greater conviction" that the editorial board had been wrong to expel Bogdanov.

Either working together was in principle harmful and impermissible, and then without waiting for him to break away it was necessary to throw them [the minority] out of the editorial board, or working together was possible, and then 'the whole question' comes down to a question of the behavior of Maximov [Bogdanov] and his 'school'.

32 Il'ia Moiseevich Dubinskii-Mukhadze: *Ordzhonikidze Seria Zhizn Zamechatelnykh Lyudei: Vyp 4*, Moscow 1963, pp. 92–94. In the 1967 edition, the harshest criticisms of Stalin (e.g., "immaturity of Koba as a Marxist,") were removed (pp. 75–76). The first edition, while eminently readable, is a popular account without footnotes and was written at a time when Soviet historians were directed to be critical of Stalin. On the other hand, Dubinskii-Mukhadze based his work on archival and published sources as well as conversations with those involved in the events and had spent time with Orjonikidze. While the first edition was published during Khrushchev's time, the second was issued during Brezhnev's when criticism of Stalin had been restricted.

33 Draft Resolution of the Executive Commission (November 1909), in: Richard Pipes (ed.): *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archives*, New Haven/London 1996, pp. 22–23.

Koba believed that working together was “possible and imperative”:

We understand the position of the editorial board being abroad, the foreign atmosphere, etc. But you ought to understand that we are not abroad, that you are writing for us, and what is expedient abroad is not always expedient for Russia.

The Baku Bolsheviks, he concluded, supported the immediate convening of a Bolshevik conference “to rein in the Maximovists” and a parallel all-party conference:

The more the conference is delayed, the less light there will be, the better for them, the worse for the faction: delay gives them the possibility and time to organise, to cut off the path to the (straying) Russian comrades working together, which (note this!) is essential to remove from their heads all ultimatist dust.³⁴

Shahumian reiterated Baku’s opposition to Tskhakaia, the Bogdanovites, and the *otzovisti*:

Regrettably in our situation there is no possibility to study philosophy seriously and to fix finally our opinion. The three volumes of *Empirimonism* are in any case with me on the table, and as much as possible I read them. I read his *From the psychology of society*. Right now my attitude is very negative. His thesis on the identity of life [*bytie*] and consciousness destroys the whole system of Marx. But, I repeat, I consider my opinion not yet final until I am fully knowledgeable.

What are your relations now with Ilich? [he asked Tskhakaia] In your first big letter you took up arms against him, and that letter in general had [...] a very bad impression on us. We are all completely on Ilich’s side [...] The ‘schism’ that is beginning among the groups abroad [...] produced a terrible impression on us. How this reminds us of the time after the Second Congress! But this group is making a grave error if it thinks that it will influence the life of the party with these scandals. The old times have already passed.³⁵

The “old times” had passed in many different ways. The revolution was becoming a memory, and even the heady years when the *duma* was dominated by the liberals and socialists had ended with Prime Minister Stolypin’s *coup d’état* of 3 June 1907. The Third Duma was a pale shadow of the raucous assembly in which Tsereteli and Zurabov had taunted and antagonised the government. They and many of their fellow democrats had been arrested and exiled to Siberia, and the newly elected *duma* was dominated by the Right – extreme

34 Letter of Stalin to *Proletarii*, 12 November 1909, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 26, ll. 1–10b.

35 Stephan G. Shaumian: *Pis'ma: 1896–1918*, pp. 155–156; Stephan. G. Shaumian: *Izbrannye proizvedeniia: 1902–1916* pp. 285–288.

reactionaries, nationalists, and moderate conservatives like the Octobrists. By extra-constitutionally changing the franchise to over represent the landed nobility and propertied classes, Stolypin had received the parliament with which he believed he could work. Of the 441 deputies only 18 were Social Democrats and 14 *trudoviki* (peasant socialists). South Caucasia, with its six million people, had its *duma* representation reduced to six: the young Evgenii Gegechkori from Kutaisi province, the old Marxist Karl Chkheidze from Tiflis, both Mensheviks; a Georgian Progressive; an Armenian socialist; a Muslim; and a right-wing Russian. Once again the Mensheviks dominated the tiny Social Democratic faction, but their erstwhile liberal allies, the Kadets, had by this time lost their radical edge. Still, the *duma* was arguably the only place in the empire where a degree of open political expression could reach a wide public.

Russia's post-1905 political system was inherently contradictory, a kind of "constitutional autocracy". Autocracy means unlimited power by a single individual, while constitutionalism is defined by the limits that the laws place on arbitrary exercise of power. Although Nicholas II had granted his people rights and Fundamental Laws, he continued to proclaim himself an autocrat. But his prime minister, Petr Stolypin, thought of himself as a constitutionalist, supporting a monarchy that would self-limit itself to ruling within the law while opposing full parliamentary government in which the executive power would be responsible to the legislature. In the wake of the revolution the government and its prime minister, along with the majority in the *duma*, had not only moved to the Right but had become more Russian nationalist. The vast majority of Russia's people had been effectively disenfranchised, and the non-Russians particularly suffered from the rising chauvinism, anti-Semitism, and condescension toward minorities. Stolypin told the Third Duma,

The Russian Empire owes its origin and development to its Russian roots, and with its growth grew and also developed the autocratic power of the Tsars. To this Russian stem no foreign and alien flower may be grafted [cheers from the Center and Right] Let our Russian flower bloom on it.³⁶

To the Polish Kolo party, which advocated autonomy for Poland, he advised:

Take our point of view, and acknowledge that the greatest blessing consists in being a citizen of Russia; hold up that emblem as high as it was held by the citizens of Rome and you will then style yourselves citizens of the superior kind, and will receive all manner of rights.

36 Cited in Abraham Ascher: P.A. Stolypin: The Search for Stability in Late Imperial Russia, Stanford 2001, p. 217.

These are words which have caused the hearts of Russians to beat for centuries past [...]: undeviating loyalty to Russian historical traditions. These words form a counterpoise to Socialism, and magnify the country in opposition to those who desire its disruption, and finally they express loyalty to the death to [our] Tsar, who personifies Russia.³⁷

The mix of gradual reform, particularly in the system governing peasant lands, with vicious repression of the radical opposition convinced many to give up revolutionary activity and find other paths to improving the plight of workers and peasants. In Baku the party organisation and its influence continued to wither away throughout the years of reaction. The Baku Committee was one of a mere half dozen Bolshevik committees operating inside Russia in mid-1909. By the end of that year Bolsheviks numbered only three hundred in Baku; two years later membership was down to two hundred, and by early 1913 to one hundred.³⁸ Yet despite police infiltration the party continued to operate. As Trotsky's newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) reported:

Even in the period of the greatest decline, the party organizations existed: the Baku Committee and the Baku [*Menshevik*] Collective, but without the districts and without ties to the masses; not even because of the police but because of the general collapse. Some kind of work was carried on in the trade unions. An awakening in the masses began in 1909 in connection with the discussion of the law to introduce *zemstva* in the Caucasus and also in connection with the deliberations by the oil industrialists of the question of settlements and also the campaign for an anti-alcohol congress.³⁹

Still, with the loss of less-committed cadres, the two Social Democratic organisations shrank down to the original core of old party activists. As Shahumian put it

Both 'collectives' consist almost exclusively of veterans [*stariki*] who do not think of giving way to despair and throwing away their Social Democratic organizations and liquidating them. It is evident that Baku is not favorable to our liquidators. The Baku Menshevik Collective has taken a sharply defined party position up to this time.⁴⁰

Koba was one of those old party activists unwilling to give in to despair. After his escape from Solvychevodsk, he burrowed his way deep into the Baku underground. His pres-

37 Ibid., p. 218.

38 Arutiunov, *Rabochie dvizhenie v Zakavkaz'e*, Moscow 1957, pp. 74–75.

39 *Pravda* (Vienna), 18 March 1910.

40 *Rabochaia gazeta*, 8 February 1910.

ence in the city was unknown even to some of his comrades. But he and the Baku Bolsheviks revived the publication of *Bakinskii proletarii* and managed to put out two issues, with Koba's articles on *The Party Crisis and Our Tasks*. In this important article, one usually neglected by his biographers, Koba analysed the lack of connectivity between party committees in various parts of Russia and the party's isolation from the broad masses.⁴¹ The fracturing of the party was evident in the pages of its *three* principal newspapers: *Sotsial-Demokrat* (1908–1917), the official organ of the party, which included both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks on its editorial board until Martov and Dan left in June 1911; *Golos Sotsial-Demokrat* (1908–1911), which gravitated toward liquidationist and thus lost Plekhanov; and *Proletarii* (1908–1909), the Bolshevik newspaper edited by Lenin from which one of his closest collaborators, Bogdanov, walked out in 1909. To bring the various committees throughout Russia under some kind of common leadership, Koba proposed that the Central Committee create a new, all-Russian newspaper. To win back the masses he advocated bringing factory and plant party committees together in district and regional organisations. There “the most experienced and influential advanced workers” would take over the most important posts and carry out practical, organisational, and literary work. Involvement in union matters a year earlier had impressed Koba that even apparently limited economic issues had potential organising benefits. “Don't forget”, he wrote, that:

Bebels do not drop from the skies; they are trained only in the course of work, by practice, and our movement now needs Russian Bebels, experienced and seasoned leaders from the ranks of the workers, more than ever before [...] Workers with knowledge are few. But here is precisely where the help of experienced and active intellectuals comes in handy [...].⁴²

Workers must be bold, speak out, and have faith in their strength: “It is not so bad if you miss the mark on the first tries; twice you will stumble, but then you will learn to walk on your own, like *Christ on water*.”⁴³

Koba's apparent conversion from the *komitetchik* of years past to the advocate of increased workers' participation was neither abrupt nor complete, but he had moved to head off the genuine worker resentment of direction by intellectuals. While in Baku the party was holding back the workers, preventing them from confronting the oil capitalists, Koba praised the party workers of the Central District and the Urals, which “have been doing without intellectuals for a long time”, as well as Sormovo, Lugansk (Donets

41 Partiinyi krizis i nashi zadachii, in: *Bakinskii proletarii*, 1 August 1909; 27 August 1909; I. V. Stalin: *Sochineniia* (works), vol. 2, Moscow 1947–1952, pp. 146–158.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Basin), and Nikolaev, where workers had published leaflets and even an illegal organ on their own.⁴⁴ He pointedly did not mention Tiflis where he had witnessed worker influence in the Social Democratic committees, but where the Mensheviks had positioned themselves successfully as spokespeople for workers' dominance and used that to rout the Bolsheviks. No matter what his inspiration, Koba now outlined a subordinate role for intellectuals, akin to that practiced by his Georgian rivals. Intellectuals were to assist advanced workers, arrange discussion groups in which the theory and practice of Marxism would be studied. Koba also called for full use of legal possibilities – “from the floor of the *duma* and the trade unions to cooperative societies and burial funds” – and the creation of a central party newspaper to be published with Russia by the Central Committee, which would link local organisations to the centre and end their isolation.⁴⁵

In this article Koba summed up a long process of personal development while revealing some of his basic predilections. He combined various, even contradictory, aspects of what made a Social Democrat. He was still primarily a party man interested in building up that organisation, but recognised that legal and economic activity could serve the party and, in turn, the revolution. The choice between trade unionism and party work was perceived, as in the by-gone days of *Iskra's* struggle with the Economists, as a choice between reformism and revolution, and Koba mirrored Lenin's primary dedication to revolution. He was an activist, a *praktik*, rather than a theorist, but was about to launch himself into theory. However plebian his origin, he was himself an intellectual, though he shared Lenin's suspicion of intellectuals and extended it even further to those *teoretiki* abroad who tried to run the party from outside without firsthand knowledge of Russian conditions. To Koba and many socialists in Russia the *émigrés* appeared to be living in an unreal world of philosophical disputes and personalised intrigues. Just weeks after Koba's return, the Baku Committee of Bolsheviks adopted a resolution (2 August 1909), condemning *otzovizm* and *ultimatizm*, along with *bogostroitel'stvo*. The resolution stated that while a “struggle of ideas” with these tendencies is imperative, and Bogdanov should be reprimanded for refusing to submit to the decisions of the majority of the editorial board, the Baku Committee disagreed with the Leninist majority on the editorial board of *Proletarii* about the necessity of “ejecting from our ranks” the supporters of the minority.⁴⁶ The local Bolsheviks demonstrated their ideological solidarity with Lenin but could not bring themselves to applaud the schism in the Bolshevik faction. Here the preferences of the more conciliatory Koba prevailed: unity of the Bolshevik faction but with fierce internal debate over divisive issues.

44 Ibid., p. 153.

45 Ibid., pp. 157–158.

46 This resolution was published in Stalin: *Sochineniia*, vol. 2, pp. 166–168.

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