

## IN THE VANGUARD OF REVOLUTIONARY ACTION: THE FIRST RUSSIAN EDITIONS OF THE “COMMUNIST MANIFESTO”

### 1.

The story behind the first Russian translation of the “Communist Manifesto” is rather enigmatic. It was published without indicating not only the authors or the editor and the printer, but also without a title page, publication date or place of publication. The publication of it was quite a surprise to Marx, who wrote to Engels (29.04.1870):

Finally, ONE COPY of the *Russian translation* of our *Communist Manifesto* for you. I saw in the *Werker*, etc., that the *Kolokol* Publishing House, which was willed to Bakunin, also includes ‘this stuff’, so ordered 6 copies from Geneva. It's very interesting for us.<sup>1</sup>

The information about this edition appeared also in Marx and Engels’ preface to the second edition, where they claim that it was translated by Bakunin and published early in the “sixties by the printing office of the *Kolokol*”<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, this information is questionable. One must remember that Marx and Engels were not exactly precise with such details. It is a well-known fact that Engels, for example, wrongly attributed the 1882 translation to Vera Zasluch and not Plekhanov in the preface to the German edition in 1890.

We know for sure that the text was printed in Geneva by Ludwig Czerniecki. This can be verified not only because the paper and fonts match those from “*Kolokol*” of 15 February 1869<sup>3</sup>; it is also confirmed in the correspondence between the printer and Nikolai Ogarev. It was published by *Volnaya Russkaya Tipografiya*<sup>4</sup>, probably in September 1869.

The attribution of the translation is controversial. It is widely believed to have been made by Bakunin. The foundation of that belief can be found in Marx and Engels, both in the preface to the second edition as well as in their correspondence. However, from everything we

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<sup>1</sup> Marx to Engels, 29 April 1870, in: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 43 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), 502.

<sup>2</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, “Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*,” in *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 425.

<sup>3</sup> Bert Andreas, *Le Manifeste communiste de Marx et Engels : Histoire et bibliographie, 1848-1918* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1963), 49.

<sup>4</sup> There was never such thing as a *Kolokol* Publishing House (although Marx refers to *VRT* by that name). The *Manifesto* was printed by the publishing house founded by Czerniecki and bearing the same name as the publishing house founded by Herzen and closed down in 1867.

know, they were not well informed about the edition. The attribution of this translation was challenged, first by a Soviet expert in history and literary studies, Boris Kozmin (1956) and then by Bert Andreas in his fundamental book on the “Communist Manifesto” (1963).

There are three main arguments against Bakunin’s authorship of the translation. The first one is linguistic: the translation contains errors that are hardly believed to be made by Bakunin, who was fluent in German<sup>5</sup>. The second one is an absence of data confirming Bakunin’s authorship: there has been no information found regarding his translation of the text in Bakunin’s correspondence<sup>6</sup>. The third one, and most important, is the already mentioned letter from Czerniecki to Ogarev, which reads as follows:

Dear Nikolai Platonovich!

The article “The Communist Manifesto” was given to me two weeks ago with your own hands. You added that this is a translation from German and although it does not fit the propaganda that we are printing now, 1000 copies should be printed regardless. That's all I know from you about this article. How did it find itself in your hands, it really cannot be explained.

With a friendly handshake, L. Czerniecki<sup>7</sup>

This letter, dated 27 September 1869, was most likely an answer to an inquiry from Ogarev, who seemed to have completely forgotten about the origins of this edition and about the fact that he had requested that it was printed. It led scholars to seriously doubt Bakunin’s authorship: he was the closest friend of Ogarev and it seems unlikely that he would have forgotten about his friend’s translation<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, the argument is clearly circumstantial and not sufficient to refute the attribution to Bakunin with certainty. However, as the reliability of Marx and Engels in this regard must be called limited, it is enough to raise questions about the authorship of the translation.

There are two different hypotheses about the authorship. The first one, put forward by Kozmin, suggests that the author might be Nikolai Lyubavin, a young chemist, who we know

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<sup>5</sup> See: Woodford McClellan, *Revolutionary Exiles. The Russians in the First International and Paris Commune* (London: Frank Cass, 1979), 39.

<sup>6</sup> See: Б. Козьмин, “Кто был первым переводчиком на русский язык Манифеста Коммунистической партии,” in: *Герцен и Огарёв. [В 3 т.], ч. III* (Москва: Изд-во АН СССР, 1956), 700- 701; Andreas, *Le Manifeste*, 51; McClellan, *Revolutionary Exiles*, 39 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Козьмин, “Кто был”, 700.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 701.

had requested copies of the Manifesto in 1868<sup>9</sup> (and who later became one of the translators of the first volume of “The Capital”). It is worth remembering that in the Soviet Union this also had the political overtone. Attributing the translation to Lyubavin — since he was not connected with the anarchists — would symbolically reclaim it to the Marxist rather than anarchist tradition.

The second hypothesis, put forward by Andreas and taken over by Woodford McClellan<sup>10</sup>, proposes Sergey Nechaev as the translator. He was less fluent in German than Bakunin, and he wrote most of the propaganda materials that were detained along with the “Communist Manifesto” on the Russian border. The second issue of Nechaev’s journal, *Narodnaya Rasprava* (People’s Retribution), also implied the authorship. “The detailed theoretical development of our main position can be found in the article “Communist Manifesto” that we have published<sup>11</sup>, wrote Nechaev in his article in the second issue of the journal. In 1872, an outraged Nicholas Utin wrote to Marx about it, claiming that it was Bakunin and Nechaev who did the translation and pirated the pamphlet<sup>12</sup>.

In fact, the problem of the authorship of the translation remains unsolved, particularly since no new materials have surfaced to shed light on the situation. Nevertheless, the letter from Czerniecki clearly supports the claim that it was published by *Volnaya Russkaya Tipografiya* and we know it was used by Nechaev. The crucial question is, therefore, not the problem of who actually did the translatory work, but why it was published by people connected to Bakunin.

Both Utin and Engels believed that the translation was meant to convince Russian youth of the existence of a big revolutionary organisation in Russia and therefore served as a part of their propaganda campaign (possibly also as a cause for arrests, as Nechaev believed them to be a trigger for further radicalization). It is indeed the most plausible explanation, as it was detained by the police with other Nechaev’s brochures. The hypothesis put forward by Levin, who suggested that it was part of Bakunin’s plan of earning Marx’s trust<sup>13</sup> does not stand up: although Bakunin indeed tried to remain on good terms with Marx at this time, the lack of any

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<sup>9</sup> Козьмин, “Кто был”, 701.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Andreas, *Le Manifeste*, 52; McClellan, *Revolutionary Exiles*, 39 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in: Н. И. УТИН - Марксу, 1.11.1872, в: К. Маркс, Ф. Энгельс и революционная Россия, ред. А. Воробьева (Москва: Изд. Политической литературы, 1967), 265.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Лев Левин, “Манифест коммунистической партии Маркса и Энгельса в России 50- 80-х гг. XIX в.,” *Вопросы истории* 2/1948, 103.

mention of it in the correspondence, as well as allusions to the Manifesto in *Narodnaya Rasprava* suggest the opposite.

Woodford McClellan claims that “the appearance of the *Communist Manifesto* in Russian (...) indicated that the Russian revolutionaries were coming out of the political and social backwaters of Europe, and were making fresh explorations into the international socialist movement”<sup>14</sup>. This opinion, however, can be misleading. The “Communist Manifesto” was known to some Russian political activists before the translation. The influence of the translation in Russia was rather limited, partially because of the detentions by the police. Moreover, we don’t know if all the mentions of the Manifesto in police reports were the 1869 one: in fact, at least in one of the copies was an **original** translation<sup>15</sup>. Marx and Engels were rather right in calling it “only a literary curiosity”<sup>16</sup>; the publication was rather connected with the colourful, but infamous and in many ways ephemeral activity of Nechaev rather than with a real social movement, especially based on Marxist principles. On the other hand, one must keep in mind that the Russian edition of Manifesto, as strange as the origins of it might seem, appears before the Paris Commune, and the sharp rise of the interest in the Manifesto. In this specific regard, it is hard to speak of coming out of the backwaters: the Manifesto gained its enormous significance only after Russian edition.

## 2.

During the thirteen years leading up to the second translation, the reception of Marxism in Russia changed dramatically. A massive factor was the Russian translation of the first volume of “Capital”, which was published in April 1872 (legally), thus being the first translation of it to other languages. It appeared just before the emergence of the Emancipation of Labour (*Osvobozhdenie truda*), the first Russian Marxist Group. The person responsible for both was the same: Georgi Plekhanov, who has spoken of the Manifesto as follows: “Personally, I can say about myself that reading the *Communist Manifesto* constitutes an era in my life. I was inspired by the Manifesto and immediately decided to translate it into Russian”<sup>17</sup>. The edition was complemented with an introduction by Plekhanov, as well as two introductions written by Marx and Engels: it reproduces the introduction to the 1872 German edition and includes a new one, written for the Russian edition. Plekhanov decided also to include in the edition excerpts

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<sup>14</sup> McClellan, *Revolutionary Exiles*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Борис Итенберг, Арон Черняк, “Неизвестный перевод *Манифеста Коммунистической партии*”, *Исторический архив*, 1959/2, 224-228.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, Engels, “Preface”, 425.

<sup>17</sup> Г. Плеханов. *Сочинения*, т. XXIV (Москва: Госиздат, 1928), 178.

from the authors' different works that might shed a light on the Manifesto's less clear passages. Including a passage from "The Civil War in France" is because of a reference to it in the German introduction. Attaching "General Rules of the International Working Men's Association" was Plekhanov's own innovation; he aimed to show the practical implementation of the Manifesto's main principles.

The introduction to the Russian edition deserves some attention. Plekhanov claimed that the initiative belonged to him. He asked Pyotr Lavrov, who was a friend of Marx and Engels, for assistance, and Marx sent him back the text. As it marks **a peak in Marx and Engels' statements about the possibility of revolution in Russia**, the examination of its relation to Marx's works must be preceded by sketching out the history of Marx's relationship to Russia.

### 3.

Ewa Borowska distinguishes between three different periods in the history of Marx's attitude towards Russia<sup>18</sup>. The first dates from 1848 to 1856 and can be characterised as the period of pure hostility or even russophobia. Marx sees in Russia only a pillar of counter-revolution and reaction and strongly opposes the Pan-slavist ideas. After the end of the Crimean War his attitude slowly begins to partially warm, although the defeat of the January Uprising in 1863 triggers hostility once again. The real break, however, appears between the second and third period: in 1870<sup>19</sup>. It is the time of Marx's intensive reading of Russian authors, of whom he took excerpts. This shift was prepared by Marx's extensive contact with Russians and the popularity of his works (outside of the vibrant reception of the "Capital" in Russia and its following translation, Borowska mentions Bapst's lectures based on the "Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" in 1859). In 1870, Marx became acquainted with Danielson, Utin, Lavrov and Lopatin. An important factor in the change was also the publication of Bervi-Flerovsky's *Situation of the Working Class in Russia*, a book Marx learned Russian to read. He planned to include its results in "Capital" (especially in the chapter on ground-rent); there are reasons to believe that the difficulties with it led to the failure of the planned publication of the

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<sup>18</sup> See: Ewa Borowska, "Marx and Russia", *Studies in East European Thought*, 54 (1)/2002, 87 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Haruki Wada, although he does not indicate one date, also points out to Bervi-Flerovsky book and the Russian translation of the "Capital" as triggers for the change. He also emphasises that before 1869, Marx seemed to believe that Russia's historical development should follow the universal path. His views of obshchina started to gradually change after 1870 under the influence of Chernyshevsky and Lopatin. See: Haruki Wada, "Marx and Revolutionary Russia", in *Late Marx and the Russian Road. Marx and the 'Peripheries of Capitalism'*, edited by T. Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 44ff.

subsequent volumes of the “Capital”. He also planned and studied thoroughly to publish a text on agrarian reform, an intention he never fulfilled.

The introduction to the Russian Edition belongs without a doubt to the third of the above-mentioned periods not only chronologically. In that introduction, the authors described the change in the Russian situation: a while ago “a pillar of the existing European system”, now Russia is said to form “a vanguard of revolutionary action”, having killed the tsar and kept his successor hiding in Gatchina, as “a prisoner of war of the revolution”<sup>20</sup>. The preface also touches the question on the fate of *obshchina*, a form of communal ownership characteristic to Russia. This question arises with another one: is the historic development linear, or could it be multilinear?

Let me quote the passage from the introduction in *extenso*. Marx and Engels write:

If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.<sup>21</sup>

This formulation differs from the most famous one, given in a letter to Vera Zasulich from 1881. In the final version of it, Marx remarks that the “Capital” describes nothing but the Western historical process and does not determine the possibility of different paths. However, he claims that *obshchina* can be “the point of support for social revival in Russia”<sup>22</sup>, but only in the case when it can grow spontaneously, without the “deleterious influence” from the outside (this enigmatic formulation can be reconstrued on the foundation of the draft to indicate, above all, the financial burdens on the peasants). The final version of the letter is the most self-preservative: in the drafts Marx developed in detail the arguments for the vitality of *obshchina* (as a starting point to a higher mode of production) and described the dangers it faces; he compared it with the more archaic formations and sketched out the outlines of the concept on nonlinear development. There he also claimed that a social revolution is a necessary requirement for saving the *obshchina*.

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<sup>20</sup> Marx, Engels, “Preface”, 426.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, “Letter to Vera Zasulich”, in *Collected Works*, vol. 24 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 371.

The preface to the Russian edition comes back to the idea of social revolution as the condition of preserving *obshchina*, present in the drafts of the letter to Zasulich, but removed from the final version. It adds to it, however, the international element: the revolution in the West and East need to complement each other. This remark could be seen in light of the performative poetics of the Manifesto, simply as invoking the international revolution. However, even if we should not jump to conclusions and read out a theory of revolutionary process out of this one sentence, this idea of complementing each other seems close to the belief expressed in drafts of the answer to Zasulich. Marx was surely convinced — as was Chernyshevsky<sup>23</sup> — that it was the simultaneity of the existence of the capitalist West and backwards Russia that made *obshchina*'s survival and transformation into the higher form possible.

The multilinearity of historical development was something he discovered thanks to his interest in Russia and Russian lectures. Marx's views on Russia were rooted, however, not only in his own personal development and lectures, but also in the ripening of the revolutionary movement in Russia. It can seem paradoxical that Marxists in Russia gave up this idea of multilinear development. The most important of them distanced themselves from the Populist tradition with the question of peasant communal property. It was the case with Plekhanov, as well as Lenin, who considered capitalism in Russia has already emerged<sup>24</sup>. The striking symbol of this distance was the fact that the letter to Zasulich was not popularised by the recipients of it. This fact is, however, easily justified. Above all, Marx's own development was mostly kept relatively private: the letter to the editor of *Otechestvennyye Zapiski*, as well as the drafts of the letter to Zasulich, were not known and he did not publish much on the subject. The introduction to the Russian edition is therefore one of the few documents stating clearly and in print at the time of its emergence that Russia must not follow necessarily the path of the West. Unfortunately, even the initiator of this edition, i.e. Plekhanov, decided to withdraw from dealing with the question that was bothering Marx in the last decade of his life.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Wada, "Marx and Revolutionary Russia", 48-49.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Janusz Dobieszewski, "Marksizm a narodnictwo rosyjskie," in *Marksizm po Marksie*, ed. by W. Mackiewicz, (Warszawa: Centralny Ośrodek Metodyczny Studiów Nauk Politycznych, 1988), 76.