



The Stalin Society

BM Box 2521 London WC1N 3XX

Tel/Fax 020 8571 9723

**The role of
the individual
in history**

by Ivor Kenna

In 1898 George Plekhanov, when he was still a Marxist, wrote *The role of the Individual in History*. This presentation bases itself on this important article.

Presentation to the Stalin Society, October 2000

The Stalin Society

The aim of the Stalin Society is to defend Stalin and his work on the basis of fact and to refute capitalist, revisionist, opportunist and Trotskyist propaganda directed against him.

The activity of the Society includes

- (a) the study of and research upon his writings and actions;
- (b) the translation of material on these subjects into and from other languages;
- (c) the publication of material relating to such study and research;
- (d) the celebration and commemoration of important occasions in Stalin's life;
- (e) the establishment of contact with other groups and individuals with a view to taking a common stand on issues and the joint organisation of future activities
- (f) the establishment of contact with similar societies and groups abroad with a view to mutual benefit from experience and collaboration.

For further information, contact us at:

The Role of the Individual in History

I am basing this account on an essay written in 1898 by George Plekhanov when he was generally recognised as the leading Russian Marxist.

Plekhanov draws on several case histories to develop his theme.

In the reign of Louis XV, France lost the Seven Years' War partly because of the attitude of the king who was under the influence of his favourite Madame de Pompadour who was the protectress of the ineffectual General Soubise.

Louis XV, Madame de Pompadour, and General Soubise were as they were because of their individual personalities. The basic reason, though, why this, to some extent, led to the loss of the Seven Years' War, was that French society, being organised from the top down, had no means of compelling the king, the favourite, and the generals to do better or get out.

**

Cortes discovered Mexico by accident. Pizarro discovered Peru by accident. They overcame local resistance and laid the basis for Spain's American empire. Actually the accidents were no accident. They occurred at the points of inter-section of inevitable processes. Spanish ships were sailing the seas. Spain was at a higher level of development than Mexico or Peru. Spain conquered Mexico and Peru.

**

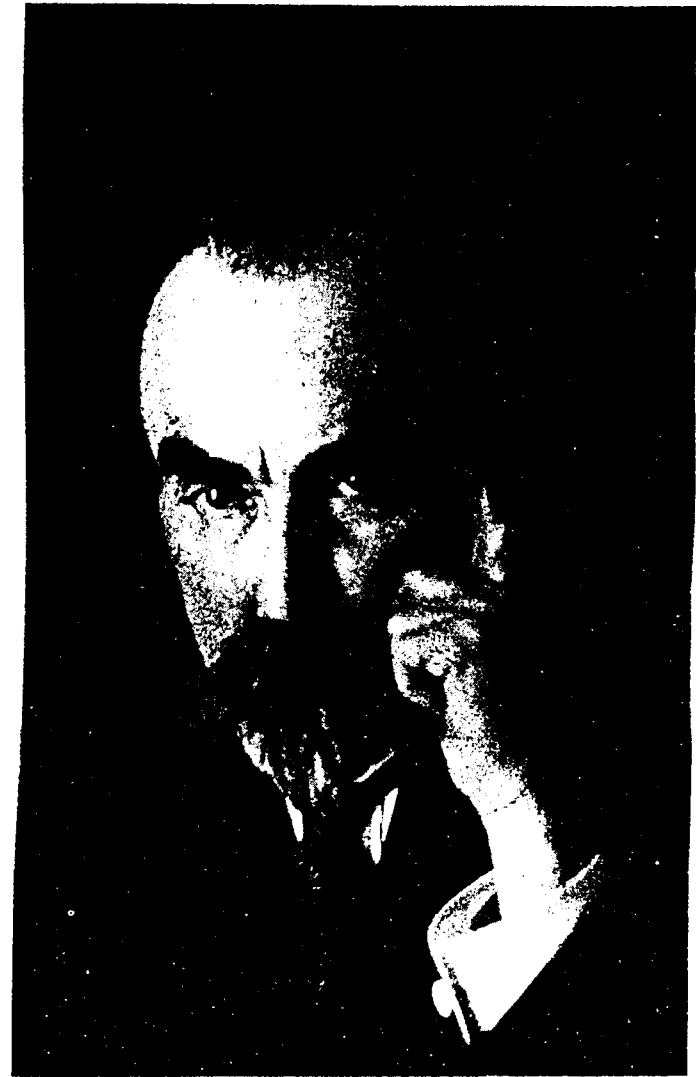
Napoleon rose from nowhere to be head of French society. Actually, it was generally agreed at the time that a "good sword" was needed to restore order and embark upon conquest abroad. Napoleon filled that slot by being the first upon the scene. Napoleon, as First Consul, and then as Emperor, made everybody else look inferior by comparison. Yet, if there had been no Napoleon, someone similar would have filled the slot.

Napoleon and his Marshals were all nobodies before the French Revolution. Marshal Ney, for example, was a non-commissioned officer.

**

In the field of art, various schools of painting appeared at much the same time.

Such are the examples. What conclusions does Plekhanov draw from them?



George Plekhanov

Communists do not reduce everything down to the economic factor and the role of the individual in history down to nothing. Communists are not quietists with a simple belief that change has got to happen, irrespective of what they do.

Communists are distinguished by their mental vigour, their activity, their force and persistence in the pursuit of extremely important aims.

Even people, such as religious fanatics, who really believe that something has got to happen, sometimes show remarkable energy just because of this.

To be effective, one's free actions must become the conscious and free expression of necessity.

It is not enough to regard something as absolutely inevitable or even to sympathise with it. One has to regard oneself as one of the forces which calls it into being. Otherwise, it may not happen.

Men and women make history and, therefore, the activities of individuals cannot help being important in history.

Individuals can influence the fate of society. The possibility of exercising this influence and its extent are determined by the form of organisation of society, by the relation of social forces within it.

No individual, or group of individuals, can change history of their own accord. Influential individuals can change the individual features of events and some of their particular consequences but they cannot change their general trend

which is determined by other forces.

Great talents appear everywhere, whenever the social conditions favourable to their development exist. Every man of talent who actually appears, every man of talent who becomes a social force, is the product of social relations. Talented people can change only individual features of events, but not their general trend. They are themselves the products of this trend.

Scores of talents which only half express social thought appear around one or two geniuses which express it perfectly.

Casual phenomena and the personal qualities of celebrated people are much more noticeable than deep-lying general causes.

The development of the productive forces is the final and most general cause of the historical progress of mankind including the social relations of men.

Parallel with the general cause there are the particular causes, that is, the historical situation. Finally, the influence of the particular causes is supplemented by the operation of individual causes, that is, the personal qualities of public men and apparent accidents.

A great man is great not because his personal qualities give individual features to great historical events, but because he possesses qualities which make him most capable of serving the great social needs of his time, needs which arose as a result of general and particular causes.

A great man is a beginner because he sees further than

others and desires things more strongly than others. He is a hero in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of the inevitable and unconscious course of social needs and social relationships.

I one knows the way things are going one can make history.

Change never takes place by itself. It always need the intervention of men and women. Those men who do more than others to facilitate the solution of these problems are called great men.

Plekhanov finishes by writing that it is not only for beginners, not only for great men, that a broad field of activity is open. It is open for all those who have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to love their neighbours.

Plekhanov was definitely a beginner himself. Up to that time nobody had covered the subject of the role of the individual in history anywhere near as well. However, subsequent experience and commentary has shown that Plekhanov's analysis was rather deficient in a number of respects, notably in what we may call the barn owl factor.

Barn owls live in barns, ignoring a few who live in hollow trees, caves and cages. If there are no barns, there will be no barn owls. On the other hand, it is quite possible to have a barn without a barn owl.

The situation will not necessarily produce the man or woman to take advantage of that situation.

In the 1905 revolution, Lenin observed that, soon after the revolutionaries had persuaded certain soldiers to back the revolution, a very talented Tsarist propagandist succeeded in talking them round again. Lenin wrote that somebody should have been deputed to follow that propagandist and kill him.

The soldiers would still have been there to be talked around but there would have been nobody to talk them round.

"A shot in time saves nine" is a fixed principle of all counter-revolutionaries, too.

Pre-war English communist Christopher Caudwell pointed out that, before Lenin, someone could be a hero without realising exactly why he was a hero. Lenin was the first hero to base his heroism upon conscious concrete knowledge of the actual situation.

Mao Zedong developed the idea of the beginner. At some stage, an individual, or a tiny group of individuals, must be saying something when no one else is saying it. They are rebelling and going against the tide. From this Mao deduced the axioms *"It is right to rebel"* and *"It is a revolutionary*

principle to go against the tide".

In 1953, the imperialists were at the height of their powers. Life in the imperialist societies appeared more attractive than life under Socialism. Stalin died. Countless individual communists, who had previously shown great heroism, showed political cowardice or even went rotten. History can work the wrong way sometimes.

There are several ways of preventing revolutionary communists from developing. One way to take active steps to exclude them from the revolution on some pretext or other. Another way is by feeding them lies or by abstaining from justified criticism.

The opportunists have their ways of developing their type of great men, too. By using the principle "*He who would lead, let him be a bridge*" they act as a bridge between people of definite but opposed views, thereby neutralising them.

The editorial preface to Plekhanov's essay quotes Stalin "*Only the people are immortal. Everything else is transient. That is why we must be able to value the confidence of the people*".

The people are immortal. However, as Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci wrote in his book *The Modern Prince* the people are not enough on their own.

A class of people are a force only is so far as there is

someone who centralises, organises and disciplines them, and in the absence of this force they would break up and cancel each other out in scattered impotence.

The leadership is the principal cohesive element which renders effective and powerful the totality of forces which left to themselves would count for nothing or very little. One can have generals without an army but in reality it is easier to create an army than to create generals.

Finally, there is a middle element, formed by the class, which puts the leadership in contact with the class. Given the existence of the leadership and the class, the middle element cannot help being formed. The middle element is the party.

In England, there are numerous objective factors impeding this simple process. There are also some subjective factors.

If the leadership enforces aspirations which have little to do with the aspirations of the class, it will cut down on the size of the party and may prevent its formation altogether.

This concludes the less controversial part of this introduction, the part that is printed. Purely verbally, I propose to refer to one or two great men.

