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**TRACING THE GENESIS OF THE
SPLIT BETWEEN WESTERN AND
SOVIET MARXISM: THE CASE OF
KARL KORSCH AND GEORG
LUKÁCS IN THE 1920S DEBATE
OVER ‘ULTRA-LEFTISM’**

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TRACING THE GENESIS OF THE SPLIT BETWEEN WESTERN AND SOVIET MARXISM: THE CASE OF KARL KORSCH AND GEORG LUKÁCS IN THE 1920S DEBATE OVER ‘ULTRA-LEFTISM’²

Although a certain incommensurability between Soviet and Western Marxism has been assumed in a wide variety of studies, no research has been done on the genesis of the split between the two traditions in the context of the political turmoil of the 1920s. The current study aims to address this issue. By highlighting the commitment of the so-called ‘fathers of Western Marxism’ to the political tactics of left communism, I argue that the tradition of Western Marxism emerged specifically as a philosophical justification for what in the Soviet Union was considered the ‘ultra-left’ political ideology. Further, I demonstrate that the works of Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács were read precisely in this light by the Bolshevik philosophers whose criticism marked an important watershed in the genesis of the split between Western and Soviet Marxists.

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Keywords: Western Marxism, Soviet Marxism, Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, Left Communism

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Introduction

Within contemporary Russian and Western philosophical cultures, a certain *incommensurability* between Soviet and Western Marxism appears to be a well-known fact. As a part of this trend, over the last seventy years—especially with the publication of Herbert Marcuse’s *Soviet Marxism* and Perry Anderson’s *Considerations on Western Marxism*—the terms ‘Western Marxism’ and ‘Soviet Marxism’ have been gradually rigidified into names of a ‘natural kind’.³ That is, the split between them appears now as a self-evident fact rather than as a product of particular historical circumstances. We can encounter this approach, for instance, in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who said in 1955 that “[t]he conflict between ‘Western Marxism’ and Leninism is already found in Marx as a conflict between dialectical thought and naturalism.”⁴ However, we can date the first documentation of the split even earlier. In 1927, the German-Russian Menshevik Alexander Schiffrin declared: “Soviet Marxist science remained only marginally acceptable and even less understandable to them [Western Marxists]. And vice versa: everything that the few Western European communist theorists have produced has been rejected and condemned by Soviet Marxism. Thus, a certain mutual ideological impenetrability arose between Russian and Western communism.”⁵

However, it must be noted that, much like the split between continental and Anglo-American philosophy, the split between Soviet and Western Marxism does not map very easily onto the geographical boundaries between the USSR and Europe. Instead, appeals to the “Soviet-ness” or “Western-ness” of the two Marxisms often imply certain value judgements and moral images of the Soviet and European communist movements.⁶ Since ‘Soviet Marxism’ and ‘Western Marxism’ are hardly limited by the geographical boundaries appropriate to them, this discrepancy becomes a problem. This inconsistency between the meaning and reference of the two terms has been recently explored by a number of researchers. For instance, Joseph Fracchia questions it whether Georg Lukács—‘the father of Western Marxism’—does in fact belong to the Western Marxist tradition. Instead, he suggests it is more appropriate to characterise Lukács’ political philosophy as ‘*Eastern* ‘Western Marxism’’.⁷ Likewise underlining the contradictory nature of the term ‘Western Marxism’, Kaan Kangal points out the case of Karl Schmückle, who was “a Westerner and a Marxist, but hardly

³ For the discussion of the problem of ‘natural kinds’ in the writing of the history of philosophy, see: Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 8.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 64.

⁵ Max Werner [Alexander Schiffrin], “Der Sowjetmarxismus,” *Die Gesellschaft* 7 (1927): 61.

⁶ Alastair Bonnet provides an insightful analysis of the ideological function behind appeals to the ‘Soviet-ness’ and ‘Westernness’. See: Alastair Bonnet, “Communists like us: Ethnicized modernity and the idea of ‘the West’ in the Soviet Union,” *Ethnicities* 2, no. 4 (2002): 458.

⁷ Joseph Fracchia, “The Philosophical Leninism and Eastern ‘Western Marxism’ of Georg Lukacs,” *Historical Materialism* 21.1 (2013): 70.

a Western Marxist.”⁸ Finally, Takahiro Chino highlights the existence of a parallel between the thought of Antonio Gramsci and the Japanese Marxist Osaka Jun thereby suggesting that ‘Western Marxism’ had in fact a *global* character.⁹

These inconsistencies between the allegedly geographical boundaries of the two Marxisms and their real boundaries, which have been drawn not in accordance with geography but rather in accordance with the methodological and political differences between the two traditions, demand a study of the genealogy of the divide between Soviet and Western Marxisms. A further justification for this research is due to the fact that there is no evidence that there was any significant conflict between Marxism in the USSR and the one in the West in the early days after the Russian Revolution of 1917. This is suggested, for instance, by the fact that there was international collaboration between the Marx-Engels Institute and the Frankfurt School, as well as by the fact that the October revolution was supported almost unanimously by the leading Western communist politicians and thinkers from Rosa Luxemburg to Antonio Gramsci. This work is an attempt to trace the emergence of the opposition between Soviet and Western Marxisms by exploring the reception of the ‘fathers of Western Marxism’—Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch—in the USSR.

The Concept of Class Consciousness in Left Communism

One of the most telling episodes for understanding the nature of Soviet criticism of Western Marxism was Grigory Zinoviev’s speech at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in the summer of 1924. Calling upon Soviet communists to fight against the “ultra-left” and international “theoretical revisionism” that, in his opinion, was represented in the works of Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Antonio Graziadei, he declared: “If a few more professors like that show up and start spreading their anti-Marxist theories, things will be bad.”¹⁰ Given the political context of Zinoviev’s speech, as well as his appeal to the struggle against ultra-leftism, it becomes obvious that the Soviet critique of the early Western Marxists is not confined to the philosophical problem of the correct interpretation of the dialectical method, as is usually assumed in philosophical scholarship, but also has an explicit political motivation.¹¹ In other words, such seminal works as Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* and Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* were seen in the Soviet Union as attempts to theorise the principles of Left Communism, which in early Soviet discourse was pejoratively called ultra-Leftism.

⁸ Kaan Kangal, “Karl Schmuckle and Western Marxism,” *Revolutionary Russia* 31, no. 1 (2018): 67-68

⁹ Takahiro Chino, “Is Western Marxism Western?: The Cases of Gramsci and Tosaka,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 2 (2017): 28-29.

¹⁰ Pyatii Vsemirnii Kongres Kommunisticheskogo Internatsionala [The Fifth World Congress of the Communist International] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye Izdatel’stvo, 1925): 53.

¹¹ For an example of an interpretation that focuses more on the differences in the dialectical method than on the political differences, see: Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 38-39.

It is worth noting that this reading of the early works of Lukács and Korsch is not entirely unfair. By the time of the Fifth Congress, both philosophers were in one way or another affiliated with Left Communist in Europe: a couple of years prior Lukács had worked for the Austrian left communist publication *Kommunismus* and Korsch was affiliated with the council communist movement to later become an important member of the radical leftist party KAPD.¹² This could not help but influence the theoretical work of Korsch and Lukács. In particular, such works as *Marxism and Philosophy* and *History and Class Consciousness* explore themes similar to those that were central to the left communist movement. Although it is impossible to reduce the theories of Korsch and Lukács to a purely political aspect, it is important to pay attention to this dimension of their works in order to understand the Soviet critique of Western Marxism.

To understand the link between early Western Marxism and Left Communism, we must first understand the central tenets of the Left Communist movement itself. The heyday of Left Communism followed the October Revolution, when Western communists attempted to develop revolutionary tactics appropriate for the spread of the revolution from Russia to the West. The question was: should European Communists emulate the experience of the Bolsheviks, or should they find alternative postulates to act on? On the one hand, the achievements of the Bolsheviks were certainly inspiring for the Western Communists. For them, the revolution in Russia was, to use Antonio Gramsci's words, "a revolution against 'Capital'": the reality of the revolution in Russia ran against the prevailing Marxist theory, according to which the socialist revolution should have first occurred in industrialised, 'civilised' countries like England, America, France, and Germany, and only then should have spread to such economically and politically 'backward' countries as Russia.¹³ That the Bolsheviks were able to carry out the revolution in spite of unfavourable economic factors could not but be admired. On the other hand, the victory of the October Revolution across the territories of the former Russian Empire did not constitute a good enough reason for the adoption of Bolshevik principles. Left communists, while not yet questioning the heroism of the Bolsheviks, were mostly inclined to follow alternative tactics to achieve their revolutionary goals. In part, this was also due to the failure of the European communist uprisings in 1918, as well as the collapse of the socialist regimes in Bavaria and Hungary—it became apparent that the historical, social, and political context of European countries required a new approach.

Regarding this, Gramsci noted that the Bolshevik tactics had no chance of being successful in Europe, where the existence of an advanced civil society under the hegemony of bourgeois ideology hindered the possibility of a revolutionary change. Moreover, Hermann Gorter, one of the leaders of

¹² See: Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971): xii-xiii; Russell Jacoby, "The Inception of Western Marxism: Karl Korsch and the Politics of Philosophy," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 3, no. 3 (1979): 15

¹³ Gramsci, "The Revolution against 'Capital,'" <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1917/12/revolution-against-capital.htm>

the Left Communist party, KAPN, suggested that, unlike the Western proletariat, the proletariat in Russia had received considerable support from the petty bourgeoisie (in particular, the peasantry) during the revolution. This was not possible in the West, where the peasantry enjoyed a fairly prosperous life and therefore did not express discontent with the existing world order. As a result, in the words of Gorter, the workers of Western Europe had to “make the revolution by themselves”. That is, the proletariat of Western Europe was left alone to fight against a much stronger “enemy” than the one that the Russian proletariat faced. In the West, capitalism, civil society, and its ideological structures were much more advanced than in Russia, and the struggle against them seemed more difficult. Gorter wrote:

On going from the East to the West of Europe, we traverse at a given moment an economic boundary [...]. West of this line there is a practically absolute domination of industrial, commercial and financial capital united in the most highly developed banking capital [...]. East of this line there is neither the gigantic development of industrial, commercial, transport and banking capital, nor its almost absolute domination, nor, consequently, the firmly established modern State.¹⁴

Thus, the need to fight against the hegemony of the Western bourgeoisie, embodied in developed legal and political systems, complicated the tasks of European communists. The political immaturity of the masses was another consequence of the developed civil society. Regarding this, Rosa Luxemburg remarked: “It is not Russia’s unripeness which has been proved by the events of the war and the Russian Revolution, but the unripeness of the German proletariat for the fulfilment of its historic tasks.”¹⁵ This sentiment was echoed by the Dutch Left Communists Hermann Gorter and Anton Pannekoek: in their view, the working masses in the West were essentially politically passive and therefore incapable of revolutionary action.¹⁶ According to Pannekoek, the different mentalities of the masses in Europe and in the USSR were the reason why the revolutions in the West were not as successful as the October Revolution.¹⁷ As a result, a new approach to revolutionary action began to take shape in the Left Communist milieu: since a successful uprising by a small group of revolutionaries seemed impossible in an advanced civil society, the political struggle for “awakening” class consciousness in the proletariat seemed to be the only way to revolution. It was this task of awakening the proletariat to the class struggle that the European left communists undertook.

¹⁴ Herman Gorter. “Open Letter to Comrade Lenin,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1920/open-letter.htm>

¹⁵ Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, Chapter 1, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/index.htm>

¹⁶ Gorter. “Open Letter to Comrade Lenin,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1920/open-letter.htm>

¹⁷ Anton Pannekoek, “World Revolution and Communist Tactics,” in *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism* (London: Pluto, 1978), Anton Pannekoek Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1920/communist-tactics.htm>

Pannekoek claimed that even in those countries where the tradition of social democracy was strong, the masses were led by the bourgeois intelligentsia that inevitably concealed from the workers their true class interests. In particular, the existing bourgeois institutions and organisations, in the power of which Social-Democrats so earnestly believed, prevented the proletariat from obtaining political autonomy and “independence of spirit.”¹⁸ This was, for instance, the danger of parliamentary activity and trade unions. Since parliamentary and trade unionist strategies relied on the ability of party leaders and bureaucrats to represent the masses, they automatically inhibited the proletariat from making their own political decisions and exercising their will autonomously.¹⁹ In other words, these strategies accustomed workers to the idea that others can make and carry out decisions on their behalf.²⁰

The revolutionary age called, therefore, for the emancipation of the proletariat from this bourgeois mentality that paralysed the workers. According to Gorter, it was the task of historical materialism to analyse how nature and society inculcated certain ideas in the human mind and how one could free oneself from “the mental yoke of the bourgeoisie”.²¹ He wrote: “The mind must now be revolutionised. It must extirpate prejudice and cowardice. The most important thing is mental propaganda. Knowledge, mental power, is the essential thing, the most necessary of all.”²² This spiritual transformation could only be achieved by the proletariat through autonomous political activity and an experience of the struggle. The entire working class had to be involved in decision-making because they had to train, first, for the revolution and then, for socialism. Apart from making the workers “learn how to use power by using power,” there was no other way to prepare them for the new world order.²³

The task of cultivating class consciousness in the proletariat had immediate political and organisational implications.²⁴ Because the institutions of bourgeois order—the assemblies, parliaments, and city councils—relied on the capacity of the leaders to represent the masses and thus depoliticised the population, they had to be abolished and replaced with organs that would allow for

¹⁸ Pannekoek, “World Revolution and Communist Tactics,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1920/communist-tactics.htm>

¹⁹ Pannekoek, “World Revolution and Communist Tactics,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1920/communist-tactics.htm>

²⁰ Herman Gorter, “Opportunism and Dogmatism,” Herman Gorter Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1920/07/24.htm>

²¹ Herman Gorter, “Historical Materialism,” Herman Gorter Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1920/historical-materialism.htm>

²² Gorter, “Historical Materialism,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1920/historical-materialism.htm>

²³ Rosa Luxemburg, “Our Program and the Political Situation,” in *Selected Political Writings: Rosa Luxemburg* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), Rosa Luxemburg Internet Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/12/31.htm>

²⁴ Marcel van der Linden, “On Council Communism”, *Historical Materialism* 12, 4 (2004): 28-30.

the majority to actively participate in politics. The mission, it was believed, could be fulfilled by establishing the workers' councils.²⁵ By allowing the workers to control production democratically and autonomously, this form of political and economic organisation was supposed to teach them how to exercise political power. As a result, the council system had to unite the proletariat for the future struggle against capitalism. Revealing to the proletarian consciousness its true class interests, the workers' councils prepared the proletariat for the uprising. As for the Left Communists in Europe, nothing except for a fully class-conscious proletariat could salvage the fate of the world revolution, the council system constituted the necessary basis of proletarian transformation.

Korsch and Lukács as the Theoreticians of Left Communism

Taking into account Korsch's and Lukács' affiliation with the Left Communist and Council Communist movements, it is fair to interpret their works in the light of ultra-left ideas. As I hope to demonstrate, both Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* were products of this conviction on the part of European Left Communists that the Western revolution needed specifically Western revolutionary tactics. That is, both works were written out of concern with advancing proletarian class consciousness toward a revolutionary outcome, a concern Lukács and Korsch shared with their fellow Left Communists. Specifically, as we shall see, in his work Lukács designated the reification of proletarian consciousness in the age of advanced capitalism as the main reason behind the inhibition of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat in the West and attempted to locate the instrument of consciousness-raising in the party organisation. Korsch, on the other hand, was interested in analysing the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary aspects of different Marxist traditions. Criticising orthodox Marxism for losing its subversive potential, Korsch celebrated the philosophy of the Third International for uniting socialist theory and practice in a way that could lead to the triumph of communist parties across the world. Like Lukács, he highlighted the role of philosophical thought in particular and human consciousness in general in the revolution.

Lukács' first writings as a communist, produced during the period when he was serving as the Minister of Culture for the government of the Hungarian Soviet Republic as well as during his subsequent exile in Vienna, betray the political underpinnings of his concern with class consciousness.²⁶ As Lukács himself wrote in his 1967 preface to the new edition of *History and Class Consciousness*, one of his central preoccupations as a member of the inner collective of the magazine

²⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, "The National Assembly," in *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings* (New York: Random House, 1972), Rosa Luxemburg Internet Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/11/20.htm>

²⁶ Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukacs: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991): 259-261.

Kommunismus in the early 1920s was working out an appropriate political and theoretical line for the ultra-left currents in the Third International, represented in particular by Amadeo Bordiga in Italy, Anton Pannekoek in the Netherlands, and their supporters.²⁷ “Our magazine,” Lukács wrote, “strove to propagate a messianic sectarianism by working out the most radical methods on every issue, and by proclaiming a total break with every institution and mode of life stemming from the bourgeois world. This would help to foster an undistorted class consciousness in the vanguard, in the Communist parties and in the Communist youth organisations.”²⁸

In particular, the arguments that Lukács made in some of his earliest essays, such as “Tactics and Ethics” (1919) and “The Question of Parliamentarianism” (1920), relied on political and theoretical assumptions shared at the time by most Left Communists in Europe. For instance, in line with the conclusions of Gorter and Pannekoek, he emphasised that the political role of communist parties consisted in clarifying the class-consciousness of the proletariat and ‘awakening’ them to the class struggle.²⁹ Precisely because the danger of any political compromise consisted in the fact that it clouded workers’ consciousness by creating an ‘illusion of action,’ Lukács believed that communist parties had to abandon all parliamentary activity as well as the tactics of a united front with social democracy.³⁰ According to him, there was always a “danger that the feeling of solidarity will take root in the form of consciousness, which necessarily obscures the world-historical consciousness, the awakening of humanity to self-consciousness.”³¹

Lukács focused, as a result, on the consciousness-raising tasks of all political activity. He relied on the assumption that the destruction of capitalism and the emergence of a socialist order was only possible as a result of the maturation of the proletariat and its increased ability to express and execute its will.³² Alongside other Left Communists, Lukács argued that the workers’ councils constituted an appropriate means of educating the workers for political action, because this form of political organisation relied on the workers’ own initiative instead of delegating the task of decision-making to their representatives.³³ The task of the party consisted, therefore, in “using every available opportunity to intensify the class antagonisms and make the proletariat conscious of this intensification” in order to steer workers towards revolutionary action.³⁴ The process of revolution, however, had to be completed by the proletariat itself rather than the party: revolutions had to express people’s will. This aspect was emphasised by Lukács in relation to the Hungarian Soviet Republic.

²⁷ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971): xii-xiii.

²⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, xiv

²⁹ Georg Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics, 1919-1929: The Questions of Parliamentarianism and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 2014): 59.

³⁰ Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*, 55.

³¹ Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*, 6.

³² Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*, 34-35

³³ Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*, 63

³⁴ Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*, 76

In an essay written *before* the collapse of the socialist government, he celebrated the Hungarian revolution as the great achievement of the proletariat itself. Although by no means criticising the Russian Revolution, he nevertheless saw the Hungarian one as superior, because it was a result of the proletariat's own will.³⁵

Neither Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* nor his *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought* constitute a decisive break from these earlier arguments. Although towards 1923, Lukács started to place a stronger emphasis on the organisational role of the party in revolutionary activity and assumed a less radical attitude towards parliamentarianism, these concessions to Bolshevism did not affect his belief in the centrality of consciousness-raising activities to the revolution. It remained a central assumption in Lukács' thought that raising the class consciousness of the proletariat was a prerequisite for world revolution. Before a practical and political solution to the world's economic crisis could be discovered, it was an ideological crisis that had to be resolved.³⁶

Lukács dedicated his *History and Class Consciousness* to an exploration of the self-consciousness of the proletariat under capitalism. According to his argument, what characterised the ideological condition of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the Western world in the beginning of the twentieth century was the reification of its consciousness. This meant that, as a result of the capitalist hegemony, people perceived social and economic relations not as a product of historical development or of existing social structures, but rather as a natural fact that had to be recognised as a necessary element of how the world worked. The existing social and economic order, however unjust in reality, was therefore naturalised and legitimised through an appeal to 'objective facts'. This ideology whereby social and economic inequalities between people were presented as a part of the natural order concealed from both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie the fact that the existing order was only a result of the way social relations developed historically.³⁷ According to Lukács, the reification of human consciousness resulted in the commodification of every aspect of human existence.³⁸

Since the bourgeoisie relied on the fact of their own and the proletariat's ignorance of the social origins and implications of their economic activities, this reification of consciousness was essential for the purposes of profit-making. At the same time, however, it concealed from the proletarians their real interests, thus allowing them to work for the objectives that were set upon them by the owners of capital and did not benefit the workers themselves at all.³⁹ Under capitalism, Lukács argued, the worker was a commodity and knew himself as such. The need to work all day under

³⁵ Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*, 35.

³⁶ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 79.

³⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 14.

³⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 100.

³⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 50

hardly bearable conditions simply in order to afford the bare minimum necessary for his survival—that is, the need to sell his labour and essentially his own self to the capital—exposed to the worker the real status of labour in a society.⁴⁰

This ability that the proletariat had to see their labour as a commodity—and not, for instance, as a duty to society—meant that the working class had a unique insight into the real way society worked. With the help of the dialectical method, the workers could expose the facts of social life that appeared objective and natural to the bourgeoisie as aspects of the process of historical development instead.⁴¹ Moreover, it was *necessary* for the proletariat to do this. Only by understanding their own economic and social conditions in relation to the whole of society could the workers combat ‘false’ consciousness, which was imposed on them by the bourgeoisie for the justification of oppression, violence, and injustice present at the heart of capitalism. This insight into the real structure of society made it possible for the proletariat to infer their real historical interests as a class.⁴² Not before this—that is, not before the workers became aware of their true interests, which united them with other proletarians and humanity more generally—was it possible for the proletariat to act in order to liberate itself from the bourgeoisie. “[O]nly the *conscious* will of the proletariat will be able to save mankind from the impending catastrophe,” wrote Lukács, “In other words, when the final economic crisis of capitalism develops, the fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of mankind) will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness.”⁴³

As Lukács argued in *History and Class Consciousness*, the purpose of the party organisation was the clarification of proletarian consciousness.⁴⁴ He repeated this in his celebratory analysis of Lenin’s political achievements, where he continued to focus above all on this consciousness-raising role of the communist party. In this book, Lukács emphasised that it was unlikely that the proletariat itself could gain the correct class-consciousness spontaneously.⁴⁵ Instead, the working class needed the support of the party avant-garde, which would consist of the most class-conscious elements of the proletariat. It was the task of the party to prepare the proletarian masses for the revolutionary situation by accelerating the maturation of the proletariat through political activity.⁴⁶ The tactical genius of Lenin consisted, for Lukács, precisely in his ability to exploit even the most unfavourable circumstances to advance the class consciousness of the masses and to thereby further the revolution. The main task of professional revolutionaries was, once again, to spiritually transform the proletariat.

⁴⁰ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 172

⁴¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 8

⁴² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 51

⁴³ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 69.

⁴⁴ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 317.

⁴⁵ Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of his Thought* (London: Verso, 2009): 24.

⁴⁶ Lukács, *Lenin*, 31-32.

Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* fundamentally stemmed from the same preoccupation with the proletarian class consciousness, as Lukács' work, even if the latter provided a more explicit and arguably more sophisticated analysis of class ideology.⁴⁷ In his critique of orthodox Marxism that he provided in *Marxism and Philosophy*, Korsch was hoping to develop a theory of the subjective preconditions for the revolutionary change.⁴⁸ The chief assumption underlying his argument consisted in the idea that any revolutionary movement, whether that of the bourgeoisie in the French Revolution or that of the proletariat in the 1920s, was necessarily intertwined with the main intellectual movements of the period. Specifically, he wrote:

Since the Marxist system is the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat, and German idealist philosophy is the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie, they must stand intelligently and historically (i.e., ideologically) in the same relation to each other as the revolutionary movement of the proletariat as a class stands to the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie, in the realm of social and political practice.⁴⁹

Thus, relying on a famous Hegelian axiom that philosophy is nothing other than 'its own time apprehended in thoughts,' Korsch sought to provide a critique of the orthodox Marxism of the Second International and establish a foundation for reconnecting Marxist theory and political practice.⁵⁰ To this effect, he argued that the abandonment of revolutionary practice on the part of social-democratic parties across Europe and their turn to reformism was explicitly connected with their theoretical stance.⁵¹ Specifically, Korsch attributed the non-revolutionary nature of the politics of the Second International to the fact that its theoreticians prioritised scientific socialism over dialectical materialism. As a result, for orthodox Marxists, socialism assumed a character of empirical observations disconnected from the political and other practical aspects of class struggle. In the words of Korsch, the separation of theory from practice in the Second International took the form of "criticisms of the bourgeois economic order, of the bourgeois State, of the bourgeois system of

⁴⁷ Karl Korsch, "The Present State of the Problem of 'Marxism and Philosophy'—An Anti-Critique," in *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), Karl Korsch Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/19xx/anti-critique.htm>

⁴⁸ Russell Jacoby, "The Inception of Western Marxism: Karl Korsch and the Politics of Philosophy," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 3, no. 3 (1979): 15.

⁴⁹ Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), Karl Korsch Archive, accessed August 2022. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>

⁵⁰ Douglas Kellner, *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (New York, USA: University of Texas Press, 2021): 33-34.

⁵¹ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>

education, of bourgeois religion, art, science, and culture ... [that] no longer necessarily develop by their nature into revolutionary practices.”⁵²

Korsch concluded that, in virtue of its turn from revolutionary dialectic towards scientific criticism, the philosophy of the Second International was no longer capable of effecting any tangible social change. It lacked, as Korsch would write in his “Introduction to the Critique of the Gotha Programme” (1922), the ‘positive’ character of Marxist dialectics.⁵³ In other words, the work of orthodox Marxists assumed a purely critical character that could not transcend the boundaries of social analysis and provide a vision for future revolutionary practices.

According to Korsch, the philosophy of the Third International represented a new stage in the development of socialist theory: it had to be radically different from orthodox Marxism. Essentially, this new philosophy re-established the connection between theory and revolutionary practice.⁵⁴ Unlike ‘degenerate’ Social Democracy, communist parties across Europe and, in particular, the Bolsheviks in Russia used the results of critical analysis for their practical aims—namely, the overthrow of the economic structure of capitalism. Theoretical criticism became for them an important part of the revolutionary movement. Before socialism could triumph across the Western world, it was the task of revolutionaries to fight the bourgeois consciousness and propagate the dialectical philosophy among the proletariat.⁵⁵ Thus, Korsch concluded, neither political nor economic action rendered “intellectual action” unnecessary.⁵⁶

As we can see, therefore, the concern with class consciousness and revolutionary philosophy shared by Korsch and Lukács with European left communists went beyond a merely theoretical preoccupation. Instead, both Korsch and Lukács attempted to develop a theory appropriate for the revolutionary times in which they lived. Their works were closely bound up with the task of defining appropriate political practices for the working class in the West. In any case, this was precisely how Korsch’s and Lukács’ works were read in the USSR.

The Bolsheviks Against ‘Ultra-Leftism’

As we have seen, when, during the Fifth World Congress of the Communist International in 1924, Zinoviev launched an attack against Lukács and Korsch, he specifically referred to the ‘ultra-left’ nature of their theories. In the next section we will see that the affiliation of Lukács and Korsch with Left Communism was an important factor in the reception of these early Western Marxists in the USSR. However, in order to understand the political nature of criticisms directed by Soviet

⁵² Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>

⁵³ Karl Korsch, “Introduction to the Critique of the Gotha Programme,” in *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), Karl Korsch Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1922/gotha.htm>

⁵⁴ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>

⁵⁵ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>

⁵⁶ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>

philosophers against Lukács and Korsch—namely, the relation of these criticisms to the debate over ‘ultra-leftism’ in the Third International—we will first need to understand the Bolshevik opposition to Left Communism. This is our task in this section.

Arguably, the Left Communist movement assumed a particular significance for the Russian socialist discourse only in the aftermath of the disastrous German revolution of 1918/19. The failure of the international revolutionary movement to gain momentum in the West prompted both Russian and European Communist intellectuals to seek an explanation for this defeat.⁵⁷ Lenin attributed the lack of success to the fact that there was no strong Communist Party in Germany by the year 1919.⁵⁸ Before another uprising was possible at all, therefore, it was essential for German revolutionaries to create a disciplined Communist party capable of winning over the masses. In the words of Paul Levi, then a leader of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), the task of the German socialists in 1919 consisted in “forming the nucleus of the determined party of revolutionary overthrow.”⁵⁹ It was the task that Levi envisioned for the KPD, but it could not be accomplished without winning political power. Whereas Left Communists called for the purity of revolutionary tactics, thus refusing to take part in any parliamentary activity as well as boycotting all attempts at forming an alliance with Social Democracy as a result, the KPD leaders espoused a more orthodox view that a communist party had to use all available means if it wanted to influence the masses.⁶⁰ This was the official position of the Communist Party leadership, which was expressed by Levi in his speech “The Political Situation and the KPD” during the Heidelberg Congress in October 1919.⁶¹

Resulting in the expulsion of those party members who found themselves in opposition to these principles—and especially of those members who endorsed anti-parliamentarianism—Levi’s Heidelberg speech marked the beginning of the German Communist Workers’ Party (KAPD) with which both Lukács and Korsch would be affiliated in the early days of their respective political careers. In contrast to the Bolsheviks and the KPD, the KAPD leaders explained the delay of the world revolution not by an appeal to unfavourable objective conditions but rather to the ‘reasons of a subjective nature.’⁶² The programme of the KAPD stated that “The problem of the German Revolution is the problem of the development of the German proletariat’s consciousness of itself.”⁶³ Because the consciousness of the German working class was thoroughly affected by bourgeois

⁵⁷ C. L. R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 149-150.

⁵⁸ V. I. Lenin, “A Letter to the German Communists,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), Lenin Works Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/aug/14.htm>

⁵⁹ Paul Levi, *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Writings of Paul Levi* (Leiden: Brill, 2011): 55.

⁶⁰ Daniel Gaido, “Paul Levi and the Origins of the United-Front Policy in the Communist International”, *Historical Materialism* 25, 1 (2017): 138.

⁶¹ Levi, *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg*, 67.

⁶² “Programme of the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD),” Marxists Internet Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/germany-1918-23/index.htm>

⁶³ “Programme of the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD),” <https://www.marxists.org/subject/germany-1918-23/index.htm>

institutions, the task of the party consisted in unleashing an ideological struggle against everything that hindered the maturation of proletarian class consciousness in the workers, including among other things parliamentary and trade-union activities. Only after the proletariat was enlightened about its true class interests could the revolution break out.

At first, it was only their anti-parliamentarianism and this rejection of the party principle that bothered Russian communists about the KAPD. In particular, the Bolsheviks' critical attitude towards the German Communist Workers' Party became crystallised in Lenin's 1920 work "*Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*". Already by 1918, Lenin believed that Left Communism was suffering from 'childish idealism' and unnecessary over-intellectualism: the mentality of left communists was, for Lenin, that of a "declassed petty-bourgeois intellectual."⁶⁴ Now in 1920, Lenin feared the same 'malaise' had taken over the German communists. He did not deny that parliaments and trade unions were indeed corrupt institutions that did not serve the interests of the working class, nor did he deny that the class consciousness of the Western proletariat was tainted with the 'bourgeois-democratic' prejudice against all illegal activities and with blind trust in the power of constitutional law.⁶⁵ Lenin argued, however, that the rejection of all parliamentary and trade union activity was tantamount to playing into the hands of the bourgeoisie. As long as parliamentarianism and trade unionism were still supported by the masses, it was essential for the communists in Europe to continue working within the boundaries of legal institutions in addition to practising illegality. Not to do so meant leaving the workers under the influence of the bourgeois leaders. Since the majority of proletarians at that time were not sufficiently class conscious to seek the means of class struggle outside of trade unions, the rejection of parliamentarianism and trade unionism amounted to abandoning the masses without giving them any opportunity to recognise their 'true' class interests.⁶⁶

According to Lenin, among those guilty of this 'idealistic' anti-parliamentarianism was Lukács himself whose tactics, although 'free of all commonplace and bourgeois contamination,' did not in fact take into account the fact that before Left Communists could accomplish anything the masses had to be won over from the bourgeoisie.⁶⁷ In order to get the support of the masses, communist parties had to be realistic about the present political conditions and seek to shape these conditions in accordance with their ultimate goals. This implied that communists in Europe had to practice a new kind of parliamentarianism: they had to conduct their activity within parliaments while staying loyal to the principle of party discipline at the same time. If they could do that, they could get

⁶⁴ V. I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Childishness," in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), Lenin Internet Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/may/09.htm>

⁶⁵ V. I. Lenin, "*Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder*" (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), Lenin Works Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/index.htm>

⁶⁶ Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/index.htm>

⁶⁷ V. I. Lenin, "Kommunismus: Journal of the Communist International," in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), Lenin Internet Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/12.htm>

closer to the masses without falling prey to the corrupting power of bourgeois institutions. The refusal of Left Communists to work ‘wherever the masses are to be found’ signalled that the left in Central and Western Europe, including Lukács, were “not a party of a class, but a circle, not a *party of the masses*, but a group of intellectualists and of a few workers who ape the worst features of intellectualism.”⁶⁸

Only months later the same concern over the nature of Left Communism was raised by Leon Trotsky in his speech on the policy of the KAPD delivered at the November session of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI). Specifically, his speech was a response to Herman Gorter’s open letter to Lenin, a letter in which the Dutch Left Communist repudiated some of the assumptions behind the idea of ‘left-wing infantile disorder’ that allegedly afflicted European Marxists. As briefly mentioned in the previous section, the gist of Gorter’s argument was the idea that the specificity of Western social and economic conditions called for different tactics from those previously adopted by the Russian revolutionaries. In his letter, Gorter accused Lenin of disregarding the difference between the East and the West and of failing to recognise that in Europe it was the ideological struggle that had to be at the forefront.⁶⁹ Trotsky had no option but to defend the Bolshevik leader from these accusations. He declared,

Comrade Gorter’s entire speech is shot through and through with the fear of the masses. The essence of his views is such as to make him a pessimist. He has no faith in the proletarian revolution. [...] Of the social revolution Comrade Gorter speaks like an artist-soloist, like a lyricist but he lacks confidence in the material base of the revolution — the working class. His point of view is individualistic and aristocratic in the extreme. But revolutionary aristocratism always goes hand in hand with pessimism. Comrade Gorter says that we Orientals are unaware of the degree to which the working class has become “bourgeoisified”; and that for the reason, the greater the masses we embrace, the greater danger we face. Here is the keynote of his speech: he doesn’t believe in the revolutionary spirit of the working class. He doesn’t see the great masses of the proletariat beneath the crust of a privileged and bureaucratised aristocracy.⁷⁰

For Trotsky, the position of Left Communists and Gorter in particular appeared thoroughly idealistic and unhistorical. To start with, Trotsky did not believe that the difference between Western Europe

⁶⁸ Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/index.htm>

⁶⁹ Gorter. “Open Letter to Comrade Lenin,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1920/open-letter.htm>

⁷⁰ Leon Trotsky, “On the Policy of the KAPD,” in *The First Five Years of the Communist International, Volume 1* (London: Index Books, 1973), Trotsky Internet Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/index.htm>

and Russia was as significant for the future of socialism as Gorter made it out to be. It was necessary, he argued, to approach the question of the world revolution not from a limited national but from an international perspective.⁷¹ More importantly, Trotsky objected to the idea that the task of the party was limited to raising the class consciousness of the proletariat. Behind this Left Communist position, Trotsky discerned an assumption that revolutions were contingent solely upon the mass consciousness of the proletariat: for socialism to become a reality the party propagandists had to simply keep on ‘enlightening’ the masses until they became capable of accomplishing the revolution.⁷² There were two problems with this assumption. First of all, it was not at all clear how a communist party could exercise enough influence on the masses to educate them if it refused to participate in parliaments and trade unions. Since after the war, as Trotsky observed, trade unions became popular with millions of workers, any party that practiced anti-parliamentarianism and anti-unionism was consciously limiting its outreach. “Comrade Gorter thinks that if he keeps a kilometre away from the building of parliament that thereby the workers’ slavish worship of parliamentarianism will be weakened or destroyed,” stated Trotsky, “Such a tactic rests on idealistic superstitions and not upon realities.”⁷³

The second issue was the idea that the proletarian revolution was contingent solely on the ability of the masses to acquire class consciousness. This theory directly contradicted Marx, whose famous dictum clearly stated that “[i]t was not the consciousness of men that determine[d] their existence, but their social existence that determine[d] their consciousness.”⁷⁴ The propaganda of communism was, Trotsky argued, far from being the only relevant factor in history. In fact, the material conditions of the proletariat, as well as the domestic and international economic situation, were substantially more important factors in bringing the proletarian uprising closer. It was entirely possible that the revolution would erupt in Europe when the maturation of the class consciousness of the proletariat was still incomplete. In this case, it would be a mistake, Lenin believed, to “postpone the achievement of the dictatorship of the proletariat until a time when there will not be a single worker with a narrow-minded craft outlook, or with craft and craft-union prejudices.”⁷⁵ If the revolution was to occur, the proletariat would need a strong, disciplined party that would be capable of organising the masses in a way that would ensure the success of the revolution. However, as Lenin and Trotsky feared, it was unlikely that a party organised around the principles of Left Communism would be capable of this kind of revolutionary leadership.

⁷¹ Trotsky, “On the Policy of the KAPD,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/index.htm>

⁷² Trotsky, “On the Policy of the KAPD,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/index.htm>

⁷³ Trotsky, “On the Policy of the KAPD,” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffyci-1/index.htm>

⁷⁴ Karl Marx, “Preface,” in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), Moscow Engels Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

⁷⁵ Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/index.htm>

The Bolshevik Philosophers on Lukács and Korsch

It is clear that, during the Fifth World Congress when Zinoviev accused Lukács and Korsch of ‘ultra-leftism’, the issue that he took with these thinkers concerned their ‘anti-Marxist theories’ as well as the implications that their writings had for communist politics in Europe.⁷⁶ The Comintern leader feared, alongside Lenin and Trotsky, that the theories developed by Lukács and Korsch provided a justification for the ‘faulty’ tactics espoused by European revolutionaries. Zinoviev was not alone in attacking the Western Marxists on these grounds. The year of 1924, when the congress took place, was in general rich in the number of theoretical reviews published in opposition to Lukács and Korsch. In part, the authors of these criticisms saw themselves as continuing the task set for them by Lenin in his programmatic article “On the Significance of Militant Materialism.” Written for one of the first editions of the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism*, Lenin’s article called for the exposure of idealist tendencies behind the theories developed by ‘scientific’ philosophers as well as by those who presented themselves as the ‘democratic left.’⁷⁷ This struggle against idealism in the Western communist movement became especially important shortly before the Fifth Congress of the Third International. Thus, in one of his articles the Bolshevik philosopher Nikolai Karev outlined the problem of idealism at the heart of Western Communism. In particular, he observed that among the communist intellectuals in the West, where people generally ‘lacked sufficient materialist culture,’ it was not just the Hegelian dialectics that became popular but also Hegel’s idealism.⁷⁸ Among those to suffer from this problem were Lukács and Korsch. In his review of Lukács’ study of Lenin, Karev suggested that “Lukács belong[ed] to that group of Western European Marxists (Lukács, Korsch, Fogarasi, etc.), which, being a part of the communist movement, confiscate[d] from Marxism its philosophy.”⁷⁹

There was no doubt this new ‘Western Marxist’ trend and the Left Communist movement were intrinsically linked with one another. Karev himself suggested that the emphasis on consciousness in Lukács was due to his ‘ultra-leftists’ inclinations.⁸⁰ The same was true of Korsch. In his review of *Marxism and Philosophy*, Karev concluded that Korsch’s book, due to the priority it gave to theory over practice, was nothing other than a theoretical justification of the ‘ultra-left’ political tendency.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Pyatii Vsemirnii Kongres Kommunisticheskogo Internatsionala [*The Fifth World Congress of the Communist International*], 53.

⁷⁷ V. I. Lenin, “On the Significance of Militant Materialism,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works, Volume 33* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), Lenin Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/12.htm>

⁷⁸ Nikolai Karev, “Marksistskaya Kritika i Kritika Marksizma,” [The Marxist Critique and the Critique of Marxism], *Bolshevik* 10 (1924): 56

⁷⁹ Nikolai Karev. “O novoi knige Georga Lukacha *Lenin*,” [“On the new book by Georg Lukacs, *Lenin*”], *Bolshevik* 12-13 (1924): 116.

⁸⁰ Karev. “O novoi knige Georga Lukacha *Lenin*,” [“On the new book by Georg Lukacs, *Lenin*”], 119

⁸¹ Nikolai Karev, “K. Korsch. Marksizm i filozofia” [“K. Korsch. Marxism and Philosophy,”] *Bolshevik* 8-9 (1924): 119.

The problems that early Soviet philosophers saw in Lukács and Korsch unmistakably resembled Trotsky's criticism of Left Communists. The Bolshevik thinkers unanimously agreed that the Western Marxists were giving undue prominence to the role of consciousness and propaganda in revolution. One of the most extensive analyses of this was given by the Hungarian communist Professor Ladislaus Rudas in a series of articles for the Moscow-based *Bulletin of the Communist Academy*. Reconstructing the argument in *History and Class Consciousness*, Rudas argued that Lukács' rejection of the existence of dialectics in nature necessarily implied that the dialectics emerged with human beings and were, therefore, a human creation.⁸² The restriction of dialectics to the sphere of socio-historical activity amounted to denying the scientific character of the dialectical method and turning it from an objective law into a subjective one.⁸³ Lukács' approach to the study of dialectics prompted Rudas to accuse the author of *History and Class Consciousness* of subjective idealism. Although this charge was rather far-fetched, it demonstrates that at the core of Rudas' concerns was the fact that Lukács placed the cognising subject at the centre of his theory. Since he made class consciousness the most important historical factor that had to be present for the outbreak of revolution, it meant that it was theory rather than practice that became the driving force for the masses.⁸⁴ Rudas believed that this conception of politics made Lukács incapable of taking into account real revolutionary factors such as the development of the forces of production. His voluntary ignorance about relevant material conditions motivated Lukács to embrace the idea that political and social changes depended on the will of the class-conscious proletariat to bring about the revolutionary moment. Regarding this, Rudas wrote:

[C]onsciousness turns out to be something that, at the end, determines the outcome of "any class struggle." We need to take into account and accept the fact that Comrade Lukács is an idealist for whom the determining factor of history lies in consciousness. I would like to pay attention to something else: to that moment ("Augenblick") that determines this role in history, in the outcome of class struggle. [...] Even the transition from the kingdom of necessity into "the kingdom of freedom" that is so important to Lukács he envisions as this one moment. [...] We will have to fall into despair about the "fate of the revolution and humanity" if it depends on these moments. Even if an occasional moment can be correctly used, the vast majority will, most likely, be missed. We no longer have Lenin who knew how to use these moments correctly. What is to be done? It seems that the

⁸² Laslo Rudas, "Ortodoksal'nii Marksizm," ["Orthodox Marxism"], *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoi Akademii* 8 (1924): 292.

⁸³ Rudas, "Ortodoksal'nii Marksizm," ["Orthodox Marxism"], 292.

⁸⁴ Rudas, "Ortodoksal'nii Marksizm," ["Orthodox Marxism"], 294-295.

revolution is destined for failure and humanity, then, is most likely destined for ruin. What a bleak prospect!⁸⁵

If anything, Lukács' failure to consider the importance of objective, material factors and his reliance solely on the ability of the proletariat's will to spark the revolution spoke of his voluntarism.⁸⁶ In this respect, there appeared to be a certain parallel between Lukács and the controversial Russian revolutionary Alexander Bogdanov criticised earlier by Lenin.⁸⁷ Rudas went so far as to say that "Comrade Lukács is nothing other than an internationalised Bogdanov. An "internationalised one" because he is not alone but drags with himself the entire "school" [...] that as of now consists of Korsch, Fogarashi, Revai, etc."⁸⁸ Bogdanov's philosophy of empirio-criticism, Rudas observed, also rooted practical activity in the human will and consciousness. Specifically, it explained the possibility of action to be a result of the development of the 'activity of the will,' which was in turn conditioned by the activity of the psyche.⁸⁹ Just like Bogdanov, Lukács made consciousness the basis of human activity and, therefore, betrayed a deeply subjectivist and voluntarist character of his theory.⁹⁰ In addition to this, another Russian communist, Professor Israel Weinstein, suggested that, much like Bogdanov's theory of specialisation that criticised the capitalist principle of the division of labour for impeding the development of a rounded worldview in the proletariat, Lukács' theory of reification similarly obscured the important reality of class struggle with unnecessary allusions to class consciousness that were, in fact, incapable of accounting for the problems of capitalism.⁹¹ The drawbacks of the system, Weinstein believed, lay not in the reification of human consciousness but rather in the inherent inability of capitalism to make production rational and effective.

Thus, it appeared to Soviet Marxists that Lukács attributed too much importance to the role of subjectivity in human history. Abraham Deborin, a Soviet Marxist philosopher and professor at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union⁹², believed alongside Rudas that Lukács' excessive subjectivism stemmed primarily from his rejection of the existence of dialectics in nature.⁹³ Behind

⁸⁵ Laslo Rudas, "Lukach, kak teoretik klassovogo soznaniya," ["Lukacs as a Theorist of Class Consciousness"], *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoi Akademii* 9 (1924): 240.

⁸⁶ Abraham Deborin, "G. Lukach i ego kritika marksizma," ["G. Lukacs and his Critique of Marxism,"] *Pod znamenem marksizma* 6-7 (1924): 57

⁸⁷ Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018): 21-30. <https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.7591/9781501732195>

⁸⁸ Laslo Rudas, "Preodolenie kapitalisticheskogo oveschestvleniya ili dialechicheskaya dialektika tov. Lukacha,," ["The Overcoming of the Capitalist Reification or the Dialectical Dialectics of Comrade Lukacs"], *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoi Akademii* 10 (1924): 5.

⁸⁹ Aleksander Bogdanov, *Empiriomonism: Essays in Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2020): 203.

⁹⁰ Rudas, "Preodolenie kapitalisticheskogo oveschestvleniya ili dialechicheskaya dialektika tov. Lukacha,," ["The Overcoming of the Capitalist Reification or the Dialectical Dialectics of Comrade Lukacs"], 26.

⁹¹ Israel Weinstein, "G. Lukach i ego teoriya oveschestvleniya," ["G. Lukacs and his Theory of Reification"], *Pod znamenem marksizma* 10-11 (1924): 39.

⁹² Alex Levant, "From the History of Soviet Philosophy: Lukács - Vygotsky - Ilyenkov", *Historical Materialism* 19, 3 (2011): 176-180, doi: <https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1163/156920611X592878>

⁹³ Deborin, "G. Lukach i ego kritika marksizma," ["G. Lukacs and his Critique of Marxism,"] 66.

Lukács' attempt to restrict the dialectical method to social and historical reality, Deborin saw a 'subjectivist' assumption that all changes that happened in the world were products of human consciousness. According to Deborin, this implied that Lukács could not acknowledge the impact that the external world, which was incidentally also in the constant state of 'dialectical' change, had on human consciousness. In other words, for Lukács, consciousness became a true 'demiurge of reality.'⁹⁴ In contrast to this, Soviet thinkers recognised that human beings were a part of an ever-changing, and hence, dialectical environment around them. The natural law of dialectics, Rudas echoed Deborin, applied to society just as much as to nature.⁹⁵ He wrote: "Human beings have consciousness and even believe that this consciousness determines the fate of the world. (We are yet to see that this is a fantasy of Lukács!) [...] It was always the task of materialists to fight this opinion. [... In fact, h]uman consciousness is the product of the world that surrounds it!"⁹⁶

Thus, according to Soviet Marxists such as Deborin and Rudas, as a part of the natural order, human consciousness was subject to the same laws of change as nature itself.⁹⁷ It existed in constant interaction with its social and natural environment and, as a result, was shaped by it. This failure on the part of Lukács to acknowledge the interaction between human societies and their material environments had immediate political implications. Namely, since Lukács could not recognise the existence of dialectical laws in nature, he had to attribute all changes that happened in human society throughout its history—and especially revolutionary change—to the power of human subjective will, whether individual or collective. According to Soviet Marxists, however, objective material factors played the decisive role in any political uprising. Revolution was a result of the process of material development. Although the class consciousness of the proletariat allowed the workers to intervene in and change the objective reality around them, it was not the only factor of the revolution and was itself conditioned by the material environment.⁹⁸

It was, therefore, the task of Marxist philosophy to discover the dialectical law that brought nature and society into interaction with one another, thereby causing further historical development.⁹⁹ Neither Lukács nor Korsch could accomplish this because their method of historical materialism was defective due to its failure to take the laws of nature into account. Thus, for Soviet thinkers, Lukács and Korsch were at fault for failing to recognise the scientific character of Marxism and for attempting to make it too philosophical. Regarding Korsch's philosophical method, one of the reviewers wrote:

⁹⁴ Deborin, "G. Lukach i ego kritika marksizma," ["G. Lukacs and his Critique of Marxism,"] 66.

⁹⁵ Rudas, "Ortodoksal'nii Marksizm," ["Orthodox Marxism"], 292.

⁹⁶ Rudas, "Ortodoksal'nii Marksizm," ["Orthodox Marxism"], 214-215

⁹⁷ Visa Oittinen. "Ontologism in Soviet Philosophy: Some Remarks." *Stud East Eur Thought* 73 (2021) 205–210. <https://doi.org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1007/s11212-020-09380-4> See also: Daniel Todes and Nikolai Kremmentsov. "Dialectical Materialism and Soviet Science in the 1920s and 1930s." Chapter. In *A History of Russian Thought*, edited by William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord, 340–67. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511845598.018.

⁹⁸ Rudas, "Lukach, kak teoretik klassovogo soznaniya," ["Lukacs as a Theorist of Class Consciousness"], 249.

⁹⁹ Rudas, "Lukach, kak teoretik klassovogo soznaniya," ["Lukacs as a Theorist of Class Consciousness"], 202.

It is important to mention a certain anxious attitude to science on the part of Comrade Korsch[. ...] The recognition of the special qualities [in philosophy]—qualities alien to science—means the return to the point of view of the pre-Marxist period, so to speak. After all, what is the characteristic of an understanding of philosophy to which Marxism put an end? Precisely this recognition of philosophy as a special mode of cognition, as a special method of truth-finding—a method unknown to science and ensuring not the relative scientific knowledge but the absolute philosophical truth. Marxism struggles precisely against this conception of philosophy as a certain uber-science that brings to humanity the absolute truth.¹⁰⁰

It was, therefore, the task of a true dialectician to find a *scientific* rather than philosophical Marxist explanation for historical developments. As far as revolutions went, since the reasons behind them did not lie in the power of human will, the explanation of the possibility of uprisings had to take into account both social and natural objective factors. To assert this did not amount to dismissing subjectivity as historically inconsequential. However, even if human will and consciousness were important, it was only due to the fact that they constituted a part of objective reality.

There was, according to Soviet Marxists, a material basis to the proletarian class consciousness that made the proletariat the only class capable of accomplishing the revolution. Specifically, the basis for its revolutionary role consisted in the fact that the proletariat was the first class whose existence was rooted in the practice of production and, more generally, in the transformation of reality around them with labour.¹⁰¹ “The being and consciousness of the proletariat are rooted in the process of labour,” wrote Rudas, “And this process of labour, therefore, is where the unity of theory and practice is to be found.”¹⁰² Without this recognition of labour as the central factor of historical transformation, one was bound to ‘misinterpret’ the character of the Russian Revolution. That is, one ran the risk of seeing the internal developments in the Soviet Union as a sign of the degeneration of Russia into state capitalism, which is precisely how many Left Communists interpreted the New Economic Policy and Stalin’s Five-Year Plans. For Soviet Marxists, however, the specificity of Russian economic and industrial development spoke only of one thing: namely, it illustrated that socialist revolutions could never be reduced to one moment (“Augenblick”) but instead constituted a protracted process of material development rooted in labour activity. It was a dangerous

¹⁰⁰ A. T. “Marksizm i filosofija,” [“Marxism and Philosophy”], *Pod znamenem marksizma* 4-5 (1924): 272.

¹⁰¹ Rudas, “Preodolenie kapitalisticheskogo oveschestvlenia ili dialechicheskaya dialektika tov. Lukacha,,” [“The Overcoming of the Capitalist Reification or the Dialectical Dialectics of Comrade Lukacs”], 47.

¹⁰² Rudas, “Preodolenie kapitalisticheskogo oveschestvlenia ili dialechicheskaya dialektika tov. Lukacha,,” [“The Overcoming of the Capitalist Reification or the Dialectical Dialectics of Comrade Lukacs”], 57.

mistake to disregard the role of production under socialism and to place, as Lukács and Korsch had done, too much emphasis on the conscious will of the proletariat.¹⁰³

There was an explanation, according to Soviet thinkers, for this subjectivism on the part of Western Marxists. As we have seen, Zinoviev located the reason for Lukács' and Korsch's mistaken approach in their social status as bourgeois 'professors.' Lukács' and Korsch's theories, Rudas argued, were not those of the proletariat but those of "intellectual[s] who experienced very little of real life, a life that is rooted in the process of proletarian production."¹⁰⁴ This charge repeated the one made earlier by Lenin and Trotsky when they accused the European Left Communists of excessive intellectualism. An undue emphasis on proletarian subjectivity was, therefore, seen as a malady characteristic of Western European communism in general. There was only one thing that could be done about this: namely, the Bolshevization. The importance of this task was excellently summarised by Nikolai Karev in his review of Lukács' study of Lenin:

Lukács as the "left" idealist has a tendency to overestimate the role of subjectivity. [...] To grasp [Lenin's theory] with all of its conclusions is the most important task of the Western communist movement on its way to the Bolshevization. [...] Only the elixir of this knowledge can be a sure antidote against the recidivism of the opportunist poison in the communist parties, be it that of the ultra-left or ultra-right.¹⁰⁵

The charge was that the theories of Lukács and Korsch did not reflect class interests of the proletariat. In this way, the Bolsheviks justified their choice to expel both philosophers from the Communist party. In 1926, the accusation of 'ultra-leftism' and 'non-proletarian intellectualism' was brought up by Stalin against Korsch, which ultimately resulted in the expulsion of the latter from the party. At that point, Korsch was already openly critical of the nature of the Soviet Union—something that no doubt had a bigger impact on Stalin's decisions than any purely philosophical deviations from the party line could be.¹⁰⁶ And yet there was some continuity with the earlier debates. Speaking against the 'ultra-left' elements in the Comintern, including Korsch, Stalin again emphasised the non-proletarian and overly intellectual character of the opposition. "The opposition reflects not the mood of the proletariat," declared Stalin, "but the mood of non-proletarian elements unhappy with the dictatorship of the proletariat."¹⁰⁷ In his other speech, referring specifically to the "bourgeois

¹⁰³ Deborin, "G. Lukach i ego kritika marksizma," ["G. Lukacs and his Critique of Marxism,"] 66.

¹⁰⁴ Rudas, "Preodolenie kapitalisticheskogo oveschestvleniya ili dialechicheskaya dialektika tov. Lukacha,," ["The Overcoming of the Capitalist Reification or the Dialectical Dialectics of Comrade Lukacs"], 66.

¹⁰⁵ Karev. "O novoi knige Georga Lukacha *Lenin*," ["On the new book by Georg Lukacs, *Lenin*"], 119.

¹⁰⁶ Ben Fowkes, *Communism in Germany Under the Weimar Republic* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984): 137.

¹⁰⁷ J. V. Stalin, "The Seventh Enlarged Plenum of the E.C.C.I.," Marxists Internet Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1926/11/22.htm>

philosopher” Korsch, Stalin urged the KPD to purge itself of the non-proletarian elements that spread the ‘ultra-left disorder’ in the Communist party.¹⁰⁸

It should be clear from the discussion above that the impatience that the Bolsheviks and Soviet philosophers had for Lukács and Korsch resulted not so much from the theory of historical materialism expounded by the two thinkers but rather from the implications that this theory had for political practice. Specifically, the inability of Western Marxists to locate the roots of historical change in the material transformation of reality through physical activity—that is, through labour—spoke of their ‘subjectivist’ and ‘voluntarist’ understanding of the role of human action in history. For this reason, the Bolsheviks blamed Lukács and Korsch for situating the possibility of revolutionary change in the will and subjectivity of the proletariat. In this respect, Lukács and Korsch were seen by the Russian revolutionary leaders as justifying the tactics of Left Communists. The Bolsheviks were strongly opposed to the latter due to its blind belief in the subjective will of the proletariat and its general ineffectiveness in establishing a genuine connection with the masses.

Moreover, the Bolsheviks believed that the European Left Communists overestimated the need for a different tactic in the West. Since the Russian leaders considered their own tactics generally applicable to the West, which subsequently led to the Bolshevisation of Western communist parties, they accused Western Left Communists of the so-called ‘left-wing infantile disorder.’ As the philosophers behind Left Communist politics, Lukács and Korsch were ultimately seen by the Bolsheviks as suffering from the same malaise as the rest of the Western communist movement. Thus, the Bolsheviks juxtaposed Soviet Marxism behind ‘universally applicable’ Bolshevism against the Western Marxism of Lukács and Korsch behind ‘ultra-leftism.’ This marks the beginning of the split between Western and Soviet Marxism—the split that would mark the history of Marxist philosophy for the rest of the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁸ J. V. Stalin, “Speech Delivered in the German Commission of the Sixth Enlarged Plenum of the ECCI,” Marxists Internet Archive, accessed August 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1926/03/08.htm>

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