

## THEORY AND HISTORY OF CULTURE



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Original Theoretical Research



### A Philosophical Analysis of the Crisis in Russian Marxism: The Case of the Don Region's Menshevik Organization

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#### Abstract

**Introduction.** After the end of the Civil War in Russia, the Soviet authorities set about dismantling the Menshevik Party. With the support of the Communist Party, an initiative group was formed in the Don region, consisting of former members of the Menshevik Party, whose main task was the official dissolution of the regional branch. The purpose of this study is to examine the system of views and ideas held by former members of the Menshevik Party that motivated them to participate in the dissolution of the regional branch. Objectives: to examine the activities of the initiative group aimed at dissolving the Don branch of the Menshevik Party; to clarify the political views of former members of the Menshevik Party in the Don region, participants in the movement, and the reasons that led them to take part in the dissolution of the Don branch of the party.

**Materials and Methods.** Documents and materials containing information on the activities of the initiative group tasked with dismantling the Rostov-Nakhichevan Menshevik organization have been identified, analyzed, and utilized. Descriptive, comparative-historical, and historical-systemic methods have been applied.

**Results.** Former members of the Menshevik Party played an active role in the dissolution of the organization's regional branch. An initiative group tasked with dissolving the regional branch of the Menshevik Party was formed amid the Soviet authorities' crackdown on opposition political forces. Another important goal of the group was to elect delegates to the All-Russian Congress, which was to officially dissolve the party within the Soviet Union. With the support of regional party bodies, members of the initiative group managed to recruit former Mensheviks into their ranks and begin the dissolution of the regional branch. Information from registration cards filled out by members of the movement shows that, prior to the Bolsheviks' rise to power, they approved of the activities of the Menshevik party leadership. But after the Bolsheviks came to power and won the Civil War, members of the movement radically changed their political views.

**Discussion and Conclusion.** It was concluded that the movement's members supported the leadership of the Menshevik Party and disapproved of the Bolsheviks' actions. However, after the Bolsheviks came to power, the movement's participants drastically changed their political views. They began to harshly criticize the Menshevik party leadership, which had gone into exile following the Bolsheviks' victory in the Civil War, and fully endorsed the political actions of the Soviet authorities. It is highly likely that former party members concealed their true political views due to the repression against other socialist parties. At the same time, some of them may have actually changed their political views. Despite this, the leadership of the South-Eastern Bureau of the RCP(b) did not allow the initiative group to fully accomplish the goals and tasks set before them.

**Keywords:** action group, Communist Party, Mensheviks, organization, political views

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## Философское осмысление кризиса русского марксизма на примере донской организации меньшевиков

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### Аннотация

**Введение.** После завершения Гражданской войны в России советские власти приступили к разгрому партии меньшевиков. При поддержке коммунистической партии на Дону была создана инициативная группа, состоявшая из бывших членов партии меньшевиков, главной задачей которой была официальная ликвидация отделения на территории региона. Цель работы – рассмотреть систему взглядов и идей бывших членов партии меньшевиков, побудивших их принять участие в ликвидации регионального отделения. Задачи: рассмотреть деятельность инициативной группы по ликвидации донского отделения партии меньшевиков, выяснить политические взгляды бывших членов партии меньшевиков на Дону – участников движения, причины, заставившие их принять участие в ликвидации донского отделения партии.

**Материалы и методы.** Выявлены, проанализированы и использованы документы и материалы, содержащие сведения о деятельности инициативной группы по ликвидации Ростово-Нахичеванской организации меньшевиков. Применяются описательный, сравнительно-исторический и историко-системный методы.

**Результаты исследования.** Бывшие члены партии меньшевиков приняли активное участие в ликвидации регионального отделения организации. Инициативная группа по ликвидации регионального отделения партии меньшевиков была создана в условиях проводимой советскими властями репрессий против оппозиционных политических сил. Другой важной целью группы было избрание делегатов для Всероссийского съезда, который должен был официально ликвидировать партию на территории Советского Союза. Имея поддержку от региональных партийных органов, члены инициативной группы сумели привлечь в свои ряды бывших меньшевиков и начать ликвидацию регионального отделения. Информация из регистрационных карточек, заполненных участниками движения, показывает, что до прихода к власти большевиков, они одобряли деятельность руководства партии меньшевиков. Но после прихода к власти большевиков и их победы в Гражданской войне члены движения радикально изменили свои политические взгляды.

**Обсуждение и заключение.** Сделан вывод, что члены движения поддерживали руководство партии меньшевиков не одобряли действия большевиков. Но после прихода к власти большевиков участники движения резко изменили свои политические взгляды. Они стали подвергать жесткой критике руководство партии меньшевиков, которое находилось в эмиграции после победы большевиков в Гражданской войне и полностью одобряли политические действия советских властей. С большой долей вероятности бывшие члены партии скрывали свои истинные политические взгляды из-за репрессий в отношении других социалистических партий. При этом у некоторых из них могли измениться политические взгляды. Несмотря на это, руководство Юго-Восточного Бюро РКП(б) не позволило инициативной группе полностью выполнить стоящие перед ними цели и задачи.

**Ключевые слова:** инициативная группа, коммунистическая партия, меньшевики, организация, политические взгляды

**Для цитирования.** Аганов А.А., Елдинов О.А. Философское осмысление кризиса русского марксизма на примере донской организации меньшевиков. *Научный альманах стран Причерноморья*. 2026;12(1):56–61. <https://doi.org/10.23947/2414-1143-2026-12-1-56-61>

**Introduction.** After the end of the Russian Civil War, the Soviet authorities set about dismantling the Menshevik Party. By 1923, as a result of political repression and the emigration of its leadership, the Menshevik Party no longer existed as a unified political organization. To finally crush the movement, the Soviet authorities began preparing to hold an All-Russian Congress of the Menshevik Party, which was intended to officially dissolve the organization within the USSR. To this end, with the support of the Communist Party, initiative groups consisting of representatives of the Menshevik Party were established in various parts of the country. Their goal was to hold local congresses of regional branches, the purpose of which was to dissolve the branches and elect representatives to the All-Russian Congress of the Menshevik Party. One such initiative group was established in Rostov-on-Don and Nakhichevan-on-Don in 1923. The objective of this study is to examine the system of views and ideas held by the Don Mensheviks that motivated them to participate in the dissolution of the regional branch. Objectives: to examine the activities of the initiative group aimed at dissolving the Don branch of the Menshevik Party; to clarify the political views of the Don Mensheviks who participated in the movement; and to identify the reasons that led them to take part in the dissolution of the Don branch of the party.

**Materials and Methods.** This study utilizes documents containing information on the activities of the initiative group tasked with dismantling the Don Menchevik organization, which were discovered at the Center for Documentation of Modern History in the Rostov Region. These sources are being introduced into scholarly discourse for the first time. Historiographical studies analyzing the activities of the Don Mensheviks from 1903 to 1917 have been consulted [1]. M.A. Vaskov's work [2] is devoted to the activities of the Don Menshevik organization from its founding in 1903 until the outbreak of World War I. T.V. Shchukina's study [3] is devoted to Menshevik organizations that existed in the Don Army District from 1914 to December 1917. Together with the Don historian S.G. Voskoboynikov, she analyzed the tactics of the Don Mensheviks during World War I in another study [4]. Historian E.A. Ryazantseva [5] studied the activities of the Saratov Menshevik organization in 1922–1924. This study allowed for a comparison of the situation of regional party branches that found themselves in similar conditions. In her work [6], L.A. Boeva noted that the Communist Party actively enlisted the GPU–OGPU in its struggle against the Mensheviks. This made it possible to completely eliminate the Menshevik party [6, p. 63] by the late 1920s. In his work [7], G.G. Kasarov examined the activities of the Menshevik Party in the second half of 1918. The author concluded [7, p. 45] that the position of the Menshevik Party had strengthened in the second half of 1918.

This study employs descriptive, comparative-historical, and historical-systemic methods, as well as the principles of historicism and objectivity. The application of the comparative-historical method made it possible to compare the views of the Don Mencheviiks before the Bolsheviks came to power and after their victory in the Civil War. The historical-systemic method made it possible to identify the individual elements of the subject of this study.

**Results.** Thanks to the efforts of an initiative group (S.M. Kasyanovsky, P.V. Okhlonin, S.V. Suslov), former members of the Menshevik Party, a meeting was held in Rostov-on-Don on November 16, 1923 [8, p. 100], attended by 11 former Mensheviks. The overwhelming majority of the Mensheviks present (9 people) had joined the party even before the February Revolution; the rest became members after it. The meeting was chaired by the Don Menshevik [8, p. 1] S.M. Kasyanovsky. He and another Menshevik, S.V. Suslov, addressed the assembly with reports. In their reports, the representatives of the initiative group drew attention to the fact that by the time of the meeting, many Mensheviks were beginning to leave the party en masse and join the ranks of the Russian Communist Party.

The speakers noted that the remaining party members were not participating in its activities. In light of the current situation, members of the initiative group proposed to the assembled former party members that they give the “movement an organizational form” [8, p. 1]. Those gathered expressed their views on the current situation. Thus, the Menshevik P.V. Okhlonin noted that at present the main task was “the liquidation of the Don organization” [8, p. 1]. He stated that every Menshevik must independently decide on the possibility of joining the ranks of the ruling Russian Communist Party. Another party member named Golishchev drew the attendees' attention to the fact that, despite its “valuable achievements” in the past [8, p. 1], the Menshevik Party had formed an alliance with the bourgeoisie after the February Revolution.

In this regard, he supported the idea of officially dissolving the Don branch of the Mensheviks. Suslov, the secretary of the meeting, noted that he did not rule out the possibility that the Don Mensheviks might collectively join the Communist Party. It is worth noting that the assembled former Mensheviks shared the Communist Party's view of the party's “treacherous” role during the revolution and the Civil War, which consisted in their betrayal of the working class and their agreement with bourgeois forces. Of course, they may have made such statements because they sought to avoid political repression by the Soviet authorities' punitive organs, but at the same time, it cannot be ruled out that they had become disillusioned with the party itself.

The outcome of the meeting was that the assembled former Don Mensheviks supported the initiative group's proposal to dissolve the Don branch of the party. To that end, they decided to convene a city conference in Rostov-on-Don, at which the former Mensheviks were to adopt an official declaration calling for the immediate dissolution of the Don branch. The drafting of this declaration was entrusted to an organizational Bureau elected at the meeting, consisting of five people.

Two days later, on November 18, 1923, at the second meeting, the members of the Bureau read the text [9, p. 1] of the draft declaration. Its text was fully approved by the assembled participants. The text of the declaration was published [9, p. 1] by the members of the initiative group in the November 20, 1923, issue of the Don newspaper *Trudovoy Don*.

After the text of the declaration was published in the newspaper, the initiative group for the dissolution of the Don branch of the party began receiving letters [10, pp. 18–43] from former party members, in which they stated that they “endorsed the initiative group's declaration” [10, p. 18] and were prepared to sign it. At the meeting [8, p. 6] held on December 9, 1923, the meeting's secretary, Suslov, summarized the Bureau's preliminary findings. Suslov noted that the Bureau had received feedback from former members of the Menshevik Party in the Don region, who supported the idea of officially dissolving the regional branch and had submitted statements of their endorsement of the declaration. He also stated that the Don Mensheviks “viewed negatively” [8, p. 6] toward the speeches made abroad by the leaders of the Menshevik Party, and that their letters had been published in the newspaper “*Trudovoy Don*” by the time of the meeting. Those gathered deemed the Bureau's work “satisfactory” [8, p. 6] and instructed it to publish articles in regional

newspapers outlining the goals and objectives of the initiative group aimed at dissolving the Don branch of the Menshevik Party. In addition, to attract supporters, the Bureau was to hold meetings at enterprises in Rostov and Nakhichevan where former members of the Menshevik Party worked.

Some former members of the Menshevik Party supported the initiative of the liquidation bureau, which was tasked with officially dissolving the movement in the Don region. As part of this process, they filled out registration cards issued by the bureau, in which they answered a series of questions. In them, the former party members, in addition to providing their personal details and the date of their joining the Mensheviks, described what “seemed most correct in the Mensheviks’ program and tactics in 1917” [9, p. 2] (referring to the events between the February and October Revolutions). The other two questions concerned when the former party members experienced a “change of views” [9, p. 2], that is, when they began to doubt the party’s course and in connection with “which issues most shook their Menshevik views” [9, p. 2]. In fact, the discussion centered on various political actions of the party. Other questions concerned the choice of the country’s path of development (through the establishment of democracy or the dictatorship of the proletariat), attitudes toward Soviet Russia’s withdrawal from World War I, the Civil War, the Bolsheviks’ policy of “war communism” from 1918 to 1921, the national question, and the intelligentsia. The last two questions concerned the former Mensheviks’ views on the introduction of the New Economic Policy in Soviet Russia and their attitude “toward the military discipline of the Communist Party” [9, p. 2]. Of course, it must be noted that the responses of the former Mensheviks cannot be fully trusted, as they may have refrained from expressing their true views on a particular issue out of fear of political repression by the punitive organs of the Soviet authorities.

Former members of the Menshevik Party gave similar answers to most questions. In the Mensheviks’ program and tactics of 1917, party members were drawn to “cooperation with bourgeois parties” [9, p. 2], “universal suffrage and a parliamentary republic” [9, p. 7], “the parliamentary method of struggle” [9, p. 8], support for the idea of convening a Constituent Assembly and “opposition to civil war” [9, p. 13], the nationalization of industry, and the introduction of democratic freedoms [9, p. 17]. Such answers indicate that the former Don Mensheviks fully supported the party’s course, which required the implementation of a minimum program, that is, to overthrow the monarchy, establish a democratic republic, carry out political and socio-economic reforms through the convening of a representative body such as the Constituent Assembly, and form a coalition government that could include representatives of right-wing parties. On these issues, the Mensheviks sharply differed from the Bolsheviks, who were advocates of implementing the maximum program. It called for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the rejection of capitalism; that is, before the Bolsheviks came to power, the Don Mensheviks did not advocate for radical reforms in various spheres of Russian society, as evidenced by the registration cards they filled out.

Former party members gave varying accounts of when they first began to question the political course of the Menshevik Party. For some, this shift in views began after the Bolsheviks came to power [9, p. 16] and the attempts to establish Soviet power in the Don region in early 1918; for others, it occurred during General A.I. Denikin’s rule in southern Russia (1918–1919), and the reason was the policy of “compromise” toward the “bourgeoisie,” as well as “slander and criticism” [9, p. 17] directed at the Bolsheviks. Another reason cited for the vacillation was the “counterrevolutionary work of the Mensheviks” [9, p. 10] in Finland, Hungary, and Germany – where attempts to establish Soviet power ended in complete failure—as well as in Georgia [9, p. 8], where Soviet power was established in 1921. For some Mensheviks, the rejection of party ideology occurred in 1920, that is, after the Bolsheviks’ de facto victory in the Civil War. The Menshevik P.V. Okhlonin noted [9, p. 13] that the shift in his views began in late 1920, when he saw signs of the introduction of the NEP, yet at the same time he approved of the policy of “war communism,” which reveals clear contradictions in his ideological views.

Most of the questionnaires filled out by former Don Mensheviks indicate that they were not in favor of establishing a democratic system in the country. They believed that “social reforms” [9, p. 24] could only be carried out through the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only one Menshevik [9, p. 23] opposed its establishment. Unfortunately, he did not explain in the questionnaire the reasons for his opposition to its establishment. In fact, most Mensheviks became supporters of Bolshevik ideology, under which no compromises with other political forces were possible, despite the fact that the party leadership had previously opposed the establishment of a dictatorship.

Former members of the Menshevik Party were opposed to World War I. An analysis of the documents suggests that they supported the Soviet government’s signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918, which led to Soviet Russia’s withdrawal from World War I despite enormous territorial concessions. They also believed that, under the conditions that arose after the Bolsheviks came to power, a Civil War was inevitable [9, p. 30] in the country. They believed that only by destroying its opponents in the Civil War could the proletariat build a “better life” [9, p. 27]. In fact, they supported the view of V.I. Lenin, who believed that if the working class came to power, a Civil War would inevitably break out in the country due to the actions of the former “exploitative classes.”

When asked about their attitude toward the Bolsheviks' policy of "war communism," the overwhelming majority of Mensheviks approved of its implementation. They believed that the Bolsheviks' pursuit of this policy during the Civil War was necessary and inevitable for the defeat of their political opponents. Only the former Menshevik L.A. Grachev stated in his questionnaire that he considered the implementation of the "war communism" policy to be "an incorrect step and tactic" [9, p. 17]. In fact, the former Mensheviks supported the Bolsheviks' actions during the Civil War, in which the Soviet authorities nationalized enterprises and seized necessary resources from the countryside through food requisitioning, because this system had proven effective and allowed them to defeat their political opponents.

As advocates of proletarian internationalism, former party members noted on their registration cards that they supported all actions taken by the Communist Party in resolving the national question. Like the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks believed that after the overthrow of the monarchy in Russia, it was necessary to remove all national restrictions that had existed in late imperial Russia. They believed that resolving this issue would strengthen the position of the working class and help overthrow the capitalist system in Western countries.

Former Mensheviks viewed the actions of the Russian intelligentsia during the revolutionary events of 1917 and the Civil War with disapproval. Some Mensheviks acknowledged the important role of the intelligentsia in "Russia's liberation movement" [9, p. 9], but noted that after the February Revolution, it had renounced radical action and failed to take the lead in the workers' movement, as it did not believe in the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat in the country. In fact, in their documents, the Mensheviks declared the "treacherous" role of the Russian intelligentsia, which, in their view, had betrayed revolutionary ideals and was unwilling to transfer power to the workers. The Bolsheviks held a similar position.

The former Mensheviks also viewed the introduction of the New Economic Policy favorably, though they regarded it as a "temporary phenomenon" [9, p. 30]. They believed that implementing this policy would restore state-owned industry and pull the country out of the severe crisis that had arisen following the end of the Civil War. At the same time, they viewed the NEP as a transitional stage from capitalism to socialism and did not share the concerns of some Bolshevik party leaders. In fact, they supported the viewpoint of V.I. Lenin, leader of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and head of the Soviet government, who had initiated the introduction of this policy. The information in the registration cards allows us to conclude that the former Mensheviks supported the strict discipline established within the Bolshevik Party, under which Communists who disagreed with a particular decision were required to submit to the decisions of the majority. At the same time, strong "military discipline" [9, p. 42] within the Bolshevik Party, according to one of the Mensheviks, was necessary for victory over "capitalist governments" [9, p. 42]. Of course, the Mensheviks with extensive pre-revolutionary experience remembered the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903, at which the party split into two factions: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. One of the reasons for the split was the issue of strict centralism, which the Mensheviks opposed. It is quite possible that, in time, the former Don Mensheviks came to recognize that the iron discipline established by the Bolsheviks had led to their victory, the seizure of political power, and the defeat of their opponents in the Civil War.

The Don Mensheviks managed to accomplish a great deal as part of their efforts to suppress the movement in the region. Their representatives took part in the work [10, p. 129] the Donetsk Provincial Conference of Former Social Democrats, which took place on January 12, 1924, in Bakhmut, and from February 1 to 3, 1924, they participated in the sessions of the All-Ukrainian Congress of Former Members of the RSDLP (Mensheviks). At that congress, its members allocated two seats [10, p. 138] to the Southeast for the future All-Russian Liquidation Congress. After the congress, the leaders of the initiative group appealed [10, p. 10] to the South-Eastern Bureau of the RCP(b) for permission to hold a regional conference of former Social Democrats to elect representatives to the All-Russian Congress, which was to officially liquidate the party. But upon facing a refusal from the South-Eastern Bureau of the RCP(b), the Mensheviks began to realize that their work was coming to an end. On May 18, 1924, they held a liquidation meeting [9, p. 48], at which they condemned the actions of the party leadership, which was abroad, for having split the party. In connection with the party leadership's "treacherous" policy toward the working class, the meeting stripped it of the right to speak on behalf of the regional branch. Former party members were advised to join the Communist Party. At the same time, the Communist Party leadership refused to convene an All-Russian Congress to dissolve the Menshevik Party. Consequently, in the fall of 1924, on the instructions of the Central Committee of the RCP(b), all initiative groups working to dissolve the movement in the regions were disbanded.

**Discussion and Conclusion.** Thus, the initiative group established in Rostov-on-Don to dissolve the Don Menshevik organization succeeded in getting its work organized and in recruiting former Mensheviks who fully endorsed the actions of the Dissolution Bureau. The registration cards filled out by former Mensheviks, despite the similarity of their answers, reveal a shift in their ideological views between 1917 and 1923. An analysis of these cards leads to the conclusion that, prior to the Bolsheviks' rise to power in October 1917, the Mensheviks fully supported the party leadership's course, which consisted of implementing the minimum program (establishing a democratic republic and carrying out a series of

social reforms). In this, they differed from the Bolsheviks, who advocated the implementation of the maximum program, that is, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the rejection of compromises with other political forces.

However, following the Bolsheviks' rise to power and their victory in the Civil War, the ideological views of the members of the Menshevik Party began to shift. An analysis of documents shows that, as political repression against the party by the Soviet authorities began, former Mensheviks started to criticize the actions of the party leadership. Of course, former Mensheviks may have provided false information on their registration cards to avoid political repression, or their ideological views may have genuinely shifted over time. Former Mensheviks almost entirely supported the political reforms carried out by the Communist Party between 1918 and 1921, which sharply contradicted the ideological views they had previously held. Despite this, the leadership of the South-Eastern Bureau of the RCP(b) prohibited former Mensheviks from holding a regional conference of former Social Democrats to elect delegates to the All-Russian Congress, which was intended to officially dissolve the Menshevik Party throughout the country, and the initiative group itself was unable to fully achieve its objectives.

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