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ARTICLE

FLASH-LIGHTS OF THE AMSTERDAM CONGRESS.

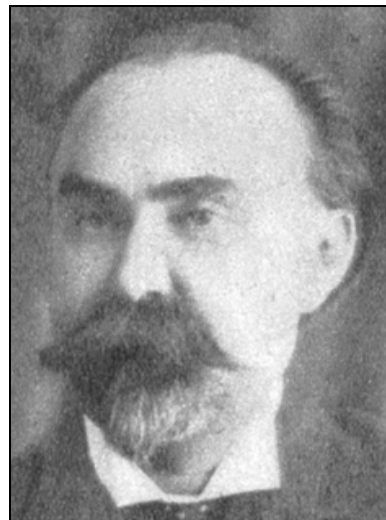
[Rather than try to give a condensed report of the Amsterdam Congress and what I saw of the European Movement in general, I shall present a series of articles under the above general head, subdivided under special heads. This flash-light method will be on the whole better. It will deal in detail with persons and things; and the flash-lights will, in the end, be seen to run into one another and portray the scene more effectively.—DANIEL DE LEON.]

V.

GEORGE PLECHANOFF.

IN order to safely judge men, their race, their language and the literature of their country should be known. He who is not versed upon these three sources of information will not, unless he be a reckless mind, venture upon a positive estimate. My knowledge of the stock Russian is limited, perhaps still more limited is my knowledge of Russian literature. I can, consequently, have only “impressions” upon the Russian, these impressions being gathered from a general knowledge of their history, the acquaintance and personal contact with a very few of them, and some casual glimpses into the nation’s literature. With this caveat, I may feel free to say I can not reconcile Plechanoff with my “impressions” of the Russian. Heinrich Heine said somewhere that there were two things he could not understand—how he and Jesus came to be Jews. I should say that at the Amsterdam Congress one thing forced itself upon me as un-understandable, to wit, how Plechanoff could be a Russian. The man’s quickness of wit and action, aye, even his appearance, are so utterly French that I can not square them with my “impressions” of the stock Russian, whom I conceive to be slow in deciding, languorous in action. Two instances, culled from several minor ones, at Amsterdam, will illustrate the point.

Van Koll of the Holland delegation and chairman of the first day's session—he was subsequently and wisely made permanent chairman for all the sessions, so as to impart some degree of continuity to them—opened with a speech. Van Koll's speech sounded as he looks—dull and bovine. His face had no more expression while he spoke than a pitcher of water when the water is flowing out. Indeed, the only time during the whole Congress when I noticed an expression on his face was after he got through reeling off his speech, and Mrs. Clara Zetkin, of the German delegation, was rendering a German translation thereof. Mrs. Zetkin is the exact



GEORGE PLECHANOFF
(1856–1918)

opposite of Van Koll. Dull and bovine as he is, she bubbles over with animal spirit. Into whatever she translated, even if it was a simple motion to adjourn, she threw the fire of thrilling, impassioned declamation. Of course she did so in translating Van Koll. A faint glimmer of expression suffused his broad and beefy, though good-natured, face. He looked at the lady sideways, and, no doubt wondering at the “bravoure” that she threw into the translation, looked as if he was thinking to himself: “Did I, really, get off all that?” No wonder he wondered. His speech was of the kind that Paul Singer, of the German Social Democracy, is usually set up to deliver when time and space is to be filled. It was soporific enough to set almost any audience to sleep—let alone so large an audience, about 500 delegates, as the one that he faced, and barely one-third of which could at any one time understand the particular language that happened to be spoken. The Congress was giving distressing signs of listlessness when Plechanoff jumped to the rescue. He sat, as the third vice-chairman, at Van Koll's left with Katayama, the delegate from Japan, as the second vice-chairman, at Van Koll's right. Plechanoff had been watching for his chance. The moment it came he seized it. He rose, stretched his right arm across Van Koll's wide girth and took Katayama's hand. Katayama took the hint; he also arose and, symbolically, the Russian proletariat was shaking hands with their Japanese fellow wage slaves. It was a well thought demonstration, the work of a flash of genius. Apart from rousing the Congress from the languor it was dropping

into, and driving it to frenzied applause, the handshake of Plechanoff and Katayama at that place was a pathetic rebuke to Capitalism, whose code of practical morality was at the very hour being exemplified in the heaped up corpses of Russians and Japanese on the Manchurian battlefields. It contrasted the gospel of practical humanity that Socialism is ushering into life, with the gospel of practical rapine that Capitalism apotheosizes.

The second instance of Plechanoff's quickness of wit and action was one I already have referred to in my preliminary report. It was the assault he made in the committee upon the Adler-Vandervelde resolution, especially the part that attacked Adler. That part of Plechanoff's speech looked like a succession of forked tongues of lightning converging upon Adler's devoted head. It was a succession of French-witted epigrams, lashing what he called Adler's "doute systematique" (systematic doubt). The strokes went home so unerringly that Adler, phlegmatic though he is, found it necessary to ask the floor for an explanation, when the debate was over, and personal explanations were in order.

Apart from his brilliantly striking personality, Plechanoff's activity suggests a train of thoughts along a different line. The question takes shape, To what extent can a man in exile effect an overturn in the country that he is exiled from? That Anacharsis Klotz, the Hollander and exile, played an important part in a foreign country, France, during the French Revolution, is known. And there are more such instances. The question that rises to my mind is not what a role history has in store for a Plechanoff, a Russian exile, this side of the Vistula. The question is, Can one, long an exile from his own country, preserve such close touch with it as to become leadingly active in it at a moment's notice? "Emigrations" during troubled days proverbially became aliens from their own fatherland; when they return home they drop strangers among strange conditions. The instances of Bolivar in South America, Hobbes in England, Castelar in Spain, not to mention royalties without number, who, though long exiled, returned home and led their parties to successful victories, may suggest the answer to the question posed above, were it not for the obvious differences between such uprisings and the social revolution in whose folds Plechanoff is active, and of whose weapons he is one of the titan forgers. In none of those other uprisings did the masses count; in all of them a minority class alone was

interested, struck the key-note and furnished the music—with the masses only as deluded camp-followers. It is otherwise with the approaching Social Revolution. It is of the people, if it is anything. Can contact be kept with the people at a distance, any more than it can be kept with a distant atmosphere?

On the other hand, America, the country that many an observer of our times has detected to bear close parallel with Russia in more than one typical respect, remains to all intents and purposes an unknown land to Plechanoff. In a letter from Mrs. Corinne S. Brown, of Chicago—one of the delegates of the Socialist party at Amsterdam—to the Milwaukee *Social Democratic Herald*, the lady declares that the Congress was a “great revelation” to her, inasmuch as “it was surprising to note of how little importance the United States is among those continentals.” The observation is correct. It includes Plechanoff. Thus, while the unwilling imperial cannon of Japan is signalling for a political revolution in autocratic Russia; while the capitalist system is making giant strides towards transforming the face of the Muscovite’s realm; while here in America Capitalism, having reached its acme, is kicking over one by one the liberal ladders by which it climbed to the topmost rung, and has begun to swing back into absolutism via all the devious paths of popular corruption and political chicanery; while these events, big with results, are both noisily and noiselessly proceeding on their course towards a kissing point, raising Russia ever nearer to the American standard, and lowering America ever nearer to the Russian level;—in short, while this evolution is taking place Plechanoff is fatedly, and that unbeknown to himself, becoming more and more an alien in Russia, and at the same time, as to America, he probably has of the country no clearer idea than that it is a quarter from some quarter of which considerable funds flow towards the propaganda that he carries {on}.

Unless untimely death deprive{s} the Revolutionary Movement of Europe of the services of this valiant paladin, the career of George Plechanoff promises to furnish an intensely interesting sociologic specimen, to which the historian of the future will turn his eyes for direction, for example and for scrutiny.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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