# Mensheviks

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*This article is about the Mensheviks as a faction inside the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. For the history of the Menshevik movement as an independent political party after 1912, see* [*Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Mensheviks)*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Social_Democratic_Labour_Party_(Mensheviks))*.*

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The **Mensheviks** (sometimes called **Menshevists** [Russian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_language): меньшевик) were a [faction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_faction) of the Russian [socialist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist) movement that emerged in 1904 after a dispute in the [Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Social-Democratic_Labour_Party) between [Vladimir Lenin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin) and [Julius Martov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Martov), leading to the party splitting into two factions, one being the Mensheviks and the other being the [Bolsheviks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolsheviks). The dispute originated at the [Second Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Congress_of_the_RSDLP) of that party, ostensibly over minor issues of party organization. Martov's supporters, who were in the minority in a crucial vote on the question of party membership, came to be called "*Mensheviks*", derived from the Russian word **меньшинство** (*men'shinstvo*, "*minority*"), whereas Lenin's adherents were known as "[Bolsheviks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolsheviks)", from *bol'shinstvo* ("*majority*").

The Mensheviks subscribed to an [Orthodox Marxist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodox_Marxist) view of social and economic development, believing that socialism could not be achieved in Russia due to its backwards economic conditions, and that Russia would first have to experience a bourgeoisie revolution and go through a capitalist stage of development before socialism was technically possible and before the working class was able to develop the necessary consciousness for a [socialist revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proletarian_revolution). The Mensheviks were thus opposed to the Bolshevik idea of a [Vanguard party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanguard_party) and pursuit of socialist revolution in Russia.

Neither side held a consistent majority over the course of the congress. The split proved to be long-standing and had to do both with pragmatic issues based in history such as the failed [revolution of 1905](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_revolution_of_1905), and theoretical issues of class leadership, class alliances, and interpretations of [historical materialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_materialism). While both factions believed that a "*bourgeois democratic*" revolution was necessary, the Mensheviks generally tended to be more moderate and were more positive towards the [liberal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberalism) opposition and the dominant peasant-based [Socialist Revolutionary party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Revolutionary_party).

## The split

At the [2nd Congress of the RSDLP](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Congress_of_the_RSDLP) in August 1903, Lenin and Martov disagreed, first about which persons should be in the editorial committee of the party newspaper [*Iskra*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iskra), and then about the definition of a "*party member*" in the future party statute. While the difference in the definitions was very small, with Lenin's being slightly more exclusive (Lenin's formulation required the party member to be a member of one of the party's organizations, whereas Martov's only stated that he should work *under the guidance* of a party organization), it was indicative of what became an essential difference between the philosophies of the two emerging factions: Lenin argued for a small party of professional revolutionaries with a large fringe of non-party sympathizers and supporters, whereas Martov believed it was better to have a large party of activists with broad representation.

Martov's proposal was accepted by the majority of the delegates. After several delegates, including representatives of the [Jewish Bund](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Jewish_Labour_Bund_in_Lithuania,_Poland_and_Russia), stormed out of the Congress in protest for unrelated reasons, Lenin's supporters won a slight majority, which was reflected in the composition of the [Central Committee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Committee) and the other central Party organs elected at the Congress. That was also the reason behind the naming of the factions. (It was later hypothesized that Lenin had purposely offended some of the delegates in order to have them leave the meeting in protest, giving him a majority.) Despite the outcome of the congress, the following years saw the Mensheviks gathering considerable support among regular [Social Democrats](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Democrat) and effectively building up a parallel party organization.

## 1903–1917

In 1906, at the [4th Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th_Congress_of_the_Russian_Social_Democratic_Labour_Party), a reunification was formally achieved. In contrast to the Second Congress, the Mensheviks were in the majority from start to finish; yet, Martov's definition of a party member, which had prevailed at the First Congress, was replaced by Lenin's. On the other hand, numerous disagreements regarding alliances and strategy emerged. The two factions kept their separate structures and continued to operate separately.

Just as before, both factions believed that Russia was not developed to a point at which socialism was possible and believed that the revolution for which they fought to overthrow the [Tsarist regime](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Russia) would be a bourgeois democratic revolution. Both believed that the working class had to contribute to this revolution. However, after 1905, the Mensheviks were more inclined to work with the liberal "*bourgeois*" democratic parties such as the [Constitutional Democrats](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitutional_Democrats), because these would be the "*natural*" leaders of a bourgeois revolution.

In contrast, the Bolsheviks didn't believe that the Constitutional Democrats were capable of sufficiently radical struggle and tended to advocate alliances with peasant representatives and other radical socialist parties such as the [Socialist Revolutionaries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Revolutionaries). In the event of a revolution, this was meant to lead to a [dictatorship of the proletariat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dictatorship_of_the_proletariat) and the peasantry, which would carry the bourgeois revolution to the end. The Mensheviks came to argue for predominantly legal methods and trade union work, while the Bolsheviks favored armed violence.

Some Mensheviks left the party after the defeat of 1905 and joined legal opposition organizations. After a while, Lenin's patience wore out with their compromising and in 1908 he called these Mensheviks "[*liquidationists*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liquidationism)".

In 1912, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party went through its final split, with the Bolsheviks constituting the [Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Bolsheviks)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_Party_of_Soviet_Union) and the Mensheviks the [Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Mensheviks)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Social_Democratic_Labour_Party_(Mensheviks)).

The Menshevik faction split further in 1914 at the beginning of World War I. Most Mensheviks opposed the war, but a vocal minority supported it in terms of "*national defense*".

### 1917 Revolution



Leaders of the Menshevik Party at [Norra Bantorget](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norra_Bantorget) in [Stockholm](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholm), [Sweden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweden), May 1917. [Pavel Axelrod](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavel_Axelrod), [Julius Martov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Martov) and [Alexander Martinov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Martinov)

After the overthrow of the [Romanov dynasty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanov_dynasty) by the [February Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_Revolution) in 1917, the Menshevik leadership led by [Irakli Tsereteli](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irakli_Tsereteli) demanded that the government pursue a "*fair peace without* [*annexations*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annexation)", but in the meantime supported the war effort under the slogan of "*defense of the revolution*". Along with the other major Russian socialist party, the [Socialist Revolutionaries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist-Revolutionary_Party) (эсеры), the Mensheviks led the emerging network of [Soviets](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_Union), notably the [Petrograd Soviet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrograd_Soviet) in the capital, throughout most of 1917.

With the collapse of the monarchy, many social democrats viewed previous tactical differences between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks as a thing of the past and a number of local party organizations were merged. When Bolshevik leaders [Lev Kamenev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lev_Kamenev), [Joseph Stalin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Stalin) and [Matvei Muranov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matvei_Muranov) returned to Petrograd from [Siberian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siberia) exile in early March 1917 and assumed the leadership of the Bolshevik party, they began exploring the idea of a complete re-unification of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks at the national level, which Menshevik leaders were willing to consider. However, Lenin and his deputy [Grigory Zinoviev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigory_Zinoviev) returned to Russia from their [Swiss](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swiss) exile on April 3, 1917 and re-asserted control of the Bolshevik party by late April 1917, taking it in a more radical, anti-war direction. They called for an immediate revolution and the transfer of all power to the [Soviets](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_(council)), which made any re-unification impossible.

In March–April 1917 the Menshevik leadership conditionally supported the newly formed liberal [Russian Provisional Government](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Provisional_Government). After the collapse of the first Provisional Government on May 2, 1917 over the issue of annexations, Tsereteli convinced the Mensheviks to strengthen the government for the sake of "*saving the revolution*" and enter a socialist-liberal coalition with Socialist Revolutionaries and liberal Constitutional Democrats, which they did on May 4, 1917 (Old Style). With Martov's return from European exile in early May, the left wing of the party challenged the party's majority led by Tsereteli at the first post-revolutionary party conference on May 9, but the Right wing prevailed 44–11. From that point on, the Mensheviks had at least one representative in the Provisional Government until it was overthrown by the Bolsheviks during the [October Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Revolution) of 1917.

With the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks clearly diverging, Russian Mensheviks and non-factional social democrats returning from European and American exile in spring-summer of 1917 were forced to take sides. Some re-joined the Mensheviks. Some, like [Alexandra Kollontai](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandra_Kollontai), joined the Bolsheviks directly. A significant number, including [Leon Trotsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Trotsky) and [Adolf Joffe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Joffe), joined the non-factional [Petrograd](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrograd)-based anti-war group called [Mezhraiontsy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mezhraiontsy), which merged with the Bolsheviks in August 1917. A small but influential group of social democrats associated with [Maxim Gorky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxim_Gorky)'s newspaper [*Novaya Zhizn*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novaya_Zhizn) (*New Life*) refused to join either party.

## After the 1917 Revolution



[Noe Zhordania](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noe_Zhordania), Menshevik leader and Prime Minister of Georgia

This split in the party crippled the Mensheviks' popularity, and they received 3.2% of the vote during the [Russian Constituent Assembly](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Constituent_Assembly) election in November 1917 compared to the Bolsheviks' 25 percent and the Socialist Revolutionaries' 57 percent. The Mensheviks got just 3.3% of the national vote, but in the Transcaucasus they got 30.2% of the vote. 41.7% of their support came from the Transcaucasus. In [Georgia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_(country)) c.75% voted for them. The right wing of the Menshevik party supported actions against the Bolsheviks, while the left wing, the majority of the Mensheviks at that point, supported the Left in the ensuing [Russian Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Civil_War). However, Martov's leftist Menshevik faction refused to break with the right wing of the party with the result that their press was sometimes banned and only intermittently available.

The Mensheviks opposed war communism and in 1919 suggested an alternative program. The Program is interesting in that after the civil war was over, a large number of the proposals were incorporated into the Bolsheviks [New Economic Policy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Economic_Policy).

During World War I, some anti-war Mensheviks had formed a group called Menshevik-Internationalists (меньшевики-интернационалисты). They opposed war and '[social chauvinism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_chauvinism)', were active around the newspaper [*Novaya Zhizn*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novaya_Zhizn) and took part in the [Mezhraiontsy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mezhraiontsy) formation. After July 1917 events in Russia, they broke with Menshevik majority that supported war. The Mensheviks-Internationalists became the hub of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (of Internationalists) ([РСДРП (интернационалистов)](http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%A1%D0%94%D0%A0%D0%9F(%D0%B8))). In 1920, right-wing Mensheviks-Internationalists emigrated, some of them pursued anti-Bolshevik activities.

The [Democratic Republic of Georgia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Republic_of_Georgia) was a stronghold of the Mensheviks. In [parliamentary elections](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary_democracy) held on February 14, 1919 they won 81.5 percent of the votes, and the Menshevik leader [Noe Zhordania](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noe_Zhordania) became Prime minister.

Prominent members of [Georgian Menshevik Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgian_Menshevik_Party) were [Noe Ramishvili](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noe_Ramishvili), [Evgeni Gegechkori](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evgeni_Gegechkori), [Akaki Chkhenkeli](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akaki_Chkhenkeli), [Nikolay Chkheidze](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolay_Chkheidze) and Alexandre Lomtatidze. After the occupation of GDR by the Bolsheviks in 1921, many Georgian Mensheviks led by Zhordania fled to [Leuville-sur-Orge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leuville-sur-Orge), [France](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France) where they set up, in a small castle, the [Government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in Exile](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Government_of_the_Democratic_Republic_of_Georgia_in_Exile). In 1930 Ramishvili was assassinated by a Soviet spy in Paris.

Menshevism was finally made illegal after the [Kronstadt Uprising](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kronstadt_Uprising) of 1921. A number of prominent Mensheviks emigrated thereafter. Martov who was suffering from ill health at this time went to [Germany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germany), where he died in 1923. However, before his death he established the paper *Socialist Messenger*. The *Socialist Messenger* would move along with the Menshevik center from Berlin to Paris in 1933 and then in 1939 to New York City, where it was to be published up until the early 1970s.

## Further reading

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## See also

* [Orthodox Marxism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodox_Marxism)
* [Russian Social Democratic Labor Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Social_Democratic_Labour_Party)
* [Bolshevik](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolshevik)
* [Anti-Leninism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Leninism)

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