Bolsheviks and Mensheviks <http://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/bolsheviks-and-mensheviks/>

  Delegates to the 8th Bolshevik party congress in 1919. - See more at: http://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/bolsheviks-and-mensheviks/#sthash.DYfVYvmv.dpuf

The Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were both revolutionary political parties of Marxist origins. Russian Marxism dates back to 1898 and the creation of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, or SDs, which itself was formed from several smaller groups. By the turn of the 20th century the SDs were Russia’s largest Marxist party. In its first few years the party platform of the SDs remained true to Marxist theory. The SDs considered the proletariat (industrial working class) to be the natural source of revolutionary energy. Since Russia’s industrial workforce was still small, socialist revolution in Russia was a distant prospect – decades, generations, perhaps even a century away. - See more at: <http://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/bolsheviks> -and- mensheviks/#sthash.DYfVYvmv.dpufBolsheviks and Mensheviks

The prevailing orthodoxy in the SDs was challenged by a young political activist named Vladimir Ulyanov, better known by his codename Lenin. In 1902 Lenin released a pamphlet entitled *What is to be Done?,*outlining his vision of how a successful revolutionary group should be composed and organised. He criticised the broad membership of the SDs, arguing that this left the party open to infiltration and agent provocateurs. Lenin also railed against the party’s democratic decision-making processes. Revolutionary parties should be organised and directed by ideology, theorists and professionals, he wrote – they should not be steered by the masses, who almost always vote to accept concessions or improved conditions. Lenin argued for a party that was small, dedicated and secretive. Its membership would be restricted to ‘professional revolutionaries’; its decisions made by an intellectual elite. This party would be the vanguard of the revolution, leading the way.

 Lenin (centre) and Martov (right) at an SD meeting in 1898.

Lenin’s theories on party membership and organisation attracted some support from members of the SDs, while others adhered to the status quo. This led to divisions within the party which manifested at its Second Congress in August 1903. Lenin called for a vote on some of the issues he had raised in his book the previous year. Lenin’s chief rival, Julius Martov, argued that the SDs should remain decentralised, with membership open to all workers. While most of Lenin’s points were defeated, he narrowly won the vote on party membership, 24 votes to 20. Most of those who voted with Lenin were young (the vast majority were under 30) and politically radical. Collectively, Lenin’s supporters became known as the *Bolsheviki*, derived from the Russian word *bolshinstvo* (‘majority’). In some circles they were also known as ‘Maximalists’ or ‘Leninists’. Those who voted against Lenin were later dubbed *Mensheviki* (from *menshinstvo*, or ‘minority’).

The same debates continued for the next decade, causing the rift between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks to consolidate and widen. By no means was it a permanent separation, however: the SD party framework was still in place, so the two factions were still affiliated and in communication. The 1905 Revolution and the tsarist counter-revolution that followed it stimulated more cooperation between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions, however the old ideological divisions still remained. At the fourth SD party congress in Stockholm, often dubbed the ‘Unity Congress’ (April 1906), Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates shared the same table – but they disagreed on almost every point. Between 1906 and 1912 there were repeated attempts to reunite the party, but all failed. Lenin and his refusal to compromise were often the stumbling block.

The split became irrevocable in 1912. In January, Lenin convened a party congress in Prague but invited only Bolshevik delegates. At Lenin’s urging, the delegates voted to break away from the Social Democrats and to form a separate socialist party. From that point the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks existed as separate political entities. A third SD faction, a small group of intellectuals calling themselves the *Mezhraiontsy*, formed in 1913 and attempted to reunify the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks into a single Marxist party, however the advent of World War I made this task almost impossible. The *Mezhraiontsy*, who included Trotsky in their number, eventually merged with the Bolsheviks in 1917.

Gifted with talented people like Martov, Plekhanov and Trotsky, the Mensheviks enjoyed high levels of support amongst urban workers and were a viable political force between 1905 and 1917. Throughout this period Menshevik figures were more visible and influential than the Bolshevik leadership, most of whom were in hiding, under arrest or in exile. The Mensheviks stood candidates for the Duma; worked with the Provisional Government; and strived for improvements for Russian workers. The Mensheviks also retained control of the SD newspaper *Iskra* (‘spark’), forcing the Bolsheviks to begin their own publication. While the Bolsheviks were slow to respond when revolution erupted in 1905, in part because Lenin was still in exile, the Mensheviks took a lead role in the trade unions, workers’ groups and, importantly, in the formation of the St Petersburg Soviet, where they enjoyed a  sizeable majority.

But the Mensheviks were not without their problems, some of which were predicted by Lenin back in 1902. Menshevik party membership was broader and contained a greater diversity of viewpoints and ideas – however this made the party more susceptible to factionalism and less decisive about key issues. The outbreak of World War I created fractures: most Mensheviks were opposed the war but some in the party’s right-wing supported it. These conflicting views about the war, along with a lack of strong leadership and the defection of Trotsky (one of the party’s most notable figures) fatally weakened the Menshevik movement. By September the party was hopelessly divided and politically ineffective, allowing the Bolsheviks to gain a majority in the Soviets and, a month later, attempt to overthrow the Provisional Government.

**5 Key Points**

1. The Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were socialist parties that began as factions of the Social Democratic party.
2. The Social Democrats were divided over issues raised by Lenin at its 1903 party congress.
3. Lenin’s faction, the Bolsheviks, wanted a party of professional revolutionaries and limited membership.
4. The Mensheviks remained truer to Marxist principles, preferring a broad-based party with open membership.
5. The split became permanent in 1912 and the two parties took radically different paths towards revolution.

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Bolshevism and Menshevism

**Bolshevism and Menshevism** (bōlˈshəvĭzəm, bŏlˈ–, mĕnˈshəvĭzəm) [[key](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/ce6pron.html)], the two main branches of Russian [socialism](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/socialism.html) from 1903 until the consolidation of the Bolshevik dictatorship under [Lenin](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/people/lenin-vladimir-ilyich.html) in the civil war of 1918–20. The Russian Social Democratic Labor party, secretly formed at a congress at Minsk in 1898, was based on the doctrines of [Marxism](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/marxism.html). At the second party congress, held at Brussels and then London in 1903, Lenin's faction gained a majority. His group was thereafter known as the *Bolsheviki* [members of the majority], and his opponents as the *Mensheviki* [members of the minority], although the Bolsheviks promptly lost their numerical superiority.

Lenin favored a small, disciplined party of professional revolutionaries; the Mensheviks wanted a loosely organized mass party. In a pamphlet published in 1905, Lenin outlined his concept of revolution in Russia: since the Russian bourgeoisie was too weak to lead its own revolution, the proletarians and peasants must unite to overthrow the czarist regime and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. The Mensheviks, led by [Plekhanov](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/people/plekhanov-georgi-valentinovich.html), believed that Russia could not pass directly from its backward state to a rule by the proletariat and that first an intermediary bourgeois regime must be developed. These differences were not always clear-cut, and many Socialist leaders, such as [Trotsky](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/people/trotsky-leon.html), passed from one group to the other and back again.

The [Russian Revolution](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/russian-revolution.html) of 1905 was a common effort of all revolutionary and reformist movements. In the first Duma of 1906, which was boycotted by the Social Democrats, the liberal Constitutional Democrats were the strongest party, but in 1907 the Social Democrats took part in the elections. In 1912 the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks formally became separate parties. In World War I, the Bolsheviks hoped for the defeat of czarist Russia and sought to transform the conflict into an international civil war that would bring the proletariat to power. The right wing of the Mensheviks supported Russia's war effort; the left wing called for pacifism.

In the Russian Revolution of 1917 the Mensheviks participated in the [Kerensky](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/people/kerensky-aleksandr-feodorovich.html) provisional government. Lenin, returning from exile in April, declared that Russia was ripe for an immediate socialist revolution. The Bolsheviks gained majorities in the important [soviets](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/soviet.html) and overthrew the government in the October Revolution. The Mensheviks opposed this coup and participated in the short-lived Constituent Assembly (Jan., 1918), but they generally refused to side with the anti-Bolshevik forces during the civil war. The Mensheviks were suppressed by 1921. Meanwhile, in 1918, the Bolsheviks became the Russian [Communist party](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/communist-party-russia-soviet-union.html).

Read more: [Bolshevism and Menshevism | Infoplease.com](http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/bolshevism-menshevism.html#ixzz2qWdJEFLS) <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/bolshevism-menshevism.html#ixzz2qWdJEFLS>

The key difference is one of hair-splitting of Marx's key elements, that of the "inevitable" progression of history.
Marx stated that as history progresses so the economic relationship between people changes; from hunter gatherer, to feudalism, to capitalism, to imperialism, to socialism finally to communism. The Mensheviks argued that Russia was just beginning the capitalist stage of development, so the main task for them was, alongside providing the workers with a Marxist framework, to help build the democratic, capitalist institutions of state. The Bolsheviks argued that the stages of history could be "telescoped" and that as Russia had been Imperialist, its capitalist stage (which they qualified as being from 1905, or February 1917 - depending on when they were asked) could be shortened, allowing for the building of socialism. So the Mensheviks thought that socialism would evolve in Russia, the Bolsheviks thought that they could, through revolution, force it to happen.

Guided Reading Questions and Terms for Class Discussion: From your readings to this point answer the following questions in your own handwriting. Your responses will be recorded as a homework grade.

1. Define yellow highlighted terms for better reading understanding.
2. What were several of the major differences between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks?
3. Why did the Mensheviks have problems within the party that ultimately causes their collapse?
4. Who became leader of the Bolsheviks and who for the Mensheviks?
5. In your own words describe how political thought and practices changed from the time of the tsars.