

The Intellectual Journey and Contributions of Riazanov Through the Lens of Marx's Biography

LIU Xun-qian

Department of History, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai 200240, China

The article delves into the intellectual endeavors and contributions of David Riazanov in the realm of Marxist scholarship, particularly through his pivotal role at the Marx-Engels Institute (MEI) following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Despite an early academic setback, Riazanov's self-taught expertise in various disciplines laid a solid foundation for his contributions to Marxism. Riazanov's tenure at the MEI was marked by significant projects aimed at collecting, editing, and publishing Marx and Engels' works, culminating in the comprehensive compilation MEGA1. His advocacy for an authentic representation of original texts underscored his scholarly rigor. Riazanov's pre-revolutionary activities and his critical stance on Bolshevik policies highlighted his dedication to a broader socialist movement. Despite ideological differences and challenges, Riazanov's efforts significantly advanced the understanding and dissemination of Marxist thought, underscoring the complex interplay between political activism and academic scholarship in the development of socialist ideology.

Keywords: Riazanov, Russian Marxism, biographical research

In the complex landscape of Marxist thought and its dissemination, David Riazanov emerges as a notable figure, serving both as a steadfast guardian of orthodoxy and as a conduit linking the theoretical underpinnings established by Marx and Engels with their practical implementation in the volatile political milieu of early 20th-century Russia. Born amidst a rising tide of socialist enthusiasm, Riazanov's intellectual voyage from the classrooms of Odessa to leading the Marx-Engels Institute (MEI) in Moscow represents a distinctive blend of academic diligence and political engagement. This paper seeks to dissect Riazanov's contributions to Marxist scholarship, with a particular emphasis on his crucial role prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. By examining his early life, ideological development, and key initiatives at the MEI, we aim to uncover the core of Riazanov's legacy, central to comprehending the spread and interpretation of Marxist ideology in the pre-revolutionary era. In doing so, we not only honor Riazanov's academic accomplishments but also situate his efforts within the wider context of Marxist historiography, underscoring the lasting significance of his work in the ongoing dialogue about socialism and its foundational theories.

David Riazanov (1870-1938), born David Borisovič Gol'dendach, became a critical figure in the spheres of Marxist theory, revolutionary politics, and archival science. He is renowned for founding the Marx-Engels

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LIU Xun-qian, Tenured Associate Professor, Department of History, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai 200240.

Institute in Moscow and leading the first extensive project to publish the collective works of Marx and Engels, the progenitors of modern socialism. Riazanov's legacy is further highlighted by his untimely demise as a prominent victim of the Great Terror in the late 1930s.

Riazanov's Marxist Research Work Before the October Revolution

Riazanov, born Goldendakh in Odessa in 1870, hailed from a prosperous Jewish merchant family. His academic journey at the Odessa gymnaziia from 1881 to 1886 ended prematurely when he was expelled due to his struggles with Greek. Yet, through relentless self-study, he later amassed extensive knowledge in history, philosophy, political economy, law, and the chronicles of the workers' movement and socialism. Starting in 1886, Riazanov dedicated himself to disseminating the principles of the People's Will group among the worker communities in Odessa. His activities soon attracted police attention, and by the autumn of the following year, facing the imminent threat of arrest, Riazanov was compelled to leave his homeland.

The academic community generally acknowledges that with Lenin's endorsement, the Marx-Engels Institute was proclaimed in Moscow in 1921, with Riazanov at its helm. His tenure was characterized by an ambitious and expansive project to collect, edit, and publish the works and writings of Marx and Engels, giving rise to MEGA1, a meticulously researched and comprehensive form of Marxist textual study (Leckey, 1995). While the success of the October Revolution and Lenin's unwavering support were instrumental, these were not the sole origins of the editorial and publishing journey of MEGA1. Indeed, Riazanov's engagement in the collection, editing, and publication of Marx and Engels' works predated the October Revolution, laying the groundwork for the extensive editorial and publishing activities of MEGA1.

Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, Riazanov only affiliated with the party in 1917. With the onset of the civil war in 1921, he was appointed director of the newly established Marx-Engels Institute. Under his leadership, the institute became a hub for talented researchers and scholars from around the globe, tasked with compiling a vast array of documents, manuscripts, and materials pivotal to the history of the international labor movement. Riazanov's relentless pursuit of inaccessible original materials, such as the Marx and Engels manuscripts from the archives of the German Social Democratic Party, epitomized his commitment to scholarly rigor. His efforts culminated in the initiation of the first "Marx-Engels Complete Works" (*Marx-Engels, Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe*, MEGA1), setting a foundational stone in the field of Marxology (Burkhard, 1985).

From a young age, Riazanov was immersed in revolutionary activities, a journey marked by repeated imprisonments and exiles. His early endeavors in teaching and journalism across European cities like Geneva, Paris, Berlin, and Zurich highlighted his evolving ideological stance, which often diverged from Lenin's, aligning more closely with orthodox Marxism. His return to Russia during the 1905 Revolution and subsequent involvement in the burgeoning trade union movement underscored his deepening engagement in the labor movement and Marxist scholarship.

Riazanov's exile years were particularly transformative, marked by a shift from political activism to scholarly research on the international workers' movement and the works of Marx and Engels. This period not only broadened his academic pursuits but also solidified his status as a leading authority on Marx-Engels scholarship, a reputation that was further enhanced by his translations of Kautsky's influential articles into Russian, significantly enriching the Marxist discourse in Russia.

The outbreak of World War I and the ensuing political upheavals interrupted Riazanov's plans, including his ambitious project to publish a comprehensive history of the First International and a four-volume compilation of Marx and Engels' articles, which remained incomplete due to the 1917 Revolution. These endeavors, however, laid the foundation for his later work at the Marx-Engels Institute, embodying his unwavering dedication to preserving and disseminating the intellectual legacy of Marx and Engels, despite the challenges and adversities he faced throughout his life (White, 2023).

Riazanov was instrumental in the 1913 publication of a seminal four-volume collection of Marx and Engels' correspondence, titled "Der Briefwechsel zwischen Friedrich Engels und Karl Marx 1844 bis 1883." While officially edited by Engels' literary executors, August Bebel and Eduard Bernstein, along with Marx's daughter Laura Lafargue, historian Franz Mehring, and Riazanov himself, the bulk of the editing was undertaken by Bernstein and Mehring. Riazanov's role primarily involved proofreading and clarifying certain manuscript passages. He was critical of their editorial approach, which involved omitting parts of letters and altering text to avoid offending any living individuals, advocating instead for a faithful representation of the original documents. This commitment to authenticity influenced his later projects, especially in publishing Marx and Engels' works.

The edited correspondence, despite its alterations, held immense theoretical value, offering deep insights into Marx and Engels' thoughts, their responses to contemporary events, and the development of *Das Kapital*, highlighting Hegel's influence on Marx.

Lenin, an avid reader, valued the correspondence for its clear depiction of Marx and Engels' greatness and its rich illustration of Marxist theory. He meticulously studied and annotated the volumes, encouraging his contemporaries to do the same, viewing the correspondence as a window into the intellectual foundation of Marxism.

Lenin's engagement with the correspondence extended to reading works mentioned by Marx and Engels, aiming to immerse himself in their intellectual realm. His notes, later published as part of his "Philosophical Notebooks," reflect a deep respect for Marx and Engels' judgments, without offering personal opinions.

The correspondence also influenced Lenin's writings, including an encyclopedia entry on Marx, where he referenced the collection to illustrate tactics in proletarian class struggle. This work, along with other references in Lenin's writings, underscores the significant impact the Marx-Engels correspondence had on his understanding of Marxism (Beecher & Valerii, 2006).

Riazanov and The Marx-Engels Institute

Riazanov returned to Russia in May 1917 and quickly immersed himself in the trade-union movement, joining the Bolsheviks by August. However, he soon discovered ideological differences with them, particularly opposing Lenin's call for an armed uprising due to his belief in the necessity of international support for socialism in Russia. Riazanov advocated for a more inclusive Soviet government, representing a broader spectrum of socialist parties, and stood against measures like the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and the suppression of press freedom. His disagreement with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk led him to temporarily distance himself from the Bolshevik party, only to rejoin following the November 1918 revolution in Germany (White 2023).

As a founding member of the Socialist Academy, later renamed the Communist Academy in 1924, Riazanov played a pivotal role in shaping it into the premier research institution for Marxist thought. He proposed

organizing the Academy into specialized departments, which later evolved into the Marx-Engels Institute (IME) under his leadership. Riazanov's efforts were instrumental in amassing a vast library on socialist history and securing unpublished works by Marx and Engels, such as "The German Ideology" and "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." These endeavors made the IME a global hub for Marx studies, attracting scholars worldwide.

To address the educational needs of Soviet students in Marxism, the IME published the collected works of G. V. Plekhanov in 24 volumes, celebrating Plekhanov's role as a pioneering and creative popularizer of Marxist ideas. Plekhanov's early commentaries on Marx, predating even those of Karl Kautsky, became a principal resource for understanding Marxist theory during this period. This initiative reflected Riazanov's commitment to fostering a deep and accessible understanding of Marxist thought within the Soviet academic landscape.

Between 1921 and 1930, Riazanov discovered a wealth of correspondence and manuscripts by Marx and Engels in Europe. The acquisition process can be broadly divided into three phases: from 1921 to 1923, Riazanov personally undertook the search in Europe; from 1924 to 1928, the Marx-Engels Institute (MEI) entered into regular collaboration with the German Social Democratic Party; and from 1929 to 1930, the efforts were primarily led by the MEI's European representative, Nikolayevsky.

Riazanov's initial visit to Europe in 1921, leveraging the purchasing strategy mentioned by Lenin, resulted in the acquisition of numerous valuable documents. In March 1930, the senior leadership of the Soviet Communist Party fully acknowledged Riazanov's work in document collection over the previous decade, stating, "Despite various difficulties in collecting the archives of Marx and Engels, the MEI has made rapid and successful progress in the past two years." This resolution, while expressing dissatisfaction with other aspects of the MEI's work, specifically recognized the value of its document collection efforts.

The diverse range of books Riazanov collected from Germany during this decade remains among the most precious materials in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (originally introduced as the Marx-Engels Museum). The archive now has a special collection for the books referenced by Marx and Engels. These documents, along with the manuscripts, correspondence, and notes of Marx and Engels gathered by Riazanov, form the foundational basis for the discipline of "Marxology" in the Soviet Union.

The Debate between Riazanov and Mehring on Marx's Biography

Franz Mehring, born in 1846, in Schlawe, Prussia (now Sławno, Poland), was a significant figure in the intellectual and political landscape of Germany during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A historian, political writer, and one of the early biographers of Karl Marx, Mehring's contributions to the understanding of Marxist theory and the socialist movement are notable. His work "Karl Marx: The Story of His Life" ("Karl Marx: Geschichte seines Lebens"), published in 1918, remains one of the pivotal biographies that shed light on the life, work, and impact of Karl Marx.

Mehring's journey into the world of politics and history was shaped by his academic pursuits. Initially embarking on a career in classical philology, his interests gradually shifted towards history and politics. His transition from a conservative nationalist perspective to a more radical socialist outlook was influenced by the socio-political upheavals of his time, particularly the rise of the workers' movement and the spread of Marxist ideas across Europe (Glen, 1983).

By the late 19th century, Mehring had aligned himself with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), contributing to the party's theoretical journal, "Die Neue Zeit." His writings during this period reflected a deep engagement with Marxist theory, and he became known for his rigorous analyses of historical materialism and the role of class struggle in shaping history.

Mehring's commitment to the socialist cause and his scholarly acumen led him to write "Karl Marx: The Story of His Life," a comprehensive account of Marx's life, work, and contributions to political theory. The biography was not merely a chronological account of Marx's life but a profound exploration of the intellectual and political contexts that shaped his ideas. Mehring delved into Marx's philosophical influences, his collaboration with Friedrich Engels, the development of his critique of political economy, and his active involvement in the international workers' movement.

One of the strengths of Mehring's biography lies in its nuanced portrayal of Marx as both a revolutionary thinker and a human being grappling with the challenges of his time. Mehring did not shy away from discussing Marx's personal struggles, including financial hardships and health issues, which added depth to the portrayal of Marx's character. This approach helped demystify the figure of Marx, presenting him as a relatable individual whose theories were deeply connected to his life experiences.

Mehring's biography also critically engaged with Marx's works, providing insights into the evolution of his thought and the core concepts of Marxism. The book covered key works such as "The Communist Manifesto," "Das Kapital," and "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," elucidating their significance in the broader context of 19th-century political and economic developments.

Despite its strengths, Mehring's biography was not without its controversies. Critics, including contemporary Marxist scholars like David Riazanov, argued that Mehring's interpretation of certain aspects of Marx's life and work, particularly "Die Deutsche Ideologie" (The German Ideology), was reductive. Mehring was accused of underestimating the significance of some of Marx's early writings and their impact on the development of Marxist theory.

Nevertheless, "Karl Marx: The Story of His Life" stands as a monumental work in the historiography of Marxism. It reflects Mehring's deep commitment to the socialist movement and his scholarly rigor. The biography contributed to the canon of Marxist literature by providing a rich, detailed account of Marx's life and work, accessible to both academics and the wider public interested in the origins and development of socialist thought.

Franz Mehring's legacy extends beyond his biography of Marx. As a historian and political writer, he played a crucial role in the intellectual development of the socialist movement in Germany and beyond. His works continue to be studied for their contributions to Marxist historiography and their insights into the complex interplay between political theory and historical practice. Mehring's life and work exemplify the commitment of early Marxist scholars to understanding and advancing the cause of socialism through rigorous scholarship and active political engagement.

Riazanov critiqued Mehring's handling of Marx's significant works as being inappropriate, accusing him of not staying true to Marx's original texts and undervaluing "Die Deutsche Ideologie" (The German Ideology). In his biography of Marx, Mehring regarded "Die Deutsche Ideologie" as a less significant supplement, suggesting that Marx and Engels wrote it merely for clarifying issues. Riazanov, however, not only was among the first to

unearth and edit the manuscript of “Die Deutsche Ideologie” by Marx but also was the earliest to recognize its significance (Riazanov, 1974). He argued against Mehring’s view of the work as ‘a less important supplement,’ stating that it was indeed very important as it illuminated the previously obscure transition from genuine humanism to ‘scientific socialism.’

Mehring’s approach to handling Marx’s important works was not only flawed in failing to remain faithful to Marx’s original writings but also in underestimating the historical significance of Marx’s key works. Moreover, Mehring erred in placing Lassalle on the same level as Marx and Engels. Despite these criticisms, as Riazanov pointed out, Mehring’s “Aus dem literarischen Nachlass von K. Marx, F. Engels und F. Lassalle” was truly epoch-making in the history of Marx studies. His excellent annotations, based on various original materials, provided crucial resources for the biographies of Marx and Engels, serving as the primary source of authentic information about the duo from 1841 to 1850 for an extended period. As the first to write a comprehensive biography of Marx’s life, Mehring’s work inevitably had its shortcomings, yet these do not overshadow its merits.

Conclusions

The exploration of David Riazanov’s contributions to Marxist scholarship reveals a complex figure whose intellectual journey and academic endeavors significantly shaped the dissemination and interpretation of Marxist thought, particularly in the tumultuous context of early 20th-century Russia. Riazanov, emerging from a background of adversity and self-directed education, carved a niche for himself as a guardian of Marxist orthodoxy and a pivotal figure in bridging the gap between theoretical Marxism and its practical applications within the socialist movement.

Riazanov’s leadership at the Marx-Engels Institute (MEI) stands out as a testament to his commitment to scholarly rigor and his dedication to making the works of Marx and Engels accessible to a broader audience. The compilation of MEGA1, under his guidance, not only preserved the authenticity of Marx and Engels’ original texts but also laid the foundational stone for future Marxist scholarship. This endeavor was emblematic of Riazanov’s broader intellectual mission to ensure that the core tenets of Marxism were accurately represented and widely understood, free from the distortions of political expediency or ideological dogma.

Moreover, Riazanov’s pre-revolutionary activities and his nuanced stance on Bolshevik policies underscore his broader vision of a socialist movement that transcended factionalism and embraced a more inclusive interpretation of Marxist principles. His critical engagement with the Bolsheviks, especially concerning issues like the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, highlights his belief in the importance of a broad-based socialist government and the necessity of international solidarity for the success of socialism in Russia.

The debate between Riazanov and Franz Mehring over Marx’s biography further illuminates Riazanov’s insistence on the critical examination and faithful representation of Marxist literature. Riazanov’s critique of Mehring’s handling of “Die Deutsche Ideologie” and other significant works of Marx reflects his deep-seated conviction that the essence of Marxism lies not only in its revolutionary fervor but also in its intellectual rigor and the coherence of its theoretical framework.

In conclusion, David Riazanov's intellectual journey and contributions to Marxism underscore the intricate interplay between political activism and academic scholarship in the evolution of socialist ideology. His unwavering dedication to preserving the intellectual legacy of Marx and Engels, coupled with his commitment to an inclusive and rigorously examined interpretation of Marxism, significantly advanced the understanding of Marxist thought. Riazanov's legacy, characterized by scholarly rigor, critical engagement, and a broad vision of socialism, continues to resonate within contemporary Marxist scholarship, serving as a reminder of the enduring relevance of Marxist theory in navigating the complexities of modern political and social discourse. Through his work, Riazanov not only enriched the canon of Marxist literature but also contributed to shaping the intellectual contours of the socialist movement, highlighting the pivotal role of scholarship in the pursuit of social justice and equality.

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