

# BORIS SAPIR

1902–1989

We deeply regret to announce the death of Boris Sapir on December 11, 1989: Menshevik from his early adolescence and for 23 years research officer of the International Institute of Social History.

Boris Sapir's contribution to Menshevism is a shining example of political perseverance and self-denial. He became a member of the party in 1919, at a time when the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks had already reduced political freedom of action to an absolute minimum. In the years following 1921 he showed great boldness and ingenuity in the Menshevik underground movement and in the Solovki concentration camp (1923–1925). After his escape abroad (December 1925) he remained active in Menshevik emigrants' organizations in Germany till 1933, in France till 1935, in the Netherlands till 1940 and then on in New York, until finally – at the end of the sixties – he was the only one left.

Even as a pupil at grammar school Boris Sapir had been much interested in social history and as a Menshevik propagandist he had widely read about West European and Russian socialism. Therefore, when in April 1936 he was given the chance to become research officer and curator of the Russian and other East European collections at the recently founded IISH, he accepted the offer with great pleasure. At first Sapir's activities at the Institute were mainly concentrated on acquiring and opening up archives which threatened to be lost as a result of the growing totalitarian movements of the thirties. The first cautious steps towards the publication of a collection of sources were rudely interrupted by the German occupation. Until 1967 Sapir worked in New York for the Jewish–American Joint Distribution Committee, which left him only his spare time to devote to his sociohistorical activities, including participation in the Interuniversity Project on the History of the Menshevik Movement.

During his second period at the IISH, from 1967 till 1986, Sapir proved himself to be a very productive historical publicist. In the *Russian Series on Social History* he published four large source editions based on the collections of the IISH. The first two were dedicated to the Populist faction of Lavrovists – not really treated by Sapir as precursor of social democracy – and the final two documented the Menshevik leaders Fedor and Lidia Dan. These publications brought Sapir international recognition as a historian and in January 1985 the University of Amsterdam conferred an honorary degree on him.

On this occasion Sapir expressed his deep pessimism concerning the future of democratic socialism in Russia. However, he became more and more aware of the

fact that in Russia individuals and groups were beginning to manifest themselves which acknowledged to be inspired by the Menshevik past. That for such groups Boris Sapir serves as a guiding light, both as a collector of Menshevik archives and as a historian of the *obshchestvennoe dvizhenie*, was proved by a telegram of condolence from Memorial in which he was referred to as “the true keeper of the social democratic tradition”.