This essay critically assesses Plekhanov's famous article on the role of the individual in history. Part I explicates his treatment of the problem of free will and determinism and argues that it is unsatisfactory. The whole issue, however, is held to be largely irrelevant to Marxism. Part II then turns to the question of the explanatory weight given to individual action by historical materialism. Plekhanov's discussion of this issue is more insightful, and the essay endeavors to distinguish between the strong and weak points of his analysis in order to lay the foundations for a more adequate handling of the subject.

Few Marxists, at least in the West, bother to read Plekhanov anymore. In terms of theory, "the Father of Russian Marxism" is remembered today largely for having been a mainstay of what many consider an out-moded interpretation of historical materialism, one which sees Marx's theory as placing explanatory primacy on the productive forces. For several decades a wide assortment of writers on Marx have repudiated such an interpretation as crude and implausible and as a vulgarization of Marx. In its place, various more or less sophisticated accounts of Marx's thought have been suggested. Recent years, however, have witnessed a resurgence of a traditional interpretation of historical materialism of the sort Plekhanov defended. Several contemporary writers have argued in detail both the exegetical claim that Marx's historical materialism involves a commitment to the explanatory primacy of the productive forces and the non-exegetical claim that such a commitment is defensible. These claims have not gone unchallenged, and the debate they have engendered has helped to stimulate further the investigation and clarification of the structure of historical materialism. Yet even if one puts aside purely empirical problems, many outstanding questions remain.

Among these questions is the one Plekhanov discusses in his famous essay of 1898, 'The Role of the Individual in History'. Concern with this topic seems inescapable for a theory like historical materialism, whose basic explanatory claims involve an appeal to social and historical forces which are thought to be more basic than the decisions and
actions of any one individual or group of individuals. Moreover, critics of historical materialism have always attacked it for allegedly playing down the significance of individuals, making them merely the pawns of history. Yet today, surprisingly, few writers in the Marxist tradition discuss this issue. To some, no doubt, the topic may seem stale — the debate was already old when Plekhanov wrote — but it remains an important one for historical materialism.

As the classical Marxist text on the subject, Plekhanov's essay furnishes a useful starting point for analyzing the perspective of historical materialism on the role of individuals in history. Accordingly, I use his essay to frame my discussion, hoping that a close reading of it will help us both to avoid certain pitfalls of analysis and to assemble some of the materials necessary for an adequate Marxist handling of the topic. I think Plekhanov's arguments interesting enough, and the subject important enough, to justify the study of his essay in its own right. But in attending to it, I do not pretend to present a full and balanced intellectual portrait of Plekhanov. That is not my object.

Plekhanov's essay runs together two topics, the analyses of which he evidently thought were linked, but which I shall argue are independent. The first is that cluster of issues that commonly passes under the rubric, "the problem of free will and determinism". I am critical of Plekhanov's treatment of this problem, but I argue that its shortcomings, while diverting us from the issues really relevant to historical materialism, do not undermine the insights of his discussion of the second issue, namely, the explanatory weight to be placed by historical materialism on the actions of individuals.

PART I: DETERMINISM, FREE WILL, AND HUMAN ACTIVITY

Plekhanov begins his essay by tackling the criticism that historical materialism implies quietism. Quietism is not explicitly defined, but the context suggests that it is the doctrine that intentional intervention by an individual or group in the historical process is necessarily impotent. Plekhanov rebuts the above criticism by arguing that no form of materialism has the implication that practical human activity is inefficacious;