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The English Master

Alexander Atabekian

June 1920

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In the spring of 1920 a delegation sponsored by the British Trades Union Congress visited Russia on a fact-finding mission. This was an important event for the Bolshevik regime, which had only a few months earlier been virtually at war with Great Britain. The delegates were treated as celebrities, but at the same time were closely chaperoned.

But the Bolsheviks were not entirely in control of the situation because left-wing opposition groups still maintained a precarious existence. Matters got out of hand when delegates insisted on attending a special meeting convened by the Menshevik-controlled printers' union in Moscow.

Detailed reports about the meeting are found in the memoirs of the Menshevik Fedor Dan and the Socialist-Revolutionary Victor Chernov, both of whom spoke at the event. The meeting was also described by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, although neither was actually present.

But there is an anarchist account of the meeting in the journal *Pochin* [The Beginning], a monthly published in Moscow. The article is unsigned but was almost certainly written by the editor Aleksandr Atabekian, an exponent of anarcho-cooperativism.

Atabekian chose as an allegory for the British visit the well known poem “The Forgotten Village” by Nikolai Nekrasov, published in 1855. The poem tells of the plight of villagers who are being victimized in various ways, and pin their hopes on the intervention of their absentee landlord (“the Master”). But help never comes; instead the landlord dies and is replaced by his equally indifferent son.

Clearly Atabekian is making an analogy between Russia’s ineffectual opposition parties and the naïve villagers. The “English Master” in fact has a message for the oppositionists, but it is one they are not prepared to hear.

“Now the Master will come,
The Master will make things right.”

– Nekrasov

Representatives of English labour organizations have come to Russia with a very well-defined goal – to study the current situation in Russia. But we, the Russians, instead of competently assisting them in this endeavour, have made them a judge over our affairs, into a Master coming to straighten out things for us.

Our ruling circles right off the bat proposed to our guests to pass judgement on the “predatory imperialism” of the government of their own country and the states allied with it, and they passed a corresponding solemn resolution.

The arrival of the English guests delighted the unified opposition parties and allowed them to put our internal regime on trial.

That was in fact the character of the public meeting convened by the Moscow printshop workers, which took place on May 23 in the hall of the Conservatory.

Here representatives of the political parties began zealously and with commendable candour to excoriate each other for the gravest villainies.

The representative of the Red Communists delivered a telling blow to the Mensheviks when he recalled that in 1918 in Petrograd they had joined an “association for the defense of freedom of the press,” which included newspaper publishers who were treacherous “social-compromisers.” But this same Communist was completely unable to prove that his party, once in power, had not offered deals to foreign capitalists in the form of concessions, had not used the services of Russian entrepreneurs as suppliers to the state, and had not established friendly relations with a crowned Asiatic monarch.

The Mensheviks, on the other hand, laid bare all the governmental persecution and violence. One thing only they forgot to mention: by what means did they themselves propose to rule if they were able to take power and hold on to it? Would they forgo persecutions, prohibitions, and prisons? Or executions and the armed suppression of mutinies?

Can state power exist in any other way? Is state power without violence conceivable?

Chernov himself – the “star” of the meeting – set forth a comparison between our current rulers and the prelates of the first centuries of Christianity, who distorted beyond recognition the communistic teachings of Christ. But would he not also become like these prelates, if he acceded to power?

The Master, in the person of a representative of English print workers, delivered a wise verdict, but did everyone there understand him?

“We also have political parties,” he said more or less, “but we don’t allow them to meddle in our affairs. We prefer to carry out the struggle for a better future ourselves, on economic soil.”

This has been the position of English workers up to the present, taking their stand on the only true platform, that of the First Workers’ International, not that of its fake, party-

dominated successors under the names of the Second and Third Internationals.

This verdict needs to be digested by the Menshevik comrades especially, who imagine themselves to be in control of the Union of Workers of the Printing Trade. The mass of printers have united not to serve as a vehicle for the Mensheviks to gain state power, but rather for the defense of their own economic interests. The printers are even less interested in political dogmas.

A convincing demonstration of this is the stormy ovation which greeted Chernov when the meeting learned his name. The Moscow printers are united around their opposition to state power, not the thirst for state power.

This should not be forgotten by the representative of the Printers' Union, who addressed the meeting not as a member of a trade union organization, but rather as the member of a political party.

This advice, in essence, was given to him by the representative of the English printers in his speech in response.

We have nothing to teach the English, rather we need to learn from them.

Translator's notes

The Menshevik leader Fedor Dan's account of the meeting is available in English in: Dan, Fedor Il'ich, **Two Years of Wandering – a Menshevik Leader in Lenin's Russia**, translated and edited by Francis King, (London, 2016), pp. 46–50. The same book contains Victor Chernov's speech as an appendix (pp. 193–197).

The printers' meeting is discussed briefly in: Emma Goldman, **Living My Life**, Vol . 2 (New York, 1970), pp. 798–799; and Alexander Berkman, **The Bolshevik Myth** (New York, 1925), pp. 150–151.

According to Dan, following the meeting, the leadership of the printers' union was subjected to a vicious campaign in the Bolshevik press and the members of the union's executive soon ended up in jail.

The Bolshevik who addressed the printer's meeting was Grigori Natanovich Melnichansky (1886–1937). He lived in the USA in 1910–1917, where he belonged to the IWW. Returning to Russia in 1917 with Trotsky, he occupied a succession of high positions in the official trade union movement before being shot as a counter-revolutionary in 1937.

Aleksandr Moiseyevich Atabekian (1869–1933), of Armenian origin and a physician by profession, was a longtime friend of Peter Kropotkin. In 1918 he co-founded the small printing and publishing house "Pochin" in Moscow, which issued a variety of anarchist material, including the monthly journal of the same name (1919–1922). Atabekian often submitted copy to Kropotkin for comment in advance of publication. Constantly subject to police harassment, Atabekian finally had to retreat to private life, earning a living in the medical field.

In 1930 Atabekian suffered a stroke and died at the end of 1933. He left a large archive in his family's Moscow apartment, but it was destroyed by a Nazi bombing raid during World War 2 (family members had either been evacuated or were at the front). A small archive of documents is found at the International Institute for Social History, but it covers only the years 1892–1894.

A collection of his writings was recently published: A. M. Atabekian, *Protiv vlasti: sbornik statey* [Against authority: a collection of articles], ed. A. V. Biryukov, (Moscow, 2013), 173 pp.