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The Problem of a Free Army

Alexander Atabekian

12 June 1918

“The struggle against the belligerent state is only possible in state form; in other words, socialism must use for its establishment the technical means, forms of organisation and techniques of warfare of the militarist states.”

(Social Tasks of the House Committees)

Our young freedom, like a small child, had to be burned in order to learn to guard against fire.

If during the world war there were differences of opinion among the anarchists about military affairs, the defeatist peace of Brest, with its logical consequences, united us all and turned us into convinced defence-minded people.

Is it not significant that it was after the peace of Brest that the idea of organising a special “black army” was born in the anarchist movement and an attempt was made to practically implement this idea?

Thus the anarchist movement recognised the principle of organised struggle.

If anarchists now preach rebellion, it is not because they are not aware of all the shortcomings of this, I would say, “ar-

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tisanal” method of self-defence against external violence, but only because the young anarchist movement has hitherto adhered to a romantic anti-militarism, and not only ignored but completely rejected the military.

Before the outbreak of the world war, the anarchists, together with the Socialist Internationalists, had placed great hopes in the possibility of preventing a European war by a general strike. This hope was so great with them, that for them the problem of an organised external defence did not exist.

This circumstance alienated the broader anarchist movement from a deeply beloved teacher.

Most anarchists disagreed with him on his attitude to militarism, just as they would have disagreed if he had preached participation in state labour legislation to combat capitalism.

Of course, Kropotkin was practically right, but a young ideological movement does not usually follow common sense, but sentiment.

History reconciled the teacher with his Russian followers in a most unexpected way.

History has destroyed the old state army that divided us to the ground.

History deprived the teacher of the hopes he had placed in the defence of the army, which had been driven away by the coercion of state power; it brought us face to face with the problem of organising a free army.

The weekly military-scientific organ “Military Affairs” has recently begun to be published in Moscow. The magazine apparently aims, under the motto “knowledge and skill are power”, to popularise military affairs.

The organ is edited by a specialist on the subject: the editor of the General Staff, A.K. Lebedev.

Since the February Revolution, I have been struck by one phenomenon. There was a deep breakdown of the huge multi-million-strong army. Everyone was talking about the military.

In the matter of the country's defence, anyone who was not stopped only by laziness could intervene. The army was headed by a talented lawyer, or an uneducated agronomist (ending his military career so brilliantly begun as a tenacious prosecutor), — and during all this time the voice of the military specialists — officers — did not reach the general public.

Political parties have been blamed, and quite rightly so, for the destruction of the country's self-defence.

But what were the military specialists, the scientifically educated officers, doing during this time?

Officers? They were waiting for orders!

In its essence, military work is a public service, like railway, postal, telegraphic, medical and sanitary work; military work also requires from beginning to end leaders with special knowledge. Such leaders in various branches of public services are engineers, electricians, physicians, etc., and in military affairs they are scientifically trained officers.

After the February Revolution, which was to change the whole way of social life in the whole country, it was clear to everyone that the army could not retain its old forms. It, too, had to be renewed.

What did the scientifically educated officers, as a professional category, do to point out to the broad layers of the people and the soldiering masses the right ways for renewal?

Exactly nothing.

We had officers with solid scientific knowledge and combat experience, but we had no officers.

There was no purely professional spirit of association among our officers, standing beyond and above political and social beliefs and views.

The army was led not by united professional workers, but by disparate officials appointed at the discretion of their superiors from above.

This is what ruined the army in the first place.

Let it not be said that the soldiering masses were hostile to the command staff. The writer of these lines worked for more than two years at the front, was in close contact, as a doctor, with soldiers of different parts and knows that there was no prejudiced, indiscriminate hostility of ordinary soldiers to the officers. On the contrary, the combat situation united them to a certain extent, simplified their relations, brought them closer together.

The truth is that we did not have a purely professional association of officers on the basis of technical knowledge, which would have enjoyed moral authority and would have been able to take into its own hands the work of army renewal from the very beginning.

Our officers in the general mass, without initiative, without social outlook, with their thinking squeezed into the deadening framework of routine, were not capable of taking the lead in the reorganisation of the army on new principles, and by habit became inert, waiting for orders from above or clinging to the decaying old forms.

From above came the political agitators, driven by the phantoms of the old power.

From above came demagogues, chasing themselves after the power that intoxicates man.

The results — we have read them in the Brest peace treaty and are reading them in Mirbach's notes.

The publication of "Military Affairs" seems to mark the beginning of the awakening of independent professional thought among the former officers.

From this point of view, any anarchist-revolutionary — for defensive war is essentially an organised revolution against external state oppressors — can only welcome the initiative of "Military Affairs".

It is high time to make military affairs purely professional, to transfer them to the healthy ground of "knowledge and skill"

and under study. It would be desirable for both ideological comrades and military specialists to comment on this issue.

instead of “what do you want?” and “I obey!” before the state power.

It is high time that such a public service as the defence of the country, which stands above the narrow programmes of political parties and beyond the incompetent minds of their leaders, should be shielded from the influence of private organisations, which alternately seize, by electoral notes or open violence, state power.

It is time to organise a new army on new principles, apart from the coercion of state power.

It is time to separate the army from state power.

The initiative to organise the new army must come from the union, I would say from the syndicate of professional officers.

Unfortunately, the new organ, edited by specialists in military affairs and intended for a wide popular circle of readers, precisely lacks this professional consciousness.

Not only that. Addressing, on the one hand, the people, the new organ still looks up to the fetish of power in the same old way.

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The editorial board even puts the publication of the magazine “in connection with the decision to carry out universal military training”.

Whose decision?

It is self-evident: the authorities.

One of the authors of the articles (M. Mishtovt) definitely says: “We firmly hope that in proceeding to organise the new

people's army, the government will immediately proceed"... etc.

The man speaks of a "people's army" but addresses... the government.

The author of another article (V. Borisov) quotes the words of the great leader, Prince de Ligne: "the emperor can appoint a general, but he cannot make one", and then correctly adds: "speciality needs work, amateurism and time."

The editors of "Military Affairs", however, apparently denying the common view among officers that the government should play a role in the organisation of the army, overlook the fact that while the army is a purely specialist organisation, the government is usually composed of persons far from competent in military affairs.

If an ordinary "speciality needs work, amateurism and time", then the complex and special matter of organising a people's army should also require not the order of an incompetent emperor-authority, but the amateurism of the officers as a professional organisation.

Authority can call any accumulation of people an "army," such as the "Red Army," but it cannot make it an army.

If the army is made by professional officers, what do the authorities have to do with it?

Won't the authorities, being essentially partisan and incompetent in every speciality, be a hindrance in the organisation of the army, and consequently in the success of the defence of the country?

That is why I believe that in the interests of the public service performed by the army, i.e., in the interests of the defence of the country, the army should be separated from the state power, the army should become a purely professional, anarchist organisation.

It goes without saying that professional officers alone do not alone constitute an army, but the army needs a professional

Both had disintegrated to give eternal life to the opportunity to build an entirely new, healthy and just social order.

But we are far from the illusion now that it is enough to stretch out a fraternal hand so that the peoples of civilised countries will unite into a friendly family.

"Military Affairs" quite correctly writes:

"As long as there continues to exist on earth a single nation which retains the right to arrange its destiny by force of arms, all others must be prepared to defend their existence and their ideals by force of arms."

Only the "weapon" itself must correspond to the ideal of the people.

For a free social order, a free army is also needed, freely federated from the smallest parts, from below, and not forcibly united from above.

To recreate an independent country means to recreate its defence capability.

Neither political parties, nor the phraseology of their leaders at congresses, nor the demagogy of meeting orators, nor the decrees and edicts of the dictatorship, which henceforth in Russia can rely only on external influence, wherever it comes from (both the Bolshevik and Cadet [parties] are the same in this respect), will give us the possibility of independent development; but a free army, laid down locally, by the people themselves, by experts in their work, by professional officers, will.

Only in this way will Great Russia gain its independence. Only in this way will it attract the former peripheries to itself by the charm of freedom. Only in this way will our socialism meet a fraternal response in the West, and our outstretched hand will not hang in the air.

Alexander Atabekian

Note. — I do not pretend that the above views are shared by the broad currents of anarchism. The question is still new

The further unifying and co-ordinating factor should be the professional union of officers, and not the coercion or arbitrariness of the authorities.

This is how I, an anarchist, see the possibility of organising the workforce in the problem of a free army.

The solution of the second part of the problem, i.e. the supply of material means to the army, follows in itself from the way the workforce is organised.

The population of each small territorial unit which has nominated its military unit will itself take care of its direct needs.

As for the general army needs, mainly technical equipment, this question must be solved on communal-cooperative principles, which I have outlined in two reports: "Towards the Organisation of Public Medicine on Communal-Cooperative Principles", published in No. 76 of "Anarchy", and in "Fundamentals of Zemstvo Financial Organisation, Without Power and Coercion".¹

I shall not repeat them in their application to the free army.

The problem of a free army is the cardinal question in the solution of the social question. "Socialism cannot be realized globally and even, at the beginning, on a broadly international scale. Socialism, in order to establish itself and acquire world influence, must put up a defence against aggressive capitalism" — I wrote at the height of the defeatist bacchanalia that preceded the Peace of Brest.²

History has its own logic. It is not immediately clear to contemporaries of the events experienced. Perhaps it was impossible to renew either the old coercive statehood or its pillar — the coercive army.

¹ The brochure is on sale in the warehouse of the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups and in the bookstore "Mediator" (Petr. line). "Mediator" (Petr. line).

² See "Social Tasks of the House Committees".

union of officers with special knowledge and practical experience.

Officers should be united by a charter-contract that excludes all party politics.

The union should be open to all professional officers, without distinction of political views, but capable of strictly separating their political and philosophical convictions from purely professional military service.

Only such a professional union of officers, in which people of the most diverse ideological directions will take part, can arouse universal confidence by its non-partisanship, unite the whole nation around itself, and create a true people's army.

An army created by the authorities can never become a people's army, because the authorities themselves are always partisan, not of the people.

"The military power of a country is composed of manpower and material means," says the already quoted military engineer M. Mishtovt in the same No. 1 of "Military Affairs". The officers constitute only one part of the "workforce", the other, the most numerous part of the workforce is made up of ordinary soldiers.

Clearly, soldiers come out of the people, in the broadest sense of the word.

What can bring the people into the army?

There are three motives: compulsion by the state power, enticement by material benefits and a sense of self-preservation.

We have already had an army composed in the first way; we have seen how it disintegrated spectacularly as soon as the chains of coercion were loosened. The people everywhere — in the rebellious Ukraine, in the starving Great Russia, in the slaughtered Transcaucasia — are experiencing on their living bodies the results of the destruction of the apparatus of self-defence. Will we, by compulsory recruitment, again put it at risk of repeating the same thing in the future?

The mercenary army, with which the authorities are experimenting right now (obviously, only for their internal domination), is not worth mentioning.

If this mode of organisation were suitable for external defence, such wealthy states as England and the United States of North America would not abandon it.

Thus, the motivating factor for uniting people, for self-defence, must be a sense of self-preservation and a consciousness of the necessity of self-defence.

How do we awaken this feeling and this consciousness in a multimillion-strong and multilingual people spread over thousands of kilometres of space?

“Military Affairs” has already found a path leading to this goal. The editors of the magazine have conceived the idea of organising an “Auditorium of Military Affairs”.

It is only necessary to expand this idea. It should not be confined to the city. It is necessary to take the auditorium to the countryside as well.

It is not the business of political parties, not the business of red-blooded demagogues, but of specialists of “knowledge and skill”. This is the business of the officers: the officers must go to the people.

But before they can go to the people, the officers must organise themselves into a universally recognised professional, and therefore non-party, union. It must not allow into its professional union any boulevard fats, worthless mama’s boys, empty careerists, limited fanatics who cannot remain neutral, and other unsuitable elements.

The officers’ union should be, first and foremost, a professional labour union.

It must first of all get in touch with the professional organisations of railwaymen, postal and telegraphic workers, etc., auxiliary to the military, and establish moral communication with professional associations in general.

In addition, before being sent to the field, the union should give special general political training to its members so that they can more easily identify the non-party, purely professional character of their activities in the field.

In this way possible persecution in the field will be prevented.

The proselytes of the free army will be covered by the prestige of the association of the officers’ union with other professional unions. The latter will also be able to defend their new brethren from the attempts of the authorities on their autonomy and self-activity.

The special knowledge of the officers is wasted on unproductive and irrelevant labour. The people are not so rich in “knowledge and skill” as to refuse their services.

All officers at a calling should unite in their professional union and then move to the people.

When the officers’ union spreads its audiences in the zemstvo, through villages and volosts, and in the cities through neighbourhoods and precincts, the living instinct of self-preservation and healthy social solidarity will unite the inhabitants of each given small territory around the apostles of the army of freedom.

In this way the second part of the “workforce” of the army will be replenished with ordinary soldiers.

If the leadership of the army, hitherto called the command staff, must become professional, then the ordinary soldiers must voluntarily unite their forces, organise, so to speak, a co-operative of singular forces.

Just as every co-operative cell has a local, organic character, so too must the initial associations of the army be local, territorial.

Only through the local organisation of village or neighbourhood platoons and volost or district companies can a solid foundation be laid for the constituent units of the people’s army.