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From individualism to the Platform

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Alexei Alexeyevich Borovoi was born on October 30, 1875 in Moscow in a general's family. However, he wasn't attracted to a military career, and after graduating from Moscow University he stayed on to teach at the Faculty of Law. Borovoi's sphere of interests was pretty wide, even in his student years and included history, philosophy, political economy, pedagogy, music, and literature. He had an interest in Marxism which he greatly respected throughout his life.

In the Autumn of 1904 Borovoi was visiting Paris on a professional business trip. A comprehensively educated person, he was intellectually ready to accept anarchist teachings, however, he came to it quite on his own, and quite unexpectedly even for himself: "No one taught anarchism to me, didn't persuade me, didn't infect me," – Borovoi remembered much later – "Suddenly, out of some unknown depths a great, well-formed, enlightening, united thought was born in me. With unusual clarity, with victorious cogency a feeling of an attitude that was new to me was born in me… I stood up from the bench in the Luxembourg Garden as

an enlightened, passionate, uncompromising anarchist, and I still remain one."

As an anarchist, Borovoi belonged for most of his life to the individualist current, however, he never shared the extremities of individualism such as the philosophical systems of Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche and always remained outside any strict confines of movements and currents. But it is doubtless that in his person anarchism has gained, to quote later researchers, "an adherent who was original, romantic and devoid of any dogmatism," a brilliant writer whose "magnificent figurativeness, daring fabulousness of style and speech betray a poet, an artist of the word, rather than what is commonly known as a theorist."

In the Autumn of 1905, when the revolution that had started a few month before was at its peak, Borovoi returned to Russia and resumed work at Moscow University. In April 1906 he read Russia's first legal, open lecture on anarchism which was a big success with the intelligentsia – "Social ideals of modern humanity."

The early Borovoi is characterized by an original synthesis of Marxist views on sociology and history with an individualist philosophy that was close to Stirnean views. He regarded the history of civilization as a succession of social systems that replace one another and are notable for the ever increasing degree of personal freedom. Feudal absolutism is replaced by the bourgeois regime with democratic freedoms and development of machinery and science. It will inevitably be replaced by state socialism which will in a revolutionary manner destroy the exploiters, the propertied classes, establish state control over all economic and social life, and deal with social problems such as poverty and unemployment. However, at the same time it will retain the spiritual enslavement of humanity by the "all-embracing authority of socialist chauvinism." The development of humanity will be crowned by the society of unlimited individual freedom naturally replacing socialism, – Anarchy. Young Borovoi considered individualism to be the only consistent anarchist system and saw in Kropotkin's anarchist com-

munism, first of all, an internal contradiction between the individual and society, the collective, as well as a denial of absolute personal freedom. Sometimes he even proclaimed that communism and anarchism are mutually exclusive concepts. Borovoi referred to the search for the way to combine the individual's absolute freedom with the interests of the entire society as the "scientific theory of anarchism" and viewed it as his chief task as a theorist. He saw the most promising ways to achieve that in the maximum development of science and machinery which was supposed to cause complete abundance of material welfare.

Starting from 1906, Borovoi lectured on anarchism in different Russian cities and took part in the activities of the Logos publishing house which printed anarchist literature without preliminary [government] permission. He also wrote several articles for an "Individualist" collection. The lectures often took the form of anti-government propaganda, and Borovoi was even sentenced to a month in gaol for one.

But Borovoi himself remained unconnected with the immediate revolutionary struggle and anarchist organisations of any sort, so the numerous Russian anarcho-communists and syndicalists viewed him as a faux anarchist who was in fact advocating parliamentary democracy in a social-democratic spirit. Borovoi was particularly scathingly attacked at the Amsterdam International anarchist congress in the Summer of 1907. One of Russia's leading anarchists Vladimir Zabrezhnev in his report "Advocates of individualist anarchism in Russia" referred to his anti-communist and individualist theories as "Nitzschean phrase-mongering."

In late 1910 Borovoi faced the threat of a court case related to the anti-state direction of the Logos publishing house. Such a crime was punishable by up to a year in gaol, so he preferred to escape abroad. After settling in France, Borovoi got a job teaching political economy and history at the Russian Popular University and at the Free College of Social Sciences, the latter of which was founded by French anarchists. His personal acquaintance with them got

Borovoi interested in the theories and practices of the French proletarian syndicalist movement and caused him to fundamentally revise his own individualist attitude. In his lectures Borovoi has now claimed support for revolutionary syndicalism which denied parliamentarism and aimed for the reconstruction of the society via social revolution. He still remained quite sceptical of classic anarchist communism though.

In 1913 the Czarist government proclaimed an amnesty for political criminals to coincide with the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. Upon his return to Russia Borovoi worked as a social and political journalist for St. Petersburg and Moscow magazines. He was also preparing a new work dedicated to the syndicalist movement. The result of this work, the book *Revolutionary Creativity and Parliament*, was published in 1917.

The second Russian revolution which started in February 1917 was greeted not just by a philosopher who dreamt of abstract ideals of anarchy. Borovoi was then an active propagandist who took part in the practical work of organisations and groups of like-minded people. As early as April 1917 Borovoi co-organised the syndicalist Federation of Unions of Workers of Intellectual Labour which united teachers, doctors etc. He also edited their paper *Klich* (*The call*). Unfortunately, the Federation didn't gain much support from the Russian intelligentsia and broke up in late 1917. In the spring of 1918 Borovoi initiated the creation of the Union of Ideological Propaganda of Anarchism and its printed organ, daily newspaper *Zhizn* (*Life*). Borovoi's comrades in the Union were veterans of the revolutionary anarchist movement: Pyotr Arshinov, Iuda Grossman-Roschin, and our old pal Vladimir Zabrezhnev who criticised Borovoi so passionately just ten years ago.

As we'd already mentioned, individualism was inherent in Borovoi's ideas throughout his life, and his 1917 and 1918 articles, as well as his new book *Anarchism* bear a remarkable imprint of these views. Denying any authority and coercion, the writer never fails to emphasise that "for anarchism never, under no

Borovoi from living in the large cities and limited his choice of jobs. He spent the last years of his life in Vladimir working as an accountant, in isolation and poverty.

Alexei Alexeyevich died on November 21, 1935.

The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art still holds Borovoi's sizeable personal archives. It includes a manuscript of his book about Fyodor Dostoevsky, correspondence with Andrei Bely, Alexander Blok, Valery Bryusov, Boris Pasternak, Alexander Chayanov and many other artists and scientists, plus unfinished memoirs. One day Borovoi's unpublished works on philosophy, history, anarchism will be extracted from the archives…

circumstances, will harmony between the personal and social principles be achieved. Their antinomy is inevitable. But it is the stimulus for continuous development and perfection of the individual, for denial of any ultimate ideals." Thus for Borovoi the chief importance is given not to Anarchism as the aim but to Anarchy as the continuous quest for the aim: "No social ideal, from the point of view of anarchism, could be referred to as absolute in a sense that supposes it's the crown of human wisdom, the end of social and ethical quest of man."

Zhizn newspaper was closed by the Soviet authorities in the Summer of 1918 along with other organs of anarchist propaganda. A year later his comrades in the Union of Ideological Propaganda left the organisation. Some joined the Bolsheviks, and some, like Arshinov, joined the mass anarchist movement of the Ukraine, the *Makhnovschina*. Borovoi remained the Union's sole leader but he didn't stop working for it. As late as 1922 he organised lectures on the history and theory of anarchism, and participated in publishing classic anarchist literature. Borovoi actually propagated anarchism among the students of Moscow University and other institutes of higher education. He lectured on the history of socialism, the workers' movement, the newest trends of capitalism etc. It has to be mentioned that his high standing as a scientist was confirmed by the granting of the status of professor by the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Moscow State University in 1919.

Borovoi's views kept changing over time. By the early 1920s they have shed the remainder of individualism and gotten closer to classic anarchism. Borovoi himself referred to his views as "anarcho-humanism." Now he accepted a possibility of conciliation between social and personal interests on the basis of socialist collectivism. Borovoi's views of the time were set out in his most thought-through and deep book, 1921's *Individual and Society in the Anarchist Worldview*.

In late 1921, using the attempt of the students of the Communist University to organise an open debate "Anarchism vs. Marxism"

(the two contrary ideologies were to be defended by Borovoi and the member of the Bolshevik Central Committee Nikolai Bukharin) as a pretext, the authorities ousted Borovoi from the Moscow State University – he was accused of being anti-Soviet. In Autumn 1922 he was stripped of his status as a professor and banned from teaching. After that Alexei Alexeyevich had to master the profession of an economist. But even in the 1920s, when legal anarchism was being put under increasing pressure, he continued to play an active role in the anarchist and social movement. He worked as an editor at the anarcho-syndicalist publishing house *Golos Truda* (*Voice of Labour*), was a member of several historical societies and the Scientific section of All-Russian Public Committee (VOK) for the immortalization of Peter Kropotkin. His participation in VOK was particularly significant as it permitted him to lecture at the Kropotkin Museum which until 1929 remained the only legal refuge of anarchism in the land of Soviets. Borovoi was the secretary of the Scientific section, and in 1925 he was elected as the deputy chairman of the Committee.

In the Summer of 1927 a group of veteran Moscow anarchists (including Borovoi) attempted to organise a campaign to support fellow anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti who were sentenced to death in the USA. They expected that the campaign, aside from its immediate purpose, would permit them to openly propagate anarchist ideas as well as to raise their voice in support of exiled and gaoled anarchists in the USSR. The anarchists repeatedly applied for a permission for a solidarity meeting from the Moscow city Soviet but in the end it was denied.

However, the short existence of the Bureau for the Defense of Sacco and Vanzetti played an important role in consolidating the Moscow anarchists. Around veterans such as Vladimir Barmash, Alexei Borovoi, Nikolai Rogdayev, and Vladimir Khudolei some of the "old guard" who didn't abandon their views as well as youths who were just discovering anarchism started to gather.

They formed an underground group which established connections with the staff of the Paris-based anarchist magazine *Delo Truda* (*Cause of Labour*) which was published by Arshinov and Nestor Makhno. After studying the famous Platform they took it as the foundation of their views. Borovoi's practical participation in the activities of the Barmash-Khudolei group included compiling the collection of articles *Ten Years of the October [Revolution]* which gave a political and economic analysis of the first decade of Bolshevik rule. The text of the collection was illegally transferred abroad and published as a pamphlet in Paris. Borovoi also organised the struggle against "anarcho-mystics" – "an ugly outgrowth on the body of anarchism," as he characterized this "esoteric" teaching which attempted to replace the scientific atheism and class approach of Kropotkin and his followers with vague "Templar" legends about angels and demons and reactionary arguments about the uselessness of revolutionary struggle and any attempts to violently transform society.

In early 1929 *Delo Truda* published a collective letter by the Moscow anarchists who greeted the activity of the magazine and the group that published it as the only thing that can lead revolutionary anarchism out of crisis. The letter was co-signed by Borovoi, and such an appraisal of the activities of the Platformists – who were in favour of a single centralised organisation of anarchist communists, of comradely discipline and responsibility; all of which were things ten years ago unthinkable for Borovoi – signified the final break with individualist anarchism.

In May 1929 Borovoi was arrested by the OGPU, along with other Moscow comrades. They were accused of "active work to create illegal anarchist groups in Moscow, distribution of anti-Soviet literature, connections with anarchist emigration." On July 12 the Special Conference of the OGPU sentenced him to three years' exile to Vyatka.

Liberation from this exile didn't bring any serious easing of the conditions of life for the old anarchist. The security organs forbade