

Biography of Armenian anarchist Alexander Atabekian

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An anarchist on the roads of freedom

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In the last quarter of the 19th century, Alexander Atabekian was an active figure in the anarchist movement of Europe, especially for the Russian anarchist movement and Armenian revolutionary movements. He published several pamphlets including the essays of Bakunin, Kropotkin and Errico Malatesta in Armenian and Russian through the Anarchist Library which he founded in Geneva.

Max Nettlau proposes that it is the self-sacrificing efforts of Alexander Atabekian, who was studying medicine in Geneva, that made anarchist publications in Armenian become known (between 1891–1894) (Max Nettlau, *Anarchisten und Syndikalisten Band V*).

In the early years of his education (1888–1890) Alexander Atabekian contributed to the type-setting of «Hinchak» («Sound of the Bell») which was the periodical of Hinchakian Social Democratic Party, being published by an Armenian socialist, Avetis Nazarbekian. The articles and essays in «Hinchak» were mainly composed of the Ottoman genocide over Armenians and the Armenian resistance to it and the pogrom executed on Armenians in Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Atabekian continued to the anarchist propaganda activities addressing the Armenian and Ottoman villagers and established relations with the militants and anarchists in Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) after he joined the anarchist movement in Europe (1890).

Anarcho-Communist Alexander Atabekian

The essays written by Peter Kropotkin in 1879 and which appeared on the paper «Le Revolt» were provoking individual and collective revolt actions and emphasizing the importance of the strikes' transformation into rebellions. These essays were collected by Elisee Reclus and published under the name of «Words of a Rebel» in Paris in 1885. This pamphlet was very popular between the young anarchists of the period. Alexander Atabekian also joined the anarchist-communist movement after reading «Words of a Rebel». He started to work in old Ukrainian Kuzman's printing house (which was the only place anarchists could attain in Geneva) in order to collect the Armenian and Russian essays.

The pamphlets he prepared here were: «To the Armenian villagers» and «Letter to Armenian Revolutionaries from an International Anarchist Organization» (Max Nettlau, *Anarchisten und Syndikalisten Band V*).

Besides preparing these pamphlets, Atabekian was establishing relations with the anarchists in Geneva, Paris and Italy. Kropotkin, Max Nettlau, Stoianoff, Paraskev, Jacques Grave and J. Gross would be the first anarchists for him to meet and exchange letters. Luigi Galleani, P. Stoianoff and Elisee Reclus (who faced prosecution after their actions in Paris in 1st of May, 1890) came to Geneva and met Atabekian. Here they printed the manifest which was written to the memory of the anarchists who were executed in Chicago (11th of November, 1887) in Kuzman's printing house and posted it in the streets of Geneva.

Atabekian, together with Stoianoff, met Kropotkin in London and declared that he was undertaking the plan to deliver the pamphlets to the first anarchist organization in southern Russia.

After he returned to Geneva, Atabekian — fairly experienced at creating multipurpose and practical printing devices — carried his work in Kuzman's printing house to the boarding-house he stayed. (This lodging house would later be the place in which the manuscripts of Bakunin were preserved. Some parts of the manuscripts were anonymously published by Atabekian in *Les Temps Nouveaux* later on). He printed the first volume of Bakunin's «Paris Commune and Idea of the State» in Russian in *Anarchiceskaya Biblioteka* (Anarchist Library) which he founded in his room (Jaap Kloosterman, *Les papiers de Michel Bakunin a Amsterdam*).

Other Armenian and Russian pamphlets he published in anarchist library were:

Kropotkin: *Political Rights* (1893), *Decomposition of the State* (1892), *Anarchism* (1893), *Revolutionary Minorities* (1894), *Spirit of Revolt* (1893, was published in *Libre de la Federation* in unfinished form), Elisee Reclus: *To Our Farmer Brothers*, Errico Malatesta: *Between Peasants* (This article was published with an preface for Armenians, 1893), Jacques Grave: *Why Are We Revolutionaries?* (1894) (M. Nettelau, *Anarchisten und Syndikalisten Band VS. 481.82*)

In his article titled «Anarchism and Armenian Movements in the Ottoman Empire», Anahide Ter Minassian notes that there is the insertion «published with the consent of Ministry of Education» (in Ottoman language) in the first pages of the pamphlets published by Atabekian. (*Osmanii Imparatorlugu'nda Sosyalizm ve Milliyetcilik* (1876–1923), ed. Tuncay, Mete — Jan Zurcher, Erik)

These pamphlets were in circulation among the Armenian immigrants. This circulation was organized by Stoianoff who went to Southern Caucasia and Istanbul and also to Bulgaria after being exiled from Paris. Some sources argue that Atabekian tried to distribute the pamphlets in Izmir and Istanbul also. (It is hard to conceive if it was done by himself or via other people. Also the archives belonging to Atabekian are scattered through four countries and much of it couldn't be classified yet).

The condition that the massacres against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (Sason, Samsun, Zeytun etc.) took a constant state affected Atabekian deeply. «...He was so affected by the events of 1895 that he was unable to continue his activities as far as I know» (M. Nettelau *Anarchisten und Syndikalisten Band V*).

Atabekian continued his medical degree in Lyon and Paris. He was graduated in Geneva with his Ph.D. thesis on quinsy. After being notified with the sentence of exile which was given for his former anarchist activities in Paris, he left Europe and first travelled to Bulgaria and then Reshd region of Iran, where he would stay for sixteen years.

«Hamayankh» («Commune»)

«Hamayankh», Atabekian's first anarchist periodical in Armenian, was published five issues in Paris in 1894 (Max Nettelau). The periodical consisted of eight pages and the first pages were containing articles about anarchism and about Armenian revolutionary movements in general. The other pages were separated for short news about anarchist movements of the world and political events, under the title of «International Revolutionary Movement». The articles about massacres and resistances mainly consist of the pamphlets published by ARF. One of these pamphlets, «Sason and Mus Combats» is written in a nihilist and lyric rhetoric. Besides publishing ARF's articles, «Hamayankh» also criticises the authoritarian and centralist structures of the Armenian revolutionary movements.

«Hamayankh» was well appreciated among the Armenian immigrants in the West and the Balkans (Max Nettlau). Stoianoff made it possible to distribute it to the Armenian revolutionists coming from the Balkans, Southern Caucasia and Turkey.

There are not any articles signed by Atabekian in «Hamayankh». It is possible for him to have written under a pseudonym after the legal prosecutions and the exile sentence in Paris. Anahide Ter Minassian explains the absence of the name Atabekian in the articles as a possible precaution for the constant prosecutions against the anarchists.

Reshd region of Iran was another place that «Hamayankh» was published in. Minassian alleges that «Hamayankh's» publication in Iran is attributed to Atabekian himself. The title of this periodical reflects the anarchist views of its publisher. Its publication date (1880) is quite early too» (Tuncay — Zurcher, 199). Karekin Levonyan, too, writes that Iran version of «Hamayankh» was published in 1880 and the publisher was Atabekian (Armenian Press, 1794–1934). The date 1880 is problematic in the context of Atabekian's biography.

Atabekian was born in Shusha, Transcaucasia in 1868. He lived there until he graduated from high school. The fact which is indicated in many sources is that his participation in anarcho-communist movement happened in 1890 and his travel to Iran took place after 1896. This makes the publication year 1880 for «Hamayankh» too early. If the fact that the other information about him in both the two sources are in consensus (except the date) is taken into consideration, it seems possible that the date 1880 is amiss.

Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and the Libertarians

«You cannot predict how an outstanding comrade of mine whom I met here and shared a deep friendship in the meantime provides me great tranquillity. He is an immigrant from Constantinople who constantly risks not only his freedom but also his life and who is one of those misunderstood rebels. Despite the fact that he is a libertarian who is convinced in our thoughts, he acts along with Armenian Revolutionary Federation due to the weakness of the libertarians in the East. He doesn't want to spend time here in vain. He is a shoemaker and works from 4 in the morning to 9 in the evening for a very little money. He doesn't want to stay here for long because of his decided and contender personality. His self-sacrifice to participate the combat again is admirable. He works in worst conditions in order to gather a few pennies.» (Atabekian's letter to Jacques Gross from Sofia, November 16–28, 1896. IISG Amsterdam).

ARF was founded in Tbilisi in 1890. In the beginning, the organization was constituted by anarchists, socialists and nationalists. It is said that Khristaphor Mikaelyan, one of the founders, was once a supporter of Bakunin and was always a defender of direct action and self-government (Minassian). Mikaelyan was an icon of freedom in Armenian literature for his militancy and authorship of essays. Like Atabekian and other libertarians from Istanbul, he also had been to Bulgaria. He died in Bulgaria while he was testing the bomb which was designed to be used to assassinate Sultan Abdulhamid II in Yildiz (Avetis Aharonian, The Fedayees).

«Droshak Library» of ARF had a rich collection. Kropotkin's «Spirit of Revolt» and «An Appeal to the Young» were too published by published by «Droshak» («Flag»).

ARF's propaganda actions appealing to the Muslim population and militant actions against the Ottoman government affected the intellectuals who initiated the second «Young Turks» movement. Fifty armed ARF militants marched to the government centre in 1894 to protest the mas-

sacres against the Armenian population. Later they raided the Ottoman Bank. Armed conflicts, bombardments and captive holding events lasted for a whole day. These events centred the gazes of the world to the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire besides leading to a great excitement in Istanbul. The style and method of the act was a first for Istanbul. Perhaps it was the first «modern» action style. This action led to Young Turks' using new propaganda methods, who were hitherto trying to get organized by secret gatherings. Young Turks gained possession of a printing press in Galata. They distributed the declarations which were written by Abdullah Cevdet and printed in a thousand copies.

The actions of ARF and massacres in 1894 and 1895 deeply affected the thoughts of Ottoman intellectuals. The declaration of the Young Turks called the peoples of Ottoman Empire to a common war against the despotic regime (Yuriy Asatovic Petrosyan, JonTurkler, Istanbul 1974).

In the meantime an anarchist group of fourteen people coming from different countries of Europe and from ARF rustled in Istanbul (Sukru Hanioglu, Abdullah Cevdet).

Armenian libertarians showing activity in ARF sent a declaration in 1896 to Socialist International in London.

«Atabekian sent a declaration titled 'Aux socialistes revolutionnaires et libertaires' (To the Revolutionary and Libertarian Socialists) and signed by the name of Libertaires Armeniens to the International Congress in London (July 18, 1896). I translated the same declaration for 'Der Sosyalist (September 26, 1896)'. (M. Nettelau, Anarchisten und Syndikalisten Band V, 482).

Minassian notes that Armenian libertarians included in their declaration the argument that the European states were participating in the crimes of Sultan Hamit and they (libertarians) were declaring "the dawn of the social revolution" in the East.

Moscow 1917 and the Death of Pyotr Kropotkin

After working as a doctor for many years in Iran, Atabekian came to Moscow in 1917. There is little information relating to his years in Iran. It is said that he met the Iranian-Armenian communist Ardeshir Avanesian there, and that Avanesian worked in the pharmacy of Atabekian for a long time (Iran Socialist and Communist Parties, Organization and Groups 1917–1991).

Atabekian attended to the discussions regarding to the October Revolution in the newspaper «Anarxia» (the publication of the anarchist federation). He published thirty articles expressing his high hopes to transform the October Revolution into an anarchist revolution and afterwards his criticism of Bolsheviks' possession of the government. In November 1917, when the Bolsheviks gained the possession of the government, Kropotkin said «This will ruin the revolution» for the first time to his close friend Atabekian.

Atabekian and G. Sandomirsku founded a printing press in 1918 which was organized as a co-operative one. Here, they published the first anarcho-cooperative periodical of Moscow, «Pocin». The typesetting and layout of Pocin was done by Atabekian himself. The periodical mainly consisted of the memories and letters of Kropotkin who was a close friend of Atabekian and who was admired by him. The periodical lasted for eleven issues and five of them included Atabekian's observations of Iran and Middle East.

In January 1921, Kropotkin who was lying in his house in Dimitrov, had Atabekian, his doctor and comrade, with him. Atabekian didn't leave him alone until his last breath.

Deteriorating with each passing day, Kropotkin died in 13th of April 1921. The formal funeral ceremony of the Bolsheviks was rejected by his family. His funeral was organized by an anarchist committee including Atabekian. Kropotkin's funeral became the last and greatest anarchist demonstration in Russia.

One month after the death of Kropotkin, Bolshevik dictatorship repressed the uprising of Kronstadt sailors cruelly. Series of operations against anarchists were initiated throughout the whole Russia. In the private penitentiaries of Cheka (Russian secret police organization) tens of anarchists were shot and executed. Hundreds of anarchists were imprisoned or exiled to Chechnya and Kyrgyzstan. Alexander Atabekian took his share from the Bolshevik tyranny, too. He was arrested by Cheka in 1920 with the charge of opposition to the Act of Press. He was sentenced to six months in a concentration camp. In 1921, when he was arrested again, he was sentenced to exile to Caucasia. With the intervention of Kropotkin's family, the sentence was consolidated (*Repression de l'anarchic en Russie sovietiste*, Editions de la « Librairie Sociale» Paris).

What happened to Atabekian afterwards? A complete enigma. The sources in Amsterdam argue that he died in a Soviet concentration camp in 1940, while A.Burkov (from Yerevan) argues that he died in Moscow. French sources allege that he was lost in exile. Another source, the author of «Anarchists in Russian Revolution», Paul Avrigh asserts that Atabekian, like other Russian anarchists, was lost.

It is (un)known that Greeks, Jews and Armenians «in this geography», like Atabekian, constitute an extensive literature. Besides the fact that much of this collection stays in different countries, the rare and few pieces in Turkey still couldn't be collected and classified. The discourse of "this geography" or "these lands" which seems to be "perfect" should be liberated from being a political discourse from now on. We are going to publish other essays and articles by Atabekian in the following issues.

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