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Bill Shatoff

**19th-20th Century Russian-American
Anarchist/Bolshevist**

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by acts violating revolutionary Soviet legality which have accumulated during a long time as a result of the negative influence of the cult of the individual [i.e., Stalin] has to be completely corrected.”⁵ And the Turksib (sometimes called the “Kazakhstan Railroad”) still fully functions in March 2023, carrying both freight and passengers. About 68 percent of all domestic and international cargo and passenger traffic in Kazakhstan is carried on rail lines, connecting Central Asia and Europe.⁶

⁵ CPSU First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev “Secret Speech,” 25 February 1956 at the Central Committee meeting of the 20th CPSU Conference, Moscow

⁶ “Transport in Kazakhstan,” WIKIPEDIA on the Internet, March 6, 2023

His failure to join the Communist Party, his anarchist philosophy, his Western ways, his close association with Leon Trotsky, his “wrecker” status regarding Turksib planning, his Turksib success despite significant adversity, and his perceived mismanagement of the construction of the second Kazakh rail line in 1936–37 all likely contributed to Shatoff’s arrest and death.

Shatoff’s wife Anna (named “AA Shagova” by one source which referred to her “memoirs”³) also was incarcerated circa 1937, and was sentenced by the NKVD on 22 March 1938 for five years of forced labor. She arrived at the “Akmola camp for wives of traitors to the Motherland” (aka ALZHIR) on 4 April 1938. The ALZHIR camp for women, located near Astana, Kazakhstan, was overcrowded and was neither designed to handle the harsh conditions of a Siberian winter nor the intense heat of a Kazakhstan summer.

Although many women did not survive ALZHIR, Anna Shatoff did and was released from Butkyra Prison in Moscow on 22 October 1942.⁴ (Butkyra Prison is in central Moscow and, during Stalin’s Great Purge, was used as a transit station before transfer to the Gulag in Siberia. In 2018 the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service declared its intention to close this very overcrowded prison.) After her release, it is not known if Anna Shatoff stayed in Russia or returned to America.

On 25 February 1956 Bill Shatoff, along with thousands of “counter-revolutionaries,” was “politically rehabilitated” posthumously by CPSU First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev: in his “Secret Speech” given at an unscheduled, unpublished meeting of the Central Committee of the 20th CPSU Congress (speech only fully translated into English in 1989), Khrushchev said “the evil caused

³ World History on the World History on the Internet, “Shatov, Vladimir Sergeevich 1887–1943,” (2019), <http://hrono.ru/biograf/shatovvs.php>.www.hrono.com

⁴ A.G. Teplyakov, *Book of Memory of the Victims of Political Repression in the Novosibirsk Region, Prisoners of ALZHIR* (Novosibirsk, Russia2008).

Introduction

Researching ancestors—assimilating sources of information, reconciling name changes and dates, reading hundreds of newspaper articles, and overcoming “walls”—is a daunting task for any genealogist. About 20 years ago I determined that American anarchist Bill Shatoff, a Russian emigrant who returned to Russia in 1917 to participate in the Bolshevik Revolution, was most likely one of my ancestors.

How did I reach that assessment? A remarkable resemblance between my father and Bill Shatoff, family folklore, and striking similarities of personalities, professions, and nomenclatures within the Shatoff/Schotoff families led to this conclusion.

These factors sparked my interest in further research on Bill Shatoff. Finding information on his life was problematic, however: there was not one, or two, or even three sources of information which I could review to get a complete, accurate account of Shatoff’s birth, background, personality, activities, employment or death. So the following biography of Bill Shatoff should provide the most complete account of his life than is currently available to the public.

Chapter One: Emigration to America, 1906–1907

Anarchism is a political philosophy often associated with 19th Century-early 20th Century immigrants to America who occupied the lowest socioeconomic rungs in the “American Dream” ladder. Anarchists’ proposed utopia for the proletarian masses would have grassroots self-government and a collective economy; workers would be self-governing, productive, generous, educated, free-thinking, egalitarian, and social revolutionaries. Government practices and capitalism were thought to be inherently bad. Some anarchists believed that, although violence was not explicitly advocated, if necessary to achieve anarchist ideals, then “the ends justify the means.” One of the most famous Russian emigrants to America who embraced the anarcho-syndicalist philosophy of Russian theoretician/labor activist Pyotr Kropotkin—expressed in Kropotkin’s 1892 book *Conquest of Bread*—was Vladimir Sergeyevich Shatov [Владимир Сергеевич Шатов] otherwise known as “Bill Shatoff”.¹ Anarcho-syndicalism is a branch of anarchism that believes in the essential goodness of man. It views industrial unionism or syndicalism as a method for workers in a capitalist society to gain control of an economy and thus influence society as a whole. Principles of anarcho-syndicalism are solidarity, direct action, and worker self-management. Anarcho-syndicalists therefore focus on the labor movement.

¹ Avrich, Paul, *Anarchist Portraits: Kropotkin in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988)

Chapter Five: Fall from Grace, Execution, 1936–1943

Shatoff’s rising star finally fell circa 1936–1937 when he was arrested by the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), the law enforcement agency for the CPSU. Reports differ on what happened to Shatoff after his arrest. Some say he was arrested, sentenced to death and executed by firing squad soon after his sentence. For example, *New York TIMES* Moscow Bureau chief Walter Duranty’s “discreet inquiry” circa September 1937 yielded the following comment: “henceforth Bill’s surname should be spelled with an ‘o’”.¹ Other reports state that Shatoff was arrested 1937, spent several years in a labor camp in Siberia, then died (or was executed) in August 1943. According to one source, Shatoff was arrested 25 December 1936 “as a Trotskyist,” was transferred to Moscow in May 1937, was then sent to Siberia where he was accused of spying for Japan, was tortured, and finally was convicted on 4 October 1937 by the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). Shatoff, who never admitted guilt, was punished for “counter-revolution and nationalist activity.”² Not unlike so many other Russian intelligentsia, anarchists, and counter-revolutionaries who were murdered by Stalin during the Great Purge in 1937–38, Shatoff was indeed probably executed by firing squad, sometime between 1937 and 1943.

¹ Walter Duranty, ““Moscow Is Filled with Spying Tales,”” *New York TIMES* Sunday, 19 September 1937.

² A.G. Teplyakov, “Book of the Memory of the Victims of Political Repression in the Novosibirsk Region,” in *bsk.nios.ru* (Novosibirsk2008).

and-shovel man on the Erie Canal, painter and roof repairman, concrete mixer, coalminer in Scranton, printer, machinist, and deposer of the Russian consul in NYC when the tsar fell in 1917. But Shatoff said, according to Strong, all of his jobs in post-tsar Russia, including that of Turksib construction, were really one job—that of “social engineering”.²⁶ Shatoff said “We have taken the American Constitution and brought it up-to-date...I am a social engineer interested in economics and a graduate of the greatest university in the world—the American Life University. I have found that if you do not play a square game, you get nowhere.”

Yet, even after the Turksib dedication in May 1930, Turksib management underwent a purge that resulted in 47 employees being fired; another 49 were given various administrative sanctions.²⁷ Shatoff obviously survived that May 1930 purge because, following construction of the Turksib, Shatoff held various positions of authority: in November 1930 Shatoff headed the Department of Railway Building in Siberia, followed by appointment as the chief of the Central Department of Railway Building and then as Soviet Vice Commissar for Transportation. In July 1933, along with four other transportation vice commissars, he was removed from his post for poor organization, excessive bureaucracy, bad discipline and red tape²⁸ but, later in 1933, he was building the Moscow-Donbass rail line. Finally, in 1936–37, he was responsible for building a new Kazakhstan rail line—from Neldy to Dzhezkazgan. However, unlike the Turksib construction, forced labor was designated for this second Kazakh line and production was considered inadequate by Moscow authorities.²⁹

²⁶ Anna Louise Strong, *The Road to Grey Pamir, Chapter One p. 20* (1931).

²⁷ State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, cited in Payne, *Stalin's Railroad*, p. 191

²⁸ “‘Big Bill’ Out,” *The Charleston Daily Mail* (Charleston, SC, August 25, 1933), p. 8

²⁹ Russian WIKIPEDIA, “The Biography of Vladimir Shatov,” <https://ru.wikipedia.org>.

Most references to Bill Shatoff’s birth indicate that he was born in Kiev, Ukraine, on 24 December 1887. “*Shatoff*”—a surname often affiliated with Russian royalty—is most likely not Bill Shatoff’s true surname because, in 19th Century Russia, Jews often adopted aliases to hide their Jewish identities. (Not identifying as a Jew might allow entry into a tradesman occupation, enhance one’s educational opportunities, or perhaps avoid identification of individuals who have transgressed against the Russian Government.) “*Ivan Shatov*” is also a main character in the Fyodor Dostoyevskiy book *The Demons or The Possessed*, published in 1871. In the book, *Shatov*, a former socialist who embraces Slavic culture, rejects the nihilistic stance of the novel’s main character.

Although 24 December 1887 is most often cited as Bill Shatoff’s date of birth in Kiev, a 2016 review of “Jewish metric records” in the Central State History Archive, Republic of Ukraine (TsDIAK), indicate that only three Jewish males were born on that date in Kiev. Not unexpectedly, a newborn named “Shatov” was not among those three. Instead, one was named Joel-Hersh son of Hershov Rosenfeld; Zalman, son of Aron Shloma Levy Itskovych Kaganovsky; and Moische, son of Leiba Simhov Faingold/Feingold. Fathers of the first two boys were registered citizens of Kiev Gubernia; the third father, Leiba, was a registered citizen of Slutsk City, Minsk Gubernia. Bookbinder Leiba Faingold, his wife Mera (Mary) Shmatevna/Schwartz, and two sons—Moses (about 16 years old) and Jankel (14) —emigrated from Kiev to America in 1906.² Further genealogical research indicates that Mera Schwartz may be the sister of Bill Shatoff’s father or uncle, Israel (Ivan) Schotoff, leader of the 19th Century orchestra, the “Imperial Rus-

² “New York, Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820–1957 for Leiba Faingold and Mere Faingold, Russians from Kiev; on SS Pennsylvania departing Hamburg, February 16, 1906,” ed. Port of Arrival U.S. Immigration Office (Washington D.C., March 2, 1906). See also “1910 U.S. Federal Census, Brooklyn, Ward 21, NY, ED 501, Sheet 16b, household of Leiba and Mary Feingold”

sian Orchestra” which presented “high class” concerts in the New York City, Atlantic City, NJ, and Bayonne, NJ areas 1894–1907. So it is possible that Bill Schotoff’s true surname is “Schwartz.” Alternatively, Bill Shatoff was said to have used additional aliases throughout his early life—“Rachkoff” when he attended college in Kiev and “Kligerman” when he supposedly lived in Yonkers, NY in 1909.

According to one source, *Current History*, Shatoff’s parents were at one time well-to-do but persecutions under Russian Tsar Nicholas I had “reduced the family to beggary. One of Shatoff’s uncles was slaughtered in a pogrom not far from Kiev.”³ (A “pogrom” is “an organized and often officially encouraged massacre or persecution of a minority group, especially one conducted against the Jews.”⁴) This claim may be related to *one of the largest Russian pogroms directed at a Jewish population that occurred in Kiev in 1905*. (In both 1881 and 1905 there were large-scale pogroms in Kiev, during which many Jews were murdered, Jewish women were raped, and many Jewish houses and stores were looted or destroyed.)

Shatoff reportedly attended Kiev Polytechnic but is said to have left the institute after two years to attend the Commercial College in Kiev from which he graduated in 1905. (The Commercial College was a part of Kiev Polytechnic but the College was more welcoming to Jews.) During his college years, Shatoff—known by the alias “Rachkoff” —participated in revolutionary activities and, in 1904, threw eggs at a bust of Tsar Nicholas I, thus earning him jail time. One source stated that Shatoff, who joined a social democratic

³ “Shatoff—Soviet Government Bully,” *Current History* (November 1, 1920). Cited in *MacLean’s Magazine* “Review of Reviews” Section (Canada, 1920), p. 36

⁴ *Second College Edition, The American Heritage Dictionary*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982)

the Kazakh workers who looked at him with “adulation.”²³ By the end of construction, Turksib had lived up to its promise to forge a Kazakh proletariat. Although ethnic animosity and discrimination remained, Kazakhs became surprisingly well integrated into the industrial working class.²⁴

In addition to successfully building a new Kazakh proletariat, the Turksib modernized the economy of Kazakhstan: in the five oblasts—regions—immediately affected by the railroad, many new enterprises were built, including the large Balkhash Copper Smelting Complex. In 1943, these five oblasts accounted for 48 percent of Kazakhstan’s industrial production, compared to 26 percent in 1930.²⁵

Another great legacy of the Turksib was its creation of a new type of Russian worker and manager—a “conscious worker” who identified with the current regime’s politics and socioeconomic policies, emphasized “productivity” instead of “intensity,” integrated Kazakhs into the workplace, and solicitously assisted the Kazakhs in learning the Russian language and understanding the new Western machinery that was being utilized on the Turksib; and managers who “led by example” and took personal responsibility for “counter-revolutionary activities” on their watch including religious insensitivity (e.g. recognizing that Kazakh Muslims could not eat pork). The fundamental difference between past and present was that the [bourgeois] specialist generally dismissed the Kazakh while the conscious worker wanted to transform him.

Meeting with Shatoff in his private railcar circa 1929, American journalist and social activist Anna Louise Strong discussed his various roles in the Russian Revolution 1917–1929 and recalled Shatoff’s earlier exploits in America: longshoreman in NY, pick-

²³ UNITED PRESS Correspondent Eugene Lyons, Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, “Builder of Soviet R.R. Once Hoboed over U.S. Was Agitator for IWW,” *Rochester TIMES UNION* 26 June 1930.

²⁴ Payne, Matthew, *Stalin’s Railroad*, (University of Pittsburgh, 19xx), p. 210.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 291

orations across his chest, i.e. he was very proud of his accomplishments in Russia.)

Yet, despite its strategic importance to his first Five-Year Plan, Stalin did not attend the Turksib dedication on May Day 1930.²⁰

International journalists who attended the dedication ceremony freely conversed with Shatoff, sometimes at his home in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan. Quoting W. H. Chamberlain, Moscow correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor*, a Canadian newspaper reported: “There is a strong streak of individualism in his character that marks him off from the average Communist official or executive. The freedom with which he hobnobbed with the foreign correspondents who had come to view the opening of the Turksib was a case in point. His method of giving an interview was another. The ordinary Soviet conception of giving an interview is either a one-sided lecture in which the speaker bombards and overwhelms the interviewer with the incredible mass of statistical data that every Soviet office accumulates, or a dry series of written answers to written questions. Shatoff’s procedure was to receive a group of foreign correspondents and talk with them simply and informally, every now and then interrupting his description of the building of the Turksib with a question about the latest American play or novel. He has tried to introduce on the Turksib the American idea that an engineer should not be a mere office worker but a field chief, ready and able to do hard physical work when the occasion demands it.”²¹

Despite its numerous management problems, in the end Shatoff, “the most famous hobo in the world,”²² was in good stead with

²⁰ Keen, Dennis T., “Walking Almaty: An Unusual Guidebook to Kazakhstan’s Southern Capital,” (2015), www.walkingalmaty.com

²¹ *The Winnipeg Tribune* (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada), October 9, 1930, p.17

²² H.R. Knickerbocker, “Shatoff, the Amazing “Wobbly,” *New York EVENING POST* 3 May 1930.

organization, was arrested twice and stole 15,000 rubles from a Kiev bank.⁵

According to numerous sources and to Shatoff himself, in referring to his American sojourn, circa 1906–1907 Bill Shatoff emigrated to America. Bill Shatoff’s place of emigration to America has been given as either New York City (NYC) or Philadelphia with relocation to NYC (in 1906 NYC had the third largest population of Russians after Moscow and St. Petersburg aka Petrograd). In 1909 Shatoff reportedly was a boarder at the home of Morris Cinnamon on Stone Avenue, Nepara Park, Yonkers, NY; Morris reportedly was from Kiev, the birthplace of Shatoff. This information was provided by Kate Cinnamon, daughter of Morris, in 1930. When a boarder, he reportedly used the name “Kligerman”.⁶ (Although Kligerman is also cited as his true name in a Russian *WIKIPEDIA* entry, this has not been verified. A 2019 review of Ancestry.Com records do not identify a Morris Cinnamon as a Yonkers resident on Stone Street/Avenue although one Morris Cynamon of 143 Stanton Street in Manhattan, who arrived in America 15 August 1906 from Lomza (?), Russia—502 miles from Kiev—declared his intention to become a U.S. citizen in May 1908. One drygoods store owner “Morris Cinnamon” did, in 1909, live at 215 Ashburton Avenue in Yonkers, the same address noted for one Kate Cinnamon in the 1920 U.S. Census.)

It is not known if Shatoff was married or single in 1906–1907 but, sometime around 1915⁷ he was living at the Ferrer Center (see below for more on the Ferrer Center) with Anna/Nunya (a Jewish woman born in 1892 in Tula, Russia, south of Moscow), his “wife”.⁸

⁵ Teplyakov, A.G., *Book of Memory of the Victims of Political Repression in the Novosibirsk Region, Volume 2* (Novosibirsk, Russia, 2008)

⁶ “Bill Shatoff in Yonkers,” *New York Statesman*, June 23, 1930

⁷ Avrich, Paul, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*, citing Eva Brandes (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2005), p. 278

⁸ See footnote #5 section on “Prisoners of ALZHIR”

It is not known if Anna was Shatoff's "official" wife since informal sexual relationships in revolutionary circles was common at this time. It is also not known where or when Bill and Anna met or might have married. Anna, said by friends to be a "redhead," returned to Russia at some unidentified time because she was reported to be in a Moscow hospital in January 1920. In 1926–1927 she was back in NYC, according to anarchist Morris Ganberg who greeted Anna Shatoff when she visited the anarchist newspaper *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* on Canal Street.⁹ Circa 1929–1930, Shatoff's 'sweetheart' was back in America, according to Shatoff himself.¹⁰ She obviously returned to Russia later because she was arrested and jailed circa 1937 and was released in 1942.¹¹ It is unknown if Bill and Anna ever had children, either in Russia or America. It is not known if Bill Shatoff ever became an American citizen but he would have been deported in any case, once he became a Bolshevik.

What was Bill Shatoff like—his appearance, personality, character, management style, values, philosophy? He has generally been described as approximately 5'8", stout, balding, stocky, husky and strong; he usually dressed shabbily—like a hobo. In his book entitled *Anarchist Voices*, Paul Avrich interviewed many former 20th Century American anarchists who knew Bill Shatoff well, primarily due to their affiliations with the Ferrer Center, *Golos Truda*, or the Anarchist Red Cross which sent aid to Russian comrades who were either exiled or imprisoned by the tsar. One anarchist said that Shatoff always greeted his friends with a "slap on the back".¹² Most often these former acquaintances would

⁹ Avrich, Paul, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*, citing Morris Ganberg (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2005), p. 376

¹⁰ Strong, Anna Louise, "The Anarchist Who Builds an Empire," *New York Times*, March 9, 1930

¹¹ See footnote #8

¹² Avrich, Paul, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*, citing Nellie Dick (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2005), p. 290

dedicated on May Day 1930, a date not chosen coincidentally. The dedication ceremony was elaborate: delegates from hundreds of factories along with Soviet and numerous foreign journalists attended; the Turksib engine was strung with colorful banners; Kazakhs traveled hundreds of miles on horseback to see the 'iron horse'; and young men danced on the rails. "Epic" and "dramatic" was the ceremony which included thousands of Kazakh horsemen amassed on the sloping hills above the rails; Kazakh men standing on the ground below with their sheepskin hats and baggy trousers; and Kazakh women wearing turbans and carrying babies on their backs.

Shatoff drove the last silver spike connecting the Northern and Southern ends of construction, followed by Russian and Kazakh officials. Finally, the spike was struck by 70-year-old Katayama, leader of the Japanese Communists and delegate from the Communist Internationale. The meaning of Katayama's blow on the joining spike was clear: this railroad was more than the joining of wheat with cotton, more than the opening of new lands to pioneers, more than the weapon of young herdsmen against tribal oppressors. This road was world revolution marching down through Asia."¹⁹

After the spiking, five hours of speeches in Kazakh and Russian were given with loudspeakers blasting and airplanes circling overhead. A feast for 5,000 was consumed, with Europeans sitting on long, wooden benches and Kazakhs squatting on the ground.

The entire Turksib work collective was awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labor, a prestigious national honor. Shatoff received an individual Order of the Red Banner of Labor, the third highest Russian civilian award in 1930 which was established in 1924 for outstanding labor accomplishments but was discontinued in 1991. (Shatoff was known for wearing all of his medals and dec-

¹⁹ Anna Louise Strong, "The Stalin Era, (New York City, Mainstream Publishers, 1957), available in Rutgers University Library, NJ," 1957.

language barrier, especially where no Kazakh foremen or lower managers existed to direct them.¹⁵ In any case, Kazakh turnover remained high throughout construction of the Turksib and Shatoff never reached his goal of 50% Kazakh labor; at best, in Spring 1930 the Turksib reached a high of 27% Kazakh labor. So, in fact, the majority of Turksib workers came to the worksite from elsewhere.

· Labor availability problems on the Turksib were compounded by the fact that highly skilled European laborers were also in short supply due to the demand of other Stalin-era infrastructure programs. Even if Shatoff could hire more skilled engineers, technicians and track-layers (gandy dancers), they were not available.

· A “caste mentality” also existed among some engineers and technical personnel. At a 1928 union conference Shatoff told his engineers “It is necessary...to remake oneself from an engineer-as-an-individual to an engineer-citizen and an engineer-revolutionary. This is what the party, the government, and society expect.”¹⁶ By the end of 1930, Turksib’s crisis of confidence in and of its managers had largely been resolved. Worker promotion and the reform of the engineering cadre had created a new type of manager on Turksib.¹⁷

· Turksib was a very dangerous place to work since train crashes, explosions and cave-ins occurred frequently. An incomplete list of accidental deaths mentions 24 fatalities but the numbers were most certainly higher since accidents were systematically undercounted. Many more workers suffered serious injury.¹⁸

Despite significant production and management difficulties 1927–30, the Northern and Southern Construction segments of the Turksib met on 28 April 1930 and the Turksib was formally

¹⁵ State Archive of the Semipalatinsk Oblast.; cited in Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad*, p. 153

¹⁶ *Dzhetysuiskaia Iskra*. cited in Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad*, p. 196

¹⁷ Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism*, p. 208.

¹⁸ State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, cited in *Stalin’s Railroad*, p.

describe Shatoff as calm, capable, loquacious, and convincing; a few said they thought he drank alcohol too much and was more interested in personal gain than the cause. One Kansas newspaperman claimed that Shatoff’s “intemperance” aka drunkenness caused him to lose his job as Petrograd Chief of Police in 1918 due to “inebriety”.¹³ (This claim has not been substantiated.) Another newsman stated that Shatoff was the “most bookish” of the anarchists, usually carrying around 3–4 worn and tattered books.¹⁴ Anarchist Emma Goldman said Shatoff was intelligent, enthusiastic, charming, jovial, “a splendid companion, dependable in every emergency...a staunch and brave friend”.¹⁵ His voice was booming and intense; he was curt of speech and was generally considered a dynamic, brilliant speaker. He was “barrel-chested, with a voice like the Mauritania [ship]. He used to make the windows rattle from one end of West Madison Street to the other, proclaiming from his soapbox the downfall of capitalism—always in long, bookish, deep bass words.”¹⁶

His management styles? Quick decisionmaker, able organizer, proud of the courage shown by the Russian revolutionaries, “true captain of a ship”.¹⁷ His values and philosophy? His emphasis on industriousness and non-discrimination was evident in his addresses to the labor masses and in his management of various Russian economic projects. He was a true believer in a working-class revolution and was a supposed believer in pacifism, in line with anarcho-syndicalist philosophy, yet he was Minister of War

¹³ Howe, E.W., “Weeper William,” *Atchison (KS) Daily Globe*, October 1, 1920, p. 9

¹⁴ Parton, Lemuel F., “Former Hobo of America Builds Soviet Railroad,” *The Post Crescent* (Appleton, WI), May 8, 1930, p. 14

¹⁵ Goldman, Emma, *Living My Life*, Volume Two (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Company, 1934), Chapter 45

¹⁶ “B & O Tie Tamper Got His Chance to Run a Rail System,” *New York Sun* (New York City: July 22, 1933)

¹⁷ See footnote #15

for Russia's Far Eastern Republic and was the 10th Red Army military commander. (In 2018 Kyle Brislan, in his Masters' thesis at California State University, Sacramento, purports that Shatoff's philosophical stance—social democracy, anarcho-syndicalism, Bolshevism, Communism—was largely dependent on the environment in which he found himself, that he was not wed to one philosophy.¹⁸ In other words, he contends that Shatoff was an ideological chameleon.)

In 1908 Shatoff joined the Anarchist Red Cross in NYC which sent aid to Russian comrades imprisoned or exiled by the tsar. Also in 1908, along with several other anarchists in NYC, he formed the Union of Russian Workers in the U.S. and Canada (URW), otherwise known as the "Russian Workingmen's Union".¹⁹ In 1911 (the same year of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in NYC that killed 147 workers, many of whom were young Russian immigrants), Shatoff became the linotype operator and member of the editorial board of the Russian-language *Golos Truda* (*Voice of Labor*), the monthly/then weekly magazine of the URW located at 586 E. 140th Street, NYC. (Many sources say that Shatoff's father trained him in the skill of typesetting, but it is also probable that he learned this skill at Kiev Polytechnic.) At its peak, the URW was the largest anarchist federation in American history with membership of 10,000–15,000. In 1912 it officially became an anarcho-syndicalist organization and formed close ties to the International Workers of the World (IWW—also known as the "Wobblies").

Also in 1911 Bill Shatoff was a staffer at the Ferrer Center located at 6 St. Mark's Place, NYC; anarchist Emma Goldman called

¹⁸ Brislan, Kyle Joseph, "The Bolshevik Illusion: A Case Study on the Relationship Between Anarcho-Syndicalists and Bolsheviks in Revolutionary Russia, 1917" (Sacramento, CA: California State University, 2018)

¹⁹ Speer, Edgar B., U.S. Bureau of Investigation (BOI), Pittsburgh, PA Office (DOJ/BOI Investigative Files, NARA M-1085, Reel #926, File #325570, April 8, 1919)

(pre-Revolution skilled railroad workers) acted chauvinistically toward their Kazakh comrades; work assignments for Europeans were often easier than those assignments given to Kazakhs; Kazakh housing, tools, and food were invariably inferior to that received by the Europeans; and verbal abuse of Kazakhs was commonplace.¹³

· On 31 December 1928 a pogrom erupted on the construction of the Turksib's northern railhead in Sergiopol—about 400 Russian workers physically attacked any Kazakh in the area, including coworkers. Result: one pogrom leader was executed and numerous Turksib employees, including managers, were either fired, reprimanded, or indicted. The regime's response to the Sergiopol riot left no doubt that it considered ethnic violence state treason. Shatoff warned "all abnormalities, coarseness, red tape, and negligence towards Kazakhs would be considered dereliction of duty," and, furthermore, he "would not allow the derision or maltreatment of [Kazakhs], ignoring their requests and needs, or speculation concerning their strangeness or cultural backwardness spoken in Russian."¹⁴

· Kazakh turnover in the workplace was a continuous problem. Some managers alleged that their "nomadic tendencies" prompted them to work just long enough to make what they considered a good amount of money, or they would walk off the job if they did not like the work or if it was too hard. It has been surmised, however, that Kazakh production difficulties had less to do with laziness, stupidity, or poor "production habits" but more to do with lack of knowledge. Yet the argument that Kazakh workers could not meet European productivity levels seems to have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. In fact, the single most common reason given by Kazakhs who left the worksite was their frustration with the

¹³ Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, ed. *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

more cost-effective and take less time, was later interpreted as negatively affecting planning for the Turksib.

· Bolshevik efforts to improve the “backwardness” of the Central Asian peoples undercut the ethnic groups’ distinct traditions, identities, and culture. Kazakh peoples’ resentment of the Turksib was broad-based, running the gamut from rumor, true or not (e.g. displacing Kazakhs from their lands) to outright sabotage (e.g. stealing surveyor stakes). Kazakh workers had to make major adjustments to their way of life: exchanging open-fielded shepherding for a closed industrial facility; eight or more-hour workdays; literacy classes instead of card-playing and kibitzing; sacrifice of lunch breaks; working with complicated, technical machinery; and supervision by non-natives. Resistance to “modernizing” their way of life was prevalent among the native peoples.

· Construction of the Turksib meant feeding and housing (frame houses versus mud huts) of an approximate 35,000-person workforce; building of schools; eradicating literacy; and making nomads become accustomed to industrial work methods. Hospitals also had to be built to counter endemic disease—stomach illness, malaria, flu, tuberculosis, scurvy, syphilis, and one outbreak of typhoid fever.¹²

· Amid their intense efforts to build the railroad, the men worked so fast that they were ahead of schedule and, since they were paid for piecework, that meant the government had to have the funds to pay them ahead of schedule as well. Unfortunately, the government budget could not handle the demand and Shatoff was frequently contacting Moscow authorities to seek compensation for the workers. And the pay for native workers was paltry compared to the “skilled” European engineers and managers.

· Discrimination of Turksib’s Kazakh workers by Russian and other European workers was rampant: Russian wages were usually higher than those of Kazakhs; “bourgeois specialists”

¹² Matthew J. Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh, PA 15261: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p. 251.

Shatoff the “manager” of the Center.²⁰ (In the early-mid 1900s St. Mark’s Place, part of Greenwich Village in 2019, was the center of Russian social democratic and anarchist activity.) The Ferrer Center was established in 1911 by Goldman (known to Ferrer Center regulars as “the Red Queen”) and her lover/friend Aleksander “Sasha” Berkman (“the Pope”). (Berkman was already known for his July 1892 attempt to assassinate industrialist Henry Clay Frick at Frick’s office in Pittsburgh, PA. After being convicted of the crime, Berkman spent 14 years in the state correctional facility, Western Penitentiary, in Pittsburgh, and was released in 1906. Goldman also was jailed in U.S. federal prison December 1917-September 1919 for “conspiring against the draft.” It was during her prison tenure in Missouri that Shatoff, “our jovial comrade and friend” sent her a basket of red roses in the midst of the Revolution, surrounded by enemies within and without, facing danger and death....”²¹

The Ferrer Center was an anarchist cultural, educational, and social center for adults; some might label it a center for anarchist debate and propaganda. It also sponsored day classes for children in its “Modern School”. A handful of children attended the Modern School in 1911 but the number grew to 32 when in 1919 it was relocated to Stelton, NJ. “Nor did Shatoff forget the Ferrer Movement. It was his gift of 10,000 rubles, it will be recalled, that started the construction of the Stelton schoolhouse in 1919.”²²

The Ferrer Center represented a “sympathetic interest in the adventures of the artistic avant-garde which was unusual for a political movement.”²³

²⁰ See footnote #15

²¹ Goldman, Emma, *Living My Life, Volume Two* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Company, 1934), Chapter 48

²² Avrich, Paul, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 333

²³ Berman, Paul, “Tales of the Jewish Working Class: The Ancient Dream of the Jewish Left, Part I,” *Tablet* (2019), www.tabletmag.com

The anarchists were always striving for ways to overcome the oppressive society of the present—politically, socially, economically, even artistically—in order to reach an Ideal Society of the future. Evening class students or guest lecturers at the Ferrer Center included American writers Eugene O’Neill, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair; lawyer Clarence Darrow; birth control activist Margaret Sanger; painter Robert Henri; journalists John Reed and Anna Louise Strong; and a host of other distinguished individuals.

Anarchist women, like Goldman and Margaret Sanger, seemed to relish shocking people with their free-thinking, modern attitudes. In 1906 Goldman founded the *Mother Earth* magazine which addressed a variety of anarchist topics including the labor movement, education, literature and the arts, state and government control, women’s emancipation, and sexual freedom. Sanger, a well-known birth control advocate (birth control and abortion were both illegal in the early 20th Century) was an active participant in the Ferrer Center and enrolled her own children in the Modern School. Shatoff is reported to have secretly printed 100,000 copies of Sanger’s birth control pamphlet “Family Limitation” in 1914 when other publishers would not.²⁴ Interesting that the anarchists, including Shatoff, were not usually active in promoting female suffrage because voting was a government mechanism and, therefore, inherently bad.

As a result of his affiliation with the Center, Shatoff became good friends with Goldman, Berkman, *New York TIMES* writer John Reed (one of three Americans whose ashes are buried in the Kremlin Wall), journalist/social activist (Anna) Louise Strong, and other well-known U.S. anarchists. These individuals not only came together for labor-related causes but clearly had established a close social circle. In November 1914 Shatoff—along with several other anarchists—were arrested by police at 3AM for disorderly conduct

²⁴ “Notes on Vladimir Shatov,” (SPUNK Library, 2019), www.spunk.org/library

dollars on American-manufactured steam shovels, air drills, compressors, motorized cranes, excavators, stone crushers, cement mixers and other construction equipment.⁹ However, equipment supplies from Western Europe/America were problematic due to the long approval process required by Moscow authorities. Circa 1929 Shatoff told Anna Louise Strong that he used funds that were supposed to finance his trip to a German sanatorium for a rest-and-relaxation visit for purchase of German construction equipment.¹⁰ The cost of foreign technology also created budget overruns and production difficulties due to unfamiliarity with the equipment.

Despite the regime’s and Shatoff’s lofty expectations of the workers, building of the Turksib generated a great number of management problems:

· Although Kazakh authorities generally supported construction of the Turksib for its promise of increasing local economic prosperity, political interests of other local (especially Kirghiz) and Moscow authorities, unions, and the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) contributed to significant planning problems and construction delays (although party “intervention” in 1929 helped to get production back on track after a problematic 1928). Early in 1927 Narkomput and Shatoff had agreed that locals’ actions should be related to “assistance,” not “meddling,” and Shatoff had asked Narkomput to not “create so many chiefs that we all get a headache.”¹¹ Yet, recruitment policies and routing of the railroad generated much conflict among interested parties, and some engineers broke ranks with Shatoff and supported the Kirghiz Government’s opposing position on the planned route. Shatoff’s insistence on the “Chokpar” Route, which he believed would be

⁹ See footnote #34

¹⁰ Strong, (Anna) Louise, *The Road to Grey Pamir* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1931), chapter one, p. 18

¹¹ Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE); cited in Matthew J. Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism*, p. 25

Whatever were the regime motives in hiring Kazakhs for the construction project, Shatoff enjoyed working with the Kazakhs and Turkestanis—camel-riding, Islamic, nomadic people who were employed as laborers for the project. Nevertheless, Shatoff never reached his goal of having half of the Turksib workers be Kazakhs; in summer of 1928 he claimed that 30–37 percent of Turksib workers were Kazakhs but that number was most likely high: Kazakhs comprised only 26.1 percent of the workforce on Northern Construction in August 1928 and the Kazakh share of workers was consistently lower than in the South (9.6 percent in August 1928).⁷

Although Shatoff left his adopted homeland of America in 1917, he hoped to import the traits of American workers to his native Russia and the Turksib workers—the can-do attitude, resilience, focus, determination. In his Alma Ata office, Shatoff even hung framed mottos on the walls that promoted industriousness, punctuality, and hard work. (These American exhortations were accompanied by other symbols of American culture: despite his residence in Alma Ata, visitors

often noted his joy in playing American jazz records and reading American books, both of which had to be smuggled into Russia by his friends. Shatoff also usually bid American visitors goodbye by saying “give my regards to Broadway!” Playing American jazz tunes on his gramophone, he once told Louise Strong “don’t you wish the shade of old Genghis [Khan—who traveled with his horsemen over the plains and deserts of Central Asia] could listen in on that!”⁸)

Shatoff not only encouraged an American work ethic for the Turksib construction but he also valued American-made equipment: according to one Chicago report, he spent two million

⁷ Payne, Matthew, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* citing the State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 2016 (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p. 136

⁸ Strong, (Anna) Louise, *The Road to Grey Pamir* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1931), chapter one, p. 23

on the streets of NYC following a farewell dinner. Berkman was also arrested but was charged with a felony—resisting a NYC police officer. Shatoff, who was recorded by NYC police as living at 1975 7th Avenue, NYC, at the time, was fined \$10.00 which he paid.²⁵²⁶

In 1916 Shatoff became an editor and typesetter for *Noviy Mir* (*New World*), a Russian-language, social democratic magazine located at 77 St. Mark’s Place, NYC, and founded by Goldman in 1916. Shatoff and his wife Anna lived on the first floor of the *Noviy Mir* building in NYC.²⁷ Its staff included chief editor Nikolay Bukharin, friend of Soviet Politburo member Leon Trotsky (who also worked at the *Noviy Mir* for a short time in early 1917). Bukharin became chief editor of the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* after the Russian Revolution of February 1917. The NYC-based *Noviy Mir* stopped publishing after the Bolsheviks assumed power in Russia in October 1917.

From 1906-1917—while Shatoff worked as a typesetter for *Golos Truda* and *Noviy Mir* and as manager of the Ferrer Center—most importantly he distinguished himself as a voice of Russian immigrant workers by playing a key role in orchestrating and/or addressing labor rallies in NYC, NY (garment and transit workers); Paterson, NJ (silk mill workers, 1913, 1916); Bayonne, NJ (oil workers, 1916); Everett, WA (mill workers, 1916); Ludlow, CO (miners, 1914); Lawrence, MA (textile workers, 1912); Pittsburgh, PA (steel mill workers); and other industrial cities throughout America.

Shatoff “rode the rails” in order to travel around America. In each city he took whatever job was available in order to make enough money to get him to the next rally: e.g., hospital orderly

²⁵ “Police Arrest Five After Clash with Anarchists,” *The Evening World* (New York City, November 9, 1914), p. 7

²⁶ “Anarchists Have Mirthful Evening,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 16, 1914), p. 11

²⁷ Avrich, Paul, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*, citing Gussie Denenberg (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2005), p. 211

(NYC), theatre propman (NYC), window-washer (Pittsburgh), longshoreman (Philadelphia), shoe factory worker (Lynn, MA), coalminer (Scranton), house painter (Detroit), machinist (Cincinnati), puddler in steel mill (San Francisco), dishwasher (Salt Lake City), etc.

“In the Spring of 1913 he went on a speaking tour to promote the cause and spoke in Russian and English in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and other major urban centers on topics such as ‘The International Working Class and Peace,’ and ‘the Tasks of Russian Immigrants in America.’”²⁸

In November 1913 “A crowd of 150 persons [in Kansas City, MO] heard a lecture in Russian by W. Shatoff, a Jewish labor worker recently from Kiev, Russia, describing the conditions of the Jewish refugees from the Russian Government, in the Jewish Educational Institute last night. Mr. Shatoff represents the Federated Russian Societies and is soliciting aid for the oppressed Jews in Russia.”²⁹

Much of Shatoff’s labor activism was in support of the IWW, an organization founded in 1908 and which Shatoff’s URW joined in 1912. Shatoff eventually became head of the IWW’s Russian section. During his engagement in labor and social democratic causes in America, Shatoff became friends with an IWW founder, “Big Bill” Haywood, a Western Federation of Miners leader and stalwart socialist from Nevada. Haywood seemed to particularly influence Shatoff.

(Early in the 20th Century Haywood allied with Eugene Debs and the American Federation of Labor. But Haywood and others wanted a more radical approach to resolving labor disputes and thus founded the IWW.³⁰ In 1918 Haywood was convicted of vio-

²⁸ “Putevya Zam’tii,” *Golos Truda* No. 30 (New York City, August 1, 1913)

²⁹ “Heard an Address in Russian: W. Shatoff Told of Jewish Refugees in His Native Country,” *Kansas City Times* (Kansas City, MO, November 29, 1913), p. 3

³⁰ “William Haywood,” (UK: Spartacus Educational Publishers Ltd., 2019), www.spartacus-educational.com/usahaywood.htm

Under Shatoff’s management, however, the building of the Turksib came in under-budget—it cost approximately 162 million rubles [approximately \$6.5 million in 1927 dollars] versus the original budget of 175 million rubles [approximately \$7 million in 1927 dollars]. The building of the train network was also 17 months ahead-of-schedule.² It was said that Shatoff drove the

Turksib construction through with such fury that “the one-humped camels had two humps on them when it was finished.”³ Shatoff often mobilized his workers with a propagandist ‘s appeals for enthusiasm and sacrifice... although very different from the specialists he led, Shatoff nonetheless had a great deal of respect for his technical cadres....”⁴

Shatoff is rightfully hailed for his accomplishment of constructing the Turksib under budget and ahead-of-schedule, but he was not entirely self-motivated: administrative authorities in Moscow were continuously pressuring Shatoff to cut the original budget and construction time. To avoid high costs, Shatoff looked for ways to avoid expensive viaducts and tunnels; he cut wages circa Spring 1928 and, in February 1929, extended the workday to 10 hours.⁵ The budget cuts did not seem to worry Shatoff much because Moscow also gave him funds for procurement of Western equipment which he felt would increase productivity.⁶

² Payne, Matthew, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* citing *Ogni Alatau* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p. 228

³ Parton, Lemuel F., “Former Hobo of America Builds Soviet Railroad” *The Post Crescent* (Appleton, Wisconsin: May 8, 1930), p. 14

⁴ Payne, Matthew, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* citing Romancherko’s *Kogda ostutpaut*, Malakhov’s “Nachalnik stroiki” and Nikitin’s *Turksib: magistrals’ sotsiaslizma* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p. 41

⁵ Payne, Matthew, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* citing the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p. 270

⁶ Payne, Matthew, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p. 104

struction centered on Sergiopol and Semipalatinsk and Southern Construction centered on Kazakhstan's capital city of Alma Ata, now Almaty). The Turksib extended from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, and eventually linked up with the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

The Turksib was of great national importance to Bolshevik Russia because it provided the shortest connection between Siberia with its abundance of grain, lumber, and coal, and the arid, cotton-growing regions of southern Kazakhstan and Turkestan. The railroad brought about increased cultivation of cotton, rice and other crops. According to Louise Strong "the important thing about this railway is that it will change the history of Asia" with the "wheat and timber of the greatest plains and forests on earth going south from Siberia to the great treeless plains of Turkestan." She noted the possibility that this part of Central Asia could also be one of the richest areas of the world for non-ferrous metals. It was also an example of the Bolsheviks' commitment to "nativization." Designed to redeem Bolshevism's promise to end ethnic inequality and uplift formerly exploited colonies, the regime trumpeted Turksib as the "forge of the Kazakh proletariat," proof that socialism could free nationalities from backwardness and imperialist exploitation.

Despite his technical illiteracy, Shatoff's appointment as chief construction officer for the Turksib was not surprising: Shatoff had earned a place as a trusted member of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and was considered a "Red director." His accomplishments as the Minister of Transport in the short-lived Far Eastern Republic particularly commended him to fill the role of the chief administrator of Turksib. Nevertheless, Shatoff's lack of technical expertise was resisted by both Moscow and local officials from the beginning of his appointment in 1927 and culminating in a January 1929 Turksib investigation by Rabkin (the "Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate"): Rabkin not only criticized Shatoff's technical illiteracy but also accused him of industrial "wrecking" and managerial dysfunction.

lating the U.S. Espionage Act of 1917 — "conspiring to hinder the draft" — and received a 20-year prison sentence. While on appeal, Haywood jumped bail and escaped to Russia where he spent the rest of his life, serving Lenin and the Bolsheviks in various advisory capacities. He died in 1928 and half of his cremated ashes reside in the Kremlin Wall; the other half were sent to Chicago to be buried at the Haymarket Martyrs' Monument in Chicago—a monument that honors four anarchists who were hanged for conspiring in the bombing of a May 1886 labor demonstration in Chicago.)

Labeled as "Wild Bill," from his "soapbox" Shatoff harangued labor rallies in Russian, English or Yiddish (the language or "dialect" of uneducated, working-class Jews whose use was basically prohibited in Russia and Germany). And he apparently spoke/understood German and, although never mentioned in available media, Shatoff probably spoke/understood the Ukrainian language as well since he was reportedly born and lived in Kiev. Harry Kelly, a fellow anarchist, stated that Shatoff was "overflowing with vitality" and was "a brilliant speaker in Russian and an excellent one in English."³¹

Shatoff was probably best known for his lecturing in support of labor strikes in the Colorado mines and in the silk mills of Paterson, NJ. In late January 1916 "the IWW [agitators], including Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlo Tresca, William Shatoff—a Russian, John Reed—war correspondent, urged the silk mill workers to get ready for another strike."³² *On 24 December 1916, Shatoff joined* nearly a thousand anarchists and IWW representatives when Carlo Tresca, who had been on trial in Minnesota as a result of his activities in the Mesaba iron range strike, returned to New York City. "A meeting of welcome was held in Manhattan Lyceum, 66 East Fourth street. In his exuberance William Shatoff kissed the protesting Carlo first

³¹ Kelly, Harry, "Unpublished Memoirs—Roll Back the Years" in John N. Bepfel Papers (NYC: Tamiment Library, New York University, date unknown), Chapter 21, pp. 10–11

³² "Let Gurley Flynn Talk in Paterson," *Perth Amboy Evening News* (NJ: January 21, 1916), p. 12

on one cheek and then on the other, while the crowd yelled its appreciation of the scene. Shatoff afterward made a speech but, as it was in Russian, it will not be reported.”³³

Although many U.S. newspapers in the early 20th Century reported Shatoff’s claim that he had been arrested in America numerous times over several years, that claim remains unverified. The only arrest that can be verified is the November 1914 incarceration by New York City police disorderly conduct. One *Chicago Tribune* report said that Shatoff had “narrowly outjumped the Chicago Sheriff” at one time.³⁴

In the midst of the burgeoning labor activism in America, anarchists in America expressed opposition to World War I (the Great War) and many, including Shatoff, Goldman and Berkman, signed an International Manifesto on the War, signed 15 February 1915.³⁵ This stand was contrary to Kropotkin’s pro-war stance but the American anarchists claimed that the Great War was simply a capitalist struggle for power and profit. Despite their opposition to World War I, most of these individuals hailed the violent overthrow of the Russian tsar.

³³ “Tresca Welcomed Back,” *New York Sun* (NYC: December 25, 1916), p. 7

³⁴ “U.S. Anarchist to Rail Magnate: A Russian Story,” *Daily Tribune* (Chicago, March 12, 1928), p. 15

³⁵ “International Anarchist Manifesto on the War,” (London: International Anarchist Movement, 1915), www.theanarchistlibrary.org

Chapter Four: Construction of the Turksib Railroad, 1927-1930

In 1927 Shatoff was appointed by the Narkomut—People’s Commissariat of the Means of Communication, charged with building of the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad (Turksib) and headed by I. Rudzutak—as chief of construction for this railroad. The *New York Sun* noted in 1933 that Shatoff used to tell his public, that “he, just a pick-and shovel stiff, could run the railroads better than the big bosses if he had a chance.”¹ So, the construction of Turksib gave him that chance.

The Turksib was one of the largest infrastructure projects of Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan (1929–32) and traversed deserts and mountains heretofore considered impregnable. At the peak of construction, the workforce was about 50,000 men. Construction was split into two sectors: the Northern Construction Administration led by engineer L. I. Perelman, and the Southern Construction Administration led by engineer S. M. Ivanov. Shatoff’s two deputies handled local contract negotiations and contacts with local officials and organizations. Shatoff reportedly did not often visit the construction sites but spent much of his time in Moscow until 1929—acting as the “people’s advocate,” leaving his senior managers with responsibility for daily operations.

This railway crossed the Central Asian Republics of Kirghizstan, Turkestan, Uzbekistan, and primarily Kazakhstan (Northern Con-

¹ “Who’s Who”, *The Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, UT, July 22, 1933), p. 4

Board of Prombank (Industrial Bank); general manager and vice president of Metalloimport; and member of various business associations, committees, and boards. At one time Shatoff declared: “I am now sharing the richest oil markets with John D. [Rockefeller] whose gunmen once chased me around the hills of Colorado.”⁷

*In response to Lenin’s call for development of Siberia’s heavy industry in the Kuzbass region, in 1921 the Russian Council of Labor and Defense and a group of foreign workers—mostly Americans led by IWW Chairman Bill Haywood—created the autonomous industrial colony (AIC). In 1922 Shatoff was appointed “coordinator” of the group of Americans in the AIC. This unique colony was an experimental group of foreign technocrats—including 250 IWW representatives—and was primarily engaged in the development of the Kemerovo mines in the Kuznetsk Basin. AIC achieved some successes—the group reconstructed several mines, built and put into production the first chemical processing plant in Russia and organized an advanced agricultural farm. Under the AIC, villages in the Kemerovo region were massively electrified and luxury districts were built in the cities of Kuzbass. However, tensions between industrial and white-collar workers, conflicts between men and women regarding work assignments, and the inability of AIC to maintain production efficiencies when larger-scale industries were created post-1922, forced AIC to dissolve in 1926.*⁸

⁷“From IWW to Oil King,” *The Kansas City Star* (Kansas City, MO: July 11, 1922), p. 9

⁸“Kuzbass Autonomous Industrial Colony” (WIKIPEDIA, March 6, 2023)

Chapter Two: Return to Mother Russia, 1917

Following the fall of the Russian tsar and installation of a Provisional Russian Government in February 1917, Shatoff predicted that the war in Europe would cease in three months. Shatoff’s prediction about World War I was obviously incorrect but he did accurately predict the failure of the Russian Provisional Government due to its failure to “meet the expectations of the people.” Shatoff said that “while the [February 1917] revolution abolished autocracy, [the revolution] was unable to place the men it wanted in power and, as a result, had to accept the present Provisional Government.”¹

Nevertheless, in May 1917 approximately 70 Bolshevik sympathizers with the entire staff of *Golos Truda* (including Shatoff), John Reed, and Leon Trotsky, left America for Vladivostok via Vancouver/Seattle, San Francisco and Yokohama, Japan. Shatoff helped to organize the return travels of these Russian emigrants and other comrades, travel which was largely financed by the Provisional Government of Russia.² The troupe entered Russia via Vladivostok and the *Golos Truda* staff shortly regrouped in Petrograd and the publication survived until 1919 when it was shut down by the Soviet Government.

While he was in Seattle making arrangements for the Bolshevik sympathizers’ travel to Vladivostok, Shatoff reportedly made a dire

¹“Russian Sees End of War in Three Months,” *Daily Times* (Seattle: May 7, 1917), p. 2

²“Russian Exiles on Way Home from Seattle,” *Daily Times* (Seattle: May 7, 1917), p. 2

prediction about revolution in Germany which would supposedly follow World War I: “At this very moment,’ he said, ‘Russians are circulating among German workers, peasants and soldiers, working toward a revolution in Germany....’”³ Obviously, the German workers’ revolution never occurred.

Shatoff continued his political activities in Vladivostok until he relocated to Petrograd in June 1917 where he first worked as a typesetter for the newspaper “*Kopejka*.” (This probably refers to *Gazeta-Kopeika*, a tabloid newspaper founded in Petrograd in 1908.) He served on the Central Council of Factory and Plant Committees (Fabzavkoms) in Petrograd and attended the First All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions. At that conference, Shatoff called the Russian trade unions “living corpses” and urged the working classes to organize in the localities and create a free, new Russia, without a God, without a tsar, and without a boss in the trade union.⁴ In October 1917 Shatoff was appointed to the Military Revolutionary Committee (VRK) in Petrograd. Four anarchists participated in the planning of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution against the Provisional Government, including Shatoff. In fact, Shatoff not only assisted in the planning but also led the attack on the Winter Palace.

The seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 had a mixed response from American anarchists, however: Goldman initially praised Lenin and Trotsky for their revolutionary spirit but some anarchists foresaw the creation of a new dictatorship that did not bode well for Russia. Anarchists began to notice that Bolshevism’s dictatorship did not have the look of a temporary or emergency arrangement. Nor did it have the look of something cautious or restrained or respectful of persons and privacy. It had

³ “Says Russ People Will Brush Aside Provisional Men,” *The Star* (Seattle: May 7, 1917), p. 8

⁴ “Notes on Vladimir Shatov,” (SPUNK Library, 2019), www.spunk.org/library

tained by Bolshevik forces. In February 1920 Shatoff repulsed the “counter-revolutionary” Kolchak and his troops and established his headquarters in Omsk. Then Shatoff turned to negotiating terms of peace with the American, British, and Japanese military commanders in Siberia and, as head of the military diplomatic mission of the Far Eastern Republic, moved to Blagovestchensk to meet with his foreign counterparts. Following successful negotiations with the Americans and British in Blagovestchensk, Shatoff was prepared to meet with the Japanese. However, the Japanese refused to meet in Blagovestchensk, insisting on Vladivostok as the venue for negotiations. Since the Russians did not trust the Japanese, a meeting was set up in Vladivostok only after Shatoff secured an American agreement for a U.S. military regiment to escort the Russians to Vladivostok for protection. In July 1920, after about a week of negotiation, Shatoff, American, British, and Japanese representatives signed a peace treaty which called for complete evacuation of Russian territory by all foreign signatories. Japanese General Akayama, signed on behalf of the Japanese Government and awarded Shatoff the Order of the Samurai Sword.⁵ (The Japanese awards system was established in the 1870s and, as of 2023, was very robust. However, no references to the Order of the Samurai Sword could be located. It is possible that this award was “retired” after World War II to eliminate any hint of Japanese militarism since the remaining awards most often reference Japanese flowers.)

After Shatoff’s 1920–1922 stint as Minister of War and Transportation in Russia’s Far Eastern Republic, it was off to Moscow where Shatoff continued his career as a high Russian official and business leader; chief of the Naptha Export Company, a government trust which monopolized oil exports; official in the Central

⁵ “Shatov, Vladimir Sergeevich,” (Russian Railway Forum, 2019), www.scbist.com/wiki/23987/shatov-vladimir-sergeevich in Russian

⁶ “Shatov, Vladimir Sergeevich, 1887–1943” (World History on the Internet, 2019), www.hrono.ru/biograf/shatovvs.php

Shatoff's analysis and appealed to all progressive forces in the West to work to lift the Allied blockade to alleviate Russian hunger and suffering. Apparently Shatoff's 1920 recommendation to Berkman to not criticize the Bolsheviks at this time went unheeded: Goldman and Berkman, who were supportive of the Bolshevik Revolution in February 1917, declared after their 1920–1921 residency in Russia that the Revolution was a huge disappointment. "They were stunned by the wholesale arrests of Russian anarchists...and the conversion of local soviets into mere rubber stamps for a new bureaucracy. The Bolsheviks, they concluded, while ruling in the name of the workers, were in fact destroying the popular initiative and self-reliance in which the success of the Revolution depended."⁴ For them, the "last nail in the coffin" was the Bolsheviks' March 1921 murder of 1,000 rioting soldiers and sailors, and the arrest of almost 2,000 more, in the port town of Kronstadt. In 1923 Goldman wrote *My Disillusionment in Russia* and, in 1924, *My Further Disillusionment in Russia*; Berkman wrote *The Bolshevik Myth* in 1925. These three books noted Goldman's and Berkman's great disappointment in the Bolshevik Revolution.

Sometime after January 1920, Shatoff firmly established himself as Minister of War and Minister of Transport for the isolated and war-torn Far Eastern Republic (Siberia). His instructions from Petrograd were to open and ensure the safety of the Trans-Siberian rail line. The task was very difficult: White Admiral Kolchak and his 20,000 men were ensconced in Omsk and the temperature hovered around 40 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit); thousands of Japanese troops were located further to the East on the Amur-Trans-Baikal Front; and the American Expeditionary Force-Siberia and British troops were in the area to protect American supplies that had been given to the Russian Imperial Army prior to the October Revolution, and to rescue Czech troops that were being de-

⁴ Avrich, Paul, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 334

the look of corruption and inefficiency.⁵ Manuel Komroff (1890–1974)—an American novelist, screenwriter and editor who lived with Shatoff and his wife in Petrograd just before and during the October Revolution—said Shatoff joined forces with the Bolsheviks because Shatoff believed Bolshevik efforts would lead to successful revolution although compromise would be necessary.⁶

Shatoff himself was rejected by some anarchists who felt that he had "collaborated" with "bourgeois" Bolsheviks by accepting bureaucratic appointments from them. By October 1917 many of Shatoff's anarchist comrades no longer considered him an anarchist. The temporary alliance between Russia's anarcho-syndicalists and Bolsheviks—illustrative of Lenin's pragmatism and his willingness to meld the two different ideologies to achieve revolution—finally disintegrated by April 1918 when the Bolshevik government began its political suppression of the anarchists via incarceration, deportation, and execution. The Bolsheviks were now threatened by the growing anarchist influence and the anarchists' anti-state, anti-communist rhetoric.

After the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, a least for part of his time in Petrograd, Shatoff lived in the Smolny Institute, a pre-Revolution girls' school which was repurposed as Bolshevik headquarters. It was at this institute that Shatoff met Louis Browne, a Washington D.C. *Evening Star* correspondent and said: "The Bolsheviks may be unsuccessful at the polls, but our propaganda has been so effective that our ideals have now become deeply rooted in the minds of the workmen and soldiers. Any political party assuming control will soon be ousted unless it makes large accommodations to Bolshevism."⁷

⁵ See footnote #23

⁶ Komroff, Manuel (1890–1974), "Red Days and Nights" manuscript (NYC: Columbia University Libraries' Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, 1974?), call number MS#-0723, Box 19

⁷ Browne, Louis Edgar, "Bolsheviki Leading in Russian Elections," *Evening-World Herald* (Omaha, NE: November 30, 1917), p. 18

One Kansas journalist claimed that, when Shatoff lived in Petrograd, his “specialty” was funerals, i.e. “frequently he stops a procession of this solemn kind, on the streets of St. Petersburg, and makes a speech wherein he tells how the deceased was the victim of autocracy, although he may have been killed in a drunken brawl.... In his funeral orations, Bill indulges in the coarsest jokes, being very witty, and those in the crowd roar with laughter. At other times, he is a weeper and his sobbing over the wrongs of the people has become fine art.”⁸

In 1918 he was appointed Chief of Police in Petrograd and occasionally encountered U.S. consulate, National City Bank, and other U.S. Government and business officials, several of whom were witnesses at 1919 U.S. Congressional hearings on the state of the Bolshevik Revolution. During his tenure as Petrograd’s Chief of Police, Shatoff took active measures to drastically reduce the number of prostitutes available in the city: Shatoff no longer recognized prostitution as a “job”; deported foreign prostitutes; and even established a farm colony outside the city where prostitutes, who were unable/unwilling to work in Petrograd City jobs, were placed.⁹

Although he never joined the Communist Party¹⁰¹¹ it is probable that Bill Shatoff was complicit in the atrocities committed during the Red Terror in Petrograd 1917–1918. For some of that time he was, after all, the Chief of Police who had to be aware of and be playing a role in executing and/or imprisoning thousands of counter-revolutionaries. He must have cooperated with the Cheka in this regard. (The Red Terror was a campaign of mass killings,

⁸ Howe, E.W., “Weeper William,” *The Atchison Daily Globe* (Atchison, KS: October 1, 1920), p. 9

⁹ “Soviet Government Wars on Prostitution,” *The Social Hygiene Bulletin* (NYC: American Social Hygiene Association, September 1919)

¹⁰ Avrich, Paul, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*, citing Paul Rose who was interviewed January 25, 1974 in NYC (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2005), p. 338

¹¹ Berkman, Aleksandr, *The Bolshevik Myth: Diary 1920–1922* (NYC: Boni and Liveright Publishers, 1925), chapter three

miss my American ‘blessings.’ Me for Russia, the Revolution, and its glorious future!”¹

In April 1920 Berkman wrote that Shatoff, who apparently returned to Siberia after the anarchists’ arrival in Russia in January 1920, was expected to return to Petrograd because his wife Nunya was in the hospital and was rumored to be near death. Berkman commented: “It appears that Bill, in spite of his great services to the Revolution, had fallen into disfavor; grave charges were made against him, and he was even in danger of his life. Lenin saved Shatoff because he was a good organizer and ‘could still be useful.’ Bill was virtually exiled to Siberia, and it is believed that he will not be permitted to return to Petrograd to see his dying wife.”² As far as is known, although Shatoff was Minister of War in the Far Eastern Republic, he was not given permission to travel to Petrograd to see his dying wife. She did, however, survive the hospital stay because she was later imprisoned in 1940 for being Shatoff’s wife.

During his personal visit with Berkman in January 1920, Shatoff said: “Just now we are passing through the difficult stage of violent social revolution. Several fronts are to be defended, and we need a strong, well-disciplined army. There are counter-revolutionary plots to be guarded against and the Cheka must keep a watchful eye on the conspirators. Of course, the Bolsheviks have committed many errors; that’s because they are human. We live in the period of transition, of much confusion, constant danger, and anxiety. It is the hour of travail, and men are needed to help the work of defense and reconstruction. We Anarchists should remain true to our ideals, but we should not criticize at this time. We must work and help to build.”³ Berkman (and, by association, Emma Goldman) accepted

¹ Ibid

² Berkman, Aleksandr, *The Bolshevik Myth: Diary 1920–1922* (NYC: Boni and Liveright Publishers, 1925), chapter fifteen

³ Berkman, Aleksandr, *The Bolshevik Myth: Diary 1920–1922* (NYC: Boni and Liveright Publishers, 1925), chapter three

Chapter Three: Success in the Russian Far East, Moscow

On 19 January 1920 the American anarchists crossed the Finnish border into Russia after their long maritime journey on the USAT Buford. (The U.S. Army Transport ship Buford was a combination cargo/passenger ship. She was purchased by the U.S. Army and was used by the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Labor to deport 249 non-citizens to Russia from America due to alleged anarchist activities.) At the same time, Shatoff was carrying out his duties as the newly-appointed Minister of War in the Far Eastern Republic (this Siberian republic lasted organizationally only a few years).

When the anarchists arrived at the Finnish-Soviet border, even though they “were welcomed on Soviet soil as brothers” by workers, soldiers and peasants, they were told that their “old comrade” Bill Shatoff was in Siberia and could not greet them on their arrival. A few days later, when Goldman and Berkman saw Shatoff in Petrograd, they expressed surprise that Shatoff did not meet them at the Finnish border since he was not in Siberia. According to Goldman, Shatoff seemed embarrassed and only said that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” prevented him from traveling to Finland. He added: “the Communist state in action is exactly what we anarchists have always claimed it would be—tightly centralized power, still more strengthened by the dangers to the Revolution. Under such conditions, one cannot do as one wills.....but do not get the idea that I

torture, and systematic oppression conducted by the Bolsheviks after they seized power in Petrograd and Moscow—which became the capital city in 1918. The Cheka –the Bolshevik secret police founded by Polish-born Felix E. Dzerzhinskiy– conducted the mass repressions. Estimates for the total number of people killed in the Red Terror range from 50,000 to 1.5 million. The Red Terror was practical implementation of dictatorship of the proletariat as explained by Lenin in *The State and Revolution* (1918) as well as an effort by the Bolsheviks to eliminate real and imaginary counter-revolutionaries who belonged to the former ruling class. The first official announcement of a Red Terror, published in the newspaper *Izvestiya* on 3 Sept 1918 called for workers to “crush the hydra of counter-revolution with massive terror... anyone who dares to spread the slightest rumor against the Soviet regime will be arrested immediately and sent to concentration camp.”)

Years later, after meeting with Emma Goldman in January 1920, Goldman said that Shatoff “loathed the dictatorship and its handmaiden, the Cheka, with their ruthless suppression of thought, speech, and initiative”. Shatoff, said, though, it was an “unavoidable evil.”¹² According to Goldman, “the Russian experience had taught [Shatoff] that we anarchists had been the romanticists of revolution, forgetful of the cost it would entail, the frightful price the enemies of the Revolution would exact, the fiendish methods they would resort to in order to destroy its gains.”¹³

It appears that Shatoff was either personally conflicted—supportive of anti-tsar revolution even if it meant violence against the counter-revolutionaries; supportive of anarchism yet viewing many anarchists as idealists; and supporting dictatorship of the proletariat but not authoritarian Communism—or he was willing

¹² Goldman, Emma, *Living My Life, Volume Two* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Company, 1934), Chapter 52

¹³ Ibid

to compromise his anarcho-syndicalism for Lenin's vision of revolution, even if it meant direct use of violence instead of peaceful, organized efforts by the working classes.

By 1919 Shatoff had become an officer in the 10th Red Army and was leading troops on the Western Front although he had no military experience. In October 1919 Bill Shatoff led troops of the 10th Army of the Western Front against Military Commissar Nikolay Yudenich who tried to retake Petrograd but was repulsed. The story is: when the Bolsheviks were assailed in Petrograd by White (counter-revolutionary) army troops, the Russian defense forces were prepared to turn the city over to the White commander Nikolay Yudenich; however, a large man with a bellowing voice [Shatoff] emerged from a group of Bolshevik soldiers, shot Yudenich and then assumed command of the Bolshevik takeover of the city (Yudenich retreated, was imprisoned in Estonia and eventually was released. He then lived in exile in France where he died in 1933). "For his effort against Yudenich, Shatoff received the Soviet Order of the Red Banner, a medal which he proudly showed Berkman in January 1920.

(The Order of the Red Banner," established in 1920, was awarded for heroism in military combat. It was last awarded in 1991.)

While Shatoff was defending Petrograd in October 1919, American anarchists were preparing to join the Bolshevik Revolution. In late December 1919 Goldman, Berkman and about 250 others left America with some, including Goldman and Berkman, leaving involuntarily due to deportation. In her autobiography, Emma Goldman credited Shatoff with helping to organize the return of these people to Russia. She said: "This revolutionary anarchist, compelled to take refuge in America from the tyranny of the Russian autocracy, had during his 10 years' sojourn in the United States shared the life of the true proletarian and was always in the thick of the struggle for the betterment of the workers' condition. Having worked as a laborer, longshoreman, machinist, and printer, Bill was familiar with hardships, insecurity, and humiliation that

characterize the existence of the immigrant toiler. A weaker man would have perished spiritually. But Bill had the vision on an ideal, an inexhaustible energy, and a keen intellect. Thanks to Bill's energy and devotion, these masses were gradually united into a strong body of rebels."¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid