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“RED LANDLORD”. THE FIGURE OF ANATOL BONCH-OSMOLOVSKY AND HIS ROLE IN THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT OF BELARUS

Abstract

The article is devoted to the social and political activity of Anatol Osipovich Bonch-Osmolovsky, who was one of the best representatives of the neopopulist direction in the revolutionary movement of Belarus and Russia in 1905–1917. This political biography of one of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party leaders looks at the revolutionary process and the establishment of democratic institutions in a predominantly peasant country by following Bonch-Osmolovsky’s opinions. The attitudes of the “red landowner” to the farm program, to the Socialist-Revolutionary Party’s terror, to the Belarusian national movement, and to the idea of Belarus’ political independence are analysed in this article.

Keywords: Anatol Bonch-Osmolovsky, Socialist-Revolutionary Party, repression, terror, revolutionary events in Belarus 1905–1907, peasantry and land issue

The name of the veteran of the all-Russian and Belarusian revolutionary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Anatol Osipovich Bonch-Osmolovsky (1857–1930) today will not say much to most of his compatriots. There are no cities and villages named in his honour. There are also no memorial plaques on the buildings of the institutions that were connected with his activities. In the whole post-Soviet area there is probably only one place where at least some memory has remained about this historical personality and his name can be recalled by the old-timers. It is the Belarusian agricultural settlement Blon of the Pukhovichi district, in the Minsk region, where in the local lore museum a memorial room was recently created in honour of its former owners. This museum is placed in the former Bonch-Osmolovsky family manor house. A memorial board was installed there, but only one former inhabitant of this house was mentioned on it. This is Gleb Bonch-Osmolovsky (1890–1943), who was the son of Anatol Osipovich and the most apolitical of all the representatives of the Blon branch of this family.

What is the importance of Anatol Osipovich Bonch-Osmolovsky at least for the historians-researchers of the revolutionary movement in the Russian Empire? At one time, he was a real legend in the revolutionary movement and an indisputable authority among the radical opponents of the czarist regime. He was one of the leaders of the Black Redistribution, and later he became a member of the Central Committee of the Russian Socialist-Revolutionary Party. He was one of the founders of the All-Russian Peasant Union. He also managed an underground peasant organisation in Blon and illegal Social Revolutionary printing houses in Belarus, etc. We limit ourselves to listing his merits before the revolution because this “track record” could take up most of this article.

The whole family of Anatol Osipovich was involved in revolutionary activity, and his estate in Blon was repeatedly subjected to searches by the czarist gendarmerie and police. His father, Osip A. Bonch-Osmolovsky, was a state councilor. He received Pukhovich possessions in the Minsk region for his faithful service to the Russian Empire after these lands were confiscated in 1863 from a participant of the anti-Russian uprising. Anatol Bonch-Osmolovsky transformed his inherited

estate into a nest of revolutionary propaganda and a refuge for various dissidents and terrorists.

The memory of the revolutionary landowner A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky was gradually erased in the Soviet times. This was a natural course of events, and it was done intentionally because of the political attitudes of the Stalinist regime. In the early 1920s, A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky was occasionally mentioned in scientific publications because of his interest in the activities of the *Narodnaya Volya* and Black Redistribution,¹ as well as in the revolutionary events of 1905–1907. As for the 1930s, his name is simply hushed up.

The work on the collection of documents and materials about the history of the revolutionary movement in Belarus begun in 1923 and was carried out by the Commission of the History of the October Revolution and the Communist Party of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, headed by the famous Belarusian revolutionary writer D. Zhilunovich (Ts. Hartny). Later, it was transformed into the Institute of Party History. Memories of A. Bonch-Osmolovsky about the events of 1905–1908 were placed in the journal *Polymya* on the initiative of Zhilunovich in 1924–1925.²

S. Agursky became the new head of the Institute of Party History of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus at the end of 1925. He was an irreconcilable opponent of Belarusian nationalism and significantly changed the materials' methodology and content with respect to the revolutionary movement's history in Belarus and its further "monumentalisation".

Memories of the Life and Activities of I. Pulikhov and E. Izmailovich are available among the materials collected by the Institute of Party History and are kept now in the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus.

¹ Y. Steklov, *Partiya sotsialistov-revolutsionerov*, Moskva 1922; A. Zimyonka, *Satsyjalistichny rukh na Byelarusi. II. Partyya satsyialistau-revalutsyyanerau*, [in:] *Belarus: Narysy gistoryi, ekanomiki, kultury i revalutsyjnaga rukhu*, Minsk 1924, pp. 152–161; I. Popov, *A.O. Bonch-Osmolovskiy, "Katorga i ssylka"* 1931, nr 4; *Deyateli revoliutsionnogo dvizheniya v Rossii. Biobibliograficheskii slovar'*, t. 3, vyp. 1, Moskva 1933.

² A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, *Epokha 1905 g. Maysye usпамiny*, "Polymya" 1925, nr 6–7, <http://ludzi-na-balocce.livejournal.com/tag> (access: 18.08.2020).

Previously, they belonged to A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky.³ They almost completely coincide with his previous memoirs published in the Minsk magazine *Polymya* in the Belarusian language.

As we have already noted, the name of A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky disappears from scientific publications for a long time, starting in the mid-1930s. His sons – Rodion and Gleb – were victims of political repression. Rodion was tortured to death in 1938 during the interrogation after his re-arrest by an investigator of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs. Gleb was convicted in 1934 because of his involvement in the Slavonic cause. He was set free after two years, but he would not forget about this and the tragic fate of his brother until the end of his life.

Relation to A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky began changing for better with the beginning of the “thaw” in the USSR.⁴ His name is found in scientific publications and articles more often. Research is appearing in which his role in the revolutionary movement at the final stage of the Russian Empire’s existence is fairly well covered.⁵ The voluminous manuscript of Anatol Osipovich’s memoirs and his son’s (Rodion) autobiography have been preserved in the archive of the family’s Moscow branch. They became available for use in the researchers’ scientific work in the *perestroika* and post-*perestroika* period. But the memorialisation of his name on steamboats and on the signs of the streets of cities and villages did not take place.

The social and political significance of A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky’s participation in the events of the beginning of the twentieth century will be examined through the lens of his views on the revolutionary process

³ Natsyyanalny arkhiv Respubliki Byelarus (NARB), F. 60, Documents of the former Institute of Party History under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, Inv. 4, Case number 40, Sh. 1–8.

⁴ *Revolutsionnoye dvizheniye v Belorussii. 1905–1907 gg.*, Minsk 1955; V. U. Chapko, *Syalanski rukh u Byelarusi u 1905–1907 hh.*, “Vyetsi AN BSSR. Syeryya gramad. navuk” 1956, nr 1; L. Lipinskiy, *Krestyjanskoye i soldatskoye dvizheniye v Belorussii (1900–1907 gg.)*, red. L. Lipinskiy, J. Lukyanov, Minsk 1968; B. Kleyn, *Delo Bonch-Osmolovskikh*, “Neman” 1970, nr 11, pp. 48–89.

⁵ M. I. Leonov, *Partiya sotsialistov-revolutsionerov v 1905–1907 gg.*, Moskva 1997; K. N. Morozov, *Partiya sotsialistov-revolutsionerov v 1907–1914 gg.*, Moskva 1998; I. A. Kiprova, *Sozdaniye i deyatelnost’ Smolenskoj organizatsii Partii sotsialistov-revolutsionerov (1901–1907 gg.): ludi, sobytiya, dokumenty*, Smolensk 2010.

and the establishment of democratic institutions in Russia and Belarus. It is also important to identify the position of the "red landowner" on the agrarian program and the terror spread by the militant group of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party. A separate, but no less relevant, issue is his attitude towards the Belarusian national movement and the idea of political independence of Belarus.

Anatol Bonch-Osmolovsky never sat still during the revolutionary events of 1905–1907. He constantly voyaged between his family estate, Minsk, Petersburg, Moscow, Finnish Helsingfors (Helsinki), Imatra and Tammerfors (Tampere), Swiss Geneva, and other political centres where prominent figures of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party and representatives of other revolutionary organisations of Russia were.⁶

A. Bonch-Osmolovsky was released from the East Siberian exile early and returned to Blon in December 1904. He joined in the revolutionary activity. He participated in the formation of local branches of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party and became responsible for relations with the peasantry and the organisation of underground printing houses.

In May 1905, he was in Smolensk at an illegal meeting of the representatives of the local Socialist-Revolutionary Party along with E. Ratner. The north-western branch of the party was formed there. His further path directed him to Moscow, where he spoke at a conference of peasant representatives at which ways of solving the land issue were discussed. His fiery speech was remembered by the delegates: "I am a landlord, but I suggest that all peasants try to seize the land of the landowners and hold on to it with their hands and teeth with every means".⁷ He did not believe in the sincerity of the October manifesto of Nicholas II, which confirmed the establishment of the State Duma and declared democratic freedoms in the country.

Anatol Osipovich returned to Minsk on October 18. This was the day when the "Kurlov shooting" during a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration took place. The event was named after the then Minsk governor P. Kurlov, who was involved in this violence. A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky got off the train a few hours after the events. He realised

⁶ A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, op. cit.

⁷ Ibidem. All translations – U. L.

the full scale of the tragedy after he saw the bullet holes and blood on the buildings of Vilensky railway station and the station square.⁸ His eldest son, Ivan, delivered a speech at this demonstration. Then, the protesters carried a fatally wounded young activist Bunda Rosa Shabad from the scene of events to her parents' house.⁹

A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky did not stay long in Blon. He again went to the All-Russian peasant assembly in late October 1905. He stayed in Moscow until January 1906, where he became an active participant in barricade battles in Presnya.

He traveled a lot to the cities of Russia and Finland during 1906–1907, where he participated in various party congresses and conferences of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party. He even went to Geneva, where he spoke about the organisation of the underground press.¹⁰

A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky remained in his family estate for a long time in late 1907, when the Stolypin reaction began. He turned his home into the main centre of revolutionary work in the Minsk region. He resumed the activities focusing on self-development and mutual assistance that were aimed at local peasants and Jewish townfolk.

Needless to say, Anatol Osipovich was an excellent organiser and conspirator. He placed caches everywhere in his manor house thanks to his carpentry skills. In them, he hid illegal literature, typographical font, and other attributes of revolutionary activity. In his memoirs, he stated with special pride that only a small part of these caches had been discovered during numerous searches by gendarmes.¹¹

Now we will take a closer look at the political views of Anatol Osipovich and his vision of the social and political situation in the country at that time. First of all, this concerns the solution of the land issue, but also the choice of the form of the political structure of the country, as well as his attitude to parliamentarism and terror.

A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky presented his principled position on the agrarian question in Russia at the founding congress of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party in Imatra, which took place between the end

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

of December 1905 and early January 1906. There he expressed his disagreement with the party leader, V. Chernov, who defended his concept of socialisation of the land, using primarily economic and legal arguments. A. Bonch-Osmolovsky wrote later:

I and a significant number of delegates from the localities were in favor of a more determined struggle against the landlords and the administration. For example, we urged the peasants to drain water from ponds, to destroy the dams of water mills from which peasant meadows were flooded, and in general to put any obstacles in order to make useless and impossible the existence of the noble economy.¹²

A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky was fifty years old in 1907, but he still adhered to a radical position in the Socialist-Revolutionary Party. He recognised the expediency of organising combat peasant troops to seize landlords' lands, calling for boycotting the orders of the czarist administration and other forms of civil disobedience.

Such a position didn't find mass support among the Belarusian peasants, which was something that A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky expected. The peasants did not know what communal land use was. Private property prevailed in their minds. They supported the Socialist-Revolutionaries only in the matter of the closure of large land estates. "Non-noble noble" was forced to admit this: "Especially I was not sure about the Belarusian peasants, Don and Kuban Cossacks".¹³ He acknowledged in 1917 at the congress establishing the Belarusian Narodnaya Hromada in Moscow that

the land issue in Belarus should be placed in a slightly different framework in comparison with Russia in connection with certain features, because our region had hardly experienced communal land use. It must be taken into account.¹⁴

A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky transferred his radicalism to other political issues. He believed that the way to achieve real democracy was not

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ L. Savitskaya, *Grupa Bonch-Asmalouskaga*, "Polymya" 1967, nr 5, p. 23.

so much through the principle of separation of powers and the rule of law, but primarily through the unlimited revolutionary creativity of the masses. He wrote later:

For me it was an undeniable truth that it is impossible to destroy first and then to build the life of the people and the state, especially with respect to the economic system. Revolutionary processes can be two-sided. The old must be destroyed and a new, more modern, more fair construction must be made at the same time and in the same process...¹⁵

A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky considered wrong and harmful in the Russian conditions the expectations of moderate socialists, who focused exclusively on parliamentary methods of the struggle for power. In his opinion, the idea of parliamentarism was alien to the broad masses in Russia. It was a kind of a “wooden idol-fetish”, to which the liberal democrats prayed hoping that the elected democratic parliament (the Constituent Assembly) will be able to solve all the long-standing social and economic problems. He emphatically defended his position:

It is not the Constituent Assembly, but a revolutionary process, which should be carried out by the revolutionary self-activity of the masses, and this was an undeniable truth for me [...]. The Constituent Assembly must only agree and give its sanction. It means consolidating this creativity in solid legislative norms.¹⁶

The position of A. Bonch-Osmolovsky regarding terrorist activities was ambiguous. He noted that he had never been a big fan of terror. So he could not shoot a tsarist soldier, although he was an excellent shooter during the battles at the Presnenskiy barricades in January 1906.

I started aiming the revolver at the nearest soldier, but I could not shoot. I couldn't find it in my heart to do this, because I had the idea that he was an unconscious pawn, so why should I ruin him.¹⁷

¹⁵ A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, op. cit.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

He considered the 1903 cynical murder of the Ufi governor N. Bogdanovich by the Socialist-Revolutionary fanatic E. Dulebov as a mistake. N. Bogdanovich did not approach the role of extreme reactionary in his views.

Nevertheless, A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky recognised the usefulness of targeted terrorist acts and bank expropriations. He considered them politically sound and "productive" if they fueled political radicalism and contributed to the growth of revolutionary sentiments in the society. He cited the productive killings of the tsarist ministers N. Bogolepov and V. Plehve, as well as that of the lawyer G. Luzhanovsky, who headed the Tambov department of the Black-Hundred "Union of Russian People".¹⁸

E. Breshko-Breshkovskaya, G.-I. Gershuni, M. Spiridonova, sisters A. and E. Izmailovitchi, I. Pulikhov, L. Yezerskaya, and a number of other famous personalities from the Socialist-Revolutionary circle repeatedly found shelter and support in his family estate in Blony. They were well-known theoreticians and practitioners of Russian terror. A. Bonch-Osmolovsky noted that the activists of the militant Socialist-Revolutionary Party stood apart from other party members in organisational relations.

They did not say anything about their military actions. This is not only for the sake of secrecy, but primarily in order not to torment close comrades, and that they do not influence them and dissuade them.¹⁹

People of different social status and with different personal motivations joined terrorist activities for various reasons. A significant contingent of them were students, many of whom represented elite sections of the society. But the social base of terrorists expanded considerably during the revolutionary period of 1905–1907. Individual officials of the lower and middle level, factory workers and artisans, railwaymen, peasants, military men, and even former criminals joined their ranks. Bonch-Osmolovsky recalls a young recidivist named Ales Oits, who was arrested for robbing a store at the age of thirteen for

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ NARB, F. 60, Inv. 4, Case number 40, Sh. 1.

the first time, for which he served three years in prison. Bonch-Osmolovsky recalls:

Political prisoners had strong influence on him in prison. He worked in a prison bakery and helped them with bread, flour, etc.; through him letters were sent to freedom and vice versa. He did not take money for this [...]. The prison governor Slavinsky was a real beast; he oppressed especially political prisoners. When the term of his imprisonment ended, Oitsa vowed to “repay” him. But he wasn’t let off in Minsk, but was sent to his homeland – Pinsk [...]. There he sold three shirts, which were sewn by political prisoners in gratitude for his help. He came to Minsk on this money, where he killed Slavinsky. He was sentenced to the chair, which was carried out in Vilna.²⁰

Psychological portraits of the most famous terrorists are most clearly described in the same memoirs. They were natives of Belarus, whose names thundered throughout the Russian Empire: C. Izmailovich, I. Pulikhov, and F. Frumkin.

Catherine Izmailovich (1881–1906) was a twenty-five-year-old daughter of a lieutenant general of artillery, and all the doors of the aristocratic houses were open before her. But she chose another way. She joined the militant Socialist-Revolutionary Party under the ideological influence of her elder sister Alexandra in 1906. A. Bonch-Osmolovsky wrote:

Katya Izmailovich shot Admiral Chukhnin in Sevastopol unleashing her revenge for the execution of Lieutenant Schmidt, who started the uprising in the Black Sea Fleet. She was shot on the spot without a charge or a trial on the orders of the injured Chukhnin. None of her close acquaintances knew that Katya Izmailovich decided to take revenge on Chukhnin and for this reason went to Sevastopol. No one imagined that they were seeing her for the last time. She did this when the revolutionary movement began to decline and little hope remained for the early revolutions. She considered it her duty to reinforce the doctrine that was spreading among others, so she went to her death. Katya Izmailovich had a crystal clear soul, but she belonged to those rare people who only occasionally appear to shed light on our lives hiding their negative sides.²¹

²⁰ A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, op. cit.

²¹ NARB, F. 60, Inv. 4, Case number 40, Sh. 2.

Ivan Pulikhov (1879–1906) was the son of actual state councilor and a student at the University of St. Petersburg. On January 14, 1906, he made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the Minsk governor P. Kurlov along with his sister Alexandra. He was arrested at the scene of the terrorist act, imprisoned in the “Pishchalovsky Castle”, and was executed a month later, on February 26. A. Bonch-Osmolovsky describes it like this:

It is necessary to speak about Pulikhov too. Once he lay down on a bench in Minsk at the station, putting a pack of fresh, just-printed proclamations under his head. I do not remember well whether he came with a night train or was going to leave with it. The railway gendarme became interested in Pulikhov, approached him closer, and wanted to pull out a piece of paper from under his head. But Pulikhov was not afraid. He said something angrily and simultaneously cocked the revolver in his pocket. The gendarme decided not to touch this man and move away from him, because it was not time to fight. Pulikhov quickly moved to another place. Once I noticed something special in his eyes during a conversation with him. The glitter of the eyes was somehow gloomy and steely. I remember well that immediately I was depressed, and I thought: “You would get your head blown off. Probably, you would end your life in a terrorist case”.²²

We must add that Pulikhov threw a bomb at Kurlov, which had been sent to him by Azef, a provocateur and secret agent of the tsarist secret police, and apparently for this reason it did not explode.

There is another image of an individualistic terrorist who was born out of the revolution. She is Frum Frumkin (1880–1907). She was the daughter of a wealthy Minsk merchant and dreamed of becoming famous all over the country by killing someone of the highest rank of the tsarist administration. But such “glory” constantly kept slipping away from her. She failed the attack on the Minsk gendarmerie colonel Salenko in 1902. She was not able to kill Count Shuvalov, who was the mayor of Kiev in 1903. She was sent to Kiev prison, and she was not able to kill the prison chief Colonel Novitsky. She escaped on her way to hard labour and went to Moscow, where she again unsuccessfully attempted to shoot the Moscow mayor A. Raynbot at the Bolshoi Theater in 1907.

²² Ibidem, Sh. 2–3.

Being imprisoned in Butyrki, she acquired a revolver in some way and again unsuccessfully tried to take the life of the chief of this prison, Colonel L. Bagretsov. F. Frumkin was executed in Moscow by a court decision in April 1907. A. Bonch-Osmolovsky described this unsuccessful terrorist in these words:

I was acquainted with Fruma, too, and I came across her in Minsk. Frum Frumkin was a persistent terrorist. She certainly had an abnormal and broken psyche. To commit any terrorist act was a great pleasure for her. She did not have any capacity for planned activities.²³

But it must be admitted that most of the educated society sympathised with revolutionaries and terrorists and morally supported them despite the harsh and inhuman consequences of terrorist acts. They included engineers, doctors, teachers, representatives of creative professions, civil servants of the lower and middle level. They were defended by the best attorneys at the trials. A lot of jurors sympathised with them. Revolutionaries were not denied shelter or medical assistance in most cases.

For example, among A. Bonch-Osmolovsky's judicial defenders were such eminent and experienced lawyers as a member of the Cadet Party, O. Gruzenberg, who became famous across Russia after the Beiliss case, and the Polish socialist K. Petrushevich. Another manifestation of solidarity of the enlightened society with the revolutionaries was the forgery that was committed by the famous Minsk doctors T. Kuodis and F. Ulyanov in the winter of 1908 in order not to allow for another imprisonment of A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky. They announced, after the medical examination of the accused, that it was not possible to transport him to the police station because of a recent surgery to remove the appendix. The police requested the provincial medical authorities to authorise the arrest of these doctors when the fraud was discovered. But the Minsk provincial sanitary inspector S. Urvantsev stood up for them resolutely.²⁴

²³ A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, op. cit.

²⁴ V. P. Gritskevich, *S fakelom Gippokrata: Iz istorii beloruskoy meditsiny*, Minsk 1987, pp. 223–231.

In his memoirs, A. Bonch-Osmolovsky did not skirt the issues of interethnic relations in the multinational environment of local revolutionaries. In addition to the local branches of pan-Russian parties, the Belarusian Socialist Hramada, the Polish Socialist Party, the Bund, the Zionists of different political movements and other participants in the revolutionary process were also active in Belarus. Despite the discrepancies, the activists of these parties, as a rule, showed solidarity and mutual assistance in relation to each other in their struggle against tsarism.

In the local socialist-revolutionary environment, where Belarusians constituted a substantial proportion of the party members, issues of ethnicity were of secondary concern. The attitude of the majority of local Socialist Revolutionaries to the national question, which did not meet with a broad public resonance at that time, was rather indifferent. The problem of the preservation and development of the Belarusian language and culture in the contemporary political activity did not yield any dividends. The solution of the issues of national self-determination was postponed to a more distant future. In the period of growing revolutionary sentiments, the Socialist-Revolutionaries sought to avoid racial tensions. The situation changed after the February Revolution of 1917, when each local national political group began to implement its own political projects.

Anatol Osipovich, during the period 1905–1907, had contacts with the leaders of the Belarusian national movement: the brothers I. and A. Lutskevich, A. Bourbis, A. Vlasov, and others. His associate in the Blonsky Peasant Union, M. Lukashik, was a supporter of the Belarusian Socialist Hromada.²⁵ But the contacts of the Blon radical with the Belarusian socialists were confined mainly to “being on speaking terms”.

The tsarist regime tried to extinguish revolutionary sentiments among the population by all means available. For political prisoners, harsh conditions of detention were created, and the only time during which these were even worse was the Stalinist period. A. Bonch-Osmolovsky was locked in tsarist prisons and was sent to exile several times. The nine months he spent in the Pyschalovsky castle in 1908–1909 he described this way:

²⁵ A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, *op. cit.*

They kept us in Minsk prison. The conditions were very harsh: firstly, the dungeon was overcrowded twice the norm; there were about 600–700 people; secondly, it was practically impossible to transfer food from outside, we were not allowed to spend money either; because of this, the whole prison was starving; and only when 60 convicts were found to have signs of scurvy, the authorities slightly improved the situation. Political prisoners, as a special category, were not recognized at first, we did not enjoy any privileges and sat in common cells with criminals. The cells were so crowded that we had to sleep on one side only, and there was no way to lie on one's back; There was also a lot of impurities: lice, bedbugs, and fleas. After a while, politicians started getting allocated to separate cells. Despite the fact that my relatives who remained at large had significant resources, the regime in prison was so severe (in terms of nutrition) that my teeth began to loosen up, and all the signs of scurvy appeared.²⁶

At that time, among the other inmates who awaited verdict in the Minsk prison together with A. Bonch-Osmolovsky were members of his family, his comrades in the Blonsky Peasant Union, and the future classics of Belarusian literature – the poets J. Kolas and A. Haroun.²⁷

Despite all these repressions, it was not possible to curb the revolutionary mood for a long time. Moreover, there were many instances of “cooperation” between the revolutionaries and the individual jailers. This was an evidence that at that time the political system of the Russian Empire was shattered and insufficiently mobilised in the face of the imminent threat of revolution. A. Bonch-Osmolovsky mentioned a prison guard named Tyrol, who participated in the organisation of a failed escape of a group of political prisoners from the Minsk prison. It is also mentioned that there were numerous instances of bribery, where the jailers allowed for contact of the prisoners with their comrades at large. There were isolated cases when prison guards informed political prisoners about “shill” gendarme agents.²⁸

Between the end of 1907 and the beginning of 1908, virtually all revolutionary activity in Belarus was eliminated or curtailed. Of all the dissident “nests” on the territory of the Minsk region only the Bonch-

²⁶ NARB, F. 60, Inv. 4, Case number 40, Sh. 4–5.

²⁷ A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, op. cit.

²⁸ Ibidem.

Osmolovsky's peasant circle continued to operate. The first illegal peasant organisation arose here in the 1890s. In 1901, it was defeated by the police, and its organiser, A. Bonch-Osmolovsky, was sentenced to deportation to a remote region of Russia. In the 1900s, the circle was revived but soon again curtailed its activities because of the threat of police repression.²⁹ Since 1907, with the intensification of political reaction, the activists of the Blon circle concentrated their work exclusively on "cultural propaganda": the organisation of political, educational, and agricultural lectures for village and settlement youth, the creation of a secret library, and the distribution of illegal literature. In carrying out this work, Bonch-Osmolovsky received help primarily from his wife and children. Overall twenty people took part, including his nephew, the lawyer-student V. Vakhovsky, the "farm manager" of the Blon manor M. Solomonov, a local paramedic – M. Ermolin, and local peasants: S. Migutsky, M. Lukashik, N. Tsekhanovich, V. Katok-Fedorinchik.³⁰ Members of the circle regularly held thematic talks with peasants, at which topical issues of their life were discussed, as well as the political and economic situation in the country. During this "tea-drinking", anti-government literature was distributed. The circle encompassed not only the residents of Blon but also those of nearby villages and Jewish towns.³¹

It is worthwhile to talk in greater detail about the estate and the economy of the "non-noble noble" in Blon. Recall that these possessions were inherited by A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky from his father "without the right to sell" and amounted to about 1,245 acres of land (slightly more than 1,357 hectares). These lands, except for Blon, were scattered around the neighbouring villages: Sirotko, Borisovchanam, Ravkach, and Levsov.³² The terms of ownership ("without the right to sell") were not accidental – Anatol's father was afraid that the son would sell these

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ NARB, F. 325, Rada Narodnykh Ministrau Byelaruskay Narodnay Respubliki, Inv. 1, Case number 2, Sh. 25.

³¹ *Historyya doylidstva y Blon*, [in:] Jurkau kutochak, http://szlachta.io.ua/s2374572/gistoryya_y_doylidstva_bloni (access: 14.10.2020).

³² Ibidem.

lands for the needs of the revolution and leave himself and his heirs without means of subsistence.

In the person of Anatol Bonch-Osmolovsky, we have a certain paradox – a revolutionary obsessed with radical changes in society, he proved to be a talented manager: he introduced on his lands progressive at the time agricultural technology, successfully developed gardening and truck farming, actively promoted modern agronomic knowledge among the local peasants. A lot of attention was paid by the “red landlord” to the creation of his own production base for the processing of timber and potatoes. In his ancestral nest, he established the production of starch, and also organised a sawmill in which, on the eve of the World War, about five to seven employees worked. This enterprise at that time gave an annual gross income of 20 thousand rubles.³³ After the fire in 1906, A. Bonch-Osmolovsky managed to restore and expand the production of starch.³⁴ It is important to note that he adamantly refused to produce alcohol and beer, not wanting to be involved in corrupting the population. It was very difficult to efficiently manage the large estate and simultaneously be engaged in political activity. However, A. Bonch-Osmolovsky was an excellent judge of character and managed to find a good team of assistants for supporting him in this work. His right-hand in business affairs was his party comrade, a former student of Petrovsky Agricultural Academy, M. Solomonov (born in Odessa and a cousin of the famous populist Boris Orzhikh).³⁵

It is necessary to pay tribute to A. Bonch-Osmolovsky: his ideological views did not differ much from practical activities. As an unbeliever, he, nevertheless, was ideologically close to “Tolstoyans” when it came to the question of upbringing. His children studied at the same desks as peasant children in a two-class folk school organised by Anatol Osipovich at his own expense. And only after receiving primary education, Ivan, Rodion, Irina, and Gleb Bonch-Osmolovsky continued their education in elite gymnasiums and universities in Minsk, Moscow,

³³ Natsyyanalny gistorychny arkhiv Belarusi, F. 311, Starshy fabrychny inspektar Minskay guberni, Inv. 1, Case number 92, Sh. 72–73.

³⁴ A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, op. cit.

³⁵ Information provided by a great-granddaughter of A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky, the St. Petersburg literary writer M. Bonch-Osmolovskaya.

and St. Petersburg. The heirs of the “non-nobleman” were brought up in a tolerant atmosphere with respect to their “peasant brothers” and local Jews. Since childhood, they were instilled with a sense of social affinity and solidarity with the common people. This demonstrated itself in many aspects, for instance in food, clothing, and in everyday behaviour. The children of A. Bonch-Osmolovsky kept friendly relations with their peasant peers for many years. Thanks to this friendship, many of the village youth joined the revolutionary activities.³⁶

Along with the cultural and educational work and the propaganda of modern agronomical knowledge, Bonch-Osmolovsky provided feasible material assistance to local peasants. During the summer holidays, his children worked free of charge in the kitchen gardens and fields of those peasant farms where there was a shortage of workers (the reason for that could be the loss of a breadwinner or the conscription of sons in the army).

At the beginning of the twentieth century in the Pukhovichi *volost*, as well as throughout Belarus, because of insufficient land there was a significant outflow of unclaimed labour to the eastern regions of Russia and North America. Not only Pukhovichsky Jews but also many local Belarusians went to distant lands by hundreds. To minimise the migration, A. Bonch-Osmolovsky attracted the maximum number of people in the summer for seasonal work, but due to the creation of another factory he did not have enough capital to organise additional permanent jobs.

Such paternal attitude towards peasants certainly had a benevolent effect on the relationship between the village and the landowner's estate. This is proved by the following facts. When in April 1908 the tsarist secret police arrested and imprisoned Anatol and Varvara Bonch-Osmolovsky, as well as their eldest son, Ivan, there were no snitches among the locals, including the Pukhovichi and Marino-Gorski Jews. At the judicial trial in 1910, even the abbot of the local Orthodox Church and the teacher of the public school gave favourable testimonies of the accused. And only two local peasants, yielding to police provocations, signed testimonies in which there was compromising evidence on

³⁶ A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, op. cit.

Bonch-Osmolovsky. But during the trial itself, most likely under the peer pressure of fellow villagers, the former renounced their confessions, saying that they were given under duress.³⁷

Another eloquent fact of the solidarity of the Blon peasants with the “gentry”, at a time when, in the autumn of 1917, many estates and dungeons were destroyed and plundered by peasants, the Bonch-Osmolovsky estate was not affected by the massacres. The Bolsheviks, who came in 1917 to replace the tsarist administration, under the influence of the local peasants did not dare to nationalise the Bonch-Osmolovsky estate in the first years of Soviet power.³⁸

Until the summer of 1920, during the Polish occupation, the estate of Blon continued to function successfully and even provided cheap vegetables and fruits to starving Minsk orphanages and schools. During the First World War, under the influence of the Pan-Russian Zemsky Union Anatol Osipovich left his estate and went to work in the Vladimir province for an organisation providing humanitarian assistance to refugees. A short stay in Vladimir dramatically changed his personal life. There, he met his new love, a sister of mercy, and the feeling completely captured him. In 1916, A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky divorced his first wife and at the age of fifty nine married a twenty-seven-year-old girl of the peasant class, Elizaveta Novikova. Already in the same year, they had the first-born son, Vadim, and in 1918 another son – Leo. By the decision of the court, as a result of the divorce proceedings, the estate of Blon was divided between the former spouses. Anatol Osipovich sold the remaining sawmill in haste and for the proceeds bought a house in Moscow.³⁹

After the February Revolution of 1917, A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky temporarily participated in the work of Belarusian national organisations: in September 1917 he joined the Belarusian People’s Gramada in Moscow, formed by the refugee organisations of Belarusians

³⁷ *O «lonskom krestyanskom soyuze»*, “Minskoye slovo” 1911, 27 janv. (№ 1196).

³⁸ Dziaržauny arkhiu Minskay voblastsi, F. 1806, Minski magistrat Gramdskaga upraulennya Uschodnikh Zyamiel, Inv. 1, Case number 84, Sh. 84.

³⁹ Information provided by a great-granddaughter of A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky, the St. Petersburg literary writer M. Bonch-Osmolovskaya.

scattered throughout Russia.⁴⁰ In the autumn of 1917, together with his family, he moved from Vladimir to Moscow to live there permanently and was soon elected to the Socialist-Revolutionary list as a deputy of the Moscow City Duma. However, he abstained from active participation in the work of the Moscow organisation of the socialists-revolutionaries, not approving of the course of the party leadership for rapprochement with the liberal bourgeois democrats.

In December of the same year, he appeared for a short time in Minsk as an honorary delegate of the All-Belarusian Congress – the first national forum of Belarusians – at which crucial issues of political and socio-economic life of the region were decided. “Red landowner” took part in the work of the agrarian section and in plenary sessions.⁴¹ On the opening day of the congress, the delegates greeted the “non-nobleman” with warm applause in recognition of his services to the revolutionary movement. Touched, he sincerely thanked those present and in reply said: “I am a nobleman, I am a landowner, but the blood of the Belarusian people is boiling in me!”⁴² In the midst of the work of the congress, A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky left Minsk and returned to Moscow, not being present during the violent dispersal of the “nationwide Belarusian meeting” by the Bolsheviks on December 18, 1917.

A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky sympathised with Belarusian socialists and supported the idea of the autonomy of Belarus as part of a single Russian federal state. At the same time, he considered the Belarusian movement only in the context of the all-Russian movement and opposed the political independence of Belarus and its withdrawal from Russia. His son Rodion, one of the leaders of the Socialist-Revolutionary organisation in Belarus, also held the same position. The latter resolutely opposed the announcement of the Belarusian People’s Republic as an independent state on March 25, 1918. Working in the *zemstvo* institutions of the Minsk province, Rodion Bonch-Osmolovsky

⁴⁰ NARB, F. 325, Inv. 1, Case number 2, Sh. 27.

⁴¹ Ibidem, Case number 6, Sh. 23–23v.

⁴² *Usybyelarusk zvezd 1917 goda: svedchannye suchasnika*, “Byelarusk gistorychny chasopis” 1993, nr 1, pp. 50–69.

was considered one of the most influential opponents of the Belarusian national movement in 1918–1920. However, later, during the NEP, working in the State Planning Committee of the BSSR, Rodion Anatolievich partially reconciled with the supporters of self-reliant Belarus, with whom he worked together on the project for the development of peasant farms of the BSSR.

Until recently, the participation of another son of Anatol Osipovich – Gleb – in the Belarusian cultural projects remained unknown. Newly discovered archival documents filled this gap. In the future an outstanding archeologist and anthropologist, in 1918 he temporarily stayed in Minsk with his mother, Varvara Vakhovska.⁴³ He stayed there for about a year, and during this time he struck up a friendship with one of the leaders of the Belarusian national movement, A. Vlasov. At his suggestion, Gleb Bonch-Osmolovsky joined the founders of the Belarusian publishing association “Zaranka”, donating 100 royal rubles to its publishing needs.⁴⁴ During its existence, this group published a book of A. Harun’s poetry, *Matchin Gift*, set up the production of the daily newspaper *Belaruski shliakh*, and prepared other publications. With the arrival of the Bolsheviks in Minsk in December 1918, Gleb Anatolievich left the Belarusian capital and went to Petrograd to continue his studies at the university.

Let’s return to the twists and turns of Anatol Osipovich’s fate. In December 1918, the exacerbated food and fuel shortages in Moscow forced him, together with his family, to move to Belarus. Here he survived the Polish-Soviet war and the return of the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1920.

In the autumn of 1920, an “exemplary Soviet farm” was established in the place of the Bonch Osmolovsky’s Pukhovichi farms. One of the organisers of the state farms in the territory of the native Pukhovichi *volost* was none other than Anatol Osipovich, who was actively involved in the organisation of the cooperative movement and the creation of

⁴³ Information provided by a great-granddaughter of A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky, the St. Petersburg literary writer M. Bonch-Osmolovskaya.

⁴⁴ NARB, F. 368, Chasovy Byelaruski natsyyanalny kamitet u Minsku, Inv. 1, Case number 27, Sh. 41–42.

collective farming enterprises. There is information that in 1926 he finally left Belarus and settled permanently in Moscow.

What could have caused this departure? – because of the lack of reliable information, it is definitely difficult to say. It remains only to wonder whether this happened because of his worsening health and accumulated fatigue; or because of the insistent demands of his young wife, who had no family ties in Belarus, to finally settle in Moscow (especially when they learnt that another child was to be born); but maybe it was because of disputes with the local leadership and his disappointment with the course of socialist transformations in the countryside. It is possible that all these reasons, to some extent, influenced his decision.

There is another probable cause that, in our opinion, could have influenced this decision. Among the active supporters of the establishment of large exemplary state farms in the BSSR in the early 1920s were the people's commissars of agriculture – the Polish Bolsheviks A. Slavinsky and S. Geltman. According to the former rector of the Belarusian State University V. Picheta, who was close to the camp of the Belarusian national communists, Slavinsky and Geltman represented the influential "Polish *colo*" in the republican branch of the Communist Party, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, the Main Political Administration of the BSSR, and other state institutions of Soviet Belarus. Through the creation of large state farms in the place of former landowners' estates, this "Polish *colo*" consciously strove to prevent their fragmentation between Belarusian peasants who did not have enough land for successful farming.⁴⁵

Today, we can bring the expressed opinion of the former rector of BSU to a logical conclusion. The Polish Bolsheviks, who occupied important state and party positions in the BSSR in the early 1920s, consciously defended the integrity of the former noblemen's farms through the creation of large state agricultural enterprises. They sought to use them as the most important economic and administrative resource in the undercover confrontation with the Belarusian national communists, who, on the contrary, relied on the development of private

⁴⁵ «Istoriya belorusskogo naroda dovolno svoyeobrazna». Doklad V.I. Pichety «25-letiyе Belorusskoy SSR». 1944 g., "Istoricheskiy arhiv" 2016, nr 3, p. 45.

peasant farms. Through their managers (and these former “*pansky* economists” were often still in charge of these posts), most of the newly formed state farms were subordinated to the then leadership of the People’s Commissariat of the BSSR and were their reliable political support. The work of hired workers in these state farms was very low paid, and their social status was not much different from that of the former farm labourers. At the same time, the Slavinsky-Geltman group encouraged the resettlement of landless and land-poor peasants from Belarus to the Southern Urals and Siberia.⁴⁶

For a short time, in 1925–1929, a group of Belarusian “national communists” (mostly the former Socialist-Revolutionaries and Social Democrats) won in this confrontation and approved for the position of People’s Commissar for Agriculture a talented manager and economist, Dmitry Prishchepov. Under his leadership, the agrarian policy in the BSSR changed substantially. Officially, in the Central Committee of the CPB and the Union leadership, communiques and reports were sent to Moscow. The documents reported that in the BSSR the course for the creation of large collective farms was continuing, and, in fact, with the help of the agrarian and economic section of the Institute of Belarusian Culture (the future Belarusian Academy of Sciences), a comprehensive program for the development of farms was worked out. The proponents of the republic’s economic independence had an aphorism: “turn Belarus into a red Denmark”.

Under the leadership of D. Prishchepov, in the territory of the BSSR, the number of operating farms was much higher than those recorded during the Stolypin reform in 1907–1914.⁴⁷ Only in the late 1920s, the union leadership began to smash the “headquarters” of the Belarusian “national communists” and “national democrats”. With political repression in the BSSR, all economic achievements of Belarus were also destroyed. Perhaps it was this political confrontation in the republic that prompted A. O. Bonch-Osmolovsky to quickly leave the BSSR.

Anatol Osipovich did not live to see the main tragedy of his life. God did not let him see how the “red wheel” of the revolution, at

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, pp. 45–46.

the time of its final roundabout, destroyed the fate of his two sons – Rodion and Gleb.

Death overtook the “red landowner” at the age of seventy-four – on September 23, 1930. Anatol Osipovich was buried in the Novodevichy Cemetery, which was taken care of by the All-Union Society of Former Political Cavalry and exiled settlers. First, a simple memorial plate of black granite was installed on his grave, and in 1957, when his second wife, Elizabeth, was buried next to him, a more respectable monument was erected on their common grave.

Anyone who visits this prestigious Moscow cemetery for the first time will surely notice, on the one hand, the modesty of the funeral plates made of black granite on the graves of the veterans of the revolutionary movement of the early twentieth century and the old Bolsheviks, and, on the other, the excessive pomposity of the monuments of the Brezhnev era of “stagnation”, erected for the Soviet party bosses and ministers. This unforgettable contrast in many respects symbolises the whole seventy-year-long era of the existence of the USSR.

Today, from the standpoint of modern knowledge and paradigms, we nevertheless have no right to speak straight from the shoulder, evaluating this or that historical person outside the context of all those objective and subjective factors that influenced the formation and actions of the actors of the era. Only a balanced and thoughtful approach to understanding the whole “revolutionary epic” will help us to understand those events and their participants in a more impartial and objective way.

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