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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 Pukhovichi 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, *Satsyjalistychny rukh na Byelarusi. II. Partyya satsyialistau-revalutsyyanerau*, [in:] *Belarus: Narysy gistoryi, ekanomiki, kultury i revalutsynaga rukhu*, Minsk 1924, pp. 152–161; I. Popov, A.O. Bonch-Osmolovskiy, "Katorga i ssylka" 1931, nr 4; *Deyateli revoliutsionnogo dvizheniya v Rossii. Biobibliograficheskiy slovar'*, t. 3, vyp. 1, Moskva 1933.

² A. J. Bonch-Asmalouski, *Epokha 1905 g. Maye uspaminy*, "Polymya" 1925, nr 6–7, <http://ludzi-na-baloce.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 w 1905–1907 gg.*, Moskva 1997; K. N. Morozov, *Partiya sotsialistov revolutsionerov v 1907–1914 gg.*, Moskva 1998; I. A. Kipro, *Sozdaniye i deyatelnost' Smolenskoy 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.