Зов к Людям Ниоткуда

The Call to the Nowhere Men

Written by
Alexander Blokhin

Translated from Russian
by Oliver Egger
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*Translator's Preface**

Little was known about the lyrical work of Alexander Blokhin (1891-1938 CE) until the recent discovery of a pamphlet of poems by scholar Mikhail Makorova in the archives at Tyumen State University. Makorova published the pamphlet, titled (A Couple Kopeks) through Moscow University Press in 2005. The poems featured in this magazine are not only the first English translation from Пара Копеек6 but also of any of Alexander Blokhin's work.

Blokhin was born in 1891 in Velyki Sorochyntsi, a small town in what is now modern-day Ukraine. Following the unexpected death of his father when he was just two years old, Blokhin's mother moved the family out of Velyki Sorochyntsi to live with her sister in Saint Petersburg. It can be gleaned from biographical records and the small archive of Blokhin's surviving poetry that his childhood in Saint Petersburg was not an easy one. In a surviving letter from 1915 addressed to Maksim Nozdrev, a childhood friend, Blokhin writes that, "Those days we spent in that Swedish city,[1] I remember well. The hard whip of my mother's lash followed by the harder whip of my aunt's. I try to remember how that old apartment looked and I can only smell the rotten food stinking next to the madeira[2] my aunt would mix with vodka till it was stronger than aqua regia.[3] I

* This collection of poetry is a work of fiction written by Oliver Egger, Wesleyan University, and translated into Russian by Anton Talsky. Alexander Blokhin is not a real historical figure.

miss our great city and those days for a flash but then, of course, images return..."

Not much more is known about Blokhin's childhood. His level of education is unknown, but considering his well-respected editorial abilities it can be gleaned that, at the very least, he attended secondary-school. In his adolescence, Blokhin worked as an apprentice turner at the Nikolaevsky Station in Saint Petersburg. In a few surviving letters Blokhin writes that this job catalyzed his ideological shift toward the Bolshevik party.

In his time, Blokhin was known as an ardent Bolshevik, political organizer, and editor for a series of important early post-revolution literary magazines such as Proletarian Culture, Magazine for All, and the Proletarian Avant-Garde. He was a founding member of the Proletkult and Forge, two experimental Soviet artistic institutions born from the rubble of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Blokhin is a long missing figure from the canon of early Soviet literature. These poems will aid literary scholars as well as enthusiasts of Russian poetry to see a more holistic picture of those turbulent but hopeful early days of the Soviet Union.

Much of Blokhin's work is inspired by the Bolshevik writer, philosopher, experimental doctor, and rival of Lenin, Alexander Bogdanov and the playwright and novelist Maxim Gorky. Blokhin rejected the materialist foundation of Marxism and instead embraced these men's philosophical idealism, which is generally categorized as "god-building."[4] This philosophy, which attempted . to build a new socialist religion, was based on the concept of of the "religion of humanity,"[5] theorized first by German anthropologist and philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. This philosophy imagined a human-centered spirituality that stressed the awe-inspiring power of art and individuals to serve a greater good within the framework of socialism. A depiction of socialism as a form of faith that revolves around the sanctity of human beings, rather than a deity, can be read in much of Blokhin's surviving poetry.

We know practically nothing of Blokhin's involvement in revolutionary politics in the years leading up to the 1917 revolution. We do know he became good friends with fellow train turner, and later founding member of the Proletkult, Georgy Konstantinovich Nikiforov. The two men lived together in Chelyabinsk, where they worked in a carriage workshop. While living together, Blokhin was drafted to the Russian army in the First World War, but was officially exempted after suffering a serious nervous breakdown. In 1914, Blokhin wrote, in the only surviving letter to his mother: "I did not tell you but I was drafted to serve a few months ago. I read about the Battle of Tannenberg[6] that same afternoon. The rest that happened to me was unfortunate but only human. So it has come that I will not have to serve in their army after all."

In 1917 Blokhin became a member of RSDLP (b)[7] with Georgy Konstantinovich Nikiforov, the first documented evidence of his revolutionary leanings. In September 1918, along with fellow writers Fedor Kalinin, Vladimir Faidysh, Pavel Lebedev-Polianskii, Aleksei Samobytnik-Mashirov, I. I. Nikitin, and Vasili

Ignatov, Alexander Blokhin helped form The National Proletkult Organization, known generally as The Proletkult, a literary organization founded on the philosophies of Alexander Bogdanov and Maxim Gorky. In fact, Bogdanov himself was personally involved in the process of establishing the literary organization.

Blokhin, unlike many of the other writers, published very little of his own work in his lifetime. Only one of his pieces, "The Blue Stacks", was published in Proletarian Culture[8] which Blokhin co-headed from 1918-1920. In 1920, Blokhin left The Proletkult and helped found the short-lived but influential intellectual literary group Forge, which helped establish a wide-spread literary scene in the Soviet Union with Magazine for All and the Proletarian Avant-Garde.

All of Blohkin's writing, which is contained in the discovered manuscript, was likely written between 1917 and 1922. No creative writing from his later period has been discovered or published. Other than his role as a copy editor of the collective novel Big Fires, published in the Ogonyok Magazine in 1927, which featured his friend Georgy Konstantinovich Nikiforov, there is no evidence that Blokhin was involved in literary or political discourse after 1922. He continued to live in Leningrad where he married Victoria Blokhina and had two children.

Despite being a behind-the-scenes figure for his entire literary career, Blokhin was not safe from persecution. He was arrested on February 13, 1938 in the "case of a conspiracy of writers"[9] during Stalin's purges against writers, scholars, party members, and random citizens. His arrest may have still been a surprise to other former members of The Proletkult due to his small amount of public visibility. Stalin was extremely distrustful of the "religion of man" themes which were central to the work of The Proletkult writers and thinkers. Therefore, every single surviving member of the organization was sentenced for treason, regardless of their level of present activism or literary presence. Blokhin was arrested and pled not guilty but was sentenced to 5-years hard labor and sent to a The Vorkuta Corrective Labor Camp[10] on April 14, 1938. His date of death is unknown but it is suspected that he died at the Transit Camp "Vtoraya Rechka" near Vladivostok later that same year or in early 1939.

These translations were made possible by the generous support of the Cultural Studies department at Tyumen State University and The Olin Fellowship at Wesleyan University. In particular, this book would not have been possible without the mentorship of Wesleyan University Professor of Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies Susanne Fusso and Tyumen State University Professor in the Institute of Philology and Journalism, Mikhail Makarova. In addition, my friend Anton Talsky did a wonderful job with translating this work into English. I hope this book will open an English speaking audience to this highly underappreciated and unjustly forgotten poet. While Blokhin may have seen himself as nothing more than an amateur writer, there's no doubt his poetry and perspective was a major influence for canonized early Soviet writers and thinkers.

Footnotes

[1] An extremely unusual nickname for St. Petersburg, although the city was once the site of a Swedish fortress that connection was rarely made. Blokhin supposedly had a deep fascination with the Swedish history along the Neva river, which runs through St. Petersburg.

[2] A fortified wine made on the Portuguese Madeira Islands, off the coast of Africa. Not a particularly common alcohol in Russia during this time.

[3] Aqua regia or Tsar's Vodka, a mixture of nitric acid and hydrochloric acid which can melt gold.

[4] Богостроительство (bogostroitel'stvo).

[5] "If man is to find contentment in God, he must find himself in God." From Ludwig Feuerbach's most famous philosophical work Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity).

[6] The Battle of Tannenberg, also known as the Second Battle of Tannenberg, was fought between Russia and Germany between 26 and 30 August 1914, the first month of World War I. The battle resulted in the almost complete destruction of the Russian Second Army and a resounding loss of life for Russia.

[7] Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (Bolsheviks): the name of the strand Bolshevik party run by Lenin from 1917 until the revolution.

[8] One of the literary magazines published by The Proletkult.

[9] Exact wording from his initial sentencing papers.

[10] One of the most infamous Siberian labor camps, functioning from 1932 to 1962.

Синие трубы

Прикованный к синим трубам завода,
рабочий мечется,
словно муха
у рамы окна.

Но дым разделяется
и нисходит под земь —
к потоку неделимому-красному
бездушных святых.

Святых, с чьей бдящей походкой
остаются рубцы железнодорожных путей
и плачущие в мерзлоте
рядки кукурузы.

Святых, проповедующих:
Не вздыхай, о рабочий!
Красное Солнце встаёт,
и долгим дням тем
недолго осталось.
Чёрный дым, словно песня,
обратит в гравий надгробье твоё —
для тысяч дорог,
безгранично проложенных
от бьющихся наших сердец
к сотням других.

The Blue Stacks

Nailed to the blue factory stacks,
a worker thrashes,
like a fly against
the window
pane.

But the smoke parts
to reveal way down below—
the unparted red tide
of soulless saints.

Saints who in their walking
wake leave railroad track scars
and weeping rows of corn
in permafrost's place.

Saints who preach:
Do not sigh, oh worker!
The red-sun rises,
and these long-counted days
are numbered.
Black smoke more like song
will turn your gravestone to gravel—
for a thousand roads,
connecting across borders
from our beating breasts
to a hundred others.

Мухи

Этим душным июльским днём,
на столе тыщи кусочков сахара
и пропаренная свинина
для тех немногих, кому повезло поесть.
Они ломают хлеб,
и потягивают кровь,
выщеженную из нашего пота.

Но посмотри: пожилые
хозяйка и повариха
ушли, уставшие, вместе с солнцем.
Окна остались распахнутыми,
чтоб наша мушиная эскадрилья
налетела и облепила
все летние богатства,
все вкусности, лакомства.
Теперь рты везунчиков-едаков
будут полны наших крылатых тел.

Наше мясцо теперь смешано с их сахарами,
мы разорвём желудки этих обжор изнутри.
Разорвём в клочья
всем нашим роем мух-докучателей.

The Flies

On a sultry July day,
a thousand beads of sugar
and plates of steaming pork sit
for the lucky few to eat.
They break the bread,
sip the blood,
milled from our sweat.

But watch: as the old
housekeeper and cook,
left sleepy by the sun,
leave the windows open,
so our squadron of flies
pour through and grab
every richness of summer,
every delectable morsel,
and the mouths of those lucky men
will be filled with our winged bodies.

Our flesh all mixed with sugar,
we tear the guts of the gluttons.
Torn to shreds
by our tide of harassing squadrons.

Зов к Людям Ниоткуда

Вы, люди-Никто, Ниоткуда, восстаньте!
Выкопанные вами могилы полны,
темницы подземные — тоже.

С вас хватит!
Удочки погрузите в сада простор.
Здесь вьётся судьбы вашей плод:
Эдемова сельдь. Она, а не грязь
и не сгнившее древо креста.
И не для сумерек жизни этот Эдем,
но для рассвета,
где ваша жизнь — и есть Бог.

Это — то самое «Где»:
города и заводы, берёзы из кирпича и труб,
кора из костей, тел и дыхания,
чистого, словно лёд.

Товарищи, люди, пробейте же лёд!
Поймайте скользкую сельдь!
Её дюжее, слёзно-солёное мясо
жаждет хруста ваших
поста не знавших зубов.
Хруста, радостного, как карнавал.

The Call to the Nowhere Men

Rise you no-one, nowhere men!
The graves you've dug are filled,
as are the dank dungeon's gloom.

No longer, living men!
Dip your fishing rods in the vast garden,
where an Eden of interlacing herring
are your fruits of fate, not mud
or the long-rotten wood of the crucifix.
This Eden is not set for life's evening,
but rather for dawn,
in the Lord that is your life.

This is the only "where":
the cities, factories, and bounding silver birches,
made of bricks, and stacks, and bark
of bodies, bones, and ice-clear human breath.

So men, so comrades, crack the ice!
Catch the bounding herring!
Its brawny, salt-tear skin
craves the crunch of
your unfasting teeth,
your joyous bite of carnival.

[Название утеряно]

[ ]
[ ] дикий плач [ ]
[ ]
[ ] причитания.

[ ] мост ведёт [ ]
[ ]
[ ] я не хотел.
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ] хватаясь [ ]
[ ]
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[ ] то [ ]
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[ ]
[ ] которое я [ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ] язык, столь немо бормочущий [ ]
Голос её, как вода, и знать я хочу, как
она с любовью ведёт за собой. Как несомая ею поэзия исходит
меж бьющихся волн, не касаясь их гребней.

[TITLE LOST]

[ ]
[ ] epic cry [ ]
[ ]
[ ] wailing.

[ ] the bridge takes [ ]
[ ]
[ ] I didn't mean to.
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ] gripping [ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ] a [ ]
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[ ]
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[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ] which I [ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ] tongue, so silently uttering [ ]
Her voice is like water, and I want to know how
she leads with love. How the poetry she carries comes
from between the crashing waves, not riding on their spiny backs.