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A Note on the Speech of Peter Alekseev

The speech of the worker Peter Alekseev, delivered on March 9, 1877, at the famous trial of "the fifty," occupies a sensitive position in the debate concerning the contributions and participation of workers and peasants in the Russian revolutionary movement. Between 1877 and 1917, the speech was reprinted more than twenty times by both populists and Marxists, thus providing the Russian free press with one of its classic publications.[1] Adam Ulam has recently questioned Alekseev's authorship of the printed text on two grounds. First, Ulam considers the printed speech too polished to have been written by a worker. Second, in connection with the techniques of revolutionary publishing, he cites an incident related in Nikolai Morozov's memoirs about a speech, purportedly delivered by another worker, Mark Malinovskii, which Zemfir Ralli invented for publication in his newspaper, *Rabotnik*. Ulam therefore leaves one with the twofold suspicion that Alekseev was incapable of writing such a speech and that the speech was probably doctored before publication.[2]

Questions about the published version of the speech do arise out of the nature of the text. In all but one of the printed versions, Alekseev's speech appeared in the guise of a stenographic account which included the interruptions of the presiding judge and Alekseev's retorts. While we know that Alekseev delivered a speech in court, no manuscript in Alekseev's hand or any reliable manuscript stenographic account of the trial has survived in Soviet archives.[3] Thus, there is no way to compare what Alekseev said with what has been published under his name. Nonetheless, a closer look reveals that the situation may have been more complex than just a simple revision or even an elaboration after the fact. However, because of Ulam's objection about Alekseev's ability to write such a speech, a few words about Alekseev are in order.

Peter Alekseevich Alekseev represents an interesting example of the semieducated workers with whom the populists came into contact during the early 1870s. Although the picture that emerges from various memoirs is not wholly uncritical of his abilities, it remains difficult to discern the real man behind the legendary author of the speech. The memoirists who had met him before the trial and described him in a favorable light wrote years after the speech had been published and republished. Praskovia Ivanovskaia, for example, considered Alekseev an

1. N. B. Panukhina, "K istorii rechi Petra Alekseeva," *Moskovskii Universitet: Vestnik*, 9th series: *Istoriia*, no. 5 (1965), p. 83. S. S. Levina, "Novye dannye o publikatsii rechi Petra Alekseeva," *Arkheograficheskii ezhegodnik za 1973* (Moscow, 1974), p. 85. Panukhina also includes a list of Soviet publications in which the speech has appeared. The Russian Underground Collection at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, possesses four underground editions of the speech. Excerpts of the speech can be found in Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, trans. Francis Haskell (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966), pp. 534–35. Unfortunately, the speech has never been fully translated into English.

2. Adam Ulam, *In the Name of the People* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 256.

3. Panukhina, "K istorii rechi," pp. 82–83.

advanced, forceful hero of the epic of the Russian revolutionary movement.[4] On the other hand, those who have cast aspersions on his abilities met him in the strained atmosphere of prison and exile and had great expectations. Grigorii Osmolovskii, perhaps his most severe critic, first met Alekseev in prison during the early 1880s and judged him a mediocrity who did not live up to his reputation.[5]

Nonetheless, Alekseev cut a striking figure on the revolutionary scene in the early 1870s. Born into a poor peasant family in Smolensk province in 1849, he went to work in a factory, as did many of the "extra mouths" of the villages. In the early 1870s, he worked as a weaver in the Thornton factory in St. Petersburg.[6] It was at this time that the radical youth felt the first stirrings of the "to the people" movement. Significantly, it was not the *intelligenty* who went to Alekseev, rather, he went to them. According to Sergei Sinegub, in September 1873 Alekseev showed up at Sinegub's apartment, having heard that he was offering free lessons to workers. Alekseev, who could read and write, wanted to learn about geography and geometry. Sinegub began working with Alekseev, but, owing to other commitments, he soon turned over his charge to Sofia Perovskaia and Lev Tikhomirov.[7] Later that year, when the police destroyed the famous Chaikovskii circle, Alekseev was forced to pursue his education elsewhere. He did so in St. Petersburg with considerable energy. From the end of 1873 through the summer of 1874 he studied with the Monetnaia student commune which was led by Vasilii Ivanovskii. He proved to be not only an avid reader, particularly of the works of Ferdinand Lassalle, but also an active participant in devising a program for the education of other workers.[8] Later in the year he was associated with the Vozdvizhenskaia workers' artel which invited *intelligenty* to serve as teachers. Here, in October 1874, he first met the Georgian populist, Ivan Dzhabadari.[9]

In dealing with Dzhabadari, Alekseev exhibited an independent and original spirit. In fact, partially because of Alekseev's advice, Dzhabadari decided to move his propaganda activities to Moscow. According to Dzhabadari, Alekseev argued that the *zavodskie* workers in St. Petersburg were too absorbed in their own pursuits, considering themselves a kind of workers' aristocracy, and not susceptible to revolutionary propaganda. Alekseev was certain that the *fabrichnye* workers in Moscow would prove more receptive. For his part, Dzhabadari feared that Alekseev viewed the *intelligenty* with scorn, and he cast a wary eye on the ironic remarks Alekseev would occasionally interject into the arguments of the *intelligenty*.[10]

4. P. Ivanovskaia, "Pis'ma Petra Alekseeva iz ssylki," *Katorga i ssylka*, no. 13 (1924), p. 168.

5. E. K. Pekarskii, "Rabochii Petr Alekseev," *Byloe*, no. 19 (1922), p. 100.

6. Ibid., pp. 85–86.

7. S. S. Sinegub, "Vospominanie chaikovtsa (Prodolzhenie)," *Byloe*, no. 9 (1906), pp. 109–10.

8. Ivanovskaia, "Pis'ma Petra Alekseeva," pp. 167–68. See also Sh. M. Levin, "Kruzhok chaikovtsev i propaganda sredi peterburgskikh rabochikh v nachale 1870 gg.," *Katorga i ssylka*, no. 61 (1929), p. 15.

9. I. S. Dzhabadari, "Protsess '50' (Prodolzhenie)," *Byloe*, no. 9 (1907), pp. 188 and 190.

10. I. S. Dzhabadari, "Protsess '50' (Okonchanie)," *Byloe*, no. 10 (1907), p. 168. Alekseev himself, being a weaver, was a *fabrichnyi* worker. For possible clues to the development of

Dzhabadari and Alekseev went to Moscow at the end of 1874. There the two men, along with other Georgian and Russian populists, formed the All-Russian Social Revolutionary Organization (Moskvich), the aim of which was to propagandize Moscow's factory workers. These activities led to the arrest of the group and subsequently to the trial of "the fifty."[11]

The trial was held in St. Petersburg from February 21 to March 14, 1877.[12] When the time came for the accused to make their statements, the government allowed only limited press coverage. On March 25, 1877, *Pravitel'stvennyi vestnik*, the organ of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, tersely noted that at the session of March 9 "one of the accused, namely Alekseev, ventured impertinent remarks for which he was restrained by the court."[13]

Dzhabadari maintained that Alekseev's speech was the product of a collective effort among the imprisoned members of the Moskvich group. As Dzhabadari related the story, the imprisoned intellectuals of the group—including Dzhabadari, Alexander Tsitsianov, and Mikhail Chikoidze—decided to exploit the opportunity of the accused to address the court by having the court, as well as the public, hear a speech from the mouth of a worker. In discussing the matter further, they agreed that this worker should be a member of their group and possess a strong character, persistent energy, and, most important, a powerful voice. Their choice was Peter Alekseev.

When they approached Alekseev they asked him to write the speech himself, but first they suggested "in general outlines" (*v obshchikh chertakh*) what to say. Alekseev produced a rough draft and presented it to Dzhabadari, who in turn corrected the grammatical mistakes and deleted some "long tedious passages." Next, Tsitsianov, Chikoidze, and a few unidentified women performed the final editing. Dzhabadari did not relate what this final editing entailed. The speech was then returned to Alekseev with instructions to memorize it and to recite it in his cell like the Lord's Prayer.

Preparations did not stop there, however. A day or two before the speech was to be presented in court, Dzhabadari and Chikoidze decided to hold a dress rehearsal. Alekseev delivered the speech, while Chikoidze played the part of the judge, intermittently shouting, "The accused will desist." Undeterred, Alekseev outshouted him and finished his delivery. This dress rehearsal, remarkably, occurred within earshot of the guards. On March 9, Chikoidze brought the text of the speech to the courtroom just in case Alekseev forgot his lines. He did not.[14]

Dzhabadari asserted that Alekseev was the author of the text as it appeared in print "in [its] major outlines" (*v glavnykh chertakh*), and Soviet historians

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his attitude, see Levin, "Kruzhok chaikovtsev," pp. 15, 22–24; and G. Golosov, "K biografii odnogo iz osnovatelei 'Severo-Russkogo Rabochego Soiuza,'" *Katorga i ssylka*, no. 13 (1924), pp. 51–55.

11. A. O. Lukashevich, "V narod!," *Byloe*, no. 3 (1907), pp. 37 and 42.

12. B. Bazilevskii, *Gosudarstvennye prestupleniia v Rossii v XIX veke*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart, 1904), pp. 157–401. This work contains the official indictment. See also N. A. Troitskii, *Tsarskie sudy protiv revoliutsionnoi Rossii: Politicheskie protsessy 1871–1880* (Saratov, 1976), pp. 167–80.

13. *Pravitel'stvennyi vestnik*, no. 66 (March 25, 1877), p. 4.

14. Dzhabadari, "Protsess '50' (Okonchanie)," pp. 193–94.

have accepted Dzhabadari's account as proof of Alekseev's authorship.[15] Yet the fact that it was edited raises the question of how much of Alekseev's original draft entered into the final text. Nonetheless, in assessing Alekseev's role in the preparation of the speech, several additional factors need to be mentioned. First, the other famous speech to emerge from the trial, that of the *intelligent* Sofia Bardina, was also a product of a collective effort, although Dzhabadari did not relate the details.[16] Second, the autobiographical references that occur throughout the speech—the references to factory employment at an early age, lack of educational opportunities, and the lengths to which factory workers must go to obtain good reading material—all point to Alekseev's contribution on a personal and passionate level.[17] Third, Alekseev proved capable of expressing himself clearly and movingly while in exile. His letters reveal him to be a sensitive man, tortured by the loneliness of exile, eager to return to the ranks of the workers, but not unappreciative of some of the more humorous aspects of life among the Iakuts.[18] Finally, there is the testimony of Alekseev himself. While in exile a certain Sergei Tereshchenko accused him of not having written the speech. Choking back rage, Alekseev replied, "No, I yield that honor to no one."[19] In sum, it is possible to conclude that Alekseev's courtroom speech was a planned and rehearsed demonstration in which Alekseev played two parts. He was the principal actor in a drama conceived by others but, once the production was set in motion, he was also a participating author.

Yet the major question remains as to whether it was Alekseev's text that found its way into print. This cannot be answered with certainty. Vera Figner, who was in St. Petersburg at the time, later recalled that Alexander Ol'khin, one of the defense lawyers, showed her the original text of the speech written in large and uneven letters and containing spelling errors.[20] It is possible that this was the text brought to the courtroom on March 9 by Chikoidze, but it is doubtful that it was the original draft written by Alekseev. After being edited by three known persons and an indeterminate number of others, the original draft was probably very disorganized and not the kind of text that could be easily memorized. Alekseev had probably copied it. At any rate, a written text of the speech survived the courtroom drama.

In her work on the underground press of Alexander Averkiev and Nikolai Kuznetsov, the first publishers of the speech, Z. A. Pokrovskaia has addressed the problem of the text the publishers used. In addition to the possible use of the text in Ol'khin's possession, she has surmised that the publishers may have worked from a written text or texts provided them by persons present in

15. Panukhina, "K istorii rechi," p. 83; Troitskii, *Tsarskie sudy*, p. 175.

16. Dzhabadari, "Protsess '50' (Okonchanie)," pp. 194–95.

17. The most recent publication to reprint the speech is B. S. Itenberg, ed., *Revoliutsionnoe narodnichestvo 70kh godov XIX veka*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1964), pp. 363–67.

18. Eight of Alekseev's letters from exile have been published. Three are found in Ivanovskaia, "Pis'ma Petra Alekseeva," pp. 172–78; four in "Neopublikovannye pis'ma Petra Alekseeva," *Katorga i ssylka*, no. 34 (1927), pp. 162–69; and one in "Pis'mo rabochego P. A. Alekseeva," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, no. 44 (1930), pp. 170–73.

19. Pekarskii, "Rabochii Petr Alekseev," p. 99.

20. Vera Figner, "Protsess '50,'" *Katorga i ssylka*, no. 33 (1927), p. 17. The fact that there were spelling mistakes in this text, as well as the large letters, reinforces my belief that Alekseev copied the edited speech.

the courtroom at the time of the speech. (Averkiev and Kuznetsov forged entry tickets to the trial for members of St. Petersburg revolutionary circles.)[21]

At the same time, Pokrovskaia has settled another controversy which has occupied Soviet historians. She has demonstrated that the one published variant of the speech to which Soviet historians have attributed importance also issued from the press of Averkiev and Kuznetsov. The press published three editions, one of which substituted the phrase "muscular peasant fist" for the phrase "muscular fist of millions of working people" in Alekseev's dramatic final sentence. This substitution occurred only in the one Averkiev and Kuznetsov edition; all subsequent editions repeated the phrase, "muscular fist of millions of working people."[22] Until Pokrovskaia proved that the same press published this variant, Soviet historians had debated the ideological significance of this substitution for its publishers. According to Pokrovskaia, the real significance of the "peasant fist" edition lies in the fact that Averkiev and Kuznetsov did not publish it in the guise of a stenographic account containing the judge's interruptions. She concluded that this variation may have arisen on the basis of different texts used by Averkiev and Kuznetsov.[23]

To take Pokrovskaia's reasoning a step further, the speech Alekseev delivered may well have been the basis for the "peasant fist" edition. Ol'khin's smuggled copy, if it was the text brought to the courtroom by Chikoidze, could not have contained the interruptions of the judge. Although Averkiev and Kuznetsov worked with two or more written texts, the remaining differences among the first three editions are, as all sources attest, insignificant. Thus, the variations in these three original editions may be no more than one should expect between a prepared text and the speech actually delivered.

Peter Alekseev's speech was a permanent fixture on the revolutionary scene during the last forty years of the tsarist regime. As Felix Volkhovskii perceptively observed, the speech was more than an instrument of propaganda for the people. It also served as encouragement to the *intelligenty* who were prepared to lose heart in the face of the seemingly endless patience of the working masses.[24] There can be no doubt about Alekseev's prior participation in drafting the speech and his actual delivery. Furthermore, the published versions can be assumed to be reasonably authentic reproductions of the speech as delivered by Alekseev.

21. Z. A. Pokrovskaia, "Nelegal'naia tipografiia A. N. Averkieva i A. N. Kuznetsova," *Kniga*, vol. 30 (1975), pp. 125 and 128.

22. Panukhina, "K istorii rechi," p. 84.

23. Pokrovskaia, "Nelegal'naia tipografiia," p. 128. Studies that have attributed significance to this variation are Panukhina, "K istorii rechi," pp. 84–85; and N. S. Karzhanskii, *Moskovskii tkach Petr Alekseev* (Moscow, 1954), pp. 116–17. More recent works, such as Troitskii, *Tsarskie sudy*, state that the printed variants are of little significance. While it is true that the edition employing the phrase "muscular peasant fist" was directed at the peasantry, the editions using "working people" were not aimed solely at factory workers. The term should be understood in the broader sense of both peasants and factory workers.

24. F. Volkhovskii, *Russkii tkach Petr Alekseev* (London, 1900), p. 18.