

Michael Bakunin, Communist

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Michel Bakunin was born in May, 1814, at Pryamuchina, situated between Moscow and Petrograd, two years after his friend, Alexander Herzen, first saw the light by the fires of Moscow. The future apostle of Nihilism was the son of a wealthy landed proprietor, who boasted a line of aristocratic ancestors. Economic conditions had decided that his natural destiny was the army. Consequently, at the age of fourteen, he entered the School of Artillery at St. Petersburg. Here he found, among a large minority of the students at least, an underground current of Liberalism which was only outwardly loyal and obedient to the behests of the Governmental despotism. Among themselves, these rebel students cherished the memories of the Decembrists of 1825, and handed round the poems-that some of the martyred rebels had written-as sacred literature, to be preserved and passed on from generation to generation. Anecdote of the martyrs themselves-most of whom had belonged to the First Cadet Corps and the Artillery Institute-was also eagerly retailed and jealously recited. Those of the Decembrists who had been sentenced to Siberia were pitied for not having been able to share the honorable fate of those who were executed. It was impossible for military despotism to efface memories of heroic revolt or to silence entirely the genius of knowledge. So the revolutionary enthusiasm continued to exist and to grow apace. That it influenced Bakunin is certain; but to what extent we cannot say. For he was conscious more immediately of the discord existing between himself and his environment. Thus, writing to his parents, in the autumn of 1829, Bakunin says:

“... Here begins a new era in my life. Until now my soul and imagination were pure and innocent. They were not stained in any way. But here, in the artillery school, I became acquainted with the black, foul, low side of life. And if I was not dragged into the sins, of which I was often the witness, I, at any rate, got so used to it as to have ceased to wonder at anything now. I got used to lying, for the art of lying-in that useful society of ours-was not only not considered a sin: it was unanimously approved. I never had a conscious religious feeling, but I possessed a sort of religious feeling which was associated closely with my life at home. In the artillery school this feeling disappeared altogether. There reigned among all the students instead, a cold indifference to everything noble, great, or holy. All my spirituality seemed to go to sleep. During my stay in this school I have lived in spiritual somnolence.”

At the conclusion of his training he passed his examination with great *eclat*. Writing home of this event, he said:

“At last I passed as an officer, eighteen year old. Thus began truly a new epoch in my life. From a condition of slavish military discipline, I suddenly gain personal freedom. I, so to speak, burst upon the free world. I could not undertake to describe the feelings that possessed me. I only can say that, thanks to this vigorous change, I commenced to breathe freer, I began to feel nobler. After such a prolonged spiritual sleep, my soul has awakened to spiritual life again. At first I was surprised, surprised and glad at my new life ... I was glad to be free to go where I liked and when I liked at all times... Except in the lesson hours, I did not meet any of my fellow officers. I severed every relation with them. Their presence always reminded me of the meanness and infamy of my school life. I have awakened ! A new life has opened out ! A strong moral feeling-that has taken off of me the responsibility of my school life-has kindled in my soul. I have decided to work upwards to alter myself.”

The truth is, Bakunin at this time was suffering from extreme conservatism. “The Russians are not French,” he wrote to his parents. “They love their country and adore their monarch, and to them his will is law. One could not find a single Russian who would not sacrifice all his interests for the welfare of the Sovereign and the prosperity of the fatherland.”

Bakunin should have become an officer of the Guards as a matter of course. This would have meant participating in the splendor of the Court. Bakunin had contrived to anger his father, however, and to arouse the jealousy of the Director of Artillery. As a punishment for this dual offense he was given a commission in the line. This meant that he was doomed to spend his days in a miserable peasant village far away from an center of civilization. A peasant’s hut had been assigned to Bakunin for his new quarters. Here he took up his abode in consequence. All social intercourse was abjured, and whole days were spent in meditation. His military duties were entirely neglected until, at last, his commanding officer was obliged to order him to resign his appointment. He now sent in his papers consequently and returned to Moscow, where he was received into “a circle” of youthful savants similarly situated to himself. This circle was engrossed in German philosophy, and was especially keen on Hegel. Its founder was Stankevitch, who had sat under Professor Pawlov at Moscow University. This worthy pedant had introduced German philosophy into the University curriculum ten years previously. But he had confined his attention to Schelling and Oken. Stankevitch, however, had become fascinated with Hegel, and it was the latter’s philosophy that seemed to him to be all-important. Consequently he had introduced it to the select circle of his friends as a subject for serious study. Among these were Alexander Herzen and Michel Bakunin.

Herzen was the love child of a German mother and a Russian noble, and was recognized by his father from the very first. In 1827 he was sent to the University of Moscow to complete the studies he had commenced at home. At this time, reaction was steadily triumphant throughout Russia. The Czar and his Court were conspiring to close the universities entirely and to replace them by organized military schools. Moscow, in particular, was suspect by the reaction as a

hotbed of liberal and revolutionary thought and plans. It boasted an ancient foundation and a real tradition for learning. It demanded a real respect and an independent life for its students and boasted professors who were actually free spirits, inspired by a love of knowledge, and convinced of the dignity of learning. Such professors declined to servilely flatter autocracy and developed in the students a true sense of personality and responsibility. The students, in their turn, secretly revered as saints and martyrs the rebels of 1825 who had died on the gibbet or been driven into exile. Czarism and its agents made increasing warfare on the professors, who could develop their genius only at the expense of secret denunciation and exile or removal. Devotion to knowledge rendered a man suspect and placed him at the mercy of ignorant inspectors and servile auxiliaries of the police department. Weak men bowed before the ruling system, only to find their genius gone, their personality extinguished. Lectures declined little by little into the hands of incapable masters, in whom routine replaced talent. These men were kept in office by corruption and police considerations. Meanwhile, knowledge banned, became loved. And the students in their quest proved the truth of Moncure Conway's words: "They who menace our freedom of thought and speech are tampering with something more powerful than gunpowder." The French philosophers were forbidden. Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Morelli, Mably, and Fourier were denied their place in the University library. Did Truth despair on that account? Not at all. So much did the authorities dread the French that they forgot to inquire if there were German ones. And so Hegel was permitted-Hegel whose method has inspired more thorough revolutionary thinking than Voltaire. Feuerbach was allowed also-Feuerbach who denied the existence of the soul and repeated the Communist warcry, heard in the streets of Paris in those days of revolution: "Property is Robbery."

And so the French philosophers were neglected and the Germans succeeded them in the affections of the students. And the revolution proceeded apace.

Herzen sought to understand the wonderful German philosophy. It excited his imagination and fired his ambition. He assimilated its theories and wrote seditious essays in consequence. His manuscripts were seized. A year's imprisonment followed. Then he was exiled to Perm, on the very borders of Siberia, for his activities, more especially for taking part in a dinner attended by the revolutionary students, who revered Hegel and sung revolutionary songs. In solitude, he determined to fathom Hegel. Then he was permitted to return to civilized life and to live at Vladimir. From here he fled to Moscow and carried off from one of the imperial schools a young cousin to whom he was engaged. He was forgiven for this escapade and permitted to live in Moscow, where he joined the revolutionary study circle at which he met Bakunin. Entire nights were spent in keenly discussing, paragraph by paragraph, the three volumes of Hegel's "Logic," the two volumes of his "Ethics," his "Encyclopedia," etc.

"People who regarded one another with affection," says Herzen, in describing these study circles, "would have nothing to do with one another for weeks after a disagreement respecting the definition of 'the intercepting mind,' and would regard opinions concerning 'the absolute personality' and its autonomous existence as personal insults. All the most insignificant pamphlets which appeared in Berlin or the various provincial cities of Germany, which dealt with German philosophy, and contained even the merest mention of Hegel, were bought and read until in a few days they were torn and tattered and falling to pieces."

Actually there were two distinct circles equally keen on the discussion of Western philosophy. One was the Bakunin-Bielinsky-Stankievitch group. The other was the group of Herzen and Ogariov. Little sympathy existed between these two factions. The Herzen group was French in its outlook, and almost exclusively political in its aim. The Bakunin faction was almost exclusively speculative in its outlook and German in its thought. They were denounced as sentimentalists by the Herzenites.

This was the period of crisis for Bakunin and the friend over whom he exercised so great an influence, Bielinsky. Both passed through the crisis and went over to the extreme left before Stankievitch's circle dissolved in 1839. They did more. They passed from being Germanophiles and Francophotes to becoming Francophiles and Germanophotes. The hindrance of such racial idealism proved as fatal when French prejudices were favored as when German ones were, except for a more radical form of address, and a clearer outlook on the world of theology. Herzen asserted that Hegel's system was nothing less than the algebra of the revolution, and that was all he appropriated from it. But it was badly formulated algebra-very likely the bad formulation was intentional. It had attracted a band of immediate disciples, therefore, who were not nearly so closely allied to the Hegelian teaching as the Socialists. For the Hegelian philosophy left men free in a sense that no other philosophy had done or could do. It liberated the world from obsolete conditions, and left no stone unturned in Christendom. It proclaimed the idea that nothing was immutable and that every social condition contained the germs of radical change.

Bakunin and his friend Bielinsky came to support these contentions of Herzen before the dawn of the hungry and revolutionary forties. But at first both were reactionary.

Whether right or left, Bakunin insisted on thoroughness. He went to the very depths of German metaphysical idealism and hesitated before none of the logical consequences of his thought. He applauded it because it was the philosophy of authority and order, and not Herzen's algebra of revolution. He spoke with contemptuous irony of the "philosophications" of Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, d'Alembert, and other French writers, who had assumed the gaudy and unmerited title of philosophers. He denounces the turbulent and recriminative French and condemns "the furious and sanguinary scenes of" their revolution, the "abstract and illimitable" whirlwind which "shook France and all but destroyed her." He rejoiced that "the profound religious and esthetic feeling of the German people" saved it from such experiences. Hegel had reconciled Bakunin to reality and oppression. "Yes," he wrote, "suffering is good; it is that purifying flame which transforms the spirit and makes it steadfast."

He declared that "reconciliation with reality in all its relations and under all conditions is the great problem of our day," and maintained that real education was "that which makes a true and powerful Russian man devoted to the Czar." Hegel and Goethe were "the leaders of this movement of reconciliation, this return from death to life."

"In France," he added, "the last spark of Revelation has disappeared. Christendom, that eternal and immutable proof of the Creator's love for His creatures, has become an object of mockery and contempt for all... Religion has vanished, bearing with it the happiness and the peace of France... Without religion, there can be no State and the Revolution was the negation of any State and of all legal order ... The whole life of France is merely the consciousness of the void ... 'Give us what is new, the old things weary us'-such is the watchword of the Young France ... The French sacrifice to the fashion, which has been their sole goddess from all time, all that is most holy and truly great in life."

This “French malady” had attacked the Russian intellectuals, who “filled themselves with French phrases, vain words, empty of meaning, killing the soul in the germ, and expelling from it all that is holy and beautiful.” Russian society had to “abandon this babbling” and ally itself with “the German world with its disciplined conscience” and “with our beautiful Russian reality.”

Thus spoke the apostle of Czarism and Prussianism. No wonder he despised the students at the Artillery School. No wonder, when he had passed through the violent change which transformed him into an anarchist and enemy of Czarism, he hated everything German and adored most things French. It may not have been reasonable. But it was very human. And Bakunin was nothing if not human. By temperament he was passionate and elemental. This fact explains the completion of his mental change.

And so Bakunin came to support the contentions of Herzen with a boldness and irresistible dialectic that marked him out as the most brilliant member of a brilliant group of disputants. Herzen was impressed with his incomparable “revolutionary tact” and tireless energy. He had made himself thoroughly at home with the German language and the German philosophy. Proudhon noted the effect of these studies and masteries on his thought and style when he declared that Bakunin was a monstrosity in his terse dialectic and his luminous perception of ideas in their essence.

Tourgenieff once invented a Nihilist hero, named Bazaroff. This character lives in my mind only because of his reply to a skeptical question. He was asked whether he, as a Nihilist propagandist, imagined that he influenced the masses. And he replied: “A halfpenny tallow dip sufficed to set all Moscow in a blaze.” Herzen’s name is associated by his nativity with the immortal flames thus humbly originated. He is the lighted tallow tip which began the mighty conflagration now threatening to consume the whole of Capitalist society. Even as the flames spread, he spluttered and went out. But he set fire to a rare torch in Bakunin—one who was destined to spread the smoke and the fire of revolution throughout the world.

This world mission began in 1841, when Bakunin proceeded to Berlin to continue the studies commenced at Moscow. He was now a red among reds. Philosopher, Rebel, Socialist, he left Russia for the first time. The following year he removed to Dresden in order to gain a nearer acquaintance with Arnold Ruge, the interpreter of Hegel, with whom he most sympathized, and to proclaim definitely his rapture with Conservatism and his adhesion to the Hegelians “of the left.” He did this in his first revolutionary essay, entitled the “Reaction in Germany,” contributed to Ruge’s “Jahrbucher” for 1842, Nos. 247–51. As if anxious to emphasize his change of front on the relative worth of the French and German spirit, Bakunin used the “nom-de-plume” of “Jules Elizard,” and had Ruge pretend that it was a “Fragment by a Frenchman.”

The article itself showed that Bakunin had not altered his estimate of the French and German spirit. He had merely changed sides consciously and deliberately. He entered an uncompromising plea for revolution and Nihilism. The principle of revolution, he declared, is the principle of negation, the everlasting spirit of destruction and annihilation that is the fathomless and ever-creating fountain of all life. It is the spirit of intelligence, the ever-young, the ever new-born, that is not to be looked for among the ruins of the past. The champions of this principle are something more than the mere negative party, the uncompromising enemies of the positive; for

the latter exists only as the contrary of the negative, whilst that which sustains and elevates the party of revolt is the all-embracing principle of absolute freedom, The French Revolution erected the Temple of Liberty, on which it wrote the mysterious words: "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." It was impossible not to know and feel that these words meant the total annihilation of the existing world of politics and society. It was impossible, also, not to experience a thrill of pleasure at the bare suggestion of this annihilation. But that was because "the joy of destruction is also the joy of creation."

The year after the publication of this essay, Bakunin quitted Dresden for Paris, as he believed he had learned all there was to be learned in Germany. In the French capital he identified himself with all who were noted for their decided views and revolutionary abandon. But a certain community of thought attracts him most to Proudhon. The latter had answered the question "What is Property?" with Brissot's reply, given when still a revolutionary, and subsequently adopted by Feuerbach and accepted by Bakunin. He declared without hesitation that "Property holders are thieves." His motto was the early Christian motto which appealed so much to Bakunin: "I will destroy and I will rebuild." He possessed an intense admiration for Hegel and believed, at least, philosophically, with Bakunin that the process of destruction was also the process of construction. Hence Bakunin's friendship. It must be confessed, however, that Marx's estimate of Proudhon as an Utopian and a reformist who uttered bold and striking phrases is much more to the point than Bakunin's view of Proudhon as a social revolutionist of the first water.

A few months after this meeting, Proudhon was obliged to leave Paris for Lyons. Bakunin was induced by his Polish friends to go to Switzerland. Two years later he was involved in the trial of the Swiss Socialists. He was thereupon deprived of his rank as a Russian officer and his rights of nobility. In all, he whittled away five years in the Swiss villages. Proceeding to Paris at the end of this time, he here threw himself wholeheartedly into the struggle for freedom. His activity brought him into contact with Marx. Nearly a quarter-of-a-century later, writing in the year that witnessed the disaster of the Commune and the beginnings of the Parliamentary debacle, Bakunin recorded his impression of his great German colleague and opponent:

"Marx was much more advanced than I was as he remains to-day, not more advanced but incomparably more learned than I am. I knew then nothing of political economy. I had not yet rid myself of metaphysical abstractions, and my Socialism was only instinctive. He, though younger than I, was already an Atheist, an instructed materialist, a well-considered Socialist. It was just at this time (1847) that he elaborated the first foundations of his present system. We saw each other fairly often, for I respected him much for his learning and his passionate and serious devotion-always mixed, however, with personal vanity-to the cause of the proletariat. I sought eagerly his conversation, which was always instructive and clever, when it was not inspired by a paltry hate, which, alas! happened only too often. But there was never any frank intimacy between us. Our temperaments would not suffer it. He called me a sentimental idealist, and he was right. I called him a vain man, perfidious, and crafty; and I, also, was right."

November 29, 1847, was the anniversary of the Insurrection of Warsaw. On this date Paris witnessed Bakunin's pronouncement of his celebrated speech to the Poles. For the first time a Russian was seen to offer a hand of Brotherhood to this much persecuted people, and renounce publicly the Government of St. Petersburg. His oration formed the prototype of countless other speeches of Russian and Polish revolutionists. It acknowledged the grievous injustice done to the Polish nation by Russia, and promised that the revolution of the future would not only make amends for this, but would remove all the existing differences between the two leading Slav families. It would, consequently, unite the lands east of the Order into a proper and beneficent federative Republic.

It must **not** be concluded from this speech that Bakunin was anticipating the Poland of Pilsudski and the Allied financiers, the tool of the counter-revolution. He was anticipating a Soviet Poland and a Soviet Russia, two allied lands in which all power and authority would be rested in the hands of toilers and exist only in response to real needs of social organization and the people's well-being. Hence his speech made a great sensation. The Czar's Government placed a reward of 10,000 rubles on the venturesome orator's head, and demanded his expulsion from Paris. His every move was now watched by Russian agents. Guizot-who but a few years before had been too polite to refuse the Russian Government's request for Marx's expulsion-consequently expelled him from Paris. Like Marx, he went to Brussels; but he had scarcely reached here when Paris expelled Guizot and Louis Phillippe from France. The new Provisional Government-that now invited the "brave and loyal Marx" to return to the country whence tyranny had banished him, and where he, like all fighting in the sacred cause, the cause of the fraternity of all peoples" would be welcome-also welcomed Bakunin. He accordingly returned to Paris and passionately threw himself into the new political life that then began. But men like Marx and Bakunin-who took the Republican ideal in earnest and realized the material revolution that must precede its realization-were a menace to the Lamartine and Marast Government. Bakunin's departure was a relief to it. He went to the Slavo-Polish Congress assembled at Breslau, and afterwards attended the Congress convened at Prague on 1st June, 1848. Here his famous Slavonic program was written. Up to the time that Windisgraetz dispersed the congress with Austrian cannon, Bakunin worked with the Slavonians. These events inspired Marx's famous chapters on "Revolution and Counter-Revolution." Treating of this political storm period, Marx sings the praises of the generous bravery, the nobility, and the far-sightedness of the spontaneous revolt of the Viennese populace in the cause of Hungarian freedom. He contrasts their action with the "cautious circumspection" of Hungarian Statesmanship. Parliamentarians he dismisses as poor, weak-minded men, so little accustomed to anything like success during their generally very obscure lives that they actually believed their Parliamentary amendments more important than external events.

The most important passages are those treating of the part played by the military in times of revolution. We are often told by so-called Marxists, the former slanderers of Bakunin and the present enemies of Bolshevism, that "**we**" **must capture the Parliamentary machine in order to control the armed forces.** Without discussing who the "we" is who is going to capture this machine, one may venture to cite the following excerpts from Marx's pages, proving that Parliament does **not** control the army nor even the executive authority.

"But we repeat: these armies, strengthened by the Liberals as a means of action against the more advanced parties...turned themselves against the Liberals and restored to power men of the old system. When Radetzky in his camp beyond the Adige received the first orders from the responsible ministers at Vienna, he exclaimed: 'Who are these ministers? They are not the

government of Austria.' Austria is now nowhere but in my camp; 'I and my army, we are Austria; and when we have beaten the Italians, we shall reconquer the Empire for the Emperor.' **And old Radetzky was right, but the imbecile 'responsible' ministers at Vienna heeded him not.**"
— Ch. IX.

"The army again was the decisive power in the State, and the army belonged not to the middle classes but to themselves...The...army, more united than every, flushed with victory in minor insurrections and foreign warfare...had only to be kept in constant petty conflicts with the people, and the decisive moment once at hand, it could, with one great blow, crush the Revolutionists, and set aside the presumptions of the middle class parliamentarians." — Ch.X.

In these trenchant words, Marx describes how the Austrian army regained its confidence at Prague and sounds the call of battle and social revolutionary-anti-parliamentarism. He thus identifies himself and his work with the struggle and endeavor of Bakunin.

During this storm-period, Herzen left Russia never to return to it again. For a time he had returned to the service of the State and spent his spare time in writing novels, romances, and studies of manners. But the meanness of his occupation outraged his self-respect. Once more he took up the struggle against Czarism. Once more his pen denounced despotism. He wrote boldly and bitterly and encountered persecution as a matter of course. Then he abandoned his office as a barrister and went into exile.

It was now that Herzen proclaimed his gospel of universal negation, the need to destroy completely the existing political world. He denounced bourgeois republicanism, whatever means were employed to bring it about. His goal was the Socialist Republic, which was to be brought into existence by burying existing society under its own ruins. Once abolished, the old society could never reconstitute itself. But another society would emerge inevitably—a better and truer society without doubt. Herzen could not see beyond that society. He did not know what was to follow it. But he knew it could not be the end. In this sense, regarding life as a constant ferment, and viewing the old society as a regime of death, Herzen saluted the prospects of revolution with the words:—

"Death to the old world! Long live chaos and destruction! Long live death! Place for the future."

Out of the chaos, Socialism was to emerge:—

"Socialism will be developed in all its phases, even to its uttermost consequences, the absurd. Then, once again, there will come forth the cry of negation from the titanic breast of the revolutionary minority. Once more, the mortal struggle will recommence. But in the struggle Socialism will take the place of the present Conservatism, to be conquered in its turn by a revolution unknown to us. The eternal game of life, cruel as death, inevitable as birth, constitutes the flux and reflux of history, 'perpetuum mobile' of life."

Thus thought and wrote Herzen "Before the Storm" which swept over Europe in 1848. That storm left power in the hands of the hated bourgeois, "the prize beasts of the 'National.'" He develops his theory with greater force "After the Storm":

“We are not called upon to gather the fruits of the past, but to be its torturers and persecutors. We must judge it, and learn to recognize it under every disguise, and immolate it for the sake of the future.”

In these words, Herzen challenged the entire constitutional theory of a gradual conquest of political power by the proletariat under Capitalism. He denied that Jesus had conquered Constantine by the Church establishing itself in the Capitol. He saw the original plan of tyranny being developed and improved in detail, but never abandoned nor destroyed. The Reformation headed by Luther did not emancipate the people. It only saved clericalism. The French Revolution did not destroy authority. It conserved it. But the coming Social Revolution would uproot and destroy. It would not widen the power of the states but destroy their entire political structure.

As one follows Herzen in the development of this theory, one knows that his message is radically at one with Marx. It is the message of the class struggle. And it foreshadowed, without a doubt, the revolutionary negation of parliamentarism, and the establishment of Soviet responsibility.

Quitting Prague, Bakunin fled to Germany, where he was received with open arms by the Radical element. Here he remained concealed for sometime, first at Berlin, then at Dessau, Cothen, and various towns in Saxony. Everywhere pursued and expelled by the police, he was a wanderer until the end of April, 1849, when he succeeded in finding employment, under an assumed name, at the University of Leipzig. Here a circle of Bohemian students embraced both his revolutionary and panslavistic doctrines.

Bakunin now united in opposition to Palacky-whom Marx denounced-the Slavonian democrats with the Hungarian independence movement and the German revolutionists. Subsequently he took command at the defense of Dresden and acquired a glory which even his enemies have not denied. From the 6th to the 9th May, he was the very life and soul of its defense against the Prussian and Saxon troops. On the later date, when all was lost, Bakunin ordered the general retreat to Frieberg with the same proud dignity as he had issued his commands for resisting the siege and had insisted, only the day before, on the European importance of this desperate enterprise. At Chemnitz he was seized by treachery, with two of his companions; and from that time-10th May, 1849-commenced his long martyrdom. Even then his proud and courageous demeanor did not desert him. Twenty-seven years afterwards, one of the Prussian officers who had guarded the prisoner on the way through Altenburg still remembered the calmness and intrepidity with which the tall man in fetters replied to a lieutenant who interpellated him, “that in politics the issue alone can decide what is a great action and what a crime.”

From August, 1849, to May, 1850, Bakunin was kept a prisoner in the fortress of Konistein. He was then tried and sentenced to death by the Saxon tribunal. In pursuance of a resolution passed by the old Diet of the Bund in 1836, he was delivered up to the Austrian Government and sent (chained) to Prague instead of being executed.

The Austrian Government attempted in vain to extort from him the secrets of the Slavonian movement. A year later it sentenced him to death, but immediately commuted the death sentence to one of perpetual imprisonment. In the interval he had been removed from the fortress

at Gratz to that at Almutz, as the Government was terrified by the report of a design to liberate him. Here he passed six months chained to the wall. After this, the Austrian Government surrendered him to the Russian. The Austrian chains were replaced by native irons of twice the weight. This was in the autumn of 1851, when Bakunin was taken through Warsaw and Vilna to St. Petersburg, to pass three weary years in the fortress of Alexis. At Vilna, in spite of the threats of the Russian Government, the Poles gathered in the streets to pay the last tribute of silent respect to the heroic Russian orator of 27th November, 1847. As Bakunin drove past them in the sledge, they bowed their heads with an affection never assumed in the presence of emperors. Bakunin understood. His fortitude during six years' confinement in Russian dungeons showed that he was not unworthy of their devotion.

In 1854, at the beginning of the Crimean War, Bakunin was transferred to the casemates of the dreaded fortress of Schlüsselburg, which actually lie beneath the level of the Neva. When Alexander II. ascended the throne in August, 1856, he half-pardoned many political refugees and conspirators, including the Decembrists of 1825. Bakunin was not among them. When his mother petitioned the Emperor, the latter replied, with affability, "As long as your son lives, madame, he will never be free." However, 1857 saw Bakunin's release from prison and removal to Eastern Siberia as a penal colonist. Three years later, the Emperor refused to let Bakunin return to Russia, as he saw in him "no sign of remorse." After eight years' imprisonment and four years' exile, he had to look forward still to a long series of dreary years in Siberia.

Two of these dreary years had gone when, in 1859, the Russian Government annexed the territory of the Amur. A brighter prospect was offered Bakunin by permission to settle here, and to move about almost as he pleased.

A new flame was kindled throughout Russia-Garibaldi had unfurled the Italian flag of freedom. Bakunin, at 47 years of age and with his pulse full of vigor, could not remain a tame and distant spectator of these events. He determined to escape from Siberia. This he successfully carried out by extending his excursions as far as Novo-Nikolaievsk, where he secretly boarded an American clipper, on which he reached Japan. He was the first political refugee to seek shelter there. Thence he arrived at San Francisco, crossed the Isthmus of Panama, and came to New York. On 26th December, 1861, he landed at Liverpool, and the next day he was with his comrades in London.

"Bakunin is in London! Bakunin buried in dungeons, lost in Eastern Siberia, re-appears in the midst of us full of life and energy. He returns more hopeful than ever, with redoubled love for freedom's holy cause. He is invigorated by the sharp but healthy air of Siberia. With his resurrection, how many images and shadows rise from the dead! The visions of 1848 reappear. We feel no longer that 1848 is dead! It has only changed its place in the order of time!"

Such were the greetings with which all English lovers of freedom and members of the revolutionary working class committees welcomed the approach of the new year 1862!

To justify these expectations, Bakunin settled down to the part editorship of Herzen's "Kolokol."

“The slightest concession, the smallest grace and compassion will bring us back to the past again, and leave our fetters untouched. Of two things we must choose one. Either we must justify ourselves and go on, or we must falter and beg for mercy when we have arrived half-way.”

In these terms, written in a mood of uncompromising Nihilism, Herzen condemned his own career. When he published his pamphlet “Before the Storm,” in Rome, it did not seem possible that the world would have to wait long for the inevitable conflagration. The downfall of all existing institutions seemed imminent. Socialism was the gospel of youth, the hope of humanity, the goal to be attained. And it seemed as though the youth of the world was about to come into its own. Herzen reveled in the thought that the spring-time was at hand:—

“When the spring comes, a young and fresh life will show itself over the whitened sepulchers of the feeble generations which will have disappeared in the explosion. For the age of senile barbarity, there will be substituted a juvenile barbarity, full of disconnected forces. A savage and fresh vigor will invade the young breasts of new peoples. Then will commence a new cycle of events and a new volume of universal history. The future belongs to Socialist ideas.”

But the 1848 upheaval failed. Herzen prophesied more vigorously than ever. He clamored strenuously and ably for universal destruction. But his faith in “words and flags, in the deification of humanity, and the illusion that salvation can be only effected by the Church of European civilization” declined. The west in which he placed so much hope was dead. And he began his weary “return to Russia” in thought, though not in fact. For he lived and died in exile.

“We were young two years ago; to-day we are old,” he wrote in 1850. The crushing of the French Labor movement angered and disheartened him. He became ashamed of his precious affection for Europe, “blushed for his prejudices,” declared that he knew nothing of the lands he had loved from the distance, and had embellished them with “marvelous colors” because they were as “forbidden fruit” to him. Universal sorrow at the general check received by the revolution throughout Europe disturbed his outlook and he poured out his sense of hopelessness and despair in his work, “From the Other Shore.”

But he could not quite give up his faith in revolution. The West had failed — but there was Russia. Why should not Russia become a Socialist State without passing through Capitalism? Herzen saw no reason : and so in 1851 he penned the prophetic words: “The man of the future in Russia is the moujik, just as in France he is the artisan.”

He saw Russia emancipating the world and continued in this faith down to the renewal of his association with Bakunin in London. At this time he developed his ideas in “The Old World and Russia.” All the States — the Roman, Christian, and feudal institutions, the parliamentary, monarchial, and republican centers — but **not the people** of Europe will perish. The coming revolution, unlike any previous change, would destroy the bases of the States. In line with which understanding of the social issue, Herzen opposed himself to reformism in the following words:—

“We can do no more plastering and repairing. It has become impossible to move in the ancient forms without breaking them. Our revolutionary idea is incompatible entirely with the existing state of things.”

“A constitution is only a treaty between master and slave.” This declaration was made by Herzen also. It at once became the motto of the Russian extremists, who were few compared with the constitutionalists who wanted either a limited monarchy or a republic.

But the boldness of his thought was paralyzed by the Russian character of his outlook. He attempted to turn opportunist in practice in order to bring about insurrectionary movements in Russia, and became disheartened by failure. He compromised with the religious sectarians and conspired with the peasants. The intrigue collapsed, and he repudiated the Nihilism he had abandoned in order to intrigue. For practical reasons, he retreated from his revolutionary position, and left his colleague, Michel Bakunin, to spread the flame of universal destruction. But Herzen’s retreat was in direct opposition to all that he taught and believed.

To Bakunin he wrote, stating that he had no faith in revolutionary measures and now stood for Liberalism. He neither wished to march ahead of, nor remain behind, the progress of mankind. The latter would not — and could not — follow him in his passion for destruction, which Bakunin mistook for a passion for creation.

The trouble was not with the revolutionary program. It rested with Herzen’s anti-revolutionary compassion for his fatherland above other lands. Concessions were made to religion and political conspiracy. He failed the social revolution and then denied its truth because his work seemed to end in smoke. The vapor was Herzen not Nihilism.

Whereas Herzen appealed to a Russian audience, Bakunin demanded a European one. He remained the Slav at heart, and on the International stage paraded his hatred of the Teuton.

In London he assured his admirers that he would devote the rest of his life to the war with Czarism. He wanted to be “a true and free Russian,” however, and to keep off the Tartars in the East and “to maintain the Germans in Germany.” This Nationalist touch marred all his work and seriously distracted from his revolutionary vigor in moments of crisis. But it did not seem to hamper his energy.

Herzen’s paper stood for the reform of Russian officialdom, not its destruction. But he was no match for Bakunin’s energy, zeal, and abandon. More and more did the “Kolokol” become identified with the latter’s Nihilism, his applause of the negative principle, and his denunciation of all positive institution. This altered policy was maintained down to 1865, when the “Kolokol” was transferred from London to Geneva only to die.

Four years later Bakunin delivered his famous speech to the Peace Congress at Berne. He impeached modern civilization as having been “founded from time immemorial on the forced labor of the enormous majority, condemned to lead the lives of brutes and slaves, in order that a small minority might be enabled to live as human creatures. This monstrous inequality,” he discovered, rested

“Upon the absolute separation between headwork and hand-labor. But this abomination cannot last; for in future the working classes are resolved to make their own politics. They insist that instead of two classes, there shall be in future only one, which shall offer to all men alike, without grade or distinction, the same starting point, the same maintenance, the same opportunities of education and culture, the

same means of industry; not, indeed, by virtue of laws, but by the nature of the organization of this class which shall oblige everyone to work with his head as with his hands.”

Later on, Bakunin repudiated Communism in a passage that has so often been misinterpreted, that we reproduce it at length:

“Communism I abhor, because it is the negation of liberty, and without liberty I cannot imagine anything truly human. I abhor it because it concentrates all the strength of society in the State, and squanders that strength in its service; because it places all property in the hands of the State, whereas my principle is the abolition of the State itself. I want the organization of society and the distribution of property to proceed from below, by the free voice of society itself ; not downward from above, by the dictate of authority. I want the abolition of personal hereditary property, which is merely an institution of the State, and a consequence of State principles. In this sense I am a Collectivist not a Communist.”

Here Bakunin propounds the old Anarchist fallacy of the State creating property, instead of espousing the sound doctrine that property necessitates and conditions the State. He fights the shadow for the substance. His aspiration as to social organization all Communists share. And when he repudiates Communism for Collectivism, they know he is giving a different meaning to these terms from that which we give to them.

Actually, he is expressing his fear of a dictatorship. But since he believed in violence, which is the essence of dictatorship, we do not see the point of his objection. No one believes in a permanent authoritarian society. All realize that there must be a transitional period during which the workers must protect the revolution and organize to crush the counter-revolution. Every action of the working class during that period must be organized, must be power-action, and consequently dictatorial. It is impossible either for Bakunin or for anyone else to escape from reality in this matter. **To destroy power the workers must secure power.** There is no other way.

The address becomes happier when the author turns to the question of religion : but since he repeats, word for word, whole passages subsequently reproduced in “God and the State,” there is no need to cite his reflections. Bakunin’s one great consistency was his hatred of God and the idealists.

Bakunin’s pan-slavism was the fatal contradiction that paralyzed his revolutionary endeavor. This will be seen from his pamphlet “Romanoff, Pugatscheff, or Pestal,” published in 1862. In this, he announced his willingness to make peace with absolutism provided that the son of the Emperor Nicholas would consent to be “a good and loyal Czar,” a democratic ruler, and would put himself at the head of a popular assembly in order to constitute a new Russia, and play the part of the savior of the Slav people.

“Does this Romanoff mean to be the Czar of the peasants, or the Petersburgian emperor of the house of Holstein-Gottorp? This question will have to be decided soon, and then we shall know what we are and what we have to do.”

The Czar's silence angered Bakunin, and he returned again to Nihilism as he would have done in any case. Bakunin was altogether too loyal to the cause of revolution to compromise with Czars for any length of time. But the weakness was there, and the fact must be recorded. It found expression once again with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War and the German invasion of France. Bakunin forgot the youth to whom he had issued his revolutionary appeals. All his ancient Russian enmity of the Germanic race-from whose thinkers he had imbibed the milk of his philosophic doctrines-came out. He at once addressed an appeal to the pleasantries of all countries, imploring them "to come to drive out the Prussians." The cause of France, he said, was the cause of humanity. And the powerful Muscovite Press agreed with him. Bakunin was at one with ruling class Russia. In backing France, he was acting as became a Russian and a patriot, not as became an Anarchist and an Internationalist. This is obvious from the company in which he found himself.

Bakunin outlined the case against Germany, and enunciated his theory of the historic mission of the French, in his "Letters to a Frenchman about The Present Crisis," written in September, 1870, and his pamphlet on "The Knouto-Germanic Empire." He disowned nationalism and race, and the Napoleons, Bismarcks, and Czars who fostered patriotism in order to destroy the freedom of all nations. In his eyes, this was a very mean, very narrow and very interested passion. It was fundamentally inhuman and had no other purpose than the conservation of the power of the national State-that is, the attempted exploitations and privileges inside a nation.

"When the masses become patriotic they are stupid, as are to-day a part of the masses in Germany, who let themselves be slaughtered in tens of thousands with a silly enthusiasm, for the triumph of that great unity, and for the organization of that German Empire, which, if founded on the ruins of usurped France, will become the tomb of all hopes for the future."

In penning that, he did not recall his own pan-Slavic utterances, and advocacy of racial antagonisms involving the continuation of government and the support of militarism.

History was shaved shamefully so as to oppose the France of 1793 to the Germany of Bismarck. Nothing was said about revolutionary Germany. The France which demanded Napoleons, supported Royalism, and favored bourgeois Republicanism, was dismissed. Bakunin was enabled, by these means, to picture the world as waiting on the initiation of France for its advance towards liberty. France was to drive back Germany, exile her traitor officials-and inaugurate Socialism!

"What I would consider a great misfortune for the whole of humanity would be the defeat and death of France as a great national manifestation: the death of its great national character, the French spirit; of the courageous, heroic instincts, of the revolutionary daring, which took with storm, in order to destroy, all authorities that had been made holy by history, all power of heaven and earth. If that great historical nature called France should be missed at this hour, if it should disappear from the world-scene; or,-what would be much worse-if the spirited and developed nature should fall suddenly from the honored height which she has attained, thanks to the work of the heroic genius of past generations-into the abyss and continue her

existence as Bismarck's slave: a terrible emptiness will engulf the whole world. It would be more than a national catastrophe. It would be a world-wide misfortune, a universal defeat."

We need add only that the great "French Spirit" murdered in cold blood its communards in the famous May-June days of 1871.

As a national manifestation, the French Spirit was confined within territorial boundaries. It has been seen that Bakunin believed also in a Russian nationalism, bounded on the East by the Tartars, and on the West by the Germans. Given these frontiers, it is impossible not to believe in a German race, bounded on the West by France and on the East by Russia. Thus Bakunin believed in upholding the States of Europe. He aimed at the status quo. Yet he said :—

"Usurpation is not only the outcome, but the highest aim of all states, large or small, powerful or weak, despotic or liberal, monarchic, aristocratic, or democratic...It follows that the war of one State upon another is a necessity and common fact, and every peace is only a provisional truce."

This idea was not worked out at some other time, under different circumstances, but in these "Letters to a Frenchman" eulogizing the national spirit. He asserted that all States were bad, and there could be no virtuos State:—

"Who says State, says power, oppression, exploitation, injustice—all these established as the prevailing system and as the fundamental conditions of the existing society. The State never had a morality, and can never have one. Its only morality and justice is its own advantage, its own existence, and its own omnipotence at any price. Before these interests, all interests of mankind must disappear. The State is the negation of manhood."

"So long as there is a State, war will never cease. Each State must overcome or be overcome. Each State must found its power on the weakness, and, if it can, without danger to itself, on the abrogation of other States. To strive for an International justice and freedom and lasting peace, and therewith seek the maintenance of the State, is a ridiculous naivete."

Bakunin had to escape this very charge of ridiculous naivete.

The German Social Democrats believed in a progressive series of State reforms and German unity with Prussia as the head of the centralizing movement. By seizing on this fact, Bakunin was able to give point to his case for the French Spirit. Unless, however, he could make the German Social Democrats amenable to that spirit, he remained the apologist for the French State. He carefully pointed out, therefore, that the German Social Democrats were anxious to go beyond

their program, and were waiting to solidate with the French workers to proclaim the Universal Socialist Republic of the proletaires. In this way, he destroyed entirely the significance of the French Spirit. And he did not write the truth. The German Social Democrats were not waiting to solidate with the French workers. The French workers were not willing to initiate the Socialist Republic. So cleverly did Bakunin reconcile his contradictions, that he buried his superstition and Anarchism in the same logical grave. It is well that this was only a passing aberration, that Bakunin was so sincerely proletarian that the Commune of Paris found him its defender and eulogist, and our gratitude for his vigor and audacity in consequence exceeds our regrets at his lapses. We recall that all his contemporaries, including Marx, nodded, and that the age of the giants who never fail and are superior to circumstance has not arrived.

Bakunin closed his stormy career at Berne on 1st July, 1876. He had founded his Social Democratic Alliance and had been expelled from the Marxist International. His heroism and tireless zeal commanded the respect of all who survived, and it was decided at his funeral to reconcile the Social Democrats and the Anarchists in one association, and to bury minor differences—namely, the questions of Parliamentarism and State reforms! This idea of compromise was supported by the Anarchists and Social Democrats throughout Europe. Marvelous words of regard were paid to Bakunin’s memory. On 7th August, the Jura Federation assembled at Chaux-de-Fonds and sent a fraternal greeting, drawn up by James Guillaume, to the German Social Democratic Congress at Gotha. Four weeks later, Wilhelm Liebknecht replied in the following terms:—

“The Congress of the German Socialists has commissioned me to express to you my delight over the fact that the Congress of the Federation of Jura has expressed itself in favor of the union of all Socialists.”

The eighth International Congress of the International was held at Berne a month later. The German Social Democratic Party sent a delegate who expressed the following hope of union:—

“The German Social Democracy expresses the desire that the Socialists may treat each other with mutual consideration, so that, if a complete union is not possible, there may be established at least, a certain understanding, in accordance with which everyone may pursue peacefully his way.”

At the banquet, which concluded the Congress, Cafiero, the disciple of Bakunin, drank to the health of the German Socialists; and De Paepe toasted the memory of Michel Bakunin. “Anarchism” kept company with State reforms and Socialism was regarded as a Parliamentary issue, over which one must not grow passionate. All Bakunin’s fiery words against the State, all his talk of the Revolution, his hurrying across Europe to boost first one and then another insurrection had ended seemingly in-vapor, smoke!

But the thing was impossible. The events of the storm years, 1848 and 1871, had made the same impression on Marx as on Bakunin. Both believed in revolutionary violence, in insurrectional politics, in the Commune and not the Empire. Whatever their personal quarrel and their difference as to the rigid interpretation of the Marxian formula, both were genuine social revolutionists, the real pioneers of the new social order, the masters from whom John Most drew his

inspiration. In their differences, each side erred. In their fundamental aspiration, both were at one. Not so with Lassalle from whom the Social Democrats drew their fatal inspiration, whose motto, "Through universal suffrage to victory," they substituted, after the downfall of the Commune and the defeat of the proletariat, for Marx's magnificent: "Workers of all lands, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains! You have a world to gain!"

"To set about to make a revolution," said Lasalle-the father of that European Social Democracy which buried itself and attempted to murder outright the European proletariat in the world war of 1914-18-"is the folly of immature minds, which have no notion of the laws of history." In this spirit, he interpreted the events of 1848 and 1849 as an argument for-direct universal suffrage! With the movement founded to maintain this principle and work towards this middle class end, the Anarchists seriously thought of identifying themselves! They imagined this to be an honor to Bakunin, just as the Marxists thought they were honoring Marx by repudiating his revolutionary principles.

"And so you think that Marx and Bakunin were at one," said my friend.

"Yes," I replied, "I think that they were at one. I believe that they were one in purpose and in aspiration. But they accomplished distinct tasks and served different functions. It would not do for us all to act the same part. Fitted by temperament to enact a peculiar role, each man felt his work to be a special call, the one aim of life. This developed strong personality. And when the two strong personalities came into conflict through the nature of their respective tasks, the natural antagonisms of their temperament displayed themselves. Then came fools, who called themselves disciples of the wise men, and magnified their accidental collisions into vital discords of purpose. Do we not know-the friend who persuades us to quarrel? And do we not know the 'disciples' who are actually street brawlers of a refined order? Marx and Bakunin have suffered at the hands of these mental numskulls."

"But how would you define the difference between the two men," pursued my friend.

"Very easily," I answered, "Marx **defined** the Social Revolution, whilst Bakunin **expressed** it. The first stood for the invincible logic of the cause. The second concentrated in his own person its unquenchable spirit. Marx was an impregnable rock of first principles, remorselessly composed of facts. He dwarfed the intelligence of Capitalist society and witnessed to the indestructibility of Socialism. He incarnated the proletarian upheaval. He was the immovable mountain of the revolution. Bakunin, on the other hand, was the tempest. He symbolized the coming flood. Both were great brave men; and together they gave completeness to the certitude of revolution. They promised success by land and by water. They symbolized inexhaustible patience, unwearied stability, inevitable growth, and tireless, resistless attack. Who can conceive of a world not made up of land and water? Who can conceive of the Social Revolution without the work of Marx and Bakunin?"

But my friend was not convinced, so we turned to other subjects.

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Michael Bakunin, Communist
1920

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