Michael Bakunin, Anarchist & Syndicalist

Iain Mckay

2026, Fall

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the death of Michael Bakunin (May 30, 1814, to July 1, 1876). While best known for his struggle against Marx in the (First) International and his correct prediction that the so-called workers' state would generate a new ruling class, there is much more to Bakunin than that. He wrote on a wide range of subjects which activists today will find of interest—the nature of a social revolution, union organizing, nationalism and national liberation, atheism, the need for a specific anarchist organization, amongst others.

It is important to stress that the conflict within the International was not a personal one. Bakunin championed a tendency that had existed within the International since the start, one which could be termed (to use a later word) syndicalist—that argued for struggle on the economic terrain and favored federalist socio-economic organization which prefigured the socialist world desired. This inevitably brought the federalist wing of the International into conflict with Marx who favored political action (electioneering) and centralized political organization (parties). Bakunin championed this tendency (which was supported by the majority of the International) and became its best-known advocate.

As is clear from the writings included in this issue, Bakunin advocated syndicalist tactics and specific anarchist organization. However, this is often ignored by commentators upon him and anarchism. Instead, Bakunin's constructive ideas are replaced with suggestions that he was an advocate of pan-destruction and terrorism. Suffice to say, comparing hostile accounts of Bakunin to anarchist ones and the reader would not be condemned if they concluded that there were about two different people with the same name.

Often this criticism is based on works for which any actual evidence of Bakunin's authorship is lacking or, at best, limited, superficial or dubious. These date from his short association—and infatuation—with the Russian Nihilist Sergei Nechaev and many of the commentators seem blissfully unaware of any research conducted since Marx and Engels first made the assertion, research which shows that Bakunin had no role in the infamous works written during that short period and that Nechaev was their author. This explains why their content is so at odds with Bakunin's other writings, whether public or private.

Bakunin's advocacy of syndicalism can be seen from his public writings, his letters to comrades and his posthumously published works. Thus we see him argue for economic organization and struggle, reject electioneering and correctly predict it would lead to reformism, see the general strike as a means of commencing the social revolution (although not rejecting the need for

insurrection) and a host of other ideas which are associated with the later syndicalism which is all too often claimed to be different to revolutionary anarchism or a new development produced by the failure of "propaganda by the deed" (again, wrongly all too often proclaimed the anarchist tactic).

Yet we find Bakunin arguing that the "International, by thus placing the proletariat outside the politics of states and the bourgeois world, constitutes a new world, the world of proletarian solidarity across all countries. This world is that of the future… it is the organisation of international solidarity for the economic struggle of labor against capital." Likewise, he indicated that the organs formed to fight capitalism (unions, councils) would be what replaced it:

This completely practical, completely vital study of social science undertaken and constantly pursued by the workers themselves, both in their respective trade sections and in these trades councils, will necessarily lead and has already led to a large extent to produce in them this unanimous and fully considered conviction, demonstrable both in theory and in practice, that the serious, final, complete emancipation of the workers is possible only on one condition, and that this condition is the appropriation of capital, that is to say the raw materials and all the instruments of labor, including land, by the workers collectively…The economic question considered in this extent and embracing both all conditions of labor as well as those of the just distribution of the products of labor, is the real terrain that the worker must never abandon. As soon as he abandons it, he loses himself in metaphysical, juridical, political, theological abstractions, and disorientated, deprived of his two faithful guides, his common sense and the awareness or instinct of his real interests, he always finds himself once again, to his great surprise, the slave and exploited of the bourgeois. While remaining on the economic terrain, the worker will be all powerful…

The organization of trade sections, their federation in the International [Workers'] Association and their representation by trade councils [Chambres de travail] not only creates a great Academy where all the workers of the International, uniting practice with theory, can and must study economic science, they even carry the living seeds of the new social order that is to replace the bourgeois world. They create not only the ideas but the very facts of the future.

Ultimately, "to create a popular power capable of crushing the military and civil power of the State, it is necessary to organize the proletariat." For the International Workers' Association would be meaningless if it did not strive irresistibly for the abolition of the State. It organizes the masses only for the purpose of this destruction. And how does it organize them? Not from top down, by imposing on the social diversity produced by the diversity of work within the masses, or by imposing on the natural life of the masses, a false unity and order, as States do; but, on the contrary, from the bottom up, taking as a starting point the social existence of the masses, their real aspirations, and rousing them, helping them to group together, to harmonise and balance themselves in accordance with this natural diversity of occupations and circumstances. Such is the specific purpose of the organization of the trade sections.

Bakunin's final letter to the Jura Federation reiterated these syndicalist ideas:

> "What matters most today is the organization of the forces of the proletariat. But this organization must be the work of the proletariat itself… final victory is assured, provided you faithfully observe these two conditions:
>
> "1. Hold fast to this principle of great and broad popular freedom, without which equality and solidarity themselves would be nothing but lies;

> ”2. Organize even more the practical, militant, international solidarity amongst workers of all trades and of all countries, and remember that, infinitely weak as isolated individuals, localities, or countries, you will find immense and irresistible strength in this universal collectivity.”

Bakunin also recognized the need for anarchists to organize as anarchists to influence the class struggle. In his letters to comrades, he discussed the role of the specific anarchist organization in the mass movements of the working classes, stressing its role as one which gives a lead rather than seeking power—what was later termed ”the leadership of ideas.” While recognizing the important role in struggle in transforming ideas, Bakunin also stressed the importance of propaganda and winning workers to libertarian ideas:

But for the international, thus organized from the bottom up, to become a real force, a serious power, each member in each section must be far more deeply imbued with the principles of the International than they are today. Only under this condition will it be able, in time of peace and calm, to effectively fulfil the mission of propagandist and apostle, and in times of struggle, that of a true revolutionary.

Bakunin, then, saw the need for both mass organizations and specific anarchist federations, with each playing different but complementary roles. Given the political situation in most countries as well as his own personal experience, he argued that these groups and federations had to be secret (at least in part). Still, we are anarchists and not ”Bakuninists” and do not blindly follow anyone, no matter how important their contributions are to the cause. We can recognize someone as being an important thinker and activist as well as a flawed individual (like everyone else). His writings need to be critically engaged with rather than mindlessly parroted. If that is done, then it soon becomes clear why Bakunin is still of interest to anarchists and other activists today.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Iain Mckay
Michael Bakunin, Anarchist & Syndicalist
2026, Fall

Scanned from Anarcho-Syndicalist Review #95, Fall, 2026, page 40
Publication information is available online at https://syndicalist.us/

theanarchistlibrary.org