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The Dilemma of Leninists: Research or Regurgitation?

Iain McKay

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A review of a book by a leading Trotskyist which shows his ignorance of anarchism. It shows the flaws within his account of Bakunin and Kropotkin plus discusses the roots of a mentality which allows someone to write about a subject (anarchism) which they clearly know next to nothing about.

Tariq Ali is a Pakistani-British political activist and writer who has been active since the 1960s, when his public profile grew due to his activism against the Vietnam War. He has long been associated with the *New Left Review* and is a leading Trotskyist, joining the International Marxist Group in 1968 and becoming a member of the International Executive Committee of the (reunified) Fourth International.

As such, the casual reader would think that he should be well placed to discuss the history of the left. The reality is different, as shown by his work on Lenin published in hardback in 2017 to

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mark the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, *The Dilemmas of Lenin: Terrorism, War, Empire, Love, Revolution* (Verso, 2017/8). Ali seeks to discuss and draw lessons from Lenin and the various “dilemmas” he apparently faced. In the process Ali appears to discuss anarchism and, as such, his book is of interest to anarchists even if it is only as an example of what not to do.

His discussion of anarchism is found in the first “dilemma”, namely “terrorism”. Lenin’s older brother, Aleksander, joined the terrorist faction of the populist *Narodnaya Volya* (*People’s Will*) group and was executed after a failed attempt to assassinate the Russian Tsar, Alexander III, in 1887. Ali uses this to discuss anarchism and its differences with Marxism but simply shows his ignorance. It is useful to indicate the failings of his account as they repeat all-too-common Marxist nonsense about anarchism yet all his claims are easily refuted by a little research – the kind which any reasonable reader would expect of a serious leftist writer. Sadly, rather than bother checking his claims he simply regurgitates notions which he undoubtedly *believes* to be true.

He talks of “Bakunin, Kropotkin and Nechaev” (36) but only the first two are anarchists. While Bakunin “appears to have believed that Nechayev shared the main ideas of his populist-anarchist creed” until the spring of 1870, in reality “although scattered anarchist elements do appear in the few writings he left, Nechayev, at bottom, was not an anarchist. As far as an ideological trend can be detected, he was much nearer to Blanquism, to Jacobinism, and to the authoritarian, centralistic Marxian brand of communism.”¹ Ignoring this research, we are told Nechaev “won himself over to the anarchist cause” (40) when, in reality, he was a Jacobin-socialist. That he fooled Bakunin for a time does not make him an anarchist nor make Bakunin responsible for his activities or ideas – regardless of the attempts by Marxists (starting with

¹ Michael Confino, *Daughter of a revolutionary: Natalie Herzen and the Bakunin-Nechayev circle* (LaSalle, Ill.: Library Press, 1973), 35.

We can only hope that the royalties gained from Ali’s book will be used to buy internet access as most of his errors would have been avoided if he had simply looked at, say, *Wikipedia* or read a book on anarchism which was published more recently than the 1960s. That he could not be bothered to do the research needed is a damning indictment of Leninism and – as well as, more importantly, its atrocious record – indicates why revolutionaries should reject the Bolshevik Myth.

astonishing in its intensity – and, at the same time, a clerical mentality which is quick to become Inquisitorial.”²⁷

This appears to explain Ali’s book. Why bother with investigating the facts when you think you have the truth? Why be concerned with exposing your ignorance of a subject when your audience either shares the same view or will be as unaware of the facts as yourself? Why research when you can regurgitate?

As such, there is no real dilemma for Leninists – regurgitating ideological “truths” is the go-to position and research into whether these reflect reality is not usually considered never mind done. Case in point, I was told by an eager SWP member once that he was going investigate anarchism and was planning to read Marx’s *Philosophy of Poverty*. The look of his face when I asked him whether that was before or after reading Proudhon’s *The Philosophy of Poverty* was priceless – the thought had obviously never crossed his mind.²⁸ As Ali’s book shows, this mentality is the default one within Leninist circles.

Why bother reviewing such an inaccurate book? First, correcting inaccuracies – while time consuming – is useful for it shows that no book should be taken at face value. Second, it shows how willing Marxists are to write apparently authoritatively on subjects – like anarchism – they know next to nothing about. Third, the book generated generally positive reviews from the Leninist-left, showing that his ignorance of anarchism is widespread within it. Fourth, not knowing history means that you cannot learn from it. So exposing the nonsense of Ali’s claims on anarchism is useful for such claims are all too common in Marxist circles. It will help anarchists debunk them and, perhaps, cause Marxists to consider their ideas and what passes for “conventional wisdom” in their circles.

²⁷ *Memoirs of a Revolutionary 1901–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 134.

²⁸ For a comparison of the two: “The Poverty of (Marx’s) Philosophy”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 70 (Summer 2017); “Proudhon’s Constituted Value and the Myth of Labour Notes”, *Anarchist Studies* 25: 1 (Summer 2017).

Marx and Engels) to do so by talking of Russian “Bakunists” when they are referring to the likes of Nechaev.

Why Ali seeks to blur the distinction between Bakunin’s ideas and Nechaev’s is painfully clear, namely to link the former to terrorism –so allowing such nonsense as “Bakunin’s and Nechaev’s caste of anarchist warriors differs in several important ways from current jihadi terrorist groups” (42) to be inflicted upon the reader. Before this, Ali discusses Nechaev’s *The Catechism of the Revolutionary* and in the space of two pages we are informed its “authorship is disputed because of the violence of the language, the ultra-nihilism and political amorality.” (41), of “joint authorship of the *Catechism*” by Bakunin and Nechaev (41) and, finally, it being “probably written by Bakunin”. (42) The reader is not informed why this final conclusion is drawn nor that the evidence for who really wrote the *Catechism* has been available for decades:

“The *Catechism* has often been attributed to Bakunin (alone or with Nechaev’s participation). However, it is worth pointing out that there was not and still is no *direct* evidence whatsoever to support this view ... the *Catechism* [has] numerous common ideas and expression with an earlier article by [non-anarchist] Tkachev ... [and] set down ... by Nechaev, possibly in collaboration with Tkachev, and certainly under his influence ... this conclusion is strengthened by a number of additional facts ...

“In his letter to Nechaev of June 1870 Bakunin sets forth the story of their relations and reminds him ... [of] ‘your programme and [plan] of actions ... You were too fanatically devoted to your plan and programme to subject them to criticism by anyone.’ Bakunin also writes in another context [of] ... ‘... your *Catechism* ...’ ... Nechaev certainly remembers. He not only knew as well as Bakunin ... who the author was of the *Catechism*; but he also recalled that Bakunin, far from being its author, was taken aback by its main ideas and rejected them as ‘an absurdity, an impossibility, a total negation of nature, man and society’. This is

... fairly conclusive evidence ... on the controversial question of the *Catechism's* authorship.”²

Ali prefers not to do the research required for a serious work and instead utilises an ideologically useful assertion. Before this research, it should be noted that authorship of the *Catechism* was indeed “disputed” (anarchists said Nechaev, those opposed anarchism said Bakunin) simply because Bakunin never wrote anything similar to that text before or after this period. It is also significant that Bakunin kept his activities with Nechayev completely separate from his other activities of the time, including those related to the International. It is these other activities which anarchists have embraced from Bakunin’s legacy, something Ali keeps from his readers.

Still, the best that can be said of Ali’s claims is that the notion that anarchism is somehow ideologically wedded to terrorism is long-standing in Marxist circles and evidence-free. As Charlotte M. Wilson pointed out in 1893:

“But is homicide the necessary antithesis of parliamentary agitation? Must the man who looks upon political action, as commonly understood, as useless and worse, necessarily endeavour to spread his views or improve society by outrages upon his fellow men?”

“The question is obviously absurd. If one particular way is barred, an infinite variety of other ways are open ... at this moment, we find as a field for our endeavours the vast force of the organised labour movement; a force which, rightly applied, could here and now bring about the economic side of the Social Revolution. Not the parliament, not the government, but the organised workmen of England—that minority of the producers who are already organised—*could*, if they would, and if they knew how, put an end to capitalist exploitation, landlord monopoly ... In face of such a state of things as this, has the propagandist of Socialism, who

² Confino, 33–5.

Democracy this represented confirmed Bakunin’s and Kropotkin’s warnings goes unmentioned.

Ali is right to note that “Lenin and Trotsky saw the early Comintern as an educational school for discussing on revolutionary tactics and strategy” (212) yet he makes no mention of Zinoviev’s frank admission at its Second Congress that “the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.”²⁵ Trotsky felt no “dilemma” over this lesson of the Bolshevik Revolution, advocating it throughout the 1920s and 1930s.²⁶ This explains the failure “to let the left Mensheviks serve as a ‘loyal opposition’ in the soviets” (336) which Ali mentions in passing but does not present any of the context needed to understand why this was not allowed by the ruling party.

The informed reader is again and again left to ponder if Ali really thinks this is what anarchism really is and, if so, where he got these bizarre notions from. Can you really be a leading Trotskyist for decades and apparently not read a book by an anarchist before writing on it? It would appear so – and, worse, be willing to write a book which exposes this fact to the world. The arrogance is clear – and speaks of a flaw deep within Leninism, namely that its adherents believe it is the truth and so can forgo such trivialities as facts or becoming acquainted with the ideas and movements being discussed. Victor Serge, in his self-serving memoirs, noted the following:

“Bolshevik theory is grounded in [a belief in] the possession of the truth. The Party is the repository of truth, and any form of thinking which differs from it is a dangerous and reactionary error. Here lies the spiritual source of its intolerance. The absolute conviction of its lofty mission assures it of a moral energy quite

²⁵ *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920* (New York: Pathfinder, 1991) I: 152.

²⁶ “The Bureaucracy in Exile: Trotsky’s limited Anti-Stalinism”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 3 No. 3 (Autumn 2023).

shows that such events – when they exist – are always involve small numbers within a movement. To concentrate on the High Treason Incident to the exclusion of the decades of work within the labour movement the vast majority of the movement did would be misleading in the extreme. Yet this is what Ali does with Bakunin, focusing exclusively on his short-lived infatuation with Nechaev and ignoring the ideas for which the anarchist movement remember him. Worse, Ali gets the details of the Nechaev events wrong as well, so his account is doubly misleading.

Ultimately, by suggesting anarchism focuses on “terrorism” and ignores the masses, Ali avoids all the actual debates between anarchism and Marxism. The real question is not action of individuals or action by the masses but how best is the latter organised and conducted as well as the related questions of how do conscious revolutionaries intervene in the class struggle and whether party power should be the goal of the revolution. None of this is discussed and instead we get twisted account whose conclusion – Marxism is right – is self-evident given how it is framed.

Strangely, as well as being inaccurate about anarchism he is also inaccurate about Marxism. For example, we are informed that on 4 August 1914 Karl Liebknecht “alone defied party discipline and voted against the war”. (136) In reality, while Liebknecht (and 13 other deputies) spoke out privately against voting for war loans within the party’s Reichstag faction, but in the parliamentary session of 4 August the faction voted *unanimously* in favour of approving the loans that enabled the government to finance the initial war effort. Ironically, Liebknecht did so because of the party discipline (i.e., unanimity) which he had earlier urged upon representatives of the party’s right wing. He finally voted against the war on 2 December 1914, ignoring the majority (why this does not make him an individualist, elitist and autocrat is never explained by Marxists such as Hal Draper who berate anarchists thusly for rejecting “democratic authority”). That the degeneration of German Social

will none of parliamentary elections, no sphere of action left but homicide? Such a question, we say again, is absurd, and we only raise and answer it here because certain Social Democrats have now and again considered it worth asking.”³

This need for anarchist participation in the labour movement is one of the many ideas which anarchists – including Kropotkin – take from Bakunin. Class conflict, Bakunin argued, was inherent in capitalism for there was, “between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, an irreconcilable antagonism which results inevitably from their respective stations in life.” He stressed that “war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is unavoidable” and for the worker to “become strong” he “must unite” with other workers and form “the union of all local and national workers’ associations into a world-wide association, *the great International Working-Men’s Association*.” Only “through practice and collective experience” and “the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle” will the worker come “to recognise his true enemies: the privileged classes, including the clergy, the bourgeoisie, and the nobility; and the State, which exists only to safeguard all the privileges of those classes.” There was “but a single path, that of *emancipation through practical action*” which “has only one meaning. It means workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means *trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*. This policy of struggle on the economic terrain is contrasted with electioneering, with Bakunin correctly predicting that when “common workers” are sent “to Legislative Assemblies” the result is that the “worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois

³ “Anarchism and Homicidal Outrage”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 4 No. 1 (Spring 2024), 67–8.

... For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them.”⁴

Needless to say, Ali does not mention that anarchists view Bakunin’s contribution to anarchism as being completely different to the one he suggests.⁵ Bakunin’s short infatuation with Nechaev is not considered remotely relevant (although his letter explaining his break with him is of interest). Rather, the ideas he expressed within the International is what counts – his arguments for a revolutionary labour movement (rather than party), the need for anarchists to organise to influence said movement (although few accept his propensity for secret groupings even as they understand its necessity at the time) and his critique of Marxist strategy (“political action”) and goals (the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat”).

Ali mentions none of this. Instead, he lumps together different concepts from different periods along with individuals with nothing in common to produce an account which is misleading. In short, the Stalinist technique of the amalgam. Thus readers are subjected to claims that “Activists were far more drawn to the direct-action philosophy preached by Bakunin and Nechaev; the principles of *The Revolutionary Catechism* were viewed by many radicals as much more attractive than the message of *The Communist Manifesto*.” (36) Yet “direct action” is not the same as “propaganda by the deed” which, moreover, was not initially equated to assassinations and all arose after Bakunin’s death in 1876. Direct action, a French syndicalist-derived term for strikes and other forms of unmediated class struggle, is not to be found in Nechaev’s writings but do find an echo in Bakunin’s arguments that the International should be focused on economic struggle and organisation and reject “political action” (i.e., electioneering).

⁴ “The Policy of the International”, *The Basic Bakunin* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1994), 97–8, 103, 108.

⁵ Look, for example, at what is included by Sam Dolgoff in *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980).

In reality, by 1907 an anarchist faction had emerged within the Japanese socialist movement around Kōtoku Shūsui who turned from Marxism to anarchism in prison and then sought to push the labour movement towards syndicalism. The 1907 Congress showed the strength of anarchism within the fledgling Socialist Party, prompting the government to ban it. The High Treason Incident of 1910 undermined these developments, when the police said they had discovered a plot to assassinate the Japanese Emperor which was then used as an excuse for mass repression, with hundreds of radicals arrested despite having no connection to it. While evidence against the defendants was mainly circumstantial, 26 anarchists were ultimately indicted, all of whom were convicted with 12 executed in January 1911, including Kōtoku, in spite of an international protest campaign. The movement continued in spite of this, with Ishikawa Sanshirō and others spreading syndicalist ideas leading to a general revival of the movement after 1918 with the rise of labour protest and organisation. As in other countries, anarchists and Bolsheviks worked together until 1922 when differences in union strategy and the reality of the Russian regime caused a split. By 1923, Ōsugi Sakae had become a leading militant in the movement and, like Bakunin, Kropotkin and Kōtoku, advocated syndicalism. Using the Great Kantō earthquake as a pretext, he alongside his partner and fellow anarchist, Itō Noe, were arrested and murdered. After Ōsugi’s death, the dominant tendency within Japanese anarchism became ‘pure’ anarchism championed by Hatta Shūzō with two main organisations in the late 1920s: the *Kokuren* anarchist federation and the *Zenkoku Jiren* federation of labour unions.²⁴

Undoubtedly the Japanese movement shows the counterproductive nature of conspiracies and terrorism, not least in giving the State an excuse to repress the wider movement. However, it also

²⁴ John Crump, *Hatta Shūzō and Pure Anarchism in Interwar Japan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993)

libertarians in spite of their significant – albeit minority – role in the events. He does find space to proclaim that the Italian Socialist Party “called a general strike” (200) which led to the factory occupations, when nothing of the kind happened. His account of Makhno is bizarre (116) and while he calls Kropotkin’s article on Anarchism in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* a “description of an anarchist utopia” which “was elegant, couched in polite language” this is simply a preamble to suggesting that it was “far from the terrorist conspiracies and violent prose of Bakunin and Nechaev as well as the actions of the anarchists on horseback, Durruti and Makhno” (37–8) It is difficult to know what is meant by this. Bakunin did not take part in any “terrorist conspiracies” (as Ali surely knows). Makhno did fight on horseback against the White and Red counter-revolution, but Durruti used motorised transport. However, the term used does have a meaning: “a military leader who presents himself as the saviour of the country during a period of crisis and either assumes or threatens to assume dictatorial powers.” The irony of someone writing a book seeking to rehabilitate someone who did create a dictatorial regime by claiming, with no evidence, that an anarchist fighting that regime in the name of free soviets and another fighting fascism were would-be dictators would be funny if it were not so misleading and ultimately shameful.

Then there is the assertion that “Anarchism never emerged in Japan”. (127) Presumably this was the product of George Woodcock’s *Anarchism* only mentioning in passing that the syndicalist International Workers Association had a small federation in Japan during the 1920s but consulting *Wikipedia* or the more recent and (much) larger *Demanding the Impossible* by Peter Marshall would have allowed this confidently uttered error to be avoided.²³

²³ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Harper Perennial: 2008), 524–5.

Ali doubles-down, proclaiming in all seriousness that “assassinations” were “considered by young activists of the period to be far more glamorous and effective than building a radical political party.” (36) Does Ali *really* believe this? If so, how can a leading Trotskyist be so ignorant of history? Indeed, for Ali, it is a case that for “almost half a century prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917, the dominant tendency on the radical left in Europe and elsewhere was anarchism than Marxism or socialism.” (36) In reality, Kropotkin and other anarchists bemoaned the rise of social democracy and the replacement of “the direct struggle against capital” (to use Kropotkin’s term) with vote chasing. Their alternative, like that of Bakunin in the (First) International, was encouraging and organising class struggle on the economic terrain which the aim of producing an expropriatory general strike, *not* assassination.

Ali himself recounts the rise of social-democracy and the Second International so where could such bizarre assertions come from? Ali’s claim may simply be a badly remembered paraphrase of Stalinist Eric Hobsbawm’s comments from 1969 that “in 1905–1914 the marxist left had in most countries been on the fringes of the revolutionary movement, the main body of marxists had been identified with a *de facto* non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and the mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical marxism.”⁶ Hobsbawm’s comments are more accurate for *The Revolutionary Catechism* was rarely reprinted or discussed in libertarian circles at this or, indeed, at any time. An exception was its appearance in Chicago’s *The Alarm* in December 1885 and January 1886 (attributed “to Bakunin alone, [when] most modern scholars regard Nechaev as the principal and perhaps sole author”⁷) and

⁶ *Revolutionaries* (London: Abacus, 1999), 72.

⁷ Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 481. Also see Paul Avrich, “Bakunin and Nechaev” “Bakunin and Nechaev”, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 40.

that did not stop them organising unions as Bakunin had actually advocated – nor Marxists claiming them for their own ideology.⁸

As Kropotkin noted, syndicalism “reverts to the old principles of the International: Direct Action, direct struggle of Labour against Capital; and the workers recognising that it is *they* who have to free themselves – not the Parliaments to free them.”⁹ Unsurprisingly, syndicalists “viewed themselves as the descendants of the federalist wing of the First International, personified above else by Mikhail Bakunin.”¹⁰ Given the core place it takes in revolutionary anarchism (and, correspondingly, in both Bakunin’s and Kropotkin’s ideas), it shows his ignorance that syndicalism warrants a single – insulting, inaccurate and baseless – sentence, being “a blind worship of existing class consciousness and an inability to think ahead.” (84) The best that can be said is that Ali may have confused “economicism” (a tendency in early Russian Marxism) with syndicalism.

Ali mentions Bakunin’s “scathing critiques” (103) of Marx and his “ferocious debates with Marx” (37) but fails to discuss what they were. The reader is provided only with *The Catechism of the Revolutionary*, so presumably they are expected to draw the conclusion that these were to do with the use of terrorism. In reality, this was not the case as Bakunin does not mention it in his only book, *Statism and Anarchy*, which was written in Russian for he aimed to influence the Populist movement. Instead, argued he that the working classes “must enter the International *en masse*, form factory, artisan, and agrarian sections, and unite them into local federations” for “the sake of its own liberation” as this was “the

⁸ “Anarchy in the USA: The International Working People’s Association”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 3 No. 2 (Summer 2023)

⁹ *Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014), 407.

¹⁰ Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves’: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), xiii-xiv.

union of all trades, and of a struggle against capital with the aid of international support”. The “workers of all nations were called upon to form their own organizations for a direct struggle against capitalism; to work out the means of socializing the production of wealth and its consumption; and, when they should be ready to do so, to take possession of the necessaries for production, and to control production”.²¹ Ali ignores all this in both Kropotkin’s and Bakunin’s writings (although, to be fair, he only implies that he has bothered to read Kropotkin – even if it is only his “wonderful” *Memoirs* and his article on “Anarchism” for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which, ironically, would be sufficient to raise serious concerns over his account if his readers bothered to consult them)

Of course, by the time this meeting took place Lenin’s party was *above* the masses, ruling them and repressing them when they resisted – including breaking strikes via lockouts and shooting strikers. This confirmation of Bakunin’s critique of Marx is ignored but Lenin is quoted telling Kropotkin that he was “against bureaucratisation” and that “we must pull up bureaucracy by its roots if it still nestles in our new system”. (56) This is typical Leninist ritualism – admitting that bureaucracy existed in the Bolshevik State, quoting Lenin’s opposition to it and completely ignoring the Bolshevik policies which created it. Saying that bureaucracy must be destroyed is all fine and well, but it was never done – another promise of Lenin’s which joined those of *The State and Revolution* in the dustbin of history.²²

Ali does not limit himself to Bakunin and Kropotkin. “Militant anarchism”, we are informed, “hung on in Russia and Spain” (115) but is ignored elsewhere in the world. For example, his account of Italy (199–201) during the *Biennio Rosso* fails to mention the

²¹ *Memoirs*, 287, 274, 284, 261, 252, 359.

²² “*The State and Revolution: Theory and Practice*”, *Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017).

“the anarchists ... since the foundation of the International Working Men’s Association in 1864–1866 ... have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organizations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.”¹⁸

Ali, of course, fails to mention this core aspect of Kropotkin’s ideas (and of revolutionary anarchism) but we are informed that Lenin “admired” Kropotkin’s *Great French Revolution*, considering it “an indispensable classic”. (56) No indication why is given. This is unsurprising: “Lenin ... praised his work on the French Revolution, *The Great French Revolution*. ‘He well understood and demonstrated the role of the people in that bourgeois revolution,’ he said.”¹⁹ Acknowledging this would have meant raising awkward questions about Lenin lecturing Kropotkin on what he had long argued as regards the importance of “the masses”.

No attempt is made to explain Kropotkin’s radically different position on Nechaev and Bakunin if, as Ali claims, these two shared the same ideas. While Kropotkin had nothing positive to say about Nechaev (according to one of his close comrades, for Kropotkin “the word ‘Nechaevism’ was always a strong rebuke”²⁰), he repeatedly praised Bakunin and his ideas. In his “wonderful” *Memoirs* he mentions “the mighty voice of Bakunin” who had expressed the “theoretical aspects of anarchism” while Nechaev is dismissed for having “resorted to the ways of old conspirators, without recoiling even before deceit when he wanted to force his associates to follow his lead. Such methods could have no success in Russia ... The circle of self-education of which I am speaking was constituted in opposition to the methods of Necháieff.” Kropotkin championed the ideas of the Bakuninist-wing of the International, “a labour movement and not as a political party” based on the “idea of an international

ways and means of organising a popular force.” He contrasted this with the Marxist policy of forming a political party and standing in elections, correctly predicting that this was “not dangerous” but rather “highly useful to the German state as a lightning-rod, or a safety-valve.” Unlike the “political and social theory” of the anarchists, which “leads them directly and inexorably to a complete break with all governments and all forms of bourgeois politics, leaving no alternative but social revolution,” Marxism “inexorably enmeshes and entangles its adherents, under the pretext of political tactics, in endless accommodation with governments and the various bourgeois political parties – that is, it thrusts them directly into reaction.” If Marxists did seize power, they would “concentrat[e] in their own hands all ... production ... under the direct command of state engineers, who will form a new privileged scientific and political class.” It would be “the highly despotic government of the masses by a new and very small aristocracy of real or pretended scholars. The people are not learned, so they will be liberated from the cares of government and included in entirety in the governed herd.” The alternative was “a voluntary alliance of agricultural and factory worker associations, communes, provinces, and nations” organised “from below upward, by the people themselves” based “emancipated labour and collective property.”¹¹

By refusing to mention Bakunin’s critique of Marxism, Ali foregoes having to evaluate them let alone placing his readers in the position of concluding that Bakunin was proven right. Social Democracy became as reformist as he feared while the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat” became a dictatorship *over* the proletariat (and peasantry). As such, the real dilemma is whether to acknowledge this and reevaluate Marxism and anarchism or to ignore the facts in favour of ideology. For most people, this would not be a dilemma at all but then most people are not Trotskyists.

¹⁸ *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 165.

¹⁹ Alfred Rosmer, *Lenin’s Moscow* (London: Pluto Press, 1971), 100.

²⁰ Quoted by Avrich, “Bakunin and Nechaev”, 51.

¹¹ Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 51, 32, 193, 179–80, 181, 178–9, 33, 22.

Bakunin's arguments in *Statism and Anarchy* were, it must be stressed, reflective of the ideas he raised in the International which confirms that the *Catechism* was not his work. Other examples include Bakunin not preaching "Jesuitical discipline" (103) – although seeing a supporter of democratic centralism consider that as a bad thing is ironic. Ali suggests that Bakunin, as regards blackmail, "on this particular issue, [Nechaev] had Bakunin's support" (46) but it is impossible to determine what is meant by this. Presumably – and this is all I can think of – this refers to Nechaev's threatening the publisher who gave Bakunin an advance to translate Marx's *Capital* and the "subsequent failure to do so. It was 'too boring', he insisted, while refusing to return the advance he had received for the translation" (this Ali describes as a "debate"!). (37) Ali fails to note that the publisher later wrote to Marx saying that he thought Bakunin was unaware of the threatening letter, something Marx decided to not to share when Bakunin was being expelled from the International in part because of Nechaev's letter. Given that the *Catechism* proclaims the necessity of being amoral against enemies, the irony meter must be in danger of shattering.

Inaccuracies abound. Ali's account of the (First) International in Italy (102) fails to mention Bakunin's crucial role in Italy in undermining the influence of Mazzini. Instead, we get "Bakunin's supporters rapidly gained control of sections in Italy and Spain" (103) as if they had not taken a leading role in forming these sections in the first place. Likewise, he talks of Bakunin trying "a similar takeover in France and Switzerland" (103) which is a strange way of saying that Bakunin was trying to convince others of his ideas, something which was allowed in the International. Marx and Engels, after all, also wrote letters to their supporters to influence how the International developed – they also actually conspired with them to pack the 1871 London Conference and 1872 Hague Congress.

More could be said but suffice to say, rather than bother to read Bakunin, Ali appears to have taken Zola's *Germinal* as fact rather

"Revolution, above all, is a popular movement ... an edifice founded on centuries of history cannot be destroyed with a few kilos of explosives ... For the revolution not to be conjured away, it is necessary that the anarchist and communist idea should penetrate the masses ... anarchists have the right to ... make *their* voice heard, and distribute by the thousand their papers, pamphlets, manifestos everywhere where the working masses are ... an imposing demonstration of the unity which is being forged between workers, with partial rebellions here and there against the exploiters ... will make them *reflect* and will help to spread the anarchist idea a hundred times more than all our spoken and written propaganda. It will force new elements to become anarchists."¹⁶

One of Kropotkin's biographers summarised his position as being in favour of "mass resistance to the oppression of the state, collective action against tyranny, and the spontaneous violence of the people during a revolution. Masses, not individuals, make the social revolution."¹⁷ As such, to regurgitate Lenin's alleged words against Kropotkin without seeking to confirm their accuracy is shamefully poor scholarship. Likewise, Ali seems unaware that Kropotkin – like Bakunin – considered himself a socialist and argued that anarchism was genuine socialism while Marxism aimed at nothing more than state-capitalism. Soviet Russia proved this was correct.

Ironically, Ali ends this chapter with the admission that "Kropotkin had not agreed with the terrorist wing of anarchism" (87) which should make the discerning reader ponder why Ali had bothered writing about him. More, it should raise the question of what strategy Kropotkin did agree with and this can be found in the article on Anarchism Ali quotes:

¹⁶ Peter Kropotkin, "Agreement", *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Vol. 2. No. 3 (Winter 2022), 42–45.

¹⁷ Martin A. Miller, *Kropotkin* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 174–5.

tion] count on success.”¹³ As he recounted in his “wonderful” *Memoirs* in a passage Ali seems to have forgotten, the “necessity” of working within the masses drove his decision to remain in exile in 1876:

“when the Russian movement became a conspiracy and an armed struggle against the representative of autocracy, all thought of a popular movement was necessarily abandoned; while my own inclinations drew me more and more intensely toward casting in my lot with the laboring and toiling masses. To bring to them such conceptions as would aid them to direct their efforts to the best advantage of all the workers; to deepen and to widen the ideals and principles which will underlie the coming social revolution; to develop these ideals and principles before the workers, not as an order coming from their leaders, but as a result of their own reason; and so to awaken their own initiative, now that they were called upon to appear in the historical arena as the builders of a new, equitable mode of organization of society, — this seemed to me as necessary for the development of mankind as anything I could accomplish in Russia at that time.”¹⁴

In exile, Kropotkin continued to champion these ideas — which he repeatedly and correctly linked to the Bakunin and the Federalist-wing of the International — until his death. Even during the (short) period of support for “propaganda of the deed” within some anarchist circles, Kropotkin always stressed the need for anarchists to be involved in mass workers organisation and struggle.¹⁵ As he summarised in 1891:

¹³ “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 95, 85–6.

¹⁴ *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Montreal/New York: Black Rose Books, 1989), 353–4.

¹⁵ “The London Congress of 1881”, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* 87 (Summer 2023); Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

than fiction, presumably thinking its account of the politics of the period is as accurate as its accounts of mining.

After distorting Bakunin’s ideas, Ali moves onto Kropotkin whom, we are told, “became close to the Populists, was imprisoned and went into exile, where he was greatly influenced by Bakunin’s ferocious debates with Marx”. (37) Yet if we consult “his wonderful *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*” (36) we would find that Kropotkin became an anarchist while visiting Western Europe in 1872, returned to Russia and raised anarchist ideas within the Populists. So by the time he had escaped from prison and went into exile in 1876, he had been championing Bakunin’s ideas for a number of years. It makes you wonder whether Ali bothered to actually read the book.

Kropotkin was “much less attracted to the violent side of anarchism” (37) but what that involves is left to the reader’s imagination. What of “the violent side” of Marxism? The Cheka — the Bolshevik secret police — shot more people in a single day than anarchists assassinated in total but this goes unmentioned and apparently matters little in terms of determining an ideology’s “violent side”. This mirrors the lack of concern of the bourgeois for the victims of the State violence the anarchist violence was in response to. Kropotkin gives a better account than Ali of the relationship between anarchism and terrorism:

“anarchists groups ... refrained from any participation in parliamentary politics, and always kept in close contact with the labour organizations. However, in the second half of the ’eighties and the early ’nineties of the nineteenth century, when the influence of the anarchists began to be felt in strikes, in the 1st of May demonstrations, where they promoted the idea of a general strike for an eight hours’ day ... violent prosecutions were directed against them ... Against these prosecutions the anarchists retaliated by acts of violence which in their turn were followed by more executions from above, and new acts of revenge from below. This created in the general public the impression that violence is the substance of anar-

chism, a view repudiated by its supporters, who hold that in reality violence is resorted to by all parties in proportion as their open action is obstructed by repression, and exceptional laws render them outlaws.”¹²

The Russian Populists embraced terrorism as did some anarchists – indeed, the assassination of the Tsar in 1881 by Populists inspired the short-lived “dynamite-bluster” of the early 1880s in certain anarchist circles (helped along by the activity of police agents). That cannot be denied but that is marginal to anarchism, not its core as Ali seeks to implant in his reader’s heads. Ultimately you need not be a Marxist to recognise the futility of terrorism and conspiracies – anarchists have made the points Ali makes against both and if he knew our tradition better he would have admitted that.

This is not to deny that a few anarchists have advocated terrorism and even fewer have practiced it (usually in revenge at worse violence by the State, something which usually goes unmentioned). The same can be said of almost every political movements – including Marxism (Ali will undoubtedly recall the Red Brigades, Red Army Faction and other “Urban Guerrillas” of the 1970s and may be aware of the bank “expropriations” – armed robberies – used to fund the Bolshevik party under the Tsar, one of which killed forty people). Suffice to say, no anarchist would be so intellectually dishonest or wilfully ignorant to write a book which contrasted the anarchist tactic of building militant unions to the Marxist one of organising Urban Guerilla groups.

Kropotkin is brought into Ali’s account presumably so he can draw upon an account by Lenin’s personal secretary, Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, of a meeting between Lenin and Kropotkin. Some of this account appears reflective of Kropotkin’s stated views, others not. The most obvious example of the latter is this passage which sounds like the words of a Marxist devotee:

¹² *Direct Struggle Against Capital*, 171.

“I was told that Vladimir Ilyich wrote an excellent book about the State which I have not read, in which he puts forward a prognosis that the State would in the end wither away ... By this single shaft of light thrown boldly on the teaching of Marx, Vladimir Ilyich has earned the deepest respect.” (56)

How Kropotkin could appreciate “this single shaft of light” in a book he had “not read” is not explained. Given how at odds these few words are from everything else Kropotkin wrote or said at this time as well as before and after, it is almost certain that these words were not uttered. That Ali repeats them shows how little he knows about Kropotkin and his ideas – and how little he is concerned about exposing that ignorance to his readers.

This exchange is used to illustrate that “the decisive factor that helped [Lenin] to solve the dilemma of choosing between anarchism and socialism ... was the necessity of ‘a mass struggle’” (57) Lenin is quoted lecturing Kropotkin that “[w]e do not need individual terrorist attempts and the anarchists should have understood long ago. Only with the masses, through the masses.” (57) We can only imagine the thoughts going through Kropotkin’s head when he heard that for, as anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of his ideas would know, he had been expounding this “necessity” since Lenin was in nappies.

After he returned to Russia as an anarchist in 1872, Kropotkin urged the Populists “to unite the most active individuals into one general organisation” and that they “must not stand outside the people but among them, must serve not as a champion of some alien opinions worked out in isolation, but only as a more distinct, more complete expression of the demands of the people themselves.” This was because radical activity had to be made “among the peasantry and urban workers” as “[o]nly then can [insurrec-