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Appeal to the Slavs

Michail Bakunin

1848

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*“The Appeal to the Slavs” is a statement of Bakunin’s opinions as they emerged from the shock and disappointment of the failure of the 1848 revolution. First, he believed the bourgeoisie had revealed itself as a specifically counter-revolutionary force, and that the future hopes of revolution lay with the working class. Secondly, he believed that an essential condition of the revolution was the break-up of the Austrian Empire, and the establishment in Central and Eastern Europe of a federation of free Slav republics. Thirdly, he believed that the peasantry, and in particular the Russian peasantry, would prove a decisive force in bringing about the final and successful revolution. Referring to Bakunin’s call for the dissolution of the Habsburg and Russian Empires, E. H. Carr added: “For this, if for no other reason, the **Appeal to the Slavs** is a landmark in European history. It was the first occasion on which, exactly seventy years before November 1918, the destruction of the Austrian Empire and the*

building of new Slav states on its ruins was publicly advocated.”

Arrested and jailed in Austria for his participation in the unsuccessful revolution of March 1848, Bakunin was eventually handed over to the Russian authorities. In the Peter and Paul fortress that had once held Dostoyevsky, among others, Bakunin was invited, as a Russian nobleman, to write a confession for the Tsar, Nicholas I, not as a criminal to his judge but as a son to his spiritual father. The paragraphs here included already prefigure Bakunin’s later recommendations for anarchist strategy.

This work foreshadows many of his later anarchist ideas on the necessity for revolution, on the peasants as a revolutionary force, on the destruction of the bourgeois social order, on antiparlamentarianism and federalism. However, what he wrote when “confessing” to the Tsar, especially the plans for dictatorship, may be attributed partly to his being still under the influence of Blanquist ideas, partly to his seeking formulations that might be comprehensible and even possibly impressive to the Tsar. According to Venturi: “When Bakunin’s temporary adherence ... to the dictatorship of the Blanqui type, came to an end ... [he] found himself an anarchist.”

* * *

Brothers! This is the hour of decision. It is for you to take a stand, openly either for the old world, in ruins, which you would prop up for yet another little while, or for the new world whose radiance has reached you and which belongs to the generations and centuries to come. It is up to you, too, to determine whether the future is to be in your hands or, if you want,

once more to sink into impotence, into the night of hopes abandoned, into the inferno of slavery. On the choice you will make hangs the fate of other peoples who long for emancipation. Your decision will inspire them to advance toward their goal with quickened steps, and without drawbacks, or this goal — which will never disappear — will again retreat into a shadowy distance.

The eyes of all are fixed upon you with breathless anxiety. What you decide will determine the realization of the hopes and destinies of the world — to arrive soon or to drift away to a remote and uncertain future. It is to be your welfare or your loss, the blessings of the peoples upon you or their condemnation of you; make your choice!

The world is split into two camps; on one side the revolution, on the other the counterrevolution. And the clear alternatives are before you. Each of us must choose his camp, you as well as ourselves. There is no middle road. Those who point to a middle road and recommend it to you are either self-deceived or deceivers.

They are self-deceived if they place their credence in this lie that we can glide smoothly and surely along toward our goal if we grant some little accommodations to each of the great antagonists in the struggle, so as to appease both of them and thereby avert the explosion of the conflict which is both inevitable and necessary.

They are deceivers if they seek to persuade you that, in accordance with the tactics of diplomacy, you should remain neutral for a time, and then choose the stronger side, making sure of your personal advantage with the help of those you have assisted.

Brothers, do not put your trust in the art of diplomacy. It is this which has brought about the ruin of Poland. The same fate will be reserved for you. What does diplomatic chicanery tell you? That you can make use of it in order to overcome your enemies. But do you not see that, rather than being able to make use of

this means, you are yourselves but a tool in the hands of the diplomats, a tool they use to crush their own enemies? Once they have got rid of them they will turn upon you, now that you stand weak and alone, and will thrust your own heads under the yoke. Do you not see that there it is, the shameful tactic, the ruse employed by the counterrevolution? Do you not know the old maxim of all oppressors: *Divide and rule*?

What could you expect from diplomacy, anyway? Can it deny its origin, which is none other than despotism? Can it have other interests to fight for than those to which it owes its origin? Can it work for the creation of a new world, which will be its condemnation and its death? Never. Look it plainly in the face; before this visage, the prototype of evil, of duplicity, of treason, you will be seized with the most profound disgust.

You will reject it, for truth is never born of a lie. Nothing truly great has ever been accomplished by eunuchs, and freedom can only be won by freedom.

You have good reason for cursing the old German politics, which deserved your rightful hatred, for it never desired anything but your ruin. It held you shackled for centuries and, even before Frankfurt, responded with irony to your well-justified hopes and your appeals ... and rejoiced, in Vienna, at the dissolution of the Prague Congress. But do not be deceived and listen carefully. *This old politics which we condemn, which we curse as you do, against which we vow terrible vengeance, this politics will never be part of the future German people. It is not the German revolution, not a part of German democracy.* It is merely the politics of the old state chancellorships, of the rights of monarchs, of aristocrats and privileged persons of all kinds. It is the politics of the camarillas and the generals directed by them as though they were war machines. It is the politics whose fall we are preparing — all of us who are animated by the spirit of youth and of the future, all those who will joyfully grasp the hands of the democrats of all countries, so that we may

and make a complete transformation of our environment, for it corrupts our instincts and our will by constricting our hearts and our minds. The social question thus appears to be first and foremost the question of the complete overturn of society.

This is what we have done and what, jointly with the democrats of all countries, we have demanded: **Liberty, Equality, Fraternity of Nations**, within which the Slav peoples, free like these and in fraternal contact with all, but united in a closer alliance among themselves, may soon be transformed into a vast democratic State.

Two great questions have moved to the forefront, as though arising spontaneously, from the very first days of the spring! The social question, on the one hand, and the question of independence of all the nations, the emancipation of the peoples, on the other hand, signifying emancipation within and outside. These were not just some few individuals, nor was it a party. It was the admirable instinct of the masses, which had raised these two questions above all the others and demanded their prompt solution. Everybody had come to the realization that liberty was merely a lie where the great majority of the population is reduced to a miserable existence, where, deprived of education, of leisure, and of bread, it is fated to serve as an underprop for the powerful and the rich. The social revolution, therefore, appears as a natural, necessary corollary of the political revolution. It has likewise been felt that, so long as there may be a single persecuted nation in Europe, the decisive and complete triumph of democracy will not be possible anywhere. The oppression of one is the oppression of all, and we cannot violate the liberty of one being without violating the freedom of all of us. The social question, a very difficult question, bristling with dangers and heavy with portents of storms, cannot be resolved either by a preconceived theory or by any isolated system. Its solution calls for goodwill and unanimous cooperation. It calls for the faith of all the people in the right of all to equal liberty. We need to transform the material and moral conditions of our present-day existence, to overturn, from top to bottom, this decrepit social world which has grown impotent and sterile and incapable of containing or supporting so great a mass of liberty. We must, first, purify our atmosphere

together, closely united, fight for the common good, for the future of all peoples.

All the reactionaries work united for an evil cause; should we not do likewise for our good cause? When reaction conspires throughout Europe, when it works without stint, with the help of an organization slowly and carefully prepared, stretching all over the land, the revolution should create for itself a power capable of fighting it.

It is a sacred duty for all of us, soldiers of the revolution, democrats of all countries, to unite our forces, to come to an understanding and to organize.

At the first sign of life of the revolution, as you know, there was a long outburst of hatred against the old politics of the oppressors, a long cry of sympathy and of love for all oppressed nationalities.

The peoples that had so long been driven by the chains of diplomacy finally became aware of their shameful condition. They realized that the welfare of nations could not be assured so long as there still existed, anywhere in Europe, a single people bowed under the yoke; that the liberty of peoples, in order to be won anywhere, had to be won everywhere. And, for the first time, the peoples demanded in one united voice a liberty that was true and complete, liberty without reservations, without exceptions, without limitations.

Away with the oppressors! was the universal cry. Liberty for the oppressed, for the Poles, the Italians, for all! No more wars of conquest, nothing but the last supreme war, the war of the revolution for the emancipation of all the peoples! Away with the narrow frontiers forcibly imposed by the congress of despots, in accordance with the so-called historic, geographic, commercial, strategic necessities! There should be no other frontiers but those which respond simultaneously to nature and to justice, in, accordance with the spirit of democracy — frontiers which the peoples themselves in their sovereign will shall trace, founded upon their national sympathies. Such was the unanimous cry of the peoples.

*Brothers! did you hear it then, that sublime cry? Right there in Vienna, do you remember? You heard it and understood it on that day when, still fighting with the others for the welfare of all, you erected, in the midst of the German barricades, that great Slav barricade over which floated your national banner, with the device: **To our future Liberty!***

How great, how beautiful was that movement, which swept over all of Europe and made it tremble! Animated by the revolutionary spirit, Italians, Poles, Slavs, Germans, Magyars, Walachians from Austria and Walachians from Turkey — all those who suffered under the yoke of foreign powers — arose, thrilled with joy and hope. The most audacious dreams were to be fulfilled. The peoples saw the boulder which for centuries had covered their independence finally rolling away into the distance, as though pushed by an invisible hand. The enchanted seal was broken, and the dragon that had been standing guard over the melancholy torpor of so many living dead peoples lay mortally wounded, writhing in its death throes. The old politics of the kings had vanished; a new one, the politics of the peoples, was coming into life.

The Revolution, in its omnipotence, declared the dissolution of the States of the despots; the dissolution of the Prussian Empire, which abandoned one of the fragments of Poland; the dissolution of the Empire of Austria, that monster composed of various nations which had been all chained together by ruse, by crime: the dissolution of the Turkish Empire, within which seven million Osmanlis had packed and trampled upon a population of twelve million Slavs, Walachians and Greeks; and finally, the dissolution of the last stronghold of despotism, the last private domain of Machiavellism and of diplomacy, struck at its very heart, the Russian Empire, so that the three great nations so long enslaved within its borders, Great Russia, Little Russia, and Poland, liberated at last and rendered to themselves, might stretch their free hands to all their brothers of the Slav race.

Thus, dissolution, overturn, and regeneration in the entire North and East of Europe, a free Italy, and as the last result. the Universal Federation of European Republics.

We then met in Prague, like brothers who, after a long separation. came together to say to each other that their paths would never again lead them apart. Strongly animated by the common bonds of history and of blood, we vowed never to let our destinies divide us. We forswore the politics of the despots whose victims we had been for so long and ourselves established our right to absolute independence. We promised ourselves that this independence would be shared by all the Slav peoples. We recognized Bohemia and Moravia as nations. We rejected the absurd claims of the Frankfurt [parliament], which has now become the laughing-stock of Europe, which had wanted to make Germans of us all, while we stretched our fraternal hands out to the German people, to democratic Germany. In the name of the Slavs who lived in Hungary, we offered a fraternal alliance to the Magyars, those fiery enemies of our race, who with a total population of some four million wanted to enslave eight million Slavs. Nor did we forget, in our pact for liberation, those of our brothers who are groaning under Turkish domination. We solemnly condemned that criminal politics which thrice tore Poland asunder and now wants once more to rend its sad remainder. We expressed an ardent wish soon to see the resurrection of that noble and saintly martyred people as a sign of deliverance of all of us. Finally, we made a strong appeal to that great Russian people which, alone of all the Slavs, has been able to preserve its national existence. We entreated the Russians to give serious thought to what they know only too well — that their nationality and their greatness mean nothing so long as they themselves are not free, so long as they permit their power to be used as a scourge against unhappy Poland and as a perpetual threat to European civilization.