

# A Few Words to My Young Brothers in Russia

Mikhail Bakunin

1869

You rise up again. So, they have not succeeded in burying you. That spirit, destructive of the State, that animates you is thus not the ephemeral product of a youthful enthusiasm, but the expression of a vital need and a real passion. It comes from the very depths of the life of the people.

If your revolutionary tendencies were only an external, passing sickness, the simple itching of a vanity of young people, the heroic means that our paternal government has employed to heal you would have long since been crowned with success. Long since, renouncing the dangerous obsession with thinking, giving up all that is human in man, you would have become, among that mob of official and titled brutes, who pillage the people and devour the nation, new brutes. You would have earned the name of patriots of the Empire of all the Russias.

The literate, *déclassé* youth of Russie, as young as they are, have already weathered many storms. In our times, under the naively despotic regime of the Emperor Nicolas, it would have taken twenty years or more to pass through half of the trials that you have undergone during these last eight or nine years.

After the fires of 1861, during and after the Polish insurrection and especially since the act accomplished by [Vladimir] Karakosoff, this good Emperor Alexander has not spared his efforts to complete your political education. Encouraged, excited by all our patriotic literature, by the Slavophiles and the Pan-slavists as well as by the partisans of the bourgeois civilization of the West, by our planters at the same time as by our liberals, he has amply used against you all the means bequeathed to him by the Tartars, which, later, have been so well perfected by the bureaucratic science of the Germans: staff, canes, tortures, death on the gallows and death by hunger, imprisonment for life, exile en masse and forced labor, he has employed them all to measure your stubborn strength, your will, your faith in the cause of the people.

Nothing has shaken you, you have persisted, so you are strong. Many of our comrades have perished. But for each victim interred, ten new combatants rise from the earth... So, it is near, the end of this infamous Empire of all the Russias.

Where do you get your strength and your faith? A faith without God, a strength without hope and without personal aim? Where do you find the power to knowingly condemn your whole existence to the void and to face torture and death without vanity and without phrases? Where is the source of that pitiless thought of destruction and that coldly passionate resolution before which the mind is appalled and the blood is frozen in the veins of our adversaries? Our literature,

official and unofficial, which claims to explain the thought of the Russian people, stops, entirely disconcerted before you. It understands nothing more.

If you were faithful servants of the Emperor and the State, spies, executioners, thieves (individual or publics with or without breaking and entering), right-minded scamps, servile liberals, slaughterers of peasants or Poles, if you had if you had caused the deaths of thousands or tens of thousands of human beings, that dear literature would have understood and amnestied you, and if only you had the mean and will to demonstrate your gratitude to the editors of the newspapers, they would have declared you the saviors of the Empire, as they have for Mourawieff the Hangman. All of that is, in the Byzantine-Tartar and Germano-bureaucratic Civilization of our State, a customary thing; it is not opposed to the patriotism, official or unofficial, of the Empire of all the Russias.

If you were a model youth, doctrinaire or sentimental; if you were amused to dream of science and art, of liberty and humanity in theory, in your conversations or your books, it would still amnesty you; for the worthy veterans of that degraded literature have also had their youth. They have also dreamed, when they were still students. Enthusiasts for fine theories, they have also sworn to devote their lives to the cult of the ideal, to noble exploits, to the service of liberty and humanity. Then came experience, an experience acquired in the most abject world that one could imagine, and under the influence of that world, they have become what they are, *canailles*. But they remember with tenderness the dreams of their youth, and they would have pardoned you for your, that much more willingly as they are convinced that with the same experience and under the influence of the same reality, you would doubtless not be slow to become still villainous than themselves.

What they will never forgive you for, is that you want to be neither thieves nor dreamers. You despise this odious world whose reality oppresses you, as much as the ideal world which has until now served as a refuge for pure souls, against the infamies of reality. That is what frightens our patriotic literature. It neither knows what you want, nor where you will go.

In their consternation, the gentlemen editors of the newspapers of Saint Petersburg and Moscow have found a way, they have unanimously decided that the present movement of the Russian youth has its source in the Polish intrigues. One could imagine nothing more cowardly, nor more stupid!

Is it not a shameful and cruel cowardice to arouse the executioner against the victim that he tortures! And on the other side, one must be truly stupid not to see the abyss that separates the program of the great majority of the Polish patriots from that of our youth, representatives of the revolutionary, socialist idea of the Russian people.

Between the majority of the Polish patriots and us, there is only a feeling and a goal: It is the hatred of the Empire of all the Russias, and the firm will to destroy it by all means and as quickly as possible. This is the single point where we are in agreement. One more step forward, and the abyss opens between us: We want the definitive abolition of everything that makes up the State, as much is Russia as outside of Russia; and the Poles only work for the reestablishment of their historic State.

The dream of the Poles, we think, is not a good one. For each State, however liberal and democratic in its form, crushes the masses of the working people, for the profit of a minority that does not work. The Poles dream of the impossible, because in the future the States will not be rebuilt, they will fall, wiped out by the emancipation of these masses; unknowingly and unwittingly no doubt, they dream thus of a new slavery for their people; and if they were able to realize this

dream, not by the strength of the people, who would doubtless not offer it, but with the help foreign bayonets, they would become as much our enemies as they would be the oppressors of their own people.

So we would combat them in the name of the social revolution and the liberty of everyone. But until then we are their friends and we should aid them, because their cause, that of the destruction of the Empire of all the Russias, is also our cause.

For the peoples, Russian and non-Russian, imprisoned today in the Empire of all the Russias, there is no enemy more dangerous, more mortal than that Empire itself.

The Polish patriots have never understood it, and that is why their influence on the revolutionary movement in Russia has always remained non-existent. It's a shame, because there would be an obvious benefit for them and for us to really deserve the slander of the Russian press and we should agree, if only for the first act of the Slavic tragedy that looms; that would not prevent us from separating and even battling one another if necessary in the next three acts, only to reconcile in the fifth.

No, it is not through the influence of the Polish intrigues, it is a force far more gigantic that lifts and shakes the Russian youth: it is the awakening of the life of the people.

The present reign offers a remarkable resemblance to the reign of Czar Alexis, father of Peter the Great, who, despite his historic good-heartedness, pillaged and stunned the people, for the greater glory of the State and the profit of the nobiliary and bureaucratic kind, just as today the soi-disant emancipator of the peasants has done, that excellent emperor Alexander II.

Then, as today, the unfortunate people, crushed, tortured, reduced to the most extreme misery and decimated by hunger, abandoned their villages and took refuge in the forests. Today, as then, this whole immense population finally perceiving the imperial swindle, stirs, no longer expecting its emancipation except from below, by the way indicated to it, just two centuries ago, by its hero Stenka Razin<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> To explain this gigantic figure of Stenka-Razin and the secret of his immense popularity, we must first give an idea of the situation in which the Russian people found themselves in the seventeenth century. To understand that situation, you must know that, until the end of the sixteenth century, that people had been free and that it was only in the last decade of this century that the peasants, who had preserved their liberty of movement until that time, found themselves bound to the land.

The traditional idea, which still constitutes today the heart of popular consciousness in Russia, is that all the land belongs to the people. The other idea, just as ancient, is this: that the people must administer its own affairs, according to the resolutions of its communal assemblies, in which all the heads of family take part.

These two ideas are so deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Russian people, that despite the three centuries of slavery that they have passed through, they have preserved them intact to this day. They will be the very basis of its imminent political organization.

The Russian people, profoundly socialist, by instinct, as much as by tradition, lack political education. It is this that explains how from being free, as they were formerly, they have been made slaves.

Contrary to what happened in the West, where monarchic power was developed by the alliance of the crown with the people against the proprietary nobility, in Russia it was founded by the alliance of the crown, the nobility, and the clergy against the people. This is also what explains why the Russian nobility and clergy always remain voluntary slaves of the czar who, as recompense, guaranteed the slavery of the peasants to them, and why, on the contrary, the people were at all times, as they still are today, the only real, serious revolutionaries in Russia.

The communes rose en masse against the tyranny of the czar, the clergy, the nobility and the muscovite bureaucracy, in the first years of the seventeenth century, and that memorable revolution had failed to destroy the Empire. It was reconstituted by the free election of a new czar, whose son, Czar Alexis (1645–1676) forgetting all the promises sworn by his father, plunged the Russian people and the peasants everywhere into a slavery of which they had not had until then an idea. It was in the middle of his reign that the famous revolt of Stenka-Razin broke out.

We sense the approach of a new, bloody encounter, of a last struggle to the death between the Russia of the people and the State.

Who will triumph this time? The people, undoubtedly. Stenka Razin was a hero, but he was alone among all and above all. His individual power, though really immense, was insufficient to resist the puissance, already in large part organized, of the State. He perished, and all perished with him. It would be otherwise today. There would probably be no heroes as powerful or as popular as Stenka Razin, who had concentrated the whole strength of the rebellious masses in his own person. But he will be replaced by that legion of young people, *déclassé* and nameless, who now already live the life of the people and who remain tightly joined among themselves by the same thought and the same passion, and by a common aim.

The union of that youth with the people, that will be the guarantee of the popular triumph.

That youth is only unshakeable and strong because it draws its thought and its implacable will from the passion of the people. It seeks not its own triumph, but the triumph of the people. Stenka Razin seems to stand behind it. Not the individual hero, but the collective and for that reason the invincible [hero]. It will be that whole magnificent youth assembled, over which he spirit already hovers.

That is the true sense of the present movement, innocent enough in appearance, which, despite this semblance of innocence, casts into consternation all our official, unofficial and patriotically literary world.

Friends! Leave then posthaste this world condemned to destruction. Leave these universities, these academies, these schools from which they chase you now, and in which they have only sought to separate you from the people. Go among the people. Your career, your life, your science must be there. Learn in the midst of these masses with hands hardened by labor how you should serve the cause of the people. And recall well, brothers, that the well-read youth must be neither the master, nor the protector, nor the benefactor, not the dictator of the people, but only the

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Stenka-Razin was a man remarkable for intelligence and will. He was a man of iron, knowing pity neither for himself nor for others. He was nothing but a simple Cossack from the Don. His father had been hung by one Prince Dolgorouki, commander of a muscovite army against Poland. Stenka-Razin fled on the Volga in 1667. There, he formed a band with which he descended in boats to the Caspian Sea, pillaged the coast of Persia, then returned to the Don rich with all his booty.

In 1670, he reappeared on the Volga and declared a war to the death with all the nobility, bureaucracy, and clergy, and proclaimed the liberty of the peasants with the full and complete possession of the earth. All the people between the Oka and the Volga came out for him, killing all the nobles, the functionaries of the Czar and the priests. In no time at all, Stenka-Razin had taken Astrachan, Zarizin, and Saratoff. His procedure was the simplest: he massacred everyone who was not of the people, leaving them to take possession of the earth and of enriching it by themselves. Everywhere he had put to the sword, the free commune of the peasants, possessors of all the earth, rose up and was enriched.

When Razin had beaten regular troops, his first care was to have all the officers killed by the soldiers themselves. To the soldiers he said that he did not make war against them, that they were free to join with him, or free to go on their way. But when they went, he pursued and massacred them.

Everywhere he went, he above all burned all the deeds, and all the papers of the czar; he, as we have seen, he did not spare men either. He was not at all religious; when someone reproached him for killing priests, he responded: "Well! What need have you of priests? If you want to be married, walk three times around a tree and your business is concluded." However, he was a poet; he made magnificent songs of brigands which are still sung on the Volga and in all of Russia. Taken prisoner in 1671, he was taken to Moscow, where the people had awaited him as a liberator, and after having been tortured, he was decapitated. In the midst of the most frightful tortures, he did not let out a cry. He had an iron nature. He is still today the greatest hero of popular legend.

The Russian people, superstitious, but not religious, and superstitious only when the superstition coincides with their desires, await his return in 1870.

midwife of its spontaneous emancipation, the unifier and organizer of the efforts and of all the forces of the people.

Do not concern yourself at this moment with the science in the name of which they would like to bind you, castrate you. That official science must perish with the world that it expresses and serves; and in its place, a new science, rational and living, emerge, after the victory of the people, from the very depths of the life of the unchained people.

Such is the faith of the best men of the West, where, as well/much as in Russia, the old world of States founded on religion, on metaphysics, on jurisprudence, in short on bourgeois civilization, with its essential complement, the right of hereditary property and that of the legal family collapses, preparing to give place to the international, freely organized world of the workers.

They lie to you saying that Europe remains buried in a deep sleep. On the contrary, it awakens, and one must be truly deaf and blind not to sense the approach of a final battle.

Organizing for that struggle and joining hands across the borders of all the States, the world of the laborers of Europe and America calls you to a fraternal alliance.

Mikhail Bakunin.

Geneva, May 1869.

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