

Letter to “La Réforme”

Mikhail Bakunin

January 1845

Monsieur!

The *Gazette des Tribunaux* has announced, together with other Paris newspapers, the ukase issued against Mr. Golowine and myself. I regard the proceedings, certainly not so delicate, of the Russian government against us as something so natural and above all so insignificant, in comparison with the enormous iniquities which it commits each day in our unfortunate homeland, that I certainly would not allow myself, Monsieur, to speak to you of myself, if I did not find myself forced to it by a letter that Mr. Golowine thought he should address to the *Gazette des Tribunaux* and which appears to me to contain some erroneous ideas about the institutions of Russia, which it is impossible for me to let pass without combating them.

My personal position is very simple. During my sojourn in Germany and Switzerland, I was denounced, in the eyes of the Russian government, as a close friend of some German publicists belonging to the radical party, as author of some newspaper articles; especially as a partisan Polish nationality, so noble and so unfortunate, and as a declared enemy of the odious oppression of which it continues to be a victim; – doubtless all things that are not very criminal, but sufficient nonetheless pour set in turmoil a government as jealous of the love and respect of its subject as our own.

So I was soon notified of the order to return immediately to St. Petersburg, threatening me, in case of disobedience, with all the severity of the laws. I knew what awaited me on my return; de plus, preferring the freer air of western Europe to the stifling atmosphere of Russia, I had long since had the firm intention of expatriating. So I responded with a flat refusal, all the consequences of which I foresaw at that time; I was not unaware that, according to the laws that govern my country, I committed, by disobeying the government, almost a crime of *lèse-majesté*; so I would show very poor grace, Monsieur, to complain of a ukase which comes, it is said, to free me from my title of nobility and exile me in Siberia; all the more so as, of these two punishments, I regard the first as an actual benefit, and the second as a reason to be glad to find myself in France.

As for Mr. Golowine, as he is himself present in Paris, I do not think I have the right to explain for him.

But what has profoundly astonished me, Monsieur, is that in his letter, inserted in the *Gazette des Tribunaux* for January 18, Mr. Golowine speaks of a charter granted by the Romanovs to the

Russian nobility! Yet he must know, as well as I do, that there is no other charter in Russia than the unlimited will of the Emperor; that gathering, in accordance with a fundamental law of the Empire, all the political powers in his person, free from all control, sole principle of all legality in Russia, the Emperor has neither privileges nor right to respect, and that consequently he is, in fact as well as right, absolute master of the life and honor of all his subject, without exception.

It costs me a great deal, Monsieur, to disclose in this way the sad situation of my homeland; but I believe the illusions dangerous; I believe that the truth is always good to hear, for it is only from the truth alone that we can draw strength to battle the which we suffer.

We have often spoken in France and in Germany of the opposition of the senate or of the nobility. The senate, Monsieur, has not even the shadow of a political power. It is nothing other than tribunal of last resort for civil and criminal trial; and still its judgments are often modified and overturned by the Emperor and his council of State. What's more, there is one chamber, always passive and always obedient to the administration. Any senator can be stripped of his title by the Emperor; any senator can be sent before a tribunal composed for that purpose by the Empereur himself. You sense well, Monsieur, that with such conditions, the senate must necessarily be incapable of the least disobedience.

With regard to the Russian nobility, its rights are only fictions, for they have no guarantee and depend *legally* on the whims of the Emperor. A noble is free from all tax and all personal service; he has the vile right to possess slaves, – the right to freely change his residence, and that, finally, of not being physically punished. Such are the prerogatives of the Russian nobility, Monsieur, which, with some few others which space does not allow me to elaborate on here, compose what Mr. Golowine is pleased to call the charter granted by the Romanovs! But all these privileges are only pure illusions, for every noble, without regard for his title, fortune and position, can be *embastilled*, sent to Siberia, and forced to serve on a simple order from the Emperor; – any noble can be given over by His Majesty to a tribunal which will judge him in 24 hours and, having deprived him of his title of nobility, will procure for him the pleasure of being bullied and whipped aplenty. And all of that will be done legally, Monsieur, for, as I have already had the honor of telling you, *the law in Russia is nothing other than the will of the Emperor.*

The Spirit that animates the greater part of the nobility is a natural consequence of this pitiful state of things. It is a demoralization, a complete apathy: absence of ideas and all those noble emotions which make life so beautiful; an almost total lack of unity, energy and pride; a profound ennui, a terrifying monotony, interrupted sometimes by sterile agitations of an ambition without dignity! That, Monsieur, is the heart of its existence. It is at St. Petersburg that the Russian nobility spreads out all its shameful misery; it is there that we see all these great lords, slaves and slave-masters at once, these princes and counts, all these high dignitaries of the Empire grovel at the foot of the throne and quarrel with a bitter hatred over the shameful prize of their debasement. And they call themselves aristocrats! It is a strange aristocracy, that one, which, absolutely devoid of all independence and common will, does not have he center and principle of its existence in itself, but in the person of the Emperor; which does not blossom and grow by itself, but only when the Emperor deigns to cast a benevolent smile its way, and which, at the least sign of displeasure on his face, feels totally dead and destroyed! A very pitiful and ridiculous aristocracy, which, absolutely foreign to all the questions of the century, to all the great interests of humanity which are debated outside its circles, does not know how to speak of anything in its meetings but the occupations, words and gestures of the imperial family and the puns of the grand-Duke Michel!

– No, Monsieur, be well persuaded of it, there are no aristocrats, there are only servants at Saint Petersburg.

It must be said however, that among the Russian nobility, and especially among young people, there are already quite a few who have more elevated tendencies and noble views. Those groan about the debasement into which they find themselves plunged with the others and with whom they feel solidarity, although on their own account they are in no way guilty of it. Those follow with love the progress of civilization and liberty in Europe and make every effort in the world to get closer to the people, an extremely difficult thing, since they are separated from them by an abyss. They strive to preserve and cultivate in themselves, and to kindle in others, the sacred fire of great and noble instincts. They mutually seek each other in that deep night, in that atmosphere poisoned by slavery, denunciation and fear, which surrounds and isolates them. Oh! Monsieur! One must have lived in Russia to understand well all the influence exerted on the intellectual and moral development of a man by the position where he finds himself in the world that surrounds him! God grant that these young people do not succumb; for those among them who will have resisted to the end, the numerous shackles which enchain them, could perhaps still be useful to our homeland. But they will act then not *as*, but *despite* being nobles; for, I repeat to you, Monsieur, the Russian nobility, as such, is completely demoralized, powerless and dead.

For myself, I do not complain of it. Aristocratic forms and privileges have been of great use in the past, but I believe them powerless for the present and future. I believe that the genius of history has turned its eyes away from these last remains of the Middle Ages; that it has finally condemned them, as incapable and unworthy to serve it. I believe that, for unfortunate and oppressed countries like Russia and Poland, there is no other salvation but democracy.

Do not think, Monsieur, that democracy would be impossible in my country. As for me, I am deeply persuaded that it is the only thing which would be seriously feasible there, and that all the other political forms, whatever names they take, will be as foreign and odious to the Russian people as the present regime. For the Russian people, Monsieur, despite the terrible slavery which weighs down on them and despite the baton blows which rain down on them from all sides, have some quite democratic instincts and appearances. They are not corrupt; they are only unfortunate. There is in their semi-barbaric nature something so energetic and so large, such an abundance of poetry, passion and spirit, that it is impossible to not be convinced, by knowing it, that there is still a great mission to carry out in this world. The whole future of Russia is to be found in it, – in that mass, so innumerable and imposing, of men who speak the same language, and who will soon be, I hope, animated by the same sentiments and by the same passion. For the Russian people advance, Monsieur, despite all the ill will of the government; some partial and very serious insurrections of the peasants against their lords, – insurrections which multiply in a frightening manner, only prove it too well. The moment is not far off, perhaps, when they will all merge in one great revolution; and if the government does not hurry to emancipate the people, there will be much blood shed.

They say that the Emperor Nicolas thinks seriously of it. God grant that that is true! Because if he really managed to emancipate the peasants, in a frank and widespread manner, that would be a true benefit, which would make up for many things, – and there are many things to make up for, his reign having been marked thus far only by the degradation of all that there still is of noble independence and good elements in Russia.

Accept, monsieur the assurance of my perfect regard.

Michel Bakounine

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