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Speech on the 17th Anniversary of the Polish Revolution

Mikhail Bakunin

November 29, 1847

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Gentlemen,

This is a very solemn moment for me. I am Russian, and I come into the midst of this large assembly, which has gathered to celebrate the anniversary of the Polish revolution, whose very presence here is a sort of challenge, a threat, like a curse thrown the face of all the oppressors of Poland; – I come here, gentlemen, animated by a profound love and unalterable respect for my homeland.

I am not unaware of how unpopular Russia is in Europe. The Polish regard it, and perhaps not without reason, as one of the principal causes of all their misfortunes. Independent men of other countries see in the rapid development of its power an always-increasing danger to the liberty of nations. Everywhere the name *Russians* appears as a synonym of brutal oppression and shameful slavery. A Russian, in the opinion of Europe, is nothing but a vile instrument of conquest in the hands of the most odious and most dangerous despotism.

Gentlemen, it is not in order to exonerate Russia of the crimes of which it is accused, it is not in order to deny the truth that I have come to this rostrum. I would not attempt the impossible. The truth becomes more necessary than every to my homeland.

Well, yes, we are still an enslaved people! Among us there is no liberty, no respect for human dignity. It is the monstrous despotism, with no impediment to its caprices, without limits on its action. No rights, no justice, no recourse against the arbitrary will; we have nothing of that which constitutes the dignity and pride of nations. It is impossible to imagine a position more unfortunate and more humiliating.

Externally, our position is no less deplorable. Passive executors of a thought that is foreign to us, of a will that is as contrary to our interests as it is to our honor, we are feared, hated, I would even almost say scorned, for we are regarded everywhere as the enemies of civilization and humanity. Our masters use our arms to enchain the world, to enslave the nations, and each of their successes is a new shame added to our history.

Without speaking of Poland, where since 1772, and especially since 1831, we dishonor ourselves each day with atrocious acts of violence, nameless infamies, – what a miserable role we have been made to play in Germany, in Italy, in Spain, even in France, everywhere our destructive influence has even been able to penetrate. Since 1815, has there been a single noble cause that we have not battled, a bad cause that we have not supported, a single great political iniquity of which we have not been the instigators or accomplices? – By a truly deplorable fatality, of which is itself the first victims, Russia, since its arrival at the rank of a power of the first order, has become an encouragement for crime and a threat for all the sacred interests of humanity!

Thanks to that execrable politics of our sovereigns, Russia, in the official sense of that word, signifies slave and executioner!

To the extent that we remain disunited, we are mutually paralyzed; together we will be all-powerful for good. nothing could withstand our common action.

The reconciliation of Russia and Poland is an immense work, well worthy of our complete devotion. It is the emancipation of 60 million men, it is the deliverance of all the Slavic peoples who groan under a foreign yoke, and, finally, it is the fall, the final fall of despotism in Europe!

So let it come then, this great day of reconciliation, – the day when the Russians, united with you by the same sentiments, fighting for the same cause and against a common enemy, will have the right to burst with you into your Polish national tune, that hymn of Slavic liberty:

Ieszcze Polska nie zginela!

prophets of our future! From the height of their gibbets, from the very depths of Siberia where they groan still, they have been our salvation, our light, the source of all our good inspirations, our safeguard against the cursed influences of despotism, our proof, before you and before the entire world, that Russia contains within itself all the elements of liberty and of true greatness! Shame, shame to those among us who would not recognize it!

Gentlemen, it is under the invocation of their great names, it is by leaning on their powerful authority, that I present myself to you as a brother, – and you will not reject me. I have no legal title to speak to you in this way; but, with the least bit of vain pretension, I feel that, in this solemn moment, it is the Russian nation itself that speaks to you through my mouth. I am not the only one in Russia who loves Poland, and who feels for it that enthusiastic admiration, that passionate ardor, that profound sentiment, mixed with repentance and hope, that I could never manage to express to you. The friends, known and unknown, who share my sympathies, my opinions, are numerous, and it would be easy for me to prove it, by citing facts and names to you, if I did not fear uselessly compromising many persons. It is in their names, gentlemen, it is in the name of all there is that is living, noble, in my country, that I hold out to you a fraternal hand.

Chained to one another by a fatal, inevitable destiny, by a long and dramatic history, the sad consequences of which we all suffer today, our two countries have long detested one another. But the hour of reconciliation has been struck: it is time that our disagreements end.

Our crimes against you are very great! You have much to forgive us for! But our repentance is not less, and we sense in you a power of good will that will repair all the wrongs and make you forget the past. Then our hatred will change to love, into a love that much more ardent as our hatred has been implacable.

You see, gentlemen, I have a perfect knowledge of my position; and I present myself here as Russian, not although I am Russian, but because I am Russian. I come with the deep sense of responsibility that weighs on me, as well as on all the other individual of my country, for the honor of individuals is inseparable from the national honor: without that responsibility, without that intimate union between the nations and their governments, between the individuals and the nations, there would be neither homeland, nor nation.

I have never, gentlemen, felt that responsibility, that solidarity in the crime as painfully as in this moment; for the anniversary that you celebrate today, for you, gentlemen, it is a great memory, the memory of a holy insurrection and a heroic struggle, the memory of one of the finest eras of your national life. You have all witness that magnificent public surge, you have taken part in that struggle, you have been the actors and the heroes. In that sacred war you seem to have exerted, spread, exhausted all that the great Polish soul contained of enthusiasm, of devotion, of strength and of patriotism! Weigh down under the numbers, you finally succumbed. But the memory of that eternally memorable era remains written in flaming characters in your hearts; but you have all emerged regenerated from that war: regenerated and strong, hardened against the temptations of misfortune, against the pains of exile, full of pride in your past, full of faith in your future!

The anniversary of November 29, gentlemen, is for you not only a great memory, it is also the guarantee of an imminent deliverance, of an impending return to your country.

For me, as a Russian, it is the anniversary of a shame; yes, of a great national shame! I say it frankly: the war of 1831 was, on our part, an absurd, criminal, fratricidal war. It was not only an unjust attack on a neighboring nation, it was a monstrous offense against the liberty of a brother. It was more, gentlemen: on the part of my country, it was a political suicide. – That war was undertaken in the interest of the Russian despotism, not

that of the Russian nation; for these two interests are absolutely opposed. The emancipation of Poland was our salvation: with you free, we would have been as well; you could not overturn the throne of the King of Poland without shaking that of the emperor of Russia... – Children of the same race, our destinies are inseparable and our cause must be common.

You understood that well when you inscribed on your revolutionary flags these Russian words: *za nachou i za vachou volnost*, “For our liberty and for yours!” You have understood it well when, in the most critical moment of the struggle, braving the fury of Nicolas, all of Warsaw gathered one day, inspired by a great fraternal thought, in order to render a solemn, public homage, to our heroes, to our martyrs of 1825, to PESTEL, to RYLEEFF, to MOURAWIEFF-APOSTEL, BESTOUGEFF-RUMIN and KOHOFFSKY, – hanged at Saint-Petersburg for having been the first citizens of Russia!

Ah! Gentlemen, you have neglected nothing in order to convince us of your sympathetic dispositions, in order to touch our hearts, in order to pull us from our fatal blindness. Vain attempts! Wasted efforts! Soldiers of the czar, deaf to your appeal, seeing, understanding nothing, we have marched against you, – and the crime has been perpetrated.

Gentlemen, of all the oppressors, of all the enemies of your country, it is we who have most earned your curses and your hatred.

And yet it is not only as a repentant Russian that I come here. I dare to proclaim in your presence my love and respect for my country. I dare more, gentlemen. I dare to urge you to an alliance with Russia.

I need to explain myself.

About a year ago, it was, I believe, after the massacres in Galicia, a Polish nobleman, in a very eloquent and now famous letter, addressed to M. the prince of Metternich, made a strange proposition to you. Carried away no doubt by a hatred, and a very legitimate one at that, against the Austrians, he enlisted

can have no illusions about the unique cause of all their suffering. Our soldiers, they are the people themselves, but still more discontent; they are the people entirely disillusioned, armed, accustomed to discipline and common action. Do you want a proof of it? In all the recent peasant riots, the discharged soldiers have played the principal role.

To end this review of the enemies of power in Russia, I must finally tell you, gentlemen, that among the noble youth this is a mass of educated, generous, patriotic men, who blush at the shame and horror of our position, who are outraged at feeling they are slaves, who are all animated against the emperor and his government by an implacable hatred. Ah! Believe it well, revolutionary elements are not lacking in Russia! It stirs, grows in passion, it reckons its forces, it recognizes itself, it gathers, and the moment is not far off when the storm, a great storm, our salvation, will break!

Gentlemen, it is in the name of that new society, of that true Russian nation, that I come to propose to you an alliance.

The idea of a revolutionary alliance between Poland and Russia is not new. It had already been conceived, as you know, by the conspirators of the two countries, in 1824.

Gentlemen, the memory that I have just alluded to fills my soul with pride. The Russian conspirators were then the first to cross the abyss that seems to separate us. Taking counsel only with their patriotism, braving the precautions that you had naturally set up against all who bore the name Russian, they came to you first, without mistrust, without ulterior motives; – they came to you to propose a common action against our common enemy, against our only enemy.

You will forgive me, gentlemen, this moment of involuntary pride. A Russian who loves his country cannot speak dispassionately of these men; they are our purest glory, – and I am happy to be able to proclaim it frankly in this midst of this great and noble assembly, in the midst of this Polish assembly, – they are our saints, our heroes, the martyrs for our liberty, the

the human heart, venality and fear; functioning outside of all the instincts of the nation, of all the interests, of all the vital forces of the country, the power, in Russia, weakens itself each day through its own action, and disrupts itself in a frightful manner. It twists and turns, thrashes about, and changes plans and ideas at each moment; it attempts many things at once, but accomplishes nothing. Only, it does not lack the power for evil, and it exhausts it fully, as if it wanted to hasten the moment of its own ruin. – Foreign and hostile to the country in the midst of the country itself, it is marked for an imminent fall.

Its enemies are everywhere: there is the formidable mass of the peasants, who no longer count on the emperor for their emancipation, and whose uprisings, more and more frequent every day, prove that they are tired of waiting; there is a very large intermediary class, composed of very diverse elements, an anxious, turbulent class that will throw itself passionately in the first revolutionary movement.

– There is also, and especially, that innumerable army that covers the whole surface of the empire. Nicolas, it is true, regards his soldiers as his best friends, as the most solid supports of his throne; but this is a strange illusion, which will not fail to be fatal for him. What! The supports of his throne, some men drawn from the ranks of the people, so profoundly unfortunate, men brutally snatched from their families, who are hunted down like wild beasts in the forests where they go to hide, often after maiming themselves, in order to escape recruitment; who are led in chains to their regiments, where they are condemned for twenty years, which is to say for the life of a man, to a hellish existence, beaten every day, loaded down every day with new fatigues, and dying every day of hunger! What would they do then, good God! these Russian soldiers, if, in the midst of such tortures, they could love the hand that inflicts them on them! Believe it well, gentlemen, our soldiers are the most dangerous enemies of the present order of things; those of the guard especially, who, seeing the evil at its source,

you to nothing less than submitting to the czar, surrendering yourselves body and soul, fully, without conditions or reservations; he advised you to freely desire what you have until now only been made to suffer, and he promised you that, in compensation, as soon as you ceased to portray yourselves as slaves, your master, despite himself, would become your brother.

Your brother, gentlemen. Do you hear? The emperor Nicolas would become your brother!

The oppressor, the bitterest enemy, the personal enemy of Poland, the executioner of so many victims, the abductor of your liberty, the one who pursues you with an infernal perseverance, as much from hatred and instinct as from politics, – would you accept him as your brother?

Each of you would prefer to perish, I know it well; – each of you would rather see Poland perish than consent to such a monstrous alliance.

But tolerate, just for a moment, this impossible conjecture. Do you know, gentlemen, what the surest means would be for you to do much evil to Russia? It would be to submit to the czar. He would find in that a sanction for his politics and such a strength that nothing, from now on, could stop him. Woe to us if that anti-national politics prevailed over all the obstacles that still oppose its complete realization! And the first, the greatest of these obstacles, is incontestably Poland, it is the desperate resistance of this heroic people that saves us by combating us.

Yes, it is because you are the enemies of the Emperor Nicolas, the enemies of the official Russia, that you are naturally, even without desiring it, the friends of the Russian people!

In Europe, we generally believe, I know, that we form an indivisible whole with our government; that we feel very fortunate under the reign of Nicolas; that he and his system, oppressive within and invasive without, are the perfect expression of our national genius.

It is not the case at all.

No, gentlemen, the Russian people are not happy! I say it with joy, with pride. For, if happiness was possible for them in the state of abjection into which they find themselves plunged, they would be the most cowardly, most vile people in the world. We are also governed by a foreign hand, by a sovereign of German origin, who will never understand the needs nor the character of the Russian people, and whose government, a singular mix of Mongol brutality and Prussian pedantry, completely excludes the national element. So that, deprived of all political rights, we do not have even that natural, we might say patriarchal, liberty enjoyed by the less civilized peoples, which at least allows a man to rest his heart in a native milieu and abandon himself fully to the instincts of his race. No, we have none of all that: no natural gesture, no free movement is allowed us. We are almost forbidden to live, for every life implies a certain independence, and we are only the inanimate cogs of that monstrous machine of oppression and conquest that we call the Russian Empire. Well! gentlemen, suppose a soul in a machine, and perhaps then you will form an idea of the immensity of our sufferings. No shame, no torture is spared us, and we have all the misfortunes of Poland, without the honor.

Without honor, I have said, and I uphold that expression for everything that is governmental, official, political, in Russia.

A weak, exhausted nation could have need of lies in order to maintain the miserable remains of an existence that is fading away. But Russia is not in that situation, thank God! The nature of that people is corrupted only on the surface: vigorous, powerful and young, it has only to overturn the obstacles with which it has been surrounded, in order to show itself in all its primitive beauty, in order to develop all its unknown treasures, to show the world finally that it is not in the name of brutal force, as it is generally thought, but rather in the name of all that is most noble and most sacred in the lives of nations, that it is in the name of humanity, in the name of liberty, that the Russian people have the right to exist.

Gentlemen, Russia is not only unfortunate, it is discontented as well, it is at the end of its patience. Do you know what is whispered in the court of Saint-Petersburg itself? Do you know what those close to the emperor, the favorites, even the ministers think? That the reign of Nicolas is that of Louis XV. Everyone senses the storm, a terrible, imminent storm, which frightens many people, but which the nation summons with joy.

The internal affairs of the country go horribly wrong. It is a complete anarchy, with all the semblance of order. Beneath the exterior of an excessively rigorous hierarchical formality is hidden some hideous wounds; our administration, our justice, our finances, are so many lies: lies to mislead foreign opinion, lies to lull the sense of security and conscience of the sovereign, who plays along all the more willingly, as he is frightened by the real state of things. Finally, the organization on a large scale, an organization, we might say, studied and learned in iniquity, barbarism and pillage: for all the servants of the czar, from those who occupy the highest position to the lowliest district employees, bankrupt, rob the country, commit the most flagrant injustices, the most detestable violence, without the least shame, without the least fear, in public; in the light of day, with an insolence and a brutality without example, not even taking the trouble to conceal their crimes from the indignation of the public, so sure are they that they will remain unpunished.

The emperor Nicolas indeed sometimes gives himself the appearance of wishing to arrest the progress of this frightful corruption; but how could he suppress an evil whose principal cause is within himself, in the very principle of his government? And that is the secret of his profound powerlessness for good! For this government, which appears so imposing from without, is powerless from within; nothing it does is successful, all the reforms that it attempts are immediately struck null and void. Having no foundation but the two vilest passions of