

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Paul Avrich
The Legacy of Bakunin
April 1970

Retrieved on 7th November 2021 from libcom.org
Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical
Association, Washington, D. C., December 30, 1969 [Ed.].
Published in *Russian Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Apr., 1970), pp.
129–142.

theanarchistlibrary.org

The Legacy of Bakunin

Paul Avrich

April 1970

A century ago anarchism was emerging as a major force within the revolutionary movement, and the name of Bakunin, its foremost champion and prophet, was as well known among the workers and radical intellectuals of Europe as that of Karl Marx, with whom he was competing for leadership of the First International. In contrast to Marx, however, Bakunin had won his reputation chiefly as an activist rather than a theorist of rebellion. He was not one to sit in libraries, studying and writing about predetermined revolutions. Impatient for action, he threw himself into the uprisings of 1848 with irrepressible exuberance, a Prometheus figure moving with the tide of revolt from Paris to the barricades of Austria and Germany. Men like Bakunin, a contemporary remarked, “grow in a hurricane and ripen better in stormy weather than in sunshine.”¹

Bakunin’s arrest during the Dresden insurrection of 1849 cut short his feverish revolutionary activity. He spent the next eight years in prison, six of them in the darkest dungeons of tsarist Russia, and when he finally emerged, his sentence commuted to a life

¹ E. Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, London, 1957, p. 118.

term in Siberian exile, he was toothless from scurvy and his health seriously impaired. In 1861, however, he escaped his warders and embarked upon a sensational odyssey that encircled the globe and made his name a legend and an object of worship in radical groups all over Europe.

As a romantic rebel and an active force in history, Bakunin exerted a personal attraction that Marx could never rival. “Everything about him was colossal,” recalled the composer Richard Wagner, a fellow participant in the Dresden uprising, “and he was full of a primitive exuberance and strength.”² Bakunin himself speaks of his own “love for the fantastic, for unusual, unheard-of adventures which open up vast horizons, the end of which cannot be foreseen.”³ This in turn inspired extravagant dreams in others, and by the time of his death in 1876 he had won a unique place among the adventurers and martyrs of the revolutionary tradition. “This man,” said Alexander Herzen of Bakunin, “was born not under an ordinary star but under a comet.”⁴ His broad magnanimity and childlike enthusiasm, his burning passion for liberty and equality, his volcanic onslaughts against privilege and injustice—all this gave him enormous human appeal in the libertarian circles of his day.

But Bakunin, as his critics never tired of pointing out, was not a systematic thinker. Nor did he ever claim to be. For he considered himself a revolutionist of the deed, “not a philosopher and not an inventor of systems like Marx.”⁵ He refused to recognize the existence of any preconceived or preordained laws of history. He rejected the view that social change depends on the gradual unfolding of “objective” historical conditions. He believed, on the contrary, that men shape their own destinies, that their lives cannot be

² E. H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, New York, 1961, p. 196.

³ Lampert, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

⁴ Eugene Pyziur, *The Philosophy of Anarchism of M. A. Bakunin*, Milwaukee, 1955, p. 1

⁵ Iu. M. Steklov, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin*, 4 vis., Moscow, 1926–27, III, 112.

squeezed into a Procrustean bed of abstract sociological formulas. “No theory, no ready-made system, no book that has ever been written will save the world,” Bakunin declared. “I cleave to no system. I am a true seeker.”⁶ By teaching the workers theories, he said, Marx would only succeed in stifling the revolutionary fervor every man already possesses—“the impulse to liberty, the passion for equality, the holy instinct of revolt.” Unlike Marx’s “scientific socialism,” his own socialism, Bakunin asserted, was “purely instinctive.”⁷

Bakunin’s influence, then, as Peter Kropotkin remarked, was primarily that of a “moral personality” rather than of an intellectual authority.⁸ Although he wrote prodigiously, he did not leave a single finished book to posterity. He was forever starting new works which, owing to his turbulent existence, were broken off in mid-course and never completed. His literary output, in Thomas Masaryk’s description, was a “patchwork of fragments.”⁹

And yet his writings, however erratic and unmethodical, abound in flashes of insight that illuminate some of the most important questions of his own time and of ours. What this article seeks to demonstrate is that Bakunin’s ideas, no less than his personality, have exerted a lasting influence, an influence that has been particularly noticeable during the past few years. If ever the spirit of Bakunin spoke, it was in the student quarter of Paris in May 1968, where the black flag of anarchism was prominently displayed and where, among the graffiti inscribed on the walls of the Sorbonne, Bakunin’s famous declaration that “The urge to destroy is a creative urge” occupied a conspicuous place. In our own country Eldridge Cleaver, in *Soul on Ice*, has expressed his indebtedness to Bakunin and Nechaev’s *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, which, interestingly enough, has recently been published in pamphlet form by

⁶ Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

⁷ M. A. Bakunin, *Oeuvres*, 6 vls., Paris, 1895–1913, II, 399; Steklov, *op. cit.*, I, 189.

⁸ Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, Boston, 1899, p. 288.

⁹ Pyziur, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

the Black Panther organization in Berkeley. The sociologist Lewis Coser has detected a neo-Bakuninist streak in Regis Debray, whom he has cleverly dubbed “Nechaev in the Andes,” after Bakunin’s fanatical young disciple.¹⁰ And Frantz Fanon’s influential book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, with its Manichaeic visions of the despised and rejected rising from the lower depths to exterminate their colonial oppressors, occasionally reads as though lifted straight out of Bakunin’s collected works. In short, at a time when a new generation has rediscovered spontaneous, undoctrinaire insurrectionism, Bakunin’s teachings have come into their own.

What are these ideas that have proved so relevant in the twentieth century—more so, perhaps, than in Bakunin’s own time? Above all, Bakunin foresaw the true nature of modern revolution more clearly than any of his contemporaries, Marx not excepted. For Marx the socialist revolution required the emergence of a well-organized and class-conscious proletariat, something to be expected in highly industrialized countries like Germany or England. Marx regarded the peasantry as the social class least capable of constructive revolutionary action: together with *Lumpenproletariat* of the urban slums, the peasants were benighted and primitive barbarians, the bulwark of counterrevolution. For Bakunin, by contrast, the peasantry and *Lumpenproletariat*, having been least exposed to the corrupting influences of bourgeois civilization, retained their primitive vigor and turbulent instinct for revolt. The real proletariat, he said, did not consist in the skilled artisans and organized factory workers, who were tainted by the pretensions and aspirations of the middle classes, but in the great mass of “uncivilized, disinherited, and illiterate” millions who truly had nothing to lose but their chains. Thus, while Marx believed in an organized revolution led by a trained and disciplined working class, Bakunin set his hopes on a peasant jacquerie combined with a spontaneous rising of the

¹⁰ *Dissent*, January-February 1968, pp. 41–44.

they had become “the slaves, the playthings, and the victims of a new group of ambitious men.”³⁰ Bakunin therefore preached a “revolt of life against science, or rather, against the rule of science.” Not that he rejected the validity of scientific knowledge. But he recognized its dangers. He saw that life cannot be reduced to laboratory formulas and that efforts in this direction would lead to the worst form of tyranny. In a letter written barely a year before his death, he spoke of the “evolution and development of the principle of evil” throughout the world and forewarned of what we now call the “military-industrial complex.” “Sooner or later,” he wrote, “these enormous military states will have to destroy and devour each other. But what a prospect!”³¹

How justified were his fears can be appreciated now in an age of nuclear and biological weapons of mass destruction. At a time when the idealization of primitive social elements is again in fashion, when mass rebellion is again being widely preached, and when modern technology threatens Western civilization with extinction, Bakunin clearly merits a reappraisal. One is reminded, in conclusion, of a remark made by the great anarchist historian Max Nettlau some thirty years ago: that Bakunin’s “ideas remain fresh and will live forever.”³²

³⁰ Bakunin, *Oeuvres*, IV, 376.

³¹ Nomad, *op. cit.*, p. 206; K. J. Kenafick, *Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx*, Melbourne, 1948, p. 304.

³² G. P. Maximoff, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, New York, 1953, p. 48.

again being widely discussed, it is well to remember that Bakunin, perhaps even more than Proudhon, was a prophet of revolutionary syndicalism, insisting that a free federation of trade unions would be “the living germ of the new social order which is to replace the bourgeois world.”²⁹

But above all Bakunin is attractive to present-day students and intellectuals because his libertarian brand of socialism provides an alternative vision to the bankrupt authoritarian socialism of the twentieth century. His dream of a decentralized society of autonomous communes and labor federations appeals to those who are seeking to escape from a centralized, conformist, and artificial world. “I am a student: do not fold, mutilate, or spindle me” has a distinctive Bakuninist flavor. Indeed, student rebels, even when professed Marxists, are often closer in spirit to Bakunin, whose black flag has occasionally been unfurled in campus demonstrations from Berkeley to Paris. Their stress on the natural, the spontaneous, and the unsystematic, their urge towards a simpler way of life, their distrust of bureaucracy and of centralized authority, their belief that all men should take part in decisions affecting their lives, their slogans of “participatory democracy,” “freedom now,” “power to the people,” their goals of community control, workers’ management, rural cooperation, equal education and income, dispersal of state power—all this is in harmony with Bakunin’s vision. Even the ambivalence among so many youthful rebels, who combine the antithetical methods of libertarian anarchism and authoritarian socialism, reflects the ambivalence within Bakunin’s own revolutionary philosophy and personal makeup.

Finally, Bakunin has found an echo wherever young dissidents question our uncritical faith in self-glorifying scientific progress. A hundred years ago Bakunin warned that scientists and technical experts might use their knowledge to dominate others, and that one day ordinary citizens would be rudely awakened to find that

²⁹ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, Indore, n.d., p. 88.

infuriated urban mobs, a revolt of the uncivilized masses driven by an instinctive passion for justice and by an unquenchable thirst for revenge. Bakunin’s model had been set by the great rebellions of Razin and Pugachev in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His vision was of an all-embracing upheaval, a true revolt of the masses, including, besides the working class, the darkest elements of society—the *Lumpenproletariat*, the primitive peasantry, the unemployed, the outlaws—all pitted against those who thrive on their misery and enslavement.

Subsequent events have, to a remarkable extent, confirmed the accuracy of Bakunin’s vision. It is small wonder, then, that contemporary historians have shown a new appreciation of the role of spontaneous and primitive movements in shaping history. From the work of Barrington Moore, who has recently investigated the relationship between modernization and agrarian revolt, as well as of Eric Hobsbawm, George Rude, E. P. Thompson, and others, we are coming to understand that most modern revolutions, like those of the past, have been largely unplanned and spontaneous, driven by mass movements of urban and rural laborers, and in spirit predominantly anarchistic. No longer can these naive, primitive, and irrational groups be written off as fringe elements to be ignored by the historian. They lie, rather, at the very basis of social change.

Bakunin foresaw that the great revolutions of our time would emerge from the “lower depths” of comparatively undeveloped countries. He saw decadence in advanced civilization and vitality in backward, primitive nations. He insisted that the revolutionary impulse was strongest where men had no property, no regular employment, and no stake in things as they were; and this meant that the universal upheaval of his dreams would start in the south and east of Europe rather than in such prosperous and disciplined countries as England or Germany.

These revolutionary visions were closely related to Bakunin’s early Pan Slavism. In 1848 he spoke of the decadence of Western Europe and saw hope in the more primitive, less industrialized Slavs

for its regeneration. Convinced that the breakup of the Austrian Empire was an essential condition for a European revolution, he called for its destruction and replacement by independent Slavic republics, a dream realized seventy years later. He correctly anticipated the future importance of Slavic nationalism, and he saw, moreover, that a revolution of Slavs would precipitate the social transformation of Europe. He prophesied, in particular, a messianic role for his native Russia akin to the Third Rome of the past and the Third International of the future. "The stars of revolution," he wrote in 1848, "will rise high above Moscow from a sea of blood and fire, and will turn into the lodestar to lead a liberated humanity."¹¹

We can see then why it is Bakunin, rather than Marx, who can claim to be the true prophet of modern revolution. The three greatest revolutions of the twentieth century—in Russia, Spain, and China—have all occurred in relatively backward countries and have largely been "peasant wars" linked with spontaneous outbursts of the urban poor, as Bakunin predicted. The peasantry and unskilled workers, those primitive groups for whom Marx expressed withering contempt, have become the mass base of twentieth-century social upheavals—upheavals which, though often labelled "Marxist," are far more accurately described as "Bakuninist." Bakunin's visions, moreover, have anticipated the social ferment within the "Third World" as a whole, the modern counterpart on a global scale of Bakunin's backward, peripheral Europe.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the spirit of Bakunin should pervade the writings of such contemporary theorists of mass revolt as Frantz Fanon and Régis Debray, and to a lesser degree of Eldridge Cleaver and Herbert Marcuse. Fanon, no less than Bakunin, was convinced that the working class had been corrupted by the values of the establishment and had thus lost its

¹¹ George Woodcock, *Anarchism*, Cleveland, 1962, p. 155.

and Jews (Marx, of course, being both), his cult of violence and revolutionary immoralism, his hatred of liberalism and reformism, his faith in the peasantry and *Lumpenproletariat*—all this brought him uncomfortably close to later authoritarian movements of both the Left and the Right, movements from which Bakunin himself would doubtless have recoiled in horror had he lived to see their mercurial rise.

Yet, for all his ambivalence, Bakunin remains an influential figure. Herzen once called him "a Columbus without an America, and even without a ship."²⁸ But the present revolutionary movement owes him a good deal of its energy, its audacity, and its tempestuousness. His youthful exuberance, his contempt for middle-class conventions, and his emphasis on deeds rather than theories exert considerable appeal among today's rebellious youth, for whom Bakunin provides an example of anarchism in action, of revolution as a way of life. His ideas, too, continue to be relevant—perhaps more relevant than ever. Whatever his defects as a scholar, especially when compared with Marx, they are more than outweighed by his revolutionary vision and intuition. Bakunin was the prophet of primitive rebellion, of the conspiratorial revolutionary party, of terrorist amorality, of guerrilla insurrectionism, of revolutionary dictatorship, and of the emergence of a new ruling class that would impose its will on the people and rob them of their freedom. He was the first Russian rebel to preach social revolution in cosmic terms and on an international scale. His formulas of self-determination and direct action exercise an increasing appeal, while his chief *bête noire*, the centralized bureaucratic state, continues to fulfil his most despairing predictions. Of particular note, after the lessons of Russia, Spain, and China, is Bakunin's message that social emancipation must be attained by libertarian rather than dictatorial means. Moreover, at a time when workers' control is

²⁸ Pyziur, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

torship, Bakunin was a direct forebear of Lenin. This makes it easier to understand how it was possible for the anarchists in 1917 to collaborate with their Bolshevik rivals to overthrow the Kerensky government. After the October Revolution, in fact, one anarchist leader even tried to work out an “anarchist theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”²⁶ There is tragic irony in the fact that, as in Spain twenty years later, the anarchists should have helped to destroy the fragile embryo of democracy, thus preparing the way for a new tyranny which was to be the author of their downfall. For once in power the Bolsheviks proceeded to suppress their libertarian allies, and the revolution turned into the opposite of all Bakunin’s hopes. Among the few anarchist groups allowed to remain in existence was one which solemnly declared its intention to launch the stateless society “in interplanetary space but not upon Soviet territory”²⁷-which raises some interesting prospects in this year of Armstrong and Aldrin! For most anarchists, however, there remained only the melancholy consolation that their mentor, Bakunin, had predicted it all fifty years before.

Bakunin’s legacy, then, has been an ambivalent one. This was because Bakunin himself was a man of paradox, possessed of an ambivalent nature. A nobleman who yearned for a peasant revolt, a libertarian with an irresistible urge to dominate others, an intellectual with a powerful anti-intellectual streak, he could preach unrestrained liberty while spinning from his brain a whole network of secret organizations and demanding from his followers unconditional obedience to his will. In his notorious *Confession* to the tsar, moreover, he was capable of appealing to Nicholas I to carry the banner of Slavdom into Western Europe and do away with the effete parliamentary system. His Panslavism and anti-intellectualism, his pathological hatred of Germans

²⁶ Avrich, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231

revolutionary fervor. “The great mistake,” he wrote, “the inherent defect in the majority of political parties of the underdeveloped regions has been, following traditional lines, to approach in the first place those elements which are the most politically conscious: the working classes in the towns, the skilled workers and the civil servants-that is to say, a tiny portion of the population, which hardly represents more than one percent.”¹² Fanon, like Bakunin, pinned his hopes on the great mass of unprivileged and un-Europeanized village laborers and *Lumpenproletariat* from the shanty towns, uprooted, impoverished, starving, and with nothing to lose. For Fanon, as for Bakunin, the more primitive the man, the purer his revolutionary spirit. When Fanon refers to “the hopeless dregs of humanity” as natural rebels, he is speaking the language of Bakunin. With Bakunin, moreover, he shares not only a common faith in the revolutionary potential of the underworld, but also a vision of rebirth through fire and a thoroughgoing rejection of European civilization as decadent and repressive-in place of which, he says, the Third World must begin “a new history of man.” The Black Panthers, in turn, have appropriated many of Fanon’s ideas, and Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton freely acknowledge their debt to him-and indirectly to Bakunin-when describing the blacks in America as an oppressed colony kept in check by an occupation army of white policemen and exploited by white businessmen and politicians.

In a similar vein, Herbert Marcuse writes in *One Dimensional Man* that the greatest hope of revolutionary change lies in “the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployables.” If these groups, he adds, should ally themselves with the radical intellectuals, there might occur an uprising of “the most advanced consciousness of humanity and its most exploited

¹² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, 1966, p. 88.

force.”¹³ Here again it is Bakunin rather than Marx whose influence is apparent. For Bakunin set great store by the disaffected students and intellectuals and assigned them a key role in the impending world revolution. Bakunin’s prophetic vision of an all-encompassing class war, in contrast to Marx’s more narrowly conceived struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie, made ample room for this additional, fragmented element of society for which Marx had only disdain. In Marx’s view, rootless intellectuals did not comprise a class of their own, nor were they an integral component of the bourgeoisie. They were merely “the dregs” of the middle class, “a bunch of *déclassés*”—lawyers without clients, doctors without patients, petty journalists, impecunious students, and their ilk—with no vital role to play in the historical process of class conflict.¹⁴ For Bakunin, on the other hand, the intellectuals were a valuable revolutionary force, “fervent, energetic youths, totally *déclassé*, with no career or way out.”¹⁵ The *déclassés*, Bakunin pointed out, like the jobless *Lumpenproletariat* and the landless peasantry, had no stake whatever in things as they were and no prospect for improvement except through an immediate revolution that would demolish the existing order.

In general, then, Bakunin found the greatest revolutionary potential in uprooted, alienated, *déclassé* elements, elements either left behind by, or refusing to fit into, modern society. And here again he was a truer prophet than his contemporaries. For the alliance of estranged intellectuals with the dispossessed masses in guerrilla-style warfare has been a central feature of modern revolutions. Regis Debray, in *Revolution in the Revolution?*, another influential manual of modern rebellion, carries this idea to its ultimate conclusion. People who have jobs, says Debray, who lead more or less normal working lives in town or village, however poor and

¹³ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Boston, 1964, pp. 256–57.

¹⁴ Max Nomad, *Apostles of Revolution*, Boston, 1939, p. 127. Cf. Lewis Feuer, *Marx and the Intellectuals*, New York, 1969, pp. 216–28.

¹⁵ M. A. Bakunin, *Gesammelte Werke*, 3 vols., Berlin, 1921–24, III, 120–21.

while he saw that the methods used to make the revolution must affect the nature of society after the revolution, he nonetheless resorted to methods which were the precise contradiction of his own libertarian principles. His ends pointed towards freedom, but his means—the clandestine revolutionary party—pointed towards totalitarian dictatorship. Bakunin, in short, was trapped in a classic dilemma: He understood that the lack of an efficient revolutionary organization would spell inevitable failure, but the means he chose inevitably corrupted the ends towards which he aspired.

More than that, on the question of revolutionary morality Bakunin preached in effect that the ends justify the means. In his *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, written with Nechaev exactly a hundred years ago, the revolutionist is depicted as a complete immoralist, bound to commit any crime, any treachery, any baseness to bring about the destruction of the existing order. The revolutionist, wrote Bakunin and Nechaev, “despises and hates present-day social morality in all its forms. He regards everything as moral that favors the triumph of the revolution... All soft and enervating feelings of friendship, love, gratitude, even honor must be stifled in him by a cold passion for the revolutionary cause... Day and night he must have one thought, one aim—merciless destruction.”²⁴ Eldridge Cleaver tells us in *Soul on Ice* that he “fell in love” with Bakunin and Nechaev’s *Catechism* and took it as a revolutionary bible, incorporating its principles into his everyday life by employing “tactics of ruthlessness in my dealings with everyone with whom I came into contact.”²⁵ (The *Catechism*, as mentioned above, has recently been published as a pamphlet by Cleaver’s Black Panther organization in Berkeley.)

Here again, as in his belief in a clandestine organization of revolutionaries as well as a “temporary” revolutionary dicta-

²⁴ Nomad, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–33.

²⁵ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, New York, 1968, p. 12.

power and forecast, in general outline, the course of the great October Revolution of 1917.”²²

But if Bakunin foresaw the anarchistic nature of the Russian Revolution, he also foresaw its authoritarian consequences. If 1917 began, as Bakunin had hoped, with a spontaneous mass revolt, it ended, as Bakunin had feared, with the dictatorship of a new ruling elite. Long before Machajski or Djilas or James Burnham, Bakunin had warned that a “new class” of intellectuals and semi-intellectuals might seek to replace the landlords and capitalists and deny the people their freedom. In 1873 he prophesied with startling accuracy that under a so-called dictatorship of the proletariat “the leaders of the Communist party, namely Mr. Marx and his followers, will proceed to liberate humanity in their own way. They will concentrate the reins of government in a strong hand... They will establish a single state bank, concentrating in its hands all commercial, industrial, agricultural, and even scientific production, and then divide the masses into two armies—industrial and agricultural—under the direct command of state engineers, who will constitute a new privileged scientific and political class.”²³

And yet, for all his assaults on revolutionary dictatorship, Bakunin was determined to create his own secret society of conspirators, whose members would be “subjected to a strict hierarchy and to unconditional obedience.” This clandestine organization, moreover, would remain intact even after the revolution had been accomplished in order to forestall the establishment of any “official dictatorship.”²⁴ Thus Bakunin committed the very sin he so bitterly denounced. He himself was one of the principal originators of the idea of a secret and closely knit revolutionary party bound together by implicit obedience to a revolutionary dictator, a party that he likened at one point to the Jesuit Order. While he recognized the intimate connection between means and ends,

²² Steklov, *op. cit.*, I, 9, 343–45; III, 118–27.

²³ M. A. Bakunin, *Izbrannye sochineniia*, 5 vols., Petrograd, 1919–22, I, 237.

oppressed, are essentially bourgeois because they have something to lose—their work, their homes, their sustenance. For Debray only the rootless guerrilla, with nothing to lose but his life, is the true proletarian, and the revolutionary struggle, if it is to be successful, must be conducted by bands of professional guerrillas—i.e. *déclassé* intellectuals—who, in Debray’s words, would “initiate the highest forms of class struggle.”¹⁶

Bakunin differed with Marx on still another point that is of considerable relevance for the present. Bakunin was a firm believer in immediate revolution. He rejected the view that revolutionary forces will emerge gradually, in the fulness of time. What he demanded, in effect, was “freedom now.” He would countenance no temporizing with the existing system. The old order was rotten, he argued, and salvation could be achieved only by destroying it root and branch. Gradualism and reformism in any shape were futile, palliatives and compromises of no use. Bakunin’s was a dream of immediate and universal destruction, the levelling of all existing values and institutions, and the creation of a new libertarian society on their ashes. In his view, parliamentary democracy was a shameless fiction so long as men were being subjected to economic exploitation. Even in the freest of states, he declared, such as Switzerland and the United States, the civilization of the few is founded on the travail and degradation of the many. “I do not believe in constitutions and laws,” he said. “The best constitution in the world would not be able to satisfy me. We need something different: inspiration, life, a new lawless and therefore free world.”¹⁷

In rejecting the claim of parliamentary democracy to represent the people, Bakunin, as his biographer E. H. Carr has noted, “spoke a language which has become more familiar in the twentieth century than it was in the nineteenth.”¹⁸ Sounding still another mo-

¹⁶ Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, New York, 1967, pp. 95–116.

¹⁷ Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

dem note, Bakunin saw the ideal moment for popular revolution in time of war -and ultimately during a world war. In 1870 he regarded the FrancoPrussian War as the harbinger of an anarchist revolution in which the state would be smashed and a free federation of communes arise on its ruins. The one thing that could save France, he wrote in his *Letters to a Frenchman*, was “an elemental, mighty, passionately energetic, anarchistic, destructive, unrestrained uprising of the popular masses,”¹⁹ a view with which Daniel Cohn-Bendit and his fellow rebels of May 1968 would enthusiastically agree. Bakunin believed, like Lenin after him, that national war must be converted into social rebellion. He dreamt of a general European war, which he felt was imminent and would destroy the bourgeois world. His timing, of course, was faulty. As Herzen once remarked, Bakunin habitually “mistook the third month of pregnancy for the ninth.” But his vision was at length fulfilled when the First World War brought about the collapse of the old order and released revolutionary forces that have yet to play themselves out.

Let us focus for a moment on the Russian Revolution, the prototype of twentieth-century social upheavals. Here, in essence, was the spontaneous “revolt of the masses” that Bakunin had foreseen some fifty years before. In 1917 Russia experienced a virtual breakdown of political authority, and councils of workers and peasants sprang up which might form the basis of libertarian communes. Lenin, like Bakunin before him, encouraged the raw and untutored elements of Russian society to sweep away what remained of the old regime. Bakunin and Lenin, for all their differences of temperament and doctrine, were alike in their refusal to collaborate with the liberals or moderate socialists, whom they regarded as incurably counterrevolutionary. Both men were anti-bourgeois and anti-liberal to the roots. Like Bakunin, Lenin called for instant socialism, without any prolonged capitalist phase of development.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

He too believed that the global revolution might be centered on backward peasant Russia. In his *April Theses*, moreover, he put forward a number of specifically Bakuninist propositions: the transformation of the world war into a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system; the renunciation of parliamentary government in favor of a regime of soviets patterned after the Paris Commune; the abolition of the police, the army, and the bureaucracy; and the levelling of incomes. Lenin’s appeal for “a breakup and a revolution a thousand times more powerful than that of February” had a distinctly Bakuninist ring so much so, that one anarchist leader in Petrograd was convinced that Lenin intended to “wither away the state” the moment he got hold of it.²⁰

And, indeed, Lenin’s greatest achievement was to return to the anarcho-populist roots of the Russian revolutionary tradition, to adapt his Marxist theories to suit the conditions of a relatively backward country in which a proletarian revolution made little sense. While the Marxist in Lenin told him to be patient, to let Russia evolve in accordance with the laws of historical materialism, the Bakuninist in him insisted that the revolution must be made at once, by fusing the proletarian revolution with the revolutions of a land-hungry peasantry and a militant elite of *déclassé* intellectuals, social elements for which Marx, as we have seen, had expressed only contempt. Small wonder that Lenin’s orthodox Marxist colleagues accused him of becoming an anarchist and “the heir to the throne of Bakunin.”²¹ Small wonder, too, that several years later a leading Bolshevik historian could write that Bakunin “was the founder not only of European anarchism but also of Russian populist insurrectionism and therefore of Russian Social Democracy from which the Communist party emerged” and that Bakunin’s methods “in many respects anticipated the emergence of Soviet

²⁰ Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, Princeton, 1967, p. 129.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.