Bakunin and Japan

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1. Introduction

When Michael Bakunin suddenly arrived, via Yokohama, San Francisco and New York, at the London home of Alexander Herzen in the autumn of 1861, governments and financiers all over Europe shuddered at what they saw as the resurrection of the Devil Incarnate. Common knowledge though this fact may be, the time which Bakunin spent in Japan en route back to Europe remains a largely-unrecorded episode. None of the available Western-language biographies or appraisals spare more than a few lines on the subject. Even in Japan there has been no systematic attempt to find out what Bakunin did, though there are odd items about him scattered here and there, mostly dating from before the war. The failure of Western writers working on Bakunin to search for these and make efforts to have them translated is yet another example of the (at best) ignorance, or (at worst) scorn which continues to surround things oriental within the bourgeois establishment.

It is possible to put together what scraps of information exist, though, and the attempt to do so by a Japanese comrade, Wakayama Kenji (see below), has revealed still another problem: the reason for the lack of Bakunin research to date is not simply the absence of materials, but also the problem of getting access to those which do exist. The doors of barbarian Japan opened far more easily to Michael Bakunin in 1861 than do those of so-called research libraries to us common mortals and anarchists in 1978. The details (if, indeed, there are any, which is a point yet to be ascertained) of Bakunin's life in Japan, and no doubt those of other revolutionaries at other times in other places, have become the jealously-guarded property of the academic establishment, who fear inroads into their monopoly of information too much to allow people like us to cross their threshold.

Still, such scraps as are available can be put together to form a rough picture. The following pages are the result of an attempt to do that for some of the existing materials, though there remain a number yet to be read. No doubt there will be mistakes and omissions, but these are best treated by exposure to the light of day.

2. An Enigma, and a Contrast

Whatever its effect upon Indochina, the Philippines, China, Korea, Hawaii, Micronesia and almost any other part of Asia one cares to mention, American imperialism's arrival in Uraga Bay, Japan, in July 1853 was certainly a triumph of fate for Michael Bakunin, But for the forced entry of Commodore Matthew Perry's four heavily-armed 'Black Ships' (two steam-powered, two sail) into the hermetically-sealed world of the Tokugawa shoguns, Bakunin would have remained a Siberian exile until the after-effects of prison scurvy finally claimed his ravaged body. Actually, he might have rendered an additional prayer of gratitude to the Tsar himself, whose messengers, after knocking at Japan's north and west gates for a couple of centuries, finally followed Perry's example and found the front door all but undefended. They subsequently wrung a series of treaties of trade and commerce out of the unwilling bureaucrats of Edo (present-day Tokyo).

Fortunately or unfortunately, Bakunin did not waste any time in supplication during his flight, and idled long enough in Japan only to await the arrival of a ship that would take him out again and across the Pacific. Meanwhile, as far as can be judged, he passed his time upon the first

snooker table ever imported into Japan, while sampling the cellar of a hotel bar, also the first of its kind in that country.

Until 1865, when Bakunin's libertarianism was first made explicit in the principles of the International Brotherhood, he was a firm believer in nationalism as a liberating force, and in the revolutionary potential of the oppressed peasantry. At the time of his visit to Japan four years before, the country was not only in the throes of emerging from 250 years' totalitarian isolation under the Tokugawa shoguns; not only experiencing, like Poland twenty years earlier, an upsurge of bourgeois nationalism; but was also a predominantly agrarian country racked by peasant uprisings, Nevertheless, Bakunin, as far as can be seen, made no attempt to apply to this situation any of the energy which he had already so willingly dedicated to the efforts of the Poles and Hungarians, and would later dedicate to those of the French, the Italians and the Finns.

In stark contrast to Bakunin's apparent indifference, the militant Japanese anarcho-syndicalist Ôsugi Sakae, celebrating May Day in Paris in 1923, made strenuous attempts to contact survivors of Makhno's movement; visited striking women garment-makers at a typical Paris sweetshop; harangued French workers for allowing their May 1 festivities to be confined to suburban parish halls; got himself arrested for illegal political activities; and inscribed "Ôsugi was here" on the walls of his dungeon before being finally shipped back to Japan under custody after the intervention of the Japanese embassy.

What lay behind the obvious differences in their ways of thinking? They were, after all, cast in similar situations, even if the condit ions surrounding them, given sixty years of rapid change, were vastly different. However great these differences may have been, it seemed an interesting problem.

3. The Origins of this Pamphlet

In the beginning this piece was to be no more than a translation of a short article in Japanese, 'Bakunin's Stop-Over in Japan' (*Nihon ni Tachiyotta Bakunin*) by veteran militant Henmi Kichizô, which brought together some of the information concerning Bakunin mentioned already. At that time (early 1976) it seemed to be an interesting sidelight on Bakunin's career, fair enough for the centenary year but, after all, no more than a sidelight since the sojourn seems to have been of no personal significance as far as Bakunin hi self was concerned. It was to have been a sort of cameo sketch.

For one reason and another, we were never able to get around to the printing and publication of the translation. In the meantime, discussions within the *Libêro* editorial group convinced us that the insignificance of Japan for Bakunin constituted itself something both intriguing and, possible, important. In other words, *why* did he make so little of what was probably the only opportunity offered any 19th century militant European anarchist to visit the mysterious Orient? What was the motivation that sent him back post-haste to Europe, ignoring even the recent outbreak of a so-called "liberation struggle" in north America? Had he escaped west instead of east, would he have spent two weeks shooting pool as he did in Yokohama? All these things, from the vantage-point of Asia, seemed to us to call for reflection, lest we all get so euphoric over the centenary celebrations that we forget that no person - least of all one who calls his or her self an anarchist - is beyond criticism. An episode hitherto ignored as far as Bakunin's career was concerned, we felt,

might just prove to contain the seeds of a fresh consideration of the very word "revolutionary", as well as provide the chance for a new approach to Bakunin the man.

These were interesting speculations, but there was only a very bare minimum of facts from which to draw conclusions. Apart from the article mentioned already, there was just one other easily available 'Bakunin and Hakodate, Yokohama and Kanagawa' by Wakayama Kenji. Part of a collection entitled 'Our Bakunin' (*Warera no Bakúnin*) published in 1976 by the 'Libertaire' group in Tokyo in commemoration of the centenary of Bakunin's death, it goes into considerable detail about various aspects of Bakunin's stay in Yokohama, even citing two early specialized items dealing respectively with the bar and the billiard table with which Bakunin reportedly consoled himself! Wakayama also traces, by way of various documents, the site of the hotel where Bakunin stayed. Since most readers of this present pamphlet would probably not be in a position to conduct a walking tour of the streets of Yokohama nor would the precise design of the bar add much to our appreciation of Bakunin, it was decided to incorporate only the essential sections of the article and of another, shorter piece since written by Wakayama into the body of the original article by Henmi.

Tagged onto the end of the Henmi article were several loosely-related pages recording Ôsugi Sakae's role in the Rice Riots in Osaka in 1918. Ôsugi's part in these events was pretty-well exemplary of Bakunin's criteria for revolutionary militants - not leaders, but catalysts or stimulators. the article also mentioned briefly Ôsugi's trip to Europe in 1923 to attend an international anarchist conference. The interesting resemblance between Bakunin's incognito flight from Siberia in 1861 and Ôsugi's similarly-incognito visit to Europe sixty years later, was the inspiration for the present pamphlet.

None of us are professional historians with the leisure to while away the days in research libraries. Nor are we experts on either Bakunin or Ôsugi, and concrete aspects of their experience apart from their foreign trips have not been considered unless they had a direct bearing. Research on Bakunin, especially, was hampered by lack of materials here In Western languages.

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