

Mikhail Bakunin

A Biographical Sketch

Henry Seymour

1888

Mikhail Bakunin was born of an ancient aristocratic Russian family in 1814. At an early age, his father, who was then a wealthy proprietor of Torchok in the governmental department at Twer, sent him to a cadet school in St. Petersburg ; here he was soon entered as an artillery ensign. In those days this service was one which was reserved especially for the most favored nobles, the Czars traditional policy being to grant greater freedom of research in this than in other services. It is not to be wondered at, then, that Bakunin here nurtured the germs of those great revolutionary ideas which afterwards made him the terror of tyrants all over the world.

He longed to master the leading philosophical thought of his day, and never lacked opportunity by losing it. Quartered with his battery in the Polish provinces, the sight of the regime of absolute repression to which these provinces were subjected filled him with horror. He resigned his commission and went to live at Moscow, where he studied philosophy with Belinski. Towards 1846 he left Russia and visited Berlin, in order to study the more thoroughly the Hegelian philosophy, which was his wont to characterize as the Algebra of Revolution. He visited Dresden, Leipzig, and in fact, every locality where he imagined it possible to exchange opinions with the leading thinkers of the times. He published many philosophical dissertations over the signature of Jules Elisard. He visited Paris in 1843, and there he became an enthusiastic admirer of Proudhon. Bakunin was undoubtedly indebted more to Proudhon than to any other man for the latest development of his thought. Bakunin's style is akin to Proudhon's. The effect of Proudhon's ideas unmistakably led to the acceptance of those anarchistic sentiments which resulted in his setting on foot the great and invincible Nihilist party in Russia, and which made him one of the most prominent features of the modern revolutionary movement.

He visited Switzerland, and remained there four years. He entered heart and soul into the new social movement on foot there, being en rapport with the Polish exiles. He excited grave suspicions on the part of the Russian government, and was ordered to immediately return to Russia. But he returned to Paris instead, and there daringly delivered a public appeal to the Poles and Russians to organize a grand Pan-Slavonic revolutionary confederation. The Czar of Russia was enraged to the highest pitch. He demanded Bakunin's expulsion from France. The French government, ever the tool of tyranny, acceded to Russia's request, and then ten thousand roubles were offered for his arrest and transportation into Russian territory. The Revolution of February soon brought him back to France, but he quickly quitted to attend at the Congress of Slavs.

After this he went to Dresden and became one of the chiefs of the May revolution. Forced to fly from Dresden, he was arrested, sent to prison, and condemned to death in May, 1850, which sentence was afterwards commuted to imprisonment for life. But jails, like laws, as Swift says, are only cobwebs, which may catch small flies, and let wasps and hornets break through. Bakunin escaped to Austria, but was relentlessly pursued and again arrested, and sentenced to death for high treason. And again a commutation of the death-sentence was secured, and he was doomed to life-imprisonment. After repeated appeals varied with a few significant threats from Russia, the Austrian government was compelled to hand him over to the tender mercies of the Czar. Even then Bakunin was buoyed up with hope. He was confined in a filthy dungeon in the fort Petropavlofifski for several years, and, after surmounting almost insuperable obstacles to life, he was finally transported to Siberia, a region where all Russian reformers, friends of the people, are sent to be cruelly tortured to death. Luckily, Bakunin found there, as governor, Muravieff-Amurski, a cousin of General Muravieff, Bakunin being by marriage also a cousin of General Muravieff. Owing to this, he was allowed exceptional latitude, and he even pursued, in a manner, his philosophic studies. It was on account of this comparative immunity that Bakunin was enabled to perform what under ordinary circumstances would have been a miracle. He escaped from Siberia, suffering untold hardships; wandering footsore over many a mile of rough and rugged country, he reached the sea; and after many a fierce encounter with all sorts of surroundings, he contrived to obtain passage to Japan. From here he sailed to California. In 1860, he alighted, like a thunderbolt, in London.

Such struggles as this man experienced, and the sufferings he endured, would have softened the activity of most men, but our hero was a *Bakunin!* He had scarcely stepped foot in England when he redoubled his enthusiasm for the cause of social revolution. He appealed to the Poles and Russians to join hands in a revolutionary confederation. He assisted Herzen and Ogareff in editing and publishing the "Kolokol" (The Bell), a revolutionary sheet, but it had no immediate effect owing to its great depth and searching into philosophy; which was far beyond the mental grasp of his co-workers. His anarchistic ideas manifested themselves more largely than ever, and he at this time entered into sharp conflict with the revolutionary politicians of the Marx school. In 1869 he founded the Alliance of the Socialist Democracy, and on Sep. 28, 1870, he organized an insurrection at Lyons, the failure of which necessitated his flight to Geneva. The '71 movement in Paris is attributed, if not entirely, at least, very largely to the propagandism of Bakunin. At the Geneva Congress in 1870 he took positive issue with the political wing of the revolutionary party. He settled in Geneva for a little while, and started a revolutionary journal, entitled "Egalité". About this time he was summarily expelled from the Hague International Congress of 1872, but he carried thirty delegates with him, who finally overthrew the International, which the delegates re-organized under their own direction later.

Like most valuable literature, that which contains the innermost thought and feeling, Bakunin's assumed the shape of correspondence. No end of time he spent in elaborating letters to those who approached him in a spirit of inquiry. In these letters, some of which were aimed to arouse the sluggish and animate the timorous, others to propound philosophical deductions from fundamental truths, Bakunin specially formulated his system of scientific Anarchy. His earliest pamphlet I have been able to discover is "Odezwa do Slawian przez Ruskiego patriote" which was published in 1849. In 1862 he published in London a pamphlet in Russian, entitled "Romanoff, Pugatcheff, or Pestel?" occasioned by Alexander II, decreeing the abolition of "serfdom" in 1861. He issued an address at Leipzig, entitled "A mes amis Russes et Polonais".

“La Revolution sociale ou la Dictature militaire” and “La Theologie politique de Mazzini et l’Internationale” were two other important pamphlets. At other times he published “L’Empire Knoutogermanique et la Revolution Sociale”, “Paroles Adressees aux Etudiants”, “The Principles of the Revolution”. “Revolutionary Catechism” was not put into type, and was in cipher, but it was first made public by being read by the public prosecutor at the trial of Netchaieff on July 8th, 1871. But the most important of all is the unfinished fragment, “God and the State”, which splendidly posits Anarchy as the basis of true order. Given an equality of conditions, he contended, and Church and State become unnecessary. Absence of equal conditions, or opportunities, is due to the existence of the State, which, although originating naturally and necessarily, has now no further title to exist, in the present order of social development, and which only assumes a claim itself to exist to protect Society from evils that directly result from its own existence. He demonstrates the really inseparable relation of Church and State. He disposes, with an unanswerable and convincing array of argument, of the god-belief, and its accompanying superstitions. Citing Voltaire’s famous phrase “If god did not exist it would be necessary to invent him”, Bakunin scientifically illustrates the nonsense of such a notion, and argues out the opposite conclusion that “If god existed, it would be necessary to abolish him”. He also reviews the various experimental forms of government, and vigorously assails the final form — the government of science. “The government of science, and of men of science, even be they positivists, disciples of Auguste Comte, or, again, disciples of the doctrinaire school of German communism, cannot fail to be impotent, ridiculous, inhuman, cruel, oppressive, exploiting, maleficent.” The mission of science is to enlighten life, not to govern it.

Bakunin died at Berne, in Switzerland, July 2, 1876. A crude simple stone marks his memory there. And let the consciousness of his struggles and triumphs, and the loftiness of his life-purpose animate all possessed of heart and brain to make a noble man’s memory immortal by unceasingly striving to finish the glorious work which Mikhail Bakunin begun.

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