

Mikhail Bakunin

Founding Father of Anarchism

Joe King

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The anarchist movement throws up many men and women, who become famous because of their actions, ideas and writings. Perhaps the best known of them all was a Russian, Mikhail Bakunin.

Anarchists do not have god-like leaders, nor all-knowing prophets. Nobody gets it right all the time and nobody is above criticism. Whoever does not make mistakes is either (a) not human, or (b) someone who never does anything at all. It is possible to take inspiration from the actions and ideas of others without falling into the trap of uncritical hero-worship.

First steps to freedom

Born in 1814 in Tsarist Russia, Bakunin quickly developed a burning hatred of injustice. At age 21, after a couple of years in uniform, he resigned from the army and began to mix in democratic circles. Nine years later he met up with radicals like Proudhon and Marx in Paris. By this stage he had formulated a theory which saw freedom being achieved by a general rising, linked to revolutions in the subject nations.

His passionate campaigning for democracy and anti-colonialism made him ‘public enemy number one’ in the eyes of most European monarchies. In 1848 he was expelled from France for making a speech in support of independence for Poland. His passion for liberty and equality, and his condemnations of privilege and injustice gave him an enormous appeal in the radical movement of the day.

The following year Bakunin rushed to Dresden where he played a leading role in the May insurrection. This led to his arrest and he was sentenced to death. The Austrian monarchy also wanted him, so he was extradited and again sentenced to death. But before the hangman could put the noose around his neck, Russia demanded his extradition and he spent the following six years jailed without trial in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Release from jail was followed by exile in Siberia.

Escape from Siberia

In 1861 he made a dramatic escape and returned to Europe by way of Japan, the Panama Canal and San Francisco! For the next three years he threw himself into the struggle for Polish independence. Then he began to rethink his ideas. Would national independence, in itself, lead to liberty for working people? This took him away from nationalism and towards anarchism.

In 1868 he joined the International Working Men’s Association (also known as the First International), a federation of radical and trade union organisations with sections in most European countries. Very rapidly his ideas developed and he became a famous exponent of anarchism. While agreeing with much of Marx’s economic theory, he rejected his authoritarian politics and the major division within the International was between the anarchists and the Marxists.

While Marx believed that socialism could be built by taking over the state, Bakunin looked forward to its destruction and the creation of a new society based on free federations of free workers. This soon became the policy of the International in Italy and Spain, and grew in popularity in Switzerland, Belgium and France. After failing to defeat the anarchist idea, Marx and his followers resorted to a campaign of smears and lies against Bakunin.

A movement is born

A committee set up to investigate the charges found, by a majority, Bakunin guilty and voted to expel him. The Swiss section called a further congress, where the charges were found to be false. An international conference also vindicated Bakunin, and went on to adopt the anarchist position of rejecting any rule by a minority.

Defeated, Marx and his followers moved the General Council of the International to New York where it faded into irrelevance. The ideas developed by Bakunin in the last decade of his life went on to form the basis of the modern anarchist movement. Worn out by a lifetime of struggle, Bakunin died in Switzerland on July 1st 1876.

His legacy is enormous. Although he wrote manifestos, articles and books he never finished a single sizable work. Being primarily an activist he would stop, sometimes literally in mid-sentence, to play his part in struggles, strikes and rebellions. What he left to posterity is a collection of fragments. Even so, his writings are full of insights that are as relevant today as they were in his time.

The danger of dictatorship

While understanding that ideas and intellectuals have an important role to play in the revolution, a role of education and articulating peoples' needs and desires, he issued a warning. He cautioned them against trying to take power and create a *dictatorship of the proletariat*. The notion that a small group of people, no matter how well meaning, could execute a coup d'état for the benefit of the majority was a *heresy against common sense*. Long before the Russian revolution he warned that a new class of intellectuals and semi-intellectuals might seek to step into the shoes of the landlords and bosses, and deny working people their freedom.

In 1873 he foretold, with great accuracy, that under the

dictatorship of the proletariat of the Marxists the party leaders would concentrate the reins of government in a strong hand and divide the masses into two great armies — industrial and agricultural — under the direct command of state engineers who will constitute a new privileged scientific and political class.

Bakunin understood that government is the means by which a minority rules. In so far as 'political power' means the concentration of authority in a few hands, he declared, it must be abolished. Instead there must be a 'social revolution' which will change the relationship between people and place power in the hands of the masses through their own federation of voluntary organisations.

It is necessary to abolish completely and in principle and in practice, everything that may be called political power, for as long as political power exists there will always be rulers and ruled, masters and slaves, exploiters and exploited.

Who now can say he was not right?

A selection of books from the revolutionary with a beard

Bakunin on Anarchy (edited by Sam Dolgoff) A huge and comprehensive anthology of his writings. By far the best collection available in the English language.

Basic Bakunin (edited by Robert M Cutler) Writings from his time in the International Workmen's Association; covering revolutionary socialism, the general strike, co-operation, all-round education, and more. Only one of these articles has previously appeared in a complete English translation.

and a few pamphlets...

God and the State by Michael Bakunin Cheap version of his book; which combines an introduction to anarchism, a manifesto of atheism and a summing up of his thoughts.

Marxism, Freedom and the State by Michael Bakunin In the more than a century since these passages were written the worship of the state has become a religion over a very large part of the globe, and we have seen in practice the fulfilment of Bakunin's gloomy forebodings on the destination of Marxist socialism. History itself has shown the relevance of his arguments.

The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State by Michael Bakunin For a few weeks in 1871 the workers of Paris took control of their city.

On Violence by Michael Bakunin His letter to Sergei Nechaev (infamous Russian terrorist) where he tackles the subject by expressing his faith in humanity and in the process rejecting the option of terrorism

Bakunin and Nechaev by Paul Avrich What exactly was the relationship between Bakunin and Nechaev? Are Marxists correct to say Bakunin was an advocate of terrorism?

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