

# **Contributions to the biography of Mikhail Bakunin**

**Bakunin's recollections of youth**

Max Nettlau

1896

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## INTRODUCTORY REMARK

It is only in these last two or three years that a mass of previously unknown documents, published for the first time, have begun to shed light on the lesser-known parts of Bakunin's life, and even for the portions of that life that we believed sufficiently well known, an abundance of new and surprising facts present themselves. We cite, save the publications of theoretical writings after some manuscripts or rare publications, only the study of his relations with Byelinsky (by Mil-ioukoff), the great correspondence with Herzen, Ogareff and others (published by Dragomanoff), the correspondence with Georges Herwegh (from 1843 to 1849, published recently by a son of the poet),<sup>1</sup> the letter to Celso Cerretti (*Société nouvelle*, 1896), the remembrances of Auguste Reichel (literary supplement to the *Révolution*, 1893), etc.

I have tried to establish, with these materials and numerous others, a biography of Bakunin that would be packed with meticulous details in which only a limited number of persons have, at this moment, a real interest and that cannot be published for the general public, and that I desire to reproduce myself in polygraphy in fifty copies (in the German language), of which a part will be given to the public libraries. However there are several fragments of a more general interest, and of those I propose to publish from time to time some extracts and summaries, in a form more accessible to the public and leaving aside the cumbersome details of my biography. So I begin with what we know of the origin and childhood of Bakunin.

### I. THE CHILDHOOD OF BAKUNIN

A happy chance has preserved for us the beginning of an autobiography of Bakunin, written on 12 pages (in-4°), probably four or five years before his death. It has evidently been written on two occasions. The first part (pp. 1-4, l. 1<sup>st</sup>) contains a true biography, while the second (up to the end of page 12) is a general description of the state of Russia under the emperor Nicolas, in the form of notes written for someone to whom they are addressed by the designation of "my dear" and who is addressed in *tu* form. What is on pages 13 and following, if they exist, I do not know.

So is it a beginning of the famous, but untraceable memoirs of Bakunin, we are asked? I still do not want to discuss here that question, on which there exists, moreover, an unpublished manuscript record by Bakunin himself. October 25, 1874, from Lugano, he wrote to his old friends at Berne: "As for my, my dear friends, retired to the sweet solitude of Lugano, where I am doing very well among my own people, I write my memoirs and I read, I study a great deal." The writing, however, of the manuscript makes me believe that it belongs to an era after the date of that letter, but that would be a question to examine anew.

Here is the text of that manuscript:

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<sup>1</sup> In one of these letters, written in Berlin in the summer of 1848, we find, what is, to our knowledge, the first directly *anarchist* observation that we have discovered thus far. After singing the praises of the well-known speech of Proudhon on July 31, he remarks that, despite that, if Proudhon had come to [governmental] power, we would probably be forced to combat him, for, all in all, he also has his little system behind him. "What's more, adds Bakunin, the times of the parliamentary life, of assemblies and constituent assemblies is passed and the interest in these old forms no longer exist or are only forced and imaginary.

"I do not believe in constitutions and laws; the best constitution would not satisfy me. We need something else: of storm and life and a new world, without law, and as a result, free (*eine neue, gesetzlose und darum freie Welt*). (V. 1848, *Briefe von und am Georg Herwegh*, Munich, 1896, p. 23.)

## THE STORY OF MY LIFE

### *First Part. — 1815 (sic)-1840.*

So I will begin the story of my life by citing my birth certificate. I was born on May, 30/18, 1815 (sic) on one of my father's properties, in the government (province or prefecture) de Tver, in the district of Forjok, between Moscow and Saint-Petersburg.

My father belonged to the old nobility. His uncle, of the same name, having been minister of foreign affairs under Empress Catherine II, my father, while still a child of eight or nine years of age, was sent as an attaché to the Russian embassy at Florence, where one of his relatives, who was charged with his education, was the minister. He only returned to Russia at about the age of thirty-five. So his education took place and his youth was spent abroad. My father was a very intelligent man, well educated, even learned, very liberal, very philanthropic, deist, not atheist, but a free thinker, in relation with all philosophical and scientific celebrities that there were then in Europe; and, consequently, in complete contradiction with all that lived and breathed, in his time, in Russia, where only one small sect of more or less persecuted freemasons watched and slowly kindled, in secret, the sacred fire of the respect and love of humanity.

The world of the court of Saint-Petersburg appeared so repugnant to my father that, voluntarily breaking up his career, he took refuge for his whole life in the country and never left. However, he was so well known by all the enlightened men who lived in Russia, in his times, that his country house almost always full. From 1817 to 1825 he was part of the "Secret Society of the North," precisely that which, in December 1825, made an unfortunate attempt at a military uprising at Saint-Petersburg. Several times the presidency of that society had been proposed to him. But he had become too skeptical and, over time as well, *too prudent* to accept it, which is why he did not share the tragic, but glorious fate of several of his friends and relatives, some of whom were hung in Saint-Petersburg in 1825 (*leg.* 1826), while the others were condemned either to forced labor, or to exile in Siberia.

My father was rich enough. He was, as we expressed it then, the owner of a thousand masculine souls, women not counting in slavery, as they still do not count even in liberty. He was thus the master of roughly 2000 slaves, male and female, with the right to sell them, [*illegible word*] them, transport them to Siberia, deliver them to the army as recruits and above all to exploit them without mercy, or, speaking simply, to plunder them and life on their forced labor. I have said that my father arrived in Russia full of liberal sentiments. His liberalism revolted at first against this horrible, infamous position of slave-master; he even made some efforts, badly calculated and unsuccessful, to emancipate his serfs, then, aided by habit and self-interest, he became a tranquil proprietor, like so many others among his neighbors, tranquil and resigned to the slavery of these hundreds of human beings whose labor nourished them.

One of the principal causes of the change that occurred in him was his marriage; at forty years of age and madly in love with a young woman of eighteen, noble like him, beautiful, but poor, he married her; and in order to make up for that selfish act, he strove for the rest of his life to descend to her level instead of making her ascend to his own. My mother was a Mouravieff, first cousin of Mouravieff the Hangman, as well as one Mouravieff who had been hanged. She was a

vain, selfish person, and none of her children loved her. But we adored our father who, during our childhood, was full of kindness and indulgence for us.

There were eleven of us children. Still today there remain to me five brothers and two sisters. We were raised under the auspices of my father, in the western, rather than the Russian manner. — We lived, as it were, outside of the Russian reality, in a world full of sentiment and fancy, but devoid of all reality. — First, our education was very liberal. But since the disastrous outcome of the conspiracy of December (1825), my father, frightened by that defeat of liberalism, changed the system. He attempted from that period to make us faithful subjects of the czar. It was with that aim that at fourteen years of age I was sent in 1830 (*sic*) to Saint-Petersburg to enter the school of artillery.

I spent three years there and at the age of seventeen years and a few months, in 1832, I was promoted as an officer.

A few words on my intellectual and moral development during that whole period. On leaving my father's house, I spoke French fairly well, the only language that I had been made to study grammatically, a bit of German, and I understood English after a fashion. Not a word of Latin and Greek, and I had no idea of Russian grammar. My father had taught the *Histoire ancienne*, by Bossuet, he read me a bit of Livy and Plutarch, the latter in Amyot's translation. In addition, I had some very vague, uncertain notions of geography and, thanks to an uncle, a retired officer of the general staff, I had learned fairly well arithmetic, algebra to the equations of the first degree inclusive, and planimetry. That is all the scientific baggage that I carried from the house of my father at fourteen years. As for religious teaching, I had none. Our family's priest, an excellent man that I loved a great deal, because he brought me gingerbread, came to give us some from the catechism, which exercised absolutely no influence, positive or negative, on my heart or mind. I was more skeptical than believing, or rather indifferent.

My ideas on morals, on right, on duty, were consequently vague as well. I had some feelings, but no principle. I loved instinctively, by a habit picked up in my childhood in the milieu where I had passed that childhood, — I loved the good and the beautiful and I detested the mean, without being able to being aware of what constitutes good and evil; I was outraged by and revolted against every cruelty and every injustice. I even believe that indignation and revolt were the first sentiments that developed in me, more vigorously than the others. My moral education was already distorted by the fact that my whole material, intellectual and moral existence was founded on a crying injustice, on absolute immorality, on the slavery of our peasants, who provided for our leisure. — My father had full consciousness of that immorality, but, as a *practical man*, he never spoke to us of it, and we *were ignorant very long, too long*. — Finally, I had a very adventurous spirit. My father, who had travelled a great deal, had told us of his journeys. One of our favorite readings, a reading that we always did with him, was the description of voyages. My father was a very learned naturalist. He adored nature and he transmitted that love to us, that ardent curiosity for all the things of nature, without however giving us the least scientific notion. The idea of traveling, of seeing countries, of new worlds, became for all of us a fixed idea. — That abiding, persistent idea had developed my fancy. In my moments of leisure I told myself some stories where I always represented myself fleeing from my father's house and seeking some adventures far, far away. With that, I adored my brothers and sisters, my sisters especially, and I revered my father like a God.

Such I was when I entered, as a cadet, the school of artillery. It was my first encounter with Russian reality.

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Here the autobiographical portion of the manuscript unfortunately ends...  
[Nettlau's account continues with some recollections by others relating to Bakunin's youth.]

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Published in *La Société nouvelle*

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