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Mikhail Bakunin
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May 1843

Retrieved on 24th April 2021 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Translated by Shawn Wilbur from the French text published in *La vie ouvrière*, No. 112, May 20, 1914,

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Letter to Arnold Ruge

Mikhail Bakunin

May 1843

St. Peter's Island, Lake Biel, May 1843.

Our friend Marx has passed on your letter from Berlin. You seem disgruntled with Germany. You only see the family and the bourgeois, cooped up with all its thoughts and all its desires between four stakes, and you do not want to believe in the springtime that will make it emerge from its hole. Ah, dear friend! Do not lose faith! You especially, do not lose it! What! me, the Russian, the Barbarian, I do not renounce it, I do not want to despair of Germany: and you who are in the very midst of the movement, you who have lived through its beginning, and been surprised by its development, you now want to accuse of powerlessness these same ideas from which previously, when their strength had still not been put to the test, you expected everything? Oh, I agree, the day of the German '89 is still far off! Haven't the Germans always remained several centuries behind? But that is not a reason to cross your arms now and be shamefully disheartened. If men like you no longer believe in the future of Germany, no longer want to work for it, then who will believe, and who will act?

I write this letter on the island of Rousseau, on Lake Biel. You know, I do not thrive on imaginations and clichés; but I feel myself

tremble with all my being at the thought that today even, when I write to you, and on such a subject, I have been led to this place by destiny. Oh yes, I attest to it, my belief in the victory of humanity over the priests and tyrants is the same belief that the great exile has poured into so many millions of hearts, and that he had carried here with him. Rousseau and Voltaire, those immortals, have become young again; it is in the most intelligent heads of the German nation that they celebrate their resurrection; a powerful enthusiasm for humanism and for the finally regenerated State, of which man has really become the principle, a burning hatred of the priests and of the insolent stain that they impress on everything that is humanly great and true, has entered the world anew. Philosophy will yet one day enjoy the role that it has so gloriously fulfilled in France; and it is not an argument against it, that its formidable power has revealed itself to its adversaries before having been revealed to itself. It is naïve and does not expect, at first, the struggle and persecution: for it takes all men for reasonable beings and addresses itself to their reason, as if that reason commanded them as a sovereign. It is always in order that its adversaries, who have the gall to declare: "We are unreasonable and we wish to remain so," begin through unreasonable measures the practical combat, the resistance to reason. Voltaire once said: You, little men, graced with a little job that gives you a little authority in a little country, you cry out against philosophy? In Germany, we are in the era of Rousseau and Voltaire, and those of us who are young enough to gather the fruits of our labor, will see a great revolution and a time when it will be worth the pain of having lived. These words of Voltaire, we can repeat them, with the certainty that history will confirm them no less this time than the first.

The French, at this moment, are still our masters. They have over us, from the political point of view, an advance of several centuries, and all that follows from it. That powerful literature, and that art, all so lively, that culture and that intellectualization of all the people, so many conditions of which we only have a distant

understanding! We must acquire what we lack; we must give the lash to our metaphysical pride, which cannot stimulate the world; we must learn, we must work day and night, to make ourselves capable of living as men among men, to be free and make others free; we must – I always return to this – finally take possession of our era and our thoughts. The thinker and the poet have the privilege of anticipating the future and of constructing, in the midst of the chaos of the death and decomposition that surrounds us, a new world of liberty and beauty.

And knowing all that, initiated into the secret of the eternal powers that will give birth to the new times, you want to give up hope? If you give up hope in Germany, you not only give up hope in yourself, you renounce the pleasure of truth, to which you have devoted yourself. Few men are noble enough to devote themselves entirely and without reservation to the action of the liberating truth, few know how to transfer to their contemporaries that movement of the heart and head; but the one to whom in has once been given to be the mouth of Liberty and to captive the world with the charming accents of the voice of the goddess, that one possesses a guarantee for the victory of their cause that another can only obtain in their turn the a similar effort and a similar success.

But we must – I must acknowledge it – break with our own past. We have been beaten. It is brutal force alone, it is true, that has been an obstacle to the movement of thought and poetry; but that brutality would have been impossible, if we had not had lead an existence apart in the heaven of learned theory, if we had had the people on our side. It was not before them that we have posed the question of its proper cause. The French have done otherwise. Their liberators would have been crushed, if they could have been.

I know that you love the French, that you sense their superiority. That is enough for a strong will, in such a great cause, to make itself their imitator, and to match them. What feeling! What inexpressible bliss que this effort and this power! Oh, how I envy you such a task, and even your anger, for that too is the feeling felt

by all the noble hearts of your people. May I only collaborate with you: my blood and my life for the liberation of that people! Believe me, it will rise, it will reach the great daylight of human history. It will not always make itself a title to glory of that shame of the Germans, of being the best servants of all tyrannies. You reproach it for not being free, for only being a domesticated people. You only say there what it is: how can you conclude from that what it will be?

Was it not just the same in France? And yet how quickly was the whole of France transformed into a nation, and her sons became citizens! It is not permissible for us to abandon the cause of the people, even if they deserted it themselves. The bourgeois have defected, they persecute us: what does it matter? Their children will only devote themselves more faithfully to our cause: the fathers try to kill freedom, they will die striving for it.

And what advantage do we not have over the men of the eighteenth century! in their time, they talked to themselves. We, we have living before our eyes the gigantic results of their ideas, we can enter into contact with these results through practice. Let us go to France, let us cross the Rhine, and we will be, in a single step, transported into the midst of new elements, which, in German, are still to be born. The diffusion of political thought in all the strata of society, the energy of thought and speech, which only explodes in the most prominent heads because it gives issue, through each word, to the concentrated passion of an entire people, – all of that could teach us now through a living spectacle. A journey in France and even a prolonged stay in Paris would be for us of the greatest utility.

The German theory, cast down from the heights of its heaven, today sees itself, in its fall, mangled by some brutal theologians and stupid country squires, who shake it by the ears, like we do a hunting dog, to show it the way to take. It has largely deserved it. It would be well if that fall cured it of some of its pride. It would be up to it to draw from that adventure this lesson, that on the

solitary somber heights it is abandoned without defense, and that it is only in the heart of the people that it can find security. “Who will win over the people, we or you?” these obscure eunuchs cry to the philosophers. Oh, shame that such has taken place! But also cheers and honor to the men who can bring about the triumph of the cause of humanity now.

It is here, yes, it is here that the combat truly begins: and so strong is our cause, that we, a few scattered men, with hands tied, by our war-cry alone we inspire fright in their myriads! Let us go, with heart, and I want to break your bonds, oh Germans who wish to become Greeks, me the Scythian. Send me your works. On the island of Rousseau I will print them, and in letters of fire I will inscribe once more in the heavens the history of the defeat of the Persians!