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Nechayev: Is He a Political Criminal or Not?

Mikhail Bakunin

1872

We have published, on August 16, a document protesting against the arrest of a man who is held, rightly or wrongly, for Nechayev, the Russian political agitator. In publishing this document, we have had the strongest desire to see this beautiful right that the Swiss guarantee aux émigrés, this right of asylum which we enjoy, preserve intact its original purity and sanctity.

The Russian government pursues Nechayev, as every despotic government does, when a man has made an attempt, even a fruitless attempt, to overthrow it. Everyone understands how, at any price, the Russian government seeks to have this man in his power. Nechayev today finds himself on the hospitable soil of Switzerland; consequently, as a political criminal, Russia cannot demand his extradition. To seize him, there remained only one means, that of making him an ordinary criminal. On such occasions, despotism has no qualms about using anything: lies, slander, the lowest intrigues, nothing disgusts it, provided that it reaches its goal. But the lower the cunning of the Russian government, the its enthusiasm for depriving the émigré of his right of asylum

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grows, and the more we feel that it is a duty for to bring to light its cowardly artifices. That is why we judge it necessary to explain in a few words the nature and character of the trial of Nechayev. We will limit ourselves to the stenographic reports which, after a preliminary revision, have been published by the government in the Russian gazettes. That will be sufficient to convince anyone that the Nechayev's crime is of a purely political nature.

To avoid any misunderstanding, we feel compelled to express with even greater precision and clarity, all that has been said in our declaration of August 16. We are far from sharing the ideas of Nechayev, his principles and especially their practical application. We could even prove, if we had to, that he has long held us as his political adversaries. However, this does not stop us, quite the contrary, it obliges us to testify, on our honor, that all the actions of Nechayev, from the organization of a secret society to the murder of a certain Ivanov, belonged to the political domain, and not to that of ordinary crimes. That is why Nechayev cannot be delivered to the Russian government. We must also not here that there exists, between Russia and Switzerland, no extradition agreement.

But before concerning ourselves more deeply with the Nechayev case, let us say a few words about the country where it took place. It is well known that the Russian people are, of all the peoples of Europe, the one that is most oppressed. A despotic, murderous yoke smothers, in its very beginnings, every social movement; individual liberty is something unknown in that kingdom of the knout; so is it necessary to speak of the position of the Russian people? Everyone, however little they know of Russia, knows that, of the 80 million inhabitants, 70 million, despite the highly praised emancipation of the peasants, dies under the burden of a slave's labor, and why? To provide for the enormous upkeep that the state gives to some employees charged with stifling every human feeling in the people, with pursuing those who

would try to awaken in them some ideas independence. As for the people themselves, they think themselves fortunate when they have morsel of bread made from bad flour and dried tree bark.

Is it astonishing that after that the miserable state of the people strongly moves the student youth whom the influence of the bureaucracy has still not corrupted? Is it astonishing that the shameful exploitation of the masses by the government offends too profoundly the ideas of justice inherent to the life of study? They have lined up on the side of the people, because they have seen their sufferings, and because they appear too bitter. And it is not only with words that they have struggled to prove their sympathy to their oppressed brothers; no, their best, their most noble part has not drawn back before any sacrifice, if some good could result from it for the people. prison, le banishment, even the death penalty could never weaken its energy, and no sooner does the government stifles one of these movements in favor of people, than another emerges, in a new form.

It would take too long to recount the history of all these movements. That is not our goal. We have touched on it, in passing, only to show the milieu in which Nechayev has acted. It is noted that the members of the secret alliance by him belonged, for the most part, to the student youth. That society was founded in Moscow, in 1869, under the name of *Jury vengeur du Peuple*.¹

Its aim was to raise up the people. Nechayev, who surpassed all the others by his truly remarkable energy, was its most influential member. He was a fanatic, formed under the rude influence of the conditions of Russian life and of the miserable, desperate state of the people. The members of the association

¹ Narodnaya Rasprava, often translated as "The People's Vengeance." Bakunin's French here translates to something like "The Avenging Jury of the People."

had given themselves body and soul to their idea, and lived only to achieve the emancipation of the people; they had made in advance the sacrifice of their blood.

The public prosecutor even characterized them by the following words: “*And that is why, gentlemen judges, I hold this conspiracy to be dangerous.* Men of very different opinions and ideas have gathered to form a single collective whole. And if they sacrifice everything to reach their goal, we can confirm that their conspiracy is dangerous to the state, although their association is few in number and does not possess considerable funds. That is why, gentlemen, I have come to the deep conviction that the secret society of which I have spoken is truly dangerous, not because of the number of its members and the pecuniary means at its disposal, but because of its internal organization, the spirit and energy that animate its members.” (*Gazette de Saint-Petersbourg*, 1871, N1 188.)

Let us return now to Nechayev, and repeat, in an impartial manner and without ourselves pronouncing in any manner, how they are spoken of in the trial.

All the accused are in agreement in maintaining that he has given certain proofs of a remarkable energy, that he has exerted a tireless activity, and that he is fanatically devoted to his cause.

Here is what the prosecutor said in his statement: *I do not want to make a detailed characterization of Nechayev here; that would be unnecessary, from the moment that he did not appear before the Jury.*² *However, I want to say enough about him to illuminate the general character of the case. Nechayev is the son of a poor artisan. He was born in the village of Ivanovo, in the district of Schnisk, government of Vladimir; according to the communication of Pryjoff,*³ *he only learned to read and write in his sixteenth*

² We must remark here that, according to the laws of Russia, no defendant can be condemned *in absentia*, and that is why Nechayev, who succeeded in fleeing to a foreign country, did not appear at all in the trial.— Note in original.

³ One of the accused.— Note in original.

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son fulfilling a state function, to expose to prosecution a man who would be convicted of it. Thus Mr. Sérébrénnikoff cannot today return to his homeland, and without having committed any crime. And that is certainly not an exceptional case. The Russian agents took the liberty of still other exploits on the soil of the Swiss Republic. At Geneva lives a certain Russian certain émigré named Outine. The Russian government found it necessary to take the contents of his papers; then they simply accused him of being a counterfeiter. A search took place at his home, and as one would imagine, they could not find the shadow a false Russian bill, nevertheless the Russian agents learned what they desired to know.

We have presented enough facts so that everyone can get an idea of the nature of the trial. We do not draw on our own conclusions, but instead on the official acts themselves,⁴ that is why we ask ourselves: Who could maintain now that the crime de Netschajeff is not a political crime?

We appeal to the justice, conscience, and good judgment of the Swiss Republic. The country which offered an asylum to Don Carlos, to Isabelle, who had poured the blood of the people in floods, this country does not wish, and cannot consent to surrender Nechayev, who, apart from its principles and from the result to which his conspiracy has led, has always been a firm and passionate champion against one of the worst governments of Europe.

We are persuaded that on the soil that gave birth to William Tell, an émigré, despite the cunning of the despotic governments, will always find an asylum.

Russian political émigrés.
Alexandre OELSPLITZ
Zemphiri RALLY

⁴ These documents, the indictments, among others, will be translated by us, and presented to the Swiss government which can verify the translation and the official character.

year, and had received, all in all, at Ivanovo, only a very incomplete education. Despite that, Nechayev being born in a village, having passed all his childhood and early youth there, acquired the experience and the necessary qualities for the success of his projects; he has familiarized himself with the life and ideas of the people, he has learned to know their needs, so that, as Mr. Pryjoff said, he has been and will always be a child of the people.

After leaving Ivanovo, Nechayev took courses at the University of Moscow, after which he became master of a parish school in St. Petersburg. In a relatively short period of time, he was able to build relationships; he perfected his education in several branches, and achieved a remarkable degree of knowledge of which he always knew how to take advantage. "All the accused speak of Nechayev as on a man of great energy. All that facts that we have in hand are convincing proofs of it. Some say that he allowed himself only two hours of sleep, and others that he had given himself body and soul to his cause. So that we can deduce from the testimonies of all the accused that Nechayev was animated by a great devotion to the common cause and to the ideas that it strove to realize." (*Feuille d'Avis de Saint-Petersbourg*, 1871, N1 188.)

And it is not us, but the public prosecutor who characterized Nechayev and his companions in this way.

From the foundation of the secret society, there entered a man who, according to the testimony of the members of the "*Jury vengeur du Peuple*," only did harm to the common interest, and through his conduct inspired suspicion in the other members of the society. The accused Uspensky, a member of the association, charged with gathering facts on the activity of each of the members of the society, said that he received from different sides some details suggesting that this man, called Ivanov, had got himself accepted as a member of the society only with the intention of denouncing the whole affair to the government (*Feuille d'Avis de St.-Petersbourg*, 1871, Nos 181, 183 et 209). Then from this a double question presented itself,

a question that it was necessary to be posed and resolved as follows: to rid themselves of such a dangerous man, or expose the whole cause, the entire organization, and all the members to an imminent peril. So five members, including Nechayev, resolved to kill Ivanov in order to safeguard their work. They accomplished their resolution. Soon after, the murder of Ivanov and the secret association were discovered, from which has resulted endless searches, and arrests without number. However, Nechayev, with the help of his friends, succeeded in fleeing the country. The trial began; in the official acts of the Russian government it bears the following title: *“Legal trial of the Conspiracy having for aim the overthrow of the present Government of Russia.”*

This title alone proves from what point of view the Russian government considered the whole affair,—it they took it to be a political matter or not. They summoned 84 accused persons to appear before the court as participants of the conspiracy, 63 were detained in prison. They were all divided into different categories and each of them subjected to a special legal examination. To the first category belonged the 11 indicted. They were all accused of conspiracy against the government, four among them, in addition, were implicated in the affair of the murder of Ivanov (Uspensky, Pryjoff, Nicolaieff et Kusnetzoff). The gathering of these four accused with the seven others, who had in common with them only the conspiracy, proves well that the affair had a purely political character and that the government only considered it from that point of view.

It is entirely natural that the Russian government tried hard to accuse those who had killed Ivanov of having only acted according to motives of personal interest. It strove to demonstrate that that Ivanov had been the victim of a vengeance, entirely personal; but the opposite appears clearly, as much from the declarations of the accused, as from the statements of the lawyers.

Thus the accused Uspensky said: “Nechayev had not grudge whatsoever again Ivanov, any more than I did. Nechayev, besides, absorbed by his work and activity, could not in any way concern himself with personalities such as they were. The revolutionary principles with which they were penetrated to the bottom of his heart excluded for him every ideal of personal vengeance, if even it had been useful to the association. I am finally persuaded that Nechayev was too human to sacrifice the life of anyone to a personal sentiment (Feuille d’avis de St-Pétersbourg, 1871, N1 194). »

The lawyer for the accused Uspensky, prince Ourousoff speaks of him in the following terms: The question bearing on what had to be done, when one person harmed the entire association, a question posed theoretically, could not be resolved otherwise, according to the dialectic of his organization, than by the removal of that person (Ivanov) at any cost. For the society there was only one means of smashing that obstacle—it was death; there remained to him absolutely on that alternative (Feuille d’avis de St-Pétersb. 1871, No191).

We have already said that Nechayev had managed to escape. The ardent desire of the Russian to have him in its hands, drove the Russian agents to such procedures, that it would be ridiculous and stupid, if one could not see secret and malicious intentions in it. Thus, during the month of May in the year 1870 a young man, named Siméon Sérébrénnikoff, was arrested at Geneva. Despite the testimony of all those who knew him and Nechayev and who testified that he had no resemblance with that latter, despite the testimony of his close acquaintances, he was detained in prison for 12 days. In that way a perfectly innocent man was deprived for 12 days of his liberty and compromised as well, for the Russian agents learned of the correspondence that he exchanged with his friends. That correspondence contained nothing which could, in a free country, have compromised a man, but to the Russian government, a single word is often enough, an unfavorable judgment bearing on some per-