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Review of The ‘Confession’ of Mikhail Bakunin

Paul Avrich

1977

THE “CONFESSION” OF MIKHAIL BAKUNIN. With the marginal comments of Tsar Nicholas I. Translated by *Robert C. Howes*. Introduction and notes by *Lawrence D. Orton*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977. 200 pp. \$12.50.

Bakunin wrote his celebrated *Confession* in 1851, at the behest of Tsar Nicholas I, while imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Speaking as “a prodigal, alienated, depraved son before his outraged and wrathful father,” he recounted his activities and impressions from his departure for Berlin in 1840 to his arrest in 1849 following the abortive Dresden uprising. *The Confession* is an important psychological as well as historical document. Apart from conveying Bakunin’s state of mind as a prisoner of the autocracy, it reveals his deep-seated pan-Slavic and anti-German sentiments, his distrust of parliamentary government, and his plan for the creation of a secret revolutionary society. It is among the most absorbing of all Bakunin’s writings, and the tsar read it with care, underlining the text and making marginal comments, which are reproduced in the present edition. Judging it a “very

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interesting and instructive” work, he gave it to the tsarevitch, Alexander II, for his edification.

For the next seventy years the *Confession* remained in the archives of the political police. Its existence, however, was not a secret, and on one occasion the government printed extracts from it to embarrass and discredit Bakunin. Yet the publication of the full text in 1921 aroused a flurry of controversy. Bakunin’s self-abasing appeals for clemency were greeted with contempt by his detractors, while his defenders pointed to his criticisms of the Russian bureaucracy and his refusal to name accomplices. The *Confession*, however, must not be seen in simple terms. Neither an abject recantation nor a courageous gesture of defiance, it was a mixture, as Bakunin confided to Herzen, of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, fancy and truth. Entombed in the fortress, Bakunin was fighting for his health, his sanity, his very survival, and his tone of contrition was a necessary expedient if he was ever to regain his freedom.

Written in Russian, the *Confession* has been translated into German, Czech, French, Polish, and Italian, but only excerpts have previously appeared in English. We are therefore indebted to Robert C. Howes for this workmanlike rendition, as well as to Lawrence D. Orton, who has provided a solid introduction and detailed annotations, making use of earlier editions and of the many articles — by Max Nettlau, B. P. Kozmin, M. P. Sazhin, and Vera Figner, among others — inspired by the original publication of the document. The *Confession*, is remarkable not only for the light which it sheds on Bakunin’s personality but for its account, by a leading participant, of the turbulent events of the 1840s. Professors Howes and Orton are to be congratulated for making this important work accessible to the English reader.