

Letter to the Bakunin Centenary Celebration

Pëtr Kropotkin

1914

Dear Comrades

I am sorry that I cannot be with you for the commemoration of the birthday of our great teacher, Mikhail Bakunin. There are few names which ought to be as dear to the revolutionary working men of the world as the name of this apostle of the mass revolt of the proletarians of all nations.

Surely, none of us will ever think of minimizing the importance of that labour of thought which precedes every Revolution. It is the conscience of the wrongs of society, which gives to the downtrodden and oppressed ones the vigour that is required to revolt against those wrongs.

But with immense numbers of mankind, quite an abyss lies between the *comprehension* of the evils, and the *action* that is needed to get rid of these evils.

To move people to cross this abyss, and to pass from grumbling to action, was Bakunin's chief work.

In his youth, like most educated men of his times, he paid a tribute to the vagaries of abstruse philosophy. But he soon found his way at the approach of the Revolution of 1848. A wave of social revolt was rising then in France, and he flung himself heart and soul into the turmoil. Not with those politicians who already prepared to seize the reins of power as soon as monarchy would fall under the blows of the revolted proletarians. He foresaw, he knew already, that the new rulers would be *against* the proletarians the moment they would be at the head of the Republic.

He was with the lowest masses of the Paris proletarians — with those men and women whose vague hopes were already directed towards a Social, Communistic Commonwealth. Here he represented the so-much-needed link between the advanced parties of the Great Revolution of 1793 and the new generation of Socialists, a giant trying to inspire the generous but much too pacific Socialist proletarians of Paris with the stern daring of the *sans-culottes* of 1793 and 1794.

Of course, the politicians soon saw how dangerous such a man was for them, and they expelled him from Paris before the first barricades of February 1848, had been built. He was quite right, that bourgeois Republican Caussidière, when he said of Bakunin: "Such men are invaluable *before* the Revolution. But when a Revolution has begun — they must be shot." Of course they must! They will *not* be satisfied with the first victories of the middle classes. Like our Portuguese worker friends [who participated in the 1910 Portuguese Revolution], they will want some immediate practical results *for the people*. They will want that every one of the downtrodden masses should feel that a new era has come for the ragged proletarian.

Of course, the bourgeois must shoot such men, as they shot the Paris workers in 1871. In Paris, they took the precaution of expelling him before the Revolution began.

Expelled from Paris, Bakunin took his revenge at Dresden, in the Revolution of 1849, and here his worse enemies had to recognize his powers in inspiring the masses in a fight, and his organizing capacities. Then came the years of imprisonment in the fortress of Olmütz, where he was chained to the wall of his cell, and in the deep casemates of the St. Petersburg and Schlüsselburg fortresses, followed by years of exile in Siberia. But in 1862 he ran away from Siberia to the United States, and then to London, where he joined the friends of his youth — Herzen and Ogaroff.

Heart and soul he threw himself into supporting the Polish uprising of 1863. But it was not until four years later that he found the proper surroundings and ground for his revolutionary agitation in the International Working Men's Association. Here he saw masses of workers of all nations joining hands across frontiers, and striving to become strong enough in their Unions to throw off the yoke of Capitalism. And at once he understood what was the chief stronghold the workers had to storm, in order to be successful in their struggle against Capital — *the State*. And while the political Socialists spoke of getting hold of power in the State and reforming it, "Destroy the State!" became the war-cry of the Latin Federations, where Bakunin found his best friends.

The State is the chief stronghold of Capital — once its father, and now its chief ally and support. Consequently, *Down with Capitalism and down with the State!*

All his previous experience and a close friendly intercourse with the Latin workers made of Bakunin the powerful adversary of the State and the fierce revolutionary Anarchist Communist fighter he became in the last ten years of his life.

Here Bakunin displayed all the powers of his revolutionary genius. One cannot read his writings during those years — mostly pamphlets dealing with questions of the day, and yet full of profound views of society — without being fired by the force of his revolutionary convictions. In reading these writings and in following his life, one understands why he so much inspired his friends with the sacred fire of revolt.

Down to his last days, even amidst the pangs of a mortal disease, even in his last writings, which he considered his testament, he remained the same firmly convinced revolutionary Anarchist and the same fighter, ready to join the masses anywhere in their revolt against Capital and the State.

Let us, then, follow his example. Let us continue his work, never forgetting that two things are necessary to be successful in a revolution — two things, as one of my comrades said in the trial at Lyon: an idea in the head, and a bullet in the rifle! The force of action — guided by the force of Anarchist thought.

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In this letter to a meeting marking the one hundredth anniversary of Bakunin's birth, Kropotkin summarises his life, ideas and influence. It is notable for its stress on the International Working Men's Association as the place Bakunin's ideas flourished. It was published in Freedom in June 1914.

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