Mikhail Bakunin and the National Question

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January 1990

The revolutions of 1848 have often been referred to as the 'Spring of Nations', and quite rightly, for the events of 1848 gave expression to the aspirations of submerged nations. Although national independence did not result for nationality groups in the Austrian or in the Ottoman empires, the experience of 1848 laid the foundations for a crystallisation of two forces in Europe: socialism and nationalism. These two currents often overlapped, for the 'national question' was as much a concern for revolutionaries in Europe as was social emancipation, and even if it wasn't a paramount concern for some, it became an issue that no major revolutionary figure in Europe could ignore in the post-1848 period.

It was during the revolutions of 1848 that Mikhail Bakunin, a founder of modern anarchism, achieved notoriety, and in later years he would become an influential figure in socialist circles, a serious rival to Karl Marx with whom he debated heatedly principles of revolutionary doctrine. Among the differences which drove a wedge between the two were their perspectives on the role of the State, of certain social strata as promoters of revolution, and, within the context of the latter, the projected prominence of one national group, or nationality bloc, in the course of revolutionary events over another. Although both men were internationalists, they were raised in different national environments, Bakunin in Russia and Marx in Germany. Consequently, their perspectives on a number of issues were shaped in part by personal experiences in one of these two states. We will return later in more detail to this aspect of the Bakunin-Marx estrangement, but first it is necessary to trace the development of Bakunin's own views on the 'national question' before they can be appraised and compared.

Bakunin first became interested in the national question through his contacts with Polish exiles. Having left Russia in 1840 at the age of 26, he spent time variously in Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and France during the course of the next decade, where he became acquainted with French radicalism, Left Hegelianism and Polish émigré nationalism. To Bakunin, the liberation of Poland, then partitioned between Prussia, Austria and Russia, was essential to the emancipation of the peoples of Russia. However, he believed that this liberation should be achieved in conjunction with the liberation of the Slavs in general. In November 1847, at a banquet commemorating the Polish uprising of 1830–31, he denounced Tsarism and called on the Poles to join with other Slavs in the struggle for liberty. In the Slav Congress of Prague in June 1848, as one of two Russian delegates, Bakunin elaborated on this principle. He believed that the Prague Congress afforded the opportunity for the promotion of the revolution that would dissolve the Austrian Empire. But

he was disappointed when the Slav delegates there, representing diverse nationalities, could not reconcile their differences and act as a homogeneous whole toward a singular goal: liberation from foreign rule by Pan-Slavic effort.[1] The Czech delegates, he noted, were more concerned with establishing hegemony over the Slavs in a reformed Austrian monarchy, the Poles wanted predominance over the Ukrainians in Galicia, while the Slavs under Hungary were preoccupied only with what affected them directly — Magyar occupation.[2] Bakunin appealed to the delegates to put aside their 'provincial interests' and to strive for liberation on a Pan-Slavic scale, for only through such an effort could the Slavs under Russian rule, and those under Prussian, Austrian, Hungarian and Turkish, attain full freedom. He argued that hopes of accomplishing gains within the framework of a restructured Austrian Empire were not only naive but. a limited aspiration, for they denoted the abandoning of the other Slavs to their fates at the mercy of their respective occupying regimes, while it also ensured the continuance of a foreign (Austrian) power in Slavic territories. No less naive, in his view, were the expectations entertained by Slavic groups in the Balkans, who had succumbed to Tsarist Pan-Slavic propaganda purporting to liberate these groups under the Russian imperial banner. There would be no liberation, Bakunin cautioned the Balkan Slavs, only subjugation:

> There is no place for you in the womb of the Russian Tsardom. You want life, but deathly silence is there; you demand independence, movement, but mechanical obedience is there. You desire resurrection, elevation, enlightenment, liberation, but death, darkness, and slavish labour are there. Entering the Russia of Emperor Nikolai you would enter the tomb of all national life and of all freedom.[3]

Bakunin thus distinguished himself from the Pan-Slavism advocated by Tsarist circles. His own programme for Slavic unity was formulated in *The Fundamental Principles of the New Slav Policy*, written for the occasion of the Prague Congress. Here he noted the symbolic nature of the Congress, bringing together for the first time Slavs representing assorted nationality groups. As Lawrence Orton affirms, Bakunin's notions of a Slav federation were not original, since such a scheme had already been espoused by groups like the Decembrists, the Ukrainian Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood and Polish exile circles. But what separates his programme from others is its messianic tone.' For instance, Bakunin relates the unhappy predicament that had periodically befallen the Slavs, but enthusiastically announces that the hour has come for the Slavic nations to achieve what other nations of Europe had accomplished. They had for too long been subjected to alien rule, he explained, and thus this experience allowed the Slavic nations to be sensitive to the liberty of others. As victims of foreign rule and central power, with all their multifarious connotations, Bakunin envisaged their salvation to be a Slav federation which would be 'based on nations, of independent and free peoples'.[4] This federation would not be dictated by 'statist policy' but by a Slav Council which would preclude the domination of one Slavic group over another, and which would formulate policies of common interest, particularly in the area of foreign affairs. The Slav Council would recognise the independence of each Slavic nation, 'each may freely establish institutions adapted to its customs, interests, and situation without the Council having the right

[1] *The Confession of Mikhail Bakunin* (London, 1977). 70.
[2] *Ibid*, 71–74.
[3] *Ibid*, 76.
[4] *Ibid*, 113.

to interfere'.[5] What Bakunin had in mind was a kind of Slavic commonwealth, 'every individual belonging to a Slav nation likewise has the right of citizenship in all other nations of the same race'.[6]

Bakunin's vision of a Pan-Slavic federation remained with him even in his anarchist years (from the 1860s onwards), when he was able to define more clearly internationalist objectives. To him the goal of Pan-Slavic unity was essential to the self-preservation of the Slavic race, threatened on all sides by alien empires. Once the objective of federation had been accomplished the Slavic peoples could then embark upon the task of assisting other groups (for instance, the Magyars and Romanians) equally languishing under foreign rule, the ultimate goal being a federated, United States of Europe, one free of empires and their concomitant abuses. Bakunin had never stated where the capital of such a Slavic federation would be, but his later writings indicate that in his pre-anarchist phase at least, his sympathies laid with Moscow for such a centre. At one time he entertained the idea of having a benevolent Tsar taking the initiative for the establishment of a Slavic federation:

> In alliance with Poland and Ukraine, having broken all the hateful German ties, and having audaciously raised the all-Slavic banner, he would become the redeemer of the Slavic world.[7]

The prominent role given to Russia, and a Tsarist one at that, naturally alarmed members of submerged nationality groups in that empire.[8] It is possible that Bakunin considered this idea in part, his affinities with Russian culture aside, for tactical and practical reasons. In the period between the 1848 revolutions and the Polish uprising of 1863, the relative inaction that prevailed in Slavic territories probably convinced him in his impatience that the 'benevolent Tsar' option was, given the conditions, the most viable.

At the same time it should be acknowledged that Bakunin was astutely aware of national sensibilities, championing the rights of those groups whose existence had not been recognised by official and intellectual circles alike. For instance, he admonished the exiled Polish intellectual, Joachim Lelewel, for wishing to absorb Byelorussia and Ukraine into a restored Poland.[9] Not that Bakunin considered these nations Russian, for as early as January 1846 he had written in the French periodical *Le Constitutionel* detailing the historical circumstances which brought them under Russian rule.[10] On another occasion he criticised Tsarist policies of expansionism and Russification. Using Ukraine as an example, he asked whether it was possible for Ukrainians along with other nationalities to ever become Russian: 'Can they forget their language … their literature, their native culture, in a word, their own hearth, in order to disappear completely and in the words of Pushkin, "mingle in the Russian sea"?'[11] Bakunin's answer was an emphatic no. Each nationality group had the right to self-determination and to develop its culture on a natural basis. Union with another group should not take place under coercion, but, if the need should

[5] *Ibid*,115.

[6] *Ibid*,115.

[7] Arthur Mendel. *Michael Bakunin: Roots of Apocalypse* (New York, 1981), 273–274.

[8] See, for instance, Raisa Ivanova. *Mykhailo Drakhemaee w supuine-politychnomu rusi Rosi ta Ukraini* (Kiev, 1971), 62–64.

[9] *Confession*, 43.

[10] Mendel, 200.

[11] *Confession*, 87.

present itself, voluntarily. To force a nationality group to conform to the dictates of another could only breed the endemic emnity of the subjected party. In 1862 in a proclamation titled *To Russian, Polish and all Slavic Friends*, he expanded on this point:

> I demand only one thing: that every tribe, great and small, be given the full opportunity and right to act according to its will. If it wants to merge with Russia and Poland — let it merge. Does it want to be an independent member of a Polish or Russian or general Slavic federation? Then let it be so. Finally, does it want to separate completely from every other people and live as a totally Separate state? Then God bless it! Let it separate.[12]

Measured by the standards of today, such a declaration may appear self-evident, but Bakunin was dealing with intellectuals for whom these endorsements were difficult to fathom. For instance, when Polish emigrées advocated independence, they limited this to mean Poland, not Ukraine, Byelorussia or Lithuania which they wished to absorb into its midst. Similarly, while the democratic Russian intelligentsia tended to favour Polish independence, they were reluctant to extend the same principle to Ukrainians or Byelorussians whom they considered limbs in the greater Russian body. Bakunin, and his colleague Alexander Herzen, whose view Bakunin shared that national boundaries should conform to the wishes of the inhabitants of the regions affected,[13] were notable exceptions to this rule. Therefore, Bakunin's views can be considered very enlightened for his time and it was with some justification that Peter Kropotkin wrote in 1907:

> If Russian progressive thought has always remained faithful to the cause of the nationalities oppressed by the regimes of Russia or Austria, it owes its fidelity to a considerable degree to Bakunin.[14]

In 1862–63, Bakunin's primary attention was directed towards Poland. By this time he had in fact married a woman of Polish extraction, Antonia Kwiatkowski, in 1858, while in exile in Siberia. Having escaped from Siberia in 1861, after several years of imprisonment and exile, he once again resumed his revolutionary activities in Europe. With insurrection in Poland looming, Bakunin renewed his contacts with émigré Poles. However, he was unable to convert them to his perspective of the direction the imminent insurrection should take. To Bakunin, the social character of the impending insurrection should take precedence over its national aspect. Only then would peasants, not only those in Poland but those of Ukraine, Lithuania and other parts of the Russian Empire too, participate wholeheartedly and a revolution be realised.[15] Bakunin advised the Polish exiles to learn the lesson of 1846, when in the Austrian province of Galicia the Polish nobility staged an uprising and were defeated not by the Austrian authorities, but by the Galician peasants themselves who turned against their landlords. But such warnings fell on deaf ears. Bakunin's formula was too radical.

[12] Cited in Roman Rosdolsky. *Engels and the 'Nonhistoric' Peapies: The National Question in the Revolution of 1848* (Glasgow, 1986), 178.

[13] M.K. Dziewanowski. 'Herzen, Bakunin and the Polish Insurrection of 1863' *Journal of Central European Affairs* 8 (1948/49): 62–643 and 66–67.

[14] Cited in Miklés Kun. 'Bakunin and Hungary 1848–1865" *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* X, no. 4 (Winter 1976): 503.

[15] Dziewanowski, 71.

The post-1863 period — that is the period after the abortive Polish revolt — marked a new phase in Bakunin's ideology. He continued to perceive the resolution of national conflicts in Eastern Europe by means of a social revolution forged by a Pan-Slavic alliance,[16] but his emphasis on revolutionary Pan-Slavism had worn off slightly in favour of more broader goals. This can be attributed in part to his ever-increasing contacts with foreign revolutionaries while in exile. Having now visited the United States and spending considerable time in Switzerland and Italy, among other places, Bakunin began to assume a more cosmopolitan outlook and drew maturity from these experiences. For one thing, he had become acquainted with the struggles of the Italians and Spaniards, whom he often compared with the Slavs. Through his contacts in Britain he also learned of the plight of the Irish and in a letter written in 1870 commented on how pleased he was that English workers had finally taken up the cause of the Irish.[17] His first-hand experience with the federative systems of Switzerland and the United States enriched his perspective of the model of federation he himself would like to promote. Furthermore, his contacts with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on the one hand, and Giuseppe Mazzini, the famous Italian nationalist, on the other forced him to formulate an ideology which would preclude chauvinism inherent in the platforms advanced by both parties. The ideology this arrived at was anarchism. We will assess its ingredients in due course, but let us pause for a moment to recapitulate the dates and events of the break between Marx and Bakunin. Although the differences between the two go back to the 1840s, Bakunin, like Marx, joined the International Workingmen's Association, better known as the First International. Frustrated at his efforts to receive recognition for his postulates there, Bakunin, in 1868, founded the International Alliance of Social Democracy as a pressure group within the First International, which immediately earned him the hostility of Marx. Even when the Alliance was dissolved, Marx continued to consider Bakunin a menacing rival and the tensions between the two culminated in the expulsion of the latter from the International in 1872. Bakunin, together with a considerable number of followers primarily from the Netherlands, France, Spain, the Jura part of Switzerland, Italy and Belgium, their memberships withdrawn from the First International, convened an Extraordinary Congress of the Jura Federation in September 1872 in Saint-Imier, and here was born the international anarchist movement. Among the disagreements between Marx and Bakunin was the role of social strata in revolutionary events, Marx stressed the industrial proletariat in forming the vanguard, while Bakunin gave equal prominence to the peasantry and what Marx would call the *lumpenproletariat*. In 1870 Bakunin wrote his *Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis* at the height of the Franco-Prussian War.

These *Letters* are considered to be among his most important works, for it is here that he elaborated such theories as turning international wars into civil strife and ultimately into social revolutions, the formation of people's militias to repulse foreign invaders, and a federalist alternative to a centralised state. It was here, too, that he expounded his confidence in the revolutionary capabilities of the peasantry. He noted that the peasants, whether in France or in Eastern Europe, 'harbour the thoroughgoing and intense socialistic hatred of labouring men against the men of leisure, the "upper crust",'[18] but that these socialistic passions had been traditionally manipulated by the 'reactionaries'. The city workers tended to display a condescending attitude towards the peasantry, but if any revolution was to succeed, Bakunin advised, this gulf had to be narrowed,

[16] Kun, 505.

[17] Arthur Lehning (ed.) *Michel Bakounine et ses relanens Slaves* (Leaien, 1974), 321.

[18] Sam Dolgoff (ed.). *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal, 1988}, 198.

because in reality the interests of both strata were compatible. Ignoring the peasantry, he concluded, was to thrust it to the camp of reaction, for paternalistic emperors have conveniently been perceived by this group as a countercheck to the nobility.[19] In like fashion, he equated the 'historical mission' of the proletariat, because of its supposed superiority, to that of the 'historical mission' of one nation, in this case the German, to civilise another, in this case the French:

> Beware! The Germans are already saying that German Protestant civilisation is far superior to the Catholic civilisation of the Latin peoples in general and to French civilisation in particular. Take heed! The Germans may soon feel morally obliged to civilise you, just as you are now telling us that you are duty-bound to civilise and forcefully emancipate your countrymen, your brothers, the French peasants.[20]

After all, he noted, was it not this pretext that the Germans used to legitimise their occupation of the Slavs and other peoples? And he concluded:

> I openly declare that in relations between nations as in relations between classes, I will always be on the side of those whom you intend to civilise by these tyrannical methods. I will join them in rebellion against all such arrogant civilisers, be they workers or Germans; and in so doing, I will be serving the revolution against reaction.[21]

Compare such a view with that advanced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who had condemned subjected nationalities to playing "non-historical' roles:

> These dying nationalities, the Bohemians, Corinthians, Dalmations, etc., had tried to profit by the universal confusion of 1848, in order to restore their political status quo of A.D.800. The history of a thousand years ought to have shown them that such a retrogression was impossible. [They ought to have understood that] the natural and inevitable fate of these dying nations was to allow this process of dissolution and absorption by their strong neighbours to complete itself.[22]

Engels, Marx's spokesperson on Central European Affairs and on the national question in general, divided Europe into 'historical' and 'non-historical' nations. In his scheme of things the non-historical nations were doomed:

> Apart from the Poles, the Russians, and at most the Slavs of Turkey, no Slav people has a future, for the simple reason that all the other Slavs lack the primary historical, geographical, political and industrial conditions for a viable independence. Peoples which have never had a history of their own, which come under foreign domination the moment they have achieved the first, crudest level of civilisation, have no capacity for survival and will never be able to attain any kind of independence.[23]

[19] *Ibid*, 190–202.

[20] *Ibid*, 203.

[21] *Ibid*, 208.

[22] Cited in Roman Szporluk. *Communism and Nationalism: Kaul Marx Versus Friedrich List* (New York, 1988), 174.

[23] Lawrence Orton. 'The Echo of Bakunin's "Appeal to the Slavs (1848)"' *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* X, no. 4 (Weer 1976). 499. For an excellent study of Engel's views on the national question, see Rosdolsky, op. cit.

It was against this type of chauvinism that Bakunin struggles, and which ultimately contributed to his break with Marx and Engels in the First International. He often compared this chauvinism with Bismarck's attempts to gain control over the Slavs, and argued that the Germanic groups within the First International were equally inclined to subordinate under their control its Slav and Latin members. He thus describes his break with Marx partially in the following terms:

> As a Slav, I wanted the liberation of the Slav race from the German yoke. I wanted this liberation to be brought about by the Revolution, that is to say by the destruction of the regime of Russia, Austria, Prussia and Turkey, and by the reorganisation of the peoples from below upwards through their own freedom, upon the foundation of complete economic and social equality, and not through the power of any authority, however revolutionary it might call itself. Already... the difference between our respective systems... was well marked. My ideals and aspirations could not fail to be very displeasing to Marx. First of all, because they were not his own; secondly, because they ran counter to the conviction of the authoritarian Communists; and finally, because, being a German patriot, he would not admit then, any more than he does today, the right of the Slavs to free themselves from the German yoke — for still, as of old, he thinks that the Germans have a mission to civilise the Slavs, this meaning to Germanise them whether by kindness or force.[24]

However, if he opposed the type of chauvinism that Marx and Engels represented, Bakunin was equally critical of the exclusive nationalism championed by persons like Mazzini.[25] In his circular *On Nationality, the State and Federation*, directed to 'My Friends in Italy', Bakunin distinguished between 'nationality' (which we today would call 'patriotism') and 'patriotism' (which in modern parlance would be 'nationalism'). The first he defined as a natural fondness for the place and people with whom one is reared and attached; the second, denoted the absolute power of a State over its native subjects and submerged ethnic groups:

> Nationality, like individuality, is a natural fact. It denotes the inalienable night of individuals, groups, associations and regions to their own way of life. It is the product of a long historical development, a confluence of human beings with a common history, language, and a common cultural background. And this is why I will always champion the cause of oppressed nationalities struggling to liberate themselves from the domination of the State.[26]

As for nationalism (or 'patriotism'), it is 'always disastrous to the popular and real interests of the country it claims to exalt and serve. Often without wishing to be so, it is a friend of reaction — an enemy of the revolution, i.e. the emancipation of nations and men.'[27] For Bakunin, any movement for national liberation had to be directed towards social goals, to prevent it from becoming a bourgeois revolution. Because this kind of nationalism espoused by the bourgeoisie, he explained, was essentially economic and a national revolution directed by this strata would have dire consequences for the masses:

[24] Cited in Guy Aldred. *Bakunin's Writings* (Bombay, 1947), $4.

[25] Bakunin even compared Marx with Mazzini. See Delgalll, 306–387.

[26] Dolgoff, 401.

[27] *Ibid*, 106–107.

> The bourgeoisie love their country only because, for them, the country, represented by the State, safeguards their economic, political and social privileges. Any nation withdrawing this protection would be disowned by them. Therefore, for this bourgeoisie the country is the State. Patriots of the State, they become furious enemies of the masses of the people, tired of sacrificing themselves, of being used as a passive footstool by the government, revolt against it.[28]

So, for Bakunin, what was the solution? In his view, the emancipation of all nationalities and labouring classes could only result from a social revolution followed by a loose federation of nations on a macro level. This federation, however, would not follow either the Swiss or US example. Switzerland, for instance, tended towards centralisation[29] and the people there, in spite of successive democratic revolutions, were sovereign *de jure* but not *de facto*; real power was vested in the hands of a propertied class. The situation was worse in the United States where the political system had degenerated into perverse corruption.[30] No, his federation would be different:

> The federation will operate with elected functionaries directly responsible to the people; it will not be a nation organised from the top down, or from the centre to the circumference. Rejecting the principle of imposed and regimented unity, it will be directed from the bottom up, from the circumference to the centre, according to the principles of free federation. Its free individuals will form voluntary associations, its associations will form autonomous communes, its communes will form autonomous provinces, its provinces will form the regions, and the regions will freely federate into countries which in turn will sooner or later create the universal world federation.[31]

Bakunin's views on the national question did not gain widespread acceptance. He had to contend with the deep-seated prejudices of the Mazzinis (nationalists) on the one side, and of the Marxists on the other, and, indeed, had to submerge his own Pan-Slavic biases in favour of internationalist-universal goals.

His support for the liberation of the oppressed nationalities struck a chord in such places as Ukraine, where community activists, Mikhailo Drahomanov and Ivan Franko in particular, echoed his points after his death in the international socialist movement[32] and formulated programmes which drew considerably from Bakunist tenets. If it has been argued that Bakunin's vision was essentially utopian and romantic, and that his writings and theories lacked the sophistication of Marx's, it has also been said that much of his writings reveal astute thinking. Scholars have contended that he had influenced Lenin's posture on a number of issues,[33] including the federative principle, the right of nations to self-determination, and on whether Russia

[28] *Ibid*, 185–186.

[29] *Ibid*, 340.

[30] *Ibid*, 143.

[31] *Ibid*, 98.

[32] See, for instance, Michel Dragomanow. 'Les nations de l'Europe orientale et le Socialisme international' *La Revue Socialiste* wo. 12 (ESS8)- 501–509, and no. 13 (1880): 516–525. For a brief discussion of Ivan Franke's assessment of Bakunin, see Orton (1974), 112.

[33] See, for instance, 'Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin' *Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History* Vol. 3, 26–27; Mendel, 482.

contained the 'objective' conditions for revolution, matters on which Lenin expended much ink in his debates with Rosa Luxemburg. Of course, the regime that came to power on the ashes of the Russian Empire was not quite what Bakunin had in mind. He anticipated that this regime would not be a dictatorship of proletarians, but one of bureaucrats, a legacy with which we are familiar today, that has been left behind for Gorbachev to contend with. In 1873 he had cautioned against the formation of a workers' state of the Marxist mould. Would this State, he asked, really be ruled by a minority of workers as Marx advocated?

Yes, possibly of former workers, who, as soon as they become the rulers of the representatives of the people, will cease to be workers and will look down at the plain working masses from the governing heights of the State; they will no longer represent the people, but only themselves and their claims to rulership over the people. Those who doubt this know very little about human nature.[34]

Furthermore, just how universal would this Marxist State be? Here, Bakunin anticipated what Stalin called 'Socialism in one country':

> Whoever says State necessarily implies a particular, limited State, which may well include many different peoples and countries if it is a large one, but which excludes even more. Because, short of dreaming of the universal State, as Napoleon and Charles V did, or as the papacy dreamed of the Universal Church, and in spite of the international ambitions which consume him today, Herr Marx will have to be satisfied with ruling a single State, not several states at once, when the bell sounds for the realization of his dreams — if ever it does sound. Consequently, State means a State, and a State confirms the existence of several States, and several States means rivalry, jealousy, and incessant, endless war. The simplest logic bears this out, and so does the whole of history.[35]

History, in fact, did bear this out, particularly the events that climaxed in World War II. In light of the Soviet and Nazi experiences (remember that Bakunin had drawn attention to the peril that exclusive nationalism, particularly German, presented), and in spite of his somewhat over-reaching style, which, for some, has detracted from the merits of his arguments, Bakunin's insightful ideas still deserve consideration today.

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[34] Dolgoff, 331.

[35] Arthur Lehning (ed). *Michael Bakunin: Selected Wriings* (London, 1973), 264.

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