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Bakunin and his *Confession*

Fritz Brupbacher

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Original title: *Bakunin e la sua *Confessione*
Fritz Brupbacher
Témoins, III, n. 10-11, autunno-inverno 1955-56
via: finimondo.org/node/2118
Michael Bakunin: Der Satan der Revolte
by Fritz Brupbacher First published in 1929

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IX

When in the spring of 1873, the revolutionary Debagory Mokrievitch came to Locarno to find Bakunin, he found him lying down and breathing heavily, with a swollen face and bags under his eyes. Getting up Bakunin coughed terribly, unable to breathe, his swollen face turned blue. He was already in a very advanced state of renal inflammation, chronic, complicated by hypertrophy of the heart and dropsy. The external enemies had not been able to overcome this giant, nor to break his fighting hope and courage. What all his adversaries had failed to do, the disease could do it: the poor functioning of the kidneys led to the intoxication of the blood and consequently of the brain. The body refused any unnecessary effort to the brain. Of course Bakunin did not go down to the level judged by his contemporaries to be medium. If it had been of a cabinet scientist, a minister, a theologian or even a prince of the Church, this brain would still have had an above average value. But it was no longer enough, at a time when a new reversal of all values would have been necessary, to adopt a new attitude before the world. Because a new attitude, a metamorphosis of the spirit had become necessary: the bloody defeat of the Parisian proletariat in 1871 had dispersed the ebb of the revolutionary tide, while the reaction from the civil war with the conscience of its victory and a new era of capitalist prosperity they seemed to promise the new proletarian strata their ascension to the labor aristocracy. Bakunin realized that his strength was no longer enough in that new situation. He considered himself a veteran of the revolution: his dream would have been to die in the whirlwind of a great riot. It can be said that in 1873 Bakunin's political activity had come to an end. The rest of his days, he was burdened with sorrows and worries. He took part one last time, in 1874, in the preparations for an attempted insurrection stifled before being born in Bologna. And he was no longer driven, as in other times, by the joyful love of struggle: unable to live anymore, he tried to die on a barricade. He could not fulfill that desire. He died of a uremia crisis on 1 July 1876 in Bern.

Those who like to command, know very well that the best way to establish their current and future power is to call all those who preach freedom and insubordination to men individualists. Thus, all authoritarians treated Bakunin as an individualist, in order to make him appear an antisocial being, in the eyes of the good harmless people, but a little limited. Yet Bakunin is far from an individualist. Bakunin is the social being par excellence. He is the man who cannot live without friends, without comrades, without the warmest fraternal environment.

Today one could not count the “revolutionaries” who can claim these qualities for themselves because they are capable of betraying a friend in the name of an “idea”. Indeed they are proud of it. They call this sincerely subordinating themselves to the community, merging in it, being a socialist or a communist.

From his most tender childhood, Bakunin felt an immense need for fraternity, for intimate communion with men. This communion, for him, was a necessary condition of life, it was almost his own life. If this intimate communion, this mutual love were to prevail, nothing, he said, would be impossible.

I

For most contemporaries, Michail Bakunin is unknown. If a certain number of people only know him by name, that is enough to hate and slander him. But there are some who love him with fervour.

Once Bakunin was truly a great name. While one would search in vain in the edition of the great encyclopedic dictionary published in 1866 for the name of Karl Marx, that same work of 1864 consecrates Bakunin, a contemporary of Marx, almost an entire page that ends with these words: «Bakunin has a personality suggestive of brilliant intellectual faculties accompanied by a rare energy, but also by a fanatic passion ».

And this is not by chance. Bakunin is one of the men who participated in the bourgeois revolution of 1848–1849: but the bourgeois have long forgotten that they were revolutionaries; they have therefore forgotten their heroes; they have therefore forgotten Bakunin.

Yes, but also Karl Marx was a Forty-Eighter and yet he is one of the most famous men of our times. More than one will say: “If Marx had been only a bourgeois revolutionary, he would certainly have been forgotten. But what survives of Marx is not the man of 48, he is the theorist of the proletarian revolution ».

To this we will reply that Bakunin was also, after 1860 and 1870, one of the spirits who dominated the International Workingmen’s Association and when Marx excluded him, this exclusion resulted in the death of the International. Marx was forced to kill the First International to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Bakuninists. This was actually the situation in 1872.

Currently, only Spain and South America have a fairly large number of Bakunin’s disciples, while in all the countries of the world Marxists are as numerous as the grains of sand of the sea.

When Bakunin was excluded from the First International, the national Federations of Belgium, Holland, Spain and England followed him, as did considerable minorities from other countries. Bakunin was then a force in the proletarian revolutionary movement.

Today among the proletarians the same Bakunin, and with him anarchism, are almost completely forgotten.

The memory of Bakunin disappeared as certain psychological tendencies in the proletariat disappeared. Let's say it right away: as big industry developed, the proletariat's aspiration to freedom, to personality, disappeared; the libertarian and anarchist tendencies of Bakuninism have gradually cancelled themselves, along with the memory of Bakunin.

Not only has the desire for freedom disappeared, but a real hatred has been reserved for all those who continue to want the freedom of the individual: this hatred is consequently directed against Bakunin and his doctrines. It is the same hatred that generated the slanders spread against his person.

As big industry has killed the will to be free, slavery has generated the will to power in proletarians, not only the will to exercise political power at the expense of the bourgeoisie, but the will to power in itself, the thirst to impose one's power on all that has a human aspect. Every individual dominated by the will to power, and in particular the politically active proletariat, comes to consider anyone who retains the will to be free his mortal enemy; and all the more so because an extremely rigorous discipline has become truly necessary in the struggle that the proletariat carries out against its enemies.

The anti-authoritarian phase of socialism was followed by an authoritarian socialism which defeated, in that form, feudalism and bourgeois society in Russia.

Anyone who aspires to freedom becomes a counter-revolutionary and deserves hatred and slander. Bakunin being the anti-authoritarian par excellence, he deserves slander and hatred par excellence.

Thus, slandered by the contemporary proletariat, forgotten by a bourgeoisie that has ceased to be revolutionary, Bakunin has to be content with being loved by those who, however distant from him and after so many circumnavigations through the psychology of the different classes, foresee the coming of a time in which the luxury of freedom will begin to be considered one of humanity's greatest assets again.

We have seen why Bakunin is unknown, why he is hated and slandered and why, nevertheless, some friends love him with fervour. It is now a matter of presenting him to those who do not know him or who know only the lying figure invented by slander.

ern. Our era is the era of the Taylor system, of ultra-rationalization, not only of the economy and mechanical movements of man, but also of the whole human personality. The ideal is to organize man according to the principle of the least effort, to make him a creature that "renders" both from the point of view of private property, which must be increased, and from the point of view of collective property and growth of the latter. Now, nothing changes for the individual that is rationalized in the sense of Ford or in that of Stalin.

All Bakunin, the very content of his dreams, are the opposite of rationalization. Bakunin is chaos, the poet of chaos. For Bakunin, man's dreams are more important than all the realities of the outside world. Bakunin is a poet —is chaos. Because after all he is not only the opponent of the feudal and bourgeois order: he is the enemy of order.

Bakunin is not modern. He is not a merchant and instead today individuals and collectives are merchants. And this is also the reason why Bakunin is entirely misunderstood by most.

He will only become comprehensible again in an age that has time. But today, neither the capitalist nor the Bolshevik have time. They understand each other better than they understand Bakunin. They resemble each other far more in their psychological constitution, in their virtues in their vices, than they resemble Bakunin.

This is what makes Bakunin attractive. The attractiveness of his life and ideas.

In a book on the first International, Gustav Jaeckh, a pre-war social-democracy writer, called Bakunin "*eine politische Verbrechenatur*" (a nature of political criminal). If a wrecker of law is a political criminal, Mr. Jaeckh is right. Bakunin wants to break all the tables of law that restrict human nature. Bakunin, by putting man above the law, is truly, by his nature, a criminal, a wrecker, like all great men. And when Jaeckh finds this frightening, this author simply shows that his fellows are missing something in order to understand human greatness. Bakunin demands the suppression of all that opposes, in "law", the fruitful becoming of man. Bakunin is with what is new, with what becomes, with the future, against the past, the present, the traditional. He is with the fecundity of chaos against what is condemned to die. Bakunin is a Promethean nature; alongside him Kropotkin is a kind of George Sand and Marx a red policeman, a Ghepeu official.

Bakunin is a destroyer of law. The idolater of law proclaims: "*Vivat justitia pereat mundus*", while Bakunin shouts what Rabelais had already written: "Do what thou wilt".

«Science is the compass of life, but it is not life. Only life creates living things and beings. Science creates nothing. It only notices and recognizes the creations of life. And whenever scientists, exiting their abstract world, meddle with living creations from the real world, everything they propose or create is poor, ridiculously abstract, devoid of blood and life, born-and-dead, similar to the omunculus created by Wagner. As a result, science has a unique mission to illuminate life, not to govern it. One can say, of men of science, as such, what I have said of theologians and metaphysicians: they have neither feelings nor hearts for individual beings and living beings. They can only be interested in general information.

Science is the perpetual immolation of fugitive life, passing but real, on the altar of eternal abstractions.

Since its very nature obliges you to ignore Peter and Paul, you must never allow it, neither it nor anyone in your name, to rule over Peter and Paul.

What I preach is, therefore, in certain respects, the rebellion of life against science, or rather against the government of science. Individuals are elusive, for thought, for reflection, and also for the human word which is capable of expressing only abstractions. So social science itself, the science of the future, will necessarily continue to ignore them. What we have the right to demand from it is that it indicates to us, with a firm and faithful hand, the general causes of individual suffering.

Scientists, always presumptuous, always vain and always impotent, would like to meddle with everything, and all sources of life would dry up under the abstract breath of the scientist.

Life is an unceasing transition from the individual to the abstract and from the abstract to the individual. It is this second moment that is missing from science: once in the abstract, it can no longer get out of it».

Close to the educated man, the politician has never enjoyed a very bright reputation, certainly because the latter does not take into account nuances, nor individualization, a quality whose first condition is precisely culture.

Bakunin's observations on science allow us to see that he, with the individual, makes a distinctly unruly and wild factor intervene in politics. Now, this trait could rightly lead the man of culture to taste Bakunin's politics.

At the same time and for the same reason, Bakunin could not be confused with the crowd of those politicians and modern men in general who are either the sadists of command or the masochists of obedience. Bakunin, on the other hand and in another sense, is not much more mod-

II

Not much is lost in not knowing anything about Karl Marx's life, almost everything is lost when Bakunin's is ignored. First of all, his very life is a novel; a novel which, thanks first to Max Nettlau and then to Kornilow and last Polonsky, he has been the subject of tireless research. Bakunin's existence has inspired more than one writer: Turgenev and Dostoevsky used him in their novels, while Ricarda Huch, great German novelist, wrote a *Bakunin*, and finally Lucien Descaves and Maurice Donnay staged him.

Anyone who is not prisoner of a doctrinaire armour, anyone who has not, once and for all, decided to belong to a militant orthodoxy, or is not blinded by the particular situation of his class, will find Bakunin's personality extremely seductive.

But it is a very small number.

His main attraction lies in being a pre-capitalist figure, a kind of savage with much culture. Feudal in revolt against feudal, bourgeois and proletarian despotism, he is the least American man imaginable, he is the least Fordian, and yet the least Stalinist of men. If we Europeans can get excited about Bakunin today, this enthusiasm is made more of nostalgia than our ability to live bakuninism. And the more we are modern rationalized Europeans, the more we will feel attracted by this wild pagan, by his indomitable natural force. I easily imagine that those who hate him most are those who are not yet sure of themselves: who are still afraid of the devil within themselves and their comrades. Thus, Bakunin will become current again the day when man begins to find bourgeois despotism and proletarian despotism unbearable.

III

Bakunin, in the “*Confession*” which these pages should serve as an introduction to, recounts many events of his life.

Bakunin’s father, a wealthy nobleman of Russia, rich in five hundred servants and ten children, himself administered his own lands, to which he had added a cotton mill which, moreover, did not make him much.

Bakunin was born in 1814, he was therefore eleven years old when the Russian nobility made its last rebellion against the Tsar, the revolt of the Decembrists. His mother was a relative of the Muraviev, rebels, one of whom was hanged, three others were sentenced to forced labour for life, and lastly two to temporary forced labour and deportation to the penal colonies. Another less glorious member of the family was that Muraviev who made himself famous as Poland’s executioner.

When Michail reached the age of fourteen his father sent him to the artillery school in Petersburg so that one day he could earn a living as an officer, something which Bakunin’s father insisted on in a letter in precise terms, saying that they weren’t rich.

At eighteen Michail Bakunin becomes an artillery officer, without enthusiasm. Indeed, he felt isolated and lost, he aspired to leave military life, he dreamed of science. A very unmilitary officer to tell the truth, excessively intellectualized, he saw himself sent to a small garrison because he had gone for a walk dressed as a civilian in an hour in which the uniform was de rigueur.

What he wanted to know was nothing about service, but about the purpose of his existence and the function he had in the great mechanism of the universe. So, having managed to get leave, he never returned to the army, but made the decision to become a teacher of philosophy, to his father’s great desperation. For young Bakunin, on the other hand, a teacher of philosophy was not something very professorial, but a man seeking the philosopher’s stone—and who finds it.

He sought this philosopher’s stone for five years, along with many comrades, discussing Kant, Fichte, Hegel day and night, detaching himself more and more from official society and its ideals, as can be seen in a letter he wrote to his sister: “What do I care about this society’s ex-

VIII

Bakunin’s life is so extraordinarily rich in picturesque features, it is a life so alive that many have not paid attention to the thoughts that sprouted, in the course of this life, in his brain.

With every physical growth, we also find in him an ideological growth, a phase during which what he has lived crystallizes in aphorisms or is organized in system fragments.

The years from 1868 to 1872 are particularly rich in thoughts of this genre—a genre unknown to today’s generation. Over the years, all that Bakunin has experienced, all his political experience is condensed into formulas. To the limited spirits who stand on either side of the barricade, Bakunin could not teach anything, because one does not find in him those intellectual machines that grasp all the facts that are given to them and automatically transform them into sausages—that is, into systems. Born from life, Bakunin’s ideas will bring greater joy to the few rare free spirits impertinent enough to still exist today.

Among the interesting pages of Bakunin, we must put those he wrote about science and the relationship of science with man. Some hack-writers have made Bakunin a kind of involuntary buffoon, a good-for-nothing bohemian. Perhaps a few sentences taken from his *Considérations philosophiques* (Works, vol. III) will show them that what is bohemian, disorderly in Bakunin, is nothing but the profoundly human chaos of the instincts in revolt against all traditions, against all the tyrannical laws that oppress man, poor instinctive creature, with all the weight of the history of humanity. Bakunin, a man from a pre-capitalist country, the son of a still prehistoric era, rebelled against a certain economic form of society, against a form inadequate to its nature; it turns against the rationalization of each and every one within human society, against the hegemony of the principle of least effort, against the slavery of man subjected to God and the State, to dogma and theory. He turns against all the bosses, whatever the pretexts they invoke, whatever the screens behind which they try to hide their will to power. And this is how he equally turns against the tyranny of science over man.

These same years are also those of his action in Russia and the drafting of the text known as the *Revolutionary Catechism*, one of the most interesting documents for a certain category of revolutionaries.

Bakunin's point of view during the Franco-German war is significant. From its inception, Bakunin's solution was to turn this war into a civil war. After the defeat of Sedan, he judged that the moment was right for armed insurrection and the revolutionary war against the Prussians, and it was in this sense that he made propaganda and agitation. But he was not satisfied with just this: he went to Lyon and participated in an attempted riot that failed and he was forced to flee and disappointed reached Switzerland. In 1874, two years before his death, although physically very ill, he still participated in the preparations for an insurrection in Bologna.

istence? It could disappear and I would not lift my little finger to save it”.

All the letters from that period vibrate with an invincible aspiration to freedom, combined with the intense need for intimate communion with other men animated by the same ideas as his.

Philosophically, at the end of this period, Bakunin is Hegelian. From becoming “dialectical” of the spirit, he awaits his own redemption and that of the world.

As for the way in which this liberation was effectively to be carried out, he believed he could learn it in the master's own country. So, in 1840, at the age of twenty-six, he went to Germany thanks to the financial help of his friends Herzen and Granowski.

IV

In Russia, at that time only a few isolated young people began to look for a new ideal in opposition to what the Tsar, the nobility and the Koupti (big merchants) recognized as legitimate in thought and action.

In the Germany of 1840, Bakunin would have found a large bourgeois class in opposition to feudalism, the princes and the nobility; consequently more than one philosopher was revolutionary, and the Hegelian school in particular had given life to a left wing. Bakunin was carried away by the German democratic movement and became friends with Herwegh and other democrats. As the Russian government had started to take notice of him, he left Germany with Herwegh and went to Zurich. In that city he made acquaintance with the communist tailor Weitling, who made a great impression on him. When Weitling was arrested, Bakunin's name was also discovered in his papers, forcing him to leave Switzerland and go to Brussels, then to Paris, where he lived from 1844 to 1848.

The Swiss government, or more precisely the government of Zurich, had denounced him to the Tsar as a revolutionary, and so Bakunin in 1848 Bakunin was sentenced in absentia to the loss of all his property and to deportation to Siberia.

On his arrival in Paris, Bakunin was already a revolutionary in politics. For the realization of his philosophical ideal, he counted on the destructive force of the politically and economically oppressed class. The misery generated by the ruling class must, as he believed and as did the whole Hegelian left moreover, create a state of spirit among the oppressed that would necessarily leave them no other road than that of exploding and thus annihilating the whole of society.

And that is why Bakunin was sincerely on the side of the oppressed. He loved them because they represented a force of destruction in his eyes. He loved them as much as they themselves hated the ruling class.

In Paris, Bakunin got to know Considérant, Lamennais, Flocon, Louis Blanc, George Sand and many other personalities. But the man he frequented most was Proudhon, whom he loved very much. Marx also belongs to Bakunin's Parisian relations.

the right was reserved to pay greater attention to cultural problems, without however neglecting economic issues .

In July 1868. Bakunin also joined the International Workingmen's Association; he moved his home to Geneva and became, in June 1869, editor of *Egalité*, organ of the romande (French-speaking) internationalists. His articles of that time could well have appeared in a syndicalist newspaper of 1913 such as *La Bataille syndicaliste* in Paris.

The conflict with Marx was not long in coming. Anyone who imagines that in this fight Marx had definitively defeated Bakunin has a superficial mentality.

Marx had no victory over Bakunin even in 1872, when at the Hague congress the former ruled out the latter, launching the slanderous charge against him that "Bakunin (had) used fraudulent maneuvers to appropriate all or part of the wealth of others, which constituted fraud". Even after the congress, Bakunin's ideas continued to live, better still, in Spain and Italy, they lasted dozens of years and only disappeared there where economic evolution made individuality and, therefore, the will to conserve the latter disappear. But when abundance of food and other reasons make individualities reappear, the struggle will resume between the principle of *perinde ac cadaver* and the will to be oneself and to be free. This moment will come and our medieval age—why isn't this another Middle Ages?—will have to give way to a new culture.

This explains the true nature of the conflict that opposed Marx to Bakunin, the Marxists and the Bakuninists of the first International. Marx represented that stratum of the proletariat who felt the need to abandon the care of thinking of their own fate to some benevolent and paternal tutor, submitting to him as the slave to the master; Bakunin, on the other hand, represented the proletariat who has the will to think and direct its own affairs by itself.

There is only an apparent contradiction in the fact that Bakunin, coming from a retrograde country, truly represents libertarian workers. Bakunin certainly came from an economically retrograde country, but at the same time capitalist domestication had not yet completely devoured man, from a country where man was still closer to the redskin than to the rationalized automaton—to Don Quixote than to Ford and Stalin.

The years 1870–74 were full of the struggle engaged against Marx, but it was also the period in which Bakunin's anarchist ideas found their definitive formula.

VII

Bakunin remained in Siberia from 1857 to 1861. In 1861 he fled through Japan, San Francisco and New York and on December 28 of the same year he reached his old friend Alexandre Herzen in London.

From that moment Bakunin's feverish revolutionary activity recommenced. He collaborates with Herzen's famous *Cloche*, orienting the paper to the left, making it go from simple propaganda to action, he brings together around him a circle of Poles, Czechs and Serbs, discusses, preaches, commands, draws up, makes decisions and organizes all day and almost all night. During his rare hours of rest, he writes letters for Semipalatinsk and Arad, Constantinople and Belgrade, for Bessarabia, Moldova and Belokriniza. It was at that time that he wrote the pamphlet entitled *To my Russian and Polish friends*, a kind of re-edition of his old Paris speech. He announces his will to consecrate the rest of his life to fighting for the freedom of the Russians, Poles and all the other Slavic nations. In 1863, he went to Sweden with the intention of later reaching Poland and participating in the Polish uprising.

After the failure of the latter Bakunin went to settle in Italy, where he developed his activity from 1864 to 1867. It brought together the most progressive men in the framework of the International Fraternity. This association was founded in the same year as the International Workingmen's Association, of which it was the anticipation in Italy and Spain. You can read his program in the German edition of Bakunin's works. It is the program of a revolution which is at the same time political and economic, directed by a secret international organization that has freedom as its supreme aim and requires in order to achieve it the absolute subordination of the individual to the directive body.

In 1867 and 1868, Bakunin and his friends participated in the Peace Congress which takes place in Geneva and Bern, with the intention of extending their influence to larger areas and they founded, in 1866, the Alliance of the Social democracy, an anti-state and anti-religious organization destined not to fight but to complete the workingmen's International, to which particularly economic work remained attributed, while

Despite all these relationships, he felt isolated in Paris. Furthermore, his economic situation was disastrous, as it was throughout his life. He read a lot, especially history, mathematics, statistical works and those of economics, and within a short time he was very alone. Revolutionary, he had no comrades who shared his ideas among his compatriots living abroad and who, on the other hand, were very rare. In this respect, emigrants from all other countries were luckier than Bakunin. If they didn't feel armies behind them, at least they had a few battalions. Bakunin was then the only Russian revolutionary, the first Russian to have raised the red flag.

He raised it publicly on November 29, 1847, in a speech delivered before the Poles who had invited him to a celebration commemorating their insurrection of 1831. This speech published in German with the title *Russland wie es wirklich ist* ("Russia as it really is") had a fulminating effect on the official Russian circles of Paris. The Russian ambassador demanded the immediate expulsion of Bakunin from the French territory. Moreover, the embassy also spread the rumour that Bakunin was an agent provocateur of the Russian government, wanted and convicted in his country for theft. Men are quick to believe baseness, these voices have had more echo than Bakunin's own work; they never ceased to follow him throughout his existence. This slander, welcomed with complacency by all his opponents, has continued its path up to more recent times.

From Paris, Bakunin reached Brussels. There he found Marx and his milieu. No rapprochement took place between Marx and Bakunin. Marx's program was the *Communist Manifesto* and the only class he believed in was the proletariat. Bakunin's program was his speech to the Poles. He struggled for the liberation of all the oppressed, but above all for the freedom of the Slavic peoples.

Engels, on the other hand, in a letter dated September 6, 1846, had written to his friend Karl Marx that Bakunin was strongly suspected of being a spy. A letter from Bakunin to Herwegh shows us, in turn, that Bakunin's love for Marx was not very strong either.

In 1848, at the news of the February revolution, Bakunin rushed to Paris.

V

On February 23, 1848, the revolution had broken out in Paris, and by the 24th, France was a Republic. “This movement unleashed by the liberals benefited the Republic, which they were afraid of, and at the last moment universal suffrage was established by the republicans for the benefit of socialism, which instilled great fear in them”. The train did not take Bakunin across the Belgian border. From Belgium he went, in three days on foot, to Paris, where he arrived on February 26, and where he naturally sided with the far left, therefore with the socialists, who would be machine-gunned in June by the liberals and the republicans reunited, who feared them like fire.

When Bakunin arrived in Paris, the barricades were still standing. Not a bourgeois in the streets: fear had paralyzed them. Armed workers everywhere. The revolution had intoxicated everyone. Including Bakunin, of course. At two in the morning, with his rifle beside him, he fell asleep on the straw mattress in the Montagnardi barracks; at four he was up, rushing from meeting to meeting, from club to club. It was an “endless party”. He talked about everything, with everyone. His friend Herzen wrote that Bakunin then preached communism, equal pay, equalization, the liberation of all Slavs, the destruction of all States, the permanent revolution, the war until annihilation of all enemies. The “president of the barricades”, Caussidière, who tried to bring about “order out of disorder”, said of Bakunin: “the first day of the revolution he is literally a treasure; on the second day, he should simply be shot.”

Caussidière, in his capacity as a bourgeois little concerned with social revolution, was right to speak like this. Others claim that Bakunin directed the famous workers’ demonstration of 17 March 1848 against the privileged caste of the old national guards. He himself said that in the beginning everyone was in a fever, and that if it had jumped into someone’s mind to say that the good God had been chased from heaven and that the republic had been proclaimed there, would have been believed on his word... Bakunin quickly realized that the Revolution was in danger and, after the first enthusiasm had passed, he judged that his presence was necessary at the Russian border in order to raise the Slavs

release has been proven by Bakunin’s entire later life. [...] All Bakunin’s later life has demonstrated that he had not forgotten his revolutionary ideas. After his release from prison, and even more so after his escape from Siberia, he demonstrated that he had not become a repentant sinner, as he had endeavoured to make Nicholas and Alexander believe. On the contrary, he has uniquely and exclusively devoted the many years of his life that remained to be lived after his escape to the service of his revolutionary ideas.

The *Confession*, on the other hand, served him nothing. Tsar Nicholas I read it and wrote in the margin: “I see no other way for him than deportation to Siberia.” It was February 19, 1852. Despite this ruling, the Tsar left Bakunin in prison. Nicholas I died in 1855 and was succeeded by Alexander II. Bakunin wrote the letter reproduced after the *Confession* to Alexander II. Psychologically this letter must be interpreted as if it were the *Confession* itself. We will not try to know to what extent it could have influenced Alexander. We cannot say with certainty to what extent this letter and the family’s interventions opened the prison doors to Bakunin and determined his deportation to Siberia. One fact remains: Bakunin is sent to Siberia on February 14, 1857.

VI

From May 1851 to March 1854, Bakunin remained in the Peter and Paul fortress, then was transferred to the Schlüsselburg, where he remained imprisoned until 1857. Six years' prison in all. For two months no one paid any attention to him, then Count Orloff, colonel of the gendarmerie, came to tell him in the name of the Tsar: "The emperor sends me to you and instructs me to repeat the following words: "Tell him to write to me as a spiritual son would write to his soul father." Do you want to write?". Bakunin thought: before a court, during a trial, he would have been forced to remain totally faithful to his role, but within four walls, at the mercy of the bear, he was allowed to compromise on the form. So he asked for the space of a month, at the end of which he handed over his *Confession*.

This had just been published when I was in Moscow in 1921. Vera Figner, my eternally young friend who had also spent twenty-two years of her life at the Schlüsselburg, gave me a copy, sadly shaking her head for the way Bakunin presents his life and his deeds, and for the tone of these pages, degrading at first impression. I didn't have time to study the *Confession* at the time, but a few days later I found myself at Radek's, who saw Bakunin's text with a completely different eye to that of Vera Figner. He basically said to me:

"Bakunin was in prison; he naturally wanted to get out of it and it is evident that he had the right to adopt the most suitable style for this purpose". Later, finally reading the *Confession*, I also felt a sense of discouragement, because I felt a little disoriented, at least from a purely sentimental point of view. But immediately reminding myself that feelings are not our only faculties and that we also have reason, I began to reflect on the *Confession*, on what Nettelau, Polonsky and Saschin had written about it most [...] In his *Confession* to the Tsar, Bakunin repents all his ideas and all his revolutionary acts and asks for forgiveness. There were people who took Bakunin's repentance seriously. They did not reflect that the use of this fiction constituted for him the *sine qua non* condition of obtaining from the Tsar Nicholas I what the prisoner desired, that is, his release. That this repentance lasted just long enough to obtain this

against the Tsar. Finding himself, as always, in great shortage of money, he requested a loan of two thousand francs from the provisional government. His intention was to go to Poznan, where he would establish his centre of action. The provisional government granted him the requested sum and issued him two passports, one in his real name and the other in a false name .

At the beginning of April, he traveled from Strasbourg to Frankfurt where the German preparliament resided. Bakunin made the acquaintance of Jacob, Willich and some other Democrats. Then, passing through Cologne, he went to Berlin. A letter written by him in Cologne on February 17, 1848 has survived. He says in essence: a "Philistine" calm reigns here. The absolute lack of centralization is heavily felt in the German revolution. Power, he adds, has now passed from the kings to the bourgeoisie, who are afraid of the Republic, given that the latter must necessarily pose the social question.

The only living reality in Germany is the proletariat, which is agitating, and the peasant class. Bakunin thinks that the democratic revolution will break out in two or three months. Everywhere the bourgeois are arming themselves against the people. On the other hand, in the *Confession*, he says that he became sadder and sadder as he approached the North. In Berlin he was immediately forced to leave. He abandoned his trip to Poznan, where the revolutionary movement had been crushed. In Breslavia he got a sign of the distrust of the Poles, a new consequence of the shameful slanders spread about him by the Russian ambassador in Paris. Sadly, he bided his time. In Breslavia he frequented the German democratic club.

When a Slavic congress was convened in Prague in early June 1848, Bakunin naturally hastened to attend it. But it is worth, first of all, placing this congress in the order of events.

From 13 to 15 March 1848 a revolt broke out in Vienna. The national guard and the students take over the city.

On May 15, 1848, second riot in Vienna. The emperor flees to Innsbruck. After the Parisian revolution in February, the different nationalities united by their common submission to the Habsburgs want to regain their independence; the Germans are demanding their union with Germany; the Italians demand to return to Italy; the Magyars try to isolate themselves; all ultimately aspire to freedom.

The Slavic congress in Prague had been convened by the Czech party Palacki. It was to be a kind of preparliament, similar to that of Frankfurt.

Representatives of Czech, Moravian, Slovak, Romanian, Polish, Croatian and Serbian nationalities attended.

The Czechs, from the beginning of the Austrian revolution, had formed a provisional government headed by Palacki. The latter's dream was to carry out a restoration of Austria and the Habsburgs under the protection of Czechoslovakia. Instead of the German domination exercised on the Czechs until then, they instead would have dominated the Germans. Palacki had semi-official relations with the emperor who had fled to Innsbruck. He wanted to cure the Habsburg disease using the Czechs.

Palacki himself presided over the Slavic congress. Bakunin opposed his Slavic democratic federation to him and to the other reactionary Panslavists, and tried to awaken the conservatives' distrust of the Russian and Austrian dynasties. He recommended, among the Slavic peoples, a federative alliance that was to have as its basis the equality of all and brotherly love. Any form of enslavement must disappear. There should be no more inequalities other than those created by nature. No more castes or classes; and wherever an aristocracy and a privileged nobility still existed, they were to renounce their privileges and wealth.

Bakunin's dreams went even further. In the ideas he limited himself to expressing, he saw only a first germ, a first means for overthrowing Tsarism later. He dreamed of creating a great Slavic democratic State, with Constantinople as its capital and which had to equally include the Greeks, the Magyars, etc. This state would have formed a republic, but without parliament. In his view, a temporary dictatorship was necessary. A dictatorship without any limits, without freedom of the press. This dictatorship must persist until the peoples themselves were sufficiently enlightened. The exercise of the dictatorship was to tend towards rendering itself useless.

The congress, although it did not want to give any resonance to Bakunin's ideas, nevertheless served as a pretext for an intervention by the Austrian dynastic army commanded by Windischgratz. The Austrians provoked the Czechs by appointing a reactionary military commander in Prague. Conservative Germans rejoiced at this appointment and formed a "Society for Order and Peace", a kind of civic guard for the defense of the Austrian regime. At which the Czech students prepared the insurrection for June 12, 1848. Bakunin, who predicted its failure, advised against it. However, on the set date and on the occasion of a Czech demonstration, a meeting took place with the guards of the "Society for Order and Peace", who were none other than the vanguard

warn him that he would stick a bullet in his head at the slightest hint of escape. In Olmutz, chains were attached to the prison wall. Bakunin tried in vain to commit suicide with phosphorus matches.

On May 15, 1851, the Austrians sentenced him to hanging, but they commuted the sentence to that of life imprisonment: Bakunin also had to pay for his food.

Meanwhile at the Russian border the cops of the Tsar were waiting impatiently for the arrival of the great criminal. The month of May had not ended when they woke him in the middle of the night in his prison in Olmutz: they had come to pick him up to deliver him to his "little father" Nicola I. A meticulously closed car drove him to the station and from there a reinforced wagon took him to the border. Apparently he rejoiced like a child at the sight of the Russian uniforms. The Austrian officer claimed the return of the chain supplied by Austria to the Tsar's officer. Bakunin in return was loaded with Russian chains which to him seemed lighter. Once again imprisoned in a hermetically sealed wagon, the time had come for him to be taken to Petersburg, to the cells of the Peter and Paul fortress.

geois collected the 10,000 silver rubles promised in 1847 by the Russian government to anyone who managed to seize Bakunin.

In any case, Bakunin's capture greatly pleased the government of the Tsar. They had been hoping to have him for a long time. A senior police officer had once proposed to pick him up simply and purely abroad; some well-placed man sent to Europe would have taken possession of the criminal and brought him back to Russia. Higher-ranking spies, however, found that the process was too unusual. This time, as soon as Bakunin's arrest was telegraphed to the Russian gendarmerie, the chief of the latter sent an officer and a troop of soldiers to the border with the order to have the guilty man bound hand and foot and take him to a Petersburg prison. The Tsar had been in too much of a hurry, he was forced to wait two more years before having Bakunin in his hands. The Saxons and Austrians wanted to be the first to vent their mood on him.

To begin with, he was locked up in the Dresden prison, full of insects. To lead him to the interrogators, they took the precaution of loading him with chains. After two months they transported him to the Konigsstein fortress, naturally always chained and surrounded by petty-officers armed with loaded pistols; moreover one officer preceded and another closed the procession; plus the whole group was surrounded by infantry.

Although it was late at night, they still blindfolded his eyes before entering the fortress. The window of his cell was closed with nailed planks. If we had had the space here, we would have reproduced his letters written from the prison. They are full of wisdom and courage, but also of regret for freedom and the society of men. Because in nobody, perhaps, the need for sociability was as profound as in Bakunin: it could be that this is the dominant trait of his character. He preferred the contact of bad people to loneliness. Death didn't seem frightening to him at all, but the grave of a cell locked up on him filled him with fear.

After being sentenced to death on January 14, 1850, Bakunin saw his sentence commuted to life imprisonment and was later handed over to Austria. A detachment of gendarmes came to pick him up at the Konigsstein fortress and, at the Austrian border, handed him over to a platoon of cuirassiers who led him to Prague. In this city, care was taken to place soldiers armed with loaded rifles above and on each side of his cell. But this did not upset Bakunin's universally famous appetite, whose stomach required twice the ration of that of an ordinary man.

A convoy of dragons led him to Olmutz, because it was feared that the Czechs in Prague would do their utmost to free this respected prisoner. The officer sitting next to him in the car blatantly loaded his pistol to

of the Austrian army led by Windischgratz. When the Germans were no longer able to stand alone, the official armed force came to their rescue and the Czechs accepted the fight. This lasted from 13 to 17 June 1848 and ended with the defeat of the insurgents. Myths abounded about Bakunin's action during those days. What is certain is that he fought bravely. He struggled against the dispersion of forces, worked on the organization of a central committee, tried to establish strict discipline, constantly studying the positions of the revolutionaries and those of their enemies, finally giving a hand in the repartition of the rebel troops. After the defeat he fled to Wroclaw, where he arrived on 20 June 1848.

From 23 to 26 June 1848, Paris was the battlefield where reaction and revolution confronted each other; ten thousand workers perished and countless defeated were condemned to deportation. The revolution was struck in the heart; the defeat of the Parisian proletariat was the signal for the counter-revolution throughout Western Europe, just as it sparked new and feverish efforts by Bakunin to save what could still be saved, to inflame what could still be inflamed.

It could have been said that the revolt of all Europe had taken refuge in his brain and his heart, and if this subjugated Europe had been like Bakunin not a single stone would have remained in the whole edifice of the feudal and bourgeois society. The proletariat and the peasants were his hope. Despite all the bewilderments and all the baseness, his revolutionary faith had been strengthened and was far from despair; he saw the old world approaching its own destruction. He regarded the cretinism of parliamentarians, the Constituent Assembly and all other pseudo-revolutionary masks with supreme contempt. He had faith only in the impact of the proletarian and peasant masses. "The storm and life—he shouted—here is what we need, a new world, without laws and, consequently, free".

Everywhere he continued his work as an agitator, igniting passions, organizing the struggle. His personal sufferings stimulated his political vigor even more. His constant poverty, the renewed insistence of slander tending to pass him off as a Russian agent provocateur, did not in any way break the strength of this man; conversely, he found himself strengthened by it in his will to win a monstrous world—or to destroy it. He worked with Germans, Poles, Czechs. Back in Berlin he found Marx, Stirner, and others there. Expelled from Prussia and then from Dresden, he found a kindergarten in the Anhalt, which was still "red". It was from there that he wrote his Appeal to the Slavs, in which he warned his blood brothers against nationalism and nationalists, inciting them to destroy

the Russian, Austrian, Prussian and Turkish states, showing them the need for joint action with the German and Magyar revolutionaries. He works to prepare an action, as far as possible simultaneous, of the revolutionaries of all countries. His plans of the time, Polonsky writes, testify to an admirable and profound understanding of the mechanism of the revolution. For Bohemia, he planned a radical and decisive revolt that, even if won, would upset everything. All the nobles, all the clergy, all the feudal lords had to be driven out; all the goods had to be confiscated, on the one hand they had to be divided among all the poor peasants and on the other they had to be used to cover the expenses of the revolution. All the castles had to be destroyed, all the courts suppressed, all the state trials suspended, all the mortgages and all the debts above a thousand florins canceled. Such a revolution would have made impossible any attempt at restoration, even if it were attempted by a victorious reaction, and would equally have served as an example to the German revolutionaries. Bohemia was to be transformed into a revolutionary camp, from which the offensive triggered by the revolution in all countries would start, an offensive which all the other revolutionaries would join. A revolutionary government would be created in Prague which would have unlimited dictatorial powers and which would be assisted by a small number of specialists. Clubs, newspapers, demonstrations would have been banned, young revolutionaries would have been sent to countries to stir them up and create a military and revolutionary organization. All the unemployed had to be armed and enrolled in a "red" army commanded by Polish and Austrian ex-officers and sub-officers. All the old institutions, all the old norms of social life would have been canceled.

With the help of Czech friends, who on the other hand could not uphold what they seemed to promise, Bakunin tried to implement his plans by founding a secret organization with a central direction. He also got in touch with the Poles, who promised money and officers. Despite exposing himself to serious danger, he went to Prague himself to find out how the preparations were going. Now, not only had nothing been prepared, but the Czech democrats were literally frightened by Bakunin's radicalism. This did not discourage him at all, his zeal for the cause grew before every obstacle. However, he had to reach Saxony, because the Bohemian territory had become too insecure. The secret society was discovered following an imprudence committed shortly before the Dresden uprising. The trial caused by the Prague preparations lasted until 1851 and ended with a large number of death sentences, which on the other hand were not carried out, and with a large distribution of years in prison.

Meanwhile, the situation in Germany was ripe for a final confrontation between reaction and revolution. Let us remember some dates to better fix the events: 1848, October 31: Imperial troops take Vienna.

1848, 10 November: Wrangel, general of the governmental and royal troops of Prussia, enters Berlin. Proclamation of the state of siege. Disarming of the national guard.

1849, April 3: the King of Prussia declares that he does not want to accept the German Constitution without the consent of the princes, who naturally oppose it. It would then have been the duty of the German Revolution to defend its Constitution and fight for its "ideas". In fact riots break out in Dresden, in the Palatinate, in the Duchy of Baden. At the time of the Dresden uprising, Bakunin was in that very city. On April 30, 1849, the King of Saxony pronounced the dissolution of "his" parliament, and the rumour spread of the arrival of the Prussians. On May 3, the people want to take over the arsenal to get weapons and the royal troops fire on the crowd. Soon the barricades are erected and the king escapes.

Unfortunately, the leaders of the popular movement, too weak as always, sign an armistice to allow the king to gather his troops. On May 4, 1849, Bakunin goes to the seat of the provisional government of the Saxon revolution to offer his help. He studies the map of Saxony, gives instructions and orders, in a word becomes the true military leader of the insurrection. He gives all the heads of the National Guard carte blanche to burn houses whenever such a measure is necessary for the progress of the struggle engaged. "This devil of a man knew no precautions." It is said that he would terrify the provisional government, distribute weapons, ammunition and provisions, and have torches put on the barricades. Instead, the legend according to which he advised putting the *Madonna* of Raphael on the barricades to prevent the Prussian "art lovers" from shooting seems unlikely.

When defeat seemed inevitable, he proposed blowing up the Town Hall with the whole government. This advice was not accepted. Then, taking advantage of a gap in the encirclement of the siege troops, he organized the orderly retreat of about one thousand eight hundred revolutionaries, with whom he expected to open a path to Bohemia; but this troop gradually dispersed. Bakunin and Heubner, a member of the provisional government, then went to Chemnitz where, exhausted by fatigue, they resigned themselves to sleep. During the night of May 10, 1849, the bourgeoisie of Chemnitz surprised them while they slept at the "Blue Angel" hotel, proceeded to their arrest and finally handed them over to the commander of a Prussian battalion. We cannot say whether those bour-