

Mark Leier. *Bakunin: The Creative Passion*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006. pp. 368.

An Anarchist Rehabilitated

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin (1814-1876) is a gargantuan figure in the history of the Russian intelligentsia and on the nineteenth-century European revolutionary stage. Born in the province of Tver', north-west of Moscow, Bakunin spent his adolescent years at an artillery cadet school in St. Petersburg and, having quickly abandoned the military career for which this training was intended to prepare him, joined the so-called Stankevich circle in Moscow. This group served as an important conduit for the introduction of German philosophical ideas into the Russia of Nicholas I. Bakunin embarked on a restless, nomadic life. He travelled to Berlin, like several of his noble Russian contemporaries, so that he could study at the feet of his philosophical masters, ostensibly in order to prepare for an academic career. After a stint in Dresden, prudence dictated a move to Zurich following the appearance of his article "The Reaction in Germany," in which he famously pronounced, "The passion for destruction is also a creative passion." In 1844, when he refused to present himself at the Russian Legation in Berne and was stripped of his noble status, he moved again, first to Brussels, and then to Paris, from which he was expelled, in the revolutionary year of 1848, following a rousing oration to a banquet commemorating the Polish uprising of 1831 against Russian rule. Next he participated in unsuccessful uprisings in Prague and Dresden, and in May 1849 he was arrested.

There now began years of imprisonment in harsh conditions, first in Prague, then in Olomouc, then in the St. Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, to which he was extradited, and finally in the Shlissel'burg Fortress. In 1857, following a plea for clemency by his mother to the new tsar, Alexander II, he was released and exiled

to Tomsk in Siberia. Here he married a girl twenty-seven years his junior, the daughter of a Polish merchant. With help from a powerful relative, the couple moved east to Irkutsk, whence in 1861 Bakunin gained permission to travel to the Pacific coast. From the port of Nikolaevsk, he escaped to Japan aboard an American vessel, made his way to San Francisco, Panama, New York, and then London, where he turned up, shortly after Christmas, at the house of fellow Russian socialist Alexander Herzen, another political exile. It was not long before Bakunin began to disagree with Herzen, though: he took a more sympathetic attitude than Herzen towards the militant younger generation who were now turning to revolutionary activity in Russia. After another failed revolutionary escapade in 1863, this time in support of a further Polish insurgency against Russian rule, Bakunin settled in Italy. In 1867, when the Russian benefactress at whose expense he had been living found herself in straitened circumstances, he accompanied her to Switzerland, where he participated in the short-lived Geneva-based League of Peace and Freedom. Bakunin clashed with Karl Marx over the relationship between the First Working Men's International, which Marx controlled, and the International Alliance of Social Democracy that Bakunin had founded in 1868. The conflict led to Bakunin's expulsion from the International at Marx's instigation, the International's ultimate collapse, and lasting animosity between anarchists and Marxists. Now rendered a somewhat tragi-comic figure, Bakunin appeared at further abortive uprisings in Lyon in 1870 and Bologna in 1874. He was a major source of inspiration, though, to those young Russian men and women who took part in the "going to the people" movement of 1874 in order to conduct socialist propaganda or agitation among the peasantry. Bakunin died in Berne in July 1876.

It is undoubtedly true, as Mark Leier contends in his new biography of Bakunin, that this larger-than-life figure—a man of great physical bulk and personal presence who was charismatic and persuasive, but also overbearing, reckless, disorganized, parasitic, and prone to anti-Semitism—has suffered at the hands of historians. This is mainly because the anarchist political philosophy that Bakunin

came to espouse in the 1860s was unattractive both to Soviet scholars operating after the Bolshevik Revolution within the ideological constraints of Marxism-Leninism and, for the most part, to Western scholars who have been more sympathetic to the moderate, liberal opponents of Russian autocracy or to representatives of other populist or social-democratic forms of socialism. It is also the case (although this is not a point that Leier himself makes) that the shadow that has been cast over Bakunin's reputation has been darkened by the radiant light in which his sometime ally Herzen has basked as a result of the efforts of his reverential British biographers, notably Isaiah Berlin and Aileen Kelly. Leier also has good grounds for taking a sceptical view of the psycho-historical approach, taken by some historians, that would seek to explain political ideas and actions as the product of inner personal drives and, in this case, "to root anarchism in individual pathology." (xii)

Although Leier's biography "stresses the evolution of [Bakunin's] ideas as much as the details of his life" and lays emphasis less on Bakunin's personality than on the philosophical, social, and political context from which his anarchism sprang, (xii-xiii) his approach, too, may be open to criticism. It is not so much that Leier occasionally lapses into a populist tone, opining, for instance, that "to a ruler in St. Petersburg or Vienna or Berlin a Slav is a Slav is a pain in the ass," (135) and musing that if "the strengths of Bakunin and Marx could have been combined, they would have made the hottest duo until Jimi Hendrix met Leo Fender." (118) More importantly, Leier is far from objective. Revealing a deep sympathy for Bakunin's political message, his work, at times, has the air of a contribution made to the struggle against the industrial-military complex by a class warrior who wishes to keep alive the spirit of 1968, when the "tyrant trembled in his palace" and Paris was "the place to be." (109) Anarchism, Leier contends, "remains the most optimistic and hopeful of alternatives" to the problems of the modern world, whose "practitioners of power, or pragmatism and practicality, have had their chance" and "botched it." (xiii-xiv) Many personal grievances about this world, in which slavery is said still to exist, (77) receive an

airing: grievances about the “way much history is still taught in schools today, that is, as the memorization of names and dates,” by which means we “bludgeon students into submission and identify those who will sit up straight and become cheerful cannon fodder, dutiful workers, and frantic consumers”; (84) about the alleged denial of time and training for intellectual work to workers in capitalist societies; (104) about modern economists, who “often cloud the issue” in order to defend capitalism; (25-6) about military discipline, as required in officer training schools, and the “irony in our modern, free nations...that soldiers are ordered to fight for democracy while being denied any experience of the concept”; (39) and about much more besides.

Leier’s ideological affiliation leads him into a simplistic attack on Isaiah Berlin, who is dismissed as having “devoted his scholastic life to defending liberalism, that is, capitalism and the limited democratic rights established by the parliaments of Western Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” (63) Leier’s belief that Berlin wished to denounce the radical critique of capitalism offered by Bakunin and Herzen is untenable, at least in relation to Herzen. In fact, Berlin’s treatment of Herzen, who relentlessly vilified the mid-nineteenth-century French and English bourgeoisie, was indulgent to a fault. Nor, surely, can Berlin reasonably be thought to have accused Herzen of failing to understand the “real world...of pragmatic politics, of deals, compromise, and surrender,” (64) as Leier seems to imply when he ill-advisedly conflates Berlin’s treatment of these two Russian thinkers.

Sympathy for his subject leads Leier to attempt, with dogged resourcefulness, to deflect every aspersion that has been cast against Bakunin by his many critics. He denies, for instance, that Bakunin incited his numerous sisters to rebel against their father, arguing—with some plausibility, it should be said—that they were themselves well up to the task. (59) He disputes—perhaps somewhat less convincingly—that Bakunin had a loose grip on reality in the late 1830s, arguing that historians have been too dependent on the literary critic Vissarion Belinskii for the view that the “young Bakunin was caught

up in a mystical world of [German] idealism.” (60) Belinskii is hardly a reliable witness, but his unreliability does not make this criticism of Bakunin untrue. Again, Leier denies that Bakunin’s Hegelianism in the late 1830s led him to reconcile himself with reality (that is, to adopt a conservative political stance), and he produces an ingenious argument to suggest that an article in which Bakunin called for such reconciliation in fact “represented his generation’s turn to realism, practical action, and resistance.” (79) Leier also challenges the persistent view that Bakunin was sexually impotent, a view that has underpinned the argument that Bakunin’s “quest for sexual wholeness drew him to German idealism and then to anarchism as a form of sexual sublimation.” This aspersion Leier tackles not by arguing that Bakunin’s sexuality should be irrelevant to an intellectual biography, but by claiming that it rests on flimsy evidence, mainly on the reported insult proffered by a contemporary in a quarrel of 1840 that Bakunin was a “eunuch.” (62-3) Leier is on less firm ground, though, when he comes to defend his profligate subject from detractors who have deplored his habit of living off others—the creditors are legion—by borrowing money that he would never repay. The charge that Bakunin’s casual attitude towards money weakened his right to speak on behalf of peasants and workers and, more importantly, indicated that he “was sufficiently detached from base reality as to be hopelessly utopian” cannot convincingly be deflected merely by a diatribe of the sort that Leier offers against the alleged hypocrisy of Marxists and the even “worse moral position” of “liberal and conservative pundits.” (90)

Leier loyally attempts also to rebut the more serious criticisms that have been levelled at Bakunin. Undaunted, for example, by the confession that Bakunin wrote to Nicholas I, with “unseemly alacrity,” from his Russian prison, Leier treats this document as not really a confession at all, but an “avowal” written by a nobleman with a sense of honour and an awareness of his right of personal appeal to his sovereign. (146) More taxing, from Leier’s point of view, is Bakunin’s boyish enthusiasm for secret societies and codes, his taste for strict discipline within revolutionary organizations, and his advo-

cacy, by the end of the 1860s, of a “collective dictatorship” to be imposed by a revolutionary International Brotherhood. Leier does accept that “however we may parse and explain Bakunin, we are left with passages in his writing that suggest he believed not in democratic, social revolutions of the masses but in secret conspiracies, putsches, and coups made by small bands of revolutionaries organized in shadowy elite vanguards.” (194) However, “a careful reading of what Bakunin actually wrote makes it plain,” he believes, “that [Bakunin’s] arguments about discipline are much more complicated and thoughtful than his critics have suggested.” (193) Bakunin, Leier insists, has been quoted out of context. What Leier will not countenance is the possibility that Bakunin’s ideas are a chaotic *mélange*, in this instance of repudiation of authoritarianism, on the one hand, and acknowledgement of its usefulness for those who cannot have their wishes implemented by other means, on the other.

More problematic still is Bakunin’s association with the young political conspirator Sergei Nechaev, who organized some revolutionary circles among students in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and who, in 1869, took refuge in Switzerland. Nechaev was infamous, in subsequent Russian revolutionary circles as well as in Russian society, for his espousal of the principle that the end justifies the means and for his orchestration of, and participation in, the murder of a member of one of these circles, whom he accused of betraying the organization. He was the model for the character of Piotr Verkhovenskii in Fiodor Dostoevskii’s novel *The Devils* (also translated as *The Possessed*). Whether Bakunin helped Nechaev to write the “Catechism of a Revolutionary,” in which revolutionaries were exhorted to expend anyone as revolutionary capital if this might be of use to their cause, has been much disputed. Leier predictably supports the view that Bakunin had no part in the production of the document, although he is bound to concede that Bakunin’s gullible infatuation with Nechaev in 1869-70 did great damage to his reputation, both among contemporaries and in the eyes of posterity.

Leier’s attempt to dissociate Bakunin from the phenomenon of terrorism which he associates with Nechaevism—although, in fact, it

was not advocacy of political terrorism that repelled contemporaries, but Nechaev's Machiavellian cynicism—takes him into territory, namely the Russian revolutionary movement of the 1870s, from which it is difficult to mine material that is of use to him. He is right to say that The People's Will party (*Narodnaia volia*) which succeeded in assassinating Alexander II, after several attempts, on 1 March 1881, was not founded until 1879, three years after Bakunin's death. Many of the revolutionaries who joined this party, though, had previously been active in the second Land and Liberty organization (*Zemlia i volia*), founded in 1876, whose programme was overtly Bakuninist. Moreover, the former Bakuninist members of Land and Liberty who eschewed political terrorism and who later founded another party, The Black Partition (*Chernyi peredel*), had no qualms about "economic" terrorism, that is to say the killing of factory owners and landowners. Indeed, for the most part, it was only on tactical, not moral, grounds that Russian revolutionaries, nearly all of whom found Bakunin inspirational, opposed terrorism in the 1870s.

Most crucial of all to Leier's rehabilitation of Bakunin, perhaps, is the question of Bakunin's attitude towards the bloodshed that might accompany the social upheaval of which he dreamed. Leier believes that "historians have been much too quick to read violence and destruction into Bakunin's most innocent remarks." (45) In defending Bakunin from the charge that he advocated, even relished, violence, Leier produces various arguments. After the manner of those who advocate a "war on terror," he, at times, presents a phenomenon, such as social relationships, rather than individual human beings, (213) as the "enemy." He therefore endorses a distinction which Bakunin tried to draw—but which, to many readers, will only confirm the view that Bakunin had a weak grasp of reality—that it would be possible in a revolution to distinguish between, on the one hand, property and institutions, which ought, according to Bakunin, to be attacked and done away with, and, on the other hand, human life, which there was no need to destroy. (99) Leier also allows his subject to shuffle off moral responsibility for revolutionary violence, should it occur and should it engulf human beings as well as things, by uncritically

reporting Bakunin's view—which was stated with a certain melancholy—that it was inevitable that the oppressed, in the event of a revolution, would “unleash their anger” and “wreak vengeance on their oppressors.” (199) Then again, if there was to be violence, the powers-that-be would have brought it on themselves, Leier believes: employers and governments “sowed the wind; they should not be surprised if the whirlwind reaped them.” (213) At any rate, the long-suffering masses would not be to blame. More generally, Leier is at pains to demonstrate that violence is not a necessary or exclusive attribute of anarchism and that many revolutionary groups that have resorted to it (for example, the Black Panthers and the Baader-Meinhoff Gang) are not anarchist. (215) In any case, the historical sum of violence done by anarchists has been infinitesimal, Leier stresses, in comparison to that done by the state and capitalists (whose “violence” seems to include accidents resulting from lax health and safety procedures in the work-place). (213-14)

And yet any attempt to rescue Bakunin from the charge that he condoned violence, whatever mitigating arguments are deployed, is fraught with difficulty. After all, Bakunin made it clear—and Leier admires him for this—that he would always side with revolutionaries and the people, even if they appeared to be wrong. (168) Such indiscriminating surrender to the mood of the popular mass is of a piece with the respect that Bakunin often expressed for the spontaneity or elemental quality (*stikhiinost'*) of the Russian peasant. Bakunin invoked the tradition of popular rebellion in Russian history and held up the revolts led by Sten'ka Razin and Emel'ian Pugachov, in 1670-71 and 1773-4 respectively, as indications that the destructive urge was alive in the people's consciousness. He drew encouragement from the fact that the Russian peasant supposedly remembered Pugachov, in the course of whose revolt the corpses of nobles and functionaries were piled high, as a hero. (129) The fact does not emerge from Leier's book as clearly as it might—indeed should—that it was Bakunin's main revolutionary ambition, insofar as Russia was concerned, actually to incite *pugachovshchina*, the set of phenomena associated with Pugachov. Leier does not examine, for

example, the “Appendix A” that Bakunin attached to his magnum opus, *Statism and Anarchy* (1873). In this appendix—Bakunin’s most authoritative instruction to his Russian followers—Bakunin addressed the purpose of “going to the people,” which he agreed was now *de rigueur* for Russian revolutionaries. He scorned the “peaceful and preparatory” path recommended by his contemporary Piotr Lavrov (though Leier does not note this when he briefly mentions Lavrov on page 289). Instead, Bakunin advocated the “fighting way, the way of rebellion,” as the only route to “salvation.” The people “are in such a desperate position that one could raise up any village with no trouble at all,” Bakunin enthuses. “But although any uprising, however unsuccessful, is always useful, nevertheless individual eruptions are not enough. All the villages must be raised up at once.” Revolutionaries should work to overcome the factors, such as the patriarchal quality of Russian life and veneration of the tsar, that obstruct this ideal in the popular consciousness. And that is what Bakunin’s followers in the 1870s sought to do. They were accordingly known as *buntari*, that is, inciters of *bunt*, or elemental rebellion.

It should be added that Leier is rather dependent on secondary sources. He draws heavily, for example, on the authoritative work done by Marshall Shatz, on theses by two postgraduate students, Martine de Giudice and John Wyatt Randolph, and on a biography by Paul McLaughlin (though not, it seems, on the chapter on Bakunin in Evgeny Lampert’s *Studies in Rebellion*). This dependency may explain some minor errors or apparent misconceptions concerning details of Russian historical, intellectual, or cultural background. It is not true, for example, that, in the nineteenth century, service to the tsar was actually “required” of Russian noble families. (3) Napoleon’s Grande Armée was pushed back across the River Niman in 1812, not 1813 (this may, of course, be just a misprint). (19) The Russian nobility had no “castles.” (129) It is not easy to see what Leier has in mind when he says that Alexander Pushkin’s narrative poem “The Bronze Horseman” hearkens “back to a mythic Russian past.” (47) Ivan Turgenev never did truly engage in radical politics, nor can he really be said to have caricatured, in the hero of his first

novel, *Rudin*, “a philosophical and political position for which [he] had little taste,” (94) nor did he try “to parody the [nihilist] movement with the character of Bazarov in his novel *Fathers and Sons*.” (203) Ivan Kireevskii was not a “Westernizer,” but a member of the opposing camp, the Slavophiles. (89)

Such minor errors, which may betray a less than sure grasp of the Russian context of Bakunin’s activity, should not be allowed to detract seriously from the worth of this book. (In any case, it may not be aimed primarily at students of, and specialists in, Russian history and thought.) After all, the book is solidly based on a major primary source, namely, the collection of Bakunin’s works published in French by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. It contains a sensitive account of the ambience in which the children of a Russian nobleman of the Alexandrine age grew up. There is an illuminating explanation of the significance of German idealist philosophy for intellectuals of Bakunin’s generation: it “enabled them to contemplate a life, a society, a world, in which people could make free choices unbound by selfish authority.” (70) Leier also provides a sound definition of “nihilism” in the Russian context in the 1860s. He lucidly describes relations between Bakunin and Marx. He acknowledges his sources and supplies a valuable bibliographical guide. The book’s index is extensive and useful.

In sum, there is space in the literature on Russian thought and on anarchism in general for an apologetic biography of Bakunin that critically re-examines the primary sources, as this book does, and approaches the existing secondary sources with scepticism. Leier’s bias in favour of his subject, which is very considerable, is at least overt: from beginning to end it is clear that the author’s aim is to retouch the historical portrait of Bakunin, so that readers may be reminded, as Leier puts it in his demotic register, that “shit runs downhill...from those who rule, lead, employ, and manipulate us,” and so that they may be moved to direct their “anger and protest” upward. (300) It is the indulgent judgement of the book’s central character, though, that will most alienate some readers. For not everyone will accept the arguments put forward by Bakunin and his

biographer as excuses for revolutionary violence. Nor will all accept the reasons given by them for attributing responsibility for such violence to the anarchist's class enemy rather than to those who perpetrate it or to the ingenuous rebel who devoted his adult life to inciting it.

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