

MICHAEL BAKUNIN 1814 - 1876

Cultivating 'the habit of freedom'

The Open Road

The year 1976 marked the centenary of the death of Michael Bakunin. Throughout the world anarchists and scholars held conferences to commemorate his great contributions to the revolutionary movement of his day and to appraise his impact on history and the activism of today.

The largest conference was held in Venice, Italy, where 500 people attended and ten formal papers were presented on Bakunin, exploring every aspect of his life and thought. In North America the largest gathering was in New York where Paul Avrich, Murray Bookchin, and Sam Dolgoff and others gave tribute to the Russian anarchist whose influence in his day surpassed that of his contemporary and rival Karl Marx.

These retrospectives of Bakunin's life and times have provided fresh insights into problems that confront revolutionaries to this day.

In the polemics of Bakunin and Marx in the congresses and documents of the First International two identifiable tendencies in the theory and tactics of socialism emerged: the authoritarian and libertarian schools. The debate conducted by Marx and Bakunin on fundamental principles still continues in the theory and practice of revolutionaries today.

The issues, which in their day appeared to be merely abstract speculations about what might happen in the distant future, are today crucial: they are being decisively posed not only in the capitalist nations, but also in the totalitarian communist regimes which relate themselves to Marx.

From our perspective one hundred years after the death of Bakunin we can see that his warnings against Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat" have proved essentially correct in every case. In 1873, Bakunin stated with stunning accuracy, that "the leaders of the Communist Party, namely Mr. Marx and his followers, will proceed to liberate humanity in their own way. They will concentrate the reins of government in a strong hand. . . . They will (centralize) all commercial, industrial, agricultural, and even scientific production, and then divide the masses into two armies — industrial and agricultural — under the direct command of state engineers, who will constitute a new privileged scientific and political class."

By now it is all too evident that the nationalization of property and the means of production does not fundamentally alter the basic inequality between those wielding power and those subject to it. Lenin's notion that "freedom is a bourgeois middle-class virtue" is giving way to the conviction that freedom is a greater necessity than even the most efficient concentration of political and economic power, and no one any longer believes that the State will "with away."

The dogma that science, philosophy, ethics, and democratic institutions are mere reflections (an "ideological superstructure" in Marxian terms) of the economic mode of production is equally losing ground to the conviction that these phenomena have an independent role in shaping human history.

Like Marx, Bakunin emphasized the importance of the economic factor in social transformation. But he accepted Marx's materialist "laws of history" only insofar as they harmonized with humankind's deepest aspirations, that is, for freedom. It is true that some of Marx's own earlier writings concerning freedom, alienation, and the State — resulting in 19th century long death — could well have been produced by an anarchist; and many "Marxist humanists" have tried to use these writings to show that Marx was really a libertarian.

Unfortunately, as the mature Marx himself elaborated his own system, the element of freedom dwindled in importance as against the inexorable laws of historical evolution. In contrast, Bakunin emphasized the psychological (and, not least, the spiritual) aspects of the revolution, insisting that revolution was impossible for people who had "lost the habit of freedom," and thereby added another dimension to revolutionary theory. As against Marx's economic determinism, he left more room for humankind's will, the aspiration to freedom and equality, and the "instinct of revolt," which constitutes the "revolutionary consciousness" of oppressed peoples.

According to Bakunin "poverty and degradation are not sufficient to generate the Social Revolution. They may call forth sporadic local rebellions, but not great and widespread mass uprisings. . . . It is indispensable that the people be inspired by a universal ideal. . . . that they have a general idea of their rights, and a deep passionate . . .



Michael Bakunin

belief in the validity of these rights." This revolutionary consciousness coupled with the reality of economic conditions is necessary to place the Social Revolution on the agenda.

Today we can see that Bakunin's perception of the class struggle and the actual development of Social Revolution was far more accurate than Marx's restricted vision. The three greatest revolutions of the twentieth century — in Russia, Spain, and China — have all occurred in relatively backward underdeveloped countries and have largely been "peasant wars" linked with spontaneous outbursts of the urban poor, as Bakunin predicted.

The peasantry and unskilled workers, those primitive groups for whom Marx expressed withering contempt, have become the mass base of Twentieth Century social upheavals — upheavals which, though often labeled "Marxist," are far more accurately described as "Bakunist." Bakunin's visions, moreover, have anticipated the social ferment within the "Third World" as a whole, the modern counterpart on a global scale of Bakunin's backward peripheral Europe.

Even the trajectory of the Russian revolution followed Bakunin's outline. Here, in essence, was the spontaneous "revolt of the masses" that Bakunin had foreseen some

fifty years before. In 1917 Russia experienced a virtual breakdown of political authority, and councils of workers and peasants sprang up which might have formed the basis of libertarian communes. Lenin, like Bakunin before him, encouraged the raw and untutored elements of Russian society to sweep away what remained of the old regime. Perhaps his greatest achievement was to return to the anarcho-populist roots of the Russian revolutionary tradition and to adapt his Marxist theories to suit the conditions of a relatively backward country in which a proletarian revolution had little sense. It is not surprising that during the early stages of the revolution Lenin was accused of being a "Bakunist" by his orthodox Marxist opponents.

Unfortunately, the Soviet Union, the fruition of so many of Bakunin's theories and dreams, was also the culmination of Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat." It quickly became proof of Bakunin's warnings that "There can be nothing living or human outside of liberty, and a socialism that does not accept freedom as its only creative principle. . . . will inevitably. . . lead to slavery and brutality."

There are revolutionary alternatives to authoritarian socialism as it is practiced throughout the world. It is in the development of these alternatives that the magnitude and relevance of Bakunin's contribution to social theory is becoming increasingly evident in contemporary society. Without denigrating the historic contributions of Marx, which Bakunin hailed and promoted in his time, anti-authoritarian socialists of all types are today re-learning the lessons of the anarchist Bakunin with a desire to avoid the tragic mistakes of the past.

Much of the material in this article has been adapted from the preface and introduction of *Bakunin on Anarchy*, an excellent presentation of Bakunin's most important writings edited by Sam Dolgoff. Other sources for Bakunin's writings are: **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings** edited by Arthur Lehning; **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism** edited by G.P. Maxmoff; and for a biography **Michael Bakunin** by E.H. Carr or **The Russian Anarchists** by Paul Avrich.

On the Road

The *Open Road* is produced by a small group of politically active people based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, who have come together to propagate news and information about anti-authoritarian, communist developments throughout the world.

This second issue of the *Open Road* has been a long time coming, mainly because of the overwhelming response to Issue No. 1 last Summer. We have been hard-pressed just to keep up with our correspondence and to cement relationships with friends and comrades on all continents.

All we have received about 1,200 letters. Our cor-

respondents have been extremely supportive, and we regret we haven't been able to personally answer them all yet. We have selected a representative sample, edited for brevity, for publication on Page 2.

Most of the letters have offered useful and insightful comments on the first issue, and we have tried to incorporate in Issue, where appropriate, into the current issue. Naturally, with such a wide readership, we have received quite a good deal of conflicting advice on what to cover and how to cover it.

As the published letters indicate, the more contentious topics included armed struggle in North America,

the counter-culture, the established trade union movement and Third World liberation movements. All too often, the main sources of information on these phenomena are the hostile mass media and/or the sectarian "mainstream" press. We feel it imperative for anti-authoritarians to have reliable information in order to make their own judgments. Our guideline in this coverage (as stated in Issue No. 1) is to "report on anti-authoritarian trends and developments wherever they may occur, and to publish no organization other than those which are created and sustained by ordinary people in the heat of struggle."

Another source of satisfaction for us has been the financial support from our readership—a total of \$1,900, mainly in small donations of under \$10. Each along with some street and store sales, this will just about cover our printing, mailing and mis-

cellaneous costs for the current issue. (Issue No. 1 was financed through gifts and loans from working friends). We don't charge for subscriptions, so if *The Open Road* is to continue publishing, we will need continuing financial support from our readership. Please consider this an appeal for donations.

We are printing 12,000 copies of Issue No. 2, twice as many as last time. Our subscription issue was completely sold out, and we had to turn down many requests for additional copies. But because of a recent fiasco in our distribution system, we have had about 600 copies of No. 1 returned. We haven't managed to keep track of all requests, so if you still want a back copy, don't hesitate to write to us.

Another item of business: we sent out postcards to everybody on our mailing list last Fall suggesting they let us know if they received the

paper, what they think of it and whether they want to continue getting it. We're using the same mailing list for the current issue, so after this we'll have to confine ourselves to those people who have given us some feedback. So if you haven't written already, and you want to keep getting *The Open Road*, please drop us a line.

Our thanks are extended to typesetter Laura Lippert, layout coordinator Gloria Mundi and Pulp Press Ltd. Many other individuals and groups have offered to help in various phases of production or in distribution in

their localities, but so far, with few exceptions, we have been unable to work out a system for dispersing the paper. We welcome any near-total responsibility doesn't always fall on the same small group of people.

As we said in the first issue: "We welcome, encourage and solicit correspondence from readers. We are looking for publishable reports from anywhere in the world, and also story ideas, tips, advice, criticism, what-have-you. The range of subjects and their treatment is indicated by, but not limited to, those found in this issue."

We will send the *Open Road* to anyone who requests it.

We have no subscription rates and depend on readers' donations.

correspondence, and contributions to: **The Open Road** Box 615, Station G Vancouver, B.C., Canada