



## The Big Liza

Review of Benoît-P. Hepner

*Bakounine et le panslavisme révolutionnaire*

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# The Big Liza

Review of Benoît-P. Hepner, *Bakounine et le panslavisme révolutionnaire: cinq essais sur l'histoire des idées en Russie et en Europe* (Paris, 1950: Marcel Rivière), *Slavonic Review* 30 (1951–2), no. 74 (December 1951), 280–5



THIS BOOK contains five essays by M. Benoît-P. Hepner on radical ideas in Russia in the nineteenth century, and is an interesting and important contribution to our knowledge of an important topic. The topic is important, as well as intrinsically interesting, because a description of the intellectual ferment which began to grow in Russia towards the end of Catherine's reign and

continued until the accession of Stalin to power is indispensable to any coherent account of the causes of the Russian Revolution, yet it is a subject on which relatively little serious analytical work has been done.

The reason for this is not hard to seek. During the nineteenth century the censorship prevented scholars from publishing all that they knew or thought, and to some degree inhibited research in this field. Conditions after the upheaval of 1905 were comparatively easier, and the noble monument to learning left by Mikhail Gershenzon and other scholars was built during the first quarter of the present century. After the Revolution, and in particular after Stalin's accession to power, the censorship grew tighter again, and in the 1930s and 1940s, despite the thin (and very precious) stream of pure scholarship, these politically topical, and therefore dangerous, subjects could again not be treated freely except by scholars living beyond the borders of Russia. For this the majority of West European historians of thought lacked the necessary equipment and interest, and readers without command of Russian have had to subsist on a few precious crumbs from the tables of such French scholars as M. Labry, M. Koyré, *père* Gratieu [*sic*] and M. Coquart, and in England Mr E. H. Carr, as well as occasional essays in the relevant periodicals – all in all, far too meagre a diet to satisfy the curiosity of amateurs, let alone scholars.

To this small and, by force of circumstances, quintessential literature, this volume is a serious and welcome addition. M. Hepner, whose knowledge of Russian cannot be questioned, possesses that degree of familiarity with European intellectual movements during the last two centuries without which the history of Russian ideas, which even at their most original are deeply derivative from it, must remain unintelligible. Moreover, M. Hepner has that sense, not frequent among historians of thought, of the elaborate interplay of ideas, emotional life and historical circumstances which renders him capable of conveying the general tone of a period, both of individual writers and of groups and schools of thought, so that we obtain a clear picture of the general character both of a milieu and of the role played in it by particular

thinkers, and not merely, though even that is rare enough, a mere description and analysis of abstract ideas in some artificial chronological or geographical sequence.

Although the evolution of Bakunin's ideas is the centre of M. Hepner's interest, his opening essay deals with the general intellectual scene in Russia in the early nineteenth century (here he rightly places in [281] the foreground German and French influences upon it). He follows this with an account of the early ideas of Stankevich and his circle; then considers the central factor of the 1840s – the views and influence of Belinsky, whose intellectual crisis is the climax of the entire movement. A chapter is devoted to the influence of Polish 'Messianism' on both Herzen and Bakunin in the middle years of the century. The final essay describes the emergence of Bakunin as the founder of international anarchism, and a commanding figure who, in the breadth of his personality and the power of his ideas, transcended national and indeed Slavonic boundaries. To the treatment of these topics M. Hepner brings a wealth of learning, and a degree of sensitive insight into the paths pursued both by men and by ideas, which few students, whether of the history of thought or of Russia, can today command. His work is, for these reasons, fit to be placed alongside that of such contemporary masters of the subject as Koyré, Eikhenbaum and Chukovsky, and well above the machine-made productions of contemporary Soviet journals, or the dreary compilations which too often see the light in the West.

M. Hepner's first essay – that dealing with the 1820s and 1830s – gives an account, at once detailed and written with a civilised, if at times somewhat inelegant, prose, of the groups and circles of Russian intellectuals before and after the Decembrist revolt. In common with most French philosophical writers, M. Hepner refrains from precise analytic treatment of the ideas with which he deals. He provides a well-executed impressionist *esquisse* of the Russian Schellingians, of the Moscow Hegelians, of the *voltairisant* aristocracy, of the early Slavophiles and of the followers (or pseudo-followers) of the French utopian socialists, or rather of the effects

of such accounts of these writers as percolated in the form of popular articles in French and Russian periodicals.

Here one may note several curious gaps: there is far too little about the luminaries of the Arzamas Society, which so deeply influenced both Pushkin and his more philosophically inclined contemporaries; there is no adequate account of the *lyubomudry* – they are referred to, indeed, but one vainly seeks for even a reflection of that light which such critics as, e.g., Ivanov-Razumnik, so generously cast upon them. Even more surprisingly, the central and indeed crucial figure of Chaadaev appears so fleetingly upon the scene that one could not begin to understand from this brief glimpse the vital role played by this remarkable man in posing the questions with the various answers to which M. Hepner's book is of necessity almost wholly concerned.

A further weakness of M. Hepner is a tendency to institute irrelevant and unconvincing parallels between the Russian followers of German Idealism or French radicalism on the one hand, and fashionable French thinkers of our day – existentialists, neo-Schellingians, transcendentalists etc – on the other. This touches upon the absurd when Belinsky's revolt is suddenly compared to that of Kierkegaard: whatever may be said of Belinsky's various metamorphoses, they are all thoroughly and almost exaggeratedly characteristic of the liberal [282] protest of the nineteenth century, the attitude which has its roots in the black-and-white moral world of Kant and Schiller, and consequently tends towards narrow fanaticism and a bleak rejection of aesthetic or intellectual in favour of ethical values, and is as sharply different as anything can be from the tormented nihilism and irrationalist despairs, and the dissolution of all systems and values, that are characteristic of modern existentialism. On the other hand, it must be counted as an exceptional merit in M. Hepner that he pays due attention to the influence of the mystics and Illuminists, particularly Saint-Martin, on the first generation of the Russian intelligentsia. This testifies to the width and scrupulous attention to historical origins involved in his method.

The chapter on Belinsky is the best in the book. It is rich in felicitous quotations, which aid M. Hepner in reconstructing the mental and moral characteristics of this crucial and noble figure. M. Hepner succeeds particularly well in conveying the essence of his generous, contradictory, often exasperating, yet deeply moving personality, which could be acutely penetrating and also utterly naive, delicately sensitive and given to moments of both coarseness and sheer vulgarity, but retaining throughout all its painful, and sometimes merely adolescent, vagaries an unmistakable unity and integrity of purpose and a purity of motive which is as clear to us, and as touching, as it was to his own friends and contemporaries. M. Hepner paints him very faithfully and sensitively, with full understanding of how much is at stake, and how well Belinsky and his contemporaries understood this; nor is he tempted, as many later writers have been, whether through lack of depth on their own part or for extraneous reasons, to represent him as a clear-cut ideologist – a convinced socialist or a prophetic proletarian revolutionary, or an embittered nationalist. All these attitudes can, of course, be traced in his words and acts, but like Mikhailovsky after him, he was first and foremost – as well as in the last analysis – a morally *révolté* liberal who fought fitfully, but with undiminished passion, for the right to possess freedom, to tell the truth, to destroy the reign of ignorance, idleness, despotism and brutal inequality, in the same spirit and with the same lack of system as many French *philosophes* in the century before. M. Hepner brings this out very vividly, and is particularly interesting on Belinsky's nationalist and Idealist strains, though it is not necessary to trace these to such relatively minor Germans as 'Gymnastic-Father' Jahn or Görres when the doctrines of Fichte and of the Slavophiles, even what is common to the Karamzinists and the Shishkovians, are sufficient to account for them.

The skill and understanding shown in dealing with the complex (if relatively monolithic) Belinsky increases one's confidence in the author's ability to cope with the far more chaotic amalgam constituted by Bakunin. Nor is one disappointed. With commendable judgement M. Hepner avoids the fatal extremes

which tempt all the students of Bakunin's wild life and character. Like all scholars in this field, he has obviously learnt a great deal from the work of Professor E. H. Carr, and pays him a well-justified [283] tribute; but he does not treat Bakunin as a lovable eccentric, a man of fantastically unstable temperament, generous and violent, with a child's exuberance, cruelty, lack of scruple, destructiveness and charm, looking everywhere only for intellectual excitement, for storms and for conflagrations, using Hegel only as an intoxicant, and no more fundamentally an 'ideologist' than, say, Blanqui or Rochefort.

Neither does he go to the opposite extreme, adopted by Bakunin's faithful disciples Nettlau or Guillaume, who tried to systematise Bakunin's day-to-day propaganda into an intellectually reputable system of coherent political, social and economic thought. M. Hepner treads a cautious path between these extremes, and makes it possible to understand how Bakunin, despite his disordered life and doctrines, came to be a powerful and, even now, vital intellectual influence, and not merely a revolutionary figure of superhuman dimensions – a magnificent memory and no more.

M. Hepner places due emphasis on Bakunin's self-dramatising tendencies – his Byronic picture of himself, his 'elemental' properties, his concept of his role as the magnificent man of action, his theatrical gestures, the tempestuous tribune, the *homme fatal*, the dreamer with infinite horizons – and not enough on the last phase, the old revolutionary, still a trifle sinister, still picturesque, but somewhat pathetic, living out his life in Switzerland. This does not perhaps allow for quite enough of what Turgenev saw in him when he was writing *Rudin*, or for Herzen's 'Big Liza',<sup>1</sup> or indeed for M. Hepner's own description of him as above all a 'charmeur et entraîneur'. Bakunin was a genuine source of ideas which were destined to play a great part in the history of Europe and of mankind, and he romanticised himself as a brilliant, magnetic, Svengali-like figure to many an innocent and naive Russian

<sup>1</sup> [As Herzen called the childlike Bakunin after his (Herzen's) daughter Liza.]

revolutionary youth upon whom he bound his spell: but it is very questionable whether he could be a genuine ‘activist’ for any length of time, like the peasants whom he taught to burn down houses, or the bomb-throwers – the Ravachols and Louise Michels – who later were inspired by him. And yet against *Rudin* in Herzen’s amusing and affectionate memories we must set the view taken of him by Dostoevsky when he was writing *The Possessed*.

M. Hepner knows all this but, perhaps wisely, refrains from a final summing-up. He is at his best when describing isolated aspects of his subject, as, for example, Bakunin’s extraordinary capacity for ‘washing out’ the entire past where it seemed necessary, or his part in one of the most influential and disastrous phenomena of the nineteenth century, the invention of the double morality, which extends from Hegel and Fichte to Nietzsche and the Fascists, with its sharp contrast between the empirical world of fact and the ‘superior reality’ of the realm in which I am what I will to be and the past is what I make it. M. Hepner is illuminating on the roots of irrationalism and nihilism; and his analysis of Bakunin’s ‘ni Dieu ni roi’ aspect is more convincing than the attempts to draw a parallel between him and Proudhon, or to represent him as being, in 1848, primarily a political or economic thinker.

**[284]** It is as difficult and misguided to father precise beliefs on Bakunin as on Blanqui or Pisacane or even Proudhon himself. Bakunin’s habit was to derive ideas indiscriminately wherever they were available – from primary sources like Hegel or Schelling, or third-rate philosophical hacks like Professor Werder, the idol of all the young Russian Hegelians in Berlin – and then to transform them and send them rocketing off to the undoing of the unwary, notions, as often as not, internally inconsistent, ambiguous, sometimes absurd, but with an inextinguishable vitality, like the ideas of Rousseau or Proudhon, who absorbed many contradictory doctrines of their time into their own impressionable personality, and crystallised them, and gave them the ‘real life’ quality and sharpness and directness of a personal confession. M. Hepner very sensibly avoids,, in his treatment of Bakunin’s thought, that



misconceived method of treating unsystematic authors whereby they are made to yield up clear and distinct propositions, which are then formally 'refuted' by philosophers interested in other fields of thought.

M. Hepner has some fascinating pages on the debt of the left-wing Slavophil populists to Polish writers like the exiled historian, Lelewel, and the poet Mickiewicz, who influenced Michelet when he spoke vaguely of the rejuvenation of the West by the barbarians from the East, an idea later so contemptuously dismissed by Karl Marx. At the same time M. Hepner has perhaps overlooked the part played in this both by the eccentric early Russian Slavophil Karazin, and by non-Polish Western part-Slav propagandists whose influence he dismisses perhaps too lightly. But he most richly compensates for this by an anthology of remarkably apt passages from Herzen, as, for instance, that in which Herzen wonders whether the Russian barbarians will reach the Atlantic, because they are united – just as the Western nations might reach the Urals, but will not, because they are not; or the fascinating argument designed to show that any Russian invasion of the West must necessarily bring socialism with it.

M. Hepner is interesting, too, on the inconsistencies of Bakunin's federal schemes and his Pan-Slavism, and provides a very convincing account of the steps whereby Bakunin abandoned the notion of a Slav federation – with its nationalist and state-controlled structure – for a revolution which was to be purely social and international (for which Marx praised him as the only man who had intellectually not retrogressed in the middle 1850s, but actually advanced), and which is to rest on the explosive revolutionary energy released by the stirring up of all the insulted and the oppressed – the underworld of criminals and misfits and all those whom society has injured or frustrated – to rise against the old world and destroy it root and branch. And yet even at such moments Bakunin inconsequently speaks of property as the basis of liberty – a sudden, Proudhonian 'petty bourgeois' note which M. Hepner does not fail to detect.

## THE BIG LIZA

M. Hepner has written a full, rich and interesting study, a compound of historical understanding and psychological sympathy, which deserves the gratitude of all the students of the subject. It is occasionally marred [285] by irrelevancies, and still more by misprints, which increase and proliferate as the reader advances, so that he cannot avoid stumbling again and again as he walks over the negligently cleared ground, even though the outlook is continuously fascinating. There are a few points of detail to which exception could be taken – such as the inclusion of Polevoy and Nadezhdin among the Slavophiles, or the description of Grimm as Catherine's factotum (which seems a little hard), or the generalisation that all German influence necessarily led to state worship (what about Stankevich and his friends?), but these are minor matters. And so, I suppose, is the fantastic crop of misprints. I have, as a casual sample, noted them on pages 7, 12, 15, 47, 68, 69, 72, 125, 129, 130, 184, 186, 193, 194, 208, but there are many, many more. It seems a pity to spoil so good a ship.

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