



The Father of Anarchism

Review of E. H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin*

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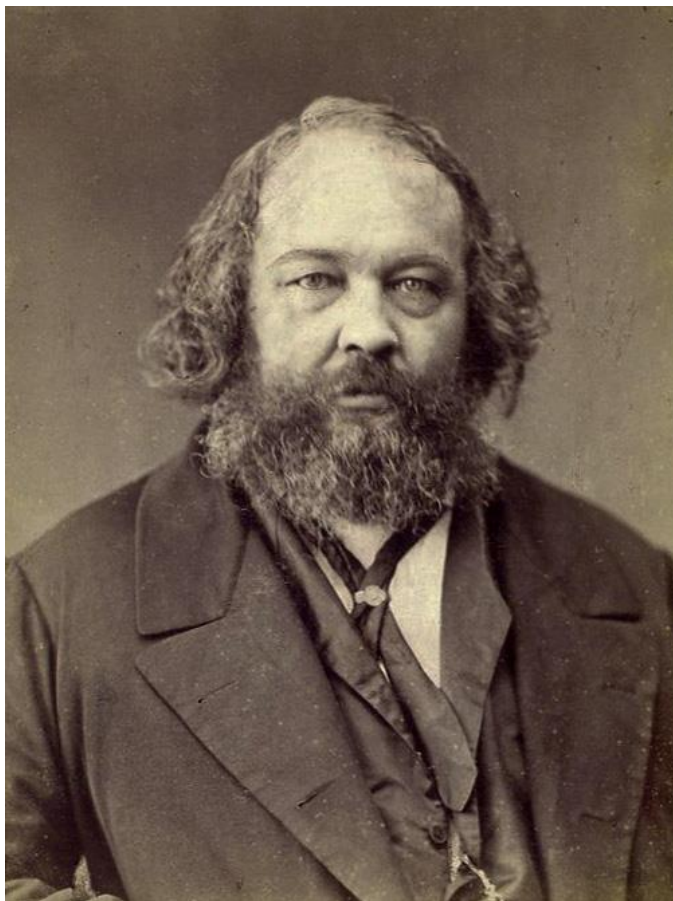
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The Father of Anarchism

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Mikhaïl Bakunin by Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon)

BAKUNIN died in 1876, and has, therefore, had considerably over half a century to wait for the official recognition of a

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standard biography in a language more widely read than his own. For the curious there is the copy of three manuscript volumes which his devoted follower, Dr Nettlau, deposited in the library of the British Museum some years before the war; even the definitive Russian biography, a long, and incredibly dull, but excellently documented work by the semi-banished Yury Steklov appeared comparatively recently; Polonsky's far better written life (the only omission I could find in Mr Carr's otherwise excellent bibliography) does not continue beyond 1848; and a mass of new material relating to his life, letters and literary remains has now been published in the USSR: but *Rossica sunt, non leguntur*¹ and Mr Carr has performed a task which urgently needed doing by writing this lively, informative, exceptionally readable account of the great revolutionary's life.

Bakunin is a grateful subject for the biographer; his life contains no dull or trivial episodes, everything he did or said or wrote was for the most part wildly fantastic and improbable; he met, and impressed profoundly, men no less remarkable than he was himself, all of whom, even when, like Marx or Mazzini, they actively disliked and disapproved and distrusted him, or else, like Herzen and Belinsky, were irritated beyond limit by the unbridled Bohemianism of his habits, never failed at some point to pay tribute to his astonishing genius, not indeed as a political theorist or an efficient organiser of conspiracies and revolution, but as a man and an influence. Mr Carr's thesis – on the few occasions on which he interrupts his narrative to state it – is based on this: he thinks that Bakunin was important not as a thinker, nor even as a man of action, but as a man who succeeded in imposing himself on the imagination and loyalty of his followers by the sheer force of a magnetic personality; so that after his death, when inferior men began to expound his teaching, his influence languished, his theories were recognised for what they were worth, naive, confused, fantastic, childish, unpractical to a degree.

¹ 'They are written in Russian and are not read.'

It is undeniable that this verdict, made originally in Marxist circles, is largely just. But it is not by any means the whole truth: it exaggerates the primitive, what Russian writers are fond of calling the 'elemental', aspect of Bakunin's nature, until it becomes difficult to understand what such highly sophisticated, cultivated, subtle persons as Herzen or Stankevich can have had to say to this barbarian, or he to them, during those celebrated evening conversations which on at least one occasion lasted until morning, in the course of which Belinsky (and later Proudhon) had the philosophy of Hegel revealed to him for the first time by Bakunin, was converted by it, and ultimately, accepting its most revolutionary consequences, applied it to contemporary Russian reality, and created the possibility of that social criticism which is most characteristic of Russian political and artistic literature in the nineteenth century. And indeed Mr Carr, who paints the later episodes in such vivid colours, leaves us pale portraits of the ideologies, both Russian and European, of Belinsky and Stankevich – the latter the first serious student of Hegel in Russia, and therefore of dominating importance in Bakunin's life – of Weitling and the Paris utopians.

Herzen, on whom the author is an authority, is far better drawn: but far the best account of the intellectual climate of Paris in the 1840s, and its effect on Bakunin, is still to be found in two brilliant chapters of Polonsky's book. What Mr Carr does not, in my opinion, stress sufficiently is that, together with his colossal energy and great personal charm, which on occasion won such hardened Russophobes as Marx and Wagner, Bakunin was endowed with considerable theoretical gifts. He understood all that he read and heard, and rapidly assimilated its essence. Added to this he had a wholly unparalleled capacity for vigorous, imaginative and lucid exposition, whose subject was not obscured even by the passionate moral eloquence with which it was expounded. It was this gift which established his sway over a circle of young women during his sentimental youth, when in more than one respect he much resembled Shelley. During the revolutionary months in Paris, Prague and Dresden, it gives

literary value to that enigmatic document, his confession to the Tsar (of which Mr Carr offers an original and psychologically highly plausible explanation); and it was his greatest single asset in winning the adherence of his last supporters, Italians and Spaniards, among whom his memory is held in honour still. Indeed the latter are even now fighting in his name.

Mr Carr recognises the magnitude and the fascination of the man he is describing; but, being free from all political or emotional bias, he has instead developed the interest of a collector in an exceptionally odd and fascinating piece. He is a connoisseur of nineteenth-century revolutionaries, as others are of rare ivories or butterflies; and he treats them with the same delicate, well-informed, faintly proprietorial interest. In the presence of a really distinguished monster like Bakunin he is at once respectful and amused, scrupulously anxious to do justice to all the aspects of this eccentric genius, but at the same time whispering to the reader that this curious being is really infinitely far removed from any world inhabited by the reader and by himself.

He is so strange, and his behaviour for the most part so bizarre, that he may almost be regarded as imaginary; gigantic but unreal, a figure of art rather than life; with the result that Bakunin necessarily loses in these pages some of the genuine grandeur, the tremendous style and sweep which belonged to him in life. The celebrated revolutionary seems faintly ridiculous in the drawing room, where his megalomania, his tendency to self-dramatisation show to worst advantage; the persons round him may be exceptionally intelligent and sympathetic, but they are tourists who may at any moment catch each other's eye; they have arrived to meet a famous character; whereas what the reader is entitled to demand is the revelation in the first place of a person, of a human being, in three dimensions. Even as it is, he is more than rewarded; he may, after all, be fond of gentle irony; and Mr Carr does not, let it be said at once, ever adopt a condescending tone, only, at times, an all but patronising one: which does not, of course, alter the fact that his book is a model of its kind, one of

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the best-documented, best-written, most important biographies
of our time.

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