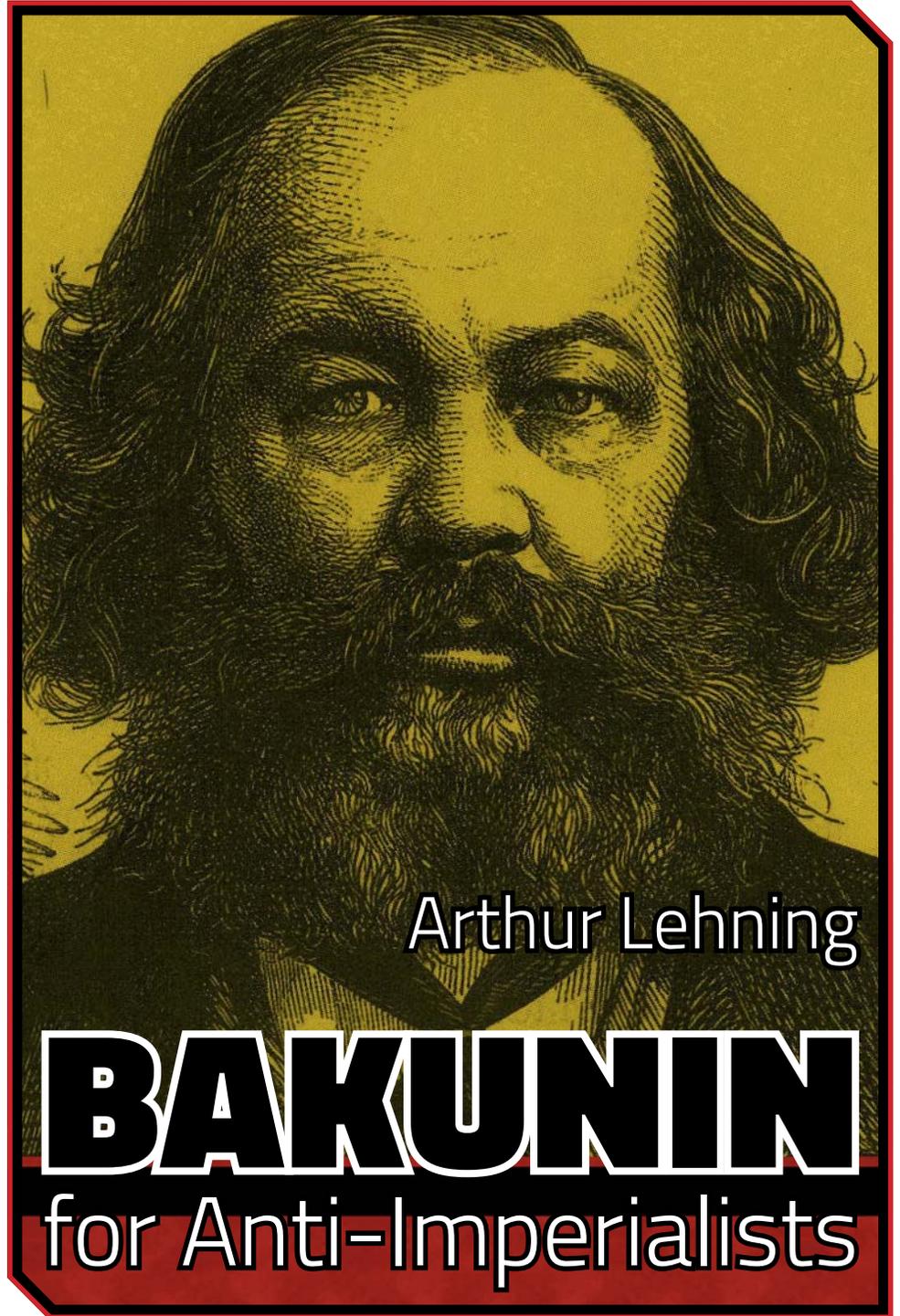




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Author Biography

Paul Arthur Müller-Lehning (1899-2000), born in Utrecht, the Netherlands, was an anarchist and syndicalist from the 1920s. Involved in the Anti-Militarist Bureau and the syndicalist International Workingmen's Association, he fled Nazi Germany for the Netherlands in 1933. In 1935, he helped found the International Institute for Social History (IISH), which includes the Mikhail Bakunin archives, and the Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels papers. In 1940, he fled to Britain when the Nazis invaded. He retained some influence after his return to Europe. A prolific writer and editor, his masterwork was the edited works of Bakunin, published in French in 1976.

NOTES: Marked up by Leroy Maisiri, ZACF. Headings and explanatory notes added. Author biography and Bakunin biography added by Lucien van der Walt.

SOURCE: Workers Solidarity Alliance (New York USA) pamphlet (undated).

BAKUNIN

for Anti-Imperialists

by Arthur Lehning



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Mikhail Bakunin Biography

A world-famous revolutionary, Bakunin was involved in pro-democracy and anti-imperialist movements in the 1840s. Jailed in 1849, he was sentenced to death twice, in both cases commuted to life imprisonment. After long, brutal years in various prisons, he was exiled to Siberia. After a dramatic escape in 1861, he made his way to Western Europe. Here he was increasingly involved in the rising workers' and socialist movement. In the International Workingmen's Association, founded 1864, he helped found the anarchist and syndicalist movement, clashing with Karl Marx. Bakunin always retained his deep opposition to imperialism. As an anarchist, however, he insisted it be combined with a revolutionary class struggle to create a self-managed, international, free, socialist and stateless society from below. Otherwise, independence would be hijacked by local ruling classes, the masses left in chains and still exploited.

the centralization of state power will be useful to the centralisation of the German working class". And a few weeks later Engels replied that Bismarck now, as in 1866, did "a part of our job".

National unity with its consequences of political and economic centralisation was, in the opinion of Marx, a prerequisite of socialism. According to Marxian dialectics, the capture of the centralised state by a working class organized in a political party would open up towards socialism and the ultimate "withering away" of the state. In this context, the predominance of Marx's theory, that is his conception of this historical process, became itself an element and a precondition of this process.

Bakunin understood this basic concept perfectly well but did not agree with it. "What has made us reject this system", he wrote, pointing to revolutionary authorities, liberty directed from above, "is that it leads directly to the establishment of a new set of great national states, would be separate and necessarily rivals and hostile to each other, and to the negation of internationalism".

Bakunin feared that this development would lead to a new Caesarism [a militaristic order headed by a strongman, involving a cult of personality – Ed.], and after the Franco-Prussian War he predicted an era of ceaseless wars and the danger of a Prusso-Germanisation of Europe. Two years before his death he wrote: "Bismarckism, that is militarism, the police and financial monopoly merged into a single whole, namely the modern state, is everywhere victorious. Conceivably, this powerful and scientific negation of all that is human may continue triumphant for another ten or fifteen years".

Certainly, this triumph has been rampant for more than a century, and is still very much alive.



★ The Use of Reading Bakunin for Anti-Imperialists

On imperialism itself, [Mikhail] Bakunin [1814-1876] has nothing specifically to say. That is not strange, because imperialism in its modern form had not yet appeared; besides, opposition to imperialism by a revolutionary is a rather obvious thing. But I think Bakunin's writings can be useful to anti-imperialists in several ways. Firstly, on account of the general view held by Bakunin about the essence of the revolutionary struggle and his conceptions about federalism and the state. Secondly on account of his activities in the eighties.

As far as the last point is concerned, it is clear that I don't wish to stress it too much. All historical parallels can be abusive. However, it is not abusive to point out the similarities between various kinds of Nineteenth Century nationalism and anti-imperialism in our time. This is not only because a great deal of today's anti-imperialist fight is carried out on nationalist platforms, but also on account of the intensity with which the banner of then and that of today monopolise the attention of men with radical consciousness. In this respect, Bakunin has important things to say.

★ Bakunin from Nationalism to Anarchism

Bakunin's so-called "revolutionary Pan-Slavism" in the 1840s is usually misunderstood. In his famous *Appeal to the Slavs* (1848) he advocated a coalition between the Slavs of Austria, the Hungarians and the democratic Germans in order to liquidate the Austrian Empire and to coalesce with the Poles for an independent Poland and a revolution in Russia. He hoped that a Slav Federation would encourage the Slavs to take part in the struggle the revolution was waging throughout Europe. The social liberation of the masses and the emancipation of

the suppressed nationalities should, in the view he then held, lead to a universal federation of European republics.

After the failure of the Polish insurrection [for independence – Ed.] of 1863, however, Bakunin no longer believed in using the banner of nationalism for social revolutionary aims. By 1864 he had definitely formulated the philosophical, political and socialist ideas which are associated with his name. From then on he would defend social revolution on an international scale, and reject every form of nationalism. Nationality is not a principle, he wrote, it is a fact, as legitimate as individuality. But neither peace nor the unification of Europe would be possible as long as the centralized states continued to exist.

★ Fighting Imperialism, but not through Nationalism

The point I wish to make is that yesterday's nationalist faith, like the anti-imperialist dedication of many present-day revolutionaries, though deserving our admiration, can be insidious and lead to dangerously wrong conclusions – such as that by putting an end to imperialist domination the revolution will be achieved and the way towards socialism be paved.

No one will deny the importance of analysing modern forms of imperialism, but it is not less important to be cautious about the methods to be used in this fight if one wants to prevent replacing imperialist domination by a national form of exploitation and despotism. This, of course, involves the fundamental question of what means to employ to achieve the aim of socialism and freedom; and experience allows us to say that the end of imperialism and the destruction of capitalism in a given country does not necessarily solve the problem of oppression.

We may ask meaningfully the capital question whether the instauration of some kind of revolutionary state brings us any nearer to a real socialist society. I don't intend to try to answer it here, only to insist that it is not an academic question as much as it seems. Few people will deny the fact that in the so-called socialist countries the state is not withering away, but there might still be some who think that their regimes may easier pave its way. This, however, may be doubted in the light of the dominating trend of these countries and in that of the history of the last five decades.

economic federation, with a parliament informed by detailed statistics on a world scale, that would decide and distribute the output of world industry among the various countries, so that there would be no longer or hardly ever industrial crisis, stagnation, disasters and waste of capital: human labour, emancipation, each and every man would regenerate the world.

★ Working Class and Peasant Revolution

Contrary to Marx, Bakunin generally regarded the peasants as a revolutionary force, though historically the essential role belonged to the proletarians of the cities. In his *Letters to a Frenchman*, written two months after the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war [1870] and in which Bakunin exposed his views on the way the revolutionary movement had to take, he gave practical advice how to overcome the antagonism between workers and peasants. Their fatal antagonism had to be eliminated, otherwise the revolution would be paralysed. It would be necessary to undermine in fact, and not in words, the authority of the state.

Bakunin advocated that delegates should be sent to the villages to promote a revolutionary movement amongst the peasants. Communism or collectivism should not be imposed on them, even if the workers had enough power to do so, because such an authoritarian communism would need the regularly organized violence of the state, and this would lead to the re-establishment of authority and a new privileged class. The revolutionary authorities – and there should be as few of them as possible – must promote the revolution not by issuing decrees but by stirring the masses to action. They must under no circumstances foist any artificial organisation whatsoever upon the masses. On the contrary, they should foster the self-organisation of the masses into autonomous bodies, federated from the bottom upward.

★ States are not progressive forces

Bakunin differed from Marx and Engels not only with regard to the role of the Slavs, but also in his appreciation of the political future of Europe, and he was far from agreeing with them that [Prince Otto von] Bismarck [Prussian founder of the German Empire – Ed.] and Victor Emmanuel [King of Italy – Ed.] in their striving towards unification of their respective countries did useful work for socialism. On 20 July 1870 Marx wrote to Engels: "If the Prussians are victorious

★ The Need for the Revolutionary Idea

Poverty and despondency are not sufficient to provoke a social revolution. They may lead to local revolts, but are inadequate to arouse whole masses of people. Only when the people are stirred by a universal idea evolving from the depths of the folk instinct and clarified by events and experience, when people have a general idea of their rights, revolution can take place.

One cannot aim at destruction without having at least a remote conception of the new order that should succeed to the one extent; and the more vividly that future is visualized, the more powerful is the force of destruction. The nearer such visualization approaches the truth, that is the more it conforms to the necessary development of the actual social world, the more salutary are the results of destructive action, determined not only by the degree of its intensity but also by the means it takes to reach the positive ideal. Exploitation and oppression are not merely economic and political, and would therefore not be automatically abolished by a conquest of political power and the organization of the new economic system. They have one common source: authority.

Bakunin held the view that every dictatorship could have no aim but that of self-perpetuation and that it could beget only slavery in the people tolerating it. Freedom can only be created by freedom. The new social organization should be set up by the free integration of workers' associations, villages, communes and regions from below upwards, conforming to the needs and instincts of the people.

★ Globalisation from Below

That was what Bakunin meant by federalism. Smaller groups should federate into greater units. Of course he was well aware that a certain economic centralization was inevitable, as a consequence of the development of large scale production, but he rejected the view that these problems could only be solved by political centralisation. He insisted on the need of collective ownership of property and argued that if the authoritarian state, with its unnatural centralisation, would become the basis of social organisation, the unavoidable result would be the destruction of the liberty of individual man and of smaller groups, and this would lead to new exploitation and to endless wars.

In Bakunin's theory, free productive associations, having become their own masters, would expand one day beyond national frontiers and form one vast

★ Imperialism and Statism Versus Socialism

Bakunin's view has importance also in that it does not see a break between nationalism and imperialism, state domination inland and abroad. Marx and the Marxists considered imperialism primarily as a consequence of capitalism, Bakunin saw it as a consequence of strong states and centralized power. Obviously, there are imperialist campaigns in the twentieth century that cannot be explained in terms of economic forces. Although Bakunin agreed with most of the Marxist analysis of the economic system, he did not believe that socialism could be achieved by centralizing power, in which hand it ever was.

Modern capitalist production and banking speculation, Bakunin wrote, demand for their full development an advanced centralised state apparatus. The modern state is necessarily a military state in its aims, and a military state is driven on by the very same logic to become a conquering state. A strong state can only have one foundation: military and bureaucratic centralisation. Every state, even if dressed up in the most liberal and democratic form, is necessarily based upon domination and violence, that is upon despotism – concealed despotism, but not less dangerous.

For Bakunin, equality without liberty was an irredeemable fraud, “perpetuated by deceivers to deceive fools”. Equality must be created by “the spontaneous organisation of the work and the common property of the manufacturing associations and by the equally spontaneous federation of the communities, not by the supreme and paternal activity of the state”. Equality without liberty meant for him the despotism of the state, and in his opinion the state cannot survive for a single day without “possessing an exploiting and privileged class: the bureaucracy”. The conspiracy of Babeuf and all similar attempts to establish a socialist society were bound to fail, because in all these systems equality was associated with the power and authority of the state and in consequence excluded liberty.

The most sinister alliance imaginable would combine socialism and absolutism – that is to say, the aspirations of the people for economic liberation and material prosperity with dictatorship and the concentration of all political and social forces in the state:

“May the future preserve us from the benevolence of despotism, and may it also save us from the damaging and stultifying consequences of authoritarian, doctrinaire or institutional socialism. Let us be socialists, but let us never become sheep. Let us seek justice, complete political,

economic and social justice, but without any sacrifice of liberty. There can be no life, no humanity without liberty, and a form of socialism which excluded liberty or did not accept it as a basis and as the only creative principle, would lead us straight back to slavery and bestiality”.

★ People’s Power or State Power

For these reasons, Bakunin opposed the belief that a social revolution can be decreed and organised by a dictatorship or by a constituent assembly set up by a political revolution. Only after the abolition of the state – the first, the essential condition for real freedom – can society be reorganized, but not from above, not according to some visionary plan, nor by decrees spewed forth by some dictatorial power. This would simply lead, again, to the establishment of a state and to the formation of a ruling “aristocracy”, i.e. a whole class of people who have nothing in common with the masses and who will begin to exploit and suppress the people all over again, under the pretence of acting in the general interest, or in order to save the state. “The victory of the Jacobins or the Blanquists [bourgeois and socialist revolutionaries advocating dictatorship – Ed.] would mean the death of the revolution”.

The Great [French] Revolution, which for the first time in history had proclaimed the liberty of citizens and men, by making itself the heir of the monarchy which it had destroyed, revived at the same time this negation of all liberty, centralisation and omnipotence of the state. “Seventy-five years of sad and harsh experience”, Bakunin wrote to a Frenchman in 1868:

“spent in sterile tossing between a freedom that was several times recovered and always lost again, and state despotism ever more victorious, have proved to France and the world that in 1793 your Girondins were right against your Jacobins. Robespierre, Saint-Just, Carnot, Couthon, Cambon and so many other citizens of the Montagne were great and pure patriots, but it is nonetheless true that they established the machine of government, that formidable centralisation of the state, which made the military dictatorship of Napoleon I possible, natural, necessary, and which, having survived all subsequent revolutions, by no means diminished but rather preserved, cosseted and developed by the Restoration and by the July Monarchy as by the Republic of 1848, was bound to lead ultimately to the destruction of all your liberties”.

★ Democracy from Below: Collectives, Assemblies, Delegates, Militias

A radical revolution can only be brought about by an attack on the institutions and by the destruction of property and its associate, the state. Then it will not be necessary to destroy people and thereby provoke the inevitable reaction which the massacre of the people always causes in every society.

That is, for Bakunin, the great secret of revolution. It must begin with the dissolution of the state; the disbanding of the army and the police; the abolition of the courts; the burning of all bonds, bills and securities; the repeal of those bourgeois laws which sanction private property, and their replacement by expropriation. The entire social capital – including public buildings, raw materials, the property owned by church and state – should be put in the hands of the workers’ organizations. At the outbreak of the revolution the community should be organized by the “Permanent Federation of the Barricades”. The council of the revolutionary community should consist of one or two delegates from each barricade, one from each street or suburb; these deputies, with a binding mandate, should always be responsible, and subject to recall.

Bakunin did not mean that there could be a revolution without violence, but that this should be directed against institutions rather than against persons. The revolution should, however, not develop a new authority, i.e. the right to coerce. Those who carry out the repression will do so with the approval of the revolutionaries; this is the only legitimation for violence should be short and not lead to an organization invested with authority to repress. In all his writings Bakunin rejected the idea of a “revolutionary government”, of “Committees of Public Safety”, including the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat”. For such a new authority, such a “proletarian state”, in theory representing the workers, would lead in practice to a new ruling class.

Revolution means to overthrow the state, because social revolution must put an end to the old system of organization based upon violence, giving full liberty to the masses, groups, communes and associations, and likewise to the individuals themselves. It would destroy once and for all the historic cause of all violence, the power and the very existence of the state, the downfall of which will carry down with it all the iniquities of juridical right and all the falsehoods of the various religious cults, that simply are the consecration, ideal as well as real, of all the violence represented, guaranteed and furthered by the state.