RUSSIAN ANARCHISM

The 1976 annual meeting of the American Historical Association included a session on Russian Anarchism with presentations by Ivan Avakumovic (University of British Columbia) on "Anarchists and Peasant Unrest in the 1870s: Russia and Mediterranean Europe" and by Arthur Mendel (University of Michigan) on "Michael Bakunin: The Politics of Fantasy." These two papers differed both substantively and methodologically. Mendel was concerned with a brief period in Bakunin's career, the 1840s, which was his first decade in Western Europe; the treatment of the subject was informed by psychological insight. Avakumovic dealt with anarchist movements 30 years later and largely in the southern rim of Europe: his approach was informed by aspects of social history. What they had in common was the legacy of Bakunin's ideas. Whereas Mendel sought to examine the motivation behind these ideas, Avakumovic tried to trace their influence.

There has not been a serious biography of Bakunin in English since E. H. Carr's study almost a half-century ago.[1] Since that time, much new material has been published in collections or utilized by scholars working on Bakunin.[2] It is also evident that revision and reinterpretation is badly needed in the case of Bakunin since so much of our knowledge of him is so full of mythologies, either those of his sympathetic anarchist and non-anarchist admirers or of his very unsympathetic Marxist and non-Marxist detractors. Thus, the larger study of Bakunin in which Mendel is engaged, and of which his paper formed a part, was most welcome.

Similarly, Avakumovic has turned his attention to an area in which there is not a single book. The impact of Bakuninism during the 1870s in Mediterranean Europe is a lacuna in modern historiography which has thus far not attracted interested researchers. Our knowledge of this subject continues to come chiefly from general studies on the First International, sections of Franco Venturi's history of Russian populism (recently reissued in a revised edition in Paris), and a rather partisan memoir literature. Avakumovic was less interested in Bakunin than he was in Bakuninism as he charted the efforts by anarchists in the 1870s to foment peasant disturbances in the Ukraine, Hercegovina, Italy and Spain. He cited the reasons why peasants in these areas would be responsive to anarchist appeals, then examined the attempts and ultimate failures of anarchists to incite rebellion there. Avakumovic found the countryside in desperate economic straits at this time, and pointed out that "Bakunin provided the radical youth with a realistic estimate of the *obshchina*" and urged them "to create a mass movement in the countryside." In each of the instances examined, Avakumovic discerned that after some initial success, anarchism was unable to mount a sustained challenge to the existing regimes. Aside from specific regional particularities which impaired the anarchists, in all four areas under study, anarchists shared the problem of cadres too small for victory against the superior forces of the imperial states against whom they fought.

It would seem apparent from Avakumovic's research that we have barely scratched the surface of these problems. Anarchism in the 1870s in these areas was virtually tantamount to Bakuninism. And what Avakumovic has done is to begin to define the boundaries for a social history of Bakuninism in Russia and Europe. But to go beyond his narrative, we shall have to examine variables like birth dates, class and social origins, not merely to show that rebels are generally young and aristocratic, but to analyze the constituency of the Bakuninist organizations in depth. Avakumovic mentioned in passing that no peasants were among those who voted in favor of the right of inheritance at the Basel Congress of the First International in 1869, but drew no conclusion. How does this compare with peasant and

non-peasant votes on other important issues? He also stated that the anarchist leaders, though exclusively not of peasant origins, had "strong links with the countryside" which was dominated by the very peasantry whom they hoped to inspire to rebel. What links? Were they the same among all anarchists (Russian and European) and how did this affect their ideology and organizations? Further, while Avakumovic was undoubtedly correct in his assessment of the socio-economic condition of the rural population which responded to anarchism, we must, nevertheless, go beyond this level of generalization and begin systematic and rigorous studies of rural localities along the lines of the research which has become so prevalent in the historiography of Western Europe.

Another area that is crucial to our understanding of the precise connection between anarchists and peasants is that of the intersecting links between Bakuninist organizations. Work is needed on the transmission of Bakuninism and its impact in these countries. For instance, there is a correspondence between Bakunin and Rafael Farga Pellicer which reveals much about the organization and strategy of Spanish anarchists; there are similar materials for two other Spanish Bakuninists, José García Viñas and Gaspar Sentiñón.[3] With regard to Italy, parallel materials exist for Malatesta and Costa,[4] and there is new work being done on the anarchist movement in France in this period.[5] In addition, there are sources on the Russians who were active in propagating anarchist ideology in Mediterranean Europe and beyond, such as Ralli, Zhukovskii, Elsnits, Sazhin-Ross, and others.[6] None of this, however, has been brought together into a synthetic analysis. One historian, who has studied problems of anarchist organizations in Europe, puts it this way: "The problem is knowing if the links of Bakunin with his friends in Lyon, the Jura, Spain and Italy were purely personal relations . . . or whether they constituted, in a somewhat informal manner, a secret organization within the International."[7] In other words, we need to know whether we are dealing with informal organizations like the *kruzhki* (circles) of the classical Russian intelligentsia, or more formal organizations which are prototypes of modern political parties on the left.

In Professor Mendel's paper, our attention turned to the man who was the inspiration for these widespread social movements. The paper analyzed a critical phase in Bakunin's overall development, at the moment when he abandoned the metaphorical "monastic castle" into which he had fled earlier in order to embark on his "crusade" to annihilate "the present political and social world." This was referred to as the start of Bakunin's "life-long war with society." Bakunin's driving motivation, according to Mendel, had less to do with politics than it did with deeper psychological forces. These were said to center on Bakunin's contradictory desire to free himself of social responsibility while simultaneously seeking social honor and self-esteem, and on his unconscious dilemma of coveting the roles of both "infant child and powerful father." Thus, the reality of "impotence" was masked by the fantasy of "omnipotence." Bakunin was therefore engaged in a process of "radical self-deception" as he continued to play out the psycho-drama of achieving infantile freedom by pursuing illusory glory, fame and power at the expense of the bourgeois world. Beneath this dimension of self-deception lay the psychological truth that his political activities and ideology were camouflage for the rage and humiliation he harbored over his impotence. To ward off these psychologically threatening forces, Bakunin created a political fantasy of the annihilation of authority. The Manichean universe which one finds in his writings—a world of moral polar extremities in collision—is actually not an accurate portrayal of the external world of mid-19th century Europe but a distorted projection upon that objective world of Bakunin's own internal conflicts. In order to protect himself from self-destruction, and unable to

resolve these problems directly, he recast these internal conflicts into a revolutionary myth in which he would wage a successful war against the existing world order.

This is, in many respects, an original and imaginative revision of the portrait of Bakunin frequently found in the historical literature. Indeed, if Mendel is correct in his interpretation, it will be difficult (if not impossible) to re-argue the more traditional view of Bakunin as revolutionary. The Soviet position has tended to ignore personality problems and concentrate on ideology (which is either applauded or condemned, from Steklov to Pirumova); Western historiography has focused on the clash between Bakunin's erratic behavior and his activities as a genuine revolutionary (with one side played up or down accordingly from Carr to Masters). Mendel's interpretation veers off in another direction not so much because of the concentration on the politics of fantasy (which other commentators have treated) but because it permits a denial of the traditional image of the revolutionary. Other scholars who have written on Bakunin's personality have done so as a way of *explaining* his radicalism whereas Mendel seeks to use personality analysis to *question* the nature of Bakunin's radicalism.

But is he correct, and how did he prove his case? The paper concerned itself with episodes in Bakunin's emigre years during the 1840s, with quotations selected from his letters written at this time. His thoughts and behavior were shown to be generally extreme and unrealistic; moreover, he apparently was, in Mendel's view unable to clearly distinguish between reality and fantasy, and was dominated by the latter in his attempts to perceive the former. There is no doubt about the hyperbole of Bakunin's language and the arrogance of many of his actions. Given the framework of analysis, however, I am not convinced that this evidence leads us to conclude that Bakunin was a pathologically narcissistic personality as Mendel seemed to suggest.

The most troublesome aspects of Mendel's paper were the lack of a supporting methodology and the set of assumptions behind his interpretation. I am not arguing against the use of psychological conceptions in historical studies. but rather am suggesting that far more rigor is required to make these conceptions meaningful. Mendel's portrait of Bakunin was ultimately rooted not in psychological theory but in psychological reductionism. The portrait he constructed of Bakunin was that of a deviant who was infantile in behavior and irresponsible in influence. The association we are forced to make is that revolutionary acts are similarly deviant. infantile. irresponsible. and based on an apocalyptic politics of fantasy. Without a defined theory of psychoanalysis or psychology, we are left only with judgments of a personal nature that explain this association.

What was overlooked is the obvious but important fact that the revolutionary is, by definition, extreme and deviant; in his effort to transcend the existing value system, his thought and behavior frequently contain components of exaggeration, hostility, and distortions of the established paradigm of "reality." This does not mean, however, that revolutionaries, because they are deviating from the norms of the status quo. are necessarily engaged in fantasies which are motivated by unresolved infantile conflicts. It also does not mean that we must choose sides in an attempt to understand Bakunin. From the perspective of the historian. neither Bakunin nor anarchism is right or wrong. but rather both are symptomatic of a particular experience. collective and individual. in response to specific problems of mass society—industrialization, urbanization, nationalism, and the growth of labor protest. to name several of the most prominent.

The *social* significance of anarchism cannot be explained by psychological reductionism any more than the "source of Bakunin's entire political life" can be illuminated by using a loosely defined

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concept like "fantasy" or a single "vision" such as apocalyptic warfare. This takes us away from defining and trying to resolve the critical problems of anarchism, such as the notion of freedom (natural, tribal, societal, as opposed to statist, formal) and the concept of the destruction of political power (which seeks to end political oppression, not to escape from the responsibility of assuming power, according to anarchist theory).

The connection we *ought* to be making here is between Bakunin's anarchist ideology, which was so influential (as Avakumovic made clear), and Bakunin's personal development. Instead of clarifying this relationship, Mendel obscured it. In attempting to de-mythologize Bakunin, Mendel re-mythologized him, however unwittingly, into a psychological stereotype.

Martin A. Miller

Duke University

NOTES

1. The recent book on Bakunin by Anthony Masters cannot be considered a step beyond previous work since, aside from errors, he does not know Russian.
2. Examples include Lehning's *Archives Bakounine*, Michael Confino's recent books and articles, and the Soviet archival materials cited by Pirumova in her book on Bakunin.
3. See Jacques Maurice. *L'anarchisme espagnol* (Paris: Bordas, 1973) with references to anarchist sources of the 1870s; Clara E. Lida. *Anarquismo y revolución en la España del XIX* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1972) with references to MS collections on anarchism in Spain, Bakuninism, etc.: *Anarchici e anarchia nel mondo contemporaneo* (Torina. Fondazioni Luigi Einaudi, 1971), pp. 59–123, with articles by Lamberet, Molnar and others on Bakuninism in Spain.
4. See Pier Carlo Masini. *Storia degli anarchici italiani* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1969).
5. See *Le mouvement anarchiste à Toulouse a la fin du XIXe siècle* (Toulouse: Publications de l'Institut d'études politiques de Toulouse. Imprimerie Maurice Espic, 1971). Introduction by Anne-Marie Magnou.
6. See vol. V of the *Archives Bakounine* on "Bakounine et ses relations slaves"; the Soviet archives, especially TsGALI in Moscow, contain important collections such as the Dragamanov Archive.
7. Marc Vuilleumier. "L'anarchisme et les conceptions de Bakounine sur l'organisation revolutionnarie," *Anarchici* . . . . p. 505.

LABOR STUDIES CONFERENCE

The third annual *Southwest Labor Studies Conference* was held on March 4/5 in Tempe and Phoenix, Arizona. The program included sessions on Working Class Culture. The Farm Worker, Labor in Mexico. Metalworkers in the West. Women and Unions, the IWW, the Radosh Thesis, and New Directions in Labor Studies. (No. 12 will carry a full report on the conference.) Anyone wishing to join this organization should contact Frank Arnold, 3293 Aramis Dr., San Jose, CA 95127 and enclose $5 for their dues. Next year's conference will be held in the early spring at Berkeley. Individuals who would like to participate should contact Norman E. Amundson, Institute of Industrial Relations, Berkeley, CA.