

Michail Bakunin

**The Reaction in Germany From
the Notebooks of a Frenchman**

This essay marks Bakunin's emergence from purely philosophical studies to active participation in revolutionary sociopolitical movements. Criticized by his friends as being too abstract, the essay employs Hegelian philosophic language to justify a concept of permanent social and political revolution tailored to Bakunin's temperament. Its polemics are aimed at the "compromisers" — who Bakunin called "positivists" as opposed to the radical "negativists" with regard, of course, to the *status quo* or establishment — and the radicals. The religious tone of some passages mark the essay as belonging to the period before his study of socialist ideas, a study which led to his public advocacy of atheism in 1860. Despite its vagueness and philosophic phrasing, the essay is a call for social revolution, for the realization of human freedom as the supreme end of history, and an assertion of faith in the revolutionary capabilities of the lowest classes in society, the poor.

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Freedom, the realization of freedom: who can deny that this is what today heads the agenda of history? . . . Revolutionary propaganda is in its deepest sense the **negation** of the existing conditions of the State., for, with respect to its innermost nature, it has no other program than the destruction of whatever order prevails at the time . . . We must not only act politically, but in our politics act religiously, religiously in the sense of freedom, of which the one true expression is justice and love. Indeed, for us alone, who are called the enemies of the Christian religion, for us alone it is reserved, and even made the highest duty . . . really to exercise love, this highest commandment of Christ and this only way to true Christianity.

To the compromisers we can apply what was said in a French journal: "The Left says, two times two are four; the Right, two times two are six; and the middle-of-the-road compromisers say two times two are five." They never answer yes or no; they say: "To a certain extent you are right, but on the other hand. . . ." And if they have nothing left to say, they say: "Yes, it is a curious thing." . . . And as it is said of the Polish Jews that in the last Polish war they wanted to serve both warring parties simultaneously, the Poles as well as the Russians, and consequently were hanged by both sides impartially, so these poor souls vex themselves with the impossible business of the outward reconciliation of opposites, and are despised by both parties for their pains. No, the spirit of revolution is not subdued, it has only sunk into itself in order soon to reveal itself again as an affirmative, creative principle, and right now it is burrowing — if I may avail myself of this expression of Hegel's — like a mole under the earth.

Nevertheless, visible manifestations are stirring around us, hinting that the spirit, that old mole, has brought its underground work to completion and that it will soon come again to pass judgment. Everywhere, especially in France and England, social and religious societies are being formed which are wholly alien to the world of present-day politics, societies that derive their life from new sources quite unknown to us and that grow and diffuse themselves without fanfare. The people, the poor class, which without doubt constitutes the greatest part of humanity; the class whose rights have already been recognized in theory but which is nevertheless still despised for its birth, for its ties with poverty and ignorance, as well as indeed with actual slavery – this class, which constitutes the true people, is everywhere assuming a threatening attitude and is beginning to count the ranks of its enemy, far weaker in numbers than itself, and to demand the actualization of the right already conceded to it by everyone. All people and all men are filled with a kind of premonition, and everyone whose vital organs are not paralyzed faces with shuddering expectation the approaching future which will utter the redeeming word. Even in Russia, the boundless snow-covered kingdom so little known, and which perhaps also has a great future in store, even in Russia dark clouds are gathering, heralding storm. Oh, the air is sultry and pregnant with lightning.

And therefore we call to our deluded brothers: Repent, repent, the Kingdom of the Lord is at hand!

To the Positivists we say: “Open the eyes of your mind; let the dead bury the dead, and convince yourselves at last that the Spirit, ever young, ever newborn, is not to be sought in fallen ruins!” And we exhort the compromisers to open their hearts to truth, to free themselves of their wretched and blind circumspection, of their intellectual arrogance, and of the servile fear which dries up their souls and paralyzes their movements.

Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!

October 1842, signed “Jules Elysard”

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