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Historiography on the "Siberian" Period of Mikhail Bakunin (1857-1861): A Critical Discourse

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Abstract

The paper critically reviews the available scientific and biographical literature, which examines the four-year period of social activity of the Russian thinker and opposition politician Mikhail Bakunin in Siberia during the "thaw" of the late 1850s and early 1860s. The purpose of the study is to provide critical perspectives on the myths of historiography that interfere with the reconstruction of Mr. Bakunin's "Siberian period." Thus, the author of the article aims to achieve the restoration of Mikhail Bakunin's place and role in the public life of Russia in those times. In particular, the author refutes the myth that the "great rebel" was allegedly in a voluntary self-isolation during that period of his life. In addition, the dubious source of this historiographical version is critically analyzed, dating back to Mikhail Katkov, a very famous ideologist of imperial conservatism. The author argues that the Katkov's legend turned into a toolbox of official communist historiography, and then it was reproduced virtually unchanged in publications of the Soviet era until the collapse of the dominant regime. First of all, the author proposes to radically rethink the false conception of the "Siberian" period of Mikhail Bakunin that has become entrenched in historical literature. Second, the author considers it necessary to justify the redirection of the copyright affiliation of some sources of radical revolutionary journalism in 1860-1861 to Mikhail Bakunin, including the famous "Letters" (1860) to the editorial office of the Russian emigrant newspaper "The Bell." Based on the methodology of textual content analysis of the keywords inherent in this journalistic message and similar letters from Mr. Bakunin from Siberia, the author formulates the main conclusion: the real author of this appeal at that moment could be only the closest friend and associate of Alexander Herzen, i.e., Mr. Bakunin himself.

Keywords: Mikhail Bakunin, Siberian periods, myths, Soviet historiography, agitation.

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Introduction

Along with many prominent compatriots, Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin (1814–1876) occupies a worthy place in history. His ideas as “one of the most striking political thinkers of Europe in the second half of the 19th century,” according to the contemporary author, “were, in a sense, the rise of world political thought about freedom” (Baglay, 1994, p. 93). Nevertheless, the achievements of this Russian thinker are still underestimated by Russian historiography. Many researchers still continue to assign him a secondary personal niche of one of the ideologists of anarchism and Narodism of the 1870s. Moreover, the real scale of the personality of M. A. Bakunin was ignored. And this is despite the fact that he was still a political figure of the first, worldwide magnitude.

Many researchers extremely rarely take into account the rich experience he has gained over the years of the “Siberian” period (1851–1861). The scientific relevance of the historiographic study of the problems of this period is determined by the fact that the existing scientific literature does not chronologically link the precise coincidence of the beginning of the “spring of liberation” with the extrajudicial deportation of the opposition politician to Siberia (March 1857). “Nobody judged Bakunin, and if, from the point of view of the government, there were sins behind him,” G. N. Vyrubov rightly remarked, “this is how they were committed outside of Russia, and he, in any case, paid generously for them with ten years of imprisonment” (Vyrubov, 1913, p. 51). Actually, the “thaw” of the 1850-1860s, as a cyclically repeating phenomenon of Russian history, is not presented in any way in scientific publications. The conspiratorial nature of Bakunin’s personal strategy of action during this difficult period is also ignored by many researchers.

Finally, the field of view of most of Bakunin's contemporary biographers does not include the motives for his flight abroad from future “frosts” and a new wave of repression, which inevitably closes, by the way, the finale of each of the short-term Russian “thaws.” Therefore, it is no coincidence that the period of the political activity of M. A. Bakunin, who preceded his re-nomination as one of the most influential leaders of the international left-wing radical movement after fleeing Russia in 1861, remained the least studied in Soviet times (Dyakov & Rudnitskaya 1974, p. 296). But in the post-Soviet period, little has changed in the scientific literature in this regard. Today, Bakunin is still a persona *non grata* for official historiography, and the existing lacunae in special literature testify to this scientific problem (*Political history...*, 1996; Lantsov, 2009). The “Siberian” period of Bakunin (1857–1861) is taken into account by researchers only partially, considering it outside the historical context of the “thaw” era as a direct continuation of prison isolation. Since his status role in the political history of Russia has always been diminished in general, the entire event background of this period is distorted.

The Soviet historiography

The myth that Bakunin allegedly withdrew from all social activities in the “Siberian” period of life contributed to the appearance of the aforementioned gap in Russian historiography. M. N. Katkov first formulated this version. In Siberia, “the leader of the revolutionary party,” in his opinion, lived “not only without need but in abundance, did nothing and read French novels; he did not have enough for serious work” (Katkov, 1870). In the 1920s, V. P. Polonsky reintroduced this myth into scientific circulation (Polonsky, 1921). True, even then B. P. expressed doubts about this version as

well as Kozmin, B. G., Kubalov, M. K. Lemke, and some other authors did (Kozmin, 1929, pp. 69-70; Kubalov, 1923, pp. 128-129; Lemke, 1923, pp. 152, 163; Pushkin, 1923, pp. 199-200).

In the last years of the Soviet period, researchers shied away from covering this little-studied problem. So, V. G. Graftsky and M. I. Mikhailov devoted two or three lines to this period in their publications. I would like to quote a fragment of one of the works for clarity. "In 1857, Bakunin was sent (?) to an eternal settlement in Siberia, from where he manages to escape after four years ..." (Graftsky, 1985, p. 17). Another researcher, Mr. Mikhailov is even more concise. In particular, he referred to the fact that "the years of Siberian exile (1857–1861) are described in full detail in the works of Polonsky, Steklov, Pirumova" (Mikhailov, 1988, p. 171). However, close acquaintance with the works of these authors does not confirm such an assessment.

Thus, the above biographers of M. A. Bakunin covered the "Siberian" period (1857–1861) exceptionally superficially. Summing up his research in 1933, Mr. Polonsky, for example, acknowledged that this period of Bakunin's life and activity remained "the darkest" for him (Polonsky, 1926, p. 44; 1933, p. 497). Such an ending in the study of the topic by metropolitan Bolshevik historians seems to be quite natural since they did not have materials of regional origin. It is challenging to understand the specifics of the activities of the Siberian exile without such materials.

It is characteristic that the work of N. M. Pirumova reproduced (though not in full) the same level of understanding of the realities of the "Siberian" period, at which her predecessors in historiography stopped. It is not surprising that M. A. Bakunin of the "thaw" period is covered in an extremely simplified form. "His ideological life froze at the level of 1849," the researcher asserts, "and all his aspirations were aimed at freeing himself from exile at all costs" (Pirumova, 1986, p. 114). I would like to note that such a twelve-year delay in the ideological evolution of a dynamic and expansive Russian thinker could hardly have taken place at a turning point in political history. Apparently, the very nature of ideological creativity is such that the views of one or another representative of social thought should change even under the most adverse conditions. Another thing is which way Bakunin's political views at that time evolved: "left," "right," or closer to the "center"? Some combined options are also possible in this case.

Most likely, in my opinion, N. M. Pirumova was sincerely mistaken about the pause in Bakunin's "ideological life" in the context of a noticeable rise in social activity in post-reform Russia. The eastern half of Russia was then no exception to the rule. "The people looked up, cheerful, energetic, he believed in the future with hope for the government," N. P. Pesterev recalls this time, "he was ready to follow the path of progress, having forgotten his age-old laziness, apathy, and hardly anywhere more sympathized with the new as in Siberia. Such a mood was noticed in all sectors of society" (*The State Archive...*, n.d., p. 109). Under the beneficial influence of the "spring of liberation" and several factors accompanying it, the leadership potential of Bakunin was supposed to intensify.

Thus, the presence of an upward (and positive) evolution of the thinker was completely denied by biographers. Consequently, the signs of regression or a single-line turn "to the right" were assiduously and specifically sought out in his ideology. In reality, Bakunin was always

multidimensional. Moreover, they varied following the changes that took place in the Russian and world political process. The connection of such a variable transformation with the domestic event background is predominantly and should be fixed to a particular extent at the break of the “thaw” in 1861–1862. In an ideological sense, for a number of objective reasons, the so-called “Siberian” period was, as I believe, the most productive in the life of a thinker. Consequently, Russian historiography does not cover the most critical aspect of the ideological transformation of Bakunin, which took place at the crisis turn of the 1850-1860s under the influence of the “Siberian factor.”

Bakunin and the “Regionalists”: Drawbacks in the Eurocentric approach

V. P. Polonsky, Yu. M. Steklov, N. M. Pirumova, and other well-known biographers of Bakunin, despite all the differences between themselves, conceptually converge in the interpretation of the main issue. They examined his life and works during the so-called “Siberian” period outside the context of all-Russian history. With this Eurocentric approach, the realities of Siberia are opposed to the whole of Russia. In many respects, in my opinion, this dichotomy is not correct (Goryushkin, 1986, pp. 37-47). Among other things, this approach artificially lowers the real role in the history of a whole group of prominent figures of the 1860s All-Russian democratic movement who were ideologically connected with Bakunin and were native Siberians (G. N. Potanin, I. Ya. Orlov, I. A. Khudyakov, and others).

In connection with this storyline, a literary interpretation of the relationship problem existing between M. A. Bakunin with young representatives of the democratic intelligentsia of Siberia is of particular interest. In particular, I mean G. N. Potanin, S. S. Shashkov, N. S. Schukin, N. M. Yadrintsev et al., who later founded the regional social movement of the so-called “regionalists.” Contacts with them clearly correlate with the period of Bakunin's exile (1857-1861). At the same time, the genesis of the ideology of this branch of all-Russian populist thought, according to modern scholars, also falls on the watershed of the 50-60s. 19th century (Sesyunina, 1974; Shilovsky, 1989). Such a significant synchronous coincidence indirectly also indicates the involvement of the future leader of the Narodniks in the genesis of the early Siberian regionalism.

Nevertheless, this story in the literature on Bakunin is covered very superficially (Sesyunina, 1974, pp. 23, 27; Shilovsky, 1989, pp. 77-79). “... His influence here, according to N. M. Pirumova was minimal. Instead, we can talk about the significance of regional ideas for him” (Pirumova, 1990, p. 77). It turns out that the author of the trendy slogan of the United States of Europe (the 1867 International Congress of the League of Peace and Freedom) almost owes its federalist convictions to inexperienced young Siberians.

Downplaying the degree of influence of M. A. Bakunin’s future leaders of Siberian regionalism, many authors took him along with his followers beyond the standard list of the main actors of the turning era of the 1850-1860s for a specific purpose. This technique artificially created the effect of the imaginary absence in Russia of “Revolutionary No. 1” during the “first revolutionary situation.” It turns out that at the crucial moment of the genesis of the ideology of early Narodism and regionalism as its regional variety, Bakunin allegedly fell out of the national political process.

Restoring the Authorship

If we assume that M. A. Bakunin was politically active in 1857–1861, then where are the fruits of his ideological and mentoring activity recorded in historiography? In my opinion, the following answer seems logical: the “default figure” used in relation to him served as, most likely, a fictitious cover for unscrupulous forwarding of the results of his actions to other people who actively showed themselves within the framework of the same era, but in different quality. Furthermore, V. A. Kitaev and V. V. Pugachev drew attention to the banal attribution of the results of Bakunin’s practical activities of those years to his closest companion friends, in particular, Herzen and Ogarev (Pugachev, 1966, p. 516; Kitaev, 1967, pp. 43-44, 48).

In order to create a historiographic illusion of the presence in Russia of the 1850-1860s an influential group of “revolutionary democrats,” not characteristic of extreme radicalism attributed to A. I. Herzen, N. P. Ogarev, N. G. Chernyshevsky, as well as some other persons. In the words of A. A. Blok, the researchers included in the famous “scientific school of academician Nechkina” as if “took fire” from the “fiery revolutionary” of that era, which (no doubt) was just Bakunin (Block, 1971).

At the same time, the arbitrary removal of the “Revolutionary No. 1” from the context of the “revolutionary situation” entailed a collision of the insolubility of several controversial historiographical problems. Among them, I would like to answer the question about the authorship of the famous “call to the ax” (“Letter from the Province” in *The Bell*, 1860) and the propaganda appeal “To the people” (“Bow to the peasants from their well-wishers,” 1861). Both documents are usually attributed to N. G. Chernyshevsky (Novikova & Kloss, 1981, pp. 13, 120-159). However, even in the Soviet period, this lying legend aroused well-founded doubts and protests among many researchers (Alekseev, 1968; Azanov, 1971; Volodin, Karjakin, & Plimak, 1976; Pantin & Plimak, 1979).

The question “who this ‘Russian man’ is,” i.e., who demanded in 1860 from the publishers of *The Bell* to call the people “to the ax,” remains debatable so far, not by chance. So unceremonious appeal to the “rulers of thoughts” of that time – A. I. Herzen and N. P. Ogarev – could come only from a public figure very close to them. Of course, Bakunin was such a unique person in Russia.

The existing Russian historical literature does not even mention Bakunin among the possible authors of both of the above-mentioned campaign documents (Novikova & Kloss, 1981, pp. 132-133, 308). Although many features of the author's style of these works definitely point to it. The notorious “peasant ax” appears, for example, in his 1860 “Answer to *The Bell*” (Bakunin, 1935, pp. 305-306, 364). According to an informed contemporary, the editor-in-chief of *The Bell* to his old comrade certainly could not refuse to publish this kind of a letter. “The truth to me is the true,” A. I. Herzen frankly declared in an interview with Siberian N. A. Belogolov, “but also Bakunin to me is Bakunin” (Belogolovyy, 1987, p. 627). And here, for example, N. G. Chernyshevsky was never “their guy” for Herzen or Ogarev (Koshovenko, 1960, p. 271).

An utterly accessible source is still ignored by chance. This source contains the keywords “revolution,” “appeal,” “ax,” etc., which allow using textual content analysis to quite reliably identify the real author of the “rebellious” appeals of 1860–1861. At the same time, one should not understand the vivid metaphor “peasant ax” literally, in my opinion. In the situational context of 1860, when the preparation by the bureaucracy of the predatory “great reform” was coming to an

end, it was not intended at all for the peasants, who did not even see the emigrant Bell. It was a signal addressed to the noble elite, who then read London editions regularly. The author of the text, the disgraced aristocrat M.A. Bakunin, was just trying to restrain his high-ranking official relatives. "To educate our official world," he asserted at that time, "another fear is needed – the fear of the people." The Russian imperial power, in his opinion, would see the light only when "when the ax flashed" (Bakunin, 1862, p. 1023).

Regional Perspectives

I developed a different version of the "Siberian" biography of M. A. Bakunin back in the late 1980s and early 1990s; it is an alternative to its previous version (Dolzhikov, 1989; Dolzhikov, 1992). "As recent studies have shown," one prominent researcher notes, "Bakunin's life in Tomsk (1857–1859) was by no means a repose after several years of violent revolutionary activity and prolonged imprisonment in Prussian, Austrian, and Russian prisons" (Sukhotina, 1992, p. 68). In subsequent publications, including monographs, the "Siberian" period of Bakunin was highlighted from precisely this angle (Dolzhikov, 1993; Dolzhikov, 2000; Dolzhikov, 2018). As a result, my approach to the topic was supported by Russian and foreign colleagues (Demin, 2008, pp. 167-184, 347; Kaminski, 2012, pp. 69, 408, 566, 581; Podshivalov, 2015, pp. 81-90).

Conclusion

Far from a complete overview of the situation in the historiography of the "Siberian" period of M. A. Bakunin to date indicates the need for its in-depth study from modern positions. I believe that it is necessary to introduce the personality of the great rebel into the context of all-Russian political history of the 1850-1860s completely. The necessary prerequisite for solving this problem should be the consistent overcoming of the negative versions, myths, and stereotypes that have turned over the long years of their functioning into a historiographic fact.

The four-year "Siberian" period of M. A. Bakunin was not, of course, a time of recreational political inaction. My research proves that the time spent in Siberia was a turning point in the philosophical evolution of the thinker. His forced stay in Eastern Russia at a crisis turning point in Russian history was for him a kind of university of sociological knowledge of the "secrets" of national mentality. The author removed the ideological baggage that formed the basis of the new, already populist program of M. A. Bakunin from Russian Siberia, which largely determined the nature of his activities in the 1860-1870s.

In addition, my aforementioned publications summarize the results of scientific studies in which regional issues and perspectives receive an absolute priority. As for the clarifying characteristics of the place and role of the Revolutionary No. 1 in the all-Russian liberation movement of the 1850–1860s, this question was considered to a lesser extent. A partial reconstruction of the so-called Siberian period, I believe, may become a necessary precondition for the subsequent adequate recreation of the multifaceted role of M. A. Bakunin in the political history of Russia.

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