



Bakunin: The Creative Passion

Mark Leier

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"The passion for destruction is a creative passion," wrote the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin in 1842. Since then, the popular image of anarchism has been one of violence and terror. But this picture is wildly misleading, and the media has done more to obscure anarchism than to explain it. Focusing on the street fighting and confrontations with police, mainstream commentators are unable to understand what anarchism is or why a philosophy with roots in the nineteenth century has resurfaced with such power at the dawn of the new millennium. To understand anarchism, it is necessary to go beyond the caricature presented by the media. In this new biography of Mikhail Bakunin, Mark Leier traces the life and ideas of anarchism's first major thinker, and in the process revealing the origins of the movement.

There was little in Bakunin's background to suggest that he would grow up to be anything other than a loyal subject of the Russian Empire. Instead, he became one the most notorious radicals of the nineteenth century, devoting his life to the destruction of the tsar and feudalism, capitalism, the state, even God. In the process, he became a historical actor and political thinker whose ideas continue to influence world events.

Bakunin is of keen interest these days, though the attention paid to his image continues to obscure the man and his ideas. Using archival sources and the most recent scholarship, Leier corrects many of the popular misconceptions about Bakunin and his ideas, offering a fresh interpretation of Bakunin's life and thoughts of use to those interested in understanding anarchism and social change. Arguing for the relevance and importance of anarchism to our present world, Leier sheds light on the nineteenth century, as well as on today's headlines, as he examines a political philosophy that has inspired mass movements and contemporary social critics.

Mark Leier shows that the "passion for destruction" is a call to build a new world free of oppression, not a cult of violence. He argues that anarchism is a philosophy of morality and solidarity, based not on wishful thinking or naïve beliefs about the goodness of humanity but on a practical, radical critique of wealth and power. By studying Bakunin, we can learn a great deal about our own time and begin to recover a world of possibility and promise. It is often said that we are all anarchists at heart. This book explains why.

Bakunin: The Creative Passion Details

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From Reader Review Bakunin: The Creative Passion for online ebook

Dylan says

This is the most enjoyable book I've read recently. The author provides a likable and human portrait of a figure who has been very poorly served by generations of historians and sectarian Marxists (not to mention Marx himself), who have distorted the anarchist's thought, misattributed the incendiary work of others to him, falsely accused him of espionage, and grasped at isolated passages of his writing as evidence of secret authoritarian intentions. After more than a century of these widely circulated falsehoods, it is a difficult task to restore Bakunin's rightful legacy as a passionate voice for liberation, but Leier has made a bold step in that direction.

This quote from the introduction was a hook for me: "The fundamental point of anarchism is critique. Anarchists have tried to show what is wrong with the world and why, but their message has been buried and distorted. Its resurgence at the 'end of history' is not surprising, for anarchism has often renewed precisely when we are told that this is as good as it gets and that happiness lies in adapting ourselves to the new horrors. When the lid of the box gets screwed down tight, people start to think and act outside the box."

And here's Bakunin himself, on capitalism, as true today as then: "The whole life of the worker is nothing other than a grievous succession of terms of legally voluntary but economically forced servitude, momentarily interrupted by liberty accompanied by starvation, and consequently a real slavery."

On the state, which history has yet to disprove: "The state cannot exist a single day without having at least one privileged, exploiting class: the bureaucracy."

Kris says

Fantastic. Must-read for anyone who believes we can attain a better, more free and equal world than we live in today. Or even for those who have become disillusioned with such hopeful thoughts. The author does a superb job in not only giving a biography of Bakunin and describing his ideas, but also skillfully places it all into the broader historical context.

Daniel says

This is a great introduction to Bakunin's ideas.

It is disappointing that Bakunin's biography is used only as a backdrop to describe his ideas. Had I known that this book's charge was not his actions per se, but what motivated those actions, I might have picked up a different book. Passing mention is given to the barricades of various insurrections all over Europe that Bakunin manned. Instead the book concentrates on ensuring that Bakunin's ideas are explained plainly to the reader, leaving the actual biography to past works about Bakunin (an example given in the first couple of pages of the book: <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/26...>)

Dotted with references to pop-culture and witty comparisons to the modern day, the purpose of this book was to expound on Bakunin's philosophy, where it comes from, how it differs from other leftist philosophy (such as Marxism, or pre-Marxist socialism). I think it is a great work of popular philosophy (pop-philo?). For example, "Bakunin[...:]had a gift for reaching non-intellectuals. Unlike Marx, Bakunin would never be the target of a purge of the Poindexters." or, for a more biting example:

"As [Marx:] noted in the preface to the new edition of the Communist Manifesto, [...]the machinery so well-adapted for the rule of the bourgeoisie could not provide the model for socialism.

"That's just what I've been on about!" Bakunin exclaimed. The old foes eyed each other warily until the realization sunk in. Then each extended his arms, crying out "Comrade!" as they embraced in a particularly hairy hug that, to be honest, left both men feeling a little awkward.[...:]Reconciled at last, they agreed to work together and use that dynamic tension that had so divided them to build a united socialist movement and well and truly launch humanity's history anew.

Perhaps in an alternate universe."

The truth revealed in this book is that Marx was a total douche. Back-stabbing, bad-jacketing, spiteful, vindictive, sectarian and jealous, Marx never drew the crowds of working people that Bakunin or Proudhon did, and so therefore Marx despised them. A bookish nerd who compiled statistics while Bakunin raised black flags on top of European barricades, Marx never said a good word about his rival. Bakunin, on the other hand, was quite reserved in his criticism of Marx, ceding where his own philosophy was not as developed as that of Marx, and treating Marx like a comrade regardless of whatever ill will Marx had towards him.

Unlike Bakunin, Marx wrote himself and others of his social standing into the supposed revolutionary philosophy of the oppressed: "[Marxists:] remained the "most impassioned friends of state power," because without the state, the social revolution would simply sweep the intellectuals aside as the masses created their own free institutions and associations." Bakunin always insisted that the lived experiences of the working class were the most important factor in their revolutionary potential. Though other social classes could help build the liberatory workers' movement, the work had to be done by the workers themselves (himself discluded), and revolution must be built on their experiences.

I'm really going to give this to my mom to read. I think she'll enjoy it.

abclaret says

Bakunin much like anarchism itself is widely misunderstood. Mark Leier in a similar vein to Francis Wheen tries to inject humour into an otherwise complex biography which weaves together philosophy, history, and a series of protracted personal disputes with Karl Marx all without being dry, the least bit academic or partisan. The last chapter tries in particular to emphasise the proximity of Bakunin and late Marx after the fallout of the Paris Commune.

Considering the morass of silliness that is claimed against anarchism the author has done a sterling job in refuting slanders, psycho-babble and managed to put a human face to Bakunin, his eventful life and his political insights. A worthwhile and sympathetic read.

D says

Really good. Posited as one of the only, and certainly the best books on Bakunin, it doesn't leave much wanting. The focus is on Bakunin's ideas, not just his life, but a lot of time is spent on his long term quarreling with Marx, and also on dispelling the myths that abound when it comes to Bakunin. Highly recommended.

Chuck says

Excellent overview of Bakunin's life and political thinking. Very funny, as the author makes comparisons to contemporary pop culture to illustrate points. Contain several good overviews of concepts, including anarchism.

Matthew Antosh says

Bakunin: the Creative Passion is one of the most through biographies of Bakunin I have ever read, although one must consider the fact that I have not read any other biographies of Bakunin other then Mark Leiers. The book takes an approach that is heavy in modern day pop culture and deep in 18th century theoretical philosophy, which makes parts of the book quick to read, and at times a little hard to slog though. While I realize it is important to understand the philosophy of Hegel to understand the development of Bakunin's thoughts, I think at time Leier focuses too much on theory and not enough on the anecdotes of living Bakunins life. Still, for someone who is wanting to understand the theoretical basis of the development of anarchist thought, as well as learn about the life and times of the father of modern anarchism, this book is the beginning.

The American Conservative says

'Mark Leier sets out to rescue not only Mikhail Bakunin, the great anarchist thinker, but the whole anarchist tradition, which he argues is a pertinent political force today: "The current interest in anarchism," he writes, "is not misplaced or irrelevant." He certainly accomplishes the former and does much to dispel the multiple canards that have surrounded this man, many of them fabricated by Marx and the Marxists, but I don't think he makes much of a case for the latter.'

Read the full review, "An Enemy of the State," on our website:
<http://www.theamericanconservative.co...>

Erik says

A really tremendous read. Anarchist histories tend not to be well-written, and certainly tend not to fall into that category of historical works characterized as 'judicious.' But without sacrificing an ounce of passion, Leier makes Bakunin jump off the page. He doesn't spare him (and there are areas in which Bakunin does not

deserve to be spared), but nor does he simply roll over and accept the multitude of silly arguments and demonizations that have been launched against the man for well-nigh over a century.

Leier does an especially good job of destroying to psycho-social readings of Bakunin's life and politics that have hitherto dominated treatments, and produces a fantastic chapter which runs from the thought of Fichte through Hegel without once being boring (and that, my friends, is worth the price of admission on its own).

Robert says

Mark Leier points out that the best way to analyse ideas is through dialectic - or in this case attacking anyone who has ever dared to criticise the anarchist intellectual Mikhail Bakunin. The fact that he does so decisively and with both verve and wit is much to his credit, as is his refusal to excuse Bakunin's anti-semitism which was troubling even for the times in which he lived.

To describe 'The Creative Passion' as an autobiography is both overstatement and misleading. Although Leier goes into some degree of necessary family history, little importance is placed on the life which Bakunin lived in comparison to his words and beliefs. As the final stop on a journey of the discovery of his ideas, this would be woeful but as an introduction it is essential. Leier's digressions are few but necessary in order to illuminate some of the more complex and obscure concepts brought to light. The author consistently manages this clearly and concisely without ever appearing patronising. I for one particular enjoyed his illumination of Nihilism.

Yes, Leier is clearly a fan and spends a good portion of the book bashing the living daylights out of Karl Marx, although he arguably has great reason to do so. Through it all, Bakunin emerges as a great, generous and warm spirit of exactly the type who could expand on the notions of Proudhon to synthesise a concept of Anarchy which embraces humanism, altrusim and collectivism. It was perhaps precisely this warmth (verging on naivete) which so often left him open to virulent attacks upon his character, exploitation, imprisonment and exile,

If Bakunin was an apocalyptic revolutionary then that version of the man does not emerge here, what is left then is a flawed soul but an inspirational one nonetheless who's vision of the future of humanity transcends the capitalist/socialist paradigm and may yet come to fruition.

Peter Pinkney says

Not an easy book to read, but as with most difficult books, extremely rewarding.

I've always thought of myself as a Marxist, but after reading this, I'm not so sure anymore.

A great deal of the book is taken up with squabbles between Marx/Engels and Bakunin, and it is difficult to know who was right. Bakunin certainly comes across as the nicer person. The book is not just a biography, but also a well argued explanation of Bukanin's views, and the whole book is interwoven with comparisons of today's situation. There is also a great deal of wit throughout, and Mr Leier is a fine raconteur.

Any book that mentions Bob Dylan will always get my vote

Sean McCarrey says

My initial disappointments with this book come from my false expectations of Bakunin, so I can't really judge this book for that. However, I did feel as though the author may have missed out on a more interesting

aspect of Bakunin's life. Throughout the book, it seems as though Leier is using Bakunin's biography to explain the ways that he came about the various characters that Bakunin wrote back and forth with. I think that a more in-depth view of how not just the people, but places and events of Bakunin's life as well affected his work would bring this book to life in the way that Peter Kropotkin's memoirs did. I mean come on, the guy travelled around the world to escape exile in Siberia, I think that warrants more than a few pages. Leier might caution away from anything that verges on phsyco-history, but Bakunin did not live in an intellectual bubble (well for the most part).

With that being said, it was an amazing book. It really brought out the differences between anarchism and Marxism, and explained a lot of the intellectual ground work for the course of European history in the twentieth century. I think the book also effectively gave Bakunin a more human presence, when it seems like it would have been fairly easy to demonize the guy. With the relatively recent events of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street (recent in comparison to the time scale we're looking at in this book) right now seems like an appropriate time to read this book.

Aonarán says

I think I stopped reading this book about 2/3 of the way through. At first I was really excited about such a sizable, dense, new biography on Bakunin, but after dragging myself through whole chapters of the book, I thought I should set it down for a while. I guess I feel like Bakunin's been regarded as more of a doer than a writer or propagandist or academic - I think I even had this image of him being nursed by a she-bear as a child and taught to hate authority and society - and this book really beat me over the head with in-depth analysis of almost all his major writing. I mean a lot of the Leier's analysis of Bakunin's work was WAY, WAY longer than the original text he was analyzing. I also got the impression Leier was some sort of liberal college professor who fancies himself a radical (possible an anarchist) but whose politics shine through pretty readily as Bakunin's life is passed through his liberal-college-professor-lense.

I did, however, enjoy having all the information about Bakunin at my fingertips, and I do plan on reading the last 1/3 at some point.

3.2

Sean says

i was stranded in the jungles of southern naperville for an afternoon, so i moseyed my way on over to the public lib and found this interesting little gem to tie up an afternoon. particularly fascinating to me is the dramatic relationship between bakunin and marx, up to and including bakunin's expulsion from the first international. at one point marx's feelings are hurt cause bakunin doesn't respond to marx's gift of a copy of the recently published Capital, and bakunin has to respond in a letter assuring ol' karl that they are indeed friends and it had simply been an oversight. charming.

can't wait to get back into this one.

Michael Schmidt says

As choking cement dust settled over Manhattan in the wake of 9/11, journalists pawing through the wreckage of history for a precedent came across the almost forgotten bombing of Wall Street by Lettish members of the Anarchist Black Cross in 1920 that killed 38 people and injured scores others.

It had been an era in which anarchism wore the mantle of most feared sect to the propertied classes (Interpol had its roots in international summits in Rome and St Petersburg in the 1890s to combat anarchism, and an anarchist loner had assassinated US President William McKinley in 1901), the master of disaster was presumed to be long-dead anarchist barricades fighter and counter-Marx polemicist Mikhail Bakunin.

Bakunin's tumultuous life, often on the run, often in the firing line, had the effect of both increasing his dangerous aura and the influence of his emergent anarcho-communist ideas on the trade unions of the First International - but also fragmenting his writings and so allowing for many distortions by his enemies.

With lively prose balanced by a judicious and ultimately fair assessment of Bakunin's life and ideas, his flaws and often fruitful engagements with Marx, Leier has produced the most accessible life of this giant figure of 19th Century socialism.

Bakunin's influence was mass-organisational: the splintering of the International in 1872 saw a tiny Marxist rump of perhaps 1,000 activists scattered internationally totally overshadowed by an enormous anarchist majority (sections in Spain boasted 60,000 members by 1873, and in Italy 30,000 members by 1874), which strength was replicated by further growth under the anarchist IWA's successor Anti-Authoritarian "Black" International, founded in 1881 (sections in Mexico boasted 50,000 members by 1882, and in Holland 188,700 members by 1895 - the year in which the famous French CGT merged with the Bourses du Travail to establish a model that would be replicated as far afield as Senegal and Brazil).

It is for that mass-organisational reason that all students of mass-line liberatory politics should read Leier, but for a more intimate perspective, I'll direct you to my brief comments on the female influences on Bakunin: <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/24259>
