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The Echo of Bakunin’s Appeal to the Slavs (1848)*

When the Prague uprising succumbed to Windischgrätz’s cannonade on 17 June 1848, Mikhail Bakunin, who had counseled and exhorted the insurgents during six days of street fighting, slipped through the military’s dragnet and escaped to Breslau. The few days Bakunin had spent in Prague attending the Slav Congress scarcely afforded him the opportunity to gain a deep understanding of the Habsburg Slavs, but the experience left the itinerant Russian émigré firmly convinced that the Austrian state edifice must be razed before a revolutionary assault could be launched successfully against tsarist reaction and the Slavs would gain their freedom.¹

During the summer of 1848 Bakunin wandered restlessly between Breslau, Berlin, and Dresden before finding a haven in the constitutionally liberal enclave Anhalt-Köthen. By Bakunin’s own account the months after the Prague debacle were “a terrible period of my life.” Unjustly accused of being a tsarist spy, he was ostracized by his erstwhile German and Polish radical allies. Only a single act of democratic fervor, he became convinced, would demolish the calumny.²

Events in the Habsburg lands would lift Bakunin’s depression. His Pan-Slav, anti-German, and anti-Magyar sentiments, which the Congress had nurtured, were deeply shaken when Ban Josip Jelačić, to the delight of the Czech liberals, marched his Croatian regiments against radical Vienna in October, 1848. At first Bakunin had thought that the war in Hungary was a just struggle by Slovaks and South Slavs to defend their national well being; now he believed it was a forerunner of reaction in Austria. In despair Bakunin wrote in September, 1848, to the Slovak leader L’udovít Štúr: “Brother, what are you doing? You are destroying Slavdom. You’ve lost your senses; you’re ... acting merely in the interests of the emperor and the Austrian aristocracy. You believe that diplomacy will save you, but it will destroy you!”³ The Austrian Slavs had strayed afield, but how could Bakunin, an involuntary exile in Germany, make them understand their folly? An idea came in a letter

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2. Confession to Tsar Nicholas (1851), in V. Polonskii, ed., Materialy dla biografii M. Bakunina, 3 vols. (Moscow-Petrograd/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1923-33), I, 184ff. The charge against Bakunin, which circulated in Polish émigré circles, was publicly aired in Marx’s Neue Rheinische Zeitung on 6 July 1848.

from Bakunin's radical German acquaintance, Hermann Müller-Strübing: "How terribly your friends the Czechs are behaving! Fulminate against this you must! A Slav must speak out for democracy and must thoroughly brand these perfidious paladins of nationality with their mendacious royalism.... You have to break openly with them. Make an appeal to the democrats among the Slavs!"4

Here was a challenge Bakunin could hardly resist: to redirect the Slavs, whom since the days of the Slav Congress he had viewed paternally as delightful but misguided children, toward the goal of European revolution. But Bakunin recognized that the task was fraught with difficulty: "I could not proclaim clearly and unequivocally my Slav ideal because I was seeking to come to an understanding with the German democrats, considering this rapprochement as indispensable; I was therefore obliged to tacit between the Slavs and the Germans." The revolutionary forces had suffered grievously since the summer, and "only the reunited force of all European democrats could provide hope for a victory over the reactionary union of rulers."5 Bakunin hoped to bring together under one roof Germans, Magyars, and Slavs, whose bitter hostility since the March Revolution was deterring the cause of revolution.

Because he was an impatient man of action, writing did not come naturally or easily to Bakunin. He struggled with the appeal for over a month, often reworking the text before he was ready to publish it in early December. To shield his publisher, Ernst Keil, the owner of the Slav bookshop in Leipzig, the frontispiece of the brochure stated: "Appeal to the Slavs by a Russian Patriot, Mikhail Bakunin, Member of the Slav Congress in Prague. Published by the Author in Köthen."6 Although Bakunin was convinced that the major test for the Appeal would be among the Czechs,7 whose lead the other Austrian Slavs would follow, curiously enough he directed that it be published in German and Polish versions "so that the Czechs cannot reproach me for addressing them in German."8

The Appeal was a blend of revolutionary exhortation and messianic fervor: "All eyes are fixed expectantly on you. The choice you make will determine both the immediate and the long-term history of mankind.... The world is divided into two camps: on one side revolution, on the other counter-revolution.... There is no

7. See Josef Kočí, "Česká politika a Bakuninův 'Hlas k Slovanům'," Slovanské historické studie, 10 (1974), 118.
8. Bakunin to Müller-Strübing, n.d. [Nov.-Dec. 1848], in Pfitzner, Bakuninstudien, p. 93. Müller-Strübing helped prepare the German version (from Bakunin's French draft), while the Polish text was by Julius Andrzejkowicz, a Polish devotee of Bakunin. See ibid., pp. 81-83, and 94-106, where Pfitzner reproduces an early French draft of the Appeal.