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Bakunin, Nechaev, and the "Catechism of a Revolutionary": The Case for Joint Authorship

Ten years ago Michael Confino presented the first new evidence about the authorship of the "Catechism of a Revolutionary" to appear in several decades. In a copy of a letter written by Michael Bakunin and dated 2 June 1870, he found the following: "I called you an abrek and your catechism the catechism of an abrek." This and the remainder of the letter leave no doubt in a reader's mind that Bakunin was trying to dissociate himself from the "Catechism" more than a year before it became a public document. Confino's publication of the letter and his interesting analysis of the sources of some of the ideas and language of the "Catechism" tended to shift scholarly opinion in the direction of Nechaev's exclusive authorship. Confino also assumed (with others) that Nechaev may have carried abroad an outline or draft, which may have been the collective work of the group responsible for the "Programma revoliutsionnykh deistviy" (Program of Revolutionary Actions). Though Confino, following the work of B. P. Koz'min, sees in the "Catechism" clear signs of the influence of Tkachev upon Nechaev and that of Nechaev's collaboration with other young revolutionaries on the "Program," he neither mentions the deviations from the "Program" in the "Catechism" nor accounts for them. Furthermore, Confino did not solve the puzzle of the style and structure of the "Catechism." The document's style and tone undergo distinct changes from one section to the other, changes which cannot be explained entirely by the change of subject; and there are ideas, turns of phrase, and linguistic mannerisms which clearly belong to Bakunin. Finally, there is the troubling statement of M. P. Sazhin, first communicated to Max Nettlau in 1904 and then repeated in his memoirs in

2. Ibid., p. 632.
4. B. P. Koz'min, P. N. Tkachev i revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie 1860-kh godov (Moscow: Novyi mir, 1922), pp. 95-98. Koz'min, however, found ideas in both the Program and the Catechism with which Tkachev would have disagreed. Ibid., pp. 150-51; 188-90.
1925, that he had seen a copy of the "Catechism" in Bakunin's handwriting among Nechaev's papers, which he and others had retrieved from Paris and burned after Nechaev's arrest in August, 1872. According to Sazhin, Bakunin had said nothing at all when told about the document. Assuming the accuracy of Sazhin's memoirs, is it possible that Bakunin had acted merely as an amanuensis for Nechaev?

Despite all of these problems, two prominent Bakunin scholars, N. Pirumova and Arthur Lehning, have accepted the new evidence as proof that Bakunin did not play a role in the composition of the "Catechism." Paul Avrich more cautiously writes that "the Catechism must now be attributed to Nechaev, although it is by no means certain that Bakunin had no role in its composition or revision." Avrich quite rightly takes into account the relationship between Bakunin and Nechaev at the time of the writing of the "Catechism," but he obviously means composition in the very limited sense of "help with the writing and editing" of the document. This at least would account for the copy of the "Catechism" in Bakunin's handwriting and for some of its stylistic aspects, while removing any responsibility from Bakunin for its major structural and substantive features. In any case, Confino, Pirumova, Lehning, and Avrich all correctly repudiated the attempts made first by Marx and Engels and then others, most notably Iurii Steklov, to assign major responsibility for the document to Bakunin. The letter of 2 June 1870 and the words "your catechism" shed new light on the relationship between Bakunin and Nechaev during the early period of their collaboration and cast doubt upon any theory that Bakunin played the major role in the composition of the "Catechism." However, as V. Ia. Grosul has noted in a recent work, the expression "your catechism" is ambiguous at best. It might signify the initiative taken by Nechaev in the creation of the "Catechism" and his participation in its composition without, however, signifying lack of participation by Bakunin in the latter. The phrase "your catechism" can serve as a guide and supplement to the other evidence, but cannot in itself establish the precise nature of Bakunin's role.

The search for the origins of the ideas in the "Catechism" is also beset with the usual problems of tracing the source of ideas and phraseology which have become the general possession of a subculture. Pirumova, for example, identified G. P. Enisherlov as the source of the "Jesuitical" ideas in the "Catechism." Like Bakunin the group associated with the "Program" wanted men of action and not words, and like Bakunin they believed that they could not have a revolution without dirtying their hands. All of them believed in passionate but disciplined devotion to the revolution and in the abandonment or revision of their public careers in order to serve it. Thus, even if we accept Koz'min's theory that Nechaev injected

8. Ibid.