Bakunin and Herzen: An Analysis of Their Ideological Disagreements at the End of the 1860s*

The conflict of ideas between Aleksandr Ivanovich Herzen and Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin is one of the important pages in the history of Russian revolutionary thought. The vivid personalities of the two participants in the polemic gave their dispute a special intensity, while the principles at issue made the debate of interest both to their contemporaries and to subsequent historians.

Mikhail Bakunin—it is not easy to speak briefly about this truly complex man. “One of the most remarkable crossroads of Russian life,” Aleksandr Blok called him in 1906. “Wave and rock, poetry and prose, fire and ice,” he went on, quoting Pushkin, and added: “Of all these things Bakunin perhaps was short only on poetry.”\(^1\) The enormous stature, the lion’s mane, the sharp, penetrating gaze, the loud conversation, the all-consuming energy, the will that bent many other wills to it, the activity on a scale which seemed to know no bounds, the ineradicable desire to create a revolution anywhere, at any time, or, more accurately, to “re-volt,” regardless of historical circumstances or potential sacrifices and without bothering about the proper organization of forces or the readiness of the people for new forms of life—these were the distinguishing features of Mikhail Bakunin.

Aleksandr Herzen—here is a man with the face of a thinker, the soul of an artist, and the heart of a fighter, a man with a cast of mind, a character, and a temperament exactly the opposite of Bakunin’s. There was nothing excessive in Herzen’s writings, in his struggle, his actions, his relations with other people. Brilliant and ironic, he cast his scientific thought in an artistic form but at the same time was endowed with a sense of tact and measure. He used to say of himself that “reflection always held him back.” Reflection was indeed his most characteristic feature, but instead of holding him back it helped him out at the most difficult moments of his life. And it was precisely his reflections on the means of liberating mankind, the tireless search for a correct revolutionary theory, the humanism which compelled him to prepare the forces and consciousness of people before summoning them “to the meaningless battle of destruction,” that so distinguished Herzen from his old friend.

* Translated from the Russian by Marshall S. Shatz.

"The issue between us is not different principles and theories, but different methods and practices," Herzen felt. "You say—and I could not have doubted it—that you agree theoretically with all my ideas," Bakunin wrote him. Yes, in theory both revolutionaries shared the same orientation. Both were socialists. Utopian socialism was an ideological current broad enough to include in this period Blanquist proponents of conspiratorial tactics, federalists, anti-state anarchists, and various other doctrines, the ultimate goal of which was the fundamental reorganization and just reconstruction of society on socialist principles. But the scientific laws of social development did not form the basis for any of these doctrines; hence, socialism of this type was utopian. The theoretical views of both Herzen and Bakunin developed within the framework of utopian socialism; what provoked their disagreements was not their long-range, ultimate goals, but the paths to be taken by the immediate revolutionary movement, its "methods and practices," which they conceived of in completely different ways.

It might seem strange that two people who shared the same social background and similar intellectual interests, who on the whole took the same ideological sources and the same Russian and European reality as their starting point, arrived at such contrary views on the means and prospects of the liberation struggle. Herzen accurately pointed out one of the primary reasons for this difference. "It is a matter of temperament, of character, of the pli of an entire life. Some become priests in early youth and preach with a catechism of faith or negation—in their hands. . . . Others cannot do this; to them naked, gaunt, bitter truth is dearer than decoration, to them the icon-mounts, the vestments, the play-acting are laughable, and laughter is a terrible thing."

Herzen was addressing these words to Bakunin, reminding him of their arguments at the end of the thirties. At that time heated philosophical discussions were taking place in the literary salons of Moscow. Hegel's doctrines were being interpreted and reinterpreted to shreds. Herzen was one of the first in Russia to fathom the true revolutionary meaning of the great philosopher's dialectic, while Bakunin (along with Vissarion Belinskii) was still propounding a one-sided concept of "rational reality." And although the scales soon fell from Bakunin's eyes, he retained the habit of preaching "a catechism of faith or negation," an organically ingrained character trait which Herzen so accurately identified.

Later, when the rift between Herzen and Bakunin developed, Nikolai Ogarev remarked: "it is really a physiological process, which is so often spoken of . . . and which no one wants to take into account. . . . The brain produces nothing arbi-

4. Literaturnoe nasledstvo [hereafter LN], 61 (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1953), 185-86.