ARTICLES

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Bakunin's "Preface to Hegel's 'Gymnasium Lectures'": The Problem of Alienation and the Reconciliation with Reality*

The first product of Russian Hegelianism, which served to establish its author's reputation as the undisputed authority on Hegel's philosophy in Russia, appeared in the March, 1838, issue of the Moskovskii nabliudatel'. Although Mikhail Bakunin's "Preface" to his translation of Hegel's Gymnasium Lectures has deservedly been labelled "the manifesto of Russian Hegelianism," a convincing interpretation of this work has not, to date, been presented; neither the significance of this article on Bakunin's intellectual development, nor the impact of Bakunin's Hegelianism on the orientation of Russian thought, has been correctly evaluated.

The "Preface to Hegel's 'Gymnasium Lectures'" is perhaps the most widely misunderstood of all Bakunin's theoretical writings, essentially because of its controversial and misrepresented appeal for a "reconciliation with reality." Generally described as a reactionary, politically conservative, right-

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2. D. I. Chizhevski, Hegel' v Rossii (Paris: Dom Knigi, 1939), p. 96; Iu. M. Steklov, Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin: ego zhizn' i deiatel'nost', 3 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo kommunisticheskoi akademii, 1926-27), 1, 56; A. Koyré, Etudes sur l'histoire de la pensée philosophique en Russie (Paris: Bibliothèque d'histoire de la philosophie, 1950), pp. 134-35; G. Planty-Bonjour, Hegel et la pensée philosophique en Russie, 1830-1917 (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 44-45 and 49. Some commentators also consider this article a joint enterprise of the Stankevich circle; see, for example, M. Dynnik, "Ot priesmenia s deistvitel'nostiu k apologii razrusheniia," Letopisi marksizma, 4 (1927), 30-44, who states: "The first published appeal to a 'reconciliation with reality' on the basis of Hegelian philosophy was not only the personal declaration of Bakunin, but also [marked] an event in Russian social thought, and in its way, a political declaration... [it was] a published thesis thought out, in a striking manner, by all the members of the circle conjunctly" (pp. 30-31). In view of Bakunin's undisputed expertise and superiority over the other members of the Stankevich circle (most of whom he introduced to Hegelianism), this hypothesis is highly unlikely, and would require adequate documentation in order to be given any serious consideration.

3. This expression was introduced into the Russian philosophical idiom by Bakunin. His earliest known use of the term was in a letter of November, 1837, in which he clarified what Hegel's philosophy meant for him. The focus of attention upon the single word "reality" is in itself an eloquent statement of the new direction of Bakunin's ideas.
wing defense of Russian absolutism and of the ideological status quo, this work is commonly dismissed as an insignificant aberration, completely inconsistent with Bakunin's later revolutionary convictions, and as the manifestation of an inexplicable espousal of a political obscurantism of the worst kind.4

The standard interpretation of Bakunin's "Preface to Hegel's 'Gymnasium Lectures'" is indicative of the prevalent trend in Bakuninist studies, which fail to discern any logical continuity in the evolution of Bakunin's thought before and after the "pivotal" date of 1840. Indeed, his intellectual development is usually divided into two distinct, mutually exclusive periods. During the first, pre-1840, Bakunin is presented as a conservative and a monarchist, dedicated to a spiritual and political compromise with the "rational reality" of the tsarist régime. After his arrival in Berlin in 1840, however, one is brusquely confronted with the apostle of universal destruction, the ubiquitous anarchist and instigator of world revolution.5 While there is no doubt that 1840 was an important date for Bakunin in terms of his intellectual formation, the abrupt dichotomy which appears in most historical commentaries dealing with Bakunin's writings and activities cannot be maintained. The procedure of dividing the ideological development of a thinker into two separate and irreconcilable phases frequently tends to be adopted uncritically and without thorough consideration of the documentary sources. This appears to be precisely the case with regard to the study of Bakunin's thought. His early works, written while still in Russia, are categorically dismissed as reactionary, mysti-

He wrote: "I am more and more absorbed in Hegel and am increasingly convinced of the absoluteness of content and in the absolute objectivity of the forms of this content. Hegel is the complete reconciliation with reality, and this was so necessary for me, as there was so much emptiness, so much illusion, so much confusion [in me] . . . . I feel that my life and the scope of my spiritual existence are becoming more real, that I am becoming closer to a normal state. I believe in life, I believe in its wonderful destiny, and hope that I shall, in time, take a real part in it. My studies are becoming more regular; I have gradually ceased to live by fits and starts as hitherto. It is time to come to one's senses; it is time to become a real man." [my emphasis] Bakunin, Pis'mo k Ketcheru, November 1837, Fond N. Kh. Ketchera, No. 5185, Biblioteka im. Lenina, Rukopisnyi otdel, Moskva.
