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Michail Bakunin

On the 17th Anniversary of the Polish Insurrection of 1830

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1847

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Bakunin's speech was given at a great banquet in Paris to commemorate that first Polish uprising, and for giving the speech Bakunin was expelled from France at the request of the Russian ambassador. Its importance for his ideological career is suggested by what he wrote, much later, to Herzen and Ogarev: "Since 1846 the Slavo-Polish cause has become my *idée fixe*." Here he himself locates the beginning of his revolutionary pan-Slavism, a blend of nationalism for the sake of revolution. *La Réforme* published the speech in full together with the introduction below.

At a meeting held in Paris on November 29 last, for the purpose of celebrating the seventeenth anniversary of the Polish revolution, a Russian refugee, M. Bakunin, delivered an address couched in the most generous terms, which contained the latest and boldest views on the Russian situation.

We quote the most striking passages of this sensational statement:

Gentlemen: This is indeed a solemn moment for me. I am a Russian, and I come to this great assembly, gathered here to celebrate the anniversary of the Polish revolution. Your very presence here is a sort of defiance, a threat and a curse thrown into the face of all the oppressors of Poland. I have come here, gentlemen, inspired by a profound love and unshakeable respect for my country.

I am not unaware of how unpopular Russia is in Europe. The Poles consider her, not without reason, as perhaps one of the principal causes of all their misfortunes. Men of independent opinion from other countries view the very rapid development of her power as an ever-growing danger to the liberty of peoples . . .

Russia figures as the synonym for brutal oppression; thanks to the execrable policies of our sovereigns, the name "Russian," in the official sense of the word, stands for "slave and executioner." (*It is on this theme that Bakunin enlarges in the first part of his address, not without referring, in this tragic period for the Poles, to the martyrdom of Postel, of Ryleev, of Muraviev-Apostol, of Bestuzhev-Ryumin, of Dohovsky, who had been hanged in St. Petersburg twenty-two years before for having been "the first citizens of Russia."*)

Almost a year ago (*continued Bakunin*) — I believe it was after the massacre of Galicia, a Polish nobleman made you an extraordinary proposition, in a highly eloquent letter addressed to Prince Metternich, which has since become famous. No doubt carried away by his hatred for the Austrians which, by the way, was quite justified, he suggested nothing less than that you should submit to the Tsar, surrender yourselves, body and soul, to him, without drawback and without reservation. He advised you to do voluntarily what you had so far done under duress, and he promised you, in compensation, that as soon as you ceased to pose as slaves, your master would, in spite of himself, become your brother. Your brother, gentlemen, do you hear this? Emperor Nicholas your brother! (*No! No! Great commotion in the hall*)

The oppressor, your bitterest enemy, the personal enemy of Poland, the executioner of so many victims (*Bravo! Bravo!*), the man who ravished your liberty, the man who is pursuing you with relentless perseverance, as much through hate and by instinct as through political strategy — would you accept him as your brother? (*Cries from all directions, No! No! No!*) Each one of you would rather see Poland perish than consent to such a monstrous alliance. (*Prolonged bravos*)

And the speaker went on to draw the following argument from his earlier remarks:

Yes, it is just because you are the enemies of Emperor Nicholas, the enemies of official Russia, that you are, in the nature of things, even without wishing it, the friends of the Russian people. (*Applause*) There is a general belief in Europe, I know, that we Russians form an indivisible unit with our government, that we are quite happy under the regime of Nicholas; that he and his system, oppressor within the country and invader beyond its frontiers, are the perfect expression of our national genius. Nothing of the kind. No, gentlemen, the Russian people are not happy! I say this joyfully and proudly. For if happiness were possible for the Russians in their present abject state, ours would be the basest, vilest people in the world.

As he developed the idea of a revolutionary alliance between Poland and Russia, Mr. Bakunin came to the following conclusion:

To the extent that we have remained disunited, we have mutually paralyzed ourselves. Together we shall be all-powerful for the good.

Nothing could resist our common and united action. The reconciliation of Russia and Poland is a tremendous task, well worth our total devotion. This will be the emancipation of sixty million men, the deliverance of all the Slav peoples who are groaning under a foreign yoke. It will be, in the end, the fall, the definitive collapse of despotism in Russia. (*Applause*)