

# ANARCHIST PORTRAITS

Reviewed by Sam Dolgoff

*Anarchist Portraits*, by Paul Avrich. Princeton University Press, 1988.

Paul Avrich's latest book, *Anarchist Portraits*, is a collection of essays dealing with the lives and leading ideas of outstanding figures in the world anarchist

movement; among them Kropotkin, Nestor Makhno, Proudhon, Benjamin Tucker, Sacco and Vanzetti, Luigi Galleani, Saul Yanofsky, Mollie Steimer, Voline, Gustave Landauer, Ricardo Flores Magon and others.

Since Bakunin was one of the pioneers of the modern anarcho-syndicalist movement and his writings (as Avrich puts it) "illuminate some of the most important questions of modern times...", we are particularly interested in his essay "The Legacy of Bakunin." While the essay does contain some valuable insights, it unfortunately repeats widely-held misconceptions of a number of Bakunin's fundamental ideas. A few examples:

Bakunin was not "a firm believer in immediate revolution...":

Revolutions are not made arbitrarily... They are always brought about by the natural force of events... Their explosion can never be artificially accelerated... Spontaneity and instinct are not enough. They are ineffectual because they lack two indispensable conditions: Organization and Knowledge. (*Policy of the International*)

Some historians foster the impression that Bakunin advocated indiscriminate violence. To the contrary, he opposed regicide and stressed repeatedly that destruction must be directed not against persons but institutions: "It will then become unnecessary to destroy men and reap the inevitable reaction which massacre of human beings have never failed and never will fail to produce in every society." (*Program of the International*)

Avrich's comments on the revolutionary role of peasants in rural areas and urban industrial workers do not represent Bakunin's ideas on this very important problem.

in order that the peasants rise up, it is absolutely necessary that the initiative in the revolutionary movement be taken by the city workers, for it is the latter that combine in themselves the instincts, the ideas, and conscious will of the Social Revolution. Consequently, the whole danger threatening the existence of states is focussed in the city proletariat. (*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*. G.P. Maximoff, page 375, quoted.)

The contention that Bakunin "had an urge to dominate others in a revolutionary dictatorship" created by himself and subject "to a strict hierarchy and unconditional obedience to his will" in contradiction to his libertarian principles is similarly false. Here, summarized, are Bakunin's views: Bakunin worked out elaborate internal statutes for the secret organization of the International Brotherhood in the style of the Masons and the Italian Carbonari because these and all other subversive organizations were forced to operate secretly. But he never regarded himself as a dictator. The one and only purpose of the organization was to destroy all government and make governments impossible everywhere. The organization would keep watch everywhere to ensure that States and Governments could never be rebuilt, but neither the association as a whole or any of its members were to take any kind of public office.

In this connection Bakunin predicted that what Avrich calls the "greatest revolutions of the twentieth century" (like Russia and China) were actually counter-revolutions which led to the re-establishment of the State and monopoly of power—a fact established by all responsible historians.

Bakunin's secret organizations were actually informal fraternities connected by personal contact and correspondence (similar, in later years, to the Anarchist Federation of Iberia [FAI] "affinity" groups of intimate, like minded friends and associates), a type of organization preferred by the members of the secret revolutionary Alliance and other groupings, all temporary. This view was confirmed by Bakunin himself when he induced his close comrade-in-arms James Guillaume to join the secret Alliance, stressing that: "the Alliance is not

like the old conspirative movements in which you must obey the edicts handed down from above; [it is] without formalities, without mysterious rituals, without hierarchies, but simply the mutual solidarity, the confidence of each member between all the comrades." (*Memoires et Souvenirs*, Volume I, page 130). This was also the opinion of Armand Ross, the old revolutionary fighter, who in his memoirs stresses that Bakunin was not "the pope, but like all his fellow members joined in discussions, group affairs and decisions."

The baseless assertion that Bakunin "was a forebear of Lenin" because he believed in a "temporary revolutionary dictatorship," as well as the equally groundless assertion that "Lenin's greatest achievement was a return to the anarcho-syndicalist roots of the Russian revolutionary tradition" is decisively refuted by Avrigh himself in his book *Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, as well as by every responsible historian. Lenin engineered the establishment of a counter-revolutionary State. And Avrigh maintained, correctly, that not Bakunin, but the Jacobin statist Robespierre, Blanqui, Tkachev and Nechayev were "Lenin's forebearers."

To back up his allegation that "Bakunin's cult of violence and revolutionary immoralism brought Bakunin close to later authoritarianism... left and right..." Avrigh refers to the notorious *Catechism of a Revolutionist*, falsely charging that it was "written with Nechayev." In the *Catechism* the revolutionist is required to be a total immoralist and, if necessary, to commit any crime and treachery to promote the revolution. But Avrigh unconsciously refutes his allegations. On the basis of the research of historians Michael Confino and Arthur Lehning, Avrigh reluctantly concedes that the authorship of the *Catechism* must now be attributed "...primarily to Nechayev."

Similarly, in view of the incontestable fact that the atrocities committed against the anarchist movement by the counter-revolutionary Spanish "Democracy" prepared the way for the victory of Franco Fascism, I can find no justification for Avrigh's charge that: "The anarchists helped to smother the fragile embryo of democracy, thus preparing the way for a new tyranny [Franco] that was to be the author of their downfall."

Aside from the "Heritage of Bakunin," the twenty-one essays are well written and researched. Nor is everything praised without reservations. For example, the essay "Jewish Anarchists in America" points to the bourgeoisification of Jewish anarchism, to the degree that all identity as an anti-establishment revolutionary movement became enmeshed in the class-collaborationist union bureaucracy, even going so far as to enthusiastically support the Roosevelt "New Deal" variety of State Capitalism (p. 196). The essay "Sacco and Vanzetti: The Italian Anarchist Background" exaggerates the influence of the extreme anti-organization anarchist Luigi Galleani. Glorification of unrestrained terrorism and other anti-social acts committed by deranged individuals (even habitual criminals) has always been rightfully denounced as outrageous violations of the constructive principles of Anarchism. In focussing on this tendency, Avrigh barely mentions the far more influential Italian communist/syndicalist organizations. He largely ignores their deep-seated differences, noting as if in passing that "Galleanists tended to shun the trade unions..."—hardly a word about the Italian libertarian labor movements.

Nevertheless the essays, in general, make instructive reading for readers interested in anarchism.