

# Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis

Michail Bakunin

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# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	3
General Problems of the Social Revolution . . . . .	4
The Revolutionary Temper and Its Matrix . . . . .	21
A Critique of the German Social Democratic Program . . . . .	24

## Introduction

These “Letters to a Frenchman” were not actually addressed to anyone in particular, but were merely the form the author used to indicate the informality and personal quality of what he had to say.

This long extract naturally divides itself into three distinct sections: a) *General Problems of the Social Revolution*, with special emphasis on the organization of the peasants in relation to the urban working class in predominantly agrarian countries, capitalist war between states, and civil war; b) *The Revolutionary Temper and Its Matrix*; c) *A Critique of the German Social-Democratic Program*.

His *Letters to a Frenchman* are among the most important of Bakunin’s writings. For it is in this major work that Bakunin made his unique contributions to the theory and practice of revolution. It was written during the stormy period of the Franco-Prussian War when France faced certain defeat. The government of Napoleon III had collapsed and the succeeding provisional republican government was hopelessly demoralized. The French armies were in full retreat and the Prussian troops were at the gates of Paris. It was in the midst of this crisis that Bakunin developed ideas which have since become the watchwords of libertarian revolutionary movements and to which even the authoritarians still pay lip service — ideas such as turning the wars between states into civil wars for the Social Revolution; the people-in-arms fighting a guerrilla war to repulse a foreign army and simultaneously defending the revolution against its domestic enemies; all power to the grass-roots organizations spontaneously created by the revolution; a federalist alternative to centralized statist revolution-by-decree, among others.

Bakunin’s had confidence in the revolutionary capabilities of the peasants, and he worked out ways of winning them over to the side of the revolution, with particular emphasis on establishing harmonious relations between the peasants and the more sophisticated urban workers. As in all his other writings on revolution, he reiterates his views on the relation between the vanguard organization and the masses. While fully appreciating the importance of the economic situation in revolution, Bakunin nevertheless attached equal weight to the will, the revolutionary consciousness of the people. The section on *The Revolutionary Temper and Its Matrix* occupies a key place in Bakunin’s revolutionary ideology.

## General Problems of the Social Revolution

I have already shown that France cannot be saved ... by the State. But outside the parasitic, artificial institution of State, a nation consists only of its people; consequently, *France can be saved only by the immediate, non-partisan action of the people*, by a mass uprising of all the French people, spontaneously organized from the bottom upward, a war of destruction, a merciless war to the death.

When a nation of thirty-eight million people rises to defend itself, determined to destroy everything and ready even to sacrifice lives and possessions rather than submit to slavery, no army in the world, however powerful, however well organized and equipped with the most extraordinary weapons, will be able to conquer it.

Everything depends on the ability of the French people to make such an effort. To what extent have blandishments of bourgeois civilization affected their revolutionary capacities?

Have such factors rendered them incapable of summoning up the requisite heroism and primitive tenacity, do they prefer peace at the price of freedom, or freedom at the cost of immense privations? Do they still retain at least some of the natural strength and primitive energy which makes a nation powerful?

If France had been composed solely of the bourgeoisie, I would have unhesitatingly replied in the negative. The French bourgeoisie, as in most of the countries of Western Europe, comprise an immense body, far more numerous than is generally assumed, even penetrating the proletariat and to some extent corrupting its upper strata.

In France, the workers are much less attached to the bourgeois class than in Germany, and are daily increasing their separation from it. Nevertheless, the deleterious influence of bourgeois civilization continues to corrupt some sections of the French proletariat. This accounts for the indifference and the egoism observed within certain better paying occupations. These workers are semi-bourgeois, because of self-interest and self-delusion, and they oppose the Revolution because they fear that the Revolution will ruin them.

The bourgeoisie, accordingly, constitute a very influential and a very considerable section of French society. But if at this moment all Frenchmen were bourgeois, the Prussian invasion would envelop Paris and France would be lost. The bourgeoisie has long since outlived its heroic age; it lacks the dynamism, the supreme heroism that carried it to victory in 1793, and, since then, having become complacent and satiated, it has steadily degenerated. In case of extreme necessity it will sacrifice even its sons, but it will never sacrifice its social position and its property for the realization of a great ideal. It would rather submit to the German yoke than renounce its social privileges and accept economic equality with the

proletariat. I do not say that the bourgeoisie is unpatriotic; on the contrary, patriotism, in the narrowest sense, is its essential virtue. But the bourgeoisie love their country only because, for them, the country, represented by the State, safeguards their economic, political, and social privileges. Any nation withdrawing this protection would be disowned by them. Therefore, for the bourgeoisie, the country is the State. Patriots of the State, they become furious enemies of the masses if the people, tired of sacrificing themselves, of being used as a passive footstool by the government, revolt against it. If the bourgeoisie had to choose between the masses who rebel against the State and the Prussian invaders of France, they would surely choose the latter. This would be a disagreeable option but they are, nevertheless, defenders of the principle of the State against the worthless rabble, the masses of the world. Did not the bourgeoisie of Paris and all France champion Louis Bonaparte in 1848 for the same reason? And did they not support Napoleon III, until it became plain to everyone that his government had brought France to the brink of ruin? The bourgeoisie of France ceased supporting him only when they became afraid that his downfall would be the signal for the people's revolution, i.e., that he could not prevent the Social Revolution. And their fear of this is so great as to lead them to betray their country. They are intelligent enough to fully understand that the present regime [the government which succeeded Napoleon III] cannot save France, that the new rulers have neither the will, nor the intelligence, nor the power to do so. Yet, despite all this, they continue to support this government; they are more afraid of the invasion of their bourgeois civilization by the people of France than they are of the Prussian invasion of France.

This being said, the French bourgeoisie in general is, at present, sincerely patriotic. They cordially hate the Prussians. To drive the insolent invaders from the soil of France they are ready to make great sacrifices of soldiers, most of them from the lower classes, and of money, which will sooner or later be recovered from the people. But they absolutely insist that all contributed wealth and manpower should be concentrated in the hands of the State and that, as far as possible, all the armed volunteers should become soldiers in the regular army. They insist that all private voluntary organizations involved in war operations, whether financial, military, administrative, or medical, be permitted to function only under the direct supervision of the State. They also demand that non-governmental citizens' militias and all irregular military bodies shall be organized by and under the personal supervision of *authorized leaders, licensed by the State*, property owners, well-known bourgeois "gentlemen," and other solid citizens. In this way those workers and peasants in the unofficial forces who might rebel or participate in insurrection will no longer be dangerous. What is more, the leaders will, if necessary, dispatch these troops to suppress uprisings against the authorities, as happened in June 1790 when the mobile guards opposed the people.

On this one point, the bourgeois of all denominations — from the most reactionary vigilantes to the most rabid Jacobins — together with the authoritarian State Communists, are unanimous: *that the salvation of France can and must be achieved only by and through the State*. But France can be saved only by drastic measures which require the dissolution of the State...<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the inferiority of the two French armies, they were still able to halt the enemy in other parts of France and to repulse the Prussian armies before they approached the walls of Paris. If the government and military authorities had done what all the French press, from the very beginning of the military crisis, had urged them to do; if, as soon as the news of the disastrous defeat of the French armies reached Paris, instead of proclaiming a state of siege in the capital and in the eastern departments, they had called for mass uprisings in all those departments; if, instead of restricting the fighting to the two armies, these armies had become the base of support for a formidable insurrection by guerrillas or, if necessary, by brigands; if the peasants and the workers had been armed with guns instead of scythes; if the two armies, casting aside all military pomp and snobbery, had entered into fraternal relations with the innumerable irregular fighting units ... by fighting together in solidarity even without the help of unoccupied France, they would have been able to save Paris. At the very least, the enemy would have been halted long enough to permit the provisional government to mobilize strong forces...

To sum up the main points: the administrative and governmental machinery must be permanently smashed and not replaced by another. Give complete freedom of initiative, movement, and organization to all the provinces, and to all the communes of France, which is equivalent to dissolving the State, and initiating the Social Revolution...

It is clear that Paris at this time cannot occupy itself with the formulation and practical application of revolutionary ideas, that it must concentrate all its efforts and resources exclusively on defense. The entire population of besieged Paris must organize itself into a great army, disciplined by the common sense of danger and the necessities of defense — an immense city at war, determined to fight the enemy at every point... But an army does not discuss and theorize. It does not make revolution, it fights.

Paris, preoccupied with defense, will be absolutely unable to lead or organize the national revolutionary movement. If Paris were to make so ridiculous and absurd an attempt, it would kill all revolutionary activity. Moreover, the rest of France, the provinces and the communes, would be obliged, in the supreme interests of

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<sup>1</sup> Bakunin here points out that for fear of a mass insurrection, the government did not institute even the most elementary measures to halt the advance of the Prussian armies, and therewith begins his discussion of his practical revolutionary program.

national salvation, to disobey all orders issued by Paris and to resist all attempts to enforce them. The best and only thing that Paris can do, in order to save itself, is to proclaim and encourage the absolute autonomy and spontaneity of all the provincial movements, and should Paris forget or neglect to do so for any reason whatsoever, the provinces, in order to save France and Paris itself, will have to rebel and spontaneously organize themselves independent *of* Paris.

It is evident from all this that if France is to be saved, it will require spontaneous uprisings in all the provinces. Are such uprisings possible? Yes, if the workers in the great provincial cities — Lyons, Marseilles, Saint-Étienne, Rouen, and many others — have blood in their veins, brains in their heads, energy in their hearts, and if they are not doctrinaires but revolutionary socialists. Only the workers in the cities can now [spearhead the movement to] save France. Faced with mortal danger from within and without, France can be saved only by a spontaneous, uncompromising, passionate, anarchic, and destructive uprising *of* the masses *of* the people all over France.

I believe that the only two classes now capable of so mighty an insurrection are the workers and the peasants. Do not be surprised that I include the peasants. The peasants, like other Frenchmen, do wrong, not because they are by nature evil but because they are ignorant. Unspoiled by overindulgence and indolence, and only slightly affected by the pernicious influence of bourgeois society, the peasants still retain their native energy and simple unsophisticated folkways. It is true that the peasants, being petty landlords, are to a considerable extent egoistic and reactionary, but this has not affected their instinctive hatred of the “fine gentlemen” [country squires], and they hate the bourgeois landlords, who enjoy the bounty of the earth without cultivating it with their own hands. On the other hand, the peasant is intensely patriotic, i.e., he is passionately attached to his land, and I think that nothing would be easier than to turn him against the foreign invader.

It is clear that in order to win over the peasants to the side of the Revolution, it is necessary to use great prudence; for ideas and propaganda which are enthusiastically accepted by the city workers will have the opposite effect on the peasants. It is essential to talk to the peasants in simple language suitable to their sentiments, their level of understanding, and mindful of the nature of their prejudices, inculcated by the big landlords, the priests, and the state functionaries. Where the Emperor [Napoleon III] is loved, almost worshipped, by the peasants, one should not arouse antagonism by attacking him. It is necessary to undermine in fact and not in words the authority of the State and the Emperor, by undermining the establishment through which they wield their influence. To the greatest possible extent, the functionaries of the Emperor — the mayors, justices of the peace, priests, rural police, and similar officials, should be discredited.

It is necessary to tell the peasants that the Prussians must be ousted from France (which they probably know without being told) and that they must arm themselves and organize volunteer guerrilla units and attack the Prussians. But they must first follow the example set by the cities, which is to get rid of all the parasites and counter-revolutionary civil guards; turn the defense of the towns over to the armed people's militias; confiscate State and Church lands and the holdings of the big landowners for redistribution by the peasants; suspend all public and private debts... Moreover, before marching against the Prussians, the peasants, like the industrial city workers, should unite by federating the fighting battalions, district by district, thus assuring a common coordinated defense against internal and external enemies.

This, in my opinion, is the most effective way of dealing with the peasant problem; for while they are defending the land they are, at the same time, unconsciously but effectively destroying the state institutions rooted in the rural communes, and therefore making the Social Revolution...

I am not at all disturbed by the seeming Bonapartist sympathies of the French peasants. Such sympathies are merely a superficial manifestation of deep socialist sentiments, distorted by ignorance and the malevolent propaganda of the exploiters; a rash of measles, which will yield to the determined treatment of revolutionary socialism. The peasants will donate neither their land nor their money nor their lives just to keep Napoleon III on his throne; but they are willing to kill the rich and to take and give their property to the Emperor because they hate the rich in general. They harbor the thoroughgoing and intense socialistic hatred of laboring men against the men of leisure, the "upper crust." I recall a tragic incident, where the peasants in the commune of Dordogne burned a young aristocratic landowner. The quarrel began when a peasant said: "Ah! noble sir, you stay comfortably and peacefully at home because you are rich; you have money and we are going to send your wealth to the poor and use it for the war. Very well, let us go to your house, and see what we can find there!" In these few words we can see the living expression of the traditional rancor of the peasant against the rich landlord, but not by any means the fanatical desire to sacrifice themselves and kill for the Emperor; on the contrary, they naturally try to escape military service.

This is not the first time that a government has exploited for its own purposes the legitimate hatred of the peasants for the rich landholders and urban bourgeoisie. For example, at the end of the eighteenth century, Cardinal Ruffo, of bloody memory, incited an insurrection of the peasants of Calabria against the newly installed liberal republican government of Naples... The Calabrian peasants began by looting the castles [estates] and the city mansions of the wealthy bourgeois, but took nothing from the people. In 1846, the agents of Prince Metternich engineered an insurrection of the peasants of Galicia against the powerful Polish aristocrats and



landlords, who themselves were plotting a nationalistic insurrection; and before that, the Empress Catherine [the Great] of Russia encouraged the Ukrainian peasants to kill thousands of Polish nobles. Finally, in 1786, the Russian government organized a “jacquerie” [peasant revolt] in the Ukraine against the Polish patriots, most of them nobles.

You see, then, that the rulers, these official guardians of public order, property, and personal security, had no scruples about using these deceptive methods when it suited their purposes. The peasants are made revolutionary by necessity, by the intolerable realities of their lives; their violent hatreds, their *socialist passions* have been exploited, illegitimately diverted to support the reactionaries. And we, the revolutionary socialists, could we not direct these same passions toward their true end, to an objective in perfect harmony with the deep-seated needs that aroused these passions? I repeat, these instincts are profoundly socialist because they express the irrepressible conflict between the workers and the exploiters of labor, and the very essence of socialism, the real, natural inner core of all socialism, *lies there*. The rest, the different systems of economic and social organization, are only experimental, tentative, more or less scientific — and, unfortunately, often too doctrinaire — manifestations of this primitive and fundamental instinct of the people.

If we really want to be practical; if, tired of daydreaming, we want to promote the Revolution; we must rid ourselves of a number of dogmatic bourgeois prejudices which all too many city workers unfortunately echo. Because the city worker is more informed than the peasant, he often regards peasants as inferiors and talks to them like a bourgeois snob. But nothing enrages people more than mockery and contempt, and the peasant reacts to the city worker’s sneers with bitter hatred. This is most unfortunate, for this contempt and hatred divide the people into two antagonistic camps, each paralyzing and undermining the other. In fact, there is no real conflict of interests between these two camps; there is only an immense and tragic gulf which must be bridged at all costs.

The more sophisticated — and by that very circumstance, slightly bourgeois-tinged-socialism of the city workers, misunderstands, scorns, and mistrusts the vigorous, primitive peasant socialism, and tries to overshadow it. This lack of communication is responsible for the dense ignorance of urban socialism so prevalent among the peasants, who are unable to distinguish between this socialism and the bourgeois character of the cities. The peasants regard the city workers as contemptible lackeys of the bourgeoisie; this hatred renders the peasants blind tools of reaction.

Such is the fatal antagonism that has up till now paralyzed the revolutionary forces of France and of Europe. Everyone seriously concerned with the triumph of the Social Revolution must first strive to eliminate this antagonism. Since the estrangement between the two camps is due only to misunderstanding, one of

them must take the initiative to effect a reconciliation. The city workers must first ask themselves what they have against the peasants. What are their grievances?

There are three grievances. The *first* is that the peasants are ignorant, superstitious, and fanatically religious, and that they allow the priests to lead them by the nose. The *second* is that they are zealously devoted to their emperor. The *third* is that the peasants are obstinate supporters of individual property.

It is true that the peasants are extremely ignorant. But is this their fault? Has anyone tried to provide schools for them? Is this a reason for despising and mistreating them? If this were so, the bourgeois, who are far better educated than the industrial workers, would have the right to mistreat the workers; and we know many bourgeois who say just this, on the pretext that their superior education entitles them to dominate the city workers and that these workers are obliged to recognize their right to do so. The superiority of the workers over the bourgeoisie lies not in their education, which is slight, but in their human feelings and their realistic, highly developed conception of what is just. But do the peasants lack this feeling for justice? Look carefully: though they express it in many different ways, you will find that they are endowed with the same feeling for what is right. You will see that alongside their ignorance there is an innate common sense, an admirable skillfulness, and it is this capacity for honest labor which constitutes the dignity and the salvation of the proletariat.

The peasants, you say, are superstitious, fanatically religious, and controlled by their priests. Their superstition is due to their ignorance, artificially and systematically implanted by all the bourgeois governments. Besides, the peasants are not as superstitious and religious as you assume; only their wives are so. But are the wives of city workers actually more liberated from the superstitions and the doctrines of the Roman Catholic religion? As to the priests, their influence is by no means as great as is generally supposed. The peasants give lip service to the Church to avoid domestic bickering and only if their formal adherence in no way conflicts with their material interests. In spite of the frantic maledictions of the Church, the religious superstition of the peasants did not stop them in 1789 from buying church property that had been confiscated by the State. Whence we conclude that, to root out the influence of the priests in the rural areas, the revolution has only to do this one thing: place the material interests of the peasants in direct and intense opposition to the vital interests of the Church.

It always angers me to hear not only the revolutionary Jacobins but also the enlightened socialists of the school of Blanqui, and even some of our intimate friends, indirectly influenced by the Blanquists, advancing the completely *antirevolutionary* idea that it will be necessary in the future to decree the abolition of all religious cults and the violent expulsion of all priests. I feel this way because *I am above all an absolute enemy of revolution by decrees*, which derives from the idea of the *rev-*

*olutionary State, i.e., reaction disguised as revolution.* To the system of revolution by decree *I counterpose revolutionary action*, the only consistent, true, and effective program. The authoritarian system of decrees in trying to impose freedom and equality obliterate, both. *The anarchistic system of revolutionary deeds and action naturally and unfailingly evokes the emergence and flowering of freedom-and-equality, without any necessity whatever for institutionalised violence or authoritarianism.* The authoritarian system necessarily leads to the triumph of naked reaction. The second will erect the Revolution on natural and unshakeable foundations.

By way of illustration, we maintain that if the abolition of religious cults and the expulsion of the priests is decreed by law, even the least religious peasants will come to their defense, primarily because there is in men an inborn irresistible urge — the source of all freedom — to rebel against any arbitrary measure, even if imposed in the name of liberty. You can therefore be entirely certain that if the cities commit the colossal folly of decreeing the extermination of religious cults and the banishment of priests, the peasants will revolt en masse against the cities and become a terrible weapon in the hands of the reaction. But does this mean that the priests should be left in full possession of their power? By no means! They must be fought not because they are ministers of the Roman Catholic religion but because they are *agents of Prussia* [or the rich]. In the rural areas, as in the cities, no revolutionary authorities, not even the Revolutionary Committees of Public Safety, should attack the priests. *This must be done only by the people themselves: the workers in the cities and the peasants in the countryside must themselves take the offensive against the priests.* The revolutionary authorities can help them indirectly, by upholding their right to do so, ostensibly out of respect for freedom of conscience. Let us, at least to some extent, adopt the prudent tactics of our adversaries. See, for example, how every government supports freedom in words but is at the same time reactionary in deeds. Let the revolutionary authorities dispense with violent phrases; but while using as moderate a language as possible, let them at the same time act and make the revolution.

In all lands, authoritarian revolutionise have always behaved in a totally different manner. While they have most often been ultra-revolutionary in words, they have at the same time been very moderate, if not entirely reactionary, in deeds. It can even be said that *their bombastic language has, in most instances, been used as a mask to deceive the people, to hide the paucity of their ideas and the inconsistency of their acts.* There are men, many of them among the so-called revolutionary bourgeoisie, who by mouthing revolutionary slogans think that they are making the Revolution. Feeling that they have thus adequately fulfilled their revolutionary obligations, they now proceed to be careless in action and, in flagrant contradiction to principles, commit what are in effect wholly reactionary acts. We who are truly revolutionary must behave in an altogether different manner. Let us *talk less*

about revolution and *do* a great deal *more*. Let others concern themselves with the theoretical development of the principles of the Social Revolution, while we content ourselves with spreading these principles everywhere, *incarnating them into facts*.

My intimate friends and allies [members of the Alliance] will probably be surprised that I speak this way — I, who have been so concerned with the theory, who have at all times been a jealous and vigilant guardian of revolutionary principles. Ah! How times have changed! *Then*, not quite a year ago, we were only preparing for a revolution, which some expected sooner and others later; but now even the blind can tell that we are in the midst of a revolution. *Then*, it was absolutely necessary to stress theoretical principles, to expound these principles clearly and in all their purity, and thus to build a party which, though small in number, would be composed of sincere men, fully and passionately dedicated to these principles, so that in time of crisis each could count on the solidarity of all the others.

But it is now too late to concentrate on the enrolment of new men into such an organization. We have for better or worse built a small party: small, in the number of men who joined it with full knowledge of what we stand for; immense, if we take into account those who instinctively relate to us, if we take into account the popular masses, whose needs and aspirations we reflect more truly than does any other group. All of us must now embark on stormy revolutionary seas, and from this very moment we must spread our principles, not with words *but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda*. Let us say less about principles, whenever circumstances and revolutionary policy demand it — i.e., during our momentary weakness in relation to the enemy — but let us at all times and under all circumstances be adamantly consistent in our action. For in this lies the salvation of the revolution.

Throughout the world the authoritarian revolutionists have done very little to promote revolutionary activity, primarily because *they always wanted to make the Revolution by them selves, by their own authority and their own power*. This could not fail to severely constrict the scope of revolutionary action because it is impossible, even for the most energetic and enterprising authoritarian revolutionary, to understand and deal effectively with all the manifold problems generated by the Revolution. For every dictatorship, be it exercised by an individual or collectively by relatively few individuals, is necessarily very circumscribed, very shortsighted, and its limited perception cannot, therefore, penetrate the depth and encompass the whole complex range of popular life; just as it is impossible for even the most gigantic vessel to contain the depths and vastness of the ocean. ...

What should the revolutionary authorities — and there should be as few of them as possible — do to organize and spread the Revolution? They must promote the Revolution not by issuing decrees but by stirring the masses to action. They

must under no circumstances foist any artificial organization whatsoever upon the masses. On the contrary, they should foster the self-organization of the masses into autonomous bodies, federated from the bottom upward. This could be done by winning the cooperation of the most influential, the most intelligent, and the most dedicated individuals in each locality, to ensure that these organizations, as far as possible, conform to our principles. Therein lies the secret of our triumph.

Who can doubt that the Revolution will be faced with many difficult problems? Do you think that a revolution is child's play, that it will not have to overcome innumerable obstacles? The revolutionary socialists of our day should not follow the pattern set by the revolutionary Jacobins of 1793. Very few, if any, of their tactics are worth imitating. Revolutionary routine would ruin them. They must create everything anew and base their policies and activities on living experiences.

As I have already said, I am not at all alarmed by the platonic attachment of the peasants to the Emperor [Napoleon III]. This attachment is merely a negative expression of their hatred for the landed gentry and the bourgeois of the cities; it need not seriously hinder the development of the Social Revolution.

The last principal grievance of the city proletariat against the peasants concerns their avarice, their unbridled egoism, and their fanatical commitment to the individual ownership of land. Workers who reprimand the peasants for all these faults should first reflect and ask themselves: who is not an egoist? Who in present society is not avaricious, in the sense that he holds on passionately to the little property that he has been able to scrape together, so that he and his loved ones shall not die of hunger and privation in the economic jungle of this merciless society? It is true that the peasants are not communists. They hate and fear those who would abolish private property, because they have something to lose — at least, in their imagination, and imagination is a very potent factor, though generally underestimated today. The vast majority of the city workers, owning no property, are immeasurably more inclined towards communism than are the peasants. Nothing is more natural; the communism of the one is just as natural as the individualism of the other, but this is no reason to praise the workers for their communist inclinations, nor to reproach the peasants for their individualism. The ideas and the passions of both are conditioned by their different environments. Besides, are all the city workers communists?

There is no point in extolling or denigrating the peasants. *It is a question of establishing a program of action which will overcome the individualism and conservatism of the peasants, and not only prevent their individualism from propelling them into the camp of the reaction but enable that individualism to serve and ensure the triumph of the Revolution.*

Remember, my dear friends, and repeat to yourselves a hundred, a thousand times a day that the triumph or defeat of the Revolution depends on the establishment of this program of action.

You will agree with me that it is already too late to convert the peasants by theoretical propaganda. There remains then, apart from what I have already suggested, this one tactic: *terrorism of the cities against the countryside*. This is the method par excellence advocated by our dear friends, the workers of the great cities of France, who do not realize that this revolutionary — I was about to say reactionary — tactic was taken from the arsenal of revolutionary Jacobinism, and that if they ever have the misfortune of using it, they will destroy not only themselves but, what is far worse, the Revolution itself. For what would be the inevitable and fatal consequence of such a policy? The whole rural population, ten million strong, would go over to the other side of the barricades, and these innumerable and invincible masses would reinforce the armies of the reaction.

Viewed from this as well as other angles, I regard the Prussian invasion as a piece of good fortune for France and for world revolution. If this invasion had not taken place, and if the revolution in France had been made without it, the French socialists themselves would have attempted once again — and this time on their own account — to stage a state revolution [putsch, coup d'état]. This would be absolutely illogical, it would be fatal for socialism; but they certainly would have tried to do it, so deeply have they been influenced by the principles of Jacobinism. Consequently, among other measures of public safety decreed by a convention of delegates from the cities, they would no doubt try to *impose* communism or collectivism on the peasants. This would spark an armed rebellion, which would be obliged to depend upon an immense, well-disciplined, and well-organized army. As a result, the socialist rulers would not only give another army of rebellious peasants to the reaction, they would also beget the formation of a reactionary militarist caste of power-hungry generals within their own ranks. Thus replenished, the machinery of the State would soon have to have a leader, a dictator, an emperor, to direct this machine. All this would be inevitable, for it springs not from the caprice of an individual but from the logic of the situation, a logic that never errs.

Fortunately, events themselves will now force the urban workers to open their eyes and reject this fatal procedure copied from the Jacobins. Under the prevailing circumstances, only madmen would even dream of unleashing a reign of terror against the countryside. If the countryside should rise up against the cities, the cities, and France with them, would be lost. This is understood by the working masses of Lyons, Marseilles, and other great cities of France; indeed, it partly accounts for their incredible and shameful apathy in this terrible crisis, when only the combined efforts of all the inhabitants of France can save the country and, with

it, French socialism.<sup>2</sup> The French workers have lost their Latin impetuosity. As of now, they have patiently tolerated their sufferings. Furthermore, their ideals, their hopes, their principles, their political and social imaginations, their practical plans and projects — which they dreamed of putting into effect in the near future — all this came more from books, from current theories ceaselessly discussed, than from their own spontaneous thoughts derived from their concrete living experience. They have viewed the facts of their daily life in abstract terms, and have lost the faculty of drawing inspiration and ideas from the real situations they confront. Their ideas are based upon a particular theory, traditionally and uncritically accepted, with full confidence in its validity. And this theory aims at nothing other than the political system of the Jacobins, somewhat modified to suit the revolutionary socialists. This theory of revolution is now completely bankrupt, since its base, the power of the State, has collapsed. Under these circumstances the use of terroristic methods against the peasants, as advocated by the Jacobins, is absolutely out of question. And the workers of France, knowing of no other alternative, are disoriented and confused. They say, not without reason, that it is impossible to unleash a legal, official reign of terror and institute draconic measures against the peasants; that it is impossible to establish a revolutionary state, a central committee of public salvation for all France, at a moment when the foreign invader is not at the frontier, as in 1792, but in the very heart of France, a few steps from Paris. Seeing the collapse of the whole official apparatus, they rightly feel that it would be hopeless to create another one. And these revolutionists, unable to understand how the salvation of France is possible without the State, these champions of the people, having not even the slightest conception of the tremendous dynamic power of what statisticians of all colors from white to red scornfully call “anarchy,” fold their arms and exclaim: “We are lost, France is doomed.”

But my dear friends, we are not lost. *France can be saved by anarchy.*

Let loose this mass anarchy in the countryside as well as in the cities, aggravate it until it swells like a furious avalanche destroying and devouring everything in its path, both internal enemies and Prussians. This is a bold and desperate measure, I know. But it is the only feasible alternative. Without it, there is no salvation for France. All the ordinary means having failed, there is left only the primitive ferocious energy of the French people who must now choose between the slavery of bourgeois civilization and the political and primitive ferocity of the proletariat.

I have never believed that the workers in the cities, even under the most favorable conditions, will ever be able to impose communism or collectivism on the peasants; and I have never believed in this method of bringing about socialism,

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<sup>2</sup> Another possible reason for the apathy is that Marseilles, Lyons, and the other cities referred to were not invaded by the Prussians, who stopped short at Paris, where the peace was concluded.

because I abhor every imposed system and because I am a sincere and passionate lover of freedom. This false idea and this ill-conceived hope are destructive of liberty and constitute the fundamental fallacy of authoritarian communism. For the imposition of violence, systematically organized, leads to the restitution of the principle of authority and makes necessary the State and its privileged ranks. Collectivism could be imposed only on slaves, and this kind of collectivism would then be the negation of humanity. In a free community, collectivism can come about only through the pressure of circumstances, not by imposition from above but by a free spontaneous movement from below, and only when the conditions of privileged [state-supported or subsidized] individualism, the politics of the State, criminal and civil codes, the juridical family, and the law of inheritance will have been swept away by the revolution...

What are the principal grievances of the peasants, the main causes of their sullen and deep hatred of the city? They are:

1. The peasants feel that they are despised by the city workers.
2. The peasants imagine, not without many and good reasons, and many historical examples to support their view, *that the cities want to exploit them and force them to accept a political system that they abhor.*
3. In addition, the peasants think that the city workers favor the collectivization of property and fear that the socialists will confiscate their lands, which they love above all else.

What should the city workers do to overcome the distrust and animosity of the peasants? They must first of all abandon their contemptuous attitude. This is absolutely necessary for the salvation of the Revolution and for the workers themselves, for the peasants' hatred constitutes an immense danger. If it were not for this distrust and hatred, the Revolution would have succeeded long ago, for it is the animosity between the city and the land which in all countries sustains the reaction and is its main base of support. City workers must overcome their anti-peasant prejudices not only in the interests of the Revolution, or for strategic reasons, but as an act of elementary justice. There is no justification for these prejudices. The peasants are not parasites; they too are hard workers, except that they toil under different conditions. The city workers who are exploited by bourgeois masters should realize that the peasants, who are also exploited, are their brothers...

Bear this in mind. The peasant hates all governments and obeys the laws only because it is prudent to do so. He pays his taxes regularly and tolerates the conscription of his sons into the army only because he sees no alternative. And he is averse to change, because he thinks that new governments, regardless of their



forms and programs, will be no better than their predecessors, and because he wants to avoid the risks and expenses involved in what may very well be a useless or even more harmful change.

The peasant will make common cause with the city workers only when he is sure that the city workers are not going to foist their political and social system upon him, allegedly for his benefit. He will become an ally as soon as he is convinced that the industrial workers will not force his land to be surrendered [to the State]...

And when the workers, abandoning the pretentious scholastic vocabulary of doctrinaire socialism, themselves inspired with revolutionary fervor, come to the peasants and explain in simple language, without evasions and fancy phrases, what they want; when they come to the country villages, not as conceited preceptors and instructors but as brothers and equals, trying to spread the Revolution but not imposing it on the land workers; when they burn all the official documents, judgments, court orders, and titles to property, and abolish rents, private debts, mortgages, criminal and civil law books, etc... . When this mountain of useless old papers symbolizing the poverty and enslavement of the proletariat goes up in flames — then, you can be sure, the peasants will understand and join their fellow revolutionists, the city workers.

What gives the urban workers the right to impose their preferred form of government or economic system on the peasants? They claim that the Revolution gives them that right. But revolution is no longer revolution when it becomes despotic, and when instead of promoting freedom, it begets reaction.

The immediate if not the ultimate goal of the Revolution is the extirpation of the principle of authority in all its possible manifestation; this aim requires the abolition and, if necessary, the violent destruction of the State, because the State, as Proudhon demonstrated so well, is the younger brother of the Church, it is the historical consecration of all despotism and all privilege, the political reason for all economic and social servitude, the very essence and center of all reaction. Whoever in the name of the Revolution wants to establish a State — even a provisional State — establishes reaction and works for despotism, not freedom; for privilege, not for equality...

Where did the French socialists get the preposterous, arrogant, and unjust idea that they have the right to flout the will of ten million peasants and impose their political and social system upon them? What is the theoretical justification for this fictitious right? This alleged right, in fact, is another bourgeois gift, a political inheritance from bourgeois revolutionism. And it is based on the alleged or real superiority of intelligence and education, i.e., the supposed superiority of urban over rural civilization. But you should realize that this principle can easily be invoked to justify every conquest, and consecrate all oppression. The bourgeoisie have always used this principle to prove that it is their exclusive mission and their

exclusive right to govern (or what adds up to the same thing), to exploit all the workers. In conflicts between nations as well as between classes, this fatal principle sanctions all invasive authority. Did not the Germans repeatedly invoke this principle to excuse their onslaughts against the liberty and independence of the Slavic and other peoples and to legitimize their violent and imposed Germanization? Was it not their claim that such subjugation is the triumph of civilization over barbarism?

Beware! The Germans are already saying that German Protestant civilization is far superior to the Catholic civilization of the Latin peoples in general and to French civilization in particular. Take heed! The Germans may soon feel morally obliged to civilize you, just as you are now telling us that you are duty-bound to civilize and forcefully emancipate your countrymen, your brothers, the French peasants. To me, both claims are equally odious, and I openly declare that in relations between nations as in relations between classes, I will always be on the side of those whom you intend to civilize by these tyrannical methods. I will join them in rebellion against all such arrogant civilizers, be they workers or Germans; and in so doing, I will be serving the Revolution against the reaction.

This being the case, I will then be asked, Must we then abandon the ignorant and superstitious peasants to the reaction? By no means!! Reaction must be uprooted in the country as well as in the rural areas. I will then be told: In order to do this, it is not enough to say we want to destroy the reaction; it must be eliminated, and this can be accomplished only by decrees. Again I say, *by no means!!* On the contrary, and all history proves it, decrees, like all authority in general, abolish nothing; they only perpetuate that which they were supposed to destroy.

What, then, should be done? Since the revolution cannot be *imposed* upon the rural areas, *it must be germinated within the agricultural communities, by stirring up a revolutionary movement of the peasants themselves, inciting them to destroy, by direct action, every political, judicial, civil, and military institution, and to establish and organize anarchy through the whole countryside.*

This can be done in only one way, by speaking to the peasants in a manner which *will impel them in the direction of their own interests*. They love the land? Let them take the land and throw out those landlords who live by the labor of others!! They do not like paying mortgages, taxes, rents, and private debts? Let them stop paying!! And lastly, they hate conscription? Don't force them to join the army!!

And who will fight the Prussians? You need not worry about that. Once the peasants are aroused and actually see the advantages of the Revolution, they will voluntarily give more money and more men to defend the Revolution than it would be possible to extract from them by compulsory official measures. The peasants will, as they did in 1792, again repel the Prussian invaders. It is necessary only

that they have the opportunity to raise hell, and only the anarchist revolution can inspire them to do it.

But will not the institution of private property be even more firmly entrenched when the peasants divide up the land expropriated from the bourgeoisie? No, for with the abolition of the State and all its juridical institutions, together with the legal family and the law of inheritance — all of which will be swept away in the maelstrom of the anarchist revolution — property will no longer be protected and sanctioned by the State. There will be neither political nor juridical rights; there will be only established revolutionary facts.

You will ask, Since private landed property will no longer be protected by the State or any other external power and will be defended only by each owner himself, will not every man grab what he can from the other and the strong rob the weak? Furthermore, what will stop the weak from uniting to plunder the other landholder? “There is no way out of this,” you will exclaim. “This means civil war!”

*Yes, there will be civil war.* But why be so afraid of civil war? Bearing in mind historical evidence, I ask, have great ideas, great personalities, and great nations emerged from civil war or from a social order imposed by some tutelary government? Having been spared civil war for over twenty years, haven't you, a great nation, now fallen so low that the Prussians could devour you in one gulp?

Civil war, so destructive to the power of states, is, on the contrary, and because of this very fact, always favorable to the awakening of popular initiative and to the intellectual, moral, and even the material interests of the populace. And for this very simple reason: civil war upsets and shakes the masses out of their sheepish state, a condition very dear to all governments, a condition which turns peoples into herds to be utilized and shorn at the whims of their shepherds. Civil war breaks through the brutalizing monotony of men's daily existence, and arrests that mechanistic routine which robs them of creative thought...

Do you wish to see ten million peasants united against you in a single, solid, and unanimous mass, incensed by the hatred which your decrees and revolutionary violence has aroused? Or would you prefer a cleavage, a division in their ranks, to be opened by the anarchist revolution; one which will enable you to exert influence and build a powerful base of support among the peasants? Do you not realize that the peasants are backward, precisely because they have not been shaken out of their torpor by a civil war which would have aroused strife in the stagnant rural villages? Compact masses are human herds, little susceptible to the developing influence of ideas and propaganda. Civil war, on the contrary, creates diversity of ideas, interests, and aspirations, The peasants lack neither humanitarian feeling nor innate hatred of injustice; what they lack is revolutionary spirit and determination. The civil war will give them this spirit.

The civil war will make the whole countryside receptive to your revolutionary socialist propaganda. You will have created, I repeat, what you have never yet had — a party which, on a grand scale, can organize true socialism, a collective society, animated by the most complete freedom. You will organize it from below upward *by encouraging the spontaneous action of the peasants* themselves in accord with these precepts.

Do not fear that the civil war, i.e., anarchy, will devastate the countryside. There is in every human society a strong instinct of self-preservation, a powerful collective inertia which safeguards it from self-annihilation, and it is precisely this inertia which accounts for the slow and difficult progress of the Revolution. Under the deadening weight of the State, European Society, in the countryside as well as in the cities (though more so in the countryside), has today lost all its vigor, all spontaneity of thought and action, and if this situation continues for a few more decades, European society may wither away...

Do not fear that the peasants will slaughter each other unless restrained by public authority and respect for criminal and civil law. They might start off in this direction, but they will quickly realize that it is economically and physically impossible to persist in doing so. They will then stop fighting each other, come to an understanding, and form some kind of organization to avoid future strife and to further their mutual interests. The overriding need to feed themselves and their families (and therefore to resume cultivation of their land), the necessity to defend their homes, their families, and their own lives against unforeseen attack — all these considerations will undoubtedly soon compel them to contract new and mutually suitable arrangements.

And do not think, because these arrangements will be made by the pressure of circumstances and not by official decrees, that the richest peasants will therefore exercise an excessive influence. For, no longer protected by the law, the influence of the great landowners will be undermined. They are powerful only because they are protected by the State, and once the State is abolished their power will also disappear. As to more astute and relatively affluent peasants, their power will be successfully annulled by the great mass of small and poorer peasants and, as well, by the landless agricultural laborers. This group, an enslaved mass forced to suffer in silence, will be regenerated and made potent by revolutionary anarchy.

In short, I do not say that the peasants, freely reorganized from the bottom up, will miraculously create an ideal organization, conforming in all respects to our dreams. But I am convinced that what they construct will be living and vibrant, a thousand times better and more just than any existing organization. Moreover, this peasant organization, being on the one hand open to the revolutionary propaganda of the cities, and on the other, not petrified by the intervention of the

State — for there will be no State — will develop and perfect itself through free experimentation as fully as one can reasonably expect in our times.

With the abolition of the State, the spontaneous self-organization of popular life, for centuries paralyzed and absorbed by the omnipotent power of the State, will revert to the communes. The development of each commune will take as its point of departure the actual condition of its civilization. And since the diversity between levels of civilization [culture, technology] in different communes of France, as in the rest of Europe, is very great, there will first be civil war between the communes themselves, inevitably followed by mutual agreement and equilibrium between them. But in the meantime, will not the internal struggle within the communes and between the communes themselves paralyze French resistance, thus surrendering France to the Prussians?

By no means. History shows that nations never feel so self-confident and powerful in their foreign relations as when they are racked and deeply divided internally; and that, on the contrary, nations are never so weak as when they are apparently united under a seemingly invincible authority.

To convince yourself of this, you have but to compare two historical periods: the first, a France tempered and invigorated from the internal wars of the Fronde, under the young King Louis XIV; the second, a France in the King's old age, with the monarchy entrenched, pacified and unified by this great French leader. Contrast the first France, flushed with victories, with the second France marching from defeat to defeat, marching to her ruin. Compare also the France of 1792 with the France of today [1870]. The France of 1792–1793 was torn apart by civil war, the whole Republic locked in mortal combat, fighting furiously to survive. And in spite of this civil strife France victoriously repelled an invasion by almost every European power. But in 1870, France, unified and pacified under the Empire, finds itself battered by the Prussian armies and so demoralized that its very existence is imperiled... . The inhuman, lustful compulsion to become the greatest and mightiest nation in the world is comparable to the frantic, superhuman exertions of a delirious patient, who rallies all his temporary energy, only to fall back again, utterly exhausted...

## **The Revolutionary Temper and Its Matrix**

France can no longer be resuscitated, galvanized into action by vain dreams of national greatness and glory. All this is already a thing of the past. The government of Napoleon III, undermined by internal degeneration, corruption, and intrigue, has disintegrated under the blows of the Prussians...

Except in England and Scotland where there are, strictly speaking, no peasants, or in Ireland, Italy, and Spain, where the peasants because of their utter poverty are spontaneously inclined to be socialistic and revolutionary, the petty peasant proprietors of Western Europe — particularly in France and Germany — are semi-satisfied. They cherish their property and feel that they must defend their imaginary advantages against the attacks of the Social Revolution; and although they have no real benefits, they still cling to the illusion of ownership, to their vain dreams of wealth. In addition to these drawbacks, the peasants are systematically kept in a condition of brutish ignorance by their churches and governments. The peasants now constitute the principal, almost the only, base for the security and power of states. Because of this, their governments carefully and consistently nurture their prejudices, implant Christian faith and loyalty to authority, and incite hatred against the progressive nonconformist elements in the cities. In spite of all these obstacles, the peasants, as I have already explained, can eventually be won over to the side of the Social Revolution. To accomplish this, the initiative must be taken by the revolutionary city proletarians, for they are the only ones who today embody the aroused idea and spirit, the understanding and the conscious will to make the Social Revolution. Hence the greatest threat to the existence of states is now concentrated solely in the city proletariat...

It is of course obvious that if this war ends in a disastrous and shameful defeat for France, the workers will be immeasurably more dissatisfied than they are at present. But does this mean that they would be disposed to become more revolutionary? And even if this were so, would the revolutionary struggle be any less difficult than it is today?

My answer is an unhesitating no, for the following reason: the revolutionary temper of the working masses does not depend solely on the extent of their misery and discontent, but also on their faith in the justice and the triumph of their cause. The working masses, from the dawn of history through our own times, have been poverty-stricken and discontented. For all political societies, all states, republics as well as monarchies, have been based on the open or thinly disguised misery and forced labor of the proletariat... . But this discontent rarely produces revolutions. Even peoples reduced to the utmost poverty, despite their tribulations, fail to show signs of stirring. Why don't they revolt? Is it because they are satisfied with their lot? Of course not. They do not revolt because they have no adequate perception of their rights nor any confidence in their own powers; and lacking both, they became helpless and endured slavery for centuries. How can these revolutionary qualities be acquired by the masses? The educated individual becomes aware of his rights both by theoretical reasoning and the practical experience of life. The first condition, i.e., the ability to think abstractly, has not yet been attained by the masses... . How can the working masses acquire any knowledge of their rights? Only through

their great historical experiences, through this great tradition, unfolded over the centuries and transmitted from generation to generation, continually augmented and enriched by new sufferings and new injustices, finally permeating and enlightening the great proletarian masses. As long as a people have not yet sunk into a state of hopeless decadence, its progress is always due to this great beneficent tradition, to this unequalled teacher of the masses... . But peoples in different historical epochs do not progress at a steady or equal pace. On the contrary, the rate of progress fluctuates, being sometimes rapid, deep, and far — reaching; at other times it is barely perceptible, or else it grinds to a halt and seems even to take a backward course, how can this phenomenon be explained?

It can be ascribed to the kind of events which shape each historical period. There are events that energize people and propel them in a forward direction. Other events have a discouraging, depressing effect on the morale and general attitude of the masses, distorting their sense of judgment, perverting their minds, and leading them in self — destructive directions. In studying general historical patterns in the development of peoples, one can detect two contrasting movements comparable to the ebb and flow of the oceanic tides.

In certain epochs, events occur which herald the coming of great historical changes, of great expectations and triumphs for humanity. At these points everything seems to move at a quickened pace. All air of vigor and power seems to pervade the social atmosphere; minds, hearts, and wills coalesce into one mighty upsurge as humanity marches toward the conquest of new horizons. It is as though an electric current were galvanizing the whole society, uniting the feelings of temperamentally different individuals into one common sentiment, forging totally different minds and wills into one. At such times the individual is brimful of confidence and courage because his feelings are reciprocated and heightened by the emotions of his fellowmen. Citing but a few examples from modern history, such was the period at the end of the eighteenth century, the eve of the French Revolution. So also, but to a considerably lesser extent, were the years preceding the revolution of 1848. And such, I believe, is the character of our present era, which may be the prelude to events which will perhaps outshine the glorious days of 1789 and 1793...

But there are also somber, disheartening, disastrous epochs, when everything reeks of decadence, exhaustion, and death, presaging the exhaustion of public and private conscience. These are the ebb tides following historic catastrophes. Such was the time of the First Empire and the restoration of Napoleon 1. Such were the twenty or thirty years following the catastrophe of June 1848, Such would be the twenty or thirty years following the conquest of France by the armies of Prussian despotism...

Under such conditions, a handful of workers may remain revolutionary, but they will lack enthusiasm and confidence; for confidence is possible only when the sen-

timents of an individual find an echo, a support in the wholehearted revolutionary spirit and will of the populace... But the populace will be completely disorganized, demoralized, and crushed by the reaction... All the workers' associations, in and out of the factories and workshops, will be suppressed. There will be no discussion groups, no cooperative educational circles, no way to revive the collective will of the workers... Each worker will be intellectually and morally isolated, condemned to impotence.

To make sure that the workers will not reorganize themselves, the government will arrest and deport several hundred, or perhaps several thousand, of the most intelligent, militant, and dedicated workers to Devil's Island [the former French penal colony]. With the working masses facing so deplorable a situation, it will be a long time before they are capable of making the Revolution!

Even if, despite this most unfavorable situation, and impelled by that French heroism which refuses to accept defeat, and driven even more by desperation, the French workers revolt, they are likely to be taught a lesson by the most deadly of modern weapons. Against this dreadful "persuasion," neither intelligence nor the collective will can avail the workers, driven to resistance by suicidal desperation alone, a resistance likely to leave them infinitely worse off than ever.

And then? French socialism will no longer be able to take its place in the vanguard of the European revolutionary movement, fighting for the emancipation of the proletariat. The new government may, for reasons of its own, grudgingly tolerate a few remaining socialist periodicals and writers in France. But neither the writers, nor the philosophers, nor their books are enough to build a living, powerful, socialist movement. Such a movement can be made a reality only by the awakened revolutionary consciousness, the collective will, and the organization of the working masses themselves. Without this, the best books in the world are nothing but theories spun in empty space, impotent dreams.

## **A Critique of the German Social Democratic Program**

Let us examine the situation in countries outside France where the socialist movement has become a real power... The German Social-Democratic Workers party (S.D.W.P.) and the General Association of German Workers (G.A.G.W.), founded by Ferdinand Lassalle, are both socialist in the sense that they want to alter the relations between capital and labor in a socialist manner [abolish capitalism]. The Lassalleans as well as the Eisenach party [named after the congress held in Eisenach, August 7–9, 1869] agree fully that in order to effect this change, it will be absolutely necessary *first to reform the State*, and if this cannot be done by



widespread propaganda and a legal peaceful labor movement, then the State will have to be reformed by force, i.e., by a political revolution.

*All the German socialists believe that the political revolution must precede the Social Revolution.* This is a fatal error. For any revolution made *before* a social revolution will necessarily be a bourgeois revolution — which can lead only to bourgeois socialism — a new, more efficient, more cleverly concealed form of the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup>

This false principle — the idea that a political revolution must precede a social revolution — is, in effect, an open invitation to all the German bourgeois liberal politicians to infiltrate the S.D.W.P. And this party was on many occasions pressured by its leaders — not by the radical-minded rank and file members — to fraternize with the bourgeois democrats of the *Volkspartei* (People's Party), an opportunist party concerned only with politics and virulently opposed to the principles of socialism. This hostility was amply demonstrated by the vicious attacks of its patriotic orators and official journals against the revolutionary socialists of Vienna.

These onslaughts against revolutionary socialism aroused the indignation and opposition of almost all the Germans and seriously embarrassed Liebknecht and the other leaders of the S.D.W.P. They wanted to calm the workers and thus stay in control of the German labor movement and, at the same time, remain on friendly terms with the leaders of the bourgeois democrats of the *Volkspartei*, who soon realized that they had made a serious tactical error by antagonizing the German labor movement without whose support they could not hope to attain political power.

In this respect the *Volkspartei* followed the tradition of the bourgeoisie never to make a revolution by themselves. Their tactics, however ingeniously applied, are always based on this principle: to enlist the powerful help of the people in making a political revolution but to reap the benefit for themselves. It was this sort of consideration which induced the *Volkspartei* to reverse its antisocialist stand and proclaim that it too, is now a socialist party... After a year of negotiations, the top leaders of the workers' and the bourgeois parties adopted the famous Eisenach Program and formed a single party, retaining the name S.D.W.P. This program is really a strange hybrid of the revolutionary program of the International Workingmen's Association (the International) and the well-known opportunistic program of the bourgeois democracy...

Article 1 of the program is in fact contradictory to the fundamental policy and spirit of the International. The S.D.W.P. wants to institute *a free People's State*. But

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<sup>3</sup> By "bourgeois socialism", Bakunin as well as Marx meant a partnership between capital and labor, the "public" and the State. — It was introduced in Germany by Bismarck and advocated in our times by right-wing democratic socialists, "enlightened capitalists." and liberals in general.

the words *free* and *People's* are annulled and rendered meaningless by the word *State*; the name International implies the negation of the State. Are the framers of the program talking about an international or universal state, or do they intend to set up only a state embracing all the countries of Western Europe — England, France, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Holland, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, and the Slavic nations subjected to Austria? No. Their political stomachs cannot digest so many countries at one time. With a passion they do not even attempt to conceal, the social democrats proclaim that they want to erect the great pan-Germanic fatherland. And this is why the only aim of the S.D.W.P., the construction of an all-German state, is the very first article of their program. They are above all German patriots.

Instead of dedicating themselves to the creation of the all-German State, the German workers should join their exploited brothers of the entire world in defense of their mutual economic and social interests; the labor movement of each country must be based solely on the principle of international solidarity... If, in case of conflict between two states, the workers would act in accordance with Article 1 of the social-democratic program, they would, against their better inclinations, be joining *their own bourgeoisie* against their fellow workers in a foreign country. They would thereby sacrifice the international solidarity of the workers to the national patriotism of the State. This is exactly what the German workers are now doing in the Franco-Prussian War. As long as the German workers seek to set up a national state — even the freest People's State — they will inevitably and utterly sacrifice the freedom of the people to the glory of the State, socialism to politics, justice and international brotherhood to patriotism. It is impossible to go in two different directions at the same time. Socialism and social revolution involve the destruction of the State: — consequently, those who want a state must sacrifice the economic emancipation of the masses to the political monopoly of a privileged party.

The S.D.W.P. would sacrifice the economic, and with it, the political emancipation of the proletariat — or more correctly said, *its emancipation from politics and the State* — to the triumph of bourgeois democracy. This follows plainly from the second and third articles of the social-democratic program. The first three clauses of Article 2 conform in every respect to the socialist principles of the International: the abolition of capitalism; full political and social equality; every worker to receive the full product of his labor. But the fourth clause, by declaring that political emancipation is the *preliminary* condition for the economic emancipation of the working class, that the solution of the social question is possible only in a democratic state, nullifies these principles and makes it impossible to put them into practice. The fourth clause amounts to saying:

“Workers, you are slaves, victims of capitalist society. Do you want to free yourself from this economic straitjacket? Of course you do, and you are absolutely

right. But to attain your just demands, *you must first help us make the political revolution. Afterwards, we will help you make the Social Revolution.* Let us first, with your strength, erect the democratic State, a good democratic State, as in Switzerland: and then we promise to give you the same benefits that the Swiss workers now enjoy... . (Witness the strikes in Basel and Geneva, ruthlessly suppressed by the bourgeoisie.)

To convince yourself that this incredible delusion accurately reflects the tendencies and spirit of German social democracy, you have but to examine Article 3, which lists all the immediate and proximate goals to be advanced in the party's legal and peaceful propaganda and election campaigns. These demands merely duplicate the familiar program of the bourgeois democrats: universal suffrage with direct legislation by the people; abolition of all political privileges; replacement of the permanent standing army by the volunteers' and citizens' militias; separation of Church from State, and the schools from the Church; free and compulsory elementary education; freedom of the press, assembly, and association; and replacement of all indirect taxation by a single, direct, and progressively higher income tax based on earnings.

Does not this program prove that the social democrats — are interested in the exclusively political reform of the institutions and laws of the State, and that for them socialism is but an empty dream, which may at best be realized in the distant future?

Were it not for the fact that the true aspirations and radical sentiments of its members, the German workers, go much further than this program, would we not be justified in saying that the S.D.W.P. was created for the sole purpose of using the working masses as the unconscious tool to promote the political ambitions of the German bourgeois democrats?

There are only two planks in this program which free-enterprise capitalists will dislike. The first appears in the latter half of clause 8, Article 3; it demands *establishment of a normal working day* (limitation of hours), *abolition of child labor, and limitation of women's work*; measures which make the free enterprisers shudder. As passionate lovers of all freedom which they can use to their advantage, they demand the unlimited right to exploit the proletariat and bitterly resent state interference. However, the poor capitalists have fallen upon evil days. They have been forced to accept state intervention even in England, which is by no stretch of the imagination a socialist society.

The other plank — clause 10, Article 3 — is even more important and socialistic. It demands state help, protection, and credit for workers' cooperatives, particularly producers' cooperatives, with all necessary guarantees, i.e., freedom to expand. Free enterprise is not afraid of successful competition from workers' cooperatives because the capitalists know that workers, with their meager incomes,

will never by themselves be able to accumulate enough capital to match the immense resources of the employing class ... but the tables will be turned when the workers' cooperatives, backed by the power and well-nigh unlimited credit of the State, begin to fight and gradually absorb both private and corporate capital (industrial and commercial). For the capitalist will in fact be competing with the State, and the State is, of course, the most powerful of all capitalists.<sup>4</sup>

Labor employed by the State — such is the fundamental principle of authoritarian communism, of state socialism. The State, having become the sole proprietor — at the end of a period of transition necessary for allowing society to pass, without too great dislocation, from the present organization of bourgeois privilege to the future organization of official equality for all — the State will then become the only banker, capitalist, organizer, and director of all national labor, and the distributor of all its products. Such is the ideal the fundamental principle of modern communism.

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<sup>4</sup> It will be seen from the context of the next paragraph that Bakunin regards state subsidy of workers' cooperatives as part of the transition from capitalism to state socialism.

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Michail Bakunin  
Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis  
1870

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Source: Bakunin on Anarchy, translated and edited by Sam Dolgoff, 1971

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