“The passion for destruction is a creative passion,” wrote the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin in 1842. Since then, the popular image of anarchism has been one of violence and terror. But this picture is wildly misleading, and the media has done more to obscure anarchism than to explain it. Focusing on the street fighting and confrontations with police, mainstream commentators are unable to understand what anarchism is or why a philosophy with roots in the nineteenth century has resurfaced with such power at the dawn of the new millennium. To understand anarchism, it is necessary to go beyond the caricature presented by the media. In this new biography of Mikhail Bakunin, Mark Leier traces the life and ideas of anarchism’s first major thinker, and in the process revealing the origins of the movement.

There was little in Bakunin’s background to suggest that he would grow up to be anything other than a loyal subject of the Russian Empire. Instead, he became one the most notorious radicals of the nineteenth century, devoting his life to the destruction of the tsar and feudalism, capitalism, the state, even God. In the process, he became a historical actor and political thinker whose ideas continue to influence world events.

Bakunin is of keen interest these days, though the attention paid to his image continues to obscure the man and his ideas. Using archival sources and the most recent scholarship, Leier corrects many of the popular misconceptions about Bakunin and his ideas, offering a fresh interpretation of Bakunin’s life and thoughts of use to those interested in understanding anarchism and social change. Arguing for the relevance and importance of anarchism to our present world, Leier sheds light on the nineteenth century, as well as on today’s headlines, as he examines a political philosophy that has inspired mass movements and contemporary social critics.
Mark Leier shows that the “passion for destruction” is a call to build a new world free of oppression, not a cult of violence. He argues that anarchism is a philosophy of morality and solidarity, based not on wishful thinking or naïve beliefs about the goodness of humanity but on a practical, radical critique of wealth and power. By studying Bakunin, we can learn a great deal about our own time and begin to recover a world of possibility and promise. It is often said that we are all anarchists at heart. This book explains why.

Mark Leier teaches at Simon Fraser University, where he is the director of the Center for Labour Studies. He is the author or co-author of four books on labor history. He lives in North Vancouver, Canada.

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Bakunin not only reassesses this fascinating and important character but also provides the biography of the forgotten ideology of anarchism itself.—Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar The time for Bakunin—the real one, not the caricature—has come again, and Mark Leier has given us just the history that we need. Wonderfully written, scholarly but also packed with fascinating tales and fresh revelations,
Bakunin: The Creative Passion is passion with purpose.—Paul Buhle, co-editor, Encyclopedia of the American Left and Wobblies! a Graphic History Mark Leier mounts a passionate defense of Bakunin and of his creed of anarchism. Even if you do not believe that anarchists, let alone Marxists, have the right answers, Leier's radical tract will force you to face the question posed by the millions of the world's poor who deserve a say in their fate, as they wait for the promised radiant future.—Andrew Mango, author of Atatürk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey A thorough and conversational biography that celebrates as much as it recounts.—Kirkus Reviews Unfailingly informative . . . and frequently exciting, Leier's biography reintroduces a fascinating revolutionary, knowledge of whose ideas helps one place such recent phenomena as the World Trade Organization protests in meaningful historical context.—Mike Tribby, Booklist

My Personal Review:
I grabbed this book to satisfy my on-again off-again interest in anarchy. It only took a few pages of Mark Leier's quirky writing style to grab my attention. I'm rarely a fan of biographies but this is certainly not your average. The author didn't create a chronologically arranged jumble of facts regarding a social revolutionary, but gave light to the lost concept of anarchism itself. The book is unapologetically sympathetic of Bakunin's theories and actions while simultaneously looking at the man critically and making no excuses for his downfalls. While Bakunin remains one of history's most controversial figures, Leier debunks many of the outlandish assumptions regarding the anarchist's life and political motivation. You don't just get a bio. but also a drama as the early rift between communism and anarchism begins to arise, a philosophical exercise as the works of Hegel and other leading intellectuals who influenced Bakunin are analyzed, and of course the ever prevalent love stories that follow the Russian nobel throughout his life. The book covers so much that at times you forget you're reading a biography until the author carefully loops the focus back to the man. The amount of information is simply staggering. You will finish this book feeling not only well versed on anarchism and the life of Bakunin but also on every social upheaval in Europe that occurred in Bakunin's lifetime. No detail is too small to mention if it had even the most miniscule impact on the revolutionary's life.

The book can be dry at times but Leier's sarcastic humor will keep you smiling. Well worth the read for anyone interested in Bakunin, anarchism, or the social movements of the 19th century.

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