

Did Kropotkin Support World War I?

Albert Meltzer

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It is commonly accepted that the Anarchist theoretician Peter Kropotkin did support the Allied cause in World War 1. But is it true? Much is made of it by hostile Marxist critics (and was at the time) exaggerating the extent of whatever he said that might be so construed. It hastened the demise of mass support for Anarchism after the war. It still dismays pacifist or liberal cultists of anarchism as an historical abstract. Kropotkin would fit as their favourite anarchist but what could be more violent than supporting that particular war?

Yet in no positive sense did Kropotkin 'support' the war. He was not a 'recruiting sergeant' nor did he offer clarion cries, or do anything practical, even oratorical. Many Russian anti-Tsarists hoped or actively strove for a German victory in the belief it would lead to the overthrow of a barbarous regime. None of them supported, even in Russia, their own government and it was notorious that the Russian court itself was pro-German, even during the war against Germany.

Kropotkin, despite his experiences in French prisons, had a high regard for British and French democratic institutions. But he did not confuse these with the governments of the day.

He was alive to the bloody suppressions of the Commune and knowing how the Communards had suffered was sympathetic to the individual attempts of the anarchist to fight-back at the bourgeoisie at the turn of the century. His distrust of Prussian militarism was of long standing. Nothing that he said or wrote during the years of war leads one to the supposition that he supported it. What can be said about him is that he failed to oppose it.

His prevarications marked him out as different from (say) Malatesta or other anarchist theoreticians, who, like the movement generally, took a firm stand against their own governments or against those under which they lived in exile. Those who took stands for one or other of the warring powers were people who did not in peace time advocate insurrection or revolution, for example Max Nettled or Jean Grave, or who in war time abandoned those principles. Kropotkin's stand was foreshadowed by his attitude to the Boer War and led to his being manipulated in the Great War.

He did not come out in open opposition to the Boer War, and told Emma Goldman at the time (as she records in 'Living My Life') that he did not think Russians who were 'guests' of Britain should do so, lest it prejudice the position of the Russian émigrés. This is an attitude that fails in an anarchist or even revolutionary perspective, but is understandable when one considers his position in bourgeois society. He was accepted not just as a 'guest' but an honoured one and he did not want to prejudice his position. As it was his anarchism compromised him in the learned

societies which respected him as a geographer or as a sociologist. This is made quite clear in his own autobiography 'Memoirs of a Revolutionist' when he speaks of his embarrassment at sitting when the Loyal Toast was given, with everyone else standing when the toast was [for] Kropotkin.

He was not in the position of being responsible to any anarchist Organisation from which he could resign. Yet as a well known figure he had to say something, the prevailing attitudes being much sharper than during the South African war. He did not want to abandon the anarchist movement. The excuse he might have liked, that as a Russian exile living in a warring country allied to it he could not comment, would have labelled him 'pro-German' (as anti-Tsarists were assumed to be) and caused more horror than putting forward a revolutionary position, The Tsar overthrown, he returned to Russia.

The attitude Kropotkin wished to take in the anarchist movement was that as the idea of an international general strike had been proved utopian, and the working class had surrendered to chauvinism, libertarians should ignore the war as best they could, standing aloof and encouraging examples of international co-operation. In "Freedom" he wished to point to the Franco-German catering workers in London joining together to form kitchen cooperatives to alleviate the hardships both suffered when war broke out. The famous Christmas Day football match at the Western front would probably have been the next such example, but by that time he was forced out of the paper he had founded. Thomas Keell used his ambivalence as an excuse to accuse him of being "pro war" and take over the press. Kropotkin was pushed into the Jean Grave camp with those who took a more assertive attitude to the war, having given up hope in the working-class and proclaiming 'the people' instead.

A gentleman who was toasted by scientific societies, listened to respectfully by professors and tolerated as a distinguished guest by the scientific establishment, did not feel able to swim against the stream.

Unfortunately many contemporary anarchists had made him a god and the trouble with being made a god is that it is hard to resign when you can't hide your feet of clay. The personality cult dogged the anarchist movement for years. Having denounced all leadership, it made intellectual leaders out of people incapable of sustaining such a role. This enabled it to be eclipsed by the Leninist movement, which made its personality cult out of leaders well able to implement such a role by political and military leadership. A popular French anarchist song of the day said 'there is no supreme saviour, neither god nor king nor leader'. To have added 'nor philosopher' would have spoiled the metre but saved the movement many setbacks.

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