

A Break in Anarchist Doctrine

Alexander Atabekian

1918

The Great War, now in its fourth year, having shaken all the foundations of social relations in the civilised world, could not but affect the ideology of the workers' movement.

It has caused a split in the majority of socialist parties in different countries, as well as among the followers of the anarchist doctrine. A part of the latter, which should be called *conservative*, if this word were not too contradictory to the general spirit of the doctrine, remained faithful to all the foundations of the former doctrine; while the other part — let us call it progressive or *renewalist* — together with P.A. Kropotkin, began to reassess its ideological values in accordance with the new historical situation.

The new current, as always happens in the beginning, was in the minority, and that is why in the broad layers of society, and in the working anarchist milieu, there was a perception that Kropotkin, the founder of scientific anarchism, had recoiled and even renounced the foundations of his doctrine.

In connection with this opinion, in literature and at meetings there have been rude attacks against the teacher by his own unconscious pupils, then the reserved regrets of friends, and sometimes even the jubilation of opponents of the anarchist doctrine.

It is much easier and more accessible to judge a *person* on a philistine scale, to criticise him hastily by a miserable comparison of scraps of his own thoughts, than to think more deeply into the development of the *anarchist doctrine*, to understand what it brings us; *for Kropotkin's anarchist thought is not a frozen formula, but a living idea.*

But at the same time Kropotkin all his life was a fighter, an enthusiast for the propaganda of his convictions, and we all, his students, should remember this and try to penetrate into the general development of his thought, and not judge it superficially, by passages of propaganda about his emerging new ideas.

It is not yet time to summarise the teacher's views on the social question in connection with the world war, as the war itself has not yet been concluded. One thing is still clear: the epoch we are living through is not a repetition of bygone times: history has not repeated itself this time. Our generation has had the difficult and sometimes painful task of reassessing all socialist and anarchist ideological values in accordance with the new historical situation.

Anarchism has to renew itself and seek a new orientation, otherwise history will outgrow it and cast it back into the world of the past, as it does with the frozen theory of so-called "scientific socialism".

In this respect, Kropotkin, who was the first to bring the scientific foundation of evolutionary thinking under the doctrine of anarchism, remains still the same scientific light which, in the fog of events, we, many of his followers, lost sight of, and must now search for again, since he is the only one we have.

It was he who, at the very beginning of the war (21 September 1914), prophetically predicted that “*the present war is creating a new history. It sets new conditions of social construction for all peoples*”¹.

Do we not see now, after more than three years, that this war really has made us create a new life, and does it not differ from the past, socially fruitless wars, to which Kropotkin had such a negative attitude?

And on the other hand, isn't Kropotkin right when he says: “we did not sufficiently foresee that whole peoples are capable of being lured by their governments and their spiritual leaders into the conquest of neighbouring lands and peoples, for the purpose of national enrichment or under the pretext of historical predestination”²?

Without *the unification of all strata* of individual people, including, of course, the proletariat, for self-defence and for attack, would this war, already in its fourth year, be possible?

The internationalists, on the basis of theoretical speculations, have been telling us all through this long war about international class solidarity.

And what did they say?

After the triumph of the Zimmerwaldists in Russia and their seizure of power, what did they come to? Was it not to declare a new war, a “holy war”? This — after they themselves destroyed the whole apparatus of self-defence, the very possibility of self-defence!

Is it not clear that it was Kropotkin who was right, who from the very beginning preached struggle until the collapse of aggressive militarism?

We must not forget: there come moments in the history of the development of capitalist states when they seek to clear the way for further industrial prosperity by military violence against other countries and peoples.

“The rapid development of German manufacturing industry in the last forty years” is not the decisive stimulus to the aggressiveness of Teutonic militarism, which has fused the whole nation into one. Wasn't Kropotkin right when he wrote:

“We all long for peace. None of us wants more slaughter. But mere desire is not enough. It is necessary to have the power *to force those who started the slaughter to stop it*. And until now, the German people have not shown that they have realised that their rulers have involved them in a mad, unfeasible and fruitless scheme.”³

And didn't our Russian Zimmerwaldists, with their call for a “holy war”, call for the same struggle *with the German people*, but after they had contributed in every possible way to strengthening the position of German militarism?

Dark, backward Russia had to come to the realisation of the necessity of self-defence by bitter experience. We too, Russian anarchists, remained deaf to the warnings and appeals of our shrewd teacher and followed the “defeatists” with a light heart.

If self-defence is necessary, then, naturally, a practical question arises: how to implement it?

¹ Letters on current events. — Moscow, Zadruga Publishing House, 1918, p. 20.

² Open Letter to the West European Workers. Edition “Pochin”, Moscow, 1918, pp. 3.

³ Open Letter to the West European Workers, p. 3. 6.

The struggle against a state at war is only possible in a state form, in other words, the attacking army of the capitalist state must be countered by an equally organised, possibly better equipped army.

We all persistently pin all our hopes on an international social revolution, on a general international revolt.

We have seen a general world war for the fourth year already, but we have not waited for a world revolt. Obviously, the territorial economic unification of all strata of the population of different states was stronger than the international spiritual unity of the proletariat.

But the same causes can simultaneously produce the same consequences: if social revolution on a *global scale* is impossible, because not all peoples have reached the proper degree of development, it can nevertheless break out in several countries at once.

Even in this case, nascent socialism cannot do without an organised army, if only for self-defence against peoples at lower stages of civilisation.

This does not mean, of course, that our army has to remain as the revolution inherited it from the autocracy. Having announced at the very beginning of the war *the new conditions of social construction*, Kropotkin does not at all hold the idea that the army should be withdrawn from this construction.

But what did our socialist-statesmen do to the army after the revolution? With their “democratisation” they have completely destroyed it. The army is a technical organisation, requiring extensive professional knowledge. It should not have been “democratised” by general elections, in order to harmonise it with the beginnings of social-democratic statehood, but transformed, like the syndicates, into a *professional* organisation, led by the very same ideological officers who, during the overthrow of the autocracy, in their great masses went with the soldiers to follow the people.

In the name of what did Kropotkin, calling for defence, preach to strengthen the fighting power of the army?

At any rate, not for the strengthening of national capitalism and imperialism, for he was the first to speak *of the new history created by the present war, of the new conditions of social construction*.

Did he not then develop this idea when he said that “the immense work of social construction is at hand. There is no more talk of utopia; it is necessary to build according to a new plan, without slowing down, according to a plan whose main lines are already being outlined. And it is high time that the workers took into their own hands, without hesitation, this work of restructuring, without waiting for the State to do it for them.”

“The essential features of social restructuring have already been marked by life itself: the whole production of necessities, as well as the distribution of the wealth created, *must be organised to satisfy the immediate needs of all*”⁴.

Isn't the whole uninhibited programme of anarchist construction contained within these lines?

These are the *aims* in the name of which Kropotkin called under the banners of the army, for *their* defence against aggressive external militarism.

In what ways did Kropotkin change his ideals?

⁴ Open Letter to the West European Workers, p. 4. 5.

Were there many people as true to their principles as Kropotkin, who were not intoxicated by the proximity of enormous power and refused the post of Minister-President offered to him by Kerensky? But a good half of the “anarchist leaders” who attacked him for his supposed treason against his ideals were themselves hovering around the “revolutionary power” in pursuit of paid positions, and the other half condoned it by their silence. Let us move on...

For the teacher, anarchism is, in his words, “not a sterile formula”, not an abstract idea detached from life. No matter how much we dream of the distant or near future, looking for the germs of a better way of social life in the present, the practical question of the outcome of the world war is before us in full force. The results of this outcome are not indifferent to the fate of the social question in our country. On the one hand, we see a powerful capitalist and militaristic state, and on the other hand, a vast backward agricultural country with a shattered industry embedded here and there. Is it not clear that it is necessary to unite the *socialist* industrial centres, the future “free cities” of Russia, with the backward provinces on a federative basis, in order to oppose the united force to the military invasion of foreign capitalism, in order to ensure the further free development of socialism and anarchism at home?

Now the Russian anarchists, who had so unanimously turned away from Kropotkin, have reached the same idea “with their own minds”. Recently a teacher, showing me the article “The Free City of Petrograd”⁵, said bitterly: “A fine article... They have come to this now, when the German hordes are likely to flood Petrograd any day now.”

And in this article the whole programme of the federal structure of Russia, long preached by Kropotkin, which gives each of its constituent parts the opportunity to develop freely, and all together to defend themselves, is set forth.

Our theories, painstakingly created in peacetime, have been devastated by this war.

The theory of class struggle, of the struggle of the international proletariat with the bourgeoisie united in its interests, was shattered at the first practical collision with historical reality. For the fourth year already, the *conscious* proletarians of the two groups of warring states, in coalition with *all strata of their peoples*, have been waging a bitter war between themselves. In the Russian industrial centres, where capitalism has been finally defeated as an organised force and is in the unlimited power of the dictatorship carried out in the name of the proletariat, what do we see? The proletariat is powerless to organise a new social order, since not only its international but also its internal unity has proved to be a fiction. The labourer is engaged in a fierce struggle with the skilled artisan over the equalisation of wages, the proletariat of technical knowledge, having felt the need at the door and having experienced the violence of its professional rights, has recoiled from both, and in the meantime production is perishing and is rapidly drawing everyone towards economic catastrophe. The theorists of socialism in power have not yet awakened to reality; they take the struggle of the various professional categories of the proletariat as a class struggle from their doctrine and are aggravating it more and more, fuelling hatred between them more and more, making this civil war fiercer and bloodier.

Isn't Kropotkin right when he hopes that “the unification of all strata of society in one common cause caused by it [the war] will not pass without a trace, but will lay the rudiments of a more united life”?⁶

⁵ In No. 1 of Labour and Volya, article by Buslaev.

⁶ Letters on current events; letter 2nd, dated 21 September 1914, p. 20.

In more developed countries we see the manifestation of this unity: there the internal struggle has not taken ugly forms, as in backward dark Russia. In these rudiments of unification is the pledge of a more rapid and more painless transition to new just social orders.

Has not the basic idea of the International — the international unification of the proletariat, which by concerted action was to lead to the realisation of socialism, failed? We have not waited for this development of the international workers' movement, and meanwhile the course of historical events does not give us time to wait for the full blossoming of capitalism to cover equally all countries and the whole agricultural province in each of them, in order to make possible, according to "scientific theory", the realisation of socialism. Social construction on new principles has become the urgent task of the present day, and the industrial centres, when socialism is introduced — it is possible only in them — must not impose their socialism on the underdeveloped provinces and villages, as they do now in our country, spreading everywhere the horrors of internecine warfare, but must work out their relations with them on new, *federal* principles.

This federation is necessary above all for the *military defence* of our free development against militant external capitalism.

The world war, having shaken all the foundations of modern society, has set before us the task of reassessing all our ideological values, and above all *the class struggle, the International and anti-militarism*.

Our teacher realised this with his genius at the very beginning of the war and courageously embarked on this hard, painful but necessary work.

Most anarchists, however, oblique in their rigid formulas, did not have enough sensitivity of understanding and independence of thought to keep up with him.

The teacher only puts a practical foundation under our common ideals, because for him the living work is more precious than a frozen formula.

Not all anarchists are those who say in the press and at meetings, "communist anarchism, communist anarchism!" at various times. Anarchists are Kropotkin and all followers of his basic ideas to the end.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Alexander Atabekian
A Break in Anarchist Doctrine
1918

Original translation of Перелом в анархистском учении.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net