

In Memory of P.A. Kropotkin

(Speech delivered on 13 February 1922 at a public meeting held in memory of P.A. Kropotkin at the 2nd grade school in Dmitrov)

Alexander Atabekian

13 February 1922

Friends and young future good comrades (comrades in the best sense of the word)!

The *All-Russian Public Committee for Immortalising the Memory of P.A. Kropotkin* was formed in Moscow. Although I am also a member of it, I find that the Committee has chosen his name very unfortunate. No one can better immortalise the memory of P.A. than he himself did with his works and life. You have only to study his works and become more familiar with his life to be inspired by his thoughts and his example. Therefore, I felt it my duty to accept the offer of the organisers of the present evening and share with you my memories of P.A.

I became acquainted with the teachings of P.A. a long time ago, in 1890–1891, in my youth, when I was in Switzerland, in the city of Geneva, where I studied medicine. The first detailed work of P.A., in which he expounded his anarchist convictions, was “Words of a Rebel”. After reading this book, I became a regular reader of the weekly newspaper “La Révolte” (The Rebellion), which was published by Jean Grave with the close involvement of Élisée Reclus and especially P.A. At that time, “La Révolte” published a number of articles by P.A., which eventually formed a new volume of his writings, “The Conquest of Bread”. Although I was not acquainted with any anarchists and was in an emigrant environment in which the social-democratic trend was consolidating at that time, under the influence of Plekhanov, my anarchist convictions were nevertheless established at that time.

The first, so to speak, “living anarchist” whom I met and befriended was the medical student P.I. Stoyanov, a Bulgarian who had come to Geneva from France, from where he had been expelled for propaganda.

The charm of P.A.’s simply stated, but heartfelt sermon was so great that my friend Stoyanov and I were drawn to see him in person, and we did not fail to fulfil this desire at the first opportunity. In the summer of 1893 we managed to gather the means and went to London, where P.A. lived. I should note that we were drawn to him not only by mere curiosity: a year earlier we had purchased some Russian and Armenian fonts and wanted to consult P.A. about the anarchist publications we had undertaken. (I had to continue this work alone, because in the meantime Stoyanov had been expelled from Switzerland for speaking at a meeting).

P.A. and I saw each other only once in London. Of my first meeting with P.A. I have very vague recollections. He lived in the suburbs of London. We went to him in the evening, when

he was resting and receiving visitors. I remember a small two-storey house with one flat, P.A.'s office on the first floor, all covered with books, and a typewriter on the table. P.A. gave us a warm welcome, but somehow the conversation did not go well. He started talking about typewriters, which were a novelty at that time, extolling their advantages and dreaming of buying one for himself. The typewriter he had was lent to him by someone, and P.A. had no money to buy one: at that time they cost about 500 francs (200 rubles).

In spite of the fact that P.A. was overloaded with work, he willingly acceded to our request for help in publishing and himself undertook to translate into Russian "Words of a Rebel", which in the original translation by the author himself was entitled "The Collapse of the Modern System".

On my return to Geneva I began to receive letters from P.A. with translations of individual chapters of the book. But as P.A. was overloaded with work and the translation was delayed, after the first chapters he handed over the work to his friend Cherkezishvili, and he himself kept only the proof-reading.

I typed in my attic (a room in the attic) and carried the finished set to a private Swiss printing house for printing. I managed to publish only one issue (about ¼) of "Words of a Rebel", Bakunin's brochure "The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State" and several others in Armenian. There was not enough money and time for more.

Having graduated from medicine in 1896, I had to leave with my family to earn money to Bulgaria and then to northern Persia, where I stayed until the World War.

Leaving Geneva, I gave all my correspondence with P.A., his translations, Bakunin's portrait with his handwritten inscription¹ and his manuscripts (given to me by Élisée Reclus on one of my visits to Geneva) to Max Nettlau, a well-known biographer of Bakunin.

From 1896 to 1917 I was completely cut off from the active anarchist movement.

The world war broke out. "Letters on Current Events" began to appear in the "Russian Vedomosti". At that time I was at the Caucasian front, where, under the flag of the Red Cross, I picked up the surviving orphans of the Armenians slaughtered on the front lines and took them out of the area of military operations.

At last came the February Revolution. Telegrams in newspapers spread the news that P.A. was on his way to Russia, and then that he had already arrived in Petrograd.

Wide opportunities for public activity were opening up. I aspired to meet P.A., came to Moscow on my way to Petrograd, and here I learnt that P.A. himself had moved to Moscow.

When for the first time after many years I came to him, he received me very cordially, embraced me in a friendly manner, guessing, obviously, by my expression, that I was not a stranger, and immediately remarked good-naturedly: "Excuse me, I don't recognise you."

It was difficult to recognise him. A whole quarter of a century separated us from our only meeting. In spite of such a long period of time, the charm of his personality at the moment of social upsurge still attracted me to him from the far south.

What is the explanation of this charm, which was equally felt by all who read him attentively, and especially by those who had personal intercourse with him?

The famous Viennese Professor Notnagel said: "A good doctor must be a good man." These words were carved in gold letters, after his death, on his tombstone.

¹ The portrait was found in one furnished room in which Bakunin apparently lived, and the inscription, in French, labelled 1868, reads: "To Mrs Monard, in memory of her kind hospitality."

Kropotkin was a doctor of our social ills, and a good doctor — this is the whole clue to the charm he produced on everyone, even on his ideological opponents.

Of course, Kropotkin was not alone in setting himself the task of public healing. The idol of our ruling party, Karl Marx, also outlined ways, wrote programmes for the establishment of socialism ...

But all of Marx's doctrine was based on cold scientific calculations (correct or false — the point is not in this), the moral foundation in it was subordinated to the economic factor, rather than prevailing over the latter, as an active force of earlier, biological origin. This has been reflected in the tactics that have arisen from this doctrine.

Kropotkin was also an outstanding scientist. When he was in the Tsar's custody, the Imperial Geographical Society published his works; when he was condemned to imprisonment in France, the whole Western European scientific and literary world clamoured for his release; for many years he was head of the natural history department of the best English scientific journal; his "Mutual Aid" is on a par with Darwin's works in its scientific importance; his "Fields, Factories, and Workshops" opens a new path for the study of political economy, and his historical studies of the French Revolution are considered the best in the field. And yet, in spite of such scientific merit, P.A. did not overwhelm with personal authority his interlocutors, not even the humblest. He knew the limits of human knowledge, and when one of the "cursed", unsolved social questions was put to him, he would not shrug, like political "leaders", but modestly and easily put himself on the same footing as his interlocutor and say: "Look for it, I am looking for it myself". I quote his authentic words. The creativity of the masses, of the "small of this world" was not a simple beautiful phrase for him.

Another type of social healer is Tolstoy. But, unlike Kropotkin, Tolstoy, by his denial of science, alienated people with scientific enquiries, even the most unsophisticated ones.

Kropotkin combined the power of scientific thought with high moral principles, recognised by him not in theory only, but carried out steadily in life. This is the main source of his charm.

Sometimes trifles brighten up his personality more vividly than lengthy, detailed descriptions. One day P.A. was asked to lobby for permission to reopen a closed anarchist organ.

"How can I do it for you alone? Don't the *others* want to speak out too?"

He alluded to the right-wing parties. Since it was hopeless to plead for a general freedom of the press, P.A. refused the request.

On one of P.A.'s visits from Dmitrov to Moscow, not knowing the reason for his coming, I went as usual to his flat in Leontievsky Lane. P.A. was greatly excited and agitated about something. When he saw me, he took me into the second room, so that we might not be prevented from talking, and without preliminary explanations began to ask me *if I did not judge him*. Gradually it became clear that he had seen Lenin and that the reason for this meeting was the shooting of hostages. A long-time friend of his, a former emigrant, was the 6th or 7th in line on the list of hostages. Several grand dukes had already been shot before him.

I remarked to P.A. that it was not for me to judge his actions. But he interrupted me, asking me to speak in a simple, comradely manner. Then I answered him that in order to save the lives of those condemned to death I would approve of appealing even to the Tsar.

"So, then, you do not condemn," he said with sincere joy, and shook my hand warmly.

I was struck by his youthful impressiveness for the opinion of one of his followers, or rather for the public opinion — for the opinion of each of us, however obscure and modest we might be.

From further conversation I learnt that P.A. had done more than clamour for his friend. He endeavoured to persuade Lenin that hostage-taking and firing squads should be abolished altogether. He reminded Lenin of the story of the Committee of Public Salvation during the French Revolution, which had ruined so many prominent figures of the revolution; and what had happened in the end? There was an old regime judge sitting on the Committee.

“I frightened *them* a little,” he added with a smile.

Soon afterwards, perhaps in connection with P.A.’s date with Lenin, the right of local Cheka departments to carry out shootings was cancelled.

Notice: P.A. was concerned about an old comrade, he probably would have been promised to spare his life from the first word, but he posed a broader question, he tried to save everyone, not just one close person.

In “The Conquest of Bread”, P.A. has a chapter on “Well-being for All.” But above well-being for all, he put justice for all.

Who of those who have read “Words of a Rebel” does not remember with what justice he speaks of people from the most diverse strata of society, even the crowned ones. Touchingly, under the pen of a convinced anarchist and veteran of the revolutionary movement, he makes sympathetic comments about the Empress Maria Alexandrovna as a person.

With the same impartiality he spoke of contemporary political figures — people with whom he had nothing in common ideologically. He considered — I had heard it from him — both Kornilov and Kerensky, as well as Lenin and Trotsky, to be honest men. He spoke of the latter in this way when the capital was still in Petrograd and the whole society was gossiping about their being bribed with German gold.

Note at the same time that Kropotkin was not naive and gullible. He was convinced that Germany bribery had played a prominent role in the defeat of Russia in the last war. In this he was convinced by his knowledge of history. He knew all too well the immoral nature of every state. Great victories were never won without bribery, he said, and gave an example from the Russian-Turkish war of 1877–78, when the commander-in-chief, Nikolai Nikolaevich the Elder, was offered to buy Plevna, and he, “the fool”, did not agree, ruining tens of thousands of lives in consequence, and in the end it seems (if memory serves me correctly), according to P.A., he still had to buy this victory.

Perhaps some of those present here have noticed one phenomenon, paradoxical at first sight: P.A., a universally recognised revolutionary, willingly took part in the All-Russian Public Council, whereas his voice has never been heard at the All-Russian Congresses of Soviets.

He found it possible to speak alongside his political opponents, and not at the Congresses of the party closer to him — at least in a remote ideal — the now ruling party. Again the cause of this phenomenon must be sought in a deep sense of justice: he could not speak where the mouths of his opponents were clamped shut, even if the latter were in the rightmost ideological camp.

While being indulgent and tolerant towards his opponents, he was nevertheless sick at heart for their mistakes. When in Moscow in October 1917 the first gunshots of the party war broke out, P.A. exclaimed: “This is burying the Russian Revolution!” Note that he did not say this to the now safely ruling party, because at that time the outcome of the struggle for power was not yet known: he only predicted the inevitably disastrous consequences of this struggle.

But is the revolution finally buried? If the rising young generations are inspired by the moral principles that P.A. extended from private life to politics, the revolution will be resurrected and no gloomy new manifestations of outmoded statehood will be able to bury it. For there cannot

be two measures of morality: one for private life, the other for political life. The basic rule of all morality – do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you – must be applied to politics. *Do not rule over others if you do not like others to rule over you* – this is the whole moral essence of Kropotkin's personal life and political doctrine.

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Original translation of Из воспоминаний о П.А. Кропоткине.

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