

Open letter to P. A. Kropotkin

Alexander Atabekian

23 October 1917

Dear teacher, I have read your tenth “letter on current events”,¹ and the listed atrocities of German militarism make my soul feel terrible. You have missed the most horrible, the most nightmarish atrocity committed by order from Berlin: the extermination, the physical extermination of an entire nation in Turkish Armenia; a nation of martyrs, which did not even have, like the Belgian nation, the possibility and comfort of self-defence against the savage hordes set upon it by the cold logic of Teutonic calculation.

Reading about the horrors created by the Germans in the European theatre of war, my thought was involuntarily transferred to another front, to the theatre of war of the Caucasian army.

Here our Russian army was already victorious. My information is not as rich as yours about the Germans, because it was not taken from literature, not from materials checked by commissions deserving full confidence, but from personal memories of two years’ stay on this front. And here, as everywhere, the god of war showed his stupid, greedy, distorted by atrocities face.

I will not dwell on the situation of the prisoners of war I saw in the winter of 1914–15 in Sarykamysh, where they were kept, healthy and mixed with acutely contagious patients and dysentery, in horrible filth, without any medical care. It seems that these prisoners were later sent in locked wagons to central Russia, but they forgot to feed and ventilate the wagons on the way. Somewhere Prince Oldenburgsky found them on the spare track of one of the railway stations, – he found corpses decomposing in their own excrement and a few dying...

In the autumn of 1915 I was working in the Bayazet and Diyadi districts to help refugees; these are two border districts beyond the Ararat and upstream of the Euphrates. It was the end of September, the height of field work; here the fields were swaying with full ears, there the bread-field was half compressed and the sheaves were stacked in piles, and further on, in the threshing-floor, the threshing had already begun, but half of it was abandoned. Vast, untouched meadows, in some places the hay is cut and laid in even strips, and there further on it is gathered into stacks. The mills by the noisy mountain rivers are silent.

But why are there neither people nor livestock? What is this dead kingdom?

These are the fields and meadows of the peaceful Kurdish farmers. Shortly before that, by order of the military authorities, they had all been evicted, evicted to their fate in frontier Persia, evicted all of them: old men, women and children, as an unreliable element, allowing each family

¹ Русск. Ведом., 12 окт. 1917 г. № 233.

to take one head of large cattle, one head of small cattle and as much property as they could take with them. Everything else was plundered by our troops, destroyed, ruined. The soldiers sold sheep for fifty per cent, cut them up to get the kidneys and roast them, and some of the cattle, which had fallen into the intendant's gurts, perished from lack of care and supervision. The officers, too, kept up with the soldiers and sent bales of carpets to their homes with messengers.

Almost all the dwellings left by the Kurds and even before that by the slaughtered or fleeing Armenians were ruined for fuel, which did not prevent the officers from receiving 150–200 rubles or more of "wood" from the treasury every month. In Karakilissa I heard at the stage the officers' fears about the nearby coal deposit exploited by the Turks; they feared that they would not be given fuel in kind.

Later, Armenian and Yezidi refugees were settled in the surviving villages, but the country, rich in agricultural products before the war, was completely devastated and the refugees had to be fed on bread imported from Russia.

In the spring of 1916, I travelled with a transport through Karakilissa and Khnys-Kala to Mushe to pick up and transport orphans who had survived the massacre. On the way I saw that the whole conquered country was completely devastated by our troops (with the rare exception of inaccessible mountain villages), and only near the military checkpoints there were miserable fragments of the former population.

One officer, in the rank of lieutenant-colonel, told me on one of the stages how a Turkish spy was hanged. They met an Armenian peasant with a piece of wire in his hands; it was obvious that the wire was a telephone wire, and the Armenian was a Turkish spy, walking around with the material proof of his crime, and... the man was hanged.

On the pass, before reaching the Charboroh stage, I saw hundreds of Armenian refugees and karapapakhs at forced labour to build a road. Just like the Germans do to the Belgians. They were barely fed with bread alone, and the payment of 1½ roubles a day from the treasury went entirely into the pocket of the stage commandant.

Perhaps, they might say, all this was under the old regime. Well, and now, under the new regime, have not our troops crushed and burnt the town of Urmia to the ground? And the pogroms in Hamadan? In Qazvin? And the petty, forced robberies and violence, when sometimes soldiers and Cossacks themselves have nothing to eat and horses to feed, and our depreciated ruble cannot buy anything.

War, this legitimisation of arbitrariness, violence, robbery and mass murder, is the same everywhere.

Teacher! Is it not with equal, if not greater reason, that a German patriot can inspire his countrymen to fight to a victorious end against our military hordes, and to outline the horrors of our victories, as you have vividly outlined the consequences of German military successes?

Or shall we bring our victories only to the borders of Germany? But where is the power that will stop those who are intoxicated with success? Or would we go no further to liberate Poland, all of Poland? Or would we commit the crime and return bloody, barely alive Armenia to the yoke of its murderer, Turkish statehood?

Will we not invade another's land, will we not encroach on another's independence?

But why have we not yet cleared our armies from the neutral, or rather powerless to defend itself, Persia, which we occupied with the British long before the present world catastrophe without declaring war on it? Why do we continue to ravage this country, independent under international law, sovereign, turning it into an arena of warfare, upsetting all internal transport

and commodity exchange and exposing it to the danger of even worse pogroms during demobilisation at the end of the war?

No, dear teacher, it is not in the victories of nations that we will find a just world. You yourself are deeply aware of this. Otherwise, why did you reject the proposal of the greatest Utopian of our time, Kerensky, who imagines to breathe new life into the decaying corpse of the Romanov Empire? Why did you refuse the post of envoy to London that was then offered to you? Why do you now reject all thought of your candidature for the Constituent Assembly?

Is not all this desertion on your part, a principled civil desertion, from a foreign camp, dear teacher?

If you have not taken up the banner of statehood, then with even greater determination, with horror, you have recoiled from neo-Tolstovism in foreign policy, from street Bolshevism, this sermon of non-resistance to the evil of the invasion of foreign imperialists.

Dear, beloved teacher, there is no place for you in these two opposite camps. Unfurl your own banner, the banner which you have woven for us thread by thread for fifty years, our common banner of social revolution!

Has not the disintegration of the modern order, which you have foreseen, reached its climax? Is not mankind, with the threat of physical destruction, facing a dilemma: either a speedy peace (what an essential meaning for the working people of a secession, an addition or the creation of new national territories!), a peace with the resumption of an even fiercer class struggle, or a social revolution?

Events are unfolding with dizzying speed, history is “burning up the stages”. What yesterday seemed a “meaningless dream” has today become a trifling husk of rapid social development. All the parties of the working people have come under the banner of socialism.

But before the people stands the terrible face of the world war, the very war which has swept away like a splinter the age-old autocratic system and now threatens to swallow up the people’s freedom in the midst of building a new life.

Not long ago you told us: “The dream that this war will put an end to wars in general, as long as the exploitation of labour remains, is pure fantasy”.²

Only by ending the exploitation of human labour, only by a social revolution will wars be ended forever.

You yourself admit that “in all the nations of Europe one feels the exhaustion of strength after three years of exertion, and this exhaustion is realised in Germany as much as in France, in Austria as much as in Russia”. This exhaustion has caused us not only the collapse of autocracy, but also the collapse of statehood. If German statehood still seems powerful, it is only because of our disorganisation, and at the first sensitive defeat it will crumble to dust.

Only the social revolution, having given the people bread and a free community, will arouse in them a powerful spirit of self-preservation, of self-defence against the bloody invasion of their native land by foreign imperialists.

In the thickened atmosphere of social fermentation, it may be that our teaching is destined to give that impetus which will determine the crystallisation of society into new forms.

But for this we must bring into those vague attempts at communal self-determination, which are breaking out everywhere from Kronstadt to Tashkent, an element of concrete organised construction of communal life on free socialist principles.

² Enquête sur les conditions d’une paix durable. 9 янв. (н. с.) 1917 г.

Take up the cry, unfurl our banner, teacher!

Your pupils, your ideological comrades, are waiting with me for an answer and action from you, for your word is action itself.

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