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How Revolutions must not be made
and the alternative

July 16, 2008

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A review of Goldman's account of her experiences in Russia, plus
a review of a classic collection of Kropotkin's essays. Both contain
much wisdom for modern revolutionaries.

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My Disillusionment in Russia by Emma Goldman

Anarchism by Peter Kropotkin

As in the 1960s, the upsurge in anarchist activism has resulted in a similar upsurge in classic anarchist titles being produced by mainstream publishers. A new generation of radicals are becoming interested in anarchism and a new generation of capitalists want to make money from them! This is a positive side-effect of the prominence we have achieved in the news reporting of the anti-capitalist movement. Hopefully these new radicals will take the opportunity to learn from some old ones, particularly as these books are so good.

After a few decades of being out of print, Emma Goldman's classic account of her experiences in Lenin's Russia has been reprinted. In addition, a valuable collection of essays by the anarchist formerly known as Prince has been reprinted. Formally known as "**Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets**" it has been renamed simply as "**Anarchism.**" For those unfamiliar with Kropotkin's

work it is simply indispensable reading. Containing such classics as (an abridged) “*Modern Science and Anarchism*,” “*The Spirit of Revolt*,” “*Revolutionary Government*,” “*Anarchist Morality*” and “*An Appeal to the Young*” a better collection of works in one volume is impossible to find. For those interested in communist-anarchism, this is the place to start.

Of particular interest in the light of the Goldman reprint are Kropotkin’s comments on the Russian Revolution. The book includes Kropotkin’s “*Letter to the Workers of Western Europe*” and a post-1917 post-script to his essay “*Anarchist-Communism*.” He reiterates the key idea of anarchism, that a revolution will only succeed if the working masses, through their own organisations, organise their own affairs directly as the only means of achieving socialism and freedom. As he put it, “*we are learning in Russia how **not** to introduce communism.*” The essays in this book indicate the only revolutionary alternative to Bolshevism, anarchism. Only revolution from below, by the working masses using direct action and creating their own popular organisations of self-management, could create a free society, “*Communist organisation*,” as Kropotkin argued years before the Bolsheviks proved it, “*cannot be left to be constructed by legislative bodies called parliaments, municipal or communal council. It must be the work of all, a natural growth, a product of the constructive genius of the great mass. Communism cannot be imposed from above; it could not live even for a few months if the constant and daily co-operation of all did not uphold it. It must be free.*”

Goldman’s book is a different, but equally important, work. The leading anarchist in America at the time, she recounts the experiences which forced her to reconsider her support for the Bolsheviks and which led to her final break with Lenin’s regime. Like many anarchists outside Russia in 1917, Goldman had defended the Bolshevik revolution wholeheartedly. Deported alongside Alexander Berkman from the US in December 1919 as being a dangerous subversive she arrived in revolutionary Russia the following month.

Willing to put aside their anti-state principles, she and Berkman hoped for the best of that oxymoron, “revolutionary” government. What they discovered soon made them reaffirm their anti-statism in the face of Bolshevik party dictatorship and bureaucracy. In the workplaces, they discovered that the workers had new bosses. In the prisons, they discovered that radicals had new guards. In society as a whole, they discovered that the autocracy of the Tsar had been replaced by the autocracy of the Bolshevik Central Committee (it took slightly longer for one-man management to be applied there than in the factories!).

Goldman had not “*come to Russia expecting to find Anarchism realised.*” Such idealism was alien to her (although that has not stopped Leninists saying the opposite). Rather, she expected to see “*the beginnings of the social changes for which the Revolution had been fought.*” She was aware that revolutions were difficult, involving “*destruction*” and “*violence.*” That Russia was not perfect was not the source of her opposition to Bolshevism. Rather, it was the fact that “*the Russian people have been **locked out***” of their own revolution and that the Bolshevik state used “*the sword and the gun to keep the people out.*” As a revolutionary she refused “*to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party.*”

Her break with Bolshevism took time. She, like Berkman, repeated the rationalisations that modern Leninists repeat to this day. She justified Bolshevik authoritarianism in terms of the blockade by the imperialist powers, in terms of the civil war, in terms of the economic collapse these events caused. It took the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion in March 1921 to finally convince them that these “objective” factors simply could not explain what had happened to the revolution. The civil war had ended, but Bolshevik authoritarianism and state capitalism remained. She could no longer blind herself to the obvious.

Goldman’s opposition to Bolshevism flowed from her politics. Rather than refute her anarchism, the Russian Revolution confirmed it. Anarchists had long argued that a revolution

would provoke economic disruption, unemployment, etc. (see Kropotkin's "**Conquest of Bread**"). Similarly, anarchists have never been so stupid to think a revolution does not need defending (regardless of what Lenin or Marx said!). Goldman saw in Russia the confirmation of these ideas and, as important, the anarchist case against using the top-down and centralising state as a means of solving the problems facing a revolution. Her illusions in Bolshevism were destroyed by exposure to its realities, but her anarchism was confirmed and enriched.

Goldman intellectual journey is useful in countering modern Leninists. Ultimately, to excuse, as modern Leninists do, Bolshevik authoritarianism on what revolutionaries are meant to consider as the inevitable results of a revolution (civil war, "exceptional circumstances," etc.) seems, well, less than convincing. Goldman's book provides a useful antidote to that kind of nonsense. She summarises the lessons she drew from her experiences, reaffirming the need for revolution, the importance of workers' self-activity and self-organisation (called by her anarcho-syndicalism) and the importance of unmasking the great delusion of Bolshevism which, if applied elsewhere, would result in the same failures as in Russia.

Her book is therefore highly recommended, particularly as her analyses have been confirmed by modern research. For example, rather than being wishful thinking, Goldman's argument that the Russian workers were capable of taking control of their revolution has support in research into working class collective struggle under Lenin. Her account of the Kronstadt revolt has been confirmed by modern historians. Bolshevik authoritarianism has been shown to have started long before the civil war started. They were, for example, gerrymandering soviets and disbanding any with elected non-Bolshevik majorities in the spring of 1918 (Goldman: "*once in control of the Government the Communists saw that the soviets threatened the supremacy of the State*"). Lenin's policies of "one-man management" and state capitalism date from pre-civil war times. All this is well know, at least outside of Leninist circles. There the

civil war explains all, regardless of the facts. There **were** alternatives to Bolshevik policies and the social forces to implement them. She has been proved right when she noted that what the Bolsheviks called the "*defence of the Revolution*" was "*really only the defence of [their] party in power.*"

Goldman simply stated the obvious by writing the Russian Revolution was "*a failure.*" She quoted Kropotkin as saying the Bolsheviks showed "*how Revolutions must **not** be made.*" If the revolution had been made "*à la Bakunin instead of à la Marx,*" she was sure the "*results would have been different and more satisfactory.*" As she stressed, the means determine the ends. Hopefully more radicals are becoming aware of these obvious facts. The reprinting of Kropotkin's and Goldman's books will undoubtedly aid that process. Studying them, learning from them and, most importantly, developing their insights and theories will ensure modern revolutionaries make history rather than repeat it. They show how a revolution **should** be made. No greater praise is required or necessary.