

# Kropotkin and Lenin

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In the first years after the Bolshevik coup d'état, many Americans, and a few Europeans as well, confused Bolshevism with anarchism. In 1917, Lenin had preached the complete destruction of bourgeois state forms and the establishment of a workers' and peasants' republic based on local soviets, similar to the local communes of which the anarchists had dreamed. Dictatorship of the proletariat, Lenin had said, was only a temporary expedient, necessary to destroy the bourgeois state and wipe out forces hostile to the new order; when the revolution was complete, the state would gradually disappear. Some of the methods, moreover, which Lenin employed in destroying the old order were similar to those preached by Mikhail Bakunin, the father of Russian anarchism. As a result, a majority of anarchists in Russia, and a large proportion of anarchists abroad, sympathized with the Bolsheviks during their first half-decade in power. Only with the extension of Bolshevik terror to anarchists and the later suppression of the Kronstadt revolt did this sympathy begin to waver.

It is an indisputable fact, however, that the greatest of all the anarchists — Peter Kropotkin — opposed Lenin from the start and considered the Bolshevik ideology more hostile to anarchism than so-called “bourgeois liberalism.” The moral gulf that separated Bolshevism from democratic socialism also divided it from the anarchism-communism conceived by Kropotkin. Nothing more dramatically illustrates this basic hostility than the relations between Kropotkin and Lenin during the first years of the Revolution. In the meeting and correspondence between these two men, the details of which have only recently become clear, may be viewed the monumental divergence between a philosophy of the free individual spirit, many of whose insights will still play a part in building a better life, and a philosophy of institutional subjugation which, for all its present vaunted power, is doomed to oblivion.

No one could better represent Bolshevism at such a confrontation than Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, for in his mind all its basic elements were conceived and through his iron will they were brought to fruition. And Peter Kropotkin, the Russian prince turned geologist, explorer, historian, and revolutionary, embodied the highest ideals toward which his creed strove — science, art, literature, philosophy, music were all within his ken, and the moral force of his loving personality was a legend even among his bitterest foes.

Both men had been abroad when the Russian people overthrew the tsarist autocracy, Kropotkin in England, Lenin in Switzerland. Both had had to flee the tsarist police many years before. But where the 47-year-old Lenin was known only to a small circle of European socialists,

Kropotkin, at 75, had been a world figure for two decades. His scientific articles had already won him scholarly acclaim when, in the 1880's, writing in the *London Times*, *The Nineteenth Century*, the *North American Review*, and other periodicals, he had done more than any other man to awaken the Western world to the realities of Russian life under Tsarism. In 1882, the French government, pressed by its burgeoning *entente* with the Romanovs, had arrested him in connection with anarchist violence in Lyons (in which he had no part); a petition asking his release was signed by Victor Hugo, Herbert Spencer, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and leading contributors to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. When Kropotkin was sentenced to five years in prison, the historian Ernest Renan and the French Academy of Science each offered Kropotkin the use of their libraries. (His French prosecutor, meanwhile, was decorated by Tsar Alexander III.)

Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, published in 1899, brought him international admiration, and the venerable Scandinavian critic Georg Brandes stated flatly in its preface, "There are at this moment only two great Russians who think for the Russian people, and whose thoughts belong to mankind — Leo Tolstoy and Peter Kropotkin." When, in 1901, Kropotkin exposed in the *North American Review* the repressive character of the tsarist school system, Pobedonostsev, Nicholas II's chief adviser, felt compelled to answer him personally.

Kropotkin's own warm and tender character (he was as at ease with children and animals as with political groups) had a marked influence on the direction of the anarchist movement. Where Bakunin had been predominantly negative — concentrating on the task of destroying existing state coercion, Kropotkin addressed his thoughts to the positive program for building a society based on free cooperation. Both as a physical scientist and as a social theorist, he postulated existence: another he called law it just the as law important of "mutual as that aid." of The the solidarity struggle for of people — their natural inclination to work out together, unhampered by coercion, the most satisfactory approach to their common problems — was the foundation of Kropotkin's philosophical anarchism.

In that anarchism, no privileged part was to be played by "professional revolutionists." Rather, Kropotkin believed that social justice could only be achieved through the conscious cooperation of all the people -workers, farmers, tradesmen, and intelligentsia. Thus, while personally intimate with the leaders of Russia's People's Will movement, Kropotkin disapproved of their idea of making a revolution *for* the people. A decent and durable social order, he said, could only emerge through the efforts of the people themselves.

Despite these doubts about other strains of Russian radicalism, Kropotkin bitterly opposed isolating anarchism as the only true anti-tsarist faith, waging war against all infidels. He greeted liberal, Socialist Revolutionary, and Social Democratic foes of despotism as allies in the common struggle for basic political liberties. The dangers of narrow sectarianism and of "professional revolutionists" were apparent to him even before 1909, when he wrote:

Every revolutionist dreams about a dictatorship, whether it be a "dictatorship of the proletariat," i.e., of its leaders, as Marx said, or a "dictatorship of the revolutionary staff" as the Blanquists maintained... They all dream about a revolution as a possible means of destroying their enemies in a legal manner, with the help of a revolutionary tribunal, a public prosecutor, a guillotine... All of them dream of capturing power, of creating a strong, all-powerful totalitarian state which treats the people as subjects and rules them with thousands or millions of bureaucrats supported by the state...

All revolutionists dream of a Committee of Public Safety, the aim of which is to eliminate everyone who dares think differently from those who are at the helm of the government... Thinking, say many revolutionists, is an art and a science which is not devised for common people...

When Kropotkin arrived in Petrograd on June 10, 1917, after 41 years of exile (he had braved German U-boats in the North Sea to reach Stockholm and the train for Russia), he was greeted by a crowd of 60,000 people, who had waited for him in the cold night till 2 A. M. Moved as he was by "that crowd of intelligent, bold, proud faces, celebrating the triumph of light over the shadows, of truth over falsehood, of freedom over slavery," Kropotkin soon began to feel the war-weariness of the Russian people and their subtle demoralization in the face of continued war losses and the concentrated pro-German propaganda of the Bolsheviks. The return to Petrograd, two months earlier, of Lenin (who came through Germany in a sealed train by arrangement with the Kaiser's General Staff) had quickly transformed the Bolsheviks' early collaboration with the democratic parties into a virulent assault on all of them, on the Provisional Government, and on the Allied war effort.

Kropotkin, even in 1914, had declared that the duty of all freedom-loving peoples was to support the Allies against German militarism, which he considered the most potent center of European reaction and a threat to all peoples. When, in those early days, he was reminded that an Allied victory would also be a triumph for Tsarist Russia, he replied that he was sure that Tsarism would be overthrown and a new regime established in Russia. Asked why he was so sure of a revolution, he would answer: "Simply because everyone in Russia is awaiting one."

The democratic revolution in Russia had made Kropotkin an even more passionate believer in the Allied cause. For with the overthrow of Tsarism and the entry of America under Wilson into the war, the Allies had become, in fact as well as word, the camp of humanitarian democracy in a mortal struggle against reactionary militarism.

Although Kropotkin had declined the post of Minister of Education in the Provisional Government (he saw little reason to alter his principled opposition to governments *per se*), he largely defended its efforts. The Bolsheviks' unsuccessful July *putsch* upset him deeply, as did the resignation of George Lvov, the noble Liberal who was the democratic government's first Premier. At the National State Conference in Moscow in August (attended by representatives of all political parties, social associations, and military organizations, as well as cabinet ministers, army leaders, and former Duma members), Kropotkin looked forward to the coming Constituent Assembly-elections for which were scheduled for late November and to the type of republic Russia would become: "And, citizens," the great anarchist declared, "the republic must be a federated one, in the sense in which we see it in the United States, where every state has its own legislative bodies, these legislative bodies deciding all the internal problems, while the Republic in all its decisions needs the consent of several states or of all the states."

Kropotkin also delivered an impassioned plea for national unity and for continued resistance to the German aggressor. His voice did not prevail. First the German rout of Kerensky's summer offensive, then the struggle between rightists, centrists, and socialists, climaxed by the Kornilov affair, paved the way for the Bolshevik coup d'état. When, in Moscow that November, Kropotkin heard the first cannon volleys of the Bolshevik uprising, he exclaimed: "This is the burial of the Russian Revolution."

Although the Bolsheviks treated Kropotkin with deference, he refused to accept any support from them (even turning down royalties from his books re-published by the state) and declined to play any part in the Soviet regime. Soon after Lenin's surrender to the Germans at Brest-Litovsk, Kropotkin described the Bolsheviks to a representative of Woodrow Wilson in this manner:

They have deluded simple souls. The peace they offer will be paid for with Russia's heart. The land they have been given will go untilled. This is a country of children – ignorant, impulsive, without discipline. It has become the prey of teachers who could have led it along the slow, safe way... There was hope during the summer. The war is bad – I am the enemy of war-but this surrender is no way to end it. The Constituent Assembly was to have met. It could have built the framework of enduring government.

By this time, the Bolsheviks had brutally suppressed the Constituent Assembly, elected by universal suffrage with a clear majority for the Socialist Revolutionaries and only 25 percent for the Bolsheviks. The red terror, which preceded and followed the dissolution of the Assembly, had erupted into the horror of the Civil War. All this while, Kropotkin lived in the small town of Dmitrov, not far from Moscow, and kept aloof from the bloody political warfare. Much as he opposed the Bolsheviks, he could not approve of foreign military intervention once it had become clear that the aims of England, France, and Japan in the intervention were so largely territorial.

On May 10, 1919, however, Kropotkin felt compelled to speak to Lenin on a personal matter. An old friend and colleague was being held as a hostage, earmarked for execution, and Kropotkin went to the Kremlin to plead for his life. But the conversation, which took place in the apartment of the old Bolshevik Vladimir Bonch-Bruyevich, soon developed into a long discourse on the revolution and Russia's future.

Kropotkin not only pleaded for his comrade, but tried hard to influence Lenin to abolish the entire system of taking hostages and shooting people in reprisal for opposition activity. He reminded Lenin of the Committee of Public Safety, which had killed so many outstanding leaders of the French Revolution, pointing out how one of its members had later been discovered to have been a former judge under the Bourbons. "I scared him a little," Kropotkin later told his friend Dr. Alexander Atabekian, who first disclosed the details of the conversation in a speech at Dmitrov a year after Kropotkin's death. To Atabekian, also, Kropotkin confessed his own personal shame at visiting a dictator whose subordinates were busy executing at that very moment the finest representatives of Russian democracy.

Nevertheless, Lenin showed Kropotkin considerable respect at this meeting, the only personal encounter between them after the revolution.<sup>1</sup> The two men talked about Bolshevik methods, about the cooperative movement (dear to Kropotkin's heart), about the development of bureaucratism in the Soviet state. Lenin tried briefly to sketch his own ideal conception of future Soviet development. Kropotkin listened attentively and then told Lenin: "You and I have different points of view. Our aims seem to be the same, but as to a number of questions about means, actions,

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<sup>1</sup> Contrary to this report, based on the account of Atabekian a year after Kropotkin's death, the British writers Woodcock and Avakumovich in their book *The Anarchist Prince*, maintain that there were other meetings. A check of their account of the "other meetings" with Atabekian and other sources indicates that they have divided the conversation of this May, 1919, meeting and the correspondence which followed into new "meetings." Since publication of their book, Kropotkin's daughter Alexandra, now in New York, has personally confirmed to me the fact that there was only one meeting. Alexandra was living near her father at the time.

and organization, I differ with you greatly. Neither I, nor any of my friends, will refuse to help you; but our help will consist only in that we will report to you all the injustices taking place everywhere from which the people are groaning.”

Lenin took up this offer and asked Kropotkin to send him information about injustices, which he would take into consideration. On March 4, 1920, Kropotkin wrote such a letter, in which he outlined the chaotic and miserable condition of the countryside under “War Communism,” and the sodden attitude of the suffering people toward local initiative:

At every point, people who don't know actual life are making awful mistakes for which we have to pay in hundreds of thousands of human lives and the ruination of whole regions. Without the participation of the local population in construction — the participation of the peasants and workers themselves — it is impossible to build a new life...

Russia has become a Soviet Republic only in name... At present it is ruled not by Soviets but by party committees... If the present situation should continue much longer, the very word “socialism” will turn into a curse, as did the slogan of “equality” for forty years after the rule of the Jacobins.

Nine months later, Kropotkin wrote to Lenin again on the subject of hostages:

Is it possible that you do not know what a hostage really is — a man imprisoned not because of a crime committed but only because it suits his enemies to exert blackmail on his companions? ... If you admit such methods, one can foresee that one day you will use torture, as was done in the Middle-Ages.

I hope you will not answer me that power is for political men a professional duty, and that any attack against that power must be considered a threat against which one must guard oneself at any price. This opinion is no longer held even by kings; the rulers of countries where monarchy still exists have abandoned long ago the means of defense now introduced into Russia with the seizure of hostages. How can you, Vladimir Ilyich, you who want to be the apostle of new truths and the builder of a new state, give your consent to the use of such repulsive conduct, of such unacceptable methods? ...

What future lies in store for Communism when one of its most important defenders tramples in this way on every honest feeling?

There were other letters, too, but these were never published. All we know is that they so enraged Lenin that the Soviet dictator told Vladimir Obukh, an old Bolshevik: “I am sick of this old fogey. He doesn't understand a thing about politics and intrudes with his advice, most of which is very stupid.”

The well-known Russian publicist, Katherine Kuskova, met Kropotkin often in those days, and she has commented that Kropotkin's “stupid advice” consisted largely of (a) vigorous criticism of the terror, which he said “debases the revolution and will lead to reactionary dictatorship,” and (b) appeals to Lenin to find six or seven able non-Bolsheviks who would work with his administration in a determined effort to restore normal conditions of living.

From Kuskova, too, we learn of Kropotkin's grim forebodings — after his meeting with Lenin — of today's global conflict. Kropotkin was convinced that eventually the Communists would gain the upper hand in Europe and would bring the same brutality there as in Russia. Kuskova pointed out that the cultural backwardness of the Russian people had helped the Bolsheviks, but that things were different in Western and Central Europe. Kropotkin replied:

To be sure, little concern was shown for the cultural development of the Russian people. But I am very familiar with the state of Western Europe and I assure you that a Bolshevik revolution there would be a repetition of what we had in Russia. The power of the Communists derives from the fact that they support themselves upon the mob, upon the unorganized, unskilled and ill-paid. Should these elements gain the upper hand in Western Europe, we shall witness a repetition of what has occurred in Russia.

But would not the mob be restrained, Kuskova asked, by other groups, responsible, well-organized and experienced in maintaining justice? "The world," Kropotkin answered slowly, "is in serious perturbation. The world is badly shaken by war, and in the flame of war insanity, human beings have lost all common sense. Anything may happen. And when it does, it will happen according to the Russian style and in no other. The mob everywhere is cruel, corrupt and animated by beastly instincts."

When Kropotkin died on February 7, 1921, the full measure of his prophecy was apparent to only a few. But the thirty-two years that have elapsed—the years of Hitler and Stalin—have made it plain to all. It might well be said that Kropotkin's dashed hopes in 1917, his protest at barbarous Bolshevism, and his grave concern over the emotional balance of a world in flames, represented a microcosm of our world today, when the citizen of a democracy educated to the hope of a freer world for all men—faces the unabated challenge of Lenin's heirs.

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*The Russian Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Oct., 1953), pp. 227–234. [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)

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