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Correspondence on Kropotkin's Letter to Professor Steffen

Fred W. Dunn

1914

Dear Comrade — That there would be differences of opinion among Anarchists upon various subjects is only to be expected, and is good for us; but that there should be any differences as to attitude of Anarchists on war is not or has not been so far thought possible. War! — we have always shuddered at the thought, knowing full well that wars, upon whatever pretext fought, are but the outcome of international rivalry for the power to exploit, and that the workers have always most to suffer, it being left to them to pay and die. Thus it is that our comrade Kropotkin's letter in your October issue comes as a double shock to many of us, firstly, because an Anarchist siding with and justifying State action, assisting, in fact, its efforts to strengthen itself anew, would indicate a throwing over of ideals and principles; and secondly, because many of us owe much to him for what he has written upon social and economic problems, thus helping us towards a

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clearer vision of the ideals we all hold dear.

Reading his letter side by side with the pamphlet "Wars and Capitalism" recently issued, written early in 1913, one is forced to ask: "What has happened in the past two years which can justify such a reversal of opinion which leads our comrade to contradict his own writings?" The anomalous position arises that here are we, Anarchists in thought, who have always regarded war as a damnable feature of capitalism, discussing the intricacies of international politics, and comparing one Government with another in an endeavour to prove that one Government, or one form of despotism, is to be preferred to another. Instead, we should be preaching and insisting upon the fact that, to quote "Wars and Capitalism": "The reason for modern war is always competition for the markets and the right to exploit..... In fact, all wars in Europe during the last 150 years were war's fought for industrial advantage."

Are we to suppose that this war is any exception to the rule? Kropotkin's letter proves nothing upon this point, and gives no clue to the position of the workers in this upheaval, or their position afterwards. No mention, in fact, is made of the workers at all; and we are left to suppose that this is a war of liberation for them, and that their interests are identical with those of their masters and the State, that the German Government is solely to blame for this awful catastrophe, and that the Allied Powers are acting purely as knight-errants or defenders of their threatened liberty. It is tragic!

I am still of the opinion, supported by Kropotkin's pamphlet, that this war is but the culminating point of the foreign policy of the Governments of Europe, dictated always by commercial considerations, during the past ten years, and that not only Germany or Austria, but the whole of the Great Powers, are responsible; and we Anarchists, striving for a world set free,

can take no part in their efforts to secure themselves more firmly in the world of commerce.

What is it to us that Germany seeks colonies, and has an eye on those of France or Britain, or on Finland? Is she not seeking to do what England has done in the past, and who now wishes to rest on her laurels, with her booty more or less secure? Are we to uphold the Powers entering upon a campaign of murder to prevent a powerful rival from transferring England's or Russia's dominions to herself? It seems to me that our attitude is not to say who shall dominate in certain areas, but to put an end to domination in every area. Are we to discriminate as to the varying degrees of tyranny? German militarism itself exists as a commercial necessity. And will England and Russia be free from tyranny when German militarism is wiped out by the triumphant militarism of the Allies?

Kropotkin speaks of Germany's culpability by virtue of her careful and deliberate preparations, all aimed at smashing France; and yet we are told in "Wars and Capitalism" that: "Jealous of keeping her supremacy on the sea, jealous above all of keeping her colonies for exploitation by her own monopolists, England is redoubling her efforts in order to have a fleet capable of infallibly crushing her German rival. England looks everywhere for allies to weaken the military power of Germany on land." (The italics are mine.)

In his letter, Kropotkin writes: "And the moment they began to feel themselves strong as a sea-power, the Germans took it into their heads to destroy the maritime power of Britain, to take a strong footing on the Southern shores of the Channel, and to menace England with an invasion."

Contrast this with, the following from "Wars and Capitalism": — "When the English press sow alarm and terror, pretending

to fear a German invasion, they well know that danger does not lie in that quarter..... The English bourgeoisie of to-day wants to act towards Germany as she twice acted towards Russia in order to arrest for fifty years or more that country's sea-power..... That is why for the last two years we have been living on the alert, expecting a colossal European war to break out from one day to another."

Has the position altered since then? I fail to see that it has, and it still remains to me as an Anarchist, an Internationalist, that this war is but the struggle for commercial supremacy between two forces who have waited for years to fly at each other's throats.

As Romain Rolland says: — "You Socialists on both sides claim to be defending liberty against tyranny — French liberty against the Kaiser, German liberty against the Tsar. Would you defend one despotism against another? Unite and make war on both. There was no reason for war between the Western nations; French, English, and German, we are all brothers, and do not hate one another..... Who has brought these plagues upon them? Brought them to the desperate alternative of overwhelming their adversary or dying? None other than their Governments, on whom in my opinion the guilt rests..... The worst enemy of each nation is not without, but within its frontiers, and none has the courage to fight against it."

This, in my opinion, should be the attitude of the Anarchists, and the niceties of diplomatic manœuvring can be left for those whose dirty business it is. We have got to fight, not Prussian militarism or British militarism, but that of which these are but the tools — Capitalism, the State; and we can do it, not by heaping faggots on to the fire, but by exposing the unscrupulous methods of Governments in general, and showing to the worker in unmistakable language that not by

fighting for the oppressors, but only by fighting against them can real freedom be won. This is the view of many Anarchists with whom I have discussed Kropotkin's letter, and it is the view dictated by the principles we hold that there is one enemy of the workers — Capitalism and the State. — Yours fraternally,

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