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In Commemoration of Peter Kropotkin

Robert Graham

2021

February 8, 2021 marked the 100th anniversary of the death of Peter Kropotkin. In his time, Kropotkin was one of the foremost exponents of anarchist communism, an anarchist revolutionary and a well-respected scholar.

Kropotkin was born into a prominent aristocratic Russian family in December 1842, during the reign of Czar Nicholas I. The political situation in Russia was bleak. Michael Bakunin, who later played an important role in the creation of anarchist movements across Europe, was imprisoned by Nicholas in the Peter and Paul fortress in 1851 and kept in solitary confinement for the next two years. Kropotkin became a prisoner of Nicholas' son, Alexander II, some 23 years later in the same fortress, illustrating the continuity of political repression in Czarist Russia.

Kropotkin was born with the title of Prince, which he ceased using when he was 11, but that has not stopped others from subsequently using that title to identify him, sometimes to discredit him politically, other times in a misguided attempt

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to emphasise his stature, as if there was something inherently noble about him.

Kropotkin himself has left a vivid description of his early life in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. With an imperious and distant father, and a mean stepmother straight out of an old Russian folk tale, Kropotkin spent more time with his family's peasant servants and his non-aristocratic tutors than he did with his parents. He could see that peasants were really no different from him, and he no better than them, despite his aristocratic status. This helped lay the foundation for a lifetime commitment to equality and equity.

Kropotkin was hand picked by the Czar himself to join his prestigious Corps of Pages. Kropotkin eventually became the personal page to Nicholas' successor, Alexander II. Never comfortable with court life and intrigue, in 1862 Kropotkin transferred to a Cossack regiment in Siberia where he thought he would have more freedom to follow his scientific interests. He explored the Siberian wilderness and began to develop a reputation as a geographer. He also attempted to ameliorate the conditions of political prisoners in Siberia, but his report on the Siberian penal system was ignored. After the execution of five Polish prisoners who had attempted to escape to Mongolia, Kropotkin resigned his commission and returned to St. Petersburg in 1867 to pursue his university studies.

It was in Siberia that Kropotkin was first introduced to anarchist ideas, obtaining a copy of Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions* from the collection of one of the Russian political exiles, the poet Mikhailov, after the latter's death from tuberculosis. But it was not until 1871 that Kropotkin really began his journey into radical politics.

Kropotkin returned to his family estate to see what he could do for the peasants in the area, but was advised by an old priest that the only way that he could do anything without being jailed would be to assume the role of a travelling preacher,

which would have required too much deception for an unbeliever like him to pull off.

Kropotkin then decided to travel to Switzerland in the spring of 1872, which was far more welcoming to political refugees and exiles back then. He wanted to find out more about the International Workingmen's Association, which had a number of sections in Switzerland. He came into contact with Nicholas Utin, leader of a reformist faction within the International in Geneva allied with Karl Marx. Kropotkin was unaware at the time that Utin was compiling a dossier against Bakunin that Marx was to use at the September 1872 Hague Congress of the International to justify expelling Bakunin from the International.

It was enough that Kropotkin witnessed Utin trying to get the Geneva building trades to renounce strike activity because it would harm the election chances of a reformist candidate. This led Kropotkin to seek out the more radical Swiss sections of the International, eventually meeting up with members of the Jura Federation who, under the influence of Bakunin, were developing an anarchist conception of revolutionary socialism.

Kropotkin was impressed by the independence of mind of the Jura Internationalists, many of whom earned their living as watchmakers. In contrast to Utin's reformist Geneva section of the International, in the Jura Federation there was no separation between leaders and led. Everyone expressed themselves freely, as they debated how best to achieve a libertarian socialism. It was the example of the Jura workers that convinced Kropotkin to become an anarchist.

Kropotkin wanted to stay in Switzerland but Bakunin's associate, James Guillaume, convinced him that he could do more valuable work back in Russia. Kropotkin returned to St. Petersburg and joined the radical populist group, the Chaikovsky Circle. He appears to have been the only anarchist in the group, and wrote an early exposition of his ideas to persuade other

members to adopt an anarchist stance, “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System.”

At the time, Kropotkin argued for equal access to raw materials, the means of production and distribution, the means of subsistence, housing, health care and education, so that everyone would be able to live by their own labour without being exploited by anyone else (a position then described as “collectivism,” in contrast to anarchist communism, which advocated the complete abolition of wage labour). Even at this early stage of Kropotkin’s political development, he was advocating the break down of the division of labour and ending the separation between manual and intellectual work. With respect to political organisation, Kropotkin defended Proudhon’s positive conception of anarchy, a federation of communal and productive units with no central state or bureaucracy above them.

In 1874, Kropotkin was arrested and imprisoned for his revolutionary activities. After two years in the Peter and Paul fortress, he and a group of comrades organised a spectacular day light escape from the hospital wing of the prison. Kropotkin made his way to England, and then back to Switzerland to reunite with the Internationalists there. He immersed himself in the nascent anarchist movement, and attended the last congress of the anti- authoritarian sections of the International in Verviers, Belgium, in 1877.

By 1877, several sections and federations within the anti-authoritarian International were moving away from the collectivism of Bakunin and his associates toward an anarchist communist position, beginning with the Italian Federation in the fall of 1876. However, it would take a few more years for Kropotkin to adopt an anarchist communist position, after other Internationalists, such as François Dumartheray, Elisée Reclus, Carlo Cafiero, and Errico Malatesta, had already done so.

Prior to Cafiero convincing the Jura Federation to adopt anarchist communism at its 1880 congress, Kropotkin’s position

tionary action. Kropotkin stresses the need for the trade union movement to remain independent of the political parties, and for the workers to take direct action against capitalism. He points to the example of the First International, while exposing the failings of parliamentary socialism. His article on mutual aid emphasises the important role of cooperation in both animal and human life. Reading Kropotkin today, it is his anarchist ideas that appear most relevant, as the gulf between the super-rich and the vast majority of the planet's population grows ever greater, while governments appear unwilling or incapable of doing much of anything to stop it.

was closer to that of James Guillaume, who argued that after the revolution, during the transition from a capitalist to a socialist society, while production and distribution were being reorganised by the workers themselves to provide for everyone's needs, workers would still be remunerated based on their labour, until a sufficient level of abundance had been achieved that the common wealth could be distributed on the basis of need regardless of one's individual contribution.

Kropotkin was immersed in the Swiss and French anarchist movements from 1877 to his imprisonment in France in 1883. He participated in various conferences and congresses, joined in demonstrations, including street fights with the police in Bern, and wrote numerous articles for the anarchist and revolutionary socialist press. One of the more explicitly anarchist papers, *L'Avant-Garde*, was published out of Switzerland by Paul Brousse, then an anarchist communist, Kropotkin and Jean-Louis Pindy, the advocate of revolutionary syndicalism within the International at its 1869 Basle Congress who had miraculously survived the massacre of the Paris Commune.

In late 1878, publication of *L'Avant-Garde* was banned by the Swiss authorities. Undeterred, Kropotkin started a new paper, *Le Révolté (The Rebel)*, in early 1879. Kropotkin wrote that the aim of the new paper was to "make one feel sympathy with the throbbing of the human heart all over the world, with its revolt against age-long injustice," for it "is hope, not despair, which makes successful revolutions."

Although Kropotkin adopted an anarchist communist stance before the 1880 Jura Federation congress, this did not mark a sharp break from the approach advocated by Bakunin and the proto-syndicalist elements within the International. Kropotkin still regarded the workers and the peasants as the two largest groups whose daily struggles would ultimately provide the impetus for a far-reaching social revolution. The role of the anarchists was to work with the workers and

peasants, to awaken their revolutionary potential through propaganda and collective action.

In 1881, Kropotkin was expelled from Switzerland as a result of his anarchist activities. He went to England, and then back to France, where the workers' movement was entering a new period of combativeness, after the long reaction that had followed the brutal suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871. In a mining area north of Lyon, the workers were striking but also blew up some stone crosses placed along the roadsides by the reactionary Catholic mine owners. Then a bomb went off in a café in Lyon, killing a worker. The authorities decided the anarchists must be to blame, and Kropotkin was among the several dozen anarchists arrested in late 1882.

At the trial in 1883, Kropotkin and the other defendants presented an address, prepared by Kropotkin, in which they proclaimed, "Scoundrels that we are, we demand bread for everyone, work for everyone, and for everyone independence and justice too!" Unable to connect Kropotkin to any of the bombings, the French authorities convicted him of belonging to the International, by then a defunct organisation.

Kropotkin remained imprisoned in France until 1886, after which he returned to England. While Kropotkin was in prison, Elisée Reclus edited a volume of Kropotkin's articles from the anarchist press and published them under the title, *Words of a Rebel*. This contains some of Kropotkin's better known writings that were often reprinted in pamphlet form, such as "Order," "The Paris Commune," "Representative Government," "Law and Authority," and "The Spirit of Revolt."

In England, Kropotkin helped found the English anarchist paper, *Freedom*, and continued to write for the anarchist press while also working on more scholarly works, such as *Mutual Aid* and *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, as well as his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, and his exposé of the Russian and French penal systems, *In Russian and French Prisons*.

Kropotkin's most important and influential book among anarchists was *The Conquest of Bread*, published in 1892. Although it was also made up of articles from *Le Révolté* and its successor, *La Révolte (Revolt)*, it reads like a complete book. It is the most sustained argument in favour of anarchist communism ever written, and was widely translated, inspiring anarchists in Europe, Latin America and Asia. Although Kropotkin was not the first anarchist communist, it was his writings, more than anyone else's, that persuaded many anarchists to embrace anarchist communism.

While Kropotkin continued to contribute to the anarchist press, primarily *Freedom* and *Les Temps nouveaux* (which in 1895 replaced *La Révolte* after its suppression by the French government), he also wrote a history of *The Great French Revolution, 1789-1793* from an anarchist perspective, and a detailed exposition of the history and development of anarchist ideas, *Modern Science and Anarchism*, in the 1900s (this being later revised and expanded into a book, *Modern Science and Anarchy*, along with other writings in 1913). However, he dealt both his reputation and the anarchist movement a serious blow when he supported the Allies, including the Russian Empire, in the First World War. His position quickly saw him isolated from the vast majority of his fellow anarchists, who remained true to their internationalist principles and opposed both sides in the conflict.

He returned to Russia after the 1917 Revolution, but was both physically and politically isolated, as he urged the provisional government to continue the war against Germany. He remained astute enough to see through Bolshevik propaganda, and denounced the growing Bolshevik dictatorship before his death in 1921. His funeral, attended by tens of thousands, was the last mass anarchist demonstration in Soviet Russia.

The articles presented in this issue of *Black Flag* emphasise Kropotkin as an advocate of revolutionary anarchism, focusing on mass revolutionary organisation and the means of revolu-