

Kropotkin and War—Today

The Debate over Kropotkin on World War I—Its Lessons for Anarchists Today

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In 1914, World War I (then called “The Great War”) began, centered in the big countries of Europe. It was greeted with enthusiasm by most of the populations of the warring countries. It was endorsed by most of their socialist and labor parties and by their unions. Most of the leading Marxist theoreticians took pro-war positions or were at best wishy-washy, not wanting to break with the militaristic majority. Only a small section of revolutionary Marxists opposed the war totally (including Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Debs).

Unlike the Marxists, most anarchists opposed both sides of the war, with the significant exception of a small minority. This minority supported the Entente (the Allies) against the Central Powers. It included the most well-known and respected anarchist, Peter Kropotkin. Kropotkin (1842–1921) was widely regarded as one of the “founders” of anarchism. Most of the anarchist movement at the time was surprised and disappointed about Kropotkin’s pro-war stance. Today, anarchists still read his works and respect his contributions to our theory and history. Yet, most who comment on Kropotkin believe that he was gravely mistaken in his views on the war and agree with his anarchist critics from that time.

However, a few writers on anarchism have concluded that his views should be re-examined and reconsidered. In the light of World War II and more current wars, perhaps he was not so wrong after all, they suggest. (Kinna 2017; Ryley 2017)

This question may appear to be abstractly historical. But, as I write this, a terrible war is raging between the Russian state and the Ukrainian people, with the latter getting aid from the imperialist states of the U.S. and NATO. Wars are also being fought in other countries around the globe. Imperialism, nationalism, the exploitation of weaker countries by the rulers of stronger ones, and the existence of a world capitalist market—all continue from Kropotkin’s time to ours. What attitude should revolutionary anarchists take toward these various wars and conflicts? These issues were debated back then and are still illuminating in our current conditions.

Referring to arguments over U.S. intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia, Peter Ryley writes, “The issues that Kropotkin raised have not gone away...The schism among anarchists in 1914 is not an historical curiosity; it is a live debate.” (2017; p. 50) I believe that Kropotkin was deeply wrong about World War I. I agree with his critics then and now. But I think it can be valuable to review the discussion.

The War

The war was an inter-imperialist conflict. This was not particularly subtle. On one side was the British Empire, the Russian Empire, and the French Empire, eventually joined by the Italian Empire and the Japanese Empire, and finally by the United States of America. On the other side was the German Empire, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and the Turkish Empire. The only one not officially calling itself an empire was the United States. With its domination of Latin America and the Caribbean and parts of the Pacific, it was hard to see it as anything else.

To justify supporting one of the sides, it was necessary to find qualitative differences among the empires. The German social-democrats pointed to a threat from the cossacks and hordes of Czarist Russia which would destroy German Kultur. Actually, Czarist Russia was a very authoritarian state, but it was weak by then and on the verge of collapse—as it did under the pressures of the war. On the other side, supporters of the Entente pointed to the ruling German junker class, and the threat of Prussian militarism.

It is worth pointing out that the German monarchy, while quite authoritarian, was not the same as the later Nazi regime. There was an elected parliament (the Bundestag), even if generally powerless. Its largest party was the Social-Democratic Party. True, the German rulers were more aggressive than the British and French rulers, if only because the British and French already held most of the world as colonies. They were the “have” imperialists. It was said that the sun never set on the British Empire nor the blood ever dried. If the rising capitalists of Germany, and the German state (the “have-not” imperialists), were to expand now, they had to challenge the British and French, they “had” to be the aggressors. This did not make the Allies more “peaceful”, just more satiated.

Kropotkin’s arguments for supporting the Allies were rooted in fear of German militarism. If the Germans were to win the war, he thought, it would set back progress toward an anarchist transformation. He saw the horrors of the German state, its military rulers, and its repressive bureaucracy, but he did not distinguish between the state and the whole German nation, including its working class. He had repeatedly denounced Marxism and statist socialism (social-democracy) as reflecting German culture. Kinna writes of “Kropotkin’s antipathy for German social democracy and this conflation of all things German with statism.” (2017; p. 187) He saw the victory of libertarian communism as requiring the victory of the “Latin” peoples over the “Germanic” peoples, and therefore the victory of the Entente over Germany. He had a romantic view of France. The French state had imprisoned him and then expelled him. Yet he saw France as the mother of revolutions, the center of revolutions in Europe, and the inspirer of revolution for Russia. It must not be conquered by the Prussian army!

Like Bakunin and other anarchists, Kropotkin had long supported the idea of national self-determination. “True internationalism will never be attained except by the independence of each nationality....If we say no government of man over man, how can [we] permit the government of conquered nationalities by the conquering nationalities?” (in Miller 1976; p. 231) He supported all national movements against foreign oppressors, such as the Indians and Irish against Britain, the Balkan peoples against Turkey, or the Poles against Russia. Solidarity with the oppressed people did not mean anarchists should give any political support to their leaders and rulers, their capitalists and landlords. Kropotkin thought it was important to combine “economic” demands, such as land to the peasants, with national demands.

In World War I, he applied national self-determination to the French, who had been attacked, invaded, and partially occupied by German forces. He ignored the difference in this case, that France was not an exploited and oppressed nation but an imperialist power. It had its own colonies (the French state ruled about 15 % of the world). He ignored that France would do the same to the Germans if it won the war.

During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 (which culminated in the Paris Commune of 1871), Bakunin had urged the French to resist the invading Germans. But he advocated this be done by forming revolutionary armies of workers and peasants, unconnected to the French state and in revolutionary opposition to it. In the years before the world war, Kropotkin had also advocated such a popular and revolutionary armed defense of France against a German attack. Yet when the war actually began, Kropotkin declared that it would not be possible to create such forces in time. The only realistic way to resist the Germans, he declared, was to support the Allied governments and their regular armies.

When the idea was floated of an end to the war through a negotiated compromise, Kropotkin protested. (Riley 2017) A negotiated peace would only allow the Germans to re-arm, he argued. Nothing would do but the complete and unconditional defeat of the Germans.

In 1917, the first phase of the Russian Revolution broke out (the “February Revolution”). Czarism was overthrown, and a more-or-less liberal “Provisional Government” took power, balancing itself against the popular democratic councils (soviets). Kropotkin returned to Russia. He continued to demand Russia’s participation in the war, even though the war was ruinous to the Russian peoples. He advocated not anarchism but a constitutional republic, modeled on the federalist U.S.A. That is, he called for a capitalist state. He did not only oppose a Leninist type of authoritarian revolution, but any kind of further socialist revolution. This was tied to his desire to continue the war.

In his history of the revolution, Trotsky was to sneer, “The superannuated anarchist, Kropotkin...made use of the war to disavow everything he had been teaching for almost half a century.” (Trotsky 1967; p. 223) Unfortunately, it was a fair criticism. (After the “October Revolution”—when the Bolsheviks took power—Kropotkin did write public appeals to the workers of Western Europe to oppose their governments’ military attacks and quarantines of Russia.)

The Anarchist Response

Only a handful of anarchists agreed with Kropotkin. Although no more than about a hundred signed the various pro-war anarchist statements, this did include some of the most well-known such as Jean Grave, Charles Malato, and Paul Reclus. (Woodcock & Avakumovic 1990) Besides the socialist-anarchists, the war was supported by Benjamin Tucker, the leading U.S. individualist anarchist (then residing in France). Anarchist-syndicalists had played a major role in building the main French union federation, although it came to be dominated by apolitical union bureaucrats. That union also endorsed the war while a group of revolutionary anarchist-syndicalists, including Pierre Monatte, organized against it.

Most anarchists were not impressed with Kropotkin’s view of the differences between the two war camps. A number wrote responses. After a period of debate, he and those who agreed with him split from the British anarchist journal *Freedom* which he had once co-founded. Important essays were written by Errico Malatesta (1853–1932). (Price 2022) He had worked with Bakunin and been a friend of Kropotkin. He wrote, “Anarchists Have Forgotten their Principles,” and “Pro-Government Anarchists.” (Malatesta 2014)

To Kropotkin’s argument that the militarism of the Central Powers was qualitatively different from the Allies, Malatesta wrote,

“Personally, judging at their true value the ‘mad dog’ of Berlin and the ‘old hangman’ of Vienna, I have no greater confidence in the bloody Tsar, nor in the English diplomats who oppress India, who betrayed Persia, who crushed the Boer Republics; nor in the French bourgeoisie, who massacred the natives of Morocco; nor in those of Belgium, who have allowed the Congo atrocities, and have largely profited by them...not to mention what all Governments and all capitalist classes do against the workers and the rebels in their own countries.

“...The only hope is revolution...” (Malatesta 2014; p. 382)

If the revolutionaries were too weak at that time to inspire a revolution, that did not mean that they should therefore rely on the states. The states caused this terrible war and, however it was resolved, so long as capitalism and the state continued, this war would be followed by another, “a new war more murderous than the present.” (same)

If the anarchists were not able at this time to overthrow the states, at least they should not strengthen them. They should stick to their values, their program, and their principles and continue to be anarchists, preparing for an eventual revolution. To Kropotkin this was a hopelessly unrealistic approach, but Malatesta saw it as supremely realistic. It was what made him an anarchist. (Turcato 2017)

Was Kropotkin Right After All?

In recent years some anarchists have come to re-evaluate Kropotkin’s views on the First World War. Malatesta and other anarchists had accused Kropotkin of betraying anarchist principles. Kinna comments, “Whether or not Malatesta was right to condemn Kropotkin’s stance, his charge of treachery is difficult to maintain: Kropotkin’s position was consistent with his conception of anarchism..” (2017)

It is confusing to begin this topic by not saying “whether or not” you believe revolutionary anarchists should have condemned Kropotkin’s pro-war opinions. Similarly, Riley writes, “Whether Kropotkin was right or not about Wilhelmina Germany remains contentious.” (2017; p. 65) They do not actually say that Kropotkin was correct to support the Allies but neither do they say he was wrong. Without taking a stance on the first inter-imperialist world war, the rest of the discussion is incoherent.

Kinna asserts, “Kropotkin’s position was consistent with his...anarchism.” But it was his “conception of anarchism” which had been inconsistent. One strand of his beliefs advocated revolutionary anarchist-communism. He opposed all states, all capitalism, and all imperialism, which he blamed for modern wars. Not long before the war, Kropotkin wrote that the real cause of war was “the competition for markets and the right to exploit nations backward in industry.” (in Miller 1976; p. 225)

On another strand—another complex of ideas—he saw the Germany of his time as the greatest threat to peace and freedom in Europe while romanticizing the French. He did not distinguish between the national self-defense of an oppressed and exploited people and an inter-imperialist war. He denied the class conflict within Germany and other imperialist nations, underestimating the possibility of revolution.

These two strands of Kropotkin’s “conception of anarchism” could co-exist for a long time, so long as there was peace (more or less). His anarchist comrades could ignore the second strand. But once war broke out in a massive way, Kropotkin had to follow one or the other set of beliefs. He does not seem to have wavered in adopting his pro-imperialist-war complex of ideas. This was consistent with some of what he had believed for a long time—but it was a betrayal of the revolutionary internationalist anarchist beliefs which he had taught generations of revolutionaries.

The Imperialist Lie

Similarly, Ryley points out that almost no anarchists were absolute pacifists. They almost all accepted the use of mass violence in appropriate circumstances. "...War could be a just and necessary instrument of self-defense and popular liberation. When Peter Kropotkin made his stand in support of the Entente powers it was from this tradition, a precedent wholly in keeping with his anarchism." (Ryley 2017; p. 62)

Except that anarchists believe that the claim of "self-defense and popular liberation" is only true if raised by a revolution or a national liberation struggle. Otherwise it is a lie raised by the imperialist powers. They are really fighting for "markets and the right to exploit backward nations," as Kropotkin had written just before the world war. To uphold this lie was not "in keeping with anarchism."

Ryley buys into the imperialist lie when referring to World War II. He regards this war as justifying Kropotkin's stance in retrospect. "Kropotkin and Grave were a war too early for general acceptance." (2017; p. 64) He refers to nice-sounding general principles such as "solidarity with oppressed peoples and the victims of aggression...to support self-determination and democratic aspirations..." (Ryley 2019; p. 65) and quotes Kropotkin that the Western side of his war was "striving to achieve progress through the steady growth of its inner forces, economic and intellectual..." (p. 64) Ryley declares, "they are a precise description of Allied war aims in the Second World War." (p. 54) Such a statement is preposterous, at least for an anarchist.

During World War II, many anarchists argued that by this time the only way to stop the genocidal Nazis was to work with the Allies, at least in Europe. This did not require denying that the Western "democracies" were imperialist nor that Stalinist Russia was brutally totalitarian. Their real "war aims" (rhetoric aside) was for the U.S. to replace Great Britain as the world's dominant imperialism, while the British ruling class hoped to hold on to as much of its empire as it could, and, for the Stalinist empire, to expand into Eastern Europe. (For further discussion of anarchist views of the Second World War, see Price 2015.)

Ryley's other major argument is that Kropotkin had the only realistic program for ending the war (supporting the side of the Allies until it conquered the Central Powers). Malatesta's program of revolution was unrealistic. Following it, Ryley charges, meant being passive as the war raged on, and giving de facto support to the Germans.

"Malatesta had gone up the blind alley of abstentionism...They argued for social revolution alone. It was not convincing....Denying the legitimacy of self-defense by anything other than popular insurrection is to invite catastrophe...adopting an impossible strategy..." (Ryley 2017; pp. 62–64)

What is remarkable about this statement is World War I did end through revolution! First there was the Russian Revolution, which ended up taking Russia out of the war. Then the German workers and soldiers overthrew the monarchist state and ended Germany's participation in the war. Rebellions and insurrections spread throughout Europe and beyond. The Allies "won" the war, but this would not have happened without the collapse of the Central Powers due to revolution. Malatesta's revolutionary program was far from unrealistic.

Unfortunately, the revolutions did not go all the way (with the ambiguous exception of Russia). This was importantly due to the reformism of the German social democrats and a lack of sufficient

numbers of organized revolutionary anarchists—who were following Malatesta’s program. The failure of the revolutions to go all the way to stateless, self-managed, cooperative community, led, as Malatesta had warned, to “a new war more murderous than” World War I.

(The Second World War was also followed by a wave of revolutions and near-revolutions in Eastern and Western Europe and Asia. These were almost entirely distorted, misled, or betrayed by the Communist Parties, in one way or another.)

Kinna does not compare Kropotkin’s strategy for World War I with that of the still-revolutionary anarchists. However, she makes it clear that she rejects the program of revolution by the workers and their allies, as held by Bakunin, Malatesta, Fabbri, Goldman, Makhno, Durruti, and so on. She describes this as part of the “classical anarchist” tradition, which she regards as no longer viable, if it ever was. Kinna does not actually present arguments for this opinion (at least in this volume) but seems to take it for granted.

She knows that Kropotkin came out of this “classical” tradition and helped form it. (See Cahm 1989.) Yet she emphasizes aspects of Kropotkin’s thinking which fit in with more gradualist, alternate-institutional, and non-revolutionary types of anarchism (“new anarchism” and “post-anarchism”). For example, she points to his work on voluntary associations being formed even within capitalist society.

Undoubtedly, the “classical” tradition of anarchism needs to be expanded, in areas such as gender or ecology (although Kropotkin had an ecological outlook and other anarchists of his time began to analyze sexual issues). However, I believe that the fundamental goal of working class revolution remains valid. Since Kinna does not agree, it is not surprising that she would not agree with the revolutionary opposition to both sides in the First Imperialist World War held by Malatesta and the majority of anarchists then and now.

Ukraine

Some anarchists argue that Kropotkin’s fatal error was his support of national self-determination and national liberation. This belief, they say, led him to support the French and the Entente. Therefore, they conclude, anarchists should not support national self-determination. They should not support the Palestinians against the Israeli state, nor the Uyghars against the Chinese state. They do not take sides between the Ukrainian people and the invading Russian imperialist army. Whatever the arguments, this is an abandonment of anarchist solidarity with the oppressed and exploited.

However, Malatesta, like Bakunin before him, also supported national self-determination. Malatesta, who was so insistent on rejecting Kropotkin’s support of the Allies, had supported the Libyan Arabs fight against the Italian attempts to conquer them, and had supported the Cuban workers and others when they waged a war of independence against the Spanish. (See Price 2022) He could tell the difference between an oppressed people which is waging war to prevent domination and exploitation by an imperialist power—and a war among imperialist powers, all trying to defend or expand their ability to loot oppressed peoples.

Kropotkin lost his way because he failed to make this distinction. Anarchists today must be clear about it.

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