

Introduction*

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by *Colin Ward*

In 1851 the Russian revolutionary Michael Bakunin, after having been chained to the wall of his cell and condemned to death in both Saxony and Austria, was handed over to Russian justice and imprisoned in the Peter-Paul fortress «to rot indefinitely». There, his biographer writes, «the swollen, flabby figure with toothless jaw and unkempt beard bore now little resemblance to the sturdy, rather dandified young giant who had entered the Saxon prison; and a glimpse in a mirror made him recoil from himself in horror». From his cell he had, at the request of the Emperor Nicholas I, written a *Confession*, thirty thousand words long, which is probably, in its mixture of fulsome self-abasement, incredible frankness and unrepentant defiance, the most extraordinary autobiographi-

* Colin Ward, «Introduction» to Pëtr Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, The Folio Society, London, 1978.

cal fragment in the Russian language. Nicholas wrote on the first page a note for his heir, later Alexander II: «It is worth your while to read this – it is very curious and instructive».

In this document which was not made public until 1921, Bakunin had two requests. One was that he that be taken out of solitary confinement in the fortress; the other was that he that be permitted to see his family for one last time. For, as Professor Carr writes the landscape of Premukhino – the long, low roomy eighteenth-century house in its estate «of fife hundred souls» about a hundred and fifty miles north-west of Moscow – carried a store of sacred memories shared by the Bakunin family, «and Michael, in the darkest moments of his career, could still conjure up out of the distant past the winding Osuga; the water-meadows and the little island where they had played in the middle of the pond; the old sawmill with the miller fishing in the mill stream; the early morning pilgrimages through the garden while the spiders» webs were still hanging on the leaves; the moonlight walks in spring, when the cherry-blossom was in flower and brothers and sisters would sing *Au clair de la lune* in chorus; the solemn burial of Varvara's pet sparrow, for which Borchert, the German tutor, composed an epitaph; the winter readings of *The Swiss Family Robinson* round the hearth – everything that was summed up for a Bakunin in the golden word Premukhino».

These memories epitomize our Western picture of Russian society before the revolution, which is drawn not only from the wonderful flowering of the novel in the nineteenth century, but from the marvellously rich stream of personal memoirs, particularly of childhood and youth, covering the century from Aksakov to Gorky, with an

ample harvest in the last doomed decades of Imperial rule from Pasternak; Paustovsky, and Nicolas Nabokov. They evoke a world of birch trees, governesses, samovars, sailor suits and sleighrides, with, in Gabriele Annan's words, «the taste of tea and jam sharpened and sweetened by the sense of the vast empty steppes beyond the garden and the imminent end of it all». For most of these recollections, though not all, are those of members of the landed aristocracy.

In this rich literature there are three masterpieces, and it cannot be coincidental that each is by a man who, like Bakunin, spent much of his life attempting to destroy the foundations of the feudal autocracy into which he was born. These are Alexander Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*, Leo Tolstoy's fictionalized trilogy *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth*, and Peter Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. These men belonged to different generations (Herzen was born in 1812, Tolstoy in 1828, and Kropotkin in 1842); they never met (apart from a brief encounter in London between Herzen and Tolstoy, which the latter remembered vividly nearly fifty years later); but their lives were intertwined through common friendships with other writers like Turgenev and the exiled mathematician Peter Lavrov, through common interest in the abolition of serfdom and in further social change, and through avid reading of each other's works. The author of the *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* found Herzen's memoirs to be, quite apart from their immense historical value, «one of the best pieces of poetical literature in any language», and was convinced in reading Tolstoy's *Childhood* that no other writer «has so well described the life of children from within, from their own point of view». Tolstoy himself, old and ill in 1903, wrote to his exiled disciple Vladimir Chertkov,

«Send my greetings to Kropotkin... I have recently read his *Memoirs* and I am delighted with them».

Herzen, Bakunin, Tolstoy, and Kropotkin were four sons of the Russian nobility, gifted, eager, and passionate, who were faced with the central question that Imperial Russia posed for all the intelligent children of its ruling élite. We are growing up, they could not avoid perceiving, into an oriental despotism, terrifyingly strengthened by Prussian militarism and overlaid with a veneer of French culture.

The atmosphere, once we have moved beyond the joys of childhood, is stifling. How should we live? *What is to be clone?* This question was the title of a drearily didactic but immensely influential novel by Chernyshevsky, and a whole generation of young people modelled their lives upon those of its characters. When Turgenev made the nihilist Bazarov the hero of *Fathers and Sons* there were impassioned discussions and quarrels about the veracity of the character and of Turgenev himself. For just as the men and women who peopled the great novels were regarded as though they were living beings whose dilemmas and choices were those facing their readers, so these four men seem larger than life in the answers they gave to the questions posed to Russians of the educated classes in the nineteenth century. (Bakunin indeed served as the model not only for Turgenev's Rudin, but for Dostoevsky's Stavrogin. Tolstoy himself provided one fictional self-portrait after another: young Nikolenka Irtenyev, Pierre Bezukhov, Konstantin Levin). The four men are great archetypes of response to the inevitability of revolution.

When did the revolution become inevitable? In retrospect it was as long ago as 1826 with the execution of the five Decembrists, hanged for their part in the plot of

December 1825 to overthrow the autocracy and establish constitutional government. Nicholas I, in signing the death warrant for Pestel, Ryleyev, Kakhovsky, Bestuzhev, and Muraviev-Apostol, signed the death warrant of the Romanov dynasty. Alexander Herzen and his lifelong friend the poet Ogarev were boys of fourteen at the time. They climbed the Sparrow Hills (now the Lenin Hills) outside Moscow. «Flushed and breathless, we stood there mopping our faces. The sun was setting, the cupolas glittered, beneath the bill the city extended farther than the eye could reach; a fresh breeze blew on our faces, we stood leaning against each other and, suddenly embracing, vowed in sight of all Moscow to sacrifice our lives to the struggle we had chosen». This was no theatrical gesture. Arrested and imprisoned as a student and twice exiled, Herzen left Russia for ever in 1847. In the European revolutions of 1848 he allied himself with Proudhon and Bakunin on the extreme left of revolutionary socialism. Settling with his family in London in 1851, he and Ogarev began the publication of a Russian journal *The Polar Star*. Kropotkin tells us how wide was its secret circulation and that of its successor *Kolokol* (The Bell) inside Russia, even at the court. «With a feeling near to worship I used to look at the medallion which was printed on the paper cover of *The Polar Star* and which represented the noble heads of the live Decembrists». Herzen, from a series of villas in the London suburbs – in Westbourne Park, Richmond, Fulham, and Putney High Street – became one of the most influential men in Russia. As one account says «He kept track as accurately of the corruption and cruelties of the most insignificant police officer as he did of the transactions in the Senate and Council chamber.

The dread of appearing in *Kolokól* soon paralysed the hand of the boldest and most hardened officials in the Service».

Bakunin was also profoundly affected by the execution of the Decembrist conspirators, one of whom had been his mother's cousin. In spite of the *Confession*, he was not released from solitary confinement, but in March 1854 he was transferred from the Peter-Paul fortress to the Schlüsselberg prison. In the following year Nicholas I died and in 1857 Alexander II gave Bakunin the choice of remaining there or of perpetual banishment in Siberia. He chose Siberia and in 1861 escaped by way of Yokohama, San Francisco, and New York. His first words as he burst into Herzen's home in London were «Can one get oysters here?» Bakunin resumed his stormy revolutionary and conspiratorial life as though nothing had happened in the intervening fourteen years. After the collapse of the Polish uprising, he began to elaborate his collectivist anarchist theories and became Marx's bitter opponent in the First International. Anyone reading his voluminous fragmentary writings will find them full of uncannily accurate prophecies of the nature of the Marxist dictatorships of the twentieth century.

Tolstoy, unlike Herzen, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, was not driven into exile. By the time he had evolved into a subversive thinker with the Tolstoyan version of pacifist anarchism, he was already world-famous and he consequently achieved the extraordinary status of a critic of the regime who could be neither silenced nor punished. Years earlier he had closely studied the Decembrist conspiracy, and had originally intended the hook which became *War and Peace* (a title he borrowed from Proudhon) to be about the conspirators. The hundred young men who were not hanged

had been exiled to Siberia and thirty years later their survivors were pardoned by Alexander II. As Tolstoy examined their personal stories he found that most of these officers had acquired their liberalism when serving in the Russian occupation forces in France following the defeat of Napoleon. As his novel took shape its emphasis changed, and he finally planned to end it with «the first forewarnings of the movement that led up to the events of 14 December 1825». The mysterious freemasonry that Pierre joins at the end of the book is in fact that of the Decembrists. Tolstoy's turbulent life, like that of Bakunin, was lived on the scale of grand extravagant gestures. He had no greater admirer than Kropotkin, who (despite his rejection of Tolstoy's pacifism and his search for a new religion) concluded in 1905 that «no man since the times of Rousseau has so profoundly stirred the human conscience... He has fearlessly stated the moral aspects of all the burning questions of the day, in a form so deeply impressive that whoever has read any one of his writings can no longer forget these questions or set them aside; one feels the necessity of finding, in one way or another, some solution... Tolstoy is now the most loved man – the most touchingly loved man – in the world».

Kropotkin himself, through the merest recital of his history, seems cast in the same larger-than-life mould as these fellow countrymen. There is a biography by Fernand Planché and Jean Delphy with a title that sums up the reasons for his fame: *Kropotkine, descendant des Grands Princes de Smolensk, Page de l'empereur, Savant illustre, Revolutionnaire international, Vulgarisateur de la Pensée anarchiste*. His life is an extraordinary story, and Kropotkin tells it superbly. The first part is one of those classical descriptions of an aris-

tocratic childhood, told with an exquisite clarity and perception. The second is a unique account of life in the Corps of Pages, as absorbing for Kropotkin's educational reflections as it is for its glimpses of life at court in the early years of Alexander II in whom such hopes had been placed with the liberation of the serfs in 1861. A military career seemed inevitable for Kropotkin, and with a privileged choice of regiments open to members of the Corps, he opted to serve with the Amur Cossacks in Siberia. This was thought to be an eccentric or bizarre decision. «Are you not afraid to go so far?» the emperor asked him. «No, I want to work. There must be so much to do in Siberia to apply the great reforms which are going to be made». Then, Kropotkin continues: «He looked straight at me; he became pensive; at last he said, 'Web, go; one can be useful everywhere'; and his face took on such an expression of fatigue, such a character of complete surrender, that I thought at once 'He is a used-up man; he is going to give it all up».

In the third part the hook opens out into a travel narrative an account of Kropotkin's journeys in Siberia and in the central Asian territories recently annexed for the empire by Bakunin's cousin Muraviev-Amurski. Few writers have conveyed so well that sense of inhabiting not a country but an immense continent, and it was his work there which gained him his reputation as a geographer. His theory of the orography of the Asian land-mass – the structure of its mountain Systems – is the basis of the modern physical geography of Asia, and Kropotkin's hopes that his work would be of practical use in the development of the resources of the region have been fulfilled. The geologist M. A. Novomeysky writes that Kropotkin's 700-page *Report on the Olelcminsk-Vit-*

imsk Expedition was his «desk-book» in that part of Siberia. «I was inseparable from it in the days when I lived on the mining site, for in it I found much of the information that I needed in my work». Kropotkin himself has a memorable passage on the sheer pleasure to be gained from scientific discovery: «There are not many joys in human life equal to the joy of the sudden birth of a generalization, illuminating the mind after a long period of patient research. What has seemed for years so chaotic, so contradictory, and so problematic takes at once its proper position within an harmonious whole. Out of the wild confusion of facts and from behind the fog of guesses – contradicted almost as soon as they are born – a stately picture makes its appearance... He who has once in his life experienced this joy of scientific creation will never forget it; he will be longing to renew it; and he cannot but feel with pain that this sort of happiness is the lot of so few of us, while so many could also live through it – on a small or on a grand scale – if scientific methods and leisure were not limited to a handful of men».

It was in Siberia too, that Kropotkin extended his political education. The exiled poet Mikhailov introduced him to the works of Proudhon, and the brutal suppression of an attempted escape by Polish exiles led Kropotkin and his brother Alexander to resign their commissions and return to St Petersburg. Part Four of the book describes his studies and geographical work there, his expedition to Finland and his first visit to Western Europe, making contact with the socialist and anarchist movements. Once again his discovery of his political position was accompanied by a scientific discovery. He advanced what was then a completely heretical hypothesis that instead of floating icefields, there had

been a glacial period in which much of Europe from the British Isles to most of Russia had been covered by a layer of glaciers in motion – a hypothesis which is now repeated in every textbook of geology and physical geography.

On his return from the West, he became a member of the Chaikovsky Circle, the most influential of the Russian populist groups of the 1870s, while continuing his geographical work. There is, as Paul Goodman remarks, «a pathetic hilarity in the story that, whereas other agitators could get out of town and escape the police, he had to stay and explain to the Geological Society his thesis on the Ice Cap». There was of course nothing hilarious about it for Kropotkin, conscious as he entered the Peter-Paul fortress that it was here that the Decembrists were hanged and here that Bakunin had rotted. The fifth part of his book describes his captivity, which permanently damaged his health, and his dramatic escape from the military hospital. The concluding section follows his arrival in Britain, his life in Western Europe as a scientific journalist and anarchist propagandist, his imprisonment in France, his assessment of some of the remarkable personalities of the anarchist movement, and his founding, with Charlotte Wilson, of the anarchist newspaper *Freedom*, which exists to this day. No reader will forget his chilling account of the assassination of Alexander II. For his public defence of the regicides he was expelled from Switzerland, and this is a reminder that Kropotkin was by no means simply «a man with a soul of that beautiful white Christ which seems coming out of Russia», which was how he appeared to Oscar Wilde.

He was in fact a much more complex character than is revealed in these pages. In some respects he was more like

a *philosophe* of the eighteenth-century enlightenment than of the Victorian age. He was an atheist, rationalist scholar with an optimistic faith in human perfectibility, and was by no means a romantic like Herzen or Bakunin. The reader of his memoirs will find neither the irony, the poetry, the pessimism and the humour of Herzen, nor the introspection and soul-searching religiosity of Tolstoy's later writing. Kropotkin was methodical, hard-working, intensely serious, immensely well-read, self-confident and absolutely certain that his own opinions were correct. At the same time he was a late-Victorian moralist, devoted to plain living and high thinking, who considered the operas of Offenbach «putrid». There is an extraordinary personal reticence about these memoirs once we move beyond the superlative evocation of his childhood and youth. We are not even told his wife's name, even though we learn that she took a Bachelor of Science at the University of Geneva. Nicolas Walter remarks that Kropotkin «describes ideas and characters, but not faces or voices». It is typical that while he mentions his renunciation first of a military and then of a scientific career, and the reasons for these decisions, he says not a word about his renunciation of his inheritance.

Tolstoy, in spite of his yearning for poverty, was a rich man, not only from his property but from his vast literary earnings. Alexander Herzen never knew financial want, for after he left Russia, his property was recovered for him by James Rothschild, the banker. Bakunin was as careless with his own money, when he had any, as he was with other people's. Kropotkin lost all his property when he escaped from Russia and never attempted to recover any. He lived in exile from his journalism. Almost all his books began

life as magazine articles and the *Memoirs* were no exception. After his visit to Canada and the United States in 1898 he was invited to write them as a series of six articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The book is, however, a more considered work than this would imply. Martin Miller, sifting through Kropotkin's papers and letters in Soviet archives, found numerous drafts and concluded that he had planned the work at three levels: «it was intended to be a literary accomplishment in the tradition of Herzen's *Past and Thoughts*, a social history of Russia during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and a personal record of Kropotkin's development from aristocrat to anarchist». Kropotkin himself would have preferred a neutral title, like that of the French edition, *Autour d'une vie*, but his publishers insisted on something more dramatic, just as they used the title «prince» on the covers of his books, even though he himself had abandoned this usage at the age of eleven, in imitation of those French revolutionary aristocrats who became commoners, «notwithstanding the remonstrances of my chiefs when I was in the military Service».

Paradoxically, it is in his account of his involvement in revolutionary movements that Kropotkin's narrative is least satisfactory as history. His opinions were more violent and intransigent than this hook reveals, and he glosses over the sharp differences of opinion in the Chaikovsky Circle in St Petersburg and in the anarchist Jura Federation, in both of which he belonged to what would now be regarded as the more extreme faction. No doubt this is partly because Kropotkin, a propagandist first and last, wanted to use his access to the general reading public to win sympathy for his cause, and partly because of the need to protect others

in both Russia and Europe from the attentions of the secret police of several governments. But it is also a reflection of a characteristic of Kropotkin's – the compulsion to praise, or at least to present people in a good light. Paul Goodman, in discussing the *Memoirs* and seeking the due to Kropotkin's personality, took a rather mechanical psychoanalytical approach (as did Martin Miller when he started his biography – only to abandon it because «the problems which were revealed by this approach appeared greater than the answers which were suggested»). Goodman wrote: «Beautiful (Mania dies when our hero is a small child. Papa, who is of coarser clay, takes another wife who is cold and tries to expunge all traces of previous paradise. Only the serfs conspiratorially keep alive the warm sentiments of Mania. The boy is under pressure to become a warrior like Papa, but he bides his time, accumulates experience, and then goes his own way, to strike at the very principle of paternal authority, the State, the Tsar himself. What is remarkable about the story in the case of Kropotkin, however, is that, blessed with intellect, boyish beauty, money and luck, he altogether abjures resentment and envy and seeks reconciliation. In the book this happens almost comically during the description of M. Poulain, the pedantic tutor brought in after Papa's remarriage. The passage starts with an account of idiotic authoritarian lessons and a taste of the birch-rod; but suddenly the child is rescued by his sister, and the author at once relents: 'No sooner had M. Poulain discharged himself of his heavy educational duties than he became quite another man, a lively comrade instead of a gruesome teacher'. From that point on, there is not a trace of ill-will in the *Memoirs* not toward anybody».

Granted that Kropotkin's public persona in Britain, that of a gentle sage or liberal saint, was misleading, and that he was more forceful and less willing to be contradicted than the recollections of eminent men of his day would suggest, he was indeed a man of immense benevolence. His shrewdest and most perceptive critic was his fellow anarchist Errico Malatesta who, knowing him intimately for almost forty years, wrote after his death, «I remember what he did in Geneva in the winter of 1879 to help a group of Italian refugees in dire straits, among them myself; I remember the small attentions I would call maternal, which he bestowed on me when one night in London, having been the victim of an accident I went and knocked on his door. I recall the innumerable kind actions towards all sorts of people; I remember the cordial atmosphere with which he was surrounded. Because he was a really good person, of that goodness which is almost unconscious and needs to relieve all suffering and be surrounded by smiles and happiness. One would have said that he was good without knowing it; but in any case he didn't like one saying so, and he was offended when I wrote in an article on the occasion of his seventieth birthday that his goodness was the first of his qualities. He would rather boast of his energy and courage – perhaps because these latter qualities had been developed in, and for, the struggle, whereas goodness was the spontaneous expression of his intimate nature».

Kropotkin was in his mid-fifties when the *Memoirs* were written and the reader who is unfamiliar with his other books will probably regret that he races through his years in England in the last few pages, and will wonder about his subsequent life. When he finally settled in England with his

wife and daughter, they lived very simply in small houses in Harrow, Bromley and finally Brighton. In the early years of his English life he travelled throughout the country and spoke at innumerable public meetings, on anarchism, on the prison System or the situation in Russia, and at trade union demonstrations like the Durham Miners' Gala or in support of minorities like the immigrant Jews in Whitechapel. As his health deteriorated more and more of his time was devoted to writing in several languages. From childhood until his last years Kropotkin was a compulsive journalist, and in his English years he wrote regularly for *Freedom*, for the French anarchist journal *Temps Nouveaux* and for a Russian journal *Khleb i Volia* (Bread and Freedom) published in Geneva and London. His anarchist journalism was translated into innumerable languages, from Yiddish to Japanese, and he became, as he still is, the most widely read anarchist propagandist in the whole world. All this, of course, was unpaid work. Apart from his contributions to scientific periodicals and to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the main non-anarchist journal to which he contributed was *The Nineteenth Century* and several of his books were serialized there: *In Russian and French Prisons; Fields, Factories and Workshops*; and *Mutual Aid*.

Highly regarded in scientific and geographical circles, Kropotkin had in Britain, as for so much of his life, one foot in established intellectual society and the other in the world of struggling revolutionary movements and journals. It was very useful for the latter to have this respected figure as a spokesman or intermediary, but his very eminence, both within the anarchist movement and in society at large, led to his becoming for the anarchists a kind of ora-

cle whose opinions were always right. The issue came to a head with his support of the Allied cause in the First World War, in opposition to the anti-nationalist and anti-militarist tradition not only of the anarchists but of the whole socialist movement. With a few exceptions, the majority of anarchists rejected his lead, and there were bitter denunciations both within the movement and in the wider world of socialist opinion. For the first time for over forty years the official Russian press was open to Kropotkin, when his letter appeared in *Russkiiia Vedomosti* calling for Russians of every political view to join forces against German aggression.

«The old fool must have completely lost his mind» wrote Stalin to Lenin, and the opening pages of Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914* evoke the confusion that the political about-turn brought to ordinary obscure sympathizers inside Russia. Varya is dismayed to find Sanya caught up in the general war fever: «Had he, her faithful mentor of old, taken leave of his senses too? She was now desperate to give him back the clarity of thought and firmness of will which he had once given her, to snatch him out of the Whirlpool... The decades of 'civic' literature, the ideals of the intelligentsia, the students» devotion to the common people – was all this to be abandoned and cast aside in a single moment? Could they simply forget it all?».

Kropotkin did forget it all, and, wheeled around Brighton in a bath chair after two chest operations, was more isolated from those who shared his general outlook than ever before in his life. He hoped, as he had hoped in 1881 and in 1905, to return to Russia. «That day when we can all return will be the greatest day of my life» he wrote to a Russian friend. A few months later, with the Febru-

ary Revolution and the abdication of the Tsar, Peter and Sophie Kropotkin (at the ages of 74 and 60) began packing for their return. He presented his desk, which had formerly belonged to Richard Cobden, to the Brighton Trades and Labour Club (which sixty years later gave it to the National Labour Museum at Limehouse Town Hall) and set off via Aberdeen and Bergen, arriving at the Finland Station in Petrograd on 30 May (12 June) 1917, where sixty thousand people, including Alexander Kerensky as head of the provisional government, were there to greet him. The anarchists, for the most part, were absent.

Even when faced with the realities of revolutionary Russia, Kropotkin went on advocating the continuance of the war. He was offered, but declined, a place in the provisional government, and was as surprised as anyone else by the success of the Bolshevik coup in October 1917. He settled at Dimitrov, forty miles from Moscow, and gradually re-established contact with the anarchists, with the guerilla activists from the Ukraine like Makhno and Volin, and with the deportees from the United States. In conditions of great hardship like those of most other Russians at the time, he worked on his hook on *Ethics*, which was published in an incomplete form after his death.

In 1920, with the visit to Russia of the British Labour Delegation, he entrusted to Margaret Bondfield (later the first woman cabinet minister in Britain) his «Message to the workers of the West» and in the same year the Bolshevik government put a railway coach at the disposal of the English Labour politician George Lansbury, in his capacity as editor of the *Daily Herald*, to visit Kropotkin. Lansbury was a widely respected pacifist socialist from the East

End of London who later became the leader of the Labour Party. He brought with him an American journalist, Griffin Barry, and, in the capacity of translators, three famous Russo-American anarchists, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Alexander Shapiro, who had been deported from the United States on the orders of Attorney-General Palmer. Emma Goldman, who gives a graphic description of their journey, reported that «We found Peter ill and worn-looking. He appeared a mere shadow of the sturdy man I had known in Paris and London in 1907. Since my coming to Russia I had been repeatedly assured by the most prominent Communists that Kropotkin lived in very comfortable circumstances and that he lacked neither food nor fuel; and here were Peter, his wife Sophie, and their daughter Alexandra, actually living in one room by no means sufficiently heated. The temperature in the other rooms was below zero, so they could not be inhabited. Their rations, sufficient to exist on, had until recently been supplied by the Dimitrov cooperative society. That organization had since been liquidated, like so many other similar institutions, and most of its members arrested and taken to the Butirky prison in Moscow. How did they manage to exist, we inquired. Sophie explained that they had a cow and enough produce from her garden for the winter. The comrades from the Ukraine, particularly Makhno, had contrived to supply them with extra provisions. They would have managed to better advantage had not Peter been ailing of late and in need of more nourishing food. Could nothing be done to rouse the responsible Communists to the fact that one of the greatest men of Russia was starving to death...»..

In fact, of course, the Kropotkins emphasized, their situation was no worse than that of the majority of Russians, and they preferred to discuss what Berkman called «the maze of revolutionary contradictions we had found in Russia». Their conversations are described in his book *The Bolshevik Myth*, in Emma Goldman's *My Disillusionment in Russia* and in her autobiography *Living My Life*:

Perhaps it was not so much Marxism as the Jesuitical spirit of its dogmas. The Bolsheviks were poisoned by it, their dictatorship surpassing the autocracy of the Inquisition. Their power was strengthened by the blustering statesmen of Europe. The blockade, the Allied support of the counter-revolutionary elements, the intervention, and all the other attempts to crush the Revolution had resulted in silencing every protest against Bolshevik tyranny within Russia itself. «Is there no one to speak out against it?» I demanded, «no one whose voice would carry weight? Yours, for instance, dear comrade?» Peter smiled sadly. I would know better, he said, after I had been a while longer in the country. The gag was the most complete in the world. He had protested, of course, and so had others, among them the venerable Vera Figner, as well as Maxim Gorky on several occasions. It had no effect whatever, nor was it possible to do any writing with the Cheka constantly at one's door. One could not keep «incriminating» things in one's house nor expose others to the peril of discovery. It was not fear; it was the realization of the futility and impossibility of reaching the world from the inner prisons of the Cheka. The main drawback, however, was the enemies surrounding Russia. Anything said or written against the Bolsheviks was bound to be interpreted by the outside world as an attack upon the Revolution and as alignment with the reactionary forces. The anarchists in particular were between two fires. They could not

make peace with the formidable power of the Kremlin, nor could they join hands with the enemies of Russia. Their only alternative at present, it seemed to Peter, was to find some work of direct benefit to the masses. He was glad that we had decided on that. «Ridiculous of Lenin to want to bind you to the apron-strings of the party», he declared. «It shows how far mere shrewdness is from wisdom».

Kropotkin's own letters to Lenin, dating from this period, are full of interest. In the first he intervened on behalf of the postal workers of Dimitrov, drawing attention to their situation, «scurrying from office to office to secure permission to buy a cheap kerosene lamp». This letter ends: «One thing is certain. Even if a party dictatorship were the proper means to strike a blow against the capitalist System (which I strongly doubt), it is positively harmful for the building of a new socialist System. What is needed is local construction by local forces. Yet this is absent. It exists nowhere. Instead, wherever one turns there are people who have never known any real life committing the most flagrant errors, errors paid for in thousands of lives and in the devastation of whole regions». It hardly needs saying that he received no reply, but, conscious of the fact that, whatever his own errors, he was regarded as an elder statesman of the revolution, Kropotkin wrote again to Lenin, on 21 December 1920, six weeks before his death, to protest against the Bolshevik practice of taking hostages:

I have read in today's *Pravda* an official communiqué from the Council of People's Commissars, according to which it has been decided to keep as hostages several officers of Wrangel's army. I cannot believe that there is no single man about you to tell you

that such decisions recall the darkest Middle Ages, the period of the Crusades. Vladimir Illich, your concrete actions are completely unworthy of the ideas you pretend to hold.

Is it possible that you do not know what a hostage really is – a man imprisoned not because of a crime he has committed, but only because it suits his enemies to exercise blackmail on his companions? These men must feel very much like men who have been condemned to death, and whose inhuman executioners announce every day at noon that the execution has been postponed until the next day. 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 as 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 defence now introduced into Russia with the seizure of hostages.

How can you, Vladimir Illich, 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? Such a measure is tantamount to confessing publicly that you adhere to the ideas of yesterday. But perhaps, with the seizure of hostages, you do not try to save your work, but merely your own life? Are you so blinded, so much a prisoner of your authoritarian ideas, that you do not realize that, being at the head of European Communism, you have no right to soil the ideas which you defend by shameful methods, methods which are not only the proof of a monstrous error, but also of an unjustifiable fear for your own life? What future lies in store for Communism when one of its most important defenders tramples in this way on every honest feeling?

Kropotkin died on 8 February 1921. His body lay in state in the former Hall of Columns in Moscow, where over seventy years earlier, dressed as a little Persian prince, he had been presented to Nicholas I. The story is always told of how the imprisoned anarchists were released for one day to attend the funeral. Some of them were, and among them was Aaron Baron, recalled by Victor Serge: «Emaciated, bearded, wearing gold spectacles, he stood erect and cried out in defiant protest against the new despotism, against the butchers at work in the dungeons, against the dishonour that had been brought upon socialism, against the violence by which the government was trampling the revolution under foot».

In the same year Nestor Makhno's peasant armies were finally defeated in the Ukraine and the revolt of the Kronstadt Soviet was brutally suppressed. The black flag of the Russian anarchists was not seen again until the revolts in the labour camps after Stalin's death in 1953.

Kropotkin himself was not forgotten in post-revolutionary Russia. His birthplace in the Shtatny Pereulok, now renamed Kropotkinski Pereulok, became a museum tended by his son-in-law Nicholas Lebedev, who also edited the incomplete book *Ethics*. Sophie Kropotkin lived there until her death in 1938, when Kropotkin's papers were dispersed in various state archives. The house, with a plaque commemorating Kropotkin on its wall, is now the Anglo-American primary school in Moscow. A mountain range in Siberia is named after him, as are several towns and schools, and apart from the Russian translations of the present English text of the *Memoirs*, versions of the Russian text were published in Moscow in 1924, 1929, 1930, 1933, and 1966. One of these editions was intended for schoolchildren.

There is in fact no definitive version of Kropotkin's *Memoirs*. He worked simultaneously in the intervals between more pressing tasks on both the Russian and the English manuscripts, and the Russian editions of 1924 and 1929 contain additions to the text and additional chapters. The edition published in Moscow in 1966, though lacking these chapters, has a valuable annotated index by its editor, Valentina Alexandrovna Tvardovskaya. The present text is that of the original English edition of 1899, which differs slightly from that of the first American edition of the same year. This version has been the basis of translations into at least fifteen languages. Some explanatory footnotes have been added, and Kropotkin's transliteration of Russian names has been modified with the aim, not of consistency, but of readability, and the English version of forenames has been retained or adopted. A few names which Kropotkin felt obliged to conceal have been inserted.

In preparing this edition I have been greatly indebted to Nicolas Walter, not only for the information in the footnotes, but for innumerable other kindnesses. I should mention for the reader who wants to pursue the subject further that there are two available biographies of Kropotkin in English. The first is *The Anarchist Prince* by George Woodcock and Ivan Avacumovic (London: Boardman 1950, New York: Schocken Paperbacks, 1971, London: Wildwood House 1973), and the second is *Kropotkin* by Martin Miller (Chicago University Press 1976). More of Kropotkin's books (as well as several collections of his pamphlets) are available today than at any time since his death. For a current list, the reader should write to the publishing house of which Kropotkin was a founder, Freedom Press, 84b Whitechapel High Street, London E1.



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