

An Introduction*

(1989)

by *George Woodcock*

We do not usually consider Peter Kropotkin as a figure in the Russian literary tradition. We tend to think of him as the geographer of great promise who sacrificed his career to become an anarchist militant; as the anarchist militant who in the end salvaged his scientific training to frame an acceptable libertarian philosophy. We rarely recognize the place he holds as a man of letters of a very Russian kind.

It is the *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* that places Kropotkin firmly within that tradition. Autobiography was a more important genre among the Russians than has been generally recognized, whether it was openly personal or thinly disguised as fiction. Perhaps the most important early book written by a Russian was *The Life of the Arch-*

* George Woodcock, «Introduction» to Pëtr Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, Black Rose Books, Montréal-New York, 1989.

priest Avvakum, the seventeenth century autobiography of one of the leaders of the heretical sect of the Old Believers. And ever since Avvakum's time, autobiographies, like other forms of literature in Russia, have usually been written with an elusive subversiveness.

In more recent times the most outstanding overt autobiographies by Russians were Alexander Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*, with its vivid recollections of the intellectual awakening of Russia in the 1840s and its splendid portraits of Proudhon and Bakunin, and Maxim Gorky's three-volume *Autobiography*. In the 1850s, Sergey Aksakov wrote two very thinly fictionalized memoirs, *A Russian Gentleman* and *Years of Childhood*, which painted a remarkable picture of life in the Russian countryside in the days of serfdom. Even the great masters of Russian fiction started off with autobiography barely disguised. Tolstoy's first small books, *Childhood*, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, were really recollections under another name of his own experiences, and even *The Cossacks* was largely autobiographical. Dostoevsky's masterpiece on the Siberian prison camps, *The House of the Dead*, was almost straight personal experience with a fragile fictional frame, and Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*, by which he helped convince the Russian educated class that the serfs were human beings like themselves, was much more matter of recollection than of invention.

It is among Russian classics of this kind that *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* belongs, as much as it belongs among the classic works of the anarchist tradition, and I suspect that Kropotkin was greatly conscious of this fact when he wrote the book towards the end of the 1890s. The active portion of his life as a militant had come to an end and he spent

more time writing in his study and cultivating his garden *à la Voltaire* than he did in active propaganda. By this time he moved on the verges of English literary circles, if he did not belong to them already, and many late Victorian writers were among his, admirers and acquaintances – even friends – including Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, Edward Carpenter and Frank Harris, William Morris and Ford Madox Ford. Some of the great Russian writers of his time certainly treated him as a colleague and an equal. Though they never met, he and Tolstoy exchanged messages of appreciation and affection and were both involved in bringing the Doukhobors to Canada. And in France, he became the friend of Ivan Turgenev, visiting him during his last terrible illness.

Kropotkin also wrote a book on the literature of his country, *Ideals and Realities in Russian Literature*, which is still worth reading if one bears in mind that Kropotkin was not primarily concerned with the aesthetic aspects of writing, but was sharply aware of the didactic inclination of Russian writing in the nineteenth century, an awareness that is indispensable for understanding even such an apparently unpolitical writer as Anton Chekhov. One feels that Kropotkin is writing from inside rather than from outside the tradition of Russian literature when he says, in *Ideals and Realities*:

In no other country does literature occupy so influential a position as it does in Russia. Nowhere else does it exercise so profound and so direct an influence upon the intellectual development of the younger generation. There are novels of Turgenev, and even of the less-known writers, which have been real stepping-stones

in the development of Russian youth within the last fifty years.

The reason why literature exercises such an influence in Russia is self-evident. There is no open political life, and with the exception of a few years at the time of the abolition of serfdom, the Russian people have never been called upon to take an active part in the framing of their country's institutions.

The consequence has been that the best minds of the country have chosen the poem, the novel, the satire, or literary criticism as the medium for expressing their aspirations, their conceptions of national life, of their ideals. It is not to blue-books, or to newspapers, but to its works of art that one must go in Russia in order to understand the political, economical, and social ideals of the country – the aspirations of the history-making portions of Russian society.

Memoirs of a Revolutionist is a book written with multiple intent, and it therefore offers us a great deal more than a mere autobiography, the life of one man. In its earlier parts Kropotkin offers a wide-ranging panorama of the Russia in which he grew up, and where, in his boyhood, serfdom prevailed. In the process he tells us a good deal about his scientific discoveries during his years as an explorer in Siberia, and as an apprentice geographer. The latter part of the book concerns his life as an underground revolutionary in Russia, and later, as an anarchist during the 1880s in continental Europe, particularly in France and Switzerland; in the process, he not only discusses some of the basic ideas he contributed to anarchist theory, but also tells us a great deal about continental anarchist movements and personalities.

As an autobiography *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* is incomplete, covering little more than half of Kropot-

kin's life. He wrote it at the urging of Walter Hines Page, then the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, whom he met when he made a trip to the United States in 1897. He appears to have written his narrative during the latter part of 1897 and the first half of 1898. Hines published it in monthly parts between September 1898 and September 1899 under the title of *Autobiography of a Revolutionist*, and the work appeared in volume form late in 1899 with the changed title, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. The abortive Russian revolutionary movement of 1905-6 was the occasion for a second edition and it is this that we have used for the present reprint, since it contains a special preface in which Kropotkin reflects at length on these events in Russia and on their significance.

In writing the *Memoirs* Kropotkin was holding to a sound principle in autobiography. Never discuss the events of your life immediately they occur; allow time for reflection in tranquillity and for memory to have done its work of discarding the inessential facts and arranging the rest in some meaningful pattern. *The Memoirs* virtually terminates when Kropotkin's days as a militant come to an end with his release from prison in France in 1886, after which he went to live in England. It would remain his home until he returned to Russia in 1917, where he died in 1921. He was looking back more than ten years when he wrote, for he devotes a very scanty space – about ten pages – to the welcome he received in Britain and does not even mention the founding of *Freedom*, in which he was so closely involved. Thus the *Memoirs* really covered only his first 44 years, but this was the formative half of a long life, on which his later achievements as a writer would be based.

In the world of autobiographers, Kropotkin seems nearer to St. Augustine than to Rousseau, for the central narrative of his *Memoirs* is that of a conversion, how he became transformed from a young aristocrat with military and later with scientific ambitions into a dedicated revolutionary militant who turned his back on his past, his class and his country. There is even a journey to Damascus in the story, for it was when he was travelling through the remoter parts of Finland, on a lonely geological investigation, that Kropotkin reached the mental parting of the ways. When he received a telegram offering him the secretaryship of the Russian Geographical Society, and the position in the scientific establishment it implied, he rejected the invitation and took the path that would lead to a life of conspiracy and finally to prison, escape and exile.

In all this Kropotkin was acting like many another conscience-stricken young nobleman in that time of «going to the people» when the radical young of Russia were disillusioned with the Tsar Alexander II, who had liberated the serfs and then halted on the path to reform that so many people hoped he would continue. But Kropotkin was different from most of the other gentlemen of Russia in the breadth of his intellectual interests and in his ability to adapt to societies other than his own. While many Russian exiles kept to their kind in little Slavic ghettos in the cities of western Europe, Kropotkin continued there the work he had begun in Russia so that, like other great converts, he propagated the faith to the end of his days.

On this level, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* is a fascinating account of intellectual development and change, and of the emotional transformations which accompany such change,

but on another level, Kropotkin shows a remarkable reticence. There is nothing here of the compulsive exhibitionism of Rousseau's *Confessions*. Kropotkin does not confess; he explains himself as a revolutionary, and matters extraneous to that explanation find little place in his narrative. For example, he never tells us of his marriage or how he met his wife or even who she was. She appears at the points in the narrative where she plays a part in his revolutionary life, not before. No other sexual relationships are mentioned, and we speculate in vain on his possible liaisons with the liberated young nihilist women he encountered in Russia and Switzerland. Perhaps there were none. Like Proudhon and Bakunin, Kropotkin was something of a revolutionary prude; he was embarrassed by Emma Goldman's sexually free conversation and highly disapproving when his admirer Oscar Wilde got into trouble for homosexual acts.

One suspects that he was in fact a man to whom friendships meant far more than sexual relationships, and one of the attractive aspects of the *Memoirs* is the warmth with which he writes of the people he encountered during his varied life, from the house serfs of his childhood to the anarchist watchmakers of the Jura. His lack of malice is striking. He condemns oppressors because they are oppressors, but he always remembers they are human beings, and one of the best portraits in the book is the gradually developing one of the Tsar Alexander II, whom Kropotkin served in his youth as a page, watching him close at hand, and perceiving the mixture of generosity and weakness that first made Alexander a hero among progressive Russians for his liberation of the serfs and then made the young people of the Narodnaya Volya assassinate him for the reactionary direction in which he had regressed. Kro-

potkin, one realizes, could never have thrown the bomb that killed Alexander, though he refused to condemn those who did. He saw too clearly the pathos of good intentions eroded by fear; he saw the Tsar as a tragic human being.

But the *Memoirs* is so much more than autobiography, even though some of its incidents, like Kropotkin's escape from prison and his explorations in unknown territories have the flavour of high adventure. As a boy living in the big town and country houses of the old Russian nobility, as a student in the Corps of Pages, as a page in the Winter Palace aware of all its intrigues, as a young officer in Siberia exploring the unknown borderlands of Manchuria, and finally, as a conspirator mingling with the factory workers of St. Petersburg while he kept up appearances by continuing to visit his friends in the palace, he had unique opportunities for observing the Russia of that prerevolutionary age. In the first two-thirds of the *Memoirs* he uses these memories, often so detailed and so sharply visual, to present a kind of personal history of his country and his time, constantly relating the daily life of Russians to political events of the period and showing how they interact. It is surprising indeed that the book has been so little used by teachers of Russian and Comparative Literatures, since it gives an admirable background to the novels of Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, for often the people he describes and the world in which he places them remind one of the Russian types whom the novelists brought to life and of the settings in which they placed them, quite apart from the fact that Kropotkin shared many of the moral and intellectual concerns of these notable contemporaries. Anyone studying Turgenev in particular will find, in the real life of

the *Memoirs*, the very kind of young people, troubled by ideas of freedom within an autocratic society, that the novelist developed into the characters of novels like *Fathers and Sons*, *Smoke* and *Virgin Soil*.

The first half of the *Memoirs* shows the events and influences of childhood, youth and young manhood that predisposed Kropotkin to become a rebel. What he saw of the treatment of Polish rebels exiled in Siberia probably tipped the balance of his intentions, in an emotional sense, but the intellectual structure of his revolutionary ideas were developed less in Russia – where he stood aside from native populist movements like Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will) – than in western Europe, to which he made his first trip in 1872, at a time when the First International was breaking apart into its Marxist and anarchist wings. There, even before he started the activity in the Tchaikovsky circle in St. Petersburg that led to his arrest in 1874, he made contact with the anarchists of the Jura federation and absorbed the ideas they in their turn had absorbed from Kropotkin's Russian predecessor, Michael Bakunin.

When after his escape in 1876 from the prison hospital in St. Petersburg (and not, as one legend asserts, from the Peter-and-Paul Fortress) he returned to the west, he fitted naturally into the Bakuninist section of the International and, in the process of working with French, Swiss and Italian comrades, developed the concept of anarchist communism that has been especially associated with him. This development is well delineated in the *Memoirs*, which at this point provide us with interesting, and in some cases unique, portraits of the little known anarchist pioneers working in the hill villages of the Jura. When the Swiss

authorities made him unwelcome, he moved to France, which was still in a period of reaction following the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1870, and his activities there led to his arrest in 1882 in connection with disturbances in Lyons, in which he had played no part. He was nevertheless tried and sentenced to his second term of imprisonment, this time served mostly in St. Bernard's historic abbey of Clairvaux, secularised during the French Revolution and turned into a prison. A decade before the *Memoirs* appeared, he had already written of his jail experiences in *In Russian and French Prisons* (1887), one of the classic denunciations of penal methods.

Memoirs of a Revolutionist follows an easy conversational pace but at times it seems, to a modern reader, somewhat excessively prolix. The passages discussing Kropotkin's theories of revolution and of anarchist communism largely repeat what he had already said in *Paroles d'un Révolté* and in the original 1892 French edition of *The Conquest of Bread*, but these were probably justified by the fact that the *Memoirs* provided a first opportunity to present such ideas to a broad English-speaking audience in the United States and Britain. One certainly welcomes the fact that in the few highly condensed final pages after 1886 he does at least sketch out the background to the work in which he blended his scientific and revolutionary pasts in a timely reassessment of the most important scientific issue of the time – that of evolution, as applied to human as well as animal societies – out of which emerged his other great book, *Mutual Aid*, that would be published in 1902, three years after the *Memoirs*. It was clearly much on his mind while he was engaged in autobiographical writing.

But, in general, we go to Kropotkin's other books for his seminal discussions of the libertarian reordering of society. We go to the *Memoirs* for its vivid picture of a long past Russia, for its record of the emergence of anarchism from a more generalized movement of social protest in nineteenth century Europe, and for its moving account of how an individual deeply implicated in that old unjust Russian society could liberate and transform himself while the society could not. So that in general form, though much has changed in detail, Russia is still after its revolution an autocratic realm, as Kropotkin uneasily foresaw before his death in his homeland a generation after the *Memoirs* was written.



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