Kropotkin, Pëtr Alekseevič

*by Ruth Kinna*

**Introduction**

Pëtr Kropotkin was a writer and propagandist active in the international anarchist movement from 1872-1921. As well as co-founding two influential anarchist papers, *Le Révolté* (1879) and *Freedom* (1886), he lectured and toured extensively. He completed ten major books, several important pamphlets and reports and regularly contributed articles to the anarchist press and intellectual periodicals. His writing, published in cheap editions and in translation, circulated widely throughout Western Europe and North America. His influence was immense: his ideas were adopted by activists involved in the 1911 Mexican Revolution and the 1929 Korean Anarchist Federation in Manchuria. Although Kropotkin’s support for the Entente against the Central powers in 1914 damaged his standing in the anarchist movement his status as a leading theorist of anarchism was unaffected.

**Early life and Political Development**

Born in Moscow in 1842 Kropotkin was brought up among aristocratic families that had been powerful before the reign of Tsar Peter I but who had been displaced in the early seventeenth century by the Romanovs. The Kropotkin family descended from the Ruriks, the first Tsars of Russia and Kropotkin, who traced his ancestry to a thirteenth century Grand Prince of Kiev, was well-aware of the advantages of his social position. He was also conscious of the effects of inequality and the inherent injustice of serfdom. Swayed by his tutor’s republican sympathies and particularly impressed by his tale of the French revolutionary leader, the Comte de Mirabeau, he distanced himself from his inherited status. When he heard that Mirabeau had relinquished his title to show his disdain for aristocratic privilege, Kropotkin followed suit. He dropped ‘prince’ from his name when he was only 12 years old. At this time, most of the subversive literature circulating in the 1850s was inaccessible to him, but he knew it by repute.

Kropotkin made a favourable impression on Nicholas I (1796-1855) when the Tsar visited Moscow in 1850 and was granted a place in the elite military academy, the Corps of Pages. His training began in 1857. He found military drill unappealing but enjoyed the schooling and excelled academically. Graduating with distinction, he turned down the chance to enter the Guards at St. Petersburg, a coveted court position, and opted instead to join the Cossacks of the Amur. The decision bewildered his family, but the move was serendipitous: the unit was based on Eastern Siberia and Kropotkin was anxious to see life in the remote parts of the Empire. He had begun to edit his first revolutionary paper as a liberal constitutionalist in 1859 or 1860.

When he arrived in Siberia in 1862 he found himself in in congenial company. Appointed Lieutenant of the Cossacks and later *aide-de-camp* to the Governor of Transbaikalia, he pursued civil rather than military projects, producing reports on conditions affecting coastal settlements on the Amur and the causes of famine. Finding that the authorities in St. Petersburg were uninterested in his proposed reforms, he concluded that it was pointless to continue working in the military. He left the service in 1867 and returned to St Petersburg. Resuming his education, he worked on the orography of Asia and from 1867-1874, serving as secretary to the Physical Geography Section of the Geographical Society. During a tour of Finland, he decided that his political ambitions were also ill suited to a research career. Turning down an invitation to become secretary to the Russian Geographical Society, he gravitated towards St. Petersburg’s nihilist circles.

In 1872 Kropotkin made his first visit to western Europe. Having joined a local section of the International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA) in Zurich, he made his way to the anarchist haven of Neuchâtel in the Jura. There, he met Michail Bakunin’s comrade James Guillaume but missed Bakunin himself, who was in Locarno. Witnessing the deprivations of the western workers and hearing first-hand accounts of the brutal suppression of the Paris Commune (1871), Kropotkin returned to Russia disillusioned with liberalism. He now called himself an anarchist. Back in St. Petersburg he joined the Chaikovsky Circle, a group with organisations across Russia. The Circle brought progressives from different parts of the anti-Tsarist movement into contact with each other and served as a launchpad for Kropotkin’s revolutionary career. In 1874 he was arrested and then imprisoned without trial. After a dramatic escape from the infirmary of the Peter-Paul Fortress in 1876 he left Russia, making a brief stop in Britain before re-joining Guillaume in Switzerland, setting in La Chaux-de-Fonds just after Bakunin’s death.

In 1879 Kropotkin co-founded *Le Révolté* to direct anarchist propaganda to French workers. He began a collaboration with fellow geographer Élisée Reclus, re-locating to Clarens, near the French border, to be near him. After the Swiss Government expelled him in 1881, he attended the London International Anarchist Conference and stayed for a year. By the time he returned in 1882, France was in the grip of a red scare. He was arrested and imprisoned for his membership of the then defunct IWMA. After an international campaign secured his release, he settled in London in 1886 and remained in Britain until 1917, when he returned to Russia. His stature made him unwelcome in Soviet Russia. After the 1917 Bolshevik revolution he was ordered from Moscow to Dmitrov, a small town some 80 kilometres north. Kropotkin died in 1921. His funeral was the last occasion that anarchists gathered *en masse* in Russia.

**Political Theory**

Kropotkin’s disillusion with western liberalism was reflected in his first collection of essays, *Paroles d'un Révolté*. This presented a critique of anti-parliamentary socialism and representative government, a defence of communism and communalism and an account of revolutionary action. Kropotkin’s advocacy of anarchist communism was novel: the Bakuninist movement had described itself as collectivist. Kropotkin’s political theory was otherwise a comprehensive, accessible restatement of anarchism rather than a new departure. At its centre was critique of social contract.

Kropotkin understood contract as a conceptual device to legitimise domination through the appropriation of individual sovereignty by the state. The concept of consent was used to establish a permanent, fixed point of authority and present the rule of law as a neutral instrument of justice, although political arrangements actually embedded inequality through the defence of property and perpetuated repressive norms, for example patriarchy, by normalising existing social hierarchies. The resulting political order bred social division, competition and international instability.

Kropotkin enriched his analysis with a historical sociology of the state. He defined the European state as a colonising force which enjoyed a territorial monopoly of violence. State formation was a process through which those functions vested in established community institutions were forcibly appropriated by absorption, preventing organic development. Driven by religiously sanctioned military-industrial elites, the state stretched itself globally through replication, and imperialist colonisation of non-European territories. His book *In French and Russia Prisons* (1887) presented an account of the state modelled on the prison.

**State and anarchy**

Kropotkin argued that democratic control of the state would leave relationships of domination intact and that the abolition class power within the state would place the instruments of control in the hands of a new elite. Calling for the state’s abolition, in *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1898)and *The Conquest of Bread* (1906) he investigated decentralised federation, using the Paris Commune to model the constituent social units. A new political economy of needs, based on the integration of agriculture and industry in localities, the abolition of labour divisions, wage systems and international trade, underpinned his system.

In his best-known book, *Mutual Aid* (1902), Kropotkin argued that the principles of co-operation that anarchy relied upon were visible in the natural world and environmentally conditioned, just as in the state competition was cultivated. However, the success of anarchy was not historically guaranteed. Kropotkin attributed this position to Marx and rejected it. Rebellion against capitalism and repression was likely to occur in the future, but the lesson he took from the French Revolution was that success required revolutionaries to work consciously towards a definite aim. His political theory was a contribution to this goal. It presented anarchy as attractive and achievable and set out a series of constructive proposals for its realisation.

Challenging the foundational idea of the contract, Kropotkin also highlighted the partiality of political theory itself. He argued that the prevailing construction of anarchy as a condition of disorder gave rise to a conceptual language biased towards statism. To remedy this, he proposed that all fields of knowledge be revised ‘from the bottom up’ to facilitate genuinely open analysis. To achieve this end, he adopted new concepts, ‘mutual aid’ and ‘free agreement’ into political theory, arguing that both were embedded in working people’s everyday practices. Mutual aid described a learned ethical disposition towards justice ‘without sanction or obligation’, adaptable to social conditions. Free agreement was a principle of consensus predicated on individual sovereignty and essential to co-operation without domination.

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**Cross references:** Michail Bakunin; Karl Marx