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Memorializing Kropotkin

Allan Antliff

2023

In February 2023, *The London Review of Books* (LRB) published ‘Anarchism’s Failure,’ a feature review by historian Greg Afinogenov of Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* in tandem with a book on Russian populism.¹ Summarizing anarchism’s tenets, Afinogenov opined; ‘It would be hard for an outside observer to dispute Eric Hobsbawm’s [1917–2012] claim that “the history of anarchism, almost alone among modern social movements, is one of unrelieved failure”’.² Ah, yes, the Communist Party of Great Britain’s (CPGB) most celebrated historian had a habit of disparaging anarchism, perhaps in a bid to deflect attention from Marxism’s disastrous track record.³

¹ Greg Afinogenov, ‘What should the action be?’ *London Review of Books* 45, 9 (May 4, 2023): 15–18.

² *Ibid.*, p18.

³ Afinogenov doesn’t provide a citation, however in Hobsbawm’s *Revolutionaries* (1973), which was written in part in response to anarchism’s renewal during the 1960s, we learn ‘no amount of sympathy can alter the fact that anarchism as a revolutionary movement has failed, that it has almost been designed for failure’, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson), p99. Hobsbawm maintained CPGB membership until the party’s demise in 1991. The Marxist tenor of his scholarship is discussed in Richard J. Evans, ‘Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm, 1917–

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In the spirit of ‘with and without,’ Afinogenov goes on to present a fanciful tale concerning Lenin’s treatment of Kropotkin during 1918–21 by way of squaring the circle vis-à-vis the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) posthumously honouring the anarchist’s memory.⁴ ‘Kropotkin’ we are told, ‘viewed Lenin as a dictatorial figure, and implored him in letters to abstain from the use of terror and the taking of political hostages’:

Lenin admired Kropotkin nonetheless. As his secret police hounded down the last remnants of Russian populism, he ensured that Kropotkin could live out his declining years in comfort in his dacha outside Moscow. When Kropotkin died in February 1921, dozens of anarchists were released from Moscow’s prisons to attend the lavish funeral and all the leading party newspapers carried laudatory announcements ... Anarchism and populism had few enemies more bitter than the Soviet brand of communism, but this was because the Bolsheviks saw themselves as continuing and overcoming the revolutionary traditions these approaches represented. But thanks to the Soviet government, streets, squares, towns, and metro

colonnade to the station is topped by an archway announcing you are entering the ‘V.I. Lenin Metro Underground’.

2012,’ *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XIV 2015: www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk (accessed 20/08/2023)

⁴ Lenin changed the name of his ‘Bolshevik’ faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party to ‘Communist’ in March 1918. The ‘Bolshevik’ (majority) designation originated at the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party’s Second Congress (1903), which was convened in exile (first Brussels, then London). The issue was whether party membership be restricted to professional revolutionaries (Lenin’s position). At the congress Lenin’s proposal was outvoted, but his faction did secure majorities in the party’s central committee and on the editorial board of the party newspaper, *Iskra*. On this fallacious basis, Lenin dubbed his own faction the ‘Bolsheviks’ and labelled his opponents the ‘Mensheviks’ (minority). Arguably, the ‘Communist’ rebrand was just as duplicitous.

David Kogan, Mark Mrachny, Aleksey Olonetsky, and Olga Taratuta.¹³

Marchers sang traditional revolutionary songs and well-known tunes with new lyrics: 'Our Lenin panicked, he issued a manifesto: All honours to the dead, the living under arrest'; 'We are crushed, comrades, by the power of the communists, The Chekist-enemy is in charge everywhere'.¹⁴ They also paraded placards and black banners emblazoned with arrest-worthy slogans such as 'Where there is authority, there is no freedom', and 'The liberation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves'.¹⁵ Prominent among them was a declaration displayed in the Hall of Columns while Kropotkin lay in state: 'We demand the release from prison dungeons of anarchists struggling for the ideas of Kropotkin – anarchy'.¹⁶

Kropotkin Station

At last, we come to Afinogenov's metro stations. I suppose the penultimate Communist 'with and without' tribute to Kropotkin is the Kropotkinskaya subway station in Moscow, which opened in 1935. Originally named Dvoretz ('Palace'), the station was envisaged as the underground gateway to the future Palace of the Soviets, a massive Christmas cake-type structure (higher than the Empire State building) sporting a ginormous statue of Kropotkin's bosom buddy, Lenin.¹⁷ The Palace was never completed, and when the authorities quietly renamed 'Dvoretz' 'Kropotkinskyaya' in 1957, the deft erasure of the memory of an architectural fiasco merging with propagandistic lies clanged a familiar bell. By way of compensation (or bombastic inversion), the neo-classical street entrance

¹³ Ibid. For most of the procession, Kropotkin's coffin was transported by a carriage on wheels.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, p227.

¹⁶ Dubovik, p4.

¹⁷ Wikipedia has a thoroughly researched history of the project. See 'Palace of the Soviets': en.wikipedia.org (accessed 20/08/2023).

stations all over Russia still bear Kropotkin's name'.⁵

Imagine pondering Lenin's caring comfort while reading the summary of daughter Alexandra Kropotkin's talk at a 9 May 1961 memorial marking the fortieth anniversary of her father's death:

The Bolsheviks wanted to make political capital out of Kropotkin's popularity. In public they seemed to do everything possible to make him comfortable. Behind this hypocritical façade they filled his last days with harassments and bitterness. They held back the foreign papers that were sent to him and censored his mail. To obtain the slightest thing, Alexandra had to wade through miles of red tape and fill out reams of forms and questionnaires ...

Alexandra and her mother did not want a government funeral and insisted Kropotkin be buried in the family plot. The Bolsheviks wanted to inter the body under the Kremlin wall, but Alexandra told them her father's bones would never be mixed with the remains of scoundrels who were drowning the revolution in the blood of the Russian people.

Alexandra promised her dying father that she would try to free the imprisoned anarchists and other revolutionaries. She threatened to expose the phonies [Bolsheviks] to the delegation of foreign newsmen who attended the funeral. She told the leaders of the Bolsheviks that if they tried to monopolize the funeral, she would throw

⁵ Afinogenov, p18.

all the government wreaths into the mud. Her efforts, along with those of many others, forced the commissars to relent. They released a few anarchists, who attended the funeral and who were later put back in prison.

Thousands of people marched in the funeral procession. As the cortege passed the Butyrskaya prison,⁶ the prisoners waved their greeting [prison cells had barred windows facing the streets] while singing the Anarchist Funeral March.⁷

Kropotkin died in the village of Dmitrov because this is where his family was driven after apartments in Moscow were repeatedly 'requisitioned': systemic harassment included two raids by the Cheka (acronym for 'Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage', the secret police organisation decreed into existence by Lenin in 1917).⁸ In March 1920, when Emma Goldman visited Kropotkin,

⁶ Located in central Moscow, this is where the Bolsheviks interned many political prisoners. Paul Avrich documents anarchists being subject to beatings while imprisoned there. See Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p235.

⁷ 'The Libertarian Book Club Commemorates the Fortieth Anniversary of the Death of Peter Kropotkin' (1961), pp3-4. Box 12, folder 6, Paul Avrich Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁸ Kropotkin's Moscow apartments were 'requisitioned' in quick succession by the authorities until he relocated to Dmitrov in the summer of 1918. See Herbert Read, introduction to *Kropotkin: Selections from His Writings Chosen by Herbert Read* (London: Freedom Press, 1942), pp12-13. Emma Goldman mentions the Cheka raids in her memoir, see Emma Goldman, *Living My Life: Vol. 2* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p865. Answerable solely to the Communist Party, the Cheka engaged in hostage taking, torture and summary killings with impunity: over 1917- 1921 the Cheka is estimated to have executed 143,000 people. See 'Entry: Cheka' in R.W. Pringle (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Intelligence* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), pp58-60.

she found the seventy-seven year old militant living in one barely-heated room with his entire family. The temperature in the rest of the house was below zero. Provisions depended on what they grew in their garden (a cow provided milk), plus donations sent by anarchist comrades.⁹ Afinogenov: 'Lenin ... ensured that Kropotkin could live out his declining years in comfort in his dacha outside Moscow'.

As for the 'lavish funeral,' which Afinogenov implies was Lenin's doing, it was organised by a committee of anarchist-syndicalists and anarchist-communists, who arranged for Kropotkin's body to lie in state for public viewing during 10-12 February in the Hall of Columns of the House of Unions, Moscow.¹⁰ Their first and only request to the government, submitted to Lenin, was that all anarchists held in prison be freed to attend the funeral.¹¹ This was met with obfuscations and evasions right up to the last moment, when the Cheka brought a few dozen prisoners to the Hall of Columns and selected seven for release (with hostage guarantees).¹² Tens of thousands of mourners (perhaps up to 100,000) accompanied Kropotkin to his final resting place on 13 February, and the coffin was carried part of the way by the emaciated anarchists "on leave" – Aron and Fanya Baron, Aleksandr Guevsky,

⁹ At first a local cooperative society supplied the family with rations, but it was repressed and finally 'liquidated' in November 1920, when most of the organisers were imprisoned. See Goldman, *Living My Life: Vol. 2*, p769 and George Woodcock, 'Anarchists who returned: Kropotkin, Goldman and Berkman in Russia, 1917-1921', p62: www.dbnl.org (accessed 20/08/2023)

¹⁰ Anatoly Dubovik, 'From Prison to the Cemetery: How Ukrainian and Moscow Anarchists Turned Kropotkin's Funeral into a Political Rally,' 3 (13 February 2021), Malcolm Archibald (trans.), www.katesharpleylibrary.net

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p3.

¹² *Ibid.*, p4. The Cheka demanded hostages to ensure the anarchists would return: a group of students volunteered to take their place should they fail to do so.