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Observations and Comments on Kropotkin and the European War

Mother Earth

1915

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*An untitled excerpt and letter from 'Mother Earth', January
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Alexander Berkman*

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Of all the terrible features brought to light in the European War, there is one which no doubt will cause rejoicing in the camps of the various governments. It is the fact that the revolutionary movement of all shades has disclosed national and patriotic superstition and racial prejudice.

Before the war the Governments of Europe spent sleepless nights over the growth of Socialism, Syndicalism and Anarchism, Statesmen and Diplomats were busy devising ways and means to check the speed of the red spectre; to tear it out root and all through police persecution, the throttling of free expression through many years imprisonment and even death. In fact, no method was too vile, too cruel, too outrageous to make revolutionary activities impossible, because they realized in them the greatest danger to their political and economic regime. Particularly it was the International which to the privileged classes was a veritable thorn, cutting into their flesh. They did not dream in their wildest fancies that the International could ever

be captured by artificially created race hatred; by the sham of political reform. Neither did they suspect that it would fall to the “charms” of national glory as represented by the glitter of a large army and the machinations of diplomacy. Aye, not only the privileged class and the military castes, but the workers themselves never dreamed that the International would ever fall into the snare of their enemies.

But the war sweeping everything into the sea of madness and confusion has also taken the bottom out of the International. The German party sent its emissaries to Italy to plead with the Italian Socialists in behalf of the allies. And the French Syndicalists sent Cornelissen to Holland to arouse the workers of that country against Germany, while English trade unionists joined their government as recruiting agents.

But the most terrible blow was rendered the International by Peter Kropotkin. His stand in the war expressed in his various articles and especially in a letter to James Guillaume, one of the pioneers of the International and co-worker of Bakunin, is the most painful of all. Among other things, Kropotkin, the great Anarchist and revolutionist writes to Guillaume: “The only and most practical thing to do now is to pitch against the 425 millimeter cannons of the Germans, 500 millimeter cannons and with the combined efforts of young and old, men, women and children to drive the Germans from French and Belgian soil.”

At the same time, Kropotkin’s daughter, Sasha, knowing the weight her father’s illustrious name would carry, writes in English papers about Pan-Slavism with Russia at its helm, which she kindly terms “Brotherhood,” while Pan-Germanism she decrys as Militarism and Conquest. We would like to believe that Peter Kropotkin, the Anarchist Communist, repudiates the vaporing of his daughter, but we fear that it is done with his knowledge and consent. In other words, Kropotkin’s emotions for France lead him to sustain the schemes of Czarism. The same Czarism which has shed so

much blood of the noblest and bravest Russian youth, among whom were many friends and Comrades of Peter Kropotkin.

These few examples may suffice to prove what heart breaking doubts, conflict and antagonism the war has created in all revolutionary ranks, thus marking for the moment at least, the bankruptcy of the International, the one great burning hope of the workers. This period will have to be overcome of course. Indeed, the psychologic moment was never so close at hand, calling upon those who have retained their mental balance and their spirit of solidarity to prove the living fibre of the International.

Let those who have been caught in the snare of politics and diplomacy, or in the whirl of the war contagion, go their way. We have work to do. The humblest soldier who now refuses military service or is guilty of insubordination — and there seem to be many such instances according to private reports — contributes more towards the resurrection of the international solidarity of the people than all the diplomats, the Kropotkins and the Jean Graves.