

In Reply to Kropotkin

Berkman, Alexander
1914

From Mother Earth vol. 9, no. 9. Berkman wrote this in response to the surprising news that the luminary Russian anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin had voiced his support for the Allies in the just-started First World War. From <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alexander-berkman-in-reply-to-kropotkin>.

We could not of course credit the report that Peter Kropotkin, our old comrade and teacher, took sides in the war. It was tragic enough to witness the Socialists and other radicals of Europe swept off their feet by the murderous blast that is turning Europe into a human slaughterhouse. But the attitude of the Social Democrats could at least be explained to some extent: they have remained good patriots and believers in the State and authority, with all the prejudices and narrow attitude of bourgeois morality and nationalism.

But Kropotkin – the clear Anarchist thinker, the uncompromising revolutionist and antigovernmentalist – he take sides in the European slaughter and give aid and encouragement to this or that government? Impossible! We could not believe it – till we read Kropotkin's own statement in the Jewish Anarchist weekly – the *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* – and the letter reprinted above.

It is a most painful shock to us to realize that even Kropotkin, clear thinker that he is, has in this instance fallen a victim to the war psychology now dominating Europe. His arguments are weak and superficial. In his letter to Gustav Steffen he has become so involved in the artificialities of “high politics” that he lost sight of the most elemental fact of the situation, namely that the war in Europe is not a war of nations, but a war of capitalist governments for power and markets. Kropotkin argues as if the German people are at war with the French, the Russian, or English people, when as a matter of fact it is only the ruling and capitalist cliques of those countries that are responsible for the war and alone stand to gain by its result.

Throughout his life Kropotkin has taught us that “the reason for modern war is always the competition for markets and the right to exploit nations backward in industry.”¹ Is the *proletariat* of Germany, of France, or of Russia interested in new markets, in the exploitation of nations backward in industry? Have *they* anything to gain by this or any other capitalist war?

In the letter to Professor Steffen, Kropotkin strangely fails to mention the *working classes* of the contending powers. He speaks a great deal of the military ambitions of Prussia, of the menace of German invasion and similar governmental games. But where do the *workers* come in in all this? Are the economic interests of the working classes of Europe involved in this war, do *they* stand to profit in any way by whatever result there

¹ *Wars and Capitalism*, Ch. 1.

might be, and is international solidarity furthered by sending Russian and French workers to slaughter their brother workers in German uniform? Has not Kropotkin always taught us that the *solidarity* of labor throughout the world is the cornerstone of all true progress and that labor has no interest whatever in the quarrels of their governmental or industrial masters?

Kropotkin dwells on the menace of Prussian militarism and on the necessity of destroying it. But can Prussian militarism be destroyed by the militarism of the Allies? Does not the militarism of a country – of *any* country – ultimately rest on the consent of the people of that country, and has not Kropotkin always argued that the revolutionary consciousness and economic solidarity of the workers alone can force capital and government to terms and ultimately abolish both?

Surely Kropotkin will not claim that carnage, rapine, and destruction advance the civilization of one country as against that of another. He has always emphasized that real culture – in the sense of social liberty and economic well-being – rests with the people themselves and that there is no difference in the true character of government, whatever its particular form. Indeed, he has repeatedly said that the “liberal” governments are the more subtle and therefore the more dangerous enslavers of humanity.

We regret deeply, most deeply, Kropotkin's changed attitude. But not even the great European catastrophe can alter our position on the international brotherhood of man. We unconditionally condemn *all* capitalist wars, with whatever sophisms it may be sought to defend the one or the other set of pirates and exploiters as more “libertarian.” We unalterably hold that war is the game of the masters, always at the expense of the duped workers. The workers have nothing to gain by the victory of the one or the other of the contending sides. Prussian militarism is no greater menace to life and liberty than Tsarist autocracy. Neither can be destroyed by the other. Both must and will be destroyed only by the social revolutionary power of the united international proletariat.