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The Reception of Peter Kropotkin in Britain, 1886–1917*

Haia Shpayer-Makov

The period between the early 1880s and the First World War marked the heyday of the British anarchist movement. Anarchism was then a popular topic of discussion. Various newspapers and periodicals expressed interest in the whereabouts and activities of anarchist supporters. Dictionaries and encyclopedias provided detailed information about the anarchist movement. Novels and short stories focused on anarchist figures, while the subject of anarchism arose in parliamentary debates and public speeches.

This extensive interest was not, however, beneficial to the movement. Discussions of anarchism usually took place in a hostile context and references to it were abusive. The movement was described as “a malignant fungoid growth . . . on the body politic,”¹ and its members as “the very dregs of the population, the riff-raff of rascaldom, professional thieves [and] bullies.”² Their humanist motivation was either ignored or denied. Violence appeared to be the characteristic mark of both the theory and practice of anarchism. The anarchist golden age “is to be ushered in . . . by bomb explosions and dynamic outrages . . . by inflammatory harangues and attempts at ‘expropriation,’ ” claimed the author of the entry “Anarchists and Anarchy” in the 1894 edition of Hazell’s *Annual*.³ Anarchism was repeatedly defined as “another name for organised crime,”⁴ and its promoters were portrayed as “a pack of bloodthirsty and ferocious criminals who prey upon their fellows for their own gain.”⁵ Other references lumped all anarchists together as terrorists and denied that they had any program “but murder.”⁶ The style varied from rational analysis to emotional outbursts, but the message was the same: anarchism was society’s worst enemy and anarchists the “most noxious beasts that have ever threatened civilised society.”⁷

*I am grateful to Professor James Joll and Ms. Caroline Cahm for commenting on this paper.

¹C. B. Roylance-Kent, “Anarchism: Its Origin and Organisation,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine* 278 (April 1895):349.

²Z. and Ivanoff, “Anarchists: Their Methods and Organisation,” *The New Review* 10 (January 1894):6.

³*Hazell’s Annual* (London, 1894).

⁴*The Daily Mail*, 12 September 1898. See also *The Times*, 5 April 1892.

⁵*Evening News*, 28 December 1910.

⁶*The Saturday Review*, 14 September 1901.

⁷*Ibid.*, 9 June 1906.

This image did little justice to the true qualities of anarchist activities and attitudes in Britain. The movement placed primary emphasis on education, and in practice showed little inclination to violence. Of these aspects of the movement only a faint echo is heard in the reports about the movement.

An exception to this treatment was the Russian prince Peter Kropotkin, chief formulator of communist-anarchism—the most prevalent doctrine in the British anarchist movement. Kropotkin, who lived in England from 1886 to 1917, was periodically referred to in the British press. But his was an experience quite different to anything other anarchists knew, for generally he was an object of praise and regard.

There were other famous and colorful anarchists living in England, but they invariably faced a hostile world. Errico Malatesta, the Italian anarchist, for example, was highly regarded in left-wing circles in London. Outside the left, he, like several other anarchists, was believed to be the leader of an international conspiracy, the “stormy petrel of the revolutionists.”⁸ This conviction was confirmed by police officers. Harold Brust, a detective-inspector of the Special Branch, depicted Malatesta in his memoirs as the “Man with nine lives” who headed a secret society.⁹ Contradicting the experience of Malatesta’s acquaintances, Brust portrayed him as someone who had “nothing decent or clean in his character.” To illustrate his point, he argued that if “there were two ways of doing a thing, Malatesta chose the crooked one by instinct.” In 1912 Malatesta was charged with libel by a fellow anarchist and sentenced to three months in prison. On the basis of police testimony the judge considered him an “undesirable alien,” and recommended adding deportation to the sentence. The testimony associated Malatesta with coining and with the Houndsditch murders, and described him as a “very dangerous type.”¹⁰ Liberal newspapers such as *The Manchester Guardian* and *Nation* maintained that such implications were groundless.¹¹ But the fact that Malatesta, who objected to terrorism,¹² was an anarchist was sufficient proof for many that “dabbling in crime gave him a zest to live.”¹³

Kropotkin, too, was sometimes the recipient of condemnatory remarks. His writings were not “a document of contemporary politics,” one writer commented, but “a matter for the pathologist of disease.”¹⁴ They were considered immoral and anti-Christian.¹⁵ Kropotkin himself was thought to be as responsi-

⁸*Daily Express*, 13 August 1900.

⁹Harold Brust, *I Guarded Kings* (London, 1935), p. 95.

¹⁰*The Manchester Guardian*, 25 May 1912.

¹¹*Ibid.*, and *Nation*, 8 June 1912.

¹²See his article “Anarchy and Violence,” in *Liberty* (London), September 1894.

¹³Brust, *I Guarded Kings*, p. 95.

¹⁴*The Spectator*, 14 July 1894.

¹⁵Geoffrey Langtoft, “Socialism and Anarchism,” *The Fortnightly Review*, n.s. 68 (October 1900): 557–58.

ble for anarchist outrages as the anarchist terrorists, since his theories preached “murder and revolution” and therefore provoked the “real anarchists” to “overt acts of violence.”¹⁶ Even charges such as these were on occasion followed by a positive reference to Kropotkin the man.¹⁷ Where a demarcation was suggested between good and bad anarchists, in many cases Kropotkin served as the best example of the former.¹⁸ The impression left by scanning references to Kropotkin is that complimentary remarks about him far outnumbered derogatory ones.

That anarchists venerated Kropotkin is not surprising. He was the most valuable asset of the movement, not only because of his contributions to its theoretical foundations and political standing, but also because of his warm and reassuring presence. There was the occasional criticism of Kropotkin’s ideas and political attitudes—particularly his support of the allies in the First World War—but these were insignificant compared to the overwhelming admiration felt for him. Rudolph Rocker, a German anarchist who, though a gentile, was from the mid 1890s the guiding spirit of the British Jewish anarchists, referred to Kropotkin as “one of the greatest happenings in my life.”¹⁹ He felt that the longer he knew Kropotkin the more he admired and loved him. Joseph Lane, another anarchist activist, so venerated him that he suggested: “To lose him would be a loss to the whole world much more important to the world than all of us put together.”²⁰

Esteem for Kropotkin was evident throughout the socialist movement. In his history of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), W. H. Lee, its secretary, recounted the cordial welcome accorded to Kropotkin by socialists and radicals as early as his arrival in Britain in 1886.²¹ His works had a formative influence on many leading socialists.²² Keir Hardie, leader of the Independent Labour Party, strongly recommended Kropotkin’s writings, and believed that “Were we all Kropotkins . . . Anarchism would be the only possible system, since government and restraint would be unnecessary.”²³

Sympathy for Kropotkin’s version of anarchism ran high in the Fabian Society in its early days in the mid 1880s.²⁴ It was a Fabian pioneer, Charlotte Wilson, who popularized Kropotkin’s ideas in the nascent socialist movement and collaborated with him to produce the first communist-anarchist newspaper in Brit-

¹⁶Z. and Ivanoff, “Anarchists,” pp. 1–2.

¹⁷See, for example, *Daily News*, 27 April 1892.

¹⁸*The Referee*, 24 July 1892.

¹⁹Rudolph Rocker, *The London Years* (London, 1956), p. 149.

²⁰Letter from Joseph Lane to Max Nettlau, 10 December 1912, in Nettlau Collection in the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

²¹H. W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social Democracy in Britain* (London, 1935), p. 137.

²²See for example, Bob Duncan, *James Leatham* (Aberdeen, 1978), p. 32.

²³*The Labour Leader*, 21 March 1896; William Stewart, *Keir Hardie* (London, 1921), p. 122.

²⁴Edward R. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society* (London, 1963), p. 66. See also Fabian Tract, No. 4.

ain. Communist-anarchism remained attractive for some Fabians even after the Society had embarked on a path opposed to anarchism. G. B. Shaw always oscillated between a strong condemnation of anarchist reasoning and a warm partiality for its perfectionist moral standpoint and individualistic principle.²⁵ On Kropotkin's seventieth birthday in 1912, Shaw wondered "whether Kropotkin had not been all these years in the right and he and his friends in the wrong."²⁶ The Fabian George Standing admitted that he admired Kropotkin "beyond all living men." "To me," he wrote, "he represents the triumph of principle over all the sordid motives of self-interest which bind the mass of us as with chains of iron." Each meeting with Kropotkin amounted to "an invaluable moral stimulus."²⁷

An unexpected admirer of Kropotkin was H. M. Hyndman, one of anarchism's most vigilant opponents. Hyndman, the leader of the Marxist SDF, could not forgive the anarchists for their role in splitting the SDF in its early days and their constant criticism of the organization's performance and beliefs.²⁸ His hatred of the anarchists can be seen in the multitude of negative labels with which he branded them. In speaking or writing about anarchism Hyndman dwelt on its connection with violence and mentioned anarchists in contexts which dealt with crime, terrorism, police spying, or other evil practices.²⁹ At the same time he insisted that "anarchist after anarchist" were joining the Liberals—a party Hyndman held in particular contempt.³⁰ But Hyndman distinguished Kropotkin from Kropotkin's followers and saw the former in a completely different light. His discriminatory approach spilled onto the pages of *Justice*, the SDF's mouthpiece, which otherwise referred to anarchists in strongly censorious terms. *Justice* complained about Kropotkin's "special aversion" to Marx, and objected to his attacks on the SDF, which the paper believed served the reactionary elements in society in their fight against socialism. Kropotkin was also found to be "as wayward as a boy and as illogical as a woman," a man whose knowledge about economics and politics was the same as that of a monkey's "about driving a motor car." Yet despite such criticism *Justice* also found it "impossible to be angry with Kropotkin, or to help liking him," for as the paper indulgently explained, he had a "weak but estimable character."³¹

²⁵See Fabian Tract No. 45, *The Impossibilities of Anarchism*; "The Illusions of Socialism," in Edward Carpenter, ed., *Forecasts of the Coming Century* (Manchester, 1896); and "Why I am a Social Democrat," in *Liberty* (London), January 1894.

²⁶George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumović, *The Anarchist Prince* (London, 1950), p. 265.

²⁷*The Freethinker*, 15 May 1892.

²⁸See report on Hyndman's speech in the International Congress of 1896 in *The Labour Leader*, 1 August 1896.

²⁹Henry Mayers Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life* (London, 1911), pp. 53, 431, and *Further Reminiscences* (London, 1912), p. 108.

³⁰Hyndman, *Record*, p. 265.

³¹*Justice*, 19 March 1904.

Hyndman's acquaintance with Kropotkin can be traced to the early 1880s, the period when Hyndman first became involved with the newly emergent socialist movement. He met Kropotkin through Joseph Cowen, a radical M. P., when Kropotkin found temporary shelter in Britain. Years later Hyndman recalled that Kropotkin had then been known to be "an out-and-out direct action Anarchist." Nevertheless, when Kropotkin came to his house, Hyndman "was at once captivated by the charm of his manner and the unaffected sincerity of his tone."³² During Kropotkin's confinement in Clairvaux prison in France (1883–86) *Justice* reported sympathetically on the conditions in which he lived, and Hyndman joined attempts to improve them.³³

1884 saw the publication of Hyndman's translation of Kropotkin's *Appeal to the Young* in *To-Day, Justice*, and later in pamphlet form. Hyndman regarded it as "the best propagandist pamphlet that ever was penned." In his opinion, no written work ever combined so completely "the scientific with the popular, the revolutionary with the ethical."³⁴ The pamphlet was recommended in the SDF's reading lists and, due to its universal, non-sectarian appeal, accounted for the recruitment of some young men to the SDF. William Sanders, a pioneer member of the SDF, acknowledged that the pamphlet "had a great effect" upon him, and that it had convinced him that he "must not be a Socialist in opinion and thought only, but also one of the active workers in the cause."³⁵

Despite the differences of opinion between Kropotkin and Hyndman their two families met frequently in the first years of Kropotkin's permanent stay in England, and the "cordial friendship and good feeling" between them remained afterwards.³⁶ Hyndman and other SDF members participated in the celebrations for Kropotkin's seventieth birthday. Hyndman gave a speech in which he expressed "the warm admiration Socialists feel towards one who braved and suffered the anger of the Russian autocracy, and who during his long exile has, according to his lights, devoted himself to the cause of mankind." *Justice* reported the event and joined in the praise: "Kropotkin does not entice us to anarchy, but his noble example, his lofty courage, and his self-sacrificing work are worthy of the emulation of us all."³⁷ Upon Kropotkin's death Hyndman remarked: "In my whole life I have never met a personality whom I admired more than he [sic]."³⁸

³²Hyndman, *Record*, p. 262.

³³*Justice*, 1 March and 28 June 1884. See also *Justice*'s celebration of Kropotkin's release (23, 30 January 1886) and arrival in Britain (6 March 1886); Hyndman, *Record*, p. 261.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 266.

³⁵William Stephen Sanders, *Early Socialist Days* (London, 1927), p. 14. In 1901 *The Labour Leader* reported that more than 100,000 copies of *An Appeal to the Young* had been sold (19 October 1901).

³⁶Hyndman, *Record*, p. 267.

³⁷*Justice*, 7 December 1912.

³⁸Woodcock, p. 185.

Respect and admiration for Kropotkin were expressed in liberal circles, too. Edith Sellers, the sociologist, credited him with the title "Our Most Distinguished Refugee,"³⁹ and a description of him in an article in the liberal newspaper *The Westminster Gazette*, elevated him to the level of a saint. The latter ended with a sentimental and idealized portrait of Kropotkin, echoing the veneration of the writer: "The last I saw of him as I turned round at the little gate was his slim figure standing at the window, his face beaming, and his child in his arms." To A. G. Gardiner, editor of the liberal *Daily News*, Kropotkin appeared "to belong to the realm of heroic fable," a Prometheus fighting despotism.⁴⁰

Kropotkin's home was frequented by political exiles and foreign visitors of various shades of opinion. Prominent among them were his compatriots, many of whom had arrived in Britain in the wake of Tsarist repression in the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth century. His standing was so high in the Russian exile community that he was asked by the Social Revolutionaries to be on the jury deciding whether their militant comrade, Yevno Azef, was a police spy.⁴¹

Kropotkin was also highly regarded in the Russian Jewish community in the East End. His writings were translated into Yiddish and circulated widely, even outside the dedicated Jewish anarchist circle. His lectures in the East End were well attended and his participation in Jewish meetings and demonstrations was applauded.⁴²

Kropotkin's closest friend in Britain was the other distinguished Russian exile, Stepniak, with whom he had been active in revolutionary circles in Russia and Switzerland.⁴³ Stepniak came to Britain in 1883, and until his sudden death in 1895 was preoccupied with arousing sympathy for the Russian revolutionary cause. His varied activities as a writer, novelist, and playwright were dedicated to this end.⁴⁴ Stepniak had advocated constitutional reforms for Russia, and although Kropotkin rejected such a solution, the two men "shared enough common ground on Russian matters for Kropotkin to take the arguments, as well as the mantle of Stepniak when the latter was killed." For his part Stepniak thought anarchist principles admirable, though impractical.⁴⁵

Kropotkin commanded respect in circles known for their disparagement of anarchism. Cesare Lombroso, the famous criminologist who used anarchists as

³⁹See title of her article in *The Contemporary Review* 66 (October 1894):537.

⁴⁰*The Westminster Gazette*, 9 March 1896; *Daily News*, 7 December 1912.

⁴¹Woodcock and Avakumović, *The Anarchist Prince*, pp. 371-72.

⁴²Rocker, *The London Years*, p. 162.

⁴³Stepniak was a pseudonym for Sergei Mikhailovich Kravchinskij.

⁴⁴See Charles A. Moser, "A Nihilist's Career: S. M. Stepniak-Kravchinskij," *The American Slavic and East European Review* 20 (February 1961):55-71.

⁴⁵James W. Hulse, *Revolutionists in London* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 75, 73.

models to illustrate his theory about the biological origins of criminal behavior, accepted that the anarchist theory embodied "some striking truths" and quoted Kropotkin.⁴⁶ Even within the police there existed a different attitude to Kropotkin than to anarchists in general. The same Harold Brust who vilified Malatesta, wrote about Kropotkin in a gentle tone, and revealed that Kropotkin vouched for Lenin's harmlessness.⁴⁷ The same trusting attitude was manifested in *The Police Encyclopaedia* which relied on Kropotkin's memoirs to provide its readers with information about prisons in Russia and France. A rosy version of what Russian prisons were like was rejected in favor of Kropotkin's critical account, and Kropotkin himself was described as a reliable and impartial authority. His escape from a Russian prison was depicted in detail and ranked as "an easy first."⁴⁸

Two questions arise: why did Kropotkin warrant this unique treatment, and what conclusions can be drawn about the influence of this highly positive image of him on the British anarchist movement?

The key to understanding the favorable reaction to Kropotkin lies in his personal history combined with his impressive character and scholarly achievements. Kropotkin had royal blood, a romantic aura, charisma, social status, and academic fame. All those characteristics created an image which was likely to be admired and respected regardless of his anarchist connections. Kropotkin's noble birth in itself was enough to make men and women of high social standing seek his company and overlook his political affiliation. His title of prince provoked such interest that people continued to use it although he himself had renounced it at the age of twelve. This respect for the title was also evident in socialist circles. James Leatham, a Scottish socialist, recounted how in the early days of the socialist movement in Aberdeen "William Morris spoke in the lesser St. Katherine's Hall; but as Kropotkin was a prince we required for him the Albert Hall, four times the size, with Sir William Ramsay in the chair, and the tickets priced up to three shillings."⁴⁹ What seems to have particularly impressed people was the contrast between the life his birth had ordained for him and the reality of his existence. Not merely a member of the Russian aristocracy, he was particularly privileged as a descendant of the Rurik family, the reputed royal dynasty of Russia. From his birth in 1842 he had been destined to enjoy a career fit for a man of his position; yet he deliberately neglected opportunities to use his wealth and status. Instead, he dedicated his life to fighting economic and social distinctions and the systems that supported them.

⁴⁶Cesare Lombroso, "Anarchy. The Status of Anarchism To-Day in Europe and the United States," *Everybody's Magazine*, 6 (February 1902):165.

⁴⁷Brust, *I Guarded Kings*, p. 88.

⁴⁸Hargrave L. Adam, *The Police Encyclopaedia*, 8 vols. (London, 1920), 8:109-15, 181.

⁴⁹James Leatham, *Shows and Showfolk I Have Known* (Turrieff, 1936), p. 33. See also Lee and Archbold, *Social Democracy*, p. 137.

At the age of fifteen Kropotkin was admitted to the Corps of Pages in St. Petersburg. It was Tsar Nicholas I himself who had advised Kropotkin's father on this step. The Corps had traditionally been one of the best routes for promotion in Russia. "Those who had passed the final examination were received as officers in any regiment of the guard or of the army they chose, irrespective of the number of vacancies in that regiment," Kropotkin related in his autobiography.⁵⁰ Every year, the sixteen best pupils became "Pages de Chambre," attached to the Tsar's family.

After a stay of four years in the Corps, Kropotkin surpassed the other pupils in studies and other duties, and was made a sergeant in June 1861. This appointment involved close attendance on the Tsar, a duty Kropotkin performed satisfactorily for almost a year. It was a further advance on the path to a brilliant administrative career as aides-de-camp to the Tsar or one of the grand dukes. Kropotkin's distinction could have borne fruit when the time came to choose a regiment in which to serve. To the astonishment of all, Kropotkin chose the undistinguished, and distantly located, mounted Cossacks of the Amur. The reasons that prompted him suggested his future leanings. He decided to spend some time in Siberia because of the landscape and the reforms that could be carried out there.⁵¹ He spent five productive years on research in Siberia and developed theories of Asian geology and geography, which later made him famous in the scientific world at home and abroad. In Siberia he advanced a step forward towards an anarchist position. It was there that he lost his belief in the ability of any state to help the mass of the people. Kropotkin's service in Siberia was interrupted following the brutal suppression in the summer of 1866 of the Polish exiles who had attempted to escape. Both he and his brother Alexander realized that as an integral part of their duties they might be involved in oppressive measures taken by the Tsarist regime, and abandoned their military careers.⁵² In the following years Kropotkin deepened his knowledge of geography and other sciences and fortified his radical ideas.

The influence of the Paris Commune (1871) and a trip through Western Europe (1872), during which he met anarchists and other revolutionaries, confirmed Kropotkin's political convictions. His fate was sealed. On his return he became a practicing revolutionary by joining the Chaikovsky circle, a center for the dissemination of socialist ideas among Russian workers and peasants. The rest of the decade saw the gradual consolidation of his communist-anarchist theories.

The road trodden by this uncompromising revolutionary was paved with rejec-

⁵⁰Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York, 1971), p. 41. Introduction by Nicolas Walter.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 223.

tion of economic and social benefits and with deprivation of freedom. As a consequence of his revolutionary affiliation he was confined to the infamous Peter and Paul prison and to another prison in Russia for over two years (1874–76). His estates were confiscated by the government after his escape from a prison hospital in 1876. His escape led him to Western Europe where he was periodically forced to be on the move. In this period he suffered wretched poverty, incessant harassment by the regimes in whose countries he lived and threats to his life by secret police agents. The three years before he settled in England were spent in a French prison as part of an attempt by the French government to suppress the anarchist movement. Most of his later physical ailments can be traced to these long and harsh periods of imprisonment. Throughout his life he maintained his wife and daughter by writing books and articles and lecturing. He refused to profit financially from his work in the anarchist movement, and despite his prolific output suffered economic difficulties and lived modestly, sometimes even in poverty. Nevertheless, his house was always open and his resources available for the needy and destitute.⁵³

In England Kropotkin found relative peace. Although he worked hard and was troubled by ill health, he no longer led the tense and hectic life of a professional revolutionary. Not that he had relinquished his revolutionary creed, but, as he acknowledged time and again, he suffered no harassment or interference there.⁵⁴ His agitation, like that of most British anarchists, was in no way different from the type of activities pursued by law-abiding radicals. When his health allowed him, he gave public lectures to various audiences, attended protest meetings and political commemorations initiated by both anarchists and non-anarchists, and joined in the odd demonstration. In his first years in Britain he played an active role in the small anarchist Freedom Group and the publication of its paper *Freedom*, and later on in anarchist groups dedicated to the Russian revolutionary cause. Above all, he led the life of a scholar, concentrating his efforts on research and writing. His articles filled the pages of anarchist and non-anarchist journals at home and abroad and his pamphlets and books were directed to and read by people of all shades of opinion.

Kropotkin's scholarly pursuits and absorption into suburban life made him appear almost an exemplary English gentleman. He enjoyed long walks in the countryside and devoted much time to gardening and making his own furniture. His way of life dispelled lingering suspicions about his involvement with terrorism and strengthened his image of respectability. The paper *Echo* emphasized his peaceful tendencies. It wrote: "Prince Kropotkin, personally, has no liking for what is called agitation. He loves the platform much less than he loves his

⁵³See Malatesta's memoirs in Vernon Richards, ed., *Errico Malatesta* (London, 1977), p. 258.

⁵⁴See his letter of response to the hosts of congratulatory messages to his seventieth birthday, published in *The Times*, 17 December 1912.

quiet home in Harrow, where he writes his books, and his letters for the *Paris Revolté*.”⁵⁵

Although Kropotkin never felt fully at home in Britain, he did not keep himself apart from British society as many other refugees had done.⁵⁶ He not only contributed new ideas to British thought, but was also an ardent student of British history and politics. His company was highly welcomed outside the society of anarchists and foreign revolutionaries and he became “familiar in many English social circles.”⁵⁷ Kropotkin had many friends and sympathizers whose “touching friendship . . . contributed so much to relieve the gloominess of a long exile.”⁵⁸ His acquaintances included some of the most renowned artists, writers, professors, scientists, journalists, and publishers in Britain, many of whom were so impressed by him that they mentioned him in their memoirs.⁵⁹

Kropotkin’s self-imposed humble life-style was much admired. But it was not only the thought of what he had given up that attracted people. Those who met him frequently acknowledged his charming personality. Walter Crane, the artist, recalled that Kropotkin charmed “all who had had the pleasure of his acquaintance by his genial manners, his disinterested enthusiasm for the cause of humanity, and his peaceful but earnest propaganda in ‘Anarchist-Communism,’ as well as his valuable sociological writings.”⁶⁰ Others emphasized his kindness. Henry Nevinson, the writer, described Kropotkin this way: “Behind his spectacles his grey eyes gleamed with invincible benevolence. Like Carlyle’s hero, he seemed longing to take all mankind to his bosom and keep it warm. One felt that if any bureaucrat, or even the Tsar himself had come destitute and afflicted, he would have found shelter there.”⁶¹ Reference to Kropotkin was always sympathetic.

⁵⁵*Echo*, 10 September 1899.

⁵⁶For evidence of Kropotkin’s feelings of isolation see Martin A. Miller, *Kropotkin*, (Chicago, 1976), pp. 167–69, 199–203. See Rocker, *The London Years*, p. 68 for a description of the kind of life led by most refugees. Kropotkin was not, however, the only Russian refugee to be involved in British intellectual and radical life. His contemporary Stepniak, and Alexander Herzen before him, had maintained similar links. For references to Stepniak’s activities see notes 44, 45. For Herzen see Monica Partridge, “Alexander Herzen and the English Press,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 36 (1957–58): 455–70, and “Alexander Herzen and the Young Joseph Cowen, M. P. Some Unpublished Material,” *ibid.*, 41 (1962–63): 50–63. For the interaction between Russian refugees and British socialism see Walter Kendall, “Russian Emigration and British Marxist Socialism,” *International Review of Social History* 8 (1963): 351–78.

⁵⁷Belfort E. Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflexions of a Mid and Late Victorian* (London, 1918), p. 42. See also Ernest Rhys, *Everyone Remembers* (London, 1931), p. 27.

⁵⁸See his farewell letter to the British nation upon his departure to Russia (*The Times*, 8 June 1917). See also *ibid.*, 17 December 1912 and 6 September 1919.

⁵⁹James Mavor, *My Windows on the Street of the World*, 2 vols. (London, 1923), 2: 95–96. See, for example, the memoirs of Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (London, 1916), pp. 218–19, and William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences*, 2 vols. (London, 1906), 2:45.

⁶⁰Walter Crane, *An Artist’s Reminiscences* (London, 1907), p. 255.

⁶¹Henry W. Nevinson, *Changes and Chances* (London, 1923), p. 125.

Ford Madox Ford associated him with "One of the greatest pleasures of my life . . . with . . . sunshine, open doors and windows [and] climbing roses." Kropotkin not only commanded respect, but inspired people with "singular affection."⁶² Some of his acquaintances felt that the man and his thought were so ideal that if all anarchists were like Kropotkin they would have become anarchists themselves.⁶³

This background in itself would not have made Kropotkin the celebrity he was if it had not been for his scholarly work. Kropotkin's intellectual interests covered a wide-range of subjects. Apart from developing various aspects of anarchist doctrine, he wrote about geography, geology, meteorology, medicine, chemistry, physics, biology, anthropology, sociology, history, literature, philosophy, and politics. His writings were published in many parts of the world, but as Nicolas Walter maintains in his introduction to Kropotkin's memoirs, in "continental Europe Kropotkin was thought of as an anarchist who happened to be a scientist, in the Anglo-Saxon world he was thought of more as a scientist who happened to be an anarchist."⁶⁴ The reaction of French newspapers to a British petition to release Kropotkin from Clairvaux prison in France, lends force to this evaluation. *La Liberté* sarcastically observed that on its side of the Channel Kropotkin was not known for his inventions, but for disseminating Russian nihilism.⁶⁵

His international academic reputation coupled with his interesting life-history made Kropotkin almost a "darling" of the serious press in Britain. This fact not only reflected the high regard in which he was held, but was itself an element which constantly enhanced the gap between his image and that of the movement he did so much to inspire. Kropotkin's scholarly contributions to British publications dated back to his first stay in Britain in 1876. His escape route from Russia led him through Sweden to Edinburgh, where he earned his living by writing about Russian geographical exploration for the journal *Nature* and for the newspaper which would from then onwards open its columns to him—*The Times*. His subsequent moves to Switzerland and then France did not interrupt his writing for British publications. Kropotkin's visits to Britain in the early 1880s resulted in the publication of his comments on the situation in Russia in the liberal newspapers *The Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, *The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, *The Fortnightly Review*, and others. Even when he was imprisoned in France his research continued. The periodical *The Nineteenth Century*, and the

⁶²Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday* (London, 1931), p. 69. See also Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences*, p. 45.

⁶³These words by Goldwin Smith, Professor of History at Oxford, Cornell and Toronto, are quoted in Mavor, *My Windows*, p. 133.

⁶⁴Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, p. x. For Kropotkin's warm reception in America see Paul Avrich, "Kropotkin in America," *International Review of Social History* 25 (1980): 1-34.

⁶⁵*The Times*, 28 March 1883.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, were pleased to print his scientific and political conclusions. Kropotkin's arrival in England in 1886 accelerated and intensified the collaboration between him and the press. His farewell address to the British nation which he had written on the eve of his return to Russia in 1917, was published by the leading British newspapers, conservative included.⁶⁶ This collaboration only ended with his death in Russia in February 1921.

Most of Kropotkin's books first appeared as a series of articles in anarchist as well as non-anarchist journals. *The Nineteenth Century* published many of the articles which later formed some of Kropotkin's best known books. There were only a few years in the 1880s and 1890s in which this distinguished monthly did not include at least one article by Kropotkin, whether on a scientific or a political topic. His other articles and comments appeared in a variety of journals, particularly those which adopted a liberal stance.

Kropotkin's scholarly work had a special appeal for liberal-minded British intellectuals. Much of Kropotkin's writing was marked by his effort to enhance the philosophy of anarchism with scientific proof. His academic explorations were the basis of his conviction that communist-anarchism was not a utopian and naive suggestion or an ideal "ought," but a natural growth; a stage in the development of the natural and human world. In his view, anarchist tendencies, such as cooperation and mutual aid, made the survival of society possible and constituted the foundation of the post revolutionary order.⁶⁷ Kropotkin described this order as a society in "which all the mutual relations of its members are regulated, not by laws, not by authorities, whether self-imposed or elected, but by mutual agreements between the members of that society and by a sum of social customs and habits."⁶⁸

Kropotkin's rejection of the pessimistic implications of Social Darwinism and his insistence that mutual aid was the most important factor in the evolution of animals as well as of human society had a special appeal in this period of crisis when unreserved competition no longer seemed conducive to economic prosperity and human progress. Some of Kropotkin's readers thought him naive for believing in the goodness of human nature and regarded his ideal of a federated system of free and self-sufficient communities as too utopian.⁶⁹ Other readers may have resented his attacks on private property and the revolutionary implications of his theories. Nonetheless, his advocacy of voluntary cooperation, free agreement, and local government accorded with traditional liberal thinking. Self-reliance, individual initiative, and freedom of action were fundamental val-

⁶⁶See, for example, the liberal papers *The Daily Chronicle*, and *Daily News*, and the conservative papers *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Morning Post* on 8 June 1917.

⁶⁷His book *Mutual Aid* (1902) centers on the idea that men were naturally cooperative.

⁶⁸Peter Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism" in Roger N. Baldwin, ed., *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* (New York, 1970), p. 157. This booklet was originally published by the London-based Freedom Press in 1912.

⁶⁹See, for example, Henry W. Nevinson, *Fire of Life* (London, 1935), p. 54.

ues shared by anarchists and liberals alike. Particularly persuasive was his anti-statist position.⁷⁰ Like liberal thinkers, Kropotkin showed that many social activities were adequately conducted without governmental interference.⁷¹

In addition, Kropotkin offered practical suggestions which not only had universal application, but were specifically designed to answer British needs. Kropotkin was concerned with the growing international competition to British industry and the decline of British agriculture. His thorough investigations of British economy—particularly in *The Conquest of Bread* (1906) and in *Field, Factories and Workshops* (1899)—contained suggestions as to how to increase industrial and agricultural production. He recommended better integration of urban and rural activities, the use of intensive scientific methods of food production, and the integration of mental and physical work.

Some of his guidelines were adopted by the various co-operative communities which arose in the late 1890s.⁷² They also had influence on the garden-city movement. The sympathetic, albeit critical, reviews of his books further suggest that his writings were received with great interest. With certain ideological qualifications, *The Daily Chronicle* regarded *Fields, Factories and Workshops* as “fresh air,” and the *Daily News* commented that *Mutual Aid* was a “deeply interesting and suggestive work [which] teems with principles which are both true and finely enunciated.”⁷³

His books were so highly regarded in Britain that a suggestion in *The Times* at the start of the First World War to reprint a cheap edition of *Mutual Aid* as a patriotic piece of propaganda was welcomed by the publisher Heinemann.⁷⁴ The book was expected to be an adequate refutation of German charges that Britain’s ally, Russia, was barbarian, and an answer to the German misinterpretation of the Darwinian theory of the struggle for existence which was assumed to be the basis of the German policy of brute force. It was argued that in contrast to the Germans, Kropotkin interpreted biological and social progress “in terms of mutual cooperation” which was a “natural conception for a Russian.”⁷⁵ In 1915 a popular edition of *Mutual Aid* was published by Heinemann.

Possibly because “few men have had an equally wide field of experience”—the words of George Brandes, the Danish literary critic—Kropotkin was himself a subject of inquiry for journals of various kinds.⁷⁶ His broad and diversified

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 52.

⁷¹Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (London, 1913), pp. 169–70.

⁷²Dennis Hardy, *Alternative Communities in Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1979), ch. 5.

⁷³*The Daily Chronicle*, 3 February 1899, and *Daily News*, 29 October 1902.

⁷⁴*The Times*, 3 and 14 October 1914.

⁷⁵Ibid., 14 October 1914.

⁷⁶Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, p. xxx. Kropotkin’s fame stretched beyond the Atlantic. In 1898 the American *Atlantic Monthly* commissioned him to write a series of autobiographical articles, despite the objection of its editorial council. Those saw print from September 1898 to September 1899. Immediately afterwards the articles were revised and published in book form as *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York and London, 1899).

experience ranged from the Russian court through European prisons to English revolutionary platforms and tea parties. He was at one and the same time a respectable Russian nobleman and a despised and persecuted refugee; a scientific observer of facts and a vehement and emotional advocate of political change. The exciting stories of his escape from a Russian prison and his semi-underground existence before he came to England, added extra flavor to his personality and made him a figure whose life story captured the public imagination.

Journals, therefore, published accounts of his life, especially on such occasions as the publication of his books, his trial in France, his seventieth birthday, his return to Russia, and his death.⁷⁷ In addition, throughout the period Kropotkin was treated as a figure whose activities were of interest to the public. Not only news-catching events, such as his expulsion from France in 1896, his departure to Russia, and his death, but even his state of health or routine activities, such as lecturing, were reported.

Kropotkin's credibility enabled him to do what was denied to other anarchists: to express his views on controversial issues in the general press. It was Kropotkin's assessment of Malatesta's character and intentions on which both *The Manchester Guardian* and *Nation* based their criticism of the imprisonment of Malatesta in 1912. *The Manchester Guardian* quoted at length what Kropotkin had written about Malatesta in 1899, and *Nation* printed a long letter by Kropotkin which described Malatesta in very positive terms.⁷⁸

Above all, the British press provided a platform for Kropotkin's opinions on Russian affairs. Indeed, he was widely acknowledged as an authority on the subject. *The Times*, *The Nineteenth Century*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Daily News*, *The Daily Chronicle*, and other papers manifested their reliance on his interpretation of developments in Russia by giving him access to their columns. According to his nephew, Kropotkin's house was besieged in the most critical day of the 1905 revolution "by innumerable reporters who wanted to interview him about events in Russia."⁷⁹ His articles and letters criticized the Tsarist regime and showed it to be autocratic and repressive.⁸⁰ Having written profusely on the subject in prestigious vehicles of communication, Kropotkin did much to enhance public sympathy for revolutionary elements in Russia.

That he gained access to these journals and used them to advertise the plight of the Russian people suggests the high esteem people held for Kropotkin personally. Yet the coverage of Russian affairs from a critical point of view in established national newspapers also indicates wide support for the Russian

⁷⁷His seventieth birthday was celebrated by various circles in Britain and abroad, and messages of congratulation expressing admiration for his life work arrived in abundance (*Daily News*, 7, 10 December 1912).

⁷⁸*The Manchester Guardian*, 25 May 1912; *Nation*, 8 June 1912.

⁷⁹Quoted in Woodcock and Avakumović, *The Anarchist Prince*, p. 365.

⁸⁰See, for example, *Daily News*, 17, 18 March 1903.

dissidents in Britain, particularly in liberal and socialist circles. Although the British government, in response to Tsarist pressure, hardened its attitude to Russian refugees at the turn of the century, well-known public figures had been busy rousing feelings against the Tsarist regime before Kropotkin's arrival, and continued to do so until the Bolshevik Revolution.⁸¹ The Society of Friends of Russian Freedom (established in 1890), in which Kropotkin took part, included M.P.s from both Houses, journalists, clergymen, academics, and others. One of the founders, Dr. Robert Spence Watson, was a President of the Liberal Federation of Great Britain. The Society provided information contrary to that emanating from the defenders of Tsarism and sought to widen support for the Russian opposition.⁸²

Kropotkin, who was increasingly identified with the Russian revolutionary cause, must have benefitted from this sympathy. Hence, apart from his personal qualities, background, and literary output, being a Russian revolutionary contributed to his positive image. Kropotkin was leading a respectable life and espousing a worthy, if revolutionary, cause. This was a diet the public could easily stomach, particularly against the background of his other qualities. Moreover, his attempt to secure liberal sympathies for the Russian revolutionaries may have accounted for the softening of his revolutionary tone in Britain. This restraint further eased his acceptance into British society, even though he was no less revolutionary than most other anarchists in Britain.

The picture presented here sheds light not only on Kropotkin but also on British public opinion in the period discussed. Indeed, it seems that Kropotkin's popularity not only contrasted starkly with the low regard in which other anarchists were held in Britain; it was also of a different order than anywhere outside Britain, since here it penetrated highly established circles. His relationship with *The Times*—the most influential English newspaper—is the best indication of Kropotkin's high status in Britain.

Liberal papers gave Kropotkin credit, but it was with *The Times* that he seems to have established a unique relationship. Apart from his comments about Russian geography, *The Times* published his articles and letters about the harsh political situation in his country of origin.⁸³ The paper also showed a lingering

⁸¹For indications of such a change of attitude see Alan Kimball, "The Harassment of Russian Revolutionaries Abroad: The London Trial of Vladimir Burtsev in 1898," *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, n.s. 6 (1973): 48–65.

⁸²For the activities of the Society see Barry Hollingsworth, "The Society of Friends of Russian Freedom: English Liberals and Russian Socialists, 1890–1917," *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, n.s. 3 (1970): 45–64. In 1908, in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, a parliamentary committee on Russian affairs was set up for the same purpose—to disseminate anti-Tsarist propaganda (Woodcock and Avakumović, *The Anarchist Prince*, p. 372).

⁸³See 24 March 1890; 13 September, 19 October 1906; 11 January, 28 July, 14 August 1908; 9 January, 29 July 1909; 25 January 1911 and 9 October 1914 for Kropotkin's letters about the political repression in Russia. See also 13 March 1906 for his letter about the repercussions of the Aliens Act (1905) on Russian refugees in Britain.

interest in Kropotkin's own activities. Having the best foreign department, *The Times* could be more informative about Kropotkin's moves abroad than other papers.

In the winter of 1882, when Kropotkin was under the threat of arrest in France and extradition to Russia, *The Times* published several telegrams which traced his whereabouts.⁸⁴ During his subsequent trial in Lyons, *The Times* reported the proceedings and hinted that the charge of belonging to the then defunct International was simply an excuse to harass subversive elements.⁸⁵ The newspaper later participated in the campaign to release Kropotkin from prison, although it did so in a reserved and uncommitted tone. The paper published the petition calling for his release, signed by prominent politicians, artists, and writers, the various reactions to it, and the harsh conditions of Kropotkin's confinement.⁸⁶

As if anxiously waiting for the event, *The Times* quoted a Reuter's report of the possible arrival of Kropotkin in Britain just a few days before it actually happened.⁸⁷ From then on the paper regularly noted Kropotkin's writings, opinions, and movements, while some of his lectures were surveyed in great detail.⁸⁸ Its reports about his state of health showed an almost personal concern. Interestingly, these reports were occasionally published under the column Court Circular—where his name appeared side by side with members of the royal family and other titled people in Britain or abroad—or under the column Condition of Invalids, together with a report about the condition of the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁸⁹

The attention *The Times* paid to Kropotkin did not wane with his departure to Russia. Although it became more and more difficult to get information about Kropotkin, *The Times* recorded what was known about his pursuits in his motherland, his continued support for the war, and his criticism of the Bolshevik regime.⁹⁰ Like other papers, *The Times* reported Kropotkin's deteriorating health in the last two weeks of his life and printed a long obituary.⁹¹ Unfortunately, Kropotkin's death had been announced in *The Times* as well as in other papers, a week before it actually happened. Thus published prematurely, the obituary was followed by a denial of Kropotkin's death, and then by a confirmation six days later.⁹²

There was much in the sympathetic coverage of Kropotkin that may have had a

⁸⁴Ibid., 28 November, 18, 20 December 1882.

⁸⁵Ibid., 23 January 1883.

⁸⁶Ibid., 27, 28, 29 March, 28 June 1883; 15 July 1884; 16 September 1885.

⁸⁷Ibid., 26 February 1886.

⁸⁸Ibid., 7 August 1882; 14 January 1889; 21 October 1890; 30 October 1893; 25 June 1898.

⁸⁹Ibid., 17 June 1911; 16 April, 19 May 1915 and 8 April 1915. See also 26 April 1915.

⁹⁰Ibid., 18, 30 August 1917; 9 October 1918; 13 February 1919. 18 June 1917 and 10 July 1920.

⁹¹Ibid., 31 January 1921.

⁹²Ibid., 3 and 9 February 1921.

compensating effect on the popular view of anarchism, since it demonstrated a gap between the reality of the anarchist movement and its image. Kropotkin's scientific inquiries were indistinguishable from his political views, the latter being the conclusion of the former. The journals which published his articles became an arena for his anarchist speculations. The many who confronted Kropotkin's observations, in whatever form, and on any subject, actually surveyed anarchist interpretations of events and solutions to society's ills. The occasional reports on his lectures—where Kropotkin addressed crowded halls, often with non-anarchist audiences—helped to diffuse his ideas even more. His insistence that anarchism was in no way anti-social, but rather invested with moral principles ran counter to current beliefs about the destructive and immoral nature of anarchism.⁹³ Lending it a scientific air, encouraged at least some people to take anarchism more seriously. Indeed, when anarchism was earnestly discussed as an ideology it was Kropotkin's ideas that were paramount. His reviewers' words of praise enhanced such tendencies. The more publicity Kropotkin's views had, the more likely anarchism was to be regarded as a set of beliefs rather than as a collection of "men of intrinsically evil-mind."⁹⁴ Kropotkin's own fame rubbed off on the movement. Many of those who dismissed his theoretical principles as an eccentricity, admired him and looked upon the anarchist as an individual rather than as a stereotype. The presentation of his life story acquainted readers with a chronicle of the anarchist movement and elucidated the harsh reality its members had to face.

No less fundamental was the awareness Kropotkin created of the existence of an unfair image and the need to rectify it. While reviewing an installment of his autobiographical articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Daily News* commented:

It is fair to remember that the Anarchists are not responsible for all the associations that have gathered about that term, though they may have been imprudent in the choice of so ambiguous expression . . . They are not looking forward, as is popularly supposed to chaos and confusion as the final cures for the ills that society as at present constituted is heir to. In other words, they imply the term "anarchism" simply in its original sense—that of dispensing with a super ruler.⁹⁵

The popular view of anarchism is neatly detailed by the review of Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread* in *The Times* which emphasized the contrast between the image of Kropotkin and that of other anarchists. After praising the book for being "an extremely interesting exposition of the gospel of anarchy" the reviewer added:

To many, probably to most, people anarchy is a word of fear or disgust; they associate it with murderous and generally cowardly desperadoes, who are the sworn and stealthy enemies of the rest of mankind. To the police, who have a good deal to do

⁹³Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchist Morality," in Baldwin, *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* (originally published 1909).

⁹⁴*The Daily Mail*, 17 September 1901.

⁹⁵*Daily News*, 14 August 1899.

with anarchists, it is a word of contempt; they associate it with a peculiarly mean and base type of criminal, whom they do not fear in the least. But there is another view of anarchy which is much less generally understood. The anarchists of the newspaper and the novel, who occasionally murder a Sovereign or a President, but more often kill a number of innocent bystanders, are either weak-minded fanatics or common criminals, who have picked up a theory spun by more ingenious brains than their own and use it as a justification of their criminal acts. The real anarchists never do anything of the kind, or indeed, anything at all, except talk and write; they theorize and lead blameless or harmless lives, at least in act.⁹⁶

It is impossible to dissect the process of opinion formation and determine the effects which the good name of one man, however prominent, may have had upon the fortunes of the movement with which he was indissolubly linked. Kropotkin's influence on expressions of dissent from the anarchist stereotype cannot be measured accurately. Favorable comments about anarchism were not necessarily made with him in mind. In any case, an examination of observations about anarchists over more than thirty years of the movement's most active period, shows that the public image did not undergo significant change.⁹⁷ Thus, Kropotkin's positive ideological impact outside the anarchist movement, although profound, was narrow. His influence was limited to radical and intellectual circles, who, while searching for a foothold from which to interpret the world, consumed some of his ideas, or at least appreciated his goal.

The bias against anarchism to which the public was exposed was far greater than the many favorable impressions of Kropotkin. Furthermore, most of the papers which projected an appealing portrait of Kropotkin, were opposed to anarchism in general. Against the flow of adverse observations, his refutations had little chance of acceptance, especially as anarchism drew intense, emotional reactions.

Those for whom anarchism was an emotional matter naturally tended to be immune to rational persuasion; and even where emotional involvement was not so intense, contrasting presentations of the subject did not necessarily lead to a change of opinion. The wider the discrepancy between new evidence and existing beliefs, the more likely it was to be rejected and leave no mark on public attitudes. The wealth of evidence about Kropotkin may have also been discounted as unrepresentative of the anarchist movement. In addition, individuals and newspapers do hold conflicting views simultaneously without evoking a sense of them violating logic. What can be said with certainty is that Kropotkin's residence in Britain stimulated comparison and doubt, and cut some ground from under the popular image. It was only a "saintly" anarchist of the caliber and immaculate behavior of Kropotkin who could dent the wall of prejudice against anarchism.

⁹⁶*Times Literary Supplement*, 1 March 1907.

⁹⁷See Haia Shpayer, "British Anarchism 1881-1914: Reality and Appearance," Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1981.