

## Kropotkin's Heirs

by George Katsiaficas

Born 160 years ago, Peter Kropotkin died in Dimitrov, his dream of a society based on liberty and equality unfulfilled. Tolerated by the authorities during the revolution, his writings remained in print throughout Soviet times. Today he remains alive on many levels: his books are in print in more than a dozen languages; his progeny have prospered, and include a 17-year-old by the same name; modern anarchists (the "fourth wave") are ready once again to fight for his dreams; and, last but not least, scholars gathered in December 2002 to celebrate his birthday and ruminate on his impact.

The form of the conference, a combination of activists and academics, was quite unusual given the line often drawn in the US between the two. As several people reminded me, representatives from the national police (FSB or Federal Security Services) visited the conference to inquire about the foreign attendees. (All two of us). This would not be the last time on my Russian trip that I was notified of the presence of such people.

Coming from Boston, which has more than its fair share of beautiful buildings, I was awe struck by the architecture of Petersburg. The conference itself was held in the ballroom of the Saltikov family mansion on the Neva. Among memorable venues I visited were the mansion of ballet dancer and one-time Bolshevik headquarters, and the famous balcony from which Lenin spoke on the eve of the final uprising.

The first event of the conference was a visit to the military academy where the teenaged Prince earned his spurs in the Czar's service. Much to my good fortune, the person designated to translate the proceedings for me was none other than Alexei Kropotkin, great great nephew of Peter through his brother. Not only was Alexei's English perfect, his elegant manner and personal generosity draws many people to him. (We quickly became buddies. He and Anna (his wife and like him, a nuclear physicist) invited me to travel with them after the conference. In Moscow, we went together to the Bolshoi. I will never forget their kindness, as exemplified in such small gestures as offering me a dry pair of socks when I arrived at their apartment, an item I much needed after sloshing through Moscow's semi-frozen street slush.)

Our conference's visit to the Peter-Paul fortress left me feeling bitterly angry. Poorly lit, badly ventilated and with paint peeling from walls and ceiling, the prison stands in stark contrast to the nearby Romanov family cathedral, where the royal remains of Nicholas II and family were recently interred. The refurbished iconostasis and nearby priest's lectern sparkle with newly painted gilding that appears at first glance to be solid gold. The recent reburial of the Czar's remains, replete with the highest rites of state and church, are one indication of the regression suffered by Russians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The halls outside the church's chambers are lined with photographs of the Czar's descendants (most of whom appear to be living in Italy). Apparently almost none of them speak Russian, having adopted the French riviera and Italian cities as their domiciles.

These larger than life photographs and freshly gilded décor stand not 100 yards from the prison inside the fortress where Kropotkin nearly died—and where hundreds of other political prisoners who were not so fortunate ended their worldly existences. Dostoevsky, Trotsky, Gorky and scores of others, some famous but most not, were subjected to these bars and walls. Bad air is to be breathed even to this day within these large chambers, air so bad that within two years of his being confined there, the Prince's health deteriorated so much that he had to be moved to a nearby prison hospital to recuperate. As we know in graphic detail from his autobiography, it was from that hospital that Kropotkin escaped, after which he drank coffee at one of St. Petersburg's fanciest cafes (the best place to hide from the police he thought rightfully).

Together with Alexei and Anna, I visited Dimitrov, where Peter Kropotkin was assigned a house by the Bolshevik authorities. Although this small town is less than an hour's train ride from Moscow, it was probably selected to isolate Kropotkin, to prevent him from taking an active role in the tumultuous events of his final days while nonetheless having his presence add to the revolutionary mystique.