

Memoirs of a revolutionist and the life of a saint: kropotkin's influence on doro...

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Stories, narratives, and scripts play a crucial role in the life of any human being. We learn human speech through listening to fairy tales our parents tell us over the cradle. We find our heroes and role models on the pages of teenage novels and adventure movies. We understand the place of our country and our time in the wider mosaic of human existence through acquaintance with history – a very powerful script in its own right. Both religion and science on the level of their substantial organization present narratives. Some modern psychologists even argue that our concept of self is the result of the narration of experience – essentially an exercise in storytelling. Perhaps the genre of written autobiography is one of the most persuasive proofs of the latter statement. Especially the autobiography that is as rich, insightful, and personal as Dorothy Day`s *The Long Loneliness*.

The importance of written narratives for the formation of the author`s worldview is one of the central points in the story of her life. As Mrs. Day herself puts it, “ though my only experience of the destitute was in books, the very fact that *The Jungle* was about Chicago [...], whose streets I walked, made me feel that from then on my life was to be linked to theirs, their interests were to be mine (Day, 43).” Intellectuals, people who work with ideas and live in their world feel the thirst for this type of communication more severely than the majority of mankind. They feed on beautiful thoughts and beautiful stories and, if lucky, they blossom on such fertile soil. That is why any of the literary references presented by Dorothy Day in her autobiography is of crucial importance for everybody who wants to trace the origins of her unique personality and worldview. One of the key references of this type is “ Prince” Pëtr Kropotkin`s own breathtaking biography *The*

Memoirs of a Revolutionist. Thorough examination of Kropotkin`s account makes evident that it put a distinctive imprint not only on the writing of Mrs. Day, but on her life and social activism as well.

This beautifully written and animated book does not only conveys the atmosphere of a number of unique places and times, to which Kropotkin became part of, but also makes evident the powerful mind of a man who stood behind such a life and directed its currents. It follows its main character from his early childhood spent in one of the Moscow`s most aristocratic neighborhoods called Old Equerries` Quarter (Stáraya Konyúshenskaya), in the family of a respectable serviceman (Kropotkin, Chapter I). His education in the Tsar`s Page Corps – the most prestigious educational facility for boys in the whole Russian Empire, his promising career, and close proximity to the future tsar Alexander III (Kropotkin, Chapter II). His self-initiated retreat from the world of high society into one of the Siberian army units, where he would have possibility to perform his numerous researches in the areas of geology, ethnography, cartography, and physical geography (Kropotkin, Chapter III). His final comeback, active accession to the leftist oppositional underground, imprisonment, escape from the most guarded prison in the country, emigration... The life of such an originality and inspiration can hardly be fitted into the space of a single paragraph. But there is something more to The Memoirs of a Revolutionist than the extraordinary life of Prince Pëtr Alexeyevich Kropotkin. It is the extraordinary life of Russian Empire. The author of the autobiography, although predominantly concerned with narrating his own life, provides a

window on some of the crucial events in the Russian history of the second half of nineteenth century: abolition of slavery (“Krepostnoye pravo”) in the year 1861; the assassination of tsar Alexander II in 1881; the accession on the throne of his successor Alexander III. This type of artful intertwining was evidently a well learned technique for Day, whose autobiography also presents a lively portrait of America throughout more than half of a century of change. Although, of course it is not the only way in which the writing of Kropotkin affected the author of *The Long Loneliness*.

We know that Dorothy Day first read *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* in her University years (Day, 42). This reading resided at the intersection of two areas of interest, which occupied her attention for a long time. The first one was classical Russian literature – according to her own testimony, the list of the Russian authors, which she read at the time included Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Gorki (Day, 47). The second one – her lifelong sympathy for the anarchist thought, of which Kropotkin was one of the major proponents together with his compatriot Bakunin, Emma Goldman, and Proudhon. Of course, the story of the Prince, Siberia explorer, political prisoner, fugitive, and anarchist should have excited a young university student, but for Dorothy Day it meant much more than a simple encounter with an exotic personality. She was attracted by Kropotkin's social and political agenda, “We emphasize the “Prince” when referring to Kropotkin precisely because he gave up titles and estates to be with the poor (Day, 218),” as she wrote many years later. This encounter also had lasting repercussions for her worldview and personal ideology. First of all, the example of Pëtr Kropotkin

provided her with a model of individual activism that targeted the existing system of power relations and was restless in his fight. Similarities in the biographies of both thinkers look more than striking: both consciously remained in the opposition to the existing regime throughout their lives, both were repeatedly imprisoned, both made a significant contributions to the ideologies of movements which they represented. The common readiness to lead political fights even when there was no apparent hope for victory is also a vibrant common feature. Therefore, although Dorothy Day may have not thought about it in such terms, she was implementing into life the patterns of behavior, already exploited by Russian anarchist more than fifty years ago. Put more formally, introduction to the intellectual legacy of Kropotkin shaped Day`s understanding of the strategies of oppositional activities on a literally fundamental level.

Secondly, the author of *The Long Loneliness* highly appreciated and inevitably adopted, to a higher or lesser degree, the mode of thinking about social issues, expressed throughout the *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. In this work, Kropotkin persistently demonstrates how cooperation between free and active individuals leads to the results much better than those that could be possibly achieved through any kind of centralized compulsory administration. He saw it in the rural communities, where peasants effectively cooperated with each other to achieve common goals, when he visited the family mansion in the years of early childhood. He saw how young boys in the Page Corps suffered from the results of poor leadership and organized themselves both against older boys and against bureaucratic

teachers during adolescence. He saw the power of freewill cooperation between the anarchists in Clervo in the years of his youth. Finally, he saw it during his Siberian expeditions. Mrs Day beautifully summarizes the point, “ Prince Kropotkin [...] was a scientist by avocation, who [...] chose a regiment going to Siberia so that he could engage in his scientific pursuits [...]. Later on in his explorations [...], after active experience of cooperation, he pointed out that the voluntary association of men on a scientific expedition worked out better than the regimentation of military men (Day, 61).” This same vector of thinking is obviously evident in Day`s ideology of distributism, which also emphasized the role of the active, uncoercive cooperation of individuals on the basis of mutual recognition of each other`s dignity. Therefore, Pëtr Kropotkin`s autobiography *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* exerted a notable influence both on the ideology of Dorothy Day strictu sensu and on the way she viewed the role of a political activist in the life of a wider society. In the first case the novel cemented her devotion to the ideas of anarchism understood as protest against any coercion in social relations. In the second one, it offered her a distinctive role model of a restless fighter against oppression and injustice. Some direct Kropotkian influences could also be seen in the way Mrs Day composed and wrote her own autobiography.

All these observations return us to the point, where we started our essay – the importance of communication of ideas and ways of thinking for the formation of the purposeful and bright mind. For any book, any narrative, even any story can later, when combined with a fully formed stream of

creative energy of the new author, fruit into real changes in the surrounding world. That is how the memories of a revolutionist may bring about the life of the saint in the final count.

Works Cited

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