MUTUAL AID

A Factor of Evolution

PETER KROPOTKIN

Edited and with an Introduction by

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Where are those who will come to serve the masses - not to utilize them for their own ambitions?

Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*[1]

NEARLY a century ago Peter Kropotkin sounded a very modern note when he called on the young to join the struggle for social justice. A young man who has studied a trade or profession, he wrote, 'has not done this in order that he should make use of his acquirements as instruments of plunder for his own gain, and he must be depraved indeed and utterly cankered by vice, who has not dreamed that one day he would apply his intelligence, his abilities, his knowledge to help on the enfranchisement of those who today grovel in misery and ignorance'. How up-to-date this sounds at a time when high-minded students in many countries are sick of war and oppression and yearn to use their talents for the benefit of mankind. For such young people Kropotkin's advice would seem as pertinent as ever: Join the cause of humanity, 'the never-ceasing struggle for truth, justice, and equality among the people, whose gratitude you will earn - what nobler career can the youth of all nations desire than this?'[2]

A scion of the landed nobility whose ancestors had been grand princes in medieval Russia, Kropotkin had himself taken the course which he was now prescribing to others. In 1871 he was offered the coveted post of secretary to the Imperial Geographical Society in St Petersburg. Though not yet thirty (he was born in Moscow in 1842), he richly deserved the honour, and only a few years before he would eagerly have accepted it. During his military service in Siberia in the eighteen-sixties, he had explored vast stretches of

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1. Boston, 1899, p. 278.
2. 'An Appeal to the Young', *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets,* ed. Roger N. Baldwin, New York, 1927, pp. 261, 279.

uncharted territory and, on the basis of his observations, had elaborated a theory which revised the cartography of eastern Asia. The structural lines of Asia, he saw, did not run north and south or east and west, as Humboldt and others had represented them, but from north-east to south-west. In his memoirs Kropotkin describes the immense pleasure he felt at the moment of scientific discovery, when all the data suddenly fell into place. 'There are not many joys in human life', he wrote, 'equal to the joy of the sudden birth of a generalization, illuminating the mind after a long period of patient research. What has seemed for years so chaotic, so contradictory, and so problematic takes at once its proper position within an harmonious whole.'[3]

His reports on the topography of Siberia won Kropotkin immediate recognition and opened the way to a distinguished academic career. Had he continued his scientific work, one can only surmise what further discoveries he might have made and what honours he might have won. When the offer from the Geographical Society reached him, he was studying glacial deposits in Finland, on which he made a host of valuable observations that enhanced his scientific reputation. By this time, however, Kropotkin was undergoing a crisis that was to change the direction of his life. He no longer could find peace in the work to which he had brought such great gifts of observation and insight. He was deeply troubled by the fact that, while he had been privileged to attain intellectual distinction, the mass of people lived in poverty and ignorance. 'What right had I to these highest joys', he asked, 'when all around me was nothing but misery and struggle for a mouldy bit of bread; when whatsoever I should spend to enable me to live in that world of higher emotions must needs be taken from the very mouths of those who grew the wheat and had not bread enough for their children?'[4]

Kropotkin's course was settled. As deeply as he cherished his scientific pursuits, to continue them seemed self-indulgent when there was so much suffering and injustice in the world. A higher calling beckoned, and wherever it might lead, whatever sacrifices it might require, he was quite prepared to follow. Indeed, as a comrade remarked, it was with an 'ecstasy of expiation' that he dedicated his life to oppose that very injustice of which fate had made him the involuntary beneficiary.[5] Accordingly, he declined the offer of the Geographical Society and, renouncing his aristocratic birthright, embarked on a future of prison and exile which was to last nearly half a century.

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[3] *Memoirs of a Revolutionist,* p. 226.

[4] ibid., p. 240.

His refusal of the secretaryship was not the first time that Kropotkin, to the consternation of his family, had rejected the path of personal advancement. In 1862, when he graduated from the exclusive Corps of Pages in St Petersburg, he could have made a brilliant career at court, but he applied instead for a commission in the unfashionable Cossack regiment of the Amur in eastern Siberia. Yet, whatever others might have thought, it was a decision he himself was never to regret. For it was in Siberia that his libertarian philosophy first began to take shape. It was here that he first read Proudhon, the father of French anarchism, and that he learned of the exploits of Bakunin, who barely a year before had escaped down the Amur and around the world to western Europe, where he founded an enduring anarchist movement among workers, artisans and intellectuals. Most important of all, it was in Siberia that he shed his hopes that the state could act as a vehicle of social progress. Soon after his arrival he drafted, at the request of his superiors, elaborate plans for municipal self-government and for the reform of the penal system (a subject that was to interest him for the rest of his life), only to see them vanish forever in an impenetrable bureaucratic maze. And towards the end of his tour, in 1866, the authorities put down with great brutality a revolt of Polish exiles near Lake Baikal, an incident which shattered whatever remained of Kropotkin's faith in the virtues of government.

At the same time, however, he was favourably impressed by the small, autonomous communities which flourished in the Siberian wilderness. The successful cooperation that he observed among the Russian peasants - especially the Dukhobor religious sectarians - and native tribesmen became a flood of light that illuminated his subsequent thinking. T began to appreciate the difference between acting on the principle of command and discipline and acting on the principle of common understanding', he later recalled. 'Although I did not then formulate my observations in terms borrowed from party struggles, I may say now that I lost in Siberia whatever faith in state discipline I had cherished before. I was prepared to become an anarchist.'[6] A few years later, Kropotkin's favourable impressions of uncorrupted communal life were reinforced when he visited the watchmaking communities of the Jura mountains in Switzerland. He was drawn at once to their voluntary associations of mutual support and to the absence among them of political ambition or of any distinction between leaders and subordinates. Their mixture of manual and mental labour as well as the integration in their mountain villages of domestic manufacture and agricultural work won his warm admiration and helped to shape his vision of the ideal society of the future. After Siberia, his experience in Switzerland confirmed Kropotkin in his new libertarian creed, 'and when I came away from the mountains, after a week's stay with the watchmakers, my views upon socialism were settled. I was an anarchist.'[7]

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[5] Enrico Malatesta, in *Peter Kropotkin: The Rebel, Thinker, and Humanitarian,* ed. Joseph Ishill, Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, 1923, p. 39.

Siberia, then, marked an important turning point in Kropotkin's life. For it was there that he began to develop his celebrated theory of mutual aid, which was to occupy a central place in his whole philosophy. He had left for the Far East in 1862, deeply impressed by Darwin's *Origin of Species* (published three years before) and eager to discover new evidence of the 'struggle for existence' which most Darwinists considered the main factor in the evolution of species. What he observed, however, quite astonished him and led him to conclude that the theory of evolution, which was then the talk of intellectual Europe, had been seriously distorted by Darwin's followers. Kropotkin's careful observations of animal and human life revealed few instances of internecine struggle among members of the same species. Far from ruthless competition, what he found was mutual aid 'carried on to an extent which made me suspect in it a feature of the greatest importance for the maintenance of life, the preservation of each species, and its further evolution'.[8]

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[6] *Memoirs of a Revolutionist,* pp. 216—17.

[7] ibid., p. 287.

[8] *Mutual Aid,* p. 18.

The theory of mutual aid had thus begun to take shape. But fully two decades were to elapse before Kropotkin could find the occasion to elaborate it. In the meantime, he threw himself into revolutionary activity which made his name an object of admiration in radical groups all over Europe. In 1872, on his return from the Jura, he joined the Chaikovsky circle, an organization of young Populists who were spreading revolutionary propaganda among the workers and peasants of St Petersburg and Moscow. Caught in a police dragnet, he was imprisoned in 1874 but made a dramatic escape two years later,' fleeing to western Europe where he became the foremost theorist and leader of the anarchist movement. The next few years were spent mostly in Switzerland, until Kropotkin, at the demand of the Russian government, was expelled after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. He moved to France but was arrested in December 1882 and locked up for three years in Clairvaux prison on trumped-up charges of sedition. It was here that his theory of mutual aid was carried a further step.

During the first year of his confinement, Kropotkin chanced to read a lecture 'On the Law of Mutual Aid', which had been delivered in 1880 by Professor Karl Kessler, a respected Russian zoologist and the dean of St Petersburg University. Kessler's thesis was that cooperation rather than conflict was the chief factor in the process of evolution. Besides the 'law of mutual struggle', he argued, there existed in nature a 'law of mutual aid' which was far more important for the survival and the progressive evolution of species. In particular, Kessler emphasized that the desire to protect their offspring brought animals together and that 'the more individuals keep together, the more they mutually support each other, and the more are the chances of the species for surviving, as well as for making further progress in its intellectual development'. All classes of animals practise mutual aid, said Kessler, and to prove his point he provided examples from the behaviour of beetles, birds and mammals.

.Kessler's lecture had a great impact on Kropotkin's thinking. It 'struck me', he wrote, 'as throwing a new light on the whole subject' of evolution.[9] Not only did it corroborate his own observations in Siberia as well as among the Swiss watchmakers of the Jura mountains, but it suited to perfection the libertarian social philosophy which he was then evolving. Indeed, Kessler's thesis seemed to Kropotkin so correct and so important that he began at once to collect new data to develop it as far as he possibly could. He soon found, to his great interest, that other writers had been making similar observations. In a doctoral dissertation published in 1877, for instance, Alfred Espinas, a French philosopher, had stressed the importance of social behaviour among animals for the preservation of species. The idea, as Kropotkin noted, was 'in the air'.[10] To concede this, however, is not to minimize Kropotkin's own achievement. Kessler himself had presented his views only in a cursory sketch which his death in 1881 - scarcely a year after delivering his lecture - prevented him from developing. Nor did anyone else, before Kropotkin, give the theory of mutual aid coherent and systematic expression. It was left to the anarchist prince to elaborate it and to buttress it with a wealth of evidence derived both from first-hand observation and from extensive study of the works of anthropologists and field naturalists, to which his copious reference notes in *Mutual Aid* bear witness.

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[9] ibid., p. 19.

By the time Kropotkin began to publish his findings, he had been released from Clairvaux prison and had settled in England, where he was to remain for the next thirty years, until the Russian Revolution allowed him to return to his native country. The impetus to make his theory known came in 1888 when T. H. Huxley, one of Darwin's leading disciples, published an influential essay on 'The Struggle for Existence' in the widely-read London periodical the *Nineteenth Century.* The burden of Huxley's argument was that life was a 'continuous free fight' and that competition between individuals of the same species was not merely a law of nature but the driving force of progress. 'From the point of view of the moralist', he wrote in a famous passage, 'the animal world is on about the same level as a gladiators' show. The creatures are fairly well treated and set to fight; whereby the strongest, the swiftest, and the cunningest live to fight another day. The spectator has no need to turn his thumbs down, as no quarter is given.

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[10] ibid., p. 31 n.

To Kropotkin, Huxley's essay seemed a conspicuous - indeed a grotesque — example of how Darwin's theories were being distorted by his followers. Kropotkin had no quarrel with Darwin himself. On the contrary, he had enormous respect for Darwin's discoveries and regarded the theory of natural selection as perhaps the most brilliant scientific generalization of the century. Nor did he deny that the 'struggle for existence' played an important role in the evolution of species. In *Mutual Aid* he declares unequivocally that 'life *is* struggle; and in that struggle the fittest survive'.[12] But who were the fittest to survive? What Kropotkin could not accept was the single-minded emphasis placed by Huxley and others on competition and conflict in the evolutionary process. There was no infamy in the relations of the whites towards other races or of the strong towards the weak, he wrote, which would not have found its excuse in Huxley's formula of unmitigated conflict. Besides, Huxley's picture of the natural world as a savage jungle, red in tooth and claw, contrasted sharply with his own findings, which indicated that, in the process of natural selection, spontaneous cooperation among animals was far more important than ferocious competition, and that ' those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest' to survive.[13] Kropotkin, moreover, hastened to point out that Darwin himself, in *The Descent of Man,* acknowledged the importance of mutual cooperation in the struggle for existence, though Darwin, it must be admitted, never developed this idea in any serious way.

Kropotkin replied to Huxley in a series of articles which appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* between 1890 and 1896, and which were brought together in his famous book, *Mutual Aid,* in 1902. A revised edition appeared in 1904, and another (from which the present edition is reprinted) in 1914, with a new preface occasioned by the outbreak of the First World War. Here he

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11. T. H. Huxley, 'The Struggle for Existence: a Programme', *Nineteenth Century,* February **1888.**

12. ibid., p. **71.**

13. ibid., p. **30.**

documents his theory of mutual aid with abundant illustrations from animal and human life. Among animals he shows how mutual cooperation is practised in hunting, in migration and in the propagation of species. He draws interesting examples from the elaborate social behaviour of ants and bees, from wild horses which form a ring when attacked by wolves, from the wolves themselves which form a pack for hunting, and from migrating deer which, scattered over a wide territory, come together in herds to cross a river. From these and many similar illustrations Kropotkin demonstrates that sociability is a prevalent feature at every level of the animal world. Moreover, he finds that among humans too mutual aid has been the rule rather than the exception. With considerable skill he traces the evolution of voluntary cooperation from the primitive tribe, peasant village and medieval commune to a variety of modern associations which have continued to practise mutual support despite the rise of the coercive bureaucratic state. His thesis, in short, is a refutation of the doctrine that competition and brute force are the sole - or even the principal - determinants of social progress. For Kropotkin mutual aid has played a far greater role — indeed, it has been 'the chief factor of evolution'.[14]

Mutual Aid has become a classic. With the exception of his memoirs, it is Kropotkin's best-known work and is widely regarded as his masterpiece. It has been translated into many languages, Asian as well as European, and has gone through numerous printings. Nor are the reasons far to seek. For *Mutual Aid* is more than a contribution to the theory of evolution. It forms the very cornerstone of Kropotkin's anarchist philosophy. In the first place, it was his most successful attempt to provide anarchist theory with a scientific foundation. Deploying his extensive knowledge pf zoology, anthropology and history, he could show, as no one had shown before, the importance of solidarity and cooperation in the evolutionary process. But even more, mutual aid was for Kropotkin the basis of all our ethical principles. Morality, he argues, has evolved from the instinct of human sociability, the unconscious recognition 'of the close

[14] ibid., p. 69. Cf. Kropotkin's *Modern Science and Anarchism,* New York, 1908, p. 44.

dependency of everyone's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own'.[15] Not that there was no negative side to human behaviour. While man's natural instincts were by and large cooperative, competitiveness and self-assertion were by no means absent, Kropotkin admitted. As a self-proclaimed Darwinist, he was hardly blind to the existence of conflict in the human as in the animal world. But the task, as he saw it, was to discourage those feelings 'which induce man to subdue other men in order to utilize them for his individual ends' and to foster those which 'induce human beings to unite for attaining common ends by common effort: the first answering that fundamental need of human nature — struggle, and the second representing another equally fundamental tendency — the desire for unity and mutual sympathy'.[16]

This brings us to the place of mutual aid in Kropotkin's social thought. Here again, as in virtually every area to which he turned his scholarly gaze, its role was of critical importance. Throughout the past, he maintained, men had displayed a marked propensity to work together in a spirit of solidarity and brotherhood. Mutual aid among human beings had been a far more potent force than the egoistic will to dominate others. Mankind, in fact, owed its very survival to mutual assistance. The theories of Hegel, Marx and Darwin notwithstanding, Kropotkin held that cooperation rather than conflict lay at the root of the historical process. Furthermore, he refuted Hobbes's conception of man's natural condition as a war of each against all. In every period of history, he declared, mutual aid associations of diverse kinds had sprung into existence, reaching a high point in the guilds and communes of medieval Europe. The rise of centralized states from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries was for Kropotkin merely a transitory aberration from the normal pattern of western civilization. In spite of the state's appearance, voluntary associations had continued to play a central role in human affairs, and the spirit of mutual support was reasserting itself 'even in our modern society, and claims its right to be, as it has always been, the chief leader towards further progress'.[17] The dominant trends of modern history were pointing back towards decentralized, non-political cooperative societies in which men could develop their creative faculties freely, without the machinations of rulers, priests or soldiers. Everywhere, said Kropotkin, the artificial state was abdicating its 'holy functions' in favour of natural voluntary groups.

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[15] *Mutual Aid,* p. 22.

[16] *Ethics: Origin and Development,* New York, 1924, p. 22.

This forecast, however, has scarcely been fulfilled in our century of world wars and large-scale government. For Kropotkin took insufficient account of the naked violence which dominates the life of most animals, from insects and fishes to reptiles and mammals. He underestimated the widespread brutality in nature, the persecution of the weak by the strong, among men as among animals. Until the end of his life he retained his faith in the innate goodness of mankind, in the fraternal ties uniting men of different classes and nations in defiance of state barriers. On the other hand, his theory of mutual aid provides a valuable corrective to the extreme pessimism, verging on outright cynicism, of Huxley and the social Darwinists. More than that, by showing that life is not a jungle, that cooperation is a vital factor in the evolution of species, he offers hope, perhaps the only hope, of human survival.

'We all know', wrote Kropotkin, 'that without uprightness, without self-respect, without sympathy and mutual aid, human kind must perish, as perish the few races of animals living by rapine, or the slave-keeping ants.'[18] Even those for whom Kropotkin's stateless vision is an unattainable Utopia can appreciate the wisdom of these words. For them, too, his ideas can serve as a guiding star pointing the way to a better and freer life. And if governments will not wither away overnight, perhaps, at any rate, they can shed their more oppressive functions while a greater measure of autonomy filters down to local voluntary organizations. For all who share such hopes Kropotkin - who achieved in his life what Albert Camus said was the most difficult of modern tasks: to become a saint without God — remains a source of inspiration.

PAUL AVRICH

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17. *Mutual Aid,* p. 245.
18. *The Conquest of Bread,* London, 1972, p. 49.

FURTHER READING

In addition to *Mutual Aid,* nearly all of Kropotkin's major works are now available in English. The most important are *In Russian and French Prisons* (London, 1887, reprinted 1971), *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* (London, 1899, revised 1913 and reprinted 1968), *Ideals and Realities in Russian Literature* (London, 1905, reprinted 1968), *The Conquest of Bread* (London, 1906, revised 1913 and reprinted 1972; companion volume to present edition of *Mutual Aid* published by Allen LaneThe Penguin Press, 1972), *The Great French Revolution* (London, 1909, reprinted 1971), and *Ethics: Origin and Development* (New York, 1924, reprinted 1968). The first full English edition of *Paroles d'un revoke* (Words of a Rebel) will be published in 1972 under the editorship of Nicolas Walter.

A good collection of Kropotkin's shorter writings was compiled in 1927 by Roger N. Baldwin under the title of *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* and has been reprinted in a paperbound edition by Dover Publications. Another anthology, *Kropotkin: Selections From His Writings,* edited in 1942 by Herbert Read, is much less satisfactory, consisting of bits and pieces from Kropotkin's major works. A more recent collection, though also inadequate, is *P. A. Kropotkin: Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution,* edited by Martin A. Miller (Cambridge, Mass., 1970). One of Kropotkin's most important pamphlets, *The State: Its Historic Role,* has been newly translated from the French original by Vernon Richards and published by the Freedom Press of London in 1969.

For Kropotkin's life see his classic autobiography, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist,* first published in Boston in 1899. Several editions are currently in print, the most useful of which is the unabridged paperback brought out in 1971 by Dover with a new introduction and notes by Nicolas Walter. The best biography of Kropotkin, though lacking an adequate scholarly apparatus, is *The Anarchist Prince* by George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic (London, 1950, reprinted 1971).

P. A.

PREFACE TO THE 1914 EDITION

Peter Kropotkin

WHEN the present war began, involving nearly all Europe in a terrible struggle, and this struggle assumed, in those parts of Belgium and France which were invaded by the Germans, a never yet known character of wholesale destruction of life among the non-combatants and pillage of the means of subsistence of the civil population, 'struggle for existence' became a favourite explanation with those who tried to find an excuse for these horrors.

A protest against such an abuse of Darwin's terminology appeared then in a letter published in *The Times.* It was said in this letter that such an explanation was 'little more than an application to philosophy and politics of ideas taken from crude popular misconceptions of the Darwinian theory (of "struggle for existence" and "will to power", "survival of the fittest" and "superman", etc.)'; that there was, however, a work in English 'which interprets biological and social progress not in terms of overbearing brute force and cunning, but in terms of mutual cooperation'.

Twelve years have passed since the first edition of this work was published, and it can be said that its fundamental idea - the idea that mutual aid represents in evolution an important *progressive* element - begins to be recognized by biologists. In most of the chief works on evolution which have appeared lately on the Continent, it is already indicated that *two* different aspects of the struggle for life must be distinguished: the *exterior* war of the species against the adverse natural conditions and the rival species, and the *inner* war for the means of existence within the species. It is also admitted that both the extent of the latter and its importance in evolution have been exaggerated, much to the regret of Darwin himself; while the importance of sociability and social instinct in animals for the well-being of the species, contrarily to Darwin's teaching, was under-rated.

However, if the importance of mutual aid and support among animals begins to win recognition among modern thinkers, this is not yet the case for the second part of my thesis - the importance of these two factors in the history of man, for the growth of his progressive social institutions.

The leaders of contemporary thought are still inclined to maintain that the masses had little concern in the evolution of the sociable institutions of man, and that all the progress made in this direction was due to the intellectual, political, and military leaders of the inert masses.

The present war, having brought the majority of the civilized nations of Europe into a close contact, not only with the realities of war, but also with thousands of its side effects in daily life, surely will contribute to alter the current teachings. It will show how much the creative, constructive genius of the mass of the people is required, whenever a nation has to live through a difficult moment of its history.

It was not the masses of the European nations who prepared the present war-calamity and worked out its barbarous methods: it was their rulers, their intellectual leaders. The masses of the people have nowhere had a voice in the preparation of the present slaughter, and still less so in the working out of the present methods of warfare, which represent an entire disregard of what we considered the best inheritance of civilization.

And if the wreckage of this inheritance will not be complete; if notwithstanding the crimes committed during this 'civilized' war, we may still be sure that the teachings and traditions of human solidarity will, after all, emerge intact from the present ordeal, it is because, by the side of the extermination organized from above, we see thousands of those manifestations of spontaneous mutual aid, of which I speak in this book in the chapters devoted to man.

The peasant women who, on seeing German and Austrian war prisoners wearily trudging through the streets of Kiev, thrust into their hands bread, apples, and occasionally a copper coin; the thousands of women and men who attend the wounded, without making any distinction between friend and foe, officer or soldier; the French and Russian peasants — old men left behind in their villages and women - who decide in their village folk-motes to plough and to sow the fields of those who are 'there', under the enemy's fire; the cooperative kitchens and *popottes communistes* which sprang up all over France; the spontaneous aid to the Belgian nation which comes from England and the United States, and to devastated Poland from the Russian people - both these undertakings implying such an immense amount of voluntary, freely organized labour and energy that all character of 'charity' is lost in them, and they become mere neighbours' help - all these facts and many more similar ones are the seeds of new forms of life. They will lead to new institutions, just as mutual aid in the earlier ages of mankind gave origin later on to the best progressive institutions of civilized society.

To the chapters of this book which deal with the primitive and medieval forms of mutual aid I should like especially now to draw the attention of the reader.

I do so in the earnest hope that in the midst of the misery and agony which this war has flung over the world, there is still room for the belief that the constructive forces of men being nevertheless at work, their action will tend to promote a better understanding between men, and eventually among nations.

P. **KROPOTKIN**

BRIGHTON

24 November 1914.