

ANARCHIST STUDIES 30

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About this issue's cover: The Prince of Kittens

One of the great luminaries in the anarchist firmament is Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), whose reception in the Anglo-American press is the subject of Lara Green's article, 'The Transnational Life and Death of Peter Kropotkin, 1881-1921'. Green discusses a shift in Kropotkin's public image from foreigner-anarchist-terrorist to unthreatening 'Anarchist Prince' during his imprisonment (1883-1886) in the French prison of Clairvaux, a repurposed medieval monastery surrounded by swamp. At Clairvaux, prisoners were housed in dank cells and worked hard from dawn to dusk in enforced silence. Outer walls surrounding the central prison complex enclosed an orchard, croplands, and outbuildings for animals. Here, those approaching the end of their term were put to work.

Fortunately, Kropotkin and the twenty-two comrades rounded up with him were given 'political' status: exempt from Clairvaux's harsh work regime, they shared a few rooms, wore their own cloths, received unproblematic publications, corresponded (letters going in and out were first reviewed by prison administrators), and were allowed to cultivate vegetables on a small plot adjacent to their quarters. Nonetheless, the experience took its toll. Food was malnourishing and disease, rampant. Kropotkin suffered from scurvy, and he contracted malaria as well.

Upon his release Kropotkin settled in London, where he wrote his damning expose, *In Russian and French Prisons* (1887). This thoroughly documented study records inhumane conditions of incarceration, sadistic cruelties, the economics of prisoner exploitation, dysfunctional prison reform, and how police and law courts collude to target the poor, the marginalised, and political radicals. States build prisons and fill them up in the name of law and order but, paradoxically, they are actually 'universities of crime'¹ – a phrase coined by Kropotkin that has echoed down the annals of the prison abolitionist movement.

In Russian and French Prisons includes firsthand observations gleaned from doing time in Clairvaux. What it doesn't relate is a light-hearted anecdote concerning a kitty amongst the anarchists! I discovered the tale quite by chance in *Chatterbox Circus* (1893), a sumptuously illustrated children's compendium of short stories, poems, and descriptions of animals. It dates from some time during Kropotkin's incarceration:

Prince Krapotkin's Cat²

The question whether a cat sees its reflection in a glass has been raised in the columns of a French periodical. Among others, Prince Krapotkin has sent

his experience from his prison. 'I see', says the prince, 'that there yet exists doubt as to whether a cat can see its reflection in a glass. I have a cat about fourteen months old, which I have brought up in prison, and as regards it, at least, there can be no doubt upon this subject. When it was little it amused us much by seeking a cat behind the glass, even when I showed it a very small glass. I have just repeated the experiment by showing it an oval mirror twenty centimetres long. It immediately assumed a serious air. It endeavoured to touch it with its paw, but finding that there was glass interposed, it peeped behind the mirror'.³

One wonders if, upon his release, Kropotkin took the kitten with him. I bet he did.

As I mentioned, *Chatterbox Circus* is illustrated. Opposite the above account is a fanciful rendering of Kropotkin and his cat playing the mirror game, which I've chosen for this issue's cover. Incidentally, some years ago I came across a Russian-language anthology from the 1920s drawing on the holdings of the Kropotkin Museum, Moscow (later closed, with its collection dispersed, in 1939).⁴ It included a pencil-sketched self-portrait of Kropotkin painting, with yet another cat by his side. It seems Kropotkin and cats were constant companions.

Allan Antliff

NOTES

- 1 Peter Kropotkin, 'Prisons: Universities of Crime', *Mother Earth* 8, 8 (1913): 242-245.
- 2 This variation on Kropotkin's name appears in many publications of the period.
- 3 'Prince Krapotkin's Cat', *Chatterbox Circus*, Laurance H. Francis (ed.), (Boston: Dana Estes and Company, 1893), p138.
- 4 On the Kropotkin Museum's tragic history following its founding in 1923, see Dionisy Gorbatsevich, 'Moscow 1934 – The Museum Tour', by Malcolm Archibald (ed., and trans. with notes), <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/fxpq8n> (accessed 23-12-2021).