

Anarchist ambivalence: politics and violence in the thought of Bakunin, Tolstoy and Kropotkin

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Introduction

The question of violence is invariably a matter of controversy and dispute for anarchists.[Pauli 2015: 142; Gelderloos 2007, 2015; Graeber 2009:222-228; Miller 1984: 109-123] Anarchist means should prefigure their political and ethical ends - and anarchy will be non-coercive. [Miller 1984:109; Graeber 2009:222] Reception of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) often focused on his aversion to violent revolution, appropriating him into the category of 'utopian' thinkers, in contrast to Marxist realism. Tolstoy's theory of state coercion can be traced to Proudhon [Rivett 1988: 31; Bartlett 2013: 143]. Subsequently there have been engagements between anarchism and pacifism in the thought and practice of Mohandas Gandhi [1869-1948], who was significantly influenced by Tolstoy.

But practices of non-violence have recently become contentious among anarchists.[Pauli 2015: 142-3; Gelderloos 2007, 2015] Anarchism is often associated with violence, both in popular imagination but also in its own frame. [Miller 1984:109] The twentieth century *Cercle Proudhon*, inspired by Georges Sorel, read Proudhon very differently and was associated with aggressive political programmes and tactics.[Darville et al 1912; Navet 1992] Anarchist activists and thinkers argue for a distinction between the violence of the state, and violent actions by those who oppose state oppression and work towards non-coercive social relations. Anarchist activism must include a diversity of kinds of action. Among these actions normally classified as violent - physical

fighting, use of weapons, destruction of property and even injury to persons - will figure. This in part is because violence can be effective in situations where non-violence is ineffective. In any case the situation in oppressive exploitative societies enforced by state authority is already violent, so violence is necessary. [Gelderloos 2007, 2015]

In this paper we examine controversies and disputes about the place, meaning, and justification of violent action in anarchism focussing mainly on Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), and Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921). These three share a common aristocratic Russian education, and the associated early career pattern of state service. They all dramatically dissented from their social inheritance [Woodcock 1975; Leier 2006; Miller 1976]. Tolstoy turned to art before his spiritual crisis further turned his writing to essays in which he worked out a justified pattern of life and action that is best characterised as christian anarchism [Woodcock 1962: 207-222 esp 215]. Bakunin and Kropotkin more directly jettisoned their aristocratic Russian duties and privileges for the lives of international anarchist activists, engaged in propaganda and theory, and in political organisation and campaigning [Schatz 1990: xv-xx; Woodcock 1962:134-206; Leier 2006: 7]. Both were centrally preoccupied with the antagonistic relations between social democracy, developing marxist communism, and anarchism. ⁱ

Focus on these nineteenth century Russian anarchists in their European political context is justified by their continuing status as prominent figures in anarchist political and intellectual history. Relatively close examination of their arguments and positions allows us to trace complexities in the theory of violence, and to examine the interactions of philosophy, practice and context.

This avoids homogenising 'anarchism' - the coherence and continuity of anarchist thought and practice is a matter for detailed analysis, not to be assumed. It is striking, though, that questions wrestled with by Bakunin, Tolstoy, and Kropotkin are still live in current argument. The association or otherwise between anarchism and non-violence, and the effectiveness and justification of violence as tactic and violence as strategy, are readdressed in recent disputes. [Gelderloos 2007, 2015] Anarchism is, in part, a philosophy of individual autonomy, but it is also a project for collective liberation. Questions of political responsibility, and in particular how individual decisions to engage in violent or non-violent action can and should be justified, and the political implications of such individual decisions, were, as we go on to show, of first importance to the thinkers studied here.

Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Tolstoy each articulate, with varying degrees of explicitness, ambivalence about violence in relation to political power. Instead of reading this ambivalence as a mark of culpable contradiction, we read it as the outcome of recognition of and engagement with the dynamics of violence in both repressive and resistant politics, and recognition of the dynamic and tense relationship between individual and collective action. Anarchism, unlike other contemporaneous progressivist and resistant ideologies, found itself working through and colliding with the difficulties of drawing clear lines between violence and non-violence in political action, and between good and bad violence. These thinkers demonstrated the fragility as well as the appeal of an idea of non-violent politics in the world as it is and as it might be.

Anarchism, violence and the 'Propaganda of the Deed'

In Bakunin's, Kropotkin's and Tolstoy's times anarchism was associated with violence in several ways. There were associations between anarchist thought, propaganda, political effort and action, and particular contexts of heightened levels of social, political and state violence. Anarchist political organisation and action resisted legal orders, and police regimes sought violently to repress incipient anarchism, real and imagined.[Kropotkin 1910/1995:242; Miller 1984:111] These same regimes focussed as well on the so-called threats and dangers of socialism. Of course, anarchists as much as socialists had close links with labour organisations and promoted the idea of the general strike. [Kropotkin 1910:242] But the relevant historical periods were marked, also, by antagonism and splits between socialism and anarchism, in which it was in the interests of socialists, if not explicitly to depict anarchists as crazy and violent, at least not to deny the association. ⁱⁱ

Further, materially violent episodes - periods of riot, state repression of political movements, attempted and actual assassination as a political strategy - were associated particularly with anarchism via processes of cultural framing which can be traced to the genres and conventions of popular press coverage in interaction with popular fears and with state security purposes. This was not simply a matter of reactionary forces delegitimising the political construction of an anarchist vision of just society. Some anarchist activists themselves framed violent political action as anarchist. Relatedly, certain elements of anarchist theory - notably the category of 'propaganda by deed' - were associated, by connotation, with eruption and with disruption and with the possibility of exemplary violence.

Bakunin's relationship with, and theory of, violence is said by critics to be difficult to characterise and interpret unambiguously. [Woodcock 1962: 136,151,160-2; Miller 1976:174; Marshall 1992:pp] His references to violence range from an early Hegelian commitment to 'a passion for destruction', which is a 'creative passion'[Bakunin 1842/1971:57; Leier 2006:111] to the project of galvanising insurrection and speaking of the value of war. Bakunin found himself in an awkward relationship with the Russian groups who launched the 'mad summer' of 1874 which was widely attributed to his influence. [Shatz 1990:xxxv-vi] Against campaigns of assassination and bombing, Bakunin insisted, in Leier's words, that 'the revolution sought to destroy institutions, not individuals'. [Leier 2006:226] He argued that assassination would achieve nothing. However, he refused to condemn Karakozov, the would-be assassin of Tsar Alexander II in 1866. [Leier 2006:226-7]

Interpretation of this strategic ambiguity is made more complicated by Bakunin's close association during 1869-70 with Sergei Nechaev, whose commitment to merciless, calculated, revolutionary passion, hating everyone and everything, was muddled with habits of extortion and theft, allegedly culminating in murder. [Confino 1973:17-32; Leier 2006:228-238; Marshall 1992:283-285; Carr 1937:398; Woodcock 1962: 160-2]. Some historians treat Nechaev as an opportunist with indeterminate ideological commitments or identity. [Confino 1973:26] For many he belongs to the history of terrorism, not to the history of anarchism as such. [Carr 1933/2007:255] Either way, his excessive violence, and betrayal of Bakunin's and others' trust, means that his membership of the canon of 'anarchist thinkers' is tendentious. The view that 'everything is permitted' is a reasonable inference from his argument that

'everything is moral that contributes to the triumph of the revolution; everything that hinders it is immoral and criminal.' [Nechaev 1869; Marshall 1992: 280].

Commentators remark that it is difficult to see how Nechaev managed to beguile Bakunin for so long. Undoubtedly the two were intimately linked for the year 1869, the year of the composition of the 'catechism', and the link was strong enough for the attribution of the catechism to Bakunin and Nechaev as joint authors, which is made explicitly by Raymond Carr.[1937:394; Confino 1973:42; Leier 2006:233-4] This attribution has been challenged by historians. Leier argues it can only be based on superficial parallels, and on misreadings of Bakunin who insists consistently that violence is to be directed against institutions, not people; he nowhere advocates assassination, nor terrorism. [Leier 2006:249] In particular, Nechaev's catechism focusses on a version of 'the immiseration thesis':

22. The Society has no aim other than the complete liberation and happiness of the masses.... Convinced that their emancipation and the achievement of this happiness can only come about as a result of an all-destroying popular revolt, the Society will use all its resources and energy towards increasing and intensifying the evils and miseries of the people until at last their patience is exhausted and they are driven to a general uprising.'

But Bakunin rejected any immiseration theory: the most terrible poverty is insufficient for revolution, and is as likely to produce despair and patience, obedience rather than rebellion. [Leier 2006: 238]

Bakunin's 'Letters to a Frenchman' invokes freedom, which given the right political and social system, can be a spontaneous characteristic of human life:

The anarchistic system of revolutionary deeds and actions naturally and unflinching evokes the emergence and flowering of freedom and equality, without any necessity whatever for institutionalised violence or authoritarianism. [Bakunin 1870/1971:194]

But, in the French case, this flowering of freedom can only proceed from 'primitive ferocious energy' of the peasants who hate all government, comply only under compulsion, and can and will make common cause with the city workers.[Bakunin 1870/1971:200] This will involve war:

Yes, there will be civil war. But why be so afraid of civil war? ... have great ideas, great personalities, and great nations emerged from civil war or from a social order imposed by some tutelary government? [Bakunin 1870/1971:205]

Civil war, Bakunin goes on, is always favourable to the awakening of popular initiative, and to the intellectual, material and moral interests of the populace:

And for this very simple reason: civil war upsets and shakes the masses out of their sheepish state, a condition very dear to governments, a condition which turns peoples into herds to be utilised and shorn at the whims of the shepherds. Civil war breaks through the brutalising monotony of men's daily existence, and arrests the mechanistic routine which robs them of creative thought.[Bakunin 1870/1971:205]

He goes on to argue that in the civil war he foresees men's self-interest and common sense will prevent slaughter, or devastation of the countryside, and

indeed will allow peasant organisation to develop and perfect itself, in a socialist direction.[Bakunin 1870/1971:206-7]

In Kropotkin's thinking we find a congruent argument - of the naturalness of cooperative freedom, but the necessary role of violence in dismantling the corrupting system that represses freedom. He was committed to the 'naturalness' of anarchism which is in accord with instinctive recognition of human worth and dignity, of mutuality and the value of cooperation. This recognition would be realised when a revolution for freedom removed the artificial constraints on human behaviour that are imposed in unequal, exploitative societies with their failures to meet human needs and their self-defeating (at best) state governments.[Shatz intro 1995:xix; Kropotkin 1902/1987:208-12,218-9]

He argued in an article in *Le Revolte* that a structure based on centuries of history cannot be destroyed with a few kilos of dynamite.[Miller 1976:174] But he also argued that a mass insurrection would be necessary to achieve change, even if it requires 'rivers of blood'. [Shatz 1995:xiii; Cahm 1989:92-3; Miller 1976:104] He viewed acts of assassination and other violence as useless if not counterproductive, but he refused to condemn the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. [Shatz 1995:xiv, xxvii]ⁱⁱⁱ

As a radical member of the Chaikovsky circle - which was engaged in the production and distribution of illegal literature in 1872 [Cahm 1989:92] - Kropotkin drafted a manifesto which revealed his own Bakuninist commitments, which were in some contrast to other members of the group who were not particularly anti-state, nor committed to popular revolt. The manifesto - accepted only after vigorous discussion - committed the group to participation in

peasant revolt with concentration on one location, rather than spreading resources thinly. From our point of view, the place of violence in this action, and the justification of it, is of particular interest. As Cahm puts it: 'Above all, Kropotkin felt that the group could do no better than be involved in a revolt whose savage repression would reveal the true evil nature of the regime, and encourage others to follow the example of the first martyrs, thus preparing for the eventual revolution:

"Let the nobility and the tsar be displayed at least once in all their bestial nakedness, and the rivers of blood spilled in one locality will not flow without consequence. ... perhaps there is no better outcome for us than to drown ourselves in the first river which bursts the dam." ' [Cahm 1989:93]

So, both Bakunin and Kropotkin associate violence above all with the state. This they share with Tolstoy. Absent the organised violence of the state, anarchist freedom and cooperation would be not only possible but probable - in particular, Kropotkin argued that the natural laws of human society enjoin cooperation, production, and the emergence of stable forms of association without coercion, oppression or repression.[Kinna 1995:273-6; Miller 1976:181-198; Kropotkin 1887/1927:47-8]

A problem for the politics of anarchism in their time, though, is that modern states have disguised their coercion and violence under the appearance of consent, civility, economic necessity, piety, rights, social conformism and the rest. Hence the importance of the motif of revelation, unmasking, showing what cannot be told. Anarchist strategy sets out to make plain the violence that underlies social order, by showing what happens when anyone seriously

dissents from the state or challenges it, including the challenge of enforcing legal or natural rights. Both Bakunin and Kropotkin face up to the fact that challenge to the state will unleash violence, and they argue that revolutionary actors must not be afraid of the violence that is unleashed. But this motif of the necessity and inevitability of violence is subtly mixed with the motif of the strategic provocation and revelation of violence in anarchist politics.

The category 'propaganda by deed' is traceable in its anarchist denotation to Bakunin's 'Letter to a Frenchman on the present crisis' (1870) in which he speaks of 'the anarchist system of revolutionary deeds and actions'[Bakunin 1870/1973:194; Cahm 1989:76] and then more explicitly to his 'Letter to the comrades of the Jura federation' (1873/1971:352) This letter contains Bakunin's resignation from the federation for reasons of ill health and because, although he considered himself capable of continuing to propagandise, 'the time for grand theoretical discourses, written or spoken, is over. ... This is the time not for ideas but for action, for deeds.' [1873/1971:352] In 1877 Paul Brousse published in the Bulletin of the Jura Federation the article 'La propagande par le fait' which takes up the idea of 'showing [people] what they cannot read'. [Brousse 1877/2005:150; Woodcock 1962:278]

The category itself is consistent both with exemplary violence and with exemplary pacifism. ^{iv} Robert Graham, in his introduction to Brousse's 1877 article, argues that the association or equation with 'terrorism' is wrong - propaganda by deed means nothing more than leading by example, the principle that actions speak louder than words. [Graham ed 2005:150; Cahm 1989:76-7; Miller 1984:98-9]

It is notable, though, that Brousse's first example of a deed which will command attention and contain a lesson is a demonstration which is designed to show how civil liberties are empty:

'Show [them] the article in the constitution allowing [them] to bring out the red flag, then bring out that flag: the State and the police will attack him; defend him; crowds will show up for the ensuing meeting; a few words of plain talk, and the people get the point.' [Brousse 1877/2005:151]

This first example is based on Brousse's experience and interpretation of the demonstration in Berne on March 18 1877. His second is the abortive uprising in the region of Benevento, Italy, in 1874 in which anarchists took over two small communes, burned the archives, and demonstrated their contempt for government by handing tax monies back to the people. [Graham ed 2005:151; Miller 1984:100] His further elaboration of possibilities based on this second strategy again anticipates state violence and insurrectionary self-defence:

'let the workers and their families move into salubrious accommodation and the idlers be tossed into the streets; if attacked, fight back, defend oneself, and if one loses, what matter? The idea will have been launched, not on paper' [Graham ed 2005: 151]

Brousse, then, does not connect propaganda of the deed with violent deeds as such. However, he does connect it with the exemplification and the demonstration, the showing, of the violence of the forces of reaction and oppression. Subsequently, anarchist critics of Brousse associated propaganda of the deed with *l'agence provocateur*. [Cahm 1989:79]

We should note here that for Bakunin the point of deeds is not propagandist - for him war will be socially transformative in the sense of destructive of institutions of oppression and cruelty. So despite the way the idea of propaganda of the deed can be traced to his thought, there is some distance between his views and Brousse's. Kropotkin similarly disliked the concept and did not use it in connection with his own ideas about strategy and the place of violence.[Cahm 1989:92] However, for both of them, the strategy of revealing the state's violence is central to their thinking about the question of state in relation to revolutionary violence.

Anarchism, non-violence and peace.

The legacy of Proudhon was often taken to be a legacy of non-violence, of anarchist refusal to engage in the coercion of state, or the violences of societies, but instead to develop free associations. [Kelley and Smith 1994: xxxiv] The principles that the ends must condition the means, that a non-coercive, voluntarist, cooperative outcome can only be got by non-coercive, voluntarist and cooperative strategies have also been a prominent part of anarchist thinking. [Marshall 1992:pp; Leier 2006:315-6] A good deal of anarchist theory focusses on creative projects of collective living and production.[Kropotkin 1910/1995: 233-5; Kropotkin 1902/1987:208-29; Kinna 1995:277-9] In this context, violent actions by anarchists are seen as a corruption of a tradition and its principles.

Kropotkin set himself against a strain in Darwinist social and biological theory exemplified by T.H.Huxley who saw nature as the struggle of individuals with each other, and, hence, as giving us no basis for ethics which accordingly has be constructed on some other basis if at all.[Kinna 1995:276; Eddy 2010:24-

6; Kropotkin 1902/1987:16-17; Woodcock 1962: 198-201] Kropotkin argued that Huxley had misread the evidence of zoology and biology, seeing as competition what can more plausibly be seen as cooperation between individuals in their efforts to cope with their environment.[Eddy 2010: 26-7; Kinna 1995:275-6; Kropotkin 1902/1887:12-14] According to Kropotkin, Huxley wrongly draws a sharp distinction between nature and culture, and wrongly focusses on the level of isolated individuals rather than individuals in relations with others, other groups and environment. [Eddy 2010:26-8; Kropotkin 1902/1887:16-17] One reading of Kropotkin locates this argument in social theory and science, as an argument for the naturalness of anarchism, and hence its status as a future which will come about. As such, as a theory it is subject to sceptical criticism of Kropotkin's wishful thinking.

By contrast, Kinna argues we should understand the theory of mutual aid in the context of political action and rhetoric. It is a theory to motivate anarchist action. It is oriented against marxist understanding of the state as much as against strains in social Darwinism. It is a call against marxist political tactics. The theory of mutual aid gives us a conception of the natural world not as struggle but as liberation and salvation, and as continuous with the social world we seek to change.[Kinna 1995:270-2]

Errico Malatesta endorses the pacific, non-violent nature of anarchism, arguing that anarchist uses of bombs and killing are contrary to anarchist principles.^v But he does not proceed to any pacifist inferences or implications. Rather, he sets out to expose the corrupting, damaging, nature of violence which 'suffocates the best sentiments of man, and [develops] all the anti-social qualities: ferocity, hatred, revenge, the spirit of domination and tyranny,

contempt of the weak, servility towards the strong. And this harmful tendency arises also when violence is used for a good end.' [Malatesta 1895/2005:160]

Malatesta laments that the

'excitement caused by some recent explosions and the admiration for the courage with which the bomb-throwers faced death, sufficed to cause many Anarchists to forget their programme, and to enter on a path which is the most absolute negation of all anarchist ideas and sentiments. Hatred and revenge seemed to have become the moral basis of Anarchism. "The bourgeoisie does as bad and worse". Such is the argument with which they tried to justify and exalt every brutal deed.' [Malatesta 1985/2005:161]

According to Malatesta, the principles of the inviolability of human life, love, and toleration must be at the centre of anarchism, which must be constantly aware of the dangers of violence, hatred, and the spirit of revenge. [Malatesta 1895/2005:163]

Tolstoy agreed with anarchists that the violence of authority under current governmental conditions could not be exceeded under anarchism. [Tolstoy 1900/1990: 68] But he distanced himself from anarchists as well as from other activists who used violent means:

The Anarchists are right in everything: in the negation of the existing order, and in the assertion that, without Authority, there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions. They are mistaken only in thinking that Anarchy can be instituted by a violent revolution. [Tolstoy 1900/1990:68]

Tolstoy also associates violence above all with the state - and also with church and nation. Politics is coextensive with violence - because the basis of political rule and government is the idea that:

'it is possible, through violence, to unite people in such a way that everyone submits, without resistance, to the same structure of life and guidance for conduct that results from it'. [Tolstoy 1908/1987:162]

In many places in his essays Tolstoy rejects violence absolutely, and consistently makes an argument about the nature of the system and structure of violence. [Stephens ed 1990; Kentish (ed) 1987; Tolstoy 1900/1948; Tolstoy 1894] Violence can be passionate - an outburst of revenge or anger, and is expressive. But otherwise, it is used 'only in order to compel', and compulsion - doing what other people wish against your own will - is slavery. So violence is coextensive with slavery. It may be thought that violence can only be abolished with violence. But this is like fighting fire with fire. The only answer is to abolish 'whatever renders governmental violence possible'. Government is unnecessary, it is highly immoral and harmful, and the only course is to refuse to participate in government at all. One should not willingly be a soldier or a tax payer, nor hold any office, nor participate in governmental institutions like schools. One should not appeal to government for protection. [Tolstoy 1900/1948:122-7]

Violence cannot work as a back up to law, as some political theories hope or predict. Violence can be used against those who do not comply, or in order to force compliance, just as it can be used to drag a person or an animal where they do not want to go. [Tolstoy 1900/1948:120] But this only means that law is violent in its inception and is inextricable from violence. [Tolstoy 1900/1948:112] This theme of the coercion of others, the use of force, covers a

wide range of institutions and phenomena. Certainly, Tolstoy's initial despair is at the uses of extreme violence against the body - weapons and bombs and physical fighting, in war, in revolutionary politics, [Tolstoy 1908/1987:153] in state punishment and military punishment,[Tolstoy 1908/1987:162, 191] and in economic servitude. [Tolstoy 1908/1987:158-9] But his emphasis on political organisation, the state and church as such, means that the institutions of violence that must be rejected encompass far more:

'If you, emperors, presidents, generals, judges, bishops, professors and other learned men need armies, navies, universities, ballots, synods, conservatoires, prisons, gallows and guillotines, do it all yourselves: collect your own taxes, judge, execute and imprison among yourselves, murder people in war, but do it all yourselves and leave us in peace because we need none of it, and we no longer wish to participate in all these useless and above all evil deeds!'[Tolstoy 1908/1987:179]

That is, violence is systematically connected to organisation: Those who 'are preoccupied with organising the lives of others' are 'pitiable, deeply misled people' who 'manifest nothing worthy'. [Tolstoy 1908/1987:128] He warns the young against any participation in government, any illusion that people's welfare can be increased by state administration.[Tolstoy 1908/1987: 219] Any preoccupation with organising the lives of others is a 'vile, criminal affair, destructive to the soul.'[Tolstoy 1908/1987:219]

For Tolstoy the ultimate justification of non-violence and non-participation in government is the gospel: 'And fear not them which kill the body but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.'[Matthew x.28] This is the first epigraph in 'The Law of

Love and the Law of Violence'. [Tolstoy:1908/1987:151] The anti-state, anti-politics argument is an inference from the Sermon on the Mount on one hand, and social theory on the other, and in its uncompromising rejection of organisation and state, of heteronomy of any kind, is unambiguously anarchist in the sense of 'no authority external to the agent'. As Romain Rolland insisted, this extends to anything we might be tempted to think of as 'the authority of Christ': Tolstoy is by no means obedient to Christ or the scriptures. Rather we should act as the scriptures would have us act because the scriptures are true: our motivation to comply with the scripture is authority independent. [Rolland 1920:41]

Any thought that we 'need to oppose evil with violence' is based on another evil - the 'primitive superstition that it is possible for man not only to know, but to organise, the future the way he likes.' That is, the impulse to control is itself evil. Both bodily violence such as running the gauntlet on the one hand, and on the other order in general, are evil because they presume too much. [Tolstoy 1908/1987:214] In the face of evil one must act as always: 'A man's conscience may demand that he sacrifice his own life, but not that of another person.' [Tolstoy 1908/1987:215] Leave aside the consideration that replying to violence with violence is futile; or the fact that theories of punishment ignore the social conditions that lead to crime. [Tolstoy 1908/1987:216, 215] The real point is that

'acceptance of the need to oppose evil with violence is nothing other than the justification people give to their habitual and favourite vices: vengeance, avarice, envy, ambition, pride, cowardice and spite.' [Tolstoy 1908/1987:216]

Tolstoy has an instrumental argument about the circle of violence, which can only be closed, never broken, by more violence. [Tolstoy 1900/1990:69-70]

To use violence is impossible; it would only cause reaction. To join the ranks of the Government is also impossible - one would only become its instrument. One course therefore remains - to fight the Government by means of thought, speech, actions, life, neither yielding to Government, nor joining its ranks and thereby increasing its power. [Tolstoy 1900/1990:70]

We saw earlier Malatesta's statement of anarchist commitment to peace and non-violence, and his disapproval of anarchist activists who seemed to be revelling in violence.[Malatesta 1895/2005:160-2] His article, though, takes the form of a defence of pacifist principles followed by a significant and far-reaching caveat. He echoes Brousse in his insistence on the rightness of self-defence and the defence of others against violence. One

'should not kill a man to avoid being punched; but would not hesitate to break his legs if he could not do otherwise to prevent his killing him. And when it is a question of like evils, such as killing so as not to be killed, even then it seems to me that it is an advantage to society that the aggressor should die rather than the aggressed. But if self-defence is a right one may renounce, the defence of others at the risk of hurting the aggressor is the duty of solidarity.' [Malatesta 1895/2005:162]

Malatesta argues that there is no way that emancipation can be attained without any use of violence. The state, the ruling class, 'is ever arming itself with more powerful means of repression, and systematically uses violence ...' [Malatesta

1895/2005: 162] In this situation anarchists must call attention to the dangers of the use of violence, but

'if we really wish to strive for the emancipation of the people, do not let us reject in principle the means without which the struggle can never be ended.' [Malatesta 1895/2005: 163]

Violence may be used 'only as a weapon in the struggle of right against wrong'. Anarchy will be that social system in which each social group is able, within the limits imposed by the liberty of others, to experiment on the mode of life which it believes to be the best. Anarchism is committed to the efficacy of persuasion and example.

That is, Malatesta denies Tolstoy's equation of violence with slavery, and distinguishes the violence of those who must act in self-defence, or of those who use violence with the aim of achieving freedom and voluntarism, from the violence of those who seek to oppress, to deprive, to prevent freedom, to coerce. For him, the violence that seeks freedom, and is for justice, is a justified violence, but to be thought of as a necessary evil.

Violence in politics: meanings and justifications

Bakunin, in the works analysed here, frames violence in a number of contrasting ways. First, it is the 'primitive ferocity' of peasants and proletariat, the people who resist social superiors and state authorities, whose compliance with either can only be got by coercion and compulsion, and who are capable of building the cooperative society within which freedom can flower.[Bakunin 1870/1971:200] In this frame violence is connected both with resistance to unjust authority, and with the energy that underpins people's capacities for

choice and decisiveness.[Bakunin 1870/1971: 205] Second, there is the violence that is visited upon the potentially revolutionary classes by the reactionaries, the oppressors and exploiters, the state institutions that defend the existing order of ownership and control. If the peasantry and proletariat have the capacity and the potentiality to permanently smash the governmental machinery, to engage in a 'spontaneous, uncompromising, passionate, anarchic and destructive uprising' which is the only thing that can save France [Bakunin 1870/1971:188] then the bourgeoisie who enslave them, under the guise of civilisation, also have the will to go to war to shore up their hold on resources. [Bakunin 1870/1971: 185-6] So for Bakunin violence will take the form of civil war which is the outcome of the meeting of oppression, either overt or in the guise of civilisation, with ferocious, resistant energy.

Kropotkin understands violence in a broadly similar set of frames. He emphasises the violence of the state, which is resistant to social change. This violence shows itself in police and military action, in courts and prisons, in state executions and other 'stupidly ferocious' punishment. [Kropotkin 1899/1971:425] It can also disguise itself; but will be revealed in response to challenge, and there will then be violence in the form of fighting, injury, blood. [Cahm 1989:93] Both Kropotkin and Bakunin, by their emphasis on the violence of the state, and the state's role in defending the existing oppressive economy and society, frame the violence of civil war, or of insurrection, revolt or rebellion, as self-defence, a necessary evil within the context of the prevailing violence of the state, an unavoidably paradoxical route to the undoing of violence and the building of a genuinely non-violent world.[Kropotkin 1885/2005:154-6; Miller 1984:119]

The context of anarchist politics of their time also featured anarchist assassins and bombers though. So the public discourse of anarchist violence encompassed further frames. In courtroom defences and other discourses, anarchist activists and sympathisers articulated an account of violence as revenge; or as retaliation or retribution.[Miller 1984:116-7] Emile Henry, who bombed the Cafe Terminus at Saint-Lazare station in 1894 argued in his trial defence that his act was part of the anarchist war against the bourgeoisie, it was retaliation against the violence of factory owners against workers, of police against children.[Henry 1894] The extent to which anarchist activists took up this theme can also be seen in part of the response to Vera Zasulich's attempted assassination of General Trepov in 1878. Trepov was implicated in a barbarous attack on a political prisoner, and was associated in liberal and radical minds with the worst excesses of the Tsarist regime. Zasulich was acquitted in a trial that became a prosecution of Trepov and Tsarism themselves.[Cahm 1989:86,91,109]

Neither Bakunin nor Kropotkin articulate any idea of revolutionary violence as revenge or retaliation. Their logic of self-defence, as well as their logic of unmasking the reality of state violence, invalidate any such justification. Nevertheless, in his engagement with and comments on incidents of anarchist violence - including Zasulich's shooting of Trepov, a successful assassination of the head of the secret police in August of 1878, and then the successful assassination of Tsar Alexander in 1881 - Kropotkin's characterisations and understandings of violence were complicated.[Cahm 1989:140-2] In the frame of the propagandism of exemplary deeds, assassination would reveal the regime to be vulnerable, with this perception reverberating among the poor, creating

revolutionary consciousness, and demoralising the ruling class.[Miller 1984:118]
Zasulich's attempt on Trepov was popular, put him in the frame of
accountability, and elicited wide sympathy for her. However, subsequent
attempted and actual assassinations, including that of Alexander II, by no means
generated widespread sympathy for the anarchists, and were liable to have the
opposite effect of causing widespread sympathy for the victims and revulsion
against the bombers.[Miller 1984:118] Both Bakunin and Kropotkin were
critical of claims made for violence's efficacy.[Miller 1984:119; Miller 1976:174-
5; Leier 2006:249]

Kropotkin was further troubled by the individualism of much anarchist
analysis of assassination, and his criticism of individualism was connected with
his scepticism about efficacy arguments. For him assassination and any other
acts of violence could by no means be a substitute for popular and collective
revolutionary organisation and action, and he feared that as exemplary deeds
which would generate widespread revolt they would be useless.[Cahm
1989:135-6] He predicted that a chain of such individual acts would make of any
revolution that did occur nothing more than a useless massacre.[Cahm
1989:140]. Nevertheless he was intrigued by the possibility of a 'serious
conspiracy between individuals' as opposed to the idea of a mass insurrection.
[Cahm 1989:145-151].

Kropotkin did, however, concede necessity arguments: because of the
context of state and reactionary social violence, the oppressed, the opponents,
the revolutionists, are in situations where violence is inevitable.[Miller
1984:119-120] At his own trial in Lyon in 1888, speaking with respect to

Zasulich's attack on Trepov, Kropotkin commented consistently with the logic of self-defence and the logic of necessity:

I think that when a party, like the nihilists of Russia, finds itself in a position where it must either disappear, subside, or answer violence with violence - then it has no cause to hesitate, and must necessarily use violence. [Cahm 1989:109]

This stresses the extent to which revolutionaries are already in a fight for survival; on these grounds their uses of violence may be understandable, but they are not justifiable in terms of delivering any particular outcome, or as exemplary actions.

In contrast to the assassins' revenge arguments, Kropotkin saw the necessity and inevitability of violence, and the consequent deaths, executions, and ferocious punishments of revolutionaries as exemplary sacrifice. He was outraged at the bourgeois representation of Alexander II as a martyred liberator of the serfs, and the narodniks as evil murderers, and instead extolled the

'men and women who have sacrificed the joys of liberty, friends, and life to the cause.' [Cahm 1989:142]

This idea of sacrifice also fits into an account of tragic inevitability. Alexander was a

born autocrat, whose violence was but partially mitigated by education of a man, a military hero devoid of courage, a man of strong passion and weak will - it seemed that the tragedy developed with the unavoidable fatality of one of Shakespeare's dramas. [Kropotkin 1899/1971: 433]

Zasulich herself found her actions framed out of kilter with her own understanding. According to Cahm she had no particular expectations about the impact of her attempt on Trepov - she did not approach it instrumentally. Neither did she - or her defence lawyer - articulate any account of revenge as such. Rather she thought of her action as a protest against the brutality of Trepov, the brutality of the prison regime that allowed or enjoined that prisoners be flogged, and against the brutality of the tsarist state. As protest, an action can be taken simply as presence, appearance, insistence that an opposing view is present in the public space. Anarchists, though, interpreted Zasulich's action through the frame of their own understandings of assassination. When she arrived in Switzerland after her release she found that local anarchists tried to appropriate her into their suite of propaganda by deed, and also tried to use her to promote anarchism against their social democrat rivals.[Cahm 1989:108-9]

Tolstoy was notable in the range of liberal and radical opinion in 1878 in that he did not celebrate Zasulich's acquittal, admire her deed, or see her as standing for a progressive or even a significant oppositional position against tsarist authoritarianism and brutality. Tolstoy equated her actions and Trepov's, arguing that both she and the brutal governmental officer she had attempted to kill were 'trash and animals'.[Medszhibovskaya 2008:510-511] Tolstoy certainly had no time for any principles of revenge or retaliation: he identified *lex talonis* as one of the supports of the modern state, and one that contributed significantly to the state's inherent violence.[Medzhibovskaya 2008:510; Tolstoy 1894 Voll:45] And he was equally dismissive of claims as to the necessity, efficacy or exemplary power of violence.

We can follow Medzhibovskaya's reading of Tolstoy's changing constructions of violence.^{vi} She reports an unfinished note from about 1861 which Tolstoy entitled 'On Violence', which distinguishes between zoological and political violence, the former being a primordial force that might be expressed naturally in anger, and the latter the simulation, organization and amplification of that force by the state. Tolstoy also noted the acquiescence in violence, out of a prudential desire for self-preservation, by the majority of individuals.

[Medzhibovskaya pp.509] The text implies that this - state violence, acquiesced in by compliant subjects - is 'the real terror'. The form of the state, and the state's functions in organisation, legislation and the enforcement of law, and the defence of the established order of property, control and authority, condense all forms of violence, setting up chains, closed circles which can never be opened by more violence.[Tolstoy 1900/1990: 70]

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy questions the condensation of wills, consent, and capacity in the sovereign - who accordingly transcends the state, an awesome figure commanding love and obedience, with his generals and others organising, administering, and fighting for the defence, and the glory, of the state:

Rostov got up and went wandering among the camp fires dreaming of what happiness it would be to die - not in saving the Emperor's life (he did not even dare to dream of that) but simply to die before his eyes. He really was in love with the Tsar and the glory of the Russian arms and the hope of future triumph. And he was not the only man to experience that feeling during those memorable days preceding the battle of Austerlitz; nine-tenths of the men in the Russian army were then in love... [*War and Peace* Bk 1 Pt 3 ch 10]

The questioning isn't just in the irony in this depiction of excess of adoration. It also in Tolstoy's depiction of the way actors - whether the Tsar himself, celebrated generals such as Kutuzov, officers, soldiers, or the people of the villages and towns around which the war is conducted - are 'carried along by unknown force'. [Medzhibovskaya 2008:509] In fact, there are also lots of known forces in the scenes leading up to and of the battle of Austerlitz: crowds of soldiers running the wrong way [*War and Peace* Bk 1 Pt 3 Ch16], but also the stream that bears the soldier on - he is borne along by his regiment, he marches whatever he will [Bk1 Pt3 Ch14]; and the aspect of military organisation that is like clockwork: an impulse once given leads to the final result. [Bk1 Pt3 Ch11] In particular, peasant soldiers die trudgingly where they are driven. [Gallie 1978:122] There are also deficits of force - the failures of generals to properly plan, or organise, or coordinate, or resource, or lead; deficits of information, uncertainty; individuals' loss of will or strength. [Bk1 Pt3 Chs ...] And overall is the fog: the lack of visibility, of sight not only foresight:

The fog had grown so dense that though it was growing light they could not see ten paces ahead..... Below where the fight was beginning there was still thick fog; on the higher ground it was clearing, but nothing could be seen of what was going on in front. [*War and Peace* Bk1 Pt3 Ch14]

The fog of war - the confusion, the pain - from the point of view of the individual might be transcended by the authority of military strategy and command, under the guiding light of the sovereign power and law. Or, it might not - it might be that, as Gallie puts it, 'war at all levels is nothing but mess.' [Gallie 1978:104]

Four particularly important points about Tolstoy's conceptualization and evaluation of violence, and the prescriptive implications of his account. First, the

distinction between zoological and political violence is carried through all of his work, including his novels. There are many scenes of violence in *War and Peace*: Pierre Bezukhov's duel,[Bk2 Pt1 Ch5], the public flogging of French servants in Moscow [Bk3 Pt2 Ch18], even aspects of Pierre's experience of freemasonry.[Bk2 Pt2 Ch4] All of these are connected to the social and political system of inequality, authority and sovereignty; they all take their meaning from, as Tolstoy would put it later, the state. And they all contrast with natural expressions of violence in immediate response to injury.

Second, Tolstoy is adamant that individuals must refuse to engage in the state institutions of violence: anything that criminalises non-compliers such as the civil service, any direct uses of force such as the military, the police, the prisons; the organised churches which use the offices of the state to support their control over people's lives. He does not prescribe for everyone that they refuse to pay taxes, but he does prescribe for everyone that they should refuse to collect them.[Tolstoy 1900/1948:129] Only we can take responsibility for violence, and the only way to end it is to refuse to engage in it or with it. [Hopton 2000:29-33]

Third, the violence of the state has endless, perverse and paradoxical ramifications. The state is condensed violence; the chaos that surrounds the state's efforts to order, direct, and control sends out waves of violence which individuals visit on each other.[Tolstoy 1900/1948:nn] There is sovereign warfare with its splendour and hierarchy - and there is guerilla violence, partisan actions by coalescences of stragglers, marauders, and foragers, who have to be seen off by country people banding together 'as instinctively as dogs worry a stray mad dog to death'[*War and Peace* Bk4 Pt3 Ch3], or 'a duellist who drops his

rapier and seizes a cudgel' [Pt 3 Bk1 Ch1]. Dolokhov, who duelled with Pierre years earlier, and his second Denisov, become leaders in the irregular warfare, breaking the rules of military science and, of course, inflicting terrible violence, and involving children [Pt 3 Bk1 Ch3 ff] In Tolstoy's later essays on violence, peace and state, there is a parallel model of the condensed state violence of prisons and sovereignty which send out waves of violence such as the beatings of peasants by aristocrats; a brutal sovereignty makes for a brutal society. Violence, in all of its manifestations, breeds violence.

Fourth, Tolstoy is strikingly vague about the anarchist society - which will be horizontal rather than hierarchical, without the levels of organisation we see in institutions like the army, the commune, the bureaucracy or, presumably, the organised social systems like the Moscow and St Petersburg rounds of balls, dinners, receptions and organised courtship and marriage - and the corresponding poverty of the city.[Bartlett 2013:96-7,291-2] He certainly does not engage in considerations of economy, production and exchange, such as we find in Bakunin and Kropotkin. His account of an alternative to the logic of violence stops at the level of individual refusal to participate in the organized and organizing violence of the state, a refusal incumbent on everyone, including those in positions of power.

After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 Tolstoy wrote to Alexander III to advise him to break the cycle of violence. [Medzhibovskaya 2008: p.511] He described the terrorists as fanatics, acknowledges the Tsar's wish for revenge, and calls on him as sovereign to purge the wrath of the state and society, and to exercise the christian law of pardon. He pleaded with the Tsar to set a christian example - to return good for evil. The cycle of violence from state to society

could be broken, in Tolstoy's view, by the widespread mass pacific action that he enjoins on all, that is radical individualism. Or it could be broken, paradoxically, by an exemplary act of forgiveness by the sovereign.

Undoing Violence

We have seen that the question of violence for anarchism is a complex series - in addition to the challenge of pacifism itself, exemplified by Tolstoy's absolutism (and in later anarchist and pacifist thinking developed as the theory and practice of non-violence) there is the question of how violence should be framed, and its place in anarchist practice and action. Bakunin and Tolstoy start with a two-fold distinction: Bakunin's 'primitive', Tolstoy's 'passionate' or 'zoological' natural violences versus the violences of oppression and exploitation, of state authority and its concomitant social relations. Kropotkin is less susceptible to the idea of 'natural' violence, his biological work being devoted to defeat of this pervasive idea; but on the subject of state violence, and the effective civil war that inheres between those who aspire to anarchic or socialist community and those who defend hierarchy and exploitation he is at one with the others.

Bakunin and Kropotkin frame violence as inevitable. Anarchist activists will face up to the reality of violence in modern states and societies; they will face with courage the war that revolutionary aspiration and action will inevitably unleash. They put violence, that is, in a frame of courage and realism. Violent actions by revolutionaries can meet the test of these virtues. However, this 'politics of courage' has also to be twinned with a 'politics of revelation'. An important aspect of anarchist action will be unmasking the state violence that

underlies apparent social peace. Bakunin and Kropotkin, and other anarchists of their time, think also in the frame of strategic provocation. It is only the war, after all, that can incept the revolution. If people are not to be bought off by so-called rights and apparent civil order, the reality of state violence must be made evident.

This kind of strategic political action is still to be clearly distinguished from misguided use of bombs and weapons, and justifications in terms of retaliation and revenge. Revolutionary sacrifice is one thing, and to be understood and praised. Revenge, on the other hand, is corrupting, connected with ferocity, brutality and hatred.

For Tolstoy violence coerces an individual against his will, equatable to slavery. Politics seeks to coerce by way of obedience to state authority; and state authority is based in violence. For Tolstoy, as we have seen, there can be no politics that is ethical. Where Bakunin and Kropotkin consider how the oppressed and exploited can hope for - and organise for - liberation from the radically asymmetrical struggle in which they are enmeshed, Tolstoy equates organisation with the coercion of violence and politics. Bakunin and Kropotkin have recourse to the idea of war, in order to ground the logic of self-defence, the logic of strategy, and the logic of liberation, that justify and condition anarchist revolutionary violence. But Tolstoy vividly demonstrates the weaknesses of any reliance on an idea of war to overcome the violence of the state.

Tolstoy's rejection of war and of self-defence, though, is shot through with ambiguity and paradox. Rolland, comparing Tolstoy with Gandhi, remarked that 'everything in Tolstoy is violence, even his doctrine of non-violence'. [Rolland 1924:97; McKeogh 2009:195; Lavrin 1960:134]. McKeogh argues that the theme

of renunciation, and the lack of concern for society and social relationships - both the dread and the fascination with annihilation of the self, the resistance to organisation of any sort - effectively promotes the extinction of human life. This adds up to a form of violence. Tolstoy's violent renunciation of violence is also a renunciation of politics as a co-operative endeavour.[McKeogh 2009:208]

Tolstoyan non-violence is the opposite of Kropotkin's mutual aid. It is an individual refusal that gains exemplary meaning when the individual has something to refuse - the possessions and responsibilities of a landowner, for example. It has effects only when underpinned by violence, whether this is the Tsar's capacity to hold back his troops and police, or Tolstoy's own capacity to command members of his household and family. Tolstoy cannot see any possibility of productive collective action in the historical, social and sovereign contexts he surveys, the fields of battle or the ballrooms. So he has recourse only to the vain possibility of sovereign clemency and individual renunciation.

Kropotkin's thinking about violence addresses the same paradox of individual and collective agency. He maintains the possibility of mutual action in concert, and is clear that individual acts such as throwing bombs are futile. Mutuality and cooperation are the anarchist aim, and also the anarchist means. However, individual actions of course are important in anarchist theory. Like Bakunin, Kropotkin both defends and sceptically disavows individuals who commit violent deeds. David Miller takes Kropotkin's refusal to condemn nihilist violence as a disavowal of the individual's responsibility for her actions.[Miller 1984:119-120] But Kropotkin's response can be interpreted differently. He acknowledges that these acts, framed as they will be in the context of society and state, are likely to be counter-productive to the anarchist cause. Yet, he also

wants to acknowledge them as political acts, which aim at the furtherance of anarchism. To individualise these actors is to deny anarchist politics.

For Kropotkin, and for other anarchist thinkers, violence is being inflicted, and the question is about how, not whether, to fight it. This is a political judgement and decision. Recent interventions regarding anarchist tactics emphasise the importance of individual decision about one's own actions, and the possibility, in conditions of diverse participation in protest, for a spontaneous but nevertheless meaningful and coherent action to happen which is autonomy preserving as well as potentially effective.[Graeber 2009 p.195; Gelderloos 2015 p.287] The difficulty, obviously, lies in the tension between individual decision and action, in relation to the political logic of action in concert, and to the political logic of bringing overall consequences for everyone into view in political (as opposed to individual) decision making. Individual actions in public settings have effects beyond the individual; yet anarchist activists resist the idea of norms - other than those to which individuals are independently committed - constraining individual actions.[Gelderloos 2015:19]

One element of difficulty, as Kropotkin understood, was that the language of individual responsibility is depoliticised. It is absolutely depoliticised in Tolstoy's idea of the sovereign, renouncing, individual in relation to the overwhelming confusion and the uncontrollable causal forces of history and society. Tolstoy leaves violence in place when he repudiates political action in concert. Recent anarchist thinkers repudiate Tolstoyan, and other forms of, pacifism; and they leave violence in place, similarly, as they reject political action in concert. Bakunin and Kropotkin accept, albeit ambivalently, the logic of political action, but leave violence in place in their plans for its undoing.

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ⁱ They overlapped in time and had near meetings, but did not actually encounter one another personally [Kropotkin 1899/1971:288-9]. Kropotkin included Tolstoy as an important figure in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article 'Anarchism' [Kropotkin 1910/ 1995: 246]. Tolstoy's disciple Vladimir Chertkov and his translator Aylmer Maude met Kropotkin to discuss his campaign on behalf of Mennonite pacifist conscientious objectors and used aspects of that as a model for Tolstoy's campaign on behalf of the Dukhobars [Bartlett 2013: 378-9].

ⁱⁱ In particular, when Marx and his allies moved to expel Bakunin from the International at the 1872 Congress, much was made of Bakunin's association with Sergei Nechaev and his implication in Nechaev's violence and criminality.[Nechaev 1869; Woodcock 1962:160-1] Notably, Nechaev's 'Revolutionary Catechism' is not included in current anthologies of anarchist writing, although it is listed among anarchist works on the marxist website www.marxists.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently he was expelled from Switzerland where he had fled after escaping from St Petersburg military hospital 1876; subsequently was arrested in 1882 in France as part of a crackdown on anarchist organisations.[Shatz 1995:xiv, xxvii]

^{iv} It has associations with the tradition of christian love or agape: 'Let them show their love by the works they do for each other, according as the Apostle says: 'let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.' '[el Bay ed 2009: 28]

^v Malatesta's 1895 'Violence as a social factor' responded to a pacifist article published in the same periodical criticising anarchists for their violence and terrorism.[Graham ed 2005:160]

^{vi} Medzhibovskaya formulates her topic, actually, as 'terror' rather than 'violence'; in our interpretation her account of Tolstoy's earlier (pre-1878 in her analysis) understanding of the use of bombs and assassination shows that he was concerned about all forms of violence.