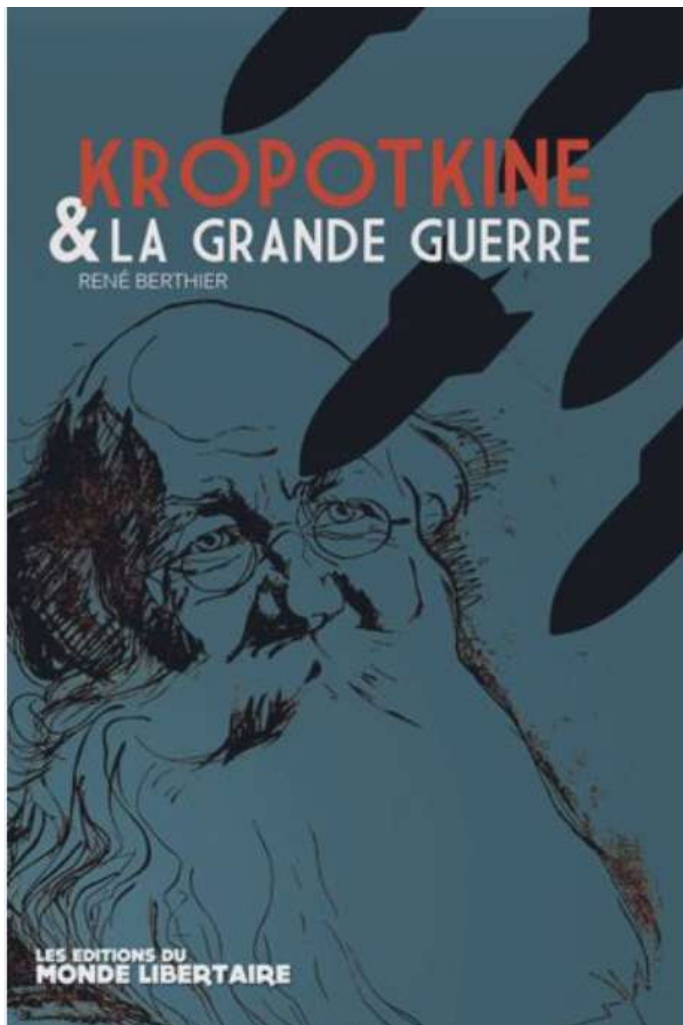


# Kropotkin and the great war

René Berthier



**THE FOLLOWING TEXT** is a summary of a book published in 2014 (in French), *Kropotkin and the Great War*, whose subtitle is “The anarchists, the CGT, and the social democracy in the face of war.”<sup>1</sup> The year 2016 marked the centenary of the publication of the famous *Manifesto of the Sixteen* in which a small number of anarchists took position in favour of the countries of the Entente against Germany and its allies. What motivated my writing the book is that Kropotkin’s signing of this *Manifesto* has always aroused – and rightly so – a malaise in the anarchist movement, but that no one, to my knowledge, dared to address the issue head on.

The subtitle aims to suggest that Kropotkin was not an isolated actor in this matter: the other actors are anarchists in general; the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), the trade union organisation that had managed to organise a general strike against the war in 1912 but eventually joined the Sacred Union; and the German social-democracy, which was also an essential actor in defining the context in which a handful of anarchist activists signed this controversial *Manifesto*. I tried to understand the reasons that led Kropotkin to this unfortunate and useless initiative – useless insofar as there were other means of conveying the message that the Russian revolutionary wanted to convey.

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Kropotkin, one of the leading theorists of the libertarian movement, adopted a position of support for the Holy Union in 1916 and signed a manifesto joined by fourteen other anarchist activists, and, it should be noted, only fourteen.<sup>2</sup> Kropotkin’s gesture caused a real trauma in the libertarian movement, traditionally anti-militarist and anti-war. The reasons for his choice have been frequently questioned. Seldom has anyone tried to understand why he waited until 1916 to do so.

Kropotkin’s attitude in the event of war between France and Germany was never a surprise. It can be said that he had simply resumed the analysis that Bakunin had developed during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, which he himself acknowledged on several occasions. Kropotkin is often quoted as having said that if he were younger and had the strength, he would have taken up arms in favour of France. Unfortunately, the statement is not quoted in full.

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- 1 René Berthier, *Kropotkine et la Grande Guerre – Les anarchistes, la CGT et la social démocratie face à la guerre*, Éditions du Monde Libertaire, 2014, 275 pages.
  - 2 It seems that only about a hundred people in total have declared their support for the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*. It was agreed to call this document the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, but in reality, as a result of a misunderstanding, a place name was assimilated into a person’s name. We will continue to refer to this text as the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*.

On November 4, 1905, in *Les Temps Nouveaux* appeared the text of a letter that the revolutionary had sent to the anarchist newspaper in order to rectify the words attributed to him:

“I am sixty-two years old, I am not sentimental about France, I was sentenced to prison there, I am still under an expulsion decree.... Well, if France were invaded by the Germans, I would regret one thing. It’s just that at my sixty years and over, I probably wouldn’t have the strength to pick up the gun to defend her.”<sup>3</sup>

But, adds Kropotkin, if he took up arms, he would not be “like a soldier of the bourgeoisie, of course, but like a soldier of the Revolution, in the legions of revolutionaries, similar to those of the Garibaldians and the assault troops of 1871”. This precision makes all the difference. When war broke out in 1914, when he signed the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* in 1916, he did not change his mind. What has changed is the context. “Let’s make a Revolution and run to the borders,” says Kropotkin in his 1905 article,<sup>4</sup> but he points out – and this is a point that will bother him permanently – that if French workers acted at the “vanguard of the working class around the world,” it is not known “*to what extent they will be followed by German workers*”.

There is clearly a serious doubt in Kropotkin’s mind... Any action against the war *must be bilateral*, otherwise it makes no sense. It is this specific point that opposes Kropotkin to the “orthodox anarchists”, who are against war on principle, even if this opposition is unilateral and leads to the occupation of the defeated country.

According to Kropotkin, there is an irreducible conflict between two views of socialism: the French and the German. As a result, Germany’s victory in a conflict with France would lead to the hegemony of its vision of socialism. In this, Kropotkin echoes long debates: during the previous war, Bakunin himself had sided with France because he considered that Prussian victory would have been a catastrophe for European civilisation. For his part, Marx wrote a letter to Engels on 20 July 1870, in which he rejoiced that the German victory had shifted the centre of gravity of socialism to Germany, thereby ensuring “the preponderance on the world stage of the German proletariat over the French proletariat.”

“If the Prussians win, then centralisation of the STATE POWER will be beneficial for the centralisation of the German working

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3 Kropotkin, “Antimilitarisme et révolution”, *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 5 november 1905.

4 *Ibid.*

class. German predominance would then shift the centre of gravity of the West European workers' movement from France to Germany, and you need only to compare developments in the two countries from 1866 to the present day to realise that the German working class is superior to the French both in theory and organisation. Its predominance over the French on the international stage would also mean the predominance of our theory over Proudhon's, etc."<sup>5</sup>

We see that, from the beginning, Marx saw the issue in terms of the hegemony of his doctrine.

Kropotkin writes that after the defeat of France in 1870, "the Germans tried to change the method and purpose of the entire socialist movement." The division between the two currents of the labour movement "became evident immediately after the Franco-Prussian War". The conflict between Marxists and Bakuninians, says Kropotkin, was therefore not a personal matter but "a conflict between the Latin spirit and the German spirit, which, after having defeated France on the battlefield, claimed supremacy in the field of science, politics, philosophy and also socialism and represented their conception of socialism as 'scientific', while he described all the other conceptions as 'utopian'."<sup>6</sup>

It is doubtful that the "Latin spirit" and the "German spirit" have much to do with this debate: many other factors were involved in the orientations chosen by the various components of the international labour movement. But it is true that the relations between the French and German socialist movements after the Franco-Prussian War had literally been a relationship of subordination from the former to the latter, imbued with a kind of morbid fascination on the side of the French socialist leaders.

In early 1916, the German command unleashed a major battle at the end of which it believed that the French army would collapse. They decided to attack Verdun, which the French defended at all costs, for strategic reasons – it was the way to Paris – and for symbolic reasons. On 6 March 1916, the Germans launched a new attack, also repelled. 700,000 men, French and German, fell on the battlefield, with no territorial gain for either side.

It was now clear that the war would last a long time. Its effects on the civilian population were difficult to bear. In addition, the atrocities committed by the Germans in occupied France and Belgium traumatised the population.<sup>7</sup> The German command felt that the situation needed to be unblocked. A quarter

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5 Marx-Engels Collected Works, Lawrence & Wishart, vol. 44, p. 71.

6 Kropotkin, "Antimilitarisme et révolution", *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 5 novembre 1905.

of French territory was occupied and there were no signs that the situation would improve. For Kropotkin, there was no doubt that the German government simply wanted to annex Belgium and northern France, something that Germany's own socialist leaders acknowledged.

It is in this context that some anarchists signed, in March 1916, the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* supporting participation in the war. The date was not fortuitous. It is also no accident that the fifteen signatories were among the oldest members of the movement: better than the young, they knew the history and had in mind the facts of the previous war, that of 1870. More than the young, they distrusted the leaders of German social democracy. This is what Kropotkin said in 1905: "It is because I have lived the social and intellectual reaction of the last thirty years that I think that the anti-militarists of any nation should defend all countries invaded by a military state and too fragile to defend themselves."<sup>8</sup> To understand the state of mind of these veterans of the anarchist movement, one must read a short pamphlet by Christiaan Cornelissen (who also signed the *Manifesto*), written in 1917, "The economic consequences of a German peace", in which he describes the economic dominance that Germany had established over continental Europe after its victory in 1871.<sup>9</sup>

Let us recall that as early as 1891, Engels had written that in the event of war, it would be necessary to tell the government that the socialists would be willing to support it on condition that it adopt an attitude towards them would make this possible.<sup>10</sup> This is very clearly a willingness to negotiate with the

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7 On August 4, 1914, one million German soldiers occupied Belgium. The reality of the atrocities committed by German troops in Belgium and northern France was a matter of controversy. They were described by German authorities after the war as "head stuffing." There were reports of shot hostages, shot children, raped women, and devastated villages. Two Irish historians, John Horne and Alan Kramer, conducted an investigation in the archives of eight European countries. The results are overwhelming: between August and October 1914, around 6,500 Belgian and French civilians were intentionally killed, and hundreds of villages (and even towns) were destroyed by the German army. German soldiers thus committed systematic and large-scale crimes. These atrocities, of which Kropotkin was aware, contributed to giving the global conflict the sense of a "crusade" against "barbarism." (Cf. *1914. Les atrocit es allemandes*, Alan Kramer, John Horne, Tallandier.)

8 Kropotkin, « Les Anarchistes et la guerre », *Les Temps Nouveaux*. 5 november 1905

9 <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article657>

10 F. Engels to Bebel, 13 october 1891, Marx-Engels Collected Works, Lawrence & Wishart, vol. 49, p. 258:

"Should the threat of war increase, we can then tell the government that we should be prepared, if enabled to do so by decent treatment, to support them against a foreign enemy, provided they prosecuted the war ruthlessly and with all available

government for provisions in favour of social democracy that would allow it to support a war. This is far from proletarian internationalism... These observations, made twenty years after the Paris Commune, anticipate the attitude of German social democracy during the 1914-1918 war. If Germany is attacked, all means of defence are good: "It is a question not only of the nation's existence but also, in our own case, of asserting the position and the future prospects for which we have fought"<sup>11</sup> – allusion to the huge real estate holdings of the Social Democratic Party. Protection of national existence, preservation of achievements, and participation in a national defence government: the ingredients for the war that will soon ravage Europe are there. Bakunin's worst fears about the "German patriots of the International" have come true.

The signatories of the *Manifesto* themselves were aware that they were not of the same generation. In a letter to *Les Temps nouveaux*<sup>12</sup>, published after the war, Malato claims to support the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, attacks the "young" members of the libertarian movement and reminds them of what is at stake: he refuses to stigmatise as "butchers" those who "organised the defence of more or less democratic societies (bourgeois, of course), against the Middle Ages, German militarism and the papacy". In this regard, he opposes those of *Le Libertaire*<sup>13</sup>: "Those are not of our generation, they do not understand us, the label may be the same, but they think and feel contrary to us".<sup>14</sup>

Malato adds:

"This is to tell you that if I am ready to take on all the responsibilities of signing with you and our old friends (Grave, with whom I have argued so much, and perhaps argue again, Tcherkesoff, Bertrand, Paul and Jacques Reclus, Cornelissen and the other comrades from *Les Temps nouveaux*), I do not intend to play the game of neo-anarchists who are much closer to a

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means, including revolutionary ones. Should Germany be attacked from the east and west, all means of defence would be justified.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Les Temps nouveaux* was a French anarchist newspaper founded in 1895 by Jean Grave, and it disappeared in 1921. Most of the newspaper's contributors, who had been pacifists until then, joined the Allied party during World War I, notably through the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*.

13 *Le Libertaire* was a French anarchist newspaper founded in 1895 by Jean Grave, and it disappeared in 1921. Most of the newspaper's contributors, who had been pacifists until then, joined the Allied party during World War I, notably through the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*.

14 *Les Temps nouveaux* n° 9, 15 mars 1920.

Mauricius<sup>15</sup> than to Kropotkin. The terrain was abandoned to the scoundrels by refusing to execute them and, in psychological moments, it is perceived that these people took the direction of the movement and that we no longer count.”

These words clearly show the gulf that had grown between the signatories of the “Manifesto” and the rest of the movement, which Malato calls “neo-anarchists”.

The *Manifesto of the Sixteen* was not conceived as an incitement to participate in the war, if we want to believe Jean Grave. Evoking in *Le Mouvement libertaire sous la III<sup>e</sup> République*<sup>16</sup> a conversation he had with Kropotkin, he wrote that readers could not be prevented from interpreting the *Manifesto* as an appeal to participation in the struggle, “but what was at stake was the danger of an attempt at German hegemony, the danger to human evolution of the triumph of German militarism, and nothing more.” Jean Grave, and presumably Kropotkin with him, had no illusions about the practical significance of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*: since it had not been possible “prevent the conflagration, it was necessary to be absolutely devoid of judgment to imagine that, once triggered, we would be able to stop it”.<sup>17</sup>

Even if the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* reflected extremely minority positions, it would deeply divide the French libertarian movement. The very quality of its signatories, and in particular Kropotkin, had something to do with it. The year 1916 marked a turning point in Germany itself. The military apparatus, unlike what was happening in France, was on its way to becoming autonomous from civilian power. In France, the tendency of the military to dominate civilian power was clearly visible at the beginning of the war, but political power managed to regain control, thanks to the strength of republican and parliamentary tradition. The famous phrase attributed to Clemenceau, “war is too serious a matter to be entrusted to the military,” takes on its full meaning here. No Clemenceau in Germany.

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- 15 Maurice Vandamme (1886-1974), better known under the pseudonym Mauricius. From the beginning, in 1905, he was one of the main collaborators of *L'Anarchie*, an organ of individualist anarchists founded by Libertad. At the congress for the unification of the mainly libertarian movement, held in Paris in August 1913, he defended the individualist point of view and tried to monopolize speech, to the point that he was expelled from the congress. In April 1916, together with Sébastien Faure, he founded the pacifist newspaper *Ce qu'il faut dire* (CQFD), which he ran under his real name.
- 16 Jean Grave, *Le Mouvement libertaire sous la III<sup>e</sup> République*, Les œuvres représentatives, 1930.
- 17 “Des socialistes révolutionnaires contre le parti”: 1900: *Écrits sous la cendre*, L'Harmattan, p. 224.

De Gaulle, who was a prisoner of war in 1917, declared that Germany had lost the war because generals no longer obeyed civilian power. Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff exercised, from August 1916, a quasi-dictatorship and concentrated in their hands political responsibilities that the French generals never assumed. A military bureaucracy was established which monopolised most political decisions. This led the German General Staff to an autistic behaviour: at the end of the war, Ludendorff was giving orders to divisions that no longer existed. In the autumn of 1918, German society and the army were exhausted and had no reserves left to continue the war; at that time, French soldiers accounted for only 40% of the total number of troops, while the Allies received from June 1918 the contribution of 450,000 Americans and the huge amount of military equipment purchased on credit in the United States, which France continued to pay until the 1980s.<sup>18</sup>

The German army, for its part, was disintegrating, literally dissolving in the desert after the spring offensives. Although it was the military command that requested the armistice, it managed to make civil and parliamentary authorities take responsibility for the defeat. The German right thus managed to construct the myth of an army that was actually victorious, but which was stabbed in the back. Within the anarchist movement, the alternative considered was:

- Either we refuse to take a stand, maintain an internationalist viewpoint and, in case of German victory, resume the revolutionary struggle;
- Or the German victory establishes a military dictatorship over all of Europe, blocking indefinitely any possibility of revolutionary struggle.

The crux of the problem was the attitude of the German proletariat in case of a victory. Kropotkin was extremely sceptical about the positions that the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party could take.

## 1912: “The War”

Kropotkin did not ignore the inter-imperialist conflicts of his time: no one could ignore them, for periodically a new crisis erupted, and every time it was feared that war between France, Germany, and England would break out. A text by Kropotkin entitled “The War” was published in 1912. It was a chapter of *Modern Science and Anarchy*, in which he presented his opinion on the function of war in capitalist and state regime in a dense and concise manner. It is difficult to examine the positions held by the old revolutionary in 1916 without knowing what he said about war in his 1912 text; not that this prefigured any of his later choices, quite the contrary. Knowing what he really

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18 Relations between France and the United States deteriorated rapidly in the 1920s, as the United States demanded repayment of war loans, while France wanted to make such repayment conditional on payment of reparations by Germany. After the defeat of 1871, France had to pay huge war reparations to Germany.

thought of the war, perhaps it can shed some light on the motivations behind his choice to support France against Germany in 1916. In this text, he inserts the colonial phenomenon within a global vision in which the projects of high finance and national governments are linked.

Germany does not play the role of the “villain,” as in the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, but appears as a secondary actor in the competition to the death between the great powers, or even almost as a victim of the dominant power of the moment: England, did everything to contain Germany within its territorial limits and to prevent it from playing with the big boys.

The war that was unleashed two years later, which had almost been unleashed several times already, was in Kropotkin’s mind undoubtedly an inter-imperialist war, even if he does not use the term. His text is a description of the economic and political context that will lead to conflagration. The colonial issue is simply the export from European territory of conflicts between states over the expansion of their economies.

The dominated countries are merely “industrially backward nations”; they have no other status. There is nothing in Kropotkin’s work that suggests they are inferior. At no time does Kropotkin see colonial domination as potentially positive for the dominated countries, as do the French and German socialists. There is neither the cynicism of the German social democrats who see colonisation as bringing “civilisation” to the dominated populations, nor the falsely virtuous reservations of some French republicans and socialists who advocate “humane” colonialism.<sup>19</sup> Great powers and dominated countries are two integral elements of the global capitalist and state system, and they are interrelated.

The other interesting aspect of the text is that Kropotkin shows a deep knowledge of the weapons used at the time and the terrible devastation they caused, as well as the strategies employed: he shows that the Russo-Japanese war prefigured modern wars, on the one hand by their duration and, by the other, by means, by engaged forces and losses. The anticipation of modern wars is also revealed by logistics, which has nothing more to do with previous wars: armaments, communications, use of complex combined sea-land operations, and so on. Clearly, the French strategists had understood these developments much less than Kropotkin had since they entered the first

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19 The Second International was crossed by opposing currents on the colonial question. At the Paris Congress in 1900, colonial politics was condemned by one vote. In 1904 in Amsterdam, a current saw the colonial question as an inevitable fact, even necessary for socialists. After 1907, one current saw colonisation as a civilising fact that the socialists had to assume; another current condemned colonial practices but recognised in it a factor of civilisation; a third current condemned colonisation in its nature.

conflict of the 20th century with the methods of the wars of the 19th century in mind.

From this very quick overview of Kropotkin's pamphlet<sup>20</sup>, it is clear that he had fully grasped the risks of the war that broke out in 1914 and the consequences, particularly in terms of human losses, that this war would provoke. In 1912, Kropotkin described what the battles of World War I would be like while French army personnel were still developing strategies similar to those of the Napoleonic Wars, with red-pants soldiers marching in line. Kropotkin concludes his description by saying that "the Western workers do not even suspect this terrible return to the most horrible savagery that modern war represents, and the bourgeois who know it are careful not to tell them."

## 1914: Letter to Steffen

Between "The War" of 1912 and the *Manifesto* of 1916, there was a letter written to a Swedish correspondent, Professor Gustav Steffen. Under the title "Kropotkin on the Present War" this letter was published in *Freedom*<sup>21</sup> in October 1914, and in the United States in November. This letter reveals an intermediate position with respect to the 1912 text and the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*: both texts contain passages that are absolutely identical. Kropotkin also refers to the positions taken by Bakunin during the Franco-Prussian War, whose main lines he will adopt. In a letter to Marie Goldsmith, he states:

"... In 1871, Bakunin told the German workers that it was his duty to revolt against their government who wanted to make conquests in France. But since Bakunin and his friends knew that the German people would not listen to them, they called on all revolutionaries of any nationality to defend France against the invaders. And when all the members of the International in Paris, extending their hands to the Blanquists, aligned themselves under the flag of the Commune, it was in the hope of expelling the Germans from France by the effort of the revolting communes. They understood that, if successful, this would have been the true, the only way to launch the social revolution, or at least take the first steps in it."<sup>22</sup>

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20 "Commentaire sur un texte peu connu de Kropotkine: La Guerre", <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article628>

21 Freedom is an anarchist newspaper founded in London in October 1886 by Charlotte Wilson and Pierre Kropotkin.

22 Pierre Kropotkine to Marie Goldsmith 23 february 1916, in "Anarchisme et internationalisme. Autour du *Manifeste des Seize*. Correspondance inédite de Pierre Kropotkine et de Marie Goldsmith, janvier-mars 1916." *Cahiers du monde russe et*

Kropotkin also recalls that the *Bulletin* of the Jura Federation supported the cause of the “insurrection of Herzegovina against Turkish rule”, that a group of Bakuninists supported this cause on the ground, that another activist went to support “the insurrection of Arabi Pasha for the independence of Egypt”, and that the anarchist newspapers “valiantly fought for the independence of Ireland, of the Boers, of the Caucasus, Poland and Finland”. Kropotkin’s position is reduced to the assertion of national independence for France (and Belgium). In short, there is no reason to oppose the occupation of Algeria by France, or of India by England, and accept the occupation of Belgium and part of France by Germany...

Like Kropotkin later, Bakunin thought that a German victory would be a terrible regression for Europe and called for a popular revolt against the German occupation in order to turn the war into a revolution. Bakunin therefore unreservedly supported France in this war, for the same reasons as Kropotkin, but the elder was fortunate that the war had turned into a popular revolt, which undoubtedly *saved him from the accusations that Kropotkin had to suffer*. The letter to Steffen echoes debates between Marx and Bakunin about the centre of reaction in Europe. It was a question of who, Germany and Russia, had the initiative for actions aimed at maintaining the reactionary *status quo* in Europe resulting from the Treaty of Vienna (1815).

According to Marx, Russia was the master that led all the anti-democratic manoeuvres that threatened Europe. Bakunin, more nuanced, had a more “dialectical” stance: although Russia had long been an obstacle to any democratic development on the continent, it was now a declining power and no longer had the capacity to influence European politics significantly, much less to intervene militarily in the context of a territorial expansion towards the West. Now it was Germany that had this capacity.

It is no accident, therefore, that Kropotkin writes in his letter to Steffen that “the last forty-three years were confirmation of what Bakunin wrote in 1871, that is, if French influence in Europe disappeared, it would be delayed in its development for half a century. And today it is obvious that if the current invasion of Belgium and France is not repelled by the common effort of all the nations of Europe, we will endure another half-century, or more, of general reaction.”

This is exactly the dilemma faced by the signatories of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*. In fact, most of them were “veterans” who had lived through the period of the Franco-Prussian War; they had experienced the regression suffered by the labour movement after the war and lived in the anguish that everything would start again. Kropotkin is therefore absolutely certain that “for the last forty years, the threat of a Franco-Prussian war has been looming permanently over Europe.”

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*soviétique*, 1981, vol. 22, n° 22-2-3.

Alexander Berkman replied to Kropotkin's letter to the Swedish professor. He recalls that the old revolutionary always said that "the reason for modern war is always competition for markets", and he points out that "in the letter to Professor Steffen, Kropotkin strangely forgets to mention the working class of the warring powers", *which is not true*. Berkman asks again, "But where are the workers?" In a sense, Berkman himself answers his own question: "Is the militarism of one country – of any country – not based on the consent of the people?" To exit the war, Berkman goes on to specify, "Kropotkin did not always say that only revolutionary consciousness and economic solidarity of workers could force capital and government to end and ultimately abolish it?" But he does not say what to do if, in the event of the outbreak of a war, the working class of a single country decides to oppose it. Yet, until the very eve of the war, the leaders of the CGT, the French trade union confederation, had tirelessly tried to get the German socialist leaders to decide on common actions in this eventuality, without success. They were met with contemptuous refusals. Only the CGT managed to organise a general strike against the war in 1912, with no such initiative ever taking place in Germany.

Now the signatories of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* claim that they would be delighted to see the conditions of peace discussed by the European workers, but the German people must realise that they have been duped, that they are not fighting to defend their territory, but on the contrary, were thrown into a war of conquest. In Germany, the bourgeois press, says the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, "is preparing the nation for the idea of the outright annexation of Belgium and the northern "departments"<sup>23</sup> of France. And there is no force in Germany capable of opposing it. The workers, who should have raised their voices against these gains, are not doing so." German social democratic leaders fully assimilated that the annexation of Belgium and a quarter of France was an irreversible fact. In a way, the German occupation of a quarter of France, the most industrialised part, with its coal and iron mines, justified in Kropotkin's eyes a resistance that amounted to a national liberation struggle.

What did the "orthodox" anarchists answer? They answered, like Malatesta, that it was better to suffer a foreign occupation than to accept war, because then we could resume the social struggle, which is incredibly naive. Malatesta underestimated the violence and repression associated with a military occupation. In reality, a military occupation engenders fear and division, rather than solidarity. Indeed, to the exploitation suffered by workers, the permanent occupation of a quarter of France would have added the question of oppression suffered by the population.

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23 Metropolitan France is divided into 96 administrative districts called "départements". The Germans occupied 30 "départements" in the North and East of the country.

Malatesta's vision rests on a very optimistic and naive view of power dynamics. Instead of a resurgence of social struggle, the occupation and all the repressive measures that accompany it would rather weaken social struggle by prioritising the fight against oppression. In light of the atrocities committed by the German army in the occupied territories, the idea that workers could organise and fight back remains highly problematic.

Kropotkin added three paragraphs to his letter to Steffen that may serve as a conclusion. He outlined a kind of immediate program:

1. "The war cannot be fought by pacifist dreams (...) just as it cannot be fought by the kind of anti-militarist propaganda that has been carried out so far." To his great regret, there was no popular uprising as was the case in 1871.
2. "The causes of war must be attacked at its roots." Kropotkin hopes that this war "will open the eyes of the working masses and a large number of men among the educated middle class.
3. Meanwhile, "the territories of France and Belgium must be liberated from the invaders."

In his response to Kropotkin, Berkman finds himself on the moral register: he condemns "unreservedly all capitalist wars, whatever the sophisms used to defend one or another band of pirates and exploiters as more liberal" (and what about the wars that are not capitalist?).

Kropotkin may agree with Berkman when he says that "war is the game of lords, always at the expense of the deceived workers", but the Russian revolutionary seems to think that it is mainly the German workers who have been deceived, which is not entirely false if we compare, on the one hand, the efforts made until the last moment by the leaders of the French CGT to negotiate with their German counterparts a common action against the war, and on the other hand the manipulations carried out by German social-democratic leaders against workers

There is an obsession among the German population that goes back a long way: the Russian danger. This obsession, maintained by political power, was largely resumed and amplified by Marx and Engels, and then by German social democracy. By 1914, the Germans had been persuaded that the purpose of the war was to protect them from Russian danger. Germany's strengthening had led France to conclude an alliance with Russia. This alliance was imposed by the need to contain German expansionism in Europe. One of the "side effects" of this alliance was to confirm in the German population the feeling that their country was under siege (*Einkreisung*). This feeling was not limited to the

right, but was widespread on the left. Perhaps this explains the obvious complicity of German social democracy with the state's war plans.

In the same year 1913, German socialist MPs voted for a huge additional war tax (in February) after signing a peace manifesto with their French counterparts (in January) and sending one of their own, Molkenbuhr, to visit France (in March) to persuade the French that Germany would never attack them. It took the unfathomable naiveté of the French socialist leaders to put up with that.

Kropotkin and Berkman are on two completely different records: the first considers the facts and foresees their possible developments. He analyses the strategy of the German General Staff based on territories already occupied by the Army of the Reich and anticipates plans for territorial expansion. Considering these developments, he chooses his party.

The second is placed on a moral level: war is an evil in itself, assimilated to an “artifice of high politics” and no no geopolitical explanation is acceptable.

## **1915: “The Anarchist International and War”**

The manifesto entitled “The Anarchist International and War”<sup>24</sup> was published on 12 February 1915, almost exactly one year before the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*. It is a document that represents anarchist orthodoxy in terms of internationalism, an internationalism I would call “proclamative” in the sense that one affirms principles, one states the conditions as one would like them to be:

“...No matter where they may find themselves, the anarchists’ role in the current tragedy is to carry on proclaiming that there is but one war of liberation: the one waged in every country by the oppressed against the oppressor, by the exploited against the exploiter. Our task is to summon the slaves to revolt against their masters.”

The document does not say who is responsible for the conflict. It is the result of economic and social inequality, of wild antagonism of interests. War was inevitable because military budgets had been increasing steadily for half a century. Therefore, “no distinction can be made between offensive wars and defensive wars”, between invaders and non invaders.

“In the current conflict, the governments in Berlin and Vienna have justified themselves by producing documents every bit as

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24 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/malatesta/1915/manifesto.htm>

authentic as those produced by the governments in Paris, London and Petrograd. It is for whoever on each side who will produce the most unchallengeable, most telling documentation to prove their bona fides and portray themselves as the unblemished defender of the right and of freedom, the champion of civilization.”

Not pointing the blame for conflict is a principled position: war is inherently reprehensible, so there can be no aggressor or assaulted. Certainly, in trying to explain how a war began, one may be tempted to deceive the truth and point to one culprit and not another. But the fact that this risk exists is not enough to disqualify any historical analysis. Internationalist proclamations have precisely the defect of refusing any real analysis of context and facts.

“The Anarchist International and War” asserts that no state is competent to claim the values of civilisation., and the text does not fail to mention, with regard to the French government, Biribi,<sup>25</sup> the bloody conquests of Tonkin, Madagascar, Morocco, with the forcible conscription of black troops; “the France whose prisons have housed, for years past, comrades whose only crime was to have written and spoken out against war? Or England, as she exploits, divides, starves, and oppresses the peoples of her huge colonial empire?”. None of the belligerent states has the right to claim civilisation, for the primary cause of war lies solely in the existence of the state, which is “the political form of privilege”; it is “oppression organised for the benefit of a privileged minority”. The document emphasizes that all forms of government are involved in the war: “absolutism is represented by Russia, absolutism mitigated by parliamentarianism, by Germany, a state ruling over very different peoples, by Austria, constitutional democracy by England and the democratic republican system by France.” Therefore, it is necessary to work to “weaken and disintegrate the various states, cultivate the spirit of revolt and create discontent among peoples and armies”. It is necessary to “take advantage of all the movements of revolt and discontent, foment insurrection, organise revolution”.

It is a document that could be described as “classic” in internationalist anarchist literature: war is the product of capitalism, it is implemented by states. The workers, the peasants, the people in general, have nothing to gain

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25 Biribi was the name of a group of military prisons where undisciplined soldiers were sent. They were subjected to an appalling regime. Corporal punishment, exhausting physical labor: many of the condemned returned from it broken, when they came out alive. The anarchist Georges Darien, who had anticipated the call and performed his military service, was sent there in 1883, at the age of twenty-one. He spent three years there, which he decided to recount in what would become his first novel, *Biribi*.

from this. War must be transformed into revolution. “The Anarchist International and War” sets out the general principles that should be adopted in case of war, but nothing more. All the belligerents are set against each other. There is no analysis of the concrete situation at the time when the text was written, of the international situation. It can apply to virtually any war, at any time.

The *Manifesto of the Sixteen* is quite different.

## 1916 : The *Manifesto of the Sixteen*

Kropotkin and some anarchists of the time regarded Germany as the aggressor, a fact borne out in some ways by the occupation of Belgium, a quarter of France, and a large part of European Russia. Germany was seen as the model of statism and militarism, while France was “the homeland of the revolution of 1789”. A German victory would therefore have been a huge setback for all of Europe. This current, described as “defensist”, wrote a manifesto known as the “*Manifesto of the Sixteen*” which caused great agitation in the libertarian movement, but which obviously had no real influence on the subsequent course of the war – a point on which the signatories should have reflected.

The *Manifesto of the Sixteen* contains many of the elements of the letter to Gustav Steffen<sup>26</sup>, but there is an important difference with the text entitled “The War” that Kropotkin wrote in 1912: Germany is no longer a secondary character in inter-imperialist relations, but a decisive actor.

Signed on 28 February 1916, the syndicalist daily newspaper *La Bataille* Manifesto was published on 14 March 1916 at . Kropotkin referred to this text as the “Draft Peace Declaration”. In the 14 April 1916 edition of *La libre Fédération de Lausanne*, about one hundred new signatures are announced, coming from France, Italy (the most numerous), Switzerland, England, Belgium and Portugal.

The “orthodox” anarchists, or internationalists, were unquestionably in the majority and regarded war from the sole point of view of principle, which could not be disputed: the war was the result of the capitalist system and the state. As anarchists opposed both, questioning the principle of opposition to any war was not an option: the war was a “settling of scores among imperialist thieves” and it did not matter who was the aggressor or the assaulted, the victor

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26 Maurice Laisant writes that the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* was written "at the instigation of Jean Grave". Michaël Confino writes on this subject: "Kropotkin indicates [...] (letter of 8 February 1916) that it was he who drafted the *Manifesto of Sixteen*, and then submitted it to the other signatories for amendment and approval." ("Anarchisme et internationalisme. Autour du *Manifeste des Seize*. Correspondance inédite de Pierre Kropotkine et de Marie Goldsmith, janvier-mars 1916." *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 1981, vol. 22, no. 22-2-3.

or the vanquished. The only thing that mattered was the struggle against militarism, patriotism and social revolution.

The signatories of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* opposed the strict orthodoxy of the majority of the anarchist movement with a relativistic view of the situation. This appears very clearly in a text by Jean Grave published on 22 September 1922.

Grave claims that he and his friends are perfectly internationalists and that “until the declaration of war” they fought militarism: “my comrades and I can boast of having led this campaign better than anyone else,” he says. Jean Grave adds something interesting:

“The only flaw we had was that we always discussed abstractly, that we did not know how to consider particular cases, and also that we thought as if anarchists should be masters of events.”<sup>27</sup>

Does this mean that the signatories thought that the Sixteen Manifesto would actually influence the course of the war?

Grave recognises that, from an abstract point of view, “one government is worth the other. In practice, however, this reasoning does not hold. Under some governments, at the cost of a few months in prison, some annoyances, the propaganda of our ideas is possible. Under other governments, this is impossible.” Jean Grave then asks the question: “On the pretext that we do not want any government, should we conclude that if there were an attempt to impose a regime like that of tsardom, for example, would anarchists have to sit down and let it happen?” This may be the dividing line between the “orthodox” anarchists and the “pragmatists,” signatories of the “*Manifesto of the Sixteen*”. For Grave, “you can only increase the amount of freedom you enjoy if you know how to defend the freedom you already have.” According to Grave, the German victory would have been, “for at least a century,” the death of any idea of emancipation throughout Europe: “This, for me and my co-signatories, was undeniable.”

According to the Manifesto, the German people were duped in 1914: they really believed that they were defending their territory. But the German workers should have understood by now that plans for the invasion of France, Belgium and Russia had been prepared long ago: “now, after twenty months of war and terrible losses, they should realise that the gains made by the German army cannot be sustained.” Therefore, it is up to the German workers to recognise that they have been deceived; they must reject any annexation or any idea of war indemnification in favour of Germany, and admit, on the other hand, that Germany must “repair the material damage caused by the invaders

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27 *Encyclopédie anarchiste*, Lettre “S”, p. 105.

to its neighbours". It is in these conditions, says the Manifesto, that "there may be a common basis for an beginning of discussion on peace."

"Unfortunately, so far we have not seen any symptoms of the awakening of the German people in this sense." All the more so because, at the moment when the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* was being written, France was in a very bad position and was losing the war. Unlike in 1871, France did not collapse in 1914. Had such a collapse occurred, it might have provoked a patriotic reaction similar to that of the Paris Commune, potentially leading to a popular uprising followed by a revolution. Kropotkin's position would then have been entirely different. The reason for signing an appeal in support of resistance against Germany in 1916 lies precisely in the fact that, on the eve of the Battle of the Marne, everything suggested that the French armies were on the verge of collapse.

## Zimmerwald

About a year before the drafting of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, from 5 to 8 September 1915, a conference of socialists opposed to official parties, in favour of internationalism and against nationalism and chauvinism was held in Zimmerwald, Switzerland. Thirty-eight delegates from different European countries were present: Swiss, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch, Polish, Romanian, German, French, Russian, Italian, British, Bulgarian, as well as representatives of the Bund, the socialist organisation of Jewish workers in Eastern Europe.

It is significant that, practically from the beginning, the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* strives to disqualify the Zimmerwald conference: "There was talk of the Zimmerwald conference, but the essential point was missing: representation of German workers." This is absolutely false. The SPD, the official socialist party in Germany, was not invited, nor was the French section of the Workers' International (SFIO), because of their support for the war. However, there were German representatives at the conference: Adolf Hoffmann and Georg Ledebour.

It should be noted that one of them, Ledebour, systematically opposed before the war the proposals made by the CGT to provide for joint action in case of an outbreak of hostilities between the two countries. In 1914 he opposed the vote on war credits, but finally voted for the credits on 4 August due to party discipline.

In fact, Kropotkin was convinced that the "Zimmerwaldians" were pro-German. He seems to think that the Zimmerwald Conference occurred only because Germany was in a strong position – which was the case in 1915 – and that a peace negotiation would have been favourable to Germany. In fact, Kropotkin's categorical opposition to Zimmerwald's options stems from his belief that an unconditional and immediate end to the war would give

enormous strategic and diplomatic advantages to Germany, which occupied ten “departements” in northern and eastern France (almost a quarter of the country, the most industrialised part with huge coal reserves), Belgium and much of European Russia. Negotiations under these conditions would have led Germany to retain important territorial gains. That is why the “defensist” anarchists opposed the idea of “immediate peace”. Kropotkin was not far from thinking that the Zimmerwald conference and the Kienthal conference which took place shortly afterwards had the implicit aim of serving German interests.

It is possible that Kropotkin no longer viewed the situation in terms of “imperialist war” but in terms of “national liberation struggle.” These two conferences had no more immediate practical effect in the course of the war than the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, but they had the merit of reaffirming positions of principle. The *Manifesto of the Sixteen* state that the German government was preparing for new offensives – which was true. What was the view of the German press?

“The bourgeois press is preparing the nation for the idea of direct annexation of Belgium and the northern departments of France. And there is no force in Germany capable of opposing it. The workers, who should have raised their voice against the conquests, do not. The unionised workers are being swept away by imperialist fever, and the Social Democratic Party, too weak to influence the government’s decisions on peace, even representing a compact mass, is divided on this issue into two hostile parties, and the majority party is marching with the government.”<sup>28</sup>

On the German desire to annex Belgium, the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* is not mistaken. Interviewed by Edward Hunt, an American humanitarian,<sup>29</sup> Kautsky had stated: “You can see that newspapers are preparing the nation for the final annexation of Belgium.” Kautsky added a remark that obviously shocked the American: “We bought this province with our blood.” It is an interesting observation, which shows that the social democrat obviously accepted the idea of annexing this country, which is, for the circumstance, called a “province”. The American also points out that his interlocutor did not say anything about Belgian blood.

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28 *Manifeste des Seize*.

29 *War Bread. A personal narrative of the war and relief in Belgium*, Edward Eyre Hunt, American delegate of the commission for relief in Belgium in charge of the province of Antwerp. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1916. (p. 63.)

In a letter to J. Guérin dated 28 July 1916, Kropotkin wrote on this subject:

“The facts are increasingly confirming our way of seeing, expressed in the ‘Declaration’. Bülow and his twelve secretaries had manoeuvred heavily in Switzerland to sow peace and to try to find supporters for the idea. Now we see that the German government never thought of giving up any of its achievements without receiving strong contributions in return and without retaining those parts of the invaded territories in Belgium and France that suit him most. One must be extremely naive not to see that this was a means of sowing discord among the allied nations, because the Germans knew, I am sure, what kind of offensive was being prepared for the summer. Let us hope that it succeeds and the Germans will soon realise that to invade a territory and fortify it is not yet conquering it.”

The signatories of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* denounced the anarchists' illusions regarding the “peaceful intentions of those who govern Germany.” They preferred to “face the danger squarely and seek what can be done to counter it.” What they termed “German aggression” was considered to be a threat not only to “hopes for emancipation,” but also “to all human progress.”

“That is why we anarchists, we anti-militarists, we enemies of war, we passionate defenders of peace and the fraternity of peoples, we stand on the side of resistance and do not believe that we must separate our destiny from the rest of the population.”

Note their use of the word “resistance” to explain their point of view. The signatories of the *Manifesto* would have preferred for the population to take into their own hands their own defence – without, however, the document specifying whether it is a defence of national territory or a defence to achieve social revolution. But, “since it has not been possible, it was only to endure what could not be changed.” This point is undoubtedly the pivot of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*. If, in the event of war, internationalist positions do not lead to a cessation of hostilities, and one of the belligerents occupies all or part of the territory of the vanquished, what should be done?

The proclamations of the “orthodox” anarchist movement do not answer this question, except by saying, as Malatesta did, that it is better to suffer an occupation than to make war, because in this case one can then continue social struggle – a very naive position: The experience of the following war showed

what happened to the social struggles under Nazi occupation, when the industrial and agricultural resources of the occupied countries were literally plundered by the occupier and the population was scourged by famine.

The *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, unlike usual internationalist texts, does not place itself in a register of “proclamation”, in the manner of: “Workers of all countries, unite,” without those who write these proclamations being able to change the actual state of things. It is placed in an “analytical” or “pragmatic” record, which merely records reality.

It is therefore said that:

1. The context is absolutely unfavourable to any discussion about peace. In fact, negotiating peace when Belgium, **ten northern departments** of France, and a large part of Russia in Europe are occupied puts Germany in a favourable position.
2. The war effort must therefore be intensified, since a German victory would have tragic consequences: political (crushing French socialism), cultural (German hegemony) and economic (loss of vital regions of the country and payment of war reparations).

Kropotkin’s positions in 1916 were extremely minority in the anarchist movement of the time, it should be remembered. However, they are based on analyses surprisingly similar to those made by Bakunin in 1870-1871. We forget that Bakunin took a clear position in favour of France in 1870, for the same reasons as Kropotkin. Like Bakunin, Kropotkin wanted the transformation of war into a social revolution – a fact that is under-emphasised. But the war of 1870 led to the communal revolt in Paris, during which Bakunin was very active in trying to turn the war into revolution, which was not the case for Kropotkin in 1914.

Can a revolutionary theorist confine himself to the pragmatic record, however obvious and convincing, when essential principles are at stake? If the theorist wants to maintain his revolutionary quality, the answer is clearly no. When you are in the pragmatic record, you are in the indeterminate, you cannot predict how events will play out. But principles are the only thing left when one cannot really influence events – which was obviously the case with Kropotkin in 1916.

It is obvious that Kropotkin in 1916 did not really imagine changing the course of events by signing the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*. Strictly speaking, this document is by no means a call to arms. In the warmongering context of the time, the Allies did not really need Kropotkin for this. Kropotkin’s intention was to send a message. But for this, was there no other way? A way that

allowed signatories to “convey the message” about the consequences of a possible German victory while preserving internationalist principles?

Kropotkin might well have written a manifesto in which he denounced in advance the foreseeable consequences of German rule over Europe, while calling on proletarians not to massacre one another. Such a statement undoubtedly would have had even more impact, but one had to count on the pride of an authoritarian personality like Kropotkin, convinced that he was right against all. The same authoritarian pride can be found in Jean Grave, who called those who did not share his views idiots

Marie Goldsmith shared Kropotkin’s “defensist” views, but refused to sign the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*. She “had preferred to express her support through articles where she could at the same time express her reservations and the nuances of her personal opinion”, writes Michael Confino.<sup>30</sup>

If Kropotkin had done so, he would have sent the same message without creating confusion in the anarchist movement.

## Conclusion

Educated in the spirit of the philosophy of the Enlightenment – all his political thought is imbued with it – Kropotkin is infinitely better informed than most of his co-signatories about the great international problems of his time. He made choices that were consistent with his education and culture. He may be reproved for not having maintained an attitude of revolutionary intransigence, all the more so since his choice had no influence on the outcome of the war: the Allies did not need the signature of fifteen anarchists to carry out their policy.

The ambition of this study was to allow the anarchist movement to free itself from the unease linked to the attacks that were carried out against it under the pretext that a handful of militants signed the *Manifesto of Sixteen* in 1916. The anarchist movement gave more than its share in the struggle against war and can be proud of being the current that, in the labour movement, published the first manifestos against the war: let us remember that the text “The Anarchist International and the War” was written eight months before the Zimmerwald conference.

The trauma of the crushing of the Commune, the hegemonic attitude of German socialists, the illusions and submissive attitude of French socialists were probably still elements that played a role in Kropotkin’s positions.

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30 “Anarchisme et internationalisme. Autour du *Manifeste des Seize*. Correspondance inédite de Pierre Kropotkine et de Marie Goldsmith, janvier-mars 1916.” *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 1981, vol. 22, n° 22-2-3.

This is why I went into great detail in my book about the unsuccessful initiatives – which I do not discuss in this summary – of the French labour movement and revolutionary syndicalist leaders to reach an agreement with the German socialists. We see that the weight of the orientations of German socialism goes back a long way and was decisive. Then, I highlight the stubborn but unsuccessful attempts of the French CGT to establish a link with the German labor movement with the aim of achieving joint action in the event of hostilities between the two countries. Finally, I show that the French anarchist movement had only minimal capacity for intervention in events, which did not prevent it, as Maurice Laisant pointed out, from largely contributing its share of opponents and refractors of war.

If the signing of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* provided a pretext for certain social democratic leftists to classify the *whole anarchist movement* as being on the side of the war supporters, against all truth and logic, I wanted to show that the reality of the anarchist movement was not found in the *Manifesto of Sixteen*, although this manifesto raised real questions.

The “rehabilitation of Kropotkin” issue obviously doesn’t make much sense nowadays. If the trauma created after the signing of the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* by some individuals was deep and lasting within the anarchist movement, it seems to us, almost a century later, exaggerated. The libertarian movement itself was the first to feel betrayed. The feeling of this “betrayal” was undoubtedly even greater, as the anarchist movement was in small numbers compared to the other forces at work: the impact was felt even more seriously.

If an examination of the reasons and context that might have led Kropotkin to sign the *Manifesto of the Sixteen* seems essential to us in order to understand this period of history, it is appropriate to bring this episode back into its correct proportions, in the sense that it remained perfectly marginal. The anarchist movement has always been able to select what should be rejected and what should be retained in its authors’ thinking and actions, and never refrained from criticising them when necessary. Kropotkin’s lamentable choice in 1916, all the more regrettable as other solutions would have been possible, does not invalidate the rest of the thinking of the Russian revolutionary.

While his intention was basically to warn the militants about the likely consequences of a German victory, Kropotkin’s mistake was that he saw no other way than to publish a text supporting the Allies. Such an alternative existed and was chosen by Marie Goldsmith, who shared Kropotkin’s ideas and spoke publicly but refused to sign the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*. It would be time to pay tribute to this woman whose positions were hidden by those of the “great man” of whom she was a friend.

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