

Moscow 1934—the Museum Tour

In the summer of 1934, an American citizen named Dionisy Gorbatshevich visited the USSR on a tourist visa and later published his observations in journal articles and a series of books under the pen name Minsky Muzhik.

In the 1930s the USSR was frequently visited by foreign intellectuals of leftist views, seeking the socialist paradise. Gorbatshevich was a different type. Born into a peasant family in what is now Belarus, poverty forced him to emigrate to the USA as an

18-year-old in 1913. He settled in Chicago where he worked at various blue-collar occupations and became an activist in the Russian-American anarchist movement.

After his observations were published, Gorbatshevich was banned from the Soviet Union for many years. In the 1960s he was finally able to return for two more visits. The following selection is taken from Gorbatshevich's first book, published in Chicago in 1935.⁷

THE MUSEUM OF THE REVOLUTION

This new Soviet museum is located in a luxurious house that formerly belonged to a wealthy Englishman. There are many rooms in the house. They are all filled with portraits and all sorts of museum exhibits.

The museum is divided into periods and sections. Some rooms depict one or other revolutionary period in Russia. In each room there are placards and leaflets describing the given period. The Museum of the Revolution starts with the room of Stenka Razin, Pugachev, the Decembrists, and the period around 1861. There's a room devoted to Petr Lavrov and other outstanding Russian narodniks. There are portraits of Bakunin and



Kropotkin, but as for their teachings, the Bolsheviks are silent: it's dangerous to mention anarchism in a country with a brutal dictatorship.

Next there are sections: the strike section, the 1917 revolution section, and others. Most of the displays relate to the Bolshevik October Revolution and the Bolshevik government; all kinds of trifles and rubbish have been collected.

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THE MUSEUM OF L. N. TOLSTOY

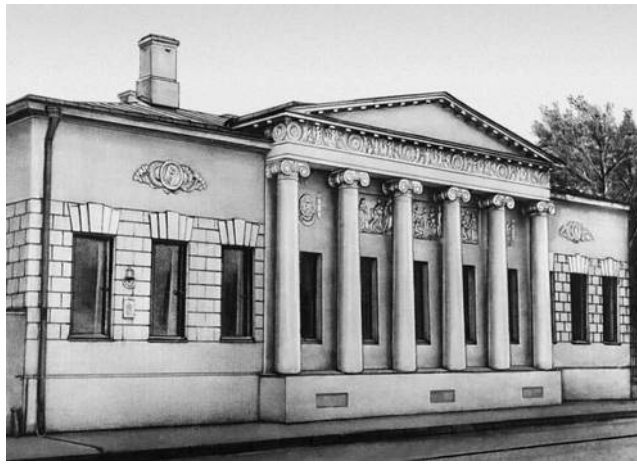
In Moscow there are two Tolstoy museums: one historical and one depicting his life-style. Visits to these museums are not part of the Intourist program. This is completely understandable: Tolstoy was opposed to all governments, which only exist, he argued, to oppress and deceive people. The Bolshevik government is the most brutal and vicious. And if this government tolerates the Tolstoy museums in Moscow, it's not

because of respect and sympathy for him, but because it knows that the whole civilized world is on the side of Leo Tolstoy. The Bolsheviks need to demonstrate that they also support historical monuments commemorating great people. If the Bolshevik government genuinely supported the Tolstoy museums, built by adherents and admirers of Tolstoy, then it would not have destroyed all the Tolstoyan organizations and circles that sprang

⁷ Minsky Muzhik, *What Did I See in Soviet Russia? From My Personal Observations*, (Chicago, 1935), pp. 64-74 [in Russian]. A second edition was published in 1937 (New York/Riga). A new edition was issued by the Moscow publisher "Common Place" in 2018.

up during the Russian Revolution and would not have tossed Tolstoy's books out of the municipal libraries.

The Museum of Leo N. Tolstoy is found on Kropotkin Street, not far from the centre of the capital—the Kremlin and Red Square—in a small, one-story stone building.



The museum building is close to the street, but the main entrance is in the back, through a large garden. During my visit there were several children in the garden. The building has been white-washed, as one finds occasionally in Moscow. The museum is open for a few hours a day on certain days. The hours are not always the same, and this causes some confusion.

At the entrance, behind a small wooden table, sits a middle-aged man. In front of him is a large book where each visitor must write their name and their home town. Members of groups—trade unionists, students, or tourists—are charged 50 kopeks for admission. Everyone else—one ruble.

To the right from the entrance is the first room of the museum. In all there are five rooms—large, spacious, bright, and without doors. Tolstoy loved space and freedom. He couldn't endure coercion and oppression. It seems this was grasped by the designers of the museum, who made sure there was lots of room.

The theme of the first room is childhood. In it stands a small bookcase with books relating to the childhood of Lev Tolstoy. On the walls there are many portraits of Lev Nikolayevich as a child with his parents. Next are the second and third rooms. On the left, there are two more. In the middle of the second room is a large bust of Tolstoy, donated to the museum by one of the best artists of the Tolstoyans. The walls of all the rooms are covered with numerous large and small portraits and paintings of Tolstoy and his ancestors. In one room I counted 103 such ancestors.

The visitors are watched by a middle-aged woman, plainly dressed, with an intelligent face. From her I learned that the museum is visited by individuals and students. Since she didn't know me, she answered my questions with "I don't know." Many people in the USSR answer like that. The brutal Bolshevik

regime has taught them to hold their tongues. The museum itself and its exhibits produce a good impression. It would take days, not just hours, to examine each picture and each book that Tolstoy read.

The Tolstoy museum was organized during the Russian Revolution. For a few years it existed independently of the state, supported by voluntary means collected in Russia and abroad. But as a consequence of the persecution of Tolstoyans, the flow of money was insufficient to support the museum. Under this pretext, the Bolsheviks nationalized the museum, thus destroying the self-activity of the persons supporting the museum. The state, especially the Soviet state, does not tolerate dissident organizations and their work. Nevertheless, Tolstoy's followers and admirers have managed to raise a great monument to him. It's true, he's a thorn in the side to the Bolshevik satraps, but his influence persists. And his influence will continue to persist and will outlive the tyrants who won't allow the Tolstoyans to live freely and don't want the museum to flourish. Tolstoy's ideas outlived the tsarist government and his museum will outlive the Bolshevik government that disrupts the peaceful lives of people who live according to the teachings of Lev Nikolayevich.

The second Tolstoy Museum is located not far away, in the Khamovniki district of Moscow. Unfortunately, it's closed in the summer, so I couldn't take a tour. It's a detached house, a large two-story building with 16 rooms. From people I ran into near the house, I learned that it was purchased by Tolstoy in 1882 and his whole family lived there in

the winter time. All the rooms are arranged with the original furniture. This museum was opened

in 1928 on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the birth of L. N. Tolstoy.

THE KROPOTKIN MUSEUM IN MOSCOW

Three or four blocks from the Tolstoy Museum, on narrow Kropotkin Lane, is a house with the sign: "The Museum of P. A. Kropotkin."

Tolstoy and Kropotkin were both profound thinkers and philosophers. They lived at the same time, and both of them rejected government, laws, and the state. But their rejection was based on different considerations: Tolstoy for religious reasons, Kropotkin for scientific and humanitarian reasons. These two important geniuses lived in the same epoch and created great works: they taught people how to liberate themselves from economic slavery and how to create a free society that is not based on any kind of compulsion. And both, almost simultaneously, had historical monuments—museums—founded by their followers.

Kropotkin escaped from the Petropavlovsky Fortress and for more than 40 years he lived abroad, where he wrote his scientific works. His books have been translated into many languages and are captivating to read. His works continue to interest and inspire the whole world, even now, in our era of global economic crisis, of Marxist-Leninist social experiments in Russia, and fascist experiments in Italy, Germany, and Austria.

For the Bolsheviks, he was the worst enemy owing to his rejection of the state and government. His followers, who were numbered in the millions in the USSR, were among the first victims of persecution and banishment to Siberia. The religious anarchism of Tolstoy and the social anarchism of Kropotkin could not be tolerated by the Bolsheviks.

By a decree two years ago, many of Kropotkin's



books, as well as those of Tolstoy, were removed from libraries and prohibited from being sold or used. But the Kropotkin Museum, like the Tolstoy Museums, was left alone in order to show foreigners that these historical depositories devoted to their bitterest enemies are valued and respected.

The gate in the iron fence with peeling paint in front of the building was locked, so I had to enter the museum through the back door. On the left side, the fence had collapsed in several places, allowing entry into the rear garden. In the garden were two kids who showed me how to get into the museum. There was no greenery or flowers in the garden, just a few dried-out trees living out their last years. As a result of Bolshevik policies, not only people forget how to speak, but even trees wither and waste away.

The museum is open only certain hours of the day. Some days in the morning, others—after lunch. An attendant, old and tired but devoted to the museum, collects one ruble from an individual visitor at the entrance, and then conducts a tour of the museum, explaining in detail everything found there.

There are eight small rooms in the Kropotkin Museum, full of various exhibits relating to the life and activity of Kropotkin. The first room contains portraits of Kropotkin's ancestors. There's even a portrait of his great-grandmother. A few large portraits are in wooden frames. The second room reflects the childhood of Peter Alekseyevich, and his scientific and revolutionary activity as a young man, in 1870—1876. There are illustrations of his remarkable escape from the Petropavlovsky Fortress.

The third room is full of exhibits connected with his life abroad. Here one finds several of his sketches of prison life in Switzerland and France, where he was locked up for several years for his anarchist work.

In the fourth and fifth rooms there are portraits relating to Kropotkin's life in London and his return to Russia in 1917. Here's his workbench and the furnishings of his home office: a table and chairs.

The sixth and seventh rooms depict the final illness and funeral of Kropotkin, who died on February 8, 1921. Here there are samples of newspapers, journals, flyers, and citations from articles about Kropotkin. On one wall hangs a portrait of Sacco and Vanzetti, painted by one of their supporters[†] in New York three years ago, and donated by a committee of aid to the museum. It's a big picture, in a beautiful frame.

In the eighth room is Kropotkin's huge library, moved here from London a few years ago. Visitors to the museum can read and rest in this room.

In the corridor near the entrance, there's a large bulletin board that has a listing of all 34 volumes of Kropotkin's collected works, and their contents.[‡] These volumes are being prepared for publication. In a small room off of the corridor there are two typewriters donated two years ago by the

New York committee of aid to the museum.

The museum was organized by followers and friends of Kropotkin soon after his death, and is located in the house where he was born and spent his youth. In recent years, the most outstanding and active members of the committee that runs the museum have been arrested and exiled to Siberia: Prof. A. Borovoi, Khudolei, Kharkardin, the scholar and writer A. Solonovich, etc. In the spring of this year, the authorities wanted to exile the elderly secretary of the museum, the gentle anarchist N. Lebedev.[§] This sick man was forced by the GPU to make a signed statement that he would sever all connections with the museum and retire to private life.

The omnipotent GPU is arresting the museum activists so they will give up the museum and transfer control of it to the state. Anyone who offers opposition is "removed" from the museum. Those who remain, including the museum's chairperson Vera Figner and Kropotkin's widow Sophia Grigorevna Kropotkin, persevere, collecting materials for the museum and working on the complete collected writings of Peter Alekseyevich. His anarchist ideas have been driven underground now by the Moscow hangmen, but have not been extinguished: ideas can't be killed with a bayonet.

— by Minsky Muzhik [Dionisy Gorbatsevich]

ADDENDUM BY THE TRANSLATOR

The Museum of the Revolution is now officially known as the State Central Museum of the Contemporary History of Russia, although the old name persists colloquially. It covers the last 150 years of the country's history, including the Fall of Communism.

As predicted, the Tolstoy Museum outlasted the Bolsheviks. There is now a whole complex of museums devoted to Leo Tolstoy under one administration, including the two in Moscow described by Gorbatsevich.

The Kropotkin Museum ceased to be financially viable in 1938 and had to be transferred to the Soviet state. By that time virtually all the real anarchists associated with the Museum had fallen victims to Stalin's terror. Only Sophia Kropotkin and the legendary narodnik revolutionary Vera Figner remained as figure-

[†] Possibly Ben Shahn.

[‡] None of these volumes was ever published.

[§] Nikolai Lebedev (1879–1934) died of natural causes shortly after being sentenced to three years of exile in Northern Russia. Aleksey Borovoi (1875–1935) died of a heart attack while serving a term of exile. Vladimir Khudolei (1890–1937) was shot. Aleksey Solonovich (1887–1937) died in prison as a result of a 11-day dry hunger strike. Ivan Kharkardin (1899–?) was sentenced in 1939 to 10 years in the camps; his subsequent fate is unknown.

heads. The Museum was shuttered in 1939, and in 1941 its holdings were transferred to the Museum of the Revolution. From there, the contents of the Kropotkin Museum were dispersed to other museums.

In 2014 a Kropotkin Museum opened in Dmitrov, 65 km north of the centre of Moscow, in the small house that was Kropotkin's last home (his widow lived there until 1942). Anarchists were involved in organizing this museum, although it seems to be operated by the local government as a tourist attraction rather than being a real research museum. The exhibits from the original museum have not been made available to the new one, and its contents come mainly from private donations. For a view of the museum and some of its exhibits, see <http://dmmuseum.ru/dom-kropotkina.html>

The original Kropotkin Museum, housed in the building where Kropotkin was born, is today the Embassy of Palestine:



But thanks to the efforts of the Russian “Society of Friends of the Museum of P. A. Kropotkin,” the old museum lives on in cyberspace, and we can take a virtual tour at <http://kropotkin.ru/>. This tour is based on the lavishly-illustrated, 84-page guide to the museum published by Nikolai Lebedev in 1928. The virtual tour is worth a look even if you can't read the Russian..

Translation and editing by Malcolm Archibald.