

Chapter 7

The verdict of history

As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular.

Oscar Wilde.

WHEREVER it was that Tolstoy acquired his information about the commercial reasons for British military operations in South Africa, and for the Russian presence in Manchuria that led to the Russo-Japanese War, he was certainly well informed. The American researcher to whom reference has already been made, namely Parker Thomas Moon, Associate Professor of International Relations in the University of Columbia, elaborated on both themes, and confirms Tolstoy's views in every respect. Here he is on the subject of the background to the Boer War:

From Rhodesia, the greatest achievement of Cecil Rhodes, we must turn our attention to the Boer communities of Transvaal and Orange River. These, as we have seen, had been recognized as self-governing republics, and had been left to pursue their own interests, until with the discovery of gold in the northern republic, Transvaal, about the year 1886, a new factor entered into the situation. The thousands of prospectors, laborers, and tradesmen, who rushed into the Transvaal gold fields in the period after 1886, soon incurred the bitter hostility of the Boer farmers, who believed the land was theirs by right of conquest and settlement, and regarded the newcomers, with some cause, as a disorderly and dangerous element. The Boers, for their part, angered the miners by excluding them from political rights, by levying heavy tariff duties on food and other supplies, by establishing dynamite and

railway monopolies which interfered with the miners' business.¹

So far it would seem that there were faults on both sides; but Moon goes on to describe the need of the mine-owners for native labour, and their belief that the latter should be forced to work for them by means of taxation or otherwise. He illustrates this by quoting the words of one of them, a man by the name of Rudd:

If under the cry of civilization we in Egypt lately mowed down ten or twenty thousand dervishes with Maxims [he was referring to the battle of Omdurman, surely it cannot be considered a hardship to compel the natives in South Africa to give three months in the year to do a little honest work.²

But the Boers interfered with the importation of native labour. There followed the unsuccessful Jameson Raid of 1895 (Ch.6), which the British cabinet effectively disowned. As time went on, however, they were more and more impelled to preparations for war for reasons that Moon goes on to explain:

... First and foremost, the British mining interests in Transvaal were dissatisfied with the Boer government because, representing the interests of the Boer farmers as opposed to British industrialists, it levied tariff duties on food, compelled British mining companies to buy dynamite and coal at exorbitant prices from monopolies, balked all attempts to establish convenient railway communications with the Cape, permitted the debauching of native laborers by saloons, and, in general, as Mr Hays Hammond so admirably explained, *reduced the profits of the mine-owners by twelve millions a year.*³

This, of course, was not the reason alleged for the break. What was alleged was the far safer one of the franchise, from which newcomers were excluded for a period of fourteen years. A five year period of qualification is generally regarded as being a justifiable one, and Kruger in the end offered seven; but Sir Alfred Milner, High Commissioner for South Africa, regarded

anything more than five as putting British citizens in the Transvaal 'in the position of helots'. He also said that 'the only effective way of protecting our subjects is to help them to cease to be our subjects'. Moon comments as follows:

... Patriotism ordinarily dictates the opposite course, the retention of subjects, and the reader may perhaps wonder why a nation should be willing to fight in order to 'protect' subjects so unpatriotic as to desire citizenship in another nation. But the paradox is easily explained if one remembers that underneath the superficial franchise question *lay the fundamental economic reason why Englishmen desired power in Transvaal, and the imperialist desire for dominant power in all South Africa.*⁴

Even the imperialist Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, was willing to consider Kruger's offer; but Milner talked him round. Then, when Kruger was willing to forego the crucial two years, Milner found other grievances, and British military preparations went ahead. Troops began to be moved to South Africa from India and the Mediterranean, while an expeditionary force was assembled in England. There was nothing left for the Boers to do but to take the initiative or submit to occupation.

In case it should be imagined that Moon's description of the foundation of Rhodesia as 'the greatest achievement of Cecil Rhodes' is meant to be taken at its face value, a brief account of how it was done is in order. The country to the north of Bechuanaland and the Transvaal was known to be fertile and well-watered, and, though within the tropics, to be high enough for European occupation. It was inhabited by the Matabeles and the Mashonas under King Lo Bengula. In order to forestall the Portuguese, Rhodes first sent a British missionary to induce the king to sign a treaty that amounted to a first option for British entrepreneurs. This done, he sent three of his most trusted lieutenants, Rudd, Maguire and Thompson, to arrange a 'mineral concession' giving them 'complete and exclusive charge over all metals and minerals situated and contained in my kingdom, principalities and dominions', together with the

right 'to exclude from my kingdom, etc., all persons seeking land, metals, minerals, or mining rights therein'. The document was signed on the 30th October 1888.

In return for all this, Lo Bengula was to receive one thousand Martini rifles, a hundred thousand rounds of ammunition and one hundred pounds a month. The negotiators also gratified his wish for a steamboat by giving him a second-hand one into the bargain. His innocent trust is illustrated by a message he sent later to Queen Victoria:

Some time ago a party of men came into my country, the principal one appearing to be a man called Rudd. They asked me for a place to dig gold and said they would give me certain things for the right to do so. I told them to bring what they would and I would show them what I would give. A document was written and presented to me for signature. *I asked what it contained and was told that in it were my words and the words of those men.* I put my hand to it. About three months afterwards I heard from other sources that I had given by that document the right to all the minerals of my country.⁵

He had given even more without knowing it. Rhodes interpreted the concession as giving him not only 'metals and minerals', but also the right to rule and exploit generally.

With this in mind, he organised a company (the British South Africa Company, and applied to the British authorities at home for a charter. The Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, at first had doubts about this; but Rhodes won him over by inviting the Duke of Abercorn to become the company's President, and the Duke of Fife to become Vice-President. He also stated that 'the conditions of the natives inhabiting the said territories will be materially improved and their civilization advanced'. The charter, signed on the 29th October 1889, gave the South Africa Company the right, for twenty-five years, to 'make treaties and laws, maintain police, construct roads, railways and harbors, develop mines and industries, make grants of land, and, in short, govern a vast *but purposely undefined area*, north of British Bechuanaland and Transvaal, and west of Portuguese

Mozambique, but with no northern boundary'.

The fraud had worked well enough, but, when the actual settlement was resisted, armed force had to be used, and Lo Bengula, like the man who admitted the camel's foot into his tent, was driven out. What had been his kingdom came to be known as Rhodesia.

Tolstoy's already quoted comments on the Russo-Japanese War, waged 'on account of dealings in some alien "leased land" (as they call it) where it seemed advantageous to some contractors to build a railway and engage on other affairs for profit' are a reference to the events that followed the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, in which European-trained Japanese troops had defeated the ill-organised Chinese. The most important provision of the resulting treaty of Shimonoseki was the session to Japan of the Liaotung Peninsula, the southern tip of Manchuria, commanding the entry to the Gulf of Chih-li and Peking.

This intrusion on their own 'spheres of influence' in China was more than the authorities of Russia, Germany and France could stand; so they sent a joint note, with which the Japanese complied, 'advising' that Japan should refrain from annexing any part of the Chinese mainland. It must not be imagined that the three States acted as they did out of any spirit whatsoever of altruistic chivalry: indeed, they expected and obtained compensation, of which the Russian share was as follows.

The Chinese statesman Li Hung Chang was persuaded the following year, after a visit to Russia, to authorise a 'Russo-Chinese Bank', financed largely with French capital, with the task of helping the Chinese to pay their war indemnity to Japan, and, more important from the Russian point of view, *that of acquiring concessions for the construction of railways and telegraphs*. In the September of the same year, it obtained such a concession, and a very important one. A 'Chinese Eastern Railway' was to connect the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway with the terminus of Vladisvostok. Instead of going by a circuitous route through Russian territory, it would go straight across the Manchurian provinces of China. The right of way was to be free; and railway property and receipts were to be

exempt from taxation. The company's bonds were to be *guaranteed by the Russian State*.

This last clause in the agreement emphasised that the venture was not a purely business one. In the event of war, the railway would provide for more expeditious troop movements; and, even in peacetime, Russian military units, posted along the line to guard it from attack, would ensure Russian domination of Manchuria. As a matter of course, possession of the railway would carry with it a near monopoly of the commerce of central and northern Manchuria; but, in addition, the company was to have mining rights along the route. The next move was to obtain a concession for a southern extension of the line, with attendant mining rights, as far as the ice-free harbour of Port Arthur; but the war put an end to these aspirations to control southern as well as northern Manchuria.

The example we have quoted from Tolstoy of state-instigated violence against the home population is insignificant compared, with what was to happen in 1905.⁶ During the firing of a salute, a shot fell close to the Tsar Nicholas II, whereupon he decided to leave Moscow. Three days after this, a huge deputation of strikers and their families, led by a certain Father Gapon, marched to the Winter Palace. Although the crowd was unarmed, the troops were ordered to open fire; and many lives were lost. This was the signal for a peasant uprising throughout the country, in which manor-houses were attacked, police officers were assassinated, and the Grand Duke Serge, uncle of the Tsar, was murdered in Moscow. It was then at last realised at Court that the time had come for some concessions to be made. Reforms were announced affecting dissenters, Jews and the subject peoples; and the censorship of the press was allowed to lapse. Finally, a consultative Duma, or parliament, was established, though chosen by indirect election. Pobedonostsev, Minister to the Holy Synod, who had been the Tsar's tutor, and had influenced him greatly in the direction of coercion rather than conciliation, was dismissed. As the next chapter will show, a British critic of Tolstoy's political ideas does not hesitate to claim that it was this policy of coercion that kept the revolution at bay for another twelve years; but a more

liberal view would be that it was the reforms, limited though they were.

This is not the place to give more than a sample of the imperialist activities that so disturbed Tolstoy; but probably the most comprehensive account of those that occurred since about 1875 is to be found in Moon's book.¹ They conform to the same pattern as the ones here described. After a careful perusal of them, it is hard to see how any fair-minded reader could do other than pronounce Tolstoy right in his conclusions, however contrary they may be to history as commonly taught in schools..

He was not alone in his opinions. At about the same period, Anatole France was ironically describing the origin of private property in land in his colony of penguins turned into human beings. A giant penguin has clubbed a little one to death, saying, 'Your field belongs to me!' The holy man Maël, cause of the transformation, calls this act murder and robbery, but is reproved as follows by the monk Bulloch:

'Prenez garde, mon père', dit Bulloch avec douceur, 'que ce que vous appelez le meurtre et le vol est en effet la guerre et la conquête, fondements sacrés des empires et sources de toutes les vertus et de toutes les grandeurs humaines'.⁷

Take care, Father', said Bulloch gently, 'lest what you call murder and robbery are not in reality war and conquest, the sacred foundations of empires, and the sources of all human virtue and greatness.

Now that the end of the twentieth century is not far off, and so much has happened to justify these views of Tolstoy, one is disappointed to come across evidence that there are still people who believe that actions condemned as criminal in private individuals belong to a different category when performed by the State. Here, for example, is an extract from the guide to Holy Trinity Church, Blythburgh, Suffolk :

The church plate was handed over to John Hopton by King Henry VIII when he dissolved the Priory. ... In Tudor times new plate

was purchased. That too was lost, *this time by theft*. (Author's italics).