

Tolstoy's Message for Our Times

By FRANCIS NEILSON

I

A FEW YEARS before Tolstoy passed away, he wrote three pamphlets which he addressed to the working people.¹ He told them that he realized there was little time left for him to live and that he wished to give them his thoughts upon the great problems they had to face every day of their lives.

Perhaps no one in Russia at that period was so well equipped for discussing with laboring men the complexities of the system under which they suffered. He himself for many years had devoted much time to hard work upon his estate. Although he was a landed proprietor, he was not satisfied to enjoy his portion of the wealth that was produced without sharing in the exertion of tilling and harvesting. Many of the people who visited Yásnaya Polyána, where he lived, brought back stories to England and America of his versatility in doing various chores for himself. He stood not aloof from the people who worked about him. Indeed, he wished to consider himself one of them and understand directly what was in their minds and how they might be helped to better their condition. From these fruitful experiences came many pamphlets that were soon translated into different languages and gained world-wide circulation.

The problems with which he dealt in these works were identical in their essentials with those which confront us today. In principle they are no different; they vary only in degree, a thousand times aggravated by the two world wars that have scourged mankind since Tolstoy passed away. And now,

¹ "The Slavery of Our Time" (1900), "What is Religion?" (1902), "To the Working People" (1902), all to be found in "The Complete Works of Count Tolstoy," trans. from the Russian by Leo Wiener, London, J. M. Dent & Co., 1905, Vol. XXIV, pp. 1-171.

when there seems to be a revival of interest in him, it might be useful to put forward the suggestion that some enterprising publisher should gather these pamphlets together and issue them at a price working men could afford to pay for them. There is a new biography² as well as a volume of his short stories³ on the booksellers' counters. These no doubt will be read by a large audience, particularly the short stories, for there is nothing quite like "The Cossacks" and "The Death of Ivan Ilyitch."

However, the essays on labor problems and religion are necessary because they are not only instructive—educative in the best sense of the term—but they direct the reader's attention to the basic defects in the system that has brought distress upon mankind.

In England before the first World War the circulation of these separate pamphlets must have been very large indeed. One—"A Great Iniquity"⁴—which dealt with basic economic conditions, was published in its entirety by the newspaper, *The Times* of London. It created a sensation, and when, afterwards, it was circulated as a pamphlet, it was read by tens of thousands of working men. For years it was referred to in the labor papers and often quoted on the political platforms. The first World War put an end to the generation that knew these messages to the producers of wealth.

II

THE BROTHERHOOD MOVEMENT in England might have become the force that Tolstoy looked for to shape reforms that would endure. But that great movement, made up chiefly of young men of military age, suffered irreparable loss in the

² "Leo Tolstoy" by Ernest J. Simmons, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1946.

³ Selected and edited by Philip Rahv, trans. by Aylmer Maude, Chicago, Dial Press, 1946.

⁴ This has been published in many forms and by many different groups. However, it is now available at the Henry George Foundation of Great Britain, 34 Knightrider Street, London, E. C. 4. This edition was printed in 1937 (written in 1905), and translated by V. Tchertkoef and I. F. Mayo.

world conflict of 1914–18, and there has been nothing else since to take its place. Indeed, the trend of political thought for the past thirty years has been in quite the other direction—toward Socialism and Communism.

The first World War not only destroyed the hopes of Radical reformers, but it sowed the ground for the rise of Socialist and Fascist dictators. The anti-bureaucratic hopes of Tolstoy and the Radical reformers were crushed under a load of misery that could not produce anything but Hitlers, Mussolinis and Stalins. And in this country, although we escaped dictatorship in name, time has revealed that it is present and active in many forms, both in government departments and in labor unions. We have our Hitlers and our Mussolinis at work, and if Tolstoy were here to view the scene, he would condemn the practices that are followed under what used to be the fair name of trade unionism. He would show quite clearly that there can be a slavery just as great under a labor leader as there can be under employers in a system of capitalism.

What would he think of the scenes enacted in and about Milwaukee; of the great disturbances in and near Detroit; of the shameful riots that took place along the shores of Lake Michigan near Chicago? And most of these disorders were countenanced tacitly by the local authorities and, in some cases, by the police. Surely Tolstoy would have seen only a difference in degree between these conditions and those of the dictators in Europe. Are we not now paying dearly for the thoughtless escapades the labor unions indulged in ten or twelve years ago?

It was Tolstoy's singular ability to point straight at the heart of the matter and in simple, clear language expose the defects he saw and understood. He could produce, in a few sentences, a story illustrating his point so deftly that anyone

could grasp it. And this he does on page after page in these pamphlets.

III

IN "THE SLAVERY OF OUR TIME," he starts out with a dialogue between himself and a weigher serving on the railroad. In this Tolstoy learns about the hours the men have to work and the pay they receive. He then applies the information to an economic and a social test which reveals a condition of industrial slavery acquiesced in by both laborers and employers. In the analysis that follows, he finds that the two principal reasons for this state of affairs are the lack of land and the taxes imposed upon wealth. No academic economist of repute during the nineteenth century ever went so deeply into these unsavory problems as Tolstoy did. He shows that taxes have never been imposed by common consent, and at the same time he infers that they are levied as tribute by the few who have the political power to collect them. He also proves that the so-called iron law of labor wages is only the consequence of human enactments concerning taxes and land; taxes, moreover, that fall upon the necessities of life. All these penalties thrust upon labor—the producers of wealth—affect the distribution of it, reduce its purchasing power, and enrich those who withhold the passive factor—land—from use, and aid in making a vested interest of every bureaucratic department.

Where is the economist in our universities who would hold that the slavery of our time is due to three particular kinds of enactments: those affecting land, those concerned with taxes, and those which are in the nature of privileges extended to labor leaders? Tolstoy sees that the fundamental cause of wage slavery is legislative impositions. Teachers in the departments of economics of our colleges and universities would do well to read in "The Slavery of Our Time" the section upon "Enactments." No one else has dealt with this matter

with such discernment and force. Indeed, it is impossible to ignore Tolstoy's conclusion that most of our troubles arise from parliamentary decrees.

When the grand old man approaches the question of how a change is to be made, it may come as a great surprise, after all our years of strife, to learn that he is opposed to violence in every shape and form. It is a peaceful revolution that he proposes as the only effective means of making men free. He calls upon the workers to stop participating in the crimes that governments commit. A form of passive resistance, in many respects, it is not unlike the constitutional weapon of the people—redress of grievance before supply. It amounts to about the same thing in the end. Indeed, it conveys the notion Mirabeau had in mind when he warned the authorities of what would happen if the workers of France should fold their arms. Unfortunately Mirabeau did not say that it was absolutely necessary for the workers to know *why* they folded their arms.

The mere matter of strike, ceasing to work, will only cause further damage. The essential thing is that the oppressed should know what is really wrong and how to set it right justly. And this calls for an educated, well-informed proletariat, such as was dreamed of by their best friends, who worked for their enlightenment during the last century when it was imagined that the spread of education would be the true means of lifting the laboring classes out of the industrial sloughs of despond.

IV

TWO YEARS after he wrote "The Slavery of Our Time," Tolstoy addressed "To the Working People" of Russia, and to the world, one of the most remarkable essays upon their condition that was ever given to them. This is not only a thorough examination of socialistic nostrums but it is at the same time an extraordinary corroboration of the findings of

Henry George. Indeed, it may be said that the most devoted and most effective pupil that George had was Leo Tolstoy. In this pamphlet Tolstoy puts the discussion of economic conditions upon a very high plane and, as the Prophet of San Francisco did in his work, Tolstoy emphasizes the deeply religious nature of the change that he desires to be brought about.

The earnestness and sincerity that shine forth in these essays give them a high moral value—one that cannot be found in any other political or economic work. It may be said that the analysis went so deep and was set forth with such learning that neither Conservative nor Socialist attempted to refute the facts and conclusions set forth in them. At a famous debate in London, a Socialist chairman of the meeting, in his opening remarks, said that he hoped the works of Tolstoy would not be referred to because Socialists ignored them. This happened at the time when so many people were reading "A Great Iniquity." Perhaps we have reached the stage when the re-publication of these essays might serve a great purpose, that is, to open up these questions again for discussion and promote debate among the contending factions in this country.

V

AFTER WORLD WAR I the writer met on the Riviera many Russian refugees. They had been displaced by the Revolution of 1917. Among them were members of the royal family, sons of grand dukes, and a very interesting eastern aristocrat, Prince Wolvonsky. He had known Tolstoy and remarked that the writer was one of the most courageous men he had ever met. He also said that Tolstoy's life was so nearly a counterpart of his teaching that everyone had to respect him, although the doctrines that he gave to the working classes were diametrically opposed to government policy.

To think of this man addressing the people of Russia in

these pamphlets, without fear of the consequences, is in the nature of a lesson to our timorous ones who seem to be imbued with excellent ideas but dare not express them in public. How strange it is that a Tolstoy should appear in Russia at that time and we have no one in this country to take a lead. It cannot be that we are devoid of the type of man who is informed and capable of presenting his ideas clearly to an audience. There must be hundreds of such people. But what is it that is holding them back? The hour cries for a man of courage, who has faith in the real American tradition. Is it fear of the authorities that deprives us of his presence? Had fear resided in the heart of Tolstoy, we should never have had the gift of these invaluable essays.

It is necessary for us to think deeply about the problems that are gathering thickly. The war between contending armies in the field has long since ended. The peacemakers have been at work here and in Europe for many months and the skeptical believe we are further than ever from the days of peace. Meanwhile, in all the separate countries, save Russia (and we except this because we really do not know what is taking place there), there are internal conflicts in politics, in industry, and in society. Our condition in a world of turmoil is parlous in the extreme.

One of the great troubles is that men are looking to politicians to do something to ease the pressure and to bring about what is called "prosperity." They do not realize that they have been defeated by the conditions their enactments have produced. Tolstoy would say that nothing is to be expected from that source and that action can only be taken by the individual himself. Men must rely upon themselves if they desire to bring about a better state of affairs. Therefore, this means that man must once again consider himself an individual if he, in association with his fellows (who also realize that they are individuals) is to act in communion for the set

purpose of initiating reform. Action should be taken with a long view ahead. No merely temporary political action will answer the purpose in this crisis. We should ask ourselves: what will our position be in the years to come? Serious people are wondering what life will be like when the post-war strife of the nations has ceased and the masses face the welter of chaos left behind by the wrack of World War II. Those of us who are students know as well as the historians can teach us what has happened after plagues, such as the Black Death, and after the scourge of the sword, such as the Thirty Years' War. But unfortunately there is no disposition to take to heart these great lessons of change and reversion or to learn from them the moral of flouting the laws of nature.

We are so deeply imbued with the ideas of the positivists and other progressives of our age that, after a short setback, we feel certain things will shape themselves in the way of mechanical progress again and bear us on to new goals of well-being. So firmly fixed in the minds of the people is this idea of material progress that it is impossible to shake it or to cast doubt upon the value of all those achievements that have raised what we call the standard of living. Such an idea as beginning again—that is, to return to the simpler vocations of life—is so foreign to the modern mind that, when it is mentioned, people shudder.

We have become so inured to our so-called comfort with all the complexities it brings to our souls, that we believe the very thought of casting it off as an encumbrance is an act of cowardice. And, yet, there were two periods during the past one hundred years when prophets pointed to the warning signs and urged their fellows to give thought for the morrow and prepare for a more natural mode of existence, one in which we would learn to be satisfied with the simple things

of life; to produce sufficient to maintain ourselves and have leisure to enjoy hours of reflection.

VI

IT WAS FOUND by some outstanding critics of our civilization that man was losing his sense of the fitness of things because he was divorced from the soil and that his desertion from natural surroundings was largely the cause of the degeneration into which he had sunk. Many pointed out the extraordinary changes that had taken place in man's character as he became a victim of the life in the towns and the cities. He became, so it was charged, the creature of his political masters and the press. He no longer thought for himself. He was a slave of the machine to which he was attached day by day, and the machine made an automaton of him. And, yet, he was imbued in a dumb way with the feeling of his progenitors, and the old motive of mankind still stirred in him: to satisfy his desires and needs with the least exertion. No matter for how many generations he had been city bred, he was still a land animal and could not subsist without the earth from which he drew his sustenance—all food, fuel, clothing, and shelter. It is strange he did not know it. He had lost all sense of his dependence upon the primary products of the earth. Nothing so much as this revealed the distance that he had traveled from his source. To him agriculture was but a name.

When Tolstoy wrote the pamphlet "What Is To Be Done?"⁵ it came to the public notice as a warning that it was time for people to reflect. No great war had taken place in Europe since the continent had been ravaged by Napoleon; and the conflicts in the Crimea, Prussia against Austria, and the Franco-German War gave no one an idea of the probability

⁵ In "The Complete Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi" (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1899). This work has also been translated as "What Shall We Do Then?" and was written between 1884-86.

of such a horror as that which afflicted Europe from 1914 to 1918. After every war, since Waterloo, the people did not take long to settle down again into a routine of life similar to that in which they had lived before they were disturbed.

However, it was all very different after the Treaty of Versailles. The slaughter had been so great that Europe suffered the loss of a generation of young men. In the larger countries on the continent there were left only cripples and defectives between the ages of 16 and 40. Dynastic and political changes of a revolutionary character had taken place in three of the most important countries of Europe. The dole was given to the workers of Great Britain to save her from revolution. Communism and Fascism spread their tentacles in all directions, and few nations escaped these astounding upheavals. For the first time in a hundred years the people of Europe did not settle down again into their old routine of existence. The war had left its scars not only on men and women and their material effects; it had also left its wounds upon their minds. They were too distraught by their sufferings to reason how they could adapt themselves to the new conditions. But to the keen observer it was evident at all times that the Treaty of Versailles contained the germs of another world catastrophe.

So long as our political mentors have their minds riveted upon a peace that will take up the line of material progress where it was broken six years ago, there will be no chance for reconstruction of any kind. For the end of World War II has multiplied a thousand times the chaos and its attendant difficulties which afflicted the people thirty years ago. Indeed, in the matter of what are called ideologies, the mass of the workers in all the lands is shifting from the old political systems to Socialism of one kind or another.

VII

FEW MEN have sufficient economic intelligence to take the line followed by Tolstoy and to offer the dissatisfied an alternative—one which might be the saving of posterity. Forty years ago when people talked about the simple life and its advocates, most of us smiled tolerantly and imagined it was a good idea for some. Those of us who were fairly comfortable thought it would be a pity to disturb the even tenor of our way but that there were elements in society which might profit by the simpler life and, at the same time, we would be rid of troublesome thoughts about how the poor managed to get enough food and lodging.

Today, however, the thinking person has forced upon him the glaring fact that the strain of war together with the huge debt incurred cannot be borne by the system we have enjoyed. Therefore, there are those who seek an alternative. Many look to the past for guidance. Strangely enough, they find in Europe's tragic history many references to the simple life—the one pursued by the practical mystic. They clutch at its story as a drowning mariner would at a spar. They see in it a return to mother earth as the source of all things which provide bounteously for the well-being of man, if he will only use it to supply his desires and needs.

It is time for our political mentors to discover what people are thinking. Questions are now discussed which were taboo a year ago. The interventionist of yesterday is almost an isolationist today. Even those who, a year ago, pinned their faith upon Russia as an emancipating angel sent by Providence to rid the earth of Hitlers and Mussolinis are now casting doubt as to the intentions of Stalin. These are the people who really believed for nearly four years that the Atlantic Charter was the Bill of Rights for the nations of the world. Our political masters should understand that they have made

the people think. Perhaps this is the only achievement with which they will be credited when the awful cost is reckoned. As it was after the first World War, so it is after the second. That must never occur again! But today it is not sufficient for the doubting to utter this estimable expression. The people who are seriously concerned want something more than a declaration, and they are pondering how it is possible to prevent its happening again.

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