

Chapter 6

Violent life of the State

Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.
Mao Tse-tung.

HENRI TROYAT, a Russian by birth and a Frenchman by adoption, has given us a vivid description of what must have been a turning-point in Tolstoy's life, when, during a visit to Paris in 1857, seeking as ever for material to transmute into literature, he went to watch a public execution.

Tolstoy was already familiar with death in many forms. For two and a half years up to the end of 1853, first as a civilian observer, then as a soldier, he had been present at what would later be described as a 'mopping-up operation' still in progress in the old kingdom of Georgia after its annexation by the Tsar Alexander I in 1801. Then, on the outbreak of war with Turkey in 1853, occasioned by the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and Russian ambitions in the Balkans, he was present, first at the siege of Silistra, then, when this was raised in 1854, on the invasion of the Crimea by British and French armies, at the far more horrendous one of Sevastopol, lasting until 1856. It was during this latter conflict that his initially favourable attitude to war underwent some change.¹

Despite all this, he was profoundly shocked by the execution. The atrocities he had seen committed during the war in moments of passion were far outdone by this cool, refined and deliberate ending of a life. That very same day, he wrote to his friend Vasily P. Botkin:

The truth is that the State is a plot, designed not only to exploit but also to corrupt its citizens. For me, the laws laid down by politics are sordid lies ... I shall never enter the service of any government anywhere.²

Public executions, or indeed any executions at all, may be described with some justification as a corrupting influence; and Tolstoy, in using the word 'exploit', made a fair assessment of the activities pursued by the Russian and other ruling classes over the centuries. Nevertheless, he was to relax this resolution somewhat in 1861, when he accepted an appointment as 'arbiter of the peace' to settle disputes between serfs and landowners when the former ceased to be the private property of the latter. All the same, he did so with the excellent motive of ensuring that the serfs in his district were not cheated even of the meagre entitlement to land that the new law of emancipation allowed them. He thereby also ensured his personal unpopularity with his fellow-landlords, who made numerous complaints against him, and brought about his dismissal on the ground of 'ill-health'.

The anarchic sentiment that had prompted his letter to Botkin was to stay with him for the rest of his life, and to permeate everything that he wrote, particularly after his crisis of 1879. It seemed to him then that all his previous life had been wasted; and probably all that saved him from suicide was the working out of his personal religious convictions.

The South African War (1899-1902) provided both him and Aylmer Maude with material for intensive thought about the interests behind the power of the State. The discovery of gold in the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State had brought about an influx of British prospectors, who, when they became established, resented the taxes they had to pay, and demanded rights of citizenship that the Boers were slow to concede. That their ultimate intention was to run the countries in their own interests instead of those of the farmers was made plain by the Jameson Raid of 1895, an attempt to seize the Transvaal by a *coup de main*. When, after this, the British began to send troops to defend what they considered to be their commercial interests, the Boer republics decided on what would now be called a 'pre-emptive strike', and declared war on the 12th October 1899.

Maude quotes Tolstoy as having written to a Russian correspondent that he could not accept the prevailing view that

all the blame for what followed could be attributed to one side or the other, but that the underlying causes of the conflict needed to be examined. He then went on:

These causes, both in this Transvaal war and in all recent wars, are quite apparent to every man who does not shut his eyes. The causes are three: First, the unequal distribution of property, i.e. the robbing of some men by others; secondly, the existence of a military class, i.e. of people educated and fore-appointed to murder; and thirdly, the false, and for the most part consciously misleading religious teaching in which the young are compulsorily educated.³

He deplored the tendency to put all the responsibility on 'Chamberlains and Wilhelms', who are 'but the blind tools of forces lying far beyond them', and proceeded to define these forces:

As long as we make use of privileged wealth while the mass of the people are crushed by toil, there will always be wars for markets and for gold-mines, etc., which we need to maintain privileged wealth.

This analysis not only conforms to what we have already observed, but also was to receive striking confirmation after the First World War by an American researcher⁴ who traced imperialism, and by inference imperialist wars, back to surplus manufactures and surplus capital requiring sale and investment abroad. But, as he would probably have agreed, if the home population had been receiving in wages the equivalent of their input of labour, no such surpluses would have existed. Poverty therefore causes war, which in turn, rather more obviously, causes more poverty.

Tolstoy's condemnation then continues to include with members of the armed forces, the instruments of war, the clergy who condone it. Tolstoy's use of the pronoun 'we' emphasizes his view that a better state of affairs will come about only when everybody understands the part that he or she plays

in maintaining the existing one, if only by acquiescing in it.

Five years after the start of the South African War, another one nearer home prompted him to further protests, this time against the rulers of his own country. Russian business organisations had found it expedient to establish themselves in Manchuria and Korea, and had exerted pressure on the authorities to refuse to enter into negotiations with the Japanese for the purpose of setting up separate spheres of influence in these countries. Without declaring war, the Japanese attacked Port Arthur and rapidly defeated the Russians, by land at Mukden and by sea at Tsushima. Peace was re-established by the Treaty of Portsmouth (U.S.A.) in the following year, 1905.

Tolstoy's reaction was immediate. What, he demanded, had the material motives behind this war to do with the great majority of the Russian people?

If there is a God, He will not ask me when I die (which may happen at any moment) whether I retained Chinnampo *with its timber stores*, or Port Arthur, or even that conglomeration which is called the Russian Empire, which he did not entrust to my care.⁵

Then again:

For other people's land, to which the Russians have no right, *which has been stolen from its legitimate owners* and which in reality the Russians do not need – as well as *for certain shady dealings undertaken by speculators who wished to make money out of other people's forests* – enormous sums are spent, that is, a great part of the labour of the whole Russian people, while future generations of that people are being bound by debts, its best workmen withdrawn from labour, *and scores of thousands of its sons doomed to death.*⁶

And for good measure:

And they know that the war is carried on not for anything at all necessary for the Russian people, but 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.*⁷

The indictment was a clear one. Firstly, there was robbery, both by support of the unequal distribution of property, and by taxation and public loans. Taxation takes from working people now alive a high proportion of the results of their labour, while the interest on public loans is a burden, not only on the present generation of workers, but also on generations yet to come. Secondly, there was the murder of thousands of young men sent to kill and be killed in a cause that did not concern them. But war is not the only reason for permanent armies.

In 1893, six years before the beginning of these events, Tolstoy had written at length⁸ on the use of armed forces, not against those of a foreign country, but domestically, for the same purpose of maintaining 'privileged wealth'. In the late summer of 1892, he had been travelling by rail on a mission of famine relief to the Tula and Ryazan provinces, when he had encountered a special train carrying a punitive expedition to one of the estates where the peasants were starving. The troops were commanded by the provincial governor, and were armed, not only with rifles and ammunition, but also with rods for the infliction of floggings.

This was what had happened. The peasants had been tending a wood on land that they held in common with the landowner. They therefore considered the wood to be theirs, either wholly or in part; but the landowner assumed that it was his, and began to have the trees cut down. The peasants thereupon lodged a formal complaint with the courts. Both the governor and the public prosecutor assured Tolstoy that the peasants were in the right; but, despite this, the judge who first heard the case decided in favour of the landowner. All the higher courts, including the Senate, confirmed this decision; so the landowner ordered the felling of trees to be resumed. The peasants, however, unable to accept that the law could be manipulated in this unjust manner, refused to submit, and drove away the men who had been sent to carry out the work. When the matter was

reported to the authorities at Petersburg, they ordered the governor to see that the decision of the courts was obeyed. It was the troops sent for this purpose that Tolstoy happened to meet.

He was well aware of the standard procedure on these occasions: it had recently been used at Orel. If the peasants were to persist in their resistance, and ignore a warning volley fired over their heads, they would be fired upon in earnest until they dispersed. Any of those remaining alive who had been seen to resort to violence themselves would be tried by a special military tribunal and hanged. If, on the other hand, the peasants were to disperse peacefully, a number of them would be designated, without any form of trial, as 'ringleaders', and flogged with rods on their bare backs. Seventy strokes had been the number awarded at Orel; but a man would probably be unconscious after fifty.

How, Tolstoy then proceeded to wonder, could men whom he knew in ordinary life to be individually honest and kindly assume the responsibility for, or carry out, acts of such monstrous cruelty? These are the answers that he proposed, in terms that still ring true today:

Those in authority who have initiated and abetted and directed the affair will say that they act as they do because such things are necessary for the maintenance of the existing order and the maintenance of the existing order is necessary for the welfare of the country, for humanity, and for the possibility of social existence and human progress.

Men of the lower orders – the peasants and soldiers who have to execute this violence with their own hands – will say that they do so because it is ordered by the higher authorities and higher authorities know what they are doing. And it appears to them an indubitable truth that the right people constitute authority, and that they know what they are doing. If they admit the possibility of mistakes or errors they do so only in regard to officials of lower rank. The highest power, on whom everything depends, seems to them unquestionably infallible.

In Tula, in the late summer of 1892, however, events took a different turn from the ones at Orel. Some of the bystanders at the railway station, including, one may well imagine, Tolstoy himself, together with some of the prospective participants in the affair, expressed in no uncertain terms their indignation at the action that was contemplated; and the soldiers in the end did no more than finish cutting down the wood. The robbery was consummated, but neither the murder nor the torture. This achievement of a peaceful solution to a particular incident was a sample of Tolstoy's idea of a general solution to the whole human predicament.

The State, he said, must go – not just the Russian State, but all States. They may have been useful once for protecting people from violence; but, by the end of the nineteenth century, they were initiating more violence than they prevented. Had he lived another four years, and seen the events of 1914, he would certainly have been confirmed in this opinion.

The method by which they should be induced to go was another matter. Further violence was out of the question; for a new order so set up would be obliged to maintain itself in precisely the same manner as the old. In any case, the use of violence was contrary to Christ's fourth commandment. Here Tolstoy incurred the scorn of Lenin,⁹ who contrasted the critic of 'capitalist exploitation', 'government outrages' and the simultaneous spread of great wealth and great poverty with the 'crackpot' preacher of 'resist not evil'.

History was to prove Tolstoy right and Lenin wrong. Tolstoy was right in the sense that violence was not the answer; but only the future will tell whether his own idea will ever work. It coincides with one proposed in mid-16th century by a Frenchman, Etienne de la Boétie, who wrote:

Ce sont les peuples mêmes qui se laissent ou plutôt se font gourmander, puisqu'en cessant de servir ils en seraient quittes. C'est le peuple qui s'asservit, qui se coupe la gorge: qui, ayant le choix d'être sujet ou d'être libre, quitte sa franchise et prend le joug: qui consent à son mal ou plutôt le pourchasse.¹⁰

It is the peoples themselves who allow themselves to be, or rather have themselves, gobbled up; for, in ceasing to serve, they would be rid of it all. It is the people who enslave themselves, who cut their own throats: who, having the choice to be subject or to be free, abandon their freedom and take up the yoke: who consent to their own misfortune or rather chase after it.

Tolstoy was later¹¹ to quote la Boétie at length; but the theory had been implicit in his own thought for some time. Deprived of its soldiers, police, lawyers, judges, gaolers and civil servants, no State could function. All that was necessary was for enough people to make up their minds as he himself had done in 1857:

I shall never enter the service of any government anywhere.

Tolstoy's general sympathy for the mass of mankind would, probably have been enough on its own to account for his attitude to rulers; but it is also likely that an incident that occurred to him personally in July 1862 gave some extra vivacity to his expression of it.¹²

A school that he had started on his own for the benefit of peasants' children had become popular enough for him to set up more and enlist the help of a few students, one of whom was under police surveillance for having circulated revolutionary tracts. Tolstoy himself had been suspect ever since his period of office as 'arbiter of the peace', during which, in the opinion of the authorities, he had shown too much favour to the peasants.

A body of armed police, therefore, taking advantage of his absence on a cure by the banks of the River Karalyk, descended in force on his home, surrounded it to forestall escapes, and carried out a comprehensive search. They ran through his manuscripts, read his private diary and letters, making a note of the names of his correspondents, broke locks, and tore off curtain linings. Outside, they prised up flagstones and dragged the ponds. Finding nothing, because his aunt and sister had managed to hide some material that would have got him into trouble, they extended the search to the schools, seized the

children's notebooks and arrested the student helpers. Still they found nothing. It must have been immediately obvious to the police that the raid had been a mistake; and they probably regretted it still more when Tolstoy, in his wrath, used the influence of a distant relative at court to extract half an apology from the governor of Tula. This experience, exacerbated by subsequent conflicts with the censor, was one that Tolstoy was not likely to forget.

Another, which he certainly remembered for the rest of his life, with both detestation for the authorities responsible and remorse for his own part in it, was the trial and execution in 1866 of a private soldier called Vasili Shabunin. It has provided sufficient material for a whole book.¹³ Tolstoy was called upon by two military acquaintances to defend this soldier, who stood accused of the military crime of striking an officer. He agreed to do so, but had no means of knowing that a falsified version of the events leading up to the incident was going to be presented at the trial. In fact, the officer, Captain Yasevich, had taken a report that Shabunin had copied for him, crumpled it and thrown it in his face. Had the trial proceeded on this basis, the punishment would probably have been exile to Siberia; but reasons of state, quite unconnected with this particular affair, were behind the official intention to take stronger measures.

Earlier in the same year, an attempt had been made to assassinate the Tsar Alexander II, who forthwith began to imagine a widespread conspiracy against him. Perhaps there was; but there was no reason for anybody to believe that Shabunin had any part in it. Nevertheless, it was expedient that he should die as an example; so a falsified account of his crime was composed, according to which the only provocation he had suffered was a reprimand for being late on parade. Tolstoy, in his speech for the defence, referred to the true provocation; but the court ignored what he said. His subsequent petition to the Tsar was delayed, on the feeble ground of his failure to quote the number of the regiment, until after the execution by firing squad had been carried out.

Tolstoy's plea had been one of diminished responsibility owing to mental weakness and the influence of alcohol; and, in

later life, he reproached himself for having based it on man-made laws and regulations instead of on eternal principles of right and wrong. He could hardly have imagined that such an approach to the problem would have had any more immediate success than the one he in fact adopted. Shabunin was lost in any case; but so was an opportunity to publicise the cruel injustices inherent in state proceedings.