

Appendix 1

To the Emperor Nicholas II. Gaspra, 28 January 1902.

Dear Brother,

I consider this form of address to be most appropriate because I address you in this letter not so much as a tsar but as a man – a brother – and furthermore because I am writing to you as it were from the next world, since I expect to die very soon.

I did not want to die without telling you what I think of your present activity, of what it could be, of what great good it could bring to millions of people and to yourself, and of what great evil it can bring to those people and yourself if it continues in the same direction in which it is now going.

A third of Russia is in a state of emergency, i.e. is outside the law. The army of police – open and secret – is constantly growing. Over and above the hundreds of thousands of criminals, the prisons, places of exile, and labour camps are overflowing with political prisoners, to whom workers are now being added as well. The censorship has descended to nonsensical prohibitions, which it never descended to in the worst period of the '40s. Religious persecutions were never so frequent and cruel as they are now, and they are becoming more and more cruel and frequent. Armed forces are concentrated everywhere in the cities and industrial centres and are sent out against the people with live cartridges. In many places there has already been bloodshed between brothers, and further and more cruel bloodshed is imminent everywhere and will inevitably follow.

And as a result of all this intense and cruel activity on the part of the government, the people who work on the land – those 100 million people on whom the power of Russia is based – despite the excessive growth of the state budget or, more likely, because of this growth, become more impoverished every year, so that famine has become a normal occurrence. And general discontent with the government among all classes and a hostile attitude towards it has become just as normal an occurrence.

There is one cause of all this and it is manifestly evident: namely that your aides assure you that by halting any movement of life among the people they are thereby assuring the well-being of the people and your own peace and security. But one can far more easily halt a river's flow than halt mankind's continual progress forward as ordained by God. It is understandable that the people to whom the present order of things is advantageous and who in the depth of their souls say 'aprks nous le daluge', can and must assure you of this; but it is amazing that you, a free man not lacking for anything, and a reasonable and good man, can believe them and follow their terrible advice to do or allow to be done so much evil for the sake of such an impracticable purpose as halting the eternal movement of mankind from evil to goodness, from darkness to light.

Surely you cannot fail to know that as long as we have been aware of human life, the forms of this life, economic and social as well as religious and political, have constantly changed, progressing from harsh, cruel and unreasonable forms to more gentle, humane and reasonable ones.

Your advisers tell you that this is not true, that just as Orthodoxy and autocracy were once natural to the Russian people, so they are natural to them now and will be natural to them to the end of time, and that therefore for the good of the Russian people it is necessary at all costs to maintain these two interconnected forms: religious belief and the political system. But this is really a double falsehood. Firstly, it is quite impossible to say that Orthodoxy, which was once natural to the Russian people, is natural to them now. You can see from the reports of the Over-Procurator of the Synod that the most spiritually developed of the people, despite all the disadvantages and dangers which they are subject to in renouncing Orthodoxy, are going over in greater and greater numbers to the so-called sects. Secondly, if it is true that Orthodoxy is natural to the people, then there is no reason to maintain this form of faith so forcibly and to persecute those who reject it with such cruelty.

As for autocracy – then similarly if it was natural to the Russian people when that people still believed that the tsar was an infallible God on earth and that he governed the people by himself, it is far from natural to them now that everyone knows, or as soon as they acquire a bit of education find out, that firstly, a good tsar is only 'un heureux hasard' and that tsars can be and have been monsters and idiots, like Ivan IV or Paul, and secondly, that however good a tsar may be, he simply cannot govern 130 million people by himself, and the people are

governed by the tsar's closest advisers, who are more concerned about their own position than about the good of the people. You will say: a tsar can select as his aides people who are disinterested and good. Unfortunately a tsar cannot do this because he knows only a few dozen people who are close to him by accident or as a result of various intrigues, and who diligently fend away from him all those who might replace them. So the tsar does not choose from among those thousands of vital, energetic, genuinely enlightened, honest people who have the social cause at heart, but only from among those about whom Beaumarchais said: 'médiocre et rampant et on parvient à tout'⁽¹⁾. And if many Russian people are prepared to obey the tsar, they cannot without a feeling of outrage obey people of their own circle whom they despise and who so often govern the people in the name of the tsar.

You have probably been deceived about the people's love for autocracy and its representative, the tsar, by the fact that everywhere in Moscow and in other cities where you appear, crowds of people run after you with shouts of 'Hurrah!' Don't believe that this is an expression of devotion to you – they are crowds of inquisitive people who would run just the same after any unusual spectacle. Often these, people whom you take to be expressing their love for you are nothing more than a crowd gathered together and organised by the police and obliged to represent themselves as your devoted people, as happened, for example, with your grandfather in Kharkov when the cathedral was full of people, but all the people were policemen in disguise.

If you could, as I can, walk along the lines of peasants strung out behind the soldiers or along an entire railway line while the tsar passes by, and hear what these peasants were saying: village elders and peasant policemen rounded up from neighbouring villages and waiting for several days in the cold and slush, without reward and with (only) their bread, for the tsar to pass, you would hear all along the line words totally incompatible with love for autocracy and its representative from the most genuine representatives of the people, the simple peasants. If some 50 years ago in the reign of Nicholas I the prestige of the tsar's authority was still high, during the past 30 years it has continually declined and has recently fallen so low that no one from any class constrains himself any longer from boldly condemning not only the decrees of the government but also the tsar himself, and even swearing at him and laughing at him.

Autocracy is an obsolete form of government which may suit the needs of a people somewhere in Central Africa, cut off from the whole world, but not the needs of the Russian people who are becoming more

and more enlightened by the enlightenment common to the whole world. And therefore maintaining this form of government and the Orthodoxy linked with it can only be done as it is now, by means of every kind of violence: a state of emergency, administrative exile, executions, religious persecutions, the banning of books and newspapers, the perversion of education, and, in general, by bad and cruel actions of every type.

Such have been the actions of your reign up to now. Starting with your reply to the Tver deputation which aroused the indignation of all Russian society by calling the most legitimate desires of the people 'foolish day-dreams' – all your decrees about Finland⁽²⁾ and the seizure of Chinese territories⁽³⁾, your Hague Conference project⁽⁴⁾ accompanied by the strengthening of the army, your weakening of self-government and strengthening of administrative arbitrariness, your support of religious persecutions, your consent to the establishment of a monopoly on spirits, i.e. government traffic in poison for the people, and finally your obstinacy in maintaining corporal punishment despite all the representations made to you for the abolition of this senseless and entirely useless measure, humiliating to the Russian people – all these are actions which you could have avoided taking, had you not set yourself, on the advice of your frivolous aides, an impossible goal – not only to halt the people's life, but to return it to a former obsolete state.

The people can be oppressed by violent measures, but they cannot be governed by them. The only means of effectively governing the people in our time is to head the people's movement from evil to goodness, from darkness to light, and to lead them to the attainment of the goals nearest to it. In order to be able to do this, it is necessary first of all to give the people the opportunity to express their wishes and needs and, having heard these wishes and needs, to fulfil those of them which will answer the needs, not of one class or estate but of the majority, the mass of the working people.

And these wishes which the Russian people will now express, if given the opportunity to do so, will be, in my opinion, the following:

Above all, the working people will say that they wish to be rid of those exclusive laws which place them in the situation of pariahs who do not enjoy the rights of all other citizens; then they will say that they want freedom of movement, freedom of instruction and freedom to profess the religious faith natural to their spiritual needs; and most important, the whole 100 million people will say with one voice that they want freedom to use the land, i.e. the abolition of the right to the private ownership of land.

And this abolition of the right to the private ownership of land is, in my opinion, the nearest goal, the attainment of which the Russian government should set as its task in our time.

In every period of the life of mankind there is a step, appropriate to the time, which comes very close to realising the best forms of life towards which mankind is striving. For Russia fifty years ago the abolition of slavery was such a step. In our time such a step is the liberation of the working masses from the minority which wields power over them – what is called the labour question.

In Western Europe the attainment of this goal is considered possible through the transfer of the factories and workshops to the general use of the workers. Whether such a solution of the question is right or wrong, and whether it is attainable or not by the Western peoples – it is obviously not applicable to Russia as it now is. In Russia, where an enormous part of the population lives on the land and is totally dependent on large-scale landowners, the liberation of the workers obviously cannot be achieved by the transfer of the factories and workshops to the general use. For the Russian people such liberation can be achieved only by abolishing the private ownership of land and by recognising the land as common property – the very thing that has for long been the heartfelt desire of the Russian people, and whose realisation by the Russian government they still look forward to.

I know that these ideas of mine will be taken by your advisers as the height of frivolity and impracticality on the part of a man who has no comprehension at all of the difficulties of governing a state, especially my idea about recognising the land as the common property of the people; but I know too that in order not to be forced to perpetrate more and more cruel violence against the people, there is only one means of action, namely: to make your task the attainment of a goal in advance of the people's wishes, and without waiting for the runaway cart to hit you on the knee, to drive it yourself, i.e. to be in the forefront of achieving the best form of life. For Russia such a goal can only be the abolition of the private ownership of land. Only then can the government be the leader of its people and effectively govern them without making unworthy and forced concessions to the factory workers and students as it does now, and without fearing for its own existence.

Your advisers will tell you that freeing the land from the rights of ownership is a fantasy and an impracticable business. In their opinion, to force a living people of 130 million to cease living or manifesting

signs of life, and to squeeze them back into the shell which they long ago outgrew, is not a fantasy and not only not impracticable, but the wisest and most practical course of action. But one only needs to think a bit seriously to understand what really is impracticable, although it is being done, and what on the contrary is not only practicable, but timely and necessary, although it has not yet been begun.

I personally think that in our time the private ownership of land is just as obvious and as crying an injustice as serfdom was 50 years ago. I think that its abolition will place the Russian people on a high level of independence, wellbeing and contentment. I also think that this measure will undoubtedly get rid of all the socialist and revolutionary irritation which is now flaring up among the workers and which threatens the greatest danger both to the people and the government.

But I may be mistaken, and what is more, the solution of this question one way or the other can only be provided by the people themselves if they have an opportunity to express themselves.

In any case, the first business which now faces the government is to eliminate the oppression which prevents the people from expressing their wishes and needs. It is impossible to do good to a man whose mouth we have gagged so as not to hear what he wants for his own good. Only by learning the wishes and needs of all the people, or the majority of them, can one govern the people and do good to them.

Dear brother, you have only one life in this world, and you can waste it agonisingly on vain attempts to halt the movement of mankind, as ordained by God, from evil to goodness, from darkness to light, or you can calmly and joyfully lead it in the service of God and man, by carefully considering the wishes and needs of the people and by dedicating your life to their fulfilment.

However great your responsibility for the years of your reign during which you can do much good or much evil, your responsibility is much greater before God for your life here on which your eternal life depends and which God has given you, not so that you can order evil deeds of all kinds or even be a party to them and allow them, but so that you can carry out His will. His will is not to do evil to people, but good.

Think about this, not in the presence of people, but in the presence of God, and do what God, i.e. your conscience, tells you. And don't be troubled by the obstacles you will encounter if you enter on a new path in life. These obstacles will be eliminated of their own accord and you will not notice them, if only what you do is done not for human glory, but for your own soul, i.e. for God.

Forgive me if I have unwittingly offended or angered you by what I

have written in this letter. I was only guided by a desire for the good of the Russian people and of yourself. Whether I have accomplished this will be decided by the future, which I, in all probability, will not see. I have done what I considered my duty⁽⁵⁾.

With sincere wishes for your true good,

Your brother,

Lev Tolstoy

Notes.

1. From *Le mariage de Figaro*, Act III, scene iii.
2. A reference to a manifesto of June 1901 on the obligation of the Finns to do military service in the Russian army.
3. Russia was a party to the partition of China into spheres of influence by the Western powers.
4. A peace conference of the Western powers at The Hague in 1899, called by Russia, but with no tangible results. Tolstoy saw it as an attempt to disguise what he considered to be the militarism of Russian foreign policy.
5. No reply was received to the letter.