

TOLSTOY ON THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND HENRY GEORGE

Since most of the contents of this volume were written there has occurred, almost in the twinkling of an eye, a momentous change in the political destinies of a nation of nearly two hundred million people held for many generations in subjection to vast autocratic power. The very name Russia had become synonymous in the minds of men with a more than medieval darkness; it conjured up the hideous spectacles of the degradation of the purest and best of a wonderful people, her singers, poets, dreamers—all whose passionate aspiration made the glory of her literature. To speak of Russia was to think of dungeon and knout, of pogroms, of Kieff and Kischneff, of the Black Hundred, and then finally of an almost imbecile monarch, himself the tool of abler men who guided the destinies of this wonderful country and had builded this great political edifice out of the blackness and cruelty of their souls. And then while we watched, not seeing it all, this great Samson of a people put their shoulder to the pillars and the whole political structure lay in ruins!

Well had Henry George prophesied in this remarkable passage in *Progress and Poverty*: "Today Russian prisons are full, and in long processions, men and women, who, but for high-minded patriotism, might have lived in ease and luxury, move in chains toward the death-in-life of Siberia. And in penury and want, in neglect and contempt, destitute even of the sympathy that would have been so sweet, how many in every country have closed their eyes? This we see.

"But do we see it all?"

"In writing I have picked up a newspaper. In it is a short account, evidently translated from a semi-official report, of the execution of three Nihilists at Kieff—the Prussian subject Brandtner, the unknown man calling himself Antanoff, and the nobleman Ossinsky. At the foot of the gallows they were permitted to kiss one another. 'Then the hangman cut the rope, the surgeon pronounced the victims dead, the bodies were buried at the foot of the scaffold, and the Nihilists were given up to eternal oblivion.' Thus says the account. I do not believe it. No; not to oblivion!"

This Russia was the home of Tolstoy, a prophet like George who saw the truth George saw, who hailed with delight the economic vision and the practical teachings of the great American whose writings had so impressed him.

In this connection the following from Herman Bernstein writing from St. Petersburg (Petrograd) in the *New York Times* of July 20, 1908, is of special interest at this time:

"At about 9.30 o'clock in the morning I found myself at the door of the little white house where lives and works the most remarkable man in the world today—Leo Tolstoy. I was met by Nicholas Gusev, Tolstoy's secretary, an amiable young gentleman, who took me into his room.

"Presently he entered. . . .

"He asked me about my impressions of Russia, and particularly about the popularity of Henry George's works in America. 'Nearly 50 years ago,' he went on slowly, 'the great question that occupied all minds in Russia was the emancipation of the serfs. The burning question now is the ownership of land. The peasants never recognized the private ownership of land. They say that the land belongs to God. I am afraid that people will regard what I say as stupid, but I must say it: The leaders of the revolutionary movement, as well as the Government officials, are not doing the only thing that would pacify the people at once. And the only thing that would pacify the people now is the introduction of the system of Henry George.

"As I have pointed out in my introductory note to the Russian version of 'Social Problems,' Henry George's great idea, outlined so clearly and so thoroughly more than 30 years ago, remains to this day entirely unknown to the great majority of the people. This is quite natural. Henry George's idea, which changes the entire system in the life of nations in favor of the oppressed, voiceless majority, and to the detriment of the ruling minority, is so undeniably convincing, and, above all, so simple, that it is impossible not to understand it, and understanding it, it is impossible not to make an effort to introduce it into practice, and therefore the only means against this idea is to pervert it and to pass it in silence. And this has been true of the Henry George theory for more than 30 years. It has been both perverted and passed in silence, so that it has become difficult to induce people to read his work attentively and to think about it. Society does with ideas that disturb its peace—and Henry George is one of these—exactly what the bee does with the worms which it considers dangerous but which it is powerless to destroy. It covers their nests with wax, so that the worms, even though not destroyed, cannot multiply and do more harm. Just so the European nations act with regard to ideas that are dangerous to their order of things, or, rather, to the disorder to which they have grown accustomed. Among these are also the ideas of Henry George. 'But light shines even in the darkness, and the darkness cannot cover it.' A truthful, fruitful idea cannot be destroyed. However you may try to smother it, it will still live; it will be more alive than all the vague, empty, pedantic ideas and words with which people are trying to smother it, and sooner or later the truth will burn through the veil that is covering it and it will shine forth before the whole world. Thus it will be also with Henry George's idea.

"And it seems to me that just now is the proper time to introduce this idea—now, and in Russia. This is just the proper time for it, because in Russia a revolution is going on, the serious basis of which is the rejection by the whole people, by the real people, of the ownership of land. In Russia, where nine-tenths of the population are tillers of the soil and where this theory is merely a conscious expression of that which has always been regarded as right by the entire Russian people—in Russia, I say, especially during this period of reconstruction of social conditions, this idea should now find its application, and thus the revolution, so wrongly and criminally directed, would be crowned by a great act of righteousness. This is my answer to your question about the future of Russia. Unless this idea is introduced into the life of our people, Russia's future can never be bright.'"