

(From Soviet Life, a Soviet English-language magazine. Thanks to Mildred J. Loomis.)

Among the portraits on the walls of Tolstoy's study in Yasnaya Polyana are those of three Americans: William Lloyd Garrison, Henry George and Ernest Crosby.

"I was ill for a week and immersed myself in Henry George's latest book, and also in his first, Progress and Poverty, which produced a very strong and gratifying impression on me," Tolstoy wrote to his friend and follower Vladimir Tchertkoff in February 1885. "I have asked someone to get me his address and intend to write him a letter. I see a brother in him, one of those whom, according to the teachings of the apostles, you love more than your own soul."

Such was the impression made on Tolstoy by his first acquaintance with the ideas of the American publicist and economist. The "latest book" he mentioned was Social Problems.

What attracted Tolstoy to George's books was, first and foremost, the social-ethical problems posed in them. He considered the abolition of "land slavery" the most important mission of the day. "Ownership of land is as illegal," he said, "as ownership of souls. He who has hold on the source of food, holds the have-nots in dependence. So much time will be needed for this idea to sink into the public consciousness. I did not understand this myself for 20 years. Henry George has been making everything so clear for nigh on 30 years, and yet nobody seems to have heard of him"...

George cherished Tolstoy's approval. On leaving for Europe, he wrote to Tolstoy, requesting permission to pay him a visit in Yasnaya Polyana. Tolstoy replied: "Your letter afforded me great pleasure because I have known and liked you for a long time ... I am still more delighted to know that I may be seeing you..."

However, they were not destined to meet in Yasnaya Polyana, for in 1897 Henry George passed away. On learning of his death Tolstoy wrote to his wife: "This death has stricken me as would that of a very close friend."

When working on Resurrection, Tolstoy wrote in his diary: "Nekhludov must be made a follower of Henry George"... In 1894 he had written to Ernest Crosby: "Had the new czar (Nicholas II) asked me for advice, I would tell him to employ his unlimited power to abolish land ownership in Russia and introduce a single tax system, and then abdicate and give the people free administration."

With the rise of the revolutionary movement in Russia the land issue loomed ever larger. In 1905 during the first Russian revolution, Tolstoy's articles appeared... They were virtually a public defense of Henry George's program. Though Tolstoy realized the futility of convincing the czar and his government of the necessity of abolishing land ownership, he wrote letters about this to the czar's relative Grand Prince Nikolai Mikhailovich and Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin. But he invariably received the same reply: George's theory was "inapplicable." Tolstoy's attempt to pose the question in the State Duma was similarly unsuccessful.

"The implementation of Henry George's premises," Tolstoy wrote in March 1909, "i.e., the liberation of the land... is needed in our time as much as the liberation of people from slavery in America and Russia was needed 50 years ago..."