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My Correspondence with Gandhi

Bart de Ligt

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From Germany, Austria and other countries, I have been urged for information about my correspondence with Gandhi, which so far has only been published in French, English and Dutch and for various reasons could not be published in German. I am therefore most grateful to the editorial staff of *Neue Generation (New Generation)* for the opportunity to acquaint you with a few matters.

It was only in 1928 that I could really go more profoundly into Gandhi's life. I had read, of course, with great interest a number of his articles. As well as that, I had taken note of various articles written about him. The most important insights I owe to the short book by Romain Rolland (*Mahatma Gandhi*, 1922) and a few articles published in magazines.

From these I came to understand Gandhi as the legitimate follower of Tolstoy. Whereas Tolstoy would have been the “John the Baptist” of revolutionary nonviolence, Gandhi would have been the Christ, so to speak, of this movement; Tolstoy the Great Precursor and Prophet, Gandhi the Performer fulfilling the Prophecy.

The way Gandhi always referred to Tolstoy seemed to justify Rolland's laudatory view. I had, however, an inkling that something did not correspond to reality. I began more and more to feel fooled by a Gandhi Myth. Rolland spoke about Gandhi's participation in the activities of the Red Cross while serving three times in the British Army, thus suggesting that the great Hindu had joined the British army for humanitarian reasons. It appeared to me that something about all this did not quite add up. Moreover, I was annoyed by the peculiar way Gandhi was worshipped in various circles as a kind of Messiah. His testimonies had to be accepted without questioning and many persons who did not care to know about Western radical opposition to War, spoke rather obsequiously about the Nonviolence of the Oriental Saint, without following his example in their own country. Moreover, it did not seem obvious to me which revolutionary role Gandhi was playing in India and the whole world. But in the 20s, at long last, I found the opportunity to make a more thorough study of Gandhi, and go more deeply into the most significant literature published thus far about him.

In particular I studied closely the nearly thousand pages of *Speeches and Writings of M. K. Gandhi*, with an Introduction and a Biographical Sketch by Mr. C. F. Andrews (Third Edition, Madras: G. A. Natesan & Co.). I was especially interested in Gandhi's position during and towards the World War. I had also met in Geneva, Vienna and elsewhere several spiritually important Indians who had committed themselves to the armed national defense of a potentially independent India. I further took note of the fact that the Indian National Congress in 1925, during the chairmanship of the well-known poetess S. Naidu, had adopted a resolution intended to toughen up and create a fighting spirit among the Indian people.

What I read in *Speeches and Writings*, I initially could not believe. I cannot remember how often I read and re-read the passages concerned. I showed these to my friend Pavel Birukov

who in 1925 had dedicated his book *Tolstoi und der Orient* (*Tolstoy and the Orient*) to the great oppressed Indian people and their great leader Mahatma Gandhi. He could not believe his eyes either.

From *Speeches* it can be clearly concluded that during the World War, Gandhi had not only been active in the service of the British Red Cross in London, but that later on in India, he had also been systematically active in India to induce his compatriots to join the British Army. He said, for example, in July 1918 in a meeting in the Kaira district, that his sisters and brothers there had recently carried out a successful non-violent struggle and had resisted the British Government courageously and with respect, without harming anyone. "I now place before you an opportunity of proving that you bear no hostility to Government in spite of your strenuous fight with them." Gandhi concluded that the Indians were still a subordinated and oppressed people and that they did not enjoy the same rights as the peoples of the British Dominions. "We want the rights of Englishmen, and we aspire to be as much partners of the Empire as the Dominions overseas... To bring such a state of things we should have the ability to defend ourselves, that is the ability to bear arms and to use them... If we want to learn the use of arms with the greatest possible dispatch, it is our duty to enlist ourselves in the Army... We are regarded as a cowardly people. If we want to become free from that reproach, we should learn the use of arms. Partnership in the Empire is our definite goal. We should suffer to the utmost of our ability and even lay down our lives to defend the Empire. The easiest and straightest way, therefore, to win *swaraj* is to participate in the defense of the Empire. It is not within our power to give much money. Moreover, it is not money that will win the war. Only an inexhaustible army can do it. That army India can supply. If the Empire wins mainly with the help of our army, it is obvious that we would secure the rights we want." (pp. 430–432) In this spirit Gandhi demanded from

every village 20 soldiers and when these should fall in battle he demanded another 20. And he participated in the large War Conference with the Viceroy.

This all made me address an open letter to Gandhi in May 1928 in which I honored him for his pioneering activities in the nonviolent struggle in Africa and India, and I stated the extent to which his nonviolent initiatives were appreciated everywhere in the world by revolutionary pacifists and anti-war activists. I reminded him to what extent the number of those contesting war was increasing, just as the preparation for war in Europe and America increased on an almost daily basis, and also to what extent so many conscientious objectors in the West were inspired by his words and deeds. I then told him how disappointed I was when I saw that three times as a member of the Red Cross he had engaged in wars by Britain against the Boers, the Zulus and the European Central Powers, and when I read about his fanatic calls to war in 1918, I asked him whether he might not admit, like Tolstoy, that participation in activities with the Red Cross were warlike activities. How could he reconcile his de facto war propaganda with the spirit of Jesus and Tolstoy?

In any case, what mattered to me was not the past, but the future. To what extent may the international war resisters count – in case there might be again another threat of World War – on Gandhi and his Indian spiritual sympathizers; that is, a Gandhi, who from 1914 to 1918 had called upon the Indians to fight as soldiers against Germany, Austria, Bulgaria and Turkey, against peoples which had never caused harm to Indians, and this in the service of the British Empire, which had oppressed and exploited India during hundreds of years. Gandhi had acknowledged several times that he was occasionally urged on by a national egotism. But had this not led him to exaggerated, merciless and Jesuitical deeds, which could only with great difficulty be reconciled with the spirit of Jesus?

carried away by unscrupulous allies? But these are issues that cannot be dealt with here.

Gandhi replied in *Young India*, 13 September 1928, that his activity in the service of the Red Cross had been a conscious war activity, but that at that time in that situation he could still be faithful to his convictions. As long as he lived under a system of government, which was based on violence and under which he voluntarily shared the many privileges this system offered to him, he would consider it his duty to support with all his strength this government in the event of war. He was disappointed that they did not fulfill their promises. Subsequently, Gandhi became opposed to the British Government and would not participate in their wars any longer. In case, however, India had an independent government, he could imagine that in certain circumstances, although he himself in no way would directly join in any war, he might nevertheless consider it his duty to vote in favor of those who wanted to join the military. These views of Gandhi did not seem to me adequate. Nor were they to Vladimir Tchertkov, who from Moscow had sent an interesting letter to Gandhi on 20 October 1928. Perhaps Gandhi felt the inadequacy of his own arguments, and, in his reply to Tchertkov, Gandhi now made reference to his inner voice and the divine light which — as he wrote — always burned in a clear and firm way within him.

One will understand that all this led to further correspondence with the Indian leader. In March 1929, I wrote a second letter to Gandhi in which I referred to the conscientious objectors in England. As citizens of their country, fully conscious of their responsibility not only to their own country but also to the whole world, they had refused to join in Britain's imperialist Great War of 1914 to 1918. The principle was that the Duty of the Citizen would be subordinated to the Duty of Man. I asked him as well whether he who had spoken of Western Civilization in such a supercilious way, might perhaps be prepared to agree to the worst of this civilization, the modern, industrialized war, the chemical, electro-technical and bacteriological warfare. The military training of a people nowadays

cannot mean anything else, this incidentally being proved by the military chapter of the Nehru Report.

I also tried to explain to him in no uncertain terms that one not only has to judge the problem of the armament of India from a nationalist or patriotic point of view, but that one must take into account the political and social development of the whole world.

Meanwhile, I met in Geneva the most beloved Englishman in India and the most intimate friend of Gandhi, C. F. Andrews. He confirmed to me that he also could not reconcile Gandhi's position during the World War with the Mahatma's creed of *ahimsa* and that Gandhi's national motivations drown more and more all his other motives. One could conclude this clearly from Gandhi's reply in *Young India*, 9 March 1929, which did not contain any substantially new information and still confirmed the naive expectation that Indian independence could be realized by a friendly settlement with Great Britain.

Gandhi also maintained that India was drawn helplessly into Britain's wars. He further touched upon a few other questions which caused me to address in December 1929 a third letter to the Indian leader, to which he replied in *Young India* of 30 January 1930. This reply was also printed in "Die Weltbühne" of 17 January 1930 (translated into German and with critical notes by Kurt Hiller). Gandhi wrote this response after he had at last realized that his hope of forty years of loyal attitude to the British Government towards India, even to a so-called Labour Government, could not be fulfilled. Despite Labour's membership being favorable towards India, they were trapped in the ruthless Imperialist system. Gandhi still claimed that in the past, during the war against the Zulus and the Boers, he had acted in accordance with his good conscience. Had he forgotten, by chance or deliberately, his awful part in the World War? If he forgot this unintentionally, which is most plausible, this slip of the mind must nevertheless be further noted. Gandhi stated now that he would cooperate with his fellow-countrymen in order

to break the British chains; but he knew that if India attained its freedom, he would have to wage a nonviolent struggle against his own fellow-countrymen, which probably might be as difficult as the struggle he had pursued against Britain.

Perhaps Gandhi was influenced in this respect by an article in "The World Tomorrow", which had been sent to him by an American conscientious objector in August 1929 and had been printed on the 22nd of the same month in *Young India*. The article would demonstrate how modern armament accounts for an ever-increasing expenditure, yet how for an appropriate defense and effective protection modern arms offer ever less security. Gandhi warned India therefore not to follow the European-American example of modern armament; this would cost hundreds of millions and claim an increasing part of industry and majority of the people. "In order to bring about the annihilation of men, women and children one has only to press a button so that within a second poisonous gas will be spread over them. Do we want to adapt this method of self-defense? And, in doing so, are we in a position to finance this?" To compete with modern military powers in the field of arming, would mean suicide for India; war is a matter of monetary expenditure and of the invention of technical means of annihilation. India's power lay elsewhere, says Gandhi. It has to decrease violence in its national life and to promote ever more nonviolence.

In this context Gandhi always considers the problem of national defense, as he himself explains, from the point of view of a patriot. However important his personal dedication to the cause of India and exemplary his devotion to a cause he considers the most important one, if we were to consider his position from the point of view of revolutionary anti-militarism, Gandhi is not yet a perfectly reliable collaborator. He has achieved marvelous results by his nonviolent methods of struggle, although one may ask if the scope of his activity has not been too narrow, or whether he has not been too much