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The Present Situation in Russia

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Now that Russia is in a state of extraordinary excitement owing to the attractive coronation of the Czar, it may not be without interest to the readers of *Freedom* to get a glimpse of the situation in that darkest of all European lands. The more so, as the advent on the throne of Nicholas II. has been accompanied by quite a number of rumours of his supposed liberality and broad-mindedness, not only abroad, but also in Russia. What wonder, then, that the people of Russia hailed him as the inaugurator of a new era; their hearts began to beat hopefully, and in their trustfulness they approached the young Czar, and, while assuring him of their most devoted loyalty, they ventured to utter the desires, hopes and expectations of the people. Many may still remember the Czar's reply to the petition of the zemstvos (district assemblies) of the government of Tver, where he told the representatives of the people that it was all "foolish dreams." This reply was a shock to all; even the most ardently devoted conservatives, who did not cease to sing hymns in praise of the new Czar, seemed rebuffed. After such a reply there can be little hope left for any noteworthy reform, and, indeed, Nicholas II. has left everything much in the same state as it was under his father, whose policy he is simply continuing or extending.

However, in spite of all this, the Russians did not give up hope entirely, and a petition, signed by 78 well-known authors of St. Petersburg, was handed by the Academician Bilbassov to the Tzar, asking for justice and fair play in dealing with the press, which is bound hand and foot. Articles and whole books are being suppressed without any trial whatever, simply by administrative order. They therefore appealed to the Tzar in very eloquent terms to take them under the protection of the law and to do away with arbitrary administration. The Tzar, acting upon the advice of the Minister of Justice, decided to "leave the petition without any attention whatever." Meanwhile, the brief reign of Nicholas II. has been signalised by numerous suppressions of journals and other publications on the most trivial pretexts; for instance, the paper *Russian Life*, for publishing an article on the measures taken by the Minister of Finance; the Moscow journal *Art and Life*, for revealing the bribery of the Commission of Building by a new Moscow theatre; the retail sale of the Moscow daily paper *Russian Gazette* was prohibited on account of its having been published without a black margin on the day of the anniversary of the death of Alexander III. Various other journals and reviews received warnings and reprimands; a weekly paper, called *Njedelia* (*The Week*), for some articles on Marxism; another, *Russian Thought*, for describing the miserable position of the Russian workers and indicating the labour movement in Western Europe as an example for Russia. Besides these, many other arbitrary dealings took place, all of which space would not permit me to chronicle; and to crown all this, a list of books has been sent to all public librarians with the special order not to lend them for reading, at the same time strictly forbidding them to let the public know of this arrangement.

Those who are acquainted with the course of the world's history will be able to judge from the above that plutocratic Russian absolutism is struggling with all its might to keep itself alive, and there can be no doubt as to the fact of it being on the eve of its downfall. Woe unto those rulers who think that by making the laws ore

stringent, or that by using brutal force and suppression, they will succeed in stopping for ever the stream of progress! They may retard it for a while, but afterwards it will break forth with irresistible force and sweep away everything in its path.

Hypocrisy has always been a useful aide-de-camp to governments of all kinds; more than ever it is now the order of the day of the new government in Russia. While the above-described suppressions, etc., are going on, the Czar, anxious to throw dust in the eyes of the public and to pose as the beneficent ruler, opened a fund in aid of poor journalists and their families. Of course, those who keep their eyes open will be able to see through this "benevolence" and easily detect its underlying motives. Especially when one sees how every attempt on the part of the intelligent to help in the education of the poor ignorant people is frustrated; and it is quite naturally so, since the upholders of absolutism are fully aware that as soon as the people become enlightened they will also become conscious of their rights. In accordance with the line of tactics so distinctly proclaimed by the late Minister of Public Affairs, M. Durnevo, who said that the bureaucracy recognised "in principle" the task of education is "perfectly honourable," but to leave it in the hands of society would be dangerous, he therefore proposed to put all existing Committees of Popular Education as well as all private societies under the immediate control of the Minister of Education. His proposal has since been put into effect by an ukase of Nicholas II. (see St. Petersburg Correspondent of The Daily Chronicle of April 22). If all this is not sufficient to convince our readers to what an extent the new Czar is furthering popular education, the following anecdote which happened in Russia may help to do so. The local zemstvo was very active in trying to organise reading-rooms in the villages. The chief obstacle lay in finding rooms for that purpose; consequently they petitioned the Minister of Education to give them permission to make use of the schoolrooms. The answer was a point blank refusal. But let nobody imagine that the Minister is against libraries, and that it is his intention to hinder

the spreading of such—oh no! he is only afraid the visitors of the reading-rooms “might make the floors dirty”!

It may be regarded as a remarkable sign of the time, however, that in spite of persecutions, suppressions and so forth, the social question is being discussed everywhere. The theories of Karl Marx are subjected to severe criticism at the hands of the best known critics such as N. Mikhailovsky, in his journal *Russian Wealth*; Slonimsky in the *Messenger of Europe*; Obolénsky, Daniélson and Professor Karéjeff in the chief organ of the Russian populists, *Novoyé Slovo* (*The New World*), as well as various other professors and learned men, have taken up that subject for discussion.