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Leo Tolstoy
Forward to article On Revolution
Forward to article “On Revolution” (written by V. G. Tchertkoff)
1904-07-22

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Leo Tolstoy

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Vladimir Grigorevich,

I have read your article and, in addition that I fully agree with what is expressed in it, I wanted to say about it the following.

”There are no more hopeless deaf than those who don’t want to hear”.

Revolutionaries say that the purpose of their activity is the destruction of that oppressing social order which abuses and corrupts people. But in order to destroy this violent system, first of all it’s necessary to have financial means; and for that need to have at least some likelihood of success of such destruction.

And there is no slightest likelihood of that. The existing governments has long ago learned their enemies and the risks to which they are exposed, and therefore long time ago they took and now vigilantly continue to undertake all steps to prevent the destruction of that order which keeps them afloat. And the motives and means

of governments are the most powerful as only can be: a sense of self-preservation and the disciplined army.

The attempt of revolution on December 14 occurred in the most favorable conditions: of lucky interregnum and the association of the majority of its members with military echelon, and so what? In both St. Petersburg and Tulchin the uprising was without slightest difficulty put down by the obedient government troops, and there started rough, stupid, perverting people thirty-year reign of Nicholas. And all the subsequent attempts by Russian peripheral revolutions, starting from adventures of a dozen young men and women who aimed, by arming Russian peasants with thirty revolvers, to win million-soldiers government army, and up to recent marches of workers with flags and yelps "down with autocracy!", easy to scatter by a dozens of guards and Cossacks with whips, just as those bombings and the murder of the seventies, ended by the first of March, - all these attempts ended up, and could not end with anything else, with only deaths of many good people and more and more reinforcement and brutality of the government. The same goes on now. In place of Alexander II - Alexander III, in place of Bogolepov - Glazov, in place of Sipiagin - von Plehve, in place of Bobrikov - Obolensky. Before I have that written, there is no more von Plehve, and someone else is preparing to take his place, perhaps even more malicious than von Plehve, because after the murder of von Plehve the government must have become even more ruthless.

We cannot not to recognize the youth temperament and self-denial of people like Khalturin, Rysakov, Mikhailov, and now of the murderers of Bobrikov and von Plehve, who directly sacrificed their lives for achieving the unattainable goal, as well as of others who, enduring the greatest destitutions, risking their freedom and often life, go to people to get them to rebel, or print and distribute revolutionary leaflets; but we cannot ignore the fact that the activities of these people could not and cannot lead to anything other

persuasion of reason, confirmed by a life example, they know they are powerless.

Spiritual activity is the greatest, the most powerful force. It drives the world. But for it to be the driving force behind the world, it is necessary for people to believe in its power and to use it alone, not to mix it with external approaches of violence, destroying its power - people need to understand that all the seemingly unassailable bastions of violence get destroyed not by secret conspiracies, not by parliamentary disputes or newspaper controversies, especially not by riots and killings, but only by clarification by every person for himself of the meaning and the purpose of his life and solid, without compromise, fearless fulfillment, in all conditions of life, of the demands of higher, inner law of life.

I really wish your article to acquire more readers, especially among the youth, so that young people, who do not have binding them past and who sincerely want to serve the well-being of people, would understand that the revolutionary activity they are attracted to not only does not reach the goal they strive for, but, on the contrary, by diverting their best strengths from the direction in which they can really serve God and people, produces mostly the opposite effect; I wish they would understand that this purpose can only be achieved by clear understanding by each individual of his human purpose and value, and as a result of living that strong religious and moral life which does not allow neither in words nor in practice any deals with the evil of violence which you condemn and wish to destroy.

If at least one hundredth share of the energy that is wasted now by revolutionaries at achieving external unattainable goals, would be spent on the internal spiritual work, then, like snow under summer sun, the evil with which revolutionaries fought and keep vainly fighting would be melted long time ago.

Those are the thoughts that your article has inspired in me.

will, by the surest way, achieve the goal of freeing people that revolutionaries sincerely set for themselves.

"But I will not be allowed to say what I think and live as I think is right".

No one can force you to say what you don't think is right, or live the way you don't want to. Yet, the efforts of those forcing you will only serve to strengthen the impact of your words and actions.

But wouldn't such refusal from outer activities be a sign of weakness, cowardice, selfishness? Wouldn't such removal oneself from the fight serve to strengthen the evil?

Such opinion exists and is spread by revolutionary leaders. But this point of view is not only unwarranted, it is clearly deceitful. Let everyone who wants to serve the common good of people will try to live without rescuing to the protection of his personality or his property by violence, let him not obey the requirements of hypocritical religious reverence and public superstition, let him under no circumstances participate in court, in administration, in any other service of public violence, let him not use in any form the money forcibly collected from people, let him, most importantly, not get involved in military service, - the root of all violence, - and this man in practice will learn how much true courage and self-sacrifice is required for such activities.

One refusal from paying taxes or from military conscription on the grounds of that religious and moral law, which governments cannot not recognize, one such firm and clear refusal undermines the foundations on which existing governments stand, thousand times stronger and more effective than the lengthy strikes, than millions of distributed socialist pamphlets, than the most successfully organized riots, or the most desperate political assassinations. And the governments know that: they, by the sense of self-preservation, surely know where and what is their main danger. They are not afraid of attempts of violence because they have in their hands the invincible powers; but against the

than to the destruction of themselves and to the deterioration of the overall situation.

Only by that the presence in revolutionary activity of the fervor, struggle, delight of risking their freedom and life, - which always attracts young people, - can be explained the fact that smart, ethical people could and continue to indulge in such clearly useless activities. It is a pity to see how much energy strong and capable people spent to kill animals, to run on bikes over large spaces, to jump over ditches, to fight, and the like; and it is even more pitiful when this energy is spent to harass people, engage them in dangerous activities that are destroying their lives, or, even worse, - to make dynamite, to blast or just kill someone known as a vicious government person, whose place thousands of even more harmful are prepared to take.

Most of all, it is pitiful to see that the best moral, selfless, kind people, who were the Perovskaya, Osinsky, Lizogub, and many others (I'm talking only about the dead), enthused by the passion of struggle, ended up with not only wasting their best strengths on reaching something unattainable, but even with allowing the crime, that is contrary to their whole nature, - murder, and with supporting it, with participating in it.

Revolutionaries say that the purpose of their activity is the freedom of people. But in order to serve the freedom, it is necessary to clearly define what is meant by the freedom.

Under freedom revolutionaries assume the same what governments, with which they are fighting, define this word, namely: guarded by law (and the law is set up by violence) the right of everyone to do what does not violate the freedom of others. But because the acts that violate the freedom of others are defined variously, depending on what people consider to be an inalienable right of every human being, so the freedom in this definition is nothing else but the permission to do anything that is not prohibited by law; or, strictly and precisely put, freedom, by this definition, is equal for all, under the threat of punishment, prohibition of committing

acts that violate what is recognized to be the right of people. And therefore that what according to this definition is regarded as freedom, is in most cases the violation of freedom of people.

Thus, for example, in our society there is recognized right of the government to manage the fruits of labor (taxes), even personality (military duty) of its citizens; there is reserved after some people right to exclusive possession of land; however, it is obvious that these rights, while protecting freedom of some people, not only don't give freedom to other people, but in the most obvious way violate it, by robbing most people of the right to manage the fruits of their labor and even their own personality. So the definition of freedom as the right to do anything that does not violate the freedom of others, or anything that is not prohibited by law, obviously does not correspond to the notion attributed to the word "freedom".

It cannot be otherwise, because, with this definition, to freedom there has been attributed the property of something positive, whereas freedom is a negative notion. Freedom is the absence of restraint. A person is free only when nobody forbids him to do certain acts under the threat of violence. And therefore in a society in which the rights of people are determined in one way or another, and certain acts are both required and prohibited under a threat of punishment, people cannot be free. Truly free people may be only when they are all equally convinced of the futility and illegitimacy of violence, and obey the established rules not as a result of violence or the threat of it, but as a result of the conviction of their reason.

"But there is no such society and therefore cannot be true freedom anywhere," some will tell me. It is true that there is no society that does not recognize the need for violence. But there are various degrees of recognition of this need for violence. The whole history of mankind is further and further replacement of violence with the conviction of reason. The clearer the unreasonableness of violence is understood in a society, the closer the society is approaching the true freedom.

This is so easy and should be so clear to everybody, if there for so long time ago hadn't been established among people the custom of violence and deliberate, in order to maintain this violence profitable to powerful people, confusion of concepts. People, as rational beings, tend to influence one another by the conviction of reason on the basis of laws of reason common to everybody. Such voluntary obedience to all laws of reason and everybody's treating all the rest the way he wants to be treated — pertains to the intelligent, common to all, human nature. Such attitude of people toward each other, which fulfills the highest justice, is preached by all religions, and to this state humanity was constantly approaching and approaches.

And therefore it is obvious that greater and greater freedom of people is never achieved by introduction of new forms of violence, as revolutionaries do, trying by this new violence to destroy the former one, but only by the means of spreading among human beings of the consciousness of illegality and criminality of violence, of the possibility of its replacement by the persuasion of reason, and by lesser and lesser use of violence or taking advantage of it by each individual.

And to spread this consciousness and to refrain from violence, every human being has always available to him super powerful means: the clarification of this consciousness in himself, i.e. in that part of the world which obeys his thoughts and, as a result of such consciousness, removal of himself from any involvement in violence, and maintaining such life in which violence becomes needless.

Think seriously, understand, and define the meaning of your life and your purpose, — religion will show it to you, - do your best, as much as you can, to fulfill by your life what you think is your human purpose. Do not take part in that evil which you recognize and condemn; live in a way that does not require violence — and you'll be the most real tool that aids in spreading of the awareness of the criminality and uselessness of violence and, by doing so, you