

Letter requesting a Nobel Prize for the Doukhobors

Leo Tolstoy

1897, November

There has lately appeared in the papers information that in connection with Nobel's will the question has been discussed as to who should be chosen to receive the £10,000 bequeathed to the person who has best served the cause of peace. This has called forth certain considerations in me, and you will greatly oblige me by publishing them in your paper.

I think this point in Nobel's will concerning those who have best served the cause of peace is very difficult. Those who do indeed serve this cause do so because they serve God, and are therefore not in need of pecuniary recompense, and will not accept it. But I think the condition expressed in the will would be quite correctly fulfilled if the money were transmitted to the destitute and suffering families of those who have served the cause of peace.

I am alluding to the Caucasian Dukhobors or Spirit Wrestlers. No one in our time has served, and is continuing to serve, the cause of peace more effectively and powerfully than these people.

Their service of the cause of peace consists in this. A whole population, more than ten thousand persons, having come to the conviction that a Christian cannot be a murderer, decided not to participate in the military service. Thirty-four men who were summoned to enter the service refused to take the oath and serve, for which they have been confined to a penal battalion one of the most dreadful of punishments. About three hundred men of the reserve returned their certificates to the authorities, declaring that they could not and would not serve. These three hundred men were incarcerated in the Caucasian prisons, their families being transported from their homes and settled in Tartar and Georgian villages, where they have neither land nor work to live by.

Notwithstanding the admonitions of the authorities, and threats that they and their families will continue to suffer until they consent to fulfill military duties, those who have refused to do so do not change their decision. And their relatives their fathers, mothers, wives, sisters not only do not seek to dissuade them from, but encourage them in, this decision. These men say:

"We are Christians, and therefore cannot consent to be murderers. You may torture and kill us, we cannot hinder that, but we cannot obey you, because we profess that same Christian teaching which you yourself also accept."

These words are very simple, and, so far from being new, it seems strange to repeat them. Nevertheless, these words, spoken in our time and under the conditions in which the Dukhobors

find themselves, have a great importance. In our time everybody speaks of peace, and of the means of instituting it. Peace is spoken of by professors, writers, members of Parliament and of peace societies, and these same professors, writers, members of Parliament and of peace societies, when the occasion offers, express patriotic feelings ; and when their time comes they quietly enter the ranks of the army, believing that war will cease, not through their efforts, but through somebody else's, and not in their time, but in some time to come.

Priests and pastors preach about peace in their churches, and zealously pray God for it, but they are careful not to tell their flocks that war is incompatible with Christianity. All the emperors, kings, and presidents, traveling from capital to capital, lose no opportunity to speak of peace. They speak of peace when embracing each other at the railway stations ; they speak of peace when receiving deputations and presents ; they speak of peace with a glass of wine in their hands, at dinners and suppers ; above all they lose no opportunity to speak of peace in front of those same troops which are collected for murder, and of which they boast one before another.

And, therefore, in the midst of this universal falsehood, the conduct of the Dukhobors, who say nothing about peace, but only say that they themselves do not wish to be murderers, has a special significance, because it exhibits to the world that ancient, simple, unerring, and only means of establishing peace long ago revealed to man by Christ, but from which the people of former times were so far off that it seemed impracticable ; while in our time it has become so natural that one can only be astonished how it is that all men of the Christian world have not yet adopted it.

This means is simple, because for its application it is not necessary to undertake anything new, but only for each man of our time himself to refrain from doing that which he regards as bad and shameful for himself as well as for others ; and not to consent to be the slave of those who prepare men for murder. This means is certain, because, if Christians were only to admit what they must admit that a Christian cannot be a murderer, there would then be no soldiers ; because all are Christians, and there would be lasting and inviolable peace between them. And this means is the only one, because, as long as Christians will not regard participation in the military service as impossible for themselves, so long will ambitious men involve others in this service, and there will be armies ; and if there be armies, there will also be wars.

I know this means has already for long been practiced. I know how the ancient Christians who refused the military service were executed by the Romans for doing so (these refusals are described in the lives of the saints). I know how the Paulicians were, every one of them, destroyed for the same conduct. I know how the Bogomili were persecuted, and how the Quakers and Mennonites suffered for this same cause. I know also how, at the present time, in Austria, the Nazarenes are languishing in prisons ; and how people have been martyred in Russia.

But the fact that all these martyrdoms have not abolished war in no way proves that they have been useless. To say that this means is not efficacious because it has already been applied for a long time and yet war still exists, is the same as to say that in spring the sun's warmth is not efficacious because the ground has not yet become bare of snow, and flowers have not yet sprung up.

The meaning of these refusals in former times and now is quite different ; then they were the first rays of the sun falling on the frozen winter earth, now they are the last touch of warmth necessary to destroy the remains of the seeming winter which has lost its power. And in fact there never was before that which now is ; never before was the absurdity so evident that all men, without exception, strong and weak, disposed for war and abhorring it, should be equally

obliged to take part in military service ; or that the greater part of the national wealth should be spent on continually increasing military preparations ; never before was it so clear as in our time that the continual excuse for the gathering and maintenance of armies the supposed necessity of defense from an imaginary attack of enemies has no basis in reason, and that all these threats of attack are only the invention of those to whom armies are necessary for their own purpose of maintaining power over the nations.

It has never occurred before, that war threatened man with such dreadful devastations and calamities, and such massacres of whole populations, as it does at the present time. And, lastly, never before have those feelings of unity and good-will, among nations owing to which war appears to be something dreadful, immoral, senseless, and fratricidal, been so widely spread. But, above all, never, as it is now, was the deceit so evident by which some people compel others to prepare for war, burdensome, unnecessary, and abhorrent to all.

It is said that, to destroy war by this means, too much time would have to elapse ; that a long process of the union of all men in the one and the same desire to avoid participation in war would have to be gone through. But love of peace and abhorrence of war, like love of health and abhorrence of disease, have long since been the continual and general desire of all men not corrupted, intoxicated, and deluded.

So that, if peace has not yet been established, it is not because there does not exist among men the universal desire for it ; it is not because there is no love for peace and abhorrence of war ; but only because there exists the cunning deceit by which men have been, and are, persuaded that peace is impossible and war indispensable. And therefore, to establish peace among men, first of all among Christians, and to abolish war, it is not necessary to inculcate in men anything new ; it is only necessary to liberate them from the deceit which has been instilled into them, causing them to act contrary to their general desire. This deceit is being more and more revealed by life itself, and in our time it is so far revealed that only a small effort is necessary in order that men should completely free themselves from it. Precisely this effort the Dukhobors are making in our time by their refusal of the military service.

The conduct of the Dukhobors is tearing off the last covering which hides the truth from man. And the Russian government knows this, and is endeavoring with all its strength to keep up, if only for a time, that deceit upon which its power is founded ; and that government is, for this purpose, using the cruel and secret measures usual, in such cases, to those who know their guilt.

The Dukhobors who have refused the military services are confined to penal battalions and exiled to the worst parts of Siberia and the Caucasus ; while their families old men, children, wives are driven out of their dwellings and settled in localities where, homeless and without means of earning their food, they are gradually dying out from want and disease. And all this is being done in the greatest secrecy. Those incarcerated in prisons, and those who are being exiled, are kept separate from every one else ; the exiled are not allowed to communicate with Russians, they are kept exclusively among non-Russian tribes, true information concerning the Dukhobors is forbidden in the press, letters from them are not forwarded, letters to them do not reach them, special police guard against any communication between the Dukhobors and Russians, forbidding it; and those who have endeavored to help the Dukhobors, and spread information about them among the public, have been banished to distant places or else altogether exiled from Russia. And, as is always the case, these measures only produce the reverse result to that which the government desires.

In our time it is impossible un perceived to sweep off the face of the earth a religious, moral, and industrious population of ten thousand souls. Those same people, soldiers and jailers, who guard the Dukhobors, those tribes among whom they are dispersed, also those individuals who, notwithstanding all the efforts of the government, communicate with the Dukhobors, all these discover that for which, and in the name of which, the Dukhobors are suffering ; they find out the utterly inexcusable cruelty of the government and its fear of publicity ; and men who formerly never doubted the lawfulness of the government and compatibility of Christianity with the military service, not only begin to have doubts, but are becoming completely persuaded of the Tightness of the Dukhobors, and of the falsity of the government, and are liberating themselves and others from the deceit which has held them up to this time.

And it is this liberation from deceit and consequent approach toward the effectual establishment of peace on earth which to-day constitutes the great worth of the Dukhobors.

This is why I believe that no one has served the cause of peace in a greater degree than they have. The dreadful condition in which their families at present find themselves¹ justifies one in affirming that no one can with greater justice be awarded the money which Nobel bequeathed to those that have best served the cause of peace.

November, 1897.²

¹ Information concerning them can lie found in a book lately published in English, entitled, "Christian Martyrdom in Russia." It is edited by Vladimir Tcherkof, with concluding chapter and letter by Count Tolstoy. ED.

² Source: Graf Leo Tolstoy, Nathan Haskell Dole (translator). Nobel's Bequest: a letter addressed to a Swedish editor. *The Novels and Other Works of Lyof N. Tolstoy*, Volume II, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917, pages 1-7. < <https://books.google.com/books?id=mlVBAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA1>

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