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March 19, 1846

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Letter to Le Constitutionnel

Mikhail Bakunin

March 19, 1846

Monsieur.

I am Russian, and I love my country. It is for that very reason that I make some wishes at this moment, like many Russians, for the triumph of the Polish insurrection polonaise. The oppression of Poland is a shame for my country, and its liberty would perhaps be the beginning of our own.

I want first of all to bring my testimony, as an honest man, in an affair which occupies at this moment all the French papers, I want to speak of the persecution of the Basilian nuns of Lithuania.

For my part, I am completely convinced of the truth of the facts denounced by the nuns. I believe them true, because I find them likely and I know that the evil that is possible in Russia sadly never fails to become real there. The political and administrative organization of that country is such that, rendering the good nearly impracticable, it makes an inevitability of evil.

The first question which presents itself is this: Is it possible that the Russian government, however absolute it may be, allowed itself to use violence as a means of religious propaganda? Unfortunately, we are not allowed doubt it. everyone knows that illegal, oppressive and often atrocious measures the Russian authorities

have used to force the inhabitants of Lithuania and White Russia to change their religion. Ordered and sanctioned by the emperor himself, this systematically organized violence could not be unknown to him.

The Lithuanians, as well as White Russia, making up thus part of the kingdom of Poland, would pass, in the 16th century, from the Greek cult to the Roman Catholic religion, they accepted all its dogmas, recognized the supremacy of the pope, but, on the other hand, the council of Florence, which designated them under the name of United Greek, permitted them to preserve the rites of the Greek church. Little by little, the ancient forms and customs were lost, so that already, in the 18th century, it became nearly impossible to find the least difference between the United Greek and the Roman Catholics. This change, as well as the introduction itself of the union in one part of these provinces, and especially in Ukraine, was not made without some difficulties, the means employed then by the Jesuits, whose complete power in Poland was one of the principal causes of the fall of that country, offered a great resemblance with those used presently by the government of the emperor; but finally the thing was done, and when the provinces were reunited to Russia, the populations no longer recalling the sufferings of their fathers, were already sincerely attached to their new worship which, as I just told you, hardly different any longer from the Catholic worship.

To *break* Poland, such has been, since 1811, the constant thought of Emperor Nicolas, a perfectly logical thought, for not wanting Poland independent and free, he must necessarily tend to the destruction of its nationality. But, to attain that end, three things were necessary: 1. The extinction of the Polish language. 2. The subjection of Poland to Russian legislation. 3. The establishment of the religion of the State on the ruins of the Catholic and the United Greek churches.

It would be impossible for me, Monsieur, to present to you here a complete tableau of the acts of the Russian government; my letter

would become too long; so I will only occupy myself with the third point.

It was naturally necessary to begin with White Russia and Lithuania. You certainly know, Monsieur, that Russian politics if composed of two principal elements: it ordinarily begins with cunning, and always finishes with violence. That is then how they went about opening to the unfortunate dissidents the ways of eternal salvation:

At first showing themselves jealous to make strictly observed the decisions of the council of Florence, the government rendered obligatory the article which permitted them to preserve the rites of the Greek church; it began with some changes inside the churches, such as the costume of the priests, changes which were made in a very violent manner, for they had no consideration of any complaint, and the recalcitrant priests were deprived of their liberty, without prior trial. In 1838, the government, suddenly adopting a new policy, decided to strike a great blow: bishop Siemaszko, who was the soul of that enterprise, convoked at Polotsk a sort of council composed of a very small number of bishops and priests, one part of which was bought with promises, and the other intimidated by threats. The joining of the Greek United and Orthodox churches was voted there unanimously, and a deputation sent to Saint-Petersburg, under to the chairmanship of Siemaszko, to beg the emperor to be so good as to permit his very humble dissident subjects to renounce the heresy. "I give thanks to go, and I accept." Such was the response of Nicolas. They heaped favors on the deputies, with magnificent presents and titles; each day they celebrated some *Te Deum*, and while that comedy played out in Saint-Petersburg, the blood already flowed in Lithuania and White Russia. Then the emperor sent the archbishop Siemaszko there, armed with full powers, enjoining the civil and military authorities to lend him aid and assistance.

The dissident populations would protest unanimously against the council of Polotsk; there were some partial rebellions, repressed

by armed force, many peasants were shot, others stunned under the knout, a still greater number sent to Siberia, either to be colonized there, or to forced labor. A number of recalcitrant priests suffered the same fate, several of them were thrown in prison, to be given up there to torture, yes, Monsieur, to torture, for although abolished by a ukase of Catherine II, it continues nonetheless to be employed, even in Russia, in the criminal investigations, not against the nobility, if it is not in the political trials, but often against the people and a part of the third estate.

Despite these barbaric measures, the dissidents still resist the tyrannical pretensions of the Russian government: the affair of the Basilians is one new proof of it, and after all that I have said, you will admit that the complaints of Mme. Mieczyslawska cannot be taxed with exaggeration. A man like Siemaszko is capable of anything. Regarding the ill treatment and insults that unfortunate Basilians have had to suffer from the Russian nuns, I find nothing implausible there, for in Russia the majority of the convents and monasteries, for men and women, are filled with idle, ignorant people, who, accustomed from their most tender childhood to all sorts of brutalities, passing their lives between mechanically recited prayers, gossip and sometimes drunkenness. You will easily imagine how such nuns would have received some defenseless, accused of heresy and disobedience to the emperor.

But was the emperor Nicolas informed of all that? Is it possible that he had himself commanded all those cruelties?

Monsieur, I do not wish to be unjust to anyone, not even towards the emperor, who has been unjust so many times and towards so many. I must, however, speak the truth: the condemnations and executions of which I just spoke to you, have all be ordered and sanctioned by the emperor. He has certainly not ordered Siemaszko to break the jawbones of poor nuns, but he has invested him with his complete confidence; he has commanded him to crack down on them with all the severity of the Russian laws. I am deeply convinced that it the emperor had had the firm will to not tolerate

unjust trials and bloody violence in his States, all these cruelties would not have taken place.

The facts which I have just discussed with you are particularly known to me, because I spent some time in Lithuania as a soldier. If I did not fear to abuse your attention too much, I would have cited many others in order to prove to you that if O'Connell could say, in leaving his homeland that "No people on the face of the earth have ever been as cruelly treated as Ireland", it is because he obviously did not know all the barbaric acts of the Russian government in Poland. The administration of Poland consists of little else than people who, having no other aim than to succeed and enrich themselves by any mean, strive to distinguish themselves by their zeal, and that zeal ordinarily in the discovery of new conspiracies and in the fierce pursuit of the conspirators real or fictive.

Recall, Monsieur, that the Russian government ne tend à nothing less than the total destruction of the Polish nation polonaise, that it wants [to destroy] its customs, its religion, even its language, that it regards and punishes as a crime of *lèse-majesté* all that which is contrary to the will of the emperor, that the forms of the trials and condemnations are tout à fait arbitrary, that those who are charged with it, that the least employee of the Russian administration enjoys a nearly absolute power with regard to all the Poles. Combine all of that together, and you will have a complete and fair idea of the des sufferings of that unfortunate and noble nation.

Accept, Monsieur, etc.

M. BAKOUNINE

Paris, February 6, 1846.