

A Terrible Question

Leo Tolstoy

1896

Is there in Russia sufficient grain to feed the people until the new crop is gathered ?

Some say there is, others say there is not ; but no one knows this absolutely. But this must be known, and known definitely now before the beginning of the winter just as it is necessary for men who are going off on a long voyage to know whether the ship has a sufficient supply of fresh water and food or not.

It is terrible to think what would happen to the officers and passengers of the ship when in the middle of the ocean it should transpire that all the provisions had gone. It is still more terrible to think what will happen to us if we believe in those that assure us that we have grain enough for all the starving, and it should prove before spring that they were mistaken in their assurances.

It is terrible to think of the consequence of such a blunder. Why, the consequence of this blunder would be something awful : the death of millions by starvation, and, worst of all misfortunes, the exasperation and anger of men. It is good merely by cannon-shots to warn the inhabitants of Petersburg that the water is rising, because that is all that can be done. No one knows, no one can know, how high the water will rise ; whether it will stand where it stood the year before, or reach its limit of four and twenty years ago, or rise still higher.

The famine of this year, moreover, is a misfortune incomparably greater than the misfortune of the flood, incomparably more universal, it threatens all Russia ; it is misfortune the degree of which may and should, not only be foreseen, but may and should be foreseen and prevented.

” Ah ! that will do ! For Russia there will be sufficient, and more than sufficient, of every kind of grain for all,” is said and written by certain people, and others who like freedom from bother are inclined to believe this. But it is impossible to believe what is said at haphazard, or by conjecture, regarding an object of such awful importance.

If it is said that in regard to the doubtful solidity of a bath in which people go once a week on a Saturday, the beams still stand, and there is no need of replacing them, one may believe them and risk leaving the bath without repairs ; but if it concerns the dubious ceiling of a theater in which thousands are sitting every evening, the unanimous decision will be, that though the probabilities are it will not fall this evening, still one cannot feel confidence and be at ease. The threatened danger is too great.

Now the danger threatening Russia is that the grain necessary for the sustenance of the people is not to be had at any price, and this danger is so awful that the imagination refuses to depict what would happen if this was so; and therefore to content ourselves with the unsupported

assurances of those that declare that in Russia we have enough grain, not only would not follow, but would be senseless and criminal.

But does such a danger exist ? Is there any likelihood that there will not be enough bread ?

The following observations may serve as an answer to this question :

In the first place, it is a fact that a whole third of Russia is attacked by famine, and that third is the very one which has always supported a large part of the other two-thirds. Kaluga, Tver, Moscow, all the "black earth" and northern governments, even the "black earth" districts of these governments, where there was no failure in the crops, have never lived on their own products, but have always bought it of those that now must live on foreign grain.

Therefore, if it is reckoned, let us suppose, that each person must have ten puds well, let us say there are only twenty millions though they are reckoned as high as forty millions of inhabitants in these famine-stricken districts, then two hundred million puds of grain will be needed, and this is far from representing the whole amount of grain necessary for the sustenance of all Russia. To this figure must be added all that is needed besides for those that have subsisted in former years on the grain of the famine-stricken localities, and this very probably will constitute as much again.

The failure of the harvest in the most fertile places accomplishes something like what happens when you shorten the arm of a lever : you not only diminish the power of the shorter end, but you increase as many times the power of the larger end. A third of Russia is attacked by famine, the most fertile part, which has fed the other two-thirds, and therefore it is very probable that there will not be enough grain for all. This is one consideration.

The second consideration is that the countries bordering on Russia will suffer in the same way from failure of harvest, and that therefore a great amount of grain has been exported, and now in the form of wheat continues to be exported abroad.

The third consideration is that in absolute contrariety to what happened during the famine year, 1840, this year there is, and can be, no stores of grain.

In Russia something has happened like what happened according to the Bible tale in Egypt; only with this difference, that in Russia there was no Joseph to foretell, and there have been no provident and orderly men like Joseph ; but there have been mills, railways, banks, and both the authorities and private persons have suffered from great lack of money. In all the years preceding, more than seven, there has been much grain, prices have been low ; but the lack of money has grown and grown as it regularly increased among us, and the conveniences of trade, mills, railways, and buying agents encouraged to trade, and brought it about that wheat was wholly sold by autumn.

If during the last years, when wheat had reached an especially low price, certain vendors began to lay in a store of grain, waiting for a price, then this storage was so difficult that, as soon as the prices advanced at the beginning of the spring of this year, and reached fifty and sixty kopecks a pud, then all the grain was sold and cleaned out, and nothing remained of the provisions of previous years. In 1840 not only had the proprietors and tradesmen plenty of provisions, but everywhere among the muzhiks were from three to five years' stores of old grain. Now this custom has gone by, and there is nothing like it anywhere. In this consists the third consideration : that grain this year will not be sufficient.

But not only is there a probability of this, but there are also symptoms, and sufficiently definite symptoms, that this lack exists.

One of these symptoms is the every day more and more frequently repeated phenomenon that there is no bread on sale in the depths of the famine-stricken localities, as in that in which I am now in the Dankovsky District, there is no rye on sale. The muzhiks cannot get flour.

Yesterday I saw two muzhiks of the Dankovsky District, who had been driving around a radius well known to them, of twenty versts, to all the mills and shops, to buy for money two puds of flour, and they could not find it. One begged for some at the depot of another district ; the other obtained some.

And this phenomenon is not exceptional ; it is constantly repeated, and everywhere. Millers come to ask for Christ's sake Khrista radi to let them have flour at the zemstvo depots, because they have no flour, and cannot get any. Of tradesmen in the cities, of the railway, it may be bought in bulk, at least a half a carload or a carload ; but at retail there is none to be had. The great merchants who have a supply will not sell at all, they are waiting ; the small tradesmen, storekeepers, buy up all they can, and sell it again at a profit to the wholesale merchants. Retail trade is only in bazaars, on market days, and then, if the purchaser comes too late, there is none to be had.

This symptom, it seems to me, shows with sufficient plainness that there is not as much grain as is needed. The same thing is proved partly, also, by the prices, although this year, hitherto, there are reasons which do not permit prices to be a legitimate proof of the conformity of demand with supply. The prices are lower than they ought to be, and are maintained on this lower level artificially : in the first place by the interdiction of exporting grain abroad ; in the second place by the action of the zemstvos, which sell rye and meal at reduced prices. I am speaking of the price of rye, supposing that the prices of other food products beets, potatoes, millet, oats more or less correspond to the price of rye.

The prohibition of foreign exportations reduced prices, in other words, caused prices to be an unreliable indication of the amount of any given commodity. Just exactly as the height of the level of the water in a dammed river cannot be an indication of its actual level, so the present price of rye cannot accurately mark the relation of the demand to its supply. The prohibition of the export of other breadstuff's has the same effect. The prices now existing are prices not self-sustaining, and are in any case reduced temporarily, in consequence of the prohibition of export. This is one cause of the fact that prices are lower than they ought to be.

Another cause is the action of the zemstvos.

The zemstvos everywhere buy only in small quantities, rarely one-fourth part of the grain needed for nourishment according to their lists, and they sell the grain at a reduced price. This action of the zemstvos also reduces the price, since if there were no sale from the depots of the zemstvos, this sale would come from the large dealers who, according as the demand increased, would raise the prices. And therefore I think the price now maintained is not the actual price.

The price at the present time I think is far lower than what it would be if it were not for the action of the zemstvos. And this price would immediately rise with extraordinary rapidity if only it should occur to the zemstvos to buy the remaining three-fourths of the grain they need.

We might say that the price will not rise if the zemstvos had bought now the whole quantity needed, and rye were on sale at that price. But according to the present state of things there is no likelihood that this was so. According to the present state of circumstances, that is to say, at the price of one ruble seventy kopecks, when the zemstvos did not buy even one-fourth of the necessary grain, and when there was no rye offered for sale anywhere, even in small quantities, there is, on the contrary, a probability that by reason of the zemstvos buying the whole quantity

they needed the price would suddenly rise to a price which would show that there was none of the grain in Russia. The price even now in our localities has risen to the highest notch to which it has ever attained, to one ruble seventy kopecks, and still continues to rise regularly.

All these symptoms show that there is a great probability that Russia has not the grain she needs.

But besides these symptoms there is still another phenomenon which ought to compel us to take all possible measures to avert the misfortune that threatens us. This phenomenon is the panic which has seized society, that is to say, the undefined obscure terror of some expected misfortune the terror which people communicate to one another, the terror which deprives people of the capability of working to any purpose. This panic is expressed even in the prohibition of exporting first rye, then of the other breadstuffs, except for some reason of millet, and in such measures, on the one hand, as assigning great sums for the starving, and on the other hand, the collecting by the local authorities of assessments from those who can pay, as if the extraction of money from the country were not a direct enhancement of the poverty of the country.

A rich muzhik holds a mortgage on a poor one's ungathered crops. He would not push him, but the taxes are demanded from him, so he has to demand payment from the poor man, and ruins him.

This panic is particularly noticeable in the controversies between the various local departments. There is a repetition of what always takes place in a panic terror ; some pull in one direction, some in another.

This panic is also noticeable in the amusements and activities of the people. I will adduce one example, the movement of the people toward wage-earning.

The people toward the end of October of this year go to seek occupation in Moscow and Petersburg, at the time when all the labors for the winter have ceased, when provisions are three times more expensive than usual, and every householder has got rid of all the superfluous persons he can, at a time when everywhere there is a multitude of laboring men thrown out of work then people, who never had any position in the cities, go and seek those situations.

Is it not evident to every one that in such conditions there is more likelihood of every proprietor of a lottery ticket drawing two hundred thousand rubles than of a muzhik who comes to Moscow from the country finding a place, and that every journey, even though very inexpensive, with the expenses incidental to travel, where there is some drinking, is only a supernumerary difficulty rushing on the poor ?

It would seem as if it ought to be evident, but all come come back and come again. Is not this a symptom of the absolute senselessness which seizes the throng at every panic?

All these symptoms, and chiefly the phenomenon of the panic, are very significant, and therefore one cannot help fearing. It is impossible to say, as is generally said about the enemy before our forces are compared with his, we can catch him with our hats. The enemy, the terrible enemy, stands here before us, and we cannot say we do not fear him, because we know what he is, and more than all, we know that we fear him.

But if we fear him, then it is necessary for us before all to know his strength. It is impossible for us to remain in this ignorance in which we find ourselves.

Let us admit that Russian society, the people that live outside the famine-stricken localities, find their solidarity both spiritual and material with the unfortunate people, and undergo actual serious sacrifices for the help of the starving. Let us admit that the activity of these people, who live now amid the starving, laboring for them, according to the measure of their ability, will

continue till the end, and that the numbers of these people will increase; let us admit that the people themselves are not down-hearted, and will fight with poverty, as they are now fighting with it, by all negative and positive means in other words restraining themselves and increasing their energy and inventiveness for the attainment of the means of life ; let us admit that all this has been done and will be done for a month, two, three, six months then suddenly the price goes up, goes up, just as it has been going up, from forty-five kopecks to one ruble seventy kopecks, regularly from bazaar to bazaar, and in a few weeks reaches two or three rubles a pud, and it transpires that there is no grain, and that all the sacrifices endured, both by those that gave money and by those that have been living and laboring amid the sufferers, were wasted expenditures of means and forces, and chiefly that all the energy of the people was expended in vain, and in spite of all their efforts they, that is a part of them, would nevertheless have to die of starvation, then how could we know and prevent it ?

It is impossible, impossible, and again impossible to remain in this uncertainty, impossible for us, wise, learned people to remain so. The muzhik whom I saw yesterday was doing about all that he could. He had procured money, and had gone to seek for grain. He had been to Mikhai'l Vasilyef's, he had been to the mill, he had been to Chernavo nowhere could he obtain meal. After he had gone to all the places where meal might possibly be, he knew that he had done his best ; and if after this he could not get meal anywhere and he and his family should be attacked by famine, he would know that he had done to the best of his ability, and his conscience would be at rest.

But for us, if it is shown that there is no grain to be had, and our labors are brought to naught, and we and the people maybe are perishing together, our consciences will not be at rest. We might have known how much grain would be needed by us, and might have got it. If our learning and our science are of any use to us, then for what more important purpose than to enable us to help in such a universal tribulation as ours to-day ? Let us decide how much grain is necessary for the nourishment of those that have none this year and how much there is in Russia, and if there is not as much as is necessary, then let us order from foreign lands as much grain as is needed ; this is our direct business, and just as natural as what the muzhik did yesterday when he made a circuit of twenty versts. And our con- sciences will be at rest only when we make our circuit and do in it all that we can. For him the circuit is Dankof, Klekotki ; for us the circuit is India, America, Australia. We not only know that these countries exist, we are already in friendly intercourse with their inhabitants.

But how can we estimate what we need and the grain which we have ? Can this be so difficult ? We who can count how many kinds of beetles there are in the world, how many microbes there are in such and such a space, how many millions of versts it is to the stars, and how many puds of iron and hydrogen there are in each one we, forsooth, are not able to reckon up how much people need to eat so as not to perish of starvation, and how much grain has been garnered by the people from the fields whereby we have been, and still are, nourished. We who with such wealth of detail have collected such a mass of statistical materials so far as I know up to the present time of no use to any living person details as to the percentage of births as compared to marriages and deaths and the like we suddenly find ourselves not in a condition to collect the only information which in the course of a century is helpful, is really useful. This cannot be. To collect these details accurate ones and not conjectural, and not approximate details like those furnished in regard to the number of the population in a one day's census, is possible.

Information is needed as to how much more than the ordinary amount of grain bought for the support of the Russian people must be furnished this year for the inhabitants of the famine-stricken localities, and how much grain there is in Russia.

Whether the answers to these questions are easy or difficult, they are indispensable for the prevention, not only of the panic, that is, of that confusedly contagious terror of approaching misfortune in which men are now living, but principally for the averting of the misfortune itself.

And not approximate, not haphazard, answers are required, but systematic ones ; the matter is too serious for us to be able to do it merely sketching the head, in other words, to build this vault which we do, not knowing whether the stone will suffice to complete it.

These details the government may receive ; the zemstvo may receive them on the spot, and more trustworthy than all, a private society constituted for this purpose may receive them. There is not a district where there would not be found, not merely one, but many men, who would be able and would willingly serve in this business.

It seems to me not excessively difficult. In a week's time, without much trouble, an active man can traverse a quarter or a fifth of a district, especially if he lives in it ; and with a possibility of error of from ten to fifteen per cent can determine the amount of grain requisite for subsistence, and the amount on hand above and beyond that required by each person. I, at least, will undertake personally to furnish such information within a week's time regarding a quarter of the district in which I live. The same is said and can be done by the majority of the country people with whom I have talked in regard to this. To organize a central bureau in which could be collected and grouped all the separate items, and which might send its members with this object in view into places where volunteers were not forthcoming, I imagine would be feasible and not difficult. There might be mistakes, there might be concealments on the part of those having grain there might be transfers of grain from one place to another, causing errors ; but the errors of reckoning I imagine would not be great, and the information received in this way would be sufficiently precise to answer the chief question, painful as it is, even if not expressed but felt by all : Is there, or is there not, enough grain in Russia ?

If, let us suppose, it is shown that this year, according to the reckoning of the grain employed generally for the army and for liquor-distilling, the abundance against that which is necessary for the sustenance of the people constitutes one hundred or fifty million puds, supposing that a part of these one hundred million might be kept by dealers, a part spoiled, a part burned, a part might constitute a mistake in reckoning, we might calmly and resolutely go on living. If there was no superfluity at all, and it was shown that in Russia there was not as much grain as was necessary, the state of things would be dubious and dangerous ; but, nevertheless, it might be that, by not ordering grain from abroad, only by modifying the amount of grain used, for example, on liquor-distilling, giving out some of the grain gratuitously, it might be possible to go on living and working.

But if it were proved that we are one hundred or fifty million puds of grain short, the situation would be dangerous. It would be analogous to what takes place when a fire flashes out and catches a building. But if we know this now it would be as if when the fire first burst out, it was still possible to extinguish it.

If we should find this out only when the last ten thousand puds were going, then it would be like the fire which should have already caught the building and there was now little hope of escaping from it.

If we now knew that we had an insufficiency of grain, let it be fifty or one hundred or even two hundred million puds, all this would not be so terrible. We could now buy that amount of grain in America and it could always be paid for by governmental, social, or popular funds.

The people who are working ought to know that their work has a meaning and is not wasted.

Without this consciousness hands fall idle. But in order to know this for that work in which now are employed an enormous number of Russian people, it is necessary to know now, instantly, within two or three weeks, whether we have enough grain for this year, and if not, then where we can get enough to remedy the deficit.

BYEGICHEVKO, November 13, 1891.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Leo Tolstoy
A Terrible Question
1896

Original text from RevoltLib.com, 2021. Written November 13, 1891. Translated by Nathan Haskell Dole in 1896.

theanarchistlibrary.org