

I Cannot be Silent!

Leo Tolstoy

1908

”Seven death sentences: two in Petersburg, one in Moscow, two in Penza, and two in Riga. Four executions: Two in Kherson, one in Vilna, one in Odessa.”

This, daily repeated in every newspaper and continued, not for weeks, not months, not for one year, but for years! And this in Russia, that same Russia where the people regard every criminal as a man to be pitied, and where till quite recently capital punishment was not recognised by law! I remember how proud I used to be of that, when talking to Western Europeans; but now for a second and even a third year, we have executions, executions, executions, unceasingly!

I take up today’s paper.

To-day, the 9 May, it is something awful. The paper contains these few words: ”To-day in Kherson on the Strelbitsky Field, twenty peasants were hung for an attack made with intent to rob, on a landed proprietor’s estate in the Elizabetgrad district.¹

Twelve of those by whose labour we live, the very men whom we have depraved and are still depraving by every means in our power - from the poison of vodka to the terrible falsehood of a creed we do not ourselves believe in, but impose on them with all our might - twelve of these men, strangled with cords by those whom they feed and clothe and house, and who have depraved and still continue to deprave them. Twelve husbands, fathers, sons, from among those on whose kindness, industry, and simplicity alone rests the whole of Russian life, were seized, imprisoned and shackled. Then their hands are tied behind their backs lest they should seize the ropes by which they would be hung, and they are led to the gallows. Several peasants similar to those who are about to be hung, but armed, dressed in clean soldiers’ uniforms, with good boots on their feet and with guns in their hands, accompany the condemned men. Beside them walks a long-haired man, wearing a stole and vestments of gold or silver cloth, and bearing a cross. The procession stops. The Manager of the whole business says something; the secretary reads a paper; and when the paper has been read, the long-haired man, addressing those whom other people are about to strangle with cords, says something about God and Christ. Immediately after these words, the hangmen (there are several, for one man could not manage so complicated a business)

¹ The papers have since contradicted the statement that twenty peasants were hung. I can only be glad of the mistake, glad not only that eight men less have been strangled than was stated at first, but glad also that the awful figure moved me to express in these pages, a feeling that has long tormented me. Therefore, merely substituting the word twelve for the word twenty, I leave all the rest unchanged, since what I said refers not only to the twelve who were hung, but to all the thousands who have lately been crushed and killed.

dissolves some soap, and having soaped the loops in the cords that they may tighten better, seize the shackled men, put shrouds on them, lead them to a scaffold and place the well-soaped nooses around their necks.

And then, one after another, living men are pushed off the benches which are drawn from under their feet, and by their own weight suddenly tighten the nooses round their necks, and are painfully strangled. Men, alive a minute before, become corpses dangling from a rope; at first slowly swinging, and then resting motionless.

All this is carefully arranged and planned by learned and enlightened people of the upper class. They arrange to do these things secretly at daybreak so that no one shall see them done, and they arrange that the responsibility for these iniquities shall be so subdivided among those who commit them that each may think and say that it is not he who is responsible for them. They arrange to seek out the most depraved and unfortunate of men and, while obliging them to do this business planned and approved by themselves, still keep up an appearance of abhorring those who do it. Even such a subtle device is planned as this; sentences are pronounced by a military tribunal, yet it is not the military but civilians who have to be present at the execution. And the business is performed by unhappy, deluded, perverted and despised men, who have nothing left them but to soap the cords well, that they may grip the necks without fail, then to get well drunk on poison sold them by these same enlightened upper-class people, in order more quickly and fully to forget their souls and their quality as men. A doctor makes his round of the bodies, feels them, and reports to those in authority that the business has been done properly; all twelve are certainly dead. And those in authority depart to their ordinary occupations, with the consciousness of a necessary though painful task performed. The bodies, now grown cold, are taken down and buried.

The thing is awful!

And this is not done once, and not to these twelve unhappy, misguided men from among the best class of the Russian people only, but is done unceasingly for years, to hundreds and thousands of similar misguided men, misguided by the very people who do these awful things to them.

And not this kind of dreadful thing alone is being done, but on the same plea and with the same cold-blooded cruelty, all sorts of other tortures and violence are being perpetrated in prisons, fortresses and convict settlements.

And while this goes on for years all over Russia, the chief culprits of these acts - those by whose order these things are done, those who could put a stop to them - fully convinced that such deeds are useful and even absolutely necessary, either devise methods and make up speeches how to prevent the Finns from living as they want to live, and how to compel them to live as certain Russian personages wish them to live; or else publish orders to the effect that "In Hussar regiments the cuffs are collars of the men's jackets are to be of the colour of the latter, while the pelisses of those entitled to wear them are not have braid round the cuffs over the fur."

This is awful!

Tolstoy's notations

translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude

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