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Last Message to Mankind

Leo Tolstoy

1909

Address to the Swedish Peace Congress in 1909, published in *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays* (translated by Aylmer Maude)

Dear Brothers,

We have met here to fight against war. War, the thing for the sake of which all the nations of the earth - millions and millions of people - place at the uncontrolled disposal of a few men or sometimes only one man, not merely milliards of rubles, talers, francs or yen (representing a very large share of their labor), but also their very lives.

And now we, a score of private people gathered from the various ends of the earth, possessed of no special privileges and above all having no power over anyone, intend to fight - and as we wish to fight we also wish to conquer - this immense power not only of one government but of all governments, which have at their disposal these milliards of money and millions of soldiers and who are well aware that the exceptional position of those who for the governments rests on the army alone: the army which has a meaning and a purpose against which we wish to fight and which we wish to abolish.

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For us to struggle, the forces being so unequal, must appear insane. But if we consider our opponent's means of strife and our own, it is not our intention to fight that will seem absurd, but that the thing we mean to fight will still exist. They have millions of money and millions of obedient soldiers; we have only one thing, but that is the most powerful thing in the world - Truth.

Therefore, insignificant as our forces may appear in comparison with those of our opponents, our victory is as sure as the victory of the light of the rising sun over the darkness of night.

Our victory is certain, but on one condition only - that when uttering the truth we utter it all, without compromise, concession, or modification. The truth so simple, so clear, so evident, so incumbent not only on Christians but on all reasonable men, that it is only necessary to speak it out in its full significance for it to be irresistible.

The truth in its full meaning lies in what was said thousands of years ago (in the law accepted among us as the Law of God) in four words: "Thou shalt not kill." The truth is that man may not and should not in any circumstances or under any pretext kill his fellow man. The truth is so evident, so binding, and so generally acknowledged, that it is only necessary to put it clearly before men for the evil called war to become quite impossible.

And so I think that if we who are assembled here at this Peace Congress should, instead of clearly and definitely voicing this truth, address ourselves to the governments with various proposals for lessening the evils of war or gradually diminishing its frequency, we should be like men who having in their hand the key to a door, should try to break through walls they know to be too strong for them.

Before us are millions of armed men, ever more and more efficiently armed and trained for more and more rapid slaughter. We know that these millions of people have no wish to kill their fellows and for the most part do not even know why they

are forced to do that repulsive work, and that they are weary of their position of subjection and compulsion; we know that the murders committed from time to time by these men are committed by order of the governments; and we know that the existence of the governments depends on the armies.

Can we then who desire the abolition of war, find nothing more conducive to our aim than to propose to the governments which exist only by the aid of armies and consequently by war - measures which would destroy war? Are we to propose to the governments that they should destroy themselves?

The governments will listen willingly to any speeches of that kind, knowing that such discussions will neither destroy war nor undermine their own power, but will only conceal yet more effectively what must be concealed if wars and armies and themselves in control of armies are to continue to exist.

'But', I shall be told, 'this is anarchism; people never have lived without governments and States, and therefore governments and States and military forces defending them are necessary for the existence of nations.'

But leaving aside the question of whether the life of Christian and other nations is possible without armies and wars to defend their governments and States, or even supposing it to be necessary for their welfare that they should slavishly submit to institutions called governments (consisting of people they do not personally know), and that it is necessary to yield up the produce of their labor to these institutions and fulfill all their demands - including the murder of their neighbors - granting them all that, there yet remains in our world an unsolved difficulty.

This difficulty lies in the impossibility of making the Christian faith (which those who form the governments profess with particular emphasis) accord with armies composed of Christians trained to slay. However much you may pervert the Christian teaching, however much you may hide its main principles, its fundamental teaching is the love of God and one's neighbor;

of God - that is the highest perfection of virtue, and of one's neighbor - that is all men without distinction.

And therefore it would seem inevitable that we must repudiate one of the two, either Christianity is love of God and one's neighbor, or the State with its armies and wars. Perhaps Christianity may be obsolete, and when choosing between the two - Christianity and love of the State and murder - the people of our time will conclude that the existence of the State and murder is more important than Christianity. Perhaps we must forgo Christianity and retain only what is important: the State and murder.

That may be so - at least people may think and feel so. But in that case they should say so! They should openly admit that people in our time have ceased to believe in what the collective wisdom of mankind has said, and what is said by the Law of God they profess: have ceased to believe in what is written indelibly on the heart of each man, and must now believe only in what is ordered by various people who by accident or birth have happened to become emperors and kings, or by various intrigues and elections have become presidents or members of senates and parliaments - even if those orders include murder. That is what they ought to say!

But it is impossible to say it; and yet one of these two things has to be said. If it is admitted that Christianity forbids murder, both armies and governments become impossible. And if it is admitted that government acknowledges the lawfulness of murder and denies Christianity, no one will wish to obey a government that exists merely by its power to kill. And besides, if murder is allowed in war it must be still more allowable when a people seek its rights in a revolution. And therefore the governments, being unable to say either one thing or the other, are anxious to hid from their subjects the necessity of solving the dilemma. And for us who are assembled here to counteract the evil of war, if we really desire to attain our end, only one thing is necessary: namely to put that dilemma quite clearly and def-

the truth which, as I firmly believe, is alone capable of relieving mankind from the incalculable ills produced by war.

initely both to those who form governments and to the masses of the people who compose the army.

To do that we must not only clearly and openly repeat the truth we all know and cannot help knowing - that man should not slay his fellow man - but we must also make it clear that no considerations can destroy the demand made by the truth on people in the Christian world. Therefore I propose that our Meeting draw up and publish an appeal to all men, and especially to the Christian nations, in which we clearly and definitely express what everybody knows, but hardly anyone says: namely war is not - as most people assume - a good and laudable affair, but that like all murder, it is a vile and criminal business not only for those who voluntarily choose a military career but for those who submit to it from avarice, or fear of punishment.

With regard to those who voluntarily choose a military career, I would propose to state clearly and definitely that notwithstanding all the pomp, glitter, and general approval with which it is surrounded, it is a criminal and shameful activity; and that the higher the position a man holds in the military profession the more criminal and shameful his occupation.

In the same way with regard to men of the people who are drawn into military service by bribes or by threats of punishments, I propose to speak clearly about the gross mistake they make - contrary to their faith, morality and common sense - when they consent to enter the army; contrary to their faith because when they enter the ranks of murderers contrary to the Law of God which they acknowledge; contrary to morality, because for pay or from fear of punishment they agreed to what in their souls they know to be wrong; and contrary to common sense, because if they enter the army and war breaks out they risk having to suffer any consequences, bad or worse than those they are threatened with if they refuse. Above all they act contrary to common sense in that they join that caste

of people which deprives them of freedom and compels them to be soldiers.

With reference to both classes I propose in this appeal to express clearly the thought that for men of true enlightenment, who are therefore free from the superstition of military glory, (and their number is growing every day) the military profession and calling notwithstanding all the efforts to hide its real meaning, is as shameful a business as the executioner's and even more so. For the executioner only holds himself in readiness to kill those who have been adjudged to be harmful and criminal, while a soldier promises to kill all who he is told to kill, even though they may be the dearest to him or the best of men.

Humanity in general, and our Christian humanity in particular, has reached a stage of such acute contradiction between its moral demands and the existing social order, that a change has become inevitable, and a change not in society's moral demand which are immutable, but in the social order which can be altered. The demand for a different social order, evoked by that inner contradiction which is so clearly illustrated by our preparations for murder, becomes more and more insistent every year and every day.

The tension which demands that alteration has reached such a degree that, just as sometimes only a slight shock is required to change a liquid into a solid body, so perhaps with a slight effort or even a single word may be needed to change the cruel and irrational life of our time - with its divisions, armaments and armies - into a reasonable life in keeping with the consciousness of contemporary humanity.

Every such effort, every such word, may be the shock which will instantly solidify the super cooled liquid. Why should not our gathering be the shock?

In Andersen's fairy tale, when the King went in triumphal procession through the streets of the town and all the people were delighted with his beautiful new clothes, a word from a

child who said what everybody knew but had not said, changed everything. He said: 'He has nothing on!' and the spell was broken, and the king became ashamed and all those who had been assuring themselves that they saw him wearing beautiful new clothes perceived that he was naked! We must say the same. We must say what everybody knows but does not venture to say. We must say that by whatever name people may call murder - murder always remains murder and a criminal and shameful thing. And it is only necessary to say that clearly, definitely, and loudly, as we can say it here, and men will cease to see what they thought they saw, and will see what is really before their eyes.

They will cease to see the service for their country, the heroism of war, military glory, and patriotism, and will see what exists: the naked, criminal business of murder!

And if people see that, the same thing will happen as in the fairy tale: those who do the criminal thing will feel ashamed, and those who assure themselves that they do not see the criminality of murder will perceive it and cease to be murderers.

But how will nations defend themselves against their enemies, how will they maintain internal order, and how can nations live without an army?

What form of life men will take after they repudiate murder we do not and cannot know; but one thing is certain: that it is more natural for men to be guided by reason and conscience with which they are endowed, than to submit slavishly to people who arrange wholesale murders; and that therefrom the form of social order assumed by the lives of those who are guided in their actions not by violence based on threats of murder, but by reason and conscience, will in any case be no worse than that under which they now live.

That is all I want to say. I shall be sorry if it offends or grieves anyone or evokes any ill feeling. But for me, a man eighty years old, expecting to die at any moment, it would be shameful and criminal not to speak out the whole truth as I understand it -