

Letter to the Peace Conference

Leo Tolstoy

The opinion expressed in your estimable letter, that the easiest and surest way to universal disarmament is by individuals refusing to take part in military service, is most just. I am even of opinion that this is the only way to escape from the terrible and ever increasing miseries of war (militarism). But your opinion that at the Conference which is about to assemble at the Czar's invitation, the question should be debated whether men who refuse military service may not be employed on public works instead, appears to me quite mistaken in the first place, because the Conference itself can be nothing but one of those hypocritical arrangements which aim not at peace, but, on the contrary, at hiding from men the one means of obtaining universal peace, which the most advanced men begin to discern.

The Conference, it is said, will aim, if not at disarmament, then at checking the increase of armaments. It is supposed that at this Conference the representatives of governments will agree to cease increasing their forces. If so, the question involuntarily presents itself : How will the governments of those countries act which at the time of this meeting happen to be weaker than their neighbors ? Such governments will hardly agree to remain in that condition weaker than their neighbors. Or, if they have such firm belief in the validity of the stipulations made by the Conference as to agree to remain weaker, why should they not be weaker still ? Why spend money on an army at all ?

If, again, the business of the Conference will be to equalize the fighting forces of the various states, and to keep them stationary, then, even could such an impossible balance be arrived at, the question involuntarily arises : Why need the governments stop at such armaments as now exist ? Why not decrease them ? Why need Germany, France, and Russia have, say, for instance, 1,000,000 men each, and not 500,000, or why not 10,000 each, or why not 1000 each? If diminution is possible, why not reduce to a minimum ? And, finally, why not, instead of armies, have champions David and Goliath and settle international questions according to the results of their combats ?

It is said that the conflicts between governments are to be decided by arbitration. But, apart from the fact that the disputes will be settled, not by representatives of the people, but by representatives of the governments, and that there is no guarantee that the decisions will be just ones, who is to carry out the decisions of the court ? The army ? Whose army ? That of all the Powers ? But the strength of those armies is unequal. Who, for instance, on the Continent is to carry out a decision which is disadvantageous, say, for Germany, Russia, and France allied together? Or

who, at sea, will carry out a decision contrary to the interests of England, America, and France ? The arbitrator's sentence against the military violence of states will be carried out by military violence that is to say, the thing that has to be checked is to be the instrument by which it is to be checked. To catch a bird, put salt on its tail.

I recollect, during the siege of Sevastopol, sitting one day with the Adjutant Von Saken, commander of the garrison, when Prince S. S. Urusof, a very brave officer, a very eccentric man, and one of the best chess-players of that day in Europe, entered the room. He said he wished to see the general. One of the adjutants took him to the general's cabinet. Ten minutes later Urusof passed out again, looking discontented. The adjutant who had accompanied him returned to us and recounted, laughing, on what business Urusof had come to Von Saken. He had proposed to challenge the English to play a game of chess for the possession of the advanced trench of the fifth bastion, which had been lost and regained several times, and had already cost some hundreds of lives.

Undoubtedly it would have been far better to play chess for the trench than to kill people. But Von Saken did not agree to Urusof's proposal, for he knew well that it would be useless to play at chess for the trench unless both sides trusted each other implicitly, and knew that what was agreed upon would be carried out. But the presence of the soldiers before the trench, and the cannon pointed at it, were signs that no such mutual confidence existed. While there were armies on both sides it was clear that the matter would be decided, not by chess, but by charges. And the same consideration applies to international questions. For them to be decided by courts of arbitration there must be, among the Powers, full mutual confidence that the decisions of the court will be respected. If there is such confidence, no armies are necessary. But if armies exist, it is obvious that this confidence is lacking, and that international questions can be decided only by the strength of the armies. As long as armies exist they are necessary, not only for acquiring fresh territories, as all the states are now doing, in Asia, in Africa, or in Europe, but also in order to maintain by force what has been obtained by force.

Obtaining or retaining by force can be done only by conquering. And it is always les gros bataillons which conquer. And, therefore, if a government has an army, it should have as large a one as possible. That is its business. If a government does not do that, it is unnecessary. A government may undertake many things in internal affairs ; it may emancipate, civilize, enrich a people, build roads and canals, colonize waste lands, or organize public works, but there is one thing it cannot do, viz., the very thing which this Conference is summoned to do, i.e. reduce its fighting force.

But if, as appeared from the explanations that followed the manifesto, it will be an aim of the Conference to prohibit implements of destruction which seem particularly cruel (and why, while they are about it, not try to prohibit the seizure of letters, the falsification of telegrams, the spy system, and all the terrible meannesses which form an integral part of military defense ?), such prohibition to use in strife all the means that exist is just as impracticable as it is to forbid people fighting for their lives to strike the most sensitive parts of the body. And why is a wound, or death, from an explosive bullet worse than a wound from the most ordinary bullet or splinter, inflicted on a very tender part ? The suffering in that case also reaches the utmost limit, and is followed by just the same death as results from any other weapon.

It is amazing that sane adults can seriously express such queer ideas. No doubt diplomatists, who devote their lives to lying, are so accustomed to that vice, and live and act in so dense an atmosphere of lies, that they themselves do not see all the absurdity and mendacity of their

proposals. But how can honest private people (not such as curry favor with the Czar, by extolling his ridiculous proposals) how is it that they do not see that the result of this Conference can be nothing but the strengthening of the deception in which governments keep their subjects, as was the case with Alexander the First's "Holy Alliance" ?

The aim of the Conference will be, not to establish peace, but to hide from men the sole means of escape from the miseries of war, which lies in the refusal by private individuals of all participation in the murders of war. And, therefore, the Conference can on no account accept for discussion the question suggested.

With those who refuse military service on conscientious grounds, governments will always behave as the Russian government behaved with the Dukhobors. At the very time when it was professing to the whole world its peaceful intentions, it was (with every effort to keep the matter secret) torturing and ruining and banishing the most peaceable people in Russia, merely because they were peaceable, not in words only, but in deeds, and therefore refused to be soldiers. All the European governments have met, and still meet, refusals of military service in the same way, though less brutally. That is how the governments of Austria, Germany, France, Sweden, Switzerland, and Holland have acted, and are still acting, and they cannot act otherwise.

They cannot act otherwise because they govern their own subjects by force i.e. by means of a disciplined army and can, therefore, on no account leave the reduction of that force (and consequently of their own power) to the casual inclination of private people, especially because nobody likes to kill or to be killed ; and should they tolerate such refusals, the great majority of people probably would prefer to do other work instead of being soldiers. So that, as soon as people were permitted to refuse army service, and do work instead, there would soon be so many laborers that there would not be soldiers enough to make the workers work.

Liberals entangled in their much talking, socialists, and other so-called advanced people may think that their speeches in Parliament and at meetings, their unions, strikes, and pamphlets, are of great importance ; while the refusals of military service by private individuals are unimportant occurrences not worthy of attention. The governments, however, know very well what is important to them and what is not. And the governments readily allow all sorts of liberal and radical speeches in Reichstags, as well as workmen's associations and socialist demonstrations, and they even pretend themselves to sympathize with these things, knowing that they are of great use to them in diverting people's attention from the great and only means of emancipation. But governments never openly tolerate refusals of military service, or refusals of war taxes, which are the same thing, because they know that such refusals expose the fraud of governments and strike at the root of their power.

As long as governments continue to rule their people by force, and continue to desire, as now, to obtain new possessions (Philippines, Port Arthur, etc.), and to retain what they already possess (Poland, Alsace, India, Algeria, etc.), so long will they not voluntarily decrease their armies, but will, on the contrary, continue to increase them.

It was recently reported that an American regiment refused to go to Iloilo. This news was given as something astonishing. But the really astonishing thing is that such things do not occur continually. How could all those Russians, Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, and Americans who have fought in recent times, set off to kill men of another country at the whim of strangers, whom in most cases they did not respect, and submit themselves to suffering and death ?

It seems plain and natural that all these men should recollect themselves, if not when they are enlisted as soldiers, then at the last moment when they are being led against the enemy, and should stop, fling away their weapons, and call to their opponents to do the same.

It seems so plain and natural that every one should do this, and if they do not do so it is only because they believe in the governments that assure them that all the burdens people bear for war are laid upon them for their own good. With amazing effrontery, all governments have always declared, and still go on declaring, that all the preparations for war, and even the very wars themselves, that they undertake, are necessary to preserve peace. In this sphere of hypocrisy and deception a fresh step is being made now, consisting in this : That the very governments for whose support the armies and the wars are essential pretend that they are concerned to discover means to diminish the armies and to abolish war. The governments wish to persuade the peoples that there is no need for private individuals to trouble about freeing themselves from wars ; the governments themselves, at their conferences, will arrange first to reduce and presently quite to abolish armies. But this is untrue.

Armies can be reduced and abolished only in opposition to the will, but never by the will, of governments.

Armies will only be diminished and abolished when people cease to trust governments, and themselves seek salvation from the miseries that oppress them, and seek that safety, not by the complicated and delicate combinations of diplomatists, but in the simple fulfillment of that law, binding upon every man, inscribed in all religious teachings, and present in every heart, not to do to others what you wish them not to do to you above all, not to slay your neighbors.

Armies will first diminish, and then disappear, only when public opinion brands with contempt those who, whether from fear, or for advantage, sell their liberty and enter the ranks of those murderers, called soldiers ; and when the men now ignored and even blamed who, in despite of all the persecution and suffering they have borne have refused to yield the control of their actions into the hands of others, and become the tools of murder are recognized by public opinion, to be the foremost champions and benefactors of mankind. Only then will armies first diminish and then quite disappear, and a new era in the life of mankind will commence. And that time is near.

And that is why I think that your opinion that the refusals to serve in the army are facts of immense importance, and that they will emancipate mankind from the miseries of war, is perfectly just. But your opinion that the Conference may conduce toward this is quite an error. The Conference can only divert people's eyes from the sole path leading to safety and liberty.¹

Tolstoy is always most careful in the arrangement of the thoughts he puts before the world. His works are written over and over again before they are published. On this occasion, after he had dispatched the letter, he felt that the manner in which he had expressed his opinion was not satisfactory. Eventually he rewrote the article, in such a way that the whole letter was recast in a fresh form, and hardly a paragraph of the original remained unaltered. TR.

Notes

¹ A number of Swedish gentlemen addressed a letter to Tolstoy concerning the Czar's Peace Conference, in reply to which he wrote them a letter.

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