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Leo Tolstoy
Persecution of Christians in Russia
1895

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Persecution of Christians in Russia

Leo Tolstoy

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"The world, ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

The Dukhobors¹ settled in the Caucasus have been subjected to cruel persecutions by the Russian authorities, and these persecutions, described in the report of one who made inquiries on the spot,² are now, at this moment, being carried on.

These Dukhobors were beaten, whipped, and ridden down; quartered upon them in "executions" were Cossacks who, it is proved, allowed themselves every license with these people; and everything they did was with the consent of their officers. Those men who had refused military service were tortured, in body and in mind; and it is entirely true that a prosperous population, who by

¹ The Russian word Dukhobortsi from *Dukh*, "spirit," and *barets*, "a wrestler" is the nickname popularly applied to the dissidents who refuse to use carnal weapons of defense. The simpler form "Dukhobors" [Canada: Doukhobors] is now generally employed. ED.

² A detailed report of those persecutions, drawn up from personal observation by a friend and agent of Count Tolstoy, was published in the London *Times* of October 23, 1895.

tens of years of hard toil had created their own prosperity, were expelled from their homes and settled, without land and without means of subsistence, in the Georgian villages.

The cause of these persecutions is, that for certain reasons three-fourths of the Dukhobors (that is, about 15,000 people, their whole population being about 20,000) have this year returned with renewed force and earnestness to their former Christian profession, and have resolved to comply in practice with Christ's law of non-resistance to evil by violence. This decision has caused them, on one hand, to destroy all their weapons, which are considered so needful in the Caucasus, thus renouncing the possibility of fighting, and putting themselves at the mercy of every marauder; and, on the other hand, to refuse, under all circumstances, participation in acts of force which may be demanded from them by the government; which means that they must refuse service in the army or wherever else violence is used. The government could not permit so many thousands of people such a desertion of the duties established by law, and a struggle broke out. The government demands compliance with its requirements; the Dukhobors will not obey.

The government cannot afford to yield. Not only because this refusal of the Dukhobors to comply with the requirements of government has, from the official standpoint, no legal justification, and is contradictory to the existing time-consecrated order; but such refusals must be discountenanced at once, for the sole reason that, if allowed to ten, to-morrow there will be a thousand, ten thousand, others who wish to escape the burden of the taxes and the conscription. And if this is allowed, there will spring up marauding and chaos instead of order and security; no one's property or life will be safe. Thus reason the authorities; they cannot reason otherwise; and they are not in the least at fault in so reasoning. Even without any such selfish consideration as that these desertions might deprive him of his means of subsistence, now collected from the people by means of compulsion, every official, from the Czar down to the *uryadnik* or village police-commissioner, must be deeply in-

dignant with the refusal of some uncivilized, unlettered people to comply with the demands of the government, which are obligatory upon all. "How dare these mere ciphers of people," thinks the official, "deny that which is recognized by every one, that which is consecrated by the law, and is practiced everywhere?" As officials, they cannot be shown to be in error for acting as they do. They use force, brute force. And they cannot avoid so doing.

In point of fact, how can you, by reasonable and humane means, compel men who profess the Christian religion to join another body of men who are learning how to kill, and practicing for that purpose? The deception of deceived people can be maintained by various kinds of stupefactions — by administration of oaths, by theological, philosophical, and judicial sophistries. But as soon as the deception is by some means broken, and people like the Dukhobors, calling things by their right names, say, "We are Christians, and therefore we cannot kill," then the lie is exposed; and to persuade such men by arguments of reason is impossible. The only means of inducing them to obey are blows, "executions," deprivation of shelter, cold and hunger in their families. Just these means are used. As long as the officials are not conscious of their wrong position they can do nothing else; and therefore are not at fault. But still less are those Christians at fault who refuse to participate in murderous exercises, and to join a body of men who are trained to kill any whom the government orders to be killed. They, also, cannot act otherwise. The nominal Christian, baptized and brought up in Greek orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, might continue to follow violence and murder, as long as he does not discover the deception put upon him.

But as soon as he discovers that every man is responsible to God for his acts, and that this responsibility cannot be shifted to some one else or excused by the oath, and that he must not kill, or prepare himself to kill, then participation with the army at once becomes to him as impossible morally as it is physically impossible for him to lift a ton weight.

This fact of the Christian religion makes its relation to government a terrible tragedy. The tragedy arises from this, that the governments have to rule over nations which are Christian, though not yet wholly enlightened, but still every day and hour becoming more and more illumined with the teaching of Christ. All "civilized" governments, from the days of Constantine, have known and felt this, and from the instinct of self-preservation have done everything they could to obscure the true idea of Christianity, and to destroy its spirit. They have known that when men become alive to this spirit, force will be abolished, together with government itself. Therefore the governments have continued to pursue their vocation by creating State institutions, by piling up laws and institutions one on the other, hoping under these to bury the undying spirit of Christ infused into the hearts of men. The governments have continued their labor, but at the same time the Christian teaching has done its work, more and more penetrating the minds and hearts of men. And now comes the time — which, Christianity being the work of God, opposed to government, which is man's work, was bound to come — when the effect of Christianity overcomes the effect of governments.

Just as in the burning of a pile there comes a moment when the fire which long worked obscurely within, only now and then by flashes and smoke proving its presence, suddenly wins its way on every side with a burning no longer to be subdued, so in the conflict of the Christian spirit with the pagan laws and institutions, there comes the time when this Christian spirit bursts forth everywhere, no longer to be kept under, and every moment threatening to destroy the institutions under which it was buried.

Indeed, what can, what must, government do with these 15,000 of the Dukhobors who refused military service? What is to be done with them? They cannot be let alone. Even now, at the beginning of the movement, there have appeared Greek Orthodox people who follow the example of the Dukhobors. What then, does the future hold? What if similar action is taken by the Molokans, Stundists,

ceeds, and will be wrought out, not through man's arbitrary will, but as the result of a divine principle common to us all and resident in our hearts. A process of birth is going on, and our whole action must be directed not to thwart, but to help, this process. And such help is given, certainly not by resisting the divine truth revealed to us, but, on the contrary, by an open and fearless admission of it. Such admission of truth gives not only full satisfaction to the conscience of those who so profess, but also the greatest possible welfare to all; to the persecuted and to the persecutors as well. Salvation is not in retrogression, but in progression.

The crisis in the change of the form of our social life and in the replacement of forcible government by some other socializing principle, has passed already; and the solution before us is not by stoppage of the process, or by reversal of it, but by nothing else than a forward movement along that road which the law of Christ points out to the hearts of men.

Yet another effort, and the Galilean will conquer. Not in that ruthless sense understood by the pagan emperor, but in that true sense in which He Himself spoke of His conquest of the world, "*In the world you shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer;*" said He, "*I have overcome the world.*" (John 16:33)

He has actually overcome the world; not in a mystical sense of invisible victory over sin, as these words are interpreted to mean by the theologians, but in the simple, clear, and comprehensible sense that, if we will only have courage and boldly profess Him, soon not only will those horrible persecutions of the body of true disciples of Christ who carry out His teaching practically in their lives disappear, but there will remain no more prisons or gallows, no wars, corruption, idleness, or toil-crushed poverty, under which Christian humanity now groans.

September 19, 1895

Shaloputy, Khlysty, the Pilgrims, all those sectarians who hold the same views as to government and military service, and who do not act as the Dukhobors have done, merely because they have not resolution to take the initiative, and fear to suffer? Of such people there are millions; not in Russia only, but in all Christian countries; not only in Christian, but in Muslim countries; in Persia, Turkey, and Arabia, for instance, there are the Karidshity and the Babisty. It is needful to prevent contagion from these ten of thousands who acknowledge no government, and do not wish to take part in government. But how? Certainly they cannot be killed. They are too many. It is no less difficult to put them in prison. It is only possible to ruin and torture them. And just this is done.

But what if these tortures have not the desired effect, and these people still persist in declaring the truth, and by so doing attract more adherents? The position of governments is crucial; the more so that they can take no certain stand. You cannot denounce as bad the deeds of men like Drozhin, who was tortured to death in prison; or Izyumchenko, still suffering in Siberia; or Dr. Skarvan, imprisoned in Austria; or like all those others at present in prisons,— men who are ready to suffer and to die, only to be faithful to the most simple, universally comprehensible and approved religious principles, which prohibit murder and participation in murder.

By no device of logic can you demonstrate the acts of these men to be bad or unchristian; and not only are you unable to disapprove, but you cannot help admiring them. Because you must admit that men who so act, act in the name of the noblest qualities of man's soul,— qualities which, if you do not recognize their nobility, you reduce man's life to the level of animal existence. Therefore, however government acts toward these men, it must inevitably forward, not their, but its own, destruction. If government refrains from persecuting these people who, like the Dukhobors, Stundists, Nazarenes, and isolated individuals, refuse to take part in the acts of government, then the advantages of the peaceful Christian lives of these men will attract to them not only sincerely convinced

Christians, but also those who will become Christians externally; and the number of people who do not comply with the requirements of government will grow more and more.

On the other hand, if the government continues its cruelty as at present, then this very cruelty, to men whose only fault is that they lead a more moral and righteous life than others do, and seek to apply practically the law of righteousness which is professed by all, this very cruelty will more and more repel men's sympathy from government, and finally there will be no men ready to support it by force. The half-savage Cossacks who beat the Dukhobors by order of the officers, "very soon began to be tired of it," as they said when they were quartered in the villages of the Dukhobors. That means, conscience began to agitate them ; and the authorities, fearing the influence of the Dukhobors upon them, hastened to withdraw them.

Never was a persecution of innocent people which has not ended in the persecutors receiving the principles of the persecuted ; as it was with the warrior Simeon, who exterminated the Paulicians and then adopted their creed. The more indulgent the government, the quicker the numbers of true Christians will grow. The more cruel the government, the quicker the numbers of those that yield to the requirements of government diminishes. Thus, whether indulgent or cruel toward men who by their lives proclaim Christianity, government is forwarding its own destruction. "*Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out.*" (John 12:31) And this judgment was pronounced eighteen hundred years ago that is, at the time when, in place of the principle of external justice, the principle of love was asserted.

However much wood one throws on the burning pile of sticks, thinking thus to put out the fire, the inextinguishable flame, the flame of truth, will only be temporarily smothered, and will burn up still more strongly, consuming everything heaped upon it. Even though it happen (as it always happens) that some of the contenders for truth become weak in the strife, and yield to the

government, that, nevertheless, would not in the least change the position. If to-day the Dukhobors in the Caucasus should yield, being unable any longer to bear the sufferings which overcome their old men and women, their wives and children, still, to-morrow, there would arise other contenders, ready on all hands, more and more boldly proclaiming their principles, and less and less liable to yield. Does truth cease to be truth because the men who professed it become weak under the pressure of torture ? That which is of God must conquer that which is of man.

"But what will happen if government is brought to an end? "I hear the question which is always put by those who think that if we lose that which we now have, then there will remain nothing, everything will be lost.

There is always the one answer to this question. There will be the thing which ought to be, that which is well-pleasing to God, which is according to the law He has put in our hearts and revealed to our minds. If government should be abolished by us in the way of revolution, certainly the question as to what will be after government is done away with would require an answer from the abolitionists. But the abolition which is now in process is taking place, not because some one, or some body of men, have resolved upon it, but government is being swept away because it is not according to the will of God which He has revealed to our minds and put into our hearts.

A man who refuses to kill and imprison his brother man does not purpose to destroy government; he merely wishes not to do that which is contrary to the will of God; he is merely avoiding that which not only he, but every one who is above the brute, undoubtedly considers evil. If through this, government be destroyed, it only shows that the demands of government are contrary to God's will — that is, they are evil; and thus government, being in itself an evil, comes to be destroyed. The change which is now taking place in the social life of the nations, although we cannot exactly tell what form it will take in the future, cannot be bad, because it pro-