

Two Wars

Leo Tolstoy

1898

Christendom has recently been the scene of two wars. One is now concluded, whereas the other still continues; but they were for a time being carried on simultaneously, and the contrast they present is very striking. The first—the Spanish-American war—was an old, vain, foolish, and cruel war, inopportune, out-of-date, barbarous, which sought by killing one set of people to solve the question as to how and by whom another set of people ought to be governed.

The other, which is still going on, and will end only when there is an end of all war, is a new, self-sacrificing, holy war, which was long ago proclaimed (as Victor Hugo expressed it at one of the congresses) by the best and most advanced—Christian—section of mankind against the other, the coarse and savage section. This war has recently been carried on with especial vigor and success by a handful of Christian people—the Dukhobors of the Caucasus—against the powerful Russian government.

The other day I received a letter from a gentleman in Colorado—Jesse Goldwin—who asks me to send him “. . . a few words or thoughts expressive of my feelings with regard to the noble work of the American nation, and the heroism of its soldiers and sailors.” This gentleman, together with an overwhelming majority of the American people, feels perfectly confident that the work of the Americans—the killing of several thousands of almost unarmed men (for, in comparison with the equipment of the Americans, the Spaniards were almost without arms)—was beyond doubt a “noble work”; and he regards the majority of those who, after killing great numbers of their fellow-creatures, have remained safe and sound, and have secured for themselves an advantageous position, as heroes.

The Spanish-American War—leaving out of account the atrocities committed by the Spaniards in Cuba, which served as a pretext for it—is very like this: An old man, infirm and childish, brought up in the traditions of a false honor, challenges, for the settlement of some misunderstanding, a young man, in full possession of his powers, to a boxing-match. And the young man, who, from his antecedents and professed sentiments, ought to be immeasurably above such a settlement of the question, accepts the challenge. Armed with a club, he then throws himself upon this infirm and childish old man, knocks out his teeth, breaks his ribs, and afterwards enthusiastically relates his great deeds to a large audience of young men like himself, who rejoice and praise the hero who has thus maimed the old man.

Such is the nature of the first war, which is occupying the attention of the whole Christian world. Of the other no one speaks; hardly any one knows about it.

This second war may be described as follows: The people of every nation are being deluded by their rulers, who say to them, "You, who are governed by us, are all in danger of being conquered by other nations; we are watching over your welfare and safety, and consequently we demand of you annually some millions of rubles—the fruit of your labor—to be used by us in the acquisition of arms, cannon, powder, and ships for your defense; we also demand that you yourselves shall enter institutions, organized by us, where you will become senseless particles of a huge machine—the army—which will be under our absolute control. On entering this army you will cease to be men with wills of your own; you will simply do what we require of you. But what we wish, above all else, is to exercise dominion; the means by which we dominate is killing, therefore we will instruct you to kill."

Notwithstanding the obvious absurdity of the assertion that people are in danger of being attacked by the governments of other states, who, in their turn, affirm that they—in spite of all their desire for peace—find themselves in precisely the same danger; notwithstanding the humiliation of that slavery to which men subject themselves by entering the army; notwithstanding the cruelty of the work to which they are summoned,—men nevertheless submit to this fraud, give their money to be used for their own subjugation, and themselves help to enthral others.

But now there come people who say: "What you tell us about the danger threatening us, and about your anxiety to guard us against it, is a fraud. All the states are assuring us that they desire peace, and yet at the same time all are arming themselves against the others. Moreover, according to that law, which you yourselves recognize, all men are brothers, and it makes no difference whether one belongs to this state or to that; therefore the idea of our being attacked by other nations, with which you try to frighten us, has no terrors for us; we regard it as a matter of no importance. The essential thing, however, is that the law given to us by God and recognized even by you who are requiring us to participate in killing, distinctly forbids, not killing only, but also every kind of violence. Therefore we cannot, and will not, take part in your preparations for murder, we will give no money for the purpose, and we will not attend the meetings arranged by you with the object of perverting men's minds and consciences, and transforming them into instruments of violence, obedient to any bad man who may choose to make use of them."

This constitutes the second war. It has long been carried on by the best men of the world against the representatives of brute force, and has of late flamed up with special intensity between the Dukhobors and the Russian government. The Russian government has made use of all the weapons it had at command—police measures for making arrests, for prohibiting people moving from place to place, for forbidding all intercourse with one another, the interception of letters, espionage, the prohibition to publish in the newspapers information about anything concerning the Dukhobors, calumnies of them printed in the papers, bribery, flogging, imprisonment, and the ruin of families.

The Dukhobors have, on their part, employed their one religious weapon, viz., gentle intelligence and patient firmness; and they say: "One must not obey man rather than God. Therefore, whatever you may do to us, we cannot and will not obey you."

Men praise the heroes of the savage Spanish-American war, who, in their desire to distinguish themselves before the world, and to gain reward and fame, have slain great numbers of men, or have died while engaged in killing their fellow-creatures. But no one speaks or even knows about the heroes of the war against war, who—unseen and unheard—have died and are now dying under the rod, in foul prison cells or in painful exile, and who, nevertheless, to their last breath, stand firm by goodness and truth.

I knew dozens of these martyrs who have already died, and hundreds more who, scattered all over the world, are still suffering martyrdom for the truth.

I knew Drozhin, a peasant teacher, who was tortured to death in a penal battalion; I knew another, Izumtchenko (a friend of Drozhin), who, after being kept for some time in a penal battalion, was banished to the other end of the world. I knew Olkhovikof, a peasant who refused military service, and was consequently sent to a penal battalion, and then, while on board a steamer which was transporting him into exile, converted Sereda, the soldier who had him in charge. Sereda, understanding what Olkhovikof said to him as to the sinfulness of military service, went to his superiors and said, like the ancient martyrs; "I do not wish to be among the torturers; let me join the martyrs." And forthwith they began to torture him, sent him to a penal battalion, and afterwards exiled him to the province of Yakutsk. I knew dozens of Dukhobors, of whom many have died or become blind, and yet they would not yield to demands which are contrary to the divine law.

The other day I read a letter from a young Dukhobor, who has been sent alone to a regiment stationed in Samarkand. Again, those same demands on the part of the officers, the same persuasion from the chaplain, the same threats and entreaties, and always the same simple and irresistible replies: "I cannot do what is opposed to my belief in God."

"Then we will torture you to death."

"That is your business. You do your work and I will do mine."

And this youth of twenty, forsaken of all, in a strange place, surrounded by men who are hostile to him, amid the rich, the powerful, and the educated, who are concentrating all their energies on the task of bringing him to subjection, does not submit, but still perseveres in his heroic deed.

But men say: "These are useless victims; these people perish, but the order of life will remain the same." This, I believe, is just what was said with regard to the sacrifice of Christ, as well as of all the other martyrs to truth. The men of our time, especially the learned, have grown so coarse that they, owing to their coarseness, are even unable to understand the significance and effect of spiritual force. A shell with 250 puds of dynamite, fired at a crowd of living men—this they understand and recognize as a force; but thought, truth, which has been realized and practiced in the life, even to martyrdom, which has now become accessible to millions this, according to their conception, is not a force, because it makes no noise, and one cannot see broken bones and pools of blood. Learned men (true, it is those whose learning is misdirected) are using all the power of erudition to prove that mankind lives like a herd of cattle, that man is guided by economic considerations alone, and that his intellect is given him merely for amusement. But governments well know what it is that rules the world, consequently—guided by the instinct of self-preservation—they are undoubtedly chiefly concerned about the manifestation of spiritual forces, upon which forces depend their existence or their ruin.

And this is precisely the reason why all the energies of the Russian government were, and still continue to be, exerted to render the Dukhobors harmless, to isolate them, to banish them beyond the frontier.

Notwithstanding all these efforts, however, the struggle of the Dukhobors has opened the eyes of millions.

I know hundreds of military men, old and young, who, owing to the persecution of the gentle, industrious Dukhobors, have begun to have doubts as to the legality of their occupation. I know people who have, for the first time, begun to meditate on life and the meaning of Christianity

only after seeing or hearing about the life of these people, and the persecutions to which they have been subjected.

And the government that is tyrannizing over millions of people knows this, and feels that it has been struck to the very heart.

Such is the nature of the second war which is being waged in our times, and such are its consequences. And not to the Russian government alone are these consequences of importance; every government founded upon violence and upheld by armies is wounded in the same way by this weapon. Christ said, "*I have conquered the world.*" And, indeed, He has conquered the world, if men would but learn to believe in the strength of the weapon given by Him.

And this weapon is the obedience of every man to his own reason and conscience. This, indeed, is so simple, so indubitable, and binding upon every man. "You wish to make me a participator in murder; you demand of me money for the preparation of weapons; and want me to take part in the organized assembly of murderers," says the reasonable man—he who has neither sold nor obscured his conscience. "But I profess that law—the same that is also professed by you—which long ago forbade not murder only, but all hostility also, and therefore I cannot obey you."

And it is just by this simple means, and by it alone, that the world is being conquered.

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