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The Death Penalty in Russia

Mikhail Bakunin

February 7, 1870

To the editors of the Rappel.

Gentlemen,

In the issue of January 29 of your estimable paper, I have found a very amusing letter from my compatriot, Prince Wiasemsky, in which he has been so tiresome as to note the ignorance of M. J. Simon and some other signatories of the bill on the abolition of the death penalty, and which ends by declaring to you that the death penalty no longer exists in Russia, having been abolished by the Empress Catherine II.

That news appears to have dismayed you. Frightened about the obvious inferiority which would result from it for your country, you have first sought a consolation in the idea that “if Russia does not have the death penalty, it has Siberia and the whip.” Then, reflecting on “the beating” which flourished in Cayenne, you have cried in despair:

“Alas! Will imperial France be reduced to envying Russia!”—(You should have added “Imperial,” it seems to me.)

Do not worry, gentlemen, and chase away the blush that threatens to invade your brow. Despite the incontestable progress that

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you have made, since June 1848, in the art of repression and bloody suppressions, you have not reached the height of our ankles, and we will continue to dominate you by the unqualified majesty of our absolute scorn for the dignity, rights and lives of men. And since the mere thought that the death penalty could have been abolished in Russia while it continues to work in France desolates you, I hasten to calm you, by assuring you that not only the simple death penalty, but varied, complicated, and refined forms, preceded by tortures, have never ceased to provoke among us the respect of authority and love of public order. In this regard, as in so many others, we surpass all the countries of Europe, not excepting even Turkey.

Gentlemen, we hang;

We shoot,

We kill with the knout;—now we no longer call it the knout, but the lash, which is more gentle;

We kill by the gauntlet in military executions,

Or with the simple rod;

We stifle and poison in secret in our prisons;

And when we find it necessary, we precede the final execution by the *question ordinaire* and *extraordinaire*[forms of torture]; we employ the traditional torture, developed and perfected by the application of all the discoveries of modern science.

It is only the Chinese who surpass us in the art, eminently political, of tormenting and eliminating men.

So, you ask, would the prince Wiasemski...say the opposite of the truth?

Alas! **I am sorry for** the prince, but I must admit he has misled you. But wait, there is an excuse for him. It is perfectly true that the death penalty, and torture as well, was legally abolished in Russia, even before Catherine II, by the Empress Elizabeth, the mother of the unfortunate Peter III, whom Catherine his wife had murdered by his guards. Becoming the great Empress by these means, Catherine II, wishing to receive the applause of civilized Europe, wrote in her own hand a sort of introduction to Russian laws, known as the

title of *the ukase of Catherine II*, and modeled on the ideas, then in great vogue, of Beccaria and Montesquieu. Issuing directly from the pen of the sovereign, this introduction should necessarily have the force of law, and serve as basis for all subsequent legislature. You will find there the abolition of the death penalty, the abolition of torture, and also this beautiful maxim: “that it is better to let ten guilty escape than to strike one innocent.”

So is Prince Wiasemski correct? Not at all. He is not right even from a legal point of view. Prince Wiasemski, who speaks with so much assurance and with this crushing disdain of the ignorance of Mr. Jules Simon, should not be ignorant of the fact that Emperor Nicolas, whose legislative power was every bit as unlimited and legitimate as that Catherine II, reestablished the death penalty in our legal codes. And what is more distinctive is that he reestablished it precisely for political crimes. Thus, Mr. Jules Simon is a thousand times right, and it is on the Russian prince that the sin of ignorance again falls, doubled by presumptuousness.

So much for the legal right. But does a legal right exist in Russia? On paper, yes; but, in reality, no. And that is another thing that Prince Wiasemski must not, cannot be ignorant of. In three lines of verse, now famous, our poet Pushkin has expressed, almost forty years ago, the very essence of what these gentlemen so pompously call the Russian laws:

There is no law in Russia!
The law is nailed to a post,
And that post wears a crown.

Perhaps that could be true in the time of Pushkin, under the despotic reign of Emperor Nicolas; but today, under the beneficent and liberating scepter of czar Alexandre II, *the most liberal man, surely, in all of Russia*, as the *Presse* (January 25) assures us, today it cannot be thus.

It has not ceased to be true for a single day, from the foundation of the Muscovite Empire to the moment when I write this letter, gentlemen. Today it is more true than ever, and it will only cease to be true the day when popular revolution will have swept away the whole establishment of the State.

In imperial Russia, there has never been but one truth, constant and sovereign: it is the lie, it is official hypocrisy, a hypocrisy which has never failed to adopt the appearances most in conformity with the dominant ideas in contemporary Europe. We have sought the primitive man, the ape-man. Why haven't we looked in the court at Saint-Petersburg? Specimens abound there.

Our laws, all the humane principles we have officially proclaimed, our so-called rights, are nothing but an eternal masquerade, under which is hidden an official reality as well, but a bestial one. That masquerade fools no one, and it does not even trouble itself to fool anyone in Russia, but it is a great aid to the peaceful triumphs of imperial diplomacy in Europe.

Do you know, gentlemen, the meaning of the verb *enguirlander* [literally *to cover in garlands*], created at Saint-Petersburg? I'll wager you do not. Allow me to explain it to you.

An important foreigner came to Saint-Petersburg. He wanted to study Russia. But you can well understand that, if he had looked at it too closely, he could have discovered things that certainly would not do great honor to the imperial government. To avoid that danger, the court made a signal. This signal is an order, understood in an instant by that titled bunch of lackeys which is called the Russian aristocracy. The princes, the counts, the German barons,—and there are a crowd of them among our official patriots,—ministers, generals, high functionaries of every hue, capitalists and monopolists of all sorts, their wives, their daughters and sisters, all surround the foreigner, weary him with invitations, smile at him, smother him with caresses, spread before him his feelings of control, and plunge him up to the ears in the imperial lie.

That is called *covering one in garlands*.

Well, gentlemen, the prince Wiasemski wishes to cover you in garlands.

If you would publish this letter in your paper, and if the disgruntled Russian prince returns to the charge, you will allow me, I hope, to respond.—It is in the interest of revolutionary Russia that the socialist democrats of Europe know it as it is.

Accept, gentlemen, the expression of my warm sympathy,

M. Bakounine

Geneva, February 7, 1870.