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Commenting on Tolstoy's anti-war stance

Shūsui Kōtoku

1904

What kind of feelings do readers have when they read Tolstoy's essay on the Russo-Japanese War, which was translated and published in the previous issue of this newspaper? The fact that such a long work was written by an old man who turned 77 this year alone is enough to amaze us with its incomparable energy, and what's more, his powerful and elegant prose (it is deeply regrettable that our poor translation is unable to convey his style) conveys lofty and grandiose thoughts, and every word comes from the heart, every word is full of heart and blood, and the brilliance of the sky is so bright and colorful that it is almost enough to inspire people to dance. When we read it, we almost feel like we are listening to the voice of an ancient sage or prophet.

And what we especially admire and respect in this essay is his observation and commentary on the mental and physical conditions of society in general during wartime, and he speaks frankly about what could never be said before and directly portrays what could never be portrayed, of the 130 million people

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of Russia and 45 million people of Japan, without the slightest bit of hesitation.

Behold, in describing the stupor of the young emperor, the tortuous teachings of scholars, the deception of diplomats, the decadence of religious people, the incitement of journalists, the profits of speculators, the pain and misery of the many unfortunate workers, and all of these dangers to society as a whole that arise from the poison and crime of war, is there anyone who can draw as sharply as an old man, who can write so powerfully, who can write so clearly, who can write so boldly, who can enter into the heart of God with such realism? Yes, this is surely someone who has unfolded before us a vivid picture of wartime society. And this vivid illustration is a fact in the current society of both Japan and Russia, a big fact, a very big fact. No matter how much people glorify, admire, advocate, or support war, on the one hand, they cannot deny the existence of these crimes, harms, and dangers, because this is what they actually witness day and night. However, in the past, because of their warlike enthusiasm, they have forced themselves to numb their consciences and overlook and turn a blind eye to these facts, and in the worst cases, have tried to cover them up and smear them. However, now that they are faced with such a clear, powerful, and bold description and criticism as the old man, how can they not be shocked and aware of them, and how can they not be ashamed and repent? We believe that Tolstoy's great treatise can be a perfect injection for the paralyzed consciences of many people in this respect, and we hope that it can be an injection. This is exactly the reason why we translated this work and recommended it to the world.

However, it would be a great misunderstanding to think that we are people who completely follow and blindly accept Tolstoy's teachings. Although we cannot help but admire and respect his bold statements about the crimes and harm of war and the dangers that arise from it to society in general, when it comes to the question of how to prevent and remedy these

crimes, harm, and dangers in the future, we unfortunately differ from him in our views.

When the old man explained the cause of the war and how to remedy it, he spoke at length, using skillful arguments and exquisite rhetoric, but the bottom line was that the cause of the war was that people had lost their true religion, and therefore the remedy was to have people repent and follow God's will, that is, to love their neighbors and give to others what they would like to be given. If that were to be the only solution, we would be disappointed. After all, this is just like answering the question "How can we get rich?" with "By getting money." This is not an answer that can solve the current problem, and is merely an answer to a problem with a problem. I regret that there are still some people who have not yet understood the old man's point. We do not necessarily think that religion is useless or harmful, but just as man cannot live by bread alone, nor can he live by the Bible alone. Just as a man without a spirit will die, a man without meat will also die. How can a man who cannot even eat a single meal find peace in hearing the Way? Not all people are equal. Even if people simply cry "repent" for tens of millions of years, if they do not change their lifestyle to obtain food and clothing, they will continue to eat and drink as they do today. When we socialists advocate non-war, our methods and goals for salvation are not so vague. We have a consistent logic and a practical plan on this point. In my opinion, the current international war is not, as Tolstoy said, simply because people have forgotten the teachings of Jesus, but because the economic competition between the countries is so fierce. And the reason for the fierceness of the economic competition between the countries is that the current social organization is based on capital. The basis of this is the family system (see editorial "The Truth Behind International Competition" in the 21st issue of this paper, published April 3rd), and therefore if we wish to eliminate international wars in the future and avoid their devastation, we must overthrow the current capitalist system and

replace it with a socialist system. Once the socialist system is established and all people live their lives equally, why would they have to suffer and start tragic wars?

In short, Tolstoy attributes the cause of war to the corruption of individuals, and therefore wants to save them by teaching them to repent, while we socialists attribute the cause of war to economic competition, and therefore want to prevent it by abolishing economic competition. This is why we cannot submit to him at all.

It seems that our views differ from those of the old man, but what he said really came straight from the heart, he spoke his heart out and did not hesitate to discuss things with his party. Even the Russian emperor could not help but give a finger at him, and his opinions were immediately reported to all nations by telegram. The old man was also a great man and a nobleman of his generation.