

Leo Tolstoy and Henry George

AT this moment of history the west, and especially Africa, is passing through a period which seems somewhat reminiscent of Russia in 1906 when the editor of a prominent newspaper remarked: "We have two czars, Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy—which of the two is the more powerful?"

Terre et Liberté (Land and Liberty), the French Georgist journal, in its spring number, published an article on Leo Tolstoy and Henry George, by Victor Lebrun, now well on in years, who was once Tolstoy's secretary. It was translated for HGN by Fryda Ossias.

"Nothing shows better the complete honesty and surprising freedom of mind of the great Tolstoy," writes M. Lebrun, "than his attitude toward Henry George."

In 1885, when George's books came to the attention of Tolstoy, his moral and social ideas were clearly established. He believed the supreme and sole duty of man was to perfect himself morally and not to cooperate with evil.

He had not then delineated the precise rights of citizens against governmental coercion. As he considered the books *Social Problems* and *Progress and Poverty*, however, he was completely overwhelmed by George's brilliant analysis. In a letter to his wife he referred affectionately to "my George," and stated that the freeing of the land and of private property was a step forward comparable to freeing of the serfs.

Personal relations having been established through correspondence, Henry George's book reached Tolstoy in 1894 by way of a visitor (Ernest Crosby) who assured him of the profound devotion the American writer held for him. Tolstoy expressed delight at "the clarity, control and brilliance of his

analysis," and said, "George is the first one to build a solid foundation for the future economic organization, and his name will always be remembered with deep respect and gratitude."

Two years later when George expressed an interest in visiting Tolstoy he responded warmly, saying that any meeting with him would be a great joy. Unfortunately George's early death intervened. Hearing of it Tolstoy wrote, "Henry George is dead . . . his death shocked me as if it had been a close friend."

Without hesitation Tolstoy sided with George and fought to make him known until his own death, a quarter of a century later. He published articles, wrote introductions for the editions in Russian, and arranged to have lectures and quotations of George distributed by the millions at low cost. His powerful novel, *Resurrection*, depicted his older daughter in the person of a repenting landowner. Another leading character, distributed his own land, free of charge, to the community of peasants, with the sole condition that the users pay the economic rent to the peasant community. [Alexandra Tolstoy, the younger daughter, speaking to Georgists in New York three years ago, told how her father distributed 2400 acres among friends and neighbors. See, "A Torch in the Darkness," HGN, July, 1961.]

In a lengthy preface to *Social Problems*, Tolstoy noted the "tremendous importance of this great and real reform proposed by George. He said the idea of transferring all taxes to economic rent conformed with natural law, and use of the unearned income deriving from bare land for the benefit of society as a whole, was also perfectly natural. This guarantees to everyone the inviolability of his labor, realization of equal rights, and enjoyment

of the advantages which come from individual or family use of the land. It is precisely this idea that has always been not only recognized but applied by the Russian peasants and put into practice whenever the government could not oppose it.

The idea is expressed in such a convincing and irrefutable way that it is almost impossible not to understand it; wrote Tolstoy. For this reason the only way to defeat it is to misrepresent it or silence it. Both are practised so carefully that it is hard to persuade people to read George attentively or to examine his proposals. But a concise and fruitful thought cannot be destroyed. Sooner or later the truth will pierce the curtain with which they try to veil it, and enlightenment will brighten the world.

By 1907 the Russian people had become exasperated. The peasant revolution was at its height — with daily hanging of prisoners and deportation of thousands. Tolstoy suffered terribly at seeing these atrocities resulting from hate building up on both sides.

"You are following a wrong path," he wrote to the Prime Minister. "You are faced with two possibilities: either continue to participate in and conduct all these executions without reaching the goal, leaving behind you an unforgivable memory; or take the lead in all Europe by destroying the enormous injustice of the appropriation of land. Indeed that way you would accomplish a great and noble deed and you would pacify the people by the most effective procedure of satisfying their most legitimate claims and putting an end to these horrible crimes."

Some time later the Prime Minister replied: "Do not think that I failed to pay attention to your letter . . . it touched me very deeply. I do not deny the theory of Henry George . . . [but] for the time being I see no use in chasing the landowners away from land which they cultivate much better than the peasants would. On the other hand I see the necessity of making it possible for the peasants to obtain a piece of land. Believe me, as one feeling the likelihood of death near I cannot help thinking over these grave questions, and the road which I am following seems to me the right one. I understand this only too well."

Tolstoy wrote again after six months of undiminished terror, asking what reason the Prime Minister had for continuing these injustices.

"Your two mistakes, the struggle by violence against the irresistible popular force, and the strengthening of private ownership of land, can be corrected by a simple reform. Recognize that the vast area of the country is the equal property of the entire population, and establish a tax-rent corresponding exactly to the privilege attached to each piece of land. This would replace, partly or fully, all other taxes.

"Only this measure could appease the people . . . this only would prevent the horrifying and the unnecessary reprisal to which the rebels are being subjected. I repeat, I am writing this to you only because I wish you well, and I like you."

This letter from Leo Tolstoy remained unanswered, as the vicious crimes continued.

Another article of particular interest in the Spring, 1964, issue of *Terre et Liberté*, and one which was reprinted in *Service-Transports*, the journal of tourism, was by Max Toubeau on Beaumarchais, the French 18th century dramatist and creator of *Figaro*. Mr. Toubeau noted that the manager of the travel journal, Jacques Seris, had just been elected vice-president of the *Ligue Française pour la Réforme Foncière* (French League for Land Reform). Another newly elected vice-president, Gabriel Stampfer of Grenoble, is planning to attend the International Conference in New York this month.