

## 1908-08-09 As Tolstoy Views the World at Eighty Years

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ST. PETERSBURG. July 20. — Before my departure for Yasnaya Polyana, Maxline Kovalevsky, one of Russia's foremost authorities on international law, said to me: "You will see the only man in Russia who dares to tell the truth, even to the Czar, and who is not punished for it."

I left St. Petersburg on the day after the first convention of the representatives of the Russian press. The cream of Russian publicists had come together for the purpose of considering the most adequate ways and means of celebrating the eightieth anniversary of Tolstoy's birth. Young men and old, men and women, offered suggestions of how best to honor the man who is at present the Russian people's only pride. They spoke with boundless enthusiasm, with fire, with the zeal and earnestness with which an enslaved people, suddenly set free, speak of freedom.

A young journalist rose and in a forceful speech declared that the most suitable means of honoring Tolstoy would be for the entire Russian press on the 28th day of August, the birthday of Tolstoy, to condemn the wholesale executions that are being committed daily in the Russian Empire and to make a general appeal that these death sentences be abolished.

[In the version of this article which appeared in Bernstein's book, this sentence follows: Then an officer walked over to the chairman and informed him that unless they stopped talking of the executions he would disperse the Convention. -- 2012 editor's note]

To Celebrate Tolstoy's Birthday.

But Russia — all Russia, except the government, the Holy Synod, and the black Hundreds — seems to have forgotten for a while its helplessness and its misery in its preparations to do honor to Tolstoy. The people throughout Russia are infinitely more interested in the Tolstoy celebration than in the work of the Russian "Parliament." Only from time to time the Union of the Real Russian People, composed of bands of dark reactionaries, in their organs, which are patronized by the Government, but which are ignored by the people, attack Tolstoy in the vilest terms, branding him as an anti-Christ and a traitor. The Church has done all in its power to hinder the jubilee, and on the day that I started for Yasnaya Polyana I read in the newspapers that the St Petersburg authorities had refused to legalize a society which was to be formed in honor of Tolstoy and which was to be known as the Leo Tolstoy Society.

On the way to Tula, in the train, a stout, red-faced "man with long hair" -- a

Russian priest — was seated opposite me. Eager to hear a Russian priest's view concerning conditions in Russia, and particularly his opinion of Tolstoy, I entered into conversation with him. When I told him that I was going to see Tolstoy I noticed how his face suddenly brightened, his red cheeks turned still redder, and bending over to me he laid in a low voice, so as not to be overheard by the other passengers:

“You are a happy man. \* \* \* When you see that saintliest man in Russia, tell him that you met a Russian village priest who sends him greetings from the bottom of his heart. Tell him that the priest you met bowed his head with shame for the manner in which the Church has treated Tolstoy. And tell him that the few peasants who have learned to read, read nothing but the Bible and Tolstoy. They understand his works even better than the Bible.”

As we turned past the little blue church I saw five women in bright parti-colored loose dresses laughing and singing and whirling about as they worked in the field, and the group as well as the colors of their clothes reminded me of Malyavin's masterly painting, "The Whirlwind," which is symbolic of chaotic, red Russia. Finally, after we had passed through numerous labyrinthine roads, at about 9:30 o'clock in the morning I found myself at the door of the little white house where lives and works the greatest artist and the most remarkable man in the world today — Leo Tolstoy. I was met by Nicholas Gusev, Tolstoy's secretary, an amiable young gentleman, who took me into his room.

Presently he entered. I cannot recall now what I said when I shook hands with Tolstoy, but he put me at my ease immediately, and he strengthened my conviction that the greatest men are the simplest men, even as the chief characteristic of the greatest masterpieces is their simplicity. In the corner, like a striking painting of Rembrandt, sat the grand old man, a black soft silk turban on his head, his wide-open eyes bright with kindness, which I have never seen in any painting or photograph of Tolstoy.

“You will pardon me if I will drink my coffee as we speak.” he said to me in English. Then, changing from English to Russian, he asked me about my impressions of Russia, and particularly about the popularity of Henry George's works in America. I related to him the incident that occurred at the Convention of the Representatives of the Press.

"Yes," he said, "an appeal by the press for the abolition of executions in Russia would please me better than any other honor." He spoke in a soft, caressing voice, and the peculiar radiance of his face, the far-away look in his eyes — all really gave him the appearance of a saint, "a man not of this world," as Repin had aptly described him.

## The Consequences of Violence.

"Count, I should like to know how you look upon the future of Russia," I asked.

"One of the most horrible superstitions," answered Tolstoy, after a minute's pause, "more harmful than all religious superstitions — one which has caused rivers of blood — is that very strange superstition which sprang from the use of violence, and which makes people believe that a small number of people can now establish the social life of the whole community. This activity to transform the present order of things not only fails to help, but actually hinders the course of events. The activity of the revolutionists, like the deeds of violence committed by the Government, will not lead to any improvement in the life of our people. On the contrary, Stolypin, who hangs hundreds of people, or the revolutionists, who are trying to kill Nicholas II., are only interfering with the natural development of events. History is full of examples to prove this. The French Revolution produced Napoleon. The civil war produced the terrible negro problem in America."

Count Tolstoy shook his head, brushed back a tuft of white hair from under his turban, and added, as though to himself:

"Strange — very strange."

"Nearly fifty years ago," he went on slowly, "the great question that occupied all minds in Russia was the emancipation of the serfs. The burning question now is the ownership of land. The peasants never recognized the private ownership of land. They say that the land belongs to God. I am afraid that people will regard what I say as stupid, but I must say it: The leaders of the revolutionary movement, as well as the Government officials, are not doing the only thing that would pacify the people at once. And the only thing that would pacify the people now is the introduction of the system of Henry George. I have outlined a plan according to which the agrarian question can be solved, and have submitted my plan to the Government as well as to the Duma. I have written about it to one who occupies a high post in the official world, and whose family I have known very well. But his hands are tied. His attitude toward the Court and toward his enemies is such that he cannot do anything in this direction. I do not reproach him. I only feel sorry for him. They do not understand that the proper solution of the land question is the only means of pacifying nine-tenths of the Russian population.

"As I have pointed out in my introductory note to the Russian version of 'Social Problems,' Henry George's great idea, outlined so clearly and so thoroughly more than thirty years ago, remains to this day entirely unknown to the great majority of the people. This is quite natural. Henry George's idea, which changes the entire

system in the life of nations in favor of the oppressed, voiceless majority, and to the detriment of the ruling minority, is so undeniably convincing, and, above all, so simple, that it is impossible not to understand it, and, understanding it, it is impossible not to make an effort to introduce it into practice, and therefore the only means against this idea is to pervert it and to pass it in silence. And this has been true of the Henry George theory for more than thirty years. It has been both perverted and passed in silence, so that it has become difficult to induce people to read his work attentively and to think about it.

"It is true that there are in England, Canada, the United States, and Germany very good little journals devoted to the single tax idea, but they have only an insignificant number of subscribers. Among the majority of the intelligent people throughout the world the ideas of Henry George are unknown, and the indifference toward them is even increasing. Society does with ideas that disturb its peace -- and Henry George is one of these -- exactly what the bee does with the worms which it considers dangerous but which it is powerless to destroy. It covers their nest with paste, so that the worms, even though not destroyed, cannot multiply and do more harm. Just so the European nations act with regard to ideas that are dangerous to their order of things, or rather, to the disorder to which they have grown accustomed. Among these are also the ideas of Henry George. 'But light shines even in the darkness, and the darkness cannot cover it.' A truthful, fruitful idea cannot be destroyed. However you may try to smother it, it will still live, it will be more alive than all the vague, empty, pedantic ideas and words with which people are trying to it will be also with Henry George's ideal.

Ideas of Henry George.

"And it seems to me that just now is the proper time to introduce this idea -- now, and in Russia. This is just the proper time for it, because in Russia a revolution is going on, the serious basis of which is the rejection by the whole people, by the real people, of the ownership of land. In Russia, where nine-tenths of the population are tillers of the soil, and where this theory is merely a conscious expression of that which has always been regarded as right by the entire Russian people -- in Russia, I say, especially during this period of reconstruction of social conditions, this idea should now find its application, and thus the revolution, so wrongly and criminally directed, would be crowned by a great act of righteousness. This is my answer to your question about the future of Russia. Unless this idea is introduced into the life of our people Russia's future can never be bright."

Thus ended our first conversation. Tolstoy advised me to meet Nikolayev, the translator of Henry George, who lives a little distance away from the Tolstoy home.