

LETTER TO THE CHIEF OF THE IRKUTSK DISCIPLINARY BATTALION

by Leo Tolstoy

Translated from the Original Russian and edited by Leo Wiener
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Dear Sir : — As I do not know your Christian name and patronymic, nor even your family name, I am unable to address you otherwise than in this cold and somewhat unpleasant formula, " Dear Sir," which distances people from one another; and yet I am addressing you on a very intimate matter, and I should like to avoid all those external forms which separate men, and wish, on the contrary, if not to evoke in you toward me a fraternal relation, which it is proper for men to have toward one another, at least to destroy every preconception which may be evoked in you by my letter and name. I wish you would act toward me and toward my request as toward a man of whom you know nothing, neither good nor bad, and whose address to you you are ready to hear with benevolent attention.

The matter in which I wish to ask you for something is this :

Into your disciplinary battalion there have entered, or shortly will enter, two men, who by the Brigade Court of Vladivostok were condemned to three years' imprisonment. One of them is Peasant Peter Olkhdivik, who refused to do military service, because he considers it

contrary to God's law ; the other is Kirill Sereda, a common soldier, who made Olkhdivik's acquaintance on a boat and, learning from him the cause of his deportation, came to the same conclusions as Olkhdivik, and refused to continue in the service.

I understand very well that the government, not having as yet worked out any law to cover the peculiarities of such cases, cannot act otherwise than it has acted, although I know that of late the highest authorities, whose attention has been directed to the cruelty and injustice of punishing such men on the par with vicious soldiers, is anxious to discover juster and easier means for the counteraction to such refusals. I also know full well that you, occupying your position and not sharing Olkhdivik's and Sereda's convictions, cannot act otherwise than to execute strictly what the law prescribes to you ; none the less I beg you, as a Christian and a goodman, to pity these men who are guilty of nothing but doing what they consider to be God's law, giving it preference to human laws.

I will not conceal from you that personally I not only believe that these men are doing what is right, but also, that very soon all men will comprehend that these men are doing a great and holy work.

But it is very likely that such an opinion will appear to you as madness, and that you are convinced of the contrary. I will not permit myself to convince you, knowing that serious people of your age do not arrive at certain convictions through other people's words, but through the inner work of their own thought. There is one thing I implore you to do, as a Christian, a good man, and a brother, – my brother, Olkhovik's, and Sereda's, – as a man walking with us under the protection of the same God and sure to go after death whither we all go, – I implore you not to conceal from yourself the fact that those men (Olkhovik and Sereda) differ from other criminals ; not to demand of them the execution of what they have once for all refused to do ; not to tempt them, thus leading them into new and ever new crimes and imposing upon them all the time new punishments, as they did with poor Drozhzhin, who was tortured to death in the Voronezh disciplinary battalion, and who evoked universal sympathy even in the highest spheres. Without departing from the law and from a conscientious execution of your duties, you can make the confinement of these men a hell, and ruin them, or considerably lighten their sufferings. It is this I implore you to do, hoping that you will find this request superfluous, and that your inner feeling will even before this have inclined you to do the same.

Judging from the post which you occupy, I assume that your views of life and of man's duties are the very opposite of mine. I cannot conceal from you the fact that I consider your duty incompatible with Christianity, and I wish you, as I wish any man, a liberation from the participation in such matters. But, knowing all my sins, both in the past and in the present, and all my weaknesses, and the deeds done by me, I not only do not permit myself to condemn you for your duty, but also have nothing but respect and love for you, as for any brother in Christ.

I shall be thankful to you, if you answer me.