

## THE CRISIS IN RUSSIA\*

Two months ago I received a cable with reply paid for 100 words from a North American paper, asking me what I think concerning the meaning, object, and probable results of the Zemstvo agitations. As I had and have a very definite opinion on this subject, differing from that of the majority, I deemed it right to express it.

I answered thus :

'' Object Zemstvo agitation restriction of despotism and establishment of representative government. Will the agitation leaders attain their aim or only continue stirring public ? In both cases sure results of whole matter will be delay of true social amelioration. True social amelioration can be attained only by religiously moral perfecting of all individuals. Political agitation, putting before individuals pernicious illusion of social improvement by change of forms, habitually stops the real progress, as can be observed in all constitutional countries^France, England, America."

This telegram was published – not quite correctly – in the Moscow News, and after this I began to receive – and still continue so to do – letters of rebuke for the thoughts I had expressed, and further inquiries from American, English and French papers as to what I think of the events now taking place in Russia. At first I intended to leave all unanswered, but after the St. Petersburg outrage of January 22-24, and the manifestation of those complex feelings of indignation, fear, exasperation, and hatred which this outrage called forth in society, I have considered it my duty to express with greater detail and precision what I had expressed concisely in the hundred words to the American paper. Perhaps what I have to say will help some to free themselves from the painful feelings of condemnation, shame, irritation, hatred, and desire for strife, for vengeance, and from the consciousness of their helplessness, now experienced by the majority of Russian people, and to direct their energy to that inner spiritual activity which alone gives true welfare to individuals as well as to society, and which is now the more necessary the more complex and painful are the events taking place.

This is what I think of the present events :

I regard not only the Russian Government, but all Governments, as intricate institutions, sanctified by tradition and custom for the purpose of committing by violence and with impunity the most dreadful crimes of murder, robbery, intoxication, stultification, deprivation, exploitation of the people by the wealthy and powerful ; and therefore I think that all the efforts of those who wish to improve social life should be directed to the liberation of themselves from Governments, whose evil, and above all, whose futility, is in our time becoming more and more obvious. This object is, in my opinion, attainable by one, and only by one, unique means – the inner religiously moral perfecting of separate individuals.

The higher men are in religiously moral stain the better will be the social forms into which they will combine, and the less Government coercion and corresponding evil will there be. Vice versa^ the lower men of a given society are in respect of religion and morality, the more powerful will be the Government, and the greater the evil it accomplishes.

So that the evil which people experience from the iniquities of Governments is always in proportion to the religious and moral state of society, whatever form this society may take.

Yet some people, seeing all the evil which is at present accomplished by the particularly cruel, coarse, stupid, and deceitful Russian Government, think that this is due to the fact that the Russian Government is not organised as they think it ought to be, on the model of other existing Governments (similar institutions for the committal with impunity of all kinds of crimes against their peoples), and for the purpose of correcting this these people use all the means at their disposal, imagining that the alteration of external forms may alter the essence.

Such activity I regard as inexpedient, unreasonable, not right – i.e., that people assert rights they have not got – and pernicious.

I regard such activity as inexpedient because strife with violence, and in general by external means (and not solely by spiritual power), on the part of an insignificant handful of men, against a powerful Government defending its life, and for this purpose holding control of millions of armed disciplined men and of milliards in money, is only comical from the point of view of the possibility of success, and piteous from the point of view of the unfortunate, misled individuals who perish in this unequal strife.

I regard this activity as unreasonable because, even granting what is most improbable – i.e., that those who are now fighting against the existing Government will triumph – the position of the people cannot improve therefrom.

The present coercive government is such as it is only because the society over which the Government rules consists of morally weak people, of whom some, prompted by ambition, avarice, pride, unrestrained by their conscience, endeavour by every means to seize and conserve power, whilst others from fear, and also from avarice, vanity, or stultification, help the former and submit.

Therefore, however these people may change places, into whatever form they may combine, from such people an equally coercive Government will be composed.

I regard this activity as not right because those who are now fighting in Russia against the Government – Liberal representatives of the Zernstvo, doctors, advocates, writers, students, and a few thousand disaffected working men, torn from the people, and calling

and regarding themselves as the representatives of the people – have no right to this claim. In the name of the people, these men present to the Government a demand for freedom of the Press, freedom of conscience, freedom of assembly, for the separation of the Church from the State, for an eight-hours working day, representation, and so forth. But ask the people, the great mass, the hundred million of the peasantry, what they think about these demands, and the true people, the peasants, will be at a loss to answer, because these demands for liberty of the Press, liberty of assembly, for the separation of Church and State, even for an eight-hours working day, have no interest for the great mass of the peasantry.

They need nothing of this, they need something else – that which they have been for long expecting and desiring, of which they are incessantly thinking and talking, and about which there is not one single word in all the Liberal petitions and speeches, and which is only incidentally alluded to in the revolutionary socialistic programmes – they expect and desire one thing, the liberation of the land from the law of property, common ownership of the land. When they are no longer deprived of the land their children will not go to the factories, or if they do they will themselves settle their hours and wages.

It is said, grant liberty, and the people will express their demands. This is not true. In England, France, and America there exists complete freedom of the Press, but the liberation of the land is not mentioned in Parliaments, and is hardly mentioned in the Press, and the question about the common right of the whole nation to the land remains completely in the background.

Therefore, the Liberal and revolutionary reformers who compose progis-ammes of the demands of the people have no right to regard themselves as the representatives of the people ; they represent only themselves.

Thus is this activity, in my opinion, inexpedient, unreasonable, and unright. It is also pernicious owing to the circumstance that it distracts people from that only activity – of the moral perfecting of separate individuals – by means of which, and only so, can be attained the objects towards which those who are fighting with the Government are striving.

It will be said, "The one does not interfere with the other." But this is not true. One cannot do two things at once – one cannot morally perfect oneself and participate in political action which draws people into intrigue, subterfuge, strife, spite, extending to murder. Political action not only fails to contribute to the liberation of men from the violence of Governments, but, on the contrary, renders people more and more incapable of that only activity which can liberate them. As long as men are incapable of withstanding the snares of fear, stultification, greed, ambition, and vanity, which enslave some and deprave others, they will always combine into a society of those who use violence and deceive and those who suffer violence and are deceived.

That this should not be the case every man should exert a moral effort upon himself. Men recognise this in the depths of their souls, but they wish in some way, without effort, to attain that which is attainable only by effort.

To elucidate by one's efforts one's relation to the world and to maintain it, to establish one's relation to men on the basis of the eternal law of doing unto another as one wishes should be done to oneself, to overcome in ourselves those evil passions which subjugate us to the power of others, not to be any one's master nor any one's slave, not to dissemble, not to lie, not to swerve either from fear or for advantage from the demands of the higher law of one's conscience – all this requires effort ; whereas to imagine that the establishment of certain forms will in some mystical way bring all men, including oneself, to all justice and virtue, and for the attainment of this to repeat without any effort of the mind that which all members of a certain party say, to fidget, argue, lie, dissemble, abuse each other, and fight – all this takes place of itself and requires no effort. People are so desirous that it should be so that they assure themselves that so it is. Thus there appears a theory according to which it is proved that people can, without effort, attain the fruits of effort, a theory exactly similar to that according to which prayer for one's perfection, or faith in the redemption of sins by the Blood of Christ, or in grace transmitted by the sacraments, may replace personal effort. On this same psychological illusion is founded that astounding theory about the improvement of social life through the alteration of external forms which has produced and is producing such dreadful calamities and which arrests more than anything else the true progress of mankind.

Men recognise that in their lives something is wrong, and that something needs improving. Man is able to improve only that one thing which is in his power – himself. But in order to improve oneself one must first of all recognise one's own deficiencies, and this one does not desire to do. Consequently all our attention is directed, not to that which is always in our power – ourselves – but to those external conditions which are not in our power, and the alteration of which can improve the condition of men as little as the shaking up of wine and the pouring it into another vessel can alter its quality. Thus there follows, first, the idle, and, secondly, the pernicious, vain (we correct other people) and evil (one may kill those who hinder the general welfare), depraving activity.

" We will reconstruct the social forms, and society will prosper.\*"  
It would be well were human welfare so easily attainable !  
Unfortunately, or, rather, fortunately – for if some people could arrange the lives of others these others would be the unhappiest of men – this is not so ; human life changes not from the alteration of external forms, but only from the internal work of each man upon himself. Whereas all effort to influence external forms or other people, whilst failing to alter the position of others, only depraves and belittles the life of him who – like all political

agitators, Kings, Ministers, Presidents, Members of Parliament, all kinds of revolutionists, Liberals – surrenders himself to this pernicious error.

Light-minded people, judging superficially, especially those who have been upset by the fratricidal butchery which has lately taken place in St. Petersburg, and by all the events accompanying this outrage, think that the chief cause of these events lies in the despotism of the Russian Government, and that if the autocratic, monarchical form of the Russian Government were replaced by a Constitutional or Republican one, then such events could not be repeated.

But the chief calamity (if one considers its full meaning) from which the Russian people are now suffering, is not the St. Petersburg events, but the reckless, disgraceful, and cruel war which has been instigated by a score of immoral individuals. This war has already destroyed and mutilated hundreds of thousands of Russians, and threatens to destroy and mutilate as many more. It has ruined and is ruining not only men of our time, but, moreover, it imposes in the form of debts an enormous tax upon the labour of future generations, and destroys the souls of men, depraving them. That which took place at St. Petersburg on January 9–22 is nothing in comparison with what is taking place there. There, at the war, are killed and mutilated a number a hundred times greater than that which perished on January 9–22 at St. Petersburg. And the destruction of these men there not only fails to revolt society as does the slaughter in St. Petersburg, but the greater portion of society looks with indifference, and a part even with approbation, upon the fact that more and more thousands of men are being driven there for the same senseless and purposeless destruction.

This calamity is dreadful. Therefore if one does speak of the calamities of the Russian people the principal one is the war, whereas the St. Petersburg events are only an incidental occurrence accompanying the great calamity, and if one is to seek for the means of liberation from calamities, one should find such as would remove both. But the alteration of the despotic form of government into a Constitutional or Republican form will not deliver Russia from either of these calamities. All constitutional States, equally with the Russian, are incessantly and senselessly arming themselves, and, as with the Russian, when it suggests itself to a few individuals in power, these States send their nations to commit fratricide. The Abyssinian, Boer, Spanish, Cuban, Philippine, Chinese, Tibetan, and various African wars – all these are wars conducted by Constitutional and Republican Governments, and, just in the same way, these Governments, when they find it necessary, crush with armed force any risings and manifestations of the will of the people, which they regard as transgressions of the law – i.e., of that which these Governments at a given moment regard as the law.

When in a State, whatever may be its Constitution, there exists an organised coercive power, which by such or other methods can be seized by a few individuals, there always does and always will take

place, in some form or other, events similar to those now taking place in Russia – both war and the suppression of revolt.

So that the significance of the events which have taken place in St. Petersburg does not at all consist, as superficial people think, in that these events have shown us the exceptional harmfulness of the Russian despotic Government, and that, therefore, one should endeavour to replace it by a constitutional one. The significance of these events is much more important; it consists in this – that through the action of the particularly stupid and coarse Russian Government, more clearly than by the action of other more decent Governments, we can see the harm and futility, not of this or that, but of every Government– i.e., of a group of people who have the possibility of enforcing the majority of the people to submit to their will.

In England, the United States, France, and Germany the pernicious character of Governments is so masked that those belonging to these nations point to the events in Russia and naively imagine that what is done in Russia is done only in Russia, but that they enjoy complete freedom and need no improvement in their position – i.e., they are in the most hopeless state of slavery, the slavery of slaves who do not understand that they are slaves, and pride themselves on their position as slaves.

In this respect our position as Russians is at once more painful (in that the violence practised in our country is coarser) and better (in that it is easier for us to understand the state of things).

The relations, the position, and the frame of mind of the Russian people and the European nations, and especially the Americans, are exactly the same as the relations, position, and frame of mind attributed to the two men who entered the Temple, as related in the Gospel of Luke xviii. 10, 11, 13 (the Pharisee and the Publican).

The fact is that every coercive Government is in its essence a great and unnecessary evil, and that, therefore, the aim both of us Russians and of all men enslaved by Governments should not be to replace one form of Government by another, but to free ourselves from every Government – to abolish it.

Therefore my opinion regarding the events now taking place in Russia is this : The Russian Government, like every Government, is a dreadful, inhuman, and powerful robber, the pernicious activity of which incessantly has been and is now manifesting itself equally with the pernicious activity of all existing Governments – American, French, Japanese, or British. Therefore all rational men should endeavour with all their power to free themselves from all Governments, and the Russians from the Russian.

That one may free oneself from Governments it is not necessary to struggle against them by external means (ludicrously insignificant in comparison with the means at the disposal of the Governments), it is only necessary to abstain from participating in them, from

supporting them. Then they will be abolished.

In order not to participate in Governments and not to support them it is necessary to be free from those weaknesses owing to which people are caught in the nets of Governments and become their slaves or participators. And free from those weaknesses which make people slaves of or participators in Governments can only be the man who has established his relation to the All, to God, and who lives according to the one supreme law flowing from this relation – i.e., a religiously moral man.

Therefore, the more clearly men see and feel the evil of Governments – as at present we Russians feel especially clearly and painfully the evil of the senseless, cruel, and deceitful Russian Government, which has already destroyed hundreds of thousands of men, which is destroying and depraving millions of men, and is now beginning to incite Russians to the murder of each other – the more strenuously should we endeavour to establish in ourselves a clear and firm religious consciousness, and the more undeviatingly should we fulfil the law of God emanating from this consciousness, which does not demand of us the correction of the existing Government, nor the establishment of such a social order as according to our limited views must ensure the general welfare, but demands of us only one thing, moral self-perfection – i.e., the liberation of oneself from all those weaknesses and vices which make one the slave of Governments and the participator in their crimes.

I had finished these remarks, and was in doubt whether or not to publish them, when I received a striking unsigned letter. This is it :

" For many days I have been unable to collect myself.

" When any one begins to speak about the working men I begin to hate him and feel physically sick.

" There have been heaps of corpses and women and children covered with blood, who were carried off in cabs.

" But is it this which is terrible ? Terrible are the soldiers with their every-day, unthinking, uncomprehending, kind faces, whilst they are jumping about in the frost and awaiting orders to fire. Terrible are the public, also with every-day, inquisitive faces. Even the kindest people go in order to see for themselves or to ascertain from others about something " dreadful " – bloody, mutilated corpses, and so forth ... as if there could be anything more terrible than these soldiers who are the same as usual, and these good people who desire one thing – that their nerves should shudder at something dreadful.

" I cannot define what is most terrible in this. I think it is that they do not understand, and that they have their usual expressions, although in the course of an hour there will be people killed and blood everywhere on the pavement.

" I think the most terrible thing is to realise that between men there is no bond. This, I think, is the most terrible. From the same village, only some in grey cloaks and others in black overcoats, and one cannot understand why the grey ones joke about the frost and peacefully glance at the black ones passing by, when they not only know that each has got cartridges for ten shots, but also know that in an hour or two all these cartridges will have been spent, and the black ones look at them just as if this should be so. About this disuniting element one reads in books, one talks, but one does not feel how terrible it is, till when all this surrounds one as during these days, everything else for a time ceases to be, and there is only this – grey cloaks, black overcoats and elegant furs, and they are all occupied with the same thing, although in different ways. This astonishes no one, none of them know why some shoot, others fall, and others look on. At other times there exists equally the same dreadful and incomprehensible life, in which it is in the order of things to kill by command without any enmity or hatred, but in these days all the rest has temporarily stopped, and there remains only this terror. Such a feeling as if you were separated from every man by a precipice, and you cannot cross it although you are quite near to the other side. This feeling is insupportable.

" I have five times begun to write to you and have given it up, and in the end I still write, perhaps merely because it is insupportable to be silent day after day; Every one speaks of help for the working men and appears to sympathise, but it is not the position of the working men that is dreadful, and help is needed not for them, but for those who shot and trampled down men, and for those who on the following day walked about and examined the broken windows and lamps, and the traces of bullets, and did not see frozen blood on the pavement, and scraped it with their feet."

Yes, the essence of the matter is that there is something which disunites people, and that there is no connection between them. The whole matter consists in that one should remove that which disunites people and substitute that which unites them. People are disunited by every external coercive form of government, and they are united by one thing – by their relation to God and aspiration towards Him, because God is one for all, and the relation of all men to God is one and the same.

Whether men wish to recognise this or not, before all of us there stands one and the same ideal of perfecting oneself, and nothing but the striving towards this destroys disunion and brings us nearer to each other.

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