

## "THE OFFICERS' MEMENTO"

by Leo Tolstoy

Translated from the Original Russian and edited by Leo Wiener  
Assistant Professor of Slavic Languages at Harvard University

1901

But, whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Wo unto the world because of offences ! for it must needs be that offences come ; but wo to that man by whom the offence cometh !  
(Matt, xviii. 6, 7.)

In all soldier quarters there hangs upon the wall a so-called Soldiers' Memento, composed by General Dragomirov. This Memento is a conglomeration of stupid, slangy, supposedly popular words (though they are quite foreign to any soldier), mixed with blasphemous quotations from the Gospel. Gospel sayings are adduced in confirmation of the statement that the soldiers must kill and chew their enemies : " If the bayonet is broken, light with your fists ; if your fists give out, hang on with your teeth." At the end of the Memento it says that God is the soldiers' general.

Nothing proves more conclusively than this Memento to what a terrible degree of ignorance, slavish obedience, and bestiality our Russians have come. Ever since this most terrible blasphemy has made its appearance and was hung up in all the barracks, – and this was done very long ago, – not one chief, not one priest, who, one would think, would directly be affected by the distortion of the meaning of the Gospel texts, has expressed his condemnation of this disgusting production, and it continues to be printed in millions of copies and to be read by millions of soldiers, who accept this terrible work as a guide in their activity.

This Memento long ago roused my indignation, and now, fearing that I shall not be able to do so again before my death, I have written an address to the soldiers, in which I try to remind them that, as men and Christians, they have quite different obligations before God than those which are put forth in this Memento. Such a reminder, I think, is not only necessary for the soldiers, but to an even greater degree for the officerdom (by officerdom I mean all the military authorities, from the ensign to the general), which enters military service or remains in it, not from compulsion, like the soldiers, but from choice. This reminder, it seems to me, is particularly needed in our time.

It was all very well one hundred or fifty years ago, when war was considered to be an inevitable condition of the life of nations,

when the men belonging to the nation with which war was waged were considered barbarians, infidels, or malefactors, and when it did not even occur to the military that they would be needed for the suppression and pacification of their own nations, – it was all very well then for a man to put on a bright-coloured, lace-covered uniform, to walk, causing the sabre to rattle and the spurs to tinkle, or to let his horse go through evolutions in front of the regiment, imagining that he was a hero who, if he had not yet sacrificed, was prepared to sacrifice his life in the defence of his country. But now, when the frequent international relations—mercantile, social, scientific, artistic – have so brought the nations together that any war among the modern nations presents itself in the form of a family dissension which violates the most sacred ties of men ; when hundreds of peace societies and thousands of articles, not only in special periodicals, but also in the general newspapers, never cease in every manner possible to make clear the madness of militarism and the possibility, even the necessity, of abolishing war; when, and this is the most important thing of all, the military have more and more frequently to proceed, not against a foreign enemy, in order to defend the country against attacking conquerors or to increase the country's glory and power, but against unarmed factory hands and peasants, – the galloping on a steed, in a lace-bedecked uniform, and the dandyish appearance in front of the company no longer is a case of trifling, pardonable ambition, which it used to be formerly, but something quite different.

In olden times, say in the days of Nicholas I., it never as much as occurred to any one that the armies were needed preeminently for the purpose of shooting unarmed citizens. But now troops are regularly quartered in the capitals and manufacturing centres, so as to be ready to disperse working men, and hardly a month passes but that the troops are taken out of their barracks with their ballcartridges and are located in a protected place, ready at any moment to shoot at the masses.

The use of the army against the masses has not only become a customary phenomenon, but the troops are in advance formed in such a way as to be ready for such emergencies. The government does not conceal the fact that the distribution of recruits according to districts is intentionally made in such a way that the soldiers are never drafted from the localities where they are quartered. This is done so as to avoid the necessity of having the soldiers shoot at their own parents.

The Emperor of Germany has said plainly at every levy of recruits (his speech of May 23, 1901) that the soldiers swearing allegiance to him belong to him, body and soul, and that they have but one enemy, and that is, his enemy, and that his enemies are the socialists (that is, the working people), whom the soldiers must, if commanded, shoot down ("niderschicsscn,"\ even though these be their own brothers or even parents.

Besides, if in former times the troops were used against the masses,

those against whom they were used were, or at least were supposed to be, malefactors, ready to ruin and kill peaceful citizens, who, therefore, had to be destroyed for the common good. But now everybody knows that those against whom the troops are sent out are for the most part peaceable, industrious people, who merely desire without interference to enjoy the fruits of their labours. Thus the chief and constant use of troops in our time no longer consists in an imaginary defence against infidel and in general foreign enemies, nor against riotous malefactors, domestic enemies, but in killing their unarmed brothers, who are not all malefactors, but peaceable, industrious people, who only do not wish to have what they earn taken away from them. Thus military service in our time, when its chief purpose is by the threat of killing and by murder itself to retain the enslaved people in those unjust conditions in which they are, is no longer a noble, but a despicable business.

And so it is necessary for the officers who are now serving to think about whom they are serving, and to ask themselves whether what they are doing is good or bad.

I know there are many officers, especially among the higher ranks, who by all kinds of reflections on the subject of Orthodoxy, autocracy, integrity of the state, the inevitableness of imminent war, the need of order, the senselessness of the socialistic ravings, and so forth, try to prove to themselves that their activity is rational and useful, and has nothing immoral about it. But in the depth of their hearts they themselves do not believe in what they say, and the more sensible and the older they are, the less do they believe in it.

I remember how pleasantly I was surprised by my friend and comrade in the service, a very ambitious man, who had devoted all his life to military service and had attained the highest ranks and distinctions (he was an adjutant-general and a general of artillery), when he told me that he had burned his memoirs on the wars in which he had taken part, because he had changed his view on military matters and now considered every war a bad business, which ought not to be encouraged by busying oneself with it, but, on the contrary, ought in every way possible to be discredited. Many officers believe the same thing, though they do not say so, while they serve. In fact, no thinking officer can think differently. We need but think what, beginning with the lowest ranks and ending with the highest, that of a commander of a corps, constitutes the occupation of all the officers. From the beginning to the end of their service, – I am speaking of the officers in active service, – their activity, with the exception of rare, short periods, when they go to war and are busy with murder, consists in the attainment of two ends, – in instructing the soldiers in the best possible way to kill men and in teaching them such obedience that they will be able mechanically, without any reflection, to do what their chief may demand of them. In olden times they used to say, “flog two unmercifully and get one well instructed,” and so they did. If now the percentage of flogged is less, the principle remains the same. People cannot be brought t<>

that animal and even mechanical condition, when they will do what is most repugnant to their natures and the faith professed by them, namely, murder, at the command of any superior, unless not only cunning deception but even most cruel violence has been practised against them.

And so it is done.

Lately a great sensation was created in the French press by the disclosure of some journalists as to the terrible tortures practised on the soldiers of the disciplinary battalions in the island of Obrou, within six hours' travel from Paris. The persons punished had their arms and legs tied together behind their backs and were thrown on the floor, screws were put on the thumbs of the hands, which were bent behind their backs, and these screws were so tightened that every motion produced excruciating pain, men were suspended by their legs, and so forth.

When we see trained animals performing what is contrary to their natures, – dogs walking on their fore legs, elephants whirling barrels, tigers playing with lions, and so forth, – we know that all this has been obtained by tortures, by means of hunger, the whip, and the hot iron.

We know the same when we see men, in uniforms and with their guns, stand stark still, or go through the same motion with absolute regularity, run, jump, shoot, shout, and so forth, in general execute those beautiful parades and manœuvres, which the emperors and kings admire so much and brag of to one another. It is impossible to drive everything human out of a man and to bring him to the condition of a machine, without torturing him, not in a simple way, but in the most refined and cruel manner, both torturing and deceiving him.

All this you officers do. In this, with the rare exceptions when you go to war, does your service, from the highest to the lowest ranks, consist.

To you conics a youth who is taken away from his family and is settled at the opposite end of the world, and who is impressed with the idea that the deceptive oath, forbidden by the Gospel, which he has taken, binds him irretrievably, just as a cock placed on the floor, on which a chalk-line is drawn from his beak, imagines that he is tied with this line. He comes to you with full humility and with the hope that you, the elders, who are wiser and more learned than he, will teach him everything that is good. But you, instead of freeing him from those superstitions which he has brought with him, inoculate in him new, most senseless, coarse, and harmful superstitions: about the sacredness of the flag, the almost divine significance of the Tsar, the duty of submitting without a murmur to the authorities. When, with the aid of methods worked out in your business for the stultification of men, you bring him to a condition worse than that of an animal, in which he is ready to kill anybody he is commanded to kill, even his unarmed brothers, you proudly show him to the higher power and receive thanks and rewards for this. It is terrible for a man to be a murderer himself, but by means of

cunning and cruel methods to bring to this his brothers who confide in him is a most terrible crime. And this you are committing, and in this does your service consist.

So it is not surprising that among you, more than in any other circle, flourish all those things which can drown conscience, – smoking, cards, drunkenness, debauchery, – and that more frequently than anywhere else occur suicides.

“It must be that offences come into the world; but woe to them by whom the offences come.” You frequently say that you serve, because, if you did not serve, the existing order would be impaired and there would be disorder and all kinds of calamities.

But, in the first place, it is not true that you are concerned about the maintenance of the existing order: you are only concerned about your personal advantage.

In the second place, even if your refraining from doing military service should impair the existing order, this would not at all prove that you must continue to do what is bad, but only that the order which will be destroyed through your abstinence ought to be destroyed. Even if there existed the most useful institutions, such as hospitals, schools, homes for the aged, which would be maintained from the revenue derived from houses of prostitution, «ill the usefulness of these charitable institutions could not keep in her condition a woman who should wish to free herself from her disgraceful calling.

“It is not my fault,” the woman would say, “ that you have established your charitable institutions on debauchery. I do not want to be a harlot, and with your institutions I have nothing to do.” The same ought to be said by every military man, when he is told of the necessity of maintaining the existing order, which is based on the readiness to commit murder. “ Establish a general order, such that murder will not be necessary for it,” is what a military man should say, “ and I will not violate it. I simply do not want to be a murderer.” Many others of you say : “ I was educated that way, I am fettered by my position, and I cannot get out of it.” But even that is not true.

You can always get out of your position. If you do not, it is because you prefer to live and act against your conscience, rather than lose some of the worldly advantages which you derive from your dishonourable calling. Only forget that you are officers and remember that you are men, and the way out from your condition will at once present itself to you. This way out, the best and most honourable, consists in this, that you call together the part which you command, step to the front, beg the soldiers’ pardon for the wrong which you have done them by deceiving them, and stop being a military man. This act seems very bold and seems to call for much courage ; and yet, much less courage is needed in this act than in storming a fort or challenging to a duel for an insult to your

uniform, – what you are always ready to do and always do in your capacity as a military man.

But even if you are not able to act in this manner, you are still able, if you have come to understand the criminality of military service, to leave that service and prefer any other activity to it, even though it be less advantageous.

But if you are not able to do even that, the solution of the question as to whether you will continue to serve will be put off for you until the time – and this time will soon arrive for everybody – when you shall stand face to face with an unarmed crowd of peasants or factory hands, and you shall be commanded to shoot at them.

And then if any human feeling is left in you, you will be compelled to refuse to obey and in consequence of this will certainly leave the service.

I know there are many officers still, from the highest to the lowest ranks, who are so ignorant or so hypnotized that they do not see the necessity of any of these three conclusions, and calmly continue to serve and under the present conditions are prepared to shoot at their brothers and are even proud of the fact ; fortunately, public opinion more and more punishes these men with contempt and loathing, and their number is growing less and less.

Thus in our time, when the fratricidal purpose of the army has become obvious, it is impossible for the officers to continue the ancient traditions of the military selfsatisfied bravado ; they cannot even, without recognizing their human degradation and shame, continue the criminal business of teaching simple people who have faith in them how to commit murder, and themselves be ready to take part in the murder of unarmed men.

It is this that every thinking and conscientious officer of our time should understand and remember.

Guspra, December 7, 1901.