

Letter to the Liberals

by Leo Tolstoy

I should be very glad with you and your companions, whose activity I know and esteem highly, to defend the rights of the Committee of Education and to fight against enemies of popular education. But I see no way of struggling in the field in which you are working. I console myself only with the fact that I am assiduously at work fighting the same enemies of education, though in a different field.

To judge from the particular question which interests you, I think that, in place of the abolished Committee of Education, there ought to be established a large number of other educational societies with the same goals and independent of the government. This should be done without asking the government for any permission of the censorship, and allowing the government, if it sees fit, to persecute these educational societies, punish people for them, deport them, and so forth. By doing so the government will only enhance the significance of good books and libraries and will strengthen the movement toward education.

It seems to me that now it is particularly important to do what is good in a quiet and persistent manner, without asking the government and even consciously evading its participation. The power of the state is based on the ignorance of the people, and the state knows it and so will always fight education. It is time for us to understand this. It is extremely dangerous to give the state a chance, while disseminating darkness, to pretend that it is interested in the education of the masses. This is the case with the so-called educational institutions, which are controlled by it – the public schools, gymnasia, universities, academies, and all kinds of committees and associations. The good is good and education is education only when it is all good and all education, and not when it is adapted to the circulars of the ministers.

Above all, I am always sorry to see such precious, unselfish, and self-sacrificing forces wasted so unproductively. At times it simply amuses me to see good, clever people waste their strength in fighting the government in the field of those very laws which are arbitrarily written by the government itself. The matter seems to me to be as follows. There are some people, to whom we belong, who know that our government is very bad, and who fight it. Ever since the time of Radíshchev and the Decembrists, two methods of struggling have been in vogue: one, that of Sténka Rázin, Pugachév, the Decembrists, the revolutionists of the sixties, the actors of the first of March, and others; the other, which is preached and applied by you, the method of the “moderators,” which consists in fighting on a legal basis, without violence, by a gradual acquisition of rights. Both methods have assiduously been applied for more than half a century, so far as my memory goes, and the condition is getting worse and worse. If the condition is getting better, this is not due to this or that activity, but in spite of the harmfulness of these activities (for different reasons, of which I shall speak later). The force against which the struggle is carried on is growing more powerful, more potent, and more insolent. The last flashes of self-government, the County Council, the courts, the committees of education, and everything else are all being abolished.

Now, since so much time has passed in the vain employment of these means, we can, it seems, see clearly that neither method is any good, and why. To me at least, who always had

contempt for our government, but never had recourse to either method of fighting it, the mistakes of the two methods are obvious.

The first method is no good because, even if it should be possible to change the existing order by means of violence, nothing guarantees that the established new order would be permanent and that the enemies of this new order would not triumph under favorable conditions and with the aid of the same violence. This often happened in France and wherever there were revolutions. And so the new order of things, which is established through violence, would have to be constantly supported by the same violence – that is, by lawlessness. In consequence of it, the new order would inevitably and very quickly be ruined, like the one whose place it took. But in case of failure, as has always happened in Russia, all the cases of revolutionary violence, from Pugachév to the first of March, have only strengthened the order of things against which they have fought, transferring to the camp of the conservatives and retrogrades the enormous number of indecisive people who stood in the middle and did not belong to either camp. And so I think that, being guided by experience and by reflection, I may say boldly that this method is not only immoral, but also irrational and ineffective.

Still less effective and rational, in my opinion, is the second method. It is ineffective and irrational, because the government has in hand total power (the army, the administration, the church, the schools, and the police) and composes those very so-called laws, on the basis of which the liberals want to fight with it. The government knows full well what is dangerous for itself and will never permit the people who submit to it and who act under its guidance to do anything that might subvert its power. Thus, for example, in the present case, the government, which in Russia (as elsewhere) is based on the ignorance of the people, will never allow the people to get any real education. It gives permission for the establishment of so-called educational institutions, which are controlled by it – public schools, gymnasia, universities, academies, all kinds of committees and associations, and censored publications – so long as these institutions and publications serve its purposes, which is to stultify the people, or at least not to interfere with their stultification. At every attempt made by these institutions or publications to undermine the ignorance of the people, on which the power of the government is based, the government, without giving any account to anyone for doing so, quietly pronounces its veto, reorganizes and closes the establishments or institutions, and prohibits the publications. And so, it becomes clear from reflection and from experience that such a supposed gradual conquest of rights is only a self-deception, which is very advantageous for the government and so is even encouraged by it.

But this activity is not only irrational and ineffective, but it is also harmful. It is harmful, in the first place, because enlightened, good, honest men, by entering into the ranks of the government, give it a moral authority, which it did not have without them. If the whole government consisted of nothing but coarse violators, selfish men, and flatterers, who form its pith, it could not exist. Only the participation of enlightened and honest men in the government gives it what little moral prestige that it has. This represents the first harm done by the activity of the liberals, who take part in the government or compromise with it. Secondly, such activity is harmful because, for the possibility of its manifestation, these same enlightened, honest men, by admitting compromises, slowly get used to the idea that it is permissible to depart from truth both in words and acts for a good purpose. It is permissible, for example, without acknowledging the existing religion, to execute its rites, to take an oath, and to deliver false addresses that are contrary to human dignity, if that is necessary for the success of the cause. It is right to enter military service, to take part in the County Council (which has no rights), and to

serve as a professor teaching, not what one thinks necessary, but what is prescribed by the government or even by the County Council chief. It is right to submit to the demands and regulations of the government, which are contrary to one's conscience, and publish newspapers and periodicals, passing over in silence what ought to be said and printing what one is commanded to print. By making these compromises, the limits of which it is impossible to foresee, enlightened, honorable men, who alone could form a barrier against the government in its encroachment upon men's liberty, fall into a condition of complete dependence on the government by imperceptibly departing more and more from the demands of their conscience. Before they get a chance to look around, they receive their salaries and their rewards from it, and, by continuing to imagine that they are carrying out liberal ideas, become submissive servants and supporters of the very order against which they have been struggling.

It is true, there are also very good and sincere men in this camp, who do not succumb to the enticements of the government and remain free from bribery, salary, and position. These men generally get caught in the meshes of the net which the government throws about them, and they struggle in this net, as you now do with your committees, whirling about in one spot. Or, they get excited and pass over to the camp of the revolutionists. Some commit suicide, or take to drinking, or in despair throw everything aside and (what happens most frequently) betake themselves to literature, where they submit to the demands of the censorship and express only what is permitted. By this very concealment of what is most important, they introduce the most perverse ideas, which are most desirable to the government, to the public, imagining all the time that with their writing, which gives them the means of existence, they are serving society.

Thus, reflection and experience show me that both methods for struggling against the government, which have been in vogue, are not only not effective, but equally contribute to the strengthening of the power and the arbitrariness of the government.

What, then, is to be done? Evidently, not that which in the course of seventy years has proved to be fruitless and has attained the opposite results. What, then, is to be done? The same that is done by those whose activity has accomplished all that forward movement toward the light and the good that has been accomplished since the world has existed. It is this that ought to be done. Now what is it?

It is the simple, calm, truthful fulfillment of what one considers to be good and proper, quite independent of the government – of whether that pleases the government or not. It is the defense of one's rights, not as a member of the Committee of Education, as an alderman, as a landowner, as a merchant, or even as a member of parliament. It is the defense of one's rights as a rational and free man, and their defense, not as one defends the rights of County Councils and committees, with concessions and compromises, but without any concessions or compromises, as indeed moral human dignity cannot be defended in any other way.

In order successfully to defend a fortress, it is necessary to burn all the houses of the suburb and to leave only what is fortified and what we will not surrender under any condition. The same is true here. It is necessary at first to concede what we can surrender, and to keep only what is not to be surrendered. Only by fortifying ourselves on what is unsurrenderable are we able to conquer everything that we need. It is true, the rights of a member of parliament, or even of the County Council, or of a committee are greater than those of a simple man, and, by making use of these rights, it seems that very much may be accomplished. But to acquire the rights of the County Council, the parliament, or the committee it is necessary to renounce part of one's own rights as a man. And having renounced a part of one's own rights as a man, no fulcrum is left, and it is impossible either to gain any new rights or retain those already possessed. To pull

others out of the mire, a man must himself stand on dry land, and if he, for greater convenience in the work, goes down into the mire, he does not pull any one else out and sticks fast himself. It may be very well and useful to pass an eight-hour day in parliament or a liberal program for school libraries in some committee, but a member of parliament must raise his hand and lie in public to do this, and lie in pronouncing an oath and expressing in words a respect for what he does not respect. If we, to carry into execution the most liberal programs, are obliged to attend Te Deums, swear, put on uniforms, write lying and flattering documents, and make similar speeches, we renounce our human dignity and lose much more than we gain by doing all these things. By striving after the attainment of one definite end (as a rule not even this end is attained), we deprive ourselves of the possibility of attaining other important ends. The government can be restrained and counteracted only by men who have something that they will not give up for anything, under any conditions. To have the power for counteraction, it is necessary to have a fulcrum. The government knows this very well, and is particularly concerned about coaxing that which does not yield – human dignity – out of men. When this is coaxed out of them, the government calmly does what it needs to, knowing that it will no longer meet with any real opposition. A man who consents to swear in public, pronouncing the unbecoming and false words of the oath, or who submissively waits in his uniform for several hours to be received by a minister, or who serves in the “guard of protection” during a coronation, or who goes through the ceremony of the communion for decency’s sake, or who asks the chiefs of the censorship in advance whether certain ideas may be expressed or not, is no longer a danger to the government.

Alexander II said that the liberals were not dangerous to him, because he knew that they could all be bought with honors, if not with money.

Men who take part in the government or who work under its guidance may, by pretending that they are fighting, deceive themselves and those like themselves. Those who struggle against them know incontestably from the opposition which they offer that they are not in earnest, but are only pretending. And this our government knows in relation to the liberals, and it is constantly making experiments as to how much real opposition there is, and, upon having ascertained to what extent it is absent for the government’s purposes, it proceeds to do its work with the full assurance that anything may be done with these men.

The government of Alexander III knew this very well, and, knowing this, calmly abolished everything of which the liberals had been so proud, imagining that they had done it all. It limited trial by jury, abolished the office of the justice of the peace, abolished university rights, changed the system of instruction in the gymnasias, renewed the school of cadets, and even renewed the governmental sale of liquor. It established the County Council chiefs, legalized the use of the rod, almost abolished the County Council, gave the governors uncontrolled power, encouraged public executions, and enforced administrative deportations, confinements in prisons, and the execution of political prisoners. It introduced new religious persecutions, encouraged the stultification of the masses by means of savage superstitions, legalized murder in duels, established anarchy in the form of the guard of protection, and instituted capital punishment as the normal order of things. In the enforcement of all these measures it did not meet with any opposition, except the protest of one honorable woman, who boldly told the government what she considered to be truth. Though the liberals softly said to one another that they did not like it all, they continued to take part in the courts, and in the County Councils, and in the universities, and in military service, and in the press. In the press they threw out hints at what they were allowed to hint at, and passed in silence what they were not allowed to mention, but continued to

print what they were commanded to print. Thus every reader, who received the liberal newspapers and periodicals but was not initiated in what was quietly talked of in the editor's office, read the uncommented exposition and condemnation of the most cruel and senseless measures – subservient and fulsome addresses meant for the authors of these measures, and frequently even laudations of them. Thus, all the sad activity of the government of Alexander III, which destroyed all the good that had begun to enter into life under Alexander II, and which endeavored to bring Russia back to the barbarism of the times of the beginning of the present century – all that sad activity of gibbets, rods, persecutions, and the stultification of the masses – became the subject of a mad eulogy of Alexander III. It was printed in all the liberal newspapers and periodicals and glorified him as a great man and a model of human dignity.

The same has been continued during the new reign. The young man who took the place of the former czar, and who had no idea of life, was assured by the men who stand by the power and who profit by it that, to govern one hundred million, it was necessary to do the same that his father had done: no one ought to be asked what was to be done, and he ought to do anything that occurred to him or that he was counseled to do by any of the flatterers near him. Imagining that unlimited autocracy is a sacred principle of the Russian nation, this young man began his reign, not by asking the representatives of the Russian nation to help him with their advice, but by boldly and indecently shouting at the representatives of the Russian nation, who came to congratulate him, and by calling the timid expression of the desire of some of them to inform the authorities of their wants “senseless reveries.”

Well? Was Russian society provoked, and did the enlightened and honorable men – the liberals – express their indignation and contempt, or at least refrain from extolling such a government and from taking part in it and encouraging it? Not at all. From that time there began a race to extol the father and the son, who emulates him, and not a single protesting voice has been raised, except in one anonymous letter, which cautiously expressed disapproval of the act of the young czar. On all sides the czar is offered base, fulsome addresses and, for some reason, all kinds of images, which are of no use to anyone and serve only as a subject of idolatry for coarse men. A coronation, horrible in its insipidity and frantic waste of money, was arranged. From disregard for the masses and from the insolence of the rulers, terrible calamities occurred in which thousands lost their lives and upon which the guilty persons looked as they would have upon a small overcasting of the solemnity, which did not need to be interrupted on account of them. An exhibition was established, on which millions were wasted and which was of no use except to those who arranged it. With unheard-of boldness they invented in the Chancery of the Synod new, most stupid means for the stultification of the masses: the relics of a man, of whom no one had ever heard anything. The severity of the censorship was increased, the persecutions for religion's sake were enforced, the guard of protection – legalized lawlessness – was continued, and the condition continues to get worse and worse.

I think that all of this would not exist if those enlightened and honorable men, who are now busy with their liberal activity on the basis of legality in the County Councils, committees, censored literature, and so forth, did not direct their energy to deceiving the government in the very forms that are established by it, and to compelling it to somehow act to its detriment and ruin.¹ It would not exist if they directed their energy to the defense of their personal human rights, and under no condition taking part in the government or in any affairs that are connected with it.

¹ It sometimes amuses me to think how foolishly men busy themselves with such an impossible matter, as though it were possible to cut off an animal's foot without the animal's noticing it.

“It pleases you to substitute County Council chiefs with rods in the place of justices of the peace; that is your business, but we will not go to court to your County Council chiefs, nor will we ourselves accept such an office. It pleases you to make trial by jury nothing but a formality; that is your business, but we will not become judges, lawyers, or jurors. It pleases you, under the guise of a guard of protection, to establish lawlessness; that is your business, but we will not take part in it and will frankly call the guard of protection a form of lawlessness, and capital punishment without trial simple murder. It pleases you to establish classical gymnasia with military exercises and religious instruction, or schools of cadets; that is your business, but we will not be teachers in them and will not send our children to them, but will educate our children as we think best. It pleases you to reduce the County Council to nothing; we will not take part in it. You forbid the publication of what displeases you; you may catch and punish the printers and burn down the printing offices, but you cannot keep us from talking and writing, and that we will do. You command us to swear allegiance to the czar; we will not do so, because that is stupid, deceitful, and base. You command us to serve in the army; we will not do so, because we consider mass murder to be an act that is as contrary to conscience as single murder, and, above all, we consider the promise to kill whomsoever our chief will command us to kill the basest act that a man can commit. You profess a religion that is a thousand years behind the times, with the Iberian Virgin, with its relics, and with its coronations; that is your business, but we not only do not recognize it as being a religion, but call it the worst kind of idolatry, and try to free people from it.”

What can the government do against such activity? They can deport or imprison a man for preparing a bomb or even printing a proclamation to the laboring people. They can transfer a committee of education from one ministry to another, or prorogue a parliament. But what can a government do with a man who will not lie in public by raising his hand, or does not want to send his children to an institution that he considers to be bad, or does not want to learn how to kill men, or does not want to take part in idolatry, or does not want to take part in coronations, meetings, and addresses, or says and writes what he thinks and feels? By persecuting such a man, the government causes universal sympathy to be directed toward such a man, makes a martyr of him, and undermines those foundations on which it holds itself, because, by doing so, it violates human rights instead of protecting them.

Let all those good, enlightened, and honorable men, whose energy is now wasted to their own detriment and to the detriment of their cause in a revolutionary, socialistic, and liberal activity, begin to act thus, and a nucleus of honest, enlightened, and moral men would form, welded together by one thought and one sentiment. This nucleus would immediately be joined by the whole wavering mass of average men, and there would appear that one force which vanquishes governments – that public opinion which demands the freedom of the word, the freedom of conscience, justice, and humaneness. As soon as public opinion would be formed, it would not only become impossible to close a committee of education, but all those inhuman institutions, in the form of the guard of protection, the secret police, censorship, Schlüsselburg, and the Synod, with which the revolutionists and liberals are struggling now, would naturally be destroyed.

Thus, two methods have been tried in the struggle with the government, and both of them have been failures. Now a third, the last, is left. It has not yet been tried, but in my opinion it cannot help but be successful. This method, briefly expressed, consists in this: that all the enlightened and honest people should try to be as good as possible. I do not even mean good in every respect, but only in the observation of one elementary virtue: to be honest, not to lie, and to

act and speak in such a way that the motives which prompt you to act may be comprehensible to your seven-year-old son, who loves you. It consists in acting in such a way that your son may not say, "Why, papa, did you then say so, and now do and say something quite different?" This method seems to be very weak, and yet I am convinced that it is this one method that has advanced humanity ever since its existence. It was only because there were such straightforward, truthful, manly men, who did not yield to anyone in the matter of their human dignity, that all those beneficent changes which men now enjoy – from the abolition of torture and slavery to freedom of speech and conscience – were accomplished. And this could not be otherwise, because what is demanded by the conscience, the highest presentiment of truth which is accessible to man, is always and in all relations at a given moment the most fruitful and the most necessary activity for humanity.

But I must explain myself. The statement that, for the attainment of those ends toward which the revolutionists and the liberals alike are striving, the most effective means is an activity that is in conformity with one's conscience, does not mean that, for the attainment of these ends, it is possible to begin by living in conformity with one's conscience. It is impossible to begin on purpose to live in conformity with one's conscience, in order to attain any external ends.

A man can live in conformity with his conscience only in consequence of some firm and clear religious convictions. When there are such firm and clear religious convictions, the beneficent consequences from them in the external life will inevitably come. And so, the essence of what I wanted to say consists in this: that it is unprofitable for good, sincere men to waste the forces of their minds and souls on the attainment of trifling, practical ends, as in all kinds of struggles of nationality, parties, and liberal programs, so long as there has not been established any clear and firm religious world view – the consciousness of the meaning of their life and its destiny. I think that all the efforts of the soul and the reason of good people, who wish to serve men, ought to be directed upon this. When this shall be, all the rest will happen.

Pardon me for having written you at such a length. Perhaps you do not need this, but I have for a long time been wishing to say something in regard to this question. I even began a long article on the subject, but I doubt whether I shall be able to finish it before my death, and so I wanted to say what I could. Forgive me, if I have erred in anything.

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