

# Letter to Nicholas II

by Leo Tolstoy

Your Imperial Majesty:

The enclosed letter, which I received from Canada, is so brief, so touching, so eloquent in its simplicity, and at the same time deals with such an important subject, that I beg you very much to read it yourself and alone, and to surrender yourself to those good sentiments which this letter will no doubt evoke in your good heart.

Nine young women, who are living at liberty and in good circumstances, and two old mothers ask you as a special favor to be permitted to abandon their free and secure condition and to emigrate to the most terrible place of exile and under the most oppressive conditions. What moral and strong people these men and women must be, if, after all those sufferings to which they have been subjected, they are not thinking of themselves, but of one another, and of being true to the marital law. How much these people must have suffered for one another in these six years of their separation!

And it is not these people alone who are suffering. Tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of the best Russian people are suffering as much, if not more, from religious persecutions, which, by some strange misunderstanding, continue to exist and of late have even been intensified in Russia. All enlightened men and governments have long ago recognized the silliness, the cruel injustice, and, above all, the aimlessness of such persecutions.

Long ago, I wished to tell you about those terrible and stupid cruelties which, under the guise of defending the state religion, are perpetrated in your name. My advanced years and the nearness of my death urge me not to delay any longer. Thousands and thousands of truly religious, and so of the best, men, who form the strength of any nation, have already perished or are now perishing in prisons, in hard exile, or are sent out of Russia. The flower of the population, not only of the Caucasus, but also of Russia – eight thousand Dukhobors<sup>1</sup> – have forever left their country. They not only have no regrets about it, but even think of it with disgust and terror, thanks to those cruelties to which they have been subjected in it. A few thousand Milkens from the Kára Territory and Eriván Government (whose petitions to be permitted to emigrate from Russia I have sent you), the Milkens from Tashként, and tens of thousands in the Governments of Khárkov, Kíev, Poltáva, Ekaterinosláv, who are oppressed on account of their religion, ask for nothing but that they be permitted to leave their country and go where they may profess God as they understand Him, and not as is demanded by the authorities, who for the most part do not recognize any God. Knowing that all this is being done in your name, and knowing that you are able to put a stop to it, you will not find any peace of mind until you do so. (You cannot help but know this. If you do not know it, let a truthful man investigate it, and he will confirm my words to you.)

---

<sup>1</sup> Transcriber's note – Chief among the Dukhobors' prohibited beliefs was their refusal of military conscription.

Your advisers, those same men who have started these persecutions and guide them, will tell you that it is impossible to stop this, that I am a Utopian, an anarchist, an atheist, and that no attention ought to be paid to me. But do not believe them.

What I say, I do not say from my standpoint, but from the standpoint of a rational and enlightened government. And from this standpoint, it has long ago been proved that all religious persecutions not only lower the prestige of the government, deprive the government of the people's love, and fail to attain the aim for which the government is founded, but even produce the opposite effect.

And so it has long been time, in the first place, to review and repeal the existing laws about persecution for religion's sake; in the second place, to stop all persecutions for departing from the profession of faith adopted by the state; in the third place, to free all men who were deported and exiled for crimes against religion on the basis of previous laws; and, in the fourth place, not to criminalize the disagreement of religious consciousness with the demands of the government, but to try to harmonize this contradiction, as it is harmonized in the case of a refusal to take the oath in court by promising to tell the truth, or as it has been harmonized in the case of the Mennonites' refusal to do military service by substituting for it obligatory, non-military labor.

By doing so, you will not only relieve yourself of a heavy responsibility, which is resting upon you, but you will also feel the joy of the consciousness of having done a good deed.

May God help you to do what pleases Him.

Your loving Lev Tolstóy  
*December 7, 1900*

---

Transcribed and edited by [www.nonresistance.org](http://www.nonresistance.org).

This transcription is under no copyright protection. It is our gift to you.  
You may freely copy, print, and transmit it, but please do not change or sell it.  
And please bring any mistakes to our attention.