

Tolstoy Leo

# Bethink Yourselves!



Leo Tolstoy

**Bethink Yourselves!**

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## I

AGAIN war. Again sufferings, necessary to nobody, utterly uncalled for; again fraud; again the universal stupefaction and brutalization of men.

Men who are separated from each other by thousands of miles, hundreds of thousands of such men (on the one hand – Buddhists, whose law forbids the killing, not only of men, but of animals; on the other hand – Christians, professing the law of brotherhood and love) like wild beasts on land and on sea are seeking out each other, in order to kill, torture, and mutilate each other in the most cruel way. What can this be? Is it a dream or a reality? Something is taking place which should not, cannot be; one longs to believe that it is a dream and to awake from it. But no, it is not a dream, it is a dreadful reality!

One could yet understand how a poor, uneducated, defrauded Japanese, torn from his field and taught that Buddhism consists not in compassion to all that lives, but in sacrifices to idols, and how a similar poor illiterate fellow from the neighborhood of Toula or Nijni Novgorod, who has been taught that Christianity consists in worshipping Christ, the Madonna, Saints, and their ikons – one could understand how these unfortunate men, brought by the violence and deceit of centuries to recognize the greatest crime in the world – the murder of one's brethren – as a virtuous act, can commit these dreadful deeds, without regarding themselves as being guilty in so doing.

But how can so-called enlightened men preach war, support it, participate in it, and, worst of all, without suffering the dangers of war themselves, incite others to it, sending their unfortunate defrauded brothers to fight? These so-called enlightened men cannot possibly ignore, I do not say the Christian law, if they recognize themselves to be Christians, but all that has been written, is being written, has and is being said, about the cruelty, futility, and senselessness of war. They are regarded as enlightened men precisely because they know all this. The majority of them have themselves written and spoken about this. Not to mention The Hague Conference, which called forth universal praise, or all the books, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and speeches demonstrating the possibility of the solution of international misunderstandings by international arbitration – no enlightened man can help knowing that the universal competition in the armaments of States must inevitably lead them to endless wars, or to a general bankruptcy, or to both the one and the other. They cannot but know that besides the senseless, purposeless expenditure of milliards of roubles, *i. e.* of human labor, on the preparations for war, during the wars themselves millions of the most energetic and vigorous men perish in that period of their life which is best for productive labor (during the past century wars have destroyed fourteen million men). Enlightened men cannot but know that occasions for war are always such as are not worth not only one human life, but not one hundredth part of all that which is spent upon wars (in fighting for the emancipation of the negroes much more was spent than it would have cost to redeem them from slavery).

Every one knows and cannot help knowing that, above all, wars, calling forth the lowest animal passions, deprave and brutalize men. Every one knows the weakness of the arguments in favor of war, such as were brought forward by De Maistre, Moltke, and others, for they are all founded on the sophism that in every human calamity it is possible to find an advantageous element, or else upon the utterly arbitrary assertion that wars have always existed and therefore always must exist, as if the bad actions of men could be justified by the advantages or the usefulness which they realize, or by the consideration that they have been committed during a long period of time. All so-called enlightened men know all this. Then suddenly war begins, and all this is instantly

forgotten, and the same men who but yesterday were proving the cruelty, futility, the senselessness of wars now think, speak, and write only about killing as many men as possible, about ruining and destroying the greatest possible amount of the productions of human labor, and about exciting as much as possible the passion of hatred in those peaceful, harmless, industrious men who by their labor feed, clothe, maintain these same pseudo-enlightened men, who compel them to commit those dreadful deeds contrary to their conscience, welfare, or faith.

## II

Something is taking place incomprehensible and impossible in its cruelty, falsehood, and stupidity. The Russian Tsar, the same man who exhorted all the nations in the cause of peace, publicly announces that, notwithstanding all his efforts to maintain the peace so dear to his heart (efforts which express themselves in the seizing of other peoples' lands and in the strengthening of armies for the defence of these stolen lands), he, owing to the attack of the Japanese, commands that the same shall be done to the Japanese as they had commenced doing to the Russians — *i. e.* that they should be slaughtered; and in announcing this call to murder he mentions God, asking the Divine blessing on the most dreadful crime in the world. The Japanese Emperor has proclaimed the same thing in relation to the Russians.

Men of science and of law (Messieurs Muravieff and Martens) strenuously try to prove that in the recent call of all nations to universal peace and the present incitement to war, because of the seizure of other peoples' lands, there is no contradiction. Diplomats, in their refined French language, publish and send out circulars in which they circumstantially and diligently prove (though they know no one believes them) that, after all its efforts to establish peaceful relations (in reality, after all its efforts to deceive other countries), the Russian Government has been compelled to have recourse to the only means for a rational solution of the question — *i. e.* to the murder of men. The same thing is written by Japanese diplomats. Scientists, historians, and philosophers, on their side, comparing the present with the past, deduce from these comparisons profound conclusions, and argue interminably about the laws of the movement of nations, about the relation between the yellow and white races, or about Buddhism and Christianity, and on the basis of these deductions and arguments justify the slaughter of those belonging to the yellow race by Christians; while in the same way the Japanese scientists and philosophers justify the slaughter of those of the white race. Journalists, without concealing their joy, try to outdo each other, and, not hesitating at any falsehood, however impudent and transparent, prove in all possible ways that the Russians only are right and strong and good in every respect, and that all the Japanese are wrong and weak and bad in every respect, and that all those are also bad who are inimical or may become inimical toward the Russians — the English, the Americans; and the same is proved likewise by the Japanese and their supporters in relation to the Russians.

Not to mention the military, who in the way of their profession prepare for murder, crowds of so-called enlightened people, such as professors, social reformers, students, nobles, merchants, without being forced thereto by anything or anybody, express the most bitter and contemptuous feelings toward the Japanese, the English, or the Americans, toward whom but yesterday they were either well-disposed or indifferent; while, without the least compulsion, they express the most abject, servile feelings toward the Tsar (to whom, to say the least, they were completely indifferent), assuring him of their unlimited love and readiness to sacrifice their lives in his interests.

This unfortunate, entangled young man, recognized as the leader of one hundred and thirty millions of people, continually deceived and compelled to contradict himself, confidently thanks and blesses the troops whom he calls his own for murder in defence of lands which with yet less right he also calls his own. All present to each other hideous ikons in which not only no one amongst the educated believes, but which unlearned peasants are beginning to abandon; all bow down to the ground before these ikons, kiss them, and pronounce pompous and deceitful speeches in which no one really believes.

Wealthy people contribute insignificant portions of their immorally acquired riches for this cause of murder or the organization of help in connection with the work of murder; while the poor, from whom the Government annually collects two milliards, deem it necessary to do likewise, giving their mites also. The Government incites and encourages crowds of idlers, who walk about

the streets with the Tsar's portrait, singing, shouting hurrah! and who, under pretext of patriotism, are licensed in all kinds of excess. All over Russia, from the Palace to the remotest village, the pastors of churches, calling themselves Christians, appeal to that God who has enjoined love to one's enemies – to the God of Love Himself – to help the work of the devil to further the slaughter of men.

Stupefied by prayers, sermons, exhortations, by processions, pictures, and newspapers, the cannon's flesh, hundreds of thousands of men, uniformly dressed, carrying divers deadly weapons, leaving their parents, wives, children, with hearts of agony, but with artificial sprightliness, go where they, risking their own lives, will commit the most dreadful act of killing men whom they do not know and who have done them no harm. And they are followed by doctors and nurses, who somehow imagine that at home they cannot serve simple, peaceful, suffering people, but can only serve those who are engaged in slaughtering each other. Those who remain at home are gladdened by news of the murder of men, and when they learn that many Japanese have been killed they thank some one whom they call God.

All this is not only regarded as the manifestation of elevated feeling, but those who refrain from such manifestations, if they endeavor to disabuse men, are deemed traitors and betrayers, and are in danger of being abused and beaten by a brutalized crowd which, in defence of its insanity and cruelty, can possess no other weapon than brute force.

### III

It is as if there had never existed either Voltaire, or Montaigne, or Pascal, or Swift, or Kant, or Spinoza, or hundreds of other writers who have exposed, with great force, the madness and futility of war, and have described its cruelty, immorality, and savagery; and, above all, it is as if there had never existed Jesus and his teaching of human brotherhood and love of God and of men.

One recalls all this to mind and looks around on what is now taking place, and one experiences horror less at the abominations of war than at that which is the most horrible of all horrors – the consciousness of the impotency of human reason. That which alone distinguishes man from the animal, that which constitutes his merit – his reason – is found to be an unnecessary, and not only a useless, but a pernicious addition, which simply impedes action, like a bridle fallen from a horse's head, and entangled in his legs and only irritating him.

It is comprehensible that a heathen, a Greek, a Roman, even a mediæval Christian, ignorant of the Gospel and blindly believing all the prescriptions of the Church, might fight and, fighting, pride himself on his military achievements; but how can a believing Christian, or even a sceptic, involuntarily permeated by the Christian ideals of human brotherhood and love which have inspired the works of the philosophers, moralists, and artists of our time, – how can such take a gun, or stand by a cannon, and aim at a crowd of his fellow-men, desiring to kill as many of them as possible?

The Assyrians, Romans, or Greeks might be persuaded that in fighting they were acting not only according to their conscience, but even fulfilling a righteous deed. But, whether we wish it or not, we are Christians, and however Christianity may have been distorted, its general spirit cannot but lift us to that higher plane of reason whence we can no longer refrain from feeling with our whole being not only the senselessness and the cruelty of war, but its complete opposition to all that we regard as good and right. Therefore, we cannot do as they did, with assurance, firmness, and peace, and without a consciousness of our criminality, without the desperate feeling of a murderer, who, having begun to kill his victim, and feeling in the depths of his soul the guilt of his act, proceeds to try to stupefy or infuriate himself, to be able the better to complete his dreadful deed. All the unnatural, feverish, hot-headed, insane excitement which has now seized the idle upper ranks of Russian society is merely the symptom of their recognition of the criminality of the work which is being done. All these insolent, mendacious speeches about devotion to, and worship of, the Monarch, about readiness to sacrifice life (or one should say other people's lives, and not one's own); all these promises to defend with one's breast land which does not belong to one; all these senseless benedictions of each other with various banners and monstrous ikons; all these *Te Deums*; all these preparations of blankets and bandages; all these detachments of nurses; all these contributions to the fleet and to the Red Cross presented to the Government, whose direct duty is (whilst it has the possibility of collecting from the people as much money as it requires), having declared war, to organize the necessary fleet and necessary means for attending the wounded; all these Slavonic, pompous, senseless, and blasphemous prayers, the utterance of which in various towns is communicated in the papers as important news; all these processions, calls for the national hymn, cheers; all this dreadful, desperate newspaper mendacity, which, being universal, does not fear exposure; all this stupefaction and brutalization which has now taken hold of Russian society, and which is being transmitted by degrees also to the masses; all this is only a symptom of the guilty consciousness of that dreadful act which is being accomplished.

Spontaneous feeling tells men that what they are doing should not be; but, as the murderer who has begun to assassinate his victim cannot stop, so also Russian people now imagine that the fact of the deadly work having been commenced is an unanswerable argument in favor of war. War has been begun, and therefore it should go on. Thus it seems to simple, benighted, unlearned men, acting under the influence of the petty passions and stupefaction to which they have been subjected.

In exactly the same way the most educated men of our time argue to prove that man does not possess free will, and that, therefore, even were he to understand that the work he has commenced is evil, he can no longer cease to do it. And dazed, brutalized men continue their dreadful work.

## IV

Ask a soldier, a private, a corporal, a non-commissioned officer, who has abandoned his old parents, his wife, his children, why he is preparing to kill men whom he does not know; he will at first be astonished at your question. He is a soldier, he has taken the oath, and it is his duty to fulfil the orders of his commanders. If you tell him that war —*i. e.* the slaughter of men – does not conform to the command, “Thou shalt not kill,” he will say: “And how if ours are attacked – For the King – For the Orthodox faith?” (One of them said in answer to my question: “And how if he attacks that which is sacred?” “What do you mean?” I asked. “Why,” said he, “the banner.”) And if you endeavor to explain to such a soldier that God's Commandment is more important not only than the banner but than anything else in the world, he will become silent, or he will get angry and report you to the authorities.

Ask an officer, a general, why he goes to the war. He will tell you that he is a military man, and that the military are indispensable for the defence of the fatherland. As to murder not conforming to the spirit of the Christian law, this does not trouble him, as either he does not believe in this law, or, if he does, it is not in the law itself, but in that explanation which has been given to this law. But, above all, he, like the soldier, in place of the personal question, what should he do himself, always put the general question about the State, or the fatherland. “At the present moment, when the fatherland is in danger, one should act, and not argue,” he will say.

Ask the diplomatists, who, by their deceits, prepare wars, why they do it. They will tell you that the object of their activity is the establishment of peace between nations, and that this object is attained, not by ideal, unrealizable theories, but by diplomatic action and readiness for war. And, just as the military, instead of the question concerning one's own action, place the general question, so also diplomatists will speak about the interests of Russia, about the unscrupulousness of other Powers, about the balance of power in Europe, but not about their own position and its activities.

Ask the journalists why, by their writings, they incite men to war; they will say that wars in general are necessary and useful, especially the present war, and they will confirm this opinion of theirs by misty patriotic phrases, and, just like the military and diplomatist, to the question why he, a journalist, a particular individual, a living man, acts in a certain way, he will speak about the general interests of the nation, about the State, civilization, the white race. In the same way, all those who prepare war will explain their participation in that work. They will perhaps agree that it would be desirable to abolish war, but at present this is impossible. At present they as Russians and as men who occupy certain positions, such as heads of the nobility, representatives of local self-government, doctors, workers of the Red Cross, are called upon to act and not to argue. “There is no time to argue and to think of oneself,” they will say, “when there is a great common work to be done.” The same will be said by the Tsar, seemingly responsible for the whole thing. He, like the soldier, will be astonished at the question, whether war is now necessary. He does not even admit the idea that the war might yet be arrested. He will say that he cannot refrain from fulfilling that which is demanded of him by the whole nation, that, although he does recognize that war is a great evil, and has used, and is ready to use, all possible means for its abolition – in the present case he could not help declaring war, and cannot help continuing it. It is necessary for the welfare and glory of Russia.

Every one of these men, to the question why he, so and so, Ivan, Peter, Nicholas, whilst recognizing as binding upon him the Christian law which not only forbids the killing of one's neighbor but demands that one should love him, serve him, why he permits himself to participate in war; *i. e.* in violence, loot, murder, will infallibly answer the same thing, that he is thus acting in the name of his fatherland, or faith, or oath, or honor, or civilization, or the future welfare of the whole of mankind – in general, of something abstract and indefinite. Moreover, these men are

always so urgently occupied either by preparation for war, or by its organization, or discussions about it, that in their leisure time they can only rest from their labors, and have not time to occupy themselves with discussions about their life, regarding such discussions as idle.

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