The Beginning of the End
by Leo Tolstoy

This year, 1896, a young man by the name of Van-der-Veer was summoned in Holland to enter the National Guard.

To the summons of the commander, Van-der-Veer replied in the following letter:

THOU SHALT NOT KILL

Mr. Herman Snijders
Commander of the National Guard of the Middelburg Circuit

Dear Sir:

Last week I received a document in which I was commanded to appear in the magistracy in order to be enlisted according to the law in the National Guard. As you, no doubt, have noticed, I did not appear. The purpose of this letter is to inform you frankly, and without any ambiguities, that I have no intention of appearing before the commission. I know full well that I subject myself to a heavy responsibility, that you can punish me, and that you will not fail to make use of that right. But that does not frighten me. The reasons that compel me to manifest this passive resistance present to me a sufficiently important counterbalance to this responsibility.

I, who am not a Christian, understand the commandment that is standing at the head of this letter better than the majority of Christians. It is a commandment inherent in human nature and in reason. When I was still a child, I permitted myself to be instructed in the soldier’s trade – the art of killing – but now I refuse. More than anything else, I do not wish to kill on command without any personal impulse or foundation. This appears to my conscience as murder. Can you name to me anything more degrading for a human being than the commission of similar murders or slaughter? I cannot kill an animal, or see it killed, and therefore I became a vegetarian. In the present case I may be commanded to shoot men who have never done me any harm. Soldiers certainly do not study the military field manual in order to shoot at leaves on the branches of trees.

But you will perhaps tell me that the National Guard must also and above everything else cooperate in the maintenance of internal order.

Mr. Commander, if there really existed any order in our society, if the social organism were indeed sound, if there did not exist such crying misuses in our social relations, if it were not permitted that one man should starve to death while another enjoys all the lusts of luxury, then you would see me in the first ranks of the defenders of this order. But I unconditionally refuse to cooperate in the maintenance of the present so-called order. What is the use, Mr. Commander, of
pulling the wool over each other’s eyes? Both of us know full well what is meant by the maintenance of this order. It is the support of the rich against the poor workers who are beginning to become conscious of their right. Did you not see the part that your National Guard played during the last strike in Rotterdam? Without any reason, this guard was compelled for hours to protect the property of the business firms that were threatened. Can you for a moment suppose that I will surrender myself to take part in the defense of men who, according to my sincere conviction, are supporting the war between capital and labor, or that I will shoot at the working men who are acting entirely within the limits of their rights? You cannot be so blind as that! Why complicate matters? Indeed, I cannot have myself cut out into an obedient National Guardsman such as you wish to have and as you need!

On the basis of all these reasons, but especially because I despise murder on command, I refuse to serve in the capacity of a member of the National Guard, and ask you to send me neither uniform nor weapons, since I have the steadfast intention of not using them.

I greet you, Mr. Commander,
I. K. Van-der-Veer

This letter has, in my opinion, very great importance.

Refusals to do military service in Christian countries began as soon as military service made its appearance in them, or rather, when the countries, whose power is based on violence, accepted Christianity without renouncing violence.

In reality, it cannot be otherwise. A Christian, whose teaching prescribes to him meekness, non-resistance to evil, and love toward all men cannot be martial. He cannot belong to a class of men who are destined only to kill other men like himself.

And so, true Christians have always refused, and even now refuse, to do military service.

But there have always been few true Christians. The vast majority of men in Christian countries have counted as Christians all those who profess the ecclesiastic faith, which has nothing but the name in common with true Christianity. The fact that now and then there appeared, compared to tens of thousands entering military service, one who refused it, did not in the least disturb those tens of thousands of men.

“It is impossible that the whole vast majority of men who enter military service should be mistaken, and that the truth should be with the exceptions, who are frequently uneducated men, who refuse to do military service, while archbishops and scholars recognize it to be compatible with Christianity,” said the people of the majority, who, considering themselves to be Christians, calmly entered into the ranks of murderers.

But here there appears a non-Christian, as he announces himself, and he refuses to do military service. He does this not from religious reasons, but from reasons that are understandable and common to all men, no matter what faith or what nationality they may be from – whether Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, Confucians, Spaniards, Arabs, or Japanese.

Van-der-Veer refused to do military service, not because he follows the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” but because he considers murder to be contrary to human reason. He writes that he simply hates any murder, and hates it to such an extent that he became a vegetarian in order not to take part in the murder of animals. Above all, he says, he refuses to do military
service because he considers murder on command, \textit{i.e.} killing those men whom he is ordered to kill (wherein indeed military service consists), to be incompatible with human dignity. To the customary retort that, if he does not serve, and if others follow his example and refuse to serve, the existing social order will be violated, he answers by saying that he does not even wish to support the existing order. He says that the existing order is bad because the rich rule over the poor, which ought not to be. Even if he had any doubts as to whether he ought to serve in the army or not, the mere thought that he would use weapons and the threat of murder to support the oppressing rich against the oppressed poor would make him refuse to do military service.

If Van-der-Veer had brought forward his belonging to some Christian denomination as the reason of his refusal, men who entered military service could say, \textit{“I am not a sectarian and do not acknowledge Christianity, and so I do not consider it necessary to act likewise.\textsuperscript{1}”} But the reasons given by Van-der-Veer are so simple, dear, and common to all men that it is impossible not to apply them to oneself. To recognize these causes as not binding, a person would have to say, \textit{“I love murder and am prepared to kill, not only enemies, but even my oppressed and unfortunate compatriots, and I do not find anything wrong with promising, at the order of the first commander, to run across to kill all those whom he commands me to kill.”}

The matter is, indeed, very simple.

Here is a young man. No matter in what surroundings, what family, or what faith he may have grown up, he has learned the necessity of being good and that it is bad to kill – not only a man, but even an animal. He has learned to highly esteem his human dignity, and this dignity consists of acting according to his conscience. A Chinese Confucian, a Japanese Shintoist or Buddhist, and a Turkish Muslim have all learned the same. Suddenly, after he has learned all this, he enters the military service, where the very opposite of what he has learned is demanded of him. He is commanded to be ready to wound and kill – not animals, but men. He is commanded to renounce his human dignity and to obey unknown strangers in matters of murder. What can a man of our time say to such a demand? Obviously only this: \textit{“I do not want to, and I won’t.”}

This is precisely what Van-der-Veer did. And it is hard to imagine what we can retort to him and to all men who, being in the same position as he, must act in the same way.

It is possible not to see what has not yet attracted attention, and not to understand the meaning of an act so long as it is not explained. But, once it is pointed out and explained, we cannot avoid seeing it or pretend that we do not see what is quite clear.

Even now there may be a man who has not thought of what he is doing as he enters military service. There may be men who wish for war with other nations, or who wish to continue oppressing the working people, or even who love murder for the sake of murder. Such men may become warriors, but even these men cannot help but know that there are men – the best men in the whole world, not only among Christians, but also among Muslims, Brahmins, Buddhists, and Confucians – who look with loathing and disgust upon war and the military, and the number of these men is growing with every hour. No arguments can veil the simple truth that a man who respects himself cannot go into slavery to a strange master, or even to one he knows, who has murderous intentions. But this is the nature of military service and discipline.

I am asked in reply to this, \textit{“But what about the responsibility to which the person refusing subjects himself? It is all very well for you, an old man, who is no longer subject to this}

\textsuperscript{1} Transcriber’s note: Membership in one of the traditional peace churches was, for a long time, the only grounds for conscientious objection recognized by the American military.
temptation and is secure in your position to preach martyrdom. But how is it for those to whom you preach and who, believing you, decline to serve and ruin their youthful lives?"

But what am I to do? This is what I answer to those who tell me this. Must I refuse to point out the evil that I see clearly and beyond any doubt, simply because I am an old man and have lived through much and thought much? A man who is on the other side of a river and thus inaccessible to a murderer, and who sees that this murderer is about to force one man to kill another, must cry out to the man who is to kill and tell him not to do so, even if this interference may further embitter the murderer. Besides, I fail to see why the government, which subjects those who refuse to do military service to persecution, will not inflict punishment upon me, since it recognizes me as the instigator of these refusals. I am not so old as not to be subjected to persecutions and punishments of every kind, and my position does not in the least protect me. In any case, whether they will condemn and persecute me or not, whether they will condemn and persecute those who refuse to do military service, I shall never stop saying what I am saying so long as I live, because I cannot stop acting in accordance with my conscience.

Christianity, i.e. the teaching of truth, is powerful and invincible for the very reason that, in order to act upon people, it cannot be guided by any external considerations. Whether a man is young or old, whether he is subjected to persecutions for it or not, having made the Christian conception of life his own, he cannot depart from the demands of his conscience. In this does the essence and peculiarity of Christianity consist, in contrast to all the other religious teachings, and in this does its invincible might lie.

Van-der-Veer says that he is not a Christian, but the motives of his refusal and his act are completely Christian. He refuses to serve because he does not wish to kill a brother. He does not obey because the commands of his conscience are more important than the commands of men. It is for this reason that Van-der-Veer’s refusal is especially important. This refusal shows that Christianity is not a sect or a faith that some men may keep and others may not keep, but that it is simply a following in life of that light of comprehension which shines upon all men. The meaning of Christianity is not in its having prescribed certain acts for men to perform, but in its having foreseen and pointed out the path on which all humanity must walk.

Men who now act well and sensibly do not do so because they follow Christ’s injunctions, but because what eighteen hundred years ago was expressed as a direction of activity has now become the consciousness of men.

This is why I think that Van-der-Veer’s act and letter are of great importance.

Just as a fire started in the prairie or the forest does not subside until it has consumed everything dry and dead, so also a truth, once expressed in words, does not cease acting until it has destroyed the whole lie that surrounds and conceals the truth on all sides. The fire smolders for a long time, but the moment it bursts into flame, it soon consumes everything that can burn. Even so, a thought may beg for recognition for a long time without finding any expression. It only needs to find a clear expression in speech, and the lie and the evil are soon destroyed. One of the special manifestations of Christianity – the idea that humanity can live without slavery – though included in the idea of Christianity, was clearly expressed, so far as I know, not earlier than the end of the eighteenth century. Up to that time, not only ancient pagans such as Plato and Aristotle, but even men who were nearer to our time and Christians, could not imagine human society without slavery. Thomas Moore could not imagine even Utopia without slavery. Likewise, the men of the beginning of the present century could not imagine the life of humanity without war. Only after the Napoleonic wars was the thought clearly expressed that humanity can live without slavery. One hundred years have passed since the time when the idea was
clearly enunciated that humanity can live without slavery, and among Christians there is no longer any slavery: and less than a hundred years will pass from the time that the idea has been clearly enunciated that humanity can live without war, and there will be no war. It is very likely that war will not be fully abolished, even as slavery is not fully abolished. It is very likely that military violence will remain, just as hired labor remained after the abolition of slavery, but in any case war and the army will be abolished in that coarse form which is contrary to reason and moral sentiment, and in which they now exist.

There are very many signs that this time is near. These signs are to be found in the hopeless condition of the governments, which keep increasing their armies, in the growing burden of taxes, in the dissatisfaction of the nations, in the instruments of war, which are carried to the highest degree of destructiveness, and in the activity of the congresses and the peace societies – but chiefly in the refusal of individual persons to do military service. The key to the solution of the question of war lies in these refusals.

“You say that military service is indispensable, that if it did not exist, we should be overcome by terrible calamities. All this may be possible, but with that conception of good and evil which is common to all men of our time and even to you, I cannot kill men on command. Thus if, as you say, military service is very necessary, make it such that it will not be in such contradiction with my conscience and with yours. So long as you have not arranged it so, but demand of me what is directly opposed to my conscience, I am not at all able to obey.”

Thus inevitably must answer, and soon will answer, all the honest and sensible men, not only of our Christian world, but also the Muslims and the so-called pagans: the Brahmans, Buddhists, and Confucians. Maybe war will from inertia last for some time yet, but the question is already answered in the consciousness of men. With every day, with every hour, a growing number of men are coming to the same conclusion, and it is now quite impossible to arrest this movement.

Every recognition of a truth by men, or rather, every liberation from some error – so it was visibly with slavery – is always obtained through a struggle between men’s clearer consciousness and the inertia of the previous state.

At first the inertia is so strong and the consciousness so feeble that the first attempt at a liberation from error is only met with surprise. The new truth presents itself as madness. “How can we live without slavery? Who will work?” “How can we live without war? Everybody will come and will conquer us.” But the power of consciousness keeps growing, the inertia keeps diminishing, and the surprise gives way to ridicule and contempt. “Holy Scripture recognizes masters and slaves. Such a relation has existed since eternity. Suddenly wiseacres have appeared who want to change the whole world!” Such was what people said of slavery. “All the learned and the sages have recognized the legality and even the sanctity of war, and suddenly we are to believe that we must wage no war!” Such will people say of war. But the consciousness keeps growing and being clarified. The number of men who recognize the new truth keeps growing larger, and ridicule and contempt give way to cunning and deception. The men who have been supporting the error make it appear that they understand and recognize the incompatibility and cruelty of the measure that they are defending, but consider its abolition impossible at present and delay the abolition for an indefinite time.

“Who does not know that slavery is bad, but men are not yet prepared for freedom and emancipation will produce terrible calamities.” They said this of slavery forty years ago. “Who does not know that war is evil?” But the thought does its work, grows, and exposes the lie, and the time arrives when the madness, aimlessness, harm, and immorality of the delusion are so

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2 Transcriber’s note: Tolstoy was a bit optimistic. Old habits are hard to break, particularly this one.
clear (so it was within our memory, in the 1860s, in Russia and in America) that it is impossible to defend it. So it is now in the case of war. Just as then they no longer tried to justify slavery, but only maintained it, so now they do not try to justify war and the army, but only keep silent. They make use of the inertia, which still perpetuates war and the army, knowing very well that all this apparently powerful, cruel, and immoral organization of murder may any moment come down with a crash, never to rise again.

It is enough for one drop of water to ooze through a dam, for one brick to fall out of a large building, or for one mesh to come loose in the strongest net in order that the dam should be broken, the building to fall, or the net go to pieces. Such a drop, such a brick, such a loosened mesh appears to me to be Van-der-Veer’s refusal, which is explained by causes that are common to all humanity. Other refusals must follow ever more frequently after Van-der-Veer’s, and as soon as there shall be many such refusals, the same men (their name is legion) who but yesterday said that it is impossible to live without war, will say that they have for a long time been preaching the madness and immorality of war and will advise you to act like Van-der-Veer, and of war and the army, in the form in which they now exist, there will be left nothing but a recollection.

This time is near at hand.

Yásnaya Polyána, September 24, 1896.


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