

Thou Shalt Not Kill

by Leo Tolstoy

Thou shall not kill. (Exodus 20:18)

The disciple is not above his master; but everyone that is perfect shall be like his master. (Luke 6:40)

All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. (Matthew 26:52)

Therefore, all the things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. (Matthew 7:12)

When kings like Charles I, Louis XVI, or Maximilian of Mexico are sentenced to death, or when they are killed in court revolutions, as were Peter III, Paul, and all kinds of sultans, shahs, and khans, there is generally a silence on the subject. But when they are killed without a trial and without court revolutions, as was the case with Henry IV, Alexander II, the Empress of Austria, the Shah of Persia, and now Humbert, such murders rouse the greatest indignation and amazement among kings, emperors, and their retinues, as though these men did not take part in murders, did not make use of them, and did not prescribe them. And yet, the very best of the kings slain, such as Alexander II and Humbert, were the authors, participants, and accomplice in the murder of tens of thousands of men, who died on fields of battle, to say nothing of domestic executions. The bad kings and emperors have been the authors of hundreds of thousands, or of millions of murders.

Christ's teaching has taken the place of the law, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But those men who have always kept that law, and even now keep it, apply it in terrific proportions in their punishments and in wars. In addition to "an eye for an eye," they command men to kill thousands without any provocation, as they do when they declare war. These men have no right to be provoked at the application of this law to them in such a small and insignificant measure that hardly one king or emperor is killed to one hundred thousand or, perhaps one million, of those killed by the command and with the consent of kings and emperors. Kings and emperors not only need not be provoked at such murders as those of Alexander II and Humbert, but should only marvel how rare such murders are after the constant and universal example of murder, which they give to men.

Most men are so hypnotized that they see and do not understand the significance of what is constantly done to them. They see the constant cares of the kings, emperors, and presidents about the disciplined army. They see those inspections, maneuvers, and parades, which they practice and which they boast of before one another. They run like mad to see their brothers, who are dressed up in stupid, variegated, sparkling uniforms, transformed into machines by the sound of drums and horns and, at the shout of one man, performing in a body the same motions. They do not understand what it means, but the meaning of this instruction is very simple and clear: it is nothing but a preparation for murder.

It is the stultification of men, in order to make of them instruments of murder. It is only kings, emperors, and presidents who do this, manage this, and pride themselves on it. And it is these men, who are specially interested in murder, who have made a profession of murder, and who always wear military uniforms and instruments of murder (the sword at their side), that are terrified and provoked when one of them is killed.

The murders of kings, like the late murder of Humbert, are not terrible on account of their cruelty. The acts committed by the commands of kings and emperors – not only in the past, as the Night of Bartholomew, the massacres for the sake of faith, the terrible pacifications of peasant uprisings, and the Versailles slaughters, but also the present governmental executions, the starvations in solitary cells and disciplinary battalions, the hangings, the chopping off of heads, the shooting, and the slaughters in war – are incomparably more cruel than the murders committed by anarchists. Nor are these murders terrible on account of not having been deserved. If Alexander II and Humbert did not deserve to be killed, how much less those thousands of Russians who perished at Plevna deserved to be killed, and those Italians who perished in Abyssinia. Such murders are not terrible on account of their cruelty or the innocence of the murdered, but on account of the senselessness of those who commit them.

If kings such as Alexander, Carnot, and Humbert are murdered under the influence of a personal sentiment of indignation, provoked by the sufferings of an enslaved nation, or under the influence of a personal feeling of revenge, such acts, however immoral, are comprehensible. But how is it that an organization of men – of anarchists, as they now say – which sent Bressi out, and which is threatening another emperor, has not been able to invent anything better for the amelioration of men's condition than the murder of those men whose annihilation can be as useful as the cutting off of the head of the Hydra, when in place of the one cut off there immediately grew out a new one? Kings and emperors have long ago arranged things in the same manner as in a magazine rifle: the moment one bullet flies out, another takes its place. *Le roi est mort; vive le roi!* So what sense is there in killing them?

Only after a most superficial reflection can the murder of these men appear as a means for saving the people from oppression and from wars, which cause the ruin of human lives.

We need only recall that such oppressions and such wars have always existed, independent of who was at the head of the government – whether it was Nicholas or Alexander, Frederick or William, Napoleon or Louis, Palmerston or Gladstone, McKinley or anybody else – to understand that it is not any definite class of men who cause these oppressions and wars from which the nations suffer. The calamities of men are not due to separate individuals, but to such a structure of society that all men are united among themselves in such a way that all are in the power of a few men (or, more frequently, one man). These few are so corrupted by this, their unnatural position of deciding the fate and lives of millions of men, that they are all the time in a morbid state and all the time obsessed by a mania of greatness, which is imperceptible in them only in consequence of their exclusive position.

In the first place, these men are, from their earliest childhood and up to their death, surrounded by the most senseless luxury and are all the time surrounded by an atmosphere of lying and servility. Their whole education and all their occupations, everything is centered in one thing: the study of former murders, the best methods of killing in our time, and the best preparations for murder. From earliest childhood they are taught every possible way of killing, and they always carry about them instruments of murder: swords and sabers. They are dressed up in all kinds of uniforms, order parades, inspections, and maneuvers, visit one another, and present decorations and regiments to one another. Not only is there not a single man to name

what they are doing by its real name and to tell them that the occupation with preparations for murder is detestable and criminal, but from all sides they hear nothing but approval, nothing but applause in consequence of this, their activity. At every appearance of theirs in public and at every parade and inspection, a crowd of people runs after them, greeting them ecstatically, and it seems to them that it is the whole nation that is expressing its approval of their activity. That part of the press which they see, and which to them appears as the expression of the sentiments of the whole nation or of its best representatives, in the most servile manner proclaims all their words and acts, no matter how stupid and bad they may be. The men and women about them, both clerical and lay – all of them people who do not esteem human dignity – in their attempt to outstrip one another in refined flattery, are subservient to them in everything and in everything deceive them, giving them no chance to see real life. These men may live a hundred years without seeing a real free man and without ever hearing the truth. One is often frightened, hearing the words and seeing the acts of these men, but we need only consider their situation to understand that any man would act similarly in their place. A sensible man, upon finding himself in their place, can do but one sensible thing: get out of that situation. If he remains in it, he will do the same.

Indeed, what must be going on in the head of the German William, a narrow-minded, half-educated, vainglorious man with the ideal of a German Junker, when there is not a stupid and abominable utterance by him which is not met by an ecstatic “Hoch!” and is not commented upon by the whole press of Europe as something extremely significant. Let him say that the soldiers must by his will kill even their own fathers, and they shout “Hurrah!” Let him say that the Gospel ought to be introduced with the iron fist – “Hurrah!” Let him say that in China the army must not take any captives, but must kill all men, and he is not put into a lunatic asylum, but they shout “Hurrah!” and sail for China to execute his command. Or the naturally meek Nicholas II begins his reign by announcing to respectable old men, in reply to their expressed desire to deliberate on their affairs, that self-government is a senseless dream, and the organs of the press, the men whom he sees, extol him for it. He proposes a childish, stupid, and deceptive project of a universal peace, and at the same time makes preparations for increasing his army, and there is no limit to the laudation of his wisdom and virtue. Without any necessity, senselessly, and pitilessly he torments a whole nation, the Finns, and again he hears nothing but approval. He finally causes the Chinese slaughter, which is terrible for its injustice, cruelty, and incompatibility with the project of peace, and all people, on all sides, laud him simultaneously for his victories and for the continuation of his father’s peaceful policy.

Indeed, what must be going on in the heads and hearts of these men?

Thus it is not Alexander, Humbert, William, Nicholas, and Chamberlain who guide the oppressions and wars of the nations, or who are the authors of the oppressions of the masses and the murders in wars, but those who have put them in the positions of rulers over the lives of men, and support them in these positions. And so Alexander, Nicholas, William, and Humbert are not to be killed, but men are to stop supporting the order of society that produces them. What supports the present order of society is the egotism and stupidity of men who sell their freedom and honor for their insignificant material advantages.

The men who stand on the lower rungs of the ladder, partly in consequence of their stultification by their patriotic and pseudo-religious education, surrender their freedom and feeling of human dignity in favor of the men who stand above them and who offer them material advantages. In the same condition are the men who stand on a somewhat higher rung of the ladder, and who, also in consequence of their stultification and personal advantage, surrender

their freedom and human dignity. The same is true of those who stand still higher, and thus it goes on to the highest rungs, to those persons, or to that one person, who stands at the apex of the pyramid and who has nothing to acquire. The only motive for his actions is love of power and vainglory. He is generally so corrupted and stultified by the power over the life and death of men, the flattery that is connected with it, and the servility of those who surround him that, without ceasing to do evil, he is fully convinced that he is benefiting humanity.

The nations, by themselves sacrificing their human dignity for their own advantage, produce these men, who cannot do anything else but what they are doing, and then the nations are angry with them for their stupid and evil deeds. To kill these men is the same as spoiling children and then whipping them for being spoiled.

To have no oppression of the nations and no unnecessary wars, and for no one to be provoked at those who seem to be the authors of them and to kill them, very little, it would seem, would be necessary. People should merely understand things as they are, should call them by their real names, should know that the army is an instrument of murder, and should know that the levy and maintenance of the army – precisely what the kings, emperors, and presidents are concerned about with so much self-assurance – is a preparation for murder.

If only every king, emperor, and president understood that his duty of managing the army is neither honorable nor important, as he is made to believe by his flatterers, but a bad and disgraceful work of preparing for murder! If only every private person understood that the payment of taxes, with which soldiers are hired and armed, and much more enlistment in the army, are not indifferent acts, but bad, disgraceful acts, not only an abetment of, but even a participation in murder! Then the provoking power of the emperors, presidents, and kings, for which they are now killed, would die of its own accord.

So we must not kill Alexander, Carnot, Humbert, and others, but must explain to them that they themselves are murderers. Above all, we must not permit them to kill people; we must refuse to kill by their command.

If men are not yet doing so, this is due only to the hypnosis in which the governments carefully keep them from a feeling of self-preservation. And so it is not with murders that we can contribute to this, that men may stop killing kings and one another. The murders, on the contrary, intensify the hypnosis. We must awaken them from the hypnosis.

That is precisely what I am attempting to bring about with this note.

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