Who is to Blame?

by Leo Tolstoy

It gives me pleasure to answer you, because your pamphlets are written very well and very sincerely, with the exception of the third, in regard to which I agree with your relatives. That pamphlet is weak, not because it is too blunt, but because it does not bring out with sufficient clearness the repellent features of one of the most disgusting, if not comical, representatives of emperors: William II. But no matter how well your articles are written, I do not agree with their subject matter. I do not exactly disagree, but I cannot condemn that which you condemn.

If two men having gotten drunk in an inn come to blows while playing cards, I will not make up my mind to condemn one of them, no matter how convincing the proofs of the other may be. The cause of the bad acts of one or the other does not by any means lie in the justice of one of them, because, instead of working or resting calmly together, they found it necessary to drink wine and play cards in the inn. Similarly, when I am told that one party is exclusively to blame in any kind of a war that has broken out, I can never agree to this. We may admit that one side has acted worse, but the discussion as to which side acts worse in no way explains the underlying cause of why such a terrible, cruel, and inhuman phenomenon as war is taking place. The causes are quite obvious to any man who does not shut his eyes, as in the present Transvaal War, and all the recent wars. There are three such causes: (1) the unequal distribution of property, that is, the robbing of one class of people by another, (2) the existence of a military class, that is, of people educated and destined for murder, and (3) the false, for the most part consciously deceptive, religious teaching in which the young generations are forcibly educated.

And so I think that it is not only useless, but even harmful to look for the cause of wars in a Chamberlain, a William, and so forth, thus concealing from ourselves the true causes, which are much nearer, and in which we ourselves take part. We can only be indignant with a Chamberlain or a William and scold them, but our anger and scolding will only make bad blood for us without changing the course of events. A Chamberlain and a William are blind tools of forces that lie far behind them. They act as they must act, and cannot act otherwise. The whole of history, including the Transvaal War, is a series of just such acts of all the persons involved in politics, and so it is quite useless and even impossible to be angry with them and condemn them, when we see the true causes of their activity and when we feel that we ourselves are to blame for this or that activity of theirs, according to how we look upon the three fundamental causes that I have mentioned.

So long as we are going to enjoy exclusive wealth, while the masses of the nation are crushed by labor, there will always be wars for markets, for gold fields, and so forth, which we need in order to maintain our exclusive wealth. Wars will be so much more inevitable so long as we are going to take part in the military class and permit its existence – if we will not struggle with all our strength against it. We either serve in the military caste ourselves, or recognize it not only as indispensable, but also as praiseworthy. Then, when war breaks out, we accuse someone else of it, such as Chamberlain. Above all else, there will be war so long as we are going to preach and permit that corruption of Christianity which is called the ecclesiastic Christianity, and under which is possible a Christ-loving army, the blessing of cannons, and the recognition of war as Christian and just. We teach our children this religion and profess it ourselves, and then say that either Chamberlain or Krüger is to blame for people killing one another.
For that reason, I do not agree with you and cannot rebuke the blind tools of ignorance and evil. Instead, I see the cause in manifestations in which I myself can contribute to the diminution or increase of evil. To contribute to the fraternal equalization of property; to make the least use of the privileges that have fallen to me; to refrain from taking part in military affairs; to destroy that hypnosis by means of which people, turning into hired murderers, think that they are doing a good thing by serving in the army; and chiefly, to profess rational Christian teaching, trying one’s best to destroy that cruel deception of false Christianity in which the young generations are forcibly brought up – in this work, it seems to me, lies the duty of every man who wishes to serve the good and who is justly provoked at that terrible war, which provoked you, too.

Moscow, December 4, 1899


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.