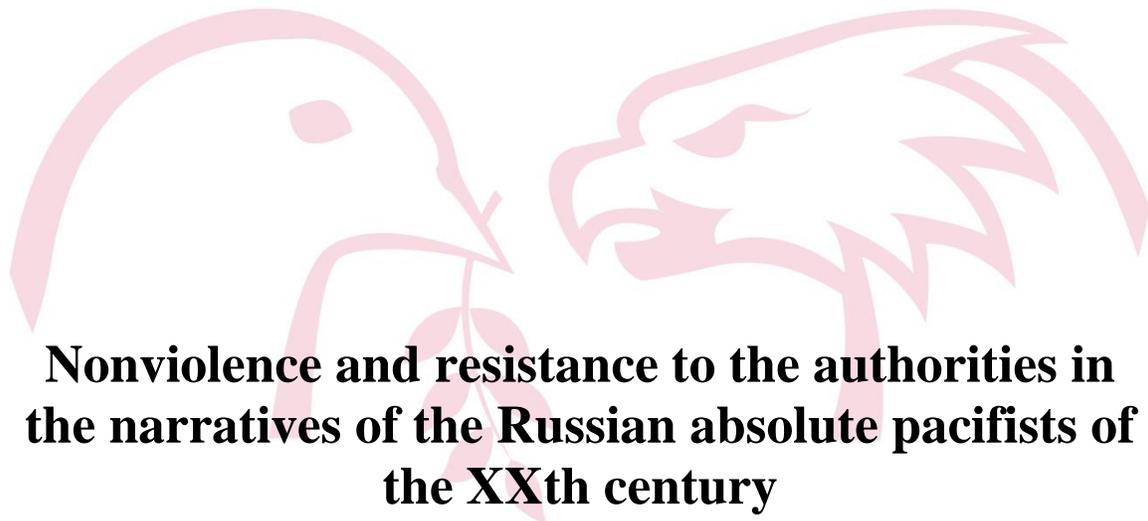


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Nonviolence and resistance to the authorities in the narratives of the Russian absolute pacifists of the XXth century

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Abstract:

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A short history of the pacifist movement in Russia

The Russian pacifist movement emerged as a result of political self-identification of the tolstoyans (or “free Christians”) in the late XIXth century (*Brock, 1972; Alston, 2014*). The tolstoyans and religious nonconformists together with other Christian anarchists, who supported their ideas, were active both in defending the civil rights and freedom of conscience and in the anti-war protest during the Russian-Japanese War (1904-1905) and First World War (1914-1918).

In the early Soviet period, the Russian pacifists, advocating the values of nonviolence, appealed to the authorities with protest against violence, coordinated interreligious dialogue, organized lectures on the history of religious freedom and nonviolence. They also struggled against the militarization of consciousness and of the everyday life, corresponded with their foreign adherents, and organized in collaboration with international organizations the famine relief in Russia. Among their foreign counterparts were the War Resisters International, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Mahatma Gandhi, Romain Rolland, and other pacifist organizations and activists (*Brock, 1997, 1999, 2006*).

The pacifist movement was heavily repressed during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s and the traditions of peaceful protest were almost forgotten. Emerged in early 1960s the Soviet dissidence did not focus on pacifism as such although some problems of nonviolence resistance have been discussed. Independent peaceful movement was re-emerged only in the 1980s on the new social base. Two main groups – the anti-nuclear “Group to Establish Trust between East and West” (*Gruppa za Ustanovlenie Doveriia mezhdru Vostokom i Zapadom*) and the pacifist group of hippies entitled “Free Initiative” (*Svobodnaia initsiativa*) – represented the movement (*Kuznetsov, 1990*). They were involved in the international network of the pacifist, anti-nuclear and left-wing organizations, such as War Resisters International (WRI), European Nuclear Disarmament (END), Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), Anarchist Black Cross, and others.

This paper is a part of a bigger research project on the history of radical pacifism in Russia in the XXth century. There is a fundamental contradiction between the nonconformist nature of the Russian pacifist movement and its public perception as ridiculous, collaborative and even obedient to the authorities. However, I managed to locate many documents that shed light on the less-known history of the movement (*they can be found in numerous fonds*

of the tolstoyans in Russian state archives, especially important for the theme are the personal fonds of Vl. Chertkov (f. 435) and K. Shokhor-Trotsky (f. 345) in the department of manuscripts of the Russian State Library). They undermine the stereotype and represent the pacifists as dissidents with their own ethics of resistance and conflict resolution.

The roots of the stereotypes of perception of the pacifist movement in Russia

In common perception in Russia pacifism and nonviolence are associated with weakness, cowardice, hypocrisy, betrayal, eccentricity, and even mental illness. Leaving aside the large and important issue such as the system violence in the Russia, I would like to draw attention to some of the intellectual reasons for dominance in the minds of my compatriots of the certain stereotypes about pacifism.

Although these stereotypes exist primarily in the ordinary consciousness, they influence the public discourse and even academic studies, in which there is a misunderstanding of the meaning of pacifism and underestimation of its public significance. To my opinion, these stereotypes have been resulted from two powerful narratives that emerged approximately a century ago but still dominate the public opinion. Here I refer to the orthodox-conservative narrative and Lenin's works.

The orthodox-conservative narrative appeared in the late XIX century. It was interrupted by the October Revolution (1917) but revived recently. Leo Tolstoy became widely known when it was announced about his anathematization and all churches started to proclaim him "heresiarch" during the Sunday talks. The talks included the sermons written by the Synod explaining the heresy of Tolstoy's teachings along with multiple invented "stories" that described him as a highly hypocritical man. According to these stories, while preaching poverty, Tolstoy used to live in wealth and luxury; teaching people to refrain life, to be kind and sincere, he spent his life in carousing, debauchery, was rude with the servants, obliged peasants pay high rent for the land, and so on (*Bokova, 1994, p. 329*). Therefore, the church propaganda succeeded in creating an image of Tolstoy as an insincere man, whose words did not meet his actions. Unfortunately, in recent years we can see the revival of this narrative mainly in the writings of religious authors, but also of some literary critics.

Another influential narrative is *the Leninist tradition of interpretation of the "tolstoyism"* that dominated in the Soviet period and still determines the concepts of the

modern humanities in Russia. Lenin regarded Tolstoy as the key figure for understanding the events of the First Russian Revolution as well as the Russian peasantry as a social force. Lenin wrote an article “Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution” (1908) and referred to him several times in his other articles and speeches. He claimed, that *“the contradictions in Tolstoy’s works, views, doctrines, in his school, are indeed glaring. On the one hand, we have the great artist, the genius who has not only drawn incomparable pictures of Russian life but has made first-class contributions to world literature. On the other hand, we have the landlord obsessed with Christ. On the one hand, the remarkably powerful, forthright and sincere protest against social falsehood and hypocrisy; and on the other, the “Tolstoyan”, i.e., the jaded, hysterical sniveler called the Russian intellectual, who publicly beats his breast and wails: “I am a bad wicked man, but I am practicing moral self-perfection; I don’t eat meat any more, I now eat rice cutlets.”...”*. (Lenin, 1963, p. 202-209)

Nowadays these two narratives play the part in the reception of the tolstoyans and their alternative ideas and values in belles-lettres and mass culture. Unfortunately, they managed to create some sort of the ironical and even satirical attitude towards “simplification” of the lifestyle, vegetarianism and pacifism, the objects of which were Tolstoy, tolstoyans, vegetarians, pacifists and peace activists.

In 1928, during the celebration the 100 anniversary of Leo Tolstoy birthday, famous Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky published in the newspaper “*Komsomolskaya Pravda*” a satirical poem against the tolstoyans “The Vegetarians”. Mayakovsky used the word “vegetarian” to criticize the pacifism and anti-military ideas of the tolstoyans. He suggested “that vegetarian pacifist propaganda should be made in Chamberlain's country, but not in the Soviet Union” (Brang, 2000).

Another example of the satirical derision of the vegetarianism and tolstoyanism was the novel “The Twelve Chairs” by I. Il’f and E. Petrov, in which vegetarian-tolstoyan ethics was portrayed as a false, hypocritical, the sole reason for which was the high prices of the meat products. Still quite popular, the novel enjoyed great success among the Soviet readers and influenced their opinion on the phenomenon.

Personal narratives and pacifist ethics of resistance

The current research concerns the analyses of the personal narratives (autobiographies, letters, prison memoirs etc.) created by the Russian absolute pacifists—tolstoyans and some sectarians. It also includes their relations with the state officers, police officers and prison guards in the situations of conflict, arrest or imprisonment.

In order to define my approach, I would like briefly introduce the tolstoyans' ethic of interaction with the authorities.

The pacifist movement participants thoroughly thought out how a person, who supports non-violence and at the same time is a non-conformist, has to behave in the situations when she/he has to communicate with the police and other authorities. Initially, it was ought to be a personal, mainly intuitive, decision. Because the pacifists were under constant threat of persecutions, it became important and essential to create a certain pattern of behavior, which later associated with the tolstoyism.

In accordance with their values, as nonconformists and often anarchists, the tolstoyans practiced disobedience. They refused to visit the police, give evidence and answer the questions they disliked, promote investigative actions, sign protocols, follow to jail, and participate in forced procedures and works. Such disobedience reminded the similar practices of the Russian religious dissidents (sectarians). At the same time, providing such resistance, the pacifists tried to be polite, calm and behave friendly. During arrests, interrogations, investigative procedures, in prison and other situations of communication with the authorities, they considered important to regard the authorities as human beings and remember that they were the children of God, possessing the living soul like all other people.

This pattern of disobedience has been adopted by the conscientious objectors (COs), who were mainly the sectarians and tolstoyans. The CO's looked impressive due to their true grit and resilience in convictions. For example, the tolstoyan Leonid Loitsner refused military service on religious grounds, he abandoned to carry weapons and wear military uniforms. Nevertheless, he was forcibly taken to regiment and dressed up in the military uniform. The guards clamped his mouth when he spoke to the soldiers about his beliefs. In order to protest against such violence, Loitsner announced hunger strike. According to eyewitnesses, "it was not easy to cope with Loitsner. Even in the disciplinary cell, he managed to tear several overcoats and uniforms. I saw how on the orders of the commander he has been "fitted out"

for the court: four soldiers could hardly cope with him; they succeeded to put the soldiers' trousers on him only by lifting him into the air..." (*OR RGB, f. 345, k. 49, ed. kr. 24, l. 4-6*).

The famous tolstoyan Sergei Popov was particularly consistent in using the method of passive resistance. For example, he called everybody, even gendarmes, who detained him, "my dear brothers". When they ordered him to go to the police station, he politely refused, sat or lay on the ground and objected to go. Thus, they had to carry him as a body. (*Novikov, 2004, p. 254, 302-303; Bulgakov, 1922*)

The First World War

The next period in the development of the tactics of passive resistance is connected with the First World War. In the beginning of the war the pacifists seemed to be an only community, which did not surrender patriotic sentiments and claimed its absolute opposition to the war.

Deeply disappointed by the "chauvinistic" attitude to the war of the European socialists, anarchists and vegetarians, the tolstoyans wrote several anti-war appeals. One of them, drawn by Valentin Bulgakov, was signed by 43 people. Twenty-five signers were arrested on charges of distributing judgments exciting to treasonable act. In 1916 they were committed to a military court but were announced non-guilty (*Bulgakov, 1922*)

The motivations of the tolstoyans, their behavior in a prison and during the court procedures were supported not only by the public, but also by the court members. The justification was considered the first victory of the Russian pacifists and convinced the public in meaningfulness of the "arguments from conscience". Interestingly, that the Chairman of the Military Court, general S.S. Abramovich-Baranovsky had been so impressed by the pacifists, that later, after the February Revolution, he joined the tolstoyan's pacifist group "Society of true freedom in memory of Leo Tolstoy" (*OR RGB, f. 345, k. 61, ed. khr. 26, l. 17*).

During the pre-trial period, still in prison, the pacifists followed their principles and tactics of nonviolent resistance. For example, the already mentioned Sergei Popov has suggested the following tactics, known as "holy disobedience". According to him, the supporters of nonviolence should not follow any orders even passively, because every act of submission empowers violence. The body should follow only its "inner voice", and the fact

that policemen (or ‘violators’) were force to carry the body could reveal the terrifying nature of their sin and helped them to come to their senses.

Therefore, Sergei refused to move around the prison. The guards had to get him out of bed by force, dragging him across the floor. He referred the prison staff and the authorities with the informal “you”, never took off his hat to anybody, at the same time he was always calm, quiet, gentle and called everybody “my brothers”. He did not demand anything particular, just saying that “it is a sin of the prison guards, who are the “children of God”, to keep him in prison, also the “son of God” and their “brother”. He was put into disciplinary cell several times for his “holy disobedience”.

However, other tolstoyans criticized the tactic of “holy disobedience”, referring to its unchristian character. They considered that the Christian can follow the orders if they did not contradict their principles and therefore, this does not violate the inner freedom. Thus, Bulgakov accused Popov in being selfish, because he did not take into account how this method affected other people. Popov accepted these arguments and recognized that his tactics of “holy disobedience” transformed him into a violator (*RGALI, f. 2226, op. 1, d. 106, l. 28-44*).

During the First World War, the Russian pacifism was radicalized. For example, the tolstoyans supported the idea of nonviolent revolution, which they saw as spiritual and considered the further development of the CO’s movement as a first sign of it. Their immediate goal towards the nonviolent revolution became to bring up children in the spirit of nonviolence and resistance to any kind of external control and suppression.

Early Soviet Period

Pre-revolutionary traditions of pacifists’ opposition developed during the Soviet period. The tolstoyans remained on the position of pacifism, struggling for the freedom of conscience and protesting against violence at any possible moment of the public events. However, in the late 1920’s - early 1930’s many active members were arrested or otherwise repressed.

There are many documents that witness these facts, for example, we have a lot prison correspondence and memoires. During interrogations and court proceeding the

tolstoyans boldly and openly declared their anti-government, Christian anarchist and radical pacifist outlooks.

In the 1930s, when the Soviet authorities started destroying the tolstoyan's agricultural communities, they once again turned to the practice of nonviolent resistance: they laid on the ground, saying: "Dear brothers, we do not want to corrupt you by our obedience" (*Popovskii, 1983*).

Being imprisoned, the pacifists often refused to work, went on hunger strikes, felt free to declare their outlooks.

There the tolstoyans were so impressed by the inhumanly rude treatment of the superiors with criminal prisoners, that decided to refuse any forced labor. By this refusal they wanted to demonstrate that subordination to the jailers, who were so harsh to their inmates, even they were the criminals, would mean devaluation (*OR RGB, f. 435, k. 94, ed. khr. 20*)

Vladimir Chertkov, the leader of the Russian pacifists in this period, wrote a letter to Stalin, where he attempted to explain the motivations of such behavior: "According to the religion of the tolstoyans, each person should follow only the instructions of his conscience, rejecting any external pressure. They can carry only those claims of the "authorities", which they regard as rational. Therefore, they object to these requirements, which other prisoners routinely performed" (*OR RGB, f. 435, k. 94, ed. khr. 20, l. 13-14*).

I would like to illustrate this statement by the behavior of the tolstoyan and spiritual monist Yakov Dragunovskii (1886-1937), who was arrested in 1935. Because he considered that there is no need for him to go to the prison, he should not do this. Thus, the jailers had to take him to cell forcibly. Whenever he was taken from the prison cell for interrogations he obeyed but on his way back to the prison he resisted once again: "I do not need to go to prison". Resisting this way, Dragunovsky remained good-natured, he was not hardened and tried to influence by his kind attitude other prisoners and even jailers.

Dragunovsky wrote numerous letters to the authorities from the prison, explaining in details his position: the rejection of violence, Tolstoy's spiritual and monistic outlooks, non-compliance of Soviet system with the ideals of communism, the futility and harmfulness of violence on the road to communism, just to name few topics that he covered in his letters. In one of them, he claimed: "I do not want to be a blind member of society, led by state

violence. I do not want to be a cog in a soulless reckless state machine» (*Dragunovskii, 1989, p. 412*).

The Second World War

Because the most of the Russian archival materials related to this topic are still secret, we do not have that many documentary sources to write the history of this period in its fullness. However, it is known, that some of the tolstoyans decided to defend their Motherland, while other remained on the position of the absolute pacifism.

There is unpublished memoirs of the tolstoyan Ivan Sorokin, who was prisoner of war. Sorokin applied the tolstoyans' tactics of resistance in the German captivity. He wrote a letter of protest against the abuse of prisoners working in the mines, that is why he was beaten so severely, that survived only miraculously. Later, in the end of his life, Sorokin wrote: "I am still alive and continue to think that all people are brothers and that the kindness should be the basis of our life" (*Shersheneva*)

Conclusion

Another body of the documentary sources related to the Soviet period mainly consists of the personal accounts of the pacifists who were also nonconformists. Among these records, there are not only created by tolstoyans, but also by the Doukhobors, Evangelical Christians-Baptists, some dissidents, the representatives of the Soviet grassroots ecumenical movement, Soviet hippies, and also participants of the new social movements and just ordinary people.

The history of the Russian absolute pacifists can be of great importance to overcome the stereotypes and to help contemporary pacifists to clarify their ideology and ethics of non-violent resistance and conflict resolution. However, currently they face another problem that goes beyond the previous stereotypes regarding the pacifism in Russia. The pacifist movement based on the principles of non-violent resistance. Unfortunately, the political discourse in the modern Russia connects the concept of non-violent resistance mainly with Gene Sharp's ideas and methods of "color revolutions", which in the minds of the representatives of officialdom and Putin's political elite are always "organized from abroad"

with the assistance of “fifth column”. This leads to the new stereotypes regarding the peace movement and its non-violent practices.

The aim of the research is to show that in Russia there was a long independent tradition of the pacifist movement of nonconformist origin, with its victories and defeats.

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