

# THE PEOPLE

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## THE RUSSIAN FAMINE

Had it not been for the initiative taken by the New York *Commercial Bulletin* in opening in its columns a subscription list for the relief of starving Russians, it is probable that our plutocrats would not spontaneously have given one cent for that purpose. It was, indeed, with the greatest difficulty that the *Bulletin* could obtain a few subscriptions, and these, for the most part, came from firms outside of this city. A sense of shame compelled at last the New York Chamber of Commerce to take action; but in spite of the official pressure thus brought to bear upon our millionaire merchants and bankers, a few only have thus far responded and the sums which they have respectively contributed are so small as to make the total amount a fit subject of ridicule.

The excuse that some give for their stone-heartedness is that the Russian government could have readily appropriated or borrowed a sufficient sum of money to relieve the starving people. Others, who are small czars in their way within their industrial, commercial or railroad empires, and who treat their employes very much as the Czar of all the Russias treats his subjects, take this opportunity of proclaiming to the world that they have no sympathy with Russian despotism. It seems to be a conclusive argument among that gentry and their representatives in Congress that the oppressed should be punished for the neglect and misdeeds of their oppressors. At any rate, it serves their purpose. It may furthermore be observed that on several occasions when we had local famines in this country, both the government and our individual plutocrats showed themselves as callous to the sufferings of American farmers as the Russian bureaucracy and nobility to the misery of Russian peasants.

That a great revolution has not broken out in Russia seems almost incomprehensible. In ancient times, the barbarians who lived upon the plains which now constitute a portion of the Russian Empire were not so submissive to the "decrees of Providence." They swept over Europe in irresistible streams and finally conquered the Roman Empire. Centuries of a galling despotism have evidently unmanned the enslaved masses.

Fortunately—if such a word may be used in connection with such misfortunes—the famine is affecting the manufacturing industries and capitalistic interests of the Empire. At Moscow, the center of the Russian cotton industry, the commercial crisis is in full blast and numerous failures for large amounts have taken place. This industry had grown to considerable proportions in recent years. There are now in Russia, exclusive of Poland and Finland, 408 cotton mills, with nearly 4,000,000 spindles and 200,000 looms. Other textile industries have likewise greatly developed, and the manufacturing class—the bourgeoisie—has grown powerful in proportion. That this class will not submit, that it is ready for a revolution, is apparent from the proclamation which it has lately issued, a summary report of which was cabled to the United States on January 30, and the full text of which, now in our hands, is as follows:

“Millions of hunger-stricken wretches are stretching out their hands to the well-fed for help; we place in these outstretched hands mere trifles. True, the Government has undertaken various measures to avert the calamity; is giving out loans and assistance for provisions, for sowing the fields, for feeding the cattle; privileged tariffs are established on the railways for the starving peasantry and for the carriage of corn; the export of breadstuffs abroad is forbidden; public works are set on foot; the receipt of offerings is started; a special committee is established under the presidentship of the Czarewitch. But the attitude of society to the famine remains languid.

“The Government even establishes a State lottery in order to attract private means to the aid of the famine-stricken by interesting society in the chances of gain; by exciting its greed. So low have fallen the descendants of Minin and Pozharsky, who not so long since grudged neither money nor their own blood for an object not so near—for the liberation of their Slavonic brothers! Are they not our brothers who are groaning in their distress, dying of starvation? Have we, instead of hearts, but pockets, from which five rubles can only be drawn by the hope of winning a hundred thousand? We do not believe in the heavens of Russian society. The tickets of the State lottery will be bought up, but its establishment will remain an insult undeservedly cast upon society by the hand of the Government. Not a mere five millions, which will be realized by the corrupting means of a State lottery, would society have given had full scope been granted its best, its noblest feelings. A clean business demands clean hands, but the Government is afraid to loosen the clean hands.

“By taking extreme measures it acknowledges an extreme calamity. Nothing

can be more alarming than the prohibition of the export of corn or the establishment of a special committee. But at the same time, from fear of alarm, the press dares not speak freely of the extent of the calamity, and in St. Petersburg a public lecture on the famine by a correspondent just returned from the affected Governments is forbidden. It was enough for the Governor of Saratow, Gen. Kositch, to earn the confidence of society for him to be translated to another destination—appointed commander of the Ninth Corps d’Armee. The charitable activity of the family of Count Tolstoi is protected only by the name of the famous novelist. Openly offered help is refused when those who offer it demand guarantees that the help shall reach its destination. People who desire to give alms are compelled to ask authorization and then do not always get it. People who desire to feed the starving are compelled to make their way almost furtively to the village selected for their efforts.

“The Government, armed with all the weapons of a state of siege, filling Siberia and the jails with suspected persons, fears a revolutionary propaganda. The government that has robbed us of all the reforms of Alexander II., that has deprived society of its participation in public life, has brought Russia to starvation. Such a government cannot solve the present problem with its own forces. The calamity is only in its initial stage. With the spring only will be disclosed its actual proportions in the shaking of all the foundations of economic life. How will it end if the government does not change its attitude to society—whether in State bankruptcy, a new terror, the political enfeeblement and dismemberment of Russia, in a popular rising, deluged with the people’s blood—no one can foresee. But there is yet time.

“We believe in the Russian land. We believe she holds within herself sufficient store of force. The salvation of the Russian land is in itself and not in Ministers, Governors General and Governors. It is time to recognize other people. Only the calling of the elected representatives of the land and the free discussion of the present situation will destroy the lukewarmness and the incredulity of society, will make corrupting lotteries unnecessary, will call forth the enthusiasm of self-sacrifice which ever saved Russia.”

To the student of history the present situation in Russia bears a striking resemblance to the internal condition of France in 1789. Both present to his view an exhausted nation, an obstinate monarchy, a corrupt nobility, an aspiring middle class, a pauperized peasantry and a starving proletariat. That history may repeat itself to the letter in the impending drama, cannot, however, be expected. The similarity is not perfect in every particular. External influences, especially, are very different now, on the eve of the

Russian cataclysm, from what they were at the beginning of the French Revolution. All the sympathies of European powers were with the old social order that the French monarchy represented, and they took the form of armed interference. To-day those powers are absolutely controlled by the middle class, whose sympathies are naturally acquired to its Russian kind; and yet, for this very reason, there may be in the end a similarity of results. In France, the proletariat followed the bourgeoisie and fought the battles which finally enthroned the latter, while leaving the former in political dependence and economic servitude. It remains to be seen if the ignorant masses of Russia, in the light that may be brought to them by modern Socialism, can do no better than did the French proletariat when it was just as ignorant and had not the same light to guide it.

[Transcribed by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
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