Tolstoy's Georgist Spiritual Political Economy (1897-1910)

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Editor’s Note: To complement the article Dr. Wenzer published in Pennsylvania History in spring, 1996, on how the political economy of the Pennsylvania-born Henry George influenced Tolstoy, and to honor George on the centennial of his death, we now complete the story of Tolstoy's espousal of George's ideas.

Following Henry George's death in 1897, Count Leo Tolstoy became the world's most important exponent of the American's ideology. Grounding his effort to alleviate suffering and establish justice in George's philosophy enabled the great Russian writer to answer charges that he was a “crackpot anarchist” espousing all sorts of ideas including vegetarianism and pacifism. Russia, of course, with its primarily rural economy, was the ideal setting for a philosophy which preached that land belonged to the people collectively and a single tax derived from it should be implemented. A picture of George hung on Tolstoy's wall, and the collection he compiled of inspiring quotation, included thirty by the single tax reformer.

Besides his literary works, Tolstoy's principal means of publicizing Georgist ideas was through Posrednik (Intermediary) a publishing house he established in 1884. In its first nine years he circulated some twenty million tracts, selling for about a penny each, including folk tales and legends for moral betterment which indirectly preached Georgist ideas. In 1898, Tolstoy's friend and collaborator Vladimir Chertkov founded Britain's Free Age Press to internationalize this effort.

Tolstoy's first major publication after George's death, What Is Art?, criticized art and the pursuit of knowledge which were not directed toward reducing human misery. Both should demonstrate that a social order founded on love and charity was not only ethical but reasonable and practicable. In an unpublished conclusion to this work, Tolstoy noted that a fine theoretical foundation of real art and science had already been laid by Henry George, although "for more than thirty years [his] Progress and Poverty... has been deemed unscientific and orthodox political economy indicates that his thinking in this work is wrong and that private property in land is legitimate and rational.

Far better known is Tolstoy's third novel, Resurrection, published in 1899. In a diary entry, Tolstoy wrote that the character Prince Nekhlyudov, like himself a noble who eschews his peers to save his people, "must be a follower..."
of Henry George.” In the text itself, Nekhlyudov realizes that the problem of poverty arises from the deprivation of the land on which they could feed themselves. At this point, “Henry George’s fundamental position recurred vividly to him. . . . ‘the earth cannot be anyone’s property; it cannot be bought or sold any more than water, air, or sunshine. All have an equal right to the advantages it gives to men.”4

Russian government officials were appalled by the influence of Tolstoy’s “strange, perverted” works, for they fostered “a kind of insanity which has taken possession of people’s minds,”5 Georgists throughout the world were ecstatic at Resurrection’s message. A reviewer in the New York-based National Single Tax commented that this “powerful, vivid, and inspiring book” proved “especially gratifying to single taxers.” For “the great work Progress and Poverty. . . forms one of the means instrumental in that moral and spiritual awakening, which comes to Tolstoy’s hero, and which is pictured with magnificent uplifting power.”6

Pennsylvania was also becoming involved in the Georgist movement at the turn of the century. George himself, in describing the state of his birth, doubted “if there is on the earth’s surface another 43,000 square miles, which . . . is better fitted by nature to yield large returns to its neighbor.” Yet here, in the mining towns which fueled the nation’s industrial revolution, he found instead “a hard, dull, monotonous struggle for mere existence, of human life reduced to little more than animal terms, and shorn of all that gives it dignity and grace and zest.”7 If Pennsylvania did not adopt the single tax, Progressive reformers and Georgists, mostly from Pittsburgh, introduced graded urban taxes which placed the burden more heavily on the land.8 Philadelphia single taxers were especially active but futile in trying to spread their gospel and win political power in neighboring Delaware.9 Except for Tolstoy, the world’s most influential single taxer was Philadelphia philanthropist Joseph Fels, who is reported to have told the British Parliament that “the taxation of land values in this world is the way to Heaven in the next.”10 Having made a fortune manufacturing soap, Fels unstintingly spent large sums to promote the single tax and even for the establishment of colonies (including potential Jewish settlements in Palestine).

Tolstoy was unstinting in his efforts, too. Where Is the Way Out? (1900) stresses the need for exploited industrial workers to return to the land, which if freed from private ownership could amply take care of them.11 Need It Be So? (1901) attacks military conscription, as well as statutory laws and a false Christianity which support private property and idle wealth.12 Yet The Only Means (1901) told the working people that they had only themselves to blame for their sufferings. If they had faith in God and obeyed the Golden Rule rather than the authorities who oppressed them, mutuality would corrode man-made institutions and establish a harmonious world.13
To the Working People (1902) condemned ungodly socialism and violence as solutions to problems which could only be solved by either the single tax on land or its voluntary surrender to the poor by ethical property owners. Also in 1902, Tolstoy worked for the last time on his unfinished play The Light that Shines Through the Darkness, in which a rich landowner who would surrender his estates to his peasants ultimately yields to his wife, who insists they keep the property to support their family. Here, Tolstoy seriously considers arguments for and against private property: an unused act praised Henry George as providing the solution to Russia's problems.

Russia suffered severe problems in the first decade of the twentieth century: economic depression, the disastrous Russo-Japanese War, and the aborted Revolution of 1905. When peaceful petitioners carrying icons were shot on “Bloody Sunday,” January 9, 1905, by troops in the streets of St. Petersburg, over a year of strikes, mutinies, and peasant rebellions ensued which led to the calling of the first Duma in April, 1906. Writing in The Public a month after the massacre, Tolstoy himself reacted to the “truly hideous” crime by condemning both the government and the “unholy agitators who for their own nefarious ends led the simple people to their death.” Insisting that the people were not revolutionary, but only seekers after land, honest work, and spiritual enlightenment, he concluded that the pacifist, anarchist, “creed of [Henry David] Thoreau and Henry George is ingrained in every Russian heart.”

Tolstoy turned to the world’s newspapers to propagate his ideas. “The Great Iniquity,” published in the London Times on August 1, 1905, expressed Tolstoy’s hope that out of the chaos of the Revolution Russia would emerge as an example to the world and show that Henry George’s ideas would work. J. H. Dillard spoke for the world’s single taxers in marveling that such an “extraordinary letter” from so great a writer would appear in the world’s most influential daily. That they would combine to spread George’s philosophy “is more than George himself, with all his faith, hope, and optimism, could fairly dream of.” Tolstoy on Land Ownership, a translation of his summary of “The Project of Henry George,” soon followed in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin.

Most of Tolstoy’s single-tax efforts, of course, were concentrated in Russia. In 1906 he wrote the introduction for the Russian edition of George’s Social Problems, translated by his friend Sergei D. Nikolaev. He also became obsessed with persuading Prime Minister Stolypin that expanding private property and the franchise were mistakes, talking endlessly about these subjects with friends and writing letters. Stolypin replied: “I do not reject the teachings of George, and I think that the single tax will in time help in the struggle against very large ownership of property, but now I do not see any purpose here in Russia of driving off the land the more developed class of landholders, but on the contrary I see the undoubted necessity of relieving the peasant by
giving him the legitimate opportunity to acquire the piece of land he needs and granting him full ownership of it." Tolstoy, on the contrary, insisted that the "disgusting and criminal" dissolution of the communes would "increase the number of homeless paupers, who will become money slaves to the rich," enable rich landowners to tell those with tiny plots that they no longer had the right to complain, and rob the Russian people of their great conviction that only "the produce of labor can be property: not the land, which is 'God's land.'"

An inveterate questioner and reexaminer of all his ideas, Tolstoy occasionally had misgivings about Henry George, but in conversation, correspondence, published and unpublished writings he referred to the American as "a great man" while proselytizing for his ideals. On Tolstoy's eightieth birthday, August 28, 1908, congratulatory letters poured in from single taxers all over the world. Their newspapers called for street demonstrations in his honor. One praised him as "the great Russian whose slightest word is more potent than the thunder of the Czar's Cossacks . . . the most eminent of those who stand for the truth as it is in Henry George." Australian single taxers claimed that with Tolstoy's adoption of George's ideas, "our hearts gained new courage. . . new confidence in the coming of the Kingdom of Righteousness." Tolstoy somewhat modestly responded that he had failed to do enough on George's behalf. One thing he did do was endorse William Jennings Bryan's third unsuccessful campaign for the presidency in 1908. The two had met in 1903. Bryan considered himself a disciple of the Russian and often mentioned his name in speeches. Tolstoy returned the favor by writing to a Philadelphian praising "our [mutual] sympathy for the workers, antimilitarism, and the recognition of the evils engendered by capitalism." He hoped that "Mr. Bryan will be an advocate of land reform in the spirit of Henry George and his single tax system . . . which every leading reformer should keep foremost in mind."

Much correspondence and many journal entries from the last two years of Tolstoy's life attest to his commitment to George along with his disgust at Stolypin's privatization of land. Anyone who wrote expressing interest in the land question was sure to receive a parcel of Georgist literature. A letter of 1909, for instance, exclaims to S. A. Fishburn, who sent Tolstoy a copy of a book he wrote, that "I am very much astonished to find that an American, discussing the land question, does not make any allusions to Henry George and his great theory, which alone completely solves the land question." A lengthier epistle, to a group of English single taxers, allies Georgist economics with the highest dictates of religious consciousness. Commenting on Stolypin's redistribution of land, he writes:
In Russia, where people have never recognized landed property, this infamous action is particularly loathsome on the part of a stupid and coarse government, which is endeavoring not only to retain the slaves in their servitude, but also by depraving the people to intensify their future slavery. I regard as stupid the action of our present government, because if it had put into practice Henry George’s principle that land cannot become exclusive property—a principle always recognized by the great mass of the Russian peasantry—it would alone, more effectually than all the acts of state violence and cruelty, have pacified the people, and rendered impossible the revolution. The Russian government, however, has had recourse to a contrary measure by encouraging in every way the transference of the land from communal ownership to private individual ownership. In this I see government’s astounding stupidity. In those measures which the government uses to repress the people’s disaffection, which naturally flows from their want of land, is manifested this astounding cruelty.

Therefore the activity of the Single Tax League organized in England is especially gladdening.

Henry George is especially to be appreciated by those who profess Christianity in its true sense, for not only the foundations of his teaching, but also his methods are truly Christian. . . . As in the law of nonresistance of evil by violence, i.e. the prohibition of killing under any circumstances whatever, has been elucidated the injustice and harmfulness of the justification of violence under the pretext of defense and the common good, so also in Henry George’s teaching on the equal rights of all to the land, has been elucidated the injustice and harmfulness of the justification of robbery and theft under the pretext of either the exclusive right of some people to the land, or the depriving of those who labor of the produce of their labor in order to use it for social needs.

In this lies the essence of George’s philosophy. However, those who need to do so, may endeavor to conceal this teaching. It is so clear and indisputable that it cannot but be recognized by mankind.

God help you. On your side are justice, reason, and love. On your side is God, and therefore you cannot but be successful. . . .

Single tax philosophy was also passed down from father to daughter. Tolstoy’s daughter Tatiana, despite an earlier unsuccessful effort to establish a modified version of the tax on her estate, hoped to write a clear, accessible summary of George’s philosophy for the Russian people. Seeking an impartial opinion of its merit from her father, she sent the first part of it to him under
an assumed name. He was pleasantly surprised at his daughter's thoughtful work when he discovered the author's true identity.30

In 1909, Henry George, Jr. set sail for the Old World, in large measure to meet his father's greatest disciple. Tolstoy was so overjoyed that he penned an article, "On the Arrival of Henry George's Son," which appeared in various Russian newspapers. Their meeting on June 5 and subsequent tearful parting was described by the younger George in "Tolstoy in the Twilight," which was in the American press. Tolstoy had asked the younger Henry George what message he could convey from him to his father in the next world. George's son responded: "Tell him the work is going on."31 On October 22, his diary recorded that he dreamed he had a conversation with the late Henry George. He also recounted this dream as the last section of Three Days in the Country, which detailed the continuing misery of the Russian folk.32 An essay which appeared in English translation as "Tolstoy's Last Message," was probably written in 1910. Beginning "I now write because I am standing at the brink of the grave and cannot keep silent," Tolstoy predicted an era of happiness for the human race, which he believed would soon adopt the principles of Henry George:

As I pointed out in my introductory note to the Russian version of Social Problems, Henry George's great idea, outlined so clearly and thoroughly more than thirty years ago, remains to this day entirely unknown to the great majority. This is quite natural. Henry George's idea, which would change the entire life of nations in favor of the oppressed voiceless majority and to the detriment of the ruling minority, is so undeniably convincing, and above all so simple, that it is impossible not to understand it. It is therefore impossible not to make an effort to introduce it into practice. So the only means [usable] against this idea are to pervert it and to pass it in silence. . . .

The supposed rights in landed property are the foundation not only of economic misery but also of political disorder, and above all, of the moral depravation of people.

The wealthy ruling classes, foreseeing as inevitable the loss of the advantages of their position, by various false interpretations, justifications, and palliatives are endeavoring with all their might to postpone its solution as long as possible.

But the time comes for everything. As it came for the abolition of man's property in man, so it has now arrived for the abolition of the supposed right of property in land, which involves the appropriation of other people's labor. The time for this is now so near at hand that nothing can halt the abolition of this dreadful means of oppressing the people.
Yet with a little effort this great emancipation shall be accomplished for the nations.33

Tolstoy, of course, never lived to see his vision realized. He decided to flee from his home and give up his remaining possessions at the age of eighty-two. He died alone at a train station on November 20, 1910. Georgists around the world followed the lead of English single taxers who extolled him as "the staunch, courageous and eloquent apostle of righteousness and justice, of peace on earth, and good-will to all men."34 A resolution passed in New York at a conference hosted by the Fels Commission termed him the "foremost man of the world," pledged themselves to follow in the footsteps of the "Russian Prophet," and hoped that "his statement that he regarded Henry George as the greatest of Americans, may be the means of drawing worldwide attention to the plan of industrial salvation to which he lent the weight of his splendid name."35

Tolstoy had valiantly and single-handedly endeavored to stop the flow of events that he saw would lead to destructiveness in Russia, a destructiveness whose end we still have not seen. He dreamed of a peaceful world busy at sowing and harvesting crops, of a world without gloom and war, which would be achieved through brotherly love, pure spirituality, and the abolition of private property. Yet he also sought to give this philosophy theoretical respectability, and found a kindred soul in Henry George. To be sure, living in agrarian Russia, Tolstoy ignored the American George's celebration of the working of natural resources into an urban, technologically advanced society. But in their espousal of the single tax, and their hatred of exploitation and cruelty, both deserve to be remembered as more than cranks. Those whose philosophies have been implemented in the twentieth-century world cannot look with much pride on their handiwork, and in some immeasurable way the efforts of those who have taken the Georgist/Tolstoyan philosophy to heart have ameliorated their worst effects.
Notes

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1. V. A. Molochinov, Tolstoi i o Tolstom [Tolstoy and about Tolstoy] (Moscow: Izdanie Tolstovskogo muzeia, 1927), 71.

2. Ernest J. Simmons, Introduction to Tolstoy’s Writings (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 139-142; and V. L. L’vov-Rogachevskii, Ot usad’by k izbe: Lev Tolstoi [From the manor to the hut; Lev Tolstoy] (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1928), 223.


8. Ibid., 416-417.


12. Tolstoy, Neuzheli eto tak nado? [Need it be so?], PSS, 34: 216-238.

13. Tolstoy, Edinstvenne sredstvo [The only means], PSS, 34: 254-269.

14. Tolstoy, Krabochemny narody [To the working people], PSS, 35: 121-156.

15. See Simmons, Tolstoy’s Writings, 180-183, for more details.

16. Tolstoy in The Public [Chicago], February 11, 1905, 711, HGS.


22. Tolstoy to F. F. Bolabol’chenkov, April 3, 1910, PSS, 81: 201. See also Tolstoy to N.
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Pestriakov, July 1, 1910, PSS, 82: 66 and 67; and numerous other letters.


25. “A Birthday Address to Count Leo Tolstoy,” in Progress [Melbourne], July, 1908, 3-4, HGS.

26. Tolstoy to the the Federation of Single Tax Leagues of Australia, September 2, 1908, Progress, December 1, 1908, HGS. See PSS, 78: 221-222.


31. Henry George, Jr., “A Visit to Tolstoy,” in The Public, November 26, 1909, 1145, HGS; idem., “Tolstoy in the Twilight,” in Land Values [London], March, 1910, 208, 210, HGS; Tolstoy to Henry George, Jr., June 2, 1909, PSS, 79: 214; and “Tolstoy’s Latest Word on George,” The Public, July 23, 1909, 714, HGS. The entire text of this letter may be found in PSS, 38: 70-71. See also Gusev, Dva goda [Two years], 262-265.


34. “Leo Tolstoy,” in Land Values, December 10, 1910, 139, HGS.