

---

# The Contemplated Treaty with Russia

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 11, no. 8 (August 1887), pp. 449-452.

The government of Russia is an autocracy, a government in which supreme, uncontrolled, unlimited authority, or right of governing devolves upon a single person — an autocrat. The tsar of Russia, the emperor of that vast realm which includes one-half of Europe and one-third of Asia, governs by absolute, by autocratic power, more than 100 million human beings. Their lives, their liberty, their destiny, are all in his hands. He can behead them, hang them, burn them, torture them, exile them, confine them in dungeons black as the deepest cave in Pluto's dominions, and there are none to say nay. When the decree, the ukase goes forth, it is as doleful as a funeral knell, and multiplied thousands of the tsar's subjects, the victims of his autocratic infernalism are now, worse than dead, dragging out an existence of unspeakable torture in Siberian mines and prisons, compared with which hell would be an elysium.

The government of the United States of America is as unlike that of Russia as fire is unlike ice, as the devil is unlike an archangel, as a benediction is unlike a malediction. The government of the United States recognizes the capacity of man for self-government. Here one man, politically, is the equal of any other man. Here citizenship is sovereignty; here the ballot is the scepter and the crown, not a symbol of power but the power itself; here all men are free and independent; here all men stand upon the same plane of political — governmental — rights, and here, more than elsewhere on God's green earth, man expands, by rights divine, to the full stature of sovereignty.

The tsar of Russia is in perpetual danger of being killed. Assassins are forever on his track to slay him. Millions of Russians look upon him as a human monster, the incarnation of inexpressible cruelty. He will not surrender any portion of his autocratic power. He refuses lib-

erty to his subjects. With his hand upon their throats and his iron-clad hoofs upon their prostrate forms, he laughs to scorn their pleadings to be free.

In the dominions of the tsar there is an eternal protest against his government; eternal pleadings for liberty, for freedom; eternal anathemas upon the head of a sovereign whose savagery, whose barbarous methods of government defy characterization, and in the presence of which liberty is speechless — and now, this tsar, this autocrat, this slayer of men and women, whose crime before God and man is a desire for freedom, comes to the United States of America and demands a treaty in which it shall be stipulated that the United States government shall declare that the nihilist movement in Russia has no political meaning at all, and that any revolution which should endanger the tsar's life — even war for constitutional government — shall be declared in advance by the American republic, so far as a treaty can declare it simply a plot to commit murder.

As a naked proposition, nihilism is abhorrent to the American mind, assassination of officials, high or low, meets with universal detestation. The American citizen, who resorts to such a demonized redress for a real or a supposed grievance, is simply a fiend — and it has generally been found that the guilty creature is one whose reason has been dethroned. In the United States, the people, being sovereign, may with little delay, by processes known to law and constitution, change both laws and rulers — and hence, nihilism has no votaries in the United States, nor would there be in Russia, if the tsar would grant the people a constitutional government, give them liberty, or a government in which they would be permitted to exercise some of the prerogatives of freemen. These things being stubbornly denied, nihilism exists, and is to all intents and purposes an outgrowth of political conditions, a crime it may be, but a crime infinitely less aggravated than the crimes of the autocrat which provokes them. The United States is free from nihilism, because, for every wrong there is a remedy, without an appeal to the extreme measures to which Russian nihilists resort to mitigate the tyranny under which they live. But if in the United States there should ever come a time, when “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is abridged or cloven down by an autocrat, then nihilism will be as conspicuous here as it is now in Russia, aye, and a thousand times more open to view. We think it can be shown without a labored effort that nihilism, as a means to advance the rights of men, to secure freedom from oppression and escape the

cruelties of autocrats, is politically and religiously right. Sacred history proclaims its justification. Those who believe the will admit the proposition in all of its terrific force.

At one time Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had the children of Israel in bondage. Pharaoh was an autocrat. He was requested to give the descendants of the old patriarch their liberty. This he refused. And for this refusal the land of Egypt was overwhelmed with plagues. In the first place all the waters of Egypt were turned to blood — and the fish that was in all the rivers died and the water “stank,” and the Egyptians could not drink the water. Again the demand was made that the people whom Pharaoh held in bondage should be permitted to go free and upon his refusal, came the plague of frogs — and the reptiles filled all the rivers, lakes, and pools, and covered all the land until Pharaoh relented and he consented to let the bondsmen go free — and the frogs were gathered into heaps when they died and “stank.” Pharaoh, however, concluded to act treacherously, and after promising to let the children of Israel go, changed his mind, and for this all the dust of Egypt was transformed into lice, and lice were upon man and beast, followed by flies, until Egypt was a land of lice and flies. This was pretty rough on Pharaoh and the people of Egypt, but the children of Israel were good working men, they could make bricks without straw, and Pharaoh concluded to hold on to them at any price, and as a consequence, all the cattle, horses, asses, camels, oxen, and sheep, of the Egyptians, were cursed with murrain, and in addition, all the people were cursed with blains and boils. But Pharaoh would not give his slaves freedom, would not let them go; as a consequence, then came a storm of hail and fire upon all Egypt and other destruction followed in its pathway. But Pharaoh persisted in fighting it out on that line. and invited more nihilism. Then came the plague of locusts which covered all the land, and devoured every herb — all the fruit that escaped the hail, followed by a plague of darkness, which was so deep that it could be felt, it was virtually the entombment of Egypt for three days. About this time the Egyptian autocrat became exceedingly wroth with Moses, telling him to quit his palace, and to visit him no more. And it may be said, that Jehovah was getting ready to settle the question with the autocrat, and as a last resort, the first born of every family in Egypt, “from the first born of Pharaoh, that sitteth upon his throne, even to the first born of the maid servant that is behind the mill,” was slain — “and all the first born of beasts” — and when the destroying angel had passed over Egypt,

Pharaoh had received lessons in nihilism, which though of terrible severity, were deserved, because he was denying life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, to men, women and children whom he held in bondage. Nor were the plagues all the penalties Pharaoh paid for his autocratic obstinacy and savagery. He followed the fleeing columns of the Israelites, their flocks and herds with his chariots and horsemen, intending to slaughter and despoil them, or bring them back to slavery, and it was only when the waters of the sea overwhelmed his hosts and they perished, that the pursuit ceased.<sup>1</sup>

The point we make is, that Pharaoh, as an autocrat, was less a monster than the tsar of Russia, and that nihilism, under certain circumstances, is justifiable, and was brought to bear upon Pharaoh by the commands of Jehovah himself, and that the plagues, the slaying of the first born, and the annihilation of Pharaoh's army, stand as eternal protests against autocracy, and as permissions, when liberty is at stake, to use any means possible to devise whereby the precious boon may be secured.

The nihilists of Russia, suffering more outrages than the Israelites, were ever subjected to under Pharaoh, resort to methods far less terrible than those which Jehovah practiced upon the autocrat of Egypt and its unfortunate people. Moses by direction of the king of kings, said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." The demand being refused, the Supreme Ruler, visited upon Pharaoh and upon all Egyptians, curses which grew in horror, culminating at last in the death of the first born in every Egyptian home, and finally the death of every man of the vast armies which went in pursuit of the Israelites.

Was this warfare which Moses conducted in Egypt, nihilism? The objection to dynamite is that the innocent suffer with the guilty, but the fact in no wise interfered with God's plans in Egypt. True, Moses did not use dynamite, but who that can form any rational conceptions of the plagues which God sent upon Pharaoh and Egypt would not prefer dynamite? The crimes that Pharaoh perpetrated upon the Israelites were such as only an autocrat could commit, and Heaven endorsed the exterminating policy of Moses.

The Russian ruler is a thousand times more infamous than was Pharaoh. In his devilish rule he sins against more light and knowledge. Pharaoh was a pagan, the tsar is a professed Christian and at the head of a great Christian church. If Jehovah could command and exe-

---

<sup>1</sup> *Exodus*, chapters 10 to 12.

cute nihilism in Egypt, why should He not command and approve it in Russia? Who knows that the Ruler of the universe does not approve it? Who knows that He does not hear the prayer, the agonizing cries of the miserable victims of the tsar's cruelties, whose only crime is a desire to be free, and who dare make an effort for freedom? Russia now comes to the United States and demands that this government shall surrender all Russians, who, by any means, seek to throw off the shackles which the autocrat of their country has forged for their perpetual enslavement. Germany and Austria have agreed to surrender-Russian political criminals, but England stubbornly refuses such concession. England's treaty with Russia provides that "A criminal is not to be executed if the crime for which his extradition is demanded is a political one, or if he shall prove that his extradition is demanded with a view to prosecute or punish him for a crime of a political nature." In this, England maintains that an effort to kill the tsar for his savage inhumanity to his subjects is a political crime for which the party charged shall never be surrendered.

The treaty which Russia is trying to get ratified by the United States Senate provides for the non-extradition of Russians for political crimes, but if killing results when Russians fight for freedom, particularly if it is the tsar himself, or any member of his family, then, in that case, the crime is to be declared not political, and the Russian, if he has sought asylum in the United States of America, is to be surrendered, given over to Russian savagery, and to pay with his life the penalty for ridding his country of an incarnate fiend, and this treaty already made between the United States and Russia, a treaty with provisions that neither Switzerland, France, nor England would tolerate, is expected to be ratified by the Senate of the United States, and proclaimed the law by the President. If such a stupendous iniquity is perpetrated by the American Senate, and proclaimed the law by the President, autocracy, tsarism, absolutism which regards with unspeakable detestation American liberty and the genius of American institutions, will have gained a foothold and a standing in the United States, well calculated to make every free man, every lover of liberty, blush for the degeneracy of his country.

The autocratic foes of liberty, of the emancipation from the deep degradation of serfdom, ought to die as reptiles and beasts of prey ought to die. The autocrat who punishes with death, exile and tortures, men whose only crime is plotting for freedom, conspiring for liberty, confederating for independence, whose high and holiest ambi-

tion is to secure life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is not fit to live, and the nations of the earth instead of giving him protection, should hunt him down and kill him as if he were a man-eating tiger. Patrick Henry's shibboleth cry was "Give me liberty or give me death," and now, when the Russian autocrat demands of the United States the surrender of a Russian, who, in the pursuit of liberty, without which life is a curse, kills a tsar, or any member of the family of a tsar, the object being the liberation of millions of slaves, he commits no greater wrong than when Jehovah pelted the Egyptians with indescribable curses because Pharaoh would not emancipate the Children of Israel. The question arises. ought Moses to have been surrendered to Pharaoh for punishment because of his worse than dynamite methods of warfare? Those who answer affirmatively may advocate the return of a Russian for torture and death, who for as holy a cause as that in which Moses was engaged and made Egypt a charnel house.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · April 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.  
First Edition.