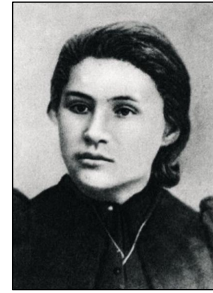


Letter from Vera Zasulich to Marx

16 February 1881

16 Feb. 1881, Genève,
Rue de Lausanne, No. 49,
L'imprimerie polonaise.



Honoured Citizen,

You are not unaware that your *Capital* enjoys great popularity in Russia. Although the edition has been confiscated, the few remaining copies are read and re-read by the mass of more or less educated people in our country; serious men are studying it. What you probably do not realise is the role which your *Capital* plays in our discussions on the agrarian question in Russia and our rural commune. You know better than anyone how urgent this question is in Russia. You know what Chernyshevskii thought of it. Our progressive literature – *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, for example – continues to develop his ideas. But in my view, it is a life-and-death question above all for our socialist party. In one way or another, even the personal fate of our revolutionary socialists depends upon your answer to the question. For there are only two possibilities. Either the rural commune, freed of exorbitant tax demands, payment to the nobility and arbitrary administration, is capable of developing in a socialist direction, that is, gradually organising its production and distribution on a collectivist basis. In that case, the revolutionary socialist must devote all his strength to the liberation and development of the commune.

If, however, the commune is destined to perish, all that remains for the socialist, as such, is more or less ill-founded calculations as to how many decades it will take for the Russian peasant's land to pass into the hands of the bourgeoisie, and how many centuries it will take for capitalism in Russia to reach something like the level of development already attained in Western Europe. Their task will then be to conduct propaganda solely among the urban workers, while these workers will be continually drowned in the peasant mass which, following the dissolution of the commune, will be thrown on to the streets of the large towns in search of a wage.

Nowadays, we often hear it said that the rural commune is an archaic form condemned to perish by history, scientific socialism and, in short, everything above debate. Those who preach such a view call themselves your disciples par excellence: 'Marksists'. Their strongest argument is often: 'Marx said so.'

'But how do you derive that from *Capital*?' others object. 'He does not discuss the agrarian question, and says nothing about Russia.'

'He would have said as much if he had discussed our country,' your disciples retort with perhaps a little too much temerity. So you will understand, Citizen, how interested we are in your opinion. You would be doing us a very great favour if you were to set forth your ideas on the possible fate of our rural commune, and on the theory that it is historically necessary for every country in the world to pass through all the phases of capitalist production.

In the name of my friends, I take the liberty to ask You, Citizen, to do us this favour.

If time does not allow you to set forth Your ideas in a fairly detailed manner, then at least be so kind as to do this in the form of a letter that you would allow us to translate and publish in Russia.

With respectful greetings,
Vera Zassoulitch

My address is: Imprimerie polonaise, Rue de Lausanne No. 49, Genève.

« Mieux que quiconque, vous savez avec quelle urgence cette question se pose en Russie, et notamment à notre Parti socialiste "russe". Ces derniers temps, on a prétendu que la communauté rurale, étant une forme archaïque, était vouée à la ruine par l'histoire. Parmi ceux qui prophétisent une telle issue, certains sont des « marxistes » qui se disent vos disciples... Vous comprenez donc, citoyen, quel grand service vous nous rendriez, si vous nous exposiez votre opinion sur les destins possibles de nos communautés rurales et sur la théorie qui veut que tous les peuples du monde soient contraints, par la nécessité historique, de parcourir toutes les phases de la production sociale. »