WAR *And* PEACE

LEO TOLSTOY

A NEW TRANSLATION BY

RICHARD PEVEAR *and* LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY

Table of Contents

War and Peace

LEO TOLSTOY

Translated from the Russian by

Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky

ISBN-13: 9780307266934

Introduction

If the world could write by itself, it would write like Tolstoy.
— ISAAC BABEL

War and Peace is the most famous and at the same time the most daunting of Russian novels, as vast as Russia itself and as long to cross from one end to the other. Yet if one makes the journey, the sights seen and the people met on the way mark one's life forever. The book is set in the period of the Napoleonic wars (1805-1812) and tells of the interweaving of historical events with the private lives of two very different families of the Russian nobility—the severe Bolkonskys and the easygoing Rostovs—and of a singular man, reminiscent of the author himself—Count Pierre Bezukhov. It embodies the national myth of "Russia's glorious period," as Tolstoy himself called it, in the confrontation of the emperor Napoleon and Field Marshal Kutuzov, and at the same time it challenges that myth and all such myths through the vivid portrayal of the fates of countless ordinary people of the period, men and women, young and old, French as well as Russian, and through the author's own passionate questioning of the truth of history.

Tolstoy wrote that he "spent five years of ceaseless and exclusive labor, under the best conditions of life," working on *War and Peace.* Those were the years from 1863 to 1868. He was thirty-five when he began. The year before, he had married Sofya Behrs, the daughter of a Moscow doctor, who was eighteen, and they had moved permanently to his estate at Yasnaya Polyana, in Tula province, a hundred and twenty miles south of Moscow. She bore him four children while he worked on the book, was his first reader (or listener), and was in part the model for his heroine, Natasha Rostov.

The orderliness and routine of family life and estate management were not only the best conditions for work, they were also new conditions for Tolstoy. His mother had died when he was two. His father had moved to Moscow with the children in 1830, but died himself seven years later, and the children were eventually taken to Kazan by their aunt. Tolstoy entered Kazan University in 1844 but never graduated; his later attempts to pass examinations at Petersburg University also led to nothing. In 1851, after several years of idle and dissipated life in Moscow and Petersburg, he visited the Caucasus with his brother Nikolai, who was in the army, and

there took part in a raid on a Chechen village, which he described a year later in a story entitled “The Raid,” his first attempt to capture the actuality of warfare in words. His experiences in the Caucasus were also reflected in his novel *The Cossacks,* which he began writing in 1853 but finished only nine years later, and in his very last piece of fiction, the superb short novel *Hadji Murad,* completed in 1904 but published only posthumously.

In 1852, he joined the army as a noncommissioned officer and served in Wallachia. Two years later he was promoted to ensign and was transferred at his own request to the Crimea, where he fought in the Crimean War and was present at the siege of Sevastopol. His *Sevastopol Sketches,* which were published in 1855, made him famous in Petersburg social and literary circles. They were a second and fuller attempt at a true depiction of war.

During his army years, Tolstoy lived like a typical young Russian officer, drinking, gambling, and womanizing. In 1854 he lost the family house in Yas-naya Polyana at cards, and it was dismantled and moved some twenty miles away, leaving only a foundation stone on which Tolstoy later had carved:

HERE STOOD THE HOUSE IN WHICH L. N. TOLSTOY WAS BORN.

In 1856 he was promoted to lieutenant but resigned his commission and returned to the estate, where he lived in one of the surviving wings of the house and began to occupy himself with management and the education of the peasant children. By then, besides the works I have already mentioned, he had also published the semi-fictional trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood,* and *Youth.*

The years from 1857 to 1862 were a time of restlessness and seeking for Tolstoy. He had left Petersburg, disgusted by the literary life there. He made two trips abroad. During the first, in 1857, he forced himself to witness a public execution in Paris, and the sight shook him so deeply that he vowed he would never again serve any government. At the beginning of the second trip, in September 1860, he visited his beloved brother Nikolai, who was dying of tuberculosis in the southern French town of Hyères. The death and burial of his brother were, he said, “the strongest impression in my life.” In 1861 he returned to Yasnaya Polyana, where he began work on a novel about the Decembrists, a group of young aristocrats and officers who, at the death of the emperor Alexander I in December 1825, rose up in the name of constitutional monarchy, were arrested and either executed or sent to Siberia. This novel would eventually become *War and Peace.*

Tolstoy himself later described the process of its transformation. At

first he had wanted to write about a Decembrist on his return from Siberia in 1856, when the exiles were pardoned by Alexander II. In preparation for that, he went back to 1825, the year of the uprising itself, and from there to the childhood and youth of his hero and the others who took part in it. That brought him to the war of 1812, with which he became fascinated, and since those events were directly linked to events of 1805, it was there that he decided to begin. The original title, in the serial publication of the book, was *The Year 1805*, it was only in 1867 that he changed it to *War and Peace*, which he may have borrowed from a work by the French socialist thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, whom he had met in Brussels during his second trip abroad. All that remains of the Decembrists in the final version are some slight hints about the futures of Pierre Bezukhov and of Prince Andrei Bolkonsky's son Nikolenka.

The book grew organically as Tolstoy worked on it. In 1865, partly under the influence of Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma,* he revised the battle scenes he had already written and added new ones, including one of the most important, the description of the battle of Schöngraben. Coming across a collection of Masonic texts in the library of the Rumyantsev Museum, he became interested and decided to make Pierre Bezukhov a Mason. He studied the people of Moscow at the theaters, in the clubs, in the streets, looking for the types he needed. A great many of his fictional characters, if not all of them, had real-life models. The old Prince Bolkonsky and the old Count Rostov were drawn from Tolstoy's grandfathers, Nikolai Rostov and Princess Marya from his parents, Sonya from one of his aunts. The Rostov estate, Otradnoe, is a reflection of Yasnaya Polyana. Tolstoy spent two days on the battlefield of Borodino and made his own map of the disposition of forces, correcting the maps of the historians. He collected a whole library of materials on the Napoleonic wars, many bits of which also found their way into the fabric of the book. His memory for historical minutiae was prodigious. But above all, there is the profusion and precision of sensual detail that brings the world of *War and Peace* so vividly to life. In his autobiographical sketch, *People and Situations* (1956), Pasternak wrote of Tolstoy:

All his life, at every moment, he possessed the faculty of seeing phenomena in the detached finality of each separate instant, in perfectly distinct outline, as we see only on rare occasions, in childhood, or on the crest of an all-renewing happiness, or in the triumph of a great spiritual victory.

To see things like that, our eye must be directed by passion. For it is passion that by its flash illuminates an object, intensifying its appearance.

Such passion, the passion of creative contemplation, Tolstoy constantly carried within him. It was precisely in its light that he saw everything in its pristine freshness, in a new way, as if for the first time. The authenticity of what he saw differs so much from what we are used to that it may appear strange to us. But Tolstoy was not seeking that strangeness, was not pursuing it as a goal, still less did he apply it to his works as a literary method.

I was struck, while working on the translation of *War and Peace,* by the impression that I was translating two books at the same time. Not two books in alternation, as one might expect from the title, but two books simultaneously. One is a very deliberate and self-conscious work, expressive of the out-size personality of its author, who is everywhere present, selecting and manipulating events, and making his own absolute pronouncements on them: “On the twelfth of June, the forces of Western Europe crossed the borders of Russia, and war began—that is, an event took place contrary to human reason and to the whole of human nature.” It is a work full of provocation and irony, and written in what might be called Tolstoy's signature style, with broad and elaborately developed rhetorical devices—periodic structure, emphatic repetitions, epic similes. The other is an account of all that is most real and ordinary in life, all that is most fragile and therefore most precious, all that eludes formulation, that is not subject to absolute pronouncements, that is so mercurial that it can hardly be reflected upon, and can be grasped only by a rare quality of attention and self-effacement. And it is written in a style that reaches the expressive minimum of a sentence like *Kâpli kâpali,* “Drops dripped”—which makes silence itself audible. It seems to me that the incomparable experience of reading *War and Peace* comes from the shining of the one work through the other—an effect achieved by artistic means of an unusual sort.

The first thing a reader today must overcome is the notion of *War and Peace* as a classic, the greatest of novels, and the model of what a novel should be. In 1954, Bertolt Brecht wrote a note on “Classical Status as an Inhibiting Factor” that puts the question nicely. “What gets lost,” he says of the bestowing of classical status on a work (he is speaking of works for the theater), “is the classic's original freshness, the element of surprise ... of newness, of productive stimulus that is the hallmark of such works. The passionate quality of a great masterpiece is replaced by stage temperament, and where the classics are full of fighting spirit, here the lessons taught the audience are tame and cozy and fail to grip.”

The first readers of *War and Peace* were certainly surprised, but often

also bewildered and even dismayed by the book. They found it hard to identify the main characters, to discover anything like a plot, to see any connection between episodes, to understand the sudden leaps from fiction to history, from narration to philosophizing. There seemed to be no focus, no artistic unity to the work, no real beginning, and no resolution. It was as if the sheer mass of detail overwhelmed any design Tolstoy might have tried to impose on it. Such observations were made by Russian critics, including Tolstoy's great admirer, Ivan Turgenev, and when the book became known in translation, they were repeated by Flaubert and by Henry James, who famously described *War and Peace* as a “large loose baggy monster.”

Another cause of surprise for its first readers was the language of *War and Peace*. The book opens in French—not with a few words of French (as in those English versions that do not eliminate the French altogether), but with a whole paragraph of French, with only a few phrases of Russian at the end. This mixing of French and Russian goes on for another five chapters or more, and occurs frequently throughout the rest of the book. There are also some long letters entirely in French, as well as official dispatches, and quotations from the French historian Adolphe Thiers. There are passages in German as well. For all of them Tolstoy supplied his own translations in footnotes, as we do. But that made the question still more problematic, because Tolstoy's translations are occasionally inaccurate, perhaps deliberately so. The amount of French in the text is smaller than some early critics asserted—not a third, but only about two percent. But there is also a great deal of gallicized Russian, either implying that the speaker is speaking in French, or showing that upper-class ladies like Julie Karagin are unable to write correctly in their own language. And there are other heterogeneous elements in the composition: Tolstoy's map and commentary on the battlefield of Borodino, and his own interpolated essays, which repeatedly disrupt the fictional continuum.

The formal structure of *War and Peace* and the texture of its prose are indeed strange. Those who did not simply declare the book a failure, dismissing the newness, the “passionate quality” and “fighting spirit” of what Tolstoy was doing as artistic helplessness and naïveté, often said that it succeeded in spite of its artistic flaws. But that is a false distinction. *War and Peace* is a work of art, and if it succeeds, it cannot be in spite of its formal deficiencies, but only because Tolstoy created a new form that was adequate to his vision.

It is equally mistaken to go to the other extreme and declare, as more recent critics have done, that, far from being a magnificent failure, *War*

and Peace is a masterpiece of nineteenth-century realism, simple and artless, a direct transcription of life. Tolstoy was well aware of the perplexities his book caused and addressed them in an article (included here as an appendix) entitled "A Few Words Apropos of the Book *War and Peace,"* published in the magazine *Russian Archive* in 1868, before the final parts of the book had appeared in print. "What is *War and Peace}"* he asked.

It is not a novel, still less an epic poem, still less a historical chronicle. *War and Peace* is what the author wanted and was able to express, in the form in which it is expressed. Such a declaration of the author's disregard of the conventional forms of artistic prose works might seem presumptuous, if it were premeditated and if it had no previous examples. The history of Russian literature since Pushkin's time not only provides many examples of such departure from European forms, but does not offer even one example to the contrary. From Gogol's *Dead Souls* to Dostoevsky's *Dead House,* there is not a single work of artistic prose of the modern period of Russian literature, rising slightly above mediocrity, that would fit perfectly into the form of the novel, the epic, or the story.

Two things in this passage are especially characteristic of Tolstoy: first, the negative definition of the genre; and second, the assertion that his departure from artistic convention was not premeditated. Both might be taken as disingenuous, but I do not think they are. Tolstoy was trying to express something which, to his mind, had never been expressed before, and which therefore required a new form that could only define itself as he worked. By excluding the known forms of extended narrative, he leaves an empty place in which an as yet unknown form, indefinable and unnameable, may appear. (He uses the same negative method throughout *War and Peace* itself.) But this procedure was not premeditated—that is, as Pasternak rightly said, it was not a literary method, not a play with form for its own sake in the modernist sense. He found it necessary for the task he had set himself.

What was that task? What was it that Tolstoy "wanted to express" in his book, which he deliberately does not call a novel? Boris de Schloezer, a fine critic and philosopher, wrote in the preface to his French translation of *War and Peace* (1960) that Tolstoy's one aim, from the beginning, was "to speak the truth" as perceived by his eye and his conscience. "All the forces of his imagination, his power of evocation and expression, converge on that one single goal. Outside any other religious or moral considerations, Tolstoy when he writes obeys one imperative, which is the foundation of what one might call his literary ethic. That imperative is not

imposed on the artist by the moralist, it is the voice of the artist himself." As early as the sketch "Sevastopol in May" of 1855, Tolstoy had asserted, "My hero is truth." In *War and Peace* he wanted to speak the truth about a certain period of Russian life—the period of the Napoleonic wars of 1805 to 1812. He wanted to say, not how that period could be made to appear in a beautiful lie, an entertaining or instructive story, a historical narrative, but how it was. He wanted to capture in words what happened the way it happened. But how does happening happen? How can words express it without falsifying it? How can one capture the past once it is past? These were questions that Tolstoy constantly brooded on. He had already posed them for himself in 1851, in his very first literary work, the fragment "A History of Yesterday." The composition of *War and Peace* was his fullest response to them.

Poète et non honnête homme, wrote Pascal, meaning that a poet cannot be an honest man. Tolstoy fully agreed with Pascal; he tried all his life to be *honnête homme et non poète.* Nabokov, in his lecture notes on *Anna Karenina,* speaks of "Tolstoy's style with its readiness to admit any robust awkwardness if that is the shortest way to sense." Yet Tolstoy found that the truth could not be approached directly, that every attempt at direct expression became a simplification and therefore a lie, and that the "shortest way to sense" was rather long and indirect. He was acutely aware of the inadequacy of all human means of speaking the truth, but his artistic intuition told him that those means might be composed in such a way as to allow the truth to appear. Against his will, he found that to be an honest man he had to be a poet.

In the fifth section of "A Few Words," Tolstoy freely embraces that role, discussing the differences between the historian and the artist. "A historian and an artist, describing a historical epoch, have two completely different objects ... For a historian, considering the contribution rendered by some person towards a certain goal, there are heroes; for the artist, considering the correspondence of this person to all sides of life, there cannot and should not be any heroes, but there should be people." And further on: "A historian has to do with the results of an event, the artist with the fact of the event." And again: "The difference between the results obtained is explained by the sources from which the two draw their information. For the historian (we continue the example of a battle), the main source is the reports of individual commanders and the commander in chief. The artist can draw nothing from such sources, they tell him nothing, explain nothing. Moreover, the artist turns away from them, finding in them a necessary falsehood." Neither here nor elsewhere,

however, does Tolstoy say what sources the artist does draw from. To compound the problem, he says at the end of the same section: “But the artist should not forget that the notion of historical figures and events formed among people is based not on fantasy, but on historical documents, insofar as historians have been able to amass them; and therefore, while understanding and presenting these figures and events differently, the artist ought to be guided, like the historian, by historical materials.” The difference lies not in the figures and events that are seen, but in the way of seeing them: the artist sees not heroes but people, not results but facts, and considers a person not in terms of a goal, but “in correspondence to all sides of life”—with what Pasternak calls “the passion of creative contemplation,” which Tolstoy wisely avoids defining.

This leads to a crucial if paradoxical reversal: the most real and even, in Tolstoy's sense, historical figures in *War and Peace* turn out to be the fictional ones; and the most unreal, the most insubstantial and futile, the historical ones.[1] Tolstoy undermines the idea of significant action, though it was the foundation of virtually all narrative before him. He does not say that all action is insignificant, but that the only significant actions are the insignificant ones, whose meaning lies elsewhere, not in the public space but in absolute solitude. For Prince Andrei there *is* something in the infinite sky above him, but it is not a general idea, and he is unable to communicate it to anyone else. In her comparison of Homer and Tolstoy *(On the Iliad,* translated by Mary McCarthy, New York, 1947), Rachel Bespaloff wrote: “Great common truths are disclosed to man only when he is alone: they are the revelation made by solitude in the thick of collective action.” Tolstoy grants this intimate but immense reality to each of his major characters, and to many of the minor ones (who then cease to be minor). Yet there is nothing very remarkable about these characters. Turgenev complained that they were all mediocrities, and in a sense he was right. They are ordinary men and women. Tolstoy was aware of that; it was what he intended. As Rachel Bespaloff observed: “Tolstoy's universe, like Homer's, is what our own is from moment to moment. We don't step into it; we are there.”