

VIEWS & REVIEWS



The Book That Became 'War and Peace'

KATHRYN FEUER

OUR IMAGE of Tolstoy is fixed—bearded, ascetic old Lev Nikolaevich, pacifist, vegetarian, and Christian anarchist, the sage of Yasnaya Polyana. It broods over all his works, especially over *War and Peace*, which in its reputation for venerable profundity is matched only by the Book of Job. The image, of course, has really nothing to do with the novel, whose author was young, clean-shaven, and robust in his pleasures, a veteran who sometimes longed to go to war again, an aristocrat jealous of his rank and privilege. If one reads *War and Peace* without predispositions, much of this portrait of its author is apparent; it is, as F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to his daughter, “a man’s book.” And, as the manuscript drafts of the novel reveal (they were finally published in Russia a few years ago), in its origins *War and Peace* was a young man’s book.

Tolstoy was, in fact, just thirty-five when, in 1863, he began work on the novel which he was to finish seven years later. The early manuscripts in particular belong to a book youthful in its attitudes, in its

sensationalism, in its grandiose conception, and in its polemic fervor. These drafts are of two quite different types: political discussions and lyrical family-life scenes, with the latter type predominating. For a year and a half Tolstoy wrote almost nothing at all about the war (only a version of the Battle of Austerlitz), and when he did deal with it, in 1865, he was concerned not with its philosophic or historical meanings but with its effects on his individual characters. And even later still, Tolstoy’s conception of his work was something other than the book we know; its title, he wrote to a friend in May, 1866, would be “All’s Well That Ends Well.”

THE EARLY MANUSCRIPTS are far more sensational than the final version. In the very first drafts and outlines, we find Old Prince Bolonsky with a serf mistress and several illegitimate children, whom he dispatches to the orphans’ home; we find Helene (Pierre’s wife) in a suggested incestuous relationship with her brother, Anatole, and the mistress of, among others, the Tsar.

Here Natasha is *really* seduced by Anatole (while in the final novel she only suffers all the consequences of seduction, remaining technically chaste). Here Pierre has many duels and many love affairs; he kills some of his opponents and one of his mistresses dies in childbirth. And here Nicholas Rostov, the novel’s triumphant model of a virtuous nobleman, whose priggishness is as impregnable as his stupidity—Nicholas Rostov has a dancing-girl mistress, provided him by his loving and solicitous parents.

All these episodes disappear very quickly, once Tolstoy has really begun. And yet, in what we might call the later early drafts, the tone of the novel remains far more extreme, its expressed emotions are more intense, than anything we find in the final version. Characters experience passion and exultation, despair, hatred and remorse, and they express these feelings in powerfully effective soliloquies, interior monologues, and, occasionally, in curiously moving dreams. These passages seem to have been written by Tolstoy with spontaneous ease; they are in the vein of eloquent and undisciplined self-revelation that so often marks the youthful work of great novelists.

THE POLITICS, too, of the first drafts was much more explicit and polemical. Indeed, *War and Peace* seems to have been first planned as a political novel, the first volume of a trilogy that would center around the Decembrist uprising in 1825, crushed by Nicholas I, in which a group of nobles, chiefly former army officers, sought to gain a constitution and other reforms for Russia. Volume I was to have taken place in 1812, a formative time in the lives of the Decembrists, many of whom became admirers of western European culture and political ideas during their service in the Napoleonic Wars. Volume II would probably have been set in 1825, the time of the uprising; while Volume III would have described the return of the Decembrist hero in 1856, when the exiled conspirators were amnestied by young Alexander II.

Tolstoy began with the third or 1856 volume, which, it is important

to realize, had a contemporary setting; he seems to have written on this theme in 1857 and intermittently thereafter. Then, in 1863, he composed four chapters depicting the first days in Moscow of a returned Decembrist and his family. The hero—one can think of him as sixty-five-year-old Pierre Bezukhov—is a sadder but wiser revolutionary; he is kindly in his dealings with rich and poor, with great and humble; he is deeply religious, not interested in politics and “important questions,” and convinced that the peasants are the strength and hope of Russia. The attitude toward the revolt that Tolstoy meant to express is conveyed by his own description of the trilogy, in which he speaks of the 1825 volume as describing “the epoch of my hero’s errors and misfortunes.”

We have no trace of any work done on this second, 1825 volume; so far as the manuscripts show, Tolstoy moved directly back from 1856 to 1812 (and then to 1805, where *War and Peace* opens). We can assume that the second volume would have recounted Pierre’s experiences as a revolutionary and that the third would have described his “true” regeneration—his rejection of political activism and his attempts to achieve spiritual self-perfection, probably through his association with peasants in Siberia. Thus it appears that Tolstoy was originally committed to a novel whose major themes were political, and the earliest manuscripts of *War and Peace* indicate that such was, in fact, his intention. There are more than a dozen drafts of the novel’s first chapter, and these alternate in a regular rhythm, between attempts to begin with a social characterization of the times and attempts to begin with what Tolstoy called in a marginal note “a subtle political conversation.”

THE MORE Tolstoy wrote, however, the more the political novel was pushed into the background. The era-characterizing introductions were not successful; usually they were written satirically, and their tone was too emotional, their wit heavy-handed, their targets too broad and their point of view unspecified; they exhibited, in fact, a total absence of those qualities

which are the cornerstones of Tolstoy’s best writing. As to the subtle political conversations, these had a tendency to dwindle into synoptic notes after a few sentences. After someone had called Napoleon a



beast, and someone else had said on the contrary, he is a great man, and the rest of the company had said no, no, he is a murderer and antichrist, Tolstoy would decide to continue this interesting discussion another day, and turn with evident relief to fluent scenes of happy family life.

Besides this excessive success of the family-life chapters and the failure of the political introductions and conversations, we can see another reason why Tolstoy abandoned his original design to write a political novel. Tolstoy was a man of warm opinions on every subject, and it must have been intolerable for him cold-bloodedly to devote not just one volume but two to what he could only conceive as his hero’s achievement of error. And so the original plan was telescoped: for Pierre’s protracted dissipation, one drunken party, marriage to the depraved Helene, and a single duel would serve; for his revolutionary activity, ideological error was substituted—admiration for Napoleon, attempts to better the condition of his serfs, Masonry, then a patriotic plan to kill Napoleon; rather than thirty years of redemptive exile, the experiences of seven years would be sufficient for his successive disillusionments with the liberal panaceas and his eventual achievement of spiritual regeneration with the help of Platon Karataev instead of the Siberian peasants.

Pierre’s attempts to help his serfs and his Masonry (the lodges were often centers of Decembrist activity) are plausible activities to attribute to a young Russian liberal or radical in the first decades of the nineteenth century. But why, one may

ask, did Tolstoy attach so much importance to admiration for Napoleon as a tenet of “advanced” political thinking? The answer is that Tolstoy seems to have been originally impelled to write *War and Peace* not from an interest in the period of the Napoleonic Wars but rather as a response to contemporary political developments. He appears to have seen in the civic radicalism of Russian intellectuals of a century ago (and perhaps also in the official liberalism of the era) the same menacing specter which had first appeared to Europe in the guise of the glorious French Revolution but had then, in his view, revealed itself more truly as Napoleon and tyranny.

THE PERSONAL SOURCES of Tolstoy’s attitude are not too difficult to trace. He had returned from his military service at the end of 1855 as a self-acknowledged liberal, deeply sensitive to the injustices of serfdom. He had enthusiastically worked out a plan to free his own serfs, and was deeply hurt when the peasants rejected it, saying that the rate of compensation he asked for the land was too high and that he was trying to trick them into paying for what the Tsar would soon grant them as their right. This was also the period of his closest association with Turgenyev, Nekrasov, and others of the Petersburg intellectuals who were contributors and editors of the progressive *Contemporary*, the journal in which Tolstoy had first published but to which he did not, significantly, submit *War and Peace*. Even at this time, when his relations with these men were at their best, Tolstoy was frequently at odds with them; he would occasionally shock them by playing the roaring, roistering officer home from the wars, racing away from literary salons to all-night drinking parties with gypsy girls; he would assume a cool aristocrat’s arrogance in the face of their ink-stained intellectualism; he steadily opposed their belief (which ranged from moderate to extreme) in socially committed art with his own preference for what he called pure and elevated art; and his temperamental contentiousness was roused to frenzy by what he considered their ritualistic liberal cant.

We should really have a good deal

of sympathy for Tolstoy; his position was much like that of so many Americans who start by rejecting certain immoral features of American life but who, in the barrage of alien assent and augmentation to their criticisms, begin to exempt much that is familiar and dear, until finally they are affirming America, a land which no foreigner can really know. So must Tolstoy have felt about the critics of the Russian landowner; this "liberalism," he said, was based on hatred rather than on love. Perhaps the crux of the matter lay in the fact that much that the liberals hated was bound up with all that Tolstoy loved most. He genuinely detested the institution of serfdom, but his own estate meant so much to him that he once said he could not imagine his life apart from his Yasnaya.

This feeling for the land—his own land—and its way of life expressed itself in a kind of ideal vision of family life in the country, compounded of plain living, high thinking, and poetically simple (a favorite adverb and a favorite adjective) relationships between the sexes, the generations, and the classes; and in this idyll he found an appropriate microcosm for the good society. (Tolstoy's idealization of family life may have owed something to the fact that he was orphaned while still a little boy and was thus deprived of a normal target for rebellion.)

At the same time there is an evident desire to shock the literary fathers, Turgenev and Nekrasov, who had sponsored him and expected so much from him when in 1856 he had first appeared in Petersburg literary society. At a time of tremendous interest in "philanthropic" fiction—fiction that depicted the peasant, the government clerk, the poor student, the widowed landlady—Tolstoy wrote, in what was to have been an entire chapter in Part I of *War and Peace*:

I have written thus far only about Princes, Counts, Ministers, Senators and their children, and I fear that henceforth there will be no other characters in my history.

Perhaps this is not good and will not please the public; perhaps a history of

peasants, merchants and seminarists would be more interesting and more instructive for them, but for all my desire to have as many readers as possible, I cannot gratify such a taste, for a number of reasons. First because [his historical materials concern only people of high position]. Second, because the lives of merchants, coachmen, seminarists, convicts and peasants appear to me to be single-faceted and boring, and all the actions of those people, as it appears to me, spring from the same sources: envy for those in more fortunate positions, self-interest, and the material passions. . . .

Third, because the life of those people . . . carries in itself less of an imprint of the times.

Fourth, because the life of those people is unattractive.

Fifth, because I can in no way comprehend what a policeman, standing in his sentry-box, is thinking, what a shopkeeper, urging one to buy his neckties and suspenders, is thinking and feeling, or what a seminarist is thinking when he is about to be flogged with birch rods for the hundredth time, and so on. I am so far from understanding all this that I even cannot understand what a cow is thinking while she is being milked, or what a horse thinks when she is pulling a barrel.

Sixth, finally (and this, I know, is the very best reason) because I belong to the very highest class, to society, and I love it.

I am not a petty-bourgeois, as Pushkin dared to say, and I dare to say that I am an aristocrat, by birth and by



habit and by situation. I am an aristocrat because for me, to remember my forebears . . . is not only not shameful but is especially joyful. I am an aristocrat because I have been brought up from childhood in love and respect for the highest classes and in love for refinement . . . I am an aristocrat because . . . neither I nor my father nor my grandfather have known want, nor the struggle between conscience and want . . . I see that this is great good fortune,

and I thank God for it, but the fact that this good fortune does not belong to all I cannot see as any reason for me to renounce it or not make use of it.

I am an aristocrat because I cannot believe in the lofty mind, the subtle taste and great honor of a man who picks his nose with his finger while his spirit communes with God.

All this is perhaps very stupid, criminal, insolent, but there it is. And I warn the reader in advance what sort of a man I am and what he may expect from me. There is still time to close the book and expose me as an idiot and a reactionary. . . .

TOLSTOY was as good as his word; in the first three years of work on the novel, he described not a single important character of less than noble rank. Instead he took delight in drawing such portraits as that of Old Prince Bolkonsky, a highly cultured and enlightened landowner (whom he modeled on his paternal grandfather) and in taunting his readers:

As I would not wish to disturb the reader with an unusual description, nor to depict something contrary to all other descriptions of that period, I must warn the reader in advance that Prince Bolkonsky was, in general, not a wicked man, that he flogged no one to death and even hated corporal punishment, that he did not wall up his wives in dungeons, nor eat as much as four men, nor keep a seraglio . . . but that, on the contrary, he could not bear all that and was an intelligent, cultured and honest man . . . exactly such a man as we ourselves are, with the same vices, passions and virtues, and with a complex intellectual life, just like ours.

Indeed it was difficult for Tolstoy to draw even a well-born but poor character sympathetically. Boris Drubetskoy is an interesting case; originally he was to have been wealthy and honorable, though overly ambitious (very much like Prince Andrey, who did not exist in the earliest manuscripts); after Tolstoy decides to impoverish him, however, we begin to see, in the successive manuscripts, his steady moral decline, until he becomes the careerist and hypocrite of the final novel. It seems that for Tolstoy the actions of a poor man were inevitably morally suspect, to the extent that one even begins to wonder about Pierre: could he have acquired so much