

The background of the cover is a vibrant red with a glossy, wavy texture that creates a sense of movement and depth. The waves are curved and flow from the top right towards the bottom left.

Leo Tolstoy

War And Peace

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WAR AND PEACE

LEO TOLSTOY

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WAR AND PEACE

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INTRODUCTION

Readers unfamiliar with the plot may prefer to treat the Introduction as an Afterword.

‘HERE is the greatest novel ever written’—so major novelists of the past two centuries, from Ivan Turgenev to Virginia Woolf, hailed Leo Tolstoy’s masterpiece, *War and Peace*. Yet Tolstoy himself saw it differently. ‘It is not a novel,’ he wrote, ‘even less is it an epic poem, and still less an historical chronicle.’¹ In an assertive claim for the primacy of artistic form, the author insisted that ‘*War and Peace* is what the author wished and was able to express in the form in which it is expressed’.² Tolstoy began his project with great joy and fear, and only discovered the courage of artistic freedom as part of his writing process. While preparing drafts of a novel about the Decembrist uprising against Tsar Nicholas I in 1825, Tolstoy ‘became absorbed in reading the history of Napoleon and Alexander’. As he described it: ‘In a cloud of joy and awareness of the possibility of doing great work, the idea caught me up of writing a psychological history of Alexander and Napoleon. All the meanness, all the phrases, all the madness, all the contradictions of the people around them and in themselves ... I must write my novel and work for this.’³

His wife, who served as his secretary, famously transcribed his almost illegible drafts into fair copies, seven times over. Yet she describes her task and Tolstoy’s creative energy with rapture: ‘I spend my whole time copying out Lyova’s novel. This is a great delight to me. As I copy, I live through a whole world of new ideas and impressions. Nothing has such an effect upon me as his ideas and his genius.’ And she leaves us this image of Tolstoy at work: ‘All this winter, L. has kept on writing, wrought up, the tears starting to his eyes and his heart swelling. I believe his novel is going to be wonderful.’ Tolstoy felt himself to be ‘never more fit for his work’ than he was at this time of his life: in his thirties, recently married and settled on his estate, the father of four children (by the time the book was finished), and a literary figure of some success, although by no means the titan whose presence he was to become in the eyes of his countrymen and ultimately the world.

The task of writing an account of ‘The Year 1812’, as one early draft was titled, quickly assumed inhuman proportions and challenged the young author’s talent beyond his available skills: ‘I wanted to capture everything I knew and felt about that time and yet, I felt either that it was impossible to express everything, or it seemed to me that the simple, banal, literary devices common to novels were inconsistent with the majestic, deep and many-sided content [so that] ... I threw away what I had begun to write and despaired ...’⁴

In tackling a historical and military subject, Tolstoy was armed with the confidence of his early successes in writing about war. He began his literary career with the early story ‘The Raid’ (1852) which was written while serving in his brother’s regiment in the Caucasus, that land of mountainous landscapes made romantic in the writings of Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov. His Sevastopol sketches were composed during his military service at the siege of Sevastopol (1854). These stories, together with his early novels, *Childhood* (1852) and *The Cossacks* (1864), were published to immediate critical acclaim. We can already glimpse the future author of *War and Peace* in the first paragraph of ‘The Raid’, where he writes that he is ‘more interested to know in what way and under the influence of what feeling one soldier kills another than to know how the armies were

arranged at Austerlitz and Borodino'. The patriotism and excitement of his Sevastopol sketches secured his status as one of Russia's major authors.

But despite the encouragement of these early successes, Tolstoy was still a fledgling in comparison to established authors like Ivan Turgenev or Fyodor Dostoevsky. In 1863, when Tolstoy began work on the early drafts of *War and Peace*, Turgenev was already regarded in Europe as Russia's greatest living author. *A Sportsman's Sketches*, a work credited with inspiring public sentiment in favour of the abolition of serfdom, was published in 1852, and his masterpiece, *Father and Sons*, appeared ten years later. Dostoevsky had burst upon the literary scene with his epistolary novel *Poor Folk* in 1845, followed by a series of novels culminating in his *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1862), which drew upon his experiences as a prisoner in Siberia and deeply impressed the young Tolstoy, who held the work in the highest regard until the end of his life. The first instalment of *War and Peace*, then titled *The Year 1805*, would appear side by side with the opening chapters of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) in the same issue of *The Russian Messenger*. This was one of several 'thick' journals, so called because of their substantive content. In the climate of heavy censorship in Russian letters, political ideas and pointed critiques of the government had to be expressed cautiously, and literary fiction was one way of doing this. The risk was by no means insignificant, as evidenced in the case of Dostoevsky, who, for his participation in a political group, was arrested, lined up to be shot by a firing squad, forgiven, and exiled to Siberia for a lengthy decade of imprisonment. Russian literature of the nineteenth century became a means of speaking to what were termed the 'accursed questions' of the reform period of Russian history: the liberation of the serfs, the education and social status of women, and so on. To win a place in such company it was not enough to write well; it was essential to have something of urgent importance to say.

Tolstoy was also writing within a European tradition in which the Napoleonic war had already acquired mythopoetic grandeur in such vast and imposing works as Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862). By Tolstoy's own account, the anxiety of influence and the pressure of literary precedent and convention was unendurable: 'time and my strength were flowing away with every hour, and I knew that nobody would ever tell what I had to tell ... Above all, traditions both of form and content oppressed me. I was afraid to write in a language different from that in which everybody writes. I was afraid that my writing would fall into no existing genre, neither novel, nor tale, nor epic, nor history ...'⁵ The key to artistic freedom was to reject any formal or stylistic requirements of literary genres, which Tolstoy happily found could be accomplished through an appeal to his own native Russian literary tradition, noted for its experimental character and flouting of literary convention. 'We Russians don't know how to write novels in the European sense of the word,'⁶ he announced, proudly and provocatively:

The history of Russian literature since the time of Pushkin not merely affords many examples of such deviation from European forms, but does not offer a single example of the contrary. From Gogol's *Dead Souls* to Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, in the recent period of Russian literature there is not a single artistic prose work rising at all above mediocrity, which quite fits into the form of a novel, epic, or story.⁷

Experimenting with genre was a signature of the Russian literary tradition from its inception. Pushkin's long narrative masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* (1825–32) was famously subtitled a 'Novel in Verse' (*roman v stikhakh*), while Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842) is subtitled 'Poëma' (the Russian word

indicating an 'epic poem') although it is written in prose.

While Tolstoy attributed his discovery of literary freedom to the experimental character of his own native Russian tradition, he also possessed a non-Russian model to emulate in the novels of the author he claimed as his favourite, Laurence Sterne. So impressed was he by *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) that he worked on improving his English by translating it into Russian. Given this level of enthusiasm, it would be surprising if Tolstoy had not also read *Tristram Shandy* (1759), a novel replete with digressions, interruptions, and vanishing characters.⁸ Its eponymous writer-hero succeeds in describing only one thing: his own failure to give an adequate account of historical and biographical events. Real life, with its abundant proliferation of details and chaotic sequences of events, twists and turns, and sidelines, evades capture by the pen. In a pitiable and comic figure of the confounded novelist and historian, Tristram Shandy's Uncle Toby spends his life trying to create a model to convey the exact information he wishes the world to know about the battle where he received his wound. Tolstoy's earliest attempt at prose narrative, 'A History of Yesterday' (1851), is an unfinished Shandean account of infinitely unfolding stories within stories, including the wandering inner thoughts of all the characters, each moment revealing endless possibilities for description and narration. The entire piece reckons with the impossibility of ever drafting a 'true and authentic account of a minute of time. In his preoccupation with the details of a moment, Tolstoy's 'History of Yesterday' narrator anticipates that typically inert Russian anti-hero, Goncharov's *Oblomov* (1859) who excuses himself from the plans and plotted activities of the world of men, because he is captivated and exhausted from watching the turbulent activity of the tiniest of ants scurrying beneath the grass blades. This image can provide a key to understanding Tolstoy's artistic technique in *War and Peace*: he writes about characters and events that are sub-historical, while the narratives of history itself, like soldiers' boastful war stories of the battlefield, are exploded as false. The movement of thousands of troops, a line on the page of a history book, will be enlarged by Tolstoy into chapters of soldierly details about boots and carriage wheels, horse manure and leg wrappings, the texture of uniform cloth, and steaming potatoes pulled from the camp-fire. The great and legendary figures of military history snore during war councils or succumb with irritability to a cold, their battle plans garbled and ignored. From his earlier anxiety, expressed in his diaries, that his habit of digression would ruin him, Tolstoy now found artistic release and justification in unleashing it.

Once liberated from the necessity of conforming to predetermined artistic design, Tolstoy began to create a prose work of extraordinary scope and size, whose formal features confused his early readers and caused them to wonder what kind of a work they were reading and who were its major characters. The cast of characters of *War and Peace* almost exceeds 600, including roughly 160 historical figures. Sympathizing with the reader's plight, Louise and Aylmer Maude, his principal English translators, felt it was necessary to indicate in footnotes which were the major characters. As the instalments appeared, critics erred in their efforts to identify the main characters: one guessed that Dolokhov and Anatole Kuragin were the heroes, while another complained that he could not figure out which characters were important until 'the second half of the third volume'. This sense of bewilderment was not restricted to the lack of a clear protagonist, nor to the confusion of crowds that fill the pages and overwhelm the reader. Critics found the absence of a familiar designation for the first instalments off-putting. What kind of a narrative was this *Year 1805*? What was the book about? Was it a historical novel about the Napoleonic invasion of Russia? Was it a family chronicle about the Rostovs and Bolkonskys? Was it a social satire? A standard critical line emerged that divided *War and Peace* into three separate components—a philosophical essay, a family chronicle, and a historical novel about the Napoleonic wars. The three components did not fit together and so in the eyes of its detractors, the work lacked unity, its failure best characterized in the words of Henry James: 'a loose baggy monster'.

Tolstoy's artistic choices were not entirely without precedent; Hugo's *Les Misérables* also took its time, growing to over 1,200 pages to accommodate the author's efforts to link characters across centuries and continents. Like his English contemporary, Charles Dickens, Hugo also took great pains in describing the minutiae of the daily life of characters who had only a momentary, if vital, role to play, like the priest whose donkey, panniers, and habits occupy many of the opening pages of the novel, to the bewilderment of the reader. Hugo is particularly adept at constructing independent lives inhabiting radically different backgrounds and trajectories, and then bringing them together through a nexus of fictional and historical events. Tolstoy was a lifelong admirer of Hugo's work, and would eventually come to write his own version of the story of Jean Valjean adapted (without attribution) from *Les Misérables* and included in his *Primer (Azbuka)*.

If, to the European literary tradition depicting the wars of Napoleon, Hugo lent the broad canvas stretched over an occult network of fatalistic threads tugging the characters towards their joint destinies, Stendhal's earlier account in *The Charterhouse of Parma* had darkened the romantic depiction of the Napoleonic wars with heavy irony, challenging all notions of heroism, undermining the credibility of war stories and historical accounts, and diminishing the legendary figure of Napoleon himself. In many ways, however, the most influential work for Tolstoy may have been Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, with its satirical depictions of high society and parallels between military and social conquests, making his anti-heroine, Becky Sharp, Napoleonic in her rise to social power. Thackeray's mocking depiction of human activity as a puppet-show at a fairground, with the standard types of the Punch and Judy show dancing on their strings to entertain the passers-by, provides another key to understanding Tolstoy's artistic design. Theatre and theatrical moments are highly significant in *War and Peace*, both in the war sequences and in the peace episodes. The sense that the characters of *War and Peace*, both great and small, act and move as if connected by threads of destiny is just below the surface of this work of art, as it relentlessly questions ideas of free will, fate, and providence. Each of Tolstoy's major characters at some point observes life as if it were theatre, each one, at significant points in his or her journey, senses that he or she is playing a role, that things could not be otherwise, that what happens is somehow scripted or inevitable. For example, Prince Andrei, on the eve of battle, imagines his life transformed into a magiclantern show. The structure over his head as he lies dying resembles the apparatus of a marionette, while his son later dreams about the strings that move the men in the theatre of war towards Glory. Pierre, seated as an observer under fire at the battle of Borodino, calmly and quizzically watches the 'theatre of war' just as he had observed the *tableaux vivants* of his Masonic initiation rituals, or as he 'performs his assigned role' in the ritual of his father's deathbed, where everything 'had to be' as it was. As Pierre observes his dying father's arm falling to one side awkwardly and lifelessly, the imaginative reader might perceive the broken thread of a puppet-string.

The staging of human activity and the parallel between theatres of war and peace is underscored in descriptions of evening parties and soirées, so that Pierre 'enters his wife's evening party as if it were a theatre', Denisov appears in the Rostovs' drawing-room 'dressed as for battle', Dolokhov and Nikolai Rostov 'do battle' at cards, Boris courts Julie by 'laying siege' to her. Victors on the battlefield, like Tushin, transcend the terrors of war by transforming the enemy activities into a kind of distant theatre show—the cannon firing becomes a giant person puffing on a pipe, the cannons themselves become characters, with personalities, names, and eccentricities. When Natasha Rostov attends the opera in Moscow, the author takes great pains to show his readers, through Natasha's inexperienced eyes, the artificiality of all that she sees: wooden boards, painted faces, exaggerated poses and gestures. As she begins to accept the false glitter of that artificial world, she is drawn into playing a dangerous role before the deceptively benign façade of a corrupt society.

The artificiality and mendacity characterizing human relations are underscored by Tolstoy's use

of the French language, spoken preferentially by his most superficial and manipulative characters. The military contest between the Russians and the French is played out in the words of *War and Peace*. High society throughout Europe on the eve of the Napoleonic wars preferred to converse in French rather than their native languages. Russian high society especially, following the reigns of francophiles Elizabeth and Catherine, had adopted French manners, fashions, and cuisine and constantly spoke French at social gatherings. When anti-French sentiment and a spirit of patriotism reached a crescendo during the Napoleonic period and Russian aristocrats began to affect their native tongue, they frequently found it necessary to hire Russian tutors to help them acquire the grammar. The French passages in *War and Peace* far exceed any exigencies of verisimilitude, however, comprising roughly 2 per cent of the massive work, and thus constituting a linguistic invasion unprecedented in world literature. The contrast is heightened by the fact that Russian is written in a non-Latin, Cyrillic alphabet, so that French words and names strike the eye as visibly alien when appearing on a page of Cyrillic text.

Tolstoy was not simply documenting a social trend for purposes of historical accuracy; the astute reader will observe that a predilection for speaking French is frequently an indictment of character, especially where Prince Vasili Kuragin, his friends and family, and their social intrigues are concerned. It is often the case that a character's decision to speak French implies a false, pseudo-literary, immoral or insincere communication, the most famous example being Pierre's profession of love to H el ene: '*Je vous aime!*' No less spurious is the exchange between Pierre and Andrei early in the novel, where both men assume clich ed poses from French romantic literature: Andrei, in his assertion, '*Je suis un homme finis*' ('My part is played out'); and Pierre's counter-revelation, '*Je suis un bat ard, sans nom, sans fortune*' ('I am illegitimate, without name or fortune'). Count Rastopchin's inner monologue attempting to justify his release of Vershchagin to a bloodthirsty mob is couched entirely in French and according to French socio-philosophical concepts. Tolstoy even tells us that French is spoken to Sonya to indicate her lower social status as a poor relation in the Rostov household, and Sonya herself speaks French only when trying (and failing) to be polite to her rival, Princess Marya.

The number of French passages increases steadily from the beginning of the novel, reaching a saturation point with the arrival of Napoleon's troops in Moscow. However, the French domination of the Russian text at that point is not solely due to the conversations spoken by French characters or quotations from French historians. Tolstoy also gives us the billeting of the French officer, Ramballe, with Pierre, who cannot help extending hospitality and exchanging confidences—all in French and with a decidedly French flavour, having to do with wine and love. Ramballe proclaims that Pierre is French, and earlier Pierre had even given himself a French identity, *l' Russe Besuhof*. Similarly, H el ene's evening parties at this point in the plot are conducted entirely in French, while H el ene adopts a continental and Jesuitical approach to adultery and morality, and converts from Russian Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism. It is worth noticing that Natasha speaks French only at one point in the novel—that is when, attending the opera, she emulates H el ene and falls in with the social world of the Kuragins. She writes in French only once, when breaking her engagement to Andrei.

Many of the French passages are direct quotations from historical works, military dispatches, letters, and famous speeches of statesmen. Tolstoy read deeply in the French historical sources and provides extracts in French from their works, in particular from Adophe Thiers, author of the *Histoire du Consulat et de l' Empire* (1845–62). There is, however, one (and only one) point in the novel (Book Three, Part Three, Chapter 20) where Tolstoy himself chooses to write as the narrator in the enemy tongue. Significantly, these French words are not spoken by characters or quoted from histories or letters, but are aimed by the author directly at Napoleon. Upon the occupation of Moscow Napoleon has planned to stage a grandiose reception of the expected deputation from the Russian nobility,

which he intends to display sublime magnanimity as a conqueror. In Tolstoy's account, Napoleon has scripted this occasion in advance, employing all of his habitual eloquence and sentiment. While awaiting the arrival of the welcoming committee, the Emperor is depicted somewhat in the manner of a writer, writing and editing his speech and inventing and revising the names of the charitable institutions he plans to build on conquered soil. Instead of the formal welcome he expects, however, Napoleon is humiliated by the absence of any delegation, the torching of Moscow, and the flight of its inhabitants. So as not to appear ridiculous, the Emperor swiftly decamps. The chapter closes with the narrator's words: '*Le coup de théâtre avait raté*' ('The *coup de théâtre* did not come off'). The blow dealt to Napoleon where it counts: in the realm of art. The Emperor is ridiculed, not as a delusion-prone general or an incompetent military strategist, but as a failed artist.

The flow of the novel is interrupted not only by passages in French, but by a cacophony of foreign tongues: in addition to French, characters also speak and write in German, Italian, Latin, and English. In addition to pages written in foreign languages, Tolstoy also subjects his readers to extended essayistic passages in which he forges his unorthodox philosophy of history. These intrusions of non-novelistic material—comprising as much as one chapter in six throughout Books Three and Four, and adding up almost to a separate volume—were poorly received by early critics—indeed, in fact, they may still be skipped by the impatient reader, just as some prefer to read only the 'war' or 'peace' sections of the novel. Critics complained of a confusion of artistic designs, 'a disordered heap of accumulated material',⁹ a failure to unite the two separate narratives, and of a plethora of incidents and characters described in great detail only to vanish from the pages of the novel, like 'a plague of small creatures nibbling at the plot'.¹⁰ Some critics charged Tolstoy with the standard accusation levelled at Charles Dickens and other nineteenth-century novelists who were considered to spin out words irresponsibly in order to fill up instalments. We now know, to the contrary, that Tolstoy cut down his novel and discarded hundreds of pages of drafts, including complete episodes in which, for example, Pierre adopts and travels with an orphan and saves the life of a young Italian count. Early drafts even contain an entire novella based on the exploits of this Count Poncini, who arranges Pierre's marriage and who is taken captive by Nikolai Rostov; all that remains of him in the final version is the ephemeral figure of Ramballe and a brief mention of a 'young Italian' who enjoys visiting Pierre in the aftermath of the war.

If we turn to Tolstoy's own comments about his work for guidance, we find, perhaps surprisingly, that he considered the episodes describing Anatole Kuragin's seduction of Natasha to be 'the crux' of his work. It is tempting to read these episodes allegorically, picturing this quintessentially Russian heroine as representing her homeland, while her conquest by the immoral and deceptively elegant continental rake could be interpreted as symbolically describing the fall of Russia to the French. Natasha's deferred marriage, loss of the beloved, and sufferings in love convey within her personal narrative the agony of a national tragedy. It could be said that Natasha's collapse, under the spell of French manners and opera, mirrors the events of the French invasion of Moscow. Her spiritual resurrection, expressed most clearly when she casts aside her family's possessions to make room for the wounded soldiers on their carts, parallels the self-sacrificing heroism of the Russian nation in retreat, ravaged, conquered, yet giving no quarter to the enemy.

Natasha's experiences in love and marriage clearly had a meaning for Tolstoy beyond the symbolic potential. Within a few years of completing *War and Peace* he would revisit the same narrative of the fallen woman in an extended, probing, and sustained way in his next great work, 'the first novel' he credited himself with, *Anna Karenina* (1875). The extensive dissection of marital and family problems in that work has its precedent in *War and Peace*: the unhappy families of *Anna Karenina* are presaged in Pierre's disastrous marital blunder with Hélène and Andrei Bolkonsky's failed marriage to Lise. Anna's psychological conflict and incapacity for spousal love have an earlier

exposition in Andrei Bolkonsky's bitterness and icy cruelty towards his wife. His marital unhappiness perhaps explains, but cannot excuse, his artificial and clichéd Byronic posing in the salons of Petersburg. His tragedy in losing Natasha is somehow a just and severe mercy demanded by what we know of his failure to love Lise, a judgement confirmed by the subsequent depiction of the happy and successful family life of Natasha and Pierre.

No nineteenth-century author had ever probed as intimately into the psychology of marital relations as Tolstoy does in the concluding domestic scenes of the 'Epilogue' to *War and Peace*: the wife and husband consulting over the best way to discipline their children and servants; the exchange of glances between husband and wife endorsing their private critique of friends and relations in order to bolster and secure their shared beliefs; the absorption of husbands and wives in the details of breastfeeding and changing their babies. Narrowing the focus from the wide canvas of war with its hundreds of thousands of soldiers crossing continents and dying on the field of battle in order to hone in on the colicky burp of a baby seems like a progression from the sublime to the quotidian, and yet this concluding vision of new life in its most earthy and tender beginnings is the fresh grass that covers the graves of heroes and rejoices the heart of the poet.

It is precisely the synoptic vastness and complexity of Tolstoy's work that allows for an assessment like Virginia Woolf's: 'If you think of the novels which seem to you great novels ... you think ... of all sorts of things ... of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul. There is hardly any subject of human experience that is left out of *War and Peace*.' This same monumental and comprehensively detailed quality of *War and Peace* has inspired characterizations of the masterpiece as 'the great book of life' or even 'life itself'. Tolstoy's biographer A. N. Wilson observes that:

no book seems more real.... For everyone who has enjoyed the experience of being completely lost in the world of *War and Peace* ... putting down the novel and returning to the everyday concerns of 'real life' is ... a turning to something paler, less true than Tolstoy's art itself. And this testimony comes not just from readers being unwillingly drawn to fireside or dinner table, but also from men and women of action. In the Second World War, it was a common experience that those who read *War and Peace* were, for that week or fortnight, more interested in the campaigns of Napoleon and Kutuzov than in those of Hitler versus the Allies. I have even heard men say that they have read it on the field of battle and that the descriptions of Schön Grabern or Borodino were more 'real' for them than the actual explosions and maimings and death going on around them.¹¹

The meandering and improvisatory character of the work, with its infinitude of details, is compatible with Tolstoy's philosophical challenge to historical narrative and his insistence on the fallacy of the idea of the great or legendary historical figure, or that any single person or event could be designated as a historical, causal force: 'All historical events', writes Tolstoy, 'result from an infinite number of reasons.' His presentation of this idea succeeds in belittling Napoleon, just as it exalts the spirit of a nation, the meaningfulness of individual lives and the apparently insignificant choices of unknown people. In expressing this view, Tolstoy set the theme for many subsequent works of historical prose, from Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* to Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy.

To find the tiny details he needed Tolstoy visited the scenes of his story, spending two days walking over the battlefield of Borodino, drawing a map of the area, and interviewing local peasants, some of whom were alive at the time of the war. He combed numerous histories, in particular those of

the Russian historians Mikhailovsky-Danilievsky and Bogdanovich, and also contemporary manuscripts, letters, and diaries. Many of the details of family life and character were borrowed from Tolstoy's own ancestors, and many physical traits of the main characters were copied from family portraits. For example, Nikolai Rostov is loosely modelled on Tolstoy's own father, and the Bolkonsky family share many traits with the Volkonskys, Tolstoy's maternal grandparents. In particular, the characterization of Marya Bolkonskaya, with the story of her upbringing, courtship, and marriage, is based on family accounts of his mother, and on her letters and diaries. Despite Tolstoy having issued the standard authorial disclaimer that his characters were entirely fictional (in 'Some Words about *War and Peace*'—reprinted here in the Appendix), most scholars agree that several are based on real historical figures: for example, Marya Dmitrievna Akhrosimova resembles Nastasya Dmitrievna Ofrosimova (1753–1826), a *grande dame* of Moscow society, and Denisov's exploits in poetry-writing, and character recall the famous poet-warrior Denis Davydov (1784–1839). Tolstoy also relied on contemporary accounts, such as A. Ryazantzev's *Reminiscences of an Eyewitness of the French Occupation of Moscow in 1812, with a View of the Fire of Moscow*, from which he borrowed the minutiae that crystallized a scene of chaos and cruelty, retold in Pierre's description of a woman whose earrings are torn away while a child is trapped in a flaming building.

Yet, Tolstoy's perusal of historical accounts only fuelled his conviction that historians were incapable of describing the realities of war. As Victor Hugo observed: 'He who would paint a battle scene must have chaos in his paintbrush.' The great French novelists, fictionalizing the Napoleonic war, had already emphasized the inscrutability of the battlefield. The hapless protagonist of Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* is a clueless waif on the field of Waterloo, while in Hugo's *Les Misérables* the generals' plans to engage battle on level ground are confounded when the soldiers discover that a sunken road cuts across it, creating a trench that must be filled with the crushed corpses of hundreds of men and horses before the troops can engage. The truth of the battlefield is contained in moments of confusion and terror: General Kutuzov's bewilderment, or Nikolai Rostov's incomprehension at the battle of Schön Grabern (Book One, Part One, Chapter 19) that the enemy is trying to shoot him: 'Mama, who everybody loves?' For these reasons, Prince Andrei sneers at young Rostov's enthusiastic account of his exploits in battle and mocks Pierre's assertion that he understands the disposition of troops and the battle plan at Borodino.

At the same time that Tolstoy professes his story to be untellable, history to be unwritable, and life to be plotless, he invests his characters with a faith in the significance of life events and a awareness of providential predestination. From Pierre's conviction, backed up by what seem to him to be irrefutable numerological calculations, that he is the one destined to assassinate Napoleon, to Prince Andrei's and Count Nikolai's belief that providence has brought them together, to the culminating dream of young Nikolenka Bolkonsky, envisioning a transcendent moment of glory spun on gossamer threads of fate, the characters of the novel find meaning, destiny, and significance in their lives. The choices, wrung from them by urgent crises, are rapid and instinctive, representing the core of their authentic selves, and thus have the most profound consequences. Consider the chain of events initiated by: Natasha's instantaneous decision to discard her family's possessions on the streets of Moscow in order to succour injured and dying soldiers, among whose number is her former betrothed, Andrei; Nikolai's reflexive leap into action to defend a young woman in mourning; Tushin's unthinking persistence on the battlefield; Pierre's rescue of a child from a burning building. In the heat of battle the strategic orders of the commanding officers are either unheard, misunderstood, or not delivered, and therefore they are unsuccessful; the theatrical plans of those who imagine they are making art or staging history do not come off. 'Only unconscious action bears fruit', Tolstoy asserts loudly, claiming for human action and contingency the same freedom he demands for the artistic process.

The enormity and detail of his canvas invests the great work with a quality most critics recognize.

as Homeric. Beyond the use of fixed descriptive tags for his characters, reminiscent of the Homeric epithet, there is a sense of what Virginia Woolf called Olympian distance on the part of the author. C. S. Lewis described it as ‘that sublime indifference to the life or death, success or failure, of the chief characters, which is not a blank indifference at all, but almost like submission to the will of God’.¹²

Nowhere is the sense of the sublime more potent than in the final passages when the narrative closes as it opened, on the rising generation of Natashas, Nikolais, and Andreis, whose childish laughter and youthful dreams welcome the unknown future. When young Nikolenka, inspired by talk of revolution, unconsciously breaks up the pens and sealing-wax on his uncle’s writing desk, he claims for himself an unscripted future, not dictated by the narratives of previous generations. But the reader, still recovering from the upheavals and tragedies of the previous books, knows that there is nothing new under the sun, and is aware of the tragic fate the Decembrist revolutionaries will encounter. There is a gentle irony contained in the novel’s closing vision of the cycles of renewed life, recalling the pacifist Russian folk song translated into English as ‘Where have all the flowers gone?’, there is also great joy. *War and Peace* has been called Russia’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with some justice. The return of the hero and the securing of the family are as essential to the great work’s meaning and artistic victory as are the glories and fatalities of the battlefield.

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