



Scorched Earth:  
Intransigent Russians vs.  
Presumptuous French in  
*War and Peace*

A Book About Violence and Love That Conveniently  
Serves as a Formidable Weapon

# Leo Tolstoy's Life

- Born 1828 in Tula Province, Russia
- Primary education was at home with French and Russian tutors
- Attended the University of Kazan and proved a dreadful student
- Tried and failed to become a farmer on his parents' estate
- Fought in the Crimean War from November 1854 to August 1855
- Married Sofia Behrs in 1862; they have 8 children
- Completed *War and Peace* in 1869
- *Anna Karenina* published in installments from 1873 to 1877
- Suffers spiritual crisis; is kicked out of Russian Orthodox Church; becomes proponent of nonviolent resistance, Christian anarchism, and opposition to the military draft
- Died 1910 in Astapovo, Russia



# Selected Other Works by Tolstoy

- *Childhood* is the first of his published works, in 1852. Details his account of his “happy” childhood
- His interest in the “reality of war, the actual killing” first appears in his “Sevastopol Stories” about the Crimean War
- *Anna Karenina* (published 1873-1877) about adultery, guilt, and unhappiness. Famous first line: "All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."
- *Death of Ivan Ilyich* published in 1886 to great popularity
- *Kreutzer Sonata* published in 1889, promptly banned by Russians and Americans

# Napoleonic Wars

- 1799-1815
- Included almost all European nations and also Egypt, North America, and South America
- Unlike previous wars that differentiate between combatants and non-combatants, Napoleon's conflicts moved the Western world towards the concept of Total War
- With his army weakened, Napoleon abdicates in 1814
- Napoleon exiled to the Island of Elba
- Escapes Elba, raises an army, and is defeated at Waterloo on June 18, 1815
- Napoleon exiled to the Island of St. Helena, ending the wars



# Napoleon's Engagements with Russia

- 1798: War of the Second Coalition (Russia, Great Britain, Austria, Portugal, The Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Naples)
- Napoleon defeats Russia; Russia leaves the Coalition
- 1805: War of the Third Coalition (Great Britain, Russia, Sweden, Austria); defeats Russians at the Battle of Austerlitz
- 1807: Destroys the Russian Army at the Battle of Friedland; Russia signs Treaty of Tilsit (divides Europe between new allies, France and Russia)
- 1808: Napoleon de facto ruler of Europe
- 1812: Invades Russia

# Napoleon's Invasion of Russia

- This was a very bad idea
- Known in Russia as “The Patriotic War of 1812”
- Russia had allowed neutral ships to trade with them (not allowed under the treaty with the French), and Napoleon was grumpy about this
- June of 1812: Initiated the invasion (roughly 680,000 soldiers)
- August 1812: Battle of Smolensk (Russian loss)
- September 7, 1812: Battle of Borodino (Russian loss)
- One week later: Napoleon enters Moscow
- Shortly thereafter: Onset of Russian winter
- For the next three months: Russians practice scorched-earth techniques; French suffer from illness, hunger, and cold
- December 14, 1812: The last French soldiers (roughly 27,000) leave Russia
- Beginning of the end for Napoleon



# Scorched Earth Policy: Don't Mess with the Russians

- The destruction of all resources (including food, medicine, transportation, buildings) to prevent them falling into enemy hands
- The Russians removed all resources; what they couldn't take, they burned
- Retreat and burn was the Russian policy, including burning crops
- According to Tolstoy, they evacuated Moscow and burned the city before Napoleon's arrival
- The whole of Russian people participated in this policy, including aristocracy (with the most to lose) and peasants (who were mistreated under the Russian serf system)

# Publication History of *War and Peace*

- First draft completed in 1863
- Parts published in 1865 under the title *1805*
- Extensively rewrote it between 1866 and 1869
- Published as *War and Peace* in 1869



# Genre Disagreements

- Contains aspects of the Homeric Epic
  - Provides manifold, hidden motives for big events in history
  - Extensive external description
  - Frequent digression
  - Fixed characterization with little to no development
- Contains aspects of the Biblical Epic
  - Multilayered characters
  - Symbolic in that each character stands for some spiritual value or significant experience
- Contains aspects of the Realist Novel
  - Characters are fully described, both physically and psychologically
  - Characters have distinct, credible personalities
  - Actions are charged with symbolism
- Also seen as a *Bildungsroman* of Pierre's life as he seeks wisdom, freedom, and happiness in his culture

# *War and Peace*

- Heaven preserve me
- Plot stretches from 1805-1813 (with epilogues until 1820)
- Characters:
  - Pierre Bezukhov (very rich, marries Ellen Kuragina who conveniently dies, becomes a freemason, tries to assassinate Napoleon, then marries Natasha Rostova)
  - Ellen Kuragina (immoral and beautiful, she makes Pierre's life hell and finally dies from an overdose of an abortion medication)
  - Andrei Bolkonsky (also very rich, marries a princess with a moustache, becomes engaged to Natasha Rostova, dies after Borodino engagement )
  - Maria Bolkonskaya (rich, unattractive, pious, ultimately marries Nikolai Rostov)
  - Nikolai Rostov (Natasha's brother, Hussar, survives Napoleon's invasion)
  - Anatole Kuragin (attempts to elope with Natasha Rostova, probably has an affair with his sister, dies a horrible death after Borodino engagement)
  - Napoleon, Tsar Alexander I, Kutuzov, and other historical figures



# Military Depictions in *War and Peace*

- Battle of Schöngrabern: November 16, 1805, Russians retreat
- Battle of Austerlitz: December 2, 1805, Russian loss
- Battle of Borodino: September 7, 1812, Russian loss, allowing the French to swarm over the Russian countryside and ultimately take Moscow

# Personal Glory vs. Protection of the Country

- Tolstoy suggests that the Russians lose the Battle of Austerlitz because the Russian army fought for glory rather than the protection of Russia
- The ultimate victory over the French is due to the fact that the Russians began to fight for “pure” goals, like protection of the country as a whole and the Russian way of life
- Sacrifice, altruism, and solidarity are the hallmarks of the Russian soldier during the invasion in 1812
- This provides a new perspective on an “enchanted” war text



# Napoleon's Rise in *War and Peace*

- Tolstoy—and his characters—demonstrate a degree of admiration for Napoleon as a leader

“That ideal of *glory* and *greatness*, consisting in esteeming nothing one does wrong, and glorying in every crime, and ascribing to it an incomprehensible, supernatural value—that ideal, destined to guide this man and those connected with him, is elaborated on a grand scale in Africa.”

# Chance and Genius in Napoleon

“But all at once, instead of that *chance* and *genius*, which had consistently led him hitherto by an uninterrupted series of successes to his destined goal, an immense number of *chance* circumstances occur of an opposite kind from the cold caught at Borodino to the spark that fired Moscow; and instead of *genius* there was shown a folly and baseness unexampled in history.”



# The Russian Peasant in Tolstoy's Works

- Tolstoy is initially a proponent of a liberal, Western, Enlightenment view of the peasant as an self-determining individual
- He starts a school for peasant children on his estate in the hopes that they will develop individual personalities and goals
- However, by the time he was writing *War and Peace*, he had shifted his views to claim that the spirit of autonomy was wholly alien to Russian peasant life, which is fundamentally communal
- *War and Peace* mirrors this communal principle, with the novel focusing on a number of characters rather than allowing one character's development to hijack the narrative

# Tolstoy the Historian

“We have only to admit that the object of the convulsions of the European nations is beyond our knowledge, and that that we know only the facts, consisting mainly of murders committed...and that the movements from west to east and from east to west constitute the essence and end of those events, and we shall not need to see something exceptional—*genius*—in the characters of Napoleon and of Alexander, and shall indeed be unable to conceive of those persons as being in any way different from everybody else. And far from having to explain as *chance* those petty events, which made those men what they were, it will be clear to us that all those petty details were inevitable.”



# Tolstoy To Those With Exceptional Hindsight

“Once admit that human life can be guided by reason, and all possibility of life is annihilated.”