

LEO TOLSTOY  
WAR AND PEACE

Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky

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reviewed by Orlando Figes

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In his *Lectures on Russian Literature* Vladimir Nabokov maintains that 'the third, and worst, degree of turpitude' in literary translation, after 'obvious errors' and skipping over awkward passages, 'is reached when a masterpiece is planished and patted into such a shape, vilely beautified in such a fashion as to conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public. This is a crime, to be punished by the stocks as plagiarists were in the shoebuckle days.'<sup>1</sup> Whether one agrees or not with Nabokov - whose own translation into English of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* sacrificed poetic rhythm, rhyme, and readability for literal word-by-word equivalence - there is no doubt that the practise of translation is strongly influenced by the literary tastes and sensibilities of the receiving culture.

When the great Russian novels of the nineteenth century were first translated into English, beginning with Turgenev's in the 1870s, they were patted into a Victorian mould of 'good writing'. That the first to be translated was Ivan Turgenev, the most Europeanized of all the Russian writers, was to have a lasting influence on the reception of Russian literature in the English-reading world: Turgenev's elegant simplicity of style and gentle social realism fixed the acceptable boundaries of 'Russianness', influencing

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, 'The Art of Translation' in *Lectures on Russian Literature*, edited with an Introduction by Fredson Bowers (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), p. 315.

later translations of the rougher and more Russian novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy which really only began to be widely read in English from the 1890s.

No one did more to introduce the English-speaking world to Russian literature than Constance Garnett (1862-1946), who translated into graceful late-Victorian prose seventy major Russian works, including seventeen volumes of Turgenev, thirteen volumes of Dostoevsky, six of Gogol, four of Tolstoy, six of Herzen, seventeen of Chekhov, and books by Goncharov and Ostrovsky. A friend of Garnett's, D.H. Lawrence recalled her

sitting out in the garden turning out reams of of her marvelous translations from the Russian. She would finish a page and throw it off on a pile on the floor without looking up, and start a new page. The pile would be this high...really almost up to her knees, and all magical.<sup>2</sup>

She worked so fast that when she came across an awkward passage she would leave it out. She made mistakes. But her stylish prose, which made the Russian writers so accessible, and seemingly so close to the English sensibility, ensured that her translations would remain for many years the authoritative standard of how these writers ought to sound and feel. For the English-reading public, Russian literature was what Garnett made of it. As Joseph Conrad wrote in 1917, 'Turgenev for me is Constance Garnett and Constance Garnett *is* Turgenev.'<sup>3</sup>

The Russians were not so impressed. Nabokov called her Gogol translations 'dry and flat, and always unbearably demure.'<sup>4</sup> Kornei Chukovsky accused her of smoothing out the idiosyncracies of writers' styles so that 'Dostoevsky comes in some strange way to resemble Turgenev':

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Garnett, *Constance Garnett: A Heroic Life* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924*, edited by Edward Garnett (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928), p. 249.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1944), p. 38.

In reading the original [of *Notes from the Underground*], who does not feel the convulsions, the nervous trembling of Dostoevsky's style? It is expressed in convulsions of syntax, in a frenzied and somewhat piercing diction where malicious irony is mixed with sorrow and despair. But with Constance Garnett it becomes a safe blandscript: not a volcano, but a smooth lawn mowed in the English manner - which is to say a complete distortion of the original.<sup>5</sup>

Brodsky sniped that the 'reason English-speaking readers can barely tell the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is that they aren't reading the prose of either one. They're reading Constance Garnett.'<sup>6</sup>

In the English-speaking world there is a common perception, largely due to Garnett's translations, that Tolstoy's style is classically simple and elegant. This is only partly true. Tolstoy writes with extraordinary clarity. No other writer can recreate emotions and experience with such precision and economy. His moral lexicon is penetrating and direct, without the nuances and ambiguities which make Pushkin so complex, and in this respect Tolstoy's writing is relatively easy to translate ('goes straight into English, without any trouble,' Garnett said).<sup>7</sup> But there are other elements of Tolstoy's literary style, in *War and Peace* in particular, awkward bumps and angularities that have been ironed out, not just in Garnett's translation, but in most of the subsequent translations of this masterpiece.<sup>8</sup>

Tolstoy's syntax is unconventional. In *War and Peace* he frequently ignores the rules of grammar and word order to strengthen an effect or to recreate the looseness of the spoken word - a practise that can make his Russian read quite clumsily at times. He

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<sup>5</sup> *The Art of Translation: Kornei Chukovsky's High Art*, translated and edited by Lauren G. Leighton (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1984), pp. 220-21.

<sup>6</sup> Cited by David Remnick, 'The Translation Wars,' *The New Yorker*, November 7, 2005, pp.98-100.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Garnett, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>8</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated by Constance Garnett (London: Library Edition, 1904); Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude (London: ???, 1922-3); Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated by Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin, 1957); Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated by Ann Dunnigan (New York: Signet, 1968); Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated by Anthony Briggs (London: Penguin, 2005).

employs a wide variety of linguistic idioms, from the archaic civil service language of the chancelleries (put into the mouths of statesmen such as Arakcheev) and the Latin-German pattern of eighteenth-century literary Russian (spoken by the old Prince Bolkonsky) to the Gallicized and sentimental Russian of the early nineteenth-century salon and the plain speech of the soldiers, peasants and workmen.

Above all, Tolstoy is deliberately repetitive. Repetition is perhaps the most distinctive single feature of his style. The literary scholar R.F. Christian has highlighted several types of repetition in *War and Peace*.<sup>9</sup> Tolstoy constantly reiterates a particular mannerism or physical detail to identify his characters and suggest their moral qualities: Princess Marya's 'radiant eyes' or Napoleon's 'small white hands'. In describing the peasant Platon Karataev, Tolstoy uses the word 'round' (*krugly*) no less than five times in one sentence. He repeats words and phrases for rhythm and rhetorical effect, sometimes using the same word six or seven times in as many lines, as in Prince Andrei's death scene when (in this excellent new translation),

everyone went up to [the body in the coffin] for a last farewell and everybody wept.

Nikolushka wept from a suffering bewilderment that rent his heart. The countess and Sonya wept from pity for poor Natasha and because he was no more. The old count wept because he felt that soon he, too, would have to take that dreadful step.

Natasha and Princess Marya also wept now, but they did not weep from their own personal grief; they wept from a reverent emotion that came over their souls before the awareness of the simple and solemn mystery of death that had been accomplished before them. [990]

Equally characteristic was Tolstoy's fondness for building large rhetorical structures through the classical device of repeated triads of nouns, verbs, adjectives and prepositions:

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<sup>9</sup> Reginald Christian, *Tolstoy's 'War and Peace': A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 148-52.

Now thousands of feet and bayonets moved with flying standards and, at the officers' command, halted, turned and lined up at intervals, circling around other similar masses of infantry in different uniforms; now there came the sounds of the measured thudding and clanking of the dressed-up cavalry, in blue, red and green embroidered uniforms, with embroidered musicians in front, on black, chestnut or gray horses; now, stretching out with the brazen noise of polished, shining cannon shaking on their carriages, and with their smell of linstocks, the artillery crawled between the infantry and cavalry and settled in their appointed places. [245]

Nabokov saw something typically 'Tolstoyan' in these repetitions:

One peculiar feature of Tolstoy's style is what I shall term the 'groping purist.' In describing a meditation, emotion, or tangible object, Tolstoy follows the contours of the thought, the emotion, or the object until he is perfectly satisfied with his recreation, his rendering. This involves what we might call creative repetitions, a compact series of repetitive statements, coming one immediately after the other, each more expressive, each closer to Tolstoy's meaning. He gropes, he unwraps the verbal parcel for its inner sense, he peels the apple of the phrase, he tried to say it one way, then a better way, he gropes, he stalls, he toys, he Tolstoys with words.<sup>10</sup>

In *War and Peace* there are countless passages that illustrate this point - 'sentences piled one on top of another' (as Chekhov described them) - perhaps none more memorable or famous than the last enormous sentence (258 Russian words) of Volume III, Part 3, Chapter 5, describing the futile efforts of Count Rastopchin, the governor of Moscow, to maintain order and avert catastrophe just before the fall of the ancient capital to the French troops.

But Nabokov's quotation suggests more than verbosity. It gets us to the heart of Tolstoy's view of art, which was to search, to grope, for truth. What Tolstoy wrote in the final (typically Tolstoyan) sentence of his second Sebastopol Sketch (1855) could serve equally as a statement of his motives in writing *War and Peace*:

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<sup>10</sup> Nabokov, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

No, the hero of my story, whom I love with all my heart and soul, whom I have attempted to portray in all his beauty and who has always been, is now and will always be supremely magnificent, is truth.<sup>11</sup>

There is no division between Tolstoy's art and his philosophy, just as there is no way to separate the fiction from the discussions about history in *War and Peace*. As Tolstoy himself famously declared, *War and Peace* was 'not a novel' and 'still less a historical chronicle', but 'what the author wanted and was able to express, in the form in which it is expressed' (1221). Without a unifying theme, without a plot or clear ending, *War and Peace* was a calculated challenge to the genre of the novel and to narrative in history. Tolstoy groped towards a different truth - one that would capture the totality of history, as it was experienced, and teach people how to live.

## 2

Richard Peavey and Larissa Volokhonsky have begun a quiet revolution in the translation of Russian literature. Since the publication of their acclaimed version of *The Brothers Karamazov* in 1990,<sup>12</sup> the couple have translated fifteen volumes of classic Russian works by Dostoevsky, Gogol, Bulgakov, Chekhov and Tolstoy, restoring all the characteristic idioms, the bumpy syntax, the angularities and repetitions, which had largely been removed in the interests of 'good writing' by the Garnetts and their followers, and paying more attention (in a way that the Garnetts never really did) to the interplay or dialogue between the different voices (including the narrator's) in these works - to the verbal 'polyphony' which has been identified by the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin as the organizing principle of the novel since Gogol.

*War and Peace* is their latest translation. It is an extraordinary achievement, particularly because Peavey does not speak or read Russian but relies on a literal

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<sup>11</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Sebastopol Sketches*, translated by David McDuff (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated and annotated by Richard Peavey and Larissa Volokhonsky (San Francisco: North Point Press).

translation (with notes on syntax, nuances of meaning and literary references) by his wife Larissa to write a more finished English draft. What really makes this wonderfully fresh and readable translation stand out from its predecessors is its absolute fidelity to the language of Tolstoy. Words for particular types of clothing and fashions have been carefully researched: the 'aunt' in the opening scene is dressed 'in high ribbons' [8]; Prince Ippolit wears a 'redingote' [23]; and when she dresses for the ball Natasha pins on a head-dress called a 'toque' [456] (mistranslated as a 'ribbon' by Garnett). The same is true of military and hunting terms. There are occasional misjudgements: the 'uncle' in the hunting scene is awkwardly described refusing 'social service' [512] instead of 'public appointments' (as in Garnett and Edmonds) or even 'public service' - the usual understanding of the Russian term, '*obshchestvennaia sluzhba*'. There are also one or two errors, such as making Prince Andrei and his sister Maria bid farewell at the end of Part One by kissing 'each other's hands' [111]. The correct custom, as described by Tolstoy, was for Andrei to take his sister by the hand and kiss her.

One of the virtues of this translation is its sensitivity to different linguistic idioms. It captures the archaic phrasing used by the old Prince Bolkonsky, for example:

'Well tell me,' he went on, getting back on his hobbyhorse, 'how have the Germans taught you to fight Bonaparte by this new science of yours known as strategy?' [100]

It is more inventive in its rendering of plain speech than previous translations, which are too cockney-coy, too grammatically correct, to communicate the drunken street-talk of the workmen in this scene, for example, just before the capture of Moscow by the French. Compare Pevear and Volokhonsky

'He ought to square it properly with people!' a skinny artisan with a sparse beard and frowning eyes was saying. 'Or else, what, he's sucked our blood - and he's quits.' [885]

with Edmonds (who follows Garnett closely)

'Why don't he give us our wages we're entitled to?' a lean boot hand with a scanty beard and knitted brows was saying. 'He sucks our life-blood out of us, and then he thinks he's quit of us!'<sup>13</sup>

Another merit of the Pevear-Volokhonsky translation is its fidelity to Tolstoy's syntax, with all its characteristic angularities and bumps, its countless repetitions and endless sentences, so that for the first time the English reader gets a real sense of how his writing sounds and feels to read in the original. In the scene before Prince Andrei's coffin, where Tolstoy uses the past tense of the word 'to weep' (*plakat'*) no less than seven times, Pevear and Volkokhonsky are the only translators not to flinch from using 'wept' throughout: Garnett says 'cried' four times and 'wept' three; the Maudes say both words three times each, omitting one verb altogether; Edmonds has 'wept' four times and 'cried' thrice; while Briggs says 'wept' five times, omits one verb, and then breaks the repetition with 'gave way to tears.' There is another passage where Tolstoy uses the word 'anteroom' (*priemnaya*) five times in as many lines. It is a specific word with specific meanings which he goes on to discuss.

During his service, mostly as an adjutant, Prince Andrei had seen many anterooms of significant persons, and the differing characters of these anterooms were very clear to him. Count Arakcheev's anteroom had a completely special character. [427]

The Maude translation uses three different words for 'anteroom' and omits it once. Edmonds omits the word twice; Garnett once; while Briggs removes the repetition altogether by omitting the noun twice and using two rather different words ('reception-room' and 'waiting-room') on the other occasions. Pevaer and Volokhonsky are the only ones to translate all five repeats of the noun.

They also make the most of those large rhetorical structures that are such a hallmark of the Tolstoyan style. Take that long sentence, referred to already, in which Rastopchin tries in vain to stem the chaos before the arrival of the French. Garnett breaks it into seven sentences; Briggs into five; Edmonds breaks it towards the end. But Pevear

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<sup>13</sup> Tolstoy (Edmonds), *op. cit.*, p. 1045.



and Volokhonsky recognize the sentence for exactly what it is - the representation of a man who cannot 'stem the flow of the enormous current of people which carried him along with it' - and leave it as they should, in all its glory, as one unbroken flow:

But Count Rastopchin, who now shamed those who were leaving, now evacuated government offices, now distributed good-for-nothing weapons among the drunken riffraff, now took up icons, now forbade Augustin to evacuate relics and icons, now confiscated all private carts, now transported the hot-air balloon constructed by Leppich on a hundred and thirty-six carts, now hinted that he would burn Moscow, now told how he had burned his own house and wrote a proclamation to the French in which he solemnly reproached them for destroying his orphanage; now he assumed the glory of having burned Moscow, now he renounced it, now he ordered the people to catch all the spies and bring them to him, now he reproached the people for it, now he banished all the French from Moscow, now he allowed Mme Aubert-Chalmet, the center of all the French population of all Moscow, to remain in the city and ordered the old and venerable postmaster general Klyucharev, who had done nothing particularly wrong, to be arrested and exiled; now he gathered the people on the Three Hills to fight the French, now, in order to be rid of those same people, he turned them loose to murder a man and escaped through a back gate himself; now he said he would not survive the misfortune of Moscow, now he wrote French verses in an album about his part in the affair - this man did not understand the meaning of the event that was taking place, but only wanted to do something himself, to astonish someone or other, to accomplish something patriotically heroic, and, like a boy, frolicked over the majestic and inevitable event of the abandoning and burning of Moscow, and tried with his little hand now to encourage, now to stem the flow of the enormous current of people which carried him along with it. [836-7]

One of the problems for the translator of *War and Peace* is what to do with the passages in French. There are entire paragraphs in French (including all but seven words of the

book's opening paragraph) and many sentences where the Russian and the French are all mixed up, sometimes with several other languages, as in first chapters of the book, where the guests at Anna Pavlovna's *soirée* also speak in German, English and Italian. Overall, about 2 per cent of the book is in French - itself enough to constitute a short novel - about ten French words for every page. In the original edition of the book Tolstoy translated the foreign passages into Russian in footnotes, but in the revised 1873 edition he cut out all the French ('I think it is better without it,' he wrote to the critic Nikolai Strakhov),<sup>14</sup> only to restore it in the later editions. So there are grounds for translators to keep the French or do away with it. Most translators have followed Garnett in cutting all but a few words of the French, retaining just enough to give a sense of the bi-lingual nature of the Russian aristocracy. Briggs cuts the French altogether. Pevear and Volokhonsky are the first and only ones to retain all the French (with translations in footnotes). They are absolutely right. Cutting out the French makes the text much easier to read but it misses an important element of Tolstoy's irony and meaning in the portrayal of his characters which relates to a broader discourse - between Tolstoy and his readers - about the relationship between Russia and Europe running through the pages of *War and Peace*. That the diplomat Bilibin, for example, speaks by preference in French and says in Russian 'only those words he wanted to underscore contemptuously' [156] marks him out as a well-known cultural stereotype which readers would have easily recognized: the Russian who would rather he were French.

Writing *War and Peace* in the aftermath of the Crimean War, when Russian national feeling was pronounced, Tolstoy was interested most of all in the inner life of Russian society during the Napoleonic Wars. He presents the war of 1812 as a crucial watershed in the culture of his class, the aristocracy, a moment when nobles like the Rostovs and Bolkonskys struggle to break free from the foreign and artificial conventions of their society and began to live more truly to themselves, on Russian principles. *War and Peace* is a 'national epic' in this sense - the gradual revelation of a 'Russian consciousness' (a 'Russian Truth' as nationalist critics such as Strakhov would have it) in the life of its characters. Tolstoy shows the aristocracy switching from the French language to Russian, renouncing *haute cuisine* for Spartan lunches of rye bread and

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

cabbage soup, adopting national dress, settling as farmers on the land, and rediscovering their country's native culture, as in the immortal scene when Natasha, a French-educated young countess, dances to a folk song in the Russian style.

Tolstoy was no Russian nationalist. He understood that foreign imports were integral elements of Russia's literary language and high culture, and wrote with irony about the futile efforts of the aristocracy to rid themselves of these. For example, in the scene in Julie's circle where they decide to ban the use of French and impose a fine on those who make a slip, he makes them use a German loan-word (*shtraf*) for 'a fine' and (as if to underscore the irony) repeats it several times. Equally, when Julie writes in the same patriotic spirit to Princess Marya,

I write to you in Russian, my good friend, because I have hatred for all Frenchmen as well as their language, which I cannot hear to speak...[691]

Tolstoy has her do so in the highly artificial style of Gallicized Russian which was in fact the language of polite society used by noblewomen in their letters at that time.

Yet behind this interplay between French and Russian there is a strategy which is related to the national vision at the heart of *War and Peace* - to Tolstoy's grand conception of the book as a national epic charting through the lives of its characters the liberation of the Russians from the intellectual empire of the French. Gradually, through *War and Peace*, French emerges as the language of artifice and insincerity, the language of the theatre and deceit; Russian as the language of sincerity, honesty and seriousness. So, for example, when Pierre proposes to the beautiful H el ene - a woman he knows he does not love - he performs the ritual in French:

'*Je vous aime!*' he said, having remembered what needed to be said on these occasions: but the words sounded so meager that he felt ashamed of himself. [215]

And when their marriage proves a sham, Pierre looks back and blames it on those words. It is no coincidence that the novel's most idealized characters speak exclusively in Russian (Princess Marya and the peasant Karataev) or (like Natasha) speak French only

with mistakes. And it is part of Tolstoy's plan that in the later stages of the book - as the Russians free themselves from foreign domination - the French language almost disappears from *War and Peace*.

The Russian language is the real hero of Tolstoy's masterpiece, it is his voice of truth, and the English-speaking world is indebted to these two magnificent translators, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, for revealing more of its hidden riches than any who have tried to translate the book before.