

CHAPTER I

*The Life**Andrei Zorin*

Readers often expect the “lives” of famous authors to explain their “works.” In Tolstoy’s case the reverse perspective is arguably even more essential since he always regarded his prose and philosophical writings as means for personal development. Moreover, in his “lived experience” Tolstoy embodied the fundamental Romantic mythology of the modern age, which synthesizes the biblical myths of the Lost Paradise and the Prodigal Son with the classical myth of the Golden Age. According to M.H. Abrams, Romantic vision “represents man’s fall from happy unity into the evil of increasing division and suffering as an indispensable stage on his route back towards the lost unity and happiness of the origin.”¹ Tolstoy’s life was full of abrupt ruptures perceived both as an exile and as an escape. He longed to leave behind the confines of his social upbringing, his earthly pursuits and fame, his family, and finally his mortal body in an ardent desire to return home to the eternal and universal unity of “general life.” His vision of this unity underwent many changes but his urge to join it was always unwavering.

Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy was born on August 28, 1828 on his family estate of Yasnaya Polyana, near the city of Tula, located 120 miles south of Moscow. The expansive and beautiful estate initially belonged to his maternal grandfather Prince Sergei Volkonsky, a scion of one of the most aristocratic families in the Russian Empire (see Chapter 3). The marriage to Princess Maria Volkonskaya, a rich heiress, saved Count Nikolai Tolstoy, the writer’s father, who was mired in debt, from imminent ruin. Lev was the fourth and last son of the couple. Tolstoy’s mother died two years later after giving birth to her only daughter. Young Lev did not remember his mother, but always cherished her memory and, as he confessed, “in his middle age . . . prayed to her soul and asked her for help” (34:354).

This loss, followed by the sudden death of his father in 1837 when young Tolstoy was not yet nine years of age, had a huge impact on the

sensitive boy known to his relatives as a “cry baby.” Lev lagged behind his siblings in his studies and felt his physical unattractiveness very strongly; until his marriage he was not sure that any woman could fall in love with such an ugly person. In memoirs from the latter years of his life, Tolstoy wrote that “since the time he remembered himself, the death of his mother had already cast its shadow upon the life of the family,” but at the same time described his childhood as “bright, tender, poetic, loving, mysterious,” a time full of “true anticipation or retrospective feeling of the real depth of life” (34:354, 375). The latter perspective reflects the Romantic notion of childhood as a time of paradisaical innocence, fullness of being, and union with God and nature.

Primordial bliss was to be ended, however, by original sin. Tolstoy was expelled from his paradise in 1841 when his aunt and legal guardian Alexandra Osten-Saken died at Yasnaya Polyana. As a result, he and his siblings were transferred to the city of Kazan to live under the guardianship of another aunt, Polina Yushkova. Here he spent his teenage years, a period marked by the conflict between his powerful sexuality and his no less powerful desire for chastity. Having been introduced to paid sex by his elder brother at the age of fifteen, Tolstoy recalled weeping after losing his virginity. The fall implied efforts at redemption and self-improvement. In Kazan, Tolstoy began the diaries he would keep on and off for more than sixty years. He subjected his deeds, thoughts, and desires to harsh scrutiny, condemning his own self for a failure to abide by the highest moral ideals he had set.

Kazan was a university city and home to a huge Tatar population, the biggest Muslim minority in Russia. In 1844 Tolstoy was admitted to the Faculty of Oriental Languages. He excelled at languages but performed poorly in many other subjects. Paradoxically for the future author of the one of the most famous historical novels to have ever been written, he struggled with Russian history, and was reluctant to memorize dates and names that made no sense to him. To avoid resitting his exams, he transferred to the Law Faculty but did not succeed there either. In 1847 when the family estates were divided between the five siblings, Tolstoy inherited Yasnaya Polyana and headed there without completing his course.

A military career was the natural choice for a Russian nobleman. In 1851, after four years of a mostly dissipated life between Yasnaya Polyana, Tula, and Moscow, Tolstoy joined his officer brother Nikolai and set off for the Caucasus where Russia was fighting rebellious local tribes. He spent more than two years in the Cossack settlement of Starogladvkovskaya, first

as an intern of sorts, and then as an artillery officer participating in raids and clashes. Wild mountain nature and the primitive life shared by the Cossacks and the tribesmen became for him the new incarnation of his Lost Paradise. Tolstoy's daily routine in Starogladkovskaya allowed him time for leisure that he used not only for gambling and womanizing, but also for literary pursuits. His story *Childhood* published in 1852 in *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*), the most popular literary magazine in Russia, brought him national fame (see Chapter 16).

In 1853 the Crimean War began. Tolstoy applied for a transfer to the battlefield and in November 1854 he joined Russian troops in Sevastopol, besieged by the Anglo-French coalition. Tolstoy was a brave and diligent, but not very disciplined, officer (see Chapter 11). Often he used to leave his brigade on quiet days to participate in clashes elsewhere and constantly argued with his superiors. This military experience was much more horrifying than anything he could have seen in the Caucasus and gave rise to the passionate pacifism that inspired his *Sevastopol Stories*. The publication of this cycle transformed an aspiring beginner into an acknowledged star of Russian literature. In the autumn of 1855 Tolstoy left military service and went to St. Petersburg to enjoy his newly acquired literary glory. On his way he lost an enormous sum at the card table and had to sell the mansion at Yasnaya Polyana to pay the debt – the house was disassembled and moved to the neighboring estate. For the rest of his life Tolstoy lived in one of the remaining two wings of the manor.

In St. Petersburg, Tolstoy was greeted by the leading authors of the day, and he both enjoyed and loathed his newfound fame. In 1857 he went for a European tour. In Paris he enjoyed theatres and concerts but became critical of “mechanistic” European civilization more generally. Appalled by witnessing a public execution, he rejected not only capital punishment, but the modern state that legislated institutionalized violence; he described the state “as a conspiracy not only to exploit, but above all to corrupt its citizens” (60:168). He left Paris for Switzerland to wander in the mountains in the footsteps of his beloved Rousseau, then went to Germany but, having lost a lot of money at the roulette table in Baden-Baden, had to cut his trip short and return to Russia.

Russian society was preparing for the imminent abolition of serfdom. Tolstoy tried to create an ideal model of emancipation on his estate but encountered the nearly fatal inability of educated nobles and peasants to understand each other. To overcome this gap in communication, he launched a major educational program for peasant children. He opened a school in Yasnaya Polyana and more than twenty in neighboring villages,

launched a pedagogical magazine, and tried to organize a national society for education (see Chapter 17). Asserting his identity as an educator, he stopped publishing literary works and tried to conceal his writings from his friends. In 1860 he left Russia to study the practices of popular schools in Europe, an experience which left him profoundly disappointed since he witnessed how Europeans were using the same disciplinary methods he had observed and loathed at home.

The emancipation manifesto of February 19, 1861 caught him on his way back. Having arrived at Yasnaya Polyana, he accepted the position of civic arbiter responsible for resolving conflicts between newly emancipated peasants and landlords. He mostly failed in this office as peasants would not listen to his arguments, while nobles hated him with a passion; in spring 1862 he resigned from this post. His successful pedagogical activities also had to stop. In July, at a time when he was absent from his estate, his property was raided by the gendarmes searching for illegal printing presses. Nothing suspicious was found, but the police turned the house and the village upside down, scared his relatives, and read his intimate papers. The incensed writer even considered leaving Russia forever, but instead made an entirely different, but no less momentous, decision.

In Romantic mythology a soul exiled from the paradise of childhood had a chance to regain the fullness of being through love. In the house of his friend, the Moscow doctor Andrei Behrs, Tolstoy was captivated by a vision of the happy family he had never had a chance to experience. In August 1862 he asked a perennial question in his diary: whether his feeling for Andrei's daughter, the then eighteen-year-old Sofia Behrs, "a child" as he called her, amounted to "true love." He quickly answered in the affirmative but was still afraid to propose as he "demanded from marriage something terrible, impossible" – to be loved as he could love (83:4). Finally, he handed Sofia a letter pleading with her to make her decision without haste. She accepted, as she later confessed, without having read the letter in question apart from the sentence "Do you want to be my wife?"² Contrary to all customs, the wedding at Tolstoy's insistence took place a week after the engagement. According to Sofia's memoirs, the marriage was consummated in the sleeping carriage taking the couple from Moscow to Yasnaya Polyana. Their first child, Sergei, was born in June 1863 followed by twelve other siblings, five of whom died in childhood.

Having closed his school, Tolstoy shared his time between running his estate and writing. He aspired to establish direct bonds with the peasants, personally performing all managerial duties. In the novel he started to write at this time, he brought together family chronicle and national epic to

describe the same ideal bond that, as he believed, emerged between peasants and nobles during the war of 1812. Sofia helped him in both endeavors, keeping financial records and copying drafts of his novel. The first installment of *War and Peace* appeared in 1865 in the journal *Russkii Vestnik* (*Russian Herald*), though Tolstoy would soon switch to publishing new installments in book form. The publication was completed in 1869. Some critics were confused by the novelty of the text, but the public was more than enthusiastic. While the results of Tolstoy's agricultural entrepreneurship were mixed, his novel enjoyed a major success which solidified his reputation as a leading Russian writer of the time and significantly enhanced the well-being of his family.

However, Tolstoy was deeply dissatisfied by his work and even called his novel "verbose nonsense." In August 1869 he travelled to Penza province to buy land. In the coach inn at the little town of Arzamas he fell into a state of unbearable panic. The acute feeling of his mortality rendered life and its endeavors useless. This crisis led to a prolonged depression and was aggravated by family problems. In 1871 Sofia gave birth to their fifth child. The pregnancy and the delivery were extremely difficult, and the doctors strongly advised against further pregnancies, but Tolstoy adamantly refused to hear about any contraceptive measures since he considered them an abomination worse than death. Sofia gave birth to eight more children, but the resentment caused by her husband's stance never completely healed.

Struggling with a feeling of failure in his mission, Tolstoy reverted to pedagogical activities. He reopened in his house the school for peasant children and composed an "ABC Book" that included new methods in the teaching of basic literacy, and a primer containing texts which gave rudimentary lessons in the natural sciences and morality. The reaction of the pedagogical community to his innovations was mostly negative, but the lower classes acquired the books for their children with great zeal. In Tolstoy's lifetime the collected print runs of both publications exceeded 2 million copies.

At the same time, he could not completely leave literature behind. Tolstoy initially thought about writing dramatic works and studied Ancient Greek to better appreciate classical tragedy. Following this, he planned and drafted historical novels about the time of Peter the Great and the exile of the Decembrists in Siberia. However, in 1873 he found himself writing a new novel about life in contemporary high society. The publication of *Anna Karenina* started in January 1875 in the *Russian Herald* and continued for two years. Tolstoy kept re-editing and rewriting his drafts,

and the slow rhythm of the publication process also gave the impression that the action was unfolding in real time. The narrative absorbed political, social, and cultural events happening in Russia, including the beginning of the war with the Ottoman Porte. In the last chapter, Tolstoy resoundingly attacked the war and its proponents. The militaristic *Russian Herald* discontinued the publication, and the last installment was published separately in book form.

Despite the ire of progressive critics irritated by Tolstoy's patriarchal views and interest in high society, the excitement of the public and the commercial success of *Anna Karenina* were unheard of in the annals of Russian literature. The following year saw the first French translation of *War and Peace*, which added an international dimension to Tolstoy's fame. And yet, the author was plunged into the deepest existential crisis he had ever experienced. Tolstoy called his novel "dull and vulgar" and later, in his *Confessions*, wrote about how his life was brought to a virtual standstill by a simple question he kept asking himself: "Very well; you will be more famous than Gogol and Pushkin or Shakespeare or Molière or all the writers in the world – and what of it? And I had no reply at all" (23:11).

Neither love, family, nor literature could provide an answer to his question, and Tolstoy turned to religion. Much like Levin in the final pages of *Anna Karenina*, he embraced the faith of his forefathers and the peasants that, as he believed, gave them the ability to accept mortality. His Orthodoxy was fervent and passionate: he fasted, withstood long Church services which involved constant bowing and praying on his knees, made a pilgrimage to Kiev to kiss the relics of the first Russian saints, visited monasteries, and talked to Church elders. Very soon, however, he discovered that Church dogmas and rituals could not satisfy his reason and conscience.

In 1855, in Sevastopol, Tolstoy dreamed about starting "a religion of Christ without mysticism" (47:37), and a quarter of a century later he embarked on this mission. He studied Hebrew and biblical Greek, and devoured enormous amounts of theological literature. He wrote *Confessions*, where he told the history of his conversion, a refutation of the most popular Orthodox catechism, and prepared a new translation and digest of the Gospels. In less than five years he developed a comprehensive religious, moral, political, and economic philosophy that he summarized in his treatise *What I Believe*, a work published, and immediately banned, in 1884. In the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, Tolstoy preached benevolence towards all humans, chastity, a rejection of all obligations to state authorities and tribal patriotism. These commands and taboos were

all based on the principle of nonviolence, a practice that he regarded as the main tenet of his teachings.

In 1881 the need to educate his elder children compelled Tolstoy to buy a house in Moscow. Deeply shocked by sights of urban poverty and hoping to better understand the roots of this social evil as well as the ways to alleviate it, he volunteered to take part in the census of 1882 in one of the most dangerous parts of Moscow, an area which was full of shelters for the homeless and the outcast. For a while he considered launching a major philanthropic initiative, but it failed from the very beginning. In his essay *What Then Must We Do?*, Tolstoy blamed the misery of the poor on the way of life led by the leisured classes, a life based on property rights, coercive taxation, and legitimized violence. He could no longer believe in the necessity or possibility of a bond between the educated elite and the impoverished majority, and instead suggested that the rich should adopt peasant lifestyles and habits.

It took Tolstoy several years to overhaul his own way of life. He began working in the fields and wearing peasant clothes, and he grew a peasant-style beard. He gradually became a vegetarian, and renounced drinking, smoking, and hunting. He dismissed his personal servants and started bringing water to the house on his own, cutting wood, and cleaning his room. He explained each step of this process in passionate articles. His family and his friends were skeptical and even outright hostile, but his teachings and example quickly and powerfully resonated both in Russia and beyond its borders. In 1883 Tolstoy met Vladimir Chertkov, also a converted descendant of a rich and aristocratic family. Chertkov became his most devoted and trusted disciple and his closest confidant. On Tolstoy's advice, he organized Intermediary (Posrednik), a publishing house that specialized in cheap editions of various literature for the public. Chertkov's connections with several British evangelicals helped spread Tolstoy's word globally, and the success of Tolstoy's novels increased the public attention to his teachings. By the end of the 1880s Tolstoy had become the most famous living author in the world and the natural leader for many existing sects and communes practicing agricultural labor and nonviolence.

Tolstoy's glory reached its zenith during the famine of 1891. Overcoming his skepticism toward philanthropy, Tolstoy appealed to individuals and organizations around the world for financial support for the needy, coordinated the relief plan, and published regular reports about the distribution of monetary funds. The enormous sum he and his wife managed to collect in several months allowed them to open 250 kitchens

feeding 14,000 adults and several thousand children. A significant part of the donations came from Britain and the USA, with Quakers being especially generous. Russian authorities were fearful of the level of Tolstoy's activity, but could not stop him. The only person deeply dissatisfied was Tolstoy himself who called his relief work "stupid." Incredible human suffering made his own relatively comfortable life especially unbearable in his own eyes.

In 1891 Tolstoy managed to convince his wife to renounce the copyright for all his works published after 1881, the year of his conversion. His earlier publications, including the two great novels, remained her exclusive property. In the following year he renounced his rights as a landowner, but transferred ownership not to the peasants, but to Sofia and their children. This tortured compromise did not satisfy either party. To avoid family conflicts, Tolstoy stopped publishing fiction, the sole exception being the novel *Resurrection*, the income from which he donated to help in the resettling of thousands of persecuted Doukhobors to Canada (see Chapter 29). *Resurrection* was published simultaneously in 1898 in a censored version in Russia and in unredacted form abroad; it was immediately translated into the major European languages. In a year, it reached more readers worldwide than Tolstoy's two great novels did in twenty.

The full version of the novel contained scathing attacks on the Orthodox Church. For a long period, the Russian Church and government had persecuted his friends and followers but did not touch Tolstoy himself for fear of making him a martyr. In 1900 the Holy Synod finally decided to take action (see Chapter 8). The edict, which amounted to a de facto excommunication even if the word itself was not used, expressed a wish for the sinner to repent and return to the bosom of the Church. In his reply Tolstoy stated that he no more could do that "than a flying bird can re-enter the eggshell from which it has emerged" (34:247). This final split with the official Church only gave more power to his voice. During the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–5 and the revolution that erupted after the defeat of the Russian army, he became the only moral authority able to stand above the fray; Tolstoy condemned both sides. He was sure that neither half-hearted political concessions nor "guns, cannons and executions" could save the government, which should at least "admit its sins before the people and try to redeem itself." At the same time, he accused the revolutionaries of being ready "to blow up, destroy and kill" (36:304, 306), and urged millions of Russian peasants not to revert to violence but to start a peaceful campaign of civil disobedience. In 1908, shocked by news of executions of the rebellious peasants, he wrote the pamphlet

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I Cannot Be Silent – a passionate denunciation of capital punishment. Tolstoy ended this piece by expressing his desire to be finally imprisoned or hanged like the nameless peasants he was writing about.

In the meantime, the situation in his family became outright tragic. Sofia hated the Tolstoyans who surrounded her husband and especially despised Chertkov, who returned to Russia in 1908 after ten years of exile in Britain. She insisted on controlling Tolstoy's contacts, reading his diaries, staging and censoring his photo ops. Some of their sons threatened to start legal proceedings against their father to invalidate his decision regarding the renouncement of copyright for his works which, in any case, was legal only until Tolstoy's death. To protect free access to his writings, and following Chertkov's advice, Tolstoy drew up a will where he bequeathed all the rights of his works to his daughter, Alexandra, and appointed Chertkov his literary executor. Unable to sustain the tumult that would ensue in the family, Tolstoy signed the document secretly. However, the news regarding the will soon came into the open and the family crisis was aggravated once more: Sofia threatened suicide and repeatedly claimed that she had the necessary means to kill herself at her disposal.

Since his religious conversion, Tolstoy had cherished the idea of leaving home and joining the crowds of wanderers, pilgrims, and beggars that sustained themselves through daily labor and alms. Nonetheless, he stayed with his family, believing that Christian love manifests itself only through love to those who are close to you. On the night of October 28, 1910, after Sofia had searched his room in search of the papers she thought he was hiding, Tolstoy's patience had run its course. He left early the following morning, accompanied by his doctor, and follower, Dushan Makovitsky. Tolstoy did not know where he was heading to; he was only sure that he wanted to spend his last days in a peasant hut, far away from a Tolstoyan commune. Leadership was thus something he resolutely left behind. He visited his sister, Maria, at Shamordino Convent where she was living as a nun, and then, together with Makovitsky and Tolstoy's daughter Alexandra who had joined them, boarded a train heading south. On the train he fell ill, and his companions had to help him disembark at Astapovo railway station.

When recovering from nearly terminal illness in 1886, Tolstoy wrote *On Life*, a treatise where he claimed that any individual existence is just a tiny particle of life, and that death is a necessary and liberating union with the source of universal and eternal love. In the last decades of his life, he was on the very brink of death at least five times. He became accustomed

to it and was always “packing for transition” (57:185), as he put it in one of his letters. Tolstoy’s one and everlasting wish was to be left to experience this sacred moment alone. This wish was not granted. His death became one of the first global media events, a manifestation of a modernity that he always loathed.

Notes

- 1 M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 201.
- 2 S.A. Tolstaya, *Dnevnik*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1978), vol. II, 489.