

REASON, AND HISTORY, IN ANNA KARENINA AND WAR AND PEACE

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Tolstoy's two powerful novels *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* are, in part, about the danger, unhappiness, and misunderstanding that happen when people believe in the effectiveness of human reason. To rely upon reason, for Tolstoy, was an error, a Western error. Two Western thinkers, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Joseph de Maistre reinforced Tolstoy in these beliefs. Rousseau did not believe reason could lead to a good and moral education. Maistre dismissed reason as a basis for either explaining or suggesting human actions. Tolstoy also believed reason did not lead to control of human history, especially through the roles of "great men" in the domains of battle or public affairs. In *War and Peace* he maintains that historians could not accurately explain events, such as Napoleon's 1812 campaign, because they believed the decisions of military and civilian leaders alone caused them. Tolstoy proposed instead a method for understanding history based upon measuring the choices and actions of all involved.

Introduction

Tolstoy did not believe human reason was good; as for Western rationalism and science he said: "A Russian is self-assured just because...he does not believe anything can be known".¹ For Tolstoy East (Orthodox Christian Russia) and West were contrasts between intuition and reason, truth and falsehood, nature and civilization, peasants and the nobility, and rural and urban life. Within Russia itself he draws a contrast between Moscow (East) and St. Petersburg (West) so that in *War and Peace* life in Moscow appears more sober and true in contrast to the inane francophile discussions in St. Petersburg salons that represent Napoleon as the maker of history and where Helene, Pierre's estranged spouse, has her Jesuits and circle of deluded admirers. In *Anna Karenina* Levin comes to wisdom and happiness and has a happy marriage with Kitty in the Russian countryside. Anna comes to unhappiness and tragedy in her affair with Vronsky in urban St. Petersburg and abroad.

For this discussion reason means people believing they can discover or invent answers to vital questions which life brings before them and can fashion and implement methods that will cause situations in life to change. If men believe this they must also believe that they can explain the actions of others, whether they act as individuals or in concert. The struggles major characters have as a consequence of these beliefs is a theme in both *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. Tolstoy exposes the limits of reason as we see Pierre, Prince Andrew, Levin, and others attempt to learn, understand and act upon their surroundings. He also finds reason wanting as a means for explaining the major events of history, particularly those which unfold in *War and Peace*. Two major Western thinkers contributed to the philosophical basis for Tolstoy's rejection of reason. Yet, in what seems a contradiction, Tolstoy himself offered a rational, scientific method that historians might employ in understanding and explaining human history.

Reason and Learning

The French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau contributed to Tolstoy's beliefs about learning.² Through his novel *Emile* (1762) Rousseau presented an educational theory which advocated abandoning the structures of education and using every experience in a person's life as a learning experience: "God makes all things good; man meddles...they become bad".³

Human institutions, which are the results of human reason, are unnatural; instead man learns moral lessons from his own acts, from his surroundings, from nature; if man accepts “what is” rather than trying to determine “why” he will receive all the information he needs. If man learns from nature then theories and philosophies are not merely of little use, they are an encumbrance to learning. Reason leads man to ask questions which cannot be answered by reason. Tolstoy’s characters try; only through that process do they learn to depend upon their senses.

Levin, in *Anna Karenina*, read and discussed the philosophers Plato, Spinoza, Kant, and so on. Their ideas were good for refuting or arguing other theories but they did not solve his problems. If anything, they only made life more unbearable for him. The more Levin learned the less he knew. The terms “spirit”, “will”, “freedom”, and “essence” were apart from anything in life, except for exercises in reason.⁴ The frustrations of his plans and his failure in finding answers to his questions caused him to lose his faith and led him almost to the point of suicide, but: “...Levin did not shoot himself, he did not hang himself; he went on living”:

Reasoning had brought him to doubt, and prevented him from seeing what he ought to do and what not. When he did not think, but simply lived, he was continually aware of the presence of an infallible judge in his soul...as soon as he did not act rightly, he was aware of it.⁵

To find happiness in the end, Levin attended to his estate, occupying himself with its tasks.

Reason and Human Actions

A second Western thinker, Joseph de Maistre, profoundly influenced Tolstoy. Maistre, who was originally from Savoy, spent the early years of the 19th Century as a diplomat in St. Petersburg and left a body of writing which Tolstoy noted in his diary: “I am reading Maistre”.⁷ Maistre was an anti-romantic, anti-revolutionary, royalist who certainly held most “un-Rousseau-like” views of nature: “In the whole vast dome of nature there reigns an open violence...the whole earth, perpetually steeped in blood...”. Yet, reason, that “flickering light”, offers no refuge from nature. Can you explain human actions in terms of reason? Men “who shed tears if they have to kill a chicken kill on the battlefield without a qualm”. Men revolt over “trivial issues” such as attempts to change the calendar, yet allow themselves to be sent like “obedient animals” to be killed in wars. Peter the Great could sent thousands to die thus, yet he almost faced a revolt when he tried to shave off his boyars’ beards.⁸ How could reason possibly be a means for improving mankind’s lot when “...men’s desire to immolate themselves is as fundamental as their desire for self-preservation or happiness”.⁹ At the onset of the 1812 campaign in *War and Peace* scores of Uhlans (heavy cavalry) were proud to drown crossing the Viliya river because they were doing so where the Emperor could watch, though there was a safe ford about one-third of a mile away.¹⁰

Throughout *War and Peace* there are contrasts between what individuals see and experience going on around them and what they believe should be going on, that is, between what their senses tell them and what their reason tells them. Consider Pierre and the events of 1812. The Knoll Battery, where he witnessed the Battle of Borodino, historians were to later call the most important point in the event; Pierre thought it the least important: there was nothing but confusion. He had come to see history being made, but all he saw were people concerned with their own personal interests; there was no perceptible pattern. Afterwards, the French almost shot him in Moscow because they thought he was an incendiary; next he was on the march with the French army retreating from Moscow. In all that confusion only the peasant Platon Karataev could make sense of and not question what went on around him. Platon accepted with a faith that things were as they should be:

He did not, and could not, understand words apart from their context. Every word and action of his was the manifestation of an activity unknown to him, which was his life. But his life, as he regarded it, had no meaning as a separate thing. It had meaning only as part of a whole of which he was always conscious...He could not understand the value of any word or deed taken separately.¹¹

After these experiences Pierre could ask himself "What am I going to do? And he immediately gave himself the answer: "Well, I shall live. Ah, how splendid".¹² Tolstoy's characters learn:

...of the need to submit; to what? Not simply to the will of God...nor to the "iron laws" of the sciences; but to the permanent relationships of things, and the universal texture of human life, wherein alone truth and justice are to be found by a kind of "natural"... knowledge. To do this is...to grasp what human will and reason can do and what they cannot.¹³

Reason and Battles

Of utmost importance to Tolstoy, Maistre derided generals who thought they were directing movements of troops and controlling battles. Tolstoy believed there can be no such thing as a military science. Nobody in a battle could really tell what was going on, neither generals nor common soldiers.¹⁴ Consider the Battle of Borodino in 1812 (the battle before Moscow). Before the battle Napoleon gave his subordinates orders they did not nor could not carry out. And during the battle he gave orders, mostly on the basis of wrong information, which they did not carry out. Not only had Napoleon no control over the events at all, he did not understand what was going on.

Moreover, Maistre thought victory in battle to be a matter of morale; the triumph, if there is any, is moral and psychological, not physical.¹⁶ Tolstoy's Russian general Kutuzov knows what wins battles, not the actions of generals but the actions of each individual who will be involved. The most important factor is morale, the motivation of the soldiers. The side that has the biggest stake in the outcome, as individuals, then will win. Kutuzov told Prince Andrew before the Battle of Austerlitz that he thought they would lose the battle. Later, before the Battle of Borodino, Andrew said to Pierre:

A battle is won by those who firmly resolve to win it. Why did we lose the Battle of Austerlitz? ...very early we told ourselves we were losing the battle and we did lose it. And we said so because we had nothing to fight for there....¹⁷

Though Napoleon "won" at Borodino he sensed that the battle was not a victory. Kutuzov, on the other hand, with no more accurate information sensed victory. None of the other Russian leaders, by any rational analysis, could call Borodino a victory; after all, the French had entered Moscow. Kutuzov could see, though not without doubts, that, given time, the enemy would disintegrate. His task after the battle was to restrain his army from further battles which would only get more men killed and which would slow the break-up of the French army: "They must understand that we can only lose by taking the offensive. Patience and time are my warriors, my champions."¹⁸

Reason and the "Great Man" in Affairs

Napoleon is, of course, the chief actor in *War and Peace*; what he *appears* to be is a profound influence upon the other characters. Pierre thinks him a "great man". Authorities charged the Duc d' Engghien with a conspiracy to assassinate Napoleon. Napoleon executed

him. Pierre defends this: "...a political necessity...Napoleon showed greatness of soul by not fearing to take on himself the whole responsibility for that deed". In Pierre's estimation Napoleon could move men, make history:

...because the Bourbons fled from the Revolution leaving the people to anarchy...[Napoleon is]...great because he rose superior to the Revolution, suppressed its abuses, preserved all that was good in it—equality...freedom of speech and of the press—and only for that reason did he obtain power.¹⁹

Pierre became a Freemason in order to change things; Masons believe man can use his reason "to combat the evil which sways the world".²⁰ Where better for Pierre to start than his own estates? His serfs were not free. Pierre proposed reforms in working conditions, punishments and wages; he proposed establishing schools and hospitals. His stewards deceived him and all his plans failed.²¹

Levin had ideas for social reform; he wrote a book on agriculture and formed a plan for share holding with his peasants—a plan he felt would bring about a world-wide revolution in the relationship between the people and the soil. Levin's district Marshall suggested schools. There was a problem of motivation; how do you get the peasants to put out more effort? Education would give them "fresh wants"; rewards would motivate them. Levin would become very frustrated with the peasants; he could not get all the work done at the time and in the way he wanted. They did not dig the drainage ditches properly; they did not mend the fences in time; all the peasants had to say to him was: "Don't put yourself out; we shall get it all done in time". Levin could try to force things but: "that's all very well, but as God wills".²²

Pierre's aims for reform were not impossible; he made the mistake of giving orders like a ruler or a general and assuming his subordinates carried out his orders. His friend Prince Andrew, on the other hand, did succeed in carrying out similar reforms on his estates. He did it as part of his daily tasks: "without display and without perceptible difficulty. He had in the highest degree a practical tenacity which Pierre lacked, and without fuss or strain...set things going."²³ Levin noticed that during the three or four weeks of harvest there seemed to be an increase of energy in the people. The peasants completed the work correctly and at the proper time. Ideas for education and Levin's schemes for share holding could not improve this; they would only interfere.

Prince Andrew was wounded at Austerlitz, the battle in Austria where the French defeated the Austrians and Russians. He meets Napoleon and realizes the "insignificance of greatness" compared to the experience of battle and of being wounded.²⁴ Nevertheless, later Andrew strove to meet the important men who are leading Russia, the Emperor Alexander and his chief advisors. He comes to learn, though, that they too are:

...systematically deluding themselves when they suppose their activities, their words, memoranda, rescripts, resolutions, laws, etc., to be the motive factors which cause historical change and determine the destinies of men and nations; whereas in fact they are nothing; only...self-important milling in the void.²⁵

During the Battle of Austerlitz Nicholas Rostov sees Prince Bagration and his entourage riding towards Schoengraben:

... neither he or his staff, nor the officers who gallop up to him with messages, nor anyone else is, or can be, aware of what exactly is happening, nor where, nor why; nor is the chaos of the battle in any way made clearer either in fact or in the minds of the Russian officers by the appearance of Bagration.²⁶

To Tolstoy leaders are leaders because of their social position or because they know how to rise in a hierarchy (much like a peasant knows how to use a scythe), not because they are better able to control events. Of course, leaders do have influence. Bagration's arrival at Schoengraben "puts heart into his subordinates"; the aide-de-camp advised the Uhlan Colonel that the Emperor "would not be displeased" by the zeal they would show in swimming the Vilna.²⁷ Things happen some of the time because, for their own purposes, ordinary people behave as if leaders have power.

Reason and History

A further contrast in *War and Peace* is between what is happening and the explanations leaders and historians later have for what happened. When historians explain the campaign of 1812 it is very easy to see why it turned as it did. The French advanced too late in the year; they did not equip themselves well for a winter campaign. Russians, in their hatred for the invader, waged total war—a "scorched earth" policy of burning towns and villages and crops as they retreated drawing the enemy further into Russia where the lack of supplies and the harsh winter would destroy them. Tolstoy says this seems so evident because it was the only rational way historians could explain how a 600,000-man army led by the best general in the world could be defeated by an ill-led force one-half its size.²⁸ But if this is so clear to historians now, how do they explain the actions at the time?

Napoleon saw every advance as a victory. He made no great effort to engage the Russians. There was enough food and clothing in Moscow to re-equip the army. The French did everything they could to get to Moscow at the end of summer, the very thing that would lead to their destruction. The Russian leaders did everything they could to prevent this, the very thing, looking back, that would destroy the invaders. The Emperor Alexander joined the army and implored it to fight for every inch of soil.²⁹

To Tolstoy such actions on the part of both sides were indeed just a few of numerous other actions that were just as important to the whole picture and which historians later ignore. For Tolstoy it is the actions of individuals that have pride of place in his view of history. Therefore, in order to know and understand that which we call a historical event, such as the Battle of Austerlitz, Tolstoy insisted that we would have to know every relationship between the people who took part—all the hopes, fears, loves, hates, moods, and so on of each and their relationships with each other and with their surroundings. To know all of these would lead to the laws of history:

Only by taking infinitesimally small units for observation (the differential of history, that is, the individual tendencies of men) and attaining to the art of integrating them (that is, finding the sum of these infinitesimals) can we hope to arrive at the laws of history.³⁰

Tolstoy denied free will in history:

Each man lives for himself, using his free will to attain his personal aims, and feels with his whole being that he can now do or abstain from doing this or that action; but as soon as he has done it, that action performed at a certain moment in time becomes irrevocable and belongs to history, in which it has not a free but a predetermined significance....There are two sides to the life of every man, his individual life, which is more free the more abstract his interests, and his elemental life in which he inevitably obeys laws laid down for him.³¹

Each of the relationships, moreover, is just as important as the other and just as important as anything generals or rulers order and as important as any factor or several factors cited by the historians Tolstoy criticized:

To study the laws of history we must completely change the subject of our observation, must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common, infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved...only along that path does the possibility of discovering the laws of history lie, and that as yet not a millionth part as much mental effort has been applied in this direction by historians as have been devoted to describing the actions of various kings, commanders, and ministers and propounding the historian's own reflections concerning these actions.³²

The higher a man is in the social order, the more he, and the historians who write about him, are deluded into thinking his will and orders make history. Bagration's arrival at Schoengraben:

... create the illusion of which he himself is the first victim, namely, that what is happening is somehow connected with *his* skill, *his* plans, that it is *his* authority that is in some way directing the course of the battle....³³

For Tolstoy kings and rulers and generals, particularly Napoleon, are merely the slaves of history: "History, that is, the unconscious, general, hive life of mankind, uses every moment of the life of kings as a tool for its own purposes."³⁴ When mankind looks back upon historical events the actions and outcomes seem to be inevitable. Of course, the actors in these dramas did not know this:

They were moved by fear or vanity, rejoiced or were indignant, reasoned, imagining that they knew what they were doing and did it of their own free will, but they were all involuntary tools of history, carrying on a work concealed from them but comprehensible to us. Such is the inevitable fate of men of action, and the higher they stand in the social order the less they are free.³⁵

Levin liked to mow with a scythe in his fields along side his peasants. When he tried consciously to mow straight he cut his rows badly and unevenly; but when he forgot what he was doing, he cut his rows smoothly and evenly. When he became conscious of his work, he cut the rows badly again.³⁶ Tolstoy believed historians must find a process, symbolized by Levin and his scythe, for discovering, receiving, and processing the numerous relationships between all the actors in history. If they could calculate and include all the "differentials" they could present the past to us evenly. Otherwise the stories they write must be incomplete; they are able just to take partial swipes at the past. Tolstoy saw the past as a smooth continuum, like life itself, which comes up to our time and beyond without artificial man-made divisions:

Just as in a clock, the result of the complicated motion of innumerable wheels and pulleys is merely a slow and regular movement of the hands which show the time, so the result of all the complicated human activities...all their passions, desires, remorse, humiliations, sufferings, outbursts of pride, fear and enthusiasm—was only the loss of the Battle of Austerlitz, the so-called battle of the three Emperors...a slow movement of the hands on the dial of human history.³⁷

To recognize that Tolstoy's method for determining the forces of history is absurd because it is impossible to do misses the point. The point is not what history *is* but what it is *not*, that is, it is not "leaders" rationally causing things to happen. The private or individual is right in believing that his actions are the result of free will, but wrong in believing that they are important only to himself. He or she does not realize that their actions contribute to the whole "hive life" which makes history. Generals and other "leaders" are more deluded, however, because they are like a horse hitched to a cart which is traveling downhill at a rapid speed. They

think they are pulling the cart but the cart is really carrying them along and they have no idea where they will end.

Conclusion

Anna Karenina and *War and Peace* are part of the continuous life of the whole of humanity. This is the essence of Tolstoy's philosophy: the epic of 1812 was not an event apart; and there was "no one cause for that occurrence, but it had to occur because it had to".³⁸ The two novels do not begin or end. Readers feel the characters had a life prior to the beginning of the novels which will continue after finishing the portion Tolstoy wrote down. The characters go through a change; indeed the changes they endured in *War and Peace* mirrored the progression of the historical epoch the novel captured.³⁹ Maybe the vital differential to be measured is the journey of individuals who come to wisdom. At the close of *War and Peace* Prince Andrew's young son Nicholas thinks about his life: "And my father? Oh, Father, Father. Yes. I will do something..."⁴⁰ The hive life of humanity which makes history continues. Again peoples will move. They will move because they must, perhaps "to combat the evil which sways the world".

Endnotes

1. Tolstoy, Leo (1966). *War and Peace*. New York: W.W. Norton, Inc., 709.
2. Berlin, Isaiah (1953). *The Hedgehog and the Fox; an Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 43.
3. Rousseau, Jean Jacques (1963). *Emile* London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 5.
4. Tolstoy, Leo (1966). *Anna Karenina*, New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 865.
5. *Ibid.*, 869.
6. *Ibid.*, 868.
7. Berlin (1953), 48.
8. Berlin, Isaiah (1991). "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism" in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity; Chapters in the History of Ideas*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 111, 122, 121.
9. *Ibid.*, 121.
10. Tolstoy *War*, 674. Though Maistre explained man through theology there can be other explanations for these apparent contradictions. What is reasonable for the individual to do might be based upon his or her personal history or in pursuit of personal goals. See page one of: Kelly George A. (1977). "The Psychology of the Unknown" in Bannister, D. ed. *New Perspectives in Personal Construct Theory*. London: Academic Press, 1-19. There is no ideal of reason that compels the actions of another, who, of course, would consider their own purpose to be reasonable, to appear to an observer as rational behavior.
11. Tolstoy *War*, 1079.
12. *Ibid.*, 1226.
13. Berlin (1953). 67.
14. *Ibid.*, 52.
15. Tolstoy, *War*, 709.
16. Berlin (1953). 54.
17. Tolstoy, *War*, 862.
18. *Ibid.*, 1135. Tolstoy's General Kutuzov made a rational choice here, based upon experience. How could Tolstoy believe that refusing to take action against the French retreating from Moscow was not a rational decision? Probably because he saw it as an "Eastern" choice, made from intuition rather than science. It was, nevertheless, one "rational" strategy to employ against a superior enemy.

19. *Ibid.*, 19.
20. *Ibid.*, 389.
21. *Ibid.*, 409-413.
22. Tolstoy, *Anna*, 374, 171.
23. Tolstoy, *War*, 457.
24. *Ibid.*, 314.
25. Berlin (1953). 17.
26. *Ibid.*, 16.
27. Tolstoy, *War*, 674.
28. *Ibid.*, 762.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 918.
31. *Ibid.*, 670.
32. *Ibid.*, 920.
33. Berlin (1953). 16.
34. Tolstoy, *War*, 670.
35. *Ibid.*, 781.
36. Tolstoy, *Anna*, 278.
37. Tolstoy, *War*, 276.
38. *Ibid.*, 669; Tolstoy restates his ideas of history: "What FORCE moves the nations?", 1317-1351.
39. The peoples of the West flushed with revolutionary zeal moved to reform, to bring the light of reason, to the ill-governed, to the superstitious, and to the backward East. After a series of rigors, and failure, and defeat, the West settled back into "the reaction", see Tolstoy, *War*, 1253 ff.
40. *Ibid.*, 1309.