

BBC Takes Another Stab at Filming 'War and Peace'

By [Des Brown](#)

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Andrew Davies is British television's undisputed master of the literary adaptation. The next project he will undertake, however, could easily baffle even such a seasoned screenwriter.

It was announced this week that Davies will work on a six-part adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace," which will be broadcasted by the BBC One in 2015 as event television. Speaking to the BBC, Davies said the book is "not just a great novel, it's a wonderful read, and it'll make a wonderful serial."

Davies had earlier translated the literary density of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens into an accessible filmic idiom for a modern audience with his 1995 adaptation of "Pride and Prejudice" and his 2005 "Bleak House." He also has experience with the Russian classics, getting credit for the 2002 version of Boris Pasternak's "Dr. Zhivago."

Tolstoy's 1869 novel, however, is on a different challenge level. It is over 1,200 pages long

and its literary complexity presents any adaptor with problems.

It doesn't lend itself to a conventional two to three-hour film. Any adaptor risks creating a museum piece that fails to connect with an on-screen 21st-century audience far more diverse than those who were reading Tolstoy in the 19th century.

There have been five previous adaptations of the novel. The earliest version was a little seen 1915 silent Russian film. The most recent, a 2007 Russian-French-Italian-German television mini-series.

Three adaptations stand out in particular. King Vidor's 1956 "War and Peace" was a typical 1950s Hollywood epic with a cast headed by Audrey Hepburn as Natasha Rostova and Henry Fonda as Pierre Bezukhov. The film was lushly scored by Nino Rota and richly photographed by Jack Cardiff in Italy. Yet, it took eight screenwriters to fashion a film-able 208-minute screenplay from the novel's ample page count.

Sergei Bondarchuk overcame this problem by filming the movie in four parts. The director shot the film between 1962 and 1967 and included members of the Red Army as extras. At the time it was the U.S.S.R.'s most expensive film, and it went on to win the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film.

The British Broadcasting Corporation's previous attempt came in 1972 when a young Anthony Hopkins starred as Bezukhov in the BBC's 20-part version of "War and Peace."

Shot in England and Yugoslavia and broadcast by the BBC between September and December 1972, it was typical of many BBC costume dramas from that era. However, it was not well-received. The Observer's television critic of the time, Clive James, wrote during the series' run, "So far, the BBC's 'War and Peace' has done nothing like a good enough job of being not as good as the book," and added that the direction and script "simultaneously faithfully reproduces and utterly betrays the novel's flow of events."

Andrew Davies will attempt to correct these fumbles 40 years after BBC's first adaptation and said that, in the interest of saving time, he plans to keep out the philosophical elements and focus on the human relationships and romance plot lines.

A fairly unknown actress is expected to be cast as Natasha Rostova. Her male suitors, however, will be picked from more experienced stars to ignite some female interest in the story. This should come naturally for Davies who is already notorious for breaking women's hearts with Colin Firth's famous lake scene in the role of Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Contact the author at artsreporter@imedia.ru

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