

Andrei Zorin's Biography 'Leo Tolstoy' is Essential Reading

This slim but rich volume is impossible to put down.

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September 26, 2021



Author Andrei Zorin **Open Russia**

Leo Tolstoy's life and works are copiously documented in editions of his writings in dozens of languages, new translations, biographies, critical studies, diaries and memoirs written by Tolstoy himself, his family, and his friends. If you already have several shelves bending under all these Tolstoys and about-Tolstoys, do you need another biography?

If it's Andrei Zorin's "Leo Tolstoy," the answer is yes. Written first in English and then translated by the author into Russian, this slim volume — less than 200 pages — takes you through Tolstoy's life and work with a light touch but remarkable breadth of knowledge. It consists of four chapters that represent blocks of time, work and focus and to some extent the roles that Tolstoy played: An Ambitious Orphan, A Married Genius, A Lonely Leader, and A Fugitive Celebrity. But, as Zorin shows us, despite different incarnations — from an army

officer to an ardent pacifist, from drinking tea in aristocratic drawing rooms to pulling a plough in peasant garb, from brothels and dalliances with servants to a close-knit family life (however dysfunctional) — Tolstoy was remarkably consistent, if sometimes he was consistent in his internal war of conflicting beliefs and desires.

Behavior that troubled him in life became the subject of his fiction. In “Childhood,” Zorin writes, “...Tolstoy shifted to the reconstruction of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of a ten-year-old boy, one of the first such endeavors in world literature. Placing his book on the thin borderline between the autobiographical and fictional, he managed to present his personal experience as universal without losing a feeling of total authenticity. Later this technique would become the unmistakable trademark of Tolstoy’s narratives.”

He used his family and friends as models for his fictional characters. “‘I took Tanya [his sister-in-law], added Sonya [his wife], stirred it up and got Natasha’ once said Tolstoy listing the ingredients of his most charming female character...”

But then, as Tolstoy wrote and “edited” — which was actually waves of rewriting — the characters took on lives of their own.

For example, in an early version of “Anna Karenina,” Zorin writes that Anna “is a lascivious animal, not so much morally corrupt as inherently immoral. The other characters see her as possessed by a ‘devil,’ an evil force or, in Schopenhauerian terms, the will to live. When she gets pregnant by Udashev (Vronsky), Anna’s wet eyes shine with happiness. As was by now his custom, Tolstoy made things more subtle and less straightforward as he rewrote the novel. If the ‘will to live’ or ‘force of life,’ as Tolstoy called it in the epigraph to one of the chapters, is irresistible, how could one possibly blame Anna?”

Zorin, who is a cultural historian and chair of Russian at Oxford University, brings his rich knowledge of Russia’s political life and personalities, philosophical, social and religious trends to his task. He places Tolstoy’s anarchism in context, writing “Tolstoy was a contemporary and a compatriot of such leading figures in the history of European anarchism as Mikhail Bakunin and Piotr Kropotkin. All three of them were aristocratic intellectuals who looked for ideals in the life of Russian peasant communes, in the stubborn resistance of sectarians and Old Believers to the official Church and central authorities, in Cossack settlements providing military support to the crown, but defying state bureaucracy in their way of life. No less important for Tolstoy were the numberless wanderers, pilgrims and beggars who left their homes and villages to search for God. The utopian vision of life without a state, masters or an official Church is no less important for Russian intellectual tradition and popular aspirations than its antithesis: unswerving trust in the secular and spiritual authorities. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky represented the two trends.”

And so we follow Tolstoy, dipping into his novels and other writing — Zorin’s serious treatment of his treatises and educational materials is particularly interesting — pausing for some help understanding the political situation or Russian cultural values, as he heads inexorably to the train station in Astapovo. There in his flight from his family and all that tethered him to everyday life, he becomes ill and is taken into the little station house where he inadvertently gives the world its first glimpse of the cult of celebrity in the future. “Within a day,” Zorin writes, “the little railway station became the main provider of breaking news to

the whole world from Japan to Argentina. Reporters, photographers, cameramen, government officials, police agents, admirers and gawpers started swarming to Astapovo. Tolstoy's flight brought him further into the limelight. Trying to evade the advance of modernity, he had contributed to its triumph by creating one of the first global media events."

He would have hated it, had he known.

Chapter 4: A Fugitive Celebrity

Since the time he suddenly left university at the age of eighteen, Tolstoy's life had been full of forced breaks and abrupt departures. He resigned from the army, stopped teaching at his school and gave up managing his estate. He rejected the dissolute life he had led in his youth and then the respectable lifestyle of a rich landowner. He abandoned the Orthodox Church and the social class into which he had been born. He also made several attempts to break up with literature, but each time he had returned to writing.

In October 1864 Tolstoy fell from his horse and broke his arm while hunting. After an unsuccessful intervention by local doctors, the bone started to heal in the wrong way and it became clear that a new operation would be necessary. This was performed in Moscow at the house of his father-in-law, who made sure to engage the best surgeons in the country. According to the memoirs of Tatiana Kuzminskaya, having received the first dose of anaesthetic, Tolstoy 'jumped up from the armchair with wide-open staring eyes, threw away the sachet of chloroform and shouted loudly: "My friends, one can't live like this . . . I think . . . I have decided . . .". He was given another dose, calmed down and the operation went successfully.

Whatever Tolstoy had 'decided' in his delirium, the urge to liberate himself from something he cherished always lived inside him. The stronger the bonds were, the more desperate he was to break them, however painful it was – particularly if it was painful. There was nothing in the world he valued more than family. In spite of or because of this, even during the happiest periods of his life he could not rid himself of a yearning to escape. In the early 1880s, when he renounced the Church, money, property, authorship, meat, tobacco, alcohol, hunting and so on, these thoughts became obsessive. 'He cried today loudly that his most passionate thought was to leave the family,' wrote Sofia in her diary on 26 August 1882. 'Even on my deathbed I will not forget the sincerity of his exclamation; it was as if my heart had been cut from inside me'.

Tolstoy was experiencing an almost physiological need to leave behind his 'position as a famous writer' and a comfortable life and to join the thousands of homeless wanderers who lived off nothing more than the fruits of their daily labour and alms. One of his younger disciples once asked him where a true follower of Tolstoy's religion was supposed to dine. 'Don't be worried,' came the mentor's answer, 'whoever needs you, will feed you.'¹ He was unable to perceive Sofia's attitude towards him as love, and he wrote in his diary on 5 May 1884: 'Dreamed that my wife loved me. How simple and clear everything became! Nothing like that in real life. And that's what is ruining my life . . . It would be good to die'. Several weeks later, after an argument with Sofia, who had accused him of financial recklessness, he packed his bag and left home. He 'wanted to leave for good', but her advanced pregnancy made him 'turn back halfway to Tula'.

The next morning their last daughter, Alexandra, was born. His urge to leave did not recede. Late in 1885 Sofia wrote to her sister Tatiana that Leo had told her he wanted to divorce her and go to Paris or America, as 'he can't bear to live like this.' By the end of the row that followed, according to Sofia, Leo was sobbing hysterically: 'Can you imagine, Levochka shaking and twitching from sobs. Twelve years later, in the midst of the family crisis over Sofia's infatuation with Taneyev, Tolstoy wrote her a farewell letter:

Dear Sonya, I have been long tormented by the incongruity between my heart and my beliefs. I have not been able to make you change your life or your habits, to which I have myself accustomed you and up to now I haven't been able to leave you . . . Neither was I able to continue living any longer the way I have been living for the last sixteen years, now struggling and irritating you; now yielding to the temptations to which I was accustomed and by which I was surrounded, and I have now decided to do what I have long wished to do – to go away.

Tolstoy did not deliver this letter and did not leave either. He believed the Gospels compelled him to leave his family and everyone he held dear in order to follow his calling, but he was also convinced that universal love could manifest itself only through love to those who are close by. It was, after all, a sudden feeling of compassion towards his wife and son that had allowed Ivan Ilyich to renounce his animal egotism and die peacefully.

Tolstoy's enemies and followers alike accused him of hypocrisy. He was pained by these reproaches, but able to withstand them because he knew them to be false. The pleasures derived from everyday comforts would never be able to influence his decisions. He was less sure about the temptations of lust and earthly fame. His struggle with both of these is evident in Father Sergius, a piece in which the intensity of contained passion is breathtaking even by the standards of Tolstoy's prose. Tolstoy spent most of the 1890s devising and writing this story before it was completed in 1898. It was never published in his lifetime. The story starts with a description of the sensational disappearance of a highly successful person:

In Petersburg in the eighteen-forties a surprising event occurred. An officer of the Cuirassier Life Guards, a handsome prince who everyone predicted would become aide-de-camp to Emperor Nicholas I and have a brilliant career, left the service, broke off his engagement to a beautiful maid of honour, a favourite of the Empress's, gave his small estate to his sister and retired to a monastery to become a monk.

Prince Stepan Kasatsky changes his life so dramatically because his bride confesses to him that, before their engagement, she had been a mistress of the emperor. This discovery turns Kasatsky's love into a sham and exposes the futility of his ambitious aspirations. Religious beliefs he has preserved from his childhood save him and guide him to a monastery where he takes holy orders as Father Sergius. From there he retires to a remote cell where he leads an ascetic life of prayer and abstinence. His solitude is, however, marred by recurrent doubts about his choice and by carnal desires. In one of his worst moments he is tempted by an eccentric aristocratic beauty, who comes to his cell specially intending to seduce the handsome hermit. Father Sergius manages to resist the temptation only by cutting off one of his fingers.

This incident, which soon becomes public knowledge, makes the recluse immensely popular and gives rise to rumours about his healing powers. More and more people flocked to him and

less and less time was left him for prayer and for renewing his spiritual strength . . . He knew he would hear nothing new from these folk, that they would arouse no religious emotion in him, but he liked to see the crowd to which his blessing and advice was necessary and precious, so while that crowd oppressed him, it also pleased him.

Tolstoy was thinking of himself, his newly acquired status as a prophet and of the crowds of people who came to seek his advice. His son remembers that, after the departure of a particularly annoying guest, Leo would start jumping wildly through the rooms of his house followed by a line of hilarious children. They used to call this silent ritual of liberation 'Numidian cavalry'. His daughter Tatiana once asked him about a strangely clad man in his room. 'He is a young member of what's to me the world's most strange and incomprehensible sect,' responded her father, 'the tolstoyans.'

In May 1893 he noted in his diary that 'as soon as a person is able to free himself a little from the sin of lust, he immediately stumbles and falls into the worse pit of human fame'. Thus it was necessary not 'to destroy existing bad reputation, but to value it as a means to avoid the greatest temptation . . . I need to elaborate on this topic in "Father Sergius". It is worth it'.

The limits of Father Sergius's pretended saintliness are laid bare by a plump, imbecilic and sexually voracious merchant's daughter, who makes him succumb to the desires of the flesh. The world of the hermit and his faith are ruined. 'As usual at moments of despair, he felt a need of prayer. But there was no one to pray to. There was no God'. Tolstoy initially planned to make the hermit kill the girl, but that would have made the story a second version of his earlier novella, *The Devil*.

Instead Tolstoy transformed the story of sex and murder into one of escape. In a trademark paradox, ugly sin liberates Father Sergius from the slavery of earthly fame and enables him to serve God by serving people. The hermit leaves his cell and is saved from utter destitution by a hapless old childhood friend, who lives a life of self-sacrifice supporting her desperate daughter, sickly and useless son-in-law and two grandchildren, without ever thinking that she is doing anything good or moral. Father Sergius becomes a wandering beggar, is arrested and exiled to Siberia. There he settles down, working in the kitchen garden of a well-to-do peasant, teaching his children and attending to the sick.

This ending seems to have been borrowed from another escape story Tolstoy considered writing in the 1890s. Posthumous Notes of the Elder Fyodor Kuzmich were based on a popular legend about Alexander I, according to which the emperor, known as a mystic and visionary, did not die in 1825, as had been officially announced, but escaped and lived under the assumed name of Fyodor Kuzmich. Fyodor was a real person. Like Father Sergius, he had wandered around Russia and been arrested for vagrancy and exiled. In his old age he lived in Siberia working in the kitchen garden of a merchant and teaching peasant children in return for meals – the old man never took money. Fyodor died in 1864, leaving behind some encoded papers. His identity was never revealed.

Tolstoy was inclined to believe the legend, but he did not write the story. He had too many other commitments in the 1890s to be able to bury himself in the documents and achieve the historical accuracy and sense of truthfulness he required. The themes of sudden escape, downturn in lifestyle, arrest and manual labour in a Siberian kitchen garden were transferred

to Father Sergius...

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“Leo Tolstoy” has been shortlisted for the 2021 Pushkin House Book Prize.

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