

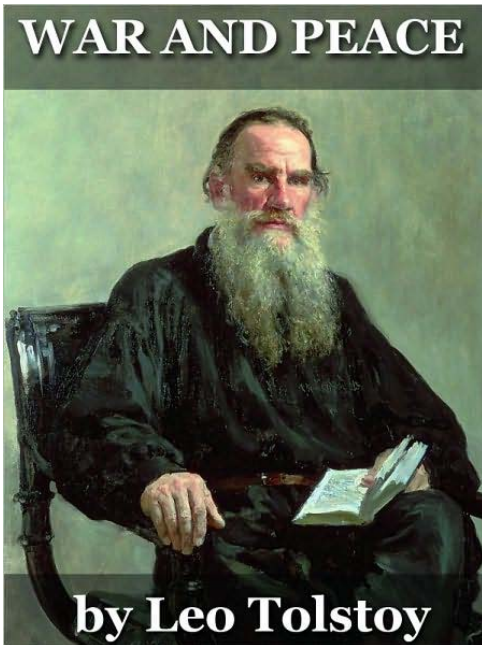
War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy

A new translation (2008) by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky

and The Last Station

a film/video, directed by Michael Hoffman

Reviewed by Stephen Carter 468-0517

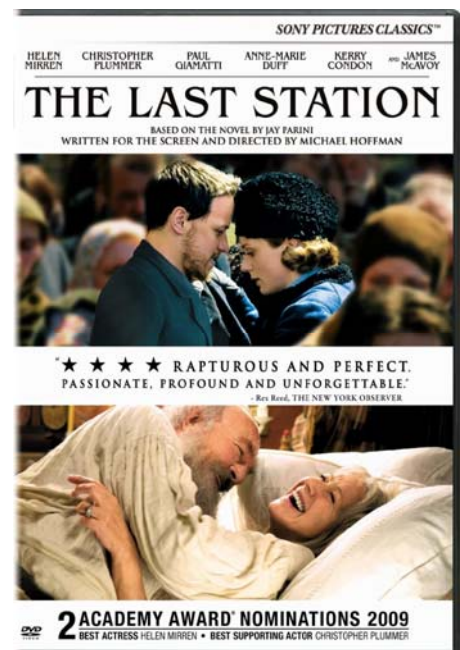


War and Peace is a very fat book. Until now, that is the reason I avoided reading it. What tipped the balance was a biographical film drama called “The Last Station” available in video at Lopez Library. Marvelous performances by Helen Mirren and Christopher Plummer portray the privileged, rural estate life of the Russian aristocracy and Count Leo Tolstoy’s involvement with a utopian movement idealizing a back-to-the-earth, cooperative lifestyle. Dreamy, cantankerous old man Tolstoy wears a peasant smock to the table while servants ladle soup out of silver tureens to his corseted and velvet jacketed relatives. A quarrel with his wife over his book royalties plummets the family into crisis just weeks before the revered author’s death. Tolstoy wanted to bequeath the profits from War and Peace to the utopians.

The very fatness of that book (1,273 pages) began then to seem less intimidating and more of an attraction as the long evenings of another Lopez Winter stretched before me. It proved to be a compelling read, even a page-turner in some stretches. The large cast of characters is helpfully annotated in a list at the front of the book. Keeping track of who loves who is almost as complicated as living on Lopez.

It is difficult to say that the book is about the devout and thoughtful Princess Marya, or her sadly cynical, but noble brother, Andrei, or the affectionate, naïve, and idealistic Pierre, or the passionate, vital Natalya; even though all these and many more become real people for the reader, full of inconsistencies and internal conflicts. Each of these becomes a central character at different points in the narrative and each time Tolstoy slowly reels the reader into their psychological core. “Yes, yes,” you say, “I have felt that.” But wait, can I really be all these different men and women?

The answer is yes. You and Tolstoy require all these personalities because he is writing about humanity in the grip of historic crisis. He is attempting to evolve a Theory of Humanity, or alternatively a Theory of History. The least readable portions of the book are when he attempts to elucidate his theory in the abstract, for example in the final thirty-six pages, part two of the epilogue. I dutifully plowed through that last bit, not so much because it has much bearing on the rest of the novel, but because, by then, the character that interests you is Leo Tolstoy himself. What exactly has he got stuck in his craw?



The human race is what's bugging him. Why on earth did six hundred thousand Frenchmen and assorted Western Europeans follow Napoleon to Moscow, burning, pillaging, and murdering every step of the way; and then turn around and march home again? Was it for Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality? Was it because Napoleon was a genius?

I am not sure that Tolstoy answers this question conclusively for himself or for the reader, except insofar as to say;

- A. Napoleon was an egotistical, cowardly, psychopath.
- B. Whether or not he ordered the French Army to invade Russia has little to do with the fact that six hundred thousand men actually did it.
- C. Massive, violent, social movements are irrational, and often, irresistible tidal movements governed by unknown causes.

But remember, Tolstoy has multiple personalities. Only one of his voices is compelled to write dry, repetitive philosophical tracts. His other voices are often psychologically incisive, or mystical and poetic. Young Petya, just before galloping into a hail of bullets, falls into a reverie while a peasant sharpens his saber with a whetstone in which all of creation constitutes a sort of a Bach fugue.

*Petya began to close his eyes and rock.*

*Drops dripped. Quiet talk went on. Horses neighed and scuffled. Someone snored. "Ozhik, zhik, ohzik, zhik..." whistled the saber being sharpened. And suddenly Petya heard a harmonious chorus of music, playing some unknown, solemnly sweet hymn.*

Or, as Pierre wanders bare-foot away from Moscow as a prisoner of war:

*The previously destroyed world was arising in his soul with a new beauty, on some new and unshakeable foundations.*

Tolstoy roots himself finally in a native, mystical, Russian folk wisdom, "Man proposes, God disposes." says the Zen-like peasant soldier Karataev. In war, as in peace, human objectives do not always correspond with the outcome. The end does not justify the means. All we can do is to persevere, to love, and to try not to do harm.