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Russian Peasants in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* - Idealized and Instrumentalized

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Abstract

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy challenges Western European notions of Russian backwardness and 'barbarity' through his depiction of the virtuousness, spiritual wisdom, and rich cultural traditions of the common Russian people. This idealized portrayal of Russian peasants and soldiers is essential to Tolstoy's construction of a Russian national myth that unites members of all social classes behind a shared set of values. However, in turning the Russian peasantry into idealized, oversimplified caricatures that lack individuality, complexity, agency, and the ability for critical thought, Tolstoy reduces these characters to mere instruments that provide morally edifying lessons to Russia's elites. This imposition of an essentializing and instrumentalizing narrative on the peasant class, weakens Tolstoy's national myth and mirrors the orientalist depiction of Russia perpetuated by the West.

INTRODUCTION

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy responds to the notion of *Eastern Europe* that was developed during the Enlightenment age in eighteenth-century Western Europe and remained pervasive during the Napoleonic wars and beyond.¹ According to the historian Larry Wolff, the West created the complement to their own "civilized" nations in the notion of "shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism" in the East.² This constructed opposition between East and West functioned as a means of intellectual and cultural domination over Eastern Europe.³ It often employed orientalist tropes to highlight supposed "ontological and epistemological differentiation between Orient and Occident."⁴ In *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy provides a

contradictory, positive Russian national narrative in response to this prejudiced Western conception of Russian primitivism. Tolstoy's main characters are all educated, cultured members of the Russian aristocracy, who clearly demonstrate the falsity of the Western notion of a simple, barbaric Russia. More notably, Tolstoy creates a positive national narrative about the simple Russian people of the lower peasant classes that defies the derogatory definition of Russian life and culture imposed by the West. He highlights their unique virtuousness, spiritual wisdom, and cultural traditions. This depiction of the virtuousness of the simple Russian people is essential to Tolstoy's creation of a national myth that unites members of all social classes through their shared virtues and uniquely Russian identity, negating and overturning the orientalizing Western narrative. However, in

¹ "Introduction." *Inventing Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, by Larry Wolff, Stanford University Press, 2010, p. 4.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴ Said, Edward W., and Hans Günter Holl. *Orientalism*. S. Fischer, 2019, p. 11.

turning them into idealized, oversimplified caricatures, Tolstoy instrumentalizes the Russian lower classes to provide morally edifying lessons to Russia's elites. Tolstoy's national myth is weakened by his manipulative essentialization of the lower classes for the ideological purpose of creating a unified Russian national identity.

TOLSTOY'S NATIONAL MYTH AND THE RUSSIAN PEASANTS

Tolstoy satirizes the European perception of Russia primarily through the character of Napoleon, who is depicted as a ridiculous, arrogant egomaniac. The French emperor disparagingly describes Moscow as an "Asiatic city," whose great number of churches and monasteries are a sign of Russia's "backwardness."⁵ Napoleon imagines himself as a liberator, who will spare the Russians and introduce them to civilized life: "On the ancient monuments of barbarism and despotism, I will write great words of justice and mercy."⁶ Envisioning how the Russians will thank him for bringing them out of their supposed barbaric state, he muses, "I will make the generations of boyars remember the name of their conqueror with love."⁷ Here, Tolstoy not only mocks Napoleon's vanity; he also demonstrates the emperor's ignorance, as the "boyars" that Napoleon orders his generals to bring to him, were a privileged order of the medieval Russian aristocracy that had been abolished a century earlier by Peter the Great.⁸

In response to such Western ignorance and disparaging prejudice against Russia, Tolstoy, in *War and Peace*, constructs a national myth for his country, to redefine Russian nationalism

and create a new, unified Russian identity. But a viable national myth cannot be born solely from the cultured and educated, yet highly westernized Russian aristocratic elites, who made up only a small fraction of the Russian population. In his sweeping study of nationalism, *Nationalism: Concepts in Social Thought*, Craig Calhoun suggests that a common national identity requires the integration of members of different classes and a sense of belonging and solidarity between them.⁹ Tolstoy seems to recognize the importance of such inclusivity, as the national myth he creates in *War and Peace* assigns a key symbolic role to the Russian peasants and commoners, highlighting their virtues, spirituality, and folk wisdom as essential elements of the Russian identity. This idealized conception of the simple Russian people is embodied most notably in the peasant soldier Platon Karataev, who is imprisoned alongside Pierre. He is anything but barbaric, characterized as the personification of "everything Russian, kindly, and round," an unfathomable "eternal embodiment of the spirit of simplicity and truth."¹⁰ The narrator appeals to the reader's senses to evocatively describe Platon's virtuousness. Pierre first notices Platon's "strong smell of sweat," which conveys his simple, hardworking nature.¹¹ Repeated references to Platon's tender voice reflect his kind, gentle nature: he speaks with that "melodious gentleness with which old Russian women speak" and addresses everyone warmly as "little falcon."¹² Platon approaches strangers with an "expression of tenderness and simplicity" and befriends Pierre through a gesture of generosity, giving him potatoes and showing him how to eat them with salt, so that it seems to Pierre "that he had never eaten anything tastier."¹³ These repeated

⁵ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 625, 871.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 872.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 871, 1241.

⁹ "Introduction & The Modernity and Diversity of Nationalism." *Nationalism: Concepts in Social Thought*, by Craig Calhoun, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 4.

¹⁰ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 972-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 969.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 970.

appeals to the senses reflect how Platon guides Pierre to experience the world from a different perspective, learning to glean pure happiness from simple pleasures.

Platon also symbolizes the simple, yet profound folk wisdom of the Russian peasants, speaking in a pattern of folk sayings, some of which connect to his faith, “man proposes, God disposes,” some teaching resilience, “You suffer an hour, you live an age,” others encouraging bravery in the face of suffering, “Lament for your sickness and God won’t grant you death.”¹⁴ These Russian folk sayings convey the peasant virtues embodied by Platon, who is always kind, generous, happy, grateful, and hopeful. Although they seem insignificant when heard separately, they “suddenly acquire a profoundly wise significance when spoken aptly,” conveying a higher meaning that Platon himself is not aware of. Even Platon’s contradictory statements seem to be true and seemingly banal stories acquire “a character of solemn seemliness.”¹⁵ Platon lacks any true reflective capacity, speaking with an “immediacy and promptness” that makes it seem as if his words “had always been ready in his mouth and flew out of it inadvertently.”¹⁶ This unperturbed frankness and utter unawareness of his own speech contrast sharply with the often deceptive and calculated speech of the aristocrats. Unlike their noble masters, the peasant class is depicted as a people whose lack of self-reflection allows them to be more honest, so that their words convey a deeper truth. However, this representation of Platon as a frank but senseless peasant is mediated through the perspective of his noble interlocutor Pierre, betraying the narrator’s own subjective approach to the peasant class.

Platon’s lack of reflection reveals a sense of contentment and inner happiness that differentiates him clearly

from Pierre’s restlessness and spiritual anguish. Apparently, peasants derive inner happiness from their simple approach to life. Rather than falling victim to vices like greed, resentment, or jealousy, Platon recognizes the joy of simple pleasures and finds meaning in a modest life. Even as a prisoner, while suffering great physical privations, he contends that “we live here, thank God, with no offense” because his soul is free and he finds happiness within himself.¹⁷ This sense of contentment and positivity allows Platon to approach everyone with indiscriminate love: “He loved and lived lovingly with everything that life brought his way ... he loved his mutt, his comrades, the French, he loved Pierre, who was his neighbor.”¹⁸ He even addresses his French captors as “little falcons” and recognizes their shared humanity: “People say they’re heathenish, but they’ve got souls, too.”¹⁹ Their simple lifestyle causes peasants like Platon to develop an inner contentedness and positivity that allows them to find value both in their own life and in others.

Tolstoy also conveys the shared virtues of the common Russian people through his depiction of simple Russian soldiers. He describes the encounter of a pair of lost, injured French soldiers, Ramballe and Morel, with a Russian encampment. The Russian soldiers demonstrate humanity and generosity, welcoming the two Frenchmen into their midst and showing them kindness: “The soldiers surrounded the Frenchmen, laid the sick man on an overcoat, and brought some kasha and vodka for them both.”²⁰ These simple men even jokingly try to learn a French song from Morel, despite their enmity and the language barrier between them. The narrator paints a scene full of warmth and joy, vividly describing the Russian soldiers’ “joyful guffawing,” “mocking winks,” and “smiling” glances.²¹ Their

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 971, 969, 1061.

¹⁵ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 973.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 970.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 971.

¹⁹ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 1012.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 1094.

²¹ Ibid., p. 1095-6.

kindness has an infectious impact on the two Frenchmen and Morel is soon “puckering up and laughing” along with the Russians. Through repetition, the narrator emphasizes Ramballe’s gratefulness: “Oh mes braves, oh, mes bons, mes bons amis! Voila des hommes...”²² This small scene of humanity conveys that the simple Russian men who fought for their country, were guided by those innate values that Tolstoy associates with the Russian folk spirit. Their powerful demonstration of virtuousness contrasts sharply with the much less ‘civilized’ behavior of the French soldiers in Moscow, who pillage and loot the city, assault vulnerable citizens, and subject their prisoners to cruel sham (and actual) executions. Through this contrast, Tolstoy reverses the traditional East/West narrative and identifies the supposedly enlightened French as the true barbarians.

In addition to extolling the virtues of the common Russian people, Tolstoy refuses to submit to Western definitions of civilization and celebrates elements of Russian culture that the West perceives as ‘barbaric’. *War and Peace* highlights the essential role that the decidedly un-European tactic of Cossack partisan warfare played in Russia’s victory. In an analytical essayistic passage, Tolstoy constructs a metaphor for the war: two men with swords are fighting a duel by the rules, but one of them is wounded, and, “realizing that it was not a joking matter, but something that concerned his life, threw down his sword and, picking up the first club he found, started brandishing it.”²³ The French troops fought by the rules of traditional European warfare, but the Russians realized that they must resort to more unconventional strategies, primary amongst them the use of partisan warfare, to win.²⁴ Small groups of Cossacks attacked larger elements of the French army, then quickly retreated

before the grouped forces could launch a counter-attack. While the French and even some “highly placed Russians” found this unconventional strategy “shameful” and primitive, the power of the Russian people prevailed.²⁵

The club of a national war was raised with all its terrible and majestic power, and, not asking about anyone’s tastes or rules, with stupid simplicity, but with expediency, not sorting anything out, rose and fell, and hammered on the French until the whole invasion was destroyed.²⁶

The pathos of adjectives like “terrible and majestic” and the powerful image of a club representing the national might of the Russian people “hammering” down on the French, convey the power of Tolstoy’s national myth born out of the war of 1812. The Cossacks, as famous symbols of the Russian cultural and military tradition, prove to be more “expedient” and effective than the approach of the “civilized’ Western forces, leading the Russian people to victory and ending the seemingly endless suffering of war.

Tolstoy closely ties this success of the Russian army over the French to the essential role played by the common Russian soldiers, simple peasants whose unified efforts and “spirit” are presented as the key element or “unknown x,” that allowed Russia to win.²⁷ By highlighting the powerful force of the united Russian people, the narrator challenges a common orientalizing trope employed by Napoleon earlier in the novel, when he personifies Moscow as an “Oriental beauty lying before him” and imagines that his army will rape her, comparing an envisioned occupied Moscow to “a girl who has lost her honor.”²⁸ According to Edward Said, author of the seminal work *Orientalism*, the use of the term ‘oriental’ in the 19th century was categorically synonymous with conceptions of Eastern or

²² Ibid.

²³ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 1032.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 1033.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 1034.

²⁸ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 872.

'oriental' people's "sensuality, despotic tendencies, abnormality, slovenliness, and backwardness."²⁹ Tolstoy defies such orientalist notions of Russia as an exotic victim ravaged by the West, by celebrating the determination and courage of the Russian commoners who made up the majority of the army. Through his celebration of the virtuous spirit of the Russian soldiers and the success of traditional Cossack warfare, Tolstoy redefines Russia's people, culture, and traditions as an asset rather than a weakness. This is the crux of Tolstoy's complex and powerful national myth: it challenges the Western narrative of Russian backwardness, not by conforming to European definitions of civilization, but by demonstrating the virtues of Russia's own unique culture and values.

TOLSTOY'S PEASANTS: ESSENTIALIZED AND INSTRUMENTALIZED

Tolstoy's portrayal of 'primitive' Russia creates a cultural setting for a new Russian national identity, united by common values, folk wisdom, and tradition. However, to create this Russian national myth, Tolstoy grossly oversimplifies and idealizes the peasant class, providing no insight into their interiority. The scenes of simple Russian life in *War and Peace* convey a general sense of the Russian spirit

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without engaging with individual characters, often referring to them only as "the soldiers" or "the muzhiks."³⁰ Even Platon, a character more pivotal to the narrative, is only perceived by the reader through the lens of Pierre's biased perspective and without an insight into Platon's individual thoughts, struggles, and hopes.

Tolstoy even implies that the peasants do not have any true individual interiority or autonomy at all, echoing some of the very tropes that Western Europeans broadly applied to Russia. Similes comparing Platon to plants and animals demonstrate the basic instincts that supposedly drive the Russian peasants' words and actions: Platon sings not like a man who knows he is being listened to, "but as birds do, apparently because it was necessary for him to utter those sounds."³¹ Similarly, he speaks and acts "as evenly, necessarily, and immediately as fragrance comes from a flower."³² Through these zoomorphizing similes, Tolstoy paints a picture of the simple-minded, unreflecting, and passive nature of the peasants and their "folkish ways."³³

These comparisons reflect Tolstoy's personal prejudices against peasants in his early years. Although he later became an advocate for the impoverished Russian peasantry, establishing a school for peasant children and adopting an ascetic, primitive lifestyle, the author's younger years were

²⁹ Said, Edward W., and Hans Günter Holl. *Orientalismus*. S. Fischer, 2019, p. 235.

³⁰ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 841, 735.

³¹ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 973.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

characterized by a very different mindset.³⁴ In fact, during the serial publication of *War and Peace* in *The Russian Messenger*, Tolstoy wrote that he considered peasants' lives "uninteresting and half unintelligible" and was therefore unable and unwilling to write about them.³⁵ He provocatively defended his choice to depict them as abstract ideals rather than thinking individuals in his diary and letters, describing peasants' thoughts as so inaccessible to him as the thoughts of a cow "while she is being milked" or a horse when it is "pulling a barrel."³⁶

In addition to employing such animalistic comparisons in his portrayal of Platon in *War and Peace*, the narrator also describes him as lacking any awareness of his own individuality—he perceives the meaning of his life "only as part of the whole, which he constantly sensed."³⁷ Platon's innate, instinctual actions, his lack of individual aims and motivations, and his sole purpose as a part of a collective, reduce him to a peasant caricature, rather than a real thinking and feeling individual.

An unusual scene of peasant revolt in *War and Peace*, when the Bolkonsky muzhiks refuse to aid Princess Marya in her flight from Bald Hills, initially seems to contradict this conception of peasants as simple-minded people, as well as contradicting Tolstoy's idealized depiction of the peasants' innate Russian virtuousness. But although this brief scene of revolt seemingly provides an insight into some peasants' more complex inner workings, their opposition is extremely easily curtailed. The moment the noble Nikolai Rostov intervenes, the headman Dron voluntarily takes off his own belt to allow them to restrain him, while the other peasants meekly admit that they acted "out of stupidity. Just a lot of nonsense."³⁸ Despite their quick subservience, one might nevertheless interpret this scene

as a contradiction of Tolstoy's broader idealization of the peasants as paragons of Russian virtue. But in fact, this scene serves as a reminder that, according to Tolstoy, the peasants' virtue comes not from conscious cognition and intelligent thought, but from something innate and unconscious within them. As long as the peasants let themselves be guided by their inner folk spirit, they remain idealized symbols of Russian virtue, who inspire the aristocratic characters around them to rediscover and return to their Russian identities. Only when the peasants attempt to think consciously and critically like their masters, do they stray from this virtuous path.

In addition to depicting the peasants as innately virtuous but simple-minded commoners, who lack a deeper interiority and individual autonomy, Tolstoy instrumentalizes this primitive Russian peasant ideal for his own ideological end. As idealized symbols of the virtuous, simple Russian peasant life, these characters function as providers of moral lessons that bring about the personal growth of the central, far more complex aristocratic characters. Indeed, in many scenes, the Russian soldiers and peasants merely provide a charming backdrop, before which the aristocratic characters' maturation arcs are able to develop. When Pierre stumbles upon some soldiers on his visit to the Battle of Borodino, this new, unprecedented contact with real, regular Russian people marks an important step in his spiritual transformation. They address him kindly, expressing their willingness to share their food with him, as long as he tells them that he is "an honest man," reflecting the ideal of simple Russian generosity perpetuated through the novel.³⁹ However, the role of these soldiers remains entirely instrumental—they spark the transformation of this central character's identity from the frenchified Count Pierre to a noble

³⁴ Bartlett, Rosamund. *Tolstoy - A Russian Life*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, p. 3.

³⁵ Tolstoy, Leo. "Extracts from Tolstoy's Letters and Diaries." *The Author on the Novel*, p. 1088.

³⁶ Feuer, Kathryn. "The Book That Became War and Peace." 1959, p. 1146.

³⁷ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 1146.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 735.

³⁹ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 841.

Russian, who realigns himself with the common people by adopting the name Pyotr Kirillovich. But although these soldiers create the welcoming, folksy setting in which Pierre begins his notable transformation, introducing him to the vitality of the united Russian people, the individual men are not even referred to by name, but remain “soldiers.”⁴⁰

Similarly, Platon Karataev functions as a striking example of this instrumentalization of the ideal peasant for Tolstoy's broader project of national myth creation. Through his simple, content way of life he acts as a spiritual father, who inadvertently brings about Pierre's recognition that “man is created for happiness” and that this happiness is already within him, “brought about through the satisfying of natural human needs.”⁴¹ When Pierre learns to appreciate basic creature comforts like food and rest, he realizes that his prior unhappiness stemmed not from a lack, from the superfluity of his extravagant lifestyle.⁴² Thus, Pierre finally finds inner, spiritual freedom and recognizes that his soul cannot be contained, so that the idea of the French holding him prisoner becomes absurd: “They're holding me prisoner. Who, me? Me? Me --- my immortal soul! Hahaha!”⁴³ But when Pierre's transformation is complete and he has embraced the simple Russian values of happiness, gratitude, and spiritual freedom, he discards Platon like an object that has fulfilled its only purpose. He demonstrates a jarring lack of compassion for Platon, becoming disgusted and afraid of this weak, ailing peasant. Pierre selfishly deserts Platon in the final moments before the peasant's execution: “Karataev looked at Pierre with his kind, round eyes, now veiled with tears, and was evidently calling him over, wanting to say something. But Pierre was too afraid for himself. He pretended that he had not seen his look and hurriedly walked away.”⁴⁴ This devastating ungratefulness

towards his kind and generous spiritual guide cements Platon's role as a dispensable mere means. The narrator's justification of Pierre's behavior further confirms this: he argues that now that Pierre has finally reached a state of happiness, he must shelter his soul from struggle by shifting his attention to more “joyful and calming thoughts” when he encounters suffering, “similar to the safety valve in steam engines, which releases the extra steam as soon as the pressure exceeds a certain norm.”⁴⁵ This simile presents Pierre's selfish protection of his fragile spiritual state as a legitimate excuse—Pierre is justified in abandoning Platon in his final moments because he must protect the mental balance that Platon helped him achieve. This thoughtless manner in which Pierre discards him after he has extracted his spiritual lesson is almost vampiric in nature, killing Platon, while Pierre emerges as an enlightened Russian aristocrat.

CONCLUSION

Tolstoy's idealization of the simple peasant life contributes to the creation of a Russian national myth, a strong contradiction of the orientalist, prejudiced narrative of Eastern European inferiority purported by the West. Tolstoy counteracts the narrative of a barbarian, primitive Russia through his depiction of both the educated, intellectual upper class, and his positive representation of the simple Russian people. One might argue that an oversimplification and idealization of the peasants is necessary in order for them to function as the symbol of Russia's folk tradition, culture, and virtue. Any true engagement with individual peasants' interiority would have destroyed their ideal symbolic function within Tolstoy's nationalist narrative. Indeed, their depiction as simple-minded but innately virtuous and unconsciously wise allows them to function as an

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 841.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 841.

⁴² Ibid., p. 1060.

⁴³ Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 2008, p. 1020.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 1065.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 1060.

inspiration for the novel's aristocratic characters, who toe the line between their Russian identities and Europeanized upbringings. Thus, the ideal peasants serve as symbols that lead Tolstoy's noble main characters away from their frenchified ways and back to their native Russian identities.

Nevertheless, this essentialization of the peasants diminishes the proud Russian narrative and rebuttal of anti-Eastern European prejudices that Tolstoy is trying to convey. The missing insight into the interiority of individual peasants and soldiers, their lack of complexity or agency, their limited mental capacities, and their instrumentalization to further the character arcs of aristocratic main characters, diminish Tolstoy's national myth in *War and Peace*. They reveal that the depiction of 'true' Russianness in this defining national myth-making text of Russia, is in fact a false construction. It is based on the manipulative essentializing of the majority of the Russian people for Tolstoy's ideological purpose: the creation of a national myth that appeals to the Russian aristocracy and reminds them of their national origins and virtues. By imposing an oversimplified, essentializing, and instrumentalizing narrative on the peasants, Tolstoy echoes Napoleon's orientalizing of the Russian nation. In this way, Tolstoy's ideal, virtuous, and simple-minded peasants are no more real than the boyars Napoleon expected to encounter.

Said, Edward W., and Hans Günter Holl. *Orientalismus*. S. Fischer, 2019.

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ENDNOTES

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