

War and Peace: A Classic for the Times

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War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy truly is a mammoth of not only Russian literature, but also a world classic in its own right. Spanning over a thousand pages in most versions, the book depicts the Napoleonic wars from a Russian perspective. Tolstoy utilizes several characters that belong to the upper classes of 19th century Russian society. These characters in turn drive the plot and Tolstoy shifts between the personal lives of these upper-class representatives, narratives of the war between Russia and France, and his own philosophical interpretations regarding human ontology and individual agency.

By no means is War and Peace an easy read. Published serially between 1865 and 1869, the shift between narration, description, and philosophizing may make reading the book somewhat disorienting to the unassuming reader. The sheer volume of named characters also contributes to the intensity of the reading experience. While most main characters are from the Russian aristocracy, Tolstoy portrays the tensions between them and the Russian peasantry throughout the book.

The five main families (Bezukhovs, Bolkonskys, Rostovs, Kuragins, and Drubetskoys) are fictional but historical characters, not least Alexander II and Napoleon, also make appearances within the novel. Through the tripartite split between relationships, war narratives, and philosophical exposition, Tolstoy offers something for readers interested in different aspects of the human experience. However, none of these three elements are portrayed in a straightforwardly approving manner, and a clear skepticism of the human condition permeates the entire book.

From Tolstoy's use of his characters, fictional or historical, it becomes apparent that he held a critical view on what many call the "great man theory" of history. Meaning that he is critical of explaining political phenomenon primarily through the agency of great leaders. While largely left behind in modern historiography and political science, the analysis of "great" men has all too often taken a

disproportionate place in academic and media analyses. In *War and Peace*, leaders like Alexander I and Napoleon are portrayed as pretentious and arrogant, but ultimately subject to the elements outside of their control. The aristocrats are subject to their own vices and the conditions of war as much as the peasantry.

Pierre Bezukhov serves as a protagonist through *War and Peace*. Many literary critics claim his journey was largely based off Tolstoy's own experiences and serves as a conduit for Tolstoy's own inner voice. Pierre inherits wealth from his aristocratic father and navigates his way through the ways of high society, war, and relationships, seeking the ultimate truth in life. Pierre seeks meaning in life by seeking novelties and glory. He seeks heroism on the battlefield with the aim of killing Napoleon and he also joins a Freemason lodge seeking community. However, Pierre ultimately finds happiness and meaning through his marriage to Natasha and not in the pursuit of grandeur. In other words, he finds peace internally and not in external acquisitions.

Does this masterpiece have anything to say about contemporary affairs? Absolutely. Particularly in an era of increased militarism and antagonistic relationships between different blocks of states, the absolute lack of glory in, and the absolute absurdity of war is a much-needed breath of fresh air. Tolstoy writes from a Russian perspective, in that he analyses the Napoleonic wars as it pertains to the experience of Russia and does not attempt to portray the Russian side as valiant heroes at all. He portrays the hopelessness and vanity of human beings at war above all else and their submission to external circumstances and structures with undertones of religious (in his case Orthodox Christian) mysticism.

The interaction between individual agency against the structure has been a core debate with the discipline of political science and other social sciences. Tolstoy's perspective clearly lands on the structuralist side which downplays the role of individuals in the broader machinery of society and the state. Nevertheless, in this work, he does have a pessimistic interpretation of human agency and calls for an introspection to recognize the unconscious dependencies we are subject to. Tolstoy wrote roughly a century before social constructivism became a substantial school of thought in the political sciences, but it would have been fascinating if he could have had the chance to interact with that body of theoretical literature which stresses the contingency of human knowledge. The second epilogue of the book is essential reading for those interested in the structure-agent discussions in history and social sciences.

As a participant of the Calotte Academy 2025, I could not help but consider the links between this year's theme Europe between "militarization" and "the green transition" and Tolstoy's classic. We live in a time where climate policy ambitions are being scaled back in favour of military expenditure to "reassure" populations that war will not come to their people. The policy framing is almost always put forward as an "inevitable" decision that "needs" to be taken for the "survival" of the group in question. For example, Finland, a country with a strong tradition of peace work and innovative climate policy, stopped allocating grants to peace organizations in 2024, and is considering taxing electric vehicles.

Instead of contingent interpretations, we seem to have entered an era of essentialism where pre-decided conceptualizations of the “good” and the “evil” are hardened concepts and the only choice is to side with the “good” with no questioning as to what “good” actually means. Similarly, an excessive focus on the personality of contemporary leaders as opposed to broader underlying political causes of military conflict seems to be a problem that we still carry today.

Perhaps Tolstoy was right in asking for an introspection of the unconscious dependencies that human beings are subject to. If we want peace across societies and states, and peace between humanity and the climate, maybe it is time to accept our limitations and prepare for peace.