

LEO TOLSTOY

1828-1910

IN THE HISTORY OF NONVIOLENCE, TOLSTOY AND GANDHI OCCUPY special places; among Americans, only Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. enjoy such distinction. It was Tolstoy who confirmed the reputations of several American theoreticians: William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, and Adin Ballou, whose writings Tolstoy cited after his own conversion to "nonresistance," as he called it, in 1880. From then until his death in 1910, he wrote numerous letters, essays, and pamphlets that constitute a major library on the subject.

Tolstoy argued with such authority on the scriptural and biblical evidence for Christian nonviolence as to almost single-handedly transform a religious tradition or at least to redirect a significant minority of believers. Since then, many Christians have re-interpreted the social and political implications of their faith. Nonviolence, one might say, is the 19th century counterpart to liberation theology, which has had a similar effect in emphasizing the social implications of Christianity in recent times.

For Americans, Tolstoy's pamphlets have particular significance, since some are based upon his reading of 19th century abolitionists and anarchists whom he admired.

If I had to address the American people, I would like to thank them for their writers who flourished about the fiftiesAnd I should like to ask the American people why they do not pay more attention to these voices (hardly to be replaced by those of financial and industrial millionaires, or successful generals and admirals), and continue the good work in which they made such hopeful progress.

In a famous polemic, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894), Tolstoy spoke of the American Quakers who responded to his writings on nonviolence and he quoted extensively from Garrison's "Declaration of Sentiments Adopted by the Peace Convention" (1838) in Boston. Tolstoy also corresponded with Adin Ballou, the founder of the Hopedale Community, and co-founder of the first international peace society in 1854.

At a time when politicians justify an increase in nuclear weapons as a means of encouraging peace negotiations (the infamous "build-down theory" of the Reagan administration, for example), Tolstoy's conclusion to *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* seems especially relevant:

It has often been said that the invention of the terrible military instruments of murder will put an end to war, and that war will exhaust itself. This is not true. . . . Let them be exterminated by thousands and millions, let them be torn to pieces, men will still continue like stupid cattle to go to the slaughter, some because they are driven thither under the lash, others that they may win the decorations and ribbons which fill their hearts with pride.

In his pamphlets, as in the earlier novels, Tolstoy combined a practical and naturalistic eye for detail with a theoretical and moral vision. And at the end of his polemics, he returned to the central question posed by most Russian writers and intellectuals of the 19th century: "What is to be done?" In "Letter to the Liberals" (1896), for example, he answered that elemental question in this way:

Merely the simple, quiet, truthful carrying on of what you consider good and needful, quite independently of government and of whether it likes it or not. In other words: standing up for your rights, not as a member of the Literature Committee, not as a deputy, not as a landowner, not as a merchant, not even as a member

of Parliament; but standing up for your rights as a rational and free man, and defending them, not as the rights of local boards or committees are defended, with concessions and compromises, but without any concessions and compromises, in the only way in which moral and human dignity can be defended.

Born in Russia, on August 28, 1828 (old-style calendar), at Yasnaya Polyana, the family estate where he is buried, Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy was the fourth son of Count Nikolai Ilyich Tolstoy. Reared by an aunt after the death of his mother and father, he studied briefly at Kazan University, and as a young man spent much of his time gambling and drinking. Later, after studying law, he established a progressive school for children of the serfs on his estate. His first stories were published during his years in the army, at the time of the Crimean war. Leaving the army in 1856, he traveled about Western Europe, principally France and Germany. In 1863, the year after his marriage, he began work on *War and Peace* (1869). Various essays and fiction followed, including a second major novel, *Anna Karenina* (1878). Although his later fiction is sometimes regarded as inferior to these novels, its popularity steadily increases, particularly *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* (1886), *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1890), and *Resurrection* (1899).

Internationally famous at fifty, Tolstoy suddenly suffered from bouts of deep despair. In 1879 he wrote,

My question was the simplest of questions lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder: It was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was "What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?"

Re-reading the Old and New Testaments at this time, Tolstoy experienced a conversion to radical Christianity. Subsequently, he wrote extensive commentaries on the Bible, blaming the decline of Christianity, after Constantine, on the church's failure to live up to the religious pacifism of Jesus. Christianity had failed, Tolstoy argued, because it refused to disassociate itself

from political power, the sanctification of which he regarded as blasphemous, as the negation of Christianity. "In truth, the words a 'Christian state' resemble the words 'hot ice.' The thing is either not a State using violence, or it is not Christian," he argued.

In 1888, following the birth of her thirteenth and last child, Tolstoy's wife and his chief disciple, Chertkov, quarrelled. From then until the end of his life, the conflicts in the household worsened, as Tolstoy devoted himself to fiction, to Christian anarchism, and to the defense of his followers, the Dukhobers, who were exiled to Canada in 1899. In 1910, in the midst of another crisis at home, Tolstoy left Yasnaya Polyana and, on November 7 of that year, died of pneumonia at Astapovo, at age eighty-two. At his funeral two servants carried a banner at the head of the procession that read, "Dear Leo Nikolayevich, the memory of your greatness will not die among us, the orphaned peasants of Yasnaya Polyana."

Tolstoy's writings document the close relationship between peace and justice issues; and perhaps because he was writing to a most unsympathetic audience, in an era when the very idea of nonviolence was foreign to many Christians, his arguments retain their intensity and vigor a century later. For that reason, almost everyone committed to nonviolence, from Gandhi to the Catholic Worker Movement, from Martin Luther King, Jr., to the youngest draft resister, regards Tolstoy's pamphlets as basic texts.

Of the two great Russian novelists, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, one usually thinks of Dostoevsky as the more anguished, the person severely tested by the dichotomies of life, and by the evils to which human beings subject one another. But as a prince, as an aristocrat who had much to lose by his conversion, Tolstoy spent much of his later life on a pilgrimage. He died miles from his home, still searching, one might say, for

the proper way to live his life as a Christian pacifist.

BY LEO TOLSTOY

The Portable Tolstoy. Edited by John Bayley. New York: Penguin Books, 1978.

Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non- Violence. New York: Bergman Publishers, 1967.

And many others.

ABOUT LEO TOLSTOY

Simmons, Ernest J. *Introduction to Tolstoy's Writings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.