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The People's Aristocrat: Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy and Russian Populism

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The People's Aristocrat

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy and Russian Populism

By
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements
for the Department of History,
Dickinson College

Dean Neil Weissman, Supervisor
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April 22, 2010

A Note on Dates and Transliteration: As a matter of continuity, dates appear throughout this thesis according to the Julian (or “Old” in the Russian style) Calendar, which is approximately twelve days behind the standard Gregorian Calendar. Russia did not officially change to the Gregorian Calendar until February 1918, about four months after the Russian Revolution.

Unless otherwise noted, proper names – people and places specifically – have been rendered as they appeared in the translations acknowledged in the footnotes. All original Russian language documents used have been translated by the author. Any transliterations from these documents have been according to the Library of Congress System of Romanization.¹

¹ ALA-LC Romanization Tables, “Russian.” The Library of Congress.
<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/roman.html>. (Accessed April, 14, 2010).

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Introduction

In 1883, Ivan Turgenev – the famed author of *Fathers and Sons* – wrote the following to his contemporary, Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy: “My friend, return to literature!...My friend, great writer of the Russian land, heed my request!”² Although the two men frequently quarreled throughout their acquaintance with one another, Turgenev felt it necessary (as he was on the verge of death at the time) to beg his friend to return to the writing of novels and short stories. To the casual reader of Russian literature, this request may seem odd: the name Tolstoy – along with Turgenev, and Feodor Dostoevsky – has become synonymous with Russian literature. Revolutionary-era novelist Maxim Gorky once wrote in a letter to an acquaintance, “Tolstoy the writer is alive; he will be with us for ever...In a few years' time when you are a little older and begin to read Tolstoy's wonderful books, you will feel a deep joy, you will feel that he is immortal, that he is there with you, giving you hours of enjoyment through his art.”³ With works such as *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, and others, Tolstoy serves as a massive figure in the world of literature, revered for his epic tales of Russian life.

Tolstoy however, was far more than simply a novelist. As historian James Billington recognized, “Tolstoy was such a formidable figure that he transcends the environment in which he lived.”⁴ It is important therefore, to examine the whole of Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy – the writer and the man himself. Who was Tolstoy and what was this “environment” in which

² I.S. Turgenev to L.N. Tolstoy, July 11, 1883. Ed. A.V. Knowles, *Turgenev's Letters* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983) 294.

³ Maxim Gorky (A. Peshkov) to a Young Acquaintance, 1910. In Ed. A.V. Knowles, *Tolstoy: A Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, Keegan and Paul, 1978) 439.

⁴ James Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1966) 442.

he lived?

I. The Conflicting Art of a Conflicted Man: The Life of Tolstoy ⁵

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy was born on August 20, 1828 on the Yasnaya Polyana estate where he would spend the majority of his next eighty-two years. Tolstoy's parents were descended from two of the oldest noble families in Russia: his mother, Marya Nikolaevna Volkonsky came from a long line of nobles beginning with the Rurik Viking princes, and his father, Nicholas Ilyich Tolstoy traced his lineage back to the late seventeenth century in the time of Peter the Great.⁶ Within the first ten years of his life however, Tolstoy lost both of his parents: in 1830, his mother died not long after the birth of Tolstoy's sister Marya and in 1837, his father collapsed while strolling the streets of Moscow. Within the year, Tolstoy was placed in the care of his aunts at the family's Yasnaya Polyana estate.

In 1841, following the death of one of these aunts, Tolstoy and his family moved to Kazan, the capital of the present day republic of Tatarstan. There, only three years later, Tolstoy matriculated into Kazan University, beginning his study of both law and foreign languages. After only three years of study, Tolstoy left the University for St. Petersburg. Although he attempted to further his studies in St. Petersburg and take his law examinations, Tolstoy quickly decided to relocate once again. In 1849, he remarked to his brother, "I came to Petersburg without any reason, and have done nothing sensible here at all; I've only run through a pile of money and got into debt."⁷ He instead returned to Yasnaya Polyana and dove into several projects reforming and reorganizing his newly inherited estate. Over the next two

⁵ The information regarding Tolstoy's life is extensive. The author has primarily based his biographical account on the following few works. Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy* (London: Wordsworth, 2008). A.N. Wilson, *Tolstoy: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988). Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Vols. 1-2*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978).

⁶ One of the first Tolstoys, Peter, was directly involved in the "retrieval" of the Tsar's rebellious son Alexis, who was shortly thereafter tortured and secretly executed for allegedly betraying his father's throne.

⁷ Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy to Sergei Nikolaevich Tolstoy, May 1, 1849. Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978) 7.

years, he established smaller peasant schools and attempted to handle the issue of allotting land to his numerous serfs. These initial projects failed, however, and a dejected Tolstoy retreated into a life of numerous sexual exploits, excessive gambling and heavy drinking.

By 1851 however, he turned his interests toward a new career – the military. He joined his eldest brother Nikolai in the Caucasus where he soon enlisted as a cadet. For the next several years, Tolstoy travelled throughout Russia and Eastern Europe, fighting in modern day Chechnya and the Crimea. His experiences in war, however, were relatively limited; Tolstoy continued his life of debauchery and aristocratic leisure with the other young officers stationed in the Caucasus. This generally lengthy time spent resting – as well as the lifestyle that came with it – allowed for a new interest to arise in his young life – writing. As R.F. Christian noted, “[This] sufficient 'action' provided the raw material for his stories of contemporary life, the Caucasus and its inhabitants, the skirmishes with the mountain tribesmen and the protracted defence of Sevastopol.”⁸ By the end of his first year in the military, Tolstoy published his first short work, entitled *Childhood*, a fictional account based on his own young life. Tolstoy's writing career had begun.

Despite his initial interest in army life, Tolstoy soon became bored with the military. In 1855, he wrote to an aunt, “I wouldn't want to abandon literature and it's impossible for me to work at it in these camp-life conditions.”⁹ A year later, he returned to St. Petersburg, resigning from the army. Almost immediately, he thrust himself into the literary world of the city, publishing five works including *A Landowner's Morning*, a fictional rendering of his own failed efforts to free his serfs at Yasnaya Polyana. Later that year, he returned to his estate, developing a relationship with Valeriya Arsenyeva, the daughter of a family friend. While

⁸ R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 19.

⁹ L.N. Tolstoy to T.A. Yergolskaya, January 6, 1855. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 47.

Tolstoy initially felt the two of them were destined to marry, by the end of 1857 their relations had slowly dissolved. Also in 1857, Tolstoy began an extensive journey throughout Europe, where he would begin to develop many of his early theories on education and passive non-resistance.¹⁰ Additionally at this time, he developed his long-standing relationship with Ivan Turgenev, while touring the social scenes of Paris and Geneva.

Upon his return to his estate in late 1857, Tolstoy devoted himself almost entirely to the upkeep of his land and the lives of his serfs. By 1859, he had opened his first successful peasant school, and significantly improved the farming on his property. Between 1859 and 1863, he wrote no new works of fiction, dedicating himself rather to the peasant cause. Although in late 1860 he again traveled throughout Europe – primarily to collect information regarding Western European popular education – he became sidetracked by the death of his brother Nikolai. Tolstoy's experience at Nikolai's deathbed would later inspire him to write his story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* as well as the moving death scene of Konstantin Levin's brother in *Anna Karenina*.¹¹

One of the most important developments of this period, however, was Tolstoy's 1862 marriage to Sofia Andreevna Behrs. For Tolstoy this marked a major transition in his life not simply due to his sudden introduction to family life; the experiences with his new wife would eventually be mirrored in his literary works such as *Family Happiness* and *Anna Karenina*. Within the year, Tolstoy and his wife were expecting a child. These occurrences quickly distracted Tolstoy from his peasant education experiments on his estate and gave rise to a new

¹⁰ While in Paris, Tolstoy witnessed a young man executed by guillotine, which turned him immediately against the idea of corporal punishment. (See L.N. Tolstoy to V.P. Botkin, March 24-5/5-6 April 1857. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 95.)

¹¹ See L.N. Tolstoy, *Smert' Ivana Il'icha. The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ed. Michael Beresford (Letchworth: Bradda Books, 1979) and L.N. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Trans. Aylmer and Louise Maude (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992).

literary project – the epic novel *War and Peace*. This tale of life during the Napoleonic Wars utterly consumed Tolstoy: he spent the majority of the next decade working on the novel. Apart from the birth of four children – Sergei, Tanya, Ilya, and Lev – and the daily maintenance of his estate, his life throughout this period *was War and Peace*. He wrote to fellow writer Afanasy Fet in 1866, belittling all other work besides his novel: “Your *zemstvo* work or your farming – those are a man's involuntary activities. You and I do them as spontaneously and involuntarily as ants dig an anthill, there is nothing either good or bad about activities of that sort.”¹²

The 1868-9 publication of *War and Peace* brought Tolstoy both fame and criticism: his unique theories of history infuriated his contemporaries, while the novel itself – with its sweeping epic tales of the Battles of Borodino and Kulikovo – was praised throughout both Russia and the world.¹³ The following decade brought a resumption of Tolstoy's pedagogical activities. He reopened the schools at Yasnaya Polyana, creating a *Primer* and an *ABC Book* for younger children. While these two books received little critical acclaim as he had first hoped, they inspired him to write numerous short stories with simple but strong moral messages such as *God Sees the Truth, But Waits*. In 1873-4, Tolstoy traveled to the nearby Samara province to aid in famine relief, establishing a popular Famine Relief Fund which received a great deal of publicity in the Moscow and Petersburg newspapers. Following this, he began work on his first “novel” *Anna Karenina*, garnering even more success as a writer after its 1877 publication.¹⁴

¹² L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Fet, November 7, 1866. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 208.

¹³ Tolstoy viewed history more as influenced more by common people and sheer coincidence than the activity of figures such as – in the context of the novel – Napoleon or Tsar Alexander II.

¹⁴ Tolstoy wrote: “What is *War and Peace*? It is not a novel, nor is it a poem, still less an historical chronicle...It is what the author wanted and could express in the form in which it was expressed.” From L.N. Tolstoy, “A Few Words about the Book *War and Peace*” In Ed. A.V. Knowles, *Tolstoy: A Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1978) 125.

Despite these two decades of monumental and unprecedented success, Tolstoy's life took a sharp turn at the end of the decade. Much like his autobiographical character Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy began a search for his place within the Russian Orthodox Church. He traveled to several monasteries – specifically Optina and the Trinity-St. Sergius Monasteries not far from Moscow – to consult with Church elders and increase his participation in the centuries' old faith of Russia. Although he initially felt some connection to the mysticism and aesthetics of the Church, by 1879-80, he renounced the Church, falling into a state of complete spiritual crisis.¹⁵ In 1881, Tolstoy retreated into a life of spiritual contemplation, condemning most of his own literature, the established Orthodox Church, and his previous life in a short work entitled *Confession*. The Russian censors forbade the publication of this work; however, through Tolstoy's numerous European connections, *Confession* was translated into several other languages and distributed throughout both the West and the Russian literary underground.

In the 1880s, Tolstoy mostly wrote nonfictional works, examining the state of the urban poor in Moscow as well as that of the Russian peasantry. The fictional works published at that time however, reveal Tolstoy's growing social awareness, anarchistic religious fervor, and an overall sense of distaste with the established order in Russia. Over the next several years, Tolstoy wrote his interpretations of the Bible, focusing strictly on Christ's humanity and the absence of an organized Church.¹⁶ Tolstoy's popularity among the literary intelligentsia – both in Russia and abroad – earned him an unanticipated following during this decade: in 1883, he met the young writer Vladimir Chertkov, with whom he soon endeavored to create a

¹⁵ See L.N. Tolstoy, *Confession*, Trans. Jane Kentish (New York: Penguin, 1987).

¹⁶ See L.N. Tolstoy, *The Gospels in Brief*, Trans. Isabel Hapgood (New York: Dover, 2008). and L.N. Tolstoy, *The Lion and the Honeycomb: The Religious Writings of Tolstoy*, Trans. Robert Chandler (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

publishing company for the common people known as *The Intermediary*. While this publishing company received only moderate levels of success, it acted as a medium through which Tolstoy could advocate his newfound simplified lifestyle. Tolstoy by this time had given up smoking, drinking, hunting, and the consumption of meat. Furthermore, he developed a growing interest in cobbling, which he pursued in various peasant huts on his Yasnaya Polyana estate.

His relationship with Chertkov proved equally detrimental to his personal life. Although his relationship with his wife had been deteriorating since almost its very beginnings, this tension was only exacerbated as Tolstoy and Chertkov grew closer. In 1891, Tolstoy renounced all copyrights to his works post-1881 (which Chertkov primarily assumed control over) much to Sofia Andreevna's chagrin. The majority of his activity throughout this period consisted of agricultural work and nonfictional writing, such as his popular Christian Anarchist work, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. His only major fictional works throughout the early 1890s were *The Kreutzer Sonata* (which was almost immediately banned by the Tsarist censors) and the drama, *The Fruits of Enlightenment*. His literary work was quickly interrupted however, by yet another severe famine which struck all of Russia. Tolstoy uprooted his entire family for the purpose of famine relief between 1891 and 1893, temporarily soothing the mounting discontent among his wife and children.

Approaching the turn of the century, Tolstoy published three of his most influential later works: *Master and Man* – the fictional tale of a man's near-death experience with his wise peasant; *Resurrection* – his last major novel; and the shocking critique *What is Art?*, a work which challenged all artistic expression. In addition to these major publications, Tolstoy continued his aid for the underprivileged throughout Russia. At the end of the decade, Tolstoy

– with the help of Chertkov and several others – organized the migration of an oppressed sectarian Christian group known as the *Dukhobors* to Canada. In 1901, however, he faced one of the most major blows to his literary career: due to the heretical and often blasphemous content of his writings of that period, the Russian Orthodox Church excommunicated Tolstoy, declaring him the Antichrist. Tolstoy retaliated, writing a series of letters to the Russian Holy Synod, condemning them equally for their particularly inflammatory criticism of him and his works.

By 1902, Tolstoy's health began to decline severely. He and his wife traveled to the Crimea in order for him to recover, and by the end of the year, he was once again able to return to his Yasnaya Polyana estate. Despite this recovery, Tolstoy never published another fictional work.¹⁷ In his final few years, Tolstoy continued his protests against social injustice and the established order. After a series of pogroms throughout Russia, Tolstoy openly voiced his anger at both government and societal apathy in numerous articles and short stories. Between 1903 and 1908, he completed several short works in opposition to the Tsar, the mounting revolutionary tendencies throughout Russia, and the Russo-Japanese War. This drew even more disciples – referring to themselves as “Tolstoyans” - to the estate at Yasnaya Polyana, and furthermore, attracted the attention of numerous thinkers around the world. Tolstoy's correspondence during this period shows an open and extensive dialogue between himself and such peace advocates as the young Mahatma Gandhi and Bernard Shaw.¹⁸

In 1906, Tolstoy endured the death of one of his closest children, Masha. This acted as a severe blow to the aging Tolstoy, particularly in the midst of perhaps the most intense period

¹⁷ An examination of Tolstoy's unpublished works however, shows that he continued to work on fiction writing, beginning works such as *Hadji Murat* and *The Light Shineth in Darkness*.

¹⁸ For Tolstoy's correspondence with Gandhi, see Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 2* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978. 691-2; 706-8. For his correspondence with Shaw see *Ibid.*, 677-9;700.

of tension within his family. Anticipating Tolstoy's death, the family began to discuss the future copyright of his works, contemplating the distribution of some of his most famous writings – often in a manner conflicting with the desires of the ailing Tolstoy. Adding to these difficulties, Vladimir Chertkov – whom Tolstoy declared one of the few people he trusted in his final years – frequently controlled the distribution of his writings, as well as the organization of Tolstoy's will, without the knowledge of Tolstoy's family. These two groups quarreled extensively, particularly during 1910, the final year of his life.

By late October of 1910, Tolstoy could no longer endure the endless bickering between his family and Chertkov. He wrote to his son and daughter early in the morning on October 31, 1910: “We're leaving now, we still don't know where for...forgive me for being nevertheless the cause of your suffering...I'm in a hurry to leave in case Mama should find me, as I'm afraid she might...Goodbye then.”¹⁹ At the time he wrote that letter, Tolstoy fled his home at Yasnaya Polyana for Astapova train station. Unfortunately however, he never indicated – let alone reached – his intended destination. Before the train even left the station, Tolstoy became ill and was forced to reside for the next several days in the station house as his friends and family visited, attempting to see him one last time. On the morning of November 7, Tolstoy developed pneumonia, lost consciousness, and died. His funeral several days later was attended by thousands of peasants and noblemen alike, all who came to pay their respects to one of the most influential authors throughout all of Russian history.

II. Transcending His World: The Environment of Lev Tolstoy

Although much of Tolstoy's writing and activity throughout the nineteenth and early

¹⁹ L.N. Tolstoy to S.L. Tolstoy and T.L. Sukhotina, October 31, 1910. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters*, Volume 2. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978) 714.

twentieth centuries can be observed as “transcending its environment,” much of it was greatly influenced by the changing world of Russia at that time. Russia during Tolstoy's life was tumultuous, a hotbed of revolution in a constantly changing society.

Following the reforms of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century, Russia turned its gaze to the West, seeking to modernize to a level comparable to major powers such as France and England. Despite the varied success of Peter's reforms, Russia managed to present itself as a major player on the world stage, particularly due to its numerous military victories against Sweden and the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, however, these reforms awakened Russia to a new era of social and cultural improvements: in the following century, Russia reformed education and developed its own voice in artistic, and most importantly, literary spheres. By the early nineteenth century, Russia began to produce numerous poets and authors whose names would be known throughout both the country itself, and the world.

Simultaneously however, Russia began to develop a voice of social awareness. Following the Napoleonic Wars of the early 1800s, educated soldiers received the opportunity to interact with French and German philosophers, bringing concepts of constitutional monarchies, and generally, the French revolutionary ideologies of liberty and social equality, back with them to Russia. These educated military figures began contemplating a Russian constitutional government, and in December of 1825, led a rebellion against the new Tsar, Nicholas I, in St. Petersburg's Senate Square. Although the rebellion – later referred to as the Decembrist Revolt – was brutally suppressed, it marked a significant shift in the mentality of the educated Russian elite. Eventually furthered by the 1848 Revolutions throughout Western Europe, this group – known as the intelligentsia – would contemplate Russia's socio-political future for the remainder of the century in their outspoken writings and revolutionary

activities. Beginning with the Slavophile and Westernizing debates of the 1830s, the Russian intelligentsia took Russia on a journey through a myriad of social ideologies including socialism, nihilism, anarchism, and eventually, Marxism.²⁰

III. This Study

These movements, while highly diverse, often captured the imaginations of Russia's most popular writers. One of the first most famous examples is Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, an open critique of rift between liberal ideologists and, specifically, the nihilists. This trend continued in the 1870s with Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed*, a biting analysis of the Utopian and positivist theories so prevalent during that period. Both of these authors, however, are considered to be separate from such ideological movements. Turgenev spent the majority of his life traveling throughout Europe and remained relatively aloof regarding any one socio-political doctrine. Dostoevsky, although frequently analyzed through the lens of radical Slavophilic thought, primarily focused on life as a Russian Orthodox Christian, often earning him a distinction as that of a “prophet” within Russian cultural and intellectual history.²¹

Lev Tolstoy however, was unique. Tolstoy did not simply write about the complex social environment of nineteenth-century Russia. Rather, he frequently engaged the world which he so often analyzed, injecting himself into the lives of the less-fortunate and directly challenging and confronting social ills. Oxford Professor Catriona Kelly in her article “Popular Culture” refers to Tolstoy's activities, and specifically, the Tolstoyan following of the late-nineteenth century as “[one of] the most successful populist groups...which advanced

²⁰ See in particular, Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism*, Trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979).

²¹ See Walicki, 310-326.

rather broadly based programs of social justice linked with Utopian visions of communality.”²² This statement is not simply contentious, but also highly emblematic of Tolstoy's ethos in both a Russian and historical context. Although it is evident through deeper exploration of Tolstoy's writings, diaries, and correspondence that he never would have participated – or even directly associated – with any of the widespread social movements of the nineteenth century, it becomes clear that Tolstoy's philosophy and even his way of life can be directly linked to them in numerous ways.

How can Tolstoy be analyzed in the context of the Russian Populist movement? Although not an adherent to the basic precepts of the Russian Populists, how did Tolstoy's own philosophies connect with them? Furthermore, although not an active participant in any revolutionary or ideological movements (let alone revolutionary Populist movements such as the “To the People Movement” of 1873-4 or the *Narodnaya Volya*) did Tolstoy approach the Russian peasantry in a similar manner? If so, was his approach more successful?

The subject of Tolstoy as a Populist has rarely been approached. The vastness of his prosaic works allows for primarily literary interpretation.²³ Historically, Tolstoy is viewed through a literary lens as well; however, his numerous nonfiction works cause many historians to focus upon his status as a “rebel” within Russian society, railing against the established order in an era of prerevolutionary dissidence.²⁴ Many others still have focused on his anarchism, his alternative views on Christianity, and pacifism.²⁵ Rarely is he classified together with the major ideological movements of his era such as the Slavophiles,

²² Catriona Kelly, “Popular Culture” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 127.

²³ A.N. Wilson's biography of Tolstoy, for instance, focuses primarily on Tolstoy in a literary realm (See A.N. Wilson *Tolstoy: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).

²⁴ See Leo Hecht, *Tolstoy the Rebel* (New York: Revisionist, 1976).

²⁵ Maude's biography is perhaps the best example of this. As Maude himself was a Tolstoyan, he would have been greatly influenced by these aspects of Tolstoy's philosophy.

Westernizers, or Socialists. Tolstoy is generally viewed as a figure who transcends these groupings despite predilections toward aspects of their ideologies.²⁶ It becomes clear however, through close examination of Tolstoy's life and works that he shared several major attributes with the early Populists despite his noninvolvement in their movement.

To analyze these issues, therefore, I have separated this study into three distinct sections. In the first section, I offer a general approach of both Populism – both as an ideology and an organized movement – and Tolstoy's activities among the Russian peasants. Following this however, I have presented two case studies which illustrate specific instances throughout Tolstoy's life in which he directly sought to improve the lives of the Russian peasants. The first analyzes the Peasant Schools at Yasnaya Polyana, a project beginning in the late-1850s and spanning the next several decades. The second approaches the 1891-3 famine and Tolstoy's subsequent relief programs in the Russian countryside. Although there were numerous occasions throughout Tolstoy's eighty-two year life which focused directly on the peasantry, the two cases I have chosen directly indicate a sensibility quite similar to that of the Populists. They illustrate that, despite his detachment from any form of revolutionary Populism, Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy can be viewed through the lens of this peasant-focused nineteenth-century ideology.

²⁶ This is articulated in great depth by James Billington in his expansive work, *The Icon and the Axe* as well as in Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox; an Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953).

Chapter 1

The Servants of the People

The Populists present the historian with a complex group of both thinkers and activists all attempting to answer the “cursed question” of the peasant's role in society. Tolstoy, in many ways mirrors this, acting as a contradictory figure in both his life and writing. Despite his aristocratic roots, Tolstoy's continuous attempts to connect with the common Russian people distinguish him from his social class, so often viewed as apathetic to the plight of the common man. The Populists represent a group that – although eventually destroyed by the terrorist activity of its many branches – initially sought to improve the peasants' status from within. Both of these therefore, deserve further examination in order to establish not simply their relation to the society in which they originated, but also to establish their relation to each other. It becomes clear through such an examination that both groups, although often ideologically in opposition to one another, exhibited similar characteristics to one another on a very base level.

I. The Populist Movement

a. Populist Terminology

It is important first to note that Populism did not exist as one homogeneous movement in Russian history. As Isaiah Berlin writes, “Populism is not the name of a single political party, nor of a coherent body of doctrine, but of a widespread radical movement in Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century.”²⁷ Thus, Populism was a trend within nineteenth-century Russian thought. Andrzej Walicki acknowledges a type of dichotomy in the meanings often

²⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978) 210.

attributed to the movement. On one hand, “In the broadest sense of the word, 'Populism' is the name given to all Russian democratic ideologies – revolutionary as well as reformist – that expressed the interests of the peasants and small producers.”²⁸ Simultaneously however, “[It is] applied to a single trend within Russian radicalism, a trend that made its appearance in the mid-1870's after the experiences of the first 'go to the people' movement, and that differed from other revolutionary trends by its advocacy of 'the hegemony of the masses over the educated elite.’”

It is clear, based on even the basic definitions offered by these two scholars, that 'Populism' is a complicated term; within the framework of nineteenth-century Russian radicalism it can be connected to a vast array of people thoughts and ideologies. The bulk of this discussion will relate more closely with Walicki's first definition of Populism, rather than the second which traces the revolutionary stages of the movement. This latter definition specifically refers to the actions of the *narodniki* – or revolutionary Populists – who throughout the 1870s, developed numerous radical factions that would later splinter off and dissolve from complete disorganization and terrorist activities. The two distinctions however, - if we are to accept Walicki's theory – are inherently linked. One cannot be understood without discussion of the other. The complex history of the Populist movement illustrates that, while Populism as a broad theory and Populism as an “organized” movement differed greatly, their fates were connected, and were destined to fail by the end of the century.

b. The History of Populism

Populism as an organized movement in Russia traces its roots back to the time following the death of Tsar Nicholas I and the Russian defeat in the Crimean War. Ideologically, the

²⁸ Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973) 222.

movement stemmed from the sudden burst of liberal thought following the 1848 revolutions in Western Europe. In many ways, Populism served as a logical successor to both the Decembrists of the 1820's and radical visionaries such as Alexander Herzen and Vissarion Belinsky, all of whom, in Berlin's words “looked on the government and the social structure of their country as a moral and political monstrosity – obsolete, barbarous, stupid, and odious – and dedicated their lives to its total destruction.”²⁹ Populism existed as a series of movements beginning in the 1850s and ending sometime after the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

The Populist movement originated with the central ideology of aiding the oppressed class of serfs throughout rural Russia by offering them social equality. This ideology was hardly new: the liberal intelligentsia had long noted a sense of disconnect and stratification which pervaded Russian society. Herzen in particular – inspired by the egalitarian French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon – acknowledged this stating “[The Winter Palace is like] a ship floating on the surface of the ocean [having] no real connection with the inhabitants of the deep, beyond that of eating them.”³⁰ Due in part to works of immense popularity such as Herzen's, a large portion of the intelligentsia shifted its focus. Previously – as in the Decembrist Revolt of 1825 – they had focused primarily on issues such as the creation of a constitutional monarchy or the general institution of basic rights of man as espoused by eighteenth-century French and English philosophers. After Herzen's critique however, the intelligentsia began to focus on the Russian peasantry.

The Populists possessed a mystical adoration of the peasant class. A vast majority of the wealthier classes had at one time or another owned serfs, requiring them to work their land

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Alexander Herzen as quoted in James Billington, *The Icon and the Axe* (New York: Vintage) 1966. 365.

or otherwise tend to their country estates. As a result, the Populists in particular felt a debt to the peasants, accrued after years of exploiting this lower class of citizens. Furthermore, in opposition to many contemporary socialist doctrines which argued for the creation of an entirely new society, the Populists believed that the ideal societal form already existed in the form of the peasant *obshchina* – or commune. The primary theorists of the movement therefore, felt that this organization represented a cooperative form of living. Peasants living in the *obshchina* both tended to, and redistributed their land, creating an egalitarian style of economic distribution. This “natural” peasant system illustrated that society could reform based on a moral and just style of living rather than on an intensified system of industrialization that they felt “created a vast, pauperized, faceless city proletariat.”³¹

It is important to note that, beyond these basic precepts of assisting the peasantry by observing its natural societal model, the Populists agreed on very little once fragmented into smaller groups. The Populist theorists such as Mikhailovsky and Lavrov – as well as their predecessors Herzen and Chernyshevsky – differed on issues such as the role of intellectuals, standards of peasant education, and the role of specialization in a new peasant-based economy. One of the most important, and often overlooked arguments, was the issue of peasant consciousness. Facing the critiques of other revolutionary groups at that time, could the Populist movement exist, let alone progress, if the peasants remained ignorant of the sheer intensity of upper-class oppression? All of these issues eventually splintered the movement into a seemingly endless number of factions leaving the Populists as a divided and often disorganized ideological group in nineteenth century Russia.

This division amongst the Populists only increased over the next two decades. After Peter Lavrov's 1869 *Historical Letters*, theory went into practice. Lavrov called for the

³¹ Ibid., 212.

intelligentsia to “Reduce, then, your own sufferings by striving to improve the lot of the majority...correct the evil vitally...by seeking and disseminating greater truth... [and to] live according to the ideal which you yourself have set up as the ideal of a *cultivated man*.”³² In response, almost two years later, the first social experiment came in the form of the *Chaikovtsy*, the brainchild of Nikolai Chaikovsky. Interestingly however, Chaikovsky's movement focused on the urban – rather than rural – poor in St. Petersburg. After a series of attempts to rally the workers of Petersburg factories, the *Chaikovtsy* movement dissolved, finding themselves incapable of reaching the uneducated proletariat. Not long after however, the Populists began a more rural approach to their ideology. In 1873-4, a large number of students - taking inspiration from both Herzen and Lavrov – began the “To the People” movement. These ambitious students dressed in peasant garb and fled to the countryside, attempting to live among the common Russian people.

Both of these early movements failed dismally. Despite the best efforts of these young students, they found themselves incapable of bridging the chasm created between the educated metropolitan Russians and the poor, simple peasants. As Turgenev noted in 1876, “[These] young people are mostly good and honest...but their course is so false and impractical that it cannot fail to lead them to complete fiasco.”³³ The peasants understood little of their lofty language and urban revolutionary ways. After only two years of activity, the Populists activists discovered the extreme difficulty of reaching the very people they hoped to elevate in society. As a result, Populism entered a revolutionary stage that would last for the majority of the next decade. After the Bosnian revolts and subsequent Russo-Turkish War of 1875, a group known as “Land and Freedom” emerged, its leaders and

³² Peter Lavrov, *Historical Letters* in Ed. James Edie et. al., *Russian Philosophy, Volume 2* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books) 1965. 143.

³³ I.S. Turgenev as quoted in Figes, 227.

followers once again fleeing to the countryside.

Their goals however, had changed. Radicals such as Vera Figner and Vera Zasulich began assassinating government officials in an attempt to inspire unrest among the peasants. The resort to terrorism divided the movement into two factions: “The People's Will (*Narodnaya Volya*)” and “The Black Repartition (*Cherniy Peredel*).” While the latter focused primarily on redistributing land to the peasants, the former continued terrorist activities throughout both the Russian countryside and the capital of St. Petersburg. These events came to a head in March 1881, when The People's Will, headed at that point by Figner and several others, assassinated Tsar Alexander II in the midst of a morning carriage ride through the capital. His successor, Alexander III, swiftly ordered the execution of the conspirators and assassins. Until the end of the century, the Tsarist government strictly monitored and suppressed all activity it deemed revolutionary. Although many of the precepts of Populism would continue – particularly in the group known as the Socialist Revolutionaries (or S.R.'s) – the movement faded due to its disorganization and seemingly aimless terrorism.

c. The *Peredvizhniki* and Cultural Russian Populism

Although often erratic in its socio-political form, Populism remained relatively consistent in a cultural setting. Decades before the revolutionary “To the People” movement, the image of the peasant had already excited the minds of the Russian creative intelligentsia. The fascination began as early as 1790 with the publication of Alexander Radishchev's *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*. Radishchev's book traced his route throughout rural Russia, causing him to be shocked to find “that nature has been so miserly with her children as to hide the truth...I felt that it was possible for anyone to strive for the well-being of his

fellows!”³⁴ The book itself was forbidden from publication by Empress Catherine II's censors; however, Radishchev's subsequent torture, exile and suicide excited the minds of intellectuals throughout the country. Although the peasant condition had in fact been quite similar for centuries at that point, Radishchev's flabbergasted and tragic cry resounded to educated Russian society. For the next century, not only socio-political theories, but also literary and artistic figures, began to voice their opinions regarding this most impoverished of Russian classes.

In 1852, Turgenev wrote a collection of short stories entitled *The Sportsman's Sketches*. Turgenev at that time acknowledged the peasants as the very upholders of Russia itself: “The tragic fate of Russia is reflected in those Russians who are closer to its roots than others.”³⁵ The *Sketches* revealed an almost mystical adoration of the peasants. His tale “The Knocking” is indicative of an awakening of a member of the Russian middle class: in it, a man discovers the strange connection of a peasant to the world around him when the peasant saves them from a band of robbers simply by communicating with them while traveling through rural Russia.³⁶ The impact of these stories was immense: for the first time, a major author portrayed the peasants not simply as a victim of aristocratic oppression, but as a wise – at times almost omniscient – human being. Suddenly, on the eve of the most significant peasant reforms in Russian history, the public was offered an entirely new perception of the common man.

Even before the 1861 Emancipation, the “peasant question” came into the forefront of

³⁴ A.N. Radishchev, *A Journey from Moscow to St. Petersburg*, trans. Leo Wiener (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) 42.

³⁵ I.S. Turgenev to I.S. Aksakov, March 2, 1852. Ed. A.V. Knowles, *Turgenev's Letters* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983) 38.

³⁶ See I.S. Turgenev, “The Knocking” In Ed. Robert Chandler, *Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 67-81.

Russian thought. In 1870, only shortly before the emergence of the “To the People Movement,” a group of artists formed a cooperative that became known as the *peredvizhniki*, often translated as “The Itinerants” or “The Wanderers.” Consisting of approximately thirty painters, the Wanderers – influenced in particular by the writings of Vissarion Belinsky and Nikolai Chernyshevsky – arranged exhibitions centered around an ideology of making their art useful to society. Many of the Wanderers, most prominently Ilya Repin, withdrew to the countryside to “study among” the Russian people.

In 1872, Repin began sketching a series of barge haulers in Stavropol, a small town along the Volga. Like the students of the “To the People” movement, he found himself at first viewed suspiciously by the peasants. Ironically however, after convincing them that he had been sent by the government, Repin was accepted into the village. There, like Turgenev, he noticed a nature within the peasants that he came to consider almost divine. They were “like Greek philosophers, sold as slaves... [one man had] the character of Russia on his face...he seemed to me a colossal mystery, and for that reason, I loved him...he was like a saint.”³⁷ The painting that resulted, entitled “Haulers on the Volga” became an instant success, acknowledged by many – as Billington notes - “as the icon of populism.”³⁸ It not only symbolized the struggle and degradation of the peasantry, but also a sense of divine empowerment in the midst of oppression.

Many others followed Repin, not simply in the artistic sphere, but also in the realm of music. Modest Mussorgsky, a member of what became known as “The Mighty Handful,” began composing operas and ballets which highlighted the “saintly” peasant in Russian society. Although Mussorgsky himself never went to Repin's lengths of living among the

³⁷ I.E. Repin as quoted in Figes, 229.

³⁸ Billington, 406.

peasants, he frequently used the peasant as the logical voice within a tumultuous society. His historical opera *Boris Godunov*, for instance, features a peasant “holy fool” who cautions the aging Tsar in the midst of a Russia bordering on governmental collapse. Mussorgsky mirrored this in many other works, including his classic “*Khovanschina*.” His stance however, was clear: the peasant was a holy character within Russian society, to be revered and not ignored.

Although frequently grouped separately from the Populist movement, the Wanderers and composers of the mid-1800's contributed substantially to the Populist ideology. Although not directly concerned with socio-political reform like Mikhailovsky or Lavrov, their role in the exposition of the plight of the peasants is undeniable. In a sense therefore, these artists and composers represent the cultural arm of Russian Populism.

II. Tolstoy, the Non-Populist

Recognizing the vast, complex nature of the Populist movement, where then, does Tolstoy fit? Even Turgenev, despite the influence of his *Sportsman's Sketches* on Russian awareness of the peasant's plight, cannot be considered a Populist. Throughout the duration of his life, Turgenev was considered by critics to be provincial and more focused on life in the West than on improving the peasants' lot in Russia. Perhaps due to social status, the most famous writers of nineteenth century literature were dismissed by revolutionaries as aristocrats in spite of their contributions to peasant understanding among the intelligentsia.

Tolstoy was by no means immune to this criticism. As a contemporary of many of the most influential Populist thinkers, Tolstoy endured the judgment – primarily in the literary sphere – of his most famous works, including *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. The two novels garnered much criticism in general, simply as a result of gaining such rapid success

both in Russia and throughout the world. The more politically-minded of his critics however, scoffed at his success, choosing to analyze Tolstoy's politics rather than simply the content of his popular novels.

In 1875, Nikolai Mikhailovsky, whom Lenin later called “one of the finest spokesmen of liberal bourgeois democracy...an ardent champion of freedom and of the oppressed masses of the peasantry” offered his pointed criticism of *Anna Karenina*.³⁹ He began his article stating that “However simple and clear are Count Tolstoy's ideas about the significance for the people of those phenomena we have come to call 'progressive' very few people have come to accept them.”⁴⁰ Mikhailovsky discounted Tolstoy's ideas as, in many ways, reactionary, and incapable of reaching the common people. Furthermore, to Mikhailovsky, Tolstoy was simply a guilt-ridden product of bourgeois aristocracy: “Even Count Tolstoy cannot avoid this fact...from his novels it is clear that he knows high society very well and has close and various connections with it...and this man who has the opportunity to enjoy all the best gifts of civilization has had the thought [to aid the peasantry by means of his art].”⁴¹ As a result of his nature as a high-society figure, Tolstoy was, in a sense, predisposed to his intentions to help the oppressed peasant classes. Mikhailovsky continued: “This task consists in, while continuing to be a writer, to cease all clever exploitation or at least somehow to recompense the people for this exploitation...by writing literature which would 'catch on' with the people...”⁴² This is not however, to state that Mikhailovsky found Tolstoy to be a reprehensible figure as a result of his “efforts in the name of the people.” On the contrary, Mikhailovsky described Tolstoy as a pitiable character, torn by his very nature between

³⁹ V.I. Lenin, “The Narodniks on N.K. Mikhailovsky,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 20 (Moscow: Progress, 1972) 117.

⁴⁰ N.K. Mikhailovsky, “On Tolstoy's 'Left Hand'” In Ed. A.V. Knowles, *Tolstoy: A Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 274-5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 278.

talents: “The range of his intellectual interests is both too wide and too narrow for him to become simply a writer for the people.”⁴³

The revolutionary Populists on the other hand, took a much more aggressive stance against Tolstoy. In the same year as Mikhailovsky's article was published, Peter Tkachov, “the last great theorist of Russian Jacobinism...a veteran of almost every important conspiratorial organization of the sixties,” directly attacked Tolstoy's “aristocratism.”⁴⁴ Of *War and Peace* he stated, “You will scarcely find another novel that is imbued with a more dubious or a more corrupt morality than that put forward by the author in that 'epic that will last forever.’”⁴⁵ Despite Tolstoy's characters in *War and Peace*, on whom “our critics...poured praise...[in] a novel not written for the people”⁴⁶, Tkachov states that Tolstoy sees “the aim and meaning of life for every individual must lie not in [civic activity and political aspirations] but in narrow egotistical self-satisfaction.”⁴⁷ Tkachov dismissed Platon Karataev – Tolstoy's character representing the ideal, life-affirming, and happy peasant – as “that sentimental insult to the national Russian character who has been taken by some of our critics as a marvelously and artistically-created truly national type.”⁴⁸ Even Tolstoy's Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina* – the autobiographical landowner sympathetic to the peasant cause – is portrayed by Tkachov as “showing the uncultivated nature of his mind...a self-satisfied and limited egotism averse to mental labor and progress...which Count Tolstoy describes with obvious sympathy for his delightful qualities.”⁴⁹ Tkachov lacked Mikhailovsky's sympathy toward Tolstoy, dismissing his pivotal works as those written by an aimless aristocrat. For Tkachov, these novels did not

⁴³ Ibid., 279.

⁴⁴ Billington, 399.

⁴⁵ P.N. Tkachov, In Ed. Knowles, *Tolstoy: A Critical Heritage*, 250.

⁴⁶ Mikhailovsky, 278.

⁴⁷ Tkachov, 251.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 256.

sate Tolstoy's inner-guilt, but were rather completely devoid of Populist intentions.

Apart from the outright criticism of both the early Populist theorists and the later revolutionary Populists, there remains another major factor which separated Tolstoy from the movement: Tolstoy himself. Although frequently connected with the anarchist movement in his later life, Tolstoy maintained a strict separation between himself and any organized movement. In 1881, he wrote to Tsar Alexander III, in an attempt to convince him to spare the lives of his father's assassins. In the letter, he stated his displeasure with the various reform and revolutionary groups within the contemporary intelligentsia:

About 20 years ago a nest of people was formed...who hated the existing order of things and the government. These people imagined a different order of things, or even no order at all...the liberal measures intended to satisfy the discontented forces and to diminish pressure from the harmful ones...either [from] firm measures of excision or liberal weakness... [This] system has been tried and both have failed to the present day, gradually growing worse...The illness continues to the present day, gradually growing worse.⁵⁰

This philosophy has been well summarized by Walicki in his analysis of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: “He became more and more obsessed by the idea that he must turn his back completely on the system of values accepted by the comfortable elite to which he belonged.”⁵¹ Tolstoy abhorred the very ideologies that manifested themselves throughout nineteenth-century Russian society. Particularly following his 1881 crisis – after which he primarily wrote nonfictional contemplative works on nearly every topic which sparked his interest – his writings are riddled with criticism regarding not merely the established order, but also the guilt-ridden revolutionary theorists that challenged it. The thought of revolution in and of itself – particularly the violent revolution suggested by theorists such as Tkachov, the People's Will, and eventually the Marxist parties of Russia – existed in complete contradiction to Tolstoy's theories of passive non-resistance. Stated plainly, Tolstoy would have never linked

⁵⁰ L.N. Tolstoy to Tsar Alexander III, March 8-15, 1881. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters*, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978) 343-4.

⁵¹ Walicki, 326.

himself to the Russian Populist movement.

III. Tolstoy, the Populist

On the other hand, there are clearly ways in which we might consider Tolstoy a populist. As Mikhailovsky noted, there was a certain duality within the character of Tolstoy, specifically that of Tolstoy the thinker and Tolstoy the man. Throughout his life, these sides constantly warred with one another, causing crisis after crisis, inspiring countless works, and causing Tolstoy the man to completely renounce his old life in pursuance of a seemingly ascetic new path. To explore the conflicted character of Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, particularly in a Populist context, it is important to analyze each side of this dichotomy. Tolstoy's Populist characteristics, however complex they may have been, presented themselves in both an external and internal manner throughout his life.

a. The Internal Tolstoy

Several factors relating to Tolstoy as a thinker seem to indicate Populist ideals. Much of this however, was based far less on Tolstoy's readings of Lavrov, Mikhailovsky – or for that matter even Herzen and Belinsky – and far more on his readings of contemporary literature and non-Russian philosophy. In a letter to M.M. Lederle in 1891, Tolstoy created a list of “Works which made an impression” since his childhood. Of the numerous works listed, only a few merited Tolstoy's distinction of “an enormous impression”: “Matthew's Gospel, Rousseau: *Confession*, Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*... 'On the Buddha'...Lao-Tzu.”⁵² It becomes clear, therefore, that Tolstoy's philosophy in general related more closely to works relating to inner contemplation, religious thought, and specifically, the rights of man in relation to an established impoverished class.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau existed in Tolstoy's mind as one of the most influential figures

⁵² L.N. Tolstoy to M.M. Lederle, October 25, 1891. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 2*. 484-6.

of all philosophical thought. He once remarked “I have read the whole of Rousseau – all his twenty volumes, including his *Dictionary of Music*. I was more than enthusiastic about him, I worshiped him. At the age of fifteen I wore a medallion portrait of him next to my body instead of the Orthodox Cross.”⁵³ Tolstoy even named his chronicle of spiritual crisis, *Confession*, after Rousseau's 1769 book of the same name. From Rousseau, Tolstoy drew several of his own philosophical doctrines, specifically relating to the concepts of social class, pedagogy, and the division of labor. As Leo Hecht recognized “Like his idol Rousseau, Tolstoy painted the rustic, bucolic scene in highly attractive colors...he made a concerted effort to disavow membership in his class.”⁵⁴

Tolstoy believed in an ideal world devoid of social class; he noted that “for the establishment of a fraternal bond among men there is no need for any special effort either intellectual or physical...the misery of the people is not caused by individuals, but by an order in society by which they are bound together.”⁵⁵ The more Tolstoy explored the various class distinctions in his society, the more he found them abhorrent and repressive against the poorest among them. This was naturally a major theme in nineteenth-century Russian liberal thought; however, Tolstoy took it a step further in relation to the peasantry. Hecht acknowledges: “Naturally the privileged classes in rural areas are also guilty of the faults listed for the city nobility, however these faults have been somewhat tempered by their closeness with the peasant...The important thing is that they have a much better chance of staying good since they are not exposed to as many corrupting influences.”⁵⁶ The only way to, in effect, cure the social ills of established class structures was to eliminate the structures

⁵³ L.N. Tolstoy as quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy* (London: Wordsworth, 2008) 55-6.

⁵⁴ Leo Hecht, *Tolstoy the Rebel* (New York: Revisionist, 1976) 61-2.

⁵⁵ L.N. Tolstoy as quoted in Hecht, 62.

⁵⁶ Hecht, 72.

themselves and to increase understanding of the peasants themselves.

One of Tolstoy's proposed methods was in the realm of education. His pedagogical reforms of the 1860's naturally contributed greatly to the literacy of the peasant classes on his estate, restricted by endless state reforms since the time of Peter the Great. His pedagogical methods however, borrowed once again from Rousseau. As Tolstoy himself stated, "Rousseau wants to teach life from life itself as he understands it and not from previous experiments. Each step forward in the philosophy of pedagogics merely consists in freeing the schools from the idea of teaching the younger generations what the elder generations believed..."⁵⁷ Rather than imposing his methods upon the peasants, clearly limited in their own education, Tolstoy saw more benefit in learning from them and teaching according to life experience. These ideas contributed greatly to the later experiment of Tolstoy's peasant schools at Yasnaya Polyana.

Perhaps most importantly, Tolstoy acknowledged vast discrepancies in the nineteenth-century ideas of property ownership and the division of labor. To Tolstoy, the concept of private property ownership was "the kernel of evil."⁵⁸ Property could have only been achieved through the subjugation of a lower, less fortunate class – in Russia's case, the peasantry. In his article "The Slavery of Our Times" Tolstoy stated, "All the agricultural laborers are slaves, working, as they do, unceasingly to grow another's corn on another's field...people of our day consider the position of the laborer to be a natural, inevitable economic condition, and they do not call it slavery."⁵⁹ In Tolstoy's opinion therefore, the only individual with the right to land was the individual who worked it.

This said, Tolstoy equally disapproved of the city and of the rapid industrialization

⁵⁷ L.N. Tolstoy as quoted in Maude, 234.

⁵⁸ L.N. Tolstoy, "What, Then, Must be Done" as quoted in Hecht, 75.

⁵⁹ L.N. Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times" in Ed. Nathan Haskell Dole, *Peace Essays* (New York: Carlton House, 1928) 345.

permeating Russian society at that time. The division of labor which moved some peasants into the city forced them to “lose part of [their] personality and...become submerged in the gray faceless mass.”⁶⁰ In a story entitled “Hell,” Tolstoy has the “Devil for Technical Improvement” state, “I persuade people that the more things they produce and the faster they produce them the better it will be for them. And men, destroying their lives in order to produce things, make more and more, though they are not needed by those who compel them to be made and are inaccessible to those that make them.”⁶¹ The capitalist stage – slowly developing at that time in Russia – constituted, to Tolstoy, a great evil, which only would increase the burden on the lowest of classes who would be forced to produce for an elite who benefited from their toil.

These philosophies – in conjunction with his theories on pacifism and religion – essentially made up the bulk of the Tolstoyan mentality which would become, in Tolstoy's final years, the very basis of his massive following. His endless focus on the common man however, is undeniable. Tolstoy viewed the obvious evils of his time as upper class apathy or exploitation toward the lower classes, seeing the only method for reform to be a removal of the breach between them. In this way, his views were similar to those of the Populists.

b. The External Tolstoy

When examining his final thirty years of life it becomes quite evident that the image of Tolstoy is connected with that of the Russian peasants. It is no mistake that Ilya Repin of the Wanderers group was responsible for the majority of artistic portrayals of Tolstoy in his later years. Although Repin later recalled somewhat negatively of journeys to Tolstoy's estate at Yasnaya Polyana, he consistently painted him in peasant attire, plowing fields or otherwise

⁶⁰ Hecht, 80.

⁶¹ L.N. Tolstoy, “Hell” as quoted in Hecht, 82.

performing some act of peasant labor.⁶² Nearly any photograph of Tolstoy throughout this period of his life reveals an unkempt figure wearing the shirt of a *muzhik*, self-made boots, and often, the straw hat of a farmer. Although in many of these photographs he is seated in the midst of his well-dressed family, there is very little else to indicate his wealthy, privileged background.

Tolstoy assumed this image some time around his 1881 spiritual crisis, chronicled elaborately in his work *Confession*. In it, he wrote the following:

I renounced the life of our class, having recognized that it is not life but only a semblance of life, and that the conditions of luxury in which we live deprive us of the possibility of understanding life. Man's purpose is to save his soul; in order to save his soul he must live according to God. In order to live according to God one must renounce all the comforts of life, work, be humble, suffer, and be merciful.”⁶³

The natural model of this lifestyle was, of course, the Russian peasant. Tolstoy noted, “I so often envied the peasants their illiteracy and lack of learning. They found nothing false in those doctrinal statements which seemed apparent rubbish to me. They could accept them and believe in the truth, in the same truth that I believed in.”⁶⁴ In Tolstoy's quest for God-inspired betterment of his life – which he believed was “the holiest of holies, a remedy against everyday, worldly evil” - he turned toward the simple people, desiring to learn their ways as a manner of self-improvement.⁶⁵

This naturally received mixed reviews from his contemporaries. Tolstoy's seemingly self-sacrificial act gained him a loyal following, who admired him for having “left Moscow to

⁶² See Ilya Efimovich Repin, *Zhivopis', Grafika*, ed. N.A. Vatenina (Leningrad: Avrorra, 1985). Repin recounted: “Several times some Yasnaya Polyana peasants walked by, doffed their caps, bowed, and then walked on as if taking no notice of the count's exploit. But then another peasant group appears, evidently from the next village. They stop and stare for a long while. And then a strange thing happens. Never in my life have I seen a clearer expression of irony on a simple peasant's face.” I.E. Repin as quoted in Figes, 242-3.

⁶³ L.N. Tolstoy, *Confession*, Trans. Jane Kentish (New York: Penguin, 1987)

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁵ L.N. Tolstoy to Tsar Alexander III, March 8-15, 1881. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters*, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978) 344.

lead the life and share the toil of the peasants.”⁶⁶ Others, however, Mikhailovsky and Tkachov included, would criticize this as nothing more than “aristocratism.” Even Lenin, writing in 1910 in relative praise of Tolstoy, noted the following: “[Tolstoy is] on the one hand, the remarkably powerful, forthright and sincere protest against social falsehood and hypocrisy; [but] on the other, [Tolstoy was] the jaded, hysterical sniveler...who publicly [beat] his breast and wailed: 'I am a bad wicked man, but I am practicing moral self-perfection; I don't eat meat any more, I now eat rice cutlets.’”⁶⁷ Lenin's view represented the very societal constraint from which Tolstoy wished to break. Despite this however, critics of his new way of life never ceased to point to him as a shamed aristocrat, hoping to quell his own sense of internal anguish and guilt.

In spite of this criticism, Tolstoy never turned from this “new way of life.” Although Tolstoy's correspondence and writings in his final years were extensive, one finds little which indicates a sense of doubt regarding his life among the peasants. In a letter to his cousin Alexandra he stated “[My existence with the peasants] has been my whole life. It has been my monastery, my church into which I escaped, finding refuge from all the anxieties, doubts, and temptations of life.”⁶⁸ Truly, he allowed the peasants and their way of life to assume and become his own. In addition to his several efforts at peasant education, he never ceased reforming his own estate, offering the peasants sizable allotments far surpassing those ordered by the 1861 Edict of Emancipation. On a far more personal level – even after his 1862 marriage to Sofia Behrs – Tolstoy continued a long-standing affair with a peasant woman on his estate, Aksynia Bazykina. The two had a son together who later became a carriage driver

⁶⁶ Jonas Stadling, *In the Land of Tolstoy* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1897) 9.

⁶⁷ V.I. Lenin, “Leo Tolstoy as Mirror of the Revolution,” *Collected Works, Vol. 15* (Moscow: Progress, 1973) 202-3.

⁶⁸ L.N. Tolstoy to Alexandra Tolstaya as quoted in A. Tolstoy, “Tolstoy and the Russian Peasant,” *Russian Review* 19, No. 2 [Special Issue: Leo Tolstoy] (April 1960): 151.

at Yasnaya Polyana.⁶⁹

The peasants' views of Tolstoy were naturally mixed. Most however, responded ambivalently, simply recounting stories of their work with him. One noted “Though he was a Count, he could work hard and always when we were mowing he was first in a row” and later, another: “Once when we were haymaking, the Count was on the wagon pressing down the hay, and I was loading...the Count lost his balance...and down he went...I ran up to him 'Lev Nikolaevich,' I shouted, 'Are you hurt?' 'Nothing to speak about...Come on, give me a hand.’”⁷⁰ Regarding shoemaking, which would become one of Tolstoy's favorite activities, one remarked, “The Count was pretty good at it, and believe me, if he were to stick to the job he would make a good shoemaker.”⁷¹ His work ethic typically did not bother them; rather, he simply served as an additional worker, observing and learning from them throughout their daily lives.

In the final years of his life, with the assistance of his secretary and follower Vladimir Chertkov, Tolstoy organized a publishing house known as *The Intermediary*. Aylmer Maude, the Tolstoyan and Tolstoy's early biographer, recounted “Up to that time the literature supplied to the peasants had been wretched...to supply the people with literature embodying the best that has been thought and felt, and – with no aim at pecuniary profit...was [its] purpose.”⁷² Tolstoy continued his quest to both educate – thereby improving – the peasants, while first and foremost, keeping their interests in mind. Tolstoy wrote “Millions of Russians able to read stand before us like hungry jackdaws with open mouths, and say to us: 'Gentlemen writers of our native land...write for us who hunger for living words, and free us from those penny-

⁶⁹ See Figes, 241.

⁷⁰ Quoted in A. Tolstaya, “Tolstoy and the Russian Peasant,” 152-3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷² Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy* (London: Wordsworth, 2008) 559.

dreadfuls and the rubbish of the market.' The simple honest Russian folk deserve that we should respond to their call."⁷³ For many years, Tolstoy wrote exclusively for this journal, becoming distracted from this only with the beginning of his 1890's famine relief programs.⁷⁴

The last year of Tolstoy's life was marked with endless renunciations to the point where his marriage fell apart completely, and Vladimir Chertkov, the same publisher of the *Intermediary*, remained one his only trusted friend and confidant. Tolstoy persisted in the desire to flee from his aristocratic ties, writing to his wife that "I can't live any longer in these conditions of luxury in which have been living... [I am] leaving this worldly life in order to live the last days of my life in solitude."⁷⁵ The eighty-two year old Tolstoy, even after his efforts with the peasants and renunciations, could not cease hoping to simplify and purify his life in the manner of his icon, the Russian peasantry. Less than a week after this letter, he died nearby the Astopova train station, attempting to flee to solitude either at the monastery of Optina, or simply further into the countryside. This lifelong desire to detach himself from his wealthy upbringing and early years of peasant exploitation connects Tolstoy's ideals to those of the early Populists who fled "to the people."

This however, is simply a broad overview of the numerous occurrences in Tolstoy's life that could be perceived as directly linked to the ideologies of the Populist movement. It is important, therefore, to look in greater detail at a few of these events to further examine this massive figure in Russian history in the context of this complex movement.

⁷³ L.N. Tolstoy to N.Y. Danilevsky as quoted in Maude, 559.

⁷⁴ See also Thais S. Lindstrom, "From Chapbooks to Classics: The Story of the *Intermediary*," *American Slavic and Eastern European Review* 16, No. 2 (April 1957): 190-201.

⁷⁵ L.N. Tolstoy to S.A. Tolstaya, October 28, 1910. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters*, Vol. 2. 710-11.

Chapter 2

The Peasant Schools at Yasnaya Polyana

In December 1874, Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy wrote the following to Alexandra Tolstaya, a distant cousin.

I ask everyone why we want to educate the people; and there are 5 answers...This is mine...When I enter a school and see this crowd of ragged, dirty, skinny children with their bright eyes and often angelic expressions, alarm and terror come over me, not unlike what I'd feel at seeing people drowning. How can I pull them out, and who should I pull out first and who next? And what is drowning here is what is most precious...I want education for the people simply in order to save those drowning Pushkins, Ostrogradskys, Filarets, and Lomonosovs. Every school is teeming with them.⁷⁶

This letter in many ways captures the very essence of Tolstoy's calling toward the education of the peasantry. This was not however, the beginning of Tolstoy's mission to both improve the situation of the peasantry and alter the general philosophy of popular education in Russia. Over a period ranging anywhere from 1850 to the end of his life in 1910, Lev Tolstoy studied and practiced non-compulsory forms of pedagogy in a series of educational experiments on his Yasnaya Polyana estate.

It is important to first understand the nature of education within Tolstoy's Russia. Peter I, the reformer Tsar, introduced the first major educational reforms to his new Western Russia. As he stated in 1721, "Learning is beneficial and basic for the good of both the Fatherland and the Church, just like the root and the seed and the foundation."⁷⁷ Despite over a century of the promulgation of Peter's Westernizing ideologies however, the right to education remained extremely isolated. Over the next century, the peasants remained primarily uneducated in Russia. Historian Ben Eklof, in his extensive work *Russia's Peasant Schools* states, "The

⁷⁶ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Tolstaya, December 15-30, 1874 in *Tolstoy's Letters, Vol. 1*, Edited by R.F. Christian (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons) 1978. 273.; Mikhail Ostrogradsky was a Ukrainian mathematician and physicist; "Filaret" refers to the influential Metropolitan of Moscow; Mikhail Lomonosov is considered a polymath, influential in science, modern linguistics, and several other fields including education.

⁷⁷ Emperor Peter I, as quoted in Ed. Catherine Evtuhov, et al, *A History of Russia: Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004) 232.

history of Russian popular education before 1864 is one of sweeping projects occasionally passed as laws but almost never carried out in practice. [Empress Catherine II] is known to have felt that too much education for the *chern'* (plebes) was dangerous for the social order...there was no provision for the funding of peasant schools.”⁷⁸

Eklof's analysis of the educational system is important; it is precisely as a result of this fact that in the late 1850s, Tolstoy began investigating popular education, as well as contemplating the establishment of his own peasant schools on his Yasnaya Polyana estate.

One translator of Tolstoy's educational writings observed the following:

[Tolstoy's] sudden renewal of interest in schools...may well be due to the stimulus of public events. The whole peasant question was clearly coming to a head. While on a visit abroad he suddenly jots in his diary: 'Above all, a strong and distinct idea has occurred to me of setting up a school in my village for the whole district and a whole range of activities of that kind.'⁷⁹

While this first venture lasted only about three years, the establishment of the peasant schools at Yasnaya Polyana represents the concerted effort of one of the world's most famous literary figures to alter the state of Russia's educational system. Furthermore, this event illustrates the multifaceted nature of Tolstoy himself: even in this early stage of Tolstoy's literary career he shows signs of radical dissent from the established order in the desire to improve Russian society. This educational venture served not only to shape his philosophical views on education and the peasantry, but also to change the ways in which he interacted with this oppressed and lowest class of Russian society. Additionally, Tolstoy's educational efforts can be viewed in a similar manner to the earliest periods of Russian Populism, when the idealistic intelligentsia heeded the call to “go to the people” to improve their status in society.

⁷⁸ Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools: Officialdom, Village Culture, and Popular Pedagogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 19-24.

⁷⁹ Alan Pinch, “Introduction” in L.N. Tolstoy, *Tolstoy on Education: Tolstoy's Educational Writings 1861-62*, Edited and Translated by Alan Pinch and Michael Armstrong (London: The Athlone Press, 1982) 13-14.

I. Early Life and Philosophy on Education

When approaching the analysis of Tolstoy's views on education and creation of the Yasnaya Polyana School, it is necessary to first examine his own education. Tolstoy was not the product of “popular” education let alone the regimented government or theological schools so prevalent at the time of his youth. As Alan Pinch notes, “Tolstoy never attended a school...his own education was conducted by tutors at home, the usual solution for aristocratic Russian families of his day.”⁸⁰ Tolstoy's family situation was altered early on – his mother and father having died before Tolstoy turned eight – leaving the appointment of tutors up to his legal guardians. This private educational system hardly limited the young Tolstoy; rather, in his earliest years he attained a level of near-fluency in both French and German, while simultaneously learning the skills of writing, reading, and mathematics. Before entering formal university at age sixteen, Tolstoy was fluent in English, and was “also well-versed in Arabic, Tartar, and Turkish...with the help of several specialized tutors.”⁸¹

Upon entering Kazan University in 1844, Tolstoy studied Oriental Languages and Law. The University quickly managed to stoke the already growing fires of Tolstoy's opposition to authority, particularly in the realm of education. Tolstoy stated, “My work on [Catherine the Great's] *Instructions* and [Montesquieu's] *Espirit des lois* opened up for me a new field of independent mental endeavor whereas the university with its demands...hindered me.”⁸² Tolstoy failed his initial examinations in Oriental Languages – despite his already clear grasp of three foreign languages – and left the University after only three years, having never earned a degree. Pinch acknowledges that “Tolstoy never came to understand what a really

⁸⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁸¹ Ed. Bob Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher: Leo Tolstoy's Writings on Education*, Trans. Christopher Edgar (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2000) 6.

⁸² L.N. Tolstoy quoted in Ed. Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*: 6.

good university could give. At Kazan he observed...the backward aspects of an institution still suffering from...the close of [school rector Nikolai] Lobachevsky's patient struggle to animate and organize a true centre of higher learning.”⁸³ Regardless of this lack of understanding, this period set the groundwork for the earliest development of Tolstoy's theories on education.

Not long after his withdrawal from the University of Kazan in 1847, Tolstoy entered the Russian army with his brother, Nikolai, who was serving in the Caucasus. This period marked a unique event in the life of the young Tolstoy: at this time he wrote some of his earliest works such as *Childhood* (1852) – a fictional account of his own youth – and *Sevastopol Sketches* (1855) – based on a battle during the Crimean War. Furthermore, his interaction with the various groups of this region would inspire later works such as *The Cossacks* (1863) and *Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1870), as well as offer him a model for interaction with the peasantry. The Cossacks, for Tolstoy, represented a peasantry without the hierarchy of landowners, who learned from each other based on personal experience rather than from an organized curriculum. This feeling was not without merit: as Blaisdell notes, this particular group of Cossacks consisted of “Russian peasants who had long lived in [the Caucasus] where they could avoid serfdom.”⁸⁴ By 1855 however, Tolstoy began to experience a growing disenchantment with army life. He wrote to his aunt, “Over these last few days the idea of leaving the army had occurred to me more and more often. I see that it would be easy for me.”⁸⁵ Tolstoy withdrew from the army in 1856, due in part to his previously expressed desire to leave the service, and in part to the illness of his brother Dmitry.

Following his military service, Tolstoy greatly increased his writing, publishing several stories in popular Russian journals such as *Sovremennik* – a periodical started by

⁸³ Pinch, *Tolstoy on Education*. 12.

⁸⁴ Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*. 7.

⁸⁵ L.N. Tolstoy to T.A. Yergolskaya, September 4, 1855. In *Tolstoy's Letters*, Vol. 1, 52.

national poet Aleksandr Pushkin, and at that point operated by revolutionary thinker Nikolai Chernyshevsky. He gained a significant amount of popularity at this time, becoming acquainted with the authors such as Turgenev, Ivan Goncharov, and the dramatist Aleksandr Ostrovskii. Simultaneously however, Tolstoy struggled in his personal life: he rapidly injected himself into Moscow society, drinking heavily and gambling recklessly. In his later work *Confession*, Tolstoy stated the following regarding his lifestyle:

I cannot think of those years without horror, loathing and heartache. I killed men in war and challenged men to duels in order to kill them. I lost at cards, consumed the labor of the peasants, sentenced them to punishments, lived loosely and deceived people. Lying, robbery, adultery of all kinds, drunkenness, violence, murder – there was no crime I didn't commit...so I lived for ten years.⁸⁶

As a result, Tolstoy frequently attempted to redeem himself for these actions, particularly in regard to the peasantry. He tried, somewhat unsuccessfully to liberate the serfs on his Yasnaya Polyana estate. In 1856, he noted in his correspondence: “My business with the peasants is going badly...words about emancipation have reached them with various additions and embellishments, and as a result of their vague idea about whom the landowners' land belongs to, they have rejected my very favourable proposals.”⁸⁷

This failure, as well as pressure from the hustle and bustle of city life led Tolstoy to flee Moscow – as well as Yasnaya Polyana – on an 1857 trip throughout Western Europe. While this trip – beginning in Paris – hardly changed Tolstoy's ways, it sparked his interest in education.⁸⁸ His travels at this point however, primarily consisted of sightseeing, touring museums, and living as recklessly as he had in Moscow. Tolstoy's sudden desire to educate

⁸⁶ L.N. Tolstoy, *Confession*, Trans. by Jane Kentish (London: Penguin Classics, 1987) 23.

⁸⁷ This quote combines two of Tolstoy's letters written in early June, 1856. The first: L.N. Tolstoy to M.N. Tolstaya, June 5, 1856. *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 58. The second: L.N. Tolstoy to N.A. Nekrasov, June 12, 1856. *Ibid.*, 58fn.

⁸⁸ After arriving in Geneva in April 1857, Tolstoy writes to Turgenev: “I spent 1 ½ months in Sodom, and there is a great accumulation of filth in my soul: two whores, and the [witness of an execution], and the idleness and vulgarity” and later to V.P. Botkin, “Alas! I've picked up syphilis in Lucerne...I threw myself at the first woman I came across!” See R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 97-102.

the peasants on his estate appears randomly: in a single diary entry in June 1857 he states, “A strong and distinct idea has occurred to me of setting up a school in my village for the whole district.”⁸⁹ Regardless of arbitrary idea, Tolstoy returned to Moscow and Yasnaya Polyana in the latter part of that year, and approximately a year and a half later, established the first Yasnaya Polyana School.

This first school acted as an experiment for Tolstoy. The majority of information regarding the school in the years 1859-60 comes from Tolstoy's correspondence and personal writings. The school was an opportunity for Tolstoy to develop his theories regarding education. In March 1860, he wrote the following to traveller and geologist Y.P. Kovalevsky:

I've been busy with a school for boys and girls...progress has been quite unexpected. [The state-run academies] are useful but in the same way as dinner at the English Club would be useful if it were all eaten up by the steward and the cook. These things are produced by all 70,000,000 Russians, but are used by several thousand...The most vital need of the Russian people is Public education...[This] hasn't begun, and never will it begin as long as the government is in charge of it.⁹⁰

Tolstoy acknowledged the moderate success of this institution – which he at that time merely had organized, arranging the instructors and school buildings – but continued to grapple with the larger issue in his mind: the problem with Russia's educational system in respect to the peasantry. He even brainstormed – in the same letter to Kovalevsky – the foundation of a “Society for Public Education.” Tolstoy's idea however, was never presented to the government.⁹¹

In October of 1860, Tolstoy's educational ambitions were temporarily sidelined by the death of his brother, Nikolai, of tuberculosis in France. Tolstoy wrote to poet A.A. Fet shortly thereafter:

He died, literally, in my arms. Nothing in life has made such an impression on me...The truth I've

⁸⁹ Pinch, 13.

⁹⁰ L.N. Tolstoy to Y.P. Kovalevsky, March 12, 1860. In R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 138-9.

⁹¹ R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 140fn.

taken away from my 32 years is that the situation in which someone has placed us is the most terrible fraud and crime...I accept life as it is, as a most mean, detestable and false condition...I'm spending the winter here for the simple reason that I am here, and it makes no difference where I live.⁹²

Despite Tolstoy's evident depression because of this situation, he used that winter to his advantage: beginning in France, he continued travelling abroad researching education throughout Europe.

In an article entitled “On Popular Education,” Tolstoy wrote, “I could write whole books about the ignorance that I witnessed in the schools of France, Switzerland, and Germany. Anyone who cares about education should study schools not from the reports of public examinations, but from extended visits and conversations with teachers and pupils in the schools and outside the schools.”⁹³ Tolstoy was disturbed by the educational systems that he viewed while travelling throughout Europe. He abhorred the compulsory nature of schools and the intense amount of regimentation in nearly every facet of the Western European scholastic system. Tolstoy would have witnessed the implementation of educational philosophies similar to those discussed by Michel Foucault in his classic analysis of disciplinary tactics – both educational and otherwise.

It was possible to link, to the binary exercises of rivalry, a spatial disposition [of students] inspired by the[Roman] legion, with rank, hierarchy, pyramidal supervision...By assigning individual places it made possible the supervision of each individual and the simultaneous work of all. Thus the classroom would form a single great table, with many different entries, under the scrupulously 'classificatory' eye of the master.⁹⁴

This standard in government-organized popular education represented - to Tolstoy - an environment counteractive to learning, and furthermore, and more broadly, the centralized, hierarchical, exercise of power upon an otherwise voiceless mass.

Tolstoy contrasted this with the prevalent café culture – specifically in France.

⁹² L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Fet, October 17/29. Ibid., 141-2.

⁹³ L.N. Tolstoy, “On Popular Education.” In Ed. Bob Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*. 178.

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977) 146-7.

“What I saw in Marseilles,” he wrote, “takes place in all the other countries: everywhere the greater part of one's education is acquired not at school but in life...The very boy who told me that Henry IV had been killed by Julius Caesar knew very well the story of the *Three Musketeers* and of *Monte Cristo*...Here is the unconscious school that has undermined the compulsory school and has made the latter's substance dwindle down to almost nothing.”⁹⁵

This, therefore, became the philosophical impetus for the creation of Tolstoy's school. In order to adequately educate the populace, education could not and should not be compulsory, but rather should grow organically from within the life experience of the people themselves. As Blaisdell notes, “He was revolutionary but non-dogmatic. He did not attack the popular *cultural* education of the day, but instead bowed to it and supplemented it with complementary material. At the same time, he eagerly offered children as much education as they desired.”⁹⁶

II. The Flourishing School and Its Curriculum

In the spring of 1861, Tolstoy returned to Yasnaya Polyana and resumed his efforts in fostering the growth of his school. He immediately dove into work: “I've been busy...with the school, which had to be placed on a new and better footing right from the start.”⁹⁷ Tolstoy appointed new teachers, all of whom – at Tolstoy's discretion – taught according to his still-developing pedagogical philosophy: “The more convenient a method of instruction is for the teacher the less convenient for the pupils. The only right way of teaching is that which is satisfactory for the pupils.”⁹⁸ He found his philosophy easier to employ himself: “[The children] are fonder of me [than of the teachers]. And we begin to chat for 3 or 4 hours, and

⁹⁵ L.N. Tolstoy, “On Popular Education.” 179.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁷ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Tolstaya, May 14, 1861. In R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 147.

⁹⁸ L.N. Tolstoy, “The Yasnaya Polyana school in the months of November and December.” In Ed. Pinch, *Tolstoy on Education*. 115.

nobody is bored.”⁹⁹ Tolstoy far from exaggerated his claims: several of his pupils later published reminiscences regarding the school and Tolstoy as teacher. One, Vasily Morozov wrote in his memoirs:

We had grown as close to Lev Nikolayevich as the cobbler's wax is to the wax-end. We were miserable without Lev Nikolayevich, and [he] without us...our school was still growing and growing. By now it had become famous not only in our province but even in Moscow and Petersburg. What am I saying? It had become famous abroad, not to speak of Russia. Even then I realized what a centre and meeting-point Yasnaya Polyana had become.¹⁰⁰

The school at this point rapidly was expanding rapidly: it is estimated that as many as twenty “schools” were opened and over fifty young boys, girls, and some adults attended lessons at Yasnaya Polyana.¹⁰¹

In January 1862, Tolstoy published the first journal of his school, entitled simply *Yasnaya Polyana*.¹⁰² This journal served primarily as a medium through which Tolstoy could voice his opinions regarding education and publicly display the successes and failures of his own efforts at establishing schools. One of his first major articles, entitled “The Yasnaya Polyana School in Months of November and December” offered a broad overview of his growing educational experiment on his estate. He states, “We have no beginners...like any living organism, the school not only varies with each year, day and hour, but also is subject to temporary crises...We have four teachers...the school is housed in a two-story stone building.”¹⁰³ He continues in a style comparable to one of his great novels, describing every last detail of the physical building and its inner-workings, down to the amount of mud frequently coating the staircases.

⁹⁹ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Tolstaya, Beginning of August 1861. In R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 149.

¹⁰⁰ Vasily Morozov, “Extracts from the Reminiscences of a Pupil at the Yasnaya Polyana School: V.S. Morozov.” In Pinch, *Tolstoy on Education*. 102-7.

¹⁰¹ Alan Pinch indicates that “schools” were a broad distinction for Tolstoy, indicating a group of children visiting village officials to learn reading, writing and the like. See A. Pinch, *Tolstoy on Education*. 18.

¹⁰² The initial title had been *A Country Schoolmaster*.

¹⁰³ L.N. Tolstoy, “The Yasnaya Polyana School in the Months of November and December,” 75-6.

The bulk of this work however, is a detailed description of the school's non-compulsory curriculum, offering not simply a glance into the day-to-day classroom regimen but also, into the depths of Tolstoy's pedagogical philosophy. Tolstoy writes:

The youngest class reads, writes, and solves problems in the first three operations of arithmetic, and reads sacred history so that the course of study is divided in the following way: 1) reading mechanics and graded reading; 2) writing; 3) penmanship; 4) grammar; 5) sacred history; 6) Russian history; 7) drawing; 8) drafting; 9) singing; 10) mathematics; 11) natural sciences; 12) religion.¹⁰⁴

He goes to great lengths to explain each one of these subjects, typically offering an anecdote or two about a “typical” day in each of these classes. It is important to note however, that, as mentioned in Eklof's extensive work on the peasant schooling system, this curriculum is not unique in structure. An “Abridged Program of Primary Schools” indicates that nearly all of these subjects were taught, albeit in a perhaps more compacted form than listed in Tolstoy's model.¹⁰⁵

How then did Tolstoy's methods differ? Perhaps the most evident example of the distinctiveness of the Yasnaya Polyana School is found in its writing program. Tolstoy describes this in great detail in a short essay entitled “Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us?” This essay focuses on a pivotal question not only for Tolstoy's educational experiment but also for the Russian intelligentsia: how was one from an intellectual background to teach the peasantry who had never experienced formal education? For Tolstoy, this question was easily answered “for the simple reason that the child stands closer than I do...to that ideal of truth, beauty, and goodness to which I, in my pride, wish to raise him.”¹⁰⁶

The basic method of teaching writing began as follows: “The chief goal in having children write compositions, consists not just in giving them themes but in presenting them

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰⁵ See Eklof, “Appendix A: Instruction in Russian Primary Schools” in *Russian Peasant Schools*, 483-6.

¹⁰⁶ L.N. Tolstoy, “Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us?” in Ed. Blaisdell, *Tolstoy As Teacher*. 48.

with a large choice, I pointing out the scope of the composition, and in indicating the initial steps.”¹⁰⁷ Tolstoy presented his class with a series of ideas rather than themes and then set the children to work on them. The children found themselves incapable of coming up with a topic completely and instead, demanded that Tolstoy begin it for them. He continues: “In the middle of the lesson I was obliged to leave them. They continued to write without me, and finished two pages that were just as good, just as well-felt, and just as true as the first page.”¹⁰⁸

Midway through the writing process however, the manuscripts were destroyed, which prompted two of the male students to remain behind and finish the story late into the evening with Tolstoy. After several hours of contemplation, one boy named Fedka finishes the story, leading Tolstoy to state the following:

The feeling for artistic measure was stronger in him than in any authors I know...It seemed strange to me that a half-literate peasant boy should suddenly arrive at such conscious artistic powers...It seemed strange and offensive to me that I, the author of *Childhood*, who had garnered some success and earned recognition for artistic talent from a cultivated Russian public...should be unable to teach anything to young Semka or Fedka,..but that only with difficulty and in a happy moment of excitement should I be able to follow them or understand them.¹⁰⁹

Although Tolstoy's commentary may be viewed as a supportive exaggeration of these two young boys' writing skills, it illustrates the very essence of Tolstoy's philosophy on education. By simply offering his students a minimum amount of ideas, they could continue on their own path to create a written story. This non-compulsory method of teaching writing led to several things: the boys not only completed the assignment, but expressed a deep interest in the writing process. As a result, the final product produced – in this case, a story entitled “They Feed with the Spoon, Then Poke the Eye with the Handle” - was a story of great magnitude, comparable (in Tolstoy's mind) if not superior to his own writing. “There could no longer be any doubt,” he stated, “that our success was no accident: we had

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 25.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 32.

apparently found a method that was more natural and more conducive than anything tried before.”¹¹⁰

This non-compulsory and unstructured style of administration permeated nearly every facet of the school's existence, counteracting many of the standards of education at that time. As Foucault acknowledges “In the eighteenth century, 'rank' [began] to define the great form of distribution of individuals in the educational order..It made the educational space function like a learning machine, but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding.”¹¹¹ This eighteenth century ideal of education could not be further from Tolstoy's pedagogical doctrine. Despite the increasing popularity of the schools and the ravings of its students, lectures were not always well attended. In fact, Tolstoy and the teachers did not even *require* attendance. Tolstoy recalled one particular moment in his journal:

Suddenly without saying a word, two or three boys will suddenly rush into the room during the second or third afternoon class hour, hurriedly collecting their caps... “Going home.” And who are these boys who decided to go home, and how did they decide to? God knows...Such occurrences take place once or twice a week. They are aggravating and disagreeable for the teacher...But who will not admit that due to these events the five, six, and even seven lessons a day for each class...take on that much more significance?¹¹²

He felt therefore, that quantity of attendance was subordinate to quality of learning in his classes, even at the risk of lessons being rarely heard by his students.

It could be quite naturally assumed that students would in some way be penalized, either by means of grades or punishment – whether corporal or otherwise – for their lack of attendance. In the case of Tolstoy's schools however, this assumption would be incorrect on all accounts. Tolstoy's system of grading carried little weight: he states, “Grades are, for the students, a measure of their work, and the students express dissatisfaction with grades only when they believe a grade has been given unfairly...Grades by the way, are left with us only

¹¹⁰ L.N. Tolstoy, “Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us?” In Ed. Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*. 33.

¹¹¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. 146.

¹¹² L.N. Tolstoy, “The School at Yasnaya Polyana,” 89-90.

from the old ways, and are beginning to fall into disuse.”¹¹³ Disciplinary measures as punishment, to Tolstoy, were equally as pointless of an inheritance from the old system of schooling: “Let the people who are themselves punished invent the rights and obligations of punishment. Our world of children – of simple, independent people- must remain pure, free from self-deception and the criminal faith of believing in punishment.”¹¹⁴

Although Tolstoy quite freely and happily published his journal of pedagogical theories, nevertheless knew that his opinions would be contentious; he wrote to Vasily Botkin, “I hope that they kick up a terrible fuss about me in the press, and I hope that as a result of it I shan't cease to think and feel just the same.”¹¹⁵ Rather than receiving outright criticism however, as Blaisdell notes, “his contemporaries – when they bothered to respond – dismissed the ideas and opinions of *Yasnaya Polyana* as unimportant or impractical.”¹¹⁶ The journal itself, therefore, while it continued to broadcast Tolstoy's educational doctrines throughout Russia, did little to support the growth of the schools themselves.

III. Collapse and Revival

By late May of 1862 however, Tolstoy had exhausted himself from work at the school. Additionally, he had begun to suffer from symptoms of consumption and was instructed by his doctor to take a *kumys* cure in Samara province.¹¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, agents from the Tsarist “Third Department” began a search of Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana estate for revolutionary publications written by either Tolstoy himself or his teachers.¹¹⁸ This group of

¹¹³ Ibid., 87.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 86.

¹¹⁵ L.N. Tolstoy to V.P. Botkin, January 26, 1862. In R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 153.

¹¹⁶ Ed. Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*. 14.

¹¹⁷ *Kumys* is a fermented form of mare's milk.

¹¹⁸ The Third Department was a Tsarist secret police force established during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I.

“secret police” ransacked Yasnaya Polyana, questioned Tolstoy's family and staff, and subjected them to the public reading of his diaries and letters. Tolstoy wrote to his aunt, “It was fortunate for me and for that friend of yours [a colonel from the ranks of the Third Department with whom Tolstoy's aunt was acquainted] that I wasn't there – I'd have killed him! Charming! Marvellous! That's how the government makes its friends...I've always been completely indifferent to the government. I can't say that now.”¹¹⁹

This event severely disturbed and depressed the young Tolstoy. While Blaisdell argues that “Tolstoy never cited [the government's intervention] as a cause for the school's demise,” it is clear from Tolstoy's letters that it was a major factor.¹²⁰ On August 7, he wrote to his aunt, “All my activities in which I found happiness and solace have been ruined...There'll be no school, the people are laughing up their sleeves, the gentry are gloating, while we think willy-nilly, at the sound of every bell, that they've come to take us away.”¹²¹ Tolstoy thus no longer finds himself capable of adequately focusing on the school, but rather preoccupies himself in preparation for another raid of his estate. Furthermore, in defense of his honor following the search – and at his aunt's recommendation – he wrote a pointed letter to Tsar Alexander II, hoping to clear both his and the Tsar's name from blame in this situation.¹²²

There were however, several other events that acted as turning points for the *Yasnaya Polyana* journal, the school, and Tolstoy's life in general. The first of these is made evident in a letter written shortly after his letter to the Tsar:

I've been afflicted by every misfortune lately: the gendarmes, such censorship of my journal that

¹¹⁹ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Tolstaya, July 22-3(?), 1862. In R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 158.

¹²⁰ Ed. Blaisdell, 15.

¹²¹ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Tolstaya, August 7, 1862. In R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 160-2.

¹²² R.F. Christian notes that “The Chief of Police appended a note justifying his action...on the technical grounds that the student-teachers were living [at Yasnaya Polyana] without residence permits. This explanation appears to have satisfied Alexander...the Governor of Tula (the region in which Yasnaya Polyana is located) was instructed in a subsequent letter from [The Chief of Police] on behalf of the Emperor that Tolstoy was not to be disturbed again for the same reason.” In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 163fn.

I'm only publishing the June issue tomorrow...and the 3rd and chief misfortune or good fortune, depending on which way you choose to look at it: toothless old fool that I am, I've fallen in love.¹²³

Tolstoy met and fell in love with Sofia Andreyevna Behrs, the daughter of a high-ranking physician, whom he would marry on October 5, 1862, less than a month later. For Tolstoy, this fulfilled a long-standing desire of his: to wed and raise a family of his own. Despite its continued operation, over the next several months, Tolstoy made little or no mention of the Yasnaya Polyana School or the journal in his letters, instead focusing primarily on married life and the formation of his family. Vasily Morozov noted Tolstoy's preoccupation, stating that, "Lev Nikolaevich rarely visited us and the school began to flag."¹²⁴

The second life-altering event was Tolstoy's resumption of fictional writing. R.F. Christian states that "the years 1863-9 were, in Tolstoy's literary biography, occupied entirely with the writing and publication of *War and Peace*, and if in one sense this was a momentous period of his life marked by almost continuous hard work, in another sense it was uneventful: there was only *one* literary event."¹²⁵ All of Tolstoy's work and focus shifted from organizing the Yasnaya Polyana School to writing what would become the epic Russian novel chronicling the tumultuous period of the Napoleonic Wars. Combined with his growing investment in his family life, Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana peasant schools faded in importance, often forced to close from disinterest, preoccupation, and neglect.

Although initially published in serial form over a four-year period – a style common to nineteenth century literature – in 1869, *War and Peace* was published in full. The end of his labors on this novel, much as the beginning, marked a major turning point for Tolstoy; by

¹²³ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Tolstaya, September 7, 1862. Ibid., 164.

¹²⁴ Vasily Morozov, "Recollections of a Pupil of the Yasnaya Polyana School." In Ed. Bob Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*, 16.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 175.

January 1871 he had written to Afanasy Fet that “I’ve stopped writing and will never again write verbose nonsense like *War and Peace*. I’m guilty, but I swear I’ll never do it again.”¹²⁶ As occurred frequently throughout the life of Tolstoy however, this self-deprecating commentary merely indicated a turn toward a nobler goal. He remarked: “There is just one difficulty: there are no good books for the people, not only in our country, but not even in Europe.”¹²⁷ With this idea in mind, Tolstoy embarked upon the second wave of his educational experiment at Yasnaya Polyana.

As in his first attempts at peasant education, Tolstoy began by focusing on the instruction of children, specifically in the realm of reading and writing. Throughout the early 1870s, Tolstoy focused primarily on the creation of an *ABC Book* and a *Primer* both of which, he hoped, would bring these basic, rudimentary skills to the masses. In January of 1872 he writes to Alexandra Tolstaya:

These last years I’ve been writing a *Primer*, and now I’m having it published...My proud dreams about this *Primer* are: that two generations of *all* Russian children, from tsars’ to peasants’, will study with the aid of this *Primer* alone, and will receive their first poetic impressions from it, and that having written this *Primer*, I’ll be able to die peacefully.¹²⁸

These primers contained a series of basic exercises, serving as a culmination of Tolstoy’s educational philosophy as first expressed in his 1860s peasant schools at Yasnaya Polyana. A large portion of the texts included stemmed not only from Tolstoy’s own work, but also from folk stories. When released however, the *Primer* received much of the same criticism incurred by his early educational theories and was ultimately dismissed. Tolstoy noted by 1873 that “The *Primer* is an inscrutable mystery to me: if I meet anyone with children, I hear genuine praise, and complaints that there’s nothing of mine to read, but nobody buys the *Primer*,

¹²⁶ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Fet, January 1-6, 1871. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy’s Letters, Volume 1*. 231.

¹²⁷ L.N. Tolstoy, “On Methods of Teaching the Rudiments.” In Ed. Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*. 182.

¹²⁸ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Tolstaya, January 12, 1872. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy’s Letters, Volume 1*. 240-1.

therefore nobody needs it.”¹²⁹ His beloved project faded not only from importance in the public sphere, but also in Tolstoy's personal life.

Regardless of the *Primer's* failures, Tolstoy resumed personally teaching at Yasnaya Polyana, reestablishing the 1860s-style peasant schools. While Tolstoy maintained the methods and regimen of the first schools, he added a new set of factors more connected with his family life: his children. Although (at the request of Sofia Tolstaya) Tolstoy's then five children were educated in a more traditional style, he often ordered that they participate in the lessons on a daily basis. His daughter Tatyana noted that “We three children taught the absolute beginners their alphabet. Our classroom was the hall, and fat Ilya, a big pointer clutched in one hand, would try to teach the alphabet to rows of stolid little children much the same size as himself.”¹³⁰ His son Ilya recalled the following:

One day *papa* set me to teaching the alphabet to one of the boys. I tried my best, but he understood absolutely nothing. I lost my temper and began hitting him; we fought and both began to cry. *Papa* came and told me that I could never teach again because I didn't know how...“It's not for us to teach them, but for them to teach us,” he remarked.¹³¹

By late 1873 however, Tolstoy found himself once again preoccupied and forced to close the schools. Although in April 1874 he mentioned becoming “involved in [schools of literacy], and made the old pedagogical ferment rise in me again,” this activity was relatively short-lived.¹³² He gave no direct reasoning for this abrupt close, yet his letters reveal several occurrences which more than likely pulled him away from his efforts at peasant education. In 1874, a famine struck his property in the Samara province, inspiring Tolstoy to begin his first of many attempts at rural famine reform. He stated in a letter to A.A. Tolstaya, “This year there was a very abundant harvest throughout the whole Samara province, and as far as I

¹²⁹ L.N. Tolstoy to N.N. Strakhov, May 31, 1873. Ibid. 261.

¹³⁰ Tatyana Tolstaya, *Tolstoy Remembered*. In Ed. Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*. 17.

¹³¹ Ilya Tolstoy, *Tolstoy, My Father: Reminiscences*, Translated by Ann Dunnigan (Chicago: Cowles Book Company, Inc., 1971) 18.

¹³² L.N. Tolstoy to N.N. Strakhov, April 18-19, 1874. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 270.

know, the only place in the whole Samara province that was missed by the rains was my estate... [I] suffered a big loss...the disaster would have been terrible if such friendly help hasn't been given to the people there.”¹³³ Furthermore, he notes the loss of his sixth child, and shortly thereafter, the expected birth of another. As his daughter Tatyana recalled, “When summer came, the school was closed, and the next year it didn't reopen.”¹³⁴

While education remained one of Tolstoy's interests throughout the duration of his life, the 1870s marked the end of his attempts at organizing schools for the peasantry. In the second half of the decade, he dedicated himself entirely to the writing and publication of his second great novel, *Anna Karenina*. Simultaneously, he became entirely preoccupied with religious ideas and the notion of impending death, culminating with a full spiritual crisis sometime around 1879, which he chronicled in his short work *Confession*. This period changed Tolstoy's outlook on his own existence, society, and his writing, leading him to renounce his old life and begin on a path of religious contemplation lasting until his death. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly in the context of this study, it awakened him to further issues, both in a social and political context, within peasant society. Over the next several years, Tolstoy would turn his attention to these glaring problems, beginning projects in much the same manner as the peasant schools in the attempt to improve the peasant condition in Russia.

¹³³ L.N. Tolstoy to A.A. Tolstaya, August 15, 1874. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 1*. 271-2.

¹³⁴ Tatyana Tolstaya, *Tolstoy Remembered*. As quoted in Ed. Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as Teacher*. 17.

Chapter 3

Tolstoy and the Famine of 1891-93

Everyone is talking about the famine, everyone is worrying about the starving people, and wanting to help them and save them. Yet how disgusting it is! People who have never thought about others, about the ordinary people, suddenly for some reason are burning with the desire to serve them. It's either vanity – wanting to show off – or fear; but there's nothing good about it.¹³⁵

The famine Tolstoy referred to in this entry would continue for approximately two more years, sweeping across much of western Russia and taking hundreds of thousands of lives – particularly in the lives of the peasants. This famine “became a landmark on the scale of the Irish potato famine of 1848: as the [literary] journals erupted in a storm of protest, the famine became the symbol of a sharp rift between the government and the intelligentsia.”¹³⁶ For the intelligentsia, the famine would reawaken the ideologies of Populism and Marxism, laying the foundations for the revolutionary activity of the next several decades, specifically in the Revolution of 1905. This famine also held particular significance for Tolstoy. Like the peasant schools, this famine offers a good case study for understanding Tolstoy's interactions with the peasantry in the final decade of the century. Like the ideology of the early Populists, Tolstoy attempted to view and aid peasant society from within rather than impose his doctrines from above. This case, therefore, illustrates Tolstoy's unchanging philosophy of the peasants' role in society; although he could influence their ideas, the peasants themselves were responsible for applying them to improve their position in Russia.

I. Roots of the Famine

The famine of 1891-93 was a tragic occurrence. Numerous factors led to its onset in mid-1891; however, it is impossible to indicate one specific catalyst, which, above all others,

¹³⁵ L.N. Tolstoy, *Tolstoy's Diaries Volume 1*. 311.

¹³⁶ Ed. Catherine Evtuhov, et al, *A History of Russia: People, Legends, Events, Forces*. 497.

led to the devastation of the Russian economy and the rural population. Rather, the causes of famine can be viewed in both an environmental sense and in a socioeconomic sense. The disastrous period of 1891-3 stemmed not only from a failing harvest, but also from the failing system of rural economy developed after the 1861 emancipation of the serfs.

Outwardly, the famine of 1891-3 was caused by a series of bad harvests gathered following seasons of strange weather. This year, Russia experienced a particularly long and intense winter, beginning in approximately late October. The normal spring crops failed to take to seed due to a light snowfall in the winter of 1890. When in the early spring this minimal snow finally melted, little water runoff resulted. Worse yet, shortly thereafter, the winter weather returned, lasting until approximately mid-April. Although temperatures gradually increased – eventually culminating in a scorching summer – the land remained in a state of drought described as “in midsummer, giving, in the end, an autumnal appearance to heat-blasted nature.”¹³⁷

As a result, the harvests of 1891 suffered greatly. In the sixteen largest provinces of western Russia, the harvest of cereal grains decreased from a total of 146, 535, 800 *chetverty* in 1888 to 77,574,700 *chetverty* less than three years later.¹³⁸ In some of the central provinces, – such as Voronezh and Kazan – this meant a decrease of almost 75 percent in rye harvest, a factor which greatly affected the peasants' daily life. Typically, a large portion of the the peasant diet was based on this staple grain. Although Robbins acknowledges that “even in the hard-hit regions...one could still find excellent crops,” by the end of December 1891, “the

¹³⁷ Department zemeledilia I sel'skoi promyshlennosti Ministerstva gosudarstvennykh imushchestv, *1891 god v sel'skokhoziaistvennom omoshenii po ovetam, poluchennym ot khoziaev*, II. (St. Petersburg) 1891. ii. In Robbins. 2.

¹³⁸ Tsentral'nyi statisticheskii komitet, *Urozhai 1891 goda v 60 guberniakh Evropeiskoi Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1892). In Robbins, 185. *Author's Note*: The *chetverty* is a Russian unit of measurement equivalent to 5.775 bushels. The unit was abandoned with the Soviet adoption of the metric system in 1924.

Minister of Internal Affairs would estimate that 12.5 million people were in need of government relief.”¹³⁹

Famine itself posed no unfamiliar threat to peasant society: famines, both major and minor occurred frequently throughout Russia due in part to the harsh climate. The primary problem lay rather in the very foundations of the peasant economy and more specifically, the issues of agricultural distribution within peasant society following the 1861 emancipation of the serfs. The Edict of Emancipation stated the following:

Having called upon God's intercession, we have resolved to execute the following task: on the basis of the aforementioned arrangements, the serfs will, in time, receive the full rights of free rural citizens. The landowners, retaining the right to property on all lands in their ownership, grant to the peasants constant use of their farmland in fixed duties; moreover, in assurance of their livelihood and to guarantee fulfillment of their duties to the government, grant them a portion of arable land fixed by these arrangements, as well as other lands...¹⁴⁰

This clause appears to imply that the peasants received decent allotments of land on which to earn the products of their labor. Rather than offering the peasants a fair share however, - thereby breaking the two hundred year old bonds of landownership – these reforms simply referred differently to the rural bureaucracy. In short, nothing changed.

The “new” system placed the peasants in a constant state of owing money to one, or several parties, all of whom in one way or another governed over this class of former serfs.

Swedish traveler and Tolstoy follower Jonas Stadling recounted the following:

The serfs proper did receive allotments, which were handed over to the *mir* or village community...the price was supposed to represent the capitalised *obrok* or rent...but the valuation was actually made, not on the market value of the land, but on the supposed loss to the landlord caused by the emancipation...the allotments were insufficient to supply even their limited needs...at least ten to fourteen hectares are required...one fourth of the peasants received only 0.8 hectares...the landlords have taken advantage of the ignorance and misery of the peasantry and their own authoritative positions to cosen, cajole, or terrify them out of their most valuable pasture and forest land.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Robbins, 1-2.

¹⁴⁰ Vserossiiskiy Imperator Aleksandr Vtoroi, “Manifest 1861 goda ob otmene krepostnovo prava,” <http://schoolart.narod.ru/1861.html>. (Accessed March 1, 2010).

¹⁴¹ Jonas Stadling and Will Reason, *In the Land of Tolstoy: Experiences of Famine and Misrule in Tolstoy's Russia* (New York: Thomas Whitaker 2&3 Bible House, 1897) 14-15.

Various groups of wealthy former serfs manipulated the peasant groups by acting as moneylenders, imposing harsh interest rates, and confiscating land from the peasant *muzhiks* in times of need. If these taxes were not paid by the peasants, these debtors would inform the police: “One of my *muzhik* acquaintances informed me that the *ispravnik* (chief of police) was coming to the village to collect arrears of taxes, and would seize the last cow of this poor woman...it was to be taken from her 'to support the state.'”¹⁴² In summary, as Robbins notes: “[This made] the *mir*, not the individual cultivator, the real owner of the land with responsibility for meeting all obligations that accrued to it.”¹⁴³ On the eve of one of the most severe Russian famines, the peasants were in no better a state of preparedness than before the Emancipation. The effects would prove devastating.

II. Tolstoy Observes the Famine

In July 1891, Tolstoy wrote the following to the author Nikolai Leskov:

I think and feel something very definite about [the famine], namely: there is a famine in some places (not with us, but in some districts near us...) and it will get worse, but famine, i.e. a greater shortage of bread than usual among those people who need it...can certainly not be averted by collecting and borrowing money and buying bread and giving it to those who need it, because it's all a question of distributing the bread people have.¹⁴⁴

This letter illustrates a very important point regarding the nature of the 1891-3 famine: the tragedy that this famine became was not only an issue of food shortage but also a problem of goods distribution.

In November 1891, Tolstoy asked (in a piece at that point forbidden from publication in Russia) what he referred to as “A Terrible Question”: “Is there in Russia sufficient grain to

¹⁴² Ibid., 27.

¹⁴³ Robbins, 4.

¹⁴⁴ L.N. Tolstoy to N.S. Leskov, July 4, 1891. *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 2*. 480.

feed the people until the new crop is gathered?”¹⁴⁵ He did not intend for any one particular answer, but rather, as he stated:

This must be known definitely now before the beginning of the winter – just as it is necessary for men who are going off on a long voyage to know whether the ship has a sufficient supply of fresh water and food or not...It is terrible to think what would happen to the officers and passengers of the ship when in the middle of the ocean it should transpire that all the provisions had gone.¹⁴⁶

Tolstoy's critiques were aimed primarily at the governing bodies responsible for distribution of grains and other foodstuffs – specifically, the Tsarist Russian government and the *zemstvos*, or local government. He stated that “the *zemstvos* everywhere buy only in small quantities, rarely one-fourth part of the grain needed for nourishment...I think the price [at which the *zemstvos* sell grain to the peasants] now maintained is not the actual price.”¹⁴⁷ Tolstoy furthermore criticized the Russian government for an action taken in autumn 1891 – that of prohibiting foreign exports of grain: “Just exactly as the height of the level of the water in a dammed river cannot be an indication of its actual level, so the present price of rye cannot accurately mark the relation of the demand to its supply...[This] prohibition of the export of other breadstuffs has the same effect.”¹⁴⁸ Tolstoy's claims however, are somewhat exaggerated and biased; the government took this action to quell any possible excessive exportation of grain in a time of mass starvation.

In the Tolstoyan circle, as well as among the intelligentsia in support of Tolstoy, praise for this article came quickly. Jonas Stadling stated: “Count Tolstoy had for some time foreseen that such a famine must inevitably come, and had warned the authorities of it. He had also, long before they had any correct ideas of the extent and nature of the distress, or had taken any measures to obviate it, laid before them such proposals as would, if adopted, have

¹⁴⁵ L.N. Tolstoy, “A Terrible Question,” Translated by Aylmer Maude. (New York: Carlton House, 1928). 191.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

lessened its terrible ravages to a considerable extent at least.”¹⁴⁹ Stadling's argument is considerably inaccurate in its bias; however, it adequately illustrates the general sense of dissatisfaction – particularly among Tolstoy's contemporary thinkers – toward the tsarist government. As Orlando Figes acknowledges: “[The anti-tsarist public] turned to Tolstoy as their moral leader and their champion against the sins of the old regime. His condemnation of the government turned him into a public hero, a man of integrity whose word could be trusted as the truth on [this] subject.”¹⁵⁰

In reality however, the Russian government had simply found itself in a compromising position. As Robbins recognizes,

The fact that the government expanded the scope of the original restrictions in October and November, when the picture of the harvest had become much clearer, indicated that officials in the center felt that the [ban on exports] had been of some value and that the situation warranted more of the same. Whatever the reasons for its promulgation, the ban on exports was one of the first public admissions by the government that the nation faced a serious crisis ahead...[many] have charged that while the concept itself was sound, the trade restrictions should have been applied much earlier and more stringently if they were to be an effective measure against famine...it may well be that the primary motive for this measure was panic.¹⁵¹

Although Tolstoy maintained his position as a veritable voice of the voiceless in Russian society, his “A Terrible Question” hardly served to awaken an otherwise oblivious government. Much as the causes of the famine presented themselves in a complicated manner – resulting from both meteorological conditions and ill-preparedness due to preexisting complexities in the village bureaucracy – the actual onset of the famine left the tsarist government to approach a complex situation that it had not been prepared to grapple with.

¹⁴⁹ Stadling, 29.

¹⁵⁰ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy, The Russian Revolution: 1891-1924*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996) 161-2.

¹⁵¹ Robbins, 60.

III. Tolstoy's Methods of Famine Relief

Toward the end of 1891, “[Tolstoy's] old friend Ivan Ivanovich Rayevsky called on him at Yasnaya Polyana and proposed that he drive through the Dankovsky District to see for himself what was happening in the villages...he has intended to stay only a day or two, but when he saw how urgent the need was, he set to work immediately.”¹⁵² Over the next two years, Tolstoy would travel throughout this region of Russia – using the small village of Begichevka as his headquarters – offering various forms of famine relief to the starving peasants in the famine-ravaged villages of Western Russia. Although the tsarist government offered its own relief programs, Tolstoy's methods focused upon a system of relief from within the peasant population itself.

Initially, Tolstoy was opposed to the notion of famine relief. In July, he had written to Nikolai Leskov, “I think that it's necessary to use all one's powers in order to counteract – starting with oneself of course – what it is that produces this famine. But to take from the government or to appeal for donations...is not, I think, necessary, and will produce nothing but sin.”¹⁵³ Tolstoy sought to avoid the mentality expressed by “the guilt-ridden liberal public: serving 'the people' through the relief campaign [as] a means of paying off their 'debt' to them.”¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, as A.M. Novikov, a Tolstoy family tutor noted, “Tolstoy enquired about the famine district and began to say that there are always many hungry but that the only way to help a horse to drag its load is *to get off its back*...Tolstoy was sitting at Yasnaya and writing...that there always is famine somewhere, and that it is immoral to prepare to feed the

¹⁵² Ilya Tolstoy, *Tolstoy, My Father: Reminiscences*. Trans. by Ann Dunnigan. (Chicago: Cowles Book Company, Inc.) 1971. 224.

¹⁵³ L.N. Tolstoy to N.S. Leskov, July 4, 1891. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters*, Vol. 2. 480.

¹⁵⁴ Figes, 160.

famine-stricken and to imagine *that* to be a good activity.”¹⁵⁵ After his autumn 1891 journey throughout Rayevsky's province however, Tolstoy quickly changed his mind.

Almost immediately, Tolstoy dove into work: by September 18, 1891, he had already begun contemplating methods of famine relief in his private diaries. “Slept badly all night and didn't get to sleep till 4 o'clock, still thinking about the famine. I think it's necessary to set up soup kitchens...So far nothing has come [of them].”¹⁵⁶ Tolstoy – although torn between the desire to help the peasantry, and the desire to uphold his philosophy opposing monetary charity – felt he had discovered the key to his famine relief program in the establishment of soup kitchens and “eating rooms.” These establishments allowed for aid in two ways highly indicative of Tolstoy's philosophy. Primarily, Tolstoy could accomplish the task of bringing food to the peasants without unnecessary distributions, or as he asked rhetorically, “Are these objects attained by the aid now extended in the form of twenty or thirty pounds of flour a month to each consumer, reckoning or not reckoning laborers? I think not.”¹⁵⁷ Secondly however, Tolstoy could allow the peasants to help themselves. He believed that the people should be “furnished with the opportunity of doing their own familiar work, without leaving their homes and their accustomed surroundings.”¹⁵⁸

At first, Tolstoy set out working alongside Rayevsky in late 1891 setting up smaller soup kitchens. He wrote to his wife: “Our work here is very enjoyable, if one can call work caused by people's misfortune enjoyable. Three kitchens are open and working. It's touching to see how little is needed to help...Each has about 30 people...People are needed most of

¹⁵⁵ A.M. Novikov as quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*. 684.

¹⁵⁶ L.N. Tolstoy, In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Diaries, Volume 1*. 313-4.

¹⁵⁷ L.N. Tolstoy, “Means of Helping the Population Suffering from Bad Harvests.” In Ed. Nathan Haskell Dole, *The Complete Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi: Patriotism, Slavery of Our Times, General Articles* (New York: Carlton House, 1927). 203.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

all.”¹⁵⁹ In late November however, after returning from a long trip in inclement weather, Rayevsky died of pneumonia leaving Tolstoy find other helpers to aid in his relief efforts. By the end of 1891, Tolstoy positioned both himself and several of his older children in villages throughout the regions of Tula, Samara, and Begichevka. His youngest four children remained at home with the Countess Tolstaya, who, despite her distance from the physical relief efforts, organized monetary and medicinal contributions which filtered to the famine-stricken villages. Endless donations poured in from both Western Europe and America, all arranged by the careful and unceasing correspondence of the Countess. The British in particular offered significant aid to the relief effort. Tolstoy however, always made certain that his philanthropic ideals were upheld. He wrote the following to T. Fisher Unwin, a London publisher: “If the money collected in England does not exceed the sum needed for the provinces in which my son and I are now working, I can undertake...to use it in the best way I can.”¹⁶⁰ Otherwise, he felt, the money should be directed elsewhere.

By mid-December 1891, Tolstoy began developing what he referred to as “free tables” in addition to the already rapidly spreading soup kitchens. He stated, “The method proposed [initially by himself and Rayevsky] consisted in proposing to widows or the poorest inhabitants of the poorest villages to feed those that should come to them, and in furnishing the necessary provisions for this purpose.”¹⁶¹ Within a few months, the first several free tables were established throughout the famine districts through which Tolstoy traveled. Tolstoy remained very specific regarding the administration of these “free tables”; he at no point desired to act as more than an organizer. He acknowledged the following:

The work of the eating-rooms is accomplished with the same simplicity as many other of the

¹⁵⁹ L.N. Tolstoy to S.A. Tolstaya, November 2, 1891. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 2*. 486-7.

¹⁶⁰ L.N. Tolstoy to T. Fisher Unwin, November 4, 1891. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 2*. 488.

¹⁶¹ L.N. Tolstoy, “Means of Helping...”211.

muzhik's industries, in which all the details, even very complicated ones are left to the peasants themselves. In the matter of transport, for example, in which *muzhiks* are employed, no employer ever bothers himself about the canvas coverings or the nails, or the linden baskets, etc. It is taken for granted that all this sort of thing will be provided by the peasants themselves' and in reality, all this is always...simply done by the peasants themselves, who need no aid or direction from their employer.¹⁶²

As a result, the peasants – according to Tolstoy – developed a high level of self-sufficiency, allowing them not to rely simply on the government, *zemstvos*, or even Tolstoy's program as a cure-all for relieving the strenuous effects of the famine. Furthermore, Tolstoy arranged “free eating rooms” thereby temporarily alleviating his economic scruples. He was happy to find that “Exactly the same thing occurred also at the free eating rooms. All the details of the business were carried out by the keepers of the rooms themselves, and so thoroughly and circumstantially that nothing was left for the inspector except the general business of the rooms.”¹⁶³

These “eating rooms” quickly gained popularity and expanded throughout the famine districts. “In four weeks,” Tolstoy stated, “without making any special effort we opened and started in twenty villages thirty eating-houses, in which about 1,500 people are fed...”¹⁶⁴

Tolstoy and his helpers discovered that it was entirely possible to feed the peasants at least two meals per day on a very small amount of money. The Tolstoy relief groups offered food of a high quality – although some peasants complained of a lack of meat – particularly in comparison to the situation at the beginning of the famine. Robbins notes the following:

[The peasants ate what is called] *golodny khleb*. It is made from small amounts of...*lebeda*, a hardy plant which still grows when others fail...Continued use causes serious disorders of the digestive tract, depression, headaches, vomiting, and diarrhea. “Famine bread” has little nutritive value, passes through the system without being absorbed, and results in considerable protein deficiency.¹⁶⁵

Tolstoy found in his travels that other food clearly grew throughout the famine-stricken

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁶⁴ L.N. Tolstoy as quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*. 690.

¹⁶⁵ Robbins, 12.

districts at that time. In a case reportedly quite typical, he discovered that “the bread is unwholesome... [but] there were sixty ricks of oats on the farmer's own land...besides the oats he had at least forty *chetverty* of potatoes, and buckwheat also. Yet the whole family, consisting of twelve souls, ate *lebeda* weed bread.”¹⁶⁶ The Tolstoyan “eating rooms” therefore, offered a supposedly positive alternative to the peasants' eating habits in the time of the famine, in which they drove themselves further and further into poor health and malnutrition.

Regardless of the rapidly increasing popularity of the eating rooms, Tolstoy maintained his belief that the peasants should be managing the upkeep of the kitchens and rooms themselves. In describing the actual overseers of the rooms he stated, “This is what we do: we buy rye and other food, and in the huts of the poorest villagers we arrange – No! Not we, for the owners of the huts do everything themselves, we only give the means, that is, the provisions for the meals.”¹⁶⁷ He felt specifically that as a result, waste could be kept at a minimum: “The supervision of the eating rooms, should there be very many of them, may be entrusted to the peasants themselves...But it may be boldly said that even under the most distant supervision, even when they are entrusted to the people themselves, the eating rooms will satisfy great needs...the needless waste of the provisions shall never amount to more than ten percent.”¹⁶⁸

Although numerous others from both Russia and Western Europe travelled extensively to assist Tolstoy in his aims of relief, he kept his central group of helpers at a minimum after the first year of the famine. Aylmer Maude, Tolstoy's contemporary and biographer, recalled a conversation in which Tolstoy observed, “I have noticed...those who are free to come at the

¹⁶⁶ L.N. Tolstoy, “Help for the Starving.” In Ed. Nathan Haskell Dole, 228.

¹⁶⁷ L.N. Tolstoy to I.B. Feinermann. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 2*, 489.

¹⁶⁸ L.N. Tolstoy, “Means of Helping.” 220.

first call – are people who are disengaged because they are inefficient. The sort of men one needs are already engaged in necessary work and cannot be spared from their posts.”¹⁶⁹ The Tolstoy family continued to do a substantial portion of the work throughout the famine districts, occasionally accompanied by Tolstoyan followers and close family friends.

The group saw many improvements, yet found themselves incapable of dealing with one major issue: the staggering spread of disease. Jonas Stadling, who joined the relief effort throughout Samara and Ryazan in March 1892, observed the following:

I went through part of the village from house to house. In *izba* No. 1 I found one cow, three elderly people, one of whom was lying on top of the over, sick with typhus, by the side of two children in the last stages of black small-pox. In No. 2 was a child with black small-pox, an old man with typhus...In No. 3...two children, one on the point of death from hunger or consumption, the other in the extremes of black small pox...No. 4. Two grown people and two children, both ill...I gave the poor woman a silver coin and passed out.¹⁷⁰

This case was hardly isolated. Another Tolstoy camp follower, Pavel Ivanovich Birukov, recalled his first trip through another famine-stricken village: “I creep through the low door and enter the hut. A damp and suffocating air, polluted with the stench from the excreta of a sick person, so that I am near fainting...the sick man comes scrambling down from the oven,¹⁷¹ moaning as he totters with great difficulty...here is a bad case of scorbutus...they only complain of pain in the gums, which bleed.”¹⁷² Cramped living conditions coupled with poor nutrition simply exacerbated the prevalence of disease throughout the provinces. Only the continued medicinal contributions of outside groups helped Tolstoy and his relief program in their attempts to quell the rapid spread of typhus, small-pox and other maladies.

Although these saw some successes as the result of Tolstoy's planning and ceaseless

¹⁶⁹ L.N. Tolstoy as quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, 694.

¹⁷⁰ Stadling, 51.

¹⁷¹ *Author's Note*: The word “oven” could also be translated here as “heater” or “furnace,” all of which are expressed with the same word in Russian. In the Russian peasant home, the oven served both heating and cooking purposes.

¹⁷² P.I. Birukov as quoted in Stadling, 134-5.

labor, he continued to battle within himself regarding his motives for relief programs. The constant flow of money and goods – all attributed to his efforts – placed Tolstoy in a morally compromising position. In late 1891, he wrote to his wife: “We live well. Too comfortably and luxuriously...I'm afraid as I write this. I'm afraid that this money and any other that is sent might distract us...”¹⁷³ Later in the same month he wrote to Isaac Feinermann, a Ukrainian follower of Tolstoy: “I am living abominably. I don't know myself how I was dragged into this work of feeding the starving...because it isn't for me to feed those by whom I'm fed. I was dragged in, with the result that I now find myself distributing the vomit sicked up by the rich”¹⁷⁴ Tolstoy could not cope with an intense feeling of self-loathing as a result of his charitable efforts in the famine provinces. He previously avoided such ventures for this very reason. Tolstoy abhorred the idea of the “liberal guilt” of the Russian intelligentsia, which caused dozens of upper-middle class Russian citizens to seek channels through which to “pay their debt” to the oppressed peasantry.

Tolstoy's opinions varied throughout the duration of the famine; he often presented them in a contradictory manner in the course of a single letter. In February 1892, he wrote, “If I had had any doubt left as to whether money can do any good, [whether one is] using it to buy grain, and feeding some thousands of people, has quite convinced me that one can do nothing but harm with it.” Later in the same letter however, he noted that he could not “escape, and because – beyond a feeling of great depression – I experience nothing, and therefore think I am not doing this work for my personal satisfaction.”¹⁷⁵ Despite his internal conflicts regarding his efforts in Begichevka and the famine provinces, it is clear through his correspondence that Tolstoy never sought any direct self-gratification from the famine relief

¹⁷³ L.N. Tolstoy to S.A. Tolstaya, November 2, 1891. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 2*, 487.

¹⁷⁴ L.N. Tolstoy to I.B. Feinermann, November 23, 1891. In Ed. R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Letters, Volume 2*. 489.

¹⁷⁵ L.N. Tolstoy to [author unknown], February 1892. As quoted in Maude, 693.

work.

Regardless of Tolstoy's woes – which were plentiful following his 1881 spiritual crisis – the relief programs garnered varied success throughout the Russian countryside. Relief efforts varied in success throughout this period; government intervention and aid – although more prevalent than implied by revolutionary critics – were undoubtedly lacking, while the organizations of individuals such as Tolstoy saw visible successes. Maude notes that “under his supervision [were] two hundred and forty-six eating-houses, in which from then to thirteen thousand people were being fed; and besides this, there were a hundred and twenty-four kitchens for children in which two to three thousand were fed. These figures do not include the relief organised by his sons.”¹⁷⁶ While Tolstoy's relief efforts did not act to cure all of the social ills of the famine, their effects greatly aided in the recuperation of the struggling peasants.

IV. Detractors, Disciples, and Problems of Documentation

At approximately the same time as his programs saw some success in the countryside, Tolstoy gained a massive following both in Russia and worldwide. Although due in part to Tolstoy's growing anarchistic and pacifist ideas, over the next two decades, hundreds would form Tolstoyan “colonies” and flock to Yasnaya Polyana, all attempting to in some way learn and absorb aspects of his self-imposed path of humility. As a result of his unorthodox beliefs – both religious and social – Tolstoy also attracted the attention of two groups, particularly during this famine relief campaign: the Imperial government and its moral arm, the Russian Orthodox Church.

The majority of anti-Tolstoy criticism came from the Church. Jonas Stadling observed

¹⁷⁶ Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, 698.

the following in his reminiscences of his travels through Russia:

The priests frightened the peasants with tales of learned theologians having conclusively proved from the book of Revelations that Tolstoy was veritably Antichrist... Only the Sunday before a Bishop had delivered a special sermon...before a crowded audience, dishing up all these fable and denouncing the Count in the strongest terms...who was seducing them with food, fuel, and other worldly goods.¹⁷⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian Orthodox Church had lost a large portion of its clout among the Russian people. Although due in part to the strong influence of a largely atheistic liberal intelligentsia, the established Church accomplished much of this disintegration of power on its own through years of corruption and weak relations with the common Russian people. As a result, many of the peasants approached the “Antichrist sermons” in an apathetic manner. Maude notes that, “[Although] a good many of the peasants were really frightened by these sermons...they remained, indifferent, arguing that Antichrist would come to destroy and torment men – but this man saved, pitied and aided them!”¹⁷⁸

Tolstoyan followers such as Stadling often characterized government efforts at censorship as if targeted directly at Tolstoy himself. Stadling's rhetoric however, paints a clear picture of both the fervor of the Tolstoyans, and the bias of their writings.

“[His critics] are many and of varied hue...the officials and politicians...represent him as a dangerous revolutionary seeing to rouse the people to armed revolt...We do not speak of thoughtful men who conscientiously dissent from his opinions...it is as if a swarm of noxious insects were buzzing round a giant ditcher, toiling in the sweat of his brow to drain a stinking and poisonous marsh, and were raging of his attempt to destroy their paradise in which they have grown fat, attacking his perspiring body, and seeking some open wound received during his noble toil, in which to instil their corrosive poison, and fatten themselves on his substance.”¹⁷⁹

This is a clear exaggeration of the situation: although Tolstoy frequently attracted the attention of the Tsarist censors, their focus was hardly set upon him with the malicious intent which Stadling implied.

¹⁷⁷ Jonas Stadling as quoted in Maude, 696.

¹⁷⁸ Maude, 696.

¹⁷⁹ Stadling, *In the Land of Tolstoi*, 10-11.

These accounts are hardly unique: a vast majority of the documents concerning the internal workings of Tolstoy's "eating rooms" and soup kitchens were written by members of his own family or Tolstoyans. Even Maude's account – drawn from a primarily objective early biography of Tolstoy – is glaringly in favor of Tolstoy's reforms. Furthermore, due to the frequently exaggerated, inflammatory, and ill-informed writings of figures such as Tolstoy, publications concerning the famine were often intensely scrutinized and censored by the government. Robbins notes the following regarding government operations at that time:

[Government officials operated] against a background of crisis, rumor, and confusion...most gossip painted the situation in the darkest terms...yet state officials did not attempt to impose a blackout of news from the countryside. During the famine the government regarded the press as a valuable source of information about conditions in the stricken *gubernii*, a useful supplement to official communications... [The government simply] ordered the governors to see to it that the papers carried truthful account of what was happening.¹⁸⁰

Censorship came naturally in this unstable period. "For the conservative entourage which surrounded the throne," Robbins acknowledges, "the participation of suspicious figures like Tolstoy in relief operations seemed unhealthy signs."¹⁸¹

V. The End of the Famine

In 1893, Tolstoy's personal woes and troubles with the Russian Church and State came to a natural – albeit temporary – conclusion. After over two years of devastating famine, the Russian countryside finally witnessed a plentiful harvest. The famine had undeniably taken its toll on the Russian peasantry: a government study at the end of 1892 reveals that in the sixteen districts of Russia most seriously affected by the famine, the total mortality reached as high as 1.7 million.¹⁸² Such successes in many ways encapsulate the complicated situation

¹⁸⁰ Robbins, 64-5.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁸² V.I. Pokrovskii, "Vliianie kolebanii urozhaiia i khlebnikh tsen na estestvennoe dvizhenie nasileniia." In Robbins, 189.

within Russian society at the turn of the nineteenth century; the famine acted as a severe blow to the Russian bureaucracy from which they would never truly recover. Despite their relief efforts later in the famine period, the government appeared largely oblivious and unprepared in the face of a nation-wide disaster. Meanwhile, popular figures such as Tolstoy captured the public imagination with their selfless attempts to aid the oppressed peasantry.

Although, in the context of Tolstoy's life and writing, the 1891-3 famine is often convoluted by his own inflammatory remarks on the government, biased information, and the accounts of disciple-like Tolstoyans, it presents something very clear regarding Tolstoy's own philosophy. Whether executed to the extent he and his followers claimed, Tolstoy maintained the interests of the peasants throughout his famine relief work. Although perhaps idealized, he firmly believed that the peasants should be in control of famine relief establishments such as the soup kitchens and eating houses. Most importantly, Tolstoy continued his path of “going to the people” in an effort to improve their lives in the midst of a dire situation. Much like the peasant schools on his estate, Tolstoy attempted to ensure the benefit of the peasants first and foremost in his efforts of famine relief throughout the starving provinces of nineteenth-century Russia.

Conclusion

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy was first and foremost a writer. His fictional and nonfictional works alike influenced generations of authors and thinkers both in Russia and throughout the world. His contemporaries, as well as numerous scholars, have labeled him as an anarchist, a radical voice against the established order within nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia. Furthermore, an unprecedented following of pacifists and general admirers viewed Tolstoy as a voice of reason in his own time – a veritable prophet in the midst of a tumultuous pre-Revolutionary Russia. Despite this long list of monikers and the subsequent ideologies attributed to the great Russian writer, few would immediately acknowledge Tolstoy as a Populist.

Populism as a movement in many ways paralleled Tolstoy's nature as a thinker - complex, and often difficult to classify. Even before the period of revolutionary Populism in the 1870s, the Populist ideology varied in form, differing in expression between its founding theorists such as Nikolai Mikhailovsky and Pyotor Lavrov. Following the emergence of revolutionary Populism with the *Chaikovtsy* and the “To the People” movements, the Populists only continued to splinter off into various radical factions, eventually becoming so diverse that the movement itself dissolved completely. It is important therefore, to firmly acknowledge the duality of Populism: Populism existed both as a broad ideology of “going to the people” in order to learn from the peasants and reform society and a specific movement between 1873 and 1881 focused upon the revolutionary transformation of society in the interests of the peasants.

Tolstoy therefore, can be seen as a direct, albeit unaffiliated, participant in the former of these two manifestations of Populism. Tolstoy's activity in both establishing the Peasant

Schools on his Yasnaya Polyana estate, as well as his several efforts at famine relief throughout the Russian countryside, are both clear examples of peasant-focused reforms. Much in the manner espoused by the early Populists such as Mikhailovsky and Lavrov, however, Tolstoy's reforms were not simply conducted “from above.” Rather, Tolstoy's programs were grassroots, and conducted from within. Although based on Tolstoy's ideas, both the Peasant Schools and the famine relief programs were incapable of functioning without the activity of the peasants themselves. In the case of the Peasant Schools' writing classes for instance, Tolstoy merely suggested basic themes and allowed the peasant students to execute the actual writing. Furthermore, throughout the famine relief programs, the peasants both arranged and operated the “eating rooms” and soup kitchens throughout the starving provinces of Russia.

Tolstoy will perhaps forever be remembered for his novels and written work. His contributions as novelist – particularly with the novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* – are undeniable and timeless. It is Tolstoy's contributions as a historical figure however, that often require further examination. The complexity of his character and non-literary activity allows for extensive reanalysis of both his works and life, making Tolstoy a figure that consistently reshapes and transforms our understanding of the Russian environment in which he lived. It is just such an examination that reveals the pervasiveness of an ideology like Populism in Russian cultural thought. Although Populism failed as a revolutionary movement, Populist thinking remained present for decades in the minds and works of some of Russia's most prominent intellectuals.

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