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A New Interpretation of the Death of Prince Andrei in Tolstoy's War and Peace



Vyacheslav Tikhonov (Andrei) and Lyudmila Savelyeva (Natasha) in *Voyna i Mir* (War and Peace), 1965.

R. Eden Martin

Leo Tolstoy was beyond doubt one of the world's greatest novelists. His major novel *War and Peace*, first published in Russia in 1868-1869, is a multi-dimensional story interwoven not just with history but with a philosophy of history – the compounded complexities of causation and incomprehensibility. An English translation was first published in 1886. (See "The Original *War and Peace*," *Caxtonian*, July 2012.)

I have read *War and Peace* several times. The first was in 1962 – the Constance Garnett translation published in the Modern Library edition. More recently, I've read it twice in Russian. It was during the last reading that I paused over the question of what caused Prince Andrei's death.

The three main characters of *War and Peace* are Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, his friend Pierre Bezukhov, and Natasha Rostov, whom Andrei

loves, and Pierre eventually marries. The death of Prince Andrei, who twice had been seriously wounded during the French invasions of 1805 and 1812, is central to the novel. His gradual recovery from the second wound coincided with the French occupation of Moscow, the burning of the city, and the evacuation of civilians. The wounded Prince Andrei was reunited with Natasha and seemed to be physically improving. Then something happened that halted his recovery and led soon after to his death.

Scholars have attributed Prince Andrei's death to some combination of disillusionment with the war, his near-death experience on the battlefield, his loss of faith in society and political reforms, his physical decline due to his severe war wound, and a spiritual awakening in his final days of life. I believe that none of these, alone or in combination, adequately explains what led Andrei to let his life slip away (see,

e.g., Andrei Zorin in his *Leo Tolstoy*, 2020).

The Bolkonskys are central to the story as are the Rostovs, including the daughter Natasha and her brother Nikolai, a soldier in the Russian militia. Prince Andrei and Natasha had been deeply in love and engaged, but a momentary infatuation of Natasha's had led to the breakup of that engagement. During the retreat from Moscow, the wounded Andrei wound up in the same caravan as the Rostov family. A high point in the novel was the reuniting of Andrei and Natasha and the rekindling of their love, as Natasha nursed him during the retreat.

Meanwhile, Andrei's sister Marya met Natasha's brother Nikolai, and they fell in love. Nikolai told Marya that the Rostov family and Andrei had gone to Yaroslavl after the burning of Moscow. Marya then left to find her brother, taking with her Andrei's son by his first marriage. Nikolai sent a letter to the Rostov family

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Scene in Red Square, Moscow, 1801. Painting by Fedor Yakovlevich Alekseev.

telling them about his love for Marya and that Marya was on her way to join them.

A feature of Russian religious culture helps make sense out of what happened next. In Russian aristocratic families (and perhaps more generally), it was believed that when a couple married, they became a single entity – “flesh of one flesh.” The married couple, and their families, considered all the siblings of both the husband and wife to be brothers and sisters of each. Specifically, if Andrei and Natasha had been married, Marya and Nikolai would have been considered a sister and a brother of both. The families and society generally would have considered a marriage of Marya and Nikolai to be incestuous and thus impossible.

This background helps explain an otherwise puzzling series of details in Tolstoy’s recounting of the death of Andrei. In the Garnett translation, pages 880-917 (emphases supplied), Nikolai made a horse-purchasing trip for the Russian military. In Voronezh he attended a soiree in the local governor’s home. The governor’s wife knew about the wealth of the Bolkonsky family and the financial difficulties of the Rostovs. She took an interest in Nikolai and decided to do a little matchmaking. She told him that Princess Marya Bolkonsky was in town. “Do you know, *mon cher*,... this is really the match for you; if you like, I will try and arrange it.... I am sure your mama will be grateful.” Nikolai responded, “It has long been mama’s wish to

marry me to an heiress; but the mere idea of it – marrying for money – is revolting to me.” He continued “I’ll tell you the truth, I like her [Marya] very much ... but I had never happened to meet her before.... And then *when my sister, Natasha was engaged to [Marya’s] brother, of course it was impossible to think of a match between us then.*” This makes clear that Nikolai was aware of the religious rule against sibling marriages. The governor’s wife pressed the case for Marya, but Nikolai continued to recognize the prohibition: “All the same, *ma tante*, it cannot be,” he said, with a sigh.”

The religious prohibition was well understood by Nikolai’s cousin Sonya, who had long lived in the Rostov household. As a child, Sonya had been loosely engaged to Nikolai. When she heard that the wounded Prince Andrei was traveling with the Rostovs, she knew Natasha loved Andrei and that his recovery would likely bring on their marriage. In that event, “owing to the relationship that would (*in accordance with the laws of the Orthodox Church*) exist between them, Nikolai could not be married to Princess Marya.” Because Sonya herself wanted to marry Nikolai, this “was a source of joy.” When Natasha told her that Andrei would live, Sonya was excited “by her own personal reflections, of which she had spoken to no one.” In other words: if Prince Andrei were to live, he would marry Natasha; and that would mean Nikolai could not marry Marya; which in turn meant that Nikolai

would be free to marry Sonya, who could then safely write to Nikolai releasing him from his earlier engagement pledge. She could be magnanimous because she knew that he would be free to marry her anyway.

Meanwhile, Prince Andrei seemed to be recovering from his wounds in Yaroslavl. The doctor told the Rostov family that Andrei was now not in danger. Then something happened: “But *two days ago ... all of a sudden this change came....*” After Marya saw her brother, she understood what Natasha had meant when she referred to “this change.”

When Marya’s eyes met brother Andrei’s, “she felt suddenly shy and guilty. ‘But how am I in fault?’ she asked herself.” The question goes unanswered. The meeting of Andrei and Marya is unexpectedly cold and distant. Why did Marya feel guilty? Why did Andrei appear cold? The loving brother and sister have just been reunited. What was the cause of Andrei’s sudden decline?

I think Tolstoy was suggesting that Prince Andrei had been told about the letter from Nikolai announcing his affection for Marya, and he knew about the religious prohibition of sibling marriages. Andrei also knew that his sister was getting older and that she had no other suitors in her life. Marya wanted and needed a husband. It would not have taken Andrei long to realize that if his sister Marya married Nikolai, then Andrei would not be able to marry Natasha.

The receipt of Nikolai’s letter coincided with and led to the sudden reversal of his recovery and the decline toward his own death. Andrei sacrificed his own future for his sister’s. Simultaneously, he must have asked himself whether life would be worth living if he could not marry Natasha. And what would such a life mean for her?

Marya felt that Andrei’s “change” was an aloofness from all things earthly. “He understood something else that the living did not and could not understand, and that entirely absorbed him.”

In his sickroom, Andrei found himself with both Natasha and Marya. It was an awkward conversation. “‘See how strangely fate has brought us together again,’ he said ... pointing to Natasha.” Marya “could not understand what he was saying.” What did Tolstoy mean to imply by having Andrei refer to fate as “strange”? There was nothing strange about a military officer being badly wounded in the war or being nursed in his recovery by the young woman whom he loved.

Andrei did not ask about Marya’s health,

or her trip to Yaroslavl, or his young son, or about the state of the war with France, or the burning of Moscow. Andrei’s mind immediately turned to Natasha’s brother, Nikolai, who had written to his Rostov family to tell them about his love for Marya. “‘And so you met Count Nikolai, Marya?’ said Prince Andrei, suddenly, evidently trying to say something to please them. ‘He wrote here what a great liking he took to you,’ he went on ... ‘If you love him, too, it would be a very good thing ... for you to get married,’ he added, rather more quickly ...” Did he say it quickly because it was hard to express? By encouraging Marya to marry Nikolai was Andrei crossing a fateful bridge?

“‘Why talk of me?’ Marya said calmly.... ‘Natasha, feeling her eyes on her, did not look at her.’ Why did Natasha not look at her? Tolstoy perhaps wants us to sense that Natasha knew something that Marya did not ... yet.

Tolstoy tells us that Andrei’s slippage into death was due to something more sudden and profound than a physical decline. It was an abrupt change that came shortly after receipt of Nikolai’s letter.

What Natasha had called “this change” had come upon him two days before Princess Marya’s arrival. It was the last moral struggle between life and death ... It was the sudden consciousness that life, in the shape of his love for Natasha, was still precious to him.... It happened in the evening.... He felt a sudden sense of happiness. “Ah, *she has come in!*” he thought. Natasha had, in fact, just come in ...

So, for that matter, had Marya.

Tolstoy’s hints seem to confirm that the change stemmed from a choice which Andrei had made, not some sudden unexplained physical turn for the worse. Andrei wonders: “Can fate have brought us together so strangely only for me to die?... Can the truth of life have been revealed to me only for me to have spent my life in falsity? I love her more than anything in the world! But what am I to do if I love her?” The existence of such a choice means that life was more than just an incomprehensible myriad of irresistible and complex causes. If there were no free will – no ability to make personal choices – then there would be no morality. More was involved than simply succumbing to overarching impersonal forces such as physical decline or disillusionment with the war.



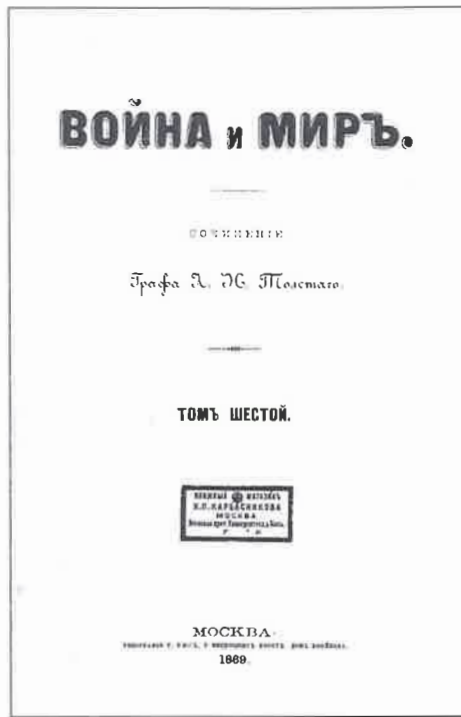
Portrait of Tolstoy by Ilya Repin

How could Andrei be “happy” (as Tolstoy describes him) facing a choice between his own future and that of his sister’s? Tolstoy supplied an answer: the difficulty of the choice had shown him how deeply he loved Natasha and how precious that love was to him. The “truth of life” had been revealed to him. The pain of choosing confirmed both that he was capable of such love and of nobility in sacrificing it. Andrei told Natasha, “Natasha, I love you too much ... Why *too much*? she said.” Tolstoy hints at an answer: “too much” to go on living either with or without her.

Andrei’s thoughts and his dream about death freed him. “He felt as it were, set free from some force that held him in bondage, and was aware of that strange lightness of being that had not left him since.... That was the change that had come over him two days before Princess Marya’s arrival.” Andrei’s awakening from sleep represented “an awakening from life.”

Andrei wasted away after his dream. The doctor thought the change was physical. “But Natasha paid little heed to what the doctor said. She saw the terrible moral symptoms, that for her were far more convincing.” In other words, it was not only Andrei who thought he had a choice to make – that his death was not inevitable. Natasha also thought his wasting away was because of “terrible moral symptoms.” Perhaps after his “too much” remark she came to understand the sacrifice he was making, why he was making it, and the implications for her own future.

From that time on, Marya and Natasha awaited his death in silence. They did not talk about him. “They felt that they could not express in words what *they understood.*” Tolstoy seems to be suggesting that by this time, Marya had come to understand that



Title page of *Voyna i Mir*, first edition, 1869, volume six.



Types de L. Tolstoj, Natasha (La guerre et la paix).
E. Boehm.

Natasha Rostova, a postcard by Elisabeth Boehm

was still on her mind when she tells Pierre: “I would ask for nothing better than to go through it all again.” With that she inexplicably “burst into tears.”

If my interpretation is correct, it brings into much sharper relief the dimensions of the choices Andrei made and helps explain the otherwise puzzling details of his motives and various conversations during his final few days of life and after. It adds grandeur to the silence shared by Marya and Natasha in the room as Andrei’s life slips quietly away.

It also illustrates Tolstoy’s extraordinary ability to use a few hints and conversational flashes to suggest and frame the choices Andrei made and their implications for those whom he loved.

One question still puzzles me. If I am correct about what Tolstoy intended to suggest to readers about why Prince Andrei died, have other readers, including scholars who have spent their lives studying Tolstoy’s works, understood Andrei’s death the same way? Have they understood what was going on in the minds of Marya, Natasha, and Sonya in the same way? Has such an understanding been published somewhere? It seems unlikely that after one hundred and fifty years, an aging retired lawyer, not a Russian literature scholar, would come up with a new and better interpretation of a central episode in one of the world’s greatest books.

My search through the biographies of Tolstoy and the materials available in English on the web turned up no published analysis of the novel that includes this interpretation. I consulted with several leading scholars of Russian literature who are experts on Tolstoy’s work, and none of them was familiar with the notion that it was Nikolai’s letter that had precipitated Andrei’s sudden decline and eventual death.

Professor Edward Wasiolek was a distinguished professor of Slavic literature at the University of Chicago. One of his books, *Tolstoy’s Major Fiction* (Chicago, 1978), contains a long chapter on *War and Peace*. Although it does not deal with Andrei’s death scene, it does puzzle over Andrei’s meditations. Wasiolek points out that Andrei seems to have adopted the view that: “Love hinders death. Love is life. Everything, everything that I understand, I understand because I love. ... Love is God, and to die means that I, as a particle of love will return to the universal and eternal source.” Yet in Wasiolek’s view, Andrei’s adoption of this quasi-Christian “divine love” view of life “contradicts the kind of character that has been painted for us in hundreds of

pages.” His view of divine love is too “intellectual.” It is inconsistent with his most “sacred moments” such as his experience with Natasha at the ball. Life and love involve experiencing those moments, not in intellectualizing about them or judging them. “Andrei goes to his death without finding the truth he has searched for so long.”

Wasiolek’s is a penetrating and provocative analysis. Yet can we not view Andrei’s decision and his death as one of those sacred moments – one in which the “truth of life” had been revealed to him? Love for two people led to his withdrawal from life. Earthly love triumphed over “divine love” rather than the other way around. In this interpretation, Andrei did find the truth. Otherwise, Nikolai’s letter, the abrupt turndown in Andrei’s health, and his deathbed conversations with Marya and Natasha seem artistically pointless.

One of our country’s leading scholars of Russian language and literature is Gary Saul Morson of Northwestern University. He kindly referred me to his book *Hidden in Plain View, Narrative and Creative Potentials in ‘War and Peace’* (Stanford, 1987). “In plain view” refers to Tolstoy’s judgment that the important events in life and in a novel about life “are the events that nobody notices, that may not even momentarily pass through anyone’s consciousness. They demand another perspective, one that can see and describe what no character can see although hidden in plain view....”

Morson’s comprehensive analysis is beautifully reasoned and rich in its explanations of the philosophy of history and psychological analysis that provide the substructure for Tolstoy’s stories of battle and individual behavior. In Morson’s view, during his final illness Prince Andrei’s thought gave way to “randomness,” and “distractions ... became the center” of his thought (202-203). Andrei was “unable to recognize how remarkable Marya” was; he was “disdainful” toward her (264-266). “In his infinite distance and indifference, [Andrei] asks Princess Marya about her recent romantic meeting with Natasha’s brother.... He forgets that his possible re-engagement to Natasha would make Marya’s marriage to Nikolai impossible.... As Tolstoy ambiguously portrays Andrei’s death, he experiences the cold love and indifferent euphoria of a skeptic’s apocalypse” (268).

A lifetime of law practice and intellectual jousting with colleagues and friends has cautioned me against being sure of anything. That caution should be at least trebled when one steps into a field of expertise other than one’s



The Battle of Borodino, fought on September 7, 1812. Painting by Louis-François Lejeune, 1822. The battle is vividly depicted through the plot and characters of *War and Peace*.

own. It should probably be cubed when the field has been well plowed by experts for over a century. Nevertheless ...

Though the full implications of Andrei’s death may not have been noticed by generations of readers, in Tolstoy’s portrayal I think they were understood at the end by Marya, Natasha, Nikolai, and the rest of the Rostov family. It was not “randomness” in Andrei’s final moments of life that gives his death “great dramatic power” (202). Rather it was his quiet decision to benefit Marya and to die rather than live separately from Natasha or impose the burden of his invalidism on her that give his death its extraordinary dramatic power.

It was not “distractions” which were at the center of Prince Andrei’s thoughts in those last moments. It was the overwhelming moral choice that confronted him. Far from being “unable to recognize how remarkable his sister is,” Andrei recognized that Marya was a superbly moral person, incapable of asserting her own interests, and deserving of protection – indeed, of sacrifice – by her brother to assure her happiness.

Similarly, Andrei did not “forget” that his marriage to Natasha would make Marya’s marriage to Nikolai impossible. It was his remembering that rule against sibling marriages that led him to make his fateful choice. Andrei was not “unable to love any particular person.”

He loved Marya enough to sacrifice his future for her. He loved Natasha “too much” to continue to live without her or to burden her with his invalidism.

Morson’s judgment is that Andrei’s death was one of “cold love and indifferent euphoria of a skeptic’s apocalypse” (268). I read it as just the opposite: a noble, moral death. His demeanor may have been “cold,” but his choices represent the furthest thing from “cold love.” They were founded on his brotherly love for his saintly sister and his overpowering love – “too much” – for Natasha.

It was Andrei’s love for these two women closest to him that led him to make the ultimate sacrifice, one that was indeed “hidden in plain view.”

§§

Editor’s note: This article is longer than any in the *Caxtonian* since the twelve-page limit was imposed by economic necessity. Because of Eden Martin’s many distinguished contributions, because the essay does not lend itself to being printed in two parts, and because of the literary importance of the essay, I decided to publish it as a whole.