

Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* dramatized in a new television series

By Joanne Laurier
11 February 2016

Leo Tolstoy's titanic novel *War and Peace* has received a new adaptation by the BBC and is now airing globally. Directed by British filmmaker Tom Harper, the serialized television production stars American actor Paul Dano and British actors Lily James, James Norton, Jim Broadbent and Stephen Rea in leading roles as part of a large, predominantly UK cast.

Tolstoy, one of the greatest of the great Russian fiction writers of the 19th century, was born in 1828, three years after the Decembrist Revolt in which a group of officers rose up in one of the first open struggles against tsarism. He died November 20, 1910, five years after the 1905 Revolution in Russia and seven years before the October Revolution. Tolstoy's other great works include *Anna Karenina* (1877) and *Resurrection* (1899).

His epic *War and Peace*, first published in its entirety in 1869, is set during the period of the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815) and the French invasion of Russia. It follows the members of several Russian aristocratic families as they seek to survive the confusing, frenzied, bloody times.

The eight-hour miniseries opens in 1805 in St. Petersburg, as Napoleon's victories and his army's conquest of significant portions of western Europe are having an increasing impact on Russian life. Many of the central characters are introduced at an upper crust social gathering. Among them is Pierre Bezukhov (Dano), awkward but amiable, and initially a supporter of the French leader: "Napoleon's a great man! He stood above the revolution, he put an end to its abuses and kept all that was good about it! You see good in revolution, sir? The equality of all citizens, freedom of speech, liberty, equality, fraternity, these are ideas we could learn from in Russia."

Pierre looks on with disgust at the room's "overfed aristocrats." The illegitimate son of a wealthy count, he will soon become the object of intrigue for the sinister Prince Vassily Kuragin (Rea), who makes an unsuccessful attempt to suppress the will that names Pierre the inheritor of his father's vast estate.

Another guest at the party is Pierre's friend Andrei Bolkonsky (Norton), the intelligent and ambitious son of retired military commander Prince Nikolai Bolkonsky (Broadbent). Also present are the Rostovs, a noble, but

down-on-their-luck Moscow family that includes a vivacious daughter Natasha (James), a quiet niece Sonya (Aisling Loftus) and a son Nikolai (Jack Lowden), who has just joined the army commanded by the veteran General Kutuzov (Brian Cox) ("He's about the only man in Russia who knows what the war's about and that includes our glorious Emperor."). Nikolai's parents (Greta Scacchi and Adrian Edmondson) are depending on their son to reverse the family fortunes.

Russia is in alliance with the Austrian Empire at this point (in the Third Coalition against Napoleon) and a restless, unhappy Andrei ("I can't bear this life")—whose young wife is pregnant—and Nikolai set off for the front. Meanwhile, Kuragin maneuvers Pierre into marrying his morally loose but beautiful daughter Helene (Tuppence Middleton). Her incestuous relationship with her dissolute brother Anatole (Callum Turner) is one indication of her manipulative, deceitful character.

Thus the stage is set for the various personal and political stratagems, unions and disunions, as the epoch of war heads toward its denouement following Napoleon's fateful invasion of Russia in 1812 and the declaration of war by a reluctant Tsar Alexander I (Ben Lloyd-Hughes). On the eve of the invasion, Napoleon (Mathieu Kassovitz) brags that he has 600,000 men while the Russian army has only one-third that number and lies in shambles.

The mini-series

War and Peace has been adapted by Andrew Davies, best known for his reworking for television of such classics as *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), *Vanity Fair* (1998) and *Sense and Sensibility* (2008). He also wrote the popular British political thriller serial *House of Cards* (1990). His work on the current production results in a credible condensation of Tolstoy's massive, complex story, some 1,400 pages and more than half a million words long.

Visually graceful and aided by numerous accomplished performances, this large-scale, high-quality production is, on the whole, a gripping experience.

The series paints a picture of a Russian aristocracy in which petty and selfish motives predominate. Andrei Bolkonsky goes off to war primarily to escape a vapid, stuffy life. Nikolai

Rostov has other motives: his gambling debts have nearly bankrupted his family. He considers it more honorable to turn soldier than remain in the clutches of a nasty, egotistical mother and kindly, but ineffectual, father. In the end, under pressure from his parents, Nikolai breaks his engagement to the impecunious Sonya in favor of a more advantageous liaison.

Andrei Bolkonsky's sister, the modest Marya (Jessie Buckley), shows her spiteful landlord coloring when she deals with the serfs on the family estate who refuse to help the household escape from the invading French army. Bellows one angry peasant: "The French will set us free and give us land! What have you ever done for us?"

Unfortunately, the production seems to side with Marya and her self-centered concerns. She is soon rescued from the legitimate wrath of the peasants by the timely appearance of Nikolai and his regiment. It is the one major scene that points to the fact that this parasitical social layer lives off the exploitation and enslavement of the peasantry.

Pierre, the moral conscience of *War and Peace*, tries to be honest when he sadly admits that "my life is one mistake after another ... I wanted to change the world for the better, help my fellow men and look at me a fat, drunken aristocrat who makes a bungle out of everything." To make amends for what he considers his mistakes, Pierre becomes obsessed with assassinating Napoleon.

In a relatively modest way, the mini-series does provide some sense of the great events that shaped the Tolstoy novel—namely, the aftermath of the world-altering French revolution. The depiction of the Battle of Borodino in September 1812, the bloodiest single day of the Napoleonic wars, with some 70,000 Russian and French casualties, is one of the series' strongest sequences. Here, at least for a moment, the aristocratic lifestyle is left behind and we see something of the horror of war: men cut in half, doctors sawing off legs, the misery of the wounded and dying. And later there are the horrific consequences for Moscow's population.

A duality exists in Tolstoy's work between sharp condemnations of the aristocratic life and his acceptance of the inevitability of that life. In his remarkable 1908 tribute to the novelist, Leon Trotsky observed that, despite everything, Tolstoy continued to place in the center of his artistic attention "the one and the same wealthy and well-born Russian landlord" as though outside this universe "there were nothing of importance or of beauty."

The mini-series tends to adopt the same standpoint, which is far less defensible given the subsequent course of Russian and world history. Trotsky noted that at the end of the novel, Tolstoy showed Pierre Bezukhov, "the restless seeker of truth," as "a smug family man," and "Natasha Rostova, so touching in her semi-childlike sensitivity," as "a shallow breeding female, untidy diapers in hand." The present series does the same, only more so. The final scene grates with its complacency and suggestion that contented family life offers some consolation

for the massive destruction and loss of life.

That being said, Davies is genuinely skilled at choosing and adapting enduring, classic works. True, his genre of intelligent costume drama is not the be-all and end-all of artistic effort. One might even say that stylish adaptations like *War and Peace* have a certain soothing effect on an audience (with the exception of the battle scenes). If we were currently flooded with challenging artistic evaluations of the status quo, it is unlikely that such series would receive quite the attention they do. However, given the actual state of cultural affairs, this version of the Tolstoy epic attracts attention for its general intelligence and pleasing aesthetic qualities.

To their credit, the makers of the miniseries have tried to capture certain crucial features of the novel. A naturalness and elegance underscore and heighten the emotional intensity. As in Tolstoy's narrative, there is truthfulness, a lack of pretension and artificiality: the viewer is engaging with real people, who have real, complex lives and feelings.

In dozens of essays the leading Russian Marxists, Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky and others, pointed to the great contrast between the immortality of Tolstoy's artistic achievement and the poverty of his philosophical and social ideas. The novelist was a pacifist, a believer in "non-resistance to evil," a conservative anarchist, "a moralist and mystic," in Trotsky's phrase, and "a foe of politics and revolution."

Nonetheless, as an indefatigable social critic, an enemy of cruelty and oppression, Tolstoy played an enormous role in undermining the tsarist regime and the entire Russian social order. Reactionary forces in the former Soviet Union have not forgiven him to this day.

In an obituary, Trotsky magnificently paid tribute to the great writer: "Truth in and of itself possesses a terrible, explosive power: once proclaimed, it irresistibly gives rise to revolutionary conclusions in the consciousness of the masses. Everything that Tolstoy stated publicly... seeped into the minds of the laboring masses ... And the word became deed. Although not a revolutionary, Tolstoy nurtured the revolutionary element with his words of genius. In the book about the great storm of 1905 an honorable chapter will be dedicated to Tolstoy."

It would be misleading to suggest that Tolstoy's fierce indictment of Russia's institutions is sufficiently present in the *War and Peace* mini-series. However, its honest presentation inevitably communicates elements of the social critique, and also may lead the viewer to investigate Tolstoy's work further. That would be all to the good.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>