

## The Ethico-Religious Imperatives of Lev Tolstoy's Life and Work

Guest Editor's Introduction

Svetlana M. Klimova

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# The Ethico-Religious Imperatives of Lev Tolstoy's Life and Work

## Guest Editor's Introduction

Svetlana M. Klimova

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy's departure from this earth took place in 1910, a year that has since become a common touchstone for Russians. The twentieth century came to a symbolic close, beginning a terrible era of changes that saw the Russian author's humanist ideas and religious inquiries burned and melted down. The terrible age seemed to consume everything that humanity had valued over the centuries: poetry, faith, morality, freedom love; everything man lived by, to use Tolstoy's own expression. After Auschwitz, the very thought of man as a superior and rational being created in the image and likeness of God was drained of all its blood. But perhaps, thanks to his genius, the world has gradually thawed and returned to man, gazing upon him anew, but with the loving eyes of Tolstoy.

The twenty-first century is linked to certain dates in Tolstoy's life that are important not only for us, but also for world culture. It has been exactly 120 years since the infamous Synodal Act of February 20–22, 1901, which discussed Count Tolstoy's excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church. This event was not so much religious as sociopolitical, an event with global consequences for the changing consciousness of many thousands of people in Russia and around the world. The intentions of the church hierarchs met with opposite results, as the name Tolstoy became much more attractive to inquiring minds than it had been before. This led to an axiological inversion typical of Russian ideological politics: Tolstoy gained the status of "sacrificial lamb" of the system, which served as additional confirmation that his criticism of the church was just.

On June 10, 2021, we celebrated another important event linked by blood and spirit to the life world of Tolstoy, the centenary of the founding of the Yasnaya Polyana State Museum-Estate, which was then and remains now a "Russian Mecca," a point of spiritual attraction for people all over the world.

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Svetlana M. Klimova, National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University), 20  
Myasnikskaya Street, Moscow, 101000, Russian Federation. E-mail: [sklimova@hse.ru](mailto:sklimova@hse.ru).

This article reports research findings on the project "Artificial Intelligence and 'Homo Sapiens' as an Object of Philosophic-Ethical Analysis," carried out within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) in 2021.

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However relevant all of the events just described might be, we certainly do not need to look for any special reason to talk about Tolstoy. He and his writings are always vital and topical, always Russian, and at the same time a global phenomenon. He was and remains a rare exemplar of confessional honesty and conscience. This is due not only to his artistic talent, which no one else has surpassed in scale, but also to his religious and philosophical anthropology, as well as his clearly expressed civic position, which is almost exotic in the Russian context. We should note that Tolstoy turned out to be unlike any other Russian political and religious thinker in that regard. He succeeded in awakening a nation while avoiding both the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, avoiding the nation's clichés and its blinders.

With regard to Tolstoy's role, place, and worldview, intellectuals of different generations have taken diametrically opposite positions. During his lifetime he was already declared "the genius of the Russian land." (Tolstoy, with some irony, asked, "why not the water?") At the same time, he was also deemed the antichrist, a holy fool, a hypocrite, compared with the "madman Nietzsche," and so forth. He was worshiped and despised passionately and sincerely; this polar axiological tension toward the writer held steady not only during the writer's lifetime, but also after his death.

Tolstoy has always been surrounded by rumors and conflicting judgments. By the early twentieth century, his name had already become so significant not only in Russia but also around the entire world that Alexei S. Suvorin's claim that Russia had two tsars—Lev Tolstoy and Nicholas II, and the former was much more powerful than the latter—was taken almost literally. However, and despite the fact that he was one of the then-government's most outspoken moral opponents, Tolstoy was never subjected to physical repression and political persecution (excluding the Holy Synod's "verdict"). His friends, like-minded people, admirers—one after another—ended up in exile, prisons, and even on the gallows (see his appeal "I cannot be silent"). He was untouchable. The authorities preferred to hide behind their standard assessments for dissenters (insane, prideful, liar, blasphemer of the Church) without heeding (or discussing) their great compatriot's appeals and arguments. He really was a "state" in himself, an indestructible force organizing and directing mass consciousness. He also served as the nation's main moral pillar. His exerted a colossal impact on people thanks to his unique "boundless love of truth and acuity of moral conscience" (Semyon L. Frank).

Why did the state keep its hands off Tolstoy, despite his open criticism of the system and all its institutions? To put it another way: What could it have done to him, in practice? Exile him, jail him, kill him, ban his publications? Clearly, none of these methods would have silenced Tolstoy, who had become a "mirror" for the conscience of millions.

Everyone, including the authorities, understood that any repressive action against him would serve as a political trigger for a rapid collapse of a state system already under great stress.

While the authorities considered him a symbol of rebellion, and the masses a symbol of conscience, the Russian philosophical and religious elite ultimately saw him as the “cause” of the disintegration and complete collapse of the era. After his death, his former “admirers” like Nikolai A. Berdyaev, Semyon L. Frank, and Dmitry S. Merezhkovsky blamed the author for all of Russia’s troubles: for the shameful way the first World War proceeded, for the collapse of the army, for the desertion of Russian soldiers who refused to defend their own generals, and as a result, for the Russian revolution and the ultimate victory of Bolshevism. He was declared an anarchist, a poisoner of “the well of life,” the “false idol” of Lenin, and even a “great, gentle Bolshevik” (David Burliuk).<sup>1</sup>

The most striking aspect of all this is that Tolstoy was never a system destroyer; he never called on anyone to overthrow a system or to confront the authorities openly. Nor was he an anarchist in the traditional sense of the word, that is, someone at war against any system, rejecting everything in his path in the name of some kind of freedom. War, violence, murder, and chaos are among the concepts Tolstoy hated most. “I am not an anarchist, I am a Christian,” he repeatedly wrote.

Of course, the public intellectuals who accused him faced terrible circumstances. “Russia faded away in three days” (Vasily V. Rozanov), and many of them ended up in emigration, losing everything, including, and most importantly, their homeland. All their hopes and dreams for a renewed Russia were destroyed. That said, their accusations against Tolstoy were monstrously unjust. They accused the pacifist of refusing to participate in the war and an unwillingness to take up arms; they denied man what Tolstoy called him to, namely, a moral right to live according to the laws of his conscience, calling his “moral reflection . . . the toxic poison of life” (Berdyaev); they reproached the vegetarian for rejecting “flesh-eating”; they accused the defender of the disadvantaged of indulging in holy foolishness and theatrics; they accused the Christian of wanting to live according to Christ’s commandments, to be guided by the laws of love and nonviolence, that is, “to destroy his own personhood” if possible, to *detach* (*ostranit’sia*) himself from all ways of life associated with the laws of violence. In this context, detachment means, by and large, not to expose all the horrors of power by *describing* them, but to *distance* himself from it, retreating into an *inner* spiritual life (see the article by Svetlana Klimova). Many accused him of destroying the individual, but, in fact, he fought against selfishness and against giving priority to animalistic instincts in man, repeating relentlessly, “Individuality is, to the rational man, the same that breath, the circulation of blood, is to the animal” (*What Is to Be Done?*).

It was within these contradictory evaluative boundaries that Tolstoy shaped his views of the church, the courts, law, oaths, and war. He countered the legal law of violence with the moral law of love (see the article by Alexei Krouglov). The goal of his critique was not opposition in itself but an overcoming of it on man's ascending path from the laws of animal life to the divine laws of love and nonviolence.

Understanding Tolstoy's political ideas requires locating the gravitational center of his thought, a center that is at once religious and anthropological. His entire philosophy is aimed at defining man's essence and relationship with the world, nature, God, and one another. Man decides for himself how to live and how to die, whether to live according to the laws of Caesar or God, whether to serve mammon or his conscience. To make the right decision in one's life, one must first understand oneself: truly a Socratic appeal.

All this helps us to see the inner logic of the articles presented in this issue. We can divide them conventionally into two types. The first is addressed to religious and anthropological issues in considerations of Tolstoy's philosophy. Here, the focus is on man as a "lens" through which we can view other social topics: the authorities, the church, science, law, and culture.

As Boris M. Eikhenbaum has noted, Tolstoy not only destroys the old but initiates the new, including a new view of man's nature and essence. This novelty is linked to the main philosophical standpoints of Tolstoy, who believes that genuine philosophy is always aimed at solving a highly important task: finding an answer to the meaning of life.

If that is so, then nothing is more than important than the subject, his experiences, and his inner world. It is man who becomes Tolstoy's criterion of understanding, that is, of the meaning or meaninglessness of life. In nearly every area, Tolstoy was thus guided by his personal (subjective) experience of experiencing life and understanding it further. To discover the meaning of life for everyone, one need first find it in oneself and for oneself. Tolstoy is thoroughly intimate/confessional and sincere in his self-searches, but as we see already in his *Confession*, his search ultimately leads to an overcoming of oneself, of one's social roles, and the selfish desire "for the best possible life for myself and my family." This means entering a different plane of life as a man who has overcome his animal egoism and selfishness. Christianity and Christ, with their doctrine of brotherly love and nonresistance to evil by evil and violence, become the plane in question.

However, life thus understood leads Tolstoy from personalism to impersonalism. Once a Christian, man ceases to be "an egoist, from the word 'ego': the self"; he becomes guided not by empirical reason but by "rational consciousness," which Tolstoy understands as "a universal-superpersonal principle inherent in every man and allowing him to overcome the limitations of 'animal personhood'" (see the article by Mariya Gel'fond). He defines man as an element of the universal nourished by divine predestination, as an

element of life that, instead of an empirical and essentially “Kantian transcendental subject,” affirms a certain universal “Self” that is the same in all of us and that gives our lives greater meaning. This universal “Self” is the core of the original moral foundation in each of us; it makes us partake of ourselves, each other, and God. He considers his *critique* of power, church, law, and culture through this religious and anthropological prism. Tolstoy is convinced of one thing: The only way to change the life of a country and society is to *change the consciousness* of its citizens, which also is a manifestation of his particular humanism.

The other articles included in this issue are based on comparative studies; they aim at putting Tolstoy’s ideas in connection and comparing them with those of other famous thinkers, such as Henry George, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Konstantin N. Leontiev, and Lev I. Shestov. These comparisons rely on various grounds, whether Tolstoy’s personal acquaintance with a certain author, the similarity or opposition of their ideas and views, or an attempt to establish a dialogue within the development of a particular culture. The articles in this category allow us to see a kind of asymmetry in these comparisons. Tolstoy’s ideas turn out to be very close to Western and Eastern thinkers and alien to his own domestic counterparts. We have long known that Tolstoy was heavily influenced by American progressive thought, especially the economic doctrines of Henry George. Tolstoy was even called a “popularizer” of George’s ideas (see the article by Galina Alekseeva), especially his law of land taxation. We also know that Tolstoy was familiar with and receptive to many Eastern philosophical and religious movements. Thus, the article by Yury Prokopchuk comparing Tolstoy’s teaching with the Indian thinker Jiddu Krishnamurti is both original and part of a huge tradition of examining “Tolstoy and the East” as a theme.

Tolstoy’s harmonizing with “foreigners” had the opposite effect in relation to his “kin.” His own compatriots, including our issue’s selection of Shestov and Leontiev, viewed him as difficult and contradictory. They not only philosophically opposed their eminent counterpart but also expressed open personal dislike and even disrespect for him as a person. Incidentally, invectives and mutual bullying are fairly traditional features of Russian polemics among the “Russian intelligentsia,” beginning with Vissarion Belinsky and the strong reactions of *Sovremennik* in the 1830s and 1840s. We will let the readers ponder the reasons for this “empathic asymmetry” for themselves. We should note only that a similar situation in the history of Russian ideas is linked to the tendency of our thinkers toward binary thinking, dictating an oppositional and categorical means of describing reality in a two-term system: truth/falsehood, beauty/ugliness, faith/disbelief, and so forth. “Whoever is not with us is against us” is a common psychological message, if not a party-line message, of many subtle thinkers writing about dialogue, the image of the Other, world empathy, and so forth.

One example of this is Leontiev (see the article by Elena Besschetnova), a well-known fighter for the purity of Orthodoxy and an apologist for the monarchical system. A natural and confirmed aristocrat and aesthete, he cannot seem to forgive the “formerly *comme il faut*” Tolstoy for betraying the elite circles, withdrawing into the life of the people, refusing to aestheticize the period of Russia’s complex cultural flowering, and so forth. Above all, he cannot forgive Tolstoy the right to his own understanding of faith, to living in imitation of Christ. Like Shestov (see the article by Elena Mareeva), he measures Tolstoy against his own yardstick, in this case a monarchical one, which has no place for love of God, only the power of God’s Fear; no place for the idea of freedom, civic consciousness, only the idea of aristocratic inequality; no place for East or West, only the beloved Byzantium on whose ruins the imagined utopia of imperial Russia will long hold dominion. Everything near and dear to Tolstoy is alien to Leontiev. This kind of confrontation makes it difficult for constructive development not only of ideas but also of personal relationships in Russian society.

With the same ideological certainty, the early Shestov forces Tolstoy into his own rigid ideological framework and tries to refute him from within. Here, he presents Tolstoy as the conscious defender of a degenerate morality of compassion while being at the same time a secret individualist and Nietzschean. It is from the point of view of vitalism and extreme individualism that he dissects *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, leaving the fundamental problems of curbing one’s individual animal “Self” that Tolstoy combatted all his life out of the equation. Shestov presents the dialectic of the individual and the collective that Tolstoy was able to discover in his religious philosophy, as well as the long evolution of his religious doctrine, purely dogmatically, and these turn out to be outside of Shestov’s proposed framework.

This issue of our journal, as conceived by the editor and the individual authors, focuses on overcoming the prevalent stereotypes in assessments of Tolstoy’s personality and work, in his political and philosophical views. This issue presents a contemporary analysis of his teachings within the Russian academic community.

## Note

1. “V Tolstom vsya zhizn’—v kriticheskom razreze, Tolstoj krugom—KROTCHAIISHIY BOL’SHEVIK!” [In Tolstoy, all of life is critically dissected. Tolstoy is altogether A MOST GENTLE BOLSHEVIK!]

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).