

Tolstoy's image of Jesus as the ultimate teacher is no more interesting than an anybody's Sunday sermon. In the preface to *The Teaching of Jesus*, Tolstoy writes:

Last year I formed a class of village children, from ten to thirteen years of age. Wishing to impart Christ's teaching to them in a way they would understand, and that would have an influence on their lives, I told them, in my own words, those parts of the four Gospels which seem to me the most understandable, most suitable for children, and at the same time most necessary for moral guidance in life. The longer I worked at this, the more clearly I saw—from the way the children repeated what I told them, and from their questions—what it was that they grasped most easily, and by what they were most attracted. Guided by that, I composed this booklet; and I think its perusal, chapter by chapter, with such explanations of the need of applying the eternal truths of this teaching to life, as the reading evokes, cannot but be beneficial to children, who, according to Christ's words, are especially receptive to the teaching about the Kingdom of God. (*Teaching* vii)

Moulin explains:

Thus in 'The Teaching of Jesus,' the long combination [sic: Moulin seems to mean *culmination*] of Tolstoy's experiments in education, religion and storytelling come to their resolution, reflecting Tolstoy's view of the child in the story. (135)

I object: preaching is *not* education.

Only the vital Tolstoy could have written the *Yasnaya Polyana* articles; only Tolstoy could describe such a moment as this, from the nighttime walk after school:

We began to talk about robbers in the Caucasus. They recalled a story of the Caucasus I had told them long ago, and I told them again

about abreks, about Cossacks, about Khadzhi-Murat. Semka was strutting ahead of us, stepping broadly in his big boots, and evenly swaying his strong back. Pronka tried to walk by my side, but Fedka pushed him off the path, and Pronka, who apparently always submitted to such treatment on account of his poverty, rushed up to my side only during the most interesting passages, though sinking knee-deep in the snow. (*On Education* 249)

Now *that's* why we focus on *Yasnaya Polyana*. The difference between Tolstoy in the whirlwind of his physical and intellectual powers turning his super-attention to immediate circumstances, and Tolstoy on the verge of his last journey making weary pronouncements about children's moral development, et cetera, et cetera, is only the difference between life and death.

#### Works Cited

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Bob Blaisdell  
Kingsborough Community College  
The City University of New York



**Nickell, William. *The Death of Tolstoy: Russia on the Eve, Astapovo Station, 1910*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010. 232 pages. Hardcover. ISBN: 0801448344.**

It was a family fight that went public, a reality show, a prime-time soap-opera. It was the vegetarian, pacifist, Christian guru and literary genius, Lev Tolstoy, who yearned for simplicity and inner peace, ending his life as a modern media

celebrity. It was the story of the great writer's flight from home and from his loyal wife of 48 years, setting out perhaps on a final journey of renunciation, out of the house and into the world. He did not get far, however, and his last moments were not serene. On November 7, 1910, twelve days after his stealthy departure from Yasnaya Polyana, the famous estate which was already a spiritual shrine, Tolstoy breathed his last. The final scenes took place in a local railway station. Every step of the way, from the decision to pack his bags, to the exclusion of his wife, to the ministrations of the physicians, was recorded by a family member, collaborator, photographer, journalist, or memoirist. The protagonists became figures in a public melodrama, but they also scripted their own roles and to some extent controlled the documentary record. The family diaries (Tolstoy's and his wife's), his letters and papers, the files of newspaper clippings, the telegrams sent back and forth, the commemorative postcards—these all found a home in the Tolstoy Museum in Moscow.

Literary scholar William Nickell uses all these sources to reconstruct the events as they happened, and as they were represented and recorded. He explores the meaning of the episode and its aftermath not only in terms of the writer's biography, but also as a chapter in the cultural biography of imperial Russia, itself on the morrow of extinction.

Tolstoy was not only a great writer, but also the propagator of a spiritual world view that earned him excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church and a global reputation as sage and moral leader. He believed in a rational Christianity, in nonviolence and moral responsibility in the face of worldly authority. He spoke out on public issues (the death penalty, for example) and participated in public life (during the famine of 1891, for example), and made pronouncements on political events, though never in the spirit of party politics. His last years were devoted to spreading his spiritual message. He wished to redeem his

position of social privilege by reaching out to the common folk on whose labors the life of culture depended. Tolstoy renounced literature.

Just as Tolstoy was an eminently public figure, the Tolstoy household, in traditional aristocratic style, was never a merely private affair. The writer, his wife, his assistants, and some of his children constituted a literary workshop. His closest disciple published his controversial writings abroad. Thousands of readers followed his every living step and many wrote him intimate personal letters. So when, in his eighty-second year, the old man decided to leave home and renounce the world once and for all, it was important news. When he seemed on the brink of death, the Church weighed in with its opinions, condemnations, and hopes of redemption. The authorities feared the potential for public outbursts and political demonstrations. Across the ideological spectrum, the media struggled to publicize the event, but also to interpret its meaning. Each party and institution appropriated Tolstoy for its own purposes.

Nickell plots the outpouring of opinion in every medium and venue: film footage, photographs, postcards, penny papers, high-brow magazines, public lectures, church periodicals, and the political press. The media circus surrounding the writer's last days and funeral, the unseemly intrusions and speculations all sound modern to us.

Indeed the entire scenario reminds us that Russia was not only the land in which prominent figures made moral statements by donning simple peasant attire, but also in which news traveled by telegraph and telephone, and newsreels ran in the movie theaters, alongside silent films, the newest thing in entertainment.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the story concerns the ways different groups appropriated the writer as a symbol, not only of Russia's cultural identity, but of their own political and cultural aspirations. The authorities, reeling from the Revolution of 1905 that had been pacified only three years before, and now contending with an

expanded public sphere and an elected parliament, did their best to control the reactions to Tolstoy's final days, as well as to his unconventional funeral, which was conducted without benefit of clergy but at the center of media attention. The funeral was not only a public event that might conceivably spin out of control. It also initiated a wide-spread conversation on the writer's significance as a cultural and political figure and, by extension, on the major public issues of the day. Even absent ideology, the rite had the makings of a political demonstration. In the event, the atmosphere was indeed pregnant with emotion, but the mood was moral rather than combative, as befit the man himself.

Nickell traces the intertwined themes of this interpretive symphony with sensitivity to tone and

context. All the players—the hero, his family, the public, the Church, the regime—were hypersensitive to the meanings imbedded in Tolstoy's life and death. These meanings were the collective product of the writer, his domestic circle, the authorities whose skin he pricked, and the readership and public he served. The tensions inherent in the dramatic story of his demise illuminate the cultural contradictions of the last decade of the old regime. The master of literary narrative departed this life with a narrative flourish worthy of the literary scholar's attention, gratifying to readers and historians alike. Nickell has done a fine job of exploring its many dimensions.

Laura Engelstein  
Yale University