

# Reviews

**Bartlett, Rosamund. *Tolstoy: A Russian Life*. London: Profile Books, 2010. xvi + 544 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 1846681383. (Also available as: Bartlett, Rosamund. *Tolstoy: A Russian Life*. New York: 2011. xv + 544 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0151014385.)**

Another Tolstoy biography in English! Did we need one? Perhaps so. The most recent substantial one is that by A. N. Wilson (1988), which itself succeeded the one by Ernest Simmons (1946).<sup>1</sup> In addition, a French biography by the incredibly prolific Henri Troyat was translated into English. In her list of “suggested readings” Bartlett says that the “most dependable” are Aylmer Maude’s much older *Life of Tolstoy* (1930) and Wilson. She lists Simmons in her bibliography, but makes no visible use of him. Troyat she does not mention at all.

Bartlett’s version has many superiorities. Bartlett obviously knows Russian well and uses a large variety of Russian sources, some of which became available only in recent years. Unlike Wilson’s, her text is fully annotated and contains a fairly comprehensive bibliography. From it the Anglophone reader can get a quite full account of the major and many minor events in Tolstoy’s life, probably fuller than from her immediate predecessors. The richness of detail is especially noteworthy. Bartlett has an eye for the picturesque,

the memorable. I had never known, for example, that Tolstoy acquired a book on Esperanto in 1894 and claimed to have learned to read the language fluently in two hours, but I found this tidbit in Bartlett. I also didn’t know that Dr. Bers, the Countess’s father, as a court employee had to ask the Tsar’s permission to grow a beard after having a tracheotomy. Bartlett’s biography is stuffed with such entertaining factlets.

Despite her richness of detail, Bartlett’s main task, like that of any Tolstoy biographer, is reduction, condensation, selection. She is obliged to compress her array of multitudinous facts into one large, but not gigantic volume. Her details are sparse compared to those in her Russian sources, particularly the magisterial Russian biography, modestly entitled *Materials* (*Материалы*), of which four volumes, covering the years 1828–1885 were compiled by Tolstoy’s erstwhile secretary Nikolai Gusev (Гусев); two additional volumes, dealing with the years 1886–1899, were completed by the late, much lamented Lidiia Gromova-Opul’skaia (Опульская). So far the “materials” for the last decade of Tolstoy’s life remain to be assembled. Bartlett has also made good use of Gusev’s indispensable day-by-day “chronicle” (*Летопись*) of Tolstoy’s life. These are perhaps Bartlett’s main sources, but she has also drawn on

many others: Tolstoy's correspondence, fully published in the Jubilee Edition; his diaries, likewise fully published; his wife's diaries; the memoirs of several of their children, and of friends, fellow writers, disciples, and miscellaneous acquaintances.<sup>2</sup> The amount of such primary source material is staggering. Tolstoy's may well be the best documented life ever lived.

Bartlett devotes about half her book to Tolstoy's career up to the "crisis" of the late 1870s, after which his central focus was no longer as a writer of fiction, but as the founder of a new religion, Tolstoyism (толстовство), a de-mythologized version of Christianity. She scrupulously plays fair, neither lamenting this transformation nor celebrating it. She simply presents succinctly and coherently Tolstoy's views as he developed them, neither arguing with them nor making any attempt to assess their value or viability. In a final chapter she goes beyond the biographer's traditional stopping point and gives an account of the fate of Tolstoyism and the Tolstoyans in Russia after the writer's death, their harsh persecution in Soviet times and their revival in recent years. She makes no parallel attempt to assess the latter-day fate of Tolstoy's artistic writings, either in Russia or elsewhere.

Bartlett has called Tolstoy's "a Russian life." She tries to give this rather empty formula some substance by claiming that Tolstoy had a "quintessentially Russian nature" (79). Furthermore Tolstoy, she believes, embodies certain Russian national archetypes, which she then uses in the titles of many of her chapters. Tolstoy was a "repentant nobleman," a "nihilist, muzhik, holy fool, and tsar," these being uniquely Russian hypostases, to which she adds some universal ones, such as "landowner, gambler, officer, writer, literary duelist, husband, beekeeper, epic poet, student, teacher, father, novelist, pilgrim, sectarian, anarchist, elder, and patriarch." That a single individual could play so many disparate roles is

only one of the many astonishing aspects of this man's life history.

The average reader, I believe, will obtain from Bartlett a comprehensive and well balanced account of Tolstoy's life. Like most of us, she is in awe of his genius, such that virtually every fictional page he touched turned to gold, and she at least respects the boldness and forcefulness of his religious doctrines. She is not blind to his considerable human faults—his overweening egotism ("I am right and the world is wrong,"—"the world" including his wife and family); his irresponsibility about money, particularly marked in his youth, but never fully overcome; his neglectfulness as a father, especially toward his younger children, with whom, except for the last two, the saintly Vanechka, who died in 1895 at age seven, and the daughter-disciple Aleksandra (1884–1979), he scarcely bonded at all.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for a Tolstoy biographer is how to treat his relations with his wife, which evolved from the idyll of the early, *War and Peace* years, to the intermittent warfare of the later period, culminating in Tolstoy's famous departure (уход) of 1910, which led to his death. Bartlett handles this conflict judiciously. It was deep and essentially irreconcilable, in view of the fact that Sofia Andreyevna remained totally impervious to Tolstoy's religious doctrines and insisted on bringing up their children to be like their parents, qualified members of the Russian educated (upper) class. Throughout their marriage she, the children, and Tolstoy himself continued to live the life of members of that class, with a landed estate, manor house, and servants, and in later years a substantial Moscow town house as well. The contradiction between this life style and Tolstoy's "peasantophile" doctrines of drastic simplification and self-sufficiency was only too obvious to all, including Tolstoy's disciples and also his enemies, who jeered at his hypocrisy. Cobbling shoes and emptying chamber pots did not make you a peasant. Tolstoy himself was torn for years by this

deep disharmony between word and deed. He longed to escape, but felt he had no right to abandon his wife and family. They were his cross to bear. (And perhaps part of him never wanted to go.)

Bartlett understands very well what a strain this discord placed on both of them, and she gives them both their due. I thought she perhaps underplays the effects of the strain on Sofia Andreyevna, whose behavior became so disturbed and disturbing that psychiatrists were called. Bartlett notes that they “correctly diagnosed paranoia and hysteria,” but then unaccountably adds, “She was not mentally ill” (411). Perhaps it would have been better to say that she had intermittent periods of mental illness.

Bartlett’s is not a reflective biography. She generally avoids speculation about determining factors in Tolstoy’s psyche, for instance the effects of his semi-orphanhood: the death of his mother when he was nearly two, so early that he had no memories of her, followed by the death of his father when he was nine. After this Tolstoy and his brothers and sister were shunted around among grandparents, aunts and uncles, who also had a talent for dying soon and unexpectedly. Tolstoy’s childhood was fairly strewn with deaths. They must have deeply affected him, but Bartlett chooses to avoid comment. In 1847, at age nineteen, with the settlement of his father’s estate and the agreed division among his sister and brothers, Tolstoy became the sole proprietor of Yasnaya Polyana, a substantial estate of nearly four thousand acres and 330 male serfs. Bartlett duly notes these facts, but has little to say about their psychological impact. She also reports that at age fourteen Tolstoy had sexual intercourse with a prostitute, after which he had stood by the bed and wept, but she offers no interpretation of the emotions involved, except almost in parody to suggest that since the brothel was situated in the vicinity of the graveyard where his grandfather was buried, “perhaps his feeling of guilt was heightened” (73). I venture to doubt that

his grandfather’s grave was a major factor in Tolstoy’s “feeling of guilt.”

Especially emotion-charged deaths for Tolstoy were the deaths from tuberculosis of two of his brothers, Dmitri, the nearest to him in age, in 1856, and the eldest, Nikolai, in 1860. Both these deaths were profound experiences for Tolstoy. His sibling rivalry with “Miten’ka” must have been strong and his ambivalence marked.

Tolstoy did travel from Petersburg to Oryol to visit Dmitri on his death bed in 1856, but soon left and later felt ashamed of how little he cared when the news reached him of Dmitri’s death. All this was transmuted and reincarnated in *Anna Karenina* in the scene of Konstantin Levin’s visit to his dying brother Nikolai, with the visiting brother’s attitude retouched to show a moving degree of fraternal bonding and sympathy. Nikolai Tolstoy’s death was quite different. It took place in 1860, at Hyères in southern France, with Tolstoy at his side. This brother Tolstoy unreservedly loved, as a model, friend, literary consultant and father-substitute, and his meaningless death, before his life had been really lived, made Tolstoy rebel against the deity who had permitted or even ordered such a fine young man to die so uselessly. Tolstoy shook his fist at the heavens, showing a striking degree of God-wrestling (бороборчество). And of course Tolstoy must also have worried that the as yet undiscovered tuberculosis bacillus, which had shown such animus against Tolstoy, might attack him as well.

One would have thought that such episodes would have inspired the biographer to some psychological commentary. Bartlett does note that Nikolai’s death dealt Tolstoy “an incalculable blow” (141), but then she presses hastily onward without further comment. Earlier, she had dismissed the story “Three Deaths” (1859) in four lines, getting the three in the wrong order (135) and failing to note that Tolstoy had consulted brother Nikolai about whether to include the death of a tree. Nikolai said “Leave it in,” and he did.<sup>7</sup>

There are some other odd omissions in Bartlett's biography. On pages 172–73 she writes of the scene in *War and Peace* of "Natasha's seduction by Anatole Kuragin" (surely this should read *attempted* seduction), adding that these events were partly modeled on "the recent experiences of his sister-in-law Tanya" (i.e. Sofia Andreyevna's sister, Tatiana), "who had gone through something similar with an inappropriate suitor." At this point Bartlett does not mention that the "inappropriate suitor" was none other than Tolstoy's brother, Sergei Nikolaevich, who was twenty years older and already had produced several children with a live-in Gypsy companion (whom he later married in a fit of conscience). Bartlett does report these facts, but not until seventy pages later (244).

Bartlett herself laments that Tolstoy, like Rousseau, was marked by "a lamentable lack of a sense of humor, [...] being the single thing which sometimes makes the study of Tolstoy's life and works slightly hard going" (76). She may be right that Tolstoy was unable to turn a sense of humor on himself and his self-image. But surely he had one: How would Bartlett account for the very funny play *The Fruits of Enlightenment*, which incidentally she never mentions.

At least once Bartlett avails herself of an old-fashioned biographer's ploy, attributing possible influence to "inheritance." She says that Tolstoy "probably inherited his superstitious nature from his grandmother Pelageya Nikolayevna" (34). As far as I know, geneticists have not yet identified a gene for superstitiousness.

Bartlett generally keeps her opinions to herself, maintaining a neutral, dispassionate persona. But occasionally another Bartlett escapes. Reporting on a lecture by Vladimir Solovyov which Tolstoy, among other things, had traveled to Petersburg to hear, she duly records that Tolstoy walked out of the lecture, later labeling it "childish nonsense" and "the ravings of a lunatic." But Bartlett allows herself a satirical description of the famed philosopher: "The emaciated figure of the twenty-four-year-old

philosopher decided to make a grand theatrical entrance in his billowing white silk cravat" (267).

Incidentally, this lecture by Solovyov was the only occasion when Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were actually in the same room, but they did not meet. Tolstoy was escorted by Nikolai Strakhov, an old friend of Dostoevsky's, who made no move to introduce them. Bartlett benignly accepts Strakhov's motive as simple compliance with Tolstoy's command "not to introduce him to anyone." Others have spoken of less pure intentions, suggesting that Strakhov wanted to keep Tolstoy to himself: If the two giants began to relate directly, what place would there be for him?

It is presumably the reviewer's duty to record what errors he perceived in the scrutinized text. Here goes. On page three Bartlett asserts that "Turgenev disappointed him [Tolstoy] by failing to take writing as seriously as he did." I would maintain exactly the reverse. Turgenev considered the creation of artistic texts, literary works of art, as a supreme goal, a noble, self-justifying purpose. Tolstoy of course created many such works, some better than any of Turgenev's, but he never considered them a sufficient end in themselves. Even the young Tolstoy demanded some higher purpose for writing—for instance, to make people better.

I don't think Oblomov manifests "humility" (7); rather passivity, inertness. On page eight Bartlett states that Sofia Andreyevna self-sacrificingly continued to bear "the children her husband wanted." I don't think Tolstoy wanted the children as such. He paid little attention to them when they came. His doctrines of "natural biology" maintained that only reproduction justified sexual activity, and he wanted *that*.

The title "baron" (21) was not imported into Russia along with Tolstoy's *graf* (рпаф). The only Russian barons were rich, often philanthropic Jews elevated by some foreign monarch. By stating that Tolstoy's mother died "not long" (35) after the birth of her only daughter, Bartlett sidles past the

error of other biographers, who have asserted that she died “in childbirth.” The interval was five months. Is that “not long”? Bartlett asserts (113) that “there was simply no written theological tradition in Russia,” but she greatly admires Richard Gustafson’s *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*, which seems fairly steeped in Russian theology. Bartlett writes that it was Tolstoy who broke off the romance with Valeriia Arsen’eva with a “brusque letter” (131), whereas in fact she was the first to break. The critic’s first name was *Nikolai Dobroliubov*, not Alexander (131). I did not check to determine whether some French spelling errors were Tolstoy’s or Bartlett’s: “Je n’essayerais pas de vous dépendre” in a Tolstoy letter (133), where he means simple future, “n’essayerai pas.” Another (36): “la partie la plus élevé de moi-même” (for élevée).

It is surely questionable to maintain (143) that the peasants were not better off after the emancipation. Whatever the economic burdens, personal freedom was worth a good deal. It is nice to think that “nearly the whole of Russia” was engrossed in *War and Peace* in 1869, but we must remember that probably only ten per cent of the population were literate. Emile Dillon was not “an academic teaching at Kharkov” (338). He was the regular correspondent in Russia of the *London Daily Telegraph*. The correct Russian title of the head of the Holy Synod was *ober-prokuror* (383). Konstantin Pobedonostsev was not “the son of a Moscow priest” (386–87). His father was a professor. His grandfather was the priest.

Generally speaking, Bartlett is a skillful writer; she writes a vivid and lively English. I will nevertheless carp at what appear to me a few roughnesses. Perhaps these complaints should be directed rather against the book’s copy editor, who did a poor job. There are also several printer’s errors. There are instances of a hypercorrect use of “whom” where the simple “who” is actually correct (20, 136). The combination of diminutive with patronymic, “Tanya L’vovna” (351) is impossible; it

must be Tatiana L’vovna. It is conventional to leave the river’s name in its Russian form, Moskva, not translated as “Moscow River” (56).

Bartlett consistently uses the objective case after “than,” treating “than” as a preposition, e.g., “older than her” (367). Perhaps this is now the Queen’s English, but I am sure George Eliot would have disapproved. Bartlett also avoids the subjunctive in contrary-to-fact conditional sentences: “If I was on my own” (251), where “were” seems natural to me. There are occasional problems with word order, e.g., “dictating an account of what had happened in 1866 to his secretary Gusev” (407). Gusev was not born until 1882. The meaning, of course, is “dictating to his secretary Gusev an account of what happened in 1866.” Perhaps the Queen now uses “like” as a conjunction, but it did make me wince to see Tolstoy doing so in Bartlett’s translation: “Many of his [Rousseau’s] pages are so close to me that it feels *like* I wrote them myself” (68).

Bartlett uses a number of colloquialisms that do not seem to have traversed the Atlantic, such as “to sit an exam,” “to be shot of his wife,” “supremo,” “to splash out” in the sense of “splurge,” “show willing,” “peppercorn rent” (this one made it into dictionaries), “demobbed” (likewise), and “no-hopers.” Perhaps we Americans should simply enrich our speech with these vivid words.

One final issue: How should we refer to Tolstoy’s wife? The late Kathryn Feuer once issued a manifesto against the demeaning and belittling practice of calling her “Sonya,” as if we were her intimates. This is Bartlett’s practice, whereas Lev Nikolaevich is consistently referred to by his last name alone, the diminutive “Lyovochka” occurring only as his wife’s form of address. No Russian would call Sofia Andreyevna “Sonya,” at least in print. For them she is always Sofia Andreyevna or Countess (*графиня*). No doubt Bartlett thought that much too long and cumbersome in English, and perhaps she is right: Informality is everywhere in vogue, and even the Russians seem to be

abandoning patronymics and going immediately to first names or even diminutives. So it seems that Countess Tolstaya will go down in history as “Sonya.”

### Notes

1. The “Special Limited Edition” of this text contained endnotes and a “bibliographical survey” omitted in the “trade edition,” which unfortunately was the one acquired by many libraries.

2. I am puzzled, however, by how little use was made of the writings of Tolstoy’s daughter Aleksandra L’vovna. Her *Отец* (1953) is listed in the bibliography, but *Дочь* (1979) is not mentioned. Her *Проблески во тьме* is cited several times and listed in the bibliography, but with a slight spelling error (*в тьме* instead of *во тьме*), which aroused in me some suspicion, perhaps unjustified, about Bartlett’s Russian. Bartlett also does not mention the very thoughtful and moving, if flawed, Russian one-volume biography by Aleksei Zverev and Vladimir Tunimanov (Зверев и Туниманов).

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**Moulin, Dan. *Leo Tolstoy*. Continuum Library of Educational Thought. Vol. 19. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. Hardcover. ISBN: 1441156577.**

Almost all the meager attention Tolstoy’s writings on education get is directed at *Yasnaya Polyana*. In those articles—available in English incompletely, but most completely in Leo Wiener’s translations in *On Education*—we get to experience Tolstoy’s impressions of his very happy and engaged pedagogical experiment. Those articles inspired me in the early 1980s as I set out teaching Freshman English courses; they buoyed me when I sat through tedious or backward meetings on teaching; they gave me confidence that I was, in spite of ignoring supervisors and handbooks, doing something right and as impossible to master as art. *Yasnaya Polyana* showed me that teaching required continuous engagement, adjustment and energy: