

News of the Profession: Tolstoy and World Literature August 22-26, Yasnaya Polyana

The "Tolstoy and World Literature" conference was the fourth in a series of conferences by that name organized once every two years by Vladimir Tolstoy and Galina Alexeeva of the Yasnaya Polyana museum, as well as by Donna Orwin from the University of Toronto. Attendees came from around the globe; thirty-two participants attended, most from Russia, the others from Azerbaijan, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States. The ostensible subject of "Tolstoy and World Literature" made room for a broad range of papers, and topics ranged from Tolstoy's effect on American and Dutch literature, to religious and moral ideas in his works, to his response to thinkers from Rousseau to Lewis Carroll. It's hard to generalize either about the paper topics or questions that arose from them, since the conference brought together so many scholars working on such dissimilar ideas, all under the rubric of Tolstoy studies.

For example, Vladimir Goudakov, from Institut Européen de Langues in France, gave a controversial paper in which he compared Alexander Dumas' discussions of Russian culture with Tolstoy's, arguing that both of them were disturbed by what they saw as a Russian cultural tendency towards an all-encompassing hierarchy in which people must become either rulers or slaves. Karin Beck, from Columbia University, spoke on *War and Peace* as a bilingual novel. Beginning with an exploration of Napoleon's use of Russian and French, Beck went on to argue that the multilingual nature of *War and Peace* carries more intricate and farther-reaching implications than scholars have as yet realized. Galina Alexeeva, from the Yasnaya

Polyana museum, gave a detailed exploration of Tolstoy's influence on the American Christian Evangelical movement, arguing for the importance of Tolstoyan ideas in the formation of utopian communities in the late nineteenth century. The conference ended with Robin Feuer Miller's painfully moving reminiscences of her mother, Kathryn Feuer, whose book, *Tolstoy and the Genesis of War and Peace*, was recently translated into Russian. Miller described her memories of her own visit to Russia with her parents as a teenager, and her visit to Yasnaya Polyana. She also discussed her mother's role in smuggling "Requiem" to the West, and the traumatic events that befell her as a result.

The strength of this conference series lies in its ability to bring together such different people and push them into dialogue with each other. It is far from insignificant that this dialogue is not just scholarly but social. At most conferences, attendees tend to socialize in groups defined by shared nationality, age group, gender, or academic institution. We don't do it on purpose—but academics tend to be creatures of habit, and in unfamiliar and somewhat stressful settings, we often like to stick with what we know. The problem with this tendency to embrace the familiar is that the best intellectual discussions often take place in social situations. When we socialize only with people who are similar to us, we may inadvertently shield ourselves from unfamiliar ways of thinking.

The Yasnaya Polyana conference, now as in previous years, has been remarkable in its ability to establish an atmosphere of relaxed intellectual curiosity. Because almost all of the participants stayed in the same hotel, ate breakfast and

dinner together, and socialized throughout the day, there were constant opportunities to connect intellectually. The organizers had arranged for small concerts each evening of quite good local music, which further helped towards social cohesiveness. I found that some of the best moments in the conference were spent in conversation with another participant while walking the mile from the hotel to the museum where the conference was held, or while wandering in the fields during breaks. By its emphatically international nature, the conference worked to break down the common tendency to be buried in the academic traditions of one's own country. I was grateful to have the chance to find out about some of the more recent work done on Tolstoy in Russia—work it would have been considerably harder for me to find out about in the U. S.

One particularly charming thing about the conference was the fact that academic hierarchy became relatively unimportant. Participants

ranged from advanced graduate students to some of the leading figures in Tolstoy studies. The younger scholars were given as much attention and respect as the full professors were—and with good reason; their work was, in general, quite strong.

There will be another conference at Yasnaya Polyana in 2007, from August 16-20. I think it will be important for Western scholars to make an effort to go. In particular, young scholars doing significant work on Tolstoy should make attending this conference a priority. I know of no other venue where they can interact intellectually and socially with so many important scholars in the field, both those who are already established and those who are up-and-coming.

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