

# The Role of the Serbian War in *Anna Karenina*

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When the eighth part of *Anna Karenina* was about to be published in the journal *Russkii Vestnik*, a quarrel arose between the editor M. N. Katkov and Tolstoy. As early as April 1877, Tolstoy himself had opposed the "Slavonic cause" in a letter to A.A. Tolstaia, calling it "Serbian madness" (сербское сумасшествие) (PSS 20: 634, PSS 62: 322). The Pan-Slav Katkov disagreed with the opinions voiced by characters in *Anna Karenina* on "the Slavonic question" and he asked the writer to make changes in the text to tone down what he regarded as rhetoric. Tolstoy was furious, and decided to print the eighth part himself as a separate booklet.

Deprived of the ending of the novel, Katkov printed a notice in the May issue of *Russkii Vestnik* which was a kind of summary of its content:

In the previous issue there was a notice at the end of the novel *Anna Karenina* that stated: "Final installment to follow." But with the death of the heroine for all intents and purposes the novel was over. The author had planned a brief epilogue of about two pages in which readers would have learned that Vronsky, in confusion and grief over Anna's death, goes off to Serbia as a volunteer, and that all the others are alive and well, but that Levin stays in his village and is angry at the Slavonic committees and the volunteers. (PSS 20: 636)<sup>1</sup>

Such a disparaging reading of his text was clearly meant as a slap in Tolstoy's face and the

writer immediately composed a letter which he intended to publish in the journal *Novoe Vremia*.

The editors [of *Russkii vestnik*] have wearied their readers for three years with the publication of a long novel when, in the same gracious tone in which they wrote this notice, they could simply have laid out the plot something like this: There was a lady who left her husband. Having fallen in love with Count Vronsky, she grew angry about various things in Moscow and threw herself under a train. (PSS 62: 331)

The letter was never sent, since—in the words of his sister-in-law T.A. Kuzminskaia—Tolstoy soon decided that "humbleness is a wise man's trait" (PSS 20: 637). But Katkov did not give up, especially when he learned that the eighth part of the novel was already in print. In the July issue of *Russkii Vestnik* he renewed his attack:

The novel is still incomplete despite its "eighth and last" part. The idea of the whole has not been fully resolved. Why, one might ask, has the fate of the ill-starred woman after whom the novel is named, been portrayed for the reader so broadly, so vividly, and in such detail? This fate remains a masterfully told incident of a very common sort and serves only as the thread along which excellent episodes and characteristics have been strung. But if the work remains unfinished, if there is no natural resolution, then it would seem to have been better to break off the novel with the death of the heroine rather than to con-

clude it with talk about the volunteers who are in no way implicated in the events of the novel. (PSS 20: 637)

One is entitled to ask whether Tolstoy's idea of bringing in the Russian volunteers for the war in Serbia is as far-fetched and out-of-place in the novel as Katkov tries to make us believe. What purpose does the "Slavonic question" serve in *Anna Karenina*? Was the war waged by the Southern Slavs against their Turkish oppressors used by Tolstoy only to connect his novel to contemporary events, thus enhancing the realism of *Anna Karenina*? Or do these events have deeper implications for the characters presented in the novel?

After the quarrel with Katkov, Tolstoy went back to his text, reworked it and did what he usually did when returning to the text of the novel: Thoughts and statements of the *author* were transferred to the *characters*. Opinions were thus spread out and a many-voicedness appeared. Every character was embodied with his or her personal view on the "Slavonic question." Let us have a look at the different opinions on the Serbian war expressed in the novel.

In the version that reached Katkov the author-narrator speaks about the "Serbian madness" in the following way:

There were Serbian matches, Prince Milan candies, and dresses in the fashionable color of Cherniaev's hair.<sup>2</sup> [...] Young ladies in sables and trains went to moujiks to ask them for money and collected less than the cost of their trains. (PSS 20: 548, 555)

Tolstoy ironically describes "helping our Slav brothers" as one in a series of philanthropic actions cherished by such ostentatiously pious ladies in *Anna Karenina* as Countess Lidia Ivanovna or Madame Stahl. In the printed version of the novel we meet such a lady, a princess, on a railway platform from which the volunteers depart for their journey to Serbia. Levin's brother

Koznyshev is about to enter the same train, though he is not headed to Serbia. Instead he is going to the countryside "for a two week rest in the very holy of holies of the people (в самой святой святых народа), the depths of the country, there to revel in the sight of that upsurge of popular spirit (насладиться видом того поднятия народного духа) of which he and all the inhabitants of the capital and other cities were fully convinced" (772; 8: 2). The princess, enthused by the Slavonic cause, addresses Koznyshev:

"You've also come to see them off?" she asked in French. [...] "Is it true that we've already sent eight hundred men? [...] And it's true that nearly a million has been donated now [...] And how about today's telegram? The Turks have been beaten again. [...] Ah, yes, you know, there's a certain young man, a wonderful one, who wants to volunteer. I don't know why they made difficulties. I know him and I wanted to ask you please to write a note. He's been sent from Countess Lydia Ivanovna." (772-773; 8: 2)

Koznyshev goes into the first-class waiting-room and writes the recommendation asked for by the princess and learns that Count Vronsky is going by the same train. "He's not only going himself, but he's equipping a squadron at his own expense," explains the princess. She concludes: "This redeems a lot" (774; 8: 2).

As already obvious from this beginning, the Serbian war functions as a litmus paper that allows Tolstoy once again to test the life philosophy of his characters, to analyze their motives and actions, and, most important, to dig deeper into the origins of their convictions. Sergey Ivanovich Koznyshev is the first tested. Tolstoy makes us understand that the Slavonic question has greatly helped Koznyshev to lift the depression caused by the deadly silence that greeted the publication of his book *Sketch of a Survey of the Principles and Forms of Government in Europe*

and Russia (*Опыт обзора основ и форм государственности в Европе и в России*), on which he had worked for six years.<sup>3</sup> It turns out that Koznyshev was one of the first to raise the subject of the plight of the Southern Slavs and since "public questions" are his spiritual oxygen, he now "devoted himself completely to the service of this great cause and forgot all about his book" (772; 8: 1). But Koznyshev, who is analytically and philosophically schooled, cannot help seeing that the "Slavonic cause" soon resembles one of those "various public questions" such as "the dissenting sects, the American alliance, the Samara famine, exhibitions, spiritualism" that come and go in the mind of the public. And Tolstoy makes Koznyshev voice some of Tolstoy's own criticisms:

He saw that the Slavonic question had become one of those fashionable fads which, supplanting one another, always serve as a subject of concern for society. [...] He recognized that the newspapers printed a great many useless and exaggerated things with one aim—to draw attention to themselves and out-shout the rest. He saw that in this general upsurge of society the ones who leaped to the foreground and shouted louder than the rest were all the failures and the aggrieved: commanders-in-chief without armies, ministers without ministries, journalists without journals, party chiefs without partisans. (771; 8: 1)

But Koznyshev comforts himself that such negative characteristics are just "details." The Serbian war had, after all, brought about a "manifestation of public opinion" and "the nation's soul (народная душа) was given expression" as Sergey Ivanovich eloquently puts it. Tolstoy comments with an ironical twist: "And the more involved he became in it, the more obvious it seemed to him that this was a cause that would attain vast proportions, that would mark an epoch" (771-772; 8: 1).

Koznyshev's rhetoric is constantly undermined by realistic "details" given in the text, however; for instance, he ignores the volunteering soldiers on purpose: "He had dealt with the volunteers so much that he knew their general type and it did not interest him" (775; 8: 3). But Koznyshev's traveling companion Katavasov shows more interest in them and through him the reader gets acquainted with three men going to war:

The loudest talker of all was the young man with the sunken chest. He was obviously drunk and recounting some episode that had happened at his school. [...] Katavasov learned that he was a wealthy Moscow merchant who had squandered a large fortune before he was twenty-two. [...] He was obviously convinced, especially now, after drinking, that he was performing a heroic deed, and he boasted in a most disagreeable manner. (775-6; 8: 3)

The second, the retired officer [...] was a man who had tried everything. [...] and he talked about it all using learned words needlessly and inappropriately. (776; 8: 3)

The third, the artilleryman [...] was a modest, quiet man, who obviously admired the knowledge of the retired guardsman and the heroic self-sacrifice of the merchant and did not say anything about himself. When Katavasov asked him what moved him to go to Serbia, he replied modestly: "Why, everybody's going. We must help the Serbs. It's a pity." (776; 8: 3)

When Katavasov remarks that "they're especially short of you artillerymen" in Serbia, the fellow admits that he has not spent much time in artillery; in fact, he is a retired cadet. And he begins to explain how he failed in his examination. Disappointed, Katavasov turns to an old man who wears a military overcoat, and asks his opinion on it all. But the old man, as the narrator

puts it, knew by experience that "in the present mood of society, it was dangerous to express an opinion contrary to the general one and particularly to denounce the volunteers," and he limits himself to the phrase: "Well, they need people there."

The old man's decision to hold his tongue was explained more fully in an earlier version of the chapter where it was expressed by the narrator:

If someone had said that other governments acted almost exactly as the Turks did, they would have been torn limb from limb. To knowingly speak a lie and hide the truth if that was necessary to rouse the populace was considered political tact. The repetition of one and the same thing, not giving anyone a chance to express an opinion at variance with the general mood, triumphed as a new discovery by society of public opinion. (*PSS* 20: 544)

The movement to "help the Slavs" is bluntly unmasked in the description of Count Vronsky. Koznyshev meets Vronsky's mother in the train and she explains to him: "This is God's help to us, this Serbian war" (779; 8: 4). But she is deceiving herself, believing that the war "was the one thing that could have lifted him up again," since in her next sentence she discloses that Vronsky might not have thought about any war himself had not his friend Yashvin lost everything in card-playing: "Yashvin—his friend—lost everything at cards and decided to go to Serbia. He came to see him and talked him into it. Now he's taken up with it" (779; 8: 4). When Koznyshev gets to talk with Vronsky, nothing is left of the volunteer's "heroic feat." Koznyshev asks Vronsky: "Might you need a letter to Ristitch, or to Milan?" To which Vronsky responds with chilling irony: "No, thank you. One needs no recommendations in order to die. Unless it's to the Turks..." (780; 8: 5). But Koznyshev remains true to his lofty ideas and sees Vronsky off with one more cliché:

"Delivering one's brothers from the yoke is a goal worthy of both death and life" (780; 8: 5).

The Slavonic question also brings out Oblonsky's character more sharply. In the crowd on the platform seeing off the volunteers we find Stepan Arkadyich, for whom the new "cause" has brought about new farewell dinners:

"It's a pity you're leaving," said Stepan Arkadyich. "Tomorrow we're giving a dinner for two departing friends -- Dimer-Bartniansky from Petersburg and our own Veslovsky, Grisha. They're both going. Veslovsky got married recently. A fine fellow!" (774; 8: 2)

Married Oblonsky, behaving like a bachelor, sees nothing blameworthy in Veslovsky's decision to leave his young wife immediately after their marriage. He has himself left his wife Dolly and their many children to be taken care of by his brother-in-law Levin, while their estate Er-gushovo—in fact, Dolly's dowry, and not "their" estate at all—is in danger of being sold to repay Oblonsky's debts. But happy-go-lucky Stepan Arkadyich is out on a spree as always, giving generously to "our Slav brothers":

Seeing a lady passing by with a cup, he called her over and put in a five-ruble note into it.

"I can't look calmly at those cups as long as I've got money," he said. "And how do you like today's dispatch? Fine fellows, the Montenegrins!" (774; 8: 2)

Oblonsky's generosity makes the Pan-Slav princess exclaim: "His is precisely a fully Russian, Slavic nature!"

The issue of "being a true Russian" in the context of the Slavonic question is developed fully on Levin's estate when Koznyshev arrives there. All through the novel, Levin's main problem has been to unite his everyday life—all the "details" which Koznyshev prefers to overlook—with some theory, some higher rules in life that

his intellect can understand and accept. So far he has not succeeded:

Recently in Moscow and in the country, convinced that he would not find an answer in the materialists, he reread, or read for the first time Plato, and Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer —the philosophers who gave a non-materialistic explanation of life.

Their thoughts seemed to him fruitful when he was either reading or devising refutations of other teachings, especially that of the materialists; but as soon as he read or himself devised answers to the questions, one and the same thing always repeated itself. Following the given definitions of vague words such as *spirit, will, freedom, substance*, deliberately falling into the verbal trap set for him by the philosophers or by himself, he seemed to begin to understand something. But he had only to forget the artificial train of thought and refer back from life itself to what had satisfied him while he thought along a given line -- and suddenly the whole artificial edifice would collapse like a house of cards, and it would be clear that the edifice had been made of the same words rearranged, independent of something more important in life than reason. (787-788; 8: 9)

The discussion of the Slavonic question among Levin and his guests takes place at Levin's retreat and quiet paradise, the apiary. Levin does not agree with his brother that the war in Serbia is "simply the expression of human, Christian feeling" (805; 8: 15). He argues instead that the government and certain members of the elite have declared this war, but that the people take no interest in it and that among the people he sees no evidence of fraternal feeling for the oppressed Slavs. Koznyshev tries to convince him by referring to "history": "There are stories alive among the people about Orthodox Christians

suffering under the yoke of the 'infidel Hagarenes.' The people heard about their brothers' suffering and spoke out" (806; 8: 15). But Levin stands fast: "Maybe so, but I don't see it. I'm the people myself and I don't feel it." Prince Shcherbatsky now enters the discussion to support Levin:

"I was living abroad and reading the newspapers, and I confess, before the Bulgarian atrocities I simply couldn't understand why the Russians all suddenly loved their brother Slavs so much, while I felt no love for them. I was very upset, thought I was a monster, or that Karlsbad affected me that way. But I came here and was reassured.—I see that there are people interested just in Russia and not in our brother Slavs. Konstantin for one." (806; 8: 15)

As a philosopher "experienced in dialectics," Koznyshev avoids the criticism and draws again on the magic word "the people" (народ):

"Personal opinions mean nothing here," said Sergei Ivanovich. "It's no matter of personal opinions when all Russia—the people—has expressed its will. [...] The people cannot help knowing. A consciousness of their destiny always exists among the people, and in such moments as the present it becomes clear to them." (806; 8: 15)

Having said this, Koznyshev glances at the old bee-keeper, as if asking his support. The old man seems to agree: "That's quite so." But the description of the bee-keeper shows that his words are empty:

The handsome old man with streaks of grey in his black beard and thick silver hair stood motionless, holding a bowl of honey, looking down gently and calmly from the height upon the masters, obviously neither understanding nor wishing to understand anything." (806; 8: 15)

A little later during the conversation the bee-keeper repeats exactly the same phrase—"That's quite so"—in response to "the accidental glance cast at him" (809; 8: 16). When Levin decides to ask the old man about this very "opinion of the people" he also receives a detached answer:

"Have you heard about the war, Mikhailovich? What they read about in church? What do you think? Should we go to war for the Christians?"

"What's there for us to think? Alexander Nikolaich, the emperor, has thought for us, and he'll think for us in everything. He knows better..." (807; 8: 15)

After these words the bee-keeper returns to what he is doing *at the moment*, an action *depending* on him—he is serving the children bread and honey: "Shall I bring more bread? For the lad?" he asked Darya Alexandrovna, pointing to Grisha, who was finishing the crust (807; 8: 15).

But Koznyshev does not give up, and when Levin says that "among eighty million people, there are always to be found, not hundreds like now, but tens of thousands of people who have lost their social position, reckless people who are always ready—to join Pugachev's band, to go to Khiva, to Serbia..." Koznyshev counterattacks:

"Yes, if you want to learn the spirit of the people in an arithmetical way, that is certainly very difficult to achieve. Voting has not been introduced among us, and it cannot be introduced, because it does not express the will of the people. But there are other ways of doing it. It is felt in the air, it is felt in the heart. Not to mention those undercurrents that have stirred up the stagnant sea of the people and are clear to any unprejudiced person. Look at society in the narrow sense. All the most diverse parties in the world of the intelligentsia, so hostile before, have merged into one. All discord has ended, all social organs are saying one and the same thing, eve-

ryone has felt the elemental power that has caught them up and is carrying them in one direction." (807-808; 8: 16)

But Koznyshev's oration falls to pieces when confronted with old prince Shcherbatsky's laconic comment:

"It's the newspapers that all say the same thing," said the prince. "That's true. And it's so much the same that it's like frogs before a thunderstorm. You can't hear anything on account of them." (808; 8: 16)

In his earlier version of the text Tolstoy criticized *the role of the press* even more strongly when it came to "expressing the will of the people": "The newspaper press made the most racket. Living off news as they did, it seemed to them that something so fertile in news couldn't not be important" (PSS 20: 548). The newsmakers act as the new rulers of people's minds.

As these textual examples show, by introducing the Slavonic question in his novel Tolstoy raised an issue that would grow in importance: that of mass media and their creation of "public opinion." Sensitive to all kinds of falsity, Tolstoy saw that "public issues" propounded by newspapers could easily create a cleavage between the life people live and their ideas. Public opinion (общественность) could become a social mechanism that forced people into "generality" (общность) and estranged them from their real, "natural" life where everything is linked together (сопряжено) and man's reasoning is rooted in his personal life experience.

Tolstoy clearly saw the repercussions of the Serbian war in society in an increasing use of ideological rhetoric: Slav brothers, communal beginnings, the *obshchina*, "the voice of the people" (*братья-славяне, хоровые начала, строй общины, "народ заговорил,"* etc.). He sensed the emptiness of such words and the danger when people took the words to be the reality. The Slavonic question, as it unrolls in the

eighth part of *Anna Karenina*, gave the author one more chance to turn his looking-glass on the moral responsibility of each individual and scrutinize the link between a man's actions, his way of life and his character. In the mirror of the Slavonic question the characters of the novel are reflected once more in all their complexity.

Bringing in events from the "outside world" as they were happening while he was writing the story, Tolstoy opened up the novel to "real life." His characters stepped out of fiction and started mingling with the readers. Katkov was right when he said that because of the eighth part "there was *no ending*" in the novel. Tolstoy let Levin express it more beautifully:

*"I shall go on in the same way with the coachman Ivan, argue in the same way, speak my mind inappropriately, there will still be the same wall between my soul's holy of holies and other people, even my wife. I shall still go on accusing her in the same way of my own fear and then regret it, I shall still be unable to understand with my reason why I pray, and I shall still go on praying; but my life now, my whole life, regardless of all that may happen to me, every minute of it, is not only not meaningless, as it was before, but has the unquestionable meaning of the good which it is in my power to put into it."* (italics mine; 817; 8: 19)

### Notes

This article was first published as "Герои романа Анна Каренина в зеркале славянского вопроса." *Северный сборник*. Proceedings of the NorFA Network in Russian Literature 1995-2000. Edited by Peter Alberg Jensen and Ingunn Lunde (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000), 131-139.

1. Except passages quoted from the English translation of *Anna Karenina*, translations from the Russian are by Donna Orwin.

References marked PSS are to Tolstoy's Russian *Complete Collected Works* (*Полное собрание сочинений*).

All other references are to the Pevear-Volokhonsky translation of *Anna Karenina*, modified as necessary to make a particular point. References are to the page number of this translation, followed by an indication of the part and chapter in the novel (Translator's note).

2. General Mikhail Grigor'evich Cherniaev (1828-1898) fought in the Crimea 1855-56 and the Caucasus, later conquering Tashkent. In May 1876 General Cherniaev went to Belgrade to take command of a division of the Serbian army. Prince Milan is apparently Milan Obrenovich of the ruling family in Serbia.

3. It is possible that the title of Koznyshev's book points to the work of N. Ia. Danilevskii entitled *Russia and Europe* (*Россия и Европа*) that appeared in 1871, having first been published in the journal *Zaria*. In a letter to N.N. Strakhov dated March 22, 25, 1872 Tolstoy mentions Danilevskii and writes:

"National character [народность] according to the Slavophiles and real national character are two things as different as sulphuric ether and the upper ether that is the source of heat and light. I hate all these *communal beginnings* (*хоровые начала*), *systems of life and the obshchina* (*строю жизни и общины*) and *Slavonic brothers* (*братьев славян*), which are all made up; but I simply love what is precise, clear and beautiful and measured and all this I find in folk poetry and language and life" (PSS 61: 276).

Tolstoy's antipathy towards all kind of clichés made him naturally critical of Slavophile rhetoric.

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