
News of the Profession

The Over-Examined Life: New Perspectives on Tolstoy

"The Over-Examined Life: New Perspectives on Tolstoy"—a two-day conference devoted to the Russian literary giant—took place on April 19-20, at the Barker Center for the Humanities of Harvard University. The conference was organized by Julie Buckler and Justin Weir, both of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Harvard, and supported by a conference grant from the Davis Center for Russian Studies, which accepts proposals from Harvard faculty in Russian and Eurasian Studies for bringing scholars together to share their work.

"How can we experience the shock of the new again in our approach to Tolstoy? How can we "defamiliarize" our cherished ideas about the great defamiliarizer himself?" asked the conference's initial call for papers. The conference aimed to stimulate a renewal of Tolstoy scholarship, inviting new approaches to Tolstoy's life and works, as well as commentary on past traditions of Tolstoy criticism. Conference participants came from the United States, Canada, and England, and they were joined in discussions by other scholars who traveled to Cambridge to attend the panels.

The conference showcased twenty-three scholars, arranged into five panels with discussants, and included a keynote address. The first panel, "Returning to *Anna Karenina*," considered Tolstoy's novel of adultery in terms of repetition principles, the poetics of listening, and the aesthetics of silent film. "Textual and Cultural Space in Tolstoy" examined the place of the country estate in Tolstoy's oeuvre and personal mythology, the hyper-textual relations between drafts of *War and Peace*, and explored the connection between Tolstoy's aesthetics in *What is Art?* and the artistic precepts espoused by modernist groups such as the World of Art and the Russian Futurists. "Tolstoy as Philosopher" pondered Tolstoy's ideas through traditional

philosophical categories such as ethics, desire, and non-violence. "Reconsidering Tolstoy's Life and Legacy" posed a broad series of questions about Tolstoy's advocacy on behalf of the Dukhobors, his conversion, his wife's fictional reply to *The Kreutzer Sonata* in "Who Is to Blame?," and Tolstoy's still-evolving place in contemporary Russian culture. "Narrative and Tolstoy" treated fictional storytelling through the prism of gender, anti-narrative drive, and fundamental narratological principles themselves. The keynote address by Professor Caryl Emerson of Princeton University, titled "Revisiting Bakhtin on Tolstoy, 2002," returned to Bakhtin's early lectures on Tolstoy in order to question this theorist's later dismissal of Tolstoy as "monologic" and less interesting in literary terms than his polyphonic counterpart Dostoevsky.

Buckler and Weir plan to edit and publish a volume of essays based on papers from "The Over-Examined Life." Synopses of the conference papers and discussants' remarks are available on the Davis Center website.

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Tolstoy in the 1850s: The Birth of a Writer

June 5-8 2002, Tbilisi

Tbilisi is not the most obvious place for a Tolstoy conference. Tolstoy lived there only briefly, and while the Caucasus certainly play a role in his writings, they were far more important in the works of other Russian writers, such as Lermontov or Pushkin. Furthermore, the perception of many of us in the West is that Georgians are separating themselves not only from Russian political structures, but also from the Russian culture that was forced upon them for so long.

This perception is not entirely accurate. The Tbilisi conference was organized jointly by the Iasnaia Poliana museum and the Caucasus House [*Kavkazkii dom*], an institution promoting cultural ties between Georgia and other countries. As the organizers made clear in their opening remarks, the conference was not simply about Tolstoy and his writings, but also about Georgia's intellectual future. One of the central questions in Georgia at the moment is whether or not Georgia is going to become isolated from all other countries, or whether it will begin to foster its relations with other nations, especially Russia.

The Tbilisi conference did everything that conferences are supposed to do. It brought together scholars from different cultures, different generations, and different ways of understanding Tolstoy. There were a few participants from Western countries (two from the United States, one from Canada and two from Germany) as well as a larger contingent from Russia and from Georgia. We all learned from each other. The amount of knowledge at the fingertips of some of the post-Soviet scholars was both impressive and helpful. The Russian and Georgian scholars, for their part, were extremely welcoming of what one organizer appreciatively called the "impudence" [*derzost'*] of Western readings of Tolstoy's works. The best papers were the ones that combined the erudition we have come to expect from post-Soviet scholars with the intellectual daring and flexibility characteristic of American scholarship at its best.

For example, Olga Slivitskaia, of the St. Petersburg Academy of Culture, began her paper with a discussion of the idea of the fractal, a term originally used in mathematics and physics, but becoming increasingly used in discussions of aesthetic pattern. Every small part of a fractal resembles the whole; in looking at a small part of a leaf, for example, we can see the entire tree in miniature. Slivitskaia described the 1857 story *Lucerne* as a Tolstoyan fractal, arguing that not only does each separate part of the story reflect the whole, but that many of the major ideas to which Tolstoy would return throughout his life are apparent in this early story.

Zaza Shatirishvili of Tbilisi State University presented a paper entitled "On the Other Side of

the Sublime: The Topos of the Caucasus in L. N. Tolstoy's 'Khadzhi Murat.'" Shatirishvili began by discussing the time-honored topos used in Russian literature for juxtaposing description of the natural world of the Caucasus with reminders of the military activity that brought Russians to the region. He went on to argue that Tolstoy makes use of what Harsha Ram has called the "imperial sublime," but that Tolstoy makes reference to the tradition only to subvert it in essential ways, condemning rather than romanticizing the military machine that puts the Russian invaders at odds with both the natural and the human world.

Nina Nikitina, of the Tolstoy museum at Iasnaia Poliana, in her paper "L. N. Tolstoy's 'Fifth Element,'" argued passionately that we ought to understand the importance of money in Tolstoy's role as a writer: according to Nikitina, Tolstoy published, in the beginning at least, in large part for money, and had a keen eye for the financial advantage his literary work could bring him.

These and the thirteen other papers of the conference are being published by the Iasnaia Poliana press. For a full list of the presenters and paper titles, see the end of this review.

One of the particularly striking features of the conference was the energy with which the Tbilisi audience listened to and debated the papers. They were often deeply invested in the ideas under discussion—problems of love, identity, suffering, and power that play out in our daily lives as well as in Tolstoy's art. Understanding this does not have to mean reading Tolstoy in a naïve sort of way. On the contrary: seeing the connection between our intellectual work and the world around us can help provide our scholarship with the life force that gives it essential validity.

If one of the goals of the conference was to help Georgia retain its connections to Russian culture as well as to the rest of the world, one might still wonder why Tolstoy, of all authors, would be seen as a proper subject for such a conference. After all, Tolstoy in the West is often accused of being the quintessential Dead White Male, a monologic preacher of authoritarian dogma—the farthest thing imaginable, in other words, from the multicultural goals of the conference

organizers. And yet for the organizers, the choice of Tolstoy as an author to connect diverse groups of people made perfect sense. Several of the organizers stressed Tolstoy's lifelong wish for unity among all people as a philosophy that could help unite Georgians with Russians and with Westerners. Although Tolstoy's idea of universal love is seldom fully and convincingly realized in his fiction, it did seem to work for three days in Tbilisi in June, when Tolstoy became the emblem of Georgian multiculturalism.

Once the conference was over, the participants were taken to see a theatrical production of *Anna Karenina* in Georgian, directed by Georgii Sikharulidze. For four hours, in a hot and crowded room, watching a production in a language unfamiliar to most of us, we all sat, rapt, watching the witty, sophisticated, and moving production. This is multiculturalism at its best. And—for three days in June—Tolstoy was *the* author.

Papers given:

Oiga Slivitskaia (St. Petersburg Academy of Culture): "The Fractal Character of Tolstoy's Early Writings."

Brett Cooke (Texas A&M University): "Self-Consciousness in Tolstoy's Early Writings."

Zaza Abzianidze (editor of *Literary Georgia*): "L. N. Tolstoy and the Georgian Humanists."

Bernhard Suin de Boutemard (Lindenfels, Germany): "The Birth of a Children's Author."

Mariia Filina (Tbilisi State University): "The Reception in Poland of Russian Literature and of Tolstoy."

Anne Hruska (University of Missouri): "The Sufferings of Children and the Cruelty of Tolstoyan Harmony."

Mariia Kshondzer (Germany / Georgia): "Moral and Aesthetic Problems of L. N. Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* Both in the Context of the Russian Literary Tradition and for Modern Readers."

Zaza Shatirishvili (Tbilisi State University): "On the Other Side of the Sublime: The Topos of the Caucasus in L. N. Tolstoy's *Khadzhi Murat*."

Guram Lebanidze (Tbilisi State University): "L. N. Tolstoy and F. M. Dostoevsky Confronting the Pushkinian Mystery: a Dialogue both with D. S. Merezhkovsky and with Modernity."

Elvira Osipova (St. Petersburg State University): "The Novella *Childhood* and the Reception by American Writers of Tolstoy's Early Writings."

Alla Polosina (Iasnaia Poliana Museum): "'It Seems To Me That I Wrote This Myself.' (L. N. Tolstoy and Jean Jacques Rousseau: Sources and Parallels)."

Galina Alekseeva (Iasnaia Poliana Museum): "Tolstoy's Readings in English during the 1850s."

Irina Gryzlova (Iasnaia Poliana Museum): "Reflections of the Devices of Laurence Sterne in L. N. Tolstoy's Story *The Storm*."

Marina Dzhikiia (Georgian Technical University): "Germanisms in L. N. Tolstoy's *Khadzhi Murat*."

Anna Hamling (University of New Brunswick, Canada): "An Introduction to the Convergences in the Religious Thought of Lev Tolstoy and Miguel de Unamuno."

Nina Nikitina (Iasnaia Poliana Museum): "L. N. Tolstoy's 'Fifth Element.'"

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