

# Tolstoy Wars

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**Popoff, Alexandra. *Sophia Tolstoy: A Biography*.  
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In the year of the centennial of Tolstoy's death, his wife Sofia Andreyevna Bers is enjoying a revival of interest and a revision of views of her legacy. She is featured in Michael Hoffman's film on the Tolstoy marriage, *The Last Station*, and in a series of print publications that tell her story more sympathetically, including several in English. A beautifully produced collection of her work as a photographer appeared in 2007, followed this year by a 1000-page edition of her memoirs and an expanded edition of her diaries, with an introduction by Doris Lessing. Two biographies have also been published: one in Russian by Nina Nikitina (in the series *Жизни замечательных людей*), and another in English, by Alexandra Popoff.

Together these works present a new image of Sofia Bers, and go a long way toward accomplishing what she herself intended when she wrote her memoirs: refuting "the accumulation of acute misunderstandings and false reports concerning [her] character." (*My Life* XIX) Most valuable in this respect are the memoirs themselves, which have been well represented in their English translation.

Popoff's work, which is based closely on these memoirs, is somewhat more problematic, however. While she succeeds in creating a very sympathetic account of a talented woman who is devoted to her husband and family, her book is marred by her tendentious tone, selective reporting, and at times gross negligence or misreading of facts. Numerous errors and omissions create, in their aggregate, a

narrow and unmeasured view of the Tolstoys and those around them.

I will begin with a relatively minor example. On page 286 Popoff reports on a segment of Tolstoy's final journey from Yasnaya Polyana of which I had not been aware.

After taking a train to the next station, they rode horseback for about twelve miles on muddy roads. They had to cross a ravine and a frozen creek. Makovitsky made it with both horses and waited for Tolstoy. Holding on to trees, Tolstoy made it to the bottom; then, gasping for air, he crawled across the ice on his hands and knees.

This scene would make a wonderful addition to the Hollywood film version of Tolstoy's departure. It has been spliced into the text here, unfortunately, from the day before his departure, when Tolstoy had gone out for his daily horseback ride with his doctor, Dushan Makovitsky. Makovitsky describes this episode in his notes for the following day in order to explain why Tolstoy was especially fatigued as he made his final exit from his estate. In its new location the scene supports Popoff's view that the great writer was pressured by his followers into a desperate escape for which his frail, eighty-two-year-old body was unprepared—and that he travelled with people incapable of taking the proper care of him that his wife had long provided.

This is a perhaps simply an error on her part, but such mistakes appear frequently, and invariably work to support the notion that Sofia Andreyevna consistently demonstrated greater virtue than those around her. In 1895 Tolstoy agreed to give one of his stories to the Northern Herald, edited by an attractive younger woman, Lyubov Gurevich. Sofia Andreyevna became convinced that he was

motivated by a romantic attraction, and some very difficult scenes followed. Popoff reports that Tolstoy explained his wife's behavior as "the devil of jealousy, insane, groundless, jealousy," but then follows with a parenthetical annotation:

Two years later, in a letter to Sophia, Tolstoy admitted that he had been in love with Gurevich, but that this feeling had only "lasted several days. (218)

The passage to which Popoff refers, however, conveys no such admission. In the midst of a long letter discussing his own jealousy over his wife's continued meetings with the pianist Sergei Taneyev, Tolstoy wrote:

You write that it is painful for you to see Gurevich, even though there was nothing resembling any grounds for the feeling that you associated with her and it lasted several days. What am I supposed to feel after a two-year infatuation and when I have the most obvious grounds, when you, after all that has happened, arranged in my absence daily (or if not daily, it was not on your account) meetings? (PSS 84: 692)

Elsewhere such misrepresentation occurs in whole swaths. A section on page 211 describes the attitude of Sofia Andreyevna and her daughter Tanya toward Tolstoy's associate Vladimir Chertkov as the latter arranged to spend the summer of 1894 near the Tolstoy estate. Popoff:

The disciple rented a cottage within walking distance of the estate and moved in with his wife, Galya, and son, Dima. Daughter Tanya found Chertkov's proximity frightening, explaining in her diary, "He will try to meddle in Papa's work and our way of life, and almost by force will require us to follow his advice and instructions. (211)

Here is the original passage from *The Tolstoy Home*, from which she quotes:

Chertkov is thinking of spending the summer near Yasnaia. That frightens me and delights me. What frightens me is that he will try to meddle in Papa's and our way of life, and almost by force will require us to follow his advice and instructions. (248)

Popoff has peeled away the balancing "delight," but also neglects to provide a context for better understanding Tanya's comments. At this juncture Tanya was herself committed to the Tolstoyan philosophy and writes repeatedly of her own desire to adhere most strictly to her moral code. A few pages earlier in her diary, for instance, we read the following: "Once more, need most severely to take self in hand, and live sternly, merciless to self, not allow self any embellishments." (244) Clearly she has her own sympathies for the sort of rigid moralism that Chertkov represents, in spite of her anxieties regarding his tendency to act as a monastic elder.

Popoff is determined to depict Chertkov as a malevolent meddler, however, and continues on this course:

Chertkov had recently attempted to turn Tanya against her mother. In February, he wrote Tanya a letter proposing she give up her inheritance and "fine clothes." He also advised her on how to denounce her mother. First, she had to spend time with Sophia, drawing closer to her, to win her trust. When the "maximum of mutual softening" was reached, Tanya should condemn Sophia for opposing Tolstoy's doctrine." (211)

The original passage in *The Tolstoy Home* however reads entirely otherwise:

I have had a letter from Chertkov in which he writes that I ought to renounce two things—property, which has passed to me by Papa's error, and fine clothes. Apart from that, he advises me to spend some days or weeks drawing closer to Mamma, and the moment I

reach the “maximum of mutual softening, tenderly, cautiously, yet firmly and without ambiguity to tell her all you think, before God, of her persistent antagonism to God in your father.” (207-208)

There is considerable difference between the moralistic cajoling that Chertkov prescribes here and the denunciation and condemnation of her mother characterized by Popoff. Chertkov is hoping that Sofia Andreyevna can be won over to a position more sympathetic to her husband’s views. This may have been ill advised, but is considerably less antagonistic than the behavior Popoff describes. Tatiana also makes it quite clear that while she does not agree with Chertkov’s practice of mutual criticism, she does not view his suggestion as ill-intentioned:

This doesn’t mean that I am irritated with Chertkov. On the contrary, I know what love and care he has put into his letter, and I can bear him nothing but good will. I simply think that he is wrong. (208)

When read in the context of another passage from Tanya’s diary, her statement takes on a different light altogether:

A number of times I would have liked to have a really good talk with her [Sofia Andreyevna], but she always begins raising her voice and saying she will buy a revolver and tell the Governor that the whole band of them are anarchists and so forth; very trying, and without departing from the truth I must try to calm her down. I find it easy so long as I pity her and must try to prevent that feeling from passing. (247)

And finally, in the troubling conclusion to her account of this episode, Popoff writes:

She [Tanya] was beginning to doubt Chertkov’s sincerity, discovering his double standards. Chertkov and [his wife] Galya said it was wrong

for Tolstoy’s children to inherit property. Yet their [the Chertkovs’] son, Dima, was well provided for. To Tanya’s question as to whether Dima would be left with funds or without, Galya replied, “Of course, with.” (211)

When compared to the original passage in *The Tolstoy Home* one sees that Popoff has entirely missed the mark:

I have become very intimate with Galya. She is a dear woman—sometimes quite a child, though in some respects very grown up and serious. We have had some talk about upbringing, and she said how it hurts to hear dear little Ivan [the Tolstoy’s youngest child] talking of Yasnaya being his, and that he is so told. And when she said that her chin quivered and she burst into tears. I followed suit. She said that she feels it such a sin, “offending one of these little ones,” and that she could not imagine a worse wrong. We also talked about little Dimitri [Dima], and I asked her what she would consider the more terrible: for him to be left without funds, or with. She said, of course, with, and I could see that she was perfectly sincere and mature about it, and had given a lot of thought to it. (256)

We may assume that the egregious misreading of this passage was accidental on the part of Popoff, but it is highly implausible to anyone who knows much about the Chertkovs. Galya Chertkov fully shared her husband’s views and contributed to his work, but she and her husband function better in Popoff’s narrative as narrow hypocrites.<sup>1</sup>

### **Chertkov**

Popoff continues to color Chertkov as a moral charlatan to the end of her book; she reports, for instance, that in 1910 Chertkov had returned to “his mansion near Yasnaya.” The house in question was at Telyatniki, the inheritance of Tolstoy’s daughter Sasha, and served not as a private mansion, but as a Tolstoyan commune, in which,

as the newspapers reported at the time, everyone in the household shared a common table. Popoff's hostility toward Chertkov seems to have been absorbed in full strength from the pages of Sofia Andreyevna's memoirs and diaries. Indeed, one feels that the biographer is channeling her subject's enmity and has taken on a commission to settle a score. In the book's introduction, she writes, "Misconceptions about Sophia have penetrated most biographies, shaping our knowledge of Tolstoy. These all have one source: Chertkov." (3)

Popoff is not alone in finding fault with Chertkov—indeed the tradition was established during Tolstoy's lifetime—but Tolstoy's more subtle and attentive biographers have recognized a situation much more complex and morally ambiguous than what she describes here. In Popoff's one-sided account, Chertkov's actions appear reprehensible and Sofia Andreyevna's justified, when in truth, each provoked the other into unbecoming behavior. The Tolstoyan movement that Chertkov heads is similarly reduced to nothing more than an avaricious grasp of family property and loyalty. The Tolstoyans loom in her work as they did in Sofia Andreyevna's consciousness—as scurrilous hangers on, living off the fat of Tolstoy's glory, feeding at his table and fawning on his daughters.

In fact, Tolstoyism was a broad movement advocating pacifism, vegetarianism, chastity, sobriety and renunciation of property rights. Sofia Andreyevna did not embrace this moralism in her husband, and could not abide those who adopted it in his name. Much of the conservative establishment of her day shared her view. The major newspaper at the turn of the century, the conservative *New Time* (Новое время), maintained a decidedly pro-Sofia Andreyevna position, viewing the Tolstoyans as misguided interlopers spoiling the writer's last years. Vasilii Rozanov wrote of the "*venenum Chertkovi*" that had poisoned Tolstoy's family life. (Розанов). This view became widespread among conservatives, and

was actively promoted by Sofia Andreyevna and her sons. When the Tolstoyans responded in kind, the public relations battle was on.

Biographers have long found it difficult to sort their way through the competing points of view. Characteristic of this difficulty is the treatment given the topic by Aylmer Maude, Tolstoy's first major English biographer, who had firsthand knowledge of the situation. Maude was not kindly disposed toward Chertkov, and in his biography joined Rozanov in charging that he "poisoned" the Tolstoy marriage. In an afterward to a later edition he adds commentary sharply critical of Chertkov's behavior following Tolstoy's death, including charges that Chertkov had edited out passages from Tolstoy's diaries that praised Sofia Andreyevna. In a second addendum, however, regarding Sofia Andreyevna's newly appearing diaries that he was co-editing, Maude concludes that perhaps Chertkov's attempts to control Tolstoy's manuscripts were ultimately justified by her behavior:

Her eagerness to place the worst possible interpretation on her husband's actions and motives makes her *Diary* distressing reading, and when she deals not with facts, but with what she supposes people may think about herself, her conjectures throw light chiefly on her own state of mind. (537)

Popoff takes much of this material at face value, and as a result often presents a very one-sided version of the story. Maude goes on to describe the sort of misrepresentation that can result from this method, and concludes by acknowledging the difficulty facing biographers in negotiating a fair account of what transpired. This is the territory that most biographers have occupied when treating Tolstoy's intimate circle. In this tradition, Chertkov typically takes blame for meddling in Tolstoy's writing and personal life, and more generally for steering Tolstoy onto a more narrow-minded moralistic course. He is often depicted as a

moralistic scrivener whose influence hobbled a literary genius in the winter of his life. But most biographers also find fault with Sofia Andreyevna, whose actions clearly provoked the Tolstoyans to meddle in her family affairs.

Neither side trusted the other with Tolstoy's papers. Both believed that the historical record would be manipulated in order to tell the story that best supported their interests. At the heart of this conflict of interests were the opposing values that would be represented in the diaries and letters as Tolstoy discussed his family life and relationship with his wife. Tolstoy's followers saw his family life as a moral impediment—a legal and emotional bond that restricted him from being true to his own principles. They watched him repeatedly submit to his wife, and felt that he had compromised much—including his moral authority, personal integrity and peace of mind—in order to fulfill his marital commitment. In their view he was a hen-pecked Jesus bowing to a morally inferior influence, a wife who insisted that he stop consorting with his disciples and spouting his moralistic prattle. That Tolstoy's followers saw him as the prophet of a new movement helps us understand their behavior, as well as Sofia Andreyevna's. It must have been unbearable for her to watch the veneration of her husband, whose faults she knew all too intimately.

Often Tolstoy's followers were better "Tolstoyans" than the author himself, which he openly acknowledged. He viewed his relationship with Chertkov as a spiritual brotherhood, in which each would help the other to live according to their shared principles. In some respects this had proven easier for Chertkov. Coming from a wealthy family engaged in the highest circles of social and political power, he had abandoned a promising military career and devoted the remainder of his life to the promotion of Tolstoy's ideas. Once Sofia Andreyevna explained her animosity to Chertkov by saying that she felt he had taken her husband away from her, to which Chertkov's mother answered: "And I have always been grieved that

your husband has taken my son away from me." (*Final Struggle* 148) Chertkov had in many respects abandoned his family and its values in order to take up his new life. He was probably motivated by some measure of moral vanity or vainglory, as Sofia Andreyevna charged, but he did provide tremendous energy to the cause.

### **Purloined Letters**

In distinction from Popoff, most Tolstoy biographers have assumed that Chertkov's devotion to this cause, if misguided, was at least in some part based in belief in its virtue, and that he was not motivated solely by literary greed and antipathy toward Sofia Andreyevna. In fairness to him, his reputation has suffered from some of the same tendencies that have tarnished Sofia Andreyevna's. Biographers have attempted to resolve moral ambiguities in Tolstoy's life by coloring those around him in broad lines.

Popoff counters this tendency by not only adopting Sofia Andreyevna's point of view, but by ignoring opposing views and even sources from Sofia Andreyevna's own archive that do not conform to her exonerating agenda. This is especially notable in the last pages of her book, where she obscures the events of the couple's last months together, the most acrimonious period of their marriage and a focal point for those who would describe the Tolstoy marriage as embattled. She follows Sofia Andreyevna's lead in holding up the early years of the Tolstoy marriage as counter-evidence to the notion that it was an unhappy one, but in truth a significant part of the last thirty years of their marriage was unhappy, and by the end the couple was fighting desperately on a daily basis.

Popoff devotes only six pages of her long biography to the summer of 1910, when the Tolstoy marriage entered its final crisis. We cannot hope to understand this period by reading around it as Popoff does here. Meanwhile, there is no lack of documentation to provide this information. There were eight diaries being kept in the Tolstoy

household that year, and several of them have been published. Dushan Makovitsky's, in particular, record events in the household in great detail. More conspicuously absent in Popoff's work are references to Sofia Andreyevna's own diaries from this year, which were extensive and quite revealing. Popoff knows of these pages, and even quotes from them:

On June 22, she wrote in her diary, 'I am disgusted by his senile affection toward Chertkov... I want to die and am afraid of suicide... My heart, head, soul—everything hurts... Love is lost, ruined.'

She follows this quote, however, with an unfortunate parenthetical comment—"This entry and others like it were never published for fear of compromising Tolstoy" (278).

In fact this entry and others like have been published, in the above-mentioned four-hundred-page volume in English, edited by Aylmer Maude and Sergei Tolstoy, the couple's son. The first edition appeared in English in 1936, and was reprinted in 1980. Apparently Popoff has not taken the time to locate this volume, but has instead consulted the incomplete 1985 volume by Cathy Porter or the censored Soviet edition of 1978 upon which it is based, which omit all entries between June 21 and October 26 of 1910—precisely the period most critical to understanding Tolstoy's departure.<sup>2</sup> While Popoff infers that the omission of these pages is part of the "cover-up" engineered by Chertkov, it would be easier to argue that it was done to protect the reputation of both Tolstoys, husband and wife, and that the greater protection is afforded to Sofia Andreyevna. The 1910 diaries are not flattering to her, as she records in great detail her own unraveling behavior and its questionable motives. In my experience, the keepers of the Tolstoy archive have viewed themselves as custodians of his family legacy as well, and have maintained a kind of bourgeois discretion in order to maintain the reputations of both the Tolstoys.

We may view this as old-fashioned or paternalistic, but it is not censorship of the sort that Popoff alleges in her work.

The Maude/Tolstoy edition of Sofia Andreyevna's 1910 diary is an exception to this practice (carried out, characteristically, in the West). It is a fascinating read, as Sofia Andreyevna's diary entries are interpolated with Tolstoy's, while their eldest son Sergei, perhaps the one positioned most squarely in the middle between his mother and father, provides extensive commentary. The diary documents a battle that Popoff argues never took place, its pitch conveyed by passages like the following:

I want to kill Chertkov and drive a knife into his fat body in order to free Lev Nikolaevich's soul from his harmful influence. (*Final Struggle* 198)

She describes dissimulations, and acknowledges her awareness of what she is doing:

For three days I have taken nothing in my mouth, and that for some reason upsets everyone. But I cannot... The whole matter depends on the passion and strength of my duress. (157)

In August of 1910 Sofia Andreyevna brandished pages from Tolstoy's 1851 diary that described his physical attraction to another young man in order to suggest that there was a secret basis for her jealousy of her husband's relationship with his follower. Chertkov's mother wrote her begging that she "bethink herself" and tear out of her soul "that evil and insanely monstrous feeling which causes so much suffering not only to my son and your husband, but to all those around you and in contact with you." Sofia Andreyevna answered: "Yes, I am insanely jealous of Lev Nikolaevich and will not yield him up" (204-205).

Sofia Andreyevna writes each day of a marriage in a state of conclusive struggle, and refers frequently to her fear that Tolstoy will leave. Popoff

treats this period in shorthand, omitting key events and misrepresenting others. Popoff reports that “Sasha treated her mother viciously and even spat at her during her attacks of hysteria and anxiety” (Popoff 281). Aleksandr Goldenweizer, who was present at the scene, writes clearly that Sasha had spit to the side.<sup>3</sup> (She was perhaps repeating a common Russian gesture, uttering “tfu,” with a spitting motion to the side to express exasperation.) In a similar manner, Popoff’s account of Tolstoy’s stroke in the fall of 1910 describes the devoted attention that Sofia Andreyevna pays him, but neglects to mention that, in the heat of the moment, thinking that Tolstoy might die, she also ran to his room and took some documents from his desk. (Her daughter Tanya confronted her and she returned them.) Nor does Popoff report that Sofia Andreyevna was overcome with remorse and prayed aloud that Tolstoy not die from this attack, for which she blamed her own behavior. There are many more lapses of this sort in Popoff’s account.

A “factual” biography of Sofia Andreyevna should, of course, take these diaries into account. They should be read alongside the memoirs and the other relevant material, as they not only give a picture of what was transpiring on a daily basis, but also reveal the representational strategies that affected how these events were consigned to history. Reading the 1910 diary, we quickly see that much of what Sofia Andreyevna writes there is addressed to us, her future reader, with a desperate sense of the fragility of her reputation. At the same time, much of what she writes is intended to provoke, and distorts her own better impulses toward her husband. It is a perverse document in this respect, displaying in abject form her overwrought, distended love.

I want to let my husband read all that is now going on in my soul, but when I think that this will only evoke his anger and will then certainly kill me, I am madly agitated, frightened, and torment myself... (*Final* 151)

I again had a severe attack of nerves and wanted to take opium, but once more I was afraid. I odiously deceived Lev Nikolaevich into thinking I had taken it, but immediately confessed the deception and sobbed bitterly, and then made an effort and controlled myself. It is so disgraceful and painful, but... no! I will say no more. I am ill and worn out. (160)

This is where Popoff could have given a more nuanced and ultimately more revealing reading. We can better understand Sofia Andreyevna and her marriage by looking squarely at all of her actions; she herself, after all, did not appear to fear being read in this way, leaving far more evidence of her erratic behavior in her own diaries than she ever had ever asked her husband to delete from his. This seems to be the way that she felt she could communicate her feelings—if she did not really want to commit suicide, then admitting that she had “odiously” feigned this desire might convince her husband and her future readers that she had been driven to a state of despair. These performances were the very texture of the Tolstoy marriage in its last days.

She may have justified these actions in her own mind by her belief that her husband and those wishing to build his cult were also disingenuous. She frequently argued that Tolstoy only professed his desire for poverty to gain personal glory, and that all the while he harbored a love, and even a need, for the comfort she provided. She viewed the Tolstoyan enterprise as a sham, built upon ideals that were not sustainable in practice. She was also justifiably disturbed that Tolstoy’s circle often moved in secrecy around her (particularly in the case of the signing of his last will in 1910).

Perhaps in her mind this warrants her own deceptions during this last summer. Her actions became so contrived that her personal secretary Varvara Feokritova and her daughter Sasha both began keeping a record of them in order to expose her duplicity. Feokritova began this project after

one of Sofia Andreyevna's particularly boldfaced manipulations: Overcome by jealousy during her husband's visit with their daughter Tanya, a visit that also permitted him extended contact with Chertkov, Sofia Andreyevna begged him to return early. When Tolstoy declined, she wrote that she was dying, and forged a telegram in Feokritova's name verifying that the situation was indeed dire. Feokritova, meanwhile, saw that she was able to quickly return to a state of calm and explain her actions: Pity was the only way to move her husband to act. The diaries of Feokritova and Aleksandra describe similar behavior continuing over the course of that summer.

Sofia Andreyevna learned of the numerous diaries that were documenting her behavior, and saw her own accounts of what transpired as a means to counter them. She noted on July 16:

Having found out that I write my diary every day, all those around me are setting to work to scribble *their* diaries. They all want to expose me and accuse me and to prepare malicious material for use against me, because I have dared to defend my marital rights and because I want more confidence and love from my husband, and demand that the diaries [Tolstoy's] should be taken from Chertkov. (*Final* 162)

On one occasion, Chertkov warned Sofia Andreyevna that he could use the diaries to "unmask" her, and she similarly noted in her daybook: "I try very hard to expose Chertkov, and I shall succeed" (206).

Given these emotions, it is easy to understand how all parties were concerned with how history might portray them. This is why it is so important to read all of these documents in tandem—because there are so many vested interests and competing allegiances at play. To approach this history from a single point of view is to subscribe to an agenda.

Popoff believes that such an agenda has prevailed in the treatment of Sofia Andreyevna's

legacy. Chertkov eventually acquired control of the Tolstoy archive and became editor of the definitive ninety-volume Jubilee edition of his works. In so doing, Popoff writes,

Chertkov, his appointees, and his successors would now control everything written about Tolstoy in Russia and censor positive comments about Sophia. In fact, letters and articles in her support could not be published until the end of the twentieth century and then only in marginal periodicals. (291)

Here Popoff echoes Sofia Andreyevna, who insisted that her attempts to keep Tolstoy's diaries out of Chertkov's hands were motivated by her desire to prevent a misrepresentation of her marriage from entering history.<sup>4</sup>

Popoff, unfortunately, implicates these tendencies into a web of anti-Sofia conspiracy that does not measure Sofia Andreyevna's own culpability in the course of events. For instance, Popoff writes that Chertkov "imposed a secret will on the ailing Tolstoy" (7) without providing adequate treatment of the motivations behind this secrecy. Tolstoy had outlined a will in his diary in 1895, in which he bequeathed his papers to his family and expressed his hope that they would renounce any royalties that might be gained from them.

If you do this it will be good. And it will be good for you—but if you don't do it, that is your affair. It means that you weren't ready for it. That my works have been sold for the past ten years has been the hardest thing in my life. (53:16)

The page was copied from his diary in 1901 by his daughter Masha, who had him sign it and then took it for safekeeping. When Sofia Andreyevna learned of it she insisted upon reading it, and eventually confiscated it and told Tolstoy that she would not comply with the wishes he expressed in it. As she explained to him, she saw no point in

changing after his death the agreement by which they had abided during his life. (According to her reasoning, he would be dead anyway, so what would be the point; Chertkov saw things differently, and was very concerned with the appearance of Tolstoy's legacy.) When the last will was written in the summer of 1910, Tolstoy's younger sons were visiting. They were fiercely protective of their mother and their inheritance, and when they suspected that the will had been written, discussed having their father declared mentally unfit in order to nullify it.

None of this is mentioned in Popoff's account, but it explains the belief in 1910 that a will would have to be kept secret. Tolstoy himself would regret this decision, writing on August 2, 1910: "I have understood my mistake quite fully. I ought to have summoned my heirs and announced my intentions, and not done anything secretly." (PSS 58:130) On other occasions, he would be convinced of the necessity of maintaining secrecy. We can only understand this ambivalence by looking at all of the circumstances that informed it.

### Conclusion

We are left facing a complex hermeneutic task. How do we extract the most truthful information from these competing histories? In this regard, Popoff is correct to draw our attention to the problem of Tolstoyan control of Sofia Andreyevna's legacy. The Tolstoyans were no doubt affected by their concern for the honor of their movement's founder as they handled the representation of his wife. But Popoff's work here goes too far in the opposite direction, and raises another perennial question: how do we protect history from what we want it to say?

Also problematic is Popoff's assertion that there has been an "official" biography of Sofia Andreyevna, over which Chertkov exerted control and which has continued to color views of the author's wife to the present. If such a canonical vision of Sofia Andreyevna exists, it has been

revised many times by subsequent biographers. I have six books on my shelf devoted to the Tolstoy marriage, and a number of others that deal extensively with the matter. It does not appear that an anti-Sofia bias persists in these works. Anne Edwards, author of the 1981 *Sonya: The Life of the Countess Tolstoy*, in fact takes up a position very similar to Popoff's. She views her subject as "an intelligent woman subjugated to a man who used her, drained her, made a villain of her." (Edwards) Cynthia Asquith's *Married to Tolstoy* is deeply sympathetic to Sofia Andreyevna; Louise Smoluchowski's *Lev & Sonya* concludes with a very moving picture of Sofia Andreyevna's last years at Yasnaya Polyana.

Often the authors of these works are explicit in their desire to maintain even-handed approach. Tikhon Polner's 1945 book *Tolstoy and His Wife* provides the perspective of a family friend with sympathy for both parties. As his translator writes in the introduction:

To him the problem of writing this book was not one of academic research. Rather it was one of exercising restraint and good judgment in the interpreting the character of a great man, and in telling the personal story of two people whom he loved and admired. (6)

The most recent chronicle of the Tolstoy marriage, by William Shirer, ends with a quote from the couple's daughter Tanya, who asks: "And who will take it upon himself to call one of them guilty?" (371) It is unfortunate that Popoff's book is being promoted and received as revelatory, when similar, and often more balanced, accounts have long existed.

It is clear in surveying the many works on the Tolstoys that there is in fact no canonical approach to their story. Opinions have long varied, and have continued to evolve in the context of changing cultural dynamics. When Tolstoy's moral philosophy had greater currency, his conflict with his wife very readily took the shape that it was

given by Chertkov, who was not alone in seeing the great disparity between Tolstoy's family life and the ideals he so persuasively articulated. Indeed, Sofia Andreyevna acknowledged this problem many times in her own diaries and interviews. Chertkov may have been moved by ulterior motives in documenting this, but he was also maintaining a narrative that begged to be written in the culture of Tolstoyism. (Even then, however, Sofia Andreyevna had many defenders.) In the more recent context, other dimensions of the marriage have come to the fore, as biographers have considered the human cost of Tolstoy's moral imperatives. The wife and sons (and perhaps everyone, in the end) are subjected to the oppressive idea of the father, whose didactic voice attains a resonance that to some readers has appeared more patriarchal than universal.

These perspectives will continue to change, but as we revisit this history from new vantage points we should not obscure those elements of the story that do not conform to our revisionary objectives. We should consider Sofia Andreyevna's history with fresh eyes—she was indeed a talented woman who gave tremendously to her husband and cannot be held solely to blame for what transpired in her household in Tolstoy's last years. Open her memoirs and you see this immediately. But we should read all of her story, and avoid being so moved by sympathy for her that we fail to see her situation in all of its complexity. This is where things get really interesting, after all.

### Notes

1. Tanya, meanwhile, does not appear to doubt their sincerity at all, and in reporting the above scene in her diary reinforces a point that she herself had made to a friend three months earlier: "I have had a talk with Vera about poverty. About how fine life is when you have nothing assured, and merely to be able to eat tomorrow you have to earn money. We talked about physical labor. And more than ever it became clear to me that it is indispensable for everybody, particularly for me."

(*Tolstoy Home* 247) At this juncture she was, like her father, strongly influenced by the philosophy of Henry George, and renounced ownership of her inherited estate, setting up a system of rent for the peasants who farmed it.

It might be noted here as well that English translations are less reliable than the original texts. This is particularly true of *The Tolstoy Home*, in which many passages from the original text are missing and others are badly garbled in the translation. I resort to these texts here in order to examine how Popoff has used them.

2. The recent second edition of the diaries has been revised to include these passages.

3. Goldenweizer writes that upon learning that Chertkov was coming, Sofia Andreyevna "seized her head in her hands and began to sob. Aleksandra Lvovna came in, saw her, spat to one side, and said: "How tired I am of this comedy!" (*Final* 176; also in Гольденвейзер 2: 157.)

4. Sofia Andreyevna was to a degree correct when she complained, "The last diaries were written for Chertkov and have lost their *sincerity* and truthfulness" (156). Though Tolstoy still recorded private thoughts there, he knew that they would be read by Chertkov and other Tolstoyans. How, Sofia Andreyevna wondered, could he give an honest account of his marriage when he knew that the first readers of his diary were now those who were categorically opposed to it? She wanted to maintain her role as a reader of the diaries to assure that she was fairly represented in them. Tolstoy understood her point of view—and so began a more complicated phase in his private papers. Tolstoy would sometimes confide something to Chertkov in a letter, and then ask him to destroy it after reading it. Chertkov subverted this intention—he complied, but photographed the pages before destroying them. Popoff argues that this is because he could not part with this evidence that was so critical to his perspective on the Tolstoy marriage.

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