
From William James to Karl Marx: David Kvitko's Studies of Tolstoy the Thinker

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An overlooked irony in the history of Tolstoy scholarship is that the first comprehensive American study of the writer's thought, a 1927 doctoral dissertation in philosophy at Columbia University, was the work of a Marxist refugee from tsarist Russia who returned to his homeland with degree in hand to become the Soviet Union's first and only academic specialist on Tolstoy as a philosopher.

David Iur'evich Kvitko was born in 1889 in the town of Bratslav in the Podolia region of Ukraine.¹ Soviet and post-Soviet reference works tell us little of his early life except that he was part of "the revolutionary movement" from the age of fifteen and that in 1913 he fled to the United States to "save himself from arrest." He settled in New York, found work in the garment district, and promptly joined the Socialist Party, following its radical wing when that wing split off in 1919 to form the Communist Party of America. He is said to have taken courses at New York University (possibly by correspondence) as early as 1915, and from 1920 or 1921 (sources differ) he spent a year studying at Harvard. From 1921 or 1922, however, he pursued his education exclusively at Columbia, receiving the MA degree in 1923 and the PhD four years later with a dissertation entitled "A Philosophic Study of Tolstoy."

Kvitko's fervent Marxist convictions are documented in the many short articles he wrote in the years 1925 to 1927 for *Novyi mir* (New World), a Russian-language newspaper that was founded in New York in 1911 as the organ of the Russian

Socialist federation and that subsequently championed Soviet-style Communism.² One adulatory piece entitled "Lenin as Theorist" shows that Kvitko, who was translating Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* into English at the time, fully accepted the philosophy of dialectical materialism and considered Lenin the greatest of revolutionaries. The other articles, except for a series entitled "The Psychology of Revolution," deal mostly with topics of special interest to American readers: race relations in the United States, the capitalist domination of American higher education (Kvitko counts the distinguished president of his own university, Nicholas Murray Butler, among "crafty agents of the House of Morgan"³), and above all the stupidities of the non-communist left in America. The conclusion of one 1926 article, as wistful as it is defiant, sums up Kvitko's dream of Communist victory:

In many places the voice of the communists is not yet heard, but it is growing ever louder and stronger. It already inspires fear in the exploiters. Under the flag of the hammer and sickle, the American Communist Party will lead the workers and peasants from victory to victory, mindful that in Europe's north there burns a red star that for nine years now has been lighting a path through the deep gloom of the capitalist night.⁴

In 1927, his political and academic credentials well established, Kvitko followed that polestar back to the country he had escaped fourteen years before. Within a year he was a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and a senior research fellow [*starshii nauchnyi sotrudnik*] of the Communist Academy in Moscow. A revised version of his Columbia dissertation was issued in Russian by the Academy in 1928, and later in the same year he published a major ideological essay on "Tolstoyism as a World View" in *Pod znamenem marksizma* (Under the Banner of Marxism), the chief theoretical organ of the CPSU at the time. That article and other texts provided material for a second, further expanded Russian edition of his book, published by the Academy in 1930.

After 1930, Kvitko turned to other studies in philosophy for which his American education had prepared him. In 1933 he began to lecture on the history of Anglo-American thought at Moscow State University and at the Moscow Institute of

History, Philosophy, and Literature. He was named Professor of Philosophy at the university in 1934 and received the degree of Doctor of Philosophical Sciences in 1936 with the publication of a monograph on contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. At the same time, Kvitko's Tolstoy book continued to be cited throughout the Stalin era as the sole comprehensive study of the writer's philosophy. In 1972, the Tolstoy scholar Konstantin Lomunov lamented that "Kvitko's book is the only (!) monograph on Tolstoy's philosophical views" (189), but no other work of comparable scope was ever published. When monographs (such as Lomunov's) did appear, they addressed particular aspects of Tolstoy's thought, not his entire philosophical "system." Yet as early as the 1960s, references to Kvitko other than bibliography entries were becoming rare, in part because his interpretation of Tolstoy was perceived as indebted more to Plekhanov than to Lenin and as insufficiently appreciative of the great Russian writer's "progressive" side.⁵

During World War II, the philosophy faculty of Moscow State University were evacuated to Dushanbe in Tadzhikistan. Kvitko died there in February 1942, in circumstances not indicated in the brief biographies available in reference works.

The writings of this now-forgotten Communist scholar present us with two interesting opportunities. First, his American dissertation is an early attempt, by someone professionally trained in philosophy, to examine Tolstoy's thought systematically. As such, it deserves more attention than it has received from Tolstoy scholars, and one aim of the present paper is simply to get a fresh sense of its possible value today. Second, given Kvitko's sincere dedication to Marxism and his unique split career, a comparative approach to his work suggests itself. For he presented his findings about Tolstoy in two quite different intellectual and institutional settings. As a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Columbia, he was expected to produce a reasoned assessment of Tolstoy's philosophy apart from political or ideological concerns—sufficiently apart, at least, to satisfy a committee (John Jacob Coss, Irwin Edman, Herbert Schneider, and John C. Cooley are the philosophy professors he thanks in his acknowledgments) with high academic standards

and no known devotion to Marx or Lenin. Publishing in Soviet Russia, on the other hand, he was free to express—indeed, obliged to express—his Marxist convictions openly, and the people he had to please were not aestheticians like Edman or logicians like Cooley but the partisan cultural commissars of the new Bolshevik regime. Another aim of the present paper, then, is to identify whatever sea changes took place in Kvitko's public assessment of Tolstoy's philosophy upon his return from America to Russia. By examining and comparing the philosophical content of Kvitko's treatment of Tolstoy, first in isolation from explicit ideological concerns and then in relation to them, I hope to arrive at a fair appraisal of his contribution to the study of Tolstoy the thinker.



Kvitko began his 1927 dissertation with the observation that although Tolstoy's reputation as a philosopher was growing, no one had yet produced "a unified exposition and interpretation" of his thought (5). After announcing his intention to fill the gap, he indicated some of the broad theses that he would defend—none of them particularly adventurous, either now or in 1927: First, that despite numerous internal contradictions, there is "an inherent unity" in Tolstoy's outlook, deriving from his intensely focused quest for "the meaning of life" and his devotion to particular concepts of God, freedom, and brotherhood or love. Second, that the mature Tolstoy's "spiritual crisis" did not mark a fundamental shift in his philosophical orientation, since he had subscribed to "the same religio-moral principles" before the crisis as he did after it, though in less developed form. Third, that Tolstoy's world view was a unique synthesis of Christian and Buddhist teachings, the latter imbibed for the most part indirectly through Schopenhauer and resulting in psychologically crippling attitudes of pessimism and quietism.⁶

The principal value of Kvitko's dissertation for today's readers resides not in his defence of these three contentions, which as they stand are vague enough to be argued either way with some plausibility, but in his systematic and generally

accurate exposition of Tolstoy's philosophical positions and in the particular points of criticism of those positions that he elaborates. Indeed, his critique, which includes a relentless uncovering of supposed internal contradictions and other departures from rational standards in the writer's views, amounts to a far more severe condemnation of Tolstoy's philosophy than the initial statement of his theses suggests. In this section I shall examine these two dimensions of his presentation, first the expository and then the critical.

Kvitko organizes his presentation of Tolstoy's philosophy into five main chapters, each covering a broad range of philosophical concerns. Chapter 1, "The Religious Problem," deals with the writer's religious quest for the meaning of life, his critique of traditional Christianity and the church, the nature of religious knowledge and its methods, and his views on such questions as the nature of God, proofs of the divine existence, and immortality. Chapter 2, "The Moral Problem," takes up not only specifically moral topics such as Tolstoy's ethics of nonviolence and his conception of conscience, but also his Christian anarchism and his denunciation of private ownership and the monetary system. Chapter 3, "The Problem of History" focuses on *War and Peace* and the question of fatalism in history as well as the general problem of freedom and determinism. Chapter 4, "Problems of Culture," brings together Tolstoy's controversial attacks on science, technology, the medical profession, and educational practices. Chapter 5, "The Problem of Art," deals with the aesthetic theories he presents in *What Is Art?* and other writings. In his conclusion, Kvitko summarizes Tolstoy's philosophical positions with special reference to his conception of metaphysics.

An interesting feature of Kvitko's presentation—one in which we may suspect the hand of an academic adviser—is that each of his five main chapters concludes with a section comparing Tolstoy with another well-known thinker or school of thought. In Chapter 1 this reference point is Buddhism. In Chapter 2 it is Schopenhauer. Chapter 3, surprisingly but not inappropriately, gives the role to Thomas Hardy, complete with lengthy verse quotations.⁷ Chapters 4 and 5, more predictably, use Rousseau and Plato, respectively. This device is employed effectively both to

highlight Tolstoy's distinctive views and to introduce further criticism of them, supplementing the section on "Critical Remarks" found in each chapter.

On the whole, Kvitko presents a generally trustworthy if pedestrian account of Tolstoy's philosophical views in all these areas, drawing on the whole sweep of his writings, both fiction and nonfiction. Where there are missteps, they are not egregious; some are common failings of Tolstoy criticism. For example, in his chapter on aesthetics, Kvitko pays insufficient attention to Tolstoy's distinction between *art* as such, which consists in the successful indirect communication of *any* emotion, morally good, bad, or indifferent, and *good art*, which requires that the emotion communicated have positive moral value. As a result, Kvitko sees nonexistent "inconsistencies" in Tolstoy's theory of art and himself uses expressions such as "true art" and "real art" without making clear whether he means art as opposed to non-art, or art that has moral value.

Perhaps the best test of Kvitko's objectivity and accuracy in expounding Tolstoy's philosophical views is his treatment of topics having a connection with Marxist socioeconomic ideology. Appropriately enough, given Tolstoy's conception of the moral basis of social relations, Kvitko treats such topics in his second chapter, "The Moral Problem," approaching them vigorously and with special sympathy for some of Tolstoy's positions. As we might expect, he highlights Tolstoy's indictment of modern capitalist society—the indictment that has been called more responsible than any other influence (given Tolstoy's immense moral authority in Russia) for preparing the Russian public for communism.⁸ Kvitko recounts with obvious approval Tolstoy's attacks on the evils of private property, wage labour, and the business cycle:

A modern worker, not dealing directly with the consumer, does not know whether his work is required, nor how much of it is needed. Under the chaotic rule of supply and demand over-production takes place periodically. Then, his work not being required, the modern slave is "free" to stay idle, thus wasting time and becoming despondent, until later, under the lash of hunger, he is compelled with a curse on his lips, to accept the employer's hard conditions.

Such a system is immoral, though the scientists and economists say that the worker is free now. How far he is from being free in reality! (35-36)

In keeping with his own radical views, Kvitko also emphasizes that Tolstoy was "no mild reformer," but a "revolutionist" (albeit a "peaceful" one) (38). That is, he did not believe (as did the American socialists and labour leaders whom Kvitko railed against in *Novyi mir*) that shorter working hours and higher wages would significantly improve the workers' economic plight. To his credit, however, Kvitko also makes clear Tolstoy's profound opposition to *violent* revolution and his firm conviction that no overthrow of one state power by another would ever fundamentally improve human society. One wonders what Kvitko really thought of the Tolstoyan views he faithfully paraphrases in these words:

Even if the change [of government] is a radical one, freedom is not won. The outcome is simply submission to a new ruling class and a new form of oppression. Should the socialists or communists, who challenge the present ruling class, prevail their order will still be based on force. They will suppress the former masters, if they can, and will themselves rule just as despotically. In place of the old forms of torment they will invent new ones, the hatred between the social classes will be intensified, and this will cause a new outbreak of violence. This is the logic of every revolution, of every form of forceful resistance to evil. (40-41)

Whatever he thought about the applicability of these words to the Communist revolution he was returning to Russia to serve, he kept it to himself.⁹

Turning now from the expository to the critical side of Kvitko's dissertation, we find a probing appraisal of Tolstoyism that is decidedly more negative than positive. Despite his generous but vague introductory remark about the growing regard for Tolstoy as a philosopher, Kvitko finds much to complain about in virtually every aspect of the writer's outlook, always excepting his critique of bourgeois society and the state. Kvitko's criticisms, though highly diverse, may conveniently be grouped into two broad categories, which I shall call *logical* and *psychological*. The former have to do with violations of

rational standards—inconsistencies, weakness or absence of evidence, unwillingness to consider negative evidence, reliance on "intuition" rather than reasoning. The psychological complaints are protests against what Kvitko considers to be damaging attitudes on Tolstoy's part.

In making Tolstoy's supposed inconsistencies a principal target of logical attack throughout the dissertation, Kvitko is following a Marxist tradition to which both Plekhanov and Lenin prominently contributed.¹⁰ In some cases, Kvitko simply calls attention to apparently conflicting passages in different works by Tolstoy, or in different parts of the same work. He notes, for example, that whereas Tolstoy contended there has been moral and social progress throughout human history, he also argues that present-day wage slavery is worse than slavery in ancient times (47-48). Similarly, although in one place Tolstoy writes that art must be universally understandable, in another place he contends that a particular level of education is necessary for the appreciation of art (102-103).

On some of these points, Tolstoy can readily be defended against Kvitko's charge of self-contradiction, for they hinge on misrepresentation of his views. For example, Kvitko states that when Tolstoy accepts the simple "merriment" evoked by a dance as a fit subject for art, he is being inconsistent with his view that "art must contain only a religio-moral idea" (103). This charge betrays a misunderstanding of Tolstoy's conception of morally praiseworthy art, which for him is art that unites all humanity in common sentiments. Such art, he argues at length in Chapter XVI of *What Is Art?*, includes not only specifically "religious" art but what he calls "universal" art, or works "transmitting even the most trifling and simple feelings if only they are accessible to all men without exception, and therefore unite them" (241).

On the other hand, some of the "contradictions" to which Kvitko calls attention are both more difficult to explain away and of greater moment for Tolstoy's philosophy. In his discussion of the nature of God or "the Whole," Kvitko notes, Tolstoy criticizes those who advance an anthropomorphic notion of the supernatural; yet Tolstoy himself ascribes personal attributes such as mind, consciousness, and will to this "Whole,"

such that it apparently entertains purposes and wishes to be served and obeyed by the "Part"—that is, by individuals (19-24). Similarly significant for Tolstoy's philosophy are the inconsistencies Kvitko notes in Tolstoy's views on freedom and determinism, especially as relating to his fatalistic theory of history in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy wants to deny that the will of individuals such as "great men" determines the course of history, yet he acknowledges that the spirit and actions of a single soldier can decide the outcome of a battle, implying that the wills of some people do have greater impact (65-66). Nor is Tolstoy successful, Kvitko argues, in attempting to set up a barrier between the realm of freedom in inner, spiritual life and the realm of determinism in outer, social life; because the two realms interact, Kvitko contends, "on logical grounds his theory defeats itself" (67).

Kvitko's most compelling observation relating to inconsistency is that Tolstoy, lacking "any great equipment for epistemological inquiry" (117), vacillates between accepting and rejecting reason as the foundation of human knowledge (15). In one text he exalts "reason" as the only tool human beings have for knowing themselves and the world, and he frequently applies this tool to the criticism of ecclesiastical dogma, mysticism, and miracles. But in other texts he condemns "reason" as used by scientists and most philosophers, calling it "false," and follows instead his own religious presuppositions. "Reason seemed 'true' to Tolstoy," Kvitko charges, "when it led to the existence of God as he understood it, and 'false' when it supported the teachings of scientists and [other] philosophers" (15).

Kvitko points to a remarkable passage in the essay "*Religiia i npravstvennost*" (Religion and Morality) in which Tolstoy describes what Kvitko calls the cognitive faculty of "intuitive reason" on which Tolstoy depends for establishing the first principles of his world view. In referring to such cognition as "religious" rather than scientific or philosophical, Tolstoy not only asserts that it is the ground of *all* other cognition but virtually equates it with both revelation and mystical vision—the same supposed avenues to knowledge that in other works he rejects as contrary to reason:

If this cognition is not philosophical and not scientific, what is it? What defines it? To these questions I can reply only that, since the religious cognition is that on which every other is based and which precedes every other, we cannot define it, since for it we have no instrument of definition. In theological language this cognition is called revelation. And this appellation, if we do not ascribe to the word 'revelation' any mystical meaning, is perfectly correct, because this cognition is acquired not through study or the efforts of an individual person or persons, but only through the perception by an individual person or persons of the manifestation of infinite reason, which gradually reveals itself to people. (K1927: 16)¹¹

Despite Tolstoy's disclaimer, it is hard to give anything but a mystical meaning to his talk of an unmediated "perception" of "the manifestation of infinite reason."

Kvitko, with considerable justification, takes this passage as disclosing the fundamental philosophical vulnerability of Tolstoy's world view—namely, that it is grounded epistemologically on religious principles supposedly known through a kind of intuition or vision. "Pull this religious base out of his system," Kvitko asserts, "and the entire philosophic pyramid totters" (117). Furthermore, he argues, such a system is completely subjective. In accepting intuitively "the manifestation of infinite reason," Kvitko asks, how can we be sure that we are not being misled by "false" reason? (47-48). There can be nothing but a personal, logically arbitrary assurance. The clear implication, though Kvitko does not actually state it as such in the dissertation, is that the system not only totters but falls.

Having completed the logical portion of his critique, Kvitko turns to psychology and advances the thesis that Tolstoy's claims about "infinite reason," and indeed his philosophy in general, consisted not in "rational inquiry" but in the "rationalization" of psychic needs (117). At this point, he appeals to the authority of the American philosopher William James, and in particular to James's notion of "the will to believe." Tolstoy's fundamental doctrines, Kvitko argues, issued from *volition* rather than *ratiocination*: their source was "persisting wishing," not "consistent thinking" (114). He pictures Tolstoy's philosophical quest as

"a great man's personal struggle against the void," until finally "the 'will to believe' in him found what it sought—eternal life in the lap of a loving Father" (27). Going still further in his appeal to James, Kvitko contends that Tolstoy's thought as a whole confirmed the American philosopher's sweeping thesis concerning the psychological roots of all philosophies: "William James' saying that one's philosophy is mainly due to one's temperament," Kvitko writes, "applies eminently to Tolstoy" (23). Thus in this original, American version of his work, Kvitko attributes the character of Tolstoy's philosophical thought to psychic forces associated with his individual personality; in short, "his philosophy is embedded in his psychology" (48).

This Jamesian reduction allows Kvitko to engage in a critique different from and independent of his logical critique. Rather than faulting Tolstoy's views for being logically defective or groundless, he can condemn them on the psychological ground that they issue from a *temperament* that is in some way censurable.

A case in point is Kvitko's treatment of the ethical pillar of Tolstoyism—the doctrine of non-resistance to evil by force. It is clear that he rejects the doctrine, but aside from suggesting some minor inconsistencies in Tolstoy's account of it, he avoids actually arguing against it on philosophical grounds. He does not so much as mention Tolstoy's highly controversial arguments against using violence even in self-defence against a mad dog, or against a cannibal who is intent on eating one's children.¹² As his only statement of Tolstoy's defence of nonresistance, Kvitko uses a letter of 1896 to an American follower, Ernest Crosby, in which Tolstoy argues that utilitarian calculation cannot be used to justify killing a person who is threatening murder, because we cannot know the future sufficiently to be able to predict all the direct and indirect consequences that our violent intervention might have in the given situation. To this Kvitko replies only that Tolstoy's argument "may not be difficult to refute" (41-42). But, strangely, he does not try to refute it or to bring up other defences that Tolstoy offers.

Essentially Kvitko rejects the nonresistance doctrine not because there is something wrong with it from a logical or rational point of view, but

because it is an expression of temperamental attitudes he finds repugnant—attitudes of passivity, disengagement, and despair. In Kvitko's analysis, as in Aksel'rod's and Plekhanov's, these attitudes link Tolstoy with Schopenhauer and Buddhism and lead him to such idiocies as asceticism, the quest for union with "the Whole," for Nirvana rather than conscious life, the welcoming of death. The ethical doctrine of non-resistance fits perfectly into this picture, Kvitko holds, for it is simply negative and passive, "each individual merely refraining from doing evil as he understands it" (47).¹³ We might object that this is a simplistic description, but Kvitko would no doubt reject any qualifications as inessential. In broad-brush fashion he goes on to show the cohesion of his picture as a psychological portrait of Tolstoy:

As for his [Tolstoy's] psychology what else was to be expected from one who had absorbed the Buddhist teaching of the evil of individuality? Surely to an individual who does not expect any good on this earth, the greatest thing is peace—a negative condition. And not unreasonably it seemed to our philosopher that this might be accomplished by non-resistance, brotherhood, and freedom, freedom regulated by conscience through the aid of "true" reason, with death and absorption into the Deity as the ideal. This is quietism, quietism rooted in pessimism. (48)

The doctrine of nonresistance, in other words, flows naturally from the *attitudes* in question, and those attitudes are censurable. In this 1927 text Kvitko does not explain why they are censurable; rather, he relies mostly on the use of pejorative terms such as "despair," "negative," and "passive" to express his disapproval. Nor does he defend himself against the possible charge that to dismiss the doctrine of nonresistance because its psychological source was odious is to commit a textbook example of the genetic fallacy.

Despite its retreat at critical junctures from logically respectable to *ad hominem* arguments, Kvitko's 1927 dissertation is not without merit. It provides us with a generally trustworthy survey of Tolstoy's philosophy, compares it helpfully with the views of other thinkers, and raises some hard questions about its logical and epistemological soundness.

But in going no further than William James and Tolstoy's objectionable "temperament," Kvitko leaves readers with no explanation of his dissatisfaction with the particular psychology behind Tolstoy's world view and no justification for engaging in a psychological critique in the first place.

II

The two editions (1928 and 1930) of Kvitko's work published in Russia after his return include virtually the entire text of his 1927 dissertation, with little rearrangement but much expansion. The sequence and basic structure of the chapters is retained, as is almost all of the original text—even the section on Thomas Hardy with its many verse citations, all translated into Russian. Throughout, however, small excisions and lengthy additions radically alter the work's focus and tone.

Some of the additions strengthen his case from a purely philosophical, non-ideological point of view, so that, paradoxically, the Soviet editions contain a somewhat fuller and more persuasive logical critique of Tolstoy's philosophy than the Columbia dissertation did. In his 1928 discussion of Tolstoy's doctrine of nonresistance, for example, instead of dismissing it with the observation that it "may not be difficult to refute," as he had in 1927, he attempts an actual refutation. Addressing directly Tolstoy's rejection, in the letter to Crosby, of the use of violence to save a young child from being murdered, Kvitko argues that the death of the attacker is clearly preferable to the death of the child: the attacker might go on to commit other crimes ("it is well known that one crime often leads to another and dulls the criminal's feelings, for his hands are already stained with blood") whereas the child not only is innocent in the given case but is incapable of committing a crime. Obviously, Kvitko reasons, it is better for society "to trade a harmful member for a harmless one" (138-39). Nor does he accept Tolstoy's contention that examples of non-resistance tend to inhibit further evil acts: "When . . . [and] how has it been shown," he asks, that "to swallow an offence means to stop the offender?" Marshalling examples from the history of China and Japan, he argues that an unresisted offender, "seeing the stupidity of his opponent," will simply repeat his

offenses (139-40). Similar efforts to provide logical reasons for rejecting Tolstoy's ideas are found in Kvitko's 1928 and 1930 discussions of still other tenets of Tolstoyism, particularly in the areas of political anarchism and the philosophy of art.

Most of Kvitko's additions, however, consist not in logical argumentation but in Marxist socio-economic explanation of Tolstoy's "temperament." What Kvitko sought to develop further in the Russian versions of his work was not so much his critical analysis of Tolstoy's philosophy as an account of the repugnant "psychology" in which it was embedded. Obviously, the crucial next step for a Marxist critic was to go from Tolstoy's personal attitudes—the "subjective" stopping point of 1927—to the "objective," material realities behind them.

Kvitko still ascribes a "will to believe" to Tolstoy, and he is still concerned with the writer's temperament (K1928: 79). But he takes pains to distance himself from James as anything resembling a final authority. Gone is the unqualified assertion that James's theory about the dependence of philosophy on temperament "applies eminently to Tolstoy." In its place we read the following:

William James says that every thinker owes his philosophy to his temperament. From this it is obvious that psychologism, like idealism in general, proclaims human thought or feeling to be the source of every ideology instead of searching for this source in objective conditions—in the forces of production—in the last analysis. (72)

The idealistic approach to temperament must be avoided by carrying the analysis further to the material environment, which "conditions the development of this very 'temperament,' predisposing it to the viewpoint of a particular ideology" (K1928: 73). Consequently, all Kvitko's writings on Tolstoy published in the Soviet Union emphasize a dimension of the writer's thought that was not so much as hinted at in 1927—its character as an expression of the material circumstances of his life in the Russia of his day. Karl Marx replaced William James as the authority of last resort.

Lenin had provided a model of such economic reductionism in a number of short pieces he wrote

about Tolstoy over the years 1908-1911. In the best known of these, "Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution" (1908), Lenin begins by calling attention to the "glaring contradictions" in Tolstoy's outlook—meaning by that not simply logical self-contradictions but all manner of incongruous combinations such as a "merciless criticism of capitalism" along with "crackpot preaching of submission" (29). But Lenin quickly announces that "these contradictions are not accidental." Rather, they "express the contradictory character of Russian life in the last third of the nineteenth century" (30).

By way of explaining just how such philosophical reflection of economic conditions comes about, Lenin quite predictably ties it to the class identity of the thinker: one's views express one's class interests. Quite unpredictably, however, he assesses Tolstoy's views as characteristic not of the *gentry* class to which he objectively belonged, but of the *peasantry*, "the mass that found itself *between* the class-conscious, socialist proletariat and the out-and-out defenders of the old regime" (56). The contradictions in Tolstoy's views, Lenin asserts, are "a mirror of those contradictory conditions in which the peasantry had to play their historical part in our revolution" (30). Without offering any explanation of how Tolstoy came to express the interests of a class other than his own, Lenin simply states that the writer "broke with all the customary views of his environment" (54):

Tolstoy's point of view was that of the patriarchal, naïve peasant. . . . [He] mirrored their sentiments so faithfully that he imported their naïveté into his own doctrine, their alienation from political life, their mysticism, their desire to keep aloof from the world, "nonresistance . . . to evil," their desperation. . . . Despair is typical of those who do not understand the causes of evil, see no way out, and are incapable of struggle. (54-55)

Yet Lenin applauds Tolstoy for representing "the striving to sweep away completely the official church, the landlords and the landlord government, . . . to replace the police-class state by a community of free and equal small peasants." It is here that Lenin sees the value of Tolstoy's message, which, he writes, "conforms to this peasant striving far more than it does to abstract 'Christian

Anarchism,' as his 'system' of views is sometimes appraised" (30-31). Tolstoy's world view, then, flowed from an *assumed* class identity rather than his *real* class identity—however puzzling this may be from a strictly Marxist point of view.

In the Soviet additions to his 1927 text, Kvitko adopts the same general strategy and much of the same language Lenin had used. Like Lenin he denies that the many "contradictions" in Tolstoy's outlook are accidental: they are, he insists, traceable to "the contradictory conditions in which Russian society found itself at that time" (K1928: 11). But, perhaps recognizing the shaky Marxist credentials of Lenin's account, Kvitko quietly (without mentioning that account) presents a quite different explanation of how Tolstoy's mindset was structured by his class identity and the socioeconomic conditions in which he lived.

There is no question, according to Kvitko in the post-1927 works, that the class Tolstoy represented, and whose ideas and attitudes he expressed, was the landed gentry. But what, then, is the source of the contradictions in his world view? According to Kvitko, they came from the historical situation of the Russian gentry at the time: the gentry was a class condemned by history to destruction, an "expiring class" (PZM: 191). Given that "objective" situation, Kvitko argues that the diversity of Tolstoy's positions, including his seeming pro-peasantry outlook and his critique of capitalism, is explained by the fact that a ruling class in process of dissolution harbours a welter of interests that conflict with one another. "In a disintegrating class, ideology cannot be monolithic," he writes, for the class includes reactionary groups, time-serving groups, progressive groups, and finally "an element in which all these views intersect, or in which all these attitudes alternate." Kvitko assigns Tolstoy to this latter, heterogeneous "element," as someone who "unconsciously" combined in himself such attitudes as hatred of the rising bourgeoisie, opposition to the tsarist regime and the clergy, and a quasi-populist idealization of the past (K1928: 11-12).

Even the pro-peasantry interests so stressed by Lenin can be accommodated in this capacious outlook as Kvitko understands it, owing to what he calls vaguely the "close bond" between the peasantry and the landed gentry (PZM: 192). At

times Kvitko almost forgets himself and speaks as if Tolstoy belonged as much to the peasantry as to the gentry, such as when he writes that "his ideas were an echo of the *barin* class, which was losing itself, and the *muzhik* class, which had not yet found itself" (K1930: 57). But his typical approach is to treat Tolstoy as unequivocally a *barin*, "the son of a class doomed by history" (K1930: 52), but a *barin* of a special sort—a model of "the split psychology of a dying class" (PZM: 191), who in his own confused way echoed the hopes and fears of *all* the diverse elements of his class, from the most conservative to the most liberal. Here is his summation in the conclusion of the 1928 edition:

Thus, the Tolstoyan ideology, a rather motley conglomeration of ideas and mutually exclusive concepts, clearly reflected the Russian reality that contained all these contradictions, to wit: there is a critique of what was rotten, base, and vulgar; utopian ideas, reflecting the position of the peasants and for that reason accepting a mirage as reality; pessimism and quietism, indicating that faith in a better future on earth had disappeared, for the enemy seemed unconquerable, and thus seeking the other world; and, finally, reactionary tendencies characteristic of the outmoded, whose hour has struck and who for that reason are drawn back toward the good old days, toward a "golden age." That is . . . why he [Tolstoy] viewed all the problems of life under the aspect of eternity, why he turned from the roadway of science and art to the narrow path of God, to the dark alley of religion. (K1928: 297-98)

In Kvitko's analysis, unlike Lenin's 1908 statement, there is little to applaud in this world view. Tolstoy recognized peasant interests, but that recognition resulted only in "accepting a mirage as reality." He criticized what was "rotten, base, and vulgar," but his critique no longer had any value as a guide to action, as even Lenin had conceded in 1911, Kvitko claims (K1928: 298-99). By emphasizing the dependence of Tolstoy's world view on the specific psychology of a class without a future, Kvitko paints an unrelievedly negative portrait:

Tolstoy's doctrine is a reflection of the contradictions of Russian reality of the pre-Revolutionary

period and of his own life, which took shape in patriarchal-landowning circumstances that found expression in contradictory attitudes, now of religious enthusiasm, now of doubt and fear of emptiness and death. For to someone who doubted the possibility of constructing an earthly life, with its struggle and joy of victory, our world must seem empty, a vanity of vanities, and he strove to fill its empty space with day-dreams of eternal life. (K1928: 301-02)

On the basis of these summaries, we can formulate the two most general and fundamental criticisms with which Kvitko caps his critique of Tolstoy's world view in his post-1927 writings. The first is that the entire outlook is objectively false: it does not present a picture of the world that corresponds to reality. The second is that it is harmful: it interferes with the measures needed to create a better world.

It is false because it issues from the plight of a class bound for the dustbin but unwilling to accept the realities before it: the interests of such a class require beliefs that falsify the real world. Gone from Kvitko's Soviet texts is the subjective and individualistic 1927 image of Tolstoy's "personal struggle against the void"; it has become a class struggle against the relentless march of history. This is a major step beyond simply attributing Tolstoyism to a Jamesian, personal "will to believe." In the abstract, reality may happen to correspond to what one personally wants to believe; but what an "expiring class" wants to believe, in this Marxist analysis, is the opposite of reality: it is "mirage," "day dream," a distracting or consoling fantasy rather than bitter truth. In his 1930 edition, Kvitko demonstrates this Marxist refinement of the "will to believe" by applying Marx's own language specifically to the case of Tolstoy: "Tolstoy had 'an inverted world consciousness,'" he writes, "for he . . . had to cherish 'an inverted world'" (K1930: 52).¹⁴

Second, it is harmful because it aids the exploiting class, by rejecting organized revolutionary action in favour of purely subjective and individual change through self-improvement. Even in 1927 Kvitko had remarked with tacit disapproval that in Tolstoy's conception, "the . . . struggle with evil . . . is to be led in an unorganized way" (47). In his Soviet publications he

freely elaborated on this criticism. Tolstoy's dream of a world free of exploitation will come to be, he wrote in 1928, but it "will come not of itself but with the help of the class that creates everything on earth, and it will not come because the oppressors and parasites heed the dictates of conscience" (K1928: 116). Tolstoy's class interests required him to show the futility of social action, and he did so by preaching historical fatalism and Buddhist resignation (PZM: 190). Therefore the proletariat should not be deceived by Aksel'rod's talk of Tolstoy's "revolutionary spirit," Kvitko insists: "In our day, any attempt to idealize . . . his doctrines of 'conscience' and 'universal love,' his preaching of asceticism and quietism and so forth, will bring the most immediate and profound harm" (K1928: 299).¹⁵ The true revolutionary path is not Tolstoyan submission but "the desire for victory, the striving for victory, the fight for victory" (PZM: 197).

* * *

In 1927, the ascription of Tolstoy's philosophical beliefs to personal desires and wishes à la William James was a convenient way for Kvitko to conclude a critical analysis of Tolstoy without broadcasting his Marxist convictions. But, for the Marxist Kvitko, James could provide only a halfway point in a chain of explanation. One can explain the philosophy by the psychology, as James does, but what explains the psychology? *Why* did Tolstoy "will" to espouse fatalism, quietism, and nonresistance, and *why* were there so many contradictions in his thinking? In Russia, Kvitko added the second half of the story. He gave what he considered a complete assessment of Tolstoy's philosophy: by identifying the socio-economic roots of the writer's yearnings and confusions, he showed that his contradictions were indeed not "accidental" and he provided further and more fundamental objections to Tolstoyism as both theory and practice.

The two sweeping objections just examined—that Tolstoy's teaching is false and that it is harmful—were absent from the earlier work because as Kvitko understood them they are dependent on the Marxist premises first advanced

in the post-1927 writings. If Marxist economic materialism and determinism were not postulated, there would be no basis for calling Tolstoyism an "inverted world consciousness." If Marxist projections of the militant task of the proletariat were not true, there would be no reason to condemn Tolstoy's call for unorganized moral self-improvement. As presented by Kvitko, these objections have no ground other than the Marxist point of view, and they would hardly be convincing to anyone who does not accept Marx's pronouncements as authoritative. The objections would "totter," to use Kvitko's term, without their Marxist foundation, just as Tolstoy's views would "totter" without his religious first principles. With regard to the Marxist arguments added after 1927, then, Kvitko was in no better position epistemologically than Tolstoy: both outlooks relied on a kind of revelation masquerading as rationality.

The same is *not* true of what I have called the "logical" arguments against Tolstoyism presented for the most part in the 1927 dissertation—the arguments focusing on self-contradiction, weakness or lack of evidence, the dismissal of contrary evidence, and invalid reasoning. These arguments stand on their own; they are logically independent of the Marxist premises. Precisely for that reason, Kvitko not only was able to advance them in 1927 without being untrue to his ideological principles but did not need to abandon them (indeed, could make additions to them) when they were incorporated in a Marxist system of interpretation in the later writings.

In this respect, those writings shared the saving grace of much Soviet scholarship in the humanities in Stalin's time and after: its Marxist framework was not all-determining. Much depended on the pronouncements of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but not all. Even a convinced Marxist like Kvitko was able to fill an American doctoral dissertation in philosophy with logically appropriate arguments that were consistent with, but not based on, Marxist first principles. And the argumentation in that work was still intact—even somewhat augmented, philosophically—when it was placed matryoshka-like in a Marxist structure that contained it without canceling it.

Both versions of Kvitko's critique, the American and the Soviet, are worth revisiting today. The

first has philosophical interest as a severely critical analysis of Tolstoy's world view, approached mostly in its own terms but with some help from William James. The second adds to philosophical interest the historical interest of an uncompromisingly Marxist reconstruction and deconstruction of that world view.

Notes

1. Basic biographical information in this article is drawn from the two encyclopedia entries entitled "Kvitko, David Iur'evich" and from a brief "Vita" at the end of K1927.

2. A complete list of Kvitko's 22 articles in *Novyi mir*, each less than a page in length, can be found in "Kvitko, David Iur'evich," *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia* 2: 488.

3. Kvitko, "Amerikanskii universitet i ego predstaviteli" 6.

4. Kvitko, "Demokraticeskii osel ili respublikanskii slon" 8.

5. Lomunov describes Kvitko's book as following a "Plekhanovite" line according to which Tolstoy's outlook was a "mixture of Christianity and Buddhism" that amounted philosophically to nothing more than "metaphysics, subjective idealism, and mysticism." Citing an unpublished candidate's dissertation by T. V. Tolpykina entitled *Filosofia L. N. Tolstogo* (The Philosophy of L. N. Tolstoy), Lomunov predicts the development of a new approach "based on a Leninist conception" of Tolstoy's world view—one recognizing that its "idealistic and patriarchal-utopian elements" by no means destroy its positive significance and value for the future (188-89).

6. The chronological unity of Tolstoy's thought and the influence of Schopenhauer and Buddhism were both themes developed in L. I. Aksel'rod-Ortodoks' 1902 monograph on the philosophy of Tolstoy (her doctoral dissertation at the University of Bern), a work much admired by her mentor, Georgii Plekhanov (Plekhanov, 24: 214, 234-35). Kvitko does not cite the monograph in any edition of his dissertation, and in K1927 he does not mention Aksel'rod at all. In K1928 he does introduce a short critique of her interpretation (in another work) of Tolstoy's view of history, and he calls

her, disapprovingly, one of "those Marxists who talk about the 'revolutionary spirit' [*revoliutsionnost*] of Tolstoy" (279). But he must have known of Aksel'rod's dissertation from Plekhanov's writings that he quotes, and the parallel between Kvitko and Aksel'rod is bemusing: two Russian Marxist exiles, studying for doctoral degrees in philosophy in different countries a quarter-century apart, both select the philosophy of Tolstoy as a dissertation topic.

7. The only other comparison of Tolstoy with Hardy (from a philosophical point of view) that I am familiar with is found in some brief remarks by D. H. Lawrence. Kvitko might have been familiar with a passing reference to the two writers in Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1916), where Lawrence writes that both "are driven to a kind of fanatic denial of life" (105). But he could not have known the passage in Lawrence's *Study of Thomas Hardy* in which Lawrence discusses similarities in the metaphysical views of the two writers; that work, though written in 1914-15, was first published posthumously in 1936 as part (398-516) of the volume *Phoenix* (see 479-81 for the comparison).

8. This point is argued in Fichter 265-289.

9. Remarkably, the passage is reprinted without comment or significant change in K1928: 112 and K1930: 82.

10. See, for example, Plekhanov, *Sochineniia* 24: 196 and Lenin 28-30.

11. In K1927 Kvitko uses for the English version of this passage the text in Leo Wiener's 1904 edition of Tolstoy's works (19: 528), which unaccountably renders the Russian phrase "*nikakogo misticheskogo znacheniiia*" as "no false meaning." The version here is my translation from PSS 39: 14, which is the text used in K1928 and K1930.

12. Plekhanov discusses these cases at length in *Sochineniia* 24: 195-201.

13. For Plekhanov's development of the point that Tolstoy's moral doctrine has a purely negative character, see *ibid.*, 207.

14. Marx's statement in "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction"—the same text in which he called religion "the opiate of the people"—reads: "This state, this society, produce reli-

gion which is an *inverted world consciousness* because they are an *inverted world*" (Tucker 53).

15. Significantly, in K1928 and K1930 Kvitko drops the 1927 statement that "Tolstoy is no mild reformer, but a peaceful revolutionist" (38). Instead, he calls Tolstoy "a revolutionary in reverse"—one who wanted to return to the past (K1928: 282).

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