

Chapter 8

Tolstoy on the State: the critical assessment

Politicians make strange bedfellows, but they all share the same bunk.

Edgar A. Shoaff.

TOLSTOY'S severe verdict on state morality led, as was inevitable, to criticism, some supportive, but on the whole adverse. The critic supremely well placed to form an opinion about him was his friend and translator Aylmer Maude, who, during Tolstoy's lifetime, and while they were still in constant touch with one another, appears on the whole to have shared his views. For example, he produces with approval the following quotation from Thoreau:

I heartily accept the motto – 'That Government is best which governs least'; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe – 'That Government is best which governs not at all'; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of Government which they will have ...¹

Thoreau's remedy, in line with Tolstoy's and la Boétie's, was non-cooperation and failure to pay taxes; but Maude is at pains to point out that, although Tolstoy was 'in good company' in this matter, and was offering 'just what some people pine for: something definite and decided to do or to refuse to do, ...',² he was really more interested in the idea that 'progress in human well-being can only be achieved by relying more and more on reason and conscience and less and less on man-made laws'.³

But, if your 'reason and conscience' tell you that a man-made law is wrong, how can you follow them except by ignoring the law? One senses here a subconscious wish to deviate from Tolstoy's strong line, but some uncertainty about how to do it. All the same, Maude does not attempt to deny that 'injustice and inequality' are 'flagrant among us today'.⁴

He was more ready to be definite where his own empire was concerned, as for example in the following passage aimed at the British presence in India:

Our pretence that we murder and steal in order to do good to less civilised nations, amounts to a declaration that the best results are obtainable, not by doing right but by doing wrong, and that as a nation we have reached a state of civilisation which we are prepared to force upon others.⁵

He does not, however, single out the wrong-doers, but, by his use of the first person plural, appears to accept a share of the responsibility for their wrong-doing.

This was his attitude in 1902. Six years later, when the first part of his biography of Tolstoy was published, he was beginning to find reasons for Tolstoy's opinions on the State other than that of their correctness. For example:

His unsatisfactory experience of administrative work [i.e. in his post of 'arbiter of the peace' in 1861] perhaps increased the anti-Governmental bias shown in his later works.⁶

Here the attempt to find a personal explanation for opinions of universal significance, and the use of the pejorative term 'bias', indicate a distinct change of front. Perhaps too, Maude thought, these opinions could have had a literary origin:

Like Rousseau, it suited him better to reform the world on paper, or even to alter his own habits of life, than to concern himself with the slow social progress, the bit-by-bit amelioration, which alone is possible to those harnessed to the car that bears a whole society of men.⁷

And why not? There is room in this world for both the bit-by-bit improvers, of whom there are many, and for the men of useful innovatory ideas, of whom there has always been a painful shortage. Furthermore, without the ideas of the latter, it is hard to imagine what the former would do, except move in many different, perhaps opposed, directions. Before Rousseau,⁸ it was generally assumed that a political community pretending to sovereignty derived the authority of its laws from its rulers or from its magistracy. After Rousseau, fewer and fewer believed that it derived this authority other than from itself. So far, practice has not risen to the heights of this theory; but the theory is universal and true. Perhaps Tolstoy, who was thoroughly familiar with Rousseau's works, saw himself as engaged in a similar task.

In the meantime, it is to be regretted that he is still far from being regarded in the same light as was Rousseau in the latter half of the eighteenth century. We have already noted (ch. 6) that the founder of the Russian Revolution, V.I. Lenin, regarded him with a curious mixture of admiration and contempt on account of what he saw as the 'contradictions' in his philosophy; but there is no doubt of his admiration of Tolstoy's denunciations of the State as then constituted:

Tolstoy's indictment of the ruling classes was made with tremendous power and sincerity; with absolute clearness he laid bare the inner falsity of all those institutions by which modern society is maintained: the church, the law courts, militarism, 'lawful' wed-lock, bourgeois science.⁹

He then criticises Tolstoy for what he considers a failure to realise that the forces of tyranny could be overcome only by the proletariat's 'intelligent, consistent, thorough-going, implacable struggle against them'. He did not foresee, as Tolstoy did, that, as a result of this struggle, the Tsarist tyranny would be replaced by that of the Communist Party, under which not only would general conformity continue to be enforced, but also the lives of individuals would be shaped and directed in accordance with preconceived political theory.

A modern Soviet critic, Victor Shklovsky, gives the impression of treading warily so as not to expose himself to being criticised on the same grounds as Tolstoy had been by Lenin. His references to Tolstoy's opinions on the State are few and muted, but nevertheless indicate agreement. For example:

It was easier to sweep out one's room than to reshape the world. For the present Tolstoy was tidying and re-shaping his own quarters, not touching the children's rooms, but he was describing the injustice of the world with such exactness and was remoulding himself with such sincerity that he was a reproach to his time. In Russia, crushed by police terror after 1881, Tolstoy seemed to be knocking on all doors, saying: Do not sleep, the timbers are burning in your house, your destiny is smouldering. Retribution will come. The people around you are living in misery and it is you who have robbed them.¹⁰

And again:

The government itself, cruel and seemingly powerful, was becoming an illusion, a historical survival; the military might of Russia was also an illusion.¹¹

The American Ernest J. Simmons, internationally recognised as a Tolstoy scholar, finds himself in two minds. Here is Simmons, counsel for the prosecution:

... Tolstoy, however much he may try, fails to resolve the central dilemma of his faith, which really did not exist for him although he knew it did for the majority of his readers. That is, on the basis of Christ's gospel of love, how can we live peacefully in this world of violence without requiring or enforcing laws or without meeting violence by violence? In short, can he be asking readers to surrender supinely to Stalins and Hitlers?¹²

And for the defence:

... To one cable from America as to whether he favored Russia or

Japan, he replied with his usual courage: 'I am neither for Russia nor Japan, but for the working people of both countries who have been deceived by their governments and forced to go to war against their own good, their conscience and their religion'.¹³

Here, had Simmons realised it, is the first step towards the answer to his question about Stalins and Hitlers.

Simmons also shares Tolstoy's lack of faith in disarmament conferences, and, by implication, in the States that send representatives to them:

In fact, the question of disarmament which had originally inspired the Hague Conference of nations got nowhere, and scarcely before it had ended one of the participators, Britain, was engaged in the Boer War.¹⁴

It is a completely different story when we come to Hēnri Troyat, French but Russian-born:

... If everyone loved other people more than himself and the world were inhabited exclusively by followers of Leo Tolstoy, there would obviously be no need of laws, courts, police or government. ... If mere non-resistance could convince and ceasing to fight could convert, we might demobilize the army and throw open the frontiers.¹⁵

The Englishman Theodore Redpath writes in the same vein:

Nor has Tolstoy proved anarchy desirable. He has not proved modern governments always or even generally worse than no government. ... And was it not states that abolished slavery, and established the rights of free speech and public meeting? And did not states sometimes protect the poor against the rich?¹⁶

A.N. Wilson is equally uncompromising:

If Tolstoy had been involved in such a campaign as the wars against Napoleon and Hitler, in which so many heroic Russians

lost their lives for an observable end, he might have wanted to say that there were some circumstances in which war was the only solution to a case of international conflict.¹⁷

And on the subject of state violence against the home population:

It has to be said that the policy of repression of which Pobedonostsev was the architect worked. The Revolution was held off for another quarter century and more. And it could be argued that if the reactionaries had not given in in 1905, they would not have been caught off guard twelve years later by the comparatively small insurrection of the Bolsheviks.¹⁸

These are specimens of what the critics say. Since what the friendly critics say merely confirms what has already been established in Chapter 7 by means of objective evidence, there should be no necessity for further comment. The others, however, need to be closely examined, to see whether their objections are relevant and valid.

We must first look at a tendency to avoid meeting Tolstoy on his own ground; in other words, to assume that he meant something different from what he actually said, and to concentrate on that. The honourable exception is Ernest J. Simmons, who, in citing the Russo-Japanese War, concedes that Tolstoy was on the side of both the Russian and Japanese working people, and against both States concerned. What a pity that he had already confused the issue by appealing to the instinct of human beings, or indeed animals of any species, to defend themselves when *individually* attacked!

The fact is that Tolstoy was the defender of the common man and woman wherever they were to be found, and against the rulers who both oppressed them and led them out to war against each other. To the question: 'What would you have done if you had found your country attacked by a Napoleon, a Hitler or a Stalin?', he might, in one of his occasional moods of patriotism, implanted in him by his upbringing, have replied: 'Fight!'. On the other hand, in a more thoughtful mood, he would probably have replied: 'I should have done what lay within my power to convince the alleged subjects of those men

calling themselves emperors or dictators that they should think again, and refuse either to take oaths of allegiance to them, or to obey their orders to perform any immoral action'.

The same policy of evasion is evident in the assertion that Tolstoy had proved neither anarchy to be desirable, nor the results of state action to be worse than those of anarchy. But this is not the only complaint that has to be made against Dr Redpath; for it seems to have escaped his notice that Tolstoy himself expressly admitted that no such proof is possible:

*It cannot be proved, as the champions of the State affirm, that the abolition of the State would involve the social chaos, mutual robberies and murders, the destruction of all social institutions and a return of mankind to savagery. Nor can it be proved, as opponents of government maintain, that men have already become so reasonable and good that they do not wish to rob and murder one another, but prefer peaceful intercourse to enmity, and will themselves arrange all that they need unaided by the State, and that therefore the State, far from being an aid, exercises a harmful and embittering influence under pretence of protecting people. It is not possible by abstract reasoning to prove either of these contentions.*¹⁹

He then pointed out that, even if our dependence on state protection at any given time should be conceded, the time will come when we shall outgrow this dependence, just as the chick outgrows its need for the protection of the eggshell. The State will then inevitably disappear.

As for States' having abolished slavery, there is little credit owing to them on that account; for they have done so under pressure, and when it was evident that there was a better way of robbing people of their rightful earnings. Tolstoy saw that depriving men of the land they need to work on not only takes away their freedom and reduces their wages just as effectively as does owning their bodies, but also involves fewer responsibilities. The abolition of serfdom in Russia, as we have seen, was followed by a general worsening of the former serfs' standard of living, simply because the total area of land available for their

cultivation was approximately halved, and they had to pay for their highly assessed allotments by way of either rent or redemption of a state loan. Similarly in the United States of America, the negro slaves had no reason to be grateful for their emancipation; for the alternative offered to them, namely to work for their former owners for wages, brought about no essential alleviation of their plight. One important difference was that, whereas it was in the owners' interest to look after their slaves when there was a lack of work, employers had no such motive to retain the services of redundant wage-earners.

Even less credit is due for what Redpath sees as States' establishment of the rights of free speech and public meeting. All they did was restore what they themselves had taken away, that is to say, rights that have existed since the beginnings of speech, and indeed of communication of any sort whatsoever. Furthermore, anybody asking the rhetorical question whether States have not sometimes protected the poor against the rich should be asked to name a few examples. The English Court of Star Chamber' certainly performed such a function; but it did not outlast the Great Rebellion.

Finally the plea that Pobedonostsev did a good job because he preserved the *status quo* for a few more years begs the question whether this result was so desirable that the most violent means justified its achievement. A saner view would be that any State whose unpopularity is such that its continued existence depends on force is one that has outlived any usefulness it may ever have had.

The pointlessness of much of the controversy of which we have here studied some examples will be better understood when once a clear distinction has been generally accepted between the State, to which Tolstoy objected on account of both its violent origins and its continuing exploitative purposes backed by violence, and 'government', a term whose usage in the sense of a body of people vested with legislative and executive authority has been intentionally avoided in the present work. The term 'government' may be more usefully employed in the sense of a system devised by a community, and operated by itself, for the purpose of preserving the freedom and security of

its members as individuals.

Such a system, in the form of peasant assemblies in the *mir* (the village assembly) and the *volost* (the canton assembly), which, in 1861, were withdrawn from the jurisdiction of the landowners and reinvested with powers of self-government, would have been thoroughly familiar to Tolstoy; and, so far as we know, he had no objection to it. So, although as a disciple of Rousseau he may have thought that humanity, once freed from the State, would be absolved by its natural goodness from the need of any form of control, there is no reason to believe that he would have held rigidly to this view in the face of all arguments and experience. Further discussion on these matters will be postponed until we consider the significance of Tolstoy's philosophy for us today.