

Andrea Gullotta

An Interview with Rosamund Bartlett about Her Book *Tolstoy: A Russian Life*

Within the workshop *Tolstoy in Different Contexts*, held on 4 December 2015 at the University of Edinburgh and organised by Alexandra Smith with the support of the Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies (CRCEES), I was asked to interview Rosamund Bartlett about her recent biography on Tolstoy (Bartlett 2010). This gave me the chance not only to discuss with the author her outstanding work, but also to analyse her role as a biographer, thus trying to get to the very roots of her work.

To write a biography of Tolstoy is quite an endeavour, considering the many (and sometimes excellent) existing biographies on the author, both in Russian and in English. How did you decide to write this book?

It came about by chance, as with my first biography, of Chekhov (Bartlett 2004). I met an agent who told me that a London publisher was looking for someone to write a biography on Chekhov, and I took the challenge. It was a hard but inspiring pro-

ject, and when my agent asked me what my next book would be, as we were about to meet my editor, I told her I wanted to write a biography of Tolstoy, as I wanted to understand better why Chekhov so revered him.

May I admit that I am not satisfied with this reply? I understand that this could be the starting moment, but to write the biography of Tolstoy is such a big challenge, that I am sure you had already some plans about it. As you know, there is a 'biographical' and an 'autobiographical' approach to biography. I wonder whether you had an 'autobiographical need', i.e. the need to write a biography on Tolstoy because you had some specific need to write that sort of story, or whether it was a biographical need, i.e. you felt that there was a lack in the existing biographies of Tolstoy and you wanted to produce a new version and thus fill that gap?

I haven't really thought of having written from an autobiographical point of view, but now that you have put it that way I

can see that there might have been an autobiographical impulse. I did a Russian degree at a British University in the 1980s, and Tolstoy occupied a very central position in the syllabus. There was a standard bibliography and the kind of research you could do on Tolstoy was fairly fixed by that. We knew who all the great British and American scholars were, and the possibilities they had were circumscribed by political factors. Things really changed after the collapse of the Soviet power. A lot of new materials came to light, and so our relationship with the great 19th-century Russian writers has inevitably changed. So it is a good time to re-write their biographies.

I suppose what made it specifically difficult for me to understand why Chekhov really revered Tolstoy was to do not so much with the first part of his career which was clear-cut, but the second part. Tolstoy's path from the end of *Anna Karenina* until his death, when he abandoned his career as a professional novelist and dedicated himself to his religious ideas, was what really fascinated me, as this was relatively uncharted territory. I was able to immerse myself in all the new sources and really try and work out what was going on in the last thirty years of his life.

For me it was a kind of personal odyssey to understand who Tolstoy was: for many reasons, no one wanted to go into Tolstoy's vegetarianism in the Soviet period, or into his pacifism and so on. And at the end of it all I did have a clearer idea of why Tolstoy inspired Chekhov. And writing the Epilogue, which looks at Tolstoy's position within the Soviet pantheon, proved to be just as important. I found it fascinating to step outside the kind of trajectory that one can get stuck on when writing about Tolstoy, by examining how his legacy was treated after his death. The story of Russia's changing relationship with Tolstoy is very a revealing one, and crucial to our understanding of his importance as a national symbol.

You mentioned the sources before. The first time I opened your book I thought that it must have been such a huge challenge having to deal with all these sources and the way that they've been treated. I think not only of the Soviet state, but also of Chertkov, Bulgakov, the previous biographers and so on. In Bulgakov's case, only 5 out of 24 volumes of his memoirs have been published (De Giorgi 2013), so there is still unpublished material. As you pointed out efficiently in the Epi-

logue, the complete works of Tolstoy are not always reliable. How did you manage to work with these sources?

I read voraciously as much as I could, and I suppose the areas I wanted really to focus on, which were not so well covered, were the ones in the later decades of his life, particularly those to do with Chertkov, who is still quite a shady figure. His archive is in the Russian National Library in Moscow and still has not been fully opened. People writing about Chertkov certainly approach him from different angles. For instance, Georgii Orekhanov (Orekhanov 2009), who published a book looking at Tolstoy's relationship with Chertkov, is a Russian Orthodox priest. This was the first major post-Soviet publication on Chertkov following a much earlier interesting book by Alexander Fodor (Fodor 1989). Therefore, it was not so much the case of looking and deciding which source, because for some aspects of Tolstoy's life there's still not that much to go on. By contrast, where Tolstoy's earlier life is concerned, you can count on some very detailed sources, e.g. the enormous multi-volume *Materials for a Biography* (Gusev 1954-1970, Opuľ'skaia 1979, 1998). Overall, most of the in-

formation that has been published is well-documented and pretty objective.

Still on the topic of sources, how did you deal with the autobiographical sources?

There is just so much to read, and there is a kind of 'set life'. I think Tolstoy himself participated in the mythmaking about his own life, didn't he? So that is incredibly difficult to get beyond, and it's particularly difficult in his early life, because it has been so mythologised, to the point that it bears resemblance to a saint's life. Dealing with someone who wrote so much about himself, I had to find a way of approaching the interpretation of his life in a kind of different way than what has been done before, otherwise I would have just gone on and said the same old things that have been said by everybody else. It's very easy to write in a very boring way about Tolstoy. The previous biographies by A. N. Wilson (Wilson 1988) and Simmons (Simmons 1949) are very valuable and worthwhile, but I think just the fact that we are living in a different political climate means that our relationship with Tolstoy has changed.

When you started to plan your book, how did you choose the specific narrative that you then utilised?

I spent a long time trying to work out how I was going to approach interpreting Tolstoy's life. I took a rather quirky approach to writing Chekhov's life, which came out of the direct experience of engaging with him as his translator. With Chekhov, it became clear to me that he was a writer who was utterly inscrutable and very closed in his relationship with most people. He certainly doesn't give himself away often in his letters, yet his stories, where he's often very unbuttoned and lyrical, particularly when writing about landscape, reveal a different side to him that I hadn't been aware of from previous biographies. So I structured my biography of Chekhov around his relationship with place, with the different landscapes he lived and worked in, from the steppe to Siberia. But you obviously can't do that with Tolstoy, who lived at Iasnaia Poliana for 70 out of his 82 years. I had to find something that could help explain his particular journey, and what I felt was key with Tolstoy was that he was a writer who lived many lives. I don't believe it's necessary to say everything about a

life in order to grasp its essence. I just had this thought in my head that Tolstoy embodied or was identified with many Russian archetypes during the different stages of his life, from the 'Holy Fool' to the 'Elder', and these became the headings of the different chapters of the book.

*You've entitled your book *A Russian Life*...*

Of course calling Tolstoy's 'a Russian life' is a construct, but this is a biography written for the general reader, not primarily for a scholarly audience. I was working with scholarly sources so I wanted it to be solid in that respect, but since Tolstoy was such an important figure in national life, I wanted non-specialists to gain some insight into the culture of the country which produced him. I found that in telling the story of each of Tolstoy's different 'lives' I was able to change the lens so that different aspects of his personality were successively revealed. This worked very well, as Tolstoy passed through so many different incarnations, going from being a typical landowner to being a novelist and then a sectarian anarchist. He is the only Russian that I am aware of who has been referred to as a

Tsar and also as a peasant. I felt that this might be a useful way of revealing the many facets of his very complicated life and personality to a Western audience which maybe wasn't quite so familiar with some of the phenomena of Russian life.

I have read many reviews of your book. Most of them are enthusiastic, however more than one criticised the decision to give your book the sub-title A Russian Life. I know that to write a biography is to interpret a life and to decide to give one's own version and selection of materials.

There certainly was an expectation that my biography of Tolstoy should concentrate on his great novels, but this is because the general perception is that this is what is chiefly interesting about Tolstoy. As a cultural historian, my approach is different. My book is not primarily a literary biography, as I wanted to put Tolstoy's life into its social, religious and political context, and take him seriously as a thinker. This means devoting serious attention to Tolstoy's last decades. I wanted to trace the full trajectory of his life, and for the book to be manageable, although it is long enough as it is... If I had got sidetracked into artistic details of, for instance, *War and Peace*

and so on, I would have been completely lost.

I appreciate that, and I also think that to write such a complex biography takes you to a point where you have to make some choices and therefore be exposed to the risk of being criticised. It seems to me also that one of your choices as a biographer, and in my view one of the most important contributions that your book gives, is to give prominence to Tolstoy as a thinker, rather than Tolstoy as a writer. You negotiate a lot between the person, the writer and the thinker, and you do it also through your use of epigraphs.

Yes, I certainly wanted to create some balance between the writer and the thinker. While he was alive, Tolstoy was actually better known abroad as a thinker rather than as a writer of fiction, then for decades it has been the opposite. We don't know much now about Tolstoy the author of *V chem moia vera?*, or about his relationship with the Orthodox Church, but it is fantastically interesting within the context of Russian religious life of the time. One can't tell the story of Tolstoy's later life in isolation, you need to give a sense of the background. Similarly, I was also amazed at the effort that he put

in his educational work, and found it very inspiring. The voluminous ABC book he put together in the early 1870s, for example, is something that previous biographers have mostly skipped over, going almost straight from *War and Peace* to *Anna Karenina*, but I don't believe it is right to do so.

You say you were writing with the wider public in mind, but would have you taken a different angle now that some time has passed?

I'm sure that if I started writing the biography now, my interpretation would be totally different, which is entirely a good thing. The same would be the case with my translation of *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy 2014). Time moves on and I'm now inevitably a slightly different person. But there is nevertheless something about the Russian spirit that I'm always trying to get to the bottom of, which makes me think my interpretation of Tolstoy is still valid. I do quite a lot of lecturing in Russian cultural history to the general public, and I'm always trying to explain what "Russianness" is both to the audience and myself. It is very striking in musical perfor-

mance, for example, when you bear in mind pianists like Richter or Yudina: they are just so uncompromising! There is something there that is 'Russian' that you don't find elsewhere.

But Tolstoy was such a unique character... What makes you think that if, for absurdity's sake, he had been born in Germany, his wouldn't have been a German life?

If Tolstoy had been born in Germany, he would have had a German life! Yes, he was unique, but he was also inevitably shaped by his environment, and numerous commentators, both Russian and foreign, viewed him as the 'face' of Russia, so there has to be something in the notion of his life having a particularly Russian quality.

As you said, it is difficult to tell the story of such an eventful life. Will it ever be possible to write a short biography of Tolstoy's life?

Yes, certainly. Anthony Briggs produced a concise biography in 2010, and Andrei Zorin is currently writing another.

Bibliography

Bartlett 2004: R. Bartlett, *Chekhov: Scenes from a Life*, Simon and Schuster, London, 2004.

Bartlett 2010: R. Bartlett, *Tolstoy: A Russian Life*, Profile Books, London, 2010.

De Giorgi 2013: R. De Giorgi, *V.F. Bulgakov, Kak prožita žizn'. Vospominaniya poslednego sekretarja L.N. Tolstogo. Otvetstvennyj redaktor A.A. Donskov, sostaviteli L.V. Gladkova, J.A. Woodsworth, A.A. Ključanskij, Moskva, Kučkovo pole, 2012, 864 p.* (Book review), «Avtobiografija», 2013, II, pp. 195-196.

Fodor 1989: A. Fodor, *A Quest for a Non-Violent Russia: The Partnership of Leo Tolstoy and Vladimir Chertkov*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1989.

Gusev 1954-1970: N. Gusev, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoj. Materialy k biografii*, Izdatel'stvo Akadmii nauk SSSR, Moscow, 1954-1970.

Opuľskaia 1979: L. Opuľskaia, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoj. Materialy k biografii*, Izdatel'stvo Akadmii nauk SSSR, Moscow, 1979.

Opuľskaia 1998: L. Opuľskaia, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoj. Materialy k biografii*, Nasledie, Moscow, 1998.

Orekhanov 2009: G. Orekhanov, *Zhestokii sud Rossii: V. G. Chertkov v zhizni L. N. Tolstogo*, PSTGU, Moscow, 2009.

Simmons 1949: E.J. Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy*, Purnell and Sons, London, 1949.

Tolstoy 2014: L. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, 2014.

Wilson 1988: A.N. Wilson, *Tolstoy*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1988.