LEO TOLSTOY AND THE IDEA OF A GOOD LIFE

Leo Tolstoy is the renowned author of some of the best novels ever written, and one of the most sincere seekers of truth of the nineteenth century. He is one of the few writers whose personal and artistic development went hand in hand. When he was in his twenties, he saw himself as a talented and ambitious youth rejoicing in his masculinity, not unlike Olenin in „The Cossacks [1858]“. As time went on, he became the first Russian writer to be widely translated into Western languages, and his War and Peace is largely responsible for improving the image of Russia in the West (as well as for creating the mythology of the Russian war against Napoleon). The novel is replete with vitality and optimism, and its author, like his alter ego Pierre Bezukhov, seems to believe that „all is right with the world“. But in later years Tolstoy began to have second thoughts about the way of life he advocated in „The Cossacks“ and War and Peace: live „naturally“ be at peace with your surroundings without trying to change them, be kind to people without exerting yourself, and enjoy life to the fullest. His religious crisis, which he outlined in „The Confession“ [1879–1882], lasted several decades and eventually made him part ways with the worldviews represented by the Olenins and the Bezukhovs. It also made him very skeptical of the Russian state and of the slavish obedience to that state required of the Russian citizens. When he reached his seventies, Tolstoy began to perceive himself, and was perceived by others, as a man in search of God. While he abandoned the dogmas of Christianity, he enthusiastically embraced the Christian concept of moral obligation and a Christian practice called kenosis. Among the works that put these principles to artistic practice are the short stories „Father Sergius [1898]“ and „Hadji Murat [1904]“. Tolstoy’s trajectory as an artist is also paralleled by his personal search for what constitutes a good life.

What is a good life? Ever since humanity began to keep records, this question has been asked by philosophers and ordinary people. Certain answers gained renown and a following. Within the tradition of Western culture, some memorable answers have been given by the ancient Greeks, the ancient Romans, and Christianity. Among the Greeks, Socrates, or rather Plato from whose works we know Socrates, believed that an unexamined life is not worth living and that the most important thing we can do in life is to rationally sort out our life’s circumstances and thus determine what is best for us.
Among the Romans a universal favorite was Marcus Aurelius, emperor and philosopher of the second century, who recommended developing the ability to endure and meet the adversities of life calmly, without vanity or emotion. And of course we know the precepts of Christianity: the love of God and love of neighbor, and following Him who called himself the truth and the life.

Leo Tolstoy was not unfamiliar with these precepts but, like the majority of humanity, he did not start his life thinking, how can I live a good life? And where should I look for a blueprint for a good life? Rather, he started his life as a member of the Russian upper class: an ambitious social climber, a soldier eager to conquer for Russia as many non-Russian lands as possible, a womanizer who damaged the lives of many of his female serfs. He fought in Russia’s aggressive wars in the Caucasus and in the Crimea, played a hero in the drawing rooms of St. Petersburg and Moscow, and exploited a number of women while looking for a young and virtuous lady worthy of becoming his wife. Since he felt an urge to write, he used these youthful adventures as material for his books.

"The Cossacks" is representative of Tolstoy’s early writings. Its main hero, Olenin, serves as Tolstoy’s alter ego: a young officer and member of the upper class who incurs debts in Moscow beyond his capacity to repay, and then volunteers for the Caucasus war, which offered adventure and escape from the creditors. The novel opens with Olenin’s farewell party. The omniscient narrator retells Olenin’s thoughts, which revolve around himself. On the eve of his departure from Moscow Olenin dreams of starting a new life, one replete with excitement, exotic girls to be raped, and looted money. Quite literally, Olenin tells himself that his war bounty will enable him to pay his Moscow debts.

As a young, unmarried, good-looking, and relatively well-to-do fellow, Olenin scores high among the impecunious Cossacks ordered to fight Russia’s colonial wars. He enjoys respectful treatment from them, and he falls in love with a Cossack girl. However, at the end the Caucasus does not deliver: there is little to loot, excitement wears away after a while, and the Cossacks’ sexual morals turn out to be unbending. Olenin ends up disappointed, not unlike Tolstoy himself after his participation in the Crimean war. Yet both Olenin and his prototype share the anxiety to live a good life: Olenin is shown failing at it and making a resolution to try again, while Tolstoy moves on in his search for a hero who does not seek satisfaction in military feats or social climbing, one who is more cerebral and definitely civilian, and not necessarily good-looking.

That character is Pierre Bezukhov in War and Peace [1863–1869]. He reflects Tolstoy’s Weltschauung during his middle years. Pierre appears in the very first scene of the novel, and he remains an active character until its very end. He arguably is the most important figure among the 400+ characters in War and Peace. He evolves from an irresponsible and carousing young man given to drinking and sleeping around, to a deeply committed landowner, family man, and do-gooder to all. What caused this transformation? Very conveniently, Tolstoy uses a victorious war and the accompanying hardship to make Pierre understand what is really important in life. I wish to stress the adjective victorious: a comparison with Stefan Żeromski’s Napoleonic-era novel The Ashes [1904], where young Polish landowners suffer the hardships of the lost wars,
will explain why the attractiveness of Pierre Bezukhov was ultimately dependent on Russia's military victory.

Pierre is taken prisoner by the French during Napoleon's march on Moscow, and he experiences hunger, cold, and fear for his life, three states with which he had hitherto been unfamiliar. More importantly, he meets a peasant named Platon Karataev, who is also a prisoner of the French and whose kindness and love of life he absorbs by spiritual osmosis. Karataev loves life, but that does not mean that he loves life's comforts such as good food, a beautiful house, a successful family, sophisticated entertainment, and the power to influence events. Such joys are unavailable in captivity, but Karataev could never have had access to them owing to his peasant status. Karataev is a serf, and he was drafted to the army as a serf: he has no hope of promotion beyond the noncommissioned officer's rank. His love of life simply means that he loves being alive, being able to see other human beings, animals, trees, and landscapes. He rejoices over being able to hear what others are saying and what nature is saying - being able to smell, touch, laugh, move, and taste the baked potatoes that are his food in captivity. Just being alive, just being, provides enough joy, Karataev seems to say. Karataev's notion of being, of what it means to exist, fascinates Pierre, and he realizes that, indeed, one does not need all the additional things money and power can provide. Just being there generates joy if one has truly fathomed what it means to be.

Another factor that makes Karataev happy is that he has converted all his memories into happy memories. After a magical transformation in Karataev's mind, even the moments of family abuse have become pleasant reminiscences. Karataev has the ability to release the tears and betrayals of his early years, and he wordlessly teaches this ability to Pierre. It is characteristic that after meeting Karataev Pierre no longer ponders the tragic aspects of life, and the part of his brain where gloomy thoughts arise and persist virtually ceases to function.

To what extent is this transformation due to the author's and reader's knowledge of future events, i.e., of Russia's victory over Napoleon and the ensuing ability of Russians to return to normal life? I submit that Pierre's transformation would have been impossible without that prior knowledge; nor would the serene figure of Karataev become credible. Karataev has to perish to introduce a touch of bitterness that enriches the final and satisfying taste of the novel. Pierre's captivity could not have led to a happy epiphany if after liberation he had not been able to return to the life of luxury and peace as a count and landowner in a victorious empire.

Just imagine one of the heroes of Żeromski's Ashes in an encounter with a Polish Karataev. An opportunity presented itself when the main hero of the novel, Rafał Ołbromski, was misidentified as a brigand and placed in jail after Helen's death. Ołbromski shared the cell with a genuine brigand and had an opportunity to observe him and talk to him. Żeromski could have made Rafał's cellmate into a Polish version of Platon Karataev. Let us assume that Ołbromski was influenced by the brigand's serenity in ways similar to those experienced by Pierre. When the misunderstanding was cleared and Ołbromski was released from prison, what could he do with his Karataev-like serenity? He had no estate to return to, no circle of friends, and no government safeguarding his welfare. His circle of friends and relatives had been shattered by the partitions - literally carved off into citizens of three different countries. Some ended up on
the Austrian side, others on the Prussian side, and still others ended up in the Russian empire. The laws of the three empires were different, and what was encouraged in one was considered a crime in another. Rafał was homeless and poor. In these circumstances, he could not become a do-gooder in the vein of Pierre Bezukhov. While Pierre’s liberation and the happy days that followed were made credible—and possible—by Russia’s victory in the war, in Żeromski’s Ashes the range of the writer’s and the characters’ choices was diminished by politics.

When Pierre returned to postwar life, he lost interest in the pleasures and hardships of aristocratic normalcy. Instead, he sought pleasure in savoring his physical well-being: he wished to breathe, see, touch, hear, and feel that „all is right with the world”. But in addition to crediting Pierre with the discovery of the joy of being, Tolstoy also heaped all kinds of advantages on him: he made Pierre fabulously rich and able to marry the most desirable woman around, to have a large brood of happy children and societal respect, and to enjoy the peace that is the fruit of victory. In other words, Tolstoy embellished Pierre’s philosophical discovery with the circumstances of life that spelled success. The credibility of Pierre’s serenity is bolstered by the aura of success; indeed, without that aura it would have been less convincing. This is how War and Peace ends: Pierre is happy in his newfound wisdom and in being a citizen of the equally successful Russian empire. Politics enabled Tolstoy to have more and better ingredients to utilize in putting together his novels. In literature as in the kitchen, more and better ingredients make for a better final product. We end up with a conclusion that the empire promotes, and enables writers to write masterpieces.

It should be added that in Tolstoy’s personal life things were also going smoothly at that time, due partly to the era of stability that ethnic Russia enjoyed after the Napoleonic wars, even though she was fighting wars and making new conquests around the edges of the empire. In the 1862 Tolstoy married a dedicated wife who kept bearing him children, ran the estate, and served as his secretary.

The empire’s role as the great enabler of happy endings cannot be denied as we compare the range of plot possibilities in War and Peace on the one hand, and in Żeromski’s Napoleonic novel on the other. Inexorably, political events led Rafał Olbrromski toward defeat, and his companions toward martyrdom at best and senseless destruction at worst. Perhaps Tolstoy vaguely understood the dependence of his heroes on empire and sensing it, if only subconsciously, he did not stop his search for a hero whose achievements would be his alone, rather than the empire’s. There was in Tolstoy a streak of absolute honesty that made it impossible for him to accept what virtually all Russian writers of his generation took for granted: that Russia’s military successes should be supported. In the 1870 Tolstoy began to realize that there was something missing in the good life he was leading, and therefore in the model of behavior he supplied through Pierre Bezukhov in War and Peace. It was also the realization of his own mortality that helped wake him up from his bliss. In his nonfictional writings he confessed that several times he experienced an acute awareness of death; in fact, he claimed that he saw a personification of death approach him and talk to him. His wife was not subject to any such experiences, and she was not bothered by her mortality, and so a rift began to develop between husband and wife based on a lack of common philosophical perception. Tolstoy realized that Sonya was an ordinary human being
without philosophical inclinations, and that there were many experiences and thoughts
he could not share with her. He was no longer living in the best of all possible worlds.
He wrote Anna Karenina [1873–1877], a novel in which things end badly and where
several decent people end their lives tragically.

While writing Anna Karenina Tolstoy still lived in relative harmony with his wife,
but clouds were already gathering on the horizon. It must have been clear that Tolstoy
would never again write anything as serene and optimistic as War and Peace. In Anna
Karenina the empire did not „save” the characters, as it did in War and Peace. It added
glamour to their lives, but did not prevent the final catastrophe. Not only was the fate
of the characters in Anna Karenina less affected by the empire than in Tolstoy’s earlier
works, but some elements of the plot, such as Karenin’s memorandum on the treatment
of the conquered peoples or discussions about what to do with Poland, indicate that
Tolstoy was beginning to be skeptical about the very idea of empire.

Four years after completing Anna Karenina, Tolstoy experienced a profound moral
and spiritual crisis. He suddenly realized that he had lived his life in a wrong way and
that he was a hypocrite like other members of his social class. He also began to realize
that Russia’s militaristic policy was evil, and that neither the hierarchy of the Russian
Orthodox Church nor those who called themselves Orthodox Christians followed the
teachings of Jesus. He described these discoveries in a short work titled „The Confes-
sion”. It was indeed the kind of confession known to Catholics and Eastern Orthodox,
where the penitent describes himself in terms of his sins and asks God and the priest
– in Tolstoy’s case, the reader – for putative forgiveness. What were the main points
of this confession? Tolstoy concentrated on two things: one was sexuality, and the other
hypocrisy concerning the belief in God and his commandments. Tolstoy argued that the
Russian educated classes were already religiously indifferent when he was growing up
in the 1830 and 40. Although the Russian society was ostensibly Christian, in private
they mocked religion and considered Russian Orthodoxy a hoax. Yet officially, the
Russian Orthodox Church was the church of the majority of people. One could not get
married except in church, and tsars invoked the blessing of the church for their aggres-
sive wars. Concerning sexuality, Tolstoy wrote that people of his class were introduced
to sex in brothels, or by raping their female servants; yet these same people required
that their brides remain chaste until marriage.

Thus Tolstoy expressed his newfound belief that what he considered a good life at
the time he wrote War and Peace was not good at all – it was an exploitative life, a life
built on the misery of other human beings. In his youth Pierre Bezukhov spent much
time with women of bad reputation; had Tolstoy been able to update this novel in 1882
he probably would have said that those „loose women” were originally servants or
serfs seduced by their masters and forced into the life of prostitution. In fact, in 1900
he wrote a novel titled Resurrection about such a situation: there, Prince Nekhludov
somewhat resembles Pierre Bezukhov, but unlike Pierre he is not allowed to put the
past behind him.

At the time of writing „The Confession” Tolstoy did not yet know how to change
his daily routine and truly start living a good life. But in the course of the following
decades, he slowly attained that knowledge and tried to implement the necessary
changes. One has to admire him for that, for the changes were not easy to make. First,
he decided that the Russian Orthodox Church distorted the message of Christ, and he therefore denounced the church. By way of retaliation, he was excommunicated. In „What I Believe“ (V chem moia vera [1884]), Tolstoy recounted the bewilderment of one of his followers when he read in his Russian prayer book (Tolkovy molitvennik, 3rd edition, Moscow 1879, p. 163) that to kill „while fighting for the tsar and the fatherland“ does not conflict with the sixth commandment. It should be noted that, according to Tolstoy, Tolkovy molitvennik did not refer to the defense of the tsar or the fatherland, but to any killing undertaken on tsar’s orders (Ispoved. V chem moia vera. Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1991, p. 301). Such gross distortion of what is God’s and what is Caesar’s pushed Tolstoy toward disbelief in all Orthodox dogmas. He realized that Russian Orthodoxy put the nation before God. In the impulsive manner so characteristic of him, he rejected all Orthodox dogmas and retained from Christianity only its ethical surface, unmindful of the fact that without metaphysics, these ethical teachings wear off awfully quickly.

The most important of these quasi-Christian elements of Tolstoy’s new worldview was nonresistance to evil. Tolstoy came to the conclusion that Jesus’s admonition to Peter, „Those who fight with the sword will perish with the sword“ applied to all of life’s situations. He denounced all wars, defensive as well as aggressive, all violence, and all physical constraints that society imposes upon its members. He called upon Russians to boycott the draft and the army – which was equivalent to telling the Chinese to not eat rice. Russian society lived by its army, and the military was the key element of all social and political rituals and celebrations. He stopped going to church and ceased to fast on Fridays (he eventually gave up eating meat altogether). Somewhat like a Jain, he began to feel that to kill any living creature was wrong. His life became simple and austere. He started cleaning his own room, on the premise that everyone should take care of his or her own physical needs. He even learned the art of shoemaking because he felt that everyone should have a trade. He renounced and denounced his earlier literary works because he felt that they were written partly to satisfy his greed and desire to be admired – evil feelings all.

But he did not stop writing. After his conversion, he continued to write stories and novels in which his new beliefs were embedded in a convincing fashion. His artistic intuition was superb, while his ability to lead a virtuous life was mediocre. Thus his characters express his new beliefs much more powerfully than he could ever do through his new habits. He wrote stories such as „The Death of Ivan Ilych“ [1886], „Hadji Murat“, and, most importantly, „Father Sergius“.

I consider „Father Sergius“ to be his most significant later work, but I would like to comment on „The Death of Ivan Ilych“ first. Here Tolstoy explored the problem of death and dying, which became more and more urgent for him as he grew older. His hero, Ivan Ilych, is an ordinary man, and he lives an ordinary upper-middle-class life. He is a flawed human being: he hates his wife and pays little attention to his children, but is ostensibly a good husband and father. He pays attention primarily to himself. His wife reciprocates in kind. And so they live the life of the millions of selfish and self-satisfied humans – until Ivan Ilych falls ill. Ivan Ilych’s transformation from the self-oriented man into one who forgives his wife her weaknesses and forgives the world its indifference makes this story a spiritual masterpiece. Ivan Ilych dies with the under-
standing that personal forgiveness is the key to serenity, and that it makes life worth living. Characteristically, in his private life Tolstoy never reached the level of forgiveness which Ivan Ilych displays.

In „Father Sergius“ Tolstoy boldly presents an idea that was not entirely alien to Russian Christian practice, but was practiced so rarely that it belonged mostly to the realm of imagination. Yet it had been practiced relatively often in early Christianity. The idea is that of kenoticism, translated as „growth through diminishment“. Kenoticism means that to complete one’s life properly, toward the end of one’s life one has to renounce and give up one’s social status, wealth, security, human admiration, and so on, and humble oneself in the same way that Christ was humbled on the cross. While Jesus was often admired during his period of public activity, his final suffering (including an extremely humiliating kind of death) constitutes a radical renunciation of respectability, human admiration, and the inherent comforts. Kenoticism conflicts fundamentally with what most of us consider a good life in old age: security, attention, respect, social status, gratitude of children. Common sense dictates that these should be the fruits of a good life. This is what Pierre Bezukhov achieved and youngsters like Olenin hoped to eventually achieve. Tolstoy’s hero, Father Sergius, achieves the opposite. Tolstoy manages to persuade us, and perhaps not only for the duration of reading, that Sergius’s search for a good life is valid. Tolstoy elevates Sergius’s abnegation to the level of a necessary ingredient for a good life.

Here is the story. Sergius is a brilliant young cadet who worships his tsar and is more than willing to fight unjust wars for the glory of Russia. He belongs to the highest circles of Russian society and is about to consolidate his social status through a brilliant marriage. Everything goes well until his fiancée confesses to him that she was the tsar’s mistress just months earlier. The tsar in question is a real person, Tsar Nicholas I, who was a known womanizer and rapist, and who also distinguished himself by exceptional cruelty, as detailed by Tolstoy in „Hadji Murat“.

What is Sergius to do? He cannot kill the tsar whom he had worshipped. His habit of obedience to the autocrat is stronger than his sense of honor. So he proudly abandons his fiancée to shame and becomes a monk. Years pass, and he gains fame as a holy man and a healer. Crowds of people come to him, and he is about to begin a successful career in the Russian Orthodox Church, one paralleling the career he might have hoped for in secular life. His years of spiritual training make him realize, however, that such an outcome would nourish his pride in the same way that the marriage to a rich heiress would have in his youth. He begins to realize that he abandoned the world in a fit of pride, and then fostered pride to the point where he began to enjoy his reputation of a holy man, just as he would have enjoyed the life of a Russian aristocrat. This understanding, plus a petty crime of sexual passion that he unexpectedly committed, make him abandon his hermit’s cell and set out on a journey to nowhere. Sergius becomes a nameless beggar and eventually is sent to Siberia for vagrancy. He settles down in a God-forsaken place, teaches peasant children to read, and learns to accept fifty cents in alms without any feelings of bitterness. He conquers his pride.

Interestingly, Tolstoy’s own life ended in a way that seemed to imitate Sergius’s anonymity. Tolstoy, however, could not escape from fame. What Tolstoy hoped to overcome were the vestiges of vanity and pride he desperately wanted to eliminate. He
was not as successful as Father Sergius, but in his fiction he created perhaps the most profound image of kenoticism that has ever been penned in literature.

To sum up, Tolstoy’s views on what constitutes a good life changed over the years – and not only because young people have different ideas about it than the old, but also because Tolstoy continued to grow spiritually and did not allow himself to fall into intellectual lethargy. Tolstoy began his life and writing career by equating good life with pleasure and success: characters like Olenin in „The Cossacks” want to grab as much as possible out of life. In War and Peace Tolstoy added another ingredient of the happy life: the ability to enjoy existence per se, enjoy being alive and understand that physical existence in itself is a great blessing. He later realized that living a good life is not the same as enjoying life’s blessings: it also is necessary to conquer in oneself the less attractive features of human personality such as resentment, anger, contempt, greed, and most of all, pride. Tolstoy realized that it is one thing to know what a good life is, and quite another to live it. Like many sages before him, he realized that a good life requires constant work at acquiring the virtues of temperance, humility, and patience.

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Резюме

Ева Тхомпсон, Лев Толстой и идея хорошей жизни

Лев Толстой был одним из тех редких писателей, которые не стеснялись откровенно говорить, что они ищут смысл жизни. Его соображения о том, в чем состоит цель жизни, менялись в соответствии с его возрастом и чтениями. В молодости он был как многие молодые русские аристократы: он жаждал только того, чтобы ему повезло. Но в конце жизни он смотрел на вещи совершенно по-другому. Он понял, в чем состоит kenosis, или рост через уменьшение, и в своих произведениях пытался внушить читателю его новое понимание смысла жизни.