

Topic Page: [Tolstoy, Leo \(1828 - 1910\)](#)

Summary Article: **TOLSTOY (or Tolstoi), LEO**

From *The Dictionary of Alternatives*

'I know a commune where the people earn their living themselves. One of the members of this community was more educated than the rest; and they require him to deliver lectures, for which he has to prepare himself during the day, that he may be able to deliver them in the evening. He does it joyfully, feeling that he is useful to others, and that he can do it well. But he grows tired of the exclusive mental labour, and his health suffers accordingly. The members of the community therefore pity him, and ask him to come and labour in the field again.' what shall we do? (1886)

Count Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828–1910) moved from being a novelist with social concerns to being a Christian ANARCHIST who wrote polemics. (Though he did not use the word anarchist about his own thought, because of its violent connotations at that time.) Perhaps the most consistent strain in his later writing is a hostility to any sort of institution, most particularly the state. In this he was influenced by PROUDHON (whom he met), though he added to Proudhon's materialism the spiritual conviction that God is within everyone. Still best known for his novels *War and Peace* (1862–9, the title also borrowed from Proudhon) and *Anna Karenina* (1875–7), he was born into an aristocratic Russian family. His early politics displayed a paternalist interest in improving the conditions of the peasantry, and considerable enthusiasm for gambling and prostitutes. After fighting in the Crimean war and travelling, he returned home. There he began to write school texts intended to help country people learn reading and arithmetic, and organized an early example of a FREE SCHOOL. Above its entrance was the motto 'Enter and Leave Freely'.

Though his novels are clearly realist explorations of politics and history, his various polemics made his mature politics clear. In *A Confession* (1879) he described his 'conversion' to an anti-institutional Christianity based on the primacy of selfless love. In *What Shall We Do?* and *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* (both 1886) he attacked the money economy, private property, and the parasitic professional and aristocratic classes. *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1894) developed ideas of non-violence and pacifism (see NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE) based on Jesus's metaphor of turning the other cheek, and was influenced by Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience (see WALDEN). In *What Is Art?* (1897) he demanded that religion and social purpose should be the prime meaning of art, and denounced work that merely produced beauty for money, including his own earlier 'sentimental' novels. Tolstoy's insistence that the highest form of reason is love, and the highest form of love is reason, implied that the state (along with patriotism) would eventually wither away. It would eventually be replaced by COMMUNES and COOPERATIVES of rational and loving individuals, people who would not need external authority to ensure that they lived well.

Essentially Tolstoy's anarchism is individualist, in the sense that he believes that the choice to live ethically will produce a better person, and eventually a better society. But this is not to defer a promise of social change to the future. His point is precisely that the 'the kingdom of god is already within us', if we choose to look for it, and that we do not need organized religion to help us find it. Tolstoy's better world would tend to embrace the values of the VILLAGE, the domestic, the spontaneous and the family –authentic nature rather than artificial culture (see ROMANTICISM). Rather like RUSKIN and Morris (see NEWS FROM NOWHERE), he also believed that manual labour was improving, and that the

division of labour was a perversion of human nature. In matters of sex and gender, he was generally of the view that sex was not in itself a sin (though chastity was the highest ideal), marriage was an unnecessary institution, and that household tasks and child rearing should be shared between the sexes. Tolstoy was also a vegetarian and a supporter of the model world language 'Esperanto'. In later life he was also extremely eccentric, giving large gifts to beggars, inviting destitute peasants back to his house, and finally dying shortly after deciding to become a wandering ascetic who had renounced his own wealth entirely.

Tolstoy's influence, as both novelist and social thinker, became very substantial in his later life. Despite being a thorn in the side of the Russian authorities, and often censored, he was too well known to be persecuted (though he was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901). Even his financial and public support of the Doukhobors (a pacifist religious minority) was tolerated. The post-revolutionary SOVIET UNION embraced him as one of their own, even though his anti-institutional Christianity could not possibly be called state COMMUNIST. A distant relative, Aleksey, later became a well known SCIENCE FICTION novelist who wrote *Aelita* (1924) – the description of a journey to Mars to establish a communist UTOPIA. KROPOTKIN said of Leo Tolstoy that, despite his Christianity and his pacifism, he was an inspiration to anarchist thinkers. His correspondence with GANDHI concerning passive resistance to oppressive power meant that Gandhi (and later, Martin Luther King) cited him as a major influence on their ideas about NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE. Tolstoy argued, perhaps more strongly than any other thinker, that Christianity was a moral version of socialism, and that socialism without Christian selflessness would simply reproduce new structures of power. Though many might not agree that Christianity is the only moral basis for such selflessness, the history of the Soviet Union certainly justifies an anarchist hostility to those who place their faith in the dictatorship of the proletariat.

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