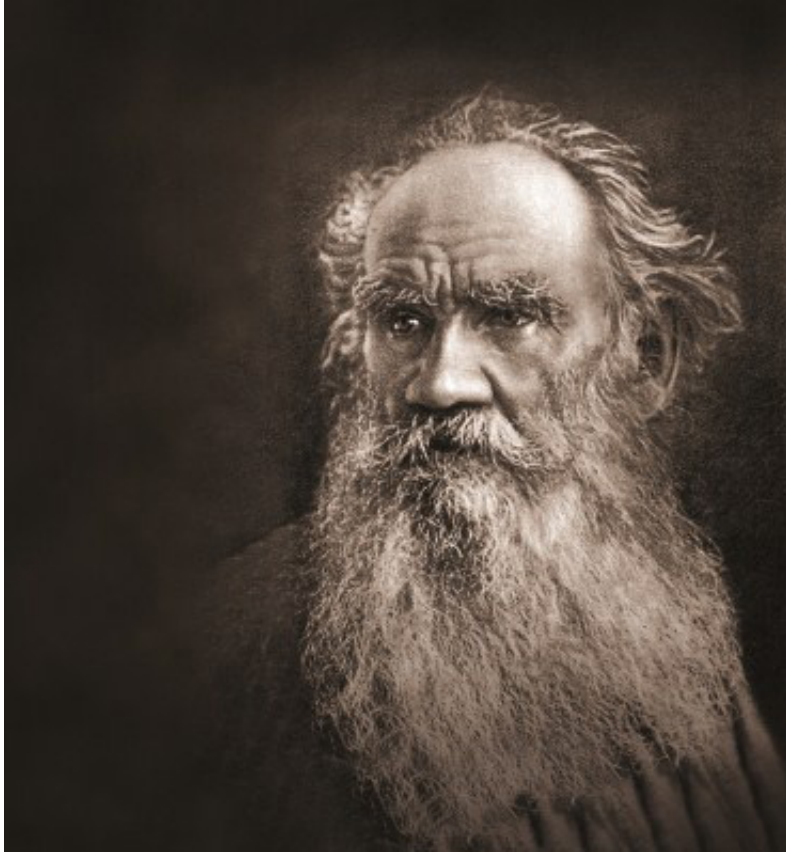


Tolstoy's Guiding Light

Charlotte Alston

The philosophical writings of the author of *War and Peace* inspired followers from Moscow to Croydon and led to the creation of a Christian anarchist reform movement. Charlotte Alston examines the activities and influence of Tolstoy's disciples.



In October 1910 Leo Tolstoy left his home at Yasnaya Polyana, 120 miles south of Moscow, in a final attempt to separate himself from his wealth, possessions and family. Just over a week after his departure he died of pneumonia in the stationmaster's house at Astapovo railway station. While his journey lasted, the drama held the attention of the media in Russia and beyond and sparked a momentary revival of interest in Tolstoy's religious and philosophical teachings, which had receded since the high tide of his influence in the last decades of the 19th century.

This year is the centenary of Tolstoy's death. The anniversary was marked by the UK release of the film *The Last Station*, based on the novel of the same name by Jay Parini, which depicts the last months of Tolstoy's life as the chronic tensions in his relationship with his wife Sophia came to a head. The hero of the film is the writer's secretary, Valentin Bulgakov, who lives for a time at Teliatinki, a settlement where enthusiasts devote themselves to agricultural work and theorists discuss the tenets of Tolstoyism. Vladimir Chertkov, Tolstoy's closest disciple and one of the leaders of the Russian movement, battles with Sophia Tolstoy for control of the writer's legacy, while Tolstoy's personal physician, Dushan Makovitsky, furiously scribbles down everything that Tolstoy has to say.

The philosophy that became known as 'Tolstoyism' was outlined in the body of work

the writer produced from the late 1870s onwards. It was essentially a form of Christian anarchism based on the doctrine of non-resistance. Tolstoy rejected the state (because it could only exist on the basis of physical force) and all institutions derived from it: the police, law courts, the army and the Russian Orthodox Church. He condemned private property and money and advocated living by one's own physical labour. He also came to believe in vegetarianism, complete chastity and abstinence from tobacco and alcohol. Beginning with his *Confession* (1882), in which he described his own struggle with questions of life and faith, Tolstoy wrote and published a series of philosophical and spiritual tracts dealing with these questions, including *What I Believe* (1884), *What Then Must We Do?* (1886), *On Life* (1887) and *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1893). While novelists and literary critics urged Tolstoy to return to literature, these later works had a profound impact on individuals disillusioned with industrial society and *fin de siècle* politics.

Tolstoy always denied the existence of a specifically 'Tolstoyan' movement. His attack on rigid doctrine could never be tidily reconciled with his followers' extraction from his work of a blueprint for life. Nevertheless, in the last decades of the writer's life there was a flourishing Tolstoyan movement in Russia. Chertkov, an aristocratic ex-officer of the tsar's cavalry guards, is portrayed in the film as the representative leader. Other key figures included Dmitri Khilkov, another nobleman and ex-army officer, who gave his family estate in Kharkov province over to local peasants and later moulded it into a centre for Tolstoyans and other sectarians; and Pavel Biriukov, a former naval officer who became Tolstoy's biographer and carried on Tolstoyan publishing enterprises. The publishing house *Posrednik* ('The Intermediary') and later the Moscow Vegetarian Society provided a focus for further activity. Agricultural colonies emerged across the Russian empire, in the provinces of Smolensk, Tver, Samara, Kursk, Perm and Kiev. The Tolstoyan movement in Russia continued to grow after the writer's death in 1910 and was at its strongest in the years immediately following the revolutions of 1917. The Tolstoyan communities, periodicals and publishing ventures that proliferated between 1917 and 1921 were eventually closed or stripped of their independence as collectivisation got underway in the late 1920s.

The impact of Tolstoyism was not restricted to Russia. French literary critics discovered the Russian novel in the mid-1880s. Its realism was seen as a refreshing change from the cynicism that they perceived in contemporary French literature. As European readerships acquainted themselves with *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy's later works were also translated into English, French and German. As the

Canadian pacifist historian William Edgerton has pointed out, this lag in the publication abroad of Tolstoy's earlier work had the effect of 'telescoping' his literary development for western readers; they were introduced to his novels and his philosophical works almost simultaneously. Indeed, Russian censorship meant that many of Tolstoy's works of the 1880s and 1890s were published abroad, either in Russian or in translation, before they were available in Russia itself.

As Tolstoy became a moral and political philosopher of world standing during the 1890s, the correspondence he received from abroad grew enormously. Enthusiasts and critics of all nationalities wrote to Tolstoy to clarify, query or debate aspects of his beliefs. His correspondents included pastors and theologians, students, doctors and working men. Hamilton Campbell, of Glasgow's Free Church College, asked in January 1891 whether Tolstoy accepted the miracles described in the gospels (he did not). Charles Anderson, an engineer from Oregon, wondered whether Tolstoy was really recommending complete abstention from sexual intercourse (he was). Jean Baptiste Coco, an Italian law student, sought Tolstoy's endorsement of the idea of a plebiscite against war in August 1900.

This was a period of intense and widespread concern with social reform and Tolstoy's ideas appealed to many individuals who were disillusioned with modern industrial society and the politics of the time. Jane Addams, the founder of Chicago's Hull House settlement and an activist at the centre of America's peace and social reform movements, experienced a period of intense doubt after reading Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?*, a treatise on poverty and inequality in society. Many readers of Tolstoy, she later recalled:

lived through miserable days and sleepless nights tormented by the simple question of 'what to do?' Most of these, whether they finally worked through the problem to their own satisfaction or whether they gave it up and lived on as best they could without having solved it, found their lives in greater or lesser degree modified.

During the 1890s a vigorous Tolstoyan movement developed. Those who formed its core often had a background in socialist or reform politics and their reception of Tolstoy's writings varied with their own experiences. It was the focus on poverty and inequality in *What Then Must We Do?* that had a profound impact on Jane Addams. *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which dealt with non-resistance and the moral obligation not to bear arms, became a key text for conscientious objectors in Austria-

Hungary (such as Albert Skarvan, a young Slovak doctor, and the Czech philosopher Frantisek Sedlak) and in the Netherlands (including the 'free socialist' Johannes Van der Veer).

In Britain the leading centre of Tolstoyism was the Croydon Brotherhood Church and its associated colony at Purleigh near Maldon in Essex. The church was established in the spring of 1894 and initially focused on small-scale cooperative industrial projects – a store, a dressmaking business, a publishing house – aimed at setting an example of industry run by workers for workers. Its honorary pastor, John Kenworthy, ran several weekly meetings devoted to the discussion of social and religious questions and published a newspaper, *The New Order* (initially the *Croydon Brotherhood Intelligence*), which detailed the activities of this and other sympathetic groups. Kenworthy first made contact with Tolstoy in 1894 when he sent him a copy of his own book, *The Anatomy of Misery*. Tolstoy replied saying that he had already had a copy translated into Russian and felt Kenworthy to be a 'kindred spirit'. In 1896 Kenworthy visited Yasnaya Polyana to discuss with Tolstoy and his friends 'ways and means of carrying forward in England the work to which they in Russia give themselves'.

The Croydon group's activities became increasingly and explicitly Tolstoyan. *The New Order* published letters from the writer and reprints of his work and was described on one occasion as 'a special channel of communication' between English readers and Tolstoy. The Purleigh Colony, established in the spring of 1897, sought to put into practice the principle devised by the peasant correspondent of Tolstoy, Timofei Bondarev and elaborated by the writer, of 'bread-labour': that each man should earn the essentials of life by his own hands. The agricultural work was begun by a group of young pioneers. While the young men eventually lived communally, houses were built on the colony or rented around it to house the families that joined them. On matters concerning marriage, chastity, the use of money, vegetarianism and fruitarianism, the colonists adopted and debated a variety of positions. The one universal principle that they sought to put into practice was Tolstoy's philosophy of non-resistance: they rejected violence of all kinds, but also any kind of rule or government. They proselytised in nearby towns and, as the focus of activity moved from Croydon to Purleigh, issued Tolstoyan publications.

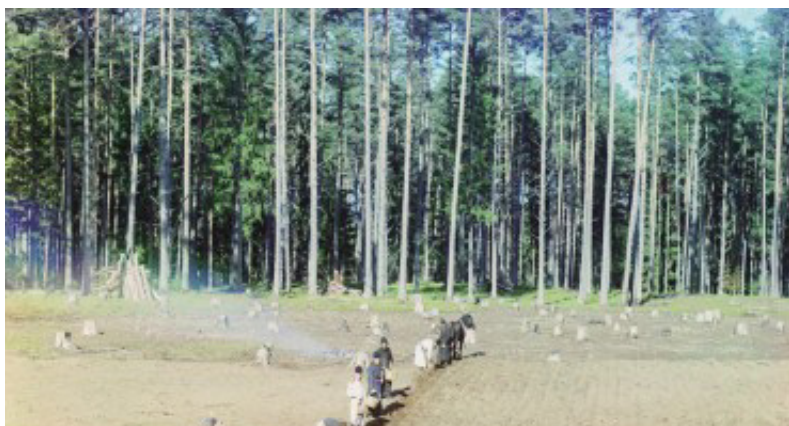
Other centres of British Tolstoyism included the Christian Communist Friends, led by William Murray in Blackburn, who circulated Tolstoy's literature 'because his conception of life is nearest to ours'; and a group led by George Gibson and D.B.

Foster in Leeds, which ran an engineering workshop with accommodation and a meeting space for sympathisers. A Purleigh splinter group funded by the Quaker journalist Samuel Veale Bracher founded the Whiteway colony near Stroud, Gloucestershire in 1898, while William Hare, a regular contributor to *The New Order*, established his own newspaper, *The Candlestick*, in Derby in 1900. Tolstoyan societies (mainly lecture and reading groups) operated in London and Manchester; the latter held large open-air gatherings in the summer, while the London society accommodated more than a hundred people in its dusty lecture hall in the London School of Music, off the Edgware Road.

In the United States, the leading figure was Ernest Howard Crosby, a lawyer who had resigned his post as a judge in the international court in Egypt after reading *On Life* in French translation. He wrote to Tolstoy:

All that you say finds an echo in my own heart, and it is all beautifully simple and self-evident. How far I may have the strength [to act upon it] in my own life ... I do not know, but I am sure that I can never be as skeptical, as hopeless, and as useless again, as I was before I read the book.

A moral repugnance for sitting in judgement on his fellow men being an exorbitant defect in a judge, Crosby returned to America to write and lecture on Tolstoyism. He kept in regular touch with other centres in the Tolstoyan movement. After a vegetarian lunch in London with Chertkov and the English Tolstoyans Arthur St. John and Arthur Fifield, Crosby's sister described him as an amateur compared with these professionals and 'so conventional when compared with the "real thing"'. Yet Crosby was well respected within the international movement as someone who 'sat on men's backs as lightly as he could'. His writings appeared widely in the Tolstoyan press and he was loosely associated with another American Tolstoyan venture, the Christian Commonwealth colony in Georgia.



This enterprise was the brainchild of George Gibson and Ralph Albertson, both of whom had previously been active in the American anti-industrial reform movement. Henry George, advocate of a single tax on land, and social reformer Edward Bellamy were as influential as Tolstoy in these circles.



The Christian Commonwealth entertained a range of political and religious views, including one member who sought a reunion between the Commonwealth and the Episcopal Church. This was uncharacteristic for Tolstoyans, who tended to be closer to other anarchist and socialist groups than to any established church. The Commonwealth's monthly journal, *The Social Gospel*, had a wider circulation than most Tolstoyan publications. Tolstoy first took interest in the Christian Commonwealth at the beginning of 1898 and continued to recommend its journal to his correspondents around the world.

Through Tolstoy, Crosby came into contact with Jenő Henrik Schmitt, the leader of a centre of sympathetic activity in Budapest. Schmitt was a Hungarian philosopher whose anarchist religious philosophy was well developed even before his introduction to Tolstoy. His following in Budapest was significant enough to support twice-weekly meetings at the Café Continental on Tuesday evenings for informal discussion and at a guesthouse in Almassy Platz on Sunday afternoons for lectures and debates. Schmitt published two newspapers during the course of the 1890s – *Die Religion des Geistes* and, later, *Ohne Staat* (also published in a Hungarian language version as *Állam Nélkül*) – which provided an outlet for his views and those of his followers. Schmitt's newspapers were more introspective than other vehicles of Tolstoyism and were in constant financial difficulty. His relatively large local following did little to make him better known abroad. Makovitsky reported that if Tolstoy had not told him about Schmitt, nobody he knew would ever have heard of him. But Tolstoy also put Schmitt in touch with English, American and Dutch Tolstoyans. Crosby was 'delighted' with Schmitt's writings and the English Tolstoyans were soon translating them and printing details of Schmitt's activities in Budapest.

Johannes Van der Veer was the key figure in the Dutch Tolstoyan movement. Prior to his conversion to Tolstoyism he had been a 'free socialist', or anarchist, and not a Christian at all. He read *The Kingdom of God is Within You* in 1895, probably in its German translation. At the time he was serving a term of conscription in the Dutch army and he wrote to the commander of the National Guard stating that he could no longer serve as he abhorred killing of any kind. Tolstoy wrote an article on Van der Veer's case, which was circulated around the Tolstoyan press. Van der Veer went on to found the journal *Vrede*, the first issue of which was published in October 1897. Those

connected with the journal included the Dutch Protestant pastors Louis Bahler, A. de Koe and S.C.Kylstra, as well as Professor Jacob van Rees and Felix Ortt, who had given up a position in the government's water department because his Tolstoyan beliefs were incompatible with the service of any government. The group spawned two colonies: a short-lived one at Bussum in North Holland and a more successful enterprise at Blaricum near The Hague. Van der Veer kept the Dutch Tolstoyans in close touch with the international movement. From the end of 1898 he was in England associating himself with the Purleigh colonists and with Chertkov and his family. He wrote regular letters for *Vrede* on the progress of the English movement.

While he disliked the idea of a specifically 'Tolstoyan' movement, Tolstoy welcomed the emergence of groups that shared his worldview. In the spring of 1895 he wrote to Dmitri Khilkov expressing 'great joy' that groups of people 'have been springing up, not only in Russia but in various parts of Europe, who are in complete agreement with our views, and with one another, although they look at things from their own particular aspect'. He recognised, as did many of his followers, the value of communication within the movement. When Joseph Edwards sent him a copy of the *Labour Annual*, a yearbook containing details of the progress of the labour movement, he praised it both because its contents were so broad – 'it contains not only records of the labour movement, but of the whole social reformation movement, which is going on now with so great intensity in the whole world' – and because 'it makes known to each other people working the same work and not knowing their comrades'. Almost all of the Tolstoyan newspapers contained columns detailing the activities of other sympathetic reform movements and their recommendations for reading were broad in scope. Nellie Shaw, a member of the Whiteway colony, reported that:

Every kind of crank came to the meetings of the Croydon Brotherhood Church: Atheists, Spiritualists, Individualists, Communists, Anarchists, ordinary politicians, Vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists and anti-vaccinationists – in fact every kind of 'anti' had a welcome and a hearing, and had to stand a lively criticism in the discussion which followed.

Nevertheless, Tolstoyans understood their movement as clearly defined within this mass of activism and social reformism. Percy Redfern, Secretary of the Manchester Tolstoy Society, valued association with 'vegetarians, socialists, land reformers, "rationalists", theosophists, Wesleyans and so forth', but felt that his purely Tolstoyan society provided a meeting place for those who wished to 'face life as a whole'. Ernest

Crosby described Tolstoyism as 'my ism'. Tolstoyans like Crosby and Kenworthy, Chertkov, Albert Skarvan and Pavel Biriukov devoted themselves to translating, publishing and promoting Tolstoy's works abroad and also to furthering his vision.

At its height in the late 1890s Tolstoyism seemed to be winning western converts by the minute. The author Morrison Davidson wrote to Tolstoy that:

Here the light is spreading from mountain peak to valley with exhilarating speed. You have disciples everywhere. I have been lecturing a good deal recently ... in the great provincial towns of England and Scotland and find your name a tower of strength amongst the choicest spirits of every class.

Ohne Staat, *The Social Gospel*, *The New Order* and *Vrede* all advertised each other and prominent Tolstoyans contributed to one another's publications. Ardent Tolstoyans made the pilgrimage to Yasnaya Polyana and paid visits to Tolstoyan colonies across Europe and the USA. Redfern learned of Purleigh by reading the *Labour Annual* and made his way there in 1899. Prior to entrance he was interrogated by Kenworthy as to his beliefs:

Did I not admit the falsity of existing economic and social relations? Could any man live by falsehood? Was not truth life, and life truth?

Redfern did not dare mention that he worked as a clerk to a moneylender. Albert Skarvan, the Slovak doctor who had refused military service after reading Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, spent time living with Van der Veer and the Vrede group in the Netherlands and with the Purleigh group in England. The Czech philosopher Frantisek Sedlak visited Purleigh on Tolstoy's advice and later went to live at Whiteway, Purleigh's successor colony. Harold Williams, a young New Zealander who had received literature from Purleigh and from the Christian Commonwealth while in New Zealand, moved to Europe in 1900. In the course of the next year he visited Purleigh as well as William Hare in Derby and Felix Ortt in the Netherlands. Aylmer Maude visited Hull House in Chicago and met Gibson and Albertson of the Christian Commonwealth there.

Yet by the time of Tolstoy's death in 1910 the international movement he inspired was in decline and many former Tolstoyans had turned to other socialist or cooperative enterprises. There are wellrehearsed reasons for the failure of individual initiatives. Disagreements over publishing enterprises or within colonies tested the concept of

brotherly love to its limits. In several cases the doctrine of nonresistance was put to the test when individuals claimed the right to land or property. At the Christian Commonwealth a small group of members filed for receivership of the corporation, obliging the majority either to abandon their principles and resist the application, or to lose their land altogether. Many Tolstoyan publishing enterprises struggled for funds; *Ohne Staat* closed for this reason in 1899.

Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, a prominent Russian liberal, wrote: 'For a whole week, from the day of Tolstoy's departure to the day of his death, people talked, and many thought, of nothing else.' Yet the writer's actions still divided opinion. The proprietor of the *Morning Post*, Lady Bathurst, wrote to her paper's St Petersburg correspondent to remonstrate with him over the sympathetic tone his telegrams on Tolstoy had been taking. She had no time for such cranks.

The widespread image of Tolstoyans as middleclass intellectuals who were poorly prepared for agricultural work is only partially just. Some Tolstoyans were aristocrats, philosophers, university lecturers, or bank clerks; but others were working men and individuals with trades and skills. Tolstoyism operated for many years as a vigorous international reform movement. It had an influence and a legacy, not least in the subsequent careers of its devotees. Some continued their work in the cooperative movement: Ralph Albertson contributed to the American newspaper *The Cooperator*, while Percy Redfern became editor of *The Wheatsheaf* and a historian of the British cooperative movement. Others, including Kenworthy and Tom Ferris of the Leeds group, became interested in Spiritualism. Charles Daniel, one of the most prolific Tolstoyan publishers, moved into pacifist publishing during the First World War and later published literature on dietary reform. Some, like the translator Aylmer Maude, gave up their Tolstoyan lifestyle but remained committed to promoting the writer's work.

Tolstoy's philosophy of non-resistance influenced and was developed by later thinkers. The most famous of these was Gandhi, who corresponded with Tolstoy in the year before the latter's death, founded a cooperative colony named for Tolstoy in South Africa and drew on Tolstoy's idea in the development of his own philosophy of non-violent, or passive resistance. Cataloguing the failures of the movement serves to obscure the more interesting questions about why individuals chose Tolstoyism, why they subsequently rejected it and the contexts from which they arrived and into which they departed.

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Further reading:

- William B. Edgerton, 'The Artist Turned Prophet: Leo Tolstoy after 1880', in *American Contributions to the Sixth International Congress of Slavists* (Mouton, 1968)
- William Edgerton, *Memoirs of Peasant Tolstoyans in Soviet Russia* (University of Indiana, 1993)
- M. J. de K. Holman, 'The Purleigh Colony: Tolstoyan Togetherness in the late 1890s', in Gareth W. Jones (ed.), *Tolstoy and Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1995)
- Peter Brock, 'Tolstoyism and the Hungarian Peasant', in *Slavonic and East European Review* Vol. 58, No. 3, July 1980
- Peter Brock (ed.), *Life in an Austro-Hungarian Military Prison: The Slovak Tolstoyan Dr Albert Skarvan's Story* (University of Toronto, 2002)
- Steven Marks, 'Tolstoy and the Non-Violent Imperative', in *How Russia Shaped the Modern World: From Art to Anti-Semitism, Ballet to Bolshevism* (Princeton University, 2003)