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Classics Revisited:  
Leo Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Stories*  
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*With the following essay, the Review launches a new series entitled "Classics Revisited." Its goal will be to provide thoughtful reconsiderations of masterpieces in the literature of war. Both literary and purely historical works will be included. The inaugural appreciation is by Walter G. Moss, professor of history at Eastern Michigan University. Professor Moss, who has taught Russian history, philosophy, and literature for many years, is the author of numerous articles and distinguished books within and beyond those subject areas, including A History of Russia, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Anthem, 2002/5), Russia in the Age of Alexander II, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky (London: Anthem, 2002), An Age of Progress? Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces (London: Anthem, 2008), and, with R.D. Goff, J. Terry, J-H. Upshur, and M. Schroeder, The Twentieth Century and Beyond: A Global History, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007). — Ed.*

In April 1855, in the midst of the Crimean War, a twenty-six year old Russian sub-lieutenant, Leo Tolstoy, was commanding an artillery battery in the besieged Black Sea city of Sevastopol.<sup>1</sup> His unit was in the most forward bastion of the defense. It was close to the French lines and under constant and heavy bombardment. Occasionally while at the front, in a bomb-proof dugout with the sounds of cannons booming in his ears, he wrote a story about the siege of the city at the end of the previous year--he had first entered Sevastopol in November and subsequently moved back and forth from the front. At the end of April, he sent the piece to a prestigious journal, *The Contemporary*, which had earlier published other works of his like the two short novels *Childhood* and *Boyhood*. Like his new work, "Sevastopol in December," these earlier ones were fiction based partly on his own personal experiences.

By the summer of 1855 his Sevastopol piece, published in May, was being widely praised. Among its admirers was Alexander II, who earlier that year had succeeded his father as tsar and emperor. In subsequent months, Tolstoy wrote two more Sevastopol stories, "Sevastopol in May [1855]" and "Sevastopol in August, 1855" that soon thereafter appeared in *The Contemporary*. Along with two short novels, *The Cossacks* and *Hadji Murad*, the *Sevastopol Stories* have recently been published in a new Penguin Classics edition

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 in my *Russia in the Age of Alexander II, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (London: Anthem Press, 2002) describes Tolstoy's experiences during the Crimean War; I have here used a small portion of that material. The chapter can also be found online <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0809.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0809.htm)> together with additional material about Sevastopol. Chapter 28 deals with the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8.

entitled *The Cossacks and Other Stories*.<sup>2</sup> Of these Tolstoy works, only *The Cossacks* is newly translated, but all three translations, *Hadji Murad* by Paul Foote and the other two by David McDuff, are well done. This edition also contains other useful material such as an introduction, a Tolstoy chronology, maps, endnotes, and a glossary. Although *The Cossacks* was not published until 1863 and *Hadji Murad* was written much later and not published in Tolstoy's lifetime, both relate to Tolstoy's pre-Crimean years in the military in the Caucasus region from 1852 to 1854. These years were part of Russia's multi-decade conquest of the Caucasus, and *Hadji Murad* remains especially relevant to Russia's more recent attempts to quash separatist movements in Chechnya. For, like most of the recent Chechen fighters, Hadji Murad was a Muslim, and many of the mountaineers who resisted nineteenth-century Russian control thought they were fighting a "holy war." Tolstoy also wrote several other short works based on his Caucasian military experiences, and one of them, "The Raid" (1853), was published even before his first Sevastopol story.

Here, however, we are more concerned with Tolstoy's depiction of the Crimean War. The first of his three *Sevastopol Stories* provides a realistic portrayal of the war: "you will see war not as a beautiful, orderly and gleaming formation, with music and beaten drums ... but war in its authentic expression—as blood, suffering and death" (192). In the center of Sevastopol, amidst mud, trenches, and earth shelters, he describes Russian artillerymen moving about and shelling the enemy while incoming cannon and mortar shells whiz and hiss near them and over dead and wounded bodies covered with mud and blood; a cart with creaking wheels and heavy with corpses approaching a cemetery; and a government building converted to a hospital, where blood-splashed surgeons pitch amputated limbs into a corner. But what probably pleased Emperor Alexander II and many of Tolstoy's readers more than his realistic descriptions was his praise of the patriotism, nobility, and courage of the soldiers and sailors who defended Sevastopol. He writes of the characteristics of "the Russian's strength—his stubbornness and straightforwardness ... a conscious sense of dignity and the traces of lofty feelings and thoughts" (198). Tolstoy also mentions the Russian defenders' "savage hatred for the enemy" and desire for revenge (199). He ends this first story telling his readers that one comes away from Sevastopol with the conviction that it will not fall to the enemy, that the courage and bravery of the Russian troops will prevail: they are "joyfully prepared to die ... for their native land. Long will Russia bear the imposing traces of this epic of Sevastopol, the hero of which was the Russian people" (201).

Although "Sevastopol in December" does not reveal it, Lieutenant Tolstoy's private attitude toward the Russian military and the war was ambivalent and confused. It is true that in a letter to his brother Sergei he wrote of the heroism of the troops and thanked God for allowing him to live in such a "glorious time," but in his diary in late 1854 he was much more critical of the way the Russian leaders conducted the war, of corruption, ignorance, and poor training, weapons, hygiene, and food. He was also impressed by the French and English wounded troops with whom he had the opportunity to talk. Early the following year, after Alexander II had come to the throne, Tolstoy began to write *A Plan for the Reform of the Army*. Although he never completed this task, he started off by saying that the army was not really an army but a group of slaves commanded by slave traders and

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<sup>2</sup> NY: Penguin, 2006.

thieves—many of the enlisted men came from illiterate serf backgrounds, while many officers (including Tolstoy) came from serf-owning families. He criticized the harsh corporal punishments often inflicted upon the soldiers and, contrary to some aspects of his first Sevastopol story, indicated that the troops lacked dignity, valor, or loyalty to the tsar, fatherland, religion, or many of their officers.

Tolstoy's second story, "Sevastopol in May," reflected his ambivalence much more than had his first sketch, and when the censors in the capital received it from the editors of *The Contemporary* there was trouble. It is not hard to see why. Early in the story he suggests that Russia and its enemies ought to reduce their forces so that each side eventually only has one soldier left, and then let the two of them fight it out to decide whether Sevastopol will stay in Russian hands or be ceded to the enemy forces. Anticipating criticism of his suggestion, Tolstoy insists it is a more humane approach than the continuing massive shedding of blood then occurring. He concludes his first chapter thus: "One of two things appears to be true: either war is madness, or, if men perpetrate this madness, they thereby demonstrate that they are far from being the rational creatures we for some reason commonly suppose them to be" (204). Although Tolstoy's suggestion and final sentence appear in the Penguin edition, based on his original manuscript, the censors cut this material from *The Contemporary's* version of the story.

Toward the end of "Sevastopol in May," Tolstoy describes a scene in which the Russians and French declare a short truce in order to gather their dead. While collecting the bodies, soldiers from both sides chat with each other. Spontaneously, a Frenchman and a Russian exchange cigarette holders, and a French officer asks a young Russian cavalry lieutenant to say hello to a Russian officer he knew. Tolstoy concludes thus:

Yes, white flags have been raised on the bastion and all along the trench, the flowering valley is filled with stinking corpses, the resplendent sun is descending towards the dark blue sea, and the sea's blue swell is gleaming in the sun's golden rays. Thousands of men are crowding together, studying one another, speaking to one another, smiling at one another. It might be supposed that when these men—Christians, recognizing the same great law of love—see what they have done, they will instantly fall to their knees in order to repent before Him who, when He gave them life, placed in the soul of each, together with the fear of death, a love of the good and beautiful, and that they will embrace one another with tears of joy and happiness, like brothers. Not a bit of it! The scraps of white cloth will be put away—and once again the engines of death and suffering will start their whistling; once again the blood of the innocent will flow and the air will be filled with their groans and cursing (254).

Although the censors did not cut this entire passage, they did modify it, chiefly by inserting the following sentence before the last one: "We must at least take consolation in the thought that we did not begin the war, that we are only defending our country, our native land." (Actually, of course, the Russians began the war by being the first country to invade enemy territory. Angered by new Catholic rights obtained by the French in the Holy Lands of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, then under the Islamic Ottoman Turkish control, the Russians insisted that the Turks reduce the Catholic role and recognize Russia's right to protect Turkey's 12 million Orthodox subjects. After the Turks refused Russian demands, the tsar's troops invaded the Ottoman Turkish Danubian provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia

in July 1853, followed by the Turks declaring war on Russia in October, and Britain and France in March 1854 after Russia ignored a British-French demand that it withdraw from the two Turkish provinces. Partly because of the British desire to remain the dominant power in the Eastern Mediterranean and to safeguard British India, Britain was wary of any expansion of Russian influence or territory southward, especially at the expense of the Ottoman Empire.)

Tolstoy's depiction of a Russian-French truce to gather the dead stimulates an emotion like that aroused by the Thomas Hardy poem "The Man He Killed," occasioned by the Boer War, almost a half century later. Hardy ends his poem with these lines: "Yes, quaint and curious war is! / You shoot a fellow down / You'd treat, if met where any bar is, / Or help to half a crown."

Tolstoy's version of the brief truce also calls to mind the recent French antiwar movie *Joyeux Noël*, which depicts a spontaneous Christmas truce that occurred between French, Scottish, and German troops in World War I's first year. Here once again some gifts are exchanged and dead soldiers buried. And once again one is struck by the contrast between killing one another one moment and being friendly to each other the next. In fact, with its depiction of dugouts, trenches, mud, rifle fire, and exploding shells, as well as the emotions of soldiers, Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Stories* also reminds us of such WWI literature as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

In addition to displeasing the censors by passages that questioned the wisdom of war, other aspects of "Sevastopol in May" probably offended many Russian nationalists. Tolstoy writes of one officer that the "notion of duty ... was highly developed in him as in all persons of limited intellect" (215). In writing of other officers who had come out of retirement to serve their country in this time of war, he cites their patriotism, but also their ambition and willingness to serve simply because "'everyone else' was doing it" (211). Time and again, he depicts Russian officers "ready to start a conflict and kill a hundred or so men simply in order to obtain another star," decoration, or increase in pay (248-9). "Vanity, vanity, vanity," he states, "even on the brink of the grave" (211). And he makes clear that his comment about one officer "being driven on by personal vanity--the desire to excel, the hope of receiving military honours, of winning a reputation, the fascination of risk"--also applied to many other officers (233). Tolstoy describes the fear of being wounded or killed that often troubled these same officers, and suggests that what is labeled bravery is often motivated by fear of seeming to be cowardly and that those often seeming to be brave take unnecessary chances. As compared to many later fictional treatments of wars, Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Stories* does not deal much with individual enlisted men or the spirit of camaraderie that is often so important to them. The officers he depicts reflect more his own observations and projections from his own feelings and experiences. He ends his second story by saying that none of the officers he depicts are its heroes. "No, the hero of my story, whom I love with all my heart and soul, whom I have attempted to portray in all his beauty and who has always been, is now and will always be supremely magnificent, is truth" (255).

Tolstoy's third Sevastopol story, "Sevastopol in August, 1855," challenged the government's representation of the war and its troops less than had his second story but more than his first. It is primarily about two Russian brothers, young officers, in the period

leading up to French taking of the Malakhov Hill Bastion, and soon thereafter the southern and main part of Sevastopol. After defending the city for almost a year, the Russian forces were short of powder, projectiles, and reinforcements; and the English and French bombardment was increasing. Tolstoy had volunteered for duty in the city and arrived at a fort on the northern side of the bay separating it from the southern side. He was just in time to witness the Russians' retreat. Before leaving the southern side they blew up their abandoned forts and ammunition and set the southern side afire. They then crossed a floating bridge to the northern side. Tolstoy closed his story describing this scene.

Before that, however, Tolstoy depicts the thoughts and feelings of two brothers and other officers going about their duties. The younger brother, Volodya, dreams of acting heroically, fears being killed or perceived as cowardly, and wishes to be liked by the men under his command. Tolstoy describes the enlisted men here more than in either of the first two stories. Before they attempt to repel a French attack, we see them talking, smoking, drinking, playing cards, and joking amidst intermittent French artillery barrages that kill some of them. Tolstoy's description of an experienced "immensely tall gunner" who assures Volodya he can get two broken-down mortars operating again, and does so, is a timeless depiction of a seasoned professional aiding a young inexperienced officer. In the end both brothers act bravely and are killed in the French assault.

By the time hostilities came to an official end the following year, the Russians had lost about a half million men in the war and their combined enemies probably at least that many. On both sides, losses came not only from combat, but from diseases that developed rapidly among the troops such as typhus, cholera, and dysentery. Soon after the war, Tolstoy resigned from the army. A decade later, the first part of his most famous novel, *War and Peace*, appeared, and during the last three decades of his long life (1828-1910) he was perhaps the world's most famous pacifist, but his *Sevastopol Stories* continued to have relevance. In translation it influenced Stephen Crane in his Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and later Ernest Hemingway, who wrote several novels dealing with war. Less than a month after the Nazi government launched its attack on the USSR, the Soviet government reprinted 150,000 copies of it. (Like the Sevastopol of 1854-5, the city again held off the enemy for many months, but finally succumbed in July 1942.)

In writing about the experiences of British writers in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell first sketched the influence of writers such as Alfred Lord Tennyson on them. Tennyson's most famous poem dealing with the Crimean War was his "Charge of the Light Brigade," in which he depicted a British cavalry brigade riding "into the jaws of death," even though the cavalymen knew the order was foolish. But Tennyson's poem contained the famous lines "Theirs not to make reply,/ Theirs not to reason why,/ Theirs but to do and die," and applied the words "hero," "glory," "honor," and "noble" to the cavalymen. We can see why those appreciating such traditional values praised Tennyson's poem. As a young U.S. artillery officer myself in the early 1960s, I often heard NCOs tell their men, "you're not paid to think." Fussell notes that WWI began in "what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant." The tragedy of WWI challenged such a mindset. A decade after the war, as Fussell states, quoting Hemingway's WWI novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, "abstract words such

as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene.”<sup>3</sup> In questioning the meaning of such words, Tolstoy’s *Sevastopol* tales are closer in tone to Hemingway’s novel than to Tennyson’s poem.

During the writing of *War and Peace* in the 1860s, Tolstoy remained ambivalent about war. In 1863, in the midst of his troubled adjustment to marriage, he expressed an interest in running off to help put down Polish rebels. A few years later he stated in a letter: “It’s a matter of complete indifference to me who suppresses the Poles, or captures Schleswig-Holstein,” taken in 1864 by Prussian and Austrian troops from Denmark. In his great novel, he portrays sympathetically the Russian defense of its homeland against Napoleon’s forces in 1812. Napoleon, who thinks he can understand and direct war, is his chief villain. Tolstoy views most positively Russian seekers after truth like the nobleman Pierre Bezukhov and unpretentious people such as the wise old peasant Platon Karataev, the noblewoman Natasha Rostov, and General Kutuzov, who oversaw Russia’s military response to the invasion. The good people in his book are those who rise above individual egoism and find meaning in something larger than themselves, who seek harmony with nature, family, and community. They are mainly Russians, but there are also unflattering portraits of Russians, and, as in *Sevastopol Stories*, enemy troops are not vilified, but presented humanely.

Despite his sympathy for the Russians facing Napoleon’s invading armies, Tolstoy’s view of war resembled that of his character Princess Marya, who “thought as women do think about wars. She feared for her brother who was in it, was horrified by and amazed at the strange cruelty that impels men to kill one another, but she did not understand the significance of this war, which seemed to her like all previous wars.”<sup>4</sup>

In an article published in 1868, while *War and Peace* was still appearing in installments, Tolstoy asked about the Napoleonic Wars: “Why did millions of people kill one another when it has been known since the world began that it is physically and morally bad to do so?” His answer in both the article and his novel was that “the causes were innumerable,” many of them unknowable, and that “small significance ... should be ascribed to so-called great men [e.g. Napoleon or Tsar Alexander I] in historical events.” In his article he also insists that military reports about battles are based on “naïve, inevitable, military falsehoods.”<sup>5</sup> In general, *War and Peace* is critical of the way traditional history is written and depicts historical figures like Napoleon and Kutuzov in ways more in tune with Tolstoy’s artistic vision than with what historians claimed were historical facts.

As in the *Sevastopol Stories*, Tolstoy again shows abstractions like bravery and heroism to be more complex than they seem in nationalistic propaganda. Young Nikolai Rostov (a cavalry officer, brother of Natasha, and eventual husband of Princess Marya) is eager to go to war and thinks it will be glamorous. Once at war, however, he realizes it is not at all what he expected. On one occasion he leads his men in an attack on French dragoons, wounds one of them, but then notices that the Frenchman’s “pale and mud-stained face—fair and young, with a dimple in the chin and light-blue eyes—was not an enemy’s face at all suited to a battlefield, but a most ordinary, homelike face.” Noticing this, he hesitates to strike

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<sup>3</sup> *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: OUP, 1975) 21.

<sup>4</sup> *War and Peace: The Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism*, ed. George Gibian (NY: Norton, 1966) 766.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 1370-2.

him again with his saber. Instead, the Frenchman and some of the other dragoons surrender. Although Nikolai is afraid he will be punished for leading an attack without orders from above, he is instead treated like a hero. Tolstoy then describes how Nikolai is puzzled by the whole affair.

Rostov was always thinking about that brilliant exploit of his, which to his amazement had gained him the St. George's Cross and even given him a reputation for bravery, and there was something he could not at all understand. "So others are even more afraid than I am!" he thought. "So that's all there is in what is called heroism! And did I do it for my country's sake? And how was he to blame, with his dimple and blue eyes? And how frightened he was! He thought that I should kill him. Why should I kill him? My hand trembled. And they have given me a St. George's Cross.... I can't make it out at all." But while Nicholas [Nikolai] was considering these questions and still could reach no clear solution of what puzzled him so, the wheel of fortune in the service, as often happens, turned in his favor. After the affair at Ostrovna he was brought into notice, received command of an hussar battalion, and when a brave officer was needed he was chosen.<sup>6</sup>

At the end of his second great novel, *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy has his character Konstantin Levin argue against his half-brother, who is enthusiastic about the willingness of the Russian people "to sacrifice themselves for their oppressed brethren," by volunteering and giving aid to Serbians and Montenegrins rebelling against the Turks. Levin responds that "the people sacrifice and are ready to make sacrifice for the good of their souls, but not for murder," and "he knew definitely that the attainment of ... [people's general welfare] was only possible by the strict fulfilment of the law of goodness which is revealed to every man, and therefore could not desire or preach war for any kind of general aims."<sup>7</sup>

Like Levin, Tolstoy was undergoing a spiritual crisis during the years he was completing *Anna Karenina* and during which Slavic rebellions in the Balkans eventually led to Russia's declaring war on Turkey in 1877. In the early 1880s, he described, with a certain amount of artistic license, his past life and crisis in *My Confession*. Writing about his early years in the army, he stated: "I cannot think of those years without horror, loathing and heartache. I killed men in war." In the same work, he relates his thinking at the time of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78.

At that time Russia was at war. And Russians, in the name of Christian love, began to kill their fellow men. It was impossible not to think about this, and not to see that killing is an evil repugnant to the first principles of any faith. Yet prayers were said in the churches for the success of our arms, and the teachers of the Faith acknowledged killing to be an act resulting from the Faith. And besides the murders during the war, I saw, during the disturbances which followed the war, Church dignitaries and teachers and monks of the lesser and stricter orders who approved the killing of helpless, erring youths. And I took note of all that is done by men who profess Christianity, and I was horrified.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 725-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Anna Karenina: The Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism*, ed. George Gibian (NY: Norton, 1970) 732-3.

<sup>8</sup> *My Confession, War and Peace, and Anna Karenina* are available online <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0810.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0810.htm)>.

For three decades, until his death in 1910, Tolstoy preached that warfare and other forms of violence were wrong. He thought that centralized governments were the main perpetrators of violence and he developed a philosophy of nonviolent anarchism. His main method for bringing an end to government was for people to refuse to pay taxes or serve the government in any manner, including military service. In 1881, after assassins had killed Tsar Alexander II, Tolstoy sent a letter to his son, Alexander III, begging him not to execute the assassins, because Christ's teaching was "Love your enemies.... Resist not evil." Elsewhere, he quotes such scriptures as "For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26:52). Time and again, he criticized various wars, such as the Spanish-American War, the Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War, and the imperialism, nationalism, and other causes that he thought helped bring them about. He criticized the Russian Orthodox Church for giving its blessing to wars fought in the name of tsar and country. He sometimes wrote letters to soldiers, such as the one in which he stated:

Only a man who is quite befooled by the false faith called Orthodoxy, palmed off upon him for true Christian faith, can believe that there is no sin in a Christian entering the army, promising blindly to obey any man who ranks above him in the service, and, at the will of others, learning to kill, and committing that most terrible crime, forbidden by all laws.<sup>9</sup>

During his long life, Tolstoy's views influenced many future pacifists, not all of whom took stances as radical or long-lasting as Tolstoy's. One such individual was the American social work pioneer Jane Addams, who visited Tolstoy in Russia in the 1890s and during WW I chaired the Women's International Committee for Permanent Peace. Another was U. S. presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, who came to Tolstoy's Russian estate in 1903, and resigned as Woodrow's Wilson's secretary of state in 1915 in opposition to what he feared was Wilson's moving closer to war against Germany. In Great Britain Tolstoy's pacifist thinking influenced the philosopher Bertrand Russell, though after the Nazis came to power in 1933, he concluded that Tolstoy's ideas about non-violent resistance would not work against so ruthless a regime. Most important, however, was Tolstoy's influence on Mohandas Gandhi, with whom he corresponded as Gandhi was developing his non-violent resistance ideas among the Asian community in South Africa. At the time, Gandhi referred to himself as a "humble follower" of Tolstoy.

Despite the efforts of Tolstoy, Gandhi, and other pacifists, the twentieth century produced more wartime deaths than any previous century, including two world wars and more than a dozen additional conflicts that caused more than a million deaths each. In 1999, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, there were "27 major armed conflicts in 25 countries."<sup>10</sup> The significance of Tolstoy's changing thoughts on war over a long lifetime that included military service and eventually a radical and absolute pacifism is not that he was right or wrong at some point. At times he was perceptive and tren-

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<sup>9</sup> *Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence* (NY: Bergman, 1967) 124, also available online <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0811.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0811.htm)>.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter I, "A Century of Violence," in my *An Age of Progress? Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces* (London: Anthem Press, 2008), deals with twentieth-century wars, some of the reasons for people's support of them, and the extent to which their support was carefully thought out and based on any consistent moral position. The chapter also briefly compares Tolstoy's ideas on violence with those of Theodore Roosevelt.

chant in his analysis of war and its causes, at other times simplistic and dogmatic. Today, almost a century after his death, his greatest contribution to the study of war seems simply to have been that he grappled seriously with it as a moral issue and inspired others to do the same. Foreshadowing many of his later reflections, his *Sevastopol Stories* remains a seminal work.

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