



BOOK REVIEWS

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The Macrocosm and Microcosm of a Great Novel. A Book Review: Boris Sokolov's *Commentaries on Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace: A Great Epoch in a Great Novel*

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**Макро- и микромир великого романа.
Рецензия на книгу: Соколов Б.В. «Война и мир»:
Великая эпоха в великом романе. Комментарии
к роману Льва Толстого**

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Boris V. Sokolov's *Commentaries on Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace: A Great Epoch in a Great Novel* (Moscow, 2026) is a book of scholarly and historical exegesis on the imagery of this literary masterpiece. Its target audience includes a wide variety of Leo Tolstoy's enthusiasts. The meticulous reconstruction of the historical context and artistic world proves the exceptional depth, high quality, and profound reliability of the author's research.

Boris Sokolov recreates the historical context by describing the lives of some historical prototypes. The structure of the book follows this idea, progressing from the genesis of the novel with its characters and their

historical prototypes to the depictions of Russian secular culture of the early 19th century, the *Grande Armée*, the Imperial Russian Army, and the major battles of Napoleon's Russian Campaign. The syncretism of literary criticism and historiography gives the book a popular science appeal: it focuses strictly on the historical figures and events related to the French invasion, as well as on the real-life prototypes behind the main characters.

Comparing the character arc and the prototype biography, Sokolov reveals a peculiar inverse pattern that Leo Tolstoy used to construct his plot lines. Boris V. Sokolov notices an obvious contradiction between the fictional lives of the characters and those of their historical counterparts. Unlike the Decembrist Sergey Trubetskoy, Boris Drubetskoy had a successful career. Pierre Bezukhov abandoned all military aspirations and Andrei Bolkonsky was mortally wounded in battle while their prototypes Alexander Kushelev-Bezborodko, Vasily Perovsky, Pyotr Volkonsky, and Evgraph Davydov were successful both in life and in military service.

Curiously, the characters Leo Tolstoy sympathized with were subjected to a fate far harsher than that of their historical counterparts, as the author repeatedly confronted them with suffering and death. Conversely, those characters for whom he felt antipathy lived happily ever after, unlike their prototypes. The key to Tolstoy's attitude to suffering is to be found in his treatise *On Life*. By counterweighing the happy destinies of the real people with the misery of their literary doppelgangers, Tolstoy rewarded his protagonists, making them artistically more attractive as opposed to the flat, one-dimensional stories of his villains.

Methodologically, Boris Sokolov relied on the academic source-study tradition, which gives the book an undeniable advantage. The information came primarily from the commentaries to the *Complete Works by Leo Tolstoy in 90 Volumes* published in 1928–1958 and the *Collected Works by Leo Tolstoy in 22 Volumes* published in 1978–1985. The resulting comprehensive historical reconstruction covers a wide range of historical figures and events while delving into the everyday life of the early-nineteenth-century Russian society. In this regard, the commentaries serve a reference function as well.

The systematic comparisons of personages and their respective prototypes follow factual, psychological, and documentary-historical lines. The chapters about Andrei Bolkonsky, Pierre Bezukhov, Boris Drubetskoy, Natasha Rostova, Prince Bolkonsky the Senior, Fyodor Dolokhov, Anatole Kuragin, and Julie Karagina provide a profound analysis of both the novel and the related memoirs, correspondence, and biographies.

The internal conflicts and spiritual discoveries that Tolstoy bestows upon his characters have their roots in his own existential experience, which Sokolov proves by citing excerpts from Tolstoy's letters and diaries. For instance, the image of the political *salonnière* Anna Scherer was based on Alexandra A. Tolstaya, Leo Tolstoy's aunt. Tolstoy once wrote to her that perpetual anxiety, labor, struggle, and hardships form the necessary framework of life that no one should ever dare to abandon, even for a single moment. Only sincere anxiety, struggle, and labor can make you happy – if they come from love.

Boris Sokolov is very consistent in proving that the complex architecture of *War and Peace* is a multifaceted kaleidoscope of impressions from specific historical events, personal reflections, family life, and socio-cultural phenomena.

Despite all these remarkable achievements, the work is not without its shortcomings. It is dominated by biographical and military-historical details, which dilapidates the scholarly logic of the analysis. By emphasizing the facts, the author overlooks hierarchical and logical sequence. In addition, the attempt to subordinate the logic to some overall concept seems overly straightforward. As a result, Sokolov asserts the character–prototype links as unquestionable, yet Tolstoy scholars tend to view such direct correlations with caution.

Moreover, many chapters concentrate too much on the historical context at the expense of literary analysis, without any attempt to interpret the role of historical accuracy in the novel's chronotope.

While not diminishing the overall significance of the work, such historiographical centrism turns it from a scholarly text into a reliable reference work for mass readers. The originality and novelty also raise some doubts: Sokolov draws information from previous collections of commentaries on Leo Tolstoy's works, which makes his own contribution to historiographic research somewhat vague. Finally, the book would look even more cohesive with a bit more structural balance: despite a logically structured main section, it seems to be missing an explicit opening and closing. The work would greatly benefit from a detailed reference list, as well as footnotes to cited sources and the text of *War and Peace*.

The above-mentioned shortcomings do not diminish the overall high praise for Boris Sokolov's high-quality reference work that summarizes the historical context of this unsurpassed novel. It will be of great value to students, literary scholars, and general readers seeking to deepen their understanding of the historical background of *War and Peace*.

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