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Tolstoy's legacy

Erich Mühsam

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Today's revolutionaries would not have worried about Leo Tolstoy's centenary if he had died at the moment when he saw his poetic work completed and cursed the time and effort it had cost him, since he felt it was stolen from his work for truth and for the freedom of mankind.

Today's writers, art-babblers and aesthetes would have missed the opportunity of Leo Tolstoy's centenary to sweat out commemorative articles even more if he had begun his written life's work not with the *Kreutzer Sonata* and *Anna Karenina*, but straight away with the appeal to humanity; for they would never have heard of such a life's work of a prophetic giant mind if they had not encountered this mind in their specialist areas.

In any case, the philosophers of today do not consider it necessary to take the centenary of Leo Tolstoy's birth as an act other than to point out that his legacy belongs in another department, namely that of fine literature, religious sectarianism and politics.

As on all occasions, including on the centenary of Leo Tolstoy's birth, it is easiest for historical materialists to correctly classify his personality, his intellectual power and the effect of his work on the events of his time and the behavior of his contemporaries and

descendants, since they have the advantage of the Marxist patent solution: consider the state of the capitalist mode of production in the second half of the 19th century, compare it with Leo Tolstoy's life's work and recognize that his novels and dramas, his teachings and warnings, his development from a pleasure-loving officer to an ascetic denier of the world, his family conflicts and his fraternization with his peasant castle neighbors, his artistic mastery and his condemnation of the arts, world morals, the state, exploitation, authority and sensuality and finally his flight into solitude were the most natural accompaniments of the economic conditions of his time. Admittedly, Dostoyevsky and Turgenev, Zola and Ibsen, Hebbel and Keller, even Strindberg and Wedekind were his contemporaries, to name just a few, who, beyond their poetic legacy, allowed social criticism and social admonitions to resonate in their work, and they all lived, worked, saw, wrote poetry, spoke, judged and prophesied in completely different ways from Tolstoy – but that doesn't matter: if you just look at things in a correctly historical-materialist way and do not neglect to think dialectically, you will understand that they were all just children of their time-bound economic form and thus there was nothing in their appearance and outward appearance that could puzzle the Marxists.

I would like to express the impression that the articles written by the bourgeois and proletarian, literary and ethical, religious and atheist commemorative writers on the centenary of Leo Tolstoy's birth made on me: I cannot remember ever, when a calendar accident called upon the brain activity of all opinion-makers to deal with a particular subject, having heard, in all the dialects of mental contortion, such helpless babble, such pitiful evasion of the real appearance of the person being celebrated. The life's work of the most powerful personality of an entire historical epoch is broken down into its individual components, and the products of a poetic force that knows how to shape people's thoughts, lives, behavior, judgments, appearance, and mutual relationships into living reality with unprecedented factual sharpness and the relentlessness

of passionate truth are carefully kept separate from the shattering cries of a visionary nature that fed the clearest mind of a millennium with the wealth of its most ardent soul. People strive to distill general rules of life from the gigantic wildness of the creative elemental power of an incomprehensibly great human mind, and the rightness or wrongness of Tolstoy's worldview and his teachings are measured by the way he leads his life as a private person.

Yes, there are even "Tolstoyians". These are people who believe that if they eat radishes instead of pork chops, drink orangeade instead of Doppelkorn, move God and the Savior from the clerical churches to the serious Bible students, and desperately implore the revolutionaries that if they want to turn the world upside down, they should above all not use dangerous tools so that no one is harmed, and, since Tolstoy unfortunately also frowns upon the carnal pleasures of sex, sometimes protect themselves against the excesses of unchaste desires by applying cold water compresses — then they will live worthy of their master and be able to school all their contemporaries who smoke their cigars without fear of poisoning their intestines and minds and who even neglect an hour of wise chatter about true virtue for the sake of a kiss from a fresh girl.

Tolstoy himself was anything but a Tolstoyian. To even attempt to formulate this figure is to remain untouched by its greatness and world significance. As cautious as one should generally be when describing a person as a genius, no other term is applicable here. Here is a giant whose dimensions do not fit into any system, no matter how cleverly devised: a giant in seeing, listening, thinking and feeling, a giant in linguistic expression and in the spiritual comprehension of the world, a giant in the clarity of his will and in the truth before himself, a giant in the demands on his own moral strength and on the will to know of others, a giant in the consistency of logic and a giant even in the contradictions of his expressions of existence. But anyone who wants to explain Tolstoy's nature on the basis of these contradictions, as Lenin attempted to do in his aston-

ishingly superficial essay on his 80th birthday, which has now been dug up by the communist press as the ultimate conclusion of all wisdom, only proves that his habituation to schematic judgments has robbed him of the gift of experiencing reality as a synthesis of diversity. For a man like Lenin, who never tired of recommending the method of dialectical judgment for all criticism and who, incidentally, was himself made up of a hundred different contradictions, the simplistic characterization of the outstanding figure of our entire age by sorting out nothing but on the one hand and on the other hand was a worryingly poor achievement. Only boring natures are free of contradictions; Only philistines boast that in 30 years or more they have never allowed themselves to be persuaded from one view to another, that they have never hesitated to open the drawer in which the infallible recipe for all situations and for all things in life is always at hand; only miserable police officers' souls are constantly snooping through their neighbors' pasts in order to triumphantly point out a mistake or an inconsistency in their actions or thoughts. To try to deal with a genius like Tolstoy with such silliness is a hopeless inability to see beyond the horizon of a limited doctrine.

If one wants to get close to his tremendous appearance, Leo Tolstoy must be recognized as a unified, elementary personality, at the same time as a lively and passionate person and as a revolutionary force of nature shaking the foundations of society. His origins in the Russian nobility, his early days as a frivolous officer, his time-bound nature — call it rootedness in the economic development situation if you like —, his handicaps due to close family relationships, the special intellectual driving forces of his environment, all of this naturally influenced his work and behavior, insofar as all thoughts and actions are tied by numerous threads to what is immediately close in time and space and cannot hang in the empty atmosphere.

But this only refers to the topic of experience and action, not to the mental and spiritual content and the nature of a world-shaking

minds in human history, a torchbearer of revolution and freedom, a driving force of the Russian Revolution, whose radiant splendour he no longer saw, whose extinction in statehood and clique dictatorship he no longer had to experience. But the Russian Revolution is not yet dead. The workers and peasants of the country still know about the freedom for which they fought their glorious battle; the great heralds of Russian liberation, of which Leo Tolstoy was one of the greatest, will rise again in the hearts of the people — and the light will shine in the darkness.

of exceptions, which life itself will create. Tolstoy says in his diary: "Everything is meaningless except what we are doing at this moment".

This insight explains all the apparent contradictions in his own manifestations of existence; but it contains the correct lesson that we should, in strict adherence to our fundamental knowledge, leave the decision about the necessities of the revolutionary struggle to the moment. There have been people, Tolstoy's disciples, who refused their lives to the state as soldiers, but who offered them to the revolution with weapons in their hands. Leo Tolstoy would have greeted them with shining eyes as the true understanders of his teachings. Our duty is to greet those who refused the state power for the state and who gave their lives to the state's vengeance for this revolutionary refusal. Tsarism slaughtered those who followed Tolstoy's anarchist teachings; since the Russian Revolution opened the way to a new state instead of freedom, the followers of Tolstoy's advice are still the victims of the authoritarian claims to power of an authority there today. Let the Bolsheviks celebrate Tolstoy's centenary with all the loud jubilation that has long been used to pretend that stifled revolutionary freedoms continue to exist and to drown out the lamentations of disappointed revolutionary enthusiasm: the fact that Tolstoy's closest collaborator Chetkoff is not allowed into the country for this celebration, that Tolstoy's disciples, who also denied the Bolshevik state the right to use military coercion, have to celebrate the celebration in prison cells or in Siberia, and that fundamental opponents of the state, such as Leo Tolstoy, are persecuted and brutalized there, shows how little right the ruling circles of today's Russia have to claim the great thinker, poet and warning voice as one of their own.

Tolstoy suffered indescribably from the luxury and false pleasures in his own house. At the age of 82 he set off to die in the poverty in which he knew the country's workers lived. Far from deceitful conventions, but freed from the constraints of any tormenting tutelage, he closed his eyes. He was one of the greatest

genius. Anyone who allows themselves to be swept away by Tolstoy's raging primal force will never ask whether he was actually right in his view of the meaning and shape of life or not, whether his judgment of art, of his own artistic creation, has lasting validity or not, whether the religious mysticism that led to his rejection of the enjoyment of life in any form should influence our attitude or not, but will try to grasp the whole of Tolstoy as a man and use the effect of his work and his being on the present and the future as a measure of value.

Effect! Everything else in the world is vanity. Tolstoy was an active person, he wanted to be nothing else, and his life and work were a constant struggle for effect, that is, for being understood. Look through his novels, short stories, and plays. (At this point, we would like to draw your attention to the 14-volume, beautiful and inexpensive edition of Leo Tolstoy's poetic works, which the Malik publishing house is publishing to mark the 100th anniversary of his birth.) The incomparable power of representation, even in works in which the poet did not yet directly combine the will to act with the will to advertise, such as in the *Kreutzer Sonata* and in *Resurrection*, or in *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, is based on the ability to always and everywhere make only the truth clear.

If one wants to sum up Tolstoy's character as a whole in one formula, it can only be that everything he did, said, thought, wrote, wanted and preached was determined by the irresistible urge for truth and confession. His later condemnation of his own works and of art as a whole is as true as his overwhelming descriptions of war in *War and Peace*. For the truth that moved Tolstoy to turn away from his earlier path was the insight that the effect of art was not simple, not immediate enough, that it was hampered by the artist's ambition to give embellished truth instead of effective clarity. The man's need for truth led him to push his philosophical reflections on human duty to completely life-denying conclusions, to the point of demanding the acceptance of physical violence without resistance and the condemnation of sexual intercourse. At the

same time, however, this passionate nature could lash out with its fists in a fit of rage when the moment demanded it of truthfulness, and the chastity preacher could still jump up from work at over 70 years of age because he could not resist the lure of the plump calf of a stable maid without committing an untruth to himself. Then again, his urge to confess required him to denounce the weakness of the flesh in his diary.

Zeal for truth allows Tolstoy to absorb the Christian moral teachings that are familiar to the peasants with whom he wants to communicate, whom he wants to persuade to apply their social obligations. But his zeal for truth also led him to thunder against the superstition of religious dogmas that claim a deity outside the human soul, and the same man who grappled with his inner self, calling on God and Father to witness his spiritual struggles, wrote the confession: "If I had seen the resurrection and ascension of Christ with my own eyes, I would not only not believe it, I would curse a God who was capable of committing such abominations".

All confessions of this kind, even if they are completely opposed to one another, arise from Tolstoy's unconditional will to truth, and it is not a contradiction of his nature, but the necessary complement to the various manifestations of a genius diversity, when, as Maxim Gorky tells us, Tolstoy used the crudest soldierly expressions in conversation about sexual matters and, when reporting on an encounter with a woman, rudely interjected the question of why the other man had not taken her straight away.

This stormy spirit, to which the eternal questions of morality and religion presented themselves in ever-changing forms for answers before the will to truth, recognized the laziness, absurdity and criminal unnaturalness of the events and institutions undertaken by men with the never-dimmed critical clarity of a seer. Here there were no contradictions between knowledge and temperament; here the recognized truth was immediately followed by the clear accusation and its practical application. With a factual logic, with a clarity and thoroughness of expression that is only

possible for the greatest linguistic artist and the most selfless seeker of truth, Tolstoy revealed the nature of state society, the injustice of all human relationships in the capitalist economic system, the madness of war drill, mutual exploitation, nationalism, the exercise of power by man over man in every form. But here Tolstoy was not satisfied with the depiction of their misery in order to work among men; here he demanded defense, measures of human dignity against their degradation. Here is Tolstoy's legacy to our present, his work through us in the present into the future; here arises the Tolstoy whose 100th birthday we are obliged to celebrate with a vow, the revolutionary Tolstoy.

It is completely irrelevant whether Tolstoy bases his revolutionary advice on words from the Sermon on the Mount and other Gospel passages or appeals directly to the conscience of the people. The advice itself is of immense importance and can be summed up in one, which is the formula of revolutionary resistance itself: If you want to get rid of an evil, do not participate in it. If you do not want war, do not wage it; if you do not want battleships, do not build them; if you do not want exploitation, refuse the exploiters your labor; if you do not want authority, then unlearn to respect authority; if you do not want a state, then do not be afraid of it, of its laws and punishments; If you do not want to be slaves, do not tolerate masters, and if you do not want to live unworthily, live with dignity or die with dignity.

The authoritarian critics assure us that Tolstoy was not a revolutionary because he rejected all violence. There are also supposed Tolstoyans who assure us that Tolstoy was the only true revolutionary, and therefore no one who affirms violence under certain conditions is a revolutionary. Gentlemen. In everything he proclaimed, Tolstoy spoke absolutely for the sake of clarity. Because he hated war, he rejected and outlawed the violence of war. Tolstoy knew as well as anyone that the absolute can never rule over the vitality of the moment. Tolstoy rejected violence so as not to confuse the simple things he had to say against war with the restriction