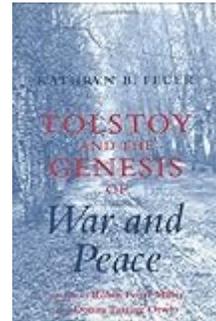


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Kathryn B. Feuer.** *Tolstoy and the Genesis of "War and Peace"*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. xiv + 295 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-1902-7.



**Reviewed by** Lesia Chernihivska (University of Rhode Island)

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Kathryn Feuer's *Tolstoy and the Genesis of "War and Peace"* was originally completed in 1965. After Kathryn's death in 1992, her daughter, Robin Feuer Miller, and Donna Tussing Orwin completed the revision and updating of her original manuscript for publication. As a graduate student, Kathryn participated in a cultural exchange program between the United States and the Soviet Union. Under the tutelage of fine Soviet scholars, she examined the original notes, drafts, manuscripts of *War and Peace*, as well as related items, such as the volumes of Tolstoy's own library and his diaries. *Tolstoy and the Genesis of "War and Peace"* is the summation of her viewpoints and discoveries. For the most part, her book examines the actual literary construction process of Tolstoy's great novel. The many fascinating bits and pieces she studied enabled her to chart Tolstoy's path through the abandoned partially-completed works and drafts that were the foundations for *War and Peace*.

As such, this book would probably be a more useful resource for those involved with the process of creative writing rather than the followers of pure history. *Tolstoy and the Genesis of "War and Peace"* discusses Tolstoy's creative methods and the reasoning behind them, and it sympathetically reveals the often frustrating and ever-painstaking effort he put into molding his creation into precisely the sort of book he wished it to be.

People may think that a writer, especially a famous one like Tolstoy, simply sat down at his desk for a given period of time and the words that became the great novel flowed easily from his pen. This would be an idealized version of what truly happened! He intensively and self-critically labored, writing draft after draft (more than a dozen for one part of the book), and then frequently discarded them, one after another. He had an overview of how he wanted the story to progress and what political and/or moral issues he wished to address, but the question of how best to begin such a work apparently plagued him for quite some time.

An interesting illustration in Feuer's book shows a page from Tolstoy's manuscript labeled "A Day in Moscow." The rather messy page clearly shows, through his cross-outs, editorializing arrows, and sideways-written notes, the kind of rigorous revision work that Tolstoy did while creating his novel.

Tolstoy wrote several prefaces and proposed beginnings, rejecting each in turn. Although some of his historical preface material was brilliant in its own right, he did not use it in the final manuscript because he could not allow it to overshadow the more conventional material that was to have followed it. He wanted his characters to represent the conflicting political viewpoints of the time, to present valuable moral lessons but in such a way that

the authorial voice would not detract from the words and actions of the characters themselves. He also was determined that his authorial voice would not be visible to the reader, especially not as a puppeteer pulling the strings of his characters. Much time and effort went into paring down his text to eliminate intrusion of his narrative voice.

Tolstoy redefined and reclassified his characters, combined the characteristics of two or more character-types into one figure, rewrote their speeches, added full-bodied characterizations, and then oftentimes discarded it all. He was dissatisfied, for one reason or another, until he reached the point when “he move[d] from having his characters articulate his ideas to having them embody them” (p. xii). Ultimately, the protagonists developed enough literary substance/personality of their own that he felt the story was progressing to find its own life through him, not by him any longer. Feuer noted that Tolstoy wrote:

At times, the way in which I had begun the novel seemed to me insignificant; at times I had a longing to capture all that I know and feel about the period and realized that that was impossible; at times the simple, trivial literary language and literary devices of the novel seemed to me incongruous with its majestic, profound and many-sided subject matter; at times the necessity to knit together the images, pictures, and ideas which had of themselves been born in me made them so repulsive to me that I rejected what I had begun and despaired of the possibility of saying all that I wished and needed to say (p. 73).

One of the problems Feuer encountered was the numbering system of the original manuscripts. In her book, she provides her methodology for dealing with the various sources she used. As well as the written description, a chart of the Manuscript Drafts of *War and Peace*, including their Assigned Title, Published Number, and Archival Number, is included.

Nine editions of *War and Peace* are charted with details of Year and Special Characteristics of each. The chart of the Development of Major Characters of those in the outlines and finished manuscript deserves special attention, because during the reading of Feuer’s book the various unfamiliar character names she uses can become quite confusing. Family groupings of characters are also listed, with a brief description of the modifications they underwent as Tolstoy progressed from draft to finished manuscript.

Included at the back of Feuer’s book is a seventy-five-page section of notes to supplement her work and to guide the reader to further source materials for additional investigation. The book is indexed, of course, and a list of her other literary works is included.

In many ways, *Tolstoy and the Genesis of “War and Peace”* is not a book for an amateur. It presupposes a great deal of knowledge about the details of *War and Peace*, especially the characteristics of the protagonists and the storyline. Although it is a fascinating and unique work in its own right, *Tolstoy and the Genesis of “War and Peace”* is so necessarily involved with the plot and characters of *War and Peace* itself that a reader unfamiliar with the novel would have some difficulty in attaining the greatest benefit this book has to offer.

To a writer seeking guidance from one of the greatest literary figures of all time, however, it is a wonderful resource, due to its close examination of the literary techniques and of the self-critical and persistent effort Tolstoy employed when creating his masterpiece. Generously interspersed with quotations from Tolstoy himself, a vivid picture is formed of his personality, the times in which he lived and wrote, and of his most remarkable talent.

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