

Determinism, Chaos, and Leadership: Re-examining Tolstoy's *War and Peace* Through Modern Geopolitical Realities

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Abstract

This review will examine how *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy portrays the Napoleonic Wars and reflects on history and human agency, especially Tolstoy's views on determinism versus free will. It will also discuss how the novel's themes – the impact of war on society, the nature of leadership, and the unpredictability of historical events – resonate with contemporary global geopolitics.

Keywords: *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy, Napoleonic Wars, novel, history, fiction, philosophy

Introduction

War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy is a monumental novel that blends historical narrative, philosophical reflection, and fiction. Set against the Napoleonic Wars (1805–1812), the novel interweaves real events and personages with the lives of several aristocratic Russian families (Vollmer 1950). Tolstoy's **historical account** of Russia's part in the wars is remarkably detailed and, as one study notes, "a reliable narrative" of that era (Vollmer 1950). At the same time, *War and Peace* includes extensive **philosophical essays** pondering the forces that drive history and the nature of human agency. This unique structure – **history, fiction, and philosophy** – has long fascinated critics (Morson 2025). The result is not only an immersive story of the 1805 campaign and the 1812 French invasion, but also a deep exploration of how events unfold and whether individuals have freedom in the face of historical forces (Morson 2025). This review will examine how *War and Peace* portrays the Napoleonic Wars and reflects on history and human agency, especially Tolstoy's views on determinism versus free will. It will also discuss how the novel's

themes – the impact of war on society, the nature of leadership, and the unpredictability of historical events – resonate with contemporary global geopolitics.

Portrayal of the Napoleonic Wars in *War and Peace*

Tolstoy painstakingly researched the Napoleonic era to ensure historical accuracy in *War and Peace*. The novel's historical portions vividly chronicle major episodes of the conflict: the Russian army's march into Austria in 1805, the defeat at Austerlitz, the Treaty of Tilsit (1807), and above all Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia (Vollmer 1950). These events are **so vividly presented** that readers can almost feel the hardship endured by soldiers on both sides (Vollmer 1950). Indeed, Tolstoy's **battle scenes** – from the carnage of Austerlitz to the massive Battle of Borodino – are renowned for their realism and emotional power. Soviet officers in World War II even reported that Tolstoy's descriptions of war moved them more than the battles they were fighting, a testament to the novel's immersive historical vision (Kaufman 2019). Through dozens of characters (fictional and historical), Tolstoy **weaves together the home front and the warfront**, showing how grand historical events touch individual lives (Vollmer 1950). The Rostov and Bolkonsky families, for example, experience personal joys and sorrows in tandem with national triumphs and tragedies, illustrating the **social impact** of war on all levels of Russian society.

Tolstoy's depiction of historical figures sharply diverges from legend. *War and Peace* pointedly undermines the "great man" image of Napoleon. Rather than a flawless military genius, Tolstoy portrays Napoleon as an **ineffective, egomaniacal buffoon** caught up in events beyond his control (Morson 2025). The French emperor in the novel is often preoccupied with trivialities or self-aggrandizement, offering a **satirical contrast** to traditional heroic narratives. Likewise, Tsar Alexander I is shown as a superficial *phrasemaker* obsessed with how historians will record him (Morson 2025). By contrast, the one leader Tolstoy clearly admires is the aging Russian general Mikhail Kutuzov – a man whom prior historians had disparaged, but whom Tolstoy depicts as **wise in his humility** (Morson 2025). Kutuzov is patient and recognizes "the limitations of human will and planning" (Morson 2025). He often chooses to yield to events (for instance, retreating and conserving forces) rather than trying to impose bold, risky strategies. This leadership style, grounded in realism and timing, is vindicated by the outcome: Napoleon's overreaching invasion fails, while Kutuzov's army survives to see the French retreat. As one analysis observes, *War and Peace* suggests true leadership may be "better served by passivity and opportunism rather than by the pursuit of bold goals" (Stanford 2014) – a lesson exemplified by Kutuzov's cautious, flexible approach in contrast to Napoleon's aggressive ambition.

The **battlefield action** in *War and Peace* reinforces Tolstoy's view of war as chaotic and ungovernable by even the greatest commanders. The novel's famous battle scenes (Austerlitz, Borodino, etc.) are not depicted as well-orchestrated set pieces of strategy, but as **confused struggles** where chance and disorder reign. Tolstoy writes that generals may imagine they can "anticipate all contingencies," but in reality a battle's course is decided by "a hundred million diverse chances" that no one can foresee (Morson 2025). In other words, combat is portrayed as **sheer chaos** where plans rapidly dissolve amid the "infinite complexity of human behaviour" (Morson 2025). For example, at Borodino, Napoleon's orders have little effect once the fighting begins; the tide of battle turns on random events and the stubborn will of thousands of ordinary soldiers. One scholarly account of Tolstoy's Borodino chapters notes that Tolstoy "stresses the fact that it is fate and the armies themselves which determine the tide of battle and not just one

man's judgment" (Vollmer 1950). The upshot is a **demystification of warfare**: rather than glorifying conquest, Tolstoy emphasizes war's unpredictability and devastating cost. We see villages burned, Moscow evacuated and set aflame, and communities uprooted – all unintended consequences of leaders' decisions. By showing not just generals and troops but also civilians – families fleeing their homes, peasants and noblewomen enduring turmoil – *War and Peace* provides a panoramic view of the **impact of war on society**. The novel thus captures how war **upends social order**, bringing hunger, chaos and a collapse of normal life for rich and poor alike. Tolstoy's contemporary readers, and even readers today, recognize in this portrayal a **timeless truth about war's folly**: that once unleashed, war's course cannot be predicted or easily controlled, and its damage spreads far beyond the battlefield.

Tolstoy's Reflections on History and Human Agency

Beyond its narrative of battles and balls, *War and Peace* is also a treatise on **history and how it works**. Tolstoy was deeply skeptical of conventional historiography, especially the notion that history is shaped by great leaders, brilliant plans, or singular ideas. In the second half of the novel, he inserts essayistic passages that **criticize the "Great Man" theory** of history (Hannula 2021) (Morson 2025). Contemporary historians of Tolstoy's time often attributed events to the decisions of prominent individuals (Napoleon, kings, ministers) or to abstract principles (like the idea of liberty fueling the French Revolution). Tolstoy, however, finds these explanations naïve and reductionist. He notes, for example, that it is absurd to claim that millions of people killed each other in the Napoleonic Wars "because Napoleon was ambitious" or "because Alexander I wanted to resist" – such **simple cause-and-effect stories** wildly underestimate the complexity of events (Hannula 2021). As one summary of Tolstoy's argument puts it, he "*argues forcefully against any Great Man theory of history*", showing that no single individual's will can explain "millions of men butchering each other on the battlefield or dying of cold and hunger in the Russian winter" (Hannula 2021). To Tolstoy, leaders like Napoleon are "*but labels serving to give a name to the event*", not the deep cause of historical outcomes (Hannula 2021).

Tolstoy's philosophy of history insists that **history is driven from below, not above**. In his view, great events (like wars or social upheavals) result from innumerable small actions taken by ordinary people, influenced by a myriad of trivial encounters and decisions that no one can fully track (Morson 2025). *War and Peace* repeatedly illustrates this idea. Armies move because thousands of individual soldiers and officers, each with their own motivations and fears, carry out orders (or don't); cities burn down due to a cascade of accidental fires amid an evacuation; battles are won or lost through countless minor incidents and choices. The **cumulative effect** of all these small factors produces what we call "historical events." Tolstoy writes that to think history is made by the orders of generals or the plans of statesmen is like observing only the treetops of a distant forest and concluding a landscape contains nothing but trees (Morson 2025). We miss the thousands of invisible threads that actually bind things together. According to Tolstoy, historians who focus on famous personalities and big battles are looking at history *backwards* – they treat the outcomes as if they were willed by those at the top, whereas in reality outcomes emerge from the collective actions of the masses. "History is made by the sum total of an infinite number of small decisions taken by ordinary people," Tolstoy argues, and the big names are usually just carried along by this tide (Morson 2025). Modern scholars note that Tolstoy's **radical vision** here anticipates a more systemic, bottom-up understanding of history (Valdai Papers 2016). It's a view in which **no single hero or mastermind controls fate** – a stark rejection of the heroic narratives of both historians and novelists.

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In *War and Peace*, **Napoleon's diminished stature** is the prime example of Tolstoy's thesis. On the surface, Napoleon appears to direct his armies; but Tolstoy shows Napoleon constantly misreading the situation and issuing orders that either come too late or are never executed. Far from being the omnipotent architect of victory, he is portrayed as "*just some guy*" who has ended up at the center of events largely by chance (Hannula 2021). During the 1812 campaign, Tolstoy describes Napoleon as **indecisive, physically unwell, and overwhelmed** – hardly the image of a triumphant commander. Meanwhile, the French invasion fails due to overextension, Russian resistance, and the winter – factors no single person orchestrated. By the end of the novel, even Tolstoy's characters Pierre and Prince Andrei, who once revered Napoleon, see through the illusion of great men. Andrei, who sought glory under Napoleon, comes to realize that **no man, not even an emperor, truly has the power to bend history at will**. He goes into his final battle resigned that he is "*a pawn in the bigger game of history*", fighting not for personal honor but because he has been swept up in events beyond himself (Hannula 2021). Pierre, for his part, evolves from a naive admirer of Napoleon to a disillusioned prisoner of war who finds meaning not in grand schemes, but in small acts of kindness and solidarity with fellow sufferers. This character progression reinforces Tolstoy's point that **ordinary human values – love, compassion, endurance – matter more than the politics of "great men"** (Hannula 2021). The **moral center** of the novel lies with humble characters (like Platon Karataev, the peasant Pierre meets, or Princess Marya and Nikolai) who exhibit decency and adaptability amid chaos (Morson 2025). In Tolstoy's view, **history should not treat individuals as mere instruments of larger forces**, nor should it elevate conquerors as idols; rather, it should acknowledge the **common humanity** and countless small deeds that truly shape the world (Hannula 2021) (Morson 2025).

Determinism vs. Free Will in *War and Peace*

Tolstoy's historical philosophy in *War and Peace* leads directly into a profound examination of **determinism versus free will**. Throughout the novel (especially in the second epilogue), Tolstoy asks to what extent human beings have free agency in a world governed by innumerable causes. He approaches this question from a historical angle: *If a single person's will cannot determine the course of events, then are individuals essentially subject to historical necessity?* Tolstoy contends that **absolute free will is an illusion** once we analyze the chain of causes behind any act. "If we admit that even one man has the power to act freely... we cannot formulate any law to explain the actions of men," he writes, pointing out that history would become utterly chaotic and unintelligible if it were just a series of free individual choices (CliffsNotes 2025). Instead, Tolstoy believes in **historical determinacy** – the idea that events follow from prior events with a kind of necessity (CliffsNotes 2025). In an often-cited metaphor, he argues that saying Napoleon's free will caused the French invasion is as unscientific as claiming that the planets move by their own free will (CliffsNotes 2025). Just as science looks for laws (like gravity) to explain planetary motion, Tolstoy insists we look for underlying forces that explain historical motion, rather than attributing it to personal freedom or genius (CliffsNotes 2025).

Yet Tolstoy does **not fully embrace a strict, fatalistic determinism** either. He is careful to note that we *feel* ourselves to be free. Humans have an inner sense of choice – a "consciousness of freedom" – even if, from the outside, every action is conditioned by circumstances (CliffsNotes 2025). Tolstoy's stance is sometimes described as a kind of *compatibilism*: he suggests that free will and necessity are relative concepts, dependent on perspective. From the God's-eye view (or a theoretical historian's view), all events are inevitable results of prior causes; but from the individual's view, making decisions in the moment, free will feels real. In *War and Peace*, the

narrator ultimately asserts that it is “impossible to imagine **total** freedom” just as it is impossible to imagine **total** determinism – reality lies in between (SparkNotes 2025). **History**, Tolstoy concludes, is our “**representation**” of the **blending of free will and necessity**: we describe what happens as a mix of human choices and inevitable laws (CliffsNotes 2025). We call the part of events that we understand “necessity” and the part we don’t understand “free will” (CliffsNotes 2025). In truth, every human action is constrained by time, space, and causality – the sum of “interconnected, infinitesimal elements” that limit our freedom (CliffsNotes 2025). Thus, **free will exists subjectively**, but once an action is done, it could not have happened otherwise given all the conditions leading up to it (Patrick R 2016)

Tolstoy stops short of solving this philosophical riddle in any neat way – indeed, he famously calls free will an “**incomprehensible essence of life**” that historians should acknowledge but not simplify (Hannula 2021). The novel embodies this ambiguity. Characters make choices – Pierre decides to attempt an assassination of Napoleon, Natasha chooses to stay by Andrei’s side, etc. – and these choices *matter* to them and to the narrative. Yet the broader outcomes (the defeat of Napoleon, the reconstruction of peace) seem to unfold by **necessity**, driven by countless factors beyond any one character’s control. Tolstoy’s **final word** on the subject is that we must view history scientifically, focusing on large trends and masses, rather than attributing events to personal freedom (CliffsNotes 2025). “To approach history as a science... begin with the necessity” of mass movements, not the “episodes from the lives of great men,” he urges (CliffsNotes 2025). By recognizing the *limits* of our freedom – much as Kutuzov does by yielding to winter or as Pierre does by accepting the course of his life – we gain a more truthful understanding of life. In sum, Tolstoy leans toward **determinism** (history governed by laws and multitude of causes) while still valuing human consciousness and moral responsibility. This nuanced stance is encapsulated by a scholar who noted Tolstoy’s dilemma of “the reality of inexorable historical determinism” on one hand and “the feeling of responsibility [and] the values of private life” on the other (CliffsNotes 2025). *War and Peace* holds both sides in tension, reflecting Tolstoy’s conviction that while we **must humble ourselves** before the vast currents of history, we must also **cherish the human agency** we experience in our personal lives.

Contemporary Resonances and Geopolitical Parallels

Tolstoy’s insights in *War and Peace* transcend his era, offering wisdom applicable to the complex geopolitics of the 21st century. Although the novel depicts events from over two centuries ago, its themes – the chaos of war, the nature of leadership, and the unpredictable course of history – have clear **parallels in contemporary global events**. Here are several broad connections between Tolstoy’s world and our own:

The Chaos of War and Its Human Toll

Tolstoy’s portrayal of war emphasizes *chaos, chance, and senseless destruction*, a portrayal that remains **painfully relevant** today (BookishElf 2024). Modern conflicts, from world wars to recent regional wars, often defy the confident predictions of planners. For instance, military campaigns frequently run into unforeseen resistance or spiraling civilian crises – much as Napoleon’s invasion unraveled due to factors he never anticipated (scorched earth tactics, guerrilla warfare, winter). The **human cost of war** that Tolstoy described – cities in flames, families displaced, soldiers and innocents suffering – is sadly echoed in contemporary conflicts. One need only consider the humanitarian catastrophes in wars of the 21st century to see how war “*remains*

painfully relevant in our era of ongoing global conflicts” (BookishElf 2024). Tolstoy’s blunt depiction of combat as disordered slaughter challenges any romanticized view of war, a lesson that aligns with modern critiques of war’s brutality, whether in the context of high-tech warfare or insurgencies. His work serves as a **reminder** that behind every strategic headline are countless personal tragedies, reinforcing a universal plea for caution and compassion in matters of war.

Leadership, “Great Men,” and the Limits of Control

The novel’s critique of hero-worship and overconfidence in leaders resonates strongly in an age that still often searches for saviors or blames villains on the world stage. Tolstoy shows that **even the mightiest leaders are constrained** by circumstances – a notion applicable to contemporary heads of state and military commanders. In recent history, we have seen world leaders embark on ambitious interventions or reforms that did not go as planned, from military invasions that became quagmires to economic policies upended by unforeseen global forces. Tolstoy would not be surprised by these outcomes; *War and Peace* teaches that leadership success often owes more to **adapting** to events than to heroic willpower. Modern management thinkers have even drawn lessons from Tolstoy, suggesting that “history is not produced by the dramatic actions and postures of leaders, but by complex combinations of large numbers of small actions” by ordinary people (Stanford 2014). In international affairs, this might translate to recognizing the role of bureaucrats, citizens, soldiers, and local actors in shaping events, rather than attributing everything to presidents or generals. Tolstoy’s **General Kutuzov** exemplifies a leader who succeeds by acknowledging what he *cannot* control and waiting for the right moment – a strategy of patience and realism. Similarly, in today’s geopolitical crises, leaders who act with humility about the limits of their power (and who listen to on-the-ground realities) may fare better than those who assert absolute confidence. The novel’s skepticism toward “great men” prompts us to question modern cults of personality and to value the contributions of the many over the glorification of the few (Hannula 2021) (Morson 2025).

The Unpredictability of Historical Change

Tolstoy’s view that history has “no direction, and fits no pattern” (Morson 2025) is borne out by the tumultuous developments of recent decades. **Historical determinism** in the sense of believing history follows a predetermined path (such as the 20th-century idea of inevitable progress, or the 1990s notion of a definitive “end of history”) has repeatedly been challenged by reality – much as Tolstoy argued it should. Events like the sudden end of the Cold War, the unexpected rise of the internet and its social impacts, or the unforeseen Arab Spring uprisings show that history often surprises even the keenest analysts. Tolstoy writes that none of the statesmen at the Congress of Vienna (1815) could **foresee** what the world would look like decades later (Valdai Papers 2016) – an observation equally true for leaders at any given moment. Our current world, with its rapid changes and emergent phenomena, “finds itself in a place that is similar” to Tolstoy’s in that we know change is underway but cannot fully grasp its trajectory (Valdai Papers 2016). For example, the balance of global power is shifting in complex ways (sometimes called a new “*polycentric*” or multipolar world), which aligns with Tolstoy’s idea that history is driven by a “momentum of nations” rather than a single dominant force (Valdai Papers 2016). The rise of many influential actors – not just nation-states but international organizations, corporations, and popular movements – creates a web of causes in world affairs that defies any one person’s control. In Tolstoyan terms, the “**strivings of millions of people**” are now obviously propelling history on a global scale (Valdai Papers 2016). Issues like climate change, pandemics, or financial crises

illustrate that it's the aggregate effect of countless individual actions (and accidents) that shapes outcomes, just as Tolstoy described historical events emerging from innumerable small causes.

Moral Agency and Private Lives in Times of Upheaval

Finally, *War and Peace* speaks to the experience of ordinary people living through extraordinary times – a theme with enduring relevance. Tolstoy shows characters striving to lead meaningful personal lives amid the backdrop of war and social change. This **human-focus** is reflected in contemporary narratives of global crises, from refugees rebuilding their lives to families coping with conflict or displacement. As scholar Andrew Kaufman notes, *War and Peace* is “a book about people trying to find their footing in a world being turned upside down” by massive social and political changes (Kaufman 2019). Substitute the early 19th-century context for the early 21st, and the sentiment remains poignant. Whether it is citizens in a country torn by war today, or communities worldwide facing rapid change and uncertainty, Tolstoy's emphasis on *human resilience and ethics* in history retains its validity. He reminds us that, even if individuals cannot control large historical currents, they still bear responsibility in their immediate sphere – for kindness, for integrity, for caring for others. In modern global events, we likewise see that individual and local actions (volunteers helping after disasters, doctors fighting epidemics, activists advocating peace) form the **moral fabric of history**, even if they don't make headlines. Tolstoy's deep sympathy for the “**private histories**” of people in chaotic times (Hannula 2021) encourages a view of global issues that never loses sight of the human stories on the ground.

Conclusion

War and Peace endures as an literary masterpiece not just for its grand scale, but for the profound historical and philosophical questions it raises. Tolstoy's recreation of the Napoleonic Wars captures the texture of history with unparalleled authenticity – from battlefield smoke to drawing-room intrigues – while also **demystifying the idea of singular heroes controlling fate** (Morson 2025). The novel's historical narrative and philosophical essays work in tandem to argue that history is **too complex for simple formulas**: it is shaped by contingency, vast collective forces, and the everyday actions of countless people (Morson 2025). Tolstoy's contemplation of determinism and free will further adds depth, suggesting that what we often celebrate as “greatness” in history may be largely the product of necessity and chance, tempered by the moral choices of individuals in their personal lives (Morson 2025) (Hannula 2021). These insights have made *War and Peace* a timeless reference point. Indeed, when we look at contemporary geopolitical situations – unstable peace and sudden wars, the rise and fall of leaders, and populations swept up by events – we find that Tolstoy's themes still **illuminate the human condition amid historical upheaval**. In a world still grappling with the interplay of war and peace, Tolstoy's epic invites us to reflect on the limits of human agency and the enduring need for humility and humanity in the face of forces larger than ourselves (BookishElf 2024) (Valdai Papers 2016).

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