

Some preliminary notes on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*

Translations

Because the chapters of *War and Peace* are short, it's easy to find passages by chapter number. The advantage of that is we don't need to read the same translation or edition.

You'll probably want a print copy. I keep a Post-It note stuck at the appropriate page in the Notes section, so that I can easily find my way to the relevant endnote. (Sometimes the notes record pointless squabbles between academics, but usually they're quite helpful.) You should be able to find used copies in good shape.

There are several published translations available.

- Constance Garnett – 1904 (Dover Thrift, etc., because it's public domain now)
- Aylmer and Louise Maude - 1922–23
 - Revised by Amy Mandelker – 2010 (Oxford)
- Rosemary Edmonds - 1957, revised 1978
- Ann Dunnigan - 1968
- Anthony Briggs – 2005 (Penguin)
- Andrew Bromfield (translation of the first completed draft, approx. 400 pages shorter than other English translations) - 2007
- Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky - 2007

Experts tell me that they are all reasonably accurate, so (except for Bromfield, which translates an early draft), your choice becomes a question of the style you prefer to read.

For those who like a more old-fashioned style, the Maude/Aylmer translation flows nicely—especially the 2010 version revised by Amy Mandelker. Some people really like the Briggs, too, which is more modern in its sentence structure and vocabulary.

Then there's the Pevear & Volokhonsky translation. It shoots for the most precise mirroring of Tolstoy's style, it's a pretty book to own, and it's what I taught from (because it's what my high school students chose – they always wanted the new and cool). It's fine, though clunky to my ear.

You can find side-by-side translations at the website [Translated \(tolstoytranslations\)](http://Translated.com) and opinions at [TolstoyTherapy](http://TolstoyTherapy.com). Any of the translations that make you happy will work.

The films

Most people see one of the film/television versions before they read the book. Obviously, it gives away the plot (if you care about that sort of thing) and can shape your vision of the characters (so it's nice to see more than one version). It's not a bad idea, in my view, to be familiar with the main characters and the through-line of the plot.

The films do highlight the soap-opera side of *War and Peace*—especially the Hollywood film. Reading the book is a different and more complex experience than watching it onscreen.

There are three major on-screen versions:

- The 1956 Hollywood movie with Audrey Hepburn, Mel Ferrer, and Henry Fonda. It's 3½ hours, so vastly condensed, and it focuses on the love story.
- The famous 1967 Russian version by Bondarchuk, with a cast of thousands for the battle scenes. It's at least seven hours, broken into four parts, and it's very Russian in its aesthetic: lots of chiaroscuro and Russian bass voices, lots of scenes with someone staring moodily off into the distance while a voice-over gives us his thoughts, etc. I like it well enough in small chunks. The problem, for an American audience, is that it makes the book seem very foreign.
- The 2016 BBC mini-series. It's in eight parts, stars many of the actors one recognizes from other BBC productions, and feels fresh in its take on the book. Lily James plays Natasha—not quite as soulful as I'd like but utterly charming. This version makes Elena Kuragin livelier, which makes her feel more attractive and dangerous—a good thing, in my view.

The main characters

War and Peace centers on two generations in the lives of four aristocratic families. The ages I list below are approximately correct for 1805. By 1812, they're all seven years older.

The Rostovs (mostly in Moscow)

Parents: Count Ilya and Countess Natalya

Children: Vera, **Nikolai** (20 when the book opens), **Natalya** (Natasha, about 12), Pyotr (Petya, about 8), plus their cousin Sophie (Sonya, about 15, a poor relation)

The Bolkonskys (mostly at their estate at Bald Hills)

Parent: Prince Nikolai

Children: **Andrei** (in his late 20s) and **Marya** (around 17?)

The Bezukhovs (mostly in St. Petersburg)

Parent: Count Kirill

Son (illegitimate): **Pyotr (Pierre)**, in his early 20s)

The Kuragins (mostly in St. Petersburg)

Parent: Prince Vassily

Children: **Anatole**, Ippolit (not important), **Elena** (Helene, around 18)

Russian names include a patronymic (father's name)—with an *-ich* or *-ovich* ending for males and an *-ovna* for females—plus lots of affectionate diminutives: Natalya often becomes Natalie or Natasha, Marya becomes Masha, and Pyotr becomes Petya or Petrushka, etc.

Believe it or not, the characters sort themselves out in your head after the first fifty pages.

Tolstoy is often said to have divided his own character (traits, characteristics, interests) into two parts, one part given to Andrei and the other to Pierre.

Getting through the opening chapters

War and Peace gets increasingly gripping as it rolls along. Some people prefer peace to war, or vice versa, but that's always a problem with a big work of historical fiction.

Many modern readers, however, bog down in the first fifty pages. (So many characters! So much historical knowledge assumed! A *cocktail party*, of all things—at a *political salon*!)

So, here's some background that makes those opening pages manageable.

I find it helpful to think of St. Petersburg as like New York City (the center of finance and high society) and Moscow as like Washington (dowdier, more old-fashioned, more historic).

The time is July 1805, the place St. Petersburg. Napoleon Bonaparte has recently conquered Italy and crowned himself Emperor; now he is about to march his armies eastward, into Poland and Austria. (Austria, a former ally of Napoleon's, has just joined Russia and Britain in an alliance against him) The political talk is about how dastardly Napoleon is (especially for his cold-blooded assassination of the Duc D'Enghien) and about Russia's decision to send troops to fight alongside the Austrian and Polish forces.

We start in the very heart of high society. The party is organized by a political hostess, Anna Pavlovna Scherer (canny, conservative, patriotic). Many aristocrats and diplomats circulate around the party, and almost all the major characters of the novel attend. Everyone speaks both French and Russian, and conversation moves easily between the languages.

Andrei Bolkhonsky (handsome, rich, intelligent) attends the party with his pretty young wife, Lise, who is very pregnant. His adorable young wife loves society & gossip while Andrei is bored by them—so bored that he has signed up to fight against Napoleon. Lise is frightened that he's going off to war and upset that he's sending her to live with his sister and difficult, irascible father in the country.

Pierre Bezukhov (large, awkward, idealistic) also attends, recently returned from Paris, stuffed full of liberal ideas and admiration for Napoleon. He knows Andrei well from before his trip to France; while growing up as the illegitimate son of one of the richest men in Russia, he also used to hang around the Rostov household, in Moscow.

Prince Vassily Kuragin is at the party, too, with all three of his adult children (handsome, selfish creatures of high society).

There will also be some not-very-important byplay with Princess Anna Mikhaiolovna Drubetskoy (who is related to the Kuragins and Pierre, on one side, and to the Rostovs, on the other). She is widowed and relatively poor; she's trying to get her son Boris into an elite position with the army, which requires influence in high places.

HAPPY READING! Get in touch if you have questions or just want to vent.