

# The Cossacks

*L. Tolstoy*

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As already noted<sup>1</sup> I brought along to a conference in Williamstown in the summer of 1975 a collection of novellas by Tolstoy as well as 'War and Peace', all of them published in the Black Classics series of Penguin (which at the time provided me with the bulk of the bulk of literature I bought and read at the time. Of the three novellas only *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* stand out in my memory, and not pleasantly so as it was never meant to be pleasant. In particular *The Cossacks* by far the longest of the three did not leave any impression on me, at least no conscious one; and reading it now, inspired to do so<sup>2</sup> it does not ring a bell, except possibly the references to the tight-fitting smocks worn by the young nubile women.

This is vintage Tolstoy and on the very first pages you feel the touch of the master. He evokes masterly the joyful expectations entertained by the protagonist Dmitri Andreyevich Olenin as he sets out with his servant Vanyusha to join a regiment in the Caucasus. It is Moscow a cold winter night during which Olenin has said goodbye to some friends, drinking and talking, while the servants outside are freezing, impatient to get going. Splendid fellows, Olenin thinks of his companions, buoyant by his own happiness and contentment feeling a boundless love for all and everyone around him. He is a young man, twenty-four in fact, the same age as Tolstoy himself when he set out to write the book in 1852<sup>3</sup>.

He is twenty-four and life had been very easy on him, and as a consequence he has never accomplished anything at all, except squandered a lot of inherited money and led the life of the young man around town, in fact an early Russian version of Wodehouse's creation Bertie Wooster. Our young protagonist vaguely feels that his life up to now has been unsatisfactory, although he cannot put his finger on it. Has it been because he has not really been in love, nor felt any real passion identifying with a quest, not even choosing a career. In short he has not really lived. But rather than look for that failure in himself he projects it to the setting in which he has grown up and thereby putting the blame elsewhere. Now he is heading for the Caucasus and that will be a real setting worthy of his ambitions and romantic day dreams. In modern jargon, he is out to find himself by cutting all ties to his former life and face his future afresh. This is of course a hackneyed situation often treated in the literature; thus hardly original, but of course by not being original it is universal and bound to potentially interest anyone. A work of art has little

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<sup>1</sup> In the previous essay on Tolstoy and the Novel

<sup>2</sup> by the same book by Bayley footnoted above

<sup>3</sup> It would take him ten years to complete it, not that his work on it was steady, on the contrary it must have been intermittent often abandoned in frustration and disgust. Tolstoy was never satisfied with it, according to critics such as Bayley - yet again a reference to the previous review, but even when Tolstoy is not up to par with his subsequent work (*War and Peace* was to be started after this novella was finished) he is a master

to do with the originality of the theme or plot, but all in its execution.

So here we have this rather nice fellow (it is easy to be a nice fellow if life has been easy on you) filled with the boundless energy of youth and concomitant good ruddy health. The kind of energy that is yours only once when you are young and hence have to be uniquely taken advantage of, as the opportunities will not return. This abstractly felt premonition comes in startling contrast with the sense that your future is boundless and infinite, that your life has hardly begun on a journey that will go on for almost ever; in fact for ever. So while the abstract sense gives a certain disquieting urgency, the second makes you feel that you have all the time in the world to accomplish things. So what Tolstoy manages to convey is the conviction of being on the verge of a new far more satisfying life in which no longer any mistakes will be made and thus none of the remorse that follow them will mar your contentment. In short a life of undiluted happiness, because ultimately what point is there to life except your own personal happiness? Thus our hero of sorts is about to confront life no differently from how he has confronted it up to now, but with the exception of an exciting change of setting, because happiness would of course be unbearable in the long run if it was not provided any distractions.

We are made to sit in with him in his sledge as it negotiates the snowy streets of Moscow and to partake of his happy thoughts, and thus to become privy to the adventure that beckons him. He is driven through unfamiliar streets and he thinks that those are the streets that only those embarking on an adventure such as his will be lead through. In short your ultimate destiny colors your present location, as if this would actually be part of your goal. And the further he gets from Moscow and thus from his former life, the greater is the excitement and the lighter the heart. Caucasus is romantically connected to mountains, and when he catches sight of them at first, partly hidden by clouds their contours softened, they disappoint him, but when a day or so later sees them snow white and clearly, he suddenly is stricken by their reality, their undeniable palpability, the very palpability of a dream of glory, they become for him his new destiny, the symbol for his new life. Mountains are situated between the earth and the sky, partaking of both, inviting to be climbed, just as dreams are exhortations to achieve.

The narrative is temporarily broken off and instead Tolstoy treats us to the tenor of a Cossack village, as if he is presenting an anthropological report almost at the level of a tourist brochure. We have all heard of Cossacks, we have seen them sitting and dance on stage, arms crossed legs kicked, with funny hats and big boots. Who are they? Tolstoy has no ambition to give the reader a deeper historical background, it is enough to sketch the presence of an exotic people, with their own language, culture and history, setting them apart from the Russian colonizers and imperialists, as Russians were just as much colonizers as their Western European counterparts, with the difference that their colonies were not situated overseas but adjacent to their own country and within its extended and steadily extendable borders. The denomination of Cossacks refers to an East-Slavic and Christian tribe, or tribes, of semi-independent people occupying the southern borders of the growing Russian Empire serving as a buffer to Nomadic Islamic tribes of predominantly Turkic origin. Like those they were part of a culture centered on the horse and taking place on the Steppes, in the case of Cossacks predominantly north of the Black Sea. The name, of Turkic origin, refers to 'free men', loosely organized in so called hosts with a pronounced

warrior culture led by hetmans. To a Russian of the mid 19th century it was like the Wild West, and the account of Tolstoy, with his references to carts drawn by bullocks on muddy paths, makes you think of rural villages of Modern India depleted of modern gadgets; or, as suggested, American Indian settlements. Thus the kind of un-civilized and primitive life which has been the lot of the great majority of humans throughout history, and which to civilized people hence appears natural and thus liable to be romanticized, as is indeed done by Olenin.

The context of the story is the pacifying expeditions of the Russian army against hostile Caucasian tribes such as the Chechens, which are Muslims, speaking a Caucasian language<sup>4</sup>, and genetically Western Europeans rather than Middle Eastern or Eastern Europeans. In the story they are referred to as *abreks*. To the Chechens it means 'avenger' or 'brave man', in Russian, on the other hand, it denotes a bandit, or in modern parlance - terrorist<sup>5</sup>. In the story the *abreks* are hunted and killed as wild animals, with the same reluctant if sincere respect that traditional hunters have for their prey.

The plot of the story is simple, and involves just a few people playing supporting roles to the trio of Olenin, the Cossack warrior Luka and the young woman Marianka. Olenin is being billeted with Marianka and her parents. They are relatively well-to-do in the village, with a prosperous farm involving cultivation of wine grapes, and the father in addition being a teacher brings prestige. At first they are suspicious of the Russian soldier, but as he is gentle and polite and above all have a lot of money and pays well they tolerate him in what he perceives as disinterested friendliness, which of course makes him feel very good and appreciated. Then there is the old giant of a man, the uncle of Luka, who has lived a life of manly exploits Cossack style, hunting big prey, having many love-affairs and killing enemies (*abreks*). Of the first two he speaks freely and boastfully, on the third he does not want to be reminded, and resents it when Olenin so does out of misplaced admiration. To kill a man may be inevitable but only in special circumstances which are regrettable. He sees Olenin as a perfect victim on which he could sponge, meaning getting free wine. The two of them strike up a friendship of sorts, with the elder one taking his young protegee on hunting trips in the vicinity, trips that Olenin soon will take on his own, mostly hunting pheasants. He is very happy and content (can he really make a distinction between the two?) leading such a life and comes to the hardly original conclusion that real happiness can only be achieved by living for others and not for yourself. A conclusion of which he is proud and something he decides to make his principle from now on.

The drama of the story consists of the love triangle that inevitably forms. Olenin, who feels himself above the usual habits of Russian soldiers to play and dally with the young women, keeps himself aloof and resents the presence of an old acquaintance and fellow soldier - Beletsky - billeted in the same village, pursuing the conventional rôle of a Russian soldier and arranging small drinking parties with giggling young women, parties which Olenin rather have nothing to do with, yet feeling pressured to attend. However Olenin

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<sup>4</sup> More specifically Nakh belonging to the North-East Caucasian, neither Indo-European nor Turkic, the dominating languages in the surrounding region

<sup>5</sup> The Chechen rebellion against Russia continued throughout Soviet times, the last one to get killed was as late as 1976, and the victim a man of seventy. Then of course the rebellion resumed after the disintegration of the Soviet empire

cannot but help being stricken by young Marianka, whose fresh, virginal beauty, with its mixture of male strength and female voluptuousness coupled with her air of contemptuous indifference to him, cannot but intrigue him more and more. Her cold inaccessibility lifts her above his erstwhile fantasies of exotic maidens, and instills in him a respect which makes him shy and awkward. Beletsky encourages him to pursue her, and it is for this reason alone he accepts invitations to Beletsky's parties in the hope to meet her and maybe even exchange a few words with him. She is not yet betrothed to Luka, the real Cossack who at the beginning of the story earns his spurs from cold-bloodedly shooting an abrek swimming under the cover of a tree trunk across the river Terek. They were on the outlook for boars, but an abrek might do as well. He is the quintessential Cossack, manly, brave, given to drink, horse stealing, and dallying with girls feeling entitled to his innocent fun. Why Marianka can you not make me happy, obviously pleading with her to sleep with him. Marianka stays off his crude advances with a mixture of girlish delight and disgust, but of course they are fated by parents and the extended society to get married. But Olenin gets more and more obsessed by her, eating her with his eyes, as anyone can see and notice, and as she seems to give him some friendly encouragement he eventually fancies himself falling in love with her and imagining that he cannot live without her. Initially viewing Luka with faint envy, when he tries to win his friendship by gifting him with a horse he feels he could spare. An act, incidentally, which puts Luka in an uncomfortable situation, puzzled as to why such a stranger should give him such an expensive gift and wonders what dirty tasks he may have been bribed to be expected do in the future. Luka later sells the gift and gets instead, one wonders how, a much more valuable horse (thereby subtly or maybe not so subtly sending a message as to the worth of the gift to the giver). So instead of being an invitation to friendship it puts Luka on his guard and cools him more and more towards the soldier and intruder. Meanwhile Olenin's envy heats up to a jealousy that burns him more and more thinking of Luka as a rival, unworthy of his bride to be. Finally Olenin can no longer contain his love for the girl, after having turned it over and over in his mind, deciding that it is pure and nothing to be ashamed of, he professes it to her, asking her, nay even pleading her to marry him. She is amused and plays along, no doubt being intrigued and amused by his ardor, taking his hands into her own strong and powerful ones and marveling how fine and delicate his are. One surmises that she thinks of them as not the hands of a real man but of a woman. She goes as far as to suggesting that he talk to her father the next day. Olenin is thrown into bliss and can as a consequence hardly sleep during the night. But the next morning there is commotion inside the village, he finds some Cossacks on their horses obviously rather excited. It turns out that a contingent of abreks has been spotted approaching the village, and now a sufficiently large counter-contingent needs to be assembled. Out of curiosity Olenin decides to join them. They all submit themselves under the command of Luka, although he is not the formal leader, that part being played by a Russian cornet. They soon come up against the abreks and get closer and closer to them under the cover of a cart. This is all viewed by Olenin, who decides that there really is no need for him to join in the fray having already proved his courage in an assignment a few days ago, and besides feeling so happy. In the end they massacre them all, but one of them, whom Luka tries to catch alive (incidentally the brother of the abrek he had killed in the river Terek, manages to wrench himself free momentarily and

firing his pistol to wound Luka seriously before being shot himself. Luka is brought back to the village, apparently dying. Herbal doctors from the mountains are summoned, who cares about Russian ones? Back in the village Olenin encounters Marianka, she looks at him with cold hatred, and when he tries to plead with her she threatens him physically and he realizes that all is lost. She will never be able to love him, that he is in fact nothing to her. He had tried to become a part of their community, but his efforts were doomed from the start, obviously no one really cared for him, he was tolerated only as a source of cash. In the raid against the abrek he was just a mere voyeur, a peeping Tom, watching the skirmish and the massacre from a safe distance, not at all part of it. No wonder he can only inspire contempt and disgust in view of a real tragedy involving real men. His forage into the Caucasus was but an impossible dream with no basis in reality. His attempt to merge with primitive and hence natural people were doomed. Their lives might indeed have been more natural than his own, but they formed a community to which he had no point of entry. We never find out how things went with Luka, most likely he died, perhaps by the herbal doctors; but who cares outside the Cossack village from which Olenin has been barred. It is a tragedy which has no ties to Olenin's life, the life to which he will return, and no matter how artificial is the only one that can become real to him.

The critic Bayley dismisses Olenin as a character, he is too feeble, too uninteresting and static and unchanging to boot, to fill the rôle of a real narrator. And the killing of the abreks are scenes made without any attempt at logical explanations, only inserted to allow the author to display his powers of description. And indeed he is a master of the description of hunts and warfare. Why could not the abreks easily have escaped rather than being massacred? This is a question many readers can ask and to which Tolstoy himself no doubt would have found relevant. Logical gaps which may not effect the general mood of the story but prevent us to engage more deeply with it. Maybe this is why the story did not make a lasting impression on me? Reading the story almost fifty years ago was very different from now. Then I read it as an innocent reader taking it on as it was, a story to be entertained and maybe also instructed by. Now almost fifty years later I read it on a meta level, as a specimen of a writer's craft. In spite of its flaws, or maybe because of them, it has had much influence on later writers, according to Bayley, in particular Hemingway who writes in the manner of English translations of the story, in particular the reference not having to take part, having already proved his valor, and being too happy anyway.

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