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Today I, feeling weak, read Thoreau and was spiritually uplifted.—Leo Tolstoy
The Journals

Before Leo Tolstoy in the 1890s, one can hardly find any documented trace of Thoreau's influence on Russian culture. Even his name evidently was not present among the names known to the public in Russia.

Highly interesting and important is the fact that Thoreau's work was noticed by Leo Tolstoy. With characteristic keenness of mind, Tolstoy constantly kept up with the latest achievements of Western culture. Early in the 1890s he read Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" and told his friend and publisher Vladimir Chertkov that a translation of that work into Russian was desirable¹; the essay was duly translated.²

Tolstoy's interest in Thoreau's works deepened with time. Leo Tolstoy saw the American thinker as his philosophical ally. This is also demonstrated by frequent references to Thoreau in Tolstoy's correspondence and numerous quotations from his works included by Tolstoy in collections of great men's aphorisms, such as *The Circle of Reading*, *The Path of Life*, *Thoughts for Everyday*.

The affinity of the ideas of Tolstoy and Thoreau is the subject of a separate and far-reaching study, so far not tackled by anyone. On becoming acquainted with Thoreau's ideas, Tolstoy undoubtedly paid the greatest attention to the theory of non-violent resistance, largely, if not fully, coinciding with his own doctrine rejecting violent resistance to social and moral evil. For this reason, Tolstoy especially marked out Thoreau's "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience." Thoreau's Romantic naturalism apparently left Tolstoy quite indifferent. Aymler Maude, the English Tolsoyan who had several personal conversations with the Russian writer, thus expressed Tolstoy's assessment of Thoreau: "Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience* he selects as the best of all Thoreau's writings. Its great merit lies in its clear statement of man's right to repudiate and refuse in any way to support, a Government which acts immorally . . . Thoreau was disinclined to devote himself to politics, but was also disinclined to support the Government of which he disapproved. . . . *Civil Disobedience* . . . may yet prove to be the source from which a telling protest against war, or other evils enforced by the Government, will spring."³

Traditionally, scholars limit the affinity between Thoreau and Tolstoy exclusively to the idea of nonviolence. But the fact is that that idea followed from more general philosophical premises of the two thinkers. To what extent

Tolstoy's Main House at Yasnaya Polyana

Tolstoy's Villa Thoreau at Yasnaya Polyana

Photos courtesy of Nikita Pokrovsky

did these premises coincide? The problem has yet to be investigated. Although a certain similarity between the views of Thoreau and Tolstoy on morality, religion and science can be said to have been already established this statement can only be made with reservations and qualifications. Thus Tolstoy's secretary, V. Bulgakov, noted in his journal: "In the evening, [Tolstoy] said that he had reread Thoreau's *Walden*, and that he had liked this book this time round no more than before. 'Affecting originality, challenging, restive,' said Lev Nikolayevitch about Thoreau."⁴ In the same year 1810, however, Tolstoy's publishing house *Posrednik* produced the most complete edition of *Walden* in Russian.

At Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana estate (near Tula), now a prosperous museum, visitors can see in his study the 1904 London edition of *Walden* among the books in Tolstoy's daily use. According to some accounts, Thoreau and his moral doctrine were the subject of constant discussions among the people close to Tolstoy. A secluded little building on the estate, the so-called "Apple Orchard Pavilion," which was used as a home hospital for the sick peasants to whom Tolstoy attended, was renamed in Tolstoy's family "Villa Thoreau," partly due to its resemblance to Thoreau's Walden cabin.

A study of Leo Tolstoy's attitude to Thoreau's philosophy contributes equally to a deeper understanding of the work of both thinkers. A great deal in this respect can be gained from the study of Tolstoy's archives and well-preserved library of Yasnaya Polyana, in which many books in foreign languages have not yet been adequately described—and there are great numbers of books by the nineteenth-century American philosophers and writers among them.

After the October Revolution of 1917 the name of Thoreau vanished for decades from the scene in the Soviet Union. After the Revolution Thoreau turned out to be an uncomfortable figure for the state authorities in Russia/Soviet Union—no matter what orientation the state had. Only in 1960 did the first modern edition of *Walden* come out in the Academy Press. However, all Soviet scholars (not many of them) who attempted to write about Thoreau confronted a serious moral dilemma. Ideologically they could (actually were allowed to) express some positive attitudes towards Thoreau's concept of nature but not toward his view on the state. True, rather often Thoreau was portrayed in Russia during those years as a severe critic of the American government but not of any other government. His nonviolence looked dangerous or at least suspicious for any authority, including the Soviet one. In other words, the Soviet reader could compromise with Thoreau's nature writings at most but not with his political philosophy.

However, the paradox of the situation was that many people in educated circles in Soviet society were quite familiar not only with the name of Thoreau but with all of his ideas as well. Sociologically it produced one of many paradoxes of that totalitarian time: nothing of the opposition writings was published but almost everything was read or at least known. In addition there was a huge interest in non-traditional and oppositional writers such as Thoreau. From my personal experience I can conclude that in 1974 when I proposed to write the first Ph.D. dissertation on Thoreau in Russia, there were those at Moscow State University and beyond who energetically supported my decision as well as those who criticized it, but everyone knew perfectly well who Thoreau was.

It was also indicative of those gloomy times in the Soviet Union known today as "Brezhnev's dream of reason" that people used historical figures like Thoreau for maintaining a free and not so free dialogue on up-to-date issues, i.e. personal independence (from the authorities), free thinking, freedom of expression. This was a vital part of symbolic dual thinking and acting typical of that period of time—the use of an Aesopian language of indirect hints. In this sense, Thoreau was our "language," and his heritage demonstrated its unprecedented potential for the inspiration of positive and constructive radicalism regardless of time and circumstances. In the same line it was illustrative of that time that my dissertation (very positive about Thoreau) successfully passed the committee, and all its opponents overnight became its sincere advocates.

The years of Perestroika of the 1990s with its almost unlimited freedom and chaos in social structures brought into being another paradox related to Thoreau. Against all possible anticipations, Thoreau did not win the struggle for Russia as one could expect. His ideas rather soon lost their oppositional and rebellious charm. Life in Russia itself became more radical and rebellious than what Thoreau could, figuratively speaking, convey through centuries and generations to people of Russia. On the surface, as one can see, almost no new dissertations, courses of study, and publications by or on Thoreau have appeared in Russia over the last years. He is not under any ban, of course, but perhaps he is no longer of any substantial interest for younger men and women.

One may assume that there is no niche for him on the scene in this country. As a moral writer and a fighter against property rights Thoreau demonstrated in his time everything opposite to what the contemporary Russian society, with its futile race for luxury and almost Freudian cult of wealth, is about. As a proponent of high morality, individual freedom of choice and self-reliance, Thoreau again does not match the current public mood in Russia. The burden of freedom seems to be too heavy for people. They prefer to delegate their freedoms and rights to higher authorities in order to be left alone with their daily problems of material survival. Furthermore, Russians today, being too tired of the unmanageable freedom of the press, express their willingness to re-install censorship of any kind. In this sense the public opinion in Russia today, I may guess, would definitely and almost unanimously approve Thoreau's arrest if it would have occurred again (especially in the condition when there is the corrupt war going on at Russia's southern borders these days—almost a carbon replica of the war with Mexico in Thoreau's days).

All in all, Thoreau is a hero without an audience in today's Russia exactly the same way as he was in his country in his own days. But countries grow and resurrect from within. And the popularity of the heroes grows simultaneously. And what has been Thoreau's public loneliness in America in his time turned out to be his wide fame today. The same phenomenon hopefully will take place in Russia some day.

After I finalized my paper and sent it off, by pure chance and on the same day I got access to a personal letter written by Professor Tatiana Venediktova of Moscow State University, a long-term friend and colleague of mine. She writes to her correspondent in Concord, MA, "I teach *Walden* every year to third or fourth year students of the two major universities of Moscow: Moscow State University and Russian State Humanities' University. Most of them major in literature, some in history, some others yet (this year) in philosophy. Usually after discussions in class I invite them to write papers-- to reflect as best

they can on their response to the text as readers-- and thus combine whatever textual analysis they can produce with some soul-searching as contemporary citizens socialized in the Russian cultural tradition. I treasure some of these papers, wonderfully personal and original, always stimulating further discussion. I take it as proof enough of the fact that Thoreau has something to say to the present generation of young Russians--he teaches them through intellectual provocation and active questioning rather than "professing" (which would have been his own preference, no doubt)."

I thought it would be interesting to people outside Russia to learn about both perspectives on the subject in question. Professor Tatiana Venediktova definitely develops a much more positive and happier perspective on Thoreau in Russia today, which must evidently be closer to the foundations of the American spirit. I see it differently due to my present social analysis stance. For example, I have had an occasion to read some of the students' papers mentioned above. I found in them almost nothing but a juggling of post-modern reflections of the empty self having nothing to do with Thoreau. But of course tastes differ.

In any event the truth must or might be somewhere half-way between our opposite views.

Notes

¹*Gudziy, N.K. Tolstoy I Thoreau. Russko-yevropeyskiye literturnye svyazi (Tolstoy and Thoreau. Russian-European Literary Links.) Moscow-Leningrad, 1966.*

²The Russian translation was published in England at Leo Tolstoy's expense. Only a small number of copies got into Russia, as the print-run was confiscated by the customs. For this reason, the work was not too well known in Russia. Before that, in 1887, part of *Walden* was translated into Russian and published in *Novoye Vremiya (New Times)* under the title *V lesu (In the Woods)*.

³Baturinsky, V.P. Aymler Moude on Leo Tolstoy, *Minuvshie Gody (L'Annes Passes)*, 1908, issue no. 9, p.104. (In Russian).

⁴Bulgakov, V.L. *L.N.Tolstoy v poslediy god yego zhizni (Leo Tolstoy in the Last Year of His Life)*. Moscow, 1957. 261.