Tolstoy in the 21st century

A new translation of *War & Peace* brings Tolstoy's great work to today's readers. **Sarah Kent** talks to its translator, Professor Tony Briggs

Professor Tony Briggs has published widely on many aspects of Russian literature, theatre and music and is the UK's leading specialist on Alexander Pushkin. He currently holds the positions of Professor Emeritus at Birmingham University and Senior Research Fellow at Bristol University.

He has recently completed a translation of *War & Peace* for the Penguin Classics series. This is the first new translation of Tolstoy's masterpiece for around 50 years and it was launched on 1 September 2005.

Professor Briggs talked to ITI's Sarah Kent about the work behind this important new translation.

How did you got the commission to translate *War & Peace*?

I was asked by Penguin to do a report for them on all the volumes of Tolstoy that they'd published – there were about 12 of them. They wanted to know which ones were still good valid translations, which needed new translations or new introductions, and whether the stories were grouped properly. I sent in a report that included recommendations about the novels. They had just done *Anna Karenina*, but the other two novels were *War & Peace* and *Resurrection*.

I recommended that they needed new translations of these two works, and – as an afterthought – I said that I'd like to be considered as a translator of *War & Peace*. I sent in some sample chapters; one thing led to another, and I got the commission.

In the case of *War & Peace*, there were several previous translations. You had to take those into consideration?

Oh rather! I've got copies of all of them. There are seven or eight altogether, depending on what you count as a translation.

The first three came out in the 19th century. The very first one was translated from a French version of *War & Peace* in 1886, and really is a very inadequate translation, though it was still being republished until recently. The next two came out at the end of the 19th century, both by Americans. These are commonly disparaged by later translators, but I think they are really rather good, especially if you think of the limitations at that time. (There weren't so many good dictionaries, and that sort of thing). They're pretty sound overall. They do read in a very archaic kind of way now, so nobody would think of republishing them, but they were a good foundation to build on.

At the beginning of the 20th century a translation came out by Constance Garnett, which raised the standard. This is really a very good version. She writes with fluency and has a sense of style. She was an excellent woman who translated almost all the major Russian works, an enormously important pioneer in introducing Russian literature to the Western world.

Sarah Kent is Joint Coordinator of the Western Regional Group and has been a freelance translator since 1992, working from Spanish, Portuguese & Catalan into English

So her translation was a big departure from the ones that had gone before?

It was a big improvement on the ones that had gone before, but it was itself soon transcended by a translation by Louise and Aylmer Maude. They were people who actually knew Tolstoy. Louise Maude was born in Russia and, I think, up there, so she was bilingual. Their knowledge of Russian was superlatively good and they had the advantage of talking to Tolstoy himself. He endorsed their translation personally and said 'Better translators could not be invented.' So ostensibly you would think you cannot move any further forward from that ... but indeed you can.

That translation would have had Tolstoy's stamp of authority...

Oh, it did, and still does. This has become the definitive translation, virtually mistake-free, and it is the one you have to take issue with and change and supersede if you think that could and should be done...

All the translations done in the 20th century are sound. They are largely readable and give a good impression of what Tolstoy was all about. But notice one thing: apart from the two American professors at the end of the 19th century (and we do discount those now), all of them are done by women. We have Constance Garnett, Louise Maude, Rosemary Edmonds and Anne Dunnigan. I'm not disparaging women as such, but I think a man's touch will be interestingly different.

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And the most recent translation, by Rosemary Edmonds, which your translation replaces, is approximately 50 years old.

Yes, for lots of reasons it needs to be superseded. It is an interesting fact that a man has now attempted this translation.

Also, I came in on the end of National Service, which was where I learned my Russian and became an interpreter, but before that I actually did some square-bashing, we did have to suffer things like tear-gas assaults, and I learned how to shoot a rifle and a Bren gun, and we got a decent glimpse of what it is like to be a military person. I lived for weeks on end in a barracks with other new recruits, so I got at least a direct if rather superficial knowledge of what army life was about. I think that fact alone is going to influence my translation.

But the biggest point of all is this: all these people belong not only to one sex, but also to one particular stratum of society, the educated class. That means that they're highly educated, cultivated and talented people, and I don't want to disparage them in any way. They know Russian and their English is perfect, but they begin to lose track of how English should sound as we move gradually down the social scale and they don't adjust their language. Even in neutral narrative passages, you'll find they will always insist upon the niceties of English. I'll give you an example: There is a moment in the novel where Pierre Bezukhov suddenly unexpectedly catches sight of Natasha, the girl he's in love with, in the middle of Moscow and he says in Russian, 'Eto ne mozhet byt' ona!' All the previous translations say, 'That cannot possibly be she!' Now, this is technically correct (she, the nominative pronoun). It's just that 95 per cent of the population don't say that, and didn't say it then, and everybody now would say, 'It can't be her!' This is a single tiny example, but you get one or two like it on every page – the English that they use is upper class educated English, and it shouldn't always be. The cumulative effect of this is strong; it is as if someone rather posh was reading a story to you. As compared with the earlier translators I have the opposite advantage, having emerged from a working-class, north-country background.

I'm beginning to develop an idea that English, as a language, is more class-conscious than Russian. In Russian the same sort of language is used by all classes in society. Admittedly, the things that are said will be more refined in the upper classes and rougher in the lower classes, but the language itself is pretty well the same. I'm not sure this is the case in English. With us it is probably still true that the way you speak to some

PHOTOGRAPH: SARAH KENT

Professor Tony Briggs took two years to complete his translation of *War & Peace*, the first for some 50 years

extent determines your social position.

Tolstoy himself was writing from an aristocratic viewpoint, but you say this doesn't come across in the language as strongly as it would in English?
Only when he's dealing with the aristocrats. I think what I've managed to do is democratise the language used in an English version of *War & Peace* in a way that hasn't been done before.

There is also an element of modernisation, but you've got to be very careful about that. The best explanation of the need to modernise are examples of phrases which would now be rather embarrassing. Simple things like, 'Andrey spent the evening with a few gay friends' – you could say that 50 years ago, but you can't say it now without implying something quite unintended. And there is a moment when two ladies are talking about a Russian general who made a bit of a fool of himself in front of his men, and one says to the other 'My dear, you should have seen how the general exposed himself on the parade ground!' – you can't say that any more. In one of the previous translations it even says '... he ejaculated with a grimace'.

All of these phrases have come to have slightly unfortunate overtones, so you gently modernise them. On the other hand you've got to be very careful. At the beginning of the novel, Pierre is banned from Moscow because he's been involved in hooliganism – we would call it that now. But the word 'hooliganism' didn't exist at that time and I don't think you could use it now. You can't use phrases like, 'It was as if things were moving in slow motion', because that idea comes from the cinema, so it would be anachronistic. Another word I felt I couldn't use was 'logistics' because it came into English too late to be acceptable.

You've got to be very careful about modernisation, and the object of the exercise is not to make it all sound like a modern English writer with snappy language and that kind of thing. We don't want Tolstoy to read like Jeffrey Archer or Barbara Cartland. So those are the two things I think I may have been able to improve on. I've tried to extend the range of expressiveness in the narrative and particularly in the dialogue.

But on the other hand there are archaic terms relating to clothing, horses and carriages, and particularly to warfare.
Nothing you can do about that; you shouldn't even try. If it's the name of a type of carriage, you put it in. Occasionally, if something archaic or exotic comes up we've had to put footnotes in. Penguin and I had a long series of disputes about this.

I wanted to minimise the number of footnotes because I think they can be a distraction, although I accept that a number are needed because the novel can be a bit confusing if you don't explain, for example, who Speransky or Arakcheyev are. Penguin wanted them, but they're endnotes not footnotes, so people can choose whether to read them or not.

With regard to the endnotes, do you feel that it's necessary to establish the historical context where the novel relates to real events and real people?
Yes. At the start of the novel there are historical events afoot a knowledge of which you will not be able to take for granted now in anybody and, therefore, it's necessary to explain. I've done it both in some of the front material in the book and also in one or two endnotes explaining what Napoleon was doing. For instance, in the opening sentence he's referred to as 'Buonaparte'. This is Napoleon's early name showing his Corsican origin, a crude low-class name which he changed to Bonaparte. So Tolstoy's Russians – who hate him – refer to him deliberately by that name; this is an insult, and it needs a note. There is a nuance of language here which is worth drawing to the attention of the reader. The use of Napoleon's name is a disparaging reminder of his common origins, which he liked to forget later in his life.

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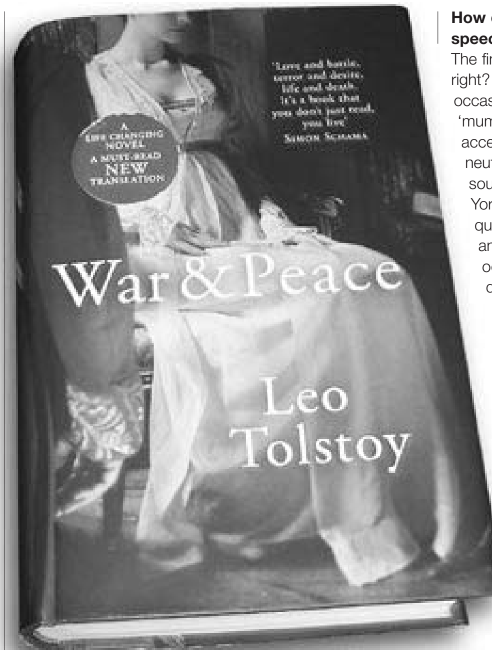
And you've included some maps in the book.
Yes, there are three major battles in the book: Shöngrabern, Austerlitz and the big battle of Borodino, which is the military climax of the book. I felt it was necessary to put in a map of the surrounding countryside because they're all described in some detail and it's worthwhile showing the layout of the forces. Tolstoy did it himself for Borodino, he visited the area to have a look around and he drew a map showing the disposition that was planned the night before and the actual disposition of the forces on the day of the battle, because one of the redoubts had been taken the previous evening. So there is an explanation in the map of how the logistics of the battle worked out.

The characters represent every level of society; what did you take as a reference when you were deciding how the different voices should come across, especially since much of the story is developed through dialogue?
Indeed it is! There are more than 500 characters in *War & Peace*. They're all different and there is the entire class spectrum from Napoleon and the Emperor Alexander down to the commonest and most vulgar peasants and soldiers.

The present translations tend to use more or less the same language. So my objective was to differentiate the tone and register of the language according to the person who is speaking. The aristocrats will tend to speak in a very well constructed, rhetorical form of language. That's easy to translate, you just do it directly. But as you go further down the scale you'll have to depart slightly more from the literal translation in order to make it sound right in English. There is a moment in a redoubt when in the heat of the battle a cannon ball comes over and takes a man's leg off. And there's a very funny phrase in Russian: 'Ekh! Neskladnaya!' says someone nearby. That phrase implies femininity because it's using a feminine ending, and has connotations of awkwardness or nastiness. The translations offered before now are ludicrous: 'Oh! You brazen hussy!' or 'You awkward baggage!' Soldiers never talk like that to each other. I would put something like 'Lousy bitch!' There's one moment right at the end of the novel when the Russians have morally won and the French are in retreat and most of the Russians want to go careering after them and pursue them out of the country, and their commander Kutuzov thinks it wiser to dissuade them and says to his men: 'So I'm here to tell you that you shouldn't go chasing after these people. But, if you do decide you want to do that, well all I have to say is, nobody invited them here...' – and he then says something very rude indeed, which is indicated in Russian because the first letters are given, which translates 'f*** your mother into her coffin'.

This is about the worst expression you can get in Russian, and Tolstoy dares to put the initial letters of the four words concerned. It's unmistakable what he's saying. I'm astonished it ever got published! But you want something equally powerful in English, so I've put, 'If you do feel you want to chase them, so be it. Nobody invited them here, the fucking bastards!' It's never been possible to put that in before.



The new Penguin hardback of *War & Peace* (£16.99), translated by Professor Tony Briggs, has already won much acclaim from reviewers

How did you decide on the speech for the rural characters?
The final test is: does it sound quite right? For the country characters on occasions I've had to put in a kind of 'mummerset' brogue, a vague rural accent, but you have to keep it neutral because you don't want it sounding like East Anglia or Yorkshire or Somerset. But it's quite possible to do it that way, and you have to judge on every occasion whether you've got it quite right.

What approach did you take to the passages in French?
We resolved this at Penguin with some difficulty. The very first edition of *War & Peace* had very long passages in French. But for the second edition Tolstoy revised his idea, and he actually said, 'Since I'm writing a novel in Russian why should I write a bilingual novel?' He cut out nearly all the French, leaving little bits here and there. Since then there have been tremendous arguments about which is the valid decision – should there be French in it or not? I think the overriding factor is this: those early translations at the beginning of the 20th century could count on a readership that knew French, so you could put some French in and pretty well guarantee that anyone reading Tolstoy could also read French. You certainly can't do that now.

Although French is taught more widely it's not taught to a very high level, and when you think that this translation will sell all over America and Australia, the number of people there able to read any serious French would be very small indeed. So what do you do? The Maudes' translation cut out nearly all the French, and when they did include a bit they put a translation at the bottom of the page. I wanted to cut out all the French and I finally persuaded Penguin that I had enough 'evidence' for this: Tolstoy revised his own edition and cut out nearly all the French, the Maudes worked on their translation and put almost no French back in, and Tolstoy approved of that.

So we have the best translator and the author agreeing that, though it included a lot of French to begin with, it need not necessarily do so now.

The question of which language you spoke was a feature of the society of the time.
Yes, and Tolstoy himself makes a little ploy of this, so I've followed suit. It is important for the reader to know that many of the conversations between the top aristocrats would have been in French, but there are ways of indicating which language they are speaking in the story.

In the opening paragraph of the novel the aristocratic hostess Anna Scherer is speaking French to her guest, Prince Vasily, and her words have often been left in French, but my translation is in English followed by: 'These words were spoken (in French) by Anna Scherer...', so that resolves the problem. I have made the language as easy and normal as possible, but sometimes it's important that the reader should know that it is in French, so on rare occasions I've added a phrase such as, 'This was spoken in French'.

There were evidently a number of decisions you had to take about your translation strategy; how would you characterise your fundamental approach?
My general translation strategy begins with the reader. I want to recreate for the reader the same kind of impression that the Russian reader would get from reading the novel. That's my aim. It follows from that that the English should sound natural, normal and right for all occasions and characters. If you start from a different strategy – and it's quite common for translators to start off with something else in mind, for instance the aim of exactitude, preciseness of translation – I think you will run into trouble because you'll end up with a form of English that is not quite right. Here's an example: In *Anna Karenina* one character asks another: 'Did you study in Kiev?' To which the answer is 'Yes' or 'Yes I did'. But the Russian doesn't say it that way. If someone asks, 'Did you study in Kiev?' and you want to respond affirmatively, 'In Kiev' is the answer. The translator who sets exactitude as the main aim will say 'In Kiev'. But I maintain that's not quite right because it's not what an English person would say. If you take that single example and multiply

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it up on every page of the novel you'll see that if a translator is going for exactitude all the way through, he or she is slightly distorting the English all the way through.

That accounts for some of the oddities in the Garnett translation.
Indeed it does. And there are some difficult decisions – in a sense impossible decisions – to be taken about style. One of Tolstoy's major failings as a writer is repetition. For instance, he repeats nouns again and again instead of using pronouns, or he'll say the same thing twice in the same paragraph. Or, for example, he'll say 'Pierre, rather annoyed with himself, said,' and then he'll make a little speech, and at the end he'll say 'he said'! You don't need it because you've already had the 'he said' at the beginning. And this is a very painful little decision, because to what extent can you edit the text to improve it? I think in an example like that all the translators will have silently removed the second 'he said'; it is a mistake of style and needs to be cut out. But there are other occasions, particularly when he's talking about his theories of history and how things work out, when he will write a whole paragraph with no breaks in it at all. What do you do?

There is one famous sentence in *War & Peace* that is 260 words long – needless to say none of the translators has translated all of that in one sentence. I think I've got away with about three! All the translators have taken some liberties with the text, but we are always reluctant to do so because if Tolstoy is a repetitive writer you've got to keep most of the repetitions in.

The other question is word order. There is a sentence in the original which if you translate it literally goes like this: 'At that time, with rapid steps, before the opening crowd of nobles, in a general's uniform and ribbon, with jutting chin and sharp eyes, in came – Count Rostopchin.' Now that can easily be done in Russian. Russian word order is more flexible than in English; because it's an inflected language and the role of each noun or pronoun is absolutely clear. I've taken the seven elements of that sentence and represented them in a slightly different order: 'At that moment the crowd parted and Count Rostopchin with his jutting chin and sharp eyes came bustling in, dressed in a general's uniform with a ribbon over his shoulder.' I think you've simply got to do that otherwise it sounds like desperately dislocated English. Sometimes you've got to do a little reconstruction. But you don't do it lightly. This is why your day takes so long, because over a paragraph like that, it probably took me 20 minutes or half an hour to work out what I thought was a 'fair' translation; one that would be fair to Tolstoy, but that would still read like a good English sentence.

Did you find that there were particular difficulties in working with such a very long book?
Curiously enough, no. I formed a mental picture at the outset, and I'd advise anyone reading *War & Peace* to do this. You're not going to do it in a day or a week, you've got a long period of time ahead and you must plan accordingly. I thought of this novel at the outset – and again I would recommend this to new readers who are a bit frightened of the sheer bulk of *War & Peace* – as a tetralogy, a four-volume text, and each of the four volumes is of fairly normal length, and I thought, 'let's just tackle Volume One to begin with', and then I found that I'd settled into a rhythm quite easily, working three and a half hours in the morning and two and half hours in the afternoon. I calculated in advance I could get it all done in about two years and I did do. Since, as I say, the text does not bristle with very great difficulties, I found that I could move on fairly fluently like that.

So did you reach the end of translating the entire book before you revised your work?
Every day I would finish my day's work, print that off – usually a chapter if I could manage it or about six pages of the original text – and then I would leave it overnight, and the following day Pam, my wife, would read it to me aloud, which is a wonderful test of the text in terms of its fluency and naturalness, and a lot of revision would go on at this stage. So there was a process of revision and refinement going on every single day, but by and large I didn't go back and revise it. (Later on, along with the editorial staff at Penguin, I went right through the whole text again, making lots of changes – it took many months.) When I was about three quarters of the way through the novel I stopped and took a couple of weeks out and translated the second epilogue 'out of turn', and pushed it back into the file and carried on. This might be good advice for new readers – the two epilogues are always problematic in *War & Peace*. The first one is largely narrative and you need it as an epilogue to round off the future fates of all the characters, and I don't advise that anyone should nip forward and read that, but the second epilogue is always an anticlimax for people. Tolstoy rounds off his own thinking about the nature of human existence, the nature of the working of society and of people and particularly the movements of history. He puts forward his theory, and it is actually very valid, it's very interesting and it's even quite amusing because he likes to debunk Napoleon as a hero and he likes to debunk historians with their theories of how history works and so on, and this is very challenging and interesting and stimulating stuff. But I'm not sure you should wait to the end of the novel and then read it; it will be anticlimactic. That's the only exception; otherwise it was steady forward progress. I had a chart on the wall and every day I would knock off one new chapter so I could see the progress as it was made.

So having finished that huge undertaking, have you got any ongoing or future projects?
While I've been winding up all the editorial work on War & Peace I've started another volume of Tolstoy's short stories. There is the best story ever written on the subject of death, 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' and the volume is called 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories', and although we don't say so openly, these are all stories about death or violence and warfare; they're grouped together with that as the theme. I've finished very nearly that volume now. But my biggest coup is that Penguin have given me the contract to do the translation of Tolstoy's last novel *Resurrection* (*Voskresen'ye*), which definitely needs a new translation for all the same reasons as *War & Peace*. It will benefit from a little modernising and this slight spirit of democratisation.

Lastly, *War & Peace* is a novel of which people say they have felt their life changed by reading it. What would be the thing you felt you got from studying it so closely?
Let's not beat about the bush. Very many people claim that this is the world's greatest novel. I think that is probably right. There aren't more than about half a dozen other novels which could even lay claim to that title, and most of them are Russian, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime & Punishment*, *Anna Karenina*. But *War & Peace* has certain qualities which lift it into a category of its own. First of all, curiously, Tolstoy said it was not a novel. By this he's trying to say 'when you read *War & Peace* don't expect what you normally get from a novel' or 'expect more than you would normally get from a novel'. You won't get a straightforward presentation of characters, exposition, confrontation, and then resolution, because the intention is to represent the life process itself, and life isn't like that.

The reader is introduced to a whole series of characters. About eight of them we know extremely well and we follow the ups and downs and vagaries of their lives, and one or two of them die or get killed along the way, and others don't, and survive into the future. And it's as if there is a great flow of life going on and we're invited to become part of this and we become part of it for a while, and go along with it, and then we detach ourselves and it all flows on again. There isn't a sudden opening, a normal parabola of development and resolution and then a conclusion; that's quite deliberate. What you have is 600,000 words and 500 named characters (someone has said that in *War & Peace* even the dogs are named!). One of my aims has been to stretch the spectrum of experience, because on the one hand I'd like people who are approaching *War & Peace* for the first time to think that all it is really, at the lowest level, is something rather like high-grade soap opera. You get to know these characters, and from then on it's a bit like *Coronation Street* or *EastEnders*, you get involved with them, watch them make all their mistakes, and so on.

The sheer narrative content is the greatest quality that the novel has, but at the other end there's no doubt that it is also a serious examination of what it's like to live a human life, and this manifests itself in all sorts of ways, Tolstoy even theorises a little bit about it too, but it comes through mostly in conversations between the two male heroes, Pierre and Andrey, and also in the reflections of both of them. They are both thinking 'How do you live a human life? What is happiness? What sort of decisions should you make? How do you make yourself happy and other people happy? How do you distinguish between happiness and fun? Is greater happiness to be found by serving other people or by being selfish?' And so on. But there is a very simple point made by this novel that I don't know is made by anybody else – even Shakespeare – and it's this: that everybody finds the living of a human life rather difficult, and at times rather unpleasant. Because most novels deal with tragedy and difficulty – take our own Dickens, for example – we tend to think that a lot of novels are written to show how society could improve itself, how poor people ought not to be oppressed, and suggesting that tragedy is written into everything.

The curious thing about *War & Peace* is that the two main characters are born into very privileged circumstances. At the beginning of the novel Pierre marries the sexiest woman in Russia, and inherits a vast fortune that makes him just about the richest man in Russia. Andrey Bolkonsky inherits wealth and an estate, he's got a terrific intellect and he too, at the beginning, is married to a beautiful young woman who's pregnant with their first child. How can things possibly go wrong for them? But things do go wrong, they make the wrong decisions, they go up and down, in and out of success and failure all the way through.

So the point is a very simple, elemental one: Life is actually a very difficult business, it's so easy to get things wrong, to make a mistake and have to live with the consequences. But the novel also shows you that you should stand back as far as you can and look at the big cycles of movement and when you're at a low ebb it is quite likely that the wheel will turn and your star will rise again. Ultimately it's optimistic, and not many of the world's greatest works are optimistic.

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PRINCIPAL PUBLICATIONS BY TONY BRIGGS

- *Alexander Pushkin: a Critical Study,* Croom Helm, 1983, reprinted by Bristol Classical Press, 1991.
- *A Comparative Study of Pushkin's 'The Bronze Horseman',* Nekrasov's *'Red-nosed Frost'*, and Blok's *'The Twelve'*, Edwin Mellen, 1990.
- *Eugene Onegin, (ed., Russian text),* Bristol Classical Press, 1993, with introduction.
- *Alexander Pushkin* (editor and translator), Everyman's Poetry, 1997, reprinted 1999 and 2001, with introduction.
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- (trans) *Nikolai Bukharin: The Last Years*, by Roy Medvedev, Norton, 1980.
- (trans) *Leninism and Western Socialism*, by Roy Medvedev, Verso, 1981.
- Leo Tolstoy: *War & Peace*, a new translation, with introduction, other front materials and notes, Penguin Books, 2005.
- Leo Tolstoy: *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and other stories*, new translations, with introduction etc, Penguin Books, 2006.
- Leo Tolstoy: *Resurrection*, a new translation, with introduction etc, Penguin Books, 2007.