

War & Peace – Discussion Questions

Leo Tolstoy's epic novel [*War and Peace*](#) chronicles the French invasion of Russia in 1812 through the interconnected lives of five aristocratic Russian families, focusing primarily on the spiritual journeys and personal transformations of Pierre Bezukhov, Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, and Natasha Rostova.

1. Pierre's passionate attachment to the world of ideas takes him from one enthusiasm to another— from free-thinking Francophile to philanthropic Freemason to would-be assassin of the Antichrist, Napoleon. What do you think Pierre is searching for? Why is his lack of familial ties and guidance an important element in Pierre's life? Why does he marry Helene since he sees himself drawn into a "frightening abyss." Why is he invariably ineffective when trying to translate his enthusiasm into practical results? And how has he changed by the end of the book?

2. Platon Karatayev, the peasant who befriends Pierre while both are captives of the French, is a catalyst for Pierre's transformation into a happy man. What does the worldly sophisticate Pierre learn from this humble man? Is there something uniquely Russian about Karatayev? How does he compare with the other peasants described in the book, such as those at Bald Hills, the Bolkonsky estate?

3. Andrei Bolkonsky's pride keeps him from stooping to the politicking and self-promotion of other staff officers and court officials — yet it also poisons his relationship with his wife, Lise, with his sister, Marya, and, for much of the book, with his one-time fiancée, Natasha. How does a terrible wound and a lingering illness change his attitude toward Marya, Natasha, and life in general?

4. What is Tolstoy's attitude toward his female characters—

- the doomed, downy-lipped Lise;
- the beautiful, bewitching Hélène – does Tolstoy equate sexuality with moral corruption;
- the love-struck, long-suffering Sonya;
- the devout, dowdy Marya – who forgives her father telling Andrei, “Grief is sent by [God], not by people. People are His instruments, they’re not to blame.” True?
- Natasha – What caused her transformation throughout the book, from her debut as a high-spirited pixie to her final incarnation as a matronly homebody?

5. Several chapters are devoted to Anatole Karagin's seduction of Natasha and its aftermath. Natasha is first confused, then thought herself in love, then is humiliated, then dangerously ill. Pierre comes to her defense. Andrei, proud and remote, releases Natasha from her engagement and returns her letters. It has been said that this episode of the novel is one of the most “unoriginal”: an innocent girl is seduced by a dissolute rake. Why might Tolstoy have included this twist in the story? What do you think of these events, and what do they contribute to your sense of the story and the characters involved?

6. Napoleon and Kutuzov are a study in contrasts, and it's clear who Tolstoy thinks is the better man—and the better general. How does Kutuzov achieve victory at Borodino and, ultimately, in Russia? Do you think his style of leadership is truly best in all circumstances? What does Tolstoy have to say about the foibles, follies, and strengths of Russia's ruling class during a period of supreme crisis? How do the intrigues, protestations, machinations, and proclamations of Kutuzov's general staff and Alexander's ministers and diplomats affect the course of the war? How does this novel treat the idea of the historical “great man”?

7. Tolstoy writes, with regard to the “character of the period” he was trying to depict, that it “had its own characteristics . . . which resulted from the pre-dominant alienation of the upper class from other classes, from the religious philosophy of the time, from peculiarities of education . . . and so forth.” Apply Tolstoy’s treatment of the themes of aristocracy and class, religion, and education to the main families: Bezukov; Bolkonsky; Rostov; Kuragin; Drubetskoy? Was there equality in the military?

8. While some novelists have bemoaned what they considered to be the formless nature of [*War and Peace*](#), Henry James called it “a wonderful mass of life.” How did the novel’s length affect your reading experience? Does its scale mirror its comprehensive outlook? Does Tolstoy’s ambitious vision succeed, in your opinion?

9. Tolstoy advances his own theory of history throughout the book and devotes his entire second epilogue to elaborating and defending it. What is it and is it defensible and unique?

Food for Thought: if you were to write an historical novel depicting a major event in your lifetime, what would it be? Would you focus on the socio-political, religious, economic, or racial implications of the time or identify leadership personalities, or what might your novel look like.....