

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## IVAN AKSIONOV

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**Ivan Aksionov** (in Tolstoy, *God sees the truth but waits*) **conscientious**

**Overview** Leo Tolstoy was a towering figure of the Russian novel and short story, as well as a vocal and influential public figure. He is uniquely respected for his novel *Anna Karenina* (1873-1877) and for his huge novel/study of *War and Peace* (1869), which deals with five Russian aristocratic families, and the impact on them of the Napoleonic invasion of their country, during six months in 1812. He was also a master of the short story, in which his objective god-like eye reached its peak of sharpness. Among the causes to which he devoted passionate attention were Pacifism and radical Christianity in the strict vein of The Sermon on the Mount. His arguments for radical Pacifism had profound echoes in the public sphere, through the work of such men as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

**Character** Ivan Aksionov was a successful merchant: 'he had two shops and a house of his own.' He had been known as a partyer in the old days, but was quite reformed, in love with his wife and family, and was in fine fettle, although his wife warned him that she had had a tragic dream about the trip he was taking to the Nizhny Fair. He dismissed her worries, spent the first night in an inn, rose early the next day, and started early for the Fair. En route, however, he was arrested, charged (falsely) with having murdered a fellow merchant the previous night, and then transported, through the legal system, into a nightmare sequence of accusations which ended up with slave labor in Siberia, lewhere after becoming (in a sense) 'enlightened,' he died. His character? Patience, endurance, ultimate goodness, and even saintliness.

**Parallels** The archaic and classical experiences, perhaps understandably, abound in examples of saintly patience, not necessarily of the Ivan forgiveness brand, Christian in essence, but in many forms. Job, in the Judaic Christian religious tradition, sets the highest example for tolerance of god-inflicted sufferings, enduring whatever God could pitch at him, and mocking the taunts of his adversaries, who say Job's suffering is meaningless. The rebellious Hellenic god, Prometheus, kept to himself the secret of the offspring who would dethrone Zeus, and with this coded knowledge managed to survive the almost endless barrage of punishments Zeus inflicted on him. Oedipus the King, in the play of Sophocles, earns the sufferings—blindness, terrible knowledge of good and evil--which his life opens and in the sequel play manages, in the Grove of Colonus, to acquire a kind of peace that passes understanding.

### Illustrative moments

**Surprise** Aksionov was surprised, on the second day of his trip to the Nizhny Fair, to be overtaken and stopped by a troika of law enforcement agents, who began to question him about his actions the previous night. He soon realizes that there has been a murder, that night, of the other merchant who had been staying at the inn. His throat had been slit! To the shock of Aksionov, the bloody murder weapon is found in his luggage. It is obvious to Aksionov, a most upright man, that he has somehow been framed, but he is unable to exonerate himself in the nearby court. Even a petition to the Tzar, from his wife, is useless. It's off to Siberia!

**Suffering** 'For twenty-six years Aksionov lived as a convict in Siberia. His hair turned white as snow, and his beard grew long, thin, and grey. All his mirth went...' His only reading was *The Lives of the Saints*, and he was conspicuous in the prison-church, where his voice (still strong and good) contributed to the choir. The big break in his life came with the arrival of a new batch of convicts, one of whom was from Aksionov's home town, and who knew about the imprisonment of his fellow city man—whom of course he did not recognize. Aksionov soon surmises, from comments made by the newcomer, that he is in fact the true murderer—who had stuck the bloodied knife in Aksionov's bag.

**Decision** Not long after his realization, about the true murderer, Aksionov finds himself in a difficult position in the prison. It has become clear that some prisoner has been planning to dig his way out of the jail. The evidence—mud collected in boots, etc.—is weighed and the prison authorities turn to Aksionov—by now widely respected in the prison for his saintliness—for a judgment on the guilt of the suspected Makar Semyonich; the true murderer. Though he knows Makar is guilty, Aksionov weighs the pros and cons of judging him, and decides to proclaim him innocent.

**Resolution** Overwhelmed with gratitude, for Aksionov's amazing gesture, Makar begs Aksionov for forgiveness, overcome by the other's grand decision. 'God will forgive you,' says Aksionov, 'and at these words his heart grew light, and the longing for home left him.' By an act of personal forgiveness, Aksionov had freed himself from decades of bitterness and isolation. By the time Makar, who went ahead and confessed his jail break plans, had been released, Aksionov was dead. But he was a free man, even in death. He seems to have found the magic words, which he spoke to Makar: 'Maybe I am a hundred times worse than you.'

### **Discussion questions**

What is the highest point in Aksionov's life, as Tolstoy portrays it in this story?

Why, as Tolstoy sees it, does Aksionov not take justified revenge on Makar, when he is called on to judge the man?

What is the significance of the dream Aksionov's wife had, of impending disaster at the Fair?