

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
**VOLKONSKY**

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**Prince Andrew Volkonsky** (in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*) determined

**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. 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** Prince Andrew Volkonsky is an aristocratic peer and friend of Pierre Bezukov, and yet he is essentially different from Pierre, the two serving as complements of one another. Pierre is very physical, sexually driven, clumsy, while Andrew is an upper body person, always reflecting or projecting. From the outset we see Andrew advising Pierre against marriage—though Andrew is married, and his wife pregnant—while Andrew is himself busy with studying military tactics, planning for reorganizations of the army, or, on several occasions, becoming the site of hallucinatory or out of body experiences. After being seriously wounded in battle, saved only by Napoleon, Andrew is drawn back into life by his love for Natasha, and in the end, approaching his own death, he is devoted to the importance of divine love, of which he reads in the Christian Gospels.

**Parallels** Volkonsky is a multi-faceted character: proud, handsome, intellectual, brave, yet at the same time withdrawn and cynical. One thinks first of Achilles, Homer's ultimately tragic figure, who will sulk on a dime, if his girlfriend is taken away, yet who contains the charismatic power to win a war. For proud withdrawal, Volkonsky has a parallel in Sigrid Undset's Erlend Nikolausson, whose pride can easily withhold him from what he loves; in *Kristin Lavransdottir* (1920). To the tragic side of Volkonsky—his wounding in battle, his loss of his wife—there's a parallel with Jim (in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, 1900), a man never quite able to rise above earlier 'life defeats.' Finally, Lydgate, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), a complex man whose love for his wife always seems slightly below him.

### Illustrative moments

**Superior** We first encounter Andrew Volkonsky in the reception room of Anna Pavlovna, the aunt of Pierre Bezukov. 'He was a very handsome young man, of medium height, with firm, clear-cut features. Everything about him, from his weary, bored expression to his quiet, measured step, offered a striking contrast to his lively little wife.' Of all whom he considered boring, his wife seems to have come first. In fact, on this occasion, it is only Pierre that Andrew seems pleased to see again. We feel little potential here for the construction of a happy life.

**Dissatisfied** On their first meeting, Andrew and Pierre disagree about the significance of the major event surrounding them, the pressure for conquest coming from Napoleon's Empire. For Pierre Napoleon is the world's 'greatest man,' and should not be opposed, but Andrew counters that if everyone followed his own convictions there would be no war. When pressed on this, he replies that he is in fact going to war 'because the life I am leading here does not suit me.' Andrew seemingly has no objection to the idea of war, and rejects Pierre's idea that the world would be better without war.

**Bored** Andrew expresses himself freely with Pierre, his foil in the structure of this novel. Pierre has returned to the heady social atmosphere of Moscow, ready for romance and high living, but Andrew, who is in fact married and whose wife is pregnant, warns Pierre against marriage. 'Never, never marry, my dear fellow!...never marry til you can say to yourself that you have done all you are capable of, and until

you have ceased to love the woman of your choice, and have seen her plainly as she is.' Andrew's evident boredom with his own wife both supports and undermines the value of the advice he is giving Pierre.

**Strategist** Andrew, not unexpectedly, leaves for war in the course of his wife's pregnancy. Before departing he explains to his aged father just what the upcoming strategy is, for combating Napoleon. His interest in the war appears to be mainly strategic, for—to his father's total boredom—he details the positions of the various armies that are being aligned against France. His humanity is brought out only as he prepares to leave for the front, when his sister, Princess Mary, pulls out a revered family icon for him to wear. 'I am glad, really, dear, I am very glad,' he says to his sister, touched by the implications of this gift.

**Loving** Andrew is wounded in battle, and luckily saved by Napoleon, who lets him go. When he gets back to his wife's estate he finds her in labor with their child, and, not long after the birth, is by her side as she dies from giving birth. Andrew is deeply touched by the powerful coincidence of events, and determines to treat his son and family well in the future. He is shocked back into an appreciation of life. Now that he is living for others, he tells Pierre later, he is happy and calm, whereas in the military—where he seemed to be working for others—he was in fact only seeking his own glory.

### **Discussion questions**

Why does Volkonsky, even while married, advise Pierre against marriage? Does Volkonsky simply feel bored with his marriage? Or does he dislike the institution?

Why is Volkonsky so moved when, as he is heading out to war, his sister Mary gives him a 'revered family icon' to wear?

How has Volkonsky changed by the end of the novel? Is he convincingly ready to 'live for others?'

**Reading** <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2600>