

Tolstoy and Italian World

To the 90th Anniversary of Death of the Great Writer

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Abstract—The work touches upon certain aspects of the literary activity by the Great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy pertaining to his acquaintance with Italy. The paper presents a very vast array of topics and, in particular, the overview of his direct contacts with Italy, including journeys, recorded personal impressions about the country, published articles, and the Italians' public response to the literary giant's death.

Keywords—Leo Tolstoy; Italy; trip to Italy, literature; Tolstoyan ideas; death of Tolstoy

I. INTRODUCTION

Italy learned about the Great Russian literature of the 19th century a while later than France and England, which can be explained by the country's disunity at that time. Meantime, the acquaintance with the Russian literature intensified after Italy's integration and especially after the 80s. Ivan Turgenev became the first Russian novelist and realist whom the Italians got to know about. Later, almost simultaneously followed the fame of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, while soon after Italy discovered for herself Nikolai Gogol and Ostrovsky.

The overall comprehension of the Russian literature formed in the Italian World based on writings by Russia's three literary giants – Turgenev, Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy, whose works had such an amazing effect on the spiritual life of Italy that for many Italian artists the Russian realism presented the touchstone of the artwork. In the meanwhile, out of all Russian writers of the 19th century, specifically Leo Tolstoy had left the most cherished and profound memory in Italy, unlike Turgenev that was more close to the Western romanticists or Dostoyevsky that deeply surprised and very much puzzled the Italian readers. Tolstoy managed to convey in his work the spirit of a new Russia [1].

The first part of this review presents a very vast array of topics of the study called "Tolstoy and the Italian World", and particularly, the record of the writer's direct contacts with Italy: his journeys and personal impressions about the country, feature articles pertaining to Italy, correspondence and the Italians' popular response to the great writer's death.

II. ACQUAINTANCE OF LEO TOLSTOY WITH ITALY

Leo Tolstoy saw Italy for the first time in spring 1857 during his short visit to Turin from France, where he arrived to meet with Pyotr Botkin and Alexander Druzhinin. The life

of Turin, at that time the capital of the Italian autonomy Piedmont, kindled the writer's interest. Its patriots enthusiastically prepared for Italy's union and the public life of Turin was in full swing. During his stay, Tolstoy visited the Sardinian Chamber of deputies and witnessed vivid discussions of the speech delivered by one of its members Angelo Brofferio that managed to produce an overwhelming effect by his ingenious and acid attacks on the government [2]. For Tolstoy all this was so unlike to the system established in the absolutist Russia, that he had experienced "a feeling of envy of this young, strong and free life" [3]. Tolstoy's closer conversance with Italy happened in 1861 during his second trip abroad. His travel route went through Nice - Florence - Livorno - Naples - Rome - Giere (France). Consequently, Tolstoy had visited four largest towns of Italy. His perception of the country became unique and original, in accordance with Tolstoy's very specific state of mind at the time. Florence, for instance, where Tolstoy lived for nearly two weeks, took on the writer by its "modesty and pleasance". Yet, as reflected in his diaries and by the recollections of his contemporaries, he was impressed not by ancient frescoes or olive groves of Florence, as by his meeting with the famous Russian Decembrist Sergey G. Volkonsky and his wife Maria.

The lovely Naples that had always been the object of admiration by many generations of Russian travelers, writers and artists, seemed to Tolstoy "too nice, luscious". Yet particularly in here he had experienced "the first impression of the nature and antiquity" and feasted his ears with marvelous Neapolitan songs on the streets of the town.

From Naples Tolstoy heads off to Rome, where, according to Nikolay Gusev, his personal secretary and the literary historian, Tolstoy returns to the art after one and a half years of his sceptic attitude and at times quite a strong aversion to it. He got interested in the painting; he was meeting with Russian artists in "Café Greco" and together they visited studios and like all travelers, toured Rome. Yet, nonetheless, he perceived the ancient town in his own way. "I loved Rome," told the writer Fyodor Strakhov fifteen years after. However, we also know absolutely different statements by Tolstoy concerning this attitude to Rome and other towns of Italy (dated 1876), indicative of his high originality and inconsistency of his perceptions:

"You wouldn't believe but I would rather live in Mamadysh than in Venice, Rome or Naples... These towns

and their life are touched by so conventional, invariable same splendor and charm, and for me it's such a vulgarity that thinking about them is sickening and reading about them... is unbearable."

Tolstoy remains true to himself in the "Italian" chapters of his novel "Anna Karenina" that describe the trip of Anna Karenina and Aleksey Vronsky around Italy:

"They have travelled through Venice, Rome, Naples and just arrived to a small Italian town, where they wanted to make a stop" [4].

"An old, shabby palazzo, with its lofty carved ceilings and frescoes on the walls, with its floors of mosaic, with its heavy yellow stuff curtains at high windows, with its vases on pedestals and fireplaces, its carved doors and gloomy halls hung with pictures – this palazzo did much, by its very appearance after they had moved to it, to confirm in Vronsky the agreeable illusion that he was not so much a Russian country gentleman, a retired army officer, as an enlightened amateur and patron of the arts, himself a modest artist, who had renounced the world, his connections, and his ambition for the sake of the woman he loved. Under the guidance of an Italian art professor he sketched from nature and studied the medieval Italian life..." [5].

This piece is relating both the direct impressions of Tolstoy on Italy and the ironic appraisal of the aesthetic attitude towards this country on the part of Russian "society". As testified by Nikolai Gusev, the writer had discussed such a "nontraditional" perception of Italy with the German biographer Raphael Lowenfeld (1898):

"I know this town (Rome) very well and with one of Russian artists have undertaken long walks from there to Naples, Pompey and Herculaneum. I must confess that the antique art did not give me that very unusual impression that seemed to overmaster all around. I had discussed this a lot with Turgenev at that time, I was convinced that the classic art had been appreciated too much. In fact, only the person had been the object of my outstanding interest. At what extent this is true, can be confirmed by my stay in Rome. As I think back, my memory awakens just one incident. Together with my partner we took a short walk in Monte Pincio. A wonderful child with big black eyes was standing there at the foot of the mountain. It was the real kind of an Italian child of the people. Even now, I hear his cry: "Give me a toy!" Other things have passed from my memory. And this happened because I was interested in the people rather than in the beautiful nature surrounding me or the masterpieces".

This period of Tolstoy's stay in Italy is depicted in the writer's diaries and letters very scantily. However, it is known that Leo Tolstoy studied the Italian language [6]. His records keep a notebook with exercises with the translation of phrases from French into Italian. The diary mentions his reading of Italian books in the original [9].

III. TOLSTOY AND PUBLIC AND POLITICAL LIFE OF ITALY

The interest by Tolstoy in the public life of Italy, risen at the first acquaintance with the country in Turin in 1857, continued onwards. The writer's articles "To the Italians" (1895) and "Carthago delenda est" (1898) verify this.

The direct contact of Leo Tolstoy with the public and political life in Italy in 1895-1898 speaks of a great sense of moral responsibility of the writer for the fate of the humankind.

In 1895, Italy had attacked Abyssinia, but lost along of the Ethiopians' valiant resistance. Tolstoy wrote on the same occasion his address "To the Italians", wherein he condemned this predatory war and outlined measures on prevention of new conflicts. Initially, the address was conceived as a direct appeal to the Italian people:

"Brother Italians! You have always lead the way before the peoples of Europe. And now the fortune opens you the way to the forefront. The happening in Abyssinia... may serve as the turning point in the history of Christian peoples. You are of the essence" [8].

This paragraph, which the author left out later, evidently meant that the Italian people can and should spearhead the antiwar movement. Tolstoy's appeal to the Italians at the bottom addressed also other nations of the imperialist powers. Probably, that is why he deleted the forecited paragraph of his article later on.

"Italian government was defeated and humiliated", writes Tolstoy. He assumes, however, that there is nothing surprising in this. The same was to have happened with France, England, Russia, "with all nations holding armies". Tolstoy urges all the people to abandon wars and false patriotism inciting the conquest of foreign territories and enslavement of other peoples:

"... The task of the Humankind is not to form super powers, but to destroy super powers, ... whereof all calamities of the nations arise, ... to unite all nations into one family without the division into super powers and without enmity coming from such disunity" [9].

The manuscript had not been finished nor published during the lifetime of Leo Tolstoy.

Thuswise, on the background of the acute political events affecting Italy, Tolstoy formulated one of his core antimilitarist ideas.

The writer's second appeal to the Italian people touches upon the same problem. This time the appeal was published and attracted ample comments. In 1898, publishers of liberal newspapers "Humanite Nouvelle" (Paris) and "Vita internazionale" (Milan) had addressed many worldwide famous public figures with a questionnaire about war and militarism. Tolstoy had also received this form. "Do history, justice and progress require war between civilized people?" – Such was the formulation of the threshold question. It evoked Tolstoy's "feeling of aversion, indignation and even despair". He began to write the answer to the questionnaire, which in the result turned into an article – a perfect example

of Tolstoy's opinion journalism – "Carthago delenda est" [10]. To title it Tolstoy used the words pronounced by Cato about destroying Carthage, accordingly implying that the modern militarism, like the uncursive Carthage, is persistently threatening peace and should be destroyed.

The article was aimed against continuous aggressive warfare and colonial robbery, which the writer called the only policy recognized by a proprietary society. As is known, Tolstoy believed that governments of bourgeois countries built up formidable armies particularly for aggressive conflicts, and which they needed both to regain and to keep by force what was taken by force [11]. Trying to give a veneer of rightful cause to their schemes and covering up their true goals, they offer these predatory plans under the guise of vital national interests. Of course, Tolstoy supported the non-resistance and preached individual refusal of military service. Yet, amidst the impending dire threat, the writer contradicted his own principles of non-resistance and urged to tame the war-makers:

"Why do we leave these men alone and do not come down upon them and railroad them to confinement institutions? Isn't it obvious that they are conceiving and preparing the most fearful crime and that, if we don't stop them now, the outrage is going to happen if not today then the day after" [12].

The manuscript of the article "Carthago delenda est" was sent to France and Italy. In Milan it was received by publisher of the progressive periodical "Vita internazionale" Ernesto Teodoro Moneta, the famous public person, who received the Noble Peace Prize at a future date. In 1892, Tolstoy commended his activity. On 20th of September 1898, after gladly receiving Tolstoy's brilliant writing, Moneta had published it in his periodical, but the authorities of Milan substantially immediately seized all copies of the magazine with Tolstoy's article and opened a criminal case against the magazine staff. The hearing continued for several days and brought out a wide news coverage in Italian press. Against its planners' will the trial of Tolstoy's article turned into the apotheosis of Tolstoy in Italy. The full report on the case that was published by "Secolo" clearly spoke for this triumph.

Brilliant and convincing was the speech before the court of the famous poet and realist Giuseppe Giacosa, who had concluded with scathing irony: "If there was a trial of Leo Tolstoy, the entire Academe would say only that the authorities, who staged this, have joined in the undying glory" [13]. These words met laughter and ovation. The jury for absence of a crime acquitted the accused. Moneta wrote to Tolstoy on the results of the trial, "I am happy for my country that haven't brought herself to shame before the civilized world by condemning the ideas of Leo Tolstoy" [14].

Moneta expressed his hope that the literary great Tolstoy would help impress into the Italians the grand ideas of good and trigger interest in important moral problems «unfortunately, paid little attention in Italy».

The historical implication of the trial in Milan was that if Tolstoy endeavored to put the war outside the law, then the

militarists would have answered him with an attempt to announce Tolstoy above the law. However, the Italian community held firm in favor of the writer and humanist, truly discrediting not itself before the civilized world. Eventually, "Carthago delenda est" was published in London in 1898.

In response to the latest acts of aggression and disarranging to the world the guilty for genocide, at all times Leo Tolstoy was defending oppressed nations. In 1909, within a year of his death, Tolstoy prepared his keynote statement for the European Peace Congress in Stockholm, wherein he calls the militarism "the criminal, shameful act". However, the Congress' organizers, got frightened by Tolstoy's forthcoming pointed antiwar speech, chose to conceal the report, which the writer had sent them. Unfortunately, Tolstoy did not get a chance to take part in the event himself.

At the threshold of the 20th century, Leo Tolstoy stood up in Italy to his full enormous height as witnessed by the Italians' response to the writer's death.

IV. ITALY'S RESPONSE TO THE DEATH OF TOLSTOY

Death of any great man always spells the end of a particular era in thinking, in the history of the Humankind, and is perceived as a tragic loss by his people. The death of Leo Tolstoy had shaken the whole world. The name of the literary giant had been the front-page news for many days. Dozens of articles, biography essays, portraits, public meetings and political manifestations... Never before had the press or public paid so much attention to any contemporary or classic writer.

Understandably, not everything of what had been wrote then by Tolstoy is of interest for us today. Alongside with the heartfelt grief and thoughtful evaluation of the great writer's personality and art, pages of magazines and newspapers had offered a good deal of biased or wrongful judgments, platitudes and rumors.

Various representatives of the Italian press, writing up left-handedly Tolstoy as a "mystical prophet" and "spiritual reformer", at the same time tried to diminish his social views and the artistic skill. However, generally, as reported a Roman journalist of the daily "Il Discorso", the death of the writer of genius had created a devastating impression [15]. During a full week, the press had been dedicating its stories to the profile of Tolstoy as a great artist, a moralist and a philosopher. Nevertheless, the Italian print media's reaction to the death of Tolstoy was ambivalent. The Catholic press displayed coldness and even bare dislike: "Observatore romano" that published the writer's biography, stated at the same time that Tolstoy had suffered from the "insane" idea for he wanted to make the people on earth happy, but could never achieve this because was unwilling to seek this in the Roman church" [16].

Anatoly Lunacharsky in his synopsis "The death of Tolstoy and Young Europe" wrote about the Italians' response to the death of Tolstoy the following: "I shall not obviously say that old Italy, catholic, conservative or

bourgeois, did not say a single word of encouragement or soundness on the occasion of the death of Tolstoy. But that little rational and kind that has been said by her ideologists was completely drown in prosy panegyrics” [17].

As an illustration of a reasonable and kind attitude to Tolstoy’s memory can be mentioned the article of the young Italian reviewer De Angelis on the writer’s death, wherein the author writes in awe about the artist’s immeasurable bigness. “The Humankind and the art are mourning: Tolstoy is dead!” – said the top line of the Milanese “Secolo” following the tragic news. “The World Became Depleted!” – exclaimed the Roman daily “Corriere della sera”. The reviewer E. Bodrero stressed that Italy was one of the countries, wherein the affect of Tolstoy’s ideas had been especially profound, and that the Italians particularly owe him for the blossom of their literature [18].

Indeed, writers of very different directions had experienced the powerful influence of the Tolstoyan ideas, the strength of his high moral politics and immortal realist art.

Grazia Deledda (1871-1936), the well-known Italian realist writer, the “verist”, who was fascinated in her youth by the genius of Tolstoy, wrote him a lyrical letter in 1897 all steeped in reverence before the master. Deledda got particularly interested in the moral and psychological aspects of life, and her novels and stories demonstrate the influence of Tolstoy’s ideas pertaining to the injustice of human laws against the commandment of beneficence (‘Anime Oneste’, ‘La Giustizia’, ‘La Via del Male’). Her necrology is an allegoric pastiche of Tolstoy in the evangelic spirit. Agreeable with to Deledda’s impression, Tolstoy is a great pilgrim heading to the ends of the world, an evangelic plowman sowing the good seed. “The spirit of Leo Tolstoy the writer, - wrote Deledda, - is the spirit of the one, who could destroy the history and recreate it anew, will stay with people, will live out his epoch, carrying to remote generations, like Dante, the light and shadows of his time” [19].

In his early works, Gabriele D’Annunzio had been captivated by the Tolstoyan ideas of compassion and forgiveness, which can be recognized in his story “Giovanni Episcopo” and the novel “L’innocente”.

Tolstoy's profound effect on the Italians’ spiritual life can be proved by the book by Giulio Vitali “Leone Tolstoj”, wherein the author writes, in particular, about his emotional stress following the news on the death of Tolstoy. In a moment of grief and loss, the Italian writer suddenly felt himself spiritually close to the greatest writer.

We need to say that at that time in Europe existed the extreme opinion, which was conveyed by the French poet and playwright Jean Richepin in 1910, who wrote about the contrariety of the “Slavic genius Tolstoy” and the “Latin soul”. Setting the “Western” culture in opposition to the “Oriental” one, Richepin agrees, “our souls are impermeable to each other for the moment” [20]. On the contrary, Giulio Vitali’ monograph about Tolstoy marks the closeness of the “Russian soul” to the people of the West:

“Leo Tolstoy – is flesh of our flesh. It is permeated by aspirations deeper than those that are wringing our restless and discontented soul, guiding it to the future” [21].

The book by Giulio Vitali presents a genuine evidence of the crucial role of Leo Tolstoy – his writing and his impassioned message of high ideals – so that the Italians may unveil “the mystique Russian soule” and approach it.

V. CONCLUSION

Tolstoy comprehended in his own way – through his specific techniques of a Russian writer – that he is manifesting the needs and hopes, humanistic ideals, which are common for different nations. Finally, the role of the artist Tolstoy in the modern literary evolution remains enormous. The weight of the literary giant is confined not to the literature and the art. Today, as before, his infinitely rich heritage arouses interest in Italy, because the life of Tolstoy in itself, and not only his works, exemplify the fight against injustice and personal service.

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- [6] L.N. Tolstoy, “The Diary”. 7/III-1857.
- [7] L.N. Tolstoy, “The Diary”. 4/IV-1857.
- [8] Collected works of L.N. Tolstoy. Vol. 31 - P.193.
- [9] Collected works of L.N. Tolstoy in 20 Volumes. Vol. 16 - P.621.
- [10] In prior years, Tolstoy commenced new articles under one and the same title three times: in 1898, later in 1895 – on persecutions of the Doukhobors, and in 1896 – on militaristic threat, but these works remained unfinished.
- [11] Collected works of L.N. Tolstoy in 90 Volumes. Vol. 90 - P.62.
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