

War and Peace (1966)

(Russian with subtitles in English and French)

Not rated. Running time: 427 min.

Our ratings: V -5; L -1; S/N -3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

*a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance...*

*...a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4, 8

He has smooth-talked himself into believing that his evil will never be noticed.

Psalm 36:2 (The Message)

And not for this day and hour alone were the mind and conscience of this man darkened, on whom the burden of events weighed more heavily than on all the others who took part in it. Never, to the end of his life, had he the least comprehension of goodness, of beauty or of truth, or of the significance of his actions, which were too contrary to goodness and truth, too remote from everything human for him ever to understand their meaning. He could not disavow his deeds, lauded as they were by half the world, and so he was

obliged to renounce truth and goodness and all humanity."

Film Narrator, on Napoleon

Although it took three attempts to make my way through Tolstoy's epic novel *War and Peace* when I was much younger, it was well worth it, but the book spoiled for me Hollywood's 1956 version, even though it starred Henry Fonda and Audrey Hepburn. Now we have available the DVD set of the 1967 Russian version (at least my local library in NKY does): in 1968 the film was given the Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film. And deservedly so, director Sergei Bondarchuk creating a magnificent blend of spectacle and intimate close ups of major and minor characters in the heat of huge battles and the exciting spectacle of grand balls. Said to be the most expensive film ever made, this 8-hour epic, shot long before CGI could create vast armies (as in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy), employed over 1500 horses and 120,000 soldiers, the latter contributed by the Soviet government. Unlike the greatly truncated Hollywood version, we often hear in the narrative the thoughts and observations of Tolstoy that make this more than just a film about pivotal battles that changed the course of European and Russian history.

The film is divided into 4 unequal parts.

Film 1 ("Andrei Bolkonsky," 140 minutes) sets the stage in 1805 with the disillusionment of the two central male characters, bookish Pierre Bezukhov (played by director Bondarchuk himself) and dashing Prince Andrei (Vyacheslav Tikhonov) plus Natasha Rostova (Lyudmila Savelyeva). The two men are members of the aristocracy but have followed divergent career paths, Pierre a bespectacled intellectual, and Prince Andrei a cavalry officer. Pierre is too hasty in marrying Helene, a woman of very different temperament and morals, and so quickly realizes his mistake. (He even engages in a nearly disastrous duel over her.)

Andrei is wracked by doubts about the whole meaning of life when his young wife dies in childbirth. Elfin Natasha is a high-spirited girl barely out of childhood, filled with the love of grand balls, men, and life in general. Pierre, a frequent guest at the Rostova estate, is drawn to her.

Film 2 ("Natasha Rostova," 93 minutes) tells the story of the failure of the love affair between Prince Andrei and Natasha Rostova. Introduced by Pierre at a ball, the two dance and fall in love. This sequence's sweeping photography is second only to the battle scenes in scope and dazzle! Bondarchuk seems to love having his camera move up and down and around in ways that sweep the spectator along, sometimes providing overhead shots (from high above in the battle scenes), and then often bringing us into close contact with the characters.

The enthusiastic Natasha wants to marry soon, but Andrei, committed to go off to war, tells her that they should wait one year to make sure of their love. Still a flighty girl, Natasha, encouraged by Pierre's rakish wife Helene, falls for the wastrel Kuraghin during her lover's absence. Her impetuous plan to elope is thwarted by her sister and Pierre. The upset Andrei breaks off their engagement.

Film 3 ("1812," 77 minutes), tells the story of the "Great Patriotic War" of 1812 in which upper and lower classes unite against Napoleon's invading army of over 500,000 men. This is where spectacle means SPECTACULAR, the Battle of Borodino sequence being the longest depiction of a battle that I can remember ever seeing. Between aerial shots showing the army formations to medium shots of men shooting, stabbing, and hacking each other, to close-ups of individuals, such as the aged Russian Field Marshal Kutuzov (Boris Zakhava) and Napoleon, each of them more of a spectator than in command once the huge masses of men, horses and cannon engage each other. Pierre has come to observe the battle and meets Andrei the night before. Memorable vignettes are Pierre's encounter with the peasant soldier Platon Karataev who shares his food

and prays before sleeping, "Lord, lay me down like a stone and raise me up like new bread." Andrei is so badly wounded that when Napoleon rides by and believes that his motionless body is dead, comments about what a noble death his was.

I wrote earlier that the voice of Tolstoy comes through in this version of the novel. Here is a sample that the Narrator speaks as the slaughter known as The Battle of Borodino goes on and on and on:

"Enough, enough, men. Stop, consider, what are you doing? Into the minds of tired and hungry men on both sides, a flicker of doubt began to creep. Were they to go on slaughtering one another? Kill whom you like, do what you like, but I've had enough. Yet some inexplicable, mysterious power continued to control them, and the terrible business went on, carried out not by the will of individual men."

Napoleon's army wins the battle, but the victory proves to be costly, something that both he and the Russian Field Marshall are well aware of.

Film 4 "Pierre Bezukhov," 92 minutes) covers Field Marshall Kutuzov's decision to abandon Moscow while stripping it of everything that could aid the occupiers. Pierre, disguised as a commoner, has decided to remain behind with the poor and seek vengeance on the French leader. The scenes of the mass exodus of the majority of citizens and the burning of the city are as carefully stage as the battles. Pierre's resolve for vengeance is diluted when he winds up befriending a French officer and sharing an apartment with him. The terrible winter sets in, and the French army, burdened with loot they cannot hope to cart away, begins the disastrous retreat bedeviled by harassment and, far worst, the bitter cold and wind-whipped snow. Pierre is almost killed with a number of other prisoners, escaping death only by chance. The scene in which we see the prisoners huddled together with just the rifles of the executioners in camera range is as harrowing and as

memorable as I have seen.

The fate of Pierre, Andrei and Natasha I will leave it to you to discover. At the conclusion of the film we again hear the voice of the author through the narrator reflecting upon what has gone before:

“Thoughts that have important consequences are always simple. All my thinking could be summed up with these words: Since corrupt people unite among themselves to constitute a force, honest people must do the same. It’s as simple as that.”

Although it’s been decades since I saw the 1956 version, I remember well my disappointment that the filmmakers ignored Tolstoy’s thoughts about war and peace, concentrating instead on the romance and the great battle scenes. The Hollywood film could convince a viewer that war is an admirable and gloriously heroic endeavor. After watching the Russian film’s bloody version of war, no one could think so except the most ardent militarist who ignores the Narrator’s observations. Tolstoy’s views on war are best summed up in still another movie, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, when Major Clipton, observing the attempt by one party to blow up the bridge while Colonel Nicholson tries to prevent them, says, “Madness! Madness!”