Highlights of *War and Peace*, Volume III, Part Three

**Part Three**

**Chapter 1:** Tolstoy’s narrative voice, in the last paragraph of this chapter, makes his “Theory of History” explicit: “To study the laws of history, we must change completely the object of observation, leave kings, generals, and ministers alone, and study the uniform, infinitesimal elements that govern the masses.”

**Chapters 2-4:** After the Battle of Borodino, the Russian forces have retreated to Fili, just before Moscow, and the full extent of the losses experienced have begun to sink in, along with the realization that the position at Fili is indefensible. After hearing the opinions of his generals, Kutusov reluctantly orders the Russian troops to retreat beyond Moscow and allow the French to enter the city. The frustrated Kutuzov is still convinced, though, that “they’ll eat horseflesh, like the Turks!”

**Chapter 5:** Despite Governor-General Count Rastopchin’s bellicose propaganda posters about defending the city, the Russian citizens of Moscow instinctively know that the right thing to do is to abandon and burn Moscow: “the wealthiest elements of the city left, abandoning their property; the poorest stayed and set fire to what remained.” No Russian was going accept occupation by the French, no matter how “civilized” the French occupation of cites like Vienna and Berlin had been: “there could be no question of whether it would be good or bad under French rule in Moscow. To be under French rule was impossible; it was the worst thing of all.” Tolstoy concludes the chapter with a blistering attack on the inconsistent, cruel, and self-serving behavior of Count Rastopchin during the final hours before the French arrival in the city.

**Chapters 6-7:** Helene Bezukhov decides that the best way to rid herself of the marital tie to Pierre is to convert to Catholicism under the instruction of a representative of the Jesuit order, who becomes her “spiritual father.” She then distracts St. Petersburg society from the controversial moral and religious aspects of this decision by encouraging them simply to debate about which of her new paramours to marry after the divorce. Having made these arrangements, she sends a letter to Pierre in Moscow, asking for a divorce; the letter arrives while Pierre is on the field at Borodino.

**Chapters 8-9:** Traumatized by the horrors he has seen at the Battle of Borodino, Pierre joins the retreating Russian soldiers and several of them provide him with open-hearted comfort and simple food. After reuniting with his servant and being forced to sleep overnight in a stable, Pierre has a lucid dream in which some voice outside himself tells him certain simple truths that had eluded him to this point: actions are more valuable than words; everything belongs to one who does not fear death; and, most importantly, “if there was no suffering, man would not know his limits, would not know himself.” While trying to “hitch up” these thoughts together, Pierre realizes that his servant is trying to wake him, telling him that it’s time “to hitch up” and join the retreating troops.

**Chapters 10-11:** Upon returning to Moscow, Pierre is summoned to see Count Rastopchin. He then witnesses the confusion of various governmental agency heads at the count’s headquarters, all trying
to figure out what to do in the face of the count’s contradictory orders. Pierre also learns about the case of one Vereshchagin, accused of distributing French proclamations and almost certainly condemned on the basis of little if any evidence. In his private meeting with Count Rastopchin, the count makes offensive insinuations about Helene’s plans; Pierre leaves angrily, and upon reading his wife’s letter requesting the divorce later at his own house, slips out the next morning, not be seen again by his household.

Chapter 12-17: Typically disorganized, the Rostovs struggle to pack and leave Moscow: Natasha and Petya can’t seem to settle down, Colonel Berg stops by with a petty request to help him buy an abandoned trinket for Vera, and wounded officers are asking to stop in the courtyard. Natasha is mobilized by her concern for the wounded men who are arriving, and ultimately she demands that the family leave much of their material possessions behind in order to transport the wounded out of the city. Natasha does not know that one of the wounded officers, arriving in his own carriage, is Prince Andrei. As the Rostovs finally leave the city, Natasha sees and calls to Pierre, whom she recognizes despite his peasant disguise. Pierre responds to her and tells her only that he is staying in Moscow. This chance meeting will affect Pierre profoundly later.

Chapters 18: Pierre, before seeing Natasha, had gone to his deceased mentor Josif Bazdeez’s home to retrieve his important Masonic papers. He asks Gerasim, the Bazdeevs’ servant, to acquire for him a peasant’s kaftan and a pistol, which he was wearing (on the way to buy the pistol) when Natasha saw him.

Chapter 19: While awaiting an expected “deputation” of Russian officials to discuss the terms under which Moscow will surrender, Napoleon fantasizes about how magnanimous he will be to the Russians during his occupation. To the embarrassment of Napoleon’s courtiers, the expected “deputation” does not arrive.

Chapters 20: In one of the great epic similes of War and Peace, Tolstoy’s narrative voice compares the abandoned city of Moscow to a beehive that has lost its queen. The beehive may look superficially normal, but its demise become more apparent under close inspection. Tolstoy was an expert beekeeper himself, so this simile is particularly detailed. The emptiness of Napoleon’s “triumph” is already clear.

Chapter 21-22: The potential disorder of the retreat is gradually quelled and the Russian troops successfully move beyong the city. The Rostov’s old servant Mavra Kuminishna gives money to a young officer, a distant relative of the Rostovs, one of the last able-bodied men to leave the city.

Chapter 23-25: The devastating account of Count Rastopchin’s despicable behavior continues. When a drunken mob appears before his headquarters, the count, in order to placate the mob and to buy time for his own escape, gives over the political prisoner Vereshchagin to them as a scapegoat, and the mob tears him to pieces.

Chapter 26: The French army enters Moscow, kills a few resisters in the Kremlin, and then disperses through the city and falls to looting. According to Tolstoy, this looting destroyed all military discipline, and “the army was annihilated forever.” Once the city was looted and burned, it could not be successfully occupied.
Chapters 27-29: Having decided that his great act of sacrifice is to assassinate Napoleon, Pierre is distracted from his plan by the arrival of Captain Ramballe, a good-natured and noble French officer whom Pierre has to save from an attack by Makar Alexiech, Josif Bazdeev’s drunken and mad brother. Needless to say, Ramballe is grateful for Pierre’s help, and is even more charmed when he discovers that Pierre speaks French and is clearly a cultured gentleman. Pierre allows himself to socialize with the Frenchman. Ultimately influenced by the contrast between the Frenchman’s smutty “love stories” and Pierre’s love for Natasha, emphasized by another view of the comet, Pierre starts to “remember his original intention” of carrying out his mission to kill Napoleon.

Chapter 30-31: While fleeing Moscow with their caravan of wounded soldiers, the Rostovs and their servants see the fires and gradually realize that Moscow is going to burn down almost totally. In addition, Sonya has let slip to Natasha that Prince Andrei is staying with them. Natasha cannot resist sneaking into Andrei’s room to see him. He recognizes her and gives her his hand.

Chapter 32: In great pain and despairoed of by his doctor, Prince Andrei is comforted by the vision of divine love that has suffused him since awakening in the field hospital. Thus, when Natasha appears to him in the room, he is able to tell her that he “loves her better than before,” clearly indicating that he forgives her. She is hustled out of his room, but she is now determined to stay by his side and care for him from now on. What will happen is still unclear, since the question of life and death hangs over not only Prince Andrei, but Russia itself.

Chapters 33-34: Having left Bazdeev’s house, guilty over having hosted Ramballe, Pierre is determined to carry out his “mission,” but he is distracted from it by his saving of an abandoned child from a burning house. Trying to return the child to her family, he then attacks a French soldier stealing from an Armenian woman. When French reinforcements arrive to quell the disorder amid the burning property, Pierre is arrested by the French troops and is accused of being an arsonist.