Major Characters in *War and Peace*

**Pierre Bezukhov (Count Pyotr Kirillovitch Bezukhov)**

Pierre is the “central character” of *War and Peace*. He is not the “hero” or main character, though, but he is central because he is the only character who maintains relationships with all the other main characters. He is also distinctive because he was not born officially into the nobility. In fact, he is the illegitimate son of Count Kiril Bezukhov, one of Russia’s richest and most influential noblemen. The old Count does acknowledge Pierre as his son, and takes responsibility for his upbringing and education. Eventually, the old Count will, somewhat perversely, decide just before his death to appeal to the Tsar to have Pierre made legitimate so that he can inherit the old man’s enormous fortune.

Although his Russian name is Pyotr (“Peter”), Pierre is generally referred to by the French version of his name, because at the beginning of the story Pierre is completely infatuated with Napoleon as “hero and reformer,” and enthusiastically defends his hero at every opportunity. Of course, Pierre is a naïve idealist, and he will pay for his naiveté as the story progresses, but there something absolutely simple and sincere in his personality to which other people cannot help but respond well, even those who should be put off by his awkward social behavior or the youthful foolishness of his ideas.

*War and Peace* is both a comedy and a tragedy, and Pierre is the novel’s comic protagonist. He is what is known a *picaresque* character; that is, he gets into all kinds of scrapes and confusions, but always seem to have the good fortune to survive both his absurd and his genuinely serious crises.

**The Bolkonsky Family**

**Prince Andrei Nikolaeievich Bolkonsky (“Prince Andrei”)**

Although he disagrees with Pierre about almost everything, Prince Andrei is nonetheless a great friend of Pierre, and they have known each other since childhood. The primary contrast between them is that while Pierre is a dreamy intellectual, Prince Andrei is very much the down to earth “man of action.” The Bolkonskys live on a country estate called “Bald Hills,” and live an austere and highly organized life, a deliberate contrast to the urban “society” that dominates the lives of the Rostovs, the other aristocratic family whose lives will be narrated in *War and Peace*.

If Pierre is the comic protagonist of *War and Peace*, then Prince Andrei is the tragic protagonist. Andrei is intellectually very sharp, but he his ideals are not found in ideas. Prince Andrei wants, more than anything else, to carry out some truly meaningful action, yet every “normal” action expected of him as an aristocrat in Petersburg seems empty and meaningless. He has come to disdain his largely ceremonial military position, the empty social prattle that he must endure at the constant round of parties he must attend with his pretty, pregnant society wife (Princess Liza, or “the Little Princess”), and he intends to leave her behind with his father and sister and join the staff of General Kutuzov, who is leading a Russian army that will join the Austrians in the fight against Napoleon. He is the most sensitive and conspicuously virtuous of the characters in *War and Peace*, but he has a tendency to be cool, distant, and self-absorbed. His deep and incessant search for
“meaning” in life has a certain tragic inevitability about it, and his destiny is literally “heart-breaking.”

**Princess Marya Nikolaevna Bolkonsky**

Prince Andrei’s younger sister, she is almost compulsively pious and meek, and lives in constant fear of her father, Prince Nikolai Andreich Bolkonsky (the “Old Prince”). She is one of the characters who will be most affected and changed by the trials of the Napoleonic invasion. She also frets a great deal over her brother’s coldly distant outlook, and his apparent unbelief in Orthodox religion. She has many of the same concerns about her father, who badgers her, inflicts mathematics on her, and makes light of her religious convictions.

**Princess Elizabeta Karlovna Bolkonsky’s (“Liza”, “Lise,” the “Little Princess”)**

Prince Andrei’s new wife, whom he leaves behind, pregnant, to enter the first conflict with Napoleon in 1805, is hopelessly out of place in the country. She has been raised an urban society girl, and she cannot understand her husband’s behavior at all, or feel comfortable in the cool, rational world of Bald Hills.

**Prince Nikolai Andeich Bolokonsky (the “Old Prince”)**

Prince Andrei’s and Princess Marya’s father, the Old Prince (as he is usually referred to in the narrative) was a contemporary of Count Bezukhov, Pierre’s father, and both were influential in the court of Catherine the Great (The Old Prince was a high general in the army.) in the late eighteenth century. The Old Prince fell out of favor at court and has retired to his estate (“Bald Hills”), which he runs on a clockwork schedule and under what amounts to military discipline. Very much a product of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, he behaves much as Benjamin Franklin would have had he been a crusty, spoiled, old Russian nobleman. Today, we would call the Old Prince a “control freak”; his moodiness and short temper keep his household, and especially his daughter, constantly on edge. He does sincerely love his family, even though he has a hard time showing it.

**The Rostov Family**

**Count Ilya Andreich Rostov**

An outgoing, fun-loving man, Count Rostov is one of the leaders of Moscow society, the one who organizes (and pays for) balls, banquets and other social events. He has excellent taste, is well-known and liked by everyone, and enjoys a happy family life. No one spends money to better effect, but Count Rostov’s generosity and lack of practical business sense put him into ongoing financial difficulties.

**Countess Natalya ("Natalie") Rostov**

The Countess, somewhat more practical and pragmatic than her husband, is completely focused on the welfare of her four children, especially the three younger ones: Nikolai, whom she must constantly remind of his material responsibilities; Natasha, to whom she is a close friend and confidante, and Petya, the younger boy, on whom she dotes.
Count Nikolai Ilyich Rostov

Nikolai Rostov is very much his father's son: sociable, friendly, liked by all. He's a typical romantic teenager at the beginning of the story, and he has made a youthful promise to marry his cousin Sonya, an orphaned relative the family has taken in and raised as their own. This promise will cause complications for him as time passes. Nikolai becomes an officer in the hussars, or cavalry, and pursues a military career during the Napoleonic Wars. He has to “grow up” a great deal during the course of War and Peace.

Count Pyotr Ilyich Rostov (Petya, Petrushka)

The darling of Countess Rostov, Petya is about seven or eight years old at the start of the story. As Napoleon invades in 1812, he will acquire a teenaged obsession with military glory.

Countess Vera Ilyinichna Rostov

The somewhat dull, conformist older daughter of the Rostovs, her chief contribution to the plot is the expense she causes her family when she marries Alphonse Karlovich Berg, an equally boring and conscientious young man of German extraction who is an officer in the Imperial Guard.

Sofia Alexandrovna (Sonya) (no last name)

An orphaned relative that the Rostovs have taken in, Sonya is very much the “good girl” of the story. Nikolai’s youthful infatuation with Sonya leads to an engagement that ultimately seems impractical and inappropriate to Nikolai’s mother, causing internal family strain. Sonya often serves as Natasha’s “conscience,” as well.

Countess Natalya (Natasha) Ilyinichna Rostov

Natasha Rostov is the central female character in War and Peace. Approximately twelve years old as the story begins in 1805, her emerging maturity as a woman and the relationships she will have with all the major male characters will ultimately form the emotional core of War and Peace. Natasha is vivacious, irrepressible, and sensitive. Naturally talented in music and dance, Tolstoy clearly presents her as the paragon of Russian womanhood, and thus highly attractive to all kinds of men, both good ones and bad ones. Natasha’s feelings will run the gamut from exultant joy to deep humiliation, and her sometimes rocky adventures in romance are part of an epic search for true love that will take the entire book to complete.

Supporting Characters

The Kuragin Family

The Kuragins are presented as examples of the worst attributes of the Russian nobility. They are opportunistic, snobbish, idle, and sensually indulgent. The opening scene of the book, in which the Petersburg society hostess, Anna Pavlovna Scherer, engages Prince Vassily Kuragin, the head of the family, in empty gossip and French chit-chat, captures this family's commitment to
the superficiality, social climbing, favor-seeking, and vulgarity that, for Tolstoy, are the aristocracy’s prime pursuits.

**Prince Ippolit Vassilievich Kuragin**

A dim-witted diplomat, Ippolit makes a fool of himself at the first party in the book, and is heard of very little afterward.

**Prince Anatole Vassilievich Kuragin**

The younger Kuragin son, whom his father admits “is running through 40,000 rubles a year,” is a totally decadent young nobleman under the influence of Dolokhov, a Russian officer with a penchant for gambling, drinking, dueling, and women. He hosts the drunken party that gets Pierre in trouble at the beginning of the story. Anatole Kuragin and Dolokhov are “partners in crime”: Dolokhov will become an antagonist to Pierre, and Anatole will be an antagonist to Prince Andrei.

**Princess Elena (Helene) Vassilievna Kuragin**

Helene is the beautiful, but empty-headed, ideal of the “society woman” in Petersburg. Her physical attractiveness trumps all other considerations, and other society people project onto her virtues that she does not possess. To Tolstoy, her hypocritical smile, bare shoulders, and exposed upper body become metaphors for her propensity for sensuality, which she shares with her notorious younger brother. Prince Vassily Kuragin, after failing to gain a portion of his relative Count Bezukhov’s estate, will maneuver Pierre, the successful heir, into a disastrous marriage with his daughter Helene.

**Princess Anna Mikhailovna Drubetskoy**

A noblewoman fallen on hard times, she wheedles favors and money from the Kuragins and Rostovs in order to advance the military career of her son Boris (who is also Natasha Rostov’s teenage boyfriend) for whom she desires a position in the Imperial Guards. She also succeeds in keeping Prince Vassily Kuragin and the Count Bezukhov’s sister from changing the old count’s will, thus assuring that Pierre will inherit the enormous fortune.

**Vassily Dmitrich Denisov (Vaska)**

A captain in the hussars, Denisov becomes Nilolai Rostov’s friend and mentor in the military. Captain Denisov becomes a close friend of the Rostov family, and he plays an important military role towards the end of the book.

**Akhrosimov, Marya Dmitrevna**

A leader of Moscow society, Marya Dmitrevna’s straightforward rebuke to Pierre for his bad behavior in Petersburg and her dancing with Count Ilya demonstrate the relative superiority of Moscow society, in sincerity and virtue, to that of the artificial and hypocritical Petersburg society.

**Julie Karagin**

She does not appear as a character, but she is Princess Marya’s correspondent, whose letters in French keep the isolated Princess Bolkonsky in touch with Moscow society. It is through Julie Karagin’s letter that Pierre’s successful inheritance and new legitimacy are revealed.