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COMRADE LENIN OR COUNT LEO TOLSTOY?  
REFLECTIONS AFTER SOME MEMORABLE MEETINGS AT HARROGATE

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Eberhard Dieckmann, Polemik um einen Klassiker, Lew Tolstoi im Urteil seiner russischen Zeitgenossen, 1855-1910 (Aufbau-Verlag: Berlin und Weimar, 1987) and Russische Zeitgenossen über Tolstoi, Kritiken, Aufsätze, Essays, 1855-1910 ed. by Eberhard Dieckmann (Aufbau-Verlag: Berlin und Weimar, 1990)

Students of Russian literature may find special symbolism in the fact that one of the last publications to appear in the months before East Germany's best known publishing house Aufbau-Verlag merges with its powerful West Germany counterpart, Suhrkamp Verlag, is a collection of critical essays and commentary on Count Leo Tolstoy and his work written by his contemporaries. The essays gathered under the general title Russian Contemporaries about Tolstoy. Criticism, Reviews, and Essays span the period between 1855--the date of Tolstoy's debut in literature--and 1910--the year of his death; they were edited and introduced by Professor Dr. Eberhard Dieckmann, the director of the Tolstoy research group at the East German Academy of Sciences. This volume follows Dr. Dieckmann's publication in 1987 of his assessment of Tolstoy criticism in Russia in 1855-1910 which he called Polemic Over One Classic. Lev Tolstoy in the Judgement of His Russian Contemporaries, 1855-1910. It also anticipates work in progress on an edition of Tolstoy's correspondence with German workers and peasants at the turn of the 19th century whose archive Dr. Dieckmann solely controls.

In the context of the current political situation in Eastern Europe, Dr. Dieckmann's commitment to his Tolstoy project makes one reflect on the precarious position of Eastern European Slavists--particularly East Germans--and the price of personal loyalty to the goals of research in the present state of ideological crisis and institutional dislocation. If in the Soviet Union the policy of glasnost has opened doors to forbidden depositories and clandestine archives and has made the search for national cultural identity into an exciting collective project, if in the West, college enrollments in Russian Studies programs have tripled, Slavic scholarship in Eastern Europe, by contrast, has reached its lowest ebb, having been for years stigmatized by its association with the pro-Moscow government cultural policy. However, there have been some positive developments in the present ideological reshuffle in East European Academies, Societies, and Unions: among them the most important,

perhaps, is the emergence of a few dedicated scholars like Dr. Dieckmann whose personal contribution to the field has begun to receive its long deserved international exposure after decades of obscure local circulation. Free from the former constraints of government censorship, the East European scholars can take full advantage of knowledge gained from the long-held privileged position in research in the Soviet Union and close professional contacts with the Russian colleagues which their Western colleagues are only now beginning to enjoy.

The Aufbau-Verlag publication of Dr. Dieckmann's two Tolstoy volumes is a personal achievement of a dedicated scholar. For many years, Dr. Dieckmann has worked in the archives of Moscow Institute for World Literature, Leningrad Institute of Russian Literature and with Soviet colleagues from the Tolstoy Museum in Moscow. At the present time of troubles when the professional and personal fate of each East German scholar and the Academy is being decided, Dr. Dieckmann's question is whether the West German Suhrkamp will honor his years of research. He finds, perhaps idealistically, reassurance in his "Tolstoy files." Dr. Dieckmann is convinced that intellectual history is cyclical by nature and the debates surrounding Tolstoy in his lifetime have resurfaced on memorable Tolstoy dates in the 20th century (1908, 1910, 1928, 1953, 1960 and 1978) a pattern that will continue in the future. Intimately familiar with the Soviet literary and scholarly scene--and yet its outsider--Dr. Dieckmann points out continuities and disruptions which at first may be imperceptible to the newly initiated Westerners. He is, perhaps, best qualified to answer the question "why Tolstoy in Eastern Europe now?" as this theme organizes both his published volumes and informs his third one.

The vast difference in political and personal circumstances of the critic becomes immediately apparent even at a cursory glance at the language and style of Dr. Dieckmann's two introductions which appeared three years apart (in 1987 and 1990). The first essay, entitled "About the Contemporary Importance of One Historical Polemic. Defining One's Critical Position" (Zur Aktualität eines geschichtlichen Streits. Standortbestimmung), appeared at the time when Erich Honneker's conservative government was rejecting the changes which were taking place in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev. Dr. Dieckmann's reopening of the "Tolstoy question" with the citation "Genosse Lenin or Leo Tolstoy?" sounded topical under Honneker's regime. Three years later, after the Berlin Wall finally collapsed, Dr. Dieckmann's new introduction appeared appropriately titled "About the Might and Impotency of Criticism" (Über Macht und Ohnmacht der Kritik) and introducing his German readers to earlier unheard critical opinions of Alexei Khomiakov, Apollon Grigorjev, Alexander Blok, Piotr Kropotkin, and Vasily Rozanov--all gathered to offset and challenge the all too familiar Lenin dictums.

Polemic Over One Classic begins with Dr. Dieckmann's analysis of the dramatic debate which unfolded in Pravda in 1928 and whose foreboding overtones overshadowed the celebration of Tolstoy's centenary in the Soviet Union. Mikhail Olminsky, the long-time Bolshevik press editor, in his article "Comrade Lenin or Leo Tolstoy?" reminded his readers of Tolstoy's "anti-revolutionary" thinking and called on the fellow comrades

to follow Lenin's guiding principles of interpretation and beware of deviationist politics. The "struggle for Tolstoy" set off by Olminsky's warnings marked the great ideological divide in Soviet literary scholarship. It is only logical to ask why Dr. Dieckmann needs to go back to the turning point of 1928 if his stated goal is to reevaluate the intellectual debate of Tolstoy's own time. To answer this question one has to be aware that in order to speak for the past, an East European scholar writing on the eve of the regime's collapse first has to disengage himself from the ideological rhetoric of his present.<sup>1</sup> To recreate the pluralism of the original critical scene, Dr. Dieckmann has to explain who, when and how the ironing out of critical diversity began; his strategy is not to focus on discontinuities and dislocations but rather for continuities in the outcome of that fatal debate. Indeed, his own legitimacy as an established East European scholar in the 1990s is contingent on the continuity with the best previous Tolstoy scholarship. As the centenary's most important development, for example, Dr. Dieckmann mentions, for example, the beginning work on the publication of Tolstoy's monumental Complete Works. Furthermore, Dr. Dieckmann would like to align himself with such distinguished Soviet scholars as Boris Eikhenbaum, Victor Shklovsky, Mikhail Lifschitz, and Nikolai Ardens and many others who continued their work under the circumstances which became even more repressive after 1928. In contemporary Eastern Europe as earlier in the West, Dr. Dieckmann's optimism sounds unjustifiably inflated. The incompleteness of Tolstoy's Complete Works, for example, has been discussed at the Soviet Academy of Sciences<sup>2</sup> and the high cost of ideological compromises which Bakhtin, Eikhenbaum, Shklovsky, and all others had to make in their work on Tolstoy have always been the subject of a critical dialogue in Western scholarship.<sup>3</sup> When the adjustments for

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<sup>1</sup>Gary Saul Morson's introduction to his study Hidden in Plain View. Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace' (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) offers an interesting counterpoint to Dr. Dieckmann's treatment of the past. Both scholars grant the initial responses of Tolstoy's first readers and critics full legitimacy, in fact they see these responses, in Morson's words, as more "correct" than the following readings. But if for Morson these initial observations serve as a starting point for his own original thesis, for Dieckmann the "correct" interpretations of the past are by themselves a self-sufficient goal. If for Morson, the past provides a springboard to new ideas, for Dieckmann, the past itself is new and the future is the "correct" or the "corrected" past.

<sup>2</sup>It is of relevance here that the Soviet Academy has decided to begin work on a new edition of Tolstoy's Complete Works which will extend into the 21st century and will exceed 100 volumes.

<sup>3</sup>For the analysis of the circumstances and effects that the new Stalinist policy towards literature had on Eikhenbaum's work see Carol Any's informative article "Boris Eikhenbaum's Unfinished Work on Tolstoy: A Dialogue with Soviet History," in PMLA, March 1990, vol. 105, No. 2: 233-244. No less controversial was Mikhail Bakhtin's attitude toward Tolstoy. Bakhtin's anti-Tolstoy stand in his study of Dostoevsky's Poetics and his ambivalent review of Tolstoy's dramas

censorship and ideology are finally made, Dr. Dieckmann's analyses merit close attention of scholars both in the East and in the West. His discussions of Tolstoy's early reviewers, the controversies at the turn of the 20th century and political subtleties of criticism from the left are among the strongest points in the study.

Dr. Dieckmann's introduction to his second volume bears witness to the sudden collapse of all rules and constraints. The ultimate "truth" about Tolstoy, we learn, is no longer to be found in the works of social democrats and revolutionaries but in the writings of formerly ideologically suspect camp of their antagonists. After all, Apollon Grigoriev, the proponent of "organic criticism, was the first critic to call serious attention to Tolstoy as an emerging talent. And Tolstoy himself, we are reminded, was on better terms with the aesthetes Botkin and Druzhinin than with the democratic members of the editorial board of Sovremennik. Dieckmann can now say openly what he could only hint at in the earlier volume. In Russian Contemporaries About Tolstoy, the reader finds indirect answers to the questions posited by Dieckmann in his first volume, "Genosse Lenin oder Graf Tolstoi?" and "why Leo Tolstoy now?" Dieckmann notes, for example, that "one of the outstanding characteristics of Tolstoy's art which sets him apart from the rest of the Russian classics, are the abrupt, ostensibly precipitous caesures in his texts which signify upheaval (Umbruch), changeover (Weschel), and turning point (Wende) and at the same time the new beginning (Neubeginn)."<sup>4</sup> In his detailed discussion, Dieckmann suggests that Tolstoy's art offers his readers the promise of a new beginning in the midst of the general chaos. As the waves of reception examined in Dieckmann's volumes demonstrate, the resistance of Tolstoyan texts to criticism originates in his quarrel with history, which for Tolstoy is no more than the present usurping the authority of the past. The past, the present, and the future--each time period has its own legitimacy in Tolstoy's writings--and most human problems occur when one tries to smuggle them into one another and justify and explain one through the other in the name of the better world. One is reminded here that Dieckmann comes from a society which for decades has been treating the present as irrelevant, "the future as certain and only the past as unpredictable."<sup>5</sup>

The most striking realization that comes to mind after reading Dr. Dieckmann's two volumes is that Tolstoy now has become the teacher of ideological pluralism whose constructive vision of anti-authoritarian

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and his novel Resurrection for the edition of Tolstoy's Collected Works. For an excellent analysis of Tolstoy connection in Bakhtin see Caryl Emerson's article in Rethinking Bakhtin ed. by Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson (Evanston, Il.: Northwestern University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup>Russische Zeitgenossen über Tolstoi, Kritiken, Aufsätze, Essays. 1855-1910 ed. by Eberhard Dieckmann (Aufbau-Verlag: Berlin und Weimar, 1990): 13.

<sup>5</sup>An observation made by Christopher S. Wren in his reflections The Failure of Communism in the Soviet Union and China (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990).

unity offers a viable alternative to the current apocalyptic state of East European thinking. Tolstoy is able to deliver a promise of change without destruction and a hope for renewal without total collapse. Now that the answers to the question Lenin or Tolstoy? are no longer certain, Dr. Dieckmann's work on Tolstoy provides an excellent opening for a dialogue between East European and Western scholars at this turning point in European history.