

What is peace? Tolstoy and Gorky in the dialogue on human nature

Nikolaus Katzer

The rooms of radical Russian students in and around 1900 were decorated with photographs of the 'late' Tolstoy and the 'early' Gorky. Both writers were surrounded by an aura of rebellion. Their paths crossed repeatedly around this time. They kept a watchful and wary eye on each other. The count and estate owner represented the world of the 19th century. He had served in the Caucasus and Crimean wars and had become a radical pacifist in his later years. He opposed the death penalty and attacked church and state. By contrast, Gorky's knowledge of the war derived from hearsay only. Born into the middle classes, he was self-taught and had experienced a sudden rise to fame. He had lived among those left stranded by the rapidly changing imperial society and appeared to herald a revolution 'from below'. When the 'Great War' broke out in 1914, Tolstoy was already dead. Gorky sought a perspective of his own on the 'imperialist war' among the controversies of the divided left. Dismayed, he described the horror of the revolution and the civil war. Aphoristic reminiscences of Tolstoy (1919) and an essay 'On the Russian Peasantry' (1922) then mark a decisive shift – violence becomes the rational principle of a dichotomous world view.