

War and Peace

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Around the time of the American war between the states, the renowned Russian novelist, Count Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) composed one of the greatest narratives in the history of Western culture -- about some of the most significant military events of last century: the Napoleonic wars, the burning of Moscow, the retreat of 1812. The title of the enormous novel was War and Peace.

Tolstoy portrayed Napoleon as looking over Moscow before taking the city and saying "A city occupied by the enemy is like a girl who has lost her honor.... But I will spare her. On the ancient monuments of barbarism and despotism I will inscribe great words of justice and mercy.... [Tsar] Alexander will feel that more bitterly than anything."

Tolstoy was unaffected, realistic, yet grand in his style. Without descending to platitudes, Tolstoy could address the great themes of human personality, life, and love -- and do so with a ring of truth. He had served the Russian army in the Crimean War, and so knew its grim details. But he saw war not as a spectacle in itself, but as the backdrop for highlighting the traits of human personality and the need for spiritual reawakening.

Ego-maniacal Napoleon chose not to humiliate Moscow as a girl losing her virginity, but rather to speak words of "justice and mercy" to her. Not because his heart was for the principles of righteousness and compassion, but precisely to press down the humiliation upon Moscow's Tsar all the more. An unmerciful mercy, indeed! In Napoleon's musings, Tolstoy crystallizes a tragic truth about human nature.

And yet Tolstoy himself was powerless to deal with man's fallen nature and bring to it spiritual reawakening. He was powerless to show those who suffer from war the lasting way to peace. Tolstoy's "Christianity" was a mere moralistic message about loving one another, a message that lost the supernatural character of God's Son, whose death alone could save from the guilt of sin, and lost the gracious power of His Holy Spirit, which alone transforms us into new creatures.

Politicians today are equally impotent to create "A New World Order" without the Prince of Peace. The crucial issue and tragic truth is that human nature is fallen and -- whether in expressions of war or expressions of peace -- incapable of genuine justice and mercy. Until the problem of sin is addressed, true peace will escape us. Talk of "justice" or "mercy" will continue to be self-serving politics.

Christ our Savior addressed the underlying problem of sin, atoning for it upon cross and breaking its power through the resurrection life He gives His people. It was about this King that David

wrote: "He will judge the poor with justice. The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the hills, in righteousness.... In his days shall the righteous flourish, and abundance of peace, until the moon is no more" (Psalm 72:2-3, 7).