



LA RAZÓN HISTÓRICA
Revista hispanoamericana de Historia de las Ideas
ISSN 1989-2659
Número 62, Año 2024, páginas 30-38
www.revistalarazonhistorica.com

Is official history important in people's every day life?

Anna Hamling

University of New Brunswick

Abstract. Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, Russian writer (1828-1910) and Miguel de Unamuno, Spanish writer (1864-1936) 'the apostles of the renewed Christianity', were deeply engaged in a controversial debate on the importance of historical events. Their interest in history stems from their ideas on immortality and Christianity considered to be a historical religion. In the current article. I will elaborate on the concept of history and 'intra-history' as understood by Tolstoy and Unamuno especially relevant in the current climate of international conflict I will also refer to the relevant sources that influenced Tolstoy's and Unamuno's thinking on history. Miguel de Unamuno did not read Russian but he became interested in the works of Lev Tolstoy after reading the French translation of *War and Peace* in 1884. *War and Peace* was published in Spanish five years later in 1889 (Bagno 45).

Key words: History, Intrahistory, Tolstoy, Unamuno, Religion.

History and Intrahistory

It is not well known that Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's ideas on the concept of history were of particular interest for Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy. The French historian, politician and writer met Tolstoy in Brussels in 1861, the year in which he published *Guerre et paix* (*War and Peace*), translated into Russian two years later (Sampson 112). Proudhon considers the origins of war as a dark mystery. His thinking is

similar to that of Jean - Jacques Rousseau (another French writer and philosopher) in terms of the concept of history as an irrational phenomenon that does not have any valid causes. Proudhon explains that both concepts of “war and peace” are deeply rooted in the heart of the human being who interprets the world. He also laments the fact that humankind worships power in spite of realising that it often acts against justice and law. (Sampson 115).

Proudhon reveals his anarchistic tendencies in *Guerre et paix*. As a result, the Russian critic, Eikhenbaum suggested that Tolstoy had not only borrowed the title of Proudhon’s work for his own great novel, but had also assimilated his general ideas about history (Eikhenbaum 386). Tolstoy himself left no note about the meeting with Proudhon, although in conversations with his friends he expressed admiration for the strength of character opinions of the man (Sampson 114).

Tolstoy, however, criticised the ideas of Proudhon concerning Catholicism, especially as the Frenchman identified Catholicism with Christianity, being himself a Catholic. For Tolstoy, Catholicism was not a synonym for Christianity because “it is not relevant to the true religion that does not need external imposition” (66:334, *Diary*). Unamuno, on the other hand, was very attracted to the philosophy of the German Karl Christian Krause who studied Proudhon’s philosophical thought in the relation to history.

Krause distinguishes between the concepts of internal and external history, in other words, he distinguishes between authentic and quasi-authentic version of history. Internal history, the authentic one, is always a history of ideas, the idea always being the idea of God; “the ideal is an ideal of humanity, its constant aspiration to fulfil its earthly existence” (López-Morillas 40). The path towards understanding God is a slow and gradual and it needs historical time to be developed.

Unamuno forges another word relevant to history. It is *intrahistory* used in *En Torno de casticismo* (*The Return to Love of Purity*) published in 1895 for the first time. He avoids an exact definition of this concept, but emphasizes its significant importance by using a following metaphor in his novel *En torno*:

There is an eternal tradition, just as there is a tradition of the past and of the present. And here we find another commonplace phrase which, being as much repeated alive as a dead thing, which is “the present historic moment”. Has the reader thought of this? Because after speaking about a present historic moment one may say

that there is another which is not this, and this is the truth. But if there is a present history, it is through having a present tradition, because the tradition is the substance of History. This is the way to conceive it in reality, as the substance of History. It is worth detaining ourselves for this point... ..That intra-historical life, as silent and continuous as the depths of the sea, is the substance of progress, the true tradition, the eternal tradition; not the made-up tradition which tends to look for the past buried in books and papers, monuments and stones. (1:820, *En torno*; translation by the author).

According to Unamuno, the waves of history are like the movement of the sea, or those events crystallised “in books and registers.” They are associated with the external or quasi-authentic history of Krause. *Intrahistory*, alludes to the depths of the sea, as a representative of the silent labour of millions of men throughout the millennia, is associated with internal history, which Krause considers the authentic history of ideas in which God is predominantly present. Krause omits a comparison between the history of ideas and that which describes the historical events, He considers them to be compatible as an idea and an ideal. “The idea is always idea od God” and the ideal is that what carries mankind towards the eternity. This process is supported by gradual knowledge of God (López-Morillas 40).

The writer considers *intrahistory* to be “the unconscious history” and “the substance of history.” Unamuno does not insist so much on the fact that the present will eventually be deposited in the archives of a tradition, but rather the opposite, stating that the present arises out of a tradition and is sustained by it. *Intrahistory*, understood as tradition, does not mean a dead residue, motionless from a historic past. The tradition called *intrahistory* by Unamuno, is a live tradition. It is the part of history which is not recorded in newspapers, “the dark and silent daily and eternal labour” (Blanco Aguinaga 89).

Eternal tradition is what all living people should look for to rise up to the light, coming to know what is unknown within the population, and to be guided by it. This is not a tradition which is conserved in the days of yore, but one which is found in the present” (1:829, *En torno*, translation by the author).

False History

Tolstoy felt attracted to history very early in his career. The desire to penetrate causes, and to understand how and why things happen at any given moment in time attracted him more than the desire to penetrate the past. Tolstoy thought that history, the sum of all concrete events in time and space, the sum of human experiences, could provide enough material to offer answers. History, the sum of empirical facts, could hold the key to the discovery how things had happened. How should we live? Why are we in this world? The study of historical connections and the demand for answers to these *prokliatye voprosy* (cursed questions) fused in the mind of Tolstoy. In his journals, references are found to his intention to buy *Nakaz* (Order) from Catherine the Great with landscapes from Montesquieu (48:167, *Diary*).

Tolstoy becomes obsessed his quest to find some philosophical principles which concretely explain history. Tolstoy explains in his diary that in order to write the history of modern Europe one could spend one's entire life, and that "leaves on trees bring more happiness to us all than their roots" (48:190, *Diary*), leading us to believe that, in spite of everything, world-vision is superficial. At the same time, Tolstoy grew disappointed with "the science of history". History is written by historians, men who cannot resolve philosophical problems by way of reason so they try to resolve them by means of historical analysis. According to him, history is the science which lost its objective (49:200).

History cannot solve all men's questions in every generation. In an attempt to respond to these questions, men try to accumulate knowledge of the facts of the time. However, no knowledge reveals the connections between good and bad, between science, art, and morality. According to Tolstoy, history is a collection of useless fables, full of figures and useless surnames (49:123, *Diary*). Tolstoy adds that history does not reveal causes; it only presents a sequence of inexplicable events. Historians select some factors that affect people's lives claiming that these are the main cause of social change. They do not even try to mention the "spiritual factors" which influence social change. The "inner facts" are our own, true, intimate, and these are what truly matter in human life, but these are forgotten by historians. When Tolstoy contrasts reality, daily human life of people with the panorama of the historical events he considers them to be a "fictitious construction."

The Russian writer was troubled to know that some historians attribute historic events to the actions of a few individuals, to the power of certain characters,

without explaining to the public the concept of “power”. These “powerful” men, explains Tolstoy, are mean, ignorant, and vane human beings because they accept the responsibility of social life: individuals who prefer to accept the blame for all the cruelties and injustices instead of recognising their own insignificance and impotence in the cosmos (52:89, *Diary*).

Tolstoy’s ideas about the “false” history and “real” history of a group of people have their equivalents in Unamuno’s concepts of a misunderstood *casticismo* and of *intrahistory*. For both men, civilisation’s false history is preserved in the memory of certain individuals. For example, the events of false history are detailed in documents, newspapers, and books written by individuals; therefore memory preserves lives of some and the tradition is the basis of a people’s collective memory, of their true history.

When Unamuno finished writing *En torno al casticismo* (1895), his ideas about history and the lack of spiritual values were presented clearly. Unamuno criticised the brand of Spanish patriotism which seeks glory in the historic past but which does not try to discover the true “homeland” which is hidden under the surface; “Reflective, responsible, and defined casticismos, which are looked for in the historic past or later, persist solely in the present history. They are nothing but instruments of spiritual impoverishment of the people” (1:834).

En torno al casticismo, not only for Unamuno but for all in Spain, was a controversial and historical awakening to the problems of Spain. Unamuno believed this historical awakening should lead Spaniards to consider critically the history of Spain because of the lack of true understanding of the tradition which encapsulates the *intrahistoric*, the silent life of the people.

Unamuno and Tolstoy, each in his own moment and environment, try to show the nature of the Spanish and Russian soul, to sense the religious and spiritual background of the Spanish and Russian characters respectively.

There are not any commonalities in Tolstoy’s and Unamuno’s use of terminology but rather in their similar understanding of some concepts. When Unamuno speaks of intrahistory, and Tolstoy of “real” history, both are referring to the eternal tradition. They both try to describe the conditions under their cultural ocean. In the past, historians had focussed their attention on wars, coronations, treaties and agreements, etc. These events had very little impact on the evolution of history. The traditions of the people are those which accumulate in the “depths of the ocean” and which form an aspect of national character. It is the submitting to the

external forces of history that an integral part of the social contract. That submission helps people to form relationships which are mutually beneficial, and produce popular characteristics found especially in religious beliefs, but also in music, dance, and stories. It is the living soul which unites people, apart from all of the historic circumstances.

The “real” history of Tolstoy is not different to the *intrahistory* of Unamuno. For both writers, it constitutes the collective unconsciousness of the people; it is this which leads to internal progress.

Tolstoy explores the concepts of history and *intrahistory* in his famous novel *War and Peace* while Unamuno shares the convergent ideas with the Russian writer in his novel *Al torno de casticismo*. Commenting on *War and Peace* (1869) and *Peace in War* (1897) Marcilly concludes that Tolstoy as much as Unamuno abstains from describing “objective” realities. This implies that for the two authors, an “external and objective” world does not exist, but rather each man lives in his own world, a product of a dialogue between determined human vision and reality. Marcilly states that, for Tolstoy and Unamuno, the world lacks understanding of how to adapt to the feelings of people. All our senses perceive only the world around us. (Marcilly 280).

In Tolstoy’s opinion it is only possible to contribute to historic progress through absolute submission to the course of events. In order to live a purposeful life, one must be altruistic, of simple character, and prepared to sacrifice oneself. Those who tried to point history in a certain direction, such as Napoleon or the Russian generals, fail in their efforts. Through selfishness, through pride, they placed obstacles in the way of historic events. Their historic role is a negative one. Marcilly considers the characterisation of general Elío as a “negative imitation” of the Russian general Kutuzov as he was presented in *War and Peace*.

According to Tolstoy, in spite of great historic events, humans continue to live an unconscious daily life. They are contributing to development of the world but the “he considers heroes” who act consciously in history as dangerous men (52:109 *Diary*).

Pardo Bazán highlights the convergences in Tolstoy’s and Unamuno’s points of view: to her, Tolstoy’s influence on Unamuno is obvious in the very concept of war. In the Spanish writer’s novel, there is an echo of Tolstoy’s view on people’s participation in a war. What is the objective to fight in the war? asks Tolstoy without finding a logical answer. Ignacio, one of the protagonists of Unamuno’s

novel *Paz en la Guerra* (Peace in the War) observes the lack of understanding between generals and 'common soldier' in the battle (Pardo Bazán 251).

Sánchez Barbudo observes that both Tolstoy and Unamuno share similar ideas on history. He states that in Unamuno's novel, prevail psychological elements of the 'common people' behaviour. What the characters think and feel surpasses what they do. Their internal life is more profound and more intensely represented than the exterior drama. Unamuno aims to analyse the feelings, thoughts and doubts of those men who fight in the battles. Equally, Tolstoy's 'characters are quite indifferent to the external and far away events.

Tolstoy and Unamuno refuse to compare political and military history with people's every day life. The "common man" who lives his entire life in detached way from the external way but builds his life with his family experiencing sadness and happiness throughout it, is the one who builds *intrahistory*. The "unconscious" of the historical events, that which stays and remains in spite of time passing by (silence, tranquillity, peace, and the unconscious living people's daily life) forges *intrahistory*.

In *Paz en la guerra* Ignacio Pachico casts doubt upon the sense of fighting to honour God and to benefit the Spanish people. It seems to Ignacio that war consists of marches and counter-marches. This enforces the principal idea of *intrahistory* in Tolstoy's and Unamuno's novel.

Therefore, although one may classify *War and Peace* and *Paz en la guerra* as historical, what becomes evident is life, not political and military events. Tolstoy and Unamuno look for what humans all have in common. All feel the same desires and have the same needs.

Tolstoy refused to classify *War and Peace* as a novel. For him, the work was conceived out of a completely original idea and, just like all great literary works, surpassed all the norms, rendering it impossible to classify. In the prologue to the first 25 chapters of *War and Peace* published in the magazine *Русский вестник* (*The Russian Messenger*), Tolstoy clarified that the work was not a novel. Unamuno considered changing his novel's title to *La paz* (Peace) (Oostendorp 258).

Neither the Russian's victory nor the Carlists' defeat in Spain justify the conclusion of the two novels. In *War and Peace* characters lead normal life: they get married, they have children, and they dedicate themselves to their careers. War is forgotten about, and everyone returns to their daily tasks. Similarly in Unamuno's

novel, daily life reclaims its rights. Both Pedro Antonio and Pachico are convinced that war does not become an ephemeral episode which upsets, for a brief moment, the wave of life's continuity.

Conclusion

Both giants of the world literature, in spite of their difference in time and space, shared similar understanding of history and intrahistory. This in turn, leads to the question of eternal truth in any religious tradition, as understood by Tolstoy and Unamuno that needs to be explored in the future article.

References

- Blanco Aguinaga, Carlos. *El Unamuno contempaltivo*. México: Publicaciones de la Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica, 1959
- Eikhenbaum, Boris. *Molodoi Tolstoi*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1924.
- García Blanco, Manuel. *En torno a Unamuno*. Madrid: Taurus, 1965
- Literaturnaya Gazeta 11 Sept. 1957: 15-23; 13 Dec. 1985: 12-16.
- Literaturnoe Nasledstvo*. Special issue dedicated to L. Tolstoy. 37-38 (1938): 1-200.
- López-Morillas, Juan *El krausismo español*. Madrid: F.C.E., 1956.
- Marcilly, C. "Unamuno et Tolstoi: de la Guerre et la Paix." *BH* 67 (1965): 274-313.
- - -. *On Life*. Trans. and ed. Professor Leo Wiener. Boston: Dana Este & Co., 1904.
- Pardo Bazán, E. *La revolución y la novela en Rusia*. Madrid: Aguilar, 1967.
- Sampson, R. V. *Tolstoy: The Discovery of Peace*. London: Oxford UP, 1973.
- Sánchez Barbudo, A. *La fe religiosa de Unamuno y su crisis de 1897*. Buenos Aires: Revista de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1951.

Tolstoi, Leo N. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. 90 vols. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1928-58.

- - -. *The Complete Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi*. Vol. IX. New York: Thomas y Crowell & Co., 1899.

Unamuno, Miguel de. *Obras completas*. 9 vols. Ed. Manuel García Blanco. Madrid: Escelicer, 1966-72.

Watson, Peggy. "Intra-Historia in Miguel de Unamuno's Novels, A Continual Presence." *DAI 50* (1990): A3616.