

# Armenians, Kurds, Turks and Tolstoy

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A promotional banner for CounterPunch Book Bundles. On the left, there are three book covers: 'Z1 ECON ROB', 'AGAIN CHAR' by Daniel Ravetto, and 'An Orgy of Thieves: Neoliberalism and Its Discontents' by Jeffrey St. Clair. To the right of the books is a black button with 'CLICK HERE' in white. Further right, the text reads '25% off every order for CounterPunch+ Subscribers'. The main title 'CounterPunch Book Bundles' is in large, bold, black font. To the right of the title, it says 'Trilogies available in Digital & Paperback.' in white text on a teal background.

February 17, 2023 by [Kani Xulam](#)

In 1893, a group of Armenian university students visited Leo Tolstoy at his home. They wanted to talk to him about the plight of their Armenian compatriots in Ottoman-Armenia. Their emancipation was on their mind. Would the world-renowned author support their struggle for freedom?

He didn't.

During their conversation, the Kurds also came up. The students described them as “barbarians”. The Turks, the coreligionists of Kurds, were equally unsavory. The Armenians, they argued, needed to put a healthy distance between themselves and their neighbors.

Tolstoy wasn't moved.

It's been 130 years since Tolstoy met the students. If Kurds, Turks and Armenians are subjects of your curiosity, I highly recommend [the remarkable give and take](#). Although condensed, the intellectual bantering brings to mind Plato's famous dialogs. It leaves in the shade many of the discussions that regularly take place in our think tanks these days.

Tolstoy in 2023 is better known for his realistic novels than his later preoccupation to ignite a moral revolution in the world. He himself divided his life into two parts—pre and post 1881. Before 1881, for 53 years, he had lived for himself, his family, and his novels. After 1881, for 29 years, he lived for all—including the animals by becoming a vegetarian.

The Armenian students, noting Tolstoy's indifference towards their cause, brought up the case of the Greeks. They had freed themselves from their Turkish oppressors—with some help from the great powers of Europe. Couldn't the Armenians, they put forth, jump on the same bandwagon?

To be sure, Tolstoy was for freedom, but thought the students were “exaggerating” their case. Weren't the “wealthy” Armenians, he asked his guests, exploiting their fellow Armenians? It was probably no worse than what the Turks and Kurds were doing to them,

he told them.

He then elaborated on his own question: in the liberated Armenia, the oppression of the poor Armenians by the rich Armenians would continue. The same, he added, is happening to the poor Russians and French under the supposedly free Russian and French governments.

A student then made a comment that the Armenians didn't just want to free themselves from the Turks, but also wanted to establish a socialist paradise that would end poverty and stop the exploitation of man by man.

"Oh, don't talk about that," Tolstoy interjected. He added, "I can't speak of it without laughing!" He went on, "The wealth now held by the minority will have to be administered by someone, who will, of course, be an ordinary human being with certain weaknesses and defects."

He then voiced a question of his own: the socialists "aren't going to invite the angels to come and attend to the distribution of wealth, are they?"

We don't know what the students thought of Tolstoy's angels, but we do know what the socialists did in Russia 24 years later in 1917. The Russian Revolution, as Tolstoy had predicted, and as George Orwell would later satirize it, showed "some animals" were "more equal than others." Men with "weaknesses and defects," such as Lenin and Stalin, ended, "supposedly," the exploitation of man by man, but kept a tight rein on the wealth of the state for themselves and their select cronies.

So, if liberation from the Turks, the way Greeks had done it, would not end the exploitation of Armenians by the Armenians and socialism as envisioned by the revolutionaries of the time, as a system, would create new ruling classes worse than the old ones, what then was Tolstoy's alternative for the Armenian students—or the Kurdish ones who may be grappling with the same issues these days?

The alternative was "the love of man by man."

Tolstoy's study of the Sermon on the Mount had transformed him into an activist in his fifties and he gently chided his guests, "please don't be frightened at the word 'Christianity.'" The Christianity that he believed in was founded on reason—he rejected both the Trinity and the Eucharist.

Perhaps sensing that the students needed some direction, he continued, "If all the energy of the patriots who preach the struggle for emancipation were directed into that path, it would in my opinion be far better and more useful. I will go even further and say that it is essential to follow that course."

Tolstoy was no stranger either to the Turks or to their religion, Islam. He had learned the language of Tatars, a Turkic people, in the Volga-Ural region in his youth. As a soldier in the tsar's army, he had also fought the Chechens, Circassians, Ottomans, Britons, and the

French in his twenties. His novella, *Hadji Murat*, takes up the resistance of a Muslim fighter against the Russians.

In fact, he and Lenin (a better-known Russian to Kurdish students who think of emancipating the Kurds) would cross paths in the same Volga-Ural region during the Russian famine of 1891. Lenin, apparently, “welcome[d]” the starvation of the Bashkirs and thought it would break down the peasantry and contribute to the growth of “industrial proletariat [p.318].”

Tolstoy, on the other hand, rolled up his sleeves and with the help of philanthropists from the West set out to save lives. “By July 1892, he had set up two hundred and forty-six kitchens, feeding thirteen thousand people daily, and a hundred and twenty-four special children’s kitchens, feeding three thousand daily [p.444].”

Notwithstanding this self-evident goodwill of Tolstoy towards all, the Armenian students were having a hard time connecting with him.

One of them took an exception to Tolstoy’s “pollyannish” views and interposed with a “but” and continued, “such humanitarian teaching [the love of man by man] is only possible under normal conditions of life, and among ... civilized people.” He then declared, one suspects after an affected pause, “Among barbarians such as the Kurds...”

The author of *Hadji Murat* was ready for him. “Allow me,” he interrupted, “is not a Kurd a man like you and me? And have we any right to kill him? Why do you suppose he will not understand this [the love of man by man] appeal and will not value it?”

Tolstoy went on, “Believe me, he will understand it a great deal better than some bureaucrat or other—say, for instance, our Chief of Police, Vlasovski! Personally, I would sooner undertake to preach compassion to a Kurd than to Vlasovski.”

He ended by saying, “I repeat that Armenian patriotism, like every other, is paganism, against which all thinking people must struggle.”

Alas, paganism was in the air. Its predatory form, nationalism, would cause havoc in the world in the next century. It is still not a spent force notwithstanding Albert Einstein’s admonition that nationalism is “the measles of mankind,” or George Orwell’s that it is “the great modern disease.”

A question is in order: If the Armenian students wanted to end the exploitation of man by man, why was it beneath them to practice Tolstoy’s message, “the love of man by man,” on Kurds—while also educating them, and thereby welcoming them into the Age of Enlightenment?

Both ideas (ending the exploitation of man by man or kindling the love of man by man) promise paradise on earth. Shouldn’t the university students be open to alternative or complimentary ideas?

Another question: what is a greater good—freedom or love? The students opted for freedom. Tolstoy urged them to consider love. The Armenians of Ottoman-Armenia themselves, according to a Turkish historian at least, were trying to secure a “landless autonomy” [p 60] within the Turkish Empire itself.

But their sultan, Abdul Hamit II, saw in every Armenian a potential student that was conversing with Tolstoy. He proceeded to silence them and put in motion a chain of events that sought their extirpation as a distinct group within the Ottoman Empire from 1894 to 1924.

One man who was not present at Tolstoy’s house, but was grappling with the same issue, and later would correspond with Tolstoy directly, was Mahatma Gandhi. He was in South Africa at the time and was tasked with the job of safeguarding the rights of his compatriots as an attorney. Unlike the Armenian students, although a Hindu, he heard Tolstoy and heeded him and experimented with his message of love to find freedom.

The age-old concept of “kill or be killed” for freedom was going to meet a new player—on a mass scale, “the love of man by man.” Its results are historical knowledge now. The rights of Indian immigrants, though less than those of the Whites, were secured in South Africa. Great Britain peacefully ended its centuries old domination of the Indian subcontinent. America became a gentler place because of Dr. King, Gandhi and Tolstoy.

The Middle East is in need of urgent gentleness as well. Some of its Kurds are still inspired by Lenin. Should they replace him by Tolstoy? Is that even possible? The record is not good. In the Soviet Union, the Leninists waited for bankruptcy to knock on their door before their permanent retirement from “public” service. In Kurdistan, the days of reckoning can’t be that far.

What would Tolstoy say if a group of Kurdish students were to visit him today the way the Armenian students did in 1893? If he knew what we know of the Kurdish question, I believe, based on my reading of his books and those of his inimitable student, Gandhi, he would have made the following points:

1) Freedom is *within* not *without*. Meaning it is not territorial. As free Kurds, you may want to free Kurdistan, but you can't free Kurdistan without being free yourself. If you want to build a brick house, you need baked bricks. With the unbaked ones, you can only build a temporary trap—a failing state.

2) The road to equality goes through love. When you love someone, you don't place her or him, below you. You place them across yourself. You treat them equally—the same or even better. In the long history of human development, the gregarious has always overcome the predaceous. You are better off with nonviolent resistance than with war.

3) In northern Kurdistan, 50 thousand Kurds have died battling their Turkish oppressors. In southern Kurdistan, that number is often multiplied by five. A virus called nationalism has infected the region—from Europe. You can't cure a sick person with an AK-47. 300,000 dead Kurds, as teachers, for example, could have changed the face of the Middle East. It took one, Socrates, to give directions to the world.

4) Kurds don't have an imperial past. They also, relatively speaking, have less blood on their hands. They are more knowledgeable in Turkish, Arabic, and Persian than all their neighbors combined. That is a huge social capital waiting to be tapped. Imagine individual Kurds vowing, I am for healing old wounds; I am not for digging new graves!

5) Kurds share the upper Middle East with Turks, Arabs and Persians. Unfree Kurds hasn't translated into free Turks or Arabs or Persians. As Will Durant notes, only “mutual tolerance” can do that. Somebody has to unlock this prison of nations. Perhaps Kurds will. Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing themselves. Start with yourself.

Politics was not the only dish that was served at Tolstoy's house on that memorable day. Literature was the second.

Tolstoy asked one of his visitors what he was studying at college. When he said, “Western literature,” Tolstoy exclaimed, “Excellent, Western literature is very rich... One only regrets that *vita brevis, ars longa* [life is short, excellence takes time]. There is so much that is good and interesting and acts beneficently on the soul, one has not time to read it all.”

There were no disagreements there. One of the students brought up Tolstoy's recent association with the translation of some of Guy de Maupassant's works in Russia and asked him if he was going to work on the rest of them.

He responded, “Yes... In my opinion, next to Victor Hugo, Maupassant is the best writer of our time. I am very fond of him and rank him above all his contemporaries. I have written a preface for a new edition of his works which will appear shortly.”

The student then asked, “but some people are rather surprised that your name should be in any way connected with the popularization of the works of Maupassant... It was thought that you would hardly have sympathized with a writer who chose such themes...”

“One must look at Maupassant from the right point of view,” Tolstoy said. “It is true that at first he went wrong... But he afterwards understood his mistake and was, as it were, reborn.”

Tolstoy then asked the student a question: “Do you remember the story in which he describes a sailor’s encounter with his own sister in a house of ill-fame [A Sailor and His Sister]? How that story sets one thinking! What a deep trace it leaves on one’s soul! Such stories certainly cannot evoke in the reader any love of or interest in profligacy, no matter into what slough the author may lead us.”

The time had come for the students to leave. The Russian writer’s parting words for them were, “...By all means reread Maupassant! You will find much in him that is remarkable and highly instructive.”

A year after the students’ meeting with Tolstoy, Ottoman-Armenia didn’t follow the example of free Greece—as the students had ardently hoped it would. It became a killing field for Turks and their Kurdish collaborators in the Hamidiye Regiments.

According to Benny Morris and Dror Ze’evi, “By early 1894 mass murder was in the air [p 72], and by mid-1896 at least 100,000 Armenians lay dead—shot, stabbed, and axed to death by Turks and Kurds in a succession of horrific massacres.”

In 1915, in another bout of violence [p 636] that would last nine years, the number of dead Armenians would go beyond a million.

Something else would happen in those gruesome years. Turks—alas, some Kurds too, would pick the good-looking women as wives among the condemned Armenians. Perhaps one day a Turkish Maupassant will write a novella of his own, “A Turk and Her Mother” like “A Sailor and His Sister”.

Maybe it will put the Turks and Kurds on a much-needed new path of thinking. Maybe it will leave deep traces in their soul the way their grandfathers left deeper wounds in the psyche of the surviving Armenians. Maybe it will finally lift them up to their feet the way Germans were able to get on theirs with atonement—relative to the surviving Jews.

When that happens, the Turks and Kurds, the coreligionists of Islam, will have an easier time to gather around the table of peace. It is, after all, an injunction of their faith, Quran 49:13, “Human beings, We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.”

Barring that, the Kurds should hitch their wagon to Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Dr. King. These friends of humanity showed the way to freedom through love in South Africa, India, and America. We would be wise to follow their example in the Middle East. Virgil is right, “Love conquers all.” It is the only conquest that delivers equality and freedom.

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