

# Hemingway's and Sholokhov's Viewpoints on War

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Ernest Hemingway was recognized as a master creator of novels about war, and Mikhail Sholokhov wrote almost solely about war. A brief comparison of the war novels by the two writers may possibly help us to understand their ideas and art more fully than studying each author in isolation.

Hemingway and Sholokhov each left one famous novel about World War I: *A Farewell to Arms*<sup>1</sup> (1929) and *The Quiet Don*<sup>2</sup> (1928-1940). Of the eight parts of *The Quiet Don*, the first four about World War I are similar to the whole story of *A Farewell to Arms*. The second half of *The Quiet Don* is about the Russian Civil War which followed World War I and The October Revolution of 1917 in the region of the Don. *A Farewell to Arms* reflects the Italian-Austrian front of the war while *The Quiet Don* takes in the whole Eastern front. Frederic Henry of *A Farewell to Arms* is a young intellectual from the American middle class, and Gregory Meilehov of *The Quiet Don* is from a middle Cossack peasant family. They come to be against the war as a result of their own experiences. Frederic Henry goes to war inspired by catch words like "democracy," "patriotism," and "glory." In contrast, Gregory Meilehov carves an Austrian's skull into two halves without knowing why. As the war goes on in the novel, even great numbers of deaths come to seem usual: Sholokhov points out that at the end of September 1916 on the eastern front near the village of Swinewha, more than 9,000 Russian soldiers lost their lives (*QD*, p. 378), and in the winter of the same year "only" 7,000 died of cholera in the Italian army (*FA*, p. 8). At the front, there were casualties and disease, there was also hunger: Italian soldiers were short of food and never had enough to eat, the "dogfish" are selling it somewhere else (*FA*, p. 3). At the same time, Russian soldiers were fed with smelly bread and rotten meat covered with maggots (*QD*, pp. 393-95). More cruel was the punishment of soldiers who refused to fight. Once when the granatieri would not attack, the Carabinieri shot every tenth man of them (*FA*, p. 39). In 1915 on the eastern front, about sixty Russian soldiers, who survived five assaults but refused to go forward on the sixth, were carved up by Cossacks (*QD*, p. 367). It was such conditions that changed Frederic Henry. He became embarrassed by the words "sacred," "glorious," "sacrifice" for they seemed to him to be vain expressions. He "had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory, and the sacrifices were like the stockyard at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it" (*FA*, p. 133). The war also shook Gregory Meilehov's traditional conception about "Faith, Tsar and Motherland." While he was being cured in an ophthalmology hospital in Moscow, he was convinced of the unfairness of the war by the arguments of the Ukrainian machine gunner named Gialansha (*QD*, pp. 338-42). Frederic Henry contracted jaundice in the hospital

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (published in 1977 by Triad/Panther Books). All references are to this edition under the abbreviation *FA*.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Sholokhov, *The Quiet Don* (Russian edition, Leningrad, 1948). All references are to this edition under the abbreviation *QD*.

from drinking too much and lost his leave because he was suspected of having caused it deliberately (FA, pp. 104-7). While Gregory Meilehov was living in a base hospital, he also got into trouble: he quarrelled with the administration for calling a visiting member of the Tsar's family "the worst louse" and was thrown out of the hospital (QD, pp. 343-45). Lenin insisted on the defeat of the Tsar's government in the imperialist war. This was expressed through the mouth of the Cossack Bolshevik Penshuk (QD, p. 358). It is interesting to note that, although Hemingway was not a Leninist, he also reflected the feeling abroad among Italian officers and soldiers that defeat "may be better" (FA, p. 129). It was historical coincidence that, at the end of 1917, both Italian and Russian fronts collapsed: this is reflected in Book 3 of *A Farewell to Arms* and Book 4 of *The Quiet Don*. Although Hemingway and Sholokhov were different in world outlook, they were alike in criticizing the cruelty and unfairness of the First World War.

However, neither Hemingway nor Sholokhov stressed the description of the war itself in their writings. Instead they emphasized how the war influenced society and the destiny of individual people. World War I influenced the West and Russia differently; the whole Western world was a "waste land." For Hemingway as one of the chief spokesmen of the "Lost Generation," World War I meant a great loss without any remedy. This was expressed most vividly at the end of *A Farewell to Arms* (pp. 232-33). According to Hemingway's viewpoint, it was the end of the world.

The situation was very different in Russia after World War I. Instead of a wasteland, it turned out to be a broken ring in the world capitalist chain. The Civil War in Soviet Russia that followed World War I was much more brutal and complicated by comparison. During the four years after the October Revolution, Gregory Meilehov twice joined the Red Army, but he took part in the riots of the Don Cossacks against the Soviet authorities three times. This reflected the reluctant attitude of the Don Cossacks, especially the middle peasants, toward accepting the new social system and the Soviet authorities. Generally speaking, it was inevitable that the first socialist country in the world would be born through many pains and mistakes.

Nothing is more apparent in showing the similarity of Hemingway's and Sholokhov's viewpoints of the First World War than the final destinies of the heroes in the two novels. Both couples, Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley, and Gregory Meilehov and Aksenia, want only a peaceful and happy life. Henry makes a "separate peace" with the enemy and deserts. After he flees to Switzerland, both his wife and baby die. Gregory Meilehov, tired of fighting in his third riot, flees from Fomin's bandit group, stealthily returning to his Tartar village and taking Aksenia with him; they want to be off to such distant parts as Kuban or somewhere else to build a new life for themselves, but Aksenia is shot to death on the road and Gregory loses hope. At last he decides to return to his native village without considering what will happen to him. The end of *A Farewell to Arms* which Hemingway wrote thirty-nine times, still gives the readers an impression, not of a farewell to arms, but of a loss of all hope. In contrast, in a scene at the end of *The Quiet Don*, Sholokhov has Gregory sink all of his weapons into the river before entering his village (QD, p. 798): a much truer "farewell to arms."

Despite Hemingway's pessimism at the end of *A Farewell to Arms*, the Lost Generation could not stay lost forever. The Great Depression and dark clouds of fascism in the late 1920s and early 1930s woke Hemingway, bringing him back into society. He realized that a man has no chance alone and people have to organize somehow in order to achieve social justice. In the same period, the Soviet system had stabilized in the region of the Don, a fact which is reflected in Sholokhov's *The Cultivated Soil*. Both Hemingway and Sholokhov worked as military correspondents

during the years of World War II and wrote extensively. Among their works concerning World War II, Hemingway's most famous is *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) while Sholokhov's is *The Destiny of a Man* (1956-1957). The two works have inestimable value in the canon of world literature. Both novels suggest that war against fascism, while cruel, is not in vain.

Although *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a novel of forty-three chapters and about 500 pages, it describes only three days of an action leading to the destruction of a bridge during a battle near Segovia in May, 1937. And the action in *The Destiny of a Man* lasts about two hours, and relates the experience of the hero through the Soviet-German war of 1941-1945. The central idea of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is humanism, while that of *The Destiny of a Man* is patriotism. The hero of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan, is different from Frederic Henry of *A Farewell to Arms* on one hand, and from Andrei Sokolov of *The Destiny of a Man* on the other. Like Frederic Henry, Jordan is also an intellectual from the American middle class. He goes to Spain without being enthusiastic about catch words as Frederic Henry was. Instead he embraces the Spanish Republican cause. Voluntarily, he undertakes the dangerous task of crossing the enemy lines to join a band of guerrillas in blowing up a Royalist-held bridge. However, he is also not free from yearnings for personal happiness with Maria after the Spanish War, but this feeling does not keep him from making a great sacrifice when it is needed. Many times he remains fearless in the face of great dangers. At last when he is leaving the scene after destroying the bridge, a shell breaks his left leg, also breaking his hopes of a happy life with Maria. But Robert Jordan does not fall into despair: he advises Maria to go away with the partisan group, then he—armed with one gun—waits for the enemy. His last action realizes the chief idea of the book: everyone is a part of the whole, and when the death bell rings for one, it rings for everyone.

While Robert Jordan and many Soviet volunteers were fighting and bleeding in Spain, Andrei Sokolov builds his little house in Voroneze and continues enjoying his happy life. A Red Army man, a farmhand of rich peasants, a woodworker, a fitter, and, finally, a truck driver, he is not an intellectual but a common Soviet laborer. His life is organized in accordance with the growth of a new social system, and in this process, Soviet patriotism penetrates his every bone and nerve. This spirit could not be shown as clearly if Hitler had not invaded the Soviet Union. Sokolov appears in the story not as a hero, but as a common Russian soldier. In fierce battles on the front, he does not complain in his letters to home, because he considers that the women in the rear guard are not having it much easier. Bearing inhuman treatment as a prisoner of war, he can choke a traitor to death without hesitation and remain fearless before the pistol of an SS officer. When he escapes to his own side with a captured German engineer worth more than twenty captives, he finds out that his house had been ruined two years before by a German bomb, and that his wife and two daughters have died. After he hears from his son Anatolie from another front, his hope of reunion with him lasts for half a year and is broken on the day of victory when Anatolie is shot to death by a German sniper near Berlin. In one word, he gives his all for the victory, but after the victory he loses all, except his life.

The tragedy of Jordan's and Sokolov's loves results chiefly from the authors' skilful arrangements. Although Robert Jordan dies much more heroically than does Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, there still remains some taint of the "Lost Generation," i.e., the sense that failure in such a struggle is inevitable. Sholokhov, in his own turn, was somewhat under the influence of Hemingway's fatalism: Sokolov is stubborn in struggle against all evils: he emerges from it the victor, but cannot enjoy the fruit of his struggle.

Although natives of two countries separated by thousands of kilometres one from the other, Hemingway and Sholokhov still had some common origin in their

literary creations. Hemingway himself once said that he grew under the influence of Russian literature and liked Leo Tolstoy very much.<sup>3</sup> Sholokhov, on the other hand, was often recognized as a successor of Tolstoy in writing about Russian peasants, but unlike Tolstoy, who wrote about the Napoleonic Wars in *War and Peace*, neither Hemingway nor Sholokhov wrote historical novels about World War I or II. The four works analyzed above, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and Sholokhov's *The Quiet Don* and *The Destiny of a Man*, only touch on some aspects of the two wars, but they clearly and quite wholly reflect the two authors' viewpoints and attitudes towards these wars. In all of the four works a similar pathetic sentiment appears, as well as the idea of fatalism. All four protagonists of the novels, Frederic Henry, Gregory Meilehov, Robert Jordan, and Andrei Sokolov lost hope before the war (or the battle) is about to be over. It seems to be predestined.

Through all his life, Hemingway's worldview was limited by pacifism and humanism. In his works, there is always a combination of deterministic pessimism and stubborn commitment to a just cause. He always stresses getting to the depths of his characters' hearts and minds, often using the stream of consciousness and the interior monologue. Sholokhov was a Communist in politics and worldview, but in literature a debate about his belonging to either a group of proletarian writers or one of peasants is still going on. Neither Hemingway nor Sholokhov tell the reader about the ultimate destiny of their protagonists, but it seems certain that Frederic Henry would lose all hope and become one of the "Lost Generation." Whether Gregory dies or lives after his return, he still has a future in a son, Mishatka, and would experience the great social changes of Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, and, together with major masses of the Don Cossacks, accept and live in a new social system. In stubbornness, Andrei Sokolov is more like Santiago in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Perhaps it is permissible to say that Andrei Sokolov was Sholokhov's Santiago. In 1957, Hemingway telegraphed Sholokhov to congratulate him on the publication of *The Destiny of a Man*,<sup>4</sup> an indication of their mutual sympathy.

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<sup>3</sup> *Izvestia*, 19 March 1960.

<sup>4</sup> *Researches to M. Sholokhov*, Chinese edition. Compiled by Sun Meiling (Beijing, 1982).