

Thoughts of G. Mazzini in “The Circle of Reading” by L.N. Tolstoy

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Abstract

Thanks to the earliest Russian translations of Giuseppe Mazzini’s major work, *I doveri dell’uomo* (The Duties of Man), L.N. Tolstoy became acquainted with the ideas of one of the leading figures of the Italian Risorgimento for whom he came to feel a profound respect, albeit tempered by certain reservations. Evidences of Tolstoy’s esteem are the numerous quotations from the “father” of Italian unity in the works of his final years. Prominent among these are the many included in the *Krug čtenija* (The Circle of Reading) (1906) — drawn from *Izbrannye mysli Iosifa Madzini* (Moskva 1905) translated by L.P. Nikiforov — which are the focus of the present article. An analysis of Mazzini’s thoughts in the *Krug čtenija* highlights significant agreement between the Italian intellectual and the Russian writer on a number of matters: the explicit assertion that God exists, which is linked to the theme of universal brotherhood, social justice and moral improvement. The author examines these core themes, singling out several areas of agreement and disagreement between Tolstoy’s ethical-philosophical vision and the thinking of Mazzini, in which no distinction exists between the political and religious dimensions. Tolstoy, on the other hand, in selecting Mazzini’s maxims and thoughts for inclusion in the *Krug čtenija*, very deliberately separates the political and religious spheres, excluding the first and endorsing the second. It is this which emerges clearly from an analysis of both the content of the quotations and the linguistic changes which Tolstoy made to Nikiforov’s translations.

Keywords: *Krug čtenija* (The Circle of Reading), Mazzini, *Doveri dell’uomo* (The Duties of Man), God’s existence, universal brotherhood, social justice, moral improvement

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Размышления Дж. Мадзини в «Круге Чтения» Л.Н. Толстого

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Резюме

Благодаря первым переводам на русский язык капитального труда Джузеппе Мадзини «Обязанности человека» (*Doveri dell'uomo*), Л.Н. Толстой соприкоснулся с мыслью одного из героев «Рисорджименто», которую он принял с некоторыми оговорками. Доказательством тому служат многочисленные цитаты «отца» итальянского единства в произведениях Толстого последнего периода. Среди них заслуживают особого внимания те, из «Круга чтения» (1906), которые были взяты из «Избранных мыслей Иосифа Мадзини» (Москва, 1905) в переводе Л.П. Никифорова. Этих цитат много, и им посвящена данная статья. Анализируя мысли итальянского интеллектуала в «Круге чтения», мы выявляем значительные совпадения Мадзини с русским писателем по следующим темам: ясное утверждение существования Бога, с которым связана тема всеобщего братства, тема социальной справедливости и нравственного совершенствования. Автор рассматривает эти тематические ядра, выделяя точки соприкосновения и расхождения между этико-философским видением Толстого и мыслью Мадзини, в которой нет различия между политическим и религиозным измерениями. Отбирая и включая в «Круг чтения» изречения и мысли Мадзини, Толстой, однако, намеренно осуществил четкое разделение между политической и религиозной сферами, исключая первую и отдавая предпочтение второй. Именно это следует из анализа содержания приведенных цитат и лексических изменений, внесенных великим русским писателем в переводы Никифорова, включенные в «Круг чтения».

Ключевые слова: Л.Н. Толстой, «Круг чтения», Мадзини/Мадзини, «*Doveri dell'uomo*», «Обязанности человека», существование Бога, всеобщее братство, социальная справедливость, нравственное усовершенствование

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As early as 1857, when the young Tolstoy's first journey abroad included a stopover of several days in Turin, we can assume that he became aware, albeit indirectly, of the activities of the Italian revolutionaries. During his short stay in the Piedmontese capital, besides going to museums and attending concerts, Tolstoy paid a quick visit to the Chamber of Deputies, made contact with the city's polite society, heard talk of the democrat Angelo Brofferio and his interpellations, and, as his diary for the time shows, carried away a positive impression overall from his days in Turin: *“Feeling of envy towards this young, strong and free life”* (Tolstoj, Jub.izd., vol. 47, p. 135).

From the time of Tolstoy's second foreign tour, between December 1860 and January 1861, Giuseppe Mazzini was certainly known to him as a leading exponent of the Italian Risorgimento. This is clear from an episode recalled many years later (1908) by Tolstoy himself and mentioned by A.B. Gol'denvejzer in his own memoirs: *“I used to have a note of his (Mazzini's, AC). While I was visiting Herzen in London, a message was delivered to him. He asked me, “Do you know who this is from? Mazzini.” I asked if I might keep it as a memento and I hung on to it for a long time. Lately, I can't think where I've tucked it away”* (Gol'denvejzer, 2002, p. 192).

Tolstoy was aware of the growing popularity of the founder of “Giovane Italia” (Young Italy) and “Giovane Europa” (Young Europe) thanks to his correspondence with Angelo De Gubernatis,

the well known linguist, orientalist, and historian of Italian literature, as well as with other Italian intellectuals (Nevler, 1972, p. 298). In 1892, in the English review “The Labour Prophet” (Joseph Mazzini, 1892), he read a letter of Mazzini’s addressed to an English acquaintance, a utopian socialist of the school of Robert Owen, whose son had died prematurely. This text, known as the Letter on Immortality, so impressed Tolstoy that two years later he decided to translate it into Russian and publish it in the review “Knižki nedeli” (Books of the Week, 1894, n. 9) (Opul’skaja, 1998, p. 118). Thereafter Tolstoy took an increasing interest in the thinking of the Italian exile and gave an enthusiastic welcome to the first Russian translation of Mazzini’s key work *Ob objazannostjach čeloveka* (On the Duties of Man) — an abridged version of his better known work, The Duties of Man — which was published in Moscow in 1902 as part of the series “Etiko-chudožestvennaja biblioteka” (Mazzini, 1902). It was translated into Russian by Lev Pavlovič Nikiforov, a revolutionary who shared Tolstoy’s admiration for Mazzini. The work captivated Tolstoy who jotted in his diary for 22 January 1902 a pithy, “Excellent book by Mazzini and thoughts of Ruskin” (Tolstoj, Jub.izd., vol. 54, p. 118). So he warmly backed Nikiforov’s proposal to have the publisher “Posrednik” (The Mediator) bring out a selection of Mazzini’s thoughts. Thus it was that in 1905 *Izbrannye mysli Iosifa Madzini* (Select Thoughts of Giuseppe Mazzini), edited by the selfsame Nikiforov (Mazzini, 1905), saw the light; and it was from this volume that Tolstoy took the 35 thoughts that he included in the *Krug čtenija* (The Circle of Reading) (1906). It is noteworthy that no other writer was accorded such extensive representation as the Italian philosopher, journalist and leading light of the Risorgimento, in the book that Tolstoy considered the best that he had ever written (U Tolstogo (1904-1910), vol. 2, p. 525).

An analysis of Mazzini’s thoughts in the *Krug čtenija* highlights significant agreement between the Italian intellectual and the Russian writer in a number of areas: the explicit assertion that God exists, which is linked to the theme of universal brotherhood, social justice and moral improvement. This article will briefly review these ideas which are crucial both to Tolstoy’s ethical-philosophical vision and Mazzini’s religious and political thinking.

This is how Tolstoy introduces the theme for the day on 7 July: “*To deny God means to deny oneself as a spiritual and rational creature*” (Tolstoj, Jub.izd., vol. 41, p. 475). In support of this claim, Tolstoy quotes the following words of Mazzini: “*God exists. It is not our duty, neither is it necessary, to prove it. By now any attempt to prove His existence is sacrilege; any denial of it is folly. God lives in our consciousness, in humanity’s awareness, in the universe that surrounds us. The conscious part of us, our conscience turns to Him in the most solemn moments of joy and grief. Only a most unhappy man or a great delinquent can deny God on a night under the starry vault of heaven, at the tomb of loved ones or before the agony of a martyr*” (Tolstoj, Jub.izd., vol. 41, p. 476).

For Tolstoy and Mazzini, faith in God defines the purpose of man’s life and duties. Both perceive atheism - which was on the rise in their respective societies - as a threat, hence their insistence on the importance of faith. Being sons of God is intrinsic to the bond of brotherhood which both believe unites all men. This idea, central to Mazzini’s thinking, we find mentioned in the *Krug čtenija* for 2 January: “*Always, throughout time, men have yearned to know, or at least have some idea of, the origin or ultimate purpose of their earthly existence, and religion existed to satisfy that need and illuminate that bond which unites all men as brothers, with a single common origin, a single common task, and a single ultimate purpose, likewise common*” (Tolstoj, Jub.izd., vol. 41, pp. 13-14).

In both Mazzini and Tolstoy, the subject of brotherhood is related to the all-important question of social justice, the indispensable condition for bringing about the Kingdom of God upon earth. With this in mind it is important to remember that Mazzini committed himself personally to furthering Christianity’s age-old mission of proclaiming the equality and brotherhood of man. This is a conviction he shared with Tolstoy who spells it out in the *Krug čtenija* in the maxim for 14 April: „*There can be no good organization in a society divided between the rich-and-powerful and the poor-and-obedient*” (Tolstoj, Jub.izd., vol. 41, p. 244). Tolstoy’s contention is echoed by Mazzini: „*You cannot found the Brotherhood of Christ where ignorance, poverty, slavery and depravation, on the one hand, while on the other, culture, wealth and power prevent men from respecting and loving one another*” (Tolstoj, Jub.izd., vol. 41, p. 246). This belief, taken from Nikiforov’s *Izbrannye mysli Iosifa Madzini* and included, with no alteration, in Tolstoy’s *Krug čtenija*, is not a literal quotation of one of Mazzini’s thoughts; rather, it seems to be a summary of the idea of “association” expounded in the Association-Progress chapter of *Doveri dell’uomo* (The Duties of Man). Here Mazzini declares that, “*We owe it to those martyrs and to those who came before them if today we know that there is no privileged caste between God and man; that the best, in terms of virtue and wisdom about matters divine and human, can and must counsel us and guide us along the paths of goodness, but without a monopoly or class supremacy*” (Mazzini 2022, pp. 269-270). Tolstoy is thus in complete agreement with Mazzini as to the future organization of a society founded on religious faith.

As mentioned above, the thoughts of Mazzini contained in the *Krug čtenija* come from the *Izbrannye mysli Iosifa Madzini*, a collection which, for the first edition of the *Krug čtenija*, Tolstoy used not in the published edition but in manuscript (Nevler, 1972, p. 303). Examining this document, now housed in the manuscripts section of the Tolstoy Museum in Moscow, V. Nevler established that Tolstoy selected 43 thoughts but included only 35 in the *Krug čtenija*. Among those excluded there is one that reads: „*Communion is the symbol of the equality and brotherhood of souls*” (Nevler, 1972, p. 303). It is well known that from the 1880s onwards Tolstoy distanced himself from the rites of the Orthodox church. So it is easy to understand why he left out this maxim in which the ideals of „equality“ and „brotherhood“ are associated with the Eucharist. Another thought of Mazzini’s, among those not included, provides a justification for war: „*War is a gigantic crime if it is not waged to establish a great truth or to bury a great falsehood*” (Nevler, 1972, p. 303). In this case, too, it is understandable that Tolstoy — a proponent of non-resistance to evil with evil — should have omitted this maxim, considering that he condemned any form of violence whatever, even in a just cause.

As becomes apparent from an analysis of the thoughts of Mazzini in the *Krug čtenija*, it was not Mazzini the revolutionary who interested Tolstoy; indeed, he considered „*all his political activity the weak side of his life*” (U Tolstogo (1904-1910), vol. 2, p. 328), at odds with his religious positions. This verdict, related by D. Makovickij, is in keeping with everything that Tolstoy wrote throughout his political journalism which is full of statements critical of revolutionary practices and of any form of struggle which resorted to violence, however just the cause. A propos of this stance, it is no accident that in the translation for the publishing house „Posrednik“ the term „rivoluzione“ (revolution), used by Mazzini, is replaced by the word “preobrazovanie” (transformation) in a passage which Nikiforov takes from the *Ricordi di Giuseppe Mazzini agli italiani* (Maxims and Reflections of Giuseppe Mazzini), a collection of Mazzini’s thoughts arranged by F. Dobelli (Milan 1882) (Nevler, 1972, p. 302), which we cite here first in the Russian translation and then in an English translation from the original Italian.

Сравнение переводов Translations Comparison

L.N. Tolstoj, <i>Krug čtenija</i> , in L.N. Tolstoj, <i>Polnoe sobranie sočinenij L'va Tolstogo v 90 tt.</i> , (Jubilejnoe Izdanie), vol. 41, p. 124.	<i>Maxims and Reflections of Giuseppe Mazzini</i> , collected and arranged by F. Dobelli, Milan 1882, p.76.
Преобразования должны совершаться народом и для народа; до тех же пор, пока они, как теперь, являются достоянием и монополией одного класса, они ведут лишь к замене одного зла другим и не служат к спасению народа. (Transformations must be accomplished by the people and for the people; however, all the while that, as now, they are the achievement and monopoly of one class alone, they result in one evil being replaced by another and they do nothing towards the salvation of the people).	Le rivoluzioni hanno ad esser fatte pel popolo e dal popolo; né fintantoché le rivoluzioni saranno, come ai nostri giorni, retaggio e monopolio di una sola classe sociale e si ridurranno alla sostituzione d'una aristocrazia ad un'altra, avremo salute mai. (Revolutions are to be carried out for the people and by the people; neither shall we ever know true well-being as long as revolutions continue to be, as they are nowadays, the heritage and monopoly of a single social class and boil down to replacing one aristocracy with another).

In Nikiforov's translation, which Tolstoy included in “The Circle of Reading” for 23 February, besides the disappearance of the word “revolution” which deprives the text of the ideological and political charge it has in the original Italian, we cannot fail to be struck by the substitution of the term “aristocracy” with “evil”. This lexical preference was also in keeping with Tolstoy's thinking which was critical of the class to which belonged as well as of any form of government. These ideas left Tolstoy open to charges of mystical anarchism, levelled by certain Italian intellectuals of his time who were ardent admirers of his novels but critical of the journalistic pronouncements of his final years. One such was Napoleone Colajanni whose judgement was scathing: “*Mazzini's God animates poets and heroes, urges active sacrifice, creates independence and freedom. Tolstoy's God preaches non-resistance, tells populations not to rise up against foreign domination, to resign themselves to being robbed and exploited by thieves*” (Colajanni, 1907, p. 579).

An examination of the thoughts of Mazzini included in the *Krug čtenija* leads to the conclusion that the interest felt by the great Russian writer in the Italian exile was confined to his ethical-religious vision. Mazzini's thinking, on the one hand based on the Gospels and particularly on the Sermon on the Mount (nagornaja propoved') (Balzani-Varni, 1992, pp. 195-196), and, on the other, unsympathetic to the Church as an expression of political power, coincided with Tolstoy's in no small measure. In different countries and in different cultures, they shared a common educative aim: to forge a new awareness of the individual and the community, firmly anchored on faith in God.

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