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Author(s)	Ann Taboroff Ann Taboroff
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The 'Spectacle' Goes Russian

By ANN TABOROFF

"War and Peace," the gargantuan seven-hour Soviet film recreation of Tolstoy's epic novel, boggles the mind.

The film, written and directed by Sergei Bondarchuk, duplicates, in its own artistic way, Tolstoy's story of the history of the Russian people—their happiness and grief, greatness and humiliation during the Napoleonic wars.

Bondarchuk's production took five years to make and cost \$100 million. Its accuracy and detail are staggering. The battles follow the original plans; 172 outdoor sets were constructed as well as more than 100 indoor ones; museums supplied art treasures for the props; the precise military uniforms of five nations and more than 2000 Russian costumes were designed to perfect authenticity.

To conform to Tolstoy's description of a battle, a bean field was changed into wheat. The French troops march at the rate of 120 steps per minute as the regulations of the day requires, while the Russians proceed at just 75 steps every minute.

All this might indicate the kind of mindless spectacle Americans are so fond of making, something on the scale of "Cleopatra" plus \$60 million.

"War and Peace" has a mind though, and a purpose. It cleaves to Tolstoy's work but enriches it also, with color and sound and motion, and becomes, on its own, an intelligent and creative picture.

Part I delineates the Battle of Austerlitz and follows Natasha as she matures from a gawky girl into a countess of great charm.

The battle, in an age when wars were dress affairs for officers in white breeches and jeweled swords, is curiously comic. The opposing columns approach each other in tight rows, undaunted by cannon shots that rip into the men, one of whom cries: "It's a mistake. They can't mean to kill me. Everybody likes me."

After that, the ball where Natasha and Andrei fall in love whirls by like a dream. The lovers step and turn and sway the length of the gleaming floor beneath the prisms of the chandeliers,

Natasha in white and Andrei gallant, both breathless and exultant.

The Battle of Borodino, the burning of Moscow, the French retreat and Natasha and Pierre occupy the second part of "War and Peace."

From the pre-dawn haze of battle, Bondarchuk ambles to the sweat and frenzy of the actual battle: columns of men killed as they stand, priests blessing the troops, the blast of cannons and the glory of flags. Anguished faces form paintings of carnage screaming unheard pleas as the cavalry surges, swinging sabers and spurring straining horses.

Later, after Moscow has burned, the French trek through the blizzards of the Russian winter toward Paris—a retreat whose agony Bondarchuk captures in one mute, masterful sequence.

If these recollections seem disjointed, they should not. The film flows between the violent and the idyllic, the vast and the intimate with a nicely balanced rhythm. Only in the beginning of the first section when the characters are unfamiliar do the vignettes seem disconnected.

Natasha—capricious, idealistic, vulnerable—is played with infinite understanding by Ludmila Savelyeva. A ballet dancer before this, her first film, she brings Natasha's essential grace and warmth to the screen while realistically expressing her deepening of spirit through the seven turbulent years the story covers.

Bondarchuk himself portrays Pierre, and perfectly too. At first he looks flabby and nearsighted and clumsy, but by the end he grows comfortable with himself.

Although not being able to hear the actors' real voices is always disappointing, Lee Kressel does an admirable job of dubbing "War and Peace." Even those with 20-20 vision would be bound to find reading subtitles for seven hours wearying, besides the esthetic damage a line of words across the bottom of the screen would inflict upon a film whose every frame is articulately conceived.

The Grand Lake Theater in Oakland is showing the film in two parts. It was originally released as four separate movies in the Soviet Union.