TOLSTOI'S VINDICATION OF GENERAL KUTUZOV AS SUBTEXT IN WAR AND PEACE

"Kutuzov was a simple, modest and therefore truly great figure, who couldn't be cast in the lying mould invented by history."

Leo Tolstoi

Natasha and Prince Andrei's charming but tragic love story along with Pierre Bezukhov's transformation from an awkward, undisciplined youth to a dedicated gentry revolutionary (i.e., Decembrist) as part of an unfolding Bildungsroman unfortunately overshadow the equally significant historical hero of War and Peace—General Mikhail Illarionovich Kutuzov (1745-1813).

A native of St. Petersburg; Kutuzov grew up respecting Peter the Great's notion that advancement should be based on achievement rather than birthright. In his early years he excelled in science and mathematics while acquiring a reputation for bravery in horse races conducted on the school grounds. Apparently, languages also came easily to Kutuzov since he became at least minimally proficient in French, German, Polish, Swedish, English and Turkish during his many years of service to his country. Choosing a military career over diplomacy (his ability to adapt to new surroundings and to hide his own opinions while listening to others would have also made him a successful diplomat), Kutuzov came under the influence of the two greatest generals of his time—Suvorov and Rumiantsev. From Suvorov he assimilated the rule that a military leader must know his army and establish a special rapport with his soldiers so that they view him as a fatherly figure who sets the prime example for them. Suvorov also instilled in him the idea that God is the ultimate source of military inspiration and leadership. Although he was once severely disciplined for mimicking Rumiantsev's gait and facial expressions, Kutuzov also accepted and subsequently applied this general's strategy of keeping the army intact at all costs and avoiding battle unless a decisive result could be achieved. Kutuzov's inclination to shun direct warfare made him a proponent of the military manoeuvre and a believer in the effectiveness of guerrilla warfare, which he carefully watched at work in the American colonies' struggle against England during the Revolutionary War. Parley-
ing all these ideas into his own unique military philosophy, Kutuzov became the man who played the greatest single role in the downfall of Napoleon Bonaparte, as Roger Parkinson notes in his important biography of the general: "Kutuzov has never received sufficient credit for his part in bringing about this downfall and in the final ending of Napoleon's rule. Greater glory has gone to Wellington, even though he would only clash with Napoleon once at Waterloo, and by then both Napoleon and his army were but pale reflections of the enemy against whom Kutuzov had fought and had defeated."

The underrated status of Kutuzov, which has persisted for almost two centuries, was due in large part to a conspiracy of prominent contemporary figures which included Tsar Alexander I, Moscow's Governor Rastopchin, and the British General Sir Robert Wilson. All their accounts depicted Kutuzov

1. Roger Parkinson, The Fox of the North: The Life of Kutuzov, General of "War and Peace" (London: Peter Davies, 1973), 234. Apparently, Napoleon himself coined the epithet "Fox of the North," showing a greater respect for his adversary than Kutuzov enjoyed from his own fellow generals. In many ways the name was prophetic, since Kutuzov truly "outfoxed" Napoleon in his strategy of abandoning Moscow to the French and blocking movement to the south where supplies and grain were stored.

2. Alexander I's contempt for Kutuzov can be traced to the conspiracy that overthrew his father Paul in 1801. As a dinner guest at the palace the evening before the fatal coup, Kutuzov was one of the last people to see Paul alive. Since Alexander always felt guilty about this plot, which transferred the throne to him, he sensed that Kutuzov was aware of his covert participation (an overt participant was General Bennigsen, a German from Hanover who later vied with Kutuzov for top position at Borodino and was Alexander's favorite) and suspected parricide but never made his feelings known. For this reason the tsar never looked at Kutuzov directly but made a point of staring at his non-functioning eye, as the Soviet writer Leontii Rakovinskii notes in his fictional work on the general: "Aleksandr norovil smotret' tol'ko na pravyy, ne zryachyi glaz Kutuzova" (Leontii Rakovskii, Kutuzov [Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1971], 373). The tsar's hatred for Kutuzov increased after the battle of Austerlitz (1805), where the general was proven right when he advised against fighting Napoleon. His strategy would have been to lure the French beyond the Carpathians and then divide them to rout them. Anxious to achieve military glory after the model of Peter the Great, however, Alexander ordered the battle which was disastrous for the Russians, who lost over 25,000 soldiers. Despite the fact that Alexander made the decision to fight at Austerlitz, he blamed Kutuzov for the defeat and exiled him to Kiev, where he became a military governor. As the governor of Moscow, Fedor Rastopchin was against Kutuzov's decision to abandon the city to the French. He also opposed Kutuzov's idea of putting weapons into the hands of peasants. Since Kutuzov disregarded his views on these issues, Rastopchin called him "an old woman" (staraia baba) and wrote denunciations of him to the tsar which Alexander kept as future material to be used against Kutuzov. Another intrigant against Kutuzov was the thirty-five year old English diplomat Sir Robert Wilson, who dreamed of a British victory over Napoleon and was envious of the unglorified methods by which Kutuzov achieved success. Himself an inveterate anglophile, Alexander had further reason to believe Wilson's denunciations against Kutuzov, which included full blame for Napoleon's escape at Krasnoe, when he crossed the Berezina unharmed. As an addendum, it is important to mention here that as late as 1970 the Soviets were still highly sensitive to Wilson's critical views of Kutuzov. This is well documented in David G. Chandler's book On the