

# Publishers weigh into War and Peace battle

By Dan Glaister

*Congress & literature*

*US bookshops see salvos exchanged between new versions of Tolstoy's epic*

“TELL me, why this nasty war?” asks a character in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Almost 140 years after first publication of the epic novel a nasty duel has broken out between rival versions of the weighty tome published in the US.

The argument between the two new translations is, fittingly, one of weight. Acclaimed translators Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky's faithful version of Tolstoy's tale of birth, death, love, war and peace clocks in at 1,267 pages and features all of the 500 or so characters Tolstoy introduced as the Russian nobility dealt with Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia.

Facing it in bookshops across the US is British translator Andrew Bromfield's reduced, “original” version. The Bromfield *War and Peace*, first published in Britain earlier this year, runs to just 886 pages, does away with the French and the philosophical digressions, and boasts a happy ending. In the words of the shorter version's Russian publisher, Ecco, it is “twice as short, four times as interesting ... more peace, less war”.

What might have been an interesting quirk of the autumn publishing schedules degenerated into a full-blown, publicity-generating literary spat when Pevar wrote an open letter criticising Ecco for its “philistine attitude towards Tolstoy”. Pevar's editor at the publishing house Knopf called the shorter version a “seri-

ous mistake”.

The editor of the shorter version, Daniel Halpern, shot back. “Not surprisingly, Mr Pevar does not address the Ecco translation in any substantive or meaningful way,” he wrote. “Perhaps this is due to the fact that Mr Pevar doesn't actually read the original Russian ... To characterise it as the ‘not real’ version, and to suggest Tolstoy's posthumous

---

The argument between the two new translations is one of weight. Acclaimed translators Pevar and Volokhonsky's faithful version of Tolstoy's tale of war and peace clocks in at 1,267 pages. Facing it in bookshops across the US is British translator Andrew Bromfield's reduced version

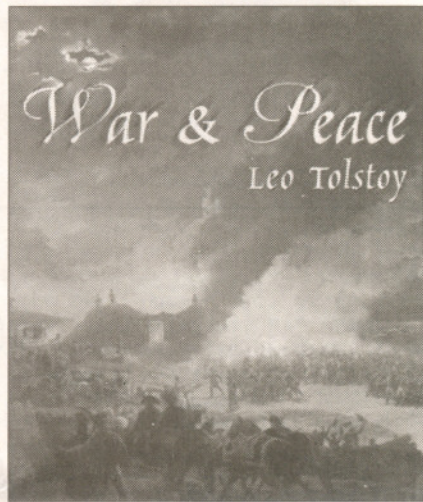
---

intent, are unfortunate, even laughable posturing swipes.”

Pevar does not read Russian; his wife is the Russian speaker on the team. But that has not stopped their previous work from finding success, most notably a translation of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina that was included on Oprah Winfrey's

list of recommended reading and became a bestseller.

But Pevar's suggestion that Ecco is being cavalier in its treatment of Tolstoy appears unfounded. The shorter version, first published in Russia in 2000, was based on an early version of the novel which was pieced together by a Russian scholar following 50 years of research. It was based on three serialised chapters



Tolstoy published in a Russian journal in 1865 and 1866 which formed the basis of a draft the author completed in December 1866, writing the words “The End” on the final page.. But over the following three years Tolstoy revisited his draft, adding the digressions and ruminations that for many define the novel. COURTESY THE GUARDIAN