

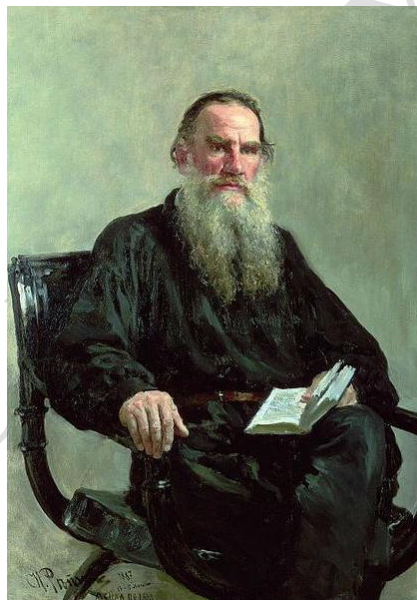
Leo Tolstoy's Adobe "Yasnaya Polyana": In search of Peace & Happiness

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Abstract:

The present article is about "Yasnaya Polyana", an Estate where Leo Tolstoy was born in 1828 and was his adobe for most of his life till 1910. This is the place which has inspired Tolstoy in his lifelong journey from finding his aim in life, and where he wrote all his fiction and philosophical works. Yasnaya Polyana was in true sense his 'karmabhoomi' where he practiced what he taught as he believed in "Be the change you want to see in others". This is the place where he spent his life in search of peace & happiness for Humanity. On 10th June 1921 this Estate was declared a State Museum and got its name 'Leo Tolstoy Museum-Estate & Nature Reserve'. In 2021 it completes its hundred years as a Museum. Since 1921 this museum has been looked after by Tolstoy's descendants who have completed a hundred year's journey in preserving the atmosphere, nature & spirit of this place as it was when Tolstoy left this place for his heavenly abode. Tolstoy always considered Yasnaya Polyana a microcosm of Russia and he couldn't exist without it. The article delves into the Estate's history, development and an era filled with creation of world famous literary and philosophical works by Leo Tolstoy.

Keywords: Tolstoy, Yasnaya Polyana, Philosophy, Russian literature¹



Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)²

Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy (Leo Tolstoy) is one of the most revered writers and philosophers in the world. His literary heritage boasts of more than 90 volumes which comprise of literary & publicist works, his diary notes & letters. He had been many times nominated for Nobel Literature & Peace Prize which he didn't want to accept and conveyed his desire to the concerned authorities.

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During his life journey, one corner on Earth which occupied the most significant place in Tolstoy's heart and was always the greatest inspiration for him – was his birth place & family estate “Yasnaya Polyana”, situated in Tula Region of Russia, just two hours journey from Moscow.



Image 1:

Entrance to Leo Tolstoy Estate-Museum “Yasnaya Polyana”, which takes you to Tolstoy's world where everything related to him has been preserved exactly as it used to be during Tolstoy. It's a pilgrimage for many ardent lovers of Tolstoy.

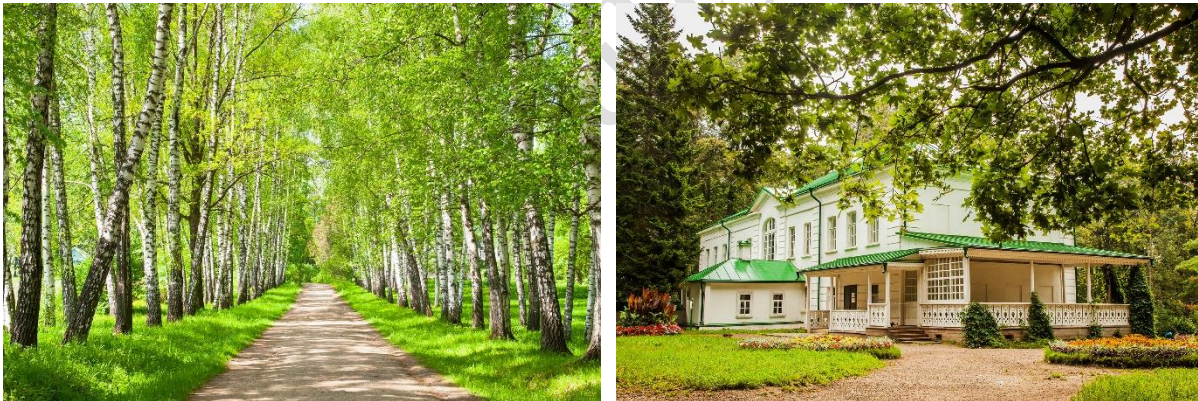


Image 2 & 3: This beautiful alley leads to the modest and humble house where Tolstoy settled down forever in 1857.

Leo Tolstoy's great-grandfather on his mother's side Prince Sergey Volkonsky bought a part of the Estate in 1763. His son Nikolai Volkonsky has the credit of playing a crucial role in its history by developing and creating the large territory of the Estate which we now know as Yasnaya Polyana. He made parks, orchards, picturesque paths, ponds, a large conservatory, and an architectural ensemble that included a manor-house and two independent wings on both sides of it. In 1821 the Prince Volkonsky died. His daughter Maria inherited a big estate. A year after her father's death she married Count Nikolai Tolstoy (1).

After their wedding the Tolstoy's parents settled at Yasnaya Polyana. Nikolai Tolstoy finished the construction of the large house into which the family moved in 1824, and also increased his landed property. Five children were born into the Tolstoy family: 4 sons – Nikolai, Sergey, Dmitry and Leo, and the daughter Maria. Leo was born on 9th September 1828.

The house in which Leo was born, unfortunately, doesn't exist anymore. At Yasnaya Polyana, a foundation stone of the house was left on the spot where the house had been located; later the following inscription was engraved on it: "Here stood the house where Leo Tolstoy was born."



Image 4 & 5

The house where Leo Tolstoy was born. The photo was taken in 1898. In 1854 the house was sold by Leo Tolstoy due to some financial constraints and moved by its new owner to the village of Dolgoye, about 40 kms away where it was demolished in 1913 due to poor maintenance. Leo lost his mother when he was hardly two years old and seven years later his father expired. Tolstoy did not remember his mother, but he always worshiped her. According to his own words, she always remained for him a "sacred ideal". Years after her death he especially cherished and carefully preserved the parts of the Yasnaya Polyana estate that were associated with his mother: the Lower (English) Park, the Summerhouse-tower in it, the Greenhouse. He spent his early childhood at the estate. His aunt took care of the children till her death in 1841. Leo had to then shift to Kazan city to live with another aunt (2). In 1844 he decided to join the prestigious Kazan University but he didn't like to study and was lost in mundane distractions. However, it was during that time that Tolstoy started writing his diaries, which gave him inspiration later when he became a writer. In April 1847 he inherited the family estate "Yasnaya Polyana" and left Kazan without completing his university education. After returning to the Estate, young Leo sincerely tried to mend his ways and made plans of studying languages, history, medicine, geography, law, agriculture, natural sciences but he soon realized that it's easier said than done because of which he was eternally dissatisfied with himself.

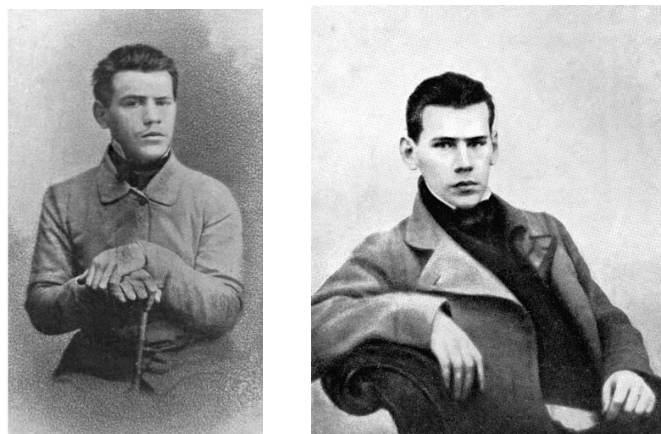


Image 6 & 7: A young Tolstoy

Fortunately, at this critical moment, in April of 1851, his elder brother Nikolai came to visit him. He was at that time serving in army in Caucasus and participating in a war. Leo immediately decided to accompany his brother and joined the army.



Image 8: Tolstoy in military uniform

Leo Tolstoy served in the army for almost two and a half years and participated in the Crimean War, did a lot of hunting and spent time in playing cards too. Initially, he seemed to like such a way of life. During his military service in Caucasus, he began writing his short-novel “Childhood”. While working on this work he found his source of inspiration in his own remembrances and personal experience. This work was published in a leading literary journal of that time “Sovremennik” and after his first success in literary field he decided to write as a sequel to “Childhood” the next short novel “Adolescence” which was published in the same journal in 1854. In the end of the same year, he arrives in Sevastopol on Black Sea which was the epicenter of the war. There he wrote two stories, one - a patriotic story “Sevastopol in the month of December” in which he described the war scenes and the bravery of Russian soldiers, while in another “Sevastopol in May” he depicted all the senseless loss of human life, futility, cruelty & atrocities of war. The success of the first Sevastopol story helped Tolstoy to finally find the aim of his life. “My carrier is literature – to write and write!”, Tolstoy wrote (2).

With this aim in mind, he went to Petersburg and there he wrote the third story “Sevastopol in the August of 1855” completing the Sevastopol trilogy. In November 1856 he decides to leave the military service forever and goes on a foreign trip to Paris, Rome, Berlin, Dresden but this trip failed to inspire him. In the summer of 1857 Leo Tolstoy returns to his native Estate “Yasnaya Polyana” to settle down for the rest of his life. At Yasnaya he settled in one of the two remaining houses that would become a home for him and later for his family; Tolstoy lived in this house for more than 50 years. The old furniture, the books, his great-grandfather’s mirrors and the family portraits moved to a new place, too. This is the house that is now referred to as the Tolstoy House Museum at Yasnaya Polyana. It is a very modest and humble house, as Tolstoy preferred simple life.

Once Tolstoy had decided to stay and look after the Estate, he quickly got involved in improvement of the peasant life and people around him. He understood that poverty and illiteracy were the root cause of peasants’ misery and suffering. There were no schools and educational institutions in the Tula region at that time.

In 1859 he opened a primary school for peasant children of villages surrounding Yasnaya Polyana. It was an experiment of its own kind. He wanted to work on an education system of his own. Thus, to gain more experience in education field he went on his second foreign trip to European schools. After eight months he returned to Yasnaya and in 1862 began publishing a pedagogical journal named “Yasnaya Polyana” in which he shared his ideas and experience of educating peasant children. He realized the lack of children’s reading books and thus decided to himself write a reader for children, named “the Alphabet” (1).

Unfortunately, his first experiment with peasant school was disrupted by political interference from official authorities which highly disappointed Tolstoy. At that time he also felt crisis in his literary occupation. Leo Tolstoy found respite by getting married to Sophia Bers in 1862 itself. They spent 48 years together. She was his true companion, secretary, tirelessly made handwritten copies of his manuscripts (Tolstoy’s hand writing was difficult to comprehend) and to some extent was also his unofficial editor. They had thirteen children, of which nine survived, so Sophia Andreyevna was always busy and involved in the family and the Estate affairs (6).



Images 9, 10 & 11: Tolstoy with his wife, family members and peasant children.

Tolstoy started working on “War & Peace” in 1863, a novel on the theme of war about which he began writing in his Sevastopol Stories. Tolstoy based many family scenes and characters from his ancestors while the war scenes have been taken from Russian history. He finished this novel in 1869 and it has gone into history as one of the most successful novels in the World. Tolstoy chose a small room in his house where he stayed specially to write this novel. Same he did when he was writing his next novel “Anna Karenina” which he began writing in the spring of 1873 and completed in 1877 (5).

Tolstoy had an interesting habit of shifting his study to different rooms in the house, to write his novels. He would request to move only his favorite sofa and the working table, this is all he needed for productive work. These rooms are extremely simple, with least distractions.

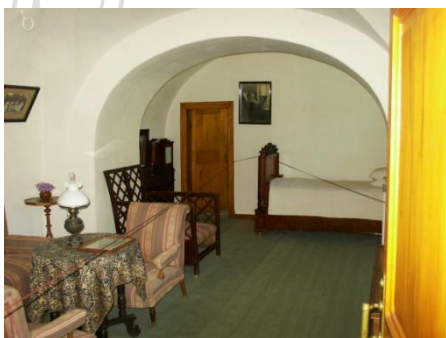


Image 11: Here he wrote “War and Peace”



Image 12: In this room he wrote “Anna Karenina”.



Image 13: Tolstoy at work

In the beginning of 1880's Tolstoy began writing predominantly philosophical works which talked about life, religion and art. This was the time when social inequality in Russian society, poverty of peasants and uncompromising Czarist regime continued worrying Tolstoy. These works include "Confession", "About hunger", "What is art", "the Kingdom of God is within you" & others. Whatever he wrote did not just become an abstract philosophy. Tolstoy believed in following everything what he professed and worked towards it .



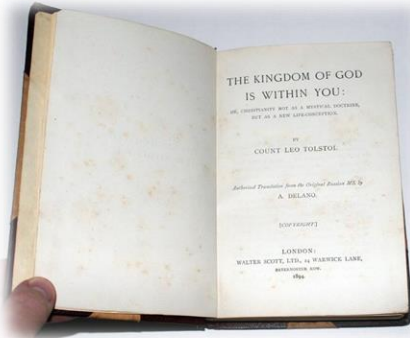
Tolstoy Ploughing (c.1889) a painting by Ilya Repin. Tolstoy regularly put down his pen to work in the fields. He kept a scythe and saw leaning up against the wall next to his writing desk. A basket of cobbler's tools lay on the floor.

Tolstoy expounded the doctrine of Non-resistance in his three essays: My Confession, My Religion, the Kingdom of God is Within You. This Non-resistance, according to Tolstoy, is destruction of evil by the refusal to cooperate with injustice.

In fact, the philosophy of non-resistance to the evil was explained to the young Tolstoy by a Buddhist monk, when he was studying in Kazan Federal University in Russia and once fell ill and was hospitalized. The monk was also being treated in the same hospital. After many years these impressions will help Tolstoy to widen up his philosophical horizons in his search for peace and eternal truth (2).

Tolstoy in the last days of his life said: "The longer I live, and especially now when I vividly feel the nearness of death, I want to tell others what I feel so particularly clearly and what to my mind is of great importance — namely, that which is called passive resistance, but which in reality is nothing else than the aching of love, uncorrupted by false interpretations. That love ... is the highest and only law of human life and in the depths of his soul every human being (as we see most clearly in children) feels and knows this; he knows this until he is entangled by the false teachings of the world. This law was proclaimed by all, by the Indian as well as by the Chinese, Hebrew, Greek and Roman sages of the world..." (2)

‘The Kingdom of God is within You’ is a publicist, religious and philosophical treatise which Leo Tolstoy wrote in the 80’s and beginning of 90’s of the XIX century. This work is considered a result of search for truth and theoretical research of the writer which he began in the 1860’s. This work raises concrete issues of democracy and socialism together with depiction of protest against any kind of class dominance.



Original Russian version (Berlin, 1896)



2. English Translation (London, 1894)

The significance of this book lies not only in depiction of writer’s religious and philosophical views but in irate and passionate exposure of bourgeois state structure and his philosophy of non-violence and religious preaching. It is a document of extreme social significance in which Tolstoy was the first to stigmatize bourgeois aggressive militarism, its expansion against the colonized people, laborers and supporters of peace and brotherhood. This work was a result of Tolstoy’s wholehearted involvement in the struggle of Russian peasantry dying of hunger just before the first Russian revolution. This status of peasants in the beginning of 1890’s made Tolstoy ignore the external conditions affecting human society, its economic position, and become a part of struggle of thousands and thousands of hungry peasants. This involvement had a serious influence on the literary and publicist work as well as teachings of Tolstoy. This was the time when there was horrible famine in Russia and any minutest spark of protest from the peasant’s side was immediately suppressed by special punitive expeditions. These events led Tolstoy to study in deep the complex processes of modernity and expose the perpetrators of suffering, famine, poverty and backwardness of the people.

In ‘the Kingdom of God is within you’ we see a shift in depiction of issues from ethical, social and national problems to those of inter-government relations, colonialism, national freedom struggle against yoke of imperialism as well as Christianity, its exploitative structure, wars and government suppression. For such views Tolstoy was harshly criticized, trolled and persecuted in press since the beginning of 1890’s but he paid no attention. He said:

“I have been writing what I think and that which will not be liked by the Government and rich classes, for already 12 years, I write consciously.... what I wrote in the “letter on Famine” is just a part of what I have extensively written and spoken about in the last 12 years. I will continue doing so till my death, propagating all enlightened and honest which exists in this world” (2).

This letter shows why ‘the Kingdom of God is Within You’ is written in such a passionate tone in exposing serfdom and militarism, with such sharp views on ever aggravating contradictions between the working class and the ruling class. In one of his entries in his diary Tolstoy writes: ‘I want to write the complete truth which I feel, like before the God’.

'The Kingdom of God is Within You' raised such a storm among the government circles that the censorship in Russia saw this book as the most dangerous and banned its publication in Russia but the book became popular in the rest of the world and its translated versions appeared immediately in Paris, Rome, London, Stuttgart, Berlin, New-York and other cities. Tolstoy wrote this book for three years with unusual persistence and extraordinary creative energy that he was so much engrossed in it in the third year, especially writing the concluding chapters that he even didn't have time to maintain his diary for at least six months at a stretch.

On 25 February 1893 he wrote to N.N. Strakhov:

"I have never in my life worked with so much intent and persistence like I am working now on my whole book, especially the concluding chapters. I must have either become obtuse, or on the contrary, become weaker in creativity, but improved my critical mind" (1).

This is the same inspiration he had felt when he began writing this work. This work consists of preface and twelve chapters. In the preface to his book Tolstoy mentions about the contents of his book and what he will be talking about:

"First I will speak of the information I received on the history of the question of non-resistance to evil; then of the views of this question maintained by spiritual critics, that is, by professed believers in the Christian religion, and also by temporal ones, that is, those who do not profess the Christian religion; and lastly I will speak of the conclusions to which I have been brought by all this in the light of the historical events of late years". (L. Tolstoy. Yasnaya Polyana, May 14/26, 1893.) (3)

The verbal and non-verbal behavior of each and every character in each episode is depicted in minutest detail. It's the talent of a great novelist that his narration takes the reader along and he feels a part of the situation. Tolstoy thus became for many 'a spiritual guide' as if he holds their hands and takes them through a spiritual journey. This book was banned in Russia, as it was deemed a threat to church and state. This work is a result of Tolstoy's lifetime's thought, it espouses a commitment to Jesus's message of turning the other cheek. In a bold and original manner, Tolstoy shows his readers why they must reject violence of all kinds—even that sanctioned by the state or the church—and urges them to look within themselves to find the answers to questions of morality.

Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi seemed destined to cross each other's paths. They could never meet personally but Tolstoy's books on philosophy acquainted Gandhi to Tolstoy. In 1894, a year after Gandhi came to South Africa, at the age of 24, he happened to read one of the first English translations of 'the Kingdom of God is Within You' and he was immediately won over by this book. Gandhi was attracted by Tolstoy's 'the Kingdom of God' so much that he used to always keep this book with him (11). Inspired by its message of non-resistance to evil, the Mahatma declared it a source of "independent thinking, profound morality, and truthfulness." He said:

"Tolstoy's the Kingdom of God is Within You overwhelmed me. It left an abiding impression on me. Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book, all the books given me . . . seemed to pale into insignificance" (11).

Gandhi describes how even in hard conditions in Pretoria jail, he kept Tolstoy's book with him: "...Tolstoy's writings are so good and simple that a man belonging to any religion can profit by them. Moreover, he tries to put into practice what he preaches, so that, by and large, they command greater confidence." (11)

During a speech at Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram on September 10, 1928, to mark the birth centenary of Tolstoy, Gandhi reminisced about the impact of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and recounted its message:

"The title means that God's Kingdom is in our heart, that if we search for it outside, we shall find it nowhere. I read the book 40 years ago. At that time, I was skeptical about many things and sometimes entertained atheistic ideas. When I went to England, I was a votary of violence, I had faith in it and none in nonviolence. After I read this book, that lack of faith in nonviolence vanished." (9)

'The Kingdom of God', Leo Tolstoy wrote, 'is attained by sacrificing outward circumstances for the sake of truth.' For man is bound by many chains, and the stoutest are forged in the inner smithy, not by Church or State. 'The Kingdom of God is within you.' You are what you make yourself. You are not free because you do not free yourself.

Gandhi attached importance to two things in Tolstoy's life. 'He did what he preached. His simplicity was extraordinary'. Hence, 'Tolstoy strove uncompromisingly to follow truth as he saw it. Tolstoy was a great advocate of non-violence in his age. No one in India or elsewhere who has tried to follow it as sincerely as he did.' (9)

Mahatma Gandhi was strongly influenced by "*The Kingdom of God is within You*", a book which he kept with himself always and from which he learnt about Non-violent resistance.

In 1894, one of the first English translations of this book found its way into the hands of a young Gandhi. Inspired by its message of nonresistance to evil, the Mahatma declared it a source of "independent thinking, profound morality, and truthfulness." Much of this work's emotional and moral appeal lies in its emphasis on fair treatment of the poor and working class (10).

Besides philosophical treatises Tolstoy wrote short-novels, one on search for meaning of life "the Death of Ivan Ilyich" & another on true recluse "Father Sergius", a play on desperation and hopelessness, a short novel on the tragic death of Nawab Shamil "Haji Murat". In 1899 Tolstoy finished writing his novel "the Resurrection" in which Tolstoy criticized the legal system, Army and the State Regime. A total of almost 200 works were written in the house where Tolstoy lived.

In the beginning of 20th century his relationship with his wife deteriorated, together with this he wanted to get rid of aristocratic way of life. Things escalated to such an extent that he had to leave Yasnaya Polyana forever in the beginning of November 1910 when he sneaked out of his native estate for undisclosed location. While travelling he fell seriously ill and was forced to leave the train and take shelter in the house of the station master of Astapovo Railway Station. Here he spent his last days. Tolstoy breathed his last on 20th November 1910.

He has been buried in Yasnaya Polyana as per his desire, in a small clearing called "the place of the green wand", next to a long ravine in a part of the old thick forest called 'Stariy Zakaz' (the Forest of the Old Order. The name 'place of the green wand' had been given by Tolstoy's older brother Nikolai, who said that the person who found the magic wand will have the secret of mankind's happiness. Tolstoy had requested that his grave should be kept simple with no plaques on it.



After the death of Tolstoy, Yasnaya Polyana survived all through the 20th century, both the Civil War and the Second World War. The peasants helped preserve it from destruction during the Civil War and in 1921 as a result of the tireless efforts of Tolstoy's younger daughter Aleksandra Lvovna, Yasnaya Polyana was officially declared a national museum. Since then it has been looked after by the descendants of Tolstoy. The Museum has preserved the Yasnaya Polyana exactly the way Tolstoy had left it before his death. His wife Sophia Andryeevna kept everything in the house in the same way as it was left by Tolstoy. In his study there is a small table where Tolstoy liked to read, the Dostoevsky's "Brothers Karamazov" is still lying there opened on page 359, waiting to be finished, but the owner will never come back...

From 1994 till 2012 the Director of the Museum and nature reserve was Vladimir Ilyich Tolstoy, the great-great-grandson of Leo Tolstoy. With the advent of his term a new stage in the development of the Yasnaya Polyana began. He has embarked on major renovations designed to attract tourists. The reunion of Tolstoy's descendants at Yasnaya Polyana every year from all over the world is the brainchild of Vladimir Tolstoy. He says: "The main thing is to more tightly bind the family and to show them what we've done with Yasnaya Polyana". In 2012 he became the Adviser to the President of the Russian Federation on Culture.



Vladimir Ilyich Tolstoy, great great grandson of Leo Tolstoy,

Director of Yasnaya Polyana from 1994-2012 (He now holds the post of Adviser to the President of the Russian Federation on Culture) & his wife Ekaterina Aleksandrovna Tolstoy is the present Director of "Yasnaya Polyana". Since 2012 the traditions are now being successfully continued by the present Director, Ekaterina Aleksandrovna Tolstoy, wife of Mr. Vladimir Tolstoy. The Museum now has new excursion routes, new branches and new buildings are being constructed. She is a champion of team work and provides creative freedom to all her colleagues at Yasnaya Polyana.

Under her leadership, the centenary celebration will begin on 10th June 2021 with the inauguration ceremony & opening of an exhibition entitled “Hundred years of Preservation & Development” which will unfold the Museum’s history through faces, events and facts. The inauguration will also include release of a commemorative postage stamp and a laying ceremony of time-capsule with a message for the future generations of museum professionals of the year 2121. The whole year round there will be many other academic, educational, ecological events will be organized which include restoration project of old mirrors of Tolstoy-House, opening of two branches: Tolstoy-Centre in Tula and a Museum of District Self-Government in the ancient city of Krapivna which Tolstoy visited many times. The Museum “Yasnaya Polyana” awaits you to have a unique, life changing experience of peaceful, serene beauty of nature and sheer simplicity of Tolstoy’s way of living which has been an inspiration for generations and will continue to do so in the future.

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