Mr. Tolstoy:

Re: your “War and Peace” query—my God, man, one word: editing! Readers today are busy counting the serfs, polishing their mazurkas and dusting their Pushkin collections. They haven't the stomach to digest a 12-room dacha of a work. Think a brightly lit (but slight) tea garden of literature for today's busy readers, or at least an airy drawing room. And let's be reasonable—War AND Peace? Confine it to one, and save 350 pages.

Now, some specifics: Instead of the original Saint Petersburg setting, it's best to confine the whole thing to a tiny village, eschewing all those dreary travel scenes. If I have to read again about the boorish behaviors of a panoply of grubby roadside characters, I'll scream! And let's avoid all that violence and mayhem; we can't find literary works on sensationalism, you know. And any drinking scenes have to go—that's a stuffy Russian stereotype that could use refreshing. Perhaps all the villains could be low-level clerks? Everyone hates a clerk.

You do show some promise with character, though must you go on so? No more interminable sighs for the women or long-winded hortatory oaths from the men; think clean, declarative, adjective-free sentences. It should also go without saying that no women should die in childbirth—ugh! And really—excluding the French, even if the portrait is unflattering, in a popular novel? No. No French.

The work shows no small promise—but it's TOO LARGE! Tighten its belt, shave its unshorn soldiers and pare 10 peasants for every one saved, and you might have something here. In fact, this might make a perfect piece of flash fiction. Cut it down to 300 words and resubmit.

Best,
Tom Bentley