

# Research Notes

## Emerson and Tolstoy's Appraisals of Napoleon

On June 30 (July 12, old style), 1884, Tolstoy with satisfaction wrote in his diary that he had “read Emerson’s ‘Napoleon’—a typical, greedy, bourgeois-egoist—wonderful” (*Diaries* 2: 220). Tolstoy had read “Napoleon; or, The Man Of the World” from Emerson’s *Representative Men*, written in 1844 and published in 1850. Tolstoy had already read two other essays from the book, on Shakespeare and Goethe, in 1858. He turned his attention at last to the essay on Napoleon in 1884. In it, Emerson characterizes Napoleon as the representative of the middle classes of modern society; of the throng who “fill the markets, shops, counting-houses, manufactories, ships, of the modern world aiming to be rich” (115).

As opposed to Thomas Carlyle, who considered Napoleon to be a symbol of human glory, Emerson saw Napoleon as entirely free of passionate urges and lacking in normal decency and honesty. One ought to note that *Representative Men*, and especially the essay on Napoleon, was Emerson’s response to Carlyle’s essay cycle *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), in which the author with conviction asserted that history is an aggregate of the lives of great men, the “heroes of mankind,” and that the masses are abject in every respect. Emerson decidedly disagreed with this in the 1840s. Tolstoy did the same later, noting in *War and Peace*: “The ancients left us examples of heroic poems in which the heroes constitute the entire interest of history, and we still cannot get used to the fact that, for our human time, history of

this sort has no meaning” (Pevear 754; *PSS* 11: 184).<sup>1</sup> On that subject, Carlyle wrote:

They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical result and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world. (2)

In contrast to the bombastic title of Carlyle’s cycle, Emerson named his book on great men simply *Representative Men*, which could not but make an impression on Tolstoy. Just like the Russian author, Emerson believed that the artist’s keen intuition and insight could better get at the truth than the historian, whose dry truth is made up of facts and documents. The idea of great men—of representative men—as the embodiment of an era’s spirit dates back to Herder, in whose ideas Tolstoy was interested while writing *War and Peace* (Осипова 36–7).

Rare was the nineteenth-century writer who did not touch on the myth of Napoleon. In Russia there was a particular cult of Napoleon, the echoes of which are present in the work of Pushkin, Lermontov, Dostoevsky, and even as far as Merezhkovsky’s panegyric essay on the French emperor. Now, though, we turn to the minority of authors who broached the subject of Bonaparte’s supposed genius somewhat skeptically: with balanced objectivity in Emerson’s case, with sharp criticism in Tolstoy’s. Both writers examined

Napoleon through the prism of his own era (which all but coincided). Tolstoy and Emerson's attitudes about Napoleon must be considered as part of their wider conceptions of history. The American philosopher contended that one ought to read history not passively but *actively*, which might make the muse of history utter its oracles. Tolstoy too read history actively: In 1852, he wrote in his diary that, "I intend to read history [...] and to study, making extracts, and translating them" (*Diaries* 1: 52). Shortly afterward, he wrote: "To compile a true, accurate history of Europe in this century—there's a task for a lifetime" (*Diaries* 1: 60). This particular aim is manifested in artistic form in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy always highlighted the fact that his view of history was expressed not in theoretical discourse but in the images and descriptions of *War and Peace*.

At the start of his essay on Napoleon, Emerson examines the mystic and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg's conception of the body. Tolstoy had the same interest at various times in his life, including while he was writing *War and Peace*. Emerson writes:

It is Swedenborg's theory, that every organ is made up of homogeneous particles; or, as it is sometimes expressed, every whole is made of similars. [...] Following this analogy, if any man is found to carry with him the power and affections of vast numbers, if Napoleon is France, if Napoleon is Europe, it is because the people whom he sways are little Napoleons [i.e., made from "homogeneous particles"]. (102)

Note the analogies with Swedenborg's theory in the description of Pierre Bezukhov's dream in *War and Peace* as a vibrating globe with moving drops, that is to say "from the many lives of separate people, with their entirely personal interests and goals, are formed both the whole life of mankind and the human bonds that move history forward" (Бочаров 27).

Emerson supposed that for business-like, energetic, and thoughtful people in both Europe and America, Napoleon was the embodiment of the democrat, that in him were concentrated all the flaws and achievements of democracy:

The times, his constitution, and his early circumstances, combined to develop this pattern democrat. He had the virtues of his class. [...] That common sense, which no sooner respects any end, than it finds the means to effect it. (105)

While highlighting Napoleon's democratism, Emerson himself did not consider democracy altogether unambiguous: While he recognized democracy's pragmatism and effectiveness in the United States, he also saw that ethical lawmaking, morality, and justice did not always coincide with democracy *per se*. Emerson suggested that materialism alone attracted people to democracy:

To be the rich man is the end. "God has granted" says the Koran, "to every people a prophet in its own tongue." Paris, and London, and New York, the spirit of commerce, of money, and material power, were also to have their prophet; and Bonaparte was qualified and sent. (103)

Setting forth a satisfactorily objective portrait of Napoleon, Emerson threads one idea throughout the entire essay: "Napoleon is thoroughly modern, and, at the highest point of his powers, has the very spirit of the newspapers. He is no saint,—to use his own word, 'no capuchin', and he is no hero, in the high sense" (103). Here, as for Tolstoy but not Carlyle, Emerson sees nothing heroic in Napoleon; he is merely a "representative man." In drafts of *War and Peace*, Tolstoy characterizes Napoleon thus: "A clever, sly, and evil philistine with plenty of success but nothing more" (PSS 13: 505). Emerson likewise held that Napoleon was "the idol of common men, because he had in transcendent degree the qualities and powers of common men"

(104), which for him was not a wholly negative factor. Emerson contended that in Napoleon one need not look for “miracles or magic,” since he “is a worker in brass, in iron, in wood, in earth, in roads, in buildings, in money, in troops” (104). In the writer’s eyes, Bonaparte did this work deftly: “Men give way before such a man as before natural events” (104).

Emerson supposed that such a man was the embodiment of the times, inevitable, made of “stone and iron, capable of sitting on horseback sixteen or seventeen hours, of going many days together without rest or food [...] a man not embarrassed by any scruples” (105). Yet the American writer also noted with some irony that Napoleon

pleased himself, as well as the people, when he styled himself the “Child of Destiny.” “They charge me,” he said, “with the commission of great crimes: men of my stamp do not commit crimes. Nothing has been more simple than my elevation: ‘tis in vain to ascribe it to intrigue or crime: it was owing to the peculiarity of the times, and to my reputation of having fought well against the enemies of my country.” (105–6)

Tolstoy, also directing his irony at the great Napoleon, compares him with a “child” who “holding the straps tied inside a carriage, fancies that he is holding it” (Pevear 1008; PSS 13: 92).

Emerson thought of Napoleon as a single-minded realist who knew no boundaries. This undoubtedly helped him to military victories, since above all he was able to win the battle of minds. His offensive and defensive strategies were not born on the spur of the moment but rigorously calculated. Although Tolstoy recognized Napoleon’s military talents, he departs markedly from Emerson’s point of view here. Through Prince Andrei he expresses his immutable positions, that “there was not and could not be any military science, and therefore there could not be any so-called military genius,”

and that, “the merit of success does not depend on them, but on the man in the ranks who shouts [...] ‘Hurrah!’” (Pevear 643–4, PSS 11: 52–3).

Emerson used Emmanuel de las Cases’ memoirs of Napoleon, which Tolstoy himself studied diligently while writing his epic novel. A decade later he named them his “most valuable material.” However, he also noted with regret that he “did not touch on this period of [Bonaparte’s] life. During the last years of his life, when he was playing at greatness, understood that there was no way out, and ended up totally bankrupt, his death must have been a very large and important part of his biography” (PSS 65: 5).

The American philosopher and poet emphasized his belief that Napoleon as commander and emperor was interesting only from the point of view of the French Revolution and insofar as the “industrious masses found an organ and a leader in him” (109). Noting that like “any Jacobin in France,” Napoleon loved to philosophize on freedom and equality, Emerson outlined Napoleon’s affinity with the masses. He used the day of the Battle of Austerlitz as a particularly emblematic example of the army’s adoration for their commander and in turn of his recognition of their military feat. Tolstoy makes reference to the same “imperial hurrah” when Napoleon appears on the Pratzen Heights during Austerlitz in *War and Peace*. Emerson writes:

The Revolution entitled the strong populace of the Faubourg St. Antoine, and every horse-boy and powder-monkey in the army, to look on Napoleon as flesh of his flesh, and the creature of his party: but there is something in the success of grand talent which enlists a universal sympathy. (112)

Here he purports that Napoleon intuited the spirit of a nation and made use of it to further his own aims of forming an army: His reason and common sense never left him. As mentioned earlier, Tolstoy too recognized the people’s attitude of Napoleon.

However, the words of the old Prince Bolkonsky nevertheless underlined the weakness of his opponents as a factor in Bonaparte's first victories:

Bonaparte was born lucky. He has excellent soldiers. And the Germans were the first he attacked. You'd have to be a do-nothing not to beat the Germans. Ever since the world began, everybody's beaten the Germans. [...] It was on them he earned his glory. (Pevear 104, PSS 10: 126)

Having paid tribute to Napoleon's remarkable qualities, Emerson's essay moves into a more critical vein. In this part of the work there are undoubted similarities with Tolstoy, and it is this section that especially pleased the Russian. However, if Tolstoy subverts the idea of Napoleon as a great man, depriving him of any moral compass, then Emerson dispassionately portrays the entire negative potential of the man and utterly disparages his achievements.

One ought to note that at the start of *War and Peace* Tolstoy's attitude to Napoleon is not obviously negative; in fact, the heroes are enchanted by him, Andrei in more restrained form, and Pierre more enthusiastically. During the course of work on *War and Peace*, as Tolstoy became acquainted with new sources and historical evidence, the characters' attitude to Napoleon evolved in line with the author's. On March 19, 1865, after the publication of the first part of *War and Peace*, Tolstoy wrote in his diary that,

I've become engrossed in the history of Napoleon and Alexander. The idea of writing a psychological history of Alexander and Napoleon has swept over me like a cloud of joy and the awareness of the opportunity to do a great thing. All the baseness, all the empty words, all he folly, all the contradictions of them themselves and of the people around them. (*Diaries* 1: 182)

Following this entry is an adumbration of the French emperor's entire life: In Tolstoy's imagination, Napoleon did not further alter. The author's attitude to this particular "hero" is absolutely evident in his entire characterization and every description. Sergei Bocharov notes that even Prince Andrei's "Napoleonic" dream of his own Toulon is idealized, that "striving for glory and fame—in its new, modern, Napoleonic form—is an egotistic, adventuristic impulse" (Бочаров 42).

While Emerson set himself the task of showing in his entirety Napoleon as a "representative man," Tolstoy sought to debunk Napoleon's false aura of greatness. In his *Essays: First Series*, Emerson wrote:

We impute deep-laid far-sighted plans to Caesar and Napoleon; but the best of their power was in nature, not in them. Men of an extraordinary success, in their honest moments, have always sung, "Not unto us, not unto us." [...] Their success lay in their parallelism to the course of thought, which found in them an unobstructed channel; and the wonders of which they were the visible conductors seemed to the eye their deed. (44)

Accordingly, we see that for both Emerson and Tolstoy, historical actors are successful and justified in their actions only when they understand that they are merely channels or weapons in the hands of Providence.

Carlyle and various other thinkers of the nineteenth century conceived of the "heroization" of great men and of their contrast with the mass of the people, who were obliged to be governed by "men of a higher order." They dismissed the absolute role of moral norms and rules as creators of history. In contrast, Tolstoy believed that "there is no greatness where there is no simplicity, goodness, and truth" (Pevear 1071, PSS 12: 165), and Emerson that every individual is worthy of greatness and that "all people are divine."

Emerson arranges his invectives against Napoleon in an almost Tolstoyan fashion. Describing how Napoleon accorded every achievement to himself, bankrupted Junot, and stole credit from Kellermann and Bernadotte, Emerson exclaimed that, “the highest-placed individual in the most cultivated age and population of the world,—he has not the merit of common truth and honesty” (115). He reiterates Napoleon’s peacockery, his “dramatic effects,” and his constant shrewdness, and refers to the French emperor’s words that only two things move people: fear and self-interest.

In some passages Emerson’s accusatory pathos exceeds even Tolstoy’s:

He was thoroughly unscrupulous. He would steal, slander, assassinate, drown, and poison, as his interest dictated. He had no generosity; but mere vulgar hatred; he was intensely selfish; he was perfidious; he cheated at cards; he was a prodigious gossip; and opened letters; and delighted in his infamous police. (116)

On the eve of Borodino, Andrei Bolkonsky speaks of the absence in Napoleon of “the best and highest human qualities—love, poetry, tenderness, a searching philosophical doubt” (Pevear 644, *PSS* 11: 53). According to Bolkonsky, Napoleon could find happiness in the misfortune of others. Ruminating on democracy, Emerson writes that

Bonaparte represents the democrat, or the party men of business, against the stationary or conservative party. [...] These parties only differ as young and old. The democrat is a young conservative; the conservative is an old democrat. The aristocrat is the democrat gone ripe, and gone to seed. (117)

Ever the philosopher and romantic, he nevertheless hoped for the appearance of an authentic “representative man” for humanity: “The counter-revolution, the counter-party, still waits for its

organ and representative, in a lover and a man of truly public and universal aims” (117).

Emerson puts forward several factors that demand a reconsideration of Carlyle’s position and, more generally, the representation of great men as the enactors of fate itself:

Here was an experiment, under the most favorable conditions, of the powers of intellect without conscience. [...] And what was the result of this vast talent and power, of these immense armies, burned cities, squandered treasures, immolated millions of men, of this demoralized Europe? It came to no result. All passed away, like the smoke of his artillery, and left no trace. (117)

Tolstoy, meanwhile, has Napoleon as “that most insignificant instrument of history” (Pevear 1085, *PSS* 12: 183). However, note firstly that at the end of Carlyle’s essay on Cromwell and Napoleon, he calls Napoleon with some regret a “weapon”—though still a “great” one—and secondly that in Carlyle’s opinion the masses are in turn a weapon in the hands of great men. Tolstoy also accorded Napoleon the historical responsibility for the terror that accompanied his campaigns: “While denying the role of the individual’s own will in history, Tolstoy does not remove from him the moral responsibility for his acts” (Купреянова 1964).

In the 1840s Emerson was almost as critical as Tolstoy would be in the 1860s: “This exorbitant egotist narrowed, impoverished, and absorbed the power and existence of those who served him; and the universal cry of France, and of Europe, in 1814, was ‘enough of him;’ ‘assez de Bonaparte.’” (Emerson 117). More than twenty years after *War and Peace* was written, when he went through a period of radical reassessment of his own works, Tolstoy wrote in a letter to Alexander Ertel of his unchanged attitude towards Napoleon. Although he altered his view of *War and Peace* as a work, calling it “verbose nonsense” (*PSS* 61: 247), his opinion of Napoleon remained the same:

I have not altered my opinion and would even say that I very much treasure it. You won't find any bright side—it's impossible to find one—while all the dark and terrible things represented by this figure have not been worked through. (PSS 65: 4)

Concluding his essay, Emerson writes that

it was not Bonaparte's fault. He did all that in him lay, to live and thrive without moral principle. It was the nature of things, the eternal law of man and of the world, which balked and ruined him; and the result, in a million experiments, will be the same. (117)

In Emerson's opinion, then, this "eternal law" which "balked" Napoleon is the essence of a universal soul and of universal reason: to these acquiesce not just all human ambitions and sufferings but the entire development of humanity. Emerson, like Tolstoy, on the whole took his ideas of the world's moral constitution and of the universe's teleological nature from the German philosopher Herder. It is Herder's ideas of ceaseless development and the wider world that Pierre so heatedly speaks of to Prince Andrei on the ferry while discussing Masonic philosophy: "I feel not only that I cannot disappear, as nothing disappears in the world, but that I will always be and have always been" (Pevear 388, PSS 10: 116). Tolstoy had read Herder's article "Man is Created to Expect Immortality" in *The Messenger of Europe* (Вестник Европы) while writing *War and Peace* (indeed, the annotated copy still exists in Tolstoy's personal library). Tushin, Belkin and Prince Andrei's conversation about immortality on the eve of the Battle of Schongraben appeared in the earliest drafts of the novel.

The shared elements of these sources (Swedenborg, Herder, Las Cases, Carlyle, etc.) gave rise to a certain atmosphere in which each author created his own "representative man." In conclusion I should like to underscore the fact that

a similarity in ethical criteria and historical approach is plainly evident in Emerson and Tolstoy's depictions of Napoleon. Having examined Napoleon on different structural levels—artistically and from the point of view of documentary evidence—both authors came to hold one and the same opinion of the French commander. However, it goes without saying that Tolstoy's fictional image of Napoleon in *War and Peace* differs from that in Emerson's essay in its depth and scale. What in Emerson is but an outline acquires in Tolstoy the scope of epic events and philosophical profundity. Nevertheless, re-reading Emerson's essay fifteen years after work on *War and Peace* was concluded, Tolstoy could still find inspiration and strength in the fidelity of his handling of Napoleon's image. Perhaps it was above all Emerson's interpretation of Bonaparte's personality that caused Tolstoy to turn his acute gaze to his work, which became an integral source for three of Tolstoy's books of wisdom (*Circle of Reading*, *For Every Day*, and *Path of Life*) and a whole array of articles.

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#### Notes

1. All translations of *War and Peace* are from Pevear and Volokhonsky. References are given as page number from the translation, followed by the *Полное собрание сочинений* (PSS) page and volume.

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### **Tolstoy's Other Sister-in-Law in *War and Peace***

Generosity constitutes one of the distinctive virtues of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The novel is bounded by welcoming Rostov feasts near the beginning and in the first epilogue. The narcissistic Natasha is forgiven her mistakes, much as Nicholas and Pierre muddle through their youthful struggles to reach respected maturity, much as Princess Maria's tireless devotion to her irascible father is rewarded in the end with a happy marriage. Even Prince Andrei, intended as cannon fodder at Austerlitz, is allowed to survive and enjoy life until his later death after Borodino. Most importantly, the major characters are rendered in such a fashion as to be received by most readers as positive, sympathetic, and/or admirable.

Yet not all of the players are accorded their author's beneficence, if only for purposes of dramatic contrast. This was the writer's reason for creating Prince Andrei, no doubt thinking that he could not permit all of his central heroes to survive the Napoleonic wars unscathed. Indeed, young Petya Rostov is struck down almost immediately in his first taste of combat. He, at least, is accorded some positive pages, as is Sonya, who is denied

romantic satisfaction in the end, perhaps unfairly. But then there is Tolstoy's depiction of the remaining Rostov sibling, Vera, a characterization which lacks any redeeming qualities.

What fascinates our inquiry is the likelihood that Tolstoy's bias against Vera may be largely rooted in the author's personal experience with her acknowledged prototype, Elizaveta Andreevna Behrs, known to him as Liza. Natasha, according to many scholars and Tolstoy's own admission, appears to gain from her association with Liza's sister, Tatiana (Tanya) Andreevna, albeit with a well-acknowledged admixture from Tolstoy's own wife, Sofia Andreevna. But if family prototypes played a positive role in their characterization, it seems that this relationship had the opposite effect with Vera. Insofar as Tolstoy appears to have been thinking about Liza in his unremittingly negative and monotone portrait of Vera, the results are, if anything, somewhat shocking for a writer of Tolstoy's normal sensitivity. Personal experience and immediate family history appear to have played a role.

In his stimulating biography of Tolstoy, A. N. Wilson suggests that the writer utilized autobiographical materials to concoct "his version of how he wanted his life to be [...] arranging events to make them tolerable to himself" (186). By drawing on his own experience and the family history which shaped him, Tolstoy evidently used his composition of *War and Peace*, as in other works, as a means of thinking about issues of deep personal interest to him and as a means of imagining (auto)biographical alternatives. With respect to characters based on his parents or himself, he generally improved on family history.<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy's other sister-in-law is an exception to this rule.<sup>2</sup> He appears to have used his characterization of Vera as a means of venting his frustrations regarding Liza. Insofar as Sofia Andreevna shared his work on the novel, his wife also participated in this process.<sup>3</sup>