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Tolstoy and Napoleon

Like practically all topics investigated by Tolstoy scholars, this one is not new. It has long been established that the figure of Napoleon is based on the “contradiction between the true pettiness of his role and his own opinion of himself as a great reformer” (Строганова 66). The only reason to return to this topic is if one approaches the study of literature (литературоведение) as the study of human nature (человековедение). Tolstoy himself described this principle in 1853 when he proposed

to write a Russian history from Mikhail Romanov to Alexander I, explaining all historical events in human terms [...] It is critical to explain every historical fact *in human terms* [человечески] and to avoid routine historical expressions. (PSS 46: 293, 212)

It is not my intent to demonstrate either that Tolstoy did not like Napoleon, or that he nurtured his antipathy for the man long before he began *War and Peace*. Here I am interested in three

issues. The first has to do with the parameters of Tolstoy’s anti-Napoleonism. I am aware that it is nearly impossible to explain adequately Tolstoy’s antipathy, and that is why I confine my inquiry to clarifying how Tolstoy himself explained matters. The second issue pertains to the ways this antipathy was expressed in *War and Peace*. Finally, the third issue raises the question of Tolstoy’s “Napoleonism,” that is, the similarities between the commander and the writer.

Tolstoy’s Three Antipathies

In the drafts of *War and Peace*, Tolstoy explains his dislike for Napoleon simply: It is not befitting an aristocrat to approve of a parvenu. Consider Count Mortemart’s remarks on Napoleon’s affair with Mademoiselle Georges:

“In 1803, friends wrote me from Paris that Mademoiselle Georges did not lack for admirers, and that among the crowds of new people, parvenu de la finance, administrators, and this entire, unsavory new breed of people that now reigns in Petersburg, she did not deign to throw her handkerchief to anyone; when, at one soirée, her admirers saw Roustan, cette âme damnée, ce valet de cet autre valet qui s’appelle Buonaparte at the new goddess’s door.” (PSS 13: 213)

And a bit further: “When all these gens de dessous terre [...] realized that their master was their rival [...] they obsequiously withdrew from the field and disappeared” (PSS 13: 214). In this description of Napoleon and his hangers-on as “bourgeois gentlemen,” one discerns, first and foremost, Tolstoy’s personal view. Tolstoy sees Napoleon as a “little man in a little gray frock coat and cocked hat, with his aquiline nose and clever eyes,” who “imagined to himself that he governed history, and tried to inflate himself to match the grandeur of his position, as he understood it” (PSS 13: 76). Napoleon’s contemporaries saw him as “something incomprehensible, now as terrifying as the

Antichrist, now as ridiculous and repulsive as a bourgeois gentleman” (PSS 13: 76).

Of course, in drawing attention to Napoleon’s class origins, Tolstoy underscores his own aristocratic limitations and fidelity to being *comme il faut*, something he had already exposed in *Boyhood*. The theme of the bourgeois gentleman disappears from the final text of *War and Peace*, but Tolstoy tries to find a new explanation for his dislike of Napoleon.

Having scandalized Anna Pavlovna Scherer’s salon with his ideas, Pierre goes to see Prince Andrei and, as he waits for him, opens a book at random. The book turns out to be Caesar’s *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*. Tolstoy famously compared this work to Las Cases’s *Mémorial*, about Napoleon’s exile on St. Helena (PSS 15: 230). In comparing the two figures, Tolstoy seems to have been responding to contemporary debates about the right of one individual to violate the natural rights of others. When Napoleon III issued his *The History of Julius Caesar* in 1865, the link between the two became even clearer. In deflating Napoleon, Tolstoy seems to have been battling against Napoleonism in general.

Natasha Rostova and Napoleon occupy the two ends of Tolstoy’s value system. Recall that upon his return from captivity, Pierre is determined to live (Tolstoy 1229–1230). Natasha, likewise, does nothing but live. Napoleon only knows that he acts, therefore, he never lives. In the drafts of his epilogue, Tolstoy writes:

All Napoleon’s actions occur as a game of chance: 99 out of 100 orders are not executed, and what is executed is done by chance. In addition to historians of the party (Lanfrey), the man himself unmask his own personality on St. Helena, and it turns out that genius is just a made-up word and that he is a petty rogue. (PSS 15: 190)

The era of Napoleon raised the question of the human grandeur of the historical figure, the hero. As Pushkin wrote:

Hero, be first of all a man.

Leave the hero his heart! What

Will he be without it? A tyrant. (Пушкин 3: 253)

Attentive to historical accuracy, Tolstoy reproduces this problematic in a series of episodes. Consider, for instance, when the wounded Prince Andrei sees Napoleon: “He knew it was Napoleon—his hero—but at that moment Napoleon seemed to him such a tiny, inconsequential creature compared with everything that was now transpiring between his spirit and that lofty, sky-blue infinity with its busy clouds” (Tolstoy 311). And further:

Everything in the world seemed pointless and trivial beside the solemn and serious line of thinking induced in him by weakness from loss of blood, great pain and a brush with death. Looking Napoleon straight in the eye, Prince Andrey mused on the insignificance of greatness, on the insignificance of human life, the meaning of which no one could understand, and most of all the insignificance of death, which no living person could make sense of or explain. (Tolstoy 312)

It is precisely this parameter that becomes most important in determining Napoleon’s place among people.

Buonaparte, Bonaparte, Napoleon¹

Tolstoy’s three antipathies find expression in the three names he uses in the text: Buonaparte (Буонапарте), Bonaparte (Бонапарт), and Napoleon. It goes without saying that such a coincidence is completely accidental, but from this coincidence one can construct the following: Buonaparte is the name of the bourgeois gentleman; Napoleon, that of the new Caesar; and Bonaparte, that of the hero who has ceased to be a man.

These different shades of meaning are manifested in statements made by Napoleon's contemporaries. Tolstoy himself viewed the historical figure as Napoleon Bonaparte, that is, as a man with a given name and a lineal surname:

Meanwhile life itself, the ordinary life of real people with their personal involvement in health and sickness, hard work and relaxation, their involvement in thought, science, poetry, music, love, friendship, enmity and passion, went on as usual, far removed from political considerations, such as being for or against Napoleon *Bonaparte*, and all questions of reform. (Tolstoy 453).

Even in those instances when Tolstoy refers to him as Napoleon, he preserves the connotations of the other names. The characters, however, usually underscore only one of the connotations. Only once does Pierre use the same name as Tolstoy: "And take Napoleon Bonaparte—universally despised as long as he was a great man, and now he's just a pathetic clown the Emperor Francis wants to offer him his daughter for an illegal marriage" (Tolstoy 590–591).

It should be noted that there are passages when Napoleon's various names are discussed. In the following example, the problem of the name has comedic overtones, but these overtones do not cancel out the problem's semantic depth.

"Who is, Buonaparte?" queried Bilibin, puckering up his forehead—a clear sign that a *bon mot* was on its way. "Bu-onaparte?" he repeated, stressing the *u*. "Still, I think we might let him off the 'u' now; after all, he is dictating Austria's laws from Schönbrunn. That's it, I've decided once and for all to accept the innovation and just call him Bonaparte." (Tolstoy 164–165).

Buonaparte is the Italian spelling of the Corsican surname, while Bonaparte is the French rendering.

The transition from one to the other changes the historical figure's social and political status.

Another example will demonstrate that the different names used to refer to Napoleon reflect not the attempt to define one's relation to him, but rather the secondary intrigues of the speaker.

On the 13th of June the French and Russian Emperors met at Tilsit. Boris Drubetskoy had asked the dignitary for whom he worked to include him in the entourage appointed for Tilsit.

"I'd like to see the great man," he said, meaning Napoleon, having hitherto called him Buonaparte like everybody else.

"Do you mean Buonaparte?" said the general with a smile.

Boris looked quizzically at his general, but soon spotted that this was a little test in the form of a joke.

"I am speaking, sir, of the Emperor Napoleon," he replied. The general smiled again and clapped him on the shoulder.

"You'll go far," he said, and took him with him. (Tolstoy 441)

Buonaparte—Bonaparte—Napoleon: this is the path the historical figure traverses in the in the consciousness of his Russian contemporaries. But whereas the passage with Bilibin shows the attempt at finding an adequate form of denomination, the one with Boris Drubetskoy reveals the careerist sensitive to shifts in political policy.

The Russians' wavering makes complete sense, but conflicts arise in those instances when the Russians and French exchange opinions on the matter:

"*Bonaparte...*" Dolokhov began, only to be interrupted by the Frenchman.

"Don't you say *Bonaparte*. He is the Emperor! His name is sacred!" came the angry shout.

“Damn and sod your Emperor!” And Dolokhov cursed like a soldier in his vilest Russian, before shouldering his gun and walking away. (Tolstoy 185)

One could add to these examples, but at this point, I’d like to make two comments. First, it is worth distinguishing the spellings of the surname: the Russified *Бонапарт* (*Bonapart*) that comes from the French and the un-Russified *Бонапарте* (*Bonaparte*), a corrupted form of the Italian. When Prince Nikolai Bolkonsky refers to Napoleon as *Bonaparte*, he underscores his contempt for the figure he considers a parvenu and bourgeois gentleman:

[...] and once again the conversation turned to the war, Bonaparte, and the latest generals and politicians. The old prince seemed convinced that all these public men were babes-in-arms without the slightest knowledge of warfare and politics, and *Bonaparte* was a useless nonentity who had been successful only because there were no more Potyomkins and Suvorovs to stop him. He was even convinced there weren’t any political difficulties in Europe, there wasn’t any war, only a kind of puppet show with people fooling around, pretending to be doing something serious. (Tolstoy 105–106)

In a letter to Julie Karagin, Princess Marya echoes her father and even cites him as the source of her opinions:

You ask whether we shall spend next winter in Moscow. For all my desire to see you, I don’t expect we shall, and I don’t want to do so. And you may be surprised to hear that the reason for this is—Buonaparte. Let me explain: my father’s health is noticeably declining; he cannot stand being contradicted and he’s always so irritable. This irritability is, as you know, mostly directed towards politics. He cannot stand the idea of Buonaparte hobnobbing on equal terms with all the

sovereigns of Europe, especially our own, the grandson of the great Catherine! As you know, I haven’t the slightest interest in politics, but from my father and his conversations with Mikhail Ivanovich, I do get to know what is going on in the world, and in particular I keep hearing about all the honours bestowed on Buonaparte. Bald Hills seems to be the only place on the globe where he is not recognized as a great man, let alone Emperor of France. (Tolstoy 528)

We see that whereas the old prince refers to Napoleon as *Bonaparte*, Princess Marya calls him Buonaparte. Moreover, *Bonaparte* seems an artificial form, insofar as French pronunciation would ignore the final “e.” *Bonaparte* turns out to be an arbitrary rendering that is neither French nor Italian.

And yet in *War and Peace*, this form is often used to express the views of the court and monarchic circles. Anna Pavlovna says early on: “Prussia has already declared that *Bonaparte* is invincible and that the whole of Europe is powerless to oppose him” (Tolstoy 7). But soon thereafter, Count Mortemart states that the Duke of Enghien “had perished through his own magnanimity, and there were special reasons behind Bonaparte’s animosity towards him [особенные причины озлобления Бонапарта]” (Tolstoy 13). Here and elsewhere, Tolstoy uses indirect speech:

The viscount then gave a nice rendition of a story that was doing the rounds. Apparently the Duke of Enghien had driven to Paris for a secret assignation with a young woman, Mlle George, only to run into *Bonaparte*, who was also enjoying the favours of the same famous actress. On meeting the duke, Napoleon had fallen into one of his fainting fits and had been completely at the duke’s mercy. The duke had not taken advantage of this, but *Bonaparte* had

later rewarded his magnanimity by having him put to death. (Tolstoy 15)

Here the different names—Bonaparte, *Bonaparte*, and Napoleon—reflect, to varying degrees, the viewpoint of author and character. But when the main character alone speaks, the meaning is unambiguous: “If *Bonaparte* stays on the throne of France for another year,’ said the viscount, taking up the thread of the conversation [...] ‘From what I hear,’ said Pierre, reddening as he got back into the conversation, ‘almost all the aristocrats have gone over to Bonaparte [перешло уже на сторону Бонапарта]” (Tolstoy 20).

Secondly, in the Russian tradition, there is another form of Bonaparte that is associated with ecclesiastical and folk usage. To cite one example: “That autumn once again the talk was of war with Napoleon, and there was more enthusiasm for it than last year. Enforced recruitment began: from every thousand of the population ten men were sent into the army and another nine to the militia. Bonapartius’s name was cursed right, left and centre [Повсюду проклинали анафемой Бонапартию]” (Tolstoy 356). “Bonapartius” (Бонапартий) arose in connection with the Holy Synod’s anathematizing of Napoleon. In its edict of December 13, 1806, the Holy Synod proclaimed Napoleon the “precursor of the Antichrist” and the “enemy of the original faith of Christ.” Bonapartius appears against this backdrop. On the one hand, it is a folk adaptation of a foreign name, but on the other hand, it is constructed on the model of saints’ names (e. g. Ignatius, Pancratius). And this is precisely why the form is used by figures far removed from folk dialects and folk perceptions of the world. Thus, at one of her soirées, Anna Pavlovna Scherer makes the following pronouncement: “Whatever the European rulers and commanders may do by way of pandering to Bonapartius with the object of causing *me*, and *us* in general, maximum annoyance and mortification,

our opinion in regard to Bonapartius cannot be changed” (Tolstoy 394).

Grandeur and Plan

The last matter I want to consider pertains to the correspondence between the purpose of an action and its grandeur. Tolstoy rejects the notion of genius founded on Napoleon’s victories in Europe and Egypt and his theatrical behavior:

We cannot say with any certainty what degree of real genius Napoleon showed in Egypt, where forty centuries looked down on him in his glory, because all his famous exploits in that country are described for us exclusively by Frenchmen. (Tolstoy 1113).

Tolstoy’s distrust of such rhetoric is completely justified, although it doesn’t appear that Napoleon ever said anything about forty centuries “looking down on him in his glory.” What Tolstoy seems to have in mind is the phrase Napoleon supposedly uttered in 1798 before the Battle of the Pyramids: “Soldiers! Remember that forty centuries look down on you from the heights of these pyramids!” But this phrase is found neither in the report of the battle nor in other documents from that time. It first appears in the anonymous *History of Bonaparte, the First Consul* (1803), but there Napoleon uses the phrase not before the battle, but a few days later, when surveying the pyramids of Giza. After Napoleon’s fall, it was referred to Napoleon’s address to his soldiers before the battle. In his *Mémoires* written on St. Helena, French General Gaspard Gourgaud cites the words thus: “Soldiers! Forty centuries look down on you from the heights of these pyramids.” The phrase came into popular use in this version (Ашукин и Ашуккина 515–516).

Tolstoy contrasts Napoleon, “the least significant instrument of history” (Tolstoy 1208), to Kutuzov, who displayed

an unparalleled example of self-sacrifice and the ability to see today’s events with

tomorrow's significance [...] Kutuzov never talked about forty centuries looking down from the pyramids, or the sacrifices he was making for his country, or what he intended to achieve or had already achieved. In fact he never talked about himself at all, he never indulged in histrionics, and he always seemed like the simplest and most ordinary man around, saying the simplest and most ordinary things. (Tolstoy 1208)

To Tolstoy, Kutuzov is a man who "trotted out utterly meaningless words," which is why he "fell out with those around him." Tolstoy then includes several of Kutuzov's historically significant expressions:

[Kutuzov was] the only person to state that *they had won the battle of Borodino*, a claim he continued to assert both verbally and in reports and dispatches till the day he died. He was the only one who claimed that *the loss of Moscow did not mean the loss of Russia*. When Lauriston sued for peace, his reply was, *There can be no peace, for this is the will of the people*. As the French retreated he was the only one to say that *all our manoeuvres were pointless, everything would happen on its own better than we could desire, the enemy must be allowed to march to destruction across a "golden bridge," the battles of Tarutino, Vyazma and Krasnoye were totally unnecessary, we must hold something back to reach the frontier with, and he wouldn't give a single Russian for ten Frenchmen*. (Tolstoy 1209)

Note that Tolstoy emphasizes the immutability of the phrase about Borodino being a victory. He probably did not intend to contrast this utterance to Napoleon's aphorism, but in the context of *War and Peace*, the contrast suggests itself. Moreover, Kutuzov's expressions had the potential to become aphorisms. They didn't only because they aren't even that well known.

So what makes this topic new? The answer: Tolstoy's Napoleonism. In July-August 1865, Tolstoy wrote the following to P. D. Boborykin:

Both your novels are written on a contemporary topic. You emphasize, in a polemical way, matters pertaining to the Zemstvo, literature, the emancipation of women and so forth, but these problems are not only not interesting in the world of art; they aren't there at all. Problems of the emancipation of women and of literary factions unwittingly appear important to you in your literary Petersburg milieu, but all these problems splash about in a little puddle of dirty water, which seems like an ocean only to those whom fate has placed in the middle of this puddle. The artist's aims are incommensurable (as mathematicians say) with social aims. The artist's aim is not to solve a problem irrefutably, but to make people love life in all its infinite and inexhaustible manifestations. If I were told that I could write a novel with which I could irrefutably establish a seemingly correct view of all social problems, I would not spend two hours on such a novel. But if I were told that what I write would be read by children twenty years from now and that they would cry and laugh over it and love life, I would devote all my life and all my strength to it. (PSS 61: 100)

Here is the Napoleonic pretense. One may judge Napoleon for his highfalutin phrase, but then one would also have to judge Tolstoy, despite the fact that he never sent his letter to Boborykin. But if we admit that Tolstoy is justified in what he says, then so, too, is Napoleon. Only before the eyes of forty centuries can one accomplish something that is indeed grand. Tolstoy and Napoleon understood this, and I do not mean to be provocative when I speak of Tolstoy's Napoleonism.

The whole difference lies in the fact that Tolstoy said these very words (albeit, not publicly) while working on *War and Peace*, whereas

Napoleon did not speak of the forty centuries before battle and only retrospectively thought up his “historical” phrase. Tolstoy indeed took a swing at something big; Napoleon just imitated this swing.

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(Translated by David Houston)

Notes

1. I have modified the Briggs translation to reflect the different spellings of Napoleon’s surname in the Jubilee edition. Thus, Бонапарт is rendered as Bonaparte, Буонапарте as Buonaparte, etc. The one difficulty pertains to the corrupted form Бонапарте which, when transliterated, would be indistinguishable from Бонапарт. To avoid confusion, I render Бонапарте as *Bonaparte*. (Translator’s note)

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