The Apotheoses of Young Barra
Dmitry Shlapentokh

A few years ago, I travelled to Dinard, a small city in Brittany in France to attend the bicentennial conference on the great Battle of Austerlitz where Napoleon had crushed both Russian and Austrian troops – ‘The sun of Austerlitz.’ Most experts consider the battle Napoleon’s greatest victory.

Since I had arrived early for the conference, I decided to take a stroll around the area where it was being held. The names of the streets were familiar and appropriate for a place where historians were to gather: ‘Clemenceau,’ named for Georges Clemenceau, the ‘tiger’ who had defeated the Germans in World War I; nearby, as it should be, the Rue de Verdun, and one step further, the Boulevard of Wilson, named in honor of the American president who had sent troops to Europe to protect liberty. Yet, while the names and the stories behind them were familiar, nothing actually struck my heart until I came to the Rue de Barra, when something clicked in my mind, causing a stream of association. Barra was a name I well remembered from my Soviet childhood, from my seventh or eighth-grade history book.

As many textbooks do, it demonstrated how malleable was history, how easily it could be changed depending on how the political winds were blowing. For example, in French textbooks the Paris Commune has been prudently extracted from historical memory. And, indeed, why should French children, who should be proud of their country, study a time when the French killed each other on the streets of Paris? In my Soviet textbooks, however, the Paris Commune was proudly included and, of course, the young drummer Barra from the time of the French Revolution made for an interesting little story during that time. Barra had been captured by the monarchists who demanded that he renounce the revolution. He refused and was killed. On the face of it – a small story in a large event.

In Soviet textbooks Barra was prominently presented as a person deserving of emulation. In fact, there was not only a description of the event but a portrait was presented of young Barra who stood defiantly before his captors ready to face death from the spears of the enemy. The prominent space given to Barra in the textbooks of my Soviet youth was hardly accidental. He was duly related to similar youthful heroes/martyrs of Soviet iconography, all of whom had a singular regret: They had only one life to give for their country. This is also the view of a chap whose statue stands in front of CIA headquarters, if I am not mistaken.

The image of Barra, a mere boy, ready to die remained clear in my mind, and the message to be derived from his death was also clear. Yet for some reason I could not remember his actual words before he was put to death, which troubled me on a deep level. I put this aside, though, so I could concentrate on what had brought me to Dinard in the first place.

The Napoleonic Society had organised the conference and, as it was open to the public, I thought that I would find a room full of people, but there was actually only a handful. We sat in a hall surrounded by an exposition of stamp collections and pictures that displayed Napoleon’s career. Several people took the floor to give welcoming speeches. The mayor of Dinard opened the conference with a speech in

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which he stressed that it was a great honor for his city to host such a prestigious gathering. He also gave his take on Napoleon. According to the mayor, Napoleon had sacrificed his life to benefit France and implicitly Europe. Then a couple of descendants of Joachim Murat, one of the most celebrated of French marshals, appeared before the public. One was a young girl, with a charming smile, dressed in a simple peasant dress. She bowed her head to the public and sat down. The other representative of Murat’s family, a tall man, made a speech with a pointed message. His great ancestor and the emperor had toiled for only one goal: liberty.

After this, there was a break and this afforded me the chance to walk around the building where the conference was taking place. Here there was an exhibition dedicated to Napoleon. Another participant in the conference, a historian, told me that the conference had such a low profile and had been relegated to such a god-forsaken place as Dinard because Napoleon and empire was now out of fashion. The ‘politically correct’ view for the French, as all other European countries, was to emphasise the rule of law rather than the violence of conquest.

I walked off to continue my tour, observing the banners of the La Grande Armée and the sundry weaponry of the period, all of which were the property of the city of Dinard as it was duly stated. Finally, I came to the room where the Battle of Austerlitz was being reenacted. I entered the room with the other visitors, mostly Frenchmen. Little figurines – representatives of the great army and Russian and Austrian troops – stood in solemn order. And then over speakers came the sounds of battle – the heavy steps of the guards, the staccato of the horses’ hoofs, the roar of the guns. There was even a simulation of the smoke as the frontal attack of the French on Pratzen Heights began.

At first, the French in the audience looked upon the display with the indifference of bored tourists, but as the sound of the guns increased and the French figurines seemed to be pressing harder and harder against the lines of the Austrian and Russian troops, you could see the spark in their eyes, a gleam that was hardly politically correct. And then as the battle was culminating and the terse voice of the emperor declares: ‘Soldiers, I am proud of you’ and as the chords of the Marseilles swell over the room, the glint in their eyes transformed again. Across the room I spotted one Frenchman whose eyes seemed to be shining with ecstasy as he assumed the posture of a soldier at attention, ready to salute.

The feeling emanating from him was almost palpable. Pushed to the back of his brain, I imagined, was the politically correct European Constitution, the present-day dictum of conformity that has spread across Western Europe, a dull conformity that postulates a love for ‘diversity,’ an aversion to viewing women as ‘sex objects,’ and a diet of green vegetables with lots of healthy vitamins and no cholesterol. However, at that moment, I imagined that those in the grip of that particular moment craved nationalistic bias, the joy of endless, raw sex, and a high calorie diet, only slightly cooked in the water of civilisation and, of course, a lot of blood. And those who proclaimed otherwise were either impotent or simply caged in the great ‘panoptikon’ of political correctness, as Foucault would have proclaimed if he were alive and not being censored by the grand dames from Women’s Studies departments and officious clerks from Affirmative Action offices. These people wanted nothing but ‘liberty.’ This is the way it is from Washington to Paris, from Paris to Moscow. Maybe, just maybe, this is the message of young Barra, the drummer.
I left the room and wandered through the corridor where paintings that depicted some aspect of Napoleon’s life were hanging on the walls. Many were from Russia and had been brought to Dinard specifically for the conference. One of them depicted Alexander, the victor over Napoleon, dressed in a beribboned, elegant uniform. He stood stately and erect, as if gazing down upon the visitors. He seemed the very picture of state might, and it was easy to see why Russian poets and historians had glorified the greatness of the Russian state which, for most of them, had been made manifest in the victory over Napoleon.

However, while Napoleon has received similar acclaim from writers, there was a significant difference between the two men. Although it was true that Russian peasants had fought and died in the war against the French, their love for the state and their emperor was not overwhelming as was the case with Napoleon and the French. In Russia, it was the elite who worshipped the state, not the populace – a trend that continues to this day. In Imperial Russia, at the time of the battle of Austerlitz, it was not unusual for even members of the Imperial Guard to desert. During World War I, Russian soldiers deserted en masse, oblivious to the call of their officers to defend the homeland. In 1991, at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, not even one detachment tried to save the country. While one can criticise Russians – at least in comparison to the French – as unpatriotic, the assumption would only partly be true. It is the absence of worshipping the state that has made it possible for Russians to look differently upon the results of the empire and the great battles of their emperor.

Near the portrait of Alexander hung another picture: Vereshchagin’s painting of Borodino. The picture represents an episode from the French victory, an important part of the battlefield. The victorious French are in exaltation, yelling and waving their helmets. But this triumph is not the message of the picture; this lies on the periphery where the focus is quite sharp. What is seen are heaps of corpses, of mutilated human bodies whose faces are frozen in death’s agony. Peeking out from the pile is a bayonet dripping blood. This, too, I submit is the message of young Barra.

At the front of the exhibition was a painting of the young Bonaparte crossing the San Bernard. What else had David painted? Of course, Marat: his hand hanging limply over the bathtub, his pale, powerless body, Christ taken from the cross. And the picture of young Barra, the boy Christ with a gaping wound. And it was clear what young Barra had screamed in the moments before his death: ‘Fraternite!’ – Brotherhood (the French empire).

All of this brings to recall a trip I took to Turkey where I had walked alone along the central streets of Istanbul, Constantinople, the second Rome, the second capital of the empire. The streets teemed with stores full of people from the former USSR, mostly those from the Turkic-speaking states. One of them, an Azeri, accosted me. ‘Where are you from, white man?’ he asked, his eyes dull with hatred. He did not wait for my answer but began a long diatribe: ‘I know, you’re from Europe, from somewhere in the West. I hate you all. You destroyed my country, the USSR.’ He added that he came from the great city of Baku where everyone had lived as brothers and sisters – Russians, Jews, and even Armenians. He said that he’d had several girlfriends, at the same time, ‘Russians, Jews, and believe it or not – I don’t care – Armenians.’ He wondered aloud why the Turks had not slaughtered us all. A Turkish woman who seemed to understand so me Russian nodded in agreement. ‘Yes, yes. Under Ottoman rule everyone lived as brothers and sisters, all peoples, all Armenians,
regardless what they say about us. And in his harem our Sultan made love to women from all over the empire: Jewish, Hungarian, and of course many Slavic women.’ The sultans, according to her accounts, were universal men. My Azeri acquaintance looked at me with a gloomy longing. ‘Yes, it’s true. I had girlfriends of all nationalities. We lived as brothers and sisters in a great state.’

Empire here, then, was not attacks by phallic bayonets, nor was it even a Casanova-style seduction of the innocent, rather it was something different. Empire here was an exchange of genitalia, a great communal gathering where bodies were given as acts of charity, love and universal brotherhood. Yes, it was ‘fraternite,’ that is, empire is the brotherhood of nations, a brotherhood of people that did not require a constitution to detail its citizens’ rights because rights were embedded in the heart. And it is quite possible that the words of young Barra held a similar meaning.

Of course, I thought a great society is impossible without more than liberty and brotherhood. There must be justice. ‘Justice,’ smirked the young Russian women whom I had met on the train to Dinard. She looked at me with the sort of contempt one usually reserves for idiots. A group of thugs had killed her brother in Ekaterinburg merely because he had refused to give up his apartment for practically nothing. They had beaten him to death. And the authorities had buried him in a cemetery for anonymous corpses. The only good thing about the cemetery was that at least the bodies did not have to share a coffin. Her mother had been out of town when the murder took place, but when she came back she asked for an investigation. The authorities said that there had been no signs of a violent death. ‘We wrote to everybody, including Putin. No answer. And you want justice? Man, you must be crazy.’

During the next session of the conference, the presentation was boring and I hardly understood what was being discussed. And the reason was clear: I was a civilian, not a military man. The only things I gleaned from the session were that the emperor was a brilliant commander and no one could stand against his genius. Thus, his victory at Austerlitz had been inevitable.

After this session, I strolled around the exhibition with an American graduate student. We paused to look at a Berezina lithograph of the Grand Army crossing a semi-frozen river in its retreat from Russia. The frozen bank of the river was littered with corpses. These people had died not from bayonet attacks as in the Borodino painting; instead they had died slowly from starvation and the cold. Those alive had been too weak to defend themselves from the approaching Bashkir cavalry of the Russian army. Only a few of the grizzly veterans, possibly members of the Imperial Guard, stood and grimly looked at the approaching Mongol horde with grim determination.

‘Dmitry,’ the graduation student remarked, ‘you know about these things better than I. Right now, I have no chance of a job. If I would write something about Soviet lesbians or Inuits at the time of the first five-year plan and place it in the context of Foucault-Derrida kind of theories, they might forgive me – the people who do the hiring might forgive me for being a white, straight male. But the subject of my dissertation had nothing to do with these subjects.’ Of course, he didn’t want to hear any homilies about fair play and justice, so I kept my silence.

He told me that he had recently read Stalin’s ‘Short Course of VKPB,’ the history of the communist party. He thought it contained a particularly good
description of capitalist society. ‘You might laugh, Dmitry,’ he said, ‘but I have come to the conclusion Uncle Joe was right. You probably remember the statement of the protagonist of Ivan Karamazov: ‘Our father is a swine, but his ideas are right.’ Yes, Stalin was right. You cannot fight against overwhelming odds.’

It was hot and humid in the exhibition hall, and I wandered outside to cool off. I found myself once again strolling down the street named for Barra, the young drummer boy whose picture I vividly remember from my eighth grade history book. At that moment the text was clear in mind, and I mentally leafed through its pages. After Barra, there had been a picture of Francois Noel Babeuf, who had initiated ‘The Plot of Equal.’ I remembered the pages of Buonaroty telling us – Soviet children – that the terms liberty and democracy accompanied only by a rubber smile were nothing. The smiles protected the power and privileges of the elite. And the text also showed a big picture of weavers from Lyon who had suffered from unemployment and misery when their factories were closed in 1832.

The weavers had stood in a line, but this was not the well-arranged, stately line of the Imperial Guard. The line was shaky and unstable and comprised solely of white males. I do not remember the painter depicting one woman or member of a minority group. Some members of the line were lying on the ground, presumably because troops had shot them. Those who had managed to stay on their feet waved a black flag that proclaimed: ‘To work living or die fighting.’ Their expressions were not one of defiance, but of victory as if those who would kill them had recoiled in horror. The image was both horrible and pleasing at the same time. It touched something in deep within me; something that I hoped might provide me with a clue to remembering the message of young Barra, which had been bothering me since I arrived in Dinar.

As the images from the text played in my mind, I once again remembered my trip to Istanbul. After the conversation with the Azeri, I had continued to walk until I reached a square surrounded by several mosques. Crowding the square were dozens of policemen in full combat gear. There were also quite a few cameras, and I understood that something important was taking place, at least from the point of view of the police. Shortly, a crowd of young men appeared waving flags depicting the famous portrait of Che Guevara. As I had no desire to be part of a skirmish between police and demonstrators, I hurried into the yard of one of the mosques. From above came a booming voice, as if someone were sounding a battle cry: ‘Allah Akbar.’ Hundreds of men, possibly thousands, fell to the ground in prayer. They stood and then came another roar from above: ‘Allah Akbar.’ The crowd stood once again primed for attack, ready to kill and to be killed. Grim determination was on their faces, a look I had seen in the faces of the workers that had followed the pictures of young Barra in my eighth grade history textbook. And at that moment, the image of Barra reemerged in my mind. But this image was quite different from the one from my eighth-grade textbook.

I was leaving the conference the next morning, on the 14 of July, so I spent the night in a hotel. As I was boarding the plane, some tourists, quite possibly because it was July 14, had turned on a radio and I heard the sound of the ‘Marseilles.’ Someone shouted out, ‘Please turn down the radio.’ The radio was turned off but the sound continued to pulsate, louder and louder, in my mind, ‘Alors . . . ’ Its intensity was too much, so I leaned back to rest.

As I started to close my eyes, a blaze of lightning struck the plane. This was

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unexpected, to say the least, and the face of the passenger seated behind me was frozen in a rictus of horror, as if he were facing an imminent, horrible death. He could not speak. And at that very moment the message of young Barra came to me – clear and sharp. Yet it had come too late for me, for I was falling into a bottomless, dark pit of sleep, a sleep without dreams, without hope.