Napoleon and the 1812 Patriotic War in Russian Humour

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There are few events in Russia's history that have anything like the significance of the war against Napoleon, the famous battle of Borodino and the subsequent Fire of Moscow, with its surrounding myths.

This evaluation may seem surprising, at least from a Western perspective. One would perhaps regard the accession of Peter the Great, or the October Revolution in 1917, or the Second World War as particularly important events. So why 1812? And why a battle that only lasted one day in early September 1812, and from which no clear victor emerged, but which instead cost umpteen thousand lives on both sides and thus can rightly be called one of the bloodiest battles of the 19th century?

A brief reminder: Both Napoleon's Grande Armée and General Field Marshall Kutuzov's Russian Army claimed the battle as a victory. Napoleon marched on towards Moscow, but his desire to start negotiations fell on deaf ears. Instead, he found himself in the looted, burning city of Moscow, and with the start of an unusually early winter, he was soon in a catastrophic supply situation. The retreat of the Grande Armée was a complete disaster with few survivors. In a second legendary battle, the Battle of Berezina, Napoleon suffered his final defeat. This military defeat was followed soon after by political defeat, and Napoleon was banished to Elba.

The events of 1812 were commemorated in grand style and with great expense at the centenary celebrations in 1912. But not just in 1912. In 2012 the bicentenary in Russia was also lavishly marked. The preparation of the celebrations had been going on for several years under the direction of a special state commission, set up exclusively for this purpose at the behest of the highest government circles. The culmination of their efforts came at the end of August and the beginning of September. Two of the highlights of the celebrations, which extended over the whole country, can be called representative for the many hundreds of events because of their particular importance. The first is the ceremony on the battlefield of Borodino on 2 September, celebrated by President Putin. Over 2,000 people from home and abroad actively participated in the subsequent reenactment (*rekonstrukcija*), and several hundreds of thousands of spectators attended. The second is the

grand opening of the Museum of the 1812 War (*Muzej vojny 1812 goda*), which was opened on 4 September as part of the State Historical Museum (GIM). With this museum, plans that had already been drafted for the anniversary in 1912 finally became reality.

Not only these measures, but many other past and present media (such as memorials, panoramas, movies, TV series, children's books, school books – to name but a few examples) can be grouped under the heading »popularisation of history«. One of the many forms of »popularised history« can undoubtedly be found in medial representations that are linked in a broad sense to the phenomenon of laughter: humour, satire, ridicule, be it in verbal (e.g. jokes) or visual (e.g. cartoon) form.

This process of popularisation is the main subject of our research project, which looks at the hype surrounding 1812 from a particular angle, namely to find an answer to the question: To what extent can this discourse be functionalised to serve the process of creating national identity?[1]

At first glance, Napoleon and the 1812 War seem to be a very serious matter, even an affair of the state. This is not surprising, given the huge number of victims. So what roles can laughter and humour play in relation to a figure like Napoleon, who as Čerepanova put it, went from being the epitome of ›the enemy‹ to a key figure in Russia's national identity? Is there a counter-discourse of laughter, as understood by Bachtin? What types of texts had the most powerful effect? Why was it Napoleon, in particular, who became a figure in Russian culture known to every single Russian child? And what is behind this sentence taken from a collection of Napoleon jokes on the Internet?

To Russian ears it sounds funny because the sentence has a structure which is not logical in the first place.

»Napoleon's legacy in Russia: cake, cognac, crackpots.«

To explain to those who are not so familiar with Russian culture: there is a delicious cake called ›Napoleon‹, a cognac of the same name, and most

1 At this point I would like to thank the project group including Regine Nohejl, Marina Kahlau and Konstantin Rapp for the many valuable stimuli they gave me for this paper, which should be seen as a joint achievement.

Napoleon jokes in Russia these days have something to do with lunacy. Here is a typical example:

»Two lunatics are talking about a third lunatic: Did you hear that Napoleon has gone completely crazy. He thinks he is a cake.«

However, in my paper I will not confine myself to the present or to jokes that are a play on words. I would like to go further back into the past, in particular to the period of Napoleon and its accompanying pictorial material. Before inviting the reader on a short journey through Russian humour, I should formulate a couple of premises:

In the 19th century and extending right up to the most recent past, all written publications and images were under scrutiny from censors – first czarist, then religious, and later Soviet censorship. The situation today is more complex because censorship is less evident. The absence of freedom of the press always has to be taken into account. In view of these conditions, oral discourse is of great significance. To begin with it was the rural folk tradition that was a rich source of Russian jokes or *anekdoty* as they are called in Russian, but in the 20th century joke collections and of course the Internet provide us with what can be called urban folklore. These *anekdoty* are usually brief, potentially satirical, anonymous, taboo-breaking, usually structured in three segments, sometimes politically subversive, sometimes sexualised, sometimes simply referring to everyday life, and sometimes they play with double semantics, like the pun about Napoleon and the cake.

When I talk of pictorial material, I am referring to a particular tradition that also needs some explanation. I am talking about so-called *lubki* (singular is *lubok*, *lubočnaja kartina*), which have a very special significance within popular Russian culture. They constitute a pictorial tradition that came into existence in the course of the 18th century in Russia, and which was recognised by Peter the Great as a political instrument because of the potential for conveying information and propaganda. The *lubki* initially served to pass on information, in particular information as put out by the State, but they were very soon used for satire and thus as a way of criticising the State. They are usually simple prints, taken from woodcuts, and then strongly coloured. Some researchers (e.g. Bowlt 1983: 222) have found similarities with German pamphlets and English broadsheets. Aesthetically they appear unsophisticated and somewhat naïve in their approach. The latter quality was at times deliberately cultivated, for example when an alphabet with jingles referring to the war was published.

The following example (Fig. 1) comes from a collection of cartoons entitled *Azbuka* (»Alphabet. A gift to children in memory of the year 1812 for the instruction of descendants«) that appeared in 1814, after the war. There are 34 sheets from the artists Terebenev, Ivanov and Venecianov.

Figure 1: I.I. Terebenev: Azubka, letter č (1814)
»What else can I do! It's time to respect the pig's kindness;there's no horses! Time to drive a pig.«

Source: <http://statehistory ru/2052/Detskaya-azbuka-pro-voynu-1812-goda--izdannaya-v-1814-godu/>

Also typical is the combination of pictorial and text elements, which remind one a little of modern cartoons.

The pictures, which were relatively inexpensive and thus widespread, were scrutinised with some suspicion by censors. Their subversive potential was able to unfold above all, however, when they relied on the language of Aesop. Animals, mythical creatures and figures were depicted to avoid suspicion of reference to current issues. It is important to realise that caricaturists had this *lubki* tradition to draw on when they established, developed, professionalised, and spread what became the Russian caricature tradition, in the context of Napoleon's rise. By the 19th century *lubki* were produced as lithographs, but the original aesthetics were retained and served Russian avant-garde art in the early 20th century as an important aesthetic source.

Let us take a brief look at the current state of research: researchers have only very recently started to focus their efforts on the tradition of *lubki* and *anekdoty*, in particular in Anglo-American academia, and in Russia itself, although it should be said there was some relevant material collected in the

late 19th century (A.D. Rovinskij) and used in the 1912 centenary. Particular credit is due the American art historian John E. Bowlt, who already complained in the 1970s that the caricatures of the pre-revolutionary period were far too little researched (cf. Bowlt 1983). He pointed to the importance of the cartoons of the Napoleonic period, in which the caricature first emerged as an independent phenomenon, particularly through the conscious activation of the Russian *lubok*'s stylised design.

Bowlt's rather generally worded thesis was followed up and sharpened by a number of Western and Russian researchers and supported by an abundance of material. Particularly noteworthy is the scientific work of Stephen M. Norris, who directs his gaze from the Patriotic War up to well into the 20th century with his 2006 monograph *A War of Images. Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture, and National Identity, 1812-1945* (cf. Norris 2006). Work published later on either focuses on individual epochs (such as Nedd 2009 or Milne 2006) or examines caricatures mainly in the context of discourses on national identity. With the latter in mind, Višlenkova's paper published in 2005 with the programmatic title *Vizual'nyj jazyk opisanija ›russkosti‹* is particularly important (cf. Višlenkova 2005). She examines not only the discourses on constructing the »Russian«, but in particular the popularisation strategies and communicative processes at work. The recently published article by Čerepanova that appeared in a remarkable but limited print run of the RGGU conference proceedings (cf. Čerepanova 2011) is particularly noteworthy insofar as the focus is on the figure of Napoleon himself.

What we don't have so far are general surveys or works dealing with the phenomenon of the comic, of jokes, and the use of text and pictures. I will attempt to do this in my paper, or at least outline an approach. To do so, I will deal with three aspects in the context of laughter, humour, wit, and satire as they relate to Napoleon and Russia. The first aspect is functionalisation; the second is impact or effect; and the third is aesthetic strategies.

FUNCTIONALISATION

Research has convincingly shown that caricatures of Napoleon particularly during the Napoleonic wars were part of state propaganda and were thus encouraged in the interests of the State. A form of satirical, political war journalism arose, which took on an increasingly patriotic tone after 1812.

The intention was to activate the population's fighting spirit, to demonstrate the superiority of the Russian Empire, and to reduce the threat of the foreign troops. Ridicule and mockery of the foe are old strategies for demoralising enemies and strengthening the morale of – in this case – the Russian forces. The medium used was above all the *lubki*, by then already established and now developed further by professional artists working in the genre of caricature. Altogether 200 *lubki* appeared during the Napoleonic Wars, 72 of them featuring the figure of Napoleon. There is evidence that over 40 artists were employed in this war of pictures against Napoleon.

However, ridiculing, mocking, and humiliating the enemy, given the historical background and certain cultural conditions in Russia, was very much an ambivalent venture: The French, after all, were not considered by Russian society in general as the enemy. *Au contraire!* France had been the Leitkultur for Russia since the 18th century: the aristocracy spoke French, fashion was copied from France, Russian salon culture modelled itself on the French equivalent. This orientation was not altered by the French Revolution.

Furthermore, the new type of ambitious, active, strong-willed self-made-man embodied by Napoleon did indeed fascinate the Russians, from the Czar to the reform-minded nobles, but at the same time he was a figure of hate to them. Thus the reactionary Czar Paul regarded Napoleon as a shining figure who had conquered chaos and fostered law and order. At the same time the Russian aristocracy regarded the young Alexander, who like Napoleon came to power through a coup d'état, as a type of »Russian Napoleon«. So to begin with, they were not unimpressed by the heroic dimensions of Napoleon's rise, his deeds, his reforms, and his willpower. However, the direct comparison with Napoleon showed up Alexander's weaknesses: his reforms were hesitant, half-hearted and did not really measure up to those of his model, Napoleon.

The ultimate in ambivalence in Russia's attitude towards Napoleon came after 1805. On one side there was the anathema of the Orthodox Church on Napoleon, who was branded the Antichrist, the Black Czar, the incarnation of the Devil. On the other side of the scales there was the Treaty of Tilsit, signed in 1807 between France and Russia, and in fact an act of betrayal on the part of the Czar, who was thus bound through an anti-Christian contract with the enemy of mankind. This treaty put Alexander I in a very problematic position within Russia right up until 1812: public comment on the external loyalty of the Czar to his »new brother« Napoleon was not permitted. After the campaign against the Russians and the fire of Moscow it was clear to everyone, however: Napoleon was effectively in alliance with the Devil.

Nevertheless, it was also possible to interpret the Treaty of Tilsit in the light of Russian Messianism, and this was in fact done in the following way: the Treaty could be seen as an act of Russian Orthodox clemency, one last chance to lead the enemy of Christendom back onto the path of truth and virtue. This discourse of »Russia as a redeemer« was to become particularly powerful in a different context in 1812.

According to this narrative, Napoleon had not only wasted this opportunity by invading Russia, but had also (inadvertently) helped Russia to define its self-image and its role within Europe for the first time. Thus the struggle against Napoleon took on several layers of significance or symbolic meaning:

- As the struggle against the consequences of the French Revolution and thus in favour of the old autocracy,
- As a war of culture against gallomania,
- As the struggle for the grand concepts of the Enlightenment, which had developed in the wrong direction in France,
- As the struggle for Russia as a genuinely European land which was to save the continent from despotism, even from barbarism as represented by the French,
- As a struggle for peace in the world,
- As the struggle against pure Evil in an essentially metaphysical form. The sacrifice of Moscow can thus be interpreted as the start of the process of bringing down and overcoming the Antichrist.

This philosophy of struggle is reflected in several variations in the caricatures which deal with 1812 and Napoleon, but also in the pictures that show the victory as a miracle: Russia conquers the Antichrist and frees Europe, which had been seduced into believing in a Utopia and was now delivered by Russia, by its people, and by its supposedly weak-willed Czar Alexander (though this point was not part of the discourse until later).

It is important to note that Russian society's longing for a hero, a grand historical figure regained popularity after only a brief interval, and there was a reinterpretation of the figure of Napoleon. In opposition circles, above all, he was now considered a genius, the legitimate successor of the Revolution, and as the man who shook the thrones of the emperors and czars. As early as 1814/15, particularly in literary discourses, Napoleon is once again an immortal name and a »great man«, but one who failed to reckon with Russian hearts and their readiness to sacrifice their lifeblood: Napoleon thus becomes the ultimate Romantic hero.

Right up to today, Napoleon caricatures and jokes illustrate a marked oscillation between these two poles of a divided nature: human and satanic, grand but terrifying. There is covert admiration for the French genius, elevated to a unique figure who could be stopped by nothing and no-one. And then he is the incarnation of the hubris typical of a Western individual, hubris that becomes laughable weakness, shown up by the Russian people and Russia itself. One can detect certain subversive and suggestive features in the contemporary caricatures: The people rather than the Czar Alexander fought off the aggressor, a version which initially even met with official sanction.

It is possible to detect how caricatures of Napoleon have been functionalised right through the 20th century and up to the present. The satirical depiction of Napoleon in the Crimean War as well as in both World Wars had the potential to mobilise the population whenever the ruling powers were under threat. The figure of Napoleon stood for the ultimate threat, for a desperate situation, but at the same time for the victory of spiritual and moral powers over material values. Above all it served as a warning to the enemy. An example of this is a caricature of the artist collective Kukryniksy from 1941, in which the text »Napoleon suffered a defeat, and so it shall be with the swaggering Hitler too!« (cf. Fig. 2) draws a direct parallel between Napoleon and Hitler.

Figure 2: »Napoleon suffered a defeat, and so it shall be with the swaggering Hitler too!«
Plakat. Chromolit. 1941

Source: Gosudarstvennyj russkij muzej (inv. Gr. pl. 469) <http://cs1851.vkontakte ru/u2008214/96409515/x_89cbc59d.jpg>

However, if we look at today's Napoleon caricatures and jokes using the new medium of the Internet, then it is very obvious that the figure of Napoleon is now used as emblematic of questionable claims to power and dictatorship within the country itself. Whereas up to the Second World War the enemies of Russia were identified with Napoleon, ever since Perestroika, it is the country's political leaders themselves. The small stature of both Medvedev and Putin are brought into play here. It is possible to read the following points of criticism out of the subtext of the Napoleon figure: disproportionate ambition, unbridled desire for power, westernisation (regarded as dangerous for Russia), individualism and finally the message that downfall (awaited, or even longed for?) will come.

»What is the difference between Napoleon and Putin? Napoleon had the complex a small man has. With Putin it is the other way around.«

What makes the matter more complicated is the fact that Putin himself lays claim to the Napoleon myth for himself and his politics. This can be seen, for example, in his legendary election campaign appearance in Lužniki in February 2012. In this event, which received wide coverage via television and the Internet, the battle of Borodino was explicitly addressed in order to get the Russian people (of today!) to commit to the defensive struggle against the »enemy«. It remained unclear, however, which »enemy« currently threatened the existence of Russia as fundamentally as Napoleon 200 years ago.

THE IMPACT OF THE NAPOLEON CARICATURES OF 1812/13

The Napoleon caricatures were successful in many ways. The figure of Napoleon led to a rapid development of the genre of caricature itself, and what is more, under the patronage of the State. There was innovation in the choice of figures that were portrayed. For the first time in this pictorial form, Russian peasants were regarded as worthy of being depicted, and moreover in an extremely positive light: one could say as the embodiment of the Russian people; something that continues to play a significant role in the discourse over national identity. Furthermore, it should be underlined that Russian artists and their caricatures of the figure of Napoleon became known in Western Europe, where they found a number of enthusiasts (cf. Bowlt 1975: 59). And perhaps most importantly: the caricatures that were created during

Napoleon's lifetime formed archetypes that were activated over and over again in later periods right up to the Second World War.

Above all, the mysterious, inexplicable, fateful downfall of the European army, symbolised in the figure of Napoleon, served as a warning. His downfall can be read emblematically and the subtext for the West is clear: It is dangerous to go into Russia. Whoever tries it will meet with defeat!

THE AESTHETICS OR STRATEGIES OF THE COMICAL

The underlying narrative of contemporary caricatures around 1812 was the contrast between the positively-connotated Russian national characteristics and the miserable state of the French Army, as embodied by Napoleon himself. Constant elements of the narrative are: love of Russia, the celebration of Moscow, the symbiosis of peasant and Cossack (moral and military power), the de-mystification of Napoleon.

In the caricatures as well as in the anecdotes Napoleon himself is frequently the centre of focus, in a highly standardised form: his small stature, three-cornered hat, typical placement of his arm. Napoleon is thus the primary ›legitimate‹ subject of portrayal.

According to Graham (2003) the psychological effect is derived from a number of elements. First of all, the feeling of superiority that arises through laughing over the bad luck or misfortune of others. This sense of superiority is stronger when the person depicted is of a higher social status than the viewer. This was the case with the western European soldiers who had traditionally been regarded as culturally superior, and of course it was even more the case with Emperor Napoleon. Secondly, the preservation of mental and emotional stability when one sees that others survive dangers and overcome the enemy (cf. relief theories, especially in Freud!). The third aspect, described by Graham as Incongruity Theories, is the activating of laughter as the response to the occurrence of two pictures or ideas that cannot be logically brought together (frequently the case with the double semantics of one and the same sign). This can be found more often in anecdotes told today:

»A pupil comes home from school. The mother asks: What did you learn today? The son: where Napoleon died. Mother: And where did he die? Son: on Saint Helena. Mother: Tut, tut. What dirty stories you learn at school these days!«

To return to the 19th century: the strategy of discrediting the enemy can be described by means of the play between the noble and the ridiculous, whereby Napoleon's titanic genius and imperial status constitute the noble overlay that is torn down and made to appear ridiculous.

Thematically and iconographically the caricatures have a broad span: for example, in the contrast between the individual and the collective. The »Übermensch«, Emperor Napoleon and his individual willpower are defeated by the collective will of the Russian people, symbolised by the Cossacks as almost mystical heroes, and then complemented by the peasants and ordinary soldiers. Many of the cartoons created directly during the war years reveal peasant figures. For example, the representation in Figure 3 shows Russian peasants who make the French soldiers (or even Napoleon himself) literally »dance to their tune«. Figure 4 presents a Russian peasant woman threatening the French soldiers with a goat.

One particular form of inversion occurs when artists resort to classical aesthetics, which are then re-coded as authentically Russian, for example with the Russian Hercules figure, who towers over doll-sized French soldiers (cf. Fig. 5).

Figure 3: Ivan Terebenev: Napoleon's Dance (1813)

Source: <htpp://1812 nsad.ru/pic/narodnye_pesni_1812_karikatura_org-jpg>

Figure 4: Ivan Terebenev: French marauders get frightened by a goat (1813)

Source: <http://www.vm ru/photo/vecherka/2012/08/file66e6nkojvhu5zqlkdv5_800_480.jpg>

Figure 5: Ivan Trebenev: The Russian Hercules of the town of Syčevka (1813)

Source: <http://www russianprints ru/files/2207_600.jpg>

The Czar himself, in a sense the »natural« counterpart to Napoleon, is not in these caricatures, no doubt as a result of his own (unsuccessful?) politics. Closely aligned to this is the contrast between courage and cowardice. The latter refers above all, of course, to the Grande Armée, usually depicted in a deplorable state.

Another aesthetic strategy is to discredit the Napoleonic army by »dehumanizing« it. A particularly drastic example is shown in the cartoon in Figure 6, in which Napoleon is subjected to a special treatment with a laxative and is actually presented with trousers full of excrement.

*Figure 6: Ivan Terebenev: The Retreat or The effect of Russian laxatives (1813) »Cossack: Get quickly on the road back home, and tell all your lot you've managed to bring everything to your forces that you've got from the Russians as pillage. Peasant: And what you can't carry away in your ***, put in your hat.«*

Source: <http://www russianprints.ru/files/2201_350.jpg>

There are also examples where this strategy of »dehumanization« is achieved by placing the French soldiers not only metaphorically but also visually on the level of animals. The cartoon in Figure 7 shows Napoleon and his soldiers as anxious rabbits on the run, fleeing in panic from the incarnation of the Russian winter and Russian cold in the form of the Russian peasant Vavila Moroz (= frost).

Figure 7: Unknown Artist: The Russian peasant Vavila Moroz on a rabbit hunt

Source: <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-6gMX- spsGfY/TxwIfCsUl9I/AAAAAAAABTw/AFb5mRK7F54/s640/canvas.png>

Also interesting in the context of discrediting the enemy is the play on gender stereotypes. The most important strategy used is the emasculation of French troops, who are not only at the mercy of the Cossacks, soldiers, and peasants, but also of the womenfolk. Figure 4 gives the impression that the soldiers of the Grande Armée were even afraid of female animals such as nanny goats, with whose help a Russian peasant woman chases off a whole company of soldiers.

Additionally the close intertwining of discourses about Napoleon and homosexuality shows just how virulent playing with gender stereotypes and sexual innuendo was.

Closely related to the contrast between the noble and the ridiculous is a procedure which I would like to call inversion. By this I mean a procedure followed in caricatures and anecdotes whereby cultural stereotypes, positive and negative prejudices, awareness of the self and the other are addressed and transformed.

One example of a contemporary anecdote:

»Napoleon waited in vain for the keys to the old Kreml. The keys were probably stolen at some point, or maybe they were just lost.«

Here we have an allusion to the negative cultural attribute (Russians steal, or are careless), re-coded into a strength in an affirmative and at the same time subversive process.

There are many such cases of inversion where the French culture is discredited as a superior culture through being presented as completely degenerate. Napoleon and his soldiers thus stand for ›the Other‹ of the Russian culture, and are given ironic treatment. The ›liberation‹ or ›cleansing‹ of Russian soil from degenerate western culture was visually captured in a caricature entitled »French actresses exiled from Moscow« (cf. Fig. 8)

Figure 8: Aleksej Venecianov: French Actresses Exiled from Moscow (1812)

Source: <http://antikvar.ucoz.ru/_ld/1/92048.jpg>

In similar vein is the ironic representation of the world-famous French cuisine, which is reduced to not much more than crows soup (cf. Fig. 9).

Figure 9: Ivan Terebenev: French crow soup (1812)

Source: <http://museum nsk ru/museum/images/rovinsky300-1.JPG>

Another example is the treatment of France as a superior culture which literally has to dance to Russia's tune or fife (cf. Fig. 3).

Cultural stereotypes about Russia undergo a similar inversion process, for example Russia's proverbial hospitality, or the famous Banja, but also the intense cold that is always associated with Russia. This technique of inversion is evident right up to the present, for example when the significance of Napoleon for Russia and France is the subject of an anecdote and the already familiar double meaning of the word Napoleon is activated.

SUMMARY

I would like to conclude with a brief summary of the subject Napoleon, humour and Russia:

First and foremost, it is clear that the Napoleon myth, as present in the humorous and satirical discourses of the czarist and the Soviet period, was above all functionalised in accordance with the intentions of the State and in the context of war. The aim was to activate the country's defences and to discredit the enemy. It is only in very recent times, that is, in the last twenty years, that in urban folklore (i.e. in anecdotes and online) Napoleon is being functionalised as a figure in counter-discourse and in confrontation with the State.

Even today both discourses still stand next to each other and are connected above all by humour and irony. The one, supportive of the state, stages Napoleon on the one hand as Russia's enemy par excellence, and on the other hand as a test for Russia, which can secure its national identity only in the face of this hostile threat and by successfully overcoming it. The other discourse, the one that moves in internet forums and urban folklore, in anecdotes and jokes, in media spaces that are difficult for the state to control, uses the figure of Napoleon to refer to dictatorial phenomena at home. But what all discourses have in common is that they play with western figures and clichés.

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