
A VAST EXAGGERATION, PLUS A FEW OMISSIONS.. HERE AND THERE..

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What I have put into Recommended Readings for today is about a historical controversy [0022.(BBC 4.5.2021) Napoléon's incendiary legacy divides France 200 years on], about how to regard a certain slice of a country's past. So it carries implicit lessons, perhaps, about how we, for example, might approach thorny questions in Turkey's history.

Except that in this case, the supposed controversy is not so real as imaginary. I am afraid I cannot help poking some fun at this “Napoléon's incendiary legacy” bit. What “incendiary legacy,” for heaven's sake? Frankly, it seems as if the BBC's Paris correspondent has been trying to stir up some spurious journalistic excitement about a non-event. (a) Today (Wednesday) happens to be the 200th anniversary of Napoléon's death (in 1821 on St Helena in the South Atlantic). (b) There has been no tense, dramatic buildup to it over previous weeks and days. All the author can find that she thinks is worth mentioning is (c) a small southern town preparing to erect a new statue; (d) the announcement that President Emmanuel Macron will be visiting Les Invalides to lay a wreath and make a speech before Bonaparte's tomb; and (e) a group of childish adults engaged in play-acting the general's great battles in period costume, talking about how they are received differently in France or Italy.

So what? Why should this be such a big deal as advertised by Lucy Williamson? Of course on virtually any past event or person, it is not difficult to find a couple of historians or politicians who will say something for or against. But whether this is a real issue on a national scale is something else. On the one hand, Napoléon's legacy is not incendiary in France. There are no big divisions around it because nobody is building anything on this or that interpretation. There is no Napoléonic empire to defend or reject, nor any current party lines drawn across it.

And on the other hand, there are many problems of French history that are far more incendiary or divisive than Napoléon. Consider, for example, the Jacobin “Terror” phase (1792-1794) of the Revolution, including the execution of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. Or what Marc Bloch called the “strange defeat” (*L’Etrange Défaite*) in Summer 1940. Or the Nazi-French compromise over the creation of Vichy France. Or collaboration in general, as well as the postwar witch hunt for collaborators. Or whether the Résistance was as strong and glorious as it has subsequently been made out to be. It did produce great poetry (by Eluard, Aragon and others), but how big, really, was it? And did so many maquisards really fight and win all those battles that appear nowhere in German army records? Last but not least, what about the Algerian war of independence — all the atrocities, mass murders and large-scale use of torture committed by the French paratroopers under top officers like Massu, Salan, Biegard, or Paul Aussaresses — who eventually admitted and defended it, thereby confirming everything in Henri Alleg’s *La Question* (1958) or Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), thereby exposing an entire history of official denial and censorship that endured for decades?

One would have expected the BBC’s Paris correspondent to have known and to have mentioned something about these other and far more serious issues before resorting to clichés about an “incendiary legacy.” Worse yet, she should have also checked her facts before calling Napoléon “France’s last dictator.” Oh really? What about his nephew Louis Bonaparte, who was elected president in 1848, and then at the end of his term refused to leave office, instead staging a so-called “self-coup” in 1851 to impose himself as “president for life” before imitating his great uncle to proclaim himself Napoléon III Emperor of the French in 1852? Or what about Marshal Pétain, who went from World War I hero (as the Lion of Verdun) to Nazi collaborator and Chief of State for the Vichy régime over 1940-1944?

This is bad, and quite below the BBC’s usual standards. And yet... my initial question about a calm and tolerant atmosphere surrounding such historical controversies remains. What is the dividing line between politics and scholarship? How can academia and academics be protected against the heavy hand and dark shadow of outside interference and ideological dictates? Here it is primarily the responsibility of politicians to refrain from fanning the flames of polarization. And my discounting of the current situation aside, France is setting a good example in this regard. About Macron’s second centenary talk, it won’t be a “blissful hagiography, or a denial, or a repentance,” the Elysée Palace has said, but will suggest that France took the best from the emperor’s legacy and separated it from the worst.

To take the best and separate it from the worst. I like that. If France can at least adopt this as a guiding principle, why can’t Turkey?

