

Movement in times of war

Russian Campaign, French Campaign 1812-1814

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ABSTRACT

The Russian campaign that began in June 1812 and ended in mid-December was—in spite of the troops committed to it—a catastrophe for the Grande Armée, which confronted both huge logistical problems as well as the resistance and patriotism of Russian troops. In January 1814, carried by the success of the German campaign, coalition troops penetrated into France. The campaign would prove to be fierce but short. On March 31, Alexander I entered Paris, which was a prelude to Napoleon's abdication on April 6.



Bernard-Édouard Swebach, *The retreat of Russia, 1838*, photograph taken and posted online by Yelkrokoyade for the exhibition *Les désastres de la guerre 1800-2014 [The Disasters of War 1800-2014]*, Musée Louvre-Lens. Loan from the musée des beaux-arts de Besançon, March 2015

Long dissociated from one another in the historiography, the campaigns of Russia (1812) and France (1814) were two intrinsically linked events that gave rise to troop and population movements of unprecedented scope for the early nineteenth century.

1812, the Russian campaign

On the eve of the campaign, the Grande Armée counted 650,000 men, of whom 420,000 crossed the Neman River at nighttime between June 24-27, 1812. Prestigious and experienced, the Grande Armée was multinational, for although the French represented 40% of its troops, it also included units made up of non-nationals who had been integrated since the annexation of their country, along with contingents of "volunteers" provided by states allied with Napoleon. The Napoleonic army was also the largest army ever built. Over the course of the ensuing months,

150,000 soldiers swelled its ranks. Opposing it was the Imperial Russian Army, which was also multinational, but had less numbers. In June 1812, it totalled 622,000 men divided among three primary armies, however only 200,000 men were deployed on the Polish border at the time.

In fact, French-Russian relations had continued to deteriorate since the Treaty of Tilsit in July 1807, due to diverging geopolitical interests and growing rivalries in Germany, the Balkans, and Poland. When Napoleon, who was convinced that war was inevitable beginning in late 1811, chose to commence hostilities, his aim was to score a quick and decisive battle, and then quickly return against England and complete his project of European unification. But nothing would take place as expected. Even before the invasion, Alexander I and Barclay de Tolly, Minister of War and commander-in-chief of the Imperial Army, actually had the intuition that the only viable strategy against so powerful an invader was to refuse combat; to retreat while destroying everything that could be useful to the enemy, and allow him to advance into central Russia, where he would be continually weakened in the face of growing logistical problems. This plan was implemented from the beginning of the invasion, and had two major consequences: it caused serious losses within the Grande Armée, due to a lack of provisions as well as to typhus and dysentery epidemics. However, it also led to the movements of civilians who, amid the panic, abandoned their towns or villages destroyed by the enemy, and fled toward the east by the thousands, or hid in nearby forests where their survival was precarious.

On August 16-18 Napoleon won a victory at Smolensk, but since the Russians had withdrawn, the battle was not decisive. On the 19th, Alexander I named Kutuzov as commander-in-chief in place of de Barclay, whose legitimacy was challenged by the army. Kutuzov, whose mission was to give battle, hastily opted for the site of Borodino (the Moskova), located 120 km from Moscow. On September 7, after more than 10 hours of combat, Napoleon apparently emerged as the victor of the encounter, as he lost only 1/5 of his engaged troops (25-28,000 men), while the Russians lost a third (40-42,000). The Russians, however, were able to resist the enemy, as the battle was not decisive: Borodino was therefore a psychological victory for them.

In search of a new battle, Napoleon decided to march on Moscow, but when he arrived there on September 15, he entered a city emptied of its inhabitants: only 2-3% of the pre-war population remained, essentially the elderly, the sick, and those too poor to flee. That very evening, Moscow burned while Moscovites began their exodus toward the east (in the direction of the Urals) and the south. The fire, which was started on the order of governor-general Rostopchin and astutely attributed to the French, soon became the symbol of the martyrdom endured by the nation. While it strengthened Russian patriotism, it helped weaken the Grande Armée, which was authorized to pillage, but descended into a lack of discipline. Faced with the czar's refusal to open negotiations, Napoleon was forced to leave after one month, on October 19. He knew at the time that he had lost the war, although for his men the worst was yet to come: faced with harassment by the cossacks, who forced them to take the same route as on their entry, the malnourished and ill-equipped men had to face the Russian winter, enduring terrible suffering. Although the army was able to escape during the crossing of the Berezina thanks to the heroic exploits of 300 members of General Éblé's bridge unit, the campaign was nevertheless terribly deadly. It is estimated that at most 15% of the soldiers crossed the Niemen River on December 13. Nearly 200-250,000 soldiers of the Grande Armée died in combat, 150,000 or even 200,000 were made prisoner, and 50-60,000 marauders and deserters, who became tutors, domestic servants or farmhands, apparently hid in Russia and survived thanks to the involvement of the local population. On the Russian side, 300,000 deaths were reported, including 175,000 who died in combat, without counting the thousands of devastated villages, and a capital reduced to ashes. The country thus paid a heavy price for its freedom.

Despite the contrary opinion of a number of his advisors, Alexander I nevertheless believed that Napoleon would return sooner or later, and that it was necessary to take to the offensive and undo him once and for all.

The French Campaign: Europe United in its Assault on French Territory

To do this, however, Alexander I needed the support of the German states, some of which were still allied with the French emperor. The central issue of the German campaign would be to convince them to turn against Napoleon. Despite brilliant victories (Lützen, Bautzen), Napoleon suffered a tough defeat in Leipzig on October 16-18, 1813, which opened for the coalition a path toward French territory in January 1814. For the first time since the French Revolution, France was invaded from the south, east, and north. The coalition, which was structured into two primary armies, led respectively by the Austrian Schwarzenberg and the Prussian Blücher, brought together

Russian, Prussian, British, Swedish, Austrian, Bavarian and Wurtembergian troops, who were as impressive in number (nearly 500,000 men, or two to three times more than the French) as they were in experience, and were opposed by young recruits of the Grande Armée known as the "Marie-Louise."

During the course of January, the two coalition armies advanced without meeting resistance, one occupying the east and the other the north, to the great displeasure of the population, which was left to its fate. Taking advantage of signs of dissension between the two primary coalition armies—the Bohemian army led by the Austrian prince Schwarzenberg and the Silesian army led by the Prussian Blücher—Napoleon marked two good victories in mid-February (Champaubert, Montmirail), while in the countryside the occupier's exactions sparked a few resistance movements in response. Yet the disproportion in troops along with the determination of the czar and the weariness of the French brought about the inevitable outcome. The day after the battle of Paris on March 30, in which 18,000 soldiers were killed and wounded on either side, the coalition entered the French capital, and on April 6 Napoleon had to abdicate. The Treaty of Paris of May 1814 preserved France's 1792 borders, however in the aftermath of the Hundred Days and the defeat at Waterloo, the second Treaty of Paris (November 1815) reduced the country to its 1789 borders and imposed, in addition to a heavy war indemnity, an occupation that lasted until 1818 in the departments of the east and the north.

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