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Nicholas Lock
La Salle University

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Napoleon Bonaparte: From Corsica to Russia

Nicholas Lock

The Moscow campaign, June 1812 – December 1812, was the finale in what had been one of the most extraordinary military careers in history. Napoleon had astonished the world by his record of military successes ever since setting foot on the battlefield. In his battles he proved to be an unstoppable force and he conquered his enemies in rapid succession. By 1805, this young, short Corsican had become the greatest hero to France and by the age of 35 he became Emperor. The mere name of Napoleon was sufficient to strike terror in the hearts of men and women throughout Europe. Armies retired from the battlefield upon hearing that Napoleon would be leading the fight against them. This proved that Napoleon was more than a man, he was a reputation. This reputation lasts even today. "Being neutral about Napoleon has never been easy for Europeans. To the French he is almost universally a national hero, his excesses overlooked and unmentioned. By most other Europeans, whose ancestors suffered terribly under his conquests, he is, understandably, hated" (Schom xix). How an obscure man, from a provincial garrison town outside of France, became the greatest military figure since Julius Caesar is a question that has occupied the minds of historians ever since. In this essay we will consider how aspects of his personality and background foreshadowed the career Napoleon would have as well as his failure and, ultimately his defeat, in Russia.

Napoleon was born to Letizia and Carlo Maria di Buonaparte on August 15, 1769. Little did they know that their son would someday rule an empire. Yet we can find many hints in Napoleon's personality as a youth that made his rise to power no surprise. "The four-square self-sufficiency characteristic of the old Roman nature appears early in the nature of Napoleon Bonaparte" (Rose 16). He had a short childhood and soon was on his own. On December 17, 1778, Napoleon left Corsica for France where he attended the Royal Military School of Brienne-le-Château. Here he learned the French language, history, geography, mathematics, and other subjects, which prepared him for the Ecole Militaire of Paris. He was exceedingly good at geography and mathematics. He rarely left military school and studied often and hard. Aside from his comprehensive study of various subjects, which showed his strong desire to absorb as much knowledge as possible, Napoleon also gained strength against the taunting and bullying of the other school boys. "His diminutive stature, his very limited French, distorted by a strong Corsican accent, his arrogance and continual chip-on-the-shoulder attitude, and his anger against France as the occupier of his beloved country set him off from the others" (Schom 4). He would often shout to the French schoolboys, "I'll make you French pay, one day!" (Schom 5). Napoleon was as strong minded with his schoolmasters as he was with his schoolmates. "On one occasion he was disciplined by a master for disobedience and ordered to replace his uniform with rough clothing and then to eat dinner kneeling on the floor of the refectory with 109 smirking school boys looking on. Napoleon rebelled. 'I'll eat standing up, Monsieur, and not on my knees.... In my family we kneel only before God!' (Schom 5). His authoritative display of arrogant behavior was apparent at this early age. One thing is for sure, Napoleon had always been accustomed to the odds being against him. Napoleon never backed down and his future successes and his ultimate failure were a byproduct of this attitude.

Napoleon entered the Ecole Militaire in Paris on October 19, 1784. There he began to teach German, physics, the construction of fortifications, drawing, public law, and philosophy, as well as more advanced levels of subjects previously studied. Mathematics, fortifications, and artillery proved to be his favorites and he received his commission in the army artillery on September 28, 1785 (Schom 6-7). From here Napoleon began a quick ascension up the military ranks. His personality and study habits were noticed by many high ranking officers and his reputation quickly began to build strength.

Napoleon's quick wit and personality aided him in his mischievous and underhanded military tactics. Rose accounts Napoleon's method of dealing with the conflict of France and Spain: "I find far more of impetuosity than trickery. True, there were many occasions when he resorted to falsehood and deception. His policy towards the Spanish dynasty in the spring of 1808 is an example of insidious intrigue worthy of the Medici of Florence..." (36). Indeed, Napoleon was capable of bending the rules at times. He was not ashamed of these deeds, however, and he was dedicated to win at any and all costs. Although he was aware of his leadership skills and tactical mind, he always took care of his men. "... he was an ideal leader. To his generals he for the most part turned the colder side of his nature, exacting instant and unquestioning obedience, giving them abundant opportunities to enrich themselves at the expense of the liberated peoples, and finally dowering them with immense domains..." (Rose 84). He made his soldiers tremble at the sound of his very voice. He was arrogant and expected his troops to follow his every order. On one occasion, Napoleon shouted, "Death is nothing; but to live vanquished and without glory is to die every day" (Rose 85). Words such as these also give us insight into Napoleon's brilliant and eloquently spoken speeches. His words had the ability to stir his great armies into action. His men would follow him anywhere. In the end, they followed him into his greatest failure.

The previous portion of this paper has dealt with Napoleon's intelligence, his incredible drive to be the best, his arrogance, and his stubbornness. These personal characteristics aided Napoleon in his drive to become the emperor of France. However, as the remainder of this paper will show these are the qualities that also led to his downfall. If the seeds of Napoleon's downfall were sown as early as the winter of 1806, the speed of his decline was indubitably hastened by the catastrophic Campaign of 1812. Time was to show that the decision to invade Russia constituted the irrevocable step, which effectively compromised any remaining chance of survival for Napoleon and his Empire (Chandler 739).

In 1807, Napoleon and Tsar Alexander had created a friendship at Tilsit. They created an alliance, but by the end of 1810 the two empires began to develop hostilities towards each other. "Basically it was insatiable ambition, lust for power and a desire to regain the international position he had enjoyed in July 1807 that led Napoleon to make his fatal decision" (Chandler 740). The Tsar of Russia had attempted to create a "friendly accommodation" for Napoleon in favor of France. With these appeasements made, Napoleon seemed to be the "master of continental Europe." Over time, however, Tsar Alexander's opinions concerning his arrangement with Napoleon began to change. His fascination with the man had worn off and he started to hear more clearly his country's complaints. Napoleon continued to make many attempts to uphold a friendship with

Russia. He encouraged them to lead conquests into the neighboring countries of Finland, Turkey, and Persia (Chandler 740). Unfortunately, "The interests of Russia and France clashed at so many points that there was little prospect of lasting peace" (Palmer 24-25). The conflict between the two nations were due primarily for three reasons. Chandler describes these three issues, the first of which concerns the possession of land. "Alexander desired nothing so much as possession of Constantinople and the Balkan states known as 'the Principalities,' but these particular ambitions Napoleon was equally determined to thwart, having no desire to allow Russian influence into the Mediterranean sphere" (740). Secondly, Napoleon's presence in Poland was seen as directly trespassing into Russian territory and national interests. Finally, Russia's involvement in the alliance with France and the Continental System was costly and placed a financial strain on Russia, as well as putting a halt to the country's once lucrative trade in timber and natural stores with Great Britain. This "... led to grave unrest among the nobility and merchants who found their wealth threatened as the rouble rapidly devalued" (742).

In 1811, as tensions increased between France and Russia, Alexander thought about launching a preventive war against France. He decided that they did not have adequate means or supplies for a war. Instead, he decided to launch a defensive strategy. Alexander stated in a letter: "I intend to follow the system which has made Wellington victorious in Spain and exhausted the French armies – avoid pitched battles and organize long lines of communication for retreat, leading to entrenched camps" (Palmer 26-27). The Tsar realized that the strength of Russia lied in the size of his country rather than in his country's military might. Meanwhile, Napoleon was dealing with an economic crisis in France as well as unemployment in Paris. There was also the problem of the country's conflict with Spain. "That spring, however, he began to move more and more troops into Germany and he took every opportunity of emphasizing his military preparedness to the Russian diplomats in Paris." He told his ambassador in St. Petersburg, Caulaincourt, who warned Napoleon of happenings in Russia, "Puh! One good battle will see the end of all your friend Alexander's fine resolutions – and his castles of sand as well!" (Palmer 27). Here we see Napoleon's arrogance regarding the developing tensions with Russia. "The general confidence in Napoleon's coming victory had an apparently sound basis. Russia was being invaded by the manifold regiments of a superbly organized army, headed by a military genius long regarded as a captain greater than Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, or Frederick II, and who, even before 1812, had won far more victories, major and minor, than all these generals of the past" (Tarlé 262).

This event also gives us an idea of how organized Napoleon was. "A sign of a strong nature is the resolve to master every fact that is essential to success. Where a weak or nervous man pretends that he knows, the strong and able man will make sure that he knows" (Rose 89). On August 16, 1811, Napoleon began planning a campaign in Russia. In December he had started his meticulous study common to all of his campaigns. "On December 19 his librarian was requested to send him 'good books with the best information about Russian topography, and especially Lithuania, dealing with marshes, rivers, woods, roads, etc' and also 'the most detailed account in French of the campaign of Charles XII [of Sweden] in Poland and Russia'" (Palmer 28). Rose states that Napoleon was well equipped for the struggle of life. Napoleon was extremely thorough with regard to his military tactical style. In essence, his success depended upon his ability to

rationalize the military situation at hand and then proceed to implement it on the battlefield. (43).

Although attempts were made to defuse a potential conflict, Russia continued to insist that she be permitted to trade freely with other countries and that France withdraw her troops from Prussia. Napoleon decided that he would invade Russia in June of 1812, and on May 9 of that year he set out on his journey. Throughout the campaign, the Russians continued to use their strategy of retreat to avoid battle. One instance involved France entering Smolensk. They fought a small battle between 10:00 am and 6:00 pm on August 17, 1812. "When darkness came, Napoleon continued the bombardment of the city. Suddenly – in the middle of the night – one terrific explosion after another shook the earth. A fire broke out, spreading across the entire city. The Russians were exploding their stores of gunpowder and burning Smolensk.... At daybreak, the French scouts reported that the town had been evacuated by the troops..." (Tarlé 270). Napoleon entered the city with a somber manner. He had an incredible ability to maintain his temper. Another example of this is seen with the French army's march on Vilna.

In his attempt to surprise the Russian rearguard in Vilna, he ordered the famous cavalry general, Montbrun, to push on with his corps and seize the magazines. Etiquette required that the order should come from Murat, commander-in-chief of the cavalry. "He [Murat], therefore, on seeing Montbrun's advance, angrily bade him retire, and... lost the prize at Vilna. Napoleon, rightly indignant at Montbrun's retirement, vehemently reproached him in presence of Murat.... At last, unable to endure Napoleon's reprimand, Montbrun drew his sword, whirled it high in the air, and galloped off, exclaiming, 'You may go to the devil, all of you.' Napoleon remained speechless with rage... turned his horse and rode away, issuing no order for Montbrun's arrest." On the way back Murat explained the incident, and neither Murat nor Montbrun incurred a further reprimand (Rose 40). Yet, Napoleon never allowed his anger to overtake his ability to command his men successfully. Therefore, Napoleon always tried to "compose" himself in every situation and adopted a very charming disposition.

"After Smolensk, Napoleon no longer hoped to gain a complete and crushing victory over Russia" (Tarlé 270). He was becoming aware that the war was heading towards a bad end. He had entered the burning Smolensk quietly and morosely. There was no battle and he knew he had to press further east towards Moscow. His morale began to decline: "It was not only that his army had diminished by half, in consequence of the necessity of maintaining the tremendous communications line, of garrisoning the provision and munition stores, of having to engage in petty yet stubborn and sanguinary skirmishes, of having to contend with the terrible heat, exhaustion and disease.... It was that the Russian soldiers fought not a whit less bravely than at Eylau. Even apart from Bagration, the Russian generals were by no means as incompetent as he had been inclined to believe..." (Tarlé 271). Napoleon usually had a talent for judging people's abilities and he recognized the methods the Russian army was utilizing as being very difficult and worthy of praise.

Napoleon's arrogance left him unsatisfied with any victory not achieved through him exhibiting his skills in battle. This is the main flaw which inevitably led to his defeat. "After Smolensk... Napoleon's main objective was to enter Moscow, and from there to offer peace to Alexander. But no matter how he thirsted for Moscow, he had no desire to possess the city without a battle" (Tarlé 276). Napoleon became excited as he neared Moscow. He could finally give his troops a chance to rest and he thought he could use the city as a hostage to force Alexander into an agreement. He soon discovered that the residents of Moscow had evacuated. Mysteriously, flames began to appear in scattered areas through the city. The next morning, the flames grew and a strong wind enveloped the city and spread the fires. "When the first fires were reported to him, Napoleon did not show any great concern, but when on the morning of the 17th he made a tour of the Kremlin and from the windows of the place saw the raging ocean of fire sweeping in every direction, he grew pale and, contemplating the conflagration, in silence said at last: 'What a dreadful sight! And they started it themselves...'" (Tarlé 283). Indeed, Napoleon had no doubt in his mind concerning the origins of the flames. Russia, rather than give in to Napoleon's desires, had burnt down another one of their cities.

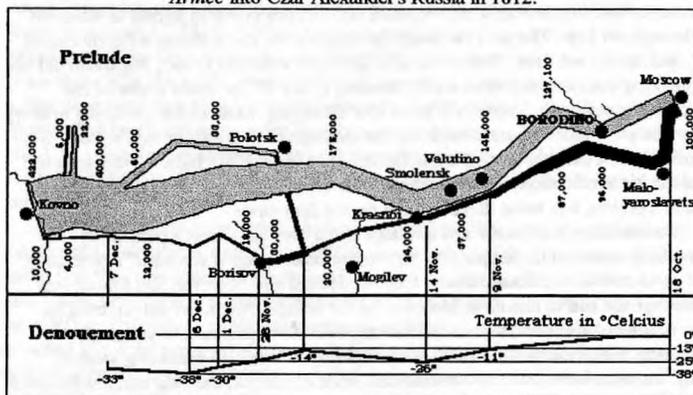
The situation in Moscow saw a change come over Napoleon's personality. He could no longer control his temper and "He was at times a raging madman" (Tarlé 284). He still continued to rule France from Moscow. He did not, however, feel France was stable enough for him to remain in Moscow for the winter. Napoleon did not trust his allies to maintain his empire; likewise, his supply line was insufficient to carry out the remaining winter campaign. His communication line was also becoming weaker. Although attempts were made to communicate with Alexander, the Tsar continually failed to reply. Whereas, previously, Napoleon patiently listened to the ideas of others without bias towards his own, now he no longer heard out his men without losing patience. His arrogance kept him from making his decision to retreat from Moscow. Finally, he decided to leave the city. The journey home was a disaster. "The weather grew colder and colder. The Cossacks and the Russian militia... raided the French provision train and captured all manner of foodstuffs and ammunition. Gradually Napoleon's army became weaker and more dispirited" (Tarlé 296). Napoleon's campaign of Russia finally came to an end in December of 1812. He had set off on the campaign with over 400,000 men and returned with only around 10,000 (Rubarth-Lay - see included chart).

Napoleon was a conqueror. He was perhaps the greatest and most feared force in Europe during his time. His reputation outlasts him even today. "Above all, there burnt in him the flame of genius. It defies analysis; it baffles description; but generals and troops felt the spell. Civilians who sought to control the young warrior found themselves in the meshes of an all-controlling will" (Rose 44). He lived a life devoted to the military and to France. He worked his way from a small, Corsican boy teased in military school, to a force to be reckoned with by all of Europe. "... we may assert that, able though Napoleon was in the Cabinet and on the battlefield, he was far more than an astute diplomatist, a discerning lawgiver, a triumphant warrior, a great Emperor. He was greatest of all as man" (Rose 44). Though Napoleon's defeat in Russia set off the idea that he could be defeated; and eventually led to his overall failure, his name will live on forever in history. Many historians, worldwide, will continue to devote their lives to the study of his reign and books upon books will be dedicated to his name. One may be tempted to view this

fascination with the man as his final success. He yearned to be respected and known all over the world in his time. Though after his death, Napoleon achieved this objective. In essence, he conquered his last front.

Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812

Being an illustrated account of the ill-fated expedition of the Emperor Napoleon's *Grand Armée* into Czar Alexander's Russia in 1812.



The map, based on the 1869 chart by Minard, graphically illustrates (both literally and figuratively) how the size of the French army dwindled during the march into Russia and was reduced to almost nothing on the wretched rout back into Poland. The map can be read in several ways. The size of the peach colored bar indicates the relative strength of the French army during the march on Moscow. The black bar shows the dwindling French army during the retreat. In the lower portion of the map, the temperature in degrees Celsius is shown, along with dates during the retreat.

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