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The Significance of the Russian Campaign of the Napoleonic Wars

The Napoleonic invasion of Russia served as a major turning point in European history as the defeat led to the fall of Napoleon and his French empire in the nineteenth century. After assuming the throne in France, Napoleon Bonaparte sought to pull France out of the revolution and instead expand French territory eastward. Napoleon was successful through many of his initial invasions, but was met with strong resistance as other European nation states grew fearful of France gaining hegemony in Europe and Great Britain led coalitions against France to counter French aggression. Napoleon’s armies marched into Russia in 1812 in an attempt to force Tsar Alexander I to cease trading with Britain. Assuming the encounter would result in an immediate French victory, Napoleon marched his armies into Russian territories only to be met with fierce, unexpected retreats and repeated counterattacks by the Russian Imperial Army that led to a decisive Russian victory. Several critical factors, most significantly the insufficient access to resources, unfamiliar, freezing terrain, and the strategic efforts of the French military leaders, influenced the defeat of Napoleon by the Russians in 1812. The defeat by the Russians marked the beginning of the fall of the French empire leading to the final defeat of the French army at Waterloo in 1815.

In the years prior to Napoleon’s Russian campaign in 1812, the monarch had successfully led his armies in a series of aggressions that resulted in the French conquer of several other nations. Though Napoleon’s armies had taken Poland, Czechoslovakia, Spain, and the regions of
present day Italy and Germany, among other nations, with ease using similar strategies to advance and conquer each state, Napoleon anticipated that the Russian campaign would present the French troops with further difficulties, but was convinced the invasion was necessary to prevent future Russian offensives. Referring to the success of the previous campaigns, Paul Britten Austin states, “unprecedented mobility had always been a condition of Napoleonic blitzkrieg. And therefore the French armies had always lived off the rich lands they had conquered. But the far north was a different matter” and Napoleon’s armies would not be able to count on the same resources in Russia as the armies had acquired from other campaigns.¹

Napoleon recognized the difficulty that the French would face in moving supplies and food across Russia even before the campaign began and considered various methods of transportation, including building a supply train to carry goods to Russia.² While the French army did make some considerations toward setting up a supply line at the start of the campaign, the plans were insufficient to sustain the six month long conflict in foreign territory. Reflecting in his journal, Heinrich Vossler acknowledged the anticipated hardships the French troops could experience during the invasion stating, “Our hopes were high, and though we did not expect to find pots of gold in Russia, we did hope for the best and fastest horses—a cavalryman’s fondest dream—and for food and supplies in abundance. No one gave a thought to the Russian winter; no one had any conception of it. A few reflective spirits, it is true, said ‘wait and see,’ but they preached to deaf ears. Yet what purpose would have been served by robbing us of our rosy expectations? Is it not better for a soldier to go into battle gaily rather than to follow his calling in fear and terror of the direst suffering and privations?” illustrating the French’s inadequate

² Ibid.
preparations for the freezing temperatures and limited access to supplies. Unlike the French, the Russians had unlimited access to supplies and were used to the harsh cold as Russian troops were fighting a defensive war on their own territory. As the war continued, the French could not obtain the necessary amount of supplies needed to efficiently maintain a large army and a shortage of food, weapons, and other goods, as well as uniforms not designed to withstand the cold temperatures, greatly contributed to loss of French troops and Napoleon’s defeat.

While the inability to obtain the necessary supplies and the troops’ presence on a freezing, unfamiliar terrain significantly contributed to the French army’s defeat, Napoleon ultimately lost the war because he was not as strategically strong as the Russian troops commanded by Barclay de Tolly. Addressing the common overestimation of the effects of the weather on the French, Marie-Pierre Ray argues, “often concerned not to ruin the image of Napoleon as a genius at strategy, French historians have had a tendency to incriminate the coldness and harshness of the climate and the extraordinary valor of the Russian troops rather than to pinpoint Napoleon’s errors,” which led to his defeat. Napoleon’s failed strategies and underestimations of the capabilities of the Russian army extended the campaign’s duration, which further exposed French troops to devastating conditions without supplies for long periods of time.

Alexander I and de Tolly did not underestimate the capabilities of the French army during the invasion, which served as a strategic advantage to the Russian armies. Though Napoleon anticipated some difficulties in the advance on Russia, he initiated the attack believing that the military engagement would be brief and the results would easily favor the French. Alexander I

and de Tolly recognized the difficulties the Russian army would face in the initial stages of the confrontation and used the first defeats at the beginning of the conflict as a means of learning and better preparing for future confrontations. When the Grand Armée marched across the Niemen River, Alexander had situated all three Russian armies along the western boarder.5

As the French advanced on the city of Vilnius, a location that would place Napoleon in a strategically favorable position to threaten both Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russian troops destroyed the Vilnius and retreated to protect the two major cities.6 Napoleon established his troops in the city to prepare for the coming advance on Moscow and St. Petersburg, but lost hundreds of soldiers and horses when a harsh snowstorm hit Vilnius.7 The Russians armies repeated the strategy of luring the Grand Armée toward the desired target and then retreating again in Moscow and in Smolensk.8 Though the Russian strategy enabled the French army to defeat several Russian cities during the beginning of the campaign, the French army lost numerous soldiers from exposure to the cold, as well as from the army’s actual advances.

The French military lost thousands of soldiers in the initial advances of the campaign, which contributed to the overall Russian victory and French retreat at the conclusion of the campaign. According to D.C.B. Lieven, “The most basic reason why Russia won this campaign was that the top Russian leadership out-thought Napoleon. In the months before the French invasion, Alexander I and Barclay de Tolly were kept well informed by Russian Intelligence of that huge army that Napoleon was concentrating against them. They also knew that he intended to end the war within a few weeks by a series of crushing battlefield victories. They believed that the French military machine was geared only to this mode of warfare and would have

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
difficulty in sustaining a long struggle. They also believed that Napoleon’s political system would have trouble sustaining a lengthy struggle or the emperor’s long absence from Paris” as French also suffered politically in addition to militarily. The French grew weaker and weaker with the defeat of each Russian city in the early stages of the campaign.

The Campaign of 1812 ended with the Battle and Burning of Moscow, which took place from September to October of 1812. As described by Hilaire Belloc, the Russian army enabled France to easily take the city as, “there was no challenger at the gate, not even a watchmen left. The small stone offices which flanked the entry upon either side were empty. No loiterer stood with his fellows in the street to see the foreigners come in; and though one could look for more than a mile uninterruptedly down the broad, unkempt way into the heart of the city, there was not a soul to be seen,” and the Grand Armée advanced on Moscow. France held Moscow for several weeks until a fire broke out in October destroying the city. Belloc addresses the significance of the fire asserting, “one might tell nothing beyond the story of all that fire for it is indeed the core and sole decision of that campaign,” as the French armies retreated from Russia after the outbreak of the fire in Moscow. Though Napoleon ultimately achieved his initiative in capturing Moscow, the French troops were forced to retreat as the Grand Armée had been left in such a weakened state that the French could not continue the fight. The destruction of Moscow further illustrated that the French were in no position to continue the offensive against the Russians.


10 Hilaire Belloc, “XII,” The Campaign of 1812 and the Retreat from Moscow, (London, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1924), Print, 121.

The retreat of the French troops from Russia after the failed campaign of 1812 signaled to other European nations the beginning of the collapse of Napoleon’s empire. Recalling the retreat of Napoleon’s armies, Nadezhda Durova, who served in the Russian cavalry during the 1812 campaign stated, “There is nothing remarkable about this march of ours except the reason for it: Napoleon somehow disappeared from the island which the allied monarchs deemed fit to hold, along with the man himself, his plans, objectives, and dreams, his talents as a great military leader, and his wide-ranging genius” as the defeat greatly weakened France’s standing in Europe.12

Even after the fall of Napoleon in 1814 and the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, global attitudes toward the French empire were not favorable, particularly in Europe. The defeat of Napoleon’s armies by the Russians and fall of the French empire became a significant cultural influence in Europe, particularly in Britain and Russia. An 1815 cartoon called Louis XVIII climbing the Mat de Cocagne drawn by British caricaturist George Cruikshank depicts Napoleon Bonaparte’s successor, Louis XVIII, reaching for a crown on top of a pole called the Mat de Cocagne and being held up by various European leaders and French officers.13 At the base of the pole are sacks labeled “English Subsidies” and the people surrounding the king and his assistants are gossiping about his inability to grasp the crown.14 In the right corner of the cartoon, a town is burning to the ground while people holding crucifixes attack each other. In the left corner is a small figure of Napoleon Bonaparte standing on an island and saying, “I climbed

14 Ibid.
up twice without any help.”\textsuperscript{15} The cartoon portrays Louis XVIII as an inadequate leader unable to assert his role as king in France and reliant upon the financial assistance of England. Cruikshank’s illustration satirically demonstrates the post-Napoleonic perceptions of France as a diminishing European power, both politically and economically.

Though Russia suffered from heavily losses and destroyed infrastructure during the campaign, Russian artists celebrated the defeat of the French and fall of Napoleon after the Grand Armée’s retreat. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s “1812 Overture” is one of the most notable displays of Russian patriotism in the years following the defeat of Napoleon.\textsuperscript{16} The fifteen minute long symphony features the heavy, majestic drumbeats and cymbal crashes to a fast tempo, positive sounding major rather than minor chords, and the sounds of cannon fire. The work simulates the 1812 invasion of Russia by the French and the successful defense of the motherland by Russian armies. Tchaikovsky’s work celebrates not only the success of the Russian defense, but also the failure of the French defense and collapse of Napoleon’s empire. The “1812 Overture” further illustrates how many European nations perceived France after the Napoleonic Wars.

The Napoleonic French Empire was one of the most significant global powers during the nineteenth century. Many nations affected by the Napoleonic Wars could not resist the French invasions and were defeated and absorbed into the empire. The surprise defeat of the Grand Armée during the 1812 Russian campaign served as a major turning point in the Napoleonic Wars as French army and political system was severely weakened after the invasion. Napoleon continued to spread his armies throughout Europe well into 1815, but many of his advances following the Russian invasion were unsuccessful. The Russian victory during the 1812 French

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
invasion destroyed France’s opportunities toward further imperialistic expansion and drastically changed the course of nineteenth century European history.
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