

Chaos and Cossacks, Two Fatal Vendettas:
The Invasions of Russia in 1708 and 1812

By

Samuel Hollander

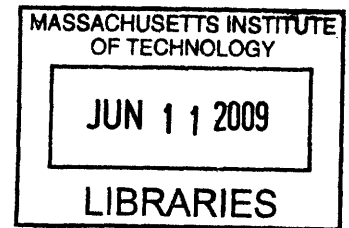
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Chaos and Cossacks, Two Fatal Vendettas: The Invasions of Russia in 1708 and 1812



Chapter 1: Introduction

There were two invasions of Russia by foreign powers in the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Charles XII of Sweden entered Russia in 1708 and was destroyed in battle outside Poltava in 1709. Napoleon invaded in 1812 and was back in France before the end of that year, having suffered defeat and having lost all but a few remnants of the once-proud Grand Army. Both of these men were at the height of their power and feared by their enemies up to the time of their attacks against Russia. However, the Duke of Wellington understood the way of conquerors and commented on their fate. "A conqueror is like a cannon-ball. He cannot stop of his own accord. He must go on until he runs down or hits something."¹ These men captured the imagination of their European contemporaries. Voltaire would later describe this attention:

Conquerors are a species between good Kings and Tyrants, but partake most of the latter, and have a glaring reputation. We are eager to know the most minute circumstances of their lives. Such is the ... weakness of mankind, that they look with admiration upon persons glorious for mischief, and are better pleased to be talking of the destroyer, than the founder of an Empire.²

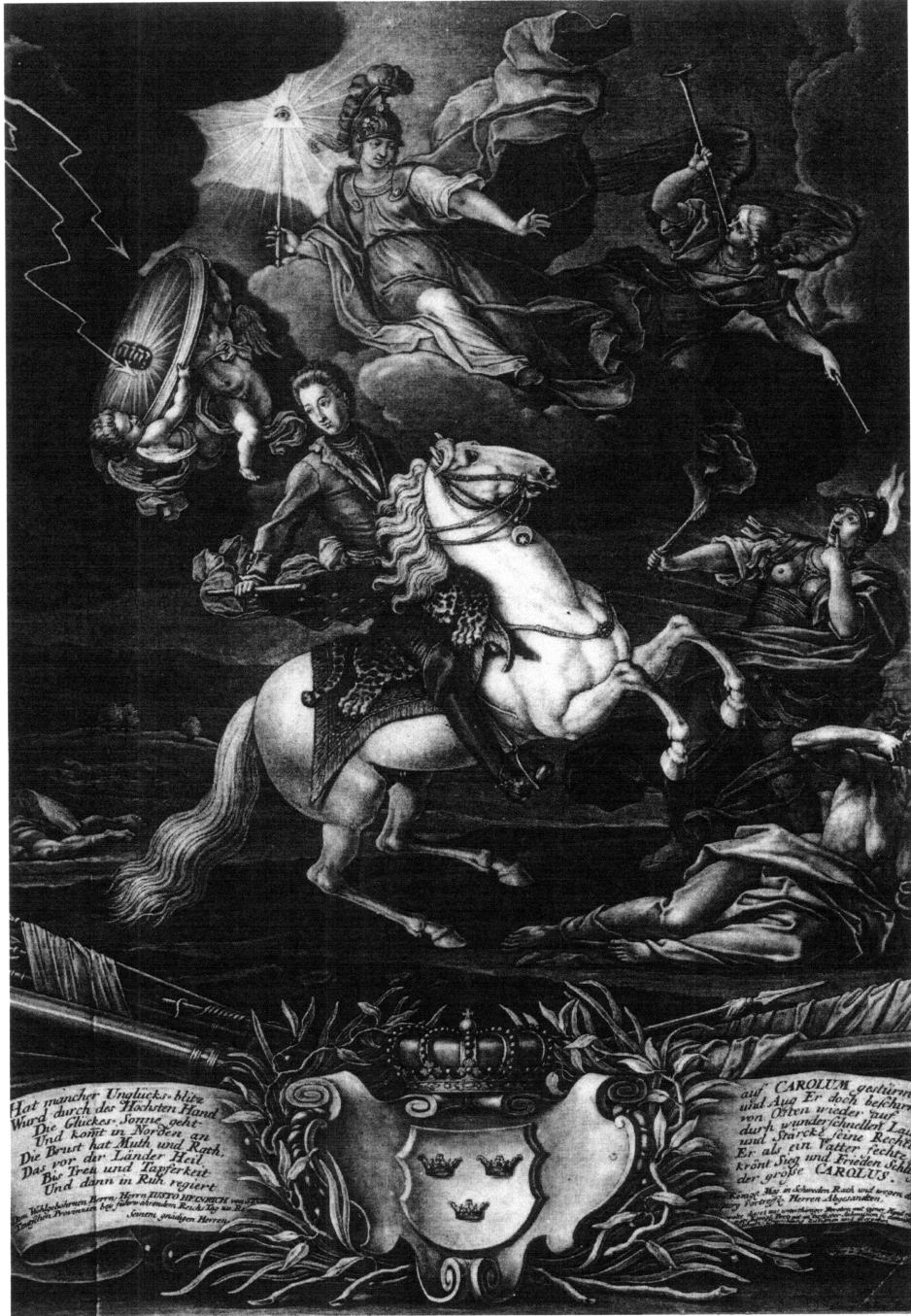
Charles XII and Napoleon were both the preeminent generals of their age. But unlike the French emperor, Charles is a relatively unknown figure today. He was the last of the Northern Vikings, the last Nordic warrior king to lead his men into battle, and a halo still surrounds his memory. Never was a man more thoroughly suited to inspire Swedish troops than Charles XII. Noble, just, self-denying, and brave, he seemed to them almost a supernatural being. Every victory he won made his soldiers more confident in him. Every danger he shared with them spurred them on to further exertions. Every age

¹ Alistair Horne, *How Far from Austerlitz?* (NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998) xxvi.

² M. De. Voltaire, *The History of Charles XII: King of Sweden. A Late Translation from the Best Paris Edition.* (Morpeth, England: 1808) xiv.

has its own heroes, men who embody the prevailing characteristics of their epoch.

Charles was that man while he lived at the start of the eighteenth century. (See Figure 1)



3

Figure 1 is a late 18th century relief that shows Charles XII as the hero and conqueror of Europe.

³ National Library of Sweden, King Charles XII Archive. Regarding my primary sources from the Library of Sweden, while conducting my research, I forgot to note some of the particulars of each source.

The very mention of his name and exploits still causes the heart of every Swede to beat quicker. It is a name renowned throughout his world, and associated with a career so extraordinary, that both the man and the career have formed a subject of greatly varied criticism. Perhaps his great descendant, King Gustavus III, summed up the life of Charles most accurately:

Charles XII was rather extraordinary than great. He certainly had not the true conquering temperament which simply aims at acquisition of territory. Charles took dominions with one hand only to give them away with the other. Superior to Alexander, with whom it were [sic] an injustice to compare him, he was as much inferior to his rival Peter in the qualities which make a great ruler, as he excelled him in those qualities which go to make a great hero.⁴

Unfortunately for Sweden, Charles was also ideally placed in history to demonstrate the fragility of her empire; much as Napoleon would doom the French empire a hundred years later with his own ambitions.

Military Revolution

Each of the past three centuries has made its own contribution to the art of war. All three of them have also witnessed an invasion of Russia. So why should we compare the Russian campaigns of Charles and Napoleon, while ignoring Hitler's own invasion of the steppes just over a century after Napoleon's failure? To try to contrast the battles and wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to those of the twentieth is a hugely difficult task. The underlying principles of war remain the same, but the methods and the resources employed were vastly different.

The eighteenth century formalized war and its principles. Wars of this century were accepted as an ordinary facet of human existence. They were conducted by small

⁴ R. Nisbet Bain, *Charles XII and the Collapse of the Swedish Empire: 1682-1719* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1902) 314.

professional armies, whose leaders saw each other as honorable equals.⁵ For the most part, there was a finite campaigning season in the summer, at the end of which both sides retired into winter quarters. Fortresses were of prime importance and open battles were infrequent and actively avoided. Charles XII, uniquely, often deviated from the customary campaigning schedule and the traditional reliance on fortresses. There was, however, good reason for this usual abstention from battle, for the professional armies of that day were the very expensive personal possessions of their countries' rulers. Battles, when they came, were no light affairs, with casualty rates as high, or higher, than the battles of succeeding centuries. Eighteenth-century warfare placed much importance on maneuver and fortifications.

This formal and limited method of warfare was swept away by the vast armies of the French Revolution, when mass levies replaced the old principles of professionalism. The early armies of the Revolution were large and untested, often carried to victory only by their enthusiasm, dedication to the new Republic, and hatred of the invading monarchies. Napoleon swiftly brought about an end to the old age of warfare. Like Charles, he placed no confidence in fortresses, preferring to maximize his freedom of movement and mobility by ordering his armies to live off the land. He sought rather than avoided pitched battles. He enhanced the importance of the roles of cavalry and artillery by breaking away from the eighteenth-century practice of using them primarily in close support of the infantry. Carl von Clausewitz would later describe this new form of warfare:

The people became a participant in war; instead of governments and armies as heretofore, the full weight of the nation was thrown into the balance. The

⁵ David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007) 5.

resources and efforts now available for use surpassed all conventional limits...This juggernaut of war [was] based on the strength of an entire people...War, untrammled by any conventional restraints, had broken loose in all its elemental fury. This was due to the peoples' new share in these great affairs of state; and their participation, in turn, resulted partly from the impact that the Revolution had on the internal conditions of every state and partly from the danger that France posed to everyone.⁶

The next century would see even greater changes to war.

The introduction of rifles and machine guns marked the ascension of infantry over cavalry forces. The First World War restored artillery to its dominant role, and defensive warfare again became prominent. All of this changed, and the pattern of twentieth-century warfare was established, with the British invention of the tank. These armored fighting vehicles brought mobility back to war. By the time that tanks came to dominate the battlefield, the methods of war had moved a long way from those of the slow-moving Swedish infantry or the tactical arms of Murat's cavalry. Hitler's invasion of Russia is also distinguished in two further aspects. The very size and mobility of his forces allowed for him to attempt conquest of Leningrad, Moscow, and the Ukraine simultaneously. In addition, the contrast is great between the personally-led armies of the King-Generals Charles and Napoleon and the vast network of authority that was required to direct the Wehrmacht of 1941. The obvious comparison lies between the first two invasions.

The Two Capitals

Charles and Napoleon started their invasions of Russia confident of success. They both despised and underrated their Russian enemies. There seemed to be little reason for

⁶ Carl Von Clausewitz, as quoted in Blaufarb, 119-120. Carl Von Clausewitz (1780-1831) was a Prussian soldier, military historian, and military theorist. He is most famous for his definitive military treatise *Vom Kriege* (in English, *On War*), based on his experiences during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.

them to recognize this common blunder. Charles, with only 8,000 men, had defeated a Russian army of 40,000 at Narva in 1700. With his almost nonexistent intelligence corps, he had no way of knowing that Peter the Great had spent the intervening years transforming a poorly-armed rabble into a modern disciplined army. Napoleon had easily triumphed over the Russians at Austerlitz in 1805 and at Friedland in 1807. It was also more comfortable to remember Eylau in 1806 as another victory, because the Russians had retired from the field at the end of the day, rather than the bloody escape and near-defeat that it had really been. He gave the following opinion of Czar Alexander's military genius:

It is his foible to believe himself skilled in the art of war, and he likes nothing so well as to be complimented upon it, although every thing that originated with himself relative to military operations was ill-judged and absurd.⁷

Neither Charles nor Napoleon was foolish enough to fail to recognize the military problems presented by the vast distances or the harsh climate of Russia. But they discounted them, assuming that it would be possible to bring the Russians to battle quickly. A swift and early victory should have ensured an end to a short campaign and a favorable treaty.

Both men dreamed of dictating peace terms from Moscow. And yet, of all European cities, this Russian capital offers the least profit to a conqueror. The Russian government can be transferred to St. Petersburg (already a capital and official residence of the czar). And in the event of disaster, there are always the vast spaces east of the cities into which no general would dare follow. Charles and Napoleon both refused to acknowledge these limitations to their plans and chose to hinge their invasions on the capture of Moscow. Charles XII never even got close to Moscow. Even if he had, Peter

⁷ O'Meara.

would have easily moved his government to the new capital of St. Petersburg. Napoleon did, in fact, reach and hold Moscow, though it did him little good. The Russian army simply withdrew to a position outside the city from which it could both protect St. Petersburg and harass his return to France.

It seems obvious (but deserves mention) that for every mile that the Russians retire eastward, their communications shorten, while the same miles cause the communication lines of the invaders to lengthen intolerably. In addition, during the extended retreat, the Russians pull back through friendly country, where they can be relatively certain of supplies and information from the local inhabitants. The invaders, on the other hand, are forced to follow through hostile and often devastated country, enduring Russian scorched-earth policies and partisan warfare. On top of these issues for any invader, there is always the Russian climate.

Napoleon decided to place the blame primarily on this last factor. When asked to what he principally attributed the failure of his expedition, he replied:

To the cold, the premature cold, and the burning of Moscow. I was a few days too late-I had made a calculation of the weather for fifty years before, and the extreme cold had never commenced until about the 20th of December, twenty days later than it began this time. While I was at Moscow, the cold was at three of the thermometer, and was such as the French could with pleasure bear; but on the march, the thermometer sunk eighteen degrees, and consequently nearly all the horses perished. In one night I lost thirty thousand. Had it not been for that fire at Moscow, I should have succeeded. I would have wintered there. There were in that city about forty thousand citizens who were in a manner slaves. For you must know that the Russian nobility keep their vassals in a sort of slavery. I would have proclaimed liberty to all the slaves in Russia, and abolished vassalage and nobility. This would have procured me the union of an immense and a powerful party. I would either have made a peace at Moscow, or else I would have marched the next year to Petersburg. Alexander was assured of it, and sent his diamonds, valuables, and ships to England. Had it not been for that fire, I should have succeeded in every thing.⁸

⁸ Barry E. O'Meara, *Napoleon in Exile; Or, A Voice from St. Helena: The Opinions and Reflections of Napoleon on the Most Important Events of his Life and Government, In his Own Words* (London: 1822)

Napoleon almost certainly exaggerated the effect that freeing the serfs would have had on his campaign, though his very statement makes the observer wonder why he did not free the Russian peasants on his way to Moscow. Even if he had done so, either prior to or during his stay in the largest Russian city, victory would have been as far from – or farther – from his grasp. For Alexander would have been embroiled in a servile war, unwilling and unable to make peace with Napoleon, not to mention resume an alliance with France. He would have placed further distance between himself and the numerous monarchical governments of his European "allies." Even with this trump card, Napoleon's campaign would not have been successful.

There were three major themes in common between the failures of Charles and Napoleon. First, both men neglected the overall strategic considerations surrounding their empires before they set out on the Russian invasions. Next, although downplayed in Western sources, the quality, resolve, and tactics of Russian soldiers and leaders were up to the task of defending the homeland against attack. Finally, Charles and Napoleon both committed serious tactical and strategic blunders during their campaigns that contributed directly to their defeats.

Chapter 2: Charles XII, Lion of the North

In early 1708, Charles XII of Sweden led the first major attempt to invade and conquer Russia from the west since the sixteenth century⁹. During the previous decade, Charles had been trying to maintain and even expand Swedish dominance of the Baltic coastlines. He faced an aggressive alliance between Denmark, Poland, and Russia. Charles took the offensive and was able to defeat the first two members of this triumvirate by 1707. Although the king was only 26, he was an effective tactician, personally leading a well-equipped and organized army (handed down by his father) in many battles. Given a battle, Charles was able to lead his army to victory in almost any situation. However, the Swedish leader was not an especially skilled strategist, preferring to act on bold impulse rather than premeditated planning. He embarked on this campaign with no clear plan except to defeat the Russians in a decisive battle and, having occupied Moscow, force the empire to surrender. So instead of focusing his campaign on the Baltic coast, which was closer to home and much more easily supplied by sea, Charles marched inland with the intent to find, pursue, and defeat the army of his rival Czar Peter, and then occupy his capital.

By the middle of the sun-bleached summer of 1709 the war had already been raging for nine long years. But all the signs pointed to a final decisive engagement. Two great armies, one Swedish and one Russian, were deployed around the little Ukrainian town of Poltava. They were now poised to strike. For months, troops from both sides had been scattered over the steppes, jockeying for position and access to supplies. Now

⁹ Russia was successfully conquered by the Mongols, who had invaded from the East, during the first half of the thirteenth century. The Teutonic Knights were defeated during their own invasion from the west in 1240. A combined Polish and Swedish campaign at the end of the 16th century successfully capture Moscow.

Poltava was besieged by the Swedish army and the Russians had arrived with their czar to lift that siege. The battle that would define Eastern and Northern Europe for centuries was about to take place.

Deep in the heart of the Ukraine stood Charles XII, King of Sweden, with his army, thousands of miles from his homeland. How did this situation come about? In order to understand fully the Russian invasion of Charles XII – and its failure – we first need some account of the background of the Great Northern War and the very existence of Sweden as an imperial power.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Swedish Empire had already existed for over 150 years. Its foundation can be traced back to the collapse of the Order of Teutonic Knights in 1525. The regional powers of Denmark, Poland, and Russia were quick to exploit the political vacuum. When the Swedish crown was approached with appeals for assistance from the Baltic trading centers, Sweden joined the scramble for power.¹⁰ A long succession of wars followed, fought between the four powers. Short periods of peace intervened, but never lasted long. Fortunately for Sweden, most of the northern wars of the following one hundred years favored her, and one piece of land after another was added to the new empire.

By 1661, Sweden had concluded peace treaties with Poland, Denmark and Russia. The expansionary period was over and the newly added territories were substantial. Poland had been forced to relinquish Livonia. From Denmark, Sweden had gained several islands and Skane in mainland Sweden. Russia lost Ingria, shutting it off from the

¹⁰ Peter Englund, *The Battle That Shook Europe: Poltava and the Birth of the Russian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2003) 29.

Baltic¹¹. Sweden also made gains throughout northern Germany. Her neighbors had noticed their losses and were not prepared to accept them in passive silence.

The Danes hoped to break the Swedish hegemony that seemed to be encircling them and win back their lost provinces. Poland, too, planned to begin a reconquest of lost territories. The new ruler, crowned in 1697, Frederick Augustus II, Elector of Saxony, had to swear an oath containing a clause that required him to regain the country's lost possessions.¹² In Russia, plans for revenge were just as real. Their main goal was to regain Ingria since its loss had excluded Russia from the Baltic. Access to warm water ports was a matter of life or death to the expanding Russian empire. Following their failure to secure maritime passage in the Black Sea by force of arms, Russian eyes turned to the Baltic ports and Sweden's provinces there.

Northern Europe was ready to explode in war. It waited only for the spark, which arrived in the spring of 1697. On Easter Day, Charles XI died, leaving his teenage son Charles XII to assume the crown. Secret negotiations began between Denmark, Poland, and Russia. By September of 1699 a secret treaty had been concluded in Dresden between the three powers. The rulers united in their intention of making a joint attack on Sweden, set for January or February of the next year.

The allies did not expect a long war. The military odds seemed to be entirely in their favor, and they expected to exploit anti-Swedish feelings in the Baltic provinces. But ranged against them was a greater military commander than any of them could have guessed. A short history of Charles XII is necessary for an understanding of his Russian invasion.

¹¹ Englund., 30.

¹² Englund., 35.

Absolutum Dominium

Sweden's Baltic empire, which reached its peak by the end of 17th century, had been built up by bold kings leading small, but well-disciplined, armies accustomed to living off of enemy territories, starting with those of Gustavus Adolphus in the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). (See Figure 2)

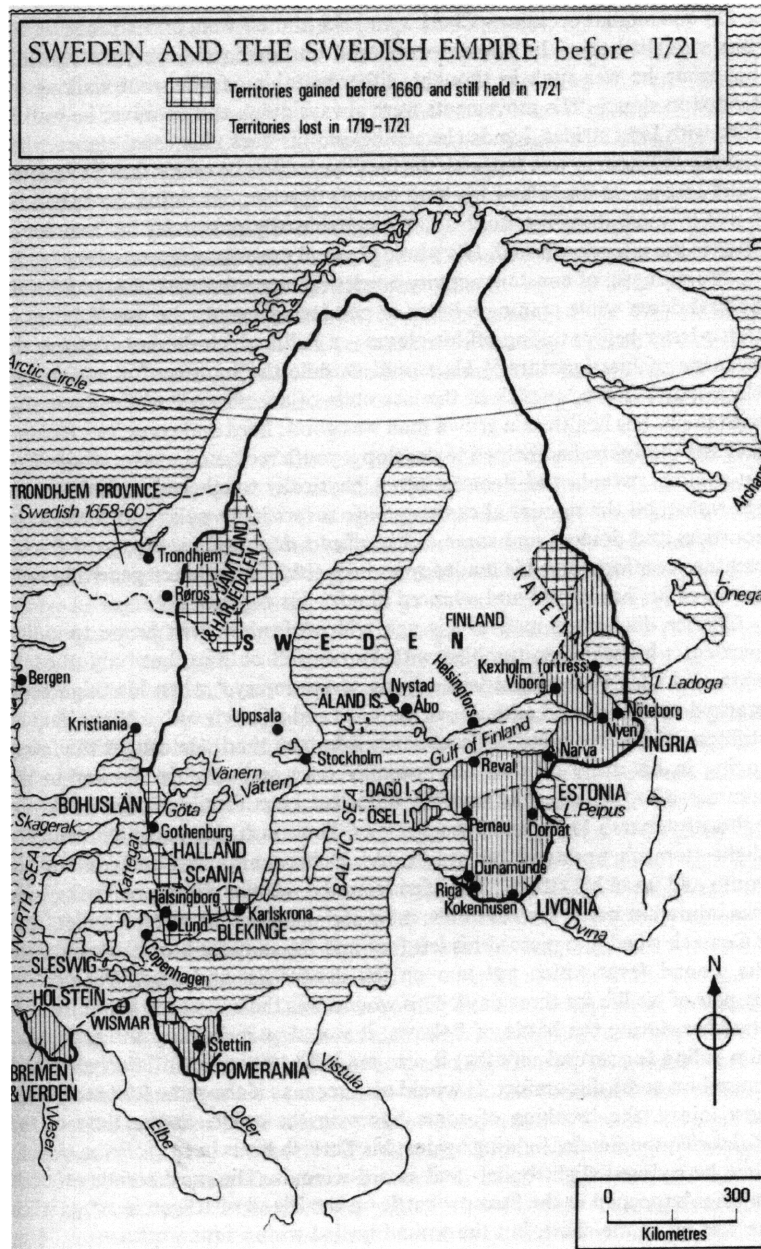


Figure 2 maps the layout of the Swedish empire at its height.

¹³ Ragnhild Marie Hatton, *Charles XII of Sweden* (London: Littlehampton Book Services Ltd., 1968) 7.

Sweden, with its tiny population, was too poor to maintain a powerful standing army or navy of any size from her own resources. Even the port tolls from the Baltic provinces were disappointing in their yield. Because of this, Sweden found it easier to conquer territories than to actually hold them down. While on campaign, Sweden's armies were able to thrive on the resources of her enemies. When at peace, the armies returned to their farms. Her power was great only while she was at war and only while she remained undefeated. Any defeat in the field left her possessions on the Baltic shores untenable.

This precarious situation was demonstrated by the meteoric career of Charles XII (1682-1718). Charles ascended to the throne upon the death of his father, Charles XI, in 1697. He spent almost all of his twenty-one year reign at war. Discontented with Sweden's dominance in the Baltic, a coalition of Russian, Denmark, and Poland set out to dismember the adolescent king's empire. However, they had not bargained on the military vigor of the new king, who was able to knock the Danes out of the war and destroy a Russian army at Narva in the first year of the conflict, 1700. Following a series of campaigns in Poland, Charles was able to place his own candidate on the Polish throne. He then turned on Russia, where his army was ultimately destroyed at Poltava, after which he escaped into exile in Turkey until 1714. During his absence, the northern coalition reformed and quickly deprived Sweden of her Baltic territories. The Swedish power had been toppled after one major defeat.

When Charles XII of Sweden set out to reach Moscow and destroy the power of Peter the Great in 1708, he was still just twenty-six years old. Even at that age, he had acquired a reputation across Europe as a soldier.¹⁴ He already had seven years of active

¹⁴ William Doyle, *The Old European Order: 1660-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 276-277.

campaigning behind him that included many major victories and no serious defeats. All of his victories had been won through hard fighting, in which Charles had taken the fullest share as his own general of infantry. And yet for all his courage and experience in leading the charge, Charles was lacking in any formal military training.

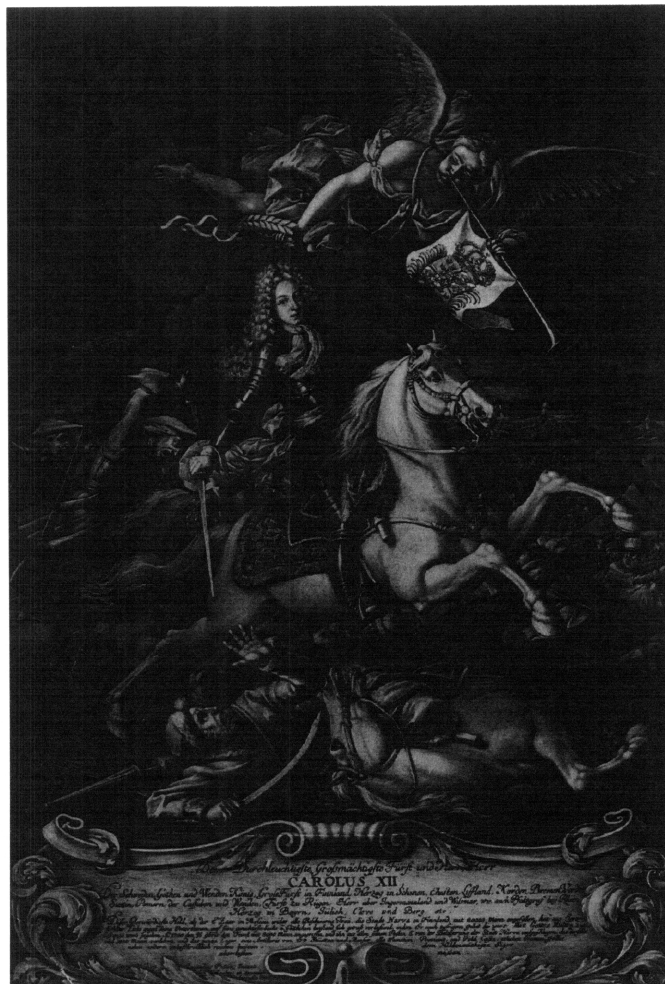
Frederick the Great, who spent his youth serving as a junior officer in armies throughout Europe, would later say of Charles's lack of training: "It is requisite that the warrior should begin his career under the guide of a great captain or be taught the principles of his trade at much experience and peril, and after having received many lessons."¹⁵ Frederick would observe that Charles, on the other hand, "first saw the enemy when he first saw himself at the head of his forces...His genius was not resplendent with acquired knowledge but his mind bore the stamp of audacity to excess and fortitude not to be shaken so that it was capable of forming the greatest resolutions...The firmness with which he opposed misfortunes, his indefatigable activity in all his enterprises and a heroic courage which was blind to danger, were the characteristic traits of this extraordinary monarch."¹⁶ These characteristics would have made his armies invincible in an earlier age of warfare. Unfortunately for Charles, however, the discovery of gunpowder marked an utter transformation of the art of war. No longer was personal strength and bravery able to guarantee a general victory. Instead, strategy (often based on experience) was the key to battles in the eighteenth century. Instead of the prowess of the individual soldiers, it was the understanding of the general that carried the most influence

¹⁵ Leonard Cooper, *Many Roads to Moscow: Three Historic Invasions* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1968) 10. As King of Prussia, Frederick (1712-1786) earned the title "Great" by demonstrating his tactical and strategic ability. Although no great conqueror or emperor, he proved his military genius by resisting the combined military forces of France, Austria, Saxony, Russia, and Sweden. His rule and Prussia's victory during the Seven Years' War marked the rise of Prussia as a European power.

¹⁶ Cooper, 11.

on the consequences of the campaign. Charles owed everything to his natural traits rather than an acquired skill. He bore the stamp of audacity and fortitude almost to an excess. But when his actions are examined in light of this lack of training, they become even greater.

All contemporary historians and accounts bear witness to Charles's exceptional courage. (See Figure 3) He was his own general of infantry, which he interpreted to mean their leader in hand-to-hand battle rather than the author and director of their tactics. Up until his departure for Russia, all had gone well for Charles. His fortitude and good luck had been enough to sweep aside all in his path.



17

Figure 3 shows an engraving made in Germany during the Great Northern War. Charles was viewed as an invincible general, trampling the eastern hordes at the head of his army.

¹⁷ National Library of Sweden. King Charles XII Archive.

Denmark and Poland had both been knocked out of the war. Even Saxony, the external power base of Augustus II, had been defeated and occupied. After his successes, Charles did actually seek peace with Russia. One chamberlain to the king later described Charles's state of mind at the time.

When the late Charles XII was in Saxony, he would have been very glad to have made a Peace with the Czar, if that Prince had been then inclined to conclude such a one, as in a Conjunction so glorious for Sweden, might have been the least reasonable. It is true that the Czar did offer one; but the Condition *sine qua non*, was not relished by the King, his Enemy absolutely resolving to keep the Port of Petersburg on the Baltick Sea, which could not be yielded to him without entirely overturning the whole System of our Politicks. Charles XII who saw himself at the Head of the finest and the most warlike Army that perhaps ever was, elated with his great Successes, and in no Humour to have Conditions prescribed to him, departed from Saxony, to impose reasonable ones on his formidable Enemy, and such as might for the future secure the Repose of the North, but especially to shut up the Russians within their ancient Bounds.¹⁸

However, he would meet with defeat and disaster on the plains of the Ukraine. Voltaire would later speak of the failed invasion of Charles XII.

Certainly there is no Sovereign who by the study of the History of Charles XII ought not to be cured of the madness of conquering; for where is the sovereign who can say, I have greater courage, more virtues, more resolution, more strength of body, greater skill in war, or better troops than Charles XII. If with all these favourable circumstances, and after so many victories, he were so unfortunate, what may other Princes expect, who shall have as much ambition, with less talent and fewer resources?¹⁹

Nemesis

The man who would ultimately defeat Charles traveled an unlikely road to power. (See Figure 4.) Peter the Great (1672-1725) was born to the second wife of Czar Alexis I, the youngest of three brothers. When Alexis died in 1676, both of Peter's half-brothers

¹⁸ M. Gustavus Adlerfeld, *The Genuine History of Charles XII, King of Sweden: Containing all his Military Actions; with a More Particular Account of the Battle of Pultowa, and of His Majesty's Retreat to Bender in Turkey, than was ever yet published* (Stockholm: 1744) 27.

¹⁹ Voltaire, xvi.

held power before he was able to become czar himself. In the end, they both died of natural causes, and Peter proclaimed himself the sole ruler of Russia in 1696.²⁰ The accession of Peter I marked a new phase in the country's history. An enormous undertaking had begun, with the aim of transforming Russia from an isolated and backward nation into a modern European state.



Figure 4 shows nineteenth-century portraits of Charles XII (by Alex Sparre, 1712) and Peter the Great (by Paul Delaroche), on the left and the right, respectively, who were great rivals for Baltic supremacy. Charles enjoyed early success, but Peter eventually defeated the Swedish king. Even in victory, however, Peter attributed much of his good fortune to lessons learned fighting Charles. At the end of the Battle of Poltava, Peter is said to have searched the prisoners, repeatedly asking, "Where is my brother Charles?"

Peter transformed the Russian military by ending the feudalistic scheme that had relied on amateur noblemen to lead the armies. He replaced this system with one that relied on contemporary notions of merit. "He wrought out of Russia a real metamorphosis, a transformation," wrote Petr Pavlovich Shafirov, Vice-Chancellor to

²⁰ Eugenio V Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress through Coercion in Russia* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993) 28-31.

²¹ Left, Alex Sparre, 1712. Right, Paul Delaroche.

Peter the Great, of his czar.²² The changes started after Russia's defeat at Narva in 1700. Although the outcome of the battle surprised no one at the time, all of Europe (including Charles) made the mistake of underestimating the persistence of Peter. He hired hundreds of officers from the rest of Europe to train his army in modern tactics and discipline. In fact, during his exile in Turkey, Charles remarked that "The power of Muscovy...has risen so high thanks to the introduction of foreign military discipline."²³ This opinion, however, should be viewed in light of the fact that Charles would not have relished admitting defeat against the Russians themselves.

The greatest shifts were in the cultural sphere. Recognizing that the problem with Russia's armed forces was that it had relied on the traditional military elite long after that group had ceased functioning as an effective officer and fighting corps, Peter instituted a new system that focused largely on merit as the road to promotion. There was much resistance to his reforms, especially from groups such as the Cossacks who saw their privileges being threatened by the changes. But by the end of the Great Northern War, Russia, with its modernized army and its long sought-after "window to the west" at St. Petersburg, had forced Europe's diplomatic community to take notice.

War Cannot Feed Itself

By the time that Charles actually invaded Russia in 1708, he had already defeated the armies of his three enemies on multiple battlefields. What was it about the Swedish army (and Charles) that allowed the poorest of the four nations to consistently defeat the others in battle? The Swedish army of the early eighteenth century was often regarded as

²² P. P. Shafirov, *A Discourse Concerning the Just Causes of the War between Sweden and Russia: 1700-1721* (Dobbs Ferry: 1973) 250.

²³ Doyle, 278.

a modern western force, and yet it did not fight as western armies were supposed to fight. Warfare of the period was designed around firepower and fortifications. Professional armies were the most expensive possessions of European rulers. Consequently, battles were few and far between. The preferred method of warfare consisted largely of marching, maneuver, and extended sieges. Technological advances such as the replacement of the matchlock with the flintlock (c. 1650), the introduction of the bayonet (which enabled armies to dispense with pikemen, c. 1670), and the increased discipline of new regular armies ensured that gunpowder played a more important role than ever.

But Charles refused to follow fashion. Although flintlocks and bayonets (the Swedish bayonet was, in fact, better fixed and superior to most western versions) were standard issue in Swedish armies, he retained the pike. Pikemen made up about one third of each battalion. Each Swedish infantryman was armed with a sword. Charles had a healthy contempt for firepower and placed much greater trust in the killing power of cold steel. Swedish infantry regulations of the time played down the role of firepower and stressed the importance of infantry attack at the double. Salvos were to be delivered as close as possible to the enemy, and attacks were to be pressed home with maximum vigor.²⁴ At Holowcyzn in July 1708, "the King himself went from one battalion to another...ordering them above all things, instead of firing, to use their pikes, their bayonets and their swords."²⁵

It was not that Charles failed to appreciate the importance and potential of firepower. Swedish artillery and musket technology remained the equal of any in Europe and he was capable of using them effectively when he felt it was appropriate. But Charles

²⁴ Robert Frost, *The Northern Wars: 1558-1721* (Singapore: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) 273-275.

²⁵ Gustavus Adlerfeld, *The Military History of Charles XII, 3 volumes* (Stockholm: 1740) 26.

judged weapons in terms of efficiency, not fashion. Flintlocks were better than matchlocks, but their rate of fire was still slow and their reliability was uncertain. Strategy at the time, therefore, tended to emphasize the defensive. Charles, on the other hand, believed in the power of movement and a seizure of the initiative, and downplayed the role of musket and field artillery as a result. According to Charles, even if cavalry was no longer capable of breaking ordered formations of infantry, a disciplined, aggressive charge by well-drilled, motivated infantry with high morale could achieve what cavalry could not. The battle of Fraustadt, in February of 1706, exemplified this. Most of the Swedish infantry did not even bother to fire a volley as it attacked, supported by pikemen, plunging into the Saxon ranks with swords, pikes, and bayonets.²⁶

Swedish success was not dependent upon infantry alone. Cavalry still played a central role on the battlefield, protecting flanks and preventing envelopment by the enemy. On the Swedish battlefield, mounted on powerful and robust horses, cavalrymen were direct and devastating. According to the regulations of Charles, they were to charge with sword in hand, and never to "caracolle or use his carbine or pistol" in preference to his sword.²⁷ Swedish cavalry was always instructed to charge in wedge formation at the gallop. The victorious results of these aggressive tactics played a vital role in their continued success, as they ensured that the morale of the army remained high.

The nature of the Swedish economy almost necessitated that her armies fight in such an aggressive nature. Even with the reforms of Charles XI, Sweden faced a familiar set of problems in maintaining its army. Once it mobilized its army, it was forced to carry the war into enemy territory. Sweden's wars could only be sustained by fighting abroad.

²⁶ Frost, 274-275.

²⁷ Frost, 275.

Supplies, for the most part, were not to be expected from the home front. The Swedes became very good at foraging through the countryside of occupied areas. However, there was a price to pay for this efficiency. Although marauding and looting were officially punished by the military authorities, there is little reason to assume that discipline was rigorously enforced. In fact, Charles was often forced to rebuke his army, as we can see in excerpts from an official bulletin from September of 1706:

I. No soldier shall attempt to exact anything in his quarters, without paying immediately for what he receives, excepting forage, which is not to be paid for; and we order our officers to take care that no village or any inhabitant be charged above his quota.

IX. Every one is strictly charged to forbear beating his host or domesticks, or doing them any kind of injury; much less may they rob or pillage in the publick and private roads, in the streets or inns of the towns and villages, or commit any other violence whatever.

XI. The officers and soldiers are to take particular care not to set fire to their quarters; all the mischief which shall arise thence will be placed to their account, and they will be forced to answer it.

Lastly, it is our pleasure that those who have any command in our troops, do not only pay an exact obedience themselves to this ordinance, but farther, that they are vigilant in obliging the soldiers and those who are under them, to live regularly, and observe punctually, what we have here prescribed to them, on pain of incurring our displeasure, the delinquents having nothing to expect but a speedy and exemplary punishment. In witness whereof we have signed these presents with our hand, and have thereunto put our royal seal.²⁸

This would come to doom the Swedish war efforts in Poland. Even in pro-Swedish areas, the very efficiency of the collections provoked hostile reactions from the local subjects.²⁹

Sweden's aggressive strategy was not based solely on the personal courage of Charles or the supply necessities of a poor state. Demographics, too, were against the Swedes. Charles XII could not afford to waste time on long drawn-out sieges or defensive-minded maneuvers. Time was always against Sweden, with each passing day

²⁸ Adlerfeld, 167.

²⁹ Frost, 282.

making it possible for her enemies to mobilize larger forces. The problem was multiplied by the fact that most operations occurred far from the recruiting centers of Sweden. Confident of the superiority of his army, Charles actively sought battle. His forces were too small to scatter in garrisons. It was against this veteran force that the coalition of Northern Europe would have to fight in order to separate Sweden from her empire.

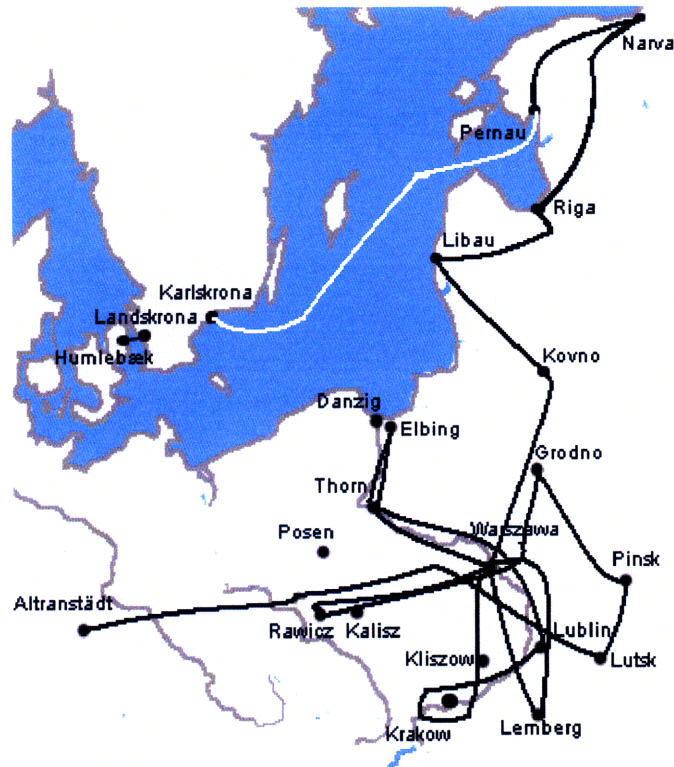


Figure 5 shows the campaigns of Charles against Denmark, Russia, and Poland-Saxony, prior to the invasion of Russia. (1700-1707)

A Surprise Beginning

The Great Northern War started in an unexpected manner. By the time Peter declared war in August, and before the Saxon-Polish forces could begin their siege of Riga in earnest, the Danes had already been knocked out of the war. Sweden, having promised to back the Maritime Powers, England and the Netherlands, against Louis XIV,

was able to call upon their support from an earlier treaty. On July 13, 1700, the Swedish fleet evaded the larger Danish fleet to unite with a powerful Anglo-Dutch fleet³⁰. Charles then landed a 10,000 man army on the Danish capital island of Zealand and marched on Copenhagen. With his capital blockaded, and under pressure from the Maritime Powers, King Frederick of Denmark surrendered. Charles and his army left Denmark before the Russian army had even left Moscow.

Things were going no better for the allies outside the walls of Riga. Augustus's siege of the port city was chaotic, to say the least. With no naval support, he was unable to cut off supply from the sea. Even worse, an administrative mistake had caused the wrong caliber of ammunition to be brought for the heavy siege guns. Unable to achieve anything, Augustus decided to retire south early to settle into winter quarters.

At the same time, Peter's Russians had begun the process of constructing their own siegeworks outside of Narva. Charles was heading for Estonia and, at the end of November, 1700, he arrived outside the Russian defenses. On the night of the 19th, the Swedes hurled themselves at the Russian breastworks, under the cover of a fortuitous snowstorm raging at their backs. Although outnumbered three to one, the Swedish infantry broke through the Russian line and smashed it entirely³¹. The Russians were routed. The Swedish empire was not as vulnerable as it had seemed.

For the next six years, Charles swept all before him. His alliance with the Maritime Powers initially deterred Charles from invading Augustus's power base in Saxony. In the midst of the War of Spanish Succession (1702-1713), England, the Netherlands, and the Austrian Empire feared that any distractions in Germany might have

³⁰ Frost, 229.

³¹ Frost, 230.

been exploited by an ambitious Louis XIV. The Swedish king brought his army into Lithuania and Poland (February, 1702). For four years he marched throughout the country, defeating army after army of Saxons, Poles, and Russians. By February of 1706, Charles was able to invade Saxony and force Augustus to abdicate his Polish throne.³²

Charles's long absence left his Baltic provinces open to Russian incursions. In 1703, Peter was able to occupy Ingria, where he began construction on the site of the future capital of St. Petersburg.³³ By the end of 1704, Peter had conquered the rest of Sweden's Baltic provinces, all while pouring a steady stream of Russian soldiers into Poland to support the anti-Swedish forces still fighting under the banner of Augustus. In 1707, with Denmark and Saxony out of the war and Poland seemingly pacified under the rule of Charles's own puppet king, Stanislaw Leszczynski, Charles prepared for the showdown with Peter.

At the outset of the invasion of Russia, Charles could only expect victory. For nearly a decade he had conquered every army with the courage to stand against him. Lacking an efficient information network, he was forced to assume that the Russian army was still the undisciplined mob of Narva. All that was required was to bring them to battle again, and they would rout. Or so he thought.

Sweden's victory at Narva had surprised no one in Europe. Spectacular victories over large Russian armies were not remarkable. However, it was this defeat which had prompted Peter to begin his great campaign to transform his army into the force that would destroy the Swedes at Poltava. Voltaire later wrote of the early Russian attempt to reduce Narva: "One hundred and fifty cannon, which should have reduced...Narva to

³² Frost, 230.

³³ Frost, 230.

ashes, had scarcely made a breach in it, whereas the town's artillery was constantly slaughtering entire files of men in the trenches. Narva was practically without fortifications, and ... had less than a thousand regular troops; nevertheless, an immense host had been unable to reduce the town in six weeks."³⁴ Von Clausewitz discounted Narva as an example of tactical genius because the Russians were "hardly European."³⁵ Frederick the Great spoke of Peter's army as "a horde of badly-armed and undisciplined barbarians without good commanders."³⁶

We must assume that much of this portrayal of the Russian army is historical exaggeration. In fact, an experienced fortifications expert sent by Augustus to aid Peter described the October arrival of nineteen battalions "of fine infantry...all the infantry were not only well-dressed and particularly well-drilled, but also well-armed; each regiment had its own uniform."³⁷ Adlerfelt would later say that the Russian camp was "advantageously fortified," with several batteries "placed in the most advantageous manner, and with a strong line of countervallation."³⁸ The fortifications were not the work of an untrained rabble. One writer would later say of Voltaire's entire account, "His history, accordingly, was extremely well received, and almost universally applauded. But yet, every thing in it was very far from being as true, and as exact, as could have been wished."³⁹ A French expatriate later wrote in response to Voltaire's work:

The relations of the victory at Narva...differ much in several circumstances...and...does not quite agree with your's. You make the King land with about 16000 foot, and a few more than 4000 horse, and march at the head of

³⁴ Voltaire, 50.

³⁵ Von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 170, as quoted in Frost, 231.

³⁶ Frederick II, "Betrachtungen uber die militarischen Talente und den Charakter Karls XII.," 370, as quoted in Cooper, 10.

³⁷ Ludwig Von Hallart, *Das Tagebuch des Generals von Hallart uber die Belagerung und Schlacht von Narva 1700*, 25, as quoted in Frost, 232.

³⁸ Adlerfelt, 50.

³⁹ S. Poniatowski, *Remarks on M. de Voltaire's History of Charles XII of Sweden* (London: 1741) vii

the latter and 4000 foot to Revel. You don't say what became of the rest of his foot, but you make him beat and put to flight 5000 Muscovites of the advanced guard, then about a league from their camp, 20000 posted beyond them, at least 10000 in the camp; and all this with the Veni, Vidi, Vici of Caesar, and so on.⁴⁰

It suited Peter to portray his army in Narva in such terms. Not only did he do little to stop the spread of the myth, he encouraged it. It was basic to his own legend of Peter the Great, the farsighted czar who opened the window on the west and dragged Russia into the modern world. When Charles turned south following his Estonian victory, he gave Peter the breathing space that the czar desperately needed. Following several years of organizational modernization, training, and the raising of new regiments, Peter was able to harden his new recruits against the outnumbered Swedish garrisons of the Baltic provinces (1703-1707). By the time Charles was ready to focus on invading Russia, Peter's armies were ready for his advance.

The Road to Poltava

Charles's march east began by crossing the Vistula River in Poland just north of Warsaw in December, 1707. When it reached the Russian border, the army had two options. It could either move north towards Novgorod and Saint Petersburg, both of which were important Russian windows to Europe, or continue east to Moscow. Although the first option was safer and promised a more secure supply train, it held no promise of an engagement with the Russian army or the seizure of the traditional capital and a subsequent collapse of the government. Considering the young king's penchant for battle, it should come as no surprise that he advanced east towards Minsk, Smolensk, and

⁴⁰ De La Motraye, *Historical and Critical Remarks on the History of Charles XII, King of Sweden* by Mr. De Voltaire, *Design'd as a supplement to that work* (London: 1732) 76.

Moscow. (See Figure 6) After several uneventful river crossings, Charles moved to Holowczyn, where he found that Peter had placed 20,000 men in defensive positions.



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Figure 6 tracks the progress of the Swedish army during its invasion of Russia in 1708-1709, from its departure from Saxony to Charles eventual exile in Bender.

The Swedish army crossed the Vistula during the final days of 1707. Behind them lay a Saxony and West Poland from which the utmost had been extracted by the invaders. Peter, although determined as ever to achieve his dream of Russian empire, had good

⁴¹ Frost, 372.

cause to fear this veteran and seemingly invincible army of Charles XII. But once the Swedes had turned down his offers of peace, he prepared to defeat Charles. The Russian strategy was simple but extreme. Avoiding any major confrontation in Poland, Peter would draw all his forces back towards Moscow, destroying roads and bridges as they retreated. On top of that, the Russians created a veritable desert, devoid of both people and provisions, for almost 120 miles around their defensive positions.⁴² Peter would save his homeland by laying it waste.

In this first major engagement of the six-month old campaign, at Holowcyn in Lithuania (June, 1708), Swedish infantry and cavalry broke through the Russian center to carry the day. However, the Russians were not routed, but merely displaced. Their 3,000 casualties could easily be replaced, while Charles's loss of 1,300 soldiers and much materiel was of considerable concern with his sources of reinforcement far to the rear. In early August, Charles continued to move east. But as the Swedish forces advanced deeper into Russia, problems multiplied. The retreating Russians destroyed foods and harassed the flanks and rear of the Swedish army. The very length of the march began to have a serious effect on the underfed and overworked men. Supplies and ammunition were beginning to reach critical levels and summer was coming to an end. Although 10,000 Swedish reinforcements with much needed supplies were advancing forward from the coast, they were still hundreds of miles to the west and their arrival date was uncertain (they too had to deal with Russian harassment). Moscow, on the other hand, lay over 200 miles to the east.

The Swedes of Charles XII noticed the Russian strategy of retreat and harassment, mixed with a newly found confidence inspired by victories in the Baltic provinces during

⁴² Englund, 42.

the absence of Charles, almost immediately. A Scottish officer in the services of the Swedish king remarked that:

It was very strange to all the world, that having now enter'd Poland ten months, neither the Muscovites, or Confederated Poles, had offered to shew their faces; but it was from this time, that we found the Muscovites another kind of Men in the Field than they used to be, and as they had learned to fight better, so they had learned not to fight when they had no just advantage, and a sufficient view of victory; and their general hovering at a distance, seem'd to design the harassing and fatiguing our troops, rather than fighting; and in this they did us more damage, than fighting would have been; for this many times caus'd us to alter our march, and turn this way, or that way, as the enemy seem'd to give us occasion to attack them; the first time we came to hands with them was, in passing a little river near Mohilow on the Nieper.

Yet we found, as before, that the Muscovites were another kind of an enemy than they used to be, and that their men stood to their arms after a better manner than formerly, especially their foot.⁴³

Charles pressed on throughout the spring and summer months of 1707, though his progress was slowed by the need to wait for the arrival of supplies from the Baltic and the constant harassment by the Russians. The constant skirmishes and the lack of food began to take a serious toll on the morale of the Swedish forces.

Charles again faced a critical decision. He could choose to continue the advance to Moscow, though a winter march through the forests and marshes of central Russia would be exceedingly difficult. Linkage with the reinforcements and their supply train would be beneficial, but it would require a withdrawal. Another option was setting up camp to wait for the new troops, but this would invite Russian buildup and harassment, all within hostile territory. Instead of these, he decided to move south to Ukraine, with its milder climate and better forage. He also hoped to forge an alliance with some of the Cossacks opposed to Peter.

⁴³ A. Bell, *The History of the Wars, Of His late Majesty Charles XII King of Sweden, From his first landing in Denmark to his return from Turkey to Pomerania, By a Scots gentleman in the Swedish service* (London: 1720) 58.

The march south was accompanied by numerous setbacks in the Pripet marshes, including the loss of supplies and weapons. These same conditions confronted the column of reinforcements and supplies. After several battles en route to the main Swedish army, the supply train was forced to burn their materiel and sink their artillery in September 1708. 6,000 reinforcements then joined the army of Charles in poorer condition than the army they were reinforcing. After a year of marching on Russian soil, Charles had yet to engage the Russians in a decisive battle. He was now deep in enemy territory with dwindling resources.

At the time of Charles's decision to head south, Adam Lewenhaupt, the Swedish governor of Riga, was left hundreds of miles away from the main Swedish army. Earlier in the year, Charles had ordered Lewenhaupt to join his invading force with reinforcements and an extensive train of supplies. By choosing to advance south rather than wait for Lewenhaupt's wagons, Charles nearly guaranteed the destruction of these supplies. Forced to escort his cumbersome line of wagons, Lewenhaupt was never able to gain on the Swedish force of Charles. Peter dispatched a powerful force of Russian dragoons (essentially infantry mounted to ensure speed of movement) to shadow the Swedish reinforcements and prevent their union with the main army. This Russian force made repeated contact with the soldiers of Lewenhaupt. All of these attacks were repelled, but Lewenhaupt was forced to destroy the supplies and advance, unhindered, to join Charles.

His move into the Ukraine has often been critiqued as a mistake. "It appears to me," wrote Frederick of Prussia, "that the king should have penetrated into Russia by the most easy route, as the most certain means of overwhelming his powerful adversary. This

route undoubtedly was not that of...the Ukraine."⁴⁴ On the other hand, to the south lay easier communications with the Turks and Tatars, whom Charles believed might be persuaded to join the war against Russia, and a country untouched by devastation. In addition, there was good reason for Charles to think that many Ukrainians were prepared to throw off the yoke of Russian oppression. One English officer in the army wrote home with relief:

We have been in a very desolate country...half a mile from the borders of Muscovy, where we found nothing but what was burnt and destroyed, and of large villages little left but the bare names, we had also news of the like destruction as far as Smolensko, which has had this happy effect on His Majesty that he has desisted from pursuing the enemy, and turned his march to the right, with intention as is supposed to make an incursion into Ukrain, this is a country...wery plentifull of all necessaries and where no army as yet has been.⁴⁵

The Ukraine was the traditional heartland of the Cossacks. Their freedom was legendary. They paid no taxes and, to a large extent, they governed themselves through elected representatives. For them, agriculture and serfdom was the gateway to subjection, and so it was forbidden. Instead, the Cossacks lived by herding and by marauding along the frontiers, which they also policed in exchange for subsidies from the imperial Russian government. They had a long history of serving as auxiliaries to the armies of the Russian czars. In addition, because the Cossacks did not turn away fugitives, their lands became a haven for runaway serfs and other anti-czar groups, creating a breeding ground for resistance against Russian imperial power.

Ivan Stefanovich Mazeppa, Hetman of the Cossacks of the Ukraine, had first made overtures to Charles while the Swedish army was still in Poland. He was prosperous and of considerable courage in both war and government. He was also

⁴⁴ Frederick II, 379, as quoted in Cooper, 14.

⁴⁵ Jeffreys to Boyle, near Kruiczow, Letters no. 22, 62, as quoted in Frost, 286.

extremely ambitious and cunning. He dreamed of an independent Cossack principedom in the Ukraine, with himself at the head of it. He carried on negotiations with the Swedes and Poles, promising aid in return for help in establishing an independent Ukraine after the war.⁴⁶ At the same time, he continued to present himself to Peter as a loyal subject in case his negotiations with the enemy broke down. At one point, in response to accusations made to Peter of Mazeppa's duplicity, the Hetman wrote in a brief note, "The Tsar's reaction...was to show even greater confidence [in my loyalty]..." He also asked Adam Sieniawski, his main contact among the Polish nobility, "to be discreet. The Swedes know about the situation under discussion. They will move against Moscow."⁴⁷ Unfortunately for Mazeppa, the "confidence" of the czar was largely a façade. Peter was so suspicious of the Ukrainian that he decided to strike first. Just before the hammer was to fall, Mazeppa nearly begged Sieniawski "to trust [him] and commit himself before Ukraine is turned into ashes and the present opportunities are lost forever...Should [you] agree with these plans [I] will re-unite Ukraine with the Commonwealth."⁴⁸

An alliance with Mazeppa would have been truly valuable to Charles had Peter not discovered their plans. He offered to Charles more than 30,000 experienced horsemen, a southern route to Moscow, prosperous agricultural districts (untouched by ravaging armies), and great personal wealth. However, while Mazeppa was on campaign, Peter dispatched a force into Cossack country to destroy the capital and plunder the treasury of the Ukraine. Peter garrisoned the Cossack towns, had Mazeppa

⁴⁶ Cooper, 35.

⁴⁷ Orest Subtelny, *On the Eve of Poltava: The Letters of Ivan Mazepa to Adam Sieniawski: 1704-1708* (New York: 1975) 131.

⁴⁸ Subtelny, 133.

excommunicated, and installed a new hetman. Mazeppa escaped with 1,500 men and his personal fortune to join Charles.⁴⁹

The winter of 1708 was the coldest in European memory. Waters from the Baltic to the canals of Venice froze over. In the Ukraine birds dropped down dead from the trees. Charles wrote to his sister, Ulrica, an account that suggests that he thought little of the cold:

Moreover the winter has been very cold and the frost has almost seemed to be unusual inasmuch as several of the enemy as well as of our own people have been frozen to death sometimes or have lost parts of their hands or feet and noses. Nevertheless for all that the winter has been a merry winter too. For, although some have been unlucky, inasmuch as the sharp cold as damaged them, nevertheless we have always managed to find a little pastime.⁵⁰

We should not assume from this that Charles was heartless. Rather, we know that he was a physically tough man and had always been accustomed, even in good times, to live hard and sparingly. As a commander, he knew that he could not give way to weakness and that he had to set an example of endurance. An officer later wrote of the king's toughness during this period. "I found the King was still encamp'd on the same spot where I had left him, under a thin cold tent, where he contented himself with, or rather would hardly suffer, a little fire, that was put therein without his order, altho' the weather was very fierce."⁵¹

As the spring approached, the Swedes found that the winter had taken a horrible toll. When he had marched out of Saxony, Charles had commanded 41,000 men. His total strength now was only 18,000. The main Russian force under Peter, on the other hand,

⁴⁹ Cooper, 43.

⁵⁰ Charles XII, Letters to Ulrica, as quoted in Cooper, 57.

⁵¹ Motraye. 121.

though Charles could not know it, numbered some 80,000.⁵² Charles was convinced that his only chance at victory now lay with bringing the Russians to a decisive battle. He marched north with army, taking minor towns and fortresses on the way. By the beginning of the summer of 1709, the Swedes came up against the town of Poltava.

Poltava was a Cossack town, strongly garrisoned by the Russians. It was well supplied with food, water, and ammunition, all of which were desperately needed by the advancing Swedes. Charles gave the order to besiege the city, hoping to gain the supplies contained within or to draw the main Russian army to the north out into a pitched battle. Before either of those came to fruition, Charles, while scouting the enemy position in range of their fortifications, was wounded in the foot by a stray musket-ball. After nine years at the head of his infantry without incident, his luck was finally shattered on June 17th, his twenty-seventh birthday.⁵³

The Russians arrived three days later to challenge the army of Charles to battle. The Swedish king decided to accept, despite the fact that he was unable to walk or ride a horse. Deprived of the inspirational leadership for which Charles had become famous, the Swedish troops undoubtedly experienced a drop in morale. But a battle was necessary. A victory would have given them supplies and may have helped to convince the Turks and the remaining Cossacks to join the war against Peter. To retreat would have been impossible, given that the Swedes were nearly out of food and the Russians would have made them pay for every step. Voltaire later immortalized the final showdown between the two monarchs.

It was on the 8th of July 1709 that the decisive battle of Poltava was fought between the two most extraordinary Monarchs that were then in the world:

⁵² Cooper, 67.

⁵³ Frost, 289.

Charles XII, illustrious from nine years of victories; Peter Alexiowitz from nine years of labours, taken to form troops equal to those of Sweden...Charles bore the title of "Invincible," of which a single moment might deprive him: the neighboring nations had given Peter the name of "Great," which, as he did not owe it to his victories, he could not lose by a defeat.⁵⁴

The Swedes formed up for their attack against the Russian camp before dawn on June 27th. Charles took his place with his infantry, supported in a litter. Confusion then took hold of the army as they advanced for the assault. The Swedes had never relied on staff officers, Charles always being able to relay orders from his position at the head of the infantry. With their king essentially immobilized, however, the Swedish army was without direction. Officers led their men without coordination. Although the individual elements of the army acquitted themselves brilliantly, they stood no chance.

The Swedes had few cannon to support them and not enough balls for their muskets, and so they were told to rely on their swords, while the well-supplied Russians were able to mow them down with plentiful artillery support. The outnumbered Swedish cavalry drove the Russian horse from the field and Charles's infantry was able to take the outlying redoubts (constructed as a breakwater) of the Russian camp before losing momentum. The end of the battle came when the litter of Charles was struck by a cannonball, killing the bearers, though leaving the king unscathed, though his wounded foot bled freely. Charles slowly rode to the rear, resting his wounded foot on the neck of his horse. When the Russians rallied, all was lost.⁵⁵ The Swedes had lost 6,000 killed and 2,000 prisoners, including a field marshal, four generals, and five colonels. Russian

⁵⁴ Voltaire, 182.

⁵⁵ Voltaire, 183-184.

casualties amounted to no more than 1,300.⁵⁶ Charles limped away to his exile in Turkey with 500 followers.

The Last Venture

The defeat and surrender of the main Swedish army transformed the course of the entire war. Augustus was back in Poland at the head of a Saxon army within a month of Poltava. By November, Denmark had landed troops in Scania, the southern tip of Sweden, and Peter had personally launched the first shells of the siege of Riga. Magnus Stenbock, charged with command over the war effort in Charles's absence, was able to defeat the Danes, but found it impossible to save the plague-ravaged Baltic provinces. By September of 1710, Peter's conquest of Livonia and Estonia was complete.

Charles's strategy now relied on persuading the Ottomans to wage war on Russia. Although he was successful, the results did not meet his expectations. The Turkish army took advantage of Peter's overconfidence and was able to surround him in the Crimea in July 1711. Despite the urgings of Charles, the Turks were willing to bargain. By giving up Azov and razing his southern border fortresses, Peter was able to escape with his army intact. Frustrated, Charles realized that the Turks would not fight his battles for him. A dramatic ride through Hungary and the Empire brought him back to Sweden in November 1714.⁵⁷

Things looked bleak for the Swedes. A new Russian galley fleet had proved to be an excellent platform for launching an invasion of Finland. During the summer, Prussia and Great Britain had joined the coalition, looking for plunder in the form of Sweden's

⁵⁶ Cooper, 69.

⁵⁷ Frost, 292.

German possessions. But with typical bravado, Charles refused to contemplate peace and in early 1716 set out on the first of two Norwegian campaigns in an attempt to force Denmark out of the war. The second of these campaigns was brought to an abrupt end in November 1718 by a missile that smashed the skull of Charles during the siege of Frederiksten.⁵⁸ Following the death of their monarch, the Swedes signed a series of peaces with their enemies, surrendering all of its empire except Finland and a small foothold in Germany.

The weaknesses of the Swedish empire had been realized. Unable to fight a defensive war, Charles had taken the battle to each of his enemies. Victory followed victory and the Swedish army seemed invincible. But once the field army of Sweden had been destroyed, the empire collapsed and a new Baltic power, Russia, was born.

⁵⁸ Frost, 294.

Chapter 3: Napoleon, Little Gunner-General

At 11 o'clock, on the evening of June 23rd, 1812, the first of Charles Antoine Morand's divisions crossed the Niemen River. Napoleon's invasion of Russia had begun. The Emperor commanded 600,000 men and 250,000 horses, drawn from all over Europe, for his march on Russia. Of all the military campaigns in the history of pre-twentieth century gunpowder, Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 is the most well known and most extensively studied. For a period with no mechanical power or electronic communications, the numbers of men, animals, weapons, and required logistics are staggering. And the geographical extent of the campaign included half of the European continent. The Russians were amazed at the size of the invading host (which was three times their own size), quickly falling back as the Grand Army pressed forward⁵⁹. Napoleon advanced hundreds of miles, over land that was mostly untamed forests and barren steppes. Soon, however, the invaders would feel the sting of lengthening supply lines, marauding partisans and Cossacks, and a landscape stripped of all resources useful to the army. In the end, it was the loss of this campaign that put Napoleon on an irreversible spiral leading towards his eventual downfall – his defeat at the hands of a European Coalition.

How did it come about that Napoleon first sought to engage in this campaign? It was no foregone conclusion that Napoleon would decide to attack his former Russian ally. Most studies ignore this question, skipping straight to the invasion as if it was the most obvious outcome. Importantly, Napoleon was convinced that his invasion would be over quickly, an easy victory. He is quoted as saying “this is going to be a short war, over

⁵⁹ Jonathan North, *With Napoleon in Russia: The Illustrated Memoirs of Faber du Faur, 1812*. (London: Greenhill Books, 2006) 9.

in two months...if all went well, within a fortnight.”⁶⁰ If Napoleon believed that the invasion would be a short and simple affair, why did the Emperor lose this “predetermined” power struggle? The size of the invasion force alone would have seemed to guarantee victory.

Over 600,000 soldiers fought for Napoleon in the Russian campaign, though no one could have called this army “French.” Only 200,000 of the men were from France, the rest were from all over Europe. Another 100,000 troops were nominally French, men recruited directly into French uniform from the new satellites of the Empire - Dutch, Belgians, Germans, Swiss, and Italians. The remaining 300,000 fought under the banners of their own nations. These men consisted of Germans from the Confederation of the Rhine (130,000), Poles and Lithuanians (90,000), Italians (27,000), Neapolitans (5,000), Swiss (9,000), Spanish and Portuguese (a few regiments of each), and the reluctant Prussians (20,000) and Austrians (30,000).⁶¹ Czar Alexander could not begin to match such numbers. Commanding some 450,000 troops throughout the war, only 160,000 were ever massed for battle at any one time (due to training and transportation delays). These numbers would have been even smaller had he not made peace with the Swedes and Turks. Michael Andreas Barclay de Tolly was in command of the First Army, 120,000 strong. Pyotr Ivanovich Bagration led the Second Army and its 40,000 men; their primary task at the outset of the invasion was to escape annihilation by the overwhelmingly large

⁶⁰ Paul Britten Austin, *1812: The March on Moscow*. (London: Greenhill Books, 1993) Caulaincourt’s Memoirs, 15.

⁶¹ The recently defeated (and still bitter) Prussians and Austrians were forced to contribute troops to guard the flanks of the main invasion force.

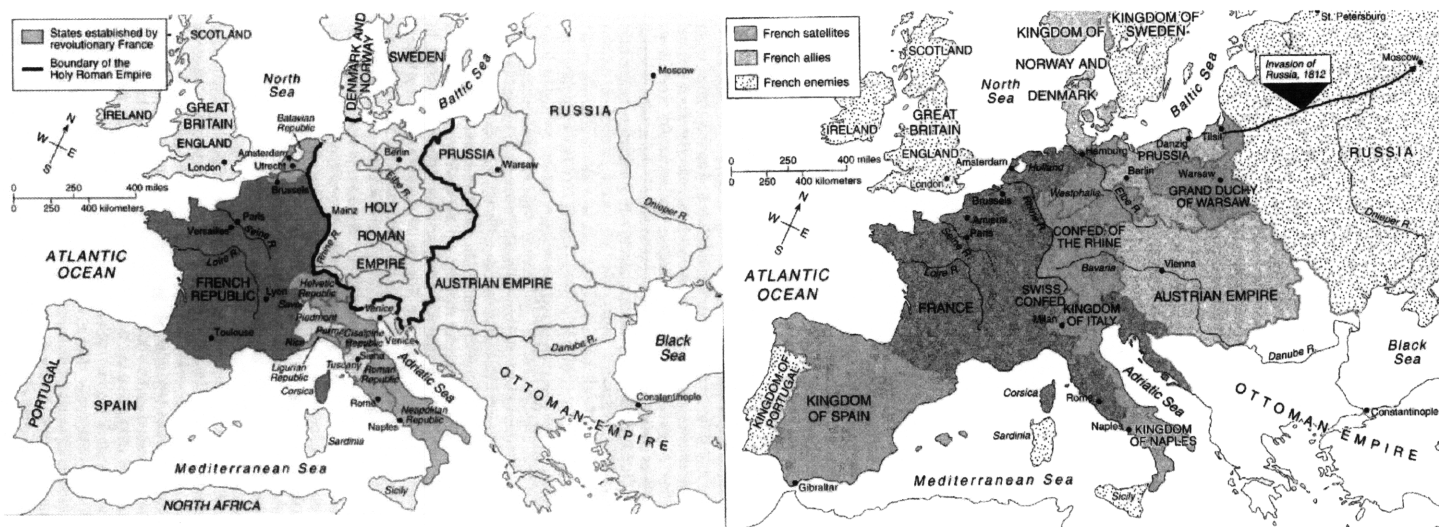
French forces.⁶² The scene was set for an epic confrontation between two empires and two emperors, former allies, and now rivals.

Storm Clouds

Before analyzing the failure of the Russian campaign, we must understand what motivated Napoleon to attack in the first place. Both international diplomacy and the continuing power struggle between Russia and France, and Alexander and Napoleon, play a large part in this question. Contrary to later characterization, the attack on Russia was no rash, unplanned decision. As early as the summer of 1810, Napoleon was preparing for an eventual clash with the Russians. On August 4th, 1810, in a letter to the king of Saxony, a loyal ally and viceroy of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw (a French satellite nation), Napoleon called for the strengthening of the local arsenals and reinforcing of the powerful Polish fortress of Modlin. "My relations [with Russia] are very good, but one must be prepared."⁶³ In fact, the Emperor had been preparing to eliminate his Continental rival for almost two years prior to his actual attack. (See Figure 7)

⁶² Owen Connelly, *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (New York: SR Books, 1999) 158-159. In contrast, during the Great Northern War, the Swedish numbered some 70,000, including reserves and auxiliaries, spread between all the theaters of war. The actual invasion force of Charles was just under 40,000 men. The Russian armies of that war numbered about 100,000 at their peak.

⁶³ Harold Parker, "Why Did Napoleon Invade Russia? A Study in Motivation and the Interrelations of Personality and Social Structure," (*The Journal of Military History*) 143-144.



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Figure 7 presents a pair of maps that illustrates the spread of Napoleon’s dominion across Europe. By the time of the Invasion of Russia, Napoleon controlled all of continental Europe except Portugal, Sweden, The Ottoman Balkans, and Russia.

By early October, 1810, his intentions were clearer. He instructed the King of Saxony, ruler of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, to raise sixteen regiments of cavalry, explaining that “in case of war, they will deliver us from the swarms of Cossacks who inundated us during the last war,” when the Fourth Coalition was defeated by the French. In December, Napoleon informed Alexander that unless Russia continued to enforce the Continental System and closed all ports to ships carrying English merchandise, there would be war. Ignoring this threat - in part due to extreme pressure from the suffering merchant class - Alexander opened his ports and Napoleon spent much of the rest of 1811 building up his forces in Germany and northern Italy.⁶⁵ Without a fleet, he could not actually threaten France’s archrival, England. His only recourse was to starve the British economy through a general blockade under the Continental System. Napoleon sought

⁶⁴ Rafe Blaufarb, *Napoleon – Symbol for an Age: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford, 2007) 20-21.
⁶⁵ Parker, 145.

European supremacy, and only the British and the Russians stood in his way. This led him to war on two fronts.

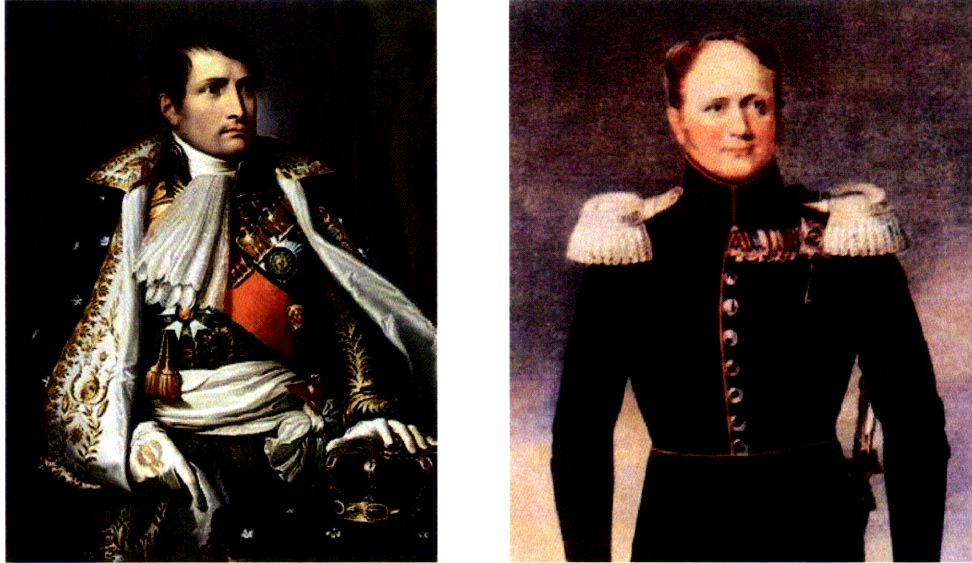


Figure 8 shows Czar Alexander (right), who had fought Napoleon (left) on several other occasions as a member of various European coalitions. The French emperor dismissed his Russian rival as "a mere child," incapable of leading an army. Alexander correctly predicted at the beginning of the invasion that "one of us will lose our crown."

Alexander chose to defy the Continental System, which amounted to a challenge to Napoleon's authority. By 1810, Napoleon controlled the entire Continent, save the territories still under Ottoman, Swedish, and Russian sovereignty. In the eyes of the deposed rulers and nationalists of Europe, Alexander was a potential savior. Although in name an ally of the French, Russia was the only remaining counter to French hegemony. Alexander actively maintained a web of propagandists throughout the cities of Europe. Unrest against the French overlords was brewing throughout Germany, fueled by the tongues of Russians.⁶⁶ The only way for Napoleon to cut short this insurrection was to eliminate its Russian source.

⁶⁶ Adam Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812: Napoleon's Fatal March*. (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005) 54-55.

To relieve the tension, Napoleon brought up the idea of a dynastic union between the two allied empires: a marriage between himself and Alexander's youngest sister. Alexander's initial response was positive, but he delayed the issue, waiting on his mother's approval. By February 1810, he was still stalling and Napoleon, seeking to avoid the humiliation of what seemed to be a likely refusal, looked elsewhere. He contacted the Austrian ambassador, von Schwarzenberg, who overstepped his powers and immediately gave Napoleon an affirmative answer. When Alexander heard of Napoleon's engagement to the Austrian Marie-Louise, he assumed that Napoleon had been carrying on simultaneous negotiations. Alexander had sincerely pushed for the match (though his mother never approved) and he felt betrayed by the apparent duplicity.⁶⁷

Poland was a pawn in the games of the two emperors. With Napoleon married, Alexander had also just lost his main bargaining chip in the Poland issue. He had been willing to marry off his sister in return for an agreement ruling out the idea of an independent Kingdom of Poland. Earlier, Napoleon had seemed willing to trade Anna for an independent Poland. Napoleon's creation of the Grand Duchy of Poland did nothing to appease Russian fears. A Polish Kingdom would have included hundreds of thousands of square miles and millions of people currently under Russian jurisdiction. However, there were no signs that Napoleon actually intended to create a free Polish state. To the contrary, he is actually quoted as saying the following:

I love the Poles on the field of battle. They're a valiant race. As for their free veto, I want none of all that...It's not for me to reestablish a breeding-ground of republicanism in the heart of Europe...All I want out of Poland is a disciplined force, to furnish a battlefield...How to excite the spirit of national liberation in Poland, without re-exciting the fiber of liberalism?⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Zamoyski, 57.

⁶⁸ Austin, 17.

He proposed to Alexander that they agree not to encourage such dreams of independence. He then sent the Duchy's best fighting units to battle in Spain under the banner of the Legion of the Vistula. The Czar stuck to his version of the Polish issue, insisting that it was of the greatest importance to formally renounce any hopes of a free Poland. Without an agreement from the French, Alexander hinted, it might be difficult to keep up the blockade against Britain. A furious Napoleon threatened Russia with war "the day she makes peace with England."⁶⁹

On the Russian side, much of the Russian nobility was actually looking forward to a war with France. There were many reasons for these feelings. First, for decades, Russians had suffered from a societal inferiority complex. French was the language of culture, learning, and power, and the customs of the Russian Empire frowned upon as backwards. Moreover, the very principles for which the French Revolution stood were seen as a threat to their way of life. The Russian aristocracy did not relish the idea of a free peasantry. There was also much economic hardship caused by the continental blockade. The prices for luxury goods skyrocketed and Russian exports fell to almost nothing. The value of the rouble plummeted. In addition, the new Crown Prince of Sweden, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, was a former Marshall of Napoleon and a Frenchman. Napoleon assumed that Bernadotte would maintain close relations with France, who had traditionally helped Sweden against her Baltic rivals, Prussia and Russia. Russia had just acquired Finland from Sweden through war (See Figure 9) and saw Bernadotte's election as further proof of French encroachment. Combined with the creation of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw and Napoleon's marriage into the royal house of

⁶⁹ Zamoyski, 60-61.

Austria, these events all helped lead to a pervasive anti-French feeling at the highest echelons of Russian society.⁷⁰

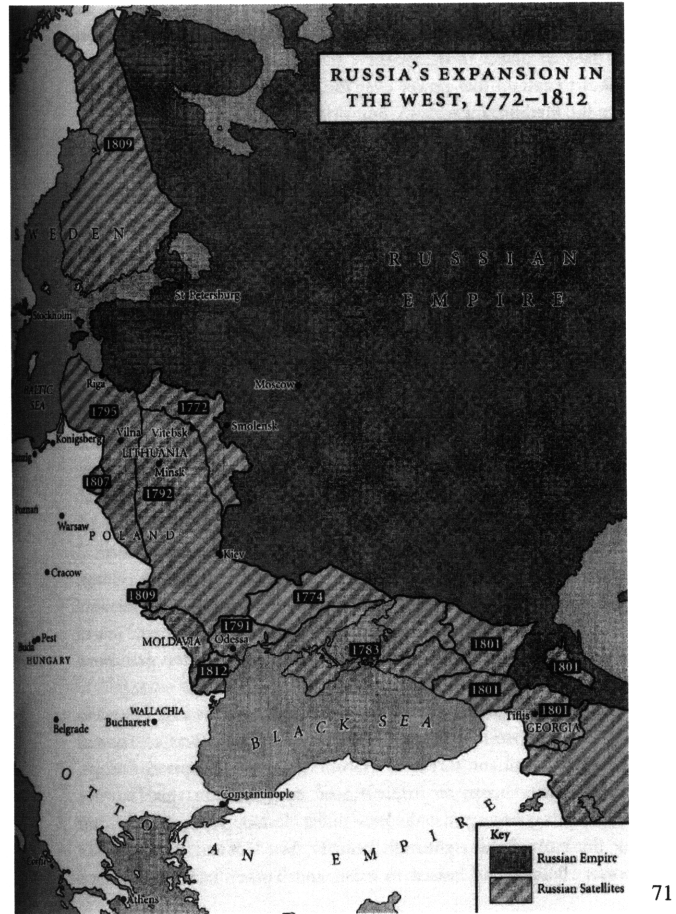


Figure 9 diagrams the substantial territorial gains of the Russian Empire in the forty years leading up Napoleon’s invasion. The map does not show the significant expansion of Russian power in Asia.

On December 31, 1810, Alexander issued a proclamation opening all Russian ports to American ships, major carriers of British cargo. Since all British goods, no matter what nation’s ships were carrying them, were banned under the Continental

⁷⁰ Zamoyski, 61-69.

⁷¹ Zamoyski, 19.

System, Napoleon saw this as tantamount to an open denunciation of the alliance. British goods were soon pouring into Russia and Germany through Alexander's kingdom.⁷²

Knowing that Napoleon would see this move as a precursor to war, Alexander began concentrating forces along his western borders and started sounding out possible alliances between the Polish, Austrians, and Prussians. Rumors of rebellion amongst the Germans increased with the growing presence of Russian armies along the Polish border. The Czar was determined to resist French domination and eager to rid himself of the shame of Russia's earlier defeats to Napoleon.

Alexander believed that a French invasion would fail. Armand de Caulaincourt was Napoleon's ambassador to Russia between 1807 and 1812. He accompanied the emperor on his campaign, and was one of the few to accompany him when Napoleon left the remnants of the Grand Army to return to France. As reported by Caulaincourt, Alexander was ready to fight to the end if necessary. "If fate decides against me on the field of battle, I would rather retreat as far as Kamchatka than give away provinces and sign in my capital any treaty which would only be a truce. The Frenchman is brave, but long privations and a bad climate tire him and discourage him...Prodigious victories are only achieved where the Emperor is, and he cannot be everywhere or spend years away from Paris."⁷³ Alexander was further encouraged by the following words of Bernadotte, crown prince of Sweden and former marshal of Napoleon:

In the position in which Russia stands towards France, it is to her advantage to prolong the war, because it is in her power to do so, but not in Napoleon's. One ought to depend as little as possible upon chance. It is therefore essential to avoid big battles and endeavour to reduce the war to a series of petty skirmishes. You must have plenty of Cossacks. You must capture Napoleon's baggage and cut off his supplies. Even if you have to retire behind the Dvina, nay, behind the Neva, so

⁷² Zamoyski, 70.

⁷³ Austin, Caulaincourt's Memoirs, 18.

long as you continue to offer a stubborn resistance everything will turn out well, and Napoleon will meet at the ends of Alexander with the fate meted out to Charles XII by Peter the Great.

Napoleon neglects nothing that can conduce to success; but his means are already exhausted, and he cannot stand a two years' war. He lacks men, money, and horses for such an undertaking; and the further he advances the worse he will fare. But of course it would be best if such extremities could be avoided, for the provinces will suffer severely, and the reverses that may be experienced in the early part of the campaign will produce a bad impression.⁷⁴

Alexander knew that Napoleon could win battles, but he also knew that Napoleon could not possibly spend years fighting in Russia against an entire nation that would rise against him. He expected all of Russia to repel the invaders and had confidence that his own armies, with their homeland at stake, would fight with unmatched passion. Although both sides used conscription to bolster their armies, the Russians were protecting their homes against the marauding French, while the very multinational army of Napoleon was kept very much in the dark about its own objectives. As one officer wrote at the outset of the campaign, "The future was vague, and its fortunes very distant; there was no inkling, nothing to exercise the imagination, nothing to awaken the enthusiasm."⁷⁵ Alexander did not want to seem like the aggressor. And, privately, he was still afraid of Napoleon's military prowess.

Caulaincourt told his Emperor that he had two choices: to cement the alliance by giving a significant part, if not the whole, of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw to Alexander; or to go to war to restore the Kingdom of Poland. He encouraged Napoleon to follow the former course. However, Napoleon stated that there would be no peace without his honor and that to abandon the Polish Duchy would sacrifice his honor. Alexander had recently made territorial gains against the Prussians, Austrians, Swedes, and the Turks. Napoleon

⁷⁴ Vassili Verestchagin, *1812: Napoleon I in Russia*. (London: 1899).

⁷⁵ Zamoyski, 101.

feared that appeasement would lead to further Russian expansion into the heart of Europe. He saw Russia's abandonment of the Continental System, her troop build-up, and Alexander's refusal to drop the Polish question as sure signs that Russia was soon to break the alliance. He did not want to fight Russia. He needed her as an ally against Britain, the only remaining obstacle to a European peace. Napoleon also wanted to travel to Spain to end the unrest in Iberia. But he feared that as soon as he was gone, Alexander might exploit his absence and invade Poland, sparking uprisings amongst the Germans. Napoleon prepared for war in order to be in a position to dictate the peace.⁷⁶

Napoleon needed a vast army to attack Alexander. However, the Emperor was still reluctant to commit to a war against Russia. His needs were more pressing elsewhere in Europe. But to negotiate with Alexander and the massed Russian troops, Napoleon needed an army of his own. He therefore needed to raise a field army huge enough to intimidate Alexander into submission, or, failing that, powerful enough to bring him to the negotiating table with a rapid and shattering blow. Time was always against the Emperor, as Alexander might strike at any time and the British were continuing to wreak havoc in Iberia. Napoleon's ultimate goal was victory over Britain, and for this he needed Russia's help as an ally or as a satellite. The Continental System would not succeed without Russia. Napoleon wanted only to convince Alexander that he could not win, that Russia's best option was to continue the fight against Britain. He did not intend to fight an extended war of devastation against the Russians. Napoleon fully expected his own army to come out of the invasion relatively unscathed. This expectation would ultimately come to doom Napoleon, as his invasion of intimidation and limited war was met with the steely resolve and complete determination of Alexander and the Russians.

⁷⁶ Zamoyski, 74.

In the end, fearing a Russian invasion of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, Napoleon ordered his client kingdoms throughout Europe to mobilize; he demanded that the Poles, in particular, raise an army of 50,000. He told his allied rulers to prepare their armies for war. He moved his existing garrisons throughout Germany and France towards the Russian border and even pulled some units from Spain. At the same time, he began a massive conscription campaign in France.⁷⁷

The gathering army was made up of contingents from every vassal and allied state. This certainly raised the issue of cohesion amongst the units from the very first, to say nothing of motivation and loyalty. All but the Polish and the Austrians were commanded by French generals, yet many of the soldiers in the newly created Grand Army had interests completely opposed to those of Napoleon. For example, a large contingent of Prussians, whose nation had just been stripped of half of its resources and manpower by the diplomatic whims of Napoleon, was forced to march with the Grand Army. Fortunately for the emperor, his very presence was enough to greatly increase the morale of many of these troops. As one Italian chronicler recorded, “Fears soon gave way to enthusiasm when we spied the emperor...moving forward. Everybody hoped that his arrival meant that he was going to crown the brilliant day with glory.”⁷⁸ He carried an aura of military genius and invincibility. However, in such a large army Napoleon could not be everywhere and his presence was diluted by the expanding size of the force.

⁷⁷ Zamoyski, 27.

⁷⁸ Jonathan North, *Napoleon's Army in Russia: The Illustrated Memoirs of Albrecht Adam*. (London: Pen & Sword Military, 2005) 82.

Onward to Moscow

The second Polish war is begun. The first terminated at Friedland; and at Tilsit Russia vowed an eternal alliance with France, and war *with the English*. She now breaks her vows, and refuses to give any explanation of her strange conduct....Does she think us degenerated? Are we no more the soldiers who fought at Austerlitz? She places us between dishonour and war-our choice cannot be difficult. Let us then march forward; let us cross the Niemen and carry the war into her country.⁷⁹

Napoleon uttered these words as he broke his alliance with Russia. At first, he followed the same initial path as Charles, hoping to be able to threaten both Moscow and Saint Petersburg. After securing his supply lines and leaving behind substantial garrisons in Poland and the Baltic coast, he advanced towards Moscow with 420,000 soldiers. Having crossed the Berezina River by the middle of July, Napoleon then had to make an important decision. Should he establish a camp here and prepare for the winter and a renewed 1813 offensive or advance on Moscow 300 miles to the east? He first dictated that the army would remain in Poland:

Here I am, and here I shall stay! I shall look about me, complete my army, give it a rest, and organize Poland. The campaign of 1812 is at an end; that of 1813 will do the rest!...Murat, the first Russian campaign is over. We will plant our standards here. Two broad rivers outline our position; we will build block-houses along this natural entrenchment, commanded by artillery in every direction. We will form a square with guns at the angles and on each front, and within this square we will build our barracks and magazines. The year 1813 will see us in Moscow; 1814 in St. Petersburg-the war with Russia shall be a three years' war!" (turning to a civil official) "As for you, my dear sir, you must see that we are properly provisioned, for we must not repeat the mistake of Charles XII."⁸⁰

Many factors had to be considered. Napoleon could muster a force of a little less than 200,000 for an advance by this point in the campaign, largely because such substantial numbers were required to guard the flanks, rear, and supply depots of the

⁷⁹ General Sir Robert Wilson, *Narrative of Events During the Invasion of Russia by Napoleon Bonaparte, and the Retreat of the French Army: 1812* (London: 1820).

⁸⁰ Verestchagin.

invasion force. Each step eastwards lengthened the lines of communication and supply for the Grand Army, while shortening the same lines for the Russians. With the summer slipping away, the Russians were still avoiding any major confrontation. The emperor was unable to consider withdrawal, partly because it might encourage his enemies at home and throughout Europe to revolt against his rule. To simply encamp in the harsh land would have required huge amounts of supplies not readily available. At the same time, it would allow Czar Alexander to further organize and increase his forces. So, like Charles, Napoleon decided to march on. But instead of turning south towards Ukraine, the French continued on to Moscow.

By August 17th, Napoleon engaged the Russians at Smolensk, driving them from the city. His advance continued until the Grand Army reached Borodino just 75 miles west of Moscow. Until this point in the campaign, Russian troop movements had consisted only of harassment and fighting withdrawal, avoiding any major battles. At Borodino, however, the rolling hills afforded some good defensive positions that the Russians were able to improve upon before the French arrived. The new Russian commander, Mikhail Kutusov, decided to test his 120,000 men against the pursuing 140,000 of Napoleon.

The battle of Borodino, the largest of the campaign, began on September 7th. Napoleon was not prepared for his decisive engagement. Through several attacks, the Russians gave up some ground, but the French were unable to rout their enemy. The emperor was not the hurrying general of old at Borodino. He instead spent much of the battle in a tent, miles behind the front lines. The redheaded Michel Ney had been a

marshal since 1804. He would win fame as the greatest rearguard fighter in history during the Russian campaign. In an ungovernable temper, Ney stated bluntly:

What is the meaning of this? Have we come out here for the pleasure of taking the plain? What is the Emperor doing in the rear? There he can only see the reverses and not the successes. If he does not mean to lead the army himself, if he has ceased to be a general and is playing at Emperor, let him return to the Tuileries, and leave the command in our hands!⁸¹

At a critical point in the battle, Napoleon refused to risk his Guard to throw the Russians into complete disarray, asking "And if I have to fight a second battle tomorrow, what troops shall I have to fight it with?"⁸²

A Russian general would later comment on this blunder:

Nothing can justify Napoleon's course in stopping the fight at three o'clock when a little further effort might have ensured a victory. The last Russian reserves had already gone into action, while on the side of the French neither the Old Guard nor the Young, nor any of their cavalry, amounting to over 20,000 men, had taken any part in the battle. There is no doubt that if Napoleon had made use of the twenty-three battalions and twenty-seven squadrons of which this select force consisted, he would have utterly routed the Russians, and compelled them to spend the remaining four hours of the day in continual retreat instead of preparing for attack.⁸³

More than 40,000 Russians and 30,000 French soldiers became casualties by that afternoon. The high casualty rates reflected the new age of total war, in which mass conscription had led to greatly expanded armies. The Russian army withdrew in an orderly manner during the night, leaving Napoleon an abandoned battlefield. The French continued east, meeting no resistance as they advanced on the Russian capital. As they occupied Moscow, they must have been disappointed to find an abandoned city; no army, battle, or Czar was in sight.

⁸¹ Verestchagin.

⁸² Verestchagin.

⁸³ Verestchagin.

Alexander's resolve remained unfazed. He issued this proclamation to the Russian people shortly after the loss of Moscow:

The enemy entered Moscow on the 15th of September.

It might be expected that consternation should be general at this news, but let us disdain a pusillanimous despondency. Let us swear rather to redouble our perseverance and our courage; let us hope that, whilst combating in a cause so just as ours, we may direct upon the heads of our enemy the calamities he is heaping up for our destruction. Moscow, it is true, is in their hands, but our army is not disgraced or dispersed. The General-in-chief has yielded to a necessity, but only to reunite with advancing forces, and then to snatch from the enemy his ephemeral triumph.

We know and feel how grieved all the hearts of the faithful Russians will be at the desolation of our provinces and the ancient capital of the empire, but the enemy occupies only its ramparts. Deserted by its inhabitants-stripped of its treasures-it resembles no more a peopled city, but a vast tomb, in which the merciless invader may erect his throne.

This haughty destroyer of kingdoms on entering Moscow flattered himself that he was the arbiter of our destinies, and might dictate peace at his will; but his presumption is already foiled: he has found in Moscow not only no aid for his domination, but not even the means of subsistence.

Our forces augment every day. They occupy all the roads, and destroy all the detachments of the enemy in search of food.

He will soon be convinced of the fatal error which led him to consider the possession of Moscow as the subjection of the empire; and famine will compel him to attempt an escape through a country of which our intrepid warriors with closed roads will bar the passage.

Look at the condition of this enemy: he entered Russia at the head of more than three hundred thousand men, but how is that force composed?

Is there any national unity in this multitude?

No! the different nations who march under his standards do not serve him from attachment or patriotism, but servile fear.

Already the disorganizing effect of his principle of fusion is apparent...

Can a true Russian feel alarm? Has Spain not broken her chains, and menaces the integrity of the French empire? Does not the greatest portion of Europe, degraded and plundered by the ruler of France, serve him with a reluctant heart, and turn an impatient regard on us for the signal of general deliverance?

Does not France herself sigh for the termination of a sanguinary war, in which she has been involved by a boundless ambition?

Does not an oppressed world look to us for example and encouragement, and can we shrink from such an honourable mission as is confided to us? No; let us rather kiss the hand that has selected us to act as the leaders of nations in the struggle for independence and virtue.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Robert Wilson, *Narrative of Events During the Invasion of Russia by Napoleon Bonaparte, and the Retreat of the French Army, 1812* (London: 1860).

Having spent several weeks in the city, Napoleon realized that his objectives in Russia were impossible. He ordered the army to return to France. The withdrawal from Moscow of a little more than 100,000 soldiers began in mid-October. As he marched west, Napoleon was rejoined by forces from outposts and flanking positions, while his army simultaneously lost thousands more to battle, disease, straggling, and desertion. By November, the snow arrived, enemy harassment increased, and the casualties continued to mount. The orderly withdrawal collapsed into a rout.

A final blow to the Grand Army (or its remnants) came at the return crossing of the Berezina River at the end of November. Napoleon was forced to quickly construct two bridges, one of which had to be able to support heavy artillery, to evacuate his army. The river was full of ice and required engineers to enter it for the construction of underwater supports. The makeshift bridges were built overnight, but they were narrow and required repeated repairs throughout the process. 50,000 soldiers, 50,000 stragglers and thousands of artillery, wagons, and baggage attempted to cross the congested bridges. With Russian military pressure increasing, the French had to burn the bridges, leaving some of the soldiers and nearly all of the stragglers on the far bank.⁸⁵ Although Napoleon lost some 20,000 soldiers and even more stragglers at the crossing, we should note how remarkable it was that his crossing was achieved at all.

The Impossibility of the Grand Army

A common feature of Napoleon's campaign tactics was to move quickly while concentrating large numbers of men at a strategic point before the enemy was able to

⁸⁵ Kroll et al., "Napoleon's Tragic March Home from Moscow: Lessons in Hubris," *The Academy of Management*, 2000.

react. The tradition had been born out of necessity. The revolutionary armies of the 1790s had been hurriedly improvised and had never acquired a proper commissariat up to par with those of other European nations. They regarded enemy territory as that of tyrants, and took to looting the enemy's land. By knocking out enemy armies in one decisive blow, Napoleon was able to force peace on his own terms. Such a strategy would prove to be considerably more difficult on the scale of the vast Russian steppes. This tactic also forced the French armies to travel lightly. In principle, Napoleon prohibited looting; ordering his men to make payments with often worthless promissory notes. But necessity and administrative red tape led to marauding and the tolerance of these misdemeanors. This placed the troops on a slippery slope of decreasing discipline. On the other hand, these tactics freed French commanders from having to drag heavy stores behind them. Liberated from this typical encumbrance, French armies were able to travel more quickly than typical European armies. However, this strategy worked best in rich and densely populated areas in the center of Europe. Russian distances were huge, roads were primitive, towns and countryside population were thinly distributed, and the land was poor in resources.⁸⁶ Key to the failure of Napoleon's Grand Army was the fact that two thirds of his troops were unaccustomed to such looting and marauding tactics. Every other European army still functioned under a traditional supply train model. For non-French, looting was accepted as a practice engaged in for personal monetary gain, not for survival.

The lack of acclimation to French military practices by the approximately 400,000 multinational auxiliaries actually led to a complete breakdown of discipline in the Grand Army. Many of the eyewitness accounts document this collapse. Christian Wilhelm Faber

⁸⁶ Connelly, 6.

du Faur, for instance, was a lieutenant of artillery serving in the Württemberg contingent of the Grand Army. He had grown up in a moderately wealthy family and had trained as a lawyer before following his father's footsteps into the army. He fought in an earlier campaign against Austria in addition to the invasion of Russia, and would fight for Napoleon again as a captain following the catastrophic retreat from Moscow. He died after retiring from Württemberg's army at the rank of general. His illustrated memoirs provide a unique view into the gradual sapping of discipline in the Grand Army.

Faber du Faur knew from the earliest days of the campaign that the invasion force was lacking in discipline and cohesion. In Lithuania, he noted that "There has never been a campaign in which the troops have relied so much on living off the land...Every day...we would see clouds of marauders and isolated bodies of troops making off in all directions...Lithuania saw only the pillaging and oppression wrought by its new allies...Discipline was sapped, and tolerating or turning a blind eye [to these misdemeanors] only speeded up the destruction of this potentially formidable army."⁸⁷ Discipline fell apart as the immense size of the army forced individuals to ignore their orders. Troops were compelled to leave their units to seek out booty from the countryside. In this way, "supply trains" were mixed in with the marching columns, and, in the words of Faber du Faur, "the whole [thing] resembled more the exodus of an entire people than the finest army of Europe commanded by the greatest captain of the age."⁸⁸ Soldiers and officers from many of other national contingents document the same collapse of discipline in their own memoirs.

⁸⁷ North, Faber du Faur, 3.

⁸⁸ North, Faber du Faur, 11.

Adrien Jean Baptiste François Bourgogne was the son of a cloth merchant. He joined the French army at the age of twenty and rose to become a sergeant. He was the veteran of nine campaigns, including the catastrophic march on Russia. A commoner, he presents a unique view of the decline of the army. The Sergeant watched as soldiers of “every nationality” competed for position in the wagon convoy. “They hurried forward in the most unheard of noise, tumult, and disorder...[many] had got their carts all smashed.”⁸⁹ Bourgogne also noticed that its multinational character often led to conflict between the common soldiers. He relates one story of near violence when he and a French officer, surrounded by a group of hungry Germans, were forced to threaten these would-be looters. After the Germans demanded their horses, “they took hold of his bridle, but Picart...said that if they did not leave hold of the bridle he would cut their faces for them with his sword, and he drew it out of his sheath.”⁹⁰

The problem of discipline only grew worse during the campaign. Faber du Faur tells us of the crossing of the Borysthene River, an ordeal that quickly degenerated into chaos. “The crush was horrific as troops, guns, and wagons all sought to get to the ramps and get over first. There was considerable disorder and no one saw fit to try and impose some discipline on the multitude.”⁹¹ This same disorder would ultimately doom thousands at the crossing of the Beresina River in November of the same year. It continued to plague the army through the occupation of Moscow and subsequent retreat. Faber du Faur recorded several instances of soldiers, fed up with dragging wagons and supplies, simply abandoning them along the road. Instead of waiting for the rearguard to

⁸⁹ Paul Cottin, Maurice Henault, *The Memoirs of Sergeant Bourgogne: 1812-1813* (London, Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1899) 56.

⁹⁰ Cotton, 188.

⁹¹ North, *Faber du Faur*, 24.

destroy the supplies (thereby preventing them from falling to the Russians), some made rash decisions to rid themselves of the burden immediately. Faber du Faur writes, “A mounted gendarme rides up and fires his pistol at [the caisson] in order to set it ablaze. It explodes, costing the gendarme his life and burning a number of men most horribly.”⁹²

(See Figure 10)



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Figure 10 shows the carnage resulting from the Grand Army’s disorderly retreat from Moscow. Looking to save time, a cuirassier fired his pistol at a discarded caisson, killing himself and a score of the men around him (in addition to causing further congestion along the retreat path).

The weather worsened as the Grand Army finally reached a deserted Moscow. Short on supplies and stinging from the French defeat at Tarutino, Napoleon commanded his army to march to the south-west. As the retreat continued, the divisions by nationality in the Grand Army became more apparent. Regiments and countrymen looked out for their own. The army degenerated almost to a group of armed gangs. As winter arrived,

⁹² North, *Faber du Faur*, 72.

⁹³ North, *Faber du Faur*, 72.

warm shelter became a rare commodity. The night before the crossing of the Beresina, Faber du Faur recorded the fighting at Imperial Headquarters (a hastily abandoned village). “There was no food. Soon fighting broke out – not, as one might expect, for space within the houses but for the houses themselves.”⁹⁴ Soldier fought soldier within the army. Maddened by cold, various groups actually destroyed the shelters of others for firewood. On the very next day, the army’s lack of discipline led to tragedy. As the remnants of the Grand Army waited to cross the Beresina, the pursuing Russians drove back the insignificant rearguard and were able to bombard the packed fugitives. Panic led to confusion, and one of the bridges collapsed under the extreme weight. “Any attempt to repair it was frustrated by the subsequent disorder and confusion. A single idea took hold of the crowd...to reach the bridge...they were prepared to crush every obstacle and force their way past anyone.”⁹⁵ The Russians continued to attack the crowd with their artillery, and the crowd, instead of organizing a coordinated defense, focused only on crossing the river.

The condition of the Grand Army continued to degenerate. By December, as it approached Poland, it was completely unrecognizable as the greatest army ever to have been assembled. Faber du Faur recorded its sad new state. “The strongest pillaged the weakest. An instinct for self-preservation had snuffed out all traces of humanity in the human heart.”⁹⁶ The army had truly become a collection of armed marauders, completely lacking in discipline and order. (See Figure 10)

Another German from Württemberg, Jakob Walter, was a private, conscripted into Napoleon’s Grand Army. His memoirs detail more of the conflict between the

⁹⁴ North, *Faber du Faur*, 85.

⁹⁵ North, *Faber du Faur*, 86.

⁹⁶ North, *Faber du Faur*, 89.

different components of the army. While eating some of the scarce bread available on the campaign, Walter writes that “Several Frenchmen saw me...and bolted at me, so that I thought my death was near; but through some extraordinary chance there came along some Germans, whom I now called to my aid...most of the Frenchmen fell back from me and then were entirely beaten off.”⁹⁷ The conflict between nationalities was fierce and constant.



Figure 11 shows the complete lack of military discipline remaining in the Grand Army by early December of 1812. Traveling in armed bands, the powerful took advantage of the weak and dying.

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Heinrich von Brandt was a lieutenant in the Vistula Legion, a Polish regiment that fought for Napoleon in both Spain and Russia. As a junior officer, he was witness to many of the privations of his fellow soldiers, in addition to the general decline of the army. He relates the loss of discipline within his own regiment, mentioning that the desertion rate was so high, that the battalion could not stick to strict military law. “We

⁹⁷ Marc Raeff, *The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier: A Unique Eyewitness Account of the Face of Battle from Inside the Ranks of Bonaparte's Grand Army – Jakob Walter* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 65.

⁹⁸ North, *Faber du Faur*, 89.

used methods more appropriate to the situation,”⁹⁹ wrote von Brandt; they relaxed the harsh rules. As the Legion advanced towards Russia, they were forced to find their own food. He met an officer stationed in Poland who was able to recount the horrors of the looters on the march. “He recounted unpleasant details of atrocities committed along the line of march and of the confusion and lack of discipline which reigned in certain parts of this immense army...Frenchmen, Italians, Württembergers, Badenens, Bavarians, even Poles, are plundering the country as they see fit...The Emperor must be blind to put up with such excess.”¹⁰⁰ Napoleon was seen as responsible for the failures in discipline and his soldiers were beginning to realize that he saw them as expendable. Each nationality was acting on its own, plundering the country to the utmost. And the army was so large that there could be no discipline. The veteran Jean-Baptiste Jolyet, a major, witnessed firsthand the collapse of the vast army’s command structure. “I mention these details to show what absolute disorder reigned at headquarters. Nobody knew who was in charge, and we hadn’t seen a single general since our arrival...It had been a junior officer who had given me my vague orders to advance.”¹⁰¹

The very size of the force that Napoleon had demanded in order to intimidate or crush Alexander’s Russia was actually destroying the Grand Army. With French forces already distributed throughout the Continent, Napoleon was forced to call upon his vassals and allies to provide men for an enormous army. However, he did not alter his supply tactics. He continued to rely on marauding and looting for the welfare of his army, a strategy which did not work on this scale. The army was simply too big and the

⁹⁹ Jonathan North, *In the Legions of Napoleon: The Memoirs of a Polish Officer in Spain and Russia: 1808-1813 – Heinrich von Brandt* (London: Greenhill Books, 1999) 188.

¹⁰⁰ North, *Heinrich von Brandt*, 192.

¹⁰¹ Jonathan North, “Nobody Knew Who Was In Charge,” *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, 84-89.

resources of the Russian steppes simply too sparse and widely distributed (and pillaged by both Russians and invasion troops). When conditions degenerated, the elements of the army turned on one another, with loyalties generally drawn by country. Antoine Henri Jomini, the great writer on the Napoleonic Art of War and chief of staff to Marshall Ney, summarized his views on the crippling size of Napoleon's expedition.

It was too big to work. Every possible provision had been made beforehand, but it was impossible to get the supplies to the troops unless they moved too slowly to achieve anything. To use an apparent bull, the invasion of Russia could only succeed if it never took place, in other words if the threatening attitude of an army in overwhelming numbers caused Russia to give way. Alexander stood firm, and his people supported him: provided that they did so, the invasion was bound to fail.¹⁰²

And so the Grand Army began its own destruction. But it was the Russians who dealt the finishing blows.

Elusive Foe

Given that the wars and revolutions of the Napoleonic era were mobilized by nationalists¹⁰³, it is not surprising that the great contributions of the Russians to the downfall of Napoleon's empire have been downplayed by British, French, and German historians. The French commanders set the tone for this disparagement, doling out praise only for the Cossacks.¹⁰⁴ They found the Russian weather to be a satisfactory explanation for Napoleon's defeat. By explaining the campaign's failure in terms of the weather, the French were able to maintain their own sense of superiority and virility in comparison to the "clearly inferior" Russians. No officer needed to worry about his reputation if he

¹⁰² Hereford B. George, *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia*, (London: 1899).

¹⁰³ This practice is related to the birth of "total war." Napoleon founded the idea of devoting a nation's entire set of resources towards war, an idea which was bolstered by national pride, i.e. nationalism.

¹⁰⁴ Austin, Caulaincourt's memoirs, 17.

claimed that disaster was unavoidable in the face of the Russian winter and the swarms of Russian Cossacks. However, we can see that the destruction of the Grand Army was brought about by the skillful strategy of the Russian army through an analysis of the performance of Alexander's troops and the few memoirs passed down by authors in Russian uniform.

The Russian performance was not just a matter of comparatively greater discipline in their army. It involved tremendous efforts of coordinating cavalry, artillery, infantry, and Cossacks in the face of a numerically superior foe.¹⁰⁵ One French officer reports the amazed response to the Russian retreats. "Not merely has the enemy vanished. He has left no trace to show which way he's gone...not even a footprint in the wind-blown sands."¹⁰⁶ A German general from Württemberg fighting for the Russians summarized their retreat from Smolensk in his memoirs. "Our retreat was one of the finest examples of military order and discipline. We left...no stragglers, no stores or carts...The withdrawals were carried out by horse artillery...covered by cavalry and light infantry...Any attempt to move around the position was reported by the Cossacks."¹⁰⁷ Amazingly, as the general reported, the Russians kept this up during most of the retreat. Some disorder was inevitable due to the length of the retreat and the huge losses sustained at the Battle of Borodino, but the retreat shines in comparison with that of the French. Even Joachim Mûrat was amazed, writing in a letter to Napoleon: "You have no

¹⁰⁵ The Cossacks often functioned as scouts and irregular raiders. They kept up a constant harassment on the French supply lines and stragglers.

¹⁰⁶ Austin, 150.

¹⁰⁷ North, *Faber du Faur*, 10.

idea of how the Russians are retreating: they leave nothing, absolutely nothing, behind.”¹⁰⁸

Russia won the campaign of 1812 because Alexander and his top commanders outwitted Napoleon. The Czar had been kept well informed by his network of spies and he knew that Napoleon planned on ending the war within a few weeks by a few successive battlefield victories. Alexander knew that Napoleon was hoping to avoid a long-term struggle, and so planned to extend the conflict for as long as possible. Napoleon’s supply network was not prepared for a long campaign and the political situation back home in France was too precarious for the Emperor to spend years away from home. Alexander planned on frustrating Napoleon and then waiting to exploit the mistakes of the French. He harassed the Grand Army at every step, while refusing to commit his forces to a decisive battle. Alexander’s grand strategy worked extremely well against a French army that was already devoid of supplies and cohesion. Caulaincourt’s memoirs record the mindset of Czar Alexander. “If the Emperor Napoleon makes war on me, it’s possible, even probable we’ll be defeated – that is, assuming we fight.”¹⁰⁹ Napoleon would come to be haunted by these words.

We can appreciate the Russian tactics used against Napoleon’s invasion force by studying passages from the memoirs of many of the same authors who were exposed to the horrors of conflict within the Grand Army itself. Faber du Faur, of the Württemberg artillery, detailed the Russian defense at the Battle of Smolensk. The Russian defenders abandoned the city to the overwhelming numbers of the French forces, withdrawing to the opposite of the Dnieper River. However, once across and relatively secure on the far

¹⁰⁸ North, *Faber du Faur*, 10.

¹⁰⁹ Austin, 18.

bank, the Russians kept up a withering artillery fire upon the attackers. The French lost their impetus while trying to march through the city streets. When Napoleon's forces were ready to attack the Russians, they gathered outside the city walls of Smolensk. Once there, the Russian artillery was able to use the walls against the French. Faber du Faur wrote, "Even if the missiles went harmlessly by, and we thought the danger over, a number of us were still wounded by cannon balls ricocheting off the walls behind us and once again falling into our ranks."¹¹⁰ The Russians had retreated to a more tenable position, forcing the French to fight from the extremely vulnerable ground at the base of the city walls. The memoirs relate several other instances of ingenious Russian fighting at river crossings. At the Beresina river crossing, Russian forces under General Peter Wittgenstein smashed through the French rearguard and were able to maintain a constant barrage on the packed fugitives, all attempting to cross the river. "Each Russian shell or round shot found a target, and swathes of unfortunates were cut down."¹¹¹ The harassment never stopped for the remnants of Napoleon's army. Groups of Cossacks were able to penetrate deep behind the French lines, cutting down troops separated from the main columns. "We were constantly harassed by bands of Cossacks...who threw themselves on stragglers or small detachments."¹¹² The able Russian pursuit ensured that the Grand Army would die on the steppes.

Denis Vasilyevich Davydov, born of Russian nobility, served as a leader of partisan warfare against the French rear. Although the Grand Army greatly outnumbered the Russian field armies, Russian leaders understood that they would need many thousands to defend their supply lines and to occupy conquered towns. Recognizing this

¹¹⁰ North, *Faber du Faur*, 30.

¹¹¹ Blaufarb, 184-185.

¹¹² North, *Faber du Faur*, 89.

vulnerability in the midst of the general Russian withdrawal towards Moscow, Davydov began organizing countless partisan raids behind French lines. Davydov sought to spread the resistance to all of the villages in the midst of the enemy. “I wanted to spread the word that troops were returning, strengthen the determination of the peasants themselves and persuade them to inform us of approaching enemy troops.”¹¹³ He instructed the peasants to fight the enemies in any way possible, even without weapons. “Receive them in a friendly way...put them to bed drunk and when they are properly asleep, grab all their weapons, and do what God has ordained against enemies of your motherland.”¹¹⁴ Russia had become a second Spanish Ulcer on a grander scale, thereby reliving Napoleon’s greatest fear. The memoirs of Sergeant Bourgogne also tell of the partisan tactics of the Russians. “We arrived half an hour afterwards at the place where part of the convoy...had been attacked by partisans...Early the next morning we resumed our march, and met at noon a party of Cossacks.”¹¹⁵ We can see that Russian Cossacks were determined to keep up a constant pressure on the convoys of the French, forcing Napoleon to assign large numbers of troops to guard the supplies or risk losing them to the constant Cossack threat. The partisans and Cossacks also pursued stragglers from the Grand Army. Bourgogne writes about weeks of wandering through the snow-swept forests and plains of Russia while trying to evade Cossacks. “We now saw two troops of Cossacks trying to surround seven of our infantrymen...We kept as much as possible to the forest...once we looked back, and saw two [Cossacks], one behind the other, about thirty yards off.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Blaufarb, 181.

¹¹⁴ Blaufarb, 182.

¹¹⁵ Cottin, 58.

¹¹⁶ Cottin, 156-164.

The Russians were prepared to use innovative tactics against the invading French. Sergeant Bourgogne detailed some of these in his memoirs. "As the head of our column charged into the Russian camp, we passed several hundred Russians stretched on the snow; we believed them to be dead or dangerously wounded. These men now jumped up and fired on us from behind...This was a stratagem the Russians often employed."¹¹⁷

The Russians were also prepared to abandon huge expanses of land to the advancing French forces. Following the grim determination of their Czar, the Russian armies retreated before the Grand Army in good order, carrying away or burning anything that could have been of use to the French. Unthinkable in earlier wars, the Russians even allowed Napoleon to occupy one of their greatest cities. Alexander assumed that the Grand Army would be destroyed in Moscow, divided by nationality and deprived of resources. An officer's letter home from Moscow details the horrible conditions that contributed to the death of the army. "We live by pillaging and marauding...[we] must forage two or three leagues from the main routes at the risk of being taken by Cossacks or assassinated by peasants...They say the Russian government burnt its beautiful capital to deprive us of resources we might have found there...but our soldiers certainly helped it along. Imagine drunken soldiers with lit candles, torches, matches ransacking wooden houses...Fanned by a violent wind, the fire lasted three days. One has never seen such a terrible, frustrating sight."¹¹⁸ A lack of resources and discipline, combined with the Russian retreat, destroyed the Grand Army.

¹¹⁷ Cottin, 109.

¹¹⁸ Blaufarb, 183.

Never So Many Before

The disastrous outcome of the Russian campaign sealed Napoleon's fate. It cost him hundreds of thousands of his best soldiers, well-trained veterans. The loss also ruined his aura of invincibility and superiority. A letter from Alexander's mother seems to sum up the general consensus of the campaign's immediate aftermath. "It seems to me that the spell has been broken as far as Napoleon is concerned, and that he is no longer redoubtable as he was in the past. He is no longer an idol, but has descended to the rank of men, and as such he can be fought by men."¹¹⁹ When the master of Europe stumbled and fell, every nation and group which resented his rule gained hope. For the first time in a decade, the future of Europe was wide open.

Napoleon had thoroughly discounted the possibility of popular uprisings within his empire. When asked to comment on the civil unrest in Germany, he replied:

There is no parallel between Spain and Germany. Spain would have been reduced long ago, but for 60,000 English,¹²⁰ for her thousand leagues of coast, and for the loan she has had from America, for England has no money to lend! There is nothing to fear from a cool and reasonable people like the Germans; if there was a movement, it would be for us and against the small princes.¹²¹

The German patriots were the first to rise up against the yoke of French rule. Still smarting from the humiliation of French domination, King Frederick William concluded an alliance with Russia by February 28th, 1813. Within two weeks, Prussia declared war on France. Sweden soon joined the coalition under Bernadotte. Britain's army, commanded by Wellington, drove Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's older brother, from Madrid. As the coalition grew in strength, France's allies in Germany and Italy began to waver. Austria had been a reluctant ally of France. The Austrians were wary of a strong

¹¹⁹ Zamoyski, 544.

¹²⁰ Wellington would have been thankful to command two-thirds of that total.

¹²¹ George.

Russo-Prussian presence in central Europe and decided to offer mediation and armistice to the French. However, when Napoleon refused, Austria joined the coalition.¹²²

Napoleon was able to raise a new army in an astonishingly short time, and he took the field by April of 1813 with a force of over 200,000 men. But his shortage of experienced soldiers and officers told. At the same time, the newly raised cavalry was inexperienced and mounted on horses of inferior quality. He tried to surprise the allies in an attempt to fight them individually and invaded Germany. Outnumbered two to one, Napoleon held his own for as long as possible. But in the end, he was forced to withdraw back across the Rhine. By November 1813, Napoleon was fighting a brilliant, but doomed, campaign against the invading allies with a force of just 40,000. Paris capitulated on March 31st, 1814, and Napoleon was forced into exile on the island of Elba, off the Italian coast. A year later, he would return amid scenes of patriotic jubilation. His final defeat came at Waterloo in June of 1815 by a combined British and Prussian army. He was then sent under guard to the island of St. Helena in the Atlantic Ocean, where he would die on May 5th, 1821.¹²³

¹²² Zamoyski, 545.

¹²³ Zamoyski, 546.

Chapter 4: Two Against Moscow

Were there any common themes between the campaigns of Charles and Napoleon that contributed to defeat in both cases? For example, is it always true that the same insurmountable challenges must face any aggressor rash enough to attempt an invasion of the Russian heartland? It would seem so, for the same obstacles met both of our conquerors: immense marching distances, the problems of supply (for both men and horses), the vast reserves of Russian manpower, and the indomitable will of the Russians when defending their homes against an invader. Perhaps it is simply true that there is too much Russia and too many Russians for such an attempt to succeed.

The two invasions, although separated by a little over one hundred years, can be characterized by several key themes. First, both Charles and Napoleon attacked Russia while at the peak of their power, both flushed with their previous success. As such, their defeats at the hands of the "backwards Russians" came as complete shocks to the states of Europe. But if we focus on three main ideas from the campaigns, we can see that their failures should have been anticipated. In the first case, Charles and Napoleon both ignored the greater strategic considerations of their invasions. Secondly, the Czars and their soldiers were not the backwater pushovers that Western historiography has made them out to be. And finally, both leaders made significant strategic blunders during the campaigns, often allowing themselves to be influenced by personal impulse rather than rational planning.

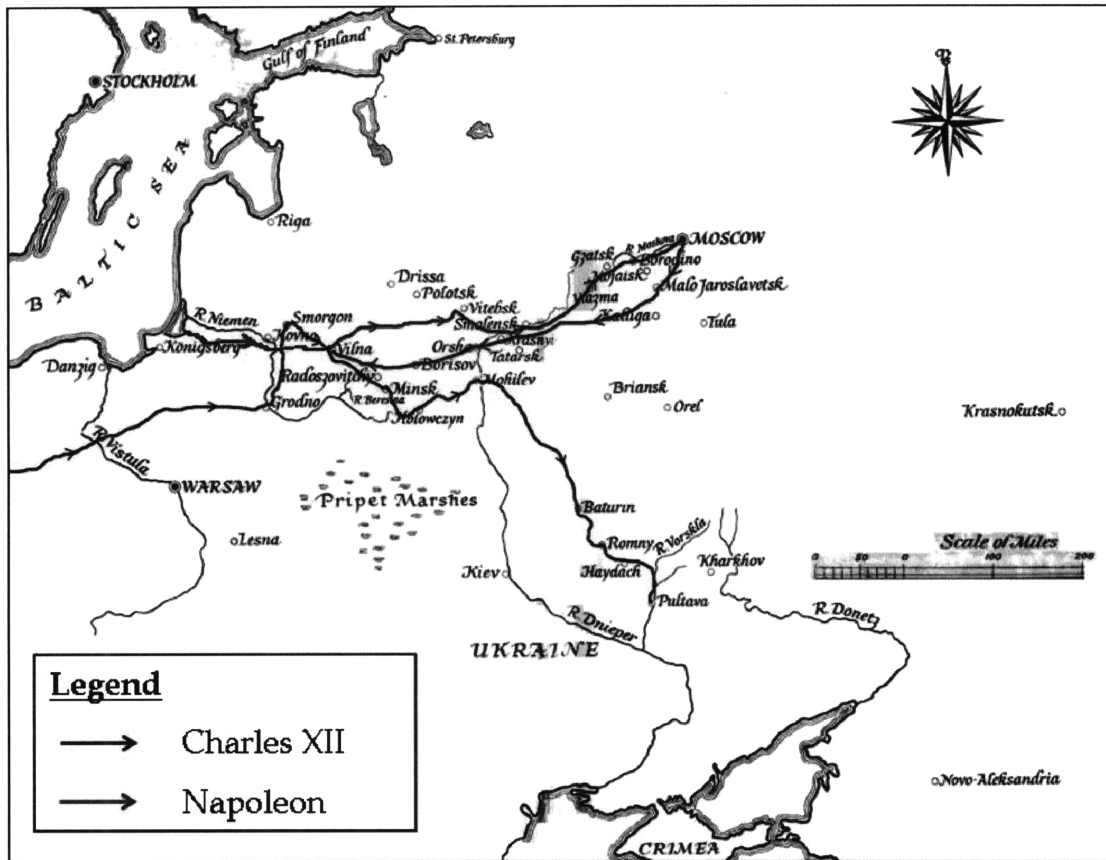


Figure 12: Map of the Russian campaigns of Charles XII (1708-1709) and Napoleon (1812)

Strategic Oversight

The first issue is that of poor planning and a lack of strategic consideration before the invasions. In both cases, the would-be conquerors started their invasions confident of success. Their reasons for this hubris varied. As is the way with men who think themselves superior to ordinary mortals, they both despised and underrated their enemy. Eight years before his invasion, Charles XII, with just 8,000 Swedes, had defeated a Russian army of 40,000 at Narva. However, he was unaware that Peter the Great had spent the intervening years transforming what had been a poorly armed rabble of serfs into a trained and disciplined army. At the same time, Napoleon dwelled on his easy

victories over the Russians at Austerlitz and Friedland in 1805 and 1807, respectively.¹²⁴

The emperor preferred to overlook the fact that Czar Alexander was both young and inexperienced, and far from his base of power on those occasions.

Neither Charles XII nor Napoleon was foolish enough to ignore totally the military problems presented by the vast distances to be traversed. And yet they both discounted them, believing that the key to success would be a swift and early victory, bringing a quick end to the campaign. They each hoped to conquer the enemy at the first chance, enter the Czar's capital, and dictate peace terms from his palace, after which they both expected to be able to march home at leisure. However, Charles and Napoleon both neglected to account for a Russian strategy of disengagement and withdrawal, one that would allow for the Russians to shorten their own lines of communication and supply, while forcing those of the invaders to be lengthened intolerably (long supply lines, of course, were extremely vulnerable as they stretched across hundreds of miles of hostile territory). Worse than these oversights was the overestimation, by both invaders, of the campaign-ending potential of Moscow's occupation. A retreat by the Russian government to a new city, such as St. Petersburg, would place it hundreds of miles (weeks or even months if attempted during winter) away from any invading army. The move would take place on a scale unavailable to any other European nation. In addition, there are always the vast and unconquerable wastes east of Moscow into which no invader would dare march.

Both men embarked on campaigns for which they were not prepared. The factors that led to these premature attacks were different for each of them. The Swedish king was essentially a warrior concerned with leading the fight, relying on pure charisma and

¹²⁴ Cooper, 3.

personal contact with his men. The French emperor, on the other hand, directed from the rear of the army, placing great emphasis on both strategy and tactical movements. Based on this, we might assume that their two campaigns took very different courses. But they both started on similar paths and Napoleon actually ended up making many of the same mistakes and miscalculations as his predecessor.

On the eve of his ill-fated 1708 campaign to reach Moscow and break the power of his rival Peter the Great, Charles XII of Sweden was twenty-six years old. In 1700, just three years after Charles XII assumed power, the alliance of Denmark-Norway, Poland-Saxony, and Russia had declared war on Sweden. Assuming that the teenage king would prove to be a weak leader, Charles's rivals united in an attempt to regain some of Sweden's extensive Baltic possessions. And so by 1708, Charles already had seven years of active campaigning behind him. He had embarrassed Denmark in a matter of months, trounced the Russians at Narva, and driven the Saxon elector Augustus from the Polish throne after several years of campaigning. His Swedes had acquired the reputation of being the finest infantry in Europe, a cohesive body of veterans with multiple campaigns behind them. The king himself was a fighter of exceptional courage, interpreting his position to involve leading his infantry in hand-to-hand combat rather than acting as director of their movements. Though no contemporary could have questioned his bravery and charisma, it should be noted that Charles never had any time to learn the art of war under a tutor. Charles first saw the enemy from the head of his own forces.

His genius was in battle, leading an infantry assault or a cavalry charge. He had little knowledge or experience of supplying an army. He knew much about fighting, but little of strategy, and even less concerning military intelligence. At the outset of the

campaign, Charles assumed that the Russian army was the same undisciplined mob that he had destroyed at Narva.¹²⁵ Victory would only require bringing that mob to battle and routing them again. Charles did not even bother with maintaining a proper staff, relying only on two revolving aides-de-camp per day, each of whom also had to command their respective units in the event of battle.

Charles also showed little foresight in the planning of his very invasion path. Focusing only on the knockout blow, the king chose to advance on the most direct route from Poland to Moscow, through marshes, innumerable river crossings, and far from his home territory and re-supply. Because of this choice, Charles forced his army to rely on the barren countryside for provisions, while money, arms, and uniforms were nearly unobtainable. We might again blame this error on his lack of experience. Because Sweden was always a relatively impoverished state, her king had relied on plunder during his earlier campaigns in Denmark, Poland, and Saxony with great success. But the devastated Russian countryside yielded a much poorer harvest.

Following the Russian defeat at Narva, Charles's generals and advisors expected him to follow up on his success by punishing Russia and removing this powerful threat to his Baltic possessions. But Charles, thinking the Russians spent, chose to embroil his army in the affairs of Poland and Saxony. His utter disregard for the Russians as fighters would lead to his downfall. Charles had defeated a much larger army at Narva. But, seven years later, he would no longer be facing the same Russian army. Peter, who had fled from his army immediately before the battle at Narva –allegedly to bring up reinforcements – was dismissed by Charles as a coward.¹²⁶ Charles did not understand

¹²⁵ Cooper, 27.

¹²⁶ Cooper, 26.

that the courage and physical strength of a commander were no longer of great consequence to eighteenth-century warfare. He also failed to realize that Peter's ultimate goal was to acquire territory that could act as a window to the west. By leaving his provinces unguarded for seven years, he allowed the reinvigorated Russian army to do just that.

Given that Charles had missed his initial opportunity to pursue the Russians following their defeat at Narva, Charles would have done much better to follow a northerly route through the Baltic provinces, culminating in a siege of the newly built St. Petersburg. He would have been able to cover his valuable Baltic territories, while staying within range of the Swedish fleet, reinforcements, and a reliable source of supplies. If he had been able to take St. Petersburg, he would have destroyed the namesake pride of the Czar. Russia's only link with the rest of Europe would have been broken. Having gained this grand point, Charles would have been able to dictate a most favorable peace, the other Russian capital notwithstanding.

In the spring of 1812, Napoleon gathered his ten army corps, a force of almost 600,000, in a wide arc from Konigsberg to Warsaw. The French armies covered a distance of about 300 miles, and Czar Alexander and the Russians could make no guess as to which line the Grand Army would take. The invaders again had the choice of a northern thrust to St. Petersburg or a central advance through Smolensk towards Moscow. Napoleon's plan was remarkably similar to that of Charles. His strategy was to march straight on Moscow and, in the course of that march, bring the Russians to battle and destroy them as soon as possible. He would then occupy the capital and, from there,

dictate peace terms. He was resolute on this point. He would discuss peace nowhere else. He had the advantage of numbers, initiative, and, until he chose his direction, surprise.

The campaign seemed ill-advised from the start. His trusted advisor and former ambassador to the Russian court, Caulaincourt, warned him against an attack, pointing out that Alexander was prepared to sacrifice everything to resist the invaders. The distances were tremendous and the supply problem real. In addition, Wellington's Iberian ulcer continued to bleed the strength of Napoleon's empire. For years, the British, Portuguese, and Spanish partisans had resisted French conquest. And for years, Napoleon had found it necessary to direct the Spanish campaigns from a distance, his attention required by other conflicts. But his marshals were unable to pacify the peninsula, a task which required Napoleon's presence and personal impetus more than anything else. Instead of securing his backyard, however, Napoleon allowed Alexander's abandonment of the Continental System to drive him to war on the far side of the continent. And so he gathered the forces of all Europe to punish his impudent ally.

The ultimate madness was about to begin. All through 1811 and the early months of 1812, the depots and the stores and the magazines were moved steadily eastwards, and the greatest soldiers in the world, who for his entire career had preached and practiced the supreme military virtue – Concentration – prepared to march one wing of his army to Moscow, while the other hammered impotently at the gates of Cadiz.¹²⁷

During the retreat of the Russians, Napoleon hoped to prevent the unification of the two armies under Barclay de Tolly and Bagration. Barclay held command over the larger force to the north, while Bagration had charge over a smaller body south of the Pripet marshes. Unfortunately for Napoleon, while the main body of the Grand Army

¹²⁷ A. G. MacDonell, *Napoleon and His Marshals* (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1934) 238.

pursued Barclay's army, he gave his brother Jerome the task of using his corps to corral Bagration and prevent his linking up with the rest of the Russian army. Jerome, placed in command solely out of nepotism, was both inexperienced and incompetent. He allowed Bagration's force to slip away and was immediately removed from command. But the damage was already done and the Russians were allowed to join forces. The entire campaign may have been saved if a more competent corps commander had made it possible for Napoleon to defeat the Russian armies in detail during the first month of the invasion.

The Grand Army was huge and full of new recruits from all over the French empire, but it contained a nucleus of non-commissioned officers and men who had entered capitals throughout Europe and fought in many victories. Napoleon's corps commanders were thoroughly familiar with his command and his tactics. The Grand Army also had an incredibly efficient system of orders through Napoleon's great chief-of-staff, Berthier. However, although Napoleon had chosen his most trusted French troops to spearhead the thrust, the Grand Army consisted of a hugely varied body of troops, a factor which made the entire army difficult to control as a single unit.

From the very beginning of the campaign, Napoleon found himself with a critical supply problem. Like Charles, he was used to campaigning in the fertile areas of Central Europe, where plunder and provisions presented themselves in easy range of foraging parties. Such a huge army must necessarily have exhausted the meager resources of western Russia. So while the advance guards were able to scrape by, the rest of the army slowly starved. Compounding the discipline problem of a multinational force, and with supplies short and wagon-trains far to the rear, Napoleon's army was forced to forage and

loot for themselves, with units competing for meager pickings. These foraging parties were also easy prey for roaming Cossacks and Russian cavalry patrols. The Russians, greatly outnumbered, withdrew in the face of Napoleon's advance, exacerbating the supply problem by constantly refusing battle and extending the campaign.

This absence of reliable supply systems would ultimately lead to catastrophe for both Charles and Napoleon. Earlier in their careers, the two generals had functioned effectively without a need for elaborate logistical support. They were exceptional for their time periods in choosing to campaign without a formal supply chain. Charles and Napoleon faced several critical problems because of this. First, soldiers, and especially mercenaries, often mutinied when not well supplied, sometimes paralyzing armies at pivotal junctures. Allowing soldiers to forage for themselves also carried the risk of widespread desertion. Regular logistical commands allowed generals to exert greater control over their men by making them more reliant on the army food and clothing.

At the same time, because the costs of rebuilding an army after a large battle were so great, some commanders simply relied on maneuver to evade their enemies, hoping that the other army's food and money would run out, leading to mutiny, desertion, and an almost costless victory. A third problem associated with a lack of a formal logistical structure was the effect on the prosecution of the war itself. If an army had to rely on plundering the local economy for supplies, its movement and strength become dependent on that often unpredictable means. Strategy for these armies was always subordinated to supply concerns. Finally, armies without sound logistics are highly vulnerable to cautious and patient enemies, especially ones willing to trade territory for time, as were the Russians of Peter and Alexander.

Russian Competence

It is important to recognize that our current historical record concerning the Russian defense of their homeland has been written almost entirely from English and French sources. Western writers continually sought to discount the role of the "backwards Russians" in any martial venture, including the ultimate defeat of both Charles and Napoleon. And so we have the legend of the Russian winter, because "the Swedes and French were so clearly superior to their eastern rivals that only fortune could have swung the balance in favor of the Russians."¹²⁸ Although both invaders vastly underestimated the Czars, the fact remains that their armies were defeated by the Russian army.

When Charles crossed the Vistula at the end of 1707, Peter had good reason to tremble. The Swedish host was large and powerful, a body of undefeated veterans. But Peter was prepared to lay everything on the line to strengthen his empire. His strategy revolved around the Zholkiyevski plan, which called for a total avoidance of conflict in Poland, focusing instead on withdrawal and the scorching of all regions through which the Swedes could be expected to advance. The march of Charles would be further delayed through the destruction of roads, bridges, and by armed resistance at carefully selected points. Peter even called for the creation of a vast desert zone, encompassing almost 120 miles along the Russian border, a zone devoid of both men and provisions. The strategy was brutal, but it was designed to save the homeland at any cost.

Even before carrying out this policy, Peter had proven himself to be a strong and capable director of Russian strategy. With Charles occupied in Poland, in 1703 Peter was able to seize Ingria, where he began to build his new capital of St. Petersburg. It was during this same period that the czar launched his indefatigable efforts to transform his

¹²⁸ See quotes of Charles, Napoleon, von Clausewitz, and Frederick, 12, 23, 30 above.

motley army into one that would ultimately destroy the Swedes at Poltava. Although we can assume that the Swedes did in fact defeat a numerically superior force of inferior training at Narva, we should not take the story of a Russian horde of barbarians at face value. Firstly, our typical western sources will have emphasized the backwardness of the Russians. But at the same time, it suited Peter to depict his army at Narva in the same terms. For it was basic to the myth, launched by Peter himself, of Peter the Great, the czar who first opened the window on the west and dragged Russian into the modern world. Even so, Peter did go to great lengths to both modernize the organization of his army and increase the professionalism of his soldiers. Peter was able to prise open the Swedish grip on all of the Baltic possessions (save the large cities) because of these tireless reforms.

Not only was Peter able to reinvigorate his own army, but he also played a much shrewder game of diplomacy in the Polish sphere than Charles did. He promised financial and military aid to any faction within the commonwealth that had common cause with Russia, namely hostilities with Sweden. Peter was anxious to ensure that Poland remained the main theater of war for as long as possible. Peter similarly placed much greater emphasis on strategic planning and military intelligence than his Swedish rival did. And so while Charles decided to turn south and advance farther into enemy territory, increasing the distance between himself and his supply train, Peter recognized this blunder and understood the critical supply situation of the Swedish army. Peter pounced on this opportunity and took advantage of his interior positioning to pounce on the Swedish reinforcements and supplies with vastly superior numbers. He seized the opportunity and sent a small force to shadow the main force under Charles, at the same time committing a larger force of dragoons and mounted infantry to harass the supply

train. The loss of these supplies actually forced Charles to turn away from Moscow to advance south to search for forage and provisions, buying Peter enough time to force the favorable showdown at Poltava.

In the same way as Peter, Alexander was no great general. He made up for his lack of tactical command with his gift for overall strategy and direction of the war effort. Unlike Peter, however, Alexander did not prepare beforehand for the invasion. Whereas Peter was able to organize his military for eight years while Charles fought the Saxons and Poles, Alexander had only a few months of deteriorating relations to get ready for war against the French. The initial strategy was dictated by survival, meaning retreat until they had sufficient numbers and position to give the Grand Army a fight. Serious engagements took place at Smolensk and Borodino. Although the French won both of these battles, the Russians were not routed and withdrew with order. As Napoleon progressed into Russia, the numerical advantage of his advance forces lessened due to exhaustion, casualties, and garrison duty. Alexander's armies, in contrast, continued to grow as men were recruited and a truce was called with Turkey (allowing for the release of 60,000 soldiers from the southern front).

Czar Alexander promised when Napoleon invaded Russia that the campaign would end with one of them losing their empire. He was determined that it should be the French emperor and was ready to withdraw to the Pacific in order to ensure that. So when Napoleon occupied Moscow, Alexander was not fazed, choosing instead to calmly withdraw his government to St. Petersburg. At the same time, he exhorted the Russian people to resist the invaders, giving them arms and advising them to refrain from trading with the aggressors. With the city in flames around him, Napoleon waited for Alexander

to reply to his suggestion for peace terms. But the czar made no move; he did not even reply to the note from Napoleon. Alexander knew that the French, without shelter or provisions for the long winter, must soon retreat. The Russian general Kutuzov made Alexander's silence even more maddening by occasionally sending hopeful notes to the emperor. Because Napoleon knew that the failure of his campaign would seriously jeopardize his entire alliance system, he was forced to extend his stay in Moscow and wait for terms.

By mid-October, Napoleon's Grand Army was on the retreat. Alexander instructed his generals to destroy the retreating forces. He dispatched Cossacks and partisans to pick off foraging parties and disrupt supply and communication lines. To his regulars, he issued commands to pursue the Grand Army, forcing the French to commit an entire [greatly weakened] corps to the defense of the rear. The Russians again chose to defend carefully chosen tenable positions through which they knew the French would try to pass. The war nearly ended at the crossing of the Berezina River, when the Russians converged on the newly constructed bridges from all sides. Only the leadership of Napoleon and his marshals saved the remnants of the Grand Army that day. As Napoleon continued his retreat, Alexander committed the entire force of the Russian army and his Cossack forces to the liberation of Napoleon's empire, making good on his earlier promise to dethrone the emperor.

Campaign Blunders

Both of our great conquerors committed blunders-some minor, some grievous-on the campaign trail. As we might expect, the generals were in their element on the

battlefields and neither Charles nor Napoleon made many mistakes while fighting (they could not have afforded such mistakes so far from reinforcements). Their missteps, then, were largely strategic.

The start of the summer of 1708 saw Charles and his army on the Dnieper River, at the western edge of the Russian empire. Low on supplies, the Swedes were forced to break camp. Instead of marching towards Lewenhaupt's supply train, Charles, impetuous and headstrong, decided to attack the Russians directly. Unfortunately for Charles, Peter commanded his own armies to fall back before the Swedish advance, leaving a smoldering and ravaged land in their wake. Charles continued the advance, while Peter was happy to order withdrawal, knowing that every mile which passed weakened the Swedes and strengthened the position of the Russians.

By August, Charles was resting his army at Mohilev, hoping that Lewenhaupt would be able to catch up to the main force. This was the closest he would ever get to occupying Moscow. His army was low on water, food, fodder, horses, and ammunition. With his army unable to wait any longer for supplies, Charles was again forced to abandon his camp. Unwilling to concede any form of defeat, the Swedish king decided to march south rather than link up with the supply train. Although the plan was based on the fact that the Ukraine was fertile, untouched by the war, and likely to sympathize with the Swedes, Charles blundered in leaving his reinforcements even farther to his rear. By marching away from Lewenhaupt, he consigned his supply train to destruction. The Russians pounced on the opportunity to attack the relatively lightly defended wagons, and the Swedish defenders were forced to burn the wagons before marching on to unite with Charles.

In the beginning of May, 1709, the Swedish army lay outside the fortress of Poltava. Convinced that retreat was not an option, Charles had decided to draw the Russian army (which now outnumbered his own by about 80,000 men to 20,000 men) into open battle. The Swedes were forced to besiege the town because Charles knew that if he was to advance, he would be faced with more scorched earth and harassment from the Russians. His only chance, he realized, was a pitched fight. And so the Swedish army invested the town, though without enough ammunition to seriously consider taking it. In fact, Charles only allowed for five rounds a day to be fired into the town. He committed his army to an attack which it could not hope to win and rendered it immobile and vulnerable to Russian counterattack.

Looking at these three strategic choices of Charles, we can see three points during the campaign at which the war may have been saved for Sweden. Given that the entire invasion of Russia was most likely a mistake, Charles may still have conducted his campaign in a more promising manner. By continually advancing into Russia, Charles deprived his army of the much-needed supplies and reinforcements of Lewenhaupt's baggage train. Left without these supplies, Charles was forced to look south to the fertile Ukraine¹²⁹, which again drew him farther from Lewenhaupt and any other sources of Swedish aid in Poland, the Baltic States, or Sweden itself. When Peter preempted Charles's march to the Ukraine, the Swedish army was denied any chance to rest in well-stocked winter quarters. The harsh winter took its toll on the Swedes, and Charles was forced to fight with the extremely unfavorable odds of Poltava. All of these blunders were derived from Charles's refusal to consider a halt in his advance on Moscow. Had

¹²⁹ Harold Winters, *Battling the Elements*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 86.

Charles been able to avoid the near-total annihilation of his army, he almost certainly would have been able to preserve much of the Swedish empire.

Much of Napoleon's error was due to the same single-minded focus on advance. From the very start of the Russian campaign, the entire Grand Army was charged simply with trailing after Murat, whose cavalry pursued the fleeing Russians. The breakneck pace exhausted men and horses. At the same time, the intense speed prevented foraging throughout the vast country. By July, men were falling out of Napoleon's columns from hunger and fatigue, with horses dying by the score every day. 400 miles into Russia, the Grand Army had reached Smolensk, where it seemed that Barclay and Bagration were finally ready to make a stand.

Two days later, the French were shocked to find the walls of Smolensk deserted. The Russians had abandoned the city in favor of the far bank of the Dnieper River. Working under the assumption that the Russian army would defend the opposite river bank, Napoleon prepared his army for an assault and ordered Junot to take his corps across the river to hit the enemy flank. Junot did reach the enemy flank when he crossed the Dnieper, but he hesitated when he discovered that the armies were withdrawing rather than holding the bank. Napoleon was far from the scene, at headquarters behind Smolensk, and unable to give Junot the order to engage the Russians. Had the emperor been in closer touch with his leading corps, the war might have ended on the outskirts of Smolensk.

On September 14, 1812, Napoleon entered Moscow, undefended and nearly deserted. He waited a month for the czar to propose terms. Napoleon feared that withdrawing from Moscow before coming to terms with Alexander would encourage a

coup in Paris and might convince his allies to abandon him. He had not planned for the supply of his huge army for the whole winter. His entire campaign had been predicated on the assumption that he could defeat Russia before the winter. To Napoleon, his last chance to accomplish this was by holding Moscow for as long as possible. When the Grand Army finally began its retreat, the emperor decided to follow the same route back to Smolensk, assuming that Kutuzov would use his new command to contest any attempt to follow any other route. According to a British observer, General Sir Robert Wilson, Kutuzov was, in fact, about to run before a French advance. Napoleon had chosen to follow the Borodino route, already stripped by the advancing French and retreating Russians.

Needless to say, Napoleon's entire campaign fell apart once it became impossible to defeat the Russians by the end of the 1812 season. Napoleon never planned realistically for a multiyear effort, and so he drove his army to exhaustion in a shot at bringing the Russians to battle as soon as possible. By trying to use his superior numbers against the Russians so early in the campaign, Napoleon sacrificed the welfare of his men and horses, not to mention a stable network of supply and reinforcement. Forced by the tremendous size of the Grand Army to rely more than ever on the individual command of his corps marshals, Napoleon missed several chances early in the war to defeat the armies of Barclay and Bagration in detail before they were able to unite or retreat towards Moscow. Lastly, by pitching everything into an attempt to close the campaign by the end of the year, Napoleon committed his Grand Army to a fatally extended stay in the ruins of Moscow. By the time the retreat began, his men were fatigued, the army was without food, and, most importantly, the Russians were ready to pounce.

Brave New World

Following defeat at Poltava, Charles gathered the remnants of his army around a tiny village called Perewolczna. He hoped to renew the struggle against the Russians, but his forces were shattered, demoralized, and equipped only with their swords. Having realized that his army had no will to continue the fight, Charles only hoped to share in their fate. His officers, however, convinced him to seek exile with the Turks rather than see their king carried to Moscow as a prisoner. He reluctantly agreed, leaving the army under the command of Lewenhaupt. Soon after Charles left, Lewenhaupt surrendered the small army to the Russians. Charles, ever committed to his warrior's code, condemned his general's behavior, later writing "He acted against orders in an unsoldierly and despicable manner...for to show timidity as he has done is indefensible."¹³⁰

Even in defeat, Napoleon was busy planning ahead for his next campaign. When he left his army in Poland to return back to France, he issued his famous bulletin announcing the loss of the campaign and the Grand Army, ending with the oft-quoted, "The Emperor's health has never been better." As he had said once before, a man like him "troubles himself little about the lives of a million men." While some may scoff at such examples of egotism, Napoleon's health still meant something to France and to his veterans. Although some may have regretted his attempt to conquer Russia, few of his veterans ever wavered in their loyalty to the emperor.

Looking back now, after this study of the two failed campaigns, there are several themes in common to the disasters of Charles and Napoleon. Both men chose to underestimate their Russian rivals. At the height of their military careers, the invaders thought of themselves as invincible. Peter and Alexander were no barbarian pushovers,

¹³⁰ Nisbet, 290.

however, and committed their very formidable efforts to assuring the prominence of the Russian empire. Finally, because of these first two factors, Charles and Napoleon were forced to commit strategic blunders that led to the destruction of their armies. Our conquerors were brilliant, but, drunk on their power and success, they led their armies to destruction at the hands of the Russian czars.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Doubt and bitterness flourished among the survivors of the Swedish army following their surrender in the aftermath of Poltava. Lieutenant George Henrik von Borneman spent the next years in Russian captivity. He had served with the North Skåne cavalry. In 1711, still a prisoner, he wrote a poem expressing his longing for home his Sweden, his desire for peace, and his misgivings about the war.

For what, O Kings, do ye wage wars so great,
Waste men and realms and many lands despoil,
Spill so much blood, and murders perpetrate?
A hand full of dust, a fist filled with soil.¹³¹

George Henrik never returned to Sweden. At the age of 25, in the same year that the poem was written, he was killed while trying to escape.

Not many returned. Of the 23,000 made prisoner at Poltava, only about 4,000 saw their homes again. The few who did return found an altered Sweden. The nation they had left had been a great power, one of the mightiest in Europe. They returned to a land that was crippled and defeated, reverted back to the secondary rank it had once held.

Napoleon's France, too, had suffered a shattering debacle from which it could not recover. The losses of his forces were staggering: 125,000 killed in battle; 48 generals, more than 3,000 officers, and 190,000 soldiers captured; 100,000 killed by hunger, cold, or sickness; 75 imperial eagles and 929 cannon taken by the Russians (not including those thrown into rivers or buried).¹³² Philippe de Ségur has left a vivid account of the desperate situation in France following the loss of the Grand Army. In 1813, recently promoted to general, he was given exactly two officers and four noncommissioned

¹³¹ Englund, 251.

¹³² Curtis Cate, *The War of the Two Emperors: The Duel between Napoleon and Alexander, Russia, 1812*, (New York: Random House, 1985) 396.

officers to help him train 2,700 new cavalrymen. He recalled many cruel anecdotes from the time, including one that had been scrawled on the side wall of the Tuileries Palace, dominated by a statue of Napoleon atop a victory column.

Tyrant, hoisted on your stilt
If the blood you caused to be spilled
Could hold in this square,
You would drink it without bending down.¹³³

By the end of 1813, Napoleon faced a European coalition that included Russia, Prussia, Austria, Great Britain, and Sweden. By March 1814, the poorly coordinated allied juggernaut marched into Paris and forced Napoleon's abdication. The Napoleonic Empire was by this time no more than a memory, with every territory other than Eugene's Kingdom of Italy having declared neutrality or defected to the allies.

The failure of the Russian invasions of Charles and Napoleon proved to be important turning points in the history of the Russian nation. Following the Great Northern War, Russia had acquired a window to the west, respect on the European stage, and the beginnings of a Russian empire. After Europe's War of 1812, Russia acquired all of Poland and, more importantly, came to be recognized as Europe's savior against the Napoleonic enemy. No longer would any European nation be able to ignore the huge nation to the east.

Charles and Napoleon had not been defeated by the cold or the vast expanses of Russia, but by the active resistance of the Russian people and the resilient leadership of the czars and their generals. Seemingly invincible armies had been squandered due to the poor strategic considerations of their generals prior to their invasions of Russia. Blunders during the actual campaigns pushed their armies further towards defeat. The Swedish

¹³³ Cate, 397.

King and the French Emperor were both conquerors up to their Russian invasions, and, like Wellington and Voltaire, we all know the fate of conquerors.

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