

1812

Napoleons Fateful March on Moscow

A.Zamoyski

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At the battle of Borodino in September 1812, maybe the largest massacre of human beings up to then took place. At least as far as occurring within a mere twelve hour period. The reason was that two huge armies had been amassed within a very constricted area, exposing even the passive reserves to murderous artillery fire and consequent attrition. As the Russian forces withdrew afterwards, victory must be ceded to Napoleon, although the newly appointed Russian commander - Kutuzov, in characteristic manner claimed victory for himself, leading to celebrations in St-Peterburg, which came to a halt when news of Napoleons seizing of Moscow eventually reached the court.

The opulent splendour of Moscow impressed the invading armies. It was in many ways an oriental city with its brightly colored buildings and ubiquitous onion domes. At the time boasting of a quarter of a million inhabitants, most of whom had evacuated the city prior to the invasion. But the splendour was fragile, so much of it erected out of wood. Within hours, as a consequence of a combination of deliberate arson ordered by the relinquishing authorities and plain carelessness of the troops, the city was aflame, presenting an awesome spectacle, and a hollow triumph to Napoleon installing himself in the Kremlin.

Napoleon had clearly overextended himself, although he would be loath to admit it. The Grand Army he had formed out of the core of his own troops supplemented by divisions of his vassals and allies was meant not so much to be an instrument of conquest as a means of intimidation. Thus Napoleon was well aware that much of it was not up to par, but to his purposes quantity counted more than quality. He was also well aware that an Eastern campaign would be very different from the ones he had excelled in during his glorious past, when speed was at a premium, and the logistics of support was more or less automatically taken care of by a rich countryside. Thus he had in characteristic manner made detailed plans of support, turning the enterprise into a very unwieldy one, involving not only the fighting troops but huge deployments of secondaries. The Russian Tsar Alexander had at first been an ardent foe of Napoleo, but at the meeting at Tilsit been charmed, flattered and seduced into becoming an ally. The alliance was never that cemented, in spite of Napoleons entreaties and courting of his fellow emperor. The young Tsar was also pressured by his own to stand up to Napoleon, and his treaty with him, was seen by many as a capitulation not to say a betrayal. A bone of contention was Poland, which Napoleon had partly resurrected through the construction of the Grand Duchy of Warzaw, formed mostly out of territory reclaimed from the Prussians and the Austrains. A real resurrection of Poland would also involve reclaiming land from Russia, and here Napoleon waivered, not sure how much support to give to the Poles. After all he saw his main enemy as being Britain and he was loath to crush the Russians.

It was a reluctant Napoleon who decided to strike against the upcoming Russian em-

pire. He tended to take the long view, thinking of a confrontation between civilized southern Europe against the barbaric north. Where Napoleon earlier had conquered he wanted to act as a liberator, spreading the liberal ideas of the French Revolution resulting in new laws and the abolishment of feudal traditions. Thus the reverence for Napoleon transcended mere national concerns and his legend grew to exalted forms. But the Napoleon of 1812 was no longer the young man he had once been, although still in his early forties. He had grown plumper and speculations to the effect of an adrenological disorder weakening his drive are still rampant, nevertheless his capacity for work remained unaffected, although his flair for quick and decisive decisions definitely was impaired. In summary his ultimate end remained vague in his mind. Intimidation of the Tsar back into the fold, maybe even joining in a crusade against British India may have been one of the dreams that motivated him.

The Russian armies, initially under the command of the Tsar himself, were stationed in Vilna, close to the Prussian border, and provocatively so, in view of the Tsars insistence that Napoleon retire his armies to the left of the Rhine. The Tsar soon relinquished his command to Barclay retreating to St-Petersburg doing what he was best at, i.e. doing nothing, except being the Russian spirit made flesh. As Napoleon crossed his Rubicon - Niemen, the Russians retreated, maybe less out of design than out of caution. To take on the legendary Napoleon was a daunting task for which most general hesitated. Vilna was taken, and then the army pressed into Russia proper, eventually taking Smolensk, which in the process was reduced to ruins. The problem of feeding the army turned out to be a formidable one, and the supply-system, not perfected to Napoleons intentions, was not up to par. To some extent the land was scorched, but the real problem was its poverty and its sparse population, becoming even more pronounced as they entered into the heartland of Russia. In the former Polish lands there was always the possibility of dealing with the Jews, but no such intermediaries were at hand in Russia, where they had to deal directly with a hostile population. The conditions for the retreating Russian army were better, but not significantly so, experiencing essentially the same logistical problem. Horrible as actual combat may seem, apparently the privations of forced marches inadequately supplied appear less tolerable, and on both sides the soldiers were eager for battle, to relieve tedium as well as give release in action and strive for glory. The caution of Barclay and subsequent accusations of treason made his position weak and ultimately untenable, and very reluctantly the Tsar agreed to replace him with the old Turkish hand - Kutozov. A man already in his mid-sixties, informal in demeanour and clothing (although always making sure to wear all his medals), braggish and facially disfigured (a bullet having once severed the muscle of an eye, made the same sag).

After Smolensk there was only about 400 km to Moscow, which normally would be reached within eight days of marching. The lure was too great, or what else was there to do trying to engage the recalcitrant Russians into battle? One such formed at Borodino, and after that the passage to Moscow was unobstructed.

In spite of the conflagration there was enough supplies, although on the luxurious side, protected in cellars to sustain an army. Military discipline was, however, not the most exacting, and looting was rampant, often carried out by criminal opportunists. To attach yourself to a French officer was usually the most expedient way of achieving some measure

of security. The French, although used to Paris, nevertheless were impressed by the luxuries available, and many a man thought nothing of pillage, amassing furs and other fancy gifts for wives and mistresses at home.

According to reports Napoleon studied carefully his predecessor Charles XII, as recounted by Voltaire, yet he scoffed at the perils of a Russian winter, the first half of October being as balmy as back in France. But what to do? Napoleon waived but decided in the end that Moscow was not suitable for winter quarters, and decided on a retreat. In hindsight it turned out that he gave the orders of evacuations about two weeks too late. Up to the middle of October the lines of communication between Paris and Moscow had worked very fine, and those that decided to return to France early in that month encountered no problems (even Henri Beyle taking off on October 16, was not sufficiently distracted by Cossack attacks, to interfere with his reading of the collected letters of some notable female). Furthermore in the interim, while the French army had been reduced, the Russian army had gained in strength, as its ranks had been well-fed and supplemented. The passivity of Kutozov worked in his favour and he was not shy of putting the right spin to his lack of actions.

On the way to Smolensk the real ordeal started as the weather took a turn for the worse and soldiers began to freeze to death. Campaigning in winter had up to then never been an issue, and consequently the army clothing was designed for much more clement conditions. The booty taken in Moscow then came into good stead, as the various furs and women clothing were used as necessary supplements, turning the retreating army into a carnival of sorts, in which even some men were donning liturgical vestments as protection.

What happened then is history. The miseries of the French army were so insistent that the men had no ways to consider the future but needed all their ingenuity to survive the day. Hunger was a constant companion, and so was the cold. Excessive luggage was a serious impediment, and soldiers bent on making a fortune rather abandoned victuals than precious medals. Horses took a heavy toll, even during the initial period of invasion, and died like flies in the cold. (Horsemeat being a major source of sustenance, preferably sampled while the horse was still alive and warm. Regular cannibalism was not unheard of either.) The number of stragglers and hangers-on made for traffic jams, and the alternation of weather caused muds as well as icy slopes. It was going from bad to worse, still to us, remarkably the loyalty of the troops to the one whose sole responsibility it was to land them into the mess, seemed unaffected. It was felt that Napoleon knew what he was doing, and his legend was pervasive enough to give to the desperate undertaking a semblance of glory, while on the level of man to man, as always in dire straits, egotism and studied indifference to the sufferings of others, became the predominant strategies of survival.

The retreating forces were continually harrassed by marauding Cossacks, while effecting no military advantage to the pursuing Russians, produced certainly a psychological one. The Russians themselves were not immune to similar hardships, in fact those were only second to those suffered by the French. In every military entanglement the French got the upper hand, and in retrospect the inability of the Russian army to deliver a 'coup de grace' seems incredible. The passivity of Kutozov was felt as downright incompetence among his more able generals, who were dismissed by the commander. The Final destruction of the Grand Army did not happen until Vilna, when Napoleon deserted it for a quick

return to Paris and no one else in the Army had the ability to inspire confidence at the required level. Vilna, well-stocked with supplies, was abandoned. Officers and soldiers who had survived months of excruciating hardship could not take it any more, reluctant to rally. The wheeled Imperial Treasure, filled with Russian loot, and abandoned by Napoleon, was scattered in a foiled attempt to flee the city. Had the governor of Vilna simply taken the precaution of sanding the icy slopes leading away from the city, much could have been saved.

Napoleon compared himself to Charles XII, but most contemporary commentators makes a comparison with Hitler instead. The two have much in common, but the reputation of Napoleon rather grew in adversity as opposed to the one of Hitler. The atrocities of the German in the 1940's are well documented, but those lacked no precedents. The French behaved abominably in Russia as well, inspiring the hatred of the suffering civilians, and those who were unlucky to be detached and apprehended often had to suffer the most cruel and barbaric retributions of fury. Yet anecdotal evidence prove very little, no doubt the scope of the Germans almost a century and a half later was far more extensive, if not necessarily more cruel in depth. But just as in the case of the more recent conflict, officers, especially high ones, were treated with consideration and respect, while the common soldiers taken prisoner were left to expire after having been robbed and stripped.

It was remarked by the French that the Russian soldier was different. He was not a free man with the option of choosing surrender, but was conscripted essentially for life, and consequently had no alternative to stubborn resistance. Thus to fight the Russians one literally had to walk over dead bodies. As to the military elite it was as cosmopolitan as the French. Prussians fought on both sides, and the military historian Clausewitz was an observer on the Russian sides. Poles did as well, and even a few Frenchmen served the Tsar. In fact many a Russian officer were killed by Cossacks due to their habits of conversing among each other in French. The whole Russian court was Franchofied, with the Tsar himself boasting that he spoke French better than Napoleon (which may well have been true). Still the predominant mood was anti-French and a romantic idealization of the Russian peasantry accompanied with fears that the Napoleonic invasion might lead to their liberation from serfdome held the day. Those apprehensions turned out to be unfounded and 1812 became a nationalistic rallying point, enhancing the prestige of the Tsar, and cementing the forces of reaction and the sentiments of slavophilia.

Napoleon was a master of wishful thinking, deep down believing that facts could confirm to fantasy. When reality no longer followed the same trajectories as that of his imagination, he was done for. The invincible became a mere man, and as such defeatable. Less than ten years later he was dead, exiled in the middle of the Atlantic. Yet as noted above his failure did not detract from the fascination he exerted, to glory was added the darker lineaments of tragedy, its shadows lending depth to what otherwise would be merely a brilliant smooth surface. The author refers to an incredible story about a French veteran discovered by a Russian historian in the 1890's. The man had never returned to France, thinking that a France without Napoleon at the helm was intolerable. Instead he eked out a frugal existence in the Russian countryside, keeping a bust of Napoleon, as well as a miniature painted by himself. When the man died in 1894, he was reputedly 127 years old.

The defeat of Napoleon stemmed the military propagation of the ideas of the French Revolution, as well as reducing France to a second-rate power from which it will never be able to rise. It left Russia and Prussia as the main continental powers with disastrous consequences for the 20th century. Such are at least the concluding words of the author, after a long a detailed presentation of the actual march. As a work of history it is of the chronicle, drawing substantially on contemporary eye-witness sources. As to military analysis, I expect the author is as much of an amateure as the common reader, and apart from a few grand speculations, as above, the work is thin on historical analysis. Still the bulk of the book inevitably provides many an intriguing tidbit of information. One thing that should strike the reader, if not already thoroughly familiar with the case through the reading of 19th century literature, is the thin veneer of the Russian elite and its cosmopolitanism, as well as suggesting both the discontinuities with the subsequent Soviet State as well as the many seamless strains of continuity.

June 24, 2005 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se