

# Russia against Napoleon

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November 28 - December 24, 2010

We all know the story of Napoleons Grand army coming to grief during its long march to Moscow in winter. The grand army in tatters, the decline and eventual destruction of the French general turned emperor was a foregone conclusion. A classic case of hubris, fighting not man but nature, being finally cut down to size. Dominic Lieven begs to differ. It was not a case of Napoleon being defeated by nature impervious to human interference, a point of view proposed by Tolstoy in his classic work, it was on the contrary very much the consequences of the planned machinations of humans, although luck and fortuitous circumstances certainly played their role, as in all human affairs. As we learned early in school<sup>1</sup>, the Russians were able to use the scorched earth method, abandoning immense tracts of territory, because if Russia had any resources at all, it surely was the vastness of its territory. This was not the first time this had happened, we were all familiar with the attempts of our own king Charles XII to penetrate deeply into Russia a century or so previously being diverted to Ukraine and suffering through the harshest winter in centuries, his army literally being frozen to death, and thus an easy picking for the fresh forces of Peter the Great in the subsequent spring<sup>2</sup>. Indeed the well-known secret of every successful military campaign lies in the logistics of feeding an army, not in the heroics on the battlefield, although the latter may provide the ultimate motivation. The Russians did indeed take pains to deny Napoleon of resources, partly by burning the land, partly by constant harassing its vulnerable flanks and tails using their superior light cavalry to interfere with his foraging expeditions. Thus the Russians did not vacate the premises and letting nature take its course, they maintained an intimate contact with the French army, their overriding strategy being not to let Napoleon wage the war on his terms but to evade decisive battles, at which he was an undisputed master, and turn the war into a prolonged one of attrition. Another well-known secret of war is that in the end numbers will prevail, not isolated acts of brilliancy and courage. The loss of a shoe does not entail the loss of

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<sup>1</sup> I am still impressed by the thorough and not at all unsophisticated teaching in history we were subjected to as ten-plus year olds in the early 1960's in Swedish schools, or at least as it was delivered by our elderly teacher. Maybe the fact that I found in those years history to be my favorite subject, may have made me particularly receptive to the smallest of nuances and enabled me at that relatively tender age, supposedly the most receptive of all, to absorb and retain everything I learned.

<sup>2</sup> Or was it so easy after all? Did we not learn that the thwarted forces of Sweden fought valiantly against all odds, and had it not been for the tardiness of a certain general Lewenhaupt reaching for his pinch of snuff at a crucial moment of battle, the victory might have been ours. In the 80's a young Swedish historian (Peter Englund) made his name by publishing a popular version of his doctoral dissertation on the subject of the battle of Poltava. The trauma that battle had imprinted in my childhood, was strong enough even decades later to bar me from even considering consulting that book, and in fact I suspect that I will never be able to peruse it, infantile as those pains no doubt are.

a kingdom, the effects of individual acts do dissipate in the long run. This strategy of sustained retreat, pushed by the commander Barclay and approved by Alexander I, was not popular according to the author, but seen as simple evasion and humiliating cowardice abandoning the Russian heartland to the invading enemy. The fact that B. was not an ethnic Russian did not help matters, during this time of national awakening and Slavic xenophobia. He was replaced by Kutznov, an elderly and somewhat phlegmatic general, who had already earned his laurels. Kutznov, maybe because of his old age and lethargy, did continue the strategy of B. but was also given the opportunity to stand up to the great Corsican at Borodino. The battle did not go the way of the supreme commander and was more or less in the nature of a draw, and of course making a draw with Napoleon was by itself a triumph, and morally equivalent to a victory. The Russian army withdrew in good order and thus maintained itself, thus evading the ultimate goal of Napoleon - its total destruction.

Traditional history, especially as it is told to school-boys, is very much a history of battles and kings. As the Swedish historian and man of letters - Erik Gustaf Geijer claimed in the early 19th century, the history of Sweden is the history of its kings. Such traditional concerns are now looked down upon by the historian establishment, and the author with his traditional tastes finds himself outmoded. Still can modern historiography take as a point of departure such old-fashioned preoccupations? This is in fact the purpose of the present book, to give a detailed account of the battles that constituted the Russian war against Napoleon, and to do so from a Russian perspective. In fact, the Russians are the heroes of the book, they are constantly being lauded for their courage, their tenacity and their skill. Russia and Russians have traditionally been portrayed as Barbarians by western accounts, and especially for a Swede, or rather old Swedish school-boy (modern Swedes are very ignorant of their own history) this is very sobering and makes for an eye-opening reading<sup>3</sup>. Lieven, whose ancestors not only fought in the war, but also are mentioned (if with different spellings) in the book; writes with a mixture of a Keegan and a Kennan. With Keegan he shares an enthusiasm for military matters, a necessary pre-requisite I gather, when it comes to writing such a book, and a certain sentimentalism for the paraphernalia of military life (such as regimental uniforms and standards, and the antics of heroics in battles); with George Kennan a propensity for masterly miniatures of key players. Contrary to what most readers would expect, the disastrous march of Napoleon into Russia, what is generally known as 1812, does not present center stage in his book. Unlike conventional wisdom initially alluded to above, 1812 did not mean that Napoleon was crushed. His first attempt had failed, but he was ready for a second one, and did in a remarkable short amount of time generate a new army of impressive size. True, he had a real problem with replacing his lost cavalry, ironically finding new fresh horses turned out to be far more problematic than finding new men, and this would turn out to be a real disadvantage to him. Also, the fresh troops he was able to muster would not have the same experience as his old ones, and thus not be as fight-worthy. The quantity of his new army may be impressive, but perhaps more on paper than in the

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<sup>3</sup> Fed in my childhood on a rather patriotic version of our history, a fact nowadays much regretted, however natural; I did in those early years also experience a certain intellectual excitement when sporadically encountering accounts in which the Swedes appeared as villains.

field. Nevertheless he remained being a formidable opponent, who when allowed to fight his own war might in the end prevail. That Alexander I had rallied the Russian nation against an intruder, is one thing, you certainly could not expect less of a Czar (although Alexander and his adviser may have been more prepared for that invasion than one would normally have expected, due to excellent gathering of information (so called spying), and in this regard Alexander I showed himself superior to Stalin), but to pursue the enemy beyond the borders, was a far more controversial issue. The true greatness of Alexander was, at least according to the author, to clearly see that in order to crush, or even to contain Napoleon, a continued campaign was necessary, as well as understanding that Russia could not accomplish this on her own, but that she needed to seek the assistance of other powers, to overcome their reluctance and to form a viable coalition. In other words that as important as the military campaign was the diplomatic one. The great continental powers of the 18th century was France, Prussia, Austria and Russia. Britain, did, as the saying goes, rule the seas. At the edges were former powers such as Sweden and Spain, uncongealed states such as presented by the German and Italian fragmentations. and regional powers such as Holland and Denmark, which played but marginal roles. Napoleon had basically taken control of the German and Italian statelets, conquered Spain and defeated resoundingly the Prussian, humiliating them at Jena, and contained the Austrian and Russian empires. He was in position to impose on the British a continental blockade, which did serious damage to the economies of his clients and was thus very unpopular and hard to maintain. At its heights, he was only opposed by Britain, Portugal and Sweden, whose king Gustavus IV Adolphus was obstinately opposed to the French general, whom he considered being the manifestation of the great beast of the Apocalypse. His heroic resistance did Sweden little good though, during the temporary truce between Alexander and Napoleon, the former took the opportunity to extract Finland from Sweden in the short winter campaign of 1808-09. From a Russian point of view this amounts to not much more than a footnote, while to the Swedes it was maybe its greatest national trauma throughout its history<sup>4</sup>. The balance of power maintained for the larger part of the 18th century was upset. The natural allies of Russia was of course Britain, but also Prussia bent upon revenge. A more questionable ally was Austria, whose interests clashed with those of Russia in the Balkans, and which did not gladly look upon the ultimate goal of Russian expansion, namely the seizure of Constantinople and securing for that basically landlocked empire a secure access to the sea. An unexpected ally was Sweden. Bernadotte, who in an unprecedented move, had been elected as the Crown Prince of Sweden to succeed the issueless uncle of the disposed Gustavus, because as a former marshal of Napoleon he was expected to take a traditional pro-French stance<sup>5</sup> Bernadotte, however, felt in no way constrained by traditional Swedish policies but could take a more realistic point of view.

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<sup>4</sup> For the first time in centuries, foreign troops were marauding on Swedish soil. Memories of Russian atrocities lived on for generations in the affected areas, retold to me by my mother as confirmations of Russia's essential barbarity. From an objective point of view, this more than anything else, illustrates how spared Swedes have been from the ravages of wars, the actual damage done to the civilian population paling besides not only later civilian traumas but even to contemporary ones.

<sup>5</sup> Sweden and France had been allied since the Thirty Years War, and France had throughout the 18th century loyally supported Sweden's continental interests.

Giving up Finland as lost, his gaze was turned westwards (as that of Charles XII after his debacles in the East) towards Norway. The alliance with Sweden would of course be of only marginal importance to Alexander, who thereby could at least be assured that no mischief would be coming from the north, diverting his campaign. As events would unfold in 1813 and 1814, Bernadotte would prove to be a very cautious general, who reluctantly committed his forces to the defeat of Napoleon, or so at least it was seen from the outside. There were even rumors to the effect that he aspired to the French throne himself, and was playing double. Bernadotte, in spite of being a marshal, was, according to the author, a rather mediocre commander, and whose strength was rather administrative than military<sup>6</sup>. The crucial diplomatic task was to ensure the cooperation of Austria. To Austria, Russia appeared in the long run to be a greater threat than France, so any cooperation must be tactical. In fact Austria did send feelers to Napoleon, and only when those were repulsed, did it (slowly) move towards the Prussia-Russian coalition. They were able to provide a lot of man-power, but its army under the cautious S. would throughout the campaign move with caution and slowness, causing a lot of frustration.

Napoleon was not crushed, and did hold his ground on the theatre of war. Admittedly he made a few mistakes and lost a few battles instead of seizing the opportunity to destroy his adversaries. Had he lost his golden touch? Had the debacle of the previous season undermined his self-confidence? Mistakes are of course far easier to identify in retrospect than ahead of time. And in particular they are far likelier to be identified as such when part of a losing cause. Eventually his fate was sealed at Leipzig, an extended battle which could have gone either way. But when all is said and done in the long run superior material advantage will prevail<sup>7</sup>. Having defeated Napoleon in the East the next step was whether to pursue him to Paris. Alexander reasoned that as long as Napoleon was allowed to remain in power, lasting peace was impossible, at most a temporary truce could be hoped for, a truce he no doubt would exploit to rebuild his armies. The Austrians were reluctant to go along, after all it was not in their interest to have a France which was too weak. Maybe France would only be pushed back to its natural borders, as opposed to its historical ones, meaning that the German states on the west of the Rhine would for ever be incorporated into France<sup>8</sup>. Anyway Alexander proved himself to be an adept diplomat (much more so than a competent military commander, the illusion of which, to his credit, he never suffered from). The campaign of 1813 continued without interruption throughout the winter of 1814, in order to forestall any possibility of Napoleon regenerating. Paris

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<sup>6</sup> The action against Napoleon by Bernadotte was the last war in which Sweden took part, thus already during my childhood the nation could brag about not having been in war for a century and a half, a duration which will soon have been extended to two. We learned at school that the Swedish losses were negligible, and that was ascribed to Bernadotte's reluctance to bleed his army, keeping it for the final confrontation with Denmark, if any (unlike Russia) the archenemy of Sweden.

<sup>7</sup> One is reminded of the allied confession, that whenever their armies encountered the Wehrmacht on equal terms, defeat was inevitable, only when having the material advantage could they hope for victory. Something similar could be said for Napoleon, probably also in his decline, when allowed to fight on his own terms, he was in-vanquishable

<sup>8</sup> The concept of the natural borders of France did resurge during Versailles, Clemenceau claiming that Germany on this side of the Rhine were at heart more French than German.

was taken, Napoleon disposed to Elba, from where he soon would return, meeting his final destiny at Waterloo in 1815. The rest is, as they say, history.

This is the story in its outlines. To this the author adds a very thorough account of the various battles being fought, as well as some rudimentary philosophical reflections on the political consequences of the war, in addition to the introductory painting of the wide background material required one would certainly expect in such a work. To paint backgrounds and to philosophize belongs to the more pleasant occupations of an historian. Such require no hard archival works, only the wide reading of secondary sources. The merits of such are more literary than historical, and as such greatly contribute to the readability of any historical work. As a reader one is also on more common ground with the author, more likely to be able to question his opinions. Thus I will postpone a discussion of this for the end of the essay, and at the moment concentrate on the meat of the work, namely the detailed account of the prolonged campaign.

Battles are exciting, and although it can be easy and tempting to make fun of the propensity for such excitements, I should not forget that not only did I take great pleasure as a child in reading about Swedish exploits, especially during the Thirty Year War, but I am still able as an ostensible reasonable adult to be tickled by those long ago events, the consequences of which have long dissipated. The author is not immune to such sentiments. The Russians, with whom he obviously sympathize are presented in a glowing light. Their courage and their skill are constantly being lauded, and from time to time he refers to neutral observers of the battles to confirm his assessments. The Russians are not only lauded when attacking, even more praise is heaped on their extraordinary discipline in retreat. Not a single wagon was lost, every cannon was saved, nor did any wounded men suffer being left behind. Now the relentless presentation of one battle after another becomes after a while a bit tedious (could it be that I would have found it less tedious had it celebrated Swedish triumphs rather than Russian and Prussian?). It would of course have been less tedious had the author presented some kind of theory, some kind of more or less universal frame, in which to interpret those events. Then instead of becoming just one damned thing after another, they would have served as illustrative examples. No doubt there is a huge military theory of what is going on in battle, although one is often encouraged to suspect that such theories are only good for past wars and tend to be rather worthless as to future ones. If so, the author does not try to explicate such theories, and probably wisely so. Nevertheless by dint of constant repetition the reader may by osmosis absorb some rudiments of battle strategy. For one thing the position of forces is paramount in any battle. The task of a commander is to position his forces in an optimal way. The optimum depends on one hand of the terrain, of which he (when did we ever encounter a female commander?) may have some advance knowledge, and on the other hand on the position of the enemy, which to some extent is hidden knowledge to him, forcing him to rely on clever guesses and luck. When it comes to the actual execution of a battle, due to the limited communication technology of the time, the commander has only limited control. The total chaotic nature of a battle is often emphasized, which makes you think what makes a Napoleon stand out. Of course some kind of intervention is possible, after all orders are given and relayed, such as when to attack and when to retreat; but one suspects that much of a battle unfolds automatically given local conditions. In fact one

would hazard to assume that there is some kind of gradients defined by the terrain and position of forces, along which the action unfolds. In what does courage consist? It is one thing to endow it retroactively, but in actual battle, what is going on amongst the deafening chaos? What makes soldiers risk their life? Patriotic sentiment is the standard, somewhat exalted explanation, but closer scrutiny reveals that many soldiers have little choice<sup>9</sup>. One may speak of some kind of mass hysteria or simple dull automatic behavior, so called discipline, imposed by effective training. This incidentally points to the effectiveness of military pedagogy, much derided yet remarkably efficient. Obviously some very basic pedagogical insights have been formed and exploited by the military<sup>10</sup>. It is also pointed out that loyalty to fellow combatants play a far more crucial role than more abstract and ideological motives. Maybe this is why well-integrated units have evolved in armies, to which the soldier owes his allegiance. From a sociological point of view humans can only relate to rather small groups, anything else become abstract entities capable of inspiring lip-service but not much more. As Ernst Jünger explains in his war memoirs *Stahlgewitter*, a soldier has no overview of what is going on, his war does not really make sense beyond the level of the regiment. But to return to the battle. One is encouraged to view a battle as a kind of chess game, in which clever thinking play at least as much a role as sheer muscle. This view is of course an exalted one, yet it points to some intriguing facts. Chess games and soccer matches may well be seen as ritualized combat, and this of course is made very palpable by the latter. Yet such games need agreed on rules to work, while a battle needs no rules at all to unfold, after all the point of war is to break all the rules. How come there is nevertheless an agreement on what a battle eventually does? There is of course some kind of physical laws involved, war may transcend human rules but it is not able to flaunt natural laws. The trajectory of a cannon ball does after all comply to the laws of physics. A battle is a matter of applying force and the untold goal is to totally destroy the enemy force by annihilation. Now total annihilation is seldom the outcome of an engagement, before it is reached the losing side usually has understood what is going on and dispersed, literally running for their lives under more or less controlled forms<sup>11</sup>. Thus physical control of territory turns out to be consensually understood as victory. In other words, physical battle is not a social convention, at least not exclusively so, it follows its own laws, and evolves in accordance with physical circumstances, including the present state of technology, and basic human psychology.

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<sup>9</sup> The practice of shooting passive participants, dodgers and deserters, has been commonly applied, and may go some way of explaining the inexplicable.

<sup>10</sup> The somewhat controversial minister of basic education in Sweden, is a former officer, whose back to basic pedagogy has generated much expected derision among intellectuals. Yet he might have a point, most pupils may in fact prefer being spoon-fed seemingly meaningless facts, so at least when it comes to imparting such skills, mindless strategies may prove superior to more sophisticated methods.

<sup>11</sup> Much is made for courage and fighting spirit, but few normal human beings continue to resist, when it is obvious that resistance is pointless, and that death is inevitable. Capitulation under extreme circumstances is usually accepted by both parties, and to normal human beings, the killing of the defenseless is instinctively anathema. However, the sustained exposure to violence often dulls normal sensitivities. And from a purely physical point of view, due to the physical fragility of a human, it probably takes less overcoming to kill a human than a (large) animal.

Now the interesting point is why battles make a difference. Battles can be lost, yet a war can nevertheless be won. The significance of a battle relates to social convention in a way the outcome of a battle does not. Physical force is, as Clausewitz remarked if in other words, just an extension of verbal. In fact one may argue that verbal force is ultimately based on physical, meaning the potential of the physical. This is why wars will always be with us. Traditionally the guarantee of force is provided by the army. The point of battle in traditional warfare is to weaken and ultimately destroy the army of your adversary. When you have a monopoly on force, your verbal powers of persuasion are correspondingly enhanced. Alexander I understood that. In order to have a lasting peace (at least within the scope of an individual, i.e. for say a generation) you have to establish facts on the ground, to use contemporary terminology. But of course all of this depends on the social convention that the power of an army will be respected. As all social conventions it can of course be flaunted. An army can be totally victorious yet fail to cow the population. This happened in Spain to the frustration of Napoleon, and of course this is exactly what happened in Iraq. Military superiority is no guarantee for dominance, a population that does not acknowledge authority will not submit to it, but frustrate incessantly its workings. To make such a resistance succumb, such a level of violence is needed that it usually becomes infeasible. The wars of the 18th century have sometimes been likened to formal dances, subject to strict rituals, and conventions that acknowledged the authority of victorious armies. If carried to the extreme, war becomes indeed a sporting event, circumscribed and well-defined. Tolstoy opposed such wars as immoral. Only total war was justifiable to him, because war should not be entered lightly into, only if you are prepared to wage it with all possible force does it become necessary. As the saying goes, everything worth doing is worth doing well.

Now the book does not enter philosophical reflections on the nature of warfare, such were never its aims. Still one wonders whether not much of the presentation of the various ups and downs of the campaign would not have become clearer to the reader, would they have been presented graphically. One picture says more than a thousand words, although a wordless picture usually says nothing at all<sup>12</sup>. Of course to make such an exposition effective, a lot of pictures have to be designed, in fact it may resemble nothing as much as a serial album. I have never seen it done in practice, so of course my ramblings on the subject are mere speculations, yet I wonder whether it would not be worth being tried out. Mathematical formulas can of course always be clothed in words, but the formula itself, at least to the practiced eye, is far more efficient imparting the relevant information. In the same way verbal transcription of battles may be just cumbersome ways to relay rather simple, if eye-catching, information. This does not mean that verbal explanation is redundant, only that it can concentrate on more relevant things, just as mathematical formulas are always commented upon in a mathematical text in plain English (or whatever vernacular idiom happens to be employed.).

The most fascinating thing about wars (as with most other things) is what remains hidden to the eye. The brutal clashing of armies is what is apparent to the eye (and

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<sup>12</sup> The same criticism I have levied against Wilson's recent book on the Thirty Year War, in which the reader is subjected to a relentless barrage of trope movements and positions, Without a clear visual picture, such information means little to a reader.

the excitement) not the logistic support that is needed and the level of technology that imposes invisible strictures. Warfare has evolved over the centuries, and although it may not have become more horrible to the individual<sup>13</sup> it has become much more powerful on the collective level, capable of inflicting much more force and causing much more mischief than more primitive methods. Modern war can in fact become total in a very literal sense, and no longer restrict itself to mere battles in its operations. Reading the book one is made curious as to the technological level of Napoleonic warfare, in what way did it differ from warfare of the 17th century. Would a battle between an army of the Thirty Years War and one of the early 19th century be an even affair? The classical army consisting of infantry, cavalry and artillery would stand little chance against say a battalion of the First or Second World War due to the far greater fire-power of the latter. (Incidentally was it not the increasing fire-power of modern Western armies which made 19th century colonialism possible?). Yet, in very adverse circumstances, with difficult terrain, I would not be surprised would an old army stand up against a modern one. Under difficult circumstances rifles are useless, hence combat is waged with bayonets. What seems to distinguish an early 19th century army from one of the 17th century is foremost the size. In the Thirty Years War battles in which more than 20'000 men on each side participated seems to have been rare, also battles as a consequence were more concentrated in location, which probably resulted in higher relative casualty rates. Secondly the more modern armies were conscripted, while those of the Thirty Year War were mostly consisted of mercenaries, whose commitments were rather volatile. They might have been battle-hardened, but I suspect poorly disciplined. I suspect that the systematic training of armies was something that evolved during the 18th century (and one naturally associates to the 'toy-armies' of Friedrich the great, in which combat was conducted by automated units acting predictably), although I suspect that such training has evolved repeatedly during history, and that classical units of Greek and Roman times, were operating at a fairly automatic level.

Another question that naturally rises is what about the impact on the Civilian population. During the First World War the Civilian population was spared direct military force, there was a clear frontier and clear distinction between area of combat and non-combat; while the Second World War in the East was as much a war against Civilians as against combatants<sup>14</sup> Thus one tends to think of former wars as rather idyllic affairs in which the

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<sup>13</sup> Modern warfare as practiced by western forces may in fact be less traumatic to the individual soldier than ancient ones. Partly because of the improvement in medical care, but maybe more significantly due to the support each soldier enjoys. Rather than being alone with his combatants, he is now taken care of by support teams, whose manpower outflanks maybe with a factor of 2:1 actual forces engaged in combat.

<sup>14</sup> Clearly the French population suffered as a whole very little under the German occupation in the 40's. The country was administered by a very small German force. In other words the social convention referred to as above worked very well. The French suffered more during the First World War, which took a terrible toll on the young male population, and indeed war memorials of the First World War are more common in France than of the Second. Also ironically the French population probably suffered more after the Normandy invasion than during the German Blitzkrieg four years earlier. Similar claims can of course be made for the Benelux countries and Norway and Denmark, where the actual suffering was even less. Of course there were obvious exceptions, but those, to put it brutally, did not matter much statistically, as opposed to the case in the East.



civilian population was to a large extent spared. Yet of course an army has to be fed, and feeding in practice means feeding off the land. A polite term for this is requisition. A big army going through the land is bound to cause havoc, and the bigger the more havoc it will cause. The devastation of the Thirty Year War is legendary, in fact it took the German lands generations to recover. A city such as Magdeburg suffered far more devastation under Tilly than it did under allied bombings in the Second World War. Admittedly due to the relative restricted size of the armies involved, the swaths they cut were relatively narrow, so if a village was lucky it would not be effected. But of course due to the long duration, those corridors of devastations, tended to be space-filling. The Napoleonic war no doubt imposed a heavy toll on Civilian life, perhaps not so much directly after all, as due to the general disruption (such as caused by the continental blockade), and certainly was felt as close to catastrophic and induced a war-weariness that lasted for a generation or two. Still having your country occupied by Napoleon did not mean that your life was in danger, maybe not even that your freedom of movement was significantly curtailed. Literary and scientific exchanges continued unabated oblivious of borders. This may contribute to our sense that old wars were somehow idyllic. Wars were contained and not total. On this matter the book shows little light except obliquely.

Finally to the discussion of background and consequences. Russia was up to Peter the Great a basically backward country by Western standards, and up to the beginning of the 18th century Russia had no impact on Europe. The above mentioned Poltava in 1709 was the defining moment of the Great Northern War in which Russia would replace Sweden as the Great Northern Power. The immediate result of which was the construction of a futuristic capital (incidentally built on Swedish territory) and the creation of a thin elite, a large part of which was made up by foreigners. What strikes the innocent reader of the book is exactly the preponderance of foreigners in the army and the administration, mostly of German descent<sup>15</sup>. The ruling dynasty in time-honored tradition was also a foreign import. The events of 1812 catapulted Russia into more than regional greatness, and there was a cultural and scientific flowering, as the country came into its own, shedding, at least on the level of its elite, its essential backwardness. For people like me who grew up under the Cold War, it is hard to appreciate how much Russia as a nation was integrated in Europe. The revolution of 1917 induced an isolationist withdrawal, and the country became, so to speak 'Asiatic'. It was to many observers a regression back to barbarism<sup>16</sup>. The pre-revolutionary European integration is still not achieved except on a very superficial level as exemplified by rich Russian tourists, and I fear it is still have to wait for the distant future. But of course the events of 20th century have little connection to the Russian triumphs of the early 19th century, even if the latter spawned a cultural flowering and led to soul searching as to the true nature of Russia, as exemplified by Slavophiles and Westernizers, and a subsequent polarization of the intelligentsia. But in history, all kinds of unbroken chains of events can be identified in retrospect providing spurious explanations of almost anything.

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<sup>15</sup> The Baltic states, taken over from Sweden in 1721, were basically Germanic enclaves since medieval times. Swedes, except as imperial rulers, had little cultural impact.

<sup>16</sup> That political barbarism is perfectly compatible with a high cultural development is usually forgotten in spite of the glaring example of Nazi-Germany.

In conclusion the author has provided an intelligent and fascinating account of a crucial historical event, and although inevitably tedious in parts, he has transcended a mere chronicling of events by at least hinting at hidden interconnections and deeper significance below the surface appearance. Of course such an ambition has its pitfalls for a historian. Neat explanations have an irresistible intellectual charm and as such are easily embraced. Particularly charming in that respect is the observation of the author that the superior quality (and quantity) of the Russian horse, may have been what gave the Russian campaign its edge. There is nothing wrong in finding such observations charming, on the contrary they highlight the fact that the crucial lessons (as far as history teaches any lessons at all) are to be found in the seemingly inane and irrelevant, and that it is the duty of a historians to explore such apparently inauspicious trails, as long as one is aware that one such trail does not necessarily preclude the existence of others equally explanatory. History, if it is to transcend a mere reporting of facts, must impose some sort of order and perspective to achieve a narrative unity. In the words of Collingwood, history is the reconstruction of the past in the context of the present, and as such never definitive. And its ultimate goal is the reconstruction of human thought, and the success of any such construction lies in how well it divines such thought through a rigorous process of asking question and uncovering evidence. In the case of Lieven, if he is to be judged on those terms, his success lies in how well he has been able to recover the thought processes of Alexander I. It may seem old-fashioned to center history on what is going on in the minds of a few individuals, rather than seeing it as the result of impersonal forces, yet from the perspective of Collingwood, this is what history is all about, and wherein it differs profoundly from the study of nature. The book is a tribute to this philosophy of history though its careful delineation of events, and the clarification to what extent those resulted from intentional human decisions.

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