

SPECIAL FEATURE

Napoleon's Russian **NIGHTMARE** 1812

**Misjudgments, Russian strategy and “General Winter”
changed the course of history.**

BY JERRY D. MORELOCK



BORODINO, RUSSIA, JUNE 1998.

Gently rolling hills, verdant fields and pastures and a bucolic setting seem more like peaceful Iowa farmland than the scene of Napoleon's bloodiest single-day battle. Yet road signs in the Cyrillic alphabet, onion-domed Russian Orthodox country churches, and landscape dotted with numerous impressive monuments to desperate battles fought here in 1812 and 1941 reveal that the location is in Russia's heartland, not America's.

September 7, 1812.

The fighting rages during the Battle of Borodino. Casualties from both sides totaled more than 70,000, including 60 generals killed. (Painting by Franz Roubaud.)



STATE CENTRAL ARTILLERY MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA; THE BROWNEAN ART LIBRARY, INDEPENDENCE, MO

Napoleon had sought since at least the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit to retain Russia as an ally and key partner in his Continental System.



When Napoleon began the 1812 Russia Campaign, he did not intend for his Grand Armée to march on Moscow. Instead, he preferred an early, war-winning battle to defeat the Russian army. However, the campaign became an exhausting pursuit that eventually led his troops to Moscow – and then back west in a horrific retreat that destroyed his army and ultimately cost Napoleon his empire.

Situated midway on the 230-mile direct road from Smolensk to Moscow – the traditional invasion route of foreign armies from Napoleon to Hitler – Borodino was the site of the September 7, 1812, battle between Napoleon's invading Grande Armée and General Mikhail Kutuzov's Imperial Russian Army. The two forces' combined casualties – dead, wounded, missing and captured – totaled over 70,000. Napoleon won the Battle of Borodino, but the bloody victory failed to win the war that would eventually cost him his empire.

On September 14, 1812, Napoleon and his Grande Armée – reduced to fewer than 100,000 combat troops from a force of over 600,000 that began the invasion of Russia – occupied Moscow, where the emperor waited in vain for Russian Czar Alexander I to surrender. When it was clear that no surrender was forthcoming, Napoleon was forced to retreat back westward in bitter winter weather from October–December along a route picked clean of sustenance during the advance on Moscow – and now plagued by fierce Russian Cossack attacks. On December 9, the Grande Armée's exhausted, sick and starving survivors began stumbling into Vilnius, about 40 miles from the Niemen River, whose June 24 crossing by the army marked the start of the campaign. (See *Battlefield Detective*, p. 48.)

Although Napoleon rebuilt the Grande Armée, it never fully recovered from its devastating losses in Russia in 1812. The French defeat at the 1813 Battle of Nations at Leipzig sent Napoleon into his first exile on Elba, and his 1815 return for the Hundred Days ended in defeat at Waterloo and led to his final exile on St. Helena. Yet the nightmarish 1812 Russia Campaign was the principal reason Napoleon lost his empire.

NAPOLEON TURNS EAST

Since the “winners” get to write the history books, the standard story line of why Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812 was created in the years after his final exile in 1815 by his enemies, Britain and Europe's reactionary kings and princes, who were anxious to show Napoleon as an egotistical warmonger. Anti-Napoleon propagandists, therefore, presented his Russia invasion as an unprovoked attack on a peaceful nation by an overaggressive, megalomaniacal monster bent on extending the French Empire from the Atlantic to the Volga. Thanks to the work of more thoughtful historians, notably Dr. Ben Weider and General Michel Franceschi in their groundbreaking book, *The Wars Against Napoleon: Debunking the Myth of the Napoleonic Wars*, the true situation confronting Napoleon in the months leading up to his invasion of Russia has been revealed.

Instead of scheming to provoke war with Czar Alexander I's Russian Empire, Napoleon had sought since at least the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit to retain Russia as an ally and key partner in his Continental System, an economic alliance of European nations formed to weaken Britain by “blockading” British trade with the Continent. Napoleon gave Russia concessions, including permitting it to continue occupying eastern Poland – despite Napoleon's goal of re-creating an independent Polish nation – and pledging French assistance in Russia's on-again-off-again wars with Ottoman Turkey. Yet Czar Alexander was more interested in *extending* the Russian Empire – particularly gobbling up all of Poland – than accommodating his putative French ally. In December 1810, Czar Alexander withdrew from the Continental System and established regular trade with Britain, rejecting Napoleon's personal pleas not to do so. Russia continued to build up its armies and prepare for war, adopting an increasingly belligerent attitude in Russian-French relations.

In May 1812, Czar Alexander concluded a peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire, effectively securing Russia's southern flank and freeing two large Russian armies, which were moved north to the Niemen River in position to invade the Polish Duchy of Warsaw. Napoleon continued trying to mollify Czar Alexander, but the Russian monarch's response was a strongly worded ultimatum demanding that all French troops immediately be moved hundreds of miles west behind the Elbe River. Napoleon realized it was no longer a question of *if* there would be war with Russia, but *when* war would occur.



In June 1812, Napoleon, with a force of 600,000 men, launched his invasion of Russia after relations between him and Czar Alexander I broke down following Alexander's demand that all French troops be moved hundreds of miles west behind the Elbe River. (Painting *Napoleon a Cheval* by Joseph Chabod.)

ROGER VOLLET COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

The Battle of Borodino was brutal and

Napoleon faced two choices: wait for the Russians to attack, or take the initiative and strike first. Characteristically, he chose not to wait for his enemy to complete ongoing war preparations, but to take offensive action instead. He turned his full attention east, toward Czar Alexander's Russia.

CAMPAIGNING IN RUSSIA

Napoleon, the creator of history's first modern military staff system, focused his considerable energy on meticulously preparing for the Russia Campaign. Beginning the operation, as usual, "in his library," he gathered as much intelligence and information about his opponent as possible. Although Napoleon did not neglect the extensive logistical requirements necessary to sustain his massive army – he collected enough provisions in supply trains to support a force of over 600,000 men for 40 days – Russia's primitive road system and subsistence-level agriculture presented monumental challenges to an army used to operating on good roads in resource-rich Western Europe. Foraging for food, especially after the Russians adopted a "scorched earth" strategy, would produce little to supplement the constantly dwindling supplies of food and, critically, water that the army carried along in its ponderous, slow-moving wagon trains.

Calling Napoleon's massive force that crossed the Niemen River border on June 24, 1812, to launch the Russia Campaign the "French" army is a misnomer. Napoleon's Grande Armée was actually an *allied* army in which Frenchmen comprised less than half the total troop strength. Napoleon labeled it "an army of 20 nations," and it included troops from the Confederation of the Rhine (100,000 men), Poland (50,000), Austria (32,000), Italy (30,000), Prussia (20,000), Switzerland (10,000), and contingents of several thousand men each from the Netherlands, Denmark, Naples, Spain and Croatia. Polish patriots in particular supported the campaign to prevent their domination by Russia, and Napoleon's June 21 Order of the Day called it "the Second Polish War."

At the outset of the Russia Campaign, Napoleon did not intend to march on Moscow. As usual, his prime target was the enemy's army, whose destruction in a decisive battle typically brought about his opponent's quick surrender and an early end to the war. Yet when Czar Alexander's field commander preferred to yield territory rather than give battle, Napoleon was forced into a pursuit of the Russian army that drew his Grande Armée ever deeper into Russia's heartland. (See Napoleon's 1812 Russia Campaign map, p. 42.) Had Napoleon been able to bring the Russian army to decisive battle early in the campaign, his 40-day supply



Czar Alexander I had dreams of expanding the Russian Empire and in 1812 began moving Russian troops in position to invade the Polish Duchy of Warsaw. (Painting from War Museum Brussels.)

of provisions undoubtedly would have sufficed. However, in what became an extended campaign into western Russia's vast interior, logistical shortages (the wagon trains found it increasingly difficult to keep pace on the abysmal Russian roads, falling far behind the army's vanguard) depleted the ranks of men and horses at an alarming rate. The Grande Armée's manpower was further reduced by the necessity to establish strong garrisons in hostile territory along the invasion route. By the time the army reached Smolensk on August 16, its combat strength had dropped well below 200,000 men.

BORODINO AND MOSCOW

Czar Alexander was fortunate to have General Barclay de Tolly as his principal field commander to this point in the campaign. Barclay instituted the scorched earth policy that severely limited the Grande Armée's foraging, and he constantly harassed Napoleon's force with small-scale raids while avoiding a major battle that could have lost the war at a single stroke. Yet not everyone in the Russian court embraced Barclay's tactics, and those who abhorred his yielding any

part of "Holy Russia" to the enemy schemed for his removal. His demise was ensured when Napoleon precipitated the August 16–18, 1812, Battle of Smolensk by executing a flanking maneuver that forced Barclay to fight at last. The relatively low casualty count (about 20,000 total killed and wounded) made the clash a modest affair compared to other Napoleonic era battles; but Barclay's withdrawal of his army after the encounter to avoid being cut off sealed his fate. Czar Alexander replaced Barclay with General Mikhail Kutuzov.

Kutuzov proved more willing than Barclay to fight the Grande Armée and chose to make his stand at Borodino, a village halfway between Smolensk and Moscow. The Borodino defenses were strong, presenting a formidable roadblock on Napoleon's direct route to Moscow. Anchored by well-sited redoubts – the most important of which was Raevsky (Grand) Redoubt – and other key fieldworks, Kutuzov's Borodino position was manned by a Russian army numbering approximately 120,000 men and over 600 cannon. (See Battle of Borodino map, p. 45.) By September 7, when the battle began, the Grande Armée's combat strength had been reduced to only about 130,000 soldiers and 590 cannon. The armies, therefore, were more or less of equal size, with the Russians having the advantage of being able to choose the battleground and fight from behind well-entrenched positions. Yet at Borodino, Napoleon's battlefield genius again shone through.

The Battle of Borodino, which began at 6 a.m. with a massive barrage by 102 French cannon, was brutal and bloody, even by Napoleonic era

bloody, even by Napoleonic era standards.

standards. Charges and counter-charges sometimes bogged down in heaps of corpses, and units lost their way in the thick clouds of gun smoke blanketing the battlefield. The Raevsky Redoubt, whose capture held the key to victory, was seized during a French assault backed by 400 cannon around 10 a.m., but was retaken by the Russians an hour later. At 3 p.m., the redoubt fell to the French for the final time. Napoleon had won the major victory he had sought since the campaign began. The battle's appalling casualty total of 70,000 men (Grande Armée and Russian army) included 60 generals (47 French and 23 Russian).

Yet as the Russian army began to withdraw from Borodino in defeat, Napoleon balked at finishing it off once and for all with a vigorous pursuit by his only remaining uncommitted, fresh unit – the Imperial Guard. The Guard was his final reserve to deal with unforeseen circumstances, and Napoleon dared not risk its destruction while deep inside Russia with the war not yet won.

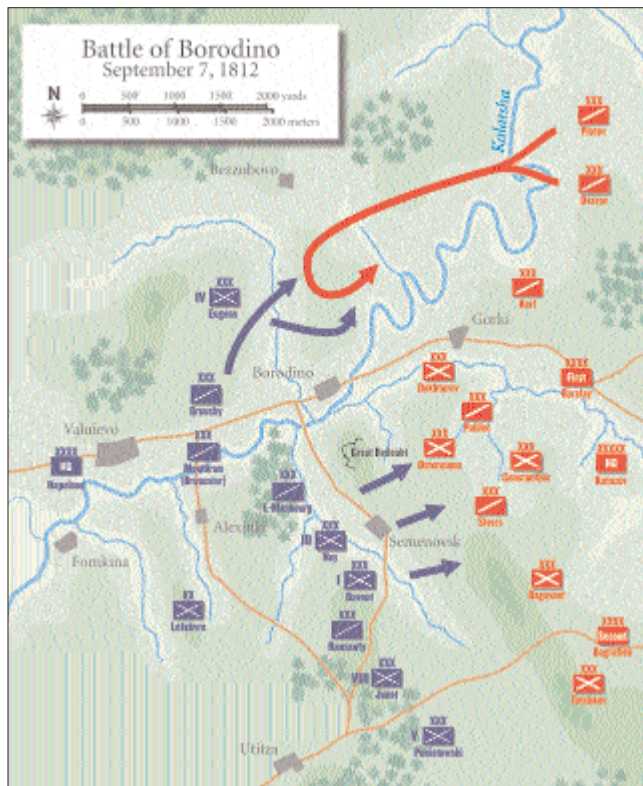
Kutuzov, meanwhile, placed the Russian Guard to cover his retreat but led the Russian army *southeast* toward Kaluga, not eastward to defend Moscow. In effect, Kutuzov was inviting Napoleon to occupy Russia's spiritual capital (St. Petersburg was Russia's political capital, but Moscow remained the revered center of "Holy Russia" and the country's most significant city).

On September 14, 1812, the Grande Armée's soldiers who survived the bloody battlefield at Borodino marched into Moscow, but they found a city stripped of supplies and with only about one-third of its normal population of 270,000 remaining. That same day, fires broke out (caused by looters, set deliberately by saboteurs, or perhaps a combination of both), burning down four-fifths of the largely wooden city by September 18. Moscow's destruction left Napoleon's soldiers without winter quarters in a city reduced to ashes and devoid of sustenance.

With Russian attacks on the Grande Armée's long supply line strangling deliveries and with no proper quarters or food available for the soldiers, Napoleon did not have the option of wintering over in Moscow and resuming the campaign in the spring. If Czar Alexander did not surrender soon, Napoleon would have no choice but to abandon the city and lead his army westward, back out of Russia.

STARVATION MARCH TO OBLIVION

Although Napoleon attempted to contact Czar Alexander via several intermediaries in hopes of opening war-ending negotiations, he waited in vain for five weeks with no Russian surrender forthcoming.



When the Russian army under Kutuzov finally made a stand at Borodino, Napoleon's tactical genius won another victory. Still, it was the bloodiest single-day battle (70,000 casualties) Napoleon ever fought – and it failed to win the war. The much depleted Grande Armée occupied Moscow, where Napoleon waited in vain for Czar Alexander's surrender.

afford with his depleted force at this late stage of the campaign. With the southwestern route blocked, Napoleon reluctantly led the dwindling Grande Armée back to the direct Moscow-Smolensk road.

From that point, the Grande Armée's retreat became a starvation march to oblivion. "General Winter" arrived in full fury on November 4, Russian partisans and Cossacks picked off stragglers and prevented foraging beyond the scorched earth region, and supplies rapidly ran out. Horses, weakened by hunger, died or were slaughtered to feed starving soldiers, leaving Napoleon's cavalry arm largely dismounted and forcing the Grande Armée to abandon its wagons and cannon. The increasingly miserable conditions prompted widespread collapse of discipline, and only the Imperial Guard remained a cohesive unit. The French forces reached Smolensk on November 7, but the city's destruction in the August battle had left little to provide shelter or sustenance, and reinforcements that Napoleon had summoned to meet the army there failed to arrive.

Meanwhile, Kutuzov planned to annihilate the Grande Armée by creating a giant pincer maneuver focused on Napoleon's anticipated crossing point of the Berezina River barrier – a brief thaw had turned the river into a raging torrent spiked with dangerous ice floes. Yet Napoleon managed to execute another battlefield masterstroke, feinting a river crossing at Borisov, the anticipated location, while actually getting his army across the river on a pontoon bridge hastily constructed by French engineers 12

Meanwhile, Kutuzov rebuilt the Russian army while prudently keeping it out of the Grande Armée's reach. Finally, on October 19, 1812, with the Russian winter approaching, Napoleon was forced to exercise his final option: retreat westward to the campaign's starting point beyond the Niemen River.

Realizing that withdrawing along the same path the Grande Armée had taken to reach Moscow would subject the men to a scorched earth area devoid of sustenance, Napoleon wisely selected a retreat route that swung in the direction of Kaluga, 90 miles southwest of Moscow. Kutuzov, however, anticipated the move and positioned the Russian army to block the Grande Armée's retreat in that direction. Advance elements of both armies clashed on October 24 at the Battle of Maloyaroslavets, 70 miles southwest of Moscow. Although the Grande Armée won a close tactical victory, the situation at the battle's end still left Kutuzov's main Russian army firmly positioned at Kaluga, blocking Napoleon's southwestern route. One of Napoleon's officers advised that it would take "another Borodino" to dislodge the Russians – a bloody prospect Napoleon could ill

*Napoleon's Russian nightmare was over,
but its long-term effects were not.*

World's Oldest Battlefield Museum

The Borodino Museum, whose official title is State Borodino War and History Museum and Reserve, is the world's oldest museum built on the actual battlefield it commemorates. Founded in 1839 on the precise spot of the September 7, 1812, Battle of Borodino, it features a priceless collection of uniforms, weapons, artifacts, tabletop maps, art treasures and a library of over 10,000 books relating to the battle. The museum is situated in the shadow of the huge monument sitting atop the Raevsky (Grand) Redoubt – the key point during the battle. Within the immediate area are bunkers the World War II Red Army built when it fought at Borodino in October 1941 against another foreign attack – Adolf Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union.

The entire area of the Borodino battlefield has been designated a "reserve" enclosing nearly 110 square kilometers. The Borodino Reserve lies within a larger 645-square-kilometer "protected zone," ensuring the battlefield topography and historical sites remain undisturbed by modern development. Over 300 monuments, fortification sites and historic buildings from the 1812 and 1941 battles are located within the area. Most 1812 monuments were erected by Russia's Romanov Dynasty during the battle's 1912 centennial. In a former monastery not far from the Borodino Museum is a separate modern museum dedicated to the 1941 Great Patriotic War (World War II) battle fought there.

Each year on or near the anniversary of the 1812 battle, hundreds of authentically uniformed re-enactors gather at Borodino to conduct re-enactments. The largest one yet planned is slated for the battle's 2012 bicentennial. For more information, visit the Borodino Museum's website, borodino.ru (text is available in English or Russian).



ABOVE: The State Borodino War and History Museum and Reserve.

RIGHT: The village limits of Borodino as it appears today.



BOTH IMAGES: JERRY D. MORELOCK



HERMITAGE, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY INTERNATIONAL

Gen. Barclay de Tolly was responsible for instituting Russia's "scorched earth" policy that severely limited the resources available to Napoleon's foraging troops. (Painting by George Dawe.)

miles farther north at Studianka. Although 10,000 stragglers were left at the Russians' mercy stranded on the river's east bank, the bulk of the Grande Armée made it safely across November 26-29. The Berezina crossing in the face of 120,000 Russians was a tactical stroke of genius, but it provided the Grande Armée only a momentary reprieve.

The worst of General Winter's wrath descended on Napoleon's sick and starving soldiers after the Berezina crossing, as December arrived, creating scenes of suffering and misery described as being akin to Dante's *Inferno*. On December 5, Napoleon received word that General Claude de Malet had attempted a coup d'état in Paris several weeks earlier. Although Malet's coup had failed, Napoleon decided it was imperative that he return to Paris. Command of the Grande Armée devolved upon Marshal Joachim Murat, although he quickly abandoned the task, fleeing to Italy to save his Kingdom of Naples. Eventually, Napoleon's stepson, Eugène de Beauharnais, took command. Eugène did the best he could, but the situation had deteriorated beyond the point at which even a commander of Napoleon's genius could salvage it. On December 9, 1812, about 50,000 battered Grande Armée survivors (some accounts claim there were only 22,000) began stumbling into Vilnius. Even in this refuge, however, disease and cold continued to kill more soldiers who had been fatally weakened by their ordeal in Russia.

Napoleon's Russian nightmare was over, but its long-term effects were not.

AFTERMATH: AN EMPIRE LOST

Napoleon immediately set about reconstituting the Grande Armée since his enemies were gathering for what they assumed would be the kill. Weider and Franceschi describe the situation in the wake of Napoleon's Russian disaster as a "gigantic fox hunt of the European monarchies against France." French-allied nations such as Prussia and Austria began to defect to Napoleon's enemies, and shortly only the Confederation of the Rhine remained a French ally.

Of the over 600,000-strong Grande Armée that crossed the Niemen





1812. Russians set fire to Moscow prior to the entry of Napoleon's army. Napoleon spent five weeks in the city waiting for a Russian surrender that never came. (Engraving from Bibliothèque Marmottan Boulogne.)

River to invade Russia in June 1812, Napoleon was able to salvage perhaps 100,000 soldiers (retreat survivors plus recalled detached formations and scattered garrisons). Although about 380,000 soldiers likely had died outright in the campaign, replacing men did not prove to be Napoleon's most difficult task. For the 1813 Campaign, in fact, he had rebuilt a Grande Armée of 400,000 soldiers supported by an additional 250,000 allied troops. More difficult to replace than men, however, were the 200,000 horses, thousands of wagons, and 1,000 cannon lost in the 1812 Campaign. These critical losses continued to hamper Grande Armée operations in Napoleon's ensuing campaigns of 1813 through 1815.

Although Napoleon defeated the Sixth Coalition led by Russia, Austria and Prussia at the August 26-27, 1813, Battle of Dresden, he lost the decisive October 16-19 Battle of Nations at Leipzig that sent him to his first exile on Elba. Returning from exile for the Hundred Days to face a Seventh Coalition of Europe's reactionary kings and princes, Napoleon was defeated on June 18, 1815, at Waterloo, which resulted in his final exile to St. Helena, where he died from the effects of arsenic poisoning on May 5, 1821.

Despite the fact that Napoleon did not suffer his final battlefield defeat until 1815, nearly three years after the 1812 Campaign, his invasion of Russia marked the vital turning point in the Wars Against Napoleon. The Russia debacle can be attributed to a number of factors that, in combination, caused Napoleon's defeat in that campaign: the French emperor uncharacteristically misjudged the supreme difficulties of campaigning in Russia over primitive roads and in a country providing little sustenance; he misjudged or ignored the ability of Russia's rulers to mobilize the Russian people into waging a "Great Patriotic War" to defend "Holy Russia" against his invading army; the Russian strategy of avoiding a pitched battle while drawing the Grande Armée deeper into

the country, combined with a "scorched earth" policy, prevented Napoleon from winning an early decisive battle and created a logistical nightmare that strangled his army of vital supplies; when the Russians did stand and fight at Borodino, Napoleon's bloody victory there was largely pyrrhic, producing massive casualties but no Russian surrender; Napoleon apparently lacked an "exit strategy" of what to do if Czar Alexander refused to surrender, which he did; after capturing Moscow, the French emperor waited in vain in the city's ashes for five crucial weeks as winter approached before realizing that he had no option other than to retreat; Kutuzov's skillful blocking of the southwest retreat route forced the Grande Armée to withdraw over the devastated road it had taken on its advance to Moscow, condemning the men to a starvation march that shattered discipline and destroyed the army's animals; and finally, Napoleon had no control over the brutal winter weather, whose arrival produced the Grande Armée's final, shattering ordeal. While General Winter was not the main cause of Napoleon's failure in Russia, it turned a defeat into an empire-ending disaster.

Above all, Napoleon's Russian nightmare showed his enemies that the emperor was not invincible. ★

Jerry D. Morelock, PhD, ARMCHAIR GENERAL Editor in Chief, has walked the ground of numerous Russian battlefields, including Borodino (1812 and 1941 battles), Poltava (1709), Russian Civil War battlefields at Ufa and Volgograd (Tsaritsyn), and World War II battlefields at Stalingrad, Leningrad, Moscow, Kiev and Kharkov.

FURTHER READING: *The Wars Against Napoleon: Debunking the Myth of the Napoleonic Wars* by Dr. Ben Weider and General Michel Franceschi (Savas Beatie, 2007); *Russia Against Napoleon: The True Campaigns of War and Peace* by Dominic Lieven (Viking Adult, 2010); and *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, the superb English translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Vintage, 2008).