

only for these plans eventually to be uncovered in the winter of 1812–13. And, most dramatically, there was the affair of General Malet in October 1812 in which a handful of conspirators came within an ace of establishing a provisional government in Paris. The work of a tiny minority though all this was, the fact that the vast majority of the *notables* played no part in active opposition to the empire does not necessarily imply that they were ardent in its support. Many, indeed, had throughout done their best to eschew direct involvement in its workings, whilst by the end of 1812 it was being generally reported that even the régime's officials were in general inclined to act more out of self-interest than of devotion to the emperor. In short, the 'masses of granite' on which Napoleon had once depended had increasingly been reduced to shifting sand.

DISASTER IN RUSSIA

If Napoleon's hold on power in France, and, indeed, the rest of Europe, was fragile, it was not yet under serious assault. What changed the situation, of course, was the disastrous Russian campaign of 1812, it also being the events of this campaign that really gave birth to the myth that the First Empire was overthrown by 'people's war'. In fact, however, it is difficult to make such an argument stick. To achieve victory in Russia, Napoleon had but one hope – to destroy the bulk of the Russian regular army whilst yet retaining sufficient strength to terrify Alexander into making peace (for arming the serfs in a genuine *levée en masse* would have been politically and socially quite unthinkable). From this it in practice followed that such a victory must be achieved, as Napoleon planned, relatively close to the frontier, for a march into the interior would inevitably bring with it such losses as ultimately to denude the invasion of all threat. If the Russian victory really was due to popular participation in the struggle, it must therefore be shown that this played a major role in the absence of a new Friedland somewhere in the western borderlands.

Superficially, at least, the evidence for a Russian 'people's war' seems quite compelling. In the first place Alexander responded to the French invasion with a series of dramatic appeals to the populace, such as that of 18 July, which proclaimed, 'We call on all our civil and religious communities to co-operate with us by a general rising against the universal tyrant'.⁴ Such appeals were

⁴ Cit. R. Wilson, *Narrative of Events during the Invasion of Russia by Napoleon Bonaparte and the Retreat of the French Army* (London, 1860), pp. 46–8.

buttressed by stage-managed events exemplified by the assemblies of the merchants and nobility which were convened when Alexander visited Moscow in July 1812, not to mention a general change of atmosphere in the régime. Ever since 1801 there had been a recrudescence of the perennial debate in Russia between 'westerners' who sought solution to Russia's problems in foreign models of government and society, and 'easterners' who believed that Russia must rather seek salvation in her own traditions and institutions, it being the former tendency that had hitherto had most influence over Alexander. Once the tsar had broken with Napoleon, however, the easterners came back into favour: Speransky was dismissed in March 1812 and replaced with Admiral Alexei Shishkov, whilst Count Fyodor Rostopchin was appointed Governor of Moscow. Bitter opponents of Speransky, both men were obsessed with the defence of the nobility and the protection of Russian language and culture from what they saw as corrupting foreign influences, and were associated with a growing Romantic tradition with strong roots in the Orthodox faith. Under their influence traditionalism was restored to fashion and attempts made to hound out enlightened thinking and whip up patriotism to fever pitch, whilst Alexander himself, who was in the throes of religious conversion, made great show of his devotion to the Orthodox Church, the war in general being portrayed as a holy crusade. Furthermore, on 20 August the 'German' Barclay de Tolly was replaced by Prince Mikhail Kutuzov as commander of all the forces facing Napoleon, Kutuzov being ideally placed to exemplify the spirit of a genuinely 'Russian' war (in earlier years he had been a collaborator of the leading general, Alexei Suvorov, who had advocated a specifically Russian mode of waging war based on the so-called 'cult of the bayonet').

From the start, then, the régime presented the war as a patriotic struggle and by one means or another sought to conciliate public opinion, which was, moreover, no longer to be ignored (not only was much concern expressed at the constant retreats of the first two months of the campaign, but the appointment of Kutuzov was forced upon Alexander by popular demand). To what extent, however, was there a genuine echo amongst the population? Amongst the élite, certainly, the war produced much excitement. Thus, French plays were jeered in the theatres of St. Petersburg, French itself was shunned (its use among the nobility had hitherto been habitual), and the events of the campaign were avidly discussed in school and salon. Much material support was also forthcoming.

A certain number of young men enlisted as patriotic volunteers, the merchants of Moscow pledged over two million roubles in money, and the Church and nobility offered huge sums in plate and jewels and 'gave' many thousands of serfs for service in the army or the militia. All this, perhaps, was to be expected – the nobility were terrified that Napoleon might free the serfs, whilst the Orthodox Church was unremitting in its hostility to French 'atheism' – but what of the people? Here, too, we have some evidence to suggest real engagement in the struggle. In the army the Russian, Kutuzov, was certainly far more popular than 'Germans' like Barclay, whilst the extraordinary ferocity displayed by the troops throughout might perhaps be interpreted as evidence of new-found patriotic enthusiasm. As for the common people, Madame de Staël claimed that the peasants 'volunteered with enthusiasm', their masters 'only acting as their spokesman' in giving them away.⁵ Meanwhile, vast crowds saluted the tsar when he visited Moscow in July, whilst the evacuation of the city by the vast majority of its population in the face of French occupation two months later can rightly be pointed to as an event for which there was no previous parallel in European warfare. Last but not least, there is no doubt that, particularly in the latter half of the campaign, at least some peasants did indeed take up arms and exact a horrific vengeance on those invaders unfortunate enough to fall into their hands.

Yet, despite all this, the evidence remains dubious. If the Russian army fought well, this was nothing new, Russian armies having been noted for their courage and resilience even in the eighteenth century. The Russian forces may have grown enormously in 1812, but this was on the whole achieved by compulsion: the traditional system of conscription – decrees levying so many 'souls' on every hundred serfs – was used extensively, no fewer than three such levies being decreed in 1812, conscription also being used to raise the 223,000 militiamen eventually called up for service with the newly-formed *opolchenie* (in giving up large numbers of serfs to the army and militia, moreover, the nobility had by no means lost sight of self-interest, continuing, as before, to use military service as a way of ridding themselves of the lazy, the incompetent, and the troublesome). Nor are the eight volunteer *jäger* regiments, the forty-seven new regiments of cossacks (so-called: many of these units were actually bourgeois town guards or troops of volunteer cavalry)

⁵ Cit. A. Brett James (ed.), *1812: Eyewitness Accounts of Napoleon's Defeat in Russia* (London, 1966), p. 69.

and the nine regiments of Tartars, Kalmucks, Bashkirs and other assorted nomads that also appeared in the course of 1812 much more interesting. The *jäger* clearly came from the well-to-do, and the cossacks either from the same source or from the same free peasants as their original namesakes. As for the Tartars and the like, they were effectively tribal mercenaries with no sense of identification with Russia. All that can be said with regard to the serfs, meanwhile, is that, *pace* Madame de Staël, conscription – which still carried with it the full term of twenty-five years – was, at best, accepted with passive acquiescence, and, at the worst, outright hostility: not only did it continue to produce general lamentations, but in December 1812 serious disorders broke out amongst the militia regiments that had been raised in the province of Penza. Nor did hostility to serfdom disappear: not only did a number of serfs wait upon Napoleon to petition for emancipation, but there were serious risings against the local landlords in Lithuania, as well as around the towns of Vitebsk and Perm. Even when they did take up arms, moreover, whether they were fighting out of a sense of patriotism is another matter: as in Calabria, or, indeed, Spain, loot, self-defence, the desire for vengeance, and sheer necessity must be all regarded as highly plausible alternatives. In so far as they had a choice, in fact, the peasantry appear rather to have remained aloof from the struggle, and to have refrained from participating in the sort of scorched-earth policy which has generally been cited as the third main pole of the supposed 'people's war'. Thus, whilst villages were certainly destroyed, crops burned and wells poisoned, this was again in large part the work of the cossacks and the regular army (when the French penetrated into areas through which the retreating Russians had not passed, these were often found to have remained untouched). In consequence, claims of massive popular backing for the struggle are clearly open to question.

Nor would the régime itself have welcomed a spontaneous *levée en masse*. As one of Alexander's proclamations specifically stated, 'I have delegated the organization of the levies to the nobles of every province'.⁶ With the nobility terrified of a servile insurrection, in short, the populace was to be kept in its place; indeed, Rostopchin even welcomed the fact that the bulk of the militia had to be armed with pikes on the grounds that these weapons were 'useless and harmless'.⁷ Near Moscow, moreover, peasants who took up arms

⁶ Cit. Wilson, *Invasion of Russia*, p. 48.

⁷ Cit. E. Tarle, *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812* (London, 1942), p. 118.

against French foragers were accused by the local nobles of being mutineers. In fact, not even the notables were to be permitted any opportunity to voice their opinion: when Rostopchin discovered that certain Moscow nobles wished to question Alexander about the war effort, he condemned their initiative as 'impertinent, improper and dangerous'.⁸ When the guerrilla warfare in which the Russians engaged in the latter half of the campaign is examined, we therefore find that, though some individual officers undoubtedly did encourage the peasants to rise, its main agents were not the people at all, but cossacks and regular cavalry.

Even if all such doubts are set aside, it will still be found that 'people's war' played little role in the defeat of Napoleon. As will become clear, Napoleon had probably already lost the war by the time that he reached Smolensk, and certainly by the time that he reached Moscow. If this be the case, then the whole question becomes an irrelevance. Not only does there seem to have been little peasant resistance before the *grande armée* reached Smolensk, the appeals of an Orthodox régime cutting little ice amongst the Catholics and Jews of the western border lands, but, however many men Alexander called up, few such recruits reached the Russian armies until quite late in the year: by the time of Borodino, in fact, the troops facing Napoleon had been joined by no more than 25,000 fresh conscripts and perhaps 15,000 embodied militia.

Why, then, did Napoleon fail? On paper the chances of a rapid victory seemed very great when war broke out on 24 June. Setting aside the mostly Prussian and Austrian forces he had deployed to cover his flanks, Napoleon had at least 375,000 men concentrated on the river Niemen (Neman) on the seventy-five mile front between Kovno (Kaunas) and Grodno, and another 80,000 in reserve in the rear, the grand total of all the troops he had available for service coming to over 600,000. Facing these forces were no more than 175,000 Russians, backed up by only a motley collection of depot formations (though the substantial forces of regular troops that had been released by the recent diplomatic agreements with Sweden and Turkey were also slowly making their way towards White Russia). Deployed in two separate armies over far too wide a front, their command arrangements were in complete disarray, such strategic plan as had been adopted was inherently weak, and there was nothing to suggest that the quality of the army was any better than it had been at Austerlitz and Friedland. Yet, for all that, the rapid

⁸ Cit. Tarle, *Napoleon's Invasion*, p. 117.

victory that Napoleon was expecting was not obtained. Hampered by poor roads, inadequate reconnaissance – the French cavalry was soon falling by the wayside in droves, some formations losing a quarter of their mounts by the beginning of July – commanders who were out of their depth, and its sheer size, the *grande armée* moved with none of its customary celerity. Meanwhile, Napoleon himself was no longer the dynamic leader of earlier years, being increasingly corpulent and rather unwell. The results were predictable. Evading French envelopments on no fewer than three occasions, the Russians eventually succeeded in concentrating their forces at Smolensk, leaving the *grande armée* to lumber slowly along in their wake. And as Napoleon advanced so his forces began to disintegrate. In the first place matters were not helped by the weather, periods of blazing heat being interspersed by torrential downpours. In the second the logistical situation soon collapsed into chaos, the troops outstripping their supply trains and discovering that the poor and thinly populated borderlands, devastated as they had been by the retreating Russians, were unable to meet their requirements. As a result, the 375,000 men amassed by Napoleon had by the time they reached the vicinity of Smolensk lost around 100,000 to disease or desertion, whilst another 90,000 had been detached to guard the emperor's line of communications with the border. There remained but 182,000 front-line troops, losses of cavalry horses and draft animals having proportionately been even worse. Nevertheless, all was not lost. Though the two Russian armies had at last succeeded in coming together at Smolensk, they still numbered no more than 120,000 men, whilst they had been under almost as much strain as the French. In short, a heavy blow might still have been decisive, for, with the defenders of Smolensk – the bulk of the Russian field army – gone, the chances were that Alexander might yet have made peace, the genuine popular mobilisation that would have been necessary to replace the regulars being as impossible as ever.

In fact, however, Smolensk witnessed no such victory, still more fumbling on the part of Napoleon and his senior commanders allowing the Russians to disengage their outnumbered forces and retire to the east. With them there probably went Napoleon's last chance of victory. As Alexander still refused to make peace, the emperor had no option but to march in pursuit in the hope that, by threatening Moscow, he might yet force a decisive battle. Of this, however, there was now little hope, the emperor being even less likely to secure a decisive victory after the wastage consequent upon a march 280 miles further east had been added to the 20,000 men

he had lost at Smolensk and the 16,000 more that he was forced to detach to protect his line of communications. And so it transpired, especially as the *grande armée* now began for the first time to encounter significant irregular resistance. By the time that Kutuzov reluctantly decided to give battle at Borodino, some seventy miles west of Moscow, the odds against him had been reduced still further, Napoleon's army now amounting to no more 130,000 men.

Even now a cheap and crushing victory might still have brought success, and for a moment this again seemed to be in the emperor's grasp, Kutuzov having not only deployed his army in such a position that it was in grave danger of being outflanked from the south, cut off from Moscow and trapped against the river Moskva, but having also disposed of its command in a manner that can only be described as bizarre. Fortunately for him, however, on this occasion Napoleon's generalship was even worse. In the first place, for no very good reason the emperor rejected the idea of a strategic envelopment of the Russian left flank, and instead settled upon a series of massive frontal assaults that demanded the very most of his exhausted and demoralised troops and could not but lead to heavy casualties, especially as there had been a significant change in French tactics since the halcyon days of 1805-7. Thus, as the ranks filled up with new conscripts, there was a tendency for finesse to be eclipsed in favour of brute force, the French now tending to attack in huge divisional columns that were difficult to manoeuvre and presented enemy artillery – and Russian artillery was notoriously well-served, heavy in calibre, and lavish in quantity – with the choicest of targets.

With such a battle plan, the only hope of victory was that the Russian army would break in panic, but this was something that was most unlikely: setting aside Kutuzov's efforts to imbue his men with religious and patriotic fervour and the fact that the Russian position was so congested that the soldiers literally could not move, Russian troops were so brutalised that they did not have the initiative to run away – as one British observer put it, 'Taken from a state of slavery, they have no idea of acting for themselves when any of their superiors are by.'⁹ As a result the French were confronted with the most obstinate resistance. Furious attacks were met by even more furious counterattacks, key positions were taken and retaken several times, and even the most experienced observers were shaken by the savagery of the fighting. Gradually, however, even the

⁹ Cit. A. Palmer, *Russia in War and Peace* (London, 1972), p. 106.

Russians were overborne and by mid-afternoon their line was beginning to crack, Napoleon in consequence being repeatedly begged to commit the 18,000 men of the Imperial Guard who constituted his last reserve. With his one hope a decisive and crushing victory, the emperor had no option but to throw in every man he possessed, but, determined to keep at least one formation intact for future use, this he would not do even though a mere 18,000 men would have made no difference if the Russians were not now firmly beaten. Tired and ill, the fact was that he had either hopelessly misjudged the real situation, or had simply lost his nerve.

When fighting gradually drew to a close in the early evening, the French had succeeded in driving the Russians from all their front-line positions and had inflicted terrible damage on most of their formations. Twenty-three generals were down, perhaps 44,000 men had been killed or wounded, many others had been separated from their units, the artillery was out of ammunition and had lost much *matériel*, and the survivors were dazed and exhausted. Yet the French were in no better shape. Their own losses had been at least 28,000 men, and they, too, were utterly prostrated. Though one more effort might have broken Kutuzov, the latter was in fact able to slip away and make a more or less orderly retreat.

In short, for all Napoleon's efforts, the main Russian field army remained intact, the war now being definitively lost. Though the French now entered Moscow without a fight, Napoleon could do no more – as Clausewitz tartly put it, 'He reached Moscow with 90,000 men, he should have reached it with 200,000.'¹⁰ With Moscow immediately set alight by agents of Count Rostopchin, partisan activity springing up all around him, supplies desperately short, Kutuzov's army being rebuilt a mere seventy-five miles to the south, substantial regular forces closing in on his thinly protected lines of communication from north and south, the discipline and morale of the *grande armée* at breaking point, and no more than 95,000 men available for action, Napoleon's position was clearly desperate.

When once it became clear that Alexander would not make peace, retreat therefore became inevitable, the troops actually beginning to move out on 19 October. Initially the plan was to move southwards so as to gain access to a route to Smolensk other

¹⁰ C. von Clausewitz, *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia* (London, 1843), p. 255; in fact, Napoleon had 95,000 men, having lost 28,000 at Borodino and dropped 7,000 more off to protect the last few miles of road.

than that traversed by the army during the summer, but on 23 October the French advance guard ran into Kutuzov's forces at Maloyaroslavets. In a fierce action the next day the French secured a tactical success that ought to have secured Napoleon's objective of a retreat on Smolensk via the towns of Medyn, Yukhnov and Yelnya. Yet, apparently because he feared that marching westwards from Maloyaroslavets would invite Kutuzov to attack his flank, Napoleon instead ordered the army to head north for the same road that had been taken before.

There followed the 'retreat from Moscow', which, thanks to the futile Maloyaroslavets affair, now got off to a very bad start, the lengthy diversion that this had incurred having wasted not only precious supplies but also a week of reasonably fine weather. Harried by cossacks and bands of peasants every foot of the way, the *grande armée* was also from the beginning of November assailed by heavy snow and bitter cold. Meanwhile, Kutuzov's army repeatedly cut the column in two, the result being that one corps or another would suddenly have to retrace its steps to rescue the beleaguered forces at the cost of yet more desperate fighting. With the army encumbered by immense caravans of baggage and non-combatants, food, warm clothing and proper footwear in short supply, and the troops on the march day after day, formation after formation lost all cohesion as their men died by the hundred or fell away to join the ever-growing crowd of stragglers. Barely escaping complete destruction when they were attacked from all sides at the river Berezina in the last week of November, the survivors staggered on under the command of Marshal Ney (Napoleon himself left for Paris on a fast sleigh on 5 December), but they were forced to leave behind almost all the remaining guns and baggage and, by the time that the frontier was reached early in December, numbered barely 20,000 men.

To conclude, The Russian campaign had produced, in Clausewitz's words, 'the most complete result conceivable'.¹¹ In the retreat, the 140,000 men whom it had involved (counting not just the troops who had started from Moscow, but also the many thousands who had been picked up along the way), had suffered at least 120,000 casualties, French losses in the campaign as a whole amounting to perhaps half a million men. How had this disaster come about? Whilst popular involvement in the struggle may to a certain extent have increased the scale of the catastrophe, far more

¹¹ Clausewitz, *Campaign of 1812*, p. 212.

instrumental were questions of climate and geography and the physical and organisational limitations of the *grande armée*. With the only chance of victory an early triumph that would have forced Alexander to the peace table, in essence, the campaign was a gamble that should never have been made, and, indeed, an object lesson in the need for Napoleon to curb his demands on the rest of Europe. Realism being something that had by now effectively deserted Napoleon, however, he did not heed the warning, and thus it was that he was now to lead France to fresh disasters from which even he could not emerge intact.

THE WAR OF LIBERATION

With the remnants of the *grande armée* driven across the frontier and the Russian armies poised to invade Poland, it might be thought that Europe would now have risen in wholesale revolt. Yet such a revolt did not occur: just as the defeat in Russia had been the work not of the people but of the régime, what defeated Napoleon in 1813 was not the people of Europe, but the great powers.

At first sight such a judgement might seem surprising, for in both Germany and Italy the Napoleonic period had witnessed the emergence of a nationalism that was above all defined by its opposition to French domination. Taking the case of Germany first of all, even before the French Revolution arguments had begun to be heard that the Germans had a 'national character' that was different – and infinitely more attractive – than its French counterpart, whilst French neo-classicism was being challenged by the *sturm und drang* movement. Inspired at first by little more than simple irritation at the predominance of the *philosophes*, this cultural nationalism had received a strong theoretical justification in the writings of Johann Herder. Thus, according to Herder it was ridiculous to lavish attention upon French models as if they possessed some universal truth, the reason being that every nation was a unique organic community differentiated by history, culture and language. We come here to the influence of Romanticism. For such men as Friedrich Schlegel, Heinrich von Kleist, Adam Müller, Friedrich Jahn, Joseph Görres, Ernst Arndt and Johann Fichte, Germany's salvation lay in a revival of the ancient Teutonic practices and culture now threatened by French-inspired reform. Bolstered by the growing vogue for folklore, they demanded that the German people be educated in their 'Germanness'. French influence must be rooted out from the language, the racial purity of the