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*“A Roman would turn back”:  
Napoleon Bonaparte’s Invasion of Russia (1812)*

**ABSTRACT:** *This article revisits Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Russia (1812) from a psychological perspective. Based on eyewitness accounts from both sides, including the memoirs of Philippe-Paul de Ségur, Armand de Caulaincourt, and Carl von Clausewitz, it first discusses Napoleon’s reasoning for the campaign, then the actual invasion, and finally its outcome. The author argues that Napoleon’s arrogance and habit of making rash decisions, against the advice of the majority of his military staff, led to his decision to invade Russia.*

**KEYWORDS:** *nineteenth century; Europe; Napoleon Bonaparte; Russian campaign (1812); Battle of Borodino (1812); Grande Armée; Philippe-Paul de Ségur; Armand de Caulaincourt; Carl von Clausewitz; psychology*

*Introduction*

In the early morning of June 23, 1812, the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte rode his horse toward the banks of the Niemen River to inspect the frontline. The river was all that separated Russia from French-controlled Europe. Of an army of 600,000 men that would be invading the next day only 70,000 would return alive five months later. As Napoleon approached the river, he was violently thrown from his horse. Someone cried out, “This is an ill omen! A Roman would turn back!”<sup>1</sup> No one knows who uttered these words, “whether it was Napoleon himself or one of his retinue.”<sup>2</sup> Great effort had been put into amassing such a large number of troops in one single area along this river between the newly created duchy of Warsaw and Russia. Troops had been marching for months from all over Napoleonic Europe, converging on this one point. But what had led to such a drastic undertaking as this, unique in the history of modern Europe? In Napoleon’s arrogant desire to control every last country in Europe, there was one he had still left to conquer: Russia. At the zenith of his power and living comfortably at his palace in Saint-Cloud near Paris, Napoleon sought one more campaign, a campaign to end all campaigns.

The historical sources for Napoleon’s Russian campaign are extensive, especially on the French side. One of the most accurate accounts of Napoleon’s behavior before and during the invasion is the diary of Philippe-Paul de Ségur (1780-1873), Napoleon’s aide-de-camp who was almost always at the Emperor’s side; in fact, it is most likely Ségur’s account, first published in French in 1824, that the Russian author Leo Tolstoy consulted while writing *War and Peace*

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe-Paul de Ségur, *Napoleon’s Russian Campaign*, trans. J. David Townsend with an introduction by William L. Langer (London: Michael Joseph, 1959), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ségur, *Napoleon’s Russian Campaign*, 17: “It is not known whether it was Napoleon himself or one of his retinue who uttered these words.” See Laimonas Briedis, “European Crossings: Vilnius Encounters,” (D.Phil. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2005), 199.

(1869).<sup>3</sup> For Napoleon's thinking and psychological bent at the time before the invasion, the personal writings of Armand de Caulaincourt (1773-1827), Duke of Vicenza and French ambassador to Russia, offer the best insight.<sup>4</sup> On the Russian side of the conflict, the testimony of a Prussian officer in the service of Tsar Alexander I, Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831),<sup>5</sup> provides a very tactical view of the invasion. For a more "on the ground" perspective, the accounts of French officer Raymond Fezensac (1784-1867)<sup>6</sup> and Russian officer Denis Davidov (1784-1839)<sup>7</sup> are invaluable. Fezensac's text gives us a sense of the feelings of French soldiers on the march and of the hardships they endured, while Davidov's testimony chronicles his Russian partisan guerilla tactics against Napoleon. From the personal journal of Emmanuel, Count de Las Cases (1766-1842), who stayed with Napoleon on the island of Saint Helena, we get a firsthand account of Napoleon's later views on the campaign.<sup>8</sup>

Up until the turn of the twentieth century, scholarship on the subject seems to have been relegated to the prefaces and authors' notes in new editions of the diaries from the campaign, which almost always contained an updated introduction. Interest in the story of Napoleon's invasion of Russia reemerged after Hitler's disastrous invasion of Russia (1941) had been processed by the world. Alan Palmer wrote one of the earlier renditions of the invasion, *Napoleon in Russia* (1967).<sup>9</sup> More recently, monographs by Adam Zamoyski (2004) and Charles Esdaile (2007) have contributed in-depth analyses of the campaign.<sup>10</sup> To understand the psychological disposition of Napoleon on the eve of his invasion, one may defer to an article in *The Academy of Management Executive* by Mark

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<sup>3</sup> Ségur, *Napoleon's Russian Campaign*, v, viii-ix.

<sup>4</sup> Armand de Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia: The Memoirs of General de Caulaincourt, Duke of Vicenza*, ed. George Libaire (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1935). Caulaincourt stipulated in his will that a certain amount of money be set aside to write his personal history and reproduce his writings. It is by mere luck that his writings are left to us. They were hidden behind a wall in his estate which was bombed by the Germans in World War I. It was not until 1933 after rummaging through the wreckage that they were found. Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia*, trans. Forrestt A. Miller (Hattiesburg: Academic International, 1970). Clausewitz's recollections were first published in German in 1835.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond de Montesquiou-Fezensac, *The Russian Campaign, 1812, by M. de Fezensac*, trans. Lee B. Kennett (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Denis Davidov, *In the Service of the Tsar against Napoleon: The Memoirs of Denis Davidov, 1806-1814*, trans. and ed. Gregory Troubetskoy (London: Greenhill Books, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel, Count de Las Cases, *Memorial de Sainte Helene: Journal of the Private Life and the Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon at Saint Helena*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn & Co., 1823).

<sup>9</sup> Alan Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Adam Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812: Napoleon's Fatal March* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 186; Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars: An International History 1803-1815* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

Kroll, Leslie Toombs and Peter Wright (2000)<sup>11</sup>, which compares Napoleon's arrogance to that of high-powered company executives. Tsar Alexander I rose to prominence during this trying period for his country. With regard to his life, Henri Troyat's *Alexander of Russia: Napoleon's Conqueror* (1982) offers great insight.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, for more recent views of Napoleon's occupation of European countries and the reactions of foreign leaders, Harold Parker and Paul Schroeder have published in-depth articles in *The Journal of Military History* (1990).<sup>13</sup> While the topic of Napoleon's erratic and domineering personality, and the effects it had on his empire, are well documented, this article hopes to delve a little bit deeper into the personality flaws and traits Napoleon exhibited, particularly in the months leading up to the invasion.

I argue that Napoleon's arrogance and habit of making rash decisions, against the advice of the majority of his military staff, led to his disastrous decision to invade Russia on June 24, 1812. A lot has been written on the consequences of Napoleon's campaign in the East, but I would like to look at Napoleon's thinking process and hone in on specific conversations with staff during the months prior to the war. When examining the sources, especially Caulaincourt's diary, one gets a sense that Napoleon had completely become a prisoner of his own arrogance. There are numerous instances of Napoleon yelling and raving, as if possessed, for extended periods of time.<sup>14</sup> The sources suggest that he only used his staff to find agreement with his ideas, and when he was met with opposition to his ideas he would fly into a rage. To begin, this article looks at Napoleon's line of reasoning with regard to the Russian question and how it correlates with the four main causes of the war. The second part considers the immediate impact of Napoleon's decision-making and some of the early blunders of his campaign which could have been avoided if it had not been for his personality faults. The third and final chapter addresses the overall effect of Napoleon's campaign on his control over Europe. Clausewitz has a lot to say about the faultiness of Napoleon's decision-making in regards to his invasion. Contemporary viewpoints that were critical of Napoleon's decision-making prove to be the most useful evidence for this analysis.

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<sup>11</sup> Mark J. Kroll, Leslie A. Toombs, and Peter Wright, "Napoleon's Tragic March Home from Moscow: Lessons in Hubris," *The Academy of Management Executive* 14, no. 1 (2000): 117-128.

<sup>12</sup> Henri Troyat, *Alexander of Russia: Napoleon's Conqueror* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Harold T. Parker, "Why Did Napoleon Invade Russia? A Study in the Motivation and the Interrelations of Personality and Social Structure," *The Journal of Military History* 54, no. 2 (1990): 131-146; Paul W. Schroeder, "Napoleon's Foreign Policy: A Criminal Enterprise," *The Journal of Military History* 54, no. 2 (1990): 147-162.

<sup>14</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 18.

### *I. An Unnecessary War*

In June 1811, Napoleon recalled Armand de Caulaincourt, his ambassador, from Russia.<sup>15</sup> Caulaincourt was a highly capable man and respected by both the French and the Russians, which was no easy task at the time. Born of noble heritage, he had been named Napoleon's aide-de-camp in 1802, a move designed to show the French people that Napoleon would take in the men of the old regime of the Bourbons.<sup>16</sup> It was Napoleon's intention to speak with Caulaincourt about the mounting tensions between both countries. In 1807, Caulaincourt had been sent to Russia as an ambassador to watch over the enforcement of the Treaty of Tilsit (1807) between France and Russia, which guaranteed Russia's involvement in the "Continental System" with the intent of ending the British monopoly on trade.<sup>17</sup> Napoleon relied heavily on Caulaincourt's advice because he counted on him to always say, in very blunt terms, what was on his mind. It is because of this intimate relationship between Napoleon and Caulaincourt, and due to Caulaincourt's obsessive habit of keeping a journal, that we get some of the best insight into Napoleon's psychology immediately before the invasion.<sup>18</sup>

Napoleon knew his line of reasoning for invading Russia was faulty but went ahead with it anyway. Central to his reasoning for the recall of Caulaincourt and invading Russia was his disappointment in that country for not adhering to the Continental System. The Continental System and its banning of British ships in Russian ports had a tremendous effect on the Russian economy. At this time, Russia had not much in the way of industry and was highly dependent on British imports. The value of the Russian rouble (currency) declined substantially, and this made the imports Russia could receive very expensive. Customs revenue decreased from nine million roubles in 1805 to a mere three million in 1809.<sup>19</sup> Prices for sugar and coffee increased exponentially as colonial imports were very hard to come by. Caulaincourt related to Napoleon that it was difficult for a country so far away from France, and in dire financial straits, to maintain such a rigid embargo.<sup>20</sup> It was in this scenario that, in 1810, Alexander decided to act on French imports and Russia's captive market.<sup>21</sup> He implemented a "Ukase," a Russian edict of law, which raised taxes on land imports while cutting taxes on

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<sup>15</sup> Curtis Cate, *The War of the Two Emperors: The Duel Between Napoleon and Alexander, Russia 1812* (New York: Random House, 1985), 43.

<sup>16</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, xix.

<sup>18</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, xxiii.

<sup>19</sup> Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, 434-435.

<sup>20</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 24. Napoleon's power of manipulation was such that Caulaincourt states on one occasion that he had overheard Napoleon say, "When I need anyone, I don't make too fine a point about it; I would kiss his [...]." He leaves the last word blank.

<sup>21</sup> Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, 434-437.

imports by sea. This new Ukase infuriated Napoleon to no end, and he challenged Caulaincourt: "[A]dmit frankly that it is Alexander that wants to make war on me."<sup>22</sup> Caulaincourt emphatically related to Napoleon that Alexander had made it clear to him that Russia would not fire the first shot, and that the decision was in Napoleon's hands. At this point in time, Caulaincourt communicated to Napoleon that the bad weather and overall vastness of Russia would aid the Russians. He also pointed out that Alexander knew that Napoleon could not politically afford to be away from Paris for long, since he had not yet dealt with the Spanish insurrection.<sup>23</sup> Napoleon listened intently, and his demeanor seemed to soften, so that Caulaincourt thought his words had an effect on him, but then Napoleon suddenly erupted into a tirade about all the troops at his disposal, and how just one decisive battle would knock Russia out. He placed the blame for his troubles in Spain on his brother Joseph (king of Spain 1808-1813), one of the many times when Napoleon did not take responsibility for his decisions and placed the blame on others.<sup>24</sup>

The other three factors that led directly to the tensions before the outbreak of war were far more trivial in nature. These were the annexation of the duchy of Oldenburg, Napoleon's betrothal to Marie-Louise of Austria, and the use of the word "Poland" in public documents. Napoleon's marriage to the Austrian princess Marie-Louise embarrassed the Russian court because Napoleon had been in negotiations with Alexander to marry the Tsar's sister Catherine, and when that stalled and eventually failed, the Tsar's younger sister Anna. Russia was buying time but felt this was a slight by Napoleon because he was playing both Austria and Russia.<sup>25</sup> It was in the midst of the conversation with Caulaincourt that Napoleon said something very strange: "It is the Austrian marriage which has set us at a variance. The Tsar Alexander was angry because I did not marry his sister."<sup>26</sup> In his memoirs, Caulaincourt notes that he bravely reminded the Emperor that Russia had not been excited by the prospect of his proposal to Catherine and, in fact, relieved when he had married Marie-Louise.<sup>27</sup> It could be proposed that Napoleon was still embarrassed over this snub by the Russian court, and this could have influenced his plans for invasion.

The next incident that angered the Russians was Napoleon's pointless annexation of the small duchy of Oldenburg (in northwestern Germany). Peter, the Duke of Oldenburg, was Tsar Alexander's uncle, and his son had married the Grand Duchess Catherine, Alexander's sister. The freedom of Oldenburg had

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<sup>22</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Zamoycki, *Moscow 1812*, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 10.

been secured by Alexander in the Treaty of Tilsit (1807).<sup>28</sup> It was at this juncture in the conversation that Caulaincourt pleaded with Napoleon to avoid war, reinstate the Duke of Oldenburg, move troops out of Prussia, and promise not to reinstate the kingdom of Poland as a buffer state. Napoleon's response was: "[Y]ou speak like a Russian."<sup>29</sup> After this five-hour conversation, Napoleon became so displeased with Caulaincourt that he withheld his salary and pretended to not know anything about it.<sup>30</sup> This seems to be another instance when Napoleon sank to childlike behavior. At this point Caulaincourt attempted to resign, but Napoleon would not let him.<sup>31</sup>

Not only did Napoleon's closest advisors see the fault in his reasoning for invasion, but it was evident to many others on both sides of the conflict. On this subject, General Carl von Clausewitz, who was in the service of the Tsar during Napoleon's invasion, said that Napoleon seemed to seek decisive battles, profit from the treaties that came from the outcome of those battles, and then seek other battles. This worked very well for Napoleon until he ran into Spain where he became bogged down. Napoleon should not have started a new campaign in the East when there was one he could not finish right at his doorstep in Spain. Clausewitz stated: "It is extraordinary, and perhaps the greatest error he ever committed, that he did not visit the Peninsula in person in 1810."<sup>32</sup> There seems to be a tendency of people imbued with hubris to twist the truth in order to achieve their goals.<sup>33</sup> There were other instances of the common soldier critiquing the famous ruler of Europe. The Russian officer Denis Davidov said of Napoleon: "being a poet at heart, he fell victim to his own flights of fancy and gradually convinced himself of the truth of these false assertions which he had made in order to mislead others."<sup>34</sup> Even the common French knew that Napoleon's pressure on the Russian government was forcing Russia to war. In his memoirs, Raymond Fezensac, an aide-de-camp in Napoleon's general staff, remarked: "Emperor Alexander refused to persevere in a system which would have brought total ruin to the commerce of his empire."<sup>35</sup>

It was Napoleon's insistence on invading Russia, even in the face of the many obstacles pointed out by Clausewitz, Caulaincourt, and others, that we begin to see the faults in his personality. It could be argued that Napoleon's drive to invade Russia was brought on by extreme arrogance, hubris, or even a sense of

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<sup>28</sup> Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, 432. It was Napoleon who initially had eyes on marrying the Tsarina Catherine.

<sup>29</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Clausewitz, *Campaign of 1812*, 252.

<sup>33</sup> Kroll, Toombs, and Wright, "Napoleon's Tragic March Home," 122.

<sup>34</sup> Davidov, *In the Service of the Tsar*, 162.

<sup>35</sup> Fezensac, *Russian Campaign*, 4.

boredom. As Napoleon experienced more success in the field, he became more arrogant,<sup>36</sup> and it was this arrogance that drove him to invade countries just for the sake of invading countries.<sup>37</sup> By late 1811, war was imminent. Napoleon dramatically made his intentions with regard to Russia known when, at a grand ball on August 15, 1811, he publicly scolded the Russian ambassador, Prince Alexander Kurakin, in front of all the guests. He shouted that France and Russia were no longer in an alliance since the Tsar had permitted foreign ships into Russian ports. He then said: "According to Monsieur de Caulaincourt, the Tsar wishes to attack me."<sup>38</sup> This was a blatant lie, as Caulaincourt had explicitly told him that the Tsar would never attack him. Napoleon was obviously planting his pretext for invading Russia by using Caulaincourt as a scapegoat.

## II. Crossing the Niemen

The Grande Armée experienced many problems even before crossing into Russian territory on June 24, 1811. Preparing for the campaign all throughout 1811 and during the early months of 1812, soldiers from all over Europe were to march to the Niemen River at the border between the duchy of Warsaw and Russia. Getting to the Niemen was a difficult task in itself. The river was approximately one thousand miles from Paris, with the last three hundred miles of this in Prussia, an area not known for its rich agriculture.<sup>39</sup> Prussia's acquisition of Polish territory in the third partition of Poland (1795) had weakened the Prussian state by overstressing its economic abilities to maintain these new territories. According to historian William Hagen, "in the years when the Polish partitions virtually doubled its size and population, the Prussian state was experiencing profound strains in political and social structure."<sup>40</sup> In a twist of irony, another reason for this lack of production was the Continental System itself, with much land being left uncultivated since its owners were unable to access outside markets.<sup>41</sup> Whatever the exact reasons, soldiers were starving. One German soldier reported in his diary that men had already begun shooting themselves before crossing the river, and one officer had slit his own throat.<sup>42</sup> The Grande Armée was composed of troops from all over Europe. French, Prussians, Bavarians, Westphalians, Saxons, Dutch, Swiss, Italians, Austrians,

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<sup>36</sup> Kroll, Toombs, and Wright, "Napoleon's Tragic March Home," 120.

<sup>37</sup> Kroll, Toombs, and Wright, "Napoleon's Tragic March Home," 118.

<sup>38</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812*, 93.

<sup>40</sup> William W. Hagen, "The Partitions of Poland and the Crisis of the Old Regime in Prussia 1772-1806," *Central European History* 9, no. 2 (1976): 115-128, here 117-118.

<sup>41</sup> Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812*, 136.

<sup>42</sup> See John Eisenhower, "A Common Soldier's Grim Account of Napoleon's Invasion of Russia," review of Jakob Walter, *The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier*, ed. Mark Raeff (New York: Doubleday, 1991), *Chicago Tribune*, September 22, 1991.

Poles, and even Spanish.<sup>43</sup> Thus, with so many nationalities, linguistic confusion became an issue immediately. What is more, on the first three days of the march, a severe storm caused the loss of over 25,000 horses.<sup>44</sup> These horses were needed to transport artillery, food, and supplies.<sup>45</sup> It almost seemed as if the omen of Napoleon falling off his horse was beginning to play out immediately

Napoleon had many occasions to turn back after crossing, but due to his impatient nature he decided to carry on against the pleas of his general staff. While stalling at the city of Vilna (Lithuania), soon after the Grande Armée's push into Russia, Napoleon received a letter from Alexander saying that if he removed his troops behind the Niemen the Tsar would agree to meet for peace talks.<sup>46</sup> Napoleon adamantly refused and lost the opportunity to end the terrible conflict.<sup>47</sup> Had Napoleon wanted to prevent the war, as he had said many times to Caulaincourt, here was his chance. It is evident that Napoleon never had any intention of not invading Russia and was just really testing his ideas against Caulaincourt's logic. Napoleon was furious that Alexander tried to dictate terms to him and let his ego get in the way of making the right decision to postpone the invasion. One may wonder where these arrogant tendencies came from. A brief look back at Napoleon's childhood might help explain some of these personality quirks. His birth had allegedly not been an easy one. According to some observers, he came out looking slightly deformed, with "spindly legs and an abnormally large head."<sup>48</sup> His mother and father seemed to favor his older brother Joseph, and this led Napoleon to literally fight for attention.<sup>49</sup> Napoleon's struggle for attention continued throughout his life. One scholar has even suggested an "Oedipal situation" in which Napoleon did not just have to compete for attention with his brother, but also with his father.<sup>50</sup> When he enrolled at the military college of Brienne (in northeastern France) (1779), he was taunted by the more "French" students: the fact that he was Corsican did not make life easy for him, and he constantly fought with this insecurity.<sup>51</sup> After being named First Consul (1799) and then declaring himself Emperor (1804), Napoleon had to legitimize himself against Bourbon supporters and the other

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<sup>43</sup> Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Battle of Borodino: Napoleon against Kutuzov* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010; first published 2007), 51.

<sup>44</sup> Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812*, 156.

<sup>45</sup> Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, 463.

<sup>46</sup> Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, 52.

<sup>47</sup> Troyat, *Alexander of Russia*, 143-144.

<sup>48</sup> Parker, "Why Did Napoleon Invade Russia," 133.

<sup>49</sup> Parker, "Why Did Napoleon Invade Russia," 133.

<sup>50</sup> Harold T. Parker, "The Formation of Napoleon's Personality: An Exploratory Essay," *French Historical Studies* 7, no. 1 (1971): 6-26.

<sup>51</sup> Parker, "Why Did Napoleon Invade Russia," 134.

monarchs of Europe.<sup>52</sup> This perpetual need to prove himself, in combination with an arrogant personality, led to many disasters not just for him, but for millions of people. His decision to invade Russia was the greatest symptom of this arrogance.

Napoleon stopped at Vitebsk (Belarus) in late July 1812 and decided to conclude the campaign until the following spring, but after two weeks of preparing the town with defenses, he made the disastrous decision to head toward Moscow. Being a student of history, he proclaimed to his generals: "We shall not repeat the folly of Charles the XII."<sup>53</sup> He was alluding to the disastrous campaign of King Charles XII of Sweden who had attempted an invasion of Russia one hundred years earlier (1708-1709).<sup>54</sup> Napoleon's initial decision had been to stop, rest, and wait for next year's spring, but his indecisiveness and habit of changing his mind got the better of him. As in Vilna, he wasted another two weeks by just sitting around in Vitebsk, a total of one whole month. All the while, his troops grew hungrier and more tired. He did make genuine attempts to see that the injured men were taken care of. He was even seen yelling at the top of his lungs at the doctors in the hospitals, but this, too, seemed like some exercise in delusion. In the words of the French officer Raymond Fezensac, an eyewitness to these events: "It is not enough to give orders: the orders must be capable of execution."<sup>55</sup> It is as if Napoleon clearly saw what needed to be done in any given situation, but that at the last minute he would change his mind and could not be persuaded to change it back.

### III. *The Outcome*

After the pyrrhic French victory at the battle of Borodino (September 7, 1812), Napoleon was convinced that if he could just occupy Moscow the war in Russia would end immediately. Napoleon waited a fateful month in Moscow in hopes of reaching a plea deal. Clausewitz noted that it was Napoleon's strategy to "beat the enemy—to shatter him—to gain the capital—to drive the government into the last corner of the empire—and then, while the confusion was fresh, to dictate a peace."<sup>56</sup> It was Napoleon's arrogance and carelessness in not deciding to wait out the winter in Vilna or Vitebsk, where he could have restocked and resupplied, that caused his army the most harm. As Clausewitz pointed out, "he reached Moscow with 90,000 men, he should have reached it with 200,000. This would have been possible if he had handled his army with more care and forbearance. But those were qualities unknown to him."<sup>57</sup> At times, the qualities

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<sup>52</sup> Parker, "Why Did Napoleon Invade Russia," 135.

<sup>53</sup> Ségur, *Napoleon's Russian Campaign*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Fezensac, *Russian Campaign*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Clausewitz, *Campaign of 1812*, 253.

<sup>57</sup> Clausewitz, *Campaign of 1812*, 255.

that Napoleon did not possess were actually his greatest strengths. According to Clausewitz, it was Napoleon's lack of care and forbearance that, many times in his life, gave him a distinct advantage over his opponents.<sup>58</sup> Eventually, this impulsive way of acting caught up with him and cost him his empire. For his Russian campaign, it was now too late: Napoleon waited a careless month in Moscow and became frightened at the first sign of snow on October 13, 1812.<sup>59</sup> The Grande Armée departed Moscow with some 100,000 men, and three months later crossed back over the Niemen with only 50,000 men from the original 600,000. All was lost due to the arrogance of one man, and the landscape of European politics would never be the same: the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) strengthened the traditional monarchies and ended the Age of Enlightenment, at least in government.

The end of the Russian campaign saw many harrowing scenes. Napoleon departed from his army on December 5, 1812, in great secrecy, along with Caulaincourt and members of his staff. Once he had entered the duchy of Warsaw, Napoleon became very cheerful and mused how "the reverses that France has just suffered will put an end to all jealousies and quiet all the anxieties that may have sprung from her power or influence."<sup>60</sup> Napoleon thought Europe would see Russia as the enemy.<sup>61</sup> Yet again, Napoleon was showing signs of delusion of grandeur. Caulaincourt answered Napoleon with what can only be described as historical frankness: "[A]s a matter of fact, it is your majesty they fear. It is your majesty who is the cause of everyone's anxiety and prevents them from seeing other dangers."<sup>62</sup> Still, Napoleon was not phased and went for his usual antics when dismissing Caulaincourt by pinching Caulaincourt's ear.<sup>63</sup> Napoleon just laughed as though he had not just lost over 400,000 men.

Reminiscent of the destruction of entire towns in the Rhineland during Louis XIV's Nine Years' War against the Holy Roman Empire (1688-1697), Napoleon's troops, too, laid waste to whole cities in the course of massive sieges, but most of these had little to no strategic value. The siege of Smolensk (southwest of Moscow) (August 16-18, 1812) was so ghastly and brutal that many of its citizens chose to die fighting with Russian troops rather than burn alive in the fire that overtook the ancient city. Moreover, it only diverted Napoleon's advance against Moscow.<sup>64</sup> Adding to this brutality on the part of the invaders was the complete destruction of the Russian countryside by its own citizens, along with the full

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<sup>58</sup> Clausewitz, *Campaign of 1812*, 259.

<sup>59</sup> Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812*, 352.

<sup>60</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 278.

<sup>61</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 278.

<sup>62</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 278.

<sup>63</sup> Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia*, 278.

<sup>64</sup> Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812*, 218.

mobilization of the population on both sides to carry out the war effort.<sup>65</sup> Thus, much of Napoleon's Russian campaign points to the kind of "modern" warfare that would wreak havoc in Europe well into the twentieth century.

### *Conclusion*

By December 1812, Napoleon's empire had slipped from his hands, and one of the most arrogant displays of power and hubris in the history of mankind had ended with dramatic results. The Russian army's chase of Napoleon's forces almost all the way back to Paris had a revolutionary effect on Russian society. For the first time, Russian soldiers saw what it was like to live in relative freedom, and they would take what they had learned and bring it back home with them to Russia.<sup>66</sup> The victory of an ancient monarchy over the upstart Napoleon was seen as a point of validation for the divine right of rulers,<sup>67</sup> paving the way for Prussian and Russian dominance in Europe for much of the remainder of the nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> For the returning French, their experience in Prussia was especially disconcerting: as they were traveling back through Prussia they were spat on by the citizens there.<sup>69</sup> Most detrimental to Napoleon were the actions of a Prussian general, Count Johann David Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg (1759-1830). Wartenburg had refused to cover the Grande Armée's retreat along the Prussian and Polish border, and on December 30, 1812, he signed an agreement with the Russian field marshal which in effect made his troops neutral in the conflict. Here we see the total and complete breakdown of Napoleon's control of his German satellites. The consequences of his unwise invasion were becoming painfully apparent.

Perhaps future research on this topic can take a more scientific approach with regard to Napoleon's physical and mental state. There is the possibility that he might have been afflicted by some kind of mental disorder brought on by an underlying illness, especially during his listless periods of wandering the halls for hours on end. Also, there are obvious signs that Napoleon's personality could have bordered on sociopathy. Whatever it was that afflicted him, be it mental lapses or flat-out hubris, it caused him to make the biggest mistake of his career.

In the end, it was Napoleon's erratic behavior that ended his empire. His genius was never in question, but it was his habit of pursuing military and political actions against his better judgment that eventually were his undoing. Had Napoleon not invaded Russia in the summer of 1812, there is no way of knowing how that might have affected the world today, but his empire likely

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<sup>65</sup> Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812*, 233.

<sup>66</sup> In fact, over 65 officers present at the Battle of Borodino would be involved a Palace Coup in St. Petersburg after the death of Tsar Alexander I in 1825.

<sup>67</sup> Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, 550.

<sup>68</sup> Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, 550.

<sup>69</sup> Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, 534.

would have stood strong for many more years. There is no telling what Napoleon could have done with the 400,000 troops he had lost during the campaign. It was toward the end of his life, when talking about the Russian campaign with a confidant at his island "prison" of Saint Helena, that Napoleon seems to have echoed the sentiments of history: "I was incessantly compelled to exercise an equal degree of address and energy. In all these enterprises I found it necessary to maintain a strange character; to evince singular acuteness of perception, and great confidence in my own plans; though they were perhaps disapproved by everyone around me."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Count de Las Cases, *Memorial de Sainte Helene*, 102.