The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

1812 Revisited

By The Moscow Times

October 31, 2012



200 years ago, Napoleon rode out of Moscow with what was left of the Grande Armée, having failed to crush the Russian army only to be famously defeated by the Russian winter.

Given the love of anniversaries by the press and governments, I am surprised more has not been made of this historic anniversary, and while I am not sure that there are any deep lessons to be learned from it, what surprises me is how many similarities there are with Russia today.

To remind you of the history: As Napoleon rode out of the city on Oct. 18, he ribbed his entourage for overestimating the severity of the legendary Russian winters, commenting: "It's a lovely day; nicer than Fontainebleau at this time of year."

He quickly had to swallow his words as temperatures plunged. This week, the same thing is happening in Moscow. Oct. 18 this year was a bright sunny day with a temperature of 10 degrees Celsius, down from the mid-teens for most of that week. However, on Oct. 30 Moscow was thrown into traffic chaos by a change in the weather. I'm sure the Eskimos have a word

for the kind of snow we had, but in English it can best be described as a heavy shower of freezing sludge that was dumped, rather than falling from the sky. This ain't picture postcard weather.

If the temperature had been a single degree lower, there would have been a repeat of the "ice rain" that fell in December 2010, which froze on contact with anything solid. By the end of the afternoon, the ice had brought smaller and older trees down under the sheer weight of the water. Two years on, and the forests that surround the city are still full of maudlin trees, miserably bowed over until their tips touch the ground.

Within days of leaving Moscow, much the same happened to the Grande Armée. Temperatures fell to between minus 5 and minus 15 C until the first heavy snowfall on Nov. 6. From then on, it stayed at between minus 15 and minus 30 C for the rest of the six weeks it took to get out of the country. In a catastrophic miscalculation, Napoleon failed to issue coats, hats and gloves that were easily obtainable during his six-week sojourn in Moscow, but he dithered, unsure what to do next. Indeed, the first officers and wounded to be sent home a week ahead of the main body cantered right through to Paris without any problems.

What held Napoleon up was that he couldn't work out what the Russians were up to and totally lost the initiative as a result. He assumed that they would attack to save Moscow, provoking a battle he would have surely won. The only clever thing Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov did during the whole campaign was to abandon and burn Moscow — as much out of fear of facing Napoleon as for any strategic reason. Kutuzov then simply camped out to the south of Moscow and re-supplied his army. He didn't really have a plan other than to avoid fighting at all costs; he just waited and let the weather do its work.

Napoleon entered Russia on June 24 with nearly half a million men; he left Moscow with maybe a quarter of million due to deaths on the road and heavy casualties suffered at the Battle of Borodino near the capital; his army finally escaped with only 27,000 soldiers still standing.

War

The roots of the war law in the treaty of Tilsit, signed between Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I in July 1807, following Napoleon's victory at Friedland. Napoleon could have destroyed the Russian army but wanted to secure his eastern border and make Russia safe. This "friendship" involved ordering Russia to close its borders to British ships, Napoleon's real enemy, which crippled the Russian economy as then, as now, it didn't make anything, importing even its pots and pans from Britain.

What is striking is Napoleon's arrogance in riding roughshod over the slightly gawky tsar. Russian ire at Napoleon's high-handed treatment built up over the following years. The legacy of the Cold War has been blamed for poor relations between East and West today, but even in 1812 the French saw Russians as a people apart — the "Slavs," the "barbarians" — and looked down on them as a people. This view was only reinforced by the appalling poverty they found once they had entered Russian lands, which also meant that the Armée could not supply itself on the march, even on the relatively easy route into Moscow.

Alexander eventually lost all faith in Napoleon's feigned friendship and massed his army

on the border of what was left of Poland.

This whole episode smacks of NATO's treatment of Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. President Vladimir Putin poignantly reminded the alliance of its broken promises and fake hand of friendship following the fall of the Soviet Union at the Munich Security Conference in a famous speech in 2007, when the West massed its forces on Russia's border.

"I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our Western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them," Putin said in the Munich speech.

Napoleon didn't want to fight Russia, he only wanted to teach it a lesson and scare the tsar into a new treaty. So he assembled the Grand Armée — one of the biggest forces the world had ever seen. Here is one of those examples of Napoleon assuming that the Russians would react rationally: Napoleon arrived with over half a million men, outgunning the Russian army by nearly two to one.

But rather than being daunted by this huge force, the Russian court camped behind the army's lines didn't even notice the enemy's arrival. The nobility was too busy having balls and parties to bother with any sort of real preparation.

The first they knew of the Grande Armée's arrival was when it crossed the Neman River into Russian territory without being challenged. Alexander's generals panicked. They suddenly realized that they were going to be attacked and would lose, so they retreated. And they kept retreating until they reached Borodino near Moscow, where they were forced to give battle — and lost, only to retreat again, all the time drawing Napoleon deeper and deeper into Russia.

Like today, the Russian military had a large number of men and materiel but suffered from a lethal combination of overconfidence and disorganization. The tsar contributed to the chaos due to his meddling and failure to put Kutuzov clearly in charge thanks to clan politics.

As an autocrat, Alexander, like Putin, was entirely dependent on the country's nobles for power, and the high command turned into a nest of vipers as the factions lobbied for advantage — ignoring the approaching French army in the process in 1812, or getting on with the job of reform in Putin's case.

When Alexander eventually went back to St. Petersburg and tried to raise money and supplies for the diminishing army, many of the nobles promptly stole the funds, while traders put the price of muskets and sabers up tenfold.

The irony of the whole campaign was that the Russian army was totally unfit to fight, let alone fight one of the greatest generals in history. So how did it win?

The sage highlights the fact that Russia's sheer size makes it difficult to attack

by conventional means (as Hitler also found out). Its vast natural resources also mean armies can constantly be resupplied as Russia was then and now a rich country. Napoleon's men were amazed by the luxury and grandeur of Moscow on their arrival, which outshone Paris until it was put to the torch.

But maybe most importantly, the sheer bloody-mindedness of the Russian soldier and the low value put on life by the high command makes Russia very difficult to defeat. In the Battle of Borodino, the Russians put their soldiers within range of French guns and left them there: Some units lost two-thirds of their men without engaging the enemy once. Napoleon was fighting a modern war and caught out by these tactics of wantonly squandering men, which prevented him from delivering the coup de grâce that day.

Putin's Russia has many of these traits. The West is built on the principles of personal freedom, but the autocratic tendency that makes the state preeminent is alive and well in Russia. The corruption of the imperial days never went away; it has gotten worse in the last few years simply because the state has more money thanks to the stratospheric rise of oil prices.

The chaos caused by bickering among the "high command" for personal gain is also an easily recognized feature of the current administration. As home to the highest concentration of billionaires in the world, and with the second most billionaires in absolute terms, Russia has then and now too many princes, which makes organizing an army, let alone an economy, difficult.

The West is also making the same mistake as Napoleon, assuming that Russia will act rationally when all it does for the most part is react to events. Unable to understand Russia's motives, the West blunders into increasingly bellicose rhetoric, and like Napoleon ends up fighting a war that isn't on its terms. Napoleon explicitly said that he never wanted to fight Russia, as it had nothing that he wanted, yet he ended up suffering one of his worst defeats ever.

Finally, anyone who has spent time in Russia and tried to do something without the correct paperwork sees nonsensical bloody-mindedness on a daily basis. The apathy that greets the hundreds of people that die every year from swimming while drunk, or eating poisoned mushrooms, let alone the deaths in the two Chechen and one Georgian wars, testifies to the enduring low value placed on life in Russia.

The West struggles to understand how such a corrupt, disorganized, wasteful state can function. These problems would quickly lead to the defeat of any normal country, but assuming Russia was like the other countries in Europe was also Napoleon's mistake.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/10/31/1812-revisited-a35235