The Grand Failure: How Logistics of Supply Defeated Napoleon in 1812

LYNCH BENNETT

In November of 1812, at the hamlet of Gara, Sergeant François Bourgogne admitted, "I am sure that if I had not found any horseflesh myself, I would have turned cannibal."[1] Bourgogne, a once dignified and proud member of the Imperial Guard, was brought to this macabre conclusion by the unfortunate events perpetuating Napoleon's invasion of Russia. Bourgogne saw unprecedented death and destruction during the campaign. On this specific occasion, he witnessed many of his comrades burnt alive as they sought shelter in an overcrowded barn. As the building burned, the number of men inside prevented any escape, and it was reported that some soldiers who were not trapped took advantage of the opportunity to dine on their fallen brethren. Bourgogne found that he could not condemn this vile behavior, however, because he believed himself not above such an act, given the circumstance.[2]

The events that saw soldiers, like Bourgogne, completely demoralized and bereft of dignity began with the ambition of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. When Napoleon decided to invade Russia, he did not foresee how disastrous his decision would prove. Throughout the summer, fall, and winter of 1812, Napoleon saw his mighty Grande Armeé reduced from a fighting machine of over half a million trained soldiers, to a tattered and demoralized band of a few thousand. When the invasion was planned, Napoleon thought only of battling the Russian army; that he would fight Russian weather, poor infrastructure, peasants, and his own hubris did not occur to the leader. Though the French did not lose a single battle against the Russian Army until their infamous retreat, they began losing the battle with logistics and the Russian environment from almost the beginning of the campaign. Supplying a force the size of Napoleon's army was a logistical nightmare for the French command. Survival instincts usurped humanity and discipline, culminating in the destruction of the Grande Armeé.

The Invasion Begins

When Czar Alexander I publicly disregarded the French Continental Blockade, Napoleon would not stand for such blatant contempt of French authority. The Emperor decided to take military action against the audacious Russians in order to force their obedience to the French embargo. By raising a massive Grande Armeé of over 600,000 men, Napoleon hoped to either intimidate the Russians into immediate capitulation, or bring the czar to his knees through a massive military engagement.[3] Napoleon knew that the speed of travel would prove vital to the success of his operation; as a result, he intended the campaign to last a mere three weeks.[4] Perhaps obviously, a foot soldier could travel much faster than a supply wagon, and so the Grande Armeé was to live off the land, taking what it needed from Russia instead of relying on lumbering supply wagons for sustenance. As the resources near the road were consumed, the soldiers were forced to branch out in search of supplies far from the main force. The decision to trust in the Russian land to supply his army was perhaps one of the greatest missteps of Napoleon's military career. While some scholars posit that the Russian Winter or Russian army were the primary agents of the demise of the Grande Armeé, these theories understate a harsher reality: Napoleon's own logistical oversight proved to be the greatest cause of his destruction in Russia.[5]

Alexander and his generals had no intention of allowing Napoleon's plan to succeed on any level. The Russian prince Petr Ivanovich Bagration realized immediately what Napoleon did not: the Russian land would not be able to sustain a force of 200,000, let alone half a million soldiers.[6] On August 21, 1812, when the Russian commanders were discussing how to go about conducting the war with Napoleon, Bagration proposed to Davidov, "What if they are left alone? The enemy army's sources of strength and sustenance will be destroyed…The country on either side of the road is not sufficient to sustain 200,000 troops."[7] With this realization that Napoleon's plan was one of unintentional self-destruction, the Russian command decided to feint and withdraw, pulling the Grande Armeé further into Russia. These leaders knew that each passing day brought the French army closer to starvation. Alexander would neither bow to the threat of the massive

---

Lynch Bennett *is a junior in the history program at Purdue University. His historical interests include, but are not limited to, colonial and early American political and cultural history through a transatlantic lens.*

[1] Francois Bourgogne, *The Memoirs of Sergeant Bourgogne* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1979), 76.
[2] *Ibid.*, 76.
[3] Robert Harvey, *The War of Wars: The Great European Conflict, 1793-1815* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2006), 641, 642.
[4] *Ibid.*, 642.
[5] D.C.B. Lieven, "Russia and the Defeat of Napoleon (1812-14)," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian & Eurasian History* 7, no. 2 (May 8, 2006), 289.
[6] Denis Davydov and Gregory Troubetzkoy, *In the Service of the Tsar Against Napoleon: the Memoirs of Denis Davidov, 1806-1814* (London: Greenhill Books, 1999), 85.
[7] *Ibid*.

army, nor would he allow his inferior force of 200,000 to engage Napoleon and risk losing a decisive battle. Instead, the Russians allowed the laws of logistics to bring the French war machine to painful, grinding halt.

Chasing a Russian Ghost

The Russians fought only occasionally through guerilla tactics, retreating ever further into the heart of Russia, while the Grande Armeé pursued them relentlessly. With each new day, the effects of Napoleon's poor planning wore down his army. Soldiers in the vanguard were able to encounter supplies first and therefore consume them before the men farther back in the column could obtain them. This resulted in increased hardship for soldiers in the rearguard, and exploitative opportunities for those ahead. Bourgogne tells of a woman who traveled with the army selling supplies she obtained to those who followed in the column.[8] Though at the time such behavior may have seemed mercenary to those in the rearguard, little did they know that in just a few months, they would yearn for any opportunity to obtain supplies, regardless of the price.

Not only were foodstuffs difficult to procure, but an even more imperative resource was nearly non-existent. Finding clean drinking water became a tremendous problem for the soldiers in the latter part of the column. The men quickly became exhausted; the latitude and long summer days meant nights were scarcely three hours long, resulting in long marching days with only short periods of rest.[9] As exhaustion, summer heat, disease, starvation, and thirst took their toll on the army, the corpses of the dying compounded the magnitude of these issues. The bodies of dead men often fell into the open sources of water, contaminating the water supplies. Sergeant Bourgogne describes this predicament: "We had not water, however, for the little stream flowing near was full of decaying bodies."[10] Men suffering from extreme thirst in the Russian summer heat had little recourse but to drink from contaminated bodies of water. The putrid water subsequently increased the prevalence of dysentery and other diseases in the army, which increased the death toll, feeding this vicious cycle. In addition to contamination from dead bodies, the shallow, stagnant water was home to worms and microbes, further tainting the water.[11] Men were not given the barest essentials, instead foraging where they could.

Wandering in search of supplies became common practice amongst the soldiers, and contributed greatly to the breakdown of discipline and cohesion of the army later in the campaign. Jakob Walter, a German conscript in the Grande Armeé, mentions that he would wander away from the French column for hours in search of supplies in order to overcome this problem.[12] As is perhaps obvious, such meandering by the soldiers would eventually lead to a degradation of military discipline. However, beyond this consequence, the French troops unwittingly created a powerful enemy with their wandering: the Russian populace.

As Napoleon's soldiers strayed from the column, they inevitably clashed with innocent Russian peasants and committed "all manner of violent excesses" in search of supplies.[13] Walter details one such encounter in which the soldiers of the Grand Armeé entered a seemingly abandoned house in search of food. They located several bags of grain, and commandeered a peasant's unguarded horse to help with transporting the grain back to the column. The peasants witnessed the soldiers' theft and rallied, forming a mob against them. The soldiers fired on the mob to deter them from attacking, managing to escape with their stolen goods.[14] An event such as this one was by no means unique and serves to highlight the growing animosity between the peasants and the Grand Armeé. As these events became commonplace, resistance to the invasion spread from the Russian army to the civilian population as well.

This resistance can be seen from the Russian perspective in the memoirs of Denis Davidov, an officer in the Russian Army. Davidov was ordered to harass the Grande Armeé with guerilla tactics, utilizing a small cavalry force of 130 men. When Davidov tried to enter Russian villages, he discovered the peasants had levied volunteer militias and were prepared to fight off all outsiders, even members of the Russian Army such as himself.[15] Davidov was able to earn the peasant's trust, and as the number of his successes against the French grew, he armed Russian civilians with captured weapons, increasing the strength of this resistance. Davidov also told villagers to pretend to welcome the invaders into their villages and homes, kill them in their sleep, and bury the bodies in secret in order to keep the enemy unaware of the village's hostility.[16] In overcoming its need of necessary supplies, the Grande Armeé united the Russian population against itself, serving only to further complicate both military and logistical issues.

---

[8] Bourgogne, 5.
[9] Jakob Walter, *The Diary of a Napoleonic Footsoldier* (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1991), 50.
[10] Bourgogne, 61.
[11] Walter, 43.
[12] *Ibid.,* 44.
[13] Davydov and Troubetzkoy, 86.
[14] Walter, 45.
[15] Davydov and Troubetzkoy, 87.
[16] *Ibid*., 89.

How the Campaign was Almost Saved

At Vitebsk on July 27, 1812, Napoleon made a decision that could have saved his campaign if only he had held to it.[17] Once again, Napoleon had narrowly missed his decisive battle with the Russian Army, which had broken camp and retreated the previous night. He accurately assessed Vitebsk as a defensible and well supplied position, and opted to set up camp there for the duration of the year thus delaying the capture of Moscow until 1813.[18] Napoleon's generals agreed with this wise plan, yet Napoleon's own hubris would not allow for prolonged inaction. He soon became obsessed with the idea of taking Moscow, believing that he could force Alexander's surrender from the capital if it were captured.[19] Napoleon lied to his generals, who preferred delaying the attack, by telling them he wanted only to take the nearby city of Smolensk before the end of the year. The generals did not believe their brash emperor, however, and Napoleon was forced to overrule their dissent with his unrelenting authority.[20] Napoleon, who later claimed in his diaries that not a man or supply cart was captured before Moscow (a claim decidedly disproven by Denis Davidov's account), set off from Vitebsk with 182,000 men with the intent of capturing Moscow.[21]

Forsaking the safety afforded by Vitebsk proved to be fatal for the Grande Armeé, as well as the humanity of the soldiers that comprised it. The hard-fought battle for Smolensk, in which 10,000 of Napoleon's soldiers died, yielded little compensation for their struggle.[22] The Russians burned the city as they retreated, thus denying the invaders any notable level of shelter or sustenance once contained therein.[23] Though Smolensk was the farthest Napoleon ever originally intended to lead his army, the allure of Moscow and the lingering desolation of Smolensk pushed the Grande Armeé onward.

As the Grande Armeé pressed on towards Moscow, stifling heat, dysentery, and starvation took an alarming toll on the soldiers. Their maps told of villages and towns that could offer reprieve and sustenence, but as they reached each town they were met only by the smoldering remnants of the Russian retreat. Without their own supplies, and with no way to extract them from villages that no longer existed, the ranks of the Grande Armeé hemorrhaged soldiers at an alarming rate of 6,000 men per day. This was a higher mortality rate than the notorious Russian winter inflicted on their infamous retreat.[24] It was in this sorry state that Napoleon's ever-weakening army fought what could have been his coveted decisive battle.

The Russian field marshal Mikhail Kutuzov finally engaged Napoleon's tattered force on September 7 at Borodino.[25] Amidst the corpses of men, livestock, and horses, the two mammoth forces clashed in one of the largest battles the world had yet seen. The size of the armies was titanic, with the French fielding 130,000 and the Russians 120,000, and the total casualties for both sides topped 100,000. Despite the grand scale, the battle proved to be utterly indecisive.[26] Both the French and Russians declared victory, but little was accomplished aside from tarnishing of the myth of French invincibility. The Russians withdrew to Moscow, and Napoleon readily followed.

Moscow

When the Russians retreated to Moscow, they quickly realized their reduced force would be unable to defend the city against Napoleon's Grande Armeé. Rather than expend resources defending the capital, Czar Alexander opted to abandon and burn the city as had been done the smaller villages before. This forced the French to tarry in the smoldering ruins while the czar rebuilt his army. On September 13, the Russians abandoned their capital, and on September 14 it fell into the hands of an elated Napoleon.[27] When Moscow was first captured, Napoleon placed Marshal Mortier in command of his newly captured jewel with orders for the soldiers to not pillage the city. Napoleon had no idea that the Russians would burn their beloved capital, yet Fyodor Vasilyevich Rostopchin, the governor of Moscow, had already released prisoners to burn the city and removed the water pumps to prevent the invaders from extinguishing the flames.[28] Sergeant Bourgogne's account affirms that Napoleon's "no pillage" order was at first obeyed, but after the chaos of the fire began, little could be done to save the civilians of Moscow and their property from being ravaged by the starved and desperate conquerors.[29] Bourgogne himself used the fire as an excuse to loot, rationalizing that if he did not take what he needed,

---

[17] Harvey, 645.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Charles J. Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars: An International History, 1803-1815* (New York: Viking, 2008), 472.
[20] Harvey, 650.
[21] Esdaile, 472.
[22] Harvey, 652.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Harvey, 654.
[25] Bourgogne, 8.
[26] Harvey, 658.
[27] Bourgogne, 14.
[28] Harvey, 660.
[29] Bourgogne, 31.

it would only be destroyed by the flames.[30] The breakdown in discipline as the fire spread foreshadowed the breakdown which would destroy the army as it limped back to Europe.

The fire at Moscow was a critical juncture in the invasion of Russia. Until this point, Napoleon had been able to rally his soldiers with promises of food and shelter in the capital. At first, this promise was fulfilled. The soldiers, once looting began, had their fill of every necessity and luxury they could fathom. Sergeant Bourgogne tells of jewel encrusted pistols, elegant formal dresses, jewelry, gold, silver, hordes of food and alcohol – anything a soldier could have imagined.[31] As the fire spread, however, the soldiers' dreams burned with the city that would have realized them. Bourgogne believed that even after the fire, Moscow could still yield the necessary supplies and shelter required by the army, yet it is difficult to see how so many men could have survived in the smoldering ruins.[32] In all likelihood, languishing in the shell of Moscow any longer would have resulted in further destruction of the Grande Armeé. One of Sergeant Bourgogne's companions, a man by the name of Picart, blamed many of the hardships the army later endured on the extended stay in Moscow. According to Picart, even Moscow could only offer a few weeks supply to the massive Grande Armeé, and the month spent therein exacerbated the danger of the situation.[33]

As the fire began, Napoleon and his generals did not think it was a deliberate act of arson, but rather a few isolated fires merely caused by the invasion. They soon realized their mistake as the instances of arson spread. Soon, orders were given to shoot any individual seen setting fire to a building. Though the fire spread rapidly, it still took several weeks for the flames to affect Napoleon's determination. Both Walter and Bourgogne tell of wandering the city in search of supplies as buildings all around them were engulfed by the flames. Though the conditions degraded every day, Bourgogne's tenure in Moscow seems to be a lighthearted time in which he was able to obtain luxuries and necessities, spending his evenings drinking and dancing into the night.[34] By the time Napoleon decided to abandon Moscow, when he had a personal close encounter with the flames nearing the Kremlin, Bourgogne's account lost their jovial air and become grim. Instead of focusing on parties and alcohol, he tells of how the fire destroyed the civilians' property. In one such account, he helped a Swedish man, living in Moscow as a prisoner of the French, scour the charred ruins of his former home for the bodies of his wife and son. Bourgogne was at first hesitant to help a prisoner, but the man persuaded him by crying out, "Mon Dieu! I have lost my wife and my son in the fire!"[35] Bourgogne then allowed the prisoner to search for his family, soon finding his wife burned to death, and his son suffocated by the smoke in the cellar.[36] As the French lingered in the remains of Moscow, Alexander was busy rebuilding his army from the battle at Borodino to an invincible 215,000 soldiers.[37] Napoleon realized that if he remained in Moscow much longer, he would be surrounded by the ever growing Russian force. Faced with destruction and starvation in Moscow, and the threat of Russians around it, Napoleon reluctantly abandoned his prized jewel.

Out of the Fire, Into the Frying Pan

When he relinquished the capital on October 18, 1812, Napoleon departed Moscow with 140,000 men, 50,000 horses, and 2,000 wagons.[38] Upon departing the city, the soldiers were disinclined to abandon the luxurious treasures they had claimed in Moscow, and so their personal provisions consisted primarily of the unnecessary spoils of war. Bourgogne carried things such as a large cloak, silver framed reliefs, lockets, and a spittoon set, "intended for presents, and had been found in cellars where houses were burnt down."[39] This decision to forgo necessities in favor of luxuries proved fatal for many of the soldiers as they faced an arduous return to France bereft of any practical supplies. Almost immediately, the goods carried in the wagons had to be abandoned because the wagon wheels sank deeply into the muddy, impassable Russian roads.[40] The telltale signs of the destruction of the Grande Armeé from starvation and exposure could already be seen.

With few supplies on their person, and the large part of their baggage train bogged down in the mud, the soldiers were once again forced to forage for supplies as best they could find them. Napoleon hoped to avoid the debacle of the journey into Russia by taking a different, warmer and better supplied road back to friendly territory; however, Kutuzov would not allow Napoleon this option. Kutuzov blockaded the road south and, in an odd engagement, Napoleon himself was nearly killed by Cossack cavalry. After this close brush with death, Napoleon seemed to have lost his nerve, and

---

[30] *Ibid*., 32.
[31] *Ibid*., 21.
[32] Bourgogne, 18.
[33] *Ibid.,* 150.
[34] *Ibid.,* 54.
[35] Bourgogne, 40.
[36] *Ibid.*
[37] Harvey, 664.
[38] *Ibid.,* 666.
[39] Bourgogne, 57.
[40] *Ibid.,* 56.

rather than force his way south to more fertile and warm terrain, he shied from Kutuzov opting instead to return to France by way of Smolensk.[41] As Napoleon reversed his course, Kutuzov realized the French war machine was in retreat, and all he needed to do was herd the army along the same path from whence it came; nature and a landscape already destroyed by the previous summer of the French invasion would take care of the rest.

Napoleon sealed his army's fate with the decision to return to France by way of Smolensk. The desolate road, riddled with corpses every fifty paces, afforded no reprieve to the starving soldiers.[42] On November 1, the weather took a turn for the worse and the soldiers' "miseries began."[43] A dense fog rolled in on the sixth, setting a dreary and sinister scene for the demoralized conquerors in retreat. By the time the Grand Armeé reached Smolensk on November 12, a 26-day retreat left Napoleon with 40,000 soldiers in rank and 60,000 strung out across the landscape in search of food. In addition to the utter disorder of the column, just under a fifth of the supply wagons that left Moscow remained with the starving soldiers. [44] Napoleon's force now had no way of supplying itself, resulting in a breakdown of discipline and organization, particularly in the rear of the army where the effects of starvation were more intensely felt. As the soldiers branched out further from the column, they became increasingly vulnerable to the Russians' ruthless guerilla onslaught. Isolated soldiers, unable to rely on the safety of numbers, fell victim to roaming bands of Cossack cavalry. Their vulnerability to guerilla tactics served to expedite the Grande Armeé's demise, as well as the increased barbarization of the remaining soldiers.

Jakob Walter testifies to this barbarization of humanity. At one point, Walter, a German conscript, was able to obtain a small portion of bread. Though he tried to eat it quickly, a group of Frenchmen surrounded him and attempted to take it from him. Fortunately for Walter, some of his fellow Germans stepped in to save him from the French gang, and were able to deter them from stealing Walter's bread. Unfortunately, the situation again turned grim when the Germans too turned against Walter and stole the same food they had just saved from the French.[45] This incident demonstrates the fault lines that were developing in the amalgamation of nationalities that was Napoleon's Grande Armeé. As conditions deteriorated, the unity of the force waned, men joining with soldiers of their own country for survival. As seen in the account of General Auguste-Jean-Gabriel de Caulaincourt, this disunity occurred even at the highest levels of the Grande Armeé, with Napoleon blaming his defeats on the weakness of his non-French allies.[46] The extreme conditions of the retreat caused Napoleon and his army to revert to the flawed human tendency to band with similar people in opposition of those who are different.

In addition to the division of nationalities, bands of thieves formed within the army. These groups of men traveled amongst the army, but not necessarily with it, keeping to themselves. At night, as the soldiers slept, the thieves would leave their places of hiding and steal what they could from their fellow soldiers.[47] Not only did the formation of these bands contribute to disorder, but they also weakened the might of the army. Delinquent soldiers who had forsaken their post and turned to crime were not present to help fight. Additionally, these bands of thieves were detrimental to the morale and the physical well- being of those soldiers who had remained in rank and file. With resources being directed to thieves who did not contribute to the well-being of the army as a whole, those soldiers who did contribute suffered as their necessities were stolen.

As the long journey from Moscow wore on, soldiers were increasingly forced to fend for themselves. The earlier mentioned incident at the burning barn, in which hundreds of men burned to death while many outside simply warmed their hands by the flames, epitomizes this self-interest. The men in the barn were trapped because, by reaching Gara first, they claimed the barn as a shelter from the cold. To prevent any more men from entering the barn, and thus crowding it further, those in the barn slept in a large human pile in front of the door. When the fire started, this pile prevented escape or rescue; their behavior doomed them to the flames. Outside of the inferno, some men attempted a rescue, but the majority merely pulled close for any warmth- even that which came from their burning comrades. Some men even claimed to have seen other soldiers eating men pulled from the flames.[48] By this point in the campaign, the desperate situation had skewed the soldiers' view of humanity to the point that the value of their fellow soldiers was reduced to the value of the basest kindling.

This disregard for the lives of others affected the wounded as well. In war, it is expected that a soldier would care for an injured comrade, valuing the life of the injured as highly as their own. In the winter of 1812, little care was shown for anyone exhibiting any signs of weakness. Sergeant Bourgogne wrote of an instance where an ambulance driver fell

[41] Harvey, 669.
[42] Walter, 62.
[43] Bourgogne, 63.
[44] Harvey, 671.
[45] Walter, 65.
[46] Armand Caulaincourt, *The Recollections of Caulaincourt, Duke of Vizina,* 86.
[47] Bourgogne, 90.
[48] *Ibid.*, 76.

asleep, leaving the horse that pulled his ambulance unattended. During the night soldiers killed and ate the horse, thus rendering this vessel of medical aid useless.[49] Though it was an animalistic act of survival to disable an ambulance, these vehicles proved were of little use to the men by this point. As the number of hurt and diseased men mounted, there was little that could be done for them without supplies. Rather than be near the sick and risk catching diseases, the ambulance drivers tossed their ailing cargo out onto the road.[50] The sick and injured, lacking strength and ability to save themselves, were further casualties of the breakdown of humanity.

In order to stave off starvation, the men turned to all manner of vile behaviors. At first, they merely disregarded order and discipline in search of supplies far from column. This soon became a dangerous tactic; the prevalence of Russian Cossacks forced them to find safer sources of nourishment. For some time, the soldiers had found that horses, when they were unable to perform their function, could provide the sustenance they needed to survive. As conditions degraded, so did the soldiers' humanity and they began to kill able bodied horses for their meat. The horses, themselves utterly numbed by the bitter cold, could not feel the soldiers cutting into them. In this way, horses fit for service were hacked to pieces for what little meat they had, while still alive, completely unaware of their assailant.[51] The soldiers could not waste time in eating the freshly cut meat because it would quickly be stolen by other men or become too frozen to eat. With no way to cook the meat, and no time to spare, these ravenous soldiers had no choice but to eat the horse flesh raw, something that many of them would never have considered doing before this campaign.

Those who could obtain this fresh horse meat might be considered fortunate given the circumstance. Often times, soldiers came across the carcasses of horses only to find the frigid weather had rendered the flesh inedible. Sergeant Bourgogne describes one such instance in which he attempted to chop off a piece of horse flesh with an axe, yet the meat was frozen solid and would not yield to his blows.[52] If no meat could be obtained, the soldiers would still extract nutrients by sucking on the frozen horse blood as it mixed with the snow. These "blood-sickles" became a common alternative food source, and highlights the desperation of these unfortunate men.[53]

Though horse blood and horse meat became a staple of the Grande Armeé diet, there were times when other sources of food became available. In his memoirs, Sergeant Bourgogne despondently reflects upon a time when he was foraging in the woods and came upon an enlisted man cooking potatoes, claiming them to be for a general. Bourgogne first attempted to buy the potatoes from the man, but when he would not sell them, Bourgogne threatened him. Finally the man reluctantly sold Bourgogne seven of the potatoes, and he ate one saving the rest for later.[54] When he returned to his unit, Bourgogne hid his treasures from his fellow soldiers; instincts of self-preservation had overcome any feelings of unity. Later on, he went off on his own in the woods to eat his potatoes in secret, yet found them too frozen to eat. Realizing the potatoes would not do him any good, and ashamed of his selfishness, Bourgogne finally decided to share the potatoes with his men who took them from him immediately. They too were dismayed to find the potatoes too frozen for consumption, and so they tried to thaw them with fire. This only destroyed the potatoes, and the frustrated men were forced to discard them. Bourgogne lied to his soldiers by telling them he found the potatoes in the woods and, believing him and thinking him to be quite kind, they shared their boiled horse blood with him.[55] This anecdote dually shows the desperate measures even the highest had succumbed to, and yet the shreds of human decency that remained even among the harshest conditions.

The consumption of horses may have temporarily staved off starvation for the men, yet it had disastrous ramifications for the military success of the campaign. As horses died, the size and effectiveness of the French cavalry dwindled, as did the ability to transport supplies in whatever wagons remained. The Russian Cossacks, with smaller horses better suited for the harsh Russian climate, had a tremendous advantage in strength of cavalry by the end of the year.[56] Troops of Cossacks quickly swept through the ranks of those straggling behind the main force, and the French had few horses with which to counter them. This placed the Grande Armeé at a tremendous tactical disadvantage to the Russians. By utilizing the horses so valuable to military tactics as a food source, the food supply issue directly harmed the invader's ability to wage a war.

The Grande Armeé's lack of supplies was not limited to food and medical attention. The soldiers had little clothing to protect themselves from the frigid temperatures.[57] The manner in which the men obtained clothing was very similar

[49] *Ibid.,* 100.
[50] Walter, 70.
[51] Harvey, 671.
[52] Bourgogne, 136.
[53] Walter, 67.
[54] Bourgogne, 69.
[55] *Ibid.,* 73.
[56] Davydov and Troubetzkoy. 83.
[57] Harvey, 672.

to the ways in which they obtained food. In some cases, like that of Bourgogne, soldiers had the good fortune of obtaining furs through plundering in Moscow.[58] In other instances, however, they were forced to strip clothing from the bodies of fallen soldiers, or take it from those who let their guard down. Jakob Walter gives a rather graphic account of soldiers freezing to death during defecation. When pulling their pants down, these soldiers often faced the brutal fact that other soldiers could come along and take their pants while they were indisposed. If another soldier did not steal the indisposed soldier's pants, there was also a risk that the freezing temperatures would numb one's hands so badly that it would be impossible to redress resulting in freezing to death.[59] The level of ruthlessness increased further as the soldiers strove to preserve their own lives at any expense.

In addition to causing death from exposure, the theft and plundering of clothing caused a breakdown in the Grande Armeé's chain of command. As soldiers obtained clothing from other soldiers of different rank, or from civilians, insignias and signs of rank became confused and meaningless. With every soldier wearing clothes that were not his own, it became impossible to tell to what rank a soldier belonged.[60] Rather than attempt to discover the true rank of the man, soldiers began to assume that all officers were really enlisted men in officers' clothing, and therefore flagrantly refused to obey orders.[61] By the time the army had retreated past Smolensk, so many regiments and units were completely lost that officers often had no unit to command. The combination of the destruction of units, along with the misappropriation of symbols of rank, resulted in a chaotic breakdown in the chain of command in which soldiers utterly disregarded the orders of superior officers.

The last major obstacle that the Grande Armeé had to overcome in their escape from Russia was the Beresina River. With their fast Cossack cavalry, the Russians had the ability to charge ahead of Napoleon's force and disable the bridge. While this might prevent the French escape, the Russians decided this would not be in their best interest.[62] If Napoleon were barred from crossing the river, Kutuzov feared that he might turn north toward Minsk, an option ultimately destructive to Russia's wellbeing. Minsk was a depot for Russian supplies; if Napoleon captured the city, he might maintain a foothold in Russia and renew his invasion. Because of this, the Russian generals decided to continue chasing the Grande Armeé out of their land, permanently removing the French threat.

The last major clash between the two forces came at the crossing of the Beresina River. Napoleon ordered the building of multiple pontoon bridges to expedite the crossing, while facing attack from the Russian army tenaciously forcing these invaders from their territory. As the bridges were completed, disorganized and desperate mobs poured across the pontoons, seeing their escape so close at hand. Sergeant Bourgogne describes the desperate fray as men and horses fell, "Indeed, whoever did not have a good horse could not help falling over the horses and people lying about in masses. Everyone was screaming under the feet of the horses, and everywhere was the cry, 'shoot me or stab me to death!'"[63] When one of the bridges broke, those who were on it dove into the frigid river and attempted to swim across; most of those who did so drowned.[64] Once the majority of the Grande Armeé had crossed the river, Napoleon ordered the bridge to be burned to hinder the Russians in pursuit. Many men were left on the eastern bank, however, and were forced to either surrender to the Russians or risk the icy waters of the Beresina. Those who were captured suffered different fates depending on their nationality. A Frenchmen was often killed on sight, and sometimes even burned alive as the Russians took vengeance for the atrocities committed. Non-French soldiers were usually taken prisoner.[65]

With the Beresina River serving as a natural buffer between the majority of the Russian Army and his own soldiers, Napoleon's thoughts turned to the rest of his empire. On December 5, having been absent from his capital for months, and believing the worst of the dangers for his soldiers over, Napoleon left his army at Smorgoni and returned to Paris.[66] Napoleon's departure resulted in a total breakdown of the army as the order of the day, according to Walter, became, "Save himself who can!"[67] Many, like Walter, believed that by heading into Poland they would not be pursued by the Russians.[68] The soldiers quickly turned against each other, forming ranks along divisions of nationality and attacking those from other countries. Marshall Joachim-Napoléon Murat, Napoleon's own brother-in-law, turned against Napoleon

---

[58] Bourgogne, 72.
[59] Walter, 90.
[60] *Ibid*., 75.
[61] *Ibid.,* 91.
[62] Davydov and Troubetzkoy. 152.
[63] Walter, 85.
[64] Harvey, 679.
[65] Walter, 74.
[66] Harvey, 680.
[67] Walter, 89.
[68] *Ibid*., 96.

with a force of 15,000 men by reaching an accord with the Austrians.[69] Marshal Michel Ney, Napoleon's trusted general and rearguard of the retreat, was in command of only 700 men as he fought his way back across the Russian border into friendly territory.[70] When the campaign began, Napoleon set out with a force of over 500,000 men; by the end of the infamous retreat, only 20,000 remained.[71] Czar Alexander had not capitulated to Napoleon's demands; no new territory had been conquered. Only the destruction of the lives and humanity of hundreds of thousands of human beings was accomplished.

How the Giant Fell

When analyzing the failure that was Napoleon's invasion of Russia, many scholars posit that the Russian weather or Russian soldiers are to blame for this disaster of humanity.[72] While these factors contributed greatly to the destruction of the Grande Armeé, they did so by exacerbating a monumental underlying problem: poor logistical planning on the part of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. When he entered Russia, Napoleon's massive army was far too strong for the Russians to effectively counter. The Russian commanders realized his fundamental weakness. By taking so few supplies with him, Napoleon set his army up for destruction from want of the basic necessities.[73] The Russian land could not sustain the large human population of the French force, and so the force dwindled to a size the Russians could match. As the mounting supply problems caused a breakdown in discipline and organization, the Grande Armeé became increasingly vulnerable to attack. In addition to destroying order and discipline, starvation took an incredible toll on the horses upon which Napoleon's few supply wagons and the cavalry depended. The Russians capitalized on their equestrian advantage further weakening the invasion force. Had Napoleon planned properly for his invasion, starvation would not have crippled his force through disorder and destruction of cavalry. Without the loss of cavalry and organization, the Russians likely would not have been able to defeat Napoleon's superior force.

The Russian winter would also have had less effect had Napoleon planned properly. If he had decided to stay at Vitebsk, or at least supply his soldiers adequately, they would not have suffered so greatly in the cold. The cold served to kill men out right, but it also had the added effect of forcing men to obtain clothes that were not their own, thus confusing the chain of command. This confusion broke down any remaining discipline of the army, making it even more vulnerable to the Russian onslaught. This breakdown could have been avoided by providing for the warmth of soldiers.

As Napoleon's Grande Armeé set out to conquer Russia, the fearless emperor doomed this endeavor from the beginning. He planned for his army to obtain supplies from a land that could not sustain it. He intended to bend the Russian czar to his will quickly and surely. The Russians realized this massive oversight and exploited it to the fullest. Napoleon's army, unable to meet the basic needs of survival, descended into a chaotic mob of humanity, utterly vulnerable to Russian winter and Russian soldiers. Soldiers wandered in search of supplies, often to never return. Divisions formed within the army that weakened its cohesion and unity. Horses, essential to fighting the skilled Cossack cavalry, were eaten. Soldiers' uniforms and insignia of rank were lost, further increasing the confusion. Without established ranks, without food and water, without horses, the Grande Armeé fell apart. All of these problems could have been avoided if Napoleon had made the proper logistical preparations for his army. As these issues compounded, the situation grew increasingly dire with each passing day. These conditions turned decent and dignified human beings into animalistic beings who stole food from starving friends, abandoned the sick on the road, stole clothing from the indisposed, and even ate their fellow soldiers. Without these weaknesses and this loss of humanity, the effects of the Russian winter and the Russian army would have been vastly reduced. In the end, it was the logistics of military supply that defeated Napoleon's Grande Armeé in 1812.

---

[69] Harvey, 682.
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] Louis Phillipe Segur quoted in Robert Harvey. *The War of Wars: The Great European Conflict, 1793-1815* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2006), 682.
[72] Lieven, 289.
[73] Davydov and Troubetzkoy. 85.