

**“To what extent did the direct involvement of
Napoleon Bonaparte in the warfare lead to the failure of
the Russian Campaign 1812?”**

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Section 1: Identification and evaluation of sources

The question of this investigation is: “To what extent did the direct involvement of Napoleon Bonaparte in the warfare lead to the failure of the Russian Campaign 1812?”

The Franco-Russian war took place in the second half of 1812 (June 24 – December 14) and ended with the defeat and retreat of the French army (Grande Armée) from Russia. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), a French military general and leader, planned the Russian Campaign 1812: the invasion of the Russian Empire with an intent to undermine the power of the Russian Empire. The main argument is that Napoleon’s direct involvement in the warfare was a major contributor to the failure of the Russian Campaign, although the impact of foreign support provided to Russia, socio-economic issues specific for the French nation (that were raised by the mandatory army drafting and foreign aid provided to Russia) and the effectiveness of Russian military strategies have also been prominently delineated.

The sources relevant to the investigation include Hollingsworth’s article “The Napoleonic Invasion of Russia and Recent Soviet Historical Writing” and Sirotkin’s book “Napoleon and Russia”.

Barry Hollingsworth’s “The Napoleonic Invasion of Russia and Recent Soviet Historical Writing” was published in *The Journal of Modern History* in 1966 and it is a tertiary source based on the collections of Soviet historical writings. It is written by a historian with a purpose to shed light on the Russian perception of Napoleon and to neutrally analyze the causes and consequences of the French invasion. The content offers a varied interpretation of the treatment of the 1812 war in Russian and Soviet literature. The values of the source are its credibility and a balanced interpretation of the course of the Napoleon’s invasion in Russian

historiography. The limitations, however, include that some of the events might have been exaggerated in order to seem more poignant to the readers and gain more profit from the publication and the article does not discuss French or other foreign works, thus limiting the extent of different perspectives on the matter.

V. Sirotkin's "Napoleon and Russia" is written in 2000. It is a non-contemporary tertiary source by a Soviet historian who specialized in the Franco-Russian relationship and the Napoleonic era. Sirotkin was a Russian historian who received the Soviet education and was a professor for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. In the book, he discusses the course of the Franco-Russian war, describes the characteristics of Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte. The benefit of the historical distance and referencing multiple sources and viewpoints are definite values of this source, as well as its acknowledgment of its close academic relation to Tarlé, the Soviet historian of Napoleonic era, and possible bias towards Russo-French relationship. The purpose of this work is educational and informative, yet considering Sirotkin's nationality, the possible limitation of his research is that his account of events involving Russian participation could be biased in their elucidation of events in favor of the Russian perspective, ideology and national interests.

Section 2: Investigation

The Russo-French relations have been in a constant struggle due to global competition. Both countries aimed to gain more power in the world in 1800s. Because of that, Napoleon Bonaparte and Alexander the Great faced times of keen friendship turning into a hostile environment and fear of conspiracies. V. Sirotkin refers to the Franco-Russian War of 1812

as a “military-diplomatic battle”¹ of Bonaparte and Alexander the Great. The initiation of the invasion is mainly assigned to Napoleon’s strategy to “make Russia subservient and to consolidate [French] Continental power for England’s subsequent defeat”². Thus, according to Sirotkin³, the territorial greed was not the incentive of the French leader, yet some historians argue that the 1812 war was the most explicit imperialistic war dictated by Napoleon’s and French bourgeoisie’s interest in expansionist politics⁴. In any case, the situation escalated to the extent which threatened the peace of Russian and European nations.

There were weak fighting spirits present in the French army due to the unfavorable characteristics of drafted troops and their problematic logistics. The political climate in France was agitated. The social unrest due to the change in the government after Napoleon’s seizure of power through a military coup in 1799 was increasing the ill-mood in the masses. To appeal to the higher classes who were distrustful of him, Napoleon had to act quickly and still instill the mass conscription (*Levée en masse*). Therefore, in 1801, he introduced an old royal law which claimed that rich could buy replacements from poorer people to take their places. Such a law, Popov insists, was unfavorable towards the poor people who had no choice but to fill in the spots of the wealthy to earn income⁵. This way, at least 10 000 soldiers annually joined the French army.

From the perspective of French Army, there was no strong motivation to win against Russia. It is important to note that the Grande Armée consisted not only from French militants but also other Europeans, making up to 600 000 people. This instance could be interpreted as the

¹ Sirotkin 2000, p. 6

² Gompert, Binnendijk, and Lin 2014, p. 43

³ Sirotkin 2000, p. 178

⁴ Tarlé 1943, p. 2

⁵ Popov 2012, p. 76

reasoning for lack of devotion in the major fraction of the troops to the cause of the protection of French national interests. Hence, the high risk of desertions and issues with food and ammunition logistics during the war were especially prominent for the French Republic. As Napoleon assumed that the incursion would only last until the fall, the food and weather conditions were considered controllable and were not taken seriously in the account by the generals. In the context of the world, all armies (not just France) across the globe suffered from issues with provision, as the Russian historian Popov mentions⁶. Apart from having poor maps of Russia, Napoleon and his officers did not lack critical information. During the invasion, Napoleon had little intelligence regarding the whereabouts of Russian forces, which obviously hampered his effort to destroy them⁷. Adding to that, the records of Svechin (1928) emancipated by Popov⁸ depict the spiraling internal tensions in the Grande Armée. For instance, in mid-November, in Orsha suburbs, out of 55 thousand soldiers led by Napoleon 30 thousand had no armor which signifies the shattering discipline of French divisions. Such a feebleness could be reverted both to the incompetence of the European soldiers of Levée en masse period and the weakening grip of Bonaparte as a military authority on his own people.

The superiority of the Russian military and resistance is one of the relevant factors that arguably led to the defeat of France. The retraction of Russians further into the country on September 8 from Borodino alongside the Moscow Road was an unexpected move suggested by a Russian feldmarschall, M. Kutuzov. France expected greater resistance to French occupying the Russian capital, so the Russian strategy was an unpleasant surprise that shifted the discourse of the war in favor of Russia. The significance of the burning of Moscow for the French army also lies in it being a triggering event for the dissipating order in the French

⁶ Popov 2012, p. 75

⁷ Gompert, Binnendijk, and Lin 2014, p. 51

⁸ Popov 2012, p. 77

military rows and theories that the Russian partisans were the initial arsonists that provoked the destabilization of French officers. As Moscow was in flames, especially during September 14-18, 1812, ¾ of the city was destroyed. Apparently, Napoleon was put *in the grimmest mood* as the establishment of a peace treaty with Alexander seemed as a tough goal to achieve as there were many *vile robberies conducted by Grande Armée, especially Bavarians and Italians*⁹. Sirotkin¹⁰ discusses how the Russian partisan movement detained the French communication systems from Berezina to Moscow, yet most harm was inflicted on small French divisions that were dislocated as provision gatherers. The role of partisans in the failure of French army is exaggerated in the populist anti-Napoleon literature, especially in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Additionally, Alexander is noted to refer negatively towards his best military generals: Barclay, Bagration and Kutuzov¹¹, diminishing the perception of the high intelligence among the chiefs. Western historians¹² claim that the Russian czar understood that "the Grande Armée would defeat Russian forces" in downright battle. Thus, the foreign aid aggravated the rates of success of the Russian army as otherwise Russia experienced a slowdown in the production and strategical issues due to underqualified military personnel. The extracts from Orlov's historical records in Popov's article state that in mid-1811 the British confidentially delivered "1000 tons of lead" to Russia¹³, the amount greater than the local Russian reserves. However, Hollingsworth's meta-analysis¹⁴ demonstrates the same sentiment, supporting the argument of a lesser effect of Russians on the loss of French delegations as compared to the significance of Napoleon's rule on his people.

⁹ Tarlé 1943, p. 105-107

¹⁰ Sirotkin 2000, p. 339

¹¹ Tarlé 1943, p. 112

¹² Gompert, Binnendijk, and Lin 2014, p. 45

¹³ Popov 2012, p. 77

¹⁴ Hollingsworth 1966, p. 39

Napoleon's direct involvement and orders manifested by him are, however, the main reasons the invasion faced miserable results. Napoleon's *own defective reasoning* is reflected as surpassing *poor intelligence or poor staffing*¹⁵. Ambitiousness and blind pursuit might have restricted his vision of the war as the short-term battle successes did not lead to long-term prosperity of French troops in Russia. From the intentionalist perspective, Napoleon was the mastermind behind the invasion, the mistakes propagated by his decisions that disregarded the opinions of French generals were irrecoverable for his national reputation, despite multiple previous victories. Napoleon's thinking based on his successes in other regions did not match his endeavors in Russia. Consequently, Napoleon's chronicles and military intellect reinforced his neglect of alternate routes and diplomatic compromises, as his persona also influenced the agitation amongst French nation. Tarlé characterizes Napoleon *as immensely stubborn*¹⁶, the trait specifically perceivable in his postponement of leaving raided Moscow (that later resulted in great human losses) in anticipation of Alexander's offer of armistice. Yet, Bonaparte's requests were debunked and disputably groundless as Russia overpowered weakened French military and the French Emperor.

To conclude, as Bonaparte was both an emperor and military general of France, his personal involvement in the 1812 Russian Campaign's warfare contributed largely to the campaign's eventual failure. Even in comparison with other factors, his responsibilities still included the consideration of logistics and difficulties inducted by harsh weather conditions to emulate the survival rate of his army on foreign lands and the reaction from the opponents. Napoleon's unpreparedness due to poorly planned Russian campaign aligned with the Russian patriotic

¹⁵ Gompert, Binnendijk, and Lin 2014, p. 48

¹⁶ Tarlé 1943, p.

spirits and the lack of unity among French and European soldiers that made the failure of the campaign inevitable by determinist approach.

Section 3: Reflection

Examining the impact of an individual figure on a big-scale event such as war raised several issues specific to the means of historical research. In order to write a credible historical paper, historians face problems ranging from determining reliability of the sources, defining the scope of the research and source selection, and distinguishing historical biases.

The obstacle in dealing with bipolar topics such as the international conflict was the reduced trustworthiness of sources. European, American and Russian historians translate substantial bias of different nature regarding Napoleon as a leader in their works. The first-hand accounts, on the other hand, of the individuals involved in the Russian Campaign 1812 could also be biasedly composed to justify their side's actions. I learned to tackle such issues by considering a wide range of academic pieces that reflect diverse populist sentiments across different time periods and in different languages. Acknowledging Napoleon's power over the historical discourse as a historically prevalent argument communicated a greater investigative message on inclusion of complex reasoning during research.

Intriguing difficulty that surfaced in my attempt to settle with historiography was distinguishing the historical biases. It became progressively palpable that the confirmation bias existed in multitude of secondary and tertiary sources, including those written by acclaimed historians such as Tarlé. Historians may find it challenging to explicitly determine a solid viewpoint that lines up with established historical perspectives. As having high quantities of evidence warrants the existence of persuasive historical narratives, the

historian's imperative lies in frankness regarding their statements being factual or dogmatic. I learned to maintain a certain vigilance while trying to assess the sufficiency of the evidence in my argumentation as well.

Another challenge was determining the scope of the research and selecting sources. Writers usually select material that fits their observations and potentially discard sources deemed inapt by them. I tackled the issue of obtaining sources relevant in its content and credible in its origin. Thus, the historical methods required me to detach personal interests from the academic analysis. I had to specify what kind of information was needed regarding my analysis on the French-Russian war and choose a limited number of sources that suggested distinct insights on the subject of French failure in the war.

In the end, this investigation helped me to comprehend the methods used by historians to write their works and what challenges await them during the process. I will make sure to use the knowledge and skills I gathered from writing this historical analysis from now on.

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