

BURNING BRIDGES

On the 14th of September 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte, the Emperor of the French, ordered his retinue to cease their line of advance, and disembarking from his carriage, proceeded to climb to the very top of the Mount of Salutation, a place where travellers of all nations traditionally kneel and pray upon their first sight of the view beyond. Napoleon felt no need of prayer, but the view still impressed him greatly. Here he now stood at the height of his fame and ambition, at the watershed of his success, a full 1,800 miles from Paris, further than any conquest, even that of Egypt, had taken him before. The master of Europe from East to West, what a legacy of Empire would his young son the King of Rome grow to inherit! Within the luggage of his retinue were carried maps of Turkey and India, for all seemed possible to the great conqueror come so far. On this warm late summer day, the Emperor of the French stood fully the master of all the vastness he surveyed, and he conjectured, of a great deal beyond. Many capitals had Napoleon seen, but the effect of this one was quite magical, and a cry of happiness escaped him. "Here at last is the Holy City of Moscow" he said, turning to his companion Caulaincourt, his Master of Horse. "It is high time".

The effect on Caulaincourt was no lesser than on his master. For four years Armand de Caulaincourt, the Duke of Vicenza, had served as the French Ambassador to the Tsar's court at St.Petersburg, a city of Frenchified elegance barely one hundred years old, but the view of this ancient capital fully took his breath away. The Byzantine magnificence of the Russian soul seemed to finally reveal itself before him. Glistening in the sun stood proudly the domes of six cathedrals and one thousand five hundred churches of peculiarly mystic aspect and outlandish design. Glittering

palaces mingled with distant trees, and the Kremlin, a vast triangular mass of towers resembling at once a palace, a castle and a cathedral all, rose like a citadel out of the general mass of groves and avenues. Clusters of gilded belfries and coloured spiralling domes rose skywards like huge turbans (Napoleon hereafter would forever refer to Moscow churches as "mosques"). The entire effect was gigantic, marvellous, outrageous and fantastical. Caulaincourt at once understood the true reason for the difficulties the campaign had presented thus far. The march on Russia had been a pursuit of the secrets of another world.

Soon, cries of "Moscow! Moscow!" were passing back through regiment, rank and many, many thousands of men. Each and every soldier felt his feet lighten with the joy of rest and the bounty their Emperor had promised them would be soon be theirs. How often had this thought alone kept them marching, how often whilst they had buried the dead or nursed their own wounds had the thought of looted riches alone sustained them? "Moscow! Moscow!". It was for this they had watched their own number die of sunstroke and strange fevers, for this had they quenched their thirst for five hundred and fifty arid miles across the Russian plains with cattles' blood and horses' urine for want of unpolluted water. For this had they fought the battles of Vitebsk and Smolensk, and for this had they somehow survived the thirteen hours of hell on earth that was Borodino, a battle without question the bloodiest any could recall or dare to imagine.

Thus it was in jubilant mood that the surviving stalwarts of the Grande Armée marched the final miles to the Gates of Moscow, singing songs of battle and conquest in celebration of their own unsurpassed achievements. Never before or since has the

Russian countryside been so filled with the sounds of "Malbrouk va t'en guerre" and the *Marseillaise*. There were many in their number who had served in the armies of Napoleon for full twenty years, many who had fought at Austerlitz and Wagram and Marengo, seen Italy, Egypt and all of Syria, toppled half the crowned heads of Europe and laid siege to Vienna not once but twice. But all considered this the day and scene of their greatest conquest. Napoleon, advancing on the city by the Mojaisk road, approached the Dorogomilov Gate with this singing of the Grande Armée ringing in his ears and fully expecting a delegation of civic leaders to await him. In the highest spirits, he wagered with his marshals as to whether the delegation would merely cower in supplication or with some act of mock independence offer him the keys to the city. Though the marshals laughed, they declined to take up their Emperor's suggestion knowing him of old to be the sourest of losers. It proved a wise decision. The Emperor waited at the Dorogomilov Gate for two hours. There was no delegation to be found. Impatient, Napoleon sent staff to reconnoitre the other gates of the city, but each came back with the same story. There was no delegation anywhere.

Still singing though with voices ever harsher, the Grande Armée grew restless. Each and every soldier dreamed of untold luxuries of multifarious kinds, of beds in palaces and treasure troves to last a lifetime. Each of them was eager to lay claim to their stake, but instead they sat with growing ill humour by the sides of the roads and in adjoining bare and stricken fields. As had been their habit throughout, the retreating Russians had left nothing but ravaged lands and fired storehouses for the French to march on with. The soldiers were expectant of the order of final advance at every moment, but as the minutes became hours, and afternoon faded towards evening and dusk, no order came. Eventually, a single gaunt and haunted figure made his way in

greeting beyond the city walls. Interrogated by Caulaincourt, the news he brought was duly related to the Emperor. The fellow was in fact a Frenchman who had languished for many years in a Moscow jail, having renegade and republican views. Rostopchin, the city governor, had that very morning freed him along with all the other criminals, who it was explained now constituted Moscow's only occupants. The governor, having executed a Russian of similar beliefs in front of this terrified Frenchman's eyes, had then turned to him and said "Stranger, you have been imprudent, and yet it is only natural you should desire the coming of your countrymen. Go then, and meet them. Tell them there is but one traitor in Russia, and you have just seen him executed". Rostopchin, so the Frenchman related, had then turned his horse and exited the city to the south, following the route of the Russian army under General Kutusov. Moscow had been left deserted.

"The city is ours complete then!" rejoiced Napoleon. The Emperor was eager to take residence in the Kremlin forthwith, but Murat, concerned as ever for his brother-in-law's longevity, insisted on entering the city first with an escort of cavalry for fear of any criminal assassins that might lie in wait. And so it was that Murat advanced cautiously towards the bridge over the River Moskva, and finding it destroyed, forded it to approach the Kremlin walls. He found only a few drunkard men and women firing with wanton aim from the battlements, and these were soon suppressed. The released and frequently deranged criminals of the Frenchman's report alone seemed to walk the streets, but upon investigation, Murat also found many official buildings filled to overflowing with terrified deserters, the injured and the abandoned poor. But of the regular inhabitants of Moscow there was no sign. Each and every one of them had chosen to abandon their homes to inevitable pillage rather

than give unwilling hospitality to Napoleon's army. Murat reflected that this was hardly of consequence, but he remained uneasy. He felt like an actor denied an audience. There was none of the inhabitants' hushed awe that normally accompanied the occupation of a city. There were no false smiles, nor nervousness nor well concealed loathing. There was only the occasional drunken obscenity amidst silence.

Napoleon finally entered Moscow on the afternoon of the following day. He made at once for the Kremlin, entering it via the Trinity Tower, the gateway of one of several bridges that negotiate the surrounding moat. Within these walls, the Emperor had no doubt he occupied the seat of all power. Geography alone dictated so, for the Kremlin rises prominent on a hill above the central bend in the Moskva, and is ringed by a crenellated brick wall perfect for the resistance of prolonged siege. Accompanied by Caulaincourt and the Chief of Staff Berthier, Napoleon took stock of the inner sanctum, of the fortress and the barracks, the arsenal, the Granovitaya Palace and the Cathedral of Assumption, feeling utterly foreign and yet at once totally at home. Here was a collection of buildings to fulfil all a monarch's needs and desires! The means of war, ceremony and religion all combined! Berthier, ever the logistitian, observed what ease of communication such close proximity of facilities must allow. Napoleon, however, upon entering the Granovitaya was disappointed by the sparse furnishings and considered it a miserable dwelling for such a powerful sovereign as the Tsar. "But then, he's not so powerful as he was!" he thought to himself. Caulaincourt ventured that the Tsar concentrated his opulence upon the newer capital of St. Petersburg, but Napoleon dismissed this observation as only Emperor's can. "This is Moscow Caulaincourt. There is no more significant a capital on earth. I walk on the Tsar's very soul". Caulaincourt duly followed Napoleon's footsteps up the marble red staircase,

reflecting that as in other matters he travelled with a purpose opposite to the Tsar, who would more normally descend the staircase en route to the great cathedral facing it. But Napoleon, whose interest in matters spiritual was at best pragmatic, reached the staircase's very top without pausing to look around him and then walked quickly through three huge drawing rooms and into the great hall, its vast ceiling supported by a huge central pillar and ornamented by many religious paintings expressing far greater reverence for the next life than for the one Napoleon and his two companions presently occupied. Scornfully moving on, Napoleon noted that the Tsar had even evacuated the curtains and shutters from the state bedroom, and then concluded with pleasure that the evacuation had been done in great haste, for many ornaments and much time honoured armour remained. There was even an old golden throne and an amber toilet seat (both in their differing ways most regal), and many fine clocks on the walls that all told the same, and very correct, time. *Tick, tick, tick*. Noticing a convenient space on the wall, Napoleon immediately hung upon it a picture by the court painter Gérard of the King of Rome. "It has been sent to me by the Empress Marie-Louise", he said turning, "and I trust it will inspire us all". Berthier had no doubts. Caulaincourt said nothing, observing instead much cracking in the plaster from where hung many abandoned chandeliers. The Tsar, he could not help reflecting, clearly valued this place more for its past than for its present importance.

The Emperor so installed in his quarters, the troops marched in at last, at their head the elite Imperial Guard, a body of men in uniforms most resplendent, for Napoleon had spared them from any engagements throughout the campaign. As so often before, Berthier's request to his Emperor that there should be no looting whilst he prepared an inventory of supplies went unheeded. Moscow this day was not

ransacked, for the troops well knew they must give some regard to their possible winter quarters, but by nightfall it was much denuded. Greed is contagious, and drink a great stimulus. The infantry wandered through ballrooms and libraries of the like ever forbidden to them in France, helping themselves to a bewildering array of fine furs and portable treasures. The officers commandeered whole cellars of wine and installed themselves in princely apartments. Both officers and infantry saw fit to stable the horses in the churches. That night many thousands of men slept with adequate food in their bellies and with a solid roof over their heads for the first time in many months. Many plans and discussions were had about the further exploration of the contents of Moscow on the morrow, although amongst a significant minority of both officers and men there was a generally unspoken but tangible disappointment that there were no decent women to be found to be raped. Otherwise however, all seemed in order. Nobody cared for the vagabonds and criminals that wandered aimlessly through the streets, and nobody noticed that all the fire-engines were unusable and all the fire-floats had been sunk. Prior to his departure, Rostopchin had done more than release criminals.

Napoleon was awoken at 4 o'clock the following morning by the sound of panic all around him. Moscow was in flames, which, aided by a generous breeze, ravaged the wooden frames of many buildings with wanton adventure. At first the Emperor insisted the fire must be accidental. Even the Russians were incapable of such a sacrifice. But many Russian incendiaries were soon caught with combustibles in hand and immediately shot. Others the French strung up from trees. But the city continued to burn, and when Napoleon climbed to the summit of the great Bell Tower of Ivan the Great to see the extent of the damage for himself, he was shocked at the

scale of enflaming carnage. "If we conquer London, we shall not burn it" he was heard to mutter, both enraged and astonished that the Russians could so immolate their own capital. "These Russians are barbarians" he reflected, pausing only to observe how nobly the great Cross astride the Bell Tower might adorn some aspect of Paris. The entire north central and western quarters of the city were ablaze, and the air was thick with burning sparks and embers. A single spark could ignite all the munitions of the Kremlin's arsenal! The stable and the palace roof of the Kremlin were catching fire, one of the bridges across the moat had already collapsed. The Imperial guard were busy dowsing the timbers, but it was to little avail, and it was they, ever loyal and fearing for their Emperor's life, who persuaded Napoleon to leave immediately. Napoleon strode forwards through the flames to the crash of collapsing archways, falling rafters and now near molten iron roofs. The ruins hindering his footsteps, he walked across burning ground, walls of fire to either side of him, the air itself scorching his nostrils and tongue. The heat threatened to burn his eyes, and only with difficulty did he keep them open and alert to danger. At length, half deranged horses were found wandering by the river, and with Caulaincourt the Emperor rode over the Moskva bridge and took again the Mojaisk road. They were heading for the Petrovsky Palace, some six miles distant, and already guarded by the troops of the Empress Josephine's son Eugène.

The fire raged for three days until thwarted by an onslaught of rain. Four fifths of the city was destroyed, though many of the churches, amongst them St. Basil's Cathedral, survived by their isolation from other buildings at the centre of great public squares. Thus the churches had been sought as sanctuary by a great many troops, who abandoned the previous equine occupants to their flame demented fate. Sated and to a

large extent drunken at the fire's commencement, discipline in the Grande Armée had fallen apart. The larger buildings were all ransacked for their food supplies. Troops stationed outside the city were more preoccupied with grabbing loot for themselves than with putting out the fire, which in truth had soon become so ferocious as to render all actions against it futile. Furs, silks, silver and jewellery were the principle prizes, but a great many possessions from trunks to carriages were abandoned to the flames when found too heavy to drag away. Together, the fire and the French had extinguished in days the wealth of centuries.

When Napoleon re-entered Moscow on the 18th of September, he found only chaos. Bands of inebriated soldiers roamed the streets in rich oriental clothes, aping Tartars and Cossacks. Serjeant entrepreneurs set up markets in the squares at which valuables changed hands for looted commodities such as sugar, coffee and preserves. Amongst the principle customers were the officers, who saw no shame in bargaining for the loot of their men, and were more appreciative of such stolen properties true worth. Bivouacked soldiers with smoke stained faces lined the streets, cooking horseflesh on fires made of the most slow burning mahogany furniture, eating it off silver plate and reclining thereafter on pavement mounted silk chaise-longues whilst wrapped in Siberian furs. Berthier was in despair. Everything he had planned for the organisation of garrison supplies would now be impossible. He doubted whether enough buildings stood standing to give shelter to the troops, and it soon became apparent that whatever stores had been left by the Russians were now destroyed. The Grande Armée was rich in jewellery but in short supply of bread and grain, which in the upside down economy that soon developed became worth vastly more than any case of fine liqueurs. Further, the peasants of the surrounding areas either refused to

sell grain and hay to the French, or burnt their crops in advance of the asking, and besides, any troops sent out to collect it risked attack from bands of Cossacks, whose movements, subject to no military high command, were impossible to predict. The Moscow all had dreamed of, a safe haven of food and shelter for the winter ahead, was utterly destroyed. In its place, Berthier knew, was only the prospect of shortages of all kinds. Further, there was no realistic prospect of re-supply, for the French bases, at Königsburg, Vilnius and Minsk all stood too far back. The loyal Chief of Staff had lived through many crises, but he could not remove from recollection the heated discussions he had witnessed prior to the Grande Armée advancing from Smolensk. When Smolensk had burned, the Emperor had argued the advantages of Moscow. What would he argue now? Berthier, much chastened, kept these thoughts to himself, and Caulaincourt too remained silent. It took eight times the supplies to feed a horse as to feed a man. From where were these supplies supposed to materialise?

Napoleon however was much pleased to find the portrait of the King of Rome in the Kremlin intact. It still hung between its two companion clocks, the inner rooms of Granovitaya Palace having escaped the fire completely. Even the externals of the building stood largely intact. The wooden frames of the common people suffer far more than the stone edifices of monarchs, and the private thoughts of a Chief of Staff have less bearing on strategy than the dreams of an Emperor. Burned or not, this was still Moscow, and Napoleon turned his attention to securing a cessation of hostilities advantageous to the French by communication with the Tsar Alexander. Alexander, Napoleon felt sure, having been deprived of one capital would be only too willing to sue for peace before the Grande Armée marched on his other one. "With Moscow burned" said the Emperor, "I argue the advantages of threatening St. Petersburg". On

the 20th of September, a letter was thus sent to the Tsar, being transported by the brother of the Russian Minister in Kassel. Napoleon's tone was cordial. He assured his fellow Emperor that it was Rostopchin that had burned the city, and that the French, in the name of all civilised conduct, had done much to limit the damage. He suggested discussion of a compromise peace, and confident of an encouraging reply, turned his attention to matters immediate.

Restoring discipline, Napoleon found occupation in organising daily parades, and in the organisation of the outlying monasteries as a defensive ring around the city. But he took Caulaincourt's intermittent warnings of the depths of the Russian winter lightly. Caulaincourt he knew to be a pessimist by nature, and besides, stories of birds freezing to death on the wing seemed scarcely credible to this child of the Corsican sunshine. The weather, Napoleon observed, was "as yet as mild as autumn at Fontainebleau". Caulaincourt's concerns grew daily. When he informed Napoleon the Grande Armée was desperately short of horses, he was ordered to buy 20,000 more. But from where? When told supplies of fodder were running low, he was told to forage for more. But how?

The vengeance of the Cossacks grew daily. Ever day they took fifty or one hundred foraging French prisoners, delivering many of these to General Kutusov who, whilst he had abandoned the city, still had his army intact some distance to the south. Many more French prisoners were bought from the Cossacks by the peasants whose hatred of the French found expression in many public and gory executions of their human purchases. One French general sought Kutusov out under a white flag to complain of the cruelty inflicted on "poor men going in search only of a little hay".

Murat reinforced this appeal by insisting that if the Cossacks persisted, he would be forced to escort all foraging soldiers with cavalry and artillery. "That is exactly what we wish" came the Russian reply. "Would you deprive us of the pleasure of taking your finest horsemen *comme des poules*?"

Napoleon, frustrated by inactivity, quickly became unpredictable and febrile. He poured over his maps, but the impossibility of joining all the maps of Russia together and viewing them whole upon any table frustrated him greatly. Sullenly, he prolonged the taking of meals through boredom and killed time reading the most disposable of novels. *Tick, tick, tick*. The clocks either side of the King of Rome completed their full circle twice daily, and each day brought fresh repetition of their motion. Here was an unthinking confidence in simple purpose that Napoleon in his darkest moments saw much to envy. *Tick, tick, tick*. Each day he waited more anxiously, and each day no letter from the Tsar arrived. *Tick, tick, tick*. Caulaincourt sought to discuss the reshoeing and reclothing of horses and men, but Napoleon showed little interest. His mind resisted full discussion of a winter spent in Moscow, which he still dismissed as an unnecessary contingency. His negotiations with the Tsar would see to that. Nevertheless, when the tales of gruesome and mercenary alliance between the loose-reined Cossacks and enraged peasants were related to him, the Emperor's shock was visible to all. Gradually, the strength and unity of Russian resistance was dawning on even Napoleon, but being more used to imposing the strength of his will upon others, this realisation served only to make the Emperor more isolated.

Ever more impatient, Napoleon suggested to Caulaincourt that he should travel to St. Petersburg under the flag of truce. As former French Ambassador to the Tsar, the Emperor was insistent he was the one who would be most acceptable. Caulaincourt refused the mission. He was certain he would not even be received at the court, and knowing the Tsar well, he was certain no truce was possible whilst Napoleon remained in Moscow. "What do you suggest", came the reply, "if I retreat to Smolensk, it will be a defeat in the eyes of all the world". Caulaincourt simply observed that since the offer of truce would most certainly be dismissed, it was wiser not be made at all. Undaunted, Napoleon turned to General Lauriston, who had succeeded Caulaincourt as Ambassador. Lauriston, knowing that it would be difficult if not impossible to pass through Russian lines without a *laisser passer*, approached General Kutusov who after much delay greeted him with a feigning courtesy and mock interest in his mission. But he refused Lauriston permission to travel, and demanded Napoleon's second letter of truce be entrusted to one Volkonsky, a member of his own staff. Lauriston thanked Kutusov for his assistance, and Volkonsky thus set off, with a recommendation to the Tsar from his General that the communication he carried be ignored. It was. In desperation, for it was now the second week of October, Napoleon sent Lauriston to Kutusov once again, with a request for "arrangements that might give to the conflict a character consistent with the established rules of warfare". Kutusov concluded that Napoleon was now actively fearful of the starvation of the Grande Armée, and replied only that he had no control over any but those in his direct command. For the Cossacks and peasants he could not vouch. The confidence of the Russian General increased as Napoleon's supplies diminished. As October advanced, the Grande Armée took more and more the part of scavengers, whilst Kutusov's

supplies burgeoned with delivery from the Don, the Ukraine and the vast steppes to the east.

The troops of the Grande Armée had awaited the reply of the Tsar with as much eagerness as Napoleon himself. The letters of Napoleon they knew of old to be the prelude to the reliable capitulation of the enemy. But as the warfare by stalemate of the Russians became daily more apparent to them, the troops grew anxious and ill tempered, and, finding their faith in the strategies of Napoleon for the first time waning, took to discussing the situation amongst themselves.

The harlequinade of armed adventure that had marched across Europe during the early months of the summer was by now rudely disabused. The Grande Armée had been cheered as they had marched into Vilnius, for the Lithuanians, like the Poles being unwillingly subject to Russian domination, considered the French their allies. But as they had marched further into Russian lands, the hostility the troops encountered had staggered all. The sullen hatred of the peasants and the constant sorties of the Cossacks had no parallel in any other campaign. The veterans of the Grande Armée were particularly shocked, being more used to considering themselves as liberators, the harbingers of freedom. But whilst the peasants lived in misery and hardship, they yet held the Tsar in mystic devotion, and clearly believed the French to be the anti-Christ. And amidst the still smouldering ruins of Moscow, there was mounting disquiet at the casualties. The Grande Armée had crossed the River Niemen and set foot on the Tsar's territories with 600,000 men, but was now reduced to barely 140,000, the vast majority having succumbed to disease and fatigue. On the march from Vilnius to Vitebsk upwards of 40,000 men had been lost in the heat and dust

storms of the vast Russian plain before a single shot was fired in battle. The forced marches of thirty miles a day had stretched the endurance of men and the route of supply lines to the very limit. And there had never been adequate hay for the horses. Summer grass, where it could be found, was no substitute for such hard working beasts, and thousands had died, their stomachs bloated as they ate unripened rye. To many troops, as they sat idle awaiting the Tsar's letter of surrender, the whole great enterprise now seemed in large measure absurd. Not only men, but cattle for milk and beef who had never entertained anything more strenuous than a walk from a farmer's yard to a field, had been expected to traverse immense distances. Many of the veterans, recalling Napoleon's lightening victories of the past, now observed how at Vitebsk and Smolensk and even at Borodino no truly decisive battles had been fought. Though bloodied, the army of Kutusov remained intact, and two other Russian armies under Chichagov and Wittgenstein were known to be assembling to the south and north. "He should seek out the Tsar in war, not write him letters" they said. "He's an Emperor now, not a General" all concluded, pondering how the administration of his vast conquests might possibly conspire against singlemindedness. A few cynics recalled how Napoleon had abandoned the remainder of his troops in Egypt in 1799, and that, frustrated at inaction, in Moscow he might yet do the same. But most still retained the faith to resist such worries. One story from the very start of the campaign, however, gained constant retelling. Whilst he reconnoitred the left bank of the River Niemen for a suitable crossing point, it was said Napoleon's horse had been startled by a hare and so discharged the Emperor to the ground. As the days and weeks went by, so the story gathered around its retelling worse and worse portents. Such were the conversations and concerns of soldiers whose debating of strategy, whilst germane, concealed more immediate perils. "An army marches on its stomach" their Emperor

once famously remarked, but it survives encamped by its latrines, and the ruins of Moscow were fast becoming an impure cesspit. Surrounded by stench and consumed with boredom, the troops blamed Berthier for the want of supplies they had half destroyed themselves. Inactivity breeds rancour, and rancour breeds itself. But not even the most sagacious of the troops dared imagine a full winter spend in these conditions.

No diplomacy had ever more angered Napoleon than the Tsar's incommunicado. "Moscow", he came to observe "is not a military position. It is a political predicament". Frustrated beyond measure at full five weeks inactivity, Napoleon called his marshals to the Kremlin. They found the Emperor most excited, his eyes shining as he walked back and forth over the maps of Russia he had now triumphantly pieced together on the floor. "We must march immediately on St. Petersburg" he announced. The marshals were astonished. St. Petersburg lay three hundred and fifty miles to the north, the roads would be barren of provisions, and the journey would be bound to take at least six weeks, demanding its completion after the onset of winter. "This represents a huge difficulty" said Caulaincourt, well knowing he proffered greatly unwelcome advise. "You lack stores, horses for the artillery, transport for the sick and wounded, and clothing for the soldiers. Every man must have a sheepskin, stout fur lined gloves, a cap with ear flaps, warm boot socks, heavy boots to prevent frost bite. You lack all this. Not a single frost-nail has been forged for the horses' hooves. How are you going to draw the guns?". Eugène, Murat, and even Berthier were unanimous that the Grande Armée was in no condition to march anywhere, and besides, they would leave Kutusov with a Russian army gaining

strength every day to the south that could easily reoccupy Moscow. The Emperor in seeking to conquer two capitals would succeed only in losing both.

"Then what do you suggest?", said Napoleon, whose own march across the room in two strides from Moscow to St. Petersburg seemed to all present a most theatrical display of wishful thinking. "This country is more vast than anything I had comprehended. Consider this. Most of Russia lies further from Moscow than Moscow lies from Paris. This is a country of many countries. It is so vast that it commences to the east of Poland, and wraps itself half way around the globe, finishing only to the west of the Canadian and American wilderness. When in the east it is day, in the west it is night. It defies me! Even the Tsar has scant control over a great deal of it. How am I supposed to conquer a country that has not yet conquered itself?". The marshals were silent.

"The issue is urgent gentlemen. It is proving most difficult to rule the rest of my dominions from this eastern extremity". For the first time since his Coronation, Napoleon found himself pondering the strength of his hold on Paris. The Imperial government was yet young, and many intriguers remained in the capital to oppose him. "And the French are like woman. One should not be away from them for too long. I still say we should march on St. Petersburg this very day. All we need is a fresh victory". The marshals were again silent, but the looks Napoleon could read on their faces made it clear this was an act of united insubordination. They would refuse to lead their troops.

"What do you suggest?", said the Emperor almost beside himself. "I can advance eastwards into central Russia, but what will that achieve save to stretch the supply lines still more? Or I can withdraw to Smolensk and Vitebsk for the winter to start a fresh campaign in the spring, this time making straight for St. Petersburg through Riga. But in the eyes of all the world that will look like defeat, and I will not do it. Or I can seek a battle immediately with Kutusov to the south, and then continue to the fruitful regions that lie in the Ukraine. But if I go south, I will only have to march north again, for the Tsar still eludes me". Caulaincourt, who had heard this kind of pondering of strategy many times before, nevertheless found himself astonished. The presumption with which Napoleon included within his own first person the lives and prospects of many thousands of men amazed him, as it did that he had never noticed this trait of his Emperor before. Napoleon, still considering the southern option, paused as he stood on Kiev, and then announced "Alternatively, I can winter in Moscow, and march on St. Petersburg in the spring. My mind is made up. This will be the cause of action. Do what is necessary".

Thus the meeting was concluded. Knowing of Napoleon's famed firmness of mind, all present were relieved and yet somewhat perturbed that their Emperor had capitulated in the face of their silent objections to his original plan. Winter in Moscow was however decided, and so the marshals spread the word throughout the Grande Armée. The troops were dismayed. Winter in Moscow! What a dreadful prospect. It would be hell on earth. But their Emperor was their Emperor, and so they resigned themselves to prolonged acquaintance with starvation and impossible cold. It was thus with unprecedented bewilderment that they learnt almost immediately that Napoleon

had changed his mind. The Grande Armée was to withdraw westwards and winter at Smolensk.

Wishing to avoid marching back across the same now ravaged lands over which he had advanced, Napoleon planned first to march south. "March to Kaluga" he cried, "and woe betide anyone who obstructs my passage!". With great haste, the troops assembled their loot and booty, hiding a great deal of it beneath the munitions and provisions. In consequence, a great many waggons were overloaded, making the toil of the already weakened horses even more arduous. The Grande Armée that had marched on Moscow with 600,000 men now consisted of 87,500 infantry, 14,750 cavalry and 533 guns, with a train following it of some forty thousand carriages and waggons. The entire effect was of a shambolic caravan, a wandering nation taking with it the salvaged loot of a devastated city almost in desperation, for in truth this was the only reward for their efforts that the troops could claim. The Emperor himself set the tone, taking with him many treasures of the Kremlin along with the great Cross of the Bell Tower of Ivan the Great, which he intended to mount in Paris over *Les Invalides* as a shining testimony to his greatest act of conquest. Napoleon also saw personally to the portrait of the King of Rome, entrusting it to the care of the Imperial Guard. The result was a huge lumbering procession far removed from the light mobility of the armies with which Napoleon had risen to prominence. There was enough food, Berthier claimed, for twenty days, but horse fodder for less than a week. And of adequate winter clothing there was almost none.

The withdrawal (for none as yet dared call it retreat) commenced on the 19th of October. As Napoleon left the city he had entered thirty five days previously in

expectant triumph, he found himself strangely pensive and lack-lustre. And oddly for one who considered his name and every action to be synonymous with the future, the Emperor found himself dwelling on the past. Fouché, formerly the head of the secret police, had, upon hearing of Napoleon's intention to march on Russia, argued strenuously against the project, pointing out that Napoleon was already the master of the greatest Empire ever assembled by any one man. Further, all of history argued the impossibility of establishing absolute monarchy. Napoleon left Moscow with the words of his own reply ringing in his ears. "I have eight hundred thousand men. To one who has such an army, Europe is an old prostitute who must obey his pleasure. Am I to blame because I have a degree of power that forces me to assume the dictatorship of the world? I must make one nation of all the European states, and Paris shall be the capital of the world". At least, reflected the Emperor, no one could consider Moscow any more the capital of anything. The fire and the Grande Armée had seen to that, and what they had started, Napoleon planned to finish. Prior to his departure, the Kremlin was primed with munitions by the Imperial Guard, and it is said that as the Grande Armée marched from the scene, the resulting explosion could be heard for thirty miles. Such was Napoleon's revenge on the Tsar's refusal to write him letters.

The road to Kaluga held upon its way the key town of Maloyaroslavets. Kutusov, not having intelligence that Napoleon had left Moscow until the 22nd of October, nevertheless managed to secure the town for the Russians under Docturov, driving out Eugène's advance guard from all positions save the strategically vital bridge. As more and more troops of both armies converged on this point, the bridge, though miraculously still standing, changed hands no less than seven times. Eugène in

particular welcomed the fight. Here was an opportunity to engage Kutusov's army in full battle, and defeating it, thus escape being plagued by its presence throughout the forthcoming weeks. But communications were poor amidst the slow moving confusion, and Napoleon, who was not informed of the battle until mid-morning, failed to send up adequate reinforcements. The French took the town for the loss of some 4,000 men, but the Russians withdrew about a mile to the south still largely intact. Napoleon slept that night in a squalid weaver's hut, no grander dwellings being available. The mansion at nearby Vinkovo, the residence of the same Rostopchin who had burned Moscow, had been razed to the ground. All that was found was a note saying "I voluntarily set fire to this building, not wishing it to be polluted by your presence". As Caulaincourt improvised a curtain to create for the Emperor some privacy, he could only reflect his master looked weary. The cold resolution of his steel grey eyes seemed but a distant memory. "I beat them every time" came the lament from behind the screen, "but I cannot reach the end".

The road to Kaluga was now blocked. Napoleon, demoralised at the thought that however much he advanced south Kutusov would simply withdraw further, chose to turn north, taking the Mojaisk road that led to the bloody field of Borodino itself. It was with much disquiet that the further diminished ranks of the Grande Armée turned themselves around, now retreating along the line of their own previous advance, the road littered with bayoneted and diseased corpses, the fields bare earth and ashen cinders. They knew along this road they would find no supplies or provisions, but Napoleon now wished to place as much distance between himself and Kutusov as was possible. Though exhausted, there was much disquiet amongst the troops as they considered such a negative strategy. Never before had they sought to avoid any

opposing force, being used to seeking such out and crushing them. There was much concern that Kutusov was now free to join up with the two armies of Chichagov to the southwest and Wittgenstein to the north, and thus united, the Russians would be able to expel the French remains with an overwhelming force. The Grande Armée, which had numbered some 100,000 when leaving Moscow now numbered some 90,000 at most, and well knew of its own peril. A strange nostalgia swelled within the ranks. The young Bonaparte would have seen the importance of Maloyaroslavets in advance, and marched on it with much greater speed and number. The young Bonaparte would have marched on both Moscow and St. Petersburg with lightening force, and, reaching both as early as August, would then have negotiated peace from a position of overwhelming strength.

The Emperor himself, who for the most part travelled in his carriage, well warm in his sable cap, fur-lined great coat and boots, heard little of these discontents and speculations. Concerned to make the most of the still clement weather, he ordered the Grande Armée to march some twenty five miles a day, mostly on poor roads and with many soldiers now having only wrapped and oiled rags for footwear. On the 29th of October, they reached Borodino, scene of the battle that had laid open the way to Moscow only seven weeks before. The highway skirts the battlefield proper to the south, and many thousands chose to avert their eyes, the stench from the corpses and the cries of the wheeling carrion crows being sufficient witness to the remnant carnage. But Napoleon stopped his carriage, and rode to the centre of the field. Here, he felt, somehow was the place where his destiny had been decided, though to what end he could not as yet make out. The battered redoubts from where the French and Russians had bombarded one another now resembled extinct volcanoes. Napoleon

could still recall vividly the smoke of battle that had consumed them, and yet now they stood silent, all energy spent. All around was the debris of bloody destruction, helmets, swords, bayonets and muskets, broken drums and bloodstained standards. There were dismembered limbs still clutching now ownerless bugles. The wolves and crows had picked the bones of some 40,000 corpses still unburied. What triumph was this? Even here, the one great battle of the campaign, Napoleon had somehow failed to act incisively. He could remember standing here after the battle itself, hearing the Russian camps a thousand yards distant still shouting of their victory. Undestroyed they were undefeated. Now on this field of bloodshed he could still see Russian corpses clenching the cross of St. Nicholas, which they had kissed as they lay dying to ease the pain. And he remembered his own illness and how it had dogged him through the battle itself. His maladies had made it impossible to act solely in the interests of glory. He felt constipated, he had difficulty passing water, his hands and feet swelled through constant water retention. He remembered how with relief he had seen the battle not go into a second day, for having lost his voice, he was incapable of command.

Napoleon turned full circle. Almost vomiting at the sight of it, he saw a one legged soldier crawl from the putrid remains of a horse's carcass, his uneven weight supported by a charred plank of wood. Wrapped in a burned and filthy flag of the tricolour, the soldier approached his Emperor, half naked, but wearing a brocaded general's hat.

"What's your name?" said the soldier.

"I am the Emperor Napoleon"

"No you're not. I am"

"I am the only Emperor" asserted Napoleon

"You're an impostor" insisted the soldier, pulling from his nonexistent scabbard an imaginary sword. "*En garde!*".

Napoleon remounted his horse, ordering that this deranged unfortunate be tended by the medics. "He has lived seven weeks on putrid flesh and stagnant water. I salute him". Napoleon then visited the convent of Kolotskoi, which had been used as the French army hospital during the battle. He found many of the wounded still alive, though many thousands more had perished for want of sufficient cleanliness and surgical equipment. The survivors crawled to the door, extending what supplicating hands they had left to their Emperor. "*Vive l'Empereur! Vive la France!*" they cried. Berthier was instructed to see that as many of these men as possible were loaded onto the carts already overladen with loot and underladen with supplies. The Chief of Staff encountered much hostility in carrying out his Emperor's command, and the vast majority of the newly rescued were subsequently dumped by the troops entrusted with their charge. Many hundreds of miles of march remaining, the common soldier could not afford compassion. Napoleon however, left the surrounds of Borodino much heartened by the warmth with which the wounded had greeted him. He took to considering how, resupplied by winter at Smolensk, he would overwhelm St. Petersburg the following spring. That night, the bivouacs of the Grand Armée felt the bite of frost for the first time.

The first flurries of snow fell some six days later. In two days more, it was snowing heavily. The blizzards dictated men marched following only those in front of them, for none could see more than thirty yards. The days grew shorter, and soon it

was dark by four o'clock in the afternoon. Mens' breath froze on their beards, their noses turned white and then blue. The rate of progress slowed to some twelve miles, for the army was hindered not only by the weather but also by the treasured loot the troops carried with them, which they were loath to abandon until survival alone dictated it (after all, Napoleon himself still insisted that the great Cross of Ivan was hauled across the ever more frozen terrain). Stragglers fell exhausted by the road side, awaiting only the snow to cover them in an anonymous grave. The most unfortunate were denied even this, and met instead the revenge of peasants who delighted in beating out their brains. What food was carried in the supply train was reserved for the Imperial Guard, the cavalry, the gun teams and the carriage horses of the officers, whilst the common soldier survived as best he could on pine and willow bark. The horses expired in ever greater numbers to complement the diet of the ranks of the unfortunate, whilst those that survived fared little better. As balls of impacted snow gathered in their hooves, each step became agonising, and on the growing sheets of ice they found it impossible to remain upright. The Grande Armée now resembled a most surprising sartorial procession, wrapped for clothing in the booty of Moscow. It was commonplace to see a soldier, his face dark and repellent, wrapped in a coat of pink or blue satin, trimmed with swan feathers or fox fur. The procession struggled on, wrapped in ladies furs and useless silks, their heads wrapped in a multitude of coloured scarves, their feet frequently protected by nothing more than the same.

The raids of the Cossacks increased daily, but it was the cold that did for most. Amongst the ingenious, it was found that by laying a powder train to a munitions waggon, much havoc could be caused by exploding the waggon's cargo in the faces of the advancing Russians, but this demanded much organisation, and in the main only

aggravated Slav revenge. The entire line of march came to resemble an elongated battlefield. In the morning, men would not leave the ashes of the fires they had frequently paid to sit by in spite of the Russians advancing and cannon-balls falling all around them. The extremities of limbs so fast heated by night fires and chilled by the day succumbed with sudden stench to gangrene. Many who swallowed snow to quench their thirst perished as their guts burned in furious reaction. Baron Larrey, the chief surgeon, noted that many of the bald perished first for want of heat retaining hair, but mortality was soon far more widespread. It was common to tell an officer you'd rather die than endure another day of the dreadful march. "The Emperor's losing himself" the infantry cried, "and us with him!". Napoleon now thought only of retreating from the scene with as much haste as possible, and, travelling in the vanguard with the Imperial Guard, showed little interest in the fate of those behind him. Fortune, observed Caulaincourt, had smiled so persistently on him in the past that he seemed unable to face it squarely now it proved fickle.

The Grande Armée that had skirted Borodino with ninety thousand arrived at Viasma with 65,000, only to find the town had already been bombarded by Kutusov. Viasma promised no respite, and indeed consumed energies further. Passing through the town some three days after Napoleon had already left it, the divisions of Murat, Eugène and Marshal Ney found themselves engaged by Miloradovich with a force of 20,000, and lost a further 7,000 men simply in securing the continuance of their line of retreat. By the time the Grande Armée finally reached its planned winter quarters at Smolensk, it numbered only forty thousand. For weeks the men had marched in the hope that here they would find rest, shelter and fresh supplies in abundance. In all three they were disappointed.

General Charpentier, the Governor of Smolensk, had learned of the approach of the Grande Armée only some two days before its arrival, and had no notion of its dilapidated condition. Supplies had steadily been moved in from Germany and Poland, including some cattle on the hoof and many wines and fine cheeses from France. But they were totally insufficient for the purposes required, and by the time the main body of the troops arrived, most of the supplies had already been consumed by the Imperial Guard, who, confident in their status as war veterans, simply ignored the orders Charpentier's administrators had to ration them. But the biggest disaster was the news that on the 16th of November, Chichagov, moving up from Brest-Litovsk, had captured Minsk with its huge supply of stores sufficient for the entire winter, thus rendering any adequate replenishments of Smolensk impossible. Napoleon's admonishment of Charpentier was worse than useless. It was self-deceiving. There was now no possibility the Grande Armée could winter in Smolensk, and a real danger that unless it marched on with the greatest haste it might be captured in entirety, the Emperor amongst it. Chichagov approached from the south west, Kutusov from the east and Wittgenstein from the north, each with the clear intention of capturing Borisov with its bridge straddling the River Beresina. The Beresina, a tributary of the River Dnieper, stood directly across the line of the Grande Armée's retreat, and without the command of the bridge at Borisov, swift withdrawal was not only impossible, but risked the Grande Armée's complete destruction.

The Emperor, whilst privately aware of the ensuing great peril, behaved in Smolensk with a regal insensitivity to the condition of those around him. He asked few questions concerning the wounded, knowing only too well the doctors had

inadequate medicines to attend to them. He ignored also the markets the troops set up to sell their loot of Moscow to Smolensk's Russian inhabitants, for most had abandoned all hope of their treasures or themselves surviving all the way to France. Napoleon gave only orders that the towers of fortification that surround Smolensk be blown up, so as not to hinder his progress when next the Grande Armée advanced this way. And then, on the 14th of November, he departed.

Napoleon now commanded the vanguard, and Marshal Ney the rearguard. Between them marched a procession forty miles in length. Newly animated by peril and the possibility of his own personal capture, the Emperor studied his maps with renewed vigour. Nothing, at this advanced stage of withdrawal, was allowed to hinder progress. The Cross of Ivan, which had cost so many lives in hauling it this far, was finally abandoned to the elements, along with the chests that contained the maps of Turkey and India, and many containing gold and silver ingots together with some estimated £200,000 in coin.

Despite these measures, sufficient haste proved impossible in the worsening conditions, and the Grande Armée's progress was now hindered by ever bolder attacks not only of the Cossacks, but from the vanguard of the pursuing Russian armies. Napoleon made the greatest progress, but the rearguard was much delayed. At Krasnoe, Marshal Ney found his way blocked by Miloradovich, and Napoleon, by now some eighty miles ahead, presumed him lost. In fact, Ney conducted a miraculous escape. Napoleon had avoided the perils of crossing the River Dnieper by travelling to its north, but Ney, forced south from Krasnoe, had no choice. Somehow he eluded Russian pursuit and found a bend in the river solid with ice floes, which

many soldiers, though no artillery and few horses managed to cross. Napoleon took great heart when he learned of Ney's survival, for he valued him as "the bravest of the brave". But Ney had lost all but 2,000 of the 10,000 in his command, and worse was to follow. When reaching Orsha, Napoleon found only two days supplies and learnt that Chichagov had captured the Borisov bridge two days earlier. Turning to Caulaincourt, the Emperor confided his innermost thoughts. "This", he observed "is beginning to be serious".

News that Chichagov now blocked their exit had a devastating effect on what remained of morale. Even a slight thaw did little to aid mens' spirits, for though it meant they could more easily sleep at night, so they also found marching through mud more laborious than marching over impacted snow. The Grande Armée, though still bearing the name, marched from Orsha to the Beresina with the appearance of a funeral procession, a disorganised mass without shame, many without weapons, its units all mixed in chaos. Officers and men walked side by side with no regard for rank and number. And all marched silent, eyes to the ground like gangs of prisoners, convinced they were marching to their deaths.

The spirits of the Emperor however, excited by the necessity of forging a brilliant strategy of escape, were strangely lifted. "I have played the Emperor for too long" he said. "Now it is time to play the General". His wont of troops made certain options impossible. There was no possibility of recapturing the Borisov bridge, and besides, any attempt would risk Chichagov's destruction of it. He could make for the north and by-pass the Beresina entirely, but that risked Wittgenstein reaching the French base at Vilnius before him, and thus would only delay and not evade

confrontation. Or he could head south, ford the river at Beresino, and attempt the recapture of Minsk. But the Beresina grew wider as it flowed south, making fording more and more difficult. And besides, he doubted the Russians had left the supplies at Minsk intact.

Napoleon resolved to cross the Beresina as swiftly and as close to Borisov as was possible, thus giving the three still converging Russian armies as little chance of effective pursuit thereafter as could be contrived. His advance parties brought him valuable intelligence of a fording point at Studenka, some seven miles north of Borisov, where, save for a middle section of some twelve feet, the river was no more than three feet deep. But now, the slight thaw that had accompanied the Grande Armée from Orsha became as urgent an impediment as the numbing cold that had preceded it. Every hour at Studenka, the river was rising and the current increasing. Napoleon congratulated himself on not trying to cross further south where the effects of the thaw would be even greater, but the obstacle before him was great enough. The Beresina was soon some twenty feet deep and two hundred feet across. It could not be forded at all, and had to be bridged.

The success of Napoleon's plan depended on convincing Chichagov that he intended to cross the Beresina between Borisov and Beresino, thus luring any Russian troops away from Studenka. And so noisy preparations were made at the three decoys of Ucholodi, Sabashevichy and Borisov itself. Trees were busily felled, sawed and hammered in a simulation of bridge building to deceive Chichagov's spies. At the same time, Napoleon continued to march west direct it seemed to attempt a recapture of Borisov itself, but on the night uniting the 25th and 26th of November he switched

north under cover of darkness, arriving at Studenka the next morning, where he rendezvous-ed with General Elbé, his chief engineer.

All the French pontoon bridges had been abandoned without foresight at Orsha, and Elbé was forced to manufacture two bridges from what timbers he could tear from the houses of Studenka and Veselovo. Fortunately, Elbé had salvaged several forges, chests of tools and cart-loads of scrap-iron from the wheels of abandoned carriages, which he used to make crampons to secure the timbers together. Napoleon showed no awareness of how much the success of his plan thus depended on the initiative of another, being too delighted that his own plan of decoy seemed to have fooled the Russians so completely. Some four hundred sappers worked with fury. They built two bridges, each three hundred feet long, one of lighter construction for the infantry and the second for what remained of the cavalry and artillery, this being constructed some two hundred yards down stream. The trestles, twenty three for each bridge, were made after nightfall under the cover of the river bank for fear of the sound of their construction alerting any passing Russian patrol. They were then carried to the river bank and sunk into the bed at increasing depths by men who worked waist and then neck deep in freezing water for hours on end. The deepest central channels were bridged by most comparatively fortunate engineers working from rafts, for few of the almost fully submersed sappers survived. They either died from hypothermia and frost-bite, or found themselves swept down stream by the rising weight of water it was their mission to overcome.

The first infantry of the Grande Armée crossed the foot bridge now secured for them as soon as they reached Studenka, for all knew the deception of the Russians

could not last. But there were soon setbacks outside the realm of Russian guns. The artillery bridge quickly buckled, and took several hours to repair. At past midnight of the following day it collapsed again, and whilst what sappers survived re-entered the water to repair it, the now constant arrival of troops, stragglers, artillery and cavalry at the bridgehead only threatened it with complete annihilation. Seeing how tenuous was the artillery bridge, too many attempted to cross the infantry bridge, threatening that with destruction also. There were soon conflicts of priority at every point, and the slow progress across the artillery bridge only reinforced the ever growing crush on its eastern bank. The horses had to be led single file, and the bridge swayed and trembled under the wheels of carriages and the remaining artillery transports.

Total panic ensued when the Russians finally realised Napoleon had tricked them. So long was the train of the Grande Armée that it took a full three days for all to reach the Beresina, and most arrived to find Wittgenstein pounding them with cannon from the east bank whilst Chichagov pounded them from the west. Sappers now worked to keep the artillery bridge from collapse under constant rifle fire. All demarcation of infantry and artillery crossings broke down completely. As more and more of the elite regiments of the Grande Armée crossed the Beresina, so the stragglers still on the eastern side panicked more. With his Imperial Guard across, plus the troops of Ney, Davout and Victor, Napoleon could not risk Russian pursuit across bridges he himself had built.

The Emperor ordered General Elbé set fire to both the bridges at ten o'clock in the morning on the 29th of November 1812. The fires ran quickly from end to end, consuming many then crossing them. The thirty thousand who remained on the

eastern shore ran demented in every direction, faced with the bayonets of the Cossacks, the freezing and still rising waters of the Beresina or self-immolation upon the burning and collapsing timbers that now denied them passage. A huge mass of men and horses surged towards both bridgeheads, but the flames threw them back and thus they plunged into the icy river. Exhausted horses were swept immediately downstream, men were cut in two amongst the ice-floes. Some cut their way through the terrified throng with their swords, but, still finding their way blocked upon the banks, fell back to weep in despair. The artillery bridge fell into the Beresina first, and thousands braved the flames of the infantry bridge in a desperate last attempt to escape. But that too collapsed under the sudden weight of desperate humanity it could not support. Many women of the ambulances and canteens braved the ice-floes, many desperately holding on to infants. But these off-spring of the private liaisons of the march on Russia were mostly lost in the deep and treacherous mid-channels of the ever-swelling river, though one it is said survived, its mother managing to cross the Beresina astride a struggling horse, one hand on the bridle and the other pressing her child against her fur wrapped bosom. All hope departed from the despairing multitude who watched this last miraculous escape, and the collective scream of mortal agony became at this moment so universal that it rose shrilly audible over the noise of the elements and the thunders of war and the sustained and redoubled *hourras* of the Cossacks. It haunted many of the survivors of the Grande Armée who now made their way across the Beresina's western marshes. But none dared to look back. All hope was dead.

Napoleon watched this scene with all the calm of a man on parade at the Tuileries. When the thaw came on the eastern banks of the River Beresina in the

spring of 1813, still lying there were the bodies of twenty thousand French men and women who had been frozen solid all winter, but the Emperor considered his escape across the Beresina to be one of his finest manoeuvres. "It is my name alone that has protected the army" he reflected. "Here is a triumph to balance the disappointments of the campaign". Now he travelled with increased haste towards Vilnius, a self-appointed "Sacred Squadron" of surviving cavalry protecting his flanks. But upon reaching Smorgoni, he learnt of fresh travails confirming his worries he had been too long absent from Paris. A plot had been hatched to overthrow him.

Four years previously, one General Malet had been committed to prison, being considered of unstable mind. Whilst still under the confinement of the police, Malet formed an audacious plan which was to come within a hair's breadth of success. Being given some writing materials from a kindly guard, by want of forceful ingenuity he was able to execute a forged paper, purporting to be a decree from the Senate, announcing officially the death of the Emperor on Russian fields. This fiction also announced the abolition of the Imperial government, and the establishment of a provisional committee of administration which was to include Malet himself. With this paper, Malet thus secured his own release from prison, and, soon commanding a battalion of troops, made for the Hôtel de Ville, there to prepare reception for the new administration. The plot was eventually foiled and Malet duly tried and shot, but when Napoleon heard this news he rejoiced not. The existence of the plot at all was what concerned him. He had conspired against superiors in former times himself and knew full well that where there was one plot there were generally others. Malet's audacity alone was bound to have pointed out the possibility of success. And the words of the report filled him with dread. "The Emperor had died on Russian fields".

How many Parisians had heard the proclamation of those fateful words? And how each day longer he spent on Russian soil brought the echo of those words more credibility. Napoleon saw at once what he must do. He must leave the Grand Armée and return post-haste to Paris.

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