

The Napoleon Series

1812: The Second Polish Campaign

By François Lelouard

In the history textbooks, the Campaign of 1812 is known as the "Russian Campaign." It is the name that is found everywhere and is generally accepted. However, before a name takes over, it sometimes shared with another. For example, the battle of 18 June 1815, was called Waterloo by the English, and Mont-Saint-Jean by the French. The Russians called the battle of 7 September 1812, Borodino, and the French called it Moskowa. In the case of the battle of Waterloo this term has definitely supplanted the other. For the battle of Moskowa the two terms continue to be used.

There is, from the choice of the name of an event, a will to impose its rhetoric, its vision of facts. The English preferred the name of Waterloo, Anglo-Saxon, to that of Mont-Saint-Jean, which was far too French. For everyone the Campaign of 1812 is "the Campaign of Russia", for everyone except Napoleon. It is astonishing that the opinion of such an important protagonist is dismissed. Napoleon invaded Russia. He was the aggressor. This campaign followed many other campaigns -- the Italian Campaign, the Egyptian Campaign, etc., which shows the ambition to conquer the world. In other words, he had already conditioned his audience.

However, if one considers a current geographical map, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus are not inalienable territories of Greater Russia. Napoleon's point of view on this campaign was rejected because it emphasized too much the real causes of this war. For him, this campaign was called "the Second Campaign of Poland" because the real subject was not Russia, but the existence of Poland.

At the time he named it, he did not know that this war was going to take him to Moscow. He thought that the Russians were not going to abandon a province without fighting; and that the capture of such an important city as Vilnius would cause a political crisis that would have led to peace negotiations.

When Napoleon entered Vilnius he made the following proclamation:

"Poles!

You are under the Russian flags; this service was permitted to you when you had no country; but everything is changed today. Poland is resuscitated; it is for its entire recovery that it is a matter of fighting now; it is to oblige the Russians to recognize rights which we have been deprived of by injustice and usurpation. The general confederation of Poland and Lithuania reminds all Poles in the service of Russia. Generals, officers, Polish soldiers! Hear the voice of the fatherland; abandon the flags of your oppressors; come to us all, and put us under the eagle of the Jagellon, the Casimir, and the Sobiewski! The country asks you; honor and religion also command you. "

In the context of the time, the name that Napoleon gives to this campaign is much more logical. Poland suffered three times from these neighbors and was totally wiped off the map. At the time of the "Republic of the Two Nations", Poland and Lithuania extended from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. The border between Poland and Russia was near the town of Smolensk. All the inhabitants of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, and part of Ukraine were called "Poles", and the Russians were called "Muscovites".

After the last partition of Poland in 1795, many Poles came to fight alongside the French against the Austrians, Prussians and Russians who had invaded them. Napoleon re-established the Grand Duchy of Warsaw in 1807. He thought in signing the Peace of Tilsit it settled the question. He had been accommodating to the Tsar, by giving him an honorable peace, and even offering him an alliance against the English. As the Tsar had not kept his promises and threatened Poland, Napoleon had no choice but to completely restore Poland in 1812, so that it would be strong enough to defend itself, at the expense of Russia which did not respect the peace treaty.

If Napoleon had amassed troops on the frontier between the Grand Duchy and Russia, it was only a response to the regrouping of Russian armies on the frontier without any reason. The aim was to protect this reviving Poland.

As can be seen in this proclamation, Napoleon did not invade Russia to "steal" a province, but instead to free it from an injustice. In 1807 he did not re-establish the Kingdom of Poland, but in order to spare the other powers, and in a concern for general appeasement, he created a Grand Duchy which he placed under the responsibility of the King of Saxony. The King of Saxony was by no means of the family of Napoleon. He was chosen because Saxony and the Kings of Poland had ancient ties. Napoleon never had an interest in Russia. He did not intend to dismiss the Tsar and replace him with someone else.

Every great event can be understood only in the light of the causes that created it. This campaign existed only by the Tsar's ambition to have himself crowned King of Poland, which was done in 1815 after Napoleon was definitely beaten.

Napoleon tried to dissuade Tsar Alexander I on several occasions from putting his plans into execution. He suggested to him to increase his territory to the north in Finland and to the south but not to the west, in Poland.

Napoleon said:

"We must admit that true truths are very difficult to obtain by history. Fortunately, most of the time, they are rather an object of curiosity than of real importance. There are so many truths! ... That of Fouché, for example, and other intriguers of his kind, that of many honest people, will sometimes differ very much from mine. This historic truth so much implored, to which every one hastened to appeal, is too often only a word: it is impossible at the very moment of events, in the heat of crossed passions; and if, later on, we agree, it is because the interested parties, the opponents are no longer. But what is this historical truth most of the time? An agreed fable. "

Napoleon said of the politicians:

"The great orators who dominate the assemblies by the brilliance of their words are, in general, the most mediocre politicians; it is not necessary to combat them by words; they are always more rousing than yours; we must oppose to their faculty a logical and logical reasoning: their force is in vague; they must be brought back to reality, practice kills them. "

This quotation could equally well apply to historians who write about the "Russian Campaign" and who continue to spread misconceptions that are totally false. One senses that the narration of this campaign is based on the tragic side and one often comes out with a lack, an incomprehension, that they are the real causes of the defeat? In order to understand it is necessary to return to the facts. We must leave the Anglo-Saxon image of a Napoleon who was thirsting for conquest and invading the world, and the idea that only the senseless ambition of Napoleon caused this drama.

Since this "agreed fable" lasts for two hundred years, let us try to bring a contradictory speech to the official version. We have the version of the victors, it is time to have the version of the vanquished.

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