

One historian has summed up Napoleon's military campaign in Russia in 1812 with these words, "the problem of space, time and distance proved too great for even one of the greatest military minds that ever existed." Napoleon made several serious miscalculations. First, he never expected that he would have to travel all the way to Moscow. He was used to defeating an enemy after only one or two battles and then having the enemy ask for peace. Napoleon expected to defeat the Russians far short of Mosco.

He also gravely miscalculated the problems of feeding, equipping, and moving 600,000 troops in Russia. The roads were terrible and supplies were often delayed weeks or even months. Normally Napoleon could count on taking grain and livestock from local farmers to extend his food supply. To prevent this, the Russians themselves destroyed what little they had.

As a result of these miscalculations, Napoleon and his army were already deeply in trouble by the time they reached Smolensk in August, two months after starting out. their supply lines were already overextended and the size of the army had been reduced by fighting along the way. At this point, Napoleon made a critical decision. Since the Russians would not fight a major battle, he would simply press on and capture Moscow and bring them to their knees. The Russians gave Napoleon his long-awaited fight 70 miles (113 kilometers) west of Moscow on the field of Borodino. It was a bloodbath for both sides, but it was indecisive. One week later, Napoleon entered Moscow.

Napoleon expected the Russians to ask for peace terms, but they did not. Moreover, the Russians had destroyed Moscow as they withdrew. There was not even enough housing for the French troops. The Russians hoped that eventually Napoleon would be defeated by the bitter cold Russian winter. The first frost and snow were only two weeks away when Napoleon finally decided to lead his army back to France.

On October 24 the Russians attacked the retreating French as they tried to cross the Lusha River at Maloyaroslavet. The French won the battle, but at a cost of 7 generals and 4,000 men. On November 9 the French reached Smolensk once again. The temperature was down to 12oF and their food supplies were used up. Still they pressed on, through heavy snow in a line that stretched for 50 miles.

Meanwhile, the Russians repeatedly attacked the retreating French. By November 25, the French had reached the Berezina River near Rorisov. Here the Russians had knocked down the bridges and fortified the river banks. Napoleon's forces quickly threw up two new bridges but in their panic to cross, thousands died in the freezing waters.

In early December, Napoleon left his troops and set out by carriage for Paris. The remnants of his "Grand Army" straggled after him.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW:

1. What were some of the miscalculations that hurt Napoleon in Russia?
2. What happened when Napoleon reached Moscow?
3. What were some of the problems faced by Napoleon's retreating army?
4. What was the final outcome of Napoleon's Russian Campaign?

THE BURNING OF MOSCOW

The Russian people were shocked at the burning of their beloved Moscow—as was Napoleon himself. He wrote the following to Czar Alexander.

The proud and beautiful city of Moscow is no more. Rostopchin has had it burned. Four hundred incendiaries were arrested in the very act; they all declared that they set fire to the place by order of the Governor, the Director of the Police. They have been shot. Three houses out of every four have been burned down. . . . Such a deed is as useless as it is atrocious. Was it intended to deprive us of provisions? These were in cellars that the fire could not reach. Besides, what a trifling object for which to destroy the work of centuries, and one of the most lovely cities in the world! I cannot possibly believe that, with your principles, your feelings, and your ideas of what is right, you can have authorized excesses so unworthy of a just sovereign and a great nation.

I made war on your Majesty without any hostile feelings. A single letter from you, before or after the last battle, would have stopped any advance, and I would willingly have surrendered the advantage of occupying Moscow. If your Majesty still retains some part of your old feelings for me, you will take this letter in good part.

1. (a) In this letter, Napoleon claims that the work of centuries was destroyed for a "trifling object." What is the trifling object to which he refers?

(b) Do you think the object was a trifling one to the Russians?

2. In the second paragraph, Napoleon reassures the czar that he made war on Russia "without hostile feelings." By this, he probably meant that he did not invade Russia because he hated the Russian people or the czar. What were Napoleon's motives for invading the country (page 498)?

3. In the long run, do you think Napoleon's personal feelings toward the Russians would matter to them?
