Two hundred years ago, on June 12, 1812, the French Grande Armée crossed the Neman River, beginning Napoleon’s ill-fated invasion of Russia. On July 16, Vitebsk fell; on August 6, Smolensk. Then on August 26 (September 7 new style), Russia was defeated by Napoleon at the Battle of Borodino, 60 miles west of the capital. At least 70,000 soldiers on both sides are thought to have died on that single day of battle.

The road to Moscow was open and Napoleon expected Russia to sue for peace. Instead, the capital was evacuated, and soon after French troops entered on September 2, fires broke out (or were set).

Frustrated, the French began their retreat on October 7, and over the next month and a half Napoleon’s forces were decimated by disease, partisan attacks, winter and starvation. By the time the Grand Army recrossed the Berezina River, they had just 27,000 fit soldiers. They had entered Russia with over 400,000 (some estimates put it as high as 600,000) men.

What follows is a collection of memoirs and letters from people who lived through the events.

Compiled, translated and edited by Alexander Mikaberidze

Above: “The Battle of Smolensk,” by Adam Albrecht (1845), who witnessed the battle.
NAPOLEON INVADERS

During the night of 25 June, with Napoleon’s Grande Armée invading his realm, Emperor Alexander dictated an Imperial Order announcing the start of the war.

We had long observed on the part of the emperor of the French the most hostile proceedings towards Russia, but we had always hoped to avert them by conciliatory and pacific measures. At length, experiencing a continued renewal of direct and evident aggression, notwithstanding our earnest desire to maintain tranquillity, we were compelled to complete and assemble our armies. But even then we flattered ourselves that reconciliation might be effected while we remained on the frontiers of our empire and, without violating one principle of peace, were prepared only to act in our own defense. All these conciliatory and pacific measures could not preserve the tranquility that we so desired. The emperor of the French, by suddenly attacking our army at Kovno, has been the first to declare war. Since no measures could convince him to maintain peace, we are left with no other choice but to appeal to the Almighty, the Witness and the Defender of the Truth. It is unnecessary for me to remind our leaders, commanders and soldiers of their duty and their bravery. The ancient blood of the valiant Slavs flows in their veins. Warriors! You defend your Faith, your Country, and your Liberty! I shall be with you and the Lord will be against the aggressor!

Born and raised in the village of Satok, Fyodor Glinka showed poetic talents early in life but chose a military career suitable to his noble background. An adjutant to General Mikhail Miloradovich in 1805-6, he retired to his estate in 1807, serving as the leader of the local militia. Witnessing the destruction of his native land, he wrote a series of letters full of his passion and heartbreak.

18 July, 1812. The Village of Satoki

At last, our fields, covered with a plentiful harvest, will soon turn into battlefields. But they are exulting to serve as the place where the junction of two armies will be accomplished and perhaps earn glory similar to the Poltava Field.1 The First Western Army, under the command of Barclay de Tolly, and the Second, under Prince Bagration, after overcoming innumerable obstacles put up by the enemy, have finally united at Smolensk. Platov has also arrived here with some fifteen thousand Don Cossacks. Our army is modest in numbers, but the troops have never been so orderly and the regiments have never had such wonderful men. The troops are given the best food; the nobles sacrifice everything. All around the city people deliver baked bread, bring in cattle and provide any good that our good soldiers, who are eager to fight at the walls of Smolensk, desire. Some of them already expressed this in a very simple, but, of course, heartfelt expression: “We are already seeing our fathers’ grey beards,” they say. “Would we let the enemy despoil them? It is time to fight!”

2 p.m., 4 August. The Village of Satoki

As I am writing to you with my trembling hand, the fate of Smolensk is being decided. The enemy, having concentrated his great forces somewhere, burst into Krasny yesterday, and while we looked towards Rudnya, he rushed to Smolensk to capture it by surprise. Neverovsky’s division carried the French on its shoulders today, but the brave General Rayevsky met them with a handful of troops and defended the city. Today, all the townsfolk were sent out of the city and batteries were set up. The enemy, with some two hundred thousand men, is coming to Smolensk, where 150,000 of our troops are defending us. The Pokrovsky Mound is still in our hands. Now the battle is raging under the very walls of the city. By the time you receive these lines, someone’s fate will already be decided: either Napoleon will be repulsed, or the door into [the heart of] Russia will be unlocked!

I am going to pray for the last time on the graves of our parents and will then go to my older brother Basil: I can observe the entire battlefield from his post. Goodbye!

8 August. The Village of Tsurikovo

I witnessed a horrible scene – the death of Smolensk. The destruction of Lisbon [from the earthquake in 1755] could not have been worse than this. On the 4th, the enemy rushed to Smolensk but was greeted by a handful of intrepid Russians under its walls. On the 5th, from early morning till late evening, a battle raged for some twelve hours before, on top of, and behind the walls. The Russians did not concede even an inch of ground. They fought like lions. The French, or rather the Poles, attacked in a mad frenzy, climbing on the walls, bursting through the gates, rushing onto the ramparts and crowding, in countless multitudes, around the city on the other side of the Dnieper. Finally, tired of our resistance, Napoleon gave orders to burn the city that he could not wrestle from us. His henchmen carried out the monster’s order at once. Clouds of bombs, shells and cannonballs fell onto homes, towers, shops, churches. And these houses, churches and towers ignited, and anything that could burn burst into flames! Burning neighborhoods, thick multi-hued smoke, crimson sunset, the crackle of bursting bombs, the roar of cannon, boiling musket fire, the rattle of drums and the wail of the elders, wives and children of an entire people falling to their knees with hands raised to heaven: this is what unfolded in front of our eyes, struck our ears and tore at our hearts! The crowds of people ran from the fire as Russian regiments marched into it; some saved lives, others sacrificed theirs. A long row of carts with the wounded proceeded from the town...

In deep dusk the icon of the Mother of God of Smolensk was brought out of the city. A dull ringing of bells, mingling with the crackle of decaying buildings and the thunder of the battle, accompanied the sad procession. The glitter of the fires lit its way. Meanwhile, black and purple clouds of smoke lodged over the city, and the fast-approaching night thickened the darkness and amplified the horrors. The confusion of people was so great that many ran half-naked and mothers lost their children. The Cossacks carried infants on their saddles

1. Glinka refers to the battle of Poltava, where the Russian army routed the Swedes in 1709.
from this raging hell. Napoleon gave orders that Smolensk had to be taken on the 5th, but the Russians defended it with their breasts and the city was not taken. But at dawn on the 6th – oh, the vicissitude of fate! – that which was defended so valiantly was given up voluntarily! The commander-in-chief had reasons for that. Now Smolensk is but a huge pile of ashes, its neighborhoods are like the neighborhood [of Pompeii] after the eruption of Vesuvius. Our troops hastily retreat to Dorogobuzh, but now, that is, in the evening of 8 August, they have stopped near Bredikha. We fought the other day, we fought yesterday, we were fighting today and will be fighting tomorrow! These scoundrels prevail only because of their great numbers. Arm all and everyone, the commander-in-chief’s last proclamation finally declares. At last – the people’s war is at hand!

BORODINO

As he rested from the exhausting marches of preceding few days, Ilya Radozhitsky was struck how fleeting the day of September 6 seemed.

The sun shone brightly and its golden rays glided over the fatal steel of our bayonets and muskets. It sparkled with brilliant light on the copper of our guns. Everything was getting ready for the bloodshed of the morrow: the Moscow militiamen were completing earthworks on the battery, the artillerymen prepared and distributed ammunition. Soldiers sharpened bayonets, cleaned sword-belts and shoulder-belts; in short, 300,000 men in both armies were preparing for the great, terrible day. As the night approached, the bivouacs of the wounded. Sokolovsky, was killed, while the other, Merkulov, was seriously wounded and captured. The Lord protected me and so

Cornet Johan Reinhold von Dreyling served in the Malorosissky Cuirassier Regiment and was appointed as an orderly to General Kutuzov in August 1812.

It was barely dawn when the enemy fired its first round. One of the very first cannonballs flew above our heads and shattered the roof of the house where Kutuzov was billeted. Everyone rushed to the horses and Kutuzov departed without delay as well. The army was ready for battle and a ferocious firefight soon began along the entire line. Thus began that most memorable and bloody day – the day of the Battle of Borodino. The enemy’s main attack was directed against our center and left flank. The enemy charged with reckless gallantry on our batteries. Drenched in blood, they were seized by the enemy and then recaptured by our troops on several occasions. Exasperation and fury, desperation and revenge engaged in a ferocious battle against the horrors of all-destructive death. The thunder of a thousand guns, musket fire – all of this combined into one continuous rumble; one’s consciousness faded away and all feelings became numbed. The rumbling noise could no longer be heard and in a moment you experience a condition that is impossible to describe, as if you are not feeling anything any more. Then a doubt sets in, “Am I still alive?” In the afternoon, the enemy cannonade had seemed to subside when it suddenly erupted with a doubled fury. Napoleon launched a new and dreadful attack against our center that we repelled only through extreme bravery. The combat continued all day long and fighting was resolute and nasty until the night and complete exhaustion on both sides put an end to the day that seemed to last forever, and terminated this horrible massacre. Thus ended one of the bloodiest battles in history, and yet our situation remained still unclear…

During the battle Kutuzov remained under direct enemy fire, standing behind our center and the left flank. He personally witnessed the humanly impossible efforts that [Russian troops] made and dispatched reinforcements and succor where they were most needed. I was dispatched twice to Prince Bagration on the left flank. The first time I found him amid the most dreadful firefight near a battery [fleches], while the second time I saw him already mortally wounded, in a pool of his own blood, as he was carried away not far from me. Our losses were horrendous and several generals and some twenty-five thousand soldiers, including ten thousand who were killed, honored their duty to their Fatherland by shedding their blood or sacrificing their lives. Our gallant cuirassiers [from the Malorosissky Regiment] also suffered serious casualties. Of the entire regiment, we could gather only 120 men immediately after the battle; by the morning, there were just 250 men, including those who had been separated from the regiment during the fighting and now rejoined it. The majority of our officers were killed or wounded. In our Life Guard squadron, there had been just two officers besides me, and one of them, Sokolovsky, was killed, while the other, Merkulov, was seriously wounded and captured. The Lord protected me and so

FACES OF BORODINO Each year, a hundred or so Russians gather west of Moscow to reenact the Battle of Borodino. Photographer Artur Demchenko captures them in character.
I emerged unscathed, but my poor horse was wounded in the right shoulder in the evening. Although she initially fell to her knees, she still carried me throughout the battle. Unfortunately, my dear friend Johannson was among the gravely wounded—he suffered nine sabre cuts. Late at night I crossed the battlefield to look for him among the wounded who were receiving treatment or enduring amputations under the meager illumination of sentry lights, but I could not find him anywhere. The screaming and wailing of the wounded was unbearable. Foes and friends alike lay together on the battlefield. The army, that is its remnants, was resting. Completely exhausted, we lay on the blood-stained ground for which we had paid such a dear price. Both our Russian heroes and the fearless and gallant Frenchmen performed marvels of gallantry, dedication and contempt for death.

We expected that the battle would be resumed the following day. But Kutuzov, after receiving all dispatches and reports, realized that it would be difficult to succeed with an army that had sustained such an enormous loss. All reserves had been committed during the battle and there was not a single fresh unit that would have replenished the losses. So Kutuzov decided to retreat.

The news of the abandonment of Moscow was received with a mixture of consternation and bewilderment. The troops, in the deepest dejection, tramped through the streets with furled standards and silent bands. Nikolai Golitsyn, who joined Kutuzov’s suite at the outskirts of the city, recalled that

...we rode across Moscow in a melancholy silence, nobody expressing what was in his thoughts, and each apparently absorbed in somber reflections. The solemnity of this silent march, of which no one except [Kutuzov] knew either the destination or the duration, had something sinister about it.

Many shared General Dokhturov’s indignation at Kutuzov’s decision “to abandon one’s cradle without a single shot and without a fight! I am in a fury…”

Even more outspoken was Governor Rostopchin, who had spent the previous weeks convincing the people of Moscow that Russia was winning the war. He wrote to his wife:

The blood is boiling in my veins, I think that I shall die of the pain.

Baron von Löwenstern, who initially found it difficult to describe his reaction to the loss of Moscow, abandoned the effort. Whereas one man grieved over the loss of his house, another regretted the loss of homes belonging to his parents or friends, while others – and they were the majority – were preoccupied with the humiliation at seeing this ancient capital occupied by foreigners. But quite spontaneously everyone forgot his personal concerns and thought only of the affront the enemy had just inflicted on us and, far from being disheartened, we felt more passionately determined than ever to continue the war and to make every conceivable sacrifice.... After the capture of Moscow we had the Empire to save, not just a town. And from this moment everybody said, “The war is only just beginning!”

On 14 September, Nastasya Danilovna, the pretty daughter of Baron Alexei Korf’s estate manager, wrote that... streets were filled with noise, ruckus and bustle. Merchants were closing their stores and packing away their goods.
A crowd stopped soldiers as they marched in the streets and asked them about the Battle of Borodino; some others cursed Napoleon... One officer teasingly told me that young and beautiful girls like me would have a fun time in Moscow when the French came. I simply turned my back to him and left...

Francois-Joseph d'Ysam de Villefort was a long-time resident of Moscow who left a detailed account of the city's fiery destruction.

I spent 13 September doing various errands on foot in the German Quarter, and I came home in the evening absolutely exhausted but determined to go out early next morning to get news of the approach of the French. I left my house at 8 a.m. and soon saw the crowd of people making their departure.

Carriages, drozhki, carts, horse-drawn vehicles of all kinds, and people on foot carrying their loads went by in a constant procession. I saw poor common women crushed with the weight of burdens far beyond their strength, carrying off even the smallest pieces of furniture in their homes, and followed by their crying children, who wailed in despair. In fact, it was a wholesale exodus. This concourse of departures lasted from eight in the morning until about midday, and as for various reasons the streets were becoming rather unsafe, everyone kept indoors and awaited the future with apprehension... Eventually our heightened attention was arrested by a fanfare of trumpets and we looked more closely at the arriving troops. They were French! What a moment of consternation!

It is certain that fires were already commencing as the Russians evacuated the city. Shortly after midday, the flames first appeared in the trade rows of the Kitai-Gorod, in or around the Gostinny Door (often referred to in French memoirs as the Bourse or Grand Bazaar) and in the Solyanka – the salted-fish market. Late at night the wind rose, carrying flaming embers across the city, scattering them among the wooden suburbs, where the conflagration rapidly spread. Among those still remaining Moscow was Madame Louise Fusil, the actress, who had stayed in Moscow against her will. Concerned about her safety on the eve of the enemy occupation, Madame Fusil left the house she was living in and joined a family of artists occupying a large palace in the Basmannaya region that belonged to Prince Golitsyn – at the opposite end of the city from where the Allied army entered the city. The following day (15th) she decided to return to her apartment and was surprised to find “all buildings occupied by the military.” Two captains of the Gendarmerie were lodged at my apartment. All my belongings were ransacked and my papers were scattered around on the floor. I found these men shamelessly reading my personal papers. My appearance confused them and they assured me that they had found the apartment already ransacked.

Unable to stay at her apartment, Fusil chose to return to the Golitsyn estate. However:

...the swiftly spreading fires threatened the house. As I returned, my path was illuminated by the flames that consumed the homes all around me. The fires made for a remarkably bright illumination, while the wind howled ominously. It seemed that everything conspired to destroy this ill-fated city.

Climbing to the top of one of the princely estates, Madame Fusil beheld “a magnificent yet terrifying sight” – the burning Moscow.

For the next four nights, we did not light candles since it was just as bright in the evening as at noon...

The day we undertook this journey was a memorable one for me. When we left, our house was intact, and there was not even a suspicion of a fire in any of the nearby streets. Madame Vendraminy’s daughter, a girl of 13, was with us. She had not yet seen the fires, except from a distance. The first one she met was at the Red Gate, the oldest in Moscow. We wished to take the usual road to the boulevards, but found it impossible to pass, the path blocked by a wall of flame. So we turned toward Tverskoy Boulevard, but the fires were even greater there. Reaching the Bolshoi Theater, we encountered a genuine inferno – words are simply insufficient to describe the sight... We turned right where fires seemed to have been subsiding but just as we stood in the middle of the street, the flames, fanned by the wind, formed an arch of fire over the thoroughfare. This may seem to be an exaggeration, but it is genuine truth. We could neither advance nor make a detour. Putting our horses to the gallop, we managed to regain the boulevard...

Returning to the Golitsyn house, Fusil and her companion saw, to their horror, that it was already burning.

I shall never forget my impressions when I saw what awaited us. The house, to which we expected to return peacefully, and where, only an hour before, there had been no sign of a spark, was on fire. This can only just have happened because the people inside had not yet realized the fact. It was the cries of Madame Vendraminy’s little girl which brought them running. This child had lost her head and was shouting, “Save mama, save everything. Oh my God! We are lost!”

Fusil and her friends rushed to save their personal belongings. They were assisted by a group of the French officers.

And so I saw myself half-rescued, even though I was going to lose a good deal of furniture and some boxes filled with
belongings. Everything else I left, and abandoned my daughter’s portrait in the corner of a conservatory. I was in tears, because I foresaw that I should never set eyes on it again. How angry I felt that the portrait was not a miniature!

We left the house and were soon prey to the soldiers. Nothing was more distressing than to see the women, children and old men fleeing, just as we were, from their burnt houses. A numerous file of soldiers, on their way to camp, were marching by at the same time and we decided to follow them. After wandering for a long while we found a street that was no longer burning. We entered the first house – they were all deserted – and threw ourselves down on couches, while the men guarded our horses and drozhdki in the courtyard and looked to see that no flames took hold of the house…

Fusil and her friends decided to move the following day.

We went from street to street, from house to house. All bore the marks of devastation. This city, so rich and resplendent only a short time ago, was now nothing by a pile of ashes and ruins, where we wandered like ghosts. Finally, after walking back and forth with no purpose, we decided to return to our former home. Perhaps it had not been burned, we thought. Indeed it was as we left it, albeit it was plundered by the soldiers… We had scarcely eaten anything since the previous day. A table and some chairs were still intact. These were carried down into the street, and a sort of dinner was prepared and dished up in the middle of the road. Imagine a table in the middle of the street, houses in flames or smoking ruins on all sides, the wind driving dust and smoke into our faces, incendiaries landing near us, drunken soldiers carrying away the booty which they had just pillaged.

Threatened by flames, some residents tried to get out to safety. In the Zamoskvorechye (south of the Kremlin), about one hundred men and women found a temporary shelter inside a church, where they fell to their knees and prayed for salvation. But with fires intensifying, they decided to seek a different shelter. Receiving the priest’s blessing, they ventured out into the burning streets only to be “astonished by the darkness of whirling smoke, and deafened by a loud rumble and howling and hissing of the wind.” Nevertheless, they pushed ahead against “an almost impenetrable wall of hot ashes that was carried by the winds, blinding eyes and burning faces.” At last, these survivors managed to get to Polyanka where another misfortune befell them. Just as they entered a square, they were surrounded by the Allied marauders.

We fell to our knees and raising our trembling hands to the heaven, begged for mercy and grace. But the concept of humanity was foreign to these barbarians, who ignored the pleas and supplications of the vulnerable and rushed with swords unsheathed like wild beasts at a flock of sheep. With frenzied shouts and raging fury, they began to pillage and beat everyone… From men they remove clothing and boots that they desperately needed, since theirs were completely worn out. They snatched scarves and shawls from women, irately tore their dresses, emptied pockets of watches, snuff-boxes, gold and silver coins, pulled earrings straight out of ears and pinched rings off fingers. I let the reader envision this scene – a square surrounded and illuminated by raging fires, filled with smoke, stench and hot ash and pierced by howling winds, and amidst such chaos, the enemy soldiers, with beastly expressions and unsheathed swords, ransacking through scattered items and among the pitiable Muscovites, crouched in various positions with faces distorted by fear…”

Similar scenes unfolded in other parts of Moscow. Postmaster Andrei Karfachevsky recalled that “It was impossible to tell night from day.”

All that time pillage continued: the French entered houses and, committing gross acts of violence, took from their owners not only money, gold, and silver, but even boots, linen, and, most ludicrous of all, cassocks, women’s furs and cloaks, in which they stood on guard and rode on horseback. It was not uncommon for people walking in the street to be stripped to their shirt, and many were robbed of boots, overcoats, frock coats. Anyone who resisted was beaten savagely, often to death; and in particular many priests of the churches here endured severe tortures at the hands of the French, seeking to extract from them information on where their church treasure was hidden.
were not afraid of them because we knew they had decency to act properly. But may the Lord protect us from their allies! We called them a “merciless host” because neither begging nor tears affected them; it was even said among the masses that they could not be killed by a bullet. Indeed, they abused people both through word and deed… The French, on the other hand, did not abuse without a reason.

*Even a German resident of Moscow, who had been born during the Seven Years War and had “imbibed the hatred towards the French with my mother’s breast milk and could not stand even to see them,” had to acknowledge that the French were “the least rapacious” of the Allied troops.*

They took only what they needed to survive but did not plunder for gold, silver or other precious items, not even watches. How different from the Bavarians and the Poles, who usually left nothing behind themselves and pillaged even those items that had no value to them. The Württembergers followed in their footsteps – in fact, the idea of opening and ransacking tombs belongs to them… These soldiers committed acts of vandalism destroying statues and Chinese bridges in the Imperial Garden. They were so greedy that they tore away even upholstering of carriages and furniture, including the cloth from the billiard tables. The French, on the other hand, did not commit superfluous pillaging. In fact, they acted with courtesy even in robbing people, which often presented dramatic contrasts. Thus, one French officer had a sofa cut down so he could sleep comfortably but when he departed from the apartment, he brought a carpenter and had the sofa restored to original condition. On another occasion, in the middle of the night some French soldiers entered the house of a professor and upon learning that his pregnant wife was in labor, they approached her bed on tiptoe, covering their candles with one hand. They quietly emptied the drawers of all possessions but took nothing that belonged to the lady of the house, leaving only with her husband’s possessions.

*Andrei Karfachevsky, the postal official, by contrast, blamed everything on the French.*

The French seized merchants and peasants, judging from their beards alone that they were priests. In short, their treatment of the inhabitants was most inhuman, and they made no distinction: any man they came across, whether official or peasant, they put to work. They made him carry sacks of stolen property and barrels of wine, dig potatoes in the vegetable gardens and then peel them, chop cabbage and drag from the streets the bodies of men and horses….

After pillaging churches they stabled horses, slaughtered cattle and lodged wounded soldiers there. And having stripped the sacred icons of their frames they bayoneted them and poured filth on them. They also committed other abominations which the tongue cannot mention. In the houses of merchants and gentlemen, the property that had been placed in store rooms and basements and cleverly walled up with bricks so that it was quite impossible to perceive that there was a hole, was discovered by the French nevertheless. Not even property buried in the ground escaped discovery: under vegetable gardens and courtyards they prodded the ground and pulled out chests.

*Anna Grigorievna, a shopkeeper, described how many Allied soldiers who went pillaging on their own were attacked and killed by embittered Muscovites.*

My father stayed in our cellar alone with the women. As ill luck would have it, an enemy soldier forced the door. Over his shoulder he carried a huge cudgel. He brandished it in his left hand and with his right seized my father by the throat. I rushed at the brigand, snatched his cudgel and caught him by the nape of the neck. He dropped, whereupon everyone fell on him, killing him in an instant and dragging his body off to the pond.

*[Over time] we had thrown quite a few uninvited guests into this pond and two wells. Sometimes four or five of them arrived together. They rummaged all over the place, but we did not move. They could see for themselves that there was nothing to take, and if they took it into their heads to do us harm, we knew how to bring them to reason. Not one of them left alive. All this sickened me, but the instinct for self-preservation reigns supreme. If we had let them go after beating them, you can see that they would have gone away in a fury and returned with a band of their comrades to exterminate us to the last man. And so we had no pity. To the death!*

I remember how one day a merchant named Zarubin came to find us. He had enemy soldiers billeted in his house and they were inquiring whether there was any means of procuring some fish. Zarubin knew that our pond, which belonged to General Kiselev’s wife, had some carp in it. He asked my father, “Is there no way of casting my net into your pond?”

“No need to ask permission,” my father replied. “The pond does not belong to us. But the question is what are you going to catch in your net, Gregor Nikitich? A carp – or a trooper?”

**NAPOLEON RETREATS**

*After spending a month in Moscow, Napoleon realized that the peace he so desired was not forthcoming, and that he had to abandon devastated Moscow before winter arrived. The French began their retreat on October 19, 1812. Napoleon’s forces dwindled to some hundred thousand men, accompanied by thousands of non-combatants and an enormous baggage train of loot.* The land between Moscow and Smolensk had been devastated by the French forces advance on the Russian capital in August and September, so Napoleon planned to move his forces towards the untouched regions to the southwest. Kutuzov intercepted the Grande Armée at Maloyaroslavets, where in a savage battle on October 23-24, the French captured the town but failed to break through the main Russian army. As a result, Napoleon had to return west via Smolensk.

This letter, written from the Tarutino camp on October 14, is noteworthy for the author’s emphasis on the changing nature of the war and the growing involvement of the common people.

From the Krasnaya Pakhra, our army retreated to Voronovo and then across the Nara River to Tarutino, where it is
currently regrouping. Count Rostopchin followed the army to Tarutino, but as we left the Moscow province, he left us and went, as he said, to Yaroslavl. On leaving Voronovo, Count Rostopchin personally set fire to his estate and destroyed everything that it contained, leaving a letter for the French at a local church in which he condemned them for the despoiling of Moscow and the Russian land...

The enemy’s stark condition can be attested from the descriptions of our soldiers who escaped from captivity and tell us how they are forced to grind grain that has been stolen from nearby villages. On the other hand, our army currently enjoys many advantages. We hold a position that is, by nature, advantageous and has been reinforced so much that the enemy will not dare to attack us and disrupt the peaceful stay that is necessary to prepare the newly arrived troops. Meanwhile, our detachments constantly harass the enemy, targeting all roads connecting Moscow to the provinces… and delivering hundreds of prisoners every day. If one counts losses inflicted by our detachments and peasants, the enemy daily casualties can be estimated at more than five hundred men per day.

Our army is fully supplied through November 12, while the enemy, unable to procure supplies, suffers from acute shortages, eats horseflesh and cannot get bread anywhere. The peasants, animated by their love for the Fatherland, have abandoned their peaceful lifestyle and are arming themselves against the common enemy. Every day they come to the headquarters and ask us for guns and gunpowder, both of which are granted to them without delay; the French are more afraid of them than regular troops, since peasants, embittered by the despoliation to which they have been subjected, kill them without mercy. The peasant activity is of double benefit to us, since it reduces the number of enemy troops and prevents the enemy, deprived of provisions, from sending out its marauders to the nearby village; the enemy is forced to forage in large detachments, but these are always intercepted or destroyed by the Cossacks. If I were to describe all the incidents that occur in nearby villages and the means by which our good but embittered peasants employ to destroy the enemy, I probably would not stop talking.

Still, I cannot but mention the exploits of the residents of the village of Kamenka. Some five hundred French troops, attracted by the village’s affluence, came to Kamenka. The local residents greeted them with bread and salt, and asked what they wanted. The Poles, who served as interpreters, demanded wine. The village elder opened wine cellars and cooked food for the French. The arrogant Gauls did not leave after drinking and eating but instead, after enjoying themselves, decided to spend the night in the village. At night, the peasants stole their...
arms and horses and, shouting “Hurrah!,” they pounced on the drowsy and half-drunk enemies. They fought for an entire day and, despite losing thirty men, they killed a hundred and brought the remaining four hundred as prisoners to Kaluga. At Borovsk, two girls killed four Frenchmen while a few days ago peasant women brought a few more French prisoners. Just now, as I write this letter, a French officer was brought in and he tells us that both officers and soldiers are increasingly unwilling to go foraging – our detachments have clearly left a bad taste in their mouth.

Among our guerrillas one distinguishes himself the most, and his name is Captain [Alexander] Figner. He began by going into [occupied] Moscow and, pretending to be one of the serfs, received a passport from the French authorities. With this passport he then went to the Mozhaisk road and gathered his detachments not far from it. Dressed in peasant garb and accompanied by two peasants, he then returned to the French and spent some time with them, learning where their cannons were located and talking to our captured soldiers. He then returned to his detachment, attacked the enemy, captured six guns, one colonel, several officers and some hundred prisoners, as well as killing almost as many. His detachment consisted of a hundred Cossacks, hussars and dragoons. When some seven thousand enemy troops surrounded his detachment, he constructed a dam amid impassable swamps and escaped. Now he has some five hundred men in his detachment and operates all around Bonaparte’s army, attacking and destroying everything he encounters. He occasionally dresses up as a French officer, travels into their regiments, talks to the enemy troops, enquiring about their circumstances, and then always returns safely back to his men.

Three days ago Major-General Dorokhov captured Vereya, where the French had dug in some time ago. He captured one flag, two cannon, one colonel, fourteen officers and 350 men, killing over 200. Our side lost just 20 killed and wounded. And please do not think that I invent the number of our killed and wounded, as is usually done in official reports: it is genuinely so low. Colonel [Denis] Davydov of the Akhtyrsky Hussar Regiment is located, with his detachment, near Vyazma and harasses enemy transports and camps. He has destroyed plenty of them and captured many prisoners. Prince Kudashev was dispatched recently with two Cossack regiments to the Tula road and sent back two hundred prisoners that same day. Count Winzegorde, protecting the roads to Troitsk, St. Petersburg and Yaroslavl, prevents the French from sending out their outposts further than ten to fifteen versts [seven to ten miles] from Moscow. In a word, Bonaparte is under siege, and he will need a miracle to get out of this trap...

The onset of autumn cannot favor the French, whose horses are so exhausted that even our peasants do not want to take them. Consequently, if they attempt to break out, the French risk losing their entire artillery, which is currently transported by peasant horses and oxen. The French do not control sufficient territory to deliver fodder for their cavalry and are forced to pull apart thatched roofs from local houses to feed their horses. So what will happen next? One cannot imagine the sense of desperation that seized the enemy troops when, after the capture of Moscow, they learned that there would be no peace. This is evident because all of their generals, officers and soldiers, even [Marshal Joachim] Murat himself, continually talk about peace. But fortunately no one on our side even considers this… Such are the circumstances that more and more improve our positions and lead [Napoleon] to the abyss where his unrestrained audacity delivered him. With the Lord’s help, we should expect the complete destruction of the enemy and the triumph of the just cause.

On November 9, 1812, just 45 miles from Smolensk, General Peter Konovnitsyn was thrilled to inform his wife about the Russian successes and the gradual degradation of the Grande Armée.

My love, we pursue the enemy day and night, capturing cannon and flags almost every day, while I lost count of the prisoners. The enemy is dying of hunger, they eat not only horses but even humans, who, on several occasions, were found roasted. It is impossible to describe the enemy’s deprivation, and it can be said that their army is completely gone. So, my love, we are winners at last and the enemy is perishing. We expect to be in Smolensk in three days and in another two weeks at Minsk, where I will make sure that your clavichord is recaptured. This winter proved to be very cold and we struggle to deal with the weather, and are tired to death, but, with the Lord’s help, we will be victorious. Bonaparte has never been in such dire straits, he is running away and the Cossacks almost captured him the other day. Perhaps he will still fall into our hands...

An officer of the Life Guard Semyonovsky Regiment, Pavel Pushin was also struck by the magnitude of the enemy’s losses as he listed thousands of prisoners brought to the Russian camp on an almost daily basis.

Wednesday, 6 November

Standing still. Our cavalry was dispatched to pursue the enemy, who flees in all directions in confusion. Commander-in-Chief Prince Kutuzov arrived at our camp with a huge number of enemy flags. His face shone with happiness. He told us that between yesterday and the moment he spoke to us the enemy had lost 152 guns, while the number of prisoners is so high they have not been counted yet. There is nothing that could compare to the universal joy that overwhelmed us at that moment and caused us to shed tears. The mighty “Hurrah” cheer rang out and touched our old general.

Just seventeen years old, Rafail Zотов was just out of school when the war began and he volunteered for service in the St. Petersburg militia. In the autumn, the militia joined General Peter Wittgenstein’s corps and participated in the battle at Polotsk, where Zотов was wounded. Barely recovered, he rushed back to his corps as it pursued the retreating Grande Armée.

[December] marked the start of the most terrible period of the French retreat. The thaw that complicated Napoleon’s crossing of the Berezina suddenly turned into a most severe
frost, which even those of us who lived in St. Petersburg had rarely experienced. Temperatures dropped every day and reached 23° to 25° Réaumur [-29° to -31° Celsius]. This was a final and devastating blow to the French army, which completely lost its morale. Its every bivouac and encampment was like the terrifying sight of the battlefield, where thousands lay dying in great agony. And so the warriors who perhaps survived Austerlitz, Eylau and Borodino now easily fell into our hands. They were in a state of trance so that every Cossack captured and brought back dozens of them. They could not comprehend what was happening around them, could not remember or understand anything. The roads were littered with their corpses and they lay abandoned and without any attention inside every hut.

We marched along the wooded area. The snow was firm and shallow and so we took advantage of clear weather to veer off the main road occasionally and travel along the edge of the forest, where we often encountered frozen French corpses lying in heaps in every direction. These terrible sights had become so ordinary to us that we no longer paid any attention to them.

As I was travelling one day I suddenly noticed a creature lurking inside the woods. Curious, I went to check and… saw a weird creature kneeling and leaning against a pine tree. It was dressed in the most grotesque clothes… head covered with a woman’s hand warmer muff that was tied with a cloth; a [traditional Russian] body warmer hanging from its shoulders; the rest of the clothing was in rags and so torn and transparent that there was no doubt about the owner’s gender. Only the tops of his boots survived and his feet were wrapped in straw, through which I could see his bare toes. This half-human was holding a small crucifix, staring at it with his clouded and motionless eyes. It was clear from his moving lips that he was praying, probably sensing that his life was about to end. We had long become indifferent to the suffering and death that surrounded us, but the sight of this praying warrior, dying in the snows of a foreign land, was extremely heartbreaking and poignant. I called some of my soldiers and asked the dying man a few questions but he could not give me any answers. Cold and starvation had completely deprived him of any feelings or perception. We carefully raised and moved him to the sleigh, where we wrapped him in everything we had at hand. We gave him a bit of rum and many protested against such senseless behavior, but the uhlan led his horse, laden with large sacks, supported by a wooden beam and filled with five-franc coins. The uhlan was angry at something and swore as they walked. They appeared to be exhausted from the cold and fatigue. Finally, driven by excitement, they grabbed fistfuls of coins and began throwing them into the snow. A crowd of onlookers gathered around them and many protested against such senseless behavior, but the uhlan only got annoyed and continued to throw the coins away, muttering, “Go find it, go find it!” When somebody remarked to them that it would be more sensible of them to hide the money for a rainy day, they calmly responded that their trunks and holsters [demodany i kohury] were already full of silver and they did not know what to do with the remaining money.

Marching with Kutuzov’s main army, Ilya Radozhitsky’s artillery company slowly advanced on the main route to Vilna, witnessing enormous human suffering along the way.
When we reached the main road to Vilna, which our unfortunate enemy used to escape, we encountered numerous overturned wagons, killed or frozen humans and horses scattered around on and under snow through which our artillery moved. On one occasion my cannon got stuck in a pothole and almost turned over. I rushed with my cannoneers to hold it up and was shocked to see that the wheel was in fact stuck in between the bones of a decomposing frozen corpse covered by snow. We often saw two or three black and burned Frenchmen, some still carrying their muskets, stumbling around like phantoms in the snowdrifts along side of the road – and no one paid any attention to them.

Once we met two Russian women, who, with clubs in their hands, were escorting about three-dozen ragged and half-frozen Frenchmen. Upon seeing the jubilation of these women as they led their captive enemies, we could not but laugh, but on the other hand, could only feel sorry for how humiliated and disgraced these once-proud conquerors of Europe had become. We often came across stragglers who were bundled up and huddled like ugly stuffed scarecrows as they continued their retreat to Vilna. Seeing officers, they would beseech us in a weak voice, “Monsieur! Bread!” and when no one paid attention to them, they emitted a heavy sigh, unhappily crying out, “Oh mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!”

We were particularly struck by the sight of one of these unfortunates. Like the others, he barely moved his legs, but what legs these were! Completely naked and with straw frozen to them, his legs were blackened by mud and covered with an icy crust, beneath which we could still see his toes through the straw. His feet were frostbitten to the knees but somehow this unfortunate man managed to move them and even asked us for some bread. Our soldiers stopped to look at him and, shuddering at his misery, they gave him a few of their biscuits. Along the way we occasionally stopped at a tavern and were usually treated to a terrible sight. Ordinarily, there was a fire in the middle of the room and frozen Frenchmen lay all around it on the floor; those closest to the fire were still moving but the rest were all dead, their bodies distorted and faces disfigured. Such were the calamities that befell the Napoleon’s great army...

With all the enemy troops expelled from Russia, Kutuzov issued an order announcing the end of the military operations inside Russia on January 1, 1813.

Brave and victorious soldiers! At last you have reached the frontiers of our empire! Everyone among you is a savior of our country and Russia hails you by this name! Your strong pursuit of the enemy and the extraordinary labors you have accomplished in this campaign have astounded all nations and covered you with immortal glory. The world has never before witnessed such splendid victories. For two months you mercilessly punished the villains. Their escape route is covered with their corpses. While fleeing, their leaders sought nothing but personal safety. Death raged amid the enemy and thousands of them fell and perished at once. The almighty God has thus expressed his anger against them and his blessing to his people.

Let us not stop amid these heroic exploits, let us march further. Let us cross the frontiers and endeavour to complete the enemy’s destruction on his own ground. But let us not follow the example of our enemy in committing acts of violence and savagery unworthy of a soldier. They burned down our homes and desecrated our holy sites but we have witnessed how the almighty God punished them for their wickedness. Let us be generous, let us carefully distinguish between the enemy and the peaceful population. Our just and kind treatment of the population will clearly demonstrate that we do not strive to enslave them and win a futile glory but that we are trying to liberate from misery and oppression even those nations that had taken up arms against Russia.

On March 31, 1814, the French surrendered their capital after losing the two day Battle of Paris. The Russians’ march into the city was led by Tsar Alexander I.