

# **An insight into 1812. The Allied Forces of Napoleon and the Russians as seen by the French during the Russian Campaign.**

## **Introduction**

The French General Berthézène wrote: “We can easily conclude that if the Russian soldier possesses neither the burst of energy that is inspired by freedom and that feeling of human dignity, nor the intelligence which belongs only to the enlightened peoples, he at least does not lack the essential qualities of a perfect machine. That is why I am quite confident, when I say that he is beyond any opposition presented by the German soldier, and that the French soldier alone, animated by the horror and electrified by the love of his homeland, can successfully oppose him”<sup>1</sup>.

The great amount of soldiers’ and officers’ testimonies that we inherited from the Napoleonic era allow the contemporary historian to rebuild the perception of “the other” that French soldiers developed, especially during the Russian Campaign. The *Grande Armée* was not called that for no reason. Napoleon had gathered approximately 644.000 men<sup>2</sup>, from all of the European countries – except for England – and this is why it was nicknamed the 'Army of the Twenty Nations'. The core of that army was formed by 350.000 French, who thus made up about half of its total strength. The Army of the Twenty Nations was an aggregate of European soldiers who, in the end, did not intermingle a lot: each army corps comprised between one and three “nations”. This helped with the command and minimized frictions: Napoleon would never have used the European characteristics of his army to harangue his men<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the values of the enlisted troops, like their motivations and cultures, differed according to the origins of the soldiers: the French had the opportunity during the campaign to confirm the proverb which goes “a friend in need is a friend indeed”, and their friends were indeed much needed. The French soldiers of the *Grande Armée* gave their perception of “the other” in their memoirs and correspondences. We can ask ourselves the following question: how did the French portray both their allies and their enemies?

In my paper, I wrote about the perception of Germans, which can be considered as “forced allies” and Poles, “natural allies”. Today I will have time to say only a few words about them, and I will focus my speech on the perception of the Russians during the campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> Général baron Pierre Berthézène, *Souvenirs militaires de la République et de l'Empire*, Paris, Dumaine, 1855, 2 volumes, vol. 1, p. 316.

<sup>2</sup> Marie-Pierre Rey, *L'effroyable tragédie. Une nouvelle histoire de la Campagne de Russie*, Paris, Flammarion, 2012, p. 53. Le nombre de soldats engagés par Napoléon fait débat : les historiens les évaluent entre 550.000 et 650.000.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 57.

## I. The Poles: Great Expectations

In 1807, Napoleon gave birth anew to Poland under the – embryonic – state of Duchy of Warsaw. The Poles hoped that Napoleon would help them recreate all of their territory, which had been divided between the Prussians, Austrians and Russians since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. That is why they massively enlisted at his side. The 4.6 million inhabitants of the Duchy supplied the Army of the Twenty Nations with 75.000 men<sup>4</sup> and Napoleon started what we then called the “Second war of Poland”.

The soldiers of the *Grande Armée* were generally warmly welcomed by the Polish people at the beginning of the Campaign, and the Poles aided the French during their retreat as well.

However, if it is true that Napoleon could count on the Polish people's abnegation, it was not the case concerning the Germans' devotion.

## II. The Germans, between Service and Treason

It is striking for the 21st century reader to acknowledge the testimonies of Napoleon's soldiers about the Germans who were then considered as a people incapable of making war. In 1812, Germany was – like Italy – divided into several, small, vassal States and some of its territories had also been annexed by France, or created from nothing to be governed by the *Napoleonides*. On the West, Napoleon had gathered the principalities in the Confederation of the Rhine, of which he was the protector. They gave approximately 125.000 men, who didn't feel concerned by the war. Nevertheless, some French soldiers recognized the values of the German soldiers. Baron Dufour would be a good example, since he didn't make any difference between French and German soldiers. However, we can read in a lot of testimonies like that of Sergeant Bourgogne: “the German soldiers, who were very well and who lacked of nothing, were poor soldiers; without the presence of the French who were among them in small numbers, they would have thrown aside their weapons and run away.”<sup>5</sup>

French got great expectations from Prussians, but were betrayed by them. The French did not understand that the national pride of the Prussian people had been so ridiculed by the defeat of 1806 that they were waiting impatiently for a weakness of the Napoleonic France to take their

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<sup>4</sup>Andrzej Nieuwazny, « Les Polonais de la Grande Armée », dans *Colloque. 1812, la campagne de Russie. Regard croisés sur une guerre européenne*, organisation : Fondation Napoléon, Souvenir napoléonien, Université Paris I, Archives diplomatiques, Paris, 4-5 avril 2012.

<sup>5</sup> A. Bourgogne, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

revenge. For the French, the Prussian honor was to remain faithful to their oath and to fight at their side; whereas for the Prussians, the honor lied in the vengeance of the affront of 1806-1807 in every possible means. The civilians joined the Prussian soldiers by refusing to give a shelter to the soldiers and by despoiling them of their guns and/or their money<sup>6</sup>.

### **III. The enemy: The Russian Army**

Napoleon's army had already fought against the Russians and defeated them several times. Nevertheless, the contacts between the French and the Russians had always been restricted (except perhaps in Tilsit) and the battlefields were not in Russia. In 1812, the Russians could make use of their territory (of which they defended a part by sacrificing the other that they set on fire): the change was significant. The Russian forces could be divided into three entities; soldiers from the regular army, Cossacks (irregular forces) and freed convicts of Moscow. All considered by the French as barbarians. *Unfortunately, we are running out of time and cannot dedicate a part to the civilians.*

#### *The Regular Army*

As believed by Berthézène, becoming a soldier was “a blessing for the Russian serf; better dressed, better fed during his service, he could even work himself free after a certain number of years.”<sup>7</sup>, but in fact, with 25 years of service, the number of soldiers who became freedmen was small. Napoleon's soldiers saw mental and physical dispositions in the Russian soldiers, who were used to enduring hardships, such as food privation, hard discipline, tiredness and hunger. The Russian soldier became a “perfect machine”

And that “perfect machine” could be defeated only by the French, “electrified by the love for their homeland” according to Berthézène. As for Docteur Faure, who survived his capture in Russia and published his memoirs, he insisted on the difference between the two value systems when he wrote that the Russian soldier was a fanatic, guided by fear and ignorance more than by love for glory or contempt for death.

They strongly believe in the existence of another life, and think they will prove to be worthy of it by dying for their country : many of our soldiers do not share this comforting idea, and face death with courage.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Faure, *Souvenirs du Nord ou la guerre, la Russie et les Russes ou l'esclavage*, Paris, Pelicier et Mongie,

Nevertheless, the regular army did not make a deep impression on the French soldiers. They focused on the irregular forces which terrorized them, the Cossacks.

### *The Cossacks*

Pitched battles were not the Cossacks' strong point. Their way of fighting, by the harassment of the soldiers who had parted from the rest of the troop was more adapted to the situation. The French memorialists described them as though they were animals. The expression "a swarm of Cossacks" was used a lot and Bourgoigne proved to be very imaginative in his creation of a bestiary: "this swarm of savages who howled like wolves"<sup>9</sup>, or again: "We were lucky, for, if the bear, talking about the wounded Cossack, had noticed that the ones of his kind were passing by so close, there is no doubt that he would have howled like a bull."<sup>10</sup>

However, what struck memorialists the most was the way in which the Cossacks made war. The French perceived them to lack courage as even when they outnumbered their enemy, the testimonies report that the Cossacks, even dramatically numerous, never attacked detachments resigned to defend themselves: "We did not understand how two thousand Cossacks could lack the courage to storm a wooded shed in which twenty-five men had found shelter to defend themselves, it is true, until they would die."<sup>11</sup> In a letter written by Drouot (General of Artillery) on the 1st of January, 1813, we can read that the only enemies were hunger and cold: "We had to fight against hunger and most of all cold, terrible enemies [...] The Cossacks got rich with the remains of our soldiers; but fifty riflemen or the sound of a canon were enough to dissipate the most numerous of their troops."<sup>12</sup> The Cossacks also came to be compared to the Mamluk of Egypt. Under these terms the official propaganda – relayed by the Bulletin and the Marshals – referred to the Cossacks, on the 2nd of November, 1812, in Vyazma, it is thought that Berthier said to Ney "We need to treat those scoundrels of Cossacks as we did in Egypt with the Arabs."<sup>13</sup> After the sand desert, came the desert of ice.

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1821, p. 217.

9 A. Bourgoigne, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

12 Lettre de Drouot à [destinataire non mentionné], 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1813, dans A. Chuquet, *op.cit.*, pp. 305-307.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

On their arrival to Moscow, the convicts who had been freed by Count Rostopchin to set the city on fire caused quite a stir. We can read of this fact in several accounts. The texts stressed the savagery of their appearance, but we need to remember that they had just been released from harsh imprisonment.

They [the convicts] all had very ugly faces, they carried rifles, spears and forks (...). He wore a sheepskin greatcoat (...), had long, gray hair hanging down to his shoulders, and a long, thick and white beard hanging down past his belt. Lastly, he was carrying a fork with three tines, in the same way as Neptune emerging from the water.<sup>14</sup>

Another text reads: “He was, like the others, ugly and disgusting; [...] our prisoner looked more like a bear than like a man.”<sup>15</sup> This image of a bear was a sort of constant figure in the French perception of the Russian, even though our soldiers preferred using other terms such as “savage” or “barbarian”. These things have to be compared with the image of the French by the Russians as seen yesterday (during the paper of A. Tchoudinov : *The Patriotic War in the Perception of the Russian People*).

## **Conclusion**

It was more accurate to refer to the *Grande Armée* as the 'Army of the Twenty Nations' rather than of *the Grande Armée*, when we see how much the soldiers were aware of their belonging to a nation and of the human characteristics that derived from it. The French, both confident in their own value and in that of Napoleon – he who was their victorious Emperor –, thought they could count on the other European nations. Even though the sooner considered them inferior, the other European nations respected their oath and joined their cause, and fought the Russians that they considered savage and barbarian. This was forgetting the previous wars waged against these very nations united in 1812 under a unique banner, this was forgetting the thirst of revenge and the motivations that ensued from it. The Polish were disappointed by Napoleon who failed to make their country come back to life. The German people somewhat desired the triumph of the Russians over Napoleon and the Tsar called his people to the “Patriotic War”. In two decades, the confrontation reverted. The French did not defend the soil of their homeland anymore, a soil which

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14 A. Bourgogne, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.

had been attacked by the coalized Kings (in 1792-1793), but they formed a European coalition to defeat the Tsar on his own soil. The very appellation of the war was important. It was the “Russian Campaign” for the French and the “Patriotic War” for the Russians. However, wasn't this war also – in spite of the obvious divisions within Napoleon's armies – an early European construction in this grouping of all the “western” forces against a common enemy, Russia. When he grouped together and led this 'Army of the Twenty Nations', did Napoleon participate in rejection of the Russian territory out of Europe?

Thank you! Spassiba!

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## **Référence de la communication**

Romain BUCLON (auteur) et Anaïs BUCLON (traductrice), « An insight into 1812. The Allied Forces of Napoleon and the Russians as seen by the French soldiers during the Russian Campaign », à l'occasion du 10e congrès international de l'International Napoleonic Society : *Napoleon's 1812 Russian Campaign in the World History: a Retrospective View*. Russian Academy of Science & International Napoleonic Society. 9-13 juillet 2012, Moscou, Russie, 10 juillet 2012.

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