CHAPTER I

Napoleon began the war with Russia because he could not resist going to Dresden, could not help having his head turned by the homage he received, could not help donning a Polish uniform and yielding to the stimulating influence of a June morning, and could not refrain from bursts of anger in the presence of Kurákin and then of Balashëv.

Alexander refused negotiations because he felt himself to be personally insulted. Barclay de Tolly tried to command the army in the best way, because he wished to fulfill his duty and earn fame as a great commander. Rostóv charged the French because he could not restrain his wish for a gallop across a level field; and in the same way the innumerable people who took part in the war acted in accord with their personal characteristics, habits, circumstances, and aims. They were moved by fear or vanity, rejoiced or were indignant, reasoned, imagining that they knew what they were doing and did it of their own free will, but they all were involuntary tools of history, carrying on a work concealed from them but comprehensible to us. Such is the inevitable fate of men of action, and the higher they stand in the social hierarchy the less are they free.

The actors of 1812 have long since left the stage, their personal interests have vanished leaving no trace, and nothing remains of that time but its historic results.

Providence compelled all these men, striving to attain personal aims, to further the accomplishment of a stupendous result no one of them at all expected—neither Napoleon, nor Alexander, nor still less any of those who did the actual fighting.

The cause of the destruction of the French army in 1812 is clear to us now. No one will deny that that cause was, on the one hand, its advance into the heart of Russia late in the season without any preparation for a winter campaign and, on the other, the character given to the war by the burning of Russian towns and the hatred of the foe this aroused among the Russian people. But no one at the time foresaw (what now seems so evident) that this was the only way an army of eight hundred thousand men—the best in the world and led by the best general—could be destroyed in conflict with a raw army of half its numerical strength, and led by inexperienced commanders as the Russian army was. Not only did no one see this, but on the Russian side every effort was made to hinder the only thing that could save Russia, while on the French side, despite Napoleon’s experience and so-called military genius, every effort was directed to pushing on to Moscow at the end of the summer, that is, to doing the very thing that was bound to lead to destruction.

In historical works on the year 1812 French writers are very fond of saying that Napoleon felt the danger of extending his line, that he sought a battle and that his marshals advised him to stop at Smolénsk, and of making similar statements to show that the danger of the campaign was even then understood. Russian authors are still fonder of telling us that from the commencement of the campaign a Scythian war plan was

adopted to lure Napoleon into the depths of Russia, and this plan some of them attribute to Pfuel, others to a certain Frenchman, others to Toll, and others again to Alexander himself—pointing to notes, projects, and letters which contain hints of such a line of action. But all these hints at what happened, both from the French side and the Russian, are advanced only because they fit in with the event. Had that event not occurred these hints would have been forgotten, as we have forgotten the thousands and millions of hints and expectations to the contrary which were current then but have now been forgotten because the event falsified them. There are always so many conjectures as to the issue of any event that however it may end there will always be people to say: "I said then that it would be so," quite forgetting that amid their innumerable conjectures many were to quite the contrary effect.

Conjectures as to Napoleon's awareness of the danger of extending his line, and (on the Russian side) as to luring the enemy into the depths of Russia, are evidently of that kind, and only by much straining can historians attribute such conceptions to Napoleon and his marshals, or such plans to the Russian commanders. All the facts are in flat contradiction to such conjectures. During the whole period of the war not only was there no wish on the Russian side to draw the French into the heart of the country, but from their first entry into Russia everything was done to stop them. And not only was Napoleon not afraid to extend his line, but he welcomed every step forward as a triumph and did not seek battle as eagerly as in former campaigns, but very lazily.

At the very beginning of the war our armies were divided, and our sole aim was to unite them, though uniting the armies was no advantage if we meant to retire and lure the enemy into the depths of the country. Our Emperor joined the army to encourage it to defend every inch of Russian soil and not to retreat. The enormous Drissa camp was formed on Pfuel's plan, and there was no intention of retiring farther. The Emperor reproached the commanders in chief for every step they retired. He could not bear the idea of letting the enemy even reach Smolénsk, still less could he contemplate the burning of Moscow, and when our armies did unite he was displeased that Smolénsk was abandoned and burned without a general engagement having been fought under its walls.

So thought the Emperor, and the Russian commanders and people were still more provoked at the thought that our forces were retreating into the depths of the country.

Napoleon having cut our armies apart advanced far into the country and missed several chances of forcing an engagement. In August he was at Smolénsk and thought only of how to advance farther, though as we now see that advance was evidently ruinous to him.

The facts clearly show that Napoleon did not foresee the danger of the advance on Moscow, nor did Alexander and the Russian commanders then think of luring Napoleon on, but quite the contrary. The luring of Napoleon into the depths of the country was not the result of any plan, for no one believed it to be possible; it resulted from a most complex interplay of intrigues, aims, and wishes among those who took part in the war and had no perception whatever of the inevitable, or of the one

way of saving Russia. Everything came about fortuitously. The armies were divided at the commencement of the campaign. We tried to unite them, with the evident intention of giving battle and checking the enemy's advance, and by this effort to unite them while avoiding battle with a much stronger enemy, and necessarily withdrawing the armies at an acute angle—we led the French on to Smolénsk. But we withdrew at an acute angle not only because the French advanced between our two armies; the angle became still more acute and we withdrew still farther, because Barclay de Tolly was an unpopular foreigner disliked by Bagratión (who would come under his command), and Bagratión—being in command of the second army—tried to postpone joining up and coming under Barclay's command as long as he could. Bagratión was slow in effecting the junction—though that was the chief aim of all at headquarters—because, as he alleged, he exposed his army to danger on this march, and it was best for him to retire more to the left and more to the south, worrying the enemy from flank and rear and securing from the Ukraine recruits for his army; and it looks as if he planned this in order not to come under the command of the detested foreigner Barclay, whose rank was inferior to his own.

The Emperor was with the army to encourage it, but his presence and ignorance of what steps to take, and the enormous number of advisers and plans, destroyed the first army's energy and it retired.

The intention was to make a stand at the Drissa camp, but Paulucci, aiming at becoming commander in chief, unexpectedly employed his energy to influence Alexander, and Pfuel's whole plan was abandoned and the command entrusted to Barclay. But as Barclay did not inspire confidence his power was limited. The armies were divided, there was no unity of command, and Barclay was unpopular; but from this confusion, division, and the unpopularity of the foreign commander in chief, there resulted on the one hand indecision and the avoidance of a battle (which we could not have refrained from had the armies been united and had someone else, instead of Barclay, been in command) and on the other an ever-increasing indignation against the foreigners and an increase in patriotic zeal.

At last the Emperor left the army, and as the most convenient and indeed the only pretext for his departure it was decided that it was necessary for him to inspire the people in the capitals and arouse the nation in general to a patriotic war. And by this visit of the Emperor to Moscow the strength of the Russian army was trebled.

He left in order not to obstruct the commander in chief's undivided control of the army, and hoping that more decisive action would then be taken, but the command of the armies became still more confused and enfeebled. Bennigsen, the Tsarévich, and a swarm of adjutants general remained with the army to keep the commander in chief under observation and arouse his energy, and Barclay, feeling less free than ever under the observation of all these "eyes of the Emperor," became still more cautious of undertaking any decisive action and avoided giving battle.

Barclay stood for caution. The Tsarévich hinted at treachery and demanded a general engagement. Lubomírski, Bronnítski, Wlocki, and the others of that group stirred up so much trouble that Barclay, under

pretext of sending papers to the Emperor, dispatched these Polish adjutants general to Petersburg and plunged into an open struggle with Bennigsen and the Tsarévich.

At Smolénsk the armies at last reunited, much as Bagratión disliked it.

Bagratión drove up in a carriage to the house occupied by Barclay. Barclay donned his sash and came out to meet and report to his senior officer Bagratión.

Despite his seniority in rank Bagratión, in this contest of magnanimity, took his orders from Barclay, but, having submitted, agreed with him less than ever. By the Emperor's orders Bagratión reported direct to him. He wrote to Arakchéev, the Emperor's confidant: "It must be as my sovereign pleases, but I cannot work with the Minister (meaning Barclay). For God's sake send me somewhere else if only in command of a regiment. I cannot stand it here. Headquarters are so full of Germans that a Russian cannot exist and there is no sense in anything. I thought I was really serving my sovereign and the Fatherland, but it turns out that I am serving Barclay. I confess I do not want to."

The swarm of Bronnítskis and Wintzingerodes and their like still further embittered the relations between the commanders in chief, and even less unity resulted. Preparations were made to fight the French before Smolénsk. A general was sent to survey the position. This general, hating Barclay, rode to visit a friend of his own, a corps commander, and, having spent the day with him, returned to Barclay and condemned, as unsuitable from every point of view, the battleground he had not seen.

While disputes and intrigues were going on about the future field of battle, and while we were looking for the French—having lost touch with them—the French stumbled upon Nevérovski's division and reached the walls of Smolénsk.

It was necessary to fight an unexpected battle at Smolénsk to save our lines of communication. The battle was fought and thousands were killed on both sides.

Smolénsk was abandoned contrary to the wishes of the Emperor and of the whole people. But Smolénsk was burned by its own inhabitants who had been misled by their governor. And these ruined inhabitants, setting an example to other Russians, went to Moscow thinking only of their own losses but kindling hatred of the foe. Napoleon advanced farther and we retired, thus arriving at the very result which caused his destruction.