

CHAPTER II

The famous flank movement merely consisted in this: after the advance of the French had ceased, the Russian army, which had been continually retreating straight back from the invaders, deviated from that direct course and, not finding itself pursued, was naturally drawn toward the district where supplies were abundant.

If instead of imagining to ourselves commanders of genius leading the Russian army, we picture that army without any leaders, it could not have done anything but make a return movement toward Moscow, describing an arc in the direction where most provisions were to be found and where the country was richest.

That movement from the Nízхни to the Ryazán, Túla, and Kalúga roads was so natural that even the Russian marauders moved in that direction, and demands were sent from Petersburg for Kutúzov to take his army that way. At Tarútino Kutúzov received what was almost a reprimand from the Emperor for having moved his army along the Ryazán road, and the Emperor's letter indicated to him the very position he had already occupied near Kalúga.

Having rolled like a ball in the direction of the impetus given by the whole campaign and by the battle of Borodinó, the Russian army—when the strength of that impetus was exhausted and no fresh push was received—assumed the position natural to it.

Kutúzov's merit lay, not in any strategic maneuver of genius, as it is called, but in the fact that he alone understood the significance of what had happened. He alone then understood the meaning of the French army's inactivity, he alone continued to assert that the battle of Borodinó had been a victory, he alone—who as commander in chief might have been expected to be eager to attack—employed his whole strength to restrain the Russian army from useless engagements.

The beast wounded at Borodinó was lying where the fleeing hunter had left him; but whether he was still alive, whether he was strong and merely lying low, the hunter did not know. Suddenly the beast was heard to moan.

The moan of that wounded beast (the French army) which betrayed its calamitous condition was the sending of Lauriston to Kutúzov's camp with overtures for peace.

Napoleon, with his usual assurance that whatever entered his head was right, wrote to Kutúzov the first words that occurred to him, though they were meaningless.

MONSIEUR LE PRINCE KOUTOUZOV: I am sending one of my adjutants-general to discuss several interesting questions with you. I beg your Highness to credit what he says to you, especially when he expresses the sentiment of esteem and special regard I have long entertained for your

person. This letter having no other object, I pray God, monsieur le prince Koutouzov, to keep you in His holy and gracious protection!

NAPOLEON

MOSCOW, OCTOBER 30, 1812

Kutúzov replied: "I should be cursed by posterity were I looked on as the initiator of a settlement of any sort. Such is the present spirit of my nation." But he continued to exert all his powers to restrain his troops from attacking.

During the month that the French troops were pillaging in Moscow and the Russian troops were quietly encamped at Tarútino, a change had taken place in the relative strength of the two armies—both in spirit and in number—as a result of which the superiority had passed to the Russian side. Though the condition and numbers of the French army were unknown to the Russians, as soon as that change occurred the need of attacking at once showed itself by countless signs. These signs were: Lauriston's mission; the abundance of provisions at Tarútino; the reports coming in from all sides of the inactivity and disorder of the French; the flow of recruits to our regiments; the fine weather; the long rest the Russian soldiers had enjoyed, and the impatience to do what they had been assembled for, which usually shows itself in an army that has been resting; curiosity as to what the French army, so long lost sight of, was doing; the boldness with which our outposts now scouted close up to the French stationed at Tarútino; the news of easy successes gained by peasants and guerrilla troops over the French, the envy aroused by this; the desire for revenge that lay in the heart of every Russian as long as the French were in Moscow, and (above all) a dim consciousness in every soldier's mind that the relative strength of the armies had changed and that the advantage was now on our side. There was a substantial change in the relative strength, and an advance had become inevitable. And at once, as a clock begins to strike and chime as soon as the minute hand has completed a full circle, this change was shown by an increased activity, whirring, and chiming in the higher spheres.