

CHAPTER VII

Meanwhile another column was to have attacked the French from the front, but Kutúzov accompanied that column. He well knew that nothing but confusion would come of this battle undertaken against his will, and as far as was in his power held the troops back. He did not advance.

He rode silently on his small gray horse, indolently answering suggestions that they should attack.

“The word attack is always on your tongue, but you don’t see that we are unable to execute complicated maneuvers,” said he to Milorádovich who asked permission to advance.

“We couldn’t take Murat prisoner this morning or get to the place in time, and nothing can be done now!” he replied to someone else.

When Kutúzov was informed that at the French rear—where according to the reports of the Cossacks there had previously been nobody—there were now two battalions of Poles, he gave a sidelong glance at Ermólov who was behind him and to whom he had not spoken since the previous day.

“You see! They are asking to attack and making plans of all kinds, but as soon as one gets to business nothing is ready, and the enemy, forewarned, takes measures accordingly.”

Ermólov screwed up his eyes and smiled faintly on hearing these words. He understood that for him the storm had blown over, and that Kutúzov would content himself with that hint.

“He’s having a little fun at my expense,” said Ermólov softly, nudging with his knee Raévski who was at his side.

Soon after this, Ermólov moved up to Kutúzov and respectfully remarked:

“It is not too late yet, your Highness—the enemy has not gone away—if you were to order an attack! If not, the Guards will not so much as see a little smoke.”

Kutúzov did not reply, but when they reported to him that Murat’s troops were in retreat he ordered an advance, though at every hundred paces he halted for three quarters of an hour.

The whole battle consisted in what Orlóv-Denísov’s Cossacks had done: the rest of the army merely lost some hundreds of men uselessly.

In consequence of this battle Kutúzov received a diamond decoration, and Bennigsen some diamonds and a hundred thousand rubles, others also received pleasant recognitions corresponding to their various grades, and following the battle fresh changes were made in the staff.

“That’s how everything is done with us, all topsy-turvy!” said the Russian officers and generals after the Tarútino battle, letting it be

understood that some fool there is doing things all wrong but that we ourselves should not have done so, just as people speak today. But people who talk like that either do not know what they are talking about or deliberately deceive themselves. No battle—Tarútino, Borodinó, or Austerlitz—takes place as those who planned it anticipated. That is an essential condition.

A countless number of free forces (for nowhere is man freer than during a battle, where it is a question of life and death) influence the course taken by the fight, and that course never can be known in advance and never coincides with the direction of any one force.

If many simultaneously and variously directed forces act on a given body, the direction of its motion cannot coincide with any one of those forces, but will always be a mean—what in mechanics is represented by the diagonal of a parallelogram of forces.

If in the descriptions given by historians, especially French ones, we find their wars and battles carried out in accordance with previously formed plans, the only conclusion to be drawn is that those descriptions are false.

The battle of Tarútino obviously did not attain the aim Toll had in view—to lead the troops into action in the order prescribed by the dispositions; nor that which Count Orlóv-Denísov may have had in view—to take Murat prisoner; nor the result of immediately destroying the whole corps, which Bennigsen and others may have had in view; nor the aim of the officer who wished to go into action to distinguish himself; nor that of the Cossack who wanted more booty than he got, and so on. But if the aim of the battle was what actually resulted and what all the Russians of that day desired—to drive the French out of Russia and destroy their army—it is quite clear that the battle of Tarútino, just because of its incongruities, was exactly what was wanted at that stage of the campaign. It would be difficult and even impossible to imagine any result more opportune than the actual outcome of this battle. With a minimum of effort and insignificant losses, despite the greatest confusion, the most important results of the whole campaign were attained: the transition from retreat to advance, an exposure of the weakness of the French, and the administration of that shock which Napoleon's army had only awaited to begin its flight.