CHAPTER X

The French army melted away at the uniform rate of a mathematical progression; and that crossing of the Berëzina about which so much has been written was only one intermediate stage in its destruction, and not at all the decisive episode of the campaign. If so much has been and still is written about the Berëzina, on the French side this is only because at the broken bridge across that river the calamities their army had been previously enduring were suddenly concentrated at one moment into a tragic spectacle that remained in every memory, and on the Russian side merely because in Petersburg—far from the seat of war—a plan (again one of Pfuel's) had been devised to catch Napoleon in a strategic trap at the Berëzina River. Everyone assured himself that all would happen according to plan, and therefore insisted that it was just the crossing of the Berëzina that destroyed the French army. In reality the results of the crossing were much less disastrous to the French—in guns and men lost—than Krásnoe had been, as the figures show.

The sole importance of the crossing of the Berëzina lies in the fact that it plainly and indubitably proved the fallacy of all the plans for cutting off the enemy's retreat and the soundness of the only possible line of action—the one Kutúzov and the general mass of the army demanded—namely, simply to follow the enemy up. The French crowd fled at a continually increasing speed and all its energy was directed to reaching its goal. It fled like a wounded animal and it was impossible to block its path. This was shown not so much by the arrangements it made for crossing as by what took place at the bridges. When the bridges broke down, unarmed soldiers, people from Moscow and women with children who were with the French transport, all—carried on by vis inertiæ—pressed forward into boats and into the ice-covered water and did not surrender.

That impulse was reasonable. The condition of fugitives and of pursuers was equally bad. As long as they remained with their own people each might hope for help from his fellows and the definite place he held among them. But those who surrendered, while remaining in the same pitiful plight, would be on a lower level to claim a share in the necessities of life. The French did not need to be informed of the fact that half the prisoners—with whom the Russians did not know what to do—perished of cold and hunger despite their captors' desire to save them; they felt that it could not be otherwise. The most compassionate Russian commanders, those favorable to the French—and even the Frenchmen in the Russian service—could do nothing for the prisoners. The French perished from the conditions to which the Russian army was itself exposed. It was impossible to take bread and clothes from our hungry and indispensable soldiers to give to the French who, though not harmful, or hated, or guilty, were simply unnecessary. Some Russians even did that, but they were exceptions.

Certain destruction lay behind the French but in front there was hope. Their ships had been burned, there was no salvation save in collective flight, and on that the whole strength of the French was concentrated.

The farther they fled the more wretched became the plight of the remnant, especially after the Berëzina, on which (in consequence of the Petersburg plan) special hopes had been placed by the Russians, and the keener grew the passions of the Russian commanders, who blamed one another and Kutúzov most of all. Anticipation that the failure of the Petersburg Berëzina plan would be attributed to Kutúzov led to dissatisfaction, contempt, and ridicule, more and more strongly expressed. The ridicule and contempt were of course expressed in a respectful form, making it impossible for him to ask wherein he was to blame. They did not talk seriously to him; when reporting to him or asking for his sanction they appeared to be fulfilling a regrettable formality, but they winked behind his back and tried to mislead him at every turn.

Because they could not understand him all these people assumed that it was useless to talk to the old man; that he would never grasp the profundity of their plans, that he would answer with his phrases (which they thought were mere phrases) about a "golden bridge," about the impossibility of crossing the frontier with a crowd of tatterdemalions, and so forth. They had heard all that before. And all he said—that it was necessary to await provisions, or that the men had no boots—was so simple, while what they proposed was so complicated and clever, that it was evident that he was old and stupid and that they, though not in power, were commanders of genius.

After the junction with the army of the brilliant admiral and Petersburg hero Wittgenstein, this mood and the gossip of the staff reached their maximum. Kutúzov saw this and merely sighed and shrugged his shoulders. Only once, after the affair of the Berëzina, did he get angry and write to Bennigsen (who reported separately to the Emperor) the following letter:

"On account of your spells of ill health, will your excellency please be so good as to set off for Kalúga on receipt of this, and there await further commands and appointments from His Imperial Majesty."

But after Bennigsen's departure, the Grand Duke Tsarévich Constantine Pávlovich joined the army. He had taken part in the beginning of the campaign but had subsequently been removed from the army by Kutúzov. Now having come to the army, he informed Kutúzov of the Emperor's displeasure at the poor success of our forces and the slowness of their advance. The Emperor intended to join the army personally in a few days' time.

The old man, experienced in court as well as in military affairs—this same Kutúzov who in August had been chosen commander in chief against the sovereign's wishes and who had removed the Grand Duke and heir-apparent from the army—who on his own authority and contrary to the Emperor's will had decided on the abandonment of Moscow, now realized at once that his day was over, that his part was played, and that the power he was supposed to hold was no longer his. And he understood this not merely from the attitude of the court. He saw on the one hand that the military business in which he had played his part was ended and felt that his mission was accomplished; and at the same time he began to

be conscious of the physical weariness of his aged body and of the necessity of physical rest.

On the twenty-ninth of November Kutúzov entered Vílna—his "dear Vílna" as he called it. Twice during his career Kutúzov had been governor of Vílna. In that wealthy town, which had not been injured, he found old friends and associations, besides the comforts of life of which he had so long been deprived. And he suddenly turned from the cares of army and state and, as far as the passions that seethed around him allowed, immersed himself in the quiet life to which he had formerly been accustomed, as if all that was taking place and all that had still to be done in the realm of history did not concern him at all.

Chichagóv, one of the most zealous "cutters-off" and "breakers-up," who had first wanted to effect a diversion in Greece and then in Warsaw but never wished to go where he was sent: Chichagóv, noted for the boldness with which he spoke to the Emperor, and who considered Kutúzov to be under an obligation to him because when he was sent to make peace with Turkey in 1811 independently of Kutúzov, and found that peace had already been concluded, he admitted to the Emperor that the merit of securing that peace was really Kutúzov's; this Chichagóv was the first to meet Kutúzov at the castle where the latter was to stay. In undress naval uniform, with a dirk, and holding his cap under his arm, he handed Kutúzov a garrison report and the keys of the town. The contemptuously respectful attitude of the younger men to the old man in his dotage was expressed in the highest degree by the behavior of Chichagóv, who knew of the accusations that were being directed against Kutúzov.

When speaking to Chichagóv, Kutúzov incidentally mentioned that the vehicles packed with china that had been captured from him at Borísov had been recovered and would be restored to him.

"You mean to imply that I have nothing to eat out of.... On the contrary, I can supply you with everything even if you want to give dinner parties," warmly replied Chichagóv, who tried by every word he spoke to prove his own rectitude and therefore imagined Kutúzov to be animated by the same desire.

Kutúzov, shrugging his shoulders, replied with his subtle penetrating smile: "I meant merely to say what I said."

Contrary to the Emperor's wish Kutúzov detained the greater part of the army at Vílna. Those about him said that he became extraordinarily slack and physically feeble during his stay in that town. He attended to army affairs reluctantly, left everything to his generals, and while awaiting the Emperor's arrival led a dissipated life.

Having left Petersburg on the seventh of December with his suite—Count Tolstóy, Prince Volkónski, Arakchéev, and others—the Emperor reached Vílna on the eleventh, and in his traveling sleigh drove straight to the castle. In spite of the severe frost some hundred generals and staff officers in full parade uniform stood in front of the castle, as well as a guard of honor of the Semënov regiment.

A courier who galloped to the castle in advance, in a troyka with three foam-flecked horses, shouted “Coming!” and Konovnítsyn rushed into the vestibule to inform Kutúzov, who was waiting in the hall porter’s little lodge.

A minute later the old man’s large stout figure in full-dress uniform, his chest covered with orders and a scarf drawn round his stomach, waddled out into the porch. He put on his hat with its peaks to the sides and, holding his gloves in his hand and walking with an effort sideways down the steps to the level of the street, took in his hand the report he had prepared for the Emperor.

There was running to and fro and whispering; another troyka flew furiously up, and then all eyes were turned on an approaching sleigh in which the figures of the Emperor and Volkónski could already be descried.

From the habit of fifty years all this had a physically agitating effect on the old general. He carefully and hastily felt himself all over, readjusted his hat, and pulling himself together drew himself up and, at the very moment when the Emperor, having alighted from the sleigh, lifted his eyes to him, handed him the report and began speaking in his smooth, ingratiating voice.

The Emperor with a rapid glance scanned Kutúzov from head to foot, frowned for an instant, but immediately mastering himself went up to the old man, extended his arms and embraced him. And this embrace too, owing to a long-standing impression related to his innermost feelings, had its usual effect on Kutúzov and he gave a sob.

The Emperor greeted the officers and the Semënov guard, and again pressing the old man’s hand went with him into the castle.

When alone with the field marshal the Emperor expressed his dissatisfaction at the slowness of the pursuit and at the mistakes made at Krásnoe and the Berëzina, and informed him of his intentions for a future campaign abroad. Kutúzov made no rejoinder or remark. The same submissive, expressionless look with which he had listened to the Emperor’s commands on the field of Austerlitz seven years before settled on his face now.

When Kutúzov came out of the study and with lowered head was crossing the ballroom with his heavy waddling gait, he was arrested by someone’s voice saying:

“Your Serene Highness!”

Kutúzov raised his head and looked for a long while into the eyes of Count Tolstóy, who stood before him holding a silver salver on which lay a small object. Kutúzov seemed not to understand what was expected of him.

Suddenly he seemed to remember; a scarcely perceptible smile flashed across his puffy face, and bowing low and respectfully he took the

object that lay on the salver. It was the Order of St. George of the First Class.