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978-1-108-04398-4 - History of the Expedition to Russia, Undertaken by the Emperor Napoleon, in the Year 1812: Volume 1

Phillippe-Paul and Comte De Ségur

Excerpt

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**H I S T O R Y**  
OF  
**NAPOLEON'S EXPEDITION**  
TO  
**RUSSIA.**  
=====  
**BOOK I.**  
—  
**CHAP. I.**

EVER since 1807, when the space between the Rhine and the Niemen had been overrun, the two great empires of which these rivers were the boundaries had become rivals. By his concessions at Tilsit, at the expense of Prussia, Sweden, and Turkey, Napoleon had only satisfied Alexander. That treaty was the result of the defeat of Russia, and the date of her submission to the continental system. Among the Russians, it was regarded by some as attacking their honour; and by all it was felt to be ruinous to their interests.

By the continental system Napoleon had declared eternal war against the English; to that system he attached his honour, his political existence, and that of the nation under his sway. That

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system banished from the Continent all merchandise which was English, or had paid duty in any shape to England. He could not succeed in establishing it but by the unanimous consent of the continental nations, and that consent could not be hoped for but under a single and universal dominion.

France had alienated the nations of Europe from her by her conquests, and the monarchs by her revolution, and her new dynasty. Henceforward she could no longer look forward to have either friends or rivals, but merely subjects; for the first would have been false, and the second implacable; it followed that all must be subject to her, or she to all.

With feelings of this kind, her leader, influenced by his position and urged on by his enterprising character, filled his imagination with the vast project of becoming the sole master of Europe, by overwhelming Russia, and wresting Poland from her dominion. He had so much difficulty in concealing this project, that hints of it began to escape him in all directions. The immense preparations which so distant an enterprise required, the enormous quantities of provisions and ammunition collecting, the noise of arms, of carriages, and the march of such numbers of soldiers—the universal movement, the majestic and terrible course of all the forces of the West against the East—every thing announced to Europe that her two greatest colossuses were about to measure their strength with each other.

But, to get within reach of Russia, it was necessary to go beyond Austria, to cross Prussia, and to

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march between Sweden and Turkey; an offensive alliance with these four powers was therefore indispensable. Austria was as much subject to the influence of Napoleon as Prussia was to his arms: he had only to declare his intentions; Austria immediately entered into his plans with warmth, and Prussia was easily prevailed on to join him.

Austria, however, did not act blindly. Situated between the two great colossuses of the North and the West, she was not displeased to see them at war: she looked to their mutually weakening each other, and to the increase of her own strength by their exhaustion. On the 14th of March 1812, she promised France 30,000 men; but she prepared prudent secret instructions for them. She obtained a vague promise of an increase of territory, as an indemnity for her share of the expenses of the war, and the possession of Gallicia was guaranteed to her. She admitted, however, the future possibility of a cession of part of that province to the kingdom of Poland; but in exchange for that she would have received the Illyrian provinces. The sixth article of the secret treaty establishes that fact.

The success of the war, therefore, in no degree depended on the cession of Gallicia, or the difficulties arising from the Austrian jealousy of that possession. Napoleon, consequently, might on his entrance into Wilna, have publicly proclaimed the liberation of the whole of Poland, instead of betraying the expectations of her people, astonishing and rendering them indifferent by expressions of wavering import.

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This, however, was one of those prominent points which in politics as well as in war are decisive, with which every thing is connected, and to which we ought to hold fast. But whether it was that Napoleon reckoned too much on the ascendancy of his genius, or the strength of his army, and the weakness of Alexander; or that, considering what he left behind him, he felt it too dangerous to carry on a war so distant slowly and methodically; or whether, as we shall presently be told by himself, from doubts of the success of his undertaking; certain it is, that he either neglected, or could not yet determine to proclaim the liberation of that country whose freedom he had come to restore.

And yet he had sent an ambassador to her Diet. When this inconsistency was remarked to him, he replied, that "that nomination was an act of war, which only bound him during the war, while by his words he would be bound both in war and peace." Thus it was, that he made no other reply to the enthusiasm of the Lithuanians than evasive expressions, at the very time he was following up his attack on Alexander to the very capital of his empire.

He even neglected to clear the southern Polish provinces of the feeble hostile armies which kept the patriotism of their inhabitants in check, and to secure, by strongly organizing their insurrection, a solid basis of operation. Accustomed to short methods, and to rapid attacks, he wished to imitate himself, in spite of the difference of places and circumstances; for such is the weakness of man, that

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he is always led by imitation, either of others, or of himself, which in the latter case, that of a great man, is habit; for habit is nothing more than the imitation of one's self. So true it is, that by their strongest side these extraordinary men are undone!

The one in question committed himself to the fortune of battles. He prepared an army of six hundred and fifty thousand men, and he fancied that that was doing sufficient to secure victory, from which he expected every thing. Instead of sacrificing every thing to obtain victory, it was by that he looked to obtain every thing; he made use of it as a *means*, when it ought to have been his *end*. In this manner he made it too necessary; it was already rather too much so. But he confided so much of futurity to it, he overloaded it with so much responsibility, that it became urgent and indispensable to him. Hence his precipitation to get within reach of it, in order to extricate himself from so critical a position.

But we must not be too hasty in condemning a genius so great and universal; we shall shortly hear from himself by what urgent necessity he was hurried on; and even admitting that the rapidity of his expedition was only equalled by its rashness, success would have probably crowned it, if the premature weakening of his health had left the physical constitution of this great man all the vigour of his mind.

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## CHAP. II.

As to Prussia, of which Napoleon was completely master, it is not known whether it was from his uncertainty as to the fate which he reserved for her, or as to the period at which he should commence the war, that he refused, in 1811, to contract the alliance which she herself proposed to him, and of which he dictated the conditions in 1812.

His aversion to Frederick William was remarkable. Napoleon had been frequently heard to speak reproachfully of the cabinet of Prussia for its treaties with the French republic. He said, "It was a desertion of the cause of kings; that the negociations of the court of Berlin with the Directory displayed a timid, selfish, and ignoble policy, which sacrificed its dignity, and the general cause of monarchs, to petty aggrandizements." Whenever he followed with his finger the traces of the Prussian frontiers upon the map, he seemed to be angry at seeing them still so extensive, and exclaimed, "Is it possible that I have left this man so large a territory?"

This dislike to a mild and pacific monarch was surprising. As there is nothing in the character of Napoleon unworthy of historical remembrance, it is worth while to examine the cause of it. Some persons trace back the origin of it to the refusal which he experienced, when First Consul, from Louis XVIII. of the propositions which he made to

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him through the medium of the king of Prussia ; and they suppose that Napoleon laid the blame of this refusal upon the mediator. Others attribute it to the seizure of Rumbold, the English agent at Hamburgh, by the orders of Napoleon, and to his being compelled to give him up by Frederick, as protector of the neutrality of the north of Germany. Before that time Frederick and Napoleon had carried on a secret correspondence, which was of so intimate a nature, that they used to confide to each other even the details of their household ; that circumstance put an end to it.

At the beginning of 1805, however, Russia, Austria, and England, made ineffectual attempts to engage Frederick in their third coalition against France. The court of Berlin, the queen, the princes, the minister Hardenberg, and all the young Prussian military, excited by the ardour of displaying the inheritance of glory which had been left them by the great Frederick, or by the wish of blotting out the disgrace of the campaign of 1792, entered heartily into the views of the allied powers ; but the pacific policy of the king, and of his minister Haugwitz, resisted them, until the violation of the Prussian territory, near Anspach, by the march of a corps of French troops, exasperated the passions of the Prussians to such a degree, that their cry for immediate war prevailed.

Alexander was then in Poland ; he was invited to Potsdam, and repaired thither immediately ; and on the third of November, 1805, he engaged

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Frederick in the third coalition. The Prussian army was immediately withdrawn from the Russian frontiers, and M. de Haugwitz repaired to Brünn to threaten Napoleon. But the battle of Austerlitz shut his mouth; and within a fortnight after, the wily minister, having quickly turned round to the side of the conqueror, signed with him the participation of the fruits of the victory.

Napoleon, however, dissembled his displeasure; for he had his army to reorganize, to give the grand duchy of Berg to Murat, his brother-in-law, Neufchatel to Berthier, to conquer Naples for his brother Joseph, to mediatize Switzerland, to dissolve the Germanic body, and to create the Rhenish confederation, of which he declared himself protector; to change the republic of Holland into a kingdom, and to give it to his brother Louis; these were the reasons which induced him, on the 15th of December, to cede Hanover to Prussia, in exchange for Anspach, Cleves, and Neufchatel.

The possession of Hanover at first tempted Frederick, but when the treaty was to be signed he appeared to feel ashamed, and to hesitate; he wished only to accept it by halves, and to retain it merely as a deposit. Napoleon had no idea of such timid policy. "What," said he, "does this monarch neither dare to make peace nor war? Does he prefer the English to me? Is there another coalition preparing? Does he despise my alliance?" Indignant at the idea, by a fresh treaty, on the 8th of March, 1806, he compelled Frederick



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to declare war against England, to take possession of Hanover, and to admit French garrisons into *Wesel* and *Hameln*.

The king of Prussia alone submitted ; his court and his subjects were exasperated ; they reproached him with allowing himself to be vanquished without attempting to fight ; and elevating themselves on the remembrance of their past glory, they fancied that for them alone was reserved the honour of triumphing over the conqueror of Europe. In their impatience they insulted the minister of Napoleon ; they sharpened their swords on the threshold of his gate. Napoleon himself they loaded with abuse. Even the queen, so distinguished by her graces and attractions, put on a warlike attitude. Their princes, one of them particularly (whose carriage and features, spirit and intrepidity, seemed to promise them a hero), offered to be their leaders. A chivalrous ardour and fury animated the minds of all.

It is asserted, that at the same time there were persons, either treacherous or deceived, who persuaded Frederick that Napoleon was obliged to show himself pacific, that that warrior was averse to war ; and added, that he was perfidiously treating for peace with England, on the terms of restoring Hanover, which he was to take back from Prussia. Drawn in at last by the general feeling, the king allowed all their passions to burst forth. His army advanced, and threatened Napoleon ; fifteen days afterwards he had neither army nor kingdom ; he

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fled by himself, and Napoleon dated from Berlin his decrees against England.

Humbled and conquered as Prussia thus was, it was impossible for Napoleon to abandon his hold of her; she would have immediately rallied, under the cannon of the Russians. Finding it impossible to gain her to his interests like Saxony, by a great act of generosity, the next plan was to divide her; and yet, either from compassion, or the effect of Alexander's presence, he could not resolve to dismember her. This was a mistaken policy, like most of those where we stop half-way, and Napoleon was not long before he became sensible of it. When he exclaimed, therefore, "Is it possible that I have left this man so large a territory?" it is probable that he did not forgive Prussia the protection of Alexander; he hated her, because he felt that she hated him.

In fact, the sparks of a jealous and impatient hatred were kindled in the youth of Prussia, which was fomented by a system of education, national, liberal, and mystical. It was among them that a formidable power arose in opposition to that of Napoleon; it included all whom his victories had humbled or offended; it had all the strength of the weak and the oppressed, the law of nature, mystery, fanaticism, and revenge! Wanting support on earth, it looked up for aid to Heaven, and its moral forces were wholly out of the reach of the material power of Napoleon. Animated by the devoted and indefatigable spirit of an ardent