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978-1-108-04399-1 - History of the Expedition to Russia, Undertaken by the Emperor Napoleon, in the Year 1812: Volume 2

Phillippe-Paul and Comte De Ségur

Excerpt

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**H I S T O R Y**  
OF  
**N A P O L E O N ' S   E X P E D I T I O N**  
TO  
**R U S S I A .**

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**BOOK VIII.**

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**CHAP. I.**

**T**HE Emperor Alexander, surprised at Wilna amidst his preparations for defence, fled with his disunited army, which he was unable to rally till at the distance of a hundred leagues from that city, between Witepsk and Smolensk. That Prince, hurried along in the precipitate retreat of Barclay, sought refuge at Drissa, in a camp injudiciously chosen and intrenched at great expense, of such length and so narrow that it served only to indicate to the enemy the intention of his manœuvres.

Alexander, however, encouraged by the sight of this camp and of the Duna, had taken breath behind that river. It was there that he first consented to receive an English agent, so important did he deem it to appear till that moment faithful to his engagements with France. Whether he acted

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with real good faith, or merely made a show of doing so, we know not : so much is certain that at Paris, after his success, he affirmed, on his honour, to Count Daru, that, “ notwithstanding the accusations of Napoleon, this was his first infraction of the treaty of Tilsit.”

At the same time he caused Barclay to issue addresses, designed to corrupt the French and their allies, similar to those which had so irritated Napoleon at Klubokoé;—attempts which the French regarded as contemptible, and the Germans as unseasonable.

In other respects, the Emperor had given his enemies but a mean opinion of his military talents : this opinion was founded on his having neglected the Beresina, the only natural line of defence of Lithuania ; on his eccentric retreat towards the north when the relics of his army were fleeing southward ; and lastly on his ukase relative to recruiting, dated Drissa, which assigned to the recruits, for their places of rendezvous, several towns that were almost immediately occupied by the French. His departure from the army, as soon as it began to fight, was also a subject of remark.

As to his political measures in his new and in his old provinces, and his proclamations from Pologzk to his army, to Moscow, to his great nation, it was admitted that they were singularly adapted to persons and places. It appears, in fact, that in the political means which he employed there was a very striking gradation of energy.

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In the recently acquired portion of Lithuania, houses, inhabitants, crops, in short every thing, had been spared either from hurry or designedly. The most powerful of the nobles had alone been carried off: their defection might have set too dangerous an example, and had they still further committed themselves, their return in the sequel would have been more difficult; besides, they were hostages.

In the provinces of Lithuania which had been of old incorporated with the empire, where a mild administration, favours judiciously bestowed, and a longer habit of subjection, had extinguished the recollection of independence, the men were hurried away with all that they could carry off. Still it was not deemed expedient to require of a different religion and a nascent patriotism the destruction of property: a levy of five men only out of every five hundred males was ordered.

But in Old Russia, where religion, superstition, ignorance, patriotism, all went hand in hand with the government, not only had the inhabitants been obliged to retreat with the army, but every thing that could not be removed had been destroyed. Those who were not destined to recruit the regulars, joined the militia or the cossacks.

The interior of the empire being then threatened, it was for Moscow to set an example. That capital, justly denominated by its poets, “*Moscow with gilded cupolas*,” was a vast and motley assemblage of two hundred and ninety-five churches, and fifteen hundred mansions, with their gardens

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and dependencies. These palaces of brick, and their parks, intermixed with neat houses of wood and even thatched cottages, were spread over several square leagues of irregular ground: they were grouped round a lofty, triangular fortress; the vast double inclosure of which, half a league in circuit, contained, the one, several palaces, some churches, and rocky and uncultivated spots; the other, a prodigious bazaar, the town of the merchants and shopkeepers, where was displayed the collected wealth of the four quarters of the globe.

These edifices, these palaces, nay, the very shops themselves, were all covered with polished and painted iron: the churches, each surmounted by a terrace and several steeples, terminating in golden balls, then the crescent, and lastly the cross, reminded the spectator of the history of this nation: it was Asia and its religion, at first victorious, subsequently vanquished, and finally the crescent of Mahomet subjected by the cross of Christ.

A single ray of sun-shine caused this splendid city to glisten with a thousand varied colours. At sight of it the traveller paused, delighted and astonished. It reminded him of the prodigies with which the oriental poets had amused his childhood. On entering it, a nearer view served but to heighten his astonishment: he recognized the nobles by the manners, the habits, and the different languages of modern Europe; and by the rich and light elegance of their dress. He beheld,

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with surprise, the luxury and the Asiatic form of those of the tradesmen; the Grecian costumes of the common people, and their long beards. He was struck by the same variety in the edifices: and yet all this was tinged with a local and sometimes harsh colour, such as befits the country of which Moscow was the ancient capital.

When, lastly, he observed the grandeur and magnificence of so many palaces, the wealth which they displayed, the luxury of the equipages, the multitude of slaves and servants, the splendour of those gorgeous spectacles, the noise of those sumptuous festivities, entertainments, and rejoicings, which incessantly resounded within its walls, he fancied himself transported into a city of kings, into an assemblage of sovereigns, who had brought with them their manners, customs, and attendants from all parts of the world.

They were, nevertheless, only subjects; but opulent and powerful subjects: grandees, vain of their ancient nobility, strong in their collected numbers, and in the general ties of consanguinity contracted during the seven centuries which that capital had existed. They were landed proprietors, proud of their existence amidst their vast possessions; for almost the whole territory of the government of Moscow belongs to them, and they there reign over a million of serfs. Finally, they were nobles resting, with a patriotic and religious pride, upon “the cradle and the tomb of their nobility”—for such is the appellation which they give to Moscow.

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It seems right, in fact, that here the nobles of the most illustrious families should be born and educated; that hence they should launch into the career of honours and glory; and lastly, that hither, when satisfied, discontented, or undeceived, they should bring their disgust or their resentment to pour it forth; their reputation, in order to enjoy it, to exercise its influence on the young nobility; and to recruit, at a distance from power, of which they have nothing farther to expect, their pride, which has been too long bowed down near the throne.

Here, their ambition, either satiated or disappointed, has assumed, amidst their own dependents, and as it were beyond the reach of the court, a greater freedom of speech: it is a sort of privilege which time has sanctioned, of which they are tenacious, and which their sovereign respects. They become worse courtiers, but better citizens. Hence the dislike of their princes to visit this vast repository of glory and commerce, this city of nobles whom they have disgraced or disgusted, whose age or reputation places them beyond their power, and to whom they are obliged to show indulgence.

To this city necessity brought Alexander: he repaired thither from Polotzk, preceded by his proclamations, and looked for by the nobility and the mercantile class. His first appearance was amidst the assembled nobility. There every thing was great—the circumstance, the assembly, the speaker, and the resolutions which he inspired.

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His voice betrayed emotion. No sooner had he ceased, than one general, simultaneous, unanimous cry burst from all hearts :—“ Ask what you please, sire! we offer you every thing! take our all!”

One of the nobles then proposed the levy of a militia; and, in order to its formation, the gift of one peasant in twenty-five: but a hundred voices interrupted him, crying, that “ the country required a greater sacrifice; that it was necessary to grant one serf in ten, ready armed, equipped, and supplied with provisions for three months.” This was offering, for the single government of Moscow, eighty thousand men, and a great quantity of stores.

This sacrifice was immediately voted without deliberation—some say with enthusiasm, and that it was executed in like manner, so long as the danger was at hand. Others have attributed the concurrence of this assembly in so urgent a proposition, to submission alone—a sentiment indeed, which, in the presence of absolute power, absorbs every other.

They add, that, on the breaking up of the meeting, the principal nobles were heard to murmur among themselves against the extravagance of such a measure. “ Was the danger then so pressing? Was there not the Russian army, which, as they were told, still numbered four hundred thousand men, to defend them? Why then deprive them of so many peasants! The service of these men would be, it was said, only temporary; but who could ever wish for their return? It was, on

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the contrary, an event to be dreaded. Would these serfs, habituated to the irregularities of war, bring back their former submission? Undoubtedly not: they would return full of new sentiments and new ideas, with which they would infect the villages; they would there propagate a refractory spirit, which would give infinite trouble to the master by spoiling the slave."

Be this as it may, the resolution of that meeting was generous and worthy of so great a nation. The details are of little consequence. We well know that it is the same everywhere; that every thing in the world loses when seen too near; and lastly, that nations ought to be judged by the general mass and by results.

Alexander then addressed the merchants, but more briefly: he ordered that proclamation to be read to them, in which Napoleon was represented as "a perfidious wretch; a Moloch, who, with treachery in his heart and probity on his lips, was striving to sweep Russia from the face of the earth."

It is said that, at these words, the masculine and highly coloured faces of the auditors, to which long beards imparted a look at once antique, majestic, and wild, were inflamed with rage. Their eyes flashed fire; they were seized with a convulsive fury: their stiffened arms, their clenched fists, the gnashing of their teeth, and subdued execrations, expressed its vehemence. The effect was correspondent. Their chief, whom they elect themselves, proved himself worthy of his station:



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he put down his name the first for fifty thousand rubles. It was two-thirds of his fortune, and he paid it the next day.

These merchants are divided into three classes: it was proposed to fix the contribution for each; but one of the assembly, who was included in the lowest class, declared that his patriotism would not brook any limit, and he immediately subscribed a sum far surpassing the proposed standard: the others followed his example more or less closely. Advantage was taken of their first emotions. Every thing was at hand that was requisite to bind them irrevocably while they were yet together, excited by one another, and by the words of their sovereign.

This patriotic donation amounted, it is said, to two millions of rubles. The other governments repeated, like so many echoes, the national cry of Moscow. The Emperor accepted all; but all could not be given immediately: and when, in order to complete his work, he claimed the rest of the promised succours, he was obliged to have recourse to constraint; the danger which had cowed some and inflamed others, having by this time passed off to a distance.

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## CHAP. II.

MEANWHILE Smolensk was soon reduced ; Napoleon at Viazma, and consternation in Moscow. The great battle was not yet lost, and already people began to abandon that capital.

The governor-general, Count Rostopchin, told the women, in his proclamations, that “ he should not detain *them*, as the less fear the less danger there would be ; but that their brothers and husbands must stay, or they would cover themselves with infamy.” He then added encouraging particulars concerning the hostile force, which consisted, according to his statement, of “ one hundred and fifty thousand men, who were reduced to the necessity of feeding on horse-flesh. The Emperor Alexander was about to return to his faithful capital ; eighty-three thousand Russians, both recruits and militia, with eighty pieces of cannon, were marching towards Borodino, to join Kutusof.”

He thus concluded : “ If these forces are not sufficient, I will say to you, ‘ Come, my friends, and inhabitants of Moscow, let us march too ! we will assemble one hundred thousand men : we will take the image of the Blessed Virgin, and one hundred and fifty pieces of cannon, and put an end to the business at once ! ’ ”

It has been remarked as a purely local singularity, that most of these proclamations were in the scriptural style and in poetic prose.