



The French Invasion of Russia and the Battle of Leipzig: The History and Legacy of the Defeats that Forced Napoleon into Exile at Elba

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures

*Includes accounts of the fighting written by soldiers and generals

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French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was not a man made for peacetime. By 1812, he had succeeded in subduing most of his enemies – though in Spain, the British continued to be a perpetual thorn in his flank that drained the Empire of money and troops – but his relationship with Russia, never more than one of mutual suspicion at best, had now grown downright hostile. At the heart of it, aside from the obvious mistrust that two huge superpowers intent on dividing up Europe felt for one another, was Napoleon's Continental blockade. Russia had initially agreed to uphold the blockade in the Treaty of Tilsit, but they had since taken to ignoring it altogether. Napoleon wanted an excuse to teach Russia a lesson, and in early 1812 his spies gave him just that: a preliminary plan for the invasion and annexation of Poland, then under French control.

Napoleon wasted no time attempting to defuse the situation. He increased his Grande Armee to 450,000 fighting men and prepared it for invasion. On July 23rd, 1812, he launched his army across the border, despite the protestations of many of his Marshals. The Russian Campaign had begun, and it would turn out to be Napoleon's biggest blunder. Russia's great strategic depth already had a habit of swallowing armies, a fact many would-be conquerors learned the hard way. Napoleon, exceptional though he was in so many regards, proved that even military genius can do little in the face of the Russian winter and the resilience of its people.

Napoleon's Russian adventure gutted his veteran army, depriving him of the majority of his finest and most loyal soldiers. Those who remained formed the hard core of his new armies, but the Russian fiasco damaged their health and embittered their previously unquestioning loyalty. Napoleon raised vast new armies, but circumstances compelled him to fill the ranks with raw recruits, whose fighting skills did not equal their undoubted bravery and whose dedication to the Napoleonic cause was shaky, and in many cases due solely to coercion. The tough, experienced, faithful veteran found himself outnumbered by unwilling, sketchily trained amateurs.

These factors set the stage for the second setback, which essentially sealed the fate of Napoleon's empire. The four-day Battle of Leipzig in October 1813, romantically but accurately dubbed the "Battle of the Nations," proved the decisive encounter of the War of the Sixth Coalition and essentially determined the course the Napoleonic Wars took from that moment forward. All the belligerents showed awareness that the European conflict's climax was at hand: "There was keen determination in Prussia to exact revenge for the humiliation visited by Napoleon, but enthusiasm for armed struggle that would bring the eviction of the French found enthusiastic response throughout the German states. [...] To minimize his army's exposure and purchase time to rebuild, Napoleon might have stood on the defensive, but he followed his standard strategy

of deciding the campaign with a bold advance to achieve decisive victory in one stroke.” (Tucker, 2011, 302).

The resultant collision was the single largest field action of the Napoleonic Wars, dwarfing Waterloo in size, complexity, and overall importance. The Battle of Leipzig was probably the combat which involved the highest concentration of men on a single extended battlefield on the planet up to that point in history, and would not be exceeded until the vast struggles of the First World War almost precisely a century later.

The French Invasion of Russia and the Battle of Leipzig details the background leading up to the campaign, the fighting, and the aftermath of France’s catastrophic defeat. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Battle of Leipzig like never before.



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