THE GRANDE ARMÉE'S RETREAT AS SEEN FROM THE INTECEPTED SOLDIERS' CORRESPONDENCE

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On September 14, 1812, the Grande Armée[1] entered Moscow. Emperor Napoleon hoped to find here sufficient supplies for his army as well as an opportunity to conclude peace with Emperor Alexander I of Russia. But instead of winter quarters and peace treaty, the French faced a devastating fire that, as the Bulletins proclaimed, consumed three quarters of the city[2]. The Russian emperor, meanwhile, refused to negotiate and Napoleon's envoy was forced to return empty handed from the Russian headquarters. The French stayed in Moscow about five weeks, still hoping that Alexander I would enter into negotiations. Only after Marshal Joachim Murat suffered an unexpected setback near Tarutino on 18 October, Napoleon decided to evacuate Moscow and march westwards, closer to his supply bases and reinforcements. The order of evacuation was issued on 20 October and the last French troops left Moscow just two days later.

By then, the Grande Armée consisted of about 100 000 soldiers; its only cavalry, though, had been ravaged by losses, fatigue and weather. After an indecisive battle at Maloyaroslavets on the 25th, Napoleon was compelled to return to the old and devastated route to Smolensk via Mojaisk, Borodino and Dorogobuzh. By the time his army reached Smolensk in the first week of November, it had lost almost half of its forces as killed, wounded, or captured, and thus, the retreat from Moscow to Smolensk, in effect, was the start of the end for Napoleon's army in Russia.

Numerous memoirs and historical studies describe these events. This article, however, concerns itself with immediate thoughts and feelings of French soldiers as they experienced these events. These can be gleaned from the French correspondence of intercepted by Russian troops. These documents are deposited in several Russian archives[3] and many of them had been published by Sergey Goryanov (Goriainow), the director of Russian State Archives of Foreign Affaires in the early 20th century.[4] For his publication, Goryanov selected letters written by prominent individuals, be it marshals, generals and their relatives. Additional material appeared on the centenary anniversary of the war in 1912, the most noteworthy of these publications being Arthur Chuquet's three-volume *La Guerre de Russie*.[5]

The intercepted correspondence covers mostly the period from the middle of September to the middle of November, that is, from the capture of Moscow to the departure from Smolensk. The Russian flying detachments actively harassed the French communication lines during this period, which explains the increased rate of interception. In fact, only few letters were intercepted in the first couple of months of the war because the Russian armies were in retreat and the Russian flying detachments could not operate as freely behind the enemy lines. Interestingly, the archives contain no letters from November-December

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[2] Bulletin N 21. *Moniteur Universel*. N 281, 7 Octobre, 1812.

[3] Manuscript Collection of Russian State Library (MS RSL), f. 41, d. 165; Russian State Archives of Ancient Documents (RGADA), fond 30, delos 239–243, 245–267, 269.

[4] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes durant la campagne de 1812,* ed. S.E.M. Goriainow (Paris, 1913).

[5] Chuquet A. *1812 La guerre de Russie*. Paris, 1912. Vol. 1-3. This was more popular publication included papers from French Archives. In Russian only several letters were published in *Russkaya Starina* (September 1907).

period which illustrates those dire conditions in the French army after Smolensk when soldiers were more concerned about self-preservation than writing and sending letters.[6] Captured mail was delivered to a special commission (headed by A. Arakcheyev) that translated and reviewed it, sending the most interesting letters directly to Emperor Alexander I.

According to the memoirs of the soldiers of the Grande Armée, both imperial courier service (estafettes) and mail couriers were regularly intercepted throughout September and November; the delivery was also delayed because of the shortage of horses. Thus, General J. Compans informed his wife, "I see that you and your relatives were very worried about me after receiving no letters from me since 7 September. And I can imagine how happy all of you were to receive five letters at once…"[7]

A bivouac of the Grande Armée during the retreat
(from *Le Figaro Illustre*)

In 1805, the imperial courir service was organized while the regulations of 31 August 1809 set up a homogeneous organization to the French military postal service.[8] The mail from the front-line forces was sent through the army postal service, which upon reaching France, passed to *Direction général des postes*. Under the regulations of the 1809, local postal services in the occupied territories could not be used for the delivery of the French correspondence and military postal service had to organize its own offices. Every letter sent through the military postal service was subject to examination by the "cabinet noir" that had authority to stop any message. Censorship was applied equally to everyone and even the members of the Imperial family were no exception; for example, the letter of Queen Hortense to Prince Eugène de Beauharnais was stopped in Vilna.[9]

Because of delays and censorship, many officers and officials of the Grande Armée tried to send their personal letters through the Imperial estafettes, famous for its speedy and timely delivery. Yet, one had to know somebody in the l'Etat Major who could slip a letter into courier bag. Such relations were highly valuable and could not be routinely abused. General Emmanuel Grouchy asked his wife to send only short messages by the estafette and use regular military mail for more extensive letters.[10] To receive a letter, the recipient had to be physically close to the l'Etat Major, otherwise his personal correspondence could be misplaced or lost. That is why Marie-Henri Beyle (Stendhal) complained in his letter that after his new appointment to Smolensk, he would not

[6] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes*, 302.
[7] RGADA F. 30. D. 253. P. 6.
[8] Alain Pigeard, '*Le service de la post à la Grande Armée*' *Tradition magazine,* No. 223 (Juin 2006), 18–19.
[9] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes*, 345–346.
[10] *Ibid.*, 136.

receive any letter since all couriers bypassed the town.[11]

Letters usually made a long journey before reaching the addressee. For example, on 5 November, General Armand Caulaincourt wrote to Marshal Jean Lannes' widow that he had just handed over her letter of 11 September to the aide-de-camp of Marshal Gouvion St. Cyr. So we can imagine that this letter made its way through the estafette from Paris to Caulaincourt in Moscow (usually it took about fifteen days), and then it travelled with him during the retreat from Moscow and it was only in Dorogobuzh that he handed it over to the aide-de-camp of marshal St. Cyrt, who then probably delivered this letter to the addressee.[12]

An officer or army official, who traveled between Russia and France, naturally was asked to carry a batch of letters from his comrades, friends and relatives and to distribute them at the end of his journey. This more personal way of correspondence was not subject to the rigors of the *cabinet noir* but usually involved a much longer delivery time, depending on circumstances in which the courier found himself.

Maintaining contacts with their families was very important and precious for soldiers. It was the only source of information for people back home to learn about their relatives fighting in Russia while the soldiers longed for news from home. Sometimes soldiers, who served far from the l'Etat Major, had to organize special expeditions to retrieve letters from home that had been delivered to the headquarters. Thus, in his letter of 7 November, commissary Marie-Joseph-Quentin Playoult de Bryas, who served in General Louis Partouneaux's 12th Division, mentioned a cavalry escort attached to a courier who was to deliver his letter to his wife to the "grand quartier general" and to inquire about any of her messages that might have been misplaced at the headquarters.[13]

[11] *Ibid.*, 127.
[12] *Ibid.*, 200.
[13] *Ibid.*, 209–210.

The most prevalent topics in these letters were conditions of everyday life, health, food and clothes. Almost every intercepted letter contained information on these topics while details of military operations and fighting were oftentimes missing. Authors might have assumed that such information could be gleaned from official sources, most notably bulletins. Baron de Beaumont was certain that his wife had read about the battle of Borodino and the Moscow fire in the bulletins.[14] But, naturally, there were exceptions as well. The letter of Alphonce de Vergennes, aide de camp to General Doumerc, contained an interesting account of the second battle of Polotsk fought between the forces of St. Cyr and Peter Wittgenstein on 18-20 October. Alphonce de Vergennes told his father that Russians had about 52,000 soldiers while the French marshal gathered only about 20,000.[15] He overstated the Russian losses, claiming some 18,000–20,000 killed and wounded when in reality the Russian casualties amounted to some 8,000.[16] But such exaggeration was customary for the period and Russian officers routinely did it as well.

The battle of Borodino was the decisive event of the campaign and long after it was fought, we still can find mentions about it in French correspondence. Letters usually contained brief description of actions that their authors took part in and listed losses sustained and decorations received. Generals often gave characteristics of their troops. Thus, in early November, General Compans wrote to his wife that his division, in spite of constant fighting, was still full of courage and doing its best; he particularly singled out the 57th Line Regiment and divisional artillery.[17] On the other hand, General Louis Baraguey d'Hilliers was extremely dissatisfied by his division, complaining that his men inexperienced and tired from long and forced marches. In a letter of 4 November, he again grumbled about the quality

[14] *Ibid.*, 102.
[15] Modern scholars believe that St. Cyr had about 16,000–18,000 and Wittgenstein, together with troops of F. Steinheil, had about 49,000. *Otechestvennaya voina 1812 goda: entsiklopediya. e*d. by Viktor Bezotosny (Moscow, 2004), 575–576.
[16] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes*, 196
[17] RGADA, F. 30. D. 253, P. 6-a.

of his troops and expressed hope that when they joined the Grande Armée, his division would be disbanded.[18]

In some case, the French soldiers responded to inquires made by their friends about their relatives who had lived in Russia before the conflict. Thus, Jubinal, an official in Secrétairerie d'Etat, wrote to Couffille, notary in Hautes-Pyrénées, about his uncle Jean Trassens de Vici. Monsieur Trassens worked as a teacher in Riga for thirteen years and Jubinal found his name in the nominal list of French civilians who suffered during the Moscow fire and received assistance from the army. Apparently, as the war began, Trassens fled form Riga to Moscow as a safer place. Jubinal was regretful that he discovered his name only on the last day of his day in Moscow and therefore he could not personally see Trassens before his departure.[19]

Interestingly, the French did not write much about Russian regular army. Usually they stressed the superiority of Grande Armée and confidence in their victory. The letters, however, contained frequent mentions of Russian flying detachments that constantly harassed the Grande Armée. These usually consisted of irregular cavalry (Cossacks, Bashkirs, Kalmyks and others) as well as regular cavalry units (hussars, dragoons, chasseurs, with an occasional horse artillery). The French often compared the Cossacks to Mamlukes or Arabs, whom they fought during the Egyptian Campaign of 1798-1800; the 28th Bulletin specifically compared the Cossacks to "the Arabs in the desert."[20]

In their letters, soldiers often mused about the ending of the war and, during their stay in Moscow, they eagerly hoped for the conclusion of the peace treaty.[21] Their dreams were shattered after the Grande Armée departed from the Russian city and it became evident that the next year's campaign was inevitable. Yet, there were still some who hoped to have enough time to come home during the winter.

The great fire of Moscow made a tremendous impression on the French, many of whom described it in their letters and wondered about the Russian resolution to forsake their town to a fiery destruction. Their accounts often provided insights that were distinctly different from those in official newspapers. In his letter to his wife, Philippe Granal stressed that Moscow, Vyazma, Dorogobuzh and Smolensk were burnt by the Russians themselves, but he did not mention about any supplies salvaged from the fire.[22] Jubinal wrote that the French civilians who remained in Moscow were more or less the victims of the fire and lived in penury and hardship, lacking bare essentials.[23] Bastier, the courier at Grand Quartier Général, complained, "We are as miserable here as in the midst of a desert, surrounded by only remains of fire and flames that these scoundrel Russians kindle everywhere.[24] Meanwhile, official bulletins claimed that though the Moscow fire had reduced the amount of supplies, the soldiers still found sufficient grain, potatoes, cabbages, other vegetables as well as meat, vine, eau-de-vie, sugar, coffee and other supplies.[25]

The letters reveal that the most urgent issues for participants were provisions and lodgings. These two topics are raised in practically every letter written during the retreat. Some authors even admitted that the lack of food and proper clothing forced them to resort to plundering.[26] During the retreat, soldiers had to bivouac under open air or in wagons every night and they were thrilled to exploit an opportunity to spend a night inside some building, be it a noble estate or a peasant hut. Even generals complained about uncomfortable conditions on bivouacs,[27] and such testimonies from the privileged (i.e. those who because of their status inside the Grand Armée or their family connections received better supplies

[18] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes*, 343–344.
[19] *Ibid.*, 189.
[20] *Moniteur Universel*, No. 334, 29 November 1812.
[21] For more details, see Vladimir Zemtzov, "Napoleon v Moskve," *Annuaire d'etudes françaises* (Moscow, 2006), 199–218.
[22] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes*, 210.
[23] *Ibid.*, 189.
[24] *Ibid.*, 173.
[25] *Moniteur Universel*, No. 278, 4 October 1812.
[26] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes*, 173.
[27] Mathieu Dumas's letter to his daughter Cornelie, RGADA. F. 30. D. 249. P. 14–15.

and better lodging) does highlight how important such issues were in the daily life of the Napoleonic troops.

It is noteworthy that while describing their difficult conditions, the authors also sought to shelter their readers from their real experiences so as not to frighten them. They frequently wrote that everything was fine (in fact, some repeat this phase a few times throughout their letters) but careful reading of their writing does reveal that things were not as good as they claimed. For example, Colonel Puniet de Monfort-Boulart assured his wife that "though, it is not a great pleasure to bivouac in -6 degrees of frost, I assure you that it is not as bad as you imagine it."[28]

Another crucial issue for the Grande Armée was the shortage of horses for cavalry, artillery and transport. The army lost tens of thousands of animals in the first two months of the campaign and struggled to replenish these losses. It was able to buy some horses from peasants on its retreat from Moscow to Smolensk but these horses were not good enough. Writing in early November, Boniface de Castellane distinguished between horses that he brought from France (he actually named them by their names) and those he bought in Russia (he referred to them simply as *konia,* a mangled Russian word for "horse"), complaining about the poor quality of the latter; indeed, two of them died just five days after Castellane bought them.[29]

Personal attitudes towards the war depended on authors' career prospects. Thus, *inspecteur aux revues* Delécourt dreamt of baronage and money and believed that he would have a successful campaign.[30] On the other hand, many were simply unhappy to be in Russia and shared the sentiments of Rayon, an official in Secrétairerie d'Etat, who told his mother and wife that he genuinely wished that this war would be the last of his career. He asked his wife to try to secure a new position in another department of Secrétairerie d'Etat or somewhere else and was ready to see his salary cut than to endure another campaign.[31]

No hardships of war could force soldiers to forget their own private affairs and even hobbies. In the midst of the campaign, Delécourt did not forget to submit an application for free education at a lycée for his son. A certain Christian remained completely devoted to studies throughout the war[32] while Baron Sopransy kept sending detailed requests for additions to his new library back home.[33]

Intercepted personal correspondence of the French soldiers is a valuable source for our understanding of the Russian Campaign. It contains numerous fascinating details about daily life of French army, experiences of ordinary soldiers and their views and perceptions of Russia. These letters show immediate impressions, unlike memoirs that had been produced years after the event and often thought to add some flourish to incite reader's interest.

During the brief period of retreat from Moscow to Smolensk conditions of life took on special significance because winter was fast approaching and the French army seemed destined to spend the cold season in Russia or in Poland. Letters written in this period contain little information about battles or military operations because their authors left such details for bulletins and newspapers. Instead, they concentrate on their personal difficulties and hardships. And by doing it, these soldiers unintentionally confirmed the words of Emperor Alexander I who warned Caulaincourt in early 1811: "A Frenchman is brave but long privations and bad climate would wear him down and discourage him. Our climate, our winter, will fight on our side[34]."

[28] RGADA. f.30, d.267, l. 1–2.
[29] RGADA. f.30, d.267, l. 130 – 131
[30] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes*, 188.
[31] RGADA. f.30, d.267, l. 17–18.
[32] RGADA. f.30, d.267, l. 81-82.
[33] *Lettres interceptées par les Russes*, 207–208.
[34] Armand de Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia: the memoirs of General de Caulaincourt, duke of Vicenza* (New York, 1935), 6.