DOMINIC LIEVEN

Russia Against Napoleon

The True Story of the Campaigns of
War and Peace
Russia Against Napoleon
Russia’s defeat of Napoleon is one of the most dramatic stories in European history. It has many twists and turns. Not just in 1812 but also for much of 1813 the outcome remained very uncertain with most of the odds seemingly in Napoleon’s favour. His personal history in these years is a tale of hubris and nemesis. There is a rich supporting cast of fascinating personalities who enliven the story and with whom it is often easy to empathize. The story contains two of the greatest battles in European history, Leipzig and Borodino, and many other episodes of great fascination for the military historian. It also tells us much about European society, culture and politics in that era. From the Russian perspective the story has that crucial element, a happy ending. Napoleon’s first Grande Armée was destroyed in Russia in 1812. His second was defeated on the battlefields of Germany in 1813. In the longest campaign in European history, the Russian army pursued the French all the way from Moscow to Paris and led the victorious coalition into the enemy capital on 31 March 1814.

For very many years I have wanted to tell this story. At one level that is the simple purpose of this book. But I am an old-fashioned historian who likes his stories to be true, or at least as close to the truth as an honest, knowledgeable and meticulous study of the available evidence allows. Many years ago I came to the conclusion that the story as told in Western Europe and North America was very far from the truth. Hearing an untrue tale told over and over again annoyed me. Another purpose of this book is therefore to tell the story of how and why Russia defeated Napoleon in what seems to me to be a more truthful way.¹

It is not surprising that what happened in 1812–14 is usually distorted in British, French and American books. Popular works on the Napoleonic era necessarily follow a rather set pattern. In Britain, for
example, the bookshelves groan under the weight of works on Nelson and Trafalgar, or Wellington and Waterloo. These are the heroic narratives and the icons of British national identity. Napoleon and his army have also retained their fascination for the English - as well as French-speaking public. In any case, most authors cannot be expected to read many languages or consult archives in a range of countries. They expect to draw their information from the research of specialists. As regards Russia's role in the defeat of Napoleon, this research and these specialists do not exist. No Western professor has ever written a book on the Russian war effort against Napoleon. The surest way to make yourself unappallingly in any British, let alone American, university is to say that you wish to study the history of battles, diplomacy and kings.  

In many areas of military history the gap left by the universities is filled by army staff colleges. There are some excellent books by military specialists - often but not always serving officers - on the Napoleonic era but almost none of this work covers Russia. One reason why military specialists have avoided Russia is that the military archives have only become accessible to foreign researchers since 1991. More important, however, has been the belief that the French and Prussian armies of the Napoleonic era are much more worth studying, because they appear more modern. In the case of Napoleon, one had the timeless lessons to be learned from military genius, but the French army was also seen as pioneering aspects of modern warfare such as the all-arms division and corps. In the Prussian case one had Clausewitz, generally seen as the greatest of all thinkers on modern war. In addition, Prussia was believed to have created two other key elements of military modernity in this era: the first modern general staff and a highly effective and motivated mass conscript army. By contrast, there seemed little point in struggling to learn Russian and scrounge for information outside the archives in order to study an army that was still unequivocally Old Regime. The result is that the Russian side of the story is ignored or misinterpreted, with historians largely seeing Russia through the prism of French- or German-language sources.

As regards the French sources, there are obvious dangers of interpreting any army or campaign largely through enemy eyes. Of course French officers usually wrote reports or memoirs to win promotion, boost their egos, achieve glory or justify their actions. No one who looks at the uniforms of the era can expect to find much modesty or self-effacement from the men who wore them. On the contrary, aggressive and boastful self-promotion often flourished in the armies of both Napoleon and his enemies. If the French were more boastful than most of the others, they had some reason to be, since their army was in most respects the best in Europe until 1812. When facing the Russians, their normal sense of superiority was sometimes heightened by an almost colonial scorn for the irrational barbarians of Europe's borders. Napoleon himself set the tone by finding few words of praise for any Russian troops other than Cossacks. This to some extent perhaps reflected a French variation on the theme of exoticism and Orientalism. Blaming defeat on the Cossacks or the weather was also useful. Since the French army had no Cossacks and the weather was an 'unfair' act of God, no French officer need fear that by invoking these sources of disaster he was questioning his own superior virility or professional skill. The way in which the English-language literature often uncritically repeats French accounts is likely to drive to distraction anyone who has studied the Russian sources or even just walked over the battlefields in question.

The German-language sources are much more mixed. In 1812-14 Germans fought both with and against Russia. Germans who fought with Russia in 1812 were either ethnic German subjects of the tsar or officers who had left their own armies in order to fight against Napoleon. There are actually a number of German-language memoirs which tell one a great deal about the Russian army and the Russian war effort in 1812. For example, of all the Russian generals' memoirs, probably the best are those of Prince Eugen of Württemberg, which are written in German.  

Even so, they are very little used by English-language authors. The same is true of a number of other valuable memoirs written in German, for the most part by men who were Alexander's subjects.  

By far the most frequently cited source is Clausewitz, both because of his fame and because his history of the 1812 campaign is translated into English.

Clausewitz's history is extremely interesting and useful but one does nevertheless need to remember the context in which it was written. Under Frederick the Great the Prussian army had been considered the best in Europe. Foreign officers studied it as a model. But in 1806 it was not just defeated but humiliated, with rearguards and garrisons sometimes disintegrating and surrendering in the face of much smaller
enemy forces. When Frederick William III sided with Napoleon in 1812 the humiliation increased, especially among those hyper-patriotic officers who like Clausewitz resigned their commissions and entered the Russian service. The xenophobic and faction-ridden Russian army of 1812 was a deeply frustrating place to be for a foreign officer such as Clausewitz who spoke no Russian and had inevitable difficulties in understanding the army and society he had joined. When reading Clausewitz I sometimes think of parallels with an intelligent staff officer in the Free French forces in London in 1940–44. Such an officer might have written a fascinating corrective to standard accounts of the British war effort but it would be surprising if we were to understand the conflict through his eyes alone.9

Studies of the 1812 campaign in English mostly concentrate on Napoleon’s mistakes, on the problems created for the French by Russia’s geography and climate, and on the horror but also the heroism in evidence in Napoleon’s army during the retreat from Moscow. The year 1813 traditionally belongs to German authors celebrating the resurgence of Prussia and the triumph of German patriotism. Some of the Prussian general staff historians, and above all Rudolph von Friederich, are excellent.9 But of course most of the memoirs and many of the histories put forward a Prussian view of events, which subsequently influenced British and American authors. So too do the views of the Austrian official history, not written until just before 1914, some volumes of which have a distinctly anti-Russian tinge.10 If anything, the Russian angle on events gets even less attention or sympathy when it comes to the 1814 campaign. Military historians enthuse about Napoleon’s reinvigorated genius after his disappointing performance in 1813. Historians of diplomacy and international relations on the other hand focus on Metternich and Castlereagh as the creators of a stable and orderly European system. Sometimes this literature has a Cold War feel to it, celebrating the alliance of British and German statesmanship to secure Europe against a threat of Russian hegemony.11

Of course national bias in the writing of history exists in all countries and especially when it comes to writing about war. War is generally the best source of heroic nationalist myths.12 The Napoleonic Wars occurred at the dawn of modern European nationalism. It was exactly at this time that many of the ideas behind modern nationalism were first expressed. Shortly afterwards the Industrial Revolution would create cities, mass literacy and all the other aspects of modern society which helped nationalism to flourish. Traditionally, for example, the British grabbed Waterloo for themselves and it is only very recently that the decisive Prussian contribution to victory has been recognized in the English-language literature.13 In this context it is not at all surprising that the Prussians elbowed Russia aside when it came to interpretations of 1813 or that French historians of the period have gloried in the exploits of Napoleon and his army, without paying too much attention to what enemy accounts and foreign historians had to say.

One crucial area of Napoleonic warfare has attracted too little attention from historians of every nationality. This is logistics, in other words the equipment and feeding of the armies. Commissariat officers had little status in any of the rival armies and societies. Their efforts have won little attention from historians. This is unfortunate because their role was often crucial. Napoleon destroyed his army in 1812 in large part because of logistical failures. By contrast, one of the key triumphs of the Russian war effort was its success in feeding and supplying more than half a million troops outside Russia’s borders in 1813–14. How this was done in a European continent which in those days only had two cities with populations of more than 500,000 is a key part of the present book. The contrast with the Seven Years War (1756–63), when logistics helped to cripple the Russian military effort, is very much to the point.14

In many ways the greatest hero of the Russian war effort in 1812–14 was not a human being but the horse. To some extent this was true of all European land warfare at that time. The horse fulfilled the present-day functions of the tank, the lorry, the aeroplane and motorized artillery. It was in other words the weapon of shock, pursuit, reconnaissance, transport and mobile firepower. The horse was a crucial – perhaps even the single most decisive – factor in Russia’s defeat of Napoleon. The enormous superiority of the Russian light cavalry played a key role in denying food or rest to Napoleon’s army in the retreat from Moscow and thereby destroying it. In 1812 Napoleon lost not just almost all the men but virtually all the horses with which he had invaded Russia. In 1813 he could and did replace the men but finding new horses proved a far more difficult and in the end disastrous problem. Above all it was lack of cavalry which stopped Napoleon winning decisively in the spring 1813 campaign and persuaded him to agree to the fatal two-month summer armistice, which contributed so much to his ultimate defeat.
The final allied offensive in 1814 which led to the fall of Paris and Napoleon’s overthrow was sparked off by the Russian light cavalry’s interception of secret French dispatches revealing all of the emperor’s plans and his capital’s vulnerability. This was a fitting end to two years of warfare in which the Russian light cavalry had been superior from the start and totally dominant after September 1812. But this dominance was not an act of God or nature. The historian needs to study the Russian horse industry and how it was mobilized by the government in 1812-14. Also crucial is a grasp of how the Russians managed, preserved and reinforced their cavalry regiments during these campaigns. Again, this is a key part of the present book.15

Naturally, humans in general and nationalist historians in particular were interested in soldiers’ heroics on the battlefield, not in how their stomachs were filled or their horses kept healthy. This was just as true in Russia as elsewhere. Like the other great powers, Russia mined the Napoleonic era for national myths. The official tsarist myth of 1812 was that the Russian people had united around the throne and under the leadership of the nobility to destroy the invader of the country’s sacred soil. There was if anything rather more truth to this Russian myth than to its Prusso-German equivalent, which stated that the Prussian nation had sprung to arms in 1813 to liberate Germany after Frederick William III’s appeal ‘To My People’.

One entirely true reason why Russia defeated Napoleon was that many able young officers were promoted on merit to key positions during the war. Among the Russian leaders, Aleksandr Chernyshev and Johann von Diebitsh became lieutenant-generals aged 28, and Mikhail Vorontsov aged 30. They were just the tip of the iceberg. Count Karl von Nesselrode was only 28 when he took control of Russian espionage in Paris in 1808. He served subsequently as Alexander’s chief diplomatic adviser in 1813-14. Even the older generation of military leaders was often not that old: Petr Mikhailovich Volkonsky, who served as Alexander’s chief of staff, was only 38 when the war ended. These men were to dominate Russia’s army and government for many subsequent decades. The official histories of the war by Dmitrii Buturlin and Aleksandr Mikhailovsky-Danilevsky were very careful not to offend these grandees. There are British parallels. The Duke of Wellington lived for almost four decades after Waterloo and was in a position to make his own view on the battle almost canonical in Britain.16

There were, however, important differences between Wellington and the Russian leaders. Although the duke had many political enemies in the 1820s and 1830s, by the time he died he was a national icon. The same was far from true of the Russian generals who lived as long as him. Just after Alexander I’s death in 1825 a group of officers, the so-called Decembrists, attempted to overthrow the absolute monarchy and install a constitutional regime or even a republic. Among them were officers such as Mikhail Orlov and Prince Sergei Volkonsky who had distinguished themselves in the wars. The coup was crushed. Key heroes of the wars such as Aleksandr Chernyshev, Alexander Benckendorff and Petr Volkonsky played a part in its suppression and went on to serve as ministers under Nicholas I well into the mid-nineteenth century.

The Decembrist revolt and its suppression was the beginning of the exceptionally bitter split between right and left in Russia which ended in the revolution of 1917. The violent hatred between the two camps helped to poison and distort memories of 1812-14. In the Winter Palace in Petersburg there is a fine gallery with portraits of almost all the generals from 1812-14. As a graduate student in the Soviet Union in the 1970s I once got into a fierce argument with a young woman who was furious at the fact that among the portraits is that of Alexander Benckendorff, who subsequently served as Nicholas I’s chief of the security police. My attempts to argue that Benckendorff was a war hero got nowhere. When I called him a partisan leader, which is exactly what he was for much of 1812-14, she stormed off in disgust. The young student was not at all pro-Communist but she was a product of the Moscow radical-liberal intelligentsia. For her, heroes of 1812 in general and partisans in particular were 'friends of the people' and therefore by definition honorary members of her radical political camp and tradition.

When it took over the 1812 myth and made it an integral part of Soviet patriotism, the Communist regime to a great extent set such ideas in stone. The historical reality of Russia’s war effort had to be startlingly distorted to suit official ideology in the Stalinist era. Alexander I had to be marginalized and vilified, and the war’s international context distorted; Kutuzov was elevated to the level of Napoleon or higher, while his aristocratic origins and court connections (together with those of Prince Petr Bagration) had to be overlooked; the significance of mass resistance to Napoleon had to be exaggerated and occasional resistance
to landlords and government officials somehow interpreted as constructive elements in the people's war against both domestic tyranny and the French. Official norms of this sort crippled Russian scholarship on the Napoleonic era for a time and have left a mark on how many ordinary Russians of the older generation think about 1812–14. Contemporary Russian historians have mercifully long since escaped the Stalinist myths about the Napoleonic era, however.17

Nevertheless, for all its crude distortions, the Soviet-era official interpretation of the Napoleonic Wars still in many ways remained true to the spirit of Leo Tolstoy, who was by far the most important nineteenth-century mythmaker as regards his impact on Russian (and foreign) understanding of Russia's role in the Napoleonic era. Tolstoy depicts elemental Russian patriotism as uniting in defence of national soil. He paints Kutuzov as the embodiment of Russian patriotism and wisdom, contrasting him with the idiocy of so-called professional military experts, whom he sees as Germans and pedants. His conception of history in any case leaves little room for skilful leadership or even for the attempt to direct events in rational fashion. Instead, he celebrates the moral strength, courage and patriotism of ordinary Russians. Perhaps most important in the context of the present book, Tolstoy ends his novel War and Peace in December 1812 with the war only half over and the greatest challenges still to come. The long, bitter but ultimately triumphant road that led from Vilna in December 1812 to Paris in March 1814 plays no part in his work, just as it was entirely marginalized in the Soviet patriotic canon and in contemporary Russian folk memory. For every one publication in Russian on 1813–14 there are probably more than one hundred on 1812. The most recent attempt to write a grand history of 1812–14 which is both popular and scholarly devotes 490 pages to 1812 and 50 to the longer and more complicated campaigns of the two following years.18

The popular or 'Tolstoyan' Russian interpretation of the war fits rather well with foreign accounts that play down the role of Russia's army and government in the victory over Napoleon. Napoleon himself was much inclined to blame geography, the climate and chance; this absolved him from responsibility for the catastrophe. Historians usually add Napoleon's miscalculations and blunders to the equation but many of them are happy to go along with Tolstoy's implied conclusion that the Russian leadership had little control over events and that Russian

'strategy' was a combination of improvisation and accident. Inevitably too, Russian lack of interest in 1813–14 left the field free for historians of other nations who were happy to tell the story of these years with Russia's role marginalized.

Of course it is not difficult to understand why Russians found it easiest to identify with a war fought on national soil in defence of Moscow and under a commanding general called Kutuzov. It was harder to be as enthusiastic about campaigns waged in Germany and France under commanders called Wittgenstein and Barclay de Tolly in defence of a true but somewhat metaphysical concept of Russian security rooted in ideas about the European balance of power. As the war's centenary approached in 1912 there was great interest, and many new publications resulted. By this time, however, Russia was on the eve of war with those very same Hohenzollerns and Habsburgs with whom she had allied herself in 1813. Obviously, this was not the best of moments to celebrate Russo-German solidarity. In 1813–14 the two most brilliant Russian staff officers were Karl von Toll, a Baltic German, and Johann von Diebitsch, the son of a Prussian staff officer who had transferred to the Russian service. Almost two-thirds of the troops in the most successful allied force - Field-Marshall Blücher's so-called Army of Silesia - were in fact Russian but Blücher's two Russian army corps' commanders were Alexandre de Langeron and Fabian von der Osten-Sacken. By now too Nikolai Rumiantsev and Aleksandr Kurakin had been marginalized and there were no ethnic Russians at all among Alexander's chief advisers on foreign policy. Meanwhile the emperor himself gave many Russians even at the time the feeling that he saw Russia as backward and unworthy of his ideals, and was willing to sacrifice Russian interests in the name of European security or even so as to win applause for himself in fashionable Europe.

At the root of all these issues is the contrast, very familiar to historians, between Russia as empire and Russia as nation and people.19 In 1814 the British, French and Germans were, or were in the process of becoming, nations. The nationalist myths generated from the Napoleonic Wars suited this reality and endeavour. Russia in 1814 was a dynastic, aristocratic and multi-ethnic empire. Its core was the Russian land, people and nobility but these did not yet constitute a nation and could never entirely do so as long as the dynastic empire existed. The Russian Empire won the war of 1812–14 but the myths which have subsequently lived
in Russian memory have above all been ethno-national ones. That is
the most important reason why – uniquely, and in total contrast to the
Germans, French and British – Russian national myths derived from the
Napoleonic Wars greatly underestimate the Russian achievement in
1812–14. A key aim of this book is to get back beyond the Russian myths
to the realities of the Russian war effort in 1812–14. I am above all
interested in establishing how and why Russia overcame the enormous
challenge presented by Napoleon in these years. There are also other
reasons for questioning aspects of Russian mythology about the
Napoleonic era.

One reason is a reflection on empires and nations. Both generally and
in the Russian case it seems to me a mistake to see everything in the
imperial tradition as harmful and the nation as the inevitable embodiment
of virtue. This is in no sense a justification for neo-empire in
today’s world. But empire in its day – unlike very many nations – was
often relatively tolerant, pluralist and even occasionally benevolent in
its attitude towards the many communities who sheltered under its
protection. This was true too as regards the Russian Empire’s treatment
of most non-Russians, most of the time. It was certainly one of the
empire’s strengths in the era of Alexander I that it was willing and able
to employ and trust the loyalty of so many non-Russian elites. More
specifically, it seems a mistake to see Alexander’s foreign policy as
‘imperial’ and as not serving the interests of Russia, however ‘Russia’ is
understood. Before 1812 Napoleon had shown rather clearly why his
domination of Europe was a great threat to Russian security and econ-
omic interests. In 1813 Alexander was entirely right to seize the oppor-
tunity of driving the French out of Germany and restoring the
foundations of a European balance of power. The subsequent decision
to take the Russian army over the Rhine and remove Napoleon is more
debatable. In my view, however, Alexander was once again right to
believe that Russia above all needed peace and stability in Europe,
and that Napoleon’s survival would make both peace and stability
impossible. The Napoleonic era is a classic example of how inter-
dependent are Russian and European security. It was also a time when
Russia made a great contribution to restoring peace and stability in
Europe.

Russians therefore have every reason for pride in what their state
and army achieved in 1812–14. Ironically, the traditional obsession of
Russian historians with military operations in 1812 at the expense of
the two following years does no service to the Russian army’s reputation.
Even more than in most activities, there is a huge difference between
training for war and its reality. By 1813–14 the army had learned from
experience. By then many of the generals were first-rate and staffs were
performing much better than at the beginning of the 1812 campaign.
On the battlefield in 1813–14 reserves were often utilized and cavalry,
infantry and artillery coordinated much more effectively than had pre-
viously been the case. Given the enormous distance of military opera-
tions from the army’s bases, the reinforcement and supply of the field
armies was managed with remarkable skill. Discipline, regimental pride,
loyalty to comrades, and pre-modern religious and monarchist loyalties
motivated the ordinary soldiers of the emperor’s army whether they
fought on Russian soil or abroad. To anyone who has read accounts of
the battles of (to take three examples) Kulm, Leipzig and Craonne, the
idea that the army’s motivation or fighting spirit declined after 1812
seems very strange.

The final crucial reason for not forgetting 1813–14 is that the history
of 1812 makes no sense without it. Alexander and his war minister,
Mikhail Barclay de Tolly, planned before 1812 for a war which would
last two years at a minimum and probably longer. They made their
plans partly on the basis of excellent intelligence about Napoleon’s
intentions and about the strengths and weaknesses not just of his army
but also of his regime. From the start, their plan was to wear down
Napoleon by a defensive campaign in Russia, and then to pursue the
defeated enemy back over the frontier and raise a European insurrection
against him. There is ample evidence of this thinking in Russian military,
intelligence and diplomatic documents. The whole manner in which
Russian resources and manpower were mobilized makes sense only in
the context of a long war. One key reason why Russia defeated Napoleon
was that her top leaders out-thought him. In 1812 they planned and
then successfully imposed on him a drawn-out campaign, knowing full
well that it was precisely the kind of war he was least equipped to wage.
In 1813–14 Alexander’s combined diplomatic and military strategy
contributed to isolating Napoleon first in Europe and then even from
French elites. Of course Napoleon played a huge part in his own down-
fall. But his enemy’s capacity for self-destruction was always part of
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Alexander’s calculation. Russian policy in these years was intelligently conceived and was executed with consistent purpose. It was very far removed indeed from Tolstyan mytholgy.

The core of this book is a study of grand strategy, military operations and diplomacy, in other words of power politics. Military and diplomatic policy were closely intertwined in these years and must be studied together. This is particularly true as regards the Russo-Austrian relationship, which was the most sensitive but also probably the most important aspect of Russian foreign policy in 1813-14.

From the summer of 1810 until Napoleon’s invasion, though in principle diplomacy was central, Russian policy was strongly affected by military considerations. The exceptionally valuable information provided by Russian intelligence in Paris persuaded Alexander I that Napoleon was intent on attacking Russia and greatly influenced Russian diplomacy and strategic planning. The Russian emperor’s preference for adopting a defensive military strategy more or less ruled out any possibility that his attempts to secure an alliance with Prussia would succeed. In the campaigns of 1812 and autumn 1813 diplomacy was of little importance and military operations were decisive. This was not true in the spring 1813 and 1814 campaigns, in which diplomatic and political considerations influenced and at times even determined military strategy. In the spring 1813 campaign this almost resulted in disaster. Alexander I decided Russian grand strategy and diplomacy, and often had a big influence on military operations. His views, personality and modus operandi were of crucial importance. Without him the Russian army would probably not have pursued Napoleon into Germany in 1813 and would certainly never have reached Paris. So this book truly is a study of kings and battles.

Power politics requires the existence of power and is influenced by how much power a state has and what forms this power takes. The book looks at the sources of Russian power in Alexander’s reign. That of course means the imperial army, and in particular its structure of command, tactics, ‘doctrine’ and personnel. But it also means Russian military industry, public finance, horse industry and manpower. Russian strengths and weaknesses in these areas help to explain how the empire fought the war and why it triumphed. As is always the case, the political regime and the social context heavily influenced both the mobilization and the use of the empire’s resources. The basis of the Russian political

and social order was serfdom. The imperial army was a professional force whose soldiers were a separate estate of the realm and who served for twenty-five years of their lives. How could and did such a society and army meet and overcome Napoleon’s challenge? The Russian officer corps, and in particular its senior ranks, were very much a part of the overall imperial elite, itself still largely aristocratic. Army, aristocracy and government were a maze of family and patronage networks. It is often impossible to understand how the army functioned unless we take this into account.

The same is true as regards the values and culture of the imperial army’s generals and officers. Honour, publicly displayed courage, and loyalty to regiment and fellow-officers all mattered greatly. So too did living up to one’s status and rank. The battlefield, like the duel, allowed honour to be publicly displayed and defended. In some respects the ‘field of honour’ - in other words the battlefield - was also the ancestor of today’s sporting match. ‘Winning’ meant holding one’s ground and capturing trophies such as cannon and standards. These male warrior values appear not just archaic but also sometimes childish: nevertheless they mattered greatly because they affected morale and kept officers steadfast in the face of death and mutilation. A key problem in the 1812 campaign was that these values cut right across Russia’s strategic imperative to retreat.

Though the historian can write with some confidence of officers’ values and motivation, understanding the mentalities of the rank and file is far more difficult. In 1812-14 more than 1.5 million men served as privates or NCOs in the army and militia. Only two left memoirs. These can be eked out by a few oral reminiscences recorded decades later and by the personnel records of many regiments preserved in the archives. Often, however, one is forced to interpret soldiers’ values through their actions and through what their officers said about them. This has obvious dangers. But a book which simply took as a given the courage, endurance and loyalty of Russian soldiers in the face of awful privations and - sometimes - brutal treatment by their superiors would be ignoring one of the most vital but also at times puzzling elements in the wars.

Russia is the biggest gap in contemporary Western understanding of the Napoleonic era. The aim of this book is to fill that gap. But a more knowledgeable and realistic understanding of Russian power and policy.
can also change overall perspectives on the Napoleonic era. In this period Russia was less powerful than Britain. Its global reach was much weaker. Unlike Austria or Prussia, however, Russian interests and perspectives were not just narrowly continental. For a significant section of the ruling elite the Napoleonic Wars were in one sense a distraction and a sideshow. They saw Russia’s main interests as lying in expansion southwards against the Ottomans and Persians. These men seldom saw France itself as Russia’s main or inevitable enemy. Most of them believed that the Napoleonic empire was a transient phenomenon, born of exceptional circumstances and Napoleon’s genius. The most impressive member of this group was Count Nikolai Rumiantsev, who was in practice Russia’s minister of foreign affairs from late in 1807 until Napoleon invaded Russia. In his view the greatest long-term challenge to Russia lay in Britain’s growing domination of global finance, trade and industry, and in her monopoly of naval power. This view of Russian interests was ultimately overruled by Alexander I. Above all, it was undermined by Napoleon, who forced the Russian government to make fighting France its top priority. But Rumiantsev’s perspective had some impact on Russian policy in 1812 because it was shared in part by Mikhail Kutuzov. It also provides an interesting insight into some of the underlying realities of the Napoleonic era.

The Napoleonic Wars of 1806–1815 were a global, not just a European struggle. This may seem a strange view since the overwhelming majority of the battles in these years occurred in Europe. In that sense the Napoleonic Wars were more European and less global even than the Revolutionary Wars of the 1790s. They were far less global than the Seven Years War or the American War of Independence, in both of which much of the most significant fighting occurred in the Western hemisphere and in Asia. In reality, however, the Napoleonic Wars were largely confined to Europe because the British were getting closer to winning their hundred-years-war with France for global supremacy. The most basic fact about the Napoleonic Wars was that British seapower locked French imperialism into Europe. For many reasons it was far harder to create any species of empire in Europe than overseas. As a number of Russian observers understood, it was in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras that Britain consolidated its hugely powerful global empire, both territorial and commercial. Looked at from one angle, Napoleon’s attempt to create a European empire was simply a last, heroic effort to balance British imperialism and avoid defeat in France’s century-long conflict with Britain. The odds were very much against Napoleon, though by 1812 he had come seemingly very close to success.

It is in fact possible to study the Napoleonic Wars on many different levels. At one extreme one has the God’s-eye view. This looks at events in the round and in the long term. It is interested in the impact of geopolitics, at shifts in European ideology and cultural values after 1789, and at global patterns of trade and finance. At the other extreme one has what might be described as the view of the worm. This includes the day-to-day perceptions of ordinary people in this era. It includes, too, important details such as the firing locks and cartridge paper which contributed to the unreliability of Russian musketry. Here, too, for example, one finds discussion of the events of the afternoon of 21 May 1813, when Marshal Michel Ney’s mistakes robbed Napoleon of decisive victory in the battle of Bautzen and probably thereby denied him the chance to decide the 1813 campaign and keep Austria out of the war. Between the levels of God and the worm one finds the other matters commonly discussed by historians. As regards this book, for example, they include Russian infantry tactics, the Russian armaments industry, or Russian perceptions of Austria and the Balkans. In the present book all these levels are covered, since all of them are relevant to understanding how and why Russia defeated Napoleon.

The basic approach of the book is chronological. I begin with the negotiations at Tilsit in 1807 and end with the Russian army’s entry into Paris in 1814. One reason for doing this is that any other approach would ruin the story. Not even a professor has the right to do this to one of the best stories in European history. But another reason for using narrative and chronology is that this is usually much the most truthful way to explain what happened in these years. On the battlefield an opportunity for victory that existed at two o’clock in the afternoon had often gone by four. Chance, misperception and confusion accounted for much of what happened. Decisions had consequences which rippled through the following days and weeks. At a number of points in the book I pause from the narrative to explain the background, however. In Chapter 7, for example, I turn aside from the narrative of the 1812 campaign to explain what was happening on the crucial Russian front.
two of the book’s ‘heroes’, namely the imperial army and Emperor Alexander I. It provides essential information on the Russian political system, the sinews of Russian power, and the nature of international relations in the Napoleonic era. It concludes with the negotiations at Tilsit in 1807 and seeks to explain Russian thinking at the conference and the bases of the Franco-Russian ‘deal’ to run Europe and put their relations on a long-term peaceful footing. Chapter 3 is a narrative of Franco-Russian relations from Tilsit until Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in June 1812. It is mostly but by no means exclusively about diplomacy. A crucial element of this chapter is a discussion of Russian intelligence operations, above all in Paris, and of their impact. The chapter ends with an attempt to put Franco-Russian relations into the broader global context. It is this chapter which most obviously combines all levels of explanation, from God to the worm. Chapter 4 looks at how the Russian army prepared and planned for war between 1807 and 1812.

There follow four chapters on 1812 and four on 1813. Six of these eight chapters are essentially narratives of the campaigns. In all six chapters, however, I devote much attention to how the armies were fed and supplied. This is always important. At some points in 1812 and 1813 it was decisive. The chapters on 1812 and autumn 1813 are largely military in content. Once these campaigns had begun, diplomacy took a back seat. On the contrary, in the first eight months of 1813 Russian strategy was largely determined by the need to bring Prussia and Austria into the war if Alexander’s goals were to be achieved. Diplomacy therefore plays a big role in Chapter 9 on the campaign of spring 1813. Two of these eight chapters are devoted to the Russian home front and to how Russian resources were mobilized in 1812 and 1813. It is impossible to understand the war effort or Russian victory without them. Chapters 13 and 14 cover the 1814 campaign. They too are a narrative, though a complicated one because of the need to weave together military operations, diplomacy, logistics and even French domestic politics, since all four elements were closely intertwined and essential to understanding Russian policy and the eventual allied victory.

For the Russian state the eighteenth century had been an era of victories. Before the reign of Peter the Great (1689–1725) European elites had seen the Russians as barbarous, alien and unimportant. Like the Ottomans, they were regarded as outsiders to Europe: unlike them, they did not earn even the grudging respect born of fear. By the time of Peter’s death, however, attitudes had begun to change. Russia had smashed Sweden in the Great Northern War (1700–21) and had replaced it as the most powerful state in north-eastern Europe. In the Seven Years War (1756–63) Russia made an even bigger impact on European minds. Her armies occupied East Prussia, defeated Frederick II’s forces on many occasions, and even briefly captured Berlin. Only the death of the Empress Elizabeth in 1762 and the dramatic reversal of Russian policy by her successor, Peter III, saved Prussia from destruction.1

There followed the reign of Catherine II (1762–96) during which Russia’s territory, power and international status grew enormously. Most of the Polish commonwealth as well as huge territories in what we now call southern and eastern Ukraine but which was then known as ‘New Russia’ were annexed. Having become the leading Baltic power under Peter, Russia now came to dominate the Black Sea as well and to send her fleets into the Mediterranean. The fertile Ukrainian grasslands conquered by Catherine began to fill up with colonists. As the economy of New Russia boom, there seemed almost no limits to possible future Russian power. Catherine and her most famous lover, Grigori Potemkin, contemplated restoring the Byzantine Empire and putting her grandson, the Grand Duke Constantine, on its throne. The scheme was ambitious and fantastic but so too was not just Catherine’s own life but also Russia’s dramatic rise in the eighteenth century.2

One effect of these triumphs was to accustom Russian elites to victory
and to feed their pride, confidence and arrogance. For better and worse, this had an impact on how Russia fought in 1812–14. Inevitably too, victory increased the legitimacy of the Romanov dynasty and of the autocratic system of government. Russia was a strong supporter of constitutional principles in Sweden and Poland because it knew that the weakness of the Swedish and Polish monarchies undermined these neighbours and rivals. Russia’s spectacular victories over the Ottomans between 1768 and 1792 also owed much to the inability of weak sultans to control court factions and provincial satraps. Both the Russian tsars and the Ottoman sultans faced the challenge of out-of-date military forces which blocked the creation of a modern, European-style army. These regiments – the strel’tsy (musketeers) in Russia and the janissaries in the Ottoman Empire – were all the more dangerous because they were deployed in the capitals and linked to conservative political and religious groups which opposed a swath of necessary reforms. Peter the Great destroyed the strel’tsy in the 1690s. Not until the 1820s was an Ottoman sultan powerful and resolute enough to destroy the janissaries. By then the tsarist state had long since overtaken the Ottomans in terms of power.1

The foundations of this power were the political alliance between the Romanov monarchy and the landowning aristocracy and gentry. In this respect Russia was similar to the other four European great powers (Britain, France, Austria and Prussia), all of which rested on a similar alliance between the crown and the landowning elites. In each case this alliance had its specific traits. In Britain, for instance, monarchical power was not absolute and the aristocracy was the senior partner in a coalition which included financial and commercial elites.1

Though all four continental great powers were in theory absolute monarchies, no one doubted that the power of the Russian emperor was more complete than that of his French, Austrian or even Prussian peers. He could make laws and tax his peoples without their consent, and no laws protected even his most aristocratic subjects against his arbitrary whims. By contrast, especially in France and Austria, aristocratic assemblies and judicial institutions inherited from medieval feudalism inhibited a monarch’s power, as indeed did the ethos of the social elites, including sometimes of the monarchs themselves and their relatives. Other factors also enhanced the power of the Russian autocrat. For example, in Protestant Europe the previously enormous landholdings of

the Catholic Church had been confiscated during the Reformation and had mostly fallen into the hands of the aristocracy. In eighteenth-century Catholic Europe most of these lands were still held by the Church. In Russia, however, the monarchy had confiscated the vast wealth of the Orthodox Church by the 1760s and largely held on to it for itself. That was one key reason why by the 1790s more than 40 per cent of the entire serf population ‘belonged’ not to private landlords but to the crown.5

The immense and arbitrary power of the autocrat was an everyday reality in Russian politics and government. The autocrat’s policies and the skill with which he or she managed both the machinery of government and the aristocratic elite were of crucial importance. But a Russian monarch was simultaneously all-powerful and yet in some respects strongly constrained. Even European Russia was vastly larger than any other great power. Its population did not exceed that of France until the 1750s and remained widely scattered by European standards in Alexander I’s reign. Land-based communications were primitive and disintegrated into impassable mud in the spring and autumn. The state bureaucracy was small, corrupt and incompetent. In 1765 Russia had only slightly more state officials than Prussia, though the latter was a hundredth the size of Russia-in-Europe. A Prussian monarch could recruit bureaucrats trained in law and administration from the many German universities which in some cases had existed since medieval times. When Alexander I came to the Russian throne in 1801 Russia had just one university, founded in Moscow in 1755. After the reform of provincial government in 1775 the state administration in the countryside began to thicken but in the great majority of cases these new officials were drawn from, and often elected by, the local landowning gentry. Very often these men had served as army officers for a few years before returning to the provinces to marry and inherit small estates. The extension of local administration therefore deepened the mutual dependence of the monarchy and the landowning class.

On the one hand the Romanovs could not do without the landowners, whom one monarch called the state’s involuntary tax-collectors and recruitment agents in the villages. Nor could the state survive without the service of noblemen in its bureaucracy and, above all, as officers in its army. But the gentry also badly needed the state. Employment as officers or officials was a crucial additional source of income. The state also provided security for the landowners against peasant recalcitrance.
or insurrection. In 1773 a revolt of Cossacks and peasants spread across a huge area in the Urals and along the lower Volga, headed by Emelian Pugachev. It took many months of campaigning by thousands of regular troops to suppress the rebellion, which cost hundreds of nobles their lives and left a deep scar on the consciousness of the elites. For a small but nevertheless significant number of minor nobles the army and even bureaucracy provided a channel by which they could rise into the aristocratic elite and thereby acquire wealth. The constant wars of the eighteenth century provided many opportunities for young nobles to prove themselves.

Apart from the Romanovs, the greatest beneficiaries of eighteenth-century Russia's growing wealth were the small group of families who dominated court, government and army in this era and formed the empire's aristocratic elite. Some of these families were older than the Romanovs, others were of much more recent origin, but by Alexander I's reign they formed a single aristocratic elite, united by wealth and a web of marriages. Their riches, social status and positions in government gave them great power. Their patron-client networks stretched throughout Russia's government and armed forces. The Romanovs themselves came from this aristocratic milieu. Their imperial status had subsequently raised them far above mere aristocrats, and the monarchs were determined to preserve their autonomy and never allow themselves to be captured by any aristocratic clique. Nevertheless, like other European monarchs they regarded these aristocratic magnates as their natural allies and companions, as bulwarks of the natural order and hierarchy of a well-run society.

The aristocracy used a number of crafty ways to preserve their power. In the eighteenth century they enlisted their sons in Guards regiments in childhood. By the time they reached their twenties, these spring of the aristocracy used their years of 'seniority' and the privileged status of the Guards to jump into colonelcies in line regiments. Catherine the Great's son, Paul I, who reigned from 1796 to 1801, stopped this trick but very many of the aristocrats in senior posts in 1812-14 had benefited from it. Even more significant was the use made by the aristocracy of positions at court. Though mostly honorific, these positions allowed young gentlemen of the bedchamber (Kammerjunker) and lords in waiting (Kammerherr) to transfer into senior positions in government of supposedly equivalent rank.

In the context of eighteenth-century Europe there was nothing particularly surprising about this. Young British aristocrats bought their way rapidly up the military hierarchy, sat in Parliament for their fathers' pocket boroughs and sometimes inherited peerages at a tender age. Unlike the English, Russian aristocrats did not control government through their domination of Parliament. A monarch who bungled policy or annoyed the Petersburg elite too deeply could be overthrown and murdered, however. Paul I once remarked that there were no Grands Seigneurs in Russia save men who were talking to the emperor and even then their status lasted only as long as the emperor deigned to continue the conversation. He was half right: Russian magnates were more subservient and less autonomous than their equivalents in London or Vienna. But he was also half wrong and paid for his miscalculation with his life in 1801, when he was murdered by members of the aristocracy, outraged by his arbitrary behaviour, led by the governor-general of Petersburg, Count Peter von der Pahlen.

The Russian aristocracy and gentry made up the core of the empire's ruling elite and officer corps. But the Romanovs ruled over a multi-ethnic empire. They allied themselves to their empire's non-Russian aristocracies and drew them into their court and service. The most successful non-Russian aristocrats were the German landowning class in the Baltic provinces. By one conservative estimate 7 per cent of all Russian generals in 1812 were Baltic German nobles. The Balts partly owed their success to the fact that, thanks to the Lutheran Church and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in northern Europe, they were much better educated than the average Russian provincial noble.6

There was nothing unusual at the time in an empire being ruled by diverse and alien elites. In its heyday, the Ottoman ruling elite was made up of converted Christian slaves. The Ching and Mughal empires were run by elites who came from beyond the borders of China or the subcontinent. By these standards, the empire of the Romanovs was very Russian. Even by European standards the Russian state was not unique. Very many of the Austrian Empire's leading soldiers and statesmen came from outside the Habsburgs' own territories. None of Prussia's three greatest heroes in 1812-14 — Blücher, Scharnhorst or Gneisenau — was born a Prussian subject or began his career in the Prussian army.

It is true that there were probably more outsiders in the Russian army than in Austria or Prussia. European immigrants also stood out more
Russia against Napoleon

sharp in Petersburg than in Berlin or Vienna. In the eighteenth century many European soldiers and officials had entered Russian service in search of better pay and career prospects. In Alexander’s reign they were joined by refugees fleeing the French Revolution or Napoleon. Above all, European immigrants filled the gap created by the slow development of professional education or a professional middle class in Russia. Doctors were one such group. Even in 1812 there were barely 800 doctors in the Russian army, many of them of German origin. Military engineers were also in short supply. In the eighteenth century Russian engineers had been the younger brothers of the artillery and came under its jurisdiction. Though they gained their independence under Alexander, there were still too few trained engineer officers trying to fulfill too diverse a range of duties and Russia remained in search of foreign experts whom it might lure into its service. On the eve of 1812 the two most senior Russian military engineers were the Dutchman Peter van Suchtelen and the German Karl Oppermann.

An even more important nest of foreigners was the quartermaster-general’s department, which provided the army’s general staff officers. Almost one in five of the ‘Russian’ staff officers at the battle of Borodino were not even subjects of the tsar. Fewer than half had Slav surnames. The general staff was partly descended from the bureau of cartography, a very specialized department which required a high level of mathematical skill. This ensured that it would be packed with foreigners and non-Russians. As armies grew in size and complexity in the Napoleonic era, the role of staffs became crucial. This made it all the more galling for many Russians that so large a proportion of their staff officers had non-Russian names. In addition, Napoleon’s invasion in 1812 set off a wave of xenophobia in Russia, which sometimes targeted ‘foreigners’ in the Russian army, without making much distinction between genuine foreigners and subjects of the tsar who were not ethnic Russians. Without its non-Russian staff officers the empire could never have triumphed in 1812–14, however. Moreover, most of these men were totally loyal to the Russian state, and their families usually in time assimilated into Russian society. These foreign engineers and staff officers also helped to train new generations of young Russian officers to take their places.

For the tsarist state, as for all the other great powers, the great challenge of the Napoleonic era was to mobilize resources for war. There were four key elements to what one might describe as the sinews of Russian power. They were people, horses, military industry and finance. Unless the basic strengths and limitations of each of these four elements is grasped it is not possible to understand how Russia fought these wars or why she won them.

Manpower was any state’s most obvious resource. At the death of Catherine II in 1797 the population of the Russian empire was roughly 40 million. This compared with 29 million French subjects on the eve of the Revolution and perhaps 22 million inhabitants of the Habsburgs’ lands at that time. The Russian population was only 10.7 million even in 1806. The United Kingdom stood somewhere between Prussia and the larger continental powers. Its population, including the Irish, was roughly 15 million in 1815, though Indian manpower was just becoming a factor in British global might. By European standards, therefore, the Russian population was large but it was not yet vastly greater than that of its Old Regime rivals and it was much smaller than the human resources controlled by Napoleon. In 1812 the French Empire, in other words all territories directly ruled from Paris, had a population of 43.7 million. But Napoleon was also King of Italy, which had a population of 6.5 million, and Protector of the 14 million inhabitants of the Confederation of the Rhine. Some other territories were also his to command: most notably from the Russian perspective the Duchy of Warsaw, whose population of 3.8 million made a disproportionate contribution to his war effort in 1812–14. A mere listing of these numbers says something about the challenge faced by Russia in these years.

From the state’s perspective the great point about mobilizing the Russian population was that it was not merely numerous but also cheap. A private in Wellington’s army scarcely lived the life of a prince but his annual pay was eleven times that of his Russian equivalent even if the latter was paid in silver kopeks. In reality the Russian private in 1812 was far more likely to be paid in depreciating paper currency worth one-quarter of its face value. Comparisons of prices and incomes are always problematic because it is often unclear whether the Russian rubles cited are silver or paper, and in any case the cost of living differed greatly between Russia and foreign countries, above all Britain. A more realistic comparison is the fact that even in peacetime a British soldier received not just bread but also rice, meat, peas and cheese. A Russian private was given nothing but flour and groats, though in wartime these
were supplemented by meat and vodka. The soldiers boiled their groats into a porridge which was their staple diet.  

A Russian regiment was also sometimes provided not with uniforms and boots but with cloth and leather from which it made its own clothing and footwear. Powder, lead and paper were also delivered to the regiments for them to turn into cartridges. Nor was it just soldiers whose labour was used for free by the state. A small minority of conscripts were sent not to the army but to the mines. More importantly, when Peter the Great first established the ironworks which were the basis of Russian military industry he assigned whole villages to work in them in perpetuity. He did the same with some of the cloth factories set up to clothe his army. This assigned labour was all the cheaper because the workers’ families retained their farms, from which they were expected to feed themselves.  

So long as all European armies were made up of long-serving professionals the Russian military system competed excellently. The system of annual recruit levies allowed the Russian army to be the largest and cheapest in Europe without putting unbearable pressure on the population. Between 1793 and 1815, however, changes began to occur, first in France and later in Prussia, which put a question mark against its long-term viability. Revolutionary France began to conscript whole ‘classes’ of young men in the expectation that once the war was over they would return to civilian life as citizens of the new republic. In 1798 this system was made permanent by the so-called *Loi Jourdain*, which established a norm of six years’ service. A state which conscripted an entire age group for a limited period could put more men in the ranks than Russia. In time it would also have a trained reserve of still relatively young men who had completed their military service. If Russia tried to copy this system its army would cease to be a separate estate of the realm and the whole nature of the tsarist state and society would have to change. A citizen army was barely compatible with a society based on serfdom. The army would become less reliable as a force to suppress internal rebellion. Noble landowners would face the prospect of a horde of young men returning to the countryside who (if existing laws remained) were no longer serfs and who had been trained in arms.  

In fact the Napoleonic challenge came and went too quickly for the full implications of this threat to materialize. Temporary expedients sufficed to overcome the emergency. In 1807 and again in 1812–14 the regime raised a large hostilities-only militia despite the fears of some of its own leaders that this would be useless in military terms and might turn into a dangerous threat to the social order. When the idea of a militia was first mooted in the winter of 1806–7, Prince I. V. Lopukhin, one of Alexander’s most senior advisers, warned him that ‘at present in Russia the weakening of ties of subordination to the landowners is more dangerous than foreign invasion’. The emperor was willing to take this risk and his judgement proved correct. The mobilization of Russian manpower through a big increase in the regular army and the summoning of the militia just sufficed to defeat Napoleon without requiring fundamental changes in the Russian political order.  

Next only to men as a military resource came horses, with which Russia was better endowed than any other country on earth. Immense herds dwelt in the steppe lands of southern Russia and Siberia. These horses were strong, swift and exceptionally resilient. They were also very cheap. One historian of the Russian horse industry calls these steppe horses ‘a huge and inexhaustible reserve’. The closest the Russian cavalry came to pure steppe horses was in its Cossack, Bashkir and Kalmyk irregular regiments. The Don Cossack horse was ugly, small, fast and very easy to manoeuvre. It could travel great distances in atrocious weather and across difficult terrain for days on end and with minimal forage in a way that was impossible for regular cavalry. At home the Cossack horse was always out to grass. In winter it would dig out a little trench with its front hoofs to expose roots and grasses hidden under the ice and snow. Cossacks provided their own horses when they joined the army, though in 1812–14 the government did subsidize them for animals lost on campaign. Superb as scouts and capable of finding their way across any terrain even in the dark, the Cossacks also spared the Russian regular light cavalry many of the duties which exhausted their equivalents in other armies: but the Russian hussar, lancer and mounted jaeger regiments also themselves had strong, resilient, cheap and speedy horses with a healthy admixture of steppe blood.  

Traditionally the medium (dragoon) and heavy (cuirassier) horses had been a much bigger problem. In fact on the eve of the Seven Years War Russia had possessed no viable cuirassier regiments and even her dragoons had been in very poor shape. By 1812, however, much had changed, above all because of the huge expansion of the Russian horsestuds industry in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Two hundred
and fifty private studs existed by 1800, almost all of which had been created in the last forty years. They provided some of the dragoon and most of the cuirassier horses. British officers who served alongside the Russians in 1812–14 agreed that the heavy cavalry was, in the words of Sir Charles Stewart, "undoubtedly very fine". Sir Robert Wilson wrote that the Russian heavy cavalry "horses are matchless for an union of size, strength, activity and hardiness; whilst formed with the bulk of the British cart-horse, they have so much blood as never to be coarse, and withal are so supple as naturally to adapt themselves to the manage, and receive the highest degree of dressing".  

If there was a problem with the Russian cuirassier horse it was perhaps that it was too precious, at least in the eyes of Alexander I. Even officially these heavy cavalry horses cost two and a half times as much as a hussar’s mount, and the horses of the Guards cuirassiers – in other words the Chevaliers Gardes and Horse Guard regiments – cost a great deal more. Their feeding and upkeep were more expensive than that of the light cavalry horses and, as usual with larger mounts, they had less endurance and toughness. Since they came from studs they were also much harder to replace. Perhaps for these reasons, in 1813–14 the Russian cuirassiers were often kept in reserve and saw limited action. Alexander was furious when on one occasion an Austrian general used them for outpost duty and allowed them to sustain unnecessary casualties.  

Russian military industry could usually rely on domestic sources for its raw materials with some key exceptions. Much saltpetre needed to be imported from overseas and so too did lead, which became an expensive and dangerous weakness in 1807–12 when the Continental System hamstringed Russian overseas trade. Wool for the army’s uniforms was also a problem, because Russia only produced four-fifths of the required amount. There were also not enough wool factories to meet military demand as the army expanded after 1807. The truly crucial raw materials were iron, copper and wood, however, and these Russia had in abundance. At the beginning of Alexander’s reign Russia was still the world’s leading iron producer and stood second only to Britain in copper. Peter the Great had established the first major Russian ironworks to exploit the enormous resources of iron ore and timber in the Urals region, on the borders of Europe and Siberia. Though Russian metallurgical technology was beginning to fall well behind Britain, it was still more than adequate to cover military needs in 1807–14. The Ural region was far from the main arms-manufacturing centres in Petersburg and in the city of Tula, 194 kilometres south of Moscow, but efficient waterways linked the three areas. Nevertheless, any arms or ammunition produced in the Urals works would not reach armies deployed in Russia’s western borderlands for over a year.  

Arms production fell into two main categories: artillery and handheld weapons. The great majority of Russian iron cannon were manufactured in the Alexander Artillery Works in Petrozavodsk, a small town in Olonets province north-east of Petersburg. They were above all designed for fortresses and for the siege train. Most of the field artillery came from the St Petersburg arsenal: it produced 1,255 new guns between 1803 and 1818. The technology of production was up to date in both works. In the Petersburg Arsenal a steam-powered generator was introduced in 1811 which drove all its lathes and its drilling machinery. A smaller number of guns were produced and repaired in the big depots and workshops in Briansk, a city near the border of Russia and Belorussia. Russian guns and carriages were up to the best international standards once Aleksei Arakcheev’s reforms of the artillery were completed by 1805. The number of types of gun was reduced, equipment was standardized and lightened, and careful thought went into matching weapons and equipment to the tactical tasks they were intended to fulfil. The only possible weakness was the Russian howitzers, which could not be elevated to the same degree as the French model and therefore could not always reach their targets when engaged in duels with their French counterparts. On the other hand, thanks to the lightness of their carriages and the quality of their horses the Russian horse artillery was the most mobile and flexible on the battlefield by 1812–14.  

The situation as regards handheld firearms was much less satisfactory. Muskets were produced in three places: the Izhevsk works in Viatka province near the Urals turned out roughly 10 per cent of all firearms manufactured in 1812–14; many fewer were produced at the Sestroretsk works 35 kilometres from Petersburg, though Sestroretsk did play a bigger role in repairing existing weapons; the city of Tula was therefore by far the most important source of muskets in 1812–14.  

The Tula state arms factory had been founded by Peter the Great in 1712 but production was shared between it and private workshops. In 1812, though the state factory produced most of the new muskets, six
private entrepreneurs also supplied a great many. These entrepreneurs did not themselves own factories, however. They met state orders partly from their own rather small workshops but mostly by subcontracting the orders to a large number of master craftsmen and artisans who worked from their own homes. The war ministry complained that this wasted time, transport and fuel. The state factory was itself mostly just a collection of smallish workshops with production often by hand. The labour force was divided into five crafts: each craft was responsible for one aspect of production (gun barrels, wooden stocks, firing mechanisms, cold steel weapons, all other musket parts). Producing the barrels was the most complicated part of the operation and caused most of the delays, partly because skilled labour was in short supply.

The biggest problem both in the factory and the private workshops was out-of-date technology and inadequate machine tools. Steam-powered machinery was only introduced at the very end of the Napoleonic Wars and in any case proved a failure, in part because it required wood for fuel, which was extremely expensive in the Tula region. Water provided the traditional source of power and much more efficient machinery was introduced in 1813 which greatly reduced the consumption of water and allowed power-based production to continue right through the week. Even after the arrival of this machinery, however, shortage of water meant that all power ceased for a few weeks in the spring. In 1813, too, power-driven drills for boring the musket barrels were introduced: previously this whole job had been done by hand by 500 men, which was a serious brake on production. A Russian observer who had visited equivalent workshops in England noted that every stage in production there had its own appropriate machine tools. In Tula, on the contrary, many specialist tools, especially hammers and drills, were not available: in particular, it was almost impossible to acquire good steel machine tools. Russian craftsmen were sometimes left with little more than planes and chisels.21

Given the problems it faced, the Russian arms industry performed miracles in the Napoleonic era. Despite the enormous expansion of the armed forces in these years and heavy loss of weapons in 1812–14, the great majority of Russian soldiers did receive firearms and most of them were made in Tula. These muskets cost one-quarter of their English equivalents. On the other hand, without the 101,000 muskets imported from Britain in 1812–13 it would have been impossible to arm the reserve units which reinforced the field army in 1813. Moreover, the problems of Russian machine tools and the tremendous pressures for speed and quantity made it inevitable that some of these muskets would be sub-standard. One British source was very critical of the quality of Tula muskets in 1808, for example. On the other hand, a French test of muskets’ firing mechanisms concluded that the Russian models were somewhat more reliable than their own, though much less so than the British and Austrian ones. The basic point was that all European muskets of this era were thoroughly unreliable and imperfect weapons. The Russian ones were undoubtedly worse than the British, and probably often worse than those of the other major armies too. Moreover, despite heroic levels of production in 1812–14 the Russian arms industry could never supply enough new-model muskets to ensure that all soldiers in a battalion had one type and calibre of firearm, though once again Russia’s was an extreme example of a problem common to all the continental armies.22

Perhaps the quality of their firearms did exert some influence on Russian tactics. It would have been an optimistic Russian general who believed that men armed with these weapons could emulate Wellington’s infantry by deploying in two ranks and repelling advancing columns by their musketry.23 The shortcomings of the Russian musket were possibly an additional reason for the infantry to fight in dense formations supported by the largest ratio of artillery to foot-soldiers of any European army. However, although the deficiencies of the Russian musket may perhaps have influenced the way the army fought, they certainly did not undermine its viability on the battlefield. The Napoleonic era was still a far cry from the Crimean War, by which time the Industrial Revolution was beginning to transform armaments and the superiority of British and French rifled muskets over Russian smoothbores made life impossible for the Russian infantry.

The fourth and final element in Russian power was fiscal, in other words revenue. Being a great power in eighteenth-century Europe was very expensive and the costs escalated with every war. Military expenditure could cause not just fiscal but also political crisis within a state. The most famous example of this was the collapse of the Bourbon regime in France in 1789, brought on by bankruptcy as a result of the costs of intervention in the American War of Independence. Financial crisis also undermined other great powers. In the midst of the Seven Years War,
for example, it forced the Habsburgs substantially to reduce the size of their army.

The impact of finance on diplomatic and military policy continued in the Napoleonic era. In 1805–6 Prussian policy was undermined by lack of funds to keep the army mobilized and therefore a constant threat to Napoleon. Similarly, in 1809 Austria was faced with the choice of either fighting Napoleon immediately or reducing the size of its army, since the state could not afford the current level of military expenditure. The Austrians chose to fight, were defeated, and were then lumbered with a war indemnity which crippled their military potential for years to come. An even more crushing indemnity was imposed on Prussia in 1807. In 1789 Russia had a higher level of debt than Austria or Prussia. Inevitably the wars of 1798–1814 greatly increased that debt. Unlike the Austrians or Prussians, in 1807 Russia did not have to pay an indemnity after being defeated by Napoleon. Had it lost in 1812, however, the story would have been very different.

Even without the burdens of a war indemnity Russia suffered financial crisis in 1807–14. Ever since Catherine II’s first war with the Ottomans (1768–74) expenditure had regularly exceeded revenue. The state initially covered the deficit in part by borrowing from Dutch bankers. By the end of the eighteenth century this was no longer possible: interest payments had become a serious burden on the treasury. In any case the Netherlands had been overrun by France and its financial markets were closed to foreign powers. Even before 1800 most of the deficit had been covered by printing paper rubles. By 1796 the paper ruble was worth only two-thirds of its silver equivalent. Constant war after 1805 caused expenditure to rocket. The only way to cover the cost was by printing more and more paper rubles. By 1812 the paper currency was worth roughly one-quarter of its ‘real’ (i.e. silver) value. Inflation caused a sharp rise in state expenditure, not least as regards military arms, equipment and victuals. To increase revenue rapidly enough to match costs was impossible. Meanwhile the finance ministry lived in constant dread of runaway inflation and the complete collapse in trust in the paper currency. Even without this, dependence on depreciating paper currency had serious risks for the Russian army’s ability to operate abroad. Some food and equipment had to be purchased in the theatre of operations, above all when operating on the territory of one’s allies, but no foreigner would willingly accept paper rubles in return for goods and services. 

At the death of Catherine II in 1796 Russian annual revenue amounted to 73 million rubles or £11.7 million; if collection costs are included this sinks to £8.93 million, or indeed lower if the depreciating value of the paper ruble is taken into account. Austrian and Prussian revenues were of similar order: in 1800, for example, Prussian gross revenue was £3.65 million: in 1788 Austrian gross revenue had been £8.75 million. Even in 1789, with her finances in deep crisis, French royal revenue at 475 million francs or £19 million was much higher. Britain was in another league again: the new taxes introduced in 1797–9 raised her annual revenue from £23 million to £35 million.  

If Russia nevertheless remained a formidable great power, that was because crude comparisons of revenue across Europe have many flaws. In addition, as we have seen in this chapter, the price of all key military resources was far cheaper in Russia than, for example, in Britain. Even in peacetime, the state barely paid at all for some services and goods. It even succeeded in palmimg off on the peasantry part of the cost of feeding most of the army, which was quartered in the villages for most of the year. In 1812 this principle was taken to an extreme, with massive requisitioning and even greater voluntary contributions. One vital reason why Russia had been victorious at limited cost in the eighteenth century was that it had fought almost all its wars on enemy territory and, to a considerable extent, at foreign expense. This happened too in 1813–14. 

In 1812–14 the Russian Empire defeated Napoleon by a narrow margin and by straining to breaking point almost every sinew of its power. Even so, on its own Russia could never have destroyed Napoleon’s empire. For this a European grand alliance was needed. Creating, sustaining and to some extent leading this grand alliance was Alexander I’s greatest achievement. Many obstacles lay in Alexander’s path. To understand why this was the case and how these difficulties were overcome requires some knowledge of how international relations worked in this era. 

In the second half of the eighteenth century Europe contained five great powers. Of this fivesome, Britain and France were ineretate enemies and so were Austria and Prussia. Russia was the only one of the five without a bitter rival and this worked greatly to its advantage. On the whole Russia sided with Britain in its conflict with France. Above all, this was because France was the traditional patron of the Swedes,
Poles and Ottomans who were Russia’s immediate neighbours and rivals. Britain was also much the biggest market for Russian exports. Nevertheless relations between the two powers were sometimes strained. Like other Europeans, the Russians resented Britain’s high-handed treatment of neutral trade in wartime and led a coalition of Baltic powers to defend neutral rights during the American War of Independence, at a time when British naval power was at its weakest. In 1787–91 France’s domestic crisis seemed to have undermined her power and thereby allowed British diplomacy more room for manoeuvre. At precisely this moment Russian armies were smashing the Ottomans and advancing deep into the Balkans. The first shadow of the Victorian-era ‘Great Game’ between Britain and Russia for the domination of Asia came over the horizon. William Pitt, the prime minister, took up the role of Turkey’s saviour against Russia and attempted without success to force Catherine II to give up some of her conquests. Soon afterwards French expansion pushed such concerns aside and they remained on the margins of European diplomacy for a generation. But Pitt’s efforts were not forgotten in Petersburg. 28

Even more useful to Russia was Austro-Prussian rivalry. The lesson learned by both the Habsburgs and the Hohenzollerns from the Seven Years War was that their security, let alone future expansion, depended on Russian goodwill. Catherine II conducted a shrewd auction for Russian support. By the 1770s she had come to the correct conclusion that Russia had most to gain by expanding southwards against the Ottomans. For such a policy Austria was more useful than Prussia. The empress therefore graciously allowed Vienna to win the auction for her favour. For this the Austrians paid a high price. In 1788 they found themselves involved in an expensive war against the Ottomans which served Russian not Austrian interests.

Already by the Napoleonic era many of the issues which were to take Austria to war against Russia in 1914 were causing friction between the two empires. Above all there was Austrian fear of ever-growing Russian power. By the 1790s, for example, not merely did the Russian navy dominate the Black Sea, it also had a powerful squadron operating in the Adriatic, in other words in the Habsburgs’ back yard. During Russia’s three wars against the Ottomans between 1768 and 1812 her armies occupied present-day Romania. Russian annexation of this territory was a very real possibility and a major threat to Austrian interests.

Russian power and Russia’s victories over their Ottoman overlords won Russia many adherents among the Christian population of the Balkans. In addition, these Christians were Orthodox, as were the Russians. In 1804–12 the Serbs were in rebellion against their Ottoman rulers and looked to Russia for support. In a manner very familiar to historians of Russian foreign policy before 1914 Russian diplomats waivered between wanting the Serbs as loyal clients and fearing that Serbian ambitions would drag Russia into disastrous conflicts with the Habsburgs. Still worse from an Austrian perspective, Russia had a growing number of sympathizers among the Habsburgs’ own Orthodox subjects, thousands of whom emigrated to the steppe lands of southern Russia and Ukraine in the second half of the eighteenth century. 29

Initially the French Revolution and French subsequent expansion was of less concern to Russia than to any other European power. Catherine disliked the Revolution and locked up a handful of Russian dissidents. She crushed ‘Jacobinism’ in Poland, using this as a good excuse to destroy the last remnants of Polish statehood. No sensible person could fear a French-style revolution in Russia, however. There was no Russian ‘Third Estate’. To the extent that it existed at all, the professional middle class was mostly of foreign origin and in the state’s employ. Russian merchants and artisans were still with few exceptions deeply traditional, Orthodox and monarchist in their mentalities and loyalties. Enlightened public opinion, still almost the monopoly of nobles, saw the monarchy as the most enlightened force in Russia and looked to it to modernize and Europeanize the empire. In the land of Pugachev any idea of mass revolution was anathema to every educated or property-owning Russian. 30

As regards French territorial expansion, Russia could initially also take a relaxed view. France was at the other end of Europe. It would have to expand some distance before Russia’s interests were challenged. By contrast, any advance would quickly carry French troops into the Rhineland and into Belgium, thereby touching on essential Habsburg and British interests. With Britain, France, Austria and perhaps even Prussia embroiled at the other end of Europe, Russia need have no fears for its security and could pursue her interests with confidence, not least in Poland. 31

By the late 1790s Russia could no longer afford to be quite so relaxed. De facto French annexation of the Rhineland, Switzerland, the
Netherlands and parts of Italy added up to a worrying increase in French power. With French eyes turning to the eastern Mediterranean and even Ottoman Egypt, Paul I had some reason to join the Second Coalition. The manner in which he did so showed, however, that he regarded Russia as an auxiliary in a war whose front-line belligerents were Austria and Britain. Moreover, within a year of Russian troops going into action Paul had fallen out with his allies. By the last year of his reign he had reversed his position entirely. Russia withdrew from the coalition, banned all trade with Britain, headed a new league to secure neutral countries’ maritime rights, and even sent off a Cossack force on a feaful expedition towards India. By the time Paul was assassinated in March 1801 Russia to most intents and purposes had allied itself to France in its war against Britain.

The new emperor, Alexander I, immediately restored good relations with Britain but his main initial priority was to steer clear of international entanglements and devote himself to internal reforms. Only in 1804 did Russo-French relations once again begin to slide towards war. The main reason for this was that the geopolitical concerns that had taken Russia into the Second Coalition had reappeared but in sharper form. France was now considerably more powerful than it had been in 1798. Under French pressure the Holy Roman Empire was being dismantled and Germany was being rearranged without reference to Russian interests. By proclaiming himself King of Italy in 1804 Napoleon was not just asserting his domination of the peninsula; he was also establishing powerful bases for French expansion into the eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and Constantinople. To these fundamental concerns Napoleon’s abduction and subsequent murder of the Duc d’Enghien, a junior member of the exiled French royal family whom he had lifted from the territory of Alexander’s father-in-law, added an element of moral outrage. Many French royalist émigrés lived in Petersburg and the Russian aristocracy saw in Enghien’s murder a confirmation that Napoleon was the true heir of Jacobin terror. Alexander himself was much less of a legitimist than these Petersburg grandees but Napoleon’s treatment of Enghien was by no means the only example of the French leader’s contempt for international treaties and norms.

All these factors took Russia to war in 1805. On this occasion the Russian commitment was more whole-hearted than it had been in 1798. Nevertheless Alexander still saw Austria, Britain and Prussia as the front-line antagonists, to whom Russia was offering unselfish assistance though its own vital interests were not directly engaged. Annoyance that Prussia was unwilling to do its duty led him to plan to coerce Berlin into joining the coalition. Though he kept a clear eye on Russian interests, Alexander also floated grandiose principles to underpin lasting European peace and security. A child of the Enlightenment, he liked to speak and see himself in such terms. But his at times almost Wilsonian tendency to proclaim great principles of international order was also rooted in a rather American sense that a country of Russia’s power and geopolitical security could afford to stand on a hill above the common ruck of states and lay down rules for the common good.

The war of 1805–7 was a disaster for Russia. Instead of awaiting the arrival of Mikhail Kutuzov’s Russians, part of the Austrian army advanced into Bavaria at the beginning of the 1805 campaign and was cut off and forced to surrender. Kutuzov extricated his army from a potential trap and retreated with great skill eastwards into Moravia. The Russian troops behaved with their habitual calm discipline and held the French at bay in a number of hard-fought rearguard actions. Most notable was the battle at Schongraben on 16 November 1805, immortalized by Leo Tolstoy in War and Peace. In this action the Russians were commanded by the fierce and charismatic Prince Petr Bagration. By the beginning of December the campaign appeared to be swinging in the allies’ favour. Napoleon’s lines of communication were very stretched and Prussia seemed to be on the verge of joining the Austrians and Russians. But Alexander I overrode Kutuzov’s advice and launched the allied army into an attack that led to the catastrophic battle of Austerlitz on 2 December. As a result Austria made peace and the Russians retreated back across their borders.

For almost a year there followed a strange interlude in which the Russians and French neither made peace nor actually fought each other. This period ended when war broke out between Napoleon and Prussia in October 1806. In the previous decade the Prussians had tried to protect their security and expand their territory by remaining neutral and balancing between France and its enemies. By the autumn of 1805, however, the implications of French hegemony in Germany were drawing Prussia towards the allies. But Berlin prevaricated for too long and Napoleon’s victory at Austerlitz left them at his mercy. In the following months they learned the humiliating price of being his client. In the
autumn of 1806 Prussia went to war to regain its position as a proud and independent great power. Instead of trying to hold the line of the river Elbe and await Russian help, however, the Prussian army advanced and was destroyed at the battle of Jena-Auerstadt on 14 October 1806.35

For the remaining eight months of the war the Russians found themselves fighting Napoleon in Poland and East Prussia almost on their own, since only a small remnant of the Prussian army had survived. In these months the Russian army fought well and inflicted heavy losses on the French, especially in the drawn battle of Eylau in February 1807. Their commander was General Levin von Bennigsen, an intelligent strategist and a skilful tactician, who had left his native Hanover as a young officer and transferred to the Russian service. The odds were always heavily against the Russians, however. Napoleon now controlled most of western Europe, Germany and Poland. A coalition able to draw its resources only from Russia and the small province of East Prussia was bound to be outmatched. In any case the Russians had not expected or prepared to wage a life-and-death struggle on their own against Napoleon. The empire’s resources were far from fully mobilized.

Thousands of Russian troops fell ill or deserted for lack of food in the winter of 1806–7. The Russian commissariat was notoriously slow and corrupt. Bennigsen was better at tactics than logistics. He put far too much faith in local Prussian contractors and failed to organize transport, communications and supply bases in his rear. To do him justice, however, the Russians had been plunged into a winter campaign with no warning. Lithuania and Belorussia – in other words the areas immediately behind his army – were much poorer and more sparsely populated than the Great Russian core of the empire or the rich agricultural provinces of south Russia and Ukraine, let alone Germany, Bohemia or France. Bad harvests were frequent and made it doubly hard to procure food for men and horses. Transporting food and fodder into the region from Russia was difficult and expensive because of primitive communications. In addition, there was the currency issue. In Russia itself the paper ruble was almost universally accepted. In the empire’s western borderlands it was either shunned entirely or accepted only at heavy discounts against the silver ruble. This made the cost of sustaining an army in the region ruinously expensive.36

Politics and geography were the most important reasons for Napoleon’s triumph in 1805–7. The three eastern great powers had not united against him: Prussia was neutral in 1805, Austria in 1806. In fact at no time were the main armies of even two of the eastern powers united on the battlefield against Napoleon. By the time Russian troops arrived in the theatre of operations their allies’ armies had already been defeated. To some extent this was due to foolish Austrian and Prussian strategy, but geography dealt the allies a losing hand. In 1805 it was possible both financially and logistically to concentrate the French armies in the area of Boulogne and to use this as a base from which the entire army could be deployed against the Austrians. For the same reasons it was inconceivable to concentrate the Russian army anywhere near the Austrian or Prussian borders for weeks, let alone months, on end. Even had it been possible, it would probably have made little difference. The distance from the Channel to the Bavarian–Austrian frontier was much less than from the Russian borderlands. Moreover, the French could march through fertile country down many excellent roads, requisitioning as they went to cover their needs. An army which attempted to move at this speed and in this way in the Russo-Austrian borderlands would have starved and disintegrated. The Austrians and Russians managed the movement of Kutuzov’s troops with fair efficiency in 1805; even so, partly thanks to Mack, they arrived too late.37

In 1806 the geographical dilemma of the allies was far worse because Napoleon now had a string of bases and allies in western and southern Germany. His troops were much closer than the Russians to Berlin and the Prussian heartland. Perhaps the Prussians could have held Napoleon on the Elbe long enough for the Russians to arrive but this is anything but certain. If not, the heirs of Frederick II were hardly likely to avoid decisive battle, abandon almost all Prussia and retire to the Oder to await deliverance from Russia. The basic lesson of 1805–7 was that not only must the three eastern monarchies unite but the Russian army must already be positioned in central Europe when military operations began. This finally happened in 1813 but under unique circumstances which no one could have predicted.

Politics and geography were a more important source of disaster in 1805–7 than any failings of the Russian army. Even in 1805 the army was in many respects formidable. Above all this was because of the near legendary courage, resilience and loyalty of the rank and file. Ethnic solidarity contributed to the army’s strength. Most soldiers were Russians, though a significant minority were Belorussians and Ukrainians.
Ukrainians were particularly common in the cavalry, which made good sense since the average Ukrainian was far more likely to be familiar with horses than a peasant from northern or central Russia. In this era, however, it was class and religion that mattered above all. What counted therefore was that these men were peasants and Orthodox. In any case in ethno-linguistic terms Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians were if anything closer than the soldiers of a French regiment drawn from Brittany, Lorraine and Aquitaine.

Most important in creating solidarity were the conditions of military service. Military historians stress that what usually matters most in war is not grand allegiances to country or ideology but the loyalty that binds soldiers to their comrades and their units. In Alexander I’s army this loyalty existed to the highest degree. In the decade before 1812 the average age of conscripts was just under 23\footnote{23} and soldiers served for twenty-five years. Given high mortality rates even in peacetime, for many soldiers this was a life sentence. Few conscripts were literate, so they could not maintain contact with their homes by letter. The regimental personnel records show that most NCOs never took home leave. Most soldiers did not return to their villages even after retirement from the army. Parents were long since dead and siblings might well not welcome an extra mouth to feed. Particularly on private estates, conscription was sometimes used as a means to rid the community of restless young men and was often conducted unjustly. Neither the landowner nor the village community necessarily welcomed the return of an ageing man, possibly unfit for agricultural work and maybe nursing a grievance against those who had sent him off as a recruit. The noble landowner could forbid a retired soldier to return to his village.

Meanwhile, once the conscript had adapted to military life, the regiment could become a new home. The new soldier’s messmates became a sort of substitute family. If a man died, his possessions went to his comrades. Each company had its own mess cooperative (артель), into which part of a soldier’s pay, half his outside earnings, and most of any money given as a reward for good service was invested. Particularly in the Guards, the funds of the regimental artels could add up to many thousands of rubles. This money was used to buy the soldiers ‘luxuries’ to supplement their diet of bread and porridge, and to save money by purchasing food, kettles, transport and other items in bulk. Ideally a soldier would serve in the same regiment all his life and many did so.

Even when men were moved into new regiments, however, they usually transferred with their whole company, so many collective loyalties and solidarities remained.\footnote{41}

Prince Eugen of Württemberg, Emperor Alexander’s first cousin, commanded initially a Russian brigade, next a division and finally a corps between 1807 and 1814. He admired his soldiers and had a reputation not just for courageous leadership but also for ‘mucking in’ with them and forgetting his royal dignity. His memoirs are probably the most useful written by any Russian general in the Napoleonic era. He recalled that

the young recruit is normally patient and very eager to learn, and he accepts his unavoidable fate more readily than is the case with the peoples of other countries who are compulsorily conscripted ... In time the regiment becomes his new home and to understand the attachment which can inspire a Russian soldier for this home you must witness it with your own eyes. No wonder then that, armed with such sentiments, the Russian soldier fights so well.\footnote{42}

Alexander I understood the power of regimental solidarity and tried to preserve it by ensuring that as far as possible officers remained within a single regiment until they reached senior rank. Sometimes this was a losing battle since officers could have strong personal motivation for transfer. Relatives liked to serve together. A more senior brother or an uncle in the regiment could provide important patronage. Especially in wartime, the good of the service sometimes required transferring officers to fill vacancies in other regiments. So too did the great expansion of the army in Alexander’s reign. Seventeen new regiments were founded between 1801 and 1807 alone: experienced officers needed to be found for them. In these circumstances it is surprising that more than half of all officers between the rank of ensign and captain had served in only one regiment, as had a great many majors. Particularly in older regiments such as the Grenadiers, the Briansk or Kursk infantry regiments, or the Pskov Dragoons the number of officers up to the rank of major who had spent their whole lives in the regiments was extremely high. As one might expect, the Preobrazhensky Guards, the senior regiment in the Russian army, was the extreme case, with almost all the officers spending their whole careers in the regiment. Add to this the fact that the overwhelming majority of Russian officers were bachelors and the strength of their commitment to their regiments becomes evident.\footnote{43}
Nevertheless, the greatest bearers of regimental loyalty and tradition were the non-commissioned officers. In the regiments newly formed in Alexander’s reign, the senior NCOs arrived when the regiment was created and served in it for the rest of their careers. Old regiments would have a strong cadre of NCOs who had served in the unit for twenty years or more. In a handful of extreme cases such as the Briansk Infantry and Narva Dragoons every single sergeant-major, sergeant and corporal had spent his entire military life in the regiment. In the Russian army there was usually a clear distinction between the sergeant-majors (fel’dfebeli in the infantry and vakhmistry in the cavalry) on the one hand, and the ten times more numerous sergeants and corporals (untero-fitsery) on the other. The sergeants and corporals were mostly peasants. They gained their NCO status as veterans who had shown themselves to be reliable, sober and skilled in peacetime, and courageous on the battlefield. Like the conscript body as a whole, the great majority of them were illiterate.

The sergeant-majors on the other hand were in the great majority of cases literate, though particularly in wartime some illiterate sergeants who had shown courage and leadership might be promoted to sergeant-major. Many were the sons of priests, but above all of the deacons and other junior clergy who were required to assist at Orthodox services. Most sons of the clergy were literate and the church could never find employment for all of them. They filled a key gap in the army as NCOs. But the biggest source of sergeant-majors were soldiers’ sons, who were counted as hereditary members of the military estate. The state set up compulsory special schools for these boys: almost 17,000 boys were attending these schools in 1800. In 1805 alone 1,893 soldiers’ sons entered the army. The education provided by the schools was rudimentary and the discipline was brutal but they did train many drummers and other musicians for the army, as well as some regimental clerks. Above all, however, they produced literate NCOs, imbued with military discipline and values from an early age. As befitted the senior NCO of the Russian army’s senior regiment, the regimental sergeant-major of the Preobrazhenskys in 1807, Fedor Karneev, was the model professional soldier: a soldier’s son with twenty-four years’ service in the regiment, an unblemished record, and a military cross for courage in action.44

Although the fundamental elements of the Russian army were immensely strong, there were important weaknesses in its tactics and training in 1805. With the exception of its light cavalry, this made it on the whole inferior to the French. The main reason for this was that the French army had been in almost constant combat with the forces of other great powers between 1792 and 1805. With the exception of the Italian and Swiss campaigns of 1799-1800, in which only a relatively small minority of regiments participated, the Russian army lacked any comparable wartime experience. In its absence, parade-ground values dominated training, reaching absurd levels of pedantry and obsession at times. Partly as a result, Russian musketry was inferior to French, as was the troops’ skill at skirmishing. The Russians’ use of massed bayonet attacks to drive off skirmishers was costly and ineffective. In 1805-6 Russian artillery batteries were often poorly shielded against the fire of enemy skirmishers.45

The army’s worst problems revolved around coordination above the level of the regiment. In 1805 there were no permanent units of more than regimental size. At Austerlitz, Russian and Austrian columns put together at the last moment manoeuvred far less effectively than the permanent French divisions. In 1806 the Russians created their own divisions but coordination on the battlefield remained a weakness. The Russian cavalry would have been hard pressed to emulate Murat’s massed charge at Eylau. The Russian artillery certainly could not have matched the impressive concentration and mobility of Senarmont’s batteries at Friedland.

Most important, however, were weaknesses in the army’s high command, meaning the senior generals and, above all, the supreme commanders. At this level the Russians were bound to be inferior to the French. No one could match a monarch who was also a military genius. Although the Russian military performance was hampered by rivalry among its generals, French marshals cooperated no better in Napoleon’s absence. When Alexander seized effective command from Kutuzov before Austerlitz the result was a disaster. Thoroughly chastened, Alexander kept away from the battlefield in 1805-7. This solved one problem but created another. In the absence of the monarch the top leader needed to be a figure who could command obedience both by his reputation and by being unequivocally senior to all the other generals. By late 1806, however, all the great leaders of Catherine’s wars were dead. Mikhail Kutuzov was the best of the remaining bunch but he had been out of
favour since Austerlitz. Alexander therefore appointed Field-Marshall
Mikhail Kamensky to command the army on the grounds of his senior-
ity, experience and relatively good military record. When he reached the
army Kamensky's confused and even senile behaviour quickly horrified
his subordinates. As one young general, Count Johann von Lieven, asked
on the eve of the first serious battles with the French: 'Is this lunatic to
command us against Napoleon?' Kamensky quickly abandoned the army and took himself off to
the rear. He was ordered by Alexander to retire to his estates, where soon
afterwards he was murdered by his peasants. In Kamensky's absence the
more junior of his two corps commanders, Levin von Bennigsen, more
or less seized control of the army, consolidating his position by exagger-
ating the Russians' success in the rearguard actions at Golymin and
Pultusk in his report to the monarch. Bennigsen's allies in Petersburg
whispered in Alexander's ear about his skill and achievement. The
emperor responded by overlooking Bennigsen's role in his father's mur-
der, appointing him to be supreme commander and loading him down
with decorations and financial rewards. To do Bennigsen justice, he
certainly was the most competent replacement available for Kamensky,
and somebody needed to take control of the situation quickly. He
also performed creditably in extricating the army from the dangerous
position in which it found itself at the beginning of the campaign. This
did not stop his army from becoming a nest of intrigue among the senior
generals. The other corps commander, Friedrich von Buxhoeveden,
loathed Bennigsen, refused to collaborate with him, and challenged him
to a duel. Alexander himself sent General Otto von Knorring to keep an
eye on his supreme commander.

A particularly bitter dispute broke out at the beginning of the spring
1807 campaign between Bennigsen and his senior divisional com-
mander, Lieutenant-General Baron Fabian von der Osten-Sacken, yet
another Baltic German. The battle between the two men is worth a
moment's attention, not just because it was symptomatic of a major
and lasting problem in the army's upper ranks, but also because the
individuals concerned were to play vital roles in the years 1812–14.

Like many of the senior Russian commanders, Osten-Sacken was
tough, jealous, stubborn, ambitious and proud. Charming and witty in
society, he could be a very different man in his treatment of the officers
and men under his command. His personality was probably affected by

a sense of unfairness and bitterness which did not finally leave him until
he achieved glory and universal respect in 1813–14. In 1740 his father
Wilhelm had been the aide-de-camp to Field-Marshall Münich, the key
figure in the army and government of the Empress Anna. Had the regime
of Anna and her nephew Ivan VI survived, Wilhelm could have expected
a glorious career. His son Fabian would have been enlisted in the Guards
almost from birth and by his mid-twenties he would have been a colonel
and an imperial aide-de-camp. Instead, Ivan VI was toppled, Münich
exiled, and Wilhelm von der Osten-Sacken banished to a garrison regi-
ment, where he spent the rest of his long career without any further
promotion. His son Fabian lived a childhood of poverty and made his
way up the military ladder the hard way, through the ranks of the line
infantry with every step won by courage and hard work. The progress
began when he won promotion to the rank of ensign, the first officer
rank, for bravery in action against the Turks in 1769.47

Osten-Sacken loathed Bennigsen. His diaries in 1806–7 are a list of
complaints against a commander whom he considered to have misman-
aged the army's medical and commissariat services, failed to seize the
opportunities for victory at Eylau, and – perhaps most significantly –
eglected ever to consult his second-in-command, namely Osten-Sacken
himself, about how to conduct the campaign. At the beginning of the
1807 campaign Bennigsen planned to surprise and trap the isolated corps
of Marshal Ney by coordinated movements from different directions by
the Russian divisions. Osten-Sacken moved slowly and Ney escaped.
Bennigsen accused Osten-Sacken of deliberately sabotaging his plans in
order to discredit him and take over the army. Osten-Sacken claimed
that the orders were contradictory. The initial inquiry got nowhere: in
predictable fashion Bennigsen and Osten-Sacken were supported by
their networks of 'friends'. The process then dragged on for months and
only in 1808 did a court martial find against Osten-Sacken.48

By then the war had long since been concluded. On 14 June 1807
Napoleon defeated the Russian army at the battle of Friedland and
drove it back to the empire's border. Friedland was a serious defeat:
initial Russian estimates suggested that they had suffered up to 20,000
casualties. Nevertheless it was not a rout like Austerlitz, let alone on the
scale of Jena-Auerstadt. The great majority of the Russian army got
back safely and in relatively good order across the river Neman. With the
river between themselves and Napoleon, the Russian regiments quickly
regained their habitual discipline, order and fearlessness. Two fresh divisions under princes Dmitrii Lobanov-Rostovsky and Andrei Gor-
chakov had just arrived from Russia to reinforce them. Two hundred thousand militiamen had been mustered in Russia and would in time be used to fill the ranks of the army. New regular regiments were being raised, and new recruit levies witnessed to the fact that Russia’s man-
power resources were far from exhausted. At present Napoleon had not even crossed the Russian border. He still had a very long way to go before he could threaten the centres of Russian military, political and economic power in the Moscow and Petersburg regions. If Russia needed to continue the war after Friedland, there was no doubt that she could do so.

Nevertheless there were excellent reasons for the Russians to seek peace. The treasury was bankrupt, the army’s arsenals and stores were empty and it would take a long time to train, arm, officer and equip the new recruits. Tens of thousands of soldiers and many generals had been lost to wounds and sickness in the previous six months. Alexander no longer had any faith in Bennigsen but saw no other general as adequate to replace him. If the war continued then in practice Russia would be fighting alone. Prussian military power had been destroyed and the British not merely had no troops on the continent but were unwilling to allow Russia subsidies or even loans. Meanwhile London still seemed able to send military expeditions to conquer the Cape and parts of Spanish America. By now Napoleon controlled most of western and central Europe and could mobilize enormous resources for a war against Russia. No doubt it would take him some months to mount an invasion of the Russian heartland but this was not a major concern of Alexander’s advisers. What worried them enormously was that Napoleon was now positioned on the borders of the provinces – most of them in present-day Ukraine and Belarus – which Russia had acquired after Poland was partitioned in the previous generation. Polish landowners and officials still dominated this region. There was every reason to fear that, if Napoleon invaded the empire’s western borderlands, the Poles would rise up in his support. After hearing the news of Friedland Alexander agreed to Bennigsen’s appeal for an armistice and sent Lieutenant-
General Prince Dmitrii Lobanov-Rostovsky to conduct the armistice negotiations with the French. The emperor’s instructions to Lobanov told him ‘not himself to propose peace negotiations but if the French were the first to express a desire to put an end to the war then he should respond that the Emperor Alexander also desires peace’.

In some ways Lobanov was a strange choice for what was a semi-
diplomatic mission. He had no diplomatic experience and neither looked nor behaved like a diplomat. On the contrary, he was a rather brusque, impatient and slightly awkward man, not at all the person to smooth over misunderstandings by flattery and politeness. Of medium height, with a somewhat oriental slant to his eyes, Lobanov’s posture may not have been improved by the fact that he had twice been severely wounded in the Russo-Ottoman war of 1788–92, once in the head. The fact that he was a courageous soldier, however, might perhaps win him respect among the French generals with whom he was to negotiate. Lobanov did also have other advantages. Having just arrived from Russia with his division, he was wholly independent of Bennigsen and of the other generals in his faction-ridden army. Lobanov was also loyal and dependable. Unlike some senior officers and officials, he could be relied on to carry out Alexander’s orders to the letter.

Lobanov quickly discovered that Napoleon wanted not just peace but also an alliance with Russia. On the Russian side the detailed negoti-
ations for both peace and an alliance treaty were conducted by Lobanov and Prince Aleksandr Kurakin. In June 1807 Kurakin was the most senior statesman and diplomat at Alexander’s headquarters. For a time in Paul I’s reign he had run Russian foreign policy. Currently he was preparing to depart for his new post as ambassador in Vienna. Kurakin was obsessed with the minutiae of rank, status and appearance. He could be pedantic. But he was more intelligent, shrewder and more worldly-wise than his critics allowed. He belonged to that section of the ruling elite which had always seen Anglo-French competition for global dominion as the key cause of the wars that had wrecked Europe since 1793. Kurakin believed that if possible Russia must remain neutral in this conflict, using Anglo-French rivalry to enhance Russian interests. Though after Austerlitz he had come to see Napoleonic France as a threat to Russian security, he believed that the best way now to protect Russia was to come to an agreement with Napoleon to divide Europe into French and Russian spheres of interest.

Lobanov and Kurakin were first cousins. Both came from ancient aristocratic families. Whereas the Kurakins were rich, by 1800 Dmitrii’s branch of the Lobanov-Rostovskys was relatively poor. Above all that
was because Kuraks had occupied top positions in government throughout the eighteenth century in an era when political power usually brought rich financial rewards. Their marriage alliances placed them at the very heart of the Russian aristocracy. The Kuraks also produced only one or at most two sons in each generation, so the family's wealth was not dissipated. By contrast, it was a long time since a Prince Lobanov had played a key military or political role and Dmitri Lobanov's wealthy great-grandfather seems to have sired twenty-nine children from three marriages. When Tolstoy in *War and Peace* needed a fictional family to embody the world of the court and Petersburg high society he called them the Kurakis, though the real-life Kuraks were much more interesting and many-sided than Tolstoy's parody of the cynical aristocratic courtier, Prince Vasily Kuragin, and his unpleasant brood of spoiled children. Like Tolstoy's fictional character Prince Boris Drubetskoy, Dmitri Lobanov was brought up and educated in the family of his rich cousins, in this case the Kuraks.  

Although Kurakin and Lobanov discussed details with Talleyrand and Marshal Berthier, Russia's chief negotiator was Alexander I, who spent hours in one-to-one conversations with Napoleon. The first meeting between the two monarchs was the famous encounter on a ceremonial raft which took place in the middle of the river Neman on 25 June 1807. The river was the dividing line between the two armies, with the Russians on the east bank and the French on the west.

Of the six men -- all of them generals -- who accompanied Alexander to his meeting with Napoleon, the senior was his younger brother and heir, the Grand Duke Constantine. The emperor was fortunate in resembling his tall and handsome mother rather than his short, ugly and snub-nosed father. Constantine was not so lucky, and he resembled his father not just in looks but also in personality. Both men were obsessed with the minutiae of correct military drill and uniforms. More important, they were both very excitable and inconsistent, swinging between moods and ideas in a bewildering fashion. Above all, both were subject to terrifying fits of temper, in which threats and insults would rain down on anyone unfortunate enough to be the target of their wrath. Both men were actually also capable of great generosity and kindness but for proud aristocrats, acutely sensitive to public dishonour, Paul's insults had been as intolerable as his wayward policies or his blows to their careers.

In 1807-14 Constantine was not just the heir to the throne but, apart from Alexander, the only adult male in the Romanov family. In the Russia of that time, it was unthinkable to overthrow the monarchy or displace the Romanov family by other candidates for the throne. Memories of the anarchy two hundred years before -- the so-called Time of Troubles -- when the extinction of the ruling dynasty had led to civil war, foreign invasion and the state's disintegration, put a taboo on any such ideas. But however frustrated Russian aristocrats might be with Alexander, few would dream of putting Constantine on the throne in his place. In any case, to do the Grand Duke justice, he revered his brother and was very unlikely to offer support to any conspiracy. If this strengthened the emperor's position at home, the fact that Constantine was one heartbeat from the throne had to worry foreign statesmen. Both Constantine's father and his grandfather, Peter III, had been notorious for sudden and dramatic shifts in foreign policy. The inherently unpredictable nature of foreign policy under an autocracy was already sufficient reason to worry about relying on Russia, even without a personality such as Constantine's lurking in the wings.

The youngest general in Alexander's entourage was Major-General Count Christoph von Lieven. Calm, tactful, self-effacing and hardworking, Lieven occupied the modest-sounding job of head of the emperor's personal military secretariat. In reality this was a position of great power. Paul I had introduced into Russia the Prussian system of military administration, whereby the monarch operated as his own commander-in-chief and ran the army through his adjutant-general, who in principle was no more than a glorified secretary. The actual minister of war sat in Berlin, rarely met the king, and ensured that the army had proper boots. Even in Prussia, the king's adjutant-general inevitably accrued great power. In Russia neither Paul nor Alexander could equal Frederick's detailed knowledge of military affairs. That necessarily increased the role of their adjutant-general, Lieven, whom one historian rightly called the 'first deputy of the emperor for military affairs.'

Though his family's medieval origins were Livonian rather than German, Lieven is best defined as a member of the Baltic German aristocracy. As was true of many Baltic German generals and senior officials, however, Lieven's identity was mixed but his loyalties were unequivocal. Being German above all meant that he was a convinced
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Lutheran, with all that religion’s stress on duty, hard work and obedience. Born in Kiev, of which his father was the military governor, he was educated in Petersburg and spent his entire adult life at the imperial court and as an ambassador. Not surprisingly, his two preferred languages were French – the lingua franca of international high society – and Russian, the language of the army. His political loyalties were entirely Russian but to an even greater extent than most Balts this meant a strong personal loyalty to Alexander I and to the Romanov family.\[56\]

This personal link owed something to the fact that Christoph Lieven was an officer of the Semenovsky Guards Regiment, of which Alexander had been colonel-in-chief from adolescence. Founded by Peter the Great in 1683, along with their sister regiment, the Preobrazhenskys, the Semenovskys provided many of Alexander’s closest aides, including Lieven’s former deputy, Prince Petr Mikhailovich Volkonsky. In a system of government made up of many networks and ‘families’, the Semenovskys were one of the emperor’s private followings. It was this regiment which had been on guard around the palace on the night of Paul I’s overthrow.

Above all, however, Lieven’s life and loyalties were determined by the fact that his mother was the closest friend of the Dowager Empress Marie, Alexander’s mother; she was her chief lady-in-waiting and the governess of the imperial children, who remained devoted to Charlotta Lieven throughout their adult lives. One of her former charges, the Grand Duchess Anna – later the Queen of the Netherlands – wrote: ‘Was it not her exclusive privilege to scold the family, for this is granted neither by decree nor by hereditary title?’ Links to the imperial family of this strength were literally golden. Titles, estates and patronage rained on the heads of Charlotta and her children. Christoph’s elder brother was a general who served subsequently as Minister of Education. His younger sibling, Johann, had distinguished himself in 1807 and been wounded at the battle of Eylau. Leo Tolstoy’s novel opens at the soirée of Anna Scherer, devoted confidante of the Empress Marie. In real life the closest equivalent to Anna Scherer was Charlotta Lieven.\[57\]

Alexander and Napoleon talked on their own for almost two hours during their first meeting on 25 June. Both men were experts in flattery and seduction, and each was intent on winning the other’s sympathy and goodwill. No doubt many ideas were floated which neither monarch would readily have committed to paper, let alone enshrined in a treaty. In the older literature, Russian as well as French, it is sometimes said that Alexander was bowled over by Napoleon and that this partly explains the terms of the Franco-Russian treaties. One has to be very careful in taking Alexander’s admiration of Napoleon at face value, however, particularly when he was speaking to French diplomats. The secret instructions he gave to Kurakin and Lobanov after he had held a number of discussions with the French emperor were rooted in a coolly realistic grasp of the interests, weaknesses and strengths of both Russia and Napoleon.\[58\]

In the end Alexander got most of what he wanted in the treaties agreed at Tilsit. Above all, he gained a peace which would be more than a temporary truce, without paying the vanquished side’s usual price of territorial concessions and a war indemnity.\[59\] Apart from this, his overriding concern was to save Prussia, both out of a sense of loyalty to the Prussian king and queen, and because Russia wanted Prussia as an ally against further French expansion eastwards. To achieve this goal Alexander would have to pay a high price. The French now occupied the whole of Prussia and there was no chance that the Russian army could regain it. Napoleon would have preferred to partition Prussia, leaving its eastern – largely Polish – territories to Alexander and distributing the rest of the kingdom among his German clients.

Prussia’s survival was therefore a victory for Russian diplomacy, though an equivocal one. Prussia lost half her territory and population. Her Polish provinces became a new small state, the so-called Duchy of Warsaw. Its ruler was to be the King of Saxony, whose ancestors had been kings of Poland for much of the eighteenth century. The new duchy would be totally obedient to Napoleon and was potentially very dangerous for Russia, both as a base for a future invasion across the empire’s western border and as a source of hope for all Poles who dreamed of the restoration of the Polish kingdom in all its former territories. Forced to reduce its army and pay a vast war indemnity, the newly truncated Prussia was too vulnerable to Napoleon’s power to act as a defensive barrier for Russia, as became clear in 1811–12. Nevertheless, Alexander’s insistence on preserving Prussia was to prove hugely important in 1813, when the Prussians played a vital role in Napoleon’s overthrow.

The main price paid by Russia for Prussia’s survival was agreeing to
join Napoleon’s war with Britain. Above all, this meant adherence to
Napoleon’s Continental System and therefore the exclusion of British
ships and goods from Russian ports. By the terms of the Treaty of Tilsit
the Russians were also bound to impose the Continental System on the
Swedes, if necessary by war. In June 1807 Alexander was angry at
Britain’s failure to support the Russian war effort but he certainly did
not want conflict with London and understood the damage it would do
to the economy and the state’s finances. He believed, however, that at
this moment Russia had no room for manoeuvre between Britain and
France, and that subordinating Russia’s economic interests to Napo-
leon’s overriding concern – in other words blocking British trade –
was the only way to ensure an acceptable peace. The emperor comforted
himself with the hope that if British trade was excluded from the contin-
ent and Napoleon’s terms were moderate, then London would proba-
bly make peace. A compromise peace which checked both British
expansion outside Europe and French advances on the continent would
of course serve Russia’s interests perfectly. Alexander could take more
realistic comfort from the fact that the Tilsit treaties did not bind Russia
to military action against Britain and that a successful war with Sweden
might allow the annexation of Finland, and thereby make Peterburg
much more secure against any future Swedish attack.\(^{40}\)

The one area where Alexander may have made an unnecessary con-
cession to Napoleon was Russia’s relations with the Ottoman Empire.
Egged on by France, the Ottomans had been at war with Russia since
1806, hoping to use Russia’s defeat at Austerlitz to regain some of the
provinces lost in the previous three decades. In the Tilsit treaties France
pledged itself to mediate between Russia and the Ottomans, and to
support her new ally should the Turks prove intransigent. Alexander
hoped that Napoleon would accept Russian predominance in the Otto-
man Empire to balance France’s domination of western and central
Europe. In reality, for all Napoleon’s grandiose talk about Russo-French
collaboration in the Orient and about the impending demise of the
Ottoman Empire, his basic policy was to block Russian expansion. No
doubt he would have pursued this policy quietly whatever the Treaty of
Tilsit said. Giving him a role as mediator merely allowed him more
opportunities to realize his goal.\(^{41}\)

To make negotiating easier, Alexander and his advisers moved to
Tilsit, on the west bank of the river Neman, where Napoleon had his

headquarters. The two monarchs spent many hours together, indulging
in conversations which ranged far beyond the treaty negotiations and
inspecting Napoleon’s troops. Half of Tilsit was handed over to the
Russians and the First Battalion of the Preobrazhensky Guards moved
in to protect their emperor. All eyes were on the French army, however.
A chance to inspect the men who had conquered Europe and to listen
as one of history’s greatest generals explained the secrets of his success
was not to be missed, especially by a monarch as interested in military
matters as Alexander. In any case it suited the emperor’s purposes to
play the role of deferential disciple and thereby flatter Napoleon. But
the French monarch would have done well to have a careful look at the
Preobrazhenskys, because his eventual downfall was to owe much to the
Russian army’s veteran regiments.

In most respects the Preobrazhensky Guards were typical of the
Russian army, or perhaps more truly, were the perfect embodiment of
what a Russian regiment should be. Of course, its officers and veteran
NCOs were very committed to their famous regiment. Like all Russian
regiments the Preobrazhensky Guards were in many respects a self-
contained little world. Soldiers doubled as tailors, cobbler and builders.
In addition, a Russian regiment had full-time armourers, blacksmiths,
joiners, carpenters, wagon-repairers, farriers and other artisans in its
ranks. Doctors were a rather new addition: very unusually the Preo-
brazhensky had four. Far more traditional and to be found in every
Russian regiment were priests and other junior clergy. Full Orthodox
masses were held on Sundays and major holidays. The priests addressed
the troops, preaching the duty of loyal service to the tsar as protector
of the Orthodox faith and community. Proper treatment of enemy
prisoners and civilians was another common theme. In battle some
priests were found right up in the firing lines. Their usual place was
with the doctors, comforting the wounded and – very importantly –
performing the proper burial services for the dead.\(^{42}\)

Least typical of the army as a whole were the officers of the Preo-
brazhensky Guards. Although the great majority of Russian officers
were nobles, 6 per cent were the sons of labourers, peasants or, most
often, soldiers. In any case most Russian nobles scraped along on small
incomes and the same was true of most officers. Roughly one-quarter of
them in 1812 owned estates or were their heirs, and most of these estates
were small. It was a very rare officer in a line regiment whose family
owned more than 100 'souls' (i.e. male scrs). In Alexander's Russia there was almost no free education of any quality. Artillery officers were usually educated at cadet corps (i.e. military schools designed to train boys to be officers) and most had essential mathematical knowledge as well as foreign languages. But the great majority of infantry and even cavalry officers of the line read and wrote Russian, might have a smattering of arithmetic but had no other educational attainments.\textsuperscript{63}

The officers of the Preobrazhensky Guards were very different. Though the personnel records underestimate officers' wealth, even they show that two-thirds of the regiment's officers came from families with 100 'souls' or more. More than one-quarter owned more than 1,000 'souls' and the commander of the First Battalion, Count Mikhail Vorontsov, was the heir to 24,000. With wealth went education and culture. The overwhelming majority of the officers spoke two or more languages and almost half spoke three or more. The Guards officers' memoirs and diaries speak of literature, history and philosophy. Their education for the most part made them rounded gentlemen and interesting conversationalists rather than professional officers in any narrow sense. They were members of a Russian and European aristocratic elite that was nourished on French literature and Roman history.\textsuperscript{64}

The relationship between Alexander and his Guards officers was strangely ambivalent. On the one hand the emperor took enormous pride in his Guards and felt at home amidst cultured, aristocratic officers. But in a curious way the officers of the aristocratic Guards regiments formed a species of republic in the heart of the Russian absolute monarchy. One officer recalled that 'in service matters strict subordination existed but outside this all officers were equal'. If this is an exaggeration, it remains true that relations between officers of very different age and rank were surprisingly informal. This was helped by the fact that very many of these men's families were related or had known each other for generations. For the monarch, this republic of Guards officers could be a source of concern. When 'outsiders' were put in charge of Guards units to tighten up discipline and treated the officers rudely, they were apt to face what amounted to strikes. At the back of an emperor's mind there must also have lurked the memory of the many coups mounted by the Guards in the eighteenth century, the last of which had happened only six years before Tilsit. Indeed, the last great attempted coup by Guards officers was to occur in 1825, immediately after Alexander's death. Its aim was to replace absolutism with a constitutional monarchy or even a republic.\textsuperscript{65}

On 9 July, after the ratification of the Tilsit treaties, the two emperors took the salute at a parade of the French and Russian guards. After the parade, in a dramatic gesture which aptly concluded two weeks of play-acting between the monarchs, Napoleon asked Alexander's permission to award the Légion d'honneur to the bravest soldier in the Preobrazhensky Guards. Mikhail Kozlovsky, the regiment's commander, was thoroughly taken aback by this piece of Napoleonic populism and simply summoned forward the battalion's right-hand marker, Grenadier Aleksei Lazarev. The bewildered Lazarev, a soldier's son, suddenly found himself embraced by Napoleon, an officer of the Légion d'honneur, and the recipient of a pension of 1,200 francs a year.

But Alexander's Russia in general and the Preobrazhensky Guards in particular were not best suited to such dramatic examples of French-style 'social mobility'. Two years later Lazarev was ejected from the regiment for cheek to a sergeant-major. In 1819, back in the invalid (i.e. veterans) battalion of the Preobrazhenskys as an ensign, he was arrested for assaulting two civilians. Maybe Lazarev was just a difficult character. But soldiers' sons who rose into the officer corps sometimes faced prejudice and had a hard time adapting to their new status. Even in line regiments a number of them were dismissed or censured after the war, their personnel records citing drunkenness, incompetence and other failings. If officers risen from the ranks faced difficulties in line regiments, Lazarev may well have found life even as a semi-retired ensign of the Preobrazhenskys quite a struggle. He committed suicide before his case could be resolved.\textsuperscript{66}

After the treaties were ratified and the parades finished, Alexander left Tilsit and headed back to Petersburg. He divulged his innermost thoughts about recent events to no one. Just how much hope or confidence he had in his new relationship with France it is impossible to say. No doubt he believed that, whatever might follow as regards Russo-French relations, at least he had gained time for his empire and rescued it from a situation of great danger. Perhaps the truest guide to his thoughts is the comment he is said to have made to the Prussian king and queen about Napoleon: 'He will break his own neck. Despite all my performance and external behaviour I am your friend and hope to prove that to you by my actions.'\textsuperscript{67}
Neither contemporaries nor historians found Alexander an easy man to understand. An excellent actor, who operated behind a screen of charm and flattery, he remained secretive, opaque, distrustful and elusive. To many observers both in his lifetime and subsequently he appeared to be a mass of contradictions. On the one hand he was a champion of enlightened and liberal principles, but on the other he did very little to ameliorate the authoritarian system of government he inherited, or the world of serf and master on which it rested. He sounded like his grandmother, Catherine II, when he spoke of liberal reforms, but acted like his father, Paul I, in his obsessive concern for the correct drill and appearance of his soldiers on the parade ground. In foreign affairs he put forward high-minded schemes for international peace and order, while simultaneously pursuing a policy of realpolitik. All this has persuaded some critics that he was simply confused and hypocritical.45

It is true that the emperor combined very different interests and enthusiasms, inherited from his grandmother and father. He also played to the European gallery, as Catherine had done, seeking to depict himself as a truly enlightened European man and monarch. Brought up on enlightened European ideas by his Swiss tutor and then forced to operate within a Russian context, at one level Alexander believed that Russia was unworthy of him. One side effect of this was a tendency to trust foreign military advisers more than his own generals. There was something in Alexander’s nature which made him want to seduce and win the sympathy of every person he met. If this applied most strongly as regards women, he used seduction, sensibility and charm on men too. Alexander was sensitive and highly strung. He evaded confrontations, disliked hurting people’s feelings and acted by indirect means to get his way. These elements of Alexander’s personality had a big influence on the way he ran his government and his army. In foreign policy he sometimes received information and operated through private channels unknown to his foreign minister and ambassadors. In the army he used private links to subordinates as a means to watch over his commanding generals. Excessive sensitivity, even an element of moral cowardice, stopped him from pruning the military structure of command of a number of superfluous generals. He was also very inclined to avoid overt responsibility for difficult decisions, operating from behind the backs of his generals to get his way, and distancing himself from them if failures occurred.

Alexander’s personality was of crucial importance in determining how Russia faced up to the challenge of Napoleon in 1807–14. Nevertheless his actions and even his ideas are incomprehensible unless one understands the context and the constraints within which a Russian monarch operated. Not just Alexander’s father but also his grandfather, Peter III, had been overthrown and murdered. So had the previous male monarch, Ivan VI. From his earliest days Alexander had been surrounded by court and political faction and intrigue. As emperor, he was the supreme source of honour, wealth and status. Most people to whom he spoke wanted to use him to advance their own interests or policies. They operated in patron–client networks which hid the truth from him and tried to reduce his independence. These networks spread across court, government and army, which were still essentially one community. The arrogant, ambitious and jealous men who peopled the networks were often very exhausting to manage. But the emperor had to manage them if he was to survive and if the army and bureaucracy were to function effectively. Faced with this Petersburg milieu, an emperor could be forgiven a large degree of suspicion, evasiveness and duplicity. Over the years a world-weary despair about human nature was almost bound to grow. As one of his confidants once remarked, ‘in your position an angel would have developed a suspicious personality’.69

During these years the shrewdest foreign observer in Petersburg was Joseph de Maistre, the envoy of the King of Sardinia, whose mainland territories had been annexed by Napoleon. He commented that it was ‘in the nature of Alexander’s personality and his system of rule that top officials operate only in their own limited sphere. He cheerfully and without repugnance employs simultaneously two mortal enemies, not allowing either of them to swallow the other.’ By this method the chances of conspiracy were reduced. Usually more to the point, the emperor had a better chance of knowing what was really going on behind his ministers’ always deferential and obedient façade. The iron fist was always present and sometimes used but in general Alexander preferred subtler methods. To an extent, secrecy became second nature, almost an end in itself. To do Alexander justice, however, it was usually not just safer but also more efficient for the monarch to operate by manipulation, seduction and bribery. It was also only natural that a monarch sometimes sought advisers who were not part of the Petersburg networks but were entirely
dependent on himself. Foreigners were one obvious source of such advice.70

When Alexander looked over the heads of the Petersburg networks he saw a vast Russia administered by a woefully inadequate government bureaucracy. In the countryside, where over 90 per cent of his subjects lived, public order, taxation and conscription depended entirely on the cooperation of the landowners. Alexander disliked serfdom but he could not destroy the foundations on which his entire system of government rested and least of all when faced with the need to mobilize all his empire’s resources against Napoleon. In any case, was not the weakening of the landowners’ power more likely to lead to anarchy than progress, given the current level of development of Russian government and society? He did begin to chip away at serfdom by making voluntary emancipation easier and above all by breaking with his ancestors’ policy of ‘donating’ thousands of state peasants to private owners.71

There are many reasons to believe that, in principle, Alexander favoured representative institutions but Russian realities were a powerful disincentive to constitutional reform. Given the weakness of the state administration and the power of the Petersburg patron-client networks, did the emperor really want to strengthen these networks by giving them a parliament through which to exert extra influence on laws, taxation and government? Any representative institutions in Russia would be dominated by the serf-owners: no other group could remotely match their wealth, education or status. Would not such institutions make it harder to modernize Russia and abolish serfdom? Did it not make more sense to improve the bureaucracy so that it could bring enlightened reform to a conservative society? Still less could the emperor be blamed for his approach to foreign affairs. In desiring a more peaceful and cooperative international order while pursuing his own country’s interests he was no more hypocritical than the allied leaders after both twentieth-century world wars.72

Though in retrospect one can advance these arguments in Alexander’s favour, at the time he was widely perceived as well-meaning but feminine and weak. In 1812 this perception mattered greatly. The Austrian foreign minister, Count Metternich, spoke for most foreign diplomats and many members of the Russian elite when he wrote that ‘I count on no shred of firmness from the Emperor Alexander’, as the French penetrated ever deeper into Russia and finally took Moscow. Napoleon’s own strategy makes little sense unless one takes such calculations into account. But in fact Alexander’s courage did not desert him in 1812. It also sufficed to overcome the enormous risks and difficulties of invading central Europe in 1813, building an international coalition, and leading it all the way to Paris.73

Back in September 1810, as Franco-Russian relations began their descent into war, the French ambassador in Petersburg tried to warn his government that Alexander was much tougher than he seemed. People believe him to be weak but they are wrong. Undoubtedly he can put up with many upsets and hide his discontent but that is because he has before him an ultimate goal, which is peace in Europe, and one which he hopes to achieve without a violent crisis. But his amenable personality has its limits, and he will not go beyond them: these limits are as strong as iron and will not be abandoned. His personality is by nature well-meaning, sincere and loyal, and his sentiments and principles are elevated but beneath all this there exists an acquired royal dissimulation and a dogged persistence which nothing can overcome.74