

HIS 241 Unit 8 Alexander I and Napoleon

Borodino, Russia's Gettysburg Remarks by Professor Blois



The Borodino Museum; photo credit B. Blois

Professor Evans' remarks for Unit 7, [Alexander and Napoleon](#), are as always very astute and worth reading. I recommend them to you highly both for their content and for the numerous links to additional sources of information both verbal and visual. In my supplement to them, I will concentrate on the battle of Borodino alone. I was privileged to visit the field of Borodino in April 2010, something I will never forget, especially because I was taken there by Muscovite friends whom I should really refer to as family, Lera and Volodya Ilichev. More about both of them later.

As a point of comparison and to set the stage for understanding the incredible violence that occurred at Borodino on September 7, 1812, I think it is instructive for Americans to call to mind the battle of Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863. Gettysburg was the bloodiest battle ever fought on American soil

with approximately 51,000 dead and wounded (in those days there was very little difference... a moderate to severe wound, or even a minor one that became infected, resulted in death within a few days). Consider also the 1862 battle of Antietam, the so-called deadliest single day in American history with around 23,000 casualties. That's just slightly less than 75,000 dead and wounded in a total of four days on two separate battlefields. At Borodino, there were more than 75,000 casualties on a single day (add in the casualties of Russian and French armies in the smaller scale battle of the Shevardino redoubt the previous day—Shevardino was expected to be the anchor position on the Russian left before the French overran it; thereafter it became Napoleon's command post—and the total comes to nearly 90,000 over two days). One more way to look at the extremely high one-day casualties at Borodino is to think of it as three times as deadly as the “deadliest day in American history” referenced above.

So, an incredible level of violence at both Gettysburg and Borodino, with the defending army--Kutuzov's at Borodino, Meade's Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg--refusing to retreat even after repeated massive assaults orchestrated by a superior battlefield commander (Napoleon, R. E. Lee). Each battle also was a great watershed in the respective histories of Russia and the United States. Borodino led to the expulsion of Napoleon from Russia some months later, which begat a surge of Russian national consciousness and pride, and which also led to the occupation of Paris in 1814 by Alexander I and his army. The upshot of all this when stirred and aged only slightly was the 1825 Decembrist revolt. Basically, Russian soldiers who felt they had defeated Napoleon, and who then marched twice across western Europe on their way to and from Paris, concluded that their own country deserved a society and government more like those of the West than their own hideously anachronistic autocracy and serf-based economy. But we'll get to this story in the next unit.

Retelling the course of the battle itself I will leave to Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, and to a rightly famous—and incredibly long—Soviet film of the same name, both of which are linked below. Napoleon's army had been marching through western Russia for nearly three months, and had fought several battles, before reaching Borodino in early September. The Russians, whether by design or necessity, had fallen back in front of Napoleon, who directed his main thrust toward Moscow rather than the capital St. Petersburg because it was toward Moscow that the Russian army had withdrawn. Shortly before Borodino, command of the Russian forces had been given to General Kutuzov, brought out of retirement for the task. He had lost an eye while leading Russian forces at the battle of Austerlitz almost seven years earlier, and was as determined as the tsar Alexander I to drive the French from Russian soil. It can rightly be said that the French won the day, by capturing the principal Russian positions—the Bagration fleches on the left of the Russian line and the Raevsky redoubt, which protruded from the Russian center; nonetheless, the Russians did not desert the field, but simply retreated less than a kilometer and stood their ground at the end of the day, as light rain fell just before dusk.

For the French, this was an unprecedented and unnerving sight. Heretofore Napoleon had without fail driven his opponents completely from the field of battle, sometimes by manoeuver alone. At Borodino, the Russians died in their thousands without a thought to retreat, and when a position was lost they invariably sought to regroup, counterattack, and retake it. This made for unbelievable carnage and surprised the French, including Napoleon. At the end of the day, both armies had suffered immeasurably and neither seemed capable of mounting a final push to decisive victory. For the Russians, this was probably out of the question given their losses. For the French, it is generally agreed that if Napoleon had engaged his strategic reserve corps, the Old Guard, he could have driven off the Russians. But he

refused to send them forward, "so far from France" as he put it. Kutuzov, emboldened by the bravery and tenacity of his army, actually issued an order for counterattack on the following morning, but was persuaded against such foolishness by his staff. Instead, he moved his forces east of Moscow, surrendering the city but preserving his ability to fight another day. When Napoleon, having occupied Moscow but realizing Alexander would not sue for peace and that the burnt out city was no place to spend the winter, began his retreat, Kutuzov and his army, aided greatly by Russian partisan forces, ushered out the French by the same route they had used in the summer as they pushed east, eating everything in sight. With little now there to be foraged, with winter setting in, and with constant harassment by the Russians, the attrition of what remained of the Grand Armeé was immense. From more than a half million at the start of the June invasion, around ten thousand escaped Russia in early December. Napoleon himself had deserted his vestigial forces in order to return more quickly to France.

Tolstoy spent a week walking the ground of Borodino fifty years later in the early 1860s before writing *War and Peace*. He despised Napoleon, whom he saw not as a great historical actor but rather as the plaything of historical forces (he compared Napoleon to a cork bobbing about on the waves of history). In Russia, Tolstoy would write in his novel, began the downfall of Napoleon and his army "on which, for the first time, at Borodino, was laid the hand of a foe of stronger spirit." What we have here is the moment when Russian national consciousness, stirred to life in the previous century, began to transform into true nationalism in the wake of invasion, catastrophe, and—ultimately—triumph.

Borodino and 1812 Remembered

Few if any events in Russian history have spawned such great cultural artifacts as those resulting from the year 1812. First and foremost is Lev

Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*. Its description of the fighting, during which (as the author himself had done years later) the character Pierre Bezukhov wanders the field during the fighting, is unmatched. Then there is Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. What more stirring musical evocation of heroism and nationalism could one imagine? The 1912 [centennial panorama painting](#) by Roubaud is itself quite remarkable and has been well-preserved in a small museum in western Moscow. This huge (115 meters in circumference) painting is impressive, but it is by no means great art, and the same claim--impressive but not great--could be made for the scores of portrait paintings in the Hermitage's [hall of generals](#), the Winter Palace's homage to 1812. But two Soviet era works of art can be termed great--Sergei Prokofiev's opera **War and Peace** and Sergei Bondarchuk's massive [1965 film](#) of the same name. And then there's Charles Joseph Minard's justly famous [graph of Napoleon's invasion and retreat](#), something you'll never forget--I promise--after taking a look at it.

My visit to Borodino



In April 2010, I traveled to Moscow and Ivanovo as a Fulbright lecturer. While there, I was able to visit old and dear friends I had known for almost twenty years, Volodya and Lera Ilichev. Volodya had been deputy mayor of Moscow when we first met in 1992, and his area of responsibility was the Kutuzov District, stretching from the Moscow River in central Moscow to the city's western edge--the Poklonnaia Hills, where both

Napoleon's and later Hitler's armies got their first glimpse of the Moscow Kremlin, some ten miles distant. In this district are located the 1812 victory arch, the preserved peasant hut where Kutuzov and his generals met on the night after Borodino to determine whether or not to surrender Moscow, and the famous panorama painting of Borodino (commissioned for the 1912 centennial of the battle). After the demise of the Soviet Union, Volodya transitioned to the private sector and is now chief development officer in Russia for Hilton Hotels. Knowing I had never seen Borodino and was determined to visit it, he and Lera drove me there on Easter Sunday morning following an unforgettable breakfast of caviar on buttered bread and the traditional Russian Easter cake or Kulich. On the way, we stopped at this monument in western Moscow to General Piotr Bagration, one of the heroes of Borodino, mortally wounded during the battle. Notice I am pointing to a bouquet of roses, something you see at virtually every monument or memorial in Russia.



When we reached Borodino, about one hundred miles west of Moscow, we parked and walked to the main monument to the battle, in the background of this photo. It was constructed at the time of the battle's twenty-fifth anniversary and dedicated two years later in 1839, by tsar Nicholas I. At the foot of the monument is the grave of Bagration, the most famous and courageous Russian general officer to have lost his life as a result of the battle. The story has it that he lingered near death for over two weeks without knowing that Moscow had been surrendered to the French. When finally learning of this, he rose to his feet for the first time since being wounded and promptly died of shock. In the foreground of the photo, please notice the World War II pillbox. As the German Wehrmacht advanced on Moscow in October 1941, there was a fierce battle on the very same field, among the monuments to the 1812 Russian-French struggle. The Russians

withdrew after a few days, but reclaimed Borodino in February 1812, after the counterattack that had saved Moscow from the Nazis in December 1941.



The Borodino Museum houses a great many artifacts and paintings from the 1812 campaign, as well as a recently installed model of the battlefield, pictured here. The lighting changes to show successive stages of the battle. Shown here, along with our guide whose name I am embarrassed to admit I do not recall, is the struggle for the central Russian stronghold, the Raevsky redoubt. The Bagration fleches, anchoring the Russian right, had already fallen (see the blue lights directly below the guide's right hand), and had the great redoubt not resisted fiercely the Russian lines would have been untenable, and the day would have ended in the kind of full scale retreat by his opponents to which Napoleon had become accustomed. Not

going to happen in this case. Raevsky was finally persuaded to leave the action, but his infantry and artillerymen--and the heavy cavalry sent to their aid--fought heroically, saving the day for Kutuzov. After it had changed hands several times, the French finally claimed the redoubt, but the Russians did not leave the field. Raevsky himself is a very interesting character in not just this episode of Russian history but also in the subsequent story of the Decembrists.



I can't finish this story without a few more words about my good friends Volodya and Lera, pictured here flanking our expert but nameless guide. I took this photo at an observation point in the middle of the battlefield. In the background is a church and convent erected with funds provided by widows of the officers who died at Borodino. After the battle, they oversaw construction of these buildings and then took vows as nuns and lived out

their days here. The tradition was continued and widows from later Russian wars occupied the convent until it was closed after the Russian Revolution. It now functions again and is peopled by widows from the Russian Afghan campaigns of the 1980s and from the more recent fighting in Chechnya. Volodya's parents, both serving in uniform, had met during World War II not far from here and later married, and I learned something even more interesting from Lera. When I had told her I wished to visit Borodino, she seemed to dislike the idea but agreed graciously to take me there. Near the end of our driving and walking around, she revealed why she has no liking for the area. As a bright, young graduate of Moscow State University, with a degree in English and top marks as a simultaneous translator of Russian to English and English to Russian, she was hoping to receive an appointment to work abroad, perhaps at the United Nations. Instead, she and many of her fellow graduates were ordered to Borodino to weed and then harvest a potato patch. She never forgot--nor forgave--her personal experience with Soviet emulation of a zealous *v narod* ("to the people") movement taken over from 1860s-'70s Russian populism. Poor Lera was, in the early 1980s, one of the very last to suffer through this wrong-headed effort to enforce proletarianization on members of the intelligentsia.