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Marie-Pierre Rey, *L'effroyable tragédie: Une nouvelle histoire de la campagne de Russie*. Paris: Flammarion, 2012. 390 pp. 24€ (pb). ISBN-10: 2081228327.

Review by David A. Bell, Princeton University.

Following in Napoleon's footsteps at a two-hundred year remove, from Corsica to Paris, Italy to Egypt, Marengo to Tilsit, the Bonaparte bicentennial show finally reached Moscow last year. As usual, it produced a useful flurry of conferences, articles and books that the profession should have just about finished digesting in time for the Grand Finale at Waterloo in 2015. Among the more notable contributions connected to the anniversary were a smoothly learned overview of the Russian campaign from Jacques-Olivier Boudon, Jean Tulard's successor as the dean of Napoleonic studies in France. [1] It also saw Dominic Lieven's important and provocative *Russia Against Napoleon*, which might be succinctly described as the anti-*War and Peace*. [2] A sober and learned tome of the sort Tolstoy liked to ridicule, it played down the role of the Russian peasant masses the novelist idolized, and the mysterious operations of fate that he celebrated. Instead, Lieven gave credit for defeating Napoleon to the cunning and foresight of the tsar, and of the multi-national leadership of the multi-national Russian empire.

Marie-Pierre Rey has now added to this expanding bookshelf with a long-needed, concise, up-to-date and readable summary of the Russian campaign as a whole. Since 2005, historians have been able to rely on Adam Zamoyski's 2005 *Moscow 1812*, which is marvelously evocative. [3] Still, Zamoyski wrote essentially for a popular audience. Rey, one of France's leading historians of Russia (she started as a scholar of the twentieth century and has moved steadily backwards), covers the Russian side of the story more completely than Boudon, and the French side more completely than Lieven, whose ambitious book also takes readers well beyond Russia, to the campaigns that led to France's final defeat. She draws with particular deftness on the massive, if partisan scholarship produced in Russia before the Revolution (in particular in connection with the 1912 centennial), and on new Russian archival discoveries, including rare eye-witness accounts from Russian soldiers. *L'effroyable tragédie* can now take its place as the standard short history of France's greatest military disaster.

Rey previously wrote a first-rate biography of Tsar Alexander I, and she draws heavily on this earlier work here (at one or two places, even copying and pasting). [4] The most vivid and convincing parts of the book deal with the Tsar, who came to power in 1801 after his father Paul's assassination—possibly with his connivance. Like Lieven, Rey gives Alexander credit for plotting a deliberate strategy of retreat and scorched earth before Napoleon's large and experienced armies, and relying on distance and weather to weaken them. "The Spanish have been beaten again and again," she quotes from an 1811 letter of his, "and they have neither surrendered nor submitted...Our climate and our winter will make war for us" (p. 42). But more than Lieven, Rey highlights Alexander's many moments of uncertainty and despair as the long retreat threatened to become a disastrous rout, as the "holy city" of Moscow fell, and as Russian forces bereft of options then burned much of their once and future capital to the ground (just 122 of the city's 329 churches survived the conflagration [p. 184]). One by one she chronicles Alexander's loss of confidence in his commanders, including Lieven's hero, Michael Barclay de Tolly (the Lutheran, German-speaking descendant of Scots), and Tolstoy's hero, Mikhail Kutuzov. At the heart of the book (p. 194) is an astonishing letter that Alexander wrote his sister in September, 1812:

“As for talent, I may lack some, perhaps, but it can’t be acquired, it’s a gift of nature, and no one has ever managed to get more. Served as badly as I have been, lacking appropriate instruments in every area, while at the levers of a gigantic machine at a critical moment, facing a hellish adversary who combines the most frightful savagery and the most remarkable talent, and who can draw upon all Europe, and upon a mass of men of genius who have been shaped by twenty years of revolutions and war, is it so surprising that I have met with failures?”

Quite an admission for the “Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias, of Moscow, Kiev, Vladimir, Novgorod, Tsar of Kazan, Tsar of Astrakhan, Tsar of Poland, Tsar of Siberia,” etc. etc. etc. etc. Rey also pays due attention to Alexander’s deepening religious fervor, which led to his quasi-utopian hopes, mocked by Metternich, that the post-1815 Holy Alliance might usher in an era of perpetual peace. Among the stranger scenes in the book is the open-air Easter service that the Tsar had celebrated by seven Russian Orthodox priests in the Place de la Concorde in 1814 (Rey is now working on a study on the Russian occupation force in France).

As for the French side, Rey credits Napoleon with a certain degree of idealism as well, giving prominence to a well-known passage in Fouché’s memoirs in which the emperor claimed the campaign would fulfill his destiny. “I want to finish what has so far only been sketched out,” Fouché remembered him saying. “We need a European law code, a European *cour de cassation*, a single currency, the same weights and measures, the same laws; I must make all the peoples of Europe into a single people, and Paris, the capital of the world” (p. 45) As with everything connected with Fouché, a certain degree of caution is needed here, and Rey might perhaps have treated the quote with somewhat more skepticism, especially since Fouché juxtaposed Napoleon’s remarks to his own, apparently prophetic warnings against the invasion: “I implore you, Sire, in the name of France...sheathe your sword: think of Charles XII” (p. 45). Overall, though, she lays out clearly the logic, pique and ambition that led Napoleon to his fateful decision. The logic was that of Napoleon’s Continental System, and the need to close all European ports, including those under Russian influence, to British trade. The pique came from Alexander’s abandonment of his entente with Napoleon, and the Tsar’s refusal to let him take a Romanov bride, after the earlier embraces of the “brother emperors” at Tilsit and Erfurt. The ambition, coming at this point in Napoleon’s career, was self-explanatory.

Rey describes the invasion and subsequent disaster with considerable skill. The numbers themselves of course tell a hideous story. From an initial multinational invasion force estimated at 655,000—already considerably less than the 800,000 Napoleon claimed to Fouché that he could muster—less than two-thirds of the main army group even made it to Moscow. Some, of course, were held back deliberately, but many had already died or fallen ill in a choking and fetid Russian summer every bit as deadly as its glacial winter. Only a small minority of Napoleon’s troops ever made it home, and like all historians of the campaign, Rey dwells on the phantasmagorical details of the final retreat in the early, pitiless winter. The sources here are mostly well-known—indeed, they were already well-known to Victor Hugo in the 1850’s:

« Il neigeait. Les blessés s’abritaient dans le ventre
Des chevaux morts. Au seuil des bivouacs désolés
On voyait des clairons à leur poste gelés,
Debout, en selle et muets, blancs de givre,
Collant leur bouches en pierre aux trompettes de cuivres. » (5)

Still, Rey makes good use of the material, including the vivid memoirs of the Württemberg soldier Jakob Walter and the chief French surgeon, Dominique-Jean Larrey, who at the Battle of Borodino carried out 200 amputations in a twenty-four hour period. She also has atrocious stories to tell of the torture of captured French soldiers by enraged Russian peasants. And then there is the final butcher’s bill. All in all, a horrifying total of 370,000 men died on the French side, and another 200,000 were

taken captive, of whom, Rey reports (p. 310), 1,500 still remained voluntarily in Russia as late as 1837. As Tolstoy wrote: “Assuming that Napoleon’s object was to destroy his own army, the most expert strategist could hardly conceive of any other series of actions which would so completely and infallibly have accomplished that purpose.”[6]

Some of Rey’s claims about the campaign are quite traditional. She treats the Russian campaign as the great fatal blow to Napoleon’s empire, whereas some historians have recently highlighted the emperor’s ability to replenish the ranks of his armies afterwards, and pointed to moments at which he came close to eking out victories during the campaigns of 1813 and 1814.[7] Here, I think, Rey has it right. While Napoleon could replace men, he could not so easily replace either materiel or military experience, and with Prussia and Austria turning against him after the Russian catastrophe, ultimately a few additional favorable rolls of the dice would not have staved off final defeat. I am less persuaded by Rey’s equally traditional, indeed Tolstoyan claim that during the campaign, a Russian “national sentiment of unprecedented strength came into being” (p. 206). She cites “popular” songs and engravings, but it is not always easy to evaluate this material, which was mostly produced by elites for popular consumption. Recently, work on Germany and Spain during the Napoleonic Wars has called into question whether the far more voluminous “patriotic” works produced in those countries really marked precocious nationalist awakenings, and Rey might have drawn productively on this comparative material. (8) The Russian government itself often seems to have found it more useful to appeal to the population’s religious sentiments, as in a placard from 1812 which excoriated Napoleon as “the enemy of the human, scourge of God upon us for our sins, a diabolical apparition, the French evil” (p. 174). A synod of the Russian Orthodox Church had already declared Napoleon the Antichrist.

Given the length of Napoleon Bonaparte’s extraordinary career, it would be understandable if, by now, the bicentennial observances had induced a degree of scholarly fatigue. By the time the hardy battalion of Napoleon historians meets its Waterloo in two years time, it would be forgivable for its members collectively to want to banish all Napoleoniana off to Saint Helena along with the man himself. Yet the Russian campaign remains one of the most extraordinary examples of human folly and horror in all of history, and Rey’s able, excellent history should rightfully attract many readers.

NOTES

[1] Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *Napoléon et la campagne de Russie: 1812* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

[2] Dominic Lieven, *Russia Against Napoleon: The True Story of the Campaigns of War and Peace* (New York: Viking, 2010).

[3] Adam Zamoyski, *Moscow 1812: Napoleon’s Fatal March* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

[4] Marie-Pierre Rey, *Alexandre 1er* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), translation: *Alexander I: The Tsar Who Defeated Napoleon*, trans. Susan Emanuel (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012).

[5] Victor Hugo, “L’expiation,” from *Les châtements*.

[6] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 1185.

[7] See for instance Michael Leggiere, *Napoleon and Berlin: The Franco-Prussian War in North Germany, 1813* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

[8] See for instance Michael Jeismann, *Der Vaterland der Feinde: Studien zum nationalen Feindbegriff und Selbstverständnis in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1792-1918* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992); Charles J. Esdaile, *The Peninsular War: A New History* (London: Allen Lane, 2002); Charles J. Esdaile, *Fighting*

Napoleon: Guerrillas, Bandits and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004).

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