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Violence and the Russian Campaign

The Russian campaign was particularly bloody and costly in human life. The Battle of Borodino, which resulted in some 70,000 casualties, was the bloodiest battle of the whole Napoleonic Wars. Trache and the print produced by Campe can see representations of this type of warfare in the painting. Moreover, like the Peninsular War, the campaign was characterised by a high level of violence that breached the normal 'laws of war' of the time. Anton Graf von Wedel, a former Prussian officer who served in the French Army during the campaign, compared the invasion to the Iberian conflict and even suggested that it was worse. 'We saw all the cruelty of the Spanish War, but in the most terrible form, in an unfavourable climate, in a desert, a bare land without succour, ten times so far from the Fatherland, which seemed to us unreachable' (Wedel, p. 101-2).

As Wedel suggests the violence of the campaign was partly shaped by the unforgiving terrain, a sense of which is given by Stoetzel's drawing of a dying soldier. During earlier campaigns, the Napoleonic armies had never been far from towns and villages which provided vital supplies. The relatively densely populated regions of German Central Europe, north western Europe and northern Italy had therefore provided amply supplies to support the 'live of the land' approach adopted by the French Revolutionary armies in the 1790s. The much more sparsely populated Russian steppe, however, meant that the *Grande Armée* was much more dependent on long supply lines, whilst the soldiers had to forage more much more widely. These supply difficulties were compounded by the actions of the retreating Russian army, which adopted a 'scorched earth' policy, removing or destroying supplies to prevent them falling into the hands of the invaders.

During the advance on Moscow these extended supply lines and the widely ranging forage parties were vulnerable. The dissolution of the *Grande Armée* during the retreat also made its soldiers, particularly stragglers, particularly vulnerable to attack from Cossacks and bands of Russian partisans. It was these two groups who were singled out in the memoirs of veterans as the main perpetrators of extraordinary violence against captured soldiers. The former were irregular troops and were believed not to adhere to the norms of warfare. Even that hardened veteran and military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, who served in the Russian army during the 1812 campaign, wrote that he was sickened by the violence meted out by the Cossacks to stragglers from the *Grande Armée.* Those unfortunate enough to be captured by the Cossacks

were invariably robbed of their belongings. Although this was not uncommon in other theatres of war, several memoirists claimed that prisoners were stripped even of the most basic articles of clothing and thereby froze to death. Prisoners of war were marched into the interior of Russia and those unable to keep pace, whether due to injury, sickness or weakness, were shot (Koenig, p. 155).

It was peasants, along with the local militias or *Ratniks*, that were accused of the worst atrocities. Several memoirists claimed that the peasants regarded it as great sport to try and kill prisoners of war and would torture captured soldiers. Karl Schehl, for example, claimed that the militia amused themselves by tying prisoners to trees and inflicting many shallow wounds with their pikes, presumably until their victims succumbed to blood loss and shock (Schehl, p. 102). Several memoirist claimed they only survived these attentions of the vengeful peasants and militias due to the protection afforded them by regular Russian officers who intervened to prevent acts of brutality (Rüppell, p. 104).

The Russian government mobilised a propaganda campaign against the invaders that emphasised the defence of the Emperor and the Orthodox faith. Wedel wrote that the 'whole nation was fanatical' and that the *Grande Armée* faced not only the Russian army, 'but the whole people (*Volk*) was in against us in arms, the nobility, the peasants, the townspeople' (Wedel, p. 101).

Memoirist were not only concerned to highlight the cruelty meted out to prisoners of war, however. They also pointed to the use of violence against the Russian people themselves. Schehl, for example, claimed that two Russian gaolers were executed by being impaled when it was discovered by a Russian officer that they had denied food and water to prisoners of war resulting in the death of several (Schehl, p. 117). Eduard Rüppell encountered a transport of convicts en route to Siberia while a prisoner of war and commented on the cruelty they suffered (Rüppell, p. 122).

Many memoirists refer to atrocities and massacres enacted by members of the *Grande Armée* itself. Crucially, however, these acts of violence were presented in a different way to those committed by the Russian population. Three explanations are distinguishable. First, some memoirist rejected claims that that German soldiers and officers had been involved in atrocities and blamed instead the French. Thus, Wilhelm Conrady when reproached by the Governor of Orel for the mistreatment of Russian PoWs, insisted that no Germans had followed 'barbaric orders' regarding prisoners (Conrady, p. 350). Wedel pointed to the execution of PoWs by the *Grande Armée* (Wedel, p. 140). This action was legitimised by the appeals to military necessity. Finally, veterans pointed to the circumstances of the retreat and

the breakdown of discipline as an explanation. This caused the soldiers of the *Grande Armée* to turn on each other and engage of ruthless looting and plundering of an already devastated land.

The image conjured in the memoirs is therefore of Eastern Europe, and of Russia in particular, as a space of extraordinary violence. This was, of course, partly due to the war itself, but the memoirs also suggest that the violence was inherent to various subject peoples of the Russian Empire since it was not only the soldiers of the *Grande Armée* but also the local population itself that was subject to it. German memoirists also admitted to the invaders complicity in violence, but either sought to blame it on the French or to explain it by reference to military necessity. What made the violence of the Russians so deplorable was that it seemed to serve no military need.

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