

# COUNTRY

## ENGLISH LITERATURE & MUSIC

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*Russia's Great Patriotic War against Napoleon - How did Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky tell such different stories?*

The French Invasion of Russia began on 24th June 1812, when Napoleon crossed the Neiman River with his Grand Armée of at least 500,000, in an attempt to defeat the Russian army and bring the Tsar to terms. He reached and briefly captured Moscow, but was then forced back, and in the retreat almost the whole of his Grand Armée was destroyed. In Russian history this is known as the "Great Patriotic War".

Two famous and still very popular works commemorate these events. In 1869, Count Nikolai Tolstoy published War and Peace, a massive tale set in Russia at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. In 1880, Tchaikovsky wrote his 1812 overture, commemorating Russia's victory over the French. While War and Peace is a reflective and thoughtful work, describing social conditions in Russia, the many failings of Russia's leaders, as well as the battles, defeats and victories, the 1812 overture is a triumphant piece, full of national sentiment, cavalry charges and 'cannon and mortar effects.' Beginning with a Russian hymn that includes the line 'grant victory to all Orthodox Christians over their enemies', it moves to frequent interludes of the Marseillaise, signifying increasing desperate French assaults. It then brings in the stirring Tsarist anthem, played with splendour by trumpets and horns, making it clear that Russia has prevailed. Written at a time when Russia was threatened by internal dissent and revolutionaries, it is a patriotic work, culminating the old Tsarist national anthem and peals of church bells.

Tolstoy by contrast anguishes over the condition of the serfs, then little better than slaves, as the story moves between the palaces of the shallow and selfish aristocrats, the battlefields and the peasant huts. The Tsar is not shown as the great commander in chief, but as a shallow figure, seemingly swept along by the great forces of history, and weak and inept in his dealings with Napoleon. Defeated at Austerlitz, Tsar Alexander agreed to meet Napoleon at Tilsit. The Treaty signed there bound Russia to help Napoleon against Britain, and he and Napoleon divided Prussia and Poland between them. In Russia the Treaty was seen as something of a national humiliation and that is how Tolstoy portrays it - particularly in the episode where Napoleon gives the Legion of Honour, France's highest military decoration, to a Russian soldier: "Sire, I ask your permission to present the Legion of Honour to the bravest of your soldiers" said a sharp, precise voice, articulating every letter. This was said by the undersized Napoleon, looking up straight into Alexander's eyes." The wretched soldier selected "rolled his eyes and persistently gazed at his own monarch to imply that what he was now doing was done for the sake of his ally". The revulsion at this change of alliance was expressed too by Count Rostov : "he remembered Denisov with his changed expression, his submission, and the whole hospital, with arms and legs torn off and its dirt and disease. So vividly did he recall that hospital stench of dead flesh that he looked round to see where the smell came from. Next he thought of that self-satisfied Bonaparte, with his small white hand, who was now an Emperor, liked and respected by Alexander. Then why those severed arms and legs and those dead men?"..

The treaty of Tilsit was not to last. By the end of 1812, Tsar Alexander was opening his

ports again to British trade, imposing taxes on French goods and rejecting Napoleon's attempt to marry one of his sisters. In response Napoleon raised a huge army of troops from all over Europe with perhaps as many as 650,000 soldiers to fight approximately 200,000 soldiers on the Russian side. Although originally hoping for a quick victory, the Grand Armée met immediate difficulties after capturing the city of Vilna, when a violent storm killed a number of troops and horses over night. Although perhaps foreshadowing the result to come, Napoleon took control of Vitebsk and Smolensk, which Russia had torched on their retreat. Not only the winter caused challenges, but also the summer, and by late August, the Grand Armée soldiers were made weak by insect-borne diseases such as typhus, and dysentery. However on September 7th, the Russians fought an immense battle at Borodino, just 75 miles from Moscow. The losses on both sides were enormous, with the casualties amounting to at least 75000, however after one day the Russians withdrew and left the road to Moscow open. One week later, the Grand Armée entered Moscow to find it abandoned with little food, and engulfed in flames.

After a month Napoleon realised that he could not go on, could not stay in Moscow, and would have to go back. As Tolstoy said, he had "demanded a contest according to the rules of fencing" but his opponent, the Russian people, "threw away the rapier and snatched up the cudgel....After the burning of Smolensk a war began which did not follow any previous traditions of war. The burning of towns and villages, the retreats after battles, the blow dealt at Borodino and the renewed retreat, the burning of Moscow, the capture of marauders, the seizure of transports, and the guerrilla war were all departures from the rules."

As Tolstoy tells it those around the Tsar understood this no better than Napoleon, but the aging Russian commander in chief, Kutuzov, did seem to understand the forces at work, and deliberately kept his troops back so that the hidden power of "Mother Russia" and its people would do its work. This is captured in his address to the Preobrazhensky Regiment towards the end - "You see, brothers, I know it's hard for you, but it can't be helped! Bear up; it won't be for long now! We'll see our visitors off and then we'll rest. The Tsar won't forget your service. It is hard for you, but still you are at home while they - you see what they have come to," said he, pointing to the prisoners. "Worse off than our poorest beggars. While they were strong we didn't spare ourselves, but now we may even pity them. They are human beings too. Isn't it so, lads?"

Mother Russia in Tolstoy's mind is much associated with the serfs, who form the backbone of the country and of the army. His romanticised view of them, is captured in the idealised peasant Platon Karatev who looks after Pierre Bezuhov in captivity: "There was so much kindness and simplicity in his singsong voice that Pierre tried to reply, but his jaw trembled and he felt tears rising to his eyes.... For a long time Pierre did not sleep, but lay with eyes open in the darkness, listening to the regular snoring of Platon who lay beside him, and he felt that the world that had been shattered was once more stirring in his soul with a new beauty and on new and unshakable foundations." Pierre sees a new Russia arising from the down trodden and misunderstood serfs.

Tolstoy's romantic confidence in the Russian people may have been misplaced but his description of events gives a sense of the deep inner strength of the Russian people in adversity. He demolishes the idea that cavalry charges and pitched battles played a part in the victory over the French. It was "the cudgel, not the rapier" - the freezing winter, the scorched earth policy and the marauding Cossacks - which destroyed the Grand Armée. And as a memorial to those who suffered and died it is more appropriate than the 1812 overture, which glorifies the war with all its "cannon and mortar effects."