Comparison of Historical and Fictional Views Concerning the Battle of Borodino (1812)

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Abstract

This work focuses on comparing the historical description of the Battle of Borodino (7 September 1812) with two of its fictional representations: Tchaikovsky's "The Year 1812, Solemn Overture", which is more briefly commented on, and Tolstoy's "War and Peace", which will be discussed in more detail.

The motivation behind this work is presented by arguing that, since Borodino represents a key moment in world history, it is important that scholars know well how to differentiate between what really took place and the usual impressions about the battle that have been propagated through fictional depictions. In order to enable this comparison, a detailed description of the events leading up to the battle - the dynamics of Franco-Russian relations, the hostilities between Napoleon Bonaparte and Tsar Alexander I, the buildup of the French invasion of Russia, and the 1812 Campaign - as well as the battle itself is presented, based upon what can be called the historians' consensus about this period.

This historical description is then followed by an explanation about the context in which the works mentioned were created, which serves to understand how the Russians, including the artists, had processed and internalized their victory after the French invasion. This is then followed by a discussion about the actual works.

In the discussion of Tchaikovsky's "The Year 1812, Solemn Overture", it is clear that the composer, while generally capturing the spirit of the 1812 Campaign, ended up employing several anachronisms in his musical piece, choosing to sacrifice historical accuracy for both artistic prowess and audience comprehension. Moreover, another crucial point about the 1812 Overture is that many commentators are actually misinformed when they say the piece represents only the Battle of Borodino, as opposed to the whole 1812 Campaign, which results in clear contradictions with the historical realities of the battle.

Concerning Tolstoy's "War and Peace", it is remarkable how accurate the author's description of the Battle of Borodino is, right down to the position of the units and the development of the fighting. Since Tolstoy was surely one of the greatest writers of all time, his description of Borodino is a great tool, for in exchanging the typical technical speech of historical research for precise and powerful literary prose, Tolstoy gives the reader a completely new glimpse into the Battle of Borodino without sacrificing historical accuracy. On the other hand, this same book also serves as a vessel for Tolstoy's philosophical essays on the nature of History, war and the personalities of the figures involved (mainly Napoleon). These essays contains some views which are questionable: some can be refuted by the factual realities of the Battle of Borodino and of the 1812 Campaign, while others are kept in check by opponent philosophical schools. As a whole, the quality of Tolstoy's literary depiction of the Battle of Borodino in "War and Peace" should be praised while his philosophical opinions in this book should be taken with caution.

Finally, this work suggests some possible pathways for future research on this topic, such as exploring Tolstoy's later live in order to verify if his philosophical views espoused in "War and Peace" remained similar or if they changed significantly; and also mapping out the diffusion of the ideas represented by these works through subsequent historiographical research.

Index Terms

Napoleon, 1812 Campaign, Borodino, Tchaikovsky, The 1812 Overture, Tolstoy, War and Peace, Fiction

CONTENTS

I. Introduction and motivation

The year 2021 marked the bicentenary of Napoleon Bonaparte's death, meaning it is no surprise to find the popular interest on such a complex historical figure suddenly reawakened. Given the echo and the consequences of Napoleon's actions throughout the world and throughout History, one finds that the assessment of the Little Corporal's character varies wildly: while some praise him as a near-messianic, enlightened law giver, to others he is characterized as a "proto-Hitler", bloodthirsty warlord. The historian, however, must be dispassionate and strive to limit himself to the facts.

But what even is a fact when dealing with History? To better illustrate this point, Tolstoy's literary depiction of the Battle of Austerlitz was at one point so influential that it even biased historiographical works [1]. When considering the whole genre of historical fiction, it is not only natural, but expected, that the authors should sacrifice some degree of accuracy for the sake of artistic freedom. Considering that these works are vastly more consumed by the general public than non-fictional history books, it is no wonder if some fictional narrative ends up supplanting the facts (sometimes even resulting in what's called the "False Memory Phenomenon"). Moreover, the entire discourse structure of fiction favors its predominance, for humans are inherently more conditioned to learn and remember by means of fictional narrative (the so-called "storytelling") than via the scientific discourse of professional historiography [2].

Concerning professional historians, it would be naive to assume that these professionals would be unaffected by the narratives embedded in their culture and willing to easily embrace revisionist views. Sometimes these narratives run so deeply as to become veritable matters of national pride: for example, the debate about the existence of Swiss folk-hero William Tell has reverberated throughout Switzerland's politics, policies on education, and so on. In more recent times, the efforts of some modern historians to reassess the outcome of the Battle of Prokhorovka (1943), canonically considered a victory of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, caused such an uproar that they even merited an official response from Russian authorities [3].

So how is it possible to untangle these narratives in the case of Napoleon? This is precisely the idea of this work. However, rather than trying to attempt the herculean task of separating fact from fiction throughout the whole of Napoleon's life, it is more prudent to focus on a single event. In this case, the event chosen for this work is the Battle of Borodino, which took place on September 7th, 1812.

But why this specific battle? The choice for it is a perfectly justifiable one, for Borodino offers a unique opportunity to compare the narratives of fiction against historical works: not only is the Battle a key moment in Napoleon's saga, but it has also been widely represented in a myriad of artistic works, including literature, music, poetry and film. Even further, from a purely practical point of view, the battle favors the scope of this project, for there are only two main nations - France and Russia - involved, which greatly limits the number of historical agents (whereas a battle such as the Battle of Leipzig had a total of 11 nations!). By finding the points where the historical consensus and the fictional descriptions diverge, it is possible, in the context of future research, to keep track of which ideas that were sprung from fictional narratives have exerted influence upon historiography.

The main artistic work against which the historical assessment of the battle will be compared is Leo Tolstoy's classic "War and Peace", which, aside from a description of Borodino, also offers criticism about the methods of historical research and Napoleon's character as well. Tchaikovsky's famous musical piece "The 1812 Overture" will also be discussed.

Concerning the structure of this project, section II pertains to the historical description of the events leading up to Borodino, the battle itself and its aftermath. Section III details the context surrounding two artistic works which depict the Battle of Borodino: Tchaikovsky's musical piece "The 1812 Overture" and Tolstoy's book "War and Peace". Section IV compares the details in these works to the historical facts. Finally Section V sums up this article's conclusions.

II. A Historical Analysis of Borodino

A. Background

The Battle of Borodino represented the culmination of many years of hostile Franco-Russian relations following the French Revolution. In order to understand just how this battle came to be, it is important to analyze the causes behind it.

The French Revolution, even before its later and more violent stages, sent shock waves throughout monarchist Europe. Austria and Prussia were already at war with Revolutionary France, a conflict that would be later be called War of the First Coalition (1792-1797), when king Louis XVI was guillotined, in early 1793. Of course, the execution of a divinely appointed Head of State was not an event to be taken lightly [4] and marked a stark turning point in how diplomacy would be conducted between France and the other European powers [5].

When news of this death reached Saint Petersburg, it is reported that Empress Catherine the Great was deeply shocked. She did in fact order six weeks of official mourning and welcomed Louis XVI youngest brother, the Count of Artois, into her court with promises to fund his efforts to reconquer France [6]. In more practical terms, Catherine annulled the Franco-Russian Commercial Treaty of 1787 and forbade any trade with the French. Yet, for all the horror that Catherine felt about the events in France, military action was off the table: the previous wars with Sweden (1788-1790) and Turkey (1787-1792), which had drained Russian resources, troubles over the final Partition of Poland (1795), and internal strife meant that Russia was

simply too busy to deploy military operations against the French Revolutionary Army, which was turning out to be a lot more competent than initially thought.

Catherine the Great died in late 1796 and was succeeded by her son, Tsar Paul I. Paul's complete hatred of anything French (be it ideas, clothes or people) meant that his internal policy was focused on strengthening Russia's autocracy in any way he could, in order to keep Revolution at bay [7]. The timing, however, was again not ripe for military action: just as Paul I ascended to the Russian Throne, a French General by the name of Napoleon Bonaparte was winning a spectacular string of victories in Northern Italy, which ended up redrawing the borders of the region and knocking Austria - by then the last militarily active of France's enemies - out of the war by 1797 with the Treaty of Campo Formio, thus ending the War of the First Coalition [8].

Napoleon stumbled more directly into Russian interests during the preparations of his Egyptian Campaign, when he conquered the island of Malta as a stepping stone. Malta was ruled by the Order of St. John, which was expelled after the French invasion. The knights of the Order, although Catholics, received no help from Catholic Europe, getting shelter instead from the Orthodox Paul I, who was eventually proclaimed Grand Master. The Malta incident - alongside others adding to Paul's personal hatred of France - led Russia to join, together with Great Britain and Austria (among some others), a new coalition against France [7].

Russia's first military actions against Revolutionary France took place during the War of the Second Coalition (1798-1802). While Napoleon was away in Egypt, Russian troops under General Suvorov - who can be pointed as a sort of "mentor" to General Kutuzov - retook the parts of Italy previously conquered by Napoleon, which had been afterwards annexed to the French sphere of influence. Russia's attitude towards the conflict soon changed, however: after a heavy defeat at the hands of General Masséna during the Second Battle of Zurich (September 25-26, 1799) and a botched Anglo-Russian invasion of the Netherlands (August 27 to November 19, 1799) Paul chose to withdraw from the war and break all relations to the coalition [7].

Napoleon's ascension to power after the *18 Brumaire* (November 9, 1799) coup changed the whole political scenario overnight. After the French victories at the Marengo (June 14, 1800) and Hohenlinden (December 3rd, 1800), Austria sued for peace, leaving only Great Britain standing against France. For all his dislike of the French, even Paul's foreign policy changed in the wake of Napoleon's coup: when Napoleon ceded the island of Malta to Paul, relations between the two countries began to improve (even though the gesture carried no real weight, given that the British soon afterwards reconquered the island from the French)[8]. With the ousting of the revolutionary government, the Tsar now felt that France had a ruler committed to order and upon whom he could trust [7]. Furthermore, diplomatic relations between the former allies Russia and Britain (or United Kingdom, after 1801) were not at all well. In order to oppose Britain's maritime trade laws, Paul created the so called "League of Armed Neutrality", which was soon to count Prussia, Sweden and Denmark as members.

It was then that Franco-Russian relations (again) took a sharp turn: in March 1801, Tsar Paul I was assassinated by a group of Russian nobles (which supposedly included General Bennigsen). It is also worth mentioning that the Tsar's murder, along with the heavy blow dealt by Admiral Nelson and the Royal Navy during the First Battle of Copenhagen (April 2nd, 1801), led to the dissolution of the League of Armed Neutrality, thus weakening France's position against Britain. Paul's heir, his twenty-three-year-old son Alexander, would now be the center figure of Russia's government, but his often ambiguous actions deserve some explanation, especially since he would be the one ultimately responsible for Napoleon's downfall.

Tsar Alexander I is a complicated character. Growing up in his grandmother Catherine's court, he was taught the ideas of the Enlightenment (including French ones) from an early age. Not entirely hostile to the ideas of the French Revolution, Alexander nevertheless constantly bore in mind that Russia was an Autocracy with himself at the head. His power, however, was curtailed: having seen his father's fate, Alexander was absolutely aware that he should not alienate the Nobility [7]. Since that Nobility was pro-British, Russia once again found itself at odds with France.

Following the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens with Britain in 1803, France, declared an Empire with Napoleon at its head in early 1804, was on the brink of war with the powers of Europe. Although Britain was unable to field an army herself (but dealing the French a good deal of damage through her Navy, especially during the Battle of Trafalgar, in October 1805), the Pitt administration could very well pay other countries so that they would send their own armies against the French. This was the case with Russia, which joined an anti-French coalition in April 1805, on the condition of receiving 1.25 million guineas from the British exchequer for each 100,000 men mobilized. Soon to be joined by Austria, these countries became involved in what is called the War of the Third Coalition (1803-1806). Unfortunately for the allies, this was Napoleon's finest moment.

After the surrender of the Austrian garrison at Ulm, in October 1805, and the fall of Vienna that November, the allies found themselves in a complicated position. On the other hand, Napoleon, with his supplies running low and his lines overextended, wasn't doing much better himself. In order to finish the war as soon as possible, Napoleon started to plan for a battle of annihilation in a field of his own choosing, intended to give the allies a fatal blow.

The allies were under the personal command of their emperors: Francis I of Austria and Alexander I of Russia. Alexander, eager for the glory of defeating Napoleon, overruled his battlefield commander, general Kutuzov, and approved the plans for

an attack. They fell right into Napoleon's trap: during what is now known as the famous Battle of Austerlitz (December 2nd, 1805), in which Russian forces bore the most of the fighting, the combined allied army was completely wrecked, with north of 35 thousand troops killed, captured, or wounded. The Battle of Austerlitz is actually one of the key points in Tolstoy's novel "War and Peace" and the humiliation caused by the defeat struck deep inside the Russian soldiers' minds. In the aftermath of the battle, Austria decided to sue for peace. Russia, though badly beaten, did not, with the army retreating back inside the county's borders in order to bid their time.

Hostilities between Russia and France, despite Napoleon's efforts to avoid it, soon resumed in 1806, in the context of the War of the Fourth Coalition (1806-1807), which this time could count Prussia as one of its actors. This war is probably the most crucial point in terms of the Franco-Russian relations.

While Napoleon was in Berlin, after having effectively knocked Prussia out the war during the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt (October 14, 1806), he signed the so-called "Berlin Decrees", bringing the Continental System into existence. Under the terms of the System, all trade and communication with the British Isles was henceforth forbidden.

After a series of battles, most notably Eylau (February 7-8, 1807) and Friedland (June 14, 1807), the Russians and Prussians sued for peace and were finally brought to the negotiating table. The so-called Tilsit Summit is a defining moment in History. Aside from the negotiations taking place in a raft on the river Niemen, the most striking detail about these meetings - the first time Napoleon and Alexander met face-to-face - is how well the two Emperors immediately got along. According to the recordings, the two men would talk into the early hours about a vast array of subjects, from music to the best forms of government. They even exchanged military decorations. Probably because of the friendship developed between Napoleon and Alexander, the Tilsit Treaties, while severe towards Prussia, were remarkably lenient towards Russia: Napoleon guaranteed that German states ruled by the Tsar's close family - foremost amongst them was Oldenburg - would not be bothered and gave Alexander a free hand to invade Finland. The treaties had only two points which aggravated the Russians: first, Russia would be forced to join the Continental System; secondly, the Duchy of Warsaw would be carved out of Prussian lands, prompting Russian fears of an eventual recreation of Poland, a cause towards which Napoleon was knowingly sympathetic. Other than these two points and some other minor concessions, the Russians had no reason to complain about the terms of Tilsit.

Fig. 1. The encounter between Emperor Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I during the Tilsit Treaties, in 1807. The two heads of state got on well

The terms of Tilsit Treaties were reaffirmed the following year, in late 1808, during the Congress of Erfurt, only now the relations between the Emperors had cooled. With Finland now in the process of being incorporated into the Russian Empire, Alexander was starting to feel the pressure both of having joined the Continental System, which was deeply unpopular, and of the constant presence of the Duchy of Warsaw on Russia's borders. Though keeping a semblance of cordiality during Erfurt, Alexander was already taking steps to prepare Russia for "right moment to take measures". On the other side, Napoleon

opposed Russian schemes against Turkey, but he relented after Alexander promised him that Russia would come to the aid of France in the event of a war against Austria.

Fig. 2. the Duchy of Warsaw, created after the War of the Fourth Coalition. The presence of a Polish state on Russia's borders together with the enforcement of the Continental System strained Franco-Russian relations

That was precisely what the Russian's didn't do when the war against Austria - the War of the Fifth Coalition (1809) - began. Rather than rushing to help France, the 70,000 men under Prince Golitsyn not only arrived late to the theater of operations, but also managed to avoid the enemy throughout the whole campaign (they only ever suffered two casualties). Needless to say, this did not endear the Russians to Napoleon, further straining Franco-Russian relations.

Further strain was added when Napoleon, after his peace with Austria in October 1809, used Austrian land to enlarge the Duchy of Warsaw, spreading fears in Saint Petersburg of a Polish Restoration. In diplomatic matters, it also didn't help when Napoleon, following his divorce, chose to marry the Hapsburg Princess Marie Louise instead of the Romanov Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna, Alexander's sister. Granted, Alexander was against the marriage and blatantly stalled negotiations, but he felt scorned nonetheless.

By early 1810, after years of ups and downs between the two countries, everything led to believe that Russia and France would soon be at war. Alexander appointed the modernizer General Barclay de Tolly as minister for war and started pushing for reforms in the Russian Army, rearming as fast as possible without raising alarm. On the French side, Napoleon, who was not at all naive about his relations with the Tsar, started revamping the Polish fortresses and sending detachments eastwards, towards the Russian frontier, all the while collecting any intelligence he could on Russia.

In July 1810 the Continental System suffered a fundamental change: special licenses could now be issued under which trade with Britain was allowed. The Russians were furious, since they saw this change as a great injustice: since the licenses were mostly given to Frenchmen at the expense of the rest of Europe, Russia felt cheated out of profitable commerce with Britain, the lack of which resulting in considerable debts to the Russian treasury.

The change in the System was necessary, for Napoleon knew it wasn't bringing about the expected result of British capitulation. In fact, smuggling of British imports was ripe throughout Europe, and most Heads of State - Alexander included

- had turned a blind eye to it. In order to combat smuggling, and in violation of the agreements of Tilsit, Napoleon annexed the Duchy of Oldenburg, ruled by the father-in-law of Alexander's sister. Although plans for a war with France predated Oldenburg, this annexation was the last straw which prompted more drastic measures: on December 19, 1810, Alexander published a decree opening Russian trade to neutral countries - which effectively ended the embargo on Britain, since simply flying the Stars and Stripes was enough for complicit customs officials to accept the ships as neutral - and imposing heavy duties on French luxury goods. This decree was a clear *casus belli* for it violated the agreements in Tilsit and Erfurt - although the Russians could very well argue that Napoleon broke them first by violating the sovereignty of Oldenburg.

Huge military concentrations began taking place on both sides in early 1811, followed by a massing of troops along the Russian borders. Logistical and diplomatic stalling pushed the war's timeline ever forward, until it became clear that climatic conditions would preclude any operations in 1811. This postponement, contrary to the theory that Russia was caught by surprise, gave the Russian High Command significant time to prepare, a bonus that Napoleon's previous enemies had so far lacked. During this preparation, Russia even pulled a significant diplomatic coup: even though the fear of French reprisal prevented Austria and Prussia from ignoring their previous peace treaties - which bound them to provide troops for Napoleon in case of a war - they assured Alexander that their contribution would be minimal. Combined, these two countries provided the French with only 50,000 men for the campaign, with the additional downside of several Prussian officers (including Carl von Clausewitz) resigning their commissions and joining the Russians in protest. Alexander also secured his northern and southern flanks by signing treaties with Sweden and Turkey.

On April 8, 1812, while Napoleon's *Grande Armée* was stationed along the Elbe, Alexander issued an ultimatum demanding the evacuation of French troops from critical zones, a proposal that would obviously be refused. Totaling 615,000 men, over twice the size of the Russian Army, Napoleon's multi-national *Grande Armée* was the largest invasion force in the history of mankind up to that time. On June 24, 1812, that force crossed the river Niemen into Russia.

B. The Russian Campaign

Upon Napoleon's entry into Russian land, his forces were opposed by three Russian "Armies of the West": Barclay de Tolly's First Army, with 129,000 men; General Bagration's Second Army, with 48,000 men; and General Tormasov's Third Army, with 43,000 men. Adding the numbers up, it is clear that the Russians were frankly outnumbered, but Napoleon still made it his primary objective to keep the First and Second Armies separate, sending Jérôme (his brother) and Eugène (his stepson) to keep Bagration pinned (though why he sent such inexperienced men to take care of such a task is still unclear).

Among the Russian High Command, opinions concerning strategy differed, with Bagration's group pushing the idea of a counter offensive while Barclay de Tolly's group advocated in favor of strategic withdrawal, in order to lure Napoleon inside deep Russia. In the end, the sheer size of the *Grande Armée* made a direct approach unthinkable, and, with the Tsar's approval, Barclay de Tolly's proposal carried the day.

The idea of strategic withdrawal made perfect sense: by now, it was clear that Napoleon's strategy consisted mainly in achieving a decisive victory as soon as possible into the campaign. His forces were not prepared for prolonged attrition warfare. Even more, the precarious agriculture of Eastern Poland and Byelorussia made it impossible for his troops to "live off the land", as they had done during previous campaigns. Thus, by combining the withdraws with a systematic scorched earth policy, the Russians had put a serious strain on Napoleon's logistics. Moreover, Russian irregulars and light cavalry squadrons constantly shadowed their enemies' movements, attacking supply and communication lines and even capturing detachments that strayed too far in the search for food. All these factors weighed heavily upon the French, who started suffering from severe shortages.

By June 28, Napoleon had entered Vilnius, the capital of Polish Lithuania, virtually without resistance. By allowing most of his troops to rest in the city for ten days, Napoleon started to waste his force's momentum, one of the things that had made the French so effective. Muddy roads, brought about by frequent rain, also slowed the soldiers down.

Although the Campaign of 1812 is famously remembered for its cold, the problem in early July, after the rain of late June had let up, was in fact the opposite: boiling heat. Soldiers frequently collapsed and fresh water had become so hard to come by that some men resorted to drinking horse urine to quench their thirst. The heat, the dirt and lack of water combined with the troop's packaging and poor hygiene brought about a devastating Typhus epidemic, which caused an average of 6,000 new cases per day. Up to 140,000 men died of disease during the 1812 Campaign [8].

Napoleon nevertheless continued pushing eastwards, trying to keep the Russian armies separated. He had no clear strategy nor war goals thus far, but several sources state that the Emperor never intended to venture too deep into Russia, much less attempt to march on Moscow in 1812. He probably thought he could deliver a decisive blow before retreating into winter's quarters in Warsaw. In any event, there is evidence that Napoleon was being misled about the real state of his army and the strategy of ending wars with a clear, decisive victory had worked out well for him in the past.

On July 23 Napoleon almost got his decisive battle, for Barclay was ready to make a stand at Vitebsk in order for Bagration to join him. However on that same day Marshal Davout blocked Bagration's advance during the Battle of Mogilev, the campaign's first major engagement. This French victory thus denied Napoleon of his decisive battle for it made the Russians leave Vitebsk

(taking their supplies with them), which Napoleon took on July 28. By now, he had a decision to make: either entrench his position or advance further.

Ending the year's campaign and resume fighting only in 1813 was seriously considered. Napoleon had a good defensive position by holding Vitebsk and huge supply depots nearby could see the army through winter. He was already deep inside Russia (though not yet inside "Old Russia") and the troops were exhausted. There were also, on the other hand, several good reasons to press on. He had lost less than 10,000 battle casualties and winter was still far away. Moreover, it would be better to strike before the Tsar could train the recently called new recruits. His commanders were also split: Duroc, Caulaincourt, Poniatowski and Bethier advised him to stay in Vitebsk. Murat argued that Napoleon should march on. Murat's reasoning was to ask how much more the Russians would be willing to give of their land before suing for peace (modern scholars now know that the answer to this question is "a lot"). Upon hearing that Barclay's and Bagration's forces, despite the French's efforts, had joined on August 1st in the city of Smolensk, Napoleon saw the opportunity for the decisive battle he so craved. He was sure that his enemies would not give up one for Russia's most important cities without a fight, so he decided to press on further, leaving Vitebsk on August 11.

Napoleon's plan, however, failed. A heroic rearguard action of some Russian troops made Napoleon lose the element of surprise. While the city caught fire as a consequence of heavy shelling, the Russians retreated further eastward, denying Napoleon - who entered the deserted city on the 18th - his decisive victory.

By now, the idea of a march on Moscow was being debated. Napoleon held a rare council of war with his top subordinates (Murat, Berthier, Ney, Davout, Caulaincourt, Mortier, Duroc and Lobau) over the matter. According to witnesses, only Davout and Murat pressed for a march on Moscow, the rest of the advisers begging Napoleon to stay at Smolensk for the winter.

On the Russian side the several retreats, however effective they were against the enemy, were deeply unpopular, which prompted Alexander to make a change of command: though Barclay remained the head of the First Army, the sixty-seven-year-old General Mikhail Kutuzov was appointed supreme commander of the Russian Forces. Although Kutuzov had been soundly defeated by Napoleon at Austerlitz, the old veteran of Catherine the Great's wars was very much popular inside the army. And though he agreed with the policy of strategic retreat - in fact, he continued to fall back towards Moscow for two weeks after his appointment - the condition for his appointment was that he had to give battle. He chose to do so, after thorough reconnaissance of the region, in a field of his own choosing, the village of Borodino, which lay 65 miles west of Moscow. On August 24, Napoleon decided to march onward.

Napoleon was now correct in his belief that the Russians would not let their old capital, the holy city of Moscow, fall without a major battle. That would too much even for them. By conquering Moscow, he thought, he could bring Alexander to sue for peace. On the 5th of September, in preparation for the clash, Napoleon had his troops take the Shevardino Redout, on the outskirts of Borodino. It was from Shevardino that Napoleon would issue his orders during the coming battle.

On the Russian side, the defenders of Borodino put their time to good use by building some major earthworks: the "Great Redoubt", upon which 24 guns would be placed, and the three "*flèches*" in the center of the field, protecting Bagration's position.

On the day of the battle, the 7th of September, Napoleon rose early after a night of broken sleep. In fact, many historians claim he was unwell that day, with hypotheses ranging from hemorrhoids to a bad case of influenza. Ségur, for example, records that Napoleon was afflicted by a burning fever. These hypotheses are not wholly unreasonable, for Napoleon's performance at Borodino was below average for him - indeed, he had rejected Davout's proposal for a flanking attack, opting instead for a costly direct assault. In the Russian camp, the holy icon "Our Lady of Smolensk" was paraded before the troops at down, which must have been a stunning sight for the many devout soldiers.

According to [8], the French were down to 103,000 men and 587 guns, while the Russians disposed of a total of 120,800 men and 640 guns (but it is worth noting that these estimates vary). The Battle of Borodino, the bloodiest single day in human history until World War I, was about to begin.

C. Borodino

At 6 a.m. on the 7th of September, 1812, salvos from the French artillery, directed at the Russian defenses, signaled the start of hostilities [9]. The initial dispositions of the Battle of Borodino are registered in Fig. 3. A good description of Borodino's order of battle can be found in [10].

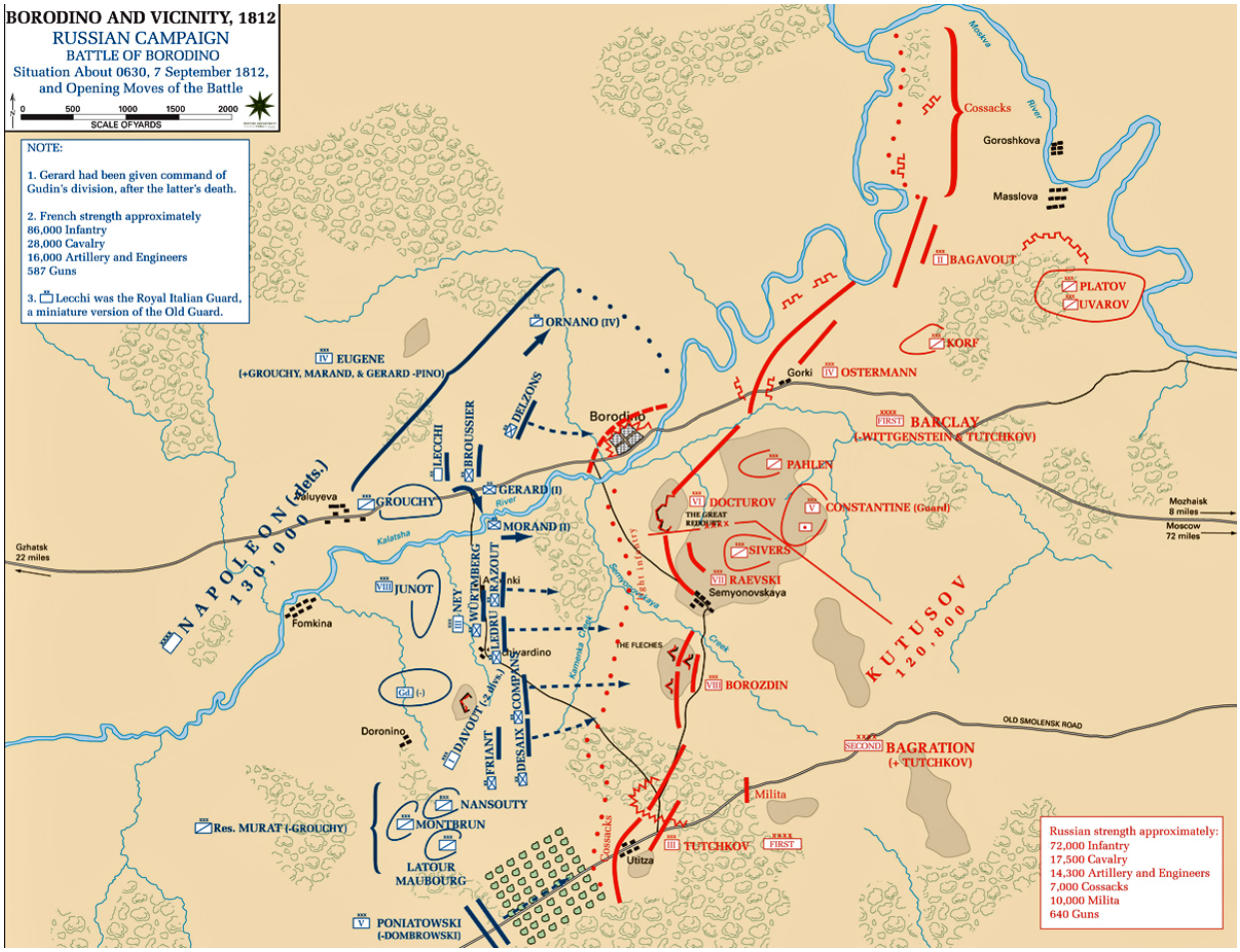

Fig. 3. Disposition of troops at Borodino - 0630 hours. Source: USMA

Right off, Eugène's IV Corps advanced on the village of Borodino proper, conquering it by 7.30 a.m., but he went too far when trying to advance towards the Great Redoubt - across the bridge over the Kalatscha river - and was driven back with heavy losses. The Russians promptly burned the bridge. The conquering of the Borodino village, however, allowed for cannons to be moved up to it, which by about 10 a.m. started dispersing flanking fire upon the Great Redoubt.

Simultaneously, on the battle's center, there was fierce fighting over the possession of the three *flèches*. At 6.30 a.m., Davout personally led part of his I Corps (22,000 men under three divisions: Friant's 2nd, Dessaix's 4th and Compans's 5th) against Vorontsov's Grenadiers, part of the Russian's VII Corps, who were defending the *flèches*. Seeing that the main attack was falling on the Russian center and left flank, Barclay sent Baggovut's II Corps to reinforce Bagration's position. The French managed to capture the Russian's leftmost *flèche*, but were driven out by a counter-attack led by Bagration himself.

An attack against Davout's forces by the Russian IV Cavalry Corps, in which Davout himself was wounded, prompted a response of the French I Cavalry Corps, led my Marshal Murat. Marshal Ney's III Corps had also joined the attack on the *flèches* by now. The *flèches* changed hands a total of seven times and only after capturing two of them - after close-quarters bayonet fighting - did the French discover that there was a third one, showing a clear failure of French reconnaissance.

In the south, Poniatowski's V Corps was tasked with taking the village of Utitsa, which they had done by 10 a.m., but Olsufiev's 17th Infantry Division - part of Baggovut's reinforcements - arrived just in time to patch the Russian III Corps of General Tuchkov. Junot's VII Corps was sent south to clear Russian skirmishers from the woods around Utitsa. Around the same time, Eugène launched a new attack against the Great Redoubt, defended by a division of Dokhturov's VI Corps. Morand's 1st Infantry Division managed to take the redoubt, but were expelled by a Russian counter attack.

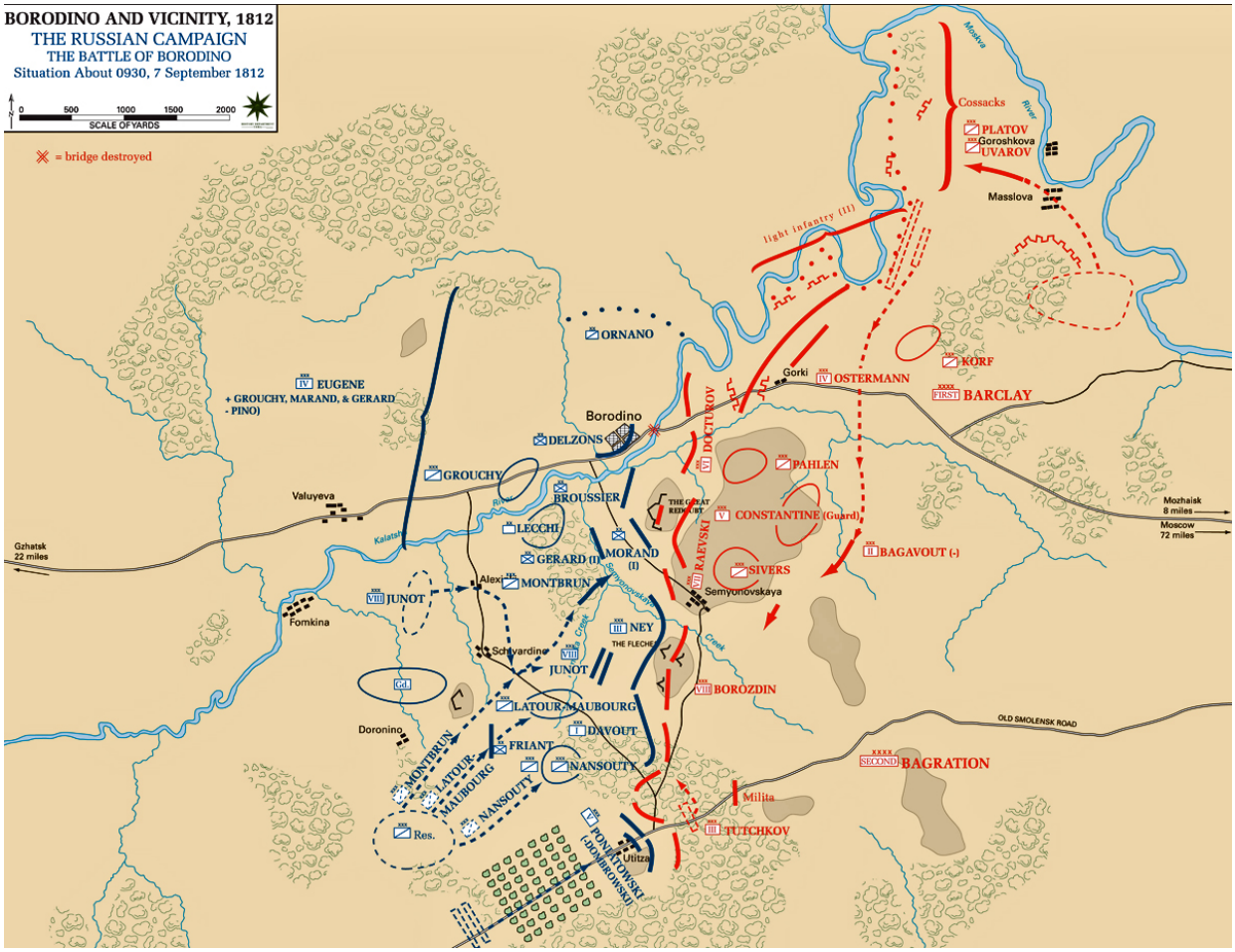

Fig. 4. Disposition of troops at Borodino - 0930 hours. Source: USMA

The sources diverge about the events here, but most state that by roughly 10 a.m. the *flèches* were in French hands, with Friant's 2nd Infantry Division and Marchand's 25th Infantry Division (composed of Würtembergian troops) being sent to help Davout, Ney and Murat face counter-attacks by Russian infantry and cuirassiers, with both sides' cavalries engaging in a large melee. Bagration swore to retake the *flèches* or die trying, and that is what he got: while overseeing the counter-attack, the legendary Russian general was hit in the left leg. Mortally wounded, he was carried off the field, dealing a great blow to the soldier's morale, who finally relented and retreated from their position (although it is debated if the French really conquered the *flèches* before or after his death).

Though the Russians had fought bravely, the onslaught around the *flèches* was too much to bear. With VIII Corps and IV Cavalry Corps pulling back, Friant's division pushed on to take the village of Semenovskaya, which allowed Napoleon to move up artillery that would fire upon the Russian left flank. At Utitsa, Poniatowski managed to take the heights around the village, with general Tuchkov being gravely wounded in the process.

It is in this moment, right around noon, that the greatest crisis of the battle - and one that leads to question whether Napoleon was in his usual mind or not - takes place. Upon receiving news from the field, no less than nine marshals (including two future ones) begged Napoleon to use the Imperial Guard in order to smash through the Russian ranks while they were in disarray. Napoleon refused. So far from France and with the result of the Campaign yet unknown, he felt it would be reckless to commit his reserves like that, and so he preferred to let the battle develop. There is serious debate as to what would have happened had he committed the Imperial Guard at this point.

While Napoleon pondered, Barclay continued moving troops from his un-engaged right flank towards the Russian center. As Ostermann-Tolstoy's IV Corps arrived at the center, French observers feared the Russians were preparing for a massive counter-attack. Though Napoleon refused to send his entire Imperial Guard, he did send forward General Sorbier's Guard Artillery, which opened devastating fire against the Russian ranks.

On the Russian Right, generals Uvarov and Platov proposed to lead the I Cavalry Corps and the Cossack Corps through a surprise flanking attack on Borodino, in order to relieve the pressure upon the Great Redoubt. Their attack was a complete

surprise, forcing General Grouchy to redirect his III Cavalry Corps in order to drive the Russians off of Borodino. Though the Russians were pushed back, their surprise attack delayed the next French attacks.

At about 3 p.m. a major French attack, consisting of Eugène's IV Corps, and the II (Auguste Caulaincourt, substituting the dead Montbrun) and IV (Latour-Maubourg) Cavalry Corps, is launched against the Great Redoubt. The Russians resisted almost to the last man, but in the end the Redoubt was finally taken, albeit at great cost (Auguste Caulaincourt, brother to one of Napoleon's closest advisers, was himself among those dead in the struggle). Though Napoleon ordered all cavalry units to advance in order to explore this success, they were halted by the last Russian cavalry reserves.

By 4 p.m. the French were in clear possession of the field, but Napoleon again refused to use the Imperial Guard. By 5 p.m. the Russians had already retreated half a mile, but the French were too exhausted to follow up, preferring to shell the enemy at a distance rather than attempt a pursuit.

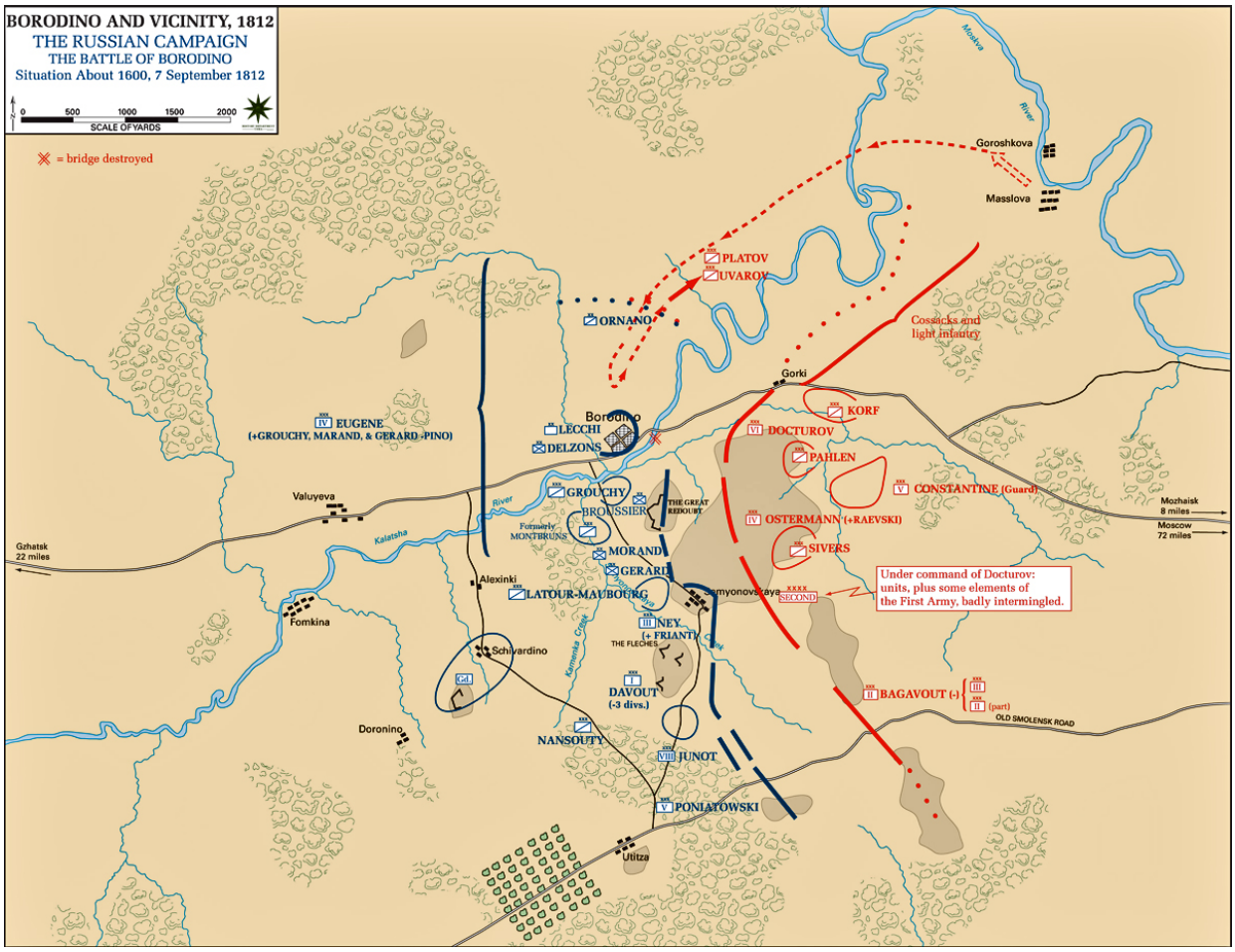

Fig. 5. Disposition of troops at Borodino - 1600 hours. Source: USMA

While Napoleon expected the fight to resume the next day, Kutuzov, having seen the level of carnage, chose to withdraw his forces at night, under the cover of darkness. Although he had left most of the decisions about the battle to his subordinates on the field, Kutuzov was still very much in charge of the Russian grand strategy. By choosing to retreat rather them attempt a second day of fighting, he might have saved the Russian Army from complete collapse.

Total tallies for the battle put Russian losses at around 43,000 casualties, with French figures at around 28,000 (although this estimate is sometimes higher). Although Napoleon suffered fewer losses, he still hadn't won the decisive battle he was after. In the end, it is hard to say who really won at Borodino.

D. Brief discussion on Borodino's aftermath

By failing to obtain his decisive battle, Napoleon had made a grave mistake. He pushed onward to Moscow, reaching the city on September 14, but this brought him nothing: while the city burned around him, he continued to send Tsar Alexander peace offers, which weren't even answered. By the time he decided to leave Moscow it was to late, for the temperatures were

rapidly falling. Irregular troops, along with Kutuzov's army, which was still held together after the battle, battered the French every step of the way.

The total losses throughout the campaign were enormous and resulted in a crippling blow to the French war-making effort. As a direct consequence of Napoleon's failed 1812 Campaign, the European nations unleashed the War of the Sixth Coalition (1813-1814), which eventually led to Napoleon's defeat and to his abdication with the Treaty of Fontainebleau.

Most historians agree that these effects can be traced to the encounter at Borodino, making it a key point in the 1812 Campaign. The importance of the Battle is remembered even nowadays, which can be attested by the sheer size of the events which marked its 200th anniversary [11].

In fact, if the historian's view of Borodino's importance is to be withheld, it is possible to trace its consequences far beyond the scope of the Napoleonic Wars. Throughout their existence, and especially after the intake of European ideas, the Russians had faced a sort of "identity crisis", struggling to answer the question "what does it mean to be Russian?". As with the Americans, through their Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the Brazilians, with their War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), the Italians, during their Second War of Independence (1859), just to name a few among so many other countries, the Russians found a good deal of their "national identity" through the ordeal of a patriotic war against a common enemy. The Russians, in fact, refer to the campaign as the Patriotic War of 1812, with the Battle of Borodino being its crowning moment, which is one of the reasons why artists such as Tolstoy, Tchaikovsky and Lermontov worked so hard to depict it [7].

In more practical terms, the outcome at Borodino resulted in profound changes to the Russian Army. The majority of the young officers who served in Borodino came from the Russian aristocracy, a proud caste per excellence. Their success gave these young men great pride in their country and great confidence in themselves. Afterwards, when the Russians were campaigning through Europe, these officers picked up many foreign ideas, writings and trends. Back in their homeland after the wars, they started seeing all of its problems. Russia was, for example, the only European country where serfdom still existed. These officers, through the late 1810s, started forming secret clubs to debate Russia's problems. By the early 1820s, these discussions were taking the form of real action plans (where even Republicanism was considered quite seriously).

The sudden death of Alexander I on November 1825 brought about a succession crisis, which threw the government into disarray. This was the signal the conspirators needed to launch their Revolution. Without a unified plan, the rebels assembled in Saint Petersburg's Senate Square on the 26th of December, but were dispersed that same day by the means of artillery fire. The "Decembrist Revolt", as the episode became known, was the first attempt at revolution in Russian history and marked an inflection point in what would become ever-more-violent Russian politics.

With these examples, it is easy to perceive just how significant the clash at Borodino is in terms of understanding recent modern History. Therefore, it becomes imperative that this event should be thoroughly studied in all its aspects, with its fictional representations figuring among the most significant of them.

III. Examples of Fictional Depictions of Borodino

A. The Works

Of all the works dedicated to the depiction of the Battle of Borodino, this article chooses to focus on two: Tchaikovsky's "The Year 1812 Solemn Overture" and Tolstoy's epic novel "War and Peace". The contexts behind this works deserve some explaining.

In 1880, sixty-eight years after Napoleon's defeat, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow was nearing completion. The project, started by Alexander I (though he didn't live to see it end), aimed to pay homage to Providence for saving the Russians during the events of 1812, by now widely known throughout Russia. Tchaikovsky was approached in late 1880 with a commission to compose a piece with which to mark the cathedral's consecration [12].

Tchaikovsky completed his work - popularly known as "The 1812 Overture" - in a mere six weeks, resulting in a final piece that the composer thought wasn't particularly good. Debuting in 1882, it ironically became one of Tchaikovsky's most famous pieces.

Tolstoy's work "War and Peace" came around a bit earlier, being written between the years 1863 and 1869. The original plan was to write a novel about the aforementioned Decembrist Revolt, but after extensive research - both through written works and oral tradition - Tolstoy figured that in order to understand the roots of the movement he should take his novel back to the year 1805, the year of the defeat at Austerlitz, all the way through to 1812, with the Battle of Borodino being his book's climax. The word "climax" has a twofold sense: not only is the battle the culmination of the tensions created throughout the book, it also serves as a backdrop for some of Tolstoy's deep philosophical reflections. The book's title is inspired by one of Proudhon's works, which reflects Tolstoy's *Weltanschauung* at the time of writing (though it is extremely hard to exactly pinpoint his beliefs, for he was a completely *sui generis* figure) [13].

B. Their Consequence

Tchaikovsky's "The 1812 Overture" is not only one of the composer's most famous pieces, but is actually one of the most famous musical pieces ever, though more for their alternative use than for its original meaning of representing the Campaign

of 1812. It is absolutely striking: the superposition of nationalistic motifs competing against each other combine to create an epic melody, with even literal cannons making an appearance. This piece has been used in several occasions, be it to mark the celebrations of the United States' Independence Day (even though they had little to do with Napoleon's Russian adventure) or appearing in movies such as Woody Allen's "*Bananas*" and James McTeigue's "*V for Vendetta*" [14].

Similarly, Tolstoy's "War and Peace" became an international success, and is considered by many critics to be one of the canon works of Western Literature. Moreover, since the book contains many dissertations on philosophy and with the characters often serving as medium to express Tolstoy's own views, the book became an important factor in the building of what is called the "Tolstoyan Movement", an ideology which was quite popular in Russia for a long time.

As said, throughout "War and Peace" there are several moments where the narrative is interrupted in order to give way to some philosophical essays. These focus mainly on the mechanisms of History: who are its agents, was Napoleon really "great" or is this idea an *a posteriori* construct, etc. In these essays, Tolstoy was often at odds with the dominant theories of the time, especially Thomas Carlyle's "Great Man Theory". Given the breadth and depth of Tolstoy's influence, it is reasonable to wonder just how much his views influence posterior scholars. Also in the book, though the Battle of Borodino represents an undoubtedly decisive moment for the characters, Tolstoy questions whether the trail of events leading up to it makes sense or not. These points shall be explored in the next section.

IV. Assessment of the Fictional Works

A. Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture

Right off, it is important to make one thing clear: it's obviously not reasonable to demand Historical accuracy from a music piece, so this is in no way a critique of Tchaikovsky's work. There are, however, some aspects of the 1812 Overture that deserve clarification. There are mainly two: some anachronisms present in the melody and some contradictions regarding its interpretation.

The first point is due to the fact that some themes used in the music are not entirely accurate. For instance, one of the most identifiable characteristics of the piece is its use of a motif derived from the "Marseillaise", representing the French invader. The Marseillaise, however, had been outlawed by Napoleon at the time of the 1812 Campaign, the French anthem at the time being the "Chant du Départ" [15]. Evidently, between the two songs the Marseillaise is the one which is better known (even in 1880s Russia it was quite famous), which justifies the composer's choice to have it represent the French, but its use in the piece might lead to an equivocated conclusion about its use during the Campaign.

Also, during the end of the piece, the theme of the Russian anthem "God Save the Tsar" starts dominating the melody, representing the eventual Russian victory (though this was later edited out during the Soviet era). This is, however, another anachronism, for this song hadn't yet been composed at the time of the 1812 Campaign, and was only adopted as the Russian anthem in 1833. Again, this is a justifiable choice, for "God Save the Tsar" was probably the most widely known song in Russia during Tchaikovsky's time, but it is still worth noting that it fails in terms of Historical accuracy.

Regarding the second point, there are conflicting interpretations about the exact meaning of the song, questioning if the 1812 Overture represents the Battle of Borodino or the 1812 Campaign as a whole. Arguing for the former, John Suchet writes: "Tchaikovsky used the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, to depict the Battle of Borodino, inserting five Russian cannon shots to depict the turning point of the battle. As the *Marseillaise* disintegrates and the French *Grande Armée* retreats, victory bells ring out [...]" [12]. This argument is representative of the view that the 1812 Overture represents the Battle of Borodino, but from what was seen, this is nonsensical: there was no "turning point" nor "victory bells" for the Russians at Borodino, since they clearly lost the battle from a tactical perspective (if Borodino is to be considered a Russian victory, it can only be so from a strategic point of view. In any case, most historians argue that Borodino was a French victory, albeit a Pyrrhic one). With that in mind, interpreting the 1812 Overture as representing the entire campaign is more accurate: an initial French invasion (the Marseillaise theme enters, contrasting the initial melody of "O Lord, Save Thy People", a traditional Russian folk song), followed by French domination, reaching a maximum at the Battle of Borodino (possibly represented by the cannons), with the eventual French demise and Russian victory (ending in "God Save the Tsar"). Although this is not a problem with the accuracy of the piece itself, performances of classical music are often accompanied by explanatory notes, which give the context of the piece. In this scenario, frequent diffusions of an imprecise interpretation might reinforce each other, resulting in a predominantly incorrect view of the battle for people who came upon it through the musical medium.

B. Tolstoy's War and Peace

As mentioned before, Tolstoy's work combines moments of fictional narrative with his own philosophical essays. We shall analyze each of these points separately. However, it is worth mentioning that we shall be comparing the book to current moderns sources, which might not have been available to Tolstoy at the time of writing. Therefore, caution is recommended in order to avoid any anachronism.

Before getting into the analysis of the battle itself, it is striking how accurately Tolstoy describes its preparations: the dispositions and commands of the Russian armies, the disagreements over strategy in the Russian high command, etc. However,

Tolstoy's "Russianness" is felt right from the start by means of his partiality. For example: in the first part of book three, the author has an appalled Tsar remark that Napoleon has invaded Russia without a formal declaration of war and vows not to sue for peace while there is a single Frenchman inside his borders. Though the Tsar's attitude might very well have been that, the passage implies that it Napoleon's action was unlawful and ungentlemanly, when in fact there was no need for a formal declaration of war, given the fact that the French ambassador had received no answer to a last-minute peace offer. Similar situations had taken place during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) [8]. Moreover, as we have seen, the idea that Russia was caught by surprise in a sudden aggressive war is ludicrous, for the Tsar had been preparing for this very event for quite some time in advance.

Fast forwarding to the battle itself, which is mainly seen from the point of view of character Pierre Bezukhov, we can see a narration which bolsters superb attention to detail, including the episode of Our Lady of Smolensk being paraded in front of the troops. As the battle starts, Pierre makes his way to the bridge over the Kalatscha between Brodino and Gorki just as Russian soldiers are driving back Eugène's troops. As he makes his way towards the Great Redoubt (called the "Raevsky redoubt" in the book), Pierre passes the Russian VI Corps, which, as explained in Section II, is precisely guarding the redoubt, showing how well researched the novel is.

Throughout the rest of the engagement, Pierre stays for the most part in the Great Redoubt, thus placing him at one of the main points of the battle. Initially the redoubt is only menaced by artillery fire, which is perfectly reasonable, considering that it took some time before the French attempted to storm the redoubt again after IV Corps initial failure. After leaving the redoubt, Pierre returns right at the moment when General Morand's division had taken the position, and sees the subsequent Russian counter-attack which retakes it.

At this moment, the narrative changes its focus, switching from Pierre Bezukhov's point of view to more general description. Tolstoy gets the initial steps of the battle absolutely right by describing the initial cannonades that marked the start of hostilities and how Dessaix's and Compans's divisions - both attached to Davout's I Corps - moved to attack the *flèches* (it can be excused that he forgot to mention Friant's). He also raises the point of Napoleon's visibility of the battle being reduced by the distances involved, which is fair: throughout the day Napoleon mainly relied upon his officer's reports when taking decisions. However, Tolstoy makes a tiny slip while narrating these parts, when recounting Napoleon's hesitancy to commit his Imperial Guard: in the passage, marshals Ney and Berthier scorn an officer's suggestion to use the guard, when in reality most of Napoleon's staff (including Ney himself) favored this move. Also, when Tolstoy describes the moment when General Belliard - one of Marshal Murat's aides - asks Napoleon for reinforcements, he was imprecise: Belliard wasn't asking for generic reinforcements, but for the Guard itself. This detail is worth the comment because, as mentioned, Napoleon's refusal to use the Imperial Guard is a major source of debate about the battle (and is a point that shall be revisited when we get to comment Tolstoy's essays that are present in the book).

Here the narrative shifts once more, this time to focus on Kutuzov, shown (correctly) to be taking little charge of the battle's development, preferring to let the events unfold. Here, there is another minor slip from Tolstoy: upon learning that Bagration has been wounded, the author has Kutuzov appoint Duke Eugene of Württemberg as commander of the First Army, later to be substituted by General Dokhturov. Although these changes are correct, Bagration was actually the commander of the Second Army, not the First (which was headed by General Barclay). Soon afterwards, Kutuzov receives the news of the fall of the "flèches" and of Semenovskaya, again on par with Historical descriptions. There is one more inaccuracy in this section, as Tolstoy claims the French attacks stopped about before 3 p.m. As has been shown, this was actually when the massive attack against the Great Redoubt was executed, with the hostilities actually ceasing around 5 p.m.

Overall, Tolstoy's literary description of the battle is remarkably precise, with only a few inaccuracies appearing. Even though this is not a major criterion for assessing a work of fiction, his attention to detail deserves praise. However, when venturing into the more analytical essays which are part of the book, we find that his biased judgment often stems from incorrect suppositions. Some of these suppositions - particularly those concerning his knowledge of Napoleon - are outright wrong, while others, more philosophical, are in the very least questionable. These essays are too lengthy to fit into the scope of this work, but some comment about them is necessary.

Throughout his essays, Tolstoy attempts to explore the natures of war, History and historiography, often clashing with the dominant idea of his time, which claimed that the "Great Men" - people in positions of power, high office, etc. - were the ones responsible for conducting the course of the events which make up "History". This theory can by synthesized in the words of celebrated thinker Thomas Carlyle: "Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here" [16].

Tolstoy denies this claim. He argues instead that "the king is a slave of History", citing as an example just how powerless Napoleon and Alexander really were to stop the coming war. In his words, if the problems over the Continental System or the Duchy of Oldenburg were really the cause of the conflict: "it would only have been necessary for Metternich, Rumyantsev, or Talleyrand, between a levee and an evening party, to have taken proper pains and written a more adroit note, or for Napoleon to have written to Alexander: "My respected Brother, I consent to restore the duchy to the Duke of Oldenburg"—and there would have been no war" (book three, first part, chapter I).

This view is a naive one, for it is obvious that the solution to such a complicated diplomatic crisis would not have been so simple. No nation or leader, especially those of what are considered "Great Powers", considers "losing face" an inconsequential matter. How would it have looked if Napoleon, the Emperor of the foremost military power of his time, had accepted Alexander's ultimatum and evacuated his troops? On the other hand, the fact that there are factors constraining the actions of these leaders does not mean that they were passive observers of the unfolding events. It was because of Napoleon's orders that the Continental System was established and that the Duchy of Oldenburg was invaded. In fact, had Napoleon chosen to simply let the matter of the Continental System go, it is possible his popularity would have actually increased, for as much as the system was harming England, it was harming France and her allies even more [8]. Using modern language, it is possible to say that Napoleon and Alexander were locked in a Prisoner's Dilemma, which is when rational individuals, because of mutual mistrust, might not cooperate even for their own benefit (which similarly explains Napoleon's dealings with England) [17].

Tolstoy also argues that if no one in either army wanted to go to war, there would have been no war, extrapolating to say that any historical event requires a complete set of conditions in order to occur. He is absolutely right about the conditions necessary for some event to occur (here one can think, for example, of the Christmas Truce in WWI, where soldiers fraternized despite orders from their commanders not to), arriving at Aristotle's conclusion that "History is a set of accidental events". But that is not contradictory to the idea that sometimes rulers guide the course of History, for direct orders are also a frequent condition leading to events, including the case in Russia. It is almost unimaginable that the soldiers of the Grande Armée would have crossed the Niemen into Russia without Napoleon's say-so.

Sure there is merit to Tolstoy's theory, for it is easy to see how often events get out of the hand of the "people in charge" and gain almost a life of their own. The French Revolution itself is such an event. But there is a midpoint between Tolstoy's "mass movement" (which is also similarly espoused by many on the Marxist School) and Carlyle's "great men", and this midpoint is nowadays the current "standard view": it is the idea that, although the people are not an historical actor *per se*, since actions can only be undertaken by persons (be they office-holders or not) or groups, they are a major factor in determining what is possible and what decisions are available in any given moment. The effect of the people's opinion limiting what policies are acceptable is known in political science as the "Overton Window", but the role of the historical agent - with whom the ability to take action ultimately lies - still falls to entities which display some "unity", a criteria which clearly does not apply to the chaotic mass (though it might apply to the individual persons which constitute the mass) [18]. This is a lengthy debate, and Tolstoy's view still holds sway, but the radical position held by him in the book led to some errors in his subsequent analyzes.

Based on his view that the individual is irrelevant when compared to the mass, Tolstoy disserts about the campaign itself (book three, second part, chapter I). In this part, his ideas are disproved by historical fact. For example, Tolstoy argues that no one predicted that marching the French Army ever further into the Russian interior would be the cause of its eventual demise, with this explanation for the ultimate failure of the campaign appearing in an *ad hoc* fashion only after such failure had happened. Sure, if it had been absolutely clear right from the start that the decision to take Moscow would result in failure, the whole enterprise of the 1812 Campaign would never have been attempted. However, this was always a risk that was known by the entire French High Command (including Napoleon, who hesitated to push forward more than one time), but a risk that was miscalculated as being outweighed by the expected advantages of taking Moscow. From the Russian side, they also were not gambling with a completely untested strategy, for the idea of delaying battle together with a scorched earth policy had been used as early as the The Second Punic War (218–201 BC) and had been especially decisive during the American Revolutionary War. Considering the vastness of the Russian territory, this strategy made every sense and its final success is not at all surprising. Tolstoy is right when he says that it is easy to judge events after they already happened, but that doesn't mean that no-one warned that this was a bad policy. Moreover, this mistake alone does not suffice to argue against Napoleon's ability (as Tolstoy does), since his record puts him among the most successful commanders in history.

Tolstoy also argues (book three, second part, chapter XIX) that if the commanders had been guided by rational motives, "it would seem that it must have been obvious to Napoleon that by advancing thirteen hundred miles and giving battle with a probability of losing a quarter of his army, he was advancing to certain destruction, and it must have been equally clear to Kutuzov that by accepting battle and risking the loss of a quarter of his army he would certainly lose Moscow.". Here Tolstoy falls victim to the same mistake he criticized earlier, that of being a "prophet of the past". Napoleon's idea to obliterate the enemy army in a decisive battle was not absurd, having been employed with success by Napoleon himself several times before, including in Austerlitz against the Russians. Had it worked at Borodino, it is possible that Alexander would have surrendered.

In chapter XXVII, Tolstoy mocks the thesis that the outcome of the battle was decided by the fact that Napoleon had caught a cold, saying this is completely irrelevant and that his orders were exactly similar to those issued during previous engagements. Aside from the fact that Napoleon opted for a direct assault instead of the flanking movement proposed by Davout, which was wholly uncharacteristic of him, the work of Colson [19] shows that Napoleon violated many of his own military principles at Borodino, which include committing forces at the decisive moment and not attacking defensive positions head-on. Though a cold would be negligible, the hypotheses of Napoleon having been afflicted by some serious malady at the day of the battle is not stupid, for it could explain his deviation from his usual standards. Furthermore, Tolstoy's argument serves as a basis for an attack both against Napoleon's standing fame and against the "scientification" of warfare as espoused by celebrated military

theorists, such as Jomini or Clausewitz (who is even a character in the book). Though the attempt of explaining warfare through precise dialectics and mathematics has led to catastrophic results[1] in conflicts such as the American Civil War (1861-1865) and World War I (1914-1918), Tolstoy's position that the military activity has no internal logic at all is hard to sustain.

There are many more points to Tolstoy's essays, such as his argument that Kutuzov acted irrationally by giving battle (which might have been the case, but he was pressured into doing so anyway), but the points debated above should suffice to give an overall view of his ideas. However, it is also important to state that the scope of this work is insufficient to discuss a thinker such as Tolstoy in all the depth that he is due, for surely the complexity of his thought is not restricted to the discussion above.

Overall, Tolstoy's literary description of the Battle of Borodino is extremely precise, but, as we have seen, his philosophical essays should be taken with a pinch of salt, for his anti-Napoleonic stance clearly biased some of his conclusions. Moreover, considering how much Tolstoy's views changed throughout his life, it is not impossible that he later changed his mind about many of these subjects. Analyzing his views gives us an edge when reading any historical work concerning the period in question, for it is more than likely that the former had some influence upon the latter.

V. Conclusion

All in all, one cannot fail to see the importance of the Battle of Borodino, which not only represents a key point in the relations between France and Russia in a post French Revolution world, but also a decisive moment in Napoleon Bonaparte's fall from power. It was also seen that, for the most part, the fictional descriptions of the Battle of Borodino chosen for analysis - "The 1812 Overture" and "War and Peace" - hold up well when compared to the actual historical events when some poetic liberty is discounted. On the other hand, Tolstoy's philosophical views, which evidently served as building blocks for his books, are often incorrect and can be refuted by the factual realities of what happened at Borodino. Moreover, though many of Tolstoy's opinions are not outright and objectively wrong, they are at least questionable, such as his idea that those in positions of power are actually powerless to stop events once these are set in motion. It is possible, however, that Tolstoy, a man who had a very complex personality development throughout his live, might have recanted some of the views espoused in "War and Peace" later in life, so a more in-depth study of the evolution of this writer's ideas is required in order to pinpoint precisely what his opinions were. Further study is also required to assess to what extent[2] these views influenced posterior generations of historians, either Russian or not, during their researches and publications about the Battle of Borodino.

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[1] Se the works of historian John Keegan for these points.

[2] Given the popularity of Tolstoy's works, it is almost self-evident that they were influential in some way or another, thus meaning that the discussion should focus on "how much" was this influence than on whether it happened or not.