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Napoleon

The Immortal of St Helena

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Destiny has had to be stronger than me. And yet what misfortune for France, for Europe . . . I became the arch of the old and new alliance, the natural mediator between the old and new order of things. I had the principles and the confidence of one and I was identified with the other. I belonged to both of them; in all conscience I could have belonged to either . . . Europe would soon truly have been one people and everybody, no matter where they travelled, would always have found themselves in a common country.

Napoleon at St Helena in the *Memorial*

If Napoleon's defeat did not destroy his legend, it is because St Helena made him the companion of Prometheus.

André Malraux, *Fallen Oaks*

PART ONE



The sword is drawn.
We must drive them back
into their fields of ice

22 JUNE 1812 TO 14 SEPTEMBER 1812

I

NAPOLEON PUSHES ON THROUGH the pine forest. Soldiers sheltering under the trees move out of his way, pulling aside the horses tethered to trunks and branches. Some rush to pick up their stacked muskets to salute the Emperor but, with a gesture, he brings them up short and stops anyone calling out. He jumps off his horse. Grand Equerry Caulaincourt, who is riding with Marshal Bessières and Grand Marshal Duroc, follows suit. Napoleon is brought a Polish lancer's cloak and a black silk forage cap. He quickly puts them on, leaves his hat, then remounts. Laying his cheek flat against his mount's neck, he gallops for the edge of the forest.

The trees thin out. The smell of sweat and stables that hung under the pines gradually gives way to a sweet scent of wet grass.

The Niemen is there, a few hundred metres below these bare hills that fall steeply down to its waters and tower over the Russian bank, a gentle slope covered in rye and wheat.

But that's what they have to hide from. Cossack patrols frequently sweep past, plunging through the crops at a gallop. They must not realize that this army of more than 600,000 men, this army of twenty nations, this army of Napoleon, is here, so close, lying in wait in the forests, choking the Polish roads, ready to cross the Niemen. The Russians must think that they're simply Polish lancers cavalcading along the river banks as usual.

Napoleon halts on the top of the slope. From this vantage point, he can see the meanders of the Niemen. He pushes his horse into a gallop towards the village of Poniemen which lies opposite the town of Kovno. There, in a bend in the river, the Polish bank curls round a spit of land jutting out from its Russian counterpart.

Napoleon goes down to the strand. The dark waters don't seem to be moving. Two hundred metres away lies the other bank; lies Russia; lies war.

Napoleon stays there for a few minutes. He remembers Tilsit

and the raft in the middle of the Niemen. He had met Tsar Alexander almost five years ago to the day, 25 June 1807. He believed in the alliance with Russia, in peace in Europe. Pure fantasy.

He waves his hand. The aides-de-camp accompanying him, also enveloped in Polish cloaks, come forward. The three bridges will be thrown here, he says, enabling the troops to cross. Inform General Éblé that he must build them tomorrow night.

Then he looks east for a long time. It is still oppressively hot, another annoyance like the swarms of mosquitoes that attack the horses and men's faces and get into the sleeves of one's coat. He hears a rumbling sound. A storm is brewing, zigzagging the red dusk sky with long flashes of lightning on this Monday, 22 June 1812.

Napoleon gallops through the gathering darkness towards his headquarters which have been established in the village of Naugardyski. On the roads beyond, the forest regiments are on the march. Further on, near the villages, soldiers are crowding around bread ovens built to supply the troops.

Napoleon yanks on the reins. Too much disorder: too many isolated soldiers, too many little bands of marauders. A quick glance is enough to tell him that. Military police courts of five officers must be set up to try pillagers and stragglers, and sentence them to death. Mobile columns must round up any soldiers who stray from their units. He communicates this to Marshal Berthier and to Davout. The Grand Army, of which almost 400,000 will cross the Niemen, comprises men from too many countries to stay together if there isn't strict discipline.

He bends over the maps in the dilapidated house that has been prepared as his headquarters.

The plan is simple, straightforward. Macdonald's troops, to the north, are marching on Riga.

'I am with Eugène in the centre; I am advancing on Vilna. My brother Jérôme is to the south with Davout. It is for them to attack the armies of General Bagration and Tormasov who hold the south. Once, with my assistance, they are destroyed we will turn back on General Barclay de Tolly's troops who are deploying towards the north of the Russian system.'

Running his hand over the map, he traces a line that splits the

Russian armies in two. They must cut Bagration and Barclay's armies off from each other and fight them in turn.

Then, suddenly, his voice is drowned out as the storm breaks. He sits down, his elbows resting on the map, so hunched forward he is almost lying on the table. And when the wind has died down, he announces that he wants to go down to the Niemen again, without an escort, just an aide-de-camp, Caulaincourt and General Haxo. He wants to take another look at the Niemen's banks in the company of Haxo, a graduate of the École Polytechnique who commands the engineers in Marshal Davout's corps. Every detail counts in a military operation.

HE HEADS BACK to the river bank. After the storm the ground is muddy, but the air is as stifling as ever and the atmosphere is clammy. In one of the villages he rides through Napoleon notices a light shining in the presbytery of a church around which cavalry units are bivouacking. He enters the little room. The curate is kneeling in prayer; he mumbles a few words in French.

'Who are you praying for? For me or for the Russians?'

The curate crosses himself. He is praying for His Majesty, he answers.

'You are right, as a Pole and as a Catholic.'

Napoleon pats the priest's neck and orders Caulaincourt to give him one hundred napoleons.

HE SETS OFF again in the dark and rides along the banks of the river, deep in thought. Every event, every encounter may be a sign, a portent, an omen. He is a man of reason and the Enlightenment. He is passionate about mathematics. But that does not illuminate all the truths of the universe; it does not explain the fact that destiny marks out certain beings and endows them with the energy to make their dreams a reality.

He lets himself be carried along, barely holding the reins, as his horse gallops through the ripe wheat. Suddenly his mount shies. He tries to hang on, slips in the saddle, spins and falls into the wheat. He hears a voice, Caulaincourt's perhaps, or Berthier's, or one of the officers who have caught them up, exclaim, 'A Roman would turn back; it's a bad omen.'

The aides-de-camp, generals and marshals leap off their horses. A hare ran between his mount's legs and startled it.

Napoleon says nothing and returns to headquarters.

I am a man of reason. I do not believe in omens.

But he looks around him at the faces of these generals and aides-de-camp and his secretary.

They saw it, or they've been told. They're worried, and I cannot shake off this sense of anxiety that presses down on me.

THEY HAVE NO knowledge of the Russian armies' movements on the other bank. No spy has offered to get him information.

Napoleon remembers what he was told by Count Narbonne, the last French diplomat to see Emperor Alexander.

'I am under no illusions,' the Tsar had said. 'I know how great a general the Emperor Napoleon is. But, you see, I have space and time on my side. There is no remote corner of this terrain, all of it hostile to you, to which I will not withdraw, no distant post that I will not defend, before I consent to a shameful peace. I won't attack, but I shall not lay down my arms as long as there is a foreign soldier in Russia.'

The Tsar pointed to the easternmost tip of the continent and added, 'If Napoleon makes war and fortune smiles on him, despite the Russians' legitimate aims, he will have to sign peace on the Bering Straits.'

NAPOLEON QUESTIONS CAULAINCOURT. Will the Russians join battle? Where? Outside Vilna? Caulaincourt murmurs that the Russians will not fight; they'll fall back, abandoning their cities.

'Then I have Poland,' replies Napoleon. 'And, in the eyes of the Poles, Alexander suffers from the ineradicable shame of losing their country without putting up a fight. He is losing Poland just by giving me Vilna.'

He must convince himself, and persuade the others, that the war will be short and victory quick.

'Within two months,' Napoleon goes on, 'Russia will be asking for peace. The grand seigneurs will be terrified, many of them ruined. The Emperor Alexander will be very embarrassed because,

at heart, the Russians care little for the Poles and even less for being ruined for Poland's sake.'

He paces up and down, his hands crossed behind his back, taking frequent pinches of snuff. Then he stops in front of Caulaincourt and asks in a low voice, his face grave, whether they have been talking about his fall at headquarters.

Caulaincourt evades the question.

'The troops,' Napoleon declares in a peremptory voice, 'will start to cross the Niemen the moment the bridges are finished.'

HE SLEEPS SEVERAL hours, then at three in the morning on Wednesday, 24 June 1812, he gallops to the Niemen.

On the three bridges finished at midnight, the troops are slowly crossing; the discordant tramp of feet creates a muffled roar amplified by the river banks, like a wave breaking over and over.

He crosses the Niemen at five, then returns to his tent pitched on a hill on the left bank. Through his telescope he observes the three immense columns that diverge once they reach the left bank. The hills and valleys are covered with men and horses and wagons. The weaponry sparkles under a sky that is already dazzling bright. A pink dust starts to rise above the columns. The heat is oppressive. And the morning has only just started.

But what might, what an army! He slaps his riding boots with his crop and paces back and forth, humming, 'Marlbrough s'en va-t-en guerre'. Who could resist such a force on the move?

He rides back along the columns through the dust. Scouts inform him that they've had no sight of any Russians, just the odd glimpse of a Cossack here and there.

They cross another river, the Vilia. The advance guards have already entered Kovno. The Russians have fled. The road to Vilna is open. They must march, and keep on marching, and march fast.

He works all day, sees the scouts, the couriers, dictates his orders and then, at four in the morning on 25 June, is back in the saddle.

He sees horses lying on their sides, their bellies distended, dying, and collapsed soldiers, their arms stretched out in the sun. The animals have been fed green rye, and the young conscripts

have died of exhaustion after a few hours of marching in this blazing sun.

He stops, walks a little way with Murat and Davout. They must move fast, he says, take the Russians by surprise, prevent them withdrawing, force them to join battle.

When night falls and a storm breaks, he takes shelter in a house in Kovno.

He is going to sleep on this narrow bed, in this stifling room. He thinks of nights in his palaces, of Marie Louise, of his son he doesn't see.

This must be a short war.

He writes to the Empress,

My friend,

I crossed the Niemen on the 24th at two o'clock in the morning. I crossed the Vilia in the evening. I am the master of Kovno. There's been no affair of significance. My health is good but the heat is extreme.

I am leaving tonight; I will be in Vilna the day after tomorrow. My affairs are going well.

Be gay, we will see each other when I promised we would.

Ever yours, your faithful husband,

Nap

II

NAPOLEON DRIVES TOWARDS VILNA. The Russians are still refusing to fight. Their general, Barclay de Tolly, is retreating.

Napoleon leans out of his carriage. The dust gets under his skin, sticks to his eyes. The heat reminds him of the Egyptian deserts, but it seems even more suffocating, dirty and clammy. And often at night cold rain turns the roads into muddy torrents. Then in the morning a few hours are enough to dry the ground and stir up the dust.

He passes the columns of troops and Würtemberger light cavalry. Through the curtain of dust he sees the corpses of horses covered in swarms of flies. He catches sight of isolated troopers and infantrymen in the fields, probably looking for food because the supply transports are not keeping up.

But they must push on, push on.

A few leagues from Vilna, on Sunday 28 June, he mounts his horse.

THE CITY IS BEAUTIFUL, but the inhabitants, although Poles, do not shout for joy. Where is the enthusiasm with which they were met only a few days previously in the Polish towns west of the Niemen? Are these Poles satisfied with their Russian masters? Do they want a nation, yes or no? Let them show it then, and not just by arguing endlessly in the Polish diet at Warsaw.

He enters the house occupied a few days before by Alexander, who had established his headquarters in the midst of his troops. He walks through the rooms and feels a sense of power, but no joy.

Berthier reports that thousands of horses have died on the road between Kovno and Vilna: the heat, the unripe rye, the exhaustion. Perhaps 10,000. Overwhelmed by the marching, men have committed suicide. They are carrying thirty kilos; they can't breathe. They're already suffering from dysentery; mosquitoes plague them constantly. They have no bread.

Napoleon is furious. The generals have to get up at four in the morning, go to the mills and storehouses in person and make sure that thirty thousand rations are produced a day! If they just lie in bed and bemoan their lot, they'll achieve nothing!

He studies the maps, the regimental returns.

'We are losing so many horses here that we will have great trouble, even with all the reserves of France and Germany, keeping our current troop strength mounted,' he says.

What of the Guard? It must be protected at all costs. It must be guaranteed twenty days' supplies and, in turn, set an example of discipline.

He sends everyone out of his study except Caulaincourt and Berthier.

He sits down.

'These Poles in Vilna and Lithuania are not like their counterparts in Warsaw,' he mutters wearily.

He takes a pinch of snuff. Berthier has just announced that an envoy of Alexander's, General Balachov, his minister of police, is asking to be received by the Emperor so that he can deliver a letter from the Tsar.

Napoleon gets to his feet and begins to walk around the room.

'My brother Alexander, who gave himself such airs with Narbonne, already wants to come to terms,' he says. 'He's afraid. My manoeuvres have disconcerted the Russians. Within a month, they will be on their knees.'

But he must force them to negotiate. He will read Alexander's letter; he will receive Balachov, but first he will give his orders.

This news of the arrival of Alexander's envoy has given him ten times his usual energy. He doesn't even think of sleeping. He sends his aides out onto the roads. Davout and Jérôme must attack Bagration to the south. Advanced guards must be sent out from Vilna towards Glubokie and thus turn the fortifications the Russians have erected in Drissa, which they have transformed into a veritable fortified camp.

He questions his aides-de-camp.

'How many prisoners have we taken?'

It is the absence of Russian deserters and prisoners that worries him. He is sombre suddenly. Weakened armies disintegrate; their

men surrender. He remembers Eylau and the fury of the Russian troops and, even at Friedland, how whole units sacrificed themselves.

He must keep peace a possibility; he mustn't allow a Polish state to be re-established immediately, and he must leave the door to negotiations open.

The other thing he could do, in this land of slaves, is emancipate the serfs and trigger a peasant revolt. In the Russian history books he has been reading for the last few months he has been fascinated by the character of Pugachev, the Cossack revolutionary who, barely thirty years previously, threatened Moscow at the head of his peasant army. But if he preaches the abolition of serfdom, who will be able to halt that conflagration? Who ever knows how far a revolution can go?

He is not just a conqueror who wants to bring down the Russians; he is also the Emperor of Kings. He wants victory and peace, but he also wants order.

He reads Alexander's letter.

What? Negotiations will be opened if my troops cross back over the Niemen? Is this what the Tsar is proposing?

'Alexander is mocking me,' he exclaims, brandishing the letter in front of Duroc and Berthier. 'Does he think I've come to Vilna to negotiate trade treaties? I have come to put an end once and for all to the barbarian colossus of the north. The sword is drawn. We must drive them back into their fields of ice so that they won't come and meddle in the affairs of civilized Europe for the next twenty-five years.'

He grimaces contemptuously.

'Now that Alexander sees it's serious and that his army is cut off, he is afraid and wants to come to terms. But Moscow is where I will sign the peace. Since Erfurt Alexander has given himself too many airs . . . If he needs victories let him fight the Persians, but don't let him meddle in Europe.'

Then he goes out.

It's hot and dusty outside; the reddish-brown expanses are covered in a thick, almost sticky mist. He has decided to hold a review of divisions of infantry and dragoons a league and half from Vilna.

It is late afternoon but the air is still scalding hot. The troops march past for several hours. He remains motionless in the clammy haze. The moment the review ends, torrential rain sluices down.

Barbaric climate.

HE GOES INSIDE. He is going to have dinner, at seven on this Wednesday, 1 July, with M. Balachov. The Russian is a vigorous man with sharp eyes that he does not lower.

'What can you expect from this war?' Napoleon asks him. 'I have conquered an entire province without a fight. If it weren't for respect for your sovereign, who for two months has had his imperial headquarters at Vilna, you would have had to defend it. Now, when all Europe is behind me, how can you resist?'

'We shall do what we can, sire.'

Napoleon shrugs his shoulders.

'I am already in Vilna and I still don't know why we are fighting! Emperor Alexander is taking the responsibility for this war on himself, in front of his people . . .'

Balachov irritates him. This man has a sort of placid assurance that he must break.

'Which is the Moscow road?' Napoleon asks.

Balachov hesitates, then says in a calm voice, 'Sire, this question is designed to embarrass me somewhat. A Russian says, as the French do, that all roads lead to Rome. One can take whichever road to Moscow one wishes. Charles XII went by Poltava.'

He knows about that Swedish defeat. Do they think they're going to worry him? *Do Alexander and Balachov know who I am?*

He dictates a reply to Alexander.

> Your Majesty has consistently refused to explain himself for the last eighteen months . . . War is therefore declared between us. God himself cannot make that which has been not have been. But my ear will always be open to negotiations for peace . . . A day will come when Your Majesty will confess that you were wanting in perseverance, confidence and, allow me to add, in sincerity. You have ruined your reign.

Alexander doesn't reply. He will only yield when he is beaten. Day after day Napoleon studies the maps, rides through the countryside around Vilna. No Russian prisoners, no trophies.

In the south, Jérôme, my brother Jérôme, has refused to heed the orders and counsel of Marshal Davout, and Bagration's Russians have managed to get away. And now Jérôme, my brother Jérôme, has left the army with his 40,000 Westphalian soldiers!

Napoleon flies into a rage. He holds it against Jérôme and Davout.

That night, to calm himself, he writes to Marie Louise.

> The little king is in very good health. Vilna is a very beautiful city of 40,000 souls. I am staying in a rather fine house where a few days ago the Emperor Alexander was very far from thinking that I was so close to entering here . . . Storms and great heat alternate here; the harvest will be excellent. I envy the good fortune you will have of kissing the little king; kiss him for me. He will have grown already; tell me if he's started talking. *Addio, mio bene.* You know how much I love you.
>
> Ever yours,
>
> Nap

It rains, then is boiling hot, then rains again. Every day Napoleon is in the saddle for several hours.

On the Kovno road he watches two Bavarian divisions march past. The whole army has to regroup, and supplies, provisions and ammunition have to arrive. So they must wait, and he's already been in Vilna for seventeen days.

He should press on, but he does not want to be imprudent. He senses that those around him are watching him anxiously, awaiting orders for a battle that won't come. How is he to encircle the Russian army when it is constantly vanishing in the oceans of space that make up this vast country?

ON THURSDAY, 16 July 1812, when he returns to Vilna after inspecting some service corps regiments, Méneval brings him two dispatches from Murat, who is in command of the advance guard. The King of Naples reports that Russian troops have managed to surprise and capture a cavalry unit.

Surprise them! Murat is a fool!

The second dispatch announces that the Russians have evacuated the entrenched camp at Drissa on which they had been working for two years.

Napoleon doesn't hesitate. They have to give chase, seize them, reduce them to submission.

It is eleven in the evening on Thursday 16 July. He gets into his carriage. He is going to drive all night towards Glubokie.

Bivouac fires flicker here and there. He doesn't hear any shouting, any songs. The nights in this country are as cheerless as the days.