

The retreat from Moscow: a medical catastrophe

Two hundred years ago, on 24 June 1812, Napoleon watched the leading regiments of his Grand Army cross the river Niemen at Kovno, near what today is the Lithuanian border. It took 8 days for the procession to pass. As well as the French, who made up one third of the whole, there included Germans, Poles, Swiss, Dutch and Italians – altogether 20 nations – a total of 530 000 men; 45 000 of these were the Imperial Guard. Wagons and carts numbered 30 000. There were 28 million bottles of wine and two million of brandy, wagons of wheat, portable forges and ambulances. Each senior officer had his own carriage for his conveyance and a wagon for his equipment.

For 7 weeks, the army travelled through empty countryside and deserted and burned out villages and towns, including Smolensk, as the Russian troops steadily withdrew in front of them. Finally, on 6 September, the Grand Army met the Russians near the village of Borodino. The Russians lost 44 000 dead and wounded, the French, 33 000, including 43 generals; it was a Pyrrhic victory for the French.

Napoleon entered Moscow on 15 September; it was deserted. That night it was all but destroyed by fires, started by convicts released from its prisons; only the Kremlin completely escaped damage. Instead of the hoped-for shelter and provisions, there were neither.

Napoleon's original plan, to over-winter in Moscow, was obviously no longer possible. He delayed withdrawing from the capital for week after week, hoping to negotiate a peace with the Emperor Alexander of Russia, but no contact was made.

Eventually, on 19 October, with winter already beginning, the retreat began; 15 000 cavalry, 90 000 infantry, 10 000 wagons, 569 cannon and a vast army of camp followers marched out of Moscow. Food was in short supply, as was winter clothing. However, it was the horse transport that proved to be the weakest part of the plan. There was little fodder and the countryside

was soon covered by snow, which started to fall on 29 October. The next night was the first serious frost and on the night of 6 November the temperature fell to -22°C . Burned out towns and villages provided little in the way of food, warmth or shelter.

By serious oversight, perhaps the most important error by the commissariat of the whole campaign, the horses were not equipped with spiked horse shoes, essential for travel on snow and ice. The poor beasts slipped and fell, then laid down and perished on the sides of the roads. Their deaths were hastened by the fact that they were eating snow to allay their thirst. They

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were promptly butchered by the troops and, indeed, their corpses provided the principal source of rations for the army.

Now bands of Cossack cavalry appeared, in their blue uniforms; stragglers were cut down, killed or captured.

On 25 November the Army reached the river Beresina, normally frozen at this time of the year. However, a thaw had turned it into a raging torrent. French engineers built two pontoons; the 400 men stood up to their necks in water to do this and most of them perished. The 8000 stragglers caught on the east bank of the river were killed or captured.

On 6 December the remains of the Grand Army at last re-crossed the river Niemen into the Grand Duchy of Warsaw – the retreat was over.

As doctors, we should bear in mind that the Russian campaign, from the French point of view, was as much a medical as a military catastrophe. Men died in their thousands from frost bite and starvation. The wounded, in particular, suffered a high death rate in these conditions. Injured limbs became gangrenous from frost bite. Medical supplies ran out – surgeons used the clothes of the wounded as well as their own for dressings.

A detailed account of the medical aspects of this disaster come to us in the meticulous *Memoires of Military Surgery* of Baron Dominique Jean Larrey (1766–1842), who trained under his elder brother, a surgeon in Toulouse.

After a period as surgeon in the French navy, Larrey was posted to the Army of the Rhine in 1792 and, from then on, was engaged in active military duties until the battle of Waterloo in 1815, where he was wounded and captured by the Prussians. He was sentenced to be shot, but was fortunately recognized by a German surgeon, who interceded for him. Larrey was brought before Blucher, the Prussian commander, whose wounded and captured son had been treated successfully by Larrey. Not surprisingly, the death sentence was cancelled.

Larrey served as chief surgeon to the Imperial Guard and was chief surgeon to the army. He was on active duty throughout the Russian campaign. Larrey's principal contribution to military surgery was his organizational skills. He insisted on getting his special, personally trained, surgical teams near the front line to ensure early surgery for the wounded. He stressed the importance of early and rapid evacuation of the injured by means of his specially designed horse-drawn vehicles, the 'flying ambulances'.

Larrey strongly advocated early amputation for severely injured limbs. After the battle of Borodino, for example, he performed 200 amputations in a 24-hour period. He described his technique for rapid disarticulation at the shoulder joint and said that all a military surgeon needs to function is some dry ground on which to place his bag of instruments.

After the Napoleonic wars, Larrey became chief surgeon at the Invalides – the hospital in Paris for army veterans – and continued to serve military medicine until he retired at the age of 72 years.

Next time you listen to the 1812 Overture spare a thought for the French sick and wounded of that campaign, 200 years ago. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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