



Napoleon had a plan to increase his influence, and power, throughout Europe. Part of that plan included an invasion of Russia.

Assessing the situation today, one might think that Napoleon's ideas were ill-conceived and more than a little naive. It was supposed to be a relatively easy, relatively short-lived campaign. Given the distances, and the difficult circumstances, how could that ever have been possible?

In June, of 1812, Napoleon led his soldiers into Russia. At the time, he had more than 500,000 troops in his Grande Armée. But the campaign was neither easy nor quick and, when he finally reached Moscow - one of the Emperor's major objectives - most of the city had been evacuated.

Concluding that it was time to leave, Napoleon began his retreat. As 1812 came to a close, less than five percent of his military (who were not just Frenchmen) were left to straggle across the Russian border. Along the way out, they had endured more misery ... like the late-November Battle at Berezina.

What happened at the three-day battle depicted in this painting? For one thing, Napoleon made a great escape. For another, his forces (including Swiss, Poles and Dutchmen) created bridges across the ice-filled river which were almost miraculous in their conception and construction.

An existing bridge had been demolished, by the Russians, to keep Napoleon's men from crossing the river. The river itself, which was often totally frozen, had thawed (making it impassable without a bridge). With an enemy army waiting to trap them, what were Napoleon's men to do?

Napoleon himself had ordered the destruction of all non-essential gear. But one of Napoleon's commanders viewed non-essential gear differently than his Emperor.

Jean-Baptiste Éblé, the French General in charge of Engineers, ordered his men to keep their hand tools. With these items, his men would build two bridges, in the dead of winter, to help an army which was close to annihilation.

But where would the bridges be built? With Russian eyes upon them, how could Éblé's men even think they could construct something which would last?

Deception had to be part of the process. Russians needed to believe that Napoleon's forces were going to build a bridge in one location while the actual workers were already building a bridge in a less-likely spot.

When the bridges were built, people had to cross them. The water was freezing cold with ice all around. Would the bridges hold? Were they strong-enough to have cannon and other supplies make the crossing?

By the time the bridges were ready, the Russians had figured-out what was happening. Then the rush was on to prevent the Allied forces, and accompanying civilians, from making a successful crossing.

After Napoleon, the cavalry and some of the infantry crossed the bridge, chaos ensued when the Russians arrived to prevent any further crossings. When the hastily constructed bridge began to show signs of strain, General Éblé's men did their best to hold it together. Reports tell us that most (if not all) of these brave men died as they did their best to help Napoleon's Grand Armée escape.

Jakob Walter (1788-1864) was an eyewitness to the terror of people who were stampeding across the only perceived way to save their lives. A German stonemason, he wrote letters about his experiences, including the disaster at Berezina.

His writings, previously published in German by the University of Kansas (in 1938), were brought to Jackie Kennedy's attention when she was an editor at Doubleday. She worked with Marc Raeff, a Russian-Studies scholar at Columbia University, to publish (in 1991) Walter's firsthand experiences in a book entitled *Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier*. His stories include these observations about the escape efforts at Berezina:

Finally, toward four o'clock in the evening, when it was almost dark, I came to the bridge. Here I saw only one bridge, the second having been shot away.

Now it is with horror, but at that time it was with a dull, indifferent feeling, that I looked at the masses of horses and people which lay dead, piled high upon the bridge. Only "Straight ahead and in the middle!" must be the resolution. "Here in the water is your grave; beyond the bridge is the continuation of a wretched life. The decision will be made on the bridge!"

Now I kept myself constantly in the middle. The major and I could aid one another; and so amid a hundred blows of sabers we came to the bridge, where not a plank was visible because of the dead men and horses; and, although on reaching the bridge the people fell in masses thirty paces to the right and to the left, we came through to the firm land.

Historians estimate casualties for this three-day battle:

- Napoleon's losses at 13,000 - 25,000 combatants plus 10,000 - 20,000 "stragglers"
- Russian losses at 6,000-20,000 combatants.

In the end, Berezina was the last battle Napoleon and his army had to fight against Russia before they crossed the border, en route home.

Despite all of Napoleon's efforts to conquer territory and create an empire, he began to realize how little war (and force) accomplishes:

Do you know what astonished me most in the world? The inability of force to create anything. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the spirit. Soldiers usually win battles and generals get the credit for them. You must not fight too often with one enemy, or you will teach him all your art of war. If they want peace, nations should avoid the pin-pricks that precede cannon shots.

This painting, by Peter von Hess, provides an artist's interpretation of a scene from the Battle of Berezina. Click on it for a full-page view.

Credits:

Crossing the Berezina River, by Peter von Hess, where the original is maintained at the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.

Online, via Wikimedia Commons.

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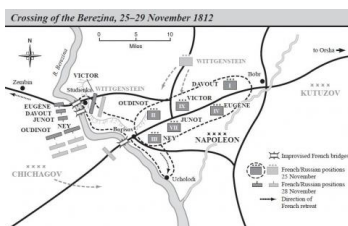
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Media Stream



Map Locator - Napoleon Crosses an Ice-Clogged River

Map from *The Encyclopedia of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, Gregory Fremont-Barnes (main editor), at page 137. Adapted from Chandler 1966, 840. Copyright, Gregory Fremont-Barnes.

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Close-up View of a Berezina Temporary Bridge

The original of this work, described above, is maintained at the Royal Dutch Army Museum in Delft (The Netherlands). It is included, as a black-and-white image, in *Napoléon à la Bérézina 26 - 29 Novembre 1812*.

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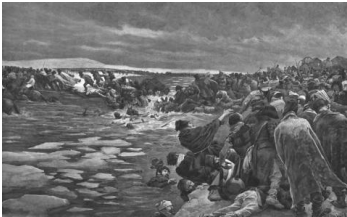
Grand Army Crossing the Berezina River

Image, described above, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Desperate People Try to Cross the Berezina River

Illustration, by F. de Myrbach, from *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, by William M. Sloane, New York: Century, vol. 4, published in 1906. Online, via Wikimedia Commons.

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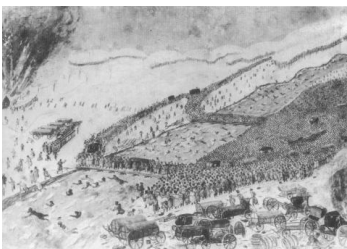


Dutch Infantry at the Bridges over the Berezina

Image, described above, of a painting maintained by the Royal Army Museum in Delft (The Netherlands).

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Crossing the Berezina to Avoid Disaster in Russia

Image, described above, from *Napoléon à la Bérézina 26 - 29 Novembre 1812* (ISBN 2-84586-464-7). Online, courtesy French-language Wikimedia Commons. PD

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Disaster at the River - Napoleon Leaves Russia

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