
CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, HIS TRINITY, AND THE 1812 RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN

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This article analyzes the 1812 Russian campaign using Clausewitz's concept of the trinitarian nature of war. This approach uses a case study to delve deeply into understanding the subtle, philosophical nature of Clausewitz's trinity. The article is serialized into two parts; the first discusses each of the trinity's elements. The second part applies each trinitarian element to the Russian campaign.

PART ONE

Though he wrote his seminal work *On War* almost 200 years ago, Carl von Clausewitz's intellectual achievements still dominate the study of warfare across the globe. One of Clausewitz's theoretical insights in particular remains especially relevant at the beginning of the 21st century. Clausewitz developed a subtle, philosophical understanding of the nature of war as a human phenomenon articulated in his concept commonly called the Clausewitzian Trinity.

This essay approaches the tripartite nature of war with a largely philosophical perspective: It will examine each trinitarian element individually as Clausewitz characterized those elements. Next, this article will analyze each element of the trinity as it is expressed in Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812. By viewing the tripartite definition of the nature of war through the lens of a historical campaign, historians and military thinkers will achieve a more comprehensive, holistic understanding of the trinity.

Clausewitz's insights are thoroughly grounded in the military experience of the Napoleonic Wars, especially that of the Russian campaign—he was, after all, both a historian and a theorist. From this historical context we can gather the full lessons his theories can teach us. As Clausewitz reminds us, “war should never be thought of as something autonomous.”¹ So the creation of his theory should never be considered in

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¹Clausewitz, p. 88.

a vacuum, independent from the unique historical circumstances from which it emerged. As an analytical device, Clausewitz's trinity can be applied to any example, from Classical antiquity to the Napoleonic Wars to the World Wars of the 20th century, and provides the historian and strategist with a unique perspective.

The 1812 Russian campaign provides a particularly appropriate case study because many of Clausewitz's concepts later elaborated in *On War* can be discerned in embryonic form in his work *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia*.

By applying Clausewitz's trinity to the 1812 Russian campaign, the following analysis will achieve two specific purposes: first, it will more completely explain the composition of each individual trinitarian element; second, it will seek to understand the interactions among each element of the trinity and how they are interrelated.

Part One of this article offers a brief background of the historiography surrounding the 1812 campaign before analyzing each individual element of Clausewitz's trinity. Part Two analyzes the trinity in the context of the 1812 campaign and concludes with a discussion of Clausewitz's enduring legacy.

Brief Historiography of the Russian Campaign

The French historian and Napoleon's companion (as well as ambassador to Russia following the war), Armand de Caulaincourt, attributed the Grand Armée's defeat to Napoleon's demagoguery. "Although there were moments when the man showed himself," Caulaincourt wrote, "it was the demigod whom one recognized most often."² According to this interpretation, Napoleon's hubris blinded him to reality during the campaign, thus provoking decisive blunders.

In a more recent analysis, William C. Fuller outlined three prominent "myths" typically used to explain Napoleon's defeat in Russia:

"the first is that of 'accidental defeat,' the view that the Grand Armée was defeated not so much because of mistakes of its own, but rather because of impersonal natural forces symbolized by the unyielding Russian winter. The second is the myth of inherent defeat: that Napoleon's enterprise in Russia was somehow doomed to fail from the start because of the innate problems of command, control, discipline, logistics, and distances, that even the Emperor's genius could not surmount."³

²Armand de Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1935) p. 3.

³William C. Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia: 1600–1914* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) pp. 178–9.

Numerous historians have promoted these myths. George Nafziger argues that “supply was one of the principal causes of Napoleon’s defeat” in his thorough study of the military campaign entitled *Napoleon’s Invasion of Russia*.⁴ David G. Chandler also argues that the Emperor’s defeat was “the failure of a giant surrounded by pygmies.”⁵ He insists Napoleon’s plan of action was strategically and operationally sound, but failed due to poor execution by “pygmy” subordinates.

Historians have also supported Fuller’s third myth, which “has long occupied an important position in Russian culture. That is, of course, the celebratory vision of the war as a supreme expression of Russian nationalism. Accounts in this vein hold that victory over Napoleon was achieved by omniscient strategists presiding over the Herculean efforts of the united Russian people.”⁶ A major proponent of this interpretation is Eugene Tarle, a Soviet historian who published during Stalin’s reign.⁷ That an argument promoting the 1812 campaign as the supreme expression of unified Russian nationalism would emerge from Stalinist Russia is in no way surprising.

In *Strategy and Power in Russia: 1600–1914*, Fuller refutes all three mythologies. He grants the difficulties posed by weather, terrain, command and control, and logistics. But he locates the decisive factors in “the errors and accomplishments of both combatants.”⁸ Fuller’s analysis is compelling and certainly more balanced than any of the “mythological” interpretations. But it seems to leave the outcome mostly within the Clausewitzian realm of *chance*.

Whatever interpretations are advanced, however, none of the major accounts of Napoleon’s Russian campaign analyzes the campaign specifically through the lens of Clausewitz’s trinity. Fuller’s analysis, resting on the military events of the campaign as having played out in the Russians’ advantage, approaches one element of Clausewitz’s trinity but not the other two. Studying the Russian campaign through the analytical lens of Clausewitz’s trinity offers a perspective that historians have not utilized and offers insights into the nature of warfare both broadly defined and specific to the fighting in Russia in 1812.

⁴George Nafziger, *Napoleon’s Invasion of Russia* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1988) p. xiv.

⁵David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: Scribner, 1966) P. 1147.

⁶Fuller, p. 179.

⁷Eugene Tarle, *Napoleon’s Invasion of Russia 1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942).

⁸Fuller, p. 197.

What Is the Trinity?—Clausewitz Defines the Nature of War

A Prussian officer during the Napoleonic era, Clausewitz's ideas emerged from the confluence of Enlightenment intellectual traditions and his own practical, temporal experiences. He observed first-hand the changes occurring in warfare and interpreted them according to the systematic philosophical approach of German scholars in the era of Kant and Hegel. The result was the unfinished masterpiece *On War*, in which Clausewitz articulated numerous concepts that have since become canonized in military thought. For instance, the notion that "war should never be thought of as *something autonomous* but always as an *instrument of policy*" and the concept of friction both originated in Clausewitzian theory.⁹

Clausewitz believed the "first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."¹⁰ Emphasizing the necessity of understanding war distinguishes Clausewitz from other military thinkers.

Unique among military theorists, he sought to understand war as a human phenomenon, not simply to understand how to win wars: "theoretical analysis alone, Clausewitz was convinced, could provide the means by which actual war in its incredible variety might be understood."¹¹ He perceived a distinction between ideal and real war. Ideal war is an absolute form in which the application of force approaches a maximum extreme.¹²

However, in reality the ideal cannot be reached because the "phenomena of the real world and the *laws of probability*" provide external factors that act against the attainment of ideal, absolute war.¹³ Clausewitz arrives at the "thesis of total war as the ideal war" which "is followed by the antithesis that war, even in theory, is always influenced by forces external to it. War is affected by the specific characteristics of the states in conflict and by the general characteristics of the time—its political, economic, technological, and social elements."¹⁴ Clausewitz thus arrives at the notion of "the dual nature of war" which "creates a basis of analysis of all acts of organized mass violence."¹⁵

⁹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. Tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 88. Everyman's Library Editor.

¹⁰Clausewitz, p. 88.

¹¹Peter Paret. *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p. 108.

¹²Clausewitz, p. 80.

¹³Clausewitz, p. 80.

¹⁴Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 109.

¹⁵Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 109.

Having established war's dual nature, Clausewitz next articulated his central analytical tool for understanding real war: the trinity. War in reality, according to Clausewitz, always reflects the three elements that comprise his trinity:

“War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.”¹⁶

These are the elements a statesman or commander must consider before launching a war. The trinity exists to aid a military commander or scholar in understanding the nature of war by providing a definition of war's nature. In Clausewitz's view, the first step to success in war is to understand its nature. With the trinity, he essentially produces a definition of the nature of war as consisting of human psychology, passions and emotions; reason; and chance, probability, and uncertainty.

The most difficult aspect of the trinity for a military commander or strategist is its invocation of intangible moral forces. In Clausewitz's words, “theory becomes infinitely more difficult as soon as it touches the realm of moral values.”¹⁷ Because of these difficulties, Clausewitz' trinitarian analysis should be employed for practical purposes as a general framework, and not thought of as a rigid, precise mathematical formula. Again Clausewitz offers advice: “to analyze war in general or to understand a particular war, but also to plan and conduct a war, requires the study or the exploitation of all three of these elements.”¹⁸ With this in mind, we turn to the trinity's first element.

The First Element: Human Psychology, Passions, and Emotions

Clausewitz's first element of his “paradoxical trinity” is “composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force.”¹⁹ Unlike previous western military theorists, Clausewitz enters the psychological realm in his search to understand war. He delves into the most basic aspects of human nature asking why people

¹⁶Clausewitz, p. 89.

¹⁷Clausewitz, p. 137.

¹⁸Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 110.

¹⁹Clausewitz, p. 89.

would want to go to war, investigating their motives and predispositions. Emotions, passions, violence, and psychology rest at the core of the first trinitarian element.

This emotional element plays a significant role in the Napoleonic Wars—emotions had not experienced such emphasis since the wars of religion in the 17 century. Eighteenth century military thought had remained largely centered on Enlightenment conceptions of reason and rationality and how best to apply these concepts to a new science of warfare. The French Revolution unleashed popular passions as an important factor in fighting wars. Patriotic, nationalist sentiments motivated French revolutionary armies. After Napoleon began his imperial expansion, national emotions and passions became less influential. However, these sentiments surface across Europe in 1806 toward the end of the campaign against Prussia and again in the Spanish guerrilla uprising beginning in 1808. During the Russian campaign, emotional elements again assume an important role, both in conventional and guerrilla actions. Perhaps due to the impact of the French Revolution on subsequent social developments, historians and military thinkers have tended to apply and therefore limit the trinitarian factor of emotion and passion to a nation's population. Michael Handel, for instance, associates this element solely with the idea of a "people in arms" and the passions of national masses.²⁰

Despite his comprehensive preparations for the campaign, Napoleon did not take into account the Russian people's passions. It is understandable that Napoleon would ignore this element before the Russian campaign. Even though he could see that popular passions had been kindled against him in Spain in 1808, he could explain France's inability to quell the rebellion on the basis of his brother Jerome's bad leadership. In 1809 Napoleon personally led a campaign against Austria that proved successful—and conventional. Emotions and popular passions had little to do with the conduct of the 1809 campaign. Napoleon could naturally have concluded that his personal command presence had proved a key element in 1809 that had not been available in Spain. It would be consistent for democracy focused-historians to fault Napoleon for not considering national passions, and perhaps for good reason. Scholars generally accept the role of various national sentiments in the Russian campaign, so those who discuss Clausewitz's theory tend to simplify the emotional aspect of the trinity, regarding it as little more than popular sentiments. The emotive element is much broader and deeper than a one-dimensional explanation of national sentiment. Reducing the emotive element to this single

²⁰See Michael Handel, *Masters of War* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001) pp. 119–133. Clausewitz discusses the people in arms in Book 6, Chapter 26, "The People in Arms."

dimension overlooks other important aspects of this first trinitarian element.

To gain a more complete understanding of the emotional element, one must first entertain two important issues. First, one must understand Clausewitz's view of human nature and the existence of a latent violent potential in human society. Second, one must determine the political and institutional devices available to leverage this violent potential. The implications of these two issues are that humans are violent creatures and that this violence can be applied in warfare. Once these issues and implications are addressed, it is possible to understand the three major manifestations of the emotional element in *On War*: the psychology of the commander, motivation of the troops, and the people in arms. However, each of these aspects of the emotional element is closely tied to the other two parts of the trinity. After explaining the three primary manifestations of the emotional element, the linkages between those manifestations and the elements of rationality and uncertainty will briefly be explored.

Clausewitz's view of human nature insists that violence plays an important role in human society. There exists an innate tendency toward violence and a potential willingness to engage in violent behavior. To Clausewitz, "most wars are like a flaring-up of mutual rage" where one of the essential aspects of military activity is that of hostile feelings.²¹ Combat "is an expression of hostile feelings."²² Combat, by its very nature, stimulates emotions: "Even where there is no national hatred and no animosity to start with, the fighting itself will stir up hostile feelings."²³ With this understanding of violence as inherent in human nature and society, the next step to understanding the nature of war is to discuss how politics and institutions can leverage society's violent potential.

Political and institutional devices long have provided a means for governments to tap in to society's latent violent pulse. During the Russian campaign, both France (and occupied Europe) and Russia could leverage the violent potentials of their societies to fight the war. In France, the *levee en masse* allowed the revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes to efficiently organize and employ French society, drawing out the popular passions and sentiments that had catalyzed the revolution. Russia had its own distinct system to tap into the violent potential of Russian society. The Cossacks, a separate entity within the Russian army, were known for their intense loyalty to the tsarist regime. A kind of social class of their own, the Cossacks were essentially a "tribal" formation in the Russian army which excelled at irregular warfare. By harnessing this distinctive element

²¹Clausewitz, p. 579.

²²Clausewitz, p. 137.

²³Clausewitz, p. 138.

of society, the Russians could better apply the Cossacks' unique warfighting skills against the French, especially during the latter's retreat from Moscow.

An understanding of the inherent violence of human nature and a government's ability to harness that natural violence is necessary to explain how emotions, passions, and psychological motives are expressed in war. Given a violent human nature and the ability of a government to put this violence to use, emotions can be employed in warfare to achieve practical effects. In the employment of the emotional element, Clausewitz outlines three primary roles: the psychology of the commander, motivation of the troops, and the people in arms.

Book I, Chapter 3 of *On War*, entitled "On Military Genius" discusses the role of the commander's psychology. Genius "refers to a special cast of mental or moral powers which can rarely occur."²⁴ Clausewitz's discussion of genius highlights his inquiry into the world of intangibles, which differs from previous military thinkers. He treats the subject carefully, explaining how the psychology of the commander is not a mysterious ambiguity, but is instead comprised of several moral factors such as courage, intellect, determination, and strength of will.

Since war is dangerous, "courage is the soldier's first requirement."²⁵ Though he focused his discussion on the role of the commander's psychology, Clausewitz considers the courage factor to include all soldiers, whether leaders or followers. Courage allows a commander or soldier to operate in the uncertain realm of war where personal danger is omnipresent. It may be a permanent condition, or may develop "from such positive motives as ambition, patriotism, or enthusiasm of any kind."²⁶ Though it emanates from an emotional or psychological base, courage's primary practical benefit is to counteract the effects of fear by facilitating the individual's ability to operate more effectively in the dangerous, chaotic, uncertain world of warfare.

Intellectual qualities are also required in an effective commander: "War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty."²⁷ Because of the play of chance and uncertainty, "two qualities are indispensable: *first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead.* The first of these qualities is described by the French term *coup d'oeil*; the second is

²⁴Clausewitz, p. 100.

²⁵Clausewitz, p. 101.

²⁶Clausewitz, p. 101.

²⁷Clausewitz, p. 101.

determination.” This *coup d’oeil* is an intuition that “refers to the quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection.”²⁸ In war’s uncertain environment, *coup d’oeil* provides a way to hold a steady course in a stormy current. Intelligence and *coup d’oeil* also support the commander’s ability to think rationally and make logical decisions despite the uncertain, chaotic environment in which a commander must operate.

Determination is a moral factor that describes a commander’s temperament. It is, in Clausewitz’s words, the “courage to accept responsibility.” Essentially a determined commander is courageous enough to maintain confidence in the face of overwhelming uncertainty—it is a sense of resolve that resists doubt and hesitation.²⁹

Danger, physical exertion, uncertainty, and chance form the climate of war.³⁰ A commander must possess strength of will “to make progress in these impeding elements with safety and success.”³¹ Clausewitz emphasizes not the predominance of a single emotion, but a balance among many which will mitigate the chaos of the climate of war. It is this psychological balance that allows a commander to accomplish one of his most important battlefield tasks. He must see through the psychological fog.

Without an emotionally balanced commander, “in the dreadful presence of suffering and danger, emotion can easily overwhelm intellectual conviction, and in this psychological fog it is so hard to form clear and complete insights that changes of view become more understandable and excusable.” In these circumstances, “action can never be based on anything firmer than instinct, a sensing of the truth.”³² Most scholars tend to ignore the psychological aspects of the “fog of war” concept. These scholars tend to limit the fog of war to the realm of chance and uncertainty. For instance, historian Michael Handel discusses the fog of war as it relates to intelligence and incomplete information.³³ This analysis restricts the fog of war to uncertain information and ignores the effects that uncertain information can have on the emotions and convictions of a commander. It is the effects of uncertainty that most influence the psychological aspects of the fog of war.

Clausewitz clearly incorporates emotional aspects into the fog of war through the above passage on the psychological fog. The uncertainty of the fog of war thus extends to the psychological realm—in this

²⁸Clausewitz, p. 102.

²⁹Clausewitz, p. 102.

³⁰Clausewitz, p. 104.

³¹Clausewitz, p. 104.

³²Clausewitz, p. 125.

³³Handel, pp. 240–244.

atmosphere “only those general principles and attitudes that result from clear and deep understanding can provide a *comprehensive* guide to action.”³⁴ To stand firm in his convictions like a shining light through the psychological fog, a commander must possess a blend of balanced emotions, a strong intellect, and the intuitive sense of *coup d’oeil*.

The second major role of the emotional element is its relation to the soldiers’ motivation. Moral factors such as these “constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole.”³⁵ Clausewitz outlines three principal moral factors: “*the skill of the commander, the experience and courage of the troops, and their patriotic spirit.*”³⁶ The first principal factor has already been discussed in the section on the commander’s psychology. The second and third factors, however, relate to the troops’ motivation. An experienced and patriotic army will be more effective in battle than an otherwise equivalent army that has no emotional connection to the war it fights. During the Russian campaign this proved especially true of Napoleon’s “allied” forces, which showed little desire to join the war without French coercion. An army’s courage is also essential because courage reduces the effects of danger and fear on the soldiers. The “fear and indecision native to the human mind” and “the imperfection of human perception and judgment” can impede action in war.³⁷ Courage will counteract the psychological effects of danger and fear in an army.

In addition to the principal moral elements, the army’s military virtues also play a part in motivating the soldiers. When Clausewitz discusses the military virtues, he intends what would in modern times be called military professionalism. Psychological and emotional feelings of *esprit de corps* create a bond among the soldiers. This bond results in the kind of army “that maintains its cohesion under the most murderous fire” and cherishes the “single powerful idea of the honor of its arms.”³⁸ This spirit can only develop through the interaction of two sources. “The first is a series of victorious wars; the second, frequent exertions of the arm to the utmost limits of its strength. Nothing else will show a soldier the full extent of his capacities.”³⁹ Combined with experience, courage, and patriotism, professional *esprit de corps* motivates and inspires the troops, counteracting the opposing effects of danger, fear, and the uncertainty of combat.

The psychology of the commander and the soldiers’ motives discussed above are two key aspects of the emotional element that scholars typically minimize. Despite this treatment, scholars do tend to realize the

³⁴Clausewitz, p. 125.

³⁵Clausewitz, p. 216.

³⁶Clausewitz, p. 218.

³⁷Clausewitz, p. 254–255.

³⁸Clausewitz, p. 220.

³⁹Clausewitz, p. 221.

importance of Clausewitz's third role of the emotional element—the people in arms.

Clausewitz separates the people in arms into two different categories: universal conscription and employment of the militia, and a general uprising. He goes so far as to say that “the psychological element, is called into being only” through the arming of the people.⁴⁰ By arming the populace, the populace becomes entangled in the war itself.

Since a small, professional army is to some degree separate from society, the entire national population has less at stake in a conflict if a professional force conducts the fighting. This was true for most nations during the 18th century. However, by involving an entire nation in war through conscription, the whole population is affected by the conflict. By further involving the people, war will kindle more passion and emotion. If a people had been brought to arms through conscription, they would most likely have intended to fight a traditional war. However, in a general uprising, the people under arms would not have been organized along traditional lines and would have been used in irregular warfare to harass the enemy and fight a dispersed campaign. In a general uprising, “the people who have not yet been conquered by the enemy will be the most eager to arm against him; they will set an example that will gradually be followed by their neighbors. The flames will spread like a brush fire, until they reach the area on which the enemy is based, threatening... his very existence.”⁴¹ Emotions feed the people's passions for war, “courage and the appetite for fighting will rise” until the conflict is resolved.⁴² In a general uprising, it is the emotion and passion of the occupied people that determines their contribution to the fighting. A patriotic people in arms will therefore find their motivation to war in the psychological element.

As discussed above, this psychological/emotional element of Clausewitz's trinity is comprised of three major aspects: the psychology of the commander, the motives for soldiers to fight, and the people in arms. These three manifestations of the trinity's psychological element rest on two prerequisites: the inherent violence of human nature and the ability for a government to harness that violence and apply it to warfare. Each of the psychological element's manifestations also relates closely to other elements of the trinity. The other elements are linked in the following ways:

Intertwined with the psychology of the commander are the rational element and the element of uncertainty/chance. The commander must plan for war using some sort of rational planning process and must make

⁴⁰Clausewitz, p. 578–579.

⁴¹Clausewitz, p. 580.

⁴²Clausewitz, p. 581.

logical decisions. He will also find the need to make decisions in an uncertain environment where the unexpected is commonplace. A proper emotional balance will aid the commander in his decision-making and planning processes within the realm of chance. A good commander thus reflects each element of the trinity, not solely the psychological element.

The troops' motivation relies in part on national sentiments and feeling, but these emotions also mitigate the effects of chance and uncertainty. An uncertain environment can create a paralyzing fear, but stalwart courage, *esprit de corps*, and dedication can overcome this fear, especially when that courage is expressed by a soldier's comrades. Psychological or emotional strength can create a bulwark against the effects of war's uncertain atmosphere.

The people in arms, motivated by patriotic fervor, are also linked to the trinity's rational and uncertain elements. Conscription forced the people to have a stake in the outcome of war. If the burden of a war seems too high a price to pay, logically fewer citizens will support the war. When the government relies on its population for resources, it cannot afford to ignore popular sentiment. As Napoleon's wars dragged on, desertions increased and conscripting new soldiers into the ranks grew increasingly difficult. War can stir the people's passions, but the people will not abandon rationality to continue in a struggle in which the human cost, borne by the people, had grown more expensive than it had been worth.

In a general uprising, the people in arms contribute to the enemy's sense of uncertainty. The ability to appear, melt away, then reappear, exacerbates the already heightened uncertainty of a guerrilla war. In this way a general uprising of the people in arms contributes to the enemy's sense of fear and danger, making them less comfortable in war's already tense climate.

In addition to the three manifestations of the emotional element and their links to the trinity's other two elements, Clausewitz portrays the main objective of war as having a psychological aspect as well. Clausewitz's first, most basic definition of war is as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."⁴³ It is thus essential to defeat the enemy's will. War "cannot be considered to have ended so long as the enemy's *will* has not been broken."⁴⁴

Usually, Clausewitz wrote, the enemy's will is broken by destroying his physical forces, occupying his territory, or otherwise forcing a peace agreement. However, "when we speak of destroying the enemy's forces, we must emphasize that nothing obliges us to limit this idea to physical forces: the moral element must also be considered. The two interact

⁴³Clausewitz, p. 83.

⁴⁴Clausewitz, p. 102.

throughout: they are inseparable.”⁴⁵ A major victory—or defeat—generates psychological as well as physical effects. Clausewitz describes this as a loss of “moral equilibrium” in which one side now has an emotional advantage due to higher morale that “can attain such massive proportions that it overpowers everything by its irresistible force.”⁴⁶ Clausewitz not only illustrated the manifestations of the psychological/emotional element through the psychology of the commander, motivation of the soldiers, and people in arms, but also incorporated the strategically relevant psychological/emotional effects of war.

Clausewitz’s trinity was intended as a guide to understanding the nature of war. His first piece, the psychological or emotional realm, presented a picture of different ways to express the psychological elements of war. To truly understand the nature of war, one must understand more than just the manifestations of emotions in war. It is also essential to understand how emotions are affected by developments in war, especially that each campaign produces psychological effects that influence both sides and all levels, from the lowest-ranking infantryman to the supreme commander. Clausewitz was the first military strategist to articulate the important role that human emotions and passions play in war and incorporated this idea as his first trinitarian element. By applying this first element to the Russian campaign one can explore the importance of human psychology to the nature of war and how to recognize it in warfare.

The Second Element: Reason

Clausewitz’s second element is war’s “element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason.”⁴⁷ This second element incorporates rational thought into the nature of war. Clausewitz was a child of the Enlightenment, in which reason and logic had been explored by the greatest intellectuals of the time. As one of Clausewitz’s contemporaries wrote, “our age is the age of self-consciousness, of self-reflection.... In the fragmented modern world... only one option is left to the enlightened individual: the heroism of scholarship.”⁴⁸ The Enlightenment permeated all aspects of life, even the study and practice of that most dangerous intellectual and physical activity—war. He lived in a world where rational thought and scientific progress over the past century had created a new, much more technical dimension to warfare.

⁴⁵Clausewitz, p. 111.

⁴⁶Clausewitz, p. 275.

⁴⁷Clausewitz, p. 89.

⁴⁸Letter from Rahel Levin to Alexander von der Marwitz, 17 May 1811. As quoted in the epigraph to Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

Fortress design, military engineering (such as the construction of entrenchments, camps, and bridges), and artillery gunnery provide some examples of the increasingly scientific aspects of warfare that had developed since the Renaissance. Military writers contributed their knowledge of the scientific realm to military applications, such as Vauban's work on fortresses and sieges. Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, one of Clausewitz's contemporaries, described in his *The Art of War* a kind of "geometric" idea of warfare where angles of approach and interior lines of communication played a key role in his theories. Although science contributed significantly to the practice of war in Clausewitz's time, he does not limit his treatment of war's rational element to technological developments. War's increasingly scientific aspects should not be confused with what Clausewitz considered the rational element of war.

For Clausewitz, reason in war remains firmly grounded in the political objective. The government's policy establishes the object for which a war is fought:

"We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means. What remains peculiar to war is simply the peculiar nature of its means. War in general, and the commander in any specific instance, is entitled to require that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means.... The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."⁴⁹

Since war is "always an *instrument of policy*," it must achieve the policy goal through a method that would successfully achieve that goal—that is, a rational means of achieving the established political objective. Clausewitz does not address the formulation of political policy in *On War*. Instead he seems to assume that the method a state uses to formulate policy will result in a rational objective. This is an important issue related to Clausewitz's study of the nature of war, especially when applied to Napoleon's use of ends and means in the Russian campaign.

Using the formulation of political objectives as a starting point, Clausewitz's discussion of war's rational element focuses on two primary sub-elements. First, he discusses the connection between strategy and policy. Second, military planning relies on the development of rational war plans that take into account certain factors (such as terrain, weather, and material resources) and relationships (between the attack and defense and between tactics and strategy).

⁴⁹Clausewitz, p. 87.

Clausewitz first connects war with the political objective—“the only source of war is politics.”⁵⁰ War is not ruled by its own set of laws or logic. It “does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different.”⁵¹ This close connection between war and policy means that “war cannot be divorced from political life.”⁵²

Although war itself is a physically and psychologically devastating phenomenon, its connection with policy “converts the overwhelming destructive element of war into a mere instrument.”⁵³ Clausewitz explained:

“In making use of war, policy evades all rigorous conclusions proceeding from the nature of war, bothers little about ultimate possibilities, and concerns itself only with immediate probabilities. Although this introduces a high degree of uncertainty into the whole business, turning it into a kind of game, each government is confident that it can outdo its opponent in skill and acumen.... If war is part of policy, policy will determine its character.”⁵⁴

Although Clausewitz established the necessary connection between war and political objectives, he also understood that “policy, of course, will not extend its influence to operational details.”⁵⁵ However, policy is “more influential in the planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle.”⁵⁶ Policy, which determines the political objectives, should guide the establishment of military objectives and the plans for achieving those ends. To Clausewitz, “the only question, therefore, is whether, when war is being planned, the political point of view should give way to the purely military.”⁵⁷ The political ends must always remain at the forefront of military planning. This is because war is not an end in itself: “subordinating the political point of view to the military would be absurd, for it is policy that has created war. Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa. No other possibility exists, then, that to subordinate the military point of view to the political.”⁵⁸

With this in mind, the political ends must rest at the heart of any strategy or campaign plan. The military commander and political leadership must establish a “strategy-policy match” in which the means supports the

⁵⁰Clausewitz, p. 605.

⁵¹Clausewitz, p. 605.

⁵²Clausewitz, p. 605.

⁵³Clausewitz, p. 606.

⁵⁴Clausewitz, p. 606.

⁵⁵Clausewitz, p. 606.

⁵⁶Clausewitz, p. 606.

⁵⁷Clausewitz, p. 607.

⁵⁸Clausewitz, p. 607.

attainment of the policy ends. They must select the best strategy to achieve the desired political objective.

The second aspect of Clausewitz's rational element relates to the formulation of military plans. A commander or planner must consider certain somewhat-quantifiable factors and relationships. Terrain, weather, and logistics can be quantified to some extent. Understanding the role of different types of geography on war is primarily "the realm of tactics, but the outcome is a matter of strategy" because the outcome of any engagement affects strategy.⁵⁹ Terrain "can affect military operations in three ways: as an obstacle to the approach, as an impediment to visibility, and as cover from fire. All other properties can be traced back to these three."⁶⁰ Fighting in open, rolling ground necessitates adopting a different scheme of maneuver or deployment—relying perhaps more on cavalry and mobility—than mountain warfare, which would generally require more reliance on small-unit tactics, decentralized execution, and infantry-centric formations. Understanding the nature of varying types of terrain and the relationship between an army and that terrain is crucial to planning or conducting a successful campaign.

A military planner can also consider the effects of the weather. During the nineteenth century it was commonplace for armies to avoid campaigning during winter. Seasonal changes affected strategic planning tremendously. At the tactical level, the presence of fog, for example, can be used to an army's advantage as Napoleon did at Austerlitz. Russia's severe winter weather significantly impacted operations in 1812—and not simply the presence of snow and cold temperatures. Napoleon and the Tsar anticipated the impending Russian winter and had to plan for its effects long before the first snowfall.

Logistical arrangements also require a rational approach to planning. A planner must calculate quantities of provisions such as food, ammunition, and medical supplies that the army would need for the duration of the campaign, and must find possible locations where more supplies could be obtained, such as an enemy depot or city. The relationship between attack and defense also plays a key role in understanding and planning for logistical requirements: "frequently, the retreating army will have more than enough [supplies], while the attacker is in dire need. The retreating army has the means of collecting supplies at prearranged points; the pursuing army is dependent on having its supplies forwarded—a difficult task while on the move, no matter how short its lines of communication."⁶¹

⁵⁹Clausewitz, p. 348.

⁶⁰Clausewitz, p. 348.

⁶¹Clausewitz, p. 470.

A commander or war planner must understand the effects of factors such as terrain, weather, and logistics, as well as the relationships between those factors and the strategic and tactical conduct of war. He must formulate a plan that considers these factors and the overarching political end that the plan is designed to achieve. In the 1812 Russian campaign, Napoleon initially made extensive planning arrangements, but ultimately the Russians found the best military strategy to support their political objectives.

The Final Element: Chance, Probability, and Uncertainty

The final element of Clausewitz's tripartite nature of war is that which makes war a gamble—the presence of uncertainty and the role played by chance and probability. Clausewitz's incorporation of war's uncertainty into his theory remains one of the great intellectual achievements of *On War*. As Clausewitz articulates, this element of chance, probability, and uncertainty stems from imperfect knowledge of the situation and the frequent periods of inaction that exist in real war.⁶² These periods of inaction “remove war still further from the realm of the absolute and make it even more a matter of assessing probabilities.”⁶³

Clausewitz's third trinitarian element lies within the scope of war in practice—what he calls “real war”—and within the scope of “absolute war,” which exists as an abstract concept. Absolute war, according to Clausewitz, is objective. On the other hand, real war is subjective in nature; “the means by which war has to be fought.”⁶⁴ Clausewitz relates probability to the objective aspects of war:

“The slower the progress and the more frequent the interruptions of military action the easier it is to retrieve a mistake, the bolder will be the general's assessments, and the more likely he will be to avoid theoretical extremes and to base his plans on probability and inference. Any given situation requires that probabilities be calculated in the light of circumstances, and the amount of time available for such calculation will depend on the pace with which operations are taking place.”⁶⁵

Because war relies on human interactions, and since human interactions are unpredictable, a military leader must consider possible courses

⁶²Clausewitz, p. 84–5.

⁶³Clausewitz, p. 85.

⁶⁴Clausewitz, p. 85.

⁶⁵Clausewitz, p. 85.

of action and probable outcomes from each given situation. Despite a leader's best abilities to assess the situation, likely actions, and outcomes, the most likely results do not always occur. Chance always plays a role in determining the outcome of a situation.

Compared to war, "no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance. And through the element of chance, guesswork and luck come to play a great part in war."⁶⁶ Because "the art of war deals with living and with moral forces" war in reality "cannot attain the absolute, or certainty; it must always leave a margin for uncertainty."⁶⁷ War exists in the realm of danger and the primary human emotional aspect that mitigates fear in the presence of danger is courage: "with uncertainty in one scale, courage and self-confidence must be thrown into the other to correct the balance."⁶⁸

Clausewitz ties chance, probability, and uncertainty closely to the emotional/psychological element of the trinity. Uncertainty is a product of danger and imperfect information. For military leaders to act capably in war's uncertain environment they must possess courage and self-confidence. Courage and self-confidence act as emotional aspects that mitigate danger and friction, which comprise two factors that contribute to uncertainty. Clausewitz describes the intense effects of danger, writing that "it is an exceptional man who keeps his powers of quick decision intact if he has never been through this experience before."⁶⁹

Danger can exert a crushing psychological and emotional effect on soldiers in combat. Indeed, "the ordinary man can never achieve a state of perfect unconcern in which his mind can work with normal flexibility.... Headlong, dogged, or innate courage, overmastering ambition, or long familiarity with danger—all must be present to a considerable degree if action in this debilitating element is not to fall short of achievements that in the study would appear as nothing out of the ordinary."⁷⁰ The third element of chance, probability, and uncertainty is closely related to the emotional and psychological experience of war through the realm of danger.

The element of uncertainty is also intertwined with friction in war. In war "everything looks simple; the knowledge required does not look remarkable, the strategic options are so obvious that by comparison the simplest problem of higher mathematics has an impressive scientific dignity."⁷¹ Friction occurs with the accumulation of "countless minor incidents—the kind you can never really foresee" that "lower the general

⁶⁶Clausewitz, p. 85.

⁶⁷Clausewitz, p. 86.

⁶⁸Clausewitz, p. 86.

⁶⁹Clausewitz, p. 113.

⁷⁰Clausewitz, p. 114.

⁷¹Clausewitz, p. 119.

level of performance.”⁷² These unforeseen circumstances can degrade an army’s performance either psychologically or physically. Psychologically, the effects of numerous small obstacles that interfere with the conduct of operations can reduce the army’s morale and cohesion. Physically, friction can affect the army through bad weather that slows an advance or a miscommunication that results in the wrong unit moving at the wrong time or to the wrong location.

Emotional factors such as courage can minimize the considerable influences that danger and friction exert on the uncertain environment of war. Through courage and self-confidence, a leader can maintain his composure and ability to make important command decisions despite the play of chance, the possibility that the most probable result might not occur, or the lack of completely accurate information. However, reason, the second trinitarian element, also relates to the element of uncertainty, chance, and probability.

Imperfect knowledge of the situation and the difficulties of translating war plans into action also perpetuate uncertainty. Good intelligence serves to better inform a military leader, providing the weapon of improved situational awareness and understanding. However, the “difficulty of *accurate recognition* constitutes one of the most serious sources of friction in war, by making things appear entirely different from what one had expected.”⁷³ Though reason contributes to a better understanding of the situation, it is subordinated to the emotional element of the trinity:

“even the man who planned the operation and now sees it being carried out may well lose confidence in his earlier judgment.... War has a way of masking the stage with scenery crudely daubed with fearsome apparitions. Once this is cleared away, and the horizon becomes unobstructed, developments will confirm his earlier convictions—this is one of the great chasms between *planning and execution*.”⁷⁴

Uncertainty clouds the reality of a situation. Again, courage and self-confidence are necessary for a leader to make the best decision as to whether or not the army should continue with the original plan after the influence of friction. Another emotional factor, genius, through the application of *coup d’oeil*, allows a commander to act decisively in the face of an uncertain situation and imperfect information.

Chance, probability, and uncertainty provide the final element of Clausewitz’s trinitarian definition of the nature of war. Closely tied to the

⁷²Clausewitz, p. 119.

⁷³Clausewitz, p. 117.

⁷⁴Clausewitz, p. 118.

other two elements, uncertainty highlights the interplay between each of Clausewitz's three elements of war. In 1812 Russia, uncertainty, chance, and probability played an important role in the conduct of the campaign. By applying this final element to Napoleon's invasion of Russia, one can learn that despite war being a human activity, sometimes results occur due, at least in part, to the play of chance or an uncertain situation. By describing in detail Clausewitz's reflections on each element individually and analyzing these ideas as expressed in the Russian campaign, one can more completely understand each of the trinity's individual parts. Also, achieving a greater understanding of the trinity's components allows for a clearer understanding of the interactions between these components and how each element is inseparably related to the others. Part Two of this series will analyze Clausewitz's trinity in the context of the 1812 Russian campaign.

Part One of this study offered a brief overview of historiography of the 1812 Russian campaign and delved deeply into each element of Clausewitz's trinity. In summary, Clausewitz's first element of psychology, passion, and emotion provides a human dimension that permeates all aspects of human action in war. This element is not simply limited to an amorphous concept of the "people," but extends to other groups and individuals, such as soldiers, civil populations, government leaders, and military commanders. Human passions and emotions reflect the enemy's will, a commander's temperament, cultural values, or soldiers' morale. Every human activity and interaction in war can be affected by psychology, passion, and emotion.

Reason, the second element, provides a framework for the human mind to approach the planning and conduct of war. Ultimately, Clausewitz writes, war is fundamentally political. Therefore the political objective dominates—or ought to dominate—military planning. All actions in war should support the attainment of this objective. Some aspects of war are scientific—it is possible for a planner to calculate how much food an army would need each day so long as he knows the army's size and the ration of bread per soldier.

However, not all rationally devised plans succeed. Sometimes the inability of the human mind produces a flawed plan—humans formulate war plans, and as the first element indicates each individual human has his or her psychological and emotional tendencies and biases. External forces such as bad weather or miscommunication can also prevent even the most logical plan from succeeding. Every possible development cannot be taken into account during war planning because of the possibility of the unexpected.

Hence the third element of chance, probability, and uncertainty play a role in the conduct of every military campaign. The play of chance

generates uncertainty within a situation. In war, a leader rarely, if ever, achieves complete knowledge of the situation. Often some piece of vital information is missing and the commander must use his judgment. Chance, such as whether or not rain slows an army's advance, serves as an impersonal factor that influences both the actual conduct of operations and commanders' perceptions of the conduct of operations.

This uncertainty can cause a commander to lose confidence in his abilities or to make an error in judgment. Both of these occurrences can have a severe impact on the outcome of a war. War, despite being a human activity, is often influenced by inhuman, impersonal factors—such as a sudden thunderstorm or a messenger who, in the dark of the night, turned on the wrong road—guided by events that humans cannot control.

In summary, Clausewitz's trinity can be said to comprise

1. human emotions and irrationalities,
2. structured, ordered—rational—human thought, and
3. the uncertainty of an environment that humans cannot completely control.

These are the essential features of Clausewitz's tripartite definition of the nature of war. What follows is a historical case study of the 1812 campaign viewed through the analytical lens of Clausewitz's tripartite definition of war. The following examples from the 1812 Russian campaign serve to highlight these features through the use of a historical case study from Clausewitz's era. From this examination of his trinity through the events of 1812, one can perceive the sublime characteristics that define the nature of war. The three component parts of psychology and emotion, reason, and chance and uncertainty, each offer unique insights into war as a phenomenon. However, each component alone is incapable of providing the full picture of war's nature. Only by considering the relationships between all three elements of the trinity can one truly understand the nature of war as Clausewitz defined it.

The First Element in the Russian Campaign

Both Napoleonic France and Tsarist Russia possessed the capability to tap in to society's latent violent attributes through measures such as the *levee en masse* and the social niche filled by the Cossacks. Given the violence of human nature and the government's ability to apply this violence in war, Clausewitz's emotional element can achieve practical effects. By influencing the conduct of the campaign and helping to better define the nature of the war on which Napoleon embarked upon by crossing the Niemen in 1812, this first element contributes to a more complete

understanding of Clausewitz's trinitarian tool for analyzing the nature of war. In the Russian campaign, the three primary manifestations of the emotive factor (the psychology of the commander, motives of the troops, and role of the people in arms) were expressed through actual events. To understand the emotional element as it is exhibited through actions and events, it is necessary to analyze the psychologies of the competing commanders, understand what motivated their soldiers, and examine the role played by the Russian people in partisan warfare.

The psychology of the competing commanders played a tremendously important role in the conduct and outcome of Napoleon's invasion of Russia. Ultimately, any army's fate lies in the hands of its primary decision-maker. In the case of the *Grand Armée*, that decision-maker was the brilliant Napoleon Bonaparte. The essential features of a commander's psychology as Clausewitz outlines them include both moral (courage, determination, etc.) and intellectual qualities (such as *coup d'oeil*). Throughout the campaign, these aspects of Napoleon's psychology influenced the conduct of the campaign and help to reveal the value of Clausewitz's first trinitarian element.

Though he once wrote that "the foremost quality of a commander is to keep a cool head," Napoleon in Russia acted somewhat uncharacteristically.⁷⁵ Caulaincourt observed Napoleon's behavior, "although there were moments when the man showed himself, it was the demigod whom one recognized most often."⁷⁶ Usually bold, decisive, and energetic, Napoleon in the Russian campaign is generally portrayed as moody, hesitant, and sickly. Historians have made much of this uncharacteristic behavior. However, it is not necessary to understand Napoleon in order to understand the emotional role of a commander's psychology in war. Instead, one must simply understand Napoleon's general mindset when at war and how specific actions or decisions during the 1812 campaign reflect his mentality.

Personally, "Napoleon could be by turns charming, hypnotic and caring, or foul-mouthed, unspeakably rude and even physically violent."⁷⁷ In his conduct of diplomacy, Bonaparte "could be equally acerbic and brusque."⁷⁸ Making peace with Napoleon consistently translated into subordination to Imperial French supremacy. Napoleon sought to dominate his opponents politically. Through his military campaigns, Napoleon "consistently sought the decisive battle in order to break his opponent's political will."⁷⁹ The achievement of a decisive battle in each campaign

⁷⁵Jay Luvaas. *Napoleon on the Art of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1999) p. 65.

⁷⁶Armand de Caulaincourt. *With Napoleon in Russia* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1955) p. 3.

⁷⁷David G. Chandler. *On the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Greenhill Books, 1994) p. 238.

⁷⁸Chandler, *On the Napoleonic Wars*, p. 238.

⁷⁹Chandler, *On the Napoleonic Wars*, p. 243.

marks the hallmark of Napoleon's approach to war. All of his successful campaigns prior to 1812 were decided by decisive battles in which Napoleon engaged his enemy's army and defeated it in detail. To achieve this result, he used "mobility as a means of applying remorseless psychological pressure upon his opponents" by "affording his enemy no time to draw breath."⁸⁰ Through vigorous maneuver and the pursuit of a decisive engagement, Napoleon achieved his most stunning victories. He was to apply the same formula that had succeeded at Marengo, Austerlitz, and Jena again in 1812, but with far worse results.

Command is one of the most important aspects of warfare. In the case of Napoleon as a military commander, understanding his individual command style is necessary to comprehend the role of a commander's psychology in Clausewitz's emotional element. Bonaparte once wrote that "in war men are nothing; one man is everything. The presence of the general is indispensable. He is the head, the whole of an army. It was not the Roman army that subdued Gaul, but Caesar; not the Carthaginian army that caused the republic to tremble at the gates of Rome, but Hannibal."⁸¹ Understanding Napoleon's system of command becomes easier after reflecting on what he wrote. Napoleon clearly believed that an army's supreme commander had a tremendous impact on the conduct of a war. Perhaps in an attempt to maximize his own control over the army, Napoleon commanded through a very centralized system in which "unity of command is of the first necessity in war."⁸²

By maximizing the control that Napoleon retained over his forces, he would maintain greater ability to apply his military talents to the conduct of the campaign. Decisions, often even the most mundane decisions, would be taken by the Emperor himself rather than delegated to lower levels of command. This highly centralized decision-making apparatus allowed Napoleon's genius to command his armies with a high degree of control, but also prevented the exercise of initiative at lower levels of command. Lack of initiative was exhibited especially among Napoleon's marshals, who often seemed confused or indecisive without Napoleon to direct them. However, due to communication difficulties and the sheer size of his army, Napoleon often "could not control everything he pretended to control."⁸³

In essence, Napoleon's general approach to war revolved around mobility and the drive for decisive battle in an army with a command

⁸⁰Chandler, *On the Napoleonic Wars*, p. 244.

⁸¹Luvaas, p. 61.

⁸²Luvaas, p. 64.

⁸³Russell F. Weigley. *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) p. 444.

structure in which decision-making was highly centralized. This approach resulted in numerous victories, but in Russia psychological aspects of command negatively influenced Napoleon's conduct of the campaign.

According to Clausewitz, war is the realm of uncertainty and a commander must base his actions on his instincts and understanding of a situation while possessing incomplete information. The effects of uncertainty most influence war's psychological aspects. Napoleon exhibited some of these effects during the campaign in Russia.

Before the battle of Borodino, French and Russian troops skirmished at a small Russian redoubt in the village of Shevardino. Napoleon saw the carnage inflicted by a small battery of twelve Russian cannon on the attacking French cavalry, which "may well have contributed to his hesitancy during the main battle [Borodino] two days later."⁸⁴ At Borodino, Napoleon first hesitated to deploy the Imperial Guard in an assault against weakened Russian positions on the far left flank of the Russian position. By the afternoon, French forces under Eugène had captured a Russian redoubt. Again, Napoleon hesitated, and decided not to send reinforcements to exploit the brief tactical advantage. Napoleon remained tentative and timid in his reluctance to deploy the elite Imperial Guard. Had he not hesitated to deploy the Guard, Napoleon might have achieved a decisive defeat of the Russian army at Borodino. Instead, the Russians fought him to a draw, allowing an orderly retreat towards Moscow.⁸⁵

Upon reaching Moscow, Napoleon acted with indecision and frustration. He expected that by occupying Moscow Alexander would soon offer to negotiate a peace settlement: "Napoleon waited, in a state of semi-paralysis, day after day, for the overture from the Tsar which never came; 'moody and taciturn,' so Constant described him, it seemed as if he were dreaming that somehow another Tilsit was just around the corner.... Days of deceptively balmy autumn weather intervened as Napoleon dallied."⁸⁶ When it became clear that Alexander would not sue for peace, Napoleon contemplated a march on St. Petersburg. This proved impracticable, so Napoleon next "decided to try peace overtures," but "Caulaincourt declined such a mission as hopeless and only serving to advertise French weakness."⁸⁷

In addition to his indecision over his next course of action, Napoleon became frustrated not only with Alexander's refusal of peace negotiations, but also the burning of Moscow. Napoleon's frustrations boiled

⁸⁴ Alan Palmer, *Russia in War and Peace* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972) p. 160.

⁸⁵ Weigley, pp. 445–9.

⁸⁶ Alistair Horne, *How Far from Austerlitz? Napoleon 1805–1815* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) p. 319.

⁸⁷ Allen McConnell, *Tsar Alexander I: Paternalistic Reformer* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1987) p. 110.

over: “‘A demon inspires these people,’ Napoleon declared. ‘They are Scythians! This is a war of extermination.’”⁸⁸ Moscow’s destruction left him “strangely inactive, withdrawn from a disaster which he had never anticipated.”⁸⁹ On October 18, “everything was ready for Napoleon to leave the city that Sunday evening, but, though his escort was already waiting, it was announced that the Emperor had changed his mind” and would leave the next morning.⁹⁰

A military commander must be psychologically prepared to deal with the effects of war’s uncertainty. For this reason, Clausewitz emphasizes a commander’s emotional balance. Without this balance, the effects of war’s uncertain environment (such as hesitancy, indecision, paralysis, or the reversal of decisions) can breed disaster and defeat. In Russia, Napoleon hesitated and failed to act decisively, which contributed to his defeat. Napoleon tried to apply his usual approach to war—seeking decisive battle as a first priority—but when this failed, he lapsed into the paralysis of indecision. By studying his actions and their consequences, one can better understand the play of Clausewitz’s emotional element in war.

For Napoleon’s opponents, Tsar Alexander I and his Commander-in-Chief Mikhail Kutuzov, the commanders’ psychological elements also played a key role in the outcome of the campaign. After ascending to the throne of Russia, Alexander felt almost disqualified to rule. He saw himself as lazy and unconfident, he hated courtly life, and he was often confused and indecisive.⁹¹ Despite these feelings of inadequacy and his usual indecision, the Tsar acted forcefully in 1812. He remained determined to struggle against Imperial France and not to give in to Napoleon’s demands. To the Russian ambassador to London, the Tsar wrote “I will not make peace until I have driven the enemy back across our frontiers, even if I must, before succeeding in this, withdraw beyond Kazan’.”⁹² Alexander’s moral determination would translate into a surge of Russian patriotic feeling later in the campaign.

In terms of personal military ability, Alexander could not compete with Napoleon as a military commander. Most, if not all, senior Russian generals could not compete with Napoleon—those who had, such as Kutuzov, were badly defeated (Kutuzov had commanded Russia’s armies at Austerlitz). Perhaps it was for this reason that Alexander favored foreign military advisors: “Alexander so lacked confidence in Russian judgements that he tended to turn for advice to Austrian or Prussian ‘experts,’ many of whom

⁸⁸As quoted in Palmer, *Russia in War and Peace*, p. 172.

⁸⁹Alan Palmer. *Napoleon in Russia* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003) p. 154.

⁹⁰Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, p. 181.

⁹¹McConnell, pp. 6–10.

⁹²As quoted in Janet M. Hartley. *Alexander I* (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1994) p. 118.

were mere paper strategists and unable to understand the strange character of warfare across the great expanses of the Russian plain.”⁹³

During the campaign’s initial stages, Alexander took supreme command and followed the advice of the Prussian General Phull, whose plan called for the Russian armies to fall back to a fortified camp at Drissa. Eventually, other officers convinced the Tsar that Phull’s plan was impractical, and soon Phull lost Alexander’s confidence. Russia’s senior commanders “wanted Alexander back in his capital, partly because they were apprehensive that he would discover yet another paper theorist to succeed [Phull], but also because they genuinely thought he could rally public opinion in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which was still lukewarm in support of the war.”⁹⁴ The Tsar’s emotional bias toward foreign officers’ expertise could have proved disastrous for the Russian forces had they encamped at Drissa. However, it was another officer with a foreign background, Barclay de Tolly, who finally convinced Alexander to withdraw from Drissa.

Although Alexander did not initially intend to leave the army, this was one of his best decisions. The Tsar was not as accomplished as his senior generals as a battlefield commander, but he did have the prestige and influence to engender support for the war from the Russian nobility and peasantry. His generals could lead a battle against Napoleon, but they could not rally the nation to support a war. After leaving the army and arriving in St. Petersburg, the Tsar named Kutuzov as the supreme commander, replacing the foreigner Barclay. Although Kutuzov did not hold Alexander’s complete confidence (Alexander still mistrusted his abilities after the defeat at Austerlitz), Kutuzov was highly popular and maintained a solid reputation both with noble society and the rank-and-file of the Russian army. Alexander turned over control of the army to Kutuzov, and then headed to St. Petersburg and Moscow, where he could best influence the campaign.

By essentially “getting out of the way” of his military commanders, Alexander allowed them to control the armies while he contributed to the war effort by increasing support and overseeing the management of the country. Through these actions, he contributed more to the success of the campaign than he could have contributed by leading Russian soldiers in the field. Tsar Alexander remained morally determined to fight Bonaparte’s invasion, but this psychological determination alone did not create disaster for the French. Emotionally biased toward foreign military émigrés’ advice, Alexander might have caused disaster for the Russians had he not listened to other officers’ good counsel to withdraw from

⁹³Palmer, *Russia in War and Peace*, p. 113.

⁹⁴Palmer, *Russia in War and Peace*, p. 154.

Drissa. Again, he listened to his closest advisors when they recommended that Alexander leave the army. By operating as head of state only, and not simultaneously as supreme military commander and head of state, Alexander could focus his attention on matters of state while leaving the day-to-day conduct of the campaign to Kutuzov. Throughout the campaign, Alexander remained morally determined to fight the French and listened to his subordinates' good advice. Emotionally, Alexander knew that he did not possess military talent similar to Napoleon—perhaps because of his feelings of inadequacy from earlier in his life—but proved able to make sound decisions when offered advice from his counselors. Psychologically, Alexander acted with more emotional balance and decisiveness than Napoleon. By delegating responsibilities and seeking opinions from his advisors, Alexander avoided becoming overwhelmed by the uncertainties of war as Napoleon was.

The importance of a commander's psychology as essential in the outcome of war can be illustrated by the examples of Napoleon and Alexander. The different psychological make-up of both individuals contributed greatly to the conduct of the campaign. The first factor in Clausewitz's emotional element, the psychology of the commander focuses on the individual commander and his personal attributes. A commander's courage, determination, emotions, and experience—all of which are parts of his psychology—can either help or hinder his ability to see through the psychological fog that permeates nearly every aspect of warfare. Through his vital position as the supreme decision-maker, the commander's personality can affect a situation more often than any other single individual.

Soldiers' motivations provide a second factor integral to the emotional element. Motivated by previous glory, the French army that marched on Moscow included a number of veterans from Napoleon's prior victorious campaigns. This successful tradition created a strong sense of conquest and pride within the French army. After years of victorious wars and intense military exertions, psychological and emotional feelings of *esprit de corps* had created a strong bond among France's soldiers. Napoleon maintained an almost legendary stature and his mere presence would suffice to inspire his soldiers: "the troops...were superb, and received the Emperor with real enthusiasm."⁹⁵ Confidence in their commander's abilities as well as their own record of triumph counteracted the psychological effects of danger and fear within the army, at least initially. However, morale is a constantly changing condition.

Success and confidence will motivate soldiers to fight, but defeat can ruin morale and shatter confidence. Sometimes simply the lack of success will degrade an army's high morale. As the Russian campaign progressed,

⁹⁵Caulaincourt, p. 41.

French soldiers found increasing difficulties with foraging—the scarcity of food and water became more acute as the army approached Moscow. Expecting to find sustenance in Moscow, the fires which destroyed most of the city also destroyed much in the way of supplies and shelter. Although “considerable supplies were saved... it required a determined effort by Napoleon to restore discipline to an army on its way to becoming a band of looters.”⁹⁶ As demonstrated in Russia, soldiers’ motivations can shift due to the uncertain and dangerous environment within which war occurs. Without success, motivating an army is much more difficult. However, the Russians managed to motivate their soldiers, and populace, through methods other than a tradition of martial success and prestige.

For Russia, patriotism provided an emotional connection to the war that motivated its armies despite years of defeat in previous wars against Napoleon and weeks of retreat in the 1812 campaign. The Tsar’s actions and the destruction of Moscow kindled Russian patriotism, which motivated Russia’s armies to continue the struggle against Napoleon.

After Alexander left the army and had traveled to Moscow, he selected Kutuzov as commander-in-chief. This cheered the dreary mood in the army because Kutuzov, despite being defeated at Austerlitz, still had a strong reputation among Russian elite society as well as the individual soldiers of the army. Unlike his predecessor Barclay, Kutuzov “was Russian to the core; and there was no alien affectation about the ‘old fox of the north.’”⁹⁷ On Kutuzov’s appointment, “all...were agreed, that a true Russian, a disciple of Suvarov, was better than a foreigner, and much wanted at the moment.”⁹⁸

Next, the Tsar went to Moscow, where he sought to rally the people. In this task he succeeded marvelously. Upon his arrival on July 23, “he was rapturously received, the people kneeling in the streets as he went by.... The enthusiasm continued for all the eight days the Tsar spent in the city.”⁹⁹ In Moscow “he received 80,000 volunteers from the townspeople, 3 million rubles from the nobility, and 8 million from the merchants; their generosity moved the sovereign to tears.”¹⁰⁰ Alexander’s presence in Russia’s holiest city provided the inspiration that he and his generals had hoped for—faced by the French threat, Moscow responded vigorously.

⁹⁶Weigley, p. 450.

⁹⁷Palmer, *Russia in War and Peace*, p. 157.

⁹⁸Carl von Clausewitz. *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia*. (London: John Murray, Ablemarle Street Publishers, 1843) p. 136.

⁹⁹Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁰McConnell, p. 107.

After the fall of Moscow and the fire which destroyed most of the city, “the Russians, at the time, believed the French had deliberately ravaged Holy Moscow, and this conviction intensified the patriotic fervour of the nation throughout the coming winter.”¹⁰¹ Although the French army was most likely not responsible for burning Moscow, the city’s destruction, followed by French reprisals against Russian arsonists, stirred popular sentiments against Napoleon’s invasion and steeled Russians’ will to resist. Napoleon had hoped that occupying Moscow would result in an opportunity for peace. Instead, with the Russian populace eager to continue a struggle that the Tsar had earlier characterized as “the last struggle of independence against enslavement, of liberal ideas against tyranny’s system,” Alexander refused French offers to negotiate and kept fighting.¹⁰²

By accessing the Russian people’s patriotic sentiments, Alexander motivated his army and population to fight against Napoleon. Appointing a Russian commander and inspiring militia volunteers and aid from the people of Moscow created deeper and broader Russian support for the war effort as well as directly affecting the army’s morale and determination to continue the war.

Napoleon’s and Alexander’s soldiers, though many had very different motives for fighting, were equally susceptible to the effects of fear, danger, uncertainty, and indecision that plague the human spirit during combat. As the campaign progressed, changed circumstances influenced soldiers’ morale and motives. Through Clausewitz’s three principal moral factors that contribute to the spirit of war—the skill of the commander, experience and courage of the troops, and their patriotic spirit—one can comprehend how soldiers’ motivations play an important role in understanding the emotional element of the nature of war.

The emotional element’s third sub-factor concerns the people in arms. When a nation mobilizes its population for war, as Revolutionary and Imperial France did through the *levee en masse*, the people’s passions play an important role. Since the populace must contribute to the war effort, the government relies on the people’s support to be able to conduct the war with adequate resources. A conscripted populace does not respond to war through passion alone. If the burden of a war seems too high a price to pay, logically fewer citizens will support the war. The French soon discovered after 1812 that 20 years of warfare were too

¹⁰¹Palmer, *Russia in War and Peace*, pp. 172–6.

¹⁰²McConnell, p. 107.

many. Constant casualties meant that by the end of Napoleon's reign conscription and death were viewed by many Frenchmen as synonymous.

In addition to the taxing manpower requirements of Napoleon's incessant wars, some French allies in 1812 proved very unreliable. For instance, the French army had been accompanied by a Prussian corps under the command of General Yorck. Yorck hated Napoleon, and since September had kept in contact with the Russians, who assured him that Alexander I had no quarrel with Prussia. By November, Napoleon's army was in headlong retreat, and the local Russian commander, Diebitsch, suggested that Yorck switch sides. After contemplation and a conversation with Clausewitz (who had been sent to Yorck as a Russian representative), Yorck brought his corps over to the Russian side.¹⁰³

Prior to the invasion, Napoleon had largely coerced army contingents from his erstwhile allies. Some of these soldiers, especially the Poles, were highly motivated and fought tenaciously. Others, such as the Prussians, whose population remained cold and skeptical, if not outright hostile, toward Napoleonic France, sought merely to placate their powerful imperial neighbor. When the populace does not want to fight, as the Prussians did not want to support Napoleon's invasion, motivating a national army becomes much more difficult.

For the Russians, arming the people proved much easier. Thanks partially to the Tsar's efforts to rally the population in Moscow, the Russians raised large numbers of militia to augment the army. Some populations mobilized completely: the Cossacks "sent their entire male population to fight" Imperial France.¹⁰⁴ Also, the Moscow fire inspired popular resistance because the Russians largely believed that Napoleon had purposefully burned the holy city. Moscow's flames had the effect of further enflaming Russian patriotism. Napoleon, believing that the Russians had set fire to Moscow, ordered the execution of suspected arsonists as a reprisal.¹⁰⁵ This served only to amplify Russian hatred and further stir the Russian people's passions against the invaders.

Using this passion to advantage, Russian troops, especially Cossack cavalry, harried the French retreat from Moscow, destroying French foraging patrols, annihilating stragglers, and generally intensifying the French troops' misery. Armed mobs of Russian peasants also wreaked havoc on many hapless French stragglers who wandered into a hostile

¹⁰³Peter Paret. *Clausewitz and the State* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) pp. 229–30.

¹⁰⁴Nicholas Feodoroff. *History of the Cossacks* (Commack: Nova Science Publishers, 1999) p. 111.

¹⁰⁵Palmer, *Russia in War and Peace*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972. p. 176.

village. Much has been made of this national partisan campaign in Russian popular myth, but it must not be overstated. Although partisans contributed to Russia's victory, the guerrilla campaign was not a decisive element. However, partisan fighting illuminates the extent to which Napoleon's invasion roused the passions of the Russian people.

Passions, emotions, and psychology provided an essential and pervasive aspect of the Russian campaign of 1812. Through an exploration of the psychology of the commander, soldiers' motivations, and the role of popular sentiment, one can better understand how Clausewitz's first element of the tripartite nature of war was expressed during 1812. Although passion and emotion played an important role in defining the nature of war in Russia, the emotional element cannot be considered alone. Integrated with the first element, the second element of reason and rationality also influenced the nature of the campaign.

The Second Element: Reason

Before invading Russia, Napoleon's planners created detailed schemes of maneuver for the massive *Grande Armée* and made extensive logistical calculations. Napoleon concentrated thousands of spare horses, provisions for over 400,000 men, over 800 wagons, and enough artillery ammunition to provide between 670 and 1100 rounds per gun.¹⁰⁶ However, these exhaustive preparations would prove fruitless without a coherent policy objective and matching strategy to achieve that objective. Imperial France differed from many nations because the political and military leadership were united in Napoleon Bonaparte. Even tsarist Russia maintained some division between the military commander-in-chief, Kutuzov, and the political leadership of Tsar Alexander. By combining the roles of policymaker and strategist, Napoleon ensured that he would make the most important decisions largely by himself.

The Emperor's overall policy end was "that Russia should be brought back into line in the economic struggle against Great Britain."¹⁰⁷ He had felt since as early as August 1811 that war would be necessary due to Alexander's deliberate evasion of the Continental System and numerous minor intrigues over Poland and the Balkans. Napoleon would not tolerate a "backslider nor a rival... and by 1811 Alexander represented both."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶Martin van Creveld. *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) p. 63.

¹⁰⁷David G. Chandler. *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: Scribner, 1966) p. 747.

¹⁰⁸Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, pp. 745–6.

To bring Russia back into the Continental System, Napoleon conceived of a military strategy that he had relied on numerous times before—an offensive in search of a decisive battle. Napoleon sought to invade, concentrate his army, fix the Russian army in place, maneuver to a position of advantage, defeat the Russians in battle, and force their surrender. He “had told Davout that his aim was to be able to ‘concentrate 400,000 men at a single point.’”¹⁰⁹ Destroying the enemy’s army remained Napoleon’s primary military objective in all his campaigns—Russia was not an exception. Napoleon, “whenever possible, after pinning the foe frontally by a feint attack” would march “his main army by the quickest possible ‘safe’ route, hidden by the cavalry screen and natural obstacles, to place himself on the rear or flank of his opponent.”¹¹⁰

In 1812 Napoleon applied his usual military solution—an offensive to seek decisive battle—to his latest political problem with the Russian tsar. Despite his numerous battlefield successes over a 20-year career, Napoleon employed one doctrine: take the offensive and destroy the enemy army in decisive battle. Perhaps one of his greatest failings as a political and military leader was his inability to apply varied and flexible military strategies to achieve his political objectives.

Each time he went to war, the French Emperor prescriptively adopted his force-on-force engagement strategy. In 1812, the Russians refused to offer a decisive battle for months and Napoleon proved unable to outmaneuver them. By refusing to offer decisive battle, the Russians effectively neutralized the French strategy. In these circumstances, Napoleon could not find an alternative to seeking battle, which drew him further into Russia, continuing his attempt to force battle with the main Russian army. When the Russians finally offered battle at Borodino, Napoleon did not win decisively as he had hoped. Although he won the field, this victory did not act as a panacea. In earlier campaigns, such as in Egypt, Napoleon had achieved a military victory that did not translate into political success (and therefore was not ‘decisive’) because Nelson destroyed the French Fleet at Aboukir Bay.¹¹¹

According to Clausewitz, a successful strategy must support the political objective. Since Napoleon’s political objective had been to compel Russian compliance with the Continental System, Napoleon could have adopted an alternative military strategy which should have emphasized a Russian center of gravity that directly influenced Russia’s ability to evade the Continental System. One alternative strategy could have been for Napoleon to direct his forces against the aspect of Russia’s economy that

¹⁰⁹Horne, *How Far From Austerlitz?*, p. 309.

¹¹⁰Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 163.

¹¹¹John Keegan. *Intelligence in War* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

most threatened the Continental System—foreign exports and imports. Foreign trade relied primarily on access to the Baltic through the ports of St. Petersburg and Riga. During the century prior to Napoleon’s invasion, St. Petersburg and Riga had grown considerably due to foreign trade.¹¹² In 1812, Russian trade relied heavily on shipping entering and leaving these two ports. Had Napoleon attacked these important ports, he could have inflicted significant damage on Russian trade rather than chasing an elusive Russian army.

Historians have often questioned Napoleon’s rationale in his plan to invade Russia: “‘Don’t march on Moscow’ was consistently one of Field-Marshal Montgomery’s ‘basic rules of war’.... Like many other students of military history, he ‘never understood Napoleon’s reasoning.’”¹¹³ Accepting Clausewitz’s assertion that “policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument,” a military commander or planner must carefully analyze the best military means of achieving the political end.¹¹⁴ In 1812, seeking a decisive battle with the main Russian army might not have been the best means of forcing Russia back into the Continental System. However, decisive battle was the only option that Napoleon considered. “War” could mean small, fast raids or large battles; it could involve limited or total national effort, but to Napoleon, war always meant decision in pitched battle. Napoleon simply applied the same strategy that he always used: “To beat the enemy—to shatter him—to gain the capital—to drive the government into the last corner of the empire—and then, while the confusion was fresh, to dictate a peace—had been hitherto the plan of operation in his wars.”¹¹⁵ The Emperor wanted battle, but the Russians did not conform to his desire.

Russian policy was to never “sign a peace dictated on Russian territory.”¹¹⁶ Alexander “stated that he would negotiate with France only if the French were to withdraw from Prussia.”¹¹⁷ This policy apparently can be summarized as simply not surrendering to the French. Russia did not have a clearly articulated political objective other than Alexander’s insistence on not agreeing to a French-dictated peace. In support of this amorphous policy end, the Russians adopted an equally ambiguous military strategy.

¹¹²Arcadius Kahan. *The Plow, The Hammer, and The Knout: An Economic History of Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) pp. 163–7.

¹¹³Horne, *How Far From Austerlitz?*, p. 308.

¹¹⁴Clausewitz, p. 607.

¹¹⁵Carl von Clausewitz. *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia* (London: John Murray, Ablemarle Street, 1843) p. 253.

¹¹⁶As quoted in Paul Britten Austin. *The March on Moscow* (London: Greenhill Books, 1993) p. 30.

¹¹⁷George Nafziger. *Napoleon’s Invasion of Russia* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988) pp. 11–12.

At the outbreak of the campaign, the Russian strategy was centered on a plan created by a Prussian, General Phull. This plan relied on a withdrawal to a fortified camp at Drissa, from which the combined armies of Bagration and Barclay de Tolly could decide what to do next.¹¹⁸ Several foreign officers serving with the Russian army, Clausewitz included, thought the Drissa plan impractical and advocated continuing the withdrawal past Drissa.¹¹⁹ Tsar Alexander finally lost confidence in Phull and the Drissa plan, and continued the withdrawal.

The Russian commanders did not anticipate a continuous withdrawal for the entire duration of the campaign. At some point they envisioned the necessity of fighting Napoleon. The Russian leadership did not have a coherent idea of when or under what circumstances they would fight Napoleon in a major battle. However, once Napoleon had begun his march on Moscow from Smolensk, Alexander pressured Kutuzov into finally offering battle at Borodino.

In contrast to the Russians' confusion, many of the Prussian officers in Russian service, Clausewitz included, viewed the progress of the campaign with a sense of inevitability: "With Scharnhorst, Boyen, and other Prussian officers, Clausewitz shared the belief that only a strategic withdrawal, possibly beyond Moscow, would save the Russians, and his major concern during the opening weeks of the war was that no artificial schemes should interfere with what he took to be the natural course of fighting, which compelled the Russians, even against their wishes, to give way before Napoleon."¹²⁰

From this perspective, the Russians unintentionally followed the best possible strategy. So long as they did not succumb to a decisive defeat in battle at Napoleon's hands, the Russian army would emerge with its political aim intact. Accidentally, the Tsar had managed to find a strategy that strongly supported his policy. The Russians had achieved a good strategy-policy match that allowed them to survive Napoleon's invasion with their forces largely intact and capable of offering continued resistance. Napoleon's armies, on the other hand, were weakened by their advance and were unable to sustain offensive operations deep in enemy territory, which forced the Emperor to retreat.

The Russian campaign provides an excellent example of the primacy of the human aspects of war planning. Leaders and planners must apply reason and critical analysis in the formulation of their strategies and

¹¹⁸Peter Paret. *Clausewitz and the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) p. 224.

¹¹⁹Paret, p. 224.

¹²⁰Paret, p. 224.

policies, but ultimately all decisions are made by people who are not always capable of acting rationally or analytically.

In Napoleon's case, the strategy adopted did not support the political objective despite the rational thought applied to the planning of logistics and troop dispositions. Napoleon never adopted a different approach to achieving his policy aims. No matter what he wanted to accomplish politically, he always sought decisive battle first. In 1812, several other alternative strategies were available—the enemy army should not necessarily act as the primary objective. To punish Russia for flaunting the Continental System, Napoleon could have attacked the Baltic ports or Saint Petersburg, thereby damaging Russia economically. The Continental System was, after all, mainly a tool for waging economic warfare on Britain. Because of Napoleon's personal limitations and position as Emperor and supreme commander, rational strategic analysis did not negate his personal preference for seeking decisive battle.

Tsar Alexander accidentally avoided confrontation with Napoleon in a decisive battle. When the Russian army finally did fight at Borodino, Kutuzov wisely preserved his army as a viable fighting force despite leaving Napoleon in possession of the battlefield. The Russians essentially benefited from what Clausewitz saw as the natural course of the campaign. In Clausewitz's view, so long as they did not interfere with this natural course—that is, losing decisively—the Russians would inevitably succeed. The Russian leadership did not arrive at a strategy of withdrawal through any rational process, but largely because the alternative Drissa plan proved impractical and possibly disastrous. By avoiding a decisive defeat, the Russians nullified Napoleon's only means of achieving his political goals and simultaneously managed to accomplish their own political goal of not negotiating a coerced peace settlement.

Again, the application of Clausewitz's second trinitarian element—reason—to the Russian campaign illuminates the centrality of war's human aspects. Although reason serves as a vital tool in the search to define a political objective and formulate a strategic plan to achieve that objective, the successful application of reason is not always completely attainable or completely necessary. Napoleon couldn't apply reason completely; the Tsar didn't have to.

Clausewitz's Third Element: Chance, Probability, and Uncertainty

The element of chance, probability, and uncertainty unifies the other elements of the trinity. Chance and uncertainty permeate war at every level and in each detail. Operational plans, no matter how thorough, may easily be disrupted by the play of chance. A commander, no matter how courageous, could misjudge an uncertain situation and make the wrong

decision given imperfect information. Difficulties with communication, logistics, mobility, weather, terrain, and intelligence contribute to the uncertainty of war. Every operation displays this trinitarian element. However, only a few examples from the Russian campaign are necessary to illuminate the effects of chance and uncertainty in war.

Upon crossing the Niemen, Napoleon's intelligence informed him that the main Russian armies were located 200 miles apart. Barclay de Tolly's main army consisted of six infantry corps and three cavalry corps deployed in southern Lithuania. Prince Bagration commanded 40,000 infantry and a cavalry force headquartered near Lutsik.¹²¹ Napoleon thought that the most likely course of action for the Russians, when faced with a French advance, would be for Barclay's army to gradually fall back until Bagration could march north to link the two armies.¹²²

When Napoleon heard that Barclay was withdrawing and that Bagration was moving north, he realized that "the fact that Barclay was retiring toward Drissa, that is to say northeast, meant that he was in fact putting more distance between his army and that of Bagration, and thus was delaying the concentration of the two Russian armies."¹²³ Now Napoleon hoped that the French army could maneuver

"between the two Russian wings and close the trap on Bagration...always provided that they could move forward rapidly enough to secure Vilna as a center of operations for the enveloping attack while Jerome's army switched from the defensive to the offensive in order to exert strong frontal pressure on the Second Army of the West [Bagration], preventing it from slipping away to the east beyond the grip of the Emperor."¹²⁴

This maneuver against Bagration relied on good communication between huge armies arrayed across hundreds of miles. Napoleon had to move against Vilna to split the two Russian armies, but could not do so until Eugene's army on Napoleon's left flank moved far enough forward to cover Napoleon's movement east to Vilna. Also, Jerome, whose army was deployed to the southwest of Bagration, would have to advance in coordination with Napoleon's movement.

Napoleon had already sent Murat's cavalry toward Vilna, but Eugene was lagging behind due to the poor mobility of his supply trains. Because of this, Napoleon had to "check the rate of advance of Murat... and at the

¹²¹Nafziger, p. 110.

¹²²Nafziger, p. 110.

¹²³Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 770.

¹²⁴Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, pp. 770-1.

same time retain Davout near the Niemen.”¹²⁵ To make matters worse, “there were few indications from the right flank to suggest that Jerome was making an effective advance from the Warsaw area to intercept Bagration.... Thus from the very outset of the campaign, lack of mobility and associated problems were threatening to ruin Napoleon’s brilliant strategic plan.”¹²⁶ War’s uncertain environment acted on Napoleon by forcing the unexpected—his transport columns slowed due to poor mobility across bad roads. This unanticipated event delayed Napoleon’s plan for trapping Bagration, but the opportunity for Napoleon to catch the Russian Second Army remained.

Chance intervened: “Next morning, the French staff enjoyed an apparent stroke of luck. Some Russian dispatches were intercepted revealing that the Tsar and the First Army were, in fact, still at Vilna, and that the town had been designated as the meeting point with Bagration’s converging forces.”¹²⁷ Napoleon still had time to trap the Russians. Eugene had finally arrived to cover Napoleon’s flank, and Napoleon ordered Murat’s cavalry to resume the march on Vilna on June 28. After a short artillery engagement, the Russians withdrew and the French triumphantly entered Vilna, but without achieving Napoleon’s goal of separating the Russian armies.¹²⁸

Barclay had managed to break contact with Murat’s cavalry, but on June 29 French reconnaissance located Docturov’s Russian infantry corps (part of Barclay’s army). On hearing this information, Napoleon initially thought that Docturov’s troops were from Bagration’s Second Army.¹²⁹ Later intelligence reports placed Bagration’s army at Ochmiana. Without reliable intelligence on Bagration’s whereabouts, Napoleon “was in effect being forced to wait upon events.”¹³⁰ Barclay, retreating northeast towards Svetsiani, could be contained, so Napoleon dispatched Murat, with two infantry divisions attached, to pursue Barclay’s First Army.

On July 1 Napoleon finally received reliable information that Bagration was again moving north to link with Barclay. Napoleon ordered Davout to move in three columns, one each against Bagration’s advance guard, main body, and rear guard. Jerome, who was now in Grodno, was also ordered to continue his advance to exert added pressure on Bagration’s rear, preventing him from turning south. Given these plans, Napoleon had arranged for “one hundred and ten thousand French troops”

¹²⁵Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 771.

¹²⁶Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 771.

¹²⁷Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 774.

¹²⁸Nafziger, p. 118.

¹²⁹Nafziger, p. 119.

¹³⁰Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 775.

to surround “a paltry 45,000 Russians; Bagration could hardly hope to escape.”¹³¹

On July 5, however, Jerome reported that he “had found no trace of the Russians at Ochmiana...and that Bagration seemed to be moving off toward Slonim and Minsk.”¹³² The French had moved too slowly in the south, allowing the Russians time and space to escape. Bagration headed south and rested at Nesvizh. Davout did not realize that the Russians had doubled back until July 8 when he entered Minsk—“all Davout’s marching has been in vain. Bagration has eluded him.”¹³³ Realizing the French armies’ positions and directions of march early on, Bagration used speed and stealth to his advantage in avoiding entrapment by Napoleon’s vastly superior forces. By the middle of July, “Napoleon was forced to admit that his first full-scale maneuver against Bagration, intended to destroy the left wing of the Russian army at one blow, had ended in complete failure.”¹³⁴ Despite Napoleon’s solid planning, probability, chance, and uncertainty intervened.

Initially, Napoleon could rationally deduce the Russians’ most likely course of action. He determined that Bagration would *probably* move north to link with Barclay. This is in fact what happened. However, imperfect information as to Bagration’s location and direction of movement plagued Napoleon’s decision-making. Without knowledge of where Bagration was before, is now, or will go in the future, Napoleon had to rely on his instincts and experience. Poor intelligence contributed to the uncertainty of the situation. Chance intervened by slowing Eugene’s supply columns, which in turn delayed the beginning of the French movement against Bagration, allowing him several precious days to maneuver without worrying about French harassment. However, chance also worked in Napoleon’s favor. The French were lucky to capture Russian dispatches that revealed Vilna as the link-up point between Barclay’s and Bagration’s forces. Unfortunately for Napoleon, he captured Vilna without engaging either Barclay or Bagration, and without driving a wedge between their two armies as he had hoped.

Napoleon’s maneuver against Vitebsk provides another example of Clausewitz’s third element. Having failed to isolate and engage Bagration, Napoleon next turned his attention to Barclay’s Russian First Army. Having abandoned Drissa, Barclay was now moving toward the Dvina. Now “Napoleon believed that Barclay would now make his way down the Orsha road to hasten the junction with his colleague [Bagration], and accordingly all units were ordered to concentrate at Kamen, ready to fight

¹³¹Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 776.

¹³²Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 776.

¹³³Paul Britten Austin. *1812: The March on Moscow* (London: Greenhill Books, 1993) p. 89.

¹³⁴Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 777.

the long-sought battle.”¹³⁵ In fact Barclay was moving to link with Bagration, but this rendezvous was intended to occur at Vitebsk, not Polotsk. Napoleon found that the Russians were not in Polotsk and moved to the next crossing point on the Dvina, Biechenkovski. Again he found that the Russians were not there. To Napoleon “nothing appeared certain.”¹³⁶ Napoleon “continued to hope for news that Murat had made contact with Barclay’s army as it moved towards the Dvina.... Somewhere a hundred thousand men were following their Tsar eastwards: where exactly they were, Napoleon had no idea.”¹³⁷ While Napoleon struggled to ascertain the situation, Barclay moved to Vitebsk, anticipating that they French would advance on Moscow using the main highway, and ordered Bagration to head northeast toward the highway.¹³⁸ During the middle of July, Barclay’s First Army concentrated around Vitebsk while the French frantically searched for them. Finally, “on July 25...less than thirty miles from Vitebsk, [Napoleon] learned what he most wanted to hear.”¹³⁹ Murat had found that the entire Russian First Army was encamped at Vitebsk.

Since Barclay’s entire command was concentrated around the city, Napoleon decided to delay an attack until he could consolidate his own forces. Napoleon did not want to squander this opportunity for battle by attacking prematurely with a small, tired force. On July 27, Napoleon “saw the Russian army drawn up in battle order, some 80,000 strong, he estimated, and deployed his own. As was his custom, he rested his troops that day in expectation of a major battle on the morrow.”¹⁴⁰ The next day, as the French advanced ready for battle, they discovered “Vitebsk in its turn evacuated by the elusive foe.”¹⁴¹ Barclay had abandoned the field during the night.

Napoleon’s delay had possibly cost him the decisive battle that he had sought from the beginning of the campaign. Although historians have highly criticized Napoleon for delaying his attack on Vitebsk, waiting for reinforcements was a prudent decision. Barclay’s army “had assumed a strong position in front of Vitebsk, the regional capital. The probability of a determined defense was high as a result. Napoleon assumed that they would feel their position was strong enough and their duty clear enough to warrant a serious defense.”¹⁴²

¹³⁵Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 778.

¹³⁶Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 778.

¹³⁷Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, pp. 55–6.

¹³⁸Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, p. 57.

¹³⁹Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, p. 61.

¹⁴⁰Nigel Nicolson. *Napoleon 1812* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985) p. 47.

¹⁴¹Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 779.

¹⁴²Nafziger, p. 179.

Again, poor information contributed to an uncertain picture of the situation in the French headquarters. Finally when Napoleon could ascertain the situation, he—prudently—delayed offering battle for one day. However, chance cheated him of his decisive battle. Napoleon could not have expected the Russians to evacuate the city during the night, especially since they had remained deployed in battle order. This unexpected move on Barclay's part preserved the Russian army and forced Napoleon to continue what had already become a much longer, more drawn-out campaign than had been anticipated.

A final example of uncertainty and chance in war is Napoleon's attempt to negotiate a peace settlement and Kutuzov's deception. In September, after capturing Moscow, Napoleon sent several letters entertaining the possibility of a negotiated settlement to the war. These were left unanswered by the Russians. Again in October Napoleon tried to make peace with the Russians. Napoleon was led to believe that the Russian soldiers wanted peace because he "was being deliberately lulled into a sense of false security, for Field-Marshal Kutuzov was determined to gain invaluable time before the next phase of the campaign should open."¹⁴³

To support this deception, "the Russians often stressed their desire for peace," but also "spread alarm among the French by emphasizing how far the army had come from its homeland and how grim the Russian winter could be."¹⁴⁴ The Russian advanced guard, made up mainly of Cossack cavalry, treated the French with respect and "lulled them into a tacit truce."¹⁴⁵ The Russians "showed great courtesy, especially so long as Murat was advancing in the wrong direction, away from Kutuzov's line of retreat."¹⁴⁶

At the beginning of October, Napoleon dispatched a formal delegation to Kutuzov, who "received Napoleon's representatives with every civility and deliberately encouraged the impression that the Russian soldiers wanted peace."¹⁴⁷ However, he did not allow the French delegation to continue on to St. Petersburg to receive an audience with the Tsar. Instead he sent the French delegation's letters along with one of his own, in which he "strongly advised the Tsar to avoid negotiation at all costs."¹⁴⁸ In his meeting with the French ambassador Lauriston, Kutuzov "could sense the discomfiture of the French in everything that Lauriston had to say."¹⁴⁹ Kutuzov realized that the French were suffering, and saw no reason why the Russians should allow them to escape with a settlement. The negotiations

¹⁴³Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 813.

¹⁴⁴Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, p. 167.

¹⁴⁵Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, p. 166.

¹⁴⁶Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, p. 167.

¹⁴⁷Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 814.

¹⁴⁸Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 814.

¹⁴⁹Palmer, *Napoleon in Russia*, p. 176.

did not produce any worthwhile results for the French, though Napoleon tried again by sending a second delegation in the middle of October.

Despite the failure of this second delegation, Napoleon refused to believe that the Tsar would refuse to make peace when a foreign army had marched across Russia and occupied Moscow. Napoleon's "enthusiasm was such, and so eager was he to nurture the illusions and hopes raised in his own mind, that he cherished the hope of receiving a reply from the Tsar, or at least negotiations for an armistice with Kutusof [sic]."¹⁵⁰ While "the overtures to Petersburg remained unanswered," Russian "Cossacks continued to harry the fringes of Moscow."¹⁵¹ While Napoleon waited for a peace that was not to come, Kutuzov had reorganized his army and prepared for the next stage of the campaign: "Every day that passed was allowing the advantage of the strategical situation to move more decidedly in the Tsar's favor. Kutuzov appreciated this and did all in his power to protract Napoleon's stay in Moscow, deliberately playing on his opponent's desire for peace."¹⁵² By the middle of October, Russian forces around Moscow outnumbered those of Napoleon's army. Kutuzov had been playing for time by deceiving Napoleon. By acting as if he wanted negotiations, Kutuzov fomented uncertainty. Napoleon did not know whether the Russians would accept peace or not—since Kutuzov seemed open to the possibility, Napoleon expended his efforts on achieving a settlement rather than preparing to continue the campaign. The French remained unsure whether peace was possible. By not eliminating the possibility of peace, Kutuzov gained more time to prepare the newly-reinforced Russian army.

For an entire month Kutuzov had succeeded in delaying Napoleon's stay in Moscow. Finally on October 20, Napoleon began his retreat. By chance, Kutuzov had selected October 20 to begin an attack which took Napoleon "completely by surprise."¹⁵³

Kutuzov's peace deception took advantage of an uncertain situation. He knew that the Russians required time to reorganize and prepare for future operations. He also knew that what Napoleon most wanted at the time was a negotiated peace. By playing up the possibility of negotiations, Kutuzov achieved his objective of gaining time because he knew that Napoleon was psychologically predisposed to view any attempt at negotiation with optimism and enthusiasm. Kutuzov created uncertainty in the situation and leveraged that uncertainty to his advantage. In this example, uncertainty interacted with Clausewitz's emotional and psychological element to produce the result that Kutuzov ultimately hoped to achieve and that Napoleon dreaded.

¹⁵⁰Caulaincourt, p. 145.

¹⁵¹Caulaincourt, p. 150.

¹⁵²Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 815.

¹⁵³Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, p. 819.

From these three selected examples—Bagration’s escape, the maneuver on Vitebsk, and Kutuzov’s peace deception—the effects of Clausewitz’s third trinitarian element of chance, probability, and uncertainty in war can be better understood. These few examples also highlight the interaction between the trinity’s three elements. Bagration’s escape and the maneuver on Vitebsk both portray the effects of chance and uncertainty on rationally-devised war plans. Kutuzov’s peace deception illuminates the psychological and emotional effects of uncertain situations on military leaders. The nature of war’s third element reveals the interconnectivity of the trinity because detailed planning, excellent communication systems, accurate intelligence, high morale and motivation, and a commander’s military genius must all contend with the play of chance, the possibility that the probable may or may not happen, and the uncertainty of rapidly changing situations and unknown circumstances.

Clausewitz’s Holistic Analysis of War

An understanding of war’s nature must incorporate a holistic examination of all three trinitarian elements as an integrated whole, not as three distinct, detached parts. As Peter Paret writes in *Clausewitz and the State*,

“an adequate theoretical understanding of war—one that did not fly in the face of reality—must incorporate all three of these elements. Theories that dealt only with the military aspects of the second—how planning, leadership, and effort might succeed in the uncertain business of defeating the enemy army—were inadequate, as were theories that interpreted war primarily as a political or psychological phenomenon.”¹⁵⁴

Clausewitz sought to approach the study of war in a comprehensive, integrated manner: “The tripartite definition of war alone made it possible for Clausewitz to advance from partial studies to a comprehensive and integrated analysis of war.”¹⁵⁵

His integrated, holistic approach to the nature of war marked a major intellectual advance in the conceptualization of war as a phenomenon. Through these insights, Clausewitz’s theory has enabled modern military professionals and scholars to examine war through this comprehensive, integrative method.

In this sense, Clausewitz’s work more closely resembles philosophy than history. Very few professional military studies specifically seek an understanding the nature of war as a phenomenon. Clausewitz was not the

¹⁵⁴Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 368.

¹⁵⁵Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 368.

first European to delve into the subject—for instance, Machiavelli highly influenced Clausewitz’s intellectual development—but *On War*, and especially the tripartite definition of the nature of war, has provided enduring philosophical insights that have stimulated the study of war more than any other Western study of war.

The Trinity in the 21st Century

Clausewitz integrated his philosophical analysis with historical examples in much the same way as this article has attempted to integrate philosophical and historical analysis. The utility of historical examples, in Clausewitz’s opinion, arises from the fact that “the knowledge basic to the art of war is empirical” and “is derived from the nature of things, this very nature is usually revealed to us only by experience.”¹⁵⁶ He then outlines four reasons for using historical examples, the first of which is that “a historical example may simply be used as an *explanation* of an idea. Abstract discussion, after all, is very easily misunderstood, if not understood at all.”¹⁵⁷

In this article the 1812 Russian campaign has been used as a historical example to more fully explain the subtleties and intricacies of Clausewitz’s trinitarian nature of war. As such, one hopes that the application of a historical example has illuminated the depth of each individual element integral to the trinity as well as the close relationships among each of the three parts. Through the lens of the 1812 campaign, historians and military scientists can better comprehend the Clausewitzian trinity as a tool to better understand warfare.

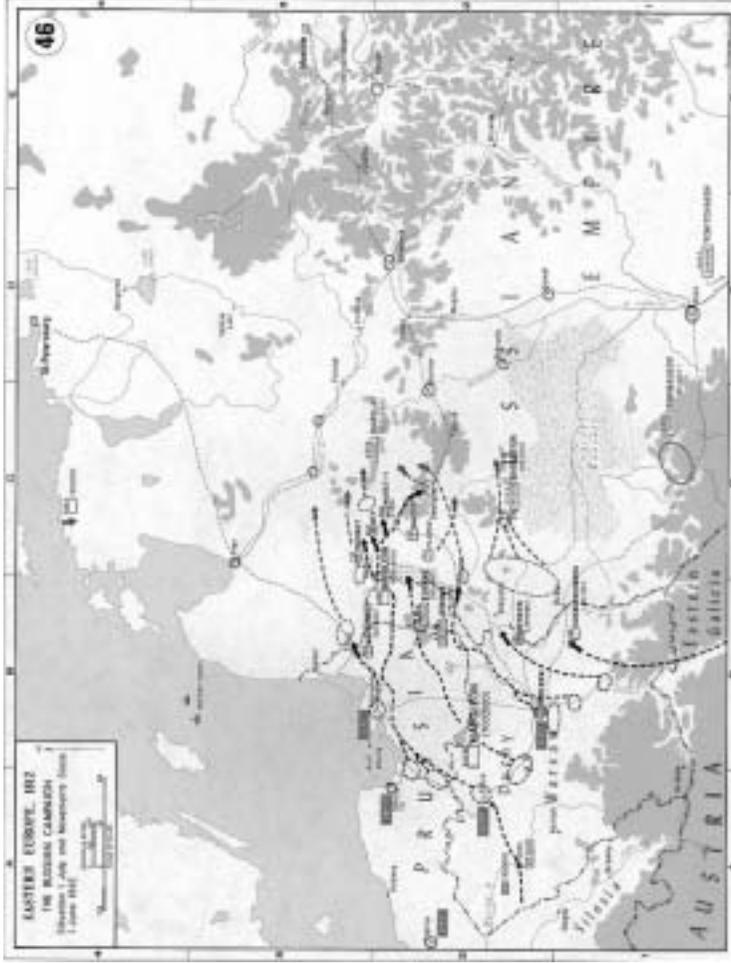
The increasing complexity of technological developments and their application to the art of war has channeled much of the study of military history and theory into a discussion of technological change and its influence on the art of war. Railroads, tanks, airplanes, submarines, nuclear weapons, cruise missiles, and computers have drastically altered the methods by which humans wage war on each other. The development of increasingly complex weapons systems and support structures has pulled the focus of military history away from the study of human social and cultural interactions.

However, 21st century global terrorism reminds us that war is fundamentally a human phenomenon, and that technology changes only how a war is fought, not the nature of war itself. War is a contest of competing wills and competing ideas. Ultimately, Clausewitz’s greatest contribution to the study of war has been his ability to articulate the essential human qualities that define the nature of war through his concept of the trinity.

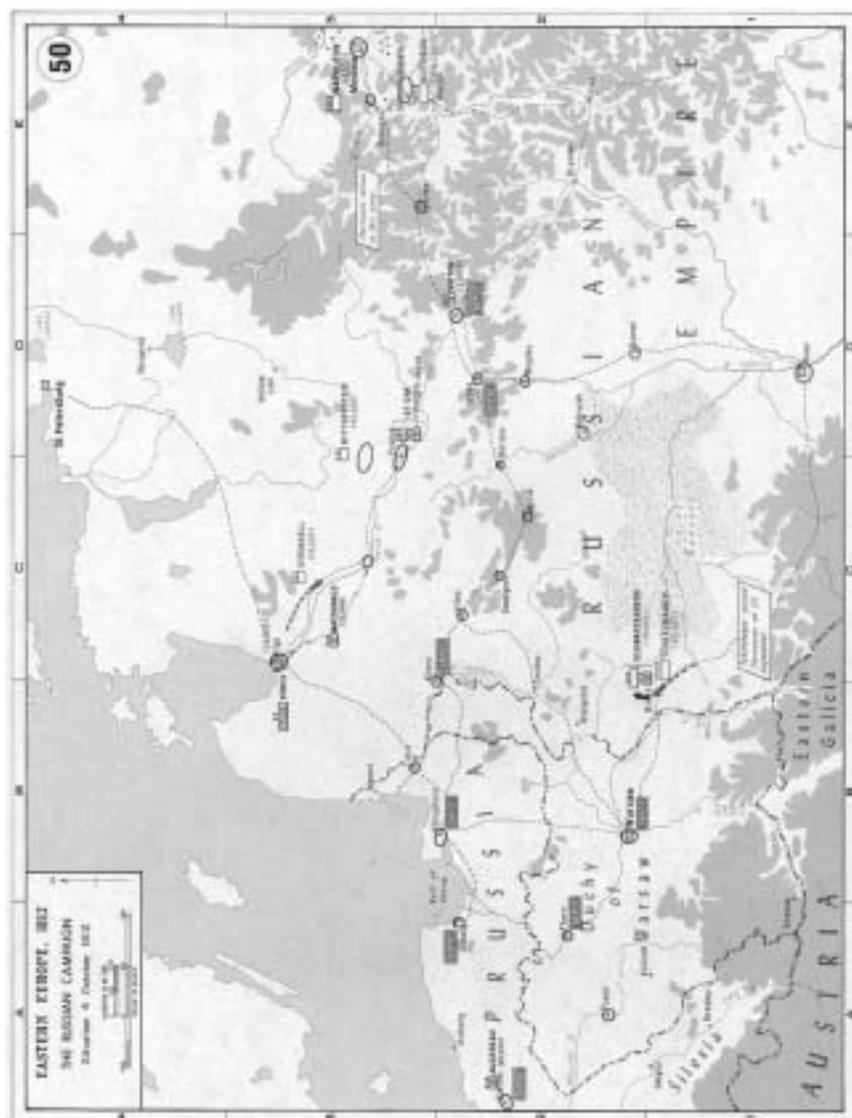
¹⁵⁶Clausewitz, p. 170.

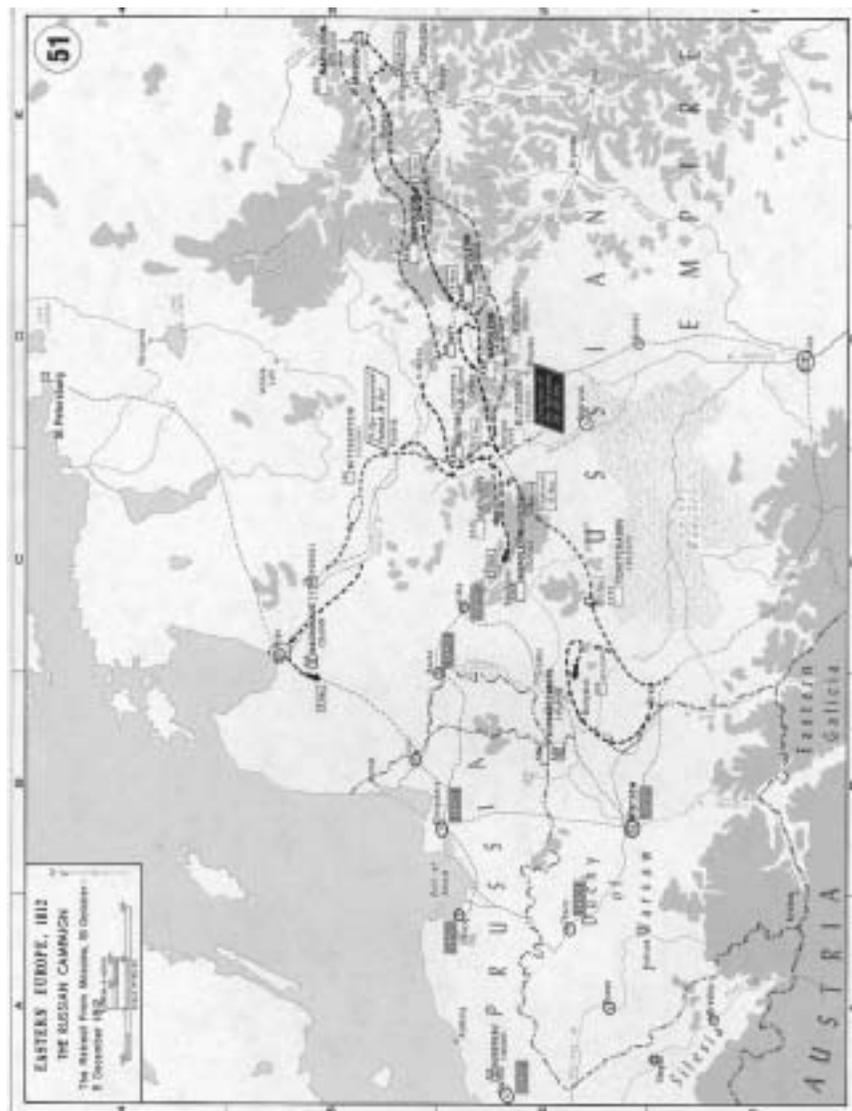
¹⁵⁷Clausewitz, p. 171.

APPENDIX: MAP¹⁵⁸



¹⁵⁸ All maps from the US Military Academy-West Point, Department of History website: <http://www.dean.usma.edu/departments/history/web03/atlas/napoleon/napoleon%20war%20index.htm>. 28 March 2005





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