

69. A HISTORY
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OF THE

INVASION OF RUSSIA

BY

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE.

FROM THE FRENCH OF EUGENE LABAUME,
CAPTAIN OF ENGINEERS DURING THE EXPEDITION.

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INTRODUCTION.

If any apology should be thought necessary in bringing out a new edition of so well known a work as "The History of the Invasion of Russia by Napoleon Bonaparte," it will be found in the extraordinary nature of the events narrated, and in the peculiar circumstances under which the relation was composed. It is, in fact, a daily record of all the material circumstances of an invasion which, in the gigantic magnitude of its preparations, and the unprovoked atrocity of the aggression, has been equalled only by the murderous inroads of a Jenghiz Khan or a Timour; whilst, for the miseries of the retreat, ancient and modern history may be ransacked in vain to find a parallel. Although these miseries were chiefly caused by the severe winter of the north, and the just vengeance of an excited nation, they were fearfully aggravated by the cruel and mistaken policy of the flying chief, who, with his first battalions, laid waste all the resources of the country which might in any way be made available by an army following in the same track; plundering and destroying every thing within his reach, and utterly regardless that by far the greatest amount of suffering thus inflicted fell on the remainder of his own army, who found death by misery, cold, and hunger, where they expected to receive food, shelter, and relief. The most moderate computation has brought the losses from this campaign to a third of a million; and though we cannot agree with our author in his opinion that these disasters will be easily forgotten, in the consideration that they have helped to procure the deliverance of Europe from the yoke of a tyrant, we cannot but look upon them as a just punishment inflicted by Providence upon a nation inordinately addicted to war, heedless of justice or mercy in the gratification of this darling passion, and always ready to

surrender her own inherent rights for the hope of plunder and aggrandizement, which she misnames glory.

The position of the writer, an Engineer Officer of the Italian Corps of Eugene Beauharnais, the Viceroy of Italy, gave him peculiar advantages in observing the operations of the whole army. His division was united to the main body whenever concentration of force was necessary, and at other times its duties as a corps of observation placed it in the most favourable situations for the purpose of a narrator. The writer himself was on occasion employed by Napoleon to survey the spots selected as fields of battle, and the plans made by him were made use of by the Emperor in the succeeding engagements. The greatest part of his work was written on the places where and at the times when the events described actually occurred; by the light of the flames of Moscow he described the conflagration and plunder of that devoted capital; on the frozen shores of the Beresina he traced the narrative of that fatal passage. The regular habit of consigning to paper the deeds of each day at its close, "surrounded by the dying and the dead," ensures a fidelity which no other account can boast; and this regularity was steadily maintained in spite of almost inconceivable difficulties. His own words present a vivid picture of these difficulties, and of his ardent resolution to vanquish them. "Compelled," he says, "to struggle with the most urgent necessities, penetrated with cold, tormented by hunger, and exposed to an accumulation of horrors; uncertain at the rising of the sun whether I should behold his setting rays, and doubtful at the close of one day whether I should witness the dawning of another, all my thoughts were concentrated in the desire of perpetuating the memory of what I saw. Animated by this irresistible feeling, I traced every evening the events of the past day, sitting by a miserable fire, and exposed to a cold of twenty degrees below the freezing point. I wrote with a raven's quill, formed into a pen by the knife with which I had carved my scanty meal of horseflesh, a little gunpowder mixed with melted snow, served me for ink, and my only inkstand was the hollow of my hand."

Under such circumstances a simple statement of facts can alone be expected; and where the facts are of such fearful interest, simplicity is more powerful than any attempt at eloquence could be. The passage of the Niemen, the Wop, and the Beresina, the burning of the sick and wounded in the crowded and miserable hospitals from which they were unable to escape, the cruel effect of the cold, more particularly on the Italians, so lately arrived from their own sunny clime, and the wretched condition of the many unhappy French women who accompanied the troops, are instances of this simplicity and of its effect on the feelings. The occasional bursts of indignation with which the writer speaks of the author of his sufferings, and of those of his comrades, may well be excused in one who while he wrote had these horrors palpably before him: although to us these feelings may be softened by long lapse of time and distance of scene; aided by the conviction that the "Great Emperor" was but an instrument in the hands of Providence, employed to further views, the full accomplishment of which may yet be distant.

The only liberties taken with the original in this edition is the omission of a few military details, being chiefly the marches of detached portions of the army, which add nothing to the interest of the narrative or information of the reader, and many of which in fact were omitted by the author himself in the later editions of his work.