1812 ON THE SCREEN

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The year 1812 has become synonymous with Napoleon's invasion of Russia, resulting in the battle of Borodino, the occupation of Moscow, and the disastrous winter retreat which followed. The popular conception of these tumultuous events has largely been determined by Tchaikovsky's '1812 Overture', and by Tolstoy's classic novel *War and Peace* — the latter adapted several times for the screen. In this article we review not only this best-known of fictional treatments, but also some of the more obscure and interesting films which have been based on the same events since the days of silent cinema.

Above:
Alexei Diky in Petrov's Kutuzov, *made in 1943 in obvious reference to Russia's ordeal under German invasion.*

THE CAMPAIGN

Before Napoleon's invasion of Russia he was at the height of his powers. The Treaty of Tilsit, 1807, spelled the end of the Fourth Coalition against him, and the start of an uneasy peace with Czar Alexander I of Russia. His sole enemy was Britain, whose one major force then in the field was still embroiled well south of the Pyrenees. But continuing trade between Britain and Russia, and Alexander's reluctance to act during the Franco-Austrian campaign of 1809 made conflict inevitable. On 24 June 1812 Napoleon's *Grande Armée* crossed the River Niemen into Russia some 500,000 strong.

Napoleon's attempts to bring about the decisive battle were continually frustrated by Russian withdrawals under Gen. Barclay de Tolly, though the French quickly captured Vitebsk and Smolensk and pushed on toward Moscow. The Russians, now under Marshal Kutuzov, fell back to a position near the village of Borodino some 70 miles west of Moscow and astride the only possible axis of advance. The pivotal point of the Russian defences was the Great (or 'Ravicsky') Redoubt, a semi-circular earthwork mounting some 20 guns, protected by a deep ditch. The battle of 7 September was an appalling killing-match which cost some 70,000 lives, and neither army was capable of renewing the contest on the following day. The Russians retreated eastwards, leaving the French an open road to Moscow.

Napoleon was to stay there only five weeks. Fire-raisers burnt many of the city's wooden buildings to the ground; the hoped-for provisions were nowhere to be found; and Napoleon's lines of communication were under constant harassing attack. The French withdrawal began in an orderly fashion on 19 October; but the combined forces of Kutuzov and 'general winter' bled the *Grande Armée* to death. Of the half-million men who had so confidently marched into Russia, only some 20,000 ever recrossed the Niemen into Poland.

EARLY RUSSIAN FILMS

Cinema in Russia flourished for a full ten years before the Revolution. Initially it was dominated by foreign companies who set up their own production facilities. Historical subjects and costume epics were popular.

The first film about the 1812 campaign was Vasili Goncharov's *Napoleon in Russia* (1910), produced under the auspices of the French Gaumont Company. The next attempt was produced by Alexander Khanzhonkov, a retired Cossack officer and nobleman turned film manufacturer. He enlisted the financial support and world-wide distribution facilities of the Pathé Frères company to make *The Year 1812* (1912), to coincide with the centenary. It was directed by A. Uralsky and Kai Hansen, who recreated many scenes based upon Vereschagin's campaign paintings. For scenes of the retreat, wolves were trained to attack dummies dressed as French troops and stuffed with raw meat! The film was given a simultaneous premiere in cities all over Russia on 25 August 1912.

During the years immediately after 1917 Russian cinema was pre-occupied with revolutionary themes. However, another cycle of historical films began in the late 1930s, and continued throughout the Second World War. By the time Vladimir Petrov made *Kutuzov* (1943) the Wehrmacht was on the retreat, but still occupying vast tracts of the Motherland; the film was made under the most difficult circumstances, being one of the first to be made after the Mosfilm company returned to their war-damaged studios in Moscow.

In the film, Kutuzov (Alexei Diky) is called to replace Barclay de Tolly, who is regarded as a foreigner by virtue of his Scottish ancestry. The film shows how Kutuzov retreats before Napoleon until the moment comes to defeat the invading army and ruin it as it retreats. Obviously, the film was conceived to present a strong analogy with contemporary events: Kutuzov represented Stalin, and Borodino, Stalingrad. Vasili Solovyov's script departed from the traditional view of Kutuzov as lethargic and fatalistic: he was portrayed as energetic and strong-willed, giving precise orders, and in complete control at Borodino.

'WAR AND PEACE'

The campaign is probably best known as providing the main historical backdrop to Tolstoy's monumental novel. The story concerns four aristocratic Russian families between 1805 and 1812, with an epilogue set some years later. The prin-

cipal character is Pierre Bezukov, whose spiritual odyssey doubtless reflected Tolstoy's own. Other main characters include Pierre's friend Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, who is fatally wounded at Borodino; and Natasha Rostova, the girl they both love.

Tolstoy was able to draw upon his own experiences when describing the behaviour of men in battle. He enlisted in 1851 as an army cadet, and saw service in the Caucasus, where he heard stories told by Cossacks who had participated in the war against Napoleon. During the Crimean War Tolstoy was a lieutenant of artillery, and was present at the defence of Sebastopol throughout the winter of 1854-55 and the following summer.

The first two films based on the novel were made simultaneously in Russia in 1915. One, produced by Khanzhonkov and directed by Pyotr Chardykin, was based on a stage version entitled *Natasha Rostova*. The other, directed by Yakov Protzanov and Vladimir Gardin (who also played Napoleon), was a ten-reel version in two parts, hastily filmed in 12 days to beat its rival into the cinemas!

It was the Italian producer Dino de Laurentiis who provided the first significant film version, which was directed by King Vidor in 1956. It starred several well-known Hollywood actors, and the Italian army as extras. Condensing the novel into less than four hours' screen time inevitably gave the film the air of a synopsis, and failed to flesh out the novel's complex characterisations. However, Henry Fonda gave an intelligent performance as Pierre; Mel Ferrer was a rather wooden Andrei, and Audrey Hepburn managed the difficult task of conveying Natasha's maturing from girl to adult.

In the book Tolstoy describes Borodino from the viewpoints of four main characters. He describes the close-quarter experiences of Pierre, who observes the battle from the Great Redoubt, and of Prince Andrei, whose regiment is in the reserve. By contrast, Napoleon and Kutuzov are too remote from the action to have a significant influence on the course of events once battle has been joined.

In the 1956 film the battle is represented by one spectacular scene in which Pierre wanders up to the Great Redoubt in order to observe the fighting. A massive column of French infantry advances up the hill towards the redoubt, preceded by a line of skirmishers. The Russians counter by sending some infantry to support their guns. They hold their fire until the French are within musket range; then artillery and infantry fire together, sending the French reeling back in headlong retreat. Napoleon (Herbert Lom), watching the progress of the battle from a chair with a drum at his feet, impassively orders a cavalry attack. Line upon line of horsemen, with blue cloaks streaming (anachronistically) behind them, charge up the hill through their own infantry and take the redoubt. As in the novel, Pierre offers to help bring up more ammunition, only to be knocked off his feet when a caisson explodes. Andrei, whose reserve regiment has sustained casualties from French artillery fire, is mortally wounded by a shell which bursts a few feet away.

The sequence is impressive enough by Hollywood standards, but hardly conveys either tactical realities or the true ferocity of the battle. In fact the redoubt changed hands several times. The film shows it at the top of far too steep a slope; and the cavalry charge covers a ludicrously long distance.

BONDARCHUK'S MASTERPIECE

As spectacular as this film is, it pales in comparison with the mighty Russian version *Voirna I Mir* (1962-67) produced, directed and written by Sergei Bondarchuk. An experienced actor, Bondarchuk cast himself as Pierre and gave a most convincing performance, aided by the advantage of physically resembling Tolstoy's description of the character. Bondarchuk's own wife, the actress Irinia Skobtseva, played Helene, the statuesque beauty to whom Pierre is unhappily married until released by her death. The then-unknown Ludmilla Savelyeva was a most delightful Natasha.

The statistics of the production were staggering: 160 cannon and 120 waggons were used, and for the Borodino sequence alone the Red Army provided four infantry and two cavalry divisions. Soldiers impersonating Russian and French troops were drilled to march at 75 and 120 steps per minute respectively; and the changes of uniform which took place between 1805 and 1812 were duly duplicated.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to comment on the full-length Russian version, which ran to some nine hours overall and was released as four separate films. A shorter version for release in the West was prepared originally by Bondarchuk; but the American distributors cut the film further, re-edited some sequences, and added intrusive American dubbing. The version televised some years ago by the BBC is the subtitled export version, which is longer, but still far from complete.

The third part, called *1812*, opens with Napoleon on a hilltop, watching his army advance into Russia. This is contrasted with the Russian court enjoying a ball in St. Petersburg, and their reactions to news of the invasion. Kutuzov, veteran of many wars, is made field-marshal in spite of the fact that his eyesight is failing. He is not a popular choice. Later scenes show the panic-stricken Russian retreat through Smolensk.

A retreat scene from King Vidor's 1956 War and Peace*; the teenage Italian conscripts in their studio uniforms do not look particularly convincing, but it is hardly fair to enlarge a crowd scene from the 1950s and compare it with such loving modern re-creations as Scott's* The Duellists.

A magnificent scene from the 1962-67 Bondarchuk War and Peace*; for the battle sequences the Soviet Army provided no less than four infantry and two cavalry divisions.*

The Borodino sequence could not be filmed at the historical site because of the numerous monuments to the Russian heroes of the battle. Similar hillsides around the small town of Dorogbuzh near Smolensk were used instead; and in the pursuit of accuracy, a field in front of the line of fortifications was even changed from a beanfield to a wheatfield.

In the film, Pierre arrives at the Russian encampment on the day before the battle. He sees the stream of wounded from the previous day's fighting at Shevardino, a knoll which had formed part of the Russian left wing but which was to be Napoleon's vantage point during the battle. Thousands of peasants are toiling to build the earthworks; and columns of soldiers form a religious procession, headed by the sacred icon of the Holy Virgin of Smolensk from the church at Borodino.

On the screen, thousands of soldiers march across the battlefield, cavalry units charge, and scores of cannon fire in rapid succession. Sometimes the camera gives panoramic views of the slaughter, sometimes close-ups of individual faces, and sometimes it even appears to glide through the chaos. Much of the overall visual effect of the battle scene was based upon the Borodino Panorama painted by F. Rubo, which hangs in Moscow. The effort poured into this sequence was well justified, and produced what must be the most spectacular battle scene ever put on film.

Bondarchuk opted for an impressionistic battle scene rather than a clear sequence of events. The version screened in this country uses many split-screens and super-impositions, and led some critics to accuse Bondarchuk of unnecessary use of avant-garde techniques. The truth is that these were inserted by the American organisation which distributed the film, as part of its efforts to cut running time still further. However, certain key elements of the battle can be discerned.

Napoleon ignores his generals' pleading to release more reserves to ensure a decisive victory. The Russian Prince Bagration is mortally wounded while leading a cavalry charge. We see the hand-to-hand fighting in and around the Great Redoubt, the arrow-shaped earthworks called *fleches*, and the ruined village of Semyenouskoye.

Throughout Bondarchuk's epic the particular character of Russian society, as reflected in the relationships between soldiers of every rank, is captured with great conviction — a fascinating bonus for Western viewers, which was quite absent from the Hollywood version.

Both Vidor's and Bondarchuk's versions portray the occupation of a virtually deserted Moscow, and the subsequent burning of the city. Pierre is wrongly arrested as a fire-raiser and narrowly escapes execution. The fire in the Russian version is particularly awesome: the camera at times appears to glide over the heads of the thousands of soldiers in the streets, and even through burning buildings; the air is filled with a black storm of wind-blown ashes.

Both versions well convey the retreat from Moscow. Vidor's film shows troops leaving the city in orderly columns which gradually disintegrate as chill autumn winds turn first to rain, and then to blinding blizzard; the roads are churned into mud, before disappearing under the snow. Bondarchuk's version accurately shows the columns passing by human skeletons still unburied on the Borodino battlefield. A guerrilla raid led by Davidov — whom Tolstoy modelled on Col. David Denisov — results in the rescue of Pierre, but the death of Natasha's brother Petya. The French suffer terribly from the cold, but the Russian pursuers seem to be able to maintain a neatness of appearance which must be regarded as poetic licence.

The military aspects of the novel end at Vilna, when Kutuzov orders the captured standards to be laid at Alexander's feet. Bondarchuk's version shows exhausted French soldiers surrendering *en masse*, and the lowering of their flags before a triumphant Kutuzov. The Vidor version continues the story further by portraying the crossing of the River Beresina, an event which took place on 25-28 November but which is hardly mentioned in the novel. Thousands of French are seen crossing a hastily-built pontoon bridge. The Russians move up artillery on sleds and succeed in blowing away part of the bridge, sending many soldiers to their deaths in the fast, freezing waters and trapping much of the French army on the eastern bank.

In Bondarchuk's film it is Napoleon, rather than the French soldier, who is the real enemy. Pierre saves the life of a Capt. Ramballe of the 13th Light Brigade in Moscow, Ramballe, portrayed as a likeable character, is later captured during the retreat. In contrast, Napoleon is seen to be responsible for the invasion, 'an event contrary to all human reason and nature'. (Unsurprisingly, the fact that Czar Alexander had contemplated invading France the previous year is not alluded to.)

BAGRATION, THE POLES, and MARSHAL YORCK

In Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* the part of Bagration — complete with his strange fleece cap — was played by Giuli Chokhonelidze, an appropriate choice in that both general and actor came from Georgia. Twenty years later Chokhonelidze was able to fulfill an ambition to star in a film solely devoted to his hero. The result was *Bagration* (1984), a Mosfilm/Gruziafilm production co-directed by Chokhonelidze and fellow Georgian Karaman Mgheladze.

The first part begins with the wounded Bagration thinking back over his past life, and in particular the events leading up to Borodino. Considerable time is given to the complex political relations between Russia and France prior to 1812, and to the fierce arguments between Bagration and Barclay de Tolly over the strategy to be adopted against the invaders. The sequences depicting the burning of Smolensk and the battle of Borodino are most impressive, skilfully combining stock footage from the Bondarchuk film with newly shot material.

The second part deals with the desperate fight to save the hero's life. Fragments of metal are removed from his leg during a grisly operation; but his spirits are raised by the sight of his favourite white horse, and by memories evoked by a sword presented to him by the revered Gen. Suvorov. When news arrives of the fall of Moscow the distraught Bagration dons his uniform for the last time in the hope of rejoining the fight; he collapses and dies, the victim of an infection beyond the powers of his doctors.

The retreat from Moscow has featured in many other films, although usually very briefly. Ridley Scott's *The Duellists* (1977) — something of a cult among Napoleonic enthusiasts for its careful reconstruction of the changing appearance of French cavalry over 15 years — was based on Jack London's novella which was itself originally published as *The Point of Honour*. It concerns a series of duels between two hussar officers in Napoleon's army. Harvey Keitel plays Gilbert Feraud, a dedicated Bonapartist who continues to challenge Armand d'Hubert (David Carradine), ostensibly over his suspected lack of commitment to the Emperor. The story spans the years 1801 to 1816, during which time they are both promoted from lieutenants to generals. The duels take place during lulls between a number of campaigns; but there is a sequence set during the Russian retreat — shot near Aviemore in Scotland — when for once the two characters help, rather than fight one another by beating off Cossacks. The art direction of *The Duellists* attracted particular praise. Most of the ironies of the original story are lost; but the duels are vividly portrayed, and the film boasts some striking location photography in the Dordogne.

When considering this campaign, some mention should be made of Woody Allen's *Love and Death* (1975), a lampoon on Russian film directors such as Eisenstein and authors such as Dostoyevsky, Chekov and Tolstoy. Though Woody's world is inhabited by all sorts of wild incongruities and 20th-century allusions, the battle scenes are not unspectacular, this time using the resources of the Hungarian army.

Most films set in 1812 give little indication of the cosmopolitan nature of the *Grande Armée*, which included Italians, Swiss, Poles, Danes, Dutch, Portuguese, Spaniards, and representatives of several German states. Andrez Wajda's *Popioly* — 'Ashes' (1965) was based on the novel by Stephan Zeromski, and concerned the plight of the Poles who fought for Napoleon. Their hope was the re-creation of a Poland united from the fragments divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria

The re-creation of the bridge over the Beresina for Vidor's War and Peace, *which extended the scope of the story beyond Tolstoy's original in this respect, giving the film one of its most impressive sequences.*

Convincing costume was a strength of Ridley Scott's The Duellists, *and in the retreat from Moscow segment Harvey Keitel — with David Carradine, background — wears an accurate mixture of French, Russian and improvised gear.*

Below:
Werner Krauss — second from left — in the title rôle in Hans Muller's Yorck *(1931).*

in the late 18th century.

The film has scenes set during Napoleon's early campaigns in Italy, the Peninsular War and the Franco-Austrian campaign of 1809; and the final sequences feature the retreat from Moscow. Napoleon's sleigh, drawn by three splendid horses, speeds along in complete silence past abandoned cannon, thousands of corpses, and frost-bitten cripples dressed in tattered remnants of their once resplendent uniforms. A snow-blinded Polish officer rises from the ground and stretches out his hand as if for help: the Emperor does not appear to notice him, and he is left alone. Certainly, Wajda was true to the spirit of the novel by showing history as cruel and squalid rather than glamorous; but in doing so he became the centre of controversy because of the implications it held for the present day. Those in Poland who thought that by 1965 the country had reached some kind of political maturity attacked the film, while those discontented with Poland's recent history defended it.

As Napoleon retreated into Poland the Prussians defected, turning against the French whose occupation of their homeland had turned them into reluctant allies. The process by which Prussia's resurgence began was explained in Hans Muller's German film *Yorck* (1931). The film shows how King Frederick Wilhelm III agreed to send Prussian troops to aid Napoleon's invasion of Russia, and how this caused a split in the Prussian officer corps. A Prussian contingent led by Field-Marshal Yorck (Werner Kraus) forms part of Macdonald's corps which advances into Russia to the north of the main body of the *Grande Armée*. During the retreat they become aware of Napoleon's famous 29th Bulletin of the Army, issued at Molodetchna on 3 December 1812, which described the army's demoralised state. Yorck meets the Russian Gen. Diebitsch-Zabolkonsky, leading to the Convention of Tauroggen of 30 December, whereby the Prussians agreed to remain neutral for two months. This was finally ratified at the Convention of Kalisch on 28 February 1813, by whose terms the Prussians formally joined the Sixth Coalition against Napoleon.

Austria, Sweden, and a number of German states joined the Coalition. Napoleon retreated through Poland into Germany; and after the battle of Leipzig, 16–18 October 1813, the combined Russian, Prussian and Austrian armies forced the French back across the Rhine. For a second year in succession Napoleon had lost almost half a million men. In spite of a well-conducted campaign he could not prevent the Allied forces occupying Paris, leading to the First Abdication of 6 April 1814.

It is not difficult to understand why the 1813-14 campaigns have been ignored in films. For the French the story is one of prolonged and humiliating national defeat. For the Russians, including Tolstoy, interest faded once the French had been driven from the actual soil of the Motherland. Although it was the biggest battle of the Napoleonic Wars in terms of numbers, the three-day struggle around Leipzig was too inconclusive and confusing to provide a climax appropriate for an epic screen production. It is not until Napoleon's return from Elba and the dramatic events of the 'Hundred Days' that history once again provides inspiration to film-makers; and Waterloo is the most filmed, as well as the most chronicled, of all the battles of the Napoleonic Wars. MI