

# 1

## Napoleon's Russian campaign

Napoleon's march to Moskva (Moscow) was only one of the many campaigns he executed as part of his strategy to expand, control, and sustain his French Empire. With this objective in mind, he changed alliances regularly—with the exception of Britain, which remained his archenemy and an obstacle to his ambition. Britain's defeat eluded him. He knew that he could not take the island country by force because, while France ruled the continent, Britain ruled the seas. In a political effort to defeat his adversary, Napoleon established the Continental System blockade in 1806. He hoped that the new political order it created would defeat Britain economically by halting all of its commerce with the French empire and its allies.

With the peace treaty of Tilsit (now Sovetsk) in July 1807, Napoleon reached his zenith. The event provides an example of the changing alliances that Napoleonic expansion prompted. After the battle of Friedland (now Pravdinsk), a short distance south of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), Prussia lost much of its territory to the new Duchy of Poland and both states effectively became vassals of France. Russia, which fought on Prussia's side against France, had to agree to join Napoleon's Continental System, which effectively made it a French ally. This new relationship proved shaky, however, because Napoleon and the Russian ruler, Tsar Alexander, remained suspicious of one another. The cession of large parts of Galicia to Poland in 1810, for example, worried the Tsar, as did the French emperor's annexation of Holland and large parts of northwest Germany, including Oldenburg, whose duke, a brother-in-law of the Tsar, had been expelled. At the same time, Napoleon married the daughter of the Austrian emperor, establishing another new alliance that worried the Russian

monarch. Napoleon accused Alexander of breaking the Continental System, which created diplomatic tension between the two states.

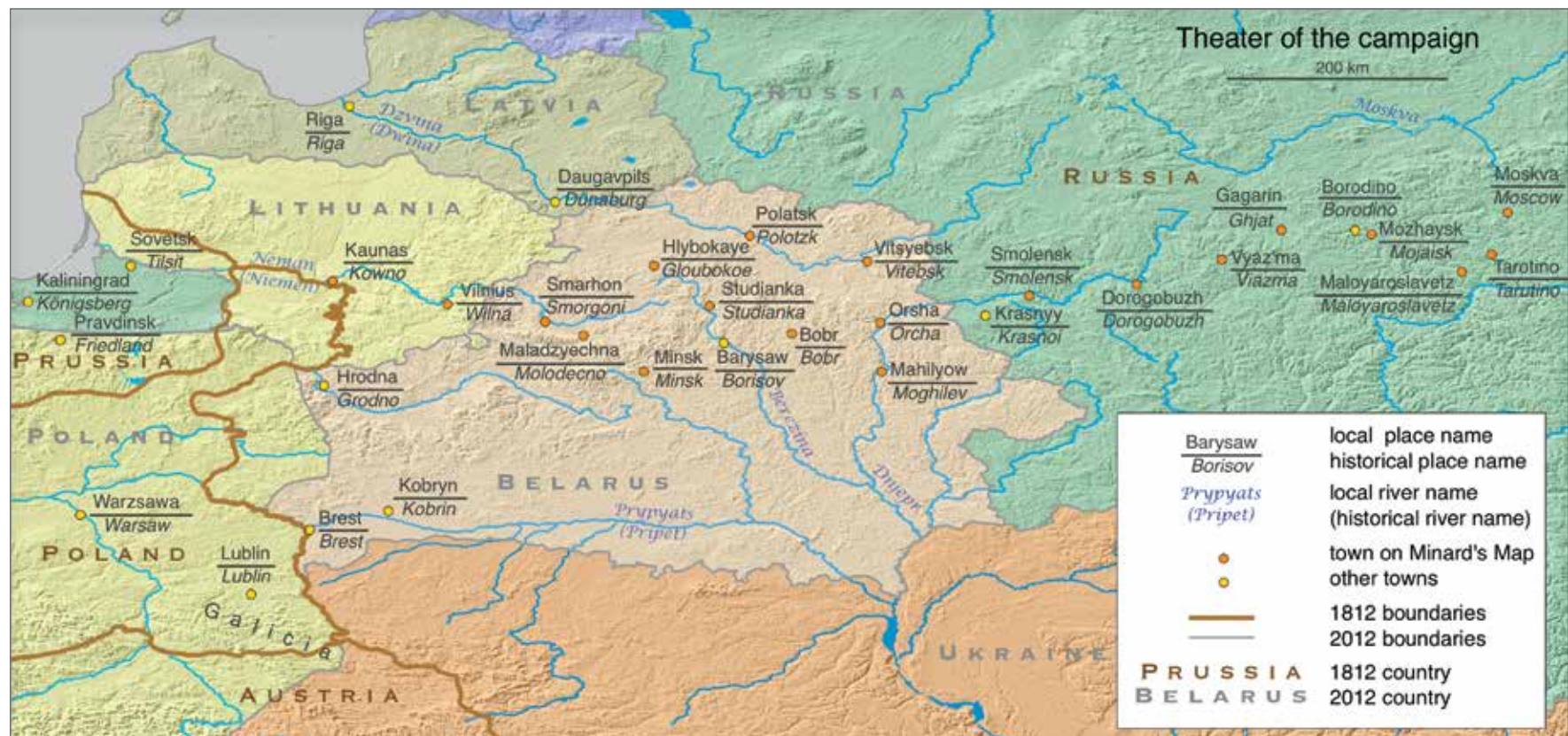
Preparations for war in both Russia and France began in 1810. The Russians seem to have been divided on how and where to defend against the expected invasion. Napoleon had to prepare the largest logistical operation of his military career. In order to attack Russia, the French military would have to supply over 500,000 soldiers and more than 100,000 animals, mostly horses and oxen.

Napoleon began to concentrate his armies in Eastern Europe and amass supplies in cities like Danzig (now Gdansk). He also undertook a study of earlier invasions of Russia, like the one led by the Swedish king Charles VII in 1708.

Figure 1-1 compares the political situation in the territory affected by Napoleon's Russian campaign between 1812 and 2012. It also highlights the area's historical and current place names. Figure 1-2 shows one of the first maps devoted to Napoleon's Russian campaign.

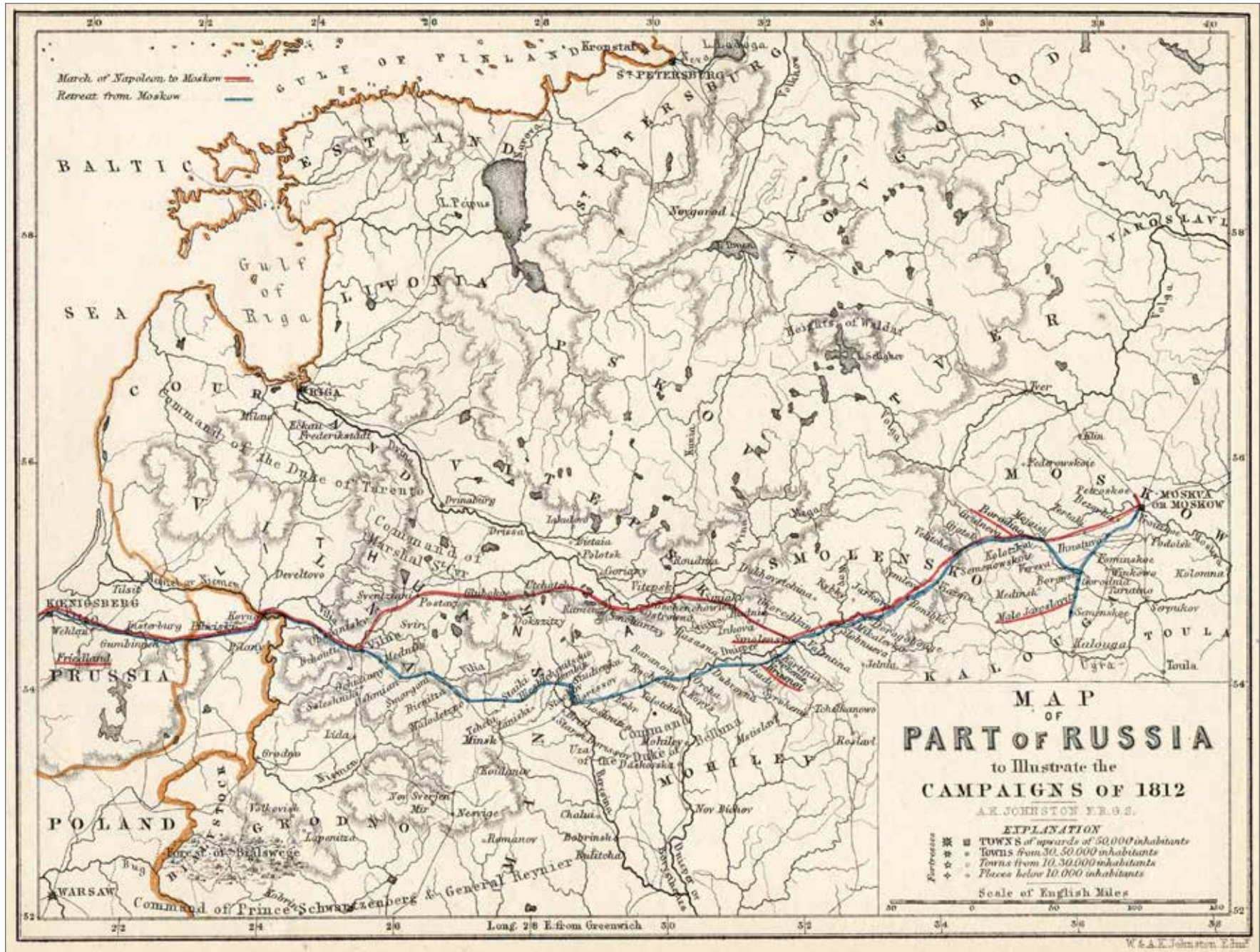
Napoleon recruited soldiers from all parts of the European continent, as figure 1-3 shows. The conscript system enlisted men from France and its incorporated territories, while the Continental System obligated allied nations to supply troops from elsewhere in Europe. Historians do not fully agree upon the sizes of both armies.

**Figure 1-1.** The theater of war. The land between Poland and Moskva showing past and current boundaries.



Estimates vary, depending on whether one counts only fighting units, or includes supporting units as well. Commanders expected organizational units to possess a certain number of soldiers; however, they could not be sure whether these units ever attained their theoretical strength. Estimating strength grew even more difficult as the campaign progressed, and the army suffered losses from battle, desertion, and disease. (The statistics used in this book represent averages of many figures cited from diverse sources. Adam Zamoyski's book

Figure 1-2. Napoleon's 1812 campaign. This may be the first published map to trace the routes taken by Napoleon's army during its march to Moskva and retreat.

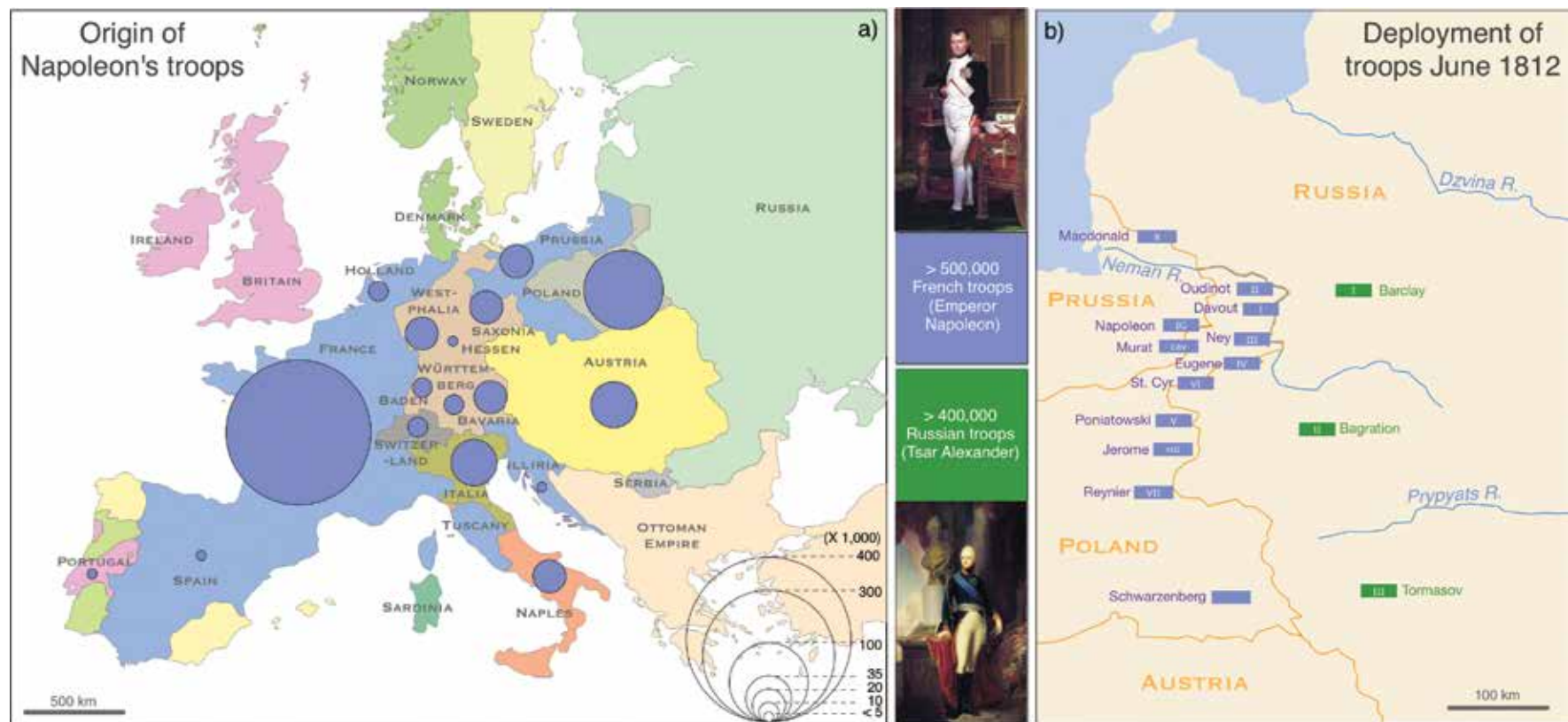


1812 [2004] and the books of Digby Smith [2002, 2004] provided guidance in understanding them.)

Napoleon organized the French army into different corps. He commanded the main body— 180,000 strong— which consisted of his Imperial Guard, I, II, and III Corps and I and II Cavalry Corps. His stepson, Eugène de Beauharnais, who commanded the 85,000 soldiers of IV and VI Corps and III Cavalry Corps, supported the French emperor from the south. Together, they opposed the main Russian army—105,000 strong—under Field Marshal Mikhail Barclay de Tolly. To the north, the 32,000 soldiers that comprised X Corps faced the 10,000 Russian soldiers in the Riga Corps, whose numbers were strengthened by troops from Finland. Napoleon’s brother Jerome commanded the V, VII, and VIII Corps and the VI Cavalry Corps, 75,000 in all, which marched against the Second Russian Army (which numbered 48,000) under General Pyotr Bagration. Farther south, 50,000 Austrians soldiers under General Karl Schwarzenberg faced the 45,000-strong Third Russian Army under General Aleksandr Petrovich Tormasov.

**Figure 1-3.** At the brink of war. The origin of Napoleon’s troops (figure 1-3a) and the situation at the front in June 1812 (figure 1-3b). The center displays portraits of Napoleon (top) and Alexander (bottom).

The landscape of the 1812 campaign appears unspectacular. It consisted mainly of undulating terrain divided by rivers like the Dzvina in campaign territory’s north, the Dnjepr and Berezina in the



center, and Prypyats in the south. However, while the land leading to Moskva posed few obstacles, the land to the north was largely forested, and the land to the south contained many lakes and swamps. Moreover, Russia possessed a lower population density, so living off the land would prove to be much more difficult than anything the French army had ever experienced during earlier campaigns in Western and Central Europe. Napoleon invaded when the Russian grain harvest was not yet ready so the military's animals were not properly fed, causing illness and death. Inside Russia, he discovered that the country's infrastructure was poorly developed. The forests allowed few roads and the swamps proved difficult to pass. The rivers usually posed minor obstacles, except during the wet season when they became difficult to cross. When the rains fell, the roads became nearly impassable, especially for the heavy supply trains. And then there was the weather. Russia's climate, with its extreme heat and cold, savaged armies. During their campaign, Napoleon's troops had to deal with all these extremes, although the severe cold did not descend on the land until early November. Most weather-related casualties manifested in diseases like typhoid.

On June 24, Napoleon and his main army crossed the Neman River between Hrodna and Kaunas (in modern-day Lithuania). Four days later, they reached Vilnius. Marshal Jacques MacDonald's X Corps covered the invasion force's northern flank from Tilsit, while Schwarzenberg's Austrian force covered the southern flank from Lublin. This move split the Russian First Army from the Second Army. However, Jerome failed to pursue the Second Army and destroy them, so Bagration and his men escaped (prompting Napoleon to send Jerome home). Even at this early stage, problems created by heat and poor supply plagued the French army.

After a two-week stay, Napoleon left the town of Vilnius on July 16 to pursue Barclay de Tolly's First Russian army, which was marching toward Vitsyebsk, on the River Dzvina. The Russians continually withdrew to avoid battle, partly because Barclay feared that he would be cut off by the French southern troops already stationed in Minsk. On July 28, after only a few skirmishes, Napoleon entered Vitsyebsk. His troops were exhausted and hungry. The size of the core army had already fallen by almost a quarter—to 150,000 men—with only a few casualties due to contact with the enemy. Several corps under Marshals Gouvion St. Cyr and Nicolas Oudinot battled General Peter Wittgenstein's divisions along the Dzvina River, near Polatzk. Here they more or less remained until the end of October. MacDonald pressed ahead, occupied several cities along the western Dzvina, and laid siege to Riga. Meanwhile, the Russian Second Army

was chased by the corps of Marshals Louis Davout, Michel Ney, and others who moved via Minsk to Mahilyow, at the River Dnjepr. By the end of July, the Russians counted only 70,000 troops. Crossing the river and turning north in the direction of Smolensk, they fled, and on August 3 joined the Russian First Army. To the south, the Austrians attacked the Third Army and advanced to Kobryn.

The French sojourned in Vitsyebesk in order to top-up supplies, rest troops, and restore communications between units. Napoleon and 180,000 soldiers left Vitsyebesk on August 13 and marched toward Smolensk, where the Russian army had amassed 120,000 soldiers in its defense. Between August 16 and 18, the two armies clashed near the fortified city, on both banks of the Dnjepr River. The Battle of Smolensk cost the lives of more than 20,000 soldiers on both sides. In the end, the Russians retreated farther east, denying Napoleon the decisive battle he sought. The French cavalry under Marshal Joachim Murat harassed the Russian rear guard as the main army marched toward Moskva. By then, most Russian leaders had grown dissatisfied with Barclay's tactics. At the end of August as Napoleon pressed east, Emperor Alexander replaced him with Mikhail Kutuzov, a veteran general, who made a stand at Borodino near Moskva. On September 7, 120,000 Russians clashed with 130,000 French in the largest battle of the war. After two days of battle, the Russians lost over 40,000 men and the French over 28,000 men. As a result, the Russians fell back, quitting Moskva, burning the city, and evacuating its inhabitants in the process.

Napoleon entered Moskva on September 14. The Russians set up camp east of Moskva, near Tarotino, and began to reinforce their army with new recruits and supplies. Napoleon waited, hoping the Russians would agree to make peace; after all, he now occupied their capital. However, the Russians proved unwilling to negotiate until invaders left their soil. Napoleon now faced a difficult decision. Sitting in a half-burned city without sufficient supplies, organization was breaking down within the army. He considered his options. He could stay for the winter, march northwest toward St. Petersburg, or pursue a southern route through areas not yet destroyed by the war. This decision grew more difficult when news came that the Russians had ended their wars with Sweden in the north and Turkey in the south. Russian units could now march against MacDonald in the northwest and Schwarzenberg in the southwest. Hostilities had already erupted again near Polatsk, where Wittgenstein attacked St. Cyr in order to stop the advance toward St. Petersburg. The French did receive reinforcements through Marshal Claude Victor's IX Corps, which marched 30,000 men from Poland to Smolensk. However, Napoleon apparently

regarded this as too little to secure his position, because he decided to order a southwesterly retreat.

On October 19, Napoleon left Moskva with just over 105,000 soldiers. He marched southwest, toward Malojaroslavetz. Overstretched, the army faced frequent enemy ambushes, so Napoleon decided to retreat farther west toward Smolensk along the same road by which his Grand Army had invaded Russia months earlier. Their supply problems persisted, because they had already exhausted the surrounding territory of its material wealth and the land had little left to offer. Then, at the end of October, the weather began to exact its toll. Temperatures dropped far below zero degrees Celsius as heavy snows began to fall. Severe winter weather punished Napoleon's army as they marched into Smolensk on September 9. Three different Russian armies harassed them as they fell back (see figure 1-4). Kutuzov's main army tailed Napoleon from Moskva, while the western army under Admiral Pavel Chichagov battled the Austrians in the west and Wittgenstein engaged the French in the north near Polatsk. Harassing attacks persisted as they retreated. Soldier morale sank.

On November 14, the French army left Smolensk with just over 50,000 men. A Russian force of 80,000 under the command of a hesitant Kutuzov pursued them. Continued skirmishes and small battles, notably at Krasnoi, thinned the army to a mere 25,000 soldiers. On November 19, Napoleon reached Orsha as Chichagov and his Russian force marched east toward the Berezina River. Two days earlier, Chichagov's army had captured Minsk, which had functioned as a French supply center. On November 22, Chichagov reached the Berezina River and captured Barysaw. Napoleon ordered Oudinot to move his corps south to Barysaw and support the local garrison there, as Victor tried to slow down Wittgenstein, who was closing in from the north. Oudinot drove the Russians from Barysaw to the west bank of the Berezina River, but not before the Russians destroyed the river's only bridge. Victor and Napoleon joined him on the November 25. There was no bridge to cross, however.

The bridge's loss dealt a serious blow to Napoleon. Weeks earlier, he had ordered his soldiers to destroy or abandon unnecessary materials. This included bridge building equipment. He would not need them, the emperor had assumed, because the winter weather would allow his soldiers to cross over Russian's frozen rivers with ease. He had not expected the temperature to rise, but it did, making the river impassable by foot. The French had to quickly find another place on the river to cross. Fortunately, they deceived Chichagov's army into thinking that they would cross the Berezina south of Barysaw. Instead, Oudinot found a suitable location near the village of

Studianka, a few kilometers north of the city. Fortunately for Napoleon, his commander of the army's mostly Dutch unit of *pontonniers* (pontoon bridge builders), General Jean Baptiste Eblé, had disobeyed his emperor's orders and kept all his bridge building supplies intact. That same day, November 25, he ordered his bridge builders to begin construction on two bridges.

Figure 1-4, adapted from an 1848 original, shows the positions of the French and Russian troops at a particular moment in time during their three-day battle around the Berezina River's crossing. The map has been enhanced with data from a digital elevation model to emphasize the terrain. The river was between 80 and 100 meters wide, but melting ice made both banks swampy.

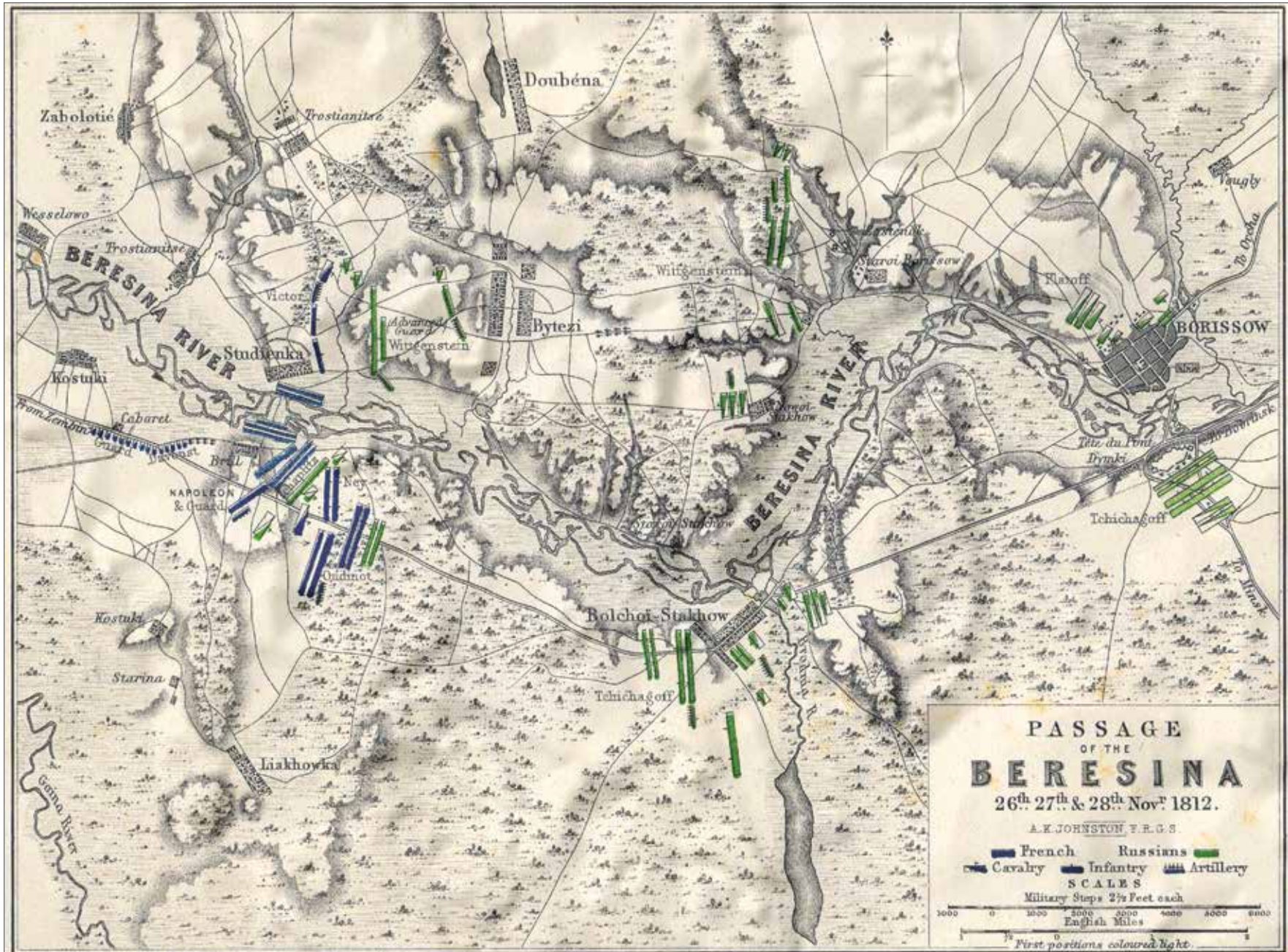
In the early morning hours, a small group of Polish lancers crossed the Berezina River to establish a bridgehead on its far side. They met with little resistance. By 13:00 the next day, the pontonniers finished the first bridge, which they had built for infantry only. Oudinot hastily moved his II Corps over the bridge to strengthen the bridgehead. Fighting erupted at Brillou when the Russians descended upon the Berezina's western bank. Three hours later, at 16:00, the pontonniers finished the second bridge made for artillery and other heavy goods. Other units followed II Corps across the first bridge, starting with III and V Corps. The second bridge collapsed twice during the evening and early morning of the November 27, and it took the pontonniers three to four hours to repair them. The bridge builders were exposed to frigid and wet weather, many of them working up to their necks in the river's freezing water, and few survived. Among the casualties was General Eblé, who died a month later. Once across the river, the French army marched forth to face Chichagov.



**Figure 1-4.** Moving towards the Berezina River. The terrain near Studianka undulates slightly (see figure 1-5).

At 13:00 on November 27, Napoleon and the Imperial Guard crossed the Berezina River. Heavy fighting on both sides of the river continued throughout the rest of the day (see figure 1-6). On the eastern bank, remaining French units and stragglers grouped around the bridgehead, as Wittgenstein closed in from the northeast in pursuit of Victor's IX Corps. The 125th Line Infantry Regiment commanded by General Louis Partonneaux remained in the town of Stari Barysaw where, after a fierce battle, they were forced to surrender (see figure 1-7). Gerrit Janz Kraak numbered among the casualties. Most of Victor's corps crossed

Figure 1-5. The terrain along the Berezina River between Barysaw and Studianka.



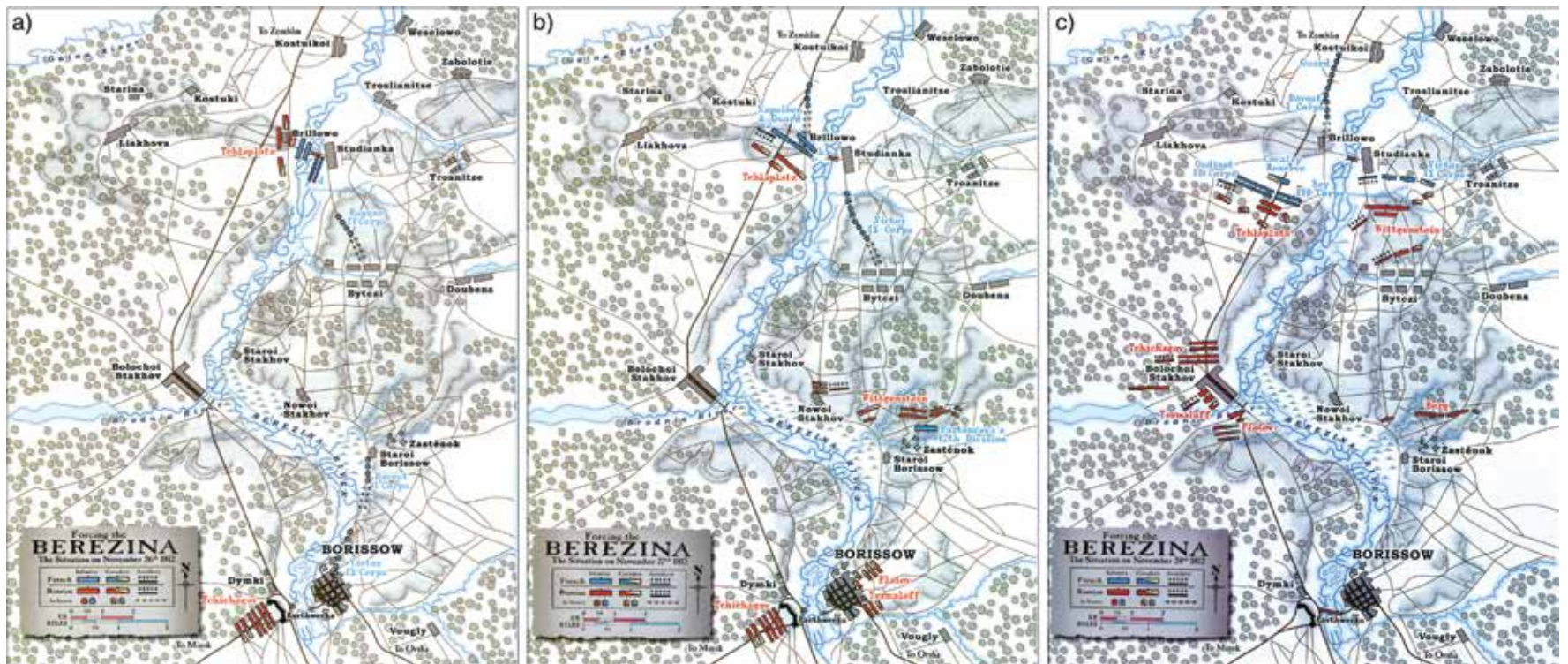


the river by day's end, however. Two days later, in the early morning of November 29, the French destroyed the bridges.

When Napoleon's army crossed the Berezina, the main Russian force under Kutuzov was still several days' march away. Slow communication among the three Russian armies certainly aided Napoleon's escape, as did the long time it took Chichagov to realize that the French had crossed the river at Studianka. Napoleon did not cross over unscathed, however. He lost more than half of his remaining force, more than 25,000 men, which Minard's map explains so starkly and eloquently (see chapter 2, figure 2-3c). In his extensive study of the crossing, Alexander Mikaberdze (2010) explains why: Cold, hunger, and disorder proved to be on the side of the Russians. Napoleon and the remnants of his Grand Army beat a hasty retreat toward Vilnius. When he reached the village of Smarhon on December 5, Napoleon left his army for Paris. On December 18, Marshal Ney was the last French soldier to cross the Neman back into Poland.

Figure 1-6 presents a set of maps that depicts each of the three days of the battle at the Berezina River. Breaking the event into a series of smaller "stills"—like frames in a piece of animation—helps to better explain what happened over time. Still, for both a single map (figure 1-5) and a set of maps (figure 1-6) one has to make arbitrary selections of the individual moments and time intervals to display, which can affect the viewer's interpretation of troop positioning.

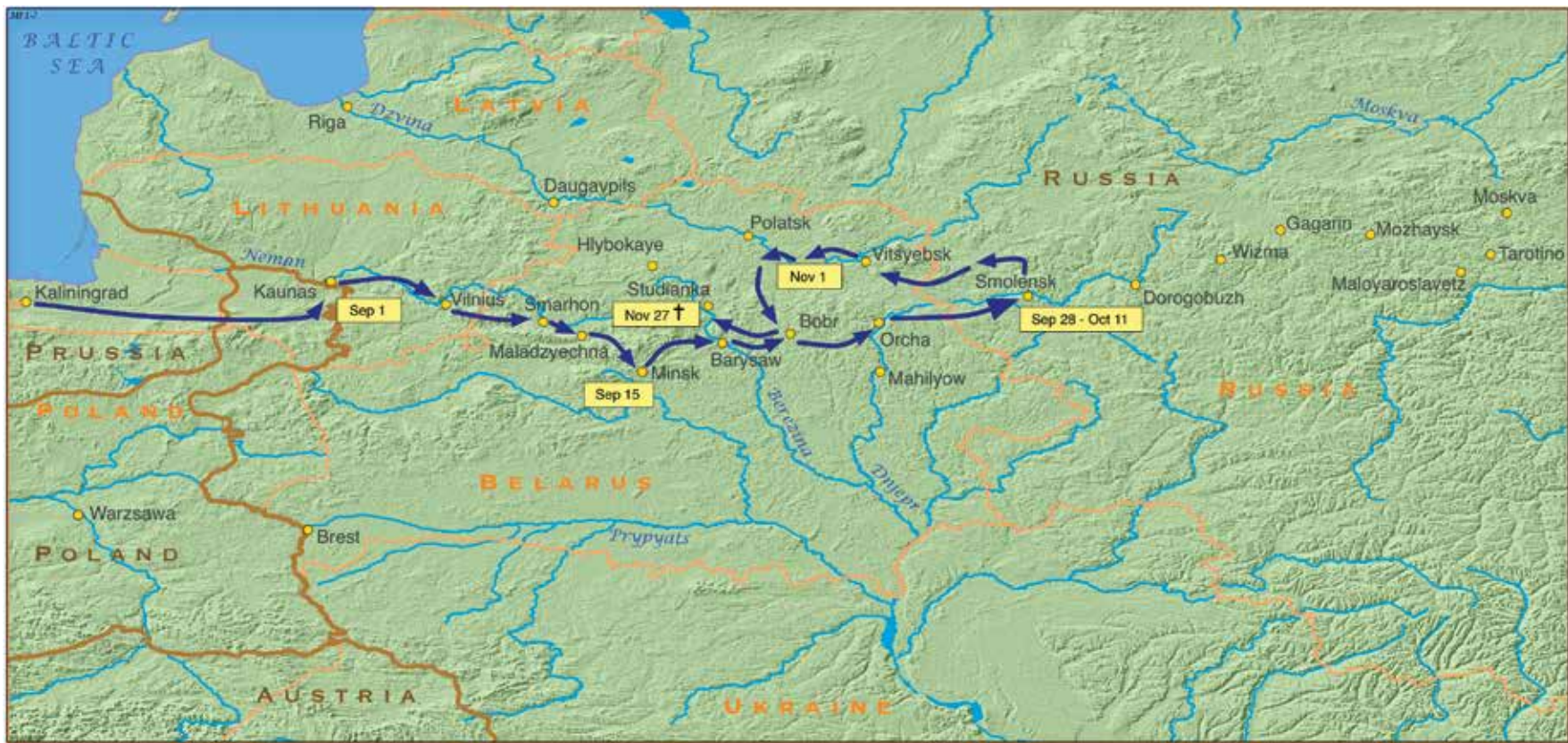
**Figure 1-6.** The situation at the Berezina River on November 26 (1-6a), November 27 (1-6b), and November 28 (1-6c). Small multiples with large maps like these have to be studied in order to understand the narrative they convey, especially when compared with the multiples in figure 5-28.



What snapshot moment during this action-filled, three-day event is shown on the map in figure 1-5? Which moments are displayed on the three maps shown in figure 1-6? One might expect that the authors of these maps chose characteristic or decisive moments to represent, but their selections may simply have been circumscribed by the availability of data.

**Figure 1-7.** The map shows the path of the IX Corps during the Russian campaign. It did not enter Russia until September of 1812, when it advanced to support Napoleon's retreat from Moskva. Gerrit Janz Kraak died in the Battle of Berezina on November 17, 1812. Below the map is an entry from the military records of the French army.

It is also possible to use a single map to depict the dynamics of an event. Figure 1-7 shows the path that Gerrit Janz Kraak took through Russia, supplemented with arrows and labels with dates that help to give the reader a sense of movement in time. Figure 1-8 shows



<p>N.° 2298 <i>Kraak</i>          (prénoms) <i>Gerrit</i>          fils de <i>Janz Kraak</i> et          de <i>Barthelemy Walrus</i> né le 28 <i>juin 1780</i>          à <i>Sreck</i> canton de          département d' <i>Prusse</i>          taille d'un mètre et 62 centimètres,          visage <i>long</i> front <i>large</i> yeux <i>bleus</i>          nez <i>large</i> bouche <i>moderément</i> menton <i>long</i>          cheveux <i>blonds</i> sourcils <i>blonds</i> marques          particulières</p>	<p>Arrivé au Corps le          enrôlé volontaire          incorporé, venant de <i>1. Rég. de Jagers</i>          conscrit de l'an <i>10</i>          remplaçant un conscrit de l'an          du département d'          de sous le N.°          son dernier domicile était à <i>Sreck</i>          département d' <i>Prusse</i>          profession</p>	<p><i>1. Rég. Comp. Volontaires</i>  <i>1. Rég. Comp. Volontaires</i></p>	<p><i>Sreck le 27 Nov 1812</i></p>	<p><i>autre mention par le Reg. 2</i></p>
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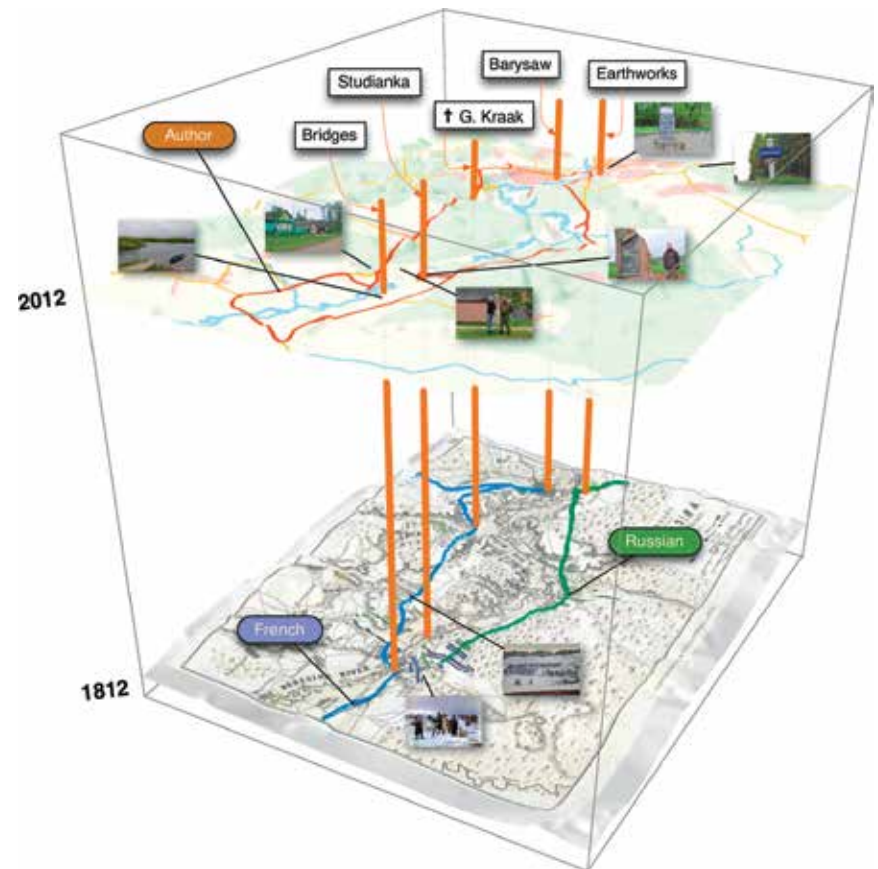
a family tree indicating the relationship between Gerrit Janz Kraak and the author. In figure 1-9, the author uses a space-time cube to compare Napoleon's crossing of the Berezina River with his own path through the region during his visit to the river two hundred years later. This cube plots time along the vertical axis and space along the horizontal plane, placing the 1812 map below and the 2012 map above. Annotations, pictures, and labels give substance to specific events and locations. Between the two horizontal maps, vertical

### ABOUT GERRIT JANZ KRAAK

Gerrit Janz Kraak was born on February 27, 1790, in the city of Sneek in the north of the Netherlands. He was the son of Jan Gerritsz Kraak, a soldier in the garrison of Sneek, and Rintske Watzes Vollenhoof (Craeck 2002). After Napoleon incorporated the Netherlands into the French Empire, the Dutch had to serve in the army. A member of a company volunteers in the province of Friesland, Gerrit Kraak was conscripted in September 1809 and moved to Utrecht. In July 1810 he signed a contract (no. 2298) for five years and joined the 125th Line Infantry Regiment, a Dutch unit in the French army (Roulin 1890). He died in the Battle of Berezina on November 27, 1812.



**Figure 1-8.** Gerrit Janz Kraak, one of Napoleon's soldiers who died in the Battle of Berezina, is an ancestor of the author, pictured here at the battle site's monument commemorating French losses. Gerrit Janz Kraak had many brothers and sisters, most of whom died very young.



**Figure 1-9.** Comparing Berezina across two hundred years using a space-time cube. Below, the path that the French and Russians took during the crossing of the Berezina River in 1812, and, above, the path that the author took to visit the battlefield. The paths have been annotated with labels, pictures (1812), and photographs (2012). Vertical orange lines represent four prominent places.

orange lines connect the same locations in both times. Figure 1-11 presents scenes from two alternative dynamic representations of the event, namely, war games maps. Users of this media can experience an event by replaying it. The top game shows action, while the bottom game displays the hexagonal grid that typically belongs to these kinds of maps.

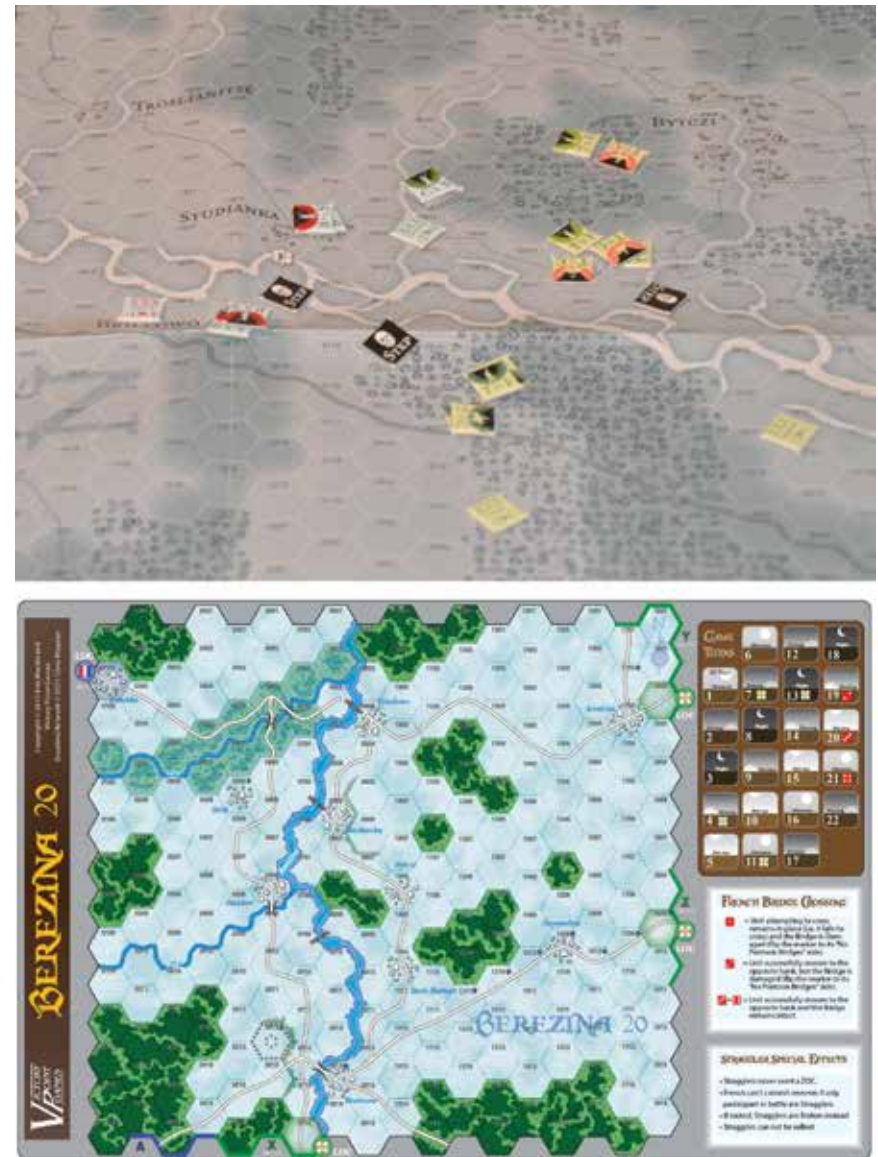
## Further reading

Napoleon's 1812 campaign has been extensively studied, and many books and papers analyze myriad aspects of this ill-fated adventure in great detail. The works by George Nafziger (1988) and Paul Britten Austin (2000) are good places to start. In *1812: The Great Retreat*, Austin describes Napoleon's disaster using eyewitness reports found in archives and personal diaries. For Russian perspectives (written in English), both Laurence Spring (2009) and Dominic Lieven (2011) describe the campaign and Alexander Mikaberidze (2012) provides



**Figure 1-10.** Dutch infantry at the bridges over the Berezina in 1812. The troops try to hold off the Russian advance while others cross the bridges. Detail from a painting by Hoyneck van Papendrecht in a series of posters specially prepared for Dutch history education at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Russian eyewitness accounts. Faber du Faur (2001) offers an illustrated eyewitness report from the vantage of a lieutenant in Napoleon's army in *With Napoleon in Russia*. Diaries of Eugène Labaume (2002) and Philippe-Paul de Ségur (1836, repr. 2005) provide vivid testimonies to the glory and horror of the march. Of course, Carl von Clausewitz's report, *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia* (1843, repr. 2007) and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869, repr. 2001) deserve mention as well.



**Figure 1-11.** War game maps: Top, Napoleon at Berezina. Bottom, Map of the Berezina 20 / Closing the Trap in Russia, 1812 Game.