Napoleon’s Campaign of 1812

In the early 1800s, Napoleon Bonaparte, emperor of France, was determined to bring all of Europe under his control. He was unable to conquer Great Britain, so he prohibited other countries from trading with it. Russia’s Czar Alexander I, however, continued to trade with Great Britain. By 1812, Napoleon was determined to change Alexander’s mind. Napoleon assembled a huge army and began to march eastward toward Moscow, Russia’s largest city.

The Grand Army

Napoleon’s “Grand Army” of more than 600,000 soldiers entered Russia in June 1812. Marching such a huge number of men across the vast expanse of Russia required that the troops be fed by villagers and farmers along their path. Napoleon’s hopes for victory depended on a quick defeat of the Russian armies. The Russian forces, however, refused to give battle. They retreated for hundreds of miles, drawing the French deep into the heart of Russia. The czar asked the Russian people to employ a “scorched earth policy”—to deny food to the enemy by destroying crops and by burning any buildings that could shelter French troops.

Reaching Moscow

Napoleon’s army arrived in Moscow after marching nearly 550 miles across marshy, inhospitable lands. The army had lost nearly half its original strength due to exhaustion, disease, starvation, desertion, and battle losses. Adding to Napoleon’s discouragement, Czar Alexander and his troops had abandoned Moscow and burned most of the city to the ground. Napoleon’s troops camped in Moscow for nearly five weeks with little food or shelter. In October, Napoleon finally decided to take his troops back to France by a warmer and hopefully better-supplied southerly route. But the Russian army forced the French army north again, along the route already devastated by the march toward Moscow. The lack of supplies left the French troops and their horses starving and ill-prepared for the coming winter. Snow began to fall in November, followed by bitter cold. The French troops were barely able to march, let alone fight the Russians who now surrounded them.

Military Disaster

Because of the great distances and harsh climate, Napoleon’s Grand Army was reduced to about 10,000 starving, freezing men forging their way back the way they came. Napoleon’s enemies in Europe took advantage of his weakened forces and revolted against the French. Napoleon was forced into exile, never to regain his power or carry out his plans for political domination.

Flow Map

The flow map on the next page shows the march of Napoleon’s army against Moscow. It includes the size of the French army (the width of the bands), the direction of its advance (upper band) and retreat (lower band), and the temperature on certain dates during the retreat. Note that during the advance, some French troops were diverted northward. These troops rejoined the main army during its retreat.
Geography and History Activity
continued

March to Moscow

TEMPERATURE GRAPH

Zero on 18 Oct
-5
-10
-15
-20
-25
-30 degrees

✓ Applying Geography to History

Directions: Read the information about Napoleon’s march on Moscow and examine the flow map. Then answer the questions below.

1. Stating Why was Napoleon determined to march on Moscow?

2. Explaining How did Napoleon plan to feed the Grand Army as it marched?

3. Explaining How did Czar Alexander hinder Napoleon’s advance on Moscow?

4. Identifying What was Napoleon’s troop strength at the beginning of the march? At the end?

5. Calculating What range of temperatures did Napoleon’s troops encounter on their retreat from Moscow?

6. Mapping Activity On a map of Europe that includes European Russia, trace the route Napoleon’s troops took to Moscow using the rivers and city names on the chart above.