Introduction

Russia as a Great Power in Europe

RUSSIA’S RISE TO GREAT power status in modern Europe began with the military reforms and foreign policy ambitions of Tsar Peter I (ruled 1682/1689–1725), whose reign has for generations of historians embodied the transformation of the Muscovite tsardom into the Russian Empire. In October 1721, following the defeat of Sweden in the Great Northern War (1700–21), Tsar Peter assumed the titles “Father of the Fatherland, All-Russian Emperor, and Peter the Great.” Scholars debate the meaning of Peter’s greatness, and depending on the specific reform under investigation, they find varying degrees of continuity, change, and effectiveness. With respect to military capability and foreign policy, Peter’s reforms successfully addressed critical problems that Muscovite institutions could not overcome. These included the legal mechanisms connecting state service to social status and the relationships of authority binding the monarchy, church hierarchy, and nobility. As the monarchy embraced European-style military mobilization and Westphalian principles of sovereignty, the church and nobility accepted the need for a strong state to guarantee their own security and advancement. From Peter’s reign onward, the monarchy and nobility also agreed that the importation and adaptation of European technology and cultural models offered the best means to confront European power. For this reason, Europeanization became the hallmark of government-directed reform and the symbol of social progress.

The lasting impact of Peter’s reforms appeared most evident in the organization of the navy, standing army, officer corps, and apparatus of military administration and supply. But the growth of military power also required the reform of basic social and political institutions. The new arrangements, which would remain in place until the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, accounted for Russia’s military success in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Indeed, decades before the emergence of France’s citizen army, Russia implemented a system of mass conscription built upon the institution of serfdom and the ascription of individuals to local communities and social groups. Together with
conscription, the ability to mobilize economic resources allowed the Russian government to support the large standing army that made possible Napoleon’s defeat. In contrast to conditions in revolutionary Europe, Russia’s military effort did not depend on the fusion of politics and war associated with an ideologically motivated nation in arms. Rather, it sprang from sheer physical necessity, popular belief in God and Divine Providence, a willingness to serve the tsar, and devotion to household, community, and the Russian land—all bolstered by extraordinary endurance and the omnipresent threat of coercion.

Based on the Muscovite Law Code (Ulozhenie) of 1649, all subjects of the Russian monarch belonged to legally defined social categories that performed prescribed service obligations and benefited from class-based privileges. Beginning in 1719, periodic censuses registered the male souls liable for conscription and payment of the capitation. Census registration, which also bound individuals to their communities of origin, placed the burden of defense primarily on Russia’s laboring people, the overwhelming majority of whom were either state peasants or privately owned serfs. Townspeople also provided recruits and paid the capitation, though individuals who possessed sufficient capital to qualify for merchant status were exempted on an annual basis. Nobles and clergy likewise avoided the capitation; however, sons of clergy and non-ordained churchmen who failed to obtain church appointments could be conscripted by special levy. Nobles, too, starting as early as the mid-sixteenth century, performed obligatory military or civil service. Theoretically, they served for life, or until infirmity, in return for the right to possess land and serfs. Although obligatory service for nobles ended with the emancipation of 1762, Tsar Peter’s educational and service reforms had made them the main source of officers for the Russian army. According to the Table of Ranks enacted in 1722, promotion in service became the primary pathway to social advancement, bringing higher rank to nobles and ennoblement to commoners. For these reasons, Russia’s hereditary and service nobles, like noble elites across Europe, sought glory, honor, wealth, and status by pursuing military careers.

Observers long have marveled at the Russian government’s ability to mobilize human and material resources on a large scale in a peasant society built upon community-based agriculture. As early as 1630/31, well before the Petrine reforms, regular levies of recruits and lifelong terms of service became part of Russian life. During the Thirteen Years’ War (1654–67) with Poland, military drafts swept up around 100,000 men, a sizeable number, though one that pales in comparison to the levies of the eighteenth century. Scholarly estimates of recruits
into the Petrine army count 205,000 men from 1700 to 1711 and at least 140,000 from 1713 to 1724. At the time of Peter's death in 1725, the army consisted of 130,000 regular troops, 75,000–80,000 garrison troops, and 20,000 Cossack irregulars. By the mid-eighteenth century, the number of men in arms reached 292,000 in a population of 23,230,000, and in 1800, 4,466,000 in a population of 37,414,000. Stated differently, from 1705 to 1801, the Russian military conscripted roughly 2.25 million men, and from 1796 to 1815, 1,616,199. When combat operations against France ended in 1815, Russian troops numbered 727,414. The empire preserved this capability for the rest of Alexander I's reign, and in the period of relative peace from 1815 to 1833, the army grew even larger. From 1816 to 1822, the number of recruits reached 3,158,199. Compared to the 696,000 troops available at the time of Napoleon's invasion in 1812, the army counted 859,000 troops just prior to the outbreak of the Crimean War.4

Russian data are notoriously fragmentary before the late nineteenth century, and in the case of military statistics, it can be unclear which troops historians are counting. In addition to the regular standing army, the Russian military establishment included garrison troops, veterans' units, military colonies, Cossacks, and a variety of irregular hosts manned by ethnic minorities. The absence of precise information is problematic, yet one critical point can be made: the numbers correctly illustrate the organizational effort needed to conscript, train, and maintain Russia's large fighting force. However inefficient and arbitrary this effort sometimes appeared, it effectively sustained costly military victories and imperial expansion over the long duration. Beyond the ability to mobilize resources across a large, sparsely populated territory, Russia's military successes also highlighted the tenacity of the empire's combat troops.5 As Frederick the Great reportedly commented, opponents found it "easier to kill Russian soldiers than to defeat them."6 Frederick's words are surely apocryphal, but there is ample evidence and broad scholarly consensus that Emperor Alexander's army performed courageously and honorably in the wars of 1812–14.7

Precisely because of Russia's military triumphs, the capabilities of the army aroused distrust among the other great powers of Europe. During the diplomatic negotiations that followed the victory over Napoleon, Russia's allies could not understand why in conditions of peace, Emperor Alexander did not demobilize his soldiers. Preservation of the army on what seemed to be a wartime footing raised questions about the monarch's intentions. In reality, the size and organization of Russia's peacetime forces had less to do with military plans than with the geographic, demographic, economic, social, and legal-administrative conditions of the empire. For economic more than diplomatic reasons, Russia's
military commanders understood all too well the need to reduce the number of troops. But within the framework of a society built on serfdom, the problem of how to organize conscription and maintain a reserve ready for call-up in time of war prevented significant reductions.

When not on campaign or assembled in summer camps—where in addition to training, soldiers also performed state works—Russia’s semi-standing peasant army quartered primarily in rural villages scattered across vast distances. Equally important, because conscription brought emancipation from serfdom or from the authority of state villages and urban communities, once a recruit became a soldier, his legal status, and that of his wife and future offspring, changed. No longer registered to his place of origin, the soldier belonged to the military command until his release from service. Soldiers could not, therefore, be demobilized or sent home before they became disabled or completed the long term of service (twenty-five years at the time). Due to the great expanse of the empire’s borders and the slowness of communications, the monarchy had no choice but to keep large numbers of men in active service. Also because of geographic constraints, the relatively centralized command structure of the Russian army had to be preserved to ensure administrative and fiscal viability. Simply put, in order to understand Russia’s military and diplomatic posture after the defeat of Napoleon, it is critical to consider the country’s physical vulnerabilities and broad security needs.

The Russian Empire maintained a robust military establishment both to secure extensive landlocked borders and to support imperial expansion into contiguous territories, an ongoing process since the sixteenth century. Prior to the Petrine reforms, the country’s enemies included Sweden, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Crimean Khanate, and the Ottoman Empire. Following the Time of Troubles (1598–1613)—a period of government collapse, social rebellion, civil war, and foreign invasion—the reconstituted Muscovite monarchy struggled to protect its borders from opportunistic neighbors. The Treaty of Stolbovo (1617) with Sweden relinquished significant territory along the shores of Lake Ladoga and left Russia completely cut off from the Gulf of Finland. The Deulino armistice (1618) ceded to Poland territory along Muscovy’s western border, including the strategically important city of Smolensk. Not surprisingly, Russia’s young dynasty spent much of the seventeenth century trying to recover the lands that had been lost. In 1656–58, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (ruled 1645–76), father of Peter I, challenged Swedish control of the Baltic trade, and from the 1620s, when the Orthodox population of Ukraine began to seek protection from Catholic rule, Muscovy again came into conflict with Poland. In 1654, following a rebellion against Poland that had begun in 1648, Ukrainian Cossacks
took the oath of allegiance to the Muscovite tsar. That same year Russia also reconquered Smolensk and launched the Thirteen Years’ War against Poland. Peace returned in 1667 with the truce of Andrusovo, which left Muscovy in control of Left-Bank (eastern) Ukraine, Kiev, and Smolensk.\textsuperscript{10}

Territorial gains in Ukraine also produced a shared frontier with the Ottoman Empire. The Russian-Ottoman War of 1677–81 stemmed from Poland’s surrender of a large part of Right-Bank (western) Ukraine to the Ottomans in 1676. The war brought no territorial changes to Russia, and Ottoman policy continued to focus more on southeastern Europe than on thwarting Muscovite acquisitions in Ukraine. But the advances highlighted another ongoing threat from the Crimean Tatars, vassals of the Ottomans, who raided and pillaged Russian settlements in the southern borderland. Because the Crimean Khanate traced its origins back to the empire of Chinggis Khan, Tatar raids not only wrought destruction but also recalled past subjugation to Mongol rule. Although Muscovy tried to confront the Tatars in campaigns of 1687 and 1689, the effort produced little direct combat and did nothing to enhance Russian security. The campaigns did, however, expose Muscovy’s limited military capability. Seventeenth-century breakthroughs in military technology, tactics, and operations had not solved the structural problem of endurance—the combined effect of logistics, transport, training, reinforcement, and finance.\textsuperscript{11} In other words, Muscovite military effectiveness lacked the capacity to support obvious military needs. It was precisely the problem of endurance, laid bare in the Crimean campaigns, that Peter I’s military reforms aimed to address.

Tsar Peter inherited long-standing security challenges in the north, west, and south, yet his early actions also revealed ambitions beyond the protection of borderlands and foreign trade. From the outset, Peter used the military tools at his disposal to project Russian power and pursue aggressive strategic goals. After an unsuccessful campaign in 1695, Peter’s troops captured the Ottoman fortress at Azov in 1696, and the monarch ordered the building of a naval fleet in the Sea of Azov. With this move Peter hoped to challenge Ottoman control of the Black Sea—Russia lacked access to a warm water port—and disrupt communications between the Ottomans and Crimean Tatars. Instead, Peter’s army suffered a major defeat. In the battle on the Pruth River in Moldavia (9 July 1711), Russian troops succumbed to a much larger Ottoman-Tatar force. Peter was compelled to surrender Azov, dismantle his southern fleet, and destroy fortresses at Taganrog and Kamennyi Zaton. Russia retook Azov in 1739, though only in the reign of Catherine II (ruled 1762–96) did the empire achieve significant victories against the Ottomans.\textsuperscript{12}
Developments in Europe told a different story, which hinted at the glorious military history to come. Indeed, the military endeavor that most fully expressed Tsar Peter’s ambition and also signaled Russia’s emergent power in Europe was the Great Northern War against Sweden. After Charles XII acceded to the Swedish throne in 1697, at the age of fourteen, the surrounding monarchs of Denmark, Poland, and Russia joined in a plot to destroy Sweden’s Baltic empire. In the spring of 1700, Frederick IV and Elector Augustus of Saxony initiated military operations, and Peter followed with a declaration of war on 9 August. As is well known, Charles proved to be the most formidable of foes. Even before the Russian mobilization, Sweden threatened Copenhagen by sea, and Denmark sued for peace. Peter began operations with a siege of the Swedish fortress at Narva, and after a few months, on 20 November, the Swedes routed the Russian army. Swedish troops numbering only 9,000 crushed a Russian force of 40,000. Charles quickly seized the advantage and moved on Riga, which had been under siege by Augustus. There he achieved another impressive victory against Russian, Polish, and Saxon troops. This triumph opened the door to an invasion of Poland.

The military failures against Sweden propelled the reforms that over the course of the eighteenth century brought to Russia great power status in Europe and Asia. Alongside mass conscription and the capitation, the translation of human and material resources into effective power resulted from substantial changes in the organization of Russia’s armed forces. These included the imposition of military discipline, the creation of centralized sources of supply, the manufacture of armaments and military cloth, the formation of an educated officer corps, the establishment of specialized technical schools, the mastery of strategic planning, and operational practices that emphasized fortification, troop mobility, and naval support. Although Peter’s first victory against Charles came in December 1701, before any of the military reforms could have yielded results, the impact of his policies became apparent over the next twenty years. As Russia and Sweden traded victories and defeats, Peter kept up the grueling military effort. A key advance occurred in 1703, when the tsar founded the city of Saint Petersburg, giving to Russia a new capital and a permanent foothold on the Baltic Sea. The following year, a summer campaign led to Russian control of Dorpat, Narva, Swedish Ingria, and the Neva River. Bold as these accomplishments appeared, they quickly faded due to Swedish victories in Poland and Saxony. The abdication of Augustus in 1706 allowed Charles to move against Russia at the beginning of 1708. But instead of marching toward Moscow, Charles led his troops south into Ukraine. There he joined forces with the Cossack hetman Ivan Mazepa, a former ally of Peter.
A more decisive victory over Sweden—one that continues to be celebrated in Russian history and culture—occurred on 28 June 1709 at the fortress of Poltava. Charles fled to the Ottoman Empire, but the threats to Russia did not subside. The Ottomans declared war in 1710, and the battle on the Pruth (1711) resulted in significant territorial losses for Russia. The defeat also forced Peter to grant Charles safe passage back to Sweden. In 1713 the Peace of Adrianople ended hostilities between the Russian and Ottoman empires, and in November 1714, Charles reached Sweden. By that time, Russia also had made gains in Swedish Pomerania and Finland. Still, Charles persevered. In 1716 he attacked Danish possessions in Norway, and only in 1718 did peace talks begin—after Britain, Denmark, Poland, Russia, and Saxony all decided to oppose Sweden. Military operations continued during the negotiations, and even after Charles’s death at the end of the year, Russia maintained military pressure by launching destructive raids into Swedish territory. Finally, on 30 August/10 September 1721, Russia and Sweden signed the Treaty of Nystad. Russia acquired Livonia, Estonia, Ingria, part of Karelia, and the Baltic islands of Oesel and Dagoe. Except for Vyborg, Finland was returned to Sweden, which also received an indemnity from Russia. Broadly speaking, Russia replaced Sweden as the dominant Baltic power, a position that would lead to great power status in Europe. What had changed between 1700 and 1721 was the ability to sustain a large-scale military effort over the long duration—to overcome, to a satisfactory degree, the problem of endurance.

Although Russia’s early steps toward great power status arose from the need to secure frontiers against dangerous enemies, including the steppe societies of the south and southeast, it quickly became apparent that tsarist military power also would be used to support imperial expansion. The start of the Great Northern War illustrated Peter’s aggressive intentions, and as a result of the Persian campaign in 1722, Russia acquired lands along the southwestern and southern shores of the Caspian Sea. Treaties of 1732 and 1735 returned these territories to Persia. But then in 1783, 1787, and 1800, Russia partially occupied, abandoned, and then formally annexed Georgia. Although protracted and uneven, Russia’s forward movement into Transcaucasia, Crimea, and Ukraine produced ongoing conflict with the Ottoman Empire. This led to wars in 1695, 1696, 1711, 1735–39, 1768–74, and 1787–91. Peter’s initial success against Azov had proven illusory, but in the war of 1735–39, Russia retook the port, briefly occupied part of the Crimean Peninsula, and also gained access to the Black Sea, on condition that the Black Sea trade use Ottoman ships. In short, Russia’s ongoing wars (and diplomacy) with the Ottoman Empire encapsulated the crisscrossing of defensive and offensive actions that defined imperial expansion.
Later in the eighteenth century, Catherine II’s victories over the Ottoman Empire would produce gains that far surpassed those of her predecessors. In the Russian-Ottoman War of 1768–74, Catherine’s army drove the Ottomans from the northern shores of the Black Sea and established a protectorate over the Crimean Khanate. By 1777, the Russian monarch effectively appointed the ruling khan, and in 1783, after a rebellion by Tatar nobles, annexed the peninsula. Henceforth the khanate came under the authority of a Russian governor. Other southern lands incorporated into the empire during Catherine’s reign included the territory of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, the Kuban steppe, the Taman Peninsula, and Kabarda in the Caucasus. Of particular importance, Russia gained the right of free navigation in the Black Sea and the Straits of the Bosporus and Dardanelles. Russia also blocked Sweden’s effort to reassert power in the Baltic region (war of 1788–90) and ended the independent existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795). Following the partitions, which also benefited Austria and Prussia, Russia controlled a large swathe of territory stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea.14

Another sphere of empire building, both defensive and offensive, grew out of the porous frontiers separating Russia’s sedentary communities from the nomadic peoples of the steppe. The steppe peoples lived in parts of present-day Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan.15 In the imperial period, the steppe’s geographical boundaries ran from the Danube River in the west to Lake Balkhash in the east, and from the forest zone of European Russia in the north to the Black and Caspian Seas in the south. Russia’s struggle to secure and subjugate the steppe began in the sixteenth century with the conquest of the khanates of Kazan (1552), Astrakhan (1554), and Siberia (1580). The incorporation of these heirs to the Golden Horde then led to struggles against the Nogay Tatars in the north Caucasus, the Bashkirs around the southern Ural Mountains, and from the 1630s, the Kalmyks in the Caspian steppe. The protracted bloodletting took the form of destructive raids, armed rebellions, and brutal suppression. Eventually, the Tatar, steppe, and Volga peoples succumbed to Russian power. The peoples of the Caucasus would submit, and then only sporadically, in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Kazakhs, who during the eighteenth century attained dominance in the steppe, did not become fully integrated into the Russian Empire until the 1860s.

Russia’s complicated relations with the steppe and Caucasus lay at the core of empire building but did not deeply impact diplomacy in Europe. Exceptions arose in areas bordering on the steppe such as Crimea and Georgia, where challenges to Ottoman and Persian interests could have consequences for the
European system, especially within the context of nineteenth-century imperialism. On average, however, Russian movement into the steppe, at least during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, remained a domestic affair, much like the westward expansion of the United States. For this reason, policy in the steppe and Caucasus has been characterized as an organic process of colonization driven by geopolitical imperatives such as the need to defend an unstable frontier. But clearly, expansion also aimed to command human and material resources and to impose sovereignty over foreign peoples. Thus, historian John P. LeDonne describes Russia as a Eurasian state in search of hegemony from the Elbe River to eastern Siberia. Although LeDonne’s analysis may overstate the intentionality and coherence of Russian imperialism, it recognizes that policymakers and intellectuals viewed territorial expansion as the bringing of civilization to barbarous lands and peoples. In relations with the steppe, the Caucasus, and later Central Asia, Russian elites clearly articulated this colonialist thinking.

Eurasian interests highlighted Russia’s global emergence and imperialist reach. Yet in the period of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and subsequently in the Restoration era, the European theater commanded the lion’s share of military and diplomatic resources. For decades after the death of Peter I, political instability and struggles over the succession could not be disentangled from diplomatic relations with Europe. The turmoil temporarily abated when Peter’s daughter Elizabeth became empress in 1741, roughly one year after Frederick II of Prussia occupied Austrian Silesia (December 1740). During much of Elizabeth’s reign (ruled 1741–61), Russia maintained good relations with both Austria and Britain, but grew ever more suspicious of Prussia. According to historians, Prussia’s rise to great power status disrupted the equilibrium of the Westphalia state system and caused a realignment in the European balance of power. Prussia abandoned its alliance with France for union with Britain, while Austria left its alliance with Britain for union with France. Eventually, the realignment led to the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), in which Austria, France, and Russia faced off against Prussia, whose ally Britain provided subsidies to Frederick and received protection for Hanover. Throughout the conflict, Russia managed to preserve the all-important trade relationship with Britain, and also took an active stand against Prussia. In return for Elizabeth’s pledge to support Austria in the recovery of Silesia, Russia received subsidies and the promise of territorial gains in eastern Prussia. The Russian government hoped to use these territories to make border adjustments with Poland that would further secure the Baltic-Black Sea corridor. Elizabeth achieved her war aims in 1758 and
continued to honor the commitment to Austria by sending troops on campaign in 1759, 1760, and 1761.\textsuperscript{19}

When Elizabeth died in December 1761, her nephew Peter III (ruled 1761–62), a known supporter of Prussia, acceded to the throne.\textsuperscript{20} Although Peter ruled for only a few short months before a palace coup brought his wife Catherine to power, he initiated another rebalancing of power relations in Europe. Peter abandoned the war against Prussia, an action that violated treaty obligations to Austria, and handed a key victory to Frederick II. The withdrawal could have benefitted Russia; the empire’s finances had become precarious, and the war had become a divisive issue within the governing elite. But Peter, born Prince of Holstein-Gottorp, remained a German ruler. In May 1762, he ordered military commanders to prepare for a summer war against Denmark with the goal of restoring Schleswig to his native Holstein. Although Frederick promised to send 15,000 Prussian troops to assist Peter, the pledge did not convince Russia’s elites to support the planned campaign. For this and other reasons, Peter lost his throne on 28 June and his life on 5 July. Russia’s military leadership, upper bureaucracy, and guard regiments stationed in Saint Petersburg all supported the accession of Catherine, initially as regent for her son Paul. After Catherine’s death, Paul ruled just long enough, from 1796 to 1801, to end the political uncertainty of the eighteenth century by establishing a clear order of succession. Ironically, the promise of security did not save him from a murderous overthrow, tacitly approved by his son and heir, Alexander I, widely known as the tsar who defeated Napoleon and the tsar diplomat who became a key architect of the Vienna settlement.\textsuperscript{21}

The decades of war against revolutionary and Napoleonic France, which culminated in the Congress of Vienna, are critically important for historians of European diplomacy and the restorations. Russia’s participation in the wars began when Emperor Paul joined the Second Coalition (1798–1802) consisting of Austria, Britain, the Kingdom of Naples, the Ottoman Empire, and Portugal.\textsuperscript{22} During the months of negotiation that produced the coalition, Russia sent a naval squadron to support British operations along the Dutch coast (July 1798) and cooperated with the Ottomans to occupy the Ionian Islands (September–November 1798).\textsuperscript{23} In February 1799, Russian troops captured Corfu, and Field Marshal Aleksandr V. Suvorov (1729–1800) became commander of a combined Russian-Austrian army. In the spring and summer of 1799, Suvorov scored significant victories in northern Italy, though instead of seizing the opportunity to march on Paris, his superiors sent him across the Alps into Switzerland. There Suvorov was supposed to join forces with General Aleksandr M.
Russia as a Great Power in Europe

Rimskii-Korsakov (1753–1840), whose corps was advancing from the Rhine valley. In late September, before the Russian armies could be united, Rimskii-Korsakov and the Austrians suffered defeat near Zurich. Faced with unchecked French power, the coalition began to unravel. Suvorov managed to extricate his men from the disastrous situation in Switzerland, and in January 1800, Emperor Paul ordered all Russian troops to return home. Austrian forces fell to the French in the Battle of Marengo in June and again in the Battle of Hohenlinden in December. After Hohenlinden, Austria’s military effort collapsed.

The War of the Second Coalition inaugurated one of the most dramatic periods in the history of European warfare. In November 1799, French general Napoleon Bonaparte became First Consul and head of the military dictatorship known as the Consulate. For the next fifteen years, until Emperor Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo in June 1815, Europe’s monarchies faced the threat of military conquest and revolution. France’s efforts to dominate Europe led to years of brutal warfare, intermittent peace, and unreliable alliances. Although Britain and Russia remained steady obstacles to French advances, Napoleon’s opponents generally failed to unite for collective action. On occasion the need to protect economic interests, freedom of the seas, or established thrones produced a degree of unity. But more often than not, alliances crumbled in the face of French military success. Repeatedly, Napoleon’s enemies abandoned allies in hopes of avoiding territorial losses or concluding illusory agreements with France. Thus, the Second Coalition evaporated within a few years, as France reached separate agreements with previously allied states: rapprochement with Russia (1800–1), the Treaty of Lunéville with Austria (February 1801), and the Treaty of Amiens with Britain (March 1802). Thanks to these accords, the defeated powers recouped territorial losses and even made some gains. For the first time in a decade, Europe seemed to enjoy a modicum of peace.

But the respite did not last, as France continued to challenge Britain’s control of the seas. By May 1803 the two powers once again went to war, and within two years, in March 1805, Napoleon began to plan an invasion of England. This aggression led in April to the Third Coalition, which joined Austria, Britain, and Russia. The deployment of troops began in late August, and the monumental naval victory of Admiral Horatio Nelson off Cape Trafalgar occurred on 21 October 1805. Britain staved off invasion and preserved naval superiority, while Austria and Russia suffered humiliating losses that paved the way for French domination in the Germanies and Poland. In September Napoleon’s Grand Army marched eastward from Boulogne, and Austria invaded Bavaria. A Russian army also moved westward to join up with the Austrians. Before the two
armies could be linked, on 20 October, the French defeated the Austrians at Ulm in Bavaria, opening the door to an invasion of Austria. Although Russian forces managed temporarily to delay the French advance, at Dürenstein on 11 November and at Hollabrunn on 15–16 November, they could not prevent the occupation of Vienna. Allied defeats at the hands of Napoleon continued to mount, and on 2 December, Russian and Austrian forces succumbed to French military might at Austerlitz in Moravia. Russia again abandoned its coalition partners and retreated into Poland. Austria surrendered unconditionally and on 26 December signed the Treaty of Pressburg. Prussia already had signed a treaty of alliance with France on 15 December. Roughly six months later, in July 1806, fifteen German states joined the Confederation of the Rhine under French domination, and during the next year, Napoleon consolidated his mastery over Western and Central Europe.

In the aftermath of Austerlitz, Europe’s monarchs understood all too well the reality of Napoleon’s intentions. But this did not mean that they were ready or able to sustain a unified response. The Fourth Coalition against France began to take shape at the same time that Napoleon formed the Confederation of the Rhine. In July 1806 Prussia and Russia agreed to cooperate in anticipation of further hostilities. The coalition congealed in October with the participation of Britain, Prussia, Russia, and Sweden. On 9 October, in a challenge to France’s continued occupation of German lands, Prussian king Frederick William III declared war. But before Emperor Alexander could make good on the commitment to his ally, France defeated Prussia simultaneously at Jena and Auerstadt on 14 October. Frederick William fled to the east, and French troops occupied Berlin. At the end of 1806 Russian forces began to engage the French in limited actions in Poland. Then in February 1807, the Russian and French armies fought the inconclusive Battle of Eylau. Just a few months later, on 14 June, combined Russian-Prussian forces succumbed to the French at Friedland. Alexander I and Frederick William III signed the treaties of Tilsit.

Based on the Treaty of Tilsit (25 June 1807) and the subsequent negotiations in Erfurt (September–October 1808), Russia recognized the French control over Western and Central Europe represented by the Confederation of the Rhine and the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. The Grand Duchy consisted of Prussia’s Polish provinces without the district of Belostok, which went to Russia. In addition, Emperor Alexander agreed to break relations with Britain and close the empire’s Baltic ports to British trade, unless Britain accepted French demands to respect freedom of the seas and trade among neutral states. Russia also consented to the demand that Britain return Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies taken since
1805. Beyond the direct actions against Britain, the French and Russian emperors pledged to promote the blockade of ports in Denmark, Portugal, and Sweden, and to encourage these powers to declare war on Britain. Finally, Alexander promised to hand over the Ionian Islands to France and withdraw the Russian navy from the Adriatic Sea.

Emperor Alexander’s concessions to Napoleon were substantial, but the Russian monarch also seemed to get what he wanted from his would-be ally. The French emperor agreed to mediate in Russia’s war with the Ottoman Empire, which had broken out in 1806. If mediation failed, Napoleon promised to support Alexander against the Ottomans. In this scenario, Russia would be required to vacate strongholds in the eastern Mediterranean occupied between 1798 and 1806, while France would accept Russian control over the Ottomans’ European provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia. If, however, Russia and the Porte reached an agreement, Alexander would at a future (unspecified) time withdraw his troops from the Danubian Principalities. Finally, the two emperors pledged that France and Russia would fight together as allies in the event of a European war.

Despite the displays of friendship on view in Tilsit and Erfurt, the years of peace from 1807 to 1812 turned out to be an uneasy breathing spell for both empires. “The probability of a new war between Russia and France came into being nearly at the same time as the Peace of Tilsit.” This was the judgment in 1812 of Russian statesman Mikhail M. Speranskii (1772–1839), who added that “the peace itself included nearly all the elements of a war.” For just as Russia could not “maintain this peace exactly,” France could not “believe that the peace would be maintained.” Napoleon’s hope that he could use the Russian alliance to undermine Britain’s economic strength came to naught. The commercial relationship between Britain and Russia had been robust since the sixteenth century. Although in Tilsit Emperor Alexander implicitly adhered to the Continental Blockade, which had been established in 1806 to strangle the British economy, he generally neglected to enforce the ban on trade. In November 1807 Russia broke diplomatic relations with Britain but then never followed up with any military action. As the neglect to act illustrated, the Peace of Tilsit “offered both sides astonishing opportunities to evade unpleasant obligations or to deduce their own claims from the treaty.”

Over time, the avoidance of obligations gave way to overtly hostile acts. In 1809 Napoleon challenged Russian interests by incorporating western Galicia, Polish lands taken from Austria, into the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. The Polish question, which during the Congress of Vienna would come close to starting a war among the peacemakers, could not have been more critical for Russia.
Clearly, Emperor Alexander, whose grandmother Catherine II had spearheaded the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, did not want to see a strong, independent, or French-dominated Polish state on the western border of his empire.28 Further French aggressions followed in July 1810 when Napoleon annexed the Kingdom of Holland. Then in December he incorporated the Hanseatic cities of Hamburg, Bremen, and Lübeck, as well as Lauenburg, the territory from Lippe on the lower Rhine to Steckenzitz, and the Duchy of Oldenburg. Alexander’s sister Catherine was married to the heir apparent of Oldenburg, and the security of the duchy had been explicitly guaranteed by Tilsit.

At the same time that Napoleon displayed increasingly aggressive behavior, Emperor Alexander also violated the spirit of Tilsit. The Russian monarch rejected the Trianon Tariff of August 1810, which heavily taxed British colonial products arriving on neutral ships. In addition, he refrained from closing Russia’s ports to the neutral ships that commonly carried British goods. Finally, in December 1810, Alexander openly refused to abide by the rules of the Continental Blockade and even imposed duties on products, primarily of French origin, brought to Russia by land. Napoleon’s inability to cripple Britain meant that Alexander’s reluctance to act on economic promises carried military implications. Nor did the offenses end there: instead of accepting Napoleon’s proposal for the hand of his sister Anna Pavlovna, the Russian monarch suggested postponement due to the girl’s young age. Snubbed by Alexander, Napoleon decided to marry Marie Louise of Austria. The marriage negotiations, like the implementation of trade policies, illustrated the Janus-faced nature of the Russian-French alliance. Both parties sidestepped its spirit and concrete provisions. Starting in 1811 and continuing into early 1812, officials in Russia and France talked openly of possible hostilities. The game of chance came to an end, as both countries prepared for war.

The war in Russia started on 24 June 1812, when Napoleon’s Grand Army, “one of the largest armies the world had ever seen,” crossed the Nieman River. The French forces consisted of 368,000 infantry, 80,000 cavalry, and more than 1,000 guns.29 From the outset, Russia’s military leaders relied on tactics of deep retreat, meaning that they avoided giving battle in order to preserve the fighting capability of their forces.30 In mid-August, when the French reached Smolensk, the Russians absorbed a two-day assault before setting the city ablaze and leaving it to the enemy. Throughout the war of 1812 Russia’s strategic patience and tactics of retreat proved effective against the combat and logistical capabilities of Napoleon’s army. French troops carried supplies for just twenty-four days and therefore lacked sufficient shelter and provisions. Napoleon had not prepared
for a lengthy campaign, hoping instead to inflict a lethal blow that would force Alexander into speedy accommodation. After the Russians retreated from Smolensk, Napoleon pressed onward to Moscow. Russia’s military commanders responded by forcing upon the French a brutal war of attrition.

On 5–7 September, near the village of Borodino, located 120 kilometers west of Moscow, the French and Russian armies met directly on the field of battle. French troops numbering 135,000 faced a Russian force of 125,000 in one of the most vicious contests of the entire Napoleonic era. The dead and wounded on both sides reached harrowing numbers: 58,000 Russian and 50,000 French casualties. Military historians call the Battle of Borodino a draw, though the Russians handed Napoleon a nominal victory by again withdrawing from direct combat. This left the road to Moscow wide open, and on 14 September, Napoleon’s army occupied Russia’s ancient capital, the site of Romanov coronations since the founding of the dynasty in 1613. Mirroring the tactics of deep retreat, Moscow officials had evacuated most of the city’s 300,000 inhabitants. Napoleon’s Grand Army entered a ghost town instead of the vibrant second capital of the Russian Empire.

For the French troops, conditions in Moscow quickly deteriorated. Fires broke out almost immediately, destroying the grand and modest homes where Napoleon’s men could have quartered, as well as the stores of grain and ammunition that could have supplied their needs. Indeed, by the time the fires were brought under control, one-half to two-thirds of the city had burned down. In mid-October, roughly one month after Napoleon’s entry into Moscow, the supply situation became untenable, and the French army began to withdraw. But Russia had not yet won the war. On 24–25 October, at Maloiaroslavets, the two armies again met in battle. Napoleon tried but failed to destroy the main Russian force commanded by General Field Marshal Mikhail I. Kutuzov (1747–1813). Again, in military terms, the battle proved indecisive, as each side suffered casualties of about 7,000 men. Despite the balance of losses, after the Battle of Maloiaroslavets, the French retreat became a catastrophe.

The last major clash between the opposing armies took place at Viazma on 3 November, and for once French losses significantly surpassed those of Russia. Yet even in these circumstances, Russia’s commanders did not seek to destroy Napoleon’s forces and again pulled back from further military action. In the words of Dominic Lieven, Kutuzov “preferred to leave the job to the winter.” Despite milder than normal weather, “Russian Novembers are cold, especially for exhausted men who sleep in the open, without even a tent, with very inadequate clothing, and with little food.” The warmer temperatures created the
additional problem of thawed ice on the Berezina River. As the French retreated, Russian troops and partisans on both sides of the river kept up attacks on Napoleon’s soldiers. When unusually deep cold did come in December, the French army already had been decimated. Of roughly 100,000 men who left Moscow, 60,000 reached Smolensk, and only 40,000 departed the Russian Empire.34

To this day, the decision to leave Moscow to Napoleon remains controversial. The occupation and destruction of the city represented a blow to the spirit of the Russian people. Across generations, the experience has been seared into public consciousness by the depiction in Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace. But Russia survived the loss, eventually to triumph, and throughout the crisis Emperor Alexander preserved his dignified determination. Repeatedly, the monarch ignored offers of peace put forward by Napoleon. Strengthened by spirituality and Orthodoxy, he weathered the dire circumstances of 1812. Alexander sought solace in daily Bible readings, an activity that in no way indicated a flight into religious mysticism. To the contrary, the monarch’s religious experience helps to explain his ability to carry on the war beyond Russia’s borders, his subsequent commitment to peace, and the pragmatic flexibility of his foreign policy. Emperor Alexander and his subjects found strength in Christian belief and in the knowledge of their providential role in human history. As the monarch wrote to his friend, ober-procurator of the Synod Prince Aleksandr N. Golitsyn (1773–1844), “in moments such as those in which we find ourselves, I believe that even the most hardened person feels a return toward his creator. . . . I surrender myself to this feeling, which is so habitual for me and I do so with a warmth, an abandon, much greater than in the past! I find there my only consolation, my sole support. It is this sentiment alone that sustains me.”35 After Napoleon’s army left Russia, and for virtually the rest of Emperor Alexander’s reign, the trauma of the invasion both tested and fueled his resolve.

Following the flight from Russia, more than a year would pass before the allies finally defeated Napoleon and removed him from power. In the spring and summer of 1813, Austria, Britain, Prussia, Russia, and Sweden formed yet another coalition against France. Hostilities began in August, and in mid-October, the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig sent Napoleon’s army retreating across the Rhine River. Over the next several months, the French suffered a series of setbacks. The Confederation of the Rhine came apart, the Dutch provinces rebelled, and the Austrians achieved military victories in northern Italy. In Spain, where since the summer of 1808 resistance to Napoleonic domination had been ongoing and supported by British troops, fighting continued, and French losses mounted. At the beginning of 1814 allied forces finally crossed the Rhine, and on 31 March,
Alexander I and Frederick William III rode into Paris. Napoleon abdicated in April and went into exile on the island of Elba. The Bourbon dynasty returned to power when Louis XVIII, brother of the guillotined Louis XVI, ascended the throne as a constitutional monarch. The peacemaking process began immediately in Paris and continued in Vienna later that year, only to be interrupted by Napoleon’s return to power in March 1815. Fortunately for the cause of peace, the Hundred Days passed quickly. In June a combined force of Belgian, British, Dutch, and German troops under the command of the Duke of Wellington, who had led successful military operations in Spain, routed Napoleon at Waterloo. On 21 June, Napoleon abdicated for the second time and on 15 July he was sent into remote exile on Saint Helena. There he died on 5 May 1821 at a time when post-Napoleonic peacemaking still demanded constant attention from his opponents.

The Russian monarchy that helped to forge the European peace had been strengthened, not weakened, by the Napoleonic Wars. Educated in the Enlightenment culture of the Catherinian court, Emperor Alexander I continued the policies of political reform and cultural advancement pursued by his predecessors. Within Russia this meant the improvement of justice and administration, consideration of constitutional projects, the establishment of state schools, the enhancement of educational requirements for advancement in military and civil service, and lavish support for letters, arts, and sciences. Alexander’s government also introduced modest reforms to curb the abuses of serfdom, and in the Baltic provinces of Courland, Estonia, and Livonia, carried out an emancipation without guaranteed access to land. Although indicative of humanitarian concerns, none of these measures indicated a serious commitment to the abolition of serfdom, which remained the backbone of Russia’s military system. Nor did the political reforms place formal limits on the monarch’s absolutist power or even institutionalize consultation with representatives of the nobility and educated service classes. In a word, the authority of the Russian monarchy, legitimized by the Russian Orthodox Church and defended by a peasant army, remained uncontested.

Intellectual dissent had begun to make inroads in the late eighteenth century, and by the time of Alexander’s death in December 1825, produced open rebellion. But this development did not prevent the monarchy, church, and educated elites from uniting around the idea that the conditions of human life could be improved through lawful reform, educational progress, and Christian morality. The servicemen who assisted Emperor Alexander in the peacemaking of 1815 to 1823 clearly shared this outlook. Most of the monarch’s diplomats originated
from the educated Russian, Ukrainian, and Baltic German nobilities who dominated the empire’s service classes. A second diplomatic cohort entered Russian service from other European countries, including Poland, at the end of the eighteenth or beginning of the nineteenth century. Finally, the diplomatic corps contained sons of foreigners who long had served the Russian monarchy. As a group, Alexander’s high-level diplomats, born primarily in the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s, were individuals who had grown up in multilingual, multiconfessional, and multiethnic environments and who moved easily in the highest government and social circles of Europe’s cosmopolitan capitals and courts.37

Emperor Alexander’s co-ministers of foreign affairs embodied the worldly qualities of the diplomatic elite. Count Karl V. Nesselrode, minister of foreign affairs under Alexander I and Nicholas I (ruled 1825–55), was born in Lisbon, where his father served as Russia’s envoy. Nesselrode was baptized in the Anglican Church and completed gymnasium in Berlin. His Catholic father came from an ancient family of German counts and his Lutheran mother from a family of wealthy merchants. Nesselrode’s co-minister, Count Ioannis A. Kapodistrias, originated from the Greek aristocracy of Corfu, received his education at the University of Padua, and served in the government of the Ionian Islands (the Republic of the Seven United Islands) under Russian protection. After the terms of Tilsit transferred the islands to French protection, Kapodistrias entered Russian service. During the European restorations, Nesselrode and Kapodistrias dominated Russia’s foreign policy, but other diplomats shared their social profile and cultural orientation. David M. Alopeus, the son of a noble from Finland, received his education in Berlin and Stuttgart. Ivan O. Anstett entered Russian service from French service in 1789. Prince Adam E. Czartoryski originated from a family of Polish magnates but ended his life in exile in Paris. Andrei Ia. Italinskii came from the lesser nobility of Ukraine, graduated from the Kiev Theological Academy, and studied medicine in Saint Petersburg, Edinburgh, and London. Prince Christoph A. Lieven belonged to a renowned family of Baltic German nobles who served the Russian monarchy in numerous military and civil capacities. Peter I. Poletika, also a Ukrainian noble, was born in Kiev province to a Turkish mother captured in the siege of Ochakov. Count Karl O. Pozzo di Borgo represented Corsica in the French Constituent Assembly in 1789–91. A royalist, he emigrated in 1796, entered Russian service in 1805, and became Alexander’s minister in Paris in 1814. Not surprisingly, among Emperor Alexander’s diplomatic agents, one also finds representatives of Russia’s great noble families: Prince Dimitrii I. Dolgorukii, Prince Andrew K. Razumovskii, Baron Grigorii A. Stroganov, and Dmitrii P. Tatishchev.
These are just a few of the men who served Emperor Alexander as professional diplomats. Diverse in their national and religious origins, educational experiences, and career paths, their common language was usually French, and their common loyalty was always to the monarch they served, the personification of Russia’s power and greatness. As the foot soldiers of Alexander’s foreign policy, they proved capable of putting before the monarch divergent points of view and of taking the initiative in complicated diplomatic negotiations. Yet for as long as they remained in Russian service, they worked faithfully to fulfill the wishes and execute the policies of Emperor Alexander. As the author of Russian foreign policy and as a leading peacemaker in Europe, Alexander expected his diplomatic agents, in their dealings with other powers, to speak his voice collectively and harmoniously. During the years from 1815 to 1823, the diplomats did just that, laboring tirelessly alongside their sovereign to construct and preserve the European peace.