

Napoleon and Russia

Napoleon's complex battles with Russia and the effects on other countries are charted below

Origins

The British like to recall Napoleon's comment that it was his 'Spanish ulcer' – the long-drawn-out low-intensity war against his army conducted by Spain, Portugal and Britain (1808–14) – that killed him. But it wasn't. It was his 'Russian heart attack' that finished his reign.

As powers at opposite ends of the European continent, France and Russia long had little importance to one another. The situation began to change as a result of the three partitions of Poland, splitting it between Prussia, Austria and Russia. This was, in effect, the first intrusion of Russia into the European balance of power, the latest result of Peter the Great's turn to the West. As French power grew under Napoleon, so his enemies – essentially all other powers – were drawn together in coalitions to resist. None of the coalitions succeeded. Defeated powers were forced into alliances with the conqueror. Domination of Europe left Britain, Sweden

and Russia as remaining enemies. To undermine Britain, Napoleon established the Continental System: economic sanctions banning all European trade with Britain.

Following the great French victory at Austerlitz, Russia was the final Continental target. In 1807, after a resounding Russian defeat at the Battle of Friedland, Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I signed a treaty at Tilsit. According to the Treaty, Russia and France would actively cooperate against enemies. For instance, an Anglo-Russian war began, but there was little action apart from a few maritime skirmishes in the Baltic. Russia also agreed to join the Continental System. Between them, France and Russia had the rest of continental Europe at their feet. However, Russia began trading with Britain and Napoleon decided the only solution was to invade his vast and distant 'frenemy'.

Assault and retreat

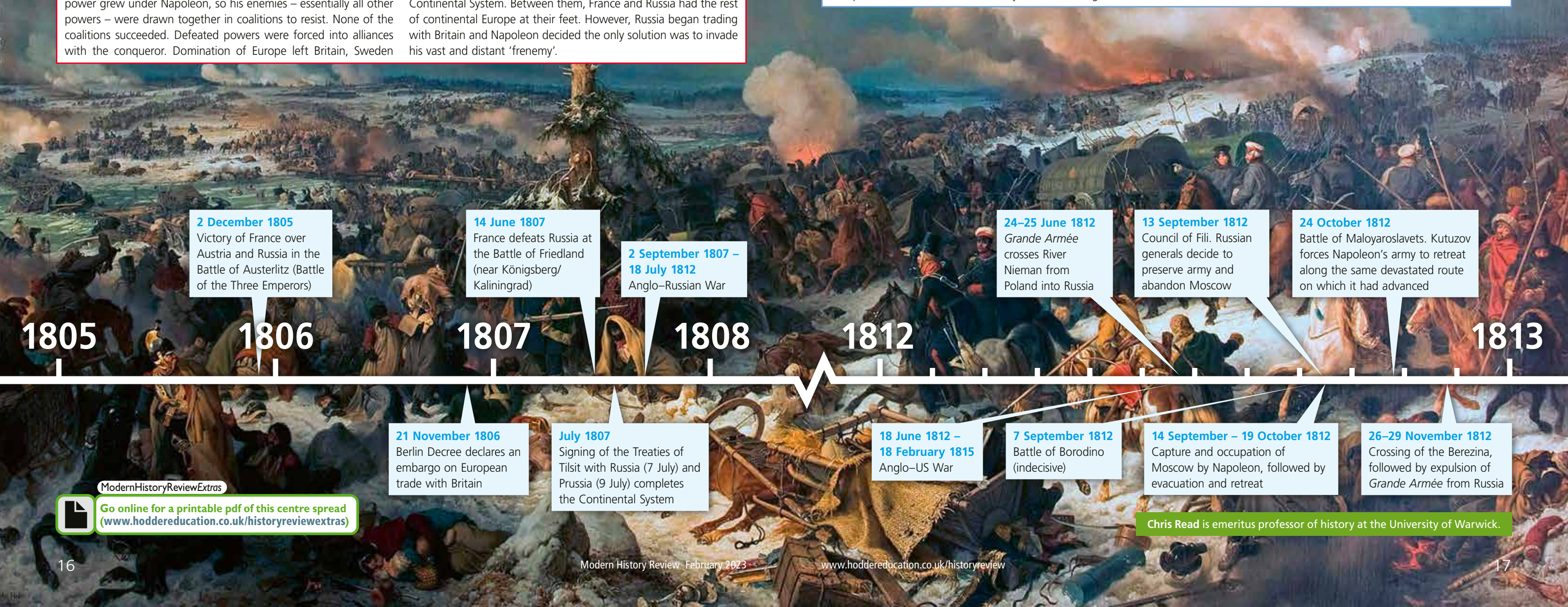
By organising the first modern nation-state, Napoleon was able to raise and maintain armies on an unprecedentedly large scale. As many as 700,000 men were in his *Grande Armée* (Great Army) as it crossed the border into Russia, led personally by Napoleon. The Russian generals refused to make a stand against the giant force and there were no major confrontations. Instead, the Russian army retreated, destroying food resources, bridges and roads as they did so and creating colossal supply and transport difficulties for Napoleon and his troops. In a military Council at Fili, on the outskirts of Moscow, the leading Russian generals decided to abandon Moscow without a fight.

When Napoleon reached the capital, pre-arranged Russian arsonists set much of it on fire. Unable to sustain his army in such conditions, Napoleon had no choice but to retreat after 5 weeks of occupation. The withdrawal was subject to increasing harassment

by Russian forces and turned into a chaotic scramble. Heavy losses were sustained and the trauma of the final major battle, the crossing of the Berezina River in icy winter conditions, burned itself into the soul of France and Russia.

Barely 100,000 of Napoleon's troops returned to France. His enforced allies took advantage of France's weakness and rose up against him. During 1813 almost 30 battles (mostly lost) left his power crumbling, especially the defeat at the Battle of the Nations near Leipzig (16–19 October).

In 1814 enemy armies, including Russians, reached Paris. Napoleon's rule was over apart from his Hundred Days in 1815, when his attempt to return from exile and take advantage of squabbles among the victors of 1814 led only to definitive defeat at Waterloo (18 June 1815).



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Chris Read is emeritus professor of history at the University of Warwick.