

The Napoleon Series

How Many Troops Did Napoleon Have on the Niemen in 1812?

By [François Lelouard](#)

In the various accounts of the Russian campaign, an idea is always suggested to us, whatever the source, that Napoleon's Grande Armée in 1812 was a formidable army, "the army of the twenty nations". Yet the sources on the number of soldiers in this army varied greatly. We are told of 400,000¹ men who would have passed the Niemen in June and then with the reinforcements the figures would reach 611,154 men² to 771,500 men in Wikipedia. In all the cases are always above half a million men. In the case of the Russian Army the figures range from 238,000 men³ to 517,682 men⁴ by the Russian historian Bourtoutin. The disproportionality of forces is clear, but such a discrepancy between the different estimates is surprising in so far as there were documents and staffing figures available to evaluate as closely as possible the exact figure. Why suggest this idea if we are not able to support it by a precise study? Why attempt to do so when one has never tried to do them so precisely in the other Napoleonic Campaigns?

First, it must be admitted that it is extremely difficult to gather documents from all units, even with computer tools, compiling all the information and cross-checking would take an enormous amount of time. The difficulty also lies in the fact of wanting to summarize something that was dynamic to something static. This is similar to the poster of a film which tries to summarize it by showing its important points. But as good as the poster is it cannot summarize the whole film. Baron Lejeune also tried this in his painting of the battle of Moskowa, showing on the same support actions that had occurred at different times in a larger space. Even if the result is good, there is a distortion of reality.

In our case, the document which seems to form the basis of most of the estimates is entitled "Synoptic table of the Grand Army before the Passage of the Niemen, Situation on June 15, 1812". This document can be found on page 371 of Marco de Saint-Hilaire's *Histoire de la campagne de Russie pendant l'année 1812 et de la captivité des prisonniers français en Sibérie*. It consists of three parts, the first comprising the nominative status of the civilian staff of the Emperor, the second part with the numerical strength of the units of the Grand Army, the corps headquarters, artillery parks, engineering as well as the state of the troops in the fortresses, and the third part of the numerical strength of the Russian armies. The

¹ Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *Napoléon et la campagne de Russie 1812*, published in France, by Armand Colin, in 2012.

² Fondation Napoléon, directed by Thierry Lentz, assisted by François Houdecek and Irène Delage, published in France, by Fayard, in 2012. François Houdecek wrote a study *La Grande Armée de 1812, organisation à l'entrée en campagne (Great Army in 1812, Organization at the Beginning of the Campaign)*. He has a master's degree in history and worked on the book *Napoléon Bonaparte correspondance générale*, publiée par la Fondation Napoléon, tome douzième: *La campagne de Russie 1812* a book published by the Fondation Napoléon, where they gathered all the different letters of Napoleon the year 1812. At the end of the book on page 1330 there is this study, and on page 1368 a table of numbers corresponding to the total men involved (611,154).

³ Emile Marco de Saint-Hilaire, *Histoire de la campagne de Russie pendant l'année 1812 et de la captivité des prisonniers français en Sibérie*, published in Paris, by Eugène and Victor Penaud, in 1848

⁴ Colonel Bourtoutine, *Histoire militaire de la campagne de Russie de 1812*, published in Paris, by Anselin and Pochard, in 1824.

form of this document and the precision on the numbers of men, saddle horses and draft horses makes it an authoritative element, which can call into question such precise data?

The first point is that the document gives the situation of the troops available as of June 15, before the passage of the Niemen. So it is for all the troops that are between France and Russia, including those in Germany and in Poland. These troops did not pass the Niemen at the same time but in several waves spread over time. Furthermore some of these troops also had to remain to hold the lines of communications and garrisons. There is a first amalgam by mixing the troops who have made the Russian Campaign with others who never set foot beyond the Niemen. The second amalgam is to consider at the beginning of June that troops such as the XIth Army Corps, commanded by Marshal Augereau, only existed when it was created later in the late summer. Elements of this corps in General Durutte's Division crossed the border at the end of the campaign in November and even in December for its other divisions. If we considered these troops as being part of the campaign and include them in the strength table, it would be appropriate to add for the Russian troops the recruits, the militias and the regiments of Cossacks who joined the Russian army in September and October.

If we go into the detail of the units we can realize that there are many errors. This is not a criticism of others' work because it will take an enormous amount of time and energy to disentangle everything. For example, the 13th Bavarian Infantry Regiment is counted twice in the 6th Bavarian Corps and in the 10th Corps of Marshal MacDonald. The 2nd Infantry Regiment of Baden⁵ which forms part of the 1st Corps to which it was administratively attached, it is also counted in the 9th Corps and in the staff of the Grande Armée. This two-battalion regiment had a battalion detached to the staff, and another battalion, garrisoned at Pillau at the beginning of the campaign, but had joined the Baden Brigade in the 9th Army Corps. Another example is the 13th Polish Infantry Regiment, which was in the division of the Polish General Zayonchek of the 5th Corps. Although the regiment remained on the Polish border to cover the city of Zamosc, during a part of the campaign, yet took part in the end of the campaign in the Kozynski's Division. A great ghost of the Campaign of 1812, is the Danish division of 10,000 men of General Ewald.⁶ It is mentioned in many of the works on the Russian Campaign. The problem is that this division was stationed in Kiel, a Danish possession at the time, in Germany today, its role was to join the French troops to repel a possible English invasion in Germany in the rear of the Grande Armée. It never set foot in Russia.

We see that on one side the numbers for Napoleon are inflated and on the other side the Tsar's troops are being minimized. It is easier to find troops to be add to those of Napoleon. The Lithuanians supplied five regiments of infantry, and four regiments of cavalry, but to add these troops would have shown too clearly the purpose of the campaign. It was more judicious for political reasons to ignore them and not to make them appear anywhere.

This idea of overwhelming numerical superiority allows the things: the first is to increase the number of deaths; the second is to question the military genius of Napoleon; the third is to introduce another idea ubiquitous in the narrative of the Russian campaign the "strategy of the scorched earth", but that is a topic for another time.

⁵ Commandant Sauzey, *Les Allemands sous les aigles Françaises, II le contingent badois*, published in Paris, by Librairie Militaire Chapelot, in 1908.

⁶ Capitaine Fabry, *Campagne de Russie*, supplement (24 juin/10 août) published in Paris, by Librairie Militaire Chapelot, in 1903.

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