Dominique Jean Larrey and the Russian Campaign of 1812

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Larrey’s Background
Early Years

• Born in Beaudean, in the Pyrenees of southern France  July 8 1766
• Educated by the local Catholic priest, Abbe Grasset
• Left home at age 13 to travel to Toulouse, to study medicine under the tutelage of his uncle, Dr. Alexis Larrey
Later Years

- Studied and worked at Toulouse until age 21, when he walked to Paris to study with Desault.
- Left Paris to join the Navy, sailing from Brest to Newfoundland in 1788, serving as the ship’s doctor of the *Vigilante* for some 6 months.
- Returned to Paris, and participated in the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, along with some 1500 students.
Years of early military service . . .

- Conscripted into the Army in March 1792
- Set off to serve in the Army of the Rhine, fighting the Prussians in Germany
- During these battles, Larrey formulated his ideas about establishing a “Flying Ambulance”, designed to better care for the war wounded
  - This included light wagons, specifically designed to transport wounded out of harm’s way, and back to the awaiting surgeons
Flying Ambulances---included special wagons to carry wounded
“These brave Republicans with many others on that day, found their safety in the flying ambulance which was now known throughout the entire army for the immediate help it could bring in all battles”.
Later Army service . . . .

- After the Battle of the Rhine, Larrey was to go to southern France and to Spain for several years as a young surgeon in the Army
- He was then called by Napoleon to join him in northern Italy in 1797
- His “Flying Ambulance” by then was an established part of the Army
- He also was convinced by then that he should treat everyone, “. . . without regard to rank or distinction.”
Larrey and Napoleon

- From 1797 until 1815 (Waterloo), Larrey served Napoleon during numerous campaigns, and many battles.
- Larrey was, for much of this time, the Surgeon to the Imperial Guard.
- He went with Napoleon throughout Europe, and also into the Middle East, particularly Egypt.
Preparations for War

- In February of 1812, Larrey began hearing rumors of another large campaign, but nobody knew where the Army would be going.
- Larrey was named Chief Surgeon of the Army, and began preparing his flying ambulances.
- This was a time of austerity, and of a general shortage of physicians and materiel, making Larrey’s challenges immense.
Methods of Warfare in 1812

• Some supplies available
• Some food provided
• However, much of the Army subsisted on food that was plundered, fuel that was gathered
• Larrey very often had to innovate to find material for dressings, food for his wounded
Preparations for War

• The Army, once together, consisted of some 400,000 men, including Prussians, Austrians, Italians. These soldiers, from subjugated countries, were not a cohesive fighting force. Only about half of the Army was from France.

• Some 60,000 of the Army were sick at the beginning of the march.
Marching through Europe

- The *Grande Armée* began marching toward the east, not knowing their final destination.
- Larrey went through Mainz, in present day Germany, to Berlin, arriving 2 April 1812, where he gathered his surgeons together and assessed their capabilities.
- They continued to march, eventually crossing the Vistula and finally, on 3 June 1812, Napoleon announced that they were going to Russia.
Marching Through Europe

• As the Army continued east, they began to encounter resistance from the Russians.
• Various cities were captured and plundered.
• Schnaps was consumed in large amounts, killing a substantial number of troops.
• Some of the towns were torched.
• The weather began making roads impassable, and the Army was strung out over many miles.
Alexander was Napoleon’s primary foe in Russia, and stated this:

“I know that the Emperor Napoleon is a great general; but you see I have the advantage of space and time. There is no remote corner of this vast country to which I will not withdraw, no distant part that I will not defend, rather than agree to a shameful peace. I do not attack, but I will not lay down my arms as long as there remains a single foreign soldier in Russia.”
Larrey and the Administration

- Larrey was an honest man in the midst of gross incompetence and dishonesty.
- The Administration was known to withhold food from wounded who could not pay, as well as taking equipment and selling it to the enemy, providing inferior supplies, running out of supplies, etc. etc. etc.
“He tormented the generals, and disturbed them out of their beds at night whenever he wanted accommodations or assistance for the wounded or sick. They were all afraid of him, as they knew he would instantly come and make a complaint to me. He paid court to none of them, and was the implacable enemy of the fournisseurs (army contractors).”
Another example of Larrey and the Administration

- Larrey killed a general’s horse and made it into soup for his wounded during a separate campaign battle (not in Russia)
Borodino

The Battle of Borodino, (also called the Battle of the Moskova), September 7, 1812, was one of the huge battles in warfare history, and later inspired Tchaikovsky to compose The 1812 Overture. Borodino was a small town, about 75 miles west of Moscow. Larrey estimated 127,000 French, and 140,000 Russians were facing each other there. Larrey had several days to prepare for this battle, and had many other members of his ambulances report from the rear to help. There were 2000 cannons in total, and there was slaughter on a massive scale.
Battle of Borodino
Larrey at Borodino
The Human Costs of Borodino

- 12,000 French and 20,000 Russians lay dead or wounded at the end of the battle
- Larrey applied his principle of operating on the most severely wounded first, without regard to rank or distinction (enemy or friend)
- Larrey performed some 200 amputations in 24 hours after Borodino
  - (about one each 8 minutes)
Amputation Techniques
Moscow

• After Borodino, the French were somewhat surprised to find little or no resistance as they went another 70 miles or so into Moscow.
• Initially, from a distance, they found the city beautiful.
• They entered Moscow on September 14th, one week after Borodino, finding it abandoned.
• Soon, however, the city began burning.
The Pillaging of Moscow

• The French soldiers began pillaging food, liquor, wine, and taking risks by going into burning buildings to get anything of use to them. After 8-10 days, the entire city, except for stone buildings, had been reduced to ashes. And the army began to be despondent, as it could no longer obtain needed sustenance, cloth, and other necessities.
Lack of Discipline and Order

Soldiers were burning beautiful furniture to keep warm. They were sporting expensive furs, cashmere shawls, gold cloth from Persia. They were sitting in elegant chairs, out in the mud. Pillaging continued, and none of the soldiers seemed interested in what they were eventually going to eat, or how they were going to live. Everyone was living for the moment, gathering wine, spirits, gold, and silver.
Leaving Moscow

• After staying in Moscow for over one month, on 29 October Napoleon decided to leave the city and attempt to attack one of the Russian armies to the south and west.

• A mob left Moscow, rather than an army.

• Many civilians (30,000) came with the soldiers.

• Much loot was taken, burdening the looter.
The Great Trek Back

• Napoleon quickly abandoned plans to fight the Russians and turned the army north and west, to join the route followed into Moscow.

• Napoleon’s army was able to go through the towns and cities they had recently taken.

• This was an advantage for Larrey, who could care again for the wounded. However, these cities were often burned, and already plundered, making it impossible to find food and shelter.
The Great Trek Back

- People carrying plunder began discarding it.
- The great iron cross, stolen from the Ivan The Great Bell Tower in Moscow, was cast into the lake at Semlewo.
- The weather began to be freezing, and the troops did not have warm weather clothing.
“I was astonished, on the approach to Smolensk, at the sight of a young woman pushed to extremes by her hunger. She threw herself into the midst of a group of soldiers who were disemboweling a native horse, and, even though she was wearing a magnificent fur cloak lined with white satin, plunged her hands into the animal’s belly to tear out the liver. But without a knife she was forced to use her teeth. At last she emerged with a piece of the delicacy and ran off to roast it at the first bivouac fire she could find. Alas! How many of these unfortunate women succumbed to the tragic effects of their overpowering need. Nearly all our wounded died from hunger.”
Cold

- Huge numbers of soldiers and civilians succumbed to cold.
- Larrey believed that by walking, he was able to avoid frostbite and hypothermia, so he walked almost all the way back to Germany.
- The temperature plunged to around 35 degrees below zero on 8th of December.
Cold

“The borders of the trail were covered with soldiers who had perished in the march during the night of December 8-9. . . . We were all in a state of torpor, and we had difficulty recognizing each other. We walked in a morbid silence. Vision and muscle force were weak, to the point that it was difficult to follow a direction or maintain balance. He who no longer had any force would fall at the feet of comrades, who did not even turn their eyes to recognize him. . . . “
Crossing the Berensina

• The Berensina is a large river, and was choked with ice
• The Russians had destroyed its bridge, trapping the French
• Two pontoon bridges were built upstream from the destroyed bridge, over which the entire army needed to cross
Larrey’s Life Saved

• After crossing the temporary bridge twice, and bringing back needed equipment, Larrey tried to go back a third time.

• He was trapped in the mob, and almost perished, when the soldiers recognized him and passed him over their heads to safety.
The Admiration for Larrey

During this dangerous time, Larrey had his life saved on many occasions by the common soldiers, who loved him and treated him as a hero. He was given rations. He was given room at the bivouac fires. He saw generals and senior officers turned away, denied warmth, shelter, or food, while he had all of that and more. He told this wife:

“Beloved Laville, these signs of the love of the army for me are the greatest rewards I could wish for.”
Napoleon leaving his army at Smorgoni to go back to France Nov 29 1812
Final Results of the Russian Campaign

“Three thousand of the elite of the guard, as many infantry as cavalry, and all from the southern provinces of France, were the only ones who had withstood the cruel hardships of the retreat. They still had their arms, their horses, and their military bearing. . . . all that remained of an army of 400,000 men. The honour and glory of French arms were enshrined in this small elite corps.”
Minard’s Famous Depiction of the French Army Going and Coming Back
Losses Among Medics

After Larrey arrived in Frankfurt-am-Oder, near Berlin, we can assume that the Russian Campaign was officially over, although it is somewhat difficult to assign an exact date and time to its termination. At that point, on February 10, 1813, Larrey tallied up the cost of the war in terms of medical assets lost to report to the Minister of War. He found that out of 826 original surgeons, 275 remained. Of those lost, 30 were dead, 137 were prisoners, 383 were missing, and one had taken his discharge.
Evidences of Larrey Today
Southern Pillar Arc de Triomphe
Val de Grace
Val de Grace Church and Hospital with Larrey’s Statue in Courtyard
Larrey’s Statue at Val de Grace
Gravestone in Pere Lachaise Cemetery
Les Invalides in Paris
Cathedral of Les Invalides
Lessons from Larrey

• Early advocate of humanitarian medicine
• Care of and devotion to the wounded
• Continuous teaching and promotion of surgical education and training
• Innovative, using resources at hand
• Honesty
• Sacrifice
• Always willing to challenge the establishment for the betterment of his patients
A favorite Larrey quote . . . .

- To do something as difficult as to be a military surgeon, I am convinced that one must
  - Shun fortune
  - Devote oneself entirely to the patient
  - Maintain an absolute integrity