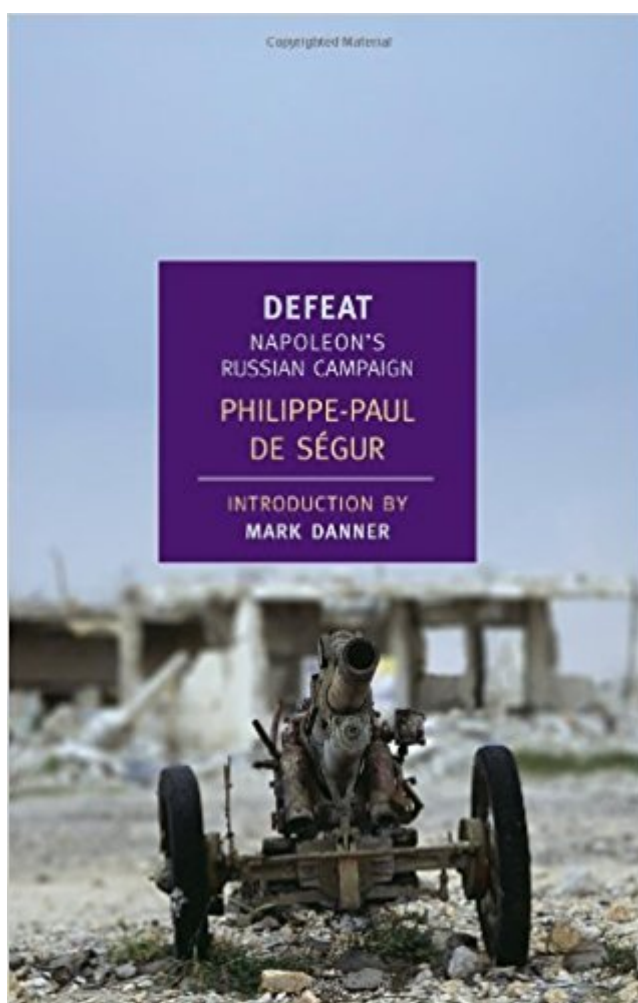


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# Defeat: Napoleon's Russian Campaign (New York Review Books Classics)



## Synopsis

In the summer of 1812 Napoleon gathered his fearsome Grande Armée, more than half a million strong, on the banks of the Niemen River. He was about to undertake the most daring of all his many campaigns: the invasion of Russia. Meeting only sporadic opposition and defeating it easily along the way, the huge army moved forward, advancing ineluctably on Moscow through the long hot days of summer. On September 14, Napoleon entered the Russian capital, fully anticipating the Czar's surrender. Instead he encountered an eerily deserted city and silence. The French army sacked the city, and by October, with Moscow in ruins and his supply lines overextended, and with the Russian winter upon him, Napoleon had no choice but to turn back. One of the greatest military debacles of all time had only just begun. In this famous memoir, Philippe-Paul de Ségur, a young aide-de-camp to Napoleon, tells the story of the unfolding disaster with the keen eye of a crack reporter and an astute grasp of human character. His book, a fundamental inspiration for Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, is a masterpiece of military history that teaches an all-too-timely lesson about imperial hubris and its risks.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is *War and Peace* without the peace and the love interest, and therefore a fraction of the length. But it was Tolstoy's major source: the History of Napoleon and the Grande Armée in 1812, the diaries of Bonaparte's aide de camp, Philippe-Paul, Comte de Ségur, was first published in 1824. Defeat is a reissue of the 1958 translation by the late David Townsend, with an introduction

by the journalist and historian Mark Danner...His account of the march on Moscow is a work of reflection and justification as well as narrative, but it still conveys the horror." --London Times

Count de Ségur's famed diary of Napoleon's Russian campaign is not just another book about Bonaparte; it is the main source of a thousand schoolbooks, cartoons, legends, sermons and second thoughts for would-be conquerors. Ségur wonderfully evokes the opening scenes of the disastrous war. [he] was a war chronicler ranking with Herodotus and Bernal Díaz.

"Time magazine: The influence of the work now made available in a new translation, was felt for many years. The giants of literature used it as a source book and as an inspiration. It is still the most vivid account of that apocalyptic disaster. Its appeal is eternal."

"The New York Times (June 22, 1958): The book is valuable, a most entertaining and interesting work."

"The New York Times (June 5th, 1895): Ségur served throughout the Napoleonic era as an aide-de-camp to the Emperor, becoming a brigadier on the eve of the Russian campaign. His memoirs remain the classic account of the destruction of the Grand Army."

"Parameters, The US Army War College Quarterly: Military History Appeal: One of the most celebrated debacles in all military history, it is the subject of a brilliant eye-witness account. extremely well written. Filled with exact observation and filled also with the grief and horror Ségur had personally experienced, it is one of the enduring classics of war memoirs. Its narrative of battles and routs, starvation and panic, is outstanding. Its close-up view of Napoleon vacillating and apprehensive, blundering into defeat, is fascinating."

"The New York Times (July 25, 1958)

Philippe-Paul de Ségur (1780-1873), the scion of an old French aristocratic family, was the son of Louis-Philippe de Ségur, a diplomat and historian who welcomed the Revolution and aligned himself with Napoleon. Sharing his father's sympathies, the young Ségur enlisted in the French cavalry in 1800 and quickly rose to become a member of Napoleon's personal staff. Ségur distinguished himself repeatedly in battle and supported the Emperor until the final defeat at Waterloo. His *History of Napoleon and the Grande Armée in the Year 1812* was published in two volumes in 1824, and the book, a great success which sold out ten editions in three years, was widely translated. Effectively retired from the army during the Restoration, Ségur was promoted to lieutenant general and received a peerage after the establishment of the July Monarchy in 1830. He was enrolled in the French Academy in 1830 and received the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor in 1847. His other books include a *History of Russia and Peter the Great* as well as his posthumously published memoirs.

Mark Danner has written about war and politics for two decades, covering conflicts in Latin America, the Balkans, and the Middle East, among other stories. His

books include *The Massacre at El Mozote*, *Torture and Truth*, and *The Secret Way to War*. J. David Townsend was a Methodist minister who served for sixteen years as a missionary in Algeria and was the pastor of churches in Paris and in Cohasset, Massachusetts. His translation and abridgement of Ségur's masterpiece was first published in 1958 as Napoleon's Russian Campaign.

The narrative about the defeat and routing of Napoleon's Grand Army is graceful and detailed. Segur's understanding of Napoleon's fears, anxieties, superstitions, his temerity yet hesitant, erratic decisions facing well-concealed doubts is an extraordinary personal history of a man fate has abandoned amidst bad judgments and declining competence. Napoleon is a fallen hero here, someone we can scarcely reconcile with his glorious cinnamon-colored marble tomb in Invalides in Paris. While the reader follows the movement of troops on opposing sides, overwhelming these manoeuvres is the accursed winter ice and snow and minus temperatures devastating the strongest as the wounded and setting the stage as the true enemy of every living soul in Russia. Yearning to return to France and its benign climate was the companionable hope of every French soldier awake or asleep, a vision that dissolved in a petrifying glacial death at the hands of nature. This Russian campaign stands alongside monumental invasions of classical times.

Written by a member of Napoleon's staff, *Defeat* is one of the most compelling books I've read in a long time. The Grand Armée advances through Russia all the way to Moscow and occupies the city as it is being abandoned and burned by the Russians themselves. The Czar decides to destroy his own capital to avoid Russian peasants joining the French. Then the Russian winter sets in as Napoleon begins the slow dreadful retreat. The retreat and withdrawal prove disastrous on a scale that almost defies belief. Yet De Segur witnessed and records every grim detail in this remarkable book written a few years later. The translation is excellent and the book flows like a novel. For anyone interested in military history and the Napoleonic wars this is indispensable.

I've heard of authors appearing in court to defend their literary art, but Count Philippe-Paul de Segur risked his life twice: first, during the deadly Russian Campaign itself when, as personal aide to Napoleon, he wrote down his observations while men dropped dead all around him; then, the second time, after the resulting memoir was published in 1824, an intimate friend of Napoleon thought Segur was too critical of the fallen emperor and challenged him to a duel, during which the author was wounded. While Segur had been loyal to Napoleon right up to Waterloo, apparently for

some readers, he should not have acknowledged the good qualities of the Russians, nor should he have drawn such a detailed portrait of Napoleon under pressure. While you can read for yourself how the French emperor and his most brilliant Marshals and officers were drawn deep into Russia, then defeated by the winter and harried out of the vast country by an steady flow of Russian troops and resources, there are three things that stand out to me. First of all, Segur was familiar with the craft of writing, how to take the facts and shape them concisely for a purpose. He knew how to use the actual battle scenes, the entry into Moscow, and Napoleon's temperament to develop his plot, to turn each scene lyrically. Obviously, Segur began his memoir with the end in mind, namely, to illustrate one of history's greatest lessons about one nation attacking another. People loved Napoleon, but Segur concludes, ". . . this great man in those great circumstances was unable to subdue nature . . . . certain mistakes were made, which were punished by abysmal suffering," Segur continues. "On this ocean of disaster, I have erected a melancholy beacon with a lurid beam; and if my weak hand has not been equal to the painful task, I have at least attempted to give this warning, that those who came after us may see the peril and avoid it" (289). Segur wrote with a coherent, carefully gauged purpose which he sustained throughout, thereby, making this military memoir a classic. Secondly, Segur shows why men were willing to follow Napoleon to the ends of the earth. I won't go into detail, but the Emperor must have had a seductive personality, charming manners, and a cult of celebrity built around him. Throughout the book, Segur shows us Napoleon's fine qualities as a person--yes, he had them--and many wise sayings were attributed to him. After riding through the Borodino battlefield littered with corpses, a dying soldier groaned; someone said that it is only a Russian, to which Napoleon replied, "There are no enemies after a victory, but only men!" (81). Thirdly, Segur acknowledges the fine qualities of the Russians. Previously, the French had defeated the them in Western Europe in 1805 and again in 1807, but on their own soil, in 1812, they did not crush the French when they could have--they let the winter do its horrible work. I've never heard ice on a river described to feel so cold in the reading, nor have I heard what it looks like when men living or dead slip beneath the ice to freeze in the grip of the frigid water. But--winter or not--in other scenes, the Russian troops often seemed to hold back. At one point, Segur claims that once the commanding officers noticed that the weather was defeating the French, they refrained from attacking. "Comrades, we must do them justice," Segur writes of the Russian enemy after Moscow. In burning their own capital, "Their sacrifice was complete, without reservation or tardy regrets; and since that time they have never made any demands on us, even in our capital [Paris], which they left unharmed" (118). Yes, two years later, in 1814, the Russians occupied Paris (with other nations) but did not take the revenge they could have. "Their reputation has remained high and spotless," Segur

concluded. Of course, he was French and he believed the Russians as a whole had not developed culturally. This astonishing account of the disintegration of an army of over half a million men, mostly French, but from anyone willing to follow the charismatic Napoleon, is a must read for background on 19th-century literature. Of course, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* comes to mind, but so does Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*. The Pierre-Antoine Daru mentioned frequently as Napoleon's Minister of War was an older cousin of the writer-to-be (who was merely Henri Beyle then). Daru was a close relation of Beyle's mother and got Beyle/Stendhal his first serious government career-track job, which alas would have been fatal if the 29-year-old Beyle hadn't learned some survival skills. After I finished Segur's account, I read Beyle/Stendhal's letters which he managed to send out to friends and family during the retreat from Moscow; Beyle claims he managed to keep his sang-froid during the disaster--once you're far into the mess there's no point in whining--but lost his carriage, money, journals, everything but the clothes he wore. How one survives such military disasters is a mystery to me, but the fact that certain men still order others into battle is--if not hubris--an insane pursuit after empire.

Excellent short book from an eye witness participant. Many details were new to me even though I thought I knew a lot about Napoleon's invasion of Russia. Every child should be taught that invading Russia during the winter on foot, with only summer clothes, not enough food and having a confused idea of your goals, is as bad an idea as starting a land war in Asia.

Great works fine every time

Very easy read.

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