

L' ARMEE FRANCAISE
A Special Scenario for the Wargamer

C'est la Berezina

The Battle for the River Crossing
28 November 1812



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Images believed to be from [Le blog de artmabigor](#) via Pinterest.

The unfortunate men who had not taken advantage of the night to get away had at the first appearance of dawn rushed on to the bridge, but now it was too late. Preparations were already made to burn it down. Numbers jumped into the water, hoping to swim through the floating bits of ice, but not one reached the shore. I saw them all there in water up to their shoulders, and, overcome by the terrible cold, they all miserably perished. On the bridge was a canteen man carrying a child on his head. His wife was in front of him, crying bitterly. I could not stay any longer, it was more than I could bear. Just as I turned away, a cart containing a wounded officer fell from the bridge, with the horse also. They next set fire to the bridge, and I have been told that scenes impossible to describe for horror then took place...

Bourgogne, Adrien Jean Baptiste François, Sergeant, Grande Armee, 1812

Battle for the Berezina Crossing, 1812

28 November 1812



It was called the St. Petersburg Plan, and had but one goal in mind, a goal which was most certainly not the expulsion of Napoleon I and his *Grande Armee* from Russia. Instead, the final object was the utter and total destruction of the French army and the capture or death of the Emperor of France. Only then would the misery inflicted upon Holy Russia be avenged.

The time was the end of November 1812, and Napoleon with the battered Franco-Allied army was in full retreat westward, hoping to cross the River Berezina and then march to safety in Poland. Napoleon's army by this time, however, was not much more than a shell of its original strength, with only some 75,000 men (to include 30 – 40,000 stragglers) remaining from an original strength of 685,000. And as it did throughout the entire retreat, nature seemed eager to conspire against the French. An unexpected warm spell had thawed the Berezina which meant the French could not simply cross by marching over the ice. The river would have to be bridged. Worse still, Napoleon had ordered the pontoon train destroyed to lighten the army's burden and increase its ability to move.

Czar Alexander I hoped to take advantage of this situation by trapping Napoleon against the banks of the Berezina via a three pronged attack delivered by several Russian formations. Marshal Prince Mikhail H. Kutuzov with the main Russian army of 54,000 continued to pursue Napoleon from the east. Supporting him and moving towards the Berezina from the northeast was General Prince Peter K. Wittgenstein and the Russian I Corps, about 35,000 men. Finally, Admiral (yes, Admiral) Pavel V. Chichagov's Army of the Danube marched north from Moldavia with another 35,000 men to complete the ambush. Of these forces, Chichagov's was by far the most important as it had the task of securing the west bank of the Berezina between Studyanka and Borisov, thus preventing the French from crossing. This would allow Kutuzov and Wittgenstein to catch Napoleon with his back to an unfordable river and destroy him.

Fortunately, Napoleon recognized the danger and acted swiftly to mitigate it. Using one of only two intact Corps of *Armee* left in command, Marshal Nicolas C. Oudinot's II Corps, Napoleon ordered a series of demonstrations on the east bank southward to Borisov. The idea was to pull Chichagov away from Studyanka where Napoleon hoped to bridge the Berezina. The ruse worked, in part due to some unwitting assistance by Kutuzov. At issue was a dispatch to Chichagov exhorting him not to be tricked by Napoleon, and to carefully watch his southern flank. Noting Oudinot's troops "searching" for crossing points near Borisov, Chichagov put two and two together and moved his little army south into the town. Oudinot's forces drove the Russians out, but not before they burned all nearby bridges. Seemingly, then, Chichagov's work was done as the west bank was firmly in Russian hands where Napoleon intended to cross.

It wasn't. In reality Chichagov's reaction enabled the French to force a small detachment across the Berezina at Studyanka, establish a bridgehead and invite the real hero of this battle to begin his tedious but lifesaving work the night of 25-26 November. That man was General Jean Baptiste Eble, chief of the army's pontooneers, who were primarily Dutch. Going against Napoleon's wishes he had surreptitiously maintained a number of wagon-drawn forges and tools for his men even though all pontoons had been destroyed. This decision quite probably saved the French army. Working under hideous conditions Eble built two 100-meter trestle bridges across the Berezina, repairing some each time one might become damaged.

Chichagov eventually realized he had been snookered and moved to destroy the crossing, only to be rebuffed by Oudinot who had moved his corps across the trestles to protect the bridgehead on the west bank. Meanwhile on the east bank, the other of Napoleon's relatively untouched corps, Marshal Claude Victor-Perrin's IX Corps, acted as rearguard against Wittgenstein who finally arrived on 26 November to assist Chichagov. Wittgenstein's efforts were halfhearted at best, but he did manage to capture Victor's 12th Division almost in total. The division garrisoned Borisov and when told to withdraw

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somehow lost its way and actually marched into the Russian army rather than away from it.

Regardless, French resistance was sturdy enough to halt all Russian incursions and enable a huge portion of the Grande Armee to cross Eble's rickety bridges unmolested throughout the day and night of the 26th. The French army continued to cross as quickly as possible on the 27th, as both sides took a deep breath, awaited reinforcements and prepared for a final decisive clash on the 28th.

Russian plans for battle were discussed in a council of war where Chichagov, technically Wittgenstein's superior, directed a combined assault against the French rear guards on both banks of the Berezina, beginning at 5:00AM early morning 28 November. He also asked Wittgenstein for two division's worth of reinforcements to support his west bank movement, which he anticipated as being the primary focus of the Russian attack. The Admiral also confiscated Kutuzov's recently arrived vanguard, General Aleksey P Yermolov's Cossacks, for additional support. Wittgenstein, who personally despised Chichagov, agreed. Sort of.

The next morning, right on schedule, the Army of the Danube moved north, ready to scrap. Leading the attack was General Yefim Chaplits Advance Guard, mostly light infantry and cavalry, as well as attached artillery. There were also two full infantry divisions in reserve, bringing total strength to 25 – 35,000 men. Facing them on the west bank was Oudinot's II Corps, the remnants of Marshal Ney's III Corps (about 400 men, and no, there is no "0" missing), Polish V Corps, Polish Vistula Legion, General Jean-Pierre Doumerc's Cuirassier Division and the Imperial Guard, about 20 – 25,000 men total. Behind them the army's final battalions, as well as hordes of stragglers, continued to shuffle over Eble's bridges of salvation, each praying the Almighty was truly Roman Catholic after all. As it turned out, He was indeed.

The Almighty spoke and Chaplits made little headway against the French and soon called for support, Chichagov responding with the 9th and 18th Divisions. However, given his inexperience on land, he turned direct supervision of these two units over to his Chief of Staff, General Ivan V. Sabaneyev. He in turn, deployed his infantry into an open, dispersed formation, likely due to his own light infantry expertise and the forested

nature of nearby terrain. Mortified local commanders tried in vain to find Sabaneyev and change the deployment as most realized,

"French soldiers had an advantage over ours since they acted without orders, were accustomed to acting alone and shot better."

Call it divine providence or luck, but Napoleon undoubtedly smiled because here was the mistake, he had for so long waited. Messengers scurried and then the command "Squadrons, by the left flank, march!" rang out through the forest. It was 12 noon, and to the horror of the soldiers of Holy Russia, the ground beneath them began to tremble.

The movement felt was the charge of General Doumerc's 1,200 cuirassiers, with 1,100 Polish lancers right behind in support. Seeing the Russians unformed and knowing they would not be able to form square, Napoleon unleashed these "iron men" over the hills and through the woods, smashing into man and musket before they could react. Chaplits penned,

"This cavalry charge had a tremendous effect, especially since the soldiers, who were supposed to support me, were scattered all around the woods and, in the confusion, began firing in my rear so I found myself between fires. This only increased the commotion among our troops."

He wasn't joking. Against all expectations the charge actually trampled both the 9th and 18th Divisions, bagging 3,000 prisoners as a bonus. It also irrevocably shifted the battle in Napoleon's favor, as for the rest of the day the Russians could mount no coherent attack on the west bank. During this period of combat, Napoleon's Swiss regiments were particularly distinguished, resorting to howling-mad bayonet charges when their ammunition was expended.

But what of Wittgenstein's attack on the east bank? At about two in the afternoon General Prince Wittgenstein - without two divisions of reinforcements - crossed the Berezina via Borisov to confer with one hopping mad Russian admiral. He had good reason. Wittgenstein's 5:00AM attack did not begin until 10 o'clock and then with only 14,000 of the 35,000 men available. For God knows what reason Wittgenstein left Count Fabian Steiheil's division in Borisov to disarm French prisoners. What attack went forward was anything but enthusiastic, and Victor's 7,400 men and 16 guns were

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able to parry all attacks, allowing most remaining stragglers to cross Eble's bridges.

And perhaps these stragglers deserve our thoughts far more than the admittedly brave warriors who fought here, for they define war for what it really is – pitiless insanity, and nothing more. While crossing, the wounded, women and children often came within range of Russian artillery. Historian Alexander Mikaberidze recounts,

“Captain Kurz saw that a young woman, with a toddler, had her thigh ripped away by a cannonball. Realizing this was the end, she kissed her daughter tenderly before strangling her; clutching her in her arms, she then lay down to await death.”

Such could bring a frozen tear to even the toughest grenadier, and on this day, often did.

By nightfall it was all over, with Victor's IX Corps withdrawing across the Berezina bridges around midnight. Casualty counts vary depending upon the source, but a good estimate would be 15,000 combatants lost on each side, with 10,000 French stragglers additionally killed or captured. A multitude of generals on both sides found themselves casualties, but perhaps the most tragic was Admiral Chichagov himself, and he suffered nary a scratch. Despite the eyewitness testimony from a variety of senior officers as to how Wittgenstein deliberately torpedoed Russian efforts during the battle, it was the Admiral that became the scapegoat. Dismissed from the service in 1813, he left Russia and became a British citizen, dying in Paris in 1849.

Today the phrase “C'est la Berezina” defines absolute disaster in French. But this refers more to the campaign itself rather than this single battle. Indeed, the primary result of the battle of Berezina was that Napoleon escaped to fight another day, his reputation intact if not enhanced. In reality this was the real disaster, but for the Russians and not the French. By failing to snap the trap shut that frosty November morning, they condemned Europe to another three years of war. It is irony personified.

The Scenario.

The crossing of the Berezina is both a tricky and excellent miniatures scenario for several reasons. If played in 15mm, its size is feasible for both tactical

level gaming where the battalion or regiment is the base unit, and grand tactical affairs where the brigade is the base unit. Likewise, the entire game can be played on an 8-foot-by-6-foot board: a very common size at conventions. However, the length of the game may well make it unsuitable for convention play where players may be unfamiliar with the rules.

The tricky part comes about because of the nature of the armies involved, particularly the French with its multitude of Allies. The long campaign had taken its toll on both armies, and units were extremely small in many cases. As noted before, Marshal Ney's III Corps was down to but 400 men by November 1812, whereas it began the campaign with 40,000. A total of 400 men is actually less than the paper strength of a single French battalion, much less a regiment, brigade, division or corps. Now consider that Ney's corps not only had French, but German Wurttemberg infantry as well, and these 400 souls become a gaggle of various troop types and nationalities fused together into a single whole. Similarly, what set of rules includes unit stats for “Stragglers?” To make such a scenario work, the gamemaster will have to do a little fudging when he creates his order of battle.

Scale: For 15mm, in AOE, each inch equals 120 yards, and in FOGN each inch equals 67 yards. In AOE for this scenario each stand of infantry represents 320 - 360 infantry, 150 - 180 cavalrymen or a single battery of 6 – 12 guns. Straggler stands equate to 500 sick, lame and lazy.

Map: The board is based on Dmitry Buturlin's *Histoire militaire de la campagne de Russie en 1812*. Vol. 1-2 (Paris; SPb., 1824). On this map each square is 12 inches by 12 inches, which are playing surface dimensions based on the larger AOE scale.

Game Length: The game begins at 5:00AM in AOE, when Chichagov's Russians enter the board at point D, and ends about dusk, or perhaps 4:00 pm. In AOE, which uses 30-minute turns, this equates to 20 turns.

Terrain: Terrain features should be pretty self-explanatory, but the Berezina River can only be crossed at Eble's two trestle bridges. The Bolshoi Road affords Road Movement benefits in both game systems. Other roads are stamped dirt but are in such poor condition that they provide no benefit to movement, other than to negate adjacent terrain

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effects if a unit is traveling along them in a road column. The hill slopes on the maps rise in elevation moving AWAY from the Berezina. Other specific issues by rules system are as follows. Marshes, villages, slopes (to include riverbanks), and woods are considered "Rough Terrain" for movement. Units whereby at least half the formation is defending in a village, in woods, or totally upslope receive a + 1 DRM (Die Roll Modifier) in close combat. Likewise, units firing at target where at least half the formation occupies woods or a village must take a -1 DRM. Cavalry charging across a marsh or into villages is automatically "Disordered". Cavalry is NOT disordered charging into or through woods, though Line of Sight restrictions do apply.

The Armies: The armies are deployed as indicated on the pdf map download or enter the map at the time and place indicated. Commanders should be placed on the board not more than one turn's movement away from a unit in their command. Other specifics are given for as follows:

Unit Labels: These are provided on the order of battle pages, containing all information necessary to create the French and Russian armies for this battle. The unit ratings are pretty much straight out of the rules book. There is one exception. For this battle, all Russian hussar units are designated "lancers" as research now indicates that they were indeed so armed and properly trained. French stragglers, use the characteristics for

Russian Opolchenie, noting this is a might generous given the wretched state these people were in.

Leaders: The leader ratings for AOE are shown on the unit labels. Ney also rates as Charismatic, and in reality, has no command at the start of the game. He can be used to immediately replace Oudinot, or Victor should either become a casualty (as actually happened to Oudinot in the historical engagement). Poniatowski is also Charismatic, but only for Polish units.

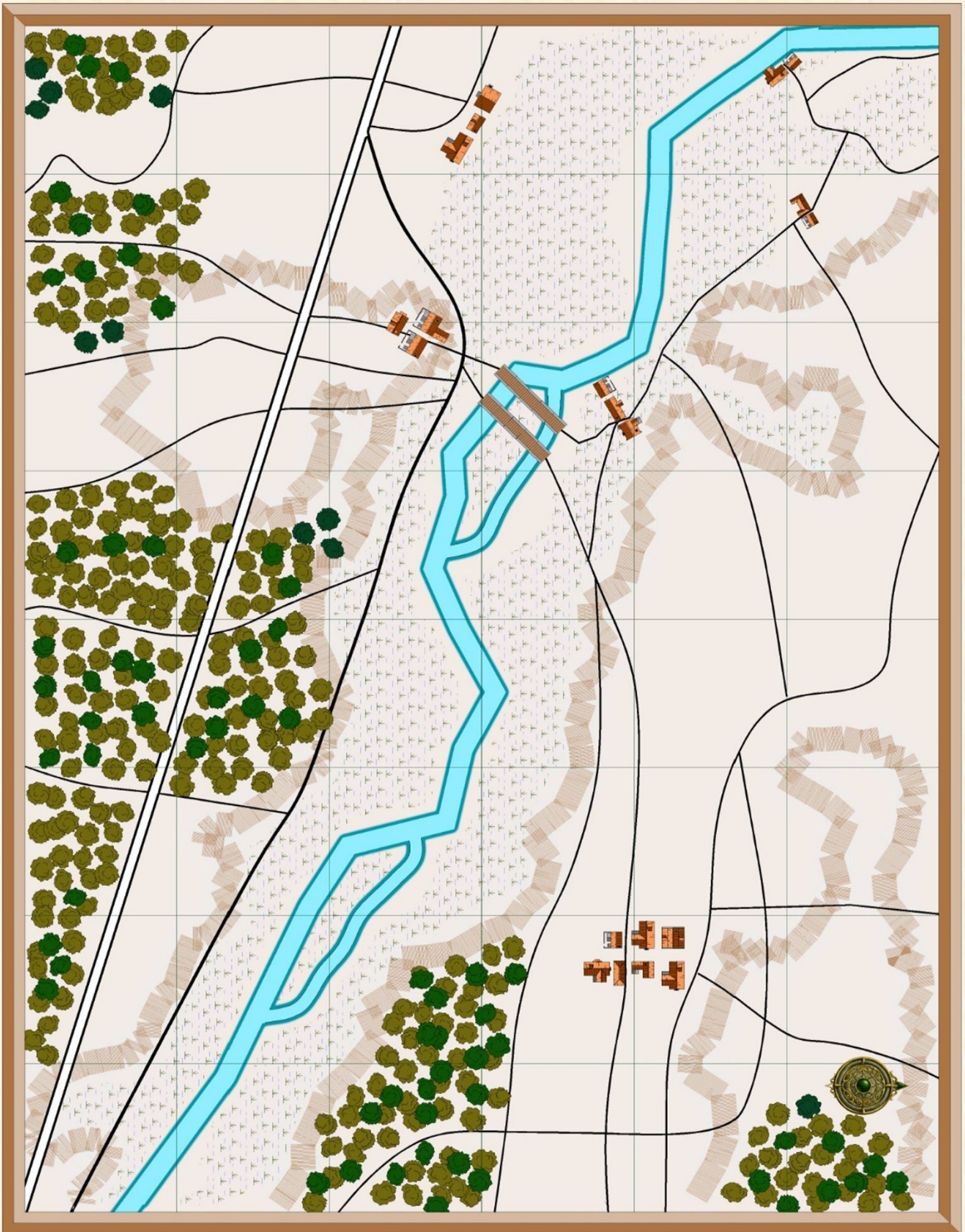
Reinforcements: All French forces begin the game on map, but Russian forces are deployed off map and enter in road column. In AOE Wittgenstein enters at points A, B and C beginning with the 10:00 AM game turn, while Chichagov's Russians enter along the road at point D, also in road column, at 5:00 AM. Entering the board is automatic as regards AOE's Reserve Movement but must be rolled for thereafter. Units unable to get on board due to space are considered backed up off the table and may enter in road column next turn. The Advance Guard divisions of both Russian forces must be the first unit to enter the board.

Victory Conditions: As stated in AOE on page 17. Note that Stragglers do count as combat units for the purpose of determining victory points or their equivalent. Additionally, the French receive two extra Victory Points for each unit of Stragglers that march off the table via the road at point E.



Berezina River today, in Winter and Summer.





Planning Map

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Berezina Crossing, 1812

Order of Battle Labels and Order of Appearance

French Grande Armee Starting Forces

Napoleon	Oudinot	Oudinot	Oudinot	Oudinot	Oudinot	Oudinot	Oudinot	Oudinot
Oudinot II	6th XX R 5/4/3 SK	8th XX R 5/4/3 SK	9th XX E 5/-/2 SK	XXX Cav R 5/4/3 LT	R Horse Art	R Foot Art	R Hvy Art	Doumerc 3d Hvy
XXX								XX

6th Division Legrand – Bde: 26th Legere, Bde: 56th Ligne, Bde: 19th Ligne, Bde: 128th Ligne & 3d Portuguese Regiments

8th Division Verdier – Bde: 11th Legere & 2d Ligne, Bde: 37th & 124th Ligne Regiments

9th Division Merle – Bde: 4th Swiss & 3d Provisional Croatian Regts, Bde: 1st & 2d Swiss Regts, Bde: 3d Swiss & 123d Ligne Regiments

Corps Cavalry – Bde Castex: 23d & 24th Chasseurs a Cheval, Bde Corbineau: 7th & 20th Chasseurs a Cheval, 8th Lancers

Doumerc	Doumerc	Doumerc	Doumerc	Oudinot	Poniatow	Poniatow	Poniatow	Poniatow	Poniatow
3d Hvy E 6/4/2 A	Poles E 6/4/2 LN	R Horse Art	R Horse Art	Poniatow V (C)	V XXX R 9/7/5 SK	Vistula E 6/4/2 SK	R Foot Art	R Foot Art	R Foot Art
				XXX (-)					

3d Heavy Cavalry Division Doumerc – 4th, 7th, 14th Cuirassiers, 3d Lancers

Polish Cavalry – 5th, 7th & 15th Polish Lancers

V Corps (Remnants) – 16th Division: Polish 3d, 15th & 16th Ligne, 17th Division: Polish 1st, 6th, 14th & 17th Ligne, 18th Division: Polish 2d, 8th & 12th Ligne Regiments

Vistula Legion – Bde: 1st & 2d Polish Regts, Bde: 3d & 4th Polish Regiments

Poniatow	Poniatow	Napoleon	Mortier	Mortier	Mortier	Mortier	Mortier	Mortier	Mortier
R Foot Art	R Heavy Art	Mortier Guard	Yng Gd R 5/4/3 SK	Old Gd E 12/-/5 SK	Gd Cav E 8/-/3 H	E OG Horse	E OG Horse	R Foot Art	R Foot Art
		XXX							

Young Guard – 1st Division - Bde: 4th Tirailleurs, 4th & 5th Voltigeurs, Bde: 5th & 6th Tirailleurs, 6th Voltigeurs

2d Division – Bde: 1st Tirailleurs & 1st Voltigeurs, Bde: Fusilier-Chasseurs, Fusilier-Grenadiers, Flanquers

Old Guard – Bde: 1st & 2d Chasseurs, Bde: 1st 2d & 3d (Dutch) Grenadiers

Guard Cavalry – Grenadiers a Cheval, Chasseurs a Cheval, Empress Dragoons, Elite Gendarmes, 1st (Polish) and 2d (Dutch) Lancers

Mortier	Mortier	Mortier	Mortier	Mortier	Gd Armee	Napoleon	Napoleon
E OG Foot	E OG Foot	E OG Hvy	E OG Hvy	E OG Hvy	Napoleon + 3 (C)	ADC	Ney (C)
					XXXX	XXXX	XXX

Napoleon	Victor	Victor	Victor	Victor	Victor	Victor
Victor IX	26th XX R 6/5/3 SK	28th XX R 8/6/4 SK	XXX Cav + E 6/4/2 LT	R Foot Art	R Foot Art	R Heavy Art
XXX (-)						

26th Division Daendals – Bde: 1st, 2d & 3d Berg Ligne, Bde: 1st, 2d, 3d Baden Ligne & Baden Legere Bn, Bde: 8th Westfalen Ligne, Hessen

Darmstadt Leibgarde, Leib & Garde-Fusilier Regiments

28th Division Gerard – Bde: 4th, 7th & 9th Polish Ligne, Bde: Saxon von Low & von Rechten Ligne Regiments

Corps Cavalry – Bde: Berg Lancers & Hessen Darmstadt Chevaulegers, Bde: Saxon Prince Johan Chevalugers & Baden Hussars

Napoleon	Napoleon	Napoleon	Napoleon	Napoleon	Napoleon
Straggler C10/9/7 IR	Straggler C10/9/7 IR	Straggler C10/9/7 IR	Straggler C10/9/7 IR	Straggler C10/9/7 IR	Straggler C10/9/7 IR

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Russian Combined Armies Reinforcements – Turn 1 +

Danube	Chichagov	Chaplits	Chaplitz	Chaplitz	Chaplitz	Chaplitz	Chaplitz	Chaplitz
Chichagov - 1	Chaplits Adv Gd	1st Jaeger R 8/6/4 SK	2d Jaeger R 8/6/4 SK	3d Jaeger R 6/5/3 SK	Hussars E 6/4/2 LN	Dragoons R 5/4/3 H	E Horse Art	E Horse Art
XXXX	XX							

Chaplits – Bde: 10th, 14th & 22d Jaegers, Bde: 7th, 12th & 28th Jaegers, Bde: 27th, 32d & 38th Jaegers, Pavlograd Hussars, Dorpat & Tagenrog Dragoon Regiments

Chichagov	Voinev	Voinev	Voinev	Voinev	Voinev	Voinev	Voinev	Chichagov
Voinev 9 th	1st Bde R 8/6/4	2d Bde R 8/6/4	3d Bde R 6/5/3	E Foot Art	E Foot Art	E Foot Art	E Hvy Art	Sherbatov 18 th
XX								XX

Voinev – Apcheron, Vladimir, Tambov, Dnieper, Iakout & Kostroma Infantry Regiments

Sherbatov	Sherbatov	Sherbatov	Sherbatov	Sherbatov	Sherbatov	Chichagov	Chichagov	Chichagov	Chichagov
1st Bde R 8/6/4	2d Bde R 8/6/4	Grenadier E 6/4/2	E Foot Art	E Foot Art	E Hvy Art	Hussars E 9/6/4 LN	1st Drgns R 5/4/3 H	2d Drgns R 5/4/3 H	Cossacks C 6/5/4 LI

Sherbatov – Vitebsk, Koslov, Kouyvan & Kourin Infantry Regts plus six Converged Grenadier Battalions

Reserve Horse – Alexandria & Oliviopol Hussars, Volhynie Uhlans, St Petersburg, Kinburn, Starodoub, Tver Dragoon Regiments

Chichagov	Wittgnstn	Vlastov	Vlastov	Vlastov	Vlastov	Vlastov	Vlastov	Vlastov
Wittgnstn I Korps	Vlastov Adv Gd	Jaeger R 5/4/3 SK	Line Bde R 5/4/3	Opolchenie C 6/5/4 IR	Cavalry R 5/4/3 H	Cossacks C 8/7/5 LI	E Horse Art	E Horse Art
XXX	XX							

Vlastov – 23d & 24th Jaegers, Lithuania Infantry Regiment, 1st & 9th St Petersburg Opolchenie, Finland & Converged Dragoon Regiments

Wittgnstn	Berg	Berg	Berg	Berg	Berg	Berg	Berg	Berg	Berg
Berg Division	1st Bde R 5/4/3	2d Bde R 5/4/3	3d Bde R 5/4/3	Opolchenie C 6/5/4 IR	Dragoons R 5/4/3 H	E Horse Art	E Foot Art	E Hvy Art	E Hvy Art
XXX									

Berg – Perm, Sievsk, Kalouga, Petrovsk, Azov Infantry Regts, 1st Marine Regts plus 5th, 10th, 11th & 15th St Petersburg Opolchenie, Iambourg & Converged Dragoon Regiments

Wittgnstn	Fock	Fock	Fock	Fock	Fock	Fock	Fock	Fock
Fock Division	1st Bde R 5/4/3	2d Bde R 5/4/3	Grenadier R 6/4/2	Opolchenie C 6/5/4 IR	Cavalry E 6/4/2 H	E Horse Art	E Foot Art	E Hvy Art
XXX								

Fock – Molhiev, Nisov, Vorohenz Infantry Regts, six Grenadier Depot Battalions plus 4th, 6th, 13th & 14th St Petersburg Opolchenie, Combined Guard Cavalry Brigade

BASING: All infantry as AOE 3-Rank, 4 figures in two ranks on stand ¾ inch wide by 1 inch deep; all cavalry has 2 figures on a stand one inch square; all artillery on a stand 3/16 wide per historical gun in the battery (a French foot battery had 8 guns so would be 3/16 x 8 or 1 ½ inches wide), by one inch deep with one gun model and two gunners if light, three if heavy artillery. All command stands should be spacious enough, but not less than one inch square with one mounted officer/staff for a division command, two for a corps, three for a wing and four for Army Command.

ABBREVIATIONS: Sk – Skirmish capable, Hvy or H-Heavy, A-Armored Heavy, Lt-Light, Ln-Light Lancer, LI-Light Irregular, IR – Irregular, C-Conscrip, R-Regular, E-Elite, (C)-Charismatic, X-Brigade or oversized Regiment, XX-Division, XXX-Corps, XXXX-Army, Bde – Brigade, Cuir – Cuirassier, Legere – French Light Infantry, Ligne – French Line Infantry, OG – Old Guard. Numbers represent Fresh/Worn/Spent status.

LABELS: Use Avery® White Full-Sheet Shipping Labels for Laser Printers 5265, 8-1/2" x 11", Pack of 25.

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Dramatis Personae



General Wittgenstein, Admiral Chichagov and General Uvarov.



General Platov and Marshal Victor.



Marshals Poniatowski, Ney and Oudinot.

