**Crawling Death: How Lice Thwarted Napoleon's Invasion of Russia**

*By Frank Thadeusz*

**His invasion of Russia failed miserably, leaving a trail of corpses from Moscow all the way to Paris. In a new book, one historian blames not the wintry march but the spread of "war plague" -- typhus -- through Napoleon's Grand Army.**

The fate of Napoleon's Grand Army was sealed long before the first shot was fired. In the spring of 1812, more than 600,000 men marched towards Russia under the command of the diminutive Corsican -- an army larger than the population of Paris at the time.

[[](http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/grossbild-638751-1604837.html)](http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/grossbild-638751-1604837.html)Napoleon's failed 1812 invasion of Russia has long been blamed on the weather. But a new theory argues that body lice were to blame.

The massive army was on its way to topple the Russian Czar Alexander I. Yet long before the fighting started, a few soldiers staggered out of the ranks and collapsed at the side of the road. Were the men drunk as skunks, or was something else at work?

Given the sheer numbers of soldiers underway, no one took much notice of a few derelict drunks. Not until 200 years later did it come to light that these first casualites of Napoleon's long march weren't hopeless alcoholics but rather marked the beginning of the army's downfall.

That's the claim of Stephan Talty, the American author who reconstructs the medical history of Napoleon's doomed Russian campaign in his new book "The Illustrious Dead: The Terrifying Story of How Typhus Killed Napoleon's Greatest Army." Talty carefully documents why 400,000 men never made it home. Like few historians before him, he illuminates the critical role of a tiny enemy: the louse.

In the end, the army's back was broken by neither the Cossacks nor the merciless Russian winter but rather by typhus exanthematicus, spread by crawling parasites. That's the conclusion of an investigation that began in 2001 with a gruesome discovery: A mass grave containing 2,000 corpses in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius.

At first, excavators guessed the victims were killed by the KGB, or were Jews killed during the German occupation. But by examining belt buckles and uniform buttons with regimental numbers on them, archaeologists unraveled the mystery. The dead, it turned out, were soldiers of Napoleon's Grand Army.

Researchers took DNA samples from the teeth of the dead men. Further lab analysis revealed that many of the hastily-buried bodies carried pathogens consistent with what was known in Napoleon's era as "war plague."

In minute detail, Talty explains how a mixture of incompetence, mismanagement and the ignorance of the army's commander brought down an army that could populate a modern mid-sized German city. In the first week of the campaign alone, 6,000 men a day fell ill. "The numbers of the sick grew in overwhelming numbers, and they crawled along the road where many of them died," observed Belgian physician J.L.R. de Kerckhove.

"Napoleon doesn't give a damn how many of his soldiers are collapsing on the road," Westphalian batallion commander Friedrich Wilhelm von Lossberg wrote to his wife. The emperor had an unsentimental view of the sick and dying.

His team of physicians, many of whom were ardent believers in the obscure theory that "miasmas" of bad air spread diseases, were overwhelmed by the rapid spread of the plague. They were products of their time: No one had yet proposed the idea of germs, let alone the idea that illness might be spread by body lice. At field hospitals along the route, the seriously ill bedded down with men who were still halfway healthy, insuring that the most recent victims wouldn't be able to recover.

Miserable hygiene paved the way for widespread outbreaks of lice. Within 10 to 14 days, the first signs of infection -- high fever and crippling headaches -- began to emerge. Soon chills and exhaustion set in. Victims developed severe rashes and swelling; by the end they were so weak they could barely lift a glass of water.

Today, doctors easily treat the infection with antibiotics. But apart from bloodletting, herbs and a mixture of wine, water and a bit of lemon juice, doctors in Napoleon's era had no effective remedy for the disease. Napoleon's chief doctor, Dominique-Jean Larrey, struggled to explain the mass deaths. The best he could come up with was constant rain, physical exhaustion and spoiled schnapps.

By the time Napoleon's army reached Moscow, his weakened troops were in no shape to conquer the city. On October 19, 1812, Napoleon turned the diseased army around and headed for home.

On the way back, starving, feverish soldiers descended on Vilnius like zombies. Desperate for food, some tried to eat formaldehyde-soaked specimens from the city's university laboratories.

Shortly before his return to Paris, Napoleon issued a bulletin intended to spread reassuring news all across his empire: "His Majesty's health has never been better."