**The Fall:**

Despite successfully consolidating his position at home, Napoleon’s ceaseless ambition would eventually drive him to defeat.

**A. The Motivation**

In 1810 Napoleon’s Empire stretched from Spain in the west to Poland (Duchy of Warsaw) in the east. In between were a collection of treaties and alliances that kept the Emperor more or less in control of the Continent. However, he was growing disenchanted with the peace treaty he signed with Czar Alexander in 1807. The Treaty of Tilsit had included Russian admission into the **Continental System** that forbade trade by any European country with the English. Napoleon had felt he had ample proof that Russia was openly trading with England through its Northern ports. After Napoleon moved further into Poland, both sides had reason to believe that the Treaty was null and void, and war was declared. In 1809, Napoleon divorced Josephine over her perceived inability to produce an heir, and soon after Napoleon married into the Hapsburg family of Marie Louise. Within a year he had his cherished heir apparent, Francois Charles, or Napoleon II.

**B. The *Grande Armee***

The estimated 600,000-strong army assembled in Poland. It was more of a “United Nations” force than a French army, as the majority of the troops were conscripted from Napoleon’s list of conquered countries. Napoleon sealed the fate of his own soldiers on the first day by doing what he had always done: pack light and live off the land. This tactic allowed for his “Blitzkrieg” style of warfare that involved speed, deception and nationalistic zeal. While it had worked in relatively small countries like Italy and Prussia, the vastness of the Russian countryside simply swallowed up Napoleon’s equation of speed x mass + death = victory. Czar Alexander’s scorched earth policy would deny Napoleon’s army - which marched on both its stomach and *la gloire -* any real victories. The eerie silence and desolation of Vilna – the first major town the army encountered – would be repeated over the coming months. Soon the only sounds Napoleon’s soldiers would hear were the chilling war cries of the Russian partisans and Cossacks who made hit and run attacks on Napoleon’s troops and disrupted his supply lines.

**C. First Battles**

The first real pitched battle occurred at **Borodino,** where tens of thousands of General Kutosovs’ troops set up a defense of “spade and earth”. Napoleon, eager to move on to the capital city of Moscow, and hungry for any kind of battle, took the bait. The result was mutual bloodshed on a scale not seen again until the U.S Civil War or the battlefields of WWI. After repeated head-on charges, Napoleon’s army woke up one morning to find the enemy had withdrawn, leaving Moscow wide open. To the Emperor’s surprise, however, Alexander was not home. He had moved North to his summer palace in St Petersburg, waiting for “General Winter” – the legendary Russian winter - to arrive. When the frigid winds arrived in October of 1812, Napoleon called off the invasion and **‘the Retreat”** was on. By the time the remains of the *Grand Armee* returned to France, it contained only 60,000 men. Further complicating the Emperor’s plight was the fact that his European allies recognized their opportunity to free themselves from the French yoke, and the rout was on.

**D. The End**

After raising yet another army, Napoleon was forced to abdicate. He was placed on the island of Elba, along with his Imperial Guard and hundreds of thousands of French francs. Amazingly, he returned once more – this time chasing out Louis XVIII – but went down in defeat for the final time at Waterloo. Escape was not an option the second time, however, and Napoleon died in 1821 on the south Atlantic island of St Helena.