



FALLEN ICARUS, AGRIGENTO, SICILY | JULIA MAUDJIN, FLICKR | CC BY 2.0

HUBRIS

Napoleon paid for his. Ours looms.



ROBERT

IN JUNE 1812, when Napoleon Bonaparte led his *Grande Armée* across the Neiman River to attack Russia, his troops carried only their summer gear. The Russian army, Napoleon assumed, would be dispatched in a

short campaign.

The French general had reasons for confidence. He had been instrumental in the defeat of France's *ancien régime*, had risen from Corsican outsider to Emperor of France and now controlled almost all of continental Europe. Even his enemies said he was among the most brilliant military tacticians of all time.

Napoleon thought the Russian forces would confront him and lose, as so many other armies had done across Europe. He thought his troops could feed themselves through pillage of captured lands, as they had done before. But this time, he understood neither his opponents nor the land.

The Russians mostly retreated, burning crops and villages as they went. Napoleon pushed the Russians back a thousand kilometres without a decisive victory. Three months after the invasion had begun, the French occupied an abandoned and burning Moscow, with few supplies and the Russian winter coming.

It was Napoleon's turn to retreat and it was a disaster. He had crossed into Russia with about half-a-million able soldiers. In December, maybe 40,000 made it back into Poland. The rest had been captured

or killed in battle, succumbed to sickness and starvation, deserted or frozen to death. Similar numbers of Russian soldiers and civilians perished. In total, roughly a million people were dead due to an overreaching six-month campaign from which nothing was gained.

The world has seen many versions of Napoleon and his Russian campaign. Probably they have been with us forever. The ancient Greeks saw the phenomenon often enough to adopt "hubris" as the word for the dangerous combination of arrogance and error, overconfidence and disrespect.

While the meaning varied somewhat in ancient usage, the lasting application was to overweening individuals who act in defiance of limits fixed by the gods or by nature, or at least fail to recognize their own limitations or understand the realities before them.

Accusations of hubris were warnings as well as criticisms. Hubris was not merely dishonourable. It also stirred Nemesis, the primordial goddess of divine retribution.

Individuals with hubris remain common today. Maybe we have more now than ever before. That would be no surprise in a world that routinely urges competitors in business and sport to reach beyond their grasp and deliver "110 per cent," in clear defiance of the gods of physics and statistics.

What's different is that hubris is no longer merely individual. The most important modern forms are collective and institutional. Today's equivalents of Napoleon and his Russian campaign include the political and economic arrangements that support ever-growing fossil fuel

extraction and consumption when the best science says greenhouse gas emissions are already disrupting climate stability. They are also evident in the institutions that have allowed 80 individuals to amass wealth equivalent to that of the poorest 3.5 billion of the world's human population, disregarding the practical as well as moral perils involved.

Hubris today is global. It is entrenched in the ambition and blindness of whole systems of convictions and organizations that guide most human activities on this planet. And the effects are mounting.

As the rippling consequences lead to more evidently desperate needs for change, we may expect calls for bold and authoritative action, for confident and charismatic leadership, for the granting of exceptional powers. Effectively, these will be calls for a green Napoleon and a *Grande Armée* of sustainability.

We would do well then to remember Napoleon's fate. As the Greeks recognized more than two millennia ago, hubris will not lead us anywhere good.

We have gotten into the present fix through undue confidence and disregard for limits, ours and nature's. We can only get out of it through a strategy of anti-hubris – with initiatives that are modest, multiple, diverse, experimental, flexible and collaborative. We must all learn and lead.

And we must carry our winter gear. It will be a long campaign. **AG**

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