

# Primary and Secondary Sources Activity

The logo for 'networks' features the word in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font. A stylized graphic of intersecting lines forms a starburst or network pattern behind the letter 'o'.

## The French Revolution and Napoleon

### Napoleon's Retreat from Russia

#### Background

**Philippe Paul Ségur** was a French general and historian who served with distinction in many of Napoleon's campaigns. During his retirement he wrote an account of the emperor's Russian invasion and retreat of 1812. Ségur's portrait of Napoleon in this historical memoir is generally unfavorable. In the excerpt below, Ségur describes Napoleon's state of mind when the emperor realized he would have to abandon his objective and retreat from Moscow.

**Jean-Roch Coignet** served in Napoleon's army during all major campaigns after 1800. In his notebooks he recounted his experiences on the terrible retreat from Moscow in 1812.

**Raimond-Emery-Philippe-Josephe de Montesquiou, Duke of Fezensac**, served as an army officer during Napoleon's Russian campaign. He kept a journal about the invasion of Russia and the retreat. In the excerpt below, he recorded his shock at events in Paris after Napoleon and what was left of the French "Grand Army" had returned to France.

**Directions:** Read the selections below. Then answer the questions that follow.

Napoleon, however, was completely aware of his situation. To him everything seemed lost if he receded in the face of astonished Europe, and everything saved if he could surpass Alexander in determination. He appreciated but too well the means that were left him to shake the constancy of his rival; he knew that the diminishing number of his effective troops, that his situation, the season, in short, everything, would become daily more and more unfavorable to him; but he reckoned upon that magic force which his renown gave him. Hitherto that had lent to him a real and never failing strength: he endeavored, therefore, to keep up, by specious arguments, the confidence of his army, and perhaps, also, the faint hope that was still left to himself.

—Philippe Paul Ségur, "Napoleon's Retreat from Moscow," 1889

The Russian winter set in with all its severity on the 6th of November. . . . The halting places were miserably supplied; the horses died of hunger and cold, and when we came to any cottages, they devoured the thatches. . . . The cold continued to grow more intense; the horses in the bivouacs [temporary camps] died of hunger and cold. Every day some were left where we had passed the night. The roads were like glass. The horses fell down, and could not get up. Our worn-out soldiers no longer had strength in their

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# Primary and Secondary Sources

## Activity *Cont.*



### The French Revolution and Napoleon

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arms. The barrels of their guns were so cold that they stuck to their hands. It was twenty-eight degrees below zero. But the guard gave up their knapsacks and guns only with their lives.

—Jean-Roch Coignet, from his notebooks, 1897

In the short time I spent in Paris that winter, I found my family, and my friends in general terror-stricken. The famous 29th Bulletin had informed France abruptly that the Grand Army had been destroyed. The Emperor was invincible no longer. . . . The stories told by officers who had survived the retreat were such that the diversions of the carnival stopped. In the midst of the general consternation people were shocked to see the Emperor entertaining at the Tuileries. It was an insult to public grief and revealed a cruel insensitivity to the victims. I shall always remember one of those dismal balls, at which I felt as if I were dancing on graves.

—Raimond-Emery-Philippe-Josephe de Montesquiou,  
Duke of Fezensac, from his journal, 1995

1. **Identifying** According to Philippe Paul Ségur, what did Napoleon rely on, even though he knew his situation was desperate?

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2. **Drawing Conclusions** In the excerpt, does Ségur seem to admire Napoleon’s attitude, or does he suggest that the emperor was taking refuge in an illusion?

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# Primary and Secondary Sources Activity *Cont.*



## The French Revolution and Napoleon

3. **Analyzing Text Structure** What are two of the vivid details that Jean-Roch Coignet uses to convey the desperate situation of the army?

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4. **Determining Importance** Why do you think that the Duke de Fezensac, in his account, gives so much emphasis to the fact that "the emperor was invincible no longer"?

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5. **Inferring** Why does de Fezensac find the sight of the emperor entertaining at the Tuileries so shocking?

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