

Russia Celebrates Napoleon Defeat With Gunshot and Fire

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BORODINO, Moscow Region — Three ear-splitting gunshots pierce the country air, a cavalry unit gallops across the forest clearing, and several thousand spectators gasp and shriek with delight.

The Battle of Borodino — 2011 redux — has begun.

A burning thatched house provides the backdrop to the next phase of maneuvers, as French troops directed by Emperor Napoleon take control of a marshy stream and try to push back their Russian enemies.

This is the annual re-enactment of the 1812 Battle of Borodino between Russia and the invading French army, staged by hundreds of volunteer actors and military enthusiasts in a field about 120 kilometers west of Moscow.

As Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture blares from loudspeakers, the participants shoot at one another with cannon fire and clash with cutlasses on horseback.

“This was our great victory. Napoleon had conquered the whole world except Britain,” said spectator Oleg Ovchinnikov, 38, attending the re-enactment of the battle for the eighth time.

Historians estimate that some 250,000 soldiers were involved in the actual conflict, with 70,000 casualties between the two sides.

Although the French are considered to have won the battle, it has come to be seen nearly two centuries later as a Russian victory in all but name — a success that is celebrated with a battle re-enactment around the Sept. 7 anniversary every year.

The human cost of victory proved too great for the French. Napoleon was soon on the retreat, pursued by a strengthened and bloodthirsty Russian army all the way to the border.

“Of course, this is a very important day — this was the first great war for Russia,” said 14-year-old Yulia, who had traveled from Moscow with her friends to watch the drama.

Napoleon’s own description of the battle only serves to fuel Russian patriotism and enthusiasm for the event: “Of the fifty battles I have fought, the most terrible was that before Moscow. The French showed themselves to be worthy victors, and the Russians can rightly call themselves invincible,” he wrote.

The hour-long enactment takes place in a picturesque forest clearing just outside the town of Borodino — a place also commemorated as a scene of fighting during the ultimately successful defense of Moscow against the German army in 1941.

The battle — ringfenced by Russian police — is watched from a grassy bank by a substantial crowd eating kebabs and drinking beer, as well as admiring the carefully choreographed spectacle.

Some of them arrived wearing their own 19th-century costumes — long wide-rimmed multicolored dresses, corsets and bonnets for the ladies and soldier outfits for the men.

“We made our own costumes — we always come dressed like this. It’s a great event for Russia,” said Alisa, 20, who said this was her sixth visit.

Now attention is turning to 2012 — the 200th anniversary of the battle — for which a string of special events are being planned.

Peter King, an Englishman attending the 2011 event, is planning a cycle ride tracking Napoleon’s cross-country route to Borodino over 1,000 kilometers from Kaunas, Lithuania, to coincide with next year’s re-enactment. “The idea is to turn a path of destruction into a path of happiness, joy and friendship,” he said.

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