

Grand Celebrations Begin for 1812 Battle

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On Aug. 1, 1812, Russia gained its first victory during the Napoleonic wars, and that victory was crucial.

The Battle of Klyastitsy in Belarus changed the whole course of the 1812 military campaign and laid the foundation for future victories.

The French sought a breakthrough that would allow them to enter St. Petersburg. The imperial capital was already preparing for a temporary relocation, but the victorious outcome of the Battle of Klyastitsy meant the move was no longer necessary.

Russia is as proud of its victory in 1812 as it is about combating Hitler during World War II. Accordingly, the scale of the anniversary festivities this month will be grand.

It is usually the Battle of Borodino that is associated with Russia's victory during the Napoleonic wars, but this year historians are seeking to draw attention to the Battle of Klyastitsy, which was essential in changing the course of the war.

The celebrations in St. Petersburg began Wednesday with a memorial service at Kazan Cathedral.

The State Hermitage Museum is organizing an exhibition of Peter von Hess' painting "The Battle in Klyastitsy," devoted to a historic battle that is often forgotten.

"The meaning of the Klyastitsy victory cannot be overestimated," said Ivan Shakhovskoi, a member of the public council aiding the State Commission for the Preparation of the Celebrations of the Russian Victory in the Patriotic War of 1812. "Danger was literally in the air, and the preparations to evacuate the capital were serious.

"Even the Bronze Horseman had been packed up and put in a wooden crate and was ready to be moved away from the city. The battle lasted for three days, and Tsar Alexander I praised Field Marshal Pyotr Vitgenshtein as 'the man who rescued Russia.'"

Vitgenshtein led the Russian army in Klyastitsy. His former estate, located in the village of Druzhnoselie on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, is now in very poor condition.

Alexander Margolis, chairman of the St. Petersburg Association for the Protection of Historical Monuments, said the neglect of the estate is nothing less than "Russia's national shame."

"What was originally the Vitgenshtein family vault, designed by a fine Russian architect, is now a run-down public toilet," Margolis said. "I am ashamed that I have to tell you this kind of thing."

Musicians from the Tavricheskaya Cappella symphony orchestra performed a program of military marches Wednesday at the Pavlovsk museum estate.

"The 1812 campaign played a special role in the history of Pavlovsk," said Vera Dementiyeva, director of the Pavlovsk museum estate. "The famous Rose Pavilion was built especially to host Tsar Alexander I after the end of the war."

"We have the important mission of highlighting the role of Russian women in the 1812 Napoleonic wars," she said. "Empress Maria Fyodorovna was a renowned philanthropist. She left a diary in which she described her daily routine during the war."

"We will prepare a special exhibition inspired by the contents of the diary."

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