

# ‘We will stand by the head for the native land!’

Natives of Belarusian provinces fought bravely on Borodino battlefield

By Eduard Kornilovich

On June 16th, 1812, on the bridge over the river Nieman, Ivshin, a warrant officer fighting for Grodno's semi battalion, became the first victim of the Patriotic War, in which Russia sought liberation from Napoleon's invasion. From the time of the French occupation of Grodno Province to its liberation (June-December 1812) there were many battles but the Battle of Borodino was the bloodiest — called ‘the greatest act of European military history’.

On that historic field, hundreds of soldiers and commanders fought bravely; many were from the Belarusian provinces, serving with the Brest, Minsk and Polotsk regiments. Some were high-ranking officers, with most from noble families. Of course, we are interested in specific names and places of birth.

Allow us to tell you of one of the heroes of Borodino, whose name is yet to grace Belarusian encyclopaedias. Grigory Chernyaev was born on January 27th, 1787, on Krivoe Estate in the Mogilev District (now, the Tolochin District) to a noble family: his father was the head of Tolochin customs.

Grigory enjoyed the fields and hills, pine forests, the River Drut, the red brick mill and the old park: all remain today. Sadly, his health was poor but this did not stop his father sending him to the prestigious Shklov Cadet Corps at the age



Reproduction of Peter von Hess' *Napoleon's Crossing of the Berezina River*

of 11, following in the footsteps of his three brothers: Ippolit, Vasily and Piotr.

In 1804, Grigory was promoted to the rank of ensign and sent to serve in the regiment based in Mogilev. Several months later, his regiment was sent to Austria, where it fought in a huge battle between the Russian-Austrian and French

armies, at Austerlitz. It then returned to fight in the Russian-Turkish war, battling for possession of the Turkish fortress of Brailov. He was awarded the Order of St. Anne (4th degree) and was promoted through three ranks during the Turkish campaign, becoming a staff captain at the age of 25.

The Patriotic War of 1812 is

perhaps the brightest page in his military career, as he fought under General Raevsky on the front line, near Saltanovka. The 2nd Russian Western Army left the enemy behind, crossed the River Dnieper near Bykhov, and joined the 1st Western Army of Barclay de Tolly in Smolensk: a move of which Napoleon had been afraid. The Russians

fought with amazing courage, not sparing their lives. Under the walls of Smolensk, Grigory injured his left hand but continued fighting, for which he was awarded the Order of St. Anne (3rd degree).

At dawn on October 24th, generals Dmitry Dokhturov and Nikolay Raevsky burst into Maloyaroslavets (occupied by the French). Grigory's regiment took part, with the city changing hands eight times. Eventually, it was burned to the ground. He showed unprecedented strength in the Battle of Borodino, distinguishing himself in action, and was awarded the Order of St. Anne (2nd degree).

Napoleon's army beat a hasty retreat, with 25,000 French soldiers killed in a bloody battle near the village Krasnoe (near Dubrovno and Orsha). Chernyaev again showed tenacity and composure, for which he was awarded a golden sword bearing the inscription ‘For Bravery’ and was advanced to the rank of colonel.

Pursuing the retreating French, he then fought near Dresden, participating in a three-day battle at Leipzig, called ‘The Battle of Nations’. He entered conquered Paris and occupied the post of commandant of Valenciennes — on the border with Belgium. There, he met the daughter of the Mayor, Lyubov-Esther Charlotte, and, in November 1818, they were married, returning to live on Tubyshki Estate.

## No one forgotten

In 1995, Belarus became the first country worldwide to have its own military specialised search battalion, seeking out thousands of unrecorded graves — from the Napoleonic War, WW1 and the Great Patriotic War. More than 2,000 names of soldiers have been rescued from obscurity, allowing their graves to be marked.

### Thank you for finding my father!

Russian Yevgenia Nikitina, though named after her father, has no memory of him, recognising his face only from old photos. She was born in January, 1941, in March. Yevgeny Ivashkov was called up to serve in the military and, in June, the war began. All her archive enquiries had proved fruitless until recently, when Yevgenia, her son and granddaughter were able to finally visit the place where he fell. They saw his grave and were even able to hold fragments of the machinegun used by sergeant Ivashkov.

“While widening the road near Logoisk, the remains of three soldiers were found,” notes Andrey Karkotko, an archaeologist on the special search team. “It was amazing luck that, during excavations, we found three



Researchers' findings

ebonite capsule-medallions which allowed us to establish the names of the dead: junior sergeant Sergey Surkov, Red Army soldier Vasily Volosenkov and sergeant Yevgeny Ivashkov. Their relatives were located and we invited them here, as well as to visit our centre and museum. They gave them photographs and documents and took home to Russia, alongside a handful of Belarusian soil, for which soldiers fought and died during the Great Patriotic War.”

“This year alone, the remains of 1,788 people have been found,” notes the com-

mander of the 52nd specialised search battalion, Oleg Merkutsa. “1,747 fought in the Great Patriotic War, while 35 died in WW1.”

### They were the first

Last autumn, the soldiers of the battalion conducted digs around the Brest Fortress Memorial Complex. Mr. Karkotko explains, “We chose the excavation site after seeing German photos from 1941. These show a large crater in which the corpses of dead fortress defenders were thrown. Judging by the size of the crater, it was created by a large aerial bomb or Karl mortar shell. The latter scattered two-tonnes bombs across three kilometres and was used by the Germans to try and destroy heavily fortified constructions. Brest Fortress was its first outing, with 31 shells launched. A



During archaeological digs

report on the effectiveness of Karl mortars was sent to Hitler, including aerial photographs of hits. One shows the crater, filled with the bodies of dead fortress defenders. The excavation unearthed the remains of 58 Red Army soldiers, who were exhumed and reburied. They were killed while defending the Brest

Region in June-July 1941. Previously, they'd been considered missing, with no bodies ever located. You can imagine the relief felt by their families, who had spent years knowing nothing. Some have now visited Belarus to pay their respects at the new graves. Naturally, the soldiers were reburied with full honours.”

## Rarities for collection

### Another volume in *Encyclopaedia of Rarities* presented in Gomel

The series by the Petrus Brovka Belarusian Encyclopaedia Publishing House already includes editions dedicated to the Radziwills, with facsimile copies of Dmitry Strukov's watercolours. *Living Faith. Vetka* was presented at Gomel's Palace and Park Estate, where since 17th century Russian Old Believers once lived. They combined Belarusian culture with their own, in paintings, architecture and folk crafts. Vetka Folk Art Museum (named after Shklyarov) helped collate the edition, with chapters devoted to Vetka icon painting, carving, sewing and the art of goldsmiths. The album cover features a photograph of a wooden icon panel, bearing deep scratches, as if someone had deliberately damaged the image. Only a small patch of ancient painting remained — an obvious hint from the publishers that our cultural heritage should be carefully protected. The authors emphasise that the Old Believers of Vetka created a cultural bridge between Belarus and Russia.