

Memory of the fallen honoured at crossroads of Europe

Belarusian, Russian and French flags fly at commemorative event marking 200th anniversary of 1812 War, held on Brilevskoe field

By Alexander Alexeevsky

Brilevskoe field, near Borisov, saw thousands of Russian and French soldiers fall in 1812. After an unsuccessful crossing of the Berezina, the largest military force of its time was defeated. The Napoleonic troops fled West in what resembled a stampede.

Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Tozik has told journalists that this year has seen many conferences and exhibitions of archival materials conducted. New tourist routes have been developed and a joint Belarusian-French archaeological dig has been organised, with remains of unknown Russian and French soldiers reburied ceremoniously.

One more event remains, as the chairman of the Minsk Region Executive Committee, Boris Batura, notes, "Many of the Belarusian and Russian cities through which the armies of Napoleon and Kutuzov travelled are connected by twin-relations. Smaller towns are also joining in,

with the rural settlement of Borodino, near Moscow, being twinned with Veselovsky Rural Council in the Borisov District; their territories saw the most wide-scale of tragedies in 1812. Belarusians and Russians would be happy to see European cities join in similar twinning since this would be the most fitting tribute to the memories of all victims of the 1812 War."

European diplomats were invited to the memorial ceremony, at which the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of France to Belarus, H.E. Mr. Michel Raineri, gave a speech, noting, "In 1812, Europe had yet to reach equilibrium, being in turmoil. There was no established legal system, which resulted in pain and conflict. Unfortunately, Europe faced more conflicts in the years to come before war was replaced by dialogue. Those soldiers who fought 200 years ago, regardless of their leadership or army allegiance, would doubtless have preferred dialogue to combat — if they had en-

joyed such a choice."

...Of course, no such choice existed and they were obliged to obey orders. Accordingly, we today honour the memory of those who fell in those cold November days two centuries ago. Wreaths and flowers were laid at all four of the monuments on Brilevskoe field. The first, from Soviet times, was erected in 1962. Another is dedicated to Russian soldiers, unveiled for the 180th anniversary, paid for by some of their descendants. A third appeared 15 years ago, in memory of French soldiers. The last was unveiled just recently: a sim-



Reconstruction of scene from 1812 War in Borisov District's Brilevskoe Field

ple memorial inscribed *Grief and Confession*.

The Military Attaché of the Russian Embassy, Maxim Kazantsev, was concise but spoke poignantly, saying, "There has been much controversy, with theories and opinions differing. It's a subjective process. However, standing where so many people fell, all this fades into second bill-

ing. This is a place to simply honour the fallen, remembering them and promising ourselves that here, at the crossroads of Europe, where Belarus is located and where many tragic events have been witnessed, in future, such things will never happen again."

In attendance was Charles Napoleon, a genuine descendant of Bonaparte, who was clearly overwhelmed by emotions, repeating several times to curious journalists, "My feelings are very strong, standing here today; I'm happy to be here to remember these events with you..."

A small reconstruction was also presented, featuring Russian hussars and Polish lancers, Belarusian and Swiss regiments and detachments of Cossacks. Three hundred horsemen and infantry forces and, even, vivandieres (the women who accompanied troops during their campaigns) took part. Those from clubs in Belarus, Russia, Poland, France and Switzerland were joined by two Belgians on horseback. Two hundred years ago, Napoleon's army, retreating from Moscow, tried to cross the Berezina, on a misty day, surrounded by the sharp smell of gunpowder and the thunder of guns. Somewhere out there, Charles' ancestor galloped on horseback.



In memory of the fallen



Representatives of history clubs of Belarus, Poland, France, Russia, Switzerland and Belgium take part in reconstructing events from 1812 War

ALEXANDER RUZHECHKA