The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# The Lessons of 1812 for Today

By James N. Class

September 02, 2012




Across Moscow, celebrations commenced over the weekend for the 200th anniversary of the 1812 Battle of Borodino, memorialized forever in Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace."These festivities can educate us about the past but they also give meaning to the present.

Some say the anniversary could reinforce public suspicions that Russia is under attack and needs to ward off foreign enemies or even domestic spies and traitors.

What would Muscovites from 1812 think about that? Luckily, we have enough sources to answer the question.

Despite the devastation of Moscow in 1812, the university typography survived. And it churned out all kinds of poetry, thick journals, and other documents that give us insight into contemporary views. Many of the sources are now available on the Internet, thanks to digitization efforts of the Russian State Library and other projects.

Many Muscovite poets from 1812-14 saw Moscow's destruction as a sacrifice for Europe.

Indeed, it might have been a strategic sacrifice for the war effort, but they also viewed it as a spiritual act: a means of atoning for the alleged sins of the French Revolution and restoring Europe. In the words of Nikolai Shatrov, a member of Moscow University's Society of Lovers of Russian Literature:

> *Your captivity, your ashes and sufferings*
> *Are a secret of divine judgments;*
> *Not by wicked human will*
> *On the abusive field of blood-letting*
> *Should you have yielded:*
> *But God, punishing Napoleon,*
> *Wanted to redeem Europe*
> *From the Dragon*
> *Though your flames*

Such thoughts were not confined to elite literary societies. We find them also in the public preaching of Moscow's Archbishop Avgustin. Avgustin, like his Western namesake St. Augustine, shared a keen interest in the philosophy of history. And his sermons wove 1812 into a divine tapestry that would culminate in the renewal of Europe and the whole world.His sermons from 1812-14 emphasized the importance of the Russian people's relationship with God and saw the victory of 1812 as the consequence of Russians' moral conversion away from sin and back into divine favor. He preached that Moscow was the "savioress" of Europe and that Russians should spread the gospel back into Europe to further its renewal.

To be sure, other writers and officials did seek to turn inward and viewed 1812 as a lesson about the dangers of foreign influence.

But many voices, primarily from Moscow, viewed 1812 and the entry into Paris in 1814 as evidence that Russia had something to offer the world and that the future would be built on stronger ties among nations. As Moscow University Professor Alexei Merzliakov said at a public celebration, Tsar Alexander I had the effect of uniting everyone throughout Europe: The triumph "unites in itself the consonant happy feelings and cries of the whole world: It is a triumph of all peoples, all virtues, all true enlightenment, scholarship and arts, a triumph, if I dare utter it, of God Himself."

In retrospect, this might seem like wishful thinking. But this was supported by a positive, future-oriented attitude that sought to strengthen Russia's international ties. As the celebrations commence, we would do well to adopt such wishful thinking today.

James N. Class, who holds a PhD in Russian history, lives and works in Moscow.

**Related articles**:

- Putin Urges Patriotism on Borodino Battlefield
- Learning to Be 2nd-Rate, Gracefully
- Grand Celebrations Begin for 1812 Battle

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/09/02/the-lessons-of-1812-for-today-a17456