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The War of 1812 Bicentennials in Canada and Russia: Two Approaches to Commemoration

Konstantin Romanov

ABSTRACT
The War of 1812, one of the major international conflicts of the 19th century, is a significant landmark that impacted both Canadian and Russian history. The bicentennial of the War of 1812 – as it is known in both countries – was extensively commemorated and used in Canada and Russia as significant identity markers. National capitals - Ottawa and Moscow - broadly celebrated the bicentennial of each war and devoted large museum spaces for the War of 1812 as a part of commemoration. The paper compares the perspectives and narratives presented at the “Four Wars of 1812” exhibition at Canadian War Museum in Ottawa and the new “Museum of the Patriotic War of 1812” in Moscow.

KEYWORDS
War of 1812, bicentennial, Canadian War Museum, Napoleon, Alexander I, Battle of Queenston Heights, Battle of Borodino, the Battle of York, Tecumseh, Kutusov, the Burning of Washington.
In the year 2012, Canada and Russia started an immense campaign of celebrating the bicentennial of the “War of 1812” as it is known in both countries. It included press releases, historical re-enactments, TV programs, book publications and museum events. The reason why both countries have plunged in these massive campaigns is that the war is a significant landmark that impacted both Canadian and Russian history. Despite this fact, nowadays the awareness of the course of the war in both societies is descending. Extensive celebrations are aimed at enhancing the popular knowledge of national histories and secure the 1812 its place in the national identity.

National capitals - Ottawa and Moscow - broadly celebrated the bicentennial and devoted large museum spaces for the War of 1812 as a part of commemoration. This paper analyzes the museum exhibition “One War: Four Perspectives”, which was open to public in 2012 at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, and the museum’s permanent exposition devoted to this event. The new “Museum of the Patriotic War of 1812”, which opened in Moscow in the fall of 2012 in commemoration of the 200-year anniversary, will be another source for the analysis. The analysis reveals common methods and differences in commemoration, which can provide the better understanding of how both nations refer to the War of 1812 in the year of bicentennial.
International Contexts

The Canadian exhibition presented the conflict between Great Britain and the United States, which took place in North America in 1812-1815. The struggle was a part of a larger international imperial rivalry between Britain and Napoleonic France. By the end of the 18th century, Britain was an imperial superpower and extensively supplied the European market with goods produced by its colonies. Emerging post revolutionary France, seeking for domination in Europe, and attempted control over the European market all caused collisions of interests.

Emerging Napoleonic France was searching for its own trade partners outside of the British circle. The USA, another young republic, was a suitable companion.

One of the major reasons for the military conflict in North America was Britain’s attempt to interfere with French-American trade relations and a practice of recruiting sailors to the Royal Navy from American merchant ships. As it is clearly stated at the exhibition in Ottawa, “the conflict had been a war waiting to happen” (Macleod, p. 8).

The Russian struggle of 1812 against Napoleon had quite a similar origin. It was also a result of complicated relations and imperial tensions. French-Russian relations had been complicated since the early 19th century. For the first time in the 19th century, Russian and French Empires met at the battlefields of Austerlitz in 1805 when Russia was an active member of Anti-Napoleonic European coalitions. Willing to defeat Britain, Napoleon tried to undermine British trade relations with other European countries. Like many other European powers, Russia was pushed by France to join the continental blockade on Britain. Extensive economic dependence on trade with Britain made Russia carry on the trade despite the treaty with France, which was the main reason that caused the French invasion in 1812. In this sense, both wars of 1812 fought in North America and in Russia were parts of the international trend and had quite similar origins.

Central Narratives

Although the Russian Empire was involved in several anti-Napoleonic coalitions and fought against Napoleon in Europe (in 1807, 1813-1815), the main museum narrative is focused on the French Invasion of Russia. The preceding and subsequent events play a secondary role and are relevant only in relation to the Napoleonic invasion into Russia.

Russian representation of the war tells the major story of the victorious march of the Great Army to Moscow and its later retreat.
The narrative presented in the museum emphasizes the historic roles of the two emperors – Napoleon I and Alexander I, both of them have distinct lines in the exhibit and are represented in all sections of the museum.

The first display that presents the French-Russian relations at the turn of the 18-19\textsuperscript{th} centuries refers to them as two new young sovereigns that would dominate the European policy in the new century. The last display contains the letter from the French general G. Gougo addressed to Emperor Alexander I, where the general begs to relax the exile of defeated Napoleon at Saint Helena island.

The course and the aftermath of the War of 1812 in North America were more tangled, as the war has left no winners and losers. For this reason the Canadian Exhibition presented four perspectives on the conflict. In the guidebook by published by the Canadian War Museum, the author provides the following reasons for the war: “For Canadians, the War of 1812 was about American Invasions. For Americans, it was about standing for Britain.

\textsuperscript{2} One of the displays that presents both emperors, Alexander I and Napoleon I. Photo by Konstantin Romanov, March, 2013.
For the British, it was an annoying sideshow to the Napoleonic Wars. For Native Americans, it was a desperate struggle for freedom and independence as they fought to defend their homelands” (Macleod, p. 9).

**Major Battlefields**

Both exhibitions provide the major battles of the war, such as *the Battle of Queenston Heights* and *the Battle of Borodino*, and occupy the central role in the museum narratives.

*The Battle of Queenston Heights* is displayed as the central event in the part of the exhibition called “*The Canadian War*” for its central role in the defensive actions of joint forces consisting of British regular forces, French and English-speaking militia and First Peoples warriors, who “Stood together to defend Canada and triumph against the odds” (Macleod, p. 50). The romanticized painting of the Battle of Queenston Heights, which portrays the heroic death of commander (and the central figure) Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, captures the essence of the patriotic narrative of “the successful defense of a small colony under attack of a much larger neighbor” (Macleod, p.50). A similar approach, the heroic defense of fort McHenry against the larger forces, is presented as one of the central events in the “American” part of the exhibition. The 12-minutes video shows the connection between the defense and the rise of American national pride.

The Russian exhibition presents the “*Battle of Moscow*” (another name: *the Battle of Borodino*) which took place near the village Borodino, 125 kilometers west of Moscow as the central event of the campaign. The battle took place on August 26th and lasted for 15 hours, with over 250 thousand regular troops involved and caused over 70 thousand casualties, which permitted it to be called the bloodiest single day battle at the time.
The exhibition leaves the question of the winner open and provides the visitor with the quotes from chief commanders Napoleon and M. Kutuzov who later reflected on the consequences. “Borodino was the worst of all my battles. The French well deserved victory and the Russians gained the right to be undefeated” (Napoleon).

**Burning the Capital**

The devastating effects caused by two wars are presented at both exhibitions. Both exhibits present fire as the main force of destruction, which affected major cities. In both exhibitions fire has a metaphorical meaning of destruction.

Upon the retreat of the Russian army, Moscow, abandoned by most of its citizens, was set on fire. This happened the same day that Napoleon entered the city. The fire, most likely set by partisans, quickly spread all over the city, damaging up to $\frac{3}{4}$ of all buildings. Another possible origin of the “Great fire” (as it came be be known) was a large number of campfires set by the soldiers of the Great Army. Napoleon had to reinforce the discipline and introduced capital punishment for everyone suspected of arson. The museum shows the horrific impact the fire made on the city, such as the loss of artistic and scientific centers, libraries and archives, and heritage buildings. At the same time it is portrayed as a purified force that hurt the alien army and finally forced it to leave the city. One of the most powerful images of the Great Fire of Moscow is provided by the Russian painter Vasily Vereshchagin, in the painting “*Through the fire*” (1899-1900).
The two major fires of the War of 1812 in North America are the *Burning of York* and the *Fire of Washington*. Both are showed as a sign of threat to the statehood, American or Canadian. Although York (present-day Toronto) was the capital of Upper Canada at the time, it did not have an important strategic meaning. However, its capture was the US forces from that point could menace Kingston, a key naval base of the British. The Burning of York happened in late April 1813, after American forces captured the fort. Americans set fire on the Legislative Assembly and other governmental buildings. The fire damaged the public library; the survived books are presented in the exhibition. In 1814, British forces retaliated for the burning of York and attacked the US capital Washington. They targeted mainly the White house and U.S. Capital as major state symbols of the USA.

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3Vasily Vereshchagin “*Through the fire*” (1899-1900).
Civilians under arms

The Russian museum of 1812 is officially called the “Museum of the Patriotic war of 1812”, which puts emphasis on peoples large involvement in warfare. One of the major imperial decrees of the first period of the war was the “Manifesto of People’s Militia” issued on July 6th, a few weeks after the French invasion. The majority of militia was made up of peasants, however, retired officers, nobility and intellectuals were also highly involved. Reach landowners and merchants sponsored the recruited troops. The role of irregular troops and partisans is especially emphasized. Rear partisan attacks, a common fact of the campaign, were usually rapid and unexpected. A portrait of the famous partisan squadron commander Denis Davydov depicts him in peasant garments that he would wear so that local population (not familiar with uniforms) would not take him as a French soldier. Women were often involved. Thus, Vasilisa Kozhyna, is said to be in chief of her own partisan party. The major reason of the high involvement of the local population in the war actions was the devastating effect that the Great Army caused on occupied territories.

The Canadian exhibition also stresses the role of “civilians under arms”. The “Canadian War” part of the exhibition started with the following opening quotation: “The Americans were in high spirits and when I said I was Canadian, one of the officers laughed and said “You’ll soon be under the Yankee government, my boy”. I was sassy, like most boys of my age and said, I’m not sure about that” (Jacob Cline, thirteen years old, 1813). The War Museum’s permanent exhibition stresses the role of French Canadians who stayed loyal to British authorities: “Many French Canadians from Upper Canada served in the militia during the War of 1812”. A lot of attention is devoted to portraying the heroic female figure of the War, Laura Secord.
A highly mythologized story of an ordinary person from the Loyalist background is aimed to reinforce the notion of common peoples participating in the war.

**Notions of Patriotism**

The central theme in the Russian exhibition is liberation of the country. As it is stated on one of the displays, “Since the first days of war the relation of the Russian society had a single meaning: the nation felt outrage of the assault that defied the world order. With the advancement of the Great Army inside the country and the increase of pillage and violence towards civilians, the exasperation increased”. The idea of the all-national involvement in country’s liberation was vividly presented in the popular caricatures of the time drawn by famous painters, I. I. Terbinev, A.G. Venetsyanov, I. A. Ivanov. State awards also underscore the idea of the expatriation of the enemy.

The Canadian exhibition is focused on the idea of colony’s survival. A few decades later, Canada’s loyalty to the Crown in 1812 was rewarded by statehood and British protectorate under Confederation: “The hostilities ended with Canada still in British hands represented a victory for Anglophones, Francophones, and First Peoples who wanted nothing more than to get on with their lives. The successful defense of Canada allowed British North America to evolve into a free and independent transcontinental country”, (Macleod, p. 68).

Patriotism has a weaker representation, as a large part of the population of the British North America and the USA still had no grounding in any particular state. For this reason, its population, a large percent of which was composed by immigrants, showed little interest in the war.
Most of the settler communities in Upper Canada and New York had a very similar population; many family members lived on both sides of the border, and the predominant majority spoke English as their first language. There were many voices against the war. The war fought in battlefields on both sides brought destruction and devastation to the farming communities on both the Canadian and the US sides. The Great Army that invaded Russia comprised Europeans of various origins: French (50%), Polish, Spanish, Italians, Germans, Bavarians, etc. The Russian population easily recognized “the other” and opposed foreign aggression.

From the cultural perspective, French Canadians and Native Peoples had more reasons to oppose the Americans than the Upper-Canadians. The exhibition explained how westward expansion of the U.S. pushed the emerging Great Coalition, formed by Native leaders in 1805, to seek for peace and alliance with the British.

**War Heroes and Major Values**

Both exhibitions devote a lot of space to capture and conceptualize several war heroes. These personalities usually depict major national values which were important for the national destiny.

The main qualities that are embedded in the war heroes of the Canadian museum focus are on valour, devotion to authorities, and the idea of unity. These qualities are represented in such images as those of Isaac Brock, Tecumseh, Shingwaukonse, and Laura Secord. The iconic painting of the unknown artist the “Battle of Queenston Heights”, which depicts the death of Isaac Brock, is one of the central pieces in the exhibition.
The tunic, with a hole left by a musket ball that Major General Brock was wearing at the battlefield, promotes the image of a fierce warrior fighting for the King and Empire.

Another important painting, the “Meeting of Brock and Tecumseh” by Charles William Jefferys, is aimed at promoting the idea of unity against the common foe. In many sources, the meeting depicted in this painting is considered a seminal event in forging Canadian identity.

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4 Battle of Queenston Heights. Unknown artist. 
Tecumseh (and other Native war leaders displayed in the exhibition) is portrayed as both the noble warrior and a devoted servant of the King, one who believes in equity of the monarch: “our rights … would be respected by the King”.

Another important model of a heroic personality portrayed in the exhibition, is a devoted patriot who is stimulated by the sympathy for the country and its people. The exhibit draws the visitor’s attention to such figures as Laura Secord and Francis Scott Key. The display devoted to Laura Secord was one of the central features in the “Canadian” part of the exhibition at the War Museum. The epic story of her 32-kilometre journey across the wilderness to a British outpost and a miraculous encounter with Native allies, not only creates a powerful image of a true hero, but adds a halo of mysticism to the war narrative.

The “American” part of the exhibition devotes a full screen 10 minute video to Francis Scott Key, a lawyer from Baltimore who witnessed the battle at Fort McHenry. Francis Scott Key saw an element of a “divine disposal” in the survival of Fort McHenry, in that despite a heavy all-night bombardment, the American flag survived. This episode inspired Francis to write a poem “Defense of Ford McHenry” that later became the American national anthem “Star-Spangled Banner”. The creation of the future national anthem is displayed as an act of heroism.

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5 Meeting of Brock and Tecumseh http://library.wrdsb.ca/blog/2012/05/25/war-of-1812-pathfinder-now-available/

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The heroic narrative of the Russian museum is focused on such values as imperial devotion, wisdom, self-sacrifice and military valour. The main heroic personality who embodies these qualities, is the 67-year-old Russian commander General Kutuzov, who led the army in the Borodino battle.

An experienced master of manoeuvres, he was appointed the Commander-in-Chief a few weeks before the major battle. His intellect, wisdom and experience are opposed to the unlimited ambitions and self-assurance of Napoleon. His decision to leave Moscow for the French in order to save the army and win important time, unpopular among generals, was later acknowledged as his best strategic manoeuvre.

The examination of the course of the Wars of 1812 in Canada and in Russia shows interdependence of these two conflicts through a sequence of the international alliances. Although this connection was indirect, it would be hard to predict what the modern map of North America would be like if the War of 1812 in Russia had a different outcome.

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Another link that brings these events closer is the extraordinary attention that both countries pay to the commemoration.

The analysis of the major themes of two exhibitions in both national capitals, both created in the year of bicentennial, “One War: Four Perspectives” (Ottawa) and the “Museum of the Patriotic War of 1812” (Moscow) shows that the approach to the commemoration of the War of 1812 is similar in many ways. Both exhibitions are based on commemorating major battles and mythologizing heroic personalities; they depict devastating effects of fires in both wars, depict common peoples’ involvement and praise patriotism.

Heightened attention to the events and narratives of both wars evidences the particular importance of the War of 1812 in the national myths of both countries. Despite a few differences - the major being that the Canadian museum provided four perspectives whereas the Russian museum sticks to one major theme of Napoleonic invasion and escape - both capital museums underscore the effects that the war had on the national past and present.
THE WARS OF 1812 BICENTENNIALS IN CANADA AND RUSSIA: 
TWO APPROACHES TO COMMEMORATION

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