

SUMMARY

*When the Suburbs of Riga were Set in Flames
in 1812: An Attempt to Reconstruct the Events*

The burning of Riga suburbs in 1812 is one of the most striking events in the history of Riga at the beginning of the 19th century. The purpose of the article is to restore the course of the event in order to show possible causes and consequences leading to the fire. The history of the burning of the suburbs began in 1810 when Russia started preparations for the war with France. In March 1810, officers in Riga realized that it was necessary to improve the fortifications and that the security of the fortress complex was jeopardized by the surrounding buildings. The work to put in order the surrounding territory of the fortress began in 1810 and continued in 1811. In Russia, regulations existed to restrict construction around the fortress, however these were not fully observed during peace time.

In 1810 and 1811, the War Ministry considered the fortifications on the left bank of the River Daugava an important element in the defence of Riga. Building of the fortifications went on quickly and the cleaning of the territory was carried out in accelerated speed. Buildings were appraised, the owners received receipts and the buildings were torn down. The work on the right bank of Daugava proceeded slower; as a result, in the beginning of the War of 1812 the surrounding territory of the fortress did not meet requirements.

On June 17th/29th 1812 martial law was announced in Riga. Shortly afterwards police informed the people living in the Moscow and Petersburg Suburbs that they should leave the houses because the suburbs would be destroyed. After several clashes with the enemy, the Russian forces withdrew to Riga and the enemy had the possibility to cross Daugava. The Riga fortress had to, therefore, be ready for battle. The Military Governor of Riga Ivan Essen had to solve the suburb issue.

On July 8th/20th 1812 Essen ordered destruction of the houses in the Jelgava Suburb on the left bank of Daugava that hindered operation of the fortifications' artillery. On July 10th/22nd the Military Governor asked engineers to prepare a report on how many buildings had to be burned down on the right bank of the river. The night between July 11th/23rd and 12th/24th police and soldier units set fire to the Moscow and Petersburg Suburbs. Due to strong winds, the flames crossed the marked line and fire broke out.

Literature and some of the sources lay the blame for the accident on Essen and his assistant, lieutenant-colonel Ludwig Tiedemann. Since it is not possible to restore the course of all the events, especially the course of the burning, it is difficult to evaluate the responsibility of the above authorities and other people involved. When the news spread, they were supplemented

by rumours about people burnt to death in their beds. Petersburg Officials demanded explanations from Essen who, in turn demanded explanations from the executors of the burning – the commandant and the police. Everybody denied loss of lives, stating that the only possible victims could be some plunderers.

It has to be concluded that the burning of the Riga suburbs in 1812 has not been fully studied. Due to the tragic character of the event, it has gained many interpretations. Each treatment largely depends on the point of view of the author and the material used. It is clear that the suburbs were meant to be destroyed before the burning of July 11th/23rd 1812. With the current source material it is impossible to find out to what degree the spreading of the fire behind the planned line was facilitated by the wind, the fire raisers or the policemen and the soldiers. The strongest condemnation from the public was directed against Essen because the enemy did not attack Riga.