

*Reforming the
Tsar's Army
Military Innovation in
Imperial Russia from Peter
the Great to the Revolution*

Edited by

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Introduction

DAVID SCHIMMELPENNINCK VAN DER OYE
AND BRUCE W. MENNING

The chapters in this book examine reform in the imperial Russian army. Rulers from Peter the Great to Nicholas II always understood the need to maintain a military capable of preserving their empire's great-power status. As Tsar Alexander III once noted, Russia's army and navy were her only true allies. In the ongoing effort to keep pace with geopolitical rivals, tsars and tsaritsas continually sought to marshal the autocracy's formidable resources to improve and modernize their armed forces. To be sure, complacency, lethargy, personal squabbles, bureaucratic paralysis, and other systemic pathologies often frustrated this imperative. Yet regardless of their views about political or social change, Russia's imperial rulers never rejected the principle of keeping their military at least equal to those of their most advanced potential adversaries. Within the context of a constant race to avoid oblivion, the impulse for military renewal emerges as a fundamental and recurring theme in modern Russian history. In addition to its inherent importance, this impulse also touches on many broader issues in politics, international relations, economics, and society, as many of the succeeding chapters remind us.

Although this collection addresses a variety of topics, some common threads run through its consideration of Russian military reform of the imperial era. Among various catalysts for innovation, defeat remains the most obvious. Successful military establishments rarely set out to reform themselves, but failure breeds change, if only to forestall recurrence. In imperial Russian history, battlefield reversals are among the most powerful impulses for innovation. And the more stunning the defeat, the stronger the incentive to avoid repetition. Peter the Great's debacle at Narva in 1700, the fall of Sevastopol in 1855, and the triple reversals suffered in 1904–5 at Port Arthur, Mukden, and Tsushima are salient examples. Of course, routs need not always be inflicted by war itself to inspire military

innovation, as the humiliating diplomatic setback at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 reminds us. After strenuous reform helped bring victory in the field against Ottoman Turkey, Russia lost the peace, thereby deepening resentment and complicating the tsar's overall military calculus.

In some cases, defeat in itself may not be the driving force for change. Perceptions of serious internal or external threat can ignite and fuel a powerful reform impulse. This was very much the case during the early 1870s, when Russia first confronted the possibility of future conflict with the coalition of a united Germany and a resurgent Austria-Hungary. The same anxieties repeated themselves in 1908, when Russia suffered a “diplomatic Tsushima” during the first Bosnian crisis of the twentieth century.

When threat perception accompanies defeat, the impulse for innovation becomes overwhelming. Such was the case during the 1860s, when the legacy of the Crimean debacle combined with fundamental and troubling change in both the domestic and the international order. Another instance was in 1910, as the menace of a new adversary fed another round of military reform.

In Russian history, defeat and threat perception often combine to highlight technological backwardness. Indeed, a preoccupation with technology and the technological dimensions of military change form a third catalyst for military reform in Russia. These issues often transcend narrow military concerns to embrace elements of the supporting infrastructure, such as railroads, as Jacob Kipp points out in Chapter 4. Considerations of technology also often involve the techniques and even tactics of military application.

A fourth inspiration for military reform in imperial Russia came from contact with other military cultures. Two centuries of incessant warfare against diverse peoples across many frontiers brought the Russians into persistent contact with enemies who stubbornly refused to play by the rules of European warfare. In the field, Russians were forced to adapt or die, a conclusion inherent in Chapter 14 by Bruce W. Menning on the steppe frontier and Chapter 10 by Dmitrii I. Oleinikov about the Caucasus. However, the Russians also learned from contact with European allies and potential enemies, as indicated in Chapter 7 by Gudrun Persson in her treatment of observations from military observers and attachés.

From these four concerns—defeat, threat, technology, and military interaction—arose two fundamental questions that underlay all efforts at Russian military reform. First, what kind of armed forces does Russia need? (*Kakaiia armiiia nam nuzhna?*) Second, for what kind of war must

Russia prepare? (*K kakoi voine nam nado podgotovit'sia?*) Answers to the first question usually held major implications for society as a whole. For example, if the autocracy opts for both a mass army and more sophisticated supporting technology, then the population, the economy, schools, and the country's infrastructure will all require varying degrees of reorganization. The consequences of far-reaching change in turn will portend serious and unforeseeable implications for the stability of the regime itself. Meanwhile, the nature of anticipated conflict will inevitably determine the structure and larger security objectives of whatever armed forces eventually emerge from reform.

These two basic questions lead to a final consideration: the socio-political dimension of military change. Perhaps the best way to think about this issue is to consider context and consequence. With regard to context, it is clear that the debates and disputes surrounding reform take place in a specific situation and under specific circumstances in which political and military figures interact with each other and their surroundings. Careers are made and unmade, institutions arise and disappear, and fortunes are won and lost—this is the stuff of politics and power. Imperial politics, both large and small, affords one set of circumstances, the institutional context another, and so on, with the ripples of reform touching ever larger segments of imperial Russian society.

In addition, in the Russian context, military reform almost always had major social—if not political—consequences. Peter the Great's innovations created a regular standing army, which required systematic recruiting and reliable economic support. A century and a half later, the Crimean fiasco provided a strong impulse for the abolition of serfdom. The Manifesto of Liberation, in turn, made possible the kind of conscript army that Alexander II's reform-minded war minister, Dmitrii A. Miliutin, so eagerly sought. Meanwhile, the requirement for a more advanced manufacturing and transportation base to support modern warfare had important implications for social stability in the waning decades of the Romanov dynasty. Thus the military imperative provided a strong impulse for the halting modernization of imperial Russia's economic infrastructure.

All of these concerns have made a tremendous impact on the course of Russian history. Cycles of military setback and renewal have been among the most dominant features of the Russian past. Whether directly or indirectly, the exigencies of military innovation in Russia have often deeply affected the lives of its people in many different ways. It would hardly be exaggerating to argue that such reforms have affected Russian society more thoroughly than perhaps any other society during the modern

age. For this reason alone, the study of military history assumes special significance in any consideration of the Russian past.

The chapters in this book reflect the multifaceted nature of military reform, as well as the promise and practice inherent in its implementation, even if imperfect. The chapters are divided into four basic categories: 1) Innovation and its relationship with basic population resources and the infrastructure necessary to support war, 2) Development and refinement of ways to anticipate conflict through better knowledge, 3) Lessons of war experience and defeat, and 4) The role played by personality.

In Part I of this book, “Population, Resources, and War,” Chapters 1, 2, and 3, by Robert F. Baumann, Mark von Hagen, and David R. Jones, respectively, examine the interplay of the empire’s subjects with military change, while Chapter 4 by Jacob W. Kipp views railroads as a key element of the economic infrastructure with military application. Focusing on one of the most important elements of the Great Reforms, Baumann studies Miliutin’s imposition of the obligation of universal military service, which radically altered the relationship between the armed forces and society at its most basic level. Russian war ministers could now draw on a more homogeneous demographic pool. As Hagen reminds us, the empire’s multiethnic nature confronted the military with important challenges, especially in an age of growing national consciousness. At the same time, in Russia, just as in other European nations, the early twentieth century witnessed efforts to prepare men for military service at an early age through such voluntary organizations as Lord Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts. The Soviet-era youth organizations, the Pioneers and the Komsomol, are well known, but Jones points out that Russians had already begun to experiment with patriotic paramilitary youth clubs well before 1917.

The technological changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution significantly altered the ways armies fought and, equally important, how they brought men and matériel to the battlefield. As elsewhere in Europe, during the late nineteenth century, railways were the crucial transport and logistical-support mechanism for Russia’s armed forces. Other scholars have already studied the interplay between industrial development and railway construction in Russia, but Kipp’s contribution examines the important factor of military requirements in the overall equation of rail-transit requirements.

Modernization affected more than the hardware of war. The nineteenth century also witnessed tremendous changes in the ways men thought about combat, a question addressed by Part II, “Intelligence and

Knowledge,” in chapters by E. Willis Brooks, David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Gudrun Persson, and David Alan Rich. On the one hand, a better-educated officer corps permitted a much more sophisticated dialogue about the army and its needs within such forums as professional journals and newspapers. Brooks in Chapter 5 suggests that Miliutin was well aware of this nuance and made good use of the press to support his ambitious reform program.

Miliutin also played an important role in another vital aspect of the “software” of war by developing more sophisticated approaches to the collection and application of intelligence. Indeed, Schimmelpenninck in Chapter 6 argues that innovations in strategic intelligence constituted one of the war minister’s more significant accomplishments. Proper intelligence can only function with wide-ranging means for collecting information about potential foes. The nineteenth century witnessed the development of one crucial source in the form of military attachés, a process that Persson describes in Chapter 7. At the same time, as Rich explains in Chapter 8, properly collating, analyzing, and disseminating intelligence depend on an effective institution staffed by officers with sufficient intellectual abilities and training. He concludes that the army’s commanders in St. Petersburg succeeded in creating a general staff that “was second only to Berlin’s” in sophistication on the eve of World War I.

The most powerful impetus for reform often was direct experience in combat, whether in victory or in defeat. In Part III, “Responses to Specific Wars,” Frederick W. Kagan, Dmitrii I. Oleinikov, Bruce W. Menning, and John W. Steinberg examine lessons learned on battlefields during four important conflicts. It is obvious that imperial Russia’s most spectacular success, the defeat of Napoleon’s Grande Armée, had major consequences for the direction of military innovation. What is less evident, Kagan reminds us in Chapter 9, is that Russian generals also carried out important reforms *during* the fifteen years of the Napoleonic Wars. Kagan suggests that it is impossible to understand fully the military world of Nicholas I without considering that of his predecessor.

Although indigenous and foreign military historians alike have written a great deal about the events of 1812, they have virtually ignored the much longer wars in the Caucasus that spanned the reigns of Tsars Alexander I, Nicholas I, and Alexander II. When compared with conventional operations, irregular warfare generally gets short shrift in the literature. Oleinikov in Chapter 10 emphasizes that the tsars’ small wars nevertheless had important impacts on various aspects of military innovation, not least because many leading reformers, starting with Miliutin at

the top, learned valuable lessons from their postings in the highlands on Russia's periphery. Oleinikov's chapter extends and deepens Bruce W. Menning's treatment in Chapter 14 of the frontier as inspiration for reform, which appears in Part IV, "Personalities."

Like the Crimean War, whose consequences are examined in other sections of this book, the conflict with Japan half a century later inflicted one of the most traumatic defeats on imperial Russia's military. As during the Great Reforms of the 1860s and 1870s, the Russo-Japanese War ushered in an intense, broadly based effort to change the army and the navy for the better. Steinberg's Chapter 12 examines one way the army sought to improve the quality of its officers: by reforming education at the Nicholas Academy of the General Staff. As a confrontation with Germany looked increasingly likely, especially after the Bosnian crisis of 1908, the most important incentive for innovation was to prevent a repetition of the Far Eastern fiasco on Russia's western front. In Chapter 11, which focuses on Russian preparations for future war, Menning explains how Russian commanders adapted their plans on the basis of what they had learned so painfully *na sopakh Manchzhurii* (on the headlands of Manchuria).

History is about people, and personality was often a decisive factor in the fate of Russian military reform. Part Four, comprising chapters by Paul Bushkovitch, Menning, and Oleg Airapetov, focuses on the key roles played by individuals in carrying out or embodying reforms. Although Muscovite tsars had periodically introduced innovations within their armies, the reign of Peter the Great is credited with the first major, conscious program of military modernization in Russia. Nevertheless, even Peter had to contend with powerful, traditional noble elites. Bushkovitch in Chapter 13 explains that the ardently Westernizing monarch relied more than is commonly supposed on old-fashioned court politics to push through his unpopular reforms.

Two individuals whose names are less frequently associated with innovation in the Russian military are Grigorii Potemkin and Aleksandr Chernyshev. Menning's Chapter 14 yields some insights into their efforts to adapt the forces under their command in light of their experience on the southern steppe frontier. Personal ambition could also act as a powerful brake on reform. Airapetov argues in Chapter 15 that Miliutin, despite his many accomplishments in shepherding through needed changes in the Russian army, effectively vetoed the creation of an independent Prussian-style general staff for fear of potential challenges to his ministerial authority.

These fifteen chapters provide useful insights not only into military innovation during the imperial era, but also into Russian history more generally. To put the question of military reform in broader context, three scholars not directly specializing in imperial Russian military history were invited to write conclusions from the perspectives of their own expertise. David M. McDonald, whose interests focus on imperial Russian political and intellectual topics, discusses in Chapter 16 the military's place in the prerevolutionary past. In Chapter 17, the European military historian Dennis Showalter considers the importance of Russia to his field. Finally, William E. Odom, an authority on the modern Russian military, provides in Chapter 18 his thoughts about the relevance of the past to the present. Together, the commentary of these three scholars, when combined with the chapters that make up the core of this book, attest to the importance of Sir Michael Howard's injunction that military history must be studied "in depth, breadth, and context."