Review Essays

What's New in Russian Military History and Why You Should Care

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When one thinks of neglected approaches to the study of the Russian past, military history rarely comes to mind. In mass market publications and on television, military historians are, to say the least, well represented. At Borders Bookstore and on the History Channel, the feats and defeats of Russian arms occupy a large share of the space devoted to Russian history. One would also be hard pressed to argue that military history has been ignored in scholarly treatments of the Russian past. Military explanations have been adduced (and in many cases have become orthodox) for many important “social” events in Russian history, such as the implementation of serfdom and its later abolition.¹

Nevertheless, there is a sense among active military historians that the most recent work in military history, by junior and senior scholars alike, remains unread by most of the field. Many scholars, of course, feel underappreciated, but

there seems to be something a bit more substantial about the complaints of military historians that their subject is ignored by the rest of the profession. To take just one example, a series of excellent edited collections on late imperial Russian history appeared in the 1990s, yet virtually none included articles on military history. Russian military intellectuals, line officers, and soldiers were involved in the “quest for public identity,” in the development of the professions, in activities that can only be called subversive of the autocratic political system, and in the engagement with “Russia’s Orient.” But military history is at the center of none of the articles in the major collections on those themes that have appeared over the past decade. At a time when new historical paradigms are being formed as a result of the “cultural turn” and the opening of the Russian archives, this lack of integration is damaging not only to the professional egos of military historians but to the quality of scholarship for years to come.

The sense of exclusion is felt acutely by many of my colleagues in military history, even the successful ones. One scholar who began his career in military history advised me – too late to make any difference in my choice of dissertation topic, but early enough to prompt years of anxiety – that studying the army had two major drawbacks. First, your classes fill up with young men who want to show you sketches of warplanes, and second, no one reads your work. At that point, I had had no luck getting funding to do research for a dissertation that foregrounded the notion of “militarization.” After dropping that word from the title of my project, I received the next four grants for which I applied. From that point forward, I was careful to make clear to anyone who asked that I was not writing a dissertation that could be called “military history,” even though the focus of my manuscript was military conscription. This caution is widely shared. In 1994, the American Historical Association found itself in the awkward position of awarding its Birdsall prize in military history to a bright young historian named Leonard Smith, who admitted on the first page of his book on the French

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3 The final version was Joshua A. Sanborn, "Drafting the Nation: Military Conscription and the Formation of a Modern Polity in Tsarist and Soviet Russia, 1905–1925" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1998).
Army mutinies of 1917 that he “fretted endlessly about being tagged a ‘military historian’” as he wrote the text.\footnote{Smith, Between Mutiny and Obedience, xv.}

Smith’s fretting is understandable. He was probably correct to sense that “academic prejudices” against military history were and are widespread.\footnote{Ibid.} For decades now, scholars defending their own approaches in the historiography have defined themselves in opposition to “old” forms of history, prime examples of which are “diplomatic” and “military.” In addition, historians of the military have had the bad fortune of being tarred with guilt by association in a decidedly anti-martial profession, as if all military historians shared the aggressively male and authoritarian sympathies of their subjects. As a result, military history is a potentially dangerous field for young scholars who want to appear cutting-edge rather than retrograde. Scholars who have successfully pulled off the trick of writing military history for a broad scholarly audience in recent years have generally been able to subordinate their examination of the military to a broader question like revolution.\footnote{See, for instance, John Bushnell, Mutiny amid Repression: Russian Soldiers in the Revolution of 1905–1906 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Allan Wildman, The End of the Russian Imperial Army, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980 and 1988); Mark von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917–1930 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).}

The stigma attached to military history is troubling for several reasons. In the first place, if we understand military history broadly, as the study of the institutionalization and application of organized violence, it is hard to see why military historians should have to make excuses for their labors. One would hope that no serious historian would deny that organized violence has affected the lived experience of a wide variety of people in Eurasia and the course of history in that region. Indeed, because organized violence has played such an integral role in Russian history, even military histories that focus narrowly on operational history have something to teach scholars whose area of specialization lies far away from the army and navy.

In the second place, forcing historians who seek a broad audience to subordinate military questions to “civilian” ones has the undesirable effect of continuously displacing our scholarly attention from the production of violence itself. If we always view war through the lens of revolution or imperialism or cultural production, we risk forgetting the enormous impact that massive violence in itself has upon individuals and societies. To take just one example, we know quite a good deal more about the ways in which soldier attitudes were changed by Order
No. 1 in 1917 than we do about the ways they were changed by the two-and-a-half years of combat that preceded it. It is far past time to ask whether in this instance, as in others, we may be missing the big picture as a result of our academic prejudices.

The solution to this problem is fairly straightforward: there needs to be more cross-fertilization between the work of military historians and those who work in other subfields. Anyone who lauds multi-disciplinary approaches, or who thinks that the way organized violence is structured and practiced has had an effect on Russian history, can only deplore the artificial separation that has emerged between military historians and the rest of the field. It is my aim in this essay to bridge some of this distance by examining four books that may have gotten buried by the avalanche of “civilian” works in the 1990s.

This is a distance, I should stress, that shows up not only in our publications but in our classes as well. While it is my hope that readers of this essay begin to integrate recent research in military history into their own scholarship, my main goal here is to prod fellow teachers to treat war and violence as part of the ongoing flow of history rather than as extraordinary events. I selected these four books in particular after realizing, to my embarrassment, that I did not assign scholarly works of military history in my own undergraduate survey courses. I looked seriously for a place in my syllabus to include Russian military and security issues. In the fall of 2000, I introduced a serious discussion of modern strategy and Russian geopolitics right after discussing the Great Reforms. The 1870s and 1880s tend to get swallowed up in discussions of “revolution” and “reaction,” turning students inward toward domestic politics and ignoring the fact that Russia was simultaneously swept away by the demands and pressures of the global imperial scramble and the modern “staff revolution.” The four books reviewed here all address this crucial period in Russian and European history.

Let me start with the book that looks the most like a traditional military history. This is Bruce Menning’s *Bayonets Before Bullets: The Imperial Russian Army, 1861–1914*, published in 1992 and re-released in paperback in 2000. Even the briefest perusal of the book will show that Menning’s primary academic milieu and focus is a military one. He teaches at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, and his diagrams, maps, and language reveal his long immersion in the ranks of military academia. This book, however, deserves a second look by non-military historians, for Menning is a military intellectual in the best sense of the term.

The primary usefulness of Menning’s book is as a judicious and sharply written institutional history of what was perhaps the Russian state’s most important institution: the imperial army. How the army worked, what it took as its tasks, the most influential players in the bureaucracy, its mentalité, and how these all...
changed over time are adroitly described. This analysis in itself makes the book extremely valuable for any student of the Russian state and the nature of bureaucratic politics in late imperial Russia.

But Menning also delved expertly into the operational activities of the Russian Army in the Russo-Turkish War and the Russo-Japanese War. Non-specialists may have to decipher some unfamiliar jargon in these sections, but the work is worth the effort. Out of his analysis of war planning and war practice comes his deceptively simple thesis: it was primarily because of faulty “linkages” that the Russian Army failed in many situations where it should have succeeded.

Menning means by this much more than that the army was hampered logistically and organizationally (although he means this too). He sees frayed or snapped wires everywhere: weak connections between military strategy and foreign policy, a bad relationship between the “high government” and the armed forces, and undeveloped potential for a firm link between the military and Russian society. This problem of “linkages,” as Menning himself comments, has long been noted among non-military historians of late imperial Russia in their own subfields. That the tsarist system was disjointed, self-contradictory, and in much disarray at the turn of the 20th century has long been understood. Menning thus seems to be telling us the familiar tale of a modernizing elite struggling mightily against the forces of monarchical conservatism and an indifferent, “backward” population in the least developed economy of the Great Powers.

But Menning’s findings have a somewhat surprising twist: the failure of linkages in the military hid many successes. To take just a few examples, he argues that military bureaucrats actually built a “reasonably efficient military administration,” but that “the political context robbed it of effectiveness” (277). To the surprise of most students of the Russian army, he argues that junior officers were often good and that rank-and-file soldiers were generally up to the tasks of modern war (56–57, and passim). Unfortunately, the competent rubbed elbows with the incompetent everywhere in the army, in part because of court patronage systems, in part because of the legacy of social hierarchies in the army, and in part because there were too few institutions of military education. Thus the army’s cadres were wildly uneven in quality and given to factionalism in matters of policy (102–03).

This factionalism and disjointed military activity, though born and developed in periods of peace, became much more evident in times of war. Menning’s close examination of military engagements allows him to argue effectively that the collapse of linkages, not technological inferiority, peasant soldier stupidity, or constitutionally incompetent leadership, led to military setbacks. In the Russo-Turkish War, as we will see below, this manifested itself mainly in the abandonment of the original strategic plan for the war and a corresponding inability to
achieve Russia’s war aims, despite combat successes. In the Russo-Japanese War, the problem of linkages led to direct battlefield reverses, especially at the centerpiece battle of Mukden, where the Japanese won not out of superior bravery or numerical predominance, but because they proved better able to coordinate and choreograph a battle of more than half a million men spread out over a 60-mile front (187).

Likewise, though the problem of technological backwardness (and the associated titanic political battles between the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Finance over military spending) is covered here, Menning is clear that Russian defeats were not technologically driven. Neither the loss at Mukden nor the capitulation of Port Arthur was the result of underequipped Russian troops being overwhelmed by their opponents. To be sure, the Japanese were well-armed, using German-made artillery pieces to throw about 1,500,000 shells onto Port Arthur and its defenses alone. But the Russians responded in kind. The Japanese made numerous assaults on the hills surrounding Port Arthur, but they failed for months to succeed. They finally took 203 Meter Hill after a massive storm of artillery fire, but it was not the artillery itself that won the day. Instead, the hill was overrun when Russian commanders sent no more reinforcements to the soldiers on the hill, fearing exposure elsewhere along the line. The Russian Army was outmaneuvered, not outgunned. In fact, Russian machine guns and return fire cut down more than twice as many Japanese soldiers (about 10,000 on 203 Meter Hill alone) as were lost in the defensive positions (171). Technologically, the Russian Army may have lagged slightly behind, but it was hardly backward. Russian soldiers had the tools and training to slaughter thousands and hold their position in conditions of modern war.  

Menning’s point about linkages is therefore a complex and important one. Russia, he argues cogently, was certainly plagued by technological, economic, and social problems, but these were not the root cause of Russian military failures. The inability to coordinate, to concentrate, and to enlist talent and initiative into public affairs was the real stumbling block.  

Footnotes:

7 This is much the same position taken by Norman Stone, The Eastern Front, 1914–1917 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975). Stone’s book, which was reprinted by Penguin in 1998, is virtually the only English-language source on the Eastern front that is used by scholars writing general histories of the European war. The fact that it has become an icon is ironic, since it was clearly intended to be iconoclastic instead. Stone’s major interpretive position was to criticize the wave of books that emerged in the wake of the war, written by Russian émigrés, many of whom had been high-ranking officers. Stone’s sally begged for a scholarly response that has not yet come.

8 This is a position that has gained ground of late in discussions of domestic policy as well. See Lars Lih, Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914–1921 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), Francis William Wcislo, Reforming Rural Russia: State, Local Society, and National Politics, 1855–1914 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Scott Seregny, Russian Teachers and
backwardness may be related, but they are not the same thing. A careful reading of Menning’s book will be of great assistance to anyone trying to arrive at a more differentiated and complex understanding of the Russian crisis at the turn of the century.

Unfortunately, they will have to flesh out that understanding by themselves. While “civilian” historians are partly responsible for the lack of integration between different literatures, military historians are also often responsible for failing to reach out to a broad group of readers. Menning is a case in point. Whether it was because of prudence, a fear of scholarly overreach, or a narrow conception of the audience for this book, Menning addresses his work almost exclusively to military historians. Bayonets Before Bullets is a fine, insightful, and judicious history, but it does not reach out to readers who are put off by discussions of redoubts, salients, and envelopments. I simply urge non-specialists not to be discouraged by the lack of an inviting hand in the apparatus of the book.

William Fuller, on the other hand, wrote his Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914 for a trade press. As a result, readers need not be familiar with military jargon or the basics of military organization to work their way through the text. Indeed, this book is accessible to anyone with a relatively firm grasp of modern European history and world geography. His aim was to write an interpretive history of the interaction between Russian foreign policy and Russian strategy, “the ways in which tsarist statesmen and governments tried to employ force or the threat of force to achieve their political objectives” (xiv) over a 300-year period.

The focus on the relationship between strategy and power rather naturally leads Fuller to center his work on the theme of Russian imperialism, using published and archival sources to carve out his own space in the long-standing debate about the nature and sources of the empire. He is most explicit about his approach to imperialism in his discussion of Russia in the 18th century, arguing against scholars who rely too heavily on economic, “accidental,” messianic-psychological, and aristocratic explanations for Russian expansion. Instead, he proposes that the primary motor of Russian imperialism was “geopolitical,” as Russia’s statesmen and stateswomen made rational decisions “to do their level best to respond to threats and take advantage of opportunities as they understood them” (127). In support of this realist position, he quickly disposes of the four other theories. In his own support, he appeals to the principle of Occam’s razor (the simpler the explanation the more likely it is to be correct). Since statesmen
spoke in strategic terms in council meetings, it follows that “grand strategy” was the driving force in imperial expansion.

There is much to recommend this position, but it seems to me that Occam’s razor is a dangerous tool in the hands of any scholar. In this instance, it allows Fuller to ignore a burgeoning literature on empire that falls outside of his rather neat theoretical classification. To be fair, much of that literature in the Russian case came out after the publication of this book, but the postcolonial approach to empire was already beginning to affect the Russian field by the early 1990s. As a result, Fuller’s discussion of imperialism has a more dated feel than a book of this erudition and this vintage should.

This is not, I should stress, a criticism on the grounds of trendiness. The problem is that the simplest explanation often does not produce sufficient understanding. One wonders, for instance, about the usefulness of a straightforwardly realist approach in explaining Russian imperialism in the late 19th century. As Fuller so painstakingly points out, the Russian empire was putting its fingers into too many pies by the end of the century and the resulting overreach seriously debilitated the military and political structure of the country. In the last two decades of the 19th century, Russia not only poked at the fringes of imperial holdings but also threatened the jewels of many an empire, sparking anxiety for India among the British, Korea among the Japanese, the Straits for the Ottomans, and the Balkans for the Habsburgs.

Fuller has some trouble explaining these developments consistently within a realist paradigm. Indeed, he never explicitly places his analysis of 19th-century imperialism within a theoretical framework, as he had done for the 18th century. If Russian imperialism was fundamentally transformed at some point after Catherine the Great’s death, the reader is not informed, and it is rather clear that Fuller himself would like to maintain his realist stance throughout the book. We still see him fighting hard for realism in his account of the 1860s, as he deploys Gorchakov’s famous 1864 circular to the Great Powers as a basis for explaining Central Asian expansion in defensible geostrategic terms. But in order to do so, he is forced to dismiss Gorchakov’s defense of imperialism as a civilizing mission.

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9 Yuri Slezkine had already finished his “Russia’s Small Peoples: Policies and Attitudes Towards the Native Northerners, Seventeenth Century–1938” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 1989) and the project that would eventually produce the volume on *Russia’s Orient* was begun in 1990. The change in focus and tone of the literature on the Russian empire during the course of the 1990s has been striking. Compare, for instance, Taras Hunczak, ed., *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1974) with *Russia’s Orient* and the recent dissertations and associated articles by Paul Werth, Nicholas Breyfogle, Willard Sunderland, Nathaniel Knight, Charles Steinwedel, and others. For an excellent overview of the most recent literature, see Paul Werth, “From Resistance to Subversion: Imperial Power, Indigenous Opposition, and their Entanglement,” *Kritika* 1: 1 (Winter 2000), 21–43.
as an “ex post facto justification” (290). Similarly, the fact that expansion was
apparently more locally driven than centrally directed causes him some problems.
Was General Cherniaev a statesman driven primarily by “state interest” or by
personal motives? What about the role of frontier relations between settlers and
“natives”? What did military commanders and settlers think about expansion and
relations with Russia’s Asian subjects? These are all questions that might have
been addressed with reference to the new literature on empire, and one suspects
that the answers would be more satisfying.

By the 1880s and 1890s, rational geopolitics is on the ropes, even in Fuller’s
account. He describes Alexander III’s foreign policy as one driven by “anger” and
“vengeance” (352–53) and accuses Nicholas II’s government of taking “insane
risks” (366) in East Asia. At the same time, the army was being “starved” of the
resources needed to defend not only Asian Russia but European Russia as well.
How then, can we describe Russia’s “grand strategy” at the fin-de-siècle in ra-
tional terms? Fuller’s answer is insightful, even if it ultimately begs this over-
arching interpretive question. He argues that wise staff officers dealt with the
fundamental irrationality of 19th-century Russian strategy by adopting a “strat-
egy of bluff” (329). It is at this stage that he begins favoring archival sources
(most of them taken from the rich but underutilized holdings of the Russian
State Military-Historical Archive [RGVIA]) over published sources and produces
a provocative interpretation of Russia’s strategic dilemma.

The major strategic development, of course, was the sudden rise of Ger-
many, now looming threateningly on Russia’s western frontier. It took a while
for the German threat to fully sink in. The Napoleonic (not to mention
Crimean) aftertaste still lingered, and the French were still far from trusted in St.
Petersburg. Needless to say, the formation of the Third Republic did little to ease
anxious Russian politicians. Given the constant friction with the British in Asia,
the British and the French still seemed the major dangers to most Russian elites
in the early 1870s.

The first significant dissent from this position came from Nikolai Obruchev,
who argued in a crucial 1873 memo entitled “Considerations Concerning the
Defense of Russia” (Soobrazheniia ob oborone Rossii) that the Franco-Prussian
War (1870–1871) had transformed the face of future war. In the first place, it
would be a coalition war, with at least Austria-Hungary and Germany arrayed
against Russia. This in itself was striking enough, as Russia, Germany, and
Austria-Hungary were formally allied in the Three Emperor’s League at the time.
But Obruchev went further, arguing that the next war would be a “modern” war
in which mobilization schedules and social preparation for war would be decisive
for victory. If all stayed the same, he concluded, Russia’s security would be
gravely imperiled. Serious reform of the social bases of the army was necessary if the state were to survive.

Obruchev’s memo was the last of a long series of laborious pushes that finally produced the universal service reform of 1874, but it was also the first active step taken by a Russian statesman to undermine the traditional dynastic and conservative base of Russian foreign policy. At the base of this tectonic shift in European politics lay not any particular animus toward Germany, much less any affinity for the French government, but a type of deep strategic thinking that soon took on a life of its own. Staff officers first developed and then used the fields of military statistics and military intelligence to think comprehensively about what the next war would be like and how Russia might win it. They counted the numbers of troops, railways, and shells building on their borders, classed their own and foreign populations by age, ethnicity, birthrate, and other factors, and tried to decipher how they might contend with the forces that were likely to array against them. Like Menning, Fuller has great respect for the professionalism and intellect of the staff officers who conducted these affairs. He approvingly calls them “technologists” to contrast them with the “magicians,” their competitors within the Russian military system who believed that a mystical Russian superiority would always carry the army through difficult times. Through their “technological” approach, modern staff officers almost save the realist approach for Fuller, who patiently and expertly describes their attempts to devise workable war plans for Russia.

The problem is that the plans they devised to deal with their troubling geostrategic position, although often innovative, were rarely “rational.” Indeed, Fuller is at his best when describing how these planners, admittedly facing a bad situation, nevertheless made their position worse by continuing to commit themselves to risky strategic plans. Take, for instance, the question of why the Russian army, stretched thin by Asian adventurism, nevertheless committed itself to go on the offensive on two fronts soon after the outbreak of European war. The traditional explanations for this decision are that they were compelled by notions of honor or by diplomatic pressure to promise relief to their French allies, and that military planners had succumbed to the cult of the offensive.

Fuller does not completely discard these explanations, but he does show “technological” reasons for Russia’s offensive posture as well. The first had to do with food. Underdeveloped rail networks and imperial overextension into Manchuria made it impossible for military planners to even plan for enough food to get to the millions of troops who would have to be massed on the western frontier in a time of war. It followed that troops would have to live off the land. But whose land? Given the population schema staff officers had developed to “know” their own empire, they were now thinking about the ethnic impact of
supplying the army in precise and explicit terms. They concluded that massive requisitions from restless Poles would surely invite a national uprising that could tear the whole empire apart and make a mockery of the government’s rhetoric of defending the Slavs. It followed that the problems of ethnic relations and poor rail networks required offensives both into Germany and into Habsburg lands in order to maintain both imperial order and soldiers’ bellies.

The reason why the Russians had to accept French demands for an immediate offensive in military conferences at the end of the 1890s, when they had been able to resist the same at the start of the decade, had to do with the push into East Asia. Russia was stretched so thin that it was now obvious to all powers that she could not possibly face the German powers alone. Losing the French alliance would have been catastrophic, and military diplomats on both sides of the table knew it. As a result, the French proved able to shift the terms of the treaty decisively in their favor. “Because Russia was overextended in Asia,” Fuller concludes, “it was forced into a posture of overextending itself in Europe as well” (393).

The effect of the “technological” approach, therefore, was not any easing of Russia’s national security but a further escalation of danger. “Rational” planning was leading the Russian staff further away from its own intended goals. This was something that the technologists themselves felt quite acutely. As Fuller points out, they were bluffing. The stakes were rising and the hands of other players were improving more rapidly than their own. As any poker player knows, bluffers in this position tend to become more aggressive and they trust more and more that perhaps their down card will be wild at the end of the game. That card was the mythical Suvorovite Russian soldier, whose staunchness, it was hoped, would overcome all the problems with food and trains and shells. In this way, technologists were forced by circumstance to become “magicians.”

But the question remains: why not fold? Why not retrench, get out of Asian entanglements, and leave China, Afghanistan, and the Balkans alone? As Fuller notes, withdrawal from the club of Great Powers would almost certainly not have spelled the death knell of the Russian empire. What would the war aims of the invaders be? No major power was willing to take on the still mighty Russian army on its home turf for concessions in Belorussia, and even a grab for Russian Poland would have been unlikely. Even the aggressive German Schlieffen Plan planned only for the occupation of small chunks of Russian territory. All European powers had Napoleon’s experience firmly in mind in the years leading up to World War I; none contemplated a march on Moscow.

Fuller is a bit at a loss to answer this question. Rationally, as he argues, “the times demanded retrenchment, not expansion” and the failure to retrench was “entirely avoidable” (462–63). So why didn’t Russia statesmen back down? The question would be easy enough to answer if the technologists had argued for this
sort of diplomatic retreat and the tsar had forged foolishly ahead. Then the overreach could be blamed on the fundamental irrationality of a political system that placed ultimate power in the hands of a hereditarily chosen autocrat. But that was not the case. Though deploring the “insane risks” in Manchuria, the ideas of empire and of Russia’s Great Power status were strong for staff officers. Again, I think that more attention to the cultural factors of empire would have provided more insight than the continued use of Occam’s razor.

I should add, however, that Fuller’s omission of the new literature on colonialism has its parallel in much of the newest work on the Russian empire. If Fuller can ill afford to ignore recent developments in the study of empire, it is equally true that those who focus on the cultural aspects of empire simply must take account of the ways that military considerations and military men affected not only campaigns of subjugation, but the entire imperial project. Most recent studies of Russian colonialism have been more comfortable treating governor-generals like Konstantin von Kaufman as governors rather than as generals.\(^\text{10}\) I, for one, eagerly await the work that will prove able to combine some of the “civilian” and “military” literature and approaches. The sooner that artificial barrier is crossed, the better for the entire field.

If Menning and Fuller, writing in the early 1990s, failed adequately to engage with the rest of the field, the same cannot be said of two books published in 1998, which do cross historiographical barriers and serve to set the stage for a fuller integration of late imperial history. Oleg Airapetov’s *Zabytaia kar’era “russkogo Mol’tke”: Nikolai Nikolaevich Obruchev (1830–1904) [The Forgotten Career of the “Russian Moltke”: Nikolai Nikolaevich Obruchev (1830–1904)]* is one of these. Like David Alan Rich’s *The Tsar’s Colonels: Professionalism, Strategy, and Subversion in Late Imperial Russia*, this book puts Nikolai Obruchev front and center. Both Airapetov and Rich claim that Obruchev has been forgotten. This is a strange claim. As Airapetov notes in his exhaustive literature review, Obruchev was included in nearly all the major Soviet works on Russian military history. Soviet authors were enthralled by his early association with Nikolai Chernyshevskii and his apparent refusal to take part in putting down the Polish rebellion of 1863. Likewise, Obruchev is quite well known in Western historiography. He appears in Bruce Lincoln’s *In War’s Dark Shadow*, and figures so prominently in George Kennan’s *Fateful Alliance* that his portrait is included in the plates.\(^\text{11}\) As we have seen, he also played a significant role in both Menning’s

\(^{10}\) See here, for instance, Daniel Brower, “Islam and Ethnicity: Russian Colonial Policy in Turkestan,” in *Russia’s Orient*, 115–37.

and Fuller’s books. Rich is therefore simply wrong when he claims that Obruchev “left virtually no trace on the historiography of the era” (2).

So why the insistence that Obruchev was indeed forgotten? Undoubtedly, both authors claim Obruchev was forgotten in order to make a case for the importance of their own books. But there is more, I think. Both are expressing a degree of frustration with the lack of cross-fertilization between historical literatures. It is not Obruchev who has been forgotten, but the fact that he was “Russia’s Moltke.” If the Soviet literature neglected his powerful political role in the 1870s and 1880s in order to focus on revolutionary leanings earlier in his life, Western historians have tended to focus on the activities late in his career, when he negotiated the military convention with the French that would lead to the “fateful alliance.” Part of Rich’s and Airapetov’s regret, clearly, is that Obruchev is not commonly discussed by non-military historians. Indeed, if the case that they make is correct (and it is powerful), Obruchev was one of the five or ten most significant people in late imperial Russia, on a par with Stolypin and Witte and well ahead of better known figures such as, for example, Iulii Martov or Nikolai Il’minskii.

Airapetov’s painstakingly researched biography of Obruchev is therefore most welcome. Biographies were, of course, long out of favor in Soviet historical circles, and they are not exactly the road to professional success in the United States either. But Airapetov reminds us why and how biographies can be revealing of more than the individual being studied. Following Obruchev through his life is a salutary exercise. Although the meat of the book lies in the second half, it was the first half that I found in many ways the most fascinating. Obruchev was born in Warsaw in the midst of the 1830 rebellion, the heir to a long and distinguished military family. He lost his father suddenly at the age of seven and was sent to the Aleksandrovskii orphan cadet school, where he began his long climb to the commanding heights of Russian politics.

Airapetov, often deprived of direct documentation about Obruchev’s activities in his early years, compensated by thoroughly researching the institutions and milieux in which Obruchev traveled. The result is rewarding. Through Obruchev, we learn in great detail about the curriculum and daily practices of the young men at the elite First Corps of Cadets, to which he was transferred at the age of 11. There, members of the royal family hobnobbed with the son of Shamil, Montenegrin princes, and rising academic stars. Side by side, they learned not only military affairs but foreign languages, statistics, physics, and natural history. Even in these elite surroundings, the young Obruchev excelled, getting 239 of 240 possible points on his final exam. The figure of Obruchev is already coming into shape by his 18th birthday: a talented orphan boy from the provincial nobility excelling in a world normally dominated by privilege.
As one might expect, the biography gets more detailed and more focused on Obruchev’s professional life as Obruchev leaves more and more documentary evidence in his wake. Obruchev was immediately swept up by the post-Crimean reform fever and served an important intellectual function in many enterprises founded by the Great Reformer Dmitrii Miliutin (among these was participation in the reform journal *Voennyi sbornik*, which he edited alongside Nikolai Chernyshevskii in 1858 and 1859). From there, his talents as a military intellectual became more and more apparent, and Miliutin relied on him to fulfill ever more important tasks.

The previously mentioned 1873 memo drafted by Obruchev was thus the result of the long maturation of an intelligent military reformer. As Fuller noted, this memo was crucial for the future strategic thinking of men both in and out of the Russian military. In the short term, it ensured passage of the universal service law of 1874. In the long term, it fixed the Russian strategic gaze on Germany for so long that conflict between the two previously friendly states became more and more difficult to avoid.

Obruchev’s influence continued to grow throughout the 1870s, although he was not without enemies in high places. Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich proved especially persistent in his attempts to derail Obruchev’s career, purportedly because Obruchev had abandoned his post during the Polish rebellion of 1863. Obruchev was thus put in the awkward position of being asked to develop high strategy while being continuously undercut in the realm of court politics. This became most obvious during the Russo-Turkish War, when Obruchev’s plan for a lightning strike on Constantinople was officially adopted but abandoned at the outset of the war by generals who harbored a personal antipathy for Obruchev and did not fully understand the need for a rapid move to the Straits. The result was an ill-conceived dispersal of forces and an extended and bloody engagement at Plevna. After that delay, Russia won on the battlefield but lost at the conference table, when the Congress of Berlin, sponsored by Bismarck, forced Russia to rip up the favorable treaty of San Stefano and accept a much-curtailed settlement instead. Obruchev himself was denied a posting to the Balkans during the war as the result of court scheming, and only succeeded in getting to the peripheral Transcaucasian front when disaster loomed there.

In 1881, Obruchev reached the pinnacle of his bureaucratic rise. When Miliutin resigned his office soon after Alexander II’s assassination, Obruchev was

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12 Obruchev believed that unless Russia presented the rest of Europe with a *fait accompli*, a European coalition backed by the British Navy would resist any attempt to transfer control of the Straits to Russia and the “unconditional destruction of Turkish rule on the Balkan peninsula” (Airapetov, 147, 166). In the end, the European powers did just that. But it is far from clear that a Russian *fait accompli* would have led to acquiescence on the part of the Great Powers rather than war.
clearly the only reformer in a position to take his post. But the new tsar did not want a reformer. He wanted a traditionalist, and he got one in Petr Semenovich Vannovskii. Miliutin warned that Vannovskii lacked a “serious military education,” and would need a chief of staff who had one. Obruchev, Miliutin advised, would be the best choice. As it turned out, Vannovskii was of the same opinion, and Obruchev was able to survive the battle of intrigue on the part of those who wished to see him cashiered rather than promoted. He would remain the Chief of the Main Staff for the next 17 years, until he was passed over for the post of Minister of War in favor of his protege Aleksandr Nikolaevich Kuropatkin, at which point he resigned. These 17 years, as Fuller so cogently argued, were a period of great strategic anxiety. Airapetov agrees with Fuller that Obruchev’s activities, including his role in negotiating the Franco-Russian alliance, were a response to the traumatic position in which Russia found herself, and that they made an untenable situation a little better.

If Airapetov’s book has all the positive qualities of a biography, it shares many of the negative ones as well. Airapetov is so enamored of his subject that at times his biography shades into hagiography. He seems genuinely upset that Obruchev’s name was tainted by revolutionary associations early in his career, and he goes to great lengths to show that his hero was never involved in any anti-state activities. He is emphatic that Obruchev did not refuse to participate in putting down the Polish rebellion, giving all sorts of reasons why a career officer would be shocked by the actions of Polish rebels but adducing little positive exculpatory proof. To be sure, he does successfully cast doubt on Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich’s account of Obruchev’s refusal. But he does not come to terms with Obruchev’s strange silence on the issue, maintained in spite of the rumors that he knew were flying around him and hindering his career.

In military terms, Obruchev can do no wrong in Airapetov’s eyes. Airapetov crowns that his strategic plans remain “highly valued” by military historians (170), and that Obruchev was the “only military man to propose that the goal of the Russian Army should be to take the living forces of the opponent and not his fortresses” (179). This pattern continued throughout the book: Russian military success was the result of Obruchev’s brilliance, while failure was caused by ignoring Obruchev’s advice.

Neither Fuller or Menning put it quite this starkly, but their positions on this question are similar nonetheless. The “technologists,” led by Miliutin and Obruchev, were leading Russia’s army in the right direction. Reform initiatives were thwarted by meddling on the part of statesmen too dense or too conservative to recognize the military imperative, or by objective Russian weakness and poverty. If only the staff officers had been given a free hand to implement their vision, things would have turned out better.
It is on this point that Rich, who shares much with the other three authors in other respects, diverges from them. Rich shares the respect that all military historians have for Obruchev and Miliutin as intellects, but rejects the view that their vision was necessarily positive for Russia. He makes his critique by placing the thinking of 19th-century military reformers within the broader context of contemporary intellectual trends. By revealing this context, he exposes a certain ahistoricity in Menning, Fuller, and Airapetov. As instructors at two of the most prestigious military educational institutions in the United States, Menning and Fuller (a professor at the Naval War College) seem to share the modern military mindset that was just beginning to develop in Russia in the late imperial period. One senses in their description of men like Miliutin and Obruchev a sense of affinity and of shared frustration with the various obstacles that were placed in their way. Both authors are far too sophisticated to make the argument that “lessons” can be borrowed directly from the past, but both are openly sympathetic to the brand of military rationality displayed by Obruchev and others. They place the blame for Russia’s military disasters mainly on the failure to implement these “rational” schemes effectively.

Rich, on the other hand, explicitly argues that this positivistic military rationality suffers from its own delusions. As we have seen, Fuller claimed that there was a split between “technologists” and “magicians” in the late imperial army. Rich shows that technologists were magicians in their own way. Citing Isaiah Berlin, he calls the outlook of staff officers a “sensational conjuring trick” that led them to believe “that all knowledge was the taxonomic constituent of science and could ultimately account for the universal” (15). They were men who believed in their own “administrative utopias” and were as excited by the scientifically-based “promise of perfectibility . . . as utopian bomb throwers and social Darwinists” (31).

Thus, from the outset, Rich is concerned with the ways that knowledge was organized and produced. How did a professional staff culture arise? How did it gain influence? What were the results of this turn? These are questions that obviously have the potential to cross subdisciplinary borders. Rich does not lose the chance to speak to non-military historians, attempting to reassure his readers that much of the book is really an intellectual and cultural history (23). He explicitly places his argument within the broader literature on the rise of professions in Europe (and Russia more particularly) by arguing that the preoccupation with “civil society” by those studying professions has led those scholars to misunderstand the nature of this development. If the General Staff was not part of civil society, then “how did it attain all the formal characteristics of Russian professional development?” (35) If it was, then the traditional notion of civil society as both civilian and separate from the state is clearly in need of revision.
Rich concludes that far from being the indication of a growing middle class or of
the existence of a sphere autonomous from the state, “professionalism had much
more to do with a process of *structuring and using information* than with satisfac-
tion of a shopping list of social traits or *a posteriori* characteristics” (39, emphasis
in original). In this way, he develops a definition of professionalism that is able to
include military figures, and that also indicates the ways in which the develop-
ment of professions might have served to undermine the bases of the old re-
gime.

After this theoretical excursus, Rich takes us step by step through the profes-
sionalization of the Russian General Staff as it transformed the way it processed
knowledge, beginning with the introduction of military statistics and military
topography in the first half of the century (as Airapetov shows, Obruchev took
these courses at cadet school in the 1840s and remained a devotee of statistics
throughout his life). In the reform era, Miliutin proved able to expand the reach
of these programs. Slowly, a staff culture based in the shared experience of ra-
tionalization emerged.

The presence of this core group of trained professionals made it possible for
the Russian military to engage in “deep future-oriented thinking” (7). Staff offi-
cers were able to gauge with increasing statistical precision where the most dan-
ger lay both within and outside the empire, and to draw up plans to deal with
those dangers. For Rich, this was a real shift in the “technology” of knowledge,
one more important than other technological transformations that simultane-
ously challenged military organizations.

Again the crucial turning point was Obruchev’s 1873 memo, which “estab-
lished hospitable conditions for a fuller maturation of strategic thought and
planning” (103). What was the outcome of this staff maturation? War. The stra-
tegic machine was running full strength when the Balkan crisis struck in 1875.
As Rich describes subsequent events, “preparation for a war with Turkey, begun
in late 1875 as little more than a staff exercise, had gathered sufficient moment-
un by mid-1876 to offer Russia’s political leaders real military choices.” Those
choices soon became imperatives as the “war planning system ran amok,” placing
itself at a distance from other state institutions and claiming exclusive expert
authority to decide military issues (115–16). In sharp contrast to Airapetov, Rich
is not enamored with Obruchev’s planning activities in the late 1870s. Techni-
cally brilliant, they were divorced from political realities, making them “parochial
and dangerous” (121). The positivistic mirage, he concludes, was largely respon-
sible for the lack of connection between foreign policy and military power that
all four authors have treated as a central issue in their work.

The real disaster along these lines, of course, is the problem that has con-
sumed historians ever since 1914 – the formation of a European alliance system
based on military needs rather than political calculations. Here Rich is quite clear. “The Main Staff’s performance in 1876 by itself changed the strategic balance in Europe” (155). This was a change that would not be seen for a few years, but which would culminate in the Franco-Russian alliance. “The events of 1876 to 1878 subsequently set up conditions that made the collapse of Russo-German relations in 1890 a much more straightforward matter. Through its military experts Russia had by 1890 committed itself to a strategy that labeled Germany the only threat and principal enemy, regardless of what the dynasty’s leader thought of his German relations” (154). World War I, in this view, was largely the outcome of the development of general staffs on the continent that planned for the most dangerous war they could contemplate – and then ended up having to fight it as a result. Rich, of course, is not the first historian to make this general argument. But he is the first, to my knowledge, who has demonstrated the integral role played by Russia’s General Staff. No longer the dim-witted junior partners and tools of the French, Russia’s military staff now seems to have played a much more active role than has been noted previously.  

The Tsar’s Colonels, then, is remarkable in several ways. By breaking free of the subdisciplinary bonds of military history, Rich occupies a space from which he can question not only the late imperial military actors under his lens, but indeed the entire set of assumptions that have underpinned the “technology” of the modern military staff in its many manifestations over the past 150 years. That space is one that was carved out by historians working outside of the military field: by scholars working on the history of professions, on the organization of power and knowledge, and the intellectual history of the 19th century. As a result, Rich’s work is a wonderful “bridge” book, one that can bring the concerns and findings of military historians to the rest of the field, and vice versa. May there be many more.

All four of these books, as I have tried to indicate, are useful for much more than culling data. They are also good for provoking thought. First of all, these works expose much about the nature of high politics in the post-reform era. Alexander II and Alexander III appear far more similar than different in Airapetov’s treatment. One cannot help but see a different side of Alexander II as he called for the merciless repression of the Polish rebellion, sanctioned the rapid, brutal, and foolish expansion into Central Asia, and bumbled his way through the Russo-Turkish War (in large part because Miliutin and Obruchev boxed him into a belligerent position by encouraging him to speak of the conflict in terms of

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13 For a similar complaint about the way in which Russia’s important role in bringing about and fighting the war has been ignored, see Daniel Orlovsky, “Russia and The Pity of War,” paper presented at the Maryland Workshop on New Approaches to Russian and Soviet History, “Occupations and Liberations from 1812 to WWII,” University of Maryland, College Park, March 2000.
honor). Alexander III does not come across any better, but his clear and long-standing support of Obruchev, both before and after his accession to the throne, did make me see him in a somewhat different light.

In a similar political vein, these four works provide much food for thought here on the workings of public politics in the late imperial period. Given that all of these authors see the Russo-Turkish War as an underappreciated moment in Russian history, I wished they had spent more time discussing issues that are, to my mind, still not satisfactorily explained. Historians routinely argue that “public opinion” and Panslavism played a role in the Russo-Turkish War. But it is hard to pin down that role in these works. Several of these authors, in fact, make the point that the men who actually planned and pushed for the war were not Panslavists. But neither were they bloodless technicians wholly divorced from the Petersburg scene. It is important to know the “private,” sequestered politics in the buildings surrounding Palace Square, of course, but some study of interaction between public and private politics would be most welcome.

Tantalizing questions about the empire and the East are also raised by these studies. All of the authors made it quite clear that Europe in general and Germany in particular were the fixation of Obruchev and his staff. Even given this fact, I still felt that the treatment of Russia’s Oriental encounter was given short shrift. After all, before the European conflagration occurred, the wars of this period took place against Muslim states and societies in central and west Asia and against the Japanese in East Asia. The heritage of textbooks in Western Civilization is strong in these books. Discussions of strategy include rather full discussions of Bismarck’s intentions and British goals, culled from primary and secondary sources, but when the foe is Turkish or Japanese this sort of analysis is not offered. Even given due allowances for language barriers and smaller literatures on these countries, the effect is odd.

Given the focus on Germany, it is also a bit awkward that none of these books carry their analysis through World War I. There is a lot of fuse here and no bomb. The reason for this omission is clear to anyone who has looked through the finding aids at the Russian State Military-Historical Archive. The problem is not too little information, but too much of it. Even given that caveat, though, the outcome of these decisions about periodization is a truncation of the military history of imperial Russia. At some point, the Great War will have to be included in the narrative.

Let me conclude by returning to the question of how the gap between military historians and the rest of the field might be bridged. My call for more integration is by no means a novel one. Even in 1970, when Peter Paret made his
plea for a “New Military History,” he was not alone. In some respects, in fact, this sort of study has been around for centuries. Russian military historians in the late 19th century – fervently trying to convince conservatives that armies were reflections of the societies from which they came – were quite aware of the necessity to include discussions of societies, nations, psychology, and economics in their strategic discussions.

But it seems that this is a point that needs periodic reiteration. Writing in 1992, Paret felt that circumstances for military historians in American academia had already noticeably improved since the nadir of the Vietnam era. If improvement was the trend in the early 1990s, however, few Russian military historians would maintain that there has been much progress since then. Perhaps the trajectory of those changes has flattened out or reversed, or perhaps scholars regardless of specialty always feel their work could have a more general impact. In either case, we probably all need a bit of prodding to read beyond our fields, and we certainly all need to reach out more actively to a broader range of readers. I hope the quality of these books prompts you to read thoughtfully in military history and to integrate those thoughts into your own research and lectures.

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14 Peter Paret, “The History of War and the New Military History,” in his Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 209. This essay is Paret’s attempt to combine two of his own talks on this theme, one of which was delivered in 1970, the other in 1990.