



PROJECT MUSE®

The Russian Officer Corps and Military Efficiency,
1800–1914

Ekaterina Boltunova

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 16,
Number 2, Spring 2015 (New Series), pp. 413–422 (Review)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2015.0019>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/582483>

The Russian Officer Corps and Military Efficiency, 1800–1914

EKATERINA BOLTUNOVA

Dmitrii Nikolaevich Kopelev, *Na sluzhbe Imperii: Nemtsy i Rossiiskii flot v pervoi polovine XIX veka* (Serving the Empire: Germans and the Russian Fleet in the First Half of the 19th Century). 338 pp. St. Petersburg: Evropeiskii universitet v Sankt-Peterburge, 2010. ISBN-13 978-5943800962.

Gudrun Persson, *Learning from Foreign Wars: Russian Military Thinking, 1859–1873*. iv + 208 pp. Solihull, UK: Helion, 2010. ISBN-13 978-1906033613. £25.00.

John W. Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men: Russia's General Staff and the Fate of the Empire, 1898–1914*. xvii + 384 pp. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010. ISBN-13 978-0801895456. \$60.00.

It is widely acknowledged that “war is a continuation of politics by other means,” to borrow one of Carl Clausewitz’s well-known sayings. Recent developments, such as changes in the Russian political environment, together with anniversaries and commemorations of past great wars, including the Napoleonic Wars and World War I, have helped revive interest in such politics “by other means.” Still, Russian military history—when judged against the overwhelming proportion of the research devoted to varied political, social, and cultural issues—has been extremely unfashionable among Russian and Western scholars for decades.¹ Now it is regaining its positions. The three

¹ Although major gaps remain and the existing literature is sparse, selected military and diplomatic perspectives of mid-19th- to early 20th-century history have been evaluated in Frederick W. Kagan and Robin Higham, eds., *The Military History of Tsarist Russia* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Bruce W. Menning, *Bayonets before Bullets: The Imperial Russian Army, 1861–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); G. D. Shkundin, ed., *Mirovoye voiny XX*

books under review here mark this emerging shift in historiography. The authors examine the Russian army—and furthermore address the issue of military professionalism, more specifically its origin and functioning.

The book by Dmitrii Kopelev, a scholar known for his works on pirates of the 16th–18th centuries, takes on a rather conventional topic for early modern Russian military history: the German officer corps in the early 19th-century Russian navy.² However, this is not yet another attempt to rethink the degree of foreign influence on Russia's domestic development. Nor is it just an echo of the old debates about foreign domination (*zasil'e*) in Russian governmental structures. Rather, Kopelev's book reaches toward modern cultural anthropology in an attempt to gain an understanding of the Russian "self" by observing the "other."

Kopelev focuses on German professional and family clans in the Russian navy and demonstrates that the idea of German domination was not a stereotype. According to his analysis, German origin truly did provide certain social and career advantages for naval officers who achieved the highest ranks more often and faster than Russians through nepotism and a patronage system that Kopelev defines as "networks of trust" (*seti doveriia*). It was a well-built scheme of integration based on sophisticated family networks, the widespread support of the German community and particular marital strategies. The system ultimately created influential circles that involved navy commanders and members of the imperial court. Kopelev draws on specific cases such as the admirals Ivan Krusenstern and Fedor Litke to show that even such outstanding naval careers were not based entirely on exceptional merits and personal abilities.

Kopelev places great emphasis on the methods of social integration, such as education at the Naval Cadet Corps (Morskoi kadetskii korpus) in Kronstadt. He explores patterns of assimilation, such as name changes, Russian-language usage, and conversion to Orthodoxy. It was common for people of German origin to alter their names according to Russian standards.

veka, 4 vols., 1: *Pervaia mirovaia voina: Istoricheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Nauka, 2002); Joshua A. Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905–1925* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003); David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Toward the Rising Sun: Ideologies of Empire and the Path to War with Japan* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001); and Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Menning, eds., *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011).

² See, e.g., Dmitrii Kopelev, *Zolotaia epokha morskogo razboia: Piraty, flibust'ery, korsary*, (Moscow: Ostozh'e, 1997); Kopelev, *Piratstvo v XVII–XVIII vekakh: Na ostrie mirovoi politiki* (St. Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2013); and Kopelev, *Razdel okeana v XVI–XVIII vekakh: Istoki i evoliutsiia piratstva* (St. Petersburg: Kruga, 2013).

In Russian service, Adam Johann von Krusenstern became Ivan Fedorovich Kruzenstern, Friedrich Benjamin Lütke adopted the name Fedor Petrovich Litke, and Fabian Gottlieb Thaddeus von Bellingshausen came to be known as Faddei Faddeevich Bellinsgauzen. The religious identities of these naval officers of German origin varied; for example, in 1828 nearly a third of ethnic German officers were Orthodox.

Despite their social and professional unity, German seamen in Russian service were not a fully homogeneous group but formed a complex intermixing community. While cataloging its distinctive features, Kopelev gets too sophisticated at times: for example, when he invents terms like impasse dynasty (*tupikovaia dinastiinost'*) or vanishing dynasty (*rastvorianshaia dinastiinost'*). In other respects, Kopelev's classification of subgroups within the German community of officers adheres to accepted categories, such as the Baltic Germans (*Ostzeiskie nemtsy*), whose influence has been widely studied. Significant in number both in St. Petersburg and in the navy, they managed to take high governmental and military positions. They generated a particular type of behavior that together with family networks made them masters in settling private and career matters. It is noteworthy that *Ostzeiskie nemtsy* frequently identified themselves in service records as Russian noblemen. Even the scions of knightly families such as the Krusensterns, the Glasenapps, and the Essens followed this pattern.

In the end, Kopelev reveals the nature of the “other”: German-born Russian naval officers were not so unique after all; patriots of their new motherland, they were ready and well suited to “serve the empire,” as the title suggests. While he successfully demonstrates the Germans' service ethic, Kopelev fails to go beyond the scope of traditional historiographical interpretations, most of which consider mid-18th- and 19th-century foreigners in Russia to have been devoted to the country.³

Kopelev's well-structured book makes extensive use of archival materials. Furthermore, it is clear that one of the author's objectives is to contribute to the collection of prosopographical data on the German officer corps. Kopelev works to accommodate lots of reference materials, statistics (often presented comparatively), comprehensive genealogical charts, and numerous family

³ There is an enormous amount of literature related to foreigners of various occupations in Russian service that states their loyalty. For the mid-18th and 19th centuries, see A. N. Alekseeva, ed., *Nemtsy i Akademiia khudozhestv v XVIII–nachale XX veka: Katalog vystavki* (Moscow: Nauchno-issledovatel'skii muzei Rossiiskoi akademii khudozhestv, 2003); Dominic Lieven, *Russia against Napoleon: The Battle for Europe, 1807 to 1814* (London: Allen Lane, 2009); F. A. Petrov, *Nemetskie professora v Moskovskom universitete* (Moscow: Khristianskoe izdatel'stvo, 1997); and Evgenii Zablotskii, *Deiateli gornoi sluzhby dorevolutsionnoi Rossii: Kratkii biograficheskii slovar'* (St. Petersburg: Gumanistika, 2004).

histories. All this makes the book an essential scholarly resource. However, this is also precisely the trap into which an enthusiastic researcher may easily fall. The collection of data is perceived as a primary value and supersedes interpretation in Kopelev's monograph, overshadowing the initial analysis of controversial and tense relations among the Russian navy cadre and of the social context in which German seamen in Russian service lived (54–81). Missing from the book is an account of public opinion, which may have been anti-German, as expressed by the likes of Aleksei Ermolov, Aleksandr Murav'ev, and Nikolai Iazykov (56–57), as well as of the government's reaction to their views.

The concepts of “foreign” and “domestic” as well as “self” and the “other” again feature in Gudrun Persson's *Learning from Foreign Wars*, though she treats them quite differently from Kopelev. Persson moves just beyond Kopelev's chronological limits to cover the late 1850s–early 1870s, roughly one and a half decades between the end of the Crimean War and the introduction of universal military conscription in Russia (1874), as well as the long-awaited victory in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78.

Persson examines the lessons that the Russian army learned from wars in Europe and the U.S. Civil War in terms of rapid technological and organizational development. While outlining military advances in Europe and America, she focuses on the way these ideas were communicated. The foundation for their appearance in Russia, she argues, was the system of military data gathering that was institutionalized in the late 1850s. At that point, a system was established to send Russian military attachés abroad—a neglected topic in the historiography. Yet attachés were not the only Russian observers on the ground. There were military intelligence operatives, whom Persson does not cover in detail, since fine studies already exist.⁴ Instead, she deals with professors at Russian military academies (of the General Staff, Artillery, and Engineering), who ranked as military officers and productively analyzed European military developments, as well as with some civilians. For example, Petr Valuev, the minister of the interior and a member of the State Council, witnessed and reported on the mobilization of German troops while traveling in Bavaria. Attachés—officers without uniform—were, however, principally responsible for collecting data systematically and arranging it in accordance with defined patterns of reporting.

⁴ See, e.g., Mikhail Alekseev, *Voennaia razvedka Rossii ot Riurika do Nikolaia II*, 2 (Moscow: Russkaia razvedka, 1998); and M. K. Baskhanov and A. A. Kolesnikov, *Nakanune pervoi mirovoi: Russkaia razvedka na turetskom napravlenii (dokumenty, materialy, kommentarii)* (Tula: Grig & K, 2014).

Russian military representatives in Europe were few in number. Persson counts only 11 in the period from 1858 to 1872, excluding several attachés at the Prussian Court from her statistics due to their status: they were performing both military and diplomatic duties, often acting as messengers between the sovereigns. They were also much better paid than typical attachés (60–62).

Although no Russian military attachés rose to the top of the army command and became the military's principal decision makers, they contributed substantially to Russian military thinking of the time. They submitted reports to the Military-Scientific Section of the War Ministry, where they were later assessed. The tsar and some members of the royal family read portions of those reports, especially those from Berlin, Paris, and Vienna. The Nicholas Military Academy highly valued the information on European military campaigns as well as on current military technology and almost immediately incorporated it into its curriculum. Moreover, those military representatives were “permitted to write about political issues” (57) and occasionally published articles in the press. Their articles on foreign wars found an eager audience, since Russian society was concerned about the army's backwardness and the devastating political effects of the Crimean War.

Persson states that technological change and military efficiency were the major challenges for Russia in the new age of warfare. She devotes considerable attention to Russian military thinkers' resistance to innovation and superbly portrays the mid-19th-century Russian army as a structure that needed to find the right balance between novelty and tradition. Meanwhile, as Persson's comparative analysis and extensive archival research suggests, an unwillingness to change was not an exclusively Russian problem but was visible in most European armies and societies. Persson argues that the alleged superiority of the West in understanding the need for the new is a myth. The Austrian army, she shows, was very conservative even in the 1870s, as many officers still believed in the absolute necessity of closed-order formations with bayonet attacks on the battlefield and were unable to admit the need to reform technology. Similar voices could even be heard in the Prussian army. All in all, Persson claims, “if the Russians were slow to learn a lesson, they were not alone” (78).

Some of Persson's assertions are questionable. For example, her decision to treat the U.S. Civil War as similar to European wars is debatable. The Eurocentric views that always dominated in Russia produced little interest in a civil war occurring on a faraway continent. At times, Persson herself admits that the U.S. Civil War did not attract much attention (63, 90). Rather more unfortunate is the absence of Great Britain in the book. Although most

British military campaigns of the late 1850s–early 1870s took place in Asia, the British had to respond to the same challenges as Russia. Besides, Persson often emphasizes that “large organizations such as armies ... show a certain reluctance to jump too quickly to adjust to change” (146). Britain’s army was relatively small, unlike Russia’s and those of many European countries, and therefore its development would have made an interesting point of comparison.

The book raises a number of questions that deserve separate research. One of them is a debate over whether technological advancement as such can win wars. As many wars of the 20th century have shown, victory requires spirit and high morale in the armed forces (146). Another debate concerns Russian society’s views on the military in general. Persson devotes several pages to Petr Valuev’s memorandum “A Nonmilitary Man’s Thoughts on Our Armed Forces,” written for Alexander II in 1870. Among other things, Valuev reflected there on Russian society’s “remarkable indifference” and unsympathetic attitude toward the army (36).

John Steinberg’s new book, too, investigates the Imperial Russian Army’s capacity to create an effective fighting force in the new technological age, although it treats a later period—the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries. He puts General Staff officers at the center of his analysis and examines the education, training, and performance of this new army elite. Thanks to the significant reforming efforts of Generals Dmitrii Miliutin and Aleksei Kuropatkin, as well as some leading military thinkers, Russian General Staff officers of the early 20th century were well prepared for modern warfare. However, a higher military education, leadership skills, and the determination to defend the country and its interests did not grant Russia’s General Staff cadre power or autonomy within the late imperial governmental and institutional systems. While operating and commanding the army, the alumni of the prestigious Nicholas General Staff Academy had few opportunities to apply what they had learned, and they failed to perform well on the battlefields of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and World War I. The autocracy rendered futile all attempts to reform the military, and the Russian army command remained ineffective. Steinberg finds Tsar Nicholas II to have been resistant to even minor changes and reluctant to recognize the key role of General Staff officers.

The book is highly informative and effectively draws broader conclusions from small details. Steinberg impressively describes how large-scale peacetime maneuvers turned out to be useless, since the tsars’ and grand dukes’ inevitable presence utterly ruined military field exercises, all the instructive value of

which had to be cast aside for the sake of performing splendidly in the royal presence. Steinberg also highlights important matters that were to shape the so called “bayonets before bullets” movement.⁵ It spread in Russia in the early 20th century and is strongly associated with General Mikhail Dragomirov, whose extreme views were based on Aleksandr Suvorov’s ideals of military efficiency, officers’ leadership quality, and the army’s self-sacrificing discipline. Dragomirov openly and fiercely opposed Aleksei Kuropatkin, Nicholas II’s minister of war, who demanded more awareness of the new-era battlefield and soldiering. By tracing the evolution of Dragomirov’s position, Steinberg proves that in this case it was not the backwardness of his thinking and rejection of change as such but rather his inability to acknowledge and effectively cope with the speed of technological progress that limited his effectiveness.

Even as it adds significantly to our understanding of the late Romanovs’ General Staff in terms of education, training, and career patterns, Steinberg’s book does not go much beyond these questions. The Imperial Nicholas General Staff Academy comes into view on the first pages of the book and monopolizes the author’s attention. The entire book is reduced to a set of issues on the academy: its faculty, admissions, and teaching; field training; various discussions on the curriculum; the growing need to promote change, and so on. It states that the Nicholas General Staff Academy contributed to the development of the planning and management of war and educated a number of prominent Russian military leaders. None of these discussions explains why, despite the great store of theoretical knowledge they eventually obtained, the General Staff officers were still losing on the battlefields or clarify the Russian army’s decision-making process—which, according to Steinberg, became the main reason for the military disasters of the early 20th century.

Surprisingly, the General Staff as an actual military command structure—a sophisticated administrative apparatus with its own goals, demands, and even logic, an institution composed of various specialized divisions, confronting departmental infighting and overlapping tasks—never actually appears in Steinberg’s book.

Steinberg disregards the Russian field regiments officers’ negative attitude toward the members of the General Staff. He mentions once that General Staff members often “gained reputations as highly qualified paper pushers”

⁵ On the “bayonets before bullets” discussion, see Menning, *Bayonets before Bullets*; Oleg Airapetov, *Zabytaia kar’era “Russkogo Moltke”: Nikolai Nikolaevich Obruchev (1830–1904)* (Moscow: Aleteia, 1998); and O. Leonov and I. Ul’ianov, *Russkaia reguliarnaia pekhot: Boevaia letopis’, organizatsiia, obmundirovanie, vooruzhenie, snariazhenie, 1855–1918* (Moscow: AST-LTD, 1998).

(288). How did this coexist with the notion of General Staff officers as a cohort of Russia's modern elite? Was this a specifically Russian problem? A comparative approach might have helped here, as well as the data provided by Gudrun Persson, who mentions that in mid-19th-century France, staff officers faced the same problem: they underperformed and were "despised by colleagues serving in the field troops" (18).

The book is not free of certain technical errors. Steinberg uses the old name—the Central State Military History Archive (Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv) (349)—to identify what has since 1992 been named the Russian State Military History Archive (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv). The reference to Nicholas II as Generalissimo (30) seems rather doubtful and is possibly confused with Supreme Commander-in-Chief. The tsar, who indeed was Supreme Commander-in-Chief during World War I, remained a colonel of the Preobrazhenskii Regiment in rank.

Each of the three books under review supports its assertions with reference to the varied biographies of Russian statesmen and military thinkers. Indeed, when it comes to biographies—both individual and collective ones—Kopelev, Persson, and Steinberg are at their best. Kopelev, who provides extensive data on naval officers and their families, portrays Admiral Krusenstern, a Baltic German by origin, not as a grand explorer but as a complex figure and as the core of a patronage circle whose actions were driven by the wish to benefit the circle's family and clients. Even his actions as the head of the first Russian world circumnavigation expedition (1803–6) are presented in the context of promoting ethnic German naval officers. Persson names all the Russian military representatives in Europe and focuses on a few, such as Counts Nikolai Adlerberg and Vasilii Golenishchev-Kutuzov. She briefly describes their daily lives, the hardships of following the activities of foreign armies, and their often tense relations with diplomatic corps. Steinberg contributes by evaluating General Kuropatkin's "Napoleonic complex," which made him ignore his staff and try hard to arrange a perfect battle order that eventually caused loss of life in Manchuria. He discusses Nicholas II's unwillingness to learn about the military milieu as an approach entirely different from that of his father. Despite having little interest in the army, Alexander III had been realistic and decisive when it came to military and state affairs. Steinberg's book includes an appendix that presents the results of his prosopographical study, "The Russian General Staff in 1914." It is devoted to the career patterns of General Staff officers, including the tensions between meritocracy and origin and the ways in which lower-class subjects rose to high command in late imperial Russia.

Sometimes biographies give a clearer perspective of what was happening in the Russian army of the 19th and early 20th centuries than any other form of analysis. Take, for example, the above-mentioned General Mikhail Dragomirov, one of the most controversial figures in both Steinberg's and Persson's studies. An army general who distinguished himself in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 and who was forced to leave active military service due to a wound sustained at the Shipka Pass, he directed the Nicholas General Staff Academy for a decade and acted as commander-in-chief of the Kiev military district for another. His high reputation as a military thinker brought him the undeniable support of the Russian officer corps. His friendship with Alexander III and his role as tutor to Nicholas II attracted wide social interest (Il'ia Repin even selected him as one of the models for his grand painting *The Zaporozhian Cossacks Draft a Manifesto to a Turkish Sultan*). In part thanks to his enthusiasm for Suvorov, the public embraced the last Generalissimo of the Russian Empire with enthusiasm, and a museum was founded in his memory in St. Petersburg in 1904. Dragomirov's influence remained unsurpassed for years, to the extent that Steinberg even refers to a cult of Dragomirov (77).

In the historical literature, as the books by Persson and Steinberg confirm, General Dragomirov has a complicated reputation. On the one hand, he is seen as a military thinker who witnessed in person the battlefields of Europe (France, Prussia, Belgium, etc.) and who was very much aware of military methods and ready to discuss the issues of army morale and technical efficiency. On the other hand, he is known to have argued forcibly against quick-firing guns and war games, and he was determined to emphasize the bayonet attack in training.⁶

Persson portrays Dragomirov as one of Russia's military representatives in Europe and a military thinker valued abroad (he was appointed to the Swedish Royal Military Academy [78]). She assesses his views as neither inadequate nor romantic and argues that he stood for nothing more than a call for boosting army morale and treating soldiers with respect (74).

⁶ Although Mikhail Dragomirov deserves a full-length biography, none has yet appeared. The few articles either date to the early 20th century (none is longer than the 20-page brochure by F. V. Butkov, *V pamiat' M. I. Dragomirova* [St. Petersburg: V. Berezovskii, 1906]) or the Soviet period, mostly from the late 1940s–50s. See, e.g., *Geroi i deiateli russko-turetskoi voiny 1877–1878* (St. Petersburg: A. M. Kotomkin, 1878), 34–43; V. I. Derman, *Dragomirov o vospitanii i obuchenii voisk* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1946); A. A. Dogmarev, *Vzgliadi Dragomirova na nraustvennoe i fizicheskoe vospitanie voisk* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1946); L. G. Beskrovnyi, "M. I. Dragomirov," in M. I. Dragomirov, *Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1956); G. P. Meshcheriakov, *Russkaia voennaia mysl' v XIX veke* (Moscow: Nauka, 1973), 196–216; and V. N. Lobov, "Russkii voennii myslitel' i pedagog," *Voennaia mysl'*, no. 2 (1990): 43–51.

Steinberg, who researches Dragomirov's activities in the Nicholas General Staff Academy and rivalry with General Kuropatkin, portrays him as the one who stood up for law and order in the army but was reluctant to admit the significance of modern technology. Both Steinberg and Persson try to avoid extremes and agree that historians have exaggerated the conflict in Russian military thinking of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Persson, 77). Yet, though similar in the broader context, Persson and Steinberg portray Dragomirov differently. For Persson, Dragomirov is a quite traditional if not to say typical European military thinker of the mid-19th century. For Steinberg, he was too much of a traditionalist, whose views progressed but in a way that was tragically slow.

At the same time, this contrast is not entirely a product of the scholars' individual interpretations; it depends also on basic chronology. In the 1870s–80s Dragomirov was bright, knowledgeable on warfare, and certain that his vision of how to indoctrinate troops would prevent devastating defeats. By the mid-1900s, he no longer understood the industry and management of war. It took no more than 30 years for Dragomirov's knowledge to become obsolete.

Taken as a whole, these three books offer us a valuable reminder of the speed of change in military planning and technological development, which grew rapidly in the second half of the 19th century and skyrocketed in the 20th. One need only think of Georgii Zhukov, who started army service in a cavalry corps and supervised the first tests of the Soviet nuclear bomb at the peak of his military career, to appreciate this truth.

National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE)

Staraia Basmanaia ul., 21/4

Moscow, Russian Federation

ekboltunova@hse.ru