

RUSSIAN MILITARY HISTORY

Overview It was not until the formation of the first Russian state, the Kievan state, that we can speak of a formal, organized military of East Slavic tribes. From its beginnings, Russia has been a society prepared for war. Starting with the first state that was established in the south, the main concerns of the rulers were to build a strong army to defend their territory against intradynastic warfare. Therefore, they invited mercenaries from Scandinavia, and learned their military tactics to put an end to this disunity. But, at the same time, this army was necessary for the survival of the state, and to repulse the nomads threatening the southern borders of Rus', and against their enemies in the North. By being a war-torn society, open to the raids of the steppe warriors, and struggling with succession conflicts for centuries, the Russian rulers realized the need to modernize their backward armies, and to do that they needed to learn modern techniques from the European countries that already had technologically advanced armies. It was with Peter the Great that the Russian military gained unprecedented influence in the region with its powerful army and navy so that it began to threaten neighboring countries. With its powerful military, Russia was transformed into a great power and was able to compete with the major powers of the world. During the Bolshevik Revolution, militarization reached to the point that the Soviets became a major political actor directing world politics.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Cimmerians In the south of Rus' land, there were kingdoms that occupied the north of the Black Sea for centuries. The earliest people of southern Rus' land were the Cimmerians, ancient mounted nomads of Indo-European origin. While they remained at the tribal level their hit-and-run tactics and lack of military organization presented no significant threat to more highly organized, settled societies.

Scythians It was the Scythians who were also Indo-European origin, came from the east and had formed confederative nomadic tribal unions. Although they were of nomadic origin like the Cimmerians, the Scythians gained a reputation for innovative tactics and extreme courage. Like other nomadic pastoralists of the Eurasian steppes, Scythian armies consisted almost entirely of mounted archers. Their combination of mobile, guerrilla tactics and scorched earth policy proved a highly effective combination.

Sarmatians After the Scythians, the Pontic steppes were dominated by the Sarmatians, another nation of mounted nomadic warriors whose lifestyle was similar to that of the Scythians. Like the Scythians, the Sarmatians used light, mounted archers in their armies, but they also used spears and swords for closing with the enemy. In addition, they made extensive use of cataphracts, heavy armored cavalry.

Slavs During the middle centuries of the first millennium CE the Eastern Slavic tribes began to settle in the lands of Rus'. Militarily, these tribes were at the level of the neighboring tribal peoples. In this period, the Slavic tribes are not credited with any military innovations, and the size of their armies was only in the hundreds. However, the small size of these armies was well suited for rapid attack on and retreat from enemy territory. When the Slavs began wars of conquest to expand their territories, more sophisticated tactics and forces were needed. The use flanking assaults, ambushes, guerrilla tactics and rapid mobility was combined with the coordinated use of infantry, archers and cavalry in these conflicts.

POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

Fragmented Society and Varangian Mercenaries: Early Rus' was a fragmented society that lacked a strong central government. Each principality was ruled by a prince and each prince ruled his own territory independent of other rulers, but there was no unity among them. As a result, struggles for power among the princes were endemic. Each prince had his own military forces, but also brought in supplementary

warriors. Therefore, the princes, to put an end their internal struggles, looked for assistance from Scandinavian mercenaries (Varangians-Vikings), and these people were later included into the princes 'retinue'. Initially, these mercenaries were invited to end the internal struggles, and bring peace to the fragmented society, but later, the ones who stayed in Rus' land were assimilated into the Eastern Slavs by the late 11th century and became part of that society.

Early Russian armies included a few hundred men who could use combined arms tactics, ambushes, flanking assaults and guerilla tactics. After they had learned how to make fortified cities, they came in contact with nomadic tribes from the steppes, such as the Scythians, Sarmatians and Huns, and later the Bulgars, Antes, Khazars and Mongols, and gained much of their military skill from them. From the Scandinavian mercenaries they learned to build ships to gain dominance in the Baltic Sea and raid the Scandinavian territories. Each prince had his own *druzhina* (military), outfitted with a helmet, armor and shield for protection and armed with a sword and a spear.

Kievan State: Around 880, the Kievan state was established, and this powerful state began to control major trade routes that ran from Varangians to the Greeks, and from Kiev frequently laid siege to Constantinople. However, after the Mongol conquest once powerful state lost its influence in the region to the expanding Mongol Empire in the 1240 and became a Mongol vassal state.

Devastating raids by Turkic nomads, the Pechenegs and Kipchaks (Polovtsy), forced the Rurikid rulers, who at the same time were engaged in their own intradynastic conflicts, to combine their forces, and secure the trade route linking Kiev and Constantinople. However, this unity did not last long, and disagreements over succession to the throne of Kiev provoked intradynastic warfare lasting for decades.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

It was the Mongols who contributed to the collapse of the Kievan state in the late 15th century, and the subsequent development of the new Russian state, known as the Muscovite state. When the Mongols conquered Kievan Rus', they introduced many new ideas customs, and most importantly the idea of complete and absolute power, and militarism. At the military level, the Russians not only adopted Mongol tactics, but also began to organize their own armies according to Mongol models to the point that almost all Russian military institutions in the 14th century could be traced back to the Mongols.

Muscovite state: At the beginning of the 16th century, after the demise of the Kievan state, the rulers of the Muscovite state saw the need to expand their army that consisted of a cavalry of seasonal landholding élite, infantry, artillery, engineers, and a logistics corps. Russian princes also used friendly Mongols and Cossacks on different occasions. The landholding élite was required to provide all the training and military supplies. It was during the reign of Ivan III that the military transformation was realized with the inclusion of servitor-landlords, *pomeshchiki*, who were compensated with land in conditional tenure, *pomest'e*, in return for their service in the military. To expand the army, the state also recruited infantry militias from the peasants, but they needed to be trained.

Streltsy: To improve the Russian army's capacity and to catch up with the developments of the European militaries, Russia began to create special regiments of artillery and musketeers (*streltsy*) in 1550. By the end of the 16th century there were about 30,000 cavalry, and around 20,000 musketeers, and the number of artillery pieces reached 3,500; in addition to the growing artillery numbers, fortifications became progressively stronger with the replacement of wood with stone.

Oprichniki: Ivan, to protect himself and his new territory the *oprichnina* against the boyars' attacks also created a private army of enforcers and executioners called *oprichniki* to hunt down his opponents.

Muscovy did not have a standing army. Instead, its military forces were built around gentry cavalymen who did part-time service for life, mustering for service when called to campaigns or to defend the realm. In order to stop the abuse of the system of *Precedence* (Mestnichestvo), a seniority system based on ancestry, Ivan the Terrible issued a decree that the precedence of the gentry did not apply during military campaigns.

European Style Regiments and Foreign Mercenaries: It was during the time of the Romanovs that Moscow's army was upgraded and to bring the Russian military up to Western standards new-style regiments were created along European lines. They adopted Western norms of organization and equipment, and brought thousands of foreign mercenaries and officers from western and central Europe, and as an alternative to the noble levies and musketeers, created new-style regiments. These units were permanently established only in the 1640s, at the end of the *Thirteen Years' War*. Under Aleksei Romanov, the new-style regiments reached nearly 100,000 soldiers, and Russia's first Western-style warships were constructed. New infantry units were armed with more modern weapons, such as flintlock muskets and handguns.

Peter the Great consolidated the military reforms of his predecessors, but did not follow the old order completely. His military reforms had a devastating impact on the Russian population through the creation of a set of institutions to recruit, train, equip, finance and administer the military.

He carried out a complete modernization of the Russian army, and founded the Russian navy to wage war against the Ottomans in the south and the Swedes in the north. With Peter the Great, Russia had a professional army, like the Preobrazhenskii and Semenovskii Regiments, and navy that could compete with any European power. He used military technology and organization based on European norms, creating a hybrid military system with predominantly Russian characteristics.

New system of Conscription: When Peter the Great decided to expand his army promises of increased pay were initially used to attract more recruits. However, in 1705 Peter the Great introduced a new system of conscription by dividing the country into blocks of twenty peasant households, every year demanding each household to supply a man who would be drafted for life into the army's ranks. The selection was made by the serf owner, but sometimes peasant communities were allowed to make the decision. However, sometimes Peter the Great arbitrarily raised the numbers of draftees in response to the progress of a war. This system resulted in creating an army of 300,000 that was much heavier on cavalry than the Europeans. Compared with previous eras, there had been dramatic improvements in the equipping, organizing and training of the army. With the new recruitment system, the Russian army did not include part-time soldiers, they were all conscripts, unlike many European armies that included large proportion of foreign mercenaries. The Russian army was homogenous by having the great majority of the soldiers of Great Russian and Orthodox background, and divisions based on class had been reduced - at least a third of the officer corps was of non-aristocratic background by 1720.

As he had done with the land forces, Peter the Great also expanded Russia's naval capability. In particular, he established a Baltic fleet that was comprised of nearly 800 support vessels and 50 warships, and ordered the construction of Kronstadt, a naval base on Kotlin Island.

Peter the Great melted church bells for artillery pieces. To finance his army, Peter the Great raised taxes, added new ones, he even taxed beards, and introduced a soul (poll or head) tax that required every male peasant and the male residents living in cities and towns to pay an annual tax to the state. The Russian military required weapons, therefore he actively promoted Russian industry by opening metal factories.

Table of Ranks: He set up the *Table of Ranks* in 1722 which lasted until the Bolshevik Revolution, copying Danish, Prussian, and Swedish models. This rank system was based on civil and military service, that rewarded people according to their ability and merit within the Table of Ranks, and not their privilege or birth. He enforced his order that nobles serve in the military and ensured that this obligation was lifelong and universal. But, the Russian nobility lacked a sufficient number of educated and trained men to handle modern warfare, therefore he had to rely on foreign expertise in command of regiments and other subunits during campaigns. The *Table of Ranks* allowed any military officer to be raised to the status of a noble, a privilege that was not obtained in civilian ranks until rank 8.

In 1775 Catherine the Great changed the conscription policy and introduced a new system that recruited one male from a block of 500 peasants per year during peace, but as many as five in wartime. The basic concept of the Petrine draft remained in place. This system worked well enough to provide the Russian army with more than 2 million soldiers toward the end of the 18th century.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Crimean War not only destroyed the credibility of the Russian military system but also confidence in the Empire's entire political, social and economic structures. Russia's inadequate industrial sector could not manufacture the new ordnance, rifles and munitions on a large scale.

Universal Military Service Statute: In order to modernize Russian military forces in the most economic fashion possible, Alexander II initiated a series of military reforms that resulted in the Universal Military Service Statute of 1874. Continued territorial expansion resulted in extensive borders that required a military presence to protect them, but such protection came at a cost. Alexander II's war minister, Miliutin, attempted to make the army more efficient through structural reorganization, and improving the education and training of both the officer corps and the enlistees. Reform of the military justice system and abolition of abusive practices were measures that were taken to improve morale. By the middle of the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution was having a major influence on Russia's military industry. However, Russia remained a backward country and did not invest in the latest weaponry, because of rapidly changing armaments and high costs.

Reduction of Mandatory Service: Miliutin embarked on other reforms that were designed to reduce expenses by the 1870s, including the creation of a large, well-trained reserve force, the extension of railways in order to mobilize forces, and a reduction in the period of mandatory service in the regular army under certain conditions. Graduates of universities had their period of mandatory service reduced to six months, and volunteers were also given a reduction in their period of service. One other far-reaching reform was elimination of class distinction in the military draft. All men, regardless of class, were now subject to the draft at the age of twenty if their names were selected in the national draft lottery, ending the aristocracy's previous exemption.

There were still problems with logistics, outdated equipment, lack of funding and manpower. The victories gained in the campaigns in the Caucasus, in the major war with the Ottomans that erupted in 1877, and during imperialist campaigns in Central Asia were counterbalanced by defeats in other theaters that were the result of the vestiges of the old military system.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Interest in the Far East: Russia had never abandoned its imperialistic and expansionist policy, particularly in the Far East, that aimed at creating a sphere of influence in the region. It attempted to unite its dissatisfied and oppressed citizens through a "small victorious war" with Japan without considering the potential cost of the war. When Japan launched a surprise attack on Port Arthur in Manchuria in 1904, the Russian army was caught by surprise. The Russian army was not prepared to fight against the technologically superior Japanese army. The poorly planned war with Japan ended disastrously, with almost all of the Russian fleet was destroyed or captured. This war showed that Russian army was still backward, the troops were led by inept generals unable to foresee how the war could develop, and untrained troops drawn into this battle could not fight without adequate arms or ammunition. Nicholas II and his leading generals also did not consider the distance they had to cover to reach the Far East, having to cross thousands of miles to reach the front. In addition, the economy was very weak, and the territory being fought over was not very important to Russia. As a result, the Russian people did not support Russian involvement in the war.

First Revolution of 1905: In 1905, there were revolutionary movements across Russia, mass strikes, famine, and military mutinies in which soldiers defied the orders of their officers and issued economic and political demands. After the event known as Bloody Sunday on 22 January 1905 and the successive waves of mass strikes, Nicholas II had to seek a negotiated end to the war.

World War I: Under the unimproved political and economic conditions the demoralized army had no time to recover, and the Russian society and the army were not ready for a total war, World War I in 1914. World War I proved that both the Russian army and the empire were insufficiently modernized to wage a major war with the European great powers. Although by 1914 the active army numbered 1.4 million men, the overwhelming majority of young men in the empire never received any military training at all. As the number

of casualties increased in the World War I, the Empire experienced difficulties in finding men to fill the ranks. Therefore, the non-Russian minorities were drafted into the army, but ethnic minorities met with considerable discrimination within the army.

The Russian army was also exhausted by the Russo-Japanese War and 1905 Revolution, and the high number of casualties, economic distress, inadequate infrastructure, arms and ammunition, and neglected social problems that had accumulated for centuries increased discontent to the level that the soldiers began to disobey the orders of their officers. It was this army that had helped the Empire to survive, but, now it was the same army that would bring it down. Participation in World War I was the final stage of this discontent, and was the time that the Russian army abandoned their Holy Father, the Tsar. Vladimir Lenin opposed World War I calling it an imperialistic war, encouraged proletariat soldiers not to take any order from their officers, and instead, to fight against the enemies of the revolution at home. The Russian military mutinied, the troops deserted soon afterward, demoralized army troops joined the strikers, and Nicholas II was forced to abdicate causing the Empire to collapse.

Provisional Government verses Petrograd Soviet: Unlike the Bolsheviks, the Provisional Government had decided to keep the Russian army in the war. However, the Petrograd Soviet forbade soldiers and workers to obey the Provisional Government unless the Soviets agreed. The Petrograd Soviet released Order #1, demanding that military units establish soldier committees, and announcing that the Soviets could veto the directives of the Provisional Government. Although this was a direct challenge to the Provisional Government's authority, the Provisional Government did nothing to stop the power of the Petrograd Soviet creating an alternate power. The Provisional Government set up death squads to execute army deserters, but this treatment increased rage against the government. When there was a pro-Tsar coup led by General Kornilov in 1917, the Provisional Government could not suppress the riot and had to call in the Bolsheviks to help it. This weakened the Provisional Government, but strengthened the Bolsheviks.

The Establishment of the Red Army: The establishment of the world's first revolutionary army, the Red army, was announced on January 28, 1918 by Lenin in a decree, with Leon Trotsky founding the army and becoming the first commissar for war. Trotsky recruited 50,000 experienced former Imperial Army officers to command the Red Army. The Red army served the world's first communist state and it was created not only to defend this state against counterrevolutionaries inside, but also against the capitalist, bourgeois states outside. In addition, it served as the political instrument of the revolution, and was also closely supervised by the Communist Party by having a political leader (*politruk*) in each unit who was appointed by the Bolsheviks to monitor the troops and the officers. To an extent that over 90% of all officers and personnel in the army were the members of the Communist Party or Komsomol. Unlike Western armies, the Bolshevik army did not serve a general national interest, it served class struggle and world revolution. Lenin's goal was to spread the revolution abroad and to expand Soviet influence throughout the world. The Comintern, established in March 1919, functioned as an organ to promote international revolution, and to establish Soviet control over countries in the West by using all available means, including military force, to overthrow existing capitalist regimes; however, the world revolution never materialized.

Civil War: During the Civil War, the Red Army fought the White armies, the opponents of the Bolshevik regime, as well as foreign interventionists, and also Russia's former allies such as the Britain and France which decided to eradicate the Bolshevik regime in order to prevent the spread of communism westward.

After the Bolsheviks won the Civil War, the Red Army became a professional military organization, and was transformed into a small regular force; territorial militias were created for wartime mobilization. The Bolsheviks opened military schools to alleviate the shortages of professional military personnel in the Soviet military.

Industrialization and the Soviet Army: During Joseph Stalin's rule, industrialization required a modernized army. Stalin began by changing the name of the Red Army to the Soviet Army, and increasing military expenditures and the capacity of the army. He introduced the old ranking system, and the rank of Marshal became the highest rank in the Soviet army. The Soviet Army was predominantly Russian in national composition. Stalin dissolve national military formations, and turned them into ethnically integrated units, and the territorial militias were abolished and replaced by a regular army in 1935. The class

restrictions on military service were lifted through the constitution of 1936. All citizens became subject to military service, and serve in ethnically mixed units; however, the potential disloyalty of ethnic groups was a major concern in the conscription of the Soviet army.

In 1937 Stalin came to see the military as a threat to his authority, removed rivals who opposed his high military spending and rapid industrialization policy, and executed thousands of Red Army officers, severely reducing the capacity of the army in the process. The killing of more than 700,000 shook the foundations of the Soviet Army.

World War II: Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 caught Soviet forces unprepared. At the beginning of World War II the Red Army had 5 million men, and but this number reached 30 million towards the end of the war. The Soviets even conscripted women and used them in combat as pilots and snipers. The conscription of large numbers of young men was the greatest constraint on the Soviet economy as it created labor and food shortages. Rations fell in urban areas, and the millions of prisoners in Gulag labor camps were starving, boosting their death rate. Stalin felt that prisoners of war and minorities could not be trusted, and deportations began. First, the German population of the Soviet Union was deported to Siberia and Central Asia; later Stalin, accusing the Chechens of collaborating with the Germans, deported the entire Chechen nation to Central Asia in February 1944. Others followed.

During the war, the majority of Soviet equipment was obsolete and inferior to that of the Germans. But, their Rattenkrieg (War of the Rats), scorched earth and Maskirovka tactics, and the ice helped them to cut off enemy supplies, and force them to surrender.

Many of the Soviet forces who helped to liberate the countries of Eastern Europe from German occupation remained in the region even after Germany's surrender in 1945. This was done to establish satellite states to create a buffer zone between Germany and the Soviet Union, and to spread the Soviet's political and economic influence in the region.

Cold War: After the war ended, however, the Cold War emerged out of a conflict between Stalin and Harry S. Truman over the future of the seven Eastern European communist states during the Potsdam Conference in 1945.

The defeat of the Germans cost the lives of over seven million soldiers and twenty-seven million civilians. By the end of World War II, the Soviet army had been reduced to 13 million men. After the war ended, the Soviets realized that they needed advanced weaponry, and to create more modernized and mobile armed forces. Accordingly, they reduced the number of army personnel to five million, introduced new weapons like the AK-47 and vehicles like the BMP-1, the first infantry fighting vehicle.

Nuclear Weapons: The Soviet Union tested their first atomic bomb *First Lightning* (also RDS-1 or Izdeliye 501) on 29 August 1949, after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and continued to develop nuclear weapons in full force. It was not until 1963 that the Soviets and the US signed a treaty to ban nuclear proliferation in Antarctica, and nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere, underwater, and in space.

Warsaw Pact: During the Cold War, in 1955 the Soviets created the Warsaw Pact, a mutual defense organization, to counterbalance the NATO alliance, and used this alliance to invade Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 to suppress the disturbances, and keep these countries within the Warsaw Pact.

In 1968 Brezhnev officially asserted the Soviet Union's right to intervene in other nation's internal affairs in order to defend socialist regimes against any intervention of the capitalist countries. The Brezhnev doctrine was also used to justify the invasion, and the creation of an Afghan satellite state in 1979. Ten years of war ended when Gorbachev ordered the Soviet troops to withdraw in early 1989; it had cost approximately 20 billion dollars a year, and resulted in 15,000 Soviet casualties.

Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty: A brief warming of relations with the US began in 1972, when Brezhnev and Richard Nixon signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT), freezing certain US and Soviet weapons systems. However, this period known as *détente* was short-lived; relations again became strained when Soviets troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979 during the presidency of the stringently anti-communist Ronald Reagan. A second SALT agreement was signed in June 1979 in Vienna, but never ratified by the United States Senate due to the breakdown of *détente* in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Soviet Defense Industry: In the 1980s, the Soviets dedicated a quarter of their total state budget to the defense industry. The Soviet Union maintained the largest nuclear weapons stockpile in the world. It was estimated by the Natural Resources Defense Council that in 1986 the number of Soviet nuclear warheads reached their highest number, approximately 45,000. The Soviet Union built 50,000 T-54/55 tanks between 1954 and 1980. Even after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Russian defense industry remained the largest in the world, larger than even those of the United States, China, Britain and France.

Discussion/Questions

1. What factors led the Soviets to invade and fight in Afghanistan?
2. Why was the Imperial Russian military unable to compete technologically with the European militaries?
3. What were the main points of Soviet military doctrine?

Readings

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