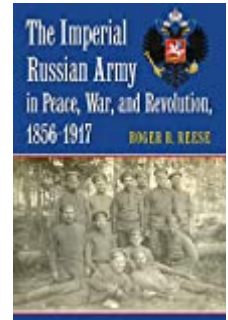


Roger R. Reese. *The Imperial Russian Army in Peace, War, and Revolution, 1856-1917.* Modern War Studies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. Illustrations. xviii + 494 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2860-5.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

This remarkable effort by Roger R. Reese is a reappraisal of the often-brutal world of the imperial Russian Army, its culture, the people who inhabited it, and their daily struggles. Reese picks up where Alan Wildman, John Bushnell, and John Keep left off in the 1980s, and in the process he challenges many assumptions about the imperial Russian military establishment in the best tradition of scholarship. Reese's argument is that the officers failed to recognize that they did anything wrong, that it was they who undermined the imperial Russian Army more than subversive or revolutionary elements, or that their legitimacy to wield authority was rooted in the power of autocracy. In Reese's words, "the officer corps was the instrument of its own demise" (p. 2). The army could not or did not want to adapt to the realities of post-emancipation Russia and transition from an army of honor to one of virtue, the framework Reese borrows from John Lynn's famous study.[1]

The book's fifteen chapters are organized in three parts. Part 1 deals with the personnel, every day life, and mentality of the army. Minister of

War Dmitrii Miliutin's reforms brought more educated and socially diverse people into the office corps, but instead of undermining its culture, the new officers took on the values of old nobility, aspiring to be a part of it. Reese questions if traditional regimental values and bonds that bind officers and men together ever existed in the Russian case. He argues the army failed to transmit basic military ethos to the soldiers. At the same time, far from being apolitical, "the military was in fact, a training ground ... for the tsar's politicians" (p. 168). The traditional image of Russian officers as a confused and hapless group engulfed by the storm of the revolution is systematically eroded.

Part 2 examines the period from 1877 to 1915 and analyzes the performance of the Russian military in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. By 1904, Reese argues, the soldiers were developing a "consciousness of peasants as citizens rather than subjects" (p. 198). The officers, in the meantime, were still oblivious to the cultural and political changes and refused to believe that peasant recruits had any legit-

imate complaints. The revolution of 1905 provided the officer corps with a roadmap of how to deal with upcoming revolts in 1917, but they learned nothing from it. Instead of improving quality of life and addressing harsh treatment, the officers continued to blame radical propaganda. By 1917 this resulted in losing control over their troops.

Part 3 focuses on the First World War and the revolution and examines “how the army accidentally engineered” the downfall of the Russian autocracy (p. 370). Here Reese argues that the Russian military entered the cataclysm of the First World War as divided as ever between regular officers and soldiers, between wartime officers and the professional counterparts, and between wealthy nobles and lesser gentry. Reese challenges the picture we get from memoirs of senior generals that blames temporary officers and the infamous Order No. 1 for breakdown in discipline. The brutal treatment at the hands of regular officers caused widespread disobedience already in the summer of 1916.

The book does not rely on many archival sources but that does not hinder Reese’s analysis. Instead, Reese builds his study on the recent outburst of Russian publications of World War I memoirs and diaries. Additional insights come from effective contextualization of Russian developments throughout these years in the larger European setting. As I read I wondered if the author thinks the officers were major enablers of the Revolution? Another fascinating aspect of the story is periodic mention of soldiers executing their officers, especially during the First World War. This surely was known to the officer corps. Was this a moderating factor in officer-soldier relations?

Aside from the above, I pondered the larger epistemological question about the new Russian sources. There are a few examples where Reese pauses to warn about the obvious inconsistencies in the old memoirs of Generals Petr Wrangel or Aleksei Brusilov and others, but in general he treats the voices from his sources with more con-

fidence than authors before him. For example, Keep’s work shows the limits of diaries and memoirs, challenges with making comparisons, frustrations with the accuracy of statistics, suspicion of accounts of foreign observers and other sources, etc.[2] Recently published materials have their own agendas, marginalize voices and events at the expense of their own actions, and possess their own inconsistencies. I wish Reese had told us more about these.

In conclusion, Reese must be congratulated on this magisterial effort, which is an exemplary work of the war and society approach to military history, an important and original contribution to the history of imperial Russia, and an illuminating addition to the social and cultural history of a largely understudied sociopolitical group of prerevolutionary Russia.

Notes

[1]. John Lynn, “Toward an Army of Honor: The Moral Evolution of the French Army, 1789-1815,” *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 152-73.

[2]. John Keep, *Soldiers of the Tsar: Army and Society in Russia, 1462-1874* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 194, 197, 237, 207, 213.

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