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Eugene Miakinkov, a senior lecturer at Swansea University, argues that the Enlightenment exerted significant influence on the military culture of eighteenth-century Russia in his award-winning book, *War and Enlightenment in Russia*. This argument connects scholarship on the Enlightenment in Russia with Russian military history and refutes the perspective that the Russian military was a backward organization championed by William Fuller in *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (1992). Miakinkov effectively examines military culture during the reign of Catherine the Great through the lens of individual officers by analyzing their published works, correspondence, letters of recommendation, and battlefield reports. He reveals not only the impact of Enlightenment ideals based in rationality, professionalism, merit, respect, sensibility, and the pursuit of knowledge on military culture but also the tensions between these ideals and the realities of Russian service. This book positions the Russian military as a contributing member of the European military-intellectual community rather than an outsider adopting foreign ideas.

Miakinkov organizes his book thematically. He begins by arguing that the development of a military proto-intelligentsia, a group of intellectuals within the Russian officer corps responsible for managing the military, fostered the growth of the military Enlightenment culture in Russia. Miakinkov’s second and most effective chapter focuses on the promotion system. His analysis of letters of recommendation reveals the increasing importance of merit in advancement. The Russian military employed a system that combined merit with seniority, which was meant to temper subjective judgments of performance with objective measures of experience. These first two chapters interrogate the tension between the reality of patronage and the ideal of individual merit in Russia’s military culture. Miakinkov persuasively argues that although the system was imperfect and favoritism continued to play a role in advancement, the practice of patronage enabled senior officers to advance the careers of deserving subordinates.

Miakinkov next explores the professionalization of the Russian officer corps, focusing on the distinction between military officers and civilians. He examines the importance Russian officers placed on developing a distinct class within the nobility and argues that this professionalization led to militarism in Russia in the nineteenth century. Miakinkov transitions from his discussion of
officers’ view of themselves to their view of subordinates. He places their efforts to transform recruits from peasants into soldiers into the broader context of the Enlightenment’s pursuit of the ideal man. Finally, Miakinkov argues that Russian officers viewed individuality as the foundation of military effectiveness. The most significant manifestation of individuality was the importance Russian officers placed on leading by example, particularly in battle.

After examining the key themes that revealed the military Enlightenment culture in Russia, Miakinkov uses the capture of Izmail in 1790 to demonstrate the impact and limitations of this culture on military operations. The siege, assault, and aftermath of Izmail revealed the best qualities of Russia’s military Enlightenment culture. To prepare for the assault, soldiers drilled under competent officers using models of Izmail’s battlements. During the assault, officers inspired their men through personal displays of courage. After the battle, officers received rewards for acts of heroism.

Izmail also revealed the limitations of the military Enlightenment culture. Most significantly, the massacre of civilians, including women and children, after the fortress surrendered contradicted Enlightenment principles of morality in war. Accounts of the battle from non-Russian officers revealed that such brutality was not a uniquely Russian trait but rather a problem faced by all European militaries, which they felt could only be overcome by further advancing Enlightenment ideals.

Miakinkov closes his work with a reevaluation of Emperor Paul I’s military policies. He argues that Paul’s reforms were rooted in Enlightenment ideals, particularly the importance of the rule of law, and aligned with viewpoints expressed in many of the writings published by Russian officers during Catherine’s reign. Paul erred by suppressing the intellectual freedom and individuality that were central to Russia’s military culture. His top-down reforms ignored the realities of Russian military service and alienated a significant portion of the officer corps, which would later play a critical role in the coups that ended his reign.

War and Enlightenment in Russia provides a much-needed revision to our understanding of the eighteenth-century Russian military, but Miakinkov overemphasizes Catherine as the catalyst for the Enlightenment in Russia. Although Catherine’s engagement with the Enlightenment was critical to Russia’s cultural development, she benefited greatly from a community among the Russian nobility that was already receptive to Enlightenment ideals when she ascended the throne. Gary Marker’s Printing, Publishing, and the Origins of Intellectual Life in Russia, 1700-1800 (1985), Elise Wirtshafter’s The Play of Ideas in Russian Enlightenment Theater (2003), Cynthia Whitaker’s Russian Monarchy: Eighteenth-Century Rulers and Writers in Political Dialogue (2003), and other studies demonstrate that this community had begun to emerge prior to Catherine’s reign. Overall, however, Miakinkov provides a significant contribution to our understanding of the Russian military. Scholars interested in the Enlightenment, Russian history, and early modern European military history will benefit from reading this book.