



The Imperial Russian Army in Peace, War, and Revolution, 1856–1917

by Roger R. Reese.

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In its very first sentence, military historian Roger Reese¹ (Texas A&M Univ.) defines his ambitious new book as

a social history of the Russian Army of the late imperial period, 1856–1917, that offers new insight and explanations for the soldiers’ revolt in 1917 and in the process seeks to expose the myths and correct misinformation and misconceptions that have grown up around the history of the Imperial Russian Army. (ix)

He sees the soldiers’ revolt as a social revolution rooted in long-standing grievances rather than entirely an outcome of the First World War, as conventional wisdom has it. In the process, based on his research, he challenges the conclusions that a generation of scholars reached with regard to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian military history.

The book comprises three parts, each pertaining to specific aspects of military education and the social composition of the officer corps. Reese also discusses relations between soldiers and officers and their living conditions, especially in peacetime. Part I begins with the Crimean defeat (1856) and the ensuing Great Reforms that emancipated Russian serfs and culminated with the introduction of universal military service. These changes fundamentally altered the roles and responsibilities of officers and soldiers. The author casts the period of the Great Reforms in general as marking the Imperial Army’s embarking on its long, arduous self-transformation from an “army of honor” to an “army of virtue.” (One detects here the influence of John Lynn’s seminal work on the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French army.²) Reese is concerned with the evolution from a dynastic/aristocratic force to a modern professional army, but he does not attempt to discuss his theories in the context of late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century Russia.

Part II explains the effect of the Great Reforms in fostering a political mentality in an officer corps undergoing a social transformation that threatened the prerogative of the nobility as the army’s leaders. Reese evaluates the performance of the army in the Russo-Turkish War (1877–79) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05). In his brief chapters on each conflict, he excoriates the officer corps for its failures, maintaining that it misunderstand the social nature of the 1905 revolution and strove to protect its class-status in the Empire.

Assessing the interwar period (1905–14), the author finds that the officer corps, by resisting reforms, squandered a chance to address the army’s pressing needs. He mostly ignores the serious efforts of progressive elements in the General Staff and newly empowered Duma politicians to address every aspect of their military system from the recruitment and training of soldiers and

1. His previous works include *Stalin’s Reluctant Soldiers: A Social History of the Red Army, 1925–1941* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1996), *Red Commanders: A Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918–1991* (id., 2005), and *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought: The Red Army’s Military Effectiveness in World War II* (id., 2011).

2. *Giants of the Grand Siècle: The French Army 1610–1715* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1997).

officers to the design of the uniforms they wore and the weapons they carried into battle. Though these efforts bore insufficient fruit they were earnest measures in the Tsarist environment. Such reformist tendencies, however, do not correspond with the thrust of Reese's arguments.

Part III analyzes the fate of the old imperial army in World War I and its collapse during the Revolution. A chapter on the First World War I officer corps details the catastrophe it suffered in 1914–17. Reese notes that officers endured a massive casualty rate, but misses the significance of such attrition. He observes that the effects of those losses included an “influx of hundreds of thousands of non-noble temporary officers [that] decreased the social domination of the nobility” (314). But, though these new officers were mostly of non-noble origin, promotion to the rank of ensign conferred non-hereditary nobility; thus, temporary officers did less to challenge the nobility's dominance than to diminish its prestige. Moreover, the promotion of men to officers' ranks during the war often meant they lacked military knowledge and even combat experience. And, newly won noble status neither papered over these shortcomings nor strengthened the bond between officers and soldiers so vital to frontline leadership. These defects helped to precipitate the demise of the army in 1917, regardless of the long- and short-term causes of the fall of the Tsarist regime in the February Revolution.

While Reese's book offers readers abundant information, it contains little that will be new to an academic audience. This is ironic in light of the author's harsh criticisms of the work of other scholars. He contends, for instance, that Allan Wildman, in his magisterial study of *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*,³

omitted all the problems associated with the governing of the country during the costly war effort such as the pernicious influence of Rasputin and the tsarina's German Heritage. Furthermore, he failed to include the associated hardship at home and front, especially the food shortages. These hardships made the soldiers see the autocracy as a failed system that no longer had legitimacy—just as they had in 1905. The issue of legitimacy is crucial in understanding the soldiers' self-justification of their mutiny—to them it was the right thing to do given the circumstances. They were supported in this thinking by radical political agitators. (364)

Had Wildman sought to address all the items in Reese's list of suggestions while maintaining his superior level of scholarship, he would have had to write a third volume.⁴

Though his book is highly informative, Reese has done little work in western archives and none at all in Russian ones. His bibliography is thin as well. He has consciously decided to step away from the historiography of the imperial Russian armed forces in order to present his own original thesis about the army in 1917: that the Russian military system was afflicted by a pervasive discontent among its soldiers in the face of ill treatment by both the regime and their officers. The soldiers' revolt, too, was the product of long-term social, political, and economic grievances.

The Imperial Russian Army in Peace, War, and Revolution should be read for its wealth of information. But more than that is required to challenge well founded conventional scholarship. Too many of Roger Reese's conclusions amount to overreach and add little that is new to the field of Russian military history.

3. Vol. 1: *The Old Army and the Soldiers' Revolt*, vol. 2: *The Road to Soviet Power and Peace* (Princeton: Univ. Pr, 2016/2019).

4. Reese is similarly critical of other respected scholars, including John L.H. Keep, John Bushnell, and Bruce Menning.