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Russia marches South: army reform and battlefield performance in Russia's Southern campaigns, 1695-1739

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CONCLUSION

The history of Russia's military way to the West has been a tale, told and retold both by national scholars and by western historians. The Cold War's obsession in understanding Russia and its military development throughout the ages was perceived as a crucial element in the ideology of "get to know one's enemy" but was also accepted as essential for the understanding of early modern Europe and its warfare. It is beyond doubt that the history of European conflicts since the eighteenth century inevitably includes Russia as a crucial factor in both the political and military struggle for mastery.

Changing notions and trends within western historiography and the reopening of Russia's intellectual elite toward the non-socialist world triggered a new wave of researchers, who are looking from a new perspective on the military history of Imperial Russia. The proliferation of ideas has reached an unprecedented level in the last decade as a great number of articles and books dealing with variety of topics emerged. Among the large number of themes are the analysis of the connections between state building and military development, as well as the incorporation of a wide variety of ethnic groups within the boundaries of the empire. A lesser number of studies have paid attention to "conflict" as a main theme of their narratives and even fewer have opted to evaluate the military effectiveness. In general, it is hard to assess both political and combat efficiency and to add the social value of state-inspired violence in a single work.

The present dissertation detaches itself from the general political and social paradigms of Russian warfare. Instead, this work mainly concentrates on the practical side of war in the period 1695-1739: combat effectiveness, application and upkeep of adequate logistics, conduct of military leaders and balance between gains and costs. The historians that have studied the period rarely paid significant attention to this side of the conflicts and many scholars choose to build their analysis on paper strength and on the general outcome of the war efforts. As demonstrated during the course of the Pruth Campaign, there was a striking discrepancy between the devastating political results and the actual military effectiveness of Peter's men. It is essential to draw a distinctive line between evaluating the military potential of an early modern state, and judging the overall political and diplomatic effectiveness of the country in question. To put it in other words, losing wars was not necessary a sign of inferiority in terms of the quality of deployed forces. This applies not only in the case of Russia, but is also evident in the outcome of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) and the Nine Years' War (1688-1697), which France was unable to win, but nevertheless Louis' armies were as qualitative as those of his opponents.

The Cold War military studies also evaluated the period 1695-1739 in close relation to the level of "westerness" the army could demonstrate. Combat proficiency was proportional to the level of resemblance between a certain army and the standards of the age – the forces fighting along the Rhine during the wars of Louis XIV. This notion has been swept aside by the critical approach of late twentieth century scholars, who have correctly noted that adoption of contemporary tactics rather than mimicking them was the true measure-stick according to which a military establishment could be evaluated. Instead of solely studying the rise of the West, it became apparent that understanding the rest of the world was far more effective in depicting and assessing the nature of early modern warfare. Once more Russia is a fundamental element in tracing the trends of evolution and adoption of certain Western European tactics into the relatively different environment of Eastern Europe and Asia. By focusing on the southern theater of Russia's expansion, the current dissertation demonstrates the elaborate interrelationship between military reforms, geographic factors and the army's adaptability. Through reviewing the main restraints, which the different environment imposed on the conduct of war, the text argues that Russia faced a voluminous amount of problems, which were more or less unknown for contemporary armies in Western and Central Europe. Distance, climate, distribution of drinkable water, availability of pastures, wood and other natural resources was essential for the conduct of any campaign. The fact that Russia constantly struggled with nomadic societies, against which standard practice of conquest and decisive actions was more or less inadequate, meant that wars in the Pontic and Caucasus regions could neither be fought nor won in the same manner as those in Lorraine or Flanders.

Apart from the socio-geographic side of conflict, the understanding of local forces is also essential for the evaluation of Russian effectiveness during the Southern Campaigns. Only recently historiography has acknowledged the military potential of steppe societies to meet and counterweight imperial military power. Furthermore, until recent years the notion of military backwardness, applied toward the Ottoman Empire, has prevented the adequate evaluation of the Porte's ability to respond to Russian expansionism and counter it with great efficiency up until 1768. By adressing the subject of Ottoman, Safavid and steppe military potential, the current work argues that Russia's victories were not against some ill-efficient enemies, waiting idly to be vanquished by superior "western-style" forces, but to the contrary – these hostile forces were quite vital and able to hold their ground against Muscovite offensives. The proper depiction of St. Petersburg's foes is crucial for the adequate assessment of Russia's development, its army's adaptability and the overall trends in military evolution.

Last but not least, in order to gasp the full proportions of the military development in Petrine and post-Petrine Russia, the thesis closely examines the battlefield performance of the army, its ability to advance or retreat and its potential to defend the empire's frontiers and to conquer enemy fortifications.

The current dissertation provides considerable data and number of practical examples, which have been carefully studied and assessed in terms of preparations, movement, battlefield conduct and tactical and strategic ability of the commanding elite. While logistics would remain an essential issue of Russia's military machine as late as World War II, the trends in the performance of its field units demonstrate a constant upgrade. Following the rather indecisive conduct during the Azov sieges, in terms of field performance the tsarist armies became better and better after each campaign . It is important to note that these improvements were not merely a product of the developments on the Pontic and Caucasian battlegrounds, but instead were a symbiosis between experience gained in the steppes and during the bitter fighting against the Swedes in the Baltic region. Hence, Russian commanders were able to draw conclusions from two distinctive fronts, accumulating considerable amount of experience, which was later applied in both the Seven Years' War (1754-1763) and the wars against the Ottoman Empire under Catherine the Great.

This continuity in Russian military tradition can easily be used to prove the fact that early modern developments in warfare should be seen not so much as a military revolution, as outlined by over half a century of historical works, but rather as an evolution, spanning over a considerable time period. The dissertation presents a case study of Muscovite military transformation and soundly establishes, that the "punctuated evolution" model, suggested by C. Rogers and extended by other scholars as well, is far more suitable to describe Russia's military change. What this work adds to the debate, is the notion that geographical and social factors should be taken into consideration in the assessment of the evolutionary development of early modern Muscovite warfare. While falling under the same general influence that changed the face of war throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the *modus* of war in Russia followed it's own, internal logic and was subjected to different principles, influenced by the diverse geographical and social factors, most of which were nonexistent in Western Europe.

Soldiers of the tsar

The main theme of the present dissertation is the story of the Russian soldier and his ability to survive, adapt and win in the span of four and a half decades of almost constant warfare. Originally designed by Peter as "*bessmertnyy*" (immortal) recruits, the consecutive levies, drawn from the general population on a constantly shifting basis of households per soldier, consumed a substantial part of the male population. In general, over ¾ of a million men were drafted into military service between 1700 and 1740. Out of a population of 11-15 million, this was a staggering percentage. Even more troublesome was the level of casualties, both combat and non-combat, sustained by the army for the same period. It is impossible to assess an exact figure, but it could be approximately

estimated that almost one-third of all drafted men died, mainly due to sickness, malnutrition, dehydration, and exposure to freezing cold or overwhelming heat. Combat casualties were rather low during the Southern Campaigns. 3-4,000 men were considered a tremendous loss of life in a single engagement and were rare in general. Therefore, it is important to make a distinction between the combat performance of the army against different enemies and the effect of ill-organized logistics during marching and quartering. Fatigue of all sorts rather than enemy bullets or swords turned out to be greater nemesis to the Russian rank and file. In this context, it is important to note that an evaluation of the military capability of the tsarist army cannot be measured solely in terms of casualty numbers, which are, generally, misleading for the actual quality of the troops.

Initially, the Russian troops were ill-prepared for engaging into open battles and conducting sieges in the Pontic region. This was demonstrated during the first Azov Campaign. In the subsequent years, due to the reform of the army following the disaster at Narva, a higher level of proficiency among the soldiers became apparent. While logistics and political actions ultimately failed during the Pruth Campaign, the battlefield performance of the Petrine army was the main factor standing between defeat and total disaster. The firm resistance at Stănileşi not only bought time for Peter to negotiate more favorable terms for extracting his surrounded army, but also proved that by that time the Muscovite soldier clearly matched and even outmatched the yeniçeri, a trend, not so visible during the two sieges of Azov fifteen years earlier. The parallel action on the Kuban proved that indecisiveness demonstrated by Shein in 1697 was replaced by aggressive offensive approach toward nomadic horsemen, which, in general, proved to be the right manner of fighting these opponents.

The Persian Campaign reveals the continuing upward trend in the development of Russian field armies and their ability to counter and overcome enemies. They adjusted their fighting techniques in order to match the unusual tactics, applied by enemy troops in the Caucasus region. Winning large-scale, pitched battles was simply not an option in Dagestan and the Petrine army was quick to adapt to the way local tribal forces operated. Even though offensives conducted deep into enemy territory were to some extentineffective, the combination of economic desolation of tribal settlements and the upkeep of well-constructed and well-equipped garrisons along vital routes was more or less successful. During his reign, Peter introduced the use of mobile, light cavalry in combating nomadic raiders as well as the large-scale establishment of auxiliary forces, drawn from local allies (Kalmyks, Circassians, Kabardians etc.). This combination proved to be the most successfuland effective way of dealing with both the protection of the frontier and the necessity of launching preemptive campaigns against Tatars, Nogais, renegade Cossacks and Caucasian warlords.

Using the experience, accumulated in the previous conflicts, Minikh and his generals tried to subdue the Crimean Khanate and to defeat the Ottoman Empire on an unprecedented level. In reality, the course of the Russo-Ottoman

war of 1736-1739 only confirmed the lessons learned during previous conflicts. Large-scale, slow-moving armies were doomed to fail when confrontedthe mobile, evasive forces of the Tatars and the well-supplied Ottoman units. The later enjoyed the luxury of operating in proximity to their well-established supply lines. While P. von Lacy was quick to understand the necessity of acting with rather limited and mobile forces, able to rapidly penetrate enemy territory and defeat opponents by denying them the chance to concentrate, Minikh would struggle in the old-fashioned way. It was not until 1739 during the final stages of the war that Minikh finally gasped the correct approach and was able to soundly defeat the Ottomans at Stavuchany and almost to conquer Moldavia. Even so, the actual battlefield capability of the Minikh's army stood higher than anything the Ottomans could place on the field. Even though campaigns failed in Jedisan and Moldavia, battles and lesser engagements were always won by the Russians and even cavalry confrontations ended with Minikh and Lacy's troops gaining the upper hand. By 1737, it was obvious that dragoons, hussars and Cossacks were more successful and, generally, better in almost every aspect, than their Ottoman and Tatar opponents.

In general, the size of the Russia's forces differed little from that during the age of Aleksey. Troop numbers alone can be misleading when asserting the actual effects of the reforms. Instead, as already outlined, it was the practical side of war and combat that should be used as a measure stick for success. The overall result of the campaigns in the south was the establishment of well-organized, disciplined units, who were able to adapt quickly to the changing climate and geographic context. Apart from nurturing several generations of veteran troops, essential for the building of a professional and highly effective force, the campaigns in the Pontic region and the Caucasus also represent a field school for Russian generals and officers. The valuable lessons, learned with blood, hardship and resilience would become essential for the upbringing of the next-generation military leaders, such as Rumyantsev, Suvorov and even the generals of the nineteenth century. Patterns of invasion and campaign organization, applied and defined in the first decades of the eighteenth century, were repeatedly used up until World War I. The series of Russo-Ottoman wars after 1768 were all developed on the basis of Minikh's experience and the inheritance of the Petrine era.

The conduct of war in the south played a substantial role in the upbringing of Russia's native officer corps, as well as in the rather smooth merging between native and foreign experience used for the transformation of the nature of the Muscovite military elite. The ability to attract foreign specialists and to transfer their experience into practice in the construction of the army was among the main strong points of Peter's military reforms. The broad but systematic use of "outsiders" both as middle and high-level officers became an essential element of Petrine heritage, which remained a trend in Russia's military history as late as World War I. Balancing between Russian and foreign commanders remained a

crucial feature of the Tsardom's political ethos throughout the eighteenth century and the nemtsy were frequently used by monarchs to counterweight political opposition in court but also as scapegoats in times of trouble and internal instability.

Feeding war

For most of the seventeenth century the principle of *bellum se ipsum alet* remained the predominant notion in the organization of logistics and military financing. Brought to life in the sixteenth century from a concept, the seizure of resources from enemy's or allied lands became a *conditio sine qua non* for the armies of Wallenstein, Gustavus and their followers. After 1648, and especially in the context of the Sun King's wars, early modern warfare experienced a constant evolution in terms of organization in both tactical and logistical aspect. As David Parrott notes in his recent study on mercenary warfare, the state would follow a constant trend of monopolizing the organization and levying of field units, the appointment of their commanding structure and the subordination of the separate corpses to the overall strategy of war.[1] This process was closely related to the development of military enterprise as well as to the strengthening of royal authority accomplished through tightening the relations between the crown and the nobility. To put it in other words, the ruler struggled to enhance his ability to mobilize resources with the help of the central administration, but also by involving the aristocracy as coinvestors in the business of war in exchange for political power, patronage and leading positions in the army. As noted in the first chapter of the current dissertation, this process is clearly visible in Romanov Russia, where Mikhail and Aleksey relied heavily on the dvoryani's support during their continuous struggle with Poland-Lithuania and to lesser extend – with Sweden. The trend remained unchanged during Peter's reign. The buttressing of serfdom and the expansion of the administrative areas, in which it was applied were a constant feature of Russia's domestic policy during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. While early Romanovs needed support from the boyars in terms of political justification, following the election of Mikhail in 1611 and Aleksey's reforms, Peter and his successors were in state of debt to certain parties among the higher nobility with whose help the throne was secured for the Great Tsar and his successors. With the rise of Catherine II, the notion of satisfying the nobility in exchange for political credit grew even stronger because she was a foreigner and she was not related by blood to the ruling dynasty. Later on, Aleksandr I (r. 1801-1825) would balance his reform policy in order to please his father's murderers, who brought him to the throne in 1801. In return for cementing its social and political privileges, the aristocracy was ready to support the crown with funds both loaned and invested for the

[1] D.A. Parrott, *The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 309.

upkeep and upgrade of Tsardom's forces. As in the course of the Second Azov Campaign, it was the companies of aristocratic houses, which provided the necessary funds for the construction of the Voronezh navy. In 1737 and 1738 it was the dvoryani from the southern Russian lands who contributed, though with reluctance, for the provision of the depleted army with horsepower for the repetitive invasions in Jedisan and Crimea. The native aristocracy also made up the bulk of the Russian military elite, with a number of prominent army figures rising in ranks from the close entourage of Peter.

Apart from the considerable role of the nobility in the development and the upbringing of the tsarist army, Peter’s era sought the application of the entrepreneur-based supply system. While the army organization became more and more a matter of state participation, the provision of food, clothes, munitions and guns remained an element of private arrangement between the state and particular merchants. Some of them were closely related to the higher and middle-rank nobility, benefiting from patronage in receiving state-funded deals. Although Peter tried to establish a form of military autarcky for his forces, gunpowder, guns, ship parts and even cloth for the uniforms, these materials still had to be imported from abroad, not to count the large number supplies, which were delivered by private entrepreneurs. Owners of gunpowder mills and gun-casting facilities, uniform producing textile manufactures, food suppliers, carpenters and even shipbuilders were contracted to support the army with their professional skills and the goods they provided. This, however, does not indicate any form of state weakness in providing the necessary means of waging war. On the contrary, this demonstrates a form of flexibility, which allowed Russia to provide supplies and armament, which it otherwise would be impossible to secure if the Tsardom relied strictly on its bureaucratic capacities. In this sense, Russia was standing on the same ground as contemporary states throughout Europe. Furthermore, the ability to provide such substantial quantities of supplies and materials along lines of communication, spanning sometimes tens of hundreds of kilometers, was rather impressive.

On the other hand, it is evident that constant shortages of logistics support for the operating armies occurred in each campaign. Horses were a rarity, especially during the later stages the conflicts. Food and water supplies were also problematic. Usually the rations lasted for half the expected time as demonstrated by Minikh's incursions in Jedisan in 1736, 1737 and 1738, but also during the Pruth Campaign and the First Azov Campaign. Problems with adequate water and land transportation were evident and never fully overcome. There was a certain struggle between the need of providing a substantial baggage train for the operating armies and the necessity of maintaining a higher movement speed in order to cover the spacious distances between the operational bases and the campaign objectives. Minikh experimented with barrels, which could be reassembled as rafts and other practical means of lightening the burden of the supply train, while maintaining enough food and

water to keep the army going. To the shortcomings contributed: the cumbersome frontier administration, the lack of clear perception of available resources, the open or hidden arguments between the operating commanders and the civil and military administration, responsible for the logistical upkeep of the advancing forces. Rulers were also not immune to such problems, as Peter found out on several occasions, being forced to repeat orders and even threaten with reprimands in case of further insubordination.

In reality, the actual effectiveness of the Russian army was like a mathematics equation of the "a-b=c" type, in which "a" stands for the battlefield efficiency of the troops and "b" represents the logistics constrains, which the army faced. Other modifiers, such as the capability of commanders, effectiveness of the enemy forces, as well as the "unknown" factors – such as climate change, all contributed to the outcome of each conflict. As demonstrated during the course of the Persian Campaign, the shift in the weather was far more dangerous for the army than the incursions of Caucasian war-bands. The ability of the logistical services to rapidly respond to changes in weather, unexpected deaths of great number of animals and unpredicted shortages of food supplies did not occur in the Russian case. Similar problems were experienced as late as the winter of 1877 and even later. They were closely related to the limitations of transportation as well as the bad quality of the existing road infrastructure. Although there were evident discrepancies in the logistics system of Imperial Russia, it would be inaccurate to denounce it as inefficient, without taking into account the social, geographical and technical limitations, within which Russian authorities operated. While it is true that certain figures in the civic and military structures of the state demonstrated apparant lack of abilities, the big picture reveals a general desire for achieving the goals, laid down by the ruler and his advisers. The overall notion that Russia was lagging behind other major states in making the transition from a military-fiscal to a fiscal-military state does not rest on any solid historical data. Evaluating the experience of the Southern Campaigns proves that although Russia faced considerable financial, administrative and logistical problems, it was able to maintain its war efforts for substantial periods of time, while simultaneously fighting on other fronts.

The southern frontier

So far, the dissertation has outlined the general trends of Russian military development over the course of half a century between the first siege of Azov in 1695 and the last shots of the 1736-1739 war. In the period in question these were not the only conflicts, in which the Empire was entangled. The Great Northern War (1700-1721) and the War of the Polish Succession (1733-1738) were as essential to the political and military development of the Tsars' realm as were the confrontations with the Ottoman and Safavid states and their vassals. Then why was the southern front so important and why considerable attention

should be paid to the ongoing wars in these territories? First and foremost, because it represented a unique environment, in which the Russian army had the chance to test and readjust its tactics and overall strategy and to fix (or at least try to) existing problems in relation to the supplying of the field armies. A puzzle of grasslands, half-deserts, waterless steppes, marshes, small and large rivers, valleys, hills and mountains, spanning on an area twice as large as France or Spain, the southern frontier on the Pontic Steppe and the Caucasus was unlike anything seen or conquered by Western and Central European armies. Habsburg forces faced somewhat similar conditions during their operations in Hungary and Transylvania, but distances were insignificant in comparison to the territories stretching in front of the marching Russian forces. For an early modern army, the Black Sea region was not a place for conquest, but rather an arena on which the ability to adapt, evolve and survive was put to the test. It was not the only harsh environment in Europe. The Baltic and Finland placed considerable constraint in front of Russia's military endeavour. The difference came from the size of the operational area, the proximity of the main Russian supply bases and the fact that most Russian soldiers were native to the climate of the Baltic-Finland region. Thus, during the Great Northern War it was the Swedes rather than nature that were the main problem in front of the Russian army. In the Pontic-Caucasus region nature was the predominant enemy. While Tatars, Nogais and Dagestani did possess substantial military skills, which buttressed the existing imperial forces of the Ottoman Empire and the Safavids, the battlefield quality of the Russian army remained unmatched. This, however, was insufficient, in relation to greater odds, such as encirclement, depletion of supplies or the overwhelming military potential of the reinvigorated Persian forces under Nadir Shah. Therefore, it was important for the imperial military establishment to develop certain features of organization on logistical and tactical level in order to face and deal with problems, most of which were non-existent during the war against Karl XII.

Apart from the military-geographic importance of the south for the evolution of Russia's military machine, the Pontic-Caucasus region has one other important feature. Following the Seven Years War, it was to become the main theater of operation of the imperial forces in the next two centuries. While the struggle with Napoleon presented a tremendous distraction, Russia's main political focus remained the destruction or at least the overpowering of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of firm control over the Straights. The roots of Russia's involvement in the region, as well as the basic approaches both diplomatic and military were all formulated during the wars of 1695-1739. Understanding the routes and the conduct of later campaigns or the existence of certain trends in diplomatic preparations after 1768 is not possible without knowing and appreciating the military and diplomatic process of Russia's southern expansion during the Petrine and Post-Petrine era. It is during this period that Russia began to exercise its influence not only over the Pontic-

Caucasus region, but also further south, laying the foundations of present-day policies, pursued by Moscow and its political leadership. The struggle to include Iran in a political sphere of influence, as well as the desire to enter the lucrative trade in the Indian Ocean, have remained essential to Russia's pursuit of mastery in Asia.

Dealing with local power-brokers became an integral part of Russia's diplomatic school, but also means of influence over a broader geo-political perimeter by pushing adjacent countries into following certain policies, which buttressed Russia's grand strategy in Europe and Asia. The diplomatic and military developments today demonstrate that problems inherited by imperial direct and indirect domination have, generally, remained intact through the last three centuries. Russia still faces a stiff opposition from the Bosporus in its sothern drive in the Caucasus and the Levant, while Iran is sometimes an ally and sometimes an enemy for the affirmation of Moscow's interest in the region. Lesser states, such as Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan still try to balance their existence by allying with one local power against another or by seeking help outside their direct geo-political zone. Ukraine is again as troublesome for Russian policy-makers as it was in the age of Mazepa and the radical approach towards Kiev has produced inconclusive results, opening more questions than finding any solution to existing problems. From this point of view, Petrine Russia had demonstrated a more flexible policy of winning Ukraine in comparison to Putin's twenty-first century domain.

The necessity of determining and assessing military effectiveness in early modern Europe is essential for the evolution of the historiography. While in theory most aspects of state-building, policy-making and general conduct of war have been dealt with, the evaluation of battlefield performance and the clear distinction between waging successful wars and organizing particular campaigns still needs to be addressed by modern scholars. While an army can perform exceptionally in the course of a certain conflict, a war might still turn out to be a disaster, given the fact that the outcome of warfare is dependent on a number of factors, with tactical success being just one among them. On the other hand, losing a war is not the same as possessing an inadequate military establishment. What this dissertation attempts to prove is that despite the overall negative outcome, a field army might perform in an impressive manner, overcoming substantial impediments such as: logistical restrains, administration and command incompetence, and superior enemy numbers. In order to build and present a full-blooded depiction of what warfare looked like during the eighteenth century, its specifics must be carefully assessed and the various limitations which influenced the performance of the army (natural, administrative and technological), must be taken under consideration. It is also important not to compare contemporary establishments only in terms of temporal coexistence, but to bear in mind the peculiarities of the geo-political

context in which the states in question and their forces thrived and developed. While certain historiographical models could be generally applied to specific periods of time, only a thorough study, which compares and outlines the particular cases, can assist the understanding of early modern warfare. The tale of Russia's Southern Campaigns, their development, evolution and unique features is an important segment of the sophisticated puzzle of eighteen-century military conduct. Along with other specific theaters of operation, for a long time the Pontic-Caucasian frontier has remained a rather understudied element of early modern war. Understanding its specifics and relation to events during the Petrine and post-Petrine era is essential for the perception of Russia’s present-day policy in the region and the various impediments standing in front Moscow’s path.