Reforming the Tsar’s Army

This volume examines how Imperial Russia’s armed forces sought to adapt to the challenges of modern warfare. From Peter the Great to Nicholas II, rulers always understood the need to maintain an army and navy capable of preserving the empire’s great power status. Yet they inevitably faced the dilemma of importing European military and technological innovations while keeping out political ideas that could challenge the autocracy’s monopoly on power. Within the context of a constant race to avoid oblivion, the impulse for military renewal emerges as a fundamental and recurring theme in modern Russian history. In addition to its inherent importance, it touches on many broader issues in politics, international relations, economy, and society.

_Reforming the Tsar’s Army_ joins the efforts of leading specialists of Russian military history from North America, Europe, and Russia to consider many aspects of this troubling question. Grouped around broad themes of resources, intelligence, personality, and responses to specific wars, these essays benefit from the new archival openness to yield some surprising insights into the empire’s willingness and ability to adapt to change. And in conclusion three prominent scholars reflect on the broader implications for international history and the present.

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Reforming the Tsar’s Army
Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution

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Practitioners of imperial Russian military history who travel to Moscow have three obligatory destinations. The first is the Russian Archive of Military History near the Baumanskaia subway station. Another objective is the Russian State Library (“Leninka”), only a stone’s throw away from the Kremlin. The third requisite stop is a fourth-story flat not far from the Sokol’niki subway station. Its residents are the distinguished, semiretired historian of the imperial Russian army, Aleksandr Georgievich Kavtaradze, and his wife.

Kavtaradze’s extensive knowledge comes from both his military background and his academic career. He was born shortly after the Revolution into the family of an officer who had served both the old and the new regimes. Like many such families, his relatives fought on both sides of the Civil War: his uncle was a White; his father joined the Red Army. Following family custom, Aleksandr Georgievich joined the artillery. Like so many of his contemporaries, he served with distinction in the Great Patriotic War (World War II), rising from platoon leader to commander of a regimental reconnaissance detachment. Wounded in action during the Belorussian operation in 1944, Kavtaradze eventually won entrance to the Dzerzhinskii (now Peter the Great) Artillery Academy, from whose faculty of command he graduated in 1948. His subsequent assignments included command of an artillery battery, two years as instructor at the Artillery Academy, and ultimately, appointment as commanding officer of a Strategic Rocket Forces regiment in Kamchatka. He retired from the Soviet armed forces in 1965 with the rank of colonel.

In 1953, while still on active duty, Aleksandr Georgievich defended a candidate’s dissertation on the “Korsun-Shevchenkovskii Operation of 1944.” However, he soon realized that it was still too early to study World War II dispassionately, and he turned his attention to earlier topics.
Aleksandr Georgievich Kavtaradze

Aleksandr Georgievich Kavtaradze. Photo by Bruce W. Menning
Aleksandr Georgievich Kavtaradze

After retirement from active duty, Kavtaradze worked in various editorial capacities until 1978, when he joined the prestigious Institute of Russian History of the Soviet (now Russian) Academy of Sciences, where he is currently a senior academic associate (*starshii nauchnyi sotrudnik*).

Kavtaradze is best known for two books, a biography of General A. P. Ermolov and a study of former tsarist military specialists in the Red Army (*Voennye spetsialisty na sluzhbe Respubliki Sovetov*). Among many other publications, he wrote several groundbreaking articles during the 1970s about the imperial Russian General Staff that appeared in *Voenno-istoricheskii Zhurnal*. More recently, he edited the memoirs of infantry general N. A. Epanchin, *Na sluzhbe trekh imperatorov*, an important account of prerevolutionary military and court life. He also served as compiler for a collection of writings by the Russian strategist A. A. Svechin, *Postizhenie voennogo iskusstva*, which affords readers a compendium of rare works by one of the twentieth century’s foremost military thinkers. Looking back on his career, Kavtaradze regrets that “there is much I neither accomplished nor achieved,” but his colleagues respectfully disagree.

For several decades now Aleksandr Georgievich has been a mentor and friend to those who share his passion for Russia’s prerevolutionary military past. Deeply loyal to his Georgian ancestors’ traditions of hospitality, he is always ready to receive his colleagues. An evening in his study invariably includes toasts, a lengthy succession of *zakuski* (hors d’oeuvres), and more toasts to lubricate the discussion. Yet the meeting has much more than purely social significance; it is an important *nauchnaia konsul’tatsia* (tutorial).

Aleksandr Georgievich has an encyclopedic knowledge of the field, as well as an intimate acquaintance with the archives and published scholarship. Conversations are inevitably interrupted by frequent references to the thickly packed surrounding bookshelves, which boast one of the richest private libraries of relevant works in all of Russia. Whether Russian or foreign, whether beginning graduate student or full professor, many scholars have benefited from the sound advice he so readily shares.

The seminar’s participants, nearly all of whom have had the honor of being in one way or another Kavtaradze’s students, express gratitude to their mentor and friend. We respectfully offer this volume in homage to you, Aleksandr Georgievich. *Mnogaia leta!*