

The Tsar's Colonels: Professionalism, Strategy, and Subversion in Late Imperial Russia. By *David Alan Rich*.

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I am not entirely sure why David Alan Rich chose to entitle his excellent monograph *The Tsar's Colonels*. The colonels who dominate this work seem instead to be distinguished by the fact that they were not "the tsar's" at all. As Rich describes them, they were men who owed their loyalty and passion to ideas and certain bureaucratic practices rather than to individuals. Indeed, Rich himself is far more concerned with the impact of ideas than the impact of the autocrat, referring to Isaiah Berlin more often (twice) than Alexander III (once).

This is not simply a history of ideas, though. Rich is justly concerned with the ways that ideas become practices and practices become professions. Specifically, Rich traces how scientific positivists in the Russian military first implemented and then routinized certain practices like the collection of military statistics and "deep future-oriented thinking." In the process, he argues, the General Staff became a genuine profession, one that proved able to assert exclusive authority within its field of expertise, war planning. Eventually, this authority expanded and brought about the "marginalization of the autocrat and the dynastic regime" (p. 20). This description of the activities of the General Staff runs contrary to the standard model of professionalization, which, as Rich rightly points out, has largely been concerned with the development (however weak) of a "civil society" in Russia. Rich's conclusion that the General Staff was in many ways the most distinguished and powerful "profession" casts doubt on the very idea of "civil" society. For if "civil" is not defined in opposition to "state" or to "military," how is it defined? This demonstration of the military's presence in "civil society" should grab the attention not only of Russian historians but also of anyone who studies the rise of professions. Rich's breadth of vision and engaging style make this work all the more deserving of a broad audience.

The impact of statistics on Russian officers is rightly stressed by Rich, and he deftly describes how the science of statistics displaced the practice of "political arithmetic" in Russia and Europe. The importance of statistics for Russian military men was twofold. First, it established that the heart of state activity was knowledge. Reformers defined the effectiveness of the state by its capability to gather and to categorize that knowledge. The better the "statistics," the better the policy. Second, the introduction of statistics as a required course for staff officers made this rationalized exercise of social planning a shared experience, a practicum in modernity within a society and a broader institution that continued to stress traditionalism. As students of military statistics fanned out across the empire in order to "know" it, they were, through the process, transformed into modernizing reformers.

This attention to the linkages between ideas, practices, and broader outcomes, backed by extremely solid research, distinguishes most of Rich's analysis. His argument and research are particularly strong at the crucial moment in his narrative, the period of time between Prussia's victory over France in 1870–71 to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. In those understudied years of late imperial history, Rich locates the moment when strategic planners, led by Dmitrii Miliutin (war minister, 1861–81) and his protégé Nikolai Obruchev, grasped the reins of military policy from the court and henceforth controlled the plans for fighting future wars.

In that moment of triumph lay Russia's ruin. Like Berlin, Rich argues that the grail of hyperrational modernization was enormously destructive once grasped. In his study of the Russo-Turkish War, Rich demonstrates how quickly abstract planning for war

became first preparation for war and then war itself. It was a war planned and executed according to “purely military considerations,” a war lost not at the conference table in Berlin but in its very conception in the offices of the Russian General Staff, where staffers simply ignored the political fact that other European states were not willing to countenance unilateral resolution of the “Eastern Question” by the Russian military.

The General Staff then repeated the mistake of ignoring politics on a larger scale. Having spent much of the 1870s examining Germany’s new and dangerous capabilities, planners mistook their “neighbor’s capability for its intentions,” a mistake “that was and remains a weakness of any staff system dependent on ‘statistics’ (intelligence) rather than politics for its direction” (p. 158). The result was the “fateful alliance” between France and Russia negotiated personally by Obruchev in defiance of his own foreign minister in 1893, which set the wheels in motion for the catastrophe of 1914.

Rich’s book is a powerful analysis of Russian politics, strategy, and professionalization between 1845 and 1893. It is in that period that his archival research was mainly centered and that his major contributions are made. Unfortunately, Rich goes a bridge too far, succumbing to the common temptation of late imperial historians to stretch their conclusion to encompass 1917. At precisely the moment when Rich’s main protagonists leave the stage (and when crucial sets of documents began to be archived in different places), Rich argues that there was a “decline in professional attitudes” among staff officers (p. 227). That decline, he claims, occurred because the new nominal heads of the newly reorganized General Staff were not of the Miliutin/Obruchev type and because “revived Romanov interference in military affairs” (p. 220) stripped the staff of its professional authority. To be sure, men like F. F. Palitsyn and V. A. Sukhomlinov were hardly cut from the Miliutin mold. But neither was P. S. Vannovskii, under whose “leadership” Obruchev flourished in the 1880s. I suspect that if Rich had extended his archival research to examine the twentieth-century “colonels,” the group that he wisely targeted in the nineteenth century, he would have seen much familiar in the outlooks, practices, and even power of men like Aleksandr Lukomskii (chief of the mobilization department before 1912). The point is not that he should have done this extra research and expanded his book, but that he started skating on thin ice when he went beyond his sources. This book is important in its own right; it does not need to carry the burden of explaining the final denouement of tsarism to be a significant contribution to Russian and European history.

Rich’s conclusion is even more surprising because it suggests that the crucial development he addresses was “thin and fragile,” that professional staff culture was a “mere patina” (p. 227). In doing so, he underestimates the lasting importance of the developments he describes. Romanov intervention was not, as Rich seems to believe, a return to the status quo ante Miliutin but was a belated attempt by the court to check the authority of these rational planners. “Grand-dukism” was a belated response to the growing strength and influence of military modernizers, especially after 1905, as the enormous tumult surrounding the rise of the “Young Turks” in the General Staff attested. Indeed, it is this political irony that Rich makes most vivid. Facing left, autocratic conservatives took their most serious blow from the right, where they least expected it. It is Rich’s great accomplishment to show how and why these rightist military men were transformed from a pillar of the autocracy to the “subversive” proponents of modern, rationalized authority.

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