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Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History

Slavica Publishers

Volume 7, Number 2, Spring 2006 (New Series)

pp. 283-308

10.1353/kri.2006.0020

ARTICLE

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Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 7.2 (2006) 283-308

[Access article in PDF]

Russia and the Defeat of Napoleon (1812-14)

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Although a vast and often excellent literature exists on the Napoleonic Wars, there remain important gaps and misconceptions in our understanding both of the wars themselves and of the context in which they were fought. Probably the most significant of these gaps and misconceptions concern Russia's role in the international relations (including, of course, the wars) of the Napoleonic era, which is very imperfectly understood both in Russia and in "the West."¹ Some reasons for misunderstanding are specific to Russian or Western historians: in other respects, however, Russian and Western scholarship on the era shares similar weaknesses. In this article I look first at Western and then at Russian writing on Russia's role in Napoleon's downfall. I seek to explain why Russia's part in the collapse of Napoleon's empire has been misunderstood and underestimated both in Russia and the "West." I also point to the ways in which this has distorted a realistic and balanced understanding of the defeat of Napoleon both in Russia and abroad.

Given the manner in which the wars of this era were mobilized by nationalist mythmakers, it is perhaps not surprising that the enormous Russian contribution to the destruction of Napoleon's empire should have been played down by British, French, and German historians. A more **[End Page 283]** interesting problem is why Russian historians have also contributed to this underestimation of their own country's efforts. This article points the finger, above all, at the Russian obsession with military operations in 1812, which existed before the 1917 Revolution but grew even stronger in the Soviet era. The reverse side of this obsession was that Russian historians largely ignored the events of 1813–14. Not merely did this do no justice to the immense military-operational and logistical efforts of the Russian state and army in those years, it also seriously distorted the understanding even of Russian strategy in 1812. Inevitably, it also allowed British, French, and German historians free rein to interpret Napoleon's overthrow in the manner best suited to serve their own national myths and historiographical traditions.

The fundamental purpose of this article is therefore twofold. As regards Western historiography, its aim is to bring Russia back into the center of the picture, where it belongs. Meanwhile, the article seeks to alert Russian historians to the importance of 1813–14 as a time not just when the tsarist state and army overcame enormous challenges with exceptional skill, but also when Russia made an immense contribution to European peace and stability, to which the Russian empire's own security was inseparably linked.

* * *

In the West, very few academics have ever written on Russian military or even diplomatic history in the Napoleonic era.² One important reason for this is lack of access to Russian military and diplomatic archives until the **[End Page 284]** 1990s.³ Although much memoir material and many volumes of official military⁴ and diplomatic⁵ documents were published in both the tsarist and Soviet eras, there remain key aspects of Russia's role in the Napoleonic Wars which can be understood only through extensive research in Russian military archives. Above all, this is true if one attempts to move away from the traditional narrow focus of Russian historiography on military operations in 1812. For example, it would be difficult to write convincingly on crucial issues such as the mobilization of the Russian rear, logistics, the formation of reserve forces, or even military operations in 1813–14 without using Russian archival sources.

At least as important, however, is the fact that military history, and above all the history of military operations, has been very unfashionable in Western universities in recent decades. Diplomatic history is only slightly less marginalized.⁶ In addition, post-1945 Western scholarship on **[End Page ...**

Review Article

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This is my first opportunity in print to thank the Leverhulme Foundation for awarding me a Major Research Fellowship to pursue my work on this subject in 2006–9.

¹ Much the best survey of this topic in English is by Alexander Martin: "The Russian Empire and the Napoleonic Wars," in *Napoleon and Europe*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001), 243–63. Another more narrowly military but very useful survey is by Frederick Kagan: "Russia's Wars with Napoleon: 1805–1815," in *The Military History of Tsarist Russia*, ed. Frederick W. Kagan and Robin Higham (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 106–22. The outstanding publication of the last decade on Russia in the Napoleonic era in any language is V. M. Bezotosnyi et al., eds., *Otechestvennaia voina 1812 goda: Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004), reviewed in *Kritika* 7, 1 (2006): 133–35. As its title suggests, this covers only 1812 in any depth.

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 7, 2 (Spring 2006): 283–308.



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