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The Integration of Non-Russian Servicemen in the Imperial, Soviet and Russian Army

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## **“Russian army, non-Russians, non-Slavs, non-Orthodox: the risky construction of a multiethnic army. Russia, USSR”**

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## **“Russian army, non-Russians, non-Slavs, non-Orthodox: the risky construction of a multiethnic army. Russia, USSR”**

- 1 Why examine the non-Orthodox, non-Russian, non-Slav soldiers in the Russian and Soviet army from a historical perspective? In what way did non-Russians have a specific relationship with the Imperial and Soviet Army and how did the military institution maintain a specific relationship with these recruits? Who may be defined as non-Russian, non-Slav or non-Orthodox, when they were all subjects of the Tsar or Soviet citizens? This categorisation is an unsatisfactory classification by default, because these groups need to be defined and redefined in a given context or situation, and that is the point of view taken in the articles we present in this issue. These address Muslims in the Tsar’s regular army (Zagidullin) and the contemporary army of the Russian Federation (interviews) and the various forms of national regiment of the Soviet period (Ohayon, Bezugol’nyi, Leclère). We also examine the integration of non-Russians in the regular army (which in theory has not distinguished between soldiers of different religions or nationalities), because at various periods this incorporation has raised political, linguistic and cultural issues (Leclère and interviews).
- 2 The Russian Empire engaged in a series of conquests in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Subsequently, some of the conquered armed forces formed the regular troops in territories that remained autonomous (Kingdom of Poland, Principality of Finland, Emirate of Bukhara and Khanate of Khiva), others formed national regiments within the regular army (Muslim cavalry of Dagestan, Crimean Tatar squadron, etc.), and others served as auxiliary forces or national militias<sup>1</sup>. A large number of non-Orthodox subjects, particularly Jews, were enlisted for regular military service. The Imperial Army reflected the cultural diversity of the Empire, particularly in major military parades involving national regiments, and enlistment ceremonies when oaths of allegiance to the Tsar were sworn in the presence of ministers of the various faiths of the Empire (Zagidullin). Although current historiography is aware of this diversity in the forms of service required of various communities, it continues to stress the fact that military service was a major instrument of social change and acculturation. Under the Tsar, the length of military service irrevocably transformed the recruits<sup>2</sup>. The policy of compulsory Orthodox baptism, although less stringent than often described, and the assertiveness of Orthodox proselytism had noticeable consequences for the inhabitants of the earliest regions acquired and incorporated in the regular troops, and for Jews subject to compulsory military service from 1827<sup>3</sup>.
- 3 In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the model of a homogeneous national army became the norm in Europe. Following the abolition of serfdom, Alexander II finally introduced compulsory military service in 1874. The reformer Dmitry Milyutin’s idea was that this would make it possible not only to win against other modernised armies but also to strengthen the national cohesion of a continually expanding heterogeneous Empire. By removing young men from their communities, enlistment would make them aware that they belonged to a wider territorial, political, linguistic and indeed emotional entity<sup>4</sup>. However, the 1874 statute did not apply to the outlying parts of the Empire, where the population was deemed unfit for military service. Successive attempts at incorporation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on Russia’s entry into the First World War had some successes<sup>5</sup>, but also failures, particularly in Central Asia, where they led to a massive revolt<sup>6</sup>. The World War and the Civil War saw an increase in the number of national units, which were gradually disbanded or absorbed by the Red Army. A policy of creating or institutionalising national units was introduced in the USSR from 1924, but until the late 1930s some of the population was largely excluded from military service<sup>7</sup>, particularly those who had never been enlisted under the Tsar or during the War. As Ohayon points out in this issue, there was, however, a small-scale recruitment of soldiers throughout the territory in the 1920s as

volunteers for territorialised national units. These politically and militarily well-trained soldiers were to be the future military elite of the national republics. The Soviet Army had meanwhile been given the capability to transform society socially and politically on an unprecedented scale within the wide-ranging Soviet project of modernisation.

4 The articles in this issue present different aspects of the way in which the Imperial and Soviet State envisaged cultural differences within the army and attempted to organise them to achieve uniformity, political and linguistic acculturation and military efficiency (meaning that the soldiers would effectively defend the Motherland and not defect to the enemy). They demonstrate that the recognition of first religious and then, in the Soviet version, national rights played a key role in the conception the central command had of the creation of a unit, which involved both recognition of cultural differences and deep distrust of population groups whose political and "geopolitical" loyalty was doubtful.

5 Zagidullin's article examines the place given to the Muslim faith in the land units of the Tsar's regular army. As mentioned above, the Imperial Army had a long tradition of using non-Russians in military operations. Within these various units, the non-Russians worked in an environment, language and religion of their own. In the regular units, there were few Muslims, mainly from the central Volga-Ural regions, but their numbers would increase as the army was enlarged. Since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and recognition of religious tolerance for non-Orthodox communities within the army, Muslims, like other believers in the Empire, were not only entitled to the protection of the State for the practice of their religious rites, but also received grants at certain times (in particular to pay for the religious services provided by the mullahs attached to the units). These rights were much fewer than those of the Orthodox believers, since Russian Orthodoxy remained the dominant faith, but the oath of allegiance to the Tsar, last rites before death and major feasts for which Muslim soldiers, along with Jewish and Orthodox ones, were allowed to leave their garrisons, required the presence of religious dignitaries who were sometimes paid. Zagidullin shows how the religious requirements of Muslims were respected in the Imperial Army: inadequately in the case of food rules, with Muslim soldiers starving and mocked for their abstinence from alcohol. The personal practices of senior officers played a key role here and whether or not they were inclined to ensure that their non-Orthodox men's religious customs were respected. Zagidullin describes how religious institutions and Muslim soldiers gradually pressed to have their rights respected. The documents that Ohayon presents and her commentaries on them concern a period some fifteen years later. Because of the militant atheism of the Soviet authorities, the hundred or so Muslim Kyrgyz soldiers enlisted in the Kyrgyz national units of the Red Army did not petition to have their religious rights respected. Quite the opposite, the Army required these soldiers to behave in a European manner, adopting in particular standards of hygiene far removed from traditional practice. The break with tradition introduced by the Soviet authorities, albeit mitigated by the formation of these national units, was a radical one. The Kyrgyz that Ohayon describes were incorporated in national units, which lasted in the USSR into the 1930s. These territorialised units were to use vernacular languages, although the command was largely Russian-speaking. Military service was shorter and could be served in the republics, making it possible to return to the village every few months. There were various reasons for creating these ethnic units: requests from national republics to maintain some semblance of a national army, respect for the nationality policy and criticism of the army as an instrument of Russification, and the desire not to alienate population groups as yet poorly Sovietised. In Kyrgyzstan, the recruitment plan involved less than 1% of the population in the late 1920s; similarly, as Bezugol'nyi shows in his article, few inhabitants of the Caucasus were enlisted in the Red Army. The national units were designed to be transitional arrangements for training a national military elite that could ultimately assume command. These locally-based regiments were also a way of showing that the Soviet authorities trusted the indigenous population by giving them weapons, and were also shop-windows for the Soviet way of life. There were not many of them and they were ultimately disbanded and denounced by Stalin in 1938 as potential rear bases for an attack on the USSR<sup>8</sup>. At the same time as disbanding these units, Stalin decided to make the teaching of Russian compulsory at schools throughout the Soviet Union<sup>9</sup>. Within an army that was now fully integrated, a Soviet soldier should be

able to serve anywhere in the territory and understand the orders of his officers. According to Bezugol'nyi's data, at the start of the Second World War, 50.5% of recruits in Armenia did not speak Russian, 33.8% in Azerbaijan and 28.4% in Georgia.

6 However, as Bezugol'nyi and Leclère show, national divisions were rapidly reintroduced once the USSR was drawn into the Second World War. In August 1941, a Latvian division was set up. Others followed in all the regions of the USSR. Bezugol'nyi studies the Caucasian units assigned to defend the Caucasus in the summer, autumn and winter of 1942. His article addresses the controversial question of the Caucasian soldiers who deserted in large numbers to the German army. Bezugol'nyi distinguishes between Lieutenant-General Maslennikov's negative opinions of the Caucasian soldier and the views of the Military Council of the Front, comprising Party First Secretaries of the Caucasian Republics worried by the confusion made between Caucasian soldiers and traitors. Bezugol'nyi reveals how distrustful some of the military command were towards the Caucasians during a war that might lead to a redrawing of frontiers. The fear of population groups with cross-border cultural links has been well researched by contemporary historiography. This form of xenophobia played an important part in the history of the late Empire and of the USSR from the 1930s on<sup>10</sup>. The remarks of the military command on the Caucasus front recall the stereotypical ranking of various nationalities that went back to Imperial times. Here the Azeri came bottom, all the more since, by the usual reasoning with respect to national minorities in Stalin's USSR, their cultural and linguistic links with the Turks disqualified them as worthy defenders of the Motherland. Bezugol'nyi describes in detail how the various levels of the hierarchy analysed events according to considerations based on a certain conception of nationalities and their loyalty to the State, and the constraints imposed by Soviet nationalities policy. He shows how Moscow, represented by Kaganovich, played a mediating role between a military command critical of Caucasian soldiers and the republic authorities. The latter put forward the disastrous living and supply conditions suffered by the soldiers in the national units and the xenophobia of the Slav officers to explain the defection of Caucasian soldiers. Bezugol'nyi stresses the action of the Party First Secretaries of Azerbaijan and Dagestan and their links with soldiers who told them of their harsh daily lives and the difficult relations they had with the Russians. He describes an atmosphere of mutual distrust, latent xenophobia and conflicts of interest. The republic authorities were keen to demonstrate to Moscow the loyalty of their nationals. Leclère, in his article, notes the same concern among the Lithuanian political elite in the rather different context of the post-War period.

7 These questions of political loyalty and graduated integration into the Soviet Army are also the focus of Leclère's study of the introduction of military service in Soviet Lithuania from 1940 to the death of Stalin. The practices used in the 1920s to integrate "less Sovietised" (i.e. less reliable) population groups were transferred to the Baltic countries absorbed by the USSR following the Nazi-Soviet Pact. National units were organised as a way of evading the issue of universal military service: they comprised competent soldiers who had been screened politically but few of whom spoke Russian. Leclère describes how the former Lithuanian national army was transformed into the 29th Corps of Lithuanian Riflemen. Following the German invasion, a small minority of this corps fought on the Soviet side and few of them were evacuated. But in March 1943 a new Lithuanian national division was formed from refugees. As Leclère points out, this division was one of a number of non-territorialised national units integrated into the army and likely to be ordered anywhere in the territory according to military requirements. Massive refusal in the countryside to enlist and the high desertion rate of Lithuanians in a period of civil war made the formation of these units irrelevant. During the first post-war years, as the Red Army was being demobilised, the enlistment campaigns only concerned a small number of Lithuanians. But in schools, youth camps and via the exhaustive census of all young men of military age, Lithuanian youth was gradually militarised. When the enlistment campaigns in Lithuania resumed on a larger scale in 1950, few held out, and young Lithuanians were regularly sent away from their homes. The author shows us a different vision of the Soviet Army as an integrated, highly structured system linked to society via military training in schools. This integration of the Army into the Soviet social fabric partly explains the speed at which Lithuanian soldiers turned from largely unwilling elements ready to desert into regimented recruits for

whom military service was a painful but customary rite of passage to adult life. This conception of military service as a rite of passage and a test of masculinity can still be found, particularly in interviews with Muslim soldiers in the Caucasus.

- 8 Overland's article on the closure of the Akhalkalaki military base and the interviews show how far strictly socio-economic issues within the army provide another explanation of conflicts often interpreted simplistically as ethnic or cultural. The dreadful conditions in which Red Army soldiers served during the Second World War from the Caucasus to the Baltic countries also appears to explain desertions in these regions. Conversely, volunteering for military service was a means of upward social mobility, as Ohayon describes in the case of the Kyrgyz and the Armenians at the Akhalkalaki base in Javakheti, Georgia, who earned their living largely from the presence of the military base. The closure of the base in 2007 caused no disruption or massive departures, evidence of the population's ability to find other sources of income. But the links maintained with the former hegemonic power (which has granted Russian citizenship to many of the region's inhabitants, especially veterans) demonstrate the persistence of socio-economic relations established because of the former military presence. As for the extent of difficulties in living together, micro-conflicts, ethnic discrimination, misunderstandings, language differences, educational differences, all the articles mention them: harassment of Muslims in the Imperial Army and the army of the Russian Federation, clashes between Armenians and Georgians at the Javakheti base in the 1970s and 1980s, mockery of enlisted Kyrgyz, distrust of Lithuanian soldiers, etc. All the articles show that these difficulties were sporadic and loomed larger only at times of major political upheaval such as the revolutionary years at the end of the Empire, the "Great Patriotic War", the collapse of the USSR and the war in Chechnya. The extraordinarily tormented and traumatising history of Russia in the 20th century and the fact that this geographical entity had continually shifting borders partly explain how hard it was to construct a national army. Examining the position of non-Russians throws new light on how interethnic relations may be envisaged in a national army. The interviews at the end of this issue illustrate the importance of this history, since the 21st-century lawmakers are now referring to Imperial experience, for example, on the question of respect for religious rights. For some years now, imams have been informally present in the army, depending on operational commanders' permission. In July 2009, President Medvedev decided to introduce military chaplains from the four traditional faiths.

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### Notes

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5 Joshua A Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation, Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905-1925*, Northern Illinois University Press, 2003

6 On the 1916 revolt see: Daniel Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire*, London-New-York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, chapter 1.

7 Joshua A. Sanborn, *op. cit.*, chapter 2

8 Roger R. Resse, *Stalin's Reluctant Soldiers. A Social History of the Red Army, 1925-1941*, University Press of Kansas, 1996; Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990.

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