Letters from the "Prussian War." The People of the Russian Imperial Army in 1758.

"Did you understand anything about this cursed day? I have to admit, Sir, that I have understood nothing. – You're not the only one, my friend, take comfort…" This is what King Frederick II said to his companion after the battle against the Russian army at Zorndorf on August 14, 1758. "The strangest battle in all of modern military history," as Clausewitz put it, marked yet another milestone of the Seven Years War (1756-1763). Hundreds of Russian imperial officers' letters intercepted by the Prussians after the Battle of Zorndorf have just been discovered in a Berlin archive. Will they shed new light on what happened? Will they provide new answers or any answers at all? Or maybe they will help historians to articulate new questions? How do the generals, officers, and clerks who wrote in Russian, German, French, Georgian come off these pages? How will they measure up to their Prussian counterparts at this "feast of Mars"? The book tries to answer these questions by examining letters from both sides in the context of outside accounts. Detailed portraits emerge of the people of 1758 who lived and fought at this eventful turning-point of the eighteenth century.

The letters were sent in September of 1758, three weeks after the Battle of Zorndorf, as the Russian army retreated across Pomerania into Polish lands. The courier who was in possession of official relations as well as hundreds of personal letters was seized at night close to the Prussian border. The letters were then sent to the Kabinettsministerium in Berlin, which at the time fulfilled the function of the Prussian ministry of foreign affairs. The great mathematician Leonhard Euler, who had lived in Russia and knew the language before moving to Berlin, translated parts of the letters. These selected translations would then become part of the "epistolary war" between Russia and Prussia as each claimed victory at Zorndorf, although it proved to be a bloody stalemate, which cost both sides tens of thousands of lives.

The main part of the publication contains the texts of the letters and accompanying materials, such as Prussian letters and eyewitness accounts of residents around Zorndorf. All the letters are published in full and authentic form. The non-Russian-language letters are published in the original with a Russian translation afterwards. When necessary, short commentaries follow individual letters or groups of letters.

An introduction opens the volume. Personal documents are important primary sources for Russia's eighteenth-century socio-cultural history because they offer insight into the self-identification of social groups and the mechanism of articulating "self-identification idioms."

From the middle of the eighteenth to the first quarter of the nineteenth century when the Russian Empire was at war almost constantly, this issue was closely linked with the autobiographical documents of the military estate, which coincided almost completely with the nobility.

The authors belonged to all levels of the military command from the supreme commander and his generals all the way to the junior officers, intendants and headquarter clerks.

The Baroque-era theatrum belli always presupposed portraying all the actors on the stage, so the accounts of the Russians are coupled with those of their Prussian counterparts. This includes the letters of Prussian officers from Russian archives, in addition to other personal accounts.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Russia's epistolary culture was still in the process of formation — the country was still traversing the threshold from old to new Russia. The tradition of continuous and content-rich letter-writing was not something in which all officers engaged. One can assume that we are dealing with the crème de la crème of the army's educated elite, especially given that the elite guards units did not take part in the Seven Years War.

The volume describes and analyzes the character and structure of the letters: their appearance, contents, and style. In addition to epistolary formulae taken from translated letter-writing manuals there are many elements from spoken Russian that goes back to pre-Petrine Russia. Each letter's style and appearance depended on the status and age of the author and recipient, as well as its content. The same young man writes a gallant letter to a lady at Court that mixes Russian and French and then composes a patriarchally-respectful letter to his father asking for money. There are also letters of a genre new to the eighteenth century, like love letters and friendship letters. Comparing them to each other demonstrates differences in their emotional content. The emotionality comes across in how the authors divide their text blocks, use interjections (not yet the universal European "Ah!" and "Oh!" but those belonging to the more traditional Muscovite style), and articulate feelings, such as "Merciful Lord, God, how miserable we are."

A detailed reconstruction of the events leading up to and following the letter's composition follows, covering the beginning of the campaign in January 1758 to its end in November. The Battle of Zorndorf offers remarkably fertile soil for this. Because it ended indecisively, "never has any battle been written about more than Zorndorf," as memoirist Andrei Bolotov put it, which includes contemporary accounts as well as official Russian and

Prussian documents. The current volume's aim is not to determine "how things actually happened," but to incorporate the letters into the microhistory of this stage of the Seven Years War.

As a theatrum belli play, Zorndorf fully demonstrated the role of chance and fate. Both the Prussians and the Russians (who were much less experienced) found themselves in a situation that ran against all the traditional rules of Baroque-era warfare and military order. The losses were enormous—from half to a third of the armies; the battle's emotional level was unprecedented, and no prisoners were taken. «The Russians fought like devils,» - British military observer Sir Andrew Mitchell recollected. The heat and dust made orientation impossible and led to many fatal mistakes; with commanders missing in action, the armies became uncontrollable. Both sides experienced looting and drunkenness. Disgruntled Russian soldiers attacked their officers. Many letters reflected the emotional shock of these experiences, which also demanded individual improvisations outside the command structure and the rules of war. Many officers therefore found themselves facing moral questions. To fight or to flee? To help the dying army or to survive? Eventually, they had to come to terms with their decisions. From the military point of view, the verdict of Andrew Mitchell seems most adequate: "The battle of Zorndorf […] was won and lost by both sides."

Personal accounts have also been used to reconstruct in detail the events unfolding around the letter-writers in the fall of 1758—the movement of the Russian army eastwards, problems with supplies and transportation, as well as disagreements with the allies—all of which resulted in the retreat behind the Vistula and the end of the campaign.

The introduction identifies at which points and in what form reflections on the battle appear in the letters. It is a pity for the historian that the Prussians did not capture the courier immediately after the battle, but then again, reactions to the carnage needed time to take form and find their articulation after the initial shock.

(Self)-censorship has no practical influence on the letters: Russia had only minimal lustration of personal correspondence at this point, while the sensibility threshold was much higher at the time than in later periods. Nevertheless, many officers write openly about their inability to articulate their feelings in the wake of such extraordinary and shocking events. The real war differs a lot from their normative understanding of it and they often refer to the battle as carnage and butchery. At the same time, the younger officers present the events as a "feast of Mars", a bloody theatrum belli.

The personal accounts from this era demonstrate two realities in which officers existed: service on the one hand and private life on the other. In the latter, the individual

interprets himself as a private person; in the former—as a “state” personality where “particularity” is inappropriate and is reduced to a minimum. The private sphere is distilled in the notion of *pokoi* (peace or quiescence), which remains one of the key concepts of Russian self-perception in the mid-eighteenth century and stands in contrast to the involuntary mechanism of regular state service.

For Russian officers, the concept peace (*pokoi*) was embodied by their home and their families. Family relations still reflect a pre-modern character with the “extended family” (relatives and servants) playing a key role. Patron-client relations often come through in private communications and requests to “benefactors.” At the same time, relations with spouses and children become emotionalized and the rhetoric of friendship plays an important role. Wives often followed husbands into army life and sometimes even accompanied them on their campaigns. Since the seventeenth century, the role of Russian women belonging to the landed nobility emerges as crucial in maintaining order on the estates left by their husbands. Moreover, husbands often ask their wives for advice concerning their career decisions—would leaving the quartermaster’s staff for the active military make sense, for example? Emotional commitments can sometimes form the most important foundation during the chaos of war and battle: “Croyez, ma vie, que le jour sanglante de la bataille passé, j’etoit 12. heures attendant la mort a tout moment, j’ai pensé souvent à ma chere Natacha…” etc.

An evaluation of the material and economic side of officers’ lives follows: the letters are full of requests and instructions about running estates. Communications with home were essential for officers’ financial affairs: the letters constantly mention financial transfers and loans. The letters and other documents recreate the picture of everyday life of the Russian army on a foreign campaign.

At the same time, the extraordinary experience of the 1758 campaign altered attitudes and values within the army. The heavy losses, the looting of officers’ carriages, the difficult retreat, and the army’s isolation in hostile territory facilitated the evolution of an emotional community within the army. Judging by the letters, it fostered friendly and informal horizontal relationships. Such processes, however, usually presuppose mechanisms of exclusion: in our case, this took the form of distinguishing between “native Russians” and German officers as well as opposition between regimental, army and imperial identities on the one hand and national ones on the other. The latter comes across as simmering resentment towards “Lutherans” and self-differentiation of the “German officers” in the Russian imperial army.

It is typical for officers to portray what they have experienced in a supra-individual context where the battles serve as milestones in the biographies of empires and military glory denotes the degree of their maturity. Some compare Zorndorf to victories at Poltava (1709) and Villmanstrand (1741) and express pride in having stood up to "Fyodor Fyodorovich" himself, as Russian officers used to call Frederick the Great.

The letters also shed light on changes in the character and dynamics of the officers' individual morals. The relationship between fear and honor is different from what the officer's code will become later. Officers are not yet embarrassed to mention their fear in letters and it is more accepted in the collective Russian consciousness than in the Prussian army. The concept of courage at the time had more to do with following regulations and orders and less with acting bravely as an individual. The central motive for participating in warfare was career advancement, since taking part in a battle meant automatic promotion through the ranks.

As for traditional values of "faith, monarch and fatherland," Empress Elizabeth's gender did not allow her to play the same role as Friedrich's "roi-connetable." Yet her mission as mater patriae symbolized "protection from carnage" and played a significant role in forming the self-identity of officers. *The fatherland* and *Russia* often appear in the letters as synonyms of peace and home, but not yet as ideals for which one should die. Faith, on the other hand, emerges as the truly ideal value, but the letters also demonstrate the evolution of how men conceived of it. A tension is emerging between faith as loyalty to religious ceremonies (this comes out especially around the question of fasting during military campaigns) and the formation of a new post-Petrine religious culture—the development of "inner" religiosity and the internalization of religious values through the personal practice of prayer and reading.

The interiorization of values and heightened self-reflection eventually become the legacy that the noble military estate will carry over to the era of Catherine the Great. Strategies to improve one's career prospects become incorporated into a public service for "common good" (*bien publique*). Officers abandon the view of service as an obligation and begin to see it as civil obligation informed by enlightened patriotism. The Seven Years War thus not only triggers reforms within the army, but also transforms the collective consciousness, which becomes a crucial component of the enlightened empire of the second half of the eighteenth century.

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