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*The role of the military in political transitions:  
from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day*

**XLIX International Congress of Military History**

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## Volume II





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# БОЖЕ, ЦАРЯ ХРАНИ! (GOD SAVE THE TSAR!)

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## **Abstract**

Winston Churchill famously defined Russia as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma". It was as true in previous centuries at least as much as it was in Churchill's time. In spite of the birth of the Tsarist regime in 1547, Russia suffered from instability, upheavals and invasions, culminating in no less than 10 major involvements in the political arena of the military - officers and/or army formations - between 1682 and 1917, including murder, deposing and crowning of Tsars as well as coup attempts and even revolutions. What were the reasons for it and how did Russia become the least politically stable of all the European powers?

Every one of the 10 plots is worthy, naturally, of a lecture, if not an essay or a book... I'll try here to describe the pattern, the model, and attempt to answer why did Russia suffer from such dangerous liaisons between the regime and the military.

There is very little correlation between the historical periods familiar to all and the history of Russia. There was no "Russia" during antiquity, and the rather artificial transition to the "Middle Ages" has no equivalent in Russia, which was officially born in the year 862. Similarly, the "Rinascimento dell'antichità" of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century found no equivalent in Russia.

Russia was never a part of Feudal Europe. Charlemagne, and also future generations of the Holy Roman Empire – never reached that far east, into the territory of Russia. The political situation in Russia during the Middle Ages, was, however, basically not

radically different from parts of Western Europe. Rival principalities fought each other incessantly until the Mongols conquered almost the entire region.

In the 15th century the great Prince of Moscow Ivan III drove away the Mongols and consolidated the position of Moscow in the entire region, and almost quadrupled the area under his control. His enterprises mirrored similar achievements of Renaissance rulers in Western Europe. In 1547, his grandson, Ivan IV, crowned himself, in 1547, in a new title – "Tsar of all Russians". Ivan continues his illustrious grandfather by a brilliant set of achievements in many fields.

One of the most important steps of Ivan IV towards a new model of government, was the establishment in 1550 of a new type of unit, unseen before in Russia, both from the aspects of organization and equipment. This was the first standing army in Russia. The troops were collectively known as *стрелецкое войско* (*streletskoye voysko*) – firearm troops, or simply *streltsy* - *стрельцы*. These troops became the first all-Russian army, as they were later divided to Muscovite and municipal formations. This was the kernel of the first Russian standing army, again, a reflection of the standing armies of king Charles VII of France and Fernando the Catholic of Spain from the preceding century.

All the commanders and officers of the *streltsy* had to be nobles, and from a certain rank (equivalent to colonel) they were appointed directly by the government. The foot soldiers were equipped with the most modern firearm infantry weapon of the period – the arquebus, replaced by the musket before the end of the century. The equipment of the unit included also polearms, including the fearsome *berdiche*.

The unending wars and conflicts forced Ivan to greatly increase the army. The *Streltsy* gradually deteriorated in quality, as losses were not always replaced by worthy soldiers, but the position of the unit remained, as it was considered superior, therefore only members of the families from the upper social strata joined this unit.

Like the rest of Russia, the *streltsy* formation suffered during the latter reign of Ivan IV and the Time of Troubles (*Смутное время*), but regained its military and social position under the Romanovs.

The first two Tsars, Michael and Alexis, were both involved in military reforms. The army was gradually enlarged. The *Streltsy* unit kept its status as an elite formation, socially much more than militarily. The use of firearms also became widespread and not limited only to the *Streltsy* unit. There were also organizational reforms.

Alexis died in 1676, leaving a complicated situation. His first wife, bore him two sons. The was bright but sickly, and the second, healthy but rather feeble mentally. There was also a daughter, Sophia Alekseyevna, who, as a female, did not count. Alexis' second wife, bore him one son, Peter. When Alexis died, he was succeeded by his sickly eldest son, and it was clear he is not going to live long. During his short reign, a power

struggle commenced under the surface. As he left no issue, his young brother was next in line, but he was known to be mentally feeble, so members his family managed to have the ten-year old Peter proclaimed as the new Tsar.

Sophia Alekseyevna, the person nobody counted, now pulled a dirty trick, opening the gates of hell. She decided to use an Ace up her sleeve – she went to the Streltsy, and for the first time in Russian history, convinced their leaders, to join in her plot and support her. She prepared it well, inciting the rank and file, as well as the officers, against the leading aristocrats and the military commanders of the unit. On May 11, 1682, all hell broke loose. The soldiers went on a rampage, brutally killing dozens of boyars, including high ranking officials. Thus started the Streltsy uprising, or the Moscow uprising of 1682. A few days later, the soldiers brutally massacred almost the entire Peter's family. Peter and his mother survived the massacre, and Sophia conjured a strange deal, according to which both her feeble-minded brother and Peter will be crowned.

The gates of hell remained open. Both Sophia Alekseyevna and the streltsy got the taste of power, success and blood.

After a few years at the helm, Sophia Alekseyevna was the real power behind her feeble-minded brother, Tsar Ivan V, Peter returned from internal exile and took charge. He tried to impose some limitations upon the Streltsy's military and political influence by relocating eight regiments away from Moscow, but ignored the advice to eliminate his half-sister Sophia, and a year after the death of his half-brother without male issue and becoming sole ruler, left Russia for a trip in Europe (The "Grand Embassy").

When Peter was in Western Europe, a rebellion erupted in Russia. On June 6, 1698, approximately 2300 Streltsy troops marched on Moscow under Prigozhin - OOPS, SORRY.

The fingerprints of Sophia Alekseyevna were clearly visible. Is the success of 1682 going to be repeated? Will the Streltsy become a Russian Pretorian Guard? No, it was not to be. The rebellion was crashed, with a debate regarding the balance between the capability of Peter to control matters from afar and local initiative and command by generals and loyal units on the ground. What is not debated, however, is Peter's swift and harsh response. An investigation was opened, and terrible tortures were employed, and many suspects died during their interrogation. Finally, over 1200 Streltsy were hanged, and over 600 exiled. The investigation and executions continued and even the regiments, which had not participated in the uprising, were disbanded. Streltsy and their family members were removed from Moscow. The corps was technically abolished in 1689. A new, Western style, regular army appeared established and organized by the Tsar, complete with elite Guard regiments. One may consider these two 17th Century events, of 1682 and 1698, as representations of the complicated relationship of crown and aristocracy during this period. Will Peter's reforms alter this situation?

Peter the Great died without leaving a male heir in 1725. As usual in hereditary monarchies, a power struggle between several factions ensued, and trouble loomed on the horizon. Members of the old aristocracy, unhappy with Peter's reforms, wished to reverse the situation and regain power. During a meeting of a council to decide on a successor, the new Guard regiments suddenly appeared. Peter's advisor Alexander Menshikov, a confidant (and a former lover) of Peter's widow Catherine, orchestrated the involvement of these new regiments, and Catherine was promptly proclaimed a ruler of Russia, with the bayonets of the troops providing a very convincing support. Change or not, reforms or not, some things never change.

Fifteen years later, in 1740, the second female ruler of Russia, Tsaritsa Anna lay dying. Childless herself, on her deathbed she declared her two-months old grandnephew as her successor and appointed a regent. Again, storm clouds gathered on the horizon. Anna died on October 17, 1740, leaving behind uncertainty for the future of Russia. The following day, the infant was proclaimed as Tsar Ivan VI. His reign was to last only thirteen months. Peter's younger daughter, who inherited a lot of his character, Elizabeth (Yelizaveta) Petrovna, made her move.

Elizabeth planned it carefully. As a daughter of Peter, she enjoyed much support from the Guards regiments. She visited their bases regularly, marking special events with the officers and acting as godmother to their children. She also managed to harness support, from the French ambassador, who bribed a large number of officers in the Guard regiments to ensure their support when the time comes.

On the night of 25 November 1741, Yelizaveta seized power with the help of the Preobrazhensky Life Guards Regiment. Arriving at the regimental headquarters wearing a warrior's metal breastplate over her dress and grasping a silver cross, she challenged them: "Whom do you want to serve: me, your natural sovereign, or those who have stolen my inheritance?" Won over, the regiment marched to the Winter Palace and arrested the infant Emperor, his parents, and their own lieutenant-colonel. It was a daring coup and, amazingly, succeeded without bloodshed.

Like her mother, the personal connection proved the key for securing the army's support.

The next, the last and the greatest of all the female emperors, Catherine the Great, arrived in Russia in 1744, as a fifteen-year-old German princess, to marry the Tsarevich, the heir to the throne. The marriage turned out to be a disaster, because of the extreme eccentricity of the Tsarevich. For eight years the marriage went unconsummated, so under these circumstances, a baby failed to appear. When a child was finally born, the tension between Catherine and her husband, Tsarevich Peter, turned to an unbridgeable chasm, as the child's father was (most likely) Catherine's lover. The relationship continued to

deteriorate, as the behaviour of Peter, crowned Tsar Peter III after the death of Yelizaveta in 1761, became more and more erratic.

By now, Catherine had a new lover, a dashing, handsome artillery officer called Grigory Orlov, one of five brothers, all army officers. As officers, they were painfully aware how incapable Peter was. They also became convinced Catherine was both fully committed to Russia and fit for the job. On July 8, 1762, Catherine arrived in the barracks of the Ismailovsky Regiment, one of the three guard regiments founded by Peter the Great after the dissolution of the Streltsy. She delivered a fiery speech, asking the soldiers to protect her and Russia from the inept, eccentric Tsar. Then, she continued to the barracks of the second regiment of the three, Semeonovsky Regiment. Grigory Orlov had organized priests who waited for her there and ordained her as Tsaritsa Catherine II, sole Empress of Russia. Peter III tried to escape by boat from the palace he was staying in, but his boat was fired upon by a ship of the Russian Navy. He was arrested on July 9 and forced to abdicate. Spilling the blood of a Tsar ordained by God is a crime, so the Orlov brothers did not spill his blood. They strangled him. In a particularly ironic sense of humour, his cause of death was officially declared to be a severe attack of hemorrhoidal colic... (probably the highest ever – real case of medical history).

Catherine only legitimate surviving son was crowned as Tsar Pavel I (Paul) upon his mother's death in 1796. He was intelligent, but mercurial and vindictive man, plagued by the giant shadow of his great mother and unpopular among the nobility. Like his father, alleged father, rather, his conduct created many enemies for himself. Pavel's eldest son, Alexander, was far in his personal character from the iron resolve of his grandmother, but the combination of susceptibility and ambition led him head on into the plot. The political circumstances of the cloak and dagger event are far too complicated and multi-layered to be fully covered within the limits of this paper, but the result is not. Pavel lived in abject fear for his life. He invited two celebrated architects to construct for him a royal residence, which would double as a fortress, surrounded by a moat, called Saint Michael's Castle (Миха́йловский за́мок, Mikhailovsky zamok), consecrated in November 1800.

Only 40 nights after moving in, a group of army officers, headed by two generals, entered the palace. The guards simply saluted. Tsarevich Alexander was also present in the palace at the time, but was not a part of this group. The officers went into Pavel's bedroom. They tried to force him to sign his abdication, but when he refused, they brutally murdered him, and then one of the generals calmly notified Alexander about his accession.

This was the very last classic "palace coup". The French revolution was to spawn a completely new type of interaction between politics and the military. The six coups described fell well within the "system", the pattern. Basically, using the military to cause a violent personal change. No more. The last four, were to be very different.

The Decembrist revolt of 1825 is unique. A watershed event in Russian history, maybe even in world history. The Russian army pursued Napoleon's retreating Grande Armée all the way to Paris, which it triumphantly entered in 1814. The ideas and the ideals of the French Revolution, as well as the social reality in the French capital, left some officers dumbfounded. Specifically, they wanted to eradicate the autocratic system, reform the judicial system, and emancipate the serfs. The seeds were sown. Several secret groups and societies dedicated to change started meeting. Tsar Alexander I died in November 1825 without legal issue. The Guard regiments swore allegiance to his brother, Grand Duke Konstantin, who refused the crown. After a few confusing days of interregnum, the next in line, the younger brother Nikolay, agreed to assume the position. Reformist officers from the secret societies started immediately to convince army officers, especially from the Guard units, not to swear allegiance to him.

On the morning of December 14th, 1825, a force of 3000 men from several Guard units assembled in the Senate Square, forming a square under the imposing equestrian monument of Peter the Great. They proclaimed their loyalty and allegiance to Konstantin, rather than Nikolay. They refused to accept the fact Konstantin refused to become Tsar, and actually lost any connection to political reality by trying to impose idealistic claims upon a completely different environment. Their appointed leaders failed to appear and take command and the effect of the surprise, the initiative and the momentum were all lost. An attempt of a parley failed as the general who tried to negotiate was killed by the insurgents. The stand-off which took a few more hours, ended with a massacre as artillery and infantry fire tore the rebels to pieces. The uprising was crashed. Hundreds were imprisoned, and eventually five ringleaders were hanged and 131 exiled to Siberia. The fallout was destined to be dramatic. A new page was opened in the social history of Russia, and the underground currents in Russia were to finally drown the regime.

The terrible humiliation of the Russian army in the Russo-Japanese war led to unrest and tension. In December 1904, a series of strikes paralyzed the city of St. Petersburg. On January 9, 1905, a quiet demonstration in the Palace Square was fired upon by and then charged by palace guards, causing mass casualties. The public responded with rage and indignation and a wave of massive strikes spread all over the country. Demonstrations were met with brutal repression with hundreds of strikers were shot dead on the streets. The unrest spread to the navy, and naval mutinies erupted in Sevastopol, Vladivostok and Kronstadt. The most famous event took place in Odessa, with the mutiny on board the battleship Potyomkin. The mutinies were disorganised and quickly crashed, with up to 2000 sailors dying in the brutal suppression. In spite of the unrest among many army units, they remained loyal to the regime, and were instrumental in quelling the unrest. The revolution of 1905 is considered as a precedent and a "dress rehearsal" for 1917. The mutinies in the navy were an important and integral part of this momentous event.



World War I brutally exposed the weaknesses and inadequacies of every aspect of Russian reality and rocked the Russian Empire to its foundations. The Tsar was away from the capital, and a lack of a guiding was sorely felt. The long-standing discontent with the regime erupted on February 23, 1917, into mass bread riots. Massive demonstrations clashed with the last loyal forces of the regime, but on February 27 the [bulk of the garrison mutinied, and the soldiers a few regiments, including Guard units, left their barracks to join the rebellion, resulting in the hunting down of police and the gathering of 40,000 rifles which were dispersed among the workers.

The Tsar left the army headquarters for the rebellious capital. Many railway stations were controlled by the revolutionaries and he had to turn back and on the next day he arrived in the city of Pskov, where he was "advised" by several high-ranking officials, including General Nikolai Vladimirovich Ruzsky, Army Chief and member of the state and military councils. General Ruzsky brutally and violently forced the wavering tsar to sign the prepared manifesto on abdication. Ruzsky held the tsar by one hand, with the other hand holding the manifesto, and repeatedly said: "Sign... Do not you see that you have nothing else left. If you do not sign, I will not be responsible for your life". Finally, the Tsar, left without any choice, signed, effectively bringing the end to 370 years of monarchy, Tsarist rule in Russia, and to the 304-year-old Romanov dynasty.

In the wake of the February revolution, total chaos spread in Russia. A provisional government both failed to bridge the many rifts and tensions among the various factions, and made the fatal error of staying in the vastly unpopular World War. This chaos was naturally reflected in the armed forces, both army and navy. The Germans plucked the Bolshevik leader Lenin from Zurich and put him on board a sealed train which brought him to Russia in April 1917. Under his leadership, the Bolsheviks turned out to be the best organised and led faction. However, as they failed to secure the support of the army, their initial moves ended in failure and Lenin had to escape to Finland. The Bolshevik party ranks grew steadily, their number increasing almost ten-fold from February 1917 (estimated around 24,000) to September 1917 (over 200,000). Their growing power both alarmed the army, and a force under general Lavr Kornilov tried to use army units to suppress them, and maybe to gain personal power. The Bolsheviks' role in stopping the attempted coup further strengthened their position.

A revolutionary military committee, which included soldiers, sailors and armed workers was created, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky. The role of this committee was both to assure the neutrality or support of the capital's garrison, and to plan the capture and occupation of strategic locations throughout the city. Clashes between units loyal to the provisional government and the Bolsheviks started on October 24. On October 25, the Bolsheviks started surrounding the Winter Palace, the political centre and seat of power, almost since the founding of the city by Peter the Great in 1703.

At 2145, the cruiser Aurora sailed the river Neva towards the Winter Palace and fired a blank shell from its front deck gun. A real shell was fired from across the river, hit the palace, causing some damage and breaking many windows. Revolutionary units started the attack and entered parts of the palace, with the real full- scale attack and mass entry arriving three hours later, storming the palace. There was some resistance, but by 0210 on October 26, the cabinet of the Provisional Government surrendered, and imprisoned.

A terrible civil war followed, but it is naturally outside the scope of this paper.

Thus ends my journey through 235 years of Russian history, in which military coups or military involvement in coups really formed a backdrop to the politics and a crucial element of regime stability, or lack of...

### **Author's short CV**

Prof. Allon Klebanoff is a fellow of the International Napoleonic Society and the chairman of the Israeli branch of the INS – the Israeli Centre for Napoleonic Research. In 2018 he has been awarded the Napoleonic Legion of Merit, the highest distinction of the International Napoleonic Society.

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