David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Bruce
W. Menning, eds., *Reforming the Tsar's army*

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David SCHIMMELPENNINCK VAN DER OYE, Bruce W. MENNING, eds., ***Reforming the Tsar's army. Military innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution***. Washington, D.C., Woodrow Wilson Center Press–Cambridge University Press, 2004, 361 p.

- 1 One of the most promising developments in our recent historiography of the Russian Empire has been a growing interest in military history. At first glance, this seems incongruous, because the Russian Empire always was a military state governed by men in uniform and expanding by military conquest to incorporate an enormous area from the Oder to the Pacific and from the White Sea to the Black and Caspian Seas. But the “community of scholars” had other priorities, notably in social and cultural history, neglecting not only military history but also foreign policy, law and economics. For this reason alone, both editors must be congratulated for giving us a handsomely produced collection of essays devoted to reforms in the Russian army.
- 2 It consists of fifteen articles discussing a variety of topics: the universal military service law of 1874 (Robert F. Baumann); the multiethnic composition of the army (Mark von Hagen); the Russian Boy Scouts (David R. Jones); strategic railroads (Jacob W. Kipp); three pieces on military intelligence (D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Gudrun Persson, and David Alan Rich), and one on the military press (Willis Brooks); the impact of the wars with Napoleon and in the Caucasus (Frederick W. Kagan and Dmitrii I. Oleinikov); three contributions on personalities by Paul Bushkovich, B. W. Menning and Oleg Airapetov. The volume concludes with three essays: a “book review” by David M. McDonald

pointing to the disdain in which Russian military history has been held until now, and two thoughtful pieces by Dennis Showalter and William E. Odom, the latter raising questions (not systematically asked in this volume) which “ought to be asked.” All in all, a very valuable contribution to Russian military history which will challenge historians to develop some of the issues raised here and more.

- 3 Some readers may object, for example, to the overwhelming preponderance given to the post-1855 period and the neglect of the eighteenth century. This is not unusual, but it is regrettable. The two and a half centuries from 1650 to 1917 included two very different periods: one from the 1650s to the 1830s: a dynamic period, when the Russians were on the offensive, confident in their strength and successful in their determination to establish their hegemony in Eurasia; the other was marked by self-doubt, an inability to cope with mounting economic and financial problems, when the rise of Germany and Japan placed the Russians on the defensive. The emphasis placed in this book on the second period conveys that pessimistic outlook. Certainly, no one steeped in the earlier period would have written that Russia was engaged in “a constant race to avoid oblivion” (p. 1) or that the discovery that the Russian army was incompetent was shocking (p. 326). Peter I, Rumiantsev, Suvorov, Kutuzov, and Dibich would turn in their graves.
- 4 A second reservation concerns the “general staff”: two pieces discuss this issue and others make a reference to it, but the whole issue remains unclear. It is not entirely true that the relationships between the “general staff” and the War Ministry were not well thought out in 1812-1815. The division was not so much between the line and supply agencies as a territorial one: the territories occupied by the army or armies in the field were under their commanders in chief and had their own supply agencies; the others came under the War Ministry. The question should have been asked why a general staff existed only during the war of 1812 (and until 1832): was not its creation connected with Russia’s strategy on an all-European scale and with unprecedented numbers in the field? Could it be that save for this exceptional case, such a staff was not necessary because fighting in the same theaters war after war predetermined how such and such a war was to be fought?
- 5 These are only some of the many questions which this book raises and which it could not answer for lack of space. But we must all be grateful for its appearance and wish it will encourage scholars and doctoral students to take up more of these issues which, as General Odom suggests, “ought to be raised” in this new field of Russian military history.