The Consequences of the Military Revolution in Muscovy in Comparative Perspective

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The early modern “military revolution” may be described most simply as the replacement of small cavalry forces by huge gunpowder infantry armies. The revolution was a diffusionary process with a relatively well-understood chronology and geography. The innovations at its core began in northern Italy in the later fifteenth century and spread throughout central, northern, and eastern Europe in the three centuries that followed. Seen in this way, it was a unique and unitary phenomenon. Thus we speak of “the” military revolution, an episode in world history, instead of several different revolutions in the constituent parts of Europe. Nonetheless, the course and impact of the revolution were different in the regions it eventually affected.

This essay will compare the consequences of early modern military reform in Muscovy and the West. The topic has several merits. First, most scholars studying the military revolution and state-building concentrate on Western Europe, paying little or no attention to developments east of the Elbe. This is surprising because there is a large literature on the Muscovite army, much of which is available in languages other than Russian. Second, where we find comparative treatments of Old Russia, they often share a set of traditional though dubious assumptions about the nature of Muscovite history and society: that Muscovy was genetically related to Kievan Rus; that Mongol domination truncated “Russian” development; that autocracy was a Mongol import; that Muscovy was ruled like a patrimonial estate; that the tsar’s rule was unfettered by “intermediary bodies.” This essay will attempt to introduce recent research into the discussion of Muscovy’s place in the process of early modern military reform. Finally, the particular interpretation of the course and results of the military revolution in Muscovy implied in the comparative literature—that Muscovy is an archtypical example of a despotic state imposing its will on a supine society—is questionable. This essay will argue that the court was not despotic and society not supine, and that this way of looking at the problem misses a fundamental point, namely, that the military reforms brought a social and cultural revolution to Muscovy.

*The author would like to thank S. Baron, M. Kestnbaum, E. Keenan, and N. Kollmann, all of whom read earlier drafts of this essay. All errors are my own.


2 See, for example, J. R. Hale’s War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450-1620 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985) which, despite its title, devotes not a page to Muscovy.

A complete and detailed comparison of the impact of military reform in Muscovy and the states of the West is far beyond the scope of this discussion. Our aim here will be to provide a schematic overview of the chief consequences of the reform. Pursuant to this goal, the first section below sketches an ideal-typical Western model of the general consequences of the military reforms and argues that the military revolution had four chief results: constitutional conflict, the dislocation and creation of new classes, the regimentation of the army and society, and the rise of “technicality” in the culture of rule. These changes were not solely the result of military reform and neither were they the only alterations caused by the introduction of the new-style forces. The claim made here is less forceful: the reforms contributed to the mutations specified and that these mutations were among the most general and important. The second section offers a comparison of the Western model to the Muscovite case. The main argument here is that while the military reform brought little change to Muscovy’s political system, its class composition, social divisions, and culture (at least among the service classes) were transformed by the coming of the new army.

The Military Revolution and its Consequences in the West

The introduction of new-style forces in the major kingdoms of the early modern West had four major consequences. Let us begin with constitutional conflict. The political impact of the military revolution in Western Europe manifested itself in terms of heightened tension between reforming central authorities and the two classes that bore the brunt of the military innovations, the nobility and urban commoners. The root of the problem was fiscal. In medieval European government, military outlays were minimal because the crown was not solely responsible for raising heavy cavalry armies: knights were obliged to come to the field ready for battle and generally served without monetary remuneration. In contrast, Renaissance courts assumed a much more active role in raising expansive new-model forces and thereby increased their financial burden. However resourceful the military reformers might be — debasing currency, selling offices, farming out monopolies — they would sometimes be forced to petition their peers and subjects for funds or the rights to raise them. And where this happened, conflict frequently resulted. The existence of representative institutions — parliaments, cortes, Landtagen, états généraux — facilitated the maturation of fiscal discord into constitutional crises. Though similarities among these bodies should not be overstated, it seems obvious that whatever their particular roles, they all served as fora for the articulation of political conflict on a very high level. Certainly national politics could be carried on outside representative bodies, for example in urban and peasant revolts, but the high assemblies were in a sense regular conduits for national affairs. They amplified issues that would have been diffused if they had remained in the localities.

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4 On the old order and the fiscal impact of the new forces, see the arguments and literature reviewed in Downing, The Military Revolution, 74.


6 Ibid. Downing, The Military Revolution, explores this in great detail.

A second result of the military revolution in the West was class displacement and creation. The superiority of infantry after the introduction of pikes and shoulder-arms diminished the relative importance of heavy cavalry. Since cavalry was the traditional mode of aristocratic combat, this led to a decline in the military significance of the traditional feudal nobility. As a consequence, the basic justification for the privileges enjoyed by the titled elite — i.e., martial service to the king — was called into question. The nobility had to seek other means for maintaining its privileges. Many nobles entered royal offices; others became officers in the new-model forces; some simply removed themselves from service. As the military reform transformed the old cavalry nobility, it created two new classes of state servitors — professional soldiers and administrators. The former appeared first in the form of mercenary units and (a bit later) conscripts. In either case the ranks were filled by men of plebeian origins, while the officer corp was increasingly occupied by aristocrats. The latter became more numerous and specialized as the court evolved into a central bureaucracy. Since education (and especially literacy) was a requirement for court administrative service, those who worked in offices tended to be recruited from the lower nobility, townsmen, and the clergy.

Let us turn now to regimentation. The medieval society of estates was transfigured by the introduction of the new forces. On the one hand, the line between “those who fought” and everyone else was blurred by increases in the size of armies. In place of this dichotomous system, new forms of hierarchical order based on a mix of heredity and merit were forged. In the first fifty years of the seventeenth century the concept of “rank” was introduced into European armies. The tiny cavalry horde — an assembly of high-born peers — neither needed nor could bear a strict chain of command. In the new armies such structures were a necessity if any sort of order was to be achieved. What is perhaps more significant is the way in which modern military style — strict regulation of functions and levels of command — was transferred into the arena of civil government. European societies, crowded with the irregularities that came of a millennium without strong central authority, came to be seen as messy and unresponsive by rulers. All right angles and order, the new-model forces presented themselves as a solution to the problem of social irregularity. Almost everywhere we see increased social regulation. In the most extreme cases (the German states and Sweden), vast systems of military and civil ranks were outlined in turgid legal compendia — the products of a fetishistic love of order and an unrealistic faith in rationality.

Finally, the introduction of gunpowder forces changed the culture of military service. Under the old style military, combat was the exclusive province of lords, duty was occasional, and mores were governed by chivalry. Little was required in the way of technical training for those who served. Logistics were comparatively uncomplicated: equipping and mustering the tiny forces at, say, Agincourt must have been a relatively simple affair. War did not require the crown to make great demands on the country.

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10. Ibid., 209.

11. Ibid., 210.

12. Ibid., 212.


Indeed contact between state and society related to war was infrequent: few war-taxes were collected, few conscripts were mustered. Every indication is that the nobility was content to leave society to its own devices, and indeed insisted as a point of honor that contact be held to a minimum. With the introduction of masses of shoulder-armed foot soldiers, the cultures of service, supply, and extraction were altered. Forces were in part democratized, service became continual, and was regulated by written codes. Chivalry became an elegiac fact, as in Shakespeare, or an object of parody, as in Cervantes. Written systems of ranks were introduced and eventually spread to society. The “three orders” were replaced by a plurality of places, ranks, and statuses — all arranged neatly in codes, statutes, and Ordnungen. Logistics were transformed. Organizational skills were expanded and refined in the emergent military bureaucracies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The new army required extensive written planning, communication, and record-keeping simply to get it in the field and prevent it from mutinying for lack of pay. Finally, the state increasingly entered the daily lives of citizens as tax collector and policeman — both of whom were armed not only with force but with written instruments to record obligations and regulate behavior. All these cultural changes might be summarized as an increase in “technicality.” Complicated weaponry and tactics transformed soldiering; new, rationalized administrative structures re-worked systems of stratification; and regulation and penetration changed the feel of state-society relations.

The Impact of the Military Revolution in Muscovy

The military revolution came to Muscovy in roughly three halting stages. Prior to the mid-sixteenth century the Muscovite military was comprised of regional cavalry forces armed with cold steel. Their opponents — Tatars, Lithuanians, Poles — fought in the same way, so nothing more advanced was considered necessary. However in the second half of the sixteenth century the Russians began to encounter new-style forces in the Baltic, and in response significant military reforms were initiated by the Muscovite court. Though the surviving sources do not permit a detailed reconstruction of the course of the reforms, their outline is reasonably clear. First, the court re-figured the army itself. The regime attempted to enhance its control over command assignments by placing limits on precedence disputes (mestnichestvo) among officers that sometimes interfered with military activity. Further, the center took steps to unite the traditional cavalry forces in Moscow. In 1551 a plan was formulated to grant estates to approximately one thousand of the “best” cavalry servitors (deti boiarskie) in the immediate environs of Moscow.

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16 Throughout this essay “court” or “elite” (rather than the problematic “nobility” or “aristocracy”) will denote the Muscovite courtiers who ruled the empire, the so-called “councillor ranks” (dumnye chiny). On them, see N. S. Kollmann, Kinship and Politics: the Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1375-1547 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) and R. Crummey, Aristocrats and Servitors. The Boyar Elite in Russia, 1613-1689 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).


a reform clearly intended to create a core military force at the immediate call of and dependent on the center. In the third quarter of the century the court founded the Military Service Chancellery (razriadny prikaz), the clearing house for all military affairs and what would become the most important bureau in Muscovy. Standing gunpowder infantry units, the musketeers (stryiz), were introduced at mid-century. Musketeer units were armed by the crown and located in Moscow. Finally, and most significantly, the system of remuneration was restructured for all military personnel. The court attempted to commute and centralize the collection of provender rents that had traditionally been granted to court-appointed officials as prebends. Both hereditary (rotchiny) and prebendal (pomest'ia) estates were subjected to a military service requirement. In essence, the regime was rapidly assuming the role of bursar to the expanding and reformed army. Taxes rose accordingly. In preparation for the Smolensk War (1632-34), the court embarked on a second reform effort. Western captains and mercenary units were recruited (not for the first time) to train and fight with the old-style cavalry and musketeers. The government issued weapons, supplies, and cash to the new units. A third and decisive effort at creating new-model forces was undertaken around the Thirteen Years War (1654-67). Again the court recruited Western captains, instructed them to train Russian soldiers, and placed them in command positions. To fill the ranks of the new army, the court began to draft soldiers directly out of the peasant and tax-paying communities. Further, the center took active measures to force cavalrymen into the new units. Finally, older and militarily unreliable musketeers were removed from field duty and made into a sort of garrison force.

19See A. A. Zimin, ed., Tysiadnina kniga 1550 g. i dvorianina tetrad' 50-kh godov XVI veka (Moscow and Leningrad: Iздательство Академии Наук СССР, 1950), 3-19 and Zimin, “K istorii voennych reform 50-kh godov XVI v.,” 348. As Zimin demonstrates, it is unclear whether this reform was carried out. Nonetheless the intentions of the court are made clear by the plan itself.

20The date of the Military Service Chancellery’s foundation is unclear, again due to lack of sources. Many scholars have argued that a predecessor of the military office existed as early as the 1530s. See V. I. Buganov, Razriadnye knigi poslednei chertveti XV-nachala XVII v. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1962), 111; I. I. Verter, O vremeni i primenim obrazovanii Muskovskikh prikazov (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografia, 1907), 55-56; P. B. Brown, “Muscovite Government Bureaus,” Russian History/Histoire Russe 10 (1983), 324; and N. P. Likhachev, Razriadnye d'aki XVI veka (St. Petersburg V. S. Balashev, 1888), 80. However the evidence is far from clear. The first unassailable reference to “military scribes” (razriadnye d'aki) is from 1563. See Likhachev, Razriadnye d'aki, 438 and A. A. Zimin, “O slozhenii prikaznoi sistemy na Rusi,” Doklady i soobshheniia Instituta istorii Akademii Nauk SSSR, fasc. 3 (Moscow: Iздательство Академии Наук СССР, 1945), 169-70. The phrase “Military office” (razriadnaia izba) is from 1566. See Zimin, “O slozhenii,” 169 (mislakenly writing 1556 for 1566) and Likhachev, Razriadnye d'aki, 438. The term razriad was used to denote “Military Service Chancellery” for the first time in 1571. See Likhachev, Razriadnye d'aki, 462 and Zimin “O slozhenii,” 169-70.


22The commutation of provender rents (kornleniia) is prescribed in the “edict on provender rents and service” (prigovor o kornleniakh i styrakh) of 1555/56. The edict is found in the Nikonian Chronicle reprinted in Polnoe sobranie Russkikh letopisei (St. Petersburg/Leningrad and Moscow, 1846-), vol. 13, 267-69. For discussions of it, see A. A. Zimin, “Prigovor’ 1555-1556 i likvidatsiia sistemy kornleniia v Russkom gosudarstve,” Istoriia SSSR (1958), no. 1, 178-82; S. O. Shmidt, “K istorii zemskoi reformy (Sobor 1555-1556 g.),” in Goroda feudal'noi Rossii. Sbornik statei pamiati N. V. Ustjagova, V. I. Shunkov, ed. et al. (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), 125-34; and Nosov, Stanovlenie usluznov-predstavitel'nykh uchrezhdenii v Rossii, 367-86.

23Universal service according to graded landholding schedules is prescribed in the “edict on provender rents and service.” See Polnoe sobranie Russkikh letopisei, vol. 13, 269. See Hellie, Enserfment, 326ff. The effect of the reform can perhaps be seen in the appearance (Kashira, 1556) of regional muster records (desiatina), which list servitors according to rank and land entitlements. See M. G. Krotov, “K istorii sostavleniia desiatini (storaia polovina XVI v.),” in Issledovaniia po istoricheskoi vedenii iistorii SSSR dokvinta'shogo perioda. Sbornik statei, V. I. Buganov, ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1984), 56-72.


25On introduction of the new-model forces in the seventeenth century, see Chernov, Voennozhezenny sily, 133-98; Hellie, Enserfment, 167-201; Keep, Soldiers of the Tsar, 80-94.
How do the consequences of the military reform in Muscovy compare to those experienced in the West? We will begin with constitutional conflict. The Muscovite court indeed faced a certain amount of opposition to the introduction of new-model forces. Hellie has argued convincingly that the gentry offered both active (in supporting the Moscow riots of 1648) and passive (in failing to enter new-model units) resistance to military reforms in the seventeenth century. Further, there is some evidence of recalcitrance on the part of the mass of tax-paying people (tiazhe lindi) and serfs (krest’iane). All rose in revolt against government policies that included taxation to support the new army. These broad similarities aside, the court faced far less political resistance to the new forces than did Western governments. The reason, which has been widely misunderstood, has to do with a subtle combination of strength on the part of the Moscow elite and consensus between the elite and its servitors. As is often pointed out, the tsar dealt with his minions from a position of relative strength. Both the gentry and townsmen were dependent on the crown. The elite had successfully monopolized cultural capital and economic resources among the service classes. The sons of the provincial gentry had no choice but to seek careers in service: the law mandated it and, in marked contrast to the West, there were no other status-ascriptive contexts in which they could seek social approbation. Moreover, the court granted estates, prebends, and salaries only in exchange for service. And even after conditional service estates (pomest’ia) had become heritable in the seventeenth century, significant economic resources could not be collected by gentry families because of the custom of partible inheritance. The situation of townsmen was similar. Small and relatively poor, the Muscovite merchantry was bound in a caste system of the government’s creation in towns controlled by government officials. And, like all other groups, the traders existed in large measure to serve the court. They did so either by paying taxes (in the case of small artisans and traders) or by collecting government duties and managing court enterprises (in the case of wealthy merchants).

Be this as it may, the argument to autocracy and class dependence is one-sided. It assumes that conflict between the court and its servitors is somehow natural and should be widespread. Autocracy is taken as evidence of the state’s victory over society. But there is some indication that over the entire period of the reform there existed a broad and stable consensus between the elite and its service classes. Comparison with the Western case is instructive in this regard. Western nobilities often were torn apart by confessional strife. The Muscovite boyars successfully resisted any incursion of confessional reform, and even granting that...
religious division appeared (in the form of Old Belief), the Old Russian governing classes were never divided by issues of faith. Thus Muscovy experienced no French Religious Wars. Further, in the West the crown and estates were often split on issues bound up with the funding and use of the new-model forces. While it is true that both the Old Russian gentry and townsfolk expressed dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the reform in the seventeenth century, there was little systematic resistance to government policy from the provinces. Thus Muscovy suffered no English Civil War or Fronde. It is sometimes argued that the potential for religious and political resistance existed, but that it could not develop because Muscovy was without intermediary bodies, these having been suppressed by the “despotic” state. But in fact Muscovy had several of the mechanisms that proved conducive to the expression of institutionalized conflict in the West, i.e., local corporations, national estates, and a tradition of customary limitations on sovereign action. It is true that none were as well elaborated as in the West, but this may be because the stimulus that led to their enhanced development in Western kingdoms — resistance to the crown — was not very powerful in Muscovy. It is interesting to note that when serious division did appear within the Muscovite governing classes as a result of the dynastic crises of the Time of Trouble, precisely these institutions, and particularly the Assembly of the Land (zemskii sobor), were invigorated. But some decades after the Troubles had ended and consensus had re-emerged, they became unnecessary for the purposes of rule and disappeared.

Let us now turn to class displacement and creation. As in the West, the introduction of new-formation military units made the old-style cavalry obsolete, though somewhat later (in the mid-seventeenth century). The proportion of archer/horse in the Muscovite army declined steadily over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the old cavalry was replaced by Western-style forces. As in the West, this brought significant changes to the lives of the provincial servitors — the Muscovite cavalrymen lost their traditional military role. But the Muscovite gentry did not — or was not allowed to — abandon state service completely. This is true for reasons already discussed. The average cavalryman needed government service to maintain his class privileges and was in any case probably too poor to do without subsidies from the crown. Given this dependence, the court needed only to threaten the gentry with a reduction of status and wealth to press it into new-formation military service.  

32 See especially Pipes, Russia under the Old Regime, 48-54 and 106-08.


37 Throughout the seventeenth century the gentry petitioned the government for all three: cash entitlements (oklady), service estates (pomest’ia), and elimination of limitations on the recovery of fugitive serfs. On these petitions, see Hellie, Enserfment, 130, 131, 133, 136, and 239-40.

38 Hellie demonstrates that the government bullied the cavalry into the new units. He also provides data which show movement into the new army: “By 1672, 50.3 percent (19,003) of the dvoriane and deti boyarskie in seventy-seven southern towns were in new formation regiments,
The reformed cavalrymen were joined by two new classes of servitors — paid soldiers and administrators. Unlike in the West, however, both groups were created very rapidly and almost ex nihilo by state fiat. Prior to the Livonian war, the Muscovite court had never commanded large infantry formations or a sizable staff of administrators. The elite was thus compelled to raise a European-style army and to create an administrative class to see to its upkeep. Beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century the court began to levy a considerable number of musketeers, primarily from among the urban population, in the 1630s the elite began to draft new-model soldiers and hire foreigners to train them. Over the same period, approximately 1550-1630, we see an appreciable increase in the number of chancelleries (prikazy) and the number of secretaries (d’iaki and pod’iachie) working in them.

The third consequence of military reform noted above was social regimentation and stratification. Early modern Russia offers an extreme case of rapid, thorough-going social division. Muscovy moved from a relatively simple society marked by slight internal division in the fourteenth century to one with many functional groups and hierarchical boundaries in the seventeenth. In every sector of society — the court (gosudarev dvor and moskovskii spisok), church (patriarshii dvor), government administration (prikazy and prikaznye izby), provincial gentry (sluzhiye ludi po otechestvu serving on the gosudarstvenny spisok), lower service classes (sluzhiye ludi po pribornu), merchants (gosti), townsmen (posadskie ludi), and peasants — the court imposed classificatory systems that designated the type of service to be performed by members of the groups in question. In theory, everyone served and everyone had a role. The Consiliar Lawcode (Sobornoe Ulozhenie) of 1649 describes all this in painstaking detail. The basic difference between Muscovite and Western stratification lies precisely in the role played by the court. Under the relatively lax control of medieval governments, Western societies developed considerable regional, functional, and hierarchical boundaries. The importance of economic developments in this process — especially the growth of national and international commerce — has long been emphasized. When Western kings embarked on programs of military reform, they added new forms of complexity to the mix and often faced resistance from pre-existing groups. In Muscovy there was little of this “spontaneous” social

compared with only 4.5 percent in 1651. In 1672 the rest of them were in town defensive service (14, 935, or 39.4 percent), and only a handful, 3,921 (10.3 percent) were in the old regimental sotennaia sluzhba, which was becoming extinct.” See Enserfment, 160. Also see Chernov, Voennozame zmny, 161; Keep, Soldiers of the Tsar, 85-87; and Stevens, Soldiers on the Steppe, 76-87. Entire peasant communities were also forced into the new units. See B. Davies, “Village into Garrison: The Militarized Peasant Communities of Southern Muscovy,” Russian Review 51 (1992), 481-501.


development: early Muscovite society, overwhelmingly rural and largely isolated from the commercial and cultural influence of parts western, was very simple.45 As is often noted, the lack of organized social interests in society afforded the Muscovite elite significant though hardly unlimited political authority. It is less often mentioned that the relative weakness of social groups also reduced the power of the Muscovite court. Western monarchs were able to use already organized estates, towns, and corporations as vehicles for the mobilization of support and resources. Muscovite society contained few such groups. As a consequence the Muscovite elite had to create organized groups in society to respond to its needs. Important for us is the fact that these needs were often military, so that it is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of Muscovite stratification is the history of the government’s attempts to raise competitive armies and to mobilize resources in society to support them. This end is clearly reflected in the most basic Muscovite social divisions. On the highest level, the Russian populace was divided according to the kind of resources various groups controlled and the kind of state-service they were to render.46 Most hereditary military servitors (sluzhiye ludi po otechestvu) controlled peasant labor and were burdened with martial and administrative duties, while contract military servitors (sluzhiye ludi po priboru) received cash and commercial concessions47; taxpayers (tiaglye ludi) either engaged in urban trades and paid government duties48 or were serfs (krest'iane), in which case they labored for the gentry; non-taxpayers (netiaglye ludi) — especially slaves — controlled no resources and served their owners, who in turn served the tsar.49

Finally, let us review the broader cultural effects of the military reforms in Muscovy. The military revolution in the West was accompanied by a movement toward technicality in the culture of state activity. The same was true in Muscovy. The new-model units used relatively complicated arms (increasingly of Russian manufacture50) and tactics, and they were drilled according to written procedures51; administrative and logistical activity grew more complex and became thoroughly literate52; service obligations within the army and outside it were recorded and regulated as never before.53 However the introduction of technicality had a much more profound impact on Muscovite culture than it did in the West. Prior to the coming of the new armies, the court itself was a rather unsophisticated operation, a fact reflected in the relative poverty and simplicity of government paper.54 Among the documents issued by the elite and its minions we find legal cases (pravye gramoty), tax-assessment edicts (kormlenye and zhalovannye gramoty), local government charters (ustavnye, gubnye, and zemskie gramoty), land registers (pistsovye knigi), 45

45 The partial exceptions of Novgorod and Pskov — neither of which were Muscovite prior to the later fifteenth century — must be noted. Significantly, both cities had close ties to the lively Baltic trade. The simplicity of Muscovite society has been described in many places, most notably in D. H. Kaiser, The Growth of the Law in Medieval Russia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), which uses law as an index of social complexity and finds Muscovy to be comparatively simple.
46 This is V. O. Kliuchevskii’s famous formulation. See “Istoriia soslovii v Rossii,” in Sochineniia, 9 vols. (Moscow: Mysl’, 1990), vol. 6, 353.
47 For a general treatment, see Pavlov-Sil’vanskii, Gosudarevy sluzhiye ludi.
48 See Hittle, The Service City, 21-76.
49 See R. Hellie, Slavery in Russia, 1450-1725 (Chicago and London, 1982).
51 See Hellie, Enserfment, 167-68, on the translation of Western drill manuals.
54 Reviews of the history Muscovite government documentation are available in Vodov, “Zarozhdenie kantseliarii Moskovskikh kniazei” and Poe, “Elite Service Registry in Muscovy.”
diplomatic paper (stateinye spisky), and books of elite genealogy and res gestae (rudoshnyye and razvristnye knigi). Of personnel lists, muster records, and pay-registers we encounter almost nothing. There were few scribes. The grand prince’s scriptorium was tiny and undifferentiated. Neither the clergy nor merchantry could provide large pools of literate administrators. All this points to the fact that the Muscovite court was relatively unprepared for the technical burden brought by the incorporation of the new armies. Despite this difficulty, the Muscovite elite succeeded in creating a subtle, powerful, and above all, literate administrative system very rapidly. By 1650, the extent of government documentary production had grown tremendously. Documentary registers (zapisyne knigi) recorded incoming and outgoing paper throughout the institutions of the central and local administration. Service registers of various sorts traced the movement, disposition, and rank of tens of thousands of servitors throughout the far-flung empire. Land registers (pistovye and perepisnye knigi) were used to record ownership, resolve legal disputes, and, of course, collect taxes. As a consequence of extensive record keeping, the administrative arm of the state developed: the number of scribes grew; the scriptorium, heretofore organized in only the most rudimentary fashion, was divided into chancelleries; political officials increasingly gained expertise as administrators. And the coming of administrative complexity to Muscovy had a significant impact on Old Russian culture, particularly among the Moscow elite. Documentation furthered social stratification by allowing the state to formulate and promulgate elaborate classificatory schemes, as we see in the massive Ulozhenie of 1649. Further, documentation changed the character of personal identity. After the arrival of administrative paper, the state could “fix” social position with written instruments. Finally, the habit of reading and writing was introduced to the elite, opening the wider world of literary art for the first time.


57Alef cites the following figures concerning the number of state scribes (d’iaki) at court: 1470s, fourteen state scribes; 1480s, ten state scribes; 1490s, seventeen state scribes; and 1500-1505, twenty state scribes. See Alef, The Origins of Muscovite Autocracy, 273. Alef’s data is drawn from A. A. Zimin, “D’iacheskii apparat v Rossii vtoroi poloviny XV -- pervoi treti XVI v.,” Istoriushcheskii zapiski 87 (1971), 219-86.

58See Bushkovitch, The Merchants of Muscovy, 1. Also see S. Baron, “Who Were the Gostiz?” California Slavic Studies 7 (1973), 1-40.


60Shmidt and Kniaž’kov, Dokumenty deloprisygodstva, 19-20 and 37-38.

61Ibid., 52-53.


63In 1626 there were 623 chancellery people (prikažnye liudi) serving in Moscow. By 1698 there were 2739. In the 1640s 774 secretaries and under-secretaries were employed in the provincial offices; in the 1690s there were over 1900. See Demidova, Sluzhilaia biurokratia, 23 and 37.

64In 1550 there were no chancelleries (prikaž); in 1626 there were forty-four; and in 1698 there were fifty-five, each with a more or less distinct territorial or functional sphere of activity. See Demidova, Sluzhilaia biurokratia, 23.

Conclusion: the Military Revolution and Social Change

The following table summarizes the differential impact of the military revolution in the West and Muscovy. The severity of consequences has been ranked “high,” “moderate,” and “low.”

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In contrast to the Western case in which the military reforms brought political conflict, in Muscovy they spurred instead significant changes in what we might broadly term “the socio-cultural sphere.” In order to support the new forces, the state was compelled to substantively alter the shape of society: new classes had to be created, new systems of social classification forged, and the techniques of literate organization introduced. This crucial point has been systematically missed in the comparative literature on constitutional and military development, with significant consequences.

For reasons that go beyond the scope of this essay, comparative analyses of European constitutional development have long focused on the “peculiarity” of Russian political culture. In such treatments Muscovy plays a specific role as the “despotical” counter-instance to the “limited” regimes in the West. Western monarchs were checked by corporations and their subjects’ rights were protected by law. In contrast, the tsar, we are told, virtually owned the realm and his subjects were slaves. According to this argument the result of autocracy and servility was constitutional immutability, a trope familiar from the older literature of “ Asiatic despotism.” When this understanding of Muscovite society is applied to the comparative study of the military reforms in Old Russia, the outcome is predictable. In the context of the military revolution, Muscovy is seen as an instance in which a powerful state succeeded in introducing new forces while avoiding “progressive” constitutional conflict. This essay has argued that such a mode of explanation is found wanting on two grounds. First, it presupposes that the Muscovite court and its service classes were in conflict. With some notable exceptions, the elite seems to have enjoyed widespread support among those who served it. Second, Muscovy does not fit the “despotical state-gelatinous society” model very well, because Old Russian society had versions of all the “intermediary bodies” so important to constitutional development in the West. It must be allowed that they did not become well-elaborated institutions for opposition to the crown, but they did not do so precisely because such institutions, in the absence of significant opposition among the governing classes, never had the opportunity to develop in this direction.

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67 This argument is implied in several comparative treatments, notably Hintze, “The Formation of States and Constitutional Development”; Bendix, Kings or People, 115-23: Anderson, Lineages, 328-41. The most complete rendition is found in Downing, The Military Revolution, 38-44.
In any event, the concentration on politics directs attention away from an important aspect of the Muscovite experience with military reform. The Muscovite case implies not so much that a “despotic” state can impose itself on society, but that the level of socio-cultural complexity was an important independent variable in the process of early modern military reform. It is easy to see how this factor operated in Muscovy. Under increasing military pressure, the Muscovite elite set about importing Western military technologies. To support the new forces (as well as older, expanded ones), the boyars had to build a machinery of state far larger and more complicated than anything they had ever experienced or desired. Yet, unlike their Western competitors, they had few resources with which to accomplish this goal. The forest society that they ruled was profoundly primitive: it offered an antiquated cavalry and tiny group of scribes with which the elite had to construct a new-model army and administration; it possessed few organized social interests on which the center could call for aid; and it contained almost no members with the skills necessary to manage a large, gunpowder army. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, the court began to cultivate resources in each of these areas — military-administrative, social, and technical. The process was painstaking and results dramatic. First, the autocratic state was born, if not autocratic political culture. What had in 1450 been a tiny collection of warriors managing a protection operation in the forests and on the trade routes of northeastern Rus' became by 1650 a large administrative system ruling a huge empire. Second, the military reforms introduced the germs of modern social complexity into the context of traditional Muscovite society. In 1450, Muscovy comprised three classes, two of which were completely uncoordinated: a small elite (including clerics), a tiny merchanty, and a huge peasantry. By 1650, the elite included an administrative class and commanded a class of professional soldiers. The townsmen and peasants had been organized for state-service. And finally, Old Russian culture — illiterate, isolated, and tradition-bound — began to move into a new era. Literacy in particular changed cultural patterns, tastes, and (more speculatively) habits of the mind. In short, in the course of a century under the impact of the military reforms, Muscovite state and society ceased to be medieval and set on the road to modernity.