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# Universal Military Service in Russia and Western Europe

BY A. M. NIKOLAIEFF

IT is commonly known that universal military service as the duty of every citizen was the product of the French Revolution. In 1798, it thus became possible for the French to assemble and maintain armies of much greater numerical superiority than those recruited by voluntary enlistment or by contract.

But it is a fact little known, except to students of Russian history, that the principle of universal military service had been first applied in Russia in 1705, ninety-three years before it was proclaimed in France. Peter the Great, being in great need of militarily trained men for the anticipated invasion of Charles XII of Sweden, had taken a step that gave him all the man-power he needed for continuing and winning the fateful war. This step was the establishment of conscription as a system of recruiting the Russian army.

Although the new method of recruiting and mobilization was of the highest importance, it was not revolutionary. Actually, before Peter's momentous reform, the Russian upper class was bound to life-time service in the army and had been granted land only on that condition. At the outbreak of war, they were expected to appear for military duty with those men in their service armed, equipped, and mounted at their masters' expense. A certain number of the peasant class was periodically drafted, but these drafted men (*datochnye liudi*) were called to serve, like the landowners, only in an emergency. Besides, there existed in Russia several kinds of troops serving in time of peace, consisting of infantry regiments (*streltsy*) stationed in Moscow and various cities, regiments "organized on a foreign model" (*polki inozemnago stroiya*), Cossacks, and artillery men headed by a special officer (*pushkarskii golova*). All these troops were recruited by volunteers who usually were granted plots of land as a reward for their services. They did not receive regular military training, while the regiments organized on a foreign model were trained only one month a year.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A. Rediger. *Komplektovanie i ustroistvo vooruzhennoi sily*. St. Petersburg, 1900, p. 85.

As a whole, the Russian army before Peter the Great's reforms, was of the nature of militia. There was no conscription in the sense of universal military service before 1705 either in Russia or in any other country of Europe.

The two fundamentals of Peter's conscription law were: (1) all classes of the population were liable for military service, and, (2) communal conscription (*obshchinnaia*) for those who did not belong to the nobility, to be recruited by the communities as before; those recruited under the new law were bound to life-time service (in 1793 the term of service was reduced to twenty-five years). Henceforth, infantry as well as other arms of service were to be recruited from all classes, abolishing the privilege of the nobles to serve only as cavalry. On February 20, 1705, the first call for military service in accordance with the new law was issued. One man was called from every twenty families (*dvory*) in each city, town, and rural district (*uezd*). A total of 167,895 men was recruited from 1705 to 1709, and fully supplied the needs of the army for the campaign of these years. Although eleven more years passed before the treaty of peace with Sweden was signed, military operations were practically at an end after the decisive battle of Poltava (June 27, 1709) and the escape of the defeated Charles XII to Turkey. No necessity for another general call for recruits arose.

In France, although universal military service became law as early as 1798, it remained in force only a very short time. Only after the defeat of France by Germany in 1870-1871, did universal and personal military service become firmly established in the French Republic. It was then clear beyond any doubt that Germany had owed much of her success to the universal conscription law. Let us see in what this system consisted and what were its results.

Following the crushing defeat of Prussia by Napoleon in 1806, great efforts were made by that country to build a strong army. However, it could not be done openly since the strength of the Prussian army had been limited by the Treaty of Tilsit to 42,000 men. In order to increase the strength of the army in time of peace without violating the provision of the treaty, young men were called to serve only for several months, given intensive training, discharged "on leave," and kept on record. Thanks to that method, the so-called *Kruemper-System*, Prussia in 1813 was able to put into the field an army of 230,000 men consisting of 100,000 regular troops and 130,000 militia (*Landwehr*).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>A. Rediger, *op. cit.*

In the war of 1813-1814, waged in and outside Germany, both the army and militia participated, accustoming the population of Prussia to the idea that military service is every citizen's duty. As a result, universal and personal military service was established in 1815 for all time. This war also showed that while the original term of active service (ten years) might be shortened, the regular units of the army, in time of war, should be filled out by men with a longer military training than that the militia had. That conclusion was confirmed by wars of later dates (1848-1849, 1859).

The war experience introduced several necessary changes. Prussia's manpower comprised twelve age groups (20-32 years of age) seven of which were made up of well-trained men and the remaining five of militia (*Landwehr*). Of the seven well-trained groups, three included men of active service and four of men transferred to the reserve upon completion of their active service. Young men from 17 to 20 years and older men, between 33 and 42, were also liable for military service in time of war though only for service in the interior of the country. Thanks to this system, which developed reserves of trained men, Germany was able, at the beginning of the Franco-German War on August 1, 1870, to mobilize an army with a strength never before attained by any country. This manpower amounted to 1,183,389 men, of which 692,823 were troops of the field armies, 245,297 troops of second line, and 245,269 troops in garrisons.<sup>3</sup>

The manpower potential of the French army at that time was derived under very different circumstances. As stated above, universal military service remained in force only a short time after 1798. Passed under the pressure of a great emergency, the law was very unpopular. According to its provisions, the armed forces of France consisted of the standing army and its reserve, the national guard, which served to reinforce the standing army in time of war. Service was to be personal and universal. But, the first of these principles was invalidated as early as 1800 when it was permitted by law to free oneself from military duty either by paying a certain amount of money, or by hiring a substitute. After some time, one-third of the army consisted of substitutes, many of them unreliable from the standpoint of morale. To improve the quality of the army, the practice of using substitutes was discontinued but the freeing from service by payment of money (2,500 francs) was retained. With this money the government hired veterans who had already passed through the ranks of the army, and men of conscription age. As a

<sup>3</sup>G. A. Leer, *Entsiklopediya voennykh i morskikh nauk*.

result, the French army at the time was neither young nor did it have trained reserves to replace front line casualties.

The Seven Weeks' War of 1866 showed how quickly Germany could put an army of great numerical strength into the field. Two years later, under the obvious influence of the Prussian victory over Austria, the important Niel law (named after Marshal Niel, its author) was enacted in France. The object of the law was to build up trained reserves by transferring to the reserve category for four years soldiers terminating their active service. Furthermore, there was to be formed a second category of reserve (*seconde portion*) from men of draft age who had not been enlisted in the standing army. These were to receive compulsory military training two months a year for three years. Finally, the National Guard, a political organization of no military value whatsoever, was likewise to receive some military training. Had the Niel law been in effect for five or six years, the French army might have had at its disposal a very considerable number of trained reserves, but less than two years had elapsed when the war with Germany broke out. Upon the mobilization of the two opponents, the French found themselves at a great numerical disadvantage. On August 6, 1870, against Germany's army in the field, 692,823 men strong, the French were able to mobilize only 272,623.

In Russia, the principles on which military service had been based by Peter the Great were not continued during the reigns of his successors. The principle of universality was violated when privileges and exemptions from service were granted to the upper classes. This was a concession to the landlords' claim that they were unable to take proper care of their landed estates during long absences. Exemptions were granted then to the merchants, and later to those who either had independent means, higher education, or for one reason or another, stood above the level of the mass of the population. In addition, the inhabitants of certain portions of the country, like Bessarabia and the remote regions of Siberia were altogether freed from service. The extent of these exemptions may be seen from the fact that, according to the 1858 census, 20 percent of the male population of European Russia enjoyed the privilege of being free from military duty.

During the War of 1853-1856 ending with the Crimean campaign, the shocking lack of trained reserves in the Russian army was brought to light. At the beginning of the war the reserve strength estimated to be one-fifth of the army's manpower and consisting of

soldiers who, after twenty years of active service, had been granted "termless" (*bessrochnyi*) leave, proved to be much smaller; many of them, because of ill health, were unfit for service. The war had also made it clear that, in addition to the recruiting system, there were urgently needed reforms relating to the organization and education of the Imperial armed forces.

Fortunately for Russia a man with whose name the liberal reforms in the reign of Alexander II are closely bound was appointed Minister of War in 1861. He was General (later Count) Dimitri Alexeevich Milyutin. Upon receiving military education, Milyutin started his career as an artillery officer, but later, upon graduation from the General Staff College, was transferred to the General Staff Corps and assigned to the Russian army in the Caucasus. There he took part in the fighting for the conquest of that land inhabited by warlike tribes. Some time after his return to St. Petersburg, he became professor in the General Staff College. By that time, he had already won distinction as a military historian, which he owed to his comprehensive history of the Russo-French War of 1799, including the description of the campaigns in Italy and Switzerland of the great Russian captain Suvorov.

As Minister of War, Milyutin started working on a program of detailed improvement of the army and its reserves. This article, however, shall set forth only the activities directly referring to the recruitment and the mobilization of manpower.

In January, 1862, the newly appointed Minister submitted a report to the Emperor stating the fundamentals on which to base the system of recruiting and the reorganization of the army. His main idea was that the defense of the country was the "common task of the people" and that "all, without distinction of class" should unite in that sacred cause.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, military service should be made compulsory for all classes and individuals alike with no loop holes for substitutes or financial privileges. Such an equal distribution of the heavy burden of military service would lead to the democratization of the army, and could lessen the burden of the poorer classes who almost alone had been subjected to compulsory service during the reigns of the successors to Peter the Great. It is interesting to note that Milyutin was the first to urge the establishing of universal military service at a time when no country in Western Europe, with the exception of Germany, was concerned

<sup>4</sup>Quoted from Alexander II's manifesto establishing conscription, in N. Golovine, *The Russian Army in the World War*, 1931.

with it. Another fundamental army reform was to build up numerous reserves the lack of which was so strongly felt in the last war.

Despite Milyutin's insistence on the urgency of the proposed reforms, it took twelve years to approve his plan in its original form, and begin to implement it. This was hastened under the pressure of international events, in particular the Franco-German War. The universal military service law was enacted January 1, 1874. Certain improvements in the system of recruitment, recommended in the plan, had been made even before that date. As a result, the number of trained reservists had increased within eight years (in 1870) from 210,000 to 553,000.

According to the law of 1874, the armed forces of the country consisted of the standing army with its reserve, and of the territorial army (*opolchenie*) which helped the army in the field in time of war. The entire male population from 21 to 43 was liable for military service, one part in the regular army and its reserve, the other in the *opolchenie*. The duration of military service was 18 years. Those who had completed active service in the standing army (at first, five years, later three years) were transferred for the remaining period of 13 (later 15 years) to the reserve. But, since the number of young men annually reaching conscription age was much higher than the number needed for the army, not all of them could be enlisted for active service. It became necessary to apply the method of selection and to grant exemption from active service to a certain number of men. The physically unfit were freed of course, as was the case in every army, but the granting of exemption to the remaining group was based on a peculiar principle, characteristic of the Russian army alone. It had been a tradition, since Peter the Great, not to deprive a family of its member on whose work that family depended for its living. Accordingly, unconditional exemption was given to only sons and, in general, to anyone who was the only male member in the family capable of work. One can easily see how important that exemption was for the class of the land-tilling peasants. All entitled to it were freed from service both in the army and its reserve, and were directly enrolled in the category of the territorials (*ratniki opolcheniya*).

Thanks to the larger number of trained reserve from this new method, it became possible to put through an important organizational reform, which served to shorten the vulnerable period of mobilization. Instead of increasing the strength of the army in war time by the formation of new units, as formerly, the number of

infantry units was increased although they were maintained in peace time at a reduced strength and filled out with reservists as soon as mobilization was declared.

No less important than the new system of recruiting and the method of mobilization in Milyutin's all-embracing program of army reforms was his plan of improving military education and uplifting the cultural level of the rank-and-file. Milyutin's fundamental idea was that a soldier, in addition to his military training, should also receive general education. These reform measures included the publication of soldiers' magazines (*Chetniya dlya soldat, Soldatskaya beseda*), the establishment of soldiers' libraries and soldiers' grammar schools (one in each company or battalion). These measures were of special significance at a time when serfdom had been abolished in Russia and the army was recruited from free men. In a very short time, according to Milyutin's *Memoirs*, it became evident that illiteracy in the army had decreased, and the average mentality of the soldiers stood on a higher level.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 offered an excellent opportunity for the testing of Milyutin's reforms. In November, 1876, the first mobilization in the history of the Russian army took place. Though all the reforms were far from being completed at the time, the mobilization was a success. As early as the fourth day, 75 per cent of the 225,000 reservists in ten provinces (*gubernii*) arrived at the assembly points, despite the very inadequate railway facilities and unfavorable weather conditions. By the end of the fourth week all units were filled out with men and horses, and by the end of the seventh week the concentration of troops in the theatre of war was completed. The mobilized army consisted of 28 divisions, 5 brigades, and various auxiliary units.<sup>5</sup> Eleven years previously, five months had passed before the mobilization of a small number of 67,000 retired soldiers was completed.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 was the next war in which the Russian army was mobilized in this way. There was no lack of trained reserves for the army at the time, but only Russian forces stationed in Siberia and a few army corps in European Russia were mobilized. To put these on a war footing only a part of the reserves had to be called out. Consequently, the mobilization of troops going to the Far East was accomplished without delay. But at the first important battle of Laoyang (August-September, 1904), there occurred an episode which offered a lesson with regard to the use of

<sup>5</sup>G. A. Leer, *op. cit.*, v. 7, pt. 1, p. 10.



reservists to reinforce the regular units of the army. A brigade under General Orlov, made up almost entirely of reservists (the usual proportion of reservists in an infantry unit was some 50 percent) had been ordered to take up a position on the extreme left flank of the front, at the Yentai coal mines, to serve as a pivot for the general attack that had already started. As the brigade advanced, it was confronted with a Japanese counter-attack and exposed to artillery and machine-gun fire. The reservists turned and fell back in disorder after the commanding general was wounded. The officers were unable to restore order, the general attack was stopped. To complete the story of the Orlov-brigade episode, it must be said in its defense that the older men who composed it had not been called for military drill regularly, their training was far from up-to-date, and they had never been in battle. Obviously, an unseasoned brigade should not have been given such an important assignment.<sup>6</sup>

At the time of the First World War universal military service had been established in all of Europe, with the exception of England. Everywhere the service was based on conscription with the army consisting of a regular peace-time force (except Switzerland where the army was a militia called out in time of emergency only) and reserves. In Russia the conscription law was forty years old, in France it was two years older, and in Italy it was thirty-eight years old. Thus every country had had time enough to build up a numerous reserve with which to fill out the peace-time army. That army in Russia, as the war began, was estimated at 1,423,000 men. The duration of active service was three years, and the period of service in the reserve was fifteen years. However, the reserve consisted not only of the men who had passed through the ranks, but also of those of conscriptive age who were physically fit and not entitled to exemption. Under this program the War Office had eighteen age-groups at its disposal to fill out the units of the standing army and to form new ones in time of war.

Out of the reservoir of manpower of trained reservists, some 3,000,000 men were called to the colors in the first two months of the war,<sup>7</sup> twice as many as the number of men of the standing army. Even though the number of reservists called in these months trebled the strength of the army, the need for well-trained men was felt so strongly that four age-groups of men who had already passed

<sup>6</sup>M. A. Rossiiskii, *Voenno-istoricheskie primery*, pt. 2, St. Petersburg, 1910.

<sup>7</sup>N. N. Golovine, *The Russian Army in the World War*, Yale University Press, 1931, p. 46.

through both their active and reserve periods of service (42-45 years old) were also called for military service as early as the fifth day of mobilization.

The mobilization of 1914 was considered a complete success. The gathering of reservists at the assembly points, their transportation to the respective army units, the movement of troops to the concentration area, went smoothly according to plan. Satisfaction and praise were expressed by the public and reflected in the press. In recognition of the fine accomplishment of such a highly responsible work the Chief of the Mobilization division of the General Staff was granted a special decoration by the Emperor.

Yet the war was only a few months old when it became apparent that it had not been enough to mobilize just the armed forces in an European war which later became World War I. The most important fact had been disregarded, that a war on a world scale which affected continents and included operations on land, on the seas, and in the air, would unavoidably become a total war. In fact, the fundamental feature of the war of 1914-1918 was its total character. It was total in the sense that it affected every citizen of the country so that not only the country's armed forces but its industry, science, productive capacity had to be mobilized as well. This characteristic of modern warfare along with the rôle of material necessitated a gigantic effort in which all the elements of a nation's physical, mental, and moral power must participate totally if the war is to be waged with some hope of success.

The war has shown beyond any shade of doubt that universal military training in peace time has no substitute.

The recruiting system of the Red Army in World War II, was based on the same principles as that of the old Russian Army. In the early years of the Soviet régime, after much discussion as to the respective advantages of the militia system and a regular army, the final decision favored the latter. Military service was made universal and obligatory by the Constitution of 1936. A most interesting detail of that state act is the terminology stating the importance of military service, since one of the articles of the Constitution uses almost the same words which occurred in Alexander II's manifesto of 1874. In the words of the Soviet Constitution "the defense of the fatherland is the sacred duty of every citizen of the U.S.S.R."<sup>8</sup>

However, the terms of service, laid down in the Soviet statute, imposed a burden even heavier than that of the old régime. The

<sup>8</sup>D. Fedotoff White, *The Growth of the Red Army*, Princeton, 1944.

draft age was lowered to 19, making the population liable for military service two years earlier, the age limit for the reservists was set at 50 years (it had been 42 according to the old law), military training was made compulsory for all young men of 18 years of age; finally, in 1927, military training was made obligatory in all educational institutions including secondary schools.

The campaigns of 1941-1942 in the Second World War were far from happy for the Soviet Union. They cost the Soviets enormously in terms of human life, material, and territory. Yet, by the end of 1941 the Soviet Command brought reinforcements at a critical time to repulse the German attack that had advanced as far as the immediate neighborhood of Moscow. Unquestionably, the ability of the Soviet Command to weld the large reserve of their militarily trained manpower into cohesive and disciplined units that replaced the millions of killed, wounded, and prisoners turned the scales near Moscow in December, 1941. This was possible because these reserves, thanks to the universal military training, had been familiarized with military discipline, use of weapons, and group action.

Near the end of the last war a weapon was used for the first time, which was so destructive that any further resistance on the part of the opponent became absolutely futile. The question arises whether the use of the atomic bomb, in case of the next emergency, would not invalidate the maintenance of ground forces and, consequently, the system of universal military training and service. In this respect the opinion of the President's Advisory Commission on Universal Military Training is of special interest. In the Report made public May 29, 1947, the Commission, outlining the probable war in the foreseeable future, concluded that under the circumstances of such a war, trained men ready and able to meet invasion will be needed "in every part of the country," and that "without Universal Military Training, the Nation's defense would be incomplete and inadequate."<sup>9</sup>

As far as is known, the conscription laws of the Soviet Union and of other European countries (except the defeated ones) have not been invalidated following the last war. They remain in effect now as they were then.

<sup>9</sup>*Military Review*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, December, 1947, pp. 35 and 37.