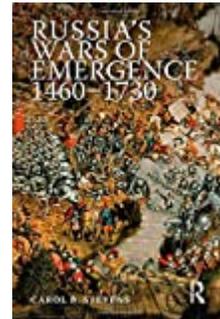




Carol B. Stevens. *Russia's Wars of Emergence, 1460-1730.* Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007. xvi + 329 pp. \$37.60 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-21891-8.



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Published on H-War (March, 2008)

Poindexters and Men on Horseback

Let us start at an apparently far remove from the subject by looking at Seamus Young's photcapture comic, *DM of the Rings* (2005-08). Mr. Young is more than a photcapture cartoonist. He is a working 3D programmer and a blogger communicating his vision of the computer game as the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the twenty-first century. At least that is how a poindexter like me would describe it. Mr. Young has been talking about story, and most especially the way that conflict-driven narrative creates the necessary "immersive experience." [1] If he is right, military historians ought to have standing beside the Burkhardts and Wagners of the next age of the world. Ought to; but will not, and here I get to the subject of this review. When Mr. Young talks about history, he gives us Will Durant's opinion, and he will continue to do so as long as books like these and (mea culpa!) my own dominate series like "Modern Wars in Perspective." Mr. Durant is immersive. We are not.

Professional historians may reasonably ask why they are fighting dead ideas rather than being read. It would be a good question, if ideas were what sold books. The ongoing zombie apocalypse, in which books which

should have died long ago continue to influence the non-specialist's view of the historical discipline, reflects the fact that prose style, organization, and narrative hook matter rather more. What will it take to make these unfortunate books stay dead? We poindexters have to eschew poorly edited, repetitive, hard-to-read books. Given that style is a relative concept, we might want to look at Mr. Young's demands of the historical profession and see if there is some connection with the eye-glazing repetition that is the real sin of Dr. Stevens' book. Mr. Young says that we are giving "names and dates," not "context." He argues that "It is much more important to know the economic context of Columbus' voyages than the exact date." [2] I think we might argue that dates are also context, but that does not mean that he does not have a point.

The Durants are not the only zombies afflicting Dr. Stevens's efforts. If there is a single reason for the repetition, it is the way that she constantly turns away from the narrative to aim another swing of the cricket bat. Karl Marx is of course the leader of the undead horde, but the special target of Dr. Stevens' repeated blows is a

less distinguished academic corpse. I can supply my own aged face, arguing that military history can be summed up with an evolutionary pastiche. The cavalry stage precedes the infantry stage, and as progress replaces feudalism with the more advanced mode of capitalism, cavalry gives way to infantry. If cavalry armies survive in Russia, it is because so does an atavistic social mode. Russian autocracy is literally the (Asiatic) man on horseback. Say what you will about the zombies, at least they have “context.”

Dr. Stevens does solid work reconstructing the interlinked social, political, and operational history of the Russian state and its army. Russian monarchs, even Peter the Great, raised the kinds of armies that worked. That meant accommodating military institutions to an emergent social order. Fiscal possibilities were leveraged to operational needs, and tax policy conditioned a new Russia. If Russia’s service cavalry and Streltsy disappear (and this disappearance is overstated, Dr. Stevens observes), it is as and because Russia’s wars have entered onto a new historical stage. Sweden and Turkey have replaced the Golden Horde as the main enemies.

Exactly how did this happen? Dr. Stevens grasps that cavalry have an operational role that is far more important than their tactical one, and talks about foraging and the little war. That in itself makes her a welcome addition to the still sparse ranks of post-Hansen military historians. Unfortunately, we do not get the same sense of the role of the Streltsy and their “European model” successors. Yes, we call the old Streltsty “Musketeers,” and muskets were their main tactical weapon; but their operational role is symbolized by their axes, and the picture would be a great deal clearer if we had a sense of how they used them. As it is, Poltava is the proper climax of this book, and here is a pioneer’s campaign if ever there was one (pp. 249-253). Unfortunately, the redoubts, abatis, roads, and dykes spring up on their own and stand outside any attempt to understand why the Swedes chose to attack the Russian fortified camp on June 28, 1709 (Old Style). The Russians built them, and Swedes tried to tear them down. How and why?

I am not trying to mystify the obvious. I know how one uses axes to tear down wooden structures and wood-framed earthworks. This is, however, hard work. The Russian military system worked, and Russians worked. Russia “emerged” because the Muscovite heartland accumulated the capital surplus needed to fund year-over-year economic expansion. Sweden did not. As near as we can tell, that really got started in the middle years of the reign of Ivan Groznii, and exploded like a grenade hurled into the Eurasian hinterland during the 1600s. This is the story of Russia’s “wars of emergence.” But how did it happen? Dr. Stevens notes (all the more evidence of a great historian lurking behind a premature book) that this is an open question. She puts her tentative money behind the new emphasis on the “well-ordered police state,” and fair enough. My own intuition (take it for what it is worth) is that the humble potato and sunflower play an important role. I do not think they are loitering about the scene by coincidence.

This is the kind of thing a Marxist would say. Zombies aside, Mr. Young needs and deserves his “context,” and Dr. Stevens does not help by resorting to the classic “and then a miracle occurs” strategy. Admittedly, the old miracle of class struggle is gone, but we have all heard far too much, from her and from other would-be post-Marxists, about a “Little Ice Age” that serves the same role.[3] It comes when it is needed (several times, in Dr. Steven’s account), gets back in its little box when it is not. And it does just exactly what it has to do, and not a whit more. We poindexters can do better. When we do, perhaps someone will even pay attention.

Notes

[1]. Seamus Young, <http://www.shamusyoung.com/twentsidedtale/?p=752> Accessed January/February 2008.

[2]. Ibid.

[3]. Chester S. L. Dunning, *Russia’s First Civil War: The Time of Troubles and the Founding of Romanov Dynasty* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), passim.

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Citation: Erik Lund. Review of Stevens, Carol B., *Russia’s Wars of Emergence, 1460-1730*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2008.

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