



Foreign Influences on the Development of Russian Military Flags

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Abstract

As Russia turned its eyes to the West under Peter the Great, foreign influences were felt in many fields, in particular the armed forces. In contrast to naval flags, army flags and particularly infantry flags were changed frequently with each monarch's reign and showed the influence of both enemies and allies such as Sweden, Saxony, Austria, and—most of all—Prussia. In the reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II, infantry flags went back to an “old Slavic” religious design. After the Soviet period with its red flags, many military flags have returned to the triumphant forms of the reign of Alexander I but in new colors. This talk is illustrated with many pictures of actual flags in contemporary and modern illustrations from the author's collection.



Peter III Guard flag in Prussian pattern, 1762

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's development as a great European power has been discussed from many points of view: historical, political, cultural, using such influences as language, music, architecture, and the like. In this talk, the medium of military flags will be used to trace the interesting history of the last 350 years in Russia.

It has been said that there were three major blocks in Russian history: the Monarchy, the Church, and the Army. Each had its period of control, shifting over the years—sometimes in partnership and sometimes in opposition. In the Soviet era, the church was replaced by the Party and the monarchy by the Leader. We will also see those trends in the flags of the army.

GENERAL DEVELOPMENT OF MILITARY FLAGS

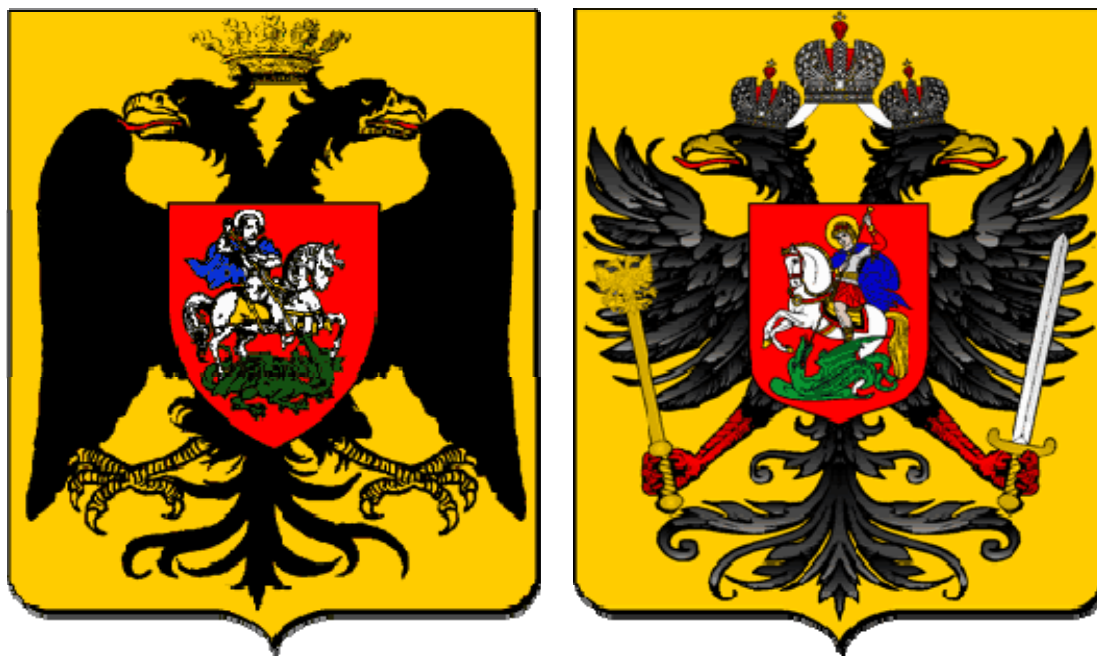
By using markers such as the animal totems on poles of the Egyptians to the eagles and the vexilla of the Romans, armies have since ancient times used symbols to distinguish bodies of soldiers. In the Middle Ages, mounted nobility became the chief arm of armies and the markings they carried were cloth flags or banners with personal coats of arms. Thanks to the rules of heraldry, these were easily distinguishable from a distance and served their purpose well. Members of the infantry fought under a variation of their lord's banners or under the flag of their patron saints such as the crosses of St. George, St. Andrew, and St. Denis. The simple banner of coat of arms lost its popularity among the mounted nobles and was replaced by the long standard with swallow tails and fringes covered with badges and mottos.

Later with the Renaissance the use of "devises" became popular among the nobility. These consisted of complex badges or allegorical figures and scenes, difficult to identify at a distance, in which color and color rules were unimportant. Flags of nobles during the wars in Italy gave little clue to who was carrying them or to their allegiance. In this period infantry again made a significant appearance on battlefields because of the prowess of the Swiss and the German *landsknechts*. These groups identified themselves with large banners, sometimes with coats of arms, often of towns or provinces, as did the Swiss, or simple horizontally striped patterns with a saint's cross as carried by the English, Spanish, and Imperials. The colors of the horizontal stripes were often the livery colors of the colonel commanding the regiment. Regiments of that time consisted of about 1,000 men divided into about ten companies of about 100 men each. Each company had a flag and these were often different one from the other but followed a similar pattern and had similar colors.

By the 1600s and the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), this was the pattern of most of the armies involved, including those of France, Austria, and the Holy Roman Empires, Sweden, and the German States. Also introduced was the colonel's company flag, usually of white, often with the colonel's arms displayed as a full achievement but sometimes with initials. Meanwhile the cavalry adopted the elaborate fringed flags of the old nobility often with split tails and always with a fringe, usually of a single color. The infantry flags are then of more interest as they showed more variety and carried more information than the cavalry flags.

Regimental flags were not national flags. The regiment belonged to the colonel and in this period of mercenary armies, national flags did not appear on the battlefield. National flags, with a few exceptions, developed from maritime flags. Over time in some countries the colonel's flag gave way to the monarch's flag and was still distinct from the company or regimental flag. The number (and size) of the flags also were also reduced over the next centuries until in the late 1900s there was only one per regiment. The number of regiments grew to the hundreds so the total number of flags stayed somewhat the same and with a wide variety of designs and colors.

With the French revolution the regimental flags of many countries began to look like the national flag. The fringe that had been reserved for the more noble cavalry was extended to the entire army. Russia stayed out of the European wars of the 1600s and only made an appearance on the European stage in the early 1700s.



Coats of arms of Ivan IV and Alexander II.

EARLY RUSSIAN MILITARY FLAGS

The medieval Russian nobility did not adopt Western heraldry. The flags of this period are geometrical with strong religious motifs such as crosses and icons. In the 1600s, the peculiar institution of the *strelsi*, a sort of home guard, had distinctive geometric flags, color-coded to their costumes. This was apparently a distinctive Russian style (Figure 1).

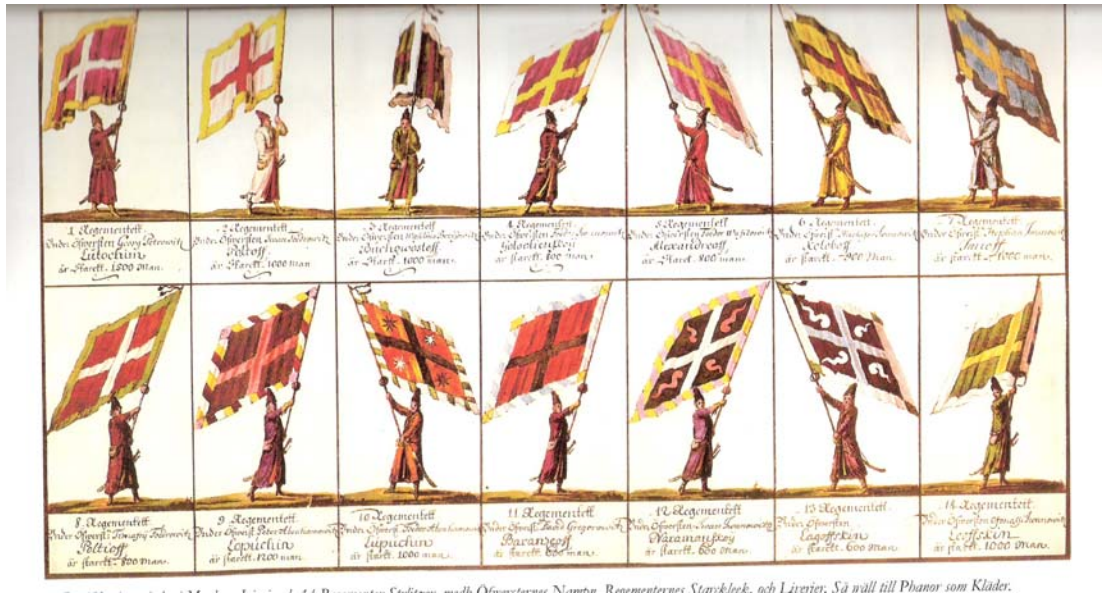


Figure 1: *Strelsi in uniforms and Strelsi flags, 1674.*

The tsars of the early- and mid-1600s looked to the West for new ideas in military fashion and actually formed foreign regiments in 1632 along the lines of the Western armies. We know the flags of several of these units and they are shown in Figure 2a.

The first company carried a white flag with eagle and arms while the other companies, about ten, carried flags all of the same color and pattern with the patriarchal cross of the Eastern Orthodox church. The number of stars on the field apparently varied depending on the company. It has been suggested that these are similar to the flags of the English Civil War that had just ended where the number of symbols marked the number of the company (Figure 2). This would seem to be a coincidence until one sees the names of the company captains: Sanderson, Keith, Crawford, and Wilson. These are the names of English and Scots mercenaries looking for new employment. We know there were many such in the Russian court and here we see their influence.



Figures 2a & 2b: *Foreign regiment flags and new model army English flags.*

As an aid to the reader, the appendix gives names and dates of the Russian tsars and some notes on the military flag changes.

TSAR PETER

Peter was a great innovator in everything that interested him. He took the medieval army and reorganized it several times into the potent weapon that eventually defeated Sweden and gave him and his country a window on the West. We are familiar with the story of how he chose the blue and red and white horizontal stripes as Russia's naval flag based on the Dutch colors. Hunting for a naval gateway to the West brought him in conflict with the Swedes. The history of the early military flags of this period exists in the captured Russian flags in the Swedish Royal collection in Stockholm, only a few of which are on public display but many of which have been photographed for the web and publications. The early Petrine flags are similar to those of the *strelsi*.

Soon we see a unique design of a cloud with a hand and sword pointing vertically downward and in the cloud the All-Seeing Eye and in the canton a cross surrounded by clouds (Figure 3). Perhaps this is more English influence. An arm holding a sword reaching from a cloud was a

common device in naval flags of Poland and the Netherlands. But the cloud was along one vertical side and the arm horizontal holding the sword upright. Whether these flags had a foreign influence is conjecture.

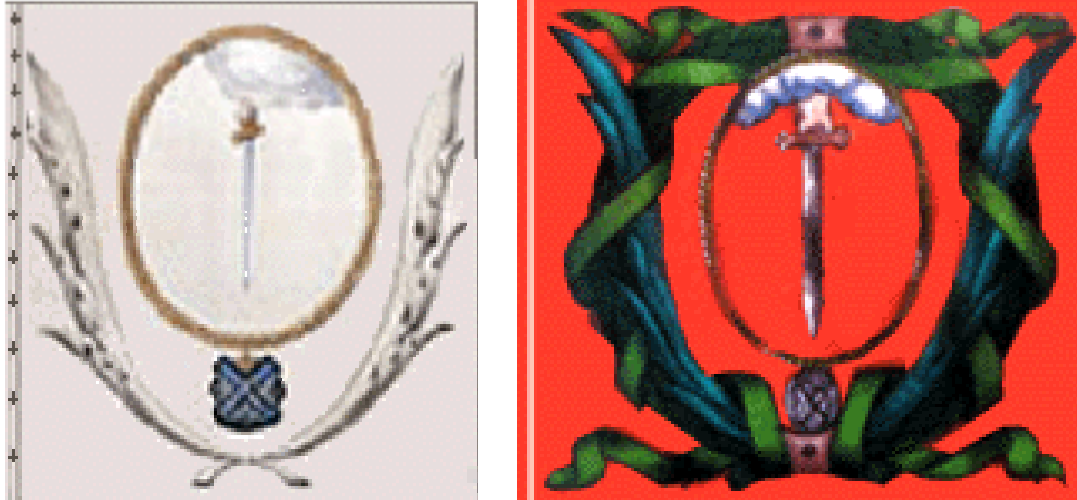


Figure 3: *Regimental flags of Peter I in 1700.*

However, Peter’s changes of 1711 and 1712 showed a definite Swedish influence with provincial coats of arms in the corners and geometric pattern to the flags (Figure 4). Peter had by this time instituted heraldry in his kingdom. He also established the green coat for infantry usually with red trim that was to last to the revolution. He established certain regiments as Guards or life guard (*leib-gard* in German and Russian) with distinctive flags and this Guard was expanded by his successors.



Figure 4: *Russian flags of 1712 (left) compared to Swedish flags of the same period (right).*

CATHERINE I

Peter's successor was his wife, Empress Catherine I. She ruled for only a short time and had little influence on the army. Between 1725 and 1727 there were nonetheless several flag changes with very baroque patterns for the Guards with lots of decoration similar to those of Saxony-Poland, a major state at the time (Figure 5).



Figure 5: *Russian Guard flags of baroque design on left compared with flags of Saxony of the time (1727).*

In 1727, under Catherine I, flags with edging of colored teeth were introduced—similar to the Austrian flags (Figure 6). Tsar Peter II, a nephew of Peter I, ruled only until 1730 dying young, but in that short time he eliminated the Austrian teeth and substituted corner flames. These corner flames had been a popular motif among the small German principalities since the Thirty Years War.



Figure 6: *Russian flags of 1727 (left) compared with Austrian flags of the same period (right).*

The familiar Prussian design of cross and corners that was to become a model for many future Russian flags may have been the result of the growth of these flames from the corner to the center and the recognition that the resulting flag looked like a cross. The shape of this cross is often called Maltese or Iron, or a cross *Formy* or *Paty* in heraldic French.

Again, the central monogram was the heraldry of the province for which the regiment was named, though the troops did not necessarily come from the specific area. Naming regiments after provinces was common in some countries such as France, but German countries tended to name regiments after the colonels so that the frequent changes in ownership led to many changes in names.

ANNA

The next Tsarina, Anna, ruled from 1730 to 1740. Though completely Russian, she allowed many Germans to run her affairs. In this case, German does not mean Prussian but refers to the many small states; their nobility populated the larger courts of Europe. She retained the design of the earlier reign of flags with flames and provincial coats of arms with her monogram on one side. The colors used were red, orange, yellow, light blue, blue, green, and red with contrasting colors for flames (Figure 7). Provincial heraldry was displayed on flags from 1730 to 1784.



Figure 7: *Russian flags with flames—Anna and Elizabeth.*

ELIZABETH

Anna was followed by Elizabeth, the daughter of Peter I, who had been engaged to marry into the Holstein family. Her suitor died but she held her almost-in-laws in great respect, making a nephew her heir. Elizabeth came to the throne in a coup led by the army. She ruled for 20 years until 1761 bringing up her nephew and his wife Sophie of Anhalt Zerbst at her court as her successors. It would appear she kept the flag designs of the previous reign with only a monogram change. Her troops would see service in Europe against the Prussian Frederick II the Great.

PETER III

Peter, the heir, hated Russia and longed for his German state of Holstein; he withdrew the Russian troops attacking Frederick and Prussia, saving the beleaguered Prussian monarch. He had a special corps of Holstein troops wearing Prussian uniforms and when he took the throne he began to transform the army into the Prussian model. First were the flags of the Guard (Figure 8).



Figure 8: *Peter III Guard flag in Prussian pattern 1762.*

CATHERINE II

But before Peter got much further, his wife overthrew him with the aid of the army. Shortly thereafter, he died and the German Sophie became Catherine II. New flags were issued with the principal colors of black for the Guard and yellow for much of the infantry. The large corners were reduced to small parallelograms so that the Prussian cross disappeared (Figure 9).



Figure 9: *Peter III Prussian-style flag with a Prussian flag also used by Catherine II.*

In 1788, Prince Potemkin, a lover of Catherine and a successful general, introduced new uniforms more suitable to the battlefield. Knee-length breeches were replaced with looser full-length pants and the tricorne hat was replaced by a leather cap with visor. Powdered hair and queues were eliminated. At the same time the Swedes adopted a new uniform. Apparently new flags began to be introduced of a geometric pattern. The Swedes adopted quite similar geometric patterns (Figure 10). When Catherine died her son Paul replaced the new uniforms with uniforms of the pattern of Paul's hero Frederick the Great.

Tsar Paul lived in a palace at Gatchina while he waited for his mother to die. There, starting in 1782, he set up a small army of his own there along the lines of the old Prussian army. It had its

own flags and a new Kaiser flag. This flag was used as Paul's insignia and consisted of the Russian versions of the St. Andrew and St. George crosses looking like a British Union Jack in reverse colors (Figure 11).



Figure 10: *Catherine the Great flags of 1780 (left) compared to several Swedish flags of the same period (right).*

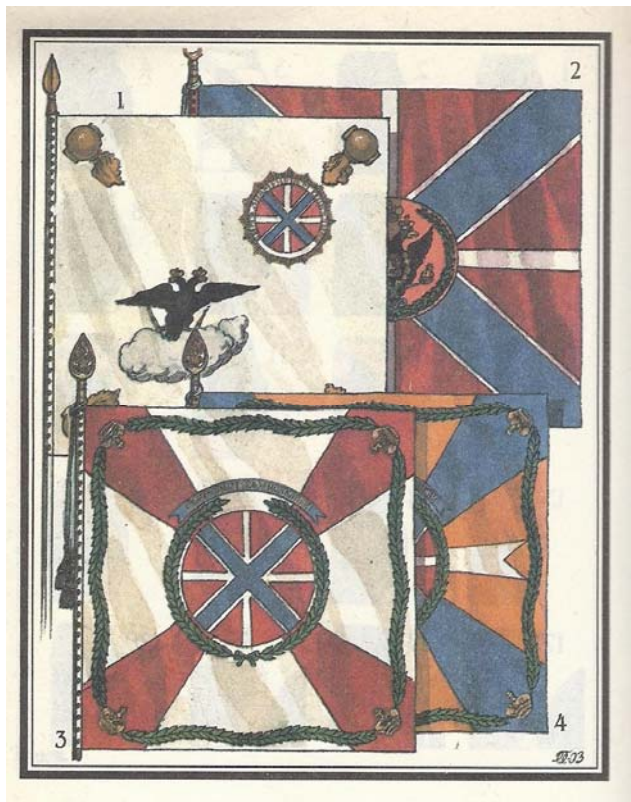


Figure 11: *Gatchina flags of Paul 1796: 1– Colonel's flag 2– Kaiserflag 3– Regimental 4– with cross of Malta.*

When Paul took over in 1796 his new flags were of the Prussian design aping the flags carried by his and his father's hero Frederick the Great. He also introduced the orange and black cockade based on the Holstein colors. He dropped the provincial names of the regiments in favor of the colonel's name, in the Prussian style. Paul also ended the wholesale replacement of flags with each new reign. He declared the cloth sacred and to be preserved at all costs. This led to the preserving of flags, so that four regiments entered the First World War in 1914 with flags originally presented by Tsar Paul over a hundred years before. In the years to come old and tattered flags often took pride of place with new ones and were proudly carried in parades and into battle. All Prussian flags were not of identical design but Paul copied the most popular—that with the cross and corners. Since Paul was Grand Master of the Knights of Malta, he incorporated a cross of Malta on some of these Guard flags (Figure 12).

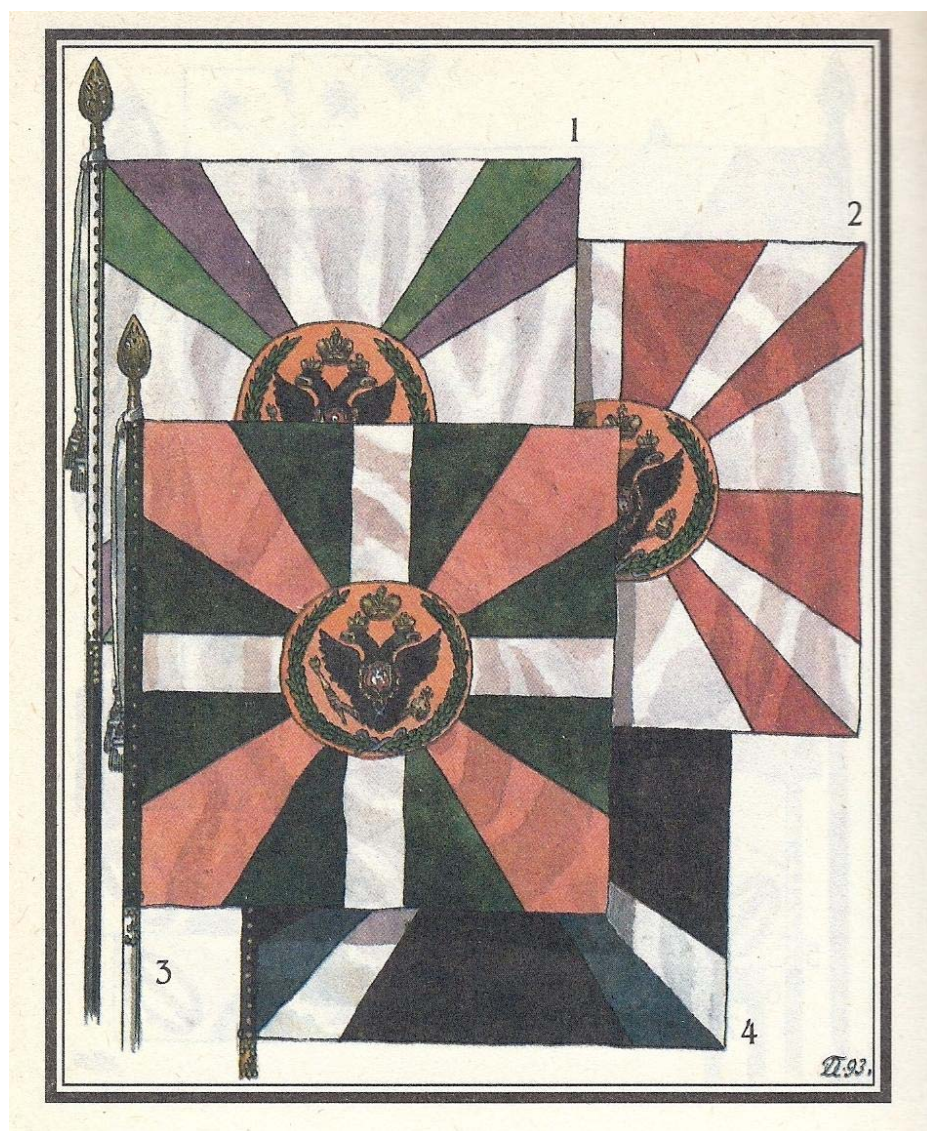


Figure 12: *Paul and Alexander Prussian-style flags and a Prussian flag of 1801.*

ALEXANDER I (the Napoleonic Wars)

Under Paul and in particular under Alexander I, the flag designers opened up their paint boxes and we see flags in a wide variety of shades including: red, cherry, strawberry, peach, violet, and several shades of brown and gray. These colors were cuff facing and collar trim on the green uniforms and the cross and corner colors of the flags (Figure 13).

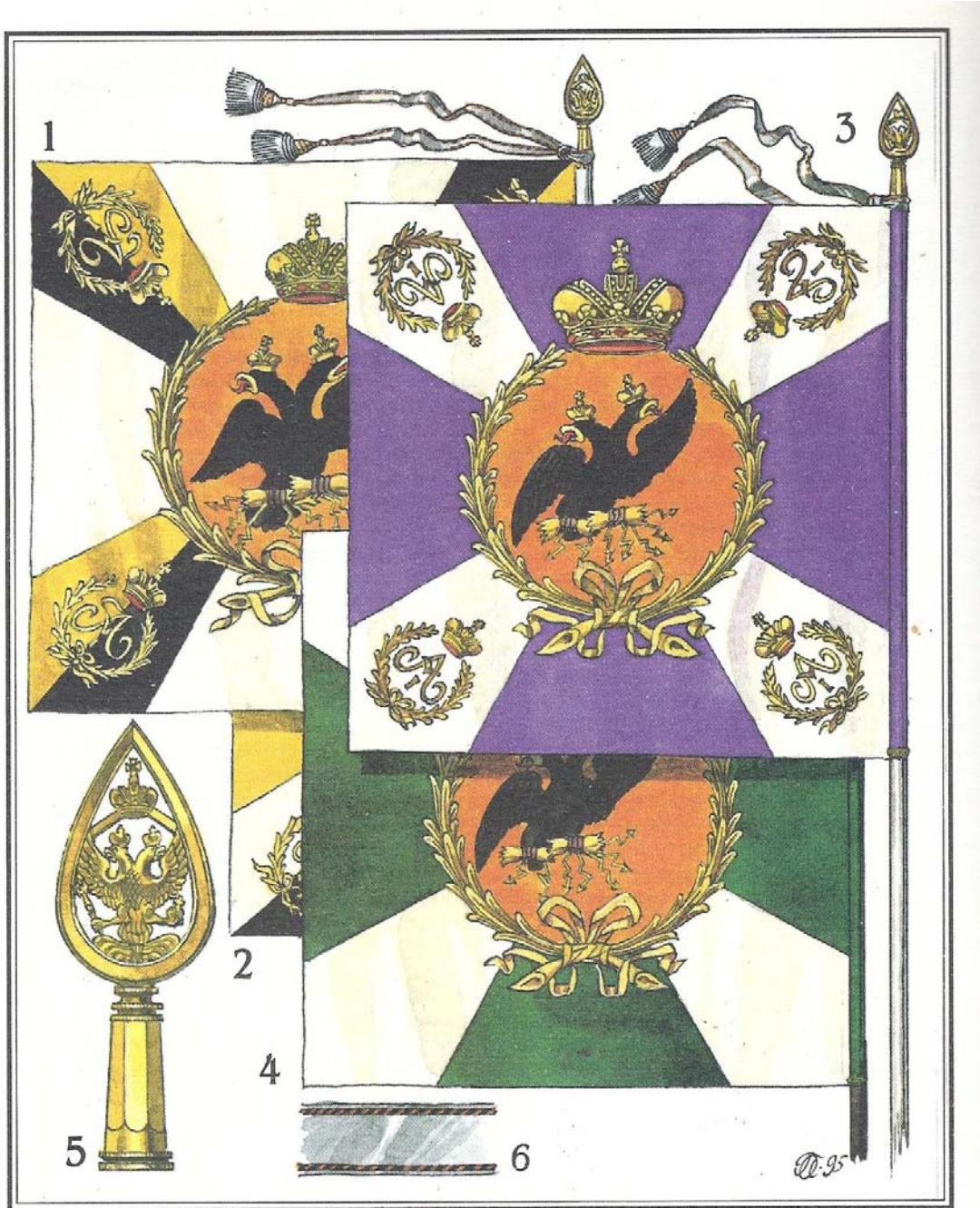


Figure 13: *Alexander I flags (1805).*

Towards the end of his reign Alexander introduced some changes to differentiate Russian from Prussian flags by doing away with the flying two-headed eagle and by changing to a yellow field for Guard units (Figure 14).



Figure 14: *Alexander I flags with less-Prussian motifs (1817).*

NICHOLAS I AND ALEXANDER II



The design of the flags were still of the cross and corners through these two reigns while the Russian Empire expanded. The flags of Nicholas I used yellow for the Guards and a lot of green for the infantry. Alexander II succeeded to the throne in 1855 and became known as a great reformer. He tried to introduce a new civil flag in the Romanov colors of white, black, and golden yellow which is often shown as orange (Figure 15). The origin of these colors is greatly debated as orange and black are often referred to the Holstein livery colors of Peter III reintroduced by Paul. Since the civil flag was heartily disliked by the people, in 1883 the red, blue, and white colors were brought back. The Romanov colors are prominent in the military colors issued in 1858 as the preferred colors of the corner with crosses of yellow for the Guards a variety of colors for the regular infantry. Minor changes were introduced in 1876.

Figure 15: *Alexander II flag with Romanov colors (1846).*

ALEXANDER III AND NICHOLAS II (Slavic themes)

In 1883, a completely new style of flag was introduced along with a new, more Russian-looking and more comfortable uniform. The cross and corners of the Prussian style flag were gone. Most prominent was the presence on one side of the patron saint(s) of the regiment and on the other side the Tsar's monogram. These were surrounded by a border that looked very much like the decorations on Russian and Ukrainian linen and folk dress. This design was also given to the cavalry. All infantry regiments carried white flags with borders decorated in red, blue, or green. Other branches of service had distinctive colors and the Guards had red fields again with borders of distinctive regimental colors. The colonel's or ruler's flag was gone. Each regiment only had one flag. (Figure 16)



Figure 16: *Alexander III flag with Slavic themes (1856)—the initials have been changed to those of Nicholas II.*

Nicholas II simplified the flags by reducing the multitude of saints to only one icon: the Holy Face, also known as the face not made by human hands (Greek: *mandylion*) or in Western religious lore, the Veil of Veronica. (Figure 17)



Figure 17: *Nicholas II flags with holy face 1904.*

THE SOVIET UNION

The armed forces of the Soviet Union (1917–1991) chose red as their basic color, often with extensive writing and few symbols. Each unit had its own regimental flag of a standard design finally settled on in the 1930s. It was red with a red star bordered yellow and a name and number on one side, while the other side had the gold hammer and sickle and the motto in Russian “For our Soviet Motherland”. The flags were rectangular and had a fringe. Stalin, in an effort to improve popular resistance to the 1941 German invasion the image of the army, had the Guard units restored with a special Guard flags, still red but often with a portrait of Lenin along with a hammer and sickle—usually inside a red star bordered in yellow and appropriate mottos (Figure 18).



Figure 18: *Red Army flags of the Soviet Union.*

MODERN TIMES

With the collapse of the Soviet Union a new Russia has emerged. There was a chance to start over again with new symbols and new flag designs. There was a strong reaction on the part of the armed forces that the red flag which they had carried against the invaders in the Second World War should be maintained. In other circles, the symbols chosen harkened back to the days of the Tsarist empire. The national flag returned to the white, blue, and red of Peter the Great. In the competition for national symbols between a bear and an eagle, the eagle won. The red flag was kept for the army flag but with new symbols in gold including the eagle (see Figure 18). The flags of various branches hark back to the flags of Alexander I but the colors are a bit different the red, blue, and white of the national flag and often the old Romanov colors of orange, black, and white (Figure 19). These were briefly the national colors from 1855 and have reappeared. The meaning of this tremendous shift to the ancient symbols of a once-hated regime and what it bodes for the future is at the moment unfathomable.



Figure 19: *Flags of modern time: flags of Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff, universal army red flag (obverse and reverse).*

SUMMARY

By looking at the development of Russian military flags and in particular infantry we have gotten a different insight into the history of the Russia and the foreign influences that have affected its history in the last 300 years.

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General Military Flag Books

To my knowledge there are only two books on the general topic of military flags. There are many books on specific periods and countries but only two general texts.

The first was by Otfried Neubecker: *Fahnen and Flaggen*, printed in 1939 in German and it has been long out of print. It is copiously illustrated in color and black and white with pages alternating text and color illustrations.

The second was by Terence Wise: *Military Flags of the World 1618–1900*, first published in 1977 by Blandford Press and reprinted several times since. Again, well illustrated with color and a popular reference book.

APPENDIX

NOTES ON RUSSIAN FLAG HISTORY by A. W. Etchells

RULER (years of reign)	CHANGE YEAR	CHANGE TO FLAGS
Pre-Peter Strelsi	1674	geometric patterns color coordinated
Peter I (1682–1715)	1700–1701	black for Guard
	1706	sword out of cloud
	1707	red white blue border
	1711–1712	C of A in canton Sweden influence
Catherine I (1723–1727)	1726	Guard Saxon influence
	1727	teeth on edges an Austrian influence
Peter II (1727–1730)	1730	corner flames
Anna (1730–1740)	1727–1732	flames in corners
Elizabeth (1741–1761)		continue flames in corners
Peter III (1761–1762)	1762	Prussian design
Catherine II (1762–1796)	1762	Prussian influence
	1763–1780	modified Prussian
	1780	divided on saltire Sweden influence
Paul I (1796–1801)	1786–1796	Paul's center on Prussian
	1796–1799	white colonel's – multicolor Prussian
	1800	Knights of Malta
	1804	more Prussian

Alexander I (1801–1825)	1813	Prussian use of yellow for Guards
	1817	reduce Prussian influence
	1824	
Nicholas I (1825–1855)	1827	modified Prussian
	1834	modified Prussian
Alexander II (1855–1881)	1846–1850	Romanov colors
	1856–1857	
	1876	white for infantry
Alexander III (1881–1894)	1883	saints' pictures
Nicholas II (1894–1917)	1896–1904	Holy Face
Soviet Union (1917–1991)		red flags
Russia Modern (1991–present)		return to old forms

About the Author

Arthur Etchells is a retired chemical engineer. He has had a life-long interest in military history and in particular emphasizing the visual aspects of heraldry, uniforms and flags. He has given numerous presentations on military flags at hobbyist conventions such as Historicon and at International Flag Congresses in Stockholm and Berlin.



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