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The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914–1917

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The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914–1917, by David R. Stone. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2015. 368 pages. \$34.95 (Kindle \$19.99).

With the centennial of World War I, interested readers can choose from among a surging wave of new books about the World War I experience and its impact on modern history. Most of these have focused on the western front, but a small number reexamine the war in Eastern Europe. Among these, David Stone's *The Russian Army in the Great War* is the first new historical overview of the Russian military on the eastern front since Norman Stone's *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* was published forty years ago. With the fall of the Soviet Union, historians have enjoyed more access to Russian archives and accounts of the war. While this new research is already familiar to specialists, Stone sets out to make it accessible to the general reader. He is clear from the outset that his work is a military history, so while social and economic factors frame military operations, they are not the focus of the volume.

Most general histories of World War I describe the Russian army in a narrative of failure. The “Russian steamroller,” feared by its adversaries for its huge but slow-to-mobilize peasant armies, fails owing to poor leadership and equipment, setting the stage for chaos and revolution. While conceding the Russian army's failings, Stone asserts that focusing solely on the negative ignores essential historical context. Four empires (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire) went to war in Eastern Europe—and none of their royal houses survived the experience. All four

empires experienced military failure, hunger, economic and social collapse, and loss of territory. The Russian experience was unique only in that the subsequent civil war led to an enduring Communist regime. On the battlefield, Russian troops generally performed as well as the Austro-Hungarian units that were their primary adversaries in the first half of the war. Only when fighting German troops were Russian units clearly outclassed. Stone observes, however, that no nation consistently matched the quality of the German army on a unit-against-unit basis. The Russian army was plagued by a lack of artillery, machine guns, and ammunition—as was every army in the war. No military had anticipated fully the requirements of modern industrial warfare, and entire societies were mobilized to meet these sudden demands, with varying degrees of success. Russia's industrial mobilization was less successful than some, but what success it achieved was notable considering the country's relatively backward starting point.

The Russian army's first moves in the war are remembered for the defeat of two Russian armies at the battle of Tannenberg—often the only eastern front battle nonspecialists can name. Tannenberg has been remembered in part because the two victorious German commanders, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, later emerged to lead the overall German war effort. Less appreciated is that at the same time the Russian army achieved significant initial success against Austria-Hungary. These territorial gains were reversed in 1915, as the Russian army endured the series of defeats known as “the long retreat.” Despite this reversal, however, the Russian army remained intact and effective. In 1916, it

launched major offensives, coordinated with its allies, to divert German forces from combat on the western front. In the process, the Russian army pushed deep into Austria-Hungary and essentially removed the Austro-Hungarian army from the war as an effective fighting force. Subsequent Austrian resistance would continue only because of direct support by German army units.

Readers generally familiar with the war on the eastern front will enjoy Stone's coverage of campaigns in the Carpathian Mountains and on the Turkish front, as well as the disastrous impact on Russia of Romanian entry into the war on the Allied side. Stone's previous research on the early Soviet military allows him to identify continuity between the imperial and Soviet militaries and frame how the new Soviet army drew lessons from World War I combat.

Combat on the eastern front was more mobile than the trench warfare in the west. This is a story in which terrain matters, and most of it is not familiar. In this context, the book suffers from the generally low quality of its maps.

For the reader already versed in the events of late imperial Russian history, *The Russian Army in the Great War* fills a gap by explaining the nuances of military events. If, however, these events are unfamiliar, or if the reader is more interested in the interplay of military, economic, and social factors, a broader history of Russia in World War I, such as W. Bruce Lincoln's *Passage through Armageddon*, would be a better starting point.

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