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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kretinin, G. V. (2012). The “court cases” of General Ye. F. Kern. *Baltic Region*, 2, 53-61. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2012-2-6>

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THE “COURT CASES”
OF GENERAL
YE. F. KERN

G. V. Kretinin *



This article focuses on the battle career of the Russian general, Ye. F. Kern, who dedicated sixty years to the service of the country. General Kern participated in most wars and military campaigns the Russian state was involved in in the last quarter of the 18th-the first quarter of the 19th centuries. Despite being a contemporary and often a companion-in-arms to outstanding Russian public and military officers, he could not secure a dominant position on the military Areopagus. Moreover, in the post-war period his life was scarred by tragedies.

In the Russian culture, he became notorious because of his wife. Over the last two centuries, Ye. F. Kern has been described as a “rude” and “ignorant” person destroying the aspirations of a young, courtly, and educated woman towards noble ideals and sublime feelings. This article considers the features of provincial military life in the light of its hardships and routine aggravated by the peculiarities of bureaucracy typical of Russian peripheral centres of the time. The case of Ye. F. Kern helps understand how a Russian general, despite the vicissitudes of fate — battle injuries, career hardships, family discord, and lack of stability — managed to remain true to the once chosen direction in life — service of the country.

Key words: war, officers, generals, service, military transport officer, army, marriage, allowance, resignation

Lieutenant General Yermolai F. Kern did not have any highest military distinctions. It happened so that, in the early 19th century, the Russian Army boasted a large number of talented commanders. The Napoleonic wars per se were quite short. So, the longest for the Russian Army Foreign Campaign of 1813—1814 lasted for a year and a

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Received on February 21, 2012.

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2012-2-6

half. Of course, such a short period was not enough for most Russian generals to demonstrate their excellence so that they could secure dominant positions on the military Areopagus. One of those commanders was Ye. Kern.

At least two facts suggest that the general was a man of a considerable military talent. Firstly, his portrait is exhibited in the Military Gallery of the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg among the portraits of the most celebrated heroes of the Patriotic War of 1812. Secondly, the walls of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow constructed to commemorate the victory over Napoleon are lined with marble slabs with the names of battlefields, regiments and Russian officers, who distinguished themselves in actions, carved on them. Ye. F. Kern is mentioned there five (!) times! In comparison, D. Davydov was bestowed this honour only three times [1, p. 156].

Indeed, Kern was an excellent, brave general, loyal to the tsar and the Fatherland, which is corroborated by numerous imperial distinctions and the accounts of his contemporaries — M.B. Barclay de Tolly, N.I. Rayevsky, etc.¹ General P.P. Konovnitsyn, who replaced wounded Bagration at the Battle of Borodino, acknowledged the then lieutenant colonel's excellent bayonet charge with the words, "Bravo, Kern! If it were in my power, I would take off my Cross of St George and put it on you!" [3, p. 653—654; 4, №46].

As most generals and officers of the time, he started his military career quite early². In 1777, a 12-year old adolescent, he was attached to the Smolensk Dragoon Regiment; in 1781, he reported for active duty. Over the first years, Kern successfully mastered the "military profession", after which his long (with a few interruptions) battle life began.

In 1787, Russia declared war on Turkey, and young Kern actively participated in all major battles. For the first time, Yermolai Kern distinguished himself at the siege of the fort of Ochakiv. He was awarded a silver medal for bravery at the siege of Ochakiv, which was attached to the ribbon of St George, and was gazetted sergeant [2, inv. 130, D. 242, l. 17—21]. The siege of Bendery and the taking of Izmail followed. Kern fought in M.I. Kutuzov's column. With his soldiers he forced a deep ditch, got on top of a rampart, and repelled the counterattack of the Turkish troops under heavy fire. He was awarded another silver medal for outstanding bravery at the taking of Izmail and gazetted ensign [ibid; 6, p. 100, 122].

In 1791, under command of General N. V. Repnin, he took part in the crushing defeat of the Turkish troops at Matchin; he distinguished himself in the battle and was gazetted second lieutenant. A year later, in 1792, during one of the clashes with confederates, Kern received his first war wound, after which he was commissioned lieutenant. In 1794, another Polish campaign took place. Kern participated in the successful battles of Krupchitsy, Brest, Kobylka. He distinguished himself in the course of Suvorov's Prague (Warsaw suburb. — G.K.) campaign and was commissioned captain and awarded another award — a gold cross attached to the ribbon of St George (his first commissioned officer's award) [2, inv. 130, D. 242, l. 18; 3, p. 653; 4, №46].

¹ For example, in 1823, General Rayevsky asked the command of the First army not to forget "this excellent general" [2, op. 76, D. 366, l. 1]

² For a detailed account of General Ye. F. Kern's biography see [5, p. 283—295].

After the Polish campaign, Kern served for ten years in the southern provinces of Russia, mostly in Ochakiv, later he fought in the Caucasus. A memorable year in Kern's life was 1806. A commissioned major, he was seriously wounded by an arrow in his left side [4, №46]. This wound affected general's health throughout his life.

While Kern was receiving medical care, he got a new commission. At the time, Russian top commanders tried to learn their lesson from the 1805 war with Napoleon. The organisational structure of the troops was being changed, new regiments were being formed — it was a preparation for the imminent war.

In autumn 1806, Major Ye. F. Kern was attached to the Pernov Regiment. The first battle, in which the regiment took part, was that of Heilsberg. However, his Caucasian wound suddenly opened, thus he was immediately evacuated to Königsberg. On May 29, 1807, the regiment fought at Heilsberg, on June 2, at Friedland. The regiment twice managed to capture French colours. In December 1807, Kern headed the Pernov regiment and was gazetted lieutenant colonel [7, p. 14; 2, inv. 130, D. 242, l. 17].

His health condition did not improve after his service in the Caucasus. Further aggravation of the wound did not let Kern participate in the war with Sweden, which began in 1808, and he submitted resignation. Having resigned, he tried to solve his personal problems. He was in his forties and was not married yet. The information on this period of his life is scarce and contradictory. So, Mikhailovsky-Danilevsky writes about Kern's first marriage to a daughter of a Vitebsk estate owner Severinov. It is corroborated by archive documents [4, no. 46; 2, op. 28, D. 563, l. 15]. This marriage was not happy; although Kern was left with son Alexander, later researchers believed him to have been born out of wedlock³.

Ye. Kern's health condition improved, and in 1811, he returned to military service to be commissioned the commander of the 48th Chasseur Regiment, and later — of one of the oldest regiments of the Russian Army — the Belozersk Regiment. As the Patriotic war broke out in 1812, the regiment was a part of the 1st army commanded by General Barclay de Tolly. The Belozersk and Ryazan regiments formed a brigade headed by Kern, since the brigade commander was absent at the time.

At Smolensk, Kern suffered concussion, but did not leave the brigade and was afterwards awarded the Order of St Anna of 2nd degree [4, №46]. He also distinguished himself in the battle of Borodino, was wounded again but did not leave the battlefield. With his brigade he crossed the abandoned Moscow in a medical vehicle; in Tarutino, he learnt that he had been gazetted colonel. He did not hold this rank for a long time. According to A. I. Mikhailovsky-Danilevsky, during the Battle of Vyazma, Kern, "heading the Belozersk regiment, to music and drums, with colours flying high, stormed into engulfed in fire Vyazma under heavy fire" [ibid]; as a result, Yermolai Kern was commissioned major general and awarded the order of St Vladimir of 4th degree with a bow [2, op. 130, D. 242, l. 17].

³ See, for example, the comments of Ya. Gordin [10, p. 460].

The next major battle Kern participated in was that at Krasny, which took place on October 4—6. During that battle, the corps of the French Marshal Ney was completely destroyed. Kern was awarded the order of Saint Vladimir of 3rd degree; in Vilno, being recommended as one of the best Russian officers, he was presented to Emperor Alexander I [4, no. 46].

The 1813—1814 Foreign Campaign was yet to be fought.

On May 8—9, one of the major battles of spring 1813 took place at Bautzen. The brigade, which was once again commanded by the general, fought on the left flank, literally before the Emperor's eyes. After the battle, Alexander sent for Kern — it was their second meeting in person — and expressed his gratitude; the next day, the Emperor awarded to the general the order of St Anna of 2nd degree decorated with diamonds.

Later, he commanded the 17th infantry division of the German Field Marshal Blücher. When Blücher's army forced a crossing over the Elbe in September, Kern used his signature method — bayonet attack — to repel the counterattack of the French troops. Blücher was so impressed that he awarded a Prussian order for bravery to General Kern.

In the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig, Kern's soldiers fought for two hours in the narrow streets of the village of Schönefeld. Kern's bayonet attacks were noticed by Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, a French ex-marshal, the heir to the Swedish throne, who commanded the Northern Army of allies at Leipzig. Bernadotte awarded a Swedish order of the Sword of 3rd degree to Kern and solicited Alexander I for awarding the order of St Anna of 1st degree to Kern.

During the 1814 campaign, Kern commanded different vanguards, participated in many battles, but for him the highlight of the campaign was the siege of Montmartre, after which he was awarded the order of St George of 4th degree. The final stage of the Foreign Campaign was the troop review in the French town of Vertus, where Kern was announced to have earned royal gratitude for his brigade's excellence in training [3, p. 653—654].

After the war, Yermolai Kern assumed command over a division quartered in Lubny, married the daughter of a local estate owner, Anna Poltoratskaya, who was brought to fame through Pushkin's poetry as Anna P. Kern.

In times of peace, Ye. F. Kern's career was developing unevenly. The marriage between the battlefield general and a provincial noblewoman was not happy. The spouses lived together for ten years and had three daughters. Anna and Olga did not live long, whereas the third daughter was a Saint Petersburg socialite and a fiancée of the composer M. I. Glinka, she received a proposal from S. L. Pushkin — the father of the poet, but married M. O. Shokalsky [8, p. 437]. Her son Yulian became a famous Russian oceanographer, a strait in the Arctic Ocean bears his name.

In 1826, A. P. Kern left her husband and moved to Saint Petersburg.

Ye. F. Kern's military career was not easy. In the first post-war years, manoeuvres were a traditional event. Manoeuvres also took place in Poltava in 1817.

The top command arrived to such events with their spouses, especially if the tsar was expected. Of course, Kern came with his young wife. The

spouses were noticed by the Emperor himself. Alongside an honourable mention, General Kern received monetary support for paying his debts. However, Kern was not invited to the next manoeuvres. He had difficult relationships with his immediate superior — General F. Osten-Sacken, who forbade him to take part in manoeuvres. And Kern made a fatal mistake. He decided to come to the manoeuvres on his own, against the order of his superior; the situation was deteriorated by the fact that, hurrying to the location he intercepted horses meant for Osten-Sacken himself.

The finale was easy to predict — Kern was dismissed [2, op. 130, D. 242, l. 17]. Serving in the army without holding a certain position affected his financial situation. Kern, who did not have any other sources of income, found himself in a tricky position. He had to go to Saint Petersburg and seek the Emperor's audience to ask for pardon. Following the advice of her relatives, Anna Kern followed her husband. In 1819, at the salon of the Olenins, Anna met Pushkin for the first time. "I still remember the amazing moment".

The trip to Saint Petersburg was a success. Kern obtained a new commission [ibid.]. He continued to command troops and even earned another "royal gratitude" in 1823. However, shortly after that, due to his health condition and family situation, general had to ask for a permanent position in a city.

In September 1823, the commander of the fourth infantry corps, General of the Cavalry N.N. Rayevsky, conveyed the request of the commander of the 11th division, General Kern, to appoint him a commandant of Riga or another city due to his health condition [2, op. 76, D. 366, l. 1—3]. As early as November, the acting chief of the General Staff, I. I. Diebitsch reported that "the ex-commander of the 11th division, Major General Kern was appointed at his own wish by the royal order the commandant of Riga on September 26" [ibid, l. 4].

However, a position which was not related to military command meant a significant reduction in income, as a result of which, on April 24, 1824, Kern submitted a request for resuming his messing allowance that he received as a commander of division. In response, Alexander I decided to pay Kern a lump sum allowance of 5,000 roubles [2, op. 130, D. 242, l. 3—6]⁴. At the same time, the Ministry of Finances and the Defence Department considered the issue of the general's messing allowance. "Riga Military and Pskov, Livonian, and Courland Governor General" marquis F. O. Paulucci received a request for details of the income of Riga commandant from the General Staff of the Russian Army. On May 23, 1824 he replied that Kern had no other income except for 300 silver roubles of the residents' voluntary contribution [ibid, l. 12].

In May, Riga received an unofficial request. General Diebitsch asked the chief of the Staff of the 1st infantry corps, General F. F. Eckeln to identify privately and surreptitiously the sources of Kern's additional income [ibid, l. 14]. Eckeln's reply contained more details. Indeed, in 1803, there was a rule

⁴ In effect, Kern received 4,500 roubles, since there existed a rule according to which 10 % of such payments was withheld "for the sake of invalids", i.e. members of military personnel dismissed due to injuries or retirement age [2, op. 130, D. 242, l. 8].

in Riga, according to which the commandant, who was responsible for preserving order in the city, was paid 300 silver roubles. This sum consisted of fees for bringing hay (1550 roubles) and firewood (1000 roubles) into the city and different gifts worth 1000 roubles, which made a total of approximately 3500 paper roubles. In the mid-19th century, 1 silver rouble was worth 15 paper roubles [2, op. 146, D. 448, l. 13]. However, Kern declined this offer in order to be independent of Riga bureaucrats. As a result the corrupt officials were dissatisfied with the commandant and complained about him.

Ecklen also emphasised that messing allowance was paid to military commandants of other cities: 4,000 roubles in Moscow, 4,000 roubles in Kamenets-Podolsky, 3,000 roubles in Kyiv, 2,000 roubles in Smolensk. Kern was paid 4,000 roubles per year [2, op. 130, D. 242, l. 22].

It is worth noting that Kern faced a rather difficult situation in Riga. The above mentioned F. O. Paulucci had been the military governor of Riga since 1812. He had served for a long time with Colonel Vakulsky⁵. Kern was not only appointed without the consent of the military governor, but also “cut in front” of his protégé. Vakulsky served as a *platz-major*, an assistant to Riga commandant. The *platz-major*’s attitude to the service was lukewarm. With his usual candour, Kern demanded that Vakulsky should fulfil his duty properly (he was responsible for guard duty and solving supply problems, etc.). Soon Kern learnt that Vakulsky had also abused his authority for material gain. Apparently, Paulucci knew about the dubious actions of his protégé and covered up for him.

The military governor needed a good reason to get rid of Kern. In December 1826, he commissioned a note to the chief of the General Staff of the Russian Army, which accused Kern of certain improper actions. Being aware that Ye. F. Kern was quite an authoritative figure in the army, the military governor understood that if he had dismissed Kern, he would have lost trust of the top command; thus Paulucci asked to appoint Kern to an army position without condemning his actions in view of his wounds and injuries received on duty. Paulucci’s note led to an investigation; the corresponding documents were maintained in the so called “Excerpt from the Case of allegedly poor performance of the Riga commandant and evasion of duties” [2, op. 133, D. 323, l. 1—15].

General I. I. Diebitsch knew Kern quite well through military campaigns, thus he doubted the letter and made a decision to send a note to Kern so that he could either request an investigation or resign from the position of a military commandant. Kern wanted to go to Saint Petersburg personally to explain himself, but his decision was met with a refusal. Thus, he had to submit his objections in a written form.

The first complaint of Paulucci was that, since 1824 Kern was often sick and did not appear in office for a long time, his duties were limited to written instructions to his inferiors, who were managed by *Platz-Major* Vakulsky, and the

⁵ As General Rosen reported later, the commander of the first infantry corps Vakulsky was Paulucci’s adjutant in 1811—1818 and later held the position of commandant, having absolute trust of the military governor [2, op. 133, D. 323, l. 8—9].

latter had to fulfil Kern's duties alongside his own. Kern also gave Vakulsky other assignments, demanding written reports.

Kern agreed he was in poor health. But in 1824—1826 he spent at home just a few days with the permission of the military governor. The staff of commandant's office did not complain about it. Only in 1826, his wound opened and he was ill for four months, but nevertheless he performed his duties, and there were no complications to regular procedures. It was corroborated by the chief of the 1st infantry division quartered in the vicinity of the city.

As to Vakulsky's carrying out the duties of the commandant, Kern refuted these allegations. The instructions given to the platz-major corresponded to his official responsibilities. Indeed, he demanded that his deputy should present weekly reports on guard duty, but only after he had learned about Vakulsky's misconduct. Kern reported it to the military governor [2, op. 133, D. 323, l. 3—4].

Paulucci was especially dissatisfied with the rigid position Kern took during procurement of construction, utility and other goods and materials required for the repair and maintenance of the fortress.

In 1826, when Kern was seriously ill and could not be in office, he commissioned the commander of the fortress's engineering unit to organise a tendering event at his place. The military governor intervened and ordered Vakulsky to hold the event on the premises of the engineering unit. Kern reported that the platz-major had raised the reference price, having paid 6 thousand roubles instead of four. Other prices were also raised. Kern reported it to the military governor, but he did not take any measures.

Moreover, Paulucci mentioned in his note that Kern had refused to set prices for the waste iron which the fortress units had to sell to traders or it was no longer required. Kern protested, "Military Governor ordered to sell iron waste for 90 kopeks per pood, I sold for 1 rouble". Paulucci had to agree, but, as the case shows, did not forget about it [ibid, l. 5—6].

All in all, when it came to financial benefits for the fortress, Kern was very meticulous which caused even more ill-feeling among his opponents. A good example is Kern's refusal to set prices for the transportation of the engineering department's supplies. The supplies were supposed to be brought to Dinaburg, and the head of the department made an arrangement to transport them at a rate of 1.1 roubles per pood. Kern gave himself the trouble of visiting the transporter. The rate was corroborated, but Kern still weighed the offer. When, on the next day, the commander of Livonian engineering district Colonel Klot started to assure the commandant that the transportation was urgent, and no one would make a better offer, and that he would have to report it to the engineering department in Saint Petersburg, Kern had to agree on 1.1 roubles per pood. However, in five hours, the commandant wrote in his explanation later, he was visited by a townsman Kotsch, who said that he was ready to transport the supplies at a rate of 1.05 roubles per pood and did not object to further bargaining. Kern suspended the signing of the contract. The military governor did not give his permission to revise the contract; in three days he endorsed the transportation at a rate of 1 rouble 5 kopeks, but this time it was to be arranged

by merchant Kryukov. However, the deal was invalid without the signature of the military commandant, but Kern did not want to validate it because of the unauthorised prices. However, he had to sign the papers after Paulucci had personally ordered it [2, op. 133, D. 323, l. 7].

Paulucci's note contained nine complaints of the kind. Kern denied all accusations. In his defence, he stated that he had reported all misconducts to the competent authorities up to the military minister, but the paper sent to the latter was returned to the military governor [ibid, l. 7—8]. Diebitsch had to launch an investigation which was led by the commander of the first infantry corps Rosen.

Rosen tried to be objective. He concluded that "Due to his health condition, Kern could not act with the promptness that the military governor demanded". He also emphasised the reasons behind the conflict between the commandant and his assistant (the relations between the latter and the military governor). He stressed that there was a certain tension between the military commandant and the head of the Livonian engineering district, Klot. "Kern's assiduousness made him go beyond his responsibilities; he checked and examined materials, analysed prices after they had been set, looked for suppliers without consulting the engineering officials, did not sign monthly reports claiming that it had not been him, but the platz-major who approved of the prices that turned out to be too high".

Moreover, Rosen admitted that the accusations of gambling made by the military governor were unfounded, "Kern was not a gambler". He indeed engaged his inferiors in civil works, but their work was paid for, and no complaints were made. Rosen did not agree with Vakulsky, who accused Kern of abusing alcohol.

Rosen came to a conclusion that it would be unreasonable to let Kern hold the position any longer. The actions in questions were believed to be a result of his best intentions aimed at preventing damage to the budget. In view of these facts and his meritorious service, it was recommended not to dismiss him without an allowance because of his difficult situation [ibid, 13—14]. As a result, on July 30, 1827, General I. I. Diebitsch wrote as follows, "By order of the Emperor of July 20, General Major Kern is to be attached to the army and receive the current allowance" [ibid, l. 15].

Six months later, Ye. F. Kern was appointed the commandant of Smolensk, in April 1828, he was gazetted General Lieutenant [2, op. 86, D. 1038, l. 6]. Such an acknowledgement of the merits of the battlefield general made him apply for more active military service. As the Russian-Turkish war of 1828—1829 began, he applied twice for a position with the field forces, but in vain. When a revolt broke out in Poland three years later Kern appealed to the Emperor, "Now, when insolent rebels invoked the righteous wrath of His Imperial Majesty, and the Russian troops are advancing in the name of the tsar — it is with regret that I stay idle, while I still feel enough strength to serve in the field and, maybe, contribute my long experience and unswerving loyalty to the cause" [2, op. 20, D. 401, l. 2—3].

General was 66 years old. The General Staff decided that there was no suitable field vacancy for Kern. However, taking into account his patriotism, Nikolai I made a decision on March 19, 1832, "As a reward for assiduous

service of the Smolensk commandant Lieutenant General Ye. F. Kern, I command that 6,000 roubles, instead of 4,000, are paid to him yearly as long as he occupies the current position” [2, op. 86, D. 1038, l. 10].

Yermolai Kern resigned on November 6, 1837 [2, op. 28, D. 563, l. 1]. Soon he moved to Saint Petersburg and rented a flat there (he had never bought his own accommodation) and tried to rebuild his personal life.

His marriage with A.P. Kern was not formally annulled. Anna Kern, caught in the whirlwind of Saint Petersburg social life, lived independently and submitted requests to different authorities, up to the Emperor, for receiving financial support from her spouse. As early as 1836, the general received the Emperor’s recommendation to grant his wife a decent allowance according to the law [2, op. 147, D. 399, l. 6].

Kern’s response to the Emperor was straightforward, “...if Your Majesty pleases, that he grants his wife allowance, he succumbs to the royal will, but asks to use the force of law to make his wife live with him” [ibid, l. 7].

Sometime later, A.P. Kern appealed to Nikolai I again asking him to make the general pay her allowance. The case reached the court. So, at the sunset of his life, the battlefield general was taken to court.

In summer 1840, the court’s ruling was announced: the Kerns should live together according to the law. There is a note in the case that Yermolai Kern did not provide a pledge because of his demise [ibid, l. 16].

General Yermolai F. Kern died on January 8, 1841 in Saint Petersburg.

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