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General Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin and the Imperial Russian Army

Peter Pozefsky

Introduction

Adjutant-General Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin served as Russian Minister of War from January 1898 to February 1904. At the beginning of the war with Japan in February 1904, his prestige as an officer was so great that the tsar believed the public would trust no one else to assume the duties of commander in the field. In these roles, he was the most visible and influential military figure in Russia in the opening years of the twentieth century.

This essay tries to fill a gap in the historical record by providing a study of Kuropatkin's career and uses his biography to examine the dominant trends in the development of the army at the turn of the century: organizational and technological modernization, and professionalization of the officer corps. The importance of these processes extends well beyond the sphere of military history. They shed light on the more general difficulties involved in the modernization of Russian society and help to explain why the army which had been the primary support of the old regime would no longer defend the autocracy in February 1917.

In the reforms of the 1870s, Minister of War Dmitrii Miliutin established the principal means of professionalization. He improved and expanded the system of military education and encouraged more meritocratic standards for the promotion of officers. With the realization of these objectives, the source and character of Russia's military leadership was significantly altered. The graduates of the nation's finest military school,

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the General Staff Academy, gradually superseded the officers of the Imperial Guard, the bastion of Russia's great families, in positions of power within the army.¹

Professionalization coincided with social changes in the officer corps. In the interest of exploiting a larger reservoir of talent, Miliutin opened the corps to individuals from all layers of society. By 1914 only 50% of all officers were from noble backgrounds as opposed to virtually 100% fifty years earlier.² Another trend of equal significance was beyond the reformers' intention. While a decreasing percentage of officers were the children of noblemen, a greater proportion were the children and grandchildren of officers.

Through professionalization and concurrent social changes, the officer corps was evolving into a new subculture within Russian society distinct in tastes and interests from the gentry class with which it had always been associated. Consequently, the officers' self image was changing in a manner which would affect their duties and loyalties. Whereas formerly they perceived themselves as noblemen who served the tsar' in the army, they were beginning to see themselves primarily as soldiers whose duty was the defense of the nation. The new officer was less politically engaged and more competent technically.

As the ideology of autocracy declined in its influence, no new doctrine arose to fill its place. There was no conflict as long as the military's technical function and the political requirements of the tsar' did not clash. The social changes did not give rise to political opposition in the army, but produced officers with diffused loyalties and diminished political sensitivity and sophistication.

By 1900 virtually all of Russia's military leaders believed that war with Austria or Germany was inevitable in the near future. Thus, the immediate goal of military modernization was the creation of an army which in its armaments, training, prestige, material conditions of its officers and soldiers, and readiness for battle could match the forces of Russia's Western neighbors. This essay will consider the perspective Kuropatkin's career provides on the obstacles which prevented the army's effective modernization by hindering the assessment of its needs and the implementation of necessary reforms.

Kuropatkin and the Skobelev Phenomenon

The origins of Kuropatkin's reputation on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War are to be found less in his own achievements than in those of his superior officer in the Russo-Turkish War, General Mikhail Dmitrievich Skobelev.³ Skobelev, whose father and grandfather were generals, made his career in Central Asia. A combination of striking personal features—

glamour in dress and bearing, tactical and administrative brilliance, bravery often leading to rashness, and a tendency towards insubordination—helped him to acquire fame and high rank at an early age. The press and public, from soldiers, peasants, and workers to high society, considered Skobelev a national hero, and in the last years of his life he was perhaps the most famous man in the nation.⁴ Nevertheless, his popularity and genius also brought about the resentment of many of his peers and, alternating with official honors, the admonitions of the emperor.

Skobelev's career was surrounded by controversy. Following his graduation from the General Staff Academy in 1869, he was sent as an aide to General Kauffman in Turkestan. His defiance of an order to enter a conquered city without firing jeopardized his career. Shortly thereafter, the execution of several exceptional feats of bravery, including a brilliant performance at the battle of Kokand, not only restored the favor of his superiors but led to his appointment at age 32 as Governor General of Ferghana. This promotion was followed by another quick reversal. The circulation of rumors concerning personal rivalries, resentment by subordinates, and an excessively reckless use of troops reflected poorly on the young general's command. Within a year he had incurred the displeasure of the tsar' and was compelled to resign.

Skobelev was denied a command at the outset of the Russo-Turkish War, but his able assistance in early campaigns led to a commission. His leadership proved instrumental at Plevna, and his role in the victory at Sheinovo brought him national attention. However, his fellow officers were less impressed than the public. At Plevna, Skobelev had deliberately disobeyed the orders of his superior, and at Sheinovo he was rumored to have entered the battle late at the expense of other units to ensure the decisiveness of his own role.⁵

Despite these rumors, Skobelev's success brought him new honors and responsibilities. After Russian forces suffered a series of embarrassing losses at the hands of a mere 20,000 poorly armed Turcoman tribesmen, Skobelev was sent to remedy the situation. In January 1881 he engineered a decisive Russian victory, the Massacre of Geok-Tepe. This was to be Skobelev's last success, for in that same year Aleksandr II was succeeded by Aleksandr III, who disliked flashiness in generals, and General Skobelev in particular. The new Minister of War, General Vannovskii, noted that although Skobelev might have made a good front commander in the West, it was feared that he would provoke the Germans to war on his own initiative.⁶

After Geok-Tepe it seemed unlikely that Skobelev would receive a new commission commensurate with his rank and reputation. He left his troops to lecture young officers and the general public on the liberation of the

Slavs, the threat of foreign agents and disloyal Russians weakening the country from the inside, and the inevitability of a war for racial supremacy between Slavs and Germans. He took his message to Western Europe, lecturing to audiences in Vienna and Paris, but was soon recalled at the request of the Austrian and German governments.⁷ Militant public preaching was unforgivable behavior for an officer. The incident lessened his chances for a more respectable appointment but increased his stature in the eyes of many nationalists.

Skobelev returned to St. Petersburg to wait for a new assignment, but shortly thereafter died of a heart attack in a brothel. Yet his early end did not prevent the further growth of his fame as a patriot and brilliant general. Although his death was less than glorious, the facts surrounding it gave rise to rumors of murder plots and poisoning. The public found Skobelev's death exciting and romantic and commemorated it with a monumental funeral. Russia mourned him with a fervor reserved only for its greatest heroes.⁸

But why did Skobelev become a hero? Certainly his exploits did not warrant all the attention he received. In the famous campaigns of the Russo-Turkish War, Skobelev was only a subordinate commander, while at Geok-Tepe he wielded the might of Imperial Russia against a disorganized, poorly armed enemy. He never faced the challenge of a large, modern army. By preventing the possibility of disappointment and defeats at the hands of greater opponents, Skobelev's early death preserved his image as a youthful conquerer. Other sources of the young general's reputation include the contrast of his own successful military exploits with the many failures of his peers and the stifling social climate of the eighties which led many Russians to seek a hero. In his article on Skobelev, Hans Rogger suggests several explanations for the Skobelev cult:

Disenchantment with the Monarch and with his unresponsiveness to society's needs and wishes had set in during the reign of Aleksandr II. In some this feeling was induced by his flagging devotion to reform; in others by his indecisiveness in dealing with sedition or by his reluctance to embrace the cause of liberating the Slavs. Discontent reached a high point during the dark moments of the Turkish War and in its disappointing aftermath. As respect and devotion to the tsar' declined among his subjects, Skobelev gained in their regard. He was what they wished their tsars and all their leaders to be in times of war; he was an extension of themselves as they wished to see themselves. He redeemed incompetence at the top, the shame of defeats, and the scorn of the world.⁹

The persistence of a Skobelev cult and the social foundation of the 'hero phenomenon' into the last years of the century and beyond led to Kuropatkin's most distinguished appointments. The impression that Skobelev's career left on the public imagination was central to the success of Kuropatkin, whose reputation as a brave and capable officer began with his service as Skobelev's chief of staff. He had been decorated with his commander several times and had written a popular history of the Turkish War, *Operations of the Detachments of General Skobelev*, which linked his name even closer to the legendary warrior. In the public's mind, Kuropatkin was the heir to his former mentor's luck, prowess, and brilliance.

If Kuropatkin's rise to prominence was due largely to the reputation of Skobelev, so too was his demise. In their adoration of the late hero, many Russians had created a fantastic ideal of success, style, and leadership. Yet Kuropatkin's performance in the Russo-Japanese War did not live up to these expectations. This contrast between the ideal and the reality ruined his career and shattered the heroic aura that had been created by Skobelev's victories and timely death a quarter of a century earlier.

Kuropatkin would never become a hero like Skobelev and, as a result, the details of his life would never be publicized in the same manner. Yet numerous sources allow the reconstruction of a relatively comprehensive portrait of his career. These sources include his own voluminous writings on geography, Russian nationalism, and war; his journal (parts of which have appeared in *Krasnyi archiv*); biographical sketches published in Russia's leading newspapers following his appointment as Commander of the Manchurian Army; and references to him in the memoirs of contemporaries, including S.V. Witte, V.N. Kokovstov, and V.A. Sukhomlinov.¹⁰ In addition, the Soviet historian P.A. Zaionchkovskii's study of the army at the turn of the century refers to many pertinent archival materials, including passages from unpublished portions of Kuropatkin's diary and the notes of his subordinates in the army and Ministry of War.

Early Years: 1848-1898

Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin was born in the Khelm district of Pskov Province on March 17, 1848. His father, a nobleman and former captain, had retired from the army to work in local government. Kuropatkin received the elite military education of a cadet in the Pavlovskii Military School. After his graduation in 1866, he served in the First Turkestan Rifle Division, where he participated in several expeditions in Central Asia and was made a company commander.

Several years later, Kuropatkin entered the Nikolaevskii Academy of

the General Staff, where he obtained the academic and technical credentials necessary for all officers aspiring to positions of leadership.¹¹ Following his graduation in 1874, Kuropatkin took part in a year-long military exchange with a French expedition in the northern Sahara. He published his experiences in a geographical study of Algeria which was awarded a medal by the Imperial Geographical Society.¹²

In 1875 Kuropatkin returned to Turkestan as chief of staff of the 16th Infantry Division. He was placed in charge of a diplomatic mission to meet the Kashgarian chieftain Yakub-bek. Soon after its departure, Kirghiz tribesmen ambushed his small party in the foothills of the Tian' shan' mountains.

Several men were killed and Kuropatkin was wounded. His outnumbered detachment managed to escape and rendezvous with the Kashgarian leader. They subsequently surveyed an unexplored 4,000-kilometer expanse of Russia's frontier. Kuropatkin published a geographical study of Kashgaria for which he was awarded a second medal by the Imperial Geographical Society.

During the Russo-Turkish War, Skobelev led the 16th division in the crucial battles of Lovcha, Plevna, and Sheinovo. Kuropatkin was injured twice. At Plevna, a bomb exploded close to his head and at Sheinovo he was shot in the shoulder. Kuropatkin spent 1878-1881 in St. Petersburg as the head of the Asiatic Department of the General Staff Academy. In 1881 he returned to Central Asia in charge of the Turkestan Rifle Brigade. In this capacity he commanded the right flank of Skobelev's army at Geok-Tepe. His performance at this post enhanced his reputation as a brave, gifted soldier. He was decorated with two orders of St. George for his exploits in the Balkans and at Geok-Tepe.

Between 1882 and 1890, Kuropatkin worked with Chief of Staff N.N. Obruchev on large-scale planning for the nation's defense and held several posts in the Warsaw and Odessa military districts. From 1890 to 1898 he served as governor general and military commander of the Transcaspian Region, one of the empire's newest, most isolated, and unruly territories. In Transcaspia he subdued native unrest, established Russian courts, administration, and schools, and played an important role in the planning and construction of railroads. Kuropatkin also acted as the tsar's official envoy to the Persian court in Teheran. During this period he published *Operations of the Detachments of General Skobelev* and several articles on Central Asia in military publications.

By the time Kuropatkin was fifty, he had served as an officer for over thirty years. He had proven himself as a writer, geographer, and academic; as an administrator in both regional government and the army; and as a strategic planner. In contrast to most of his contemporaries in the elite General Staff who were stationed in the peaceful western military

districts, Kuropatkin had seen many years of combat among the rebellious peoples of Central Asia.

Early Ministry 1898-1902

In late 1897 Minister of War P.S. Vannovskii was preparing to leave office. The official explanation was illness, but illness was only an excuse. As a result of the increasing interference of the new tsar', Nikolai II, and the grand dukes in the Ministry, Vannovskii no longer believed that he had the authority he needed to perform his duties satisfactorily.¹³

As with the custom, the tsar' invited the retiring minister to nominate candidates to succeed him. Vannovskii suggested several. The first was his Chief of Staff General N.N. Obruchev. Obruchev had proven administrative and organizational talent; however, he had seen little combat. The next choice was General P.L. Lobko, a former tutor to the tsar'. Yet he too had almost no combat experience. The final candidate was Kuropatkin. He possessed an excellent reputation in military circles but had considerably less experience in either the higher ranks of the General Staff or the Ministry of War. At fifty he was considered quite young. In concluding his report, Vannovskii thought it best to appoint either Obruchev or Lobko and to make Kuropatkin chief of the General Staff while grooming him to succeed the next minister.¹⁴

The tsar' summoned Kuropatkin, whom he received briefly and sent directly to Obruchev. Obruchev assumed that Kuropatkin had been named head of the General Staff and was bringing word from the emperor of his own appointment as minister. He expected that Kuropatkin would present himself as his Chief of Staff (the standard procedure for the appointment of a new Minister of War). Obruchev was angered when he found the opposite to be true.

The appointment of Kuropatkin, young as he was, created almost no controversy among members of the General Staff. In comparison with the turmoil surrounding Kuropatkin's appointments in later years as Commander of the Southwestern Front and of the Russian forces in Manchuria, interest in this appointment was minimal. Officers did not associate great prestige with the position of minister. They aspired to lead men and to command armies. A War Minister was a bureaucrat whose position in the chain of command was ambiguous.

It is uncertain precisely why Nikolai picked Kuropatkin over Vannovskii's favored nominees. Perhaps it was his association with Skobelev or his role in Russian imperialism in Central Asia. Witte speculated that at an earlier meeting, Kuropatkin had made a great impression on the tsar'. In a report on a mission to Teheran, Kuropatkin had concluded that Russia should have an increasingly strong role in Persia. This type of decisive,

imperialistic proposal probably appealed to Nikolai.¹⁵ Or perhaps the emperor's selection was based on entirely different criteria. Having just gotten rid of the increasingly intractable Vannovskii, the tsar' was probably seeking a young replacement who was not well-established in St. Petersburg's military and political circles and would prove a more pliable partner in the management of military affairs. All of these factors may have worked together to persuade the tsar' that Kuropatkin would be amenable to his new plans for Russian expansion in the Far East.

From this perspective, Kuropatkin turned out to be an excellent choice. Already in his first month in office, January 1898, he began to promote Russia's interests in the Far East. His policies in response to the Boxer Rebellion and the siege of Peking's foreign community provided the impetus for the occupation of Manchuria. Kuropatkin convinced the emperor to send an expedition to liberate the western consulates in defiance of the more cautious advice of Minister of Finance Witte and Minister of Foreign Affairs M.N. Muravev. The mission, executed in cooperation with the Japanese, placed over a hundred thousand Russian men in Chinese territory. Many marched all the way to Peking. While the occupation was to be temporary, the troops did not fully evacuate Manchuria before Russia's defeat by Japan in 1905.

Although Kuropatkin had spent most of his career in the field, he quickly adapted to the politics of the capital. He was particularly adept at forming ties with the emperor, the Empress Aleksandra, and the Dowager Empress Maria Fedorovna. While he did not possess the glamour of a Skobelev, he was a man of society, a nobleman with a social yet modest disposition, a dignified military bearing, and a religious nature. Kuropatkin was also close to Vladimir Meshcherskii, an influential conservative journalist and an intimate associate of the tsar'. Kuropatkin believed that Meshcherskii defended his personality and programs before Nikolai.¹⁶ These characteristics, in addition to his considerate attention to the empresses, soon made him Nikolai's favorite minister. While Aleksandr III and Nikolai in previous years had refrained from socializing with ministers and dined with them only on the rarest occasions, Kuropatkin became a regular at court and frequently took meals with the imperial family. This was a cause of great jealousy among the other ministers.¹⁷

Witte was the most resentful, for it was common knowledge that the tsar' found his presence extremely distasteful.¹⁸ The envious Minister of Finance would become Kuropatkin's most vehement critic. In his memoirs, he characterized Kuropatkin as a man of little creativity of imagination, who had to be led by the hand at all times, and whose only saving grace was determination.¹⁹

Witte's memoirs contain several stories which shed light on Kuropatkin's character and relationship with the tsar'. He recalls on one occasion

walking into Kuroptakin's study the night before the general was to present an important report to the emperor. He apologized for the untimely interruption, but he required a special favor. Kuroptakin told him not to worry. He was not working on his report but reading Turgenev. When asked why, he responded that to ensure the acceptance of his proposals he would have to make interesting conversation for the empress.²⁰

On another occasion, the general was visiting the imperial family in Yalta. It was a gloomy day and the tsar' was in a sour mood, yet he had to approach the emperor on a matter to which he expected opposition. On being admitted into the emperor's parlor he looked out the window and remarked, "Your Highness, the sun has appeared." The emperor responded in surprise, "Where do you see the sun?" When he approached the window and realizing that the sun to which Kuropatkin had referred was Aleksandra strolling outside, his moodiness disappeared.²¹

While Kuropatkin's relations with the imperial family were exceptional, he was not merely a sycophant. Early in his ministry, he developed a realistic appreciation of the powers and limitations of a minister. The tsar' considered himself the first of the nation's soldiers and as such made many important organizational and strategic decisions without consulting Kuropatkin. He often bypassed the minister's advice for the counsel of his Chief of Staff and other subordinates. On several occasions, Kuropatkin considered tendering his resignation, but he felt that such an act would be a denial of the autocratic authority to which he was firmly committed. The tsar' had the right to make all decisions, and as a loyal subject his duty was to serve obediently.²²

If Kuropatkin related to the imperial family better than Witte, it was only in part the result of servility or flattery. His bearing made him a natural associate of the tsar'. Unlike his colleague the Minister of Finance, he treated Nikolai with respect for his imperial prerogative and did not project condescending feelings about his intelligence.

There is a variety of opinions concerning Kuropatkin's ability to fill the role of minister, most of them positive but often with reservations. Zaionchkovskii writes, "Kuropatkin possessed all of the qualities necessary for a Minister of War. An intelligent, educated officer of the General Staff, one who possessed much combat experience, had been praised by the famous Skobelev, whom he served as his chief of staff—such was Kuropatkin. He had three orders of St. George and was a man of uncontested bravery. He was the author of a number of serious works on military themes."²³

The head of Kuropatkin's chancellery and his successor as Minister of War, N.A. Rediger, wrote:

Kuropatkin loves military affairs very much, he studies them

constantly, has read a great deal and has participated in all of the Russian campaigns (of our time). He possesses a mass of both practical and theoretical knowledge. He has a praised military record, an excellent knowledge of the forces, their lives and needs, as well as a love of soldiers. He is always calm, talks freely and with enthusiasm. He produces on listeners an impression of knowing his business and of strong character. Good-natured, he wants more than anything else to be loved and praised and, therefore, treats his subordinates leniently.

Grand Duke Konstantinovich remarked, "How much modesty, simplicity and strength there is in him."²⁴

Dmitri Miliutin made an entry in his journal following Kuropatkin's appointment. "Kuropatkin has proven an excellent officer, and an able and businesslike commander in Turkestan and Transcaspia. We must hope that he deals equally well with this business. The main question is will he fit in at the War Ministry and in the Council of Ministers. In other words, will he maintain the prestige of the position?"²⁵ Through good personal relations with the tsar, Kuropatkin easily overcame this problem.

The Chief of Staff of the Warsaw Military District, General F.K. Gershelman wrote, "It was difficult to beat him in an argument—he always firmly stood his ground and did not like objections," though he adds, ". . . Kuropatkin had a slight air of indecision about him, the propensity to alter decisions quickly, searching for the best, but leading to indecision, an absence of a firm, principled foundation in decisions and the tendency to be distracted by details of a question at the expense of central concerns."²⁶

Doubts of Kuropatkin's decisiveness and intelligence were more widely shared than Witte's criticisms of his relations with the emperor. While indecisiveness may have been considered only a small defect in most ministers, in an officer it was nothing short of a tragic flaw. Other generals would comment on this same feature in a manner significantly less generous than Gershel'man's. Almost without exception, Kuropatkin's contemporaries in the General Staff believed these shortcomings had a great effect on his ministry, which they viewed as devoid of a decisive program for the further modernization of the army.

Yet the judgments of Witte and the officers of the General Staff require qualification. Most often they were made many years after the fact and were colored by personal rivalries and Kuropatkin's role in the military fiascos of the Russo-Japanese War. They failed to consider the existence of other obstacles to modernization beyond Kuropatkin's indecisiveness or servility.

In fact, Kuropatkin did have a well-defined platform. At his first audience with the emperor, the new minister proposed important reforms. His primary goals were the improvement of the composition of the high command and of the living conditions of both officers and soldiers.²⁷ The tsar's response was indicative of his ambivalence to change. While he agreed with the latter suggestion, he refused to commit himself to the former. He explained to Kuropatkin that despite their negative influence, he could not simply remove those too old or unfit from their posts. "We cannot make them beggars."²⁸

However, Kuropatkin did manage to convince the tsar' to sign some important legislation. New laws established a maximum age for officers, raised their pay, limited the role of privilege in the admission to officer training programs, and improved the educational standards of the military schools. The ministry drafted additional laws pertaining to the personal conduct of officers on matters ranging from marriage to dueling.²⁹ Another priority was the preparation for war in the West. To this end, the ministry supervised the construction of new fortifications and strategic railroads, and the preparation of new strategies for attack and defense.

Familiarity with the emperor was a political tool which the other ministers did not have. It was instrumental in convincing the tsar' to pay attention to the military's problems and to personally endorse even the most modest reforms. Despite this advantage, Nikolai ignored Kuropatkin's urgent requests to upgrade artillery, to adopt the widespread use of machine guns, and to increase the educational level of the peasants (Kuropatkin considered literacy a prerequisite for the improvement of the fighting capacity of the soldiers). Even those reforms approved by the tsar' were, in general, not executed. Most frequently neglected were the numerous proposals which threatened the privileges of officers and noblemen. The emperor feared that the rigid enforcement of legislation which limited the role of birth in promotion and admission to military schools or established age limits for officers might arouse opposition in the most loyal elements of the population.³⁰

Kuropatkin's lack of resolve and his tendency to adhere to the whims of the emperor may have inhibited the realization of any thorough program of reform. Yet given Nikolai's sensitive, capricious personality, these same characteristics may have helped to ensure the general's political survival and thus enabled him to procure some less controversial, though much needed legislation concerning the conduct, education, and standard of living of officers. The tsar' was increasingly intolerant of assertive ministers such as Vannovskii and Witte.

Blame for the inadequacies of reform at the turn of the century cannot rest entirely on Kuropatkin's personal weaknesses. Many of the shortcomings were the result of the institutional structure of autocracy. The

Minister of War could not pressure Nikolai to act against his conscience or even assert that he was mistaken. Indeed, given the personal limitations of the tsar', his frequent interference in military affairs, and the limited power of the ministers, it is difficult to see how another individual could have accomplished more than Kuropatkin.

Minister of War, 1902-1904

Minister of War Kuropatkin had firmly established ideas concerning the reform of Russian society and the army. He was guided by the extremely pessimistic belief that Russia was in a state of rapid decay. On 29 November 1902, he remarked, "We are living through strange times. Turbulence and even general dissatisfaction are spreading."³¹ He believed that the nation could not long survive the continuous outbursts of violence brought about by deep-rooted economic problems.

The army in particular was greatly affected by the increase in urban and rural violence, for it was responsible for crushing all internal unrest. Kuropatkin shared the opinion of many of his colleagues in the General Staff that the military should not continue to engage in police functions. The troops often had to fire on their unarmed countrymen, a demoralizing task which left them unfit for defending Russia's frontiers.³²

More importantly, the ranks of the army were composed of peasants and workers who did not escape the deprivations which afflicted the lower classes. Extreme poverty and ignorance made the Russian peasant a less educated, less healthy, and less loyal soldier than his West-European counterpart. The Minister of War was convinced that the economic and educational level of the peasants would have to be improved if the physical and spiritual capacities of the soldiers were to be maintained at a satisfactory level. He was also afraid that workers, a rapidly growing segment of the population, would prove less loyal soldiers than peasants.³³

Kuropatkin blamed this state of affairs on Witte's economic programs, which were taking resources from the already impoverished lower urban and rural classes to provide income for industrialization.³⁴ An additional factor in Russia's decay were the economists, businessmen and engineers who executed Russia's industrialization. In Kuropatkin's mind, many of these specialists, often of German extraction, sabotaged the construction of railroads and factories to make Russia more vulnerable to attack from Germany. Even the planners of strictly civilian projects such as the St. Petersburg streetcar network were objects of the general's suspicion. The Russian economy had to remain independent of foreign capital and technicians.³⁵

Kuropatkin spoke out against Witte's economic and social policies in

the Committee of Ministers. He wrote favorably of the ideas of Minister of Justice N.V. Muravev. Muravev shared his pessimistic vision of Russia's industrial future and spoke with him of a four-point platform for the Committee of Ministers: 1. Replace Witte. 2. Work to improve the conditions of workers. 3. Return trust to the Zemstva (rural land assemblies). 4. Involve the Zemstva in the government's discussions.³⁶ In contrast to Witte, Kuropatkin wanted Russia to concentrate her resources on agriculture and the army rather than on industry. He also opposed Witte's programs for the administrative centralization of agricultural planning. The Minister of War had no specific plans for Russian agriculture but believed that the key to reform lay in the liberation of the local gentry and the Zemstva from the authority of bureaucrats in regional economic matters. Too much interference by officials unfamiliar with local conditions prevented the freedom of action necessary for the development of profitable agricultural practices.³⁷

Kuropatkin's constant criticism of industrialization led to difficult relations with the Minister of Finance, "who defended Jews, foreigners, and foreign capital on principle and a belief that they were actually needed by Russia."³⁸ He wrote of an encounter during a recess of a meeting of the Council of State:

During a coffeebreak, Witte, in good spirits, attacked my support for the Zemstvo and told the other members of the Council of State, Aleksei Nikolaevich, our military commander will have us hung in wartime. We must unite in peacetime to hang him first.' I answered, 'Why are you scared of being hung only in wartime? If the tsar' asks, then I will hang you even in peace time.'³⁹

To prevent the continued demoralization of the troops, Kuropatkin believed that the programs which strained social bonds—in particular taxes used to gain capital from the peasants for industrialization and laws designed to inhibit the cultural expression of non-Russian nationalities—would have to be moderated. Such measures would help prevent future violence. Following riots in Rostov in November 1903, Kuropatkin told Witte, "Internal policies must not be conducted in such a fashion that the troops become a necessity. This spoils the forces and may bring certain regiments to insubordination."⁴⁰ He had similar discussions with Plehve. In the spring of the following year, when the Minister of the Interior discussed the pressing need for troops to suppress riots, Kuropatkin responded, ". . . it would be better to take measures to placate the population in order not to ruin the forces by having them fire into an unarmed crowd."⁴¹

Although Kuropatkin involved himself with policy on general social problems, his major concerns were the reform of the army and foreign affairs. The Ministry of War investigated legislation for officer education, the modernization of armaments, and the administrative reorganization of the General Staff. However, these specific issues received little of Kuropatkin's personal attention. The concerns to which he would dedicate his energies between 1902 and 1904 are reflected in this segment of a report submitted to Nikolai in 1901.

. . . our Western frontier has never in the whole history of Russia been exposed to such danger in the event of a European War as it is now, and . . . accordingly, the attention of the War Department in the first years of the present century should be confined to strengthening our position on that side, and not diverted to aggressive enterprises elsewhere.⁴²

Whereas Kuropatkin had previously been one of the strongest supporters of military expansion in the Far East, his new observations forced him to reverse his stance. In the years before the Russo-Japanese War, he dedicated himself to reorganizing and strengthening the Russian forces in the West and influencing the tsar' and the other ministers to adopt a foreign policy compatible with this new emphasis. However, he would not achieve the results he desired and, for political reasons, largely beyond his control, his efforts served only to weaken the army and to threaten his own career.

A New Emphasis on Military Preparation in the West

Believing that Russia's defenses in the West required a comprehensive reappraisal, Kuropatkin planned the construction of new fortifications and strategic railroads. Under his authority, the General Staff drafted more detailed strategies for war with Germany and Austria and rehearsed them in numerous maneuvers. A new wartime battle order was established which divided the Western front into a Northern and Southern Force. Nikolai named Kuropatkin Commander of the Southern Army on the Austro-Rumanian front and Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich Commander of the Northern Armies. While the officers demonstrated little interest in the position of Minister of War, they all aspired to command armies. Many believed that Kuropatkin was unqualified for the honor and that the appointment was the result of unscrupulous pandering to the emperor. Kuropatkin's new assignment made him the object of extreme jealousy and suspicion.

The politics of the maneuvers also damaged Kuropatkin's relations with

the army. The Minister paid close attention to the Western Front's most strategically significant military districts, Kiev and Warsaw, in which the oldest and most respected generals were situated. The exercises involved constant scrutiny by Kuropatkin and the tsar', which the senior officers found insufferable. The tactless meddling of the emperor gave rise to bitter resentment. For example, when displeased with the inadequate volume and quality of the "hurrahs" with which the troops of Kiev greeted him, Nikolai brought the problem to the attention of the district commander, General Dragomirov. When the "hurrahs" remained unsatisfactory the following year, the tsar' decided to replace him.⁴⁴

Like most of his peers, Kuropatkin considered the quality of "hurrahs" an insufficient reason to replace a general of proven talent and great stature. The head of the Kiev Military District had been praised as a hero in the Turkish War and served for many years as the director of the General Staff Academy. Dragomirov was the most respected figure in the army and a personal mentor for many of the General Staff's leading lights. However, Kuropatkin later learned that although Nikolai did not use conventional meritocratic criteria, he did not take this decision lightly. Nikolai resented the extent and authority of Dragomirov's influence. He had intended to replace him when he had ascended to the throne, but in his youth he had felt intimidated by the illustrious general.⁴⁵

Nikolai invited Dragomirov to express his own opinions on a successor, but the tsar' had, in fact, already decided to replace him with Puzyrevsky, with whom the retiring district commander was known to have a long-standing personal feud. The old general fell to his knees and begged not to be replaced by his rival. Nikolai politely agreed to consider the request, but only to remedy a socially awkward situation; he had no intention of changing his plans. These events enraged the clique of influential officers who comprised Dragomirov's circle.⁴⁶

The politics of the reorganization of the Western front greatly diminished Kuropatkin's popularity within the General Staff. His appointment as Commander of the Southwestern army, and Nikolai's thoughtless meddling, created resentment against the tsar's confidant and closest military advisor. This hostility would not affect Kuropatkin as long as he remained the emperor's favorite, but would work against him later when his relations with Nikolai had changed.

Restraint in the East

The conclusions reached in the report of 1901 also affected the Ministry of War's Far-Eastern policy. Kuropatkin believed that Russia did not possess the resources to make the necessary military improvements in the West while simultaneously preparing for war in the East. Whereas

previously Kuropatkin had championed military expansion in the Far East, he now reversed his position and adopted an unaggressive posture. While his new western policies antagonized the General Staff, his new eastern policy antagonized the tsar'.

The principal issue in the Far East, the fate of the Russian troops in Manchuria, divided the ministers into two camps. The Minister of Finance and his supporters hoped to limit the military's involvement in the Far East but to continue to penetrate and exploit Manchuria through strictly commercial means. This policy reflected political as well as economic considerations, for the Ministry of War would govern the region if it were occupied by the military. Witte's program would allow his ministry a greater role in the administration of Manchuria and a free hand in the placement of new railroads and industries. The tsar', on the other hand, favored the military pursuit of Russia's "Manifest Destiny" in the Far East. Kuropatkin had been the principal proponent of Nikolai's program in the Committee of Ministers until his recognition of the danger to which it exposed the western frontier changed his opinions.

Even after the defection of his most supportive minister, Nikolai continued to pursue aggressive policies by giving financial and political support to the Bezobrazov clique. This group of adventurers, led by a former guards officer A.M. Bezobrazov, the Grand Duke Aleksei Mikhailovich, and Admiral A.M. Abaza, had established a lumber concession on the banks of the Yalu River. They hoped that it would not only prove very profitable but would also serve as a covert base for the military infiltration of Korea. The workers would be armed and would build small fortresses around the operation.

The Bezobrazov clique alarmed Witte and his protege, Minister of Foreign Affairs Count Lambsdorff. The clique's operation disrupted Witte's monopoly on control of the region, while its proximity to Korea antagonized Japan. An armed conflict would threaten the substantial Russian investments in neighboring Russia's position in the East. Disagreements with China and pressure from Japan, this time supported by Great Britain, forced the Russians to agree to terminate their military presence in all of Manchuria with the exception of the Liaotung Peninsula.

In response to the changing international situation and Russia's military needs in the West, Kuropatkin adopted a new policy which both camps found completely unsatisfactory. Like Witte, he believed that the continued military occupation of Southern Manchuria would provoke a war with Japan. Yet in defiance of the new diplomatic agreements and the Minister of Finance's plan for strictly commercial colonization, he believed that Russia must continue to occupy Northern Manchuria. A military presence in Northern Manchuria alone, he reasoned, would probably not provoke the Japanese to war. Instead, it might deter Japan

from occupying Southern Manchuria and, therefore, would protect the railroad and other commercial interests in the region. Since Port Arthur could not be defended without troops in Southern Manchuria, Kuropatkin recommended the abandonment of the Liaotung Peninsula. He considered any intrusion into Korea without prior agreements with the Japanese tantamount to a Russian declaration of war.⁵⁰ His plans antagonized Witte, who did not want any troops in Manchuria; Lambsdorff, who would have to defend the violation of diplomatic agreements to Japan and Great Britain; and the navy, which resented Kuropatkin's attack on its most important eastern base. Most significantly, Kuropatkin alienated the tsar', who had valued his services as a collaborator in Russia's eastward expansion.

After discussions with the Japanese confirmed their aggressive interest in the area, Witte came to agree with Kuropatkin. Commercial infiltration would not succeed if the Japanese countered with force. In addition, the tsar's strong support of Bezobrazov on the eastern question, and of Minister of the Interior Plehve in important domestic issues, forced Witte to seek a new political alliance with the influential Minister of War. In April 1903 Witte and Kuropatkin, along with Lambsdorff, formed a coalition to thwart the interests of the Bezobrazovtsy. The tsar' supported his ministers in public and at their frequent meetings appeared to promote the interests of peace and stability in Russian society and the world. However, in his actions, he invariably contradicted them. His allocation of funds and authority in the East supported the aggressive manipulations of the Bezobrazov clique and the continued influx of Russian men and arms into Southern Manchuria and Korea. Nevertheless, the Witte-Kuropatkin coalition might have convinced the tsar' of the need to proceed cautiously in the East; at least its members might have used their ministries to obstruct aggressive policies, had not an ingenious administrative device removed the issue from their jurisdiction.⁴⁸

The tsar' created the Viceroyalty of the Far East, an administrative unit encompassing all territories east of Lake Baikal, which removed the Manchurian question from ministerial jurisdiction. Admiral E.I. Alekseev, the naval commander of Port Arthur, was appointed Viceroy and Commander in Chief of all naval and ground forces in the region. In contrast to a provincial governor, a viceroy was not subordinate to policies originating in the ministries. Instead, he was responsible directly to the tsar' in matters of war, diplomacy, and finance. Nikolai established the Committee on the Far East, under his personal chairmanship, to consider the Viceroyalty's affairs instead of the Committee of Ministers. While Witte, Lambsdorff and Kuropatkin served on the new committee, so too did Bezobrazov and Abaza, who could not have participated in the deliberations of the Committee of Ministers.⁴⁹

Political historians suggest that Plehve engineered and promoted the tsar's administrative maneuver. The ministers themselves did not learn of the changes through official channels, but, to their dismay, from the official publication of the Ministry of the Interior, the "State Courier." Plehve was ignorant of the subtleties of the situation in the Far East and was inclined to believe that the patriotic enthusiasm of a war with Japan would help relieve Russia's social tensions. More importantly, he was engaged in a bitter duel with Witte for the favor of the emperor and control of the Committee of Ministers. Their struggle was based primarily on fundamental disagreements over solutions to the agrarian question and the organization of local government. By 1903, Plehve's position was pre-eminent, his victory complete. While Manchuria was at most a peripheral issue in the struggle, Plehve saw fit to diminish the role of Witte and his supporters in the region. The creation of the Viceroyalty, which weakened the proponents of moderation and thereby made war more likely, was based less on consideration of national interest than on the intrigue of court politics.⁵⁰

Witte had lost his usefulness in the tsar's eyes. In August of 1903, he was transferred from the Ministry of Finance to serve in the formally higher, but in practice less influential position of Chairman of the Committee of Ministers. Lambsdorff remained in office to conduct the policies which he opposed. Under the authority of Alekseev, he delivered Russian promises of peace and friendship to the Japanese. However, his mission was consistently undermined and contradicted by the tsar's aggressive actions in Manchuria and in northern Korea. Kuropatkin was convinced that, despite the tsar's protestations of friendly intentions, he had long ago dismissed the possibility of a peaceful solution. In March he had told Witte:

. . . our sovereign has grandiose ideas: he wants to take Manchuria for Russia, and then go on to take Korea. He dreams of taking under his control even Tibet. He wants to take Persia, and to acquire not only the Bosphorous, but the Dardanelles as well. We ministers, with our personal reservations, delay the tsar' in the realization of his dreams and disappoint him in everything. He nevertheless thinks that he is right, that he understands the glories and needs of Russia better than us.⁵¹

Despite his reservations, however, Kuropatkin, like Lambsdorff, remained to supervise the implementation of policies to which he strongly objected.⁵²

Kuropatkin's Failures

After reversing his Far-Eastern policy, Kuropatkin was unsuccessful in virtually all of his endeavors. He could not bring the tsar' over to his new position and won the support of Witte and Lambsdorff only after their power had deteriorated. In addition to being unpopular with the General Staff, Kuropatkin lost his privileged position with the tsar'. Consequently, his plans for reform in the military, improvements in officer education, the administrative reorganization of the General Staff, and the modernization of armaments found almost no support. Most significantly, Kuropatkin's ideas for the strengthening of the Western military districts were not to receive the attention they required.

Convinced of the pacific nature of Wilhelmine Germany in the West, the tsar' allowed himself to be consumed by his ambitions in the Far East.⁵³ As early as March 1903, military funds and troops that Kuropatkin had designated for the West were diverted by the tsar' to Manchuria. The funds which the army needed to fortify the West were further drained by the tsar's plans to build a navy in the East which would rival the Japanese. Nikolai began to cancel the army's western maneuvers. In the opening years of the century, the government provided the army with less than a third of the funds which the Minister of War requested.⁵⁴ Kuropatkin's persistent requests that the government limit its use of the army to suppress internal disorder were also neglected. In this respect, Plehve continued the practices of Witte. Confident that the army could crush all opposition, the Minister of the Interior often disregarded the potentially explosive impact of his programs on the population.

On 2 August 1903 Kuropatkin went to speak to the tsar'. The pretext of his visit was dissatisfaction with the measures which gave Admiral Alekseev control of the Viceroyalty of the Far East and, as a result, transferred control of the ground forces in the region from the army to the navy. The conversation, however, turned to Kuropatkin's general dissatisfaction with his present position. He indicated to Nikolai that none of his recent programs had received approval; in fact they had all been met with scorn and indifference. He stated, that

A loyal subject must not try to penetrate his sovereign's thoughts concerning the implementation of these or other measures. Sovereigns are responsible only to God and to history in the actions which they choose for the good of the people. Therefore, even though I oppose the subordination of the Priamursk region to Alekseev, I have no pretense of assuming that my opinion is correct. Therefore, I would respect each of the sovereign's decisions and apply all of my

powers to its best possible execution. But, being entrusted by the tsar' as the head of an important ministry, I am by law responsible for taking the proper course in the affairs of that ministry. With the trust of the tsar', I can cope with the heavy obligations placed upon me. But if this trust is expended, if people in positions of responsibility see that this trust no longer exists, they begin to slight me. The tsar's relatives, the commanders of the forces and other ministers begin to bypass my authority, and the successful fulfillment of the duties of minister becomes impossible.⁵⁵

The tsar' responded that he always listened to Kuropatkin's counsel. Growing increasingly frustrated, Kuropatkin mentioned how in previous months his authority had been undermined, maneuvers cancelled, money and men transferred from his priority programs in the West to the Far East. In these operations, the tsar' himself had bypassed the minister, keeping plans from him and working directly with subordinates such as Chief of Staff Sakharov. Nikolai had formed a "black cabinet," led by the Bezobrazov clique, which was distinct from the Committee of Ministers and to which he was beginning to entrust the nation's affairs. The tsar' answered Kuropatkin, "All of this is news to me."⁵⁶

Kuropatkin felt wounded and insulted. He wrote in his journal:

already made a name for myself known throughout Russia as a brave, honest soldier, loyal to his tsar'. This good name comprised all that I could hand down to my son, and for this reason I was obliged to defend it. At present, people look at me and ask why I bear the degradation: to keep the ministerial post, the government apartment and so forth? or to speak the truth to my sovereign and tell him that the Bezobrazov clique is bringing to life a turbulence which is undermining authority. I request of my sovereign that if he no longer has confidence in me, then he relieve me of the obligations of my office, and replace me with someone who will enjoy his trust.⁵⁷

He added,

I recalled to the tsar', that on the day when I was named, I told his Majesty, 'You bring me great news. You have shown me a great confidence, but in my heart I do not feel joy.' I have not felt this joy in the course of the five and a half burdensome years that I have been minister. It has been an

unceasing, heavy, stressful labor. My life has not been my own. The tsar' nodded his head affirmatively and answered, 'I know.'⁵⁸

At this point, Nikolai turned the discussion to Kuropatkin's future status should be relieved of his ministry. He suggested the post of head of the Kiev Military District. The minister responded that with the tsar's permission he would take two months leave during which they could reach some conclusions regarding his status.

The tsar' then asked where I would take my leave. I answered, 'Primarily in Finland.' 'Are you not afraid to live in Finland?' (a reference to the violent unrest there) 'No, your Highness, I fear only God and yourself and no one else. I believe in God and, therefore, do not fear murderers.' 'Will you be fishing? I have heard that you enjoy fishing during a storm.'⁵⁹

Upon his return from Finland, he was not relieved of his post. In fact, Nikolai treated him with the greatest respect and politeness. However, the tsar's courtesy alone was not convincing evidence that Kuropatkin's precarious position had improved.

Commander Kuropatkin

Kuropatkin remained Minister of War through early 1904, disillusioned and uninfluential. He continued to submit unheeded reports which warned the tsar' of the necessity of restraint in the Far East and of the need to strengthen the army in the West. However, the policy matters which alienated Kuropatkin from the emperor occupied only a fraction of his time. Most of his duties enabled him to display the dignified military bearing and social graces that Nikolai found so pleasing. He spent much of the year travelling around the country inspecting the forces. On these travels, his daily routine consisted of observing and critiquing maneuvers in the morning, lunching with the emperor and his family, and attending parades in the afternoon.

In January 1904, relations with Japan progressed from bad to worse. The Japanese ended the unproductive negotiations in which Lambsdorff continually assured them of the tsar's disinterest in Korea and Southern Manchuria. Several days later, on 27 January the Japanese demolished Russia's Eastern fleet in a surprise attack on Port Arthur. Kuropatkin was called to the emperor to submit a list of candidates for the command of the Manchurian Army. On 7 February he was summoned again. Nikolai warmly embraced Kuropatkin, for he had been chose to lead the campaign

in the East. He would not remain Minister of War, since the demands of his new, more prestigious post would occupy all of his time. It was the consensus of contemporaries that "society" had clamored for his appointment. He was immensely popular and retained the allure of his association with Skobelev. Witte believed that, given the trust the people had placed in him and the respect he commanded, Kuropatkin was the only possible choice.⁶⁰

Kuropatkin's appointment may have been popular with the public, but several influential officers and ministers had serious reservations. They felt that Kuropatkin was indecisive and incapable of accepting responsibility. Basing his observation on Kuropatkin's performance as minister, General Puzyrevskii remarked, "Kuropatkin is the type of man who unsystematically raises all sorts of questions and never fully solves any of them."⁶¹ Indecision was an impermissible flaw in a military commander. Kuropatkin requested that Sukhomlinov, whom he greatly admired, serve as his Chief of Staff. Sukhomlinov declined as he was encouraged to do by his mentor, Dragomirov, who did not believe that Kuropatkin could command a successful military operation. Dragomirov remarked, "Kuropatkin does not need a chief of staff, but rather another Skobelev."⁶²

Witte recorded several stories concerning Kuropatkin's inability to perform successfully the role of military commander. Many years prior to 1905, while Kuropatkin was a young, though highly regarded officer, Witte had the following conversation with Admiral A.A. Abaza (not to be confused with the associate of Bezobrazov). Abaza commented, "Kuropatkin is an intelligent general, a brave general, and will make a great career for himself. He will become Minister of War and perhaps accomplish more. But do you know how it will finish?" Witte responded that he did not. Abaza answered, "It will end in disillusionment . . . Do you know why? . . . Although he is a brave and perceptive general, he has the soul of a staff clerk."⁶³

Witte never spoke personally with Skobelev about Kuropatkin, but Skobelev's sister, the princess Belosel'skaia-Belozerskaia, once related the famed general's opinion:

My brother loved Kuropatkin very much; however he always said that he could execute orders but did not have the ability to give orders; he did not have the necessary warlike fibre and character. He is brave in that he is not afraid of death but cowardly in that he is never ready to take decisions or assume responsibility.⁶⁴

Kuropatkin's farewell meeting with the emperor, the empresses, and the grand dukes was as warm and ceremonious as his appointment. He was

embraced by Nikolai and presented with an icon which Aleksandr Nevskii had worn into battle. Kuropatkin discussed some of his doubts. At first, he would have to retreat and was afraid that the public would not respond well to the strategy. He was assured of the emperor's complete confidence and future support. On his trek across the country to Manchuria, Kuropatkin was greeted by cheering crowds at every stop. He is reported to have delivered speeches in which he promised an easy victory and claimed that soon he would be dictating terms of peace to the Japanese in Tokyo.⁶⁵

While Kuropatkin remained composed, he saw many factors hindering the allocation of resources necessary for an effective campaign. The war would require sacrifices and defeats before victories. He was afraid that the initial losses would not be tolerated given the contradiction between the war's material demands and the populace's relative indifference to a matter so distant. Another factor was the emperor's and society's racist underestimation of the Japanese, referred to condescendingly as *macaques* (monkeys). For example, former Minister of War Vannovskii estimated that the Russians would need only one soldier for every two Japanese.⁶⁶ A third problem was the lack of interest of the best officers of the General Staff in aiding Kuropatkin. Dragomirov's disparaging remarks and Sukhomlinov's refusal to serve as Kuropatkin's chief of staff may have been part of a more general attempt to sabotage his efforts, since his ministry and his two command appointments (first in the Southwest and then in Manchuria) had made him an object of jealousy and resentment.

Kuropatkin's farewell meetings with the ministers were decidedly more sober than the public demonstrations or his meeting with the emperor. In his interview with Kokovstov, the new Minister of Finance, he discussed the course of the war. Kuropatkin drew a picture with a line for a horizon, and a dot high above for his star. He observed that at the moment he was the most popular man in Russia, a national hero. However, when he arrived at the front and began executing his strategy of retreat, his star would fall far below the horizon. The completion of the railroad would then improve supply lines, allowing the Russian forces to establish a numerical advantage. This would take several months, but if he maintained the support of the Minister of Finance at the critical stages, the victories would come and his star would rise again. Kokovstov pledged his assistance.⁶⁷

Kuropatkin had a similar discussion with Witte. Once again, he mentioned the political liabilities of his strategy of retreat and asked for support in the Committee of Ministers while he was at the front. Like Kokovstov and the tsar', Witte, too, agreed to endorse Kuropatkin's policy. He also had some advice for Kuropatkin concerning Alekseev, who despite Kuropatkin's publicized appointment, was, as Viceroy, the Commander in Chief and Kuropatkin's superior. Witte said that as soon as

he arrived at the front, he should have Alekseev arrested and placed in custody. Kuropatkin must then send the Viceroy under supervision on a train back to St. Petersburg with an apology to the emperor in the name of duty and necessity in the conduct of the war. Kuropatkin was so popular that the men would surely follow. The general believed that Witte was making an absurd joke, although Witte writes that he was not.⁶⁸

By the end of 1904, Witte's advice must have seemed less absurd. The division of authority between Kuropatkin and Alekseev was the dark side of the emperor's prestigious appointment and demonstrations of confidence. The split was to prove crucial in the outcome of the war, since the two men held opposing opinions on the execution of the campaign. Kuropatkin believed that after the destruction of Russia's fleet, Port Arthur had become useless and indefensible. It needed to be abandoned. The army had to retreat until it could be reinforced to a size larger than the Japanese army. Only then would Russian forces be sufficiently prepared to advance.⁶⁹

Alekseev was a naval officer, stationed in Port Arthur. From his perspective, Port Arthur, the navy's principal base in the region, seemed a logical choice for the center of Russia's military effort. He felt that Russian forces needed to advance immediately to rescue Port Arthur at all costs.⁷⁰ The results of the conflict in leadership were seriously divided priorities and a weakened command structure. Kuropatkin and Alekseev turned frequently to St. Petersburg for arbitration.

It was not until Port Arthur was lost in December 1904 that Kuropatkin was actually placed in command. However, by this time it was too late. Kuropatkin's star had all but disappeared under the horizon. The public viewed his retreats as an ineffectual, cowardly, anachronistic emulation of the great patriotic war of 1812. In this war, the enemies were not even worthy opponents. Kuropatkin had not retreated from Germans or Frenchmen but from *macaques*. The war had been conducted miserably: morale proved poor and leadership at the regimental level less than competent. As the most visible figure involved, Kuropatkin was blamed for the defeats and held responsible for much of the nation's shame. Miliukov wrote, "The continuous defeats and retreats of Kuropatkin struck painfully on the national self-esteem."⁷¹

The Russian defeat at Mukden in February 1905 was indecisive, but for Kuropatkin it was the last straw. The tsar would no longer tolerate him as commander. Despite the small defeat and Nikolai's decision, the reinforced strength of the army together with Japanese losses and overextension indicated that the war could now be won. Neither the press nor officers of the General Staff was willing to recognize the fact that even if Kuropatkin had not engineered a swift and brilliant victory at Geok-Tepe, he had perhaps followed the only possible strategy, given Russia's

initial weakness in the region. By March of 1905, Kuropatkin had placed Russian forces into a strategically imposing and advantageous position; he only needed more time and money. However, even if ministers such as Witte and Kokovstov had not abandoned him, had they recognized the merits of his strategy and seen the new prospects for victory, and had the tsar understood that the retreats were necessary, they could not have given the extra support the commander requested. The French loans had stopped and civil war threatened the capital.

In his memoirs, Sukhomlinov recalls the meeting in which it was decided to dismiss Kuropatkin from his post as commander of the forces in Manchuria. Nikolai, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, Minister of the Navy Grand Duke Aleksei Aleksandrovich, Generals Sukhomlinov and Dragomirov, Minister of the Imperial Court Baron V.B. Fredericks, and the palace commandant General P.P. Gesse were present. The session was short and to the point. It began with a joke by Dragomirov concerning the necessity of a Skobelev for the military experiments of a Kuropatkin. The consensus was that Kuropatkin's incompetent ministry had created the shortcomings which caused Russia's military defeat. His irresponsible meddling in the maneuvers, his preoccupation with reorganization, and the political manipulations of his appointment as commander of the forces in southwestern Europe had divided and antagonized the General Staff and, subsequently, left the army's leadership unprepared for war.⁷²

The harsh judgments of Sukhomlinov and his peers reveal their unwillingness both to distinguish between the shortcomings of Kuropatkin's leadership and the systemic problems of the army, and to recognize that Kuropatkin had assumed actual authority too late in the war to bear complete responsibility. Resentment towards Kuropatkin in the highest ranks of the army had been increasing for years, and his untenable position in Manchuria provided members of the General Staff with an opportunity to vent their resentment and a scapegoat for defeat.

While the social, political, and financial crisis must have occupied the minds of all present, they were not recognized as factors in the outcome of the war or in Kuropatkin's replacement. All of the blame was placed on Kuropatkin. Sukhomlinov states, "It was clear to all that having sustained a decisive loss (the battle of Mukden) Kuropatkin could not remain at his post. There was no debate." He adds, "Aleksei Aleksandrovich then expressed the widely shared opinion that the replacement of Alekseev by 'the land general,' had destroyed the efforts in the East."⁷³ On March 3, 1905, Kuropatkin was replaced by his Chief of Staff, General N.P. Linevich, remaining in Manchuria as a subordinate commander in charge of the First Russian Army.

Career after the War

While the remainder of Kuropatkin's career was less than glorious, he did not fade quietly from Russian civic life as many of his contemporaries thought he should. After the war, he was appointed to the State Council and spent most of his time writing two large works: *The Russian Army and the Japanese War* (2 volumes, 1909) and *Russia for the Russians: The Tasks of the Russian Army* (3 volumes, 1910). In the former, Kuropatkin analyzes Russia's defeat. In the latter, he uses a discussion of the impact of Russian and non-Russian nationalism on the history of the empire to arrive at new economic, social, and political policies. He focuses on the treacherous role of internal foreigners in Russian political, industrial, and military circles; the process by which national minorities and Jews weaken the country and drain its resources through religious and national liberation movements; the Russian mission to expand in the Far East, Central Asia, and Europe; and the need to reinforce continuously the traditional Russian values of orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationalism. *Russia for the Russians'* extreme ideological conservatism was tempered by a more moderate, practical appreciation of Russia's social problems. Kuropatkin wrote of the urgency of the modernization of agriculture, the improvement of the material conditions of the people (including national minorities), and the pressing need to permit Russians a greater degree of local autonomy in dealing with social and agricultural problems. He saw the huge imperial bureaucracy as one of the most imposing obstacles to the amelioration of Russia's social, economic and spiritual problems.⁷⁴

When Kuropatkin's opportunities in the army were limited, he, like Skobelev, became an outspoken advocate of Russian nationalism. As the full title implies, *Russia for the Russians* was a continuation of his work as a soldier and Minister of War. Russia's spiritual goals were at the same time military objectives (for example the unification of the Slavs and the expansion of the empire). Though Kuropatkin addressed a wide range of social problems such as the national minorities, the agricultural question, and industrialization, he did so only in regard to their spiritual, moral, and physical effect on the masses, who comprised the source of the nation's fighting strength.

Several years after the publication of *Russia for the Russians* Kuropatkin returned to active service. In 1915, through the influence of General M.V. Alekseev, he was appointed head of the Corps of Grenadiers and later, Commander of the 5th Army. From February to July 1916, Kuropatkin served as Commander of the Northern Front. In July he returned to Turkestan to crush a national uprising. He remained there as Governor General until the February Revolution, when he was arrested and sent to St. Petersburg as a political prisoner. He was soon released by a decree of

the Provisional Government. Kuropatkin refused to join the Whites in the Civil War and declined an invitation by the French ambassador to emigrate. Instead, the former minister retired to his family estate, Sheshuvino, in Pskov province, where he established an agricultural school and worked as a secondary school teacher. Kuropatkin was murdered by bandits on his estate on 16 January 1925.⁷⁵

Conclusion

In both career and disposition, Kuropatkin was the opposite of the commander in whose shadow he lived. Skobelev had good timing in death and in war. When he died, his career was certainly at an impasse. The new tsar would not tolerate his restlessness, insubordination, or perhaps even his brilliance. Had Skobelev lived, it is doubtful that he could ever have satisfied the promise shown in youth or kept the public attention he cherished. His death preserved his youthful and heroic image for several generations.

But what exactly was the extent of Skobelev's brilliance? Because of his early death, we shall never know for sure. Yet what was seen as brilliance was, on the one hand, his flashiness, white suits, a dissipated lifestyle, and a passionate temperament; he was supremely glamorous. On the other hand, Skobelev's reputation was the result of victories which, while not insignificant, involved either greatly outnumbered Turcoman tribesmen or the decaying, inefficient Turkish army. He never encountered the modern armies of Germany or Austria, or more to the point, he never commanded ill-equipped, demoralized, and outnumbered Russian troops against more than a hundred thousand well-trained Japanese soldiers.

Like Skobelev, Kuropatkin possessed both bravery and talent. Unlike Skobelev, Kuropatkin was cool and patient, neither restless and flashy, nor haughty and insubordinate. He was modest, quiet, and religious, and by no means glamorous. Unlike Skobelev, he had the chance to prove himself. It is difficult to say whether a Skobelev would have fared better. Perhaps a Skobelev would have heeded Witte's advice and imprisoned Admiral Alekseev. Acting in such a manner, he might have unified the command, rapidly overcome Russia's inferior strategic position and severe early losses, and executed a brilliant victorious maneuver in the early days of the war. However, this type of dashing victory undoubtedly appeared more often in romantic novels than in reality and was accomplished more easily in battle against primitive, poorly armed forces than against Japanese cavalymen and machine guns. It is doubtful that even a Skobelev could have turned the war around in its early stages. However, if we remain unsure about how Skobelev might have fared in

the Russo-Japanese War, we can be fairly sure that he would never have reached as high a position as Kuropatkin. It was only because Kuropatkin—mild cool and polite—was nothing like Skobelev that he was able to win favor of the tsar' and become both Minister of War and commander in Manchuria.

Although Kuropatkin was no hero, the concept of hero worship continued to have great importance in our understanding of his life and times. One study of Skobelev explains "The Hero and His Worship" by the loss of faith in the dry, undynamic leadership of the tsar' and his inner circle, and society's need for a more inspirational, exciting symbol of authority.⁷⁶ The public's ability to find such a symbol in Kuropatkin, who, despite his intelligence, bravery, and talent, possessed few inspirational qualities, shows the extent of this general dissatisfaction. The aspiration for new, more dynamic leadership remained strong even among conservative elements of the population.

However, if some of the greatest lessons from the story of Skobelev's career come from an examination of the causes of exaggerated praise, those from Kuropatkin's story come from exaggerated criticism. He did not deserve the burden of full responsibility for the losses of the Japanese War or the deficiencies of his ministry. He made persistent efforts to reform the army. In Manchuria he conducted a logical, perhaps the only possible, strategy. Kuropatkin's career reveals several contradictions in the nature of the society and government in which he worked. These contradictions help us understand just why his position was so untenable, why he could do nothing right. In turn, they can help us understand some of the general questions about the army raised at the beginning of this essay.

The primary contradiction in the careers of both Kuropatkin and Skobelev stems from the tsar's attitude toward the talent and leadership capabilities of his subjects. Both Aleksandr III and Nikolai II were jealous of the outstanding ability and public visibility of the men who served them in high office. They were perhaps too insecure in their authority to favor a potential hero and consequently would not allow men of heroic capabilities to assume responsibilities of heroic proportions. This is one of the important reasons why Kuropatkin and not Skobelev had the opportunity to command all of Russia's forces in a major campaign.

Another important contradiction involves the status of the army officer, particularly his relationship to the tsar' and society. Studies investigating the literature and the social history of the officer corps suggest that the public stature of the Russian officer corps was at this time very low and declining.⁷⁷ This view must be modified: though with respect to the lower order of officers it may have been accurate, the army's leaders remained the most respected members of society. This was especially true in the

eyes of the tsar' whose predilection for soldiers gave the War Ministry a privileged political position. Although historians regard the Minister of Finance, Witte, and Ministers of the Interior Plehve and Stolypin as the most prominent and important of this epoch, the tsar' held his Ministers of War in the greatest esteem. This appreciation was most apparent in the time the tsar' made available to receive various ministers and in his social treatment of Kuropatkin. Witte himself said of Kuropatkin, ". . . as war chief he was destined to be the right hand of the ruler of an essentially military empire."⁷⁸

Ironically, this "special" status was a mixed blessing for a Minister of War. While the tsar' did not consider himself a bureaucrat-policeman such as Plehve, or a bureaucrat-business-manager such as Witte, he did consider himself the first soldier of the nation, and thus meddled in the daily routine of the ministry, making it more difficult for Kuropatkin than for the other ministers to develop a forceful, coherent, personal platform. (The same holds true for the grand dukes, who were almost all military men.) The other ministers were less frequently granted an audience but also less frequently interrupted.

Another general conclusion of military historians such as Peter Kenez and Alan Wildman has been that the professionalization of the officer moved him into a distinct class, with a subculture whose lifestyle separated him from the rest of the society.⁷⁹ They have seen this subculture's detachment from politics as its most interesting characteristic. In their opinion, the officers' lack of political sophistication contributed to the army's capitulation to the left in the revolutionary struggles of 1917.

The life of Kuropatkin sheds considerable light on the nature of officers' political sophistication. On the one hand, the general who had just completed eight years of service in remote Transcaspia and had never participated in politics proved an adept politician, currying the emperor's favor for several years and winning ministers to his Far-Eastern position. The army needed a politician to represent its interest at court, and Kuropatkin was able to fill this role. On the other hand, Sukhomlinov's notes illustrate the military leadership's lack of appreciation for any of Kuropatkin's political attempts to improve the officer corps or to modernize the military. The officers of the General Staff saw only his closeness to the emperor and his use of this intimacy to advance his own career. While a minister must practice politics, politics alienated Kuropatkin from the army. As a result, he would not get the assistance from the army he needed in the war, either in forming the most talented staff or in supporting his logical, if somewhat ill-executed strategy.

Another complication in the relationship between the military and politics is evident in the contrast between Kuropatkin's willingness to

participate in politics for the army's benefit and the conviction he shared with his colleagues that the use of the army should not be influenced by political considerations. Throughout his ministry, for example, Kuropatkin maintained that the state must not use the army as an internal police force to bolster the regime's weaknesses. This demoralizing function interfered with the army's duty to defend the nation. He carried the belief in the independence of the military from political considerations into his conduct of the Japanese War. In this respect, Kuropatkin was as naive in his distrust of the impact of political considerations on military strategy as his colleagues were in their distrust of a War Minister's political role. Unlike Plehve, Kuropatkin was fully aware of the stress a war would place on Russia's already unstable political condition. As early as January of 1903, he had written a memorandum to the tsar' which mentioned the internal instability of the country as a principal reason for avoiding war in the Far East.⁸⁰ Yet Kuropatkin proceeded with a policy of retreat that ignored political reality by placing an intolerable strain on Russia's fragile internal equilibrium. While his strategy may have been sound from a military perspective, it was completely unfeasible from a political perspective and contributed to the Revolution of 1905.

Finally, Kuropatkin faced institutional paradoxes inherent in Russian autocracy which were the bane of all ministers. While the tsar' surrounded himself with talented men to formulate the country's policies, he had no faith in them. He continually rejected their advice and undermined their credibility. Nikolai remained too independent from his ministers, and used them more efficiently as scapegoats than as advisors. This attitude hindered Kuropatkin's efforts to modernize the army, just as it had undermined the economic program of Witte and would later contribute to the demise of Styloypin's agricultural reforms.

If Nikolai did not respond to the pressing needs of the military as presented to him in the rational explanations of his ministers, it was because, as Kuropatkin had learned early in his ministry, it was the nature of Russian autocracy that it need not respond either to ministers or rationality. The tsar' of the early twentieth century was not of the school of Europe's enlightened monarchs of the eighteenth century. Ultimately the tsar' had faith only in his own judgment, conscience, prayer and an abstract notion of the Russian people, the peasants who loved their tsar' and would remain faithful to autocracy to the end. More importantly, he had a strong, irrational faith in the peasant soldiers who, through their orthodoxy, loyalty, hardiness, and numbers, could with their bayonets rival the modernized armies of the East or West.

Commanders such as Kuropatkin spent much of their lives leading these under-equipped, illiterate soldiers into battle, confronting the realities of war, the rapid military modernization of Russia's neighbors, and the

demoralizing influence of the army's internal police function. They could not afford to share Nikolai's extravagant delusions. Kuropatkin was not the boldest minister or the most progressive officer. Yet a lifetime of military service made him aware of the pressing technical, strategic, and moral needs of the army, while loyalties to Russia and the army compelled him to confront the tsar' and uninterested ministers with his concerns. Distracted by other issues, they ignored his imprecations. The tension between the tsar's apathy and the urgent need to modernize Russia's military practices alienated Kuropatkin and, indeed, all officers whose military experience and professional interests dictated the need for reform.

NOTES

¹ Sources for introduction: P. Kenez, "A Profile of the Pre-Revolutionary Officer Corps," *California Slavic Studies*, vii, 1973, pp. 121-58. A. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, Princeton, 1980. Note: All dates follow the Old-Style Calendar.

² A. Wildman, op. cit. p. 22.

³ See Hans Rogger, "The Skobelev Phenomenon: the Hero and his Worship," *Oxford Slavonic Studies*, ix, 1976.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64. Skobelev, as well as Kuropatkin, feared that foreign technicians and businessmen working inside Russia on railroads and other industrial projects sought to make the country vulnerable to external invasion. They also feared that Russians of foreign origin, Jews, and other non-Russian nationalities sympathized with these foreigners and weakened the country with their lack of patriotism.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁰ Kuropatkin's publications include: *Alzhriia*, St. Petersburg, 1877. *Kashgariia*, St. Petersburg, 1897. *Lovcha, Plevna: deistviia otryadov Generala Skobeleva*, St. Petersburg, 1885. *The Russian Army and the Japanese War*, 2 vols., New York, 1909. (Written originally as a government document, *Otchet Generala Ad'iutanta Kuropatkina* in 1906.) *Rossia dlia russkikh: zadachi russkoi armii*, St. Petersburg, 1910.

¹¹ With rare exceptions, Russia's military figures at the turn of the century were members of the General Staff. For a discussion of the General Staff and its rise to prominence following the Miliutin reforms, see M. Mayzel, "The Formation of The Russian General Staff," *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Sovietique*, xvi, 1975.

¹² In reconstructing Kuropatkin's life prior to his term as minister, I have used biographical articles from contemporary newspapers printed at the time of his appointment to the command of the Manchurian Army. *Novoe vremia*, St. Petersburg, February 9, 1904. *Russkie vedomosti*, Moscow, February 9, 1904.

¹³ S. Iu. Witte, *Vospominaniia*, 3 vols., ii, Moscow, 1960. p. 149.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁶ A. N. Kuropatkin. "Dnevnik A.N. Kuropatkina," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, ii, 1922. p. 44.

¹⁷ Witte, op. cit. ii. p. 153.

¹⁸ Witte's memoirs contain several references to his dissatisfaction with Kuropatkin. After Kuropatkin published his observations on the Russo-Japanese War, Witte responded with a

volume of vitriolic criticism. S.Y. Witte, *Vynuzhdennyie raziasneniia o voine s Iaponiei*. St. Petersburg, 1909.

- ¹⁹ Witte, op. cit. ii, pp. 154-155.
²⁰ Ibid., p. 154.
²¹ Ibid., p. 154.
²² Kuropatkin, loc. cit., pp. 45-6.
²³ P.A. Zaionchkovskii, *Samoderzhavie i russkaia armia na rubezhe XIX-XX stoletii*, Moscow, 1924. p. 62.
²⁴ Ibid., p. 68.
²⁵ Ibid., p. 71.
²⁶ Ibid., p. 71.
²⁷ Ibid., p. 72.
²⁸ Ibid., p. 72.
²⁹ Ibid., pp. 70-76.
³⁰ Ibid., pp. 70-76.
³¹ Kuropatkin, op. cit., pp. 11, 44.
³² Ibid., pp. 11, 13.
³³ Ibid., p. 25.
³⁴ Ibid., p. 26.
³⁵ Ibid., pp. 30, 33.
³⁶ Ibid., p. 11.
³⁷ Ibid., pp. 13, 26.
³⁸ Ibid., p. 26.
³⁹ Ibid., p. 13.
⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 12.
⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 27, 40.
⁴² A.N. Kuropatkin, *The Russian Army and the Japanese War*, i. p. 77.
⁴³ Zaionchkovskii, op. cit., p. 74.
⁴⁴ Kuropatkin, "Dnevnik," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, ii. pp. 73-74.
⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 74.
⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 74.
⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 43, 87.
⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 34, 43.
⁴⁹ James Judge, Plehve: *Repression and Reform in Imperial Russia*, Syracuse, 1983. pp. 154-174.
⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 154-174. Kuropatkin, op. cit., p. 45.
⁵¹ Kuropatkin, op. cit., p. 31.
⁵² Ibid., pp. 84-85.
⁵³ Ibid., p. 6.
⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 37, 38, 47. Wildman, op. cit., p. 20.
⁵⁵ Kuropatkin, op. cit., p. 55.
⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 56.
⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 48.
⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 48.
⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 50.
⁶⁰ Kuropatkin, op. cit., p. 111. Witte, op. cit., ii, pp. 156-157.
⁶¹ Zaionchkovskii, op. cit., p. 74.
⁶² V. Sukhomlinov, *Vospominaniia*, Berlin, 1924. p. 101.
⁶³ Witte, op. cit., ii, pp. 156-157.
⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 156.
⁶⁵ A.N. Kuropatkin, "Dnevnik," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, Moscow, 1924. pp. 85-87; Maria

Petrovna von Bock, *Reminiscences of My Father, Peter A. Stolypin* Metuchen, New Jersey, 1970. pp. 108-109.

⁶⁶ Witte, op. cit., pp. 128-129.

⁶⁹ Kuropatkin, op. cit., pp. 82-84.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 82-84.

⁷¹ P. N. Miliukov, *Political Memoirs: 1905-1917*, Ann Arbor, 1967. p. 30.

⁷² Sukhomlinov, op. cit., pp. 150-153.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 153.

⁷⁴ A.N. Kuropatkin, *Rossia dlia russkikh: zadachi russkoi armii*, St. Petersburg, 1910.

For a contemporary's discussion of the work see L.Z. Slonimsky, "Natsional'naya programma A.N. Kuropatkina," *Vestnik Evropy*, vi., Moscow, December, 1910.

⁷⁵ M. Pokrovskii, "Predislovie," (Preface to Kuropatkin's journal) *Krasnyi arkhiv*, ii, 1922. p. 5.

⁷⁶ Rogger, Skobalev, p. 69.

⁷⁷ Kenez op. cit., pp. 130-136, 157. John Bushnell, "The Tsarist Officer Corps: 1881-1914," *American Historical Review*, lxxvi, no. 4. October, 1981. pp. 753-755.

⁷⁸ Witte, op. cit., p. 115.

⁷⁹ See Kenez, op. cit., Wildman, "Tradition, Caste and Modernization," op. cit., Raymond Garthoff, "The Military as a Social Force," *The Transformation of Russian Society*, Cyril Black, ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960.

⁸⁰ Kuropatkin, "Dnevnik," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, ii, pp. 13, 20.