

## Dragomirov on Training

*Mikhail Ivanovich Dragomirov, who was born in 1830, became one of the primary military thinkers in Russia during the long period of restructuring and reform following the Crimean War defeat. He is mentioned briefly by Baumann (chapter 8, p. 145) and Menning (chapter 11, p. 207). While not responsible for the restructuring of the Russian military as much as Miliutin, he was the primary theoretician for new methods of training and battlefield tactics. Dragomirov was responsible for popularizing one of Suvorov's maxims, "Train the troops only to do that which is necessary in combat". He advocated an idea of war which saw conflict not as the movement of chess-like, mechanical movement, but of deadly struggle between two living forces.*

*The following is an excerpt from his essay on military training and education. After discussing the necessity of 1) not emphasizing useless parade-ground drill, 2) the importance of habit in being skilled at anything, he goes on...*

Everything that happens in battle and in war can be divided into two kinds: the first is all that we do to subject the enemy to our will, the second is everything the enemy does, to subject us to his will. It needs no explaining that it is just as useful to make the former subject to the force of habit as it is dangerous to do the same with the latter. Everybody knows that the agents are the same for both ourselves and the enemy: the shell, the bullet, the bayonet and all that we undertake to turn these agents to the purposes for which they were intended. At the top of the list of these measures is of course: 1) obedience, as the one and only condition under which the realization of the thoughts and will of one by the actions of many is possible; then 2) the ability not only to desire, but also to be able to carry out this united will, that is the habit of mass movement and mass action by individuals. Higher than all of this is the willingness to suffer and die, that is, self denial: Self denial justifies obedience, self denial makes the worst yoke bearable, it makes the heaviest load seem light; self denial gives the power to endure to the very end, to make the ultimate sacrifice of love to the fatherland, like that wonderful Bible verse, according to which there is no higher love than that which lay's down its life for its friends.

How does one have to act to induce the right habits and avoid the wrong ones? Let's begin with self denial. First, self denial cannot be taken, only given. Wherever a man loves his fatherland or his unit; wherever as a consequence the common object is his personal object, wherever an insult to or a failure of his fatherland, his unit becomes a personal insult, a personal failing – then he will not think twice about sacrificing himself for the good of the latter. How do we accomplish this? Take care of the soldier! Where he is cared for, he won't worry about his own well being, because he knows he is of value, and he knows that he won't be led to do pointless work or sacrificed for no reason. It is self evident that this does not mean that soldiers are to be spoiled. Feed him according to expectations, take care of him according to expectations, but also let him work and hold him tightly in your grip according to expectations<sup>1</sup>. The man of the masses admires power just as much as he holds lack of

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<sup>1</sup> I am translating from the German here, and the word is "Gesetzgemäß", literally, "according to the law", not "according to expectations". I strongly suspect that the Russian word is "zakonomerno", also literally "according to the law", but implying natural law and predictability, not legal law. I think the author is trying to say, do all this stuff, "according to predictable, expected and fair rules" or something like that.

character or arbitrariness in contempt. Thus, self denial cannot be taught, it can only be worked, that is, it must be sown and left to grow. Just as in any expression of the will, the personal example plays an enormous role: One works with the one who himself is willing to work and one follows into death only him, who himself is willing to die.

The declared enemy of self denial is self preservation, an enemy, however, which cannot be gotten rid of, as it is inexorably interwoven with self denial in every human being, it is therefore an enemy which must be fought. Actually these are not even two different forces, but opposite poles of the same force: the self denial of the individual is necessary for the self preservation of the masses; even in reference to the individual, by himself, the claim holds true, that he who is not capable of self denial has no right to self preservation. It is well known to all that those who love their lives too much do not enjoy the sympathy or the respect of their fellows.

Is it necessary to practice self preservation? We wouldn't bother with this question were it not for those who consider such a question silly in theory, but who, without realizing it, answer in the affirmative in practice by not only allowing training which promotes self preservation, but even consider such training necessary. For example we could talk about rehearsing how to retreat, how to use the terrain for protection, how to break off an attack after the signal to attack has been given, etc. etc. This is how we answer the question: Is it necessary to practice self preservation? It is not only not necessary, but quite the contrary, we must work against it as an attribute of man which is strong enough without and which, and this is the most important, is damaging to the goals of battle, because here the enemy finds an effective ally in subjecting us to his will.

Suvorov was as great as he was because he was ideally consistent in building his system on the foundation of self denial and of totally excluding everything which encouraged self preservation.

*Obedience:* Where there is self denial there will also be obedience. But obedience can be misunderstood, and that can be dangerous. The enemy seeks nothing else in battle than our obedience to him. What do all his actions mean, translated into words? From which thoughts do they stem? Only one: "Go away, or I will kill you!" So soldiers must be trained not only to obey, but to resist. His obedience should not be the obedience of a well-trained horse which can be ridden by both his master and his enemy, provided that enemy knows how to ride. A great opportunity to train such resistance is that which has a war-like character even in times of peace: guarding the post. The same soldier, who in the company, the battalion, the regiment etc. is totally subordinate to me, *does not dare* obey me as soon as he is on guard duty. This apparently unique exception to the principle of unconditional obedience to one's superiors is totally sufficient to train the force of tension in the character of the soldier, because it will come into use as often as he pulls guard duty. When you consider that the soldier on guard duty is also confronted with the need to combat exhaustion, and sometimes (in the case of fire, flood or an attack) the instinct of self preservation, that he is sometimes forced to answer the fateful question: shoot or not shoot, stab or not stab, that he is forced to do decide according to his personal assessment, on his own responsibility, without the slightest leadership or command from anybody. It is eminently clear that his thinking and the tension in his character must be trained in this way. Even without explanation it is understandable that only someone with a true and honest heart and a head in the right place can emerge from such a situation with honors. That is the importance of guard duty, and those who say that it is a

detriment to training are making a serious error. It does an irreplaceable service in education, without which even the most thorough training is for not<sup>2</sup>.

*The Bayonet:* Carrying out the jabs of the bayonet must become a solid habit for the soldier, the more so, the better. He must estimate the distance from which he must thrust the bayonet into its target without forethought; without forethought he must hit his mark; without forethought he must quickly pull the bayonet back. Any mistake in estimating the distance is much more dangerous than when shooting: in one case, you lose a bullet, in the other your head. It must become no less of a habit to endure the thrust directed at himself without the bat of an eye and without movement.

*Shooting:* The more a soldier is used to determining the range to target, setting the site, aiming and calmly pulling the trigger without thinking about it, the better. The more his will is trained to endure the effect of enemy fire, even better. The first habit can be trained by means of a simple course of marksmanship training (without great detail and without pedantry), the latter by practicing under the paths of live ammunition and by fire-training....[...]

*Translation: Mark R. Hatlie, using Freiherr von Tettau's German translation: Neue Folge Gesammelter Aufsätze von M. Dragomirov. Hannover, 1891.*

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<sup>2</sup> In a footnote here, Dragomirov complains at length about those who think all a soldier has to do is learn to shoot straight.