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# Ermolov - Proconsul of the Caucasus

By Michael Whittock

The Caucasus came to occupy a unique place in Russian life and literature during the first half of the nineteenth century. It provided an important theme for Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy and several lesser but still significant writers. It was also the breeding-ground of a "school" or "generation" of soldiers and administrators who were, for varying reasons (and often unconsciously), out of tune with official policy and who found among the wild mountains of the south an atmosphere of free thought and positive action which could not exist in the rigid pomposity of St. Petersburg or in the ennui of provincial garrison life. Some of these men came to the "warm Siberia" as political exiles, banished from the north for their suspected or proven hostility to the regime; some were romantic young officers who volunteered for the hard-worked and unfashionable Caucasian regiments, having been influenced by Pushkin's *Prisoner of the Caucasus* or the highly-colored novels of "Marlinsky"; some were men of small fortune in search of quick advancement who came to the south "with large hopes and small portmanteaux,"<sup>1</sup> prepared for death or glory; some had been banished for drunkenness, gambling, duelling, and similar misdemeanors. For those sent south as "transgressors," the punishment varied: a civilian might remain a civilian or be forced into the army as a private soldier, an officer might be reduced to private or NCO or allowed to keep his rank. But whatever category these men came into, they were all, with very few exceptions, members of the *dvoryanstvo*, the land-owning and serf-holding nobility, and this common social origin bound them together, giving them in time a remarkable *esprit de corps*, a "Caucasian" outlook.

This spirit first developed during the period from 1816 to 1827, when Aleksei Petrovich Ermolov was Russian commander -in-chief in the Caucasus and ambassador-extraordinary to the Persian court. General Ermolov assumed his command at a time when Russian supremacy in the Caucasus was in great danger; Tsar Alexander's pre-occupation with the European peace settlement had encouraged Turkey and Persia to attempt, by subversion and force of arms, the re-conquest of territories they had lost to Russia in the recent past. Christian Georgia was again threatened with a Moslem invasion; in the northern Caucasus, the thin and scattered units (mostly local Cossacks) manning the defense cordons along the Terek and Kuban rivers were under continual harassment by raiding bands of Moslem tribesmen—Adygs (Circassians) on the Kuban and the Black Sea Coast, and Chechens and Lezgins along the Terek and in the mountain districts of Dagestan.

Ermolov, only forty years of age at the time of his Caucasian appointment, had already made a brilliant military career for himself. He had been decorated on the field by Suvorov while still in his teens; at twenty he was a colonel. At the fall of Paris in 1814 he commanded both the Russian and Prussian Guards, and with the deaths of Kutuzov and Bagra-tion he became the most illustrious and popular soldier in the Empire.

By a systematic and subtle combination of force and intrigue, cruelty and justice, threats and blandishments, superb tactical skill and cynical diplomacy, Ermolov restored Russian hegemony in the Caucasus in a very short time. He built a line of strong fortifications along the

<sup>1</sup> Lermontov, "Kavkazets" (1841).

Sunzha river, branching south from the Terek to protect the exposed flank of the Georgian Military Road and reaching down into the densely-wooded hills of hostile Chechnia. Massive stone forts were situated at strategic points in this line, forts with characteristic names like *Groznyaya* (Menacing), *Burnaya* (Stormy), and *Vnezapnaya* (Unexpected), provocatively established in territory where the raiders had so far moved freely, and serving as forward bases for the Russian punitive columns that went out from time to time to burn the dwellings and crops of "irreconcilable" communities. In Chechnia the timber was cut back from either side of the forest tracks, so that convoys and troops passing along them were out of gunshot; the cut timber was used for fuel and for building. Ignoring the formalities of diplomacy whenever it suited him, Ermolov convinced the Persians that it would be the height of folly for them to come to grips with him. "My grim visage always showed pretty clearly what I felt," he wrote of his negotiations in Teheran, "and when I spoke of war, I gave the impression of a man ready to set his teeth in their throats . . . Whenever more reasoned arguments were lacking, I relied on my wild beast's muzzle, gigantic and terrifying figure and wide throat—for they were convinced that anyone who could shout so vociferously must have good and weighty reasons."<sup>2</sup>

"Yarmul" (as the tribesmen called him) soon made himself feared, hated and respected throughout the Caucasus. He crushed all opposition to Russian rule by the merciless application of fire and sword; he stamped out the slave trade by the simple method of hanging all who dealt in it; he permitted no racial discrimination or religious intolerance, and insisted that the given word of a Russian official be scrupulously kept. Behaving as a classic imperialist in the field, Ermolov presented quite a different picture when he was at his administrative seat of Tiflis. There he gradually gathered around him a "family" of talented and enlightened assistants, civilian and military-Georgians and Russians, Moslems as well as Christians. There was Griboedov, author of the immortal *Woe from Wit*, special envoy to the Shah, intimate of Pushkin, and a revolutionary conspirator; there was Griboedov's father-in-law, the Georgian prince Alexander Chavchavadze, a poet and soldier who combined in himself "the scepticism of Voltaire and the ardor of the Georgian national bards."<sup>3</sup> Ermolov's chief of staff, Velyaminov, was an organizer of genius and a military thinker of some originality: cold, severe, and withdrawn where his chief was bluff and hearty, Velyaminov inspired the respect rather than the affection of his subordinates, but he was indispensable by virtue of his amazing grasp of the terribly complex social, political, economic and military aspects of the Caucasian situation.

The Georgian capital in Ermolov's time became the intellectual as well as the political center of the Caucasus. A well-appointed officers' club was supplied with the leading west-European and Russian newspapers and reviews; in 1819 the first Georgian-language literary journal was founded. Ermolov himself was by no means the conventional rough, semi-educated soldier, but a man of wide culture and a fluent linguist, greatly influenced by the ideas of the Encyclopédistes; a writer of philosophical verse, a skilled Latinist who always kept his Livy close at hand, and who named his two sons Severus and Claudius.

Ermolov was an incorruptible man of simple, even Spartan habits, careless of his own safety and comfort but always watchful for the well-being of his troops; disliking formality and protocol, he addressed his men as "comrades," even in written orders, and made a point of never receiving anyone while seated, even if his visitor were a private soldier.

<sup>2</sup> J. F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, London, 1903.

<sup>3</sup> M.V. Nechkim, *Grihoedov i dekabristy*, 2nd ed., Moscow, 1951, p. 205.

This democratic behavior from a person of Ermolov's exalted rank was unknown in the Russian army, and while it endeared him to his men, it deepened official suspicions of his political radicalism. He was never afraid to speak his mind to his superiors, and anecdotes illustrating his caustic wit were widespread. Offered promotion by Alexander I, he asked the Tsar to "make him a German" (i.e. one of the influential foreigners and Baltic barons who won easy preferment at court and in the army). He referred to the official historian of the campaign of 1812 as the greatest fabulist since Krylov; and he described Paskevich (his successor in the Caucasus, who was a rambling and hesitant speaker and an ungrammatical writer) as a man who "talked in commas and wrote without them." Once, at an inspection by the ultra-reactionary Count Arakcheev—the most powerful man in the Russian Empire during Alexander's last years—the count informed Ermolov that his opinion of the artillery drawn up for review would depend on the condition of its horses. "It's a pity, your Excellency," replied Ermolov (himself an artilleryman), "that officers' reputations must depend on brutes."<sup>4</sup>

Information about the "dangerous" tendencies in the Caucasian corps was slow in reaching St. Petersburg, where the authorities were chiefly concerned with military conquests in the south; but as the Caucasus became more settled under Ermolov's draconian rule and a civil administration began to function, greater attention was paid to the question of the commander-in-chiefs popularity, influence and independent attitudes. Alexander I (who, in the early days of his liberal period, had protected Ermolov to a certain degree) now became alarmed. "There are rumors," he wrote to his brother Nicholas, "that a pernicious spirit of free thought, or liberalism, is spreading— or at least developing—among the troops; that in both armies as well as in the independent corps there are secret societies or clubs in different places, with hidden missionaries to propagate their gospel—Ermolov . . . and many other generals, colonels and regimental officers."<sup>5</sup>

In fact, many Russian officers, particularly those of Guards regiments, had come home from the Napoleonic campaigns strongly affected by western European ideas and political institutions—a powerful leaven for the liberal and humanitarian views which many of these young men had already adopted from the writings of Radischchev and others questioning the morality of serfdom. Moreover, the army as a whole had its special grievances: expecting an improvement in their condition as a reward for honorable service, the rank and file found themselves exposed to the brutalities and stupidities of the Arakcheev regime. A wave of hatred and revulsion swept through the army, particularly in the Guards regiments with their tradition of palace conspiracy which subsequently were to form the backbone of the insurgent forces in the outbreak of December 1825.

The Decembrists had expected the support of Ermolov and his Caucasian troops, though there is no evidence that the general was implicated in the conspiracy; but Ermolov, in spite of his obvious sympathy and frequent practical help for opponents of the regime, kept himself and his regiments aloof from the secret societies. When news of the rising reached him, he warned Griboedov and some other deeply-involved members of his staff to burn any incriminating papers. During the investigations of the uprising, vague evidence did come to light of the existence of a "Caucasian Society" of conspirators, but there was insufficient detail for Nicholas I to take action against Ermolov.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the courier who came to arrest

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 580, note 294.

<sup>5</sup> I.L. Andronikov, *Lermontov v Gruzii v 1837 godu*, Moscow, 1955, pp. 205-6.

<sup>6</sup> M.V. Nechkina, *Dvizhenie dekabristov*, Moscow, 1956, II, 109-112.

was warned by several officers never to show his face in the Caucasus again is an indication of the views of Ermolov's immediate associates. Probably the new Tsar was afraid to hazard his luck in such a shaky situation, where the temper of the regiment could mean success or failure for him; but the time soon came when Nicholas felt strong enough to settle with Ermolov. In 1826 the Persians invaded Transcaucasia without prior declaration of war; the repeated appeals of the Russian commander (who had foreseen such action) for reinforcements were ignored by the Tsar. The Russian army in the Caucasus was taken at a disadvantage, and the Persians' initial successes were the excuse for Nicholas to remove Ermolov from the command and replace him by the untalented but reliable Paskevich—only after the Persians had been driven back. Ermolov was ordered back to Russia, and never received active employment again.

The tragedy of Ermolov is partly a reflection of the general and inevitable failure of the *dvoryanstvo* as an instrument of social change, and partly a result of his own personality. His was a complex, subtle, and inordinately secretive character; he was a man of many faces—to Griboedov, who knew him as well as any man, he was "the modern sphinx";<sup>7</sup> to Pushkin, who admired him and hoped to write his biography, he was "the great charlatan."<sup>8</sup> There exists a striking analysis of Ermolov's character made by the director of Nicholas' secret police, who kept the Caucasian commander-in-chief under close surveillance. "Nothing has any influence on Ermolov except his own vanity," he writes, "He *sometimes* permits certain of his admirers to speak the truth to him, but he never follows their advice. The more intelligent the man beside him, the less influence he has, so that no-one can say he is guided by anyone else. Ermolov has the unusual gift of binding to himself—unconditionally, like slaves—the people near to him . . . Officers and men truly love Ermolov for quite trifling things: on active service, he allows the soldiers, even when off duty, to wear loose trousers and jackets, and the officers to go about in foragecaps and to dress how they please . . . In time of need, he shares his last crust. Ermolov's great virtue is that he is not greedy for gain, and despises wealth."<sup>9</sup>

He was a master-schemer; as much diplomatist as soldier, his victories often due to his amazing grasp of the psychology of his opponent. It says much for his patriotism and self-control that he made no attempt to play the Napoleon, though, with his talents, his personal following, and the remoteness of his command from the capital, nothing would have been easier at the time of the December insurrection. At a time when Russian society was rapidly dividing into two hostile camps, Ermolov lost the trust of both. His political position is never quite clear: undoubted enemy of the autocracy as he was, nevertheless his relations with some of its leading protagonists remain ambiguous. A sceptic and rationalist of the Voltairean cast, it was perhaps to the eighteenth century that he belonged—the age of the benevolent despot.

In 1829, Alexander Pushkin was on his way to Armenia, hoping to serve as a volunteer with the Russian force then fighting the Turks. He made a long detour purposely to visit Ermolov, who was living in retirement on his estate near Orel. "He received me with his usual kindness," writes the poet, "At the first glance, I found not the slightest resemblance to his portraits, which are generally painted in profile. A round face, fiery gray eyes, stiff gray hair. The head of a tiger on the torso of a Hercules. His smile is unpleasant because it is unnatural.

<sup>7</sup> M.V. Nechkina, *Griboedov i dekabristy*, 2nd ed., Moscow, 1951, p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Pushkin, Diary entry for June 3, 1834.

<sup>9</sup> M.M. Medvedeva, "Novoe o Griboedove i dekabristakh", in *Literatur-noe Nasledstvo*, vol. 60, book I, Moscow 1956, pp. 485-6.

But when he meditates and frowns, he becomes beautiful, and definitely puts one in mind of the poetic portrait by Dawe . . . He seems to bear his inaction with impatience.’’<sup>10</sup>

Ermolov was left inactive in Russia until his death in 1861, at the age of eighty-nine, but his influence remained paramount in the Caucasian army, despite many attempts to eradicate it.

<sup>10</sup> Pushkin, *Puteshestvie v Arzrum* (1836)