The Cavalry Maiden

Journals of a Russian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars

Nadezhda Andreevna Durova

OVERVIEW

The Cavalry Maiden is the English title of *Zapiski kavalerist-devitsya*, a memoir originally published in Russian in 1836. Its author, Nadezhda Andreevna Durova (1783–1866), disguised herself as a young man and served in the Russian cavalry from 1806 until 1816. During that time she fought in a number of battles and was awarded the St. George Cross for valor. The Russian ruler, Tsar Alexander I, became aware of her true gender but was so impressed with her devotion to military life that he let her continue the masquerade for almost a decade.

Twenty years after she retired (at a rank equivalent to captain), Durova decided to become a writer. Utilizing personal journals she had kept during her military service, she created a lively account of her adventures on and off the battlefield. *The Cavalry Maiden* quickly became a success, and over the next few years, Durova published several works of popular fiction as well as additional autobiographical material. Then she stopped writing as abruptly as she had begun. Her last quarter-century was spent quietly in a small town, where she was regarded as a good-natured eccentric.

Durova's fascination with the military began in childhood. Her father was a cavalry officer, and she spent her early years in the company of soldiers, learning about horses, weapons, and camp life. When her father left the military, the young Durova found herself restricted to a "female" life that seemed empty of adventure or meaning. Although she resented her mother's attitudes and expectations, Durova dutifully married at the age of eighteen and soon had a son.

Nothing is known of Durova's five-year marriage. Her autobiographical introduction to *The Cavalry Maiden* omits this period entirely, claiming that she ran away from home to join the army at sixteen. The rest of the story proceeds roughly according to fact, however. Durova adopted a male persona and went on to serve in three regiments of the Russian "light cavalry," a type of unit that specialized in communications, reconnaissance, raiding, and swift skirmishes. Light cavalry operations required great skill on horseback as well as proficiency with personal weapons such as the sword and pistol.

Durova saw combat action against the French in East Prussia in 1807, during the French invasion of Russia in 1812, and in Russia's European campaign of 1813–14. Her accounts of these experiences depict the chaos and confusion of the battlefield, as well as the role that fortune plays in war, and her narrative provides an unusual perspective on combat, combining masculine and feminine points of view. In both her writing and her life, Durova blurred gender distinctions, although she maintained a male persona for the most part. In *The Cavalry Maiden*, a great deal of narrative attention is devoted to her observations of fellow soldiers, her travel adventures, and her love of nature.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Durova's military service took place during the Napoleonic Wars, a series of conflicts between France and various coalitions formed by other European powers. During the revolutionary wars in France, which began in 1792 and ended around 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte recaptured some parts of revolutionary France (Toulon in 1793 and Paris in 1795) and annexed territory in several other countries. Although his attempts to invade Britain failed at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, Napoleon was more successful on the continent, winning major battles in 1805 and 1806 against a coalition formed by Russia, Austria, and Prussia. He completed his victory over the coalition in 1807 at the Battle of Friedland, and the Treaty of Tilsit established an alliance between France and Russia. For her heroism at the Battle of Friedland—her first major combat engagement—Durova earned the St. George Cross and a promotion to the equivalent of second lieutenant.

Napoleon's successes continued for a time, but by 1812 his fortunes had begun to decline, and relations between France and Russia had deteriorated. The French army invaded Russia in June of that year with about 500,000 men and reached the outskirts of Moscow by September. The Russian army put up a valiant defense at the Battle of Borodino, where Durova was wounded in the leg by a cannonball. Borodino was the bloodiest engagement of the Napoleonic Wars, resulting in more than seventy thousand casualties.

✣ *Key Facts*

Conflict:
Napoleonic Wars

Time Period:
Late 18th–early 19th Centuries

Genre:
Memoir

La Pucelle! (1907) by Frank Craig portrays Joan of Arc leading her army to important victories during the Hundred Years' War. © ERICH LESSING / ART RESOURCE, NY

Although the French forces succeeded in taking Moscow, the retreating Russians had set fire to the city, and the tsar refused to surrender. In October, Napoleon began a disastrous retreat, during which his army was decimated by freezing weather, lack of supplies, and frequent guerrilla attacks. Although the Napoleonic Wars continued until 1815, when France was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, the failed invasion of Russia marked a crucial turning point. The epic scope of the Napoleonic Wars was captured by Leo Tolstoy in the great Russian novel *War and Peace* (1869).

Hundreds of military memoirs were written by officers in Napoleon's army, and the genre became very popular in early nineteenth-century France. As printing became cheaper and literacy rose, even common soldiers began to publish their memoirs, and according to Yuval Noah Harari's "Military Memoirs: A Historical Overview of the Genre from the Middles Ages to the Late Modern Era," many memoirists of lower rank aimed "to dispel the myths and official narratives of war, and retell the story of war as the story of the soldiers' experiences rather than as the story of operational maneuvers, strategy, and politics." The vogue for military reminiscences also took hold in Russia, and according to *Russia through Women's Eyes: Autobiographies from Tsarist Russia*, edited by Toby W. Clyman and Judith Vowles, "the military memoir—a personal account of military engagements and campaigns, mainly of the Napoleonic Wars and 1812, was one of the first types of autobiographical writing to appear in print [in Russia]." By connecting historical events with personal experiences, military memoirs promoted the acceptance of autobiography.

THEMES AND STYLE

The military memoir was, of course, considered a masculine domain—so it was rather ironic that by utilizing the genre, Durova became the first Russian woman whose autobiography was published in her own lifetime. Clyman and Vowles point out that, in *The Cavalry Maiden*, Durova "extended the boundaries of the military memoir by her pronounced emphasis on herself, adding pages on her childhood and focusing on the regiment's daily life and her impressions of the places and people she encountered during her travels with her regiment." As Durova explains in her narrative, what seemed "ordinary" and unremarkable to the other soldiers seemed to her "quite extraordinary" and worthy of recording.

Unlike male memoirists of the Napoleonic Wars, Durova was more interested in sharing her observations than in recounting her exploits. Although she was apparently intrepid in battle, putting herself at risk to defend or rescue comrades, as an author she makes her own boldness a matter of interest rather than a point of pride. In *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender*, Susan Bell and Marilyn Yalom characterize Durova as "a diffident and amused narrator who describes her masculine persona as heroic by accident [and] speculates on her fearlessness almost as

an external phenomenon." At the same time, however, Durova's accounts of battle are filled with dramatic energy and telling details.

Although most of *The Cavalry Maiden* takes place in a military setting, and Durova's narrative persona is that of a soldier, the central theme of the work is concerned not with war but with personal freedom. She writes that only other young women—"you who have to account for every step, who are eternally sheltered and eternally guarded, God knows from whom or what, from the cradle to the grave"—can understand "the joyous emotions that overwhelm me when I see deep forests, vast fields, mountains, valleys, and streams and realize that I can roam them all with no one to answer to and with no fear of anyone's prohibition." To retain this liberty she is more than willing to risk her life in battle and suffer the difficulties that come with living in disguise. Although her impersonation isolates her from close relationships and traps her in a kind of perpetual adolescence, it also frees her to live an adventurous life.

Durova does not romanticize military life and often records mistakes, misfortunes, and even corruption. She is never polemical, however, and generally exhibits good humor, writing in a brisk, direct, and personable style. "As a woman and an outsider," translator Mary Zirin points out in her introduction to *The Cavalry Maiden*, Durova can "laugh at the manifestations of masculine ambition and the gamecock ways of Russian officers." Her playfulness extends to the grammatical level of her writing, which, in Russian, alternates the use of masculine forms (when she talks to others) and feminine forms (when she refers to herself in narration). Because English is not a gendered language, however, this clever effect is lost in translation.

THE MAID OF ORLÉANS

It seems certain that Joan of Arc is not only the most famous woman warrior in history but also the most famous cross-dresser. Yet for many admirers, Joan is known more for her religious visions than for her role in one of Europe's most important conflicts.

Although the Hundred Years' War took place from 1337 to 1453, it was interrupted by a period of peace that lasted from 1389 until 1415. Then England's Henry V invaded France, and hostilities began again. Following a decade of military success in France, the English army laid siege to the city of Orléans in 1428, and the French found themselves on the brink of a decisive defeat.

Joan was an illiterate peasant, then only seventeen years old, who felt inspired by God to drive the English from France. After making her way to Orléans, she swiftly lifted the siege. She went on to achieve further political and military victories, but her great popularity—particularly the adoration she received from the common people—raised concern among the nobility and the leaders of France's powerful Catholic Church. In 1431, Joan was tried for heresy and burned at the stake, but her conviction was later reversed by the church and she was made a saint.

In response to the politically motivated charges against her, Joan raised a religious defense, always maintaining that she was following God's will. Her passion inspired the French people and led to the eventual defeat of England. Joan was often referred to during her life as *la Pucelle*, "the Maiden," and later as the Maid of Orléans. Among the documents that provide insight into Joan's life and death is the contemporaneous *Chronique de la Pucelle* (also known as the *Chronique de Cousinot)*, which records a variety of events that took place during the second quarter of the fifteenth century.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

In "Gender Trial and Gothic Thrills: Nadezhda Durova's Subversive Self-Exploration," Andreas Schonle offers both a survey of critical commentary on Durova and a close reading of *The Cavalry Maiden* that explores Durova's approach to gender not only through her use of language but also through themes such as fearlessness and self-esteem. Schonle challenges the view—which he sees as prevailing in critical literature—that Durova wanted to become a man, noting that "even a cursory look at [her] behaviour suggests that she hardly attempts to conform [to] male standards." He offers instead a nuanced argument that Durova sought to "develop a distinct gender identity" and in so doing, to offer a "redefinition of female identity."

Although gender issues are a frequent topic in contemporary discussions of Durova and her work, in her own time Durova's cross-dressing seems to have been regarded largely as either an entertaining eccentricity or an expression of ardent patriotism. *The Cavalry Maiden* was well received, and Durova was briefly a literary celebrity, but the work soon faded into relative obscurity. Several romanticized accounts of Durova's life appeared in the early twentieth century, as revolutionary spirit developed in Russia, and a serious biography was published in 1912 by A. Saks, a colonel serving in one of Durova's old regiments.

In 1960 a Soviet version of *The Cavalry Maiden* appeared, omitting more than half of the original without explanation. The introductory material about Durova's childhood was retained, along with her first year in the cavalry, then just the months from September 1806 to December 1807. This abridgment was reprinted several times, and it was not until 1983, the bicentennial of Durova's birth, that the original text again became available in Russia.

Mary Zirin's English translation of *The Cavalry Maiden*, published in 1988, brought fresh attention to Durova and her work. In a review for *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Linda Edmondson notes that while the memoir would once have been disregarded as a curiosity, "now Durova can be read in the context of a growing literature about women in various epochs and in widely differing cultures who felt their ascribed role in society to be so constricting that it impelled

This 1913 Franz Roubaud painting depicts the bloodiest single-day battle of the Napoleonic Wars, the Battle of Borodino, in which Nadezhda Andreevna Durova was wounded in the leg by a cannonball. © BATTLE OF BORODINO ON 26TH AUGUST 1812, 1913 (OIL ON CANVAS), ROUBAUD, FRANZ (1856–1928) / STATE CENTRAL ARTILLERY MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

them to risk life, limb, and public ridicule in pursuit of an autonomous existence." In *The Women's Review of Books*, Julie Wheelwright contends that Durova should not be regarded as an anomaly but rather as part of "a vibrant tradition of female cross-dressing." Wheelwright suggests that the tales of the 'woman warrior' often preserved in oral cultures "have laid the groundwork for an understanding and acceptance of stories like Durova's."

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Cynthia Giles

COMMANDO

A Boer Journal of the Boer War

Deneys Reitz

OVERVIEW

The first and best-known volume in South African politician Deneys Reitz's autobiographical trilogy, *Commando* tells the story of Reitz's experiences "on commando" as a Boer in the Second Boer War. The son of the Transvaal's state secretary, Reitz was only seventeen when the South African Boer republics (including the Transvaal and the Orange Free State) declared war on Great Britain in 1899. He was officially too young to enlist, but Transvaal president Paul Kruger waived the age requirement for him. He joined the Pretoria Commando several days before war was declared and remained in the field until the end. Because he changed commandos several times, Reitz saw more service than most Boer soldiers, including the first action of the Natal campaign, the siege of Ladysmith, and the battle of Spion Kop. A "bitter-ender," he fought in the later guerrilla war in the West Transvaal under Koos De La Rey and accompanied General Jan Smuts's raid into Cape Colony in 1901.

At war's end Reitz, his father, and his four brothers were among the "irreconcilables" who refused to sign the oath of allegiance required by each Boer soldier as part of the peace terms. They went into self-imposed exile in Madagascar. Reitz returned to South Africa in 1906 at the request of Jan Smuts and his wife.

Although Reitz wrote *Commando* during the three years he spent in Madagascar, it was not published until 1929. Reitz continued his autobiography in *Trekking On* (1933) and *No Outspan* (1943). The three volumes of the trilogy were published as a single volume, *Adrift on the Open Veldt: The Anglo-Boer War and Its Aftermath, 1899–1943*, in 1999 in conjunction with the centennial of the Second Boer War.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

The discovery of gold in the Boer republic of the Transvaal in 1886 exacerbated long-standing tensions between the Boer republics and Great Britain's South African colonies. By September 1899 relationships had disintegrated to the point that Britain began organizing to send an overseas expeditionary force to South Africa.

Convinced that Britain was prepared to destroy the Boer republics, the presidents of Transvaal and the Orange Free State decided to seize the military initiative. Both the Transvaal and the Orange Free State had citizen militia systems in place. Every male between the ages of sixteen and sixty was part of a ward commanded by a *veldcornet*. Wards were subdivisions of a district, which was led by a commandant. Each district was responsible for fielding a unit of mounted riflemen, known as a commando. The Transvaal could raise sixty thousand men and counted on another sixty thousand from the Orange Free State. They hoped that the forty thousand at Cape Dutch would rise and join them if war was declared.

On October 9, 1899, the Transvaal issued an ultimatum calling for British troops to withdraw from the Transvaal's border by October 11. The British left their troops in place and the Transvaal declared war the next day. Boer commandos invaded the British colonies of Cape Colony and Natal and besieged British garrisons at the border towns of Mafeking, Kimberly, and Ladysmith.

The British forces under the leadership of General Redvers Buller outnumbered the Boer armies by roughly seven to one. They expected to steamroll over the unpaid army of Boer farmers. Buller's professional solders, however, were unable to relieve the besieged garrisons and suffered humiliating defeats at the Stromberg on December 10, at Magersfontein the following day, and at Colenso on December 15.

Three days after the end of what became known as "Black Week," war hero Lord Frederick Roberts was appointed to replace Buller. He landed in Cape Town on January 10, 1900. Reinforcements arrived from Australia, Canada, and Ireland. The first of the besieged garrisons was relieved in mid-February. Roberts soon turned the tables and invaded the Boer republics. The British annexed the Orange Free State in May and the Transvaal in June.

The bitter-enders fought on even after the republics were in the hands of the British. Boer leaders switched to guerrilla tactics that made the best use of their strengths: mobility, self-sufficient units, and knowledge of the terrain. For two years Boer commandos made quick, destructive raids into Cape Colony with the aim of inciting the Cape Afrikaners to revolt. The most famous of these units was commanded by

✣ *Key Facts*

Conflict:
Second Boer War

Time Period:
Late 19th–early 20th Centuries

Genre:
Memoirs