

## Mobilization Measures and Informing the Peasants of the Smolensk Province About the Events of the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878

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### **Abstract**

*This article reports on mobilization activities and coverage of the events of the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 among the peasants of the Smolensk province. The main attention is paid to the activities of the Smolensk provincial military presence and peasant self-government bodies in organizing mobilization and informing the local population about the course of hostilities. The study of these issues made it possible to determine the attitude of the Smolensk peasants to the war, and to identify the characteristic practices of the local population in providing material assistance to the families of the mobilized. The author concludes that for the Smolensk peasants, the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 was closely connected with the idea of the liberation of the Slavic peoples of the Balkan Peninsula. The positive attitude of the peasants towards the war contributed to the implementation of mobilization measures by the provincial administration on the territory of the province.*

**Keywords:** *Russian-Turkish War Of 1877-1878, Mobilization, Provincial Military Presence, Peasant Self-Government, Volost, Volost Foreman, Village Headman, Peasant Community*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Russian historiography, the study of the Russian-Turkish wars of the XVIII-XIX centuries is given serious importance. The Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878, which led to the liberation of the Slavic peoples of the Balkan Peninsula from the rule of the Ottoman Empire, is also in the focus of researchers' attention. Pre-revolutionary historiography studied mainly the military actions of the tsarist army on the Balkan Peninsula and diplomatic correspondence during the war [1,2, 3]. Pre-revolutionary researchers also touched upon the attitude of the Russian population towards the army and soldiers who returned from combat operations. Thus, in the "Collection of materials on the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878 on the Balkan Peninsula" it was noted that residents of the city of Bialystok, Grodno province, welcomed soldiers who returned to their "former place of lodging cordially", understanding the importance of their feat in liberating the Slavs from Turkish rule [4, pp. 288-289].

Soviet historiography continued to study the key events of the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878, with an emphasis on the course of military operations and Russian foreign policy. Bialyaev's work analyzes the situation of the warring parties on the eve of the war and the course of hostilities in the Balkans [5]. I.I. Rostunov, studying the balance of forces between Russian and Turkish at different stages of the war, noted the broad support of various strata of Russian society for the actions of the army and the government [6].

In the works of L.I. Narochnitskaya and P.K. Fortunatov, the main attention is focused on the patriotic upsurge that swept Russian society. According to the authors, the war in Russia was perceived as the liberation struggle of the Slavic peoples from the Ottoman Empire [7, 8].

In modern historiography, there is an interest in the traditional problems of the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 [9, 10, 11, 12, 13]. At the same time, modern researchers are also interested in new stories. In particular, from the standpoint of the anthropological approach, pay great attention to the problems of perception of war by various strata of Russian society. E.A. Suchalkin concludes that the support of the Russian army in the war of 1877-1878 had a "massive character" [14, p. 53]. The fighting found a positive response among educated society and ordinary people, including peasants who participated in charity events for the needs of the army [14, p.53].

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L.V. Kuzmicheva focuses on the religious factor, considering it decisive for Russia's policy in the Balkans [15]. Of particular interest to our research is the article by N.V. Miku "The Peasantry and the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 (based on the materials of the Penza region)", which examines social programs of financial assistance to families of mobilized peasants. The author describes a campaign to collect donations in the form of things and clothes for wounded soldiers, in which the peasants took a very direct and active part [16. p. 117].

However, the involvement of peasants in support of the army, as well as their attitude to mobilization to the front, remains an almost unexplored lacuna in the history of the Second Eastern War of 1877-1878. The consideration of these plots seems to us very interesting from the point of view of clarifying the attitude of the peasants to the war.

The Russian army began a military campaign in April 1877. At that time, the Smolensk provincial conscription presence deployed mobilization measures for conscription in the province. During the war conscription stations were opened in the districts. If the collection point was located more than 25 versts from the place of residence of peasants subject to conscription for military service, the military presence carried out their delivery by horse-drawn carts, which were provided to the presence by the community for temporary use for mobilization activities. Monetary settlements with the community for the transportation of lower ranks were made by land institutions [17, p.3-4]. However, the peasants, realizing the importance of the cause of the liberation of the Slavic peoples from Turkish rule, voluntarily refused to receive monetary compensation. For example, the peasants of the Vorontsov volost of the Gzhatsky district, having put an "artillery grade" horse into the army, did not accept remuneration from the county administration for it. [18, p.44]. The peasants of the Spas-Nerazluchinsky volost of the Vyazemsky district also did the same. The police officer expressed gratitude to the members of the community for the selfless help to the army [18, p.43].

Officials of the peasant self-government were also involved in mobilization activities. Village headmen brought young members of the community to the assembly points who wanted to go to war [19, p.52].

According to the statistics of the Smolensk provincial military presence in 1877, 10,203 peasants were mobilized from the Smolensk province. On average, each district had about 850 mobilized [20, p.149]. At the same time, 226 mobilized were recognized as unable to perform military service for health reasons, and only 73 people who were to be sent to the army [20, pp.149,166-167], or 0.7% of the number of mobilized, did not appear at the recruiting station for unspecified reasons.

In general, the mobilization measures were widely supported by the peasantry, which was a reflection of the patriotic sentiments that prevailed among the people. Minister of Internal Affairs A.E. Timashev reported to Emperor Alexander II in April 1877 that "according to the general response of the governors, the reserve people gathered everywhere quickly and willingly" [21, p.51]. The Smolensk governor A.G. Lopatin also gave a positive assessment of the course of mobilization in the province, noting that people called up for service "appear at recruiting stations in a timely manner" [18, p.41].

The peasants were interested in military operations on the Balkan Peninsula. Village headmen regularly informed the peasants about the main events of the war. The village received information in the form of reprints from the Government Gazette. Literate peasants willingly read these telegrams and articles to their fellow villagers at village meetings [19, p. 52]. The head of the gendarmerie department of the Pskov province neighboring Smolensk region reported in his report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs that "the peasant population, excited by the rumored newspaper news <...>, acted deeply imbued with sympathy for the bleak situation of the Slavs of the Balkan Peninsula" [22, p.458].

The Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 remained in the peasants' memory, they well remembered the events of twenty years ago and at the end of the XIX century. According to the correspondent of the Ethnographic Bureau of Prince V.N. Tenishev in the Smolensk province, the peasants of Dorogobuzhsky district learned about the events that took place during the war from the volost chiefs and clergy. For this reason, they did not miss volost meetings and church services, seeking to obtain new information about the situation of the Russian army in the Balkans. Some members of the community, influenced by these messages, enlisted in the army as volunteers [23, p.1]. The villagers discussed the military situation at the front in all public places, including pubs,

where they gathered to relax and socialize. Being "tipsy", the peasants liked to embellish events and spread rumors about the fighting that did not correspond to reality. In taverns peasants spread rumors about the overthrow or murder of the sultan, about popular unrest in Turkey, which could lead to the defeat of the enemy [24, p.212].

It can be said that the peasants were well informed about the outside of events, about the battles and the heroes of the war, who in their imagination corresponded to the heroes of Russian folk tales.

Another source of information about the war for members of the community was "passers-by people who stayed with peasants for the night: soldiers, travelers, worshipers" [25, p.185]. In addition, peasants learned about the course of hostilities by going to the crafts in the cities, where they received information from more knowledgeable comrades, or from newspapers. Upon returning home, they took on the roles of informants and told long stories about the war among their fellow countrymen [25, p.185].

Soldiers' letters were an important source of information directly from the theater of operations. Literate peasants wrote letters to their relatives and fellow villagers. In them, they asked for the blessing of their parents and talked about the situation in the war. So, Mitrofan, a peasant of the Smolensk province, who got to the Caucasian front, in a letter to his family says: "Also, my parents, I inform you that I arrived at the place four hundred versts in the Caucasus, I am now standing in a camp near Kartz (near Karsem - GK) in Turkey and I see my death twenty versts away, and I just don't know my fate.; I hear Turkish bombs and see smoke and expect to go into battle hour after hour" [24, pp.201-202]. Participation in the war remained in the memory of its participants for the rest of their lives. Correspondents of the Ethnographic Bureau wrote about this. They recorded memories of the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 among the peasants of Novgorod, Vyatka, Penza and Smolensk provinces [25, p.185].

All the sources of information about the war listed above were external in nature, they were not direct participants in the events, except for those who wrote from the front. Another thing is the participants of the war who returned home as heroes.

The appearance of war participants in rural societies led to a change in the nature of the information received. Now, in addition to general messages, peasants at meetings received information about certain episodes of the war [25, p.185]. The message of soldiers returning from the war strengthened its support among the peasants, who reacted to the war as a military campaign to liberate Orthodox Christians from Turkish rule. A striking example of this attitude is the story of Andrei Sergeev, a peasant of Vyazemsky district of Izdeshkovo village, recorded by a correspondent of the Ethnographic Bureau V.N. Tenishev. At the end of the XIX century, a seasoned soldier made a rural career – his fellow villagers elected him headman. A. Sergeev told his countrymen: "Two years before the war, rumors began to spread among the people that the Turks were killing Christians <...> We knew that our father-tsar was merciful, we thought, and some said aloud: "Why does our father-tsar give his own to the Turks? "Well, Andrei Kuzmich, we have heard that the tsar began to send people slowly to fight there, yes, and in order, therefore, to irritate the Turks. It is known why the tsar cannot wage war himself" [26, pp. 3-4]. Similar opinions on the issue of the war with Turkey were voiced in other provinces of the Non-Black Earth Center [25, p.185]. At the same time, despite the support of the fighting, the peasants realized that "war is one of the greatest national disasters" [22, p.469].

A vivid expression of the just nature of the war in the eyes of the peasants was their attitude towards the soldiers who fought in the war and their families. The rural society helped poor peasants whose husbands or sons were at war. Donations to peasant women were made by the community in money or products, so that they would not beg in the village, going "to pieces" [24, p.205].

Thanks to the help of the community, women and their children, finding themselves without their breadwinners, could receive material support and food. Sometimes officials of the secular self-government refused financial assistance to members of the community because of the large number of arrears they had accumulated on redemption payments and government taxes. A.N. Engelhardt in letters "From the village" cites a case told by a poor peasant woman about the inaction and rudeness of a volost foreman. The woman

asked for help to the volost, where she was "shouted at. No, they say you get benefits, because your society has a lot of arrears." At the same time, the clerk threatened to throw the children into the grove, into the snow [24, p.205]. But such cases were not typical and illegal.

On June 25, 1877, a law was passed according to which the families of the lower ranks of the reserve and the soldiers of the state militia, called up for wartime service, received benefits. In October 1877, the Minister of Internal Affairs informed the governors that this law applies to all categories of military personnel caught up in the Russian-Turkish war. According to the law, the wife and children received a free room with heating from the village in which they lived, if they did not have a home [27, p.5, 7]. In addition, zemstvos were involved to help the peasants, who either gave out food rations of flour, cereals and salt, or gave out an appropriate amount of money to purchase these products. And although this amount was very burdensome for the zemstvos, it is known that in the Smolensk province they collected information about peasants in need and provided them with assistance [27, pp.83, 99, 133, 279]. At the same time, we must not forget that the guardianship of orphans and the poor was not just a duty of the peasant society, but a long-standing tradition. In addition, zemstvo budgets were formed mainly at the expense of salary fees from peasant lands, therefore, by providing material assistance to peasants, zemstvos played the role of a kind of mechanism for returning peasant money to the community.

During the war, the peasants of the Smolensk province had their favorite heroes, which included Russian generals and leaders of the Serbian uprising. According to the correspondents of the Ethnographic Bureau, the peasants respected generals of the tsarist army M.D. Skobelev and I.V. Gurko [25, p.187]. In the Smolensk province, community members of the Dorogobuzhsky District revered General M.D. Skobelev and his exploits [28, p. 13]. They depicted military operations and portraits of war participants on handicrafts. A.N. Engelhardt recalled that during the war, the local boxmaker Mikhail, who used to wear headscarves with images of flowers, birds and animals, now offered the peasants headscarves depicting General M.G. Chernyaev, hero of the Bosnian uprising Lazar Sochica and Prince Milan Serbian (Obrenovich), who declared war on Turkey. The following inscription was embroidered on the scarves: "the leaders and heroes of the Serbian uprising in Bosnia and Herzegovina, fighting for the faith of Christ and the liberation of the fatherland from the barbarians" [24, p.198]. Gathering together at a gathering, and looking at the images on the handkerchiefs, the peasants spoke with respect about General M.D. Skobelev: "This is Skobelev, the general, took Plevna. Here Skobelev himself stands and points with his finger at the soldiers in order to capture the gates to Plevna as soon as possible. There, you see the gate, there our soldiers are running. Here Osman Pasha is being led by the arms - he's crouched down!" [24, p. 203].

Summing up, we can say that the bodies of peasant self-government of the Smolensk province, their officials, despite some excesses, assisted the provincial military presence in carrying out mobilization measures. The peasants, considering the war to be a war of liberation and a war for the Orthodox faith, provided mass support to those who went to the front, and took care of the families of soldiers who needed support and assistance.

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