Shared Challenges, Unique Solutions: Russia and France in the Great War and After

France and Russia fought as allies against Germany and the other Central Powers in the Great War, but although both countries and their armies endured similar trials during the course of the conflict, Russian society collapsed into revolution following the armistice of December 1917, whereas French society survived long after the war officially ended on November 11, 1918. The conclusion that the reason for this lies in the idea that while there existed “a France” which could survive the war, there was no “Russia” capable of doing so (beyond the far-off and detached Tsar) is easiest to evince by way of comparison of the challenges shared by the French and the Russians during the war and, perhaps more importantly, in the examination of how differently each country viewed and handled those challenges.

In the first place, neither France nor Russia expected a long war of attrition such as the Great War turned out to be; nor, for that matter did the Central Powers. The French intended to “charge forward...to dislocate the ponderous German war-machine before it could carry out its plans,” (Horne 14), and the Russian Plan No. 19 hinged on the expectation that “the outcome of the war would be decided within six weeks,” (Stone 45). This optimism arose not out of any careful consideration of the distances or difficulties involved in waging war, but out of a correlation of ‘attack’ with ‘strength’ on the one hand, and ‘not attacking’ (whether in the form of defending a position or retreating) with ‘weakness’ on the other. This sentiment found its purest expression in the French *philosophie de Grandmaison*, and in the doctrines of the “military historians and General Staff theorists” of the Russian army (Stone 45). However, it is important to note that the French belief in all-out assault arose not out of a “disbelief in...men,” (Stone 45) as was the case for the Russians, but rather out of a *belief* in them, out of a belief that France was still *La Grande Nation* of old and *not* the nation of rash incompetents that waged the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

Understanding this difference is key to understanding why France survived the Great War while Russia did not; whether the French fought on the offensive or the defensive did not matter in the end, the central theme, that whatever the circumstances they must fight to the bitter end to erase the black mark against their national character, remained unchanged. From the opening clash with the Germans when “young men filled with a mighty lust for revenge [marched] up at that rapid staccato pace...[and] sang the *Marseillaise*” (Horne 17), to the height of the battle during Opertaion ‘May Cup,’ where “Verdun had...become a symbol of honor...*L’honneur de France,*” (Horne 243) to the bloody depths of Fort Vaux where Raynal signalled “*Vive la France!”* (Horne 263) even after hope had run out, the French army fought and died for *France*. For the Russians, there was no corresponding desire ‘to prove something;’ Russia entered the war in defense of her allies, not in immediate self-defense or for the honor or the Russian people.

What is more, the Russian army was subordinated among the two fronts, the various command groups, incompetent officers, those officers’ constantly shifting spheres of influence, and the impotent *Stavka*, all the while working towards different and often self-defeating cross purposes, rather than being beholden to a more concrete command structure headed by the likes of “the Verdun team of Pétain-Nivelle-Mangin” (Horne 308). Put bluntly, “*Stavka* was in no position to enforce a plan, even if it had had one,” (Stone 53), whereas the French had a system of command and control which was in a position to at least *try* and enforce plans as they were developed. Up until the breaking point in 1917, when Nivelle finally pushed the army too far, the existence of a defined command structure (on scales both great and small) went a long way towards motivating the French to fight; Horne notes that French officers exhibited “leadership in battle...composed of selfless example and fantastic gallantry,” (Horne 63), a fact which seems to have largely outshone the neglectfulness of the French officers in matters outside of battle in the eyes of the men they commanded. Contrast this with the Russian army, where disregard for ordinary troops off the battlefield carried over to disregard for them on the battlefield as well. For the average Russian soldier, it appears that “the absence of real capacity on the part of the commanders [was] felt more strongly than lack of shell,” (Stone 169). The issue was so bad that men began to surrender out of hand or wound themselves *as early as 1915* in order to escape the appalling conditions and total disregard for their livelihood on the part of those in charge which they had to endure in order to advance the abstract aims of the Russian war machine.

Had the Russian officer corps been able to inspire confidence in their men, to convince them that they were more than just cannon-fodder to be used to slow the enemy long enough for artillery to be brought to bear on them, or to instill some reasonable hope of success in whatever endeavor the army was presently engaged in (even if that was retreat), it is likely that the Russian troops would have borne the conditions they were forced to endure a great deal better than they did, as was the case with the French. It is conceivable that had those in command paid more mind to their men and less to their grand maneuvers (whether political or tactical in scope), the absence of a unifying “Russian identity” would not have made such a critical difference in the closing days of Russia’s involvement; loyalty to a commander and by extension to the command system as a whole might have proven sufficient to maintain discipline, or at least to confine the inevitable uprising to a level from which recovery was possible, as was the case in the French army at the close of the Nivelle offensive in 1917.

Closely related to the relative command-structures of the two armies is the theme of poor strategic execution which was common to both sides. Examples, of which it must be noted that there are many, include the decision of the French under de Castelnau to commit to the defense of Verdun whatever might come, despite the fact that hindsight has revealed that there probably existed far more optimal decisions open to the French high command at the time[[1]](#footnote-0); the Russians heavy investment in vague, sweeping strategies keyed on archaic fortresses “gave a decisive, and fatal, twist to the development of Russian artillery,” (Stone 31). This in turn made artillery a precious resource oft to be hoarded rather than used, a fact which, in conjunction with the logistical issues associated with supplying the front with guns and shells to replace those captured by the Germans when the forts fell contributed heavily to the failure of individual battle groups to comport themselves properly on the field.

The difference here lies in that though the French army seems to have eventually adapted to the nature of ‘modern war,’ as can be seen in the relatively swift transition from offensive to defensive strategy executed by Pétain at Verdun in response to the German offensive[[2]](#footnote-1), the Russian army failed to do so. To borrow from Stone, “[i]nflexibility of reserves and confusions of command...marked the first few months of the war...nor was this problem ever successfully overcome,” (Stone 95). The Russian struggles in this area are in sharp contrast with the French ability to move reserves to Verdun, organize their activity to maximal effect, and then cycle them out again as evidenced by the *Noria* system. “Under the *Noria* system, divisions were pulled out [of Verdun] after a matter of days, before their numbers were decimated and morale was impaired, and sent to rest far from the front,” (Horne 228) a practice which kept the French divisions fresh and their morale relatively high, and which would have been impossible in the Russian army given the sorry state of its command and control structure. Worse, the Russian war machine’s refusal to admit the existence of flaws in its resistance to modernization led to a need to find a scapegoat for its failures.

Arguably, the issue of shell-shortage provided just such a scapegoat. That is not to say that the shell-shortage did not matter, but it was not the reason for defeat. Instead, the “[c]onstant talk of shell-shortage, and the blaming of everything upon it, concealed a much more important factor, the increasing crisis of authority in the Russian army,” (Stone 166). The shell-shortage was a symptom of something which ran deeper, hearkening back to the inability of those in command to wage modern war, and to the average soldier’s increasing belief that he was fighting for a lost cause at the behest of people whom he no longer felt obligated to fight for. Moreover, the poor handling of the shell-shortage by the government and the forces of industry on the home front was exacerbated by the constant, stubborn, and perpetually mistaken belief that ‘the war is going to end soon.’ This belief made it easier to opt to purchase shells and other instruments of war abroad rather than investing in the infrastructure to produce them at home, and perhaps more importantly to *move* what was produced to the front.

This led to a state of affairs where the “Russian people were saddled with a huge international debt incurred for war-material which did not arrive when it was needed...but that did arrive when much of it was redundant,” (Stone 160). Faced with a choice between mutiny and continuing to fight and die for a weak Tsar, under the command of an officer-class who did not care about their men, on fronts which Russian infrastructure could not keep supplied, in conditions inferior to those they would find in German POW camps, and in doing so to perpetuate a conflict which was doing incalculable harm to those at home from an economic perspective-it really is no wonder that the army disintegrated in November 1917.

The reason that France survived the war and Russia did not is simple: the French army had a reason to fight, to protect French honor and the French way of life; the Russians had no such reason. The French had a hope of success, fomented by a competent corps of officers, a moderately well-oiled supply-system, and a grand strategy which accepted the truths and challenges presented by modern warfare, and did its best to cope with them; by comparison, the Russians had very little hope of emerging victorious for the myriad reasons outlined above. *Pour résumer*, the French fought for France...the Russians merely fought.

1. See Horne 130 [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. See Horne 145-147 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)