

On the history of the formation of the Nizhny Novgorod militia: information on officers' illnesses in September-December 1812

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Abstract

When Napoleon invaded the Russian Empire, various Russian provinces were asked to form “people’s militias” as part of the mobilisation plans of the country’s military command. Nizhny Novgorod Province was expected to put together five infantry and one cavalry regiments. As the Nizhny Novgorod militia was being put together, there were serious difficulties with manning the officer corps, which consisted exclusively of nobles, many of whom had serious health problems. The goals of this study were to identify the main ailments suffered by officers of the Nizhny Novgorod militia and to create a tentative collective “medical map” of a specific (provincial) class/section of a local community. To this end, we have attempted to define the “semantic peculiarities” in the diagnosis of ailments according to certificates and other documents from the time and to identify features of the administrative relations and interactions within a certain class (the nobility) in the context of the particular health problems of specific individuals. Our research reveals that the militia officers rarely suffered from diseases of the cardiovascular system and not at all (based on external descriptions) from cancers. Their most common ailments were impairments to the limbs (as a result of old wounds), rheumatism, arthritis (arthrosis), diseases of the internal organs, and problems with hearing and vision, but even obvious signs of serious conditions were not enough for an officer to be discharged.

Keywords

Nizhny Novgorod militia of 1812, Nizhny Novgorod Province, military medicine, officers' illnesses, officer corps

When Napoleon invaded the Russian Empire, Alexander I declared the start of a war in an official rescript addressed to the Chairman of the Committee of Ministers, Nikolai Saltykov. The central message of this lay in his confidence that this war would affect the whole country. The tsar expressed hope in the “diligence” of the people and the “bravery of the troops”, stating: “The defence of our country, the preservation of our national independence and honour has compelled Us to gird ourselves for battle”.¹

A proclamation dated 6 July 1812, addressed to all classes and all subjects of the Empire, asserted the need to create local provincial militias throughout the country to “form a second barrier in the reinforcement of the first [i.e. the regular troops], and in defence of our homes, wives and children”. Some time later, the territories where militias were to be created were restricted to the 16 provinces nearest the sites of battle. 1 September 1812 saw the start of recruitment to the Nizhny Novgorod Province militia. This was a “people’s militia” in its composition, as it mainly consisted of peasants, led by an officer corps drawn from the nobility

¹ Nizhny Novgorod Oblast Central Archive (TsANO), f. 5, op. 42 (1812), d. 302, l. 1.

(Nikolaev and Drozdov 2012, p. 96). In all, “12,275 infantry and 653 cavalry soldiers were recruited in the province from September to December 1812 for the formation of five infantry and one cavalry regiments” (Kaurkin, Drozdov, Nikolaev 2012, p. 34), which were part of what was known as the 3rd militia district, commanded by Major General P.A. Tolstoy.

A great many members of the “noble” class, who should have led the militia formations even while they were being set up, donned the militia uniform voluntarily and enthusiastically, but there were also multiple cases of nobles, including ones from Nizhny Novgorod, avoiding militia service under the pretext of being “afflicted with illnesses” – actual and pretended – (Nikolaev 2017, p. 256). From the outset, a significant number of the potential officers being recruited were found to have health problems.

Much has been written on healthcare and sanitation in the army in 1812 in both general overviews (Istoriya voennoy meditsiny... 2008; Chizh, Shepelev, Veselov 2007), and specialised thematic studies (e.g. (Chizh et al. 2016, p. 434–446; Budko and Brinyuk 2012, p. 13–18; Budko and Zhuravlev 2012, p. 49–58; Vorobjev 2012, p. 71–78; Egorysheva 2012, p. 47–49; Glyantsev 2012, p. 53–57)). A distinctive feature of this study is that it focuses not on the regular Russian army, but on the militia of a particular province – Nizhny Novgorod, which (like the militias of the country’s other provinces) was completely separate from the regular army in terms of concepts and language and command and administration: the militia personnel were called *voiny* (“fighters”) and *ratniki* (“militiamen”) rather than *soldaty* (“soldiers”), let alone *rekruty* (“recruits”). Since “militia service” was temporary (Manifest... 1830, p. 892), many issues specifically concerning militia have been ignored by scholars. Many researchers studying healthcare and sanitation around 1812 have focussed mainly on life on the battlefield and afterwards, and we are not aware of any works assessing the state of health of officers in either the militia or the standing army (in peacetime, or, depending on the circumstances, “semi-peacetime”) in this period. From the current state of historiography on the issue, it may be said that the state of health of the significant contingent of officers in Russia’s militias in this period has been studied in the general context of the history of the everyday, of social history overall, rather than the specific context of military medicine, as is indirectly reflected in both popular works (e.g. (Byt pushkinskogo Peterburga 2011; Fedosyuk 2017)) and ones more academic but with a broader scope (e.g. (Mironov 2012)). This underlines the fact that this topic is almost entirely (!) unstudied.

Even when the militia units were being formed, their commanders constantly reported to their superiors that a significant number of officers were

“not present”. For example, Nizhny Novgorod militia regiment commanders Rovinsky, Rall, Shebuyev, Zvenigorodsky, Karatayev and Voinov informed Prince G.A. Gruzinsky, the marshal of the Nizhny Novgorod militia, of a shortage of officers in their regiments and asked him to ensure personally that the officers discharged while ill returned to their regiment without fail.² For example, Rovinsky wrote in a letter to Gruzinsky that the following individuals ordered to report to the regiment by 1 September 1812 “have still not reported: *sotniks*:³ Tatarinov, captains Alekseyev, Nizkopoklonny, Staff Captain Buturlin, Lieutenant Gulyakov, *pyatidesyatniks*⁴ Shchuplov, Tumsky, Orlov 1 and Orlov 2, Scherbakov 1, Pleshivtsev, and equally all the sword-knot ensigns and sub-ensigns, which is making it difficult to assign officers to escort groups [of militiamen recruited in the districts]”. Rovinsky continues: “Lieutenant Stolitsa and *Pyatidesyatnik* Kastalsky, who are at Gorbatov, have not reported either, but I have sent them an order to report to Battalion Commander Sushchev [there], who has been instructed to employ them in escorting groups”.⁵

In a letter to Gruzinsky, Rall writes: “The following officers, notwithstanding orders [...] have not yet reported [...] Battalion Commander Boltin 1, *sotniks* Ostafyev 1, Ruzhevsky, Shilnikov, Nefedyev 1, Nefedyev 2. *Pyatidesyatniks*: Kasatkin, Mustafin, Knyazedelev 1, Knyazedelev 2, Ulyanin 2, Ulyanin 3, Sentsov, Pantusov. Sergeants: Gerdlichka and Sword-Knot Ensign Ushakov”.⁶

² TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 99, l. 24.

³ A *sotnik* was an officer leading 100 men.

⁴ A *pyatidesyatnik* was an officer leading 50 men.

⁵ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 65, l. 1.

⁶ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 65, l. 2. We find similar information in correspondence: in a letter from Rovinsky to Gruzinsky: “Nizhny Novgorod’s civilian governor [Runovsky] in response to my report on the summoning [...] of Tumsky and Tatarinov [...] informed me that the former was in Simbirsk Province, [...] but the whereabouts of latter was unknown...” (TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 65, l. 3); in a letter from Zvenigorodsky to Gruzinsky: “battalion commanders: Makashev, Melnikov and Stremoukhov, *sotnik*: Staff Captain of Cavalry Voronin and Lieutenant Gobuneyev, *pyatidesyatniks*: Berezovsky and Melnikov have not arrived to date” (TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 65, l. 5); in a letter from Shebuyev to Gruzinsky: “*Sotnik* Lieutenant Pasynkov, *pyatidesyatniks* [...] Aminev, Mikhaylov, Mustafin 2, from the sub-ensigns P. Smolkov, L. Knyazedelev, Yegor and Dmitry Kostin, P. Ostafyev, P. Knyazedelev [...] have not at present arrived at the regiment” (TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 65, l. 8); in a letter from Voinov to Gruzinsky: “Released by my predecessor... Colonel Prince Zvenigorodsky, *pyatidesyatniks* Alembik, Obrezekov and Alekseyevtsev [...] [as well as] Sub-Ensign Zubov, [...] Staff Captain of Cavalry Voronin... have not arrived at the regiment” (TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 65, l. 15). See also: TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 65, ll. 6, 10, 12, 14, 17.

Marshals of the nobility and police chiefs in the districts also worked hard to find all the nobles already commissioned who failed to report for service.⁷

The militia commands received many requests from nobles to be discharged on medical grounds. Many of these merely mentioned illness. For example, it was reported that “Sub-Ensign Pavel Sinebrychhoff was incapable of service owing to the illnesses in him”.⁸ The TsANO has dozens of such certificates, containing descriptions of the most common ailments preventing people from serving: piles (“haemorrhoidal disease”), “leg pain” (“unbearable aching”, “weakness in the legs”) and “nervous fits”. Many potential officers complained of eyesight problems.⁹

For example, archive documents reveal that Sub-Ensign Astafyev “has long felt aching in his arms and legs and is afflicted by catarrhal fever”; *Pyatidesyatnik* Troitsky “is afflicted by haemorrhoidal disease and lithiasis”; the elderly Lieutenant Nefedyev, assigned to the militia, was in a state of “total weakness”, which has deprived him of vision and hearing”.¹⁰ Some officers in the militia’s cavalry regiment complained of “fever and tightness in the chest”, “muscular hernias”, gout and haemorrhoids. Second Lieutenant Pirozhkov, for example, noted in his request that he was “afflicted by an illness, piles, [...] as a result of which I get an extreme pain in my lower back every hour, and the same in my head, which leads to considerable weakness and frequent clouding of my memory, as well as causing dullness of vision”.¹¹ A very common condition was rheumatism, which is mentioned in a request from A. Shatrov: “both my legs are wounded; when training soldiers, I caught such a chill from the damp that to this day I feel an unbearable aching and do not have the strength to walk around the room [...] Your Illustrious Highness, [...] be mindful to ask the right person to certify the legitimate illness in my legs (and) discharge me from the militia”.¹²

Lieutenant A.M. Gabuneyev was chosen for the militia and commissioned, but in 1807 he had “suffered a severe stroke of palsy, from which he has a weakened arm and leg”. He also suffered from epilepsy (“the fall-

ing sickness”). The records also contain detailed stories about ailments. Lieutenant A.M. Gabuneyev wrote in a request to the marshal of the militia, Gruzinsky: “I would have considered it my duty to report to take up this service, had the constant illnesses afflicting me not prevented me from doing so, these having begun in 1807, when I suffered a severe stroke of palsy, from which, having a weakened arm and leg, I could not continue serving in the former militia [...] I was discharged [...] since when the illness in me [...] has resulted in frequent falling fits... from which I have been unable to fulfil the duties of a district judge [he goes on to write that his ailment can be verified from documents from the militia recruitment in 1806] [...] now, since the start of last August, I have been afflicted by an incessant fever and aching in my legs, as a result of which [...] I am unable to perform service”.¹³ Later, Gabuneyev appealed to the tsar personally (which was permitted), and the lieutenant provided the set of documents he needed to be discharged, including: certificates from local district officials stating that he could not continue serving, a certificate of his illness from regimental doctor Grebnitsky, Captain Betling, district marshal Kutlubitsky, and a certificate confirming that he was discharged from service in 1807. He was finally discharged in 1812.¹⁴

Many officer veterans in the militia were found to have old ailments. For example, Captain A.I. Nizkopoklonny states in a letter to Gruzinsky: “I have learned that I have been appointed a company commander [...], but since in the previous war with the Swede back in 1808, I was in the fighting [...] against a fallen tree and, fighting the enemy at bayonet point, accidentally injured my right leg very painfully, from which, and equally from campaigns in the climate there, I have chronic sores from scurvy in the aforesaid place, making me incapable of pursuing any military service [...] there is no way that I can serve in the militia, especially as I cannot cover two *versts*¹⁵ on foot.”¹⁶ Even so, the heroic captain went on a long foreign campaign with the militia and died soon after the war. *Pyatidesyatnik* Orlov, who had once served in the guards, had “aching in the legs and noise in the head” and could not come to his regiment owing to long-standing illnesses; “an old muscular hernia” prevented *Pyatidesyatnik* Koslitsov from serving. *Pyatidesyatnik* Durov, explaining his complaints (“a constant strong pain in the chest and frequent spitting of blood [...] also weakening of the eyes”), described a terrible incident in the Battle of Eylau when he received “a blast injury in the chest from a cannonball”.¹⁷

⁷ A letter from Priklonsky [marshal of the nobility in Sergach District] to Gruzinsky reads: “Gentlemen Colonel N. A. Boltin and Lieutenant Prince A. S. Golitsyn, who are in Sergach District, [have been instructed] to come to the city of Nizhny to take up their posts in the militia” (TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 59, l. 1); another letter from Priklonsky to Gruzinsky reads: “*Sotniks*: Titular Counsellor Shilnikov and Lieutenant Nefedyev, Second Lieutenant Knyazedelev 1 and provincial secretary Knyazedelev 2 and 13th class [official] Ilya Pantusov, for them to report to Colonel Rall in the village of Lyskovo” (TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 59, l. 32)

⁸ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 30.

⁹ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 1-47.

¹⁰ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, ll. 1, 28, 41, 55.

¹¹ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 1.

¹² TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 24.

¹³ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 24.

¹⁴ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, ll. 2-7.

¹⁵ 2 *versts* ≈ 2.1 km.

¹⁶ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 16.

¹⁷ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, ll. 1, 82, 86.

Sometimes, both potential officers and those already enlisted were unable to report their illnesses themselves, and their immediate superiors did so for them. For example, Cavalry Regiment Commander Kozlov informed G.A. Gruzinsky that “Titular Counsellor Bravin, appointed a *pyatidesyatnik* in his assigned [...] regiment, is so ill that he is in no state to continue serving.”¹⁸ Regiment Commander Rall reported that his quartermaster, Kostrov, no longer had any hope of recovery.¹⁹ *Sotnik* P. Mikhaylov, who, “owing to the major shortage of military manpower” was also due to report for service, “withdrew” with an account of being “afflicted by illnesses in the head and chest”.²⁰ The Arzamas lower territorial court informed the military authorities that *Pyatidesyatnik* I.D. Kasatkin of the 4th Militia Regiment had fallen ill with “vomiting, diarrhoea and stomach ache, chills and headache, and a continuous noise in the ears”.²¹ Cavalry Regiment Commander Kozlov reported that “*Sotnik* and Captain of Cavalry Argamakov [...] owing to being struck by illness cannot continue serving”.²²

The officers called up to the militia sometimes requested not to be discharged but simply to be allowed to delay their service to receive treatment, after which they promised to report for service. For example, *Sotnik* Khrapov of the 3rd Regiment, being “burdened with illnesses”, asked for 29 days’ leave “for treatment”, but this request was dismissed.²³

Some nobles assigned to the Nizhny Novgorod militia were in other provinces when it was being formed, for reasons including treatment. Orders to come to Nizhny Novgorod immediately, or, by agreement with the authorities of the provinces they were in, to join the local militia formations, were sent to all of them from the governor of Nizhny Novgorod and the military leadership via the local authorities.²⁴ To find nobles effectively and “encourage” them to serve in the militia, a message from Kutuzov warning of the consequences of malingering was distributed to the provinces where militia were being formed (and communicated to the Nizhny Novgorod militia officers by Tolstoy and the governor of Nizhny Novgorod, Runovsky).

For example, Tolstoy wrote in a letter to Runovsky: “Lieutenant Meves of the Ryazan militia, having been granted leave by its leader for a certain time and having taken advantage of this discharge, pretended to be ill and despite many summonses did not report for service, so Brigadier Izmaylov was compelled, so that this would not become an example for the other gentlemen officers serving in the militia, to report this avoidance of service

by him (Meves) to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armies the Most Serene Prince Kutuzov-Smolensky. Immediately, he received an order stripping Lieutenant Meves of his commission to expel him from the militia with a passport ensuring that, being unworthy of an officer rank, he would not be appointed to any form of service anywhere in future [...] I beg you [...] to use the most effective measures so that such a shameful example cannot occur with a noble in the province of which You are in charge and to send all the gentlemen field and company officers putting off joining the militia to the regiments straight away [...] and to make absolutely sure that no one else avoids this common obligation of the nobility under the cover of sickness certificates obtained solely by connivance”.²⁵

Among the ailments suffered by the militia officers, diseases of the cardiovascular system were rare and cancers non-existent (based on external descriptions). Their predominant complaints were impairments to the limbs (as a result of old wounds), rheumatism, arthritis (arthrosis), diseases of the internal organs, and problems with hearing and vision.

Notably, even obvious signs of serious diseases and wounds were not enough for immediate discharge. This required an array of documents, including a certificate confirming that the ailment was real from the applicant’s of residence or service (from a senior official), a medical examination document, permission for discharge from top commanders or local marshals of the nobility. Without the required papers (and in certain cases even with them), the applicant would receive a strict order to “gather their last strength... to report to fulfil their duties”. Such measures were understandable in wartime, and were prompted by the existence of malingerers unwilling to undergo an “independent” medical examination. However, there are grounds for suspecting that the chief malingerer in the Nizhny Novgorod militia was its marshal, Commander of the Militia Prince G.A. Gruzinsky, who sometimes pitilessly made people extremely ill do service.²⁶ Right before the start of a campaign, Gruzinsky

¹⁸ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 20.

¹⁹ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 37.

²⁰ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 54.

²¹ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 88.

²² TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 36.

²³ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 34.

²⁴ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 25, l. 65.

²⁵ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 57, l. 67.

²⁶ For example, he rejected an application for discharge from Lieutenant A. M. Gabuneyev: “I must tell you that without personal verification of your illness I cannot agree to discharge you from service, all the more so as in the present wartime conditions such reports do not merit any credence, further adding that the gentleman commander of the 3rd District [...] is gathering appropriate information through the Head of the province on officials appointed to the militia who, following multiple summonses, have not turned up to their regiments, reporting illnesses evidently pretended, and intends must humbly to provide this to His Imperial Majesty so that they are made known to the public, I hope that you, as a nobleman and son of your country, will not stoop to this, and despite all your infirmity will gather your last strength and report to the regiment immediately, which is why the papers sent from you are herewith being returned” (TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 83, l. 100).

claimed to feel “a nervous fever and extreme weakness” and that “the illness [...] requires even more assiduous treatment from doctors”.²⁷ Because of this, he ultimately withdrew from the campaign, resigned his position, and, afflicted by such serious ailments, lived until 1852, dying at the age of 90.

²⁷ “From the commander of the Nizhny Novgorod military force [Gruzinsky] to the Donations Committee [of the Nizhny Novgorod militia]: “Since the month of December last year, I have felt a nervous fever and extreme weakness, without ceasing, but such strength as I have has allowed me to sort out the Committee’s business, along with my current position, but finally my illness [...] requires even more assiduous treatment from doctors, for which I can neither hear nor sign papers in the committee before my recovery” (TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 57, l. 44).

Because of the acute shortage of officers, the government permitted Count P. A. Tolstoy to recruit nobles from the provinces where militia recruitment had not taken place to command positions in the newly formed militia. In addition, a circular order was given on the instructions of Field Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov to Oryol, Kursk, Voronezh, Vologda, Saratov, Tambov and Sloboda Ukraine provinces, “so that they take appropriate measures to recruit [to the militia] non-serving nobles”²⁸ of their provinces. These measures partly helped to address the problem of providing officers for the Nizhny Novgorod militia.

²⁸ TsANO, f. 1822, op. 1, d. 99, l. 3.

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