

War on the Eve of Nations: Conflicts and Militaries in Eastern Europe, 1450-1500. By Vladimir Shirogorov. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-7936-2240-2. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Indexes of persons, notions, and geographical locations. Pp. 507. \$135.00 (hardback).

An important book that truly does fill a gap, Vladimir Shirogorov's study tackles a period in Eastern European warfare that has received less attention than the subsequent centuries, although there remains room for a study of the following half-century. Offering what he terms an action-orientated account, Shirogorov in practice provides a study that is military, international, political and sociological, one, indeed, that also highlights the need for a similarly synoptic work for Western Europe. The focus is on Poland-Lithuania and Muscovy, but the range encompasses the Livonian Order, the Great Horde, the Crimean Khanate, and other players in Europe, in what is aptly termed "A Carousel of Forces."

There is a needs-must, fitness-for-purpose account, although it can at times underplay the complexities of securing outcomes. For example, the following may seem plausible:

"In the first half of the reign of Casimir IV, until the 1480s, Lithuania failed to undertake the urgent military reforms [sic].... As the Polish king, Casimir IV exercised a great deal to advance the Polish army to a very modern level of organisation and tactics, while as the grand prince of Lithuania he did nothing" (134).

That, indeed, is one way to approach the issue, but there is possibly a little-too-much of a needs-must development on a certain trajectory. This is especially the case because of a more general lack of clarity as to how best to assess capability and effectiveness in this period, and indeed every period. At any rate, Ivan III is acclaimed as a visionary, a term also used of others as with Sten Sture.

The discussion of the applicability of the concept of an early-modern European military revolution is instructive, not only because it is found inapplicable for Eastern Europe but also because this raises questions about the validity of the concept for Western Europe itself. For example, and as part of an important longer discussion that cannot be summarised simply in terms of one quotation:

'The "classic" Military Revolution of the firearms, bastions, infantry of commoners, sail gunships and states' bureaucracy that allegedly needed to push them to the height of efficiency wasn't evident. There weren't new material tools in the armies. The organisation and application of the forces was what mattered (367-8) ... the tactical Military Revolution ... was distanced from the Military Revolution of the fiscal-military state' (373).

There is much here to consider. In particular, the range of circumstances and developments in Eastern Europe comes to the fore. Indeed, the very concept of Eastern Europe deserves scrutiny, as also, for example, with economic history. Inherently a region that, however defined, is larger than

Western Europe, this diversity is also one that undermines the kind of past simplification or primitivisation that continues to the present. Scholars such as Larry Wolff in *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilisation on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1996), have produced significant accounts of this past process that remains all-too-apparent in modern discussion by military historians. Similarly, there is reason to reconsider the extent to which other geographical categories would repay consideration.

Given the length and cost of this book, it is unlikely that many will read it, which is a pity but also makes a summary particularly relevant. Here there are a number of problems, not least the difficulty of seeing the wood for the trees. The value of a narrative is clear, not least given the lack of any available, and here there is an instructive parallel with the comparable period in Western Europe prior to the outbreak of the Italian Wars in 1494.

Yet, such a narrative, however valuable, can pose serious problems of clarity and, to a degree, that is the case with this book. Possibly more signposting would have helped, and not just in the form of maps. At any rate, there is the classic issue of balance, and I am not sure this is one that is helpful to the reader. The glibness of so much work on the early-modern period is avoided, but, possibly, the book moves too far in a different direction.

At any rate, Shirogorov makes the case very well for agency as opposed to simply structure, with agency approached principally in terms of the ability of individual leaders to respond to circumstances whether changing or not. This, therefore, is a non-Marxist account, and that for an area that suffered long from that intellectual straitjacket, and, not least, from the tendency to offer a materialist and schematic account of military history. The reach toward a non-Marxist account deserves encouragement, but there are clearly a variety of approaches that can be adopted.

While it certainly could have been better edited, Shirogorov's study deserves wide attention.

(780 words)

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