



## Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

### Research Report

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**Dana M. Ohren**  
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**Russia**

#### **All of the Tsars' Men: Minorities and Conscription in Imperial Russia, 1874-1905**

In my dissertation, I examine tsarist minority conscription policies to assess the goals of a centralizing regime when faced with the reality of governing a multi-national, multi-religious empire. As the army was the largest social institution in the empire, a study of minority conscription policies provides an excellent base to explore the goals and realities of tsarist imperial rule. The introduction of universal conscription in 1874, as with many of the Great Reforms of Alexander II's reign, signaled a break with the past. The regime sought to streamline its governance of the empire through a standardization of the rights and obligations of its subjects. That was the theory. Yet, even in the original Regulation of Military Service of 1874, one can discern the regime's trouble reconciling its past with its future. Despite the term "universal" (*vseobshchaia*), conscription in the Russian empire was not extended on equal terms to all of its subjects even after 1874. Prejudices and practicalities led the regime to follow distinct conscription policies based on geography, *soslovie* (estates), and religion and thus reinforce the policy of governing according to corporate statuses that it had hoped to quit. While the military reforms were a failure in terms of achieving a more unified conscription policy, one can argue that any attempt on the part of the regime to pursue universal policies was bound to fail due the sheer diversity of peoples that the tsars commanded. Indeed, scholarship on other areas of tsarist minority policies demonstrates that the tsarist regime worked best when it governed least and that the regime well understood its need to weigh the benefits of increased standardization with

possibly adverse reactions from its subjects. Therefore, one must question to what extent universal conscription, or other intrusive policies towards minorities, was even a desirable goal for the tsarist empire. Through an examination of the first three decades of universal conscription in Russia, my dissertation will evaluate the balance the regime struck between its desires to standardize its rule with the reality it confronted in its vast expanses.

The study of tsarist minority and military policies allows us to appreciate the foundations of current ethnic and religious relations within the Russian Federation. At a time when ethnic discontent is rife in Chechnya and Muslims pose a demographic threat to Russian dominance, we must look to the past to understand the long-standing nature of these tensions. As the relationship between the Russian state and many of the minorities that live today in the Russian Federation began in the imperial period and often concerned conscription and military service, we must recognize and evaluate these earlier interactions and place current events within the proper historical framework. Furthermore, these history lessons will boost the United States' understanding of other global ethnic and religious conflicts and allow policymakers to form protocols to respond effectively to erupting crises.

I spent the last seven months conducting research in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) and the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg and the Russian State Military Historical Archive (RGVIA) and the Russian Public Historical Library in Moscow on an IREX-IARO research grant. As I encountered a wealth of materials, far more than I had expected in both quantity and quality, I adjusted my project with these new possibilities. Originally, my dissertation focused on conscription and service of Jewish soldiers in the tsarist army. I expanded my topic to include other minorities so as to gauge how exceptional or unique policies towards Jews were. In this process, I discovered that despite the lofty goal of universality, many unique situations existed regarding conscription in tsarist Russia. With encouragement from my advisor, I narrowed my topic to focus only on conscription policies from 1874 to 1905, but broadened my research to include Jews, Muslims, Mennonites, various *inorodtsy*, *raskol'niki*, Armenians, "foreign settlers," and others. In doing so, I can more fully explore all aspects of "universal" conscription. I still focus on Jewish conscription as archival materials reveal that such policies were later extended to other minority subjects, including Volga Tatars. Furthermore, the regime sought to take over local Jewish communal administrations more so than any other group. Comparisons with policies towards other minorities will indicate how exceptional or extreme the Jewish situation was and allow for a better understanding of tsarist minority policies and imperial governance in the nineteenth century.

The following is a brief chapter outline of my dissertation. In the introduction, I review scholarship on imperial governance in the nineteenth century in general and universal conscription in the European context specifically. From there, a background chapter surveys conscription for Russians and minorities prior to 1874. In Chapter Two, I analyze the decisions concerning which groups to conscript during the preparation of the new Regulation. Chapter Three details the first few years of the Regulation's

implementation and the practical problems encountered by the administration. This chapter in particular highlights the center's distrust of minorities, especially Jews, governing themselves and its attempts to take over the local administration of minorities. Chapter Four examines efforts to curtail evasion, a problem specifically associated with non-Russians. In Chapter Five, I consider the rationales and ability of the regime to extend the draft to populations previously exempt from it, including Muslims of the Caucasus and *inorodtsy* (a catch-all term for non-Russians who were usually non-Europeans as well) of Siberia and the Far East. Chapter Six investigates to what extent being in a state of war or peace affected the conscription of minorities. Finally, the Conclusion reflects on the processes and results of three decades of universal conscription in tsarist Russia and compares them with those of other nations and empires. Throughout my dissertation, the four Regulations of Military Service, published respectively in 1874, 1876, 1886 and 1897, provide chronological reference points to trace the evolution of minority conscription policies and put them in the context of more general developments of minority policies in late imperial Russia.

In my research, a number of themes have emerged that intersect and overlap with the designated chapter topics. Such themes speak to larger issues in Russian history and the history of empire. The overarching focus of my dissertation is how the tsarist regime sought to govern its immense empire. Centuries of rule based on dividing its subjects into corporate statuses, and assigning rights and obligations based on those classifications, could not be eradicated with the promulgation of one new law code. Indeed, the caution the regime exhibited when introducing conscription to new populations contributed to the measure of success the reforms achieved. Thus, the "technical" failure at standardization proved to be a strength when governing a multinational empire and must be viewed in this light.

Secondly, while the regime had shed much of its overt russification policies of the Nicholaevan era, the government still wished to foster *sliiane* (blending) between Russians and non-Russians, especially the *inorodtsy*. Problems arose as the regime encouraged *inorodtsy* to convert to Orthodoxy and adopt a settled lifestyle. However, the threat of conscription if they did proved an impediment to such *sliiane*. To achieve the more important goal of *sliiane*, the regime granted service exemptions to certain categories of converts.

Thirdly, the regime used conscription as a pretext to take over the administration of minority groups. Before 1874, local minority, often religious, leaders kept communal records and acted as liaisons between the community and the state. The center remained wary of local leaders' honesty, especially with Jews, when keeping birth records and family composition lists as they formed the basis for conscription registers. The regime took these responsibilities out of the hands of minority personnel and assigned them to town, city and county (read: Russian) officials. Thus, conscription provided the justification for dismantling minorities' political and administrative autonomy.

Fourthly, universal conscription highlights a fundamental leitmotif in Russia history: the battle between the center's policies and the peripheries' abilities to carry them out. Conscription required a level of administrative proficiency that the remote provinces all too often had not yet achieved. Accordingly, inhabitants of vast areas of land in Siberia and Central Asia were not liable to the draft in the first few Regulations. However, as time passed, the regime extended universal conscription into new areas once it believed that the administrative structures were adequate and the local population receptive and prepared for service. Indeed, a good measure of the extent to which a people or region were incorporated into the empire was whether or not they were liable to the general draft.

Finally, even in areas that had the necessary administrative structures to carry out conscription, problems arose when the outcome of the laws contradicted their rationales. For example, despite efforts to equalize the burden of military service among all of its subjects, the government feared that Russians were still serving disproportionately in greater percentages than other groups. While it is difficult to determine from existing records how accurate accusations of minority evasion really were, the center did not take such matters lightly and passed numerous laws to "correct" the situation. In most cases, both the provincial and central administrations privileged and protected Orthodox Russians. Still, the regime granted some groups, such as the Mennonites, rather extraordinary exemptions while it enacted exceptionally strong measures against Jewish evasion. A comparison of minority conscription policies therefore provides a guide to the hierarchy of minorities within the empire.

This study will contribute to the growing body of research on tsarist minority policies. As my project compares the treatment of numerous minorities who resided in different regions in the empire, it will expand on previous research that focuses on one minority group or one specific region. As our field's knowledge of such matters increases, these types of comparisons will allow for a broader understanding of tsarist rule and its conceptual goals while not losing sight of the nuances of state-minority relations. Minority conscription policies provide just one window into the nature of tsarist imperial rule. Many other aspects of imperial governance have or would benefit from such a comparative approach.