Western historians have traditionally portrayed the Russian military as corrupt, brutish, resistant to change, and led by an officer corps generally ignorant of developments in the wider European context. This is true regardless of whether the specific context is World War II, the Napoleonic Wars, or the Seven Years’ War. In War and Enlightenment in Russia, political scientist Eugene Miakinkov (Swansea Univ.) challenges that stereotype by examining the Russian military during its first major forays onto the European stage. He argues that the Russian army during the reign of Catherine II (r. 1762–96) was in fact well-informed concerning broader European developments.

Miakinkov concentrates on the effects of the Enlightenment on a movement known as the Military Enlightenment, a subject area that has expanded dramatically in recent years due to the pioneering work of scholars like Christy Pichichero,1 to whom he acknowledges an intellectual debt. The author’s thesis is that “Instead of being successful because of its barbarousness or non-Western practices, Catherine’s military was successful because it mobilized and internalized elements of the European Enlightenment” (8).

The book’s lengthy (36-page) introduction surveys the historiography of European warfare in the eighteenth century and sets the basis for an extremely nuanced study. Chapter 1 examines patronage networks in the officer corps and the importance of what the author calls the proto-intelligentsia—nobles involved in “the creation, diffusion and communication of military culture” (40). They included members of the military who wrote both military manuals and more theoretical works, all in the reforming spirit of the Age of Reason. The chapter goes a long way to explain just how the Russian Empire experienced the Enlightenment in a manner that fit the indigenous culture.

Chapter 2 examines the various means by which (particularly junior) officers sought to gain promotions. These included familial networks, advanced education, seniority, and meritorious service. Chapter 3 explores the military writings produced by officers as they reflected broader themes of the Enlightenment, while retaining certain distinctly Russian traits. The focus here is on the training of recruits. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the treatment of soldiers during the target period. Miakinkov elucidates certain distinctly Russian expectations the men held concerning their leadership. These expectations set the stage for dramatic public displays of what Pichichero dubs “symbolic individualism.”

Chapter 5 is the most compelling portion of the book. It elaborates on various performances officers sometimes engaged in during the course of their duties. These might include anything from a superior launching into a raving tirade to confuse an overly ambitious subordinate to an army commander appearing in disguise at one of the picquets. The author notes that a particular-

ly notorious fan of displays of symbolic individualism was Count Petr Rumianstev (1725–96), who used them to inculcate and reinforce in his men the values he advocated in his military works.

All these themes are drawn together in chapter 6 with an examination of the siege of Izmail (1790) during the Russo-Turkish War. This operation ended with a bloody eleven-hour assault that “sent shockwaves throughout Russia and Europe” (384) and exposed both the extent and the limitations of the Enlightened spirit in the Russian Army. The seventh and final chapter describes the reforms in military culture under Empress Catherine and the radical departure from them in the reign of her successor, Tsar Paul. The book’s conclusion identifies the longer-term effects that the reforms made during Catherine’s reign exerted on later Russian and even Soviet military culture.

Some will criticize the author for straying into areas of intellectual and cultural history too far afield from true military history. But, to cite one example, his chapter on the Izmail siege makes clear just how pertinent these fields can be to a more nuanced understanding of military decisions and measures taken by past actors. Serious students of Russian history, the Military Enlightenment, and the influence of Enlightenment thought will find Eugene Miakinkov’s new book deserving of their careful reflection. It is a highly instructive contribution to the English-language literature on the army that stymied Frederick the Great and helped defeat Napoleon Bonaparte.