



**Russia Seven Year War Accession: Myths Of Soviet Historiography**

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**ABSTRACT**

The urgency of the problem under study is conditioned by the fact that the issue of Russia entry into the Seven Years War leaves a field for discussion in modern Russian historiography. This discussion is largely related to the inheritance by public consciousness and the part of modern Russian historians concerning the tradition of this issue explanation, which was formed in Soviet historiography, but it was based on ideological rather than scientific postulates. The purpose of the article is to characterize the views of Soviet historians on the problem of Russian Empire entering the Seven Years' War and the evaluation of these views ideologization and mythologization degree. The leading approach to the study of this problem is a general scientific method of analysis and synthesis. The article describes the views of Soviet historians of 1940-ies - 1980-ies on the problem of Russia entry into the Seven Years' War. The ideological conditionality of these historical representations is shown. The continuity of Soviet historian views of different historical periods is given. A definite evolution of historian views on the indicated problem is revealed. The degree of Soviet historian verifiability is estimated by historical sources. The mythologization of the conception formulated in the scientific community at the subsequent stages of Soviet historical science existence is shown. The materials of the article can be useful to clarify the ideas about the foreign policy of Russian Empire in the middle of the 18th century, and also for the teaching of the course on the history of Soviet historical science.

**Key words:** history, the Seven Years' War, Soviet historiography, Elizabeth Petrovna, Frederick the Great, Russian Empire, Prussian Kingdom.



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The history of Russia was full of wars during the imperial period. A special place among them is occupied by the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), which took place during the reign of the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna. This is determined by the fact that Russia was not directly involved in either the Austro-Prussian or the Anglo-French conflicts. Russia was not involved in any of these conflicts directly. Nevertheless, Russia took a direct part in the Seven Years' War, in the alliance with Austria and France, opposing Prussia. The main burden of war at the European theater fell on the Russian army. Considering that the goals set before the war were never reached by Russia, it would be fair to ask whether it was necessary to join the Seven Years' War.

The scientific interest to the Seven Years' War in our country reached its peak in the 20th century because of the most complicated Russian-German relations. During two World Wars, Germany was the main opponent of Russia (USSR). And during the Cold War FRG was a strategic adversary of the Soviet Union in Europe. Therefore, the interest in the diplomatic and military confrontation between Russia and Germany in the historical past remained topical in Soviet historiography. Alexander Nevsky's fight against German crusaders in the 13th century, the Seven Years' and Great Patriotic War became the markers in the minds of Soviet people, marking the hostility of our country with Germany. The representations about this confrontation flowed from the scientific and historical field into the sphere of public historical consciousness. It also actualizes the need to study the Soviet historiography of the Seven Years' War.

## **2. METHODS**

The system-structural approach provided an opportunity to characterize the sources of this study comprehensively, which were the works of Soviet historians, but in their interrelationships with each other and with historical studies of contemporary Russian historians. The system-structural approach also made it possible to combine historical and historiographic research data in one study. The problem-chronological approach has made it possible to divide the analyzed area into a number of specific problems and to characterize them separately, but in interrelation with other problems. The application of the comparative-historical method made it possible to compare the views of various Soviet historians.

## **3. RESULTS**



In Soviet historiography the problem of Russia participation in the Seven Years War was actualized in the late 1930-ies due to the growing aggression of Nazi Germany in Europe during the second half of the 1930-ies. A direct parallel to this was seen in the growth of Prussian power during the reign of Frederick II in the middle of the 18th century. Unlike the Prussian king, the ruling circles of Nazi Germany set the task of predominance on the Baltic Sea. In 1939, Lithuania was forced to give the port of Klaipeda (Memel) to Germany. And in 1940 the Baltic states Estonia and Latvia were annexed to the Soviet Union. The territories of Germany and the USSR came into direct contact. "Military anxiety" has become a constant factor in the social life of Soviet people. In historical retrospect, a possible clash between the Soviet Union and Germany restored the events of the Seven Year War - the conflict of imperial Russia with royal Prussia. Therefore, in 1939 a number of brochures devoted to this war was published. And in 1940 a fundamental monograph was published on the Seven Year War by the historian N. Korobkov. The author, responding to a question about the reasons for Russia participation in the Seven Year War, believed that Prussia threatened Russian direct interests in the Baltics. The historian wrote: "The struggle for the Baltic, with any kind of alliance, became the most vital task" (Korobkov,1940, p. 25). The idea by N. Korobkov had a shortage. The historian had no proof of the aggression of Prussia in the Baltics in the eastern direction during the 1750-ies. During this period Friedrich II did not deploy an extensive program for the construction of the navy, which could be a weighty argument in the historian's constructions. This means that only modern events related to the strengthening of Hitler's Germany influenced his views and were extrapolated to the historical past of Russian-Prussian relations during the mid-18th century.

There were no aggressive actions by Frederick II in relation to Russia on the eve of the Seven Year War. The Prussian king showed some hostility towards Russia only in the 1740-ies - early 1750-ies. Friedrich II's sister was the wife of the Swedish king, and the Prussian king tried to influence the position of the Swedish ruling circles through her in order to induce them to revenge for the defeat from Russia during the Northern War. The Prussian ambassador intrigued in Stockholm during the course of the Russian-Swedish war of 1740-1743, setting up the Swedish tops to continue the unsuccessfully developed war (Anisimov ,2012,pp. 180-198). But in the 1750-ies there could be no talk



of such intrigues. In March 1751 the Swedish king died, and the new monarch Adolf-Friedrich was not hostile to Russia during the whole decade that has come. Therefore, Prussia also stopped its attempts to make him start a war with Russia, realizing the futility of its efforts (Anisimov, 2012, pp. 198-234). Moreover, Friedrich II did not have any anti-Russian actions in Lithuania and Kurland in the 1750-ies, although in the 1740-ies he tried to have the support of Polish Lutherans and the Courland aristocracy. Thus, the hostile actions of Prussia against Russia in the Baltic region took place in the 1740-ies, 5-10 years before the Seven Year War.

In the 1750-ies, Friedrich II stopped intrigues against Russia in the Baltic region. A weighty argument in favor of this statement is the so-called "First political testament" by Frederick II, written by him in 1752. It was published in Germany in 1920, and was made available to historians who specialize in the history of international relations during the eighteenth century in Europe. In his will, the Prussian king wrote that Prussia and Russia do not have deep reasons for enmity, capable of pushing them toward war. Consequently, Frederick II was not going to threaten Russian possessions in the Baltic States during 1750-ies, which confirms the passivity of Prussia actions towards Russia. Frederick II in the "First Political Will" set only the union of East Prussia (the Duchy of Prussia) with Brandenburg, which were separated from each other by Polish Pomorie, as the maximum goal of Prussia in the east. Frederick II did not plan anything else in this regard. Consequently, N. Korobkov attributed non-existent aggressiveness towards Russia to Prussia completely unfoundedly.

Despite this, the point of view by N. Korobkov became predominant in the Soviet historiography. In the "Essays on the History of the USSR", the authors of the section on Russia foreign policy during the reign of Elizabeth Petrovna stated "further strengthening of Prussia and the threat from its side to the Baltic States" and saw Russia main task during the Seven Years War in "putting an end of Prussian aggression" (Essays on the history of the USSR. 1957, p. 413, 415). The Soviet historian L.G. Beskrovny in his work "The Russian Army and the Navy in the XVIIIth century" solidarized with the ideas by N. Korobkov: "We had to protect the Baltic from its possible capture by Prussia and to strengthen its border in the west" (4, p. 265). In the "History of the USSR" these views have not changed. The authors stated "the danger of Frederick's policy to Russia, who was striving for Courland, Poland and Saxony" (5, p.



504). In general, the Soviet work of the 1950-ies - 1960-ies depicted the following picture: Russia, attacking Prussia, supposedly defended itself against potential Prussian aggression. The remaining goals of Russia entry into the Seven Year War (consolidation of the alliance with Austria through the return of Silesia, the transfer of the Commonwealth to East Prussia in exchange for Courland and Belarusian lands on its eastern outskirts of the Commonwealth), recorded in the decision of the aristocratic council under Elizaveta Petrovna (the conference in the highest court) in March 1756, and, of course, known to Soviet historians (the proceedings of the Conference were published in 1912) were ignored by historians. The reproduction of N. Korobkov's ideas in the postwar works about the Seven Year War was conditioned by the influence of the international situation on the mindset of historians in the conditions of the "cold war". The emergence of FRG and the existence of revanchist sentiments in it during historical retrospect were perceived as an extension of the long Russian-German confrontation during the Seven-Year, First World War and World War II.

In the early 1970-ies, the journal "History issues" published the article about the Seven Year War by the historian Frumenkov G.G., who partly departed from the conception existing in Soviet historiography. He wrote that the basic demand of the Russian government concerned Polish territory. Here Frumenkov G.G. quoted one of the Conference decisions: "... lending to Poland the delivery of royal Prussia, to obtain not only Courland, but also such rounding off of the Polish borders, by which ... the incessant troubles and worries ceased to exist" (Beskrovny ,1958,p. 264). The author of the article commented on this text in the following way: "The implementation of this program would lead to the strengthening of Russia influence on the affairs of Central and Eastern Europe ..." (Frumenkov,1971, p. 109). Thus, Russia entry into the Seven Year War was first recognized in Soviet historiography as the desire to strengthen its position. But Frumenkov G.G. still did not recognize the existence of a direct desire for territorial seizures by Russia. Following the abovementioned words, he wrote: "... The Baltic and Poland would be shielded from the possible capture by Prussia, and Poland, which received East Prussia, could become an ally of Russia" (Frumenkov,1971, p. 109). Thus, Russia was pictured as an assistant to Poland in the defense against the same Prussian aggression. Therefore, the ideas by Frumenkov G.G. became only the



modification of the traditional explanation of the reasons for Russia entry into the Seven Year War for Soviet historiography.

The revision of the concept of Russia entry into the Seven Year War began in the second half of the 1980-ies, when during the years of "perestroika" under the influence of "new political thinking" by M.S. Gorbachev the ideological attitude to confrontation with the West was weakened, and a number of former, unshakable ideas were criticized. Russian foreign policy in the middle of the 18th century began to be interpreted through the personal influence of persons from the entourage of Elizabeth. The historian Anisimov E.V. stated that the anti-Prussian mood of the Empress was not objectively set as a "national task", but arose due to the personal influence of subject views by A.P. Bestuzhev-Ryumin on Elizabeth Petrovna. The main danger of Prussia, in the opinion of the Russian Chancellor, was the following one: "If the strength of the Prussian king increases, there will be more danger for us, and we can not foresee the acts of such a strong and unstable neighbor for the empire" (Anisimov,1988, p.136). There are no words about the Baltic. As A.P. Bestuzhev-Ryumin supposed, Frederick II could "intrigue" against Russia in Poland, in Sweden, and in Courland. Anisimov E.V. wrote the following on this matter: "The policy by Frederick II, including the rapid change of the allies, depending on a current need, was organically unacceptable for Bestuzhev-Ryumin" (Anisimov,1988, p. 136). The Chancellor was able to convince the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna that Friedrich II is dangerous for Russia, and she decided to join the Seven Year War.

Despite the beginning of the Soviet concept revision, in 1993 Russian historiography claimed that "the aggressive aspirations of Prussia in Central and Eastern Europe could not please Russia, which had sufficient grounds to fear for the fate of the Baltic possessions" (Soloviev,1993, p. 607). In the History of Europe, published in 1994, a similar opinion was expressed: "... the Prussian king was ready to seize the part of Poland, Courland and Livonia" (History of Europe. Europe of New Time (XVII-XVIII centuries)", Kann , p. 461). According to the author of the section on Russia foreign policy in the 18th century, I.A. Bulygin, it was the behavior by Frederick II that caused Russia "special concern", and led it to join the Seven Year War. Thus, in the works of the first half of the 1990-ies, the echoes of the Prussian threat ideas to the Baltic possessions of the Russian Empire persisted.



#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The problem of Russia entry into the Seven Year War was reflected in Western and modern Russian historiography. The opposite points of view were expressed. R.A. Cannes believed that Russia showed little interest in the achievement of an effective result in the Seven Year War (Kann,1980 ). On the contrary, H. Butterfield (1951) and D.E. Bangert (1971) considered Russia guilty of unleashing the Seven Year War. G.G. Kaplan considered that the goal of Russia entry into this war is the Russian expansion in Europe - the seizure of new territories (Kaplan,1968), and the main factor that prompted Russia to enter the war, is the personal dislike of the Russian Empress Elizabeth Petrovna to Prussian King Frederick II. T. Talbot (1970) Rice believed that Elizaveta Petrovna had entered the Seven Year War because of her loyalty to the allied principles and agreements with the Austrian monarchy about joint action against Prussia. The modern researcher F.-D. Lishtenan (Liechtenhan,2007) bases her point of view concerning the reason for Russia entry into the Seven Year War on a literal interpretation of the Conference decisions at the High Court on the need to weaken the influence of Prussia in Central Europe, and that's it. In modern Russian historiography E.V. Anisimov (Anisimov,1999, p. 352) put forward a directly oppositional point of view to the preceding Soviet historiographic traditional one that Russia had exclusively aggressive intentions in the Seven Year War, which is shared by P.P. Cherkasov (Cherkasov,2010, p. 215). A more complex picture of various foreign policy motives, intentions and goals combination in the future war among Russian aristocrats from Elizaveta Petrovna's entourage, including the Empress herself, was created in by M.Yu. Anisimov in his monograph (Anisimov,2014, pp. 90-133). At the moment his work seems to be the most fundamental.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Thus, the study of the views of Soviet historians on the reasons of Russia entry into the Seven Year War made it possible to reveal a significant degree of subjectivism in their views, conditioned by several circumstances. The ignoring the available historical sources distorted the views of Soviet historians about the intentions of the Prussian kingdom toward Russia in the middle of the 18th century. The ideological orientation of Soviet historical science in the field of Russian-German relations to emphasize the aggressiveness of Prussia (as well as later Germany) did not allow to see the



multivariate foreign policy of Frederick II. They developed the image of a permanent external enemy in Europe in the person of the German state (the Livonian Order in the Middle Ages, Prussia in the XVIIIth century, Germany in the XXth century) in the Soviet public consciousness.

## **6. SUMMARY**

The concept of Russia preventive and defensive participation in the Seven Year War for the purpose of the Baltic states protection, which arose in the early 1940-ies, persisted in Russian historiography until the first half of the 1990-ies, for more than 50 years. Such a long existence of this concept was conditioned by a long-term factor - the "cold war". The tension between the Soviet Union and the FRG revived in historical memory the conflicts between Russia and Prussia, as well as between Russians and Germans. And the representation of the USSR policy on the international arena in the mass media naturally reflected the position of Russia in the Seven Year War as a defensive one from the aggression of Prussia. Baltic region was considered a possible region of such an aggression, where the territories of two countries adjoined. The scientific nuances that appeared in this concept during the Soviet period did not lead to its revision and the abandonment of it due to the prevalence of ideology over historical truth. After the end of the Cold War, this historical concept continued for some time by inertia in Russian historiography, but by the beginning of the 2000s it disappeared.

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