



The Cavalry Maiden: Journals of a Russian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars

Nadezhda Durova (Contributor), Mary Fleming Zirin (translator)

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..". sparkles with wit, intelligence and bold characterization." --Women's Review of Books

..". a ripping yarn... admirable translation... sensitive introductory essay." --Times Literary Supplement

..". a remarkable journal worthy of the attention of a wide audience." --Doris Grumbach, National Public Radio

In male guise, Nadezhda Durova served ten years in the Russian cavalry. The Cavalry Maiden is a lively narrative which appeals in our own time as a unique and gripping contribution to the literature of female experience.

The Cavalry Maiden: Journals of a Russian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars Details

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From Reader Review The Cavalry Maiden: Journals of a Russian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars for online ebook

Jessub Kim says

This was an emotional book for me. Not because the story was crafty (even though it is still good), but because I could empathise with her so much.

From the day she was born, she knew she wanted to be a cavalry soldier. She described infantry as boring and had no interest in it.

Through dangerous battles, she distinguished herself as a fierce, brave soldier, despite lacking some common sense at times.

She preferred her military uniforms over pretty feminine dress, in one instance claiming 'I enjoyed looking at the pretty dresses the women wear... but mine is better!'

Through her army service, she constantly faces situations where she gets agitated for the fear of being found out about her gender. Even as a man, I could relate to how it feels to get nervous about being 'found out'.

I found Russian translation to be seamless. The humor in the story is great, it made me laugh many times. The words used to describe her recollection of events are very emotive, describing a dead corpse in a barn as: 'the sole inhabitant of this dwelling in his eternal rest'

I felt very sad at the end when she chose to leave the Cavalry for her aging father, bidding farewell to the romantic life of swords and good steed and going back to ordinary civilian life.

Shannon says

read in undergrad. They drank a lot of vodka

Ella Teplitsky says

It was sooo hard to finish this book, and there were many terms I didn't understand in it.

Rachel says

Nadezhda Durova was the first female officer in the Russian military. She disguised herself as a man and ran away from home to join the cavalry. Although she was from a well-to-do family and had a comfortable life, it is easy to see why she left. Women had very little freedom in 18th century Russia, especially upper-class women. They were chaperoned at all times, could not live or travel by themselves, and only certain activities (mostly sedate ones) were considered appropriate for them. Durova ruins her needlework, runs away at night to explore the woods, she "thirsted for dangers and longed to be surrounded by them." Although she does not

mention this in her narrative, she did marry and bear a son, but returned to her father's house, presumably after some dispute with her husband. She ran away from her father's house at 23, not at 16 as she describes in her journals. Very little is known about her marriage; presumably she censored her journals because her readership would not accept a narrative about a runaway wife and mother.

Surprisingly, Durova's journals are less about disguising her sex than simply about serving in the cavalry during the Napoleonic Wars. Therefore this book is less of interest to feminists than to those who are interested in 18th and early 19th century cavalry warfare. It is an interesting snapshot of life in the military, which Durova describes as a great deal of marching, waiting, freezing, starving, and generally being uncomfortable, interspersed with periods of battle and rest and relaxation in the great houses in which the cavalry were quartered.

Being from a noble family, Durova is permitted to choose her form of service, though she will have to provide documentation of her nobility. She joins the Polish Horse; and at first does not distinguish herself in the cavalry. Unable to withstand the severe sleep deprivation of life on the march, she often falls asleep and is left behind when her unit moves off. She also has a tendency towards wandering, sometimes into the danger of battle, to satisfy curiosity. And her compassion for the wounded is both severely reprimanded and later commended. Early in her military career, she rescues a fallen officer:

I caught sight of several enemy dragoons surrounding a Russian officer and knocking him off his horse with a pistol shot. He fell, and they prepared to hack at him as he lay. Instantly I rushed towards them with my lance tilted. I can only imagine that this scatterbrained audacity frightened them, because in a flash they abandoned the officer and scattered.

She gives the wounded man her horse, and later is chastised by her superior for this act of compassion, as well as for falling asleep after two days on the march without food or rest:

At Guttstadt in the heat of battle, you decided to give up your horse to some wounded man or other....They let you go into Heilsberg for half an hour, and you settled down by the fireplace and went to sleep, at a time when even to think about sleeping was impossible—that is, impermissible. A soldier has to be more than human. In this calling there is no question of age: he has to carry out his duties the same way at seventeen and at thirty and at eighty. I advise you to die on your horse and in the ranks, or else I warn you that you will either be taken prisoner in disgrace or killed by marauders or worst of all, considered a coward.

Durova's tendency to wander into the heat of battle out of curiosity causes her to be sent to the wagon trains along with the wounded men, to her great shame. But later, her rescue of the wounded officer is considered an act of bravery and compassion, and after rescuing another officer, she gains a reputation for valor. She is invited to meet Emperor Alexander, who says to her, "I have heard that you are not a man. Is this true?" To her surprise, she sees that he is blushing, and he appears to her to be modest and shy. He wants her to return home; it was her father's special request to Alexander to find his daughter. But she is so distressed at that notion that he permits her to remain in the cavalry, promotes her to officer, and gives her his name to bear, Aleksandrov. She admires the Emperor a great deal, and he becomes a patron to her, providing her with financial support during the campaign.

On their second meeting, the Emperor asks for details about the officer she rescued. It turns out that his is a famous name and that "my fearlessness on this one occasion did me more honor than everything else during the campaign, because it was based on the greatest of virtues—compassion." The Emperor awards her the Cross of St. George for her deed.

Although Durova does not fear battle, she does experience other kinds of fear, of harsh elements, hunger, being lost, and particularly of wolves. Prone to wandering off by herself at night, she hears the cries of wolves on several occasions. She ponders:

Why is it that in battle, within sight of thousands of horrible deaths nearby, there was no trace of fear in my soul? What does it mean? Are not pain, torment, death just the same whether they come from a bullet or enemy saber or from the teeth and claws of a ferocious beast? I cannot rationally fathom the real reason either for my fear or my fearlessness. Can it really be because death on the battlefield is linked with glory and death in the field among wolves only with pain?

This was a very different world for the military. Soldiers were quartered in private homes as a matter of course. One of her more unpleasant duties is to collect hay from farms for the military. In exchange, farmers were given vouchers which they could redeem, but many were unwilling to do so, in which case, the military would seize the supplies. But officers were given a great deal of respect as defense against Napoleon's invasion was widely supported.

....how could he resolve to come and conquer a vast, rich nation, one famed for the magnanimous spirit and selflessness of its nobility, the unshakable bulwark of the Russian throne, and for its well-ordered host of troops, whose strict discipline and courage, physical strength, and sturdy constitution allow them to withstand all hardships; a nation that includes as many peoples as it does climates and above and beyond all this, is buttressed by its faith and toleration? The French are a foe worthy of us, noble and courageous, but evil fate in the guides of Napoleon is leading them into Russia. Here they will lay down their heads, and their bones will be scattered and their bodies rot.

Durova was wounded once, and distinguished herself leading a minor skirmish in which she captured several French officers as prisoners-of-war, in addition to saving two wounded officers from death. She did not suffer a serious injury nor kill vast numbers of the enemy; in fact, she apparently did not take any lives in the course of her military career. Although her service record is not as heroic as many others, she was widely considered to be a brave and valiant officer, and according to her account, the men under her leadership probably knew that she was not a man, but by the time they realized this, it no longer mattered, because they would have followed her anywhere.

James Erickson says

One of the most fascinating accounts I've ever read.

Fred Dameron says

Some people who reviewed Cavalry Maiden short the book as too much riding around and falling asleep or terrible prose. To both I say poppy cock.

I found the shortcomings as part of Russia finding her literary voice and deciding what is "Russian", as opposed to French, Polish, German, or Tarter. Twenty years later Durova sends her journal to Pushkin. The reader must remember this is a journal written by a soldier, it needed to be edited. Pushkin did a first rough

cut edit but then died in a duel. Pushkin was unknown when Durova wrote her journals and the literary style Maiden does have must come from Pushkin's limited editing. Durova's brother tried editing her work but he did a workman job. Also the first copies came off the press in 1836. Pushkin has just died and Lermontov has still to write "Hero of Our Time". Russia is still finding out what to write in Russian means. This won't be established until the late 1850's when Tolstoy writes Sevastopol tales. From a readability point Zirin, translator, has done a yeomen job of making this early Russian style readable at all. Taking style and readability aside I do find Durova lacking as an officer.

She does go off to find comfort while her troops have to get on with the drudgery of the march or garrison duty. This is true especially in bad weather. ALSO she leaves her troop to assist an officer who was wounded and in danger of capture. Her superiors say of her she is either a fool or courage's beyond all measure. Her men and superiors do speak well of her to the investigating officer sent by Alexander I. His report gets her presented to the Tsar. So maybe her ability to command was not as impaired as her journal seems to say? Her journal may be the points that she failed on and wrote about as a way to reminder herself not to do that again. Or her failings during the retreat to Moscow and later got her what today would be called a "Letter of Reprimand".(LOR) If so her career would have been ended by such a letter. Even today an officer with an LOR is on borrowed time until he/she must resign their commission. Durova believes that she was passed over for promotion because of her youthful looks. But again in 1808 she is made an officer and by 1816 she has promoted once. With a war on and officers getting killed she should have made Captain. I base this on a 23 year Air Force (AF) career where promotion, even in the modern AF, sometimes resembles a Byzantium maze of boxes to check and positions to be held prior to selection to the next rank. Posting to those positions is based on merit and if Durova lacked the skill/merit she would not be posted. ALSO many times she talks about the Wives of the Regiment. Again 23 years experience: as rank increases your wives skill at tennis, organization in the wives club, cooking etc becomes a larger part of an officers performance report. Durova has no wife and does not participate in the normal social life of her Regiment. This also would have affected her chance to promote. This brings me to the last point why did she write?

I believe that she wrote to deal with the Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) of being a cavalryman in combat. Writing is a common way for PTS patients to deal with our nightmares and anger. By writing it out we see that now what ever it was can NOT hurt us any more and allows us to sleep better. I believe that it is very possible. Durova wrote to keep the memories of what she saw at bay in her sleep. Also that the most graphic images she wrote may have found there way onto Pushkin or her brothers floor. Don't want to scare the public if you want to make a living by writing. Also PTS would explain why she shunned her fellow officers social life in favor of long contemplative walks in the woods or mountains. These became her own way to deal with what she had seen in combat. Her fellow officers drank at these images she walked. And she couldn't join them for fear of revealing her secret. This would also explain why she cries so much over her dead animals. Psychologists call this displacement where the patient substitutes an animal for the people he/she has seen killed and maimed.

Finally, I agree with the translator that Maiden is as good as Babel's Red Cavalry and both are good yarns that should be read. If you are looking for better prose and the same action read Lermontov's "Hero of our Time" but for more raw felling as to being in a line regiment, Maiden is a better read.

Rob Markley says

Quite an extraordinary tale of how a girl impersonates a man in the Russian cavalry... but not terribly well written or translated - hard to tell which?

Simon says

Fascinating story of a young Russian woman's career in the cavalry forces of Tsar Alexander I. Durova fought in some of the key battles of the Napoleonic Wars, and the book is a vivid first-person account of life in the Imperial cavalry of the time. However, apart from the introduction which Durova herself wrote, there is often less focus on the fact that she is a woman passing herself off as a man than I had expected.

Hannah says

Better than Catherine the Great's memoirs, but I did not enjoy reading about "I went on my horse and went there, then there, then there, then my horse died and I cried, then we went there...".

Crunknor says

Interesting stuff, good translation.

Philip says

I got this out from the library because I had read a book based on Durova, but I wasn't able to finish this biography.

Malacorda says

Già soltanto il libro come oggetto, non può non affascinarmi: carta spessa e ingiallita, Prezzo Lire 8.000, chissà in che magazzino ha soggiornato prima che IBS me lo spedisce. E poi la storia, è così avvincente (oltre che così vera) che a paragonarla al celebre cartoon da altri citato mi sembrerebbe proprio di svilirla. Il titolo stesso meriterebbe di restare "La cavalleria femminile", più pacato e meno ammiccante, e al tempo stesso più comprensivo del valore storico e letterario di tale opera.

Ci sono storie, anche parzialmente reali, come in "Vergine giurata" della Dones, dove una donna si ritrova a vivere da uomo per necessità. In altre storie, come "Creatura di sabbia" di Tahar Ben Jelloun, c'è un padre che, desiderando talmente tanto il figlio maschio, finisce per negare l'evidenza e cresce la femmina come se fosse un maschio. Qui non c'è nulla di tutto ciò: Nadezda era solo insofferente alle limitazioni, all'incasellamento dei ruoli e ad una madre che a sua volta non sapeva esprimerle affetto e ha generato così un circolo vizioso che ha portato alla ribellione e alla fuga della giovane.

L'autobiografia si apre dunque con alcuni episodi, siamo verso il termine del diciottesimo secolo, relativi all'infanzia di una "signorina" dal carattere vivace ed esuberante che mal si accompagna alle convenzioni della sua epoca e della sua classe, la quale infine fugge di casa per aggregarsi all'esercito.

Si prosegue con un racconto piuttosto dettagliato e fedele circa i giorni del suo arruolamento e le sue prime battaglie: questo resoconto è molto sincero perché la Durova non cerca di rendere le sue gesta più eroiche di quanto non siano state, ammette con franchezza i propri errori, le sciocchezze e le dimenticanze.

L'aspetto negativo di tutto questo sono i vuoti, è quel che manca: quando narra in prima persona, la Durova dice di essere fuggita di casa a sedici anni, ma le note in postfazione dicono ben altro, la ragazza sarebbe in realtà partita per arruolarsi a venti e passa anni, dopo un matrimonio e un figlio. Un'altra mancanza è l'incontro con lo Zar: le note dicono semplicemente "non è nel volume a nostra disposizione". E infine, mancano dettagli su un aspetto essenziale per tale vicenda: una donna, per quanto bruttina e/o mascolina, per quanto vestita da uomo, anche così salterà primo a poi all'occhio a qualcuno, specie se è proprio l'unica donna immezzo a torme di barbudos. Gli accenni a questo aspetto della vicenda sono invece rarissimi. Per non parlare degli aspetti pratici: andava a nascondersi per tagliare i capelli che crescevano più rapidamente di quelli dei suoi commilitoni? Si isolava ogni qual volta doveva cambiarsi e anche solo in parte denudarsi? Come se l'è smazzata col problema delle regole mensili che, a quanto mi risulta, esisteva già anche nel diciottesimo e diciannovesimo secolo? Ecco, nessuna menzione circa questi argomenti pratici. Probabilmente queste omissioni sono causate da quello stesso motivo che l'ha spinta a lasciare casa, sono solo il frutto del gusto dell'epoca che non consentiva di parlare apertamente di certe cose, eppure è un peccato perché queste omissioni finiscono per dare una vaga aria di finzione ad una storia che invece è proprio vera che più vera non si può. La postfazione suggerisce che il fatto di aver costruito la biografia operando non solo senza alcuna aggiunta, ma addirittura per sottrazione, serva a conferire maggior valore all'opera e a sottolineare maggiormente i caratteri più veri e profondi dell'autrice e protagonista. Su questo punto non mi trovo molto d'accordo, ma io scrivo questo da stare nel ventunesimo secolo; lei era uno spirito del ventiduesimo secolo impastoiato nelle convenzioni del diciottesimo secolo.

In ogni caso, il valore dell'opera resta fuori da ogni dubbio: le operazioni durante le guerre Napoleoniche sono fedeli, raccontate in direttissima. La descrizione dell'infanzia è aggraziata e vivace, e sempre citando la nota in postfazione di Pia Pera: "...la descrizione dell'infanzia, così strana e poetica, infiammata d'ispirazione cavalleresca e immalinconita dall'oppressione materna." Personalmente, mi fa fatto ripensare ad Aksakov.

Ed è pur vero che in poche pagine si arriva a conoscere e capire bene la Durova che non aveva il benché minimo senso del protagonismo, "fino alla fine [...] restò un cavaliere solitario, ispirata da un ideale donchisciottesco di protezione degli indifesi e da un profondo senso di compassione per i deboli. Si sentiva in armonia con la natura e le bestie, e parlava soprattutto al suo diario."

Noi oggi siamo ancora qui a discutere se sia più appropriato dire "sindaca" piuttosto che "sindaco", "ministra" piuttosto che "ministro", mentre all'inizio del diciannovesimo secolo c'è stata una persona che ha avuto la forza e il coraggio di fare semplicemente quello che si sentiva di fare, senza pensare nemmeno per un attimo a come si potesse etichettare, a quale parola usare per quel che stava facendo. Ha fatto, e basta. Mi sa che siamo più arretrati noi.

Justin says

I wish this book involved more than her riding around Eastern Europe and falling asleep when important things happen. Sadly, I'm not exaggerating.

Laura Edwards says

What a wonderful book! I really enjoyed Durova's writing style, her joy and exuberance leapt off the page. I will be seeking out other titles, if they're available. And the introduction by Mary Zirin, explaining her translation, was very helpful. I do think, however, that more people suspected Durova's secret than she believed. So many of the men seem very protective and solicitous towards her. Throughout the book, I shared her utter enthusiasm and I was glad she was able to escape the constraints of her time and follow a path which enriched her life. Also, she wrote a couple of eloquent paragraphs near the end about the love a dog has for its master.

After seeing so many low ratings for this book, I can only conclude a lot of people went in with a preconceived notion of what to expect. It's a journal. Says so in the title. If you want a more in depth look at generals and strategy or a book with a feminist bent, look elsewhere. This is a slice of life about a woman who undertook an extraordinary adventure for her times. A book about a soldier's day to day life, something which often includes more tedium than thrilling and dangerous pursuits. Try to enjoy it for what it is.

Dana Loo says

Un librino di grande interesse, breve ma intenso, con una protagonista a dir poco singolare che, avvalendosi di una prosa molto scorrevole, di qualità, a tratti divertente, a tratti drammatica narra, con una naturalezza e veridicità sorprendenti, le memorie di una donna che ebbe il coraggio, in un'epoca in cui la figura femminile era relegata a determinati compiti che erano essenzialmente quelli di moglie e di madre, di prendere in mano la propria vita e fare ciò per cui sentiva di essere nata: la guerra, le imprese belliche, dimostrare il proprio valore combattendo per la Patria senza risparmiarsi. Nella prima parte, che si legge davvero con grande godimento, la Durovna narra quasi con levità, nonostante la gravità di qualche episodio della sua primissima infanzia (quando la madre la buttò letteralmente fuori dal finestrino della carrozza in movimento mettendo a serio rischio la sua vita; la bimba venne poi salvata dal padre ed affidata alle cure del suo reggimento di ussari) del suo burrascoso e opprimente rapporto con questa madre poco amorevole e rigida che voleva imbrigliare la sua esuberanza di ragazzina selvaggia e ribelle, relegandola a quei ruoli per cui le ragazze del suo tempo erano predestinate. Terrorizzata dalla prospettiva di passare il resto della sua vita rinchiusa in una camera tra trine e merletti e lavori al tombolo in attesa di essere maritata, la ragazzina meditò per tutta la sua adolescenza di scappare di casa, unirsi ad un reggimento e iniziare così la sua tanto agognata carriera militare. Cosa che, attraverso varie peripezie, realizzò combattendo durante le guerre napoleoniche in territorio russo in groppa al suo amatissimo Alkid, mostrando un coraggio e una temerarietà non comuni e qualche vulnerabilità legata al suo essere donna e quindi meno resistente fisicamente, ma distinguendosi sempre per la sua profonda umanità e valore, tanto che venne ricevuta dallo zar Alessandro I in persona il quale le diede l'onore di portare il suo nome e la innalzò al grado di ufficiale, assegnandola ad un reggimento di élite. Cosa che poi rifiutò perché mal tollerava la vita di società e si trovava molto più a suo agio tra gli ulani tra i quali era stata addestrata. Conobbe il famosissimo Generale Kutuzov, eroe di guerra, che la prese molto a ben volere e fino al suo congedo visse la vita che sognò.

In realtà queste memorie tralasciano intenzionalmente episodi significativi della sua giovane vita. Il matrimonio per esempio, che contrasse prima della sua fuga e dal quale nacque un bimbo. Però nulla riuscì a fermare questo suo ardore per la battaglia e queste memorie napoleoniche, genere molto in voga nell'epoca, lo dimostrano chiaramente. Memorie che furono sollecitate e appoggiate da Puskin, il grande scrittore russo, il quale le raccomandò chiarezza e veridicità di stile e che le diederò una grandissima notorietà, tanto da venire contesa nei vari salotti più in voga, un tenore di vita mondana che mal tollerava. Si ritirò ad Elabug e

ultimi anni della sua continuò a dedicarli alla scrittura e alla condizione della donna...'

Sherwood Smith says

I read this some years ago. While Durova finesses some of the personal details (presents herself younger and more innocent than she was, i.e. no mention of running from a husband) her writing about her experiences as a cross-dressing Russian soldier among the hussars is fascinating reading.

She is pretty frank about her shortcomings, from her difficulties with lance evolutions to her wandering the perimeter of the battle of Borodino, looking for her unit (she was not the only one totally lost and confused), and other hardships of war.

Leaving this here as a placeholder for a better review when I reread it.
