

A Survey of Military Oaths in Russian History

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Oaths, pledges of loyalty to a ruler or government, have a long history in Russia and they reflect the main sources of moral authority at any given time. What follows is a concise review of some of the Russia's most important oaths at different historical periods.¹

The first recorded reference to an oath in Russia (modern Russians claim descent from what was then referred to as Rus'), taken by members of the so-called prince's guard (княжеская дружина), dates back to the ninth century. The administration of the oath was an important ritual in which warriors pledged faithful service and undying allegiance to their ruler. (The term Tsar was not yet in use. Kievan rulers were considered princes.) Witnessing before God was common in oaths of various types of legal proceedings in this period.²

Boris Morozov, adviser to the second Romanov tsar, Aleksei Mikhailovich, authored an oath in 1647 that would serve as a base document for future editions throughout the dynasty. A later text of the oath, published in 1775 in the "Military Regulations for warriors concerning artillery and other matters of military science," expanded to include the full set of drills and procedures for Russian soldiers. Based on versions dating back to 1607, the regulations demanded not only true and unswerving loyalty to the Tsar under any circumstances, but adherence to 663 specific instructions.³

Under Peter the Great, who helped edit the oath himself, the text changed a bit, replacing the word to "swear" with "promise," and elaborating on some aspects of loyalty to the ruler. The word "promise" was more secular, which probably pleased Peter, and more closely adhered to legal phraseology.⁴ An English version of the text follows:

I (name of the person), promise under the **Almighty God** to serve lawfully his Majesty Peter the First, our **Tsar and Autocrat of all the Russias**, and so on...and the rightful heir with all my might without sparing my health or property. I am obliged to carry out all decrees and edicts by His Majesty as well as any decrees He and his government will make in the future. I must everywhere and in all circumstances warn, protect and advise His interests and those of his **Nation**, and if I hear something said against Him, I will defend him. I will find and oppose all enemies who would harm him and I will expose all I discover who would act against him. And so I will serve His Majesty and his Government of my own **Christian Conscience**, without lying and equivocating, as any honest person of good will should do, who will have to answer on Judgment Day. May **Almighty God** help me to do my duty.⁵

Peter introduced a form of military conscription to Russia and, therefore, the oath highlighted service to the tsar and the state.⁶ As we can see, religion played an important role in the process of taking an oath. The person should be loyal not only to the Tsar but also to *Almighty God*. Indeed, in the text of the

oath, Christian devotion to God demands faithful service to the tsar. Besides, he should be devoted to his *Motherland* and be ready to denounce if he hears something said against the Tsar or the current system in the country. It is interesting to mention that every time a military man was promoted he had to renew the oath.

In 1743 under the reign of the Empress Ekaterina Alexeevna the oath became even more personal and included the necessity to swear not only to the Empress, but also her son, Pavel Petrovich.

With the promise set forth below, I swear before the **Almighty God and His Holy Evangel** that I will be devoted to Her Majesty, My All-merciful and Great Empress, Ekaterina Alexeevna, and her **dearest son Pavel Petrovich**, legal heir of all the Russias. I swear to serve faithfully and sincerely and to obey the laws truly, without regard for my own health and willing to **fight to the last drop of blood**. Let Almighty God help me in all this. In conclusion of this oath I am kissing **the Words and Cross of the Savior**. Amen.

In this oath we can see such religious symbols as the Savior's Cross and His Words which were not mentioned in previous oaths. *Fight to the last drop of blood* is another innovation, showing devotion and faithfulness to the Empress and the heir. It is interesting to note that the Government is not mentioned at all. The oath is very personalized and includes some religious elements.

According to the martial law in 1869 “an oath is a pledge which a soldier takes in God's name and in front of the Savior's Cross and the Gospel..., to go and fight for the Motherland bravely and cheerfully. The betrayer will receive no mercy, neither in this life, nor on Doomsday.”⁷

Присяга есть клятва, которую солдат дает перед лицом Божиим на кресте Спасителя и на святом его Евангелии: служить Богу и Государю верою и правдою ..., смело и весело идти в бой за Царя, Русь Святую и Веру Православную. Изменнику же присяги не будет пощады ни на белом свете, ни на Страшном Суде Божьем.⁸

In this oath we see that there is no direct punishment for refusal to fight against the enemy. It was considered that God and higher forces would punish a person who failed to do his duty. The expectation of a soldier “to fight bravely and cheerfully” without thinking about death highlights readiness to sacrifice oneself. Soldiers often went to war singing patriotic songs to elevate their morale and distract them from thinking too much about the battle to come.

Russia's February 1917 Revolution ushered in a new regime without a dynastic autocrat. Still, the practice of taking an oath remained very important. March 7, 1917 was the day when the Provisional Government, headed by Georgy Evgenievich Lvov (1861–1925), a member of Ministerial Counsel, created a new text for a martial oath.⁹

In this oath, we see a new reference to the “soldier's honor” and nothing was more valuable than that. It stated, “I promise to obey the temporary Government which currently heads Russia until a new Government is formed *by the people's will*.” Until that time, Russia's soldiers would obey and fight for the provisional regime up to *their last drop of blood*. They swore to be honest, conscientious, and brave officers (soldiers) and never to violate their oaths for *dishonest gain, friendship, and enmity*. Nothing could be allowed to distract them from serving the state.¹⁰

As events turned out, the Provisional Government barely lasted half a year. On April 22, 1918 the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Bolsheviks created the text of the new oath which was called the Formula for a Ceremonial Promise.

Formula for a Ceremonial Promise

Asserted in the working session of All-Russian Central executive Committee among the Soviet of Workers, Soldiers, Countrymen and Cossack Deputies.

From April 22, 1918

1. I the son of working class people, a citizen of the Soviet Republic take the rank of a working-class warrior.
2. Before the working class of Russia and the World I promise to carry this rank with honor, learn military arts responsibly and guard the people's and military's belongings as a just and lasting peace.
3. I promise to follow revolutionary discipline strictly and steadfast and execute orders given by the Working Government without question.
4. I promise to prevent my friends and myself from actions defaming and shaming the dignity of a Soviet Citizen and direct all my actions and thoughts to the main goal which is to liberate working people.
5. I promise to protect the Workers' Government at a word from all the danger and attempts from all the enemies and never to be afraid to die for Socialism and the brotherhood of nations.
6. If I diverge from this promise, let everyone despise me and let the revolutionary law punish me severely.¹¹

As we see, the approach changed a little in this oath. There are no such symbols as God and Religion. Instead, *revolutionary law* would punish all betrayers. *Working class people and the idea of socialism* are at the head of this pledge. Revolutionary discipline and the ideas behind it lead and guided most people at that time. Nothing could be possibly worse than saying something bad or acting against the *brotherhood*.

On January 3, 1939 a decree from the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adapted a new text of the military oath. It was called *the Military Oath of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army*.¹² Not surprisingly, the text reflected the priorities of Stalin's regime. Besides obligations mentioned in previous oaths, this one includes the necessity to keep state and military secrets. There is also reference to the Soviet motherland, indicating the revival of traditional patriotic symbolism in a new package. Now soldiers had to be faithful to the USSR and the Red Army, and fight bravely for the interests of the government of workers and peasants.

Of course, as regimes changed, oaths did the same. Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, on February 11, 1993 there was a new military oath for the Russian Federation. It is called the Military Service Oath.¹³ Here for the first time, the Russian Constitution is the most important object of the soldier's loyalty.

I, (the name of the person),
Swear with a formal ceremony
To be devoted to my Motherland—
The Russian Federation.
I swear to comply with
The Constitution of the Russian Federation,
Fulfil all the requirements
Of Military Regulations, Commanders' orders.
I swear to meet all military obligations,

Protect bravely freedom, independence,
And constitutional regime of Russia,
People and my Motherland.¹⁴

Most recently, the *Yunarmiiia* (Youth Army) has appeared as the National Military Patriotic Social Movement Association supported and funded by the Government of Russia. Established in 2015, it too has an oath reflecting expectations for patriotic Russian youth.

The Oath of a Youth Army Member

I, joining Yunarmiiia, am taking a solemn oath in front of all my friends:

- to be always faithful to my Motherland and Yunarmiiia Brotherhood
- to follow all Yunarmiiia rules and be an honest Yunarmiiia member, follow all traditions of valor, courage and comradely assistance
- to always protect the weak, overcome all the difficulties in order to gain justice and the truth
- to strive for victory in studying and sports, lead a healthy lifestyle, get ready for serving the Motherland
- commemorate the heroes fighting for the freedom and independence of our Motherland, be a patriot and a dignified citizen of Russia
- to carry the rank of Yunarmiiia member with valor and honor

I pledge!¹⁵

As we can see, children are being prepared to serve the Russian Army and state, and the government encourages them to join Yunarmiiia in order to gain some knowledge about patriotism and the army in general. The oath stresses being ready to help your friends in any situations and being faithful to Russia, ready to fight for it if required. Teenagers swear this oath in front of their teachers, family, and friends, and it is considered to be a serious step for young Russian people.

End Notes

1 Translations of oaths are by the author.

2 *Ustav ratnykh, pushechnykh I drugikh del kasaiushchiikh voinskoi nauki*, [Military Regulation for Warriors concerning Artillery and other Matters of Military Science] St. Petersburg: 1777. For a good review of imperial Russian oaths, see these Russian sites: “Kak meniaetsia tekst voennoi prisiagi v Rossii v raznoe vremia. Istoriia nashei voennoi prisiagi,” [How the text of the military oath in Russia changed over time. A History of our military oath], accessed March 29, 2019 at https://pikabu.ru/story/kak_menyalsya_tekst_voennoy_prisyagi_v_rossii_v_raznoe_vremyaistoriya_nashey_voennoy_prisyagi_6329947; “Istoriia priniatiia voennoi prisiagi v rossii” {History of Taking a Military Oath in Russia] accessed March 29, 2029 at <https://poisk-ru.ru/s42738t6.html>; Russkaia imperatorskaia armiia. [The Russian Imperial Army] accessed March 29, 2019 at https://pochta-polevaya.ru/aboutarmy/history/russkaya_imperatorskaya-armiya/history_the_military_oath.html. For a basic Russian definition of a military oath, see “Prisiaga voennaia,” in *Voennyi entsiklopedicheskii slovar’* [Military Encyclopedia dictionary] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1983), 591.

3 “How the Text of the Military Oath Has Changed over Time” at https://pikabu.ru/story/kak_menyalsya_tekst_voennoy_prisyagi_v_rossii_v_raznoe_vremyaistoriya_nashey_voennoy_prisyagi_6329947

4 Artem Krechetnikov, “*Voennaia prisizga Rossii: ‘Obeshchanie vmeste ‘kliatva.’*” [The Military Oath of Russia: Promise instead of Pledge], BBC Russian Service, December 24, 2012 at https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2012/12/121224_russia_military_oath.

5 Krechetnikov.

6 “Petr I,” in *Voennaia entskilopediia*, 553.

7 “How the Text of the Military Oath changed over Time.”

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 *Kliatva iunarmeitsa* [Oath of the Young Army], accessed 23 March, 2019 at https://gym1583s-new.mskobr.ru/files/klyatva_yunarmejsca.pdf. For more on the Yunarmia, see the site of the Ministry of defense of the Russian Federation at <http://stat.mil.ru/youtharmy/info.htmor>.