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FIELD MARSHAL PETER LACY: AN IRISHMAN IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIA

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Irishmen, albeit few in number entered the service of the Russian court well before the reign of Peter the Great. However, the coinciding of that modernizing tsar's desire for Western military experts with the defeat by William of Orange of King James's outnumbered and poorly equipped army on the Boyne in July 1690, meant that of those 19,000 Irish men-at-arms who fled to Europe, some at least found their way to Russia. It was much more the usual pattern for such soldiers of fortune to join France's Irish Brigade, or to enter the Spanish or Austrian service. Indeed, it was not uncommon for officers to seek and accept a series of commissions at a number of courts. The Russian service, by contrast, was not a widely sought after career move. As one Irish historian put it earlier this century: "Russia has never attracted the Irish to any great extent, partly on account of the climate, and partly on account of the repugnance the Irish have always entertained towards despotism". Nevertheless, in the same writer's view, there are common national characteristics which would seem to favour closer contacts: 'Both races are dreamers and idealists; both believe in

fairies and ghosts; both are intensely religious ... both have a natural antipathy to commerce and both are born fighters'.¹

It is, certainly, difficult to establish even approximately the number of Irishmen who made their way to the eighteenth-century Russian court. Any systematic search of officers' service records in Russian military archives would be likely to yield considerably more than the twenty or so Irish army and naval officers identified to date. Three of the most outstanding of these were Field Marshal Peter Lacy, Count John O'Rourke, and General George Browne. Their careers span the reigns of all Russia's eighteenth-century rulers with the exception of Paul. It is the extraordinary contribution to Russian service made by the first of these, Field Marshal Lacy, which is the focus of this article.

Peter Lacy from Co. Limerick was at 22 year of age among the first group of one hundred Western European officers recruited by Peter I in 1700, following his first embassy to the West which is this year celebrating its bicentenary. Lacy was presented to Peter during the Russian siege of the Swedish fortress of Narva, which started in October 1700 and ended in disaster for the Russians. The introduction was made by the hapless Duc de Croy, foreign commander of the Russian troops overwhelmed by the sudden Swedish attack in November of that year. The shock defeat underlined Peter's need for experienced and battle-hardened Western commanders to meet Russia's needs in the Great Northern War against the Swedes. It was in the earliest Russian campaign against Charles XII of Sweden that Peter Lacy saw his first action on his new master's behalf in the Baltic territories of Livonia and Ingria. His obvious talent ensured him a rapid rise: in 1706 the tsar entrusted him with the command of the Polotskii regiment and the task of training three newly-raised regiments.² An action he undertook in December 1708 was to prove typical of his decisiveness and boldness: as colonel at the head of three battalions of infantry, one company of grenadiers, one regiment of dragoons and 500 Cossacks he attacked and captured the HQ of Charles XII at Rumna. The delighted tsar rewarded Lacy with the prestigious command of a grenadier regiment.³

His next conspicuous action was in July the following year at the decisive battle of Poltava, where the Swedes gambled and lost in taking on a Russian army twice as large as its own, thereby marking the start of their eventual defeat in the Great Northern War. Peter Lacy's advice to the tsar on musketry methods

¹ E. O'Donnell, *The Irish Abroad: A Record of the Achievements of Wanderers from Ireland*, London, 1915, p. 306.

² M. O'Callaghan, *History of the Irish Brigade in the Service of France*, London, 1870, p. 482.

³ J.E. McGee, *Sketches of Irish Soldiers in Every Land*, New York, 1881, p. 104.

is said to have played a decisive role in Russia's celebrated and important victory, whose significance has been compared in this century with the Soviet victory at Stalingrad (1943). According to one source:

It was Marshal Lacy who taught the Russians to beat the King of Sweden's army, and, from being the worst, to become some of the best soldiers in Europe. The Russians had been used to fighting in a very confused manner, and to discharging their musketry before they had advanced sufficiently near the enemy to do execution. Before the famous battle of Poltava, Marshal Lacy advised the tsar to send orders that every man should reserve his fire until he came within a few yards of the enemy. The consequence was that Charles XII was totally defeated and in one action lost the advantage of nine glorious campaigns.¹

In spite of this victory, Russia's war with Sweden dragged on, and so did Lacy's role in the continuing action. By 1719 the necessity of invading Sweden was generally recognized and reflected in a diary entry made by Lacy in June of that year: 'I know of no other way of forcing the Swedes to make peace,' he wrote.² Accordingly, promoted to the rank of major-general, Lacy led a raid on the Swedish coastal towns of Osthhammer and Oregrund as well as 135 villages and smaller settlements. In a similar action two years later, Lacy, now lieutenant-general in command of 5,000 troops, razed Sundsvall along with two other towns and numerous villages in the locality.³ Commenting on Lacy's tactics, a contemporary English observer noted that Lacy 'always commanded apart with his division, and perpetrated numerous devastations'.⁴ The devastations visited by Lacy on Sundsvall were, in the view of one authority, enough to prompt the Swedish negotiators at Nystadt to yield Livonia to Russia, thereby providing her with direct access to the Baltic Sea and so paving the way for the Treaty of Nystadt which was at last concluded in September 1721.⁵

Although the Great Northern War was over, this was to be by no means the last Sweden had seen of Peter Lacy. His career from this point went from strength to strength. The high esteem, which he had enjoyed at court during the last years of Peter's reign, was marked by his appointment in 1723 to membership of the College of War. Similar esteem was shown by Peter the Great's successors. Catherine I made Lacy a Knight of the Order of St Alexander Nevsky

¹ Ibid., pp. 104-105. McGee cites Ferrar; this is, presumably, M.L. Ferrar, the nineteenth-century military historian.

² R. Wittram, *Peter I*, Gottingen, 1964, vol. 2, p. 417.

³ E. Schuyler, *Peter the Great*, London, 1884, vol. 2, pp. 517, 533.

⁴ C.A.G. Bridge (ed.), *History of the Russian Fleet during the Reign of Peter the Great, by a Contemporary Englishman (1724)*, Publication of the Navy Record Society, 1899.

⁵ Schuyler, op. cit., p. 533.

on the very day of its institution, 21 May 1725.¹ In addition, he was appointed General-in-Chief of Infantry, and commander of all forces garrisoned in Petersburg, Ingria and Novgorod.² In the general staff list for 1728, Lacy's name ranked third among the six full generals in the Russian army. As a foreigner, his annual salary was 3,600 rubles, whereas Russians received 3,120.³ A further indication of Lacy's standing at this time is the fact that his signature always occupied first place on War College reports to Catherine I. It is interesting to note in this connection that he always signed his name in English as 'C-te P. Lacy', even on official Russian documents. This perhaps lends support to the claim of one commentator that Lacy's command of written and spoken Russian was never particularly good.⁴

From the time of Peter's death in 1725, foreigners at the Russian court were to play an even greater role in the execution of the country's increasingly ambitious foreign policy. Lacy's own career is a clear illustration of this tendency. There was a shift in emphasis, already apparent during the closing stages of the Great Northern War, away from his training of troops and advising on tactics and weaponry, to leading his men into action and planning and engaging in front-line operations. Typical of these was his mission in 1727 to expel Maurice de Saxe from the Duchy of Courland. Maurice, much to Russia's irritation, had managed to have himself elected Duke of Courland. The duchess of Courland was Anna, who became Empress of Russia when she succeeded Peter II to the throne in 1730. Her request to marry Maurice de Saxe was rejected by Empress Catherine I and led to the decision to expel him and his retinue from the duchy. Lacy's successful execution of this task fully justified the confidence placed in him, and confirmed him as the most influential foreigner at the Russian court. This position, however, was not without its dangers. Lacy was always careful never to become embroiled in the notorious perils of court intrigue. Indeed, it is to his studious avoidance of court cabals that his remarkable survival throughout the 'era of palace revolutions' is generally attributed. However, his evident standing aroused the resentment and jealousy of the most ambitious of the many Germans at court. The most powerful threat came from Burkhardt Munnich (known in Russian as Minikh), one of Anna's Courland favourites, who from

¹ D.N. Bantysh-Kamenskii, *Biografii russkikh generalissimov*, Moscow, 1840, pp. 203-15 (p. 204).

² O'Callaghan, op. cit., vol. 9, p. 483.

³ 'Protokoly, zhurnaly i ukazy verkhovnogo taynogo soveta', (Jan-June, 1728); *SIRIO* (Sbornik Imperatorskogo Rossiiskogo Istoricheskogo Obschestva), vol. v, St.Petersburg, 1891, p. 369.

⁴ *SIRIO*, vol. III, passim. Cf. *Rizhskii vestnik*, 2 June 1871, no. 121.

the start of her reign skilfully set about concentrating all authority over military affairs into his own hands.¹

The growing rivalry between Lacy and Munnich was intensified when they saw action together in 1733 in the Russians' march on Warsaw in support of Augustus of Saxony's candidacy as King of Poland against that of Stanislas Leszczynski, who was supported by France. The ensuing War of the Polish Succession, which continued until 1735, gave both men an opportunity to display their military prowess. Of the two, it was Lacy who had the better war, in the view of the military historian Maslovsky. After successfully raising the siege of Gdansk in 1733, Lacy's action the following year at the Battle of Wisiczin 'showed him to be one of the best type of foreign generals of Peter's time who knew and loved the art of warfare.' Moreover, Lacy 'essentially preserved the modus operandi of dragoon-type cavalry of Peter's time, which was extremely important at a time when Munnich was beginning to introduce foreign methods, which he did not really understand, without considering their suitability for an army like ours.'² In addition, Lacy is credited with having 'terminated the civil war in that distracted country by the battle of Busawitza where, with only 1500 dragoons, 80 hussars and 500 Cossacks, he completely routed 20,000 Stanislavites commanded by the Palatine of Lublin'.³

On the successful conclusion of the War of the Polish Succession, Augustus created Lacy a Knight of the Order of the White Eagle of Poland. The next two years he spent assisting Augustus consolidate his position as King of Poland, fending off attacks from elements hostile to him in a series of remarkable feat of arms. Lacy visited Vienna where he was warmly received by the Emperor and Empress and presented with gifts. It was on his return from the Austrian capital to Petersburg that he was met by an imperial courier bearing him a signal honour: his patent as a Russian field marshal.⁴ This was the first time in Russia's history, and consistent with the general thrust of Anna Ivanovna's reign, that there had been two foreigners serving as field marshals in imperial service. The other was Munnich.

Lacy's first mission in his new rank was to prepare for the siege of the fortress-town of Azov in anticipation of the long-expected war with Turkey, which was waged from 1735 to 1739. During the ensuing siege he was wounded and

¹ D. Maslovskii, 'Russkoye voyennoye delo pri Fel'dmarshale Graf Minikh', *Voyennyi sbornik*, 7, 1891, pp. 5-21 (p. 6).

² Maslovskii, op. cit., 8. 169-87 (p.174).

³ McGee, *Sketches of Irish Soldiers in Every Land*, p. 107.

⁴ O'Callaghan, op. cit., p. 484.

lucky not to fall into Turkish hands. Azov capitulated to Lacy's forces in July 1736, after which the field marshal was directed to join Munnich in the Crimea.

In 1737 Lacy was awarded the prestigious Order of St Andrew, and appointed commander of a new campaign to annexe the Crimea. Two previous attempts to do so, Leontiev's in 1735 and Munnich's in 1736 had ended in failure. Lacy eagerly accepted this new challenge, and rose to it with characteristic brilliance and improvisation. To the considerable astonishment of the Crimean khan, Lacy bridged the Azov Sea at a narrow point near Perekop. Within four days, aided by favourable winds and tide, his entire army crossed it and began marching on Arabat. As one commentator has wryly observed, 'the parallel to a well-known incident in the Book of Exodus was sufficiently striking to make an immense impression upon the superstitious Russian soldiers'.¹ Then, on learning that the khan had reached Arabat before him, Lacy decided to spring a further surprise by fording the sea separating him from the rest of the Crimea. His amazed generals countered this audacious plan by proposing immediate retreat. But to their further embarrassment, Lacy promptly ordered the protesting generals to return to Russia without delay. It was three days before they managed to persuade the angry field marshal to relent and to forgive them their presumption in proposing a retreat to him.² By the use of characteristically imaginative and novel strategy, Lacy made a great success of the expedition of which it has been remarked that 'without knowing why he had been sent into the country he quitted it with very great glory to himself and very little sickness to his army.'³ All the same, in spite of the success Lacy made of this operation, the Crimea was not finally annexed to the Russian Empire until 1783, well into the reign of Catherine the Great. Meanwhile Lacy's relationship with Field marshal Munnich deteriorated. The Irishman's achievements in the field, together with the high standing he enjoyed among his troops and at court, profoundly antagonized the increasingly eclipsed Munnich. His jealousy boiled over when, on one occasion, he drew his sabre and launched himself at Lacy who promptly defended himself until the timely intervention of a third party, General Levashev, brought about the separation of the two field marshals before any serious damage was done.⁴

In the spring of 1741, Lacy was placed in command of Russian forces in Finland mobilising for renewed war with Sweden. Following Sweden's declara-

¹ F.T. Jane, *The Imperial Russian Navy: its past, present, and future*, London, 1904, p. 73.

² E. Cust, *Annals of the Wars of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1857-60 (2 vols.), to 1744, London, 1770, p. 169. vol. 1, pp. 211-12; Baron de Manstein, *Memoirs of Russia, historical, political from 1727 to 1744*, London, 1770, p. 169.

³ O'Callaghan, *op. cit.*, p. 489.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 485.

tion of war in July, Lacy advanced at the head of 30,000 troops on Villmanstrand and inflicted a defeat on the 11,000 Swedish defenders under General Wrangel. Although the victory boosted morale in the Russian capital, Lacy was prevented from continuing his advance into Sweden as far as Fredrikshamn by the lack of reinforcements and supplies, and so returned to Petersburg.

Here, in December, 'an incident occurred in the life of the marshal, which', as J.E. McGee relates, 'but for his ready wit, smacking somewhat of his race and nation, might have been attended with very serious consequences'.¹ Elizabeth, Peter the Great's daughter, became empress literally overnight as a result of a palace revolt. As already mentioned, Lacy prudently avoided court intrigue and generally played no part in it. Nevertheless, the coup was hardly over when, in the account of Baron de Manstein, Lacy 'was applied to at 3 o'clock in the morning to say of what party he was — that of the Grand Duchess Anna, or the Princess Elizabeth? Although suddenly awakened out of sleep, perceiving that there was in fact an empress who had the reins, but not being equally satisfied if it were the grand duchess or the Princess who had succeeded, he replied: "of the party of the reigning empress".² This answer apparently satisfied Elizabeth, whose accession brought an end to the supremacy at court of the so-called 'German' party. Senior Courlanders, such as Ostermann, Biron, and Munnich, were stripped of their high rank and office, and sent into Siberian exile. But Peter Lacy survived this purge of foreigners to become the principal field marshal in Russian service. An immediate consequence of Elizabeth's policy of the russification of the Russian court and armed forces was an outbreak of xenophobic riots in the capital. For example, on Easter Sunday 1742, Lacy took prompt action following a brawl between Russian and foreign serving officers by implementing a policy of much stricter policing of army personnel in Petersburg. As a result, potentially much more dangerous disturbances in the capital were averted. In fact, Lacy is credited by McGee with having 'saved Petersburg and, perhaps, the Empire. Most certain it is, that, if it had not been for the good arrangements made by Marshal Lacy, the disorders would have multiplied and gone greater lengths'.³

After the three-month truce with Sweden following Elizabeth's accession, Lacy returned in June to Swedish Finland at the head of a large force. He took Fredrikshamn, which had been torched and abandoned by the Swedes. There

¹ McGee, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 117. For fuller details of such incidents, see Sergei M. Soloviev, *History of Russia, vol. 37, Empress Elizabeth's Reign, 1741-1744*, edited and translated by Patrick J. O'Meara, Academic International Press, Gulf Breeze, 1996, pp. 62-4.

was jubilation at the capture of what was the only fortified town in Swedish Finland without the loss of a single man. Lacy now, to quote from E. Cust, 'obliged the Swedish army under Count Lowenhaupt to retire before him from one place to another, until at length they were quite surrounded near Helsingfors'.¹ In fact, the instructions Lacy had received from Petersburg following the capture of Fredrikshamn ordered the conclusion of the campaign once the enemy had been driven beyond the river Kymen. The Russian generals were ready to comply, but the foreigners (Lacy, Keith and Lowendahl) were anxious to exploit the Russian advantage by pushing on to Helsingfors. Thus, in August, Lacy caught up with the retreating Swedish army near Helsingfors and pre-empted its further retreat to Abo by leading his forces along an unmapped road. This had been built during the campaigns of Peter the Great and was now revealed to the field marshal by a local Finnish peasant. As a result of this stratagem, the surprised Swedish army capitulated, leaving all Finland subject to the Russian Empire. Lacy thus returned in triumph to the Russian court with whose orders he had so judiciously dispensed.²

The empress's approval of Lacy's actions was clearly indicated when, at the start of Russia's operations against Sweden in 1743, Elizabeth boarded the field marshal's ship in Petersburg to present him with gifts and to bless his newest enterprise. However, Lacy's eagerness to match his success on land with a victory over the Swedes at sea was pre-empted by the Treaty of Abo, which was signed in August 1743. Once more he returned in triumph to Petersburg, this time aboard a yacht sent by the empress herself. After the peace celebrations, which marked the culmination of his fifty years' active service, Lacy retired to his estates in Livonia as governor of the province, a post to which Peter II had originally appointed him back in 1729. There he resided until his death in May 1751 at the age of 72. John Cook, the doctor who attended Count Lacy in his last months, recalled that the citizens of Riga so mourned the field marshal's death that 'they tolled their bells eight days'.³ He left a large fortune (£60,000 sterling) and sizable estates, acquired as his will states by way of an epitaph, 'through long and hard service and with much danger and uneasiness'.⁴

Lacy was a popular commander combining qualities of unusual ability and sound judgement. He had a notoriously quick temper, but, in the words of one English historian of the early eighteenth century 'he was generous to a fault, as

¹ Cust, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 24-6.

² O'Callaghan, *op. cit.*, p. 485.

³ J. Cook, *Voyages and Travels through the Russian Empire, Tartary and Part of the Kingdom of Persia*, Edinburgh, 1770, p. 622.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 498; *Dictionary of National Biography* (4th reprint), vol. II, pp. 385-7 (p. 387).

brave as a lion and incapable of committing a mean action.’¹ In the course of his remarkable career he served five eighteenth-century sovereigns — six if one counts the fact that he partnered the 16-year-old future Catherine II at her wedding dance in 1745. It was an incident which, as she describes in her memoirs, almost drove her to tears, so painfully did her clumsy partner tread on her toes.² Unquestionably, his most affectionate imperial patron was Elizabeth. This is evident not only from the various attentions and favours she showed him, as already described, but also from the fact that other foreign officers regarded Lacy as the best channel for reaching the Empress. For example, in 1747 General Keith turned to Lacy begging him to petition Elizabeth on his behalf for an audience.³ The medic, John Cook, similarly secured Lacy’s assistance in returning his wife and sons to Scotland. Moreover, when Elizabeth was told that Lacy’s health was improving (during what was to be his final illness), Cook recalled that ‘she expressed as great satisfaction as if he had been her father’.⁴ What particularly impressed Russians about Lacy was his loyalty to their country. ‘Necessity obliged him to sell his sword’, one commentator has rightly observed, ‘but he served his paymaster loyally and with honour. He differed markedly from the other Russian commanders of foreign birth in that he always pursued Russia’s interests, never his own’.⁵ The admiration he aroused was typically expressed in a common soldier’s view, as recorded by Sergei Soloviev: ‘Even though he was a foreigner, he was a good man’, while Frederick the Great dubbed him ‘the Prince Eugene of Muscovy’. In 1891, one hundred and forty years after his death, this remarkable Irishman was commemorated by the naming after him of a division of the Russian army.⁶

¹ R. Nisbet Bain, *The Pupils of Peter the Great*, London, 1897, p. 219.

² *Memoirs of Catherine the Great*, London, 1955, p. 100. Further evidence of Elizabeth’s regard for Lacy is the warm wording of the wedding invitation she sent to him on this occasion (reproduced in *Rizhskii vestnik*, 26 May, 1871, no. 115).

³ *Historical Manuscripts Commission Reports*, vol. 9, app. 2, 1884, p. 227.

⁴ Cook, *op. cit.*, pp. 611, 617.

⁵ *Russkiy biograficheskiy slovar’*, St. Petersburg, 1914, vol. 10, p. 86.

⁶ *DNB*, *loc. cit.*

