

Great Northern War Russian Infantry Colours pre-1712

Vladimir Velikanov has uncovered written descriptions of five Russian infantry colours of the Great Northern War period that date before 1712. The accompanying plate illustrates reconstruction attempts of these five colours based on the written descriptions. These colours would seem to indicate that there was more diversity and less standardization of colours pre-1712 than previously thought.

Russian Infantry Colors from the early Great Northern War, 1700-06.

Vladimir Velikanov

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Russian infantry regiments in the second half of the 17th Century did not carry any regulated pattern of colours. Each regiment had one white regimental colour with a black eagle and colored company colours decorated after colonel's wishes. But at the same time, colours lost at Riga in 1656 had the following common features: a Russian Orthodox Cross (as a national emblem), a heraldic symbol (previously Russians used religious symbols) and a motto in Latin (normally phrases from New Testament). These colours were manufactured before the war in 1653-54, and were made from expensive cloth and richly decorated. All of the elements were embroidered. During the 1654-67 war, the colours were simplified. Less expensive material was used, and elements were painted or sewn. Colours made in 1665 for regiments in Belgorod did not have any heraldic symbols or mottos, only a simplified Orthodox cross and stars. When the war ended, matters of economy were forgotten. Colours made in the 1680s again became richly decorated with various embroidered elements (heraldic symbols, stars, moons, "herbs", mottos, crosses, etc.) and were of expensive cloth.

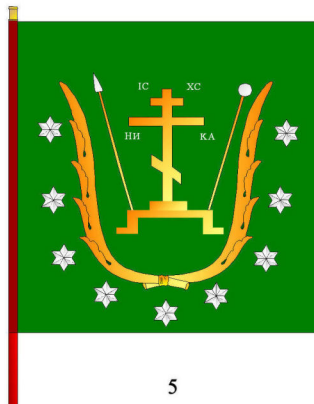
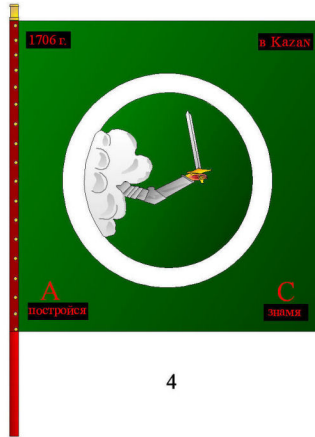
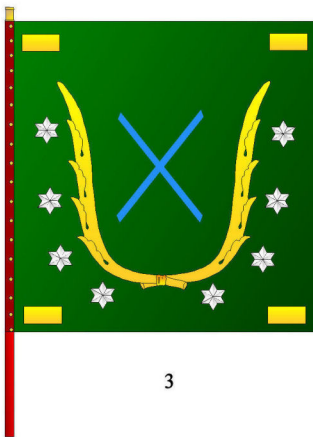
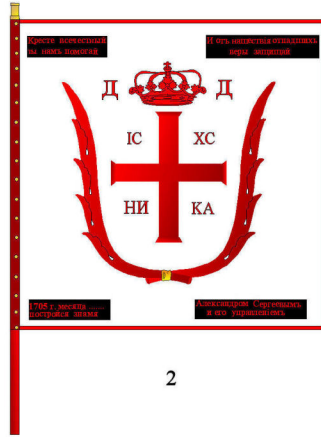
New infantry regiments raised in 1700 received colours of a new pattern. Each had one white regimental color with black or brown eagle in colonel's company and colored colours in the other companies. The sixteen regiments raised in Moscow had company's colours in ten different colors: red, green, gray, brown, dark brown, light blue, dark blue, violet, yellow, sand. Company colours were decorated with an arm holding a sword issuing from a cloud surrounded by a golden chain at the bottom of which was a St. Andrew medallion. On either side of the golden chain was a palm branch. All of these colours were made in the flag works in Moscow. The colours of the 11 regiments raised in Kazan and 2 in Novgorod are unknown. Two "old" selected regiments and the streltzi evidently used flags of the old types in 1700.

At Narva, the new Russian regiments lost 131 company colours out of 176 (74 %). To

replace them was a difficult task. Both economic matters and a shortage of time forced a simplification of the pattern. Most of the surviving post-1700 colors were made in Kazan, but the reason is unclear. The Moscow flag works stayed in the city and continued production, and the number of regiments raised in Kazan after 1701 is less than a number of available colour sets produced in Kazan. Evidently, the works in Kazan received orders for cheap infantry company colours, while the Moscow works produced infantry regimental (colonel's) colours and dragoon standards. Colours made in 1704 in Kazan had a simple cross with crown instead of the gold chain with cloud and sword (see Ill. 1 & 2). Another colour had a blue St. Andrew Cross with palm branches (see Ill. 3). Besides the new units, a number of regiments raised pre-1700 participated in the Great Northern War (for example 5 regiments from Kazan, 5 from Smolensk, Belgorod and Sevsk troops, etc.). Their patterns are unknown, evidently they continued to use old or adapted types. Illustration 5 shows an old-styled Orthodox cross surrounded by palm branches (adaptation of 1700-pattern). The colour made in 1706 in Kazan (see ill. 4) repeated the colors used in 1660s. Swedish Ridderskirchen collection had a set of 11 rose colors each with a black St. Andrew cross. Flags had dates of 1702 and 1704. Evidently they were lost at Fraustadt. In most of these cases, the regiment is unknown. In the Russian Army, colours usually lasted for 5 years, and in period 1705-7 most Russian infantry regiments received new colours. However, at this time their pattern is unclear. There are no detailed descriptions or surviving examples from the period 1707-11. In 1712 a new pattern was adopted. It is well known and described in many sources. From that time, the appearance of Russian colors became regulated.

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Description

Nrs. 1 and 2 - Colonel's Colour and Company Colour of Stubenski's Infantry Regiment ca. 1705 (1708 Galitcki Infantry Regiment). The text in the black cartouches are the same on all of the colours. Translated they read:

Upper Left - "Help us the fair cross"

Upper Right - "Protect us from heretic invasion"

Lower Left - "The color was made in 1705 in the month of" (the month is unknown)

Lower Right - "By Alexander Sergeev"

Nrs. 3, 4 and 5 - Company Colours for three unknown units. The number of stars in Nrs. 3 and 5 indicate the company. The text in the black cartouches on Nr. 4 translate as follows:

Upper Left - "In 1706"

Upper Right - "In Kazan"

Lower Left - "was made"

Lower Right - "this colour"