The Seminal Events of the Great Northern War: Evolution of Perspectives from the Eighteenth to Twenty-First-Century

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By
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Abstract

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It is said that history is written and remembered by the victors. From 1700 to 1721, the Great Northern War shook Europe. From the Houses of Parliament in London to the embryonic city of St. Petersburg, the effects of the war reverberated. The effects of the conflict were to last for centuries, outlasting even the Soviet Union. Even today, memories still remain. In 2009 many Baltic nations marked the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava where Russia defeated the Swedish army in what is now Ukraine. As time has passed, numerous historical accounts have examined this war and its long reaching effects on the various states caught up in the crucible of conflict. Anyone who read every account written on this war from 1721 to the present day would find numerous discrepancies between the various accounts. The goal of this thesis is to examine a handful of these historical works from the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first-centuries and determine the precise nature of these differences and what consequences they incur. These sources vary in complexity and quality from diplomatic accounts in the middle of the conflict to works borne of significant academic labor. These works differ not only in time period, but place of origin. Several of the pieces are written in neutral nations such as the United Kingdom while others are begotten from the warring states such as Russia and Sweden. The thesis is divided into three large sections devoted to each of the three major time periods. This thesis only examines three specific events within each of these historical works. These events are the First Battle of Narva in 1700, the Battle of Poltava in 1709 and the Treaty of Nystad in 1721. While these three events by no means cover the entire history of the conflict, they are crucial events which attracted great attention from historians then and now. Each section analyzes a variety of works and their portrayal of each event with a concluding section summarizing and analyzing the findings. At the conclusion of the paper, the collected findings of each of the three sections are combined, analyzed and summarized to give us a limited but concise picture of the evolution of the historical account over time. Overall, this paper should provide the reader with a limited but concise image of the evolution of the historical record over the past two centuries and its changing significance with regard to the past, present and future.
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Introduction

The Great Northern War lasted from 1700 to 1721, and involved every major power touching the shores of the Baltic Sea. Prior to the beginning of the war, Sweden reigned supreme over an extensive, but fragile empire stretching over most of the Baltic coastline. In 1700, Russia was an isolated state which had just begun to make its debut in European affairs under its young Tsar, Peter I. The war would last for twenty-one bitter years with various states entering and retiring from the conflict at various points. The only two constants were Russia and Sweden, both ruled by young, strong rulers, Russia by Peter I and Sweden by Charles XII. Charles would not live to see the conflict finished or the final defeat of his nation at the hands of the new Russian Empire. The Treaty of Nystad in 1721 completely transformed the state of Baltic politics for the next 200 years.

This thesis will examine the evolution of the historiography of the Great Northern War through three critical events: the Battle of Narva, the Battle of Poltava and the Treaty of Nystad, which defined the portrayal of the war from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century. The differences between the various historical accounts portray the changing importance of these events in the eyes of the scholars and their audiences. The interpretations within these historical accounts reveal the scholars’ attitudes towards Russia and Sweden. My goal is to assess the changes over time in the portrayal of the events. In order to understand the portrayals of these events and their reception by the audiences it is imperative to know the basic facts behind the three events.
The Battle of Narva was the first major skirmish between the Russian and Swedish armies in the Great Northern War. In 1700, Peter personally led his army to besiege the Swedish stronghold of Narva. The Russian army was composed of roughly 40,000 men under the command of the Duke Du Croy. Charles XII learned of Peter’s attack on the city and led a Swedish army of 10,000 men to relieve the city. His force arrived at Narva on November 16\(^{th}\) 1700. The Swedes had marched 200 kilometers to relieve the city and were outnumbered four to one. Nonetheless, Charles ordered his forces to charge the Russian position. The Swedes routed the Russians and rescued the city. Charles did not follow up his victory and instead turned his attention to Poland. He began a campaign in Poland against Augustus of Saxony, the King of Poland and Peter’s main ally, leaving the Russians to lick their wounds.

In 1708, Charles began an invasion of Russia, having dethroned Augustus and installed his own puppet king of Poland. The campaign was long and arduous, with the Swedes suffering from a brutal war of attrition. The Swedish army of 20,000 faced extreme winters, harsh terrain, minimal resources, and constant skirmishes with the Russians. In 1709 Charles received aid from Mazeppa, Hetman of the Ukrainian Cossacks. Mazeppa defected to the Swedes against Peter, but his forces were quickly crushed by Russian troops. Mazeppa became a military refugee in the Swedish army and accompanied Charles for the remainder of the campaign. In May 1709 Charles began a siege against the town of Poltava in Ukraine with the remnants of his army. Under Peter’s personal command, nearly 42,000 Russian soldiers descended upon the Swedes. On June 28\(^{th}\), the main confrontation began between the two armies. Charles’ army was routed, with nearly 7000 dead and 2,800 captured out of 19,000 men. Charles was forced to retreat to the Dnieper River, from which he escaped to the Ottoman Empire. The remainder of his army
surrendered to Russians. The Battle of Poltava ended the Swedish invasion of Russia and placed the Swedes on the defensive, a position they would never leave for the remainder of the conflict.

Following the Battle of Poltava, Sweden’s fortune rapidly declined. Russian soldiers overran Sweden’s Baltic enclaves and placed the Swedish homeland under threat of invasion. Charles was able to return to his homeland in 1715, but was killed at the siege of Fredriksten on the 30\textsuperscript{th} of November, 1718. The war continued for several more years until the Treaty of Nystad. The treaty ended the war on August 30\textsuperscript{th} 1721. Russia gained possession of Livonia, Estonia, Ingria and Eastern Karelia. The days of the Swedish Empire were over and Russia emerged as a new European superpower, changing the course of European history.

In 2009, various Baltic nations celebrated the tercentenary of the Battle of Poltava. Although 300 years have passed, the war has returned to the public eye particularly in the field of Ukrainian national identity. This conflict changed the face of Eastern Europe and birthed the Russian Empire. This thesis establishes a historiography of these three key events and their evolving significance through the centuries in the eyes of historians and audiences throughout Europe and later the world. The war has gained new interest in recent years with regard to its relationship with Ukrainian national identity. As a result, the focus of the war has shifted towards the fate of Ukraine, but in the past it was firmly focused on Russia and Sweden. The current studies of the Great Northern War are gaining greater importance in the East European cultural and political interactions. The Great Northern War has developed a powerful political charge into today’s geopolitical climate which will only continue to grow as Russian and Ukrainian scholars continue to battle over the portrayal of the war’s significance.
Section I: The Eighteenth-Century

The works examined below represent a variety of historical accounts regarding the Great Northern War. I have chosen these works based on their authors, their nationality and their time period. First, I am examining sources from a variety of years throughout the eighteenth-century in order to track historiographical development throughout the century. The nationalities include Swedish, French and English. My research indicates that historiographical accounts began among Western Europeans, while Russian sources discussions appeared later on. The eighteenth-century authors include a diplomat, James Jeffereys: a former Scottish mercenary, an anonymous writer, and the historian Voltaire. I chose a wide variety of writers so that I could examine a selection of accounts written for different reasons and focusing on different issues. These works were intended for different audiences ranging from government advisors to the educated classes of various nations. The representation of the war in these accounts varies greatly so we are given the widest range of interpretation. As a result these accounts establish the initial interpretive trends for the Great Northern War. Many if not all future historical interpretations of the Great Northern War share a common lineage back to the accounts of this era.

Before I begin to examine the historiographical account of the Great Northern War in the eighteenth-century, it is important to establish the attitude of the audience and the authors. Marshal Poe’s work *A People Born to Slavery: Russia In Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476-1748* provides a description of the attitudes maintained by scholars during the eighteenth-century towards Russia. One such example can be found in John Perry’s *State of Russia under
the Present Czar from 1716. Perry served as an advisor to Peter I of Russia before returning to England. As a result, he was one of many foreigners to witness the changes in Peter’s Russia. He later recorded certain perceptions of Russia.

Much of The State of Russia is given over to a comparison of what Perry called “the old methods of Russia” with Peter’s plans for their “reformation” and the results of his attempts. Perry was sympathetic to Peter’s cause, for he clearly understood the “old methods” to be barbaric: he described the Russians at some length as idolatrous drunkards, wanting in all learning, honor and honesty…As in “old” Russia, so under Peter, “all the common People, or Peasants of Russia…are slaves…I believe I have said enough to let the Reader see the Happiness of living in a free Country.”¹

Poe offers us an insight into the type of audience the authors of these accounts were encountering. Perry’s account is written during the Great Northern War, but the perceptions regarding the conflict are not important. He portrays the Russians as a barbarous people with an equally morbid behavioral past. Perry clearly carried preconceived notions into Russia and merely reinforced these previous beliefs. In particular, the issue of slavery in Russia was not a new stereotype. Ethnographic accounts from the fifteenth century depicted the Muscovites as particularly barbaric and oppressive towards their own people. While contact with Western Europe had occurred prior the fifteenth century, Russia remained an anomalous entity, but by the fifteenth-century several accounts compared Russia other nations perceived as barbaric such as Tatars, Scythians and Turks. These stereotypes and images proliferated throughout Europe and did not diminish.² It is safe to assume that other Europeans may have also seen the Russians as a barbarous people not just in England, but elsewhere. If the people of Europe
possessed such scornful attitudes towards Russia prior to Perry, his account would have only served to perpetuate these beliefs during the course of the war. As a result, the portrayal of the Russians in the upcoming accounts is more than likely skewed by these preconceived notions of Russian life. It is imperative these passages be interpreted with some retrospective compensation for the attitudes of the scholars at the time. Besides the authors’ preconceptions, it is important to consider the attitudes of the audiences and the notion that some of the authors may have been catering to the interests and beliefs already held by the public.

Perry’s account establishes the mindset and attitude of the West European audiences, but the diary of Captain James Jefferyes initiates the historical record for the Great Northern War specifically. Jefferyes was a mid-level English diplomat traveling with the Swedish army under Charles XII through his campaigns in Poland and his subsequently ill-fated invasion of Russia. Jefferyes joined the army well after the Battle of Narva and his journal ends prior to the Treaty of Nystad. Thus, the primary utility of his letters and journals relates to the circumstances and events surrounding the Battle of Poltava in Ukraine.³

Even before delving into the accounts of the late captain, we must first understand why Jefferyes’ insights are important to understanding the history of this particular battle and its role in the larger scope of the Great Northern War’s legacy. First, Jefferyes is neither Russian nor Swedish, though he is traveling with the Swedish army. He is a diplomat reporting back on events to his superiors, in London so that they will have a detailed description of events in the course of the conflict. Despite the fact that Jefferyes was attached to the army, he still maintained a degree of separation from the actual action. However many of his reports place him in the same camp as the Swedes, thereby establishing a degree of preference.
In addition to the captain’s background, the proximity in time of his accounts is by far the greatest of any professional account examined in this thesis, written within less than a year’s span of time from the occurrence of the events. As a result, Jefferyes offers an immediate perspective of the battle which is unmatched by the other accounts. In effect, we are given a professional, recent and on site account of the events surrounding the Battle of Poltava. James Jefferyes served in Queen Anne’s regiment in Charles XII’s army. His father served Charles XI and his brother was killed at the Battle of Narva. The family was paternally English and it is speculated by many that his mother was Swedish. Jefferyes spent much of his childhood in Sweden before returning to England with his father who took up a position under King William III. In 1702, twenty-one-year-old James Jefferyes was sent to Sweden to serve in the English diplomatic corps. By 1707, he was with the Swedish army in Saxony assisting his superior, Dr. John Robinson in informing Whitehall about Swedish intentions. The level of interaction between the foreign diplomats and the Swedish army was severely limited in that Charles XII absolutely forbade diplomats to accompany the army. The British attempts to place a diplomat in the ranks finally bore fruit when Jefferyes was granted permission to serve as a volunteer in the army. Although Jefferyes was attached to the army with the intent of providing diplomatic accounts to the British government, he lacked any official diplomatic title and made his reports in great secrecy.
After Poltava, Jefferyes was returned to England by the Russians. He was promptly sent back to Charles XII at Bender in the Ottoman Empire. He continued to record the conflict from the Swedish perspective until he was reassigned to St. Petersburg as a diplomat. He was forced to return to England due to deteriorating political connections between Peter I and George I of England. He later became governor of Corke and died in 1739. Overall his journals offer a limited but profound first hand perspective on the campaign of 1707-1709. We possess only a small part of his work, as many of his letters were lost during the conflict. The letters were intended for the Secretary of Northern Affairs which took variable interest in them with regard to Charles’s actions which might affect events in Western Europe. 

The first account of interest is taken from his journal entry for the 27th of June, 1709. Jefferyes opens the entry by describing the army’s state and its current situation.

The beginning of this year has not been so successful to us as we thought it would, the losses we have had at several times, though not very considerable, yet are greater than we well can beare in the circumstances we now are; 4 times the ennemy have done us mischief, 1 when they attacked Coll:l Albedyhls regiment the half of which they cutt down …Neither is the siege of Pultava carry’d on with that success we expected, the ennemy have hitherto defended themselves with great obstinacy…tis not easy to judge what His Maj:ty’s aim has been in besieging this place, some think it was only for want of other business, others think that Gen:ll Mazepa has had a hand in persuading His Maj:ty to it, but the general opinion is, that His Maj:ty has undertaken it, to bring the Muscovites to a battle.
While the passage does not detail the battle itself, it does provide intriguing context for the conflict. His initial descriptions indicate that the army is in a fragile state due to the campaign’s minimal success and significant losses. The Russians have attacked the army several times and we can detect a nervous tone in his writing as the army appears to be lacking a clear plan of action. By the 27th of June, the Swedes have laid siege to Poltava, but it is quite clear that some confusion exists within the ranks of the Swedish army and the chain of command. The question is whether the siege carries the direct military purpose of drawing the Russians to battle or is directed towards the fulfillment of some personal goal of either Charles or Mazepa. We have to wonder why Jefferyes speculates as to these two possible personal goals when he clearly states that the majority of the soldiers believe the siege to have a solid military purpose. It is entirely possible that Jefferyes wishes to indicate some dissent within the officer corps or the ranks of the soldiers. If this is the case, Jefferyes may be reporting to his superiors in London that the bedraggled Swedish army is losing cohesion and is engaged in what may be a pointless siege.

Further reading of the passage reveals further diverging opinions within the officer corps of the Swedish army.

The King is forced to keep to his bed of the wound he received in his left foot the 17th inst: but there being no apparent danger, His Majesty continues to give the necessary orders in the siege of Pultawa...we have had some probability to fight with his enemy who approach us nearer and nearer, which H. Majesty’s sickness has in a great measure made us deferr. Though we speak but little of peace at present, yet here are but few among us who do not heartily wish for it, for the officers as well as the common soldiers begin to be tired of their continual fatigues. 6
This entry sets the beginning stages for the battle by describing the general condition of the Swedish army and its lack of a clear plan of action. In addition the fact that the king was already wounded hardly improved the military situation in Jefferyes’ eyes. The commanders of the army wished to avoid battle due to Charles’s weakened condition, indicating a general lack of confidence as a result of the king’s injury. In addition to the obvious worries over the health of their commander and ruler, the officers and soldiers were growing weary of the campaign which had proven to be unsuccessful. Beyond the physical losses suffered by the army, the Swedes had lost their confidence and assuredness of victory. Jefferyes paints a picture of a conflicted Swedish army which was loyal to its king, but greatly desirous of peace. This letter gives us a powerful insight into the physical and psychological state of the Swedish army just prior to the Battle of Poltava. It is critical to remember that although Jefferyes was a clandestine diplomat; his personal experiences with the army were no less severe. As a result, his observations regarding the Swedish command are from personal experience, and word of mouth through the ranks. Jefferyes was composing these letters in secret and without official sanction of the Swedish army. His accounts should only be seen as a single viewpoint of the army, but his skills as a diplomat and his exposure to the army’s activities give his account considerable credibility. No doubt as a volunteer he would be privy to basic details regarding the condition of the soldiers, but his insights into the upper echelons of military command are limited. He never expressly states that he spoke with the commanders or not so his source of information from the upper echelons is unknown. It is possible that his regiment remained in close proximity to the Swedish headquarters which may have enabled him to gain valuable information regarding the activities and opinions of the Swedish commanders.
Jefferye’s letter from July 13, 1709, provides details about the aftershock following the ill-fated Battle of Poltava. We can safely assume that Jefferyes was unable to write immediately after the battle due to the chaos in the ranks of the vanquished Swedish army and his subsequent capture. At this point, Jefferyes is a prisoner of the victorious Russians, likely influencing the tone of his entry:

Y:r Honor understood by last of the 12:th inst. that the Svedes have had an entire defeat by Pultava ; that 14:m (which by a mistake I thought were only 8:m) yielded themselves prisonners of warr, and that the King of Sweden made his escape over the Nieper with 2 or 3000 as well officers and soldiers for Poland. This strange reverse of fortune has wholly chang’d the face of affairs in these parts, the Muscovites who have an army of 100:m men a foot are now ready to enter Poland, the infantry as I am informed is to march to Liefland probably to besiege Riga while their cavalry advances...to raise new factions against the Svedes in Poland and to renew King Augusts right to that crown.  

This initial section of the letter confirms the magnitude of the Swedish defeat, the loss of significant numbers of men and the flight of Charles across the Dnieper River into the realm of the Ottoman Empire. Jefferyes appears to recognize the broader implications of the defeat, noting in some detail the Russian tactical movements following the battle. He clearly envisions a complete disintegration of Swedish military gains from the eight previous years of conflict, the restoration of Augustus of Saxony to the throne of Poland over the Swedish candidate Stanislaus Leszczynski and the apparent Russian intent to expand their Baltic foothold beginning with the city of Riga.
Besides these geopolitical inferences, we can read further into the significance of Jefferyes’ view as to the significance of the events at Poltava. His simplest statement thus far makes by far the grandest impact. “This strange reverse of fortune has wholly chang’d the face of affairs in these parts...” His use of “strange” indicates total shock at the turn of events. Despite his earlier misgivings, as noted in the letter from June 27th, it is quite evident that Jefferyes did not expect such a devastating defeat. Jefferyes may have lacked faith in the quality of the Russian soldiers which was certainly not a rare belief within the Swedish army. If this is true, then Jefferyes likely experienced a complete reversal of opinion. Recalling his role as a clandestine diplomat reporting what he perceives to be fact to the British government, it is not unreasonable to assume that he chose his diction with great care, and intended to convey a message of significant political upheaval as a result of the battle.

Jefferyes’s letters and memoirs effectively begin the historical record of Poltava. His account cannot be considered wholly sympathetic to the Swedes, but he does develop the first foreign account from a Swedish viewpoint of the battle. As a result, the first record to reach Europe was based on the Swedish depiction of events. While Russian accounts reached Europe relatively quickly, Jefferyes set the stage for the historiography of this particular battle. The account is meant for diplomatic eyes and ears, not a common gentleman on the steps of Wren’s Cathedral. As a result, modern day historians must take this account with the realization that this did not reach public eyes and therefore may have had little effect on the public perceptions of the war. Jefferyes’ interpretation of the Battle of Poltava is the most important legacy of his work. Other scholars and historians would soon record events through their own viewpoints.
Their works would reach a much larger audience and would begin to alter public opinion regarding Russia unlike Jefferyes’ account.

The phrase “wholly chang’d” indicates the severity and the relative permanence of the effects of the battle. Jefferyes does not see this as some minor roadblock or stumbling point for the Swedish army. He perceives a defeat of catastrophic proportions which will redefine the geopolitical face of the region. We can infer that by using “these parts”, Jefferyes is not merely referring to the area around Poltava or even Ukraine, but the entire theatre of war. Up to this point, the Swedish army appeared nearly invincible in the eyes of the European powers and looked ready to redraw the map of Eastern Europe with Swedish steel as the most potent of styluses. Now we turn towards the closing passages of his letter, in which Jefferyes reveals his opinions regarding the outcome of the war.

The latter sections of his letter reflect Jefferyes’ perspectives on the future of the war, and the emergence of Russian dominance in the region:

Tis more than probable that Sveden which by this long and tedious war is exhausted of menn and money will be forc’d to succumb. I need not mention to Y:r Hon:r the great projects the Muscovites have maid to extend their dominions in the East-Sea, all along the Nieper, over Crimm and from the Black Sea to the Mare Caspium...their more than human endeavours to roote themselves where once they gett footing, are things which I humbly lay before Y:r Hon:r who will best be able to judge whether these projects are consistent with the ballance...among the Princes of Europe.
Jefferyes is not merely envisioning the Swedish defeat in the Great Northern War, but he clearly believes that the Russians are on the rise to great political power. He mentions the various Russian ventures in the Pacific, the Crimea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Dnieper River as definite indicators of Russia’s foreign ambitions. The tone of the letter is certainly one of apprehension and expectation as Jefferyes considers these ambitions to be tied in with the victory at Poltava and not mere Russian dreams. Finally, we can see that Jefferyes’ interprets the effects of Poltava extending outwards to affect the balance of power in Europe and beyond. In essence, Jefferyes is describing Russia’s emergence on the world stage. His interpretations would have a significant impact on future European foreign policy.

Clear connections exist between Jefferyes’ account of the rise of the Russian Empire and the modern day historical connotations associated with the Battle of Poltava. Today, this battle is considered the historical turning point of the war. From this point on, many scholars argue that the Swedes were continually on the defensive as they vainly defended themselves from the newly triumphant Russian army and its allies. This battle is considered to be the lynch pin of Peter’s hopes for a new Russian Empire and we can see how Jefferyes interprets the events to support such a belief.

The diary of Captain James Jefferyes is a potent piece of historical and political work as it provides the British government with the most immediate account of the effects of the Battle of Poltava. Jefferyes goes beyond simple statistics and molds his observations and information into precise geopolitical theories which he believes important enough to be considered by his superiors. We see him describing the rise of the Russian Empire just days after the battle. He accurately predicts the defeat of Sweden, the expansion of Russian territory and the entry of
Russia into the theatre of European politics. Essentially Jefferyes has held the door open for us to one of the great pivoting moments of the history. His definition of significance encompasses the immediate years following the battle, but he realizes that great changes are afoot. The legacy of this battle will not diminish easily, as we shall see in later works from Jefferye’s century.

The next examined work dates from 1720, just before the Treaty of Nystad and the end of the Great Northern War in 1721. The historical account is entitled “The History of the wars of his late majesty Charles XII. King of Sweden” by a “Scotsman in Swedish service”. While the author of the historical work remains anonymous, his accounts provide valuable insights into early perceptions of key events within the Great Northern War. We can now see a historian develop the significance of these events. We are no longer dealing with letters or diplomatic dispatches, but instead with a work which is ostensibly historical in purpose. By historical, I mean that this work does not appear to have a motive beyond educating the reader about the war and analyzing its impact. The author has his own perspectives and as a result this account, while not biographical, is strongly influenced by his views. The writer is anonymous, and we cannot be certain as to his frame of reference or possible prejudices. Even so, we may still derive significance from his work to the extent his conclusions and opinions reflect another stage in the evolution of the historical perspective of the war.

Unlike Jefferyes’ diary, the Scotsman’s account, “The history of the wars, of his late Majesty Charles XII. King of Sweden, from his first landing in Denmark, to his return from Turkey to Pomerania, with a continuation to the time of his death”: published in 1720, does include a description and historical account of the Battle of Narva. This was the first major armed
encounter between the Russian and Swedish armies in the Great Northern War, and the
resulting perceptions of the participants strongly colored public opinion and policy in the
interval leading to Poltava. The battle resulted in a significant Swedish victory which set the
military and political tone for the conflict up to the Battle of Poltava. The Swedish victory
established a strong myth of invulnerability for them and cowardice for the Russians. These
motifs are a powerful theme in the history of the Great Northern War. The Scotsman provides
his impressions as follows:

[T]he muscovite army was actually set down to the Siege of Narva. After having read
how weakly, and with what poor success, the King of Poland manag’d the Siege of Riga,
it will not be wonder’d at, that the muscovites manag’d no better that of Narva. The
King of Poland had an army of veteran soldiers, Germans by Nation, commanded by
experienc’d officers, and led by the King himself, whose personal conduct and courage
was well known to the world...Whereas, on the other hand, the muscovites, tho’ of
themselves a hardy and resolute people, yet being unexperienc’d in the Field, and, as is
well known, little better than the militia of other Places, were not at this Time
formidable to the Swedes at all.¹¹

This does not appear to be a contemporaneous account, but a subsequent recounting of the
events at Narva. We do not know whether his views are based upon direct observation or other
accounts, but he obviously possesses strong views. His comparison of the Russian siege of Narva
to the Polish siege of Riga would appear to insult the Poles rather than the Russians. The
inexperienced Russian army is placed against the veteran Polish army to demonstrate the
ineptitude of the Poles. We can see that he establishes the nations of Poland and Muscovy as
separate and somehow inferior to the Swedes. He does acknowledge them as nations, but places them in a declining order of quality or ability. The Poles are far better in some respects than the Russians, according to this man, but even they cannot compete with the Swedes. We can detect that this account remains strongly in favor of the Swedes based on the scornful tone of the passage apparently reflective of common perceptions at the time. His phrases: “after reading how weakly, and with what poor success...it will not be wonder’d, that the muscovites manag’d no better” indicate that the author holds a low opinion of the Poles. In contrast, while he finds the Russians military inept, his attitude towards the Russians themselves appears to be slightly warmer in tone.

We cannot be certain what the intended audience was for this work, but the fact that the author entitled his account a life story of Charles XII and his military campaigns gives us a fair idea. We can assume that this is meant for popular consumption. The work was published in London and was available to the general public. More than likely this was a sort of epic history intended to inform and entertain an audience. This work does establish a historical legacy for Charles and the war within the popular mindset if this is correct, thus this account plays an active role in the evolution of the historiographical account. It does this by only discussing events through the mindset of Charles XII and breeding a scornful attitude towards the Russian state.

His use of the term “field” raises intriguing ambiguities with respect to the author’s view of the tactical capabilities of the Russian army at Narva. The author may be referring to the Russians as completely new to the idea of warfare as a whole or merely to the western style of war. The contemporary reader cannot forget that the Russians were by no means new to war in
1700. Their previous conflicts against the Poles, Turks, Tatars and Swedes, to name just a few; had given the Russians a significant amount of experience on the battlefield. The previous campaigns in Azov and the Crimea against the Ottoman Empire had occupied the Russians for some time, granting them significant combat experience.\textsuperscript{13} However, the audience towards which this history was aimed may have been relatively unaware of Russian military experience, so the first supposition is a distant possibility. The more likely alternative is that the author refers to the European style of warfare practiced by the majority of combatants in the Great Northern War. This style of warfare would be familiar to a West European audience especially considering that in 1720, the War of Spanish Succession was just coming to an end, bringing peace to the whole of Western Europe. The net effect is effectively a literary limiting device which brands the Russians as neophytes in the eyes of the European audience. Whether or not a valid characterization, the mere fact that it was published is significant, particularly to the extent underestimation of Russian military abilities may have contributed to the later events at Poltava.

A further parameter to consider is his comparison of the Russian soldiers to the militia of other western powers. The comparison is clearly intended to denote the low quality and limited combat ability of the Russian army. This further degrades their status as a threat to the Swedes, and builds up the glory of the victory for Charles XII and the Swedish army. The labeling of the soldiers as mere militia serves a further purpose later in the passage when the author does his summing up of the early engagements between the Swedes and the Russians in the conflict. “having with less than 20,000 Men, four Months Time, bombard Copenhagen... and overthrown the Muscovite army of 120,000 men.”\textsuperscript{14} While the phrase is most certainly intended to enlarge the glory of the number of Swedish victories within such a short period of time, the
previous statements regarding the quality and experience of the Russian soldiers actually undermines the grandeur of the victory at Narva. If the Russians were of such little experience and ability, their numbers may have mattered very little considering these circumstances.

As the previous examination demonstrates, the Scotsman’s account regarding the Battle of Narva places very little value in the merits of Russian military ability, but what does the text indicate with regard to the impact of this single battle? The author clearly favors the Swedes with his writing and the descriptions of the victories add significant power to image of the Swedish army. Considering that this work was written in 1720 when the fortunes of Sweden had sharply declined, the author appears to attach a nostalgic significance to the early battles in order to perpetuate Sweden and Charles upon a pedestal. Another distinct possibility is that the author is simply prejudiced towards Sweden and wishes to establish a set of guidelines or limits for his examination of the conflict. With regard to the Russians, one crucial phrase indicates the importance of the battle to their interests. “the muscovites... were not at this Time formidable to the Swedes at all.” Considerable significance can be gleaned from this phrase. The term “Time” adds an element of tenuousness to the Swedish domination over Russia. When we consider this the tense and time when this work was written, we can understand the emphasis on the term “Time”. The defeat gave the Russians an image of weakness and inexperience which the Swedes took to heart until the turn of events at Poltava and elsewhere. We can derive great significance from this image in that the battle represents the start of the modernization of the Russian army into the formidable force which would later oust the Swedes from their Baltic enclaves. Effectively, the author portrays the Battle of Narva as a significant victory for the Swedes against a large albeit inexperienced force and a turning point for the Russians.
Ultimately the interpretations of the Battle of Narva regarding the Swedish victory and its immediate impact on Russia develop in a conflicting manner. These interpretive trends will clash later at the Battle of Poltava.

The Scotsman’s treatment of the battle of Poltava can best be described as resigned in nature, which cannot be surprising considering the terrible reversal inflicted upon Charles’s army. We can almost detect a sense of confusion in the tone of the author when discussing the Swedish actions leading up to the main battle.

It was thought that the King did this [besiege Poltava] rather to draw the Czar to a Battle, than that he designed to carry on a long siege; but he found no difficulty to come to a battle, the Czar seeming as willing as we were, only...that he kept the Advantage of the situation; whereas we, who were fewest in number, had all possible disadvantage. It is in vain to lay the whole temerity we ow’d this ill conduct, our fate was determin’d, and we could not shun the means of it.16

If one reads this passage literally, it would suggest that the hand of fate was solely the cause of the Swedish defeat, not the combat ability of the Russians. Once again we see another guideline or frame which governs this historical account. Fate is the catalyst of the changes in the battle. The author claims the Russians held all positions of advantage, while the Swedes were always at a disadvantage. It appears quite clear that the writer does not have a definitive opinion regarding the beginning of the siege in that he does not define a definite reason for its commencement. The siege may have been meant to gain another strategic foothold, gain supplies or simply draw the Russians into battle. Effectively, the author shifts the focus away
from any possible tactical blunders on the part of Charles or his commanders and onto the hands of fate.

The role of fate can be interpreted in many ways without drifting into religious semantics. On one hand the Scotsman could be arguing that the Swedes were victims of fate and that the Russians only won by the will of fate. Such an interpretation could indicate that the Swedes remained superior to the Russians in discipline and experience, but were simply overwhelmed by bad luck and numerical superiority. Another possible explanation could be that the Russians were destined to become superior to the Swedes, and that it was not the battle, but rather the course of the war that had shifted. When we consider the idea that this battle did in fact completely change the course of the war, such an interpretation becomes increasingly probable. The use of elements such as fate indicates that this account includes certain personal embellishments from the author. The author’s personal opinions place Sweden far above the other combatant nations, clearly emphasizing his personal prejudices. The work is nonetheless important as it does establish another step in the historiographical evolution despite the personal idiosyncrasies of its author.

The Scotsman’s account goes on to describe the course of Poltava in detail and concludes with the terms of the surrender of the Swedish army at Perevoluchna. Following these descriptions, he sums up the ramifications of the battle.

Thus was the gallant army reduced to nothing, and all the great Designs of his Majesty at one Blow brought to an End; the Soldiers dispers’d, disarm’d, and carry’d into a kind of Slavery, or... were carry’d away as it were to be bury’d alive, in a foreign and remote
The relation of these Things are so grievous to me that I purposely bury in Silence the farther particulars.\textsuperscript{17}

The importance of the battle in the Scotsman’s account is somewhat limited by his own apparent reluctance to discuss it in any detail. We can certainly see that this author attaches great personal value to this defeat and considers it to be a defeat of epic proportions. His references to the captivity of the Swedes suggest an extremely brutal fate at the hands of an unknown nation rather than a new Western European style state. The author by no means ignores the idea that great changes were set to occur, but his tone severely limits the expansion of his historical account. As with Jefferyes, the Scotsman recognizes the idea that the defeat is total for the Swedish invasion of Russia, but unlike Jefferyes the author here does not look into the future. Considering that the account is written eleven years after Poltava, the lack of a connection to subsequent events is surprising, particularly considering that the account is written shortly before Sweden’s capitulation, when defeat was a distinct possibility. He writes that the emotional burden is too great to recount later events. Overall, he acknowledges the immediate significance of the battle in his account with regards to the Swedish invasion of Russia, but remains unwilling to critically examine the events beyond that. His refusal to contemplate the resultant rise of Russian power in the region is perhaps emblematic of prevailing views at the time in Western Europe or merely the result of his own prejudice against Russia’s success.

Although both of the accounts discussed were produced during the Great Northern War, we can clearly see distinct differences in the portrayals of the described events. Jefferyes offers his own personal accounts from the viewpoint of a diplomat and offers cogent insights
into the later outcome of the war based on the results of the Battle of Poltava. The Scotsman offers an opinionated personal history focused on Charles XII. He portrays the Swedes in a favorable light during the two target events of Narva and Poltava. His portrayal of the outcomes of the battles is severely limited to the Swedish point of view, but even then he refuses to discuss the major future consequences from the Battle of Poltava. Both men intend their works for two distinct English audiences. One is political, the other more than likely domestic. Leaving these two historical accounts, we will now begin to contend with accounts written after the conclusion of hostilities and their own eccentricities.

The History of the Remarkable Life of the brave and renowned Charles XII: King of Sweden is the earliest account I have been able to locate following the conclusion of the Great Northern War. Published in London in the 1760’s, the work is also anonymous and does not declare an intended audience or social class in its introductory sections. Despite the document’s brief nature, it still offers us a published account of the events of the Great Northern War roughly 40 years after the conflict ended – sufficient time for perspectives to have evolved further.

The Battle of Narva is portrayed differently in this account than in the earlier wartime depictions, particularly with respect to the portrayal of the Russian soldiers and their state of readiness. “The Czar was no sooner arrived before the place, than he marked out his camp, fortified it on all sides, raised the redoubts at certain distances, and opened the trench himself. He gave command of his army to the Duke du Croy, a German, and an able General.” While this description of the Russians does not include precise details, it does create an image of order and relative experience, unlike the ill-prepared, inexperienced image conveyed by earlier
sources. Moreover, the author mentions the foreign commander at Narva as Duke du Croy\(^1\), which alters the portrayal of the battle. The army may be Russian, but it is under the command of a westerner. The Scotsman’s account does not mention this piece of information, but it may alter the portrayal of the quality of the Russian army. The brief but glowing emphasis on the qualities of Du Croy as a general serves to make the Russians appear a far more formidable foe to Sweden, thereby enhancing the value of the Swedish victory at Narva. However, these suppositions clash with the next passage comparing the Russian and Swedish armies. Du Croy was an experienced military commander who had fought for the Austrian Empire, thus he was no military neophyte. “The Swedes were no more than twenty thousand, but the Czar had no advantage except superiority of number. Far therefore from despising his enemy, he employed all the art he had to crush him, and not content with 100,000 men, he was getting ready another army to oppose him, and check his progress.”\(^19\)

This passage belies the previous section as it makes numerical superiority Tsar Peter’s sole tactical possession, rather than the experience and order portrayed earlier. The author portrays the army as more organized than the Scotsman had previously indicated, but still vulnerable to the much smaller Swedish army. In fact, the work suggests that Peter fears Charles to the point that he is preparing yet another force in addition to his 100,000 man strong army. The purpose here appears to be to convey the paradox of the Russian position—no matter how much additional manpower or external expertise they bring to the fray, Swedish superiority still poses a considerable threat to the Russian campaign. The following passage portrays Charles’s confidence of victory, thereby confirming Peter’s own fears: “A general Officer having

\(^{1}\) Duke du Croy was a German commander on loan to Peter from Augustus of Saxony. He was commander of the Russian army at Narva, was captured and died in captivity in 1702.
represented to him the great hazard of the attempt, What says he, do you make any question
whether I with my 8000 brave Swedes shall not rout 100,000 Muscovites...One might properly
call by that name about 4000 men, who were in pursuit of near 50,000."20

The author recounts the confidence of the Swedish army and complete rout of the Russians by
such small numbers. It is clear that the author portrays the earlier battle at Narva in such a way
as to make the Swedish victory look miraculous and create an aura of invincibility. The account
does not discuss any myths created by the Swedish victory or their effect on the later course of
the conflict. The author reconfirms the earlier accounts that a significantly outnumbered
Swedish force routed a much larger, entrenched force under the commander of a western
general. The simple statistics and facts of the battle create the glory for Charles and his 8000
Swedes. The smaller details which describe the attitude of the Russians and the confidence of
the Swedes add a personal element to the account which ingrains it within the memory of the
reader. The battle was a significant Swedish victory and such a notion is not disputed. This
account has the sole intent of apotheosizing the victory for Charles, but the later accounts
regarding the Battle of Poltava and the Treaty of Nystad demonstrate how the motif of
invincibility vanished in a mere eight years.

While the account regarding the Battle of Narva is quite detailed regarding the Swedish
victory, the same cannot be said for the description of the Battle of Poltava. While the author
does go into great detail regarding Charles XII’s injury just prior to the battle, the impact of the
injury is characterized by one simple phrase: “The army was in the upmost consternation.”21
While concise, the impact is significant, suggesting that the injury has thrown the army into
complete confusion—a rather significant departure from the portrayal of the force at Narva.
Jefferyes mentions the same effect of the incident in his letters to the British government. The significance of Charles XII’s wound has persisted in the historical record—but at this point it is utilized primarily as the major reason for the defeat at Poltava. The following passage, concerning the battle itself, furnishes additional context:

The decisive battle between the King of Sweden and the Czar of Muscovy, wherein Charles was entirely defeated, near 9000 Swedes killed, and about 6000 taken Prisoners, and Charles was obliged to make his escape with the remainder of his Troops...There still remained near 18,000 men, comprehending the cosaques; with the Swedes and Poles, who fled towards the Boristhenes under the direction of General Levenhaup. He marched one way with these fugitive troops, whilst the King took another road with some of his horse.22

The description is brutally short and lacking of any precise details with the intriguing exception of the casualty figures for the Swedish soldiers. The account is singularly devoted towards the plight of the Swedes with little to no references to the Russians or their combat ability. This absence of a Russian account could be due to the prejudice of the author towards the Swedes and against the Russians. At the same time, the intended audience might be the cause of such a narrow account. The author might be catering to opinions of the audience or their own preferences. We can see a clear difference between these two military portrayals. Not surprisingly, the victory at Narva is recorded in great detail with many references to the bravado and glory of the Swedes and the fear of the Russians. However, the crushing defeat at Poltava is given only cursory treatment, despite the dramatic departure from the heraldic tone of the victory. Although written four decades after the war, this version shares the overall tone of
Jefferyes’ reports and the Scotsman’s portrayal, even to the extent of tacitly blaming the defeat on Charles XII’s injury. The 1760 account, however is bereft of any seminal personal embellishments by the author, providing only a statistical view of Poltava, while nonetheless clearly favoring the Swedes.

Overall the 1760 account of the life of Charles XII offers glowing portrayals of the victory at Narva and a limited description of the Battle of Poltava. The author establishes the invincible aura surrounding the army at Narva, but offer very few insights as to how that invincibility vanished at Poltava. The account lacks Jefferyes’ analysis, and the personal emotion of the Scotsman. The almost sterile account of the events may be partially attributable to the passage of time and the intervening events, but also represents a persistence of anti-Russian sentiment among European observers.

Voltaire’s *The Life of Charles XII; King of Sweden-To which is added: Life of Peter the Great* is the final account we from the eighteenth-century under examination. By Voltaire’s time, Russia was a major European power under Catherine II. He corresponded with Catherine regarding her implementation of certain “Enlightenment” ideas in the 1760’s after releasing his *History of Peter the Great*. It is difficult to determine the effects of his correspondence with the Empress as the two separate histories come from different periods of time. The account of Charles XII is the final edition. It was translated in 1780 after Voltaire’s death, but the account was edited by Voltaire several times. The first edition was released in the 1730’s while the account of Peter I was released in the 1760s. As a result, this work offers two opposite perspectives on the conflict. In order to understand Voltaire’s portrayal of the three target
events of the Great Northern War, we will examine the two descriptions in each personal history. We will focus on Charles XII first as he was the primary focus of the historical account.

Voltaire’s portrayal of the Great Northern War establishes Enlightenment visions of Eastern Europe. Larry Wolff’s *Inventing Eastern Europe: the map of civilization on the mind of the Enlightenment* examines the portrayal of Eastern Europe during the course of the Enlightenment and its effect on historical writers. Wolff discusses Voltaire’s personal correspondence and its effect on later eighteenth-century perceptions of Eastern Europe as a whole. “Catherine’s ambitious Russian foreign policy of domination and conquest, in both Poland and Turkey, simultaneously, combined the northeastern and southeastern quadrants of Europe into one coherent domain of Eastern Europe, evident...in the mental maps of an enlightened public.”

Catherine II’s military campaigns gained significant attention from the European powers. Her military conquests redefined the East European sphere of influence and as a result, they altered the perception of the region in the West European mindset. Voltaire had a powerful impact on the thoughts and opinions of Western European audiences. Although he is examining events from the early eighteenth-century, his perspective is almost certainly affected by his correspondence with Catherine and the attitudes developed during that time. Voltaire’s attitude is best described by his description of his agenda for Eastern Europe:

Voltaire in his letters formulated an idea of Eastern Europe to cover the ground of Catherine’s campaigns. ‘I expect very humbly of destiny and of your genius,’ he wrote in 1773, ‘the unscrambling (débrouillement) of all this chaos in which the earth is plunged, from Danzig to the mouth of the Danube,’ the triumph of ‘light’ (lumière) over ‘darkness’ (ténèbres). Voltaire made the mastery of Eastern Europe a point of the
program of the Enlightenment, the unscrambling of lands that were scrambled just because he said they were. By the same intellectual authority, Eastern Europe was proclaimed a part of the earth plunged in chaos and darkness. What was truly original here, however, and perhaps inconceivable before this war, was the mental association of rivers that linked Gdansk, at the mouth of the Vistula on the Baltic, to the mouth of the Danube on the Black Sea.25

Effectively, Voltaire sees Eastern Europe as a disorganized or smeared canvas which needs Catherine’s steel brush to cleanse. In his eyes, Catherine is bringing order and “light” to the whole of Eastern Europe, but through forceful methods. Voltaire clearly idolizes western-style rulers, so it is no surprise that he would dedicate one of his works to Catherine’s cultural predecessor, Peter I. Although Voltaire holds high opinions of Catherine and Peter, he still holds a prejudiced attitude against the common populations of Eastern Europe, including Russia. While he does not hold negative opinions regarding his historical pursuits, he views the Russians as an imperfect and ignorant race along with the whole of Eastern Europe’s people. It is important to take this into account when reading his account of Peter and his portrayal of the Russians.

In Voltaire’s biography of Charles XII, the Battle of Narva is discussed in considerable detail from the perspectives of both sides of the conflict. First addressing Peter and his troops, Voltaire observes:

He appeared before Narva, at the head of this great army, on the first of October, at a season of the year, more severe in this climate, than it is in the month of January, at Paris...he knew that the Swedes... could make war in the midst of winter as well as in
summer: he, therefore, wished to accustom the Russians likewise to know no distinction of seasons, and to render them, one day, not in the least inferior to the Swedes... He had given command of his army to the Duke du Croix, a German, and a skilful general, but who, at that time, was little assisted by the Russian officers.\textsuperscript{26}

Voltaire’s description of the initial deployment of the Russians suggests a sound logic behind Peter’s military movements and also suggests that Peter was aware of the tactical deficiencies of his army when compared against the Swedes. We are not given the image of an arrogant ruler leading his army before an enemy city, but rather a cautious ruler attempting to harden his troops for future engagements with a tough and determined enemy. This, Voltaire for the first time introduces a distinct Russian approach leading up to Narva, and Voltaire argues that there is an internal logic behind the siege despite the terrible Russian defeat. Voltaire portrays Narva as a type of brutal “learning experience” for the Russians attributable to command structure that was admittedly deficient, but also willing to learn.

Essentially Voltaire portrays Peter as being aware of the possibility of defeat, but using the battle to improve the quality of his soldiers. He reinforces such notions with a more detailed characterization of the Russian soldiers at Narva.

The Russians are robust, indefatigable, and perhaps as brave as the Swedes, but time and discipline alone can render troops warlike and invincible. The only regiments from which any thing was expected, was commanded by German officers, but they were few in number. The rest were barbarians forced from the forests, and covered with the skins of wild beasts; some were armed with arrows and some with clubs...none had seen a
regular siege….He [Peter] quitted his camp...and appeared by this behavior to be afraid. 27

Here, the Russian army is described as a conglomeration of a number of different types of soldiers, who, on the whole, appear inexperienced and unorganized, with a frightened prince at the helm. As with the prior accounts, this passage makes the Russians appear to be a miniscule threat to the Swedes. However, unlike the other accounts, Voltaire goes into great detail regarding the army’s shortcomings, which should be viewed in conjunction with his prior views relating to Peter’s apparent desire to educate his troops in battle. His description of the army as disorganized, ill-supplied and without leadership, effectively destroys any notion of Russian confidence and makes the outcome of the battle at Narva appear inevitable.

Voltaire offers a detailed account of the battle with the advance of the Swedes and the expulsion of the Russians from their earthworks. Beyond this, the substance of the account differs very little from the previous sources. His account examines the battle in a similar linear format as the other previously examined histories with his own extrapolations. Voltaire’s own description offers what he considers to be the most significant outcome of the battle. “It is not the number of the dead, it is the terror of the survivors that occasions the loss of battles.” 28 In his biography of Charles XII, Voltaire establishes the premise of a psychological legacy from the Battle of Narva. Of course, the flip side of fear is confidence, and Voltaire suggests that both will come into play at Poltava, where the Russian and Swedish roles are suddenly reversed.

Voltaire’s depiction of the Battle of Poltava offers us a detailed glimpse from the viewpoint of Charles XII, including the events leading up to the defeat of the Swedish army. As we have seen from the account of the Battle of Narva, Voltaire provides detailed descriptions of
both combatants which have been lacking in the previous accounts. While the portrayal of
Narva still favored the Swedes, it did so in a far more objective manner, focusing on the military
skill of the Swedes rather than personal statements of glory. This is not to say that the account is
completely without a private agenda as the overall context is a personal history of Charles, but it
is to a significantly lesser degree than previous accounts. Voltaire’s initial descriptions of events
leading up to battle provide a wealth of information regarding the organization of the
combatants. “Charles, with but eighteen thousand Swedes, had neither lost the design nor the
hope of penetrating into Moscow... The king perceived, from the beginning of the siege that he
had taught his enemies the art of war. For, in spite of all his precautions... the [Russian] garrison
[at Poltava] beheld itself fortified with almost five thousand men.”

The passage is significant in that it suggests that Charles holds a grudging respect for the military
ability of the Russian soldiers. The idea that Charles has begun to respect the Russians for their
fighting prowess begins to erode the previously established idea of Russian fear of the Swedes.
This does not mean that the Russians are arrogant in the face of the Swedish threat, but that
they are now soldier capable of fighting Charles on an even playing field. The roles of the two
powers have begun to shift in the account of the battle even before the actual commencement
of hostilities. The Russians are no longer untrained “barbarians” but are soldiers at least the
equal of the Swedes. The air of invincibility is further weathered by Charles injury which is
described in nearly identical terms to the 1760 account: “The consternation of the army on this
occasion was inexpressible.” We can see that Voltaire is recording confusion similar to
Jefferyes’ account, within the ranks of the Swedish army. This theme is consistent with Jefferyes
and the Scotsman. The army is depleted in numbers, contending with an experienced enemy
and has lost its leader to a serious injury. Voltaire’s Swedish army closely parallels the army of Jefferyes and the Scotsman once again shattering the aura of invincibility that had carried the Swedes from Narva to the fields of Poltava. Of course, by the time Voltaire penned this work, the actual results were known, and the historical aftermath was firmly established with Catherine II’s powerful hold over Eastern Europe. A tempering of the Swedish idolatry was accordingly in order.

Voltaire does offer some further input as to why the Swedes lost the battle before it even began. He places some of the blame on Charles and his impulsive decision making. “He [Charles] did not assemble a council, as, considering the perplexed situation of his affairs, he ought to have done...he sent for velt-marschal Renschild...and... ordered him to...[attack] the czar next day.”

The author would appear to be placing a significant amount of the blame on Charles and his hasty decision to attack the Russians which makes Charles appear to be the lesser of the two commanders as he decides not to consult with all of his officers despite the precarious situation of the Swedish army. Such a passage makes the Swedes appear to be more akin to an outmatched foe, just as the Russians were portrayed at Narva.

The account of the day of the battle compares the two opposing forces and confirms our previous conclusions. “Charles XII illustrious for nine years of victories and, Peter Alexiowitz for nine years of pains, taken to form troops equal to those of Sweden...Charles had the title of “Invincible”, of which a single moment might deprive him.”
Voltaire reaffirms his earlier arguments regarding the new military equality between the Russian and Swedish forces. He also stresses the great danger of the battle to Charles and his ambitions. Most importantly, we see the phrase “invincible” appear for the first time in all of the accounts we have examined. As we have seen thus far, this battle balances the futures of Sweden and Russia. Whatever the victories or defeats of Peter and Charles in the past years of war, Voltaire portrays them as equal on the plains of Poltava. If either force falters, disaster looms.

In summarizing the aftermath of the Battle of Poltava, Voltaire lists several reasons for the Swedish defeat:

All the Swedish writers affirm, that they would have gained the battle, if they had not committed several blunders; but the officers pretend that it was a great blunder to give battle at all, and a greater still to shut themselves up in a desert country, against the advice of the most prudent generals, in opposition to a warlike enemy, three times stronger than Charles, both in number of men, and the many resources from which the Swedes were entirely cut off. The remembrance of Narva was the principal cause of Charles’s misfortune at Pultowa.  

Voltaire adopts the opinions of unnamed Swedish academics to support his expressed reasons for the Swedish defeat. Voltaire firsts suggests that a certain amount of blame should be shifted from the officers to the overall strategic approach to the battle. This suggests that the entire campaign, which the officers did not advise and could not prevent, was a loss from the start. Voltaire suggests that some scholars believed the Russians to be the superior power in the war of attrition, due primarily to their numerical advantage.
Beyond issues of tactics and numbers, Voltaire posits the “remembrance of Narva” as an intangible, but powerful cause for the Swedish disaster at Poltava. The Swedish hubris at their supposed advantage negated the fear noted by other commentators, and, in Voltaire’s view, represents the primary reason for the defeat. We cannot know how much he altered the accounts of the nameless Swedish scholars, but the “remembrance of Narva” was well established within Swedish circles during the course of the war. Their victory at Narva profoundly strengthened their belief in their invincibility. Essentially the element of fear and the air of invincibility surrounding the Swedes led to their own downfall and the loss of their regional dominance. Peter’s willingness to learn from the Narva defeat, and Charles XII’s intransigence in considering the possibility of a skilled Russian opponent combined to create the power – shifting results at Poltava.

We can see that Voltaire links the events at Narva and Poltava together with the psychological profile of the Swedish army and its effect on their efforts at Poltava. His account matches with many of the earlier versions in that he describes a shaken and depleted Swedish army facing a large and determined force of Russians. However, his account differs by granting the Russians a certain measure of parity in military and strategic prowess. The equality of the two opposing forces is still debated today. The Russians were no longer new to the ideas of European warfare, but they were not nearly as experienced as the Swedes. The Russians outnumbered the Swedes and were in a better position with regard to supplies, but the Swedes had beaten the Russians previously under similar circumstances. The ability of the Swedes to destroy a much larger foe makes this battle appear far more significant to the outcome of the
war, thereby it coincides with Jeffereyes’ own account. Of course Voltaire had the benefit of decades of hindsight, which effectively validated Jeffereyes’ predictions.

Turning to the war’s conclusion, Voltaire’s account is very brief, but significant to the extent that it is, but inexorably linked to the death of Charles XII and massive changes in the Swedish government.

After the death of the king, the siege of Fredrickshall was raised, and a change in the government instantly took place. The Swedes, who considered the glory of their sovereign rather as a burden than an advantage, lost no time in concluding a peace with their enemies, and suppressing that absolute power...The states...elected the sister of Charles XII...and obliged her, by a solemn act, to renounce all hereditary right to the crown, that so she might hold it by the suffrages of the people.35

Voltaire clearly ties the treaty and the abandonment of an absolute monarchy to the death of Charles XII. The fact that the treaty is hastily signed, is indicative of the attitude of the Swedish people, who are clearly desperate for peace. Voltaire clearly characterizes the Swedish populace as being less than enthralled with the “glory” of their late leader, and his death is the catalyst which allows such a rapid change to occur. In essence, Voltaire describes how Charles’s death and exasperated Swedish citizenry combine to facilitate the end of the Great Northern War, and with it the transformation of Sweden from a regional dynastic force with an autocratic ruler, to a constitutional monarchy playing a lesser role in regional affairs.

Voltaire’s history of Peter the Great offers another, later viewpoint on the key events of the Great Northern War. Many parallels exist between the account focused upon Peter’s role,
and the version devoted to Charles XII, but the differences that do exist add a new dimension of understanding to the history of these events. As with the earlier account, we will begin our examination with a description of the Russian forces at the Battle of Narva.

The czar marched about twenty thousand men towards Ingria. It is true, that in this great army there were not above twelve thousand good soldiers...the rest consisted of a militia indifferently armed...The czar confiding in the certainty of taking the town, was gone to Novgorod...Peter instructed the command of his army... to the prince of Croy...[and] Prince Dolgorouky...The jealousy between these two chiefs, and the czar’s absence, were in part the cause of the unparalleled defeat at Narva.36

Voltaire’s portrayal of the Russians is little changed from the previous accounts including his personal history of Charles XII. The Russian army is large, but relatively inexperienced with the exception of a small group of men. However, he does not portray Peter as coward fleeing from certain failure, but rather a confident ruler leaving to attend other business while leaving the siege in what he deems to be capable hands. Additionally, while the previous accounts have designated Du Croy as the commander of the Russian army, Voltaire argues that the command structure was not homogenous. In fact, he claims the division between Du Croy and Prince Dolgorouky helped to cause Russian defeat at Narva. This is a detail lacking from other accounts, including Voltaire’s own description in the Charles XII biography. Modern accounts confirm that Du Croy was unable to establish firm command over his men due to his status as a foreigner. Russian xenophobia severely hampered the chain of command and compromised Russian tactical superiority. While Voltaire does not portray the Russians as the superior force, his account provides a new rationale for the defeat. We are left with an image of an ill prepared
Russian army that loses due to quantifiable phenomena rather than inherent inferiority. The Russian army is not destined to lose, but simply lacks the requisite ability at this time. This is consistent with Voltaire’s own characterization of Peter as wanting his troops to gain experience through military engagement.

Voltaire’s descriptions of the aftermath of the battle provide unique perspectives on the Russian and Swedish sides of the battle. He first addresses the significance of the Swedish victory and its place in the history of warfare. "This battle was one of those which prove, that ever since the battle of Arbela, the greatest victories have often been gained by inferior numbers." Voltaire emulates the earlier accounts by emphasizing the victory of the smaller Swedish force over the considerably larger Russian force. This is a consistent cornerstone of Swedish portrayals of the conflict at Narva. Voltaire then turns towards the impact of the Swedish attack on the Russians. "Every man quitted his post, and tumult, confusion, and terror spread throughout the army. The Swedish troops had nothing more to do, than to kill men who are flying...The sudden panic, and want of discipline therefore, did every thing on that day." Once again, Voltaire reinforces the previous accounts by describing the overall panic and collapse of the Russian ranks in the face of Swedish aggression. His portrayal of events lists the lack of discipline and experience as the main cause. He does not particularly emphasize the element of fear and its long term effects on the course of the war as he does in the earlier account, but he does emphasize that the Swedes represent an overwhelming force. He assesses the battle as significant in that it affirms Swedish martial superiority over the inexperienced Russians, but he indicates little with regard to the effects of this battle on future events. Indeed,
this is not surprising, given the time frame in which Voltaire is writing, with the benefit of knowing how the war ended.

Voltaire’s description of the Battle of Poltava contains numerous details regarding Peter’s tactical plan as well as strong opinions regarding the reasons for the Swedish defeat. The first unique feature of this account, contrasted with the prior versions previously discussed, regards Peter’s own mindset during the opening stages of the battle and deployment of forces in and around the town of Poltava.

It was at this spot that Peter expected him; he had disposed the different divisions of his army at convenient distances for joining together, and marching in a body against the besiegers... His army was in no want of necessaries of any kind...this was another degree of which he had acquired over his rival...Charles might then judge, whether the person whom he affected to despise...understood the art of war.³⁹

The portrayal of the Russians is very different from Voltaire’s prior depictions of Poltava. The Russians are now an orderly, experienced force as Voltaire describes in his history of Charles XII. Peter is deciding the field of battle and is encircling the Swedish besiegers around Poltava while he makes sure his army is well equipped. Voltaire provides after-the-fact criticism, noting that Charles should have realized that his former neophyte foe was now his equal if not his superior. Voltaire goes on to describe the Russians maintaining advantage in numbers, both in men and guns, just as at Narva. However, this time these numbers consist of battle hardened veterans. The depiction of the battle suggests a course of events dictated by the Peter’s tactical strategy and characterizes the advantage as remaining firmly within his hands. Following the description
of the force being drawn up against Charles, Voltaire goes on to describe the possible spoils of
the battle.

This battle was to determine the fate of Russia, Poland and Sweden, and two monarchs,
on whom the eyes of all Europe were fixed. Although so many nations were attentive to
these important concerns, yet the greater part of theme knew neither the place... or
how their affairs were circumstanced: but having seen Charles XII. Set out from...at the
head of a victorious army, and having heard that he was driving his enemy everywhere
before him, they [European observers] no longer doubted that he [Charles XII] would at
length entirely crush him [Peter].

Voltaire attaches just as much if not more significance to the battle as he does in the history of
Charles. Besides the fate of Russia and Sweden, he also ties in Poland as well as the interests of
the various European spectator nations. The European powers do not anticipate a Swedish
defeat, but rather expect yet another victory in an already long chain of the same. What we see
could be viewed as a sign of the passage of time. The author and readers can look back at this
event in hindsight and discern the significance of the battle from the viewpoint of the Europeans
at the time. While Jefferyes did theorize that such events would occur, his account was not
widely available to the masses. Only a select few would have read his account and their own
interpretations are unknown. The significance of the battle is great in that the defeat of Sweden
not only shatters Charles’s confidence and that of his nation, but also the hopes and beliefs of
the whole of Europe. Effectively, Voltaire is using his knowledge of the ultimate outcome to
describe the ripple effect of the defeat even before the battle occurs in his account of the war.
This battle will reverberate around Europe and redefine the expectations of the war.
Voltaire’s account of the course of events following the defeat at Poltava not only records the fate of the Swedish survivors, but also establishes various reasons for the failure of the experienced Swedish army in its invasion of Russia. “With these feeble arms he had undertaken the siege of Pultowa, and attacked an enemy provided with a formidable artillery. He is therefore accused of having displayed more valour than prudence.”

Voltaire lays the blame on the overall weakness of the Swedish army as well as the ambition of its commander. While he does mention Charles’s wound in an earlier passage, he does not declare it to have had any impact on the combat ability or mindset of the Swedes. This differs greatly from his personal account of the Swedes at Poltava in his earlier work. Thus we can suppose that Voltaire has reconsidered his position and placed more blame upon the king, despite his relatively limited engagement in the battle. In his eyes the Swedish defeat is portrayed as result of a lack of resources and Charles’s poor judgment.

Voltaire continues to discuss the significance of the battle’s aftermath and overall impact with regard to its role in history. He wishes to elevate this battle above countless others not just within the theatre of the Great Northern War, but across all human conflict. “What is of greater importance in regard to this battle is, that of all those which have stained the earth with blood, it is the only one, that instead of producing only destruction, has proved beneficial to mankind, by enabling the czar to civilize a considerable part of the world.”

The portrayal of this battle in such a manner embraces the notion of hindsight. Voltaire’s account is far removed from the closure of the war and as a result, he and his audience are able to view the battles with an appreciation only the future generations possess. Many of the previous accounts we have examined have either bemoaned the defeat of the Swedish army as
the defeat of a civilized force by a ruthless and wild nation or have predicted great changes
without stating whether they are well intentioned or not. Of course, Voltaire has the advantage
of actual observation of the decades that followed the war, but nonetheless is unequivocal in his
presentation.

In this case, Voltaire describes the Battle of Poltava as clearing the road for the rest of
Peter’s westernizing decrees in Russia and its spheres of influence. This is an extremely narrow
viewpoint, and while the victory is indeed connected to Peter’s future reforms such a direct
claim of causality is rather tenuous. Nonetheless, Voltaire clearly sees this battle as significant
for numerous reasons. The battle redefines European expectations for the outcome of the war
and it clears the way for Peter to “civilize” his enormous nation. Peter I’s version of “civilize”
involved bringing Russia into line with Western culture and methods whatever the cost or
inconvenience to his subjects. Of course, the geographical scope of Russian influence is
expanded after the war, and that alone is a significant by-product. Voltaire clearly benefits from
the passage of time in assessing the actual historical impact of Narva, Poltava and the individual
factors playing into the results on each of these battlefields.

We now turn to Voltaire’s account of the peace negotiations which is by far the most
voluminous discussion of the peace process. He discusses the numerous attempts to create a
lasting peace between Russia, Sweden and the other military powers up until the final Peace of
Nystad. For our purposes, we shall solely focus upon the final treaty which brought the Great
Northern War to its long awaited conclusion. Unlike the account from 1760, the 1780 version
does not create a link between the death of Charles XII, the reforms of the Swedish state and
the Treaty of Nystad. Instead, the death is merely attributed to the entry of England in to the
conflict. Voltaire mentions the treaty as a completely separate entity from these two prior

topics.

At length the new King of Sweden asked a suspension of arms; and the menaces of

England having hitherto proved ineffectual...The Congress was held at Neustadt, a small
town in Finland; but the Czar could not hear of a cessation of hostilities till all things

should be settled for signing...At length the terms he imposed were agreed to; all his

conquests,...were ceded to him for ever.43

Voltaire does not portray the treaty as a small detail, hastily thrown together after the death of

Charles XII. Rather he portrays the treaty as the result of a significant amount of ineffectual

combat the King’s death. As the victor, the Tsar is drawing up the terms and imposing them

upon the defeated Swedes, establishing himself as the new dominant force in the Baltic. As with

many treaties, the Treaty of Nystad appears to be little more than a formalized version of the

Tsar’s final demands. The significance of this viewpoint of the treaty is the final establishment of

Russian supremacy in the Baltic. Charles is dead and the new rulers of Sweden are unable to

extricate themselves from their desperate straits. In order to avoid annihilation they must

submit to the Russians. Voltaire’s account provides the most detailed image of the Treaty of

Nystad. According to him, it closes the book on the Swedish Empire and marks the

commencement of the Russian Empire. Again, though Jefferyes foretold this result, Voltaire has

seen it come to pass.

Marshall Poe and Larry Wolff discuss and examine various themes involving the

historiography of the Great Northern War. The eighteenth-century is important as it establishes

the primary groups or trends of examination. Swedish and Russian historical trends are two of
the expected groups although Russia’s preeminent works discussing the war do not appear until the nineteenth-century. The third grouping can best be defined as belonging to Western Europe and England. These three groupings come to define the historical progression of the Great Northern War and set the initial trends for future accounts. The trends set in the eighteenth-century primarily revolve around European perceptions of Russia through the eyes of Charles XII’s army and various historical writers. My introductory discussion of Marshall Poe demonstrated how European accounts prior the Great Northern War shaped European opinions towards Russia and the course of the war. These conceptions are the most singular trait of this century. The previously mentioned authors such as Voltaire, Jefferyes and the Scotsman were strongly influenced by earlier writings on Russia which altered their opinions. The general attitude of these works is that the Russians were uncouth and unstable with no real talent for waging war.

One particular account which would have impact Jefferyes at the very least comes from Giles Fletcher’s Of the Russe Commonwealth from 1591. Fletcher was an English scholar and politician who held a number of offices during the reign of Elizabeth I. Fletcher was connected with the English “Russia Company” and served as Elizabeth’s liaison between the two governments. He spent only a few years in Muscovy during the late 1580’s and returned to England in 1589. Fletcher’s interactions with Moscow were chaotic to say the very least and as a result his accounts were less than generous with their portrayal of Russia. Fletcher’s account is a broad examination of Muscovy’s government and many of its national customs. Despite the fact that Fletcher spent only a limited amount of time in Muscovy and seldom wandered far from Moscow, he interviewed many scholars and officials trying to gain information about the
nation. What makes Fletcher’s account important to the eighteenth-century accounts of the Great Northern War is his message to the rest of Europe regarding Russia’s nature. “What is remarkable about Fletcher’s work on Russia is the sharpness of his observation and the acuity of his judgments on the Muscovite government and society. His portrayal of the ‘tyrannical’ government of Russia is an original interpretation.”45 His study of Muscovy contained a detailed description of the organization of the Russian government as well as a scathing indictment of the Oprichniki and their reign of terror throughout Russia. Overall most historians considered his work a portent of things to come in Russia. “Ever since Fletcher finished writing it, Of the Russe Commonwealth has provoked strong reactions in its readers. Its obvious merits led many Russian historians of the nineteenth century to rely heavily on it.”46 Fletcher’s work maintained its academic potency well into the nineteenth-century, so it undoubtedly had an equal or greater effect on the scholars of the eighteenth-century. As a result, it is important to view the works of this century as a continuation of established historical interpretations of Russia. These authors began their academic ventures with works such as Fletcher’s affecting their own conclusions. Overall, the eighteenth-century clearly remained dominated by older perceptions of a rapidly changing nation. It took the work several nineteenth-century scholars to begin to abandon these dated viewpoints while many of their colleagues continued to maintain the work of their predecessors.

The eighteenth-century accounts of the Great Northern War offer intriguing similarities and distinctions. The authors appear to agree that the Battle of Narva was significant in that it established the cult of personality for Charles XII and the myth of invincibility for the Swedish army. In fact, their accounts give birth to and perpetuate the myth. The authors diverge on the
future implications of this phenomenon. Some argue that the victory creates a poisonous over-
confidence which later undermines the Swedes at Poltava while others see no such
disadvantage. The prominence of the Battle of Poltava is established as the great turning point
of the war. The interpretations of the significance range from the immediate impact on Charles
and the Swedish army to the political mindset of the rest of the European powers. While
Jefferyes must rely on prognostication to reach this conclusion, the accounts of 1760 and 1780
can confirm that those predictions became reality. Finally, the Treaty of Nystad is treated in any
detail only by Voltaire, despite the fact that it formalized the end of Swedish dominance in the
Baltic, and the emergence of Russia as a regional power. Due to the limited time that has
elapsed between the events at issue and the sources examined during the eighteenth-century,
only relatively minor evolution of the historical perspective is seen. The open disdain for Russia
as a barbaric, militarily inept power displayed in the earlier accounts is severely tempered by the
time Voltaire wrote his works, when the grudging acceptance of Russia as a regional power
becomes manifest. However, as the complexities of history proceed through the later centuries,
we will see more fluid treatments of the same historical record, and further manipulation of the
historical record.
Section II: The Nineteenth-Century

The nineteenth-century is a momentous era in the development of the historiography of the Great Northern War. In nineteenth-century Russia, several major historians rose to prominence with their efforts to record Russian history. Two particularly prominent academics were Sergei Mikhailovich Solovyov and Vasily Osipovich Klyuchevsky. Their work in Russian history became signature pieces which not only defined their academic era, but also influenced future Russian historians. In addition to their work inside the Russian Empire, another prominent scholar by the name of Alfred Rambaud, a French historian, composed another comprehensive history of Russia. While his work does focus on a large time frame of Russia history, his analysis of the war is a significant offshoot of his main examination of Peter I. All three of these men are major examples of historical development during the course of the nineteenth-century.

Sergei Mikhailovich Solovyov’s History of Russia is a multi-volume historical examination of Russia. Solovyov worked on this particular work from 1851 until the year of his death in 1879. While this work examines several centuries of Russian history from Solovyov’s viewpoint, I will only discuss a few particular sections from volumes twenty-six, twenty-eight and twenty-nine. Solovyov can be considered one of Russia’s defining historians for the nineteenth-century. His fifty-nine volume work affected Russian historical development for the latter half of the nineteenth-century, a successor to Nikolai Karamzin’s History of the Russian State considered
the preeminent historical specimen of the early nineteenth-century. Solovyov’s work would in turn influence another great historian, Vasily Osipovich Klyuchevksy, and his own work on Russian history. His analysis of Peter I’s reign stretches through several volumes, and is composed of semi-linear and thematic groupings.

Solovyov’s examination of the Battle of Narva comes from volume twenty six and provides an extensive account of the battle from the Russian perspective.

There were no rumors about Charles XII’s arrival but there was news that Narva was poorly fortified and guarded by only a few troops...Difficulties immediately arose...Apart from the skill, experience and daring of the Swedish side the main reason for Charles’s success was that the Russian troops were stretched thinly over a huge distance...In addition, a strong gale blew right into the face of cold, hungry Russian soldiers, and they could make out nothing more than twenty paces away.47

Solovyov’s description closely mirrors accounts from the eighteenth-century, but provides far more depth to the account. Despite their numbers and entrenched position, he emphasizes the various faults and issues that plagued the Russian army. Between supplies, exhaustion and weather, the Russians still had to contend with a well-armed and experienced military force. If Solovyov’s account is to be believed, the Russians lacked proper intelligence or preparation for the Narva campaign. They did not anticipate the sudden arrival of Charles XII and his Swedish army, and apparently had few weapons in functioning order. As a result Solovyov does not interpret the battle as a major upset as the Russians were at such a serious disadvantage. Such a depiction comes into conflict with the epic histories of Charles XII such as Voltaire’s work and other examples in later centuries. Solovyov’s research into the reasons for the Russian defeat at
Narva is not controversial and his conclusions are well established within the historical record, but his interpretations of the impact from the battle offer insight into the ramifications for the Swedes and their future campaigns against Russia.

Solovyov’s interpretation of the fallout from the Battle of Narva offers interesting insights in Charles XII’s decision making process as well as the reception of the battle’s outcome in Europe.

On Charles’s part the chief motive was hatred of Augustus and scorn for the Russians. These enemies, he thought, will always be easy to topple, just a few troops are needed to restrain them for a while...Meanwhile word of the battle of Narva spread throughout Europe, arousing amazement about the eighteen-year-old victor. Poets tuned their lyres and medals were struck in Charles’s honor...But he who laughs last laughs longest. People...noted the harmful effect which his extraordinary success had upon him From then on he was consumed by a powerful passion for war.  

Clearly the Battle of Narva has several distinct legacies. European opinions clearly favored the Swedes and idolized Charles XII. However Solovyov also emphasizes how the legacy of Narva was harmful for the Swedes. The European adoration for Charles XII caused him to become obsessed with the glory of combat and the potential rewards for Imperial Sweden. In short, Charles became hopelessly focused on warfare when he could have ended the Great Northern War much earlier from position of power and with substantially fewer losses. While he does acknowledge that Narva was a great victory for the Swedes, he clearly sees it as an example of “win the battle, lose the war”. Because Charles XII assumed an aura of invincibility, he and Europe could not comprehend the possibility of defeat. The legacy of Narva proved to be
Charles XII’s signature victory but also his undoing. His glory and ego would remain unscathed through his campaigns in Poland and the early stages of his invasion of Russia. However he would lose his army, his glory, the security of his empire and power over Europe in one day at a little Ukrainian town called Poltava.

Solovyov’s examination of the Battle of Poltava provides detailed accounts from both the Russian and Swedish armies. He opens his account with a comparison of the Swedes and Russians with particular focus on the degradation of the Swedish forces.

Only a small river separated him from the victors of Narva, but these were not the Swedes of 1700 or 1707. These were troops who were utterly exhausted and in low spirits. Karl had not lost one battle. He could still consider himself invincible. At the same time, however, he did not have half of that brilliant army with which he crossed the Vistula in 1707...Karl would not even hear of going back across the Dnieper.49

Solovyov’s depiction of the Swedish army connects with the legacy of Sweden’s earlier victory at Narva. While he does discuss the condition of the Swedish army at Poltava prior to the major battle, he also focuses on the issue of the Swedish aura of invincibility. Effectively the Swedish army was still considered invincible, but this image was based on a now seriously decayed Swedish military force. The Swedish army that had beaten the Russians at Poltava was only a shadow of its former strength. The passage further reinforces Solovyov’s assertion that Charles had been blinded by the glory of Narva and his subsequent campaigns in Poland. Clearly the scope of Russian victory at Poltava extended far beyond the field of battle. While Solovyov does not examine the impact of the Battle of Poltava in Europe, his analysis still demonstrates the far reaching implications of the Russian victory. He does discuss the various celebrations and the
return of Poland and Denmark to the war effort, but his overall depiction of the victory remains confined to the immediate realm of battle. Although he does not discuss the Treaty of Nystad, he still believes that the Great Northern War changed Russia, he still emphasizes that it was only a small part of Peter’s reign. Therefore, while he does not discount the war’s transformative properties completely, his account clearly places the war in a subordinate position in the greater scope of Russia’s history.

The next author, Alfred Rambaud, serves as an example of a foreign historical account during the nineteenth-century. Alfred Rambaud was a French historian and noted expert on Russian and Byzantine history. He visited Russia several times and composed a comprehensive history of Russia similar to Solovyov’s but far less extensive. Nonetheless, his work and analysis of Russian history is important to the development of the Great Northern War’s historiography as it is an example of shifting European attitudes towards Russia during the latter half of the nineteenth-century.

Rambaud’s account of the Battle of Narva displays several insights into the European interpretations of the Great Northern War and his critique of his scholarly predecessors. In the opening passages of his chapter on the Battle of Narva, he discounts the works of his predecessor, Voltaire. “A desire to please the victors has caused the numerical disproportion between the armies to be exaggerated. Voltaire himself was forced to rectify his earlier errors in his History of Peter the Great, the numbers that he had given in the “History of Charles the Twelfth.” Rambaud is an example of the evolution of the historiography of the Great Northern War in European academic circles. He critiques his fellow countryman’s previous work on the topic by emphasizing that he needed to use new facts in the later editions of his work on Charles
XII and Peter I. He believes that enthusiasm for Charles XII caused previous scholars such as Voltaire to skew history in order to make the account support one side more than the other. Effectively Rambaud is attempting to make his account more objective and repair what he perceives to be errors in previous works by his colleagues. Clearly European attitudes had begun to shift to a far more neutral or even sympathetic stance in the late nineteenth-century.

Rambaud’s final major contribution to his examination of the Battle of Narva focuses on the legacy of Narva and its effect on Charles XII.

There are salutary defeats and fatal victories. Charles was overwhelmed by flatteries from the whole of Europe. Medals were struck in his honor....The young King could not entirely shake off the intoxication of his success...He despised enemies who were so easily conquered, and, counting the Russian army for nothing, made great preparations for the downfall of the harmless King of Poland.\(^\text{51}\)

His analysis of Narva’s legacy is virtually identical to Soloyov’s earlier account. Both men see Narva as the source of Charles XII’s later defeat at the Battle of Poltava. His victory was so profound for the whole of Europe that their commemoration of the event simply overwhelmed his commonsense. Charles was known to possess a significant ego but he usually tempered this with simple military discipline and a similar lifestyle. Following Narva, Charles could not envisage the possibility of defeat. It is hard to find fault with his belief. From 1700 to 1707 he marched through Poland and Saxony defeating every force sent against him. The rulers of Europe anxiously awaited news that he had chosen a side in the War of Spanish Succession or simply another marvelous victory against a Russian, Polish or Saxon army. With such a winning streak under his belt, Charles could rightfully march into Russia in 1707 with great confidence, but that
confidence was built on sand. His open disdain for the Russians caused him to enmesh himself in a Polish quagmire for several years, buying the Russians precious time to reform and reshape their armies. As Solovyov, Rambaud and many other future historians argue, Narva was Charles XII’s poisonous victory.

Rambaud’s account of the Battle of Poltava expands his argument regarding Charles XII’s blind quest for glory. He examines the battle through the viewpoint of the Swedes, but his opening sections provide a cynical analysis of Charles XII and his war plan. “[H]e determined to attack the town “for a diversion.” It was in vain that the uselessness of the enterprise and the impossibility of success were represented to him.”

Clearly Rambaud holds an extremely cynical opinion of Charles XII and his qualities as leader. He does not argue that Charles was not an important figure head for his army, his country and Europe, but he argues that Charles XII no longer resembled the young king who had marched to Narva. Besides attacking Charles XII’s reasons for besieging Narva, he also adds further support for Charles XII’s irrational pursuit of victory by describing the serious condition of the Swedish army. Clearly Rambaud wishes to undermine the popular notion that Charles XII maintained his competent and level-headed command at Poltava. The dissension within the ranks of the Swedish officers is made apparent so Rambaud appears to place much of the blame for the army’s difficult starting position on Charles XII’s shoulders.

Besides examining Charles XII and the condition of the Swedish army, Rambaud also offers an interesting insight on Peter I’s attitude prior to the Battle of Poltava. “He then harangued his troops. “The moment is come,” he said; “the fate of our country is to be decided. You must not think, “It is for Peter we fight’; no, it is for the empire confided to Peter, it is for
the country...As for Peter, know that he is ready to sacrifice his life for a prosperous and glorious future for Russia.”

The passage is important in that it does not assign the glory of the Battle of Poltava to Peter I. His speech to his troops portrays the outcome of the battle as vital for the state rather than for the tsar. The final comment suggests that Peter is even willing to risk martyrdom if it means Russia’s success. It cannot be known if Peter did actually deliver the speech verbatim. It is known that Peter endeavored to encourage service to the Russian state rather than just the current tsar. Effectively, his portrayal of Peter I places him in the position of an epic leader who is willing to sacrifice all for the well-being of his nation. While his history of Russia is not an epic history in that it does not embellish his persona to the level of classical hero, he does place Peter in a position similar to the one Voltaire and the Scotsman assign to Charles XII. As Narva defined Charles XII’s image as a conqueror, so too did the Battle of Poltava do to Peter.

Rambaud’s final observations and conclusions regarding the Battle of Poltava focus on its impact throughout Europe and its transformative effect for Russia.

Narva had been only a victory; Poltava marks a new era in universal history.

Sweden...had played in Europe the part of a great Power...The place it had left vacant in the North was taken by a nation which had at its disposal far larger resources, besides a greater power of expansion....Already Russia declared itself, not only a Power of the North, but a Power of Europe...With Russia, the Slav race, so long humiliated, made a triumphal entry into the stage of the world.
Besides examining the political impact of the battle, he also compares it to the Battle of Narva. Clearly he minimizes the legacy of Narva and maximizes the effects of the Battle of Poltava. Poltava transformed Russia and European politics in way that would not be replicated until the defeat of Napoleon or the Russian Revolution. Beyond his analysis of Russia’s political and diplomatic transformation, he also makes an ethnic argument. Richard Pipes argued that Russia was viewed with considerable contempt prior to the Great Northern War and the Battle of Poltava. As a result, Rambaud sees Poltava as the redemption of the entire Slavic race, not just one nation. While he does discuss the Slavs as a whole, he only mentions Slavs in relation to Muscovy, so his interpretation is likely limited to the Russian Slavs. Beyond redemption, he also sees it as the rise of new political order with the Slavs as the major dominating power. His connection of Poltava with ethnic superiority or redemption is interesting in that it expands the scope of the victory to a racial entity. As a result, the evolution of divergent ethnic and national identities within the Slavic nation in the proceeding centuries would suggest a conflict over claim to the victory. His account lays the base for further developments and conflicts in the legacy of conflict.

Rambaud’s examination of the Treaty of Nystad is very brief and offers no unique insights into the legacy or impact of the treaty. Although he only accords the treaty a marginal mention in his history of Russia, he clearly sees the Battle of Narva and the Battle of Poltava as seminal events in Russian history. He sees the Battle of Narva as a major factor in Charles XII’s downfall while he views the Battle of Poltava as a major transformative force not only for Russia, but also for the entire Slavic race. His arguments and conclusions regarding the Battle of Poltava will be indirectly challenged with the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of
several nations with a vested interest in the history of the Great Northern War. His ethnic argument will be fragmented by the harsh realities of twenty-first-century geopolitics and their impact on historical interpretations of the Great Northern War.

Vasily Osipovich Klyuchevsky’s *A History of Russia* is a piece of academic work which overlaps the barrier between the nineteenth and twentieth-century. Although the work was published in the early 1900’s, Klyuchevsky had already established himself as a historical authority by the turn of the century. The vast majority of his intellectual development and exploration occurred in the nineteenth-century with his work marked with impressions from the century’s events and developments.

Perhaps the most important figure to affect Klyuchevsky’s record of Russian history was Sergei Solovyov. Solovyov’s impact is important in that Klyuchevsky diverged from Solovyov’s methodology of chronicling Russian history. Solovyov and his colleagues were members of the Statist school of thought which placed heavy emphasis on the importance of Russian autocracy and imperial power in Russia’s historical evolution. Klyuchevsky’s work shifted away from a focus on the state and examined the impact of various other historical factors such as economics and social development or deterioration. The work in question is considered to be one of his finest examples of scholarly work and signifies the transformation of Russian historical research at the end of the nineteenth-century and into the realm of the twentieth-century.

Klyuchevsky’s analysis of the Great Northern War and its seminal events is somewhat reduced compared to the accounts from the rest of the nineteenth and eighteenth-century. While he does not completely neglect the war, his examination of Peter I’s reign focuses heavily on domestic and foreign policies as well as his controversial social programs. As a result, he
draws some unique connections between the key events of the Great Northern War and various elements of Russian society. His analysis of the Battle of Narva is rather brief and primarily focuses on ways the defeat could have been prevented, but he does offer an interesting insight on Peter I’s attitude towards the conduct of the battle in retrospect.

However, Peter was honest enough when, some twenty-four years later, he had become a famous sovereign, and was drawing up his programme for his third annual celebration of the Peace of Nystadt, to annotate that programme with a confession that at the beginning of the Swedish war his ignorance of his opponent’s strength and of his own resources had been such that he had entered upon the struggle as a blind man might have done.57

Peter’s admission to his past faults is open to interpretation. On one hand, by 1725 he was an emperor and commanded a formidable empire with a bright future. He could afford to be humble when the results of the war shone so prominently across Europe from his new glittering capital, St. Petersburg. At the same time, Peter’s admission reveals the even the tsar who brought his nation into the war and saw its victory realized he had made a serious tactical error. As with many of the previous accounts, this passage makes the Swedish victory at Narva appear far less spontaneous and more inevitable. Similar to his fellow warrior king, Charles XII, Peter rushed into the Great Northern War without making appropriate inquiries into the strength and ability of his foe. He was rewarded with a significant military setback, but thanks to his fellow ruler’s own hubris, he was spared destruction. Essentially, Klyuchevsky’s record of this confession is important in that it establishes the idea that the Russians admitted to their neophytic errors at the beginning of the conflict. To the Russians, the Battle of Narva was a
learning experience that Charles XII seriously misinterpreted. The Russian acknowledgment of their status as military students at the Battle of Narva helps to set the foundation for the history of the Great Northern War by establishing the military capacity of each warring power.

Klyuchevsky’s discussion of the Battle of Poltava is also quite brief, but his conclusions regarding the impact of the battle on the course of the war and Russia’s immediate future reveal several new interpretations. “However that may be, the victory at Poltava relieved Peter of a burden of anxiety which had been his for nine years past…At the same time the result showed that the victory of 17 June did nothing to hasten the coming of peace, but merely complicated Peter’s position, and so indirectly prolonged the war.”

While Klyuchevsky does not discount the glory and importance of the Russian victory at Poltava, he does remark that the victory lifted one burden from the shoulders of the nation only to place yet another burden back on the Russian people. Peter’s victory destroyed Charles XII’s hopes of knocking Russia out of the conflict and securing Sweden’s superiority in the Baltic, but it did not bring peace. Klyuchevsky argues that Peter’s subsequent efforts to recreate the international alliance against Sweden and his diplomatic entreaties caused the war to continue for twelve more years. In Klyuchevsky’s mind, the legacy of Poltava is that it opened the door for Russian expansion into European political and diplomatic circles in which it became hopelessly intertwined. Peter’s negotiations with numerous European powers such as Poland, Hanover and England would cause serious contention between the rising eastern state and the designs of the European powers. While Poltava saved Russia from the threat of invasion and subjugation under Sweden, it nevertheless forced Russia to contend with over a decade of conflict when its goals had already been achieved and secured by 1709.
The Treaty of Nystad is recorded in a manner that it strongly connects with Klyuchevsky’s earlier discussion about the Battle of Poltava. He does not discuss the terms of the treaty particularly extensively, but he does acknowledge its significant impact on Russian diplomatic and foreign policy.

In 1721, the Treaty of Nystad put a long-deferred end to the struggle which in his after years he dubbed his “threefold school of war,”...[which] had taught him that unaided Russian prowess, not ally-sired Russian prowess, alone could bring the contest to a successful termination. The sphere, however, where Poltava did show its supremely far-reaching effect was, not Peter’s sorry foreign policy, but his internal administration...success had been attained at the cost almost of ruin of the people.59

For Klyuchevsky, the Treaty of Nystad and the Battle of Poltava are indelibly linked to Russia’s internal and external fortunes. The end of the war taught Russia that it could not rely on European alliances, which Peter I found out numerous times with each failed European alliance. Russia needed to stand alone in order to achieve its goals in foreign lands. Such a diplomatic legacy would have profound implications for Russia in future dealings with other foreign powers, notably England. If Klyuchevsky’s conclusions are correct, then the Great Northern War caused Russia to eschew foreign treaties and therefore to act without the approval of allies.

Such an independent strategy smacks strongly of imperial expansionism. While the rest of Europe maintained similar political and military practices for their imperial interests, Russia’s new abilities caused particular concern. Russia had long been an enemy of Poland and the Ottoman Empire. With a new a modern military force and western state, the Russians now had the means to expand their empire to the Black Sea and deeper into Eastern Europe.
Preconceptions of Russian barbarity had begun to fade, but Russia was still considered by many to be an eastern state. Few nations knew how to prepare for Russia’s future imperial endeavors. Fears of such a possibility would occupy Western Europe for centuries to come and would be verified during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries.

The second important legacy to the Treaty of Nystad is the final rewards of the Battle of Poltava. As I mentioned previously, Klyuchevsky saw Poltava as the source of yet another burden for the Russian state and people. His focus on the state of the people at the end of the war is iconic of his new school of historical examination. Because of the Russian victory at Poltava, the people had been forced to take on twelve years of taxes and drafts from the Russian state. The enormous cost of the Russian war effort nearly broke the back of the Russians. Peter’s reforms were meant to lift his people and his nation to a new level of power and prosperity, but he war he engineered to assist these policies nearly destroyed the very nation he sought to transform. This interpretation of Poltava and Nystad is highly controversial in that it nullifies many of the benefits of the war due to the already extreme cost placed on the people. Klyuchevsky’s account sours the fruits of victory somewhat, but still acknowledges the potency of the Treaty of Nystad for Russia’s legacy as a new European power both domestically and internationally.

Solovyov’s and Klyuchevsky’s works are the distinguishing works of the nineteenth-century developments in the Great Northern War’s historiography. The 1800’s were a period of tremendous intellectual turmoil for Russia. At the dawn of the nineteenth-century, the French Revolution rocked Europe to its political and intellectual foundations. Russia’s rulers were particularly concerned and instituted a government sanction of certain Enlightenment
philosophies that could threaten the crown. Russia’s paranoia regarding Western ideas would only deepen with the Napoleonic Wars and the Decembrist revolt in 1825. Russia’s tumultuous interaction with Western culture led to a schism within Russian intellectual circles. Westerners and Slavophiles fought on every political and cultural battlefield at their disposal. History was no exception. Solovyov’s work is important in that it comes from the latter half of the nineteenth-century. The later years of the century marked “a period during which we notice the emergence of a new kind of historian, whom we may call the professional historian...among these stand out two particularly eminent figures, S. M. Solovyev and V. O. Klyuchevsky.” In essence, Solovyov and Klyuchevsky are considered the first career historians to attempt an all-encompassing history of Russia. While Rambaud’s work battles against the prejudices developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, these two figures had a far stronger impact. None of the previous sources have been written by professional historians. The closest the eighteenth-century comes to developing such a figure is Voltaire and yet his own accounts are based on his own romantic notions about historical figures not the fruit of painstaking research. Therefore, my firm belief is that besides Jefferey’s own professional political account, only these two works can be considered professional historical documentation of the conflict. While Solovyov and Klyuchevsky still had their own personal goals for their research, their accounts set a new trend for the study of the war.

The nineteenth-century was an era of transformation, innovation and scholarly experimentation. In Imperial Russia, great minds such as Solovyov, Karamzin and Klyuchevsky would remake the fabric of Russian historical development; each one in his own way with the tools given to him by the preceding scholar. In Europe, scholars such as Rambaud sought to
reform the previous accounts examining the Great Northern War. Due to the status of Russia on the foreign stage, historians such as he began to abandon the earlier misconceptions of Russia that had been espoused previously by observers such as Pipes. While significant misgivings remained regarding Russian international ambitions, the nations of Europe could not maintain their aloof and hostile attitudes from the seventeenth century towards Russia. The nineteenth-century is when scholars began to extrapolate the far-reaching legacy of the conflict both within and outside Russia. With the arrival of the twentieth-century, came changes which would tear the academic world asunder with wars and revolutions in both the physical and mental realms of Europe.
Section III: The Twentieth-Century

The twentieth-century marked a shift in the scholarly exploration of the Great Northern War and its key events. Historians began to examine a larger array of accounts from the various combatant nations and determine their impact on the opinions and policies of the European powers. Soviet scholars continued to examine the war from their perspective and interpret it through their modern viewpoint. Their work reclaimed the war for the U.S.S.R. by reinterpreting its events to fit in the Soviet historical school of thought. In the West various academics dissected older accounts of the war from various scholarly viewpoints in order to grasp the greater significance of the events of the conflict. Their work would help to continue the evolution of the historical portrayal and legacy of the Great Northern War. The following accounts begin in the mid-twentieth-century and continue up to the millennium. Considering the rapidly changing world surrounding these scholarly efforts, it is imperative to remember that the context and significance of these works now is not the same as it was then. The rise and fall of the Soviet Union, the Second World War and the creation of new independent East European states greatly complicated historical examination of the Great Northern War. If anything, the twentieth-century was an era of even greater transition than that witnessed in the nineteenth-century. The impact of the events of this turbulent century had a variable effect on each author’s work and their examination of the conflict.

Frans Bengtsson’s *The Sword does not Jest*, is meant to be portrayed as an epic chronicle of the life of Charles XII from his ascension to the throne to his death at the siege of Fredricksten in 1718. Before delving into this particular work it is important to understand his academic
motivation. Bengtsson was a Swedish essayist, novelist, poet and biographer in the early twentieth-century. He held a considerable admiration for noted historical figures such as Oliver Cromwell and Napoleon. He was known to hold a great fondness for the past while scorning the present. The work I am examining received the Swedish Academy Prize in 1938 and was noted for portraying Charles XII as a character more akin to that found in ancient epics. The piece was noted for drawing heavily from Voltaire’s work in the eighteenth-century. His work offers a twentieth-century version of an epic history of Charles XII. Like the earlier eighteenth-century accounts, Bengtsson examines the war from a perspective predominately focused on Charles XII’s exploits and policies during the conflict. His account is a unique example of academic and literary achievement that delicately blends history and drama into a potent combination which not only informs the reader, but possesses the ability to alter opinion in favor of the Swedes.

The book is a fine example of popular Swedish historical literature. While it does contain several motifs bordering on nationalism, the writer’s frequent embellishments make this work quite similar to a romantic historical novel.

His examination of the Battle of Narva offers familiar opinions regarding the Russians and the legacy of the battle. Bengtsson’s initial depiction of the Russian army makes them more akin to an angry horde of nomads rather than Peter’s semi-modern army. He sees the Russians as an undisciplined force with little to no regard for civility or western rules of war. This attitude connects strongly with Pipe’s account of European conceptions of Russia during the seventeenth and eighteenth-century. However, his later descriptions of the Russian army appear to contradict his earlier description of the quality of the Russian army. “Moreover, some of the
regulars, with a Turkish war behind them, were more experienced fighters than the Swedes, of whom only the older officers had ever seen a shot fired in anger, some twenty years before.”

Despite his earlier portrayal of the Russian army as an out of control military force, this specific passage indicates the Russian army was the larger and better trained army. While previous accounts have all agreed that the Russians possessed a significant advantage numerically, they also argue that the Russians were little better than armed neophytes in a western theatre of war. As mentioned previously in the nineteenth-century accounts, Russia’s status as a student of war under the coercive tutelage of Charles XII was a popular method of interpretation when examining the results of the Battle of Narva. As a result, it is difficult to determine exactly where Bengtsson stands on the quality of the Russian army. His statements reflect conclusions from the early eighteenth-century, but also from the mid to late nineteenth-century. The combination of these two opposing interpretations leaves an enigmatic description open to interpretation.

His further descriptions of Tsar Peter’s actions further develop his viewpoint. “[T]he Czar’s reflections grew increasingly somber. Every hour he beheld in his mind’s eye a large and wrathful Swedish army speeding on winged feet towards his lines, and at last it dawned upon him that important business awaited him elsewhere.” Clearly Bengtsson sees Peter as a coward for departing the Russian lines as news reached him about the approaching Swedish army. This portrayal is controversial as it cannot be known if Peter did flee out of fear or left due to practical considerations. While the answer to this debate will likely never surface, Bengtsson clearly sides with the idea of Peter’s cowardice. Considering that his work is a personal history of Charles XII, it is not surprising that he should support this viewpoint. If Peter did flee out of fear
from the young Swedish king before a single shot had been fired, Charles would appear to be
the better man and greater foe. His cult of personality benefited significantly from Peter’s
absence at Narva. Medals were struck throughout Europe, portraying Peter fleeing the scene in
fear. Many of his phrases can be found nearly verbatim in the accounts from two centuries
before. Voltaire’s work has a virtually identical passage: “He quitted his camp, where his
presence was necessary, in quest of this fresh body of men, which might have arrived very well
without him, and appeared by this behaviour to be afraid.” This is just one similarity between
the two accounts, but it demonstrates how much Bengtsson relies on eighteenth-century
accounts. Clearly this aspect of Narva’s legacy has not lost its potency even in the early-
twentieth-century.

Bengtsson emphasizes the Swedish legacy of the Battle of Narva in an epic style which
leans towards the dramatic rather than the objective. As he details the progression of events of
the battle he breaks into an aside emphasizing the legacy of the coming struggle. The passage
builds suspense for the literary audience and induces further sympathy for the Swedish army.

Yet here they stood, all unawares, as fame’s elect: inspirers of dispatches, bonfires, and
panegyrics; the wonder of all Europe because of what they were to achieve that day.
They were about to produce the military sensation of the age, one that would rank
among the greatest of all time.

Bengtsson is an author outside his own time period as his work is clearly written in a style quite
similar to Voltaire and the other eighteenth-century accounts examined earlier. While he does
not state his specific audience, he clearly wishes to awaken feelings of glory and nostalgia for
the moment. Besides emphasizing the obviously grand qualities of the Swedish victory, the
passage also helps to clarify his contradictory sections prior to this passage. The earlier sections describing the wildness, the size and the quality of the Russian forces are aligned to further develop the quality of the Swedish legacy of the victory. Unlike his predecessors in the eighteenth-century, he builds up the Russian army slightly by portraying them as a highly experienced force, but he also incorporates elements from the popular opinions of the eighteenth-century. As Poe’s work indicated at the beginning, many Europeans considered Russia to be a wild and untamed land with similar people. Despite the fact that Bengtsson composed this work in the twentieth-century, he apparently thought some of these opinions to still be valid in the modern age. It is not my position to question the ethics of his actions, but his integration of opinions and accounts in such a manner places the Russians in an archaic light.

Overall, Bengtsson’s examination of the Battle of Narva seeks to reinforce the legacy of Charles XII and his heroic victory with the aid of the mighty Swedish army. Effectively he resurrects an earlier composition style with his own personal variations and the benefit of significant hindsight. His portrayal of the Battle of Narva as such a colossal victory could be a method of portraying it as the zenith of Swedish military dominance in Eastern Europe. Many previous and future accounts connect the victory at Narva with defeat at Poltava and draw many connections between the two beyond the simple course of the war. His glorification of the victory may be a belated attempt to temper the shock of the Swedish defeat at Poltava and the damage to their aura of invincibility.

Bengtsson’s account of the Battle of Poltava focuses heavily on the personal level of the disaster. He highlights the interactions between the Swedish commanders without going into great detail regarding the circumstances of the Charles’s wounding, but he does examine how
the Swedish command structure was seriously disrupted. Like most of the earlier accounts, Bengtsson agrees that the sudden loss of the King’s leadership and his aura of invincibility caused havoc amongst the Swedish army. While Bengtsson does emphasize that Rehnsköld was a capable commander in his later passages, the psychological trauma could not be overcome so easily. As a result, Charles’s incapacitation was a tactical blow, but only on the mental level. The rest of the chain of command was intact, but the loss of such a crucial lynchpin in the army’s morale greatly reduced the confidence of the already beleaguered army. Clearly the assessment of this key event at Poltava has not diminished through the centuries. In Bengtsson’s epic history of Charles XII, the disaster is unprecedented.

Bengtsson continues his account by reinforcing earlier depictions of the mindset of the Swedish high command at the Battle of Poltava. “That evening, after conferring with the King, Rehnsköld summoned Lewenhaupt and the major-generals and told them that by the King’s command they were to give him their views on what was to be done next. They were almost unanimous in wanting to raise the siege.”67 This event is just as critical to the legacy of the battle now as it was in 1709. Clearly the officers were against maintaining the siege and fighting the inevitable battle with Peter’s fast approaching Russian army. However, Charles disagreed with them and chose to continue on with the operations. The results of this decision are evident today. Charles’s decision to remain at Poltava raises new points regarding the legacy of the battle. Did Charles stay for sound tactical reasons or was it his confidence that he could best the Russians again? Unfortunately history has yet to provide an answer to this question. However, depending on each reader’s interpretation of these events, the defeat may appear to be the
result of the young king’s hubris or a simple tactical defeat with disastrous consequences for one side.

Bengtsson provides further details regarding the disposition of both armies the day of the battle and the attitudes held by the men of the Swedish army. His descriptions are vital to understanding his personal viewpoint of the outcome of the battle and the reasons for it.

Careful analysis of information from all sources shows a fighting-force of 22,000 men, excluding Cossacks of various kinds. Not an imposing host to lead against 45,000 Russian...But 45,000 Russians were not very terrifying in themselves, and optimists could recall a day at Narva when that number had been turned upside down by a Swedish army half the size of the one now assembled at Poltava. There was no denying, however, that from a military point of view the Russians had altered considerably since Narva.68

Bengtsson’s account of the two armies incorporates a variety of descriptions and arguments which can be found in many of the earlier accounts. The Swedes were severely outnumbered, but they had reason to be optimistic as they had won out against superior Russian numbers at Narva. However, Bengtsson credits the Russians as having improved significantly since Narva. As a result, Bengtsson’s description appears to be resigned to the idea that a Swedish victory was the least likely prospect at Poltava. The Russians were the larger force that had modernized considerably and gained significant experience since 1700. As a result, he discounts the optimism of the Swedes as their previous victory at Narva had been against a less experienced force. Unlike the previous personal histories of Charles XII, he admits to the likelihood of defeat far more readily than others before him. It is clear that an evolution of the historical account has
taken place. Unlike the overly optimistic accounts from the eighteenth-century, Bengtsson does include a healthy dose of skepticism regarding Charles’s outlook for the rest of the war.

Bengtsson’s closing remarks on the Battle of Poltava summarize his beliefs and opinions regarding the reasons for the outcome of the battle and ultimately the war.

He [Peter] had won because he had stiffened his army with fine German officers, and also as a result of the extraordinary good fortune that attended him ever since the late summer of 1708, when disaster upon disaster had fallen upon the Swedes without any help from him. The issue was finally decided by the King’s wound, for from that stemmed the defeat at Poltava.69

Clearly Bengtsson blames a combination of training and fate for the loss at Poltava. It appears that to him, the battle was not so certain after all. If Charles had not been wounded and if the various strings of accidents and disasters had not occurred, the war may have ended in a different manner. Overall, Bengtsson’s account of the Great Northern War portrays Charles XII and the Swedes in the role of epic heroes who are struck down by the hand of fate. His account is unique amongst the other accounts of the twentieth-century due to his personal style of portrayal and his heavy reliance on the personal histories of the eighteenth-century. I do not consider Bengtsson to be the next level of historiographical evolution for the Great Northern War. Rather he is the preeminent example of the continuation of popular personal histories into the twentieth-century.

The second account comes from Matthew S. Anderson’s “English Views of Russia in the Age of Peter the Great”. Written in 1954, Anderson discusses numerous positions and opinions
maintained by the English people and government throughout Peter the Great’s reign and in response to the various events of the Great Northern War. Anderson describes the preconceived notions the British maintained regarding the Russians prior to the Great Northern War and their transformation during the course of the conflict. Anderson’s article is important in that it establishes the legacy of the Great Northern War within at least a segment of English society. In order to understand the impact of the legacy of the Great Northern War it is vital to understand the initial opinions maintained by the English people.

His [Peter’s] presence in London did stimulate a short-lived and superficial curiosity about the country from which he had come, and hence the publication, in 1698 and 1699, of a number of books designed to meet this temporary demand. None of these attempted to challenge the accepted view of Russia as remote, backward, and, except as a source of supply for a few raw materials, fundamentally unimportant.  

Anderson’s description indicates a popular attitude which remained relatively static despite the recent visit of the first definitively western style Russian Tsar, Peter I. The English attitude towards the people, nation and ruler indicates a significant amount of contempt if not downright hostility. However Anderson’s description does argue that such an attitude had its own variations. Clearly some Englishmen saw Russia as irrelevant in the affairs of the nation though he does not clarify as to how thoroughly this attitude permeated the upper echelons of the British authorities. Despite a contemptible attitude towards the Russians, it would not remain static for long. The Great Northern War changed many minds in England for better or for worse.
Before delving into specific events of the war, Anderson provides an overarching description of the changes in the attitude and level of interest in the British government during the course of the Great Northern War from 1700 to 1721.

With the outbreak in 1700 of the Great Northern War the English attitude began to undergo relatively rapid and sometimes violent changes. The possible repercussions of the war upon events in Western Europe soon forced the Government to take more account than had hitherto been done of the great power now emerging on the eastern fringes of the continent...England remained keen and watchful up to the very moment of the signature of the Treaty of Nystad in 1721.\(^{71}\)

Despite the initial ambivalence to Russian affairs, Anderson indicates that the British government did not dare ignore the conflict occurring in the remote regions of the Baltic territories. Considering the establishment of Captain James Jefferyes as an unofficial correspondent for Whitehall in the Swedish army, it is clear that Anderson’s conclusions are confirmed. The volatile nature of European politics and the beginning of the War of Spanish Succession in Western Europe, forced the British government to maintain diplomatic oversight over a conflict which threatened to interfere with their own interests on the European continent. The war would establish a strong legacy in Anglo-Russian relations for decades if not centuries to come, but the precise nature of this legacy and its evolution can best be found in the descriptions of the fallout from the three primary events of the conflict.

Before discussing the legacy of the three events on English attitudes towards Russia, it is important to establish the civilian perspective in England during the course of the conflict as
well. Anderson provides a description of changes in the civilian attitudes in response to various battles and events in the East.

Parallel with, and lagging slightly behind, the governmental and diplomatic interest, can be discerned the slower growth in England of a more general and popular interest in Russia. Complete separation of the two is hardly possible or even desirable, for they were closely interconnected, and it is often not easy to tell whether a particular pamphlet or newspaper comment was inspired by the Government or by some group or party, or whether it expresses the real views of the educated public or even the mere idiosyncrasies of some individual. 72

While Anderson describes two distinct British entities, he shows that the domestic opinions and philosophies maintained by the British for the Russians were not necessarily mirror images or extrapolations of the current government’s policy. As a result the government attitudes towards the key events and their impact on the interactions between England and Russia must be considered far more important than the attitudes of the populace. However the attitudes of the citizens cannot be wholly discounted as they in turn alter the policies of their government through their collective voice.

The Battle of Narva is a curious anomaly in Anderson’s examination of the English interest in the Great Northern War. As the eighteenth-century sources in the previous section have shown, the first real battle between the Russians and the Swedes fascinated the majority of Europe and was widely publicized to the benefit of the Swedes and the detriment of the Russians. Although the English were by no means ignorant of the outcome of the battle and the
ramifications for the fortunes of the combatants, little additional attention appears to have been paid towards this single event.

Thus while Charles XII’s descent on Zeeland, the Treaty of Travendahl, and the Holstein-Gottorp question all provoked a substantial amount of newspaper and pamphlet comment, so spectacular an event as the great defeat of the Russian Army at Narva seems to have aroused surprisingly little general interest in England. Defoe’s description of Poland...continued to be applicable...to the average Englishman’s concept of Russia...Thus in 1703 the difficulties which John Robinson, the English envoy to Sweden, was encountering in obtaining an audience with Charles XII produced strong rumors of the King’s death, while even the battle of Poltava was followed...by reports of a great Swedish victory.73

The difficulty the English had in obtaining reliable correspondence and information from the conflict indicates that the immediate effects of the battles were minimal if not irrelevant. Once again, James Jefferyes’ diary supports Anderson’s claims that the British had serious difficulty in obtaining up-to-date and accurate accounts from the battlefield. As a result the legacy of the battles would have changed considerably over time as the British government contended with new information as well as the changing views of its own citizens towards Russia. Anderson provides little else on the Battle of Narva, but clearly the English government paid minimal attention to the event either intentionally or merely due to their lacking sufficient information to create a policy or viewpoint. More than likely the changing British attitudes were established as other events began to unfold following Narva until they underwent another significant transformation at the Battle of Poltava.
The Battle of Poltava captured the attention of the British government in many ways, altering their attitudes and policies towards Peter I and the emerging modern Russian state. Anderson explains the transformations at both the official and civilian level following the aftermath of the historic turning point.

The annihilation of the Swedish army in the Ukraine changed this position in a number of ways. On the official level, it endowed Peter and his allies with the power to partition or even destroy the Swedish Empire, and thus posed the question of a Russian-dominated Baltic, which it gave him it brought forward the still wider problem of the place of Russia in the whole European state system...It was only after 1709 that a note of real anxiety at the prospect of Russian predominance in the Baltic became clearly audible in the correspondence of British statesmen.74

The account indicates that the legacy established by the Battle of Poltava shifted English attitudes from contempt to wariness. The rapid change in the fortunes of the war clearly caught the British government off guard and forced them to reconcile their foreign policy as well as their cultural disposition towards the new Russian state. They were not alone in this as the vast majority of European states from Denmark to Spain considered the Russians the definite losers. Considering the significance attached to the battle by James Jefferyes and other accounts from the eighteenth-century it is not surprising that the British government was forced to adopt such radical alterations in policy. Anderson indicates that the Russians were an anomalous political entity for the British foreign office. The British mindset was unable to determine the future of the Baltic or European political stage with such a powerful Russian presence. While the British were aware that Russia was modernizing and attempting to bring itself in line with western
practices, the significance of these reforms was not brought home until Poltava. However Anderson argues that the British government and people looked towards the distant rather than the immediate future with far more interest and foreboding. Obviously the British considered the impact of the battle on the course of the war, but they appear to have shifted their focus to the larger ramifications of the battle. Overall, Poltava plays a significant political role for the British as it forced the British to contend with the increasing likelihood that Russia was becoming the dominant power in the Baltic and Eastern Europe with the ability to play a pivotal role in the larger scope of European politics.

The Treaty of Nystad is mentioned only briefly in Anderson’s article, but he emphasizes that the treaty only established the end of the conflict and not the end of the formation of the legacy of the conflict. Anderson emphasizes that the war established a far more hostile legacy in Great Britain. “The anti-Russian feeling which had so suddenly crystallized in 1716-1717 retained its strength for a number of years. Much of it outlived the Great Northern War and even the Tsar himself.” Clearly Anderson sees the Treaty of Nystad as merely a footnote in the British historical views of the Great Northern War. The years 1716 and 1717 were tumultuous times for Anglo-Russian relations. The ascension of the Hanoverian King George I to the English throne caused significant complications for Russia’s international diplomats. George I took the throne in 1714 and saw Russia as a direct threat to England and Hanover’s interests. Although England and Hanover were initially allied against Sweden, George I and his advisors believed that Russia was the greater threat. His policies sought to dissolve Russia’s international coalition against Sweden. While he did succeed, George’s policies hardened English and Russian diplomats against one another. His distrust of Russian foreign ambition would outlive him and be a central
theme of British foreign policy throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries.\(^76\) The Russian victories at Poltava and elsewhere transformed their image from an irrelevant eastern power to an aggressive European superpower. Overall Anderson’s account emphasizes that the legacy of the Great Northern War in the English historical accounts established a negative view of the Russian people and nation. Therefore the legacy of the Great Northern War added to Russo phobia amongst the English people which would affect the future interchanges between the two powers.

The following two scholars, Veniamin Shutoi and Sergei Molchanov, are just two examples of Soviet historiography. Due to time constraints, I was only able to focus on these two works, but I must emphasize the fact that Soviet examination of this war is rich and varied. Following the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks rapidly gained control over Russia’s academic resources. Under Lenin, the Bolsheviks encouraged historians to examine Russia’s history in relation to the larger international labor revolution predicted by Marx. Effectively Lenin and other party officials sought to erode the borders between national histories in order to create a much larger global history of the proletariat. After Lenin’s death, Stalin initiated a course for Soviet historians and academics. His policies caused an “ideological shift from the internationalism of the 1920’s, when the Bolsheviks lived in expectation of world revolution, to the drive to build socialism in a single country. In the new conditions it was no longer thought desirable for historians to criticize Russian imperial traditions; instead they should help consolidate the new Soviet empire.”\(^77\) Both Shutoi and Molchanov composed their works after Lenin and Stalin’s time, but they still show elements of Stalin’s system. After Stalin’s death, Russian historiography remained under tight state control, but more interpretive trends
continued to develop. As a result, it is extremely difficult to classify these two scholars or many of their colleagues under a single title or banner. Molchahov’s work appeared on the eve of Gorbachev’s ascension to power and the beginning of Perestroika. It is vital to remember that these works are not the only Soviet academic attempts to examine the Great Northern War. Many other historians devoted their time and energy to this war and its role in history. The work developed by these scholars under such a repressive regime is a fragment of the Great Northern War’s historiography. Some Soviet elements are readily apparent, while others were ingrained in the authors themselves.

Veniamin Shutoi’s Severnaia Voina (Northern War: 1700-1721) offers Soviet academic perspectives of the target events of the Great Northern War from 1970. Despite the fact that scholars like Shutoi operated under a stifling regime, the war was still an appropriate topic. Scholars like Shutoi could claim the Great Northern War as a victory of the Russian people. As a result the war did not become a forbidden topic of study amongst Soviet scholars. Shutoi’s account offers several new perspectives on the various events, but maintains focus on the larger national legacy of the war for Russia. His examination of the Battle of Narva focuses particularly on the larger ramifications of the outcome of the battle not only for the immediate course of the war, but also for Russia in Europe. “The Russian army, having suffered defeat at Narva, retreated, but had not been crushed as the Swedes had hoped ... The Swedes did not begin to pursue the retreating Russians. Charles had been assured of the weakness of the Russians and that it could not recover from their defeat at Narva.”

2 Text translated by the author
While Shutoi does acknowledge that the Russian army suffered a serious defeat at Narva, he emphasizes that the Russians were able to carry on the fight. The important interpretation to consider is the miss evaluation of the victory by the Swedes. Several of the previous accounts from the eighteenth-century indicate that the Swedes incorrectly assumed that Russia was totally defeated and an unworthy adversary. In previous accounts, Charles assumes that Russia is knocked out for a significant length of time, but Shutoi indicates that Charles saw Russia as completely defeated. While it is true that Charles maintained an aloof attitude towards Russia and its armed forces up until the end of the Battle of Poltava, Shutoi elevates his hubris to even greater heights. The purpose of such a description is most likely meant to portray Charles as a proud fool and an incapable ruler.

Shutoi does not limit his study of the Battle of Narva to just the field of battle, but also includes the impact of the battle on the European mindset. Shutoi’s description of the impact of the Battle of Narva contradicts Anderson’s earlier argument that the Battle of Narva passed relatively unnoticed in the public mindset. In addition to the obvious enthusiasm in Europe for Charles and Sweden, Shutoi indicates that Europe took a long time to forget the legacy of Narva. The European populace held the Russians in great contempt due to the outcome of the battle up until the sudden reversal at Poltava. The battle is significant in that it set the public and official stage for the first several years of the war and established a legacy of Russian defeat and Swedish victory which remained unbroken until 1709. As a result the Battle of Narva set the tone for a war which would see several more shifts of observer opinion before its conclusion. These conflicting tones affect the evolution of the historiography of the war. Narva is more
often cast in the light favoring the Swedish forces, but academics like Shutoi study the battle from the Soviet or Russian perspective to interpret the victory and defeat in their own fashion.

Shutoi’s analysis of the Battle of Poltava focuses on the practical aspects of the battle as well as its larger ramifications for both the war and the world. In particular Shutoi focuses on the endurance of the legacy of the battle in his time and indeed ours as well. “But Poltava has world glory not antiquity, and as it is told in one national song, the battle where the Swedes laid down their heads.” Even in 1970, Shutoi considered the glory of Poltava to be just as potent in Russia as it was in 1709. The ability of the history of one battle to remain powerful in a completely new society indicates how its legacy could survive even the October Revolution. The fact that a national song mentioned the battle proves that its legacy was considered important to the national history and in the interest of the Soviet state. Clearly the song is a cultural object, developed in line with the inward looking policy enforced by Stalin.

He strengthens his point further by emphasizing the scope of the battle’s impact. He calls it… “one of the great events not only of domestic, but also world history.” The validity of the statement is not necessarily questionable as the battle did alter the face of European history for centuries, but he applies the label as if the victory is a victory for world history. Up until Poltava most Europeans backed the Swedes and not the Russians, so while this event was no doubt significant to them, it was not seen as a victory but a serious blow or as a Jefferyes puts it: a catastrophe. The Russian defeat at Narva had not endeared them to the European community so the Battle of Poltava was important, but it established a double-edged legacy for Russia. From Shutoi’s viewpoint, the battle is tremendous victory which altered Russia’s history for the better, but for most Europeans the battle was a disaster which opened Europe to the advance of the
new Russian Empire. The interpretation combines Stalin and Lenin’s historical philosophies. On one hand, Shutoi interprets the war in relation to Russia alone, but he still maintains that Poltava was an event for international Soviet history.

Shutoi’s examination of the battle itself and its practical considerations matches several earlier accounts with particular emphasis on the condition of the Swedish army. Shutoi views the outcome of the battle as inevitable due to the appalling condition of the Swedish army at Poltava. The various Swedish hardships are already well documented within various sources, but Shutoi grants little merit to the fighting mettle of the Swedish soldiers. He argues that the outcome of the battle was decided before it began. He supports his argument further by describing Charles’s inability to take control of his army at Poltava despite his aura of invincibility. “[Charles…could not stop the Swedish army which had crumbled into disorder.”

Shutoi’s description emphasizes the notion that by the end of the Battle of Poltava, his cult of personality and the certainty victory had vanished from the Swedish army. Considering that Charles had already been wounded prior to the commencement of hostilities, the disintegration of this cult of victory is not surprising. Ultimately Shutoi’s interpretation of the battle and its outcome demonstrates the certainty of victory and its immense impact on history then and now.

The Treaty of Nystad is a relatively small section of Shutoi’s work, but his depiction of the treaty is quite significant due to his interpretations of the logic behind the treaty. Shutoi focuses most of his attention on spoils of Russia’s war and Peter’s attitude towards his military gains. “Peter,— wrote Marx, -- had taken hold of only that which was absolutely necessary for natural progress of his country.” Shutoi appears to agree with Marx in that he sees the Treaty
of Nystad and Peter’s territorial claims as part of the natural historical evolution of Russia. The incorporation of the Treaty of Nystad into Marx’s historical progression emphasizes the importance of treaty to Russia’s future. Even in the late twentieth-century Shutoi continues to see the treaty and Marx’s interpretation as significant elements of the legacy of both the treaty and the war. Besides the place of the treaty in the historical heritage of Russia, Marx portrays the conquest and acquisition of new Russian territories as absolutely necessary for the wellbeing of the nation. As a result the treaty is not portrayed as the conclusion to a war for imperialistic expansion but rather the end of a necessary military campaign for the future security of the Russian people. Such an interpretation of the legacy of the Treaty of Nystad raises numerous issues. Many states and historians in Sweden, Poland and elsewhere viewed the conclusion of the treaty as an omen. Anderson described how the English feared further imperialistic Russian expansion in the Baltic and Eastern Europe. Jefferyes held similar fears although he did not document the treaty. Overall this portrayal of the treaty refutes numerous viewpoints of other academics by portraying it within a light of practicality. Shutoi’s work demonstrates numerous salient points of the Russian historical viewpoint of the Great Northern War and these three iconic moments.

The next account comes from Nikolai Molchanov’s Diplomatie Petra Pervova (Diplomacy of Peter I) \(^3\) from 1984. Molchanov’s account diverges from the previously examined accounts in that it does not solely examine the Great Northern War but rather focuses on the overall diplomatic history of Russia during the reign of Peter I. As the Great Northern War occupied twenty years of Peter’s forty-three year reign, a significant amount of attention is given to the

\(^3\) Work translated by author
war and its impact on his time on the throne. Considering how the war altered the state of European politics, the political legacies of the battles of Narva and Poltava in addition to the Treaty of Nystad are considerable. The historiography of the Great Northern War has been and still is strongly influenced by the diplomatic ripples at the time of the conflict. However the political legacy of these events is bound to change as time passes and the historical significance of the war’s events take on new political roles for the current generation of scholars. His work comes just prior to one of the greatest shifts in Soviet culture. The book was published just prior to the beginning of Perestroika.

Molchanov’s examination of the Battle of Narva examines the first political impressions created by the opening confrontation between Sweden and Russia. Molchanov devotes his effort towards interpreting the reasons for the outcome of the battle and the after effects. First Molchanov emphasizes just how long the effects of Narva affected European impressions of Russia during the course of the war. “In fact, for almost ten years, Europe would look at Russia only through a prism incorrectly interpreting the experience at Narva.” As has been mentioned numerous times before, the Swedish victory at Narva shaped European opinions sharply against the Russians, but it also deceived them. Due to the enormity of the victory, the hubris of Charles XII and the hostile preconceived notions regarding Russia, the various nations of Europe could not envision Russia as a serious threat. For ten years their illusions of ultimate Swedish superiority and Russian incompetence remained relatively un tarnished until the defining moment at Poltava.

Molchanov elaborates further by delving deeper into the European perceptions of the Russian defeat. “Narva looked like a chaotic heap of unfortunate accidents, of unpreparedness,
confusion, cowardice, indifference to business or even the treachery of foreigners as well as Peter’s mysterious actions. All these various elements combined together to seal the fate of the Russian forces besieging Narva. Molchanov establishes the utter impossibility of the situation which has been mentioned in the previous accounts from the eighteenth-century. The Russians did lose, but for clearly defined reasons which were either quirks of chance such as the snow storm which blinded the Russian forces, or the untrained status of the soldiers. Molchanov himself states that “[the] trouble in that there were no skilled and prepared Russian officers.” The European interpretation of these events was flawed because they saw no chance for improvement or progress in the Russian army. No doubt born of the preconceived ideas planted by earlier academic accounts, the idea that the Russians could raise a competent western-style fighting force appeared unlikely to them. As a result the Swedish victory at Narva and the legacy of the battle pulled a veil over the eyes of Europe for nine years until it was ripped off at Poltava.

Molchanov discounts the European views of the Russians by examining the ephemerality of their interpretations of Narva.

Therefore the victory of the Swedes was absolutely natural as it was a question of the superiority of the skilled and trained army over an untried and untrained army...Events at Narva caused wide resonance in Europe. Thus the scales of the defeat were unreasonably exaggerated in the spirit and concepts of Charles. Molchanov’s argument that the Swedish victory was purely natural undermines the earlier grand interpretations which cast Charles and the Swedes in mythic roles of invincibility. Molchanov does not declare the Swedes to be incompetent in the methods of warfare, but
argues that such training coupled with the disadvantages of the Russians at Narva made the only possible outcome victory. In his eyes, the Battle of Narva was nowhere near as heroic or epic as portrayed in the Swedish and European accounts. He declares the scale of the victory to be “exaggerated”, but herein lies the crux of the debate.

The Swedes argue that at Narva, Charles and his army were outnumbered, exhausted and attacking a strongly entrenched foe. Obviously victory under such circumstances as these does make for a heroic victory that is sure to captivate the masses. Molchanov does not attack the specific details of the battle, but rather the message taken from them. At the same time Molchanov describes the Russians as disorganized and ill-prepared for the battle which could only result in defeat. The historical struggle over the legacy of this battle appears to be firmly entrenched with little hope of resolution. Overall Molchanov’s interpretation of the Battle of Narva discounts Swedish interpretations of the battle and instead argues that the Battle of Narva blinded the Swedes and European spectators so that they could not anticipate the end result of the war.

Molchanov’s examination of the Battle of Poltava focuses on several primary topics involving the impact of the battle. Two of particular note focus on the more esoteric reasons for the victory and the change of political attitudes in Europe towards Russia. First, Molchanov resurrects an already familiar line of thought that the Russian victory was guaranteed. “It [the Battle of Poltava] is absurdity, for the destiny of the battle had been already predetermined.” Just as he saw the outcome of Narva as inevitable due to the circumstances regarding the state of the Russian army, he maintains a similar interpretation of the victory at Poltava. While his account of the battle and the severely deteriorated state of the Swedish army is congruent with
earlier accounts, his comments on the victory are rather enthusiastic. “The true battle proceeded for two hours. But what two hours! Russians have put down nine thousand Swedes and taken three thousand foreigners captive.” Although Molchanov considers the battle to be an inevitable victory for the Russians, he views it as an epic victory for Russia. While the battle was the turning point of the war, his less than restrained depiction demonstrates the power of the battle’s legacy even in the late twentieth-century.

Beyond this depiction Molchanov examines the moral factors behind the victory. “Peter found and awakened this moral factor – the patriotism of the Russian people.” The previous accounts examining this battle have not mentioned any such moral factor as relevant to the outcome of the battle. Considering that such a factor is not quantifiable, it falls into the more ephemeral list of reasons the Swedes lost. Molchanov is tying the moral character of the Russian army to the inevitability of the battle’s outcome. I cannot determine whether this addition was due to his patriotic enthusiasm for the historical event or the expectations of Soviet academic censors. The Soviets would have wanted to emphasize the epic qualities of the battle and ensure its place in the annals of victories of the Russian people and it does fit with Shutoi’s account as well. Shutoi mentions how the battle is memorialized in songs and has yet to lose its glory. It can be safely argued that for Shutoi and Molchanov, Poltava possesses an immortal legacy.

Finally Molchanov examines the reception of the Russian victory in Europe. He examines various responses from specific nations as well as making an overall analysis. “In Holland the reaction appeared significantly constrained...London did not hide its affliction at the destruction of the army of Charles XII...Poltava changed European conceptions about Russia.” The
European reception of the Russian victory in Holland and London was hardly enthusiastic. It can even be considered sorrowful. Molchanov’s account emphasizes the wide ranging impact of the victory at Poltava, and the European attitude. Clearly the enthusiasm carried over from Narva had intoxicated European states with the idea of an imminent Swedish victory over Muscovy. The shock of the defeat forced European states to revise their opinions regarding Russia. The battle not only altered the opinions born from the war, but also those established long before the outbreak of the conflict. In essence Poltava not only ended the legacy of Narva and the conceptions of the war up until 1709, but it also forced Europeans to look at Russia in a new light. Peter’s Russia had vanquished a victorious European power and stood poised to reshape Eastern Europe. Whether the European governments liked it or not, they now had to contend with a new Russia. Molchanov establishes two distinct legacies of the Battle of Poltava. One is the ending of the legacy of Narva and the changes of the fortunes of war.

Molchanov’s discussion of the Treaty of Nystad involves the larger interpretation of the impact of the treaty. Molchanov discusses the main aspects of the treaty with the confirmation of the transference of territories and the ending of the conflict, but he also focuses on the larger symbolism for the treaty. “The Nystad treaty recognized the fruitfulness of the heavy efforts of the entire Russian people and the great success of the reforms of Peter.” In Molchanov’s examination he ties in the Treaty of Nystad with the success of Peter I’s westernizing programs. As a result the historiography of the Treaty of Nystad has evolved to portray the ending of the Great Northern War as the zenith of Peter’s western doctrines. Molchanov looks beyond the scope of the war, and towards the larger changes occurring in Russia. He sees the ending of the war not just as the expansion of Russia territorially, but also culturally, economically and
politically. The treaty marks the ending of a successful conflict with a powerful western state and the opening of a new window of opportunities. I concur with this viewpoint’s interpretation of Peter’s military ventures and other reforms. Peter’s programs, although controversial, made it possible for Russia to win the war and ended Russia’s virtual isolation from western modernity. Even if the Russians did not realize this, the kings and queens of Europe certainly realized that Russia could no longer be ignored. The formidable Swedish Empire had failed to keep back the upstart Russians and their western Tsar, making Russia an equal if not superior contender for supremacy in Eastern Europe. Overall Molchanov’s depictions of the Battle of Narva, the Battle of Poltava and the Treaty of Nystad examine their various political legacies as well as their larger role in the history and perceptions of the new Russian Empire.

Theodore Machiw creates a new historical perspective on the Great Northern War and the significance of its seminal events. His article, “England, Russia and Ukrainian question during the Great Northern War”, focuses on England’s interest in the Great Northern War and its interactions with both Sweden and Russia. His examination focuses on the diplomatic history of the conflict from beginning to end, but some of his most compelling arguments revolve around the Battle of Poltava and the Treaty of Nystad.

Machiw’s depiction of the Battle of Poltava examines the general condition of the Swedish army with most of his observations and conclusions being drawn from the journal of Captain James Jefferyes. He agrees that the Ukrainian campaign was in desperation on the Swedish army’s part and that its own condition and fighting prowess had deteriorated sharply. What makes his account unique is his discussion of the fallout from the Russian victory at Poltava and the English hopes for Mazepa’s defection. England kept a close watch on Charles
XII’s progress through Russia and later Ukraine. They could not avoid forming suppositions and theories regarding the impact of the Ukrainian Cossacks on the course of the Swedish campaign.

Whitworth indicated that “the revolt of General Mazepa to the King of Sweden...will properly give a new turn to these affairs”....English diplomatic reports of the time indicate that London showed an interest in Mazepa’s movements and was probably concerned for the future of the Hetmanate...The victory at Poltava brought fundamental and decisive changes in relations between Russia and Sweden, as well as between Russia and England and Western Europe in general. Louis XIV sent de Baluze to Moscow to seek a rapprochement. The elector of Hanover, the future King George I of England, concluded a twelve year alliance with Russia (1710)....England now desired to act as mediator between Russia and Sweden and even to accept Russia into the Grand Alliance.94

While previous sources have discussed the military, political and diplomatic impact of the Battle of Poltava, Machiw provides a unique and detailed account of the precise nature of the political turnaround. Whitworth was the primary English diplomat for Eastern Europe and helped coordinate Jefferyes’ placement in the Swedish army. The English diplomatic circles placed high hopes in the Ukrainian defection, but Machiw provides very little supporting material regarding their attitudes to the issue of Ukrainian autonomy. Clearly the Battle of Poltava marked the complete and total reversal of English diplomatic plans in Eastern Europe. Machiw devotes much of the second section of his article to explaining and legitimizing Mazepa’s defection. His work marks the beginning of a shift in focus in the historiography of the Great Northern War. Machiw’s work is part of a growing group of scholars who focus heavily on the role of Mazepa
and Ukraine in the Great Northern War. More examples will be provided, but Machiw’s attempt to legitimize Mazepa’s defection is a new portion of the legacy of the Battle of Poltava.

Despite the notion that most of Western Europe was highly suspicious of Russian ambitions or held their nation in high degree of contempt, clearly their arrogance was rapidly shoved aside. England had limited interest in mediating a settlement between Russia and Sweden prior to the Battle of Poltava. England feared that if Sweden was freed from its military shackles in Eastern Europe it would possibly join the side of Louis XIV and threaten England’s campaign against him. As long as Charles XII and the Swedish army were occupied in Eastern Europe against Russia, their threat to the alliance against Louis XIV was minimal. After Poltava England had to alter its foreign policy to deal with Russia’s new ability to impact European politics.

Despite the ramifications of the Battle of Poltava, Machiw indicates that England’s initial offer of mediation was temporary.

On the other hand, England wanted the war against Russia to continue, and promised to help Sweden. At the end of October 1709 the Russian ambassador in Denmark...reported...that, “England and Holland promise to restore, at a general peace, everything that the Swedish king loses during this war without the least trouble or loss.”

Although England initially offered to mediate the terms of the Great Northern War on Russia’s behalf, it also offered to restore Sweden’s lost imperial Baltic possessions. The diplomatic double dealing carried out by the English sought to keep the political situation under their
control for as long as possible. While the Battle of Poltava did establish Russian military and diplomatic dominance in Europe, it also led to the serious deterioration of international relations with England. Matthew Anderson’s article on Anglo-Russian relations during the Great Northern War lends further support to Machiw’s argument. British suspicions regarding Russian territorial ambitions as well as fears for Sweden’s allegiance in the War of Spanish Succession led to the collapse of diplomatic relations between Russia and England.

Machiw closes his article with an analysis of the Treaty of Nystad. The discussion of the treaty does not focus on Ukraine, but on the larger political ramifications of the treaty in Europe. In particular he focuses on the reasons for the Swedish surrender.

In the summer of 1720 the new Swedish King...explained to the English ambassador in Stockholm...that he would be forced into peace negotiations with Russia if England or other countries did not help Sweden....Since no help came, the Swedes sued for peace....Russian influence had never reached so deeply into Western Europe....Having excluded England from the negotiations at Nystadt, the Tsar concluded the peace treaty on his own terms and set the stage for bitter Anglo-Russian relations...Diplomatic relations between England and Russia were not reestablished until 1731.96

Machiw’s depiction of the Treaty of Nystad focuses heavily on the role of foreign powers in bringing about the signing of the treaty. He clearly views the interaction between Sweden and England as a major determining factor in the Swedish surrender. One possible interpretation of Machiw’s earlier arguments from the Battle of Poltava is that England’s wish to keep Sweden at war with Russia actually helped to bring about the complete destruction of Sweden. If English diplomatic aspirations for the Baltic had been different, the Great Northern War may have
ended much earlier and Russia’s dominance of the Baltic may have been far less extensive. Peter
had frequently offered to make peace with Sweden and return much of its territory provided he
could keep the embryonic St. Petersburg. Therefore does Machiw place the blame for Sweden’s
final defeat on the shoulders of English diplomats? Regardless of the answer, Machiw
establishes a new perspective on the legacy of the treaty as the fruit of English diplomatic
ventures in Eastern Europe.

The final segment of Machiw’s interpretation of the Treaty of Nystad focuses on the
effect of the treaty on diplomatic relations between the new Russian Empire and England. While
much of his argument matches Matthew Anderson’s account, he goes into much greater detail
examining the fallout from the treaty. While England maintained diplomatic interest throughout
the course of the war, it was unable to maintain its place at the negotiating table. Russia’s
domination of the treaty talks aggravated the English due to their already heightened fears of
Russian expansionism. Relations deteriorated to the extent that they were severed completely
and not restored until ten years after the treaty. Machiw’s examination of the Great Northern
War focuses on the diplomatic ramifications of various events during the war. He establishes a
new trend of focus regarding Mazepa and the role of Ukraine. Finally he discusses the events of
the war and their relation to English diplomatic goals for Russia and Sweden. Overall his account
closely examines the diplomatic history of the war and its future impact on European politics.

Peter Englund’s book, The Battle that Shook Europe: Poltava and the Birth of the
Russian Empire, published in 1992, offers a detailed description of the Battle of Poltava and its
impact on Russia and the birth of the Russian Empire. What makes Englund’s account unique is
that it examines the battle through numerous personal accounts from the Swedish army. While
the account is historical by nature, it is composed in a style more akin to an epic. Many
similarities can be found between Englund’s book and Frans. G. Bengtsson’s work from the early
twentieth-century.

Englund focuses the vast majority of his book on the Battle of Poltava, but he does
briefly examine the Battle of Narva. His account of the Battle of Narva portrays the divergence
of academic opinions regarding the examination of certain events of the Great Northern War.
Englund’s account preserves many of the original conceptions held in eighteenth-century
depictions of the Russian army at Narva. He portrays the Russian army as a cobbled together
force of inexperienced soldiers. While he does emphasize that the Russians were an entrenched
and numerically superior force, he clearly intends such a comparison to highlight the quality of
the Swedish army. Simultaneously he emphasizes the notion that the victory was unexpected.97
He belongs to the historical camp which views the Russians in a condescending manner.
Englund’s account is quite similar to Bengtsson’s account in that he portrays the Swedish army
and Charles XII in an epic fashion. While the Battle of Poltava is a Russian victory, he focuses on
the battle through the personal records of various Swedish officers and soldiers who
participated in the battle. As a result, the Swedes are portrayed as historical martyrs for their
nation and his work takes on the tone of an epic tragedy.

Englund’s book examines the Battle of Poltava through nearly every possible avenue of
exploration. Apart from a description of the course of the battle, he offers details into the layout
of the battlefield, the precise deployment of the opposing armies as well as various
psychologically insights borne from various diaries and journals belonging to Swedish military
personnel. While his entire work is a signature examination of this great historical moment, his conclusions regarding the legacy of the battle are particularly compelling.

Of the 23,000 made prisoners at Poltava and Perovolochna perhaps only about 4,000 saw their homes again...The few who came back found an altered Sweden. The land they had left long before had been a great power, one of the mightiest in Europe....The battle of Poltava, and the ensuing surrender, marked an irrevocable turning-point in the war. When the long-delayed peace was finally concluded it signaled the end of the Swedish imperium. At the same...it confirmed the birth of a new great European power: Russia....an empire in the lee of whose long dark shadow the Swedes would have to learn to live.98

Englund examines the aftermath of the Battle of Poltava through the viewpoint of the survivors of Charles XII’s Russian invasion force. He focuses on the more immediate impact of the battle, but he does tie in the defeat at Poltava with the long term fate of Sweden. He considers Poltava to be the cause of Sweden’s complete and inevitable defeat in the Great Northern War and its subjugation by Russia. His portrayal of the results of the Poltava reinforces the tragic theme of his book. He portrays the rise of the Russian Empire as an evil omen for the rest of Europe, most notably Sweden. While the loss of Sweden’s imperial status was certainly cause for sorrow, Sweden was not an imperial Russian territory. I consider Englund’s description of Sweden’s plight to be somewhat melodramatic. Clearly he attaches a highly negative legacy to the Battle of Poltava and its impact on Sweden. He interprets the battle in a manner that sympathizes with their plight. His work is far more akin to the accounts of the eighteenth-century due to its highly sympathetic nature towards Sweden and Charles XII.
The twentieth-century marked a period of transition and further diversification of the historiography of the Great Northern War. Historians such as Theodore Machiw and Matthew Anderson began to focus on precise areas of the diplomatic history and relations during the conflict. Soviet scholars such as Shutoi and Molchanov establish connections between the legacy of the conflict and the new cultural and political ideals of the Soviet Union. Their works are just two examples the diversifying Soviet historiographical trends. Both men utilize different elements from Stalin and Lenin’s political philosophies towards history. Both men operated under a government which saw certain practices from the Tsarist Era as useful to the interests of the Soviet state. Effectively, the Soviets developed their own socialist version of the Statist school of historiography from the nineteenth-century. While Klyuchevsky broke from this mold, Soviet scholars were hampered by a level of oppression much greater than under the Tsars. Effectively the Soviet Union preserved and encouraged study into events such as the Great Northern War, as they saw them as examples of the success of the state and by tying these events in with Soviet history, they gained greater power for their own regime and its philosophies. The twentieth-century saw the history of the Great Northern War as a political tool in the hands of the Soviet Union’s academics.

Frans Bengtsson resurrects the style of the epic personal histories from the eighteenth-century in order to reinforce the significance of the past to the academics of the present. Finally, the twentieth-century initiates a new focus on Mazeppa and the role of the Ukrainian Hetmanate in the Battle of Poltava. While this historical theme encompasses an extremely small section of the historical legacy of the conflict, it will continue to develop throughout the twenty-
first-century into one the major controversies surrounding the depiction of the war and its significance for the modern world.
Section IV: The Twenty-First Century

The Northern Wars: 1558-1721 by Robert Frost, offers an extensive and comprehensive examination of a number of wars to plague northern Europe up until the end of the Great Northern War in 1721. Frost’s examination of the Great Northern War focuses on a variety of topics and themes. He connects the current topic with previous conflicts and actions. As a result he creates a connection between the events of the current war and those of the past. His accounts of the events of the Great Northern War focus on the larger impact of the outcomes for all parties concerned. His examination of the Battle of Narva focuses on numerous elements of the battle and the various permutations affecting its outcome and legacy.

By the time that the Russian army, at least 35,000-strong, began its bombardment of Narva on 31 October, the Saxons were entering winter quarters. As the Russians laboriously constructed their elaborate siegeworks, Charles was already heading for Estonia. In the battle of Narva (19/30 November), the Swedes hurled themselves at the Russian defences under cover of a fortuitous snowstorm. Outnumbered nearly three to one, they broke through at two points, smashing the Russian line into three parts before rolling it up. The Russians were routed; including those drowned in a desperate stampede across the river they lost 8,000 men and 145 guns. The Swedish empire was not as vulnerable as it looked.
The passage is objective in construction without emphasis on emotional or patriotic elements while it does capture the magnitude of the defeat. However the account does offer some new insights into the nature of the Russian assault on Narva. His opening phrases emphasize the lateness of the Russian actions when compared against those of their allies. By the time the Russians began to besiege Narva, the Treaty of Travendal had been signed on the 18th of August, knocking Denmark out of the war. Augustus of Saxony had gone into winter quarters, abandoning his siege of Riga. As a result the Russians embarked on their military escapade without either ally in the field to support them or distract the Swedes. Therefore Frost portrays the Russian advance as strategically unsound. He further emphasizes the magnitude of the debacle by describing the rout of the Russian army by such a small force. Finally he closes the section by countering the suppositions of fragility maintained by Peter and his allies with regards to the fighting mettle of the Swedes. It can be gathered that the allies saw the Swedish Empire as a relatively easy foe to conquer which may account for Peter’s solo advance against Narva.

Frost’s descriptions of the legacy of Narva emphasize its future impact and examination by other military scholars.

The Swedish victory at Narva surprised nobody: spectacular victories over large Russian armies were nothing new. Ever since, Narva has been central to accounts of Peter’s transformation of the Russian army. Most begin, as Voltaire began, by stressing Russian backwardness... It was the shock of Narva that caused Peter to launch his indefatigable efforts to transform this motley force into the army that destroyed the Swedes at Poltava... It is a beguiling story, beguilingly told; like many historical myths, there is some truth behind it. Yet [Voltaire’s description]...is colorful hyperbole.
Frost emphasizes that the Russians were not as ill-prepared as many historians believed them to be. He does mention that the Swedes had beaten the Russians in previous wars, particularly during the Time of Troubles and the disastrous Livonian Wars. As a result, the foes had become militarily acquainted before with similar outcomes. In fact he argues that they were a formidable force which the Swedes had every reason to fear and respect. Everything from their tactical position to their numbers and armaments favored them over the Swedes. Frost’s account raises a whole new set of issues regarding the Swedish victory. If the Russians were defeated by a bad turn of weather and the impetuousness of the young Charles XII, then the Swedish victory was far less predetermined than previously indicated. As a result the later outcome of the Battle of Poltava and the Great Northern War was not accidental. I have stated earlier that Narva gave the Swedes and their young king a false sense of security and a fragile legacy of invincibility. Frost’s account restructures this argument by indicating that the Russians did not have nearly as far to progress in order to defeat Sweden as most European historians previously believed. After Narva, the Russians rapidly became more than a match for the Swedish army and it was merely a matter of time before the Swedes would be tested again. For them that moment came on June 27th, 1709 at Poltava.

Frost’s account of the Battle of Poltava closely examines various factors leading up to the disastrous battle and the impact of the Russian victory. Frost initiates his examination by examining Charles XII’s invasion of Russia and the disastrous campaign of 1708-1709.

The Russian campaign of 1708-1709 is usually presented as definitive proof of Charles’s hubristic failure to take account of military reality...By May 1709, the proud force of 33-36,000 Charles had led into Russia had been reduced by at least a third, and it was short
of food, ammunition and gunpowder. Trapped at Poltava, it faced its nemesis 225 kilometres east of Kiev and over a thousand from Riga. The disaster, it seems, was eminently avoidable.¹⁰²

Frost’s account of the Swedish invasion of Russia indicates that much of the blame for what happened at Poltava could be attributed to the severely deteriorated state of the Swedish army. The disastrous campaign with its subsequent defeat at Poltava could thus be partially blamed on Charles’s pride and his inability to see the deteriorating tactical situation. While Frost does declare the disaster avoidable, it would appear from his descriptions that the defeat was not avoidable due to the army’s condition. Only the deterioration of the condition and thus the defeat was avoidable due to Charles XII’s pride. Frost seeks out James Jefferyes for additional support, utilizing his account of the battle and his claims regarding Charles XII’s hubris. “James Jefferyes, an English agent attached to Charles’s army, wrote... ‘the King would not hearken to any advice that was given him by his Councillors’.”¹⁰³ Clearly Frost maintains many of the theories and conclusions drawn at the very beginning of the historical legacy of the Battle of Poltava. Even at the turn of the millennium, the opinions penned by Captain James Jefferyes remain indelibly impressed upon Poltava’s historical record.

Frost further draws on previous beliefs and conclusions regarding Poltava by discussing the events leading up to the actual day of battle. Amongst these events focuses on the opening moves of the Russian army and Charles’s wounding. “Indeed, although it was characteristically the Swedes who took the initiative with an ambitious plan to Assault the Russian camp, it was the Russians who had issued the challenged by crossing the Vorskla to the north of Poltava...three days after Charles’s luck ran out when he received a bad wound in his foot from a
stray bullet while observing the Russian positions....Unable to provide the inspirational leadership for which he was famous...the morale of his troops was undoubtedly affected.”

Frost’s examination indicates several elements affecting the outcome of the battle. By describing the opening Russian tactical deployments, he indicates that the Swedes were caught in an atypical situation. Throughout the course of the Great Northern War up until 1709 the Swedes had maintained a nearly unbroken military rule of making the first move against an enemy army. The Russians committing the opening maneuver, combined with the wounding of Charles caused considerable consternation for the Swedish high command. Unlike previous situations, the commanders found their window for action considerably narrow which was not completely new to them, but they did not have the option of initiating their own course of events. Rather they were forced to contend with the first Russian move and play around it.

The wounding of the king continues to play a major role in the development of the Swedish tactical strategy. While Frost does acknowledge the idea that the army was in the capable hands of Rehnsköld, he focuses heavily the emotional trauma borne by the army. From Narva through Golovchin, Charles XII had led his troops to victory and had been their guiding light through the chaos of battle. His nearly miraculous ability to avoid injury despite the numerous battles made him a hero to the troops. All this came tumbling down just before the battle royale between the Russian and Swedish armies.

Frost offers closing insights on the impact of Poltava on the course of the war and its larger ramifications for Russia. “The annihilation of the main Swedish army transformed the course of the war. With Charles...in an increasingly frustrated exile at Bender in Moldavia...the coalition he had destroyed so effectively between 1700 and 1706 sprang back into life.” Frost
goes on to describe the general collapse of the remainder of the Swedish Empire. Effectively the
defeat at Poltava enabled Russia’s allies to return to the field of battle and the destruction of
the Swedish Empire to begin. Frost blames the defeat at Poltava on Charles XII’s hubris and the
failure of the aggressive Swedish war strategy on the battlefield. The defeat marked the end of
Charles’s ambitions for glory and the beginning of the end for the Swedish Empire.

Frost’s interpretation of the Treaty of Nystad is quite brief, but he does examine the
more immediate legacy of the treaty within the realm of Russo-Swedish relations.

Frederick [the Royal Successor to Charles XII] and the Riksdag had little choice. On 30
August 1721 (OS) Sweden and Russia signed the peace of Nystad, by which Russia
agreed to evacuate Finland in return for the cession of Estonia, Livonia, Ingria, Kexholm
and most of Karelia. The Northern Wars were not yet finally over: Sweden made several
attempts to reverse the losses of 1721 over the next century, but all ended in failure. It
took the loss of Finland in 1809...before Sweden finally accepted the verdict of 1721.
Nevertheless, the treaty of Nystad made clear who had won.106

Clearly the immediate legacy of the Treaty of Nystad was not uncontested, Russian dominated
peace in the Baltic Sea regions. The numerous Swedish attempts to restore their imperial
possessions to their control indicate just how humiliating and degrading the treaty was to the
Swedes. The Russians forced their terms upon the Swedes because the Swedes were in no
position to resist. Their armies were gone, their fleet sunk or trapped at anchor and their nation
on the verge of starvation and threat of invasion. On top of all these hardships, the Swedes had
lost their young warrior king Charles XII. Frost’s record of the treaty portrays its controversial
and mercurial nature in history. For nearly a century after the treaty’s signing, the Swedes
continued to fight its terms and the rise of the Russian Empire. The account not only establishes the solidity of Russian dominance in the Baltic after the war, but also the state of collapse in the Swedish Empire.

Overall, Frost’s accounts of the Battle of Narva, the Battle of Poltava and the Treaty of Nystad focus on numerous historical themes through a highly comparative point of view. He ties in the various events with each other as well as with historical precedents set before and during the Great Northern War. He offers a highly objective account without many of the artistic accoutrements of personal historians from previous eras. He focuses on well-known historical accounts regarding the war from the distant past such as Captain James Jefferyes and Voltaire while critiquing their interpretations of these key events. His account opens the twenty-first century historical examinations of the Great Northern War and its seminal events.

The twenty-first-century has seen the arrival of the three hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Poltava. With the arrival of the anniversary, popular interest in the battle and the Great Northern War has been rekindled within the modern academic community. Derek Wilson’s March 2009 article, “Poltava the Battle that Changed the World” for History Today magazine demonstrates how Poltava remains relevant in today’s historical mindset. Wilson establishes the legacy of the battle within the introduction but he summarizes three hundred years of historical development and analysis.

In the history of warfare it does not rank as one of the outstanding examples of bravery, great generalship or brilliant tactics. The victors owed their success as much to fortune as to heroism. Daniel Defoe, on the news in England, was scornful. He described the outcome as ‘an army of veterans beaten by a mob, a crowd, a mere militia’...Many of his
contemporaries shared his surprise and dismay and assumed that this apparent triumph of an uncivilized eastern nation...The Battle of Poltava was one of the major turning points of modern history and we are still living with its consequences. Peter the Great’s victory...signaled the end of Sweden’s long period of domination of the Baltic and, more significantly, the emergence of Russia as a major European power.\textsuperscript{107}

Despite the passage of three centuries, historians continue to regard the Battle of Poltava as one of history’s major turning points. However Wilson does not label the battle as significant due to its military nature, but rather to its impact on the course of the war. He considers the course of the battle to be due to a quirk of fate rather than a single act of military prowess. However, he does establish that the legacy was not necessarily positive for the European community. His article closely matches with Anderson’s depictions of English reactions to the Battle of Poltava. Overall, the legacy of the Battle of Poltava is not purely military, but rather it is a cultural turning point. After 1709 the world was forced to view Russia through an entirely different mindset. For better or for worse, Russia had emerged victorious and stood poised to conquer and alter the course of European history.

What is significant about Wilson’s article is not necessarily his conclusions, but the idea that he considers the legacy of Poltava to still be important to the present day. “As the European map was redrawn, kings and princes scrambled to grab territory. One man commanded a foremost position in the negotiations—Tsar Peter of Russia. And that is a position that Peter’s heirs, whether royal or presidential, have enjoyed ever since.”\textsuperscript{108} His conclusions confirm the permanence of Russia’s victory and its continual impact on world affairs. Although the battle is long over and the regime that reaped its initial spoils no longer rules, the victory
remains a seminal moment in Russian military and political history. Very likely its legacy will continue to endure and affect the course of Russia’s history.

Dr. Serhii Plokhii’s October 2010 lecture *Poltava 1709: What if History missed its Turning Point?*, provides a modern reexamination of the Battle of Poltava. While the vast majority of historical accounts focus on the battle as it happened and its impact on later events, Plokhii focuses on the possibilities if Charles XII had won the battle and Russia had lost. His analysis of the battle focuses on two primary issues. He first focuses on how Charles XII could have beaten Peter I and the numerous military precedents for just such a victory. His second area of focus involves the fate of Ukraine following the battle if the Swedes had won and Mazepa had picked the correct side.

Plokhii considers the Russian victory to have been a stroke of luck rather than an inevitable outcome.

Defeating larger armies was Charles’s trademark and proof of his military genius. It therefore seems particularly telling that the first large battle he ever lost was one in which he could not fully participate…Confusion in the Swedish ranks during the battle, poor communication between units, and the lack of one decision-making center, as well as the absence of the young king’s inspirational leadership were among the reasons for the stunning Swedish defeat. Thus, if Charles had not been wounded on June 17, could the outcome of the battle have been different? ...What would such an outcome have meant for Ukraine?109
Like many earlier accounts he considers Charles XII’s wounding to be the one major factor which cost the Swedes their victory at Poltava. Charles had led his army to victory against larger Russian, Polish and Saxon armies before, but his leadership had been one of the key factors. Poltava was the first major battle he had not been able to participate in due to his injury. The lack of his leadership and the blow to Swedish morale proved to be devastating. The twenty-first century shows a definite shift of the examinations of the Great Northern War towards more specific and esoteric topics. The role of lesser nations and ethnic groups in the course of the war has risen to prominence in the study of this conflict. While Plokhii does examine the possibility of a Swedish victory, his main theme revolves around the fate of Ukraine. The current examinations of the Battle of Poltava have shifted inexorably towards Ukraine and its fate during and after the war.

Plokhii ties the legacy of the battle with the fate of Ukraine and its impact all the way to the present day. He focuses heavily on the issue of Ukrainian statehood and its possible future.

From the Ukrainian perspective, the Battle of Poltava was unique. For the first time in history, a battle was fought on Ukrainian soil by foreign armies with no direct Ukrainian participation…Mazepa’s…priority would have been to exercise as much independence as possible in the international arena. His agreement with Charles entailed the preservation of Cossack rights and privileges under the Swedish king, but no formal independence for the Hetmanate. Plokhii argues throughout his lecture that if the Swedes had won, Mazepa may have been able to create a unified Cossack-Ukrainian state under relatively autonomous conditions. The state would have been under the suzerainty of Sweden, but Mazepa would have enjoyed a modicum
of independence from Russia. However, he does emphasize that it was just as likely that Ukraine would have come into conflict with the Ottoman Empire or the Polish Commonwealth. Due to the antiquated status of the Cossack armed forces, Plokhii predicts that the Hetmanate would have endured another stage of collapse similar to its status prior to the beginning of the Great Northern War.\textsuperscript{111}

Overall Plokhii establishes a new legacy for the Battle of Poltava with regard to the fate of the Ukrainian state. He argues that the victory at Poltava smashed any hopes for the formation of an autonomous Ukrainian Hetmanate containing both Right and Left Bank Ukraine. If the Russians had lost the Battle of Poltava, he argues that while the Ukrainian Hetmanate would not have remained independent for long, he strongly believes that “the Hetmanate would have been incorporated into the Russian Empire much later, possessing a much stronger political and cultural identity. A more assertive national identity would have meant a stronger national movement and the possible survival of an independent Ukrainian state during the interwar period of the twentieth-century.”\textsuperscript{112} In Plokhii’s mind, Poltava is an integral component in the destruction of the remnants of the independent Cossacks.

While Mazepa’s interests were focused on the Hetmanate rather than all of Ukraine, his story has been adopted by several segments of the Ukrainian populous as a symbol of freedom and national pride. His Cossack roots are reconciled with larger Ukrainian cultural traditions and beliefs. As a result he ties this in with later Russian annexations of Ukraine during the Soviet period. In this century, Poltava and the Great Northern War have been inexorably intertwined with the fate of Ukraine in the past and present. The relevance of the Great Northern War in
modern society has not only avoided diminishment, but has in fact grown in significance due to its effect on the development of statehood in Ukraine and other East European states.

While the twenty-first-century has just completed its first decade, the scholars of the modern era have already developed numerous works focusing on various aspects of the Great Northern War. Historians such as Robert Frost attempt to establish the significance of the war for all concerned parties and dismiss many of the established theories and beliefs carried on from the preceding centuries of academic development. What makes the opening years of this century unique is the amount of attention to a conflict that ended nearly three centuries ago. The guns have long been silent but the legacy of this conflict continues to fascinate many academics and plague the diplomatic circles of Eastern Europe. Derek Wilson and Serhei Plokhii are just three examples of how the war continues to impact Eastern Europe. Of the three events I have examined, two have seen their tercentennial come and go. The historians of the Great Northern War have only a decade more to wait for the three hundredth anniversary of the Treaty of Nystad. Very likely the academic world will come to focus on this event and those that led to it and try to determine the scope of the legacy of the Great Northern War and its impact on the shaping of the modern world.

Over three centuries of development and interpretation have shaped the Great Northern War’s role in world history. While every account’s portrayal is completely dependent on the attitudes of the author or authors, the author’s environment is just as crucial to the formation of interpretations regarding the events of the conflict. National interests and attitudes played a significant role in forming the opinions of the scholars. Although Jefferyes was a political correspondent, he was very likely affected by the sixteenth and seventeenth-century
accounts that portrayed Russia as a backwards and barbaric nation on the periphery of Europe. Voltaire and the Scotsman focused on personal histories and glorified the exploits of Peter I and Charles XII. Voltaire attempted to reconcile Peter’s reforms with Enlightenment ideals and his role in bringing civilization to a backwards Russia. The attitudes established prior to the outbreak of the Great Northern War did not disappear until the nineteenth-century when writers such as Rambaud and Solovyov began to practice new methods of historical development and research. The twentieth-century witnessed the adaptation of the Great Northern War for political purposes in the Soviet Union, while the twenty-first century has created a new political dimension with the role of the Battle of Poltava in Ukrainian culture. National politics, social pressures and the legacy of previous interpretations all help shape history, but their effect on the Great Northern War has preserved its relevance in society. The eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries incorporated the war into the Enlightenment and revolutions in Russian historical interpretation. The twentieth and twenty-first-centuries utilize the Great Northern War for political and social purposes prior to and after the fall of the U.S.S.R. I firmly believe that historians and scholars will continue to develop the history of the Great Northern War and that it shall maintain a significant place in historical examinations of East European history.

Overall, the Great Northern War’s historical role has evolved over three hundred years. The debate today does not rage about the battles themselves, but rather what they changed. The political, social and cultural ramifications of the war are the subject of intense debate even into the modern day. It is highly unlikely that debate will ever grow silent. As long as East
European nations continue to see the Great Northern War as significant, it will remain a historical controversy.
Conclusions

Several of the aforementioned works involving the Great Northern War and its significance for Ukraine are part of a growing controversy surrounding the war and its modern day connotations. As Plokhii has demonstrated, most of the controversy circles around the Battle of Poltava. The battle’s location in Ukraine as well as its intimate connection with the defection of Ukrainian Hetman Mazepa have caused a split in the manner of remembering and commemorating the Battle of Poltava. In 2009, Russia, Ukraine and several Baltic nations including Sweden commemorated the anniversary of the Battle of Poltava. The anniversary caused significant consternation between Russia and Ukraine. In 2008, Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Golovnyov and Nadezhda Druzhinina published an article discussing the battle between the two nations over the legacy of the Battle of Poltava. Their article entitled “Russia and Ukraine clash over History”, sheds considerable light on the controversy and its potential ramifications for both nations.

The fact of the matter is that the Ukrainian authorities have their own view of the historical significance of the Battle of Poltava, a view that is radically different from Russia’s... Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko signed special decree No. 955 [2008] ‘On the Celebration of the 300th Anniversary of Events Involving the Military and Political Activity of Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazepa and the Establishment of the Ukrainian-
Swedish Alliance.’ The decree...commemorate[s] that event (which Russian historiography calls “the treason of Hetman Mazepa”).

Clearly the Battle of Poltava is connected with an event held in strongly opposed viewpoints. To Russia, the Battle of Poltava marks the destruction of an invader’s army and the punishment of a traitorous leader. To the Ukrainian people, Poltava marks the end of their autonomy and the completion of their subjugation to Russia. Considering more contemporary events involving Russo-Ukrainian relations, the issue of Ukraine’s previously subservient status to Russia is a highly sensitive topic of conversation. With a heritage of domination first by Imperial Russia and later by the Soviet Union, any event connected with Ukrainian nationhood undoubtedly creates a highly charged political atmosphere between these two states.

The importance placed on the anniversary by former President Yushchenko further supports the significance of the battle to certain Ukrainian cultural and historical groups who view Cossack history as a component of Ukrainian history. To the Ukrainians the battle is a chance to remember a historical and national martyr who in their eyes sought to restore the Ukrainian Hetmanate to a more autonomous political state.

The Ukrainian president is so concerned about restoring Ivan Mazepa’s reputation that he even tried to remove the anathema that Peter the Great pronounced against the hetman for his pact with Charles XII, an anathema that remains in effect to this day. Viktor Yushchenko raised this issue at a meeting with Patriarch Aleksey II of Moscow and All Rus during his February visit to Moscow. But the attempt failed.
The attempt to remove Mazepa's anathema indicates just how potent a patriotic symbol he is to the Ukrainian people. Mazepa suffered greatly for allying himself with Charles XII and died in exile in the Ottoman Empire. His title of Hetman was revoked by the Russians and the anathema was just one of a score of denunciations and labels placed upon him for his perceived crime. Even three hundred years later, the Ukrainian people still consider the matter of his anathema to be a serious matter worthy of petitioning the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Paul Magocsi’s *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples* provides a detailed account focusing on Mazepa’s portrayal throughout various histories. He states that Mazepa’s negative image continued to spread throughout Russia and Ukraine even after the rise of the Soviet Union. The primary source of positive romantic images of Mazepa did not come from Ukraine, but rather from western writers such as Lord Byron and Victor Hugo. As a result, popular Ukrainian images of Mazepa as a positive figure are a relatively recent phenomena and not shared by the entire populace.115

Beyond all of these specific matters, the crux of the issue remains the memorialization of the Battle of Poltava in Russia and Ukraine. Despite the considerable age of the event many believe that its legacy holds much at stake for all concerned nations. Sergei Strokan comments on the article and its implications for Russo-Ukrainian relations:

Turning to history to try to find a steadying point for the shaky relations between Russia and Ukraine is a risky, if not dangerous proposition....In recent years, history has been setting off “explosions” in Russian-Ukrainian relations with increasing frequency...But while Moscow should not play the role of mentor in history lessons, Kiev must resist the
temptation to turn the interpretation of history into a never ending “holiday of disobedience” to Russia.\textsuperscript{116}

In the end, the memorialization of the Battle of Poltava is just one of many historical controversies affecting Russo-Ukrainian relations. Remembering Poltava is part of a trend of Ukrainian academic refusal to follow the Russian historical record of events in Eastern Europe. Clearly certain cultural elements have their own story to tell regarding the Battle of Poltava and its impact on their society and its development into the modern era. According to the article, both sides are at fault. Russia cannot hope to dominate the history of Eastern Europe completely by viewing it solely through their eyes. At the same time, Ukraine must be willing to compromise in developing the new history of the Great Northern War. Russian and Ukrainian scholars may be able to reach a middle ground involving the interpretations of the battle. Although the conflict is long over, the story of the Great Northern War is still being written. Very little history is set in stone and the legacy of this particular war remains as fluid as it was the day two armies stood outside a small Ukrainian town in the summer heat of June 1709.

With the anniversary of the Treaty of Nystad only a decade away, the academic world has to wonder what will come of its legacy. While the Battle of Poltava and its legacy do affect Russo-Ukrainian political relations, the anniversary of the treaty may heighten tensions between the former combatants. Then there is the issue of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania and their remembrance of the event. The fact that many of the Baltic states celebrated the Russian victory in 2009 indicates that the legacy of the conflict has the ability to connect numerous nationalities. The various scholars and academics I have examined in this thesis demonstrate the power of the war’s legacy and the persistent controversy. From the quality of the Russian
soldiers at Narva, to the issue of the ramifications of the Treaty of Nystad for Russia and Europe, only the most basic and superficial interpretations are widely accepted by the academic world. Since the days of Captain James Jefferyes to Dr. Serhii Plokhii, the war has remained the subject of intense research. The historiography will continue to evolve just as it has for the last three hundred years. The significance of this war has not diminished through the centuries and it will very likely continue to affect how many of the nations of Eastern Europe define themselves and remember their common history or histories through their own eyes. These historical works mark the passage of the inevitable march of time, but each one sets the stage for yet another chapter to be written in the history of this chapter of history.
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