

The Collection of Flags of the Museums of The Moscow Kremlin

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The collection of flags of the Museums of The Moscow Kremlin is one of its most significant and ancient collections. The collection's history started at the same time as the other unique collections of the Armoury Chamber were established. The first documents of the Armoury Chamber – originally the Chamber of Great Princes, later the Tsars' Arsenal – date back to the 16th century. It housed not only a collection of arms and armour, but also dynastic regalia, objects which were used in ceremonial processions for rulers and festive court ceremonies, as well as icons and other relics. The conglomerate of precious items has been amassed in the Kremlin throughout Russia's long history. Many have become symbols of the Russian state and culture.

Earlier, flags were preserved together with the relics of the tsars' Arsenal, but are nowadays kept with the collection of artistic textiles considered as a separate collection with special museum numbers. Due to the special properties of flags, they are no longer included in the museum's permanent displays. Only separate items of the collection participate in the special thematic exhibitions. However because of the difficulties of exhibiting, they are in certain cases only published in the catalogues of the thematic exhibitions. It should be noted that in consideration of the special needs of the collection, all flag parts are stored separately. All parts have one inventory number and a special identification number. Only through photography can we reconstruct the state flag.

The history of scientific study of the collection is rather short. As a collection of military regalia, the flags were for the first time published in 1841 by military historians in the first volume of the fundamental multivolume work "Историческое описание одежды и вооружения российских войск" (The Historical Description of Clothes and Arms of The Russian Armies). The first volume was devoted to the period before the beginning of the 18th century. A special chapter entitled "Flags"

includes an outline of the history of Russian flags and descriptions of some ancient flags. Thus, some flags from the Armoury Chamber collection have been published, but the descriptions were based on documents such as the ancient inventories of the Moscow Armoury Chamber. The texts were supplemented with drawings of the 13 ancient flags. In ten of the drawings we can see the Armoury Chamber flags, but the other three flags were not part of the collection at that time.

In the end of the 1850s a grand research project was initiated in the Armoury Chamber. Many different sources for the story of ancient flags were researched and classified to form a base for the scientific study of the museum exhibits. It led to the publication in 1865 of a major volume "Русские старинные знамена" (Ancient Russian Flags), compiled by the associate director of the Armoury Chamber who was a professional soldier: Major Lukian Pavlovich Jakovlev (Лукиан Павлович Яковлев).

As the author specified in the table of contents and appendices the edition consisted of three parts: the description of the story of Russian flags, the detailed inventory of flags of the 16th, 17th and part of the 18th century and the documents from the archive of the Armoury Chamber. For the book, drawings of the most considerable flags of the collection were prepared. Ancient Russian Flags was an important stage in the study of the collection as numerous written sources were revealed, studied and published.

The descriptions of flags in Ancient Russian Flags were again published in 1884 in the inventory of the Moscow Armoury Chamber, in a multivolume work called Inventory of the Armoury Collection (1884–1893). One of the volumes was «Знамена, прапоры, значки, флаги и штандарты» (Flags, Banners, Small Flags, Colours and Standards). New material had been added and the inventory now included all the flags of the collection, not only the Russian. In total the inventory presented about 300 Russian and foreign flags of the 16th – 19th centuries.

Ancient Russian Flags and the Inventory of the Moscow Armoury Chamber became a basis for publications by researchers of the late 19th / early 20th century when a growing interest of the history of Russian flags was observed in debates about the national colours of the Russian flag. They were still the basis for researchers in the 1990s.

Today the collection has undergone quantitative changes because a large number of items were shared with different institutions. The chronological frames of the collection are rather wide - the earliest flag is dated 1560, and the latest acquisitions are dated to the second half of the 20th century. All in all the collection covers 450 years. However in terms of quantity the collection of flags of the Armoury Chamber is insignificant in comparison with other well-known collections. It comprises only about 370 items. Among them are only 190 flags of various types. 138 numbers refer to the finials - which are the remnants of lost flags. In addition, there are various accessories to the flags in the collection (shoulder belts for carrying flags, ribbons etc.).

The collection structure includes flags of various types. The major part of the collection in terms of quantity consists of Russian flags (the collection includes 168 Russian Flags, 126 finials, 3 shoulder belts) and the smaller

part is based on foreign items (20 flags) – from Poland (2 flags, one from the 17th century and one from first half of the 19th century); Sweden (5 badges and 10 finials registered as trophies from the battle of Poltava); Hungary (6 flags and 2 finials, 1848); Central Asia (4 flags, second half of the 19th century); Turkey (3 flags, 19th century).

A special group in the collection comprises the state banners of the 18th–19th centuries (5). The state flag was part of the regalia of Russian emperors in all coronation ceremonies since the middle of the 18th century. The first time a state flag was made was in 1742 for the coronation of the daughter of Peter I, Empress Elizabeth. On the flag the coat-of-arms of the Russian empire was placed corresponding to the title of Empress Elizabeth. This flag was used in the following four coronations, until the middle of the 19th century. In 1856, for the crowning of Emperor Alexander II, a new flag with a new coat-of-arms for the Russian empire was prepared.

After the last coronation celebrations, the state flag remained in the Armoury Chamber together with other objects used for the ceremonies. In the exposition of the Armoury Chamber the state flags were exhibited together with the regalia. However already during the Soviet period the state flags were included in the collection of military flags.



7.1 The Flag "Великий Сяг" ("Velikiy Syag", "The Great Flag"). Front. Moscow, 1560 228x452 (original size: 228x520) figure



7.2 Flag of The Big Regiment. Reverse. Moscow, workshops of the Kremlin, last quarter of 1653 - first half of 1654. 2120417

The collection consists mainly of war relics from major events in the history of the Russian state.

Chronologically they are distributed as follows: the largest group (more than 100 items) is flags from the middle of the 17th century to the first quarter of the 18th century; 15 flags are dated to the 19th century. Such specific structure of the collection is directly connected with its history and the principles of its formation.

The collection of flags began in the time of Tsar Ivan the Terrible. The oldest flag in the collection is the “ВЕЛИКИЙ СТЯГ” (“Velikiy Styag”, “The Great Banner”). The staff and the finial of the flag have not survived. On the flag is the illustration of the text of The Revelation of St John the Divine (The Apocalypse of St John, 19:11–18). The text is written on the flag. We see here the appearance of Christ the Saviour and his army which follows Archangel Michael. The flag was restored in 1861 and its reverse side is now obscured by a restoration cotton grid. However on the reverse side is an inscription with the title of the tsar, and also the date “1560”. (See Ill 7.1)

According to the date this flag was connected to major historical events. This was the period when Ivan the Terrible governed autocratically. It was during the war against Livonia and there were resolute plans to overwhelm the Livonsky Order. In the opinion of 19th-century researchers, the flag was used in the campaign of the Russian army headed by Prince I.F. Mstislavsky and Prince P.I. Shujsky

(May 1560), which ended with the capture of Fellin (Viljandi), on August 30, 1560).

Researchers of Russian art noticed that the text of the Revelation was very common in Russian literature and art in the end of the 15th–16th centuries. Themes of punishment for infidels and the solemnity of righteous men were widespread in art after the conquering of Kazan and Astrakhan.

It is very difficult to study such a unique, isolated relic of the past that has survived from the 16th century. But we can tell that the skilful composition of the flag and the high level of workmanship of painting on silk testify that in the second half of the 16th century in Russia there was already a sophisticated culture of flags.

The inscription contained the title of the tsar, Ivan the Terrible, showing that the flag was a monument of official political history. The value of the flag was appreciated by its contemporaries. This is indicated by the fact that the flag survived and was carefully stored in the Armoury Chamber for centuries.

The conception of the flag, its social and religious-moral sense remained significant. The flag became the pattern for flags of the great regiments of the 17th century. In 1654 and 1659 it was recreated in full size for the regiments of the tsar, Aleksey Mihajlovich. According to the tradition of Russian flags in the 17th century, the form and the huge size of the flag place it among the flags marched to by major regiments of the Russian army.



7.3 Flag of the Special Big Regiment. Front. Moscow, workshops of the Kremlin; 1654 209 x 450

According to the information found in the sources, Ivan the Terrible headed the army in a campaign against Polotsk, Lithuania's largest and richest city, in 1563. It was a huge success for Russia in the Livonsky war (1558–1583). It attracted international attention and was compared with the campaign in Kazan in 1552. Almost all military forces of the country participated in the campaign.

Research does not reveal which flag was carried in the campaign but documents indicate that close to the flag was a small detachment that consisted of 200 people. Perhaps they didn't carry the flag at the front of their regiments but raised it when the army was ready for the battle. The flag should always be under safe protection.

In the following century, during the difficult period of the Russian-Polish (1654–1667) and the Russian-Swedish (1656–1661) Wars the Russian army took to the field many times. In the beginning of the Russian-Polish War in 1654, Tsar Aleksey renewed the ancient Russian tradition of the formation, developed as a result of Ivan IV's military reforms in the mid-16th century. The Tsar headed the army personally in campaigns, flying a special flag. In the centre is the image of The Holy Face – the main, central image of all Christianity. Later, after returning from the campaign, the flag participated in the ceremonial parades.

New flags were prepared for all regiments of the 1654 campaign. Today there are six flags of this issue in the

collection of the museum. We can see the image of the Holy Trinity on the Main Regiment's banner as well as the image of the Protecting Veil [Intercession] of the Mother of God on its reverse (see ill 7.2) and all the scenes of Christmas on the Special Main Regiment's banner. (See ill 7.3) In addition there is a great number of the host of heaven, saints and warrior-saints. All these banners are made of light taffeta of different colours and are extremely large at around 240 x 480 centimeters. They were painted in the Kremlin workshops by the best icon-painting masters. The origin of the iconographical programs of these flags demands a special iconographical analysis.

When the tsar (Ru: Gosudar) took part in a campaign, the main Regiment of the army was his special Gosudarev Regiment. The Gosudarev Regiment was gathered only for the period of a campaign. It was a cavalry regiment made up of Russian noblemen, a tradition born in the 16th century. Tsar Aleksey headed the regiment when at war. Unfortunately the regimental flag hasn't survived.

All regiments consisted of companies of 100–200 persons. Each company had a flag. For the companies ("hundreds") of the Tsar's regiment, the flags were special. One, dated to 1654, has survived in the collection of Armémuseum in Stockholm (Inv. № ST 21:32)². On the flags we can see the image of St Eustacius (Placidus) (See Ill 7.4 and 7.5).



7.4 Flag of the Company (Hundred) of the Tsar's Regiment. Front. Moscow, workshops of the Kremlin; 1675

The flags of the 1654 issue were used in ceremonies and parades and were also used by different regiments, gradually becoming unfit for use. In the early 1670s by decree of Tsar Aleksey, new flags of this type were produced. Eight have survived in the Armoury Chamber collection.

Documents list the images: 50 names, multiple heavenly hosts, soldier-saints, martyrs and Russian holy princes. The list of holy images correlates with frescoes on the pillars of the Archangel cathedral in the Kremlin. It was the main military cathedral. The frescoes were from the mid-1560s, at the time of Ivan the Terrible's victorious wars.

All the images of the flags were painted with gold and silver in the workshops of the Armoury Chamber by its best artists and were stored in the Armoury treasury of the Tsar.

The Armoury Chamber inventories list a profusion of flags up until the early 18th century. The collection documents military regalia of the Russian tsars for a century and a half. But only 21 objects from this list are left.

In Russian history, the 18th century was marked by the creation of the Russian empire, a new ideology, and Russian military victories. The cultural paradigm changed. The beginning of the 18th century was a starting point. In November 1699 new regular regiment were set up. For them, new flags with new symbols were created in the Armoury Chamber. The system of Russian flags was transforming.

By now the Armoury Chamber was no longer a manufacturing centre for flags. When the capital was transferred to St Petersburg, institutions and workshops in the Kremlin in 1727 were integrated in a single storehouse of ancient treasures. But because of its importance and

high value to the Kremlin, the storehouse was under the control of the Senate.

The flags of the new Russian army were used for 5 or 10 years and then deposited in local arsenals according in strict order. But in the 18th century the collection of flags in Moscow grew when more than 20 flags of the 17th and the 18th century were found in various storehouses of the Kremlin, unlisted in previous inventories. In 1746 four flags made in 1700 for regiments of the new army of Peter the Great were noted in the inventory. Their combat history is unknown. Thus, in the beginning of the 19th century, the Kremlin collections had little more than 40 flags from the 16th–18th centuries.

In 1806, by decree of Emperor Alexander I, a museum was created in the Kremlin under the Administration of Kremlin Buildings, the institution in charge of building activities in Moscovian palaces. In 1831 it became the Moscow Palaces Bureau, under the Imperial Court Ministry. The museum was intended to present the power and resolve of the Russian State, the glory of Russian weapons and national history through a gallery of heroes. Flags were also exhibited.

Nothing could be added to the museum's collections without "top-level approval". On the personal orders of Emperor Nikolai I in the 1820–30s, new items were added to the collection of flags "to be preserved together with national memorials". The items included: from 1827 the Flag of Prince Dmitry Pozharsky of 1612, the national hero of the Russian people in the turbulent early 17th century, and from 1834 three historical flags from Siberia. The



7.5 Flag of the Company (Hundred) of the Tsar's Regiment. Reverse. Moscow, workshops of the Kremlin; 1654. Painted by Olof Hoffman in Stockholm in the late 17th century. Photo: Armémuseum.

Armoury Chamber believed them to be those of Ermak the conquerer of Siberia. They were dated 16th-century, the time of Ivan the Terrible. These wonderful discoveries, recognised as the flags of glorious heroes in Russian history, were an integral part of the collection. Images of these heroes decorated the museum building as far back as 1810. Relics have often been discovered by luck. In the first half of the 19th century the Armoury Chamber was given 34 items 17th-century found by chance.

The study of flags carried out in the museum and the publications of the time, became the template for the many new additions to the collection. In 1863 the collection doubled with the arrival of 80 flags from the Artillery Museum in St Petersburg and the Moscow arsenals.

In the St Petersburg's Arsenal, flags had been collected since the beginning of the 18th century from various arsenals and fortresses. They were relics from the events of the Northern War. The flags had been transferred on the initiative of the minister of the Imperial Court to replenish the Armoury Chamber's military antiquities.

All flags have been broadly dated, e.g. 17th-century. Individual flags have been dated as early as to the first half of the 17th century up to the time of Tsar Michael Fedorovich. In the Armoury Chamber the flags have been systematized: they have been defined as flags of "regiments on deployment abroad". One group of flags was connected with the history of annexation of Siberia.

The aim wasn't just preservation and to increase the number of relics. The Russian flags were part of the exposition of the Armoury Chamber. They were exhibited in the Hall of Arms (Hall № IV) in a new museum built in 1851. It is obvious that the flags were not in good condition. In 1837 Emperor Nikolai I instructed that drawings be made of the flags, which were kept in cases, and displayed near the flags "so that visitors can examine the drawings without unrolling the flags". In 1861–1862 restoration work was completed. To prevent further destruction, the flags were pasted onto cotton tulle. The staffs of the flags were also replaced. Restoration work continues to this day. It is a priority for the management of the museum.

In Soviet times the museum's collection was augmented through purposeful purchases and transfers from government institutions. Thus, the basic stages of the history of the collection of flags of the Armoury Chamber tallied with important periods of Russian history and with the history of the armed forces of the Russian state. And also with the development of Russian historical research and the formation of museology in Russia. In the 19th century it was deliberate policy by the Armoury Chamber to collect flags as historical relics.

The collection of flags of the Armoury Chamber has always attracted researchers' attention. However, publications of the items have been produced within the limits of a research paradigm of the 19th century and need modern updates. But the basic problem is that the 19th century created a lot of legendary attributions to a number of flags. Some are difficult to refute because we lack sources. These imaginative attributions had been accepted till today.

Despite some differences in comparison with available publications and evidence, and in some cases inconsistent attributions, the collection as a whole remains a unique collection of the most ancient flags of the Russian state.