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## **“Zouaves Sont les Premiers Soldats du Monde”: The Role of Elite French Infantry in the Battle of the Alma River, 1854**

### **Abstract**

This article presents an in-depth critical reassessment of the established historiographical explanations for the Allied victory in the key Battle of the Alma during the Crimean War. The relevance of the study stems from the need to reconsider long-standing interpretations in Crimean War historiography, which tend to attribute the defeat of the Russian army at Alma primarily to its technological backwardness, especially the lack of widespread rifled firearms. Such technological determinism overlooks other crucial aspects of military confrontation, including tactical skill, training, and troop morale. The aim of the article is to critically analyze and reevaluate the principal factors behind the Allied victory, shifting the emphasis away from superiority in weaponry toward the comprehensive tactical superiority of elite French infantry units — the Zouaves and Chasseurs

à Pied. The research methodology is based on a comprehensive analysis of a wide range of sources, including French, Russian, and British documents (among them military regulations), memoirs of direct participants in the battle from both sides, as well as materials from Russian and foreign historiography. The main findings of the study challenge the dominant viewpoint. The author attempts to demonstrate that the decisive factor in the success of General Bosquet's division and in the outcome of the battle as a whole was not rifled muskets, but rather the exceptionally high combat training, tactical flexibility, encouraged individual initiative among lower ranks, and refined bayonet-fighting skills instilled in the Zouaves through colonial campaigns in North Africa. Specific examples show that the Zouaves often deliberately refrained from exploiting their firepower advantage in favor of rapid close-combat assaults, which proved both unexpected and highly effective. At the same time, the article deconstructs the long-established stereotype of the unquestioned dominance of the Russian bayonet. The study concludes that it was precisely the tactical innovation and professional mastery of the “African” troops that determined victory at Alma.

**Keywords:**

Crimean War, Battle of the Alma, Zouaves, Tactics, Bayonet combat, Historiography.

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In Russian and foreign historiography, the defeat of the Russian Empire in the Crimean War of 1853–1856 has traditionally been explained by the technical and organizational backwardness of the Russian army. It has become an established axiom that the key factor behind the Allies' victory was their widespread use of rifled small arms, against which Russian smoothbore muskets and tightly packed columns proved powerless, while the principal strength of the Russian forces — their “trump card” — was the bayonet, whose effectiveness was often neutralized by the enemy's rifles. This thesis, rooted already in the testimony of contemporaries<sup>1</sup>, memoir literature<sup>2</sup>, and pre-revolutionary historiography<sup>3</sup>, was canonized in the works of the prominent Soviet historian Evgeny (Yevgeny) Tarle<sup>4</sup>, as well as — in a somewhat simplified form — by Mikhail Pokrovsky<sup>5</sup>, and, having retained its relevance after the collapse of the USSR, continues to dominate even the most modern school textbooks<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> On September 24, reports were received from Flügeladjutant (Aide-de-Camp) Shenshin, who stated that the entire success of the allies at the Alma had been due to the rifles (ГА РФ. Ф. 722. Оп. 1. Д. 206. Л. 228). Сборник рукописей, представленных Его Императорскому Высочеству Государю наследнику Цесаревичу о Севастопольской обороне севастопольцами. СПб., 1872. Т. 1. С. 351; *Меньков П.К.* Записки. СПб., 1898. С. 241, 255; Собрание донесений о военных действиях и дипломатических бумаг и актов, относящихся до войны 1853, 1854, 1855 и 1856 годов. СПб., 1858. С. 241.

<sup>2</sup> *Adye J.* A review of the Crimean War to the winter of 1854–5. London, 1860. P. 128; *Ершов А.И.* Севастопольские воспоминания артиллерийского офицера. СПб., 1858. С. 84–85; *Алабин П.В.* Походные записки в 1849, 1853, 1854–56, 1877–78 гг. (Ч. 3: Защита Севастополя. (1854–1856)). Самара, 1892. С. 14; *Милошевич Н.С.* Из записок севастопольца. СПб., 1904. С. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Тотлебен Э.И.* Описание обороны г. Севастополя. Часть I. СПб., 1863. С. 434–437; *Тотлебен Э.И.* Описание обороны г. Севастополя. Часть II. Отдел II. СПб., 1872. С. 128; *Дубровин Н.Ф.* История Крымской войны и обороны Севастополя. СПб., 1900. Т. 2. С. 479; *Дубровин Н.Ф.* История Крымской войны и обороны Севастополя. СПб., 1900. Т. 3. С. 126.

<sup>4</sup> *Тарле Е.В.* Крымская война. М., 1943. Т. 2. С. 109, 111, 178, 186–187.

<sup>5</sup> *Покровский М.Н.* Дипломатия и войны царской России в XIX столетии. М., 1923. С. 128, 153–154.

<sup>6</sup> *Мединский В.Р., Торкунов А.В.* История. История России. 1825–1914 гг. 9 класс. Учебник. М., 2025. С. 63.

Within the Marxist paradigm, both historians regarded military technology as a direct consequence and the clearest manifestation of the overall “rotteness” and backwardness of the serf-owning system. It was precisely their conclusions concerning the technological gap — emphasized by Tarle almost to the point of fatalism — that laid the foundation for what may be called “technological determinism” in the study of the Crimean War. Evgeny Tarle, observing that “almost the entire Allied army that entered battle at the Alma was armed with rifles, while we... had only 1,660 riflemen”<sup>7</sup>, concluded that for Russian soldiers “every [enemy] bullet reached its target”<sup>8</sup>. Notably, Pokrovsky himself, despite all his Marxist dogmatism, pointed to systemic problems deeper than mere technology, ironically mocking the command’s faith in the “fine fellow bayonet” and arguing that “the strength lay not in [the rifles], but in those who fired them”; however, he did not claim that the Russian soldier fought poorly with the bayonet or that the Frenchman or Englishman did so better<sup>9</sup>. Yet it was precisely the simplified interpretation — reducing a complex picture to technological superiority — that entered the historiographical canon.

Such a reduction of a complex and multifaceted problem to technological determinism, requires revision. It has pushed other aspects of the military confrontation to the margins of scholarly discourse, including the enemy’s tactical skill, combat training, and the role of elite units. The contribution of the French Zouaves, whose participation was not limited merely to superiority in weaponry, becomes secondary, if it is acknowledged at all.

Moreover, historiography has entrenched a contradictory stereotype regarding the unquestionable superiority of the Russian army in bayonet combat, a notion which also requires critical verification on the basis of sources. As will be demonstrated in this article, this stereotype — originating in pre-revolutionary historiography and reinforced during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods — finds no unequivocal confirmation in contemporary testimonies or in evidence

<sup>7</sup> *Тарле Е.В. Крымская война. М., 1943. Т. 2. С. 106–107.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* С. 108.

<sup>9</sup> *Покровский М.Н. Дипломатия и войны царской России в XIX столетии. М., 1923. С. 130.*



*Zouave in Combat. Artist Alexander Rachinsky. Circa 1858.  
From open sources*

concerning actual battlefield practice. As Prince Vasily Vasilchikov noted, the commander Alexander Menshikov “quite rightly feared the first clash with the superior Algerian troops, accustomed to a life of combat”<sup>10</sup>. These fears of the “African” veterans among the leadership of the Russian army indicate that professional military men perceived the elite French infantry as a qualitatively different opponent even before the first shot had been fired.

It is noteworthy that even a cursory outside glance was enough to appreciate the special qualities of these units. British officers observing the French troops immediately remarked upon their exceptional bearing and physical conditioning<sup>11</sup>. The Zouaves in particular made a strong impression upon the Allies, who described them as “native Frenchmen in Algerian dress, the roughest-looking fellows one could possibly imagine”<sup>12</sup>. An English corporal, while noting the excellent relations with the French, singled out the Zouaves in particular, who, according to him, “proved to be a very cheerful company, though

<sup>10</sup> Gowing T. A soldier's experience: or, A voice from the ranks... A personal narrative of the Crimean Campaign. Nottingham, 1892. P. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Walker C.P.B. Days of a soldier's life. London, 1894. P. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

later they demonstrated that they were a headache for the enemy”<sup>13</sup>. These descriptions, provided by Allied observers, eloquently testify that the outward appearance and conduct of the “African” troops immediately revealed their colonial experience and special system of training, visible even on the eve of battle.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to reassess the key factors behind Allied success in the Crimean War using the Battle of the Alma as a case study. The focus of the research is the role of elite French infantry (the Zouaves and Chasseurs à Pied), whose effectiveness is considered not to be the result of rifled weaponry, but rather as a complex phenomenon incorporating tactical innovation, individual initiative, and a high degree of skill in close combat. The study is based on comparative-historical and source-critical analysis of archival, memoir, and published sources of French, British, and Russian origin.

After the Allied landing in Crimea, the Russian army under the command of Alexander Menshikov occupied a favorable position on the Alma River, intending to give battle. Despite the numerical superiority of the Anglo-French corps, the Russians relied on the strength of their defensive position.

The Allied battle plan envisioned that the right flank of the Russian army would be attacked by the British, while the center would be assaulted by the 1st and 3rd Divisions under the command of Marshal Canrobert and Prince Napoleon. However, the main role was assigned to the left flank, where the 2nd Division of General Pierre Bosquet operated, consisting of veterans of the Army of Africa, including 2,200 Zouaves of the 3rd Regiment<sup>14</sup>. This sector was considered impregnable because of the steepness of the slope<sup>15</sup>.

On September 8 (20), 1854, with the outbreak of battle, Bosquet's Zouaves, to the astonishment of the enemy, forded the Alma and began rapidly climbing the steep slope “like goats”<sup>16</sup>, provoking ad-

<sup>13</sup> Gowing T. A soldier's experience: or, A voice from the ranks... A personal narrative of the Crimean Campaign. Nottingham, 1892. P. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Lettres du maréchal Bosquet à sa mère, 1829–1858. Pau., 1879. V. IV. P. 141.

<sup>15</sup> Lecat Bazancourt C. L'expédition de Crimée jusqu'à la prise de Sébastopol. Paris, 1856. V. I. P. 208–209.

<sup>16</sup> Canrobert F.C. Le Maréchal Canrobert, souvenirs d'un siècle. Paris, 1904. V. II. P. 250.



Pierre Joseph François Bosquet, Marshal of France. Artist Horace Vernet. 1857.  
*From open sources*

miration even among their British allies<sup>17</sup>. Following them, French artillery was brought up onto the plateau and opened fire on the Russian positions.

This bold maneuver came as a complete surprise to Alexander Menshikov. The Russian command was forced urgently to redeploy troops to the threatened left flank, disrupting the original position and weakening the center. The powerful French blow that followed against the center — in which the French elite infantry also played a highly active role — proved fatal for the Russian army and led to its retreat.

The success of this combined strike — the flanking maneuver by Bosquet and the frontal assault — was obvious to contemporaries. As one British officer observed in summarizing the actions of the French: “On this front the battle was won; the French carried out a very difficult and gallant attack, for which their mobility and dashing élan made

<sup>17</sup> *Peard* G.S. Narrative of a campaign in the Crimea: including an account of the battles of Alma, Balaklava, and Inkermann. London, 1855. P. 56.

them perfectly suited”<sup>18</sup>. This assessment, coming from an allied rival, precisely captures the essence of French tactical superiority: it was speed, flexibility, and determination — not merely superiority in armament — that determined the outcome of the battle on their sector.

The famous British war reporter William Howard Russell also drew attention to the tactical skill and initiative of the Zouaves in the center of the battle. He described in detail how “the Zouaves under Colonel Bourbaki immediately rushed forward, driving before them the chain of Russian riflemen and skirmishers... and making use of the branches... of the trees to cross the narrow stream”<sup>19</sup>. Even more revealing is the bayonet attack episode described by Russell: “Colonel Cler, at this critical moment... calling upon his men to charge, threw himself upon the tower, which after a short but bloody struggle they carried at the bayonet, driving the Russians from it in confusion...”<sup>20</sup> These outside observations are of particular value because, independently of French reports, they record the tactical pattern that became the leitmotif of the entire battle: the Zouaves did not passively rely upon the superiority of their weapons, but actively sought opportunities for decisive hand-to-hand combat.

These assessments, made by British allies who watched the French actions attentively and not without jealousy, are extremely important because they directly contradict the dominant historiographical tradition. Despite the evidence cited above, historiography has generally interpreted the root of Bosquet’s division’s victory — and of the Allies as a whole — not in tactical mastery, but in the superiority of rifled weapons and the outstanding marksmanship of Anglo-French troops. According to this view, Russian troops with their smoothbore muskets and tactics of tightly packed columns could oppose nothing to enemy fire, serving as a classic confirmation of the thesis concerning the technical backwardness of the Russian army<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> *Adye J.* A review of the Crimean War to the winter of 1854–5. London, 1860. P. 50.

<sup>19</sup> *Russell W.H.* The British expedition to the Crimea. London, 1877. P. 102.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* P. 103.

<sup>21</sup> *Figes O.* Crimea: The Last Crusade. London, 2011. P. 209–210, 214–215; *Royle T.* Crimea: the great Crimean War, 1854–1856. Boston, 1999. P. 224, 227.

Without denying a certain influence of the armament factor, we believe that such an interpretation obscures another, at least equally important element — the bayonet fight. Russian sources abound with assertions about the superiority of the Russian bayonet at the Battle of Alma, superiority supposedly nullified only by the unwillingness of the Anglo-French troops to engage in close combat; any Russian attempt to launch a bayonet attack was futile because it was swept away by rifle fire, and often the Russians did not even manage to close with the enemy<sup>22</sup>. A vivid illustration of this view is provided by the words of A. A. Panaev: “The Anglo-French gave no thought to our bayonet, and even unfastened their own bayonets, placing — and quite rightly — all their hopes in firepower”<sup>23</sup>. This position of the sources is confirmed by descriptions of other events of the Crimean War as well<sup>24</sup>. This interpretation, shaped by the sources themselves, became the conventional view in historiography. The stereotype of the Russian bayonet as the army’s “trump card” and traditional strength found expression in pre-revolutionary historiography<sup>25</sup>, subsequently “mi-

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<sup>22</sup> Материалы для истории Крымской войны и обороны Севастополя / Под ред. Н.Ф. Дубровина. Вып. II. СПб., 1871. С. 495; Сборник рукописей, представленных Его Императорскому Высочеству Государю наследнику Цесаревичу о Севастопольской обороне севастопольцами. СПб., 1872. Т. 1. С. 58; *Колчак В.И.* Война и плен. 1853–1855 гг. Из воспоминаний о давно пережитом // *Колчак В.И., Колчак А.В.* Избранные труды. СПб., 2001. С. 37; Сборник рукописей, представленных Его Императорскому Высочеству Государю наследнику Цесаревичу о Севастопольской обороне севастопольцами. СПб., 1873. Т. 3. С. 315–316, 327–328.

<sup>23</sup> *Панаев А.А.* Князь Александр Сергеевич Меншиков в рассказах бывшего его адъютанта А.А. Панаева. СПб., 1877. С. 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Андреанов А.* Инкерманский бой и оборона Севастополя. СПб., 1903. С. 59–60; *Урусов С.С.* Очерки Восточной войны 1854–1855 гг. М., 1866. С. 78; *Жандр А.П.* Материалы для истории обороны Севастополя и для биографии Владимира Алексеевича Корнилова, собранные и объясненные капитан-лейтенантом А. Жандром, бывшим его флаг-офицером. СПб., 1859. С. 229; Материалы для истории Крымской войны и обороны Севастополя / Под ред. Н.Ф. Дубровина. Вып. IV. СПб., 1872. С. 180.

<sup>25</sup> *Дубровин Н.Ф.* История Крымской войны и обороны Севастополя. СПб., 1900. Т. 1. С. 240; *Богданович М.И.* Восточная война 1853–1856 годов. СПб., 1876. Т. 3. С. 19, 36–37; *Тотлебен Э.И.* Описание обороны г. Севастополя. Часть I. СПб., 1863. С. 193–195; *Богданович М.И.* Описание экспедиции англо-французов в Крым, 1854–1855 гг. СПб., 1856. С. 44.

grating” into and becoming entrenched within Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship<sup>26</sup>. It is precisely this established narrative, rooted in the testimony of one side of the conflict, that requires critical reconsideration.

To test this established point of view, let us turn to how the French participants themselves — from commanders to ordinary Zouaves — described the reasons for their success. Here we discover that the center of their attention was by no means superiority in weaponry. French sources describing the Battle of Alma rarely emphasize small arms, generally limiting themselves to the neutral *fusil* (“musket” or “rifle”) instead of specialized terms such as *fusil rayé* (“rifled musket”) or *fusil de précision* (“precision rifle”). A few examples may be given. Significantly, General Bosquet, commander of the 2nd Division, in his personal correspondence never once mentioned rifled weapons as a decisive advantage and did not even use neutral terms such as *fusil* to designate firearms; indeed, he remained entirely silent about small arms<sup>27</sup>. Far more often the focus falls upon bayonet combat. Thus, the Zouaves in their memoirs directly emphasized their superiority in hand-to-hand fighting: “At once the Zouaves rushed forward, uttering their terrible cries; they fell upon the enemy like thunder, scattered them in an instant, and without stopping seized the village”<sup>28</sup>.

Another example describes their actions even more vividly: “The Zouaves hurled themselves upon these stunned, stupid masses! They slashed, stabbed, scattered them”<sup>29</sup>. Characterizing this chaos in expressive terms, General Bosquet declared: “When the Zouaves are

<sup>26</sup> Тарле Е.В. Крымская война. М., 1943. Т. 2. С. 109; Еремин С.П. Английская армия в Восточной войне 1853–1856 гг. дис. ... канд. ист. наук. М., 2004. С. 70, 75, 178, 235; Ченнык С.В. Крымская кампания (1854–1856). Кн. 2. Альма. Севастополь, 2011. С. 96–97, 193–194; Айранетов О.Р. Крымская война. Популярный очерк. М., 2017. С. 101–102.

<sup>27</sup> Lettres du maréchal Bosquet à sa mère, 1829–1858. Pau., 1879. V. IV. P. 189–192; Lettres du maréchal Bosquet à ses amis. 1837–1860. Pau., 1879. V. II. P. 157–159.

<sup>28</sup> Noir L. Souvenirs d'un simple zouave: campagnes de Crimée et d'Italie; mœurs militaires. Paris, 1872. P. 229.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. P. 237.

among the Russians, those poor Russians resemble a flock into whose midst the shepherd has unleashed his dogs”<sup>30</sup>.

This confidence in the irresistible power of the bayonet charge and the willingness to engage in hand-to-hand combat had been forged in countless clashes in North Africa. Descriptions of the war in Algeria abound with references to the bayonet as the principal instrument of victory. This involved not merely straightforward frontal assaults, but also complex tactical combinations. For example, Jacques Leroy de Saint-Arnaud described in detail operations in which cavalry deliberately drove Kabyle detachments into the path of Zouaves waiting in ravines with fixed bayonets<sup>31</sup>. The bayonet was employed massively and ruthlessly: in one battle Saint-Arnaud, after “driving [the enemy] into the ravines”, pursued them specifically with the bayonet, which, according to him, provoked panic and flight<sup>32</sup>. Assaults on fortified settlements, such as the capture of Laghouat, were likewise decided by rapid, “avalanche-like” bayonet attacks, when the Zouaves, “finishing off all who attempted to resist”, surged forward irresistibly, inspiring terror in the enemy through their sheer ferocity<sup>33</sup>. Thus, their actions at Alma were not the product of sudden bravery, but the natural continuation and practical embodiment of a principal mode of warfare transferred from the North African theater to Crimea.

A vivid illustration of French tactical preferences is provided by the episode in which Colonel Cler, commander of the 2nd Zouave Regiment within the 3rd Division, seeing that the attack was faltering under the devastating fire of Russian batteries, decisively led his soldiers into a bayonet assault: “To me, my Zouaves,” he said to his old jackals, spurring his horse into a gallop; ‘bayonets!’—and all rushed forward at a run”. This maneuver resulted in success and the capture of the enemy position<sup>34</sup>. This offensive spirit was a systemic quality of the “African” troops, whereas the Russian regulations, by contrast, restrained such initiative. The rule prescribing that rifle units be sent into attack

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Lettres du maréchal de Saint-Arnaud*. Paris, 1855. V. II. P. 332.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. P. 26.

<sup>33</sup> *Cler J.J.G. Souvenirs d'un officier du 2e de Zouaves*. Paris, 1859. P. 41–42.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. P. 154–155.



*Armand Jacques Leroy de Saint-Arnaud, Marshal of France.*

Artist Charles-Philippe Larivière. 1854.

*From open sources*

“only in the most important or unavoidable cases” demonstrates that doctrinally the Russian army regarded the use of elite riflemen as a shock force not as a norm, but as an exceptional measure<sup>35</sup>.

An even more revealing case occurred in the battle for the village of Burliuk in the center of the battlefield. Prince Napoleon, seeing no progress, issued a paradoxical order from the standpoint of technological-superiority theory: “We must throw the Russians into confusion, and for this purpose immediately double our skirmishers... who must, without firing a single shot, crawl up to the very feet of the Russians; once there, they are not to fire, but to make use of their bayonets.” This tactic, deliberately ignoring the potential advantages of rifled weaponry, achieved complete success: the Russians “stood petrified on seeing our [French. - A. K.] men among them, who took advantage of this to attack them with bayonets”. As a result, the village of Burliuk was captured<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> ГА РФ. Ф. 672. Оп. 1. Д. 96. Л. 46.

<sup>36</sup> Chartier A. La 3e Division de l'armée d'Orient et le prince Napoléon. Paris, 1898. P. 186.

The success of this attack, founded upon a conscious rejection of firepower superiority, became perhaps the most convincing argument against technological determinism. This tactical device was not an improvisation born amid the heat of the Battle of Alma, but a direct consequence and culmination of combat experience accumulated in the colonial campaigns of North Africa. It represented a demonstrative reliance on surprise and psychological impact, on close combat — that element in which the Zouaves felt themselves absolute masters.

The psychological paralysis of the Russian soldiers, “petrified” by their appearance, clearly demonstrates that victory was achieved not by technology itself, but by the tactical culture that allowed it to be employed — or entirely discarded in favor of a proven colonial doctrine.

Already in Algeria, French commanders had deliberately refined tactics of approaching the enemy without firing a single shot in preparation for a devastating bayonet blow. Thus, Saint-Arnaud proudly described an operation in which his brigade advanced to within thirty paces of the enemy without opening fire and then attacked with bayonets — a maneuver he regarded as “completely ordinary” practice for his unit<sup>37</sup>. A battalion under the command of Morand acted in a similar manner after receiving a categorical order from Lieutenant Colonel Cler not to respond to enemy fire and to attack in complete silence. This tactic, based on the absolute renunciation of firepower advantage, culminated in the capture of a fortified position with minimal losses — one killed and three wounded<sup>38</sup>. Thus, the seemingly paradoxical order at Burliuk was not an isolated episode, but a logical application of a combat doctrine refined and repeatedly tested in North Africa, in which abandoning gunfire in favor of sudden bayonet attacks was a standard method. At its core lay a calculation based on psychological shock and the moral crushing of the enemy, achieved through surprise and the ferocity of close combat — that sphere in which the French “African” units acknowledged no equal.

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<sup>37</sup> Lettres du maréchal de Saint-Arnaud. Paris, 1855. V. II. P. 53–54.

<sup>38</sup> Cler J.J.G. Souvenirs d'un officier du 2e de Zouaves. Paris, 1859. P. 35–36.



Military scene. The Battle of the Alma. Marshal de Saint-Arnaud on horseback and two dragoons. Artist Hippolyte Bellangé. 19th century.  
State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

It is noteworthy that, on the question of small arms, Allied sources often paid tribute to the accuracy of Russian marksmen. Significantly, the above-mentioned Colonel Cler, in his description of the Battle of Alma, uses the term denoting a rifle (“*carabine de précision*”) only once, and does so in reference to Russian riflemen, whereas for French weapons he employs the neutral term *fusil*<sup>39</sup>. Even more revealing are the reports of Marshal Jacques Leroy de Saint-Arnaud, in which, while noting the massive and troublesome fire (“*un feu très-vif et très-incommode*”) of Russian riflemen armed with rifled carbines in the center, he identifies as the key reason for success not superior return fire in a shooting duel, but rather the effectiveness of the French bayonet attack carried out under precisely this devastating fire<sup>40</sup>. Thus, French documents consistently emphasize the decisive role of bayonet combat, which enabled them to prevail despite the resistance of Russian riflemen equipped with rifles.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. P. 147–157.

<sup>40</sup> Lettres du maréchal de Saint-Arnaud. Paris, 1855. V. II. P. 577, 581.

Moreover, tactical skill rather than technical superiority proved decisive in the actions of the French skirmishers (*tirailleurs*). As one participant observed: “all ours [French riflemen — A. K.] lay on the ground and concealed themselves so effectively that we ourselves could scarcely see them”, whereas the Russians, “on the contrary, all stood upright and arranged in line almost shoulder to shoulder”<sup>41</sup>. This observation finds a direct explanation in Russian military regulations. Although they permitted riflemen in rough terrain to seek cover, the principal rule for flat ground required the preservation of formation order — equal intervals “as they stood behind the front” — which in practice resulted in the formation of a linear skirmish chain<sup>42</sup>. French skirmisher tactics, by contrast, had been elevated into doctrine: the “Brief Instructions of the Marshal of France to Division Generals, Brigade Generals, and Corps Commanders” (“*Instructions sommaires*”), written by Saint-Arnaud for the Army of the East, explicitly forbade “degenerating” into useless exchanges of fire with enemy skirmishers, instead prescribing attacks upon enemy riflemen in small groups with the aim of rapidly destroying or dislodging them in hand-to-hand combat<sup>43</sup>. This aggressive doctrine stood opposed to the defensive and passive logic of Russian regulations. Paragraph 797 of the Russian manual prescribed: “When the enemy approaches within ordinary musket range... [the riflemen] are immediately recalled from the skirmish line”<sup>44</sup>. Thus, at the very moment of close engagement — when the accuracy of rifles might have proved useful in supporting their infantry — the Russian riflemen were by regulation removed from participation in the critical phase of battle, depriving the troops of their elite core of firepower. This body of evidence leads us to the conclusion succinctly formulated already in the nineteenth century

<sup>41</sup> *Masquelez M.* Journal d'un officier de zouaves; suivi de Considérations sur l'organisation des armées anglaise et russe; et accompagné de l'Itinéraire de Gallipoli à Constantinople. Paris, 1858. P. 107.

<sup>42</sup> ГА РФ. Ф. 672. Оп. 1. Д. 96. Л. 39.

<sup>43</sup> *Masquelez M.* Journal d'un officier de zouaves; suivi de Considérations sur l'organisation des armées anglaise et russe; et accompagné de l'Itinéraire de Gallipoli à Constantinople. Paris, 1858. P. 180.

<sup>44</sup> ГА РФ. Ф. 672. Оп. 1. Д. 96. Л. 39.

by Prince Vasily Vasilchikov: “The poor quality of our small arms is not the true cause of our defeat”<sup>45</sup>.

A natural question nevertheless arises: to what extent can one trust these accounts, which portray elite infantrymen as masters of bayonet combat? To clarify this issue, let us turn to an analysis of the combat training system of the French elite infantry<sup>46</sup>. Considerable attention was devoted to bayonet combat in the regulations governing the training of French Chasseurs à Pied. Significantly, these ordinances were issued in 1845 — that is, already taking into account the experience of the colonial war in Algeria. This becomes particularly evident when compared with the general infantry regulations of 1831, in which bayonet fighting was not treated as a subject of instruction at all<sup>47</sup>. Thus, the combat experience of Algeria found its reflection in military regulations, emphasizing the important role of bayonet combat within an overall combat system that combined it with accurate fire and maneuver.

Against this background, the state of bayonet combat in the Russian army raises serious questions. Already in 1838, Rengau criticized the existing Russian system of bayonet training and proposed improvements. Given the well-known inertia of the military system under Nicholas I, there is every reason to believe that these recommendations were never properly implemented<sup>48</sup>. As Sergei Andolenko correctly observed, under Nicholas I the Suvorovian traditions of troop training — which had devoted significant attention to

<sup>45</sup> Записки князя В.И. Васильчикова // Рус. архив. 1891. № 6. С. 181.

<sup>46</sup> Ordonnance du 22 juillet 1845 sur l'exercice et les manoeuvres des bataillons de chasseurs à pied. 1re partie. Ecoles de soldat, avec les modifications prescrites par décision ministérielle du 7 avril 1852. Paris, 1862. P. 64–71.

<sup>47</sup> An analysis of the content of the regulations (*Ordonnance sur l'exercice et les manoeuvres de l'infanterie*. Du 4 mars 1831. Première partie. Ecole du soldat et école du peloton. Paris, 1839) shows that issues of bayonet fighting are absent from it. The main emphasis is placed on drill training, formations, and shooting, while techniques of hand-to-hand combat are not regulated.

<sup>48</sup> Ренгау. Правила для обучения пехоты драться штыком для употребления застрельщикам при одиночном бое во время войны, составленные учителем фехтования на всех холодных оружиях капитаном Ренгау и изданные с разрешения высшего начальства. СПб., 1838. С. 2–3, 5–6, 10–11, 113–116.



French Zouaves storm and capture  
Telegraph Hill during the Battle of the Alma. 1854.  
*From open sources*

hand-to-hand combat — had largely been forgotten<sup>49</sup>. An English officer's observation concerning the quality of Russian bayonet combat is also revealing: he noted the poor quality of Russian bayonets, characterizing them as soft, thin, and fragile<sup>50</sup>.

A comparative analysis of systems of training and armament therefore suggests that the superiority of French elite infantry in bayonet combat is a factor at the very least deserving the closest attention, and one that casts doubt upon the entrenched thesis of the unquestioned dominance of the Russian bayonet.

Another important but historiographically neglected aspect of Zouave tactics was their exceptional speed and tactical flexibility. Their style of fighting — which astonished opponents compared to the leaps of monkeys<sup>51</sup> — differed radically from the tactics of Russian troops. The Zouaves skillfully employed varied forms of

<sup>49</sup> Андоленко С.П. История русской армии. Славные военные традиции российских и советских полководцев. М., 2022. С. 242.

<sup>50</sup> Peard G.S. Narrative of a campaign in the Crimea: including an account of the battles of Alma, Balaklava, and Inkermann. London, 1855. P. 68.

<sup>51</sup> Figs O. Crimea: The Last Crusade. London, 2011. P. 209.

movement<sup>52</sup>, in contrast to the Russian army, whose tactical system was outdated by half a century<sup>53</sup>. This difference in approaches often resulted in Russian units simply being unable to react adequately to the rapid and unexpected actions of the French elite infantry. A vivid example is provided by the episode described by Vasily Kolchak: “The second battalion of the Minsk Regiment, concealed in a ravine, suddenly found itself surrounded from the rear and flank by Zouaves”, forcing the Russians to retreat<sup>54</sup>. The same disparity in tactical skill is vividly illustrated by the previously described maneuver of Prince Napoleon.

This “African” style of combat was a deliberate tactic developed during the colonial campaigns in North Africa. As one participant in the Battle of Alma wrote, the veterans of Africa operated “like jackals” (*opèrent à la chacal*): “crawling, they dragged themselves on all fours, wriggled, rolled along, and thus reached the Russians. The method has been found; it works splendidly. The enemy is astonished, terrorized; he does not dare take a step without looking beneath his feet; while he is distracted, we throw ourselves upon him in order to capture or shoot him”<sup>55</sup>.

This vivid description reveals not merely physical actions, but an entire tactical doctrine founded upon psychological suppression. The “jackal tactic” was the direct antithesis of linear formations and passive firefights. Its purpose was not to outshoot the enemy, but to demoralize him through unpredictability, stealth, and the inevitability of sudden close combat. The reference to the enemy being “terrorized”, afraid “to take a step”, eloquently demonstrates that the Zouaves were winning the battle even before the first bayonet charge, paralyzing the will of Russian troops trained in entirely different, more rigid and formalized tactical traditions.

<sup>52</sup> Материалы для истории Крымской войны и обороны Севастополя / Под ред. Н.Ф. Дубровина. Вып. II. СПб., 1871. С. 337.

<sup>53</sup> Rousset C. Histoire de la guerre de Crimée. Paris, 1894. V. 1. P. 193–194.

<sup>54</sup> Колчак В.И. Война и плен. 1853–1855 гг. Из воспоминаний о давно пережитом // Колчак В.И., Колчак А.В. Избранные труды. СПб., 2001. С. 37.

<sup>55</sup> Chartier A. La 3e Division de l'armée d'Orient et le prince Napoléon. Paris, 1898. P. 185.

The key condition that enabled the development and effective application of such a flexible “African” style of warfare was a system of command unique for its time, founded upon an exceptionally high degree of trust in junior officers and the encouragement of intelligent initiative. In Algeria, a battalion commander with seven hundred men could be entrusted with the independent task of controlling a vast territory, and carried it out effectively, being in essence “master within a radius of four leagues”<sup>56</sup>. In critical situations — for example, during a sudden attack upon the rearguard — Zouave officers, without waiting for orders from above, independently decided upon counterattacks, often saving the situation<sup>57</sup>. This system was cultivated not merely through orders, but through the personal example of senior officers (“I ... showed them how it was done by acting personally”<sup>58</sup>) and created a unique atmosphere of “absolute community of fatigue and dangers”, where strict subordination did not prevent mutual assistance or the exercise of personal initiative<sup>59</sup>. It was precisely this culture of tactical independence, instilled in Algeria, that formed the foundation of Zouave superiority in maneuver and close combat.

This doctrine of initiative and maneuver differed radically from the official prescription for the elite riflemen of the Russian army. The drill regulations required that riflemen in skirmish formation act “entirely independently from the other skirmishers, so that they may be sent into the line or recalled from it at the discretion of the commander”<sup>60</sup>. The key tactical decisions — whether to occupy a position or retreat — were therefore not made on the spot, but “at the discretion of the commander,” which under the conditions of rapidly evolving combat effectively paralyzed any private initiative on the part of Russian riflemen. Another example of Zouave tactical training was the maneuver perfected to the point of automatism known as “ventre à terre” (“belly to the ground”) — the instantaneous dropping

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<sup>56</sup> Lettres du maréchal de Saint-Arnaud. Paris, 1855. V. II. P. 201.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. P. 342.

<sup>58</sup> Derudder G. Un soldat d'Afrique: vie du commandant Clemmer. Calais, 1899. P. 70.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. P. 100.

<sup>60</sup> ГИ ПФ. Ф. 672. Оп. 1. Д. 96. Л. 38.

flat before a grapeshot volley. Its effectiveness is illustrated by the following episode: “The Russians, seeing us lying down, decided that we were all dead and let out a loud cry of triumph. But immediately afterward the column rose up and, with one swift rush, captured the guns and the telegraph”<sup>61</sup>.

It is noteworthy that the Zouaves’ preference for hand-to-hand combat was reflected even in their soldiers’ slang. The expression “travailler à la fourchette” (“to work with the fork”), a direct reference to bayonet fighting, eloquently indicates that the bayonet was perceived not as a last resort, but as a favored and effective instrument of close combat<sup>62</sup>.

Even those authors who recognized French tactical superiority were often unable completely to abandon the entrenched paradigm that attributed success primarily to firepower. Thus, Nikolai Gersevanov, despite the perceptiveness of his observations, continued to insist upon the decisive role of rifles<sup>63</sup>. This perspective, which reduces tactical mastery merely to the quality of weaponry, also finds echoes in modern historiography: for example, Gutman argues that during the ascent the Zouaves “kept the Russians at a distance thanks to the accurate fire of their rifled muskets”<sup>64</sup>. Yet such an interpretation, as well as Gersevanov’s position, overlooks the essential fact that this firing served merely as a tactical means for occupying advantageous ground, whereas victory itself was achieved by the subsequent bayonet attacks, to which the Russian troops — contrary to the prevailing myth — proved unable to offer an adequate response. Thus, even while recognizing the marksmanship of the Zouaves, it should be regarded not as an independent factor of victory, but as one element within the broader tactical superiority of the “African” troops.

<sup>61</sup> *Noir L.* Souvenirs d’un simple zouave: campagnes de Crimée et d’Italie; mœurs militaires. Paris, 1872. P. 235.

<sup>62</sup> *Pick E.* Les fastes de la grande armée d’Orient: histoire politique, militaire et maritime des campagnes de Crimée et de la Baltique. Paris, 1858. P. 152.

<sup>63</sup> *Герсеванов Н.Б.* Несколько слов о действиях русских войск в Крыму в 1854 и 1855 гг. Париж, 1867. С. 86–87.

<sup>64</sup> *Gouttman A.* La guerre de Crimée: 1853–1856: la première guerre moderne. Paris, 2006. P. 217.

In this connection, it is necessary to examine the thesis — present in a number of English sources and some modern Russian studies — that colonial warfare in Algeria negatively affected the combat qualities of French troops<sup>65</sup>. The analysis conducted here, however, suggests the opposite conclusion. The experience, tactical flexibility, and close-combat skills acquired by the Zouaves and Chasseurs à Pied in North Africa constituted not a negative factor, but rather the key positive element determining their success at the Battle of Alma.

Another indirect but highly revealing argument in favor of the high combat effectiveness of the French Zouaves, and of the considerable psychological impression they made upon their opponents, is the little-known story of attempts in Russia to duplicate these units — the so-called “Russian Zouaves” (“zouaves russes”). This episode, which has thus far remained outside the attention of researchers, was initiated by Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich. Having visited Algeria in April 1846, he was deeply impressed by the Zouaves, which he immediately communicated in a letter to Emperor Nicholas I<sup>66</sup>. The impression he formed makes it possible to advance the hypothesis not only of the Grand Duke’s personal interest, but also of his subsequent initiative in creating Russian counterparts to the Zouaves.

French memoirists directly point to the possibility of such a project’s realization, noting with surprise that Russian troops attempted to employ against them their own “African” tactics. Moreover, these memoirs contain a curious mention of a French instructor who allegedly disappeared precisely in 1846, shortly after Konstantin Nikolayevich’s visit, and later participated in the Battle of Alma on the Russian side<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> The Panmure papers. London, 1908. V. I. P. 188–189; Кривоналов А.А. Фельдмаршал И.Ф. Паскевич и русская стратегия в 1848–1856 гг. М., 2019. С. 216–217.

<sup>66</sup> Воронин В.Е. Великий князь Константин Николаевич на православном востоке и арабском западе в середине 1840-х гг. // Российская история. 2019. № 2. С. 96.

<sup>67</sup> Noir L. Souvenirs d'un simple zouave: campagnes de Crimée et d'Italie; mœurs militaires. Paris, 1872. P. 229.

A number of participants on both sides, including an English officer, recorded forms of combat uncharacteristic of the Russian army in the center of the position—in particular, the actions of riflemen concealed in trees<sup>68</sup>. A French officer, and following him the Russian historian Ivan Bestuzhev, wrote of Russian riflemen who skillfully used vineyards for concealment<sup>69</sup>. Such effective exploitation of terrain and cover — one of the defining features of the Zouaves’ “African” tactics — was observed precisely in the central sector where, according to this hypothesis, the experimental units operated. This hypothesis undoubtedly requires further archival investigation for definitive confirmation. Yet the very fact of its emergence, based upon concrete observations by the enemy, constitutes a powerful argument in favor of the central thesis of this study: it was the tactical superiority of the Zouaves, rather than their rifles, that made such a profound impression upon the Russian army that it inspired attempts at the direct imitation of their unique “African” style of warfare.

The image of the Zouaves as exceptionally dangerous and skillful opponents, formed at the Alma, was only reinforced during the subsequent battles for Sevastopol. Russian memoirists unanimously noted their ferocity and skill. A.P. Khrushchov directly called them “elite French troops”, whose attacks were “extraordinarily rapid” and “brave”<sup>70</sup>. Significantly, a commander who had encountered the Zouaves in battle emphasized not their rifles, but their speed and courage — precisely those qualities forged in Algeria and decisive at Alma.

In descriptions of the assault on the Gervais Battery (6 June 1855), the Zouaves appear as fearless close-combat fighters: “...the Zouaves twisted like snakes with their knives — slashing, stabbing, falling themselves, yet not yielding a single step...”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *Lysons D.* The Crimean War From First to Last. London, 1895. P. 102–103.

<sup>69</sup> *Herbé J.F.J.* Français et Russes en Crimée, lettres d'un officier français à sa famille endant la campagne d'Orient. Paris, 1892. P. 85; *Бестужев И.В.* Крымская война 1853–1856 гг. М., 1956. С. 91.

<sup>70</sup> *Хрущов А.П.* История обороны Севастополя. Зап. ген.-адъютанта Хрущова. СПб., 1889. С. 68–69.

<sup>71</sup> *Погосский А.Ф.* Старики: Рассказ из Крымской войны / [Соч.] А. Погосского. СПб., 1871. С. 72.



Zouaves at Malakoff. Artist Horace Vernet. 1856.  
*From open sources*

This assessment was echoed by their British allies. After the Battle of Inkerman, the Zouaves were described as fighters who “fight extraordinarily well and handle themselves like a skilled fencer”<sup>72</sup> and who “fought magnificently; they were the admiration of all”<sup>73</sup>. Even the appearance of the “African” troops — their “savage dark faces” and “ferocious features”, in the words of V.I. Kolchak — produced a profound psychological impact<sup>74</sup>, giving rise to seemingly strange practices: there are recorded cases of Russian soldiers wearing captured Zouave uniforms, believing them capable of granting invulnerability<sup>75</sup>. These assessments, made during the prolonged siege itself, eloquently demonstrate that the tactical superiority and

<sup>72</sup> Windham C.A. The Crimean diary and letters of Lieut.-General Sir Charles Ash Windham. London, 1897. P. 56.

<sup>73</sup> Stephenson F.C.A. At home and on the battlefield; letters from the Crimea, China and Egypt, 1854–1888. London, 1915. P. 109.

<sup>74</sup> Колчак В.И. Война и плен. 1853–1855 гг. Из воспоминаний о давно пережитом // Колчак В.И., Колчак А.В. Избранные труды. СПб., 2001. С. 74.

<sup>75</sup> Chartier A. La 3e Division de l'armée d'Orient et le prince Napoléon. Paris, 1898. P. 450.

fighting spirit of the French elite infantry were constant factors rather than a one-time phenomenon at Alma.

The present study makes it possible to reconsider the established historiographical views on the causes of the Allied success at the Battle of the Alma and, more broadly, in the Crimean War. An analysis of a wide range of sources — including French, British, and Russian documents and memoirs — convincingly demonstrates that the key factor behind the victory was not so much the technical backwardness of the Russian army or the superiority of rifled weapons, but rather the comprehensive tactical superiority of the elite units of French infantry, above all the Zouaves.

This superiority manifested itself in several respects. First, contrary to the entrenched stereotype of the dominance of the Russian bayonet, it was the French elite infantry that demonstrated superior skill and initiative in close combat, deliberately relying upon it, as confirmed both by examples of bayonet attacks at Alma and by the testimony of contemporaries. At the same time, Russian doctrine, as can be seen from the regulations, not only failed to prepare riflemen for active close combat, but explicitly prescribed withdrawing them from the firing line when approaching the enemy, demonstrating a fundamentally different, passive approach to the use of elite infantry<sup>76</sup>. A French sailor who visited the battlefield therefore did not accidentally call the bayonet “a truly French weapon”<sup>77</sup>. Second, decisive importance belonged to the tactical flexibility, speed of maneuver, and individual training of the “African” troops, all developed during colonial campaigns. Their ability to exploit terrain, operate in dispersed order, and deliver unexpected strikes differed radically from the tactics of Russian units and paralyzed their capacity for effective resistance.

The positive influence of Algerian experience on the combat qualities of the French army is also confirmed by the assessments of Russian military men. As A.P. Khrushchov rightly observed, the French troops “had acquired great skill in military affairs in Africa” and were commanded by “experienced generals knowledgeable in

<sup>76</sup> ГА РФ. Ф. 672. Оп. 1. Д. 96. Л. 39.

<sup>77</sup> *Leusse P. de. Souvenirs d'un aspirant de marine. Paris, 1867. P. 70.*

the art of war”<sup>78</sup>. Later, during the defense of Sevastopol, he gave the Zouaves perhaps their most vivid characterization, directly calling them “elite French troops” whose attacks were “extraordinarily rapid” and “brave”<sup>79</sup>. This testimony, coming from a participant in the events, eloquently demonstrates that French tactical superiority was not an isolated occurrence, but a persistent factor exerting a significant psychological impact on the enemy.

Thus, Marshal Saint-Arnaud’s ambitious phrase, placed in the article’s title — “The Zouaves Are the First Soldiers of the World” — though highly ostentatious, was not without foundation. In the context of the Battle of the Alma and the Crimean campaign as a whole, it was precisely the Zouaves and the other units of the “Army of Africa” that became the bearers of a new, more effective military doctrine, combining accurate fire, unconventional maneuver, and decisive bayonet assault. Their advantage lay not merely in superior weaponry, but in tactical innovation, which ultimately determined one of the Allies’ key successes in the Crimean War.

### Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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<sup>78</sup> Хрущов А.П. История обороны Севастополя. Зап. ген.-адъютанта Хрущова. СПб., 1889. С. 18.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. С. 68–69.

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