



2-12-2016

From Russia with Love: John and Nadine Turchin

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Nadeau, Ryan M., "From Russia with Love: John and Nadine Turchin" (2016). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*.
121.

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From Russia with Love: John and Nadine Turchin

Abstract

In August 1856, Ivan Vasilievitch Turchaninov and Nedezhda Dmitrievna Lvov arrived in the United States. The two had been married for only three months, and were both natives of the Russian Empire. Ivan was descended from a family of Cossacks with a strong military background in whose footsteps he followed by attending military school in St. Petersburg. He had served as an army captain during the Crimean War, stationed in the critical port city of Sevastopol, and was part of the forces sent to put down rebellions in both Poland and Hungary. It was while stationed in Russia that he had met Nedezhda, a highly educated and articulate woman with ties to the aristocracy. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, John and Nadine Turchin

Disciplines

History | Military History | Social History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

From Russia with Love: John and Nadine Turchin

February 12, 2016

By Ryan Nadeau '16

In August 1856, Ivan Vasilievitch Turchaninov and Nedezhda Dmitrievna Lvov arrived in the United States. The two had been married for only three months, and were both natives of the Russian Empire. Ivan was descended from a family of Cossacks with a strong military background in whose footsteps he followed by attending military school in St. Petersburg. He had served as an army captain during the Crimean War, stationed in the critical port city of Sevastopol, and was part of the forces sent to put down rebellions in both Poland and Hungary. It was while stationed in Russia that he had met Nedezhda, a highly educated and articulate woman with ties to the aristocracy.



Brigadier General John Basil Turchin.

The two shared a secret passion—aside, that is, from their love. Both were committed liberals, with connections to republican intellectuals considered subversive to the autocratic reign of the Tsars. And after Russia's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Western powers in 1856, both were firmly tired of that autocracy. In April 1856, after Ivan obtained a one year leave of absence from the army, he and Nedezhda eloped to Krakow, then part of the Austrian Empire, and quickly fled to the United States, where they hoped to make a new home in a republican state. Neither spoke a word of English upon arrival, but they wasted little time Anglicizing their names. Ivan and Nedezhda Turchaninov became John and Nadine Turchin.

After a failed experiment in farming outside of New York City, the Turchins moved to Philadelphia, where they began taking classes: John on engineering at the University of Pennsylvania, and Nadine at the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia. John's natural talents for his subject soon saw him offered a job as a surveyor with a crew of arctic explorers, but he turned it down for he could not bring himself to leave Nadine. When war broke out, however, John, as a committed member of the Republican Party with an army background, immediately volunteered for service, and was made colonel of the 19th Illinois Infantry Regiment. This was not goodbye to Nadine, though, for when the 19th left Chicago for the Western Theater, she rode right along with them, with a revolver and dagger on her belt. Writing in August 1863, Nadine commented in her diary that she chose to follow the army because it would have been expensive to maintain a home without John around and difficult for a foreign woman such as herself to find an occupation. These utilitarian reasons could have well been true—but given John's prior choice to stay with Nadine, it seems likely that the Turchins simply did not want to be separated. After all, in 1861, they were still very much strangers in a strange land.

Both Turchins were popular with the men under John's command. In the words of the historian Peter Cozzens, "No general in either army inspired greater loyalty or more intense hatred than Turchin." To his men, he was a hero and a valiant leader who never flinched in the face of danger. Nadine was viewed similarly, as a motherly figure who went out of her way to care for injured and sick soldiers in the regiment, and who, in her own right, was "utterly devoid of fear" on the battlefield. According to some witnesses, she herself took part in combat on more than one occasion, including a period of several days in 1862 where she took unofficial control of the 19th Illinois when John was incapacitated with sickness. Allegedly, her immense popularity prevented any of the men from questioning her orders.

Astute readers will note, however, that not only was John Turchin loved—he was also hated. By the South, that is. For John's political radicalism colored his view of war, and how to conduct it. He despised the Union's policy of "guarding-potato-patches," or the protection of southern property from damage or use by the Union army, which he viewed as selling out to pro-slavery interests. In his mind, it was "the greatest military absurdity that was ever practiced in the prosecution of war." Evidently, Turchin's men agreed, for after a particularly aggravating day of fighting near Athens, Alabama, they began to loot and pillage the town. In retaliation, General Don Carlos Buell, who advocated for the policy of restrained warfare, had Turchin court marshaled on three charges: neglect of duty, conduct unbecoming of an officer, and disobedience of orders. Turchin pled guilty only to the third, in recognition of the fact that Nadine's presence

in his camp defied army orders. In short order, John was acquitted, though dismissed from the army in August 1862.

For most men, this would have meant the end of their military career. For John, however, it was not—for John had Nadine. At the start of his trial, Nadine had departed Alabama for Washington, where she began to lobby in favor of her husband. No evidence exists to confirm that Nadine met with President Lincoln on her husband's behalf. At this period, however, it was not a difficult task to speak with the president in person. And in 1863, it was Lincoln who saw John reinstated into the army and promoted to brigadier general in April 1863.

And so Turchin returned to the war, with Nadine following him once again—despite the fact that her presence had contributed to his court marshalling. Nadine avoided that from coming up a second time by petitioning for recognition as a nurse, which was approved of by then-General James Garfield. Nadine's 1863 diary hardly ever mentions any nursing she performed, however. Rather, her primary concerns were the wellbeing of her husband, whose care she placed above all else, any perceived slights to him he received from his superiors, which caused her great rage, and philosophical and intellectual musings on the conduct of the war. The diary is free of deep and emotional declarations of love, though not entirely without indication of the affection Nadine and John shared. Following the disastrous Battle of Chickamauga, John was missing, causing Nadine to search the roads for hours in poor physical condition until word came that he was safe. And after the victorious Chattanooga Campaign, John delivered several captured Confederate banners to Nadine as trophies, who herself deeply and fervently longed to see the Confederacy defeated.

While the Turchins departed from the war when John fell ill in 1864, the two were a power couple without peer. When John was dismissed in 1862, he was greeted by a cheering crowd of thousands when he returned to Chicago, who viewed him as “an officer who [understood] his duty, who [comprehended] the malignant character of the rebellion, and who [was] ready and willing to use all means at his command to put it down.” Nadine was viewed just as heroically, to the point where decades after the war, men who had served with John were commenting that she deserved a soldier's pension for her wartime services. And while their written records lack the same flowery and romantic prose of other wartime couples, the dedication they had to each other and the great cause they mutually believed in is a concrete example of the deep love and respect that they shared.

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