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Tactical Insight and Sick Burns from a Woman at War: The Diary of Nadine Turchin

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Abstract

On June 27th, 1863, while camped at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Nadine Turchin, wife of Brigadier General John Turchin of the Army of the Cumberland, wrote an irate entry in her journal. "Really, I think that the commanding general should take me as his chief of staff," she began, "or at least as his personal advisor." She went on to discuss the movements of her husband's regiment as they campaigned in the west, criticizing the orders given to him by his superiors that had resulted in several deaths within the regiment and offering her own take on how they should have proceeded. "Oh, uncivilized beasts!" she concluded, in reference to the army's leaders: "They are dedicated to sacrificing this unfortunate army." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Tactical Insight and Sick Burns from a Woman at War: The Diary of Nadine Turchin

March 15, 2016

By Ryan Nadeau '16

On June 27th, 1863, while camped at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Nadine Turchin, wife of Brigadier General John Turchin of the Army of the Cumberland, wrote an irate entry in her journal. “Really, I think that the commanding general should take me as his chief of staff,” she began, “or at least as his personal advisor.” She went on to discuss the movements of her husband’s regiment as they campaigned in the west, criticizing the orders given to him by his superiors that had resulted in several deaths within the regiment and offering her own take on how they should have proceeded. “Oh, uncivilized beasts!” she concluded, in reference to the army’s leaders: “They are dedicated to sacrificing this unfortunate army.”

As I have previously [written on this blog](#), Nadine Turchin was an extraordinary woman. Not only did she follow her husband to war (and by some accounts directly engage in the fighting), but she was highly articulate and possessed an incredible intellect. A multilingual Russian immigrant from an aristocratic background, Nadine was a unique observer of the Union army. She kept a diary while with the army, written primarily in 1863 as a writing exercise so that her mastery of French would not decay. In it, she recorded her frequently scathing thoughts on a variety of topics, including the rights of women, the conduct of the war, and the state of the country. She also used it to record her wartime observations, and it includes accounts of both the Battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga, written from her point of view during the fighting.



The Battle of Chickamauga, depicting the Union army Nadine Turchin believed only knew how to die, and the Union officers she believed to be incompetent. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Like her husband, Nadine was a fully-committed radical Republican who believed that a hard war against the South was necessary to achieve a lasting victory. Her journal is filled with expressions of disgust at every class of people whom she believed were holding back the war effort, be they southern sympathizers, apathetic citizens, or moderate politicians and generals who did not espouse the same desire for a hard war that her husband did. Frequently, she equated the later categories with the former, considering a moderate or restrained commitment to prosecuting the war tantamount to directly aiding the South. "Cowardice, ineptitude, duplicity, and failure: we accumulate all these fine qualities, we of the North," she wrote in an entry on July 18th, 1863. "We are cowardly before the truth of the matter. We have no strong convictions, and for that alone shall not succeed in achieving anything great or truly good," she concluded on the subject, frustrated with the restrained conduct of the North's leadership up to that point.

Her harshest words for Northern leadership had come approximately a month earlier, when she fumed in the midst of a slow campaign season in which there was "no man competent and trustworthy, either at the head of the military forces or at the head of the government," decrying their "general apathy" in the face of advancing Southern armies. She concluded the entry with perhaps her fieriest wish of the entire journal: "Ye gods! Cannot nature provide some cataclysm in time to destroy the present miserable generation? Such a race is unworthy of living."

Despite these frustrations, Nadine remained wholeheartedly in support of the war. "It is not too much to sacrifice one's rest, even one's life, for a great cause, for a worthy outcome," she wrote in a moment of deep reflection on August 12th, "I have seen the truth, the necessity, the justice of this conflict; I have joined it out of conviction." The justice of the conflict that she believed in was freedom for the slaves, which she viewed as its principle cause (making her a more progressive thinker than many today). On July 14th, while her husband's men were setting slaves free in Alabama, she noted that "the resentment of the free man living off of the fruits of his work, whether manual or intellectual, against the despot, exploiting the slaves, living as a parasite, strengthening his primitive appetites at the expense of his moral sense," was a truly unifying force among the Union army, composed of men of all backgrounds and opinions.

Nadine also concerned herself with issues of women's rights when unoccupied with wartime thoughts. In a June 4th entry, whilst she mourned what she saw as a lack of great men in the conflict, she concluded that "only the women are great. . . . Shall we ever see the day when mankind is civilized enough to consider seriously our position in the society where they allow us to be everything but intelligent beings authorized to enjoy the rights guaranteed to *All*! By the American constitution," she questioned. In her next entry, written the following day, her anger had subdued to resignation: "If society treats the majority of women like beasts of burden or superfluous beings, so much the worse for society," she stated flatly before moving on to other matters. Frequently, however, her anger at the unequal treatment of women in American society would rise forth, expressing frequent indignation for any assumptions of delicacy or incapability made of her.

Nadine's diary concludes on a note just as dismal as it had been, even as the tide of the war began to move in the Union's favor. In her final entry, she angrily noted that, "I would rather see my husband out of this army, which only knows how to die. It is impossible that they do him justice." This did not, however, reflect a change in either Turchin's dedication to the war, for

both remained with the army until October 1864. Rather, the criticism comes as evidence that Nadine was a woman who would not be distracted by individual trees among the forest and who continued to maintain the highest expectations in the Union army, which while she frequently criticized, pursued a cause, as well as those of other societal reforms, that she deeply believed in.

Sources:

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