

RUSSIA

ARABIAN HORSES AND THE CAVALRY



Artwork by Karen Hodges.

by Sharon Meyers*

Russia, being such a vast and sparsely populated country has for centuries depended upon the horse for its transportation needs. Enormous numbers of quality, sound animals were required by the population for farm, carriage, military, and general-purpose saddle work. The Russian people were connoisseurs of the horse and had a great passion for horse breeding, so it comes as no surprise to find the Arabian horse has long been admired by the Russians for their endurance, soundness, thriftiness, and harmonious form.

Many Russian breeders in the 1700s and 1800s had the necessary expertise and huge resources to use the Arabian horse as a foundation for the creation of many breeds. In fact, the Arabian heralded in a new era for these astute breeders. They utilised these wonderful animals to increase the endurance, movement, working ability, soundness, and thriftiness, as well as beauty of their native stock. It was noted the Arabian had the amazing ability to transmit these outstanding characteristics onto their descendants for several generations. In fact, the Arabian had a phenomenal effect on Russia's horse breeding activities.

The Orlov Trotter (and Orlov Riding Horse) is one of Russia's most famous breeds and was founded by the Arabian stallions Smetanka and Saltan I. The grey Smetanka, reputed to be a magnificent horse, was purchased by Count Alexis Orlov-Chesmenskii from a Turkish pasha in 1774. Smetanka travelled to Count Orlov's Khrenovoyaya Stud in Russia with a military escort, the journey taking two years to complete. Smetanka only stood at stud in 1777 and was crossed with a Danish mare to start the foundation of the Orlov Trotter breed. The chestnut stallion Saltan I came to Russia from Arabia in 1775 and died in 1776, leaving three sons (confusingly named Saltan) and one daughter to carry on his influence as co-founder of the Orlov Trotter. Count Orlov also imported many other horses of Oriental blood to his Khrenovoyaya Stud. The characteristics of the Orlov Trotter appeared to mirror in many respects the excellent features found in their Arabian ancestors. The breed was noted for its exceptional height, excellent athletic movement, long neck, luxuriant mane, tail and forelock, prominent eye, sturdy legs and long-distance stamina. By 1866, the Orlov Trotter was used for the upgrading of local stock and to produce horses for the Russian army.

The Arabian stallions Rishan, Kaimak, and Kadi were imported from Arabia to Russia in 1802 by Count Fyodor Rostopchin. He crossed these Arabians with English, Persian, Kabardin, Karabakh, and Don mares, creating a new breed of horse which was aptly named the Rostopchin. The Kabardin horses were a Russian mountain breed noted

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*The Orlov-Rostopchin horse evolved into the Russian Riding Horse, also known as Russian Warmbloods.
Photo by Anna Vlasova.*

for their surefootedness and were used for both riding and pack horses. The Kabardin developed in the Caucasus and is believed to have resulted from crossing Persian, Karabakh, and Arabians with the local equine populations of the Nogai type and eastern steppe horses. The Karabakh horse was an ancient breed which had great presence and substance and the Arabian influence on this breed was prominent. The Don was developed circa mid-1700s and was important to the army as a cavalry horse. From this fascinating foundation came the Rostopchin breed, which were selected on their working ability and conformation for breeding purposes. After the death of Count Orlov, the Orlov and Rostopchin horses were crossbred and initially called the Orlov-Rostopchin Horse, eventually evolving into the Russian Riding Horse (also known as Russian Warmblood). These horses were used for International Competition in the late 1800s and were most successful in French and American equestrian events. Actually, many Russian horses made expeditions to European horse shows. In 1873, 44 horses were sent to compete at the Vienna Horse Show, and it was stated eight of these were purebred Arabians and many of the remainder were of Arabian descent.

Two purebred Arabian stallions founded the Streletsky (aka Streletski) breed which was formed in the mid-1800s. Begri Begrein was a grey stallion born in 1826 in the Babrain Islands and exported into Russia in 1835, where he stood at stud for six years. The grey Obejan Srebrny was born in 1851 at the Polish stud of Count Rozwadowski and was registered by the Poles as Obejan Srebrny. It's fascinating to note Obejan Srebrny (Obejan oa/Kobey-Han oa) was

an ancestor of the legendary Skowronek on his distaff side. Obejan Srebrny was originally sold to Slawuta in 1855, where Prince Roman Sanguszko considered him to be lacking in type and was sold in 1857 to the Russian stud Streletz. Whether Obejan Srebrny lacked type or not seems to be irrelevant, as he certainly had the pre-potency to pass on the necessary characteristics required to co-found such a significant line of horses as the Streletsky. This breed was primarily used to upgrade other Russian stock. The Streletsky horses were exhibited at the 1900 Paris Exposition where the entire team received gold medals.

One of the breeds which the Streletsky horses helped create was the Tersky. This breed is one of Russia's youngest and was originally used for both saddle and harness work. The Tersky was formed by inbreeding to the Arabian Obejan Srebrny and then crossing the progeny to the Rostopchin horses, later incorporating the bloodlines of the Kabardin, Don, and selected Hungarian horses. The Tersky was officially announced as a breed in 1948. Having many of the Arabian horse's excellent qualities, the Tersky was well suited as a sport and long-distance riding horse.

By the mid 1800s there were over 40 studs breeding Arabian or Arabian-bred horses. Numerous desert-bred Arabians arrived in Russia during this time. The Imperial Studs Khrevovoye, Derkuls, Limarev, and Streletz bred very few purebreds, but all were supplied with Arabian and Oriental stallions for cross breeding. Other Arabians arrived from Poland, including the chestnut stallion Hussar oa. He had been presented to the Prince of Wales (Edward VII) during



*A Russian Warmblood descending from the Orlov-Rostopchin horse.
Photo by Anna Vlasova.*

his tour of India in 1875 and was shipped to England where he was sold in 1878 at the Islington Agricultural Hall in London and then travelled to Poland. While in Poland he stood at the studs Janiszowka, Uzin, and Szamrajowka before being sent to the Russian stud Streletz. At Streletz, Hussar sired the chestnut stallion Gouneiad (from Egoistka), and Gouneiad was exported to America in 1893, where he held the distinction of being the first Russian horse registered in the American Arabian Stud Book.

Wilfrid and Lady Anne Blunt, owners of the Crabbet Park Stud in England, exported a considerable number of horses to Russia in the 1800s. The bay 1876 stallion Pharaoh was purchased in 1878 by Mr Skene in Syria for the Blunts and sent to England in 1879. He was then sold at their first sale to Count Joseph Potocki for 525 guineas in 1882 for the Antonin Stud in Poland. Count Potocki sold him three years later and he became the principal stallion in the Emperor of Russia's private stud, eventually moving to the Russian Government stud, Derkoul. It's noteworthy that the Blunts enquired about repurchasing him in 1891. Colonel Alexandre de Sdanovitch attended the Crabbet Park Summer Sale in 1899 to purchase horses for the Russian Government. At this sale the Colonel bought the bay stallion Naaman (Mesaoud/Nefisa) along with Dinarzade (Rataplán/Dahna), Dijleh (Ashgar/Dahna), Jeyneyna (Azrek/Jerboa), and Fezara (Merzuk or Mesaoud/Ferida). He also purchased the lovely grey 1879 mare Sobha (Wazir/Selma) for 200 guineas. Sobha was originally imported into England after being purchased from her breeder Mahmud Bey in Cairo. The celebrated chestnut stallion Mesaoud 1887 (Aziz/

Yemameh), purchased from Ali Pasha Sherif by the Blunts in the winter of 1888/9, came to Russia via Poland in 1910. He sired many influential horses at Crabbet Park and a large percentage of these horses went on to create a substantial impact on the Arabian breed throughout the world. It was indeed a tragic loss for Russia and the rest of the world that none of these horses or their Russian descendants survived the ravages of World War I and the Russian Revolution.

Two prominent Russians who were fascinated by the Arabian horse in the 1800s were Prince Aleksandr Grigor'evich Shcherbatov (Sherbatov) and Count Sergei Aleksandrovich Stroganov. They had a great love of horses and after reading about the Blunts' account of Arabia they decided to travel there together. The Stroganov Family originally came from Novgorod in Russia and had developed vast commercial empires encompassing salt mines, iron mines, fur trading, and farming interests, northeast of Moscow. In 1558 the Stroganov Family were granted virgin lands along the Kama River with rights to establish their own independent province. Eventually, wishing to enlarge their empire, the Stroganovs financed a Trans-Ural expedition in 1581 with their own private army, which was led by Ermak Timofeev, and mainly consisted of Cossacks and a few hundred mercenaries. They defeated Kuchum, the Siberian Khan, and the army claimed the area for the Stroganov family and the Tsar. The Tsar rewarded the services of the Stroganovs with further land grants for opening up the vast Siberian territories. A couple of centuries down the track the Stroganovs were still strong supporters of the monarchy in Russia.



Count Stroganov's stud was founded on the present site of the Tersk Stud. Photo by Alexia Khrusheva.

From such a famous and wealthy family emerged Count Sergei Stroganov, who joined with Prince Sherbatov and his wife Princess Olga Aleksandrovich (Stroganov's sister), to travel to Syria and the North Arabian Deserts in 1888, during the reign of Alexander III. Their journey was organised along the same route the Blunts had travelled six years earlier. I love the fact that the travel agency Thomas Cook organised their trip and the agency supplied an interpreter as well as a Bedouin guide. The guide was Shaikh Nasr Ibn Abdulla. Both Sherbatov and Stroganov wanted to study the Arabian horse in its natural environment in Arabia. During their journey they met many people who remembered the Blunts and they also came across Shaikh Mohammed of the Ibn-Arouk Tribe who had travelled with the Blunts throughout their journeys. On this trip Sherbatov purchased two purebred Arabian stallions and Stroganov purchased two purebred Arabian stallions in Damascus and nine purebred mares were obtained directly from the



The Streletsky horses helped create the Tersky, one of Russia's youngest breeds. Photo by Karina Voski.

Anaza (also known as Anezeh and Anazeh) tribe. Two other stallions were purchased by Count Stroganov, a three-year-old Kehilan Ajuz and a two-year-old Maneghi Lagra, but they were mated almost exclusively with Kabarda and Kabarda-Arabian mares in Russia. In 1899, both Stroganov and Sherbatov visited Wilfrid Blunt at Crabbet Park in England. They made recommendations to the

Russian Government to purchase horses from the Crabbet Stud. Their next joint venture together to Syria was in 1900. They were fortunate in being able to acquire horses of Oriental breeding from both journeys to Syria.

Count Stroganov founded his Arabian horse stud in 1889 at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains in the Stavropol District



Stroganov's Arabians were shepherded out onto the Steppe at dawn to graze, returning of an evening. This tradition continues today at Tersk Stud. Photo by Alexia Khrusheva.

Stroganov's horses were watered twice daily. Arabians at Tersk Stud photographed by Alexia Khrusheva.

of Russia (the present site of the Tersk Stud) with the horses purchased from his 1888 journey. Their guide, Shaikh Nasr Ibn Abdulla, visited Count Stroganov in Russia two years later and presented him with two grey Arabian stallions. Visiting Damascus again in 1895 Stroganov purchased three more purebred mares for his stud with the help of Shaikh Nasr Ibn Abdulla. When attending the Paris International Horse

Show in 1900, he bought the grey mare Makbula (Wazir/ Makbula) from the Blunts. Wilfrid Blunt took several horses to Paris to exhibit them at this show.

Count Stroganov had great success when he crossed the young Kehilan Ajuz and Maneghi Lagra strained stallions he purchased in Syria with the Kabardin and Kabardin-

The travel company Thomas Cook organised Sherbatov and Stroganov's trip to Syria. Photo by Sharon Meyers.

Arabian mares. These horses found a ready market with the Russian Army. Count Stroganov believed Arabians had to be bred close to the conditions of those in Northern Arabia, which included a dry continental climate with hot summers, stony soil, and, if possible, good quality ground fodder. He suggested horses bred in stud conditions should be subjected to speed tests on racetracks so as to preserve the Arabians main qualities of speed and endurance.

Count Stroganov's horse management techniques were quite advanced for his era as he fed oats all year round to his purebred stock, except for when grass was plentiful. The horses were shepherded out onto the Steppe at dawn to graze, then brought back at dusk and were given access to water twice daily. The mares were usually ridden at three-years and frequently had their first foals at four. As with many of the earlier importers of Arabians, he found they achieved greater height in future generations than their desert-bred parents.

He wrote, 'In selecting the sires and dams, the following should be borne in mind: their over-all leanness, especially lean and strong tendons; a good bone-structure with properly set legs; a good hoof; sound lungs; and, lastly harmonious lines with a proportionate development of each part of the animal: in other words, overall beauty. Then its movements should be correct, powerful and vigorous. On the other hand, the stud



does not seek to produce any particular type of Arabian, so that no special attention is paid to such points as the shape of the head or the size of the eye.'

Prince Sherbatov's horse stud was established in central Russia, and he crossed his purebred Arabian stallions with half-Arabians and Don mares. He wrote an informative booklet entitled 'The Arabian Horse and its Importance', which was circulated to studs of that era by the Russian Main Administration for Horse Breeding for feedback about the publication. Prince Sherbatov was connected with the



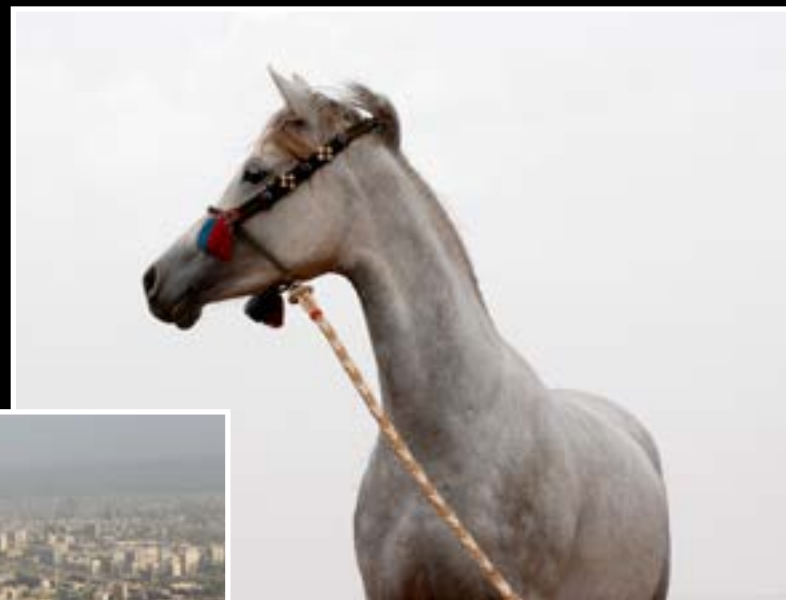
Arabians heralded in a new era for Russian breeders. Syrian stallion photo by Sharon Meyers.



They visited the Anaza Tribe to buy horses. Photo by Sharon Meyers.

International Society for the Preservation of the Arab Horse, which was formed in 1912 in Egypt. The patron was H.H. Abbas Pasha with H.H. Prince Mohammed Ali as president of the society and Prince Yoressef Kenial as vice president, Prince Sherbatov also supplied partbred Arabian horses to the Russian Army.

The breeding of superior cavalry horses was most important during the turbulent seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as the army horse was an essential component of the military power of a country. The ideal light cavalry horse



Count Stroganov wrote, "No special attention is paid to such points as the shape of the head or the size of the eye". Photo by Sharon Meyers.

Sherbatov and Stroganov purchased Arabians in Damascus, Syria. Photo by Sharon Meyers.

was required to have the qualities of soundness, hardiness, agility, great constitutional strength, a harmonious but utilitarian build, and, hopefully, a good disposition. These horses were required to carry 265 pounds (120.45 Kilograms) or more in weight and had to be capable of safely carrying a rider at all paces over very diverse terrain. The cavalry horse had to remain sound under adverse weather conditions that included cold, rain, mud, snow, heat, and humidity, often suffering great hunger as well. Many Russian horse breeders considered the Arabian to be the ideal light cavalry horse due to its excellent temperament, soundness, endurance, and frugality with feed and care. To cope with the problem of Russia's severe climatic changes and enormous distances, it was felt their saddle horses had to be extremely resilient. Due to his vigour and desirable size, the Arabian was considered the perfect horse for these arduous conditions.

During the Crimean War (1853/1854) the English Cavalry lost the majority of their Thoroughbred horses due to the privation and miseries of the campaign. The French Light Cavalry rode oriental-bred horses and they easily outlasted the English cavalry. This helped to substantiate the fact Arabian-bred horses were much more capable of withstanding the rigors of war than the Thoroughbred. Captain Lewis Edward Nolan, a noted author on cavalry training and tactics who was killed in the tragic Charge of the Light Brigade, wrote in 1852, 'For ages the finest cavalry in Europe was undoubtedly that of the Turks.' The Turks rode horses which rarely exceeded 14 hands and these horses were 'nimble, spirited, and yet docile' and were of obvious Arabian descent.

Russian breeders were not the only people who considered the smaller size and agility of the Arabian horse to be advantageous for their light cavalry. The famous Hungarian Hussars as far back as the 1700s rode horses with more than a fair dash of Eastern blood and these horses were small and lively. The Arabian was favoured by the Russian, Turkish, Hungarian, and Polish aristocrats for hundreds of years.

During the invasion of Russia in 1812, Napoleon's Grand Army lost between 130,000 and 175,000 horses. Even with these horrendous losses many horses survived this wretched ordeal. Hundreds were captured by the Russian peasants, who eventually used them to help improve local breeds. Interestingly, many of these horses were of Arabian bloodlines. Both the French and Russian cavalry were similar in most respects including quality, organisation, and tactics. Perhaps the main difference was the Russian horses on a whole were smaller. These horses were robust animals that had a distinct advantage over the French horses, as the bulk of these were incorrectly shod for the appalling weather conditions they encountered during the retreat from Moscow. A great number slipped on the icy

roads, never to rise again. The bigger and heavier animals of the French Cuirassiers suffered cruelly as hunger, thirst, and bad weather killed them off like flies. It is perhaps a little ironic that many of the French Cuirassiers either walked out of Russia or rode the incredibly hardy little Russian ponies they begged, borrowed, or stole. The heroic French horses that survived the 1812 campaign were comprised of many Arabians. These noble animals were greatly prized by their owners in recognition of their valiant efforts in reaching the safety of their homeland.

Russian breeders also stated the breeding of Arabian and Arabian-bred horses was not as expensive as breeding the Thoroughbred horse. The Thoroughbred required more feed and care than did the Arabian, and this made them a costly animal to produce. The cost of supplying war horses for armies was quite expensive and each cavalry trooper may have required in excess of three horses per year in peace time. While under battle conditions and on the campaign trail, the loss of horses could be quite staggering. For example, horses became a rare commodity during the English Civil War (1642/1649) and the 'quartermasters on both sides resorted to theft, confiscation, and compulsory purchase in order to mount their troopers'. The King imposed the death penalty for anyone found trying to reclaim their horse from his army. Such was the value of the humble cavalry horse! During the Battle of Assaye, Western India in 1803, every mounted field and staff officer serving with Major General Arthur Wesley (whom became The Duke of Wellington) lost a horse, and one officer had three of his horses killed. Marshal Ney, a principal member of Napoleon's army, had five of his horses slaughtered in a matter of hours during the battle of Waterloo (1815). The Spanish had several thousand horses killed each year in the wars against France and Portugal. The Prussian Army lost over a million horses in eight months in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Maintaining a reserve of horses for military use was imperative in those troubled times.

As can be seen, it was not beauty alone that drew the Russian horse breeder's attention to the incredible Arabian horse. It was certainly due to the foresight and dedication of these Russian breeders in the Nineteenth Century that the Arabian horse was instrumental in both the development and improvement of so many breeds. As Russia marched forward into the Twentieth Century many of these marvellous horses vanished as a result of the death and devastation of World War I and the Russian Revolution. Fortunately, due to the indomitable character of the Russian people, they were able to rebuild their studs and breeding programs in the 1920s and 1930s. The renowned Tersk stud was established during this period and exported its purebred Arabians worldwide. These remarkable Arabians have contributed their own unique qualities to the gene pool of many countries.