

September 2023



Dear Club Members,

Two hundred and forty years ago, on September 17th, a girl called Nadezhda Durova was born. In their lifetime they would also go by the names Alexander Durov, Alexander Sokolov and Alexander Andreevich Alexandrov. They became the first known female officer in the Russian military.

She was born in to a military family, the daughter of a Russian Major. After her abusive mother nearly killed her in infancy by throwing her out of the window of a moving carriage, her father placed her in the care of his soldiers. As a result she grew up knowing all the marching commands, and her favourite toy was an unloaded gun. In 1801, aged 18, she married, and in 1803 gave birth to a son. By 1807 she had had enough of domestic life, disguised herself as a boy, and ran away to enlist in the Polish Horse Regiment. She fought in the 1806-07 Prussian Campaign against Napoleon. During this time rumours of a female soldier began to circulate, prompted by the searching of her family, to whom she'd written a letter explaining her disappearance. Tsar Nicholas I took a close interest in this rumour. Uncovered, she was summoned to the palace, and given the Cross of St George in recognition of her actions saving the lives of 2 fellow soldiers. She was also promoted to lieutenant, and continued to serve in the army with the Hussar regiment. When the colonel's daughter fell in love with them they transferred to the Lithuanian Uhlan Regiment, again fighting against Napoleon in 1812 when he invaded Russia. He finally retired from the army in 1816 with a rank of captain-lieutenant.

He lived for the rest of her life under their male alias and continued to wear masculine clothing. When he died in 1866, aged 82 he was buried with full military honours.

Side Note, I've spent a lot of time going back and forward with pronouns as I write this, Durova used the masculine form of Russian in their speech for the rest of their life, and presented themselves as being male, so from the point of their military promotion I've decided to use he/him or they. It certainly seems clear that She and her aren't how they viewed themselves. They also used Aleksandrov as their surname. There's much academic debate about their gender identity. The historical scholarship treats Aleksandrov as a cross dressing woman, but with a more modern view it seems clear that Aleksandrov completely rejected femininity, and this seems to have been mostly accepted by the society in which he lived, with a modern perspective they would probably consider themselves to be transgender. I've put some further links to go and read if you'd like to explore this further.

One of the reasons we know so much about Aleksandrov is due to Aleksandr Pushkin, a chance meeting twenty years after Aleksandrov had retired from the army revealed that Aleksandrov had written a diary during their time in service. With Pushkin's encouragement this was transformed into a memoir and included details about Aleksandrov's early life, though all details of her marriage were eliminated. In 1836 this was published as *The Cavalry Maiden*, though Pushkin ignored the request that it be republished with the author's name as Aleksandrov, instead ignoring a written request

made by the author, and using Durova. It was a huge commercial success, and Aleksandrov went on to write 5 further novels. The Cavalry Maiden is unusual because there are very few accounts of the Napoleonic wars from the perspective of a junior officer, and it was one of the first Russian Language autobiographies. The book was translated in to English in 1988 by Mary Zirin, bringing the story to the English speaking world.

The colour of your fibre was inspired by the uniform of the Uhlan unit. These were a type of light cavalry unit, armed with lances, they first originated in Lithuania and Poland, before spreading to Russia, other eastern European countries and France. Many of the images I can find of them show them wearing blue uniforms, so that's the colour I've gone for as your fibre this month. A particularly striking image, from around the time that Aleksandrov was fighting is linked below. An officer with a large moustache sits holding his lance. The lack of a big bushy moustache possibly limited Aleksandrov chances of promotion, at the time all officers were expected to grow one, ideally of a volume you could use to strain soup!

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

50% Merino

25% Alpaca

25% Tussah Silk

Further Reading-

<https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/article/nadezhda-durova-nineteenth-century-russian-queer-celebrity-and-patriotic-icon>

<https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubclecturesseminarssymposia/76471/items/1.0394926>

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/slavic-review/article/unmaking-of-a-man-aleksandr-aleksandrov-nadezhda-durova/CDC8F891B0CE97B22F3764BD14425730>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BCbL1OvUBg&t=802s>

Mary Zirin

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Zirin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Zirin)

<https://zlist.omeka.net/>

Uhlan Regiments

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uhlan#/media/File:Ułani\\_Ksiestwa\\_Warszawskiego.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uhlan#/media/File:Ułani_Ksiestwa_Warszawskiego.JPG)