

Metaphors of memory: Count Kokovtsov and his “Fragments of memories”

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the reconstruction of “Fragments of memories of my childhood and the time in the Lyceum”, the memoirs of Count Vladimir Nikolayevich Kokovtsov, the former Minister of Finance and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Empire. The history behind his words is analysed, as are the circumstances surrounding the transfer of Kokovtsov’s memoir to the State Archive of Belgium (Archive of Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History in Brussels), and the history of its publication over many decades. “Fragments of memories” is compared with “Out of my past”, another memoir written by Count Kokovtsov. The author of the article tries to understand the peculiarities of the construction of the past by the representatives of the imperial bureaucracy, to reveal the specifics of its memorial culture and identity. Kokovtsov’s memoirs are remarkable within the context of Russian emigration memoiristics. They reflect the ambitions of an old Russian bureaucrat who survived the existential tragedy of exile and who tried to find moral support in the past.

Keywords: Count Kokovtsov, Russian Empire, Russian Imperial bureaucracy, Russian emigration, historical memory, memoirs, Rossica, Imperial Alexander Lyceum.

Introduction

In recent years, the interest in historical studies with regards to imperial elites, parliamentarianism, political parties and social movements in Russia in the early twentieth century, has increased significantly. Simultaneously, traditional subjects related to the history of the State, foreign policy, social conflicts and the specifics of Russia’s modernization, have started to be interpreted in new ways. In this regard, the figure of Count Vladimir Nikolayevich Kokovtsov (1853–1943) was a significant one. He was a prominent politician of the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century. Kokovtsov served twice as the Minister of Finance (in 1904–1905 and 1906–1914) and was Chairman of the Council of Ministers (1911–1914). His name is often spoken of in conjunction with such distinguished reformers as Sergei Yul’evich Witte and Pyotr Arkad’evich Stolypin. After the Revolution of 1917, Count

Kokovtsov emigrated from Soviet Russia. He settled in France, where he eventually died (Kovalev 2015, pp. 151–169). Nowadays, numerous publications are written about him. Yet, he is not considered to be of the same calibre as other major Russian reformers. Much of the research on the Count focuses on his state activities (Veber 2000; Zaytsev 2003; Vekshina 2008; Gaida 2011). His private life, public activities, work in banking and personal memoirs have, until recently, not been studied in detail because they drew little interest from researchers.

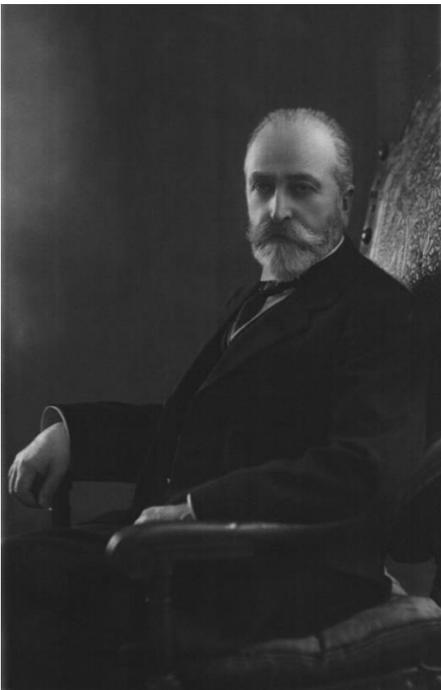
In 1990–2000, many memoirs of prominent Russian public figures and politicians from the first quarter of the 20th century were published and republished. This made it possible to expand the knowledge of the Russian Empire during the period of social, economic and political transformation. The memoir of Count Kokovtsov, entitled “Out of my past”, which was written in Paris and first published in 1933, was among the published texts (Kokovtsov 1933). The English translation of this book appeared soon afterwards (Kokovtsov 1935). The memoir of the Russian statesman aroused great interest among his contemporaries (Churchil 1936, pp. 509–511; Florinsky 1936, pp. 306–308; Kohn 1936, pp. 236–237). Today, it is impossible for any serious researcher to not consult it when seeking to reconstruct the history of the last years of the Russian Empire under the Romanovs. The book contains a lot of information about the political struggle in Russia, the ideological confrontation between the intelligentsia and the authorities, the mechanisms of government decision-making, and Nicholas II and his entourage. However, the memoir of the famous bureaucrat gives no clues as to his childhood, youth, parents, friends, education and start in life. The crucial thing is that little is known about him personally and what circumstances shaped his personality and worldviews. Until recently, only a small number of historians were aware of the existence of another memoir by Count Kokovtsov entitled “Fragments of memories of my childhood and the time in the Lyceum”. In this memoir, the author describes his life in the second half of the 19th century. The book, which fully uncovers his view of life, raises important questions such as: what are the peculiarities of the text and its significance for historical studies? And, what features of the memorial culture of the Russian diaspora is embodied in the text?

In recent times, in Russia, the subject of historical memory has taken a special place in the minds of people. It acquired significance in the late 1980s and early 1990s when unknown pages of history were discovered and old ones were redefined. In this respect, the Russian diaspora of 1920–1930s is an interesting subject to research and is often included in comparative historical and social studies. By using this as an example, it help us to understand how a community builds its past when faced with social and political change, how past experiences are reflected in these structures, and what the dynamics and mechanisms of the commemorative processes are. For Russian immigrants, memoir writing was one of the ways to preserve historical memory. That is why almost all of those memoirs were imbued with nostalgic notes. For the analysis of Count Kokovtsov’s memoirs, the theoretical achievements of authors who have written about the phenomenon of historical memory and memorial culture, are of a great help. These include the works of the French scientists, Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, the German researchers, Jan and Aleida Assmann, and the Russian historians, Lorina Repina and Olga Leontieva.

The circumstances surrounding memoir writing

In Count Kokovtsov's declining years, he tried to make sense of his experience as a man and a politician. In 1933, his memoir, entitled "Out of my past", was published in Paris. One of the motives for writing his memoir might have been the publication of the memoir of Count Sergei Witte in the early 1920s. In his memoir, Witte gives a lot of negative assessments of his contemporaries and the results of their work. Kokovtsov was also criticized. He was described as a man full of "bureaucratic jealousy for his power", and a social climber who is not reluctant to indulge in machinations, lies and slander in order to pursue his own objectives (Witte 1922, I, p. 332). Kokovtsov was therefore forced to defend himself in his own memoir. He went into great detail about his public activities. He notably avoided reproaching Witte and objectively went about highlighting his public role in the life of Russia. Pavel Nikolayevich Milyukov, a person who did not like tsarist bureaucrats, said of Kokovtsov's memoir, that it represented a historical source of primary importance: "V.N. Kokovtsov rendered considerable services to the cause of Russia, and his memoir conclusively proves it. Subjectivity is not a character trait of Kokovtsov, but a trait of his entourage and position. He remains faithful to it. <...> but he does not reflect upon the later psychological experiences in his memoir" (Musée Royal de l'Armée... XIX-24(a)). However, Kokovtsov writes only about the events of 1903-1919, starting with the resignation of Witte from the position of Minister of Finance, up to his own emigration from Russia.

Picture 1. Count Kokovtsov in Paris in the early 1930s



Source: Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii, fond 6734, opis' 1, delo 1, list 11.

While living abroad, Count Kokovtsov became one of the founders and active members of the Association of Former Pupils of the Imperial Alexander Lyceum that he graduated from. In 1934, his friends and colleagues of the association asked him to write a memoir about his childhood and youth. He promised to consider the idea, despite having some obvious

reservations. Kokovtsov never kept any diaries and it is for this reason that he feared he could not give an objective account of the past. He was required to recount events that had happened more than half a century previous. Events which were no longer a part of living memory and “were covered with a thick layer of mist, blurred by what happened in the years that followed ...” according to Kokovtsov (Kokovtsov 2011, p. 28). However, the desire to reveal his childhood and youth gradually possessed him. His thoughts and recollections delved ever deeper into his past, with images of his family, relatives and home therefore starting to appear more frequently in his memory. He wrote about this: “They began to gradually protrude from the shadow, from a forgotten time, and became brighter and brighter, refreshing the memory of the most cherished and irreplaceable time of my happy childhood, and led me to my admission to the Lyceum, and then, to many other events which are associated with the time spent in the Lyceum. In explanation of this phenomenon, I will say <...> that my early childhood never left my memory. It marked the firm, indelible foundation of my family’s life...” (Kokovtsov 2011, pp. 28–29). An archetype of a Home therefore appeared in the mind of the Count. This is regarded as the zero point in the coordinate system of the world, and is considered to be a key symbol of culture. The Home preserves and transfers the experience, customs and traditions of previous generations. The emigrant was a man without a Home. The luxury apartments in the centre of Paris could never replace the Home for the old Count. Hence the nostalgia for his parent's estate of Gorna-Pokrovskoye in the Novgorod Province, the longing for the St. Petersburg of his childhood and youth, the poignant memories of his relatives, and about the breakup of his family due to historic events. However, these features were characteristic of the commemorative culture of Russian emigration with its nostalgia for the lost homeland, the happy times of bygone days, and the comfort of domestic life (Megreleshvili 2010, p. 256). On the one hand, Kokovtsov’s recollections cast sad thoughts, but on the other hand, he sought to find harmony in the past. As a result, he set pen to paper, and by 1937, he completed the manuscript “Fragments of memories from my childhood and the time in the Lyceum.” It is still difficult to say with certainty whether Kokovtsov had any specific publishing plans. However, it is known that he acquainted the members of the Lyceum Association in Paris with the manuscript of his memoir. Mentions of this can be found in a letter dated 19th April, 1938, in which lyceum students congratulated him with his birthday: “We have all read these texts with reverence, and they brought back the memory of our years at the Lyceum and reminded us about everything we owe to our dear Lyceum” (Musée Royal de l’Armée... XIII–G16).

Unfortunately, the memoir was not published during Kokovtsov’s lifetime. In 1937, the Count’s manuscripts, including the “Fragments of memories”, were deposited in the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History in Brussels. Typewritten copies of the Count’s memoir were found in the possession of his heirs, who then gave one of the copies to the Bakhmeteff Archive in the United States. It is these very texts that researchers use for their work today (Lieven 1989, pp. 91, 113–114, 118). In the meantime, the materials deposited in Brussels lay forgotten for decades. In 2007, a historian, Sergei Mikhaylovich Nekrasov, published a fragment from Kokovtsov’s memoir (Kokovtsov 2007, pp. 125–159). He did so on the basis of a copy which had remained in France in the personal archive of Kokovtsov’s grandson, Patrick de Fliegé. It wasn’t until 2011 that a full version of the Count’s memoir was prepared for publication. This was made possible through the joint efforts of

Russian and Belgian historians. The typewritten manuscript that contained small handwritten notes made by Kokovtsov formed the basis for the prepared manuscript (Musée Royal de l'Armée... XIX-17). No other draft versions or additional materials were available. The Count had apparently given only the final copies of his work to the museum in Brussels, including the final manuscript, dated 28th May, 1937 (Musée Royal de l'Armée... XIX-16).

Keys to the past

Kokovtsov's "Fragments of memories" are notably different from his memoir about the time of Nicholas II. As noted by Andrei Valentinovich Mamonov, Kokovtsov when creating the book "Out of my past", once again plunges into the political struggle he recently took part in. He comes back to debates about the fate of an already collapsed empire, as discussed in emigrant circles. The belief that the actions that were undertaken were right had to drown the bitterness of defeat and the mistakes made (Mamonov 2015, p.194). On the contrary, in "Fragments of memories" he deliberately avoids anything that could be relevant in the 1930s. He writes about a time that few people remember. In so doing, he is not reaching out to his contemporaries and future generations, but only to himself.

"Fragments of memories" are chronologically arranged and, in contradiction to the title, are not abrupt, but complete. They mainly cover the period from the beginning of the 1860s until the 1880s. The text can be divided into three parts. The first part is dedicated to the time of Kokovtsov's first conscious impressions and his life on the family estate of Gorna-Pokrovskoye prior to his admission to the Imperial Alexander Lyceum in 1866. The second part is about his time at the Lyceum from 1866 to 1872. The third and the smallest part by volume looks back at his beginnings in the civil service. Unfortunately, the Count only touches the surface when describing the start of his bureaucratic career. He very briefly talks about his service in the Ministry of Justice during the period 1873-1879, about his work in the Central Administration of Prisons of the Ministry of Internal Affairs during the period 1879-1890, about the transition in the Department of the State Economy of the State Council in 1890, etc.

It is known that Kokovtsov, prior to starting his memoir, confessed to being hesitant about reconstructing events "long gone" because he was not sure that he could recall faded images of the past. It is important to note that in the middle of the 1930s the former Prime Minister had turned ninety. It is for this reason that he understandably hesitated, struggling between his sense of duty and doubts about his own memory. The "key" to the past (in the Count's own words), and the impetus for the memory flow, were recollections from his childhood and images of relatives. This allowed him to organize the system of memories about the times of his childhood and youth. It goes without saying, that the author uses chronological detours which is usual for the genre of memoirs. This in no way affects the overall impression of the integrity and consistency of the facts and events portrayed.

Kokovtsov needlessly worried that his memory would let him down. The memoir features many small important details of the beginning of a great life journey within the apparatus of a huge empire. "Fragments of memories" neither features references to Chekhov's Russia, the nobility, the powerless reflexive country, nor about rioting Russian intelligentsia. Similarly, no

mention is made of, or descriptions given of, Russian aristocracy or the imperial luxury they lived in. What Kokovtsov's memoir does do, is paint an image that allows us to better understand the Russia of the pre-reform years, which was hardly fitting for the industrial era. The memoir also clearly demonstrates the tortuous path that was followed in the creation and construction of the new Russia, and of the heavy social and cultural transformations of the time. For this reason, Kokovtsov avoids stylization and excessive sentimentality in his memoir. This contrasted strongly with the typical memoir culture of emigrants in which the idyllic adoration of a bygone Russia was usual. The Count's memoir also does not feature any speculation as to why the Russian Empire "suffered a wreck" along with the whole world. Kokovtsov combines a deep resentment of historical events, especially the Bolshevik Revolution, with a willingness to accept the inevitable. His memoir reflects the pain, rather than any bitterness, of the losses suffered. People did not cause the hostility and malice. However, Kokovtsov does not ponder on the general, but rather focuses on specific individuals. He writes with great admiration about the commoners who surrounded him on the family estate during his childhood. In his memory, the peasants were "his people" and were perceived to be a part of the large patriarchal family. It goes without saying that Kokovtsov maintained the status quo, but he was never arrogant about it. Patriarchy became one of his main values and a measure of harmony for him. It lay at the heart of Kokovtsov's religious beliefs, which never bore a pretentious character. "Fragments of memories" gives an insight into this and the reason why his personal religious experience contributed to his acute resentment of Grigori Rasputin. It is also clear from the book that domestic life shaped his identity more than his education or schooling. At the same time, the years spent at the prestigious Alexander Lyceum took a central place in his memoir. Kokovtsov describes this time in great detail, vividly depicting his teachers and classmates. The scenes in which he describes the fellowship and mutual support, express sentimentality. It turns out that a friendship started at the Lyceum lasted a lifetime. This is true of Kokovtsov's closest friend, Eduard Dmitrievich Pleske (1852–1904), with whom he went up the corporate ladder. After Pleske's premature death in 1904, Kokovtsov took his place as Minister of Finance. He also became close friends with one of his young teachers Nikolai Stepanovich Tagantsev (1843–1923).

It seems that the great value of the memoir is in the details, the small things that are carefully reproduced by the author. The image he creates breaks many stereotypes. For example, when one tries to typify who Count Kokovtsov was, the answer, more often than not, is that he was an aristocrat, a scholar, a high-calibre professional. It is therefore a surprise to realize that he is an author of memoirs: "I can confess that the in the years up to 1860 I did not learn anything <...> We did not have any children's books and ABC books, and I do not even know if there were any in other well-to-do families in the countryside. My first textbook was a newspaper "Severnaya Pochta" ("The North Mail"), which arrived just two times from a post office <...>" (Kokovtsov 2011, p. 37). It is curious that this was being said by a man who was considered to be the embodiment of Saint Petersburg bureaucracy, a man, who after his graduation from the prestigious Lyceum, served exclusively in metropolitan institutions. However, his words capture what real life was really like for provincial Russian nobility, isolated as they were by the boundaries of their estates and surrounding neighbourhoods. The Count's own ancestral estate of Gorna-Pokrovskoye was a typical example, being almost

150 versts (160 km) from the nearest railway. Kokovtsov had to deal with a lot of domestic and economic problems too, which meant life conditions were quite modest. When Kokovtsov was sent to study in the capital, he was forced to live modestly and frugally too. On the other hand, it is clear from the memoir that such life conditions prepared him well for the high levels of hard work and responsibility he was later to undertake.

Kokovtsov's memoirs disprove the long established stereotype of the Russian elite being closed, as well as the belief that in pre-revolutionary Russia only the chosen ones who had the connections and noble origin could make their way up the corporate ladder. He does not deny the existence of such phenomena in Russian life, however, the example of Kokovtsov himself clearly proves that there were other life scenarios. He became the Russian equivalent of what in the West is called a "self-made-man", through hard work learnt during his childhood, a clear understanding of the ways to achieve a goal and spiritual strength. He also managed to achieve the great heights he did without the means and connections, being admitted to the Lyceum from a grammar school, to be later invited to attend University, and then to serve the State.

Conclusion

In his memoirs, Kokovtsov hardly writes about the events of national importance which he witnessed at the beginning of his bureaucratic career. Nevertheless, these events are important for the understanding of Russian political history at the turn of the 19th to 20th century. They bring across the conditions under which the bureaucratic worldview was formed by those who ran the empire prior to its destruction.

The memoirs are full of descriptions of everyday life, values, worldviews of the Russian nobility and bureaucracy, tales of pedagogical practices and educational institutions, and of the household culture of the students attending the Lyceum. In addition, they contain a lot of interesting information and opinions about the political and public figures surrounding Kokovtsov. His texts are remarkable in the context of Russian emigration memoiristics. The catastrophic events that catapulted him into exile, happened right before his very own eyes. These events had a serious impact on people's faith in natural social evolution and progress. They led to a reassessment of traditional values and instigated many people to think about pressing issues such as relationships between Russia and the West, people and intelligentsia, government and society. Historical memory also underwent profound change under their influence. On the one hand, exile brought forth an interest in subjects that might inspire pride in Russia, its people and its culture, but on the other hand, it forced people to think about the historical roots of the disaster they had experienced. Many were tormented by the question: how did the Russian empire disintegrate so rapidly? Was it historically doomed? Or, did the Russian imperial project stand a chance, and the catastrophe could have been avoided? (Kovalev 2012, pp. 323–325)

Kokovtsov's memoirs reflect the life ambition of an old Russian bureaucrat who survived the existential tragedy of exile and who tried to find moral support in the past. The preservation of images of the lost homeland and the ruined world created some kind of a bridge over the chasm, which bound the broken thread of time. The publication of Kokovtsov's memoirs has

enriched historical science by providing it with a valuable resource that will be used by historians both now and in the future.

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