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Published on H-Russia (February, 2021)

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Frances Nethercott has produced a welcome contribution to a growing cohort of books dealing with historical thinking and writing in the Russian Empire and its successors. These works—most notably *Historians and Historical Societies in the Public Life of Imperial Russia* (2017) by Vera Kaplan, whose praise is featured on the back cover—advance our understanding of the historical practice in the empire by considering not only its intellectual and political dimensions but also exploring its cultural and social aspects. In eight densely argued chapters, Nethercott explores the relationship between literature and history and, in so doing, complicates our understanding of the late imperial historiography to a great extent.

Such a project is especially appreciated in a field whose graduate students—and even the public in Russia—still draw on the works of nineteenth-century historians like Sergey Solovyov and Vasily Klyuchevsky, whose weighty tomes of literary classics star in their stories of coming to choose Russia. Both of these features can be attributed, to a certain extent, to the academic genealogy that connects the late imperial historians with their émigré students who occupied key positions in English-speaking academia. Much of the current historiography has focused on reading the development of Russian historiography in relation to political issues, to the creation of official history and memory, and to the development of European historiography.

Nethercott starts by discussing the institutional context. By virtue of cohabitation within the same historical-philological faculty, the study of literature was historical and the study of history was institutionally closer to the literary than the social scientific disciplines, even as Rankian and positivist turns made their way from the Continent. Equally important, however, was that historians established extra-institutional forums for learning and discussion, such as associations and seminars. In these parallel “sites of learning,” “the study of history never entirely vacated its common ground with *belles lettres*” (p. 33). Hovering over these sites of learning were master historians, the focus of the book’s second chapter. These historians were not only praised for combining a careful examination of the facts with literary ability, but also saw their vocation as one of enlightenment and thus related to the general reading public. It is a consequence of this perceived role that allowed no “differentiated discourse” in Russia between “‘textbook history,’ lectures, and the public addresses” that are usual components of the professionalization of the historical practice (p. 56).

Her third chapter focuses on style. For the student of Russian language and history, whose training must have included at least portions of
Klyuchevsky’s five-volume *Kurs russkoy Istorii* (1904), this chapter is highly revealing. Her analysis demonstrates how mastery of style was perceived as crucial for the writing of good history and the extent to which literature could substitute for “law-based, empirical enquiry” when desired (p. 75). A public enlightener, Klyuchevsky’s beautiful portraits of figures like Ivan the Terrible were much needed and appreciated, but, expectedly, were later rejected by Soviet historians who focused on the empirical and the scientific. Thus, for fulfilling their purposes, historians were able to draw “upon a rich inventory of sources including, in addition to fiction, legal record, memoir, notes and impressions by foreign visitors” (p. 97). This literary toolbox and its perceived merits and limitations is the subject of chapter 4.

The fusion of literary and historical writing was aided by the idea that “a work of realist art could be treated as a phenomenon of actual life,” a prevalent idea in the 1860s (p. 99). Historians like Ivan Greves employed works of literature like Horace’s lyric poetry not only when the sources for “external facts” were missing but also as “social-psychological observations” that made for a more complete portrait (p. 100). Such sentiments were heeded by Jacob Burckhardt in central Europe, for whom poetry was “one of [history’s] purest and finest sources” (p. 113). Nethercott shows how Klyuchevsky and Greves differed in their use of literature, with the latter using literature to supplement records that were not available to him and the former more liberal in making “fictional protagonists no less than historical ‘great men’ viable candidates for his deepening interest in national character” (p. 115). In many respects, Greves’s achievement in the “anthropologization of economic research” (Anton Sveshnikov’s words, p. 116) was well ahead of its time.

Chapter 6, perhaps the most surprising to the contemporary historian, discusses “tangible remnants of the past” and Greves’s fieldwork (p. 117). This is a Greves chapter; the transition in focus from Klyuchevsky to Greves is done masterfully and elegantly. Greves and his students contributed not only to a man-centered approach to history but also to its local and topographical study. These were not separate endeavors. Unlike Marc Bloch’s emphasis on enduring structures (to whom Russians often compared Greves), Greves saw the local as a way of “total immersion ... into the spiritual culture” (p. 136). His method was thus of visualization, of using its “material trace” to reconstruct its cultural world (p. 137). Following the turn to the local and the tangible and its connection to Russia’s unique form of historical-literary scholarship is certainly one of the book’s strongest and most interesting points.

In chapter 7, Nethercott explores the corpus of writings produced by historians on the “modern literary pantheon” of modern Russia (p. 141), focusing on Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, Mikhail Lermontov, and Ivan Turgenev. Their affinity, proved on the methodological level so far, seems a natural match to the reader: historians were interested in the values of history and in what the reconstruction of mental environments has to offer and thus were interested in the values and atmospheres created by these men of letters. As literati put in charge of the writing of history, they were also interested in contextualizing the authors and discussing the philosophies of history that emanate from their work. The latter, and more expected, role better conformed to western European conceptions of how literature and history should coexist, with literature being a cultural artifact that is shaped by the author’s background and times.

The entire spectrum of possibilities and contradictions is well encapsulated in this quote of Klyuchevsky from an unsigned review of Sergey Platonov’s *Ancient Russian Tales and Stories about the Times of Troubles of the 17th Century as a Historical Source* (1888), which I find useful to reproduce here in full: “There is not one historical source, which does not require critical verification. Besides, what does factual material for the history
entail? Historical facts are not simply events: the ideas, viewpoints, feelings, impressions by people in a given period are also facts, they are very important and equally require critical study” (quoted, p. 158). Thus, Nethercott claims convincingly to show a differentiation—even if one intuitively to us—between “literary-critical” and “historical skills” (p. 158).

The final chapter turns to the historical study of literature. Unlike in France, where the adoption of positivism produced a sharp distinction between the study of history and the study of literature, Nethercott adopts Lidia Lotman’s term to describe a “hybrid philological-historical science” in which folklore and oral traditions were employed in the study of social and cultural history (p. 167). A series of case studies show the notion of narodnost’ allowed nationalists and Slavophiles to continue some of the tendencies of the Romantic era in their study of folklore. Nethercott demonstrates how, more perhaps than in many other, parallel academic spheres, historians of literature and mainstream historians shared the same concerns and many of the same convictions. Having said that, this chapter brings her main point to completion: literature was exceptionally useful to historians in the late Russian Empire, ranging from “verbal art, supporting evidence, to source, and resource in the study of man’s attachment to his environment” (p. 187).

Writing History in Late Imperial Russia is a tightly argued and pleasantly presented study that abounds in fascinating insights. Its primary audience is mainly historians of historiography or, even more likely, of Russia, as it assumes some basic knowledge (an assumption of which the reader is implicitly reminded by the phrase “of course” with which the text is checkered) of Russia’s history. Those who are in possession of such knowledge will hear many pennies drop during the reading. The short epilogue, which brings these issues to their resurfacing during the Thaw, testifies to the continuing relevance of literature to the Russian-speaking historical discipline.