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Author's Subject: new book: Vovina-Lebedeva on schools of study of Russian chronicles

Date Written: Thu, 7 Mar 2013 16:40:12 -0800

Date Posted: Fri, 07 Mar 2013 19:40:12 -0500

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V[arvara] G[elievna] Vovina-Lebedeva. *Shkoly issledovaniia russkikh letopisei: XIX-XX vv.* Sankt-Peterburg: "Dmitrii Bulanin", 2011. 928 pp. ISBN 978-5-86007-674-7.

Vovina Varvara Gelievna. *Shkoly issledovaniia russkikh letopisaniia (XIX-seredina XX vv.). Avtoreferat dissertatsii na soiskanie uchenoj stepeni doktora istoricheskikh nauk* (S.-Peterburg, 2012). 25 pp.

First, a disclaimer: the author has kindly provided me with copies of the book and the *avtoreferat*, that generosity not to be seen as influencing my positive response to her work.

Let me start my appreciation of (perhaps, meditation on) this imposing study with a personal anecdote. A good many years ago, in a letter to *The Slavic Review* regarding the late Ia. S. Lur'e's contribution to the study of Russian chronicles, I referred to him appropriately as a one of the most prominent exponents of the methodologies developed by Shakhmatov, whose initials I omitted. Little did I realize that a punctilious editorial assistant at the journal might never have heard of the eminent philologist and student of Russian chronicles. So when my letter appeared in print, Shakhmatov had been christened "Mstislav V." (presumably the first Shakhmatov the hapless editorial assistant had unearthed in a catalog search), not Aleksei Aleksandrovich, whose name should have been familiar to anyone with even the slightest academic interest in the study of Russian history or philology.

Perhaps I should not read too much from that incident beyond its having left the impression with knowledgeable readers that I was ill qualified to write on anything to do with Russian chronicles. However, stimulated by Vovina-Lebedeva's book to revisit matters about which I once concerned myself, I confess I worry that her colossal effort will barely be noticed outside of Russia, where even in the heyday of the training of specialists in the pre-modern period (if there ever was such a heyday), only the slenderest of threads connected any of my generation with a real knowledge of the Russian academic traditions which had shaped our field. At very least, her book should remind us of how important it is to understand those earlier traditions of scholarship, even if some of them led to dead-ends and a great deal (but by no means all) of the accomplishments of our intellectual predecessors has now been superseded. As one of the rare individuals outside of Russia who ever ventured to teach a course devoted to analysis of Russian chronicles (it folded quickly for want of students), I am painfully reminded of how ill-prepared I was to do so and how much of that earlier legacy of scholarship is still beyond my ken. The situation can only get worse as positions vanish and "demand" for pre-modern subjects shrinks. It is unsettling

to anticipate the day when the name Shakhmatov indeed may be meaningless outside of a narrow circle of specialists within Russia.

The issue here is not whether we and our successors will read (at least some of) the published scholarship and study the primary sources, but whether we understand fully the evolution of the methodologies of scholarship and the way in which personal relations shaped what eventually made it into print in an era when the foundations for the scholarly study of Russia were being laid. While some rather cavalierly will refer to "schools" of scholarship on Russian topics in, say, the U.S. (think for example of the "skeptical school of Keenan" or the "revisionists" accused of being soft on Stalinism), as Vovina-Lebedeva argues, in the Russian context the concept means something rather different and far more significant for what it tells us about intellectual history and scholarly inquiry. There, with whom one was trained and with whom one's teacher and his or her teacher in turn was trained is still deemed meaningful and certainly can help explain why certain projects were ever undertaken (or abandoned) and why they came out the way they did. Maybe eventually this sense of the importance of scholarly genealogies will disappear as does so much else touched by the contagions of the modern world, but that moment in Russia has not yet arrived.

As she elaborates, the issue here is not that we lack in overviews of "source study" and historiography with specific reference to the chronicles and to important specialists who wrote on them. However, few who have written on the subject for the period from the late 18th-century, when August Ludwig Schlözer pioneered in the critical study of the Russian chronicle texts, and the beginning of the 20th century when much of the significant scholarship by Shakhmatov had been published, have clearly articulated what was significant about methodologies of this study and how it related to traditions of philology that developed first outside of Russia. Moreover, questions of the degree to which certain scholars were indebted to the methods developed by their predecessors have often been left for debate or answered in contradictory fashion. Vovina-Lebedeva thus highlights the value of a previously unknown and unpublished anonymous overview of the study of Russian chronicles written in or soon after 1916 for its insights into such questions informed by the perspective of the then recent appearance of Shakhmatov's work.

While for the Soviet period there is V. I. Buganov's still useful but mechanical overview (published in 1975) of the study and publication of Russian chronicles, its approach is not one that emphasizes schools of scholarship but rather individual "contributions" generally taken out of context of how their authors' ideas developed. In Buganov's work there is no real distinction between those who contributed serious scholarship to the study of the chronicles and those who merely treated "letopisevedenie" as he called it as an auxiliary discipline on the way to locating "facts" in the sources.

While Vovina-Lebedeva often explores in great detail what individual scholars wrote on the chronicles, she does so with continual reference to how their methods of analysis and conclusions either coincided with or differed from those of their predecessors or contemporaries. That is, the issue here is not whether a given study necessarily established a new factoid that then could be used to document a narrative about

Russian history, but rather how even the apparently most devoted students of a noted scholar may have ended up going in different directions from their mentors. Of some importance is her emphasis on the philological/linguistic "school", where F. I. Buslaev was a seminal influence through his pupil F. F. Fortunatov, who in turn influenced Shakhmatov in his development of his "comparative method" for studying the chronicles.

At various times Shakhmatov's own methods and conclusions have been misrepresented, his hypothetical reconstructions of chronicle compilations (*svody*) sometimes confused with real texts or, on the contrary, criticized for the fact that too much of what he did built hypothesis upon hypothesis. Historians tended to want to find concrete sources in real chronicles rather than be satisfied by what seemed like a continually shifting interpretive scheme. Yet with few exceptions (the most obvious one is M. D. Priselkov), the boundaries between one "school" and another in this telling end up being permeable. Beginning with Shakhmatov, no one could avoid engaging his work, and at least parts of his method tended to be adopted even by those who were most critical of some of his conclusions.

Vovina-Lebedeva draws on both published and unpublished reviews of the scholarship, the unpublished ones (some relating to dissertation defenses) often being the most revealing for their unvarnished opinions. For me, of the greatest interest is how she tries where possible to set the stage for an analysis of the scholarship by first exploring the personal histories of interactions between teacher and student. In all this, Shakhmatov is still the key figure; she repeatedly draws on the archives containing his correspondence to show how he supported those who wished to master the study of the chronicles, even in the difficult days of World War I, the Revolution and right up to his death before the end of the Civil War. V. N. Peretts' role as a supportive mentor is also highlighted here. Among the particularly valuable sets of correspondence which Vovina-Lebedeva mines is that between Ia. S. Lur'e and A. A. Zimin, which she helped prepare for publication, only to have it blocked by opposition from Zimin's heirs. It is an incredibly rich source covering about three decades of spirited interaction between two of the most prominent medievalists of the mid-20th century. Perhaps somewhat oddly (she recognizes his contributions in a note), she does not attempt to analyze Zimin's work on the chronicles (including publication of some important texts), even as she devotes considerable attention to Lur'e, one of the real "heroes" of this volume. I might add that I had the memorable experience of sitting in on part of the *spetskurs* Lur'e offered at LGU on the chronicles in 1971. Vovina-Lebedeva's terminal date for her study is the beginning of the 1960s, though she makes an exception for Lur'e's work, arguing that he represented the last thread in the direct line of the school that went back through his teacher M. D. Priselkov to the latter's teacher Shakhmatov.

As I know from a certain amount of personal experience and from the evidence in this book and some other post-1991 studies of Soviet scholarship, it is only by mining this kind of archival evidence that we can really begin to learn what was going on behind the closed doors of academic meetings, especially in those dreadful decades of the 1930s and 1940s, when a number of the key individuals in the narrative here were arrested, exiled, and/or perished in the Blockade. That is, the

published record is not enough, though increasingly revealing parts of the personal files are beginning to appear in print.

The reader is warned here that some scholars will receive attention even if they may not have left much of a published legacy or at least may not have had much impact. Thus there are some surprises. E. Iu. Perfeckij, who emigrated, did much of his important work outside of Russia. Another emigré, N. E. Andreyev, with I think less justification other than the fact that Vovina-Lebedeva has mined his correspondence with George Vernadsky, gets a chapter here. We learn of his contribution to the study of certain Pskov chronicles (largely contained in one article) but as much about his annoyance at being termed a "foreign" scholar by his Soviet peers, his often acid comments on meeting some of them, and his outrage concerning Keenan's book on the Kurbskii-Groznyi correspondence.

The work of S. A. Bugoslavskii, major portions of which have finally appeared in print only in the last few years, receives a great deal of attention. But above all one is struck by the space given to N. F. Lavrov's notes for a study of the Russian chronicles which he never lived to complete. Over some 90 pages, Vovina-Lebedeva reproduces his tabulations of chronicle texts and notes to specific entries specifying which events were reported in which chronicles, which items are unique, and so on. Interspersed are small stemmata he drew to illustrate what a given set of readings might suggest about textual filiation, these schemes however not all pointing in the same direction. We cannot know where all this might have led, but it is suggestive of the kind of major study that might have been, had he lived to complete it.

The archival files are revealing about the discussions beginning in the mid-1930s concerning revival of the publication of the Russian chronicles: should the old PSRL merely be continued, or should a whole new approach be undertaken? When these discussions were renewed after the War, opposing schemes (one by M. N. Tikhomirov, the other by A. N. Nasonov) outlined where the series might go. Tikhomirov's argument for tradition won. Even though Vovina-Lebedeva tries hard to remain neutral in her judgments on differing scholarly stances regarding the analysis of the chronicles, I think it is clear that she looks with something of a jaundiced eye on much of what Tikhomirov wrote about the chronicles, and in contrast ranks very highly Nasonov's understanding of the analytical methods which should be followed if the study and publication of these important sources was to advance.

Even if this is where the book ends, as the author clearly appreciates, that is not the end of the story. Part of the fascination of the topic is that so much of the history of the chronicles is still so actively disputed, and not the least of the reasons, as she concludes with reference to her opening epigram quoting Jacques Derrida, is that each individual, while having been shaped by his training and possibly belonging to a particular "school", in the final reckoning produces something unique which incorporates some element of individual creativity.

Will this book be read? I can't see many savoring every line or even large swatches of its close review of scholarship on the chronicles. Unless one is actively working on the chronicle texts, a lot of that detail cannot really be meaningful. Yet, if one is using the

chronicles, those details will have to be taken into account. The personal stories and interactions documented here are for me the real fascination and reward for the effort the book demands of its readers. It has a long bibliography, indexes of personal names and chronicles, and the delight of a binding that replicates (photographically) the half-leather marbled paper bindings with which those who work in the collections of 19th-century Russian libraries are familiar. The best tribute to Vovina-Lebedeva's magisterial work would be if some real wear were to be added to the rubbed edges in that facsimile of the historic binding.