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The End of an Era

Remembering Sigurd Ottovich Shmidt (1922–2013)

DANIEL C. WAUGH

Sigurd Ottovich Shmidt, who died at age 91 on 22 May 2013, was one of the last of an important generation of Russian historians and arguably the most influential of them. His breadth, energy, and colossal productivity have left their mark across the entire landscape of the study of Russian history, from medieval to contemporary. He liked to cite the famous French historian Marc Bloch about how important it was to understand the study of any historical topic with reference to the times in which it was being studied. Following Shmidt's lead, our best tribute to Sigurd Ottovich would be to look at the circumstances that shaped his career and try to understand the outpouring of warm tributes to him which marked his last decades and his passing. To review merely the published record of his books, articles, interviews, and reviews does not suffice, even if it were humanly possible—his bibliography is said to number more than 2,000 items, of which more than 500 are counted as scholarly publications.

Shmidt was a “child of the Arbat,” if slightly younger than that spoiled generation enshrined in Anatolii Rybakov's novel.¹ He was born in and, but for the war years, lived all his life in the same apartment in the old Arbat neighborhood of Moscow. This “malaia Rodina,” as he termed it, a home to intelligentsia and artists, would inspire some of his most important work in his last decades, when he assumed a leading role in organizing efforts at historical preservation, the recording of its memories, and the writing of its history. When asked in an interview several years ago whether it was difficult growing up as the son of one of the most famous Russian scholars, the geophysicist and mathematician Otto Iul'evich Shmidt (1891–1956), Sigurd Ottovich indicated that for a long time he tried to distance himself from that heritage,

¹ Anatolii Naumovich Rybakov, *Children of the Arbat: A Novel*, trans. Harold Shukman (Boston: Little Brown, 1988).

wanting instead to be valued for his own work. The elder Shmidt made his name as an explorer of the Arctic and then for years was the responsible editor of the first edition of the *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* (Great Soviet Encyclopedia). Shmidt's mother, Margarita Emmanuilovna, was also an academic. As a boy, Sigurd Ottovich on occasion accompanied his father to receptions in the Kremlin, where he remembers standing at only arm's length from Stalin while applauding him. Even as Otto Iul'evich's colleagues then began to disappear in the Purges, he merely fell out of favor but was never sent to the Gulag. After 1937, Otto Iul'evich would not mention Stalin at home or breathe a word about the Purges, perhaps in an attempt to protect his family from the possible consequences of being overheard discussing forbidden topics.

The young Sigurd Ottovich must have had about him something of the air of privilege, as one of his female classmates at the university remembered first seeing him dressed, she thought, rather formally, in a gray outfit—suit jacket and knickers. On my first meeting with him decades ago, I was put off by what I would now term a kind of “patrician” air. Those who became his students, though, all emphasize his accessibility and the warm interest he displayed in their work. He and several of his admirers have noted that one of the two most important women in his life (the other being his mother) was his nanny, Frantsiska Aleksandrovna Teterskaia, whose death in 1989 left Sigurd Ottovich (then 67!) with no one to remind him to put on his warmest boots before going out into Moscow's winter weather. Of course, the important thing we should emphasize here is his roots in the traditions of the old intelligentsia, where encyclopedic curiosity was encouraged along with a sense of openness to alternative viewpoints even as one might be willing to argue against them. Those traits carried over into his teaching.

Sigurd Ottovich began his historical training at Moscow State University (MGU) in 1939 just as the war began. He remained in Moscow as one of the few men in a history cohort that now came to be populated mostly by women. Among his classmates was the later eminent Byzantinist, Aleksandr Petrovich Kazhdan (1922–97). Shmidt distinguished himself early on, but it could not have hurt—as his classmate Elena Viktorovna Chistiakova (1921–2005), later herself a respected historian, suggested—that their mentor Mikhail Nikolaevich Tikhomirov (1893–1965) seemed more supportive of his male students. Arguably Shmidt became the favorite. Since the era was at hand when “cosmopolitanism” of all kinds would be looked on with suspicion, it is worth noting that Shmidt must have acquired an early mastery of German (his father, from a family that traced its origins to Courland, was bilingual).

When he and Chistiakova met, it was in a group that was studying French, a language that he spoke well enough to impress his French hosts when in Paris for an international conference in 1966.

Evacuated to Central Asia, Shmidt continued his studies at the Central Asian University in Tashkent (a fellow student there was Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Zimin, later one of Shmidt's teaching colleagues in Moscow), returned to Moscow in mid-1943, and graduated the following year. Presumably Tikhomirov pointed Shmidt in the direction of his topic for his graduate (*kandidatskaia*) dissertation: Aleksei Adashev and the "eastern policy" of Ivan IV. Chistiakova recalled in a poignant memoir how in 1951 Tikhomirov invited just the two of them on an excursion to the Russian North, visiting the historic towns of Velikii Ustiug and Sol' Vychegodsk and ending up in Arkhangel'sk. Sigurd Ottovich's later career built on some of the important themes in Tikhomirov's own work: in addition to a research focus on Muscovite history, an emphasis on source study and dedication to the exploration and study of Russia's provinces and their history. In Tikhomirov's last years, when his eyesight was failing, Schmidt was one of his former students who came regularly to assist him in preparing a description of his large manuscript collection in advance of its donation to the Academy of Sciences library in Novosibirsk.

Among the most frequently cited legacies of Tikhomirov was his revival of the Archaeographic Commission of the Academy of Sciences, the body charged with oversight over the collection, preservation, and publication of historical texts. Established in the first half of the 19th century, it had continued after the revolution, led then by the noted historian Sergei Fedorovich Platonov (1860–1933). With Platonov's arrest in the "academic affair" of 1930, the commission was dissolved. After a brief interval following Tikhomirov's death in 1965, Shmidt succeeded him as the head of the Archaeographic Commission and became the chief editor of its annual, *Arkheograficheskii ezhegodnik*, positions from which he could exert considerable influence and which opened the way for active exchanges with foreign colleagues and travel abroad at a time when such interaction was still quite difficult. How many of his colleagues could break out to celebrate his birthday a bottle of cognac that had been given him by Fernand Braudel? Shmidt's position as head of the commission and editor of its journal was not unassailable, though. As he later would note, in the early 1970s, supported among others by Dmitrii Sergeevich Likhachev (1906–99), he successfully rebuffed an attempt by party hacks to discredit him.

Writing about Schmidt after his death, one of his former students traced the explicit intellectual lineage he had passed on to the many who had

studied under him. That lineage began with Sergei Mikhailovich Solov'ev (1820–79) and passed through Vasilii Osipovich Kliuchevskii (1841–1911) and Sergei Vladimirovich Bakhrushin (1882–1950) to Mikhail Tikhomirov. This progression raises the interesting issue of the significance of “schools” of historical training in Russia. As Likhachev stressed in his tribute to Shmidt as a teacher, to claim being the “student” of any academic involves more than just taking a lecture course with him. Rather, it means absorbing and practicing a particular methodology of research and adopting a particular mode of conduct following that of the teacher. By this standard, in Likhachev's view, Shmidt could be credited with establishing his own “school” of followers. Shmidt's many admirers have especially emphasized this aspect of his career, the side that is perhaps the least appreciated by those of us outside Russia who know Shmidt's work.

In 1949, Shmidt moved smoothly from completing his graduate study at MGU into an uninterrupted career of teaching at the Historical-Archival Institute in Moscow (MGIAI) (now part of the Russian State Humanities University). (He was briefly removed from the institute's payroll in the 1970s but continued to teach.) The particular emphasis of his teaching was source study (*istochnikovedenie*), which he helped elevate to the level of a separate discipline both in formally offered courses and most notably in the informal student “circle” (*kruzhok*) which he founded in the spring of 1950 and led for half a century. The circle continues to this day. Its meetings came to involve a broad spectrum of students studying history and preparing for careers in academia or archival administration; other faculty members also became regular members. Participants would present their work for open discussion and critique in an intellectual environment that might be compared with that of the 19th-century intelligentsia *kruzhki*. Indeed, as many have recalled (perhaps retrospectively idealizing the experience?) the atmosphere was that of *glasnost*, a kind of almost subversive freedom of discussion that well antedated the era of Gorbachev and was fraught with some danger at the end of the Stalin era and in the years that immediately followed. In this circle, it was possible to discuss objectively foreign scholarship (insofar as it could be had), even if to employ its methodologies in published work was out of the question.

As Sergei Mikhailovich Kashtanov would put it, Shmidt became both “idol” and “tyrant” to his students. He developed an enviable reputation as a lecturer, able to move around in the classroom while relying on only a few notes. Of course, students would be students, not always paying attention. One of them recalls having been so absorbed with a fellow student in reading

Marina Tsvetaeva's "Poema kontsa" ("Poem of the End"), in a *samizdat* copy at a time when her work was banned) that they did not realize Shmidt was standing behind them. Rather than rake them over the coals, he merely nodded approvingly but noted that he preferred Tsvetaeva's "Tsar'-Devitsa" (The Tsar' Maiden). Shmidt respected his students' efforts and encouraged them to develop independent thinking at the same time that he pushed them hard, even as undergraduates, to meet the most rigorous professional academic standards. Another of his students, when pressed by him as to whether she had checked directly all the primary sources, replied in the affirmative. At which, he pulled from his shelf the relevant source publication, forcing her to admit she had in fact used a citation in a textbook which had misquoted the original. Shmidt's knowledge of the archives was legendary, and he shared that expertise generously with students and colleagues.

The list of those who experienced Shmidt's *kruzhok* is almost a Who's Who of the Russian historical profession of the last half-century and includes many who became prominent in academic administration or headed libraries or archives all across the Soviet Union. He often played a key role in the publication of their work once they had become academic professionals. Shmidt outlived some of the best of those whom he trained. One senses from the emotional tribute he delivered to Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Amosov after his sudden death in 1996 that Amosov was like the son whom Shmidt never had, whose talents and scholarly achievements most closely matched Shmidt's ideal. Amosov combined scrupulous methodology of source study with field work in archaeography and a particular interest in regional history. One of several books Shmidt sent me over the years is *Biblioteka Ivan Groznogo*, a book that he edited containing Amosov's annotated edition of a "reconstruction" of the tsar's library undertaken but never published by Nikolai Nikolaevich Zarubin in the 1930s.² Shmidt himself wrote on another subject to which Amosov and others of his students devoted particular attention, the vast and important illuminated chronicle (*litsevoi svod*) produced in Ivan's reign. Amosov's contribution to its study was based on his careful codicological analysis of the manuscripts.³ That we now have a superb facsimile edition of this important monument of Muscovite culture is due to Shmidt's initiative.⁴

² N. N. Zarubin, ed., *Biblioteka Ivana Groznogo: Rekonstruktsiia i bibliograficheskoe opisanie*, ed. S. O. Shmidt with notes and commentary by A. A. Amosov (Leningrad: Nauka, 1982).

³ A. A. Amosov, *Litsevoi letopisnyi svod Ivana Groznogo: Kompleksnoe kodikologicheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow: Editorial URSS, 1998).

⁴ E. N. Kazakova, ed., *Litsevoi letopisnyi svod XVI veka: Russkaia letopisnaia istoriia*, 24+ vols. to date (Moscow: Akteon, 2009–). On the history of the facsimile project and S. O. Shmidt's role in it, see E. A. Belokon', V. V. Morozov, and S. A. Morozov, eds., *Litsevoi letopisnyi*

The concept of “source study” as a separate “discipline” may seem a bit foreign to those trained as historians outside Russia. Whether it deserved to be considered an independent subject as opposed to being merely part of the professional equipment of any good historian was disputed rather vigorously in the last Soviet decades. As Shmidt himself admitted in looking back over his career, at least in part the particular emphasis given to source study was a way of trying to engage in historical research of lasting value that might not be compromised by the necessity of conforming to the prescriptions of Marxist orthodoxy. Whether or not he could apply some of the proper methodologies of source analysis consistently in the immediate post-Stalin decades, Shmidt’s concept of “source study” was very broad, a kind of multidisciplinary approach to the study of history.

He was quick to point out that the antecedents to this modern emphasis on *istochnikovedenie* were to be found in the work of some of the most prominent of the previous generations of Russian historians. Interestingly, much as he honored Tikhomirov and the “Moscow school,” he may have identified even more closely with the scrupulous methodological approaches and emphasis on source publication of Platonov, considered to be the leading representative of the “Petersburg school” in the early 20th century. The common perception of these “schools” might contrast Platonov’s work with that of Vasilii O. Kliuchevskii in Moscow, who was instead known especially for a “sociological” approach in his stimulating and sweeping syntheses of Russian history. In his thoughtful essays on Platonov, Shmidt pointed out that the traditional view of the difference between these “schools” exaggerated the distance between them—the lines, if they exist, are blurred when it comes to the basics of historical methodology. He readily admitted to eschewing broader interpretive and integrative subjects in his own work, publishing instead primarily articles with often narrowly focused themes. Whether by preference or necessity in the post-Stalin years, if he was the heir to the “Moscow school” epitomized by Kliuchevskii, he seems not to have played the role that heritage would have required of him. Yet from early on in his teaching, Shmidt pushed his students to position their work on a larger canvas of historical generalization, somewhat to the dismay of one of his respected senior colleagues who observed one of Shmidt’s first classes at the institute.

What he termed *istochnikovedenie istoriografii* became increasingly important for Shmidt and his “school” in later years, as evidenced by the attention given the subject on the pages of *Arkheografichskii ezhegodnik*. In the face of some opposition, he advocated that discussion of historiography not be

based mainly on a somewhat superficial characterization of published works of historians. If one were truly to understand and critique their interpretations, this required archival research in their unpublished papers, correspondence, and so on, as well as looking at the details of their biographies.

Apart from his methodological essays, he wrote on many of the famous Russian historians, supported republication of their works and published new archival material relating to their careers. To a considerable degree his emphasis was on correcting the distortions that had been imposed by the prevailing Marxist orthodoxy, beginning with the malignant activity of Mikhail Nikolaevich Pokrovskii in the 1920s and 1930s but continuing long after Stalin's death. Platonov was the most prominent of Pokrovskii's victims, stripped of his academic positions and then arrested for a purported monarchist plot in 1930. Shmidt was the responsible editor for the recent publication of Platonov's correspondence with colleagues and presumably was involved in the planning that led to publication of the documents about the Unified State Political Directorate's (OGPU's) fabricated case against him and other academics. Beyond this one famous example, the outpouring in recent years of memoirs, correspondence, unpublished reviews, and the like has opened the doors to a much more nuanced understanding of the historical profession in the Soviet era than we have previously had.

As Shmidt readily admitted, his earlier work was flawed by the necessity of working within the limits imposed by the prevailing orthodoxy. Yet because he was interested in moving on, not spending time revisiting and revising, when encouraged to do so, he simply republished those many earlier essays on Muscovy, even if the hard evidence derived from his work on the primary sources had to be presented in an interpretive framework that at times made little sense of Muscovite realities. Shmidt himself recognized that this earlier academic writing now might seem rather dated, written as it was in a kind of artificial isolation from what was happening in the larger world of historical scholarship, a world of which he was probably more aware than were many of his peers.

Apart from Platonov, other historians of particular interest to Shmidt who had been condemned for their "bourgeois" interpretations were Nikolai Pavlovich Pavlov-Sil'vanskii, known for his studies of early Russian law and interpretations about Russian feudalism, and Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin, whose immensely popular *History of the Russian State* had a profound influence.⁵

⁵ N. M. Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva rossiiskogo*, ed. D. S. Likhachev and S. O. Shmidt, 12 vols. in 3 (Moscow: Kniga, 1988–89), repr. of the 5th ed. published in St. Petersburg, 1842–43.

Shmidt acknowledged the way in which Karamzin's (and later Kliuchevskii's) vividly evocative portrayals of early Russian history influenced literature, art, and public perceptions about the Russian past. Yet as some critics have noted, Shmidt's awareness of this has not led to a sufficiently critical reassessment of those images, which still shape modern work on early Russian history.

In keeping with his concern over the way interpretations of history can mold public opinion, in his last years Shmidt became one of the most vocal critics of the so-called "new chronology" of Anatolii Timofeevich Fomenko and his acolytes, which has been foisting on a gullible public pseudohistorical "reinterpretations" of Russian and world history.

There are interesting points of contact and contrast between Shmidt and his almost exact contemporaries (they were all born within two years of one another) Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Zimin (1920–80) and Iakov Solomonovich Lur'e (1921–96). Both published prolifically on premodern Russia, leaving behind analytical work that is likely not to be superseded, as well as a large corpus of scrupulous text editions. Both suffered in their careers in ways that Shmidt did not. With limited opportunities to teach, Lur'e left no "school." In contrast, Zimin, a colleague of Shmidt's at MGIAI, trained good students who are passionately devoted to his memory. Zimin's impact at MGIAI rapidly declined after the early 1960s, when he ventured to question orthodox opinions about the origins of the famous epic *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (The Igor' Tale) and was condemned by most of the Soviet academic establishment. Shmidt was among those whom Zimin numbered as his "enemies," an epithet he applied to any who did not take his side in the controversy over Igor'. One has to imagine, though, that the two historians shared a lot in their views about historical methodology and their dedication to the importance of the proper teaching of history. Indeed, it is common for the admirers of both Shmidt and Zimin to write about the sense of "moral obligation" they felt about their scholarship and the need to instill the highest standards of critical thinking in the next generation.

One who worked with both Shmidt and Zimin (his principal adviser) and has been generous in acknowledging his debt to them, Sergei Mikhailovich Kashtanov, is arguably the most accomplished Russian medievalist active today. Only a decade younger than Shmidt, Kashtanov enrolled in the institute as a student in the same year Shmidt began teaching there. Over the years, Shmidt served on the examining committees for all of Kashtanov's degrees, starting with his diploma work at MGIAI. One of the historic photos from the institute's archive shows Shmidt, Zimin, and Kashtanov on an excursion Shmidt arranged for the famous *kruzhok* to the Trinity–St.

Sergius Monastery. Kashtanov had the distinction of participating in the *kruzhek* from its very beginning and on through the time when he returned to the institute as a department head and had been elected a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In a purge of the Academy of Sciences Institute of Russian History in 2000, its director Andrei Nikolaevich Sakharov in effect eliminated the medieval division. Kashtanov and Shmidt both resigned. Two years later, as Shmidt turned 80, he persuaded Kashtanov to replace him as president of the Archaeographic Commission.

What we might term Shmidt's "social commitment" extended well beyond the confines of the ivory tower. He was a public figure of a stature that helps us appreciate why the celebration of his 80th birthday in 2002 included a major event hosted at the office of the (somewhat notorious) Moscow Mayor Iurii Mikhailovich Luzhkov. Shmidt's resumé includes an exhausting list of his service on various academic advisory boards for cultural and educational institutions. He was an active supporter of initiatives for improving the teaching of history in schools and raising public awareness of Russian cultural traditions. Among his honors was election as an academician of the Russian Academy of Education, appropriate for an individual whom one admirer and former student characterized as an "enlightener" (not merely a teacher or educator).

Perhaps paradoxically for one whose personal history was anchored in urban Moscow, his advocacy of regional studies (*kraevedenie*) is of a piece with his concern over public education about the Russian past. Shmidt was careful to avoid using the term "provincial" in the derogatory connotation that it commonly conveyed with reference to history and culture outside the Russian capitals. For him, the history and culture of the Russian regions embodied important values and achievements that merited attention in their own right and deserved to be at the core of any treatment of Russia's past.

Beginning in the late 19th century, with the creation of various historical-archival commissions across Russia, the interest in local history took off, peaking in the first decade of the Soviet era, only to be ruthlessly destroyed during the Purges. Using his position as head of the Archaeographic Commission (whose mandate included the preservation of the sources for local history and culture), Shmidt helped organize the revival of *kraevedenie* in the 1990s. Among the tasks was to enhance the training of local historians and archivists and to bring local history into the school curriculum. Significantly, in one of his last interviews (published online posthumously as the "Testament of Sigurd Shmidt") he suggested that school textbooks might best have two parts, one a relatively compact treatment of national history and the second,

which also would include a methodological section, focusing on regional history.⁶ In all this Shmidt stressed the importance of history for educating students in critical thinking skills and preserving a public appreciation for the nation's culture in the face of modern developments that threaten it.

It was no accident that the first major commemorative publication honoring him (on the occasion of his 70th birthday) appeared in Penza, which hosted one of the first conferences devoted to local history in the early 1990s.⁷ At about this time, a museum was established there to honor the memory of its most famous local son, Vasili Kliuchevskii. Shmidt's work on the history of the Arbat and his initiative in the publication of *Moscow: An Encyclopedia* in conjunction with the celebration of the city's 850th anniversary in 1997 are other fruits of his increasing attention to the writing of local history.⁸ Following on Shmidt's 75th birthday, a second major commemorative volume appeared, appropriately titled *Source Study and Local History in Russian Culture*.⁹

Although I had but limited personal acquaintance with Shmidt and cannot be numbered among his students, I owe him a considerable debt. Over the years he consistently supported the developing academic careers of his students, in part by publishing their work in the prestigious *Arkheograficheskii ezhegodnik*. I first met him in 1971 (still short of my Ph.D.) when he offered me the opportunity of publishing there a text I had discovered (but whose significance had first been pointed out to me by Zimin)—what purported to be a letter, previously unknown, from Tsar Ivan IV to King Stefan Bathory of Poland-Lithuania. To be sure there were no other copies, Shmidt undertook himself to do some checking in the archival files of the Central State Archive of Ancient Acts (TsGADA, now RGADA), to which I had no access. This would be the first of my several publications in Russian journals. A few years later, when I had prepared a book-length finding aid for the important

⁶ Kim Smirnov, "Zaveshchanie Sigurda Shmidta," *Novaia gazeta: Obshchestvo*, no. 55 (24 May 2013) (available at <http://en.novayagazeta.ru/society/58251.html>, accessed 10 September 2013). The interview took place on 18 June 2007.

⁷ A. D. Zaitsev et al., eds., *Mir istochnikovedeniia: Sbornik v chest' Sigurda Ottovicha Shmidta* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, Istoriko-arkhivnyi institut; Penza: Departament kul'tury Penzenskoi oblastnoi administratsii, 1994).

⁸ S. O. Shmidt, ed., *Moskva: Entsiklopediia*, comp. M. I. Andreev and V. M. Karev (Moscow: Bol'shaia rossiiskaia entsiklopediia, 1997). He initiated *Arbatskii arkhiv: Istoriko-kraevedcheskii al'manakh* (Moscow: Tverskaia 13, 1997–), published several short articles, and gave interviews emphasizing the importance of the Arbat's history.

⁹ V. F. Kozlov, ed., *Istochnikovedenie i kraevedenie v kul'ture Rossii: Sbornik. K 50-letiiu sluzheniia Sigurda Ottovicha Shmidta Istoriko-arkhivnomu institutu* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2000).

early Russian manuscript collection of Count F. A. Tolstoi in the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library (now the Russian National Library), there was some debate in Russian academic circles as to whether it could be published at a time when inventories (*opisi*) were themselves considered to be “archival documents” and restricted in access. Dmitrii Likhachev had facilitated the project from the beginning, but Shmidt’s opinion, I am told, was also sought and proved to be decisive in allowing the publication to appear.

In the Festschrift published to celebrate Shmidt’s 70th birthday, one of his former students concluded his tribute with the wish that for many years yet he might phone Shmidt at home on the Arbat and hear in response to the conventional “Zdravstvuite [Hello], Sigurd Ottovich,” the reassuring, “Spasibo, ia eshche zhiv” (Thank you, I am still alive). In his warm appreciation of his mentor posted to H-EarlySlavic on the day of Shmidt’s death, Sergei Bogatyrev recalled phoning him but a month earlier, impressed by the still encyclopedic memory and the youthful enthusiasm for projects yet underway. Bogatyrev concluded: “For many years, Sigurd Ottovich gave a lecture about ‘Introduction to the Profession’ to first-year history students at the Istoriko-arkhivnyi institut in Moscow. To many of us, he became the face of the profession.” Indeed, I think our appreciation of this remarkable man and scholar will only continue to grow, for his legacy is very much alive.

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