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Nikolai Mikhailovich
Karamzin in Germany

Fiction as Facts

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Preface

Credit goes to Professor Michael Wachtel, Princeton University, for having first introduced me to Karamzin. In his Graduate Seminar on “Eighteenth-Century Russian Literature” in the Spring of 2003 he suggested that I work on the *Письма русского путешественника*. Out of the term paper grew the article, published in *Die Welt der Slaven* (Panofsky 2005), which is reprinted here in a revised and enlarged version as “On the Road through Germany”. For my subsequent research I am deeply obliged to the archivists and librarians at Berlin and Potsdam, Heidelberg and Princeton for advice and support. Especially I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Dr. Jürgen Kloosterhuis, Director of the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin-Dahlem (and among his competent and kind staff above all to Irina Fröhlich and Stephan Utpatel); to Mr. Helmut Herbig, Bibliothekar of the Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin; to Dipl. Hist. Anja Lampe and Knut Wendt of the Stadtarchiv Potsdam; and to Dr. Falko Neining of the Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv in Bornim, without whose knowledge and experience I would have missed many a lead. Dr. Jutta Weber, in charge of the Handschriftenabteilung Staatsbibliothek Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz, generously gave permission to transcribe and partly reproduce the Karamzin autographs in her collections. A great enrichment for me were the stimulating discussions by correspondence and conversations in Princeton or Berlin with the true Karamzin scholar Professor Joachim Klein, now Berkeley / California, whose friendship and interest in my modest pursuits have been always encouraging. It was upon his advice that I turned to Professor Natal’ia Dmitrievna Kochetkova at the Pushkinskii Dom in Saint Petersburg, who accepted the two studies on Karamzin’s arrival in Berlin and his Russian veteran at Potsdam for *XVIII век* in Russian translation, the latter being done with utmost care by Anton Demin (Saint Petersburg) and Elena Iu. Kozina (Freiburg). Finally I would not have been able to avail myself to some obscure articles and books, had not Mrs. Karen Downing of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, untiringly procured those titles through interlibrary loan. Last I am indebted to my friend Professor Michal Grover-Friedlander of Tel Aviv University for having suggested the subtitle “Fiction as Facts”.

Princeton, New Jersey, September 2009

Introduction

From May 1789 till September 1790 the barely twenty-three years old¹ Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin (1766–1826) undertook a sixteen months' long journey through Germany, Switzerland, France and England. His impressions resulted in the famous *Письма русского путешественника* (Moscow 1791–1792), the *Letters of a Russian Traveller*, which in a modesty topos the author did not consider his best work (“ce n'est pas mon meilleur ouvrage”, Wolzogen, Caroline v. 1849: II, 409). Simultaneously with the complete edition of 1799–1801 appeared in Leipzig the German translation by Johann Gottfried Richter (1764–1829), a former private tutor in Moscow (Bartel / Lindemann 1992: 502 f.). Richter claims in his preface that “Karamsin, der des Deutschen vollkommen mächtig ist, die Übersetzung selbst durchgesehen hat” (Karamsin 1966: 496). Karamzin (1984: 611) knew only from hearsay (“à ce qu'on m'a dit”, Wolzogen, Caroline von 1849: II, 409) that the German edition was in press, as the Tsarist censorship prohibited its import into Russia. Indeed in the German version some political statements are more outspoken and critical than in the Russian original (Karamzin 1984: 447 f.). These two texts, the late eighteenth century Russian original provided with the commentaries by Iuri M. Lotman, N. A. Marchenko and B. A. Uspensky (Karamzin 1984) as well as the re-published German translation from the turn of the nineteenth century (Karamsin 1966) are the basis for the present study.

Back in Moscow Karamzin prepared his *Письма русского путешественника* for press by editing his journal, the frequently mentioned “записную книжку” (Karamzin 1984: 12, 57, 72, 76, 181, and passim) and any on the road casually on scraps of paper penciled observations, “где и как случалось, дорогою, на лоскутках, карандашем” (Karamzin 1984: 393; Klein 2008 b: 308). Presumably he changed as little as possible of the original notes, except for deleting trivialities and redundancies. At least for the second printing of 1793 Karamzin (1984: 393) decided against any polishing of his wording, let it be colorful and rough, “Я хотел [...] многое переменить в сих Письмах, и . . . не переменял

¹ Karamzin (1984: 167) turned 23 (or according to other sources 24) in Geneva on 1st December 1789.

почти ничего. Как они были написаны, как удостоились лестного благоволения Публики, пусть так и остаются. Пестрота, неровность в слоге есть следствие различных предметов”². Granted this is a variation on the time-honored *captatio benevolentiae*, the literary device asking for the readers’ indulgence, but Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) similarly described the revising of his Italian travel diary in a purely private letter to Karl Friedrich Zelter (1758–1832) dated Weimar, 27 December 1814, “Von meiner Italienischen Reise habe ich die vorhandenen Tagebücher von Karlsbad bis Rom redigiert. Dieses Büchlein erhält dadurch einen eigenen Charakter, daß Papiere zum Grunde liegen, die im Augenblick geschrieben worden. Ich hüte mich, so wenig als möglich daran zu ändern, ich lösche das Unbedeutende des Tages nur weg, sowie manche Wiederholung; auch läßt sich vieles, ohne dem Ganzen die Naivität zu nehmen, besser ordnen und ausführlicher darstellen” (Goethe [1890]: 71 f.). Goethe burned most of his papers from Italy afterwards. Karamzin could have done the same, or the conflagration of Moscow in 1812 that turned his library to ashes might have spared him the effort. We do not know. As his notebooks have not been found, their very existence has been doubted (Karamzin 1984: 534; Klein 2008: 308). However, it was normal to keep a diary, when travelling afar. Vyazemsky (2003: 285 f.), for instance, refers to an anecdote put down in such a “записной книжке русского путешественника прошлого столетия [i.e. eighteenth century]”. As Svetlana Gellerman (1991: 78) has proven with near mathematical exactitude, if one were to deny the fact that Karamzin took notes on his trip, then one would be forced to attribute a phenomenal memory to him. “Pourtant, une chose nous paraît désormais hors de doute: Karamzine, premièrement, tenait bien, sous une forme ou une autre, des notes de voyage; et deuxièmement, il les a utilisées lors de son travail sur les *Lettres*” (ibid.: 86).

Nobody doubts the documentary value of Goethe’s *Italienische Reise* of 1786/87 that was penned nearly contemporaneously with Karamzin’s *Letters of a Russian Traveller* and also printed at a later date (1816). Nor for that matter are the comments questioned, which M.^{me} de Staël (1766–1817), who could have been Karamzin’s twin sister, made in *De l’Allemagne* (1813) in 1808–1810. Yet Karamzin’s epistolary work tends to be regarded as the effusions of an invented “traveller”, serving as a vehicle for the author’s “self-representation”, “self-image” or “self-stylization”. Instead of interpreting the *Letters of a Russian Travel-*

2 [I had wanted { . . . } to change a lot in these Letters, and . . . changed almost nothing. The way they were written, they have received the flattering favor of the readership, so let them stay like this. The motley appearance, the unevenness of style are the result of the diverse objects].

ler as a character aggrandisement, they should be recognized as an important biographical and topographical source. Already in 1858–1859 Prince Pyotr Vyazemsky (1792–1878) scolded his countrymen for no longer reading the *Письма русского путешественника* as the “настоящие мемуары, исповедь человека, картина эпохи”³ that they represented. Vyazemsky (2003: 885–888) loved “отыскивать, угадывать следы его [Карамзина], разумеется, давно стертые с лица земли. Поколения сменили поколение, которое он застал и видел. Гостиницы исчезли. Все приняло новый вид”⁴. A hundred-and-fifty years later Joachim Klein (2008 b: 310) somewhat hesitantly conceded, “heutzutage neigt man vielmehr dazu, den dokumentarischen Wert der Reisebriefe ziemlich hoch einzuschätzen”. In order to follow Karamzin’s footsteps “long ago worn from the face of the earth” one has, of course, to undertake some research and preconceived notions do not suffice to determine, what he saw and to whom he spoke during his stay in Western Europe in 1789–1790. Here too Svetlana Gellerman (1991) has done pioneering investigations for the Geneva interlude of Karamzin’s travel.

Admittedly the *Письма* could give the impression that in the course of his long journey Karamzin became negligent in keeping track of his days. However, contrary to Germany, where he spent only a few days in each town, in Paris and London he lived for several weeks. Here the exact sequence, when he did what, was less important than to give his readers a survey by subject matter. Thus home in Russia Karamzin must have re-arranged his diary entries, which originally carried an exact date or even hour, into an inventory of sites worth seeing. For Paris he decided to group into separate chapters the theatres, the royal palaces and parks, the academies, the streets, the coffeehouses and taverns, the public institutions such as hospitals and libraries, the funerary monuments or the surroundings of the city in order that each category of monuments might be appreciated at a glance. Although such editing of the travelogue made the *Письма* more useful, it destroyed the semblance of authentic letters or a journal. Even if in the eighteenth century literary tradition the letters were not real, but fictitious (Klein 2008 b: 307 f.), this would not diminish their documentary value.

Lotman and Uspensky (Karamzin 1984: 534) assumed, erroneously, that we knew much too little about the actual travel of the writer, since we had no other evidence about this period besides the *Письма*, “мы слишком мало знаем о

3 [the genuine memories, the confession of a man, the picture of an epoch].

4 [to search for, to divine Karamzin’s traces, which, it goes without saying, have long been worn from the face of the earth. {Later} generations have changed the one, which he witnessed and beheld. Hotels have disappeared. Everything has taken on a new look].

реальном путешествии писателя [...], у нас нет об этом периоде никаких других сведений”. Their admirable research was alas impeded by their isolation in Soviet Russia. Although no such hardship existed for the recent annotated English translation of the *Письма* by Andrew Kahn (2003), he too ignored the realia. Certainly the episodes of the *Письма* are neither symbolic nor disconnected ‘snapshots’ (Brinkjost 2000: ch. 1). Kahn (2003: 495) furnishes us with a good example of what we dispute. Referring to the tomb slab of the Count of Gleichen in Erfurt (see below, 38–42), he construed,

The narrative of the duke and the Saracen girl, the source of which is said to be an inscription; but the legibility of the stone itself can be read only metaphorically as a cipher, since the story would have been commemorated epigraphically at greater length than the narrator produces. The conceit of the stone is noteworthy because it is an image of containment and fixity, and makes the narrator at least in his own self-representation a reader of the landscape rather than its inventor.

No attempt is made to search for the literary and historic background, let alone to locate the extant monument. Kahn treats “the duke [*recte*: count] and the Saracen girl” like a fairy-tale and the stone like a “conceit” or mere figure of speech. He interprets the inscription on the stone as a metaphor, but neither does the stone commemorate anything epigraphically, not even names or dates anymore, nor did Karamzin pretend that his inspiration for the narrative was an inscription. Karamzin (1984: 81) wrote that the hand of the diligent sculptor carved the “изображения” of the deceased in stone, which Kahn (2003: 109) himself correctly translated as “their image[s]”. The lack of familiarity with the actual funerary relief led Kahn to make up an inscription and worse, to fail to appreciate the moral of the tale, which is not about “the duke and the Saracen girl” as a twosome, but about a Count of Gleichen married to two wives at the same time.

Since my previous article on Karamzin’s “Travel through Germany” (Panofsky 2005), I have been able to substantiate more of the occurrences mentioned in the *Письма* by primary sources. These concern above all the circumstances of “The Arrival in Berlin” (below, 77–85) and the conversation with “The Russian Veteran in Potsdam” (below, 87–108). In both case studies Karamzin’s reliability is not only vindicated down to the smallest detail, but his reports open a window onto the historical conditions, which regulated the civilian and military life in Prussia at the end of the eighteenth century. They throw light on the experiences Russians were exposed to as foreigners in Germany, whether they were enlightened travellers or uneducated grenadiers. Here and elsewhere

the episodes of the *Письма* can be matched with newspaper reports or census-, church-, court- and military-records, facilitated by the fact that Karamzin (1984: 613) dated his Letters from Europe according to the Gregorian calendar (not the Julian one in use in Russia at the time, which would have been eleven days behind). In addition, as Svetlana Gellerman (1991) has compellingly shown, the chronology and contents of the Letters are faithfully mirrored in the correspondence of third parties, “Karamzine n’invente rien” (ibid.: 78).

Although after his grand trip in his early twenties Karamzin never returned to Germany in later life, he retained a deep respect for this country of poets and philosophers. As late as in 1823 he meant to hire a German tutor, who could talk and read with his children in German, and only five months before his death on 22 May / 3 June 1826 he thought in all seriousness of moving his family to Germany in order to provide his sons with excellent and affordable schooling (Bartel / Lindemann 1992: 514 f.). Not all traces of Karamzin have been obliterated from the face of German soil though, some of his papers have found their way into German libraries: there is a letter to Wieland of 1789, which is now permanently housed at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nürnberg (Zum Winkel 1963) and there are “The Sixteen Autographs in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin” (below, 109–153), which are published and commented upon in this present volume. The Wieland letter was originally sent to Weimar, so was the letter to Wilhelm von Wolzogen of 1808 (below 111, I). The other papers in Berlin remained in Russia till the 1920s. Those that were acquired and then donated by Ludwig Darmstaedter were probably smuggled out by some emigré after the Revolution and those that had been addressed to the numismatist Johann Philipp Krug in Saint Petersburg were inherited by his German relatives, who sold them to the Staatsbibliothek. The Handschriftenabteilung of the Staatsbibliothek Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz thus owns a haphazard collection of handwritten letters and notes by Karamzin, written in French, German and Russian and ranging from 1806 to 1823. Despite their random selection, we agree with Amburger (1962: 329), “daß es sich lohnt, nicht nur große zusammenhängende Bestände, sondern auch zufällig erhaltene Einzelstücke zu untersuchen, und daß man dadurch manche Anregung zu Studien auf dem Gebiet der deutsch-russischen gelehrten Beziehungen empfangen wird.”