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‘The Primary Pleasure Now is History ...’: Nikolai Karamzin’s Interest in History in the Light of His Letters to Mikhail Murav’ev

The article discusses the letters of Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826) to Mikhail Murav’ev (1757–1807) during the period 1803–1807 focussing on the circumstances surrounding the creation of *A History of the Russian State*. The article analyses 15 letters published in a three-volume collection of the works of Karamzin in 1848, as well as a letter published by Laura Rossi in 2018. The first letter was written on 28 September 1803 and it contains a request from Karamzin to Murav’ev to support his efforts to receive financial assistance from Russian authorities for the preparation of *A History of the Russian State*. The letters by Karamzin to Murav’ev, together with the writer’s letters to other individuals (the poet Ivan Dmitriev and Karamzin’s brother Vasiliï), highlight the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the idea to compose an outline of the history of Russia (after the periodical *Vestnik Evropy* had ceased to be published) and the stages of Karamzin’s work on the first volumes.

The relations between Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826) and Mikhail Murav’ev (1757–1807) (and other writers of the turn of the nineteenth century) have attracted the attention of various researchers (Georgii Makogonenko, Liubov’ Kulakova, Rimma Lazarchuk, Irina Fomenko, and others), among whom a particularly prominent place is occupied by the work of Laura Rossi, who explored, among others, the problem of the relationship between artistic prose and letter-writing (Rossi 1994: 91–115).

This article focuses on Karamzin’s interest in history and the

circumstances of the initiation of his work on *History of the Russian State* [Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo, 1816–1826], and this angle will serve as a basis for a discussion of the writer’s letters to Murav’ev. We seek to identify in the correspondence thematic lines associated with Karamzin’s interest in history. It is not a coincidence that the title of this article includes a quotation by Karamzin stating that the exploration of Russian history and the writing of *History of the Russian State* became for him in that period the greatest pleasure, meaning that he was completely engrossed in his

work, which became his centre of interest and a pursuit more important than any other. This is also borne out by Karamzin's words from letters to others and opinion writing, listed at the end of the present article.

This article focuses on 15 letters by Karamzin to Murav'ev from the period 1803–1807. The majority of them were drafted in Moscow. The first letter is from 28 September 1803; in a post scriptum to it, Karamzin gives the address of his Moscow residence. The last letter is dated 28 January 1807. They were first published in the journal *Moskvitianin* in 1845 with two editorial footnotes, one of which referred to Karamzin, and the other to Murav'ev (Karamzin 1845: 1–16). They were later included in collections of works by Karamzin, including a three-volume collection published in St. Petersburg in 1848 (Karamzin 1848: 680–699). They are complemented by a letter dated 16 October 1803, published by Laura Rossi as a supplement to an article from 2018 on the exchanges between the two authors (Rossi 2018: 213–227). If we include it in the primary body of letters by Karamzin to Murav'ev, it comes second in chronological order. According to Rossi, the manner in which Karamzin addresses Murav'ev in the first two

letters demonstrates that at the time they were not friends yet, but did enjoy mutual respect. In subsequent letters, the tone of their exchanges evolves, but not beyond the scope of topics discussed. The thematic scope of the letters expands, but the central focus is always on history. Murav'ev's letters have been lost, but Karamzin's letters allow us to guess their contents and what his attitude towards his interlocutor was. The absence of letters from Murav'ev to Karamzin was, in a way, to be compensated for by an extensive footnote in the journal *Moskvitianin*, devoted to the public activity of Murav'ev. After Murav'ev's death on 29 July (10 August) 1807 in St. Petersburg, 'Karamzin was linked by close bonds [...] with his family – widow [...] and growing sons' (Lotman 1997b: 287). The letters by Karamzin to Murav'ev was the subject of a 2011 article by Liubov' Sapchenko, however her central focus was not the issue of history (Sapchenko 2011: 89–96).

At the start of the correspondence with Murav'ev, Karamzin was a well-known literary figure, the author of sentimental novels (*Poor Liza*, [Bednaia Liza, 1792] *Julia* [Iuliia, 1796], etc.) and pre-romantic novels (*Bornholm Island* [Ostrov Borngol'm, 1793],

creator of *Letters of a Russian Traveller* [Pis'ma russkogo puteshestvennika, 1791–1792], one of the precursors of Russian historical prose, a poet, translator, the founder and editor of journals (*Moskovskii zhurnal*, *Vestnik Evropy*) and literary almanacs (*Aglaiia*, *Aonidy*). His objective at that time was to compose an outline of the history of the Russian state. Karamzin gave indication of his urgent need to deliver such a volume to his fellow Russians in *Letters of a Russian Traveller*: in his opinion, such a theme would be interesting and enticing to readers – the history of Russia would be no less engaging than that of other European states, not only for Russians, but for foreigners as well (Karamzin 1984: 344). Nestor and Nikon became, in the writer's view, symbols of Russian history: if he claimed in *Letters of a Russian Traveller* that a well-written history of Russia should bring them alive in the imaginations of its readers (Karamzin 1984: 344), in a letter dated 2 May 1803 to his friend, the poet Ivan Dmitriev, he wrote that he had become so engrossed in his work on *A History of the Russian State* that he saw them in his dreams at night (Karamzin 1866: 116). Al'bert Starchevskii concurred with Karamzin's harsh opinion on the

lack of a well-written outline of Russian history: distinguishing two periods in Russian historiography – *the time before Karamzin* and *the time of Karamzin* – he stated that everything that had arisen during the former period appears incomparably modest in terms of depth and significance next to what came in the latter (Starchevskii 1852: 2).

Starchevskii's attention was also drawn to Murav'ev, a novelist, poet, translator, teacher of literature, history and moral philosophy to the Grand Princes Alexander and Constantine. Starchevskii perceived Murav'ev's historical works, mainly written for his pupils, as a transition between two distinct periods, stating that without Murav'ev there would be no Karamzin-as-historian; in his opinion, the future creator of *A History of the Russian State* could not have been under the influence of Murav'ev, since Karamzin possessed a more well-rounded education that allowed for greater independence and originality of thought (Starchevskii 1852: 3). Starchevskii assigned a particular role in the development of historical thought to the cycle of *conversations among the dead* and Murav'ev's *Attempts at History, Literature and Morality* [Opyty istorii, slovesnosti i

nravoucheniia, 1810]. The *conversations among the dead* induced him to nickname the writer ‘the Russian Macaulay of the eighteenth century’ (Starchevskii 1852: 6), in reference to Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859), a state activist, poet, novelist and historian of the Victorian era, who devoted the waning years of his life to work on *The History of England from the Accession of James II*.

It is to Murav’ev that Nikolai Karamzin turned with a request to support his efforts in gaining the assistance of Russian authorities in the preparation of *A History of the Russian State*. The choice of Murav’ev had to do with the latter’s duties and position in the state hierarchy – Murav’ev was not only an author, but also a secretary to Alexander I, in charge of the reception of petitions, and a collaborator for the minister of education (Alpatova 2002: 139). ‘Murav’ev [...] spoke but two words to Tsar Alexander, and Karamzin was appointed historiographer without any attestations or explanations’ – this is how Mikhail Pogodin assessed the effectiveness of Karamzin’s efforts in a speech in praise of the writer given at the 1845 unveiling of a monument to him in Simbirsk (Pogodin 2006: 625). His efforts to inform Tsar Alexander I of the intention to

compose an outline of the history of Russia and to induce him to provide funds for that purpose constitute the first and most important theme of their exchange – it practically covers the entirety of the correspondence. After obtaining the Tsar’s support, that first theme developed into the writer’s requests – which achieved equal success – to obtain unfettered access to archives and libraries.

The second theme in the letters centres on Karamzin’s reports on the progress of his work on *A History of the Russian State*, while a third strain is made up of considerations on history and historians. In all of the letters, the author thanks Murav’ev for his help.

The borders between the various themes are not impenetrable, as in some letters they are generally woven freely into one another and are mutually complementary.

It should be added that the third theme served as the very title – *On History and Historians* [O istorii i istorikakh] – for an undated article by Murav’ev included in the large group of *texts about history* published in the three-volume St. Petersburg edition of his works from 1819–1820 (Murav’ev 1819–1820). That same group is represented by the articles *The Science of Histo-*

ry [Uchenie istorii, 1810] and *Historians of Antiquity* [Istoriki drevnosti, 1810]. The term *texts of history* is taken from Vladimir Toporov, who additionally distinguished three groups among them: articles on the history of Russia, articles on general history, and articles containing theoretical 'lessons of history' (Toporov 2001: 747–750).

The aforementioned volume of Murav'ev's works was published at the time when Karamzin's work on *A History of the Russian State* was already at an advanced phase. The same can be said of *Attempts at History, Literature and Morality*, issued in 1810 and edited by Karamzin himself, which also in part contained *texts of history* (Murav'ev 1810). On this work, Starchevskii wrote that it had become a sort of memorandum for the author of *A History of the Russian State* (Starchevskii 1852:6). Toporov summarised the issue of the relationship between Karamzin and Murav'ev as historians thus:

Murav'ev took up the history of Russia far earlier than Karamzin did [...]; in 1803, when Karamzin turned to him, he had already written much, but his writings largely remained unpublished; on the basis of what he had

written up to that time, we may express the not-groundless hypothesis that [...] Murav'ev himself could have sought to write a history of Russia, all the more so considering that [...] he already possessed a general plan for such a history and a brief outline (Toporov 2001: 760).

Even if Karamzin was not broadly aware of Murav'ev's historical output, he had proceeded correctly in turning to him for receiving support with his letters, as he reached not only a person versed in history, but also one who felt the need to provide readers with an outline of the history of Russia.

In order to appreciate the importance of this correspondence, it is important to discuss the state of Russian historiography in the period preceding the writing of the *History of the Russian State*. Such discussion should necessarily mention the name of August Ludwig von Schlözer (1735–1809). Schlözer was influential in the publishing of Vasilii Tatishchev's (1686–1750) *A History of Russia from Ancient Times* [Istoriia Rossiiskaia s samikh drevneishikh vremen, 1768–1843], one of the most important works on the history of Russia prior to Karamzin's work.

The author of *A History of the Russian State* was thus not the first to take such an endeavour, however it was not Tatishchev, but Karamzin himself who went down in history and to be referred to by Aleksander Pushkin as 'old Russia's Columbus' and 'our first [Russian – M.D.] historian and last chronicler' (Pushkin 2006b: 159; Pushkin 2006a: 289). Karamzin's predecessors have been extensively discussed by Pavel Miliukov, who set out by dismissing the common belief – perpetuated by Pushkin – that Karamzin was a pioneer working on 'barren land':

ignoring the connections between the *History of the Russian State* and the preceding period and remembering only its relation with the period to come, we have grown used to thinking that Karamzin had no teachers, only disciples. That is why Karamzin became a Peter I for a few generations and his history became an America of our historiography (Miliukov 1913: 128).

Miliukov established that Karamzin's predecessors and sources of historical information had included Schlözer (Miliukov 1913: 137–138). That Karamzin

took steps to familiarize himself with the works of the German scholar, assuming that they could be significant and interesting for him, is attested by his letter to Murav'ev from 10 October 1804 (Karamzin 1848: 689). In a letter dated 6 March 1806, Karamzin wrote that he was not afraid any more of Schlözer's criticism (Karamzin 1848: 695).

Writing *A History of the Russian State* was for Karamzin not only a pleasure, as suggested by his words (quoted in the title of the present article) in a letter to Murav'ev dated 12 September 1804 (Karamzin 1848: 688). The preparation of that work, which grew to become one of the most monumental in European historiography of the first half of the nineteenth century, was perceived by its author as a duty towards his compatriots, an attempt at filling a gap in the library of educated Russians which was felt as an embarrassment to the nation.

The letters of Karamzin to Murav'ev constitute merely a small portion of his extensive epistolary legacy, shedding light on both his personal life and his multifaceted social activity. By comparing the letters written during the same period to various recipients, including members of his family, we can identify the most important issues for

the writer at that time. In 1803, Karamzin's attention was primarily devoted to the idea of writing *A History of the Russian State*, which is attested to by letters not only to Murav'ev, but also to his brother Vasilii. The letters to both of them shed light on the reasons for and circumstances surrounding the decision to take up the work on the volume, as well as on the personal and creative dilemmas which tormented the writer. Karamzin wrote to both of them about his intention to cease publishing the journal *Vestnik Evropy*, which he had successfully done since 1802. In a letter to his brother dated 6 June 1803, he wrote that he was planning to publish the journal until such time as he had gathered a sufficient sum of money to live without material concerns, and that after that goal was achieved, he would abandon publishing in favour of working as an historian (Karamzin 1982: 222). On 24 December 1803, Karamzin informed Murav'ev that he only had one more issue of the journal *Vestnik Evropy* to print, in which he intended to say a final goodbye to his readers (Karamzin 1848: 684). The farewell article was printed in the final – double (23 and 24) – issue of the journal; in the main portion of the article, the author limited

himself to the enigmatic statement that he was now facing an important and difficult task, while readers could find full information about the grant from the Tsar of 2,000 roubles annually for the preparation of *A History of the Russian State* in a footnote. Karamzin would work on *A History of the Russian State* until the end of his life, although he optimistically declared in his 28 September 1803 letter to Murav'ev at the start of their correspondence that five or six years would be sufficient for that purpose (Karamzin 1848: 681). The financial argument would again be advanced by Karamzin, as he suggested putting the remuneration of a historian on par with that of a university professor (Karamzin 1848: 681). A second, repeating theme in letters to both addressees is his health. In a letter to Murav'ev dated 28 September 1803, and to his brother Vasilii dated 13 October of the same year, Karamzin complains of worsening sight which prevents him from the day-to-day work of editing a journal (Karamzin 1848: 680; Karamzin 1982: 222). If Karamzin associated his publishing activity with haste and nervousness, he saw the work of the historian as calm and unhurried. In a letter to Murav'ev dated 10 October 1804, Karamzin wrote that

he would also not rush to publish individual volumes of *A History of the Russian State* (Karamzin 1848: 689). The discussed letters thus clearly present a dyad of *present – past* (or, to put it differently: *immersing in the present, discarding the present in favour of the past*). We may comment on this juxtaposition borrowing the words of Iurii Lotman: ‘while the young associates of [Tsar] Alexander rapidly attempted to see into the future with their plans for reform, Karamzin countered them with his orientation towards the past as the foundation of the future’ (Lotman 1997a: 578).

Lotman points out that Karamzin set out working on *A History of the Russian State* after quitting as editor of the journal *Vestnik Evropy*, but the idea to work on the *History* matured during the period in which the journal was published (Lotman 1997a: 576). It was not by chance that the journal contained reportages with a historical slant, whether written by him (*Historical Memories and Musing on the Way to the Monastery of the Holy Trinity and in That Monastery*; Karamzin 1802 [Istoricheskie vospominaniia i zamechaniia na puti k Troitse i v sem monastyre]), or attributed to him (*A Journey to the Monastery of the Resurrection, Today Known as*

New Jerusalem [Puteshestvie v Voskresenskii monastyr’, nazyvaemyi nyne Novym Ierusalimom]), also attributed to Mikhail Kachenovskii; Karamzin? 1804: 97–108; Batshev 2016: 173–177; Sokolinskii 1997: 219). A review of drafts written by Karamzin was prepared by Mikhail Pogodin (Pogodin 1866: 5–24). Monasteries around Moscow became places the author went to in search of materials for *A History of the Russian State*, about which he wrote to Murav’ev in a letter dated 3 June 1805 (Karamzin 1848: 693). Even if, in order to become an historian, Karamzin abandoned his work as a writer and publicist, he did not cease being a writer and publicist while preparing *A History of the Russian State*. The literary skills developed over decades left their mark on the linguistic and stylistic shape of the *History*, which should be considered one of the reasons for its failure among readers. As Vladimir Murav’ev observed,

the drafts and historical articles published in the years 1801–1803, other than being an attempt at working with historical sources, was also an attempt at a literary rendering of historical material; they are different in terms of tone,

character, degree of fictionalisation; individual elements found in them foreshadow the style of *A History of the Russian State* (Murav'ev 2005: 378–379).

Lotman linked the purpose of the creation of *A History of the Russian State* with the second stage of the 'reconstruction' of Russian society, following the reform of the literary Russian language:

The reform of the language was meant to fashion the Russian reader into a member of a society, a civilised person, a humanist; now Karamzin faced a new task – to make him into a citizen, and in order to achieve this [...] he should have a history of his own country, he should become a person of history (Lotman 1997a: 577).

The reason to come to such a conclusion can be found in the letters to Murav'ev. In a letter dated 28 September 1803, Karamzin called himself 'a person who encourages the successes of language and good taste' (Karamzin 1848: 681), while in a letter from 12 Septem-

ber 1804 he wrote about the role of *A History of the Russian State* in educating the society (Karamzin 1848: 687). 'Russia should always have a historiographer' – this is Karamzin's statement in the second of the letters (Karamzin 1848: 687).

The letters to Murav'ev reflect the progress of Karamzin's work on the first three volumes of *A History of the Russian State*. In a letter dated 12 September 1804, he informed Murav'ev that he had completed the introduction and outline of the history of Rus' since the times of Riurik (Karamzin 1848: 687); on 6 March 1806, he declared the completion of the second volume (Karamzin 1848: 695); and in a letter from that same day, as well as in an undated missive to Murav'ev, he detailed plans for arranging the material in the third and fourth volumes (Karamzin 1848: 698). The progress of the work on the initial volumes was also reflected in Karamzin's letters to other correspondents (Kniazheva 2017: 15–27). The writer's approach to his country's history changed depending on the era he was working on. In his opinion, the description of every era posed different challenges to the historian, as he wrote in a letter to Murav'ev dated 6 March 1806 (Karamzin 1848: 695). The prod-

uct of the historian's work should be, as he wrote in a letter from 12 September 1804, deeply careful, as there can be no information included without the confirmation of the source material (Karamzin 1848: 686–687). The letters are important resources for scholars of both Karamzin and Murav'ev, as they reflect the development of

Karamzin's interest in history and his road to writing *A History of the Russian State*, while also showing his relations with the intellectual and artistic circles at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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