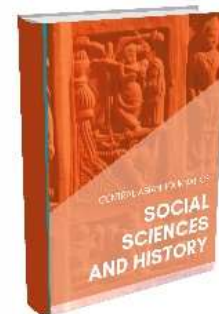




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One French Source about Georgia

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Abstract:

The present work is about one of the famous foreign travelers who visited Georgia in the XIX century, a French diplomat, orientalist, travel writer, archaeologist, philanthropist, and literary critic, Vicomte Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé (1848–1910). He wrote and published several books and works based on his travels, impressions, and encounters. One of Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé's most important works for us is "Through the Caucasus". It is one of the parts of the book called "The Tsar and his People: or, Social Life in Russia," which was published in 1891 in New York. Our interest in this book was mainly evoked by the fact that it contains a lot of interesting information about Georgian history, culture, traditions, and the social life of the population in the second half of the XIX century. It is noteworthy that during his six-week stay in the Caucasus, Marie-Eugène Melchior de Vogue visited many cities and regions of Georgia, during the description of which the author often uses both epithets and critical assessments. Conclusively, it will not be an exaggeration if we say that Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé's above-mentioned work, despite certain inaccuracies, should be very significant and very interesting material for researchers studying the events taking place in Georgia during that period.

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Introduction

Among the many famous foreign travelers who visited Georgia in the XIX century, we should undoubtedly mention the French diplomat, orientalist, travel writer, archaeologist, philanthropist, and literary critic, Vicomte Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé (1848–1910). From 1875 to 1882, he served as the secretary of the French embassy in Saint Petersburg. During this period, he traveled around the Russian Empire, including in our country. During his six-week stay in the Caucasus, Marie-Eugène Melchior de Vogue visited many cities and regions of Georgia, during the description of which the author often uses both epithets and critical assessments.

Goals and Objectives

In 1882, Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé quit her diplomatic career, after which, in 1888-1893, he was a Member of Parliament of the French Third Republic. In 1888, he also became a member of the French Academy. He wrote and published several books and works based on his travels, impressions, and encounters. One of Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé's most important works for us is "Through the Caucasus". It is one of the parts of the book called "The Tsar and his People: or, Social Life in Russia," which was published in 1891 in New York. Our interest in this book was mainly evoked by the fact that it contains a lot of interesting information about Georgian history, culture, traditions, and the social life of the population in the second half of the XIX century.

The novelty of the study

The book begins with a description of the Caucasus region and an assessment of its importance. Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé focuses not only on the religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the region, but also on the fact that, despite nearly a century of Russian domination in the region, its in-depth study had not yet begun.

Research methods

In our present work, we rely on the methodological principles of objectivity, historicism and comparativism developed in the theoretical studies.

Sources:

Primary sources of the present research are:

1. The Tsar and his People: or, Social Life in Russia, by Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé.
2. Travels in the Trans-Caucasian Provinces of Russia, and along the southern shore of the lakes of Van and Urumiah, in the autumn and winter of 1837, by Richard Wilbraham.
3. Modern History of Georgia by Vakhtang Guruli.

Bibliography

Scientific research regarding the book of Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé was performed by

Travels in the Trans-Caucasian Provinces of Russia and along the southern shore of the lakes of Van and Urumiah, in the autumn and winter of 1837, by Richard Wilbraham, and Modern History of Georgia by Vakhtang Guruli, Mingrelia, and Svanetia, 1854–1861. (Memoires), by Korneli Borozdin and others.

Research Results

According to the French diplomat, „On a superficies almost equal to that of France, on the various levels of these terraces, which rise from the banks of the Caspian and the Black seas to heights of 17,000 feet, you see all the productions of the globe as they might be displayed by samples on the shelves of one of our Universal Exhibitions... Strabo in his day calculated that seventy languages were spoken in the markets of Colchis, and modern philologists do not consider this figure exaggerated even at the present time. The Caucasus limits the domains of the two great religions that come and expire at its feet while struggling for the possession of its inhabitants; but between Christianity and Islamism we find traces of all the primordial forms of worship - pagans, fetichists, and adorers of fire...

The Caucasus is a book that has not yet been read. With the exception of a few observations by ancient travellers, almost nothing is known about it; even in Russia there does not exist any publication devoted to a general study of it. The first thing that ought to be done by the Imperial Government, and by the academies of Petersburg, is to organize a scientific mission on the model of that memorable Egyptian commission which Bonaparte formed for the purpose of noting all the curiosities of the valley of the Nile... The Caucasus certainly guards the secret of many problems in the physical and natural sciences, and the key of many obscure or controverted questions in the history of races, languages, and religions. An attentive inspection of its inhabitants would enable us to reconstitute in miniature the figure of the Indo-European world from the very remotest epochs which have still their representatives here“ [4, p. 102–104].

The impressions of Marie-Eugene Melchior de Vogue, which she gained after seeing Tbilisi and getting acquainted with its history, are very interesting. The French diplomat was particularly impressed by the Georgian capital, with its individual architecture and daily life. Firstly, in his opinion, Tbilisi gave the impression of an Asian-type settlement, except for its central districts. To get a clearer picture of the author's point of view, I will quote the relevant excerpt from the book:

„You have seen on the shores of the ocean pebbles pitilessly rolled by the ebb and flow, worn and deformed by the play of the waves ? Such is the history of Tiflis. An old and venerable city, for it can show churches that were founded in the first centuries of our era, it has always been the victim of its geographical position... The last total destruction dates a century back; it was the work of the Shah Aga-Mohammed-Khan...

At the present day Tiflis is a hybrid town, half Russian and half Oriental. In the centre of it the victors have built a palace, a museum, barracks, boulevards, lined with hotels and shops, which vie with those of Moscow. The moment you return to the faubourgs you find yourself in the East again. In the narrow tortuous streets are to be seen the native industries, with the aspect and usages that each one faithfully preserves throughout Asia. Each trade has its' street. Here the jewellers, working in the open air, in their little stalls, at a bench, where they set turquoises in silver filigree; there. the sword cutlers and gunsmiths, squatting in their niches behind a heap of iron, invite you to buy old Persian shields,

Khorassan blades, poniards of niello-work from Trebizond, long Kourds guns with the stocks inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Beneath the damp vaults of the bazaars Armenian clerks unfold the silks and gauzes of Asia Minor, and Carpets from Kirman and Bokhara, piled up in heaps on the floor of a back shop, where the Persian dealer smiles at you in his dyed beard. Tiflis is the principal market for Oriental carpets. Here you find a finer selection and less unreasonable prices than in the bazaar of Constantinople“ [4, p. 115–116].

Marie-Eugene Melchior de Vogue is no exception, and we often see similar opinions about Tbilisi in the records of other foreign travelers visiting our capital. For example, I will cite a quote from the book by the British Captain Richard Wilbraham "Travels in the Trans-Caucasian Provinces of Russia, and along the southern shore of the lakes of Van and Urumiah, in the autumn and winter of 1837":

„...At the entrance of the town I was stopped by a barrier, which, on my presenting my passport, was immediately raised, and I descended a steep hill into the lower or native quarter of the town. This portion of Tiflis is completely Asiatic, both in architecture and costume, containing long rows of bazaars, thronged with Georgians and Armenians in their native dresses... On ascending the opposite hill the houses are better constructed and the street wider; and the Russian quarter, which contains the governor's palace and the public offices, is laid out in spacious squares, and evinces a taste for showy architecture, with which the buildings of their modern capital have probably inspired them. In spite of much which showed bad taste, I was particularly struck with the first view of Tiflis, and its picturesque situation... The houses rise in tiers from the water's edge, interspersed with terraces of gardens and large open squares, while on a spur of the overhanging mountain stand the dark ruins of an ancient castle erected by the Turks during their temporary reign in Georgia. On the left bank stands the modern citadel, based on the perpendicular rock washed by the current; and higher up the stream lies the German colony of New Tiflis“ [5, p. 116–118].

As we can see, both travelers describe Tbilisi almost identically. It is noteworthy that they emphasize the multi-ethnic composition of the city population and the current state of the old Georgian aristocracy. In this regard, the assessments made by the French diplomat are very important, in which many problems facing our society and the country in general are brought to the fore. For example:

„You go back into the street, and your carriage is stopped by a team of camels, which sway along or kneel down beneath their heavy burden of bales of cotton. Drivers and passers talk back at each other in all languages. The camels draw off to one side to give passage to a Tcherkess horseman, who manages with graceful ease his thorough-bred Kabarda. A Tatar is going to the bath-house mounted on his donkey...

The population of Tiflis helps one to understand what I said above about the Caucasus, that it is the meeting-point of all the races of the Old World, if it is not even the starting point of many of them... Here are the Greek cross over a gilded cupola rising above the green sheet-iron roof of an orthodox church; the octagonal spire of sculptured stone, surmounted by a reversed extinguisher, which invariably crowns the Byzantine churches of the Georgians; the square belfry of the Armenian cathedral; the Roman cross on the gable of a Catholic chapel; and, finally, in the Tatar quarter, the humble minaret whence the

imam still calls the faithful to prayer.

...At Tiflis, out of a population of one hundred thousand souls, the Georgians are estimated at 22 per cent, and the Armenians at 37 per cent. In the town itself the Georgians are in the minority, for they are essentially rural people and unskilled in commerce... Almost all the nobility of the country is Georgian, and very proud of its blood; for that matter, every Georgian calls himself noble, and even in the lowest conditions of life you find some of them bearing the title of prince. This aristocracy now serves in the Russian regiments, but it speaks with regret of the past, when it was master of the country, and endeavors to maintain its old traditions of idleness and luxury, which are difficult to reconcile with our iron age.

In comparison with the Georgian aristocracy, the Armenians form what we should call the middle class: very industrious and sharp-witted, they excel in all kinds of business; the proverb says that one Armenian is a match for two Jews... At Tiflis you find them exercising the most various professions, from that of shopman up to that of bank director. Capital is getting concentrated in their hands“ [4, p. 116–120].

Some of the facts cited by the author may be somewhat dubious, but the description of the overall picture created throughout the country is indeed true, as evidenced by the records of other travelers. To prove this, I will recall the book of memoirs ("Mingrelia and Svanetia") of Korneli Borozdin (1828-1896), an official of the Chancellery of the Viceroy Caucasus (in 1848-1854), which describes the situation in Imereti Region and western Georgia in general:

„Unlike the Armenians and the Jews, whose main field of trade was trade, the Georgians were more engaged in agricultural activities.” He put his craft above all. „He said, "This idea is so deeply rooted that even today, Imeretian Aznauri, who has already lost his political rights to a peasant, does not live as a cook and is forced to harvest the land with his personal labor." If he has a hard time and gets involved, he will immediately be able to do all sorts of things. He will even take possession of other people's property by force, and he will not become a merchant anyway" [1, p. 52–56].

Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé also focuses on the architectural monuments in Tbilisi and related folklore. The author also points out the lack of nunneries in Georgia and does not hide his surprise in this regard. The French diplomat also pays special attention to the description of the Crown Prince's palace and adorns it with distinctive epithets.

„In this country, where monasteries for men are so numerous, there is only one convent for women, that of the Armenian Community of Sour Stefanos, or St. Stephen. This pious retreat is picturesquely situated on an eminence in the very heart of Tiflis. The church, which is very old, opens on a terrace planted with trees, a silent spot commanding a view over the mountains. On entering this sanctuary, I felt the sensation of a sudden return to the most distant past...

Among the Georgian sanctuaries the most ancient and the most interesting is the Cathedral of Sion, where are venerated the relics of St. Nina, the patron saint of the Iberians. The Chapel of St. David, on the mountain against the side of which Tiflis is built, attracts a great number of pilgrims. On Thursdays the girls who are impatient to get married go up to St. David with a hank of thread and a little stone; they tie the thread around the oratory, in the form of a rotunda, and fix the stone against the wall. If the stone sticks their wishes will be fulfilled... Tradition asserts that the Church of St. David has been entirely

built with these stones...

The religious edifices alone testify to the antiquity of Tiflis, ravaged, and mutilated by so many invasions. After visiting them, and after feasting his eyes on the kaleidoscope of the bazaars, the traveller finds nothing more to retain him except the kindly hospitality of the Emperor's lieutenant, Prince Dondoukof-Khorsakof, who governs this kingdom from the recesses of a palace built by his predecessor, Bariatinsky. In the Moorish halls of this building the luxury of Persia combines its seductions with the luxury of the West around fountains whose fresh waters babble beneath roses" [4, p. 120–122].

It is noteworthy that during his six-week stay in the Caucasus, Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé, besides Tbilisi, visited many other cities in our country, including Kutaisi. As it is clear from the relevant episode of the book, Kutaisi made a great impression on the French diplomat. Also noteworthy is the respect and love that the French diplomat showed the locals. Everything seen and experienced here, the author has conveyed in the form of the following superior epithets:

„Another world —the earthly Paradise! I left the Tiflis-Poti Railway at the Koutais junction line, along which I followed the upper valley of the Rion—the Phasis of the ancients, the river in which they used to dip the fleeces of ewes in order to collect pepites of gold... Koutais was the capital of Imeretia. It is now one of the most important and certainly the most ravishing town in the Caucasus...

In this flowery landscape imagine a people of gods and goddesses. The human race has retained here a perfection of form and a nobleness of bearing which it has lost everywhere else. Beauty is not the exception but the rule. From the day-laborer who breaks stones on the road up to the seigneur who is a descendant of the ancient princes, every man that you meet is a walking statue of Olympian Jupiter... Most of these Georgians have blond hair, blue eyes, a nose like an eagle's beak, and straight foreheads. No words can render the fire of their look, the proud dignity of their bearing, even when they are dressed in rags. On Sunday, in the public garden at Koutais, where the fashionable people assemble, I could not tire of watching as they passed this population of animated statues... I may perhaps be allowed to corroborate my own testimony by that of the old traveller Chardin: "The blood of Georgia," he says, "is the finest in the East, I may even say in the world. I have not remarked an ugly face in that country in either sex; but I have seen some that are angelic. Nature has lavished upon most of the women charms that are not to be seen elsewhere. I consider that it is impossible to look upon them without loving them. More charming faces and finer figures than those of the Georgian women cannot be painted" [4, p. 130–132].

It should be noted that Marie-Eugene Melchior de Vogue's attitude towards Kutaisi was not only conditioned by the current situation in the city, and the French diplomat also drew attention to its great historical past. Even if the ruins of the Bagrati temple were in disrepair during the French traveler's visit to Georgia, their visit to it would be as admirable as that of the Gelati Monastery. To confirm all the above, I will quote from the book:

„From the little that we know of its history, Georgia offers a unique phenomenon in the Christian world. It has marched backward in relation to our civilization. Evangelized in the fourth century, before Gaul, it was comparatively prosperous and cultivated in the tenth century, at a time when our ancestors

were in the thick darkness of the Middle Ages. Attached to the Byzantine Empire, it reflected the final greatness of its Greek doctors; in those days Plato and Aristotle were translated into Georgian. Overpowered afterwards by the Turks and Persians, this people ingrafted Mussulman vices on Byzantine vices, and fell into the worst barbarity at the very moment when Europe of the Renaissance was entering upon modern life. How can we doubt that this country has had its era of power and intellectual culture when we see at Koutais the remains of its admirable cathedral attributed to the ninth century?*" This monument is comparable to the most imposing edifices of the Christian West, so far as we can judge from the grand arches that are still standing, and from the columns and capitals that strew the ground. At the present day it is the most poetical of ruins.

I went to visit the monastery of Ghelati, twenty-five versts to the north of Koutais, in the mountains. It is the object of great veneration in the country, and all the national souvenirs are connected with it. Built in the twelfth century by King David, Ghelati preserves the archives of Georgian history in the frescos which decorate the walls of its churches. The style of these paintings well shows the double influence under which everything in the Caucasus has been modelled - a Byzantine influence and a Persian influence. In these stiff processions of monarchs and of holy personages you might imagine the figures to be from Ispahan, and drawn by a painter from Mount Athos. They contain the authentic(?) portraits of Queen Tamara, of David the Restorer, of Baghrat, King of Kings" [4, p. 135–138].

Despite the inaccuracies made by the French diplomat in certain cases, we will not be mistaken if we say that there is nothing exaggerated and wrong in these and similar assessments made by the author. This opinion is further supported by the fact that when talking about other cities and corners of Georgia in the book, the author does not turn a blind eye to their shortcomings.

Conclusion

Finally, as a result of in-depth study, it will not be an exaggeration if we say that Marie-Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé's abovementioned work, despite certain inaccuracies, should be very significant and very interesting material for researchers studying the events taking place in Georgia during that period.

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