

VAS. I. NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO: THE FATHER OF RUSSIAN MILITARY JOURNALISM¹

Abstract:

The article traces the life of the Father of Russian military journalism Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko (1844–1936). Attention is focused on that part of his extensive literary heritage, which is devoted to Bulgaria and his description of two conflicts separated by 35 years. Despite a significant number of literary digressions, the journalist's books still retain their value as an important historical source.

Keywords:

Nemirovich-Danchenko, Military journalism, Bulgaria, Russo-Turkish war, First Balkan war.

АННОТАЦИЯ: Н.С. Гусев. «ПАТРИАРХ РУССКОЙ ВОЕННОЙ ЖУРНАЛИСТИКИ ВАС. И. НЕМИРОВИЧ-ДАНЧЕНКО».

В статье прослеживается жизненный путь патриарха русской военной журналистики Вас. И. Немировича-Данченко (1844–1936). Внимание сосредоточено на той части его обширного литературного наследства, что посвящена Болгарии и ее описанию в двух конфликтах, разделенных 35 годами. Несмотря на значительную долю литературных отступлений, книги журналиста и поныне сохраняют свое значение как ценный исторический источник.

Ключевые слова:

Немирович-Данченко Вас.И., военная журналистика, Болгария, русско-турецкая война, Первая балканская война.

Vasily Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko (1844–1936) was a famous Russian writer and the author of about 250 artistic and ethnographic essays, novels, short stories, collections of reports and poems. He was the father of Russian military journalism, and his name was known in pre-revolutionary Russia to everyone “from tsar to schoolboy.” Nemirovich-Danchenko was born into the family of an officer on the outskirts of the Russian empire in Tiflis (present-day Tbilisi in Georgia). He spent his childhood in the Caucasus at the height of the war with the mountain peoples. His father's various postings while in the service allowed him to become familiar with Georgia, Azerbaijan and Dagestan, where he first began to pay attention to the details of the life and customs of different peoples. Nemirovich-Danchenko enrolled in a cadet school in Moscow, but without graduating he went to St. Petersburg, hoping to enter the world of writers. Later he was banished for embezzling money to the northern, Eu-

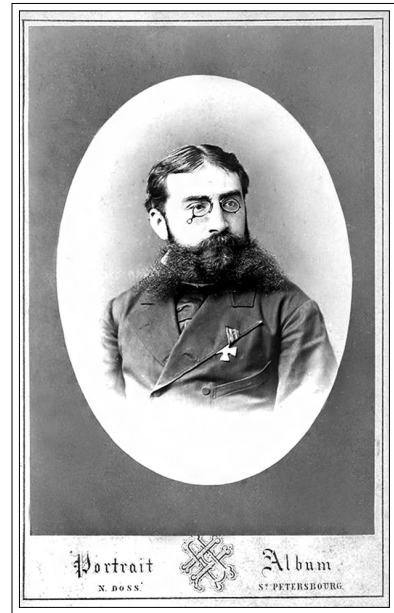
¹ The work was carried out with the financial support of the RFBR (grant № 18–512–76004).

ropean part of Russia: to the city of Arkhangel'sk. There he began to write articles in the then-popular travel note genre, richly filling them with details of the life and customs of the local population, landscape sketches, stories of adventures on the road and interesting encounters. Published in leading Russian journals, these works were well received by critics and brought him fame.

In subsequent years he traveled often, describing in his articles the Caucasus, the Urals, the countries of Europe, Asia Minor and Africa. He “fell in love” with Spain, and the Spanish theme resonated in many of his works. In 1876, when Serbia declared war on the Ottoman Empire, Nemirovich-Danchenko went to observe the theater of war and cover the events taking place there and was lightly wounded in the leg. A year after the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War, the journalist found himself in the Balkans again, and the articles and books he wrote there became the pinnacle of his work.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 was the first war that readers followed almost in real time. Thanks to technological progress, the public learned of the news of victories and defeats at the front from newspapers the day after the incident. For the first time, correspondents were permitted to be officially embedded with the Russian army, which allowed Nemirovich-Danchenko to spend about a year following the war, more than all of the other journalists. He was the only Russian military correspondent able to visit all of the combat positions and to cover Tsar Alexander II of Russia's activities in the Balkans. His reporting on the siege of Plevna, the battles at Shipka Pass and the winter passage through the Balkans, signed with the pseudonym “Six,” brought him national fame. Portraits of Nemirovich-Danchenko, as well as of other heroes of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, were placed on the packaging of a chocolate produced at that time, and he was awarded the Cross of St George, the most honored among military awards.

After returning home, the writer prepared to publish a three-volume collection of his impressions of the Russo-Turkish War, which was met with public success. He then returned to Bulgaria to see how the formation of the young state was going. Nemirovich-Danchenko admired how thoroughly the Bulgarians approached the matter of restoring their state. According to him, they were aware of the instability of relying on only one army and that it was only possible



*Photo of
Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko,
shortly after 1876*

to ensure their future and independence through a combination of “books and fire,” i.e., it also required developing their culture. He was pleased with the democratic order established by the Bulgarian constitution that was, alas, absent in his homeland. The clash of the nascent Bulgarian intelligentsia with the Russian bureaucratic system made him feel bitter. Bulgarian statehood was created with the help of Russia while the temporary Russian administration was working on the territory of this country. Among his fellow countrymen-officials, Vasily Ivanovich repeatedly noted ignorance, rudeness, and an unwillingness to understand a young, but culturally developed people, whose intelligentsia was ready to die for their homeland but not to be whipped for it.

Impressions from his stay in Bulgaria then formed the basis of three of the writer’s novels, describing the events of the era of the Russo-Turkish War. These works were distinguished by an abundance of characters, among whom were soldiers, officers, officials, residents of Bulgarian villages, etc., but his characters were not fleshed out and did not impress the reader. Nevertheless, the author managed to create vivid images of the nurses and embody in them the best qualities of Russian womanhood — i.e., the sort of self-sacrifice that brought a famous actress, a student, as well as a “fallen” woman to the warfront.

In the years of peace that followed, Nemirovich-Danchenko searched for new themes for his works. In his novels, he described the rapid development of industry and Russia’s economy at the end of the 19th century, whereas other writers of the time were writing love poetry about different types of love and love affairs. However, at the same time critics noted the implausibility of his plot denouements and the writer’s penchant for theatrics and theatrical dialogue. Nemirovich-Danchenko himself did not overestimate his place in Russian literature, considering himself “a mediocre novelist, a conscientious and tireless journalist and a good war correspondent.” Therefore, as soon as the Russo-Japanese War broke out in 1904, Nemirovich-Danchenko immediately set off for the front and over the course of a year published about 350 dispatches, which were in great demand with readers.

In 1912, when the first Balkan war broke out (Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Montenegro opposed the Ottoman Empire) Nemirovich-Danchenko wanted to see how the country whose liberation he had witnessed would now battle against its centuries-long oppressor. Therefore, despite his advanced years, he set off for the Balkans. He was received in Bulgaria with all sorts of honors: newspapers reported on his arrival, he was given a reception, and the top officials of the Bulgarian state secured a pass for him to the front lines. He was the first foreign correspondent to witness the fighting with the Turks firsthand. His articles from 1912 were full of nostalgia for the Russo-Turkish War. Following the Bulgarian army, he traced familiar routes and remembered the advance of the Russian army 35 years before. Looking at the unapproachable Chataldzha fortifications near Constantinople, he thought about the epic siege of Plevna and saw in the Bulgarian soldiers the successors of the Russian troops.

Bulgarian statehood filled him with delight, because he was able to see with his own eyes the path the country had taken since its liberation. Nemirovich-Danchenko admired the transformed Bulgarian cities, claimed that Bulgarians were almost universally literate, democracy was present, both in politics and in human relations, and there was full freedom of the press. The essence of his description of the young, recently revived Bulgarian kingdom was expressed in his toast at a dinner party: “To the Bulgaria of mind, knowledge, progress and work!” Only one thing upset the writer: the attitude of the Bulgarians to the wounded, to whom they showed not a shred of sympathy. The writer considered that no matter how competent or hardworking they might be, it was too early to deem a people as having reached the pinnacle of civilization if they had not cultivated a respect for life. However, the first Balkan war was followed by the second, inter-allied Balkan war, and the country’s progress was interrupted. During World War I, Bulgaria initially took a position of neutrality, and Nemirovich-Danchenko, using his authority, tried to encourage the Bulgarians to act in concert with Russia. Publicly addressing them, he exclaimed: “Bulgarians! Where are you? Why are you not with us in this bright and joyful hour of shared selfless sacrifice?” However, Sofia eventually sided with the Central powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey.

Nemirovich-Danchenko, naturally, could not miss the next war and went to the front as a correspondent. He covered battles in Galitsia, the Caucasus and even near Verdun. “In his Astrakhan hat and whiskers, despite his age, he runs around like mad, and produces writing that is embarrassing to print.” — one contemporary wrote about him. Indeed, with age Nemirovich-Danchenko’s dispatches became ever more Germanophobic and jingoistic. Parodying his messages, some journalists wrote about detained Austrian trains with cars full of needles for gouging out the eyes of Serbians, and about magazine covers made by the Turks from the skin of Christians.

Although after the October revolution Vasily Ivanovich remained in the country, unlike his brother Vladimir (a famous theatre director), he did not accept the political changes that took place. In 1922, under the pretext of needing to conduct archival research for a large-scale work, *National Heroes, Leaders and Martyrs*, Hemirovich-Danchenko received an exit visa and went to Berlin. After spending a year there, he moved to “the Russian Athens” of that time, to Prague, where the cream of the Russian émigré intelligentsia had gathered. His countrymen treated him with great respect, but his new literary works were perceived as anachronistic. Nevertheless, he remained strong in spirit, and in 1934 the émigré community celebrated the 90th birthday of the journalist and writer with great fanfare. Two years later Vasily Ivanovich died and was buried in a cemetery in Prague.

Nemirovich-Danchenko was a younger contemporary of Dostoyevsky and Chekhov’s elder. He outlived both of these classical writers and managed to write far more than they did. He became part of the history of Russian literature, pri-

marily as the father of war reporting. His dispatches from the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 were particularly famous. They marked a new page in the development of journalism and revealed the Bulgaria of that time to Russian society. His speeches in defense of Bulgaria and its popularization were appreciated by the Bulgarian people. In 1935, in Bulgaria, he was awarded a state pension. In the USSR, the writer's flight abroad led to the banning of his books up until the collapse of the communist system in the country. Nowadays, although interest in Nemirovich-Danchenko's travelogues has gradually revived, one cannot consider them to be widely studied.

Translated by Igor Kaliganov

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ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Photo of Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, shortly after 1876.
2. The cover of Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko's book "The country of a cold", dedicated to the Russian North.
3. The cover of Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko's book "Peasant monastery."
4. The cover of Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko's book based on the Russo-Turkish war.
5. The cover of Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko's book "The War with the Turks for the liberation of the Slavs", intended for children.
6. The cover of a book of memoirs about the hero of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78 General M.D. Skobelev.
7. Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1906.
8. The cover of the "Iskra" magazine with a portrait of Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, October 14, 1912.
9. The cover of the writer's book in two volumes, "With Armed People," dedicated to the First Balkan War of 1912–13.
10. The cover of the journal "Nature and People" from 1915 with an article dedicated to Vas. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko. In the photo — the writer in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese War.