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A REVIEW BY N. I. VESELOVSKY AS A MODEL OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM OF A TEXTUAL SOURCE

This article presents the review by Nikolay Ivanovich Veselovsky (1848-1918), a Russian orientalist and expert of Central Asian history and historiography, who critically analyzed French orientalist, Louis-Mathieu Langlès' (1763-1824), work Tamerlan, under the title Zhizn' Timura [The Life of Timur] in its Russian translation. According to Veselovsky, Langlès made a number of conspicuous and serious mistakes and disregarded the reliable sources available at that time when describing the Mulfuzat Timuy, or the Memoirs of Timur. In addition, Veselovsky expressed his opinion on the role of local sources, particularly from the 14th century in the study of Central Asian history as it pertained to Timur and the Timurids. The article discusses the experience of working with authentic sources from various classics by N. M. Karamzin, S. F. Platonov and other historians whose viewpoints on the principles of textual source criticism maintain their relevance. The review concludes by stating that Langlès essay concerning Timur only triggered more attention toward the study of Central Asian history and the formulation of several pressing themes and questions for Asian studies in Russian among which the critical analysis of sources is of no minor importance.

Key words: oriental studies, N. I. Veselovsky, Louis-Mathieu Langlès, Timur, Tamerlane, medieval written sources, translations, textual source criticism

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IN TRUTH, the majority of orientalists engage the greater part of their research in describing various facts and phenomena. "A historian conveying a specific fact cannot be completely academic and impartial toward the event of interest. The historian often obtains new data about some facts via second-hand or even third-hand sources; and since each person embellishes or tweaks their story, the historian totally depends on the witness and must take into account that person's worthiness and integrity from whom the news is received including their personal position and views" (Veselovsky 1901: 6). Such works, according to N. I. Veselovsky, include the essay by Louis-Mathieu Langlès entitled *Tamerlan* (1787), translated from French into Russian by a N. Suvorov and published in Tashkent in 1890.¹

¹ **Ed. note:** In the Russian version of this article the modern Russian transliteration of the surname of the French scholar is rendered *Лангле*, and not *Лянглэ*, as it appeared in the Tashkent edition and as first used in Veselovsky's review. There is no information available on the original translator of the

The public and personal life of Tamerlane² hugely and historically impacted the peoples of Central Asia and its neighboring regions. This effect was so comprehensive that for several centuries the era of Timur and the Timurids has been studied by Russian, English, and French experts in various fields of historical science, not to mention the important place that it occupies in the works of contemporary researchers in Uzbekistan. At one point, Langlès' work aroused keen public interest and even created a level of jealousy on the part of other orientalists. Accordingly, the "historical criticism" of N. I. Veselovsky appeared as a re-

1890 publication except what he wrote about himself as being "a native of the Turkestan region," from which Veselovsky inferred that he was a young person. Apparently, the translator was not a professional historian, hence he chose a source for his translation that had long been outdated.

² **Ed. note:** The name Tamerlane derives from the Persian *Timūr-i-lang* (i.e. Timur the lame) which was transliterated in the West as Tamerlane. Timur (sometimes rendered *Temūr*) was his actual Turkic name and is more commonly used in modern scholarship today. The term Tamerlane will only be used when quoting authors in their original sources of the day.

sponse to the work. Veselovsky entitled this response “Suzhdenie o chastnyh individual’nyh javlenijah na osnovanii obshhih nachal, principov, vozvedennyh v sistemy” [“Judgment on Certain Individual Phenomena on the Basis of General Concepts or Principles Aggrandized as Systems”] (Veselovsky 1901: 6), Veselovsky was an authoritative expert of oriental history, particularly the history of Central Asia, and an expert, according to B.V. Lunin, who enjoyed the distinction of possessing “scientific rigor” (Lunin 1979: 127).

While, as one scholar attests, “it is difficult to produce reviews on historiographical works in which evaluation often bogs down and loses candor... Yet, no two books are alike. So, the further the genre of a historiographical work is from that of a reference guide, the angrier its review” (Puchkov 2009: 282-283). Veselovsky’s review cannot be called “angry,” yet being critical, as any review should be, does not mean objectivity is lost. He wrote that “acquainting Russian readers with Timur’s personality [...] is far from an easy task and not all authors are comfortable with it” and in this case “Professor Ármin Vámbéry, whom the European and Russian audiences consider as a grand expert on Central Asia, even he [...] eventually failed” (Veselovsky 1892: 344). As the one who stated that “Russian scholarship has made considerable progress in the study of Central Asia,” Veselovsky believed that Langlès’ book failed to satisfy oriental scholars in any way, although “among our intelligentsia in Turkestan there is interest in local history and local antiquity, which is ever increasing” (Veselovsky 1892: 345).

Considering that Veselovsky, as professor at the Department of Oriental History at St. Petersburg University (Farmakovsky 1916: 361), conducted vibrant educational activity and therefore could boast firsthand knowledge of his students’ abilities; compared Langlès’ investigation with the capabilities of a high school student of the time, whom, he claimed, in turn, would have done a better job at this work. In his opinion, Langlès’ research was “somewhat disgusting to read.” Veselovsky continued that if any reviewer could ask himself whether they “could write like that,” and often respond to this question with “yes, I could, only better,” then, Veselovsky, as an expert on Timur and the Timurids, expressed his irritation with Langlès’ “pathetic expatiation.” At this point it would be appropriate to recollect Veselovsky special interest regarding his study of Timur’s history and that of Timurids³ and to note his extensive knowledge in the

field. This was reflected in his report “On the Tomb of Amir Timur in Samarkand” (Izvestiya 1887) at the 7th Archaeological Congress in Yaroslavl. As a historian and orientalist, Veselovsky expressed a high opinion of the *Mulfuzat Timury*,⁴ which, according to him, “depicts Timur and speaks of him much more than all our expatiations, or, rather, he speaks for himself” (Veselovsky 1892: 344). Although the French scholar, without concealing surprise, did admire the content and reliability of this medieval source: “We were far from imagining that the khan, upon whose conquests we consider as robbery, would write treatises on political and military tactics, and would leave a very wise system for his descendants. There were two obstacles: our prejudices and the falsity of history which have prevented us from knowing and appreciating Timur” (Langlès 1890).

Analyzing the work of Langlès, the Russian academic accused the French author as committing gross mistakes and ignoring reliable sources extant at the time. When describing the *Muzfuzat Timury*, Veselovsky himself, regarding the study and analysis of the sources, adhered to the school of his colleague and comrade-in-arms, S. F. Platonov, a prominent Russian scholar of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who guided his students and followers to embark on specific study and objective analysis of the sources and clarify regularities of the historical process. In particular, referring to the problem of working with textual sources, Platonov wrote: “In order to give a scientific, accurate, and artistically integral picture of any era ... or the complete history of a people, it is necessary to: 1) collect historic materials; 2) inquire into their trustworthiness; 3) precisely restore the specific historical facts; 4) indicate the pragmatic relationship between them; and 5) bring them together into a general scholarly review or artistic picture” (Rusina 2015: 51). These instructions given by this person versed in historical science not only influenced the academic research methodology pursued by historians of the time, they also maintained their relevance for today.

His attention to detail and accuracy of analysis to the facts along with a high level of academic exactitude and adherence to these principles always allowed Veselovsky to create a most complete and comprehensive picture of the past which was reflect-

Muslim architecture in Turkestan of the era of Tamerlane to the jurisdiction and custody of the Archaeological Commission” and others.

⁴ **Ed. note:** This memoir appeared in an English translation by H. Talib and Charles Stewart in 1830. Talib H. Abu, and Charles Stewart. *The Mulfuzat Timury: Or, Autobiographical Memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Timur*. London: Printed for the Oriental Translation Committee, and sold by J. Murray. 1830. Internet resource.

³ Russian State Historical Archives. F. 565. Op. 1. D. 3573. “O peredache v vedenie Arheologicheskoi komissii pamjatnikov drevnego musul'manskogo zodchestva v Turkestane epohi Tamerlana” // “On the transfer of the monuments of ancient



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ed in his research. Owing to his academic interests, this scholar could not disregard such a controversial personality as Amir Timur. This was evidenced by his own reasoning concerning the “important and at the same time extremely tempting task that can have a great influence on the development of our historical information base for Central Asia” (Veselovsky 1892: 344).

V.V. Bartold, while highly appreciative of Veselovsky’s achievements in the area of the oriental history for Russian scholarship, noted that “Nikolai Ivanovich did not master the oriental languages to the extent that befits the production of independent research based on authentic sources” and “for his publication and translation of oriental texts was forced to seek the assistance of linguistic specialists. A number of gaps and errors in Nikolai Ivanovich’s works [...] are explained by his inability to use the chronicles and official documents of the original texts (Bartold 1976: 654). As his junior colleague, Bartold stated with regret as a result of Veselovsky’s “lack of knowledge of the oriental languages could not help but be reflected in the results of his research. Primarily in quantitative terms; he was unable to provide us with major historical works that would have taken complex research based on authentic sources” (Bartold 1976: 657). Thus, Veselovsky analyzed sources such as the *Zafarnâma* (Book of Victory) by Sharaf ad-Din Yazdi (d. 1454); *Mulfuzat Timury*; *Bâburnâma* by Zahir ad-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530); *Abdullahnâma* by Hafiz Tanysh al-Bukhari (late 16th – early 17th cen-

turies); only as versions translated into Russian. Thus, probably reproaching himself, Veselovsky concluded that a competent study of these sources and a correct translation into foreign languages would serve as “major foundations for our knowledge” (Veselovsky 1892: 346).

The importance Veselovsky’s statement for today concerning the need to study ancient manuscripts and conducting a careful analysis is evidenced by the recent Resolution issued by the Republic of Uzbekistan’s President on May 24, 2017, *On measures to further improve the system of storage, research, and propaganda of ancient textual sources*.⁵ This decree focuses on expanding and deepening the works of scholarly researchers and thinkers who lived and worked in Central Asia during the Middle Ages. The resolution indicates the need to introduce and publish these works via new editions of the original manuscripts and with critical commentaries on the translations. In other words, the academically-based conservation of historic and cultural treasures has always been and still remains important.

Referring in particular to the quality of ancient manuscript translation, Veselovsky commented that both Langlès translation of the *Mulfuzat Timury* made into French and Charles Stewart’s English version were unsatisfactory. He noted that the Persian translation, on the other hand, was good. He drew attention of the need to translate into one of the European languages the *Muqaddimah* (Prolegomena) to the *Zafarnama* by Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, which was dedicated to the genealogy of the Turkic khans and Genghis Khan. This lack of a complete translation can be surmised, as noted by Veselovsky – despite the fact that partial translations appeared in multiple eastern and western languages over the course of five and a half centuries (including several times in the 20th century) – to the great number of poetic excursions in the work. These pericopes were probably the product of Ali Yazdi’s own personal creativity and has led to the thought that “the author misuses the reader’s time and attention, weakening and sometimes interrupting presentations of the political and/or military events” (Ali Yazdi 2008). Nevertheless, the *Zafarnâma* has not yet been fully translated into the European languages. Only small excerpts in Russian have been published and translated by V.G. Tizengauzen (Tizengauzen 1941), whose academic research remains relevant as a valuable collection of the extracts from these rarely-accessed, original sources.

In regard to translations of the *Bâburnâma* (*The Notes of Sultan Babur*), Veselovsky, did not belittle their significance. On the contrary, he highly appre-

⁵ *Narodnoye Slovo* newspaper, dated May 25, 2017, No. 103 (6767).

ciating these versions and expressed regret that in regard to the English (dated 1826) and French (dated 1811) translations, “it is a shame that we do not have the translation in Russian, made in such good literary style.” He immediately, however, warned that the solution to this problem must be approached with extreme care and that “those who were not altogether confident of their ability,” should not embark on such an undertaking, “so as not to spoil it for others” (*Veselovsky* 1892: 344). It is noteworthy that interest in the *Bāburnāma*, an outstanding work of medieval memoir literature, maintained a significant interest as a historical source among scholars. Therefore, the aspiration of orientalists, such as Georg Jakob Kehr who copied this treatise from a currently unbeknown manuscript that was available to him, is totally understandable (*Pekarskiy* 1870: 313-314); O. I. Senkovsky also copied the *Bāburnāma* from a manuscript owned by a Bukharan merchant, Nazarbay Turkestani (*Blagova* 1966: 170-171). V. V. Grigoriyev was the first in Russian literature to relate the biography and history of Babur’s campaigns according to the *Bāburnāma* (*Grigoriev* 1863). N. I. Ilminsky later revised Kehr’s edition and in his version used a significant amount of additional supporting literature from both foreign translations and from lists found in lectionaries (*Ilminskiy* 1857). Other scholars such I. N. Berezin, V. V. Velyaminov-Zernov, A. N. Samoilovich, and N. N. Pantusov all made reference to the work. As can be seen by this review, Veselovsky focused his attention to this text as well. He identified yet another task for researchers of this valuable medieval source—the need to collate the only manuscript found in Turkestan. It belonged to the military governor of the Fergana region, G. A. Arandarenko, with the text published by N. I. Ilminsky, the latter whom supported the idea of comparing several good authentic manuscripts of the *Bāburnāma*. In connection with this, Veselovsky used his ethnographic and linguistic knowledge in clarifying the issue around the origin of the terms “Mongol” and “Mogul” (*Veselovsky* 1892: 344).

Another important source, whose study could have a significant impact on Central Asian history, according to Veselovsky, was *Tarihi Seyid Rahim*, which “must serve as a handy reference book for anyone studying the new history of Central Asia” (*Veselovsky* 1892: 345). As in the case of the *Bāburnāma*, the *Tarihi*’s abundance of bibliographical sources, the multiplicity of manuscripts, and the variety of descriptions of the same events also require textual comparisons. This analysis could provide an invaluable contribution to the development of oriental studies. Indeed, these historical works contained valuable reference material for illuminating the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the peoples of Central Asia. Veselovsky was confident that such efforts would

definitely further the cause of oriental studies.

Veselovsky considered the *Abdullahnāma* a no less significant historical work. As pointed out by others “sources on this period’s history are almost exclusively available in manuscripts and, just like the history of the region’s recent centuries, have been poorly studied” (*Umnyakov* 1930: 307). The history of the Shaybanid dynasty, which ruled over Turkestan during the 16th century, only began to be thoroughly studied during the second half of the 19th century. Until 1821, not a single known work on Central Asia from this period was available. The only source concerning the history of Bukhara for Europeans was a Persian manuscript of Muhammad Yusuf Munshi. Obtained from Bukhara in 1821, it was entitled *Tezkere-i Mukim-khani*, and relates the history of the city from the time of its conquest by Shaybani khan until the early 18th century. In 1854, V.V. Velyaminov-Zernov acquired a complete manuscript of Hafiz Tanys’h *Abdullahnāma*, which he was planning to publish first in Persian, and then in Russian (*Veselovsky* 1904: 5). Scholars had long been on the lookout for this source and this find proved extremely valuable. The list of the copies of the *Abdullahnāma* manuscripts and its references in historical literature continued to grow throughout the twentieth century. (*Umnyakov* 1930: 320-322).

Veselovsky considered the available translation as more literary than historical. He noted that it was this characteristic which complicated the comprehensibility and digestibility of the text’s content. Its study, translation, and publication were also undertaken by various experts of oriental languages such as N. V. Khanykov, O. I. Senkovskiy, L. A. Zimin, and P. I. Lerh, among others. They adhered to the tradition laid down by the great Russian historian of the early 19th century, Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin, who sought to treat historical sources as independent objects of research.

This was manifested in his desire to develop the principles of textual criticism in approaching the study of historical sources and the publication of documents. Following this tradition of the source-critical analysis of V.V. Velyaminov-Zernov, L.A. Zimin made a second attempt to publish the *Abdullahnāma*. He had to familiarize himself, whenever possible, with all the manuscripts of this work available at the time and compare them with other historical works to ascertain their mutual dependence for his undertaking to serve as a truly critical edition of the text (*Umnyakov* 1930: 316-317).

Veselovsky did not confine himself to studying important and valuable textual sources on Central Asian history. He believed that there were a number of other such tasks, but all of them could be successfully resolved through local efforts and cooperation

with Turkestani antiquities collector since they had a “great advantage” in knowing local life, the indigenous people, and the local topography. Local indigenous knowledge of the linguistic peculiarities, provided the correct approach was used in the matter, would avoid blunders and mistakes typical of armchair oriental researchers. Without belittling the role of local scholars, Nikolai Ivanovich was sure that “all of this will constitute landmark achievements which are not maturing with the progress of oriental studies and their usage will extend for a long time. These will be large foundations for our knowledge and other secondary and less weighty, yet more numerous, foundations will begin to develop harmoniously around them” (*Veselovsky 1892: 346*).

In his review, Veselovsky provided a completely balanced assessment of the translation of Langlès' work, both its merits and demerits, by maintaining

the main principle of review - fairness, impartiality, and objectivity. When this principle is observed, any work under review is evaluated irrespective of the critic's personal views and preferences from the standpoint of its academic, practical, or artistic significance of the object under analysis. This small work of his serves as a shining example of textual critical analysis by a competent professional who expressed his opinion with sufficient reasoning.

The Russian translation of Langlès' book about Timur only served as a trigger for even more attention toward the study of Central Asian history and for the formulation of a number of pressing themes and questions for oriental studies by Russian scholars. These, according to Veselovsky, are “extremely rewarding,” and the scholars “who embark on this path, will deserve special gratitude for their posterity” (*Veselovsky 1892: 346*).

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