

***Anton Schiefner (1817–1879) und seine indologischen Freunde: seine Briefe an die Indologen Albrecht Weber (1825–1901), Rudolf Roth (1821–1895) und William D. Whitney (1827–1894) sowie den Indogermanisten Adalbert Kuhn (1812–1881).*** Hartmut Walravens, Agnes Stache-Weiske [editors]. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 2015. (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Sitzungsberichte, 868. Bd.; Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens, Nr. 89). 455 pages: portraits (black and white). ISBN: 9783700177999 (paperback)

This book, prepared by Hartmut Walravens and Agnes Stache-Weiske, well-known German experts in the history of European Oriental Studies, contains a large corpus of letters of the eminent 19th c. scholar Frantz Anton (Anton Antonovich) Schiefner, a member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, that present him as an prominent Orientalist of his time who belonged to the narrow circle of professional Indologists involved in one of the most famous projects ever realized by the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, namely the great Sanskrit-German Dictionary compiled by O. von Böhtlingk, R. Roth and A. Weber in 1853–1875.<sup>1</sup> About ninety letters from Schiefner to Weber comprise the major part of the edition. They are supplemented with 9 letters to Roth and 5 letters to W.D. Whitney, the American Indologist who contributed to the dictionary, too. Moreover, the book contains 22 letters to the German linguist A. Kuhn who shared Schiefner's interest in European and Asian folktales and myths. This broader perspective of Schiefner's academic interests is supported with republication of some of his less known papers including his German translation of a Mongolian tale, two papers on Finnish epic tales, etc. The letters included into the book are kept now in various German libraries. The main details of Schiefner's life and works are presented in the general introduction while each of the four groups of letters are prefaced with data on their addressees. Their and Schiefner's portraits are also provided.<sup>2</sup>

In 2008, some fragments of the letters to Weber had been published by H. Walravens in his paper *Letters of A. Schiefner about V.P. Vasil'ev*.<sup>3</sup> They give us

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2013, another corpus of his letters was edited by H. Walravens — *St. Petersburg und Livland — und die Entwicklung der estnischen Literatur. Anton Schiefner (1817–1879) und Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882) im Briefwechsel (1853–1879)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2013. (Orientalistik Bibliographien und Dokumentationen 22).

<sup>2</sup> There is also a photo of Schiefner's grave taken recently at the Smolenskoye Lutheran Cemetery in St. Petersburg.

<sup>3</sup> WALRAVENS H. *Letters of A. Schiefner about V.P. Vasil'ev*, in "Written Monuments of the Orient", No. 1(8), 2008, pp. 251–264.

---

an insight into what exactly happened between the two important St. Petersburg Orientalists who started as good colleagues, if not friends, but then, rather abruptly, broke any contacts with each other.

Vasiliev who mastered Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian and Tibetan during his long stay in Peking as a member of the Russian Orthodox Christian Mission, was unable to use German or French to make his papers available for the European colleagues, and Schiefner was eager to promote Vasilyev's works abroad, seeing him as a man of great knowledge and competence. This cooperation went on smoothly until Schiefner decided to publish the German translation of the famous Tibetan author Tāranātha's *History of Buddhism in India* as his own translation without referring to Vasiliev as the original Russian translator of the text. The Russian and German translations were published almost simultaneously, in 1869, but Vasiliev could use the German text to improve his own as Schiefner *did* translate from Tibetan although widely using Vasiliev's translation so that he even repeated some of Vasiliev's mistakes.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Schiefner published an addition to his German translation where he explained the great role of Vasiliev in this matter. But Vasiliev, notorious for his volcanic temper and obviously instigated by some nationalistic sentiments against the Academy of Sciences as a place with German predominance, published an article where he accused Schiefner in plagiarism.

The situation could never be seen before with Schiefner's eyes, it could only be judged from the outside, by a few newspaper articles written by Vasiliev and critical responses written by Schiefner's friends. Such a fair observant as V.M. Alekseev, one of the latest students of Vasiliev in sinology, claimed in a much later talk about Vasilyev and his legacy (dated from 1950s, first published in 1982) that "Vasilyev's articles against Schiefner and Germans at the Academy, published in 1869, make a bad impression (*производят тяжелое впечатление*)".<sup>5</sup> This is exactly what can be felt from Schiefner's letters to Weber, and it is no surprise that he eventually stopped thinking about any reconciliation with Vasilyev and just crossed him out of his life. As Walravens pointed out in his paper (p. 264), it meant no more professional translations of Vasilyev's papers into German or French to be secured by Schiefner for him.

It is interesting though that Schiefner really seems to have been assured in his actual right to treat his German translation as an independent piece of work.<sup>6</sup> One of his acquaintances described him as a person who was always ready to help other people at the cost of his own time (p. 318), and his letters do show that he generously provided colleagues with any useful information needed, tirelessly edited academic works, tried to fasten contacts between scholars in St. Petersburg and Europe. Perhaps, it was his openness to be involved in others' projects that led him to the highly controversial situation with Vasilyev he obviously suffered much from.

<sup>4</sup> VOSTRIKOV A.I. *S.F. Oldenburg i izuchenie Tibeta*, in "Zapiski Instituta Vostokovedeniya Akademii Nauk", Vol. IV. Moscow-Leningrad 1935, pp. 59–81. See p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> ALEKSEEV V.M. *Shkola Vasilyeva*, in "Nauka o Vostoke". Moscow, GRVL Nauka, pp. 64–67. See p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, he writes to Whitney — *Ich beendige in diesen Tagen den Druck des tibetischen Textes von Tāranātha's Geschichte des Buddhismus in Indien <...> Dann beginnt der Druck der deutschen Übersetzung* (p. 310), without even mentioning Vasilyev. In one of his letters to Kuhn we find — *Meine Tāranātha-Uebersetzung* (p. 369). In another letter, though, both Russian and German translations are mentioned together (p. 376).

While some of the first pages of Schiefner's correspondence with Weber tell us about Vasilyev's case, the final letters are stamped with sadness about another unpleasant story connected, again, with an important Russian scholar, this time the great Indologist I.P. Minaev whose direct disciples S.F. Oldenburg and Th.I. Stcherbatsky would create the famous St. Petersburg–Leningrad Buddhological School, so ruthlessly destroyed by the Stalinist regime in the second half of the 1930s.

The name of Ivan Minaev is one of a few most frequently mentioned names in Schiefner's letters to Weber. We can see how the older scholar's opinion on the promising colleague changed over time, from a somewhat restrained interest to rather a high appreciation from both scholarly and personal points of view (pp. 98, 137, 232). Nevertheless, in 1878, he supported the candidature of another Indologist, of German origin, Leopold von Schröder, to become a member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. This attempt led to a new scandal tinged with nationalistic feelings<sup>7</sup> and eventually failed. It seems Schiefner had not expected that his and his colleagues' choice would be unpleasant for Minaev and was sorry about it (p. 280).<sup>8</sup> Basically, he found the entire situation as a new signal that German scholars, usually connected with the University of Dorpat (now Tartu, Estonia), were not very welcome anymore (pp. 276–277). Schiefner provided Weber with a long list of the names of St. Petersburg academicians with the German background (p. 277).

However, I suppose the main issue was not simply about their “non-Russian” origin, *Russianness* itself being a complicated issue. In the early 20th c., we still find many scholars with the German names in St. Petersburg, it suffices to mention here such brilliant Buddhologists as S.F. Oldenburg, O.O. Rosenberg, A. von Stael-Holstein, and E.E. Obermiller. Like their predecessors from the 19th c., they used freely various European languages. Still, there is a distinct difference. It seems the early 20th c. generation was already a much more organic part of the Russian society, deeply involved in its life. Schiefner had to witness the beginning of changes but his early death that followed soon after the incident with the scandalous elections<sup>9</sup> did not allow him to see it in progress.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> In 1879, a well-known scholar and Russophile V.L. Lamansky published a newspaper article with severe critics on the Academy and its members of the German origin, in particular Schiefner and the Sanskrit Dictionary project. He stressed that the cost of the dictionary was about 100,000 rubles, Schiefner thought the sum was about 60,000 and it was not too much for the work that lasted for 23 years (pp. 278–279). See also the chapter on the Sanskrit dictionary in the book: A. Vigasin. *Izucheniye Indii v Rossii (ocherki i materialy)*. Moscow 2008. According to Vigasin, the annual spending on all the editions of the Academy's Department of Russian language and literature was just 4,000 rubles (p. 134, n. 93). By the way, in his letters to Weber Schiefner provided a very interesting account of the financial situation at the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences (pp. 140–146).

<sup>8</sup> It seems possible that Minaev preferred to let his valuable collection of Indian texts be passed, after his death, to the Imperial Public Library and not to the Academy's Asiatic Museum (that would have been rather natural) because of his tensions with the Academy (I thank my colleague T.V. Ermakova for this comment).

<sup>9</sup> The fact that Schiefner died very soon after the scandal needs some explanation that is not found in the book.

<sup>10</sup> His own son Meinhard must have been a good example of this change. He became a Russian general, took part in the World War I and was even awarded with the Order of

---

Schiefner's letters tell us surprisingly little about St. Petersburg, the city he lived in for so many years<sup>11</sup>, to say nothing about Russia on the whole. Meanwhile, the years covered with this correspondence, mostly from early 1860s up to 1878, were one of the most promising and interesting periods in the history of Russia. The emancipation reform of 1861 was followed with a series of other important liberal reforms. At the same time, the revolutionary movement developed very fast and, in 1882, a radical socialist group made a successful attack at the Emperor Alexander II — he was murdered in the very center of St. Petersburg. Dostoevsky's novel *The Devils* (1871–1872) presented a sharp satirical portrait of the revolutionary circles, two other major novels of his, *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Idiot* (1868), as well as Leo Tolstoy's crucial novels, *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877), also belonged to this period, just to mention a few of its political and cultural landmarks. No trace of the moderately liberal or revolutionary hopes, social tensions or cultural achievements of the Russian society can be found in the highly scholarly letters that could be sent, judging by their contents, from almost any European city with academic traditions.<sup>12</sup>

The only important political event he reflected on was the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. His remarks found in several letters to Weber show him as a deeply peaceful person who hated any militarism and wild nationalism of the crowds that always stand against Knowledge (pp. 87, 90, 93). Being a catholic, he did not write much about his beliefs, one of the rare cases of this kind being his remark that he was anti-Darwin (p. 117).

While this book of the letters present little interest for the general audience, it is undoubtedly a great source of information on the history of Oriental Studies in Europe and, surely, on the life and works of Anton Schiefner himself. He knew and was in contact with a great number of eminent European (and some American<sup>13</sup>) scholars and their names and some remarks connected with them appear here and there in his letters. O. von Böhtlingk, M. Müller, the brothers Schlagintweit, K.S. Veselovsky, W. Radloff, J.A. Nauck, J.F. von Brandt, A. Harkawy, F. Wiedemann, B. Dorn are only a few of

---

St. George, the highest military decoration of the Russian Empire. He and one of his sons were executed by the bolsheviks in 1918. Another one of his sons, Anton Meingardovich Shiefner-Markevich, was a Russian general, too, and an eminent participant of the white movement during the civil war in Russia, he died from wounds in 1921. See: KISLOV V. *Gatchinskije ofitsery — geroi Velikoi voiny — A.M. Schiefner-Markevich*, <http://kraeved-gatchina.de/data/documents/GATChINA-I-GATChINCY-V-VELIKOY-VOYNE-40.pdf> [03.06.2016].

<sup>11</sup> We learn from his letters about some curious events in the life of the Russian capital such as the theft of books from the Imperial Public Library (p. 105) or the opening of the monument to Catherine the Great (p. 153).

<sup>12</sup> In one of his latest letters, though, he called himself *Ein petersburger* (p. 314) so he must have had some feelings to this particular city. Of course, Schiefner could be reluctant to talk about political issues in his letters to foreign countries because of censorship but he could exchange opinions in conversations with friends (I thank H. Walravens for this comment in an e-mail from 05.06.2016). Schiefner's casual mentioning of P.N. Rybnikov (p. 212), a political prisoner who became an eminent Russian ethnographer while being in exile, may hint at such conversations.

<sup>13</sup> In spite of his general sceptic opinion on the Americans he could appreciate some representatives of this nation (pp. 209, 211).

---

these scholars. Moreover, Schiefner left interesting remarks on some great scholarly events such as the International Congresses of Orientalists (pp. 150, 185–186, 202, 207). His personal meetings with colleagues and friends are often described with warm feelings of true friendship. It is no surprise that his rather early death was commented upon by his acquaintances with words of sincere sadness (e.g., p. 318).<sup>14</sup>

It *may be* a surprise then that his personal and academic legacy was not studied enough in St. Petersburg or elsewhere. I would argue with H. Walravens who claimed (in the Russian abstract of his above-mentioned paper, p. 264) that Schiefner's name was silenced down (*замалчивалось*) in literature on the history of Russian Oriental Studies because of his conflict with Vasiliev. As an expert in Tibetan, Mongolian and Indian fields of philological research he took the place of his great predecessor I.J. Schmidt and this status is always stressed in relevant papers<sup>15</sup>. It is true that his minor works in this field were not often called for but I doubt it can be caused by any prejudice, there seems to be no witness that would support such a hypothesis.<sup>16</sup> As for his major Tibetological work, the German translation of Tāranātha's *History of Buddhism*, it was of no interest for the Russian reader that had Vasiliev's translation.<sup>17</sup> As a Buddhologist, Schiefner was certainly just overshadowed by his opponent whose highly controversial, tragic and astonishing figure attracted attention of anybody who talked about this field of studies in Russia, starting from S.F. Oldenburg.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, even Vasiliev's life has not been studied properly, and, generally speaking, very few Russian Orientalists have been honored with detailed biographical accounts.

Schiefner's case is especially complicated because his archives are not found so far. In this sense, the edition of his letters<sup>19</sup> gives us a precious key to understanding his person and reconstructing his life.

Alexander Zorin,  
Institute of Oriental Manuscripts,  
Russian Academy of Sciences

---

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Whitney wrote to Weber: *Schiefner's acquaintance is one of the pleasantest memories that I brought back from Europe, and the persons are not very many whose loss I should more deeply deplore* (p. 308).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., VOROBOVA-DESIATOVSKAYA M.I., SAVITSKII L.S. *Tibetovedenie*. In "Aziatsky muzei — Leningradskoe otdelenie Instituta vostokovedeniya AN SSSR". Moscow: Nauka, 1972, pp. 149–176; see pp. 153–154 (general account of Schiefner's contribution to Tibetology); ZORIN A. Tibetsky fond Instituta vostochnykh rukopisei RAN: iz istorii formirovaniya i katalogizatsii (1720–1917 gg.), in *The New Historical Bulletin*, No. 3(33), 2012, pp. 37–53; see p. 45 (on Schiefner's work with the Tibetan collection kept at the Asiatic museum).

<sup>16</sup> I cannot judge his place in the history of the study of Finnish and Estonian folk tales and epic songs where his contribution was significant.

<sup>17</sup> Both translations are outdated, there is a good English translation from Tibetan — *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India*, Tr. by Lama Chimpa, Alaka Chatopadhyaya. Ed. by D. Chatopadhyaya. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1970.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Oldenburg S.F. *Pamyati Vasiliya Pavlovicha Vasilyeva i o ego trudakh po buddizmu. 1818–1918*, in "Izvestiya Rossiyskoi Akademii Nauk, Ser. VI [Vol. XII]. 1918, No. 7, pp. 531–548.

<sup>19</sup> Schiefner's handwriting is often rather difficult to read so the editors are worth a separate praise for their success in this regard.

---