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Epidemics, Medical Treatments, Vaccinations, and Doctors in the Memoirs of Prince I. M. Dolgorukov (1764–1823)

Gesundheitsfragen sind nicht erst mit dem Ausbruch der COVID-19-Pandemie relevant geworden, sondern haben auch in der Vergangenheit die Menschheit betroffen, wie es in der Literatur oft dokumentiert wird. Das Ziel des folgenden Beitrags ist die Analyse der Darstellung von Krankheiten, medizinischen Behandlungen und Ärzten in den Memoiren von Fürst I. M. Dolgorukov (1764–1823). Darüber hinaus wird gezeigt, wie diese Themen den Zielen und Prinzipien entsprechen, nach denen die Memoiren verfasst werden.

Health issues have become relevant after the advent of COVID-19, but also in the past they have concerned the human being, as literature has often recorded. The aim of the following paper is the analysis of the representation of diseases, medical treatments, and doctors in the memoirs of Prince I. M. Dolgorukov (1764–1823). In addition, the paper shows how these themes respond to the aims and principles according to which the author writes his memoirs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the topic of health relevant today. However, this interest is not a peculiarity of contemporary society. Diseases, epidemics and the treatments to fight them have characterized the history of humanity for centuries. Therefore, it is not surprising that these kind of events have left their traces in literature, and this is also true for the Russian literature of the second half of the 18th and early 19th centuries. It should be noted that the latter period was particularly stimulating for medi-

cine, because the ideas of the Enlightenment led to a rethinking of medical theories.¹ Furthermore, in addition to the innovations coming from abroad, the Russian Empire of the time saw a rapid modernization of its health system.² Undoubtedly, a precious source for reconstructing past opinions and beliefs on health issues are memoirs. The aim of the following paper is to examine the representation of diseases, cures and doctors in the prose of Prince I. M. Dolgorukov (1764–1823). In particular, the textual analysis of his memoirs shows his point of view on the aforementioned themes. The opinions of Dolgorukov are interesting not only because they are sometimes contradictory, but also because they often seem to be influenced by his belonging to nobility. Not surprisingly, the ›linguistic turn‹, the ›cultural turn‹ and the ›social constructionism‹, which have revolutionized the humanities in recent years, have highlighted how the context and cultural models impact a person’s way of looking at reality. Moreover, the paper also highlights how health topics respond to the principles according to which the author writes his literary works.

Dolgorukov was the representative of one of the oldest families of the Russian aristocracy³ and a successful poet of the turn of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In addition, he was the author of two interesting works in prose, namely *Повесть о рождении моем, происхождении и всей жизни*⁴ (›The Story of My Birth, Origin and My Whole Life‹) (cf. Dolgorukov 2004; Dolgorukov 2005) and *Капище моего сердца, или Словарь всех тех лиц, с коими я был в разных отношениях в течение моей жизни*⁵ (›The Temple of My Heart, or the Dictionary of All Those People with Whom I Have Been in Different Relationships During My Life‹) (cf. Dolgorukov 1997).

In the former, Dolgorukov retraces his life by talking only about himself and things related to him, as he states several times. More precisely, *Povest’* apparently recalls a ›letopis’‹, but the influence of Rousseau’s famous *Les Confessions* is evident. Instead, *Kapishche* is a particular sort of calendar in which the writer describes his life by dedicating a literary portrait and a specific day to those people, he met during his life.

1 To learn more about the history and evolution of medicine in the West and in Russia see *Istoriya meditsiny* of Yu. P. Lisitsyn (cf. Lisitsyn 2015).

2 This process was initiated by the reforms of Peter I and continued by his successors. For example, Peter I founded the first military hospitals. In 1719, he established the Medical Chancellery (cf. Kaspruk 2018: 56).

3 The dynasty of Dolgorukov reached the apogee of its power and influence during the reign of Peter II but fell out of favour politically and economically with the ascent to the throne of Anna Ioannovna.

4 *Povest’ o rozhdenii moyem, proiskhozhdenii i vsej zhizni*, in the rest of the paper referred to as *Povest’*.

5 *Kapishche moego serdtsa, ili Slovar’ vseh tekh lits, s koimi ya byl v raznykh otnosheniyakh v techenie moey zhizni*, in the rest of the paper referred to as *Kapishche*.

It is well known that memoirs and autobiographical prose inevitably involve

[...] discrimination and selection in face of the endless complexity of life, selection of facts, distribution of emphases, choice of expression. Everything depends on the standpoint chosen. (Pascal 2017: 10)

Consequently, it is not surprising that Dolgorukov follows some principles in this process of selection. In fact, in his two works (*Povest'* and *Kapishche*), dedicated to his children, the author wants to combine the pleasure of writing with its utility according to the famous Horatian precept »miscere utile dulci«. On the one hand, he intends to represent himself as a worthy heir of his lineage, a virtuous servant of the Russian Empire and a good father. On the other hand, the writer has clear didactic intentions, as he reports his philosophical considerations, and gives his life lessons. Moreover, he pays particular attention to and often comments on the extraordinary events that he witnessed according to those important values for a member of nobility, such as honour, family prestige, and gratitude. The latter is linked to another of Dolgorukov's writing principle, that is to pay tribute to the people he loves or esteems. As a result, even the choice to write about medical issues is in some cases related to these aims.

Epidemics

Disobeying one of his fundamental rules (i.e. »talking only about himself«), but justified by the exceptional nature of the event, Dolgorukov dedicates some pages of his autobiography to the description of the bubonic plague that devastated Moscow between 1770 and 1771.⁶ Certainly, the narration of this unexpected epidemic was a topic that could be considered »instructive« and »useful« for posterity. In particular, he describes it as a terrible catastrophe, but the consequences of the plague are even more shocking for him. In fact, as the writer states:

6 The latter is brilliantly reconstructed by J. T. Alexander in his monograph *Bubonic Plague in Early Modern Russia* (cf. Alexander 2013).

Одно бедствие всегда сопровождается другим. Есть и пословица народная: 'Придет беда – отвори ворота'. Так и ныне. Чума породила другое пагубное зло.⁷ (Dolgorukov 2004: 25)

The new evil was the revolt that broke out in Moscow due to the frustration of the people, exhausted by the precautionary measures and the pestilence.⁸ The so-called »Plague Riot«⁹ shows the »aristocratic« point of view of Dolgorukov on the matter. In fact, this revolt was particularly feared by nobility, and, consequently, the author criticizes the cowardice of the city governors who abandoned the city. Instead, he praises the way in which the Lieutenant General Pyëtr Dmitrievich Eropkin violently and bloodily ended the protests:

Один генерал-поручик Петр Дмитриевич Еропкин, незабвенный муж в Российском царстве, вступился за родину, набрал пушек, принял начальство, расставил в городских воротах орудии и палил по черни [...]. Таким образом остановлен быстрый ход мятежа! В Москве начался бунт – в ней и заглушён. Нигде более его не слышно было. Хвала тебе, доблестный сын отечества! Герой нашей матушки-столицы.¹⁰ (Dolgorukov 2004: 25)

The epidemic gives Dolgorukov the opportunity to praise his family as well. In fact, he attributes to their impeccable conduct the fact that no one in his house was infected by the terrible disease. Therefore, he describes all the precautionary measures taken by them, and which were considered effective by the medicine of the time. For example, they never left the countryside, where they had taken refuge to escape the

7 Transl. by the author: »One catastrophe is always accompanied by another. There is also a traditional proverb: »It never rains, but it pours«. So, it happened in this case. The plague generated another pernicious evil«.

8 The revolt broke out due to the attempts of the Moscow authorities to avoid crowds near the Icon of the Virgin Mary of Bogolyubovo in the city centre.

9 A. G. Tartakovskiy notes that the Plague Riot is one of the recurring themes in the memoirs of the period (cf. Tartakovskiy 1991: 37).

10 Transl. by the author: »Only the Lieutenant General Pyëtr Dmitrievich Eropkin, a memorable man in the Russian Empire, helped his motherland. He gathered cannons, took over the leadership, placed guns at the city gates, and fired at the crowd [...]. In this way, the fast development of the rebellion was stopped! A riot began in Moscow, and it was also repressed in it. Nothing else was heard about the revolt anywhere. Praise to you, courageous son of the fatherland! The hero of our mother-capital«.

»турецкий подарок« (»Turkish gift«) (Dolgorukov 2004: 24),¹¹ but only looked through a window with a telescope at the numerous dead who crammed the cemeteries and the streets of the ancient capital. In addition, all goods from Moscow were sanitized with vinegar and other medical products.

Curiously, similar preventive measures were considered far exaggerated by Dolgorukov when a new epidemic threat arose, and he was governor of Vladimir. According to him, the only result of the fear of the emperor was that he found himself busy filling paperwork, as if the epidemic had broken out in Vladimir. Moreover, he had to deal with a real case of »fake news«, being aware that

[в]се имеет свое время и моду. Тогда везде казалась чума. Всякий на нее взводил разные слухи, и многие очень счастливо поиграли этой игрушкой.¹² (Dolgorukov 2005: 55)

Taken by too much zeal or, as Dolgorukov claims, longing for new rewards, »штаб-лекарь, попросту сказать, дурак, грубиян и редко трезвый человек«¹³ (Dolgorukov 2005: 54) falsely said that the plague was present in the Vladimir region. With this episode, Dolgorukov wants to demonstrate his good governance and portray himself in the best possible light, by showing his integrity. In fact, instead of getting rich or ingratiating himself with falsehood about the plague, like many others did, he preferred to tell the truth and loyally serve the emperor.

Peculiarly, Dolgorukov faced a last »epidemic« much less dangerous, but for him, a lover of fun and parties, much more unbearable. In fact, the arrival of the »grippe« stopped the social life of the previous capital. Dolgorukov writes about it:

Когда же? Зимой! В такое благополучное время, когда в Москве всякий всякого по пяти раз на неделю может видеть в публике, несносно

11 In fact, the advent of the plague in Moscow was linked by public opinion to the Russo-Turkish war, conducted by Catherine II in those years. It is interesting how a similar definition »подарок Оттоманской Порты« (»gift of the Ottoman Empire«) is also used by A. T. Bolotov (1738-1833), who devotes several pages to the narration of the Moscow epidemic (cf. Bolotov 1993: 7).

12 Transl. by the author: »[e]verything has its own time and fashion. At that time, the plague seemed to be everywhere. Everyone spread various rumours about it, and a lot of people very happily played with this toy«.

13 Transl. by the author: »an army doctor, to put it simply, a fool, an ill-mannered and seldom a non-drinking person«.

было им сидеть на диете и видеть одних угрюмых своих родственников да скучных медиков, которые лишь тогда становились милы, когда давали позволение на выезд.¹⁴ (Dolgorukov 2004: 506)

Diseases

An unpleasant subject such as diseases could have provoked the objection of some of his readers, but as Dolgorukov explains:

Можно бы это и не вносить в Историю мою, но никакого случая не оставляю для того, чтоб по окончании каждого года удобнее сделать сравнительную таблицу часов веселых и неприятных.¹⁵ (Dolgorukov 2004: 613)

In addition, he believes that even apparently less significant facts might be useful and instructive for his children. As a result, in his memoirs there is a rich inventory of diseases that were widespread at the time.¹⁶ The latter are often an opportunity for Dolgorukov to reflect on the inexorability of destiny and the inscrutability of the future. Furthermore, the description of how people face a disease (and often the related death) becomes his »means« of showing his appreciation and gratitude to them. For example, with much pathos he recounts the heroic way in which his first wife and his eldest daughter died of tuberculosis. He idealises the two women, by describing how stoically they did not fear death and peacefully faced their mournful fate, never afflicting their loved ones with their own sufferings.

With reference to the diseases affecting his family, it can be highlighted that Dolgorukov often shows himself as a loving father, ready to do anything for his children. As a matter of fact, he did not even hesitate to generously pay a doctor to certify

14 Transl. by the author: »And when does it happen? In winter! At such a prosperous time, when in Moscow everyone can meet each other in public five times a week. It was unbearable for them to follow a diet, and see only their depressing relatives and boring doctors, who only became kind when they gave the permission to go out«.

15 Transl. by the author: »Maybe [these things] should not be included in my History, but I do not omit anything in order to make it easier to create a comparative table of happy and unpleasant times at the end of each year«.

16 Just to give some examples, Dolgorukov mentions hydrops, scrofula, hysteria, dysentery, epilepsy, Saint Anthony's fire, smallpox, paralysis, pleurisy, tuberculosis, etc. It is interesting to note that even pregnancy was considered a disease in the past. The memoirs of the author show how it was looked upon with apprehension as infant mortality was particularly widespread.

his son's false madness¹⁷ to save him from the consequences of his misconduct. At the same time, since Dolgorukov, like Rousseau, intends to tell the whole truth about himself, and offer an instructive example to his children, he does not forget to describe his illnesses and mental syndromes. For instance, he confesses his fear of open spaces, probably agoraphobia, which according to his doctors was caused by the peculiar structure of his eye (cf. Dolgorukov 2004: 50). Another disease that afflicted Dolgorukov was hypochondria, which at the time was considered a real illness as demonstrated by the Encyclopedia of Diderot and D'Alembert.¹⁸ In his case, it was often caused by the loss of a loved person, but Dolgorukov found a personal antidote for it. Surely more effective than the »shock therapy« with which his father forced him to face his fears, Dolgorukov's remedy for dealing with depression is writing. As he states in the preface to *Kapishche*:

Главная цель моя, [...] принявшись за сию работу, была та, чтоб не задумываться, разгонять гипохондрию и разбивать мысли, омраченные продолжительным недугом.¹⁹ (Dolgorukov 1997: 6)

Medical Treatments and Vaccinations

Although the writing was a special and personal kind of cure for Dolgorukov, in his memoirs he also mentions other types of medical treatments. Some were very odd, for example milk to treat tuberculosis, while others are still in use today. He talks about diets that for him were even worse than the chemical mixtures of doctors: »Строгая диета [...] еще более меня тиранила, чем все химические приправы

17 This was not something unusual. As governor of Vladimir, Dolgorukov had to deal with numerous cases of false certificates to be exempt from military service.

18 »HYPOCHONDRIQUE, (passion ou affection); c'est ainsi qu'est ordinairement désignée par les Médecins une espèce de maladie, dont la mélancholie est le genre; [...] l'humeur morbifique, qui infecte toute la masse des fluides, comme dans la maladie générale, mais se fixe plus particulièrement sur les organes ou viscères du bas-ventre; [...] elle constitue alors l'affection hypochondriaque« (D'Alembert/Diderot 1766). Transl. by the author: »HYPOCHONDRIAC, (passion or affection); this is how doctors usually designate a kind of disease, of which melancholy is also a type; [...] the morbid humor, which infects the entire mass of fluids, as in the generic disease, fixes itself more particularly on the organs or viscera of the lower abdomen, [...] so it causes the hypochondriac condition«.

19 Transl. by the author: »By starting this work, my main aim [...] was to avoid dwelling on things, to get rid of hypochondria and to shatter thoughts, darkened by a long illness«.

господ врачей.»²⁰ (Dolgorukov 2004: 46). Another popular remedy was the blood-letting, experimented by him to soothe his love pains that had brought him close to suicide. In *Povest'*, the episode is described as follows:

Врач пощупал у меня пульс и нашел большое сгущение крови, посмотрел мне в глаза, что в них прочел, не знаю, но провозгласил очень решительно: кровь пустить!²¹ (Dolgorukov 2004: 98)

Dolgorukov shows a keen interest in the new therapies of his time as well. For instance, he was fascinated by animal magnetism,²² which at the time was a highly discussed cure and a recurrent topic of conversation for aristocrats. Despite the declaration of not wanting to express judgments on the matter, Dolgorukov can certainly be considered a supporter of the new cure. According to him, who witnessed how the doctor Goldbach used magnetism to heal the niece of his second wife, in it «нет ничего чрезвычайного, ни магии, ни волшебства.»²³ (Dolgorukov 2005: 444). In addition, in *Kapishche* he states that it is the only effective medical remedy for nervous infirmities (cf. Dolgorukov 1997: 143). For these reasons, he hopes that all rumours and criticisms regarding magnetism will disappear as had happened with the electric machine that was initially considered a «сатанинск[ая] выдумк[а]» («satanic invention») (Dolgorukov 2005: 445).

If magnetism certainly did not have the success desired by Dolgorukov, another scientific innovation, introduced during his life, had a more lasting success: the vaccine. Until the 18th century, smallpox was a plague that caused numerous deaths. In some ways, it also caused the misfortunes of Dolgorukov's lineage, as Peter II died of this disease. Dolgorukov himself contracted it and, according to him, only a miracle performed by the divine image of Mary of Smolensk saved him from death (cf. Dolgorukov 2004: 20). Fortunately, with advances in science, a cure was finally found. In 1768 Catherine II decided to test the invention on herself and her son. In order to do so, she invited the

20 Transl. by the author: «A strict diet [...] tyrannized me even more than all the doctors' chemical mixtures».

21 Transl. by the author: «The doctor felt my pulse and found a large thickening of blood. He looked into my eyes, I do not know what he read in them, but declared very resolutely: Let bleed!»

22 Animal magnetism, also called mesmerism, is a medical theory formulated by the German doctor F. A. Mesmer. According to the latter, «a magnetic fluid» is present in the human body. If this fluid is not properly distributed, it causes the onset of diseases. The healing of these disorders is possible thanks to the influence of the curator's magnetic fluid, who can sometimes help himself with the use of magnets.

23 Transl. by the author: «there is nothing supernatural, no magic, no witchcraft».

English doctor T. Dimsdale.²⁴ This courageous decision is commented by Dolgorukov as follows: »Какой диковинный пример на троне всем отцам и матерям!«²⁵ (Dolgorukov 2004: 21).

The theme of the vaccine for Dolgorukov is a way to prove again that he is a good father. In fact, he pathetically tells how bravely he decided to vaccinate his children, and endured being away from them, since the inoculated ones were isolated from the remaining family members as a precaution. Therefore, it is surprising to find, years later, Dolgorukov's critiques of the vast vaccination campaign promoted by the Russian Empire to immunize all rural children. According to the writer, such an initiative shows how »[с]амая добродетель обращается во зло, когда она попадает в крайность.«²⁶ (Dolgorukov 2005: 181). Since for him there was still little evidence of the effectiveness of such a remedy, and »о коровьей оспе, как перекрестные огни, летали в Европе ученые прении«²⁷ (Dolgorukov 2005: 181), he thought that it was an error to impose the vaccination on the peasants. The writer feared that the latter may have misunderstood such a philanthropic initiative. He was sure that they would not have been impressed by the widespread panegyrics, written by those in search of recognition and prizes. Here, Dolgorukov shows a concern common to many representatives of the Russian nobility of the time: the threat of a peasant revolt.

Finally, Dolgorukov decides to write also about pharmacies, which played an important role in the Russian health system. On the one hand, the building of a »free pharmacy«, which supplied medicine to the poor, is yet another demonstration of his qualities as an excellent and reliable servant of the Russian Empire. On the other hand, pharmacies are linked to one of his childish pranks, which offers him another opportunity to give his children one of his life lessons. Following the aforementioned Rousseauian principle of sincerity, Dolgorukov recounts how he tested his first notions of Latin by writing a medical prescription that could have had lethal consequences, if not being discovered (cf. Dolgorukov 2004: 33).

24 To celebrate the success of the operation a ceremony was organized. Moreover, two medals in memory of the happy event were commissioned by Catherine II.

25 Transl. by the author: »What an unusual example on the throne to all fathers and mothers!«

26 Transl. by the author: »[v]irtue itself becomes something bad when it goes to extremes«.

27 Transl. by the author: »intellectuals' debate about cowpox flew over Europe like crossfires«.

Doctors

As A. Martin points out, in that period doctors could be considered a real luxury (cf. Martin 2015: 219), since they were very few.²⁸ Certainly, in the relationship with doctors the contradictory attitude that Dolgorukov has towards medicine clearly emerges. In fact, he does not hesitate to turn to doctors for treatments and admits that they are one of the main means for aristocrats to have spiritual peace and tranquillity. Moreover, he defends them against accusations of patients and relatives: «От чего бы больной ни умер, а лекарь всегда виноват. [...] Я осмелюсь сказать, что это вздор.»²⁹ (Dolgorukov 2005: 130).

However, Dolgorukov does not fail to criticize doctors. He even sometimes thinks that they deceive him, give only false hopes, and he complains about their ineffectiveness. For example, when his little nephew died, he states:

Часто мы горюем, когда около нас нет докторов, [...] а я, напротив, как Петрарх скажу: чорт ли в эскулапах! [...] Пришел ли роковой момент — ни все лейб-медики четырех стран света дыхания не продлят, напротив, если человек еще жить должен, и без лекарств протянет лет десять. Бог один держит нитку живота нашего, и когда он ее режет, врачи — худые покровители.³⁰ (Dolgorukov 2004: 478)

As this quotation shows, for Dolgorukov, when medicine does not help, the only true cure is faith: «Вера есть единственный и превосходный врач души и тела.»³¹ (Dolgorukov 2005: 52), to which he adds the love of his family: »Удовольствию

28 Although the number of doctors had increased compared to the time of Peter I, they were still in great demand, and their world was extremely competitive. In fact, Dolgorukov tells us of the rivalries between them. For example, he had to fire his trusted doctor Burkart to treat his stepdaughter due to the protests and conflicts of the other physicians. Moreover, it should be noted that doctors were often foreigners, as it is evident from the names mentioned by Dolgorukov (Burkart, Berkman, Pegelau, etc).

29 Transl. by the author: »From whatever the sick person dies, the doctor is always to blame. [...] I dare to say that this is an absurdity«.

30 Transl. by the author: »We often complain when there are no doctors near us, [...] but, on the contrary, I affirm as Petrarch: the devil is in the followers of Asclepius! If the fatal moment has come, not all the physicians of the four corners of the world will prolong [our] breathing. On the contrary, if a person still has to live, he will live out ten years without medicines. God alone holds the thread of our life, and when he cuts it, doctors are poor protectors«.

31 Transl. by the author: »Faith is the only and superior doctor of the soul and body«.

семейные одни препятствовали мне унывать совершенно.»³² (Dolgorukov 2004: 531).

Despite this contradictory attitude, it is significant that in *Kapishche* the writer dedicates some of the days of his calendar to his doctors. In this way, he can express his appreciation for them. Interestingly, his gratefulness is not determined by their successes in healing, but by the medicians compassion and solidarity towards him in difficult times.³³

Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis shows that Dolgorukov's choice to write about health issues is often not fortuitous. Although his views on doctors and medicine are sometimes contradictory, these themes respond to the »principle of utility« that he follows in writing his life story. Thanks to them, the representation he gives of himself is that of a typical and worthy representative of nobility, impeccable both as a father and as a servant of the Russian Empire. Furthermore, the episodes linked to diseases, epidemics and treatments allow him to give valuable life lessons, and to show his gratitude towards the esteemed people.

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32 Transl. by the author: »The pleasures of the family alone prevented me from losing hope completely«.

33 Obviously, a negative portrait of a doctor is not missing. In fact, Dolgorukov hopes that doctors like Shmits will never be met, since he disapproves Shmits' cold and detached attitude in treating his dying daughter.

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